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The Pagan's Cup A Country Story

by

Fergus Hume

Chapter I A Modern Arcadia

Certain portions of England yet remain undiscovered by Americans and uncivilised by railways. Colester village above King's-meadows, in a county which need not be named, is one of these unknown spots. No doubt before long the bicycle and the motor-car will enliven its somnolent neighbourhood, but at present it is free from the summer jaunts of tourists. With this neglect the Colester folk profess themselves satisfied. They have no wish to come into contact with the busy world. This prejudice against intrusion dates from mediæval times, when strangers rarely came to the village with peaceful intentions. Even now a chance comer is looked upon with suspicion.

Mr Richard Pratt said something of this sort to the vicar during a morning ramble, some six weeks after he had taken up his residence in The Nun's House. With the parson and the gentry of the parish Mr Pratt agreed very well, his respectability having been vouched for by Mrs Gabriel, the lady of the manor. But the villagers still held aloof, although the newcomer did his best to overcome their churlish doubts. They did not credit his story that he had settled in Colester to pass his remaining years in peace, and even the money he scattered so freely could not buy their loyalty. Pratt had never met with such people before. In most countries an open purse invites an open heart; but the Colester villagers were above Mammon worship. Such an experience was refreshing to Pratt, and introduced him to a new type of humanity.

“The first place I ever struck in which the dollar is not all-powerful,” he said, with his Yankee twang and pleasant laugh.

“We are not sufficiently educated in that respect,” replied Mr Tempest in his simple way. “For my part, I am not ill pleased that my parishioners should refuse to worship the Golden Calf.”

“There is no calf about me, I guess,” said Pratt, grimly, “and very little gold. I don’t say I haven’t a decent income, but as to being a millionaire—no, sir.”

“In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed is king, Mr Pratt. You are a millionaire in this poor place. But I fear you find it dull.”

“Why, no, vicar. I’m glad to be out of the buzz. The world’s made up of nerves and machinery nowadays. At fifty-two years of age I can’t stand the racket. This Sleepy Hollow’s good enough for me to stay in until I peg out. Guess I’ll buy an allotment in that graveyard of yours.”

“Hollow!” said the vicar, smiling, “and our earthly dwelling-place is set upon a hill! Mr Pratt, I suspect you have Irish blood in your veins.”

Pratt laughed, and being to a large extent devoid of humour, explained earnestly that he had used the word figuratively. “Washington Irving, Rip Van Winkle,” he explained, nodding, whereat the vicar smiled again.

The situation of Colester was striking and strange. A green-clothed promontory extended abruptly from the high table-land into King’s-meadow. To right and left chalky cliffs of considerable height flared away for miles, forming a buttress to the moors above and walls to the plains below. In pre-historic ages the ocean waves had beaten against these cliffs, but, gradually receding, had left dry the miles upon miles of fertile lands now called King’s-meadows. An appanage of the Crown, they had been called so from the days of William the Conqueror.

From where they stood, the vicar and his friend had a bird’s-eye view of this desirable land, unrolled like a map under the bright June sky. League after league of corn-fields stretched away to the clear, shining line of ocean; and amidst the ripening grain appeared red-roofed villages, clumps of trees, the straight lines of dusty white roads and the winding, glittering serpent of the river. And as a background to this

smiling plenty—if so Irish an expression be permitted—was the blue expanse of the Channel dotted with the white sails of merchantmen.

A small wood of ancient oaks shut off the purple-clad moor from the spur upon which Colester was built. On the verge of this, yet encircled by trees, stood the village church—a crusading chapel, dedicated to St Gabriel the Messenger. Thence the ground fell away gradually, and spread out into a broad neck of land, down the centre of which ran a road leading from chapel to village. On either side of this, amidst oaks and elms and sycamores, were the houses of the gentry. From where they ended the promontory rose into two rounded hills, with a slight depression between. On the one to the left the village was built, its houses cramped within a tumble-down wall, dating from the days when it was needed as a defence. The other hill was surmounted by a well-preserved castle, the keep of which with its flag could be seen above the oak woods. This was inhabited by Mrs Gabriel, the sole representative of the feudal lords of Colester. Yet she was only the childless widow of the last baron, and had none of the fierce Gabriel blood in her veins. The once powerful and prolific family was extinct.

From castle and village steps led down into the depression between the two hills. Down this continued the chapel road, sloping gradually with many windings to the plains below. The whole place had the look of some Rhenish robber-hold. And if tradition was to be trusted, the Gabriel lords had dwelt like eagles in their eyrie, swooping down at intervals to harry and plunder, burn and slay the peaceful folk of the plains. A turbulent and aggressive race the Gabriels. It had defied king and priest, and parliament and people. Time alone had ever conquered it.

“A survival of the Middle Ages,” said Mr Tempest, pointing out these things to his companion. “It was needful that the Gabriel barons should build strong defences. They were fierce and blood-thirsty, defiant of law and order. For many centuries they were a scourge to the inhabitants of the plains. These often complained to the king, and several times the place was besieged, but without result. The Gabriels kept their hold of it. The only thing they ever lost was their title. A bill of attainder was passed against them in the time of the second George. After that they became less lions than foxes.”

“Just so,” said Mr Pratt. “This place couldn’t do much against artillery, I guess. And even in the bow and arrow days, a strong force coming over the moor and down the spur—”

“That was often tried,” interrupted Tempest, quickly, “but the attempt always failed. In the days of Henry II. Aylmer Gabriel beat back an overwhelming force, and then erected the chapel as a thanksgiving. The Archangel Gabriel was the patron saint of the family, and the chapel is dedicated to him.”

“He couldn’t keep the family from dying out, however,” said Pratt, as they moved towards the village.

“No. With the late John Gabriel the family became extinct. But I daresay Mrs Gabriel will arrange that her adopted son succeeds. He can take the name and the coat of arms. I should be very pleased to see that,” added the vicar, half to himself. “Leo is a good fellow, and would make an excellent landlord.”

The eyes of the American flashed when the name was mentioned, but he made only a careless comment. “Leo Haverleigh,” he said, after a pause, “he’s a right smart young chap, sure. Who is he?”

“The son of Mrs Gabriel’s brother. She was a Miss Haverleigh, you know. I believe her brother was somewhat dissipated, and died abroad. The boy arrived here when he was three years of age, and Mrs Gabriel adopted him. He will be her heir.”

“Is there anyone to object?” asked Pratt, eagerly.

The vicar shook his head. “The Gabriels are absolutely extinct. Failing Leo, the estates would lapse to the Crown. In the old days they would have been seized by the king in any case, as the sovereigns were always anxious to hold this point of vantage which dominated their lands below. But we live in such law-abiding times, that Mrs Gabriel, although not of the blood of the family, can leave the estates to whomsoever she will. I understand that she has quite decided Leo shall inherit and take the name; also the coat of arms.”

“She doesn’t strike me as over-fond of the boy,” said Pratt, as they climbed the crooked street; “rather a hard woman I should say.”

“Mrs Gabriel has a particularly high moral standard,” replied the vicar, evasively, “and she wishes all to attain to it. Leo—” he hesitated.

“He’s no worse than a boy ought to be,” said the American, cheerily. “Your young saint makes an old sinner. That’s so, vicar!”

Mr Tempest laughed outright. “I fear there is small chance of Leo becoming a saint either young or old,” he said, “though he is a good lad in many ways. Wild, I admit, but his heart is in the right place.”

Pratt smiled to himself. He knew that Leo was in love with Sybil, the daughter of this prosy old archæologist. Simple as Mr Tempest was, he could not be blind to the possibility of his daughter making such an excellent match. “Oh, yes,” laughed Pratt, knowingly, “I’m sure his heart is in the right place.”

But by this time the vicar was on his hobby horse, and did not gauge the significance of the speech. “Here,” he said, waving his hand towards the four sides of the square in which they stood, “the Romans built a camp. It crowned this hill, and was garrisoned by the tenth legion to overawe the turbulent tribes swarming on the plains below. In fact, this town is built within the camp, as the name shows.”

“How does it show that?” asked Pratt, more to keep the vicar talking than because he cared.

“The name, man, the name. It is properly Colncester, but by usage has been shortened to Colester. Coln comes from the Latin colonia, a colony, and caster, or cester, is derived from castra, a camp. Colncester therefore means the camp colony, which proves that the original builders of this town erected their dwellings within the circumvallation of the original castra of Claudian. If you will come with me, Mr Pratt, I will show you the remains of this great work.”

“I have seen it several times before,” replied Pratt, rather bored by this archæological disquisition. “I know every inch of this place. It doesn’t take an American centuries to get round, and six weeks of walking have fixed me up in your local geography. But there’s the chapel, vicar. We might walk up there. I’d like to hear a few remarks on the subject of the chapel. Interesting. Oh, I guess so!”

“Certainly! certainly!” said Tempest, absently, “let us walk, walk,” and he strolled away with his hands in his tail-coat pockets, looking something like an elderly jackdaw. Indeed the churchman, with his lean, oval face, his large spectacles and the fluttering black garments on his thin figure, very much resembled a bird. He was scholarly, well-bred and gentle, but wholly unworldly. Since his wife had died seven years before, Sybil had taken charge of the house. Harold Raston, the energetic curate, looked after the parish. But for these two, both clerical and domestic affairs would have been neglected, so immersed was Mr Tempest in his dry-as-dust explorations. Many people said openly that the vicar was past his work and should be pensioned off. Mrs Gabriel, a capable and managing woman, had once hinted as much to him. But the usually placid parson had flown into such a rage, that she had hastily withdrawn herself and her suggestion. “There is nothing more terrible than the rebellion of a sheep.” Mrs Gabriel recalled this remark of Balzac’s when Tempest, proving himself worthy of his name, swept her in wrath from his study.

Pratt was quite another specimen of humanity. A neat, dapper, suave little man, undersized yet perfectly proportioned. He had black hair, black eyes, and a clean-shaven face, which constantly wore an expression of imperturbable good-humour. His dress was too neat for the country. A blue serge suit, white spats on brown boots, a Panama hat, gloves and—what he was never without—a smoothly-rolled umbrella. Spick-and-span, he might have stepped out of a glass case, and this was his invariable appearance. No one ever saw Pratt unshaven or untidy. He had been everywhere, had seen everything, and was a most engaging companion, never out of temper and never bored. But for all his smiling ways the villagers held aloof from him. Wishing to break down their barrier of prejudice, the sharp little American had attached himself to the vicar during the good man’s usual morning walk. He thought that such a sight might dispose the villagers to relent.

“I shall not vary my usual walk,” remarked Mr Tempest, positively. “We will stroll through the village, return to the chapel, and then, Mr Pratt, I hope you will lunch with me.”

“Delighted, if it will not put Miss Sybil out.”

“No, no. My wife is always prepared for chance visitors,” answered the vicar, quite oblivious to the fact that the late Mrs Tempest was resting in the churchyard. “Ha, this is Mrs Jeal. How do you do, Mrs Jeal?”

Mrs Jeal was in excellent health, and said so with a curtsey. A dumpy, rosy-faced woman was Mrs Jeal, with a pair of extremely wicked black eyes which snapped fire when she was angered. She had a temper, but rarely displayed it, for it suited her better to gain her ends by craft rather than force. Fifteen years ago she had appeared from nowhere, to settle as a midwife in Colester. Contrary to their usual fashion, the villagers had taken her to their bosoms. This was owing to the clever way Mrs Jeal had of managing them, and to her knowledge of herbs. She had cured many sick people whom the doctor had given up, and consequently was not looked upon with favour by Dr James, who had succeeded to the family practice. But even he could not be angry at rosy, laughing Mrs Jeal. “Though I don’t like her,” confessed Dr James; “the devil looks out of her eyes. Dangerous woman, very dangerous.”

Pratt had no chance of proving this remark of the doctor’s to be true, for Mrs Jeal never looked at him. She kept her wicked eyes on the kindly vicar and smiled constantly, punctuating such smiles with an occasional curtsey. “Pearl is not with you?” said Mr Tempest.

“No, bless her poor heart!” cried Mrs Jeal, “she is up at the chapel. Her favourite place is the chapel, as your reverence knows.”

“She might have a worse place to haunt, Mrs Jeal. Poor soul—poor, mad, innocent child!”

“Do you call eighteen years of age childish, Mr Tempest?” asked the woman.

“No, no! I speak of her mind, her poor, weak mind. She is still a child. I beg of you to look after her, Mrs Jeal. We must make her path as pleasant as we may.”

“Then I beg your reverence will tell that Barker to leave her alone.”

“Barker, Barker? Ah, yes, the sexton—of course. Worthy man.”

Mrs Jeal sniffed. “He won’t let her stay in the chapel,” she said.

“Tut! tut! This must be seen to. Poor Pearl is God’s child, Mrs Jeal, so she has a right to rest in His House. Yes, yes, I’ll see to it. Good-day, Mrs Jeal.”

The woman dropped a curtsey, and for the first time shot a glance at Pratt, who was smiling blandly. A nervous expression crossed her face as she caught his eye. The next moment she drew herself up and passed on, crossing herself. Pratt looked after her, still smiling, then hurried to rejoin the vicar, who began to explain in his usual wandering way.

“A good woman, Mrs Jeal, a good woman,” he said. “For some years she has had charge of Pearl Darry, whom she rescued from her cruel father.”

“Is that the insane girl?” said Pratt, idly.

“Do not talk of one so afflicted in that way, Mr Pratt. Pearl may not be quite right in her head, but she is sane enough to conduct herself properly. If the fact that she is not all herself reached Portfront”—the principal town of the county—“it is possible that the authorities might wish to shut her up, and that would be the death of Pearl. No, no!” said the good vicar, “let her have a fair share of God’s beautiful earth, and live to a happy old age. In this quiet place we can afford one natural.”

“Like the village idiot we read about in Scotch tales,” said Pratt.

“Just so, Mr Pratt. In Waverley there is such a one. Pearl Darry is quite harmless, and really has a very beautiful nature. Mrs Jeal is much to be commended for her charity.”

“She looks a charitable woman,” said the American, but whether he meant this ironically or not it is hard to say.

The women of Colester were mostly lace-workers, and toiled at this fairylike craft while their husbands worked in the fields below. During three seasons the mountain men, as they might be called, ploughed the meadow-land, sowed the corn and helped to reap and harvest it. In the winter they returned to live on their earnings and take a holiday. But the women worked all the year through, and Colester lace was famous. As the vicar and Pratt walked down the street, at the door of every house sat a woman with her pillow and pins dexterously making the filmy fabric which was destined to adorn the dress of many a London beauty. They

were mostly serious-looking, and some even grim. But all had a smile for the vicar, although they pursed up their lips when they saw the good-natured face of Pratt. Most unaccountable this dislike they had for the American. He was rather annoyed by his pronounced unpopularity.

“I must really do something to make them like me,” he said, much vexed.

“Tut, tut!” replied the vicar, “liking will come in good time, Mr Pratt. It takes some years for them to fancy a stranger. I was an object of distrust to them for quite three. Now they are devoted to me.”

“And have you been here long?”

“About forty years,” said Tempest. “I have buried many and christened most. We have no Methodists in Colester, Mr Pratt. Everyone comes to church and worships according to the rites of the Anglican communion, as is fit and proper.”

“I suppose you are a prosperous community on the whole?”

“So, so! Nothing to complain of. The lace made here by those clever fingers sells well in London and even abroad. Then the men earn a fair wage in King’s-meadows. Mrs Gabriel looks after the few poor we have amongst us. On the whole, we have much to be thankful for, Mr Pratt.”

Thus talking the good vicar led his companion round by the mouldering walls, where they could look down on to the plains. After a glance they re-entered the town and walked through the cobbled-stoned streets, between the quaint, high-roofed houses. Everywhere the vicar was greeted and Pratt frowned upon. He was quite glad when they descended from the village through the old gate, and after walking along the neck, which was the fashionable part of Colester, began to climb up towards the chapel.

“A most delightful spot,” said Pratt, politely; “but I guess the folk don’t cotton to me. I must make them freeze on somehow.”

Chapter II

The Crusaders' Chapel

The church dedicated to St Gabriel the Messenger was enshrined in a leafy glade. No churlish wall marked the limits of the sacred ground, and from the ancient building a soft green sward stretched on all sides to the circle of oaks which sheltered it from the rude winds. In this circle were two openings counter to each other. The lower one admitted those who came from Colester into the precincts; the upper gave entrance to a larger glade, in which the dead had been buried for centuries. This also was without a wall, and it was strange beyond words to come suddenly upon an assemblage of tombstones in the heart of a wood. From this sylvan God's-acre a path climbed upward to the moor, and passed onward for some little distance until it was obliterated by the purple heather. Then for leagues stretched the trackless, treeless waste to the foot of distant hills.

Of no great size, the chapel was an architectural gem. Built in the form of a cross, a square tower rose where the four arms met, and this contained a famous peal of bells. The grey stone walls were carved with strange and holy devices, lettered with sacred texts in mediæval Latin, and here and there were draped in darkly-green ivy. The sharp angles of the building had been rounded by the weather, the stones were mellowed by time, and, nestling under the great boughs of the oaks, it had a holy, restful look. "Like a prayer made visible," said Mr Tempest.

With his companion he had paused at the entrance to the glade, so as to enjoy the beauty of the scene. Round the chapel swept the swallows, pigeons whirled aloft in the cloudless blue sky; from the leafy trees came the cooing of doves, and the cawing of rooks could be heard. All the wild life of the wood haunted the chapel, and the place was musical with forest minstrelsy. As the beauty of scene and sound crept into their hearts, the vicar quoted Spenser's lovely lines:—

*"A little lowly hermitage it was,
Downe in a dale, hard by a forest side."*

"Just so," said Pratt, in the hard, unromantic way of the twentieth century; "it's the kind of church you see in pictures."

“The church in which Sir Percival met Sir Galahad,” replied Tempest.

The American felt the influence of the place despite the material faith which he held. There was a vein of romance in his nature which had been buried beneath the common-place and selfish. But in this holy solitude, at the door of the shrine, his spiritual self came uppermost, and when he stood bare-headed in the nave his talkative tongue was silent. The influence of the unseen surrounded him, and, like Moses, he was inclined to put off his shoes, “for this is holy ground,” murmured his heart.

Glancing at his companion, Tempest was surprised to see his usually pale and calm face working with emotion and covered with blushes.

“You are unwell, Mr Pratt?” he asked in a low tone befitting the place.

The man stammered, “No—that is, I feel that—well, no matter.” He controlled himself by a powerful effort and laughed. Tempest was not shocked. He was shrewd enough to see that the merriment was artificial and designed to cloak a deeper feeling. But the laughter was reprovved in a most unexpected fashion.

“The joy of the profane is as the passing smoke,” said a high, sweet voice.

Pratt started in surprise, and looked around. He saw the jewelled windows shining through the dim twilight of the church, the white cloth on the altar, and the glimmer of a silver crucifix, in the faint light of tall candles. But who had spoken he could not guess, as no one was in sight. Mr Tempest, however, had recognised the voice.

“Is that you, Pearl?” he called out softly.

From behind the altar emerged a girl of eighteen, though in looks and stature she was a child. She was small and delicately formed, and on her thin white face there was a vacant look as of one whose wits were astray. No intelligence shone through her dark eyes, but a mystical light burned in their depths. Like Kilmeny, she had been to fairyland, and had seen things which had lifted her above the common lot of mortals. Therefore upon her face there shone the light that never was on sea or land. And, curiously enough, she was dressed in a green gown—the fairy’s colour.

Round her straw hat was twisted a wreath of oak leaves. When she appeared her arms were full of flowers.

“You are decorating the altar, Pearl,” said the vicar, kindly.

“I am making ready the House for the Master’s coming,” replied the girl in her silvery voice, “but He will abide here but a little time.” She pointed to the groined roof of black oak. “That shuts out His Home,” said Pearl, reverently, “and He loves not to dwell in darkness.”

“Darkness and light are the same to Him, Pearl. But go on with your work, my child. You have beautiful flowers I see.”

“I gathered them in the woods before dawn, when the dew was yet on them. And see, I have got these mosses to put into the pots. The flowers will be quite fresh to-morrow for morning service. Then they will die,” added the girl, heaving a sigh, “die, as we all must.”

“To rise again in the light of Heaven, child.”

Pearl shook her black locks and turning back to the altar began dexterously to arrange the flowers. When passing and re-passing she never forgot to bend the knee. Pratt observed this. “Is she a Roman Catholic?” Mr Tempest smiled. “She does only what I have taught her,” he said. “I am what is called High Church, Mr Pratt, and believe in a beautiful ritual. To the service of God we should bring all lovely things, and perform all solemn acts of humility and reverence. That,” said Tempest, pointing to the white-covered altar, “is a symbol of the Unseen Power, and so those who approach it should acknowledge its solemn meaning.”

Pratt shrugged his shoulders. The vicar was talking of things too high for his comprehension. He looked at the mad girl decorating the altar. “I suppose the villagers think a great deal of this church,” he said.

“It is the most precious possession we have,” replied Tempest, reverently, “and it is all that remains to us of the beautiful and sacred things created by the faith of our forefathers. There were many vessels for the altar, Mr Pratt; but these were melted down by the Gabriel who fought for the first Charles in order to help his king. I would we had a communion service as beautiful as this shrine,” and Mr Tempest sighed.

The remark gave Pratt an idea. He wanted to obtain the goodwill of the villagers seeing he had come amongst them to pass his days in peace. If they loved their church so much they would approve of anyone who helped to decorate it. "I am not rich," he said slowly, "and I can't give you a whole service such as you want. But I should like to present this chapel with a communion cup. I have in my travels collected many beautiful things, Mr Tempest. Amongst others a golden cup of Roman workmanship which I obtained in Italy. It is a splendid example of the jeweller's art, and would look well on that table."

"On the altar," corrected Tempest, wincing at the sound of the word which he connected with the Low Church party. "It is more than good of you, Mr Pratt. We must talk the matter over. I do not accept gifts lightly, especially for the service of the Church. But come, let us look at the tombs. Then we can go to luncheon."

Pratt said no more, but fully made up his mind that the cup of which he spoke should figure on the altar. He had a vague kind of idea that he could buy repentance if he gave so splendid a present. If the vicar proved difficult to deal with, he resolved to ask for Mrs Gabriel's help. As the lady of the manor, she could insist upon the acceptance of the offering. There was no reason why Tempest should refuse it, but Pratt knew that the old man was—as he phrased it—queer, and one never knew what objection he might make. If he thought that the cup was given only to secure the goodwill of the parish he would certainly refuse it. A gift made in such a spirit could not be accepted by the Church.

Meanwhile he examined the tombs of the crusading Gabriels, which he had seen often before. But the vicar made the present visit more acceptable by recounting the legends connected with each recumbent figure. The tombs were three in number, and occupied what was called the Lady's Chapel. Their sides were richly blazoned with the Gabriel crest and with decorations of scallop shells to denote that those who rested below had been to the Holy Land. The figures of the brave knights were cross-legged, and their hands rested on the pommels of their huge swords. Considering the lapse of time, they were in a wonderful state of preservation. Pratt looked upon them with a sigh, and the vicar inquired the reason of his sadness.

“I was thinking of the glory of having such ancestors,” said Pratt, and Mr Tempest noticed that his Yankee twang and mode of expressing himself had quite disappeared. “I would give anything to come of such a line—to have a dwelling that had been in the possession of my race for centuries, and to have traditions which I could live up to. I am a lonely man, Mr Tempest,” he added, with some pathos, “no one cares for me. I never had a home, or a family, or a position in the world. All my life I have had to fight for my own hand, and for years I have been a rolling stone. Money, yes! I have made money, but I would give it all,” and he pointed to the crusaders, “if I could call those my ancestors.”

Mr Tempest looked surprised. “I did not expect to hear such views from the mouth of a Republican,” he said, “for, as you are an American, I presume you hold by the political faith of Washington.”

“I don’t hold by anything in particular,” replied Pratt, recovering himself, as they left the chapel. “I am unfettered by sectarian prejudices. You can call me a cosmopolitan, Mr Tempest. But we can talk of these things on some other occasion. You must come to see me. I have furnished The Nun’s House, and have got out my collection of rare and curious things. Will you and Miss Tempest dine with me next week?”

“I rarely go out,” replied the vicar; “however, I will see what Sybil says. If she is willing, I will come with pleasure.”

“Oh, Miss Tempest will be willing,” said Pratt, significantly. “Leo Haverleigh is coming to dine also!”

“They are very good friends,” said the vicar, simply. No thought of what Pratt meant entered his mind.

At the Vicarage they were met by Sybil and the curate, who had been talking to her about parish affairs for the greater part of the morning. At once Raston drew aside his ecclesiastical superior, and the two went into the library, leaving Sybil to entertain the American. She was not averse to doing this, as she liked Mr Pratt and his merry conversation. Having recovered from the emotion caused by the atmosphere of the chapel, the man was more pronouncedly Yankee than ever. He described his walk with the vicar, and repeated his invitation to dinner. “Mrs Gabriel and Mr Haverleigh are coming,” he said, “and I shall also ask Sir Frank Hale and his sister.”

Sybil smiled on hearing that Leo was to be present, but her brow clouded over when she heard about the baronet and Miss Hale. She did not like that young woman, and Pratt knew the cause. It was not unconnected with Leo. He was the prize for which these young ladies strove. Miss Hale was very much in love with the young man, and so was Sibyl, but he cared more for the vicar's daughter than for Miss Hale. The two girls guessed each other's feelings, and disliked one another accordingly. This might not have been proper, but it was eminently human. However, Sibyl was too much a woman of the world to show Pratt what she felt, and she accepted his invitation calmly enough. "I shall be delighted to come," she said, "but I can't answer for my father."

"Oh, I have something to lure him," said Pratt, easily, "and I think you will be pleased also, Miss Tempest." And thereupon he told the girl of his proposed gift. "The cup is over a thousand years old," he explained. "It belongs to the time of the Cæsars."

"From all I have heard of them," said Sybil, bluntly, "I don't think a vessel of their manufacture ought to serve for a Christian ceremony."

"On the contrary, the cup will be sanctified by being put to such a good use," said Pratt, "and you can set your mind at rest, Miss Tempest. I got the cup from the church of a little Italian town, where it served for a chalice. It has been used in the service of the Romish Church for ages."

"In that case I am sure my father will be delighted to accept it. He is anxious to get some vessels for the chapel altar. It is very good of you to give the cup, Mr Pratt."

"Not at all. It is better put to such use than in my collection. However, you will see all my curios when you come. Mr Haverleigh has already seen them."

"He told me about them yesterday. I only hope Mr Haverleigh will be here next week. He said something about going away."

"Why is he going away?" Pratt fixed his keen eyes on the girl.

"I think he is in trouble. That is," added Sybil, hastily, "I gathered as much. But don't say I told you anything, Mr Pratt. Ah," she broke off suddenly, "here are my father and Mr Raston."

Pratt cast another sharp glance at her. He guessed that something was wrong with Leo, and that the young man had told her of his trouble. He wondered if the two were engaged when they were thus confidential. Pratt took an interest in Leo, as he had known him for some years, and rather sympathised with his outbursts of youthful folly. He thought that marriage would steady the lad's somewhat volatile nature, but he could not make up his mind as to whether Miss Hale or Miss Tempest was the best wife for him. However, it was useless for Pratt to worry over this, as he recognised very clearly. In the first place, it was none of his business; and in the second, Leo would certainly choose for himself.

“I am giving a house-warming, Mr Raston,” said Pratt during luncheon, “and I should like you to come to dinner. Next Thursday. I suppose in this Arcadian spot it is not necessary to give written invitations.”

“I accept with pleasure,” replied Raston, quite ignorant that Pratt wished to enlist him on his side in getting the vicar to accept the cup; “but as to written invitations—what do you say, Miss Tempest?”

“Oh, those are most necessary,” laughed Sybil. “We are very particular in this part of the world.”

“I am an American, you see, Miss Tempest, and I don't know your English way of doing things. But the invitations shall be written in due form. I guess it is as well to humour the prejudice of folks.”

“If you wish to be popular,” said the vicar, “you must do so here.”

“As I intend to die in this part of the world, I must get on with the crowd somehow. I am not accustomed to be shunned, and that is what your people here are doing.”

“Oh, no!” cried Sybil, much distressed, “they are only waiting to know you better, Mr Pratt. In a year you will be quite friendly with them.”

“I'm friendly with them now,” said Pratt, dryly, “it is they who hold off.”

“We are slow to make friendships here,” said Raston, “but when we do accept a friend we stick to him always.”

“You are a native of these parts, Mr Raston?”

“I was born and bred here.”

“It is I who am the stranger,” put in Mr Tempest, “and it was a long time before my parishioners took to me.”

“You are adored now, papa,” said Sybil, with a bright glance.

“And someone else is adored also,” put in Pratt. Sybil flushed at the compliment. She thought it was in bad taste.

After a time the conversation turned on Pearl Darry, and Raston, who was deeply interested in her, gave them some insight into the girl’s mind. “She does not care for churches built by hands,” he said. “If she had her way she would take the altar into the middle of the moor and worship there. I think she feels stifled under a roof.”

“Ha!” said Pratt, with a swift glance, remembering Mrs Jeal, “is she of gipsy blood? She looks like it.”

“No. Her dark complexion comes from Highland blood,” explained Sybil. “Her father, Peter Darry, was a stone mason. He is dead now—died through drink. While working in Perth he married a farmer’s daughter. They came back here and Pearl was born. Then her mother died and her father treated her badly. Mrs Jeal rescued her, and Peter fell over a cliff while drunk.”

“Mrs Jeal is a good woman,” said Tempest, mechanically.

“Do you endorse that statement, Miss Tempest?”

Sybil looked at Pratt who had spoken. “I think Mrs Jeal was very good to take charge of Pearl,” she said evasively, whereat Pratt smiled to himself. He saw that Sybil did not like the woman, and privately admired her insight.

Mr Pratt was destined to deliver all his invitations verbally. On his way home after the vicar’s luncheon he met with a rider on a roan horse. This was a fair, handsome young man with a clear skin, a pair of bright blue eyes and a sunny look on his face. He had a remarkably good figure, and rode admirably. Horse and man made a picture as they came up the road. Pratt waved his hands and the rider pulled up.

“How are you this morning, Haverleigh?”

Leo laughed. He did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and if he was worried, as Sybil averred, he did not show his vexation. “I am all right,” he replied, with a smile. “Who could help being all right in this jolly weather? And how are you, Mr Pratt?”

“I am busy,” responded the American, gravely. “I have been lunching with the vicar, and now I am going home to write out invitations for a dinner at my new house.”

“Will you ask me, Mr Pratt?”

“I have asked Miss Tempest and I want you to come.”

Leo laughed. Also he flushed a trifle. “It is very good of you,” he said. “And who else will be at your house-warming?”

“Mrs Gabriel, Mr Raston, Miss Hale and her brother.”

“Oh!” Leo looked annoyed at the mention of Miss Hale. “I am not sure if I shall be able to come,” he said, after a pause.

“No?” Pratt’s tone was quite easy. “Miss Tempest said something about your going away. But I hope you will put that off. My dear fellow”—Pratt smiled meaningly—“you can depend upon me. It is not the first time I have helped you!”

Haverleigh made no direct response, but sat on his saddle in deep thought. “I’ll come,” he said at length, and rode off abruptly.

“I thought you would,” murmured Pratt, with a bland smile. He knew more about Leo Haverleigh than most people in Colester.

Chapter III

The Lady Of The Manor

Haverleigh’s face did not continue to wear its sunny expression after he left the American. He frowned and bit his moustache, and in the annoyance of the moment spurred his horse full speed up the castle

road. Only when he was within the avenue and nearing the porch did he slacken speed, for his mother—so he called her—might be looking out of some window. If so, she would assuredly accuse him of ill-using his horse. Mrs Gabriel rarely minced matters in her dealings with Leo. He was never perfectly sure whether she loved or hated him.

Mindful of this, he rode gently round to the stables, and, after throwing his reins to a groom, walked into the castle by a side door. As he had been absent all the morning, he was not very sure of his reception, and, moreover, he had eaten no luncheon. The butler informed him that Mrs Gabriel had asked that he should be sent to her the moment he returned. At once Leo sought her on the south terrace, where she was walking in the hot June sunshine. He augured ill from her anxiety to see him. A memory of his debts and other follies—pardonable enough—burdened his conscience.

“Here I am, mother,” he said as he walked on to the terrace, looking a son of whom any woman would have been proud. Perhaps if he had really been her son, instead of her nephew, Mrs Gabriel might have been more lenient towards him. As it was she treated him almost as harshly as Roger Ascham did Lady Jane Grey of unhappy memory.

“It is about time you were here,” she said in her strong, stern voice. “As you are so much in London, I think you might give me a few hours of your time when you condescend to stay at the castle.”

Leo threw himself wearily into a stone seat and played with his whip. This was his usual greeting, and he knew that Mrs Gabriel would go on finding fault and blaming him until she felt inclined to stop. His only defence was to keep silent. He therefore stared gloomily on the pavement and listened stolidly to her stormy speech. “No reverence for women—after all I have done for you—clownish behaviour,” etc.

Some wit had once compared Mrs Gabriel to Agnes de Montfort, that unpleasant heroine of the Middle Ages. The comparison was a happy one, for Mrs Gabriel was just such another tall, black-haired, iron-faced Amazon. She could well have played the rôle of heroine in holding the castle against foes, and without doubt would have been delighted to sustain a siege. The present days were too tame for her. She yearned for the time when ladies were left in charge of the donjon keep, while their

husbands went out to war. More than once she fancied that if she had lived in those stirring times, she would have armed herself like Britomart, and have gone a disguised knight-errant for the pleasure and danger of the thing. As it was, she found a certain relief in the power she exercised in Colester. Her will was law in the town, and her rule quite feudal in its demand for absolute obedience.

Report said that the late John Gabriel had not been altogether sorry when he departed this life. Undoubtedly he was more at rest in the quiet graveyard near the chapel than he had ever been before. Mrs Gabriel mourned him just as much as she thought proper. She had never professed to love him, and had married him (as she calmly admitted) in order to become mistress of the grand old castle. Besides, Gabriel had always hampered her desire to rule, as he had sufficient of the old blood in him to dislike being a cypher in his ancestral home. Consequently, husband and wife quarrelled bitterly. Finally, he died, gladly enough, and the Amazon had it all her own way. It was about two years after his death that Leo came to live with her, and everyone was amazed that she should behave so kindly towards the child of her dead brother, whom, as it was well known, she hated thoroughly.

However, Leo came, and from the moment he entered the house she bullied him. Spirited as the boy was, he could not hold his own against her stern will and powers of wrathful speech. When he went to school and college he felt as though he had escaped from gaol, and always returned unwillingly to Colester. Mrs Gabriel called this ingratitude, and on every occasion brought it to his mind. She did so now; but even this could not induce Leo to speak. He declined to furnish fuel to her wrath by argument or contradiction. This also was a fault, and Mrs Gabriel mentioned it furiously.

“Can’t you say something?” she cried, with a stamp. “Is it any use your sitting there like a fool? What explanation have you for me?”

“To what?” asked Leo, wearily; the question had been asked so often. “You have accused me of so many things.”

“Then why do you do wrong? I am talking of those debts you have incurred in London. You gave the list to me before you went out riding.”

“I know, mother. I thought it best to avoid a scene. But it seems there is no escape. When you have quite done perhaps you will let me speak?”

“You shall speak when I choose,” rejoined Mrs Gabriel, fiercely. “All I ask you now is, how comes it that your debts run up to three hundred pounds? I allow you that income. You should make it do.”

“Perhaps I have been a little foolish,” began Leo, but she cut him short.

“A little foolish, indeed! You have behaved like a fool, as you always do. What right have you to be extravagant? Are you in a position to be so? Have I not fed and clothed and educated you?”

“You have done everything that a charitable woman could have done.”

“You mean that a mother could have done. Had you been my own child—”

“You might have been kinder to me,” finished the young man.

Mrs Gabriel stared aghast at this speech, and at last broke out furiously, “Had you been my own child you would have been a stronger man; not a weak fool squandering money, and defying your benefactress. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I am,” replied Leo, bitterly, “ashamed that I have endured this humiliating position for so long. I was only a child when you brought me here, and had no voice in the matter. Yet, out of gratitude, I have borne with your injustice, and—”

“Injustice!” broke in Mrs Gabriel. “What do you mean?”

“My meaning is not hard to gather, mother. You have never been just to me, and the bread with which you have fed me has been bitter enough to swallow. Do you think that I can go on listening to your angry words without a protest? I cannot. My position is not of my own making, and since you find me a burden and an ungrateful creature, the best thing will be to put an end to the position.”

“Indeed!” sneered the woman. “And how do you propose to do that? You are quite unable to earn your own living.”

“Oh, there is one way of doing that,” replied Leo, grimly. “It does not need much education to be a soldier.”

“A soldier!” screamed Mrs Gabriel.

“Yes. I made inquiries while I was in London, as I knew very well what welcome you would give me. It is my intention to volunteer for the war.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

“I beg your pardon. I have made up my mind.”

“Then I shall have nothing more to do with you.”

“That is as you please, Mrs Gabriel. You are my aunt, and I suppose you have the right to support me out of charity. At any rate, you have no right to keep me here and taunt me all the time with my inability to keep myself. Again I say that the position is none of my making. However, I intend to relieve you of the burden of a useless man. Next week I shall enlist. Then you will be well rid of me.”

Mrs Gabriel gasped. “I forbid you!” she cried, with a stamp.

“I am afraid I must decline to accept the command,” said Haverleigh, with great coolness. “You have told me often enough that I am a beggar and a loafer. You shall do so no longer. As to my debts, I shall see to them myself. You need not pay them, nor need you continue my allowance. I earn my own bread from this moment.”

“How dare you, Leo? Do you not owe me something?”

“No! You have cancelled all obligation by the way in which you have treated me. Everything you have done has been done grudgingly. If you did not intend to behave as a woman should, why, in Heaven’s name, did you not leave me to be dependent on strangers? They could scarcely have been more harsh to me than you have been. But this is the end of it. I relieve you from this hour of the burden you complain of.”

“Take care. I intended you to be my heir, and—”

“I decline to accept further favours at your hands,” said Leo, proudly; “for what you have done I thank you, but I do not care to accept an

inheritance as a favour. Now you know my intentions and I shall not change them.”

Mrs Gabriel raged for twenty minutes without making the least impression on the young man. He was determined to put an end to the position, and she found that she could not longer dominate him by her wrath. Then Mrs Gabriel became aware that she had driven him like a rat into a corner, and that, like a rat, he had turned to fight. For reasons best known to herself she did not wish him to leave her. Forthwith she abandoned her tyrannical attitude, and took refuge in the weakness of her sex. Considering her boasting, this was ironical.

“It is cruel of you, Leo, to behave thus to a woman who loves you!”

Leo, leaning over the parapet, shrugged his shoulders and replied without looking round. “That is just the point,” he said. “You really do not love me—no, not one little bit.”

“I do. See how I have looked after you all these years.”

“And made me feel that I was a pauper all the time,” he retorted. “But is it necessary to go over all the old ground? I have made up my mind.”

“You shall not enlist.”

“I tell you I shall.”

The two faced one another, both pale and both defiant. It was a contest of will, and the weaker would be sure to yield in the long run. Mrs Gabriel quite expected that her adopted son would give in, as he had often done before, but this time she found to her surprise that he declined to move from his attitude of defiance. Seeing that she was beaten, she suddenly calmed and proceeded to win the necessary victory in another and more crafty way.

“Sit down, Leo,” she said quietly. “It is time we had an explanation. You are behaving very badly, and I must request you at least to listen to me.”

Haverleigh had been doing nothing else for nearly an hour, so this speech was a trifle inconsistent. However, he could not be brutal, so with another shrug he resumed his seat. All the same he was resolved in his

own mind that no argument she could use should make him alter the course he had determined upon. Leo could be obstinate on occasions.

“I do everything I can for your good,” said Mrs Gabriel in a complaining tone, “yet you thwart me at every turn.” Then she proceeded to recount how she had sent him to Eton, to Oxford, how she had permitted him to go to London and allowed him money, and how he had behaved foolishly. It was at this point the young man interrupted her.

“I admit that I have been foolish, but that comes from want of experience. You can’t expect me to have an old head on young shoulders.”

“Don’t interrupt me, please,” said Mrs Gabriel, sharply. “Now that you have sown your wild oats, I want you to come here and take your position as my heir. I am no longer so young as I was, and I need someone to help me in administering the estate. Besides, I want you to marry.”

Leo rose from his seat. “You wish me to marry,” said he; then, after a pause, he proceeded sarcastically, “And I suppose you have chosen me a wife?”

“Just so,” said Mrs Gabriel, coolly. “I want you to marry Miss Hale.”

“Not if there was not another woman in the world!”

“That’s all nonsense, Leo. She has a good dowry and she is an agreeable girl. You shall marry her.”

“I don’t love her,” protested Leo.

“No matter; she loves you. Her brother told me so, and I am woman enough to see that she is deeply attached to you.”

“I won’t marry her!” said Leo, doggedly. “I have a right to choose a wife for myself, and Miss Hale is not my choice.”

“Ah! Then what I have heard is true?”

“What have you heard?” he demanded, with a dangerous look in his blue eyes. Mrs Gabriel was going too far.

“That you are in love with Sibyl Tempest.”

“That is true. She is a beautiful and charming girl.”

“And a beggar!” burst out Mrs Gabriel, savagely. “Her father has nothing beyond his stipend, and that he spends on books. When he dies she will be a beggar. If you married her she would bring you no dowry.”

“She will bring me herself,” replied Haverleigh, “and that is good enough for me. I love Sybil with my whole soul.”

“And how do you propose to keep her?” sneered Mrs Gabriel.

“Not as the heir to your property,” said Leo, wrathfully. “In some way or another I shall make my way in the world. Sybil is quite willing to wait for me. We are engaged.”

“Ha! You seem to have settled the whole matter.”

“We have. And it will not be unsettled by anyone.”

The young man looked so determined, there was such fire in his eye, such a firmness about his closed mouth, that Mrs Gabriel felt that she was beaten. For the moment she retreated gracefully, but by no means gave up her point. By nagging at Leo she might be enabled to bring about things as she wished. “Well, have it your own way,” she said, rising. “I have said my say, and you are behaving abominably.”

“I am sorry you should think so, but I really cannot submit to this life any longer. You quite understand that next week I go to London?”

“As you please.” Mrs Gabriel was outwardly calm, but inwardly furious. “I hope you have well considered what you are doing?”

“I have. My mind has been made up for some time.”

“In that case, Leo, we may as well part good friends. I shall pay your debts and fit you out. Now do not contradict me. If you have any feeling of gratitude you will at least let me do this much.”

Haverleigh did not like the proposition, as he felt that Mrs Gabriel was preparing some snare into which he might blindly fall. However, as he

could not see his way to a refusal, and, moreover, was weary of this bickering, he merely bowed. Mrs Gabriel had thus gained time, and in some measure had secured the victory. It remained to her to make the best use of it. She was determined that Leo should marry Edith Hale.

“Have you had luncheon, Leo?” she asked, changing the subject.

“No. But I am not hungry now.”

“Nonsense. A big man like you. Come in and have something to eat at once.”

As a refusal would only have meant another outburst, Leo accepted the inevitable, and moved towards the door with his mother. “By the way,” he said, “I met Mr Pratt down below. He intends to ask us to a house-warming.”

It might have been Leo’s fancy, but he thought that Mrs Gabriel started at the mention of the name. However, there was an emotion in her hard voice as she replied, “I shall be rather glad to see the interior of his house, Leo. It is said that he has the most beautiful things. Will he ask us to dinner?”

“Yes. Hale and his sister are coming.”

“Ah!” said Mrs Gabriel in gratified tones.

“And the vicar and his daughter. Also Raston, the curate.”

“The church party,” said Mrs Gabriel, disdainfully. She had no love for Tempest, whom she regarded as half insane, nor for Sibyl, who was too beautiful for womanly taste, nor for Raston, who had frequently fought her on questions connected with parish affairs.

“By the way,” said Leo, who had been meditating, “why has Mr Pratt settled in these parts? I should think he found it dull.”

Mrs Gabriel smiled contemptuously. “Mr Pratt is not a foolish young man like someone I know,” she said; “he does not find pleasure in the follies of the Town. For my part, I think he is wise to settle here in his old age. He is a delightful neighbour and a pleasant companion.”

“He is all that,” assented Leo, heartily. He liked Pratt. “You have known him for many years, mother?”

“For ten or twelve,” replied Mrs Gabriel, carelessly. “I met him in Vienna, I think, and he called on me when I returned to London. Afterwards he came down here and fell in love with the place. For years he has been a rolling stone, but always said that when he settled down he would come to Colester. He is liked, is he not, Leo?”

“He is more than liked. He is immensely popular—with our friends, if not with the villagers. You have done a good deed in introducing him to our dull parish.”

“I don’t think Mr Pratt, who has so many resources in himself, finds it dull, my dear. However, I shall be glad to accept the invitation to his dinner. I should like to see him married.”

“Indeed! Have you chosen him a wife also?”

Mrs Gabriel laughed. “I thought he might take a fancy to Sibyl Tempest.”

“Why, he’s old enough to be her father. Besides—”

“Besides you love her,” finished Mrs Gabriel, with a shrug. “Well, do not get angry, Leo. I should like to see Mr Pratt marry Sybil and you the husband of Edith Hale. Then everything would be right.”

“I don’t think so at all,” commenced Haverleigh in vexed tones. “But don’t let us quarrel any more. I have the greatest regard for Pratt, but I do not care to go the length of letting him marry the girl I love.”

“You know very little of Mr Pratt,” said Mrs Gabriel, looking suddenly at the young man, “how, then, can you regard him so—”

“Oh, I have seen him often in Town,” broke in Leo; “sometimes when I was in difficulties and did not want to tell you Pratt helped me.”

“With money?” asked Mrs Gabriel, sharply.

“Of course with money. But I paid him back.”

Mrs Gabriel made no answer, but, rising suddenly, passed out of the room, and left Leo eating his luncheon alone. Her usually calm face looked disturbed and her hands were restless. Leo's information had annoyed her.

“What does Pratt mean?” she asked herself. “Can't he leave the boy alone after all these years? I wonder—” She broke off and pressed her hand to her heart as though she there felt a cruel pain. Perhaps she did, but Mrs Gabriel was not the woman to show it.

Chapter IV **The Dinner-Party**

Built on the lower slopes of the Castle Hill, Mr Pratt's residence, commonly known as The Nun's House, stood a little distance back from the highway which led down to King's-meadows. It was a plain, rough stone building of great strength, two storeys in height, and with a high roof of slate. Gloomy in the extreme, it was rendered still more so from its being encircled by a grove of yew trees which gave it a churchyard air. Not the kind of residence one would have thought attractive to a cheerful and dapper man like Richard Pratt. But he had, so he declared, fallen in love with it at first sight, and Mrs Gabriel, always having an eye to business, had only too readily granted him a seven years' lease. She was delighted at the chance of securing a tenant, as the house had been empty for a long time owing to its uncomfortable reputation. There was not a man, woman or child in Colester that did not know it was haunted.

The name came from a tradition, probably a true one, that when the Colester convent had been suppressed by Henry VIII., the evicted nuns had found refuge in this dismal house, a dozen of them. In time they died, and the mansion was inhabited by other people. But queer sounds were heard, strange sights were seen, and it became known that the twelve nuns re-visited the scene of their exile. There never was a house so populated with ghosts; and the tenants promptly departed. Others, lured by a low rent, came, and after a month's trial departed also. Finally no one would stop in the ill-omened mansion until Mr Pratt arrived. He liked the place, laughed at the gruesome reputation of the dwelling, and announced his intention of making it his home.

“Ghosts!” laughed Pratt, with his cheery smile. “Nonsense. Ghosts went out with gas. Besides, I should rather like to see a ghost, particularly of a nun. I am partial to the fair sex.”

“I wonder, then, you never married,” said the person who had warned him against the house, with the best intentions, of course.

Pratt looked at her—she was Mrs Bathurst, the gossip of the neighbourhood—under half-closed eye-lids, and smiled. “Ah!” said he, rubbing his plump white hands, “I have admired so many beautiful women, dear lady, that I could not remain constant to one;” which reason, although plausible, did not satisfy Mrs Bathurst. But then she was one of those amiable persons always willing to believe the worst of people.

However, Pratt took up his abode in the chief Colester inn, and sent for cartloads of furniture, while the house was being re-decorated. He took a deal of trouble to make it comfortable, and as he was a man of excellent taste, with an eye for colour, he succeeded in making it pretty as well. In six weeks the place was ready to receive him, and up to the period of his walk with the vicar, Pratt had occupied it for another six without being disturbed by the numerous ghosts. The Colester folks quite expected to hear that he had been carried off like Dr Faust, and were rather disappointed that he met with no ghostly adventure. But then Mr Pratt, as he said himself, was not imaginative enough for spectres.

Failing his leaving the house, the gentry expected that he would entertain them and show his treasures, for it was reported that he had many beautiful things. But Pratt was in no hurry. He wanted first to study his neighbours in order to see who were the most pleasant. In a surprisingly short time he got to know something about everyone, and on the knowledge thus acquired he selected his guests. In addition to those already mentioned, he invited Mrs Bathurst and her daughter Peggy. The girl was pretty and the mother talkative, so, in Pratt’s opinion, it paid to ask them. “There is no chance of an entertainment being dull if Mrs Bathurst has her legs under the table,” he said, and this being reported to the lady, she accused Pratt of coarseness. Nevertheless, she accepted the invitation. Not for worlds would Mrs Bathurst have missed a sight of re-decorated Nun’s House. Besides, it was her duty to go. She supplied all the gossip of the neighbourhood.

Anxious to see as much as possible of the house, Mrs Bathurst was the first to arrive. Pratt, in a particularly neat evening dress, advanced to meet her and Peggy with a smile. He knew very well that her ungovernable curiosity had led her to be thus early. "I am glad to see you, Mrs Bathurst," he said genially; "pray sit down. You are the first to arrive."

"I always like to be punctual," responded the lady, nodding to her daughter that she also should be seated. "Dear me, how well this room looks! I can see you have spared no expense."

"I like to make myself comfortable, Mrs Bathurst. We only have one life."

"I wonder you care to spend it in such a dull place as Colester. If Mr Bathurst were rich I should make him take me to London."

"You would soon get tired of the roar of that city."

Here Peggy, who was fair and pretty and fond of gaiety, shook her blonde head vigorously. "I should never get tired of fun," she said. "I could go to a dance every night and still want more."

"Ah, Miss Peggy, you are young and active!"

"Well, dear Mr Pratt, you are not old," said Mrs Bathurst, flatteringly; "we must make you happy here. I am sure you are quite an acquisition. We must find you a wife."

"I shall apply to you when I want one," he said, with a laugh; "but I guess I'm not made to run in double harness."

"What odd expressions you use! I daresay that comes from your being an American. Never mind, you'll soon lose all Americanisms here. I look upon you as quite one of ourselves, dear Mr Pratt."

The fact is that Mrs Bathurst wished to bring about a marriage between her daughter Peggy and the newcomer. He had been introduced by Mrs Gabriel, so his social position was secure; and if one could judge from the magnificent furnishing of the house, he was a wealthy man. That Peggy herself should be consulted never entered her mother's head.

Pratt guessed what Mrs Bathurst was after, and chuckled. He had no intention of having the good lady for a mother-in-law. Moreover, he knew that Peggy was in love with Raston, the curate. Nevertheless, having a love of tormenting people, and wishing to punish Mrs Bathurst, he sighed, cast a languishing look at Peggy, and allowed the mother to think that he might be guided by her wish. Seeing this, the lady pushed her advantage vigorously, and was getting on very well by the time the other guests arrived. Then, after some desultory conversation, dealing with the weather and the crops, all went in to dinner.

The table was beautifully set out. The linen was snowy white, the silver and crystal of the best, and the flowers, which Pratt had personally arranged, were skilfully chosen and blended. The women present were rather annoyed that a man should be able to manage a house so well, for the dinner was one of the best that had ever been eaten in Colester, and the service was all that could be desired. What was the use, thought Mrs Bathurst, of suggesting a wife to a man who knew so well how to dispense with one? She could not have arranged things better herself, and it was vexing that a mere man should be able to beat a woman on her own ground.

“You have certainly made a very pretty place of it, Mr Pratt,” said Mrs Gabriel, when they returned to the drawing-room. “I suppose you will live here for many a long day?”

“I hope to die here,” he replied, smiling. “But one never knows. I may take a fancy to resume my travels.”

“You are like Ulysses,” put in the vicar, “you know men and cities.”

“And, like Ulysses, I don’t think much of either, Mr Tempest.”

“Come now!” cried Leo, laughing. “I never heard that Ulysses was a cynic.”

“He was not modern enough,” said Sybil, who was looking particularly charming, much to the anger of Mrs Gabriel, who saw in her a man-trap for her adopted son.

“I don’t think cynicism is altogether a modern disease,” remarked Sir Frank Hale. “Solomon had not much belief in human nature.”

“What could you expect from a man who had so many wives?” put in Pratt, in a dry voice. The remark annoyed Mrs Bathurst. It augured ill for her scheme to marry Peggy. A man who talked thus of women could never be brought to respect his mother-in-law.

While this conversation was taking place Mrs Gabriel kept a vigilant eye on Leo. Whenever he tried to edge up to Sybil she contrived to get in the way, and, finally, by a dexterous move, she placed him ‘longside the baronet’s sister. Edith Hale was a tall, raw-boned, thin girl, with small pretensions to beauty or wit. She had a freckled skin and red hair, an awkward way of carrying herself and a silent tongue. She was so deeply in love with Leo that she followed his every movement with her eyes, until he found her regard most embarrassing. However, Leo, to avert a storm when he returned home, was obliged to show her every attention, and strolled away with her into Mr Pratt’s new conservatory. Sybil looked disappointed, but controlled herself sufficiently to play an accompaniment for Peggy. Raston turned over the leaves of the music, and Mrs Bathurst, with a glance at Pratt, settled herself to listen. As to Mr Tempest, he was moving round the room examining the objects of art in his usual near-sighted way. Seeing everyone thus occupied, Mrs Gabriel drew aside Sir Frank into a convenient corner.

The baronet was a pale-faced, hunchback, lame creature, with a shrewish expression and a pair of brilliant grey eyes. He had been an invalid all his life, and his temper had been spoilt thereby. The only person in the world for whom he cherished the least affection was his sister. In his eyes she was as beautiful as Helen and as clever as Madame de Stael. He knew that she was breaking her heart for Leo, and resented the young man’s indifference. And as Hale had the spite of a cripple, his resentment was not to be despised. But Leo did not know that.

“Frank,” said Mrs Gabriel, addressing him thus familiarly, as she had known him from his cradle, “I want to speak to you about Leo. It is time he was married. Nothing but marriage will steady him.”

“Sybil Tempest is ready enough to become his wife, Mrs Gabriel,” snarled the little man. “Why don’t you speak to her?”

“Because she is not your sister,” replied Mrs Gabriel, coldly. “I do not intend that Leo shall throw himself away on a penniless girl who has

nothing but her face to recommend her. Edith has both brains and beauty.”

“Leo does not see that,” said Hale, who implicitly believed in his companion; “he is infatuated with Sybil. I don’t say a word against her,” he added hastily; “I want to marry her myself.”

Mrs Gabriel looked with secret contempt on the deformed man, and wondered how he could have the impertinence to think that any woman could take him for her husband. However, she was pleased to hear of this new complication. If Sybil could be induced to marry the baronet—and from a worldly point of view the match was a good one—she would be out of the way. In despair Leo might marry Edith, and thus all would be as Mrs Gabriel wanted. She wished to move human beings as puppets to suit her own ends, and never thought that she might be thwarted by the individual will of those with whom she played. However, she had an idea of how to entangle matters so as to carry out her schemes, and commenced her intrigue with the baronet. She knew he would help her, both for his own sake and for the sake of his sister. At the same time she moved warily, so as not to make a false step. It was no easy matter to deal with Hale, as she knew. Once or twice he had got the better of her in business.

“I don’t mind being candid with you,” said Mrs Gabriel softly. “It is my wish that Leo should marry Edith, and I shall be delighted to help you to become Sybil’s husband.”

“It’s easy saying, but harder doing,” said Hale, snappishly. “Sybil is in love with Leo, and the woman who admires Apollo will not look upon Caliban. Oh, I am under no delusions respecting myself,” he added, with a hoarse laugh. “I am not agreeable to look upon, but I have money, a title and a good position. Nine women out of ten would be content with these things.”

“I am afraid Sybil is the tenth,” said Mrs Gabriel, coldly. “However, neither she nor Leo know what is good for them. Help me to marry him to your sister, and then Sybil will fall into your arms.”

“Do you think so?”

“I am certain of it.”

“How are we to manage?” asked Hale, after a pause. “You have some scheme.”

“It is in order to explain my scheme to you that I have brought about this conversation. Listen. I am not pleased with Leo. He has been leading a wild life in Town, and is in debt to the tune of three hundred pounds.”

“Humph!” said Frank, under his breath. “These Apollos know how to waste money. I shall see that Edith’s dowry is settled on herself.”

“And I shall tie up the Gabriel property so that Leo cannot waste it.”

Hale looked at her from under his bushy eyebrows. “You intend that he shall be your heir, then?”

“Assuredly. If he does what I want him to do.”

“What is that?”

“He must marry Edith and take up his residence in the castle. No more gadding about, no more wild living. Let Leo be a respectable country gentleman and his future is secure.”

“Have you explained that to him?” asked the baronet, sharply.

“No. Leo is a fool, and infatuated with that girl. I must force him to do what I want. It is for his own good. You must help, both for the sake of Edith, and because it is your only chance of marrying Sybil.”

“I’m quite ready to help you, Mrs Gabriel. Go on.”

Mrs Gabriel glanced round, bent her head, and spoke lower. “I intend to refuse to pay this three hundred pounds for Leo. There is no chance of his earning it for himself, and he will soon be in serious difficulty. Now if you come forward as his old friend and—”

“I don’t like lending money,” said Hale, who was something of a miser.

“If you want to gain Sybil and make your sister happy, you must lend Leo three hundred pounds. When he is in your debt, well—the rest is easy.”

Hale nodded. "I see what you mean," said he, ponderingly. "The idea is not a bad one. But Leo—humph! Three hundred pounds! A large sum!"

"Oh, I will be your surety for it," said Mrs Gabriel, impatiently. She did not want her plans upset by this miser. "But if you want to gain anything you must sacrifice something. You love Sybil?"

"With my whole soul," said the cripple, and flushed.

"And your sister?"

"I would give anything to secure her happiness."

"Three hundred pounds will be enough," said Mrs Gabriel, coolly. "Make Leo your debtor, and then you can deal with him. He is so honourable that he will keep his word even at the cost of his happiness. Well?"

Hale reflected. "I will think of it," said he, cautiously.

"As you please. But remember that if I do not have this settled within the week, I shall allow Leo to marry Sybil."

Of course Mrs Gabriel had no such intention, but she determined outwardly on this course to frighten the baronet. It had the desired effect.

"I will see to the matter," he said hastily; "to-night I will ask Leo to come and see me. It will all be arranged. But three hundred pounds!" He winced and Mrs Gabriel smiled.

"I will be your surety," she said, rising. "Let me know when you have made Leo your debtor. Come, we must not talk any more. Here is Mr Pratt."

It was indeed the host who came to disturb them. He wished to take the whole party round his house. Leo and Edith returned from the conservatory, the former looking bored, the latter brilliantly happy. Sybil did not like this, and glanced reproachfully at Leo, who immediately would have gone to her side, but he was anticipated by Hale. "Help me to get round the house, Miss Tempest," he said, pointing to his lame leg. "You must be my crutch."

Sybil could not but assent, and so Leo found himself out in the cold. Peggy, who approved of his love for Sybil, took his arm. "Never mind," she said softly, "I will manage to take Sir Frank away," and Leo gave her hand a grateful squeeze.

"Come, all of you!" cried Pratt, cheerily. "The museum is open."

He led them through a series of rooms crammed with treasures. There were valuable pictures, pieces of rich tapestry, exquisite examples of goldsmith's work, and many other things of value. Mr Pratt had a story for every object. This he picked up in the Great Bazaar at Stamboul; that was a bargain obtained in an Italian town; the silver crucifix came from Spain; the lacquer work from Japan. Apparently he had been all over the world, and had made purchases in every part. Here was the evidence of his travels and his wealth before the longing eyes of Mrs Bathurst. More than ever was she determined that Peggy should become Mrs Pratt.

While Pratt discoursed and the company exclaimed at the treasures displayed to their wondering eyes, Mrs Gabriel maintained her haughty silence. She surveyed all the beautiful things in a cold, unemotional manner, and kept an eye on the movements of Leo. He felt uncomfortable under her gaze, and once or twice looked angrily at her. But Mrs Gabriel met his indignant looks with a calm smile.

"You must have spent a fortune on all this," said Hale, inspecting a tray of antique coins. "What a collection!"

"I have been buying for years," explained Pratt, smiling. "Mine has been a varied life. I was born of poor parents and had to make my own way in the world. For years I worked in the States, in South America and elsewhere to make money. Finally I secured a fortune in South Africa, and for the last ten years I have devoted myself to collecting these things. They have been stored for years, and now that I have a house of my own, this is the first time I have been able to arrange them. I am glad you are pleased."

"We are more than pleased," gushed Mrs Bathurst. "It is a most beautiful treat to see these lovely things and hear you talk about them. What is this cup, dear Mr Pratt?"

"Ah!" said Pratt, taking it up. "This is the property of the vicar."

“Mine!” said Mr Tempest in mild surprise. “Dear me, Mr Pratt, what do you mean? It would take half my year’s stipend to buy this!”

“It is the cup of which I spoke to you, vicar.” Pratt handed it to Tempest and then turned to the group. “I wish to present this cup to the chapel, Mr Raston,” he said, “and I hope that you and Mr Tempest will accept it on behalf of the town. It is an old Roman goblet, and has been used for centuries as a communion chalice in an Italian city. I bought it many years ago. Is it not beautiful?”

The cup was indeed an exquisite object of art. Of considerable size, it was of pure gold. The rim and the stem were set round with gems of great value, and the outside was embossed with faces peering from out a tangle of flowers. It had two handles formed of twisted snakes with ruby eyes and round its broadest part ran an inscription in Latin. The vicar held the goblet to the light and translated the inscription. “To the great God, who maketh the heart joyful,” he said, then added dubiously, “Does that refer to a pagan god, or to the Maker of all things?”

“If the cup is Roman, probably it is an inscription to Bacchus,” said the curate, a shadow on his face. “If so, we cannot use it as a communion cup.” Pratt laughed and raised his eyebrows at this scrupulous regard. “You can set your mind at rest,” he said. “The priest who sold it to me on account of the poverty of his parish church said that the inscription was inscribed during the Middle Ages. It refers to the God of Christendom.”

“In that case,” said the vicar beaming, “I accept the cup with pleasure and with many thanks. It shall be consecrated and placed on the altar by the end of this week.”

While the others were thanking and congratulating Mr Pratt, an expression of relief might have been noticed on his face. Mrs Gabriel, who knew his every look, wondered to herself why he appeared to be so pleased. Evidently he was thankful to be rid of the cup. However, she said nothing, as she was a wise woman, but added her congratulations to those of the others.

“Everyone will be delighted,” she said coldly. “Such generosity is unusual in Colester.” But her glance hinted unusual as regarded Pratt. He received the hint smilingly.

“I hope it will make me popular,” said he. “I am weak enough to wish to be liked, and hitherto I have not secured the goodwill of the people.”

“You will have it now,” said Raston, “and particularly that of Pearl Darry. She loves beautiful things for the altar, and as she attends to the decorating of the chapel, it will be a constant pleasure to her to keep this cup bright and spotless.”

“I hope it will be safe with her!” cried Mrs Bathurst. “These insane people are like magpies, and steal anything glittering that attracts their weak fancies. Are you sure she will not take it away, Mr Raston?”

The curate was indignant. “Pearl would no more do such a thing than take her own life, poor soul,” he said. “She is devoted to the church. Religion, so far as her own poor brain understands it, is her one consolation.”

“She ought to be shut up,” said Mrs Gabriel.

“There I differ from you,” said the vicar, mildly. “She is not harmful enough to be placed in durance. Let her enjoy liberty and sunshine, Mrs Gabriel. It is little pleasure she has.”

“She seems to me harmless enough,” said Pratt, “and if this cup will be an additional pleasure to her, I am the more glad that Mr Tempest has accepted it. I shall have it wrapped up, vicar.”

“Thank you. Be very careful, Mr Pratt. So beautiful an object must not be carelessly dealt with.” From which remark it will be seen that now the Roman goblet was the property of the Church it assumed quite a new value in the eyes of the priest. Formerly it was merely a beautiful example of the goldsmith’s art; now it was sacred.

After this the company repaired to the drawing-room, where Mr Pratt told stories until quite a late hour for Colester. Never had there been so agreeable a host in the dull little provincial town, and one and all confessed themselves charmed with their evening. “Quite an acquisition,” repeated Mrs Bathurst as she departed. “Mind you come and see me, Mr Pratt. Peggy will never forgive you if you do not.” A foolish speech which sent poor Peggy away covered with blushes. But then Mrs Bathurst’s zeal always outran her discretion.

As Mr Pratt stood at his door waving a hearty good-bye to his guests, he saw that Hale was beside Leo and overheard a remark. “Come and see me in three days, Leo,” the baronet was saying. “I want to speak to you most particularly.”

“Most particularly,” echoed Pratt, thoughtfully. “Humph! What’s up now?”

Chapter V

Love’s Young Dream

The Colester folk were certainly pleased that Mr Pratt had adorned their beloved chapel with so magnificent a gift. They unbent so far as to smile when they curtsied or touched their hats, but did not take him to their bosoms. However, Pratt saw that he had made a step forward in their affections, and professed himself well pleased. “Rome was not built in a day,” said he, philosophically.

Mr Tempest installed the cup on the altar, where it glittered in front of the crucifix. It was an object of wonder and reverence to the simple villagers, and the vicar himself was no less pleased. Its weight, the beauty of the workmanship, and the splendour of the jewels, filled him with joy, and he came to regard the pagan vessel—as it undoubtedly was—as a kind of Holy Grail. Having made some such reference to it, the sexton Baker, an inquisitive octogenarian, wanted to know what the Holy Grail was. Forthwith Mr Tempest prepared a lecture, compounded of Mallory’s prose work and Tennyson’s poetical interpretation. This he delivered in the village schoolroom, and had the sacred cup placed on the table before him, so that his hearers might have the significance of the gift borne home to them. Pearl heard the lecture, and so much of it as her poor wits took in led her to look upon the cup as the very vessel itself mentioned in the poem. To Pearl the Pagan cup, as Frank Hale called it, was the veritable vessel from which the Master had drunk at that last sad feast. And no argument could shake this belief when she once got it into her head.

“So ridiculous,” said Mrs Jeal, sniffing. “I daresay Mr Pratt bought it in London. He is clever at inventing stories,” whereupon Pearl flew into

such a rage that the elder woman never ventured to hint a doubt of the cup. In her own queer way, and that was none of the most righteous, Mrs Jeal was fond of Pearl. It is true that she regarded her as a half-baked natural, but she would never let anyone but herself say so. Mrs Jeal was superstitious, and kept Pearl in her humble cottage as a kind of talisman against evil. Probably she felt it necessary for her to have some pure and innocent thing beside her. The Colester people never thought of this. They regarded Mrs Jeal as a hard-working, honest woman. She was certainly all that, and more. What the "more" was Mrs Jeal never explained. She was well able to hold her tongue.

Meanwhile the cup stood on the altar, and Pearl frequently stared at it on her knees, dreaming Heaven knows what dreams, as its beauty flashed in the sunlight. She attended to her duties as usual, and the vicar had no reason to complain that the decking of the altar suffered. But the insane girl passed hours before the cup, drinking in its lovely colour and beauty of form. It was to her a kind of fetish, and she resented it being touched even when Mr Tempest used it for the purpose for which it had been presented. Pratt, hearing this, laughed, and was a little touched. He was sorry for the girl, and pleased that he had been the means of introducing a new element of beauty into her life.

One day while Pearl was on her knees with clasped hands, Sybil entered the chapel. She had come here to meet Leo, for owing to the vigilance of Mrs Gabriel, a meeting was not easily arranged. Whenever Leo and Sybil were together, they would be joined by Mrs Gabriel, by Frank Hale or by Edith. It was no use resenting this addition to the company, for the inconvenient third would never take the hint. Consequently Leo met Sybil by stealth, and as those who interfered rarely came to the chapel save on Sunday, it was the chapel they chose for their meeting-place. Certainly Pearl was always haunting the shrine, but she gave them no trouble.

Although the day was warm, Pearl had draped a shawl of white Chinese crape over her shoulders. This was a present from Mrs Jeal, who had many such beautiful things, although she would never say how she came by them. The girl still wore her favourite green dress and the straw hat, which had a fresh wreath of oak leaves round it. Every day the wreath was renewed, and some significance was attached to it by the wearer which was not understood by her friends. With her eyes fixed on the

cup, and her hands clasped on her knee, she knelt on the lower step of the altar with a wrapt expression and moving lips.

“And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones,” she murmured, and went on with the verse enumerating the gems. Pearl knew much of the Bible by heart, and frequently recited long passages to herself. But, like a parrot, she could never be got to speak when she was wanted, and few knew the extent of her knowledge. Sybil overheard the words, and guessed that the poor creature applied them to the cup.

A strong ray of sunlight streamed in through a small plain glass window in the chancel. It struck with a golden glory on the altar, and in its burning light the cup flashed with many hues. The gems with which it was adorned shot sparks of rainbow fire—the green or the emerald, the fiery red of the ruby, the amethyst, purple in colour as a ripe grape, and above all the fierce flash of a diamond that was in front of the vessel immediately above the Latin inscription. Sybil did not wonder that Pearl had a passion for the cup. It looked a singularly beautiful object glowing in the splendour of the sunlight, and might well have been the Holy Grail, as Pearl thought it was.

“What is it, Pearl?” she asked, drawing near, but speaking low so as not to disturb the girl. For Pearl was like a wild animal, and shrank away even at the slightest sound. And even as she spoke the sunlight passed away.

“It is gone, gone!” cried Pearl, rising with a wild look. “The Master has withdrawn His presence. I would that I could take it out where His sun would ever shine. Did you see the angels, Miss Sybil?”

“What angels, Pearl?”

“In the beam of the Master’s glory. They ascended and descended like the angels of Jacob’s dream. From the holy cup a shining pathway went up to heaven, and now it is gone.”

“The shining pathway will be there again at this same hour to-morrow,” said Sybil, comforting the girl.

“But it endures only for a little while,” sighed Pearl. “Oh, why doesn’t the Master take His cup into the bright sunshine where it could grow warm and rejoice in the glory of day? And the sun would make it glitter like a thousand fires, nor would the moon withhold her light.”

“It is better here in this sacred place, Pearl.”

“The roof shuts out the light, Miss Sybil.” And the girl looked at the great cup, now dull and colourless like a dead thing. “Only in the sunshines does the Master put out His hand to grasp His cup.”

“It is not the real cup, Pearl,” said Sybil, incautiously.

“How dare you say so?” shrieked the girl, tearing herself away from Sybil’s grasp. “The vicar said it was the cup of the Master. I doubt you are one of the evil things its presence makes to fear,” and with an indignant look Pearl moved swiftly down the aisle, murmuring as she went. At the door she broke into a jubilant chant, and Sybil gathered that she was recalling some lines of Tennyson which the vicar had repeated in his lecture:—

“Oh, yet methought I saw the Holy Grail,

All palled in crimson samite, and around

Great angels, awful shapes, and wings and eyes.”

Half singing, half reciting, she passed out of the door and brushed by Leo, who entered at the moment. Like a shadow she faded out of the church, and left him staring after her. But high and sweet in the distance rose her voice, singing like a lark.

“What’s the matter with her now?” asked Leo as Sybil met him.

“Nothing much. She has a belief that yonder cup is the veritable Holy Grail, and when I suggested that it was not she grew angry. But what a memory she has!” added Sybil, linking her arm within that of Leo. “Did you hear her recite Tennyson’s lines? Well, she only heard them once before.”

“I daresay. But she cannot read, and those who can’t read have always a marvelous memory. But the wonder to me is that her poor, cracked

brain can hold anything. I know she's mad about the Grail, as she called that cup. Mrs Jeal told me that Pearl expects the cup will some day be snatched up to heaven to be used there. Poor soul!"

"It is a sweet belief, though," murmured Sybil; then, after a pause, she drew Leo into the side chapel where the crusaders were set stiffly on their tombs. "We are safe here, Leo. No one will come. Sit down beside this pillar and let us talk. We have much to say to one another."

"And nothing very pleasant," sighed Leo, as he sat down, and slipped his arm round the girl's waist. "Oh, Sybil, how foolish I have been getting into debt and quarrelling with Mrs Gabriel! It will end with my going away to the war. Indeed, I intended to have gone this week, only I could not leave you, and besides—" Here Leo hesitated.

"What is it?" she asked, noticing that he looked nervous.

"There is a chance of my debts being paid."

"Mrs Gabriel?"

"No, indeed. At first she said she would pay. Now she has changed her mind. But Hale has offered to lend me the money."

Sybil looked anxious. "I don't like that," she said decidedly. "It is not like him to be so generous."

"My dear," said Leo, taking her hand, "you are too hard upon poor Frank. I have known him now for many years, and it is reasonable enough that he should be willing to help an old playfellow."

"It is not like him," insisted Miss Tempest. "I hope he is not laying a trap for you, Leo. He is spiteful enough to do that."

"And when he has caught me in his trap, Sybil?"

She shook her head. "It is easy laughing, but I don't like your accepting a favour from that cross-grained little man."

"You are uncharitable, my dear."

“I don’t want to be. I am sure I am sorry poor Sir Frank is so afflicted, but I really wish he had a sweeter nature. Besides,” her eyes fell and she began to play with a button on Leo’s coat, “he is—I think—too fond of me.”

“Can anyone be too fond of you?” asked Haverleigh, not taking in the real significance of this remark.

“You do not understand, Leo. I mean that I think he intends to ask me to be his wife. Now don’t be angry, for I am not sure if he will. It is only a kind of instinct I have that such is his intention.”

Haverleigh, confident in his good looks and virile strength, laughed good-humouredly. “I am not angry, my dear. The idea of that wretched little creature thinking of marriage!”

“Who is uncharitable now, Mr Haverleigh?”

The young man laughed. “Fairly hit,” he said; “but really, Sybil, I don’t think you need trouble about Hale. No man of his build and weakness would insult a woman by asking her hand in marriage. He is a queer little creature, but for all his cross-grained temper his heart is in the right place. I am sorry for him, and I feel his kindness in offering to help me. To be sure he is well off, but the kindness is all the same.”

“And what about his sister? She is in love with you.”

“So Mrs Gabriel says,” responded Leo, coolly. “But that is all nonsense—much the same as your suspicions of Hale. Why, the girl never opens her mouth to me; she only looks and looks.”

“With her soul in her eyes!”

“It must be a dull soul then, for I see no gleam in those eyes of hers.”

“You are most unsuspecting, Leo,” said Sybil at length. “I have a kind of feeling that we are on the eve of some trouble. Have you noticed that until we found out this quiet spot Mrs Gabriel or Sir Frank and his sister always joined us?”

“I noticed that, but it meant nothing.” Leo paused and then continued, “I know that my mother wants me to marry Edith, but I told her plainly that I would not, and she has agreed to let me have my own way.”

“That is not like her,” said Sybil, after a pause. “She always wants to have her own way.”

“I think she is beginning to find me one too many for her, my love. It is this way, Sybil. I told her that if she went on treating me so badly I would enlist. That frightened her, and she has been kinder since.”

“I don’t trust her, no more than I do Sir Frank. Are you going to take this money?”

“As a loan I am, but I hope to pay it back.”

“How are you going to manage?”

“Oh, Pratt has promised to make it right with my mother. He has a wonderful influence with her. You know he has been her friend for years, and she has great reliance on his judgment. I told him all my trouble, and he has promised to help me. It is not the first time he has done so, Sybil. Several times last year he lent me money.”

“I know he is a kind man,” said Sybil; “but, Leo, I do wish you—”

He stopped her mouth with a kiss. “I know what you are going to say,” was his half-laughing, half-serious remark, “and, indeed, my love, I am not worthy of you. But now I am a man, and I intend to put away all childish things—by which I mean the follies of youth. I have done nothing very wrong, Sybil. Indeed, my wickedness has been of the mildest description. I understood Mrs Gabriel to say that I was her heir, and so I thought I had a right to spend money. I overstepped the mark, and I own my fault. I should have been more sensible, but, indeed, Sybil, it is difficult for a man brought up in luxury to know when to stop. If my home had only been made more attractive to me, I should never have behaved so foolishly. But that page of my life is turned down now. It will close with the payment of this three hundred pounds, and henceforth I shall try and deserve your love.”

“That is right, darling. But don’t you think it would be better to get Mr Pratt to see your mother and induce her to give you the money than take it from Sir Frank?”

“No, my dear,” said Leo, decidedly; “if my mother thinks that I am able to pay the money myself, she will be afraid lest she will lose me altogether and be more amenable to reason. I have arranged it all with Pratt. Hale is to lend me the money next week. I pay my debts. Then I shall get him to speak to Mrs Gabriel.”

“Does Mr Pratt know that Sir Frank proposes to lend you the money?”

“No; I did not tell him that at Frank’s special request. I merely said that I would put off paying the matter for a month. In the meantime he will speak to my mother.”

“It seems all wrong,” said Sybil, with a sigh. “I can’t help thinking that you are behaving foolishly.”

“I hope not, Sybil. But I must manage Mrs Gabriel somehow. I cannot have her treating me so badly. Sometimes she really seems to hate me. When my debts are paid I shall look about and see what I can do to earn my own living. I am half inclined to enlist in the Yeomanry.”

“Leo! Leo! Don’t do that!” Sybil seized his arm. “I should lose you.”

“My dear, it is the only thing I am fit for. My mother would not let me have a profession, and I am not clever enough to make money. I should have gone into the army long ago. Indeed, it was my wish, only Mrs Gabriel would not consent. I think my father must have come of a fighting stock, Sybil, as I feel so inclined to be a soldier.”

“The Haverleighs were always simple country squires, Leo. I have heard my father speak of them often. There were no soldiers amongst them!”

“Then I don’t know where my aunt got her fierceness. By the way, Sybil, don’t you get mixed by the many different ways I refer to that lady; I call her my mother, my aunt, and very often Mrs Gabriel.”

“I think the last name suits her best,” said Sybil, “she is such a hard woman. Still, she has been kind to you, Leo.”

“I don’t quite agree with you there,” he answered a trifle bitterly. “If she took me in, she has made me feel my position. No, Sybil, I hope in some way to make a position for myself. Then Mrs Gabriel may be proud of me. At present I am only an object of her charity. Let me go for a soldier, my darling.”

“You must wait for a time, Leo,” entreated Sybil. “If you are really bent upon enlisting, I shall not try and dissuade you. But, oh! how unhappy I shall be when you are in South Africa!”

“Come, come, you will never do for a soldier’s wife. Is it not better for me to be fighting for my country than staying here eating the bread of idleness? I am sure you would be prouder of me dead on the battlefield than to see me a hanger-on here.”

“Yes,” said Sybil bravely, “I should.”

“In that case I shall enlist.” And after taking her in his arms, he kissed her tenderly. “I shall be here for another week. Let us make the best of our time.”

Hand in hand they passed from the chapel, but at the door they suddenly separated. Mrs Gabriel was coming up the steps, and cast a cold smile at the pair. “I want to see you, Leo, when you can spare the time,” she said.

“I will come with you now,” said Haverleigh. “And you, Sybil?”

“I want to find Pearl Darry,” said Miss Tempest; “she is offended with me, and I must make my peace with her. Good-day, Mrs Gabriel!”

“Good-day!” said Mrs Gabriel in her stiffest manner. Then, as Leo walked down the road beside her, back to the castle, she added, “I understand that you are engaged, Leo, and without my consent?”

“I am sorry you should be vexed,” he said formally; “but I cannot sacrifice my life’s happiness even for you.”

“Bless the boy! I don’t want you to do that,” said Mrs Gabriel, sharply. “And about this enlisting?”

“I intend to enlist.”

Mrs Gabriel drew a long breath, and walked on in silence for a few moments. “Well,” she said at length, “I think it is about the best thing you could do. Your debts?”

“I shall see that they are paid,” said Leo, calmly.

“Oh, indeed! And where will you get the money?”

“From a friend.”

Mrs Gabriel again became silent. “I don’t think you are treating me altogether fairly, Leo.”

“I am willing to do whatever you think best, mother. But I am ashamed to live on your charity any longer. However, I promise you one thing. I shall not enlist for at least a month.”

Mrs Gabriel laughed silently. Many things might happen in a month.

Chapter VI

Trouble

Still anxious to secure Mr Pratt for a son-in-law, Mrs Bathurst resolved to make some return to his hospitality. Her husband had very little money, and the lady was unable to give a dinner-party on account of the cost. Also Pratt had “done things so well”—so she put it—that she was unwilling to provoke comparisons. Nevertheless, some sort of entertainment had to be given, and after much reflection and many consultations with Peggy, it was decided that it should take the form of a picnic. The scenery around Colester was beautiful, the weather was fine, and the cost of an open-air entertainment would be comparatively small. Mrs Bathurst therefore issued cards.

“We must make Mr Pratt one of ourselves,” said the energetic lady; “and although we cannot hope to vie with his luxury, we can at least bestow what we have with liberal hearts.”

What Mrs Bathurst had in the way of food was principally sandwiches—the cheapest form of nourishment she could think of. As she had decided

that the picnic should take place on the moor, where there were no roads, it was not necessary to hire vehicles to convey the party to the scene of revelry. "A good brisk walk will give everyone an appetite," said the hostess, "and the air will do us all good." Thus it came about that all those who had partaken of Pratt's hospitality found themselves the guests of Mrs Bathurst. Her husband, who characterised the picnic as foolery, was not present.

By a dexterous arrangement the good lady contrived that Peggy should find herself in the company of Pratt. The little man was as neat and dapper as ever, and as Peggy strolled beside him over the heather, she could not but admit that he was a pleasant companion. The principal meal of the day had been devoured, and Mrs Bathurst's guests had been sent hungry away. Tea and a limited quantity of sandwiches were scarcely sufficient for appetites sharpened by the keen moorland air. However, there was nothing else; and now the company, split up into small parties, wandered here, there and everywhere. Peggy was with Pratt. He saw how Mrs Bathurst had manoeuvred to bring this about, and resolved to make use of the opportunity in a way of which the schemer would not approve.

"Most beautiful place this, Miss Peggy," said Pratt, glancing round, "but I fear the company is not to your mind."

"Oh! Mr Pratt, how can you say that!" said poor Peggy, divided between a desire to keep him at a distance and to avoid giving offence to her mother. "I am very pleased to be with you."

"Well, I don't know, Miss Peggy. I am not a parson, you know."

Peggy laughed and blushed. Her secret was everybody's property, and it was well known in Colester that she and Raston were attached to one another. Even Mrs Bathurst knew, but she was resolved to crush this affection before it grew too strong for her control. As a matter of fact it had already passed that stage, but Mrs Bathurst was not aware of that. "Mr Raston is quite happy with Miss Hale," said Peggy, frankly. She found Pratt sympathetic and did not mind speaking freely to him.

"And I think Miss Hale would rather be with young Haverleigh," said her companion, "but he is with Miss Tempest."

“And with Sir Frank Hale.”

“Who is the inconvenient third, Miss Peggy? We are all at sixes and sevens, I fancy. Even Mrs Gabriel and the vicar are badly matched. However, in a little time I shall ask Mr Raston to join us.”

“Not on my account,” cried Miss Bathurst, hastily.

“I understand, your mother would not be pleased.”

“Mr Pratt!” Peggy bit her lip. “Really, Mr Pratt!”

“My dear young lady,” said Pratt, with a twinkle, “do you think that I flatter myself that a battered old man like myself is your choice? No, indeed; although your mother would have it so. Like draws to like, and if I can bring it about you shall be Mrs Raston.”

“No chance of that,” sighed Peggy. “Mr Raston is too poor!”

“Oh, no. He has three hundred a year of his own, and it is more than probable that when Mr Tempest dies, Mrs Gabriel will give him the living. Then why won’t your mother consent?”

“She was not opposed to my engagement until—until—” Peggy hesitated.

“Until I arrived,” finished Pratt. “Set your mind at rest, Miss Peggy; I am not a marrying man; I have seen too much of the world.”

Peggy laughed and looked at him. His pleasant face was turned towards her, and she saw on his cheek a mark she had never noticed before. It was a tattooed star, very small and placed just under the jawbone. Unless looked for very closely it was apt to escape notice. But there it was, and being so close to the man, Peggy saw it very plainly. Perhaps she saw it the more clearly because Pratt held his head at a particular angle. He noticed the curiosity in her eyes, and flushed a trifle. He knew what she was looking at. “I had that done in the South Seas,” said Pratt, rubbing the star; “foolish thing to have had done, but I was a reckless young sailor then. And see here, Miss Peggy,” he rolled up his sleeve, that of the left arm. Immediately below the elbow there was a beautifully tattooed snake, half red and half blue. “That was done in Japan,” he said.

“You seem to have been everywhere, Mr Pratt?”

“I have. That is why I have come down here to end my days in peace. I want everybody hereabouts to like me—you included, Miss Peggy.”

“I do like you, Mr Pratt,” protested Peggy. “Not, of course, like—”

“I understand. Well, I shall speak to your mother about Mr Raston. Oh, do not look so afraid, Miss Peggy. I know very well what I am about. I have managed much more obstinate people in my time. All you have to do is to look pleased as though you were delighted with me. That will put your mother on the wrong scent.”

“Harold will not like it,” objected Peggy, as they returned to join the others. “Harold is Mr Raston.”

“I gathered that from your blush,” said Pratt, with a chuckle. “Well, leave it to me. There is Harold making signals. What is up now?”

Mrs Bathurst informed them as soon as they came within earshot. “Come here at once, Peggy,” she screamed. “Mr Pratt, come here! Mr Raston is about to take a group with his kodak. It will be a memorial of my picnic.”

The American did not seem pleased. For the moment his usually active tongue was silent, and he seemed unwilling to form part of the group. “I do not care about having my likeness taken, Mrs Bathurst,” he said.

“But indeed you must—in the group,” said the lady, vigorously; “dear Mr Pratt, do not spoil the little memorial of my picnic.”

“It can be taken without me, Mrs Bathurst.”

“That would be the play of Hamlet with the Prince left out,” replied the lady, gracefully. “Mrs Gabriel, add your entreaties.”

“Oh! Mr Pratt will not listen to me,” said Mrs Gabriel, severely, “I know him of old. He can be obstinate when he chooses.”

Pratt laughed but gave her a sly look which made her wince. Strong woman as she was, there was something about this artless, good-natured little man which made her turn white and draw her breath in quick gasps. “I consent to be taken,” said Pratt, withdrawing his gaze, “if I am permitted to arrange the group myself.”

“Certainly,” said Raston, brightly. He had been exchanging a few words with Peggy. “Arrange it as you please.”

Leo, who had Hale at his elbow, ranged alongside the American. “You know where to place me,” he said softly, and Pratt nodded. It was mainly for that reason that he wished to arrange the group.

The result of his efforts was that Leo and Sybil were together, much to the wrath of the baronet and Mrs Gabriel. The others Pratt scattered anyhow, and placed himself at the back. Raston did not approve of this.

“You can hardly be seen, Mr Pratt,” he said. “Please come more forward.”

Pratt hesitated, but, catching sight of a cold smile on the face of Mrs Gabriel, he gave her a defiant look and placed himself in the position indicated by Mr Raston’s outstretched finger. Then the curate adjusted his kodak and took three pictures. He also had to take a fourth, as Mrs Bathurst wanted herself to be seen making tea, surrounded by her guests. “To recall a happy, happy day,” she explained.

“You are fond of photography, Raston?” said Pratt, when this was over.

“Very. I have taken pictures all round the place.”

“And the other day he took a picture of the cup you gave,” put in Sybil.

“I guess that’s kind of him,” said Pratt, gnawing his lip. “I suppose,” he was addressing Raston, “that you send copies of these to your friends?”

“Indeed I do not,” replied the curate, cheerily, “I take only a few copies and place them in an album. Certainly I have given a few to Miss Bathurst.”

“Natural, very natural,” said Pratt, gravely; “you must give me one of the group you took just now.” And without waiting for an answer he turned away. Somehow he seemed relieved to hear that the photographs were not likely to be sent round the country. And all the time Mrs Gabriel, who had listened to this conversation, heard it with a cold smile. She seemed rather pleased that Pratt should be upset, and upset he was, a remarkable thing in so calm a man.

After a time Leo and Sybil slipped away, and were some distance across the moor before their absence was noticed. There was no chance of following them save in the most pointed manner, so Sir Frank, with a scowl, devoted himself to his sister. She was seated on the heather, staring after Leo with a despairing look. Frank patted her hand kindly. "He will come back, Edith," he whispered.

"No," she replied, quietly, "he will never come back. Sybil has taken him away for ever. Don't worry about me, Frank."

"Oh! as to that," retorted Frank, savagely, "I approve of that no more than you do. If you want to marry Leo, I wish to make Sybil my wife."

"I am afraid neither of us will get our wishes," said Edith, with a sigh.

"We'll see about that," muttered Frank; "at all costs I'll stop that marriage. Sybil must become my wife."

Mrs Gabriel overheard him. "Make your mind easy, Frank," she said, "I can put an end to this." She cast a look at Pratt. "I could have done so long ago but for—" She stopped.

"But for what, Mrs Gabriel?"

"Nothing! nothing!" she said hastily. "A matter which does not concern you, Frank. But it is time to adopt strong measures. Mr Tempest"—she went to the vicar—"come for a stroll with me. I wish to speak to you."

"About parish matters?" asked the vicar, rather nervously, for he knew Mrs Gabriel's tongue and temper. "Won't you speak to Raston?"

"It is not about parish matters," said Mrs Gabriel. "It is concerning your daughter and Leo."

Mr Tempest looked up sharply. "Indeed!" he said, with quite a new note in his voice. "Nothing wrong, I trust?"

"I shall leave you to judge of that," replied Mrs Gabriel. "Come, vicar!" and she carried the old man away. Hale started after them distrustfully.

"What does she intend to do now?" he muttered. "I intend to take my own way in this matter, and I don't trust her. Too clever by half!"

Meantime Leo and Sybil, not thinking of the envy their happiness caused, were walking slowly along. Every now and then they would turn and look at one another and smile. The action seemed childish, but those who are deeply in love are often nothing but children. Then they came to talk of their future.

“When are you going away, Leo?” asked Sybil.

“I go to Town next Monday,” replied Leo. “I start at seven o’clock for Portfront, and there take the steamer that leaves at ten.”

“And the money for your debts?”

“That will be all right. Frank has promised to give it me this week. But the queer part is, Sybil, that he will not give me a cheque.”

“Why not?” she asked, stopping abruptly.

“I don’t know. Some whim on his part. He intends that I shall take it in sovereigns—yes, the whole three hundred pounds! There is a treasure to travel with! However, I shall take it to London and pay it into my bank there. Then I can settle with my creditors by cheque.”

“Does he give any reason why he wants you to take it in gold?”

“No! But he is a queer chap, although a kind one. I must take the money as he chooses to give it. But do you know, Sybil, I believe Hale has the instincts of a miser, and likes to look at gold. I should not be surprised if he had a chest of sovereigns in his house. I expect that is why he gives me specie instead of a cheque or notes.”

“I don’t like it at all,” said Sybil, decisively.

“There you go with your distrust!” said Leo, good-humouredly. “You will not make allowance for the queerness of poor Frank. Never mind, I will take the money as he chooses to give it. When my creditors are paid I shall see about enlisting.”

“You have made up your mind to that?”

“Fully. Mrs Gabriel understands as much. And I do not think, Sybil,” said Leo, bending down, “that you will seek to dissuade me.”

Sybil paused for a moment. “No,” she said at length, and her voice was firm, “it is a good thing for you to take up the burden of life, Leo. Even if you die in South Africa it will be better than that you should live on the charity of Mrs Gabriel. I admire your spirit.”

Leo shook his head sadly. “Don’t admire anything about me, dear,” he said. “Long, long ago, I should have earned my own living. I have been a fool too long. But now, Sybil, I intend to work my hardest for you. I am sure to get my commission, as there are plenty knocking about; and when I return, your father will consent to our marriage, and Mrs Gabriel will forgive me.”

“I don’t think my father would ever object, Leo,” said Sybil. “He would not care if you had little money. All he asks from anyone who marries me is that they come of a good stock. He has much family pride, you know.”

“Then he will easily be satisfied with the Haverleighs. They have been established in the place down yonder for centuries. I did not know, though, that he attached much value to pedigree, Sybil.”

“It is his one failing. He would not mind if I married a pauper, so long as my future husband had good blood in his veins. The one thing he would not permit would be that I should marry what he calls a ‘base-born’ man. But, of course, there is no danger of that.”

“No; I think my pedigree will satisfy Mr Tempest. But it is strange that he should attach such value to race.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Sybil, slowly. “I have a great opinion of race myself, Leo. But, come,” she broke off, “there is my father waving to me. I wonder what he wants. To go home, I expect.”

Mr Tempest did, indeed, want to go home, and, moreover, he seemed by no means anxious for the company of Leo. Quite different to his usual self, he was stiff and cold towards the young man. Mrs Gabriel saw this, and smiled. Not in vain had she adopted the stronger measures of which she had spoken to Sir Frank. However, she gave Leo no time to talk to the vicar, but took possession of him and threw him into the company of Miss Hale. Leo was obliged to talk to the girl, for, although she bored him greatly, she was too unoffending a creature to hurt. Frank saw how

dexterously Mrs Gabriel had managed, and came up to her. “What have you been doing?” he asked in a low voice.

“Talking Mr Tempest over to my views about this marriage. Set your mind at rest, Frank. Leo will never become the husband of Sybil now.”

Sure enough matters seemed to be quite in Mrs Gabriel’s favour. On arriving home Mr Tempest had a scene with his daughter, and forbade her to think any more of Leo. “Had I known of this before, it would not have gone so far,” said the vicar; “but I have been blind. Fortunately, Mrs Gabriel has opened my eyes. It must stop!”

“I am engaged to Leo Haverleigh,” said Sybil, firmly.

“Nothing of the sort!” retorted the vicar. “I won’t have it, I tell you. I do not consider that Leo is a fit husband for you.”

“And what is your reason, father?”

“I decline to give it you. Later on I may do so, but not now. Please do not argue, Sybil. I won’t hear a word. You are neither to see Leo again nor are you to talk to him. I won’t have it.”

“But, father—”

“That’s quite enough, Sybil. Not another word.” And, as the girl knew of the rages into which her father was capable of falling, she said nothing more at the time lest she might provoke one. But this sudden change of front on the part of her easy-going father bewildered her.

Leo was also at his wits’ end to understand the new state of things. From the day of the picnic he never had a chance of seeing Sybil alone, nor was he asked, as formerly, to the Vicarage. Mr Tempest was coldness itself when they met, and appeared to wish to see as little of him as possible. Leo asked Mrs Gabriel what was the meaning of these things, but could get no answer. She only laughed insultingly, and said that Mr Tempest was of her opinion about this ridiculous marriage. Leo saw Mr Pratt, and consulted him.

“I guess you’d better leave it to me,” said Pratt, who was on the side of the lovers. “I’ll bring Mrs Gabriel to reason.”

“But it is more the vicar that needs bringing to reason,” argued Leo. “He has changed wholly towards me.”

“Perhaps he has heard of your debts,” suggested Pratt, pondering.

“What if he had! He knows that I am not so wild as everyone tries to make out. No. It is something else. I believe my mother has been saying something to him about me.”

Pratt looked up suddenly, but his face did not change. “I’ll see Mrs Gabriel,” he said calmly. “If she has said anything to the vicar likely to do you harm, I’ll get her to tell me. I have known her for many years, Leo, and she often takes my advice.”

“I know. She has the very highest opinion of you, Pratt,” said the innocent Leo; whereat Pratt chuckled.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’ll speak to Mrs Gabriel about your debts at the same time.”

“No; don’t do that!” cried Leo in alarm. “You will only weaken my position with her. I want to settle these debts without her knowledge. I can raise the money, as I told you. Later on, when she comes round, I can get her to give me the sum and settle. She will surely do that when she hears that I have enlisted.”

“I daresay. In fact, I’m sure she will,” said Pratt, with his queer smile. “Who is going to lend you the money meantime?”

“I can’t tell you that, Mr Pratt,” said Leo, with dignity.

“You might tell it to a worse person,” said Pratt, rather offended. “However, keep your secret; I’ll do what I can.”

“Don’t be offended, Pratt. Indeed, as soon as possible I’ll tell you.”

“There! There! Don’t make a fuss over it,” he said testily. “I know you are not such a fool as people think you are. And to tell you the truth, Leo, if you can pay these debts independently of Mrs Gabriel, I fancy she will think all the more of you. I don’t offer to help you myself, because if she asks me I want to be able to say ‘no’ for reasons which I will explain later. But I tell you what, Leo. If, when you get these matters settled and

enlist, Mrs Gabriel won't come round, I'll give you the money myself to repay the loan, and fit you out for South Africa."

"You are indeed a friend," cried Leo, with emotion, and the two men shook hands. They understood each other very well.

But all this time Leo was pining to get a sight of Sybil. It is true that he sometimes saw her in the distance; but she was always with her father, and he could not come near. However, it came about that Sybil induced Pearl to take a note to Leo. She explained in it that her father had taken a dislike to the marriage, and that the only chance of things being arranged lay in Leo going away for a time. Several notes passed between the lovers, and then their kindly messenger fell ill, but not before it was understood that Sybil was to leave a note or so in a certain crack in the chapel wall, which they could use as a post-office. And out of that subterfuge all the subsequent trouble arose.

Pearl was really ill. She was in the habit of wandering about at night, and as the wet weather was coming she had been caught on the moor in a thunderstorm. Now she was laid up with a severe cold. Raston was particularly anxious about her. Leo met him one day, and the curate was red with indignation. It seemed he had good cause for it.

"Did you ever hear of anything so wicked, Haverleigh?" he asked.

"What is the matter now?"

"Why, that poor mad child! She is very ill, as you know, but is getting on all right; Dr James says she is well on the way to recovery. Now Mrs Jeal took it into her head that the girl was dying, and has been frightening her with stories of eternal torment. You know, Pearl always believed that she would go to heaven, and be at the Supper with the Master, as she calls Our Lord. She never had any doubt. Now these gruesome stories of Mrs Jeal's have made her doubt if she will be saved. In fact, she believes now that unless the Master gives her some sign she will be lost!"

"How cruel of Mrs Jeal," said Leo, angrily.

"Oh! I believe she did it for the best. She is fond of Pearl, and kind to her. But you know she came from the north, and she holds to that gloomy Calvinistic religion that has terrified so many people. I gave her

a good talking to, and she has consented to leave Pearl alone. All the same, she still holds that the child is a lost soul. I have been trying to pacify the poor creature. She is haunted by terrible fears.”

“Show her the cup!” suggested Leo. “She has such a belief in it as the Holy Grail that it may soothe her.”

“A good idea,” said the curate. “I will ask Mr Tempest about it. But I cannot take it to her till Monday. To-morrow I preach in the evening. I hear you are going up to Town.”

“On Monday morning early. When you next hear of me, Raston, I may have enlisted.”

“And a good thing too,” said Raston. “But that I am a clergyman I should have been a soldier. Good-day! Come to church to-morrow.”

And to church Leo went to see Sybil in her pew. He also went to the evening service. On Monday he departed for London. But no one heeded his going. The village was excited by a rumour that the cup had been stolen. On hearing the report Mr Tempest went to the church. It was true. The cup was gone.

Chapter VII **A Nine Days' Wonder**

Ill news spreads like circles on water when a stone is thrown in. Barker, the old sexton, a white-haired, crabbed sinner, was the first to discover the loss. He had gone to the chapel at seven in the morning to make ready the church for early celebration, and on going to the altar he had noticed that the cup was missing. Nothing else had been touched. At once the old man had trotted off to see the vicar, and in a quavering voice related what had taken place, finishing with a hope that he would not be blamed for the loss.

“You locked the chapel up last night?” asked Mr Tempest, sorely distressed, for indeed this was sacrilege and not a common robbery.

“Deed and I did!” replied Barker, sturdily. “And I took the key home with me. My wife saw me place it on its nail just inside the door.”

“Was the church door locked?”

“Fast locked, sir. And all the windows fastened. I went round the chapel to see if I could find any sign.”

“When did you leave the church last night, Barker?”

“At nine o’clock, after I made everything right for the night. It was after evening service, if you mind, Mr Tempest. Then I went home and put the key in its place. My Joan and I went then to a neighbour for a bit of supper. We got home again about eleven.”

“And the key was still on its nail?”

“Well, sir,” said Barker, scratching his white locks, “I didn’t look. But it was there this morning; so it could not have been taken away. Besides, my Joan locked the door of our cottage. No one could have got in.”

“The cup was on the altar when you left the church last night?”

“On the altar where it ought to be. But this morning it’s nowhere to be seen. I hope you don’t think it’s my fault, sir.”

“No,” replied Mr Tempest. “I cannot see that you are to blame. But this is a very serious matter, Barker. I did not know that there was anyone in Colester who would have committed such a crime.”

“It’s terrible,” sighed the sexton. “And what that poor lass Pearl will say I don’t know.”

“She must not hear of it,” said Raston, who entered at the moment. “She thinks so much of the cup that in her present state of health its loss may do her much harm.”

“Is she very ill, Raston?”

“Yes, sir. Much worse than she was last night. But Mrs Jeal is giving her all attention, and I have sent Dr James. But about this loss, sir?”

“We had better go to the chapel, Raston, and see with our own eyes.”

Followed by Barker, still protesting that it was not his fault, the vicar and the curate went up to the church. It was surrounded with a crowd of people, for the news had spread quickly. Some looked in at the door, but no one had ventured to enter, as each one was afraid if he did an accusation might be levelled against him. Mr Tempest told Harris, the local policeman, to keep back the crowd, and entered the chapel followed by his curate. All was as Barker had said. There was the altar covered with its white cloth, and with the withered flowers still in the vases. The gilded crucifix was also there; but not a sign of the cup. It had vanished entirely. Tempest sighed.

“A terrible thing for the man who stole it,” he muttered. “This is no common robbery. Raston, let us examine the church.”

The two went round it carefully, but could find nothing for a long time likely to enlighten them as to the cause of the robbery. Then in the lepers’ window, a small opening at the side of the chancel, Raston discovered that some of the stones had been chipped. “I believe the church was entered through this window,” said Raston, but the vicar was inclined to doubt.

“The window is so small that no grown man could have got through,” he said.

They went outside, and certainly against the wall and immediately under the window were marks, and scratches of boots, as though someone might have climbed the wall. Also the sides of the window were broken, as though a way had been found through. The lepers’ window was so small that no care had been taken to put in glass or iron bars. Besides, no one had ever expected that the chapel would be robbed. In all its centuries of history nothing up till now had ever been taken from it. And now the most precious thing of all had vanished!

“And during my occupation of the Vicarage,” said Mr Tempest. “It is really terrible!”

However, in spite of the loss, he held the service as usual, and as a great number of people, attracted by the news of the robbery, had come, the

chapel was quite full. Service over, Tempest returned to the Vicarage, and found Mr Pratt waiting to see him.

“This is a nice thing!” said Pratt, looking annoyed, as well he might, seeing that his magnificent gift had disappeared. “I did not know that you had thieves in the parish, Mr Tempest!”

“Neither did I,” groaned the vicar, sitting down. “Hitherto we have been singularly exempt from crime. And now one of the very worst sort has befallen us! Not a mere robbery, Mr Pratt. Sacrilege, sir, sacrilege!”

The American turned rather white as Tempest spoke. He had not regarded the robbery save as a common one. The idea that it was sacrilege placed it in a new light. Yet Mr Pratt was sharp enough to have guessed this before. The wonder was that he had not done so.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, after a pause.

“Raston has sent for the police at Portfront. I expect the inspector will come over this afternoon.”

Pratt shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t think much of the police,” he said. “The metropolitan detectives are stupid enough; but the provincial police—oh, Lord! I beg your pardon, Mr Tempest; I forgot myself.”

“No matter, no matter,” said Tempest, wearily. “I can think of nothing save our great loss. And your gift, too, Mr Pratt! Terrible!”

“Well,” said the American, cheerfully, “if this cup can’t be found, I guess I must find you another one.”

“The cup shall be found,” cried the vicar, vehemently. “The culprit must belong to this parish, else he would not have known the lepers’ window in the chapel. We shall find the guilty person yet, Mr Pratt.”

“I hope so,” said Pratt, with another shrug; “but he seems to have got away very cleverly. I shall see you this afternoon when you interview the inspector, Mr Tempest. I should like to have a hand in the discovery.”

“Certainly, certainly. Who but you, the giver of the cup, should wish to help? Come here this afternoon, Mr Pratt.”

As Pratt left the Vicarage he met Sybil, who looked sad. “Don’t take on so, Miss Tempest,” he said; “we’ll find the cup yet.”

“I was not thinking so much of that,” explained Sybil; “but this morning my poor dear Leo went away.”

“When is he coming back?”

“Towards the end of next week. I wonder who can have taken the cup?”

Pratt sneered, an unusual thing for so good-natured a man. “No doubt the Portfront police will tell us,” he said; “but I haven’t much opinion of law officers myself, Miss Sybil. I once lost a lot of gems in London, and the thief was never found. Are you fond of gems? Come to my house and I’ll show you my collection. I have several thousand pounds’ worth.”

“Is it not dangerous to keep them in your house after this robbery?”

Pratt laughed. “I don’t think a thief would steal them so easily as the cup!” he laughed. “I have a good dog and a capital revolver. No, Miss Sybil, I can look after my property well, I assure you.”

When he went away Sybil sighed and sought her room. The departure of Leo had left her very sad. She did not know what would become of him. He would pay his debts and then enlist for South Africa. In that case she would not see him again for months. Perhaps never—for it might be that some bullet would lay him low on the veldt. However, for the sake of her father, she strove to assume a light-hearted demeanour. The vicar felt the loss of the cup keenly. And although Sybil thought he had treated her hardly in her love affair, she laid all thoughts of self aside so as to comfort him in his trouble.

As for Pratt, he walked back to his own house. At the foot of the Castle Hill he met Mrs Gabriel, who seemed to be in a great state of indignation. As usual, her anger was directed against Leo.

“He came to me last night and said that he was going up to London to pay his debts. This morning he went off at seven without taking leave. Now, Mr Pratt, you have been giving him the money to pay his debts.”

“Indeed I have not, Mrs Gabriel,” said Pratt, quite prepared for this question. “I have not given him a sixpence.”

“Then where did he get so large a sum?” asked the lady, anxiously.

“I don’t know. He told me that someone had lent it to him.”

“A likely story! As if anyone here would trust him with money without a guarantee! Mr Pratt—” Here Mrs Gabriel stopped and her face went white. A thought had struck her and she was about to speak. But she saved herself in time and stared at her companion.

“What is the matter?” said Pratt, anxiously. He thought she would faint, a weakness he had never hitherto associated with Mrs Gabriel.

“Nothing,” she replied in a strangled voice. “But Leo—I must see Frank,” and without another word she hurried away.

Pratt stared after her as he could not conjecture what she meant. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went back to The Nun’s House. That same afternoon he called again at the Vicarage, and there found Mr Tempest in consultation with a grey-haired man whom he introduced as Inspector German. The police officer, who had a shrewd face with keen eyes, nodded in a friendly manner. “I understand you gave this cup to the chapel, Mr Pratt,” he said. “Pity it is lost.”

“A great pity,” replied Pratt, who was making a thorough examination of the man, and now seemed much more at ease than when he had entered. “I hope the thief has gone away, however. I have in my house several thousand pounds’ worth of gems, and I don’t want him to come after them.”

“How do you know it was a man?” asked German, quietly.

“I don’t know,” responded the American, with a stare and a laugh. “I only speak as others do. For my part, I believe that there were two people concerned in the robbery—a man and a boy.”

“Certainly a boy,” replied Tempest, looking up. “No one but a small boy could have forced himself through that window.”

“Then you don’t think, Mr Tempest, that a woman can have had anything to do with the matter?”

Tempest stared. The idea seemed ridiculous. “I do not think a woman would commit so wicked an act,” he said stiffly.

“Oh, as to that,” interposed Pratt, “women are as wicked as men, and worse when the fit takes them. But I see what Mr Inspector means. He has heard of Pearl Darry’s devotion to the cup.”

“It was not Pearl!” cried Mr Tempest, indignantly. “I am sure of that. Why, the poor child regarded that cup as something too holy to be touched—as it was,” added the vicar, reverently.

“Well,” said German, after a pause, “I have been talking to your villagers about her. It seems that she was always haunting the chapel and looking at the cup. She might have been seized with a desire to have it for her very own. She is insane, I believe, and insane people have very mad ideas. Also she is small and could easily have forced herself through the lepers’ window, of which she would know the position.”

Pratt looked with contempt at the officer. He was even more stupid than he had given him credit for. “You can rest easy, Mr Inspector,” he said. “It was not Pearl who stole my cup. She has been ill in bed for the last few days and unable to move, as Mrs Jeal and Dr James will tell you.”

“I must make certain of that myself,” said the inspector. “Will you come with me, Mr Pratt?”

“Not I,” replied the American. “I think you are going on a wild-goose chase. The best thing for you to do, Mr Inspector, is to see if any vagabonds have been in the village lately.”

“I have already done so,” replied German, coolly; “and the villagers assure me that no stranger has been seen hereabouts for some days. However, I am willing to give this girl the benefit of the doubt. But I must see her.”

As Pratt still refused to come and Tempest was unwilling to call at the cottage of Mrs Jeal on such an errand, the inspector went himself. He found no difficulty in entering, as Raston was at the door. All the same

the curate was indignant on hearing the accusation. He took German into the sitting-room, but refused—and in this he was backed up by the doctor—to let the inspector enter the bedroom of the sick girl. Not that German desired to do so after an interview with Mrs Jeal. She was most indignant at the slur cast upon the character of the girl she called her adopted daughter. There was a scene, and Mrs Jeal proved herself to be more than equal to the official from Portfront.

“I never heard anything so wicked in my life,” cried Mrs Jeal. “The poor child may be mad, but not mad enough to take what is not her own. I wonder at you, sir, that you should come here on such an errand.”

“My duty is clearly before me,” replied the inspector, stiffly. “Is the girl really and truly ill?”

“You can take my word for that, Mr German,” said Raston. “Or, if you do not believe me, here is Dr James!”

“Ill!” repeated the doctor, when the question was put to him. “She had a bad attack of inflammation of the lungs, and she is worse this morning than I have ever seen her. I do not wish her disturbed, Mr Inspector.”

“She could not have gone out last night to the chapel, doctor?”

“Not without the risk of being dead this morning,” replied James, dryly. “Besides, Pearl Darry is not a thief. No, sir. Whosoever stole that cup, it was not my patient.”

“And I would have you know,” cried Mrs Jeal, with her arms akimbo, “that I sat beside her the most of last night, and not one step did she stir off the bed.”

“Ah, well,” said German, who could not go against this evidence, “it is very plain that I am in the wrong. Unless—”

“There’s no unless about it, sir,” cried Mrs Jeal. “Pearl wasna oot o’ this hoose;” in her excitement she was falling into the Scotch speech of her childhood. “I wonder at ye, I do that! Hoots, awa’ wi’ ye!”

Baffled in this quarter, the inspector took his way into the village. First he examined the chapel. Then he started out to make inquiries. For quite

three days he exasperated everyone in the village with his questions and suspicions. But for all his worry he was unable to get at the truth. No tramps had been to the village. Old Barker proved his innocence with the assistance of a wrathful wife, and there was not a single person to whom the well-meaning but blundering inspector could point as likely to have stolen the cup. Finally, he was obliged to state that he could do nothing, and withdrew himself and his underlings from Colester, much to the relief of the villagers, whom he had grievously offended by his unjust suspicions. The cup had vanished as though it had been swallowed up by the earth, and no one was able to say who had taken it.

“A grievous loss,” sighed Mr Tempest, when he became resigned. “But I sorrow not so much for the theft of the cup as for the awful sacrilege of which the thief has been guilty.” And he took occasion to refer to the terrible deed in a wrathful sermon. The villagers shook in their shoes when they heard of the ills likely to befall the thief. But not one was able to say who was guilty.

For a whole week things went on much as usual, and the excitement died away. Leo was still in London, and, through Pratt, Sybil had heard from him. He had seen his creditors and had settled all his debts. He was now thinking about enlisting. Before he could do so, however, Sybil sent a message recalling him to Colester to defend his good name.

It so happened that Barker held his tongue for some time, but when the first effects of the fright lest he might be accused passed away, he began to talk. The old man was given to babbling in his cups. Thus it came about that he mentioned that he believed Mr Haverleigh had taken the cup. It seemed that Barker had seen Leo near the chapel, as he was leaving it about half-past nine. Mr Haverleigh, said the old man, had seemed to shun recognition, and had hurried past him. Not thinking anything of the matter, Barker had left him near the chapel door. Now, however, he hinted that Leo might have had some reason to be there at so untoward an hour. Also, he had gone away the next morning early. It was well known in Colester that the young man was in debt, and that his mother had refused to pay his debts. What, then, was more likely, people argued, than that Leo should have stolen the cup, should have taken it up to London before the loss was discovered, and should have sold it to pay his debts? In a few hours this sorry tale was all over the place, and so

came to Sybil's ears. It was her father who heard it, and her father who told her.

"But surely you do not believe it!" cried the girl, when the accusation was made. "You have known Leo all these years! Whatever you may have against him, father, you know that he would never commit so wicked an act."

"I say nothing until I hear what he has to say," replied the vicar, who, for some reason, seemed to be biased against Leo. "But you must admit that it was strange he should be near the chapel at so late an hour. And we know that he is deeply in debt. Mrs Gabriel told me herself that he owed three hundred pounds. In a moment of madness—"

"I won't hear a word against Leo!" interrupted Sybil, pale but resolute. "Not if an angel came down to accuse him would I believe him guilty! How could he have got the key? And if he did not get the key, how could he have forced himself through that small window?"

"I say nothing until I hear his defence," said the vicar, obstinately; "but the whole affair is highly suspicious."

"I never knew you to be unjust before, father," cried Sybil. "Mrs Gabriel has infected you with her dislike of Leo. I shall say nothing myself, although I could say more than you think. But I shall send at once to Leo, and he shall come back to rebut this wicked accusation."

Without listening to another word, Sybil ran off to see Pratt, who was equally indignant. "It is disgraceful," he said furiously. "Leo never would do such a thing, never! Be comforted, my dear. I'll ride over to Portfront this very day and send a wire to him."

And this he did without delay. More than that, he defended Leo heartily when he returned; so did Raston. Hale kept silent. But the majority of the villagers were against the young man. Leo returned in disgrace.

Chapter VIII

Haverleigh's Defence

Thanks to the care of Dr James, and the nursing of Mrs Jeal, the sick girl took a turn for the better. In a remarkably short space of time she began to improve, and when Leo arrived back in Colester she was on a fair way of recovery. Although the doctor did not like Mrs Jeal, he could not but admit that no mother could have been kinder than the midwife. She waited hand and foot, day and night, on Pearl, and refused to let anyone take her place, even when she was worn out with watching. In the middle of her trouble she was called away to London.

One day shortly after the theft of the cup she received a telegram from Town informing her that her father was seriously ill, and that she was to come up at once if she wanted to see him alive. Now, if there was one strong feeling Mrs Jeal possessed it was love for her father, of whom she often spoke. Much as she liked Pearl, she was not prepared to stay beside her in the face of such a summons. The old man might die if she delayed.

“I can get Joan Barker in to nurse Pearl,” she said to the doctor, “and go at once to London. I may be away a week or two.”

“Humph!” said James, running his eye over the telegram. “I suppose you must go; the matter seems urgent. Mrs Barker is not so good a nurse as you, though.”

“But Pearl is much better, doctor,” said Mrs Jeal, anxiously.

“Yes, I’ll pull her through. Well, pack your traps, Mrs Jeal. Myself and Mr Raston will attend to Pearl with the assistance of Mrs Barker. You must leave me some address, though, in case anything goes wrong during your absence. Not that I think anything will; Pearl is mending rapidly.”

Mrs Jeal gave an address in a humble Battersea street, and in a few hours was ready for the road. She took a tender leave of Pearl, to whom she appeared to be sincerely attached, and that same morning left for Portfront by a carrier’s waggon. When she departed the village was still filled with anxiety regarding the loss of the cup.

As has been said before, no railway had yet opened up the solitudes of Colester and King’s-meadows. But those who wished to get quickly to London took the steamer from Portfront, and in a few hours came to

Worthing, at which place a train was easily procurable. Mrs Jeal took this route, and having started early she arrived in Town that same night. She sent a wire telling of her arrival to Dr James. He showed it to Sir Frank Hale.

“Quick work,” said James; “yet we are far enough away from the world here.”

“That’s true,” replied the baronet. “So Mrs Jeal has gone to Town! I saw her at Portfront when I was there yesterday morning. It is not often she goes to Town. I suppose she does not wish to lose the money.”

“The money, Hale? What do you mean?”

“Why, it seems, from what Mrs Jeal told me, that her father is not badly off, and if he dies she will come into a tidy bit of money. There are other relatives, though, and she was afraid lest they should get the old man to leave the fortune to them.”

“Fortune!” said James, with a smile; “a large word for a small legacy.”

“I don’t know so much about that,” responded the cripple, snappishly. “From what the woman told me, her father is well off. He was a porter or something in a stockbroker’s office, and dabbled in mines himself. It seems he was lucky in his speculations and made money. By the way, James, has Haverleigh turned up yet?”

“No, but I heard that Mr Pratt had sent a telegram to him. I expect he will wonder what is the matter that Pratt should ask him to come back.”

“Not he!” growled Hale. “He knows well enough.”

“Why, Hale, you don’t believe he stole the cup?”

The cripple remained silent for a time. “It is a difficult thing for me to say,” he finally remarked. “You know, James, that my sister Edith is deeply in love with the man. I don’t like him myself; I never did. But if he would marry my sister I should not decline the alliance. I put her happiness before my own feelings. Well, under the circumstances, I really am not prepared to give an opinion. I know that Leo was in debt, and it is common talk that Mrs Gabriel refused to pay his debts; yet she

informed me that he went up to London to settle them. Now, he must have got the money from somewhere, and who would trust him?"

"It looks black against him, I confess," replied James, shaking his head; "still, I cannot believe that Haverleigh would sink to being a common thief. You will see when he returns that he will be able to explain."

"If he ever does return," growled Hale, doubtfully.

"He will. Why, Miss Tempest believes in him, and he must come back if only to justify her faith. I believe those two are in love with one another, Hale. Well, they will make a handsome couple."

"He will have to get back his good name first," retorted Hale, jealously. "And as to there being anything between them—I don't believe it. Good-day, James. Don't go spreading cock-and-bull stories."

As the baronet walked off the doctor looked after him with a smile of contempt. He knew that Hale was madly in love with the vicar's daughter, and that he regarded Leo as a too successful rival. "You'll be delighted if the poor chap comes to harm," muttered James; "you are a viper! But I am sure Haverleigh will clear himself. A girl like Sybil Tempest is not likely to be deceived in the character of the man she loves. I would rather believe her than you, Sir Frank Hale!" And James, who had no great love for the spiteful little cripple, walked away to see Pearl.

By this time the opinion was that Leo would not return. It was positive, said the gossips, that he had stolen the cup in order to procure money for the payment of his debts. The most likely thing was that he would clear out of the country.

"What fools these people are," said Pratt, who heard this. "If the man intended to leave the country he certainly would not pay his debts. Only a heaven-born ass would do that. He would take the money himself and leave his creditors unpaid." But the gossips did not see matters in that light. They were bent upon thinking the worst of Leo.

All this time Mrs Gabriel said nothing, but remained shut up in the castle. She knew well enough what was being said about Leo, and could not bear to face anyone, the more particularly as she did not know how

to defend him. She denied herself to everyone, even to Pratt, although he called several times to interview her on behalf of her nephew. The young man had a strong defender in Pratt. He went about everywhere insisting on Haverleigh's innocence. In this opinion he was supported by Sybil, by the curate, and, strange to say, by Mrs Bathurst.

“The whole thing is absolute nonsense,” said Mrs Bathurst. “Why should Mr Haverleigh be such a fool? Mrs Gabriel would have paid his debts in the long run. And then if he had not wished to pay them himself, he could have enlisted and slipped away to Africa without anyone being the wiser. Then there's another thing. He would not commit a crime for such a purpose. If he was in difficulties before, he would not make them worse by putting himself within reach of the law.” All of which was common-sense, although Leo's enemies were too much bent on thinking the worst of him to accept such a reasonable view.

It was while matters were in this state that Leo Haverleigh returned. He drove up to the castle one night without informing anyone of his coming. Mrs Gabriel was amazed when he presented himself before her. He looked bright and cheerful, not at all like a man who had been accused of a sordid crime. But it must be remembered that Leo knew nothing of his new reputation. All he knew was that Pratt, at the instance of Sybil, had recalled him to Colester. He thought that this telegram had to do with some new difficulty with regard to his love affairs.

“Good evening, mother,” he said as he marched into the room where Mrs Gabriel was sitting. “I have returned, you see.”

“And are you not ashamed?” cried Mrs Gabriel, rising, with a wrathful expression. “I thought some feeling of decency would have kept you away.”

“Oh, come now, mother,” returned Leo, trying to keep his temper, “I am not so bad as all that. If I have been foolish and extravagant, surely you can forgive. Besides, my debts are paid. I am a free man.”

“You won't be a free man long,” said Mrs Gabriel, grimly. “I am willing to do what I can for you, badly as you have treated me. But I cannot condone a felony! That is out of the question.”

Leo stared and sat down. “You use very extraordinary words,” he said at length. “I never heard that a man who was in debt could be called a felon. Come, mother,” he went on, trying to be amiable—a difficult task with a woman like this. “Don’t use big words for a trifle. I intended to enlist, but I thought I would come down first to see you and talk the matter over. You have been kind to me and I do not want to part in anger. Let us arrange matters in a kindly spirit.”

Mrs Gabriel looked at him aghast at his boldness. “How dare you speak to me like this,” she cried. “Are you not aware that everyone in Colester is talking of your crime?”

“Crime!” Leo started to his feet. “What crime?” He looked bewildered.

“As if you didn’t know! I wonder you have the impertinence to come back here! How much did you sell the cup for?”

Leo still looked puzzled. “Cup!” he echoed. “What cup?”

Mrs Gabriel grasped him by the shoulders and shook him, her eyes blazing with anger. “You are absolutely shameless,” she cried. “I mean the cup which Mr Pratt presented to the chapel, and you know too! It has been stolen, and you are the thief.”

Haverleigh stared at her for a moment and then burst out laughing. “Is this a joke, mother?” he said at length. “If so, it is a very poor one.”

“It is not a joke,” retorted Mrs Gabriel, still angry. “The cup was missing on the very morning you went up to London. You stole it, Leo, and took it away to pay your debts. I never—”

“Nor did I!” cried Haverleigh, now beginning to lose his temper. “Who dares to say such a thing about me?”

“The whole village says it, and everyone believes it.”

“Does Sybil?”

“I don’t know; nor do I care. And so far as she is concerned, you need not think to marry her. Mr Tempest will never let his daughter become the wife of a—”

“Stop!” cried Leo, before she could utter the shameful word. “How dare you call me by a foul name? I know perfectly well you hate me; but you have no right to believe that I did this thing. I know that Sybil believes me guiltless. She would never credit the man she loves with such a contemptible crime. And Pratt believes in me also. He sent me a telegram asking me to come back. I thought it had to do with some trouble you had made over my engagement to Sybil. I never expected this. How dare you accuse me of such a crime?”

“The whole village accuses you,” said Mrs Gabriel, passionately. “You have paid your debts. I know you have. Where did you get the money? Not from me—not from Pratt, for I asked him. And Barker saw you lurking about the chapel on Sunday night at a late hour. What were you doing there if it was not to steal? Oh, shame upon you, Leo! How can you stand there and deny your guilt?”

“Because I am not guilty!” cried Leo, furiously. “I tell you I did not steal the cup. I did not even know that it was lost. I was near the chapel on that night and at that hour. I can explain why I was there.”

“Explain then,” said Mrs Gabriel, with a stamp.

“Not to you, and not until I have thought over my position. Everyone seems to have judged me guilty without giving me an opportunity of defending myself.”

“You cannot,” muttered Mrs Gabriel. “You dare not!”

The scorn of her speech carried Leo beyond all bounds of prudence. He had not intended to defend himself until he had consulted with Pratt. The situation was so unpleasant and dangerous that he wanted an older and wiser head than his own to deal with the matter. But Mrs Gabriel’s taunt made him forget his resolutions. “I dare, and I can!” he burst out. “I went to the chapel to meet Sybil. Her father would not let us see one another, so we had to do so by stealth. I was going away on Monday morning, and she wished for a meeting, as I did myself. In her pew she left a note, and she let me know by signs during the service that she had done so. I looked in the vicar’s pew after the service was over, and found that she asked me to meet her at the door of the chapel shortly after nine. I was there, and I saw old Barker going away. I think he saw me, but as I did not wish to attract attention, I kept out of his way as much as

possible. Sybil came about half-past nine, perhaps later, and we had a talk. Then I took her back to the Vicarage, and returned here to sleep. I was on my way to Portfront by seven in the morning. That is all I know.”

“A likely story,” sneered Mrs Gabriel. “I do not believe one word of it.”

Leo looked at her with great dignity. “If you do not choose to believe me I cannot make you,” he said; “but from this moment all is at an end between us. God knows why you hate me so. I have done nothing to deserve it. What I have told you is the truth. Sybil can vouch for it. I have some hesitation in asking her to do so, as she will have to say that she was alone with me at that late hour, and you know well what the gossips will say. Still, if I am in danger of arrest, she will come forward, although I would rather suffer myself than that she should be lightly spoken of. I shall see her, and her father. For some reason best known to you, Mrs Gabriel, Mr Tempest has taken a dislike to me. But he is a just man, and I am sure he does not believe me guilty.”

“You’d better see him and ask,” said Mrs Gabriel, tartly. “I say again that I don’t believe your explanation. Where did you get the money to pay your debts if it was not from selling the cup?”

“I borrowed it,” retorted Leo, after a pause. “I did not intend to tell you, but it seems I must, in order to clear my character. You would not help me, and Pratt was not ready to do so. I daresay if I had pressed him he would have helped me, but I did not think it right he should pay for my folly. I borrowed the money, if you must know, from Frank Hale.”

Mrs Gabriel, who had seated herself, looked at the young man indignantly.

“Why will you tell these lies?” she said, trying to speak calmly. “I had an idea that Hale might have assisted you, and I went to see him. He absolutely denies that he lent you a penny.”

Leo looked bewildered. “He denies the debt,” said he. “Why he has my acknowledgment! He gave me the three hundred pounds in gold on Sunday morning. I packed it in a Gladstone bag, and took it to London with me. There I paid it into my bank, and gave my creditors cheques for—”

“In gold!” burst out Mrs Gabriel, contemptuously. “Is it likely that in these days a man would pay such a large sum otherwise than by cheque? Why, if you said notes it would be more reasonable, but gold—bah!”

“I tell you he did,” said Leo, now thoroughly angry. “I wondered myself at the time, and I mentioned to Sybil how inconvenient it was. I asked Hale for notes, for a cheque, he refused both, and said I must take the money as he chose to give it, or not at all. He gave it to me in three bags, each containing a hundred sovereigns. I paid that into my London bank.”

“Oh, I daresay you did,” sneered Mrs Gabriel. “But you should have got a better price for the cup.”

“You still believe me guilty,” cried Leo, recoiling.

“I do. Hale denies that he paid you the money.”

“I shall see him about it to-morrow,” said Leo. “He will not dare to deny what is the truth. And I leave the castle this very night, Mrs Gabriel. I shall never call you ‘mother’ again. You are cruel and wicked. Tell me why you hate me so.”

Mrs Gabriel’s eyes flashed. “If I told you that—” she began, then closed her mouth and turned away.

“Then you do hate me?”

“Yes. With all my soul!” She turned on him like a fury. “I have hated you from the moment you came into my house. All these years I have been on the point of turning you out. Go now, and never darken my doors again. I was a fool to have anything to do with you. Go! Go!”

For a moment Leo stood bewildered at her furious speech. He thought she was mad, for he could not conceive why she should speak so. It was useless to talk or to remonstrate, or to seek an explanation. He looked at her for a moment, then, without a word, he walked away. In another quarter of an hour he had left the castle, bag and baggage.

“Thank God!” cried Mrs Gabriel when alone. “I am rid of him at last!”

Chapter IX

A Bad Reputation

Pratt sat alone in his library. He was not reading, for although he had many books he rarely looked into one of them. He collected rare editions, he indulged in gorgeous bindings, and placed all his gatherings on shelves behind glass doors. It was the look of the thing Pratt liked. If his collection had been so many volumes of blank pages he would have been just as well pleased.

As the evening was cold there was a fire in the steel grate. The room looked comfortable and luxurious. It was decorated in dark red, with bookcases of rosewood, and many busts of celebrated men. On the desk stood a reading lamp, and this was the only light in the room. Before the desk sat Pratt. He was playing with a small pile of precious stones which he had shaken out of a leathern belt. The jewels gleamed in the light with rainbow hues, and Pratt fingered them with loving care, recalling where each one had been bought and found. He was crazy about his gems, but never showed them to anyone. Moreover, in addition to his liking for such things, it was a portable way of carrying about his wealth.

The door opened softly and a servant entered. Pratt did not turn his head, for he knew the footstep. But when he heard that Leo wished to see him, he poured the jewels back into the belt, flung it into a drawer and told Adam—that was the man's name—to admit Mr Haverleigh. Adam was a tall, soldierly looking man, of the fair Saxon type. He had been with Mr Pratt for years, knew all his secrets and was absolutely devoted to him. As well he might be, for Pratt had once saved his life. Adam never forgot the obligation, and was Pratt's devoted slave.

“Hullo, Leo!” said Pratt, rising, when the young man entered the room. “Where did you come from?”

“From London, if you want to be precise,” said Leo, after shaking hands. “My bag is in the hall, Pratt.”

“What? Have you not been to the castle?”

“I have been there, and I have come away. In fact, Pratt, she has turned me out at last. I always knew that it would come to this.”

As Leo sat down Pratt frowned, and when he frowned he did not look pleased. “Ah!” said he, calmly, “so she has turned you out—on account of this theft, I suppose?”

“Yes. It is the first I ever heard of it!” said Leo, looking up. “Your wire said nothing about such an accusation. I don’t suppose you could very well have mentioned it in a telegram. However, Mrs Gabriel insisted that I had stolen the cup and sold it in London in order to pay my debts. We had a few words on the subject and parted. I am now here to ask you for a bed!”

“My dear fellow, you shall stay here as long as you please. Let me ring for Adam to bring you some supper!” and Pratt touched the bell.

“A few sandwiches and a glass of port will be sufficient,” said Leo. “I am not in the humour to eat. By the way,” as Adam entered, “I see he has got back?”

“Who? Adam? Yes. Where did you meet him?”

“At Portfront,” said Leo, with a nod to Adam, who smiled. “He told me he had been up to London on your business. I gave him a lift part of the way. Didn’t I, Adam?”

“I shouldn’t have got home otherwise, sir,” said Adam, respectfully, and departed to get food for his benefactor. Pratt seemed pleased that his servant was so friendly with Leo. He had a great opinion of Adam’s intelligence. Also, Adam was a power in the house—but Leo did not know that. Later on, he learned all about it, to his great astonishment.

“Come now,” said Pratt, when Leo had eaten and had finished a glass or two of port. “Tell me about this cup. Did you take it?”

“I certainly did not!” said Leo, stiffly. “I wonder at your asking me such a question, Pratt! I am not a thief!”

His host laughed somewhat nervously. “I only wanted to be sure, my dear lad,” he said. “Don’t get angry with your best and only friend.”

“I have another friend,” said Leo, looking up from the cigar he was cutting, “and that is Sybil. She does not believe that I am guilty.”

“Have you seen her, then?”

“No. But I do not want to see her in order to know that. She loves me, Mr Pratt, and would never believe me guilty. No; not though the evidence was twice as strong against me!”

“The evidence is strong,” said Pratt, rubbing his chin. “You were seen at the chapel, and—”

“And I have paid my debts,” finished Leo. “So I have, and I can explain how I paid them; also my movements on that night.” And he forthwith related to Pratt the story he had already told Mrs Gabriel. The man believed him much more readily than the woman. But then Pratt liked Leo, and Mrs Gabriel—as she had shown plainly—hated him with all the intensity of her stern and cruel nature.

“You say that Hale lent you the money?” asked Pratt.

“As I told you—in gold.”

“And he now denies that he did so?”

“So Mrs Gabriel says. But I shall see for myself to-morrow.”

Pratt reflected, staring into the fire. “It seems to be a conspiracy,” he said slowly. “I wonder what his game is?”

Leo remembered that Sybil had also been uncomfortable when she heard that Hale intended to lend him the money. A thought flashed into his mind as Pratt spoke. “I believe that Hale is in love with Sibyl,” said he.

“Humph! And his sister Edith is in love with you.”

Leo coloured a little at this very direct remark. “I believe she is,” said he, with an embarrassed laugh; “but I assure you, Pratt, the feeling is not reciprocal. The only woman I have ever loved, whom I shall ever love, is Sybil Tempest. And the course of our true love does not run smooth,” he finished, with a sigh.

“A conspiracy,” repeated Pratt, who was not paying much attention to what Leo was saying. “Yes! I believe it to be one. By lending you that

money Hale hoped to get you into his power, so as to induce you to give up Sibyl to him and marry Edith.”

“If he ever did have so ridiculous an idea,” said Leo, angrily, “he has thrown away the fruits of it by denying the loan.”

“No! The unforeseen has happened and he is simply making use of the new development,” said Pratt. “You are accused of having sold this cup to pay your debts. If Hale acknowledged that he gave you the money he would take away the motive and would in a measure prove your innocence. That is exactly what he will not do. Unless—” he hesitated.

“Unless I give up Sybil and marry his sister?”

“Precisely,” replied Pratt. “However, this is only a theory. You had better wait until you see Hale before you make up your mind. I don’t mind making you a bet, Leo, that what Mrs Gabriel says is true.”

“Do you think Hale will deny the loan?”

“I am certain of it. I have studied human nature a great deal during a not uneventful life, and if ever I saw a crafty scoundrel Hale is the man. I wish you had told me that he was the friend who was to lend you the money. I would rather have found it for you myself than have let you go to him.”

“I wish I had spoken out. But it’s too late now. And how did I know the man would be such a scoundrel? Not that we yet can be certain that he is, Pratt. Only the worst of it is,” added Leo, wrinkling his young brows, “that I cannot now repay the money.”

“If he denies the debt you will not need to repay it.”

“I shall insist upon doing so when I am able!” cried Leo, vehemently. “But Mrs Gabriel won’t help me.”

“I will let you have the three hundred pounds,” said Pratt.

“I don’t see why you should, Pratt. As it is, you are too kind to me. No! I will borrow no more. This interview with Mrs Gabriel has fixed my mind as to enlisting. I shall see if I can’t arrange about the money for Hale. I

have some jewellery and other things I can sell. In some way or another I'll contrive to get out of his debt."

"He won't admit that you are in his debt," persisted Pratt; "but it is no use talking all night about these things, Leo. You have a friend in me, and as I know you are innocent I'll get you out of this trouble somehow. To-morrow you can see Hale and Miss Sybil."

"I'll see him first," said Leo, grimly, after which speech—ominous of evil—he retired to bed. Worn out with his long journey and by the anxiety attendant on his new position—which was that of an absolute pauper—he soon fell into a dreamless sleep. Pratt remained in the library and for a long time sat watching the dying fire. He also saw trouble ahead, but it had to do more with himself than with his guest.

Since the illness of Pearl, Sybil had attended to the decorating of the altar. Sometimes she had the assistance of Peggy Bathurst. But Mrs Bathurst, still fearful lest Peggy might become engaged to the curate, would not let her come as often to the chapel as Sybil wished. So Miss Tempest usually decked the altar alone. The morning after Leo's arrival she was in the chapel at mid-day with her arms full of flowers. Taking these and the altar vessels into a quiet corner she began to arrange the blossoms. While thus engaged she heard a step. At once she sprang to her feet with the love-light in her eye. She had no need to see the newcomer. Her heart told her it was Leo.

"My dear!" She took him into her arms. "How glad I am to see you again! Oh, Leo, I have so many sad things to tell you."

"I know all, my love," said the young man, kissing her. "I arrived last night and saw Mrs Gabriel. She did not spare me."

"Your mother?"

"She is no more mother of mine, Sybil. She told me she hated me; called me a thief, and turned me out of the castle. I shall never enter it again—never! Last night I slept at Pratt's. He was a good Samaritan and took me in. This morning I went to see Hale."

Sybil clapped her hands. "Oh, then it is all right!" she cried joyfully. "I could have told my father that you had got the money from him, but I thought it better you should do so yourself."

"I can't do that without Hale calling me a liar."

"Leo! What do you mean?"

"That in the eyes of the people here I am both a liar and a thief. Hale, whom I saw this morning, denies having given me the money."

"Has he spread that all about the town?" asked Sybil, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"No, he is too clever for that. Now I know, Sybil, why he gave me the money in gold. So that he might be able to deny the debt if occasion arose, as it has done. Had he given me a cheque his signature would have given him the lie."

"But what does he mean by denying that he lent you the money?"

"Well, I'll give you Pratt's theory. I believe it is the true one," and the young man rapidly repeated the conversation he had had with the American on the previous evening. "So you see you were right, Sybil."

"I knew it," said Sybil in low tones. "Do you remember how I told you on the day of Mrs Bathurst's picnic? What is to be done now?"

"There is nothing to be done save to fight," said Leo, fiercely, "and fight I shall. I had intended to enlist, but I shall not do that until I have cleared my name. To leave here now would be to give colour to the lies that are being told about me. I shall stay with Pratt. He is my friend, and you, Sybil, also. We three will fight it out."

"Mr Raston is also your friend, Leo. He says he does not believe for one moment that you did what you are accused of doing."

"Thank God for that! How can anyone who knows me believe me guilty of so terrible a crime? To rob a church! Think of it, Sybil. Your father? Does he believe I did this vile thing?"

"He suspends his judgment, Leo, until he has heard your defence."

“Alas, Sybil, what defence can I make save state that I am innocent? I cannot make Hale confess that he lent me the money, and I cannot prove, independently of him, that he did so. This morning he coolly denied all knowledge of the loan, but said that for my sake he would not speak of the visit I had made or the threats I had used.”

“Did you use threats, Leo?”

“I am afraid I did, dear. But is it not enough to make an honest man’s blood boil to be placed in such a position? I threatened to give him a thrashing. But when I remembered that he was a cripple, of course I could not do that. But for all his physical weakness, he is a venomous beast. No, Sybil, without Hale I can do nothing.” He paused for a moment, and then went on. “I think the best way to do is to wait,” he said. “If this is a plot on Hale’s part he will continue to carry it out—that is, he will make some proposition to me about giving you up. I don’t suppose he will want me to marry his sister, now that I am called a thief.”

Sybil placed her hand over his mouth. “You must not be so bitter, Leo. I will not have you revile yourself in this way. Don’t you think you had better see my father?”

“What good would that do, my dear? I can only tell the story I tell you, and as I have no evidence to prove its truth, he probably will not believe me. No, Sybil. It is best for me to remain quietly with Pratt, and wait until Hale makes some move. Besides, Pratt is a clever man of the world, and can guide me. No doubt everyone will be disagreeable, but I must put up with that. I refuse to go away, as though the charge against me were true. You will see me sometimes, Sybil?”

“Whenever I can,” she replied; “but it will not be easy. When my father hears that you are back he will be more particular than ever to keep me from meeting you.”

Leo mused. “I wonder why he has changed so, Sybil? He used to like me.”

“I think Mrs Gabriel said something which has turned him against you.”

“Very probably,” replied Leo, bitterly; “for some reason she hates me. But all is at an end between us. I wait here, Sybil, to vindicate my character, and afterwards I shall carry out my plan of enlisting. I may be years away from you, but you will be true, I know.”

“I swear to be true, Leo! I marry no one but you.”

“Not even Hale,” whispered Leo, straining her to his breast.

Sybil laughed. “If I disliked him before, think how I hate him now!” she said. “He is acting a mean part. But his punishment will come. Now go, Leo, for my father may come at any moment.”

The two lovers embraced and parted. Leo went away much comforted by the belief Sybil had in his innocence. He returned to The Nun’s House, and spent the day with Pratt talking over the position of affairs. It was a disagreeable position, and at the present moment he could see no way of mending it. Hale alone could prove his innocence, and Hale refused to speak out. Bitterly did Leo regret that he had ever been tempted to believe in this fox.

The days went by, and the position remained much the same as it was. By this time the excitement consequent on the loss of the cup had died out. Leo remained mostly within doors, as he did not care about meeting the cold looks of those he had known from childhood. Mrs Gabriel gave no sign, but secluded herself within her own grounds. Once or twice Pratt saw her on Leo’s behalf, but he could do nothing with her. However, he told Leo to keep up his spirits, that all would come right. But how this alteration was to be brought about he did not say. Pratt knew when to keep his own counsel.

Towards the end of the week Mrs Jeal returned. Her father was much better, she said, and she had come back to look after Pearl. The mad girl was now out of bed, but, as yet, unable to leave the cottage. Someone had conveyed to her the news of the loss—Raston shrewdly suspected Joan Barker—but, strange to say, she was not so upset about it as had been expected.

“The Master has taken His cup to use in heaven,” she told the curate, who often came to sit with her. “When he thinks fit he will bring it back again to the altar.”

Raston was puzzled by this queer view, but as it prevented the girl from fretting he outwardly agreed with her. Having settled the matter thus, Pearl rarely referred to the loss. She was quite content to wait until the cup was restored. Taking a hint from Raston, Mrs Jeal never discussed the matter. All the same she knew more about the missing cup than the Colester people knew. And it was in this way she explained the matter to Harold Raston.

“Sir,” she said one day shortly after her return, “I want you to get me speech with his reverence. I wish to make a statement to him.”

“Indeed, Mrs Jeal! What is the statement?”

“It is about the cup, sir. But I prefer to speak to the vicar and to Mr Haverleigh. I hear he is staying with Mr Pratt.”

“I believe he is. Some foolish people accuse him of having stolen the cup, Mrs Jeal. I hope you will be able to give us some information likely to lead to its discovery, so that Mr Haverleigh’s character can be cleared.”

Mrs Jeal screwed up her mouth, and sent out a flash from her wicked eyes. She absolutely refused to speak save in the presence of Mr Tempest and Leo. Therefore, after a consultation with the vicar, Raston went to see Leo, and asked him to come to the Vicarage. Leo was surprised at the summons, and not very willing to obey it. He resented the way in which he had been treated by Mr Tempest. Still, from what was hinted by Mrs Jeal, he fancied that she might be able to clear his character, so he accompanied Raston to the place of meeting.

Mrs Jeal was already in the study, seated beside the vicar’s desk. She was dressed in her best, and looked demure as any cat. Tempest reddened when he saw Leo, and held out his hand. Leo refused to take it. “No, sir,” he said coldly; “you have not treated me well. I thought you were my friend, but I find you believe me to be a thief.”

“Pardon me,” replied Tempest, suddenly growing hard, “I do not say that you took the cup. I refuse to believe anything against you until I hear what you have to say in your own defence.”

“I make no defence, Mr Tempest,” rejoined Leo. “Sybil believes me guiltless; so does Pratt; Raston also is my friend. I can only wait until I

am vindicated by time. Or perhaps Mrs Jeal will prove to you that I did not steal the cup,” and Leo looked at the crafty face of the woman.

Mrs Jeal at a nod from the vicar, rose and folded her hands. “I can prove that you did steal it, Mr Haverleigh,” she said. “I saw you pawn the cup in London.”

Chapter X

The Price Of Silence

For a few moments there was a dead silence. Tempest looked gravely shocked. Mrs Jeal triumphant, and the curate much disturbed. He had been so certain of Leo’s innocence that this precise evidence took his breath away. Leo was thunderstruck, and passed his hand across his eyes to make sure that he was not dreaming.

“You saw me pawn what I never had in my possession!” he said quietly.

Mrs Jeal shrugged her plump shoulders. “I can say no more than I know,” she said. “Of course, I quite expected you would deny my story.”

“I have not heard it yet,” replied the accused man, slowly; “and I shall be glad to hear it. At the present moment, I declare most solemnly that I never took the cup. I did not even know it was stolen until I returned from London.”

“Where you had pawned it,” finished Mrs Jeal.

The vicar interposed. He was struck by Leo’s calmness, which was not that of a guilty person. “I think you had better tell your story, Mrs Jeal,” he said; “then we can hear Mr Haverleigh.”

“I thank you for giving me a fair trial, Mr Tempest,” said Leo, quietly, and sat down with his eyes on the face of the woman.

Mrs Jeal cleared her throat, and in a slow voice began to speak. She rather enjoyed her position, and made the most of it. “But before speaking of what I know, sir,” she said, looking at the vicar, “might I ask if it is true that you have offered a reward for the recovery of the cup?”

“I have not done so myself,” said Tempest, gravely; “but Mr Pratt, who presented the cup to me, has offered the sum of fifty pounds to whomsoever will give information likely to lead to its recovery. If you know of anything, Mrs Jeal—”

“I’ll get the reward,” said the woman, a greedy light in her small eyes. “Yes, sir, I do know of something. I went up to Battersea, in London, to see my father, who is ill. He is a retired gardener, your reverence, and has invested his savings in a seed shop. My mother is still alive, and she looks after him. They do fairly well out of the shop, and, of course, your reverence, I give them some assistance, as becomes an only child.”

“This is not to the point, Mrs Jeal!”

“I am coming to the point shortly,” said the woman, with a look at Leo, who made no remark; “but it is necessary that your reverence should understand how it was that I came to see Mr Haverleigh taking the cup to Old Penny’s pawnshop.”

Leo could bear it no longer, and started to his feet. “It is absolutely false!” he exclaimed passionately. “I did not pawn the cup. I never had it in my possession. I was never in Battersea in my life, and I do not know the name of Penny.”

“Better wait and hear the story, Leo,” said Tempest in a more friendly tone. He was beginning to be impressed by the bearing of the young man. Even in the face of Mrs Jeal’s evidence, he thought Leo might be innocent. After all, the evidence was circumstantial, and that is not always to be relied upon. “You shall have every justice,” he said, patting Leo’s shoulder.

“I know what I know,” said Mrs Jeal when Leo sat down again. “One evening last week I was out late. I had been to get some medicine for my dear father. In Barry Street there is a pawnshop kept by an old man called Penny. I have known it most of my life. As I passed I saw Mr Haverleigh ahead of me. He did not stop immediately at the shop.”

“You saw me!” cried Leo, bewildered. “How was I dressed?”

“In a blue serge suit, with a hard, fawn-coloured hat,” said Mrs Jeal, glibly. “Over your arm you carried a coat, and under it you had a parcel. It was the cup.”

“You are telling a pack of lies!” said Leo, angrily. “How did you know the cup was in the parcel?”

“Wait and you shall hear,” said Mrs Jeal, tartly. “I do not care about being hurried. You passed the shop; I recognised you at once and wondered what you were doing in so poor a quarter of the town. Of course I knew that the cup had been stolen, but I never thought that you had it under your arm. You had a silk muffler round your throat although the evening was warm, and apparently you wished to escape observation. I was determined to find out what you were doing so, I followed you. You went round the block until it grew darker. Then you returned to the shop, and entered. I waited on the other side of the road. In half-an-hour you came out again. You had the great-coat on and your hands in your pocket. After looking up and down the street to see if anyone was observing you I saw you walk rapidly to the end. I did not follow as I was anxious to see why you had been to the pawnshop.”

“Why all this anxiety, Mrs Jeal?” asked Tempest, annoyed.

“Well, sir! of course I know that Mrs Gabriel does not approve of Mr Haverleigh’s behaviour—”

“That has nothing to do with the matter,” interposed Mr Tempest, sternly, and Leo gave him a grateful look. “All you have to do is to state facts.”

Mrs Jeal dropped an ironical curtsey. “Very good, sir,” said she; “but I must say that I thought Mrs Gabriel had cut off Mr Haverleigh’s allowance and that he was pawning some jewellery to keep himself in bread.”

“I never pawned anything in my life,” said Leo, disgusted at the plain spite of the woman. “Go on, Mrs Jeal. You saw this man Penny, no doubt?”

“I did that!” cried the woman, triumphantly. “I have known him for many years. I went into the shop and into his back parlour. On the table

I saw the cup. Yes, gentlemen, you no doubt are surprised. But it was the very cup I had so often seen on the altar of the chapel.”

“It is wholly false!” cried Leo, rising. “I never pawned the cup. Someone must have impersonated me.”

“It was yourself, Mr Haverleigh,” insisted the woman. “I had a talk with Old Penny, but of course I said nothing about having seen the cup before. I did not mention that I knew you. Penny told me that he had given you four hundred for the cup. It was worth much more he said, and he was chuckling over the bargain he had made. I left the cup in his possession and returned home. Several times I went to the shop to hear if you had redeemed the cup. But it was still with Penny. I then had to attend to my father and gave the matter little thought. But when I returned and heard how you, Mr Haverleigh, had stolen the cup, it became my duty to let his reverence know what you had done with it. And I hear,” added Mrs Jeal, with a malignant smile, “that your debts have been paid.”

“Who told you so?” asked Raston, who hitherto had been silent.

“Mrs Gabriel. I went to tell her what Mr Haverleigh had done. She said that she expected as much, as she had refused to give him the money to pay his debts. So that is all I know. I am prepared to take my oath in a court of law that this is true.”

There was a pause. Then Tempest observed quietly, “If that is all you have to tell, Mrs Jeal, you can go. I will speak to Mr Haverleigh.”

“But will I not—”

“You will do nothing,” interrupted the vicar. “Go away and hold your tongue, lest you get into trouble.”

“You’re going to let him off, I see,” said Mrs Jeal, with a toss of her grey head. “Well, I have done my share. Good-day, gentlemen,” and she sailed out of the room quite satisfied that she had ruined Leo.

When the three were alone Tempest addressed Leo, who sat silently beside the table. “Leo,” he said sadly, “I do not want you to get into trouble. If you will confess to me that you did what Mrs Jeal says I will

see about getting the cup back and say nothing more about the matter. I will give you money to leave the town.”

“I tell you I am innocent!” cried Leo passionately. “Why do you want me to confess a crime of which I am not guilty? I shall not leave Colester. Here I stay until my innocence is acknowledged.”

“But the evidence against you,” urged the vicar, sorely perplexed. “You were seen about the chapel on the night the cup was stolen. Your debts are paid, yet Mrs Gabriel did not give you the money, and you have none of your own. And now Mrs Jeal says she saw you pawn the sacred vessel.”

“I admit that the evidence is strong,” said Leo, recovering his calmness. “All the same I am guiltless. I was at the chapel on that night. I was to meet Sybil since you had forbidden me to meet her.”

“Please leave my daughter’s name out of this,” said Tempest, an angry spot on each cheek. He was annoyed at the mention of the meeting, but in the presence of Raston he controlled himself out of pride.

“I can’t leave Sybil’s name out of it,” said Leo, sadly. “I would if I could; but she is as anxious as I am that I should recover my good name. I did meet Sybil, and she will tell you that I left her at the door of the Vicarage before ten o’clock. I therefore could not have stolen the cup. I got the money to pay my debts from Frank Hale.”

“From Hale? Then he will say as much!” cried the vicar. “This will go far to prove your innocence, Leo.”

“I don’t think Hale will help me much,” said Leo, coldly. “However, we can talk of that later, or you can see Hale for yourself, Mr Tempest. But I declare most solemnly that Hale lent me the money. As to pawning the cup, I said before, and I say again, that I did no such thing. I did not take the cup. I was never in Battersea, and I do not know the man Mrs Jeal calls Old Penny. If you want to have me arrested, Mr Tempest, you will find me at Mr Pratt’s. Far from wishing to run away, I court an investigation.”

“Leo,” stammered the vicar, restlessly, “I do not want to get you into any trouble. If I can help—”

“I am in the deepest trouble,” returned Leo, “and more will not matter. You can have me arrested if you like. I know that Sybil believes me to be innocent, so does Pratt. I do not care for anyone else’s opinion. I think you are treating me cruelly, Mr Tempest, and some day you will be sorry that you showed so little charity. I go now, and I shall not see you again until such time as you give evidence against me in court,” and with this last bitter speech Leo walked out of the room with his head in the air.

The two clergymen looked at one another. They did not know very well what to say. Tempest sat down with a sigh. “I do not know what to think.”

“I do,” said Raston, sharply. “Notwithstanding the woman’s story, I still believe that Haverleigh is guiltless. Circumstances have so culminated that he appears to be in the wrong. There is a mystery about the whole of this affair, and it seems to me that Haverleigh has some enemy.”

“That may be so,” admitted Tempest, struck by this remark. “But what is to be done? I can’t have Leo arrested. Even if he were guilty, which I am now inclined to doubt, I cannot ruin his life.”

“What we need,” replied the curate, “is some clever man who will get to the bottom of this. If you can spare me for a few days, Mr Tempest, I will go to London and see Marton?”

“Marton?” repeated the vicar. “Who is Marton?”

Raston laughed. “Such is fame,” said he, lightly. “Marton is one of the best detectives in England. He was leaving college when I went up, and we met for a few weeks. When I was curate in the Battersea slums I met him again, as he has a wide acquaintance with the criminal classes. We renewed our college friendship, and I still write to him. Now, with your permission, Mr Tempest, I will put this case into Marton’s hands. It is just the kind of mystery he would love to solve.”

“The man is a gentleman, I suppose, Raston?”

“Certainly. He is my friend. I know the pawnshop of Old Penny. He is a Scotsman, if you can grasp the idea of a Scotsman keeping a pawnshop. I’ll tell Marton the whole case, and we can then go to this shop. If possible, we may get back the cup.”

“Who is to pay four hundred pounds for it?” asked Tempest.

“We’ll see,” replied Raston, quietly. “I shall do nothing without Marton’s advice. Have I your permission?”

Tempest nodded. “I think it is the best thing you can do. Go to London and keep me advised of everything. I should like to know Mr Marton’s opinion of the matter.”

“It is probable he’ll come down here later on,” said the curate; “but in the meantime, Mr Tempest, do nothing to Haverleigh.”

“I promise you that,” replied the vicar, and the matter being settled in this way, the two men shook hands. Afterwards Raston went to prepare for his departure.

While this was taking place, Leo was talking in the chapel with Hale. Haverleigh had gone up to see if Sybil was about, as he wished to tell her of this new development of the conspiracy against him. Leo felt sure by this time that there was a conspiracy, and that Hale was concerned in it. He was therefore rather pleased when he saw the cripple walking up the hill before him. Leo made up his mind to force the truth out of him, and hurried on so as to catch him. Hale heard his steps, and turned with a queer smile on his face. He was not at all abashed by the presence of the man to whom he had told a lie, but, on the contrary, welcomed him in the most friendly manner. Haverleigh was irritated by this false behaviour. “Either you think me innocent, and wish to be my friend,” he said, “or you believe that I am guilty and have some reason to be feigning good fellowship. I must have some understanding with you, Hale. Come into the chapel. We will not be disturbed there as it is mid-day and everyone is at dinner,” and Leo, without waiting for a reply, entered the door.

The chapel was empty; even Sybil was not in sight. Hearing the halting steps of the cripple behind him, Leo led the way into the crusaders’ chapel, where he sat down beside one of the tombs. Hale paused before him and looked down in a whimsical manner. “You have chosen a strange place,” he said, looking round.

“It is a sacred place,” replied Leo, coolly; “and you may be the less inclined to tell lies. I presume you have some religion.”

“How dare you say I tell lies?” cried the baronet, scowling.

“Because I have had some experience of your capability in that direction. And now I should like to know what you mean by denying that you lent me the three hundred pounds?”

Hale shrugged his unshapely shoulders and sat down with a painful effort, placing his crutch beside him. “You were fool enough to speak to me in the presence of my sister,” he said. “I could only say what I did say. Now that we are alone I am willing to answer any questions you may put to me.”

“You will answer truthfully, I hope?”

“Assuredly. It is time we understood one another. Go on.”

“You lent me three hundred pounds?” said Leo, in the form of a query.

“In gold,” assented Sir Frank, coolly.

“Why did you lend it to me in gold?”

“A whim of mine.”

“I don’t think so,” said Leo, slowly. “You had some scheme in your head. I believe you wanted to deny the loan if you found it convenient.”

“You are very clever, Haverleigh. That is just what I did want. Had I given you a cheque you could have proved the loan. Even notes might have shown the truth. But I wanted to be free to act as I pleased, so I went to the trouble of getting gold from the bank.”

“Then it seems to me that you had this cup stolen by some confederate, and intended to lay the blame on me so as to get me into a trap!”

“Indeed, no,” protested Hale, so loudly that Leo believed he was speaking the truth. “The stealing of the cup, and the subsequent blame being thrown on you, was unexpected. But I took advantage of the opportunity. You can prove your innocence only by my help, Haverleigh, and I give my evidence only on conditions.”

“I was prepared for such a speech,” said Leo, calmly; “but it won’t do, my friend. You must go to Tempest and tell him that you gave me three hundred pounds to pay my debts. Perhaps then he may disbelieve this ridiculous story of my being a thief.”

Hale sat up alertly. “Then you didn’t steal the cup?”

“Certainly not. How dare you suggest such a thing? I suspect you know more about the loss of the cup than I do.”

The baronet looked down on his crooked leg and smiled ironically. “Do you mean to infer that I thrust this misshapen body through that window?”

“No! But you have plenty of money to pay for any rascality.”

“I am not so fond of parting with money,” said Hale, dryly. “I know nothing about the cup. But I really thought you stole it. Mrs Jeal’s tale—”

“Ha!” Leo started up. “She told you that? Why?”

“Because she is a woman who is fond of money,” said Hale, quietly. “Knowing that my sister is in love with you, Haverleigh, she came to threaten me. She declared that she would proclaim you a thief if I did not pay her. It was her belief that such a course would break my sister’s heart.”

“And what did you do?”

“I told her I would inform the police if she dared to speak to me in that manner again. I believe she then went to the vicar. But if I come forward, Haverleigh, and state that I lent you the money, it will go a long way towards clearing you. Of course, I do not understand this pawning business. The woman says she saw you.”

“She saw my double, or someone dressed up to resemble me,” said Leo, vehemently; “but she did not see me. I was never near the shop.”

“So you say,” said Hale, smiling cruelly. “However, you must see that I can help you. I will do so on one condition—no, on two.”

“I can guess the two,” said Leo, looking at his mean face. “You want me to surrender Sybil so that you may marry her, and to make your sister my wife? Is that not so?”

Hale smiled again. “You save me the trouble of an explanation,” he said.

“Then I absolutely refuse to do what you want, Hale. I respect your sister, who is a kind and good-hearted girl; but I do not love her, and not for all the gold in the world would I marry her. On the other hand, nothing will induce me to give up Sybil. She shall never become your wife. I wonder you have the impertinence to propose such a thing to me!”

“If you don’t do what I ask,” said Hale, very pale and venomous, “I shall refuse to help you. I shall deny that I lent you the money.”

“Deny what you please!” Leo walked to the door of the chapel. “Everything is in your favour, and you can have me arrested if you choose. But I decline to sell my love to buy my safety. Good-day, Hale,” and he marched away.

Chapter XI

The London Detective

Sybil had seen Leo go into the room where her father was waiting with Mrs Jeal, and wondered what the woman had to do with her lover. She was called out to see a sick woman on behalf of her father, and on her way home bethought herself how she could see Leo. The girl was in a perfect fever of nervous fear for the young man. Then it struck her that the best thing to do would be to call at Mr Pratt’s. No sooner had she made up her mind to brave her father’s anger in this respect than she went at once to The Nun’s House. She feared if she delayed that her courage might evaporate.

The door was opened by Adam, who explained that Mr Pratt was from home. “He went into Portfront to-day, miss,” said Adam. “I only hope he will be able to get back this night, as there is a sea-fog coming up the Channel.”

“There is no danger of his losing the road, Adam,” said Sybil, cheerfully; “but I don’t want to see Mr Pratt. It is Mr Haverleigh who—”

“He is in the library, miss,” replied Adam, and admitted her into the house. When Sybil found herself alone with Leo she had a qualm. What would her father say should he ever come to know that she had paid such a visit?

Leo was seated at the desk, his face hidden in his arms, looking most dejected. He lifted his head as she entered, and, at the sight of his face, Sybil forgot all about her father and the impropriety of the visit. At once she ran to her lover, and drew his head down on to her breast with a look of almost divine pity. “My darling Leo,” she said, “I knew that you were miserable, and I have come to comfort you.”

“How good of you, dear!” replied Haverleigh, stroking her hair; “but your father? I did not think he would let you come to me.”

“My father does not know that I am here,” said Sybil, blushing, as he placed a chair for her; “but I knew you had been to see him, and I could not rest until I heard all about the interview. Was he very angry?”

“No; I think he is inclined to believe in my innocence in spite of Mrs Jeal’s story. And Heaven knows she has painted me black enough!”

“I wondered what Mrs Jeal was doing at the Vicarage, Leo; I don’t like that woman. She looks sly and wicked. But what story can she have to tell about you, dear?”

“Sybil, she says that she saw me pawning the cup in London,” and while Sybil, filled with surprise, sat looking at his agitated face, Leo told all that Mrs Jeal had said. “So you see, dear,” he continued, “that there is some sort of conspiracy against me. I believe Hale is in it too.”

“It is a strange story,” she said musingly. “I wonder who it was could have impersonated you? Did the man give your name?”

“By Jove!” cried Leo, starting up, “I never thought of asking. Yet the rascal must have given it for the pawn-ticket. Sybil, I can’t help thinking that Hale knows something about this. He saw me in the chapel an hour

ago and said that he would make a statement to the effect that he had paid me the money if I would give you up and marry his sister.”

Sybil’s eyes flashed. “How dare he?” she cried. “He wants to drive you into a corner, Leo. What did you say?”

“I refused to have anything to do with him, dear. He can join with your father in having me arrested for all I care. I would rather that than give up my Sybil! But you see the position. What is to be done?”

“Can’t you go to London and see this man Penny?”

“No. I dare not leave the place. Your father and the others would think that I was seeking safety in flight. I might be arrested before I got as far as Portfront. I don’t say that your father would go so far but there is always the chance. I am sure Mrs Gabriel would not counsel mercy. For some unaccountable reason she hates me thoroughly.”

“My poor Leo!” Sybil stroked his cheek. “Fate is very cruel to you. But never mind. In spite of everything I will be true to you. And what is more, Leo, I’ll help you to prove your innocence.”

“How can you do that, my love?”

She pursed up her pretty mouth, and, crossing her slender feet, looked on the ground with an air of portentous gravity. “I don’t believe this story of Mrs Jeal’s,” she said; “there is something behind it. As you cannot go to London—and I see it would be foolish of you to go away from Colester at present—we must do the best we can through the newspapers.”

Leo looked at her in surprise, and knelt beside her. “What can we do with the newspapers, darling?”

“Put an advertisement in every London daily paper saying that the cup has been lost, giving a description, and offering a reward if any information is given to me.”

“To you, Sybil! What would your father say?”

“He won’t know. Besides, Leo, darling, you are more to me even than my father, and I am angry at the unjust way in which you are being treated.

I will write out a number of these advertisements, and send them up with post-office orders. The replies to be sent to 'S. T. Colester Post-office.'"

"But what good will that do?"

"Oh, you stupid darling! I have to think for two, I see. Why, this pawnbroker—what is his name?—Penny. Well, if Penny sees the advertisement, he will recognise the cup from the description, and know that it has been stolen. He will be afraid of getting into trouble with the police, and he no doubt will write saying that the cup was pawned with him and that he will be willing to sell it back for the price paid. Then we'll get it back, Leo. When I am certain, I'll tell my father, and he will arrange about buying it again."

"Yes. But how does all this benefit me?"

"This Penny creature will explain who pawned it, and he will give the name of the person Mrs Jeal said resembled you. He might do that if the matter were made public by advertisement. If we approach him privately he will very likely deny everything. We can't be too careful, Leo."

"But the reward," said Haverleigh, puzzled. "I have no money; you have no money. What will you do?"

"When the cup is back, or if information is given likely to recover it, I am sure my father can arrange about the money with Mrs Gabriel. Now do not say a word, Leo. She has nothing to do with you now. And, after all," added Sybil, naïvely, "I don't see why any money need pass. This is a trap I am laying for that pawnbroker. That is if Mrs Jeal's story is true, which I am inclined to doubt. I'll put the advertisement in on chance, Leo, and see what comes of it."

"But it is such a mad idea," remonstrated the young man, who could not follow all these feminine arguments. "Let me tell Pratt about your suggestion. He will be able to advise us."

Sybil rose to her feet and shook her head obstinately. "If you say a word to Mr Pratt I'll never forgive you. Let me try this experiment all alone, Leo, dear. It can do no harm, and it might do a lot of good. We must not tell anyone about it."

“Sybil, I kept the fact of my borrowing that money from Hale a secret, and I have regretted it ever since. Let us ask Pratt’s advice.”

“No, Leo.” Sybil was still obstinate. “I want to try this myself. If it fails it can do no harm, and if it succeeds I shall have the joy of knowing that it was I who got you out of this trouble. Now promise not to tell!”

At first Leo refused. He did not want Sybil to mix herself up in this disagreeable case even for his sake. But she used such endearments, and kept to her point with such pertinacity, that he gave in. It was useless to contend against Sybil when she set her heart on getting anything. She never would give in, however discouraged. Therefore, before she left the library, she had drawn out an advertisement with the assistance of Leo, in which the appearance of the cup and its Latin inscription were carefully set down. A reward of fifty pounds was offered, and the answers were to be sent to S. T., at the Colester Post-office.

“There!” said Sybil, when this document was completed, “I have set my trap. Now we shall see who will fall into it. I’ll make a dozen copies at once, and have them sent off by to-morrow. Not a word, Leo, about this.”

“I will be silent, as I have promised. All the same, I do not feel comfortable about your experiment. To tell you the truth, Sybil, I can’t see the sense of it. Now, don’t look angry, dear. I know it is all done out of love for me.”

“I am not sure that you deserve my love,” pouted Sybil as he escorted her to the door. “You place all kinds of obstacles in my way!”

She was rather angry, for her heart was fully taken up with the magnificence of her scheme. However, Leo managed to calm her, and gain her forgiveness. He was quite unaware of what he had done wrong. But Sybil said that he had behaved disgracefully, so he apologised. Then she said that she was a wicked girl, and after kissing him ran away. All this was very foolish, but very sweet. Leo often recalled that interview to her in after days, and they both agreed that they behaved like two most sensible people. But at present Leo was too sad to enjoy the stolen meeting as a true and loyal lover should have done.

That same night the sea-fog rolled up thick and white. Mr Pratt did not return home, at which non-arrival Adam was not surprised. Mr Pratt was too fond of his creature comforts to drive twenty miles through a damp and clinging mist. Leo had the whole house to himself, and Adam, who thought a good deal of him, did his best to make him comfortable. He consulted with the cook and gave Leo a capital little dinner, together with a bottle of superfine Burgundy. Then he supplied him with cigars of the best and coffee of the finest, and left him comfortably seated before the drawing-room fire. Under these circumstances Leo felt happier than he had expected, seeing at what a low ebb his fortunes were.

The position of the unfortunate young man was undeniably hard. Here he was, deserted by his aunt, Mrs Gabriel. She had taken him up, brought him up to expect a large fortune, and then, for no cause at all, had suddenly cast him out on the world to earn his own living as best he could. And in addition to this, although it was hardship enough, poor Leo's character was gone. He was accused of a sordid crime, and might have to answer for it to the law. He did not see what defence he could make. Certainly, if he acceded to Hale's terms, he could vindicate his position in some measure by accounting for the sum of money he had used to pay his debts. But in this case Sybil would be lost to him. And what would life be without Sybil? Altogether, Leo was in low spirits, in spite of the fire and the Burgundy, and the memory of that charming interview. But it was no use lamenting, as he very truly observed to himself, so he tried to shake off the feeling of depression and went to bed. He was young, the world was large, and he hoped in some way or another to sail out of these troubled waters into a peaceful haven. Hope was the silver lining to his cloud of black despair.

Meanwhile, Raston had written to his friend Marton a full account of the loss of the cup, of the accusation by Mrs Jeal of Leo, and of the suspicions entertained by the villagers concerning the probity of the young man. For some days he heard nothing. Then one evening Marton himself arrived unexpectedly at Colester. He went at once to the curate's lodgings and was received with great surprise.

“My dear Marton, this is an unexpected pleasure,” said Raston, assisting his distinguished visitor to pull off his coat. “I thought you would have written to me about your visit to Penny.”

“I didn’t go there,” replied Marton, with a laugh. “The fact is, Harold, I cannot quite understand this case. You have not explained matters clearly enough in your letter. I have set a detective to watch Penny and Penny’s shop, and I have come down to hear all details from your own worshipful lips. But what a foggy sort of place you have here! I have been driving in your mail-coach through a kind of cotton-wool. The guard thought we would never reach Colester. I felt like a character of Dickens in that coach. You are a primitive people here. Do you know I rather like it!”

Marton was a tall, slim, black-haired man, neatly dressed in a tweed suit. He constantly smoked cigarettes, and maintained a perfectly calm demeanour. No one ever saw Marton excited. His face was clean-shaven, and his grey eyes were sharp and piercing. He looked what he was, a thorough gentleman, and a remarkably shrewd, clever man. His fame as a detective is so well known that it need hardly be mentioned.

“I must get you something to eat,” said Raston.

“No. I dined at Portfront before I left. Give me a glass of port, and I can smoke a cigarette. This fire is comfortable after the fog.”

“I have some excellent port, Marton. My dear mother is under the impression that I am delicate, and keeps me well supplied from my father’s cellar. I don’t know what he says to it.”

“Being a clergyman, you had better not know,” said Marton, dryly. “Your father had a vocabulary of—There, there, I’ll say nothing more. I want my port, my cigarette, and a full account of this case. It seems to be an interesting one. I shouldn’t have come down otherwise, even for your sake, my dear Harold. I have just twice as much business on hand as I can do with. The detective life is not a happy one.”

Raston poured out a glass of port and placed it at Marton’s elbow. He watched his friend light a cigarette, and himself filled his well-worn briar. Then, when they were comfortably established, he related all that he knew about the case. Marton listened with his eyes on the fire, but made no observation until the recital was finished. Indeed, even then he did not seem inclined to talk.

“Well?” said Raston, rather impatiently. “What do you think?”

“Wait a bit, my friend. It is a difficult case. I am not prepared to give you an opinion straight away. I must ask something about the people concerned in it first. This Leo Haverleigh? What about him?”

“He is a good man, and perfectly honest. I should as soon have suspected myself of stealing the cup as Leo. And I have known him for some time.”

“Well, if anyone ought to know the truth about a man’s character I should think a clergyman was the person,” said Marton. “Is it not Balzac who says the clergy are all in black because they see the worst side of human nature? Humph! Have you had to put on mourning for this Haverleigh?”

“No. He has been a trifle wild, and has got into debt; but otherwise there is nothing wrong about him. Besides,” added the curate, “Miss Tempest is in love with him, and they are engaged. She is a noble girl, and would not love a scoundrel.”

“Ah!” said Marton, cynically, “I have seen a remark of that sort in novels, my good man. In real life—But that is neither here nor there. I should like to meet this young man.”

“I can take you with me to-night. He is staying with Mr Pratt at The Nun’s House. It is no very great distance away.”

“I can wait till to-morrow, Harold. I have no very great desire to go out into this dense fog. By the way, who is this Mr Pratt?”

“A newcomer to Colester. He has been here off and on for the last few months, and has decided to settle here. He is well off, and has travelled a great deal. His house is beautifully furnished.”

“Quite an acquisition to the neighbourhood!” said Marton, drowsily. “I must make the acquaintance of your people here to-morrow. Just now I feel inclined to go to bed.”

“But tell me your opinion of this case?”

“Well,” said Marton, thoughtfully, “from all the evidence you give me it seems that Haverleigh is guilty.”

“No, Marton,” replied the curate, “I’ll never believe that. And you forget that he claims to have obtained the money from Sir Frank Hale.”

“Well, then, his possession of three hundred pounds is easily proved. I shall see Sir Frank Hale and question him. With regard to this Mrs Jeal, her story seems credible enough. I don’t suppose she has any enmity against Haverleigh?”

“No. But she is a woman I neither like nor trust. A demure, cat-like creature, with a pair of wicked eyes.”

“You make me long to see her,” said Marton, waking up. “That is just the sort of person I like to meet. Do you think she may have stolen this cup herself, and have invented this wild story to account for the loss? I have heard of stranger and even more daring things.”

“No. That is out of the question, Marton. On the night the cup was stolen Mrs Jeal was watching beside this sick girl—the mad creature I have told you about. She is innocent.”

“Then I can only say that young Haverleigh seems to be the most likely person. Only, the evidence against him is so plain that I believe him to be guiltless. I always mistrust too plain evidence, Raston. It shows signs of having been prepared. Well, I’ll see this young man to-morrow, and have a chat. I go by the face a great deal. Have you a photograph of him?”

“No,” said the curate on the spur of the moment. “Oh, yes, by the way! I took a group of our people at a picnic. It is not a bad picture, although small. You can see the whole lot at a glance.”

Raston got out the photograph, and Marton went to the lamp to see it the more plainly. He glanced at first carelessly at it, then his eyes grew large, his attention became fixed. At that moment there was a ring at the door. Marton looked at the clock. “You have a late visitor,” he said.

“A call to see some sick woman probably. Why do you look so closely at that picture, Marton?”

“There is a face here I know. Who is that?”

Raston looked. “That is the man with whom Haverleigh is staying. Pratt!”

“Pratt?” repeated Marton in a thoughtful tone. “Has he a tattooed star on his cheek just under the cheek bone?”

“Yes. And he is tattooed on the arm also—the right arm. I expect he had it done while he was a sailor.”

“Oh!” said Marton, dryly, “he says he was a sailor.”

“Not to my knowledge; but he has mentioned something of being an amateur one. Do you know him, Marton?”

“If he is the man I think he is, I know him better than you do, Raston!”

“Then who is—” Raston had just got thus far, when the landlady opened the door to announce Mr Pratt. “Here is the man himself, Marton.”

“Marton!” echoed Pratt, who was standing in the doorway.

“Yes, Mr—Angel,” said Marton, looking straight at him.

Pratt stood for just half a moment as though turned into stone. Then he turned on his heel, and went out of the door and down the stairs as swiftly as he was able. Without a word Marton darted after him. By the time he reached the street door Pratt had disappeared in the fog.

Chapter XII

A Surprise

Raston was astonished when Pratt disappeared so suddenly, and Marton rushed out after him. He went to the door, but his friend was not to be seen. It was little use following, for he did not know which direction the man had taken, and the fog was so thick that he could hardly see the length of his hand before him. The whole of the spur upon which Colester was built was wrapped in a thick white mist, and those who were abroad in the streets ran every chance of being lost. The village was small, but the alleys and streets were tortuous, so there would be no great difficulty in mistaking the way.

For over an hour the curate waited, yet Marton did not return. He could only suppose that the detective had followed Pratt, for what purpose he could not divine. Evidently Marton knew something not altogether to Pratt's advantage, and Pratt was aware of this, else he would hardly have disappeared so expeditiously. Moreover, Marton had addressed Pratt as "Angel," which hinted that the American was masquerading under a false name. Still wondering at what was likely to be the outcome of this adventure, Raston placed himself at the door and waited for the return of his friend. But, as time passed, he made sure that the detective, a stranger in the village, had lost his way.

"I can't leave him out of doors all night," soliloquised Raston, peering into the fog; "yet I do not know where to look for him. However, his own good sense must have told him not to go too far."

It was now after ten o'clock, and most of the villagers were in bed. Mr Raston then ventured upon a course of which he would have thought twice had the situation been less desperate. He placed his hands to his mouth and sent an Australian "coo" through the night. This accomplishment had been taught to him by an Australian cousin. As this especial cry carried further than most shouts, Raston congratulated himself that he knew how to give it. It was the only way of getting into communication with Marton.

After shouting once or twice, Raston heard a faint cry in response. It came from the right. So the curate, feeling his way along the houses, started in that direction, shouting at intervals. Shortly the answering cry sounded close at hand, and after some difficulty and inarticulate conversation the two men met. With an ejaculation Marton grasped the hand of his friend. "Thank Heaven you have found me," said the detective. "I have been going round in a circle."

"Did you catch up with Pratt?" asked Raston.

"No; the rascal disappeared into the fog, and I lost myself in pursuit of him in about three minutes."

"Why do you call him a rascal?"

“Because he is one; I know all about him. But I never thought I should have stumbled on ‘Mr Angel’ in this locality. I feel like Saul, who went out to look for his asses and stumbled on a kingdom.”

“Is his name Angel?”

“That is one of his names; he has at least a dozen. Why he should have chosen one that fitted him so badly I cannot say.”

By this time Raston, holding on to Marton’s coat sleeve, had guided the detective back to his lodgings. The man was shivering with cold, for he had gone out without coat or hat. He hastily swallowed a glass of port, and began getting his things to go out. “You’re not going into that fog again!” protested Raston. “You’ll only get lost.”

“Not under your capable guidance,” laughed the detective. “You must guide me to the house of this Mr Pratt. I intend to arrest him.”

“Arrest him!” echoed the curate, staring. “Dear me, what has he done?”

“Ask me what he hasn’t done,” said Marton, with a curl of his lip, “and I’ll be better able to tell you. It’s a long story, Raston, and time is passing; I want to go to the man’s house. Is it far from here?”

“Some little distance,” replied the curate, wondering at this haste. “I can find my way to it by guiding myself along the walls. But you can’t arrest him, Marton, whatever he has done, unless you have a warrant.”

“I accept all responsibility on that score,” replied Marton, grimly. “The police have wanted Mr Angel, alias Pratt, for many a long day. Now the rascal knows that I am here, he will clear out of Colester in double quick time. I want to act promptly and take him by surprise. Now don’t ask questions, my dear fellow, but take me to the house. I’ll tell you all about this man later on. By the way, he is the individual who gave your church this celebrated cup?”

“Yes. I really hope there is nothing wrong.”

“Everything is wrong. I expect the cup was stolen—”

“It is stolen—”

“Pshaw! I don’t mean this time. Pratt stole it himself. I wonder he dare present his spoils to the Church. The fellow must have very little religion to think such an ill-gotten gift could be acceptable.”

“Stolen!” murmured Raston, putting on his coat. “But why—who is Pratt?”

“Simply the cleverest thief in the three kingdoms. Come along!”

Raston gasped, but he had no time to ask further questions. The detective had him by the arm and was hurrying him to the door. When outside he made the curate lead, and followed close on his heels. Raston, rather dazed by this experience, turned in the direction of The Nun’s House, and, guiding himself along the walls and houses, managed to get into the street in which it stood—that is, he and Marton found themselves on the highroad which led down to King’s-meadows. It was fully an hour before they got as far as this, for the fog grew denser every moment. Finally, Raston stumbled on the gate, drew his friend inside with an ejaculation of satisfaction, and walked swiftly up the path that led to the house. On the ground floor all was dark, but in the centre window of the second storey a light was burning. Marton did not wait for the curate, but ran up the steps and knocked at the door; he also rang, and he did both violently. For a time there was no response, then the light disappeared from the window above.

In a few minutes the noise of the bolts being withdrawn was heard, and the rattle of the chain. The door opened to show Leo in his dressing-gown standing on the threshold with a lighted candle in his hand. He looked bewildered and angry, as though he had just been aroused from his first sleep, which indeed was the case. “What the devil is the matter?” he asked crossly, peering out into the night. “You make enough noise to wake the dead! Who is it?”

“It is I, and a friend, Haverleigh,” said the curate, pushed forward by the detective. “Is Mr Pratt within?”

“I suppose so,” replied Leo, much astonished at this nocturnal visitation; “he is no doubt in bed. I can’t understand why he did not hear the noise you made. Has he left anything at your place, Raston?”

“Ah! You knew he was going to see Mr Raston?” put in Marton, sharply.

“He left here over two hours ago, and I went to bed. Then I heard him come back just as I was falling asleep, but he did not come up to my room. If you will tell me what is the matter, I’ll rouse him.

“Let us enter, Haverleigh,” said the curate, who was shivering. “We have much to tell you.”

Still much puzzled, Leo led the way to the library after shutting the door, and the two men followed him. He lighted the gas—Colester was not sufficiently civilised for electric light—and then turned to ask once more what was the matter. Raston thought the best way to bring about an explanation was to introduce his friend, who was already looking keenly round the well-furnished room. “This is Mr Marton,” he said. “He is a London detective.”

With a bitter laugh Leo set down the candle on the table. “What,” he said, “are you the man with the bow-string, Raston? Scarcely worthy of your cloth! If you wanted to arrest me, you might have waited until morning!”

“Who is this young gentleman?” asked Marton, suddenly.

“I am Leo Haverleigh, Mr Detective,” replied the young man, sharply; “and I suppose you have come here at the instance of Mr Tempest to arrest me!”

Marton snatched up the candle, and held it close to Leo’s face. He was apparently quite satisfied, for he spoke in a more friendly tone.

“You need not be afraid, Mr Haverleigh,” he said soothingly. “I have not come to arrest you—but to investigate the case. I don’t think there is any chance of your being arrested. Your face is enough for me. But this is all very well,” he added impatiently; “I want Pratt!”

“I will go and wake him,” said Leo, who could make neither top nor tail of all this, but who was relieved to find that he was not in danger of arrest. He retired from the room, while Marton darted about here there, and everywhere. He was like a bloodhound nosing a trail. Suddenly he stopped before a cabinet, a drawer of which was open.

“Too late!” said Marton in a tone of disgust. “He’s bolted.”

“How could he bolt in this fog?” asked Raston, dubiously.

“Oh, he’ll find his way somehow. Tony Angel is the cleverest of men for getting out of a difficulty. He has evaded the police for years. See, my dear chap, this drawer is open. That means he has taken money or valuables from it, and is now on his way to Heaven knows what hiding-place.

“Can you be sure of that? The open drawer may be an accident. Besides, he would not think you would act so promptly.”

“Indeed, that is just why he has bolted so expeditiously,” said Marton, with something of admiration in his tones. “Angel has experienced my promptitude before, and several times I have been on the point of capturing him. He has taken French leave within the last two hours. But for that infernal fog I should have stuck to him till I ran him down. Or, at all events, I might have disabled him with a shot.”

The curate looked at his friend aghast. “A shot!” he stammered.

Marton produced a neat little revolver. “I should have used that had I been able,” he said quietly. “It does not do to adopt half measures with our mutual friend. Besides, if hard pressed he would have returned the compliment. Your Haverleigh fellow is a long time!”

“He’ll be back soon. You can trust Leo. Surely, Marton, you do not think he knew anything of Pratt’s doings?”

“With such a face as that he knows precious little,” retorted Marton; “he is a good fellow, but not sharp. He did not steal that cup, nor did he help Pratt to get away. No, Raston. Our criminal friend came back here while I was blundering in the fog, and after taking some money cleared out without loss of time. I sha’n’t catch him now. I suppose the telegraph-office is closed?”

“Yes. It closes here at nine o’clock. And even if you sent a wire, it would not be delivered at Portfront to-night.”

“No, I suppose not. You are all so slow in these country places! It is clever of you to mention Portfront, Raston. You think that Tony Angel will go there?”

“How else can he get away?”

“I don’t know. You know the country better than I do. But I tell you what, our friend will not go to Portfront or anywhere near it.”

“Why not?” asked the curate, bewildered.

“Because you expect him to go there. Angel always does the thing that is not expected. I wish I had caught him! I’ve been years trying to hunt him down. And the beast has made himself comfortable here!” said Marton, with a glance round. “I bet you, Raston, that the greater part of these things have been stolen.”

“Stolen, Marton! How terrible. And the cup?”

“He stole that also,” replied Marton, promptly, lighting one of his cigarettes. “Oh, he is a clever man, is Angel. Ah! here is our young and enterprising friend. Well, Mr Haverleigh, so Pratt has gone?”

“Yes,” said Leo, looking puzzled. “I went to his room and found that his bed had not been slept in. The back door is open, although closed—that is, it has not been locked. How do you know Pratt has gone?”

“I’ll tell you later. Throw a few logs on that fire, Raston. It will soon burn up. Here is a bottle of whisky, too, and some soda.”

“I left that for Pratt,” said Leo, somewhat surprised at the cool way in which this man was behaving.

“And Pratt was too clever to muddle his head when he needed all his wits about him. By the way, has his jackall gone also?”

“Adam is not in, if that is what you—”

“Yes, Mr Haverleigh, that is exactly what I do mean. Ha! Clever man Pratt! He came back here straight, and, warning his pal, walked off, leaving the empty house to me and to you, Mr Haverleigh. Did you hear him leave?”

“I heard nothing until you knocked at the door. Then I wondered why Adam did not hear you. The other servants are asleep at the back of the house, and I suppose they also expected Adam to answer the bell.”

“That is extremely probable. Well, let us hope the remaining servants will sleep well. To-morrow they must leave this house!”

“Why, in Heaven’s name?” asked Leo, starting up.

“For the very simple reason that the police will be put into possession here by me to-morrow.”

“What? Did Pratt steal the—I don’t understand. Raston, what does this man mean? Who is he? What are—”

“Wait a bit, Mr Haverleigh,” interrupted Marton, motioning the curate to hold his tongue, “all in good time. I am Horace Marton, a detective. I was asked by Mr Raston to investigate this robbery, and he was telling me about it at his lodgings. Your friend Mr Pratt arrived, and when he saw me he bolted out into the fog. I followed and lost him. Then I got back to Raston here, and we have been over two hours looking for this confounded place. During that time Pratt and Adam have made themselves scarce.”

“But why should they do that?” asked Leo, still puzzled.

“Because this man who calls himself Pratt, and poses as a giver of gifts to the Church, is a well-known London thief, and his man Adam is what he would call a pal. ‘Tony Angel,’ that is the real name of Mr Pratt, but he had half-a-dozen others beside. I congratulate you on your friend, Mr Haverleigh!”

“I never knew anything of this,” cried Leo, utterly taken aback.

“I am quite sure of that, Haverleigh,” said the curate, heartily.

Marton chuckled. “Wait a bit, Harold,” he said; “do not be in such a hurry. How do we know that Mr Haverleigh has not been working together with Tony Angel? He may know all about him and may have been employed by him to steal the very cup which was given by Pratt as an evidence of his respectability.”

Leo jumped up and would have flung himself on Marton; but Raston held him back. “How dare you make such an accusation against me?”

cried the young man, furiously. “Let me go, Raston; don’t you hear what he says?”

“Wait a bit, Haverleigh,” urged the curate. “Marton does nothing without a motive. He can explain if you will remain quiet.”

Thus advised, Leo sat down again, but in rather a sulky humour. “I am a trifle tired of being called a blackguard,” he said, frowning at Marton, who regarded him with a friendly smile. “I know absolutely nothing about Mr Pratt, save that he was a friend of Mrs Gabriel’s, and that he has been very good to me. I always thought he was what he represented himself to be.”

“Small wonder you did,” said Marton, coolly. “Angel would deceive a much cleverer man than you appear to be, Mr Haverleigh! And look here, I may as well tell you at once that I am certain you knew nothing about him. Also I am equally certain that you have had nothing to do with this robbery. I cannot say yet whether Pratt—as I may continue to call him for clearness’ sake—stole the cup. But you are innocent, Mr Haverleigh; and I intend to do my best to get you out of your trouble. Shake hands.”

At first Leo hesitated, for he was still sore about the accusation. But the detective regarded him in a friendly manner, and his smile was so irresistible, that in the end he shook hands heartily. He felt that the man who spoke thus would be a good friend. “You know all about the case?”

“All that Mr Raston could tell me,” said the detective, “even to the fact that you borrowed the money for which you are accused of stealing the cup from Sir Frank Hale.”

“Then I wish you would make him acknowledge the loan,” said Leo, petulantly.

Marton started and looked at the young man. “Does he not do so?”

“No. He is in love with Miss Tempest, who is engaged to me, and he says he will deny the loan if I do not give her up.”

“And marry his sister, I suppose!” interposed the curate, whereat Leo nodded.

“Humph!” said Marton, thoughtfully, caressing his chin. “It seems to me, Mr Haverleigh, that you have been made a tool of by unscrupulous people. But I’ll give my attention to this to-morrow. I’ll get the truth out of this Hale! He don’t dare to palter with me. Leave yourself and your reputation in my hands, Haverleigh.”

“Very gladly,” said Leo, heartily; “but what about Pratt?”

Marton reflected, and took a sip of whisky and water. “He’s gone. I do not think he will appear again in Colester.”

“But he has left his house and all these beautiful things behind him,” put in Raston, with a glance around.

“I see he has made himself comfortable,” said Marton, with a shrug; “it was always his way! This is not the first time he has furnished a house and settled down. He has been driven out of every burrow, however. This time I discovered his hiding-place by accident. Colester was about the best place in the whole of England he could have chosen. No one would have thought of looking for him here. I daresay he expected to settle down and die in the odour of sanctity, surrounded by his ill-gotten gains. But he has not gone empty-handed, Haverleigh. He is too clever for that, and is always prepared for an emergency.”

“But who is Pratt?”

“Well; you are asking me a hard question. I understand he is a workhouse brat of sorts. He himself claims to be the illegitimate son of a nobleman. Certainly, he has a very gentlemanly appearance. He has been working for at least thirty years, and has always contrived to evade the English police. I believe he was laid by the heels in America.”

“He has travelled a great deal.”

“I believe you! He knows the whole world and all the scoundrels in it. A king of crime! That is what Pratt is. The generality of thieves adore him, for he has his good points, and he is generous. Well, we have talked enough for to-night. I’ll sleep here, Haverleigh. Raston?”

“I’ll return to my own place,” said the curate, rising to go.

And this he did, but Marton, having found the burrow of Pratt, alias Angel, did not intend to leave it. He was quite as clever as the man he was hunting.

Chapter XIII

An Interesting Document

Marton did not wish the identity of Pratt to be concealed. On the contrary, he gave it as wide a publicity as possible, hoping that it might lead to the man's capture. Everyone from Portfront to Colester knew the would-be country gentleman, so it was not unlikely that he might be caught. Considering that only a night had elapsed, it was impossible that he could have got far away, especially in a fog. And if Pratt escaped there was always the off-chance that Adam might be laid by the heels.

An examination next morning showed Marton that the two bicycles were missing, so he judged that both men had gone off together. It was improbable in Marton's opinion that they had gone to Portfront, as they could not possibly leave before the steamer at seven o'clock, and the police could be communicated with by telegraph before they could get clear of the place. At half-past six Marton routed a telegraph operator out of his bed, and set him to work. He wired to the inspector at Portfront to arrest Pratt and his man forthwith, or, at all events, to detain them until the London police could be communicated with and a warrant for Pratt's manifold iniquities procured.

But, to Marton's surprise, no answer was returned from Inspector German. Yet the inspector knew Pratt well, and, if the man set foot in Portfront, could easily seize him. Later on, somewhere about nine o'clock, the reason that no answer had arrived became apparent. A messenger came from Portfront to say that the telegraph wire between that place and Portfront had been cut midway. There was only one line, so all communication had been broken off. The steamer had started, and, without doubt, the two men were on board. At once Marton started off to Portfront on the curate's bicycle. On his arrival he went to see German.

The inspector was much astonished when he heard the story. He had not received the wire, and therefore had done nothing. In Marton's company he hurried to the office of the steamer.

"You see the kind of man we have to deal with, German," said Marton, much vexed. "It was a clever dodge to cut the wire, and yet he gave himself away. I did not think he would go to Portfront, but the cutting of the wire proves he did. We'll wire to Worthing, and stop him there."

An inquiry at the steamer office resulted in nothing. It seemed that Mr Pratt had a season ticket, and therefore had not purchased one. Nor had Adam, so it might be that he was still in the town. The loafers on the pier said they had not seen Pratt go aboard.

"Humph!" said Marton, "he sneaked on in some disguise."

"Is he clever at disguising himself?" asked German.

"I should think so. His own mother would not know him. Still, he had no time to make-up before he left Colester, so he may not be so carefully disguised. I daresay we can catch him at Worthing."

A wire was sent to Worthing forthwith, and another to Scotland Yard, requesting that someone might be sent down to take charge of Pratt's house, and to identify the goods he had in it. There was a list of the houses Pratt had broken into, and a list of the stolen goods also, so it would be easy to have this brought down and compared with the contents of The Nun's House. Having thus done all that he could under the circumstances, Marton returned to Colester, where he found the curate and Leo waiting for him. The latter had now taken up his quarters at the inn. But he kept within doors, as now that the identity of Pratt was known, Leo was credited with having been his confederate.

There was tremendous excitement in Colester over the discovery that the village had entertained unawares a well-known London thief. Many of the villagers flattered themselves on the stern and non-committal attitude they had adopted towards the too fascinating stranger. Mr Pratt had never been very popular, but now he was spoken ill of on every hand. The whole village would have been delighted to have seen him in the power of the law.

But Pratt was too clever for them all. The wire to Worthing produced no result. Neither Pratt nor Adam were on board. It then appeared that the steamer had put in at Bognor. Marton had omitted to advise the police there of the fugitives, so it was presumed that they had got off with the rest of the passengers. The captain did not know Adam by sight, and Pratt had evidently disguised himself well. At all events, in the crowd the two had passed unnoticed. Although the London stations were watched, no sight could be caught of them.

“A clever man Pratt!” said Marton, when informed of his ill success. “I am perfectly certain of the way in which he went about the matter. He and his servant got off at Bognor, and alighted at some station just outside the metropolis. They got to their own haunts by some back way.”

“Do you know of their haunts?” asked Leo, who was keenly interested in the matter, and could not help feeling relieved that Pratt had escaped.

“Oh! they change them every now and then. Besides, Adam will keep out of sight, and Pratt will so disguise himself that there will be no recognising him. He’s got clean away this time. And I believe, Mr Haverleigh,” added Marton, with a laugh, “that you are rather pleased!”

“Well,” said Leo, with some hesitation, “in spite of all you say, I can’t bring myself to believe that Pratt is a bad sort of chap. He was very kind to me.”

“He is kind to most people. He poses as a kind of modern Robin Hood, who robs the rich to give to the poor. I have known him to do many kind actions. But he is a scamp for all that, and if I could lay my hands on him I’d get him!”

Mrs Gabriel was much annoyed to find that Pratt was so notorious a character. She determined to clear herself of complicity in his sordid crimes, although no one ever suspected that she had any knowledge of the man’s true character. She sent for Marton, and had a long talk with him about Pratt; incidentally a reference was made to Leo.

“I have asked you to see me, Mr Marton,” she said, “because it was I who introduced Mr Pratt to Colester. I have known him ten years, and he always appeared to me to be a most respectable American.”

“He is not an American at all,” said Marton. “But he could assume any nationality that suited him for the moment. He is a brilliantly-clever man, Mrs Gabriel, and I do not wonder he took you in.”

“He got no money out of me, at all events,” said the lady, grimly.

“Ah! Then you escaped easily. The wonder is he did not try and marry you! A rich widow is exactly the kind of victim he would like.”

“I am not the sort of woman to be anyone’s victim, Mr Marton.”

Marton, looking at her stern, strong face, quite agreed, but he was too polite to give vent to his feelings. He merely inquired how Mrs Gabriel had become acquainted with this Prince of Swindlers. She had no hesitation in giving him full details.

“I met him at a Swiss hotel many years ago,” she said. “He was then called Pratt, and he posed as a rich American. I met with an accident while out walking on the hill above Montreux, and lay out till nightfall. Mr Pratt rescued me from this very unpleasant position, and took me back to the hotel. A friendship sprang up between us, and when he returned to England he called on me. As he was always the same for ten years, and I saw much of him, I never suspected that he was other than he represented himself to be. Besides, Mr Marton, you must admit he is a most fascinating man.”

“Much too fascinating, Mrs Gabriel, as many have found to their cost.”

Mrs Gabriel reflected a moment. “Do you think he will be put in prison?”

“Certainly, if we catch him,” replied Marton, quietly; “he is a man dangerous to society. All his life he has been a rogue and a criminal. All his money comes to him in the wrong way. That house below—I believe you let it to him, Mrs Gabriel—is filled with the proceeds of his robberies. He bought the furniture, but the objects of art—even the pictures—have all been stolen. In a few days I shall have some people down from Scotland Yard to identify the things and restore them to their owners. But as to Mr Pratt, I fear he has escaped out of the clutches of the law—as usual.”

“I cannot say I regret it,” said Mrs Gabriel, boldly. “Bad as he is, there are worse people in the world, Mr Marton. But tell me, sir. You are investigating this robbery. My adopted son, Mr Haverleigh is suspected.”

“He is perfectly innocent, Mrs Gabriel. The money he was said to have obtained from the sale of the cup was given to him by Sir Frank Hale.”

“Sir Frank denies it.”

“So Mr Haverleigh says. But I’ll see Sir Frank myself, and see what I can make of him. I would rather believe Mr Haverleigh than anyone else. He has an absolutely open nature.”

“He is a fool, if that is what you mean.”

“Pardon me, I do not think so! A man can be straightforward and honourable, as Mr Haverleigh is, without being a fool. As yet I have not investigated this case, as my attention has been taken up with Pratt. But in a day or so I hope to go to work and then I am prepared to say that the crime will not be brought home to your nephew.”

“Have you any suspicions?”

“Not yet. I have not searched out the evidence sufficiently.”

“Mrs Jeal saw my nephew pawn the cup.”

“Ah! That is a mystery which I must fathom, Mrs Gabriel. A person resembling Mr Haverleigh pawned the cup, but I am sure it was not your nephew. There is a conspiracy against him, on whose part I am not prepared to say yet. But I shall find it out, clear his character, and punish those who have been concerned in it. And now, Mrs Gabriel, I must bid you good-day, as my time is fully occupied. Let me, however, inform you that there is no need to excuse your association with Mr Pratt. I quite understand how he wriggled himself into your acquaintance, and you are in no way to blame. Once more, good-day!”

Marton bowed himself out. But he had seen enough of Mrs Gabriel to note the strong hatred she bore towards Leo, and he wondered what could be the reason. Also, he saw that for a moment she had flinched at the mention of conspiracy, which set him on the alert as to whether her

detestation of her nephew had carried her so far as to plot against his good name.

“If there is anything the matter, Hale is the man to know,” murmured the detective; “he lent the money, and now declines to acknowledge the loan. I believe there is something bad at the back of all this. Poor Haverleigh seems to be the most harmless of men, yet he is being ruined in some underhand way. Well, I’ll settle Pratt’s matter, and then clear his name.”

But before Marton could do this, Providence took the task out of his hand. For the next ten days he was busy consulting with those sent down from Scotland Yard about the numerous stolen articles found in The Nun’s House. The cabinet of antique coins was restored to a famous collector, who had lost them five years before. Many pictures were replaced in the galleries of country houses, and, in one way and another, by the time The Nun’s House was denuded of what belonged to other people, there remained very little but the furniture. And even some choice articles of furniture were found to be the property of other people. It was really wonderful the amount of stolen goods that Pratt had collected. He must have thieved for years to have got together such a collection.

“But he will start no more burrows,” said Marton, when all was at an end. “He never expected that I should find him here, and therefore collected all his treasures. His life is not long enough to enable him to bring together such a collection of things again. Besides, he has not the same wide field for his knaveries. The police are one too many for him now.”

Marton said this to the vicar, who was deeply shocked to hear of the wickedness of the man from whom he had accepted the cup. “Do you think that sacred vessel was stolen also, Mr Marton?” asked the good man.

“I am perfectly sure of it,” replied the detective, promptly; “but we have not got the cup down on our list, and no one has come forward to claim it.”

“It has not been advertised, Mr Marton.”

“Pardon me, sir, it has been advertised, and by someone in this place. I saw this notice in the Daily Telegraph, also in the Times. Can you tell me who ‘S.T.’ is, Mr Tempest?”

The vicar took the newspaper handed to him and looked at it in a bewildered manner. He read the notice carefully, but it never struck him that the initials were those of his own daughter. “I really do not know who can have inserted this, Mr Marton,” he said. “It seems to be carefully worded, too, and a reward of fifty pounds has been offered. Dear me!”

“I have a rival who is investigating the case,” said Marton, with a smile. “Is the description accurate, vicar?”

“Perfectly; even the inscription. If you will permit me to take this away, Mr Marton, I will see if I can discover who has put it in. I am annoyed that the thing should have been taken out of your hands. But, Mr Marton, before I leave you, let me state to you my conviction that my young friend Leo Haverleigh did not steal the cup.”

“Ah, indeed, Mr Tempest,” said Marton, eyeing the old man keenly. “And what has led you to such a happy conclusion?”

“I have no grounds for it save my inward conviction.”

“There is the story of Mrs Jeal, you know.”

Mr Tempest looked troubled. “Most remarkable story,” he said. “But we have heard of many cases of accidental resemblances, Mr Marton. I fear I have been unjust to Leo, and I wish to withdraw any charge I may have made against him. I heard his defence, and saw his face while he was making it. Unless the face is not the index of the mind, I cannot bring myself to believe that he lied. No, Mr Marton, I cannot give you my reasons, but I am convinced that I misjudged Leo.”

“Were you prejudiced against him by Mrs Gabriel?” asked Marton, for Leo had told him his suspicions on this point.

Mr Tempest hesitated. “I admit that I was,” he said at length. “She said something to me which I am not at liberty to repeat.”

“Does it make Mr Haverleigh out a villain?”

“By no means,” said the vicar, hastily. “What she told me is sad, but not wicked. More his misfortune than his fault. I can say no more. I can keep this paper, Mr Marton? Thank you, sir. Good-day, good-day!” and the vicar walked away, leaving Marton pondering.

It was three days after this, and when Marton was about to begin his investigation of the case, that he received a letter from London. He was more surprised than he chose to say when he found that it came from Mr Pratt. That gentleman gave no address—he had posted the letter at the General Post-office, so that even the district where he was hidden should not be traced. The letter—as Marton said afterwards—was one of consummate impudence, and it took him all his time to read it with patience. As a human document it possessed a certain value. The letter ran as follows, and Marton swore as he read:—

“Dear Marton,—So you have let me slip through your fingers again. Is it not about time that you stopped setting your wits against mine? Several times you have tried; but always you have been beaten. Really, you must take lessons in the art of thief-catching, if you want to deserve the reputation you possess.

“I am bound to say that but for the fog I should have been caught. But, thanks to its friendly shelter, I ran back to my house, while you were blundering about like a lost sheep, and warned Adam. I knew you would have to get Raston to show you the way, and would be some time. Still, I knew your infernal pertinacity, and made myself as scarce as possible in a very short space of time. I should like to have seen your face when you came to my house and found your prey had escaped.

“I packed up my jewels, which I always keep prepared for such an emergency as this, and, dressing myself warmly, I mounted my bicycle. Adam, who had likewise made his preparations, mounted another, and we both went down the main road. In spite of the mist there was no difficulty. The highway runs in a straight line to Portfront, and there was no vehicle abroad to make our travelling dangerous. We did not hurry, but took our time, as I did not wish to get to Portfront before the steamer went. As a

matter of fact we did, but hung about the outskirts of the town until it was time to be aboard. Of course I do not need to tell you how I stopped you from communicating with the Portfront police. I suggested the idea, and Adam climbed the pole to cut the telegraph wire.

“We had a very pleasant trip as far as Bognor, where we got on the train, and stopped at some station, the name of which I need not tell you. We are now in London in very comfortable circumstances. If you are clever enough to find me—which I don’t think you are—I promise to give myself up as soon as you appear. But there is no chance of my seeing you. Better remain in Colester, my dear Marton, and turn farmer. It is all you are fit for. Upon my honour it is.

“One thing I should like to know. How the devil did you manage to find out my retreat? I never thought you had it in you. I went to see Raston on some business likely to enhance my popularity in the parish, and I dropped across you! For the first time in my life I was taken aback. Was it design or accident that I found you there? I do not wish to compliment you undeservedly.

“Well, you have driven me away, and I must find a new place in which to pass my old age. It is too bad of you, Marton! On my soul, too bad! I was getting so popular in Colester. Now, I suppose, everyone of the honest men are swearing at me. Yet I never robbed them.

“One other thing. If you came down to investigate that robbery of the cup I presented to the church, you can spare yourself the trouble. I stole it myself. It went to my heart to lose so valuable an object, and I was sorry when I had given it. I could not ask for it back, so I resolved to steal it. I went to the church, and, as I am a small man, I climbed in through the lepers’ window. I got the cup, climbed out again, and went back to my house. Then I was afraid lest the cup would be seen by chance, and all my popularity would go. I therefore resolved to pawn it. That is a way I have kept safe many a piece of jewellery. I could not go myself, but I sent Adam. He is rather like Leo Haverleigh, and so that fool of a Mrs Jeal made the mistake. You need not look for the cup in

Battersea now, as I have redeemed it. I took the ticket from Adam, and went myself. It is now in my possession, again, and I do not intend to part with it any more. You know how fond I am of beautiful things, dear Marton.

“Well, I daresay you guessed that I stole the cup. Here is my confession, and you can tell all those fools at Colester, including the vicar, that Leo Haverleigh is perfectly innocent. He has not enough brains to steal anything. I only took back my own, and I am proud of it, as I have bamboozled the lot of you—clever Mr Marton included!

“Leo got the money with which he paid his debts from Sir Frank Hale. You can ask him—Hale, I mean. If he denies it, I leave him to you, as you are clever enough to get the truth out of him. He wants to marry Sybil Tempest, and desires Leo to marry his sister Edith. All this was a plot to get Leo into his power, and force him to do what was wanted. I hope you will punish the young man Hale. He is a cripple, and has all the spite of one. I should have punished him myself, but you have deprived me of that pleasure. I therefore call upon you to do your best.

“And now, my dear Marton, good-bye. Give my love to all the mourning population of Colester, and especially to Mrs Gabriel, my dear and life-long friend. I am afraid she will not get her rent. Also I had the house re-decorated at her expense. The bills will be sent in to her. Let her pay them with my blessing. I will write to Leo myself, and give him my blessing. I have much to say to him that will be of no interest to you. He is a good fellow, and I wish to see him married to Sybil. He will be some day. I can manage her fool of a father even at a distance.

“Now, I hope you will look after yourself, for my sake, Marton. So long as the Scotland Yard idiots keep you on my track, I am safe. If you died, they might perhaps pick a clever man, dangerous to me, my friend. So, with all kind regards and best wishes until we meet.—Believe me, my dear failure, yours never—in the flesh,

“Richard Pratt.”

Chapter XIV

An Unexpected Meeting

“I have been much to blame,” said the vicar. “I set myself up as a judge when I had no right to do so. Leo, you must forgive me.”

“I forgive you freely,” replied the young man, grasping the hand held out by Mr Tempest. “Appearances were against me, so it was little wonder that you did not entirely trust me. Still, Mr Tempest, you should have known me better than to think me guilty of such a crime.”

“I know—I know I have been wrong.”

“Well, let us drop the subject. My character is now clear, and I have no wish to recall a very disagreeable past.”

This conversation took place in the study of Mr Tempest, and in the presence of Sybil and Marton. The detective had shown the vicar the insolent but welcome letter he had received from Pratt. The confession therein entirely exonerated Leo, and he could again hold up his head. He and Mr Tempest were quite reconciled. Sybil, with her hand in Leo’s, looked thoroughly happy.

“I never lost faith in you, Leo!” she said. “Sooner or later I knew that all would be well.”

“I have to thank Marton for the clearing of my character, Sybil.”

“Faith, you are wrong there!” said Marton, smiling. “I thought you were innocent; but as I had not looked into the case, I saw no means of proving it. Had not Pratt sent this confession I should still be in the dark. He is a scoundrel, but he is a good friend to you, Haverleigh!”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Tempest, sharply, for he was still sore on the subject of the cup. “Pratt knew that Leo was suspected, and he should have come forward long ere this to put the matter right.”

“You ask too much from a man of Pratt’s nature,” said Marton, dryly. “It is wonderful that he should have confessed his guilt even at the eleventh hour. However, this closes the case, and I can go back to London. We know now who stole the cup, and we know also that it cannot be

recovered. Pratt will stick to it this time. It was only his vanity and desire for popularity that made him give it away in the first instance.”

“If it came back to me I should never accept it,” said the vicar, emphatically. “A stolen cup should never have been put to sacred uses. I wonder at the daring of the man!”

“Oh! a man like Pratt is capable of anything,” said Marton, with a shrug. “But you will never see him again, Mr Tempest. And now, Mr Haverleigh, I think you should see Sir Frank Hale and make him confess that he lent you the money.”

“There will be no difficulty about that,” replied Leo. “Hale told only two people that he repudiated all knowledge of the loan. One was my aunt, the other myself. He is too cunning to tell the world the untruth he told us. Besides, my character being cleared, he can have no further hold over me. I fear he will be angry.”

“I am certain he will. Let us see him together.”

Leo was quite willing to do this, so after taking a fond leave of Sybil, and a cordial one of her father, he set out with the detective to bring Sir Frank Hale to his bearings. On the way Marton asked Leo’s permission to touch upon a delicate subject. Haverleigh told him to speak freely. “I owe you too much to take offence at anything you may say,” he observed. “You have been my very good friend, Marton.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” replied the detective, brightly; “and I really do not deserve your thanks. Any help I have given you has been purely accidental. If Pratt had held his tongue, you would still have been in the same position as before. But I am bound to say, Haverleigh, that even before the arrival of this letter Mr Tempest expressed his belief in your innocence.”

“I am glad of that,” said Leo. “He treated me badly, and it is a pleasure to me to hear that his own good sense told him I was innocent before he had the actual proof. I am anxious to stand well with him, Marton.”

“Ah! That is the matter I wish to discuss. I see that you and Miss Tempest are much attached to one another. Do you think the vicar will consent to the marriage?”

“I really can’t say. Even before this scandal he seemed to be displeased with me, and kept me away from his house as much as possible. He did not want to see me, and he would not let me see Sybil. We had to meet by stealth. Now he may have changed his mind.”

“And if he has? What, then?”

“Then I can announce my engagement to Sybil,” said Leo. “But, you see, I am not in a position to marry, and may not be for a long time. I have to make my way in the world, and to make money also. I thought of enlisting for this war, and of fighting my way through the ranks to a commission.”

“Even then I do not see how you could marry. You might gain a commission, but not money. Until your worldly prospects are more secure, I do not think you should engage yourself to Miss Tempest.”

“That is straight speaking, Marton.”

“You gave me permission to speak out. I like you, Haverleigh, and after the trouble you have come through I think you should be rewarded by getting your heart’s desire. But if you love Miss Temple, you will not marry her until you can give her a comfortable home. Even if you are successful in South Africa, a baggage waggon is not the place for a delicate girl. You can offer her nothing better than that.”

“True enough. I admit that what you say is correct. But what am I to do?”

“Well,” said the detective, after a pause, “it seems to me that you have some claim upon your aunt. She took charge of you and brought you up. I understand she intimated that you would be her heir, and you received an education to fit you for the position. If she intended to send you adrift as she has done, she should at least have had you taught some profession or trade whereby you could earn your bread and butter. Yes; I think you have a right to demand some assistance from her.”

Leo shook his head and flushed. “I can’t bring myself to do that,” he said in a low voice. “She has insulted me so deeply that it goes against my nature to eat humble pie. I would rather make my own way in the world.

As to Sybil, I shall not ask her to engage herself to me until—as you say—I can offer her a home.”

“You can do nothing but enlist, I suppose?”

“No. Soldiering is all I am fit for. Now that my name has been cleared I will bid farewell to Sybil and enlist straight away. She will wait for me, I am certain. I get my commission I can perhaps see my way to make her my wife. If I am shot—well,” Leo shrugged his shoulders, “there is an end to all things.”

“Haverleigh!” said Marton, after a pause. “Will you tell me what reason your aunt has for disliking you so much?”

“I don’t know. She has always been stern and hard with me. Lately she has openly hated me. That is why I left her.”

“There is something connected with you that is wrong?”

“Not to my knowledge. I have been foolish, but not wilfully wicked.”

“I know that. But Mrs Gabriel knows something—it may be about your parents—that has prejudiced the vicar against you. It was her influence that made him turn against you. He admitted as much to me. But he refused to say what she had told him.”

“I guessed all this,” said Leo, quietly; “but what can I do?”

“Insist upon knowing what has been said. You have a right to. If the vicar will not speak out—and he has given his word not to—Mrs Gabriel may be forced to do so. Were I you, Haverleigh, I should see her and insist upon an explanation.”

“She won’t give it.”

“I should force it out of her,” said Marton, determinedly. “Oh! I know she is a hard woman, but if you persevere she must give way.”

Leo thought for a few moments. “Well, Marton,” he said at length, “I will see the vicar first and speak to him on the subject of Sybil. From what he says I may see the reason of his attitude towards me. Then I can call upon Mrs Gabriel. You may be sure I shall do my best.”

Marton nodded, but said no more for the present, as by this time they were at the door of Hale's house. A demure servant opened the door and took in their names. Shortly she ushered them into a room where Sir Frank was seated in a chair by the window reading to his sister. Edith Hale looked pale and ill. She lay on a sofa, but started up and blushed rosy red when she saw Leo. There was no doubt that the poor girl was deeply in love with the young man. Leo, in the kindness of his heart, felt a pang. It seemed to him that he was treating her cruelly, although the position was none of his making.

“Good-day!” said Hale, without rising, and including Leo and Marton in one swift glance. “I am surprised to see you, Haverleigh. I thought you did not care about keeping up my acquaintance.”

Leo would have replied sharply, but as Edith was present he cast a meaning glance in her direction. “I should like to speak with you alone,” he said, “that is, in the presence of Mr Marton.”

Before Hale could reply Marton interposed. “Wait a bit,” he said in his smooth voice, and with a glance at the girl. “There is something to be said first in the presence of Miss Hale.”

“In my presence!” she exclaimed turning red, while her brother scowled.

“Yes. Something you will be pleased to hear. You both know that Mr Haverleigh has been accused of stealing this chapel cup.”

“I never believed it, never!” cried Edith, eagerly, and Leo gave her a look of gratitude, which made her turn pale with emotion.

“And you, Sir Frank?”

Hale shrugged his shoulders. “I never thought much about the subject,” he said, the lie coming at once to his practised lips. “The evidence was against Haverleigh, I admit; but I tried to think the best of him.”

“Your speech is rather contradictory, Sir Frank,” was the dry response of Marton. “But I think you must have thought well of Haverleigh or you would not have helped him out of his difficulty by lending him money.”

“Oh, Frank, did you do that?” cried Edith, taking her brother’s hand. “I love you for it. How good you are!”

Hale’s face grew blacker and blacker. Had he been alone he would have lied, but in the presence of the sister he loved so deeply he could not bring himself to deny the truth. Moreover, he had a kind of instinctive feeling that Marton had come to proclaim the innocence of Leo, else why should he come at all? His plot of getting Leo into his power had failed—he was clever enough to see that—so it only remained for him to retreat with as much dignity as possible.

“I was only too glad to help Haverleigh,” he said quietly, and with marked courtesy. “He was in debt, and the three hundred pounds I gave him was of some use, I believe. I beg that he will say no more on the subject.”

“How good you are—how good you are!” gasped Edith, caressing her brother. Leo and Marton glanced at one another. Hale’s masterly retreat took them both by surprise. When Leo remembered the conversation in the chapel he could hardly believe his ears. The only thing to be done was to beat the man with his own weapons.

“I will say no more, Hale, save that when I am able the money shall be repaid. I thank you heartily for your kindness.”

Sir Frank bit his lip, but summoned up sufficient dignity to be gracious. He and Leo were both wearing masks for the benefit of Edith. “Pay the money when you like,” he said, sitting up. “I am shortly going abroad with my sister, and I do not think we shall see one another for a long time. However, my solicitor at Portfront will attend to the matter of the loan.”

“Then there really was a loan,” said Marton, determined to get the plain truth out of Hale in the presence of witnesses.

“Certainly. I gave Leo three hundred pounds in gold. I have already said so.”

“And it was with that loan he paid his debts?” pursued Marion.

“Yes,” said Leo, seeing his drift, “I paid them with that money. But the good people here declared that I sold the cup to pay them!”

“How could they! How could they!” muttered Edith.

“Because they are fools,” cried Sir Frank, seeing that he was completely beaten. “For my part, I never believed that Haverleigh did such a thing!”

“Thank you,” said Leo, inwardly smiling at the lie.

“Then you will be delighted to hear that the thief has been found.”

As Marton spoke Hale suddenly turned pale, and rose with an effort. “The thief has been—found!” he stammered.

“Yes,” replied Marton, with a swift glance, thinking at once of his theory of a conspiracy. “It seems that this man Angel—I beg your pardon, you know him as Pratt—stole the cup.”

“But it was Mr Pratt who gave it!” cried Edith.

“Quite so, Miss Hale. Afterwards he was sorry that his generosity had led him to make so great a sacrifice. Therefore he stole what he had bestowed.”

“And what about this story of Mrs Jeal?” asked Hale, trying to be amiable.

“Oh! that was part of the business, Sir Frank. Pratt thought the cup would be seen here, even if he kept it in his house. So he sent it up to London to be pawned for safe keeping. You do not understand why this should be done. But then you have never come into contact with a man like Pratt. However, for reasons I need not explain, he pawned the cup. His servant Adam is rather like Mr Haverleigh, and it was thus that Mrs Jeal, not having a clear view, made a mistake. You understand, Sir Frank?”

“Quite,” replied Hale in a strangled voice. He was pale and anxious-looking. Leo thought that this was anger at his escape. But Marton took another and a more serious view.

“I am sure you are pleased that Haverleigh’s character has been cleared.”

“I am pleased—very—very pleased,” said Edith, joyfully, “and so is Frank. Are you not, Frank?”

“Yes! very pleased.” Hale forced himself to say so much; then he walked to the door. “I am not well,” he said, turning for a moment; “you will excuse me, gentlemen. My sister will see you out. If you—” He paused, and darting a look of hatred at Leo, left the room. Haverleigh was more surprised than Marton, who had captured a fresh idea, and was already building up a theory.

Leo remained only a short time. He was most embarrassed by the looks of Edith, and escaped as speedily as courtesy permitted. When they left the house and were some distance on the road, Marton spoke. “I think there is insanity in that family,” he said.

“Why do you think so?”

“The girl is queer. No woman in her sane senses would give herself away as she does. The brother is a cripple, and queer too. Never you marry into that lot, Haverleigh! They have some hereditary taint.”

“I have no intention of marrying anyone but Sybil,” said Leo, dryly; “but did you see how Hale backed out of his false position?”

“Yes; and I believe he has more to do with this matter than you think. I should not be at all surprised to find that he and Mrs Gabriel for some reason had been working together against you. Oh! there has been—there may be yet some conspiracy against you.”

“I can understand Hale conspiring,” said Leo; “he wants to marry Sybil, and wishes Edith to become my wife. But Mrs Gabriel, why should she?”

“We have yet to find that out,” interrupted Marton. “Go and see what the vicar says. I must be alone for a time. I want to think the matter out. At all events, Hale has acknowledged that he lent you the money, in the presence of witnesses. You are all right in that quarter. I daresay he’ll make another attempt to best you, though.”

“Nonsense. Did you not hear him say that he was going abroad with his sister? I think he will leave me alone now.”

“Perhaps,” replied Marton, thoughtfully. “We’ll see. I’ll believe he is going abroad when he is across the Channel. I’m off for a long walk,” and the detective set off at a brisk pace.

Leo thought no more about this especial matter, leaving it entirely to Marton. Forthwith he returned to the Vicarage, saw Mr Tempest, and then and there asked him if he objected to him as a suitor for Sybil. At this very direct question Mr Tempest wriggled and looked uncomfortable.

“You put a very painful question to me, Leo,” he said, after a pause. “I am ashamed of myself for having thought so ill of you, and I should like to make amends, if possible. I know that you are attached to Sybil, but now that you are at variance with your aunt, I do not see that you are justified in asking me to consent to this engagement.”

“I know what you mean,” said Leo, proudly, “and I do not intend to engage myself until I am in a better position. All I ask is that you will not force Sybil to marry Hale when I am away.”

“I should not let her marry Hale in any case!” cried the vicar, angrily. “I would never give my child to a cripple. Moreover, the Hales are not so sane as they might be. And, Leo, I shall not force Sybil’s inclinations in any way. She can remain unmarried all her life if she pleases.”

“That is all I want,” said Leo, gladly. “I am going to enlist, Mr Tempest, and if I get a commission there may be some chance of my asking Sybil to be my wife. She will be true to me while I am away; I know she will.”

“Humph!” said the vicar, doubtfully. “A commission, eh?”

Leo interpreted his objection. “Then you have something against me personally,” he said, “and for this reason you do not want me to think of Sybil in any way. What is the matter, Mr Tempest?”

“I can’t tell you, Leo.” The vicar looked directly at him. “So far as you are concerned, I do not wish for a better husband for my daughter, but Mrs Gabriel has informed me of something which makes me unwilling to countenance the marriage. Don’t ask me what it is. I cannot tell you.”

“I do not ask you to tell me, Mr Tempest. This very night I shall ask Mrs Gabriel herself what she has been saying.”

“Better not,” advised the vicar. “It will only cause you much distress.”

Leo looked at him in astonishment. What could his aunt have been saying about him or his parents likely to make the vicar take so strong a view of the matter? “If there is anything wrong I have a right to know,” he said at length. “I shall insist upon an explanation, Mr Tempest. If I discover any valid reason why I should give Sybil up, I am quite ready to yield. When you next see me, Mr Tempest, I shall either have given up the idea of marrying your daughter, or I shall insist upon marrying her in spite of you and Mrs Gabriel! You cannot say that I am treating you unfairly. I go now.”

“But, my dear boy—” called out Mr Tempest, much distressed. He spoke to the empty air. Leo had already left the room and was out of the gate.

After leaving The Nun’s House, Leo had taken up his residence at the Colester Arms. Marton was there also, and Leo expected to see him at dinner. He was anxious to tell him what the vicar had said. But the detective did not return from his walk, and after waiting for him till close upon nine o’clock, Leo left the hotel and walked towards the castle to have it out with Mrs Gabriel.

The night was moonless, but there were many stars. Here and there a swathe of mist lay on the plains below; but up on the hills all was comparatively clear. Leo, who knew every inch of Colester, walked slowly out of the town gate and crossed to the other hill. He took a narrow private path which he knew of, wishing to get unobserved to the castle. Just at the foot of this path he met Marton. The recognition was mutual.

“You are going to see Mrs Gabriel?” said the detective.

“Yes. Where have you been, Marton?”

“I have been trying to see her, but she is ill—at least so the butler says. I suspect, however, this is a lie. She doesn’t want to see me!”

“Shall I—”

“Yes, you go up. I must return to the hotel and get some dinner. I have been walking and thinking until I am worn out. I’ll wait your return, and we can talk over the matter.”

“What matter?”

“The conspiracy of Mrs Gabriel and Hale,” said Marton, promptly. “Get on with you, Haverleigh. I’m off to dinner.” And he went away at a quick pace, leaving Leo much astonished.

However, there was no use in standing and wondering, so he pursued his way. As Mrs Gabriel was said to be ill, and had denied herself to Marton, it was not unlikely that he would be treated in the same way. Therefore, instead of going to the front door, Leo went round the castle on to the terrace. This was shut off from the rest of the ground by a high fence with a gate in it. Leo had retained the key of this gate and had no difficulty in getting in. The room which looked on to the terrace was lighted, but the blinds were down. Leo peered in. He saw Mrs Gabriel seated in a chair. Standing near her was Mr Richard Pratt.

Chapter XV

A New Complication

Leo was so surprised by this unexpected sight that for the moment he stood still. Then he made up his mind to interview the pair. Mrs Gabriel and Pratt evidently understood one another, and the two of them together might probably tell him more about himself than one would do. Moreover, Leo was angry at the way in which Pratt had let him lie under the imputation of being a thief when he could have lifted the disgrace from off his shoulders. Certainly Pratt could have done so only at the risk of incriminating himself, but at the time Leo was too much annoyed to think of this. He saw that there was some mystery, and thinking it might have to do with Mrs Gabriel’s enmity towards himself, he interrupted what seemed to be a furious conversation by knocking at the window.

Mrs Gabriel and Pratt turned in the direction where the sound came, she with a pale face, and Pratt with a levelled revolver which he took from

his breast pocket. Leo might have been in danger of his life, but that he chanced to remember a peculiar tune which Pratt had taught him, in order to announce his coming while he was staying at The Nun's House. At the time Leo had thought this was only a freak of the old man's, but now that he knew who Pratt was, he saw that there was use in it, to Pratt if not to himself. At all events, he began to whistle.

Hardly had he got through the first few bars before Pratt's watchful attitude relaxed, and he tossed the revolver on to the table. Mrs Gabriel still continued to look agitated, but Pratt stepped towards the window and opened it coolly.

"I knew it was you," he said, pulling Leo into the room and shutting the window. "It is a lucky thing you remembered my signal, else I might have drilled a hole in you. You come at a happy moment." Here he stopped and looked suspiciously at the young man. "Have you that infernal Marton with you?" he asked, with a glance at the window and a movement towards the revolver.

"No, no," replied Leo, hastily. "I am all alone."

"That's a good thing," said Pratt, grimly. "I won't be taken alive, I promise you. But I knew you would not give me away. I said so to Mrs Gabriel. She said you would—speaking the worst of you as usual."

Leo was too much taken aback by the discovery that Pratt was in the castle to reply immediately. Moreover, the man was so cool and composed that he felt as though he were in the wrong. He tried to collect his scattered thoughts, but before he could open his mouth Mrs Gabriel spoke in her usual domineering tones.

"What are you doing here, Leo?" she asked. "How did you get on to the terrace? No one can get on without the key of the gate."

"I happen to have the key," said Leo, showing it. "You gave it to me yourself some years ago. When I left you I took it with me by mistake. It has come in useful to-night. You may thank your stars, both of you, that I did not bring Marton back with me. He left me at the foot of the hill with a story that you were ill, Mrs Gabriel."

“Leo,” said Pratt in an agitated tone, “surely you would not have brought the man here to get me into trouble?”

“I did not know you were here,” said Haverleigh, carelessly, for he was still angered at the man.

“I have been here ever since the night I fled from Raston’s house. It was Adam who went on to London and cut the wire.”

“And the letter in which you said you had stolen the cup?”

“I wrote that here and posted it to Adam that he might send it from London. Mrs Gabriel helped me to hide. No one knows that I am in this house save herself, and now you are a sharer in our secret.”

“It must be difficult to keep your presence here a secret from the servants,” said Leo, wondering how the man had forced Mrs Gabriel to help.

Here the lady herself interfered. “It is not difficult at all,” she said in her most offensive tones. “You know nothing of what you are talking about. Pratt is up in the tower room, and I take him food myself from my own meals. It is impossible that anyone can guess.”

“Well, my dear aunt,” said Haverleigh, emphatically, “I know that Pratt is here. I think, therefore, you had better behave towards me in a more civil manner.”

“Ha!” scoffed Mrs Gabriel, folding her arms and looking defiant. “You would not dare to state the truth.”

“How do you know that?” said Leo, dryly. “Pratt is wanted by the law. He committed a theft here and allowed me to lie under suspicion. Why should I not give him up and accuse you of being an accessory to his concealment?”

Mrs Gabriel frowned and her black eyes flashed, but Pratt, who had taken a seat, did not move. He merely laughed. “I don’t think you will give away, Leo,” he said. “I admit that Mrs Gabriel is enough to irritate a saint; but if you punish her you punish me also.”

“And you deserve punishment,” retorted Leo.

“Probably I do; but I have my own opinion of the matter. All I ask you to do is to hold your tongue until such a time as I can get away.”

“When are you going away?”

“Soon, I hope,” cried Mrs Gabriel, spitefully. “I am rather tired of having a jail-bird in my house.”

“Oh! you refer to that American affair,” said Pratt, airily. “I had quite forgotten it. Well, my dear lady, I do not intend to burden you with my presence after to-morrow. By this time no one will be watching for me hereabouts, as I am supposed to be in London. I shall go to-morrow night and return to my London quarters, where Adam awaits me. By the way, Haverleigh, has that fool of a detective gone?”

“He is going to-morrow,” said Leo in a surly tone.

“All the better. We can travel to London together. Ah, you smile, my dear Leo, but I assure you that if I chose to travel with Marton I should do so. I can disguise myself so effectively that even he would not know me. It is not the first time I have baffled him.”

“Look here, Mr Pratt, or whatever you choose to call yourself,” said the young man, calmly, “you have been kind to me in your own way, and I do not want to take advantage of your present unfortunate position. At the same time, you are a thief and a criminal, and I want to have nothing to do with you. Mrs Gabriel may approve of your company, but I do not wish to have you for a friend. I shall hold my tongue, but I recommend you to leave this place as soon as possible.”

Mrs Gabriel glared at Leo, as she could ill brook his references to herself. She half rose as though she would have flown at him, but a glance from Pratt quelled her, and she sat down with more meekness than could have been expected from such a redoubtable termagant. Pratt, still keeping his temper, turned to Leo. “It is very good of you to interest yourself in my movements,” he said in silky tones, “but I can look after myself. It is a grief, my dear fellow, a great grief, that I should be compelled to leave this neighbourhood. I like the place, and the people are fairly agreeable. I was nicely settled in The Nun’s House, and—”

“Surrounded with stolen goods,” interrupted Leo, wrathfully.

Pratt sighed. "I had some charming things," he said; "how I shall miss them! I am too old to make another such collection. I suppose they have all returned to the people I took them from, I fear the stupid creatures will not appreciate them as I have done."

Pratt's impudence was so consummate that Leo could not help laughing, but Mrs Gabriel rose in a black fury and shook her fist in the man's face. "How dare you boast of your iniquities in my house?" she cried.

"In your house, my dear lady?" queried Pratt, blandly. Mrs Gabriel got very white and sat down again. Apparently Pratt had some power over her, which she was afraid he might use. Leo had never seen the woman so cowed.

"Well, well," continued Pratt, stretching his legs; "I have to go, thanks to that wretched man Marton. How was it he appeared so unexpectedly?"

"Raston sent for him to London to find out who committed the robbery."

"Ah!" Pratt laughed. "I hope Mr Marton is satisfied now. My letter should have pleased him."

"It pleased me more," said Leo, bluntly; "my name is now clear! And you will be glad to hear," he added, turning to Mrs Gabriel, "that Hale, in the presence of Marton and his sister, confessed that he lent me the money. I am afraid your plot against me has failed, my dear aunt."

"Hold your tongue!" said Mrs Gabriel, angrily.

"No. The time has passed for that. I am no longer in your power. I intend to make my own way in the world."

"With assistance from Mrs Gabriel," said Pratt, quietly. "She will start you with a thousand pounds, my dear Leo."

"I won't give one penny," said Mrs Gabriel, glaring. "You can do your very worst, Pratt. I have been your milch cow long enough."

"I would not take anything from her," said Leo, interposing; "and I'll thank you, Mr Pratt, to leave my affairs alone. If you will persist in meddling with them, I shall not keep my promise of silence."

“Oh, yes, you will!” chimed in Pratt, fixing him with his eye. “You dare not betray me, Leo.”

“Dare not!” echoed the young man, angrily.

“Not unless you want to be called an unnatural son, my boy!” Leo stared, not taking in the meaning of this speech. “For you are my son, Leo,” added Pratt in low tones, his eyes never leaving Haverleigh’s face.

“Your—your—Great Heavens!”

Mrs Gabriel burst into a taunting laugh. “Ah, you know it at last!” she cried triumphantly. “And he has told you after threatening me with all sorts of things to keep me silent.”

“It’s—it’s not true!” gasped Leo.

“It is perfectly true,” said the woman, jeeringly. “You are the son of the cleverest thief in the three kingdoms.”

“Hold your tongue, you hag!” shouted Pratt, angrily, for Leo was as white as ashes and his face wore an expression of terrible agony.

“I won’t be quiet. You told him yourself, and now he shall know all—as the vicar does,” finished Mrs Gabriel, laughing fiercely.

Leo started to his feet. “Sybil!” he cried out, staring at his enemy. “I know now why the vicar will not let me marry her. You—you—”

“Told him you were an illegitimate son,” said Mrs Gabriel, rapidly. “I did not say who was your father, but now that Pratt’s true character is known I shall tell Tempest everything. Then we shall see if he will let you speak to Sybil again.”

“You dare say a word, Mrs Gabriel, and I—”

But the woman was not to be stopped. She turned like a fury on Pratt, who had risen angrily. “Hold your tongue,” she said savagely; “I have had about enough of you and your precious son. You made me take him to my home and tell everyone that he was the son of my dead brother. A lie, as you well know. And you,” she added, turning on Haverleigh, “you know now why I have hated you all these years. That man knows a secret

of mine and he forced me to do his bidding. I took you here. I brought you up, I gave you money, and I let you take a position to which you were not entitled. Position!” Mrs Gabriel laughed scornfully. “Your position should be in the gutter, where you were born. You are no kith or kin of mine, thank God!”

“And I do thank God,” said Leo, vehemently. “You are a bad, evil-minded woman. Although my father is a thief, I would rather be his son than connected with you in any way. For years you have made my life a hell on earth with your vile temper. Terrible as is what you have told me, I prefer the thief to the righteous woman.”

The mistress of the castle recoiled aghast before this outbreak of anger. Never had the usually good-tempered young man spoken so fiercely to her. As he advanced towards her she believed that he was going to strike her, and put up her arm with a look of terror in her eyes. For once the bully was cowed.

“Bravo, my boy!” cried Pratt, laughing at her discomfiture, and clapping Leo on the back. The young man started away.

“Don’t touch me,” he said harshly. “Is it not enough that I should have the shame of being your son, but that you should approve of any action I do? But I do not believe that you are my father. Where is the proof?”

“In London,” said Pratt, very quietly, and wincing at the tone of Leo’s speech. “If you come with me to London I can show you sufficient proof to make you believe.”

“My mother?” Leo, with a sudden thought, cast a look at Mrs Gabriel.

“I am not your mother,” she said scornfully. “Didn’t I say there was no blood of mine in your veins?”

“Your mother is dead, Leo,” said Pratt in a low voice.

Mrs Gabriel laughed insultingly. “And I daresay she was some—”

“If you dare to say another word,” growled Pratt, casting a bitter look at her, “I’ll give your secret to the world.”

“I don’t care if you do,” retorted Mrs Gabriel; but Leo saw that she quailed. What could she have done to give a man like Pratt—he could not call him father—a power over her?

“You do care,” said Pratt, quietly; “but if you don’t I’ll begin by telling Leo. Here goes. Leo, my son—”

In a moment Mrs Gabriel’s defiant attitude became one of supplication. She sprang forward and caught Pratt by the arm. “Don’t! don’t,” she said faintly. “I’ll do whatever you wish.”

“Will you dare to speak again as you have done?”

“No, no; I know you are the stronger. I could kill you,” she muttered, with a flash of her old temper. “But I have to give in—I have to!”

“Well,” drawled Pratt, taking a pleasure in bringing her to her knees, a position to which she was quite unaccustomed. “You have persecuted my poor son so that I think he should have something to hold over your head. It would serve you right.”

“I don’t want to know your wicked secrets,” said Leo, very pale, but otherwise calm. “It seems to me that you are an evil couple. And I—Heaven help me!—have a father who is a thief.”

“What of that!” said Mrs Gabriel, getting angry again. “You are a thief as well, are you not? The cup—”

“I did not steal it,” said Leo, proudly. “You know as well as I do that this—this”—he winced—“father of mine took it away from the chapel.”

“That is just where you are wrong. He did not—”

“Mrs Gabriel!” Pratt’s voice sounded dangerous. She was quiet at once, and looked at him in a frightened way. But Leo had heard enough to arouse his suspicions. He turned on Pratt and seized him by the arm.

“Have you been telling a lie?” muttered the unhappy young man.

His father shook him off. “It’s no use telling another one,” he said in a dogged way; “now you know so much you may as well know all. I know nothing about the cup; but, to clear you, I took the blame on myself. You

see, Leo,” he said calmly, “my character is already so bad that a robbery more or less does not matter. I did it for you, my boy, as I have done everything else. I wanted you to be a gentleman and marry the girl of your heart. Sybil loves you, and I thought when the vicar knew you were innocent that he would let you marry her.”

“He might have done so,” said Leo, sitting down in absolute despair; “but since Mrs Gabriel told him that I was illegitimate, he has never been the same. He is a proud man.”

“Too proud to let the son of a thief marry his child!” taunted the woman.

“He doesn’t know that Leo is my son,” said Pratt, fiercely.

“I intend to tell him as soon as you are away,” she said.

“You will do nothing of the sort,” said Pratt in a slow, venomous way which made her shrink back. “By speaking to the vicar and telling a lie you have caused trouble enough. He must know no more.”

“I did not tell a lie.”

“You did. My son was born in lawful wedlock.”

“Then why didn’t you bring him up yourself?” said Mrs Gabriel, with a sneer. “You gave him to me in London, and made me adopt him. I had to say that he was my nephew. Oh, how you have used me!”

“And I have not done using you. Hold your tongue, or it will be the worse for you. You know the power I have. I will not scruple to use it if you dare to do anything against my orders. Now, you can go. I want to speak to my son alone.”

Mrs Gabriel seemed inclined to dispute this order, but a look from her tyrant cowed her. With a defiant flinging up of the head she walked out of the room, and closed the door.

“She will tell the servants,” said Leo.

“Oh, no, she won’t,” said Pratt coolly. “You don’t know the power I have over her. She will not dare.”

“I don’t want to know anything,” said Leo, looking down on the ground, with folded arms. “I know quite enough. Are you speaking truly?”

Pratt met his gaze in a perfectly composed manner. “I am speaking the truth,” he said; “you are my son, and your mother died two years after you were born. I was then in some danger from a—Well, no matter. To make a long story short, I wanted to procure a home for you where you would be brought up like a gentleman. Having a certain power over Mrs Gabriel, I fixed upon her, and made her tell the story of your being her nephew. She did all I wished, but had I known how she treated you,” he muttered, clenching his fist, “I should soon have brought her to her bearings.”

“And it was this power that made her introduce you into Colester society?”

“Yes. I can do what I like with the woman. I know it is a terrible thing for you to find out what I am. But I took to bad courses early, Leo, and I went from bad to worse. It is a second nature for me to steal—”

“Oh!” Leo rose with a sickening sensation of disgust. “Don’t tell me any of your evil doings. I know that you are my father; that you are a thief; I want to know no more. You have ruined my life.”

“I have not,” said Pratt. “How can you say such a thing! What you have heard to-night need go no further. I shall say nothing, and Mrs Gabriel will be forced to hold her tongue. Your name is cleared of this theft.”

“Did you not steal the cup?” broke in Leo, looking at his father.

“No; I did not. If I had stolen it I should say so. But I do not know who took it. I am going to London to find out. Old Penny, the pawnbroker, is a friend of mine. I know enough to get him into trouble as a receiver of stolen goods, so he will have to tell me who it was impersonated you.”

“You said in your letter that Adam—”

Pratt interrupted impatiently. “Adam had nothing to do with it,” he said. “I invented all that to throw dust in Marton’s eyes. I suspect that Hale has something to do with the stealing of the cup. He may have taken it himself, for all I know. But Old Penny will tell me. I’ll get to the bottom

of this, you may be sure. As to you, Leo, hold your tongue about being my son and come back to Mrs Gabriel. She will be quite willing to receive you, and I can force her to make you her heir. Then you can marry Sybil. When you are rich and have an assured position, the vicar will overlook the stain on your birth. It is a lie, certainly," added Pratt, with a shrug, "but to tell the truth would be to make matters worse, so we must leave things as they are. For once Mrs Gabriel has got the better of me. But it won't occur again. You stay with her, and I promise you she will be as polite as possible to you. You will be master here."

Leo listened to this long speech with his aching head between his hands. When Pratt had finished, he looked up quietly. "It is good of you to take all this trouble," he said, "but I cannot come back to Mrs Gabriel. Even if she loved, instead of hating me, I could not come back on those terms. I can never marry Sybil either. Do you think that I would let her become my wife, knowing who I am? Your sins must be visited on me, Pratt—I can't call you father. You say you are my father, and you declare that you can prove it. When you are in London I expect you to do so. Let me know your address, and I'll come up. But for the moment I assume that you are speaking the truth. In that case there is nothing for me to do but to go to South Africa and seek a soldier's death. I would rather die than marry Sybil now."

"Don't talk like that, Leo," said Pratt, much moved, and wincing at the contempt of the young man. "I am not so bad as you think. I have done many a kind action. I can—"

"Oh, don't defend yourself," said Leo, rising to go. "I must get away by the same way I came. I shall say nothing, but I hope you will be out of Colester by to-morrow night. Marton leaves in the morning, so the coast will be clear. I'm going now, and I hope to hear from you, so that you may give me proof of the truth of this story."

"You don't believe me?"

"I do—in a way. It seems to be true. You say so, and Mrs Gabriel also. I suppose I am your son. But I am hoping against hope that you may not be able to prove the truth."

"Leo," said Pratt, following him to the window, "I am your father, and if you intend to leave Sybil you may as well come with me. I can go with

you to South America, and there I can lead a new life. I am rich in spite of losing The Nun's House. I have a belt of jewels!—thousands of pounds of the most valuable—”

“And all stolen,” cried Leo, thrusting him back in disgust. “For God's sake don't speak to me any more, or I shall forget that you are my father! If you only knew how I loathe myself for being your son! I never thought it would come to this. Let me go—let me go!” and Leo, pulling his arm from the grasp of Pratt, rushed out on to the terrace.

In another ten minutes Mrs Gabriel re-entered. She found Pratt with his head buried in his arms, sobbing like a child. At the sight she burst out laughing. Then she locked the window Leo had left open.

“Get to bed, Pratt,” she said, contemptuously, “and pleasant dreams to you!”

Chapter XVI **Sybil's Visitor**

Leo had never felt so wretched in his life as he did the next day. Seeing that he was greatly disturbed, Marton wished to learn the reason. As Haverleigh had promised to keep secret the presence of his father at the castle, he was obliged to evade a direct answer.

“I saw Mrs Gabriel,” he said quietly. “We had a long conversation, and she told me what she had said to the vicar.”

“Is it a serious matter?” asked the detective.

“Serious enough to prevent my marriage,” replied Leo; “but what it is I do not feel called upon to explain. It concerns myself and no one else. If you could help me, Marton, I should tell you, but you cannot—no one can. I don't think there is any more to be said.”

Seeing the young man thus determined, Marton said no more, as he did not wish to force Leo's confidence. The next morning he took his departure, assuring Haverleigh that he was always at his disposal when wanted. “Depend upon it,” he said, as he took leave, “you are not yet

done with Mrs Gabriel. She will get you into more trouble. When she does, write to that address.”

“Thank you, Marton; should I require your assistance I will write.”

The two men parted, Marton to London, and Leo back to the inn. He was very miserable, the more so as he had to avoid the society of Sybil. Knowing what he did, it was impossible for him to talk of love to her. He felt that he had no right to do so—that he was gaining her affections wrongly. Sooner or later he would have to leave her, but he did not wish to break away abruptly. Little by little he hoped to withdraw himself from her presence, and thus the final separation would be more easy. All the next day he wandered alone on the moor, where there was no chance of meeting with Sybil. The morning afterwards he received a note from Mrs Gabriel stating that a certain person had taken his departure, Leo was then in a fever of anxiety lest the person should be captured.

However, he learned within twenty-four hours that there was no need to worry. An unsigned telegram came from London, intimating that the sender was in safety, and would communicate with him when the time was ripe. Leo took this to mean that Pratt could not easily get at the papers verifying his story, owing to the vigilance exercised by the police, who were on the look-out for him. Leo therefore possessed his soul in patience until such time as all should be made clear.

Meantime, as he told Pratt, he was hoping against hope that the story was not true. Certainly Pratt had spoken in what appeared to be a most truthful way, he had exhibited an emotion he would scarcely have given way to had he been telling a falsehood. But Haverleigh knew what an actor the man was, and, until proof was forthcoming, still cherished a hope that a comedy had been acted for some reason best known to Pratt himself. That is, it was a comedy to Pratt; but to Leo Haverleigh it approached perilously near to tragedy. Afterwards, looking back on the agony of those few days, he wondered that he had not killed himself in sheer despair.

But he could not remain in the same place with Sybil without feeling an overwhelming desire to tell her the whole story, and thus put an end to an impossible situation. Once she knew the truth, that he was the son of a criminal, she would see that a marriage was out of the question. Leo

was quite certain that she would still love him, and, after all, he was not responsible for the sins of his father. But for the sake of Mr Tempest, she could not marry him, nor—as he assured himself—would he ask her to do so. Two or three times he was on the point of seeking her out and revealing all; but a feeling of the grief he would cause her made him change his determination. He resolved finally to leave her in a fool's paradise until he had proof from Pratt of the supposed paternity. But to be near her and not speak to her was unbearable. So he sent a note saying he was called away for a few days on business, and went to Portfront. Here he remained waiting to hear from Pratt. And no man could have been more miserable, a mood scarcely to be wondered at considering the provocation.

Meantime, Colester society had been much exercised over the discovery of Leo's innocence and the supposed delinquency of Pratt. Certainly, as Haverleigh and Mrs Gabriel knew, Pratt had generously taken on his own shoulders the blame which had wrongfully rested on those of the young man. But no one else knew this, and even if Pratt had come forward and told the truth, no one would have believed him. He had been so clearly proved to be a thief, and the scandal concerning the stolen goods in The Nun's House was so great, that there was no ill deed with which the villagers and gentry of Colester were not prepared to credit him. Mrs Bathurst was particularly virulent in her denunciations of the rascal.

“But I always knew that he was a bad lot,” said Mrs Bathurst. “Did I not say it was incredible that a wealthy man should come down to pass his days in a dull place like Colester? How lucky it is that we found out his wickedness, thanks to that dear Mr Marton, who is, I am sure, a perfect gentleman, in spite of his being a police officer. I shall always look upon him as having saved Peggy. The creature,” so she always called her former favourite, “wanted to marry Peggy. I saw it in his eye. Perhaps I might have yielded, and then what would have happened? I should have had a Jack the Ripper in the family!”

“Oh! scarcely as bad as that, Mrs Bathurst,” said Raston, to whom she was speaking. “Pratt was never a murderer.”

“How do you know that, Mr Raston? For my part, I believe he was capable of the most terrible crimes. If he had married Peggy! The very

idea makes me shudder. But the dear child has escaped the snares of evil, and I hope to see her shortly the wife of a good man," here Mrs Bathurst cast a look on her companion.

Raston smiled. He knew perfectly well what she meant. Failing the wealthy Pratt, who had been proved a scoundrel, the humble curate had a chance of becoming Mrs Bathurst's son-in-law. And Raston was not unwilling. He loved Peggy and she loved him. They understood one another, and had done so for some time. Never would Peggy have married Pratt had he asked her a dozen times. But, as she had told Raston, the man had never intended to propose. Knowing this, Raston was glad to see that Mrs Bathurst was not disinclined to accept him as a suitor for her daughter. He then and there struck the iron while it was hot.

"I do not know if I am a very good man, Mrs Bathurst," he said, still smiling, "but if you think me good enough for Peggy, I shall be more than satisfied. I have the curacy and three hundred a year. My family you know all about, and I suppose you have formed your own conclusions as to the merits of my personality. I am not likely to turn out a criminal like Pratt, you know."

"Really, Mr Raston, you take my breath away," said Mrs Bathurst, quite equal to the occasion. "I never suspected that you loved Peggy. Still, if such is the case, and she loves you, and you are prepared to insure your life in case you die unexpectedly, I do not mind your marrying her. She is a dear girl and will make you an excellent wife."

"Thank you, Mrs Bathurst. Then I may see Peggy now."

"She is in the garden, Harold." Mrs Bathurst had long since informed herself of the curate's Christian name, so as to be prepared for an emergency of this sort. "Go to her and take with you a mother's blessing."

Thus burdened, Raston sought out Peggy, and then and there told her that all was well. They could love one another without let or hindrance. The engagement had been sanctioned officially by Mrs Bathurst. Peggy laughed consumedly when Raston related the pretty little comedy played by her mother. "She must think you a donkey, Harold," she said. "Mother thinks everyone is as blind as herself."

“Mrs Bathurst fancies herself very wide awake, my dear.”

“Those who are particularly blind always do, Harold.”

Then they began to talk of their future, of the probability of Sybil becoming the wife of Leo, and the chances of Mrs Gabriel taking the young man again to her castle. From one subject to another they passed on until Peggy made an observation about Pearl. “She is out and about, I see,” said Peggy, “but she still looks thin.”

“And no wonder. Her illness has been a severe one. But she will soon put on flesh and regain her colour. She is always wandering on the moor, and the winds there will do more to restore her to health than all the drugs in the pharmacopœia of James.”

“Why does she go on the moor?” said Peggy. “I thought it was the chapel she was fond of sitting in.”

“Ah! She has changed all that,” said Raston, sadly. “It seems—I think I told you this before—that Mrs Jeal told her some horrible Calvinistic doctrine, and poor Pearl thinks she is lost eternally. It was her idea that the cup was given into her charge, and now she believes that the Master has taken it from her because she is not good enough to be the custodian.”

“Poor girl!” said Peggy, sympathetically. “But I thought, Harold, that she believed the cup had been taken up to Heaven for the Supper of the Master?”

“She did believe that till Mrs Jeal upset her mind anew. Now she thinks she is lost, and I can’t get the terrible idea out of her head. She is like a lost thing wandering about the moor. Only one cure is possible.”

“What is that, Harold?”

“The cup must be restored to the altar she has built.”

“An altar! Has she built one?”

“I followed her on to the moor the other day, wishing to calm her mind. Some distance away, in the centre of the heather, she has erected an altar of turf, and she told me that if the Master forgave her He would

replace the cup which He had taken from her on that altar. She goes there every day to see if the cup has returned. If it did, I believe she would again be her old happy self.”

“But there is no chance of the cup being returned.”

“No,” said Raston, a trifle grimly; “Pratt has got it again in his possession, and he will not let it go. Save for Pearl, I do not think it matters much. We could never again use it for the service of the chapel. A cup that has been stolen cannot be put to sacred uses.”

“Do you think it was stolen?”

“I am certain of it. Everything belonging to that man was stolen. What a pity, Peggy, that such a clever fellow should use his talents for such a bad purpose.”

“A great pity. I liked Mr Pratt, and even now, although he is such a wretch, I can’t help feeling sorry for him.”

“So do I, Peggy. There was good in Pratt. Let us hope he will repent. But now, darling, don’t let us talk more of him. He has gone, and will never come back. What about the wedding-day?”

“Oh, Harold!” began Peggy, and blushed. After this the conversation became too personal to be reported. It is sufficient to say that the wedding-day was fixed for two months later.

While all these discoveries in connections with Pratt were being made in Colester, events which had to do with Sybil’s advertisement had happened which prevented her keeping it any longer a secret from her father. She put off telling him till the very last moment, but when one day a London visitor arrived she was forced to speak out. A card inscribed with the name “Lord Kilspindie” was brought to her, and on the back of it was a pencilled note hinting that the gentleman had called about the advertisement. Sybil ordered that he should be shown into the drawing-room, and went to her father’s study. The vicar was preparing his sermon, and looked up ill-pleased at the interruption.

“What is it, Sybil?” he asked. “I am busy.”

“Please forgive me for interrupting you, father,” she replied, coming to the desk and putting her arm round his neck, “but I have something to tell you, something to confess.”

“You have been doing nothing wrong, I hope,” said Tempest, suspiciously.

“I don’t think it is wrong, save in one particular. That advertisement! It was I who put it into the papers.”

“Sybil! And you never told me!” The vicar was annoyed. At the same time he felt relieved that it was nothing worse. He fancied that she might be about to confess that she had married Leo.

“It was no use telling you until something came of it, father,” replied Sybil, calmly, “so do not be angry. Now that the whole mystery has been cleared up, the advertisement is useless. But I received one answer to it. A gentleman called Lord Kilspindie wrote to me at the post-office as ‘S. T.,’ asking to see me about the cup. He had something serious to say about it. I was curious—I think you would have been curious yourself, father—so I wrote, and, giving my real name and address, asked him to come down here. He is now in the drawing-room.”

Tempest rose to his feet, looking vexed. “Lord Kilspindie in the drawing-room, and I only know of the matter now. Really, Sybil, you have behaved very badly. What does he want?”

“To tell us something about the cup, I suppose,” said Sybil. “Do you know Lord Kilspindie, father?”

“No more than that he is a border lord and a wealthy man. I believe he has a splendid and famous castle near the Tweed. Sybil, you should have told me.”

“I am sorry, but I didn’t think it was worth while until he came. You are not angry, father. I have done nothing so very bad, and it was my eagerness about Leo that made me take up the matter.”

“You offered a reward of fifty pounds! How is that to be paid?”

Sybil laughed. “I don’t think there will be any question of reward with Lord Kilspindie,” she said. “Besides, he has not brought the cup. You know that Mr Pratt has it, and is likely to keep it. Come, father, forgive me, and let us see Lord Kilspindie. I am filled with curiosity.”

“You are a wicked girl,” said the vicar, indulgently, and gave her a kiss. “If you do this again—”

“I never will, father—unless Leo is again in danger.”

The vicar sighed. His conscience pricked him about Leo, and he did not know how to act towards making amendment. Certainly if he gave his consent to the marriage Leo would be more than repaid for the ill thoughts entertained about him. But Tempest was filled with pride of race, and could not bring himself to give his beautiful daughter to a nameless man. However, he could not consider the matter now, since his illustrious visitor was waiting in the drawing room, so with Sybil he went to greet him.

“Miss Tempest?” said Lord Kilspindie, coming forward, with a look of admiration at the beautiful girl before him, “and you, sir?”

Sybil allowed her father to speak, as was right and proper. “I am the vicar of this place, Lord Kilspindie,” said Tempest, politely, “and this is my daughter. It was she who put the advertisement in the paper. I presume that it is to that we owe the pleasure of your company.”

“That and nothing else,” said Lord Kilspindie, taking the seat pointed out to him by the vicar. “I have been looking for that cup for over twenty years. It is not in your possession?”

“It was for a few weeks,” replied the vicar, who was very curious. “I had better tell you the whole story, and then you can judge for yourself.”

“If you will be so kind,” replied Lord Kilspindie, courteously.

He listened attentively while Mr Tempest narrated all the events in connection with the cup from the time Pratt had arrived in Colester. The story was a strange one, and the visitor was much interested. However, he did not offer one interruption. Sybil watched him the meanwhile.

He was a tall, grey-haired man of over sixty, but still vigorous and straight. His face was lined, however, as though he had undergone much trouble. He had a soldierly look about him, and all the time the vicar was speaking tugged at a long grey moustache, the only hair he wore on his face. Sybil thought of the line in the “Ancient Mariner” about long and lean and brown as the seashore sand (she could not quite recall the quotation), but to her it described Kilspindie perfectly. He was rather sad-looking, and his quiet grey eyes looked as though he had known bitter trouble. And indeed he had. Sybil learned that later.

“A very interesting story,” he said politely when Mr Tempest had finished, “but disappointing in its ending. You say this man Pratt has now the cup in his possession?”

“He confessed as much, my lord, in a letter to the detective in charge of the case. It is a pity he has escaped with it.”

“A great pity,” responded the other. “I suppose there is no chance of his being captured?”

“From what Mr Marton said I should think not,” put in Sybil. “He says that Pratt has baffled all the cleverest detectives in England for a great number of years.”

Kilspindie sighed. “No chance of getting it back,” he murmured; “and the luck will still be bad.”

“The luck!” echoed Sybil, catching the word.

“You will think me superstitious,” he said, with a smile; “but the fact is that the cup is said to be a fairy gift, and has been in our family for generations. The luck of the family goes with the cup.”

“Like the luck of Edenhall!” said Sybil, remembering Longfellow’s poem.

“Precisely,” responded Kilspindie. “The legend is a curious one. I must tell it to you some time. Of course my opinion is that the cup is of Roman manufacture. I recognised it from its description, and especially from the Latin motto you set down in the advertisement. I think that goblet was dedicated to Bacchus, and was probably lost by some Roman general when Scotland was invaded by the Cæsars.”

All this time Mr Tempest was trying to recover from the horror of his thoughts. “A pagan cup!” he gasped, “and a stolen cup! Oh, my lord, and it was used as a communion cup. Pratt said that he had brought it from Italy, where it was so used by the Romish Church. I thought it was sanctified by such a use, and did not hesitate to put it again on the altar. I really don’t know what to say. It is like sacrilege.”

“I am sorry, Mr Tempest. But the cup has been at Kilspindie Castle for five hundred years. It never was used in the service of the Church. Over twenty years ago it was stolen by a woman.”

“By a woman,” echoed Sybil. She had quite expected to hear Pratt’s name.

Chapter XVII

Lord Kilspindie Explains

“Before you begin your story, my lord,” said the vicar, “will you please inform me how you came to know of the loss of the cup?”

“I have already done so, Mr Tempest. I saw the advertisement offering a reward for its recovery. The description and the quotation of the Latin motto were sufficient to show me that it was my heirloom. I wrote to the office of the paper, and afterwards received a letter from Miss Tempest, here, asking me to call. I have taken up my abode at the inn, as I may stay here for a few days. I want to know all I can about the matter. If I can only trace and recover the cup through your agency I shall be eternally your debtor.”

“I cannot tell you more than I have related,” replied the vicar. “This man Pratt took back the cup, and is now in London—where, no one knows. I fear the cup is as lost as though it had been swallowed up by the ocean!”

“It is enough that I know in whose possession it is,” said Kilspindie, with determination. “In some way or another I shall find this man. For I may tell you, Mr Tempest, that, besides the recovery of a family treasure, I have another and more important object in view—the recovery of my son, who was stolen from me at the time the cup disappeared.”

Tempest expressed much astonishment at this information, and Sybil opened her eyes wide. She had never thought that her attempt to clear the character of her lover would lead to such a result. Neither she nor her father knew what to say, and, seeing them silent, Lord Kilspindie continued to speak.

“How the cup came into the possession of this man I cannot say. It was taken from the castle by a nurse called Janet Grant, who also carried away the child.”

“Why did she do that?” asked Sybil, horrified.

“Out of revenge for a fancied slight she received from my wife,” replied Kilspindie, with a sigh; “but it is best I should tell you all from the beginning. First, you must know the legend of the cup, that you may understand the value we Grants attach to its possession.”

“I am fond of folk-lore,” murmured the vicar, settling himself down for a pleasant half-hour. “Your family name is Grant, then, my lord?”

“Yes. Our title is Kilspindie, an earldom. My son who was stolen—my only son and only child, alas!—is Lord Morven, if he be still alive. But who knows if I shall ever see him again?”

“Hope for the best,” said the vicar, gently. “God is over all!”

“You are right, Mr Tempest. But how many weary years have I waited, and have had to comfort myself in that fashion. Now, when I had lost all hope, the advertisement roused it again. If I find the cup I may discover my boy, or, at all events, I may find out if he is alive or dead.”

“I am sure he is alive,” said Sybil, impulsively. “Dear Lord Kilspindie, if there was no chance of your finding him I should not have been guided to put in that advertisement. It was entirely my own doing, and had I consulted with my father it would never have appeared.”

“It certainly would not,” said the vicar, promptly. “I had placed the matter in the hands of Mr Marton, and I was angry when I saw the advertisement—very angry, indeed.”

“You must not be angry any more, Mr Tempest,” said Kilspindie, with a smile, “seeing that it may lead to the discovery of my son. I owe much to Miss Tempest’s indiscretion, as you no doubt call it.”

“No,” said Sybil, resolutely; “I am sure papa does not call it that. I did it to help Leo, and I would do it again. But tell us the legend, Lord Kilspindie.”

The old man laughed. “If you have not the imagination of the Celt you will think it but a poor thing,” he said. “In the days of Bruce, and on the Border, Nigel Grant, the head of the clan—my ancestor, Mr Tempest—was riding home from a foray against the English. He had been successful, and had collected a large mob of cattle, which were being driven to the castle by his followers. He was anxious to get home, for when he had left, two weeks previously, his wife was expected to give birth to a child. The chief eagerly desired that it might be a boy, for he had few relatives, and those he had were his bitterest enemies.”

“What!” said Tempest, “and the Scotch so clannish?”

“They are more clannish in the Highlands than on the Border,” replied the old lord. “Many of the Border families fought with one another. My clan did also for many a long day, although they are friendly enough now. However, you know the reason that Nigel Grant was so eager for an heir.”

“Wouldn’t a girl have done?” asked Sybil mischievously.

“By no means. The chief wanted a brave boy, to bestride a horse and wield a sword, and govern the unruly Grant clan with a strong hand. He had prayed to the Virgin to give him his heart’s desire—they were all Roman Catholics in those days, remember. So you may guess he rode home at top speed, and as he neared the castle he was far in advance of his followers and alone. And then came the fairies.”

“The fairies!” echoed Sybil. “This is interesting,” and she laughed.

“We call them the Good Neighbours in Scotland, you know, because the fairies don’t like to be talked about with disrespect. But to go on with my story. Nigel Grant was on a wide moor all alone, although the lances of his men-at-arms glittered on the verge of the horizon. Suddenly—from

the viewless air, apparently, since there was no rock or tree or shelter of any kind—there appeared a small woman dressed in green, with a golden crown. At the sight of her the chief's horse stopped all at once, as though stricken into stone. The fairy queen—for it was she, the same, I suppose, who appeared to Thomas the Rhymer.”

“Ah! she was mounted on a horse!” said Sybil, half to herself.

“Indeed? Well, this queen was on foot, and in her arms she carried a child. Stopping before Nigel, she placed the child on his saddle-bow, and told him to take it home for a year and a day. ‘If it returns to us safe and sound,’ she continued, ‘great good fortune will befall the Grants. But if anything wrong is done to it, then will sorrow come.’ So speaking she vanished, and the horse, suddenly regaining motion, galloped home to the castle, bearing the amazed chief with his child in his arms.”

“His child, my lord?” asked the vicar, smiling.

“It had to be his child for a year and a day. He found that during his absence his wife had given birth to a fine boy, but that a day or so after it was born the cradle was found empty. Lady Grant was in a great state of terror, as you may imagine. When the chief told his story she declared that her child had been carried off by the Good Neighbours. It was her wish to kill the changeling. But this the chief, mindful of the prophecy, would not permit. It was supposed that the fairy child required to be nursed by a mortal woman, and this was why the chief's boy had been carried away.”

“I never heard that version of the old story before,” said Tempest.

“No? It is usually said that the fairies want the child for themselves. But in this story what I have told you was believed. Lady Grant, hoping to get back her own child in a year and a day, nursed the changeling. It was a peevish, cross, whimpering creature, and marvellously ugly. But when she fed it with her milk it grew fat and strong, and became good-tempered.

“On the night when the year and a day were up, there was heard the sound of galloping horses round the castle. A wind swept into the rooms and down the corridors. Everyone in the castle fell into a magic sleep. But in the morning the true child was found smiling in his cradle and the

fairly changeling was gone. In the cradle also was the cup I am seeking, and a scroll saying that while it was kept in the family no ill would befall, but that if lost the line would be in danger of extinction.”

“And did the prophecy ever come true?” asked Sybil.

“Twice,” replied Kilspindie, with the most profound conviction. “In the reign of the first James of Scotland the cup was stolen, and three brothers of the chief were slain in battle. Only the child of one of them lived, for the chief had no family. Then the cup was brought back—I could tell you how, but the story is too long—and the child was spared to become the father of a large family.”

“And the second time?” asked Tempest, wondering how much of this wild tale the old lord believed.

“The second time was in the reign of Henry VIII. The castle was sacked and the cup taken. All the family were killed, but the nurse managed to save one child, with whom she fled. After a series of adventures the cup was restored and the child regained his inheritance.”

“How strange!” said Sybil. “And now that the cup is lost again?”

Kilspindie smiled. “Well, you see, Miss Tempest, I have but one son and he is lost. If I do not find him the title and estates must go to a distant cousin, and the prophecy of the fairies will be fulfilled. That is why I am so anxious to get the cup. If I can find it and bring it back to Kilspindie Castle, I am certain that I shall find my boy.”

“A wild story,” said the vicar, after a pause. “There is oftentimes a grain of truth in these folktales. But tell me, how came it that the cup was stolen the third time?”

“I am about to tell you,” replied the visitor. “There was a woman called Janet Grant, the daughter of one of my tenants. She was in service at my place, but after some years she became weary of the dull life. We are not very lively up in the north,” said Kilspindie, with a laugh. “However, this woman got tired and went up to London. There, I believe, she obtained a situation, but what her life was while absent I do not know. She was always reticent on the point. After six years she returned. In the interval I had married, and at the time Janet returned, or a year before, my wife

became a mother. I was the father of a splendid boy, my son and heir, Lord Morven. Janet was taken back into my service as an under nurse, for she was a very capable woman.”

“Had she a good temper?” asked Sybil, guessing what was coming.

“One of the worst tempers in the world. Also she was evil in her disposition. Had I known then what was told to me afterwards by the other servants, she should never have re-entered my service. But they were all afraid of Janet and her wicked ways, and therefore remained silent when it was their duty to speak out. When the boy was two years of age, or it may be a trifle over, the head nurse died. Janet expected to succeed, but my wife appointed another woman.”

“She did not trust Janet,” hinted the vicar.

“No. By this time Janet was not so careful in her behaviour, and my wife began to suspect her true character. Janet was very angry at the slight—as she called it—and swore she would be revenged. Of course, she knew the legend of the cup, so it struck her, no doubt, that if she stole the cup the usual disaster would follow.”

“What superstition!” murmured Mr Tempest.

“Well, I don’t know, sir,” said Kilspindie, quietly. “You see, Mr Tempest, we had chapter and verse for what might happen. However, Janet, out of revenge, took away the child and stole the cup. She had no difficulty in doing either. The cup was placed in the picture gallery under a glass shade, for no one ever expected that it would be stolen. It was not guarded so carefully as it should have been. But who would have thought that any one of my faithful servants would steal? As to the child, Janet was one day sent out with him. The head nurse remained at home. I believe she then took the cup with her. At all events she never returned, and when a search was made both the child and the cup were missing.” Here Lord Kilspindie stopped and shook his head.

“What happened after that?” asked Sybil, curiously.

“There is no more to tell, Miss Tempest. The woman vanished utterly with the child and the cup. My wife, poor soul, died of grief. I employed all manner of means to find the woman, but without result. I even

offered a reward and a pardon if she would bring back what she had taken. But she gave no sign of her existence. Well”—Kilspindie sighed—“that is all. I have been a lonely man for over twenty years, and things have gone wrong with me in every way. I am certain that prosperity will not return to me and mine until the cup is brought back. Then I may hope to recover my son. You can understand now how anxious I am to find this man Pratt. I would willingly pardon him all if he would give back the cup.”

“I wonder how he became possessed of it?” said Tempest.

“Ah!” said Kilspindie, “that is what we must find out. He seems to be an accomplished thief, so it may be that he stole the cup. On the other hand, Janet, finding herself hard up, may have pawned it, and Pratt may have got it into his possession in that way. You tell me that he has a love for beautiful things.”

“Such a love,” said the vicar, sadly, “that he is willing to be a thief to obtain them. Well, my lord, at present I do not see how we can help you.”

“There is one way,” said Kilspindie, after a pause. “Give me a letter to this Mr Marton, and with his aid I may succeed in tracing Pratt. In the meantime I intend to wait here for a few days. At my age I am not able to get about so rapidly as I once did.”

The man did indeed look old and worn-out. But he was a fine, courtly gentleman of what is called the old school, and Sybil was quite fascinated with him. After some further conversation it was arranged that he should remain at the inn until the end of the week—it was now Wednesday—and that afterwards the vicar should accompany him to London to introduce him personally to Marton. Leaving her father and Kilspindie together, Sybil went to her room to think over the strange episode which was the outcome of her advertisement.

She was anxious to tell Leo all about it, but he was at Portfront, and she had received no letter from him. Sybil wondered at this, as it was not like Leo to neglect her. For the moment she was inclined to drive to Portfront and see him. He had given her no reason for his departure, and she was becoming anxious about him. Mrs Gabriel still remained in seclusion, and, so far as Sybil knew, Leo had never been to see her. It

was therefore no use talking to Mrs Gabriel about the man she had so cruelly cast off. Her father she could not appeal to because, although he wished to make amends to Leo for his unjust suspicions, he did not wish him to marry her, and would therefore do nothing likely to bring them together. In this dilemma it struck Sybil that she might see Raston; he was a kindly creature, and all through the dark day had believed in Haverleigh's innocence. She thought that Raston might be induced to bring Leo back from Portfront, so Sybil put on her hat and sought out the curate. He was at home and delighted to see her.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Tempest," he said, wheeling the armchair forward. "I hope there is nothing wrong."

"Why should there be anything wrong?" asked Sybil, smiling.

Raston passed his hand across his forehead with a troubled air. "This fact is I do not feel well this morning," he said. "I have received a letter from Town which has worried me. But do not let me inflict my troubles on you, Miss Tempest. What can I do?"

"I'll tell you, Mr Raston. But, first of all, you must promise to keep all I tell you a secret. I don't think I am breaking confidence in saying what is in my mind, as I gave no promise of secrecy. But I must tell you all, as you are the only person who can advise me."

"I promise to keep your secret, whatever it may be, Miss Tempest."

"Then listen to the latest information about the cup," said Sybil, and forthwith related to Raston the news of Lord Kilspindie's arrival, and how he had been brought to Colester by means of the advertisement. Having made this preliminary explanation, she related the story which had been told to her father and herself. As no promise of secrecy had been given, Sybil did not think she was doing wrong; and, besides, it was necessary for Raston to know all the details before he could help her to bring Leo back. Finally, she had the utmost confidence in the curate's silence.

"It is a most extraordinary story," he said, when she had finished; "and more curious still—" here he stopped short and considered. "I can tell you what is in my mind later," he said; "at present you must let me know in what way I can serve you."

“I want you to help me with Leo,” said Sybil, promptly. “For some reason he has gone to Portfront and is stopping there. I would go over myself and bring him back, but I am afraid of offending my father. I want Leo to be introduced to Lord Kilspindie.”

“For what reason, Miss Tempest?”

Sybil looked at the ground, and began to draw diagrams with a dainty shoe. “Well, Mr Raston, you know that I want to marry Leo,” she said, with a blush, “and at present there are so many obstacles to our engagement. My father is not so just towards Leo as he should be. I suppose this is because he is poor and has no prospects. If he enlists and goes to the war, I do not see how that will bring us together. Even if he gets a commission I cannot marry him. There will not be enough money. Now, I thought that as I had done something to bring Lord Kilspindie a chance of getting back the cup, he might be induced to do something for myself and Leo.”

“Something might come of it, certainly, Miss Tempest.”

“I am sure Lord Kilspindie is very kind,” she said in a feminine way. “He looks kind. Leo has delightful manners, as you know, Mr Raston. He is clever in his own way and well educated. Lord Kilspindie might take a fancy to him and make him a secretary or something. At all events, he might put him in the way of earning money, for I am sure that Lord Kilspindie has power as well as wealth.”

“Then you want Leo to come back and meet him?”

“Yes. You must tell him all I have told you, and say that if he loves me he must come back at once.”

“I shall do what you say, Miss Tempest, and if I can induce Leo to return he certainly shall. I do not know why he went to Portfront. His name was cleared, and he need have had no hesitation in remaining at Colester.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what is the matter with him,” said Sybil, with a sigh; “he has been so strange lately. I am sure he is keeping something from me. But if I get him to myself I’ll find out what it is. But you will go to Portfront, Mr Raston?”

“Yes. This afternoon. In fact, I was going that way in any case, Miss Tempest, as I intend to journey to London.”

“Why are you going to London?” asked Sybil in surprise. She knew that Raston rarely went to the great city.

The curate hesitated again and rubbed his hair in a distracted way. “I would rather you did not ask me, Miss Tempest,” he said at length. “I am going to London in answer to a letter. I hope to be back on Saturday. I have to preach on Sunday, as you know. The vicar said something about taking a service at Portfront.”

“As Lord Kilspindie will be at church on Sunday,” said Sybil, “I think papa will stay. He looks upon Lord Kilspindie as his guest.”

“Well, in any case I’ll be back,” said the curate, with a nod; “then I shall be able to tell you the reason I had to go. In the meantime, Miss Tempest, I wish you would see Pearl Darry occasionally. She goes wandering about the moor lamenting her lost soul, poor creature. I have been with her a good deal, but while I am away she may do something desperate. You see her, Miss Tempest, and persuade her that she is under the care of the Master.”

“I’ll do my best,” replied Sybil; “but I am afraid I am not good enough to preach, Mr Raston. What a shame of Mrs Jeal to put these ideas into the girl’s head! She knew that Pearl was not sane, and to make her think such things was downright dangerous.”

“I know.” Raston sighed. “If we could only get back the cup, Pearl would be satisfied that the Master is pleased with her and has taken her into favour again. Then she would recover her old faith in the goodness and love of God which Mrs Jeal, with the best intentions, no doubt, has destroyed. I cannot think Mrs Jeal is a good woman.”

“I am sure she is a very bad one,” said Sybil, emphatically. “However, I’ll do as you wish, Mr Raston. Good-day. A pleasant journey,” and she departed.

The curate took out a letter, glanced at it, shook his head. He was puzzled by the communication, and knew not what to make of it.

Chapter XVIII

A Miracle

That same afternoon Raston notified the vicar that he was going for a few days to London. On the understanding that the young man would be back for morning service on Sunday, the vicar readily consented that he should go. Raston forthwith packed his bag, and driving to Portfront stayed there the night. But for Sybil's message he would have waited until the next day, and have gone directly to London without pausing on the way. However, he wished to have a talk with Leo, both on account of Sybil's message and because he wanted to consult with the young man about the letter which worried him. This entailed a long conversation, so Raston put up at the hotel at which Leo was staying, and sent a message that he wanted to see Mr Haverleigh.

Leo made his appearance, looking haggard and worried, and very much unlike his usual self. He seemed nervous on seeing Raston, and hurriedly approached him as though he expected to hear bad news. The events of the last few weeks had shaken Leo's nerves, and he was prepared for any calamity—even to hear that Pratt had been arrested. Something of the sort he expected to hear now.

“Hullo, Raston!” he cried, with an affectation of brightness. “What brings you here?”

“I am on my way to London,” said Raston, shaking hands in a friendly fashion, “and I am staying here for the night, as I want to have a long talk with you.”

“Very glad,” replied Leo, mechanically. Then after a pause he raised his head. “There is no bad news, I trust?” he asked anxiously.

“By no means. My news is good.”

“Then it cannot concern me,” said Leo, bitterly. “No good news ever comes my way now. What is it?”

“I'll tell you after dinner.”

“No; tell me now! I can’t wait. I am so anxious and worried that my mind cannot bear suspense.”

“You brood too much on things,” said Raston. “However, the matter is very simple. Miss Tempest wants you to return at once to Colester.”

“What for? Has her father discovered anything bad about me?”

Raston laughed. “No. You are getting morbid on the subject—the result, I suppose, of your late experience of man’s injustice. If you will sit down I will tell you what she asked me to say. It is a long story.”

“An agreeable one, I hope,” muttered Leo, dropping dejectedly into a chair. “I really cannot bear much more worry without going to chuck myself into the water.”

“Haverleigh,” said the curate, severely, “that is an ungrateful way to speak, after the mercy God has shown you. Has he not brought you through much tribulation, and set your feet on a rock of safety!”

“Well, there are two answers to that, Raston. However, I’ll try and behave myself while you tell me what Sybil said.”

Raston sighed. Not knowing Leo’s worry, he was beginning to think him wrong to behave as he did. Still, this was not the time to preach, and, unlike most clergymen, Raston knew where to stop. He sat down near Leo and related the whole story of Lord Kilspindie and his loss. Then he detailed Sybil’s idea that Kilspindie might do something for the young man. “And if your future is arranged you can then be married.”

“I shall never be married, Raston,” said Leo, gloomily. “If you knew—But I must keep my own counsel. What takes you to London?” he asked suddenly. “You are such a home bird that there must be some strong reason.”

“The very strongest,” replied the curate, drawing a letter out of his pocket. “But first you must promise to hold your tongue about what I am going to tell you.”

Leo nodded. “I have too many unpleasant secrets of my own not to keep those of others,” he said. “Well, what’s up?”

“Read this letter from Pratt.”

“Pratt!” Haverleigh took the letter hurriedly. “Why, what is he writing to you about?” He cast his eyes over the letter. It was to the effect that Pratt would be glad to see Raston at a certain place in London to speak with him about the cup which had been lost. It asked the curate to keep the contents of the letter a secret, or at all events to tell only Leo Haverleigh. Also, it warned Raston that if he behaved treacherously, and brought down the police on Pratt, that there would be the devil to pay. These last words were underlined and shocked the curate. The time and place of the appointment were also underlined, and from the way in which the meeting was arranged Leo could see that his father had contrived to see Raston without running the risk of arrest.

“I wonder what he wants to see you about!” said Leo, handing back the letter and speaking uneasily. He fancied that Pratt might be going to reveal to Raston the secret of his own paternity.

“About the cup,” said Raston, returning the letter to his pocket. “I suppose he is about to give it back to us again. Not that it will ever be used again for so sacred a purpose. I shall take it and return it to Lord Kilspindie. That is only right, as the cup was stolen from him.”

“Ah, I forgot! You think that Pratt has the cup?” said Leo.

“He has. Do you not remember the letter he wrote to Marton saying he had stolen the cup and again had it in his possession?”

“I remember; but that was one of Pratt’s fairy tales.”

“How do you know?” asked Raston, astonished. “Has he written to you?”

“No. I have seen him.”

“In London?”

“In Colester.”

Raston pushed back his chair and stared at his friend. “When did you see him in Colester?” he asked, open-mouthed.

“A few days ago.” Leo pondered for a moment while Raston stared at him. He wondered if it would not be as well to make a confidant of the curate, and ask his advice. The secret was rapidly becoming too much for him to bear alone. Raston was his friend, a good fellow, and a wise young man. Certainly it would be well to confide in him. Leo made up his mind. “I have to tell you something that will astonish you. I speak in confidence, Raston.”

“Anything you tell me will be sacred,” replied the curate, with dignity.

Leo nodded, quite satisfied with this assurance. Then he related all that had taken place in the castle on that night when he had discovered Mrs Gabriel and Pratt in company. Raston fairly gasped with surprise as the recital proceeded, and when Leo confessed that Pratt claimed him as a son he sprang from his seat.

“I don’t believe a word of it!” he cried, bringing his fist down on the table. “The man is a vile liar. Whomsoever you may be, Leo, you are certainly not the son of this wretch. Can a bad tree bear good fruit? No.”

“But he can give me proofs.”

“He has not done so yet. Let me speak to him, Leo. I may be able to get more out of him than you. I am your friend, you know that! so if you will place the matter in my hands, I promise to find out the truth somehow.”

“Well,” said Leo, with some hesitation, “I rather thought of coming with you to London. Pratt expects me.”

“He has not written to that effect,” said Raston. “I tell you, Leo, the man is dangerous and unscrupulous. The fact that he claims you as his son will prevent you dealing freely with him. I can manage him better myself. You go back to Colester and Miss Tempest. It is but right that you should do what she wishes, as she has held by you in your time of trouble. Besides, I quite approve of her wish to introduce you to Lord Kilspindie. And if—oh!—” Raston stopped short.

“What’s the matter, Raston?”

“Suppose you should be the long-lost son of Lord Kilspindie?”

“Ridiculous!” said Leo, shaking his head and flushing.

“It is no more ridiculous than that you should be the son of a thief—or, rather, believe yourself to be so. Why should you believe the bad and doubt the good? See here, Leo”—Raston was much excited—“the cup was lost along with the child. Pratt has the cup, why should you not be the child? The woman who stole both might have died and passed them on to Pratt. For his own purposes he says that he is your father.”

“I can’t believe it, Raston,” said Leo, shaking his head.

“Well; disbelieve it if you choose. If the thing is so, what you think will not alter it. All I ask is that you should let me represent you at this interview. I have to see Pratt on my own account. Let me see him on yours.”

“Very good, Raston. You can do what you like. I am greatly obliged to you for the trouble you are taking.”

“Indeed, it is only right, Leo,” protested the curate. “I begin to see that you have been wronged. I may not be right in my surmise about your being the son of Kilspindie. But I am sure that I am correct in saying you are not the son of that scoundrel. Now, go back to Colester, hold your tongue, and wait till I come back on Saturday.”

“I’ll do as you wish,” said Leo, sadly; “but indeed I have no hope.”

“I have,” said the curate, emphatically, and the conversation ended.

The next day Raston departed by the steamer to London, via Worthing, and Leo returned to his old quarters at the Colester Arms. His meeting with the curate had done him good, and although he did not adhere to Raston’s theory about his noble paternity, yet he felt more cheerful and hopeful. He was particular as to his toilet, which, in his despair, he had rather neglected of late, and went to the Vicarage. Sybil was away with Pearl on the moor, the servant said. Leo would have followed, but Mr Tempest caught sight of him, and insisted that he should enter and be introduced to Lord Kilspindie. Leo willingly obeyed, as he was anxious to see his supposed father according to Raston. He could not help smiling when he was presented.

Kilspindie was taken by that smile. He saw before him a singularly splendid young man, with a graceful, slender figure and a handsome face, but best of all was the kindly look in the eyes. Kilspindie shook hands heartily with Leo, and sighed as he thought that his lost son might be just such another. Had he known of what Raston and the young man before him had talked about on the previous night, he might have been more particular in his inquiries, and might perchance have been brought to think as Raston did. However, he knew nothing, Leo said nothing, and the conversation resolved itself into the common-place. Tempest was kind to Leo, Kilspindie was friendly, and the three got on very well.

Meanwhile, Sybil and Pearl were walking across the moor. After a time they stopped at the turf altar erected by the mad girl, and she explained to her companion the reason she had made such a place.

“The Master is angry with poor Pearl now,” she said sadly, “and He has taken the sacred cup from her. She is not good enough to keep it. But when the Master is pleased, and will save Pearl from the Pit”—she shuddered—“He will place the cup on this altar, and Pearl will bring it back to the chapel. Then she will be saved and happy.”

“But, Pearl, you must not think of God in this way. He is your Father, and He loves you.”

“He did love Pearl, but He made her ill, and Mrs Jeal told Pearl that she was wicked and in danger of the Worm.”

“Pearl! Pearl! Do not believe that. Mrs Jeal is wrong. God loves you!”

“Why, then, did He make Pearl ill if He loved her? And why did He take away the Holy Grail which Pearl watched over so carefully?”

“He did not take it away,” said Sybil, hardly knowing what reply to make.

“Yes, He did,” persisted the poor, mad creature. “Pearl was not good enough to keep it. But when she is good the cup will come down to earth again.”

“Do you think it is in heaven now, Pearl?”

“I am sure it is. No roof here to stop the cup from floating up to the New Jerusalem. In the chapel it would have stayed, because the bad roof kept it down, but here it went up and up and up to the sky.”

Sybil did not know what to make of this talk. She soothed the girl as much as she could and tried to bring her back to that old happy state of mind which Mrs Jeal had destroyed with her gloomy Calvinistic creed. But it was all of no use. Only the restoration of the cup would make Pearl believe that she was good again. However, Sybil induced her to talk of other things, of birds and flowers, and the poor creature was in a quieter state of mind when Sybil brought her back to the cottage.

“I go every morning to the altar,” said Pearl, as she went inside. “The cup will come back when the Master is sorry for Pearl.”

At this moment Mrs Jeal pulled her into the house and scolded her for being away. When she saw Sybil she became more civil, but still behaved in a covertly insolent manner. Sybil grew angry.

“You have behaved very wickedly in putting these ideas into Pearl’s head, Mrs Jeal,” she said severely. “The poor creature is not responsible. She does not understand.”

“She understands more than you give her credit for, miss,” retorted Mrs Jeal, coolly, “and she is not fit to be left alone. But when I go away I shall put her in an asylum.”

“Indeed, you will do nothing of the sort!” cried Miss Tempest, indignantly. “The poor thing would die. Liberty is all in all to her. When are you going away?”

“I go with Sir Frank Hale, miss. I am going to be the maid of his sister.”

“I heard Sir Frank was leaving Colester,” said Sybil, coldly, “and I think it is the best thing he can do. When does he go, Mrs Jeal?”

“In a week, miss. I have got a good situation, miss, and I do not want to be burdened with Pearl. She must go to an asylum.”

“No, no! I shall take charge of her myself,” said Sybil. “You leave her to me, Mrs Jeal, and I’ll look after her.”

“Well, I might, miss; I’ll see.” Then, after a pause, Mrs Jeal asked, “About that gentleman at your place, miss—will he stay long?”

“Only till the end of the week. I suppose you mean Lord Kilspindie?”

Mrs Jeal’s wicked eyes blazed. “Yes, I mean him,” she said, and gave an unpleasant laugh. “Oh! so he goes at the end of the week! Well, miss, before I take up my situation with Miss Hale, I’ll come and see you about Pearl. If you could take her I should be glad, but you’ll find her a nuisance.”

“I don’t think so,” said Sybil, coldly. “When will you call?”

“After the departure of Lord Kilspindie,” said Mrs Jeal, with another wicked look, and went into the house. Sybil departed, wondering why the woman had asked about Lord Kilspindie, and why she seemed afraid to meet him. Had she been clever enough, she might have guessed the truth. As it was the matter passed out of her mind.

After this there were some very pleasant evenings at the Vicarage. Leo felt almost happy, in spite of his troubles. He could not as yet bring himself to tell Sybil that he could never marry her. Besides, he was hoping against hope that Raston would bring back some good news from London. Not, indeed, that he (Leo Haverleigh) was the lost son of Lord Kilspindie—that such good fortune should be his never entered Leo’s head—but that Pratt was not his father. Leo felt that he would rather be proved to be illegitimate, as Mrs Gabriel had told the vicar he was, than have such a father as the criminal, Pratt. Yet, at times he felt sorry for the man. It was certain that he had in him some good qualities. But whenever Leo thought of him as his father, he became enraged against him. The thing was too horrible.

Lord Kilspindie took wonderfully to Leo, and this the vicar was pleased to see. Owing to Leo’s want of an honest name, he could not bring himself to consent to the marriage, so he hoped that the Scotch lord might take a fancy to the young man and carry him off. Thus Sybil would be safe, and Leo would be provided for. Mr Tempest had evidently forgotten his own youth, or he would have remembered that loving hearts are not so easily severed. Leo and Sybil loved one another too well for aught to come between them.

On Saturday night Raston returned. It was so late that Leo had not expected him, so they did not meet until the next morning. Then it was on the way to church.

“Well,” Leo asked eagerly, “and what does my—what does Pratt say?”

“I’ll tell you after service,” said Raston, hastily. “At present I can’t think of these things.”

“But one word, Raston,” urged Leo. “Is Pratt my father?”

“No,” replied the curate, emphatically, “he is not.” And before Leo could ask another question he ran off. Filled with joy at the intelligence, but much bewildered, Leo went to church to offer up thanks.

Kilspindie was also in church, and with Sybil, in the vicar’s pew. Mr Tempest allowed Raston to preach, as had been arranged, and took a very minor part in the service. Indeed, he did little else but read the lessons. The church was filled, as everyone was anxious to see Lord Kilspindie. Mrs Bathurst was there, wondering if his lordship could be induced to marry Peggy. She quite forgot that she had promised her daughter’s hand to the curate, and was already scheming to get at the old nobleman. That he was old did not matter to Mrs Bathurst. She would have sold her daughter to anyone, provided the match was a good one. And, curious to say, she would have considered that she had done her duty as a mother. Her moral nature was decidedly warped.

The service was almost over, and the church-wardens were handing round the bags for the collection when a sweet voice was heard singing in the distance. Everyone recognised the voice—it was Pearl’s—and the vicar, kneeling at the communion table, looked rather disturbed. He knew the eccentric ways of the girl, and he feared lest she might come in and distract the attention of the congregation. And his fears were fulfilled—Pearl, still singing, entered the church. The scandalised church-wardens would have kept her out, but that she bore something which made them open their eyes. The congregation also became aware of Pearl’s burden, and a gasp of astonishment went round. Still singing some wild, vague melody, the mad girl walked slowly up the aisle, bearing the sacred cup.

Lord Kilspindie did not see her until she was almost at the chancel steps. He then gave a cry of astonishment, in spite of the building and the occasion. Surely he might have been pardoned, for the fairy cup upon which depended the fortunes of the Grants glittered before his eyes. There was a dead silence. Everyone was too astonished to speak or move. The vicar himself was staring from the communion table at this miracle. But Raston, who had come down to receive the collection, stood quietly waiting till the girl reached him. She came up singing, placed the great gold cup in his hand and fell on her knees.

“The Master has forgiven Pearl,” she said in a voice which could be heard all over the church. “She is saved and the cup will be here to watch over for ever and ever. Amen. Amen.” And she bowed her face in her hands.

Raston paused for a moment in hesitation and glanced at the vicar, then at Lord Kilspindie. Then he made up his mind, and walking up to the altar, placed the cup in its old position. And there it glittered, all gold and gems, with the sunlight striking down on it, until it became almost too glorious to look upon. Lord Kilspindie stared, with tears in his eyes. The cup would be his again and he would soon have his son. He never doubted but that the restoration of the one was the prelude to the discovery of the other.

Raston pronounced the Benediction and the organ broke forth into jubilant music. Shortly the congregation streamed out. Everyone was much excited. The old nobleman came out with Sybil, and they waited at the porch for the vicar. Leo also was with them.

Suddenly a woman broke through the crowd in the churchyard. It was Mrs Jeal, and she was seeking Pearl. In her haste she never noticed Lord Kilspindie, until she almost ran into his arms. Suddenly he saw her face, started, and made one stride forward to clutch her by the arm.

“The cup and then the heir!” he said loudly, while all looked on amazed. “Janet Grant, where is my son, Lord Morven!”

Chapter XIX

A Story Of The Past

Half-an-hour later and Lord Kilspindie was back in the Vicarage library with Janet Grant, or, as it may be more convenient to call her, Mrs Jeal. Mr Tempest was present, together with Leo and Mr Raston, and they had assembled to force the truth out of Mrs Jeal. This was no easy matter. All the evil in the woman was uppermost, and with her shawl wrapped round her tightly she sat there and defied them all.

“You may burn me, you may put me in prison,” said Mrs Jeal, savagely, “but I won’t open my mouth.”

“I’ll have you arrested unless you tell the truth,” said Lord Kilspindie.

“Arrest me, then,” snarled Mrs Jeal. “There’s a policeman handy, my lord.”

“Why are you behaving like this, woman?” asked the vicar, sternly.

“Why!” she retorted violently. “Because I was badly treated by my lord there. I served him faithfully for many years, yet, in place of giving me the position to which I was entitled, he set another woman—a woman I hated—over my head. But I paid him out,” she said revengefully. “Oh! many a sad hour you have had, my lord! And many more you will have. I know where your son is; but I won’t tell. You have got back the cup, but the son, my Lord Morven,” she sneered, “will remain in the humble position in which I have placed him.”

“Something is gained,” said Kilspindie. “You have revealed that my son is alive and well. I’ll get the rest out of you.”

“Never!” Mrs Jeal shut her mouth with a snap and shook herself. “I’ll not speak another word!”

“What a wicked woman you are,” said the vicar, sadly. Mrs Jeal’s eyes flashed a wicked glance at him, but, true to her determination, she held her peace. It seemed impossible to do anything with so pronounced a vixen.

Hitherto Raston had been silent. Now he came forward. "I am able to deal with this matter," he said quietly, "and I have a way of making the woman speak."

Mrs Jeal shook her head and glared. The vicar and Kilspindie both looked at the curate. So did Leo. He was beginning to have a faint hope that the scene would end in the discovery that he was the rightful son of Lord Kilspindie. With an anxious face he sat in the corner and drank in eagerly every word which fell from Raston's lips. Mrs Jeal maintained her self-imposed silence.

"Mr Tempest," said Raston, "when I asked you if I might go to London, I did not tell you my errand. I tell it to you now. It was to see the man known as Pratt."

"What!" exclaimed the vicar. "You saw that man!"

"Two days ago. He wrote asking me to see him, hinting that he had something to tell about the cup."

"Which he stole," said Kilspindie.

"No, my lord. Pratt did not steal the cup. He took the blame upon himself, so as to clear the name of my friend Haverleigh."

Both the old men looked at Leo, who winced.

"Are you sure of that?" asked the vicar. "Pratt wrote to Marton, remember."

"To take the blame upon himself. Quite so. But he was not guilty for all that. His record was so black when Marton unmasked him that he thought a crime more or less would not matter."

"But why should he shield Haverleigh?" asked Mr Tempest.

Leo started forward. He saw that the time had come for him to speak out. "I can answer that," he said. "Pratt told me that I was his son."

Tempest uttered an exclamation. "You must be mistaken," he said; "Mrs Gabriel informed me that you were illegitimate."

“That would not have made any difference,” said Leo, bitterly. “I might as well be the illegitimate son of Pratt as of anyone else. At a matter of fact, however, he told me that I was born in wedlock. His wife—my mother—died, and he placed me with Mrs Gabriel to bring up. She believed that I was a nameless orphan, and what she told you, Mr Tempest, was true so far as she knew. Her telling was none the less spiteful, however. It was that which made you unwilling that I should marry Sybil.”

“Yes,” said the vicar, with a flush. “I did not like to think that a daughter of mine should marry a nameless man.”

“And you visit the sins of the parents on the head of their innocent offspring,” said Leo. “You have not treated me well, Mr Tempest. You thought me guilty of theft; scorned me because I was nameless! Is this the conduct of a minister of the Gospel?”

The grey head of the vicar drooped. “I admit that I have been wrong, Leo,” he said in a faltering tone. “You have vindicated your character. I ask your pardon. And more,” said he, when Leo grasped his hand, “even although there is a stain on your birth—”

“No,” said Leo, “I don’t want you to bind yourself to anything. Wait till this mystery is cleared up. At present, so far as I know, I am the son of a criminal. If that is true, I should refuse to marry Sybil.”

Here Mrs Jeal burst out into a taunting laugh. Lord Kilspindie frowned upon her, and took Leo’s disengaged hand. The vicar held the other. “You are a good man, Haverleigh,” said his lordship, far from suspecting the truth. “I wish I had you for a son,” and Mrs Jeal laughed again.

When quiet was restored, Raston went on with his story. “First,” he said, “I must tell you how I recovered the cup. I went up and met Pratt. As I promised not to deliver him into the hands of the law, much as he deserved punishment, he spoke to me freely and I was with him three hours. I do not know if I was right in letting such a dangerous criminal escape,” said the curate, looking round, “but if I had given information to the police I should never have heard the truth about Leo, nor should I have secured the cup.”

“Then I am not his son?” cried Leo, eagerly.

“No. Pratt gave me his word for that. Who you are you shall hear presently.” Here Raston gave a glance at Mrs Jeal, who was moving her hands restlessly and seemed to be ill at ease. “Meantime I must go on with the story of the cup. It seemed that Pratt knew the pawnbroker Penny, and having learnt from Mrs Jeal’s story that he had the cup, he went to get it back and to learn who had pawned it.”

“And who did?” asked the vicar, sharply.

Raston gave the answer he least expected. “Mrs Jeal pawned it,” said he.

The woman sprang to her feet and found her tongue. “It is a lie!” she shouted, furious with rage; then she made a rush for the door. Lord Kilspindie put his hand on her shoulder and forced her back into the chair.

“I am beginning to suspect the truth,” he said sternly. “Sit still or I will have you punished.”

She scowled and relapsed into a dogged silence. Raston went on to tell how the cup had been stolen. “It seems that when Pearl Darry was ill,” he said, “this woman watched by her bed. The poor, mad creature was delirious and raved about the cup. Mrs Jeal persuaded her that she would be eternally punished, what for Heaven only knows—”

“She is a child of sin,” groaned Mrs Jeal.

“She is as pure and good as an angel,” cried the curate, frowning. “It is you who are the evil doer, Mrs Jeal! Well, Mr Tempest, the girl thought in her half-delirious state that she would test the goodness of God. She proposed to take the cup out of the chapel and place it on an altar of turf which she had prepared on the moor. It was her idea that if God wished to save her, He would take the cup up to Heaven, and then replace it at a later date on the altar. She, therefore, while Mrs Jeal was absent, dressed herself and ran out of the house. She went to the house of old Barker the sexton. His door was not locked—he told a lie about that to save himself—and she knew where the key of the church hung. It was in her hand in a moment, and she went to the church sometime about ten o’clock. She entered and took the cup. Then she replaced the key on its nail after relocking the door.”

“One moment,” interrupted Mr Tempest; “those scratches on the lepers’ window—we thought, if you remember, that the robber had entered that way.”

“I shrewdly suspect that old Barker made those scratches to save his own skin,” said Raston. “You had better ask him.” And it may here be mentioned that the vicar did, and learned that what Raston said was true. The old sexton, finding the cup gone, feared lest he might be accused of the robbery, and so conceived the idea of making marks as though someone had entered at a window which his fat body could not possibly have squeezed through. It was a clever idea and misled all. But old Barker was punished by being sent to Portfront after he had confessed.

“It was when Pearl left Barker’s cottage with the cup that Mrs Jeal met her,” went on the curate. “She had missed her out of bed, and thinking that the mad girl had gone to the chapel, followed. She met her at the door of the cottage and saw that she had the cup. It was then that the idea came into her wicked head to steal the cup.”

“It’s a lie!” cried Mrs Jeal again.

“It is what you told Old Penny, anyhow, as he is prepared to swear in court,” said the curate, coolly. “He would not give you what you asked for the cup until you told him where you got it. For a wonder, you told the truth. Yes, Mrs Jeal, you followed Pearl on to the moor and saw her set the cup on the turf altar. Waiting till she got back to your cottage, you took the cup and concealed it under your shawl. You took it home, and found the girl back again in bed, very ill from the effects of exposure. For a time you nursed her while the hue and cry was being made about the cup. Then you made the excuse that your father was ill and went to London. You have no father, Mrs Jeal, and Old Penny, in answer to a letter of yours, sent the wire. You told him you had something for him, and so he aided you with your plot. You took the cup to London, pawned it to Old Penny after telling him the story, and got five hundred pounds for it.”

“I did not—I did not!” Mrs Jeal tried again to rise, and again had to remain; Lord Kilspindie kept his heavy grip on her shoulder. In his rage at her duplicity he could have slain her, but he spared her for the

moment that he might learn the truth. After many years of darkness dawn was breaking. Mrs Jeal saw that the end was in sight and began to sob.

“Then,” continued Raston, “you banked the money and came down to tell that wicked lie about Leo Haverleigh. You know that he was never near the place—that he was innocent and that you were guilty. However, Pratt got all this out of Old Penny, and then gave him the five hundred pounds for the cup. He took it to his own place, and when I was with him he handed it to me.”

“Come,” said Kilspindie, “there is some good in the man.”

“He has to make reparation to you, my lord,” said Raston, solemnly, “for he is this woman’s husband, and it was by his direction that your son was stolen. Yes,” here the curate pointed to Leo, “and there is your son.”

Leo rose slowly, as pale as a corpse. He had expected this, yet when it came the thing was too much for him. He could only look at his newly-found father in silence. Lord Kilspindie gasped and he too turned pale. Then he made one stride forward, and grasping Leo’s hands stared into his face. “Yes,” he muttered, “I believe. You have her—her—” He turned on Mrs Jeal. “Woman, is this true?” he demanded. But Mrs Jeal, with a cruel smile on her fat, puffy face, still sat silent. “I could strangle you,” muttered Lord Kilspindie, exasperated by her obstinacy.

“I can make her speak,” said Raston, taking an envelope out of his pocket, “and here is the means of doing so.”

Still holding Leo’s hand, Lord Kilspindie looked at the curate. Mrs Jeal remained quiet, a contemptuous smile on her lips and her eyes on the floor. Tempest, much interested in this strange scene, sat waiting for the end. It would seem that the result was in Raston’s hands.

“After I had received the cup and had heard its story,” the curate continued, “I began to question Pratt about Leo. At Portfront Leo had already told me of the claim Pratt had made to being his father. I did not believe it, for I know Haverleigh’s upright nature and could not think that he was the child of such a bad man. At first Pratt insisted that he was the father. I then appealed to his better instincts and told him how Leo had made up his mind to give up Miss Tempest rather than make

her the wife of a man with such antecedents as his. I think Pratt really loves you, Leo, for after a time he yielded to my entreaties and told the truth.”

“I am sure he likes me,” said Haverleigh, quietly; “he was always very kind to me. Bad as he is, I at least have no reason to complain of his treatment.”

“But what did he say?” asked Lord Kilspindie, anxiously.

“I shall leave Mrs Jeal to tell. She can repeat to you the story Pratt told me.”

“I’ll not say a word,” muttered the woman, resolutely.

“I can compel you!” replied Raston, sternly.

“Try!” was Mrs Jeal’s disdainful retort.

The curate turned towards Kilspindie. “Pratt’s story had a great deal to do with his wife, my lord, and on several points he referred me to her. I told him that she would never speak, for I well know how obstinate she is. Pratt then agreed to help me, ‘for Leo’s sake,’ he said. He wrote out something and placed what he had written in this envelope. I did not see what it was and I do not know now. The envelope is sealed as you see. Now,” added the curate, looking at Mrs Jeal, who was beginning to show signs of uneasiness, “if you tell the story of how you stole the child and prove that Mr Haverleigh is really Lord Morven, I will hand this letter to you with the seal unbroken. If you refuse, I will open the envelope now and act on the contents. Pratt assured me that what is contained herein would cost you much more than your liberty!”

The three men looked at the woman. Her face was livid, and the perspiration beaded her forehead. Twice she tried to speak, but her mouth opened and shut without a sound.

“Will you speak?” asked Raston, quietly.

“Give it to me,” she muttered in a husky tone, and stretching out her hand for the envelope Raston withdrew it beyond her reach.

“Not until you have told us the story,” he said.

“If I do, will you give me the letter?”

“Yes—with the seal unbroken. I do not know what iniquity you have been guilty of; but we are all willing not to know so long as you inform us of your minor fault.”

“I have your promise to give me the letter as it is?” asked Mrs Jeal.

“Yes,” said Raston, and the other three men echoed his response. Mrs Jeal nodded, well satisfied, and wiped her pale face with the end of her shawl. She then took a key out of her pocket.

“Will one of you gentlemen go to my cottage,” she said, “and open the third drawer in the chest of drawers in my bedroom standing opposite to the door? There you will find a parcel wrapped up in brown paper. I want it brought here immediately.”

“Shall I go?” said Leo, rising.

“No,” said Lord Kilspindie. “I have you and I mean to keep you. Mr Tempest, no doubt, has a servant whom he can trust.”

Tempest nodded and touched the bell. The old butler, who had been with the vicar for over twenty years, appeared. “Take this key,” said his master, handing it to him. “Mrs Jeal will give you directions how to use it. Lose no time in coming back.”

Mrs Jeal repeated her instructions and the servant departed on his errand. Then the woman rose to her feet and began to talk with an assumption of courage which would have been ludicrous had it not been so pitiful. Still, she fought well, and was game to the last.

“You have got the better of me,” she said, “or, rather, that brute of a Tony Angel has peached. If he had held his tongue I could have defied the lot of you. As it is—” She shrugged her fat shoulders and paused. “Ask me what questions you like,” she said, “I am in your power. I must reply.”

“Is this my son?” asked Kilspindie, his hand on Leo’s shoulder.

“Yes. That is Lord Morven!”

Leo uttered a cry and looked at his father with moist eyes. The revulsion of feeling was too much for Kilspindie, and he sank down into a chair. Leo held his hand, and there was silence for a few moments. "I am thankful to God that he has spared me to see my son again!" said Kilspindie, solemnly, and the vicar added a solemn "Amen."

"And thank God that I have a father and an unsullied name!" said Leo, almost too moved to speak. Nor was this emotion unmanly on the part of father and son. The least sentimental person must grant this much.

Kilspindie remained seated in his chair and holding the hand of his newly-recovered son. Both men fixed their eyes on Mrs Jeal, who in a cold and unemotional way continued her confession.

"I was brought up on your estate, my lord," she said, "and there I met with Pratt—or, rather, with Tony Angel. He came on a visit to the village to get away from the police. He was a handsome and fascinating man and I fell in love with him. Whether he loved me or not I cannot say. At all events, he pretended to. I left your service and married him. We went to London, and then I discovered that my husband was a thief. At first I was horrified. In those days, my lord, I was not the hardened sinner you see me now. But after a time Pratt—as I may call him—made me as bad as himself. He taught me to love fine things and comfort, and as he always made plenty of money by stealing I had a gay life. Oh! we had fine times I can tell you! He—"

"Go on with your story, Mrs Jeal," said the vicar, sternly.

She tossed her head, but obeyed. "After a time things got bad. Pratt was so well known to the police that he was not so successful as he had been. I used to tell him about Kilspindie Castle and the cup. Pratt, who loved beautiful things, wanted to get the cup. He proposed that I should go back and steal it. I was already known in the castle, so there would be a better opportunity for me to get it than himself. As I wanted money I agreed, and I came back to the castle."

"Did you re-enter my service in order to steal the cup?" asked Lord Kilspindie.

"Yes," replied Mrs Jeal, defiantly, "you had plenty without it. I entered as an under-nursemaid, and as I was comfortable I thought I would stay

for a while. Pratt came up and urged me to steal the cup at once. I refused, as I did not wish to leave my good situation. Then an idea came into his head that if I could obtain the child of a nobleman he could hold it as a hostage.”

“What do you mean?” asked Raston.

“The meaning is not difficult,” said Mrs Jeal, coolly. “Pratt was always in danger of being taken by the police, and his record was so bad that he would have been shown no mercy. He thought if he had Lord Kilspindie’s son, that when he got into trouble he could promise to restore the child on condition that he was set free.”

“A clever idea,” muttered the vicar.

“And a very wild one,” said his lordship. “What influence could I bring to bear towards helping a criminal?”

“What, indeed?” sneered Mrs Jeal. “I assured Pratt that your lordship had no power. But the idea of getting the child as a hostage fascinated him, and he commanded me to steal the boy. For a time I refused. Then the head nurse died and another woman was set over my head. My lady treated me badly—she insulted me; she showed that she mistrusted me. I was angry and I determined to be revenged. I was revenged by obeying Pratt. I took the cup and the child and went away. How I—”

“I know how you stole both the child and the cup,” said Lord Kilspindie.

“Very good, my lord. Well, I went to London with Pratt. He pawned the cup, and on the money we lived for a time. Then he insisted that, as he might some day have to restore the child—we called him Leo,” said Mrs Jeal, with a glance at the young man, “it was necessary that he should be brought up as a gentleman. He knew Mrs Gabriel, whom he had met abroad. He had some power over her—”

“And what is the power?” asked Leo.

Mrs Jeal shook her head. “That has nothing to do with you or with the restoration of your rights, Lord Morven,” she said. “I keep that secret to myself. Pratt had a power over her and used it. He brought the child to her and said he was a natural child. He insisted that she should bring

him up as the son of her brother who had just died abroad. How Pratt knew this I do not know; but then he knew everything. Well, it was done, and Leo was established at the castle. Mrs Gabriel brought him up.”

“Yes,” said Leo, bitterly, “she brought me up.” And he looked back on the long life of petty worry and contemptible tyranny that had been his. “I know all this. But yourself, Mrs Jeal?”

“I remained with Pratt. I was only too glad to get rid of you. I hated you for your mother’s sake—”

“Stop that!” cried Lord Kilspindie, and Mrs Jeal dropped a mocking curtsey.

“At your lordship’s service! However, I found out that Pratt was treating me badly. He went about with other women. He even struck me. I made up my mind to leave him, and I did. I went from one place to another, and finally I came to settle in Colester.”

“Why did you come here?” asked the vicar.

“Oh, your reverence can understand that I wanted to keep an eye on the young lord!” said Mrs Jeal, obsequiously. “He was my property as well as Pratt’s, and when the day came to give him up to his father I wanted my share of the spoil.”

“You shall have nothing,” said Lord Kilspindie, sternly. “You ought to be glad that I do not hand you over to the police!”

She scowled and would have become vituperative, but Raston moved the hand which held the envelope significantly. At once a frightened look came over her face, and she sat down. “I stayed here,” she continued feebly, all the strength having gone out of her, “and saved Pearl Darry from her father. When Pratt came I was afraid; I was always afraid of Pratt. No one knows but myself what a devil he is. He told me to hold my tongue, and I was too frightened of him to disobey. Now I’ll go away from here with the Hales, since Miss Sybil has promised to look after Pearl. I want to put the seas between myself and that man. He terrifies me, and I am not a woman easily terrified.”

“Why did you tell that lie about my having pawned the cup?” asked Leo.

Mrs Jeal shook her head. "I can say no more," she said. Leo would have insisted, but at that moment the servant entered with the parcel of which the woman had spoken. When he went out Mrs Jeal opened this, and spread out the contents on the table.

"Here are the evidences your lordship wished for," she said, glancing at Lord Kilspindie. "This is the dress Lord Morven wore when I took him away, his name is marked—the underclothing is also marked. The coral necklace which your lordship may perhaps recognise as an heirloom. And your lordship may perhaps remember some mark by which Lord Morven can be recognised. There is a mark, if your lordship remembers."

Kilspindie drew his hand across his forehead and thought. "My wife showed me the child one day and pointed out the mark. Yes, three moles in a line just above the elbow of the left arm."

Mrs Jeal nodded, and Leo, hastily stripping off his coat, drew up his sleeve to show the three moles in question. "But I don't need that to assure me that you are my son," said the old nobleman; "you have the eyes of your mother. Yes; you are my son and Lord Morven!"

"I congratulate you, Leo," said Raston, shaking his friend's hand.

"And I have to thank you with all my heart," said the new Lord Morven, "for if it had not been for you this would never have been discovered. I should like to know, however, how it was that Pratt claimed me as a son?"

"That was Mrs Gabriel's fault," said Raston. "She told him that you intended to denounce him to the police. When you discovered him at the castle on that night he was afraid lest you might do so, therefore he said you were his son, so as to put such a betrayal out of your power."

"As if I would ever have betrayed him!" said Leo. "There was good in Pratt."

"There is no good in him," cried Mrs Jeal, fiercely. "How dare you say so? He is a bad and wicked man. I hate him with all my soul! But never will I set eyes on him again. He might kill me as he has often threatened to do. But I have told all; I have proved your identity, Lord Morven, and

you have the cup, my Lord Kilspindie. The—the—letter—” She hesitated. Those present looked at one another. “Should this dangerous woman go free to be a pest to society?” said the vicar, sternly.

“You promised,” said Mrs Jeal, terrified and white to the lips.

Leo looked at her for a moment, then took the letter from the hands of Raston, and gave it to her. “We must keep our word,” he said.

“And you must leave this place at once,” said Mr Tempest, austere.

But Mrs Jeal was paying no attention to them. She had torn open the letter, and was reading the few lines it contained. “I thought so,” she muttered, with a black look. “I wish I could kill him.” She crushed up the paper and put it into her pocket again. Then she walked to the door. “Good-day, my Lord Morven, and good-bye, Lord Kilspindie. You are poor creatures, both of you. Your reverence will now be glad to sell your daughter for a title! As to you, Mr Raston, the girl you love would have been sold to my husband by her mother. I wish you joy, all you men fools.” And with a mocking curtsey Mrs Jeal walked out of the room.

“Let her go. We know the truth,” said Lord Kilspindie. “Leo!”

But Leo, with a nod, was making for the door. “I must tell Sybil,” he said, and vanished.

Half-an-hour later the vicar and his father went in search of him. They found him sitting hand in hand with Sybil in the drawing-room. “It’s really wonderful, wonderful!” she was saying.

“And your father will let me marry you now, darling,” said Leo.

“If you will grant him your pardon,” said the voice of Mr Tempest.

Leo shook the vicar’s hand, kissed Sybil, and Kilspindie smiled, well-pleased.

Chapter XX

Mrs Gabriel’s Secret

Mrs Jeal was not pleased. She was a woman who liked to make mischief, and preferred to leave sorrow rather than joy behind her. In her time she had caused a good deal of misery, and she had always rejoiced over it. But now that she had been forced to undo the evil she had committed, her heart ached. Bad as Pratt was, his wife was worse, and if he had indeed killed her, as he had threatened, he would have been doing a service to mankind. Mrs Jeal was a noxious snake who should have been killed without pity.

On leaving the Vicarage she went home at once and found the cottage empty, as Pearl had not yet returned. Mrs Jeal brought out the letter and again read it. Then she turned white and shivered; finally she put it into the fire, and watched it burn to black ashes. Afterwards she filled herself a glass of brandy and drank it neat. Yet she was an abstemious woman as a rule. There must have been something very terrible in that letter to make her take to strong drink. And what was in it no one in Colester ever found out. Having burned it, Mrs Jeal put it out of her mind as well as she was able. Yet often afterwards she shivered to think of what would have happened had it been opened in the Vicarage library. "A narrow shave that," muttered Mrs Jeal.

Shortly, when she had recovered herself in some measure, Pearl danced into the room. She was now quite her old happy self. The restoration of the cup made her believe that God had forgiven her, and that the Master believed her worthy to be the guardian of the Holy Grail. Raston had arranged the matter in order to save her from further misery. Early on Sunday morning he had taken the cup across the moor and had placed it on the turf altar, knowing that there Pearl, as was her custom, would come and seek it. He had not anticipated such a dramatic scene as had taken place in the chapel. Pearl believed in her own weak mind that the Master had brought the cup down again from Heaven. She was therefore glad and merry, and her singing and dancing annoyed Mrs Jeal.

"Keep quiet, you minx!" she cried savagely, "or I'll have you shut up. Where have you been after making an exhibition of yourself?"

"I have been looking at the cup," said Pearl, gaily. "It is on the altar. I am pleased the Master has given it again into my charge. He has forgiven me, and some day I shall be with Him in Paradise."

It was in Mrs Jeal's wicked mind to tell the truth to the girl. But she knew that Pearl would not accept the explanation. Besides, strange as it may seem, even Mrs Jeal had some compunction in making the girl miserable. The woman was evil to the core, but she must have had some good in her. Therefore she held her tongue on the subject of the cup.

"Where were you so early this morning?" she asked. "I found your bed empty at six o'clock."

"I went to the altar to find the cup brought down by the dear Master," replied Pearl, "and I was watching Sir Frank Hale and his sister going away. They drove with two horses and many boxes. I did not—"

Mrs Jeal jumped up and seized Pearl's arm. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Has Sir Frank Hale gone?"

"And his sister," said Pearl, twisting away with a frightened face. "They have left Colester and gone away—away, oh, far away! Oh! Oh! what are—"

"Hold your tongue," said Mrs Jeal, thrusting her into a chair, "and sit you there till I come back." She hurriedly put on her bonnet and shawl. "If you stir I'll kill you," and she hurried out of the house.

Pearl's news was true. There was no one in the Hale's house save an old woman who was to act as caretaker. She explained that Sir Frank and his sister had left early that morning, and by this time were on their way to London, whence they departed in a few days for the Continent.

"Did they leave no message for me?" asked Mrs Jeal, her face growing black as she clenched her hand.

"No; why should they?" asked the crone, contemptuously. "What have fine folks like them to do with a woman like you?"

"I'll slap your face if you talk to me like that," raged Mrs Jeal, her worst nature coming uppermost.

"I have influence with your master. I can have you turned away."

“No, you can’t,” replied the other hag. “Why I heard Sir Frank say how glad he was to get away without seeing you. He called you a witch. He! He!”

“He did, did he?” muttered Mrs Jeal, furiously. “Now just you—” She was going on to threaten the caretaker when she found the door banged in her face and heard the mocking laughter of the old woman behind it.

Treated thus scornfully, Mrs Jeal stamped and raged like one possessed. “Not a penny,” she muttered, “and he promised—ugh, the miser—the beast! I’ll be even with him. There’s the money for the cup. I can follow. I can—but I want more. Now that I have given up my secret”—her face grew dark as she thought of the burnt letter—“I shall be poor. Ha!” She stopped, and biting her finger looked towards the castle. “I can make her pay. This evening, then. It will be worth more than the cup. One secret is of no use. But I have another—another.”

She shook her fist at the house of Sir Frank, said something about him that was not exactly a blessing, then returned home with her mind made up. She wished to leave Colester, which was now too hot for her. As Sybil would look after Pearl, there would be no difficulty in that quarter. She had saved money, and with what she had got from pawning the cup she was fairly well off for her station in life. But Mrs Jeal was greedy and wanted more. Mrs Gabriel was to be the milch cow this time. Thus it came about that Mrs Gabriel was informed that evening that Mrs Jeal wished to see her at once on important business.

The underlying insolence of the message annoyed Mrs Gabriel, who always prided herself on keeping the lower orders in what she called their proper place, which was under her heel. And Mrs Gabriel was in no mood to be merciful to insolence. Some kind friend had informed her of the discovery of Leo’s true position. She was savagely angry. On account of Pratt she had hated the young man, and later on, when he came to defy her, she had disliked him on his own account. That he should have a title, and that he should marry Sybil Tempest! These things were all gall and bitterness to the haughty woman. She wanted Leo to be her slave, to punish him for Pratt’s misdemeanours. But her slave had escaped, and she could do nothing save sit in the empty room, eating out her heart in the bitterness of impotent anger. She could do nothing. Leo

was gone; Pratt was gone, and she was left a lonely woman. She had not even the comfort of feeling that she could revenge herself.

Feeling in this mood, she was not unwilling to see Mrs Jeal. Here, at least, was someone on whom she could vent her rage. With an imperious gesture she ordered the woman to be admitted, and received her with a stormy brow. Mrs Jeal smiled. She knew that she had the upper hand, and was not to be intimidated by stormy looks. Waiting till the servant had departed and the door was closed, she introduced herself.

“I have to speak to you on important business, my lady,” she said, with assumed meekness, and addressing Mrs Gabriel by a title to which she laid no claim. This was done to accentuate the later part of the interview. Mrs Jeal was quite as well prepared as was Mrs Gabriel to make herself disagreeable. She also was out of tune.

“What business can a woman like you have with me?” demanded Mrs Gabriel, with scorn, and put up a lorgnette to freeze Mrs Jeal with a look.

But Mrs Jeal had borne the looks of even greater ladies than Mrs Gabriel. “It is strange, is it not, my lady?” she sniggered; “but I have something to talk about which will interest your ladyship very much.”

“Indeed!” Mrs Gabriel looked more scornful than ever. “And I believe you have to do with this precious discovery?”

“I have, my lady. Mr Haverleigh is now Lord Morven. I proved his right to the title. You see, my lady, I was a nurse at Kilspindie Castle, and I stole his lordship when a child.”

“How dare you speak to me like this?” cried Mrs Gabriel. “Do you not know that I can have you arrested for such an admission?”

“Oh, no; you cannot, my lady,” retorted Mrs Jeal, coolly; “only Lord Kilspindie can do that, and he has let me go free.”

“Then you leave this place,” said Mrs Gabriel, haughtily. “I’ll have no one in Colester likely to corrupt the morals of the people.”

“Ah, you have great power here, my lady—great power,” mocked Mrs Jeal.

Mrs Gabriel’s blood grew cold as she saw the look in the woman’s eye. “I don’t understand you. Leave the room and the place,” she said.

“All in good time, my lady,” replied Mrs Jeal, calmly, and took a seat. As this was more than Mrs Gabriel could bear, she rose.

“You infamous creature!” she cried furiously. “Out of my house, or I’ll have you thrown out by my servants.”

“My house, my servants, my estates!” sneered Mrs Jeal, keeping an eye on her victim. “Are you sure you can talk like that, my lady?”

“I repeat I don’t understand you,” stammered Mrs Gabriel, sitting down. She was beginning to be afraid. Mrs Jeal would not dare to speak so unless she possessed some information dangerous to the lady of the castle.

“I shall leave the parish to-morrow,” went on Mrs Jeal, coolly. “I have no wish to remain. Miss Tempest will take charge of Pearl, and—”

“What have I to do with all this?” said Mrs Gabriel, sitting up.

“This much: I want your ladyship to give me a thousand pounds.”

“Ah! I thought so. Your mission here is one of blackmail?”

Mrs Jeal shrugged her plump shoulders. “Some people would call it that,” she said, dropping the courtesy title; “and as you have paid blackmail to Pratt all these years, I don’t see why you should not give me a thousand pounds to get rid of me.”

“Pratt!” Mrs Gabriel could hardly speak. “What do you know?—”

“I know that Pratt was married to you in Switzerland when you were Miss Haverleigh, and that you afterwards married Mr Gabriel. The property was left by Mr Gabriel to—’my wife.’ Those were the words used in the will. And you, Miss Haverleigh, were never Mr Gabriel’s wife.”

“It is not true,” muttered Mrs Gabriel, her lips quivering.

“It is true; you know it is!” said the other woman. “A word from Pratt, and you would have been turned out of possession here. He held his tongue so long as you took the child and brought him up. I have held my tongue also, because I was afraid of Pratt. But now he has told my secret about Lord Morven, I want money on my own account, so as to get away from him across the seas.”

Mrs Gabriel drummed on the table. She saw that this woman was too much for her. “What you say is perfectly true,” she said. “I met Pratt in Switzerland when I was a young girl. We were married in Geneva, and I afterwards found out what a brute he was. We parted. Afterwards I heard that he was dead, and regarded myself as free to marry Gabriel.”

“Oh, that was one of Pratt’s jokes,” said Mrs Jeal, easily. “He was always a merry sort of brute. But, you see, I can turn you out.”

“Not without Pratt’s aid,” said Mrs Gabriel, fiercely. “I won’t give up the property to go to the Crown! I love power, and I intend to keep what I have. Pratt made me take that child, and lie about him. He made me introduce him to Colester society, and for years he has taken money from me. After doing all this, do you think I’ll give it up? No; I’ll fight!”

Mrs Jeal laughed unpleasantly. “I can put a weapon into your hand to fight with,” she said; “that is, if you give me a thousand pounds.”

“What do you mean” panted Mrs Gabriel, throwing herself forward and seizing Mrs Jeal by the shoulders. “Can you?—will you?—”

“If you give me a thousand pounds,” replied the other woman, quite unmoved, and looking up with her wicked eyes into Mrs Gabriel’s agitated face.

“What do you know? Quick—tell me!” Mrs Gabriel shook her.

“Don’t shake me,” said Mrs Jeal, tartly, twisting herself free. “If you want to know my secret, I’ll tell it to you—I am Pratt’s lawful wife.”

Mrs Gabriel put her hand to her forehead, and reeled to the end of the room. “Wife—wife!” she muttered. “Then I am not—”

“You are not his wife,” finished Mrs Jeal, coolly. “You never were his wife, seeing he was married to me before he met you. You are Mrs Gabriel, the widow of John Gabriel, and the possessor of this property.”

“Can you—can you prove this?” asked the other woman, gasping.

“I’ll give you my marriage certificate for a thousand pounds,” said Mrs Jeal. “I don’t want it. I’ve had enough of Pratt. Then you can see the church where we were married, and search the register. Oh, it’s all right.”

“Give me the certificate,” Mrs Gabriel stretched out her hand eagerly.

“Not without the thousand pounds,” said Mrs Jeal, resolutely.

“I’ll give you a cheque,” said Mrs Gabriel, hurrying to a writing-desk.

Mrs Jeal shook her head. “Won’t do!” she remarked. “I’ve had to do with ladies before. You might stop that cheque when I had given you what you wanted. No. Come to the bank; give me the money in notes, and I’ll place the certificate in your hands.”

“We can’t go to the bank to-night,” said Mrs Gabriel, frowning.

“Oh! I can wait till to-morrow,” replied Mrs Jeal, coolly.

Mrs Gabriel lost her temper and stamped her foot. “Give me that certificate, or I’ll have you arrested.”

“Oh! So you want me to tell my story in court, my lady.”

“You dare to!”

“Then give me the thousand pounds.” Mrs Jeal was beginning to lose her temper. “Here’s a coil about a trifle,” she said angrily; “instead of asking you for blackmail, as I could have done, I offer to give you freedom. And you won’t pay for it.”

“I will. Here’s a cheque. Come with me to the bank at Portfront to-morrow, and you can cash it in my presence. The certificate—”

“Will be given to you when the notes are in my hand. You can take me to Portfront with my boxes, as I then can catch the afternoon steamer to London. I have given up my cottage, and sold my furniture, and packed my things. To-morrow I’ll take Pearl to Miss Tempest, and then we can drive to the bank.”

“You insolent woman!” raged Mrs Gabriel, but she was obliged to yield. For once in her life she had met a person of her own sex who had as bad a temper as herself. The two women had a royal battle, but in the end victory declared itself on the side of Mrs Jeal, and she departed in triumph.

The next morning Sybil was informed that Mrs Jeal and Pearl were waiting to see her. Guessing the woman’s errand, Miss Tempest descended. Mrs Jeal, perfectly respectful, dropped a curtsy.

“I’ve brought you Pearl, my lady,” she said.

“I am not ‘my lady,’” said Sybil, coldly.

“You soon will be,” smirked Mrs Jeal, “Lady Morven. Well, I don’t grudge it to you. You’re not so bad as some. Here’s Pearl.”

Sybil took the hand of the poor creature, who was shedding tears at the thought of losing Mrs Jeal. “Don’t cry, Pearl, you will be quite happy with me. Remember you have to look after the cup.” Whereat Pearl clapped her hands and was joyful again.

“I shan’t want you any more,” said Pearl to Mrs Jeal; “the Master has given me the cup to look after, and you are too wicked to come near me.”

Mrs Jeal winced, and looked down. “Here’s gratitude,” she sighed. “I’ve loved but one thing in my life, and it turns against me. Well, Pearl, I hope you will be happy. Good-bye.” She paused, and then went on. “And, my lady, I would like to tell you the reason I told that lie about Lord Morven having pawned the cup. It was Sir Frank Hale made me do it.”

“Sir Frank!” echoed Sybil in amazement. “Why should he?”

“It was partly your fault, miss,” said Mrs Jeal, coolly; “he loved you, and he loved his sister. If Lord Morven had married Miss Edith, and you had married Sir Frank, all would have been well. But on that night I brought back the cup he saw me, and got the truth out of me. There he used me for his own ends, so as to get the blame laid on Mr Haverleigh.”

“How wicked of him!” said Sybil, angrily.

Mrs Jeal laughed. “It was his way, my lady. But he has gone away, and will not trouble you again. Neither shall I. Good-bye, my lady. Pearl?”

But Pearl turned away like a cross child. Mrs Jeal had to go without a farewell kiss, and her wicked nature felt the slight. However, she controlled her emotion, and went off to Portfront with Mrs Gabriel. There the cheque was cashed, and Mrs Jeal became possessed of a thousand pounds in Bank of England notes—she would take no other.

“And there’s the certificate,” she said to Mrs Gabriel.

“Thank God!” cried that lady, seizing it, “now I’m free of that man. If he comes to Colester again I’ll put him in gaol. And you, hussey, I’ll have you ducked.”

“I said you would talk like that,” jeered Mrs Jeal. “A lucky thing I have the notes. Good-day, Miss Haverleigh!” And with this last insulting speech, which she knew was untrue, Mrs Jeal went away. What became of her no one ever heard. But creatures like Mrs Jeal always fall on their feet like cats, perhaps because they have so much of the cat nature in them. Mrs Gabriel, rejoicing in her freedom, returned to Colester, and became more domineering than ever. Whether Pratt guessed that his wife would tell her the truth, it is impossible to say. But he never came near Mrs Gabriel again, nor did he write to her. If he had, she would have set to work to trace him out and have him arrested. With the certificate of marriage it was easy for Mrs Gabriel to prove that she had been deceived by a villain, and she would have had no hesitation in making the affair public. Pratt knew this, and knew her savage nature. He therefore kept away, and Mrs Gabriel, unrestrained by any fear, became more of a tyrant than ever.

She refused to come to Leo’s wedding, or even to see him, intimating to Sybil, who called upon her to entreat her to be reconciled to the new

Lord Morven, that she hated both of them. Mrs Gabriel went away to London for six months, and amused herself by hunting for Pratt. In the meantime, Lord Morven and Sybil were married. Also Raston was united to his Peggy on the same day—Mrs Bathurst bore up heroically. Only she regretted that she had not known of Leo's true parentage. He might have married Peggy. "She would grace a title," said Mrs Bathurst.

"And now," said Lord Kilspindie, when the wedding was at an end, "we will go to our own place and take the cup with us."

So it came about that the Pagan Cup, which was the luck of the Grants, was replaced in Kilspindie Castle. There was a brave home-coming for the long-lost son and his bride. And there Lord and Lady Morven lived beloved by all. It was a happy ending to Leo's troubles.

After a time Mr Tempest found that he could not live without his daughter, so he took up his residence in Kilspindie Castle as a kind of chaplain. Pearl was already established at the castle, and constituted herself the guardian of the cup, which in her mad fancy she still called the Holy Grail. No one tried to undeceive her. But there is no danger of the cup being lost again while Pearl looks after it. And that is a good thing for the Grants, since their luck is wound up in its possession. "And who would doubt the truth of the tradition!" said Kilspindie, "seeing that three times the legend has come true."

Raston succeeded Mr Tempest as vicar of Colester, as Mrs Gabriel rather approved of him. Thus it was that Mrs Bathurst came to think herself entitled to interfere in parish affairs as the mother-in-law of the vicar. She and Mrs Gabriel fought bitterly, and still fight over the affairs of the kingdom. Raston and Peggy take no notice. They are perfectly happy.

Pratt wrote one letter to Lord Morven telling him that he was going to lead a new and decent life in South America, and asking the young man not to think too badly of him. As he gave no address, Leo could not answer the letter, so he burnt it and said nothing about it save to his father. "There was some good in Pratt," said Lord Morven.

"Well, yes," assented Kilspindie; "he was a thief, a liar, and a rogue in grain. Nevertheless, I believe he had a sincere affection for you, my dear boy. He certainly did a kind act when he restored to me my son and my cup—"

“And a daughter,” said Sybil, who entered at the moment.

“Who is the light of my eyes,” said Morven, kissing her. “We are happy now, father. After the storm comes the calm.”

“Therefore, remember to give thanks,” said Mr Tempest, pointing to the cup. “I think we can make use of the line on that goblet,” and he read out in English the inscription, “ ‘To the great God who maketh the heart joyful.’ The God of Israel,” said Mr Tempest, solemnly. “Amen, and Amen.”

THE END

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