The Two Carnations

by Marjorie Bowen, 1886-1952

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Chapter I

The Bouquet.

The Assembly Rooms at Bath were full of the brilliant company gathered for the last ball of the season. Though perhaps other spas had eclipsed the complete glory once exclusively possessed, in the days of Beau Nash, by the fashionable town, it was still famous enough and gay enough to satisfy the leaders of the "mode" for at least a few weeks in the year, and to-night many of the best known people from town were among the crowd in the ball-room.

In an alcove intended for card players, but now deserted by them, a young man sat alone, leaning his elbows on a table of pale olive-wood and supporting his face in his hands while he gazed across the anteroom in which the alcove was situated, through the blue velvet curtains looped away from the entrance, and at the groups that passed, during this interval between the dances, across the shining floor of the ball-room. An expression of irritation and anxiety clouded his delicate, sensitive features, and his dark eyes were literally flaming with some suppressed excitement or passion.

It was obvious, both from the extravagant and unusual fashion of his rose-coloured suit and the darkness of his complexion, also from something lithe and impetuous in his movements and carriage, that he was not English; his grace and elegance, the refinement and hauteur of his appearance could only belong to one nation—anyone would have known at a glance that he was French.

He made no attempt to join the company, but remained motionless—yet with a look of swiftness in repose and passion barely reined in—in the alcove, gazing at the ladies and gallants who passed and re-passed behind the velvet curtains.

In all that throng his eyes were for one only—a lady in violet satin who was closely attended by two gentlemen who appeared to be watching every glance and gesture she used. One at least was openly deferential, and both were tender and delicate in their manner. Nevertheless, their complete absorption of their companion, their obvious intention that not even a look of hers should go unnoticed, was plain enough to such an intent observer as the young Frenchman, and when he had watched them pass the entrance for the fourth time he bit his lip passionately and the blood rushed impetuously to his face.

It was impossible to learn from the demeanour of the lady whether or no she enjoyed the presence of her companions; she answered their remarks, waved her fan and laughed, smiled and nodded, with a pleasant air. And not once did she look through the blue curtains to the alcove where the Frenchman sat, watching her.

She was a tall and slender lady, who nevertheless carried her heavy gleaming brocades with great dignity; she wore some beautiful pearls, and at her breast two carnations—a rare flower for so early in the year—one striped, the other pure white.

The music commenced; the Frenchman saw the object of his interest led out to the minuet by the elder of her two companions.

He leant back in his chair so that he could not see them; the blood had receded from his face, leaving it colourless and drawn.

He glanced at himself in the oval mirror hanging above the card-table, and was startled at the change in his countenance.

"This"—he said aloud, and in his own language—"has got to end, one way or another."

He took from his pocket a little ivory notebook encrusted with a coronet in diamonds, and a gold pencil; placing the book on the table he began to write rapidly, as if under the impulsion of a sudden and desperate resolution.

The violins were playing an enchanting and distracting measure; he tore the scrap of paper into pieces and cast them on the floor.

Unable to resist the impulse, he leant forward again and saw the lady in the purple and her partner close together with clasped hands, in the graceful movement of the dance.

He pulled another sheet from his notebook and began to write again, in French, and with a kind of passionate precision.

> "*For Mademoiselle Ursula Brent. Mademoiselle,—Will you be my wife? Will you at least give me an answer to this question that you must know I have been in vain attempting to put to you for the last month? Your brother and his friend, Mr. Wedderburn, have hitherto successfully thwarted me; when I wait on you, you have company; when I meet you at Vauxhall you never are a moment alone—at the reception and the concert it is the same. And now I must soon leave England. To leave in an uncertainty such as is torturing me now would be insupportable to me. I have dared to think that I was not wholly*

displeasing to you—what I can offer you must know, and I shall write to-night to your brother with a formal request for your hand. But I want to know now, at once, what your answer will be. The present situation is unendurable to me, and I cannot hope that I shall be permitted to speak to you alone. If I have not been madly presumptuous, will you give me, before I leave the hall, the white flower you wear? If there is no hope for me, hand me the other, the thing of gaudy colours. This paper cannot contain what I feel. I dare not think of either the joy or misery that awaits me. I believe you know something of my feelings, something of what I have felt since first I saw your face.—Your devoted servant, CHAMPLAIN."

The music had come to an end. The Frenchman folded his note across and tied it with a pink ribbon that he pulled from the fine stitched muslin ruffles at his wrist; then he pulled the bell-rope, and when the attendant came asked for taper and wax.

They were brought, and he carefully sealed the letter on the knot of the ribbon and impressed it with the seal ring he wore on his little finger.

While he was engaged thus, the three people in whom he took so keen an interest passed through the ante-chamber, on their way to the supper-rooms. Two of them did not notice him; but the third—the tall gentleman who had been the lady's last partner—happened to notice the elegant figure in the alcove with the long silver taper-holder in his hand, bending over a little packet on the olive-wood table.

He glanced away again instantly, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that this careful sealing of a letter was an unusual action during a ball, and said nothing to his companions.

So quick had been his observation, and so instantaneous his disguise of it, that the Frenchman, glancing up swiftly at the sound of footsteps, saw the three passing along the opposite wall and never guessed that he had been noticed.

His face darkened. He blew out the taper, thrust the letter into his bosom, and when the room was again empty descended from the alcove.

Carefully and quietly he slipped away from the gay and brilliantly lit room, and out into the gardens that were pretty with coloured lamps under the moon.

The Frenchman followed the neat gravel path until it brought him to a parterte planted with formal beds of roses.

Quickly and skilfully he pulled two of the roses from their bushes and, stepping under the light of a coloured lamp, slipped the stems through the pink ribbon of the note, so that it was firmly fastened to the flowers.

There were not many roses, for it was scarcely June, but such as were in bloom he picked and placed round the two holding the note, so that it was completely hidden by the foliage.

This done, he bound them tightly together with another ribbon from his wrist, and holding the bunch, which was round as the world and the colour of deep blood, he turned again towards the Assembly Rooms.

Not, however, to the principal entrance by which he had left them, but to the back where the footmen, pages, and sedan-chairs waited.

Here it was fairly dark, and for a while he was not noticed as he moved in among the servants till he found the one he sought, a black boy in a fantastic scarlet dress and white turban.

"Timor," he said, and beckoned the negro apart. "I want you—"

The page interrupted, showing the whites of his eyes in a kind of obstinacy and terror.

"You know Timor cannot take messages," he said hurriedly. "You know Sir Harry, he forbid it—"

The Frenchman struck in impatiently. He had already proved the impossibility of bribing Miss Brent's page into disobeying the orders of her brother, Sir Harry, who had all his servants very well in hand.

"I did not ask you to take a message or a note; I ask you to take these flowers to your mistress." He held out the round red bouquet. "Give them to her under her brother's eyes, if you like; I know," he added grimly, "that you will have no chance of giving them to her secretly—and say that they were sent by one who asks her to untie them carefully—because they are rather full blown. Do you understand?"

The negro nodded but hesitated; he was mortally afraid of Sir Harry.

"I do not think I dare, my lord," he began.

"Say you do not know who gave them to you—it is dark enough here, you well might not know me. Do you know me?"

"You are the Marquis de Champlain," whispered the boy, with a grin.

"Well, you need not say that it was I." The Marquis put his hand into his pocket and brought out three gold pieces which he placed in the outstretched black hand; "and as much again when I see those roses in Miss Brent's hands."

The negro hesitated no longer, but, fearful lest he should be seen talking to the Marquis and so jeopardise this errand, snatched at the bunch of red roses and darted off into the darkness.

His cunning brain had instantly decided that his best policy would be absolute openness.

He would give his mistress the flowers before her brother and anyone else who happened to be with her; e would deliver the innocent message that was to accompany them, and rush back for the other three guineas.

He slipped through the open window into the ball-room, which was empty, and then passed into the antechamber, which was empty also, save for a tall gentleman in one of the alcoves who was engaged in picking up some fragments of paper from the floor and fitting them together on the pale olive-wood card-table.

Timor tried to dart away again, for this gentleman was Mr. Wedderburn, his master's inseparable companion and co-guardian, it seemed, of Miss Brent. But the negro was observed before he had time to escape; Mr. Wedderburn swept the fragments together into his hand and descended into the room.

"Ah, Timor," he said in a leisurely tone, "I was looking for you. Will you go to the tiring-room and fetch your lady's shawl? There is a chilly air in the supper-room."

It was the errand he had invented as an excuse to leave the supper-table; now it served a second purpose, for his watchful grey eyes had noticed the bouquet the negro was carrying.

"Who are those flowers for, Timor?" he asked pleasantly, approaching the page.

“My lady, sir,” answered the negro, assuming a stupid expression. “A stranger thrust them into my hands and begged me to give them to my lady.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Wedderburn; “not a very elegant bouquet, nor very rare, but you shall deliver it to Miss Brent. Give it me while you go for the scarf. I will wait here for you.”

The page hesitated, but he had no excuse for refusing; he was, in truth, relieved that he was not scolded for accepting a stranger’s offering, for he stood in even greater awe of Mr. Wedderburn than of Sir Harry.

“I will wait for you here,” repeated that gentleman, still pleasantly, but in a tone of command.

The page surrendered the roses and left.

As soon as he was alone Mr. Wedderburn returned to the alcove, hastily unbound the bouquet, disclosed the letter fastened to the stems of the two centre flowers, removed it and tied the roses tightly together again.

He had not the least doubt as to the writer of this note; the paper matched the crumpled fragments he had picked up from this very floor, the ribbon was the colour of those the Marquis de Champlain was wearing, and his coat of arms—three stars and three greyhounds—impressed the red wax which matched that in the taper-holder the Marquis had left on the card-table.

“He is not so clever after all,” muttered Mr. Wedderburn, with a dark face. He put the letter carefully in the inner pocket of his red velvet coat and returned to the entrance to wait for Timor, who soon appeared carrying a white wrap edged with swansdown.

Mr. Wedderburn gave him the roses, and without a word preceded him to the supper-room where Miss Brent and her brother sat at a little round table with a couple of other ladies.

Ursula Brent greeted him with a smile.

“So you have brought my cloak? La, Mr. Wedderburn, I told you it was unnecessary. And here is Timor.”

“There is a mighty draught here,” said Mr. Wedderburn calmly putting the wrap round her shoulders. “And Timor has a bouquet for you from an unknown admirer.”

The page presented the roses.

“A gentleman gave them to me in the dark, my lady,” he said; “and bid Timor ask you be careful how you untie them, for they are full blown.”

A deep colour flooded Ursula’s fair face, as she laid the roses on her lap.

“Thank you, Timor,” she answered lightly. “This is a strange, though flattering, tribute.”

The page escaped to demand the other half of his reward, and Mr. Wedderburn took the empty seat beside Miss Brent.

“I wonder where the Marquis de Champlain is,” he remarked carelessly.

“Why should you wonder?” she returned carelessly, and it seemed joyously.

“Because, madam, since the season began he has never been so long absent from your side,” he answered pleasantly.

She raised her fine brows.

“Are you jealous?” she asked smiling; her fingers were playing with the pink ribbon binding the thorny stems of the roses. “I do not think you like the Marquis,” she added with a challenging directness.

“I do not trust him, madam,” he replied calmly.

Her blue eyes darkened, and her mouth hardened.

“You do not know him,” she said.

Her brother turned from his companion.

“Are you talking of the Marquis de Champlain?” he asked. “For here he comes.”

Ursula looked swiftly round and saw the Marquis entering the supper-room. As he passed her he bowed, and glanced at the roses on her lap; then he raised his eyes, and they met hers in one quick, thrilling look.

Chapter II

The Two Carnations.

Ursula had danced, under her brother’s orders, twice more with Mr. Wedderburn before she contrived, under the plea of fatigue, to escape to the dowager who was her chaperon for the evening, and there, under shelter of the spreading skirts of that lady who was deep in a game of faro, to unfasten her cherished bunch of roses.

She was not in the least uncertain as to who had sent them to her, and she untied the pink ribbon with a tremble of expectancy. At last he had found a means to write to her; at last he had been able to do what her instinct told her he had been endeavouring to do since she had first met him at St. James’s—outwit her brother and his ally, Mr. Wedderburn.

Seated on the low gilt settee, out of sight for once of Sir Harry, she felt a delicious sense of freedom and relief, and as the roses fell apart on her lap her heart was beating fast with joy and anticipation.

The music was playing a coranto; the sound of it came enchantingly into the card-room, together with the swish of skirts and the tap of high heels. Ursula sorted out the roses with delicate fingers. Nothing but the deep glossy leaves met her intent gaze.

A chill of disappointment ran through her. She searched again—nothing.

The dowager looked round, to see her seated with her lap full of scattered red roses.

“La, child!” she cried; “what is this?”

Ursula smiled; she was very pale.

“Nothing, madam; they are but some flowers I—thought to wear—”

The old lady returned to her play, and Ursula picked the roses up one by one and bound them together again. Had he sent them? Surely his glance at them when he saw them on her lap was sufficient without the evidence of the pink ribbon. What then did his message mean?

She noticed that her violet brocade and the shining floor were covered with crimson petals; the message had been literally true—the roses, though the first of the year, were overblown and falling. Had she the meaning now? A shock sent the blood to her heart, and made her lips tremble. Was it possible that he meant that this was the end of the season and of his attendance, that his feelings were dying with the early roses, that he took an insolent adieu of her with these flowers and this message?

She sat quite still with the bruised bouquet in her hands, and the petals all about her, not seeing the card players nor hearing the dance music.

It had swept over her, with a rush of agony, that no one had ever spoken any good to her of the Marquis de Champlain.

Her brother openly, and Mr. Wedderburn indirectly, and with a calm carelessness more convincing than Sir Harry's downright abuse, had always referred to the young Frenchman as a trifler, a mere frivolous man of fashion, for ever playing the cavalier servant to some beauty, a man known in Paris as a ruined rake and a hanger-on of wealthy relations; and everyone else who had ever mentioned him to her had done so slightingly, with some cold reference to foreigners in general and Frenchmen in particular.

These things had had no effect on Ursula; she did not believe them, and she had her own idea of the Marquis and her own instinctive conviction of how he stood in his own country. But now suddenly, as she sat holding his falling roses, all these words and glances returned to her with bitter force—even little remarks that she thought she had forgotten.

Was it possible that she, in ignoring all these warnings, and permitting—aye, encouraging—the young Frenchman's attendance through a whole season, had been preparing a great humiliation for herself? Had all her private and intense convictions been wrong, and were the hateful warnings, that she had despised and laughed at, right?

The horrid reflection came to her that she knew nothing of him. What proof had she that he was incapable of laughing at her and making her laughable? How could she tell that this message—she blushed crimson as the fateful roses themselves to think how public it had been—was not a delicate insult, telling her she was getting too direct and sincere in her glances and favours and that for his part he was tired?

She rose with a great bitterness in her heart and left the flowers on the settee; her next dance was to be with the Marquis. She resolved she would not stand up in the middle of the long room with him, to be observed and gossiped over—and he could not have meant anything but a slight by sending her so crudely-made a bouquet composed of common and dying flowers hastily picked; so she called them now in her angry thoughts, though they had seemed beautiful as love itself when he had glanced at them on her lap.

When the Marquis came to claim her hand for the minuet he found her deep in conversation with her brother, and received a cold excuse to the effect that she was tired.

He saw that she was not carrying the roses, and he left her with a sad and sinking heart.

Meanwhile Mr. Wedderburn, unusually pale, but also with an unusually brilliant sparkle in his fine grey eyes, approached Miss Brent.

"So you have abandoned your bouquet?" he said.

"Why should I carry it?"

"You did—for a couple of hours, madam."

She bit her lip.

"Well, I was tired of it." She hated this man, but the Marquis was standing near, observing her, and therefore her usual courtesy deepened into friendliness. She smiled coquettishly and waved her large lace and chicken-skin fan.

"Do you know who sent it to you, Miss Brent?" he asked directly.

She looked at him straightly, lifting her head with a proud little movement that shook back the long fair powdered curls from her shoulders.

"You know all I know. You heard what Timor said."

His eyes were as steady as hers.

"The message and the gift," he answered calmly yet sternly, "were impertinent; that is why I asked, for I should like to tell the sender so."

So he had noticed it. It had not been only her own foolish fancy.

She went very pale, but she nerved herself to answer lightly.

"I did not consider it impertinent," and added, smiling: "Neither am I in need of a champion, sir."

He took the rebuff in silence. After a little he asked her if she would dance this set with him.

She steadied herself not to show her anger.

"I have danced with you three times already, sir; and for this figure I was promised to the Marquis de Champlain, but have excused myself because I am very fatigued."

Again he was silent, but not as if he was blank of words but as if he had too much to say for the time and place.

Yet, silent as he was, the sense of his presence was acutely with Ursula; she did not find it easy to forget him, even though she was not looking at him and despite the fact that her heart was full of another.

Mr. Steven Wedderburn was not a man belonging to her set or to the fashion of town, but a City merchant of a wealth so princely that he could have bought up all Miss Brent's noble acquaintances and still been a rich man.

He was by birth as good as she—the descendant of an aristocratic house; but she affected to despise him as a tradesman, and certainly, she thought, beside such a fine gentleman as the Marquis he appeared commonplace indeed.

But she was looking at him with prejudiced eyes; there was, in reality, nothing either commonplace or ordinary about the vivid personality of Steven Wedderburn, and he had naturally the "grand manner," both in the City, where he was a power, and in the fashionable world into which Sir Harry Brent had introduced him. He was one of the richest commoners in England, and in his person graceful and charming, and, though habitually reserved and stately in his manner, of a quickness of movement, observation and understanding that betrayed inner and passionate fires, perhaps inner and passionate recklessness.

But Ursula saw none of these things; to her he was only a man from another world to whom her brother was under obligations as to money, and whom he was

desirous of her marrying for this same money; a man who quietly but persistently courted her by look, word, and act, and who left her in no doubt as to how he intended to use the immense influence he had acquired over Sir Harry, both through the purse and the intellect.

Accordingly, she hated him, and often vowed in that heart that was wholly given to another that never—no, never—should he ever come even to touching her hand with more warmth than a chance cavalier of an evening.

She endured him because she had to endure her brother's friend; till now she had endured him cheerfully, for she had been waiting for the Marquis to give the signal—to carry her off openly before the disappointed schemers.

But now, when her first doubts of her undeclared lover were poisoning her heart, she felt not mere contempt and half-amused aversion to Steven Wedderburn, but an active hate, such as one might feel to a despised enemy who suddenly gains an ascendancy.

He, sitting immobile and quiet in his glowing red velvet, was fully aware of the feeling that held her silent; with the sure and sharpened instincts of a great passion he knew the thoughts and sensations of the object of his constant adoration. He knew that Ursula loved the Marquis, perhaps as strongly as he, Wedderburn, loved her; he knew that this love was returned, and he was resolved that his passion should override their two passions opposing it.

He looked at the pale proud profile, the slender shape of the silent woman beside him; he looked at the haughty figure of the young Marquis with whom she should have been dancing, standing equally pale and silent against the opposite wall watching the dancers with clouded eyes, and he put his hand to his heart and felt, under the stiff velvet of his coat, the shape of the stolen letter in his inner pocket.

He had read the letter through twice and knew almost every word of it by heart, but he felt not a spark of pity for either of those whom he had wronged, only a deep and exulting triumph. Presently he rose and took his leave, and crossed over to the only other lady in the room in whom he had the least interest—Sophia Compton, the younger daughter of a younger son, dowerless, not opulent in beauty, clever and enamoured of him; this last fact that he had coldly divined and coldly made use of was the one thing that attracted him to her; not because of flattered vanity or because he designed to make a fool of her—indeed, his whole being was too occupied with Ursula for that—but because she-was a clever woman and able to be of service to him in a world where he had few friends.

He led her out to the minuet, and when it was over he escorted her into one of the deep arched recesses of the windows, and said, fixing on her his deep, resolute, and sparkling eyes:

"Miss Compton, I wish you to obtain for me that striped carnation that Miss Brent is wearing."

She looked at him swiftly and her lip curled.

"Still on that chase?" she asked mockingly and unfurled her black lace fan between them.

"You know," he answered calmly, "that it is not one I am likely to forgo."

Sophia smiled—not pleasantly; her bronze-coloured hair glittered even through the thick powder, and her dark brown eyes glittered behind her thick lashes.

“All the world can see that she is in love with the Marquis de Champlain.”

“I know.” He looked at her in a quiet, masterful fashion. “Will you procure for me the striped carnation?”

“Is she not more likely to give it to you?” she taunted him.

“Will you do this for me?” he repeated.

She knew she would; she knew she always did these little services for him; always gave him advice, news and hints. She was playing a long game; she meant to win him in the end; she was quite sure that she would—quite sure that he would never win Ursula Brent; and she was prepared to do anything even to help him in his quite useless pursuit of the other woman. It was a means, the only one she had at present, of keeping him interested in her; if she refused to be of use to him she was well aware that she would lose even the small amount of regard he had for her. She laughed gaily and rather cynically, as if she was humouring a foolish boy, and presently went over to Miss Brent who was still seated where Mr. Wedderburn had left her, but with her brother at her side, and gracefully sank on the red rout seat next her.

“La, Miss Brent!” she exclaimed at once, smoothing out her rich satin skirts, “what a curious flower you are wearing! Why, I have been looking for just such a one to copy in my needlework. May I beg for that when the ball is over?”

Ursula did not like Sophia Compton, but she was instinctively obliging to every one, and now too dispirited to care about anything; since she had refused to dance with the Marquis she was tired of the ball, weary of everything.

“Why, you can have it now, madam, and with pleasure,” she answered politely, detaching it from her bodice. “I f ear it is somewhat crushed by my laces.” Sophia thanked her carelessly, and after a decent interval returned to Mr. Wedderburn, to whom she gave the bloom with a languid air and a scornful little smile.

He thanked her gravely.

It was getting late; the yawning gallants and sleepy ladies were departing, the musicians were packing away their instruments in the gallery, and the pearl-coloured light of dawn was slipping between the heavy curtain of the tall windows.

Ursula and her brother rose to take their leave.

Mr. Wedderburn, from the other end of the room, watched them; he held the striped carnation behind his back.

From the ante-chamber came the Marquis de Champlain looking weary and dull; at sight of Mr. Wedderburn he drew up and for a second the rivals faced each other.

“Where is Sir Harry?” asked the Marquis haughtily. “I have a letter for him.”

He held it out as he spoke.

“I will be your messenger, my lord,” answered Mr. Wedderburn serenely, “or, if you wish, you may deliver it yourself. Sir Harry is over there with Miss Brent.”

With the slightest inclination of the head the Marquis was turning on his heel when Mr. Wedderburn, looking after him with smiling eyes of hate, said:

“One moment, my lord. I have a pleasant duty to perform; Miss Brent commanded me to give you this flower.”

He held out the striped carnation that the Marquis had asked might be his answer if his suit was refused.

Chapter III

The Schemers.

Steven Wedderburn came home with Sir Harry and Ursula and instead of leaving them, as usual, at the door of their fashionable house, he asked the young baronet for a few minutes' conversation. Sir Harry, weary as he was, made an effort to be affable, and asked him up into the great withdrawing-room. Ursula gave them both the barest goodnight and swept upstairs to her room; she was thinking of one thing only, the fact that the Marquis de Champlain had, for the first time since she had known him, left without a personal farewell to her. She associated his silent disappearance from the ball-room with his message and his flowers, and the terrible conviction that he was slighting her was gaining greater mastery over her heart.

Mr. Wedderburn, hat in hand, watched her up the stairs, then followed her brother into the magnificent room that looked chill and forbidding in the blue light of dawn that poured through the unshuttered windows on the gilt furniture, the circular mirrors, the brocade and velvet hangings.

The baronet, a fair and handsome man whose aristocratic countenance was marred by a look of dissipation and indifference, flung himself along a sofa drawn up near the bare empty hearth, and, with difficulty repressing a yawn, said:

"What is your business at this hour, Wedderburn?" And he glanced at the ormolu clock on the chimney-piece that was pointing to near four.

Mr. Wedderburn, composed, alert and with the air of one sure not only of himself but of the man with whom he was dealing, answered quietly:

"You have a letter, Sir Harry, from the Marquis de Champlain given to you before you left the Assembly Rooms."

The baronet put his white hand into the gold-braided pocket of his claret-coloured cloak.

"Yes," he said indifferently, "I think it is a demand for Ursula's hand—I have been expecting it for some time. But it was a strange moment to choose."

He drew out the letter and began leisurely breaking the seal.

"I have the fellow to that epistle here," remarked Mr. Wedderburn, and he laid on the velvet arm of the sofa the note that he had found among the roses.

Sir Harry sat up, and some of the indifference left his face. "How did you get that?" he asked.

Mr. Wedderburn told him, briefly.

"By the la!" cried the baronet softly. He took the two letters, spread them out on his knee and read them both through carefully.

That addressed to him was a formal and rather haughty request for the hand of Miss Brent; he read this over twice, then intently re-read that intended for his sister.

"What are we going to do?" he asked rather helplessly.

Mr. Wedderburn, still standing, still serene and leisurely, told him of the incident of the carnation.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Sir Harry. "You have gone monstrous far, Wedderburn."

That gentleman gave him a glance that was partly contempt, partly amusement.

"This match"—he pointed to the papers on the other's knee—"is not desirable for Miss Brent?"

"You know that."

"You would never permit it?"

"No. Who is the fellow? A foreigner, an adventurer for all I know."

Steven Wedderburn interrupted with a sudden fire.

"No need for these pretences with me, Sir Harry!" he cried. "The Marquis is well enough and a good match, but it does not suit you or me that he should marry your sister, and we are resolved to prevent it."

Sir Harry laughed sullenly.

"It would be easy enough," he said with a touch of malice, "if she did not favour him."

"I am well aware that she favours him," was the stern answer, "but that is not the question. She is going to be my wife, either by the ways of honour or dishonour, faith or unfaith. And you are pledged to help me."

The last words, though quietly uttered, were like a threat, and the baronet coloured faintly.

"You can be sure of me," he said, lowering his gaze.

"I hope so," returned Mr. Wedderburn, fixing his powerful eyes on the younger man. "I have waited long enough and now I must speak plainly," he continued. "Our acquaintanceship has been in the nature of a bargain"—his lip curled—"and you must forgive me if I use tradesmen's terms, Sir Harry, or if I put things crudely. Briefly, I mean to marry your sister or—"

"Ruin me?" finished the baronet, and his face showed somewhat ghastly in the increasing light of the spring day.

"Yes," said Mr. Wedderburn calmly. "You can never repay, I think, what you owe me?"

"No."

"You cannot without my help continue living in the fashionable world. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"If I withdraw my support, your debts would overwhelm you, and you would have nothing before you but suicide or the Fleet—am I right?"

"Yes."

"Therefore you will help me by every means in your power?"

"Yes." The word came heavily. Harry Brent did not gild the situation. He did not pretend to himself that he was settling a match for his sister that would make her the most envied woman in London. He saw that, for his own care and security, he was selling Ursula to a man she did not love.

He looked down helplessly at the two letters.

"What am I to do?"

"Answer the Marquis's letter—say the lady is already promised."

"And this?" He took up the note stolen from the roses.

“That she must never see. She must think he did not care. Champlain is leaving England in a few days, and Ursula’s favour will very soon turn to hatred, and she will be glad to cover her mortification by the match you will propose to her.”

Sir Harry rose.

“I have no final authority over her,” he said. “Remember that, Wedderburn; she has as much courage, as much spirit, as much daring as either of us.”

“I know,” smiled Mr. Wedderburn. “I know.”

“And if she dislikes you, as I fear she does, not all our tricks can persuade her to marry you.”

“She can be conquered,” said Steven Wedderburn; “and I can conquer her.”

Sir Harry moved restlessly to the window.

“You do not know her as well as I,” he said, staring out at the empty street; “and I fear that we make a compact that will recoil on our own heads.”

“Leave that to me,” said Mr. Wedderburn. “You at least shall not suffer—if I marry her under these terms I take the risks. Give me those letters.”

The baronet handed them, and Steven put them carefully inside the inner pocket of his coat.

“Now write to the Marquis,” he added.

Sir Harry came slowly from the window and seated himself before a heavy desk of ormolu and tulip wood that stood in one corner; the room was now light from end to end, and the first sparkles of sunlight were glittering in the gilt appointments of the chamber. Sir Harry glanced round the gorgeous apartment—everything unpaid for or paid for with Wedderburn’s money!

“What shall I write?” he asked wearily, drawing a sheet of gilt-edged paper towards him.

Steven crossed over to him, and stood leaning against the wall looking down at him.

“I will tell you,” he said.

The baronet headed the paper—“To the Most Noble the Marquis de Champlain”—and waited.

“Write this,” dictated Mr. Wedderburn. “‘Monseigneur,—I am honoured by your request for my sister’s hand in marriage. I have also read the note conveyed to Miss Brent at the ball to-night, and at her request I am penning this reply to both.’ Have you got that?”

The baronet wrote reluctantly.

“‘When I tell you that the lady is already promised in marriage, and that the match will be shortly announced, you will understand that your letters were painful to me and to her, and will, I am sure, Monseigneur, excuse the lady from replying personally. I trust you will believe that we are duly sensible of the honour your lordship offers us and that we shall always be your lordship’s sincere well-wishers…Monseigneur, your obedient servant.’”

Sir Harry wrote silently, then paused when it came to the signature.

“On my honour!” he cried, “I cannot send this—lie!”

“Sign,” said Mr. Wedderburn curtly.

The younger man rose before the desk and flung down the quill; his face was haggard beneath the powder and the patches, and his pomaded curls hung dishevelled on his shoulders.

“I will go no further,” he muttered; “I wish that I had not gone so far.”

“Oh, weakness!” mocked Mr. Wedderburn. “What will this cowardice gain you now?”

“Cowardice!” repeated Sir Harry wildly; “nay, not cowardice, but honour holds me back!”

“Honour bids you pay your debts to me and complete the bargain we have struck—for the other kind of honour it is too late, Sir Harry, unless you disclose your position to the world and spend to-morrow night in a sponging-house.”

Sir Harry gazed into the passionate, masterful face of the speaker and his own quivered.

“Aye,” he answered hoarsely, “perhaps it would be better if I did—then Ursula could marry this man who loves her, and whom she cares for; but I cannot. You are right—I am a coward.”

He took up the quill in a trembling hand and signed his name to the still wet letter.

“I think Ursula hates you,” he said wearily; “how are you going to overcome that?”

For the first time that evening the dark face of Steven Wedderburn faltered in its haughty calm.

“Does she—*hate* me?” he asked, and his voice shook a little.

“I think she does.”

“She has no cause.”

“You stand between her and the man she—loves—aye, I truly think loves. That is enough. And if she knew of this night’s work—oh, heavens, she would have cause enough to hate you!”

“She must never know.”

“I am not likely to tell her of my disgrace,” was the bitter answer.

“She must never know,” repeated Mr. Wedderburn, “and it will be the Marquis, not me, whom she will hate.”

Sir Harry folded up the letter.

“We do her and this young man a great wrong,” he said.

“Who knows?” answered Steven. “He is a shallow young rake of a slender fortune; can he give her what I can? Can he care for her as I can? Give me the letter, I will deliver it at his lodgings on my way back to my own.”

“You are sure that he is leaving England?” asked Sir Harry. “What if they should chance to meet and speak and uncover this plot?”

“I am sure that he is leaving England; I inquired at his Embassy and found that he was under orders to attend the Court. Besides, they have no chance to speak, nor will they wish to; both will be too utterly ruled by pride.”

“God forgive us,” said Sir Harry unsteadily as he sealed and directed the letter. “I hope that this may be for her ultimate happiness—before Heaven I do—for she is very dear to me.”

Mr. Wedderburn took the letter from him.

“Do you think,” he demanded with controlled passion, “that I would stoop to this if I did not think that I could make her happy—happier than she could be with this Frenchman?”

“You rely on your wealth,” answered the young baronet; “you intend to buy her as you have bought me.”

“Not entirely.”

“But it is the money that makes you confident, that gives you the assurance of victory—the cursed money—and Heaven knows you may be right! She is fond of luxury, of all wealth can bring, and that is why you feel so sure of her.”

“I think I can make her happy,” repeated Mr. Wedderburn. “I believe that I can make her forget this young gallant. I *know* that I can satisfy her every need, and in this fashion I justify what I do now.”

Sir Harry looked at him straightly. “You think that you can make her *love* you?” he asked.

A spasm passed over Steven’s handsome features, and his eyes flashed brightly.

“I think I can,” he replied.

“On this foundation?”

“On this foundation; have I not said that I can justify myself?”

“If you win—in the end—her heart as well as her hand, then you will have indeed justified yourself; but how shall I make *my* honour clean again?”

Mr. Wedderburn smiled.

“Your honour is not in my keeping, Sir Harry; I play with high stakes to gain my prize, your sister. From the first I told you my object and the means I proposed to gain it. I told you the price I was prepared to pay for your help and you accepted it; if you have any qualms now, it is not for me to soothe them.”

“You put the brutal truth—brutally,” smiled Sir Harry, pale to his disarranged side curls.

Mr. Wedderburn picked up his fawn-coloured roquelaure, his beaver, and his long white doeskin gloves from the chair where he had flung them.

“I warned you that I should use no polished terms,” he remarked. “You must forgive my City breeding, Sir Harry.”

The baronet laughed.

“You are a strange creature!” he exclaimed. “Why do you love her so? You must have had your choice of women as fair, as good, as accomplished, have you not? Come, Mr. Wedderburn, why do you love her so?”

Mr. Wedderburn fastened his roquelaure.

“That is not for discussion here,” he said; his magnificent grey eyes had a flash in them and there was a kind of flash too in his voice. “It is my own affair,” he added haughtily and fiercely.

“You hardly know her,” persisted Sir Harry languidly and curiously. “She might be a shrew or a fool for all you can tell. How can a woman be judged at routs and parties, at Vauxhall or Bath, simpering behind the tea-table or stitching roses into a useless sampler? You do not know my sister; have you thought of that, Mr. Wedderburn? Perhaps the prize is not so wonderful!”

Mr. Wedderburn looked at him with a kind of fiery coldness.

“Why do you decry the wares you have to sell?” he asked.

The baronet’s hands flew to his sword.

“By heaven,” he began, flushing scarlet.

“Do not be a fool,” interrupted Mr. Wedderburn, putting on his hat. “I have not insulted you, you insulted me by speaking so. What devil of perversity possesses you?”

Sir Harry sank on to the chair before the desk.

“You speak as if you despised me for what I have done,” he said hoarsely.

“Perhaps I do.”

Mr. Wedderburn was drawing on his gloves and gazing at the bright sunlight in the street.

“We will meet later in the day,” he added pleasantly. “Au revoir.”

Sir Harry made no answer, nor did he look up.

Mr. Wedderburn left the house quietly and turned his steps to Monsieur de Champlain’s lodgings, where he roused the servants and left Sir Harry’s letter.

Chapter IV

Sundered Lovers.

The Marquis de Champlain sat in his lodgings holding Sir Harry’s letter in his hand, his untasted chocolate at his side, his face worn and his expression bitter.

Tumultuous and intense trouble and wrath surged in his heart; presently the anguish of his loss, the pain of his disappointment would be uppermost, but now the sense of outraged pride was predominant, and he felt a hot fury towards the woman he loved who had coquetted with him for a season only to so insultingly reject his offer of his name and heart.

How successfully she had done it! Though they had never had a moment alone, yet she had managed to especially distinguish him among the cavaliers who attended her, convey to him in a thousand subtle ways, by a glance, by an intonation, by a movement of her fan, that he was agreeable to her; nay more, that she understood his feelings and returned them.

So at least the Marquis had believed, and so firm was his conviction that she cared for him that even now with her brother’s formal, even cruel, note in his hand, and the shrivelled carnation lying on the table at his side, he could scarcely credit her complete and contemptuous rejection of him. If it had not been for the gift of the carnation he would have believed that there had been trickery, but that she had sent him the flower convinced him that she had both received and read his note.

He writhed at the recollection of Mr. Wedderburn’s face as he had handed him the fatal flower. Surely, he thought bitterly, she might have spared him that, cold coquette though she was, just as she might have sent him an answer in her own hand instead of showing his letter to her brother as she must have done.

She was an accomplished jilt indeed, he thought, as he reviewed those delicate but decided marks of her favour on which he had built such high hopes—and how like a fool he had fallen into the snare of her smiles and glances! She was no doubt at this very moment laughing over his discomfiture with her maid or her brother,

ridiculing his presumption and his vanity. And she was “promised,” her brother said, to someone else—Mr. Wedderburn, of course.

The Marquis found his chance to sneer in this reflection; he set his nobility, his old estates far above the vast wealth of Mr. Wedderburn. She was selling herself after all, for he was very sure that she did not love this man, and he could scorn her. He had played the finer part in this comedy of theirs—better to be a sincere fool than a false wit—and as such she had proved herself. He would not regret her. In his own country he would forget the fair deceptive face, the eyes of English hazel, the locks of English brown, the pale vermilion lips.

He rose up impetuously and tore Sir Harry’s letter into a hundred fragments. Then his mood changed. “Oh, my darling, my darling, but I do love you!” he cried to himself, and wildly resolved to seek her out, to tell her that this thing could not be, that she cared for him, that she must care for him, that he would make her care, that neither her brother nor Mr. Wedderburn mattered in the least, and that only from her own lips would he take his dismissal.

Then his glance fell on the striped carnation, shrivelled now and brown, and his pride reasserted itself.

With an effort he pulled himself together. She had had her season’s amusement, and both season and amusement were over now; he would play his part elegantly to the end, leaving her to retire in the blaze of her wealthy marriage. At least she should not see his wound; he could still show a smiling front—to Sir Harry and all of them.

He rang for his valet and his barber, and was splendidly attired, powdered, perfumed, curled and adorned.

Then, a proud figure in violet velvet encrusted with crystal and silver embroidery, with his black beaver at a martial cock, and his ebony cane under his arm, he went forth into the streets of Bath, and straight to the fashionable promenade where he knew he would find Miss Ursula Brent.

The day was mild and lovely; there were flowers everywhere, in the hats of the ladies, in their fichus, in the cravats of the gentlemen, in the flat rush baskets of the hawkers, in the windows and balconies; the sky was superbly blue and the mad golden sparkle of spring danced in the air.

But the Marquis de Champlain found it all blackness; he hated Bath, he hated England, he felt as if all these gay, smiling, well-dressed people were mocking and gibing at him; he longed fiercely to be away from them all, to be back in Paris or Versailles among his own nation.

But first he must see Ursula Brent, and show her that he could take her rebuff with a smile.

He had not walked far before he perceived her, and at the sight all his anger died, and his heart almost stopped with the sheer pain the thought of losing her brought, at the absolute anguish of the near parting that would be for ever.

In that moment he wished he had never put his fortune to the test, not for his pride’s sake, but because if he had not he could still have remained near her; better her false glances than never to see her. He knew her now for a heartless coquette; but still he loved her—he could not disguise from himself that he loved her as much as ever.

She came on, unconscious of him. She wore a white muslin dress that flowed in frills and ruffles from her slender waist to her tiny sapphire-coloured shoes; she carried a mauve silk parasol with a heavy fringe, and the light and shade flickered all over her gently stepping beauty.

The Marquis stood still, waiting for her. The impetuous rush of his romantic passion towards her was checked by the sight of her two companions, Sir Harry and Mr. Wedderburn. He hated them in the same measure that he loved her, and this hate nerved him to await them calmly.

When she was only a few paces away she saw him, and the colour flew into her face.

He bowed very low; the two gentlemen saluted him. Mr. Wedderburn's greeting was pleasant and careless, but Sir Harry blushed almost as deeply as his sister. Ursula was the first to speak.

"Ah, my lord," she said, "why did you not take leave of me last night?"

He looked at her straightly. Did she then still intend to mock him?

His gaze seemed to discompose her. She added hurriedly:

"Are you coming to Lady Grantham's fête this afternoon? Of course you are."

"No, madame," he answered quietly.

Ursula paled, but smiled and said gently: "Please, do—it will increase my pleasure."

The Marquis felt the blood rush angrily to his heart. So she thought that he was still her plaything, that he would still loiter at her side and allow her to exhibit him to all Bath as a hopeless admirer of her beauty.

"Madame, I am returning to London to-day," he answered sternly.

"So soon?" remarked Mr. Wedderburn, putting up his glass.

Ursula took no notice of him; her eyes were fixed on the Marquis; it seemed to her that a great disaster was about to befall.

"To London?" she repeated.

"To-morrow I leave for Paris," he answered gravely. "I will therefore make my adieux now…messieurs…madame."

He bowed again, once to the gentlemen, once to her, and turned on his heel, and so left her before all Bath.

"A mighty cool leave-taking," remarked Mr. Wedderburn; but Sir Harry was dumb with shame.

Ursula noticed neither the comment nor her brother's silence; the world was suddenly blotted with black, hideous, grotesque. He *had* then meant to slight, nay more than slight, to *insult* her!

First by his bouquet of over-blown roses and his message, now by this unheard of farewell. This sudden departure for his own country was to humiliate and mortify her.

And there is no more cruel humiliation for a proud and sensitive nature than to find one whom they have trusted and believed in prove himself unworthy before those who have always vowed that belief and trust were misplaced.

This had happened; before her brother and his friend the Marquis had proved himself the very man they had always declared he was—a trifler, a heartless man of fashion who had been amusing himself—one who, perhaps (and this was the

most terrible thought of all), had discovered that she was no heiress, was indeed without any dower.

Ursula raged inwardly; she persuaded herself that she had never cared for him, that now she hated him; she resolved fiercely that she would so play her part that no one should guess that it was she who had been jilted.

How she contrived to get through the morning she never knew; she heard her own voice as if it were a stranger's voice very far away; she saw the moving figures about her through a blur and a mist; the sunshine was dark, and she could not see the flowers.

At last she reached home, at last gained her own room, dismissed her maid, and was alone.

She flung off her hat and fichu and cast herself on the floor, hiding her face in her hands, and, resting them against a frail little satin chair, she broke into a storm of bitter weeping.

She felt that life was over for her; that nothing that happened now could matter at all. If it had not been for her outraged pride that cried aloud to her for help and healing she would willingly have contemplated death.

As it was, she felt that the only object in living was to hide her wound from the world and disguise her humiliation from the curious.

"After to-day," she moaned between her sobs, "I will never weep again—what is there to weep for? My heart is dead and empty; these are the last tears I shall ever shed; alas, that they should be for a worthless man!"

Then her love began to show its head again and to justify him. Was he worthless? The fact that he did not love her did not show him so—perhaps he had never credited her with being so simple as to be sincere—he came from a different country that had a different code—had she not been warned against foreigners?

What right had she to assume that because he had been her cavalier of the season he wanted her as his love and wife for ever? Was it his fault if she had misread his glances? Yet the cruelty of his final rejection of her, the curt farewell before all Bath, his message last night!

He was vain and a trifler, she could not disguise that from herself, but in the generosity of her love she absolved him from all other charges. It was her fault if she had given all her heart for nothing and she must pay the penalty, and bear the penalty silently—yes, even if she killed herself in the so doing.

With a tremendous effort she rose and forced back her tears and checked her sobs, mechanically arranged her crumpled gown and smoothed her disordered hair.

She had scarcely done so before Timor, the black page, was at her door with a message from her brother that he would like to speak to her at once.

With a heavy step, a heavier heart, but a composed demeanour, she descended to the magnificent withdrawing-room, where, not so many hours previously, her brother and Mr. Wedderburn had plotted against her happiness.

She found Sir Harry with his back to the window; he was considerably graver than his wont, but she was too preoccupied to notice it.

She seated herself at her little satinwood work-table, and picked up a pile of tangled silks that she began to unravel as an excuse for keeping her head down, and so hiding her red eyes.

“Well, my dear, what is it?” she asked languidly.

“Something serious,” he answered, “something not pleasant.”

“Serious? Not pleasant?” she echoed. Her heart sank; her brother was in debt again, no doubt; but why did he come to her? She could not help him.

Sir Harry paused a moment and then said:

“I thought that you were going to marry Monsieur de Champlain, therefore I have been silent—waiting for him to speak.” Ursula shuddered strongly.

“What made you think that?” she asked dully.

“My dear, everyone thought it.”

Everyone! She sat with her fingers still in the skeins of silk. So her humiliation was even greater than she had thought; she was a laughing-stock!

Sir Harry glanced at her bent head.

“But now this gallant has gone without speaking, Ursula.”

She looked up now.

“I thought you disliked him! You gave him no chance to come near me, to see me alone; you were always speaking against him!”

“I did not wish him to make you ridiculous. I did not trust him, but I saw you cared for him and I hoped he would marry you.”

The anguish of humiliation was almost more than she could endure.

“I shall faint before he has finished speaking,” she thought.

“But he has gone,” continued Sir Harry. “I suppose he could not afford to marry a poor wife—that is the brutal truth, my dear. Here are you, good, noble, beautiful, and a toast, but what offers have you had? None, while plain women with swinging fortunes marry every day. There is the truth you have got to face, Ursula.”

“I don’t wish to marry at all,” she cried wildly.

He took no notice of that, but went on gravely:

“I did not like this fellow, but he was in some ways a good match, and I should have been glad to see you his wife if only because it would have saved you from my ruin.”

She got somehow to her feet; the silks fell to the floor, and she stood clutching the back of the chair.

“Your—ruin?”

“It is that, my dear, no less.”

She was as white as her muslin gown.

“I—I—never guessed!”

“No.” Genuine emotion, genuine rage against circumstances, lent sincerity to his words. “I did not mean that you ever should, If you had married I could have let you go to France and never have spoken—as it is, I cannot disguise it any longer.”

She tried to rally herself; his display of feeling, his obvious deep trouble touched her.

With a woman’s instinct she thrust her anguish into the background to comfort the man’s distress.

“What do you mean by ruin, Harry?” she asked. “Are you in debt? But everyone is.”

“Not as I am—when they are they shoot themselves like young Charlton did at Tunbridge Wells last week.”

“I never knew!” she murmured.

“Where did you think the money was coming from?” he demanded. “Did you think we were living like this”—he waved his hand round the room—“with a town house, and a glass coach, and ten servants apiece, on a few beggarly acres in Kent?”

Her common sense saw this at once; she blamed herself bitterly as a fool, and a wicked fool, not to have considered it before, but she had never thought; women never considered money.

“It did not occur to me,” she faltered. “You were always so open-handed and gay, Harry, and we have always been well off; and there is the property in Scotland and the Manor in Devon.”

“Those went long ago,” he answered, “and Brent Hall”—he named their old home in Kent—“is mortgaged more than it can carry.”

“Oh!” she gave a cry of bitter distress.

“This season sees the end of me,” he continued. “I can do no more. We are done for, both of us. I have behaved like a knave to you, but I always let you spend the money as freely as I did myself, and I always hoped that you would make a good match.”

“Oh, Harry!” she answered impulsively; “I am as much to blame as you. I have been as reckless and extravagant as you; I have—nay, when I think of it, I wonder that we have managed so long.”

“We should not have been able to if it had not been for Steven Wedderburn.”

“Ah, I knew you owed him money.”

“I owe him everything.”

“Everything?”

“Even honour. He redeemed some bonds of mine that were overdue in the City, he settled some bets, he has paid for everything we possess, Ursula—bah! why continue? I owe him everything.”

“Dear Heaven!” said the girl, sickening at the thought.

The brother looked at her, and a guilty flush stole into his cheeks.

“Ursula, I am in this man’s power,” he said.

Her eyes widened.

“He wants something for what he has done for us?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Ursula, he loves you.”

“I know,” she said coldly.

“Last night he asked me for your hand.”

She flushed and winced as if she had been struck in the face.

“Oh, the knave!” she cried. “The low knave!”

Chapter V

Brother and Sister.

“Ursula!” exclaimed her brother. “You must not say that of Steven Wedderburn. He loves you. On my soul, he loves you.”

“Love!” she interrupted. “Love!” And she thought of the Marquis de Champlain.

“Yes,” insisted Sir Harry earnestly. “He loves you. I know what I am talking about. He would do anything for you—even a weak or foolish thing, and he is not a weak man. He is also one of the wealthiest people in England, and a gentleman.”

She turned her dark, sad, troubled eyes on her brother.

“Do you want me to marry this man?” she asked.

He flushed and moved away to the window.

“No,” he said stormily, “I do not. I wish you to please yourself. I was bound to tell you of his offer, but I do not wish you to sacrifice yourself for me.”

Ursula seated herself and put her hand to her brow. She was realising in those few swift seconds how empty her life had suddenly become. Empty of love and self-esteem, empty of money and all that money meant.

“No,” she said quietly, “it would not be a sacrifice. I have shared this man’s money with you. I must help pay for it. I do not blame you, Harry, more than I blame myself,” but there was no warmth in her lifeless voice.

The baronet did not, could not, speak. After a little her still voice again broke the sunny silence.

“What could we do, either of us? I suppose Uncle Wharnworth would give you a hundred a year, and you could hang round the Spas trying to catch an heiress; or you could write pamphlets and starve on them, or go as attendant to some rich lord and nurse his humours for your board.”

Sir Harry shook his handsome head.

“No,” he said fiercely; “I’d put a bullet through my brains first.”

“But what of me?” cried the lady. “Women do not shoot themselves; they go on living, getting old and bitter…What of me? Am I to go as companion to some City madam, to tend her cats and her parrot, and ride with my back to the horse, and be civil to the maids, for what will keep body and soul together?”

“Don’t talk like that!” answered the baronet hotly.

“My dear, what else is there before me? It is that or Mr. Wedderburn.”

She was silent a while, then she said in a dull, level voice:

“I hate Mr. Wedderburn.”

Sir Harry groaned.

“Yes, I hate him,” she repeated. “I always did. I hate him more now that he has us both in his power, now that I know that he has used his money to save you and to trap me. I would like to be avenged on him.”

Sir Harry did not speak. He thought that perhaps he too hated Steven Wedderburn—hated him for this moment of humiliation and remorse.

“But I see that he is our only hope,” continued Ursula. “We must have money.”

She would have faced anything, even absolute poverty, with the Marquis de Champlain; but that dream had been rudely scattered, and, looking ahead down the dry, dull prospect of the years yet to be lived—she was so very young!—she saw that she must have money. The shock of what her brother had told her had brought home to her how much she wanted wealth now love had for ever eluded her.

Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were hot with scarlet. She hated Mr. Wedderburn—yes, hated him! But she would use him. She would be avenged on him. She would by this means retrieve their ruin and salve the hideous wound her pride had received.

Her brother watched her, half frightened of her calm and the absence of the reproaches he had been nerving himself to hear. He guessed that the departure of Monsieur de Champlain had been so strong a pain that she could scarcely feel the full force of this second blow, being already stunned by distress. It made the remorse already torturing him stronger. To palliate his conscience he said hastily:

"Do not marry this man. I do not wish you to. Let us speak no more of it."

She was moved by the troubled, sincere ring in his voice, but it could not blind her to the insincerity and hollow folly of his words.

"The matter is not so easily dismissed," she said, through pale lips. "You tell me you are ruined, and then bid me speak no more of the subject! You have known from the first, Harry," she added, with a hint of rising passion in her tone, "that this man was my suitor, and you encouraged him. You did not dare to do otherwise. I saw that, though I never, never guessed that you were so terribly in his power. But the thing has happened, and we must face it together; there are only the two of us left in the world"—a sad tenderness came into her manner—"and we are both rakes at heart, and we must rise again somehow from this fall Fortune has given us."

He cursed himself silently. This was worse than the reproaches he had anticipated.

"I would to Heaven," he cried sincerely, "that you could have married the Marquis."

Ursula rose and looked at him. Her face was pale and immobile like carved marble. He was startled by the expression of her wide-open eyes.

"Harry," she said, "you must never, never mention that name to me again—never."

"You—cared?"

She did not answer. Her eyes literally blazed.

"You cared—so much?" he questioned miserably.

"He has left me," said Ursula, "and I will never hear his name again. If you have any pity, any regard for me, you also will be silent on this subject."

He was on the point of telling her everything, of confessing to her the plot hatched against her, and of casting himself at her feet for forgiveness. There was still time to recall the Marquis.

But he could not. He thought of the terrible consequences of such an action, of the ruin that would follow on the withdrawal of Mr. Wedderburn's support, of the wrath of that gentleman when he learnt that his ally had betrayed him, of the shame and amaze of Ursula herself, of the Marquis's scorn.

These things rushed through his mind, and he could not speak. He consoled himself desperately by the reflection that Mr. Wedderburn loved her honestly and sincerely, loved her, and would make her life a Paradise for her if she would permit him. And in time she might permit it; she might even come to care for him when she had got over this infatuation—and could it be more than an infatuation for a man she knew so little of?

Ursula was thinking, too—thinking deeply, with a little shudder. She spoke, rousing herself from her thoughts.

"You say he would do anything for me?"

The baronet looked at her, startled by the bitter coldness of her tone. He felt that in the last few moments her character had hardened—had changed.

"I believe," he answered wearily, "that he would do anything for you if you would become his wife, Ursula."

"Ah, there is that promise, of course; but say I promised to marry him, would he take me on my own terms, Harry?"

"I believe he would."

She put up a slim white hand to push back the fair locks from her brow.

"And he is a very rich man, and I want money. Not money as we have it now,"—her eyes gleamed—"but wealth, real wealth." Her lips curled into a hard smile. "There is nothing else in the world that I care about now. I might as well be dead as poor."

He could not disguise his remorse, his concern.

"I am a coward and a brute," he cried.

"No, Harry." Her voice was full of pity. "You are only like me—extravagant. Heaven pity us! I think we were never brought up to be anything else."

"But I might have—I should have spared you this. I should never have got into this man's power. I should have told you before things were so desperate. As you say, I *knew* he admired you. I knew you were the lure; but I tried to blind myself—I tried to hope that you would make a rich match."

He broke off and pressed his handkerchief to his quivering lips.

Her heart overflowed with sorrow for him, with a generous desire to assure him that he was not to blame. And she did not think that he was. She believed that he had been as sure, of the Marquis de Champlain as she, and that, though in another way, his defection had been almost as great a blow to him as to her. In her sincere affection she believed that he had really been hoping that she would marry the Frenchman and get clear of these troubles, and that only necessity had driven him to disclose to her their plight.

She believed, too, that he did not wish her to marry Steven Wedderburn, and she loved him for his attitude. Impulsively she crossed over to him and caught his arm.

"Harry, it *isn't* your fault," she said earnestly. "You have made me very happy since we have been alone together, and I have had the pleasure and the joy of the money—and even if you had told me before the way we were going, I should never have cried 'Stop!' I, too"—her eager voice broke a little—"I, too, thought that I should marry; but, as you say, a girl without a penny has not much chance, even if she is a toast. But it will be all right. We will not go under. The Brents have weathered more storms than this, my dear."

He could not look into her fair, honest face. It was a torture to him to feel her loving clasp on his arm, to hear her brave, kind words.

"Ursula—" he began hoarsely.

He felt her leave go of him suddenly, heard her give a curious little exclamation.

He turned swiftly, and saw Mr. Wedderburn in the doorway.

Ursula and her brother fell apart. Mr. Wedderburn looked from one to the other. He wore a handsome suit of deep blue brocade velvet with rich Venice lace flowing from his black cravat and his white satin waistcoat. The sunlight sparkled in the elaborately cut steel of his sword hilt and in his paste buckles; he carried his hat in his hand and his fine violet silk cloak over his arm. He looked very grand, stately, and imposing. His dark face was slightly flushed, and his narrowed eyes danced with fire.

"Mr. Wedderburn," said Ursula, "my brother has told me everything—about our position and your offer."

It was the first time she had spoken to him in other than a formal tone and with conventional words; it was the first time she had really *looked* at him, appraised him, considered him, given him her whole attention.

He was profoundly aware of this: the flush beneath his eyes deepened.

"Is my answer ready?" he asked.

She turned to her brother.

"Harry, I would like to speak to Mr. Wedderburn alone."

The baronet hesitated. He was burning with shame and confusion, longing to escape the cruel situation, yet fearful lest he should do the wrong thing if he went. Ought he not first to give his ally some warning of his sister's attitude? But Mr. Wedderburn did not hesitate at all. He lifted his flaming eyes to her cold face, and spoke immediately, without waiting for Sir Harry's answer.

"Thank you, madam; I am indeed honoured."

"But this is my affair," began Sir Harry.

"No—mine, dear," said Ursula firmly. "You shall know afterwards all I have said."

"Please leave us," added Mr. Wedderburn quietly.

Reluctant and fuming, the baronet went from the room.

Ursula indicated a chair to Mr. Wedderburn and seated herself near the window with her back to the light; she had no mind that he should see the traces of her recent tears.

But he had seen them, nevertheless, and he knew perfectly well for whom they had been shed, and he exulted in his heart because he had just seen the Marquis de Champlain riding out of Bath to London on his way to Paris.

For a while Ursula did not speak, and he sat silently watching her, in a great contentment at being near her, alone with her for the first time, able to gaze at her to his heart's desire. She did not look at him, but down at the floor. Her hands were folded in her lap and her head a little bent to one side. No one could have guessed from her pensive demeanour the bitter and raging thoughts passing through her mind, the fierce and strong passions surging in her heart.

"Sir," she said at length, and her voice was very clear and steady, "you asked my brother for my hand in marriage, I believe?"

"Yes, madam."

"My brother is very much in your debt."

"Yes, madam."

"Would you tell me for how much?" she asked.

He raised his brows. "Does that matter?"

She gave him a cold, brilliant smile as she answered:

“Perhaps not, but I would have liked to know my price.”

He winced slightly.

“Very well,” he said evenly, and he named a sum that caused her to start visibly.

“Good heavens!” she murmured. “As much as that! Harry must have been mad!”

“Perhaps I was,” returned Mr. Wedderburn. “At least, you see that I do not rate you cheaply.”

She flushed and frowned.

“This was all because of me?”

“Yes.”

“You are shameless.”

“Are you not a better reason than a Jew’s hope of gain?” he added grandly. “And what had I to gain? I have given your brother six times the value of all the estates he ever possessed; he can never repay me in coin.”

“Therefore you have asked him to barter his sister?”

“No—I have bought, madam, with the money I have given your brother the privilege of this moment, when I stand before you as a suitor, with his consent.”

“Is that all?” she flashed.

“That is all, madam.”

“No—not quite, I think; for before you asked for my hand you got my unfortunate brother into your power.”

“No man can be in another man’s power,” answered Mr. Wedderburn. “Sir Harry is free as air. I shall never ask him for repayment. I saw you before I knew your name. This was my only way to gain acquaintance with you—this way of making myself useful to your brother. This alone has gained me entry into the world of fashion, where you belong and I do not. By this means only have I been able to be so constantly by your side. It has not been the way of honour, perhaps; but I love you more than honour.”

There was a moment’s intense and utter silence, then Ursula rose.

“You have spoken plainly,” she said, “and I will speak plainly, too. Candour is the only thing possible between us.”

She drew herself erect; her lips quivered.

“You have made a bargain with my brother, Mr. Wedderburn; now you must make one with me.”

Chapter VI

The Bargain Struck.

“A bargain?” he repeated.

“What else,” she said, “between you and me?”

“Let me hear your terms.”

“They are, perhaps, hard.”

“Still, let me hear them.”

She came to the mantelpiece and leant there, a great flush of sunlight over her from head to foot. She looked very beautiful in her exquisite pallor, with the glory of her fair hair threaded with gold glittering in the light.

"I never thought," she said, with a proud air and a little catch in her breath, "to have bargained on a matter like this; but what my brother has told me has changed everything for me—changed my heart and all the world."

He guessed that the departure of Monsieur de Champlain had changed the world more for her than even her brother's news. He stood still and intent, always watching her.

"I am going to speak very plainly," she continued. "Perhaps I shall shock you," she smiled haughtily; "but it does not suit me to be ruined. It does not suit me to be penniless, to see my brother penniless, Mr. Wedderburn."

He interrupted her.

"Do you hate me for what I have done?"

Her long lashes flickered over her brilliant eyes.

"No matter for that," she answered hardly. "We are not discussing sentiments, sir. You want me, do you not, for your wife?"

"By Heaven I do!"

"On my own terms?" She was breathing heavily.

"On any terms."

"On any terms! You speak rashly, I think, sir."

"Madam, I speak sincerely. You have already seen what I am prepared to do to win you."

Her face was vivid with scorn. "How much more will you do?" she asked.

He came a step nearer; his eyes were unclosed, wide and flashing, his passion laid bare in them.

"Ask me. Ask me anything!" he said unsteadily.

"Anything?" She seemed to mock him.

"Anything. If you will be my wife," he answered.

"Yes, I will be your wife," she said, "if you care to take me when you hear my terms."

"Stop," he cried passionately. "I will subscribe to your terms blindly, and you can let me know them on our wedding-day."

For a second she appeared startled by the wild generosity of this; but she was too absorbed in her own bitter considerations to be moved by the great, sincere, and single-minded emotion animating him.

"No, that would not be honest; you shall hear what I have to say." She drew herself erect; she had the air of one goaded and desperate.

"I want wealth," she continued hoarsely. "You will have perceived that for yourself. If I marry you, it will be for your money. I do not—*like* you."

"You do not know me," he put in on a quick breath.

"I do not like you," she repeated; "I even dislike you. Now you know the kind of woman I am, for I am ready to marry you for your money. Here is my first condition: On your agreement that you will never expect the least sign of regard from me, I shall be civil to you—no more."

"I will never ask any affection from you. I will wait for you to give it."

“You will wait till death undo this bargain then,” she answered, so sure was she of herself, of her own dead heart. “Do you agree to the first of my terms?”

“I agree,” he answered.

“The second is that you give me absolute freedom with your money. I shall spend it as my own, as I please, and you are never to call me extravagant or to oppose or reproach me in any way as to the fashion in which I spend it.”

“I agree to that.”

“Then you shall present Brent Manor, free of all claims, to my brother on our wedding-day; you shall settle on him a handsome income.”

He did not change a muscle nor for one moment lower his proud, dark eyes from her face.

“I agree,” he said.

“Then—if you should ever lose your fortune—as merchants do lose their money, if you should ever find yourself ruined, then you shall give me back my freedom and let me leave you, as if I had never been your wife; you shall make no attempt to detain me, to follow me or to put any reproach on me; I shall be as if I had never married you, free to do as I choose with my life.”

The slightest flush passed over his face, and his nostrils distended with his sharp intake of breath, but he answered without hesitation:

“I agree—even to that.”

She looked at him with a defiant air of challenge. “There is one more condition!”

“Give it me.”

“I do not think that you will subscribe to it.”

“I am prepared to hear it, madam.”

“You rate me highly, I think,” she answered. “You have said extravagant things as to what you would do for me; you are now hearing my price. This is the last condition.”

She paused, looking at him curiously and searchingly.

“I am waiting,” he said.

“It is that you make me your widow at the end of four years and leave me your entire fortune unless you have been ruined first, and I have left you.”

“Make you my widow?” he repeated slowly.

“Would it be so difficult? There are always ways for a man—a duel, a riding accident, a capsized boat. But, of course you do not accept, and so our bargain is off.”

“Why do you make this condition?” he asked.

“Because you are distasteful to me, and I cannot imagine spending my whole life with you. If you care to make me your wife for four years, then I will marry you. Otherwise I wish never to see you again.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” he remarked quietly.

“You said ‘on any terms,’” she reminded him contemptuously. “But I did not expect you to accept what I offered, Mr. Wedderburn.”

“Then you were wrong,” he answered calmly. “I do accept.”

She was startled beyond all concealment or disguise. “You accept?”

“Yes.” There was a moment’s silence. “Have you any other terms?” he asked at length.

Ursula caught her breath. “No.”

“Then I have, on my side, only two conditions to make. First, that this bargain is kept secret. Secondly, that if I have made you care for me before the four years are out this bargain is void.”

She was very pale. “I cannot,” she answered, “refuse either of these conditions, but I warn you, sir, that it is not likely that I ever shall—care—for you.”

“I am taking the risks,” he said. “As you have, of course, no manner of trust in me, shall we make this a sealed bargain in writing between us?”

“I will take your word,” she said with a great flush.

“Why should you?” he replied gravely. “You do not know me, you dislike me, and I have already shown myself regardless of honour.”

“Nevertheless,” she said coldly, “I will take your word, sir.”

“No,” he persisted. “I will draw the agreement up and we can sign it and seal it.”

She seemed half incredulous, half bewildered. Had he then agreed to this monstrous thing? Was this incredible bargain really to be struck? But her spirits rose to meet the moment; she would abate none of her conditions. If he was a madman and chose to accept her terms she would reap the advantage of it; she felt hard and cruel towards the whole world, especially towards Steven Wedderburn.

“Very well,” she said, “let that be, sir, as you wish.”

“And I may announce our marriage?”

“Yes.”

“And the date?”

She quivered. “When—when do you wish it to be?” she asked.

“This day next month.”

“So soon?”

“Why not?”

She braced herself. “Why not, of course, Mr. Wedderburn. Yes. I can be ready this day next month if you wish; it is after all the same to me.”

His eyes were more than ever gleaming and flaming, but he came no step nearer and took a formal leave.

“I will wait on you to-morrow,” he said he swept on his hat with a fine bow and left her; she never could have guessed how his heart was leaping with exaltation. When he had gone she sat cold and limp in one of the gilt chairs with her long fingers pressed to her aching brow while she tried to calm and straighten out her whirling thoughts.

Presently Sir Harry entered, agitated, breathless; Mr. Wedderburn had left the house without speaking to him again, and all his transient remorse and shame was swallowed up in sheer terror at what he would have to face if Ursula had refused to listen to his creditor. She looked up and winced at the expression of selfish apprehension on his face.

“It is arranged, Harry,” she said brokenly. “We—we have made a bargain.”

He drew a great breath of relief. “But what do you mean by a ‘bargain’?” he asked.

She collected herself. “He will look after us. I mean—he—Oh, I can do anything with him, so it was worth while.”

Her wretched haggard face, her changed trembling voice awoke some conscience in Sir Harry; but he consoled himself anew by the reflection: Wedderburn loves her, he will make her happy. Aloud he said:

"It will be the most brilliant match of the season, Ursula."

She gave him a curious look. "Yes, I suppose so," she answered.

She rose and left the room; he heard her ascend the stairs, and did not dare to follow her.

Meanwhile Mr. Wedderburn was proceeding through the streets of Bath caring for nothing in heaven or on earth.

"If she had made it one year or six months," he said to himself, "I would have done it. I shall not lose my money, and, please God, when four years are over she will care a little for me. If not, then I shall be very pleased to die."

He went on to Lady Grantham's fête, half hoping that Ursula might appear; but his mood was too perfectly joyous to be clouded even when she did not; he thought that probably she was in her room weeping for the Marquis, but he did not care. She was to be his wife.

Among the gay company who paid homage to his splendour was Sophia Compton.

He smiled at her triumphantly. "I am betrothed to Miss Brent," he said quietly.

Her face looked dead and old; she stood still and gazed at him keenly.

"We are to be married in a month's time," he added. "You never thought that I should be successful, eh, madam?"

"No," she said; then she laughed horribly. "So Miss Brent is to be bought like anyone else?"

"Not quite like anyone else," he answered calmly.

"There is some trick in this," said Sophia Compton, thinking of the looks she had surprised between Ursula and Monsieur de Champlain. "You never won her fairly, I could swear it."

She spoke in a languid tone that successfully disguised the fury and amazement that she felt.

Mr. Wedderburn merely smiled. "Miss Brent certainly made some conditions, but I did not find them too difficult."

"I suppose," answered Miss Compton, "Monsieur de Champlain jilted her?"

"No, she jilted Monsieur de Champlain," he smiled.

"For you?"

"For me, madam."

She forced a smile. "It is incredible!"

"Why?" he carelessly asked.

"She was so clearly in love with the Frenchman. All the world remarked it," replied Miss Compton with a bitter desire to wound.

"Women"—Mr. Wedderburn's smile deepened—"are fond of these little deceptions, madam."

"Yes," she responded. "They sometimes pave the way for larger ones. Miss Brent may exercise her talents in a fashion not so gratifying to you next time. I am sorry for you, indeed, sir."

"Why?"

“First, because you are marrying an obvious coquette. Secondly, because you are being married for your money. Thirdly, because your betrothed is in love with someone else.”

He laughed. “You are positively alarming!”

“Of course, I am your friend.” She curtsied. “I wish you joy, but I do not expect that you will find it with Ursula Brent.”

“I have won her,” he answered. “And I shall keep her.”

“Oh, luck to you in that enterprise!” smiled Sophia, and she passed on.

She had received a blow little less cruel than had Ursula when the Marquis took his abrupt farewell. Perhaps she did not altogether love Mr. Wedderburn, for her nature was too narrow, cold, and calculating; but she had resolved to marry him, principally because of his great wealth, but also because so many women were in love with him, and because she herself found him the most attractive man she had ever met.

She was clever and proud of the fact, but this time her cleverness had led her astray; she had been quite sure of Ursula Brent, convinced that she loved the Marquis, and certain that in any case she was not the kind of woman to marry for money. She had been sure, too, that Steven Wedderburn’s infatuation would wear itself out, and that when Ursula married the Marquis he would come to her for comfort and she would catch his heart on the rebound.

She had been content to see him cavalier Miss Brent, to even give him advice and help him. It kept him in her gratitude, but now she saw that she had acted like a fool—that he had been either laughing at her or so absorbed by his passion as to be unconscious of her. Either reflection was profoundly humiliating, but her keen common sense told her that one or the other was true; either he had completely seen through her, and used her for his own ends, or else she had counted for no more than the lady’s maid or the black page in his intrigue. Whichever it was, she felt that she would give a good deal to do him a bad turn, to spoil this hateful marriage, to injure Ursula Brent, for she suddenly knew that she detested her unconscious and now triumphant rival. The more she thought of it the more she hated the woman who had played so quietly and so successfully for the prize she, Sophia, had counted on as her own.

While she was turning over these bitter and revengeful thoughts Steven Wedderburn was saying in his heart in a perfect whirlwind of joy: “I have won her, and I shall keep her.”

Chapter VII

The Rich Man‘s Wife.

“Sir, I shall be glad if you will look to these bills for me, they should have been sent to you; and will you afford me some money for the cards to-night? Yesterday I lost.”

Ursula Wedderburn stood before her husband in the magnificent dining-room of her gorgeous town house; she wore an opal interchangeable satin, and so many diamonds on her breast, on her arms and hands, and in her powdered hair that she shamed the light of the hundred candles; it seemed as if her white flesh was on fire, so vivid was the flashing of the stones.

As she spoke she laid on the black polished table a little pile of papers.

"Do you accompany me to-night?" she asked coldly.

"Not to-night." He rose and unlocked a desk that stood in a corner and took from it a little linen bag of gold.

Returning to his wife he emptied the golden coins on to the table before her; she picked them up indifferently, and dropped them into the satchel of cloth of silver that she carried.

"Harry goes with you?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"You will be late?"

"As late as usual."

"Good-bye, madam."

"Good-bye, sir."

She gathered her gorgeous brocades together with a slim hand heavy with costly rings, and left him without a backward look.

Steven Wedderburn stood alone in his great splendid room, surrounded by his resplendent furniture; above the mantelpiece hung a portrait of his wife by the most fashionable and expensive painter of the day, and, though it was February, red and white roses were scattered extravagantly in gold vases.

On a rich settee inside the door rested some unopened packages. Steven went and took off the wrappings.

Valuable prints, rare books, and costly, useless ornaments. All ordered by his wife, and not yet looked at—perhaps never would be looked at by her.

He returned to the table and took up the bills she had left him. They were for the most trifling and intimate purchases—laces, gloves, note-paper, shoes, powders and perfumes—but they amounted to some thousands of pounds.

He lifted his eyes to the haughty face of the portrait above the chimney-piece.

"So you are revenging yourself on me," he said, "this way."

He had been married nearly three years, and his wife's boundless extravagance, the demands made on him by Sir Harry, and the total losses he had sustained by foregoing all that gentleman owed him, and returning Brent Manor, together with reverses in his business, and the loss of some valuable ships, had reduced his fortunes to a dangerous condition.

He had kept his bargain; neither Ursula nor her brother had been denied anything; he had never mentioned money to her. He had been her banker to an unlimited amount, she was the leader of fashion, the centre of the "mode," the most talked of woman in London for her wealth and her reckless manner of using it.

"I wonder," thought Steven, "if I shall be able to keep this up for another year? I wonder which way I am to lose her—by death or disaster?"

If he was ruined inside of another year she was at liberty to leave him. If his fortune survived to the fourth year of their marriage he was to make her his widow.

He meant to keep the bargain as he had kept it so far, and as she had kept it; under these terms he had married her, and lie would not cheat her. But he recalled his boast: “I have won her, and I will keep her.”

It seemed that he had vaunted in vain; only by love could he hold her now, and he believed that she still hated him as she had hated him the day she made her bargain with him.

She was civil, sometimes kind, generally indifferent; she had changed a great deal since her marriage, nay, since the departure of the Marquis de Champlain from England.

There were times when Steven felt that he had only bought the empty shell of the woman, and that her heart was utterly dead.

And he loved her as he had loved her from the moment he had seen her first, entirely, utterly, to the exclusion of everything else; she was the sole motive in his life, the mainspring of all his actions.

He was ruining himself for her without a murmur; not one word of interest, of affection, of consideration rewarded him, but he did not blame her. In all he did for her he was only keeping to their bargain, and her coldness was but the natural result of what he did when he removed the Marquis’s note from the bouquet of red roses that night at Bath.

Presently, while he was still sunk in his reverie, his head clerk, an old man who had served his father, was ushered into his presence.

To arrange this interview he had refrained from accompanying Ursula to the masquerade.

“Oh, Denham,” he said pleasantly, “we have dismal affairs to discuss.”

The old man dropped into the luxurious chair the other side of the table, and looked wistfully at his master’s handsome, proud, passionate face.

“Mr. Wedderburn,” he exclaimed impulsively. “Sir! you must stop! You must, or the House of Wedderburn will be ruined!”

“What must I stop?” asked Steven calmly, folding up his wife’s bills.

Denham answered with great emotion: “Forgive me, sir, but I have served you so long—your father, too; I have been so proud of your success and fortune. And you were so different from the other young men; you knew how to spend the money, though you came into it so young; you had no follies, no extravagances until this madness overtook you!”

“What madness, Denham?” asked Steven, leaning back in his chair.

The old man sat erect. “‘Tis Mrs. Wedderburn, sir; she is ruining you, and I will tell you so if you turn me out of your house for it. I came here nerved to speak to you, and speak to you I will.”

Steven said nothing.

“Since you met her,” continued the clerk, emboldened by the young man’s silence, “you have poured out your money in every whim a thoughtless woman can devise, and you must stop it, you must stop the house she is building in the country; you must reduce her coaches, her servants, her masques, her jewels.” He

paused. “You cannot afford it,” he added unsteadily. “Everything is mortgaged, and the money-lenders are beginning to be shy.”

“We will pay them a higher rate of interest,” said Steven.

“Why should you? Mr. Steven, sir, why should you?” The old man’s tone was almost pleading. “I have been managing your business all these years, and I know all the ins and outs of it; if you would draw up—we could clear this corner, and the House could be saved yet.”

“Yes, I suppose I could save myself,” said Steven thoughtfully.

“You could, sir, you could!” Denham’s eyes gleamed joyously. “There is no one like you when you put your mind to it. But you must retrench, sir. Forgive my plain speaking, Mr. Steven, but the Czar of Muscovy could not stand the strain you have put on your fortune.”

Mr. Wedderburn looked down at the dark polished table in which was reflected his handsome face, the dark curls of his unpowdered hair, his long lace cravat, and the diamond buckle of his solitaire.

“I will not reduce my wife’s expenditure,” he said calmly. “As long as I have a guinea in the world it is hers to spend.”

Something in the expression of his resolute young face told the old man that he meant what he said.

“Will you not tell her, sir?” he asked desperately. “Will you not put it to her how affairs stand? No woman could be so callous, so wicked, as not to wish to spare you at such a pinch, surely.”

Steven looked up.

“My wife will know of my ruin when the world does,” he said, “not before, Denham.”

The old clerk was bitterly silent; in the old days he had always been so proud of his master’s singleness of purpose, iron strength of will, unflinching constancy, and here were these very qualities being turned against the House they had served so brilliantly, and being directed as surely towards ruin as once they had been towards success.

He hated the woman who had wrought this change; at that moment he could have killed her.

“I will tell her myself,” he muttered. “She shall know.”

“Denham!”

Steven spoke in a terrible voice; his eyes had changed from their natural grey to a look of pure flame.

“I forbid you to breathe a word of this to my wife. Do you hear me?”

The old man bowed his head. Steven, seeing his look of suffering, spoke more gently.

“I hope you have put your fortune in safe keeping, Denham. I do not want to drag you down.”

“What does it matter what becomes of me,” was the proud retort, “if the House goes under?”

Steven sighed, but his expression of firm resolve did not change.

“Let us consider the last report,” he said.

The old clerk fell at once back into his long business habits; he put on his horn spectacles and pulled a number of letters and papers from his pocket, which he proceeded to open, read and explain.

Things looked black; they were bad and might easily become worse. The failure of a Dutch bank had been a severe blow, and the revolution in France was shaking the stability of the business world; money was scarce, and people were pressing for debts; several huge loans were due, and creditors were impatient. At first, Steven, thanks to his secure position, vast assets and steady record, had found no difficulty in raising all the money he wished in the City, and from the great banks, without going near the Jews; but lately it had been different.

He had had several losses, and they had been talked about. The extravagant style of his living began to attract attention. It began to be known that he was "plunging," not on cards or horses, but on his wife. His property began to be more and more heavily mortgaged to meet his constant need of ready money; his debts were soon tremendous; he had had to turn to the moneylenders and to pay a huge rate of interest.

His profits had been recklessly anticipated; and the value of a ship that had just come home had been raised and spent last Christmas on an entertainment which Ursula had given to make London stare.

Thinking of these things, he looked across the table at the anxious face of the old clerk; clearly Denham thought him a madman. What would he think if he knew the whole truth, if he knew the bargain his master had made, and that he was literally under sentence of death?

Steven smiled whimsically; certainly, not only Denham, but the whole world, would think him mad if the terms on which he had obtained his wife were known. But no one did or would ever know.

Not now or at any time had he ever regretted his bargain, not now or at any time had he ever considered any endeavour to escape from the terms of it.

Denham continued speaking of the effect on business affairs of the terrible state of things in France. Steven caught his thoughts back from his reverie to listen to him. France—Paris—was now one seething anarchy, the aristocracy fleeing, fleeing very often in vain, blood being shed like water.

Steven remembered the Marquis de Champlain. Was he now undergoing his punishment for the wrong he had done him three years ago?

He straightened his shoulders and gave the old clerk his instructions.

The business was to be kept going as long as possible; no retrenchments were to be made, but t firm front was to be maintained, and the reckless policy of raising money anywhere and at any cost was to be pursued.

Ursula needed more than unlimited credit. She needed money to play with, to gamble with, for her private purse, and while her husband had a sixpence he was resolved to give it to her, to devote it to her most trivial whim.

Denham dare expostulate no more; he saw the great uselessness of it, and with distress and foreboding in his heart he left. Steven was alone again.

He rose and went to his desk and took from a secret drawer at the back of it two scraps of paper.

The two letters of the Marquis de Champlain—one addressed to Ursula, one to her brother.

Steven looked at them and wondered why he kept them. Perhaps because, when he had flattered himself that he would win her love, he had contemplated, on the day when there should be complete understanding between them, confessing the wrong he had done her, and entreating her to forgive him, and to herself destroy the evidences of his dishonour.

Or perhaps he wished her to find them when he had fulfilled his bargain by death and learn from them the full cost of his love for her.

But now it came to him to destroy them.

She did not know, she must never know. Sir Harry would never speak. Why keep these witnesses as to the means he had used to win her?

He was crossing to the fire when he heard a step outside; he replaced the notes loose in his desk, turned up the flap, locked it, and put the keys in his pocket. The door opened slowly, and Ursula entered.

"You are early," he exclaimed, startled.

"Yes."

She moved, all glittering, to the table.

"I did not care to stay. I left Harry there."

She looked agitated and pale; she seemed to scarcely notice Steven as she crossed to the fire and seated herself before it with a little shiver.

Her husband watched her intently, every sense alert.

"What has happened, Ursula?" he asked gently.

"Nothing—nothing of importance," she answered. "But I met Sophia Compton to-night. I have not seen her since we were married."

Steven felt as if he were threatened by an indefinite but terrible danger.

"Well?" he asked.

Ursula sat with her back to him, looking into the fire.

"She has just come from Paris. Her father's mother has been living there all her life. She and Sophia had to flee. Things are terrible there."

Steven steadied himself.

"But you have no one dear to you there, have you, Ursula?" he asked.

"No, no. But some of the things Sophia told me were very horrible. It was foolish of me, but I cared."

Then she rose up very coldly, as if she shut him out of all further confidence, and with a mere good-night left him.

Chapter VIII

Ursula Remembers.

Ursula could not forget her meeting with Sophia Compton, neither could she forget nor ignore the memories roused by that lady's account of Paris, and of what was taking place there, and of the chance meeting she had had with the Marquis de Champlain, which she had recounted in detail. Sir Harry, who had heard her, had afterwards found occasion to cynically congratulate his sister on her escape;

as the wife of a French nobleman, instead of being one of the wealthiest and most admired women in London, she would have been a proscribed fugitive, perhaps a victim of the guillotine.

Ursula had made no answer, but now, the morning after, she sat alone in the beautiful drawing-room, having rather impatiently dismissed the crowd who filled her rooms for the morning levee, and thought over what her position was and what it would have been if she had married the Marquis de Champlain.

She realised that this was really the first time since her marriage that she had stopped to think; it gave her a shock, but it was true nevertheless. Her heart had stopped when the Marquis left Bath, and since then she had lived like a mechanical thing; her one occupation had been the spending of money.

She felt her conscience clear towards her husband; she had kept her part of the bargain; she had married him, been faithful to him, been civil; she had adorned his name, and his house with her beauty, her graces, her taste, her noble acquaintances and her notable following.

She admitted that he had kept his compact too; he had not intruded on her in any way either with affection, advice or authority; he had never troubled her with his affairs nor brought to her notice any matter personal to himself, nor had he in any way interfered with her unlimited expenditure of money. She examined her feelings and found that she still felt cold and hard and cruel towards her husband; she discovered, with a sense almost of horror, that deep down in her heart lurked, and always had lurked since her wedding day, a revengeful desire to ruin him, to regain her freedom and really to begin to *live*. For this was not life to her, but a mere cramped existence; she had stifled all her instincts, all her emotions, schooled herself to good behaviour, just for the sake of the money, and with the money she had dazzled herself, occupied her time, dulled, if not satisfied, herself; but suddenly, at the chance mention of the man she had been prepared to so truly love, all her old self awoke, and she saw in a flash the falsity, the wretchedness, the barren uselessness of the bargain she had made and the life she was leading.

Her heart leapt and strained towards the danger in Paris. That would be real, to be in the midst of danger with one whom one cared for—nay, even to face and meet death in such circumstances would be a triumph; her soul ached and yearned towards such a happiness.

And what was he doing, the trifler to whom she had been foolish enough to give her affection, what was he doing? Had he forgotten her?

Sophia Compton had said that he was still unmarried.

Perhaps he was in danger, perhaps he was already a victim of the Revolution, perhaps she might at any minute meet him, a proscribed exile and refugee. She wished wildly that she were free. Could she never exhaust her husband's resources? Would he never come to her to tell her she was free, since he was ruined?

Must she drag through another year of this, till the four years were up—and what then? Would he really keep his bargain?

She did not want his death, yet she was almost prepared to exact it if she could not gain her freedom any other way. Wild thoughts passed through her mind; she even contemplated leaving her husband's house at once and hurling herself into the turmoil of France, to find an easy death there, and that way end all.

But she strongly put these things from her; she would be as true to her bargain as Steven Wedderburn was to his.

Only on one point would she make a concession to herself; she would ask Sophia Compton to come and see her, and from her she would learn more of the country that had nearly been the country of her adoption, of the man who had nearly been her husband, and of the reign of terror to which she might have been a victim.

She rose with this purpose, and was returning to her room to write a note and send it to Miss Compton by her page.

There was every excuse for this action, which might pass as a mere piece of kindness; Sophia was poor, without relations or intimate friends, and living in modest lodgings in Golden Square.

As Ursula passed from the drawing-room on to the stairs, she saw her husband coming down them.

She hesitated on the landing. He used to know Sophia well; should she tell him of her purpose? Perhaps, if she asked him to visit Sophia with her, it would be easier.

As she hesitated, he reached the landing and saw her; each had a constrained look as their eyes met.

He greeted her with his usual gravity, and held open the dining-room door; still half hesitatingly, she entered.

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and was about to open his desk when he suddenly checked himself and instead laid the keys on the table.

“This is your birthday, madam,” he said, looking at her with a tenderness he could not conceal, and that was strangely in contrast with his formal words.

“So it is,” she answered carelessly. She stood by the dark table, a golden figure in her primrose-coloured brocade sacque on which the early spring sunlight gleamed; her fair hair was covered in a muslin cap which was fastened under her round chin by a swathe of soft lace.

In her husband’s eyes she was infinitely more beautiful now than she had been last night in her powder and diamonds.

“I bought you these,” he said.

He took a flat velvet case from his pocket and put it, very simply, on the table before her.

“You give me too many presents,” she answered.

With indifferent fingers she opened the case, but when she saw the contents a faint flush came into her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled; that flush and sparkle were eagerly watched for and ardently treasured in the remembrance of Steven Wedderburn.

“Black pearls,” she exclaimed.

She held out the necklace; the pearls were beautifully matched and of unusual size, while on them the marvellous colour known as “black” was like the bloom of a grape.

Ursula knew that there could not be many such necklaces in Europe; for the moment she forgot the Marquis de Champlain and all her distastes and longings.

“They are very beautiful,” she breathed.

He leant a little towards her across the table.

“Do they please you?” he asked.

His tone startled her. She looked at him, and his expression startled her still more; she realised for a swift second that this man’s feeling for her was a tremendous thing in its strength, its silence, its constancy, and for the first time she felt inferior and abashed before him.

“Who would not be pleased?” she answered, dropping her eyes. “They are very gorgeous and ‘must be very rare.”

“They belonged once to Mary Stuart,” he said, “and they have only been worn by great queens and great beauties.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” she said, looking at him. “I will wear them to-night.”

His eyes besought her.

“Will you not put them on now?”

She was strangely discomposed, troubled; she hesitated, wondering what was the matter with her, what put her so ill at ease, and while she hesitated he took the pearls gently from her fingers.

“May I put them on?” he asked humbly.

She felt that to refuse was impossible. She tried to accede lightly.

“Of course—the gift is worth that recompense at least.” She lifted the curls from her neck and held up her chin. But before he could raise the pearls to her throat the door opened and his secretary entered.

“Sir, your pardon, but one moment’s speech with you.”

Steven angrily turned.

“It is important,” said the man earnestly. “Just one moment. I entreat you, sir, and at once.”

Steven laid the pearls upon the table. “Further losses!” he thought, “further losses!” Aloud he said to his wife: “For a little space forgive me; I shall return.”

He put the necklace into her hand and left her, followed by the secretary.

Ursula did not trouble herself about what news this might be that the secretary wished to impart, though she had noticed that he looked white and agitated.

Her husband’s “business” had always been the vaguest thing possible to her. He was referred to before her as a wealthy man of almost limitless riches, and limitless she had certainly found them, and at that she had left it.

She picked up the pearls and wondered as to their probable cost. How few men could have given her such gifts! She ought to consider herself very fortunate that a man of such wealth thought of nothing but pleasing her. Yet how little it meant really!

Even these pearls, after the first moment’s flush of pleasure, were like dead things in her hand.

Surely, if she had loved her husband, a bunch of flowers given by him would have been cherished with more delight than these priceless jewels!

She remembered with a bitter pang the marvellous pleasure she had taken in an ordinary bunch of red roses when she had Ursula Remembers thought they came as the messengers of Monsieur de Champlain’s love.

Five minutes had passed and her husband had not returned. She tried the necklace on and admired it coldly in the Venetian mirror above the gilt side-table.

Then she returned it to its case; she had already lost all interest in it.

Ten minutes passed and still Steven did not return.

Ursula decided not to wait for him—why should she? They had nothing to say to each other when he did return; she had already decided not to ask him to accompany her to Sophia. It would be better to leave that lady in her own home. She would write at once.

She noticed her husband's keys on the table; it was the first time she had known him leave them about; he must, she reflected, have been very agitated, or startled, or absorbed, to have forgotten them.

She took them up and decided to put the pearls in the desk for safety, and to write here and now her note to Sophia.

Unlocking the desk, she seated herself at it and wrote her note; when it was finished she put the case of pearls in one of the back drawers, and was relocking the desk when she noticed two scraps of paper lying loose.

With an idle curiosity she picked them up; one was addressed to Sir Harry.

She wondered at that; locking the desk, she replaced the keys on the table, and went to the window to examine this opened letter that was addressed in an unknown hand to her brother.

The opening of the door startled her; she slipped the two pieces of paper into the bosom of her primrose yellow gown and turned.

It was her husband who had entered the room.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

He was so manifestly distressed, so white and anxious.

"Ursula," he said brokenly, "I must tell you some unpleasant news."

Her mind flew at once to money, and her heart gave an odd leap. Was she nearing her freedom?

"Yes?" she questioned quietly, and came nearer the table.

He saw the keys and put them in his pocket. His glance went swiftly to the desk; seeing it still locked he appeared to dismiss the subject, but Ursula had observed that, despite his absorption in some trouble or disaster, it had given him a shock to see that he had forgotten the keys.

"You will need courage to hear, as I need courage to tell," he said turning his dark troubled eyes on the erect figure of his wife.

"Is it about money?" she asked with calmness.

A flush crossed his cheek.

"No," he answered. "I should not count any money difficulty of mine a disaster for you, madam."

She slightly winced.

"Nor have I ever broken our bargain," he continued, "by referring to these matters to you, have I?"

"No," she said, "you have not."

A little fear crept over her—if this trouble was not money, what could it be?

He saw the look of alarm spring into her eyes and placed a chair for her and bade her sit down in it, speaking with great tenderness.

"Please tell me," she said.

He seemed as if he could not bring himself to inflict pain on her.

"Would to Heaven!" he exclaimed, "I could have prevented it!"

"What is it—about?" she asked.

He looked away from her and said in a low voice: “Your brother!”
“Harry?
“Yes.”
Ursula rose. “Has anything happened to him?”
“Yes.”
Her mind flew over all possible fears, she voiced the most probable.
“A duel?”
“Yes.”
“When?
“Early this morning.”
“He is—hurt?”
“Alas, he is. I had the news the minute his second brought it.”
“Oh, Harry!” she cried. “Oh, my dear!”
Steven caught her limp hand.
“Ursula, Ursula!” he exclaimed in a passion of pity, “he may live.”
“*May* live!”
“I fear—I fear it is no more than that!”
She shuddered.
“Where is he?”
“He is lying in an inn off Hyde Park, where the duel took place.”
“I must go to him.”
“I will take you there.”
“At once.”
“At once.” He rang the bell on the table.
“What was the quarrel?” asked Ursula dully.
“I do not know—cards, the second told me.”
The servant appeared, and Steven ordered the coach and Ursula’s cloak.
“He may live?” she questioned in a piteous murmur.
“So they tell me—at least you will see him.”
“And speak to him,” added Ursula.
Steven went white; he thought of the secret he shared with the dying man, and in his heart he prayed that Harry Brent would die with that secret unrevealed.

Chapter IX

Sir Harry.

As the coach rolled swiftly through the streets of London that Ursula had never before viewed so early in the morning (it was not yet eleven o’clock), husband and wife, seated side by side, silent, leaning back against the red velvet lining and gazing out of opposite windows, were each thinking rapidly and deeply.

Ursula felt that her world had come to such another standstill as it had done on the morning when Monsieur de Champlain left Bath. It seemed an ironical thing that Harry should die after so brief an enjoyment of the fortune she had secured

for them both at so great a cost. Harry, who loved life so, who always had barred the subject of death or spoken of it with a vague horror, what had caused him to fling himself on to this sudden end?

It was terrible, tragic, in a way unworthy. How much she had hoped from their joint lives! How fond she had been of him!

She had imagined full, honourable, even glorious lives for both of them, and how had it ended?

This sudden death for him after a few years of idleness and extravagance—and for her one unrequited affection, then a loveless marriage that was a travesty and a mockery!

The tears welled into her eyes for the mere pity of it.

"How differently," she thought to herself, "I dreamt it all!"

Steven had his reflections, no less sad-than hers, and touched with a dread from which her wild thoughts were free.

Supposing remorse visited Sir Harry. Supposing he elected to confess to Ursula the means by which her marriage had been brought about?

Steven wished that he could have seen the wounded man (his second said he had been stabbed through the lungs, and was dying rapidly) before Ursula did so; but that had been impossible, though for a desperate moment he had considered the idea of going himself alone and not telling her till all was over.

But both honour and policy had forbidden this course.

He could never have explained to Ursula why he had not taken her to her brother, and he dare not take it on his soul to prevent the last earthly meeting of brother and sister. He greatly wished that he had been able to destroy the two letters, but he had seen that the desk was locked, and the keys were safely in his pocket.

At the earliest possible moment he would destroy for ever the evidence that it had been folly to keep so long.

The coach drew up at an inn at the corner of the road to Edgware, not far from Tyburn.

Steven helped Ursula to dismount; she looked round her with a shudder on a world inexpressibly dreary. The early morning sun was over; low grey clouds hung over the scattered houses, over the bare hedges running out into the open country, and the muddy roads and paths across the Park.

A crowd of idlers was gathered round the door of the inn, attracted by the news that a person of quality lay dying within.

They closed curiously round the splendid coach and stared and gaped at the lady in the primrose-coloured gown and violet velvet cloak, who was no other than Ursula Wedderburn, they told each other, one of the famous town beauties.

Steven cleared the way with his cane, and conducted Ursula into the dark, evil-smelling passage of the inn.

She felt her spirits sink so unutterably that it seemed as if she could not go on, could not mount the steep dirty stairs where the landlady and chambermaid were whispering together.

Harry dying—and here, in this intolerable place!

Steven drew her gently towards the stairs. The sight of her piteous face made him forget his own fears; he no longer wished, as he had wished in the coach, that

Sir Harry might die before they arrived—now he passionately desired that he might live to see and hear his sister.

The chambermaid was crying; she whispered from behind the corners of her coarse apron that the gentleman was alive, but that the doctor said that it could not be long now—

"Where is he?" cried Ursula, bewildered by misery. "Where have they put him?"

The two women ran upstairs in a confusion of protestations that the gentleman was as comfortable as they could make him, in the best chamber on the best bed.

Steven led Ursula up the wretched little dark stairs; it was a common inn of the poorest description.

"They might have brought him to me," murmured Ursula. "Need: he have been taken here to die?"

Steven did not answer; he was utterly in the dark as to the cause or circumstances of this fatal duel. He had merely gathered from the second, Captain Heaton, that Sir Harry and a certain Mr. Carmichael had had a quarrel over cards the previous night after Ursula had left the Masque, and had settled it this morning at dawn beneath the trees of the' Park.

The doctor met them at the door of the room; he was a fashionable physician who had been hastily summoned by Steven's groom.

Steven felt a sense of relief at sight of him; his presence seemed to atone for the wild wish that Sir Harry might die before his sister reached him.

"Is there no hope?" he asked, gently detaining Ursula from entering the partially open door.

"None," whispered the doctor. "He might live an hour—no more."

Ursula spoke with a calm that surprised herself.

"Is he conscious?"

"Yes, madam, and asking for you. I so much feared that you would be too late."

Ursula drew her hand away from Steven's and entered the room where her brother lay.

It was a plain whitewashed chamber overlooking the gaunt, wind-swept space of the Park, with the bare trees and shrivelled winter grass.

The furniture was scant and poor, the plaster had peeled from the walls in places, and the wainscoting and the beamed ceiling were decaying and worm-eaten.

On a low bed, covered by a patchwork quilt, lay Sir Harry, with his face turned towards the door.

He wore the same green velvet suit that Ursula had last seen him in at the fête only the night before.

His sword, his jewels, lay on a dingy rush-bottomed chair at the foot of his bed.

Another doctor was standing looking down at him, and holding his limp wrist in his hand.

The wounded man's flowered waistcoat of yellow satin was open, as was his fine muslin shirt, and linen bandages, dully stained, showed across his breast.

Ursula noticed everything in one dreadful glance; the smell of herbs and restoratives came pungently to her nostrils mingled with the stale, close odours of the chamber.

Sir Harry gave a broken cry when he saw her.

“Ursula! Thank Heaven—in time!”

She went straight to the bed and knelt down beside it, gazing up into his fearfully changed face, her own almost as white.

“My poor Harry!—my dear!”

He moved his lips and closed his eyes; his features looked sharp, his cheeks were sunk; the glitter of his fair hair on the pillow made the death-like hue of his pallor a terrible thing.

Steven crossed to the other side of the bed and began speaking to the doctor in a whisper.

Ursula did not notice them; all her attention, all her faculties were concentrated on the dying man.

“Harry, how did it happen?”

He made no answer.

“Harry, is there anything you want to do?”

He opened his eyes on her.

“Nothing. I have made my will.”

“Is there anything you want to say?” she asked.

His piteous gaze remained on her face.

“Yes—there is a great deal—I want to say. My sins—”

She interrupted in a warm burst of affection and pity.

“Do not think of them! What are your sins?”

He feebly touched the clasped hands she rested on the edge of the bed.

“How good you are! I must tell you—something—”

He closed his eyes again.

“Something—I did—”

Steven Wedderburn heard these words, and came round to his wife’s side.

The doctor laid down Sir Harry’s hand and retreated to join his colleague at the door.

Neither could do anything more.

“Ah, you, Wedderburn!” exclaimed the baronet faintly.

“I came at once, Sir Harry; I am sorry to see you in such a case.”

“Yes—I am punished.”

“For what?” asked Ursula, smoothing with a tender gesture the bright locks back from his damp forehead.

“He knows,” muttered Sir Harry.

“You?” Ursula glanced up over her shoulder at her husband.

“I think your brother wanders,” he answered quietly.

“No, no—lift me up, Ursula—I want—to tell you—”

His voice died away, and Mr. Wedderburn spoke.

“Sir Harry, pause before you say anything that may cause bitterness and trouble—”

“Bitterness and trouble enough already,” muttered the dying man. “I am losing my life through you—through that night’s work!”

Ursula helped him up on his pillow, and put her arm round his heavy shoulders.

“What is he talking of?” she asked, looking wildly at her husband. “What is this between you and him?”

“There is nothing,” he answered her, “between me and him—”

The dying man dragged himself more into a sitting posture.

“You lie!” he said. “You know you lie—you have ruined me!” he groaned. “Do you think that I want to die—like this—at twenty-five?”

Steven was bitterly pale, but he maintained his stately pride.

“I am not responsible for your plight,” he said. “I counsel you to make no mischief before you die.”

If Ursula had not been there he would have spoken more harshly. He had never liked Sir Harry, and despised him as men always must despise the things they use unworthily. ‘He saw nothing fine in the young spendthrift’s early death, nor did he feel much pity for this victim of an ignoble quarrel, and at the thought that Sir Harry’s conscience, grown sensitive at the last pinch, might make him utter words that would lose Ursula to him for ever, he felt such a fury possess him that he could again have wished the baronet a thousand times dead already.

“The mischief has been made,” answered Harry feebly. “I am going to repair it. Ursula—listen—”

“You can repair nothing this way,” said Steven. “Again I say, pause, Sir Harry—”

The baronet took no notice of him; his eyes were on his sister, and she looked up at her husband resolutely.

“Hush!” she said. “Hush! I will hear—he shall speak. My dear, my dear!” she turned again to her brother, “tell me what you want me to know.”

He gathered his strength a moment, then said:

“It was not—the cards—”

“What, then?” she whispered, leaning close to him and holding him tightly.

“It was—you—this Carmichael—a gallant of Sophia Compton, has just come from Paris—”

The blood rushed to her heart.

“Yes, Harry, yes?”

Feebly the dying man pressed her arm.

“There he had met M. de Champlain, who spoke of you once—at a supper—so this Carmichael said—”

“Well, my dear?” she encouraged him, bending even closer.

“He called you—an English jade—a jilt—this man repeated it—confirmed it. I—I—challenged him—we made the cards an excuse—”

His voice trailed off; he continued to look at her with imploring dim eyes.

“Oh, why did you?” she whispered passionately. “For me—there was no need—”

“I must tell you—you must know the truth—”

Then he lay silent, gathering strength.

Steven went softly over to the doctors; he drew the one of least repute aside and whispered to him.

“How long can this last?”

“A little while only.”

“He is killing himself by speaking.”

“Yes.”

Steven lowered his voice even more.

“A hundred guineas, doctor, if you can prevent him speaking any more.”

He went back to the bedside. Ursula had noticed neither his going nor his returning.

Sir Harry was moaning and struggling with his breath.

"I did you—a great wrong—I must tell you. I prayed that you might come—in time—in time—"

The doctor approached the bed.

"Permit me to give your brother this cordial, madam; it will rally his strength."

He offered a glass, but Sir Harry shook his head.

"No—let me speak—doctor. I must speak. At Bath—"

"Speak when you have drunk," said Steven.

"No, no," His strength was rapidly failing him. "Hold me up, bring the light nearer—Ursula—Ursula—it was at Bath."

The doctor put the glass to his lips; he drank a little, gave a slight sigh, and closed his eyes.

"Speak to me, Harry," pleaded Ursula. "Speak to me—what was it you wished to tell me?"

Steven glanced at the doctor.

The dying man murmured something incoherent, his eyelids fluttered, he made a faint effort to rise, but the soothing draught had its effect—it numbed and dulled his senses; unconsciousness overcame him; he sank sideways out of his sister's arms.

"He is dying!" she cried frantically, "dying without speaking to me!"

"Hush!" said the doctor. "Wait—hush—hush—hush!"

With her very breath stilled Ursula waited, her eyes fixed intently on her brother's drawn changed face.

Steven, pale and erect, watched her, his dark lashes veiling his flaming eyes.

A few minutes dragged terribly by; Harry did not stir.

The other doctor crept to the bedside and whispered with his colleague.

The unconscious man gave the slightest sigh and a tremble passed over his limbs.

One doctor stooped over him, then glanced at Steven, who went on his knees beside his wife and drew her gently towards him.

"It is all over," he said in a tone of great tenderness.

Sir Harry Brent had died with his secret unspoken.

Chapter X

The Discovery.

It was all over so soon—it was so tragically sudden, that Ursula, back in her own house and prostrate along the gorgeous gilt brocade settee in her sitting-room, felt that some of the sable horrors of madness were overcoming her brain and heart.

Harry dead!

Harry dead for her sake—to avenge a slighting word spoken of her by M. de Champlain and repeated by some idle gossip!

The fact stared her in the face, but she could not realise it.

That M. de Champlain's name should be associated with this tragedy was almost beyond endurance terrible. And what did it mean?

How could he who had trifled with her and left her dare call her a jilt? Who was this Mr. Carmichael? She had a feverish desire to find him and hear his account.

But he had fled, was abroad or in hiding with his friends.

And what had Harry been trying to say?

She endeavoured to recall his broken words—"I wronged you—at Bath—that night's work—I must put that straight—"

And her husband had bade him be silent, had seemed eager that he should not speak.

What did it all mean?

Her heart ached and her eyes were heavy with weeping; she felt more than the deep natural grief at the loss of her brother; she felt that the world was all wrong, at war with her, out of joint, distorted.

Once everything had seemed right and beautiful, sane and happy—lately she had been walking in an unhappy darkness in which everything was black and miserable.

And with this morning's events this sense of misery and horror culminated. She had been right, she thought, when she had decided that night in Bath three years ago that her life was over. So it was; she was a dead, a useless thing.

And with the death of Harry the last warm tie that kept her human had gone. What was there now to live for? Who now cared what she did? Her husband, of course, he cared—tremendously. It surprised her to think how little effect this immense affection had on her life—it did not alter his unhappiness, it was of no use or pleasure to her, save in that it had provided the means of her luxury and extravagance.

And neither luxury nor extravagance survived now. With Harry's death their final dazzle had gone. What use had the money been to Harry?

She had a sharp instinct that he had been as secretly unhappy as she ever since her marriage.

Money had not saved him from an early and miserable death, nor saved him from fear and grief in the hour of it.

It would not save *her* when the time came.

She rose up stiffly, feeling utterly forlorn, utterly alone, utterly weak and dull with heavy sorrow and regret—regret for the life she had hoped to lead, which was so far, far different from that she was leading.

It was evening; a red angry sunset stained the sky behind the dark roofs opposite, heavy lead-coloured clouds hung above the bars of scarlet and orange, and a cold wind was abroad.

Ursula shivered.

She thought that she would go to bed; perhaps weariness of body would triumph over weariness of mind—perhaps in sleep she might forget.

She went to the window and looked out at the dreary, cold prospect, then hastily closed the window.

The maid had been forbidden to attend her. Ursula had been alone all day; she wore the same morning primrose sacque, the same muslin cap, crumpled now over dishevelled hair.

She began to unlace the silk cords of her bodice. As she did so, two scraps of paper fell on to the floor.

She picked them up and gazed at them vacantly, trying to recall what they could be.

Suddenly she recollected.

She had taken them from the desk in the dining-room that morning, and all memory of them had been swept utterly from her mind.

And one was addressed to Sir Harry! Was it a note entrusted to Steven for delivery to him? But the paper looked old.

The room was getting dark. Ursula lit a candle and placed it on the mantelshelf. By the light of it she unfolded the letter addressed to Sir Harry. With a curious shock she saw that it was written in French, in a fine hand.

She laid it down, unread, on the chimney-piece and took up the other.

A piece of faded pink ribbon was fastened to it by means of a seal in common red wax. She looked at the seal—three greyhounds and three stars.

She looked at the inscription—"To Mademoiselle Ursula Brent"—

The name she had worn when she was happy!

With cold fingers she unfolded the paper. She looked at the first line—"Will you be my wife?" and at the signature, "Champlain."

Quite still and motionless she stood, with the paper in her hand.

So this was what Harry had wanted to tell her!

Treachery—black, horrible treachery! and the Marquis had loved her!

Her thoughts raced into wild chaos; she could not for a moment adjust things; then the confusion of the shock cleared, she began to piece events together, to see the miserable, cruel whole.

She read the Marquis's letter to Harry; she read that addressed to herself: she recalled the carnation that Miss Compton had asked for.

She saw the whole plot. Her unhappy brother and Steven Wedderburn had intercepted and suppressed the letter to her—they had told the Marquis that she would not listen to his suit, and the man she loved had left thinking her a jilt and a coquette, even as she had thought him insincere and light.

As she realised the great wrong done to her and to him, as she thought of their two wasted lives, of the infamous bargain to which she had been driven, of the humiliation, bitterness, heartache and loneliness she had endured, a great cry escaped her, anger and despair filled her heart, and she felt nerved to some terrible revenge.

Harry had paid; his action had brought its punishment. She saw now that it was remorse that had made him challenge Mr. Carmichael—*he* knew that his sister was not a jilt, and *he* knew that M. de Champlain had good reason to believe she was, therefore he had rushed on his death—a foolish atonement and one useless to Ursula; but she closed her mind towards Harry and Harry's part in this.

He had done her a great and cruel wrong—he had deeply injured a man who trusted him, and towards whom he had no grudge; his conduct had been beyond words dishonourable. But he was dead.

She could no more deal with Harry in terms of bitter reproach or forgiveness. But the arch-plotter, the man who had entered their lives to cause all this misery, the man who had seduced Harry, who had bought them both with his hateful money, he was still within her reach.

She could revenge herself upon her husband.

Her heart swelled with a sense of bitter, deep wrath and hatred.

He had ruined her life, cheated her, bought her, come between her and love, between her and happiness; he had been the indirect cause of her brother's death—the direct cause of his dishonour. Beyond all measure she hated him. Her thoughts were too whirling and tumultuous for her to be able to decide on immediate action.

She knew she could not stay another night under her husband's roof; but she would not flee like an eloping wife—she wanted first to see him, to tell him that she had discovered his treachery, to leave him openly, with loathing—to humiliate him before London as he had humiliated her before Bath.

She took up the letters, put on the cloak she had worn that morning, and went downstairs.

The house was hushed; the awe of Sir Harry's death lay heavy over it; it seemed as if he might be lying, ready for his burial, in one of these dusky chambers.

Ursula felt that she held in her heart a tragedy above the tragedy of death.

She entered the dining-room and found it empty.

Now she remembered how eagerly he had glanced at the desk when he discovered that he had left the keys on the table; now she remembered that on the way back from her brother's deathbed he had asked her what she had done with the necklace—she had answered that she had "locked it away," and he had seemed satisfied. She saw now that he had feared lest she had opened the desk—and all the while she had had those two letters in her bosom—yes, all the while he had been endeavouring to hush Harry's poor confession.

The desk was still locked; probably he had not opened it yet, so did not know of his loss.

He would have had much to attend to to-day, and with the keys in his pocket would feel safe enough.

Ursula smiled cynically to think how that one moment's carelessness on Steven's part, that once leaving of the keys, had undone all his elaborate plot, all his care, all his precautions and scheming.

She went into the withdrawing-room and there found him.

He was seated by the fire in a weary, dejected attitude; he was already dressed in black, and his bright hair was confined in a mourning ribbon.

This fact gave Ursula a shock of horror. He, wearing black for Harry!

She felt her limbs weaken beneath her as she advanced into the room.

Steven looked round quickly, then rose; he was plainly startled at seeing her, and in her cloak.

She replied to his glance.

"I am going away."

"Madam?"

He appeared to think that her mind was unsettled by her grief.

"I am going away," she repeated.

By the light of the candles on the chimney-piece and the glow of the fire they looked into each other's faces.

"What has happened?" he asked in a strained voice.

"A great deal."

She came nearer the circle of the firelight.

He spoke again.

"This is because of Harry?"

"No—because of you."

"Of me?"

"Does it surprise you?"

He put his hand to his pocket; feeling the keys of his desk there, he became more assured in his heart.

She marked his gesture and smiled cruelly.

"Words are very futile," she said, "but before I go I must tell you that I know the great wrong you did me."

He looked at the floor; he was very pale despite the ruddy light.

Ursula continued.

"This morning you left your keys on the table—"

"Ah!"

"You understand the rest?"

Steven was silent.

"I opened your desk to put away the necklace and to write a letter to Sophia Compton. When I had done so I saw—two scraps of paper—"

Still Steven did not speak.

"I noticed that one was addressed to—to Harry. As they were lying loose I thought that they were of no consequence. I took them to the window to see what they were—then you entered—with—the news. And I put them inside my gown."

He raised his eyes to her accusing face.

"So you have been carrying them round with you—all day," he said.

She saw he was conscious of the irony as she had been.

"Just now I read them," she said.

"Ah!"

He gave a sound between a sigh and a sob and moved farther towards the fire.

Her hot desire of revenge was quelled by something in his demeanour that she could not place; somehow she could not, when face to face with him, despise him, though she was angry with herself for this baffled feeling of confusion.

"Have you nothing to say?" she demanded coldly.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?

"Nothing at all."

She could have said the same of herself. What was there to say on either part?

Her wrath and hate, her scorn and bitterness were not to be degraded into railing and scolding.

She had a sure instinct that he would have listened to her in silence, making neither denial nor defence; she was not the kind of woman to strike at a man's containment, even in this moment of anguish and scorn.

Besides, since she was about to wound him in the most terrible of ways, she thought she might spare him the lesser hurts of speech.

"Good-bye!" she said.

She took the letters from her gown and laid them on the gleaming black table where her bills had lain the night before.

A queer light came into his eyes.

"You are—going?

"Yes."

Again he said nothing. She began to realise that this silence of his was a terrible thing.

"Everything has ended from this moment," she continued. "You must know that, I think."

"What of our bargain?" he asked.

"It should never have been made."

"I have kept it."

"And so have I."

"But now you propose to break it—there is another year yet."

She pointed to the letters.

"These alter everything."

"Why? They only prove I love you above everything. I never made any pretence beyond that."

At the passion in his voice the passion rose in her.

"They prove that another man loves me." Her eyes were like jewels in her pallid face. "And he is the man I love," she added instantly.

Steven moistened his lips; his face was so utterly distorted that she would not have recognised it.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To—Paris."

"Ah!"

"To find M. de Champlain."

She gathered her hood together under her chin.

"To tell him of this horrible—thing—to stand by him—if he needs me—"

She moved towards the door.

"You are free," he said. "I meant to tell you so to-night. I am a ruined man."

"Ruined!" She turned to face him again.

There was a second of silence—utter silence that yet seemed to Ursula to be full of jangling sound.

"All I can realise on my properties will hardly clear me of my debts," said Steven at last. "I heard to-day of my final losses. So you are free. And so I keep my bargain."

Free! The word echoed in her brain—free! All this horror to pass and go like a hideous vision—free of this man—free of his wealth—free of her artificial life—free!

"Good-bye!" she said again. Her eyes sparkled and her bosom heaved; she looked radiant as she had not looked since her name was Wedderburn.

He came to the door and opened it for her; she passed out without another word or look.

Steven shut the door on her. The bargain had been kept, the bargain was complete.

He turned back into the gorgeous room that was no longer his—a ruined man, disgraced, without a wife.

Presently he put the candles out and, seated in the dark, put his hands before his face and wept.

Chapter XI

Towards Paris.

Ursula Wedderburn sat in a heavy post-chaise that was lumbering from Calais to Paris.

Her companion, a faithful creature who had one time been her maid and then Sir Harry's pensioner, sat in a corner asleep in sheer weariness of mind and body; no money nor consideration of self could have induced her to undertake this journey, which she considered terrible and mad to the last degree.

But for the sake of the mistress who had been good to her in her prosperity and now came to her in her trouble, she had come cheerfully though fully confident that certain death was in store for both of them.

Ursula had no such foreboding; she knew that English people came and went between Paris and London much the same as usual; she knew that business continued between the two capitals, and no tales had reached her ears of English people being imprisoned or in any way interfered with.

Besides, she believed that reports had very much exaggerated the state of things in Paris, and when she reached Calais to find the coaches running as usual and no signs of any particular disturbance this view was confirmed.

Nor was she naturally of a timorous nature, and in the present desperate state of her fortunes and the present wild state of her spirits, the thought and prospect of danger were rather a stimulus than in any sense a deterrent.

Yet, though no personal terror touched her, she was forced to admit to herself that she had recklessly entered on an extraordinary and difficult undertaking. Before she left London she had been to visit Sophia Compton, and had learnt from her the full story of the striped carnation (that lady already knew so much that Ursula, though against her will, was forced to fully confide in her) and had also discovered the address of the Marquis de Champlain—the name of his hotel and that of his country house.

And she was going to find him. Steven Wedderburn was to be as the dead—nay, she told herself desperately, as if he had never been. She was going to tell him of the great deception that had been put on both, of the great wrong that had been done them—of her bargain with her husband, of her own absolute freedom.

And what then?

She shuddered before that question, and dare not answer it—what then, indeed?

What way would love dictate—what way honour?

"Honour," she thought, "I have long since done with that!"

But in her heart she knew that she had not, that though she had taken Steven's wedding ring from her finger and vowed never to see him again, though he was bound not to follow or in any way pursue, she was still before God and man his wife.

She tried to thrust this knowledge away from her, to banish his name from her thoughts.

And the Marquis?

Had three years changed him? Would he still care?

What would he think of her action? Surely, surely he must pity and understand!

Even if he did not welcome her, even if she had passed out of his life too completely ever to re-enter it, still she could not regret having left England, since what was there to keep her in her own country now Harry was dead? And if death instead of love was awaiting her in Paris, still she would accept it gratefully.

Somehow she felt that joy had spread its wings and taken its flight from her life altogether; that she pursued only a phantom that she named Nicolas de Champlain.

With the dawn they neared Paris; her fellow travellers, prosperous, well-dressed men, yawned and stretched themselves, and brought the situation of the country home to Ursula by beginning to calmly discuss the prospects of the king being put on to trial.

When their conversation came to a pause, she spoke to one in her clear, high, English-French.

"Pardon, monsieur, but is there any difficulty in getting into Paris just now?"

The man was civil.

"No, madame, it is much easier to get into Paris than out at present!" he answered.

The other two laughed at the joke.

"But madame is English?" questioned one.

"Yes," said Ursula, flushing with a sense of the strangeness of her position and the strangeness of the object of her journey.

"Then madame need have no fear. Madame has friends in Paris?"

"Oh, yes," she answered hastily.

"Because it would not be pleasant for madame and her companion to be without friends with whom to stay. Paris is mad—may yet be more mad."

Ursula shivered.

"The aristocrats?" she questioned, rather faintly. "Paris is no longer safe for them?"

The three men exchanged meaning glances.

"Madame is interested in an aristocrat?" asked one.

Ursula rallied her strength.

"My sister married a Frenchman," she said, inventing rather desperately. "He is dead, but she is alive and with her children in Paris; we have come to fetch her home."

The Frenchmen were, or appeared to be, satisfied.

“It is wiser for madame’s sister to leave Paris,” said the oldest gravely, and then ail were silent until the capital was reached, when they took a courteous leave.

Poor Martha Fenton, Ursula’s companion, awoke in a baleful state of gloom and apprehension.

“Is this the place where we are all to be murdered?” she exclaimed, thrusting a dishevelled head out of the coach window and gazing forlornly round the grey streets of Paris.

“Nay,” said Ursula, who was low-spirited indeed but determined to put a good front to the world. “The place is quiet enough, Martha; the revolution is not likely to interfere with us.”

The two women dismounted; their modest trunks were placed at their feet on the cobbles, and the coach rattled off into the yard of the inn.

A terrible sense of home-sickness rushed over Ursula; talk as bravely as she would she could not deny to herself that the city looked strange, that wild figures were prowling about, that there was a dangerous air abroad.

Before leaving England she had written to a French lady whom she knew, the daughter of a former French Ambassador to England, who had, since Ursula’s first acquaintance with her, married a certain Comte de Brétueil; there had been some affection between her and Ursula and a continued correspondence after the Countess had returned to her own country.

Ursula had asked her hospitality for a few days, but had received no answer to her letter.

However, she was sure that the Countess would welcome her, and, taking her courage in both hands, she summoned a passing hackney coach and bade the driver take them to that lady’s mansion in the Rue du Bac.

The sights Ursula observed as they drove through Paris did not reassure her as to the state of the country; bands of lawless people seemed abroad; workmen and women were wandering about idle; here and there an orator spoke to the crowds at street corners.

There were many fashionably dressed folk laughing and lolling before the cafés—obviously not persons of quality, yet persons in power.

Ursula’s heart became more and more heavy. She had been to Paris when a girl for a short space of gaiety, and she tried to recall that time now—but the country had too utterly changed. Then the king had been on his throne, and all was smiling and pleasant; no memories of that holiday season would serve to sweeten for Ursula this grey town, grey buildings, with a grey river running between them and a grey sky overhead against which grey turrets, spires and roofs rose bleakly.

When they reached the Rue du Bac a fresh disappointment confronted Ursula.

The Comte de Brétueil and his wife were away. There was a letter for Ursula from the Countess. A manservant and a maid were in charge of the shut-up mansion.

Ursula tore open her letter standing in the courtyard, while the hackney driver waited stolidly for his fare, and Martha seated herself forlornly on the box that had been deposited on the cobbles.

The Countess’s letter was in a frantic tone; she could, she wrote, find no words strong enough to contemn Ursula’s action in coming to Paris at such a time. Where was her husband that he permitted it? What was her object?

The day she had received Ursula's note, she continued, she and the count had decided to leave Paris and remain hid in the country till the present troubles were over.

She had left two faithful servants in charge, she added, and if Ursula wished to remain in Paris she was a thousand times welcome to make the house of the Rue du Bac her home, but the Countess's advice was for her to return to England at once, while, she added ominously, the way to England was open.

Ursula finished the letter, then turned to the servant, who was waiting quietly for her decision.

"Your mistress gives me leave to stay here," she said. "I am Mrs. Wedderburn—the Countess spoke of me to you?

"Yes, madame."

"Well, I will stay here for the present. My business in Paris is very important and I know of nowhere else where we can safely go."

"Yes, madame." The man seemed composed but anxious. "Madame will find that we can make her comfortable."

Ursula paid the hackney coachman and followed the servant into the splendid empty salons of the Countess de Brétueil.

The rooms, so gorgeous, so empty of all atmosphere of life and light seemed to Ursula as foreboding, as full of gloom, as the sordid streets.

She shuddered.

"How long will your master be away?" she asked.

"It is indeed difficult to tell, madame," the servant answered. Something in his tone and face arrested Ursula.

"Things are very bad here?" she asked sharply.

"Very bad indeed, madame."

"Do you—do you think there will soon be some settlement—some return to order? Surely the revolutionaries cannot have so completely the upper hand?"

"Madame," was the answer, "there were thirty executions in the Place Louis XV yesterday, and in the provinces they are—massacring."

Ursula paled.

"But we—but those who do not offend in any way are safe? There is still some order, some law?"

"There is none, madame; one may be arrested one day and executed the next with no manner of trial. And for the noblesse, madame, the whole of Paris is a prison. I should advise madame to transact her business quickly," added the man in a respectful tone, "and return to London soon."

"Yes, yes," answered Ursula hastily.

She saw now that the state of things in Paris came nearer Martha's estimate than her own. She had done in every way a mad action, but she still thought that it was the only thing possible under the circumstances and she did not regret it. The servant and the maid conducted her and Martha into one of the splendid guest chambers.

It was a noble room, white and gold and painted with clusters of gay-coloured flowers and shepherdesses in the midst of fairy landscapes.

The gilt and tapestry furniture, the mirrors, the rose pink velvet and white silk lace curtains were all exquisitely arranged; it reminded Ursula of the room she had

left behind. She seated herself on the step of the cream-coloured and gold bed, and stared up at the canopy of brocade satin supported by f our gilt Cupids.

Martha and the maid (who spoke a little English) were deep in discussion of practical matters, and she was alone. More alone than she had ever been in her life.

Her brother was dead (it gave her a horrible shock to think that he was lying in the family vault at Brent at this actual moment), her husband she had put out of her life—and where was M. de Champlain?

Was it likely that she could find him? Things were worse than she had thought; she had counted on the Countess's help and that had failed. It was very probable that he had left Paris. He might even be in prison—or—

Thirty victims yesterday!

She dare not, she could not, and would not pursue that thought. No, he *was* alive, and she *must* find him; she was *going* to find him.

She reviewed her resources; none of her husband's costly gifts had she touched—she had cynically reflected that most likely they were not hers to take, but already belonged to his creditors. Such jewels as she had possessed before her marriage she had sold and placed the proceeds to her credit at a bank with a branch in Paris.

She was in possession of this bank's draft for about five hundred pounds.

Before her departure from England their lawyer had told her that Harry had left her the little—very little—ready money he had died possessed of, and Brent Manor with the land, furniture and effects, which he had managed, by some miracle, to preserve intact and unencumbered, during the three years he had been in fresh possession of the place.

The land was in the hands of a capable steward, and should yield presently a fair income; Ursula was glad that the horror of sheer poverty was lifted from her shoulders.

The bargain had at least brought her her old home and means to live.

Suddenly she began to think of Steven Wedderburn.

She wondered what he had done; if he had managed to save anything from the wreck of his business; what he would do with the rest of his life.

"He paid dear for me," she thought.

For the first time she faced the fact that she had ruined him, that from her wedding day she had set out to ruin him, and had succeeded.

He had pitted his fortune against her capacity for spending it, and he had lost, as she had known he was bound to lose. But this ending was better than if the incredible bargain had been pushed to its limit, and she had had to demand his death.

She wondered what London would say—what story he would offer.

She could hear the comments round the tea-tables:

"That rich Wedderburn—lost all his money. *She* fled—with some other man, of course. Who was he?"

She wished now that he had not been ruined, for on the discovery of the letters she could have left him in any case, and she thought that her flight would have had a better savour if it had not been coincident with her husband's downfall.

With a great effort she dismissed the past from her mind.

Chapter XII

In the Grip of Paris.

The next day Ursula questioned the servant Did he know of the Marquis de Champlain?—who was, she added, connected with the business on which she had come to Paris so desperately.

Yes, the man knew monseigneur; he had been a frequent visitor to madame's salons, but visiting had been over in Paris for some time, and it was months since he had seen monseigneur—most probably he was no longer in Paris—very, very few of the noblesse were.

"Where is his hotel?" asked 'Ursula with a faint heart.

"In the Rue d'Antin, madame."

"Will you take a note there for me to-day?"

"Certainly, madame."

Ursula wrote the note, a mere line saying that she was in Paris, only to hear on the return of her messenger a few hours later that the Hôtel de Champlain was shut up and barred, no one in attendance—"as one might have supposed, madame," the servant concluded with a little shrug.

"Where is his country residence?" asked Ursula.

It was in Provence, near Aix. She sent her letter there, though warned that the post was not in the least reliable. Three weary intolerable days passed, spent by Ursula almost entirely in the silent, gorgeous house.

She dare not venture out beyond necessity, especially as she had no escort; her beauty and her costly clothes attracted unpleasant attention, and the streets were lawless and wild—became, she thought, more wild and lawless hour by hour.

She heard talk of the terrible work done every day in the Place Louis Quinze—"Place de la Révolution," as the people had named it now—a spot she very carefully avoided—of massacres in the prisons, of parties rising and falling like a shuttlecock tossed in the hand.

And there came no news from the Marquis de Champlain, nor yet from the Comte de Brétueil.

Jean, the servant, and the maid went their way quietly, did their duty excellently and were silent; Ursula could not in the least gauge their feelings.

On the second day the man left off his livery—it was no longer wise, he said, for him to be seen in it; the Republic had abolished servitude.

On the third day he told Ursula that he had been to a certain French bank where his master had stored his jewels and made inquiries for him. He had been told that they had heard nothing of the Comte de Brétueil for the last week; most probably he had fled the country.

He had also asked if they knew anything of Monsieur de Champlain, and the answer had been that the Marquis was one of their customers and had lodged most of his effects with them; they did not know where he was at present, but they

expected to hear from him any moment as they were awaiting instructions from him as to the forwarding of his valuables to England.

"Perhaps," concluded Jean, "they know where he is and would not tell me for fear I was a spy. But that is not likely, for they know I am in the confidence of Monsieur de Brétueil."

Ursula was warmly grateful; it seemed as if she had already got into touch with her lover, but the last sentence alarmed her.

"Why should they be afraid to give his address?" she asked. "Is he in hiding? Is he 'wanted'?"

"All the noblesse are 'wanted' by the people, madame," he answered, and he added quite dryly that the mob was beginning to break into and sack and burn the empty mansions that had been left unprotected.

"I do not know how long we shall be safe, madame. Of course, I shall stay by the property of monseigneur as long as possible, but it may not be possible soon, and monseigneur gave me instructions to leave the country if things became worse. I should advise madame to return to England."

Martha, whose shrewd common sense saw clearly enough how black affairs were becoming, said the same thing.

"Why do we stay, ma'am?" she demanded. "Every soul who can get away is doing so as fast as possible."

"Wait," said Ursula. "I cannot go; if you must, you shall. But I shall stay here. We are safe enough; they will not touch English women."

Martha shook her head; she thought that the French mob, for whom she felt as much contempt as fear, was capable of anything; but it never occurred to her to leave her mistress, and so though she held up her hands at the folly of it all, she stayed, therein behaving with an admirable courage, for she was quite certain that she would be massacred sooner or later.

The next day Ursula, on fire with impatience, and gowned as simply as possible, went to the Comte de Brétueil's bank for news of the Marquis.

As she entered the dark, dusty premises and drew up with the other anxious inquirers at the long polished counter, behind which the clerks stood, she felt her heart quiver with a nervous horror as if she had come to learn a sentence of life or death.

The place was full of people, and the air seemed oppressive with sadness, anxiety, suspense, and fear.

Directly in front of Ursula stood a young girl of remarkable beauty, dressed in white muslin, worn and mended, a dark green pelisse, and a straw hat trimmed with green ribbons.

Ursula was attracted to her by reason of her extreme youth and the deep trouble that was stamped on her frail, lovely face.

She seemed such a child to be in such distress, so gently made, so obviously highly born, to be alone in this press. Ursula saw that her lips were twitching with anxiety, and heard that her voice was husky and low as she made her inquiry.

"I wish to know—if you have heard from a client of yours," she began. In an even lower tone she gave the name, "the Marquis de Champlain?"

Ursula started as if an ice-cold weapon had been driven into her already aching heart.

“You know me,” the girl continued pitifully. “I was to call here for letters.”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” the clerk answered with respect and sympathy. “Unfortunately there are no letters.”

“Ah! No—no letters?”

“None, mademoiselle.”

“No—message?”

“I regret, no.”

“You have not heard?”

“No, mademoiselle.”

“You have no idea where he is?”

“No; it is a month since we had any news.”

“And he was to have joined us in Paris a fortnight ago,” said the girl. “And never any news! How may one bear it?”

“Mademoiselle,” said the clerk kindly, “probably Monsieur de Champlain has left the country. I should advise you to do the same.”

She seemed on the point of breaking down, but her breeding came to her aid; she moved aside, and the next eager inquirer stepped into her place.

A tumult had surged in Ursula’s heart during this short conversation, every word of which she had overheard for all the lowered voices.

Jealousy, envy, fear, pity, and dread tore at her—curiosity, too. Who was this girl? There was no use in her making inquiries since she had heard all she could hear; she turned impetuously round and touched the girl on the shoulder.

“Mademoiselle!”

The other turned with a great start, flushed, and trembled.

“Forgive me,” said Ursula rapidly, “I heard what you said just now.”

The strained young face went deadly pale; it was evident that she was living under a constant terror.

“I am a friend,” added Ursula. “Please do not be afraid of me. I am an Englishwoman.”

The girl breathed more freely; even in her state of nervous dread she thought it very unlikely that an Englishwoman should be a spy—besides Ursula’s face inspired confidence in the repose and dignity of its beauty.

“What do you wish, madame?” she murmured.

“I am a—I was an acquaintance of Monsieur de Champlain when I was in England. I came here myself to make inquiries about him. I heard—I thought—if I could be of use—” Ursula stopped abruptly. What had she to say, after all? How could she justify to the girl her impulse of speech?

“You are a relation of Monsieur de Champlain?” she asked desperately.

“Yes, madame.”

“Could I—be—of any use?”

The dark eyes gazed at her gravely.

“Thank you—no, madame.”

She turned to go, but Ursula made another effort to detain her; she could not so easily allow this link with the Marquis to escape her.

“If you ever should need help—I am staying in the Comte de Brétueil’s mansion in the Rue du Bac.”

“Oh!” the girl seemed startled. “Yes, I know him—of course. And you, are you *staying* in Paris?”

“For the present.”

“Then you cannot know how—horrible Paris is. Adieu, my parents will be expecting me.”

Without giving her name or asking Ursula’s she slipped through the press of people that crowded the narrow door and disappeared.

‘When Ursula gained the street the slight figure in the worn green pelisse was not in sight; she must have rapidly turned down some side way. It was evident that she did not wish to be followed.

Who was she, and was she in hiding? Was she or were her people under some proscription? What was the terror that had banished all the youth from her lovely face? What was the reason of her anxiety as to the whereabouts of Monsieur de Champlain?

Ursula’s heart ached to know these things. She felt sad at the rebuff she had been given; she thought that if this young girl could have confided in her she would have been happier. A relation, she had said—Ursula wondered what this relationship was.

Possibly she was even his sister; Ursula knew nothing of his family, or if he had brothers and sisters.

She tried to trace a likeness between the features of the Marquis that she so well remembered and the delicate face beneath the straw hat that she had just gazed into.

Both had black eyes and black hair, both had delicate features and clear brown complexions. Yes, there was a certain likeness.

“I wish she had not fled,” thought Ursula, “nor been so proud, or so afraid.”

With a heavy step she turned in the direction of the Rue du Bac. There was nothing more that she could do. She must continue to face that most hideous of all agonies—suspense. She must wait, more or less hopelessly, for what were the chances that she should find Monsieur de Champlain in this tumult of a city when his own relations, who had recently been in much closer touch with him than she had ever been, could not discover any news of him? What chance was there that he would ever receive her letter or be able to send a reply if he did? She conceived the wild idea of travelling down to Provence and looking for him there, but there was scant comfort in that project.

She woke suddenly from her thoughts to find that she had been walking aimlessly, and was now in a part of Paris utterly unknown to her.

As she paused and looked round at the strange and gloomy streets full of rough and fierce-looking people she felt, for the first time since her arrival in France, a touch of sheer personal terror.

She suddenly realised that it was not so light a thing as she had thought, to be unprotected and friendless in Paris.

She felt a mere straw on the fierce tide that was sweeping a dynasty away, a helpless creature in the grip of the angry and maddened city.

It was near the hour of sunset and she trembled at the thought of being out after dark, yet instinct warned her that to ask any of these people her way would be to attract attention to herself in a very foolish manner. It was a poor quarter full

of low wineshops and cafés; ominous looking groups in red caps were lounging about smoking; distant shouting came from some of the side streets; bands of the Republican Guard went by, and, both by their presence and the quantity of traffic, Ursula gathered that she was near one of the gates. She stopped before a dark and gloomy house and tried to think what she should do. The obvious thing seemed to be to hire a hackney, but she could not see one, nor did there seem much likelihood of one appearing in this quarter.

Despite her dark cloak and the hood well pulled over her face, she began to notice the passers-by staring at her; well-dressed women out alone were a rarity these days—moreover, she looked foreign.

Alarmed by this scrutiny of the dark, lowering, brutal faces, she hurried on, resolved to walk until she came to some street familiar to her.

She had not proceeded far before she saw signs of a great commotion and excitement.

People were running from all directions, armed with all kinds of uncouth weapons; there was shouting and cursing, shrieking, beating of drums and waving of rags and sticks. Ursula stepped into the doorway of a small barber's shop, for she was in danger of being swept off her feet in the rush.

As she watched the crowd gathered in numbers and wrath—men, women and children, all wearing the red cap, were dancing, yelling, and rushing along the straight dark street, brandishing some kind of knife, axe or gun.

"They are out to kill," muttered Ursula. "They are out to kill!"

She prayed that she might not see their killing.

The shop door opened and an old man touched her shoulder.

"This is no place for you," he said kindly. "Come inside."

She obeyed mechanically; everything was fast assuming the proportions of a nightmare.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"Near the Porte Saint Antoine, my dear," answered the little barber, who was putting bars up across his window. "It is a terrible place to live in—they watch all the carts leaving and entering Paris, and sometimes they find 'suspects.'"

"Have they found someone now?" asked Ursula faintly.

"Yes; they are rushing to the gate, because the soldiers have stopped someone from entering Paris—some aristocrat, I fear."

"What will they do?" Ursula sank on to a stool inside the door.

"They kill them," said the barber. "It is rather horrible."

"Oh, heavens!" cried Ursula. "And you live here?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I move? One stays where the custom is. But you are a foreigner; you should not be here."

"I lost my way," she answered, feeling that she had lost it indeed, into the heart of some dreadful dream.

The door was shut and bolted half-way, but open at the top. Ursula rose and stood there, looking at the street.

"Come to the back till it is over," said the old man.

Ursula shook her head; she felt that to hide while this horror was going on would be more awful than to face it.

The crowd was beginning to turn from the gates.

A man in a torn red shirt stopped and leant over the door. He explained that a number of aristocrats, the men disguised as women, had tried to enter Paris—no doubt (the accursed ones!) to fetch their jewels. Now they had been discovered, and the people were disguising them—another way.

The barber laughed.

"One has to humour them," he said as the man passed on.

Surging and tossing through the narrow street, the crowd came back triumphant. Ursula braced herself; here and there, where the people were denser, she guessed they were dragging along a victim.

"Come away," said the little barber, and he pulled violently at her arm.

But Ursula resisted him; a wild excitement had come over her; if there were people of her own caste out there being hurried to death, if noble men and women were going to be martyred before her eyes, then she wanted to join them—she wished to hurl herself under the trampling feet and face the glittering knives.

"I cannot hide," she cried. "Let me go!"

But he still tried to draw her from the door.

There were awful things stuck on the bayonet blades some of the men carried—things with floating hair!

The crowd suddenly swept close to the window. One man, red from head to foot, carried a round, fair object against his ragged shirt.

"Here are some curls for you to dress!" he shouted to the barber, and he cast what he carried in at the door.

It fell at Ursula's feet.

"Don't look!" shrieked the old man frantically.

But Ursula was gazing down at the floor where a blonde bleeding head lay near the edge of her skirt, the rich locks stained with gore, the features distorted, the blue eyes staring fearfully. Shriek after shriek issued from Ursula's lips.

She had recognised the face of the woman in whose house she was living—Marguerite de Brétueil.

Chapter XIII

The Mob.

And then the mob entered.

Ursula did not faint, nor for one second of the dreadful time that followed lose full possession of her senses.

She stood up in the dimness of the little shop, her white dress showing between the dark lines of her cloak.

She had ceased to shriek.

"Yes, I was her friend," she said. "Kill me, too!"

They were thrusting the fair head of the Comtesse de Brétueil on a pike. Ursula remembered that lovely face laughing behind tea tables, glancing round a fan, flashing through a ball-room—

"Kill me, too!" she repeated.

"She is English," said one.

"Yes," added the little barber. "English; take care what you do."

The men and women who had entered the shop paused and stared at Ursula.

In that moment she was not afraid of anything; her life seemed a valueless thing, no one wanted her, she was prepared to die. She kept her eyes fixed on the head on the pike.

She wished Marguerite de Brétueil knew that she was there—that she was going to die, to keep her company.

The utter indifference she felt with regard to her own fate showed in her unfaltering carriage and had its effect on the crowd.

They were almost awed before her.

Then they began to trail out of the shop, one after the other, and joined their companions in the street.

When the last had gone the barber tried to prop up his broken door.

"They are going to burn the Hôtel de Brétueil," he said, listening to the shouts of the mob. "Paris is mad."

He turned to Ursula, who still stood immovable in the centre of the floor.

"Poor child!" he said. "Where do you live?"

Ursula began hurriedly fastening her cloak, a new thought inspired her with fresh energy. Her life was not useless. Someone did need her. They were going to burn the Hôtel de Brétueil. Martha was there, and the two faithful servants who did not yet know the fate of their mistress.

They would be massacred; there was just a chance that she might warn them. If she failed she could perish with them.

She flung herself before the old man who had befriended her.

"Monsieur, for the love of heaven, tell me a short way to the Hôtel de Brétueil. I am residing there, and there are other people there whom I must endeavour to save. Oh, I know you are good! Help me in this!"

The old barber was bewildered by the strangeness of the story; he was still shivering with a sense of the miracle by which their lives had been spared.

He raised Ursula from the blood-stained floor, murmuring:

"It is a long way from St. Antoine to the Rue du Bac—a long way!"

But he guided Ursula out through the back of his house, across his garden, and into a narrow dark street. There he would have left her, with hurried directions, but she, fearful of missing the way, besought him in so earnest a fashion to accompany her that at length he consented.

After half an hour's rapid walking, they arrived at the Pont du Carrousel; here Ursula knew her way.

She emptied into the old man's hands all the money she had that morning drawn from the bank (close on fifty pounds), and with broken blessings on him, fled over the dark bridge and along the dimly lit quay.

Though even this part of the town seemed in a wild state of disorder, though plainly Paris was roused to-night and out for blood, there was no particular sign of disturbance in the Rue du Bac.

The mansion of the woman they had murdered they had not yet reached.

Ursula thought of the Count; had he been slain also?

Almost certainly he was among the victims of the Place Saint Antoine.

She reached the house unmolested; it was all in darkness.

She passed through the iron gates into the courtyard; the front door stood open as usual. She entered, closed the portals behind her and stood at the foot of the grand staircase.

On the first landing a single candle of the clusters in a huge candelabra was lit, and in the feeble light of the flickering rays it sent down the stairs Ursula could discern the figure of Jean the servant.

He was seated on the top stair and held across his knee a long and beautiful pistol.

"Ah, it is you, madame!" he said softly. "I have been very much afraid for you."

He rose and stood against the gorgeous gilt balusters.

Ursula mounted the stairs; she could not speak.

As she approached Jean she found herself noticing him for the first time; it was a new thing for her to take any heed of the personalities of servants, and she could not hitherto have told what the man was like.

But now she knew that a great deal depended on the character of this lackey.

She paused beside him and gathered strength to speak.

"Jean, bring me some wine into the drawing-room. I want to speak to you. Where is my maid?"

"I sent her to her father's place at Ivry, where she will be safe, madame," answered Jean.

"Ah! then you know something?"

He replied grimly:

"I know that Paris is up to-night—up for blood."

He lit another candle and conducted her into the great, chilly, magnificent drawing-room, which was at the back of the house. When he had placed the candle on the chimney-piece, where it was reflected in ghostly fashion in the huge mirror, he left her, and she heard him barring the door; he had evidently been waiting for her. He returned to the drawing-room and brought some wine, which Ursula drank, but she could not take much of it. As she set her glass down she raised her eyes to the servant, who still waited.

He no longer wore his livery, but a black suit and a muslin cravat; he had discarded his peruke, and she saw that his hair was auburn and curling long like a gentleman's, and fastened with a silk ribbon.

She wondered, as she looked at him, that she had not before observed the fine quality of his face and bearing, the resolution and pride in his expression; before he had seemed merely an excellent servant, now he seemed a vigorous personality on which she could rely.

"Jean," she began, "you need not stay The Mob if there is any place where you would be safer than you are here. It is no part of your duty to remain."

She wondered, faint and sick at heart, if she should tell him of the fate of his master and mistress?

Her eyes roved round the unutterably dreary splendour of the cold drawing-room.

"I must warn you," she said, "that there is a good chance of this place being stormed to-night. I gathered so much from—what I heard in the streets. I lost my way. If you know of any place of safety=-do not think of me, but go."

Jean looked at her quietly.

"Madame is good—but my post is here," he answered. "Madame herself will, I hope, leave this place. There would be shelter at the English bank where madame goes."

"Yes, yes," said Ursula. "I am quite ready; I do not, indeed, think this place is safe. I came back to say so. We will get ready at once. You must come too, Jean."

"Madame, it is impossible," he replied firmly.

"Why?"

He answered in the tone he had used before.

"Madame, I have a duty to perform—I must stay here till the Countess comes."

Now she must tell! Dear heavens! she must tell him what she had seen that afternoon.

"The Countess is expected here tonight or to-morrow," continued Jean. "The country house where she was hiding has been burnt. I had this news yesterday."

"Where is the Count?" asked Ursula desperately; the image of the husband of her dead friend, a man she had never seen, loomed terribly before her. Heaven pity him!

"He," answered Jean, "will meet madame here to-morrow."

"He was not with her, then?" cried Ursula.

"No, madame," was the answer. "He has been hiding in Paris."

"Oh!" cried Ursula. "Oh!"

"So you see, madame, why I must stay."

Ursula's fevered brain was rapidly considering the situation. Could she give her horrible news to a servant? Could she leave him to face his master with it? Did she not owe it to the man whose house had sheltered her to tell him herself of the tragedy that had overtaken him?

"Jean," she said, "I will stay and meet the Count."

He looked surprised; even, she thought, angry.

"Morbleu!" he exclaimed. "It is quite mad!"

Ursula rose.

"No more for me than for you," she replied. "Less for me, for they are not likely to touch an Englishwoman, while you, as an aristocrat's servant, have little chance. I shall not go, Jean."

He was silent; his expression was hard and angry.

"What does your master mean to do?" she asked. She was still fencing with the moment when she must impart her dreadful knowledge.

"All arrangements are complete for them to leave Paris as German travellers, madame."

"When do you expect—" she could not say "them." Her voice broke.

“I am waiting for the Countess now,” said Jean. “She will ring three times. I would have gone to meet her, but I did not know by which gate she would come.”

He paused to listen to the distant murmur of the rising mob; his nostrils were distended, his eyes dilated. Ursula noticed the deep emotion under his control. She must tell him now.

“Jean,” she began chokingly.

He did not seem to hear her; he had stepped to the window and his figure was almost lost in the shadows of the great room so feebly lit by the one candle.

The sounds drew nearer.

Ursula heard him exclaim: “Mon Dieu! that she should be out in this!”

The passion in his voice arrested her; she felt she was losing control of her senses, of the just proportion of things.

“Jean!” she called sharply.

He turned into the circle of candlelight.

Ursula supported herself against the table; she looked down on the floor, she saw the soiled frill of her white gown, she noticed some tiny red marks on it—blood! Marguerite de Brétueil’s blood!

“Jean!” she said thickly, “you are a very faithful servant. Your mistress—” The voice broke; she clapped her hands to her heart; the man’s face was oppressing her, mastering her.

“Who are you? she asked dully.

“Jean, the servant,” he answered. “You are going to faint—take some wine.”

“Yes, I shall faint,” said Ursula. “I shall faint before I have told you what I must tell you.”

He stood quite still, but he spoke with great vehemence.

“Will you leave? Will you let me take you to the bank?”

“No,” she shook her head, “it is my post now as well as yours, Jean. We must stay. And it does not matter at all about my life; it is—quite—a useless—thing.”

She broke down utterly and began to sob.

“Very well, then, you must stay and face it,” said Jean grimly.

She cursed herself for her weeping.

“Oh, a fool, a fool!” she muttered; she looked up and dried her eyes with the muslin ends of her fichu.

“I shall not cry any more,” she said bravely. “I am not really afraid for myself.”

She looked at him; he had been to the window again and was returning from it. His desperate anxiety was past concealment.

Ursula noticed something gleam under the full black skirts of his coat. Why—was she blind not to have seen it before?

He was wearing a sword.

“You—you are not a servant,” she stammered.

“No,” he said dryly. “I am François de Brétueil, madame. And I am waiting for my wife.”

Then the bell rang three times.

Chapter XIV

The Rivals.

Ursula was swept to the uttermost depths of nightmare horror as she stood alone in the dark drawing-room, listening to the footsteps of the man descending the great stairway as he went to the door in answer to the three peals on the bell.

"It is my wife," he had said quietly as he had left her.

"I have gone mad," thought Ursula. "Nothing happened this afternoon—it was all a vision. Marguerite is alive. Her husband has gone to open the door to her."

She crept across the great smooth floor and leant against the wall inside the door, listening—listening.

She heard the front door open and the sounds of Paris coming louder. She heard a woman's voice.

"I am mad," she said again, and clenched her hands fiercely. "This is Marguerite—"

She tried to steady herself.

"*Nothing—happened—this—afternoon*," she repeated.

Stiff in the heavy shadows she waited. Footsteps came up the stairs—double footsteps. She heard the woman's voice, faint, tired, complaining—the man's soothing, strong.

"Supposing I had spoken," thought Ursula, "of what *did not happen this afternoon?*"

She drew away from the door as they entered.

François de Brétueil was supporting a slender figure in a dark pelisse.

"It is not the Countess," he said under his breath.

And then Ursula knew that she had been deceiving herself and that she had been aware all the time that what she had seen in the barber's shop was true, true, *true!*

Her limbs shook beneath her; she staggered to the table and sank into a chair; so awful was the reaction from those drugged moments of hope, when she had told herself that it *was* Marguerite coming up the stairs, that she had no strength to observe the stranger.

She heard the Count's voice from a long way off:

"This is Mademoiselle de Rochefort, who has come here for shelter. She says she met you this afternoon."

Ursula raised her dizzy eyes; she recognised the young girl she had seen in the bank.

"I thought you were the Countess," she shuddered. "You rang three times."

"Madame, it is the arrangement we have in our house that we may know each other. I thought it might be the same here."

She looked imploringly at Ursula.

"You told me to-day that if I needed help you were here. I came. I found Monsieur le Comte."

"What happened to you?" asked Ursula stupidly.

“I came to find you,” answered the girl. “There was no place in Paris where I dare go. I was near here. The mob has risen to-night.”

“Where is your father, mademoiselle?” asked M. de Brétueil.

“I do not know. He and my mother went out to make final inquiries about the coach; we were to leave Paris to-night. They were out when I got back from the bank. Well, I went out to try to find them, and then I met the people, and I was afraid.”

She collapsed into a chair, and gazed imploringly from one to the other.

“But I had better go again and try to find them,” she added feverishly.

“No,” answered M. de Brétueil, “you will stay here; we must all stay here. There is nothing else to do.”

Ursula dragged herself to the window and leant her sick head against the mullions.

All the world had suddenly broken into chaos. What was she to say or do?

She heard M. de Brétueil explaining his position to the young girl. “I am waiting for the Countess,” he concluded.

Was she to let him wait? Could she permit him to be deceived? Was it her duty to be the messenger of horror?

She seemed to be in an awful loneliness. This was likely to be the most terrible moment of her life, and never had she been so alone to face any trifle as she was to face this.

All her life some love and protection had encompassed her—first her parents, then poor Harry, then Steven. She thought of Steven, of the man who had perjured himself and ruined himself for her, who had kept his bargain. What wicked folly all her extravagances seemed now! How paltry and mean her design to “revenge” herself on the man who had, after all, given her everything!

The street began to be red with light; the crowd was surging down the Rue du Bac.

“I suppose I must die to-night,” thought Ursula, “without seeing Monsieur de Champlain again—without telling Steven I am sorry; that it was my fault, too.”

She came back into the room. The Count put out the solitary candle, and they were in the dark, relieved only by the shifting angry lights flung in from the street.

Martha had joined them; she was silent and alert like a well-trained animal; without any explanation, she seemed to understand the situation.

Ursula spoke to the Count.

“Monsieur,” she said in a trembling voice, “I owe you great thanks for this hospitality. I would that you had confided in me sooner.”

Amongst her swirling thoughts was this: That three women, no one of them any concern of his, had flung themselves on his protection, thereby considerably hindering his escape.

He did not seem to hear her.

“Mon Dieu! Marguerite!” he exclaimed under his breath.

Martha spoke.

“Is there a back way out, ma’am?” she suggested.

“No,” said the Count, “only into the garden, which is walled all round and overlooked.”

“The people,” murmured Ursula, “may pass.”

The red light was now insistent, flaring; it lit the room from end to end. They saw each other's faces dyed a false crimson.

"They have fired the house opposite," whispered Mademoiselle de Rochefort. The Count caught her arm.

"Do not go to the window; do not look out," he said.

Ursula was perfectly sure, from the words of the little barber, that they would not escape the fury of the mob. She was sick with apprehension that these fiends might have brought with them that fair ghastly head.

The Count went to the window.

"They are entering the courtyard," he said through his teeth.

There was a crash of glass as the ground floor windows were instantly smashed with stones and axes; yells and cries and snatches of wild song arose.

"There is one chance for you," said M. de Brétueil—"the roof!"

He turned to Ursula and with great tenderness drew Mademoiselle de Rochefort towards her.

"Stand by this child, madame," he said. "As an Englishwoman you are comparatively safe, but she—" He broke off, listening to the thunderous blows on the door. "They will be in in a moment," he exclaimed. "This way."

He opened the door and rapidly preceded them up the chill, stately, dark staircase.

They followed him to a room at the back; he showed them that the coping that ran outside the window was large enough for a foothold and led to the next mansion, on the roof of which they might lie till the street was quiet, and then descend by means of the windows of that house, as it had some time ago been sacked and was not likely to again attract the attention of the mob.

"Are you not coming?" gasped Ursula desperately.

The moon was up and they saw his face in the light of it, colourless and composed.

"They are already on the stairs," he said.

"But are you not coming?" She grasped his shoulder.

"No, madame, I shall keep the stairs," he replied.

"Alas!" moaned Ursula.

"What else could a de Brétueil do?" demanded Mademoiselle de Rochefort.

"But the Countess, sir?" put in Martha.

His face had a strange look on it.

"I have a fancy that I am going to meet her," he said. "Adieu, mesdames!"

He left them. He crossed the room, opened the door (and as it was opened they heard a hideous outcry coming up the stairs), closed it behind him and locked it.

"We cannot leave him," cried Ursula frantically.

"Madame," the young girl seized her arm, "we can best please him by obeying him. Do not let him lose his life for nothing; and it is better that he should die, for he loved his wife, and I have seen her head on a pike."

"Ah! so you know, too," answered Ursula. She felt rebuked and ashamed at this courage from the girl that the man who had so heroically gone to his death had put in her charge.

She nerved herself; she shut her mind to what was taking place on the stairs. She helped the others out of the window and herself followed on to the coping, and

so on to the roof, where they lay crouching on the dusty stones, under the February moon.

They drew themselves into the shadow of an ornate chimney stack, and listened to the howling of the mob below.

Mademoiselle de Rochefort's cold hand slipped into Ursula's damp palm.

"Madame," she asked in a deep whisper, "have you anyone you care for, anyone you *love*, in Paris to-night?"

Ursula hung her head.

"The man I love and whom I came to find," burst from her pale lips, "is abroad in France—perhaps in Paris—to-night."

The girl pressed closer towards her.

"My love, too, is lost in this terrible city," she said simply; "therefore we should cherish each other, madame, to the end."

Ursula put her arm round the slender body and passionately clasped her to her heart.

"Until the end," she repeated. She gave her other hand to Martha, and the three sat still for some little space, thinking of death.

Presently the noise died away; the crowd were retreating, and without firing the house.

Doubtless the sole object of their vengeance was the Comte de Brétueil, and they could have no possible idea that there was anyone else in the hotel.

The three women crept along the roof and looked over the parapet into the courtyard.

A few people carrying harsh flaring torches were searching among a pile of clothes and small articles heaped near the defaced gates.

Full in the middle of the cobbled courtyard, with his face upturned to the pale, cold sky, lay François de Brétueil, coatless, with his slashed shirt crimson from neck to waist.

"He must have fought like an Englishman," whispered Martha.

Ursula did not speak.

"He was my cousin; we used to play together in Provence," said Mademoiselle de Rochefort. "Pray to God for him—pray to God!"

She made a feeble motion with her hands as if to ward off something too terrible to be endured, and fell unconscious across Ursula's lap.

"What is the use of our lives, Martha?" asked the Englishwoman. "Why did we ever come up here? Why do we not go down now and die also?"

"It is not God's will, ma'am," answered Martha. "And that brave dead gentleman down there put this poor young creature into our charge. There are those who love her and would see her again, ma'am."

"Yes," cried Ursula wildly. "Let us save her for her lover."

They drew the slight form again into the black pool of shadow cast by the chimney-stack, and presently she revived, and they helped her to pass to the roof of the next mansion, which immediately abutted on this, and then along the coping again, and in through the first gaping smashed window to which they came.

There they dropped against the wall in sheer sick weariness.

Ursula was giddy and stabbed with pain; her dress was torn, soiled and dishevelled; her hair in knots down her back.

Her face was burning feverishly, her lips were dry, her mouth hot, but she continuously shivered.

The other two were in little better plight.

By the cold light of the moon they gazed at each other.

They were in a dismantled and charred room; the door was wrenched away and the walls broken.

Ursula began to madly speculate on who had lived here; how and when they had met their end, and in what circumstance of horror.

Her brain was a confusion of terrible thoughts, of nightmare images, and of wild terrors.

She endeavoured to steady herself by gazing on the pallid face of Mademoiselle de Rochefort.

In that very young and lovely countenance were a serenity, a purity, a fearlessness, and a gentle resignation that had something angelic in it.

Ursula believed that she was praying.

"She has never done anything wrong in her life," reflected Ursula, "yet she has to face this. Her case is far, far worse than mine."

Moved by a great impulse of respect and pity towards the girl who had probably lost father, brother, and lover, and who had seen the mangled body of her cousin and playmate, Ursula, lifted above all her own selfish fears and terrors, put her arms about her.

"What is your name?" she asked, pityingly.

"Clarisse, madame," the sweet voice answered.

"Who is your lover?" whispered Ursula, caressing her hair.

The girl shivered.

"I am betrothed to Nicolas de Champlain," she said; "and I love him more than my heart can well bear."

Ursula's arms relaxed about her; a long silence fell; then Clarisse slept.

At their feet lay Martha. The night passed; the three women slept without stirring. They were awakened by two of the Garde Républicaine.

Chapter XV

In the Prison.

The three were prisoners.

So it seemed that it did indeed approach the end for all of them. Neither their youth, their helplessness, their innocence, nor Ursula's nationality seemed likely to save them from a speedy death by the guillotine. Paris was in a seething state of anarchy in which none of these things counted at all, or only counted to whet the appetite of a people already mad with blood.

Ursula, lodged in the Conciergerie, had no means of communicating with the outside world, or of acquainting her friends in England with her plight.

Nor did she, for herself, care to take any steps to procure her freedom. The last agony had been driven into her heart.

Nicolas de Champlain, even if he was alive and she found him, was no longer free and would never be her lover now.

He belonged to this lovely creature who had been entrusted to her—Ursula—to protect.

If any miracle rescued them he would be this girl's husband, and never, never could she be more to him than that melancholy thing, the forgotten love of yester year. Her heart rebelled bitterly; it was cruel that the deception of another should so have blighted her life, cruel that the Marquis must always think her a shallow flirt.

She shook these thoughts from her. A bar of the pale sunlight fell through the high-barred window on the figure of Clarisse sleeping on the straw with her delicate little hand pressed under her pale cheek.

Of all those crowded into the common prison cell Ursula was the only one awake.

With strange and terrible feelings she stared down at the sleeping girl, wondering if she hated her.

She recalled the days, happy days, in England; incredibly happy they seemed now; and her numbed soul suddenly stirred and cried out passionately for life, for happiness again.

She was so young. And two men had loved her. Could it then be that she was to die alone, unpitied, unnoticed?

She sank down on the dirty straw beside Clarisse and covered her face with her hands, while between her thin fingers rolled the bitter, heart-broken tears.

With a little sigh Clarisse stirred and woke; she sat up, shaking back her fleece of black ringlets.

Then she saw Ursula, and smiled tenderly into the sad face the Englishwoman had raised. That smile turned in Ursula's heart like a knife.

She could not speak.

Clarisse crept closer to her side.

"I wonder how long we have to live?" she said.

"They cannot condemn us."

Clarisse looked round at the other sleeping women.

"I wish I could give my life for all these," she said softly, "for now I have had time to think, it is better that I should die."

"Why do you say that?"

"I was always in the way," smiled Clarisse.

Ursula started.

"I want to die now," whispered the French girl. "I wish they would make haste. They will save you, madame; I am sure of that. But there can be no hope for a de Rochefort."

Ursula averted her face.

"Do you not wish to live to meet your lover?" she asked faintly,

"Not now."

“Why?”

“Because”—she paused and glanced round to make sure that they were the only ones awake—“because—I must tell you now, madame, for I am near death I know, and I do not want you to grieve for me, and if you should ever meet him,” the sweet voice broke, “you could tell him that I was glad to—die!”

She clung to Ursula’s arm and lifted her lovely frail face; she seemed to bring a radiance as of a spring dawn, a melody as of slow, sad music into the vile cell.

“Madame,” she said, “Monsieur de Champlain does not love me.”

The blood rushed to Ursula’s face; a wild exultation shook her soul.

“Does not love you?”

“No; we were betrothed for a matter of convenience between our families, and I knew he never cared. One day he came to me and told me how he had loved a lady in England—the kind of love that is for always, and she had not returned it; that he could only give me honour and affection. And I was pleased to take that. I cared so much that I was selfish; but now—if he lives—he will be free—and perhaps he might meet that lady again, if he escapes to England.”

She smiled up into Ursula’s wild, beautiful countenance.

“So you see, madame, why I shall be glad to die.”

“But this other lady?” murmured Ursula; “you say that she does not care for Monsieur de Champlain?”

“So he thought, but it always seemed to me that there must have been some mistake,” answered Clarisse simply. “I do not know the whole story; I only know that he cares for her and not at all for me.”

She paused, then added:

“Since I first saw you, I wondered if she was at all like you. I suppose you never knew her?” she added wistfully.

“My acquaintance with Monsieur de Champlain,” said Ursula in a still voice, “was very slight. I never even spoke to him alone. I knew nothing of his affairs.”

Clarisse looked at her with sweet, calm eyes.

“Why did you leave England, madame, at such a time?”

Ursula did not answer.

“Madame, forgive me, but you are married; could you not contrive to let your husband know that you are in this plight?”

“I have left my husband,” answered Ursula hoarsely. “I can ask nothing more from him.”

“Alas!” murmured Clarisse.

Then Martha woke; then another woman; and the poor prisoners began to arrange their dress and to discuss their hopes and fears.

Only Ursula sat silent, thinking, thinking. So Nicolas de Champlain loved her; he had been as faithful to that thwarted passion as she had been, though he, as well as she, had agreed to a marriage of convenience.

And if she found him, if he was alive, if they ever met, he belonged to her and she to him.

For a while this knowledge blotted out even the thought of approaching death; if he was dead already and she were to die to-morrow she had accomplished what she had left London to accomplish—she had found out he still remembered, still cared.

She was glad she had come, though her way had led through horror and suffering—though it was leading to death.

Her soul was satisfied, only one more thing was needful now—that she should be able to tell him of the deception practised on them. If she could only have that one moment before the end, she would indeed die contented and at peace.

She felt strangely strengthened and encouraged, ready to face whatever might befall.

But when her glance fell on the sad yet courageous face of the tender girl, her own selfishness struck her with a horrid pang.

For was she not rejoicing in another's unhappiness?

What was life and hope and joy to her was dreary blackness to this unfortunate child. Her gain was another's cruel loss.

And Steven?

Suddenly her husband's name crossed her thoughts.

She recalled that great, powerful affection that had never touched her life, that she had spurned and flung away, that she had used to ruin the man who had offered it and that now in her need could not serve her.

She wondered if he would ever hear of her end, what he would do with the rest of time, of what quality was his affection? Would it last long after she had left his life?

Ursula believed it might, and a kind of shame came over her spirit. Things seemed different here; in this gloomy prison, close to death, her soul lost the vanity, the selfishness, the hardness that had once cloaked its fine generous quality.

Steven had wronged her, but his love had been greater than his wrong. And who was she to judge? Might she not have done the same if the temptation had come her way? Was she not even now ready to rejoice over Clarisse's piteous confession and take advantage of it if the chance arose?

She was abashed in her own eyes, she saw every action of her life as mean and unworthy great gifts had been given her, and what had she done with them?

Towards the middle of the morning they, together with some of their companions, were taken out of the prison under a strong guard and brought to trial in the close, evil-smelling, crowded court.

Ursula looked round her curiously; the dirty walls were scrawled all over with the motto of the Republic—"*Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité ou la Mort*"—and at the back of the tribunal, on which sat the President and his two fellow judges, were a couple of crossed tricolour flags.

The doors were guarded by soldiers with set bayonets, and the body of the court was occupied by a closely-packed, dirty, fierce and surging crowd, all wearing red caps, and most of them heavily armed.

The beauty of Ursula and Clarisse, who bore herself with the air of a queen holding court, caused a sensation among the crowd.

Ursula had the impression that these cruel eyes turned on them were already picturing how they would look on the scaffold.

She was sure that they had not the least chance.

While the public prosecutor read out the charges against them, she leant with almost an indifferent air against the wooden edge of the dock.

With little ceremony or delay, Clarisse de Rochefort, daughter of a duke, betrothed to a marquis, late maid of honour to the Queen, was condemned to death as a "suspect," one who had plotted against the people, and a manifest aristocrat who had endeavoured to escape the country.

When it came to Ursula's turn, she made no attempt to defend herself, to plead her nationality, or to threaten them with the wrath of her country.

She admitted that it was quite true that she was a close friend of those accused enemies of the people, M. de Brétueil and his wife, that she had been staying in their house when the mob sacked it and killed the Count, and that she had endeavoured to aid Mademoiselle de Rochefort in escaping.

Asked for what purpose she had come to Paris, she replied that it was to make the attempt to save some of her friends from the bloody tyranny of the people.

The last portion of her speech was drowned by the angry yells of the crowd, who surged towards her and seemed as if they would drag her from the dock.

When the soldiers had restored some order, the President asked her what standing she had in her own country.

"Sir," answered Ursula, "my family have lived and died aristocrats for five hundred years—"

Amidst the furious shouts, curses, and execrations of the crowd she was condemned to death as an enemy of the Republic.

Martha, on account of her birth and the mildness of her replies, was acquitted as one who had been misled by her mistress.

She tried to stay by Ursula, but was forced from her side and dragged away to make room for other prisoners.

The two condemned were taken back to the prison and locked into a separate cell with a large barred window overlooking a narrow strip of courtyard.

"They have left us together," tried Clarisse as the key was turned on them. "Thank Heaven for that!"

Ursula embraced her closely.

"Indeed, dear, I am happy that we shall be together till the end."

Clarisse hid her face on her bosom, and a long sigh issued from her blanched lips.

"When will it be, I wonder?" she asked faintly.

"I do not know—I cannot tell. How long is it generally?"

"The next morning, I think."

They sat down side by side on the wretched pallet bed.

"I wonder what time it is now?" asked Clarisse.

"I think it must be about two o'clock."

"Till to-morrow's dawn—that is a very little while."

"Yes, a very little while."

They were silent for a space. The cell was large and dull; a screen, torn and dirty, stood in one corner, behind it was another bed.

Before the window were a chair and table.

The faint spring sunshine streamed through the high window and lay in a square crossed by the shadows of the bars on the rough floor. The atmosphere was close, yet chill, evil-smelling, and draughty.

They could hear the steady, heavy tramp of the jailer as he passed to and fro without, and the occasional rattle of his keys as he opened or locked a door.

The world seemed to have receded; they were stranded in utter loneliness, closed away from all the life and emotion and strife and peace without.

They drew closer to each other.

Their lives were practically over; the few hours left to them could amount to nothing but a space for prayer, an interval in which to strive for calm to face the final awful moments that must herald their passage through the gates of death.

Useless now to think of what life might have been, to count up follies and mistakes, to lament, to regret, for there was no time to put anything straight; what had been done had been done, and was not now to be altered, mended, or changed by one jot—this was the end.

Ursula's arm tightened round the young girl; this gentle creature, who was her rival, the betrothed of the man she loved, who was to be the companion of her last hours, had become very dear to her.

She felt protective and tender towards her. Presently she stooped and kissed her dark head.

Chapter XVI

Under Sentence of Death.

The strange and terrible day had worn away. Ursula sat in the dark cell and listened to the steady breathing of Clarisse, who slept like a child on the bed behind the screen.

She thanked God the girl could sleep; for herself it was impossible.

During those few hours left to her she could not slumber.

The jailer who brought their scanty supper had told them that they were to be fetched at six o'clock the next morning.

Ursula was thinking over that. Six o'clock!

It would hardly be light. She knelt down beside the chair under the window and looked up at the windy, moon-swept sky. The silver light fell on her upturned face and clasped hands.

She began to pray. She prayed that her useless, extravagant life might be forgiven her, that the hardness and cruelty of her dealings with her husband might be forgiven in view of her sincere repentance.

She put no gloss over herself nor her own value as she had so frequently done. With almost terrifying clearness she saw her own actions and the motives for them right back to those sunny days at Brent Manor, when she had thought that the world was always going to be filled with golden sunshine.

Her prayer finished, she rose and cast herself along the bed.

She envied Clarisse's beautiful and innocent slumber; how could she face to-morrow if she could get no rest now?

A clock without struck eleven. Ursula closed her eyes.

But she could not for one moment lose consciousness. Suddenly and softly the door opened, a stream of harsh yellow light parted the darkness.

Ursula sat up on the bed. There was a sound of muffled whispering, a slight pause, then a man entered carrying a lantern, and closed the door behind him without a word.

Ursula got to her feet.

The new-comer hung the lantern on a nail on the wall behind him. He was a slight man, wearing a heavy cloak, a cocked hat with a tricolour rosette, and (Republican fashion) a black cravat swathed right over his chin. Ursula took him to be some official of the prison.

"Sir," she said in a low voice, "cannot we have our last hours in peace?"

He made no answer. He took off his hat and gazed directly at her.

She was looking into the face of the Marquis de Champlain.

"So we have met again," he said in a broken voice.

A moan was stifled on Ursula's lips.

"Are you also a prisoner?" she murmured.

"No."

"Why are you here?"

He approached her. "Do you give me no better welcome?"

"Why have you come?"

"To save you."

"Oh, Heavens!"

"Because I love you, because' I think that you love me. Ursula, Ursula—you have left him?"

She shrank away; the long beams of the lantern showed her standing pale and tall in her dishevelled white gown, with her fair hair rolled in full curls over her shoulders and bosom.

"Come!" he said in a masterful voice. "Your maid went to your bank to-day and I was there making arrangements for my departure for England. This jailer used to be my servant once, and I have influence with him—he will let you out with me. There are so many for to-morrow you will not be missed. I have your passport ready."

Ursula sank on to the bed and clasped her hands on her heart.

So the chance had been given her. He was here. She could tell him of the deceit; she could clear herself in his eyes; she could go out to freedom, to life and love with him.

The rich blood glowed in her face; she made an impulsive movement towards him.

"Ursula," he murmured fervently.

She thought of Steven—of Clarisse.

"Stop!" she said hoarsely. "There is another woman here!"

"Another woman?"

She pointed to the screen. "Yes."

He went pale.

"But we cannot take two. I have come for you. It is impossible to take two. Come, come!"

With a terrible effort over her failing limbs she rose to her feet.

“That girl sleeping there has a stronger claim on you than I, Monsieur de Champlain,” she said through dry lips.

“Who is she?”

“Clarisse de Rochefort.”

A groan broke from the Marquis; he hid his face in his hands.

“I thought she had escaped with her father,” he muttered.

“No,” said Ursula dully. “She is there, and your duty is to her.”

He faced her again.

“Love not duty brought me here tonight,” he cried.

Ursula moved towards the screen that hid Clarisse.

What an incredible thing had happened! What an awful problem had she, who had considered herself within a few hours of death, to decide!

In one swift moment it came to her what was being offered, what the consequences of refusal or acceptance.

On one hand a speedy and terrible death; on the other life and that love she had been cheated of once and that she had starved for ever since, that she had abandoned everything to desperately seek, and which had come as by a miracle to save her in her greatest need.

Only a few moments before she had vowed repentance of her useless life; here was her chance to redeem it.

“If I go,” she thought, “I shall think all my days of that girl waking in the last dawn of her life alone!”

She looked at the Marquis.

It seemed to both of them that hours were passing as they gazed on one another in a distracted silence.

“I could not leave her,” she said at last, in a strained tone.

He came a step nearer. In a broken, hoarse voice he began to justify himself.

“She sleeps—she need never know. There is only the chance for one—do not delay. I have staked my life on this hope of seeing you, of saving you.”

She did not, could not speak.

“Ursula,” he asked, “why did you come to France?”

There was no answer to that either. Why, indeed, had she come? To look for love and find death! What a mockery now to speak to him as she had planned to speak should they ever meet.

“Make haste!” he said. “Why should you delay? We were bound to come together—through everything, in spite of everything.”

So she had thought once; now she saw barriers huge and terrible rising between her and this man.

“Do not importune me,” she answered. “I am ready for my end. Take the girl and go.”

“You,” he said, “are the woman I love.”

She shivered to the very centre of her heart; her muslin gown was no paler than her face in the wavering glow of the lantern beams against the dark wall of the cell.

“I am married.”

“What does that matter?”

“Matter?”

"Yes."

"It makes a difference."

"None. You married, as I was going to, for convenience. In this moment that does not count."

"Monsieur de Champlain, I have never said I—cared for you."

He started, then paused with a look of arrested motion.

"I refused you once," she continued desperately.

He struck his hand down on his sword hilt.

"Is this a time to be playing with these niceties?"

She rose. "I think, perhaps—"

"Ursula, what?"

"You do not understand."

"Do you understand that I am here at peril of my life? Do you understand?"

She stopped him by a swift gesture of her hand.

"I understand it all."

"Then, dear Heaven! why will you not come?"

She glanced at the screen that concealed the sleeper.

"It is because of—her," he added hoarsely.

Ursula moistened her lips. "Not wholly."

"You madden me."

"Have patience—I implore you have a little patience."

So she spoke, feeling all his words like arrows in her heart, longing desperately for darkness, for quiet, for utter silence, for peace.

Passionately she wished that this moment was over and she in her grave.

He stared into her face, and so awful was its tragic expression that a cry broke from him.

He went on his knees on the rough floor at her side.

He began kissing her hands, her arms, the edges of her fichu.

He implored her to come; he entreated, he besought.

His endearments rushed over her like a tide, drowning all her own individual feelings. She looked over his bent dark head, at the lantern hanging on the wall, at the marks in the plaster.

She noticed how the beams of light shook and altered their position in the draught from the window.

She almost lost consciousness. What did, what could anything matter save the fact that they had met at last, that he had come for her, that he was taking her away from death into that life she had always longed for and never lived?

Then through this drowsiness she heard Clarisse turn on the pallet bed and sigh in her sleep.

"What am I," cried Ursula in her heart, "that I can think of doing this thing?"

A great strength came to her, the strength of a noble resolve.

"Rise, monsieur, rise," she said, and her voice was steady.

He looked up at her.

"You will come?" he asked joyously.

She shook her head.

"No."

"Ah!" He sprang to his feet.

"You will not?"

"No." She rose also. "I cannot."

"Because of Clarisse de Rochefort?" he asked fiercely.

"As I said—not only because of her," she replied.

He stared at her in horror.

"What is—can it be—"

She interrupted his broken words.

"It is that I do not care enough for you, Monsieur de Champlain," she said, "to owe my life to you."

"You—do—not—care?

"No."

"You tell me that—to my face you tell me that?"

"I do. In this moment I tell you that you are terribly mistaken, Monsieur de Champlain. When I told my brother to refuse your offer, I did so because I did not care for you." She paused a second, then added, "And because I did care for the man I married."

She looked bravely into his agonised face.

"This is true," she added firmly.

"Why did you come to France?" he demanded.

"On private affairs of business."

"You—had forgotten me?"

"Monsieur, until you entered that door just now, I had not thought of you since we parted in Bath."

He put his hand to his heart. "Forgive me," he said, very white. "I should have remembered that you behaved—cruelly to me once."

"That is over," said Ursula quickly. "All is over now. Wake your betrothed, take her and go."

Seeing he hesitated, she added, "Nothing could induce me to go with you, monsieur. I am waiting for my husband."

"He is in Paris?"

"Yes; he knows of this; it is only a question of some formalities. I shall probably be released to-morrow; they would not touch an Englishwoman."

He stepped before her.

"This is not true," he said. "You are deceiving me."

"An end to this!" she cried.

She moved away from him, stepped round the screen, and caught the sleeping girl by the shoulder.

"Clarisse, Clarisse! Wake up!"

With some difficulty she roused her from the utter exhaustion of her slumber. "Clarisse, there is someone come for you."

Mademoiselle de Rochefort shuddered into consciousness.

"Is it time?" she asked, clinging to Ursula.

"Hush! We are saved! Monsieur de Champlain has come for you."

The girl gave a soft, low cry and sprang from the bed.

"It is all arranged; you must ask no questions. Make haste!"

She drew the girl round the screen and brought her face to face with the Marquis.

“Nicolas!” sobbed Clarisse.

He looked at Ursula. “As madame says, we have very little time,” he said.

Ursula was putting her own dark cloak round Clarisse.

“You must be very, very good to her,” she whispered to the Marquis. “She is very tired and confused.”

The two women clung together.

“And you?” sobbed Clarisse. “You are coming?”

“Yes, I am to be released. I shall see you in England. Mind to hide your face. Kiss me again. No, I did not think that you—that we—were meant to die.”

The Marquis opened the door and the jailer came slinking up.

“Kiss me again.”

Once more Ursula pressed the fresh, sleep-flushed face to hers; once more she smoothed the disordered curls and clasped the fragile form in a passionate embrace. Then the jailer, impatient, drew Clarisse away.

Ursula looked straightly into the white face of the Marquis.

“Clarisse loves you,” she said simply. “You ought to be very happy—and thankful.”

He bent and kissed her finger-tips.

“Adieu, madame,” he said gravely.

He took the lantern from the wall; he went out.

The door closed behind him; she heard the key turn; she heard the footsteps retreating down the passage into silence.

And she was alone in the dark; alone to wait the fate she had chosen. She went on her knees.

“Thank God!” she said humbly, “that I could do it.” Then her tears broke forth.

“Oh, Steven! Steven!”

Chapter XVII

Dead Love.

The Marquis and Clarisse had cleared Paris by dawn; by midday, never stopping, they were out of immediate danger, and almost within sight of the sea that was the highway to England and safety.

At a small posting-house where their passports were examined and found satisfactory, they stopped to change horses.

But they were themselves too wrought up to be able to rest. Clarisse, in a delirium of sweet thought, had slept in the coach, and the Marquis was alert and alive to every nerve in his body, and felt no particle o fatigue.

There was some delay about the fresh horses. An Englishman, travelling with much pomp from Calais to Paris, had taken the only available relays, as he had engaged the best room and the attention of all in the inn, it seemed.

The Marquis was glad to escape observation. He and Clarisse were passing as a woollen merchant and his sister, Germans, going to England for trade purposes, and he at least was aware that their disguise would not bear close scrutiny.

They found themselves in the close, dirty back parlour, the door of which opened on to a bleak, poor little garden where a few miserable fowls were scratching a living up out of the dusty, dry earth.

It was a hard, dismal day with neither sun to penetrate nor wind to move the close, dun-coloured clouds that concealed the sky.

There was a chill in the air that caused the body to shudder and a sense of melancholy gloom abroad before which the soul shrank.

Clarisse sat on a low settee covered with a tattered chintz cover; she put back her hood from her stained and weary face, and lifted eyes dark-shadowed with fatigue.

M. de Champlain had told her that her father and brother were safe in England; she was safe, or almost safe, herself. Her lover had risen, even from his grave, as it seemed, to rescue her on the edge of hers.

She was united to him again very wonderfully, and, most delicious thought of all, he had cared enough for her to come back into the jaws of death to rescue her.

Yet, somehow, Clarisse was not wholly satisfied, not wholly happy. The figure of Ursula Wedderburn standing in the hideous cell left behind was with her like a spectre.

In the wild, delirious excitement of the moment, when she had been roused to find her lover waiting for her, ready to lead her away to life, she had not, she felt, sufficiently assured herself that Ursula was safe.

It seemed now to her sensitive soul that the Englishwoman had merely soothed her with false hopes, for how was it that she had not before said that her nationality would save her, instead of preparing for death on the morrow, as Clarisse knew she had.

She had spoken ‘of her misgivings to the Marquis, and he had answered her that Mr. Wedderburn was in Paris—a wealthy and influential man, who would certainly have everything in train for the release of his wife.

But Clarisse had heard Ursula say that she had left her husband, and would neither expect nor ask anything from him.

So in her soul she was not easy; she had a dreadful horror that she had abandoned Ursula.

Supposing there was no Mr. Wedderburn in Paris? Then—by now—nay, hours before, while she was drowsing in the hurrying coach, that fair head would have fallen into the basket.

“Nicolas,” she whispered sharply, “do you think she was safe—is safe now?”

He was standing by the open door. He turned quickly.

“Yes, you heard what she said,” he answered rather abruptly.

“We should never have left her,” responded Clarisse.

“But she would not come.”

Clarisse started. “You had only two passports, you told me.”

He bit his lip.

“I know; but we might have risked it.”

“Did—did you suggest it?”

He looked away again over the dreary garden.

"Yes."

"Ah!"

"I suggested that she should chance escape with us," added the Marquis, speaking with difficulty, "but she would not listen to me.

"She was too noble to take advantage of your generosity."

"I did what I could."

"I know—I know."

"I believe she is safe—by now a free woman."

"Yes—but, Nicolas, if it should not be so I think I shall never be happy again—even," she added naively, "when I am your wife."

He winced.

"You seem to have had a great affection for this lady," he said hurriedly, still looking away.

"Had you known her you would understand," she replied. "And we were together in some terrible moments. I never saw her afraid."

"Her husband will look to her. I have no fear for her at all."

Clarisse bent puzzled brows on him as she replied.

"But, Nicolas, do you not think it strange? Why did she come to Paris alone? And she told me that she had left her husband."

He turned his face away in terrible agitation.

"And she seemed to want to die," added Clarisse.

He did not answer.

And for a while the girl sat very silent also.

"Did you know her in London?" she asked at last.

The Marquis moved impetuously into the room.

"Are you not content with me?" he demanded irrelevantly.

He seated himself beside her on the old settee.

"Are you not glad that I came for you, Clarisse?"

Her whole face flushed and glowed like an opening rose.

"It is because I am so happy," she breathed, "that I think of one who is not so fortunate."

He clasped her little tired hands.

"It is more than I deserve," he said reverently.

"You saved my life, Nicolas."

"Is that why you are so happy?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

The colour grew deeper in her cheeks, but she continued to look steadily into his earnest, weary face.

"Because—because you cared enough to come for me."

He convulsively pressed her hands closer to his bosom.

"It was," her eyes were still brave, but her voice sank a little, "because you cared and not because it was your duty, was it not, Nicolas?"

For answer he kissed her hands.

She sighed with joy.

“Yesterday—think, only yesterday, Nicolas, I was quite glad to believe I was dying.”

“Hush! do not speak of it.”

“I thought it would set you free. I believed it would be the best way for all of us.”

“I cannot bear it.”

“I remembered the English lady, Nicolas,” she whispered.

He did not, could not speak.

“I wondered,” added Clarisse, “if she was at all like Ursula Wedderburn?”

The Marquis raised his head.

“I have forgotten what that lady was like,” he said in a low but firm voice. “She was never anything but a shadow to me, after all.”

“Nicolas!”

“And now I want to make you happy.”

“My dear!”

He drew her gently to her feet.

“There is nearly all of life before us, Clarisse; this will come to be like a dream. I do not want you ever to speak of it.”

“Nicolas, I am so grateful, so happy, so proud, too.”

He smiled tenderly down into her frail, childlike face.

“We shall be very poor, Clarisse, and in exile.”

“I know.”

“Very little have I been able to save from my fortune.”

She looked fearlessly up at him.

“It does not matter.”

They stood side by side in the doorway looking over the bleak prospect that rolled away to freedom.

The Marquis felt a changed man; much that was false, extravagant, vain and superficial in his old life had been stripped from him during these awful red days of the Revolution.

And among other dead things was his love for Ursula Wedderburn.

What now was this proud woman to him? She had twice spurned him. His first indirect rebuff had left torturing and lingering doubts of trickery and deceit.

After the first hideous smart of her behaviour, when, angrily withdrawing to Paris, he had leisure to think it all over, he had been minded to return to England, and, face to face with Ursula, demand a clearer and more explicit answer.

Only her speedy marriage had prevented him. But the sense of something incomplete had haunted the following years.

And when Martha had met him in the bank and had told him that Ursula was in the Conciergerie his spirits had ardently leapt to the conclusion that she had sickened of her loveless marriage and come to him.

And he had gone straight to her and offered her life, love, and freedom—only to be repulsed.

To be repulsed definitely, by her own lips this time. To hear that she did not care, that she never had cared—to hear that her heart belonged to her husband.

In the night following the escape from Paris he had faced his feelings, striven with them.

While Clarisse de Rochefort slept against his shoulder he had faced the life before him, and with the vanishing of the night his love for Ursula Wedderburn had vanished also—a secret phantom that could never more be recalled to earth.

As he stood beside Clarisse now he vowed to be faithful to her, to love and protect her while life should be left him.

And peace came to Clarisse also; to her mind, too, the image of Ursula grew dim. She thought that God would look after her, that she was safe, even in Paris.

"Come, dearest," said the Marquis, "I do not feel wholly safe while we are on this side of the Channel."

They came back into the room, and M. de Champlain went to the door, opened it, and looked out.

The inn seemed in a great confusion of running to and fro, shouting of orders and counter orders.

"They have forgotten us," said the Marquis, vexed at the delay. He went out into the dark passage and stopped the host, who was hurrying by with a leg of ham under his arm.

"The horses?" he asked.

Ah, they were not ready; one had had to send to the next village for them. The Englishman had taken all the horses.

M. de Champlain did not dare to show too much impatience, annoying, even dangerous as the delay was.

"How long before they arrive?" he asked quietly.

"Two hours, citizen; perhaps less, perhaps more."

"Thank you, citizen."

"There is a room upstairs where the citizeness can rest if she wishes."

"I shall be glad of it; we have made a long journey from the frontier, and my sister is fatigued."

The innkeeper passed on along the corridor, and the Marquis went back to Clarisse in the parlour.

"There is some delay, dear; nothing serious, only a question of fetching the horses from the next village. This Englishman has taken all the beasts that this post could provide."

"I am not afraid," smiled Clarisse, "of anything."

"I wonder," said the Marquis thoughtfully, "who this Englishman is travelling to Paris now?"

"Yes, it seems strange."

"Now, I wish you to go upstairs and rest, my dear."

She came obediently.

As they were leaving the room, a stout chambermaid entered.

She had, she said, a message from the English milord.

He had heard that a lady had come to the inn and was being delayed through his action in having secured the only horses. He begged to offer her and her companion the hospitality of the rooms he had engaged, and trusted that they would share his déjeuner which was now being prepared.

The Marquis stiffened with suspicion. Was this some trap or plot? Had they been seen or recognised?

Clarisse came to the rescue by pleading intense fatigue. The delay was not in the least inconvenient, she declared; she was, in fact, glad of the chance of a few hours' rest.

She followed the maid out into the passage, addressing a few words in German (which they had both learned at the Austrian Court) to the Marquis.

The chambermaid clambered heavily up the narrow wooden stairs, and Clarisse, drawing her cloak over her head, followed her. The Marquis waited at the foot of the stairs, wondering what his action should be in regard to the Englishman's invitation.

He had just decided that it would be wiser to accept it, when the door of the front parlour opened and a magnificently dressed gentleman appeared on the threshold.

The Marquis turned swiftly.

He found himself face to face with Steven Wedderburn.

Chapter XVIII

Steven.

The Englishman looked swiftly from the Marquis to the woman's figure disappearing round the bend of the stairs.

He caught his breath with a swift sound of pain. Then his level grey eyes sought the other's face.

"I suppose, monsieur," he said in English, "that is the lady who is—or was—my wife."

He waved his hand haughtily in the direction of the stairs.

"Dear Heaven!" exclaimed the Marquis blanching.

"Oh, there is no need for any embarrassment," returned Mr. Wedderburn, with a flash in his eyes. "You will soon both be free of me. Permit me to congratulate you, M. de Champlain—she will be a wealthy widow."

The Marquis caught his arm.

"You do not know what you are talking about—you do not understand."

"I do, perfectly."

M. de Champlain glanced round.

"Allow me to come in and speak to you," he whispered.

Mr. Wedderburn was perfectly controlled and composed.

"With pleasure. I was hoping to meet you, monsieur."

The two men entered the inn's principal room where the light of a brilliant fire mellowed and beautified the poor walls and mean furniture, the dusty beamed ceiling, and coarse diamond-paned window.

Steven moved to the hearth.

A strong red glow flooded his claret coloured roquelaure, the gold braid on his black coat, and his strongly lined dark face.

It was in red that M. de Champlain remembered him always.

The years seemed to slip away; he might have again been in Bath or London, rival with this man for the hand of Ursula Brent.

He gripped the back of the chair and faced the Englishman.

"I thought you were in Paris." he said hoarsely.

"I should have been had I not been delayed," replied Mr. Wedderburn, "and thrown off the track."

He added pleasantly:

"You have been quick and—successful; it is scarcely a week since my wife left London."

"That is not Mrs. Wedderburn upstairs," said the Marquis, "but my betrothed, Clarisse de Rochefort."

"Ah!"

Mr. Wedderburn eyed him quizzically.

"You do not believe me, perhaps?" cried M. de Champlain in agitation.

"Scarcely."

"You must. I could send for Mademoiselle de Rochefort, but we are here in disguise."

"So I imagined."

Mr. Wedderburn looked at him without sympathy, without belief—nay, rather with a kind of pleasure in his agitation and confusion.

"Tell the truth," he added dryly; "you may as well. I know it—"

"You do not. You must listen—you must understand. Mrs. Wedderburn is in Paris, may even be in prison."

Mr. Wedderburn looked at him with marked contempt.

"Do you think to send me posting to Paris with that story?" he asked, "while you escort the lady to Calais?"

The Marquis moved towards the rude bell on the table.

"You shall see Clarisse," he exclaimed desperately.

Mr. Wedderburn stayed him with a quiet gesture.

"No doubt you can produce my lady's maid, while my lady lies low till I have gone. You know that I shall not jeopardise her safety by making any scene or disturbance here."

"This is too much!"

Mr. Wedderburn clasped his hands behind his full skirts.

"Speak the truth," he said lightly and yet sternly.

"On my honour—"

"Ah, your honour, or my honour, or any man's honour, what do they count for in moments like these? I know she is upstairs."

The maid entered and put the food and wine on the table.

"I asked your lady," she said to the Marquis, "if she would take any food. I think she would not, but her foreign tongue is too deep for me."

Mr. Wedderburn flicked a glance at the Marquis who groaned in his heart.

So Clarisse's piteous attempt to keep up her disguise only served to feed this mad Englishman's delusion.

"We are passing as Germans," he said hotly, as soon as the door was closed on the servant.

"Do not lie," answered Mr. Wedderburn quietly.

M. de Champlain came a step nearer to him.

"What makes you think that your wife is with me?" he demanded through his set teeth.

"We cannot fight here," returned Steven.

"I do not wish to; I asked you the question."

"Well, then, I knew her intention when she left me."

"You—knew?"

"It was part of our bargain. Has she not told you of our bargain?"

"Your bargain?"

"Yes, *the* bargain."

"I do not understand."

"So Ursula did not tell you?"

Steven seemed to muse over that.

"No, I wonder why," he added thoughtfully. "I wonder why she did not tell you?"

The Marquis stared at him.

"Are you mad?" he asked. "I do not understand anything of what you say."

Steven's grey eyes glinted angrily; he tapped his right foot impatiently.

"I do not know why you think fit to try this play acting with me, Monsieur le Marquis."

"Not that name here, for Heaven's sake!" cried M. de Champlain.

"Your pardon; I should have remembered," said Steven.

"If you have any regard for the safety of the lady with me, you will be careful, sir."

"I have every regard."

"But she is not your wife."

"No?"

"By Heaven, no!"

"She was once, then."

"Are you purposely blinding yourself? What have you in your mind?"

Steven answered quietly:

"My wife," he said, "left me, in accordance with our bargain. Before she left me, she told me that she was going to Paris to meet you."

The Marquis fell back a step.

"So you see," continued Steven calmly, "that your subterfuges are quite—unnecessary."

M. de Champlain could not gather his wits to speak; he could not find the clue to this monstrous situation.

"When the lady left me," said Mr. Wedderburn quite composed, "I was utterly ruined; but since then some ships of mine came home and I have cleared my debts and am fairly wealthy. Now, while it was in the pact that I should not chase, pursue, or follow the lady, I came to France to find her—and you."

The Marquis stammered something incoherent in his throat.

"I wished to see you," continued the Englishman, "purely on a matter of business. You, I take it, have lost your fortune; she has nothing but Brent Manor." He grew pale.

"And while I live," he added, "she can never be your wife."

"Sir," began the Marquis desperately.

Steven took a step towards him.

"Hear me out; afterwards you shall speak. In a week you will receive formal and indisputable notice of my death, and my Steven lawyers will acquaint you with my will, the nature of which is that Mrs. Wedderburn and yourself will find yourselves possessors of a considerable fortune upon the condition that you marry each other before the year is out."

"Dear Heaven!"

"And if Ursula has not told you of our bargain perhaps she did not tell you of the letters?"

"What letters?"

"I do not know if you are feigning this amaze or not. Come, let us sit down to the table; we must make some feint of eating."

He seated himself at the table, and the Marquis mechanically took the place opposite.

"If Ursula did not tell you it was very honourable of her," said Steven in a moved voice.

"Before Heaven, I do not know what you are referring to!"

"The letters you wrote in the Assembly Rooms at Bath, monsieur, three years ago."

With a steady hand he poured out a glass of wine.

"Ursula never received them," he said.

"Never—received—"

"The one you put in the bouquet I removed before the flowers reached her; the one you delivered to Sir Harry she was never shown. I set a lady to obtain the carnation. Ursula thought you had jilted her. In the humiliation of that she married me—as I had planned."

"Oh!" The Marquis rose.

"Yes; it sounds ugly, does it not?" said Steven, looking up at him. "But I would do it again, you know?"

"Was Harry Brent in this infamous plot?"

"Hush! He is dead!"

"Dead?"

"And the plot was mine. And the blame is mine. And the punishment."

The Marquis sank into his chair, and hid his face in his hands.

"Come," said Steven in a strong voice, "you have conquered—bear yourself like a conqueror. As for me, I repent nothing. I have paid; but for three years she was my wife."

The Marquis looked up.

"I don't understand. I cannot grasp what has happened. I do not know if you are speaking the truth or not. I only know this—that since I took farewell of Ursula in your presence, on the promenade at Bath, three years ago, I have only seen her for a few moments, and those few moments were last night, in the prison of the Conciergerie."

Steven gave him a swift look.

"Do you still hold to that tale?" he demanded.

"Before Heaven, I do!" the Marquis answered hoarsely and earnestly. "And without entering into judgment on what you have said, I must beseech you to

believe what I am about to say. Yesterday, being in Paris in disguise, I met an Englishwoman, one Martha Fenton, who told me that her mistress, Mrs. Wedderburn, was in the Conciergerie; she was making endeavours among the English residents for her release. I thereupon, having influence with the jailer of the prison, made arrangements for the lady's escape, penetrated her cell and besought her to accompany me. This she would by no means do. She declared that she had no manner of regard for me, and that she was safe—that you were in Paris procuring her release, the date of which was only a question of some formalities being settled. Thereupon she woke the companion of her imprisonment, Clarisse de Rochefort, thrust her into my arms, and gave me an indifferent farewell. With this lady, to whom I indeed recognised my duty as the wife my family had chosen for me, I made my escape. And that is all that I know of Ursula Wedderburn."

Steven bit his lower lip; his face was ghastly.

"If this should be true," he murmured heavily.

"Up, sir! To Paris and prove it for yourself. I would bring Mademoiselle de Rochefort to tell you herself only she is only leaving France under the belief that you are in Paris looking after Ursula, and if I have to open the whole story to her here we are lost, I think."

Steven looked him straightly in the face.

"I believe you—I must believe you. You, a gentleman, would not lie to me on such a subject, at such a time."

"No," said M. de Champlain. "I tell you the truth as you have told it to me, though the more truth there is the more confusion, it would seem, ensues."

"Confusion, indeed!" murmured Steven. "Where is the meaning to all this tangle?"

He rose and stood holding on to the back of the chair.

"In Paris—in prison!" he said. "Sir," he added, "when was this?"

Most of his composure and haughtiness had gone; he spoke quite humbly.

"Yesterday—yesterday evening."

"Why," breathed Mr. Wedderburn; "why"—he pulled himself together—"she may be dead!" he said abruptly.

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Marquis. "Nor do I think it; no Englishwoman has yet fallen a victim to the terrors of our anarchy. Yet, since she deceived me, maybe her escape was not assured. To Paris, sir, this now falls to your duty."

"Aye, to me," answered Steven. "A pretty fool I have been; a pretty part I have played!"

He caught up his hat and gloves.

"And when I find her I have no right to her," he groaned.

"Sir, she is wholly yours."

"In name."

"In everything."

Steven turned fiercely.

"Have I not told you," he exclaimed, "how I won her?"

M. de Champlain smiled half sadly as he answered:

"That is so long ago."

"Do you hate me for what I did that night?" demanded Steven.

“Not now; it seems inevitable.”

He came nearer.

“Here is my hand, Mr. Wedderburn,” he said quietly.

Steven grasped it firmly.

“She will not forgive so easily,” he murmured.

“Go and see,” replied the Marquis. “Would that I could come with you, but my present journey lies in taking Clarisse de Rochefort beyond seas.”

Steven was silent a moment.

“Perhaps we may meet in England,” he said at length.

He withdrew his hand from the Marquis’s clasp and put it quietly on his sword hilt.

“Thank you for your generosity,” he said.

The Marquis was silent; a new life, new ties, new cares were closing round him, absorbing him, and not even the shock of hearing of the deception that had been used to sunder him and Ursula could wake any echo of his visionary love.

“I never spoke to her alone before last night,” he said, voicing his inner thoughts. “We were phantom lovers, and she has been your wife for three years. You need feel no jealousy of me, Mr. Wedderburn.”

“I do not think of you at all,” answered Steven. “I never did—only of her. If she no longer cares for you—”

“Believe me, she does not.”

Steven gave a short laugh.

“Then I must alter my will and leave my fortune to the man she does love. Good-bye!”

He left the room abruptly, and the Marquis heard him calling for his coach and servants.

“Why did I take your hand?” thought M. de Champlain. “You have spoilt my life.”

Then he went to the woman upstairs to tell her to make ready for the journey.

Chapter XIX

Life Begins Again.

Ursula, on the morning of the day that she had considered was to be her last, was taken, not to the guillotine but to the prison of La Force, where she was left in a large public room with several other prisoners.

She did not in the least know nor, to say truth, in the least care what this meant.

She was so lonely, so dispirited, so resigned to the thought of death that it made little difference to her if her fate was delayed or immediate. She was not agitated by fluctuations of hope or fear. When M. de Champlain had left her in her cell and gone out into the lantern-scattered darkness with Clarisse de Rochefort, life seemed to have ended for Ursula.

She had been enabled, she thanked Heaven, to do the honourable thing.

Little Clarisse was happy; she had kept her promise to François de Brétueil. In her country Nicolas de Champlain would begin a new life, probably a better, more useful, more worthy life than that he had led hitherto.

Now she had slain his cherished affection for her he would be free—free to love Clarisse—free to forget.

As far as her own feelings were concerned, she felt that in renouncing M. de Champlain she had discovered of what a strange, illusive, fairy quality her love had been—his, too, she reflected, half sadly, half amused.

They did not know each other.

She wondered if they would have loved each other if they had been better acquainted, or if it was not rather this constant separation that had fostered and kept alive their feeling for each other.

Well, they had really loved once, and they had been cruelly parted.

But the deceit that parted them had been avenged. Harry was in his grave; had died miserably with a crying conscience. Steven had been disgraced, ruined.

And M. de Champlain had recovered what he could certainly turn into happiness.

Her own life had been wrecked and ruined and hurried to a tragic end, but she blamed herself as much as Steven for that—and she did not regret life.

She was so lonely.

Who was there in all the world now for her to cherish?

Far better to die than to pick up a broken, maimed existence and endeavour to piece it together into a decorous old age at Brent Manor, poignant with memories of Harry and ancient happiness.

She was satisfied that her feeling for the Marquis had been vanishing ever since she had known that Clarisse de Rochefort loved him, and that it had gone for ever when she had repulsed him and put the other woman in her place; the strong reality of that moment had shown her herself.

She had wanted life, love, freedom that night when he offered them to her—not Nicolas de Champlain, who was, after all, but a name to her.

Now she admitted that; she had been weaving all her romance, her fancies round a name.

And he the same with her, no doubt. He had never loved her as he would love Clarisse, and she had never loved him as she might have loved Steven—in the same live, tense way as she had hated him, she told herself.

The white, agitated man who had entered her cell had been like a stranger to her, had been quite different from the gallant of Bath, different again from what she had pictured him at such a crisis. She had been desperately lonely since she had been in Paris. Her thoughts had all been fixed on the Marquis, but on looking into her heart she realised that it was Steven she was lonely for.

She could not picture M. de Champlain's life, for she did not know it, nor how he behaved, nor what he said or did, but she did know these things of Steven, and she could think of them and picture them and miss them.

How gladly, how triumphantly she had left him!

How she had flung his treachery in his face and scorned him!

With what contempt she had taken all his love had offered!

And now she thought of these things. His attention, his solicitude, his gifts, his thoughts of her, his splendid fidelity to their outrageous bargain—the very air and atmosphere with which he had managed to inflate her into thinking she was something more than mortal. Seated now among these unhappy prisoners, not noticed, nor regarded, nor glanced at, no more beautiful nor high born nor young than a dozen other women here, Ursula felt humbled in herself. It was as if this man's passion of admiration had been held before her like a distorting mirror, and now only when it was withdrawn did she realise that it had been a deception, that she was neither very brilliant, nor so very beautiful, nor so good, nor in any way the paragon she had been made to believe.

As night fell in the strange prison and she felt another awful darkness approaching, Ursula wished that she could have died that morning.

"By now," she thought fancifully, "I, being dead, could have travelled a long way. I could have crossed the Channel with Clarisse and the Marquis; I could have gone to Brent Manor and looked at Harry's grave, and I could have gone to London and looked for Steven."

She was conducted into a separate cell and locked away for the night. Once more she was in hideous darkness, only broken by the pale patterning of the occasional moonbeams as they cast the shadows of the prison bars on the damp rough floor.

Once more she had to face those dark, intolerable hours that might be the last she had to live—to struggle with bitter reflections, with confused thoughts, with half-lulled anticipations, dreads, forebodings; once more she had to catch what peace, what consolation she could from her hopes of a quiet grave.

No one came with any news of death or release, even when another pale day was glimmering in her cell.

Towards daybreak she had slept a little, but once the sun was high she could rest no more.

She began feverishly arranging her dishevelled gown, her disordered hair. Fatigue and lack of food made her very weak.

She could hardly keep on her feet. Presently she sat down on the edge of the bed.

She wondered if the first spring flowers, daffodils, and primroses were out round Brent Manor. And if they had put up the marble tablet to Harry.

She wondered if she would meet Harry when she died.

It was long past midday when they came to her.

She was then utterly indifferent to anything they might have to tell her; even the thought of death brought her no chill or shudder.

Mechanically she rose to her feet.

She heard them speaking, but could not distinguish their words.

Free?

Yes, she was free.

The last time she had named herself free had been in her husband's gorgeous house in London.

There was no echo in her heart now of the exultation that she had felt there.

She bowed her head without a word or gesture.

They conducted her out of the prison to a courtyard, where a coach waited for her.

She hid her eyes in her cloak from the sunshine.

When she mounted the coach she found Martha Fenton inside. Ursula smiled wanly, and fainted in the good creature's arms as the coach rattled out of the prison yard.

* * * * *

When she awoke, she was in a pleasant bed in a room hung with fresh chintz.

There was sunshine coming in through the white muslin curtains, and a bowl of early flowers on the sill. Her old soiled garments had gone; she was wrapped in a silk gown; Martha was seated on a wand-bottomed chair watching her. Ursula was glad to be there.

She stretched herself luxuriously.

"How was I saved?" she asked, smiling.

"The people at the bank," said Martha rather vaguely, "made a great to-do. I told them."

"You faithful dear!" said Ursula. "Whose house is this?"

"It belongs to the bank. They have lent it to you as a safe place till you return to England."

"Where is it?"

"On the Ivry road, near Fosy le Roi—a quiet place."

Ursula lay silent a little, looking at the sunlight. Then she said:

"I might just as well have died, Martha."

"That is foolish talk; you are not well yet."

Ursula shook her fair head on the pillow.

"No; it is quite true."

It was a full minute before she spoke again.

"What am I to do with the rest of my life?"

"I suppose you will return to Brent Manor, ma'am?"

"Brent Manor will be very empty," sighed Ursula.

"You can fill it."

"How?"

"Oh, many ways."

Martha rose.

"Shall I bring your supper up, or will you come downstairs?"

"Oh, I will come down."

She sat up on the bed and looked round her.

"This is a pretty little room," she murmured.

"It is a pretty little house, but nothing compared to what you left in London."

"That!" Ursula shuddered. "I hated that place."

"Your beautiful mansion!"

"Yes."

"And all your gorgeous things!"

"Yes."

"Well, here is a change come over you, ma'am! You used to be considered the most extravagant lady in the whole of London."

“I know.” Ursula spoke gravely. “I have changed—a great deal.”

She put her feet to the ground.

“It was being so near death, I suppose,” she added. “I feel dazed and bewildered yet.”

“And I,” said Martha, “as if I should not be happy till I was in England again.”

She left the room, and Ursula stood thoughtfully by the bed.

She was still very weak, but a rush and glow of inner strength sustained her.

So she was to live!

She had to face the more difficult—life, not death.

What was she going to do with it?

She sank down on to the chair Martha had left, and clasped her hands loosely in her lap.

A pleasant drowsiness came over her senses.

She thought of little, pleasant, intimate things—the things that had never seemed to count for much until they had stopped, that were now going on again, and were so sweet and so dear.

How delightful this little house seemed! How charming and how like home!

She recalled with a shudder her former cold splendours in London; she hated them, she knew now that she had always hated them.

Not a thing that wealth had brought her did she regret.

She searched her heart and could find no longing for one of the fine carriages, or horses, or houses, or dresses, or jewels that she had so short a while ago possessed.

No longing, no regret, no desire nor wish.

Nor did she miss the flattering friends, the noble acquaintances, the homage of poet, of painter, of musician, of wit.

“I should,” she thought, “be happy in a cottage for the rest of my days.”

She went to the window and looked out on to a garden just beginning to be fragrant with the first green of early spring.

The slender poplar trees dusted with golden leaves rose up against the purple dusk of the evening sky in which the early stars shook their crystal fire.

The perfume of hyacinth, tulip, and daffodil stole shyly on to the still, sweet air.

It was difficult to believe that not so far away the air was heavy and loathsome with the smell of blood.

It was difficult for Ursula to realise that only last night she had lain down in a hideous cell resigned to death.

For now she felt innumerable voices calling her to life.

To die now would be impossible, she thought.

She opened the window and looked out into the garden which was being rapidly absorbed by the falling twilight.

There was a fountain, and she could hear the gurgling splash of the water falling.

A bat flew past.

Ursula leant out.

How silent it was, how beautiful! The tears came to her eyes, she knew not why.

In some such house as this Clarisse and Nicolas de Champlain would live.

At Twickenham, or Hampton, or Sheen.

How happy they would be!

Happier than she could ever have been if she had abandoned the girl and gone with the Marquis; she knew that that would have been a very brief delight.

She did not regret that renunciation, bitterly as it had cost her at the time.

She wondered what Steven was doing now.

She wondered if he had missed her, or if he was cured of his expensive passion.

She started!

She thought that she had seen a man below in the garden, a dark figure vanishing through the bushes towards the fountain.

She strained her eyes, but could discern nothing.

The silence was complete and the shadows were empty.

"It was only fancy," she said.

She came in and closed the windows; the night air was growing chill.

Chapter XX

Steven's Wife.

Two days after Ursula spoke to Martha in a decided tone.

"I am going back to England to-morrow, Martha."

"Yes, madam."

Ursula stood at the glass doors of the little salon, looking into the charming garden.

"Yes," she repeated, "it is very peaceful here, but—"

She paused so long that Martha finished the sentence:

"You want to see your own home again?"

Ursula unlatched the doors, letting in a rush of cool air.

"Did you hear anything of Mr. Wedderburn when you were asking about me at the bank?"

"Yes, madam, I did."

"What?"

"That he was quite, quite ruined, madam and had taken up some poor post in the City."

Ursula did not move.

Martha looked at her rather anxiously and keenly.

"I ruined him," said Steven's wife at length.

Martha was silent, still watchful.

"I am going back to him," continued Ursula.

"To him!"

"Yes."

"I thought that you meant to live in Brent Manor?"

"So I did."

"But?"

“Oh, I have changed my mind—or rather, I see things differently now-more clearly.”

“Mr. Wedderburn will be quite poor, ma’am,” ventured Martha.

“Do you think that I should go back if he was still rich?”

Martha said no more, but left the room.

Ursula continued standing by the open glass doors.

She was glad that Steven was poor; it gave her a chance to redeem her marriage.

He could not say that his money had lured her back.

If he was still fond of her, he would sooner have her return of her own free will than have all his wealth again, twice over.

She believed that she could make him happy in a way that he had never dreamed of, and that in this fashion she would gain happiness for herself.

She pictured herself going to London, searching him out, in his humble rooms, telling him that she was sorry, that it had been her fault as much as his, that she had come to make amends.

She stepped out into the garden, rehearsing this scene in her mind.

It seemed such a satisfactory solution. She went over all she would say, all he would answer.

Turning round the tangled bushes by the fountain she came face to face with Steven Wedderburn.

For a moment the shock made her speechless and lifeless.

“Martha said I might come!” he cried, his whole being glowing.

“How long have you been here?” gasped Ursula.

“As long as you have.”

“Oh!

“I thought that you did not wish to see me. Martha kept my secret.”

Ursula, very pale, took a step away from him.

“You—you procured my release?”

“Yes.”

“This—this house is yours?”

“Yours. I bought it for you.”

She glanced at his gorgeous attire.

“Then you are not—poor?”

“No.”

He told her briefly of his mended fortunes, of his object in coming to Paris, of his meeting with Clarisse and the Marquis. She listened with a blank, dazed face; the little scene of reconciliation she had been rehearsing in her mind fell to the ground.

“Then this old, hateful bargain endures?” she said dully.

“No,” said Steven strongly. “No.”

“But you were never really ruined, and I was never free?”

He looked at her keenly.

“Martha told me just now that you were coming back to me.”

She averted her face.

“I thought you were poor.”

“Does it make a difference that I am not?”

“All the difference.”

Steven stood silent; his face seemed to change and harden, all the life and joy went out of it.

“Then you are not coming?”

She shook her head.

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know—to Brent Manor, I suppose.”

“You will not come to England with me?”

“No.”

“Very well,” he answered bitterly. “I was a fool to believe that you could change towards me. I knew it in my heart that it was hopeless.”

He paused, and Ursula, glancing covertly at his face, saw that it was drawn and cold.

“I am sorry,” she said miserably; and that was all she was able to manage of the graceful, fluent excuses she had been going over in her mind.

“I will not make you sorry any more,” he answered passionately. “I will keep to my original intention. You shall be free of me for good and all.”

“I do not want that,” she answered feebly; “besides, there is another year,” she added lamely.

“Do you think I could endure another year, another month, another week of this?” he asked in a low, quiet voice.

She replied in despair.

“Do not speak of that hateful bargain. I do not want you to keep it; let us each go our own way.”

“Not so easy,” he answered grimly, “when we are husband and wife.”

Ursula did not answer.

“I would have freed you for Monsieur de Champlain,” he added. “I can free you for another man.”

“There is no other man,” said Ursula, with tears in her eyes.

“Yet—”

She turned round sadly; it was a dismal end instead of the triumphant conclusion she had planned. What had happened to her that she could not say a thing of all the emotions that tugged at her breast?

He thought that she still blamed him, was still proud, and she stood silent and miserable and could in no way help the situation.

She did not even know what she wanted.

“Good-bye!” said Steven. “I shall not plague you again.”

“Good-bye!” answered Ursula forlornly.

She moved away to the little fountain and looked into the gently flowing water.

He took a step away, then a step back.

“Let me see you to England,” he said earnestly. “It is not safe for you to travel alone.”

“Oh, forget me!” answered Ursula, wretchedly and faintly.

“Never while I live,” he said firmly. “But you will soon be free.”

He put on his hat that he had been holding in his hand while he spoke to her, and turned slowly towards the house.

Ursula let him go.

She looked into the water and asked if she was a fool.

Why had she treated him like this? What did she want?

How was the whole thing going to end?

She felt as if she was stunned or drugged, incapable of action or decision, almost incapable of thought.

Presently she, too, went into the house and up to her room.

Dinner was laid in the little salon with the glass doors; she had caught a glimpse of the table as she came upstairs, and it had looked very homelike and pleasant. A fresh pang disturbed her torn heart.

She sat down heavily before the dressing-table, and stared at her pallid face in the glass.

He still cared so much—why had she sent him away?

Why was she so frozen that she could not speak or act?

His wealth made it impossible; but—she need not squander the money even if it was there.

No, but the whole thing was over, spoiled, done with.

If she could have gone to London, had time to think—if she had met him in poverty, it might have been different.

But what was the use of thinking of what had not happened?

The whole thing was over.

He was going away.

And she would return to Brent Manor and Harry's grave.

Martha entered her room.

She made no comment on the meeting in the garden.

She gave Ursula a little package. It was from Mr. Wedderburn.

"He was leaving immediately, he said."

"There was no message?" faltered Ursula.

"None, madam."

"Will he not have his dinner before he leaves?"

"Yes, madam; he has been having his meals in his own apartments."

Ursula was silent.

Martha hesitated, then broke out in apologies as to the traitor's part she had played lately.

Ursula cut her short and dismissed her.

When alone she opened the package with trembling fingers.

It contained the modest case that held the black pearls.

The tears rose to Ursula's eyes, and fell on the white fingers that held the costly necklace.

She remembered the fateful day her husband had given her this present, the grateful glow with which he had responded to her faint pleasure in it, the joy with which he had proposed to fasten it round her throat. And they had been interrupted—for ever—by the news of Harry's death.

She laid the almost priceless jewels on the bare little dressing-table and looked at them blankly.

They seemed like the keynote to the whole tragedy.

In putting them away she had discovered the two scraps of paper that had sent her out of her husband's house.

But what use was it to recall these memories?

Why had he sent her the necklace? She fancied that it was from some touching idea that she had really valued it, and she felt that she could have wept.

Martha had brought her some clothes, and there were others in the house left by Steven. Ursula went to a press in the hall and took out a gown of blue brocade, simply made, very full and stiff.

She put it on slowly, buttoned on a deep collar of point lace, and ruffles at the elbow.

Then she combed her shining hair into a cluster of curls at the back of her neck, and put on it a cap of fine muslin with a frill all round the face, and fastened under the chin with embroidered lappets.

She gave herself a sweet, grave, critical look in the glass, then took up the case of pearls and went downstairs.

There was no one about; the place seemed very silent.

She went into the little pleasant salon and seated herself at the charming dinner-table facing the two open glass doors.

She rang for Martha.

"Will you ask Mr. Wedderburn to have his dinner here with me?" she said.

She took a couple of daffodils and fastened them in her gown.

He sent back a formal acceptance of her invitation, and she ordered another cover.

He came.

"I thought," quivered Ursula, "since' it is—for the last time—it seemed foolish that we should be under the same roof together—and—and—eating at separate tables."

He thanked her gravely.

"The house and all that is in it," she answered, "is yours."

"I thank you for your company, then," he said, and seated himself at the little round table opposite to his wife.

She thought that very seldom before had they been alone at a meal; always there had been company, or she had been out. Indeed, she could not remember once when they had eaten alone together like this.

He did not speak at all; he seemed grave, preoccupied, to have got suddenly immeasurably beyond her reach.

Ursula wished that she could convey to him that she no longer cared for the Marquis; but perhaps he had already gathered that.

Presently she spoke.

"I hope you will not leave here on my account."

Once the remark was uttered, it seemed entirely foolish.

"I could not stay," he answered with a grave air.

Ursula finished the meal in silence; she wished now that she had not asked him to share her dinner; how bitterly foolish this situation was!

It came to an end at last; he rose and asked her permission to leave.

She sat silent awhile looking at the cloth.

"Are you going?" she asked at last.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“You will get news of me,” he answered evasively.

She shuddered.

“I—I wish you would not—” Her voice trailed off.

“I will do my best,” he said significantly, “to make you happy. You will be quite free of me.”

She rose and shook out the blue brocade.

Her eyes, swimming in tears, sought his face.

She took up the case containing the black pearls.

“You never had your reward,” she said.

“My reward?”

“You never put them round my neck.”

She held out the case.

“It was very lonely in prison,” she said. Steven took the hand she held out and pressed it closely.

“What do you mean?” he asked, very pale.

Her lovely face flushed.

“I mean I want you to stay,” she answered.

“Ursula! After everything! Oh, Heavens, Ursula!”

“I mean it.”

He dared to take hold of her.

“I have been very foolish,” breathed Ursula.

He held her—bewildered, speechless.

“Let us make another bargain,” she said.

“Another? What bargain? Ah, my dear, my dear!”

“Just—the ordinary bargain,” smiled Ursula, and hid her head on his shoulder.

And so Steven had won his wife after all.
