

FICTION

Flora Annie Steel

In the Tideway

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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BY

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1897

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Norwood Press
J. S. CUSHING & CO.—BERWICK & SMITH
NORWOOD MASS. U.S.A.

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IN THE TIDEWAY

PROLOGUE

A Statue of charity with helpless childhood gathered to the ample bosom, and helpless age sheltered by the ample veil behind it, a crimson curtain concealing an angle in the stairway. In front a crowd streaming slackly, yet steadily, up the steps; a crowd which broke into little eddies of greeting, little backwaters of gossip, whilst the waves from the rear, taking advantage of the pause, rippled higher and higher. A crowd complaining indifferently of the crush, the heat, the impossibility of being in two places at once--not with reference to the hay-sweet meadows and copses where the nightingales were singing to the moon that summer's night, but in regard to some other hot staircase, where society was due some time ere the sun rose.

To the man who, in a comfortable niche behind the statue, sat removed from the pressure of the current, the scene was framed by Charity's mantle. Perhaps it needed the setting; a crowd generally does whether it be in the old Kent Road or Grosvenor Square.

"The Big Bear! I beg your pardon, Mr. Lockhart. Why aren't you in Rome, and is there room for me on that peaceful seat?"

"There is always room for Golden Locks beside the Big Bear--and now, Lady Maud, why should I be in Rome at this season of the year?"

"Because, being an artist, you should not mind malaria. Besides, what is malaria to this insufferable heat and crush? Doesn't it strike you that our hostess thinks getting into society, and getting society into her rooms, are synonymous terms? Did you ever see such a--"

"Charity, Lady Maud, Charity!" interrupted her companion, pointing to the protecting arm stretched between them and the crowd. "Let it cover the multitude--"

"Of sins? Thank you. I suppose I am wicked. But you--why are you here in the swim? When you profess to despise us--to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil--"

"Because I came to see one who should have nothing to do with that Trinity of Evil either. I came to see you, Lady Maud. I couldn't pass through Babylon without giving you my congratulations. So you are going to be married--"

He paused, looking her in the face curiously.

"Well! Why don't you say 'at last'? It is what every lady thinks, I'm sure. People have been coming perilously near calling me 'poor Lady Maud' these last two seasons, and now--yes! I am to marry Mr. Wilson--you know him, I think."

"Yes, I do know that fortunate man, and, pardon me, Lady Maud, but you and I have been confidential, haven't we? ever since in a *tourbillon* of white frills and blue sashes you chose to prefer my walnuts to other folks' sweeties at dessert. Now about Eustace. What is to become of him?"

The pretty face winced just a little.

"Haven't you heard? Eustace is to be married also; indeed, we think of choosing the same day."

"Out of bravado?"

"Nothing of the kind. Eustace and I have put away--childish things. We have decided to be sensible, and he is marrying Louisa Capper, the American heiress. I like Louisa."

"I trust that feeling is shared by Eustace."

"How hopelessly old-fashioned you are, Big Bear! I don't believe you will ever learn to shave yourself in tufts, and become a civilized poodle. Of course he likes her. She is really a very nice girl, and then she only has a father. Don't you think the American '*par-par*' is less objectionable as a rule than the '*mar-mar*'? To be serious,--which I should not trouble to be with ninety-nine people out of a hundred,--Eustace and I have seen the error of our ways, and we intend--in fact, I personally expect to be very happy. As I said, Louisa is very--"

"Where do you spend the honeymoon?" he interrupted, not being in the least interested in Louisa's part in the business.

"Again hopelessly old-fashioned! There is but one place, nowadays, in which to spend a honeymoon,--Paris. It is so full of distractions. Then Mr. Wilson has taken a grouse moor near the North Pole; Eustace is to come there in his new yacht, and we are to have a real good time; as Louisa--"

"Near the North Pole? Didn't know grouse grew there."

"Well, it is not very far from it. I forget the name,--but see! there is Eustace behind old Lady Brecknock's feathers. He will remember."

A very handsome dark man in the stream saw her signal and drifted sideways to shelter.

"Charity cometh," he began.

"Please not. Mr. Lockhart has patented it already; besides, I want you to tell me the name of that place in the Hebrides. Roederay! Yes, of course! I remember now that it put me in mind of dry champagne. By the way, you used to paint that coast once, Mr. Lockhart; do you by chance know Roederay?"

What is called a flicker of expression crossed her hearer's face. It is a poor description for the absolute blank which a chance word brings to some imaginative people by summoning them from the present into the past.

"I know it well," he replied. "And if you will excuse me, Lady Maud, I don't think it has much in common with dry champagne."

Her clear, rather scornful eyes were on him critically.

"Association belongs to Hope as well as Memory, Mr. Lockhart. You may have had a *mauvais quart d'heure* at Roederay. We intend to have a good time; don't we, Eustace?"

"Rather!"

"I doubt it," retorted the elder man; "civilized people, like you, Eustace, for instance, shouldn't go to those places. To begin with, there is always a difficulty about dinner."

Lady Maud laughed. "Not in these days of ice and telegraphs. Besides, some of us like high teas--don't we, Eustace?"

His face did not change, though the appeal took him back many years in his turn; but then, the speaker was in that past as she was in the present. To say sooth, she occupied them both fully.

"Yes, we can endure them. Do you remember those holidays at Lynmouth, Maud, and the feeds we had on the cliffs? I wonder if any boy ate more strawberries and cream at a sitting than I could do in those days?"

"Have you changed much since then?" she asked, smiling up at him mischievously. "I don't see it, do you, Mr. Lockhart?"

"Not a bit," replied the elder, laying his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder. "Eustace is just what he was as a boy--not to be stinted in his enjoyment of good things. To return, however, to Roederay. You won't like its simplicity, its habit of taking one right down to first principles."

"It couldn't! we are too complex--aren't we, Eustace?"

"And then it is grim. There is an island full of dead people, who appear--"

"Ah! I know all about the stone coffins and the bones; Professor Endorwick told me, and he is coming north on purpose to explore all the antiquities. There he is in the crush with Cynthia Strong. I wonder when that will come off? Call them here, Eustace, and wisdom shall confound this Evil Prophet. Why, the professor, Mr. Lockhart, thinks *Eilean-a-varai* alone is sufficient inducement for a visit to Roederay."

"*Eilean-a-varai*--Isle of the Dead, you call it? We used to prefer another name: *Eilean-a-fa-ash*--Island of Rest. It lies right out in the sunset, like Avilion."

Lady Maud gave a little shiver.

"Oh no! that is ever so much more grim than the other. I hate things which--which appeal to the imagination."

"I am quite aware of it," he replied quietly; "hence my prophecy that Roederay will not suit you."

She sat playing with her fan idly. "Island of Rest indeed! There never was such a place--there never will be. Ah, professor, come like a good soul and do battle for civilization and culture. Are we not far better than the primitives of the North Pole? Are we not stronger, wiser, more original--"

The learned professor, being a little deaf, did not quite catch her words. He was, in addition, much given to the jocular style when addressing the weaker sex, which he held to have been created for the sole purpose of exercising the social qualities of man. So, an appropriate remark having occurred to him, he came forward primed with it.

"Charity, Lady Maud, is, as a rule said to cover a multitude of sins; in this case it conceals the virtues."

And he was greatly pleased with himself when everybody laughed.

"On the whole, I retract 'original,'" continued Lady Maud gravely; "so you needn't defend that proposition, professor. How can we be original? There is nothing new under the sun; even one's jokes have been appropriated by past generations. Everything has been used up."

"Not everything," said Will Lockhart. "To return to Roederay, for instance. You will be next-door neighbours to the Gulf Stream. It is not used up; far from it. *That*, Lady Maud, will be another of the horrid things which appeal to the imagination. Night and day--day and night--"

She shrugged her pretty bare shoulders.

"There is the Gulf Stream I like," she replied, pointing to the crowd still surging onwards. "Why should you abuse it? We go on day and night, night and day. Upwards and onwards--to heaven, for all you know. I defy you and your old-world ideas and romances. We are going down to Roederay to paddle about where we choose, catalogue your dead people and their beliefs as we choose, and we are going to eat our dinner and kill everything we see. There is one of the slayers in the stream, Arthur Weeks, the best shot in England, so people say. Ah! Captain Weeks, Mr. Wilson tells me you are coming to Roederay. I am glad."

"Charity, Lady Maud," began the gallant warrior.

"That is not your bird, Captain Weeks! Mr. Lockhart, my cousin Eustace, and the professor have all blazed away at that poor joke already. Of course, your gun would bring it down, but please be merciful. Let it go for another day."

"That reminds me, Gordon," said the captain confidentially to Lady Maud's cousin, when the laugh had ceased, "I was speaking to old Snapshot about Roederay, and he assures me that the birds lie like stones in that part. Something, he said, to do with the Gulf Stream--but I don't know much of these scientific things, Lady Maud. Only I assure you he declares you can kick 'em up and shoot 'em like chickens on the last day of the season."

There was a solemn pause. The advantages of Roederay seemed exhausted on all sides.

"If some one will give me his arm," said Lady Maud, rising, "I will go upstairs--to Paradise, perhaps, Mr. Lockhart. I really must say how do you do to our hostess before going on to the next."

I

"Any luck, Rick?" called a lady sitting on the doorstep of Eval House to a young man coming up the ferry-path. His rod was balanced level in his hand, his head bent forward against half a gale of wind, which, after sweeping the grass slopes into silvery waves, raced with white horses over the greener sea beyond. Yet on the doorstep, with the

stone house betwixt you and the nor'west, the day was warm and still as any autumn day can be when a bright sun shines clear out of a brilliant blue sky.

She was a very small lady, looking all the smaller because the energy expressed in every line of face and figure suggested its adequacy for the direction of a far larger mass of matter. Looking still smaller at that particular moment by reason of her being overwhelmed by a fleecy lamb she was endeavouring to feed with a teapot. For the rest, a lady long past youth, yet with sufficient traces of it left to show that it had been pre-eminently attractive.

"Luck, Aunt Will? Why, yes, the best of luck. I've seen the most beautiful woman in the world."

Miss Willina smiled.

"Who will that be now? And is it twenty or twenty-one you are next month? Twenty-one, is it--yes: time passes. Then as you are so near man's estate it won't be Maclead's niece from Glasgow; she is too red in the face. Nor Katie Macqueen; you've seen her too often. Nor me, either, Rick, though I used to be called that sometimes."

The transparent vanity in her tone made her nephew smile in his turn.

"It's no home-grown beauty, Aunt Will. It's a London belle,--Lady Maud Wilson. You should just--"

The sudden upset of a lamb, whose four pointed toes strove for foothold against his legs, checked further speech. His aunt, however, waving the teapot in her excitement, filled up the pause, aided by a sick gosling which had fluttered down from her lap as she rose.

"The Wilsons! Why didn't you tell me at once? Have they come at last? And why didn't they come before? And where are their servants? Why didn't they send word to the factor? And goody gracious me, Rick! what are they going to do?"

"If you'll put that teapot at a safer distance and prevent Baalam from making me curse utterly, I'll try and explain."

A minute of frantic shoving, joined by a chorus of hounds from within, and Miss Will Macdonald returned breathless to her seat on the steps, while the sick gosling fluttered to her lap once more.

"This is what I could gather. They have been deer-stalking with friends, because the grouse here were reported late. So they are, Aunt Will, I saw a covey yesterday--"

"Skip, please."

"Ahem! Well, their servants came by last *Clansman*; or rather they didn't, because--"

"Skip again. I know--too rough for her to put in--won't come till return trip. Go on, dear."

"How you do bustle a fellow! They expected cooks and scullions. All the show, in fact, including a but--"

"Oh! do skip!"

"My dear aunt! you should have been a telegraph clerk. Well. Wrote for a machine to Carbost. Came along. Place shut up. Rick Halmar fishing sea pool. Saw signals of distress. Piloted 'em to harbour. Found Kirsty stacking peats. Lit the fire. Put on the kettle. Came home to tell his aunt. That is all, except that the factor is away to the Alan market and Kirsty has no English to speak of."

"They have servants with them of course?"

"A French maid. She is more solid than she looks. You see I had to help her out of the machine. She hadn't recovered the boat. They have been visiting about, and Mr. Wilson's man got left behind at Inverness, looking for lost luggage. Wired to say he would come on by the afternoon boat. Ha! ha! good joke, isn't it? Afternoon boat to Roederay. Now then, jump aboard! a penny all the way."

Miss Willina's sympathetic soul saw no cause for mirth in the vision conjured up by her housewifely imagination. She put on the deer-stalker cap lying on the step beside her. It was a signal for action, since, within the home precincts, she dispensed with any head covering save the thick masses of dark hair, which were still her greatest pride.

"I'll go over. Kirsty is an idiot, at best. She was six whole months learning the 'Happy Land' at Sunday-school.

"Besides it's not far--then your uncle's official position."

"Skip, please!" interrupted Rick, laughing. "You don't want excuses for being a trump. Come along."

His aunt's blue eyes flashed and sparkled. "Oh! my dear! was she so pretty as all that? You won't be wanted! her husband is there, of course."

"Aye! and her cousin, I think. At least, she called him Eustace."

"Two of them! Then preserve us from a third man. Go you and fish like a Christian."

"Leaving you to roam the moors alone, when I may be appointed to a ship tomorrow and not see you again for--don't laugh in that rude way, Aunt Will! Look here! Let's compromise. I'll go so far and fish Loch-na-buie till you return."

They passed the slight hollow where Eval House sought a faint shelter, and the farm-yard whence, after depositing the sick gosling, Miss Willina had to escape at a run from a motley following of birds and beasts. So to the level stretches of moor and the full force of the blustering wind. A strange landscape to southern eyes. Earth, air, and water blent in a triple alliance so close as to destroy individuality. The sea lay landwards, the land seawards, and over both the nor'wester swept unrestrained, cresting green waves of heather as water with an edging of white foam or purple blossom. Were those hills, eastward across the Minch, or clouds? Was that level streak of light westwards the Atlantic or a glint of sky? Was the water showing at your feet between miniature cliffs of sphagnum moss salt or fresh? And did the land really sway before the wind? or was it only your footstep making the spongy soil rise and fall? This, however, was in the low ground eastward. Westward the rocks began to pile themselves gregariously in cairns, and the moorland rose gradually, so gradually that when its edge was reached you were surprised to find yourself so far above the shining plain of sea.

Here on a promontory commanding a magnificent view, and also a perfect exposure to all the winds of heaven, stood the modern shooting-box of Roederay Lodge.

Substantial enough for the nineteenth century, yet reminding one irresistibly of those Swiss chalets in boxes which are to be bought for a sixpence in the Lowther Arcade. The fault, no doubt, of its surroundings; above all, of a sound which seemed to monopolize the whole landscape,--the sound of the Atlantic rolling in upon two miles of shelving sand a little to the southward. A sound that went on night and day, day and night, without a pause. Rhythmically true to a second, not to be shut out by any device of man. The strongest must put up with it or go away. On this particular September day, with the keen bright nor'wester sending a cross sea round the point, its voice had a querulous ring in it very different from the roar which echoed for fifteen miles across the island when the Atlantic was in a southwesterly mood.

Rick Halmar, however, being a sailor accustomed to the sea in all tempers, took little heed of its tone. He sat to leeward of a cairn which tradition said marked the grave of a Viking, and whittled away at a piece of wood he had found close by, the pretence of fishing having been set aside when Miss Willina's decided little figure disappeared from sight. He whittled with more than the sailor's ordinary dexterity; for his father had been a Norwegian sprung from a long line of ancestors who had whiled away the winter days when their ships were in dock with wood-carving. Not much else save that trick of the knife, a straight Norse nose, and a passion for the sea had Eric Halmar inherited from the father he had never seen. For within a year of that hasty marriage between the shipwrecked sailor and Miss Willina's younger sister, pretty little Mrs. Halmar was in Eval House once more, weeping and waiting. Weeping for her handsome husband; waiting for her child to be born. She wept even after the waiting was over, till consolation came in the shape of another husband; for she was not a person of great steadfastness, and even her land prejudice against the sea as a profession had given way before Miss Willina's stern common sense.

"The laddie thinks of nothing else," said his aunt; "indeed, why should he, seeing he comes of pure Viking blood on the one side, and something of it on the other, if old tales be true? Send him to the navy; then if he is drowned, it will be decently in the Queen's uniform."

So into the navy he went, and, having passed through Greenwich, was now awaiting orders at Eval; where he found a most congenial playmate in his aunt.

His still beardless face dimpled with smiles as he worked. To begin with, the wood, which had evidently been used as a cow peg, was mahogany. In other words, it must have been stolen from the drift pile on which his uncle, by virtue of his official position, was supposed to keep an eye, since the logs which the Gulf Stream leaves in its course are

Government property. This amused Rick, seeing that the mere suggestion of such nefarious possibilities was a sure bait to his uncle's anger. Then the subject he had elected to carve seemed to him amusing. It was a replica of a Numbo Jumbo he had seen amongst the Caribbees, and which had tickled his fancy by its lavish ugliness. So his knife being a perfect tool-chest of implements, he gouged and punched, chiselled and filed, until, as he stuck the pointed end of the peg into the ground again, a very creditable copy of a malignant god stood before him.

"It's the best I've done yet," he said to himself; "that dodge of the bread-pellet eyes with the shot in the middle of them gives the old devil quite a live look."

He was not yet twenty-one, and boy enough to be proud of the ingenuity which had converted some sandwich crumbs and the lead off a cast into a pair of evil eyes. Man enough, however, to whistle "Who is Sylvia?" as he leant back against the caim, smiling at Numbo Jumbo and thinking of Lady Maud.

"Rick! you bad boy!" cried his aunt's eager voice just as he was beginning to forget everything in drowsiness. "You promised you wouldn't when I threw the last into the Minch, and this is worse, ever so much worse!"

"Better, you mean. It's the best I've done. Look at its eyes!" Miss Willina pretended to shudder as her hand, instinct with righteous vengeance, went out towards the idol.

"You might leave it there till we go," pleaded Rick. "It really is the best I've done by a long way. Then you could take it home Aunt Will, and have a real *auto-da-fé*. It's more orthodox than drowning; besides, it will help the peats to a blaze when we go in."

She burst out suddenly into an amused laugh. "Peats!" she echoed. "Ah, Rick! if you had only seen them at Roederay. The room full of smoke, that lovely girl--she is beautiful, my dear--full of apologies. They took so long to kindle, she said. 'Excuse me,' said I, 'but you mustn't miscall a peat fire. It is the most hospitable one in the world.' They were all lying crisscross like a crow's nest, and you should have seen her relief when I had them standing shoulder to shoulder and they flared up like a Highland regiment at the skirl of the pipes. A little thing that, Rick, but so it was in all. I laughed till I cried. That house full of telephones, electric bells, hot-water pipes--all the modern whims--the factor says people won't take a shooting unless there is a fixed bath nowadays. Well! downstairs Kirsty and Janet the herd; four willing hands and no knowledge. I tell you, Kirst is just terrified of the dampers. 'Will it be blowing down the house, Miss Willina?' she says."

"Skip, please."

The remark met with a scornful neglect.

"Then upstairs those three with the knowledge but never a hand. Brains--at least two of them had, for the husband seemed fickle and no action. There they couldn't understand each other, and Mr. Wilson went about with his hand in his pocket, asking if a five-pound note would do any good.

"My dear sir," said I, "neither five, nor ten, nor fifteen will help us if the *Clansman* can't put in to-morrow. So let us pray for fine weather. Then I promised to lend them our cook, and we became great friends. Only, I don't know why, I felt all along as if something was going to happen; a sort of conviction things were going wrong; a kind of doubt whether we were in our right places; a description of--"

Miss Macdonald's presentiments were apt to embrace all things visible and invisible, so Rick made haste with a remark.

"And what did you think of the other man,--Eustace?"

The shot was lucky. She paused and sat looking out over moor and sea with a mysterious expression of self-complacent sagacity.

"Well, auntie? you think--"

"Nothing, my dear. Gracious goody! past four o'clock! the chickens not fed, the cows out in the wind, the ducklings still at the stream, the whole blessed Noah's Ark."

She had risen with the first word, and started off like a lapwing, so that, ere she finished, distance deadened her voice.

"Wait! please wait," shouted Rick; "the animals went in two by two, remember!"

It was of no avail; so he caught up his rod and ran after her, leaving the idol to fulfil Miss Willina's role of sphinx.

It had been dark some hours before she dropped her knitting with a purposely dramatic start.

"Oh, Rick! didn't I say I had a presentiment? Now I've gone and left that wicked idol on the *harp*--on the Alt na heac *harp* of all places in the world, and you a descendant of the Vikings!"

Rick, at work on an infant Samuel for his aunt's room, looked up cheerfully.

"Well, what has that to do with it?"

"What? why, everything. Don't you know the legend? Everything left on that *harp* disappears. The dead take it as a tribute, and if they don't like it, they send it back to work evil to the living for a month and a day."

"Willina!"

Mr. John Macdonald was a silent man, but when he did speak, his meaning was clear. "Where the devil you get all that rubbish passes me. I've lived longer in this island than you, I've seen more of the people than you, yet I never heard such trash."

He dived back into his book as suddenly as he had emerged from it, and there was a dead silence.

"Never mind, auntie," whispered Rick sympathetically; for these outbreaks were almost the only things which upset Miss Willina's majesty. "I'll go first thing and bring Numbo Jumbo back to be burnt."

"Pray do not trouble," she replied with an audible sniff. "If I am foolish, I am foolish. If it is rubbish, I suppose it is rubbish. Only if anything happens, perhaps you will be considerate enough to admit that I foretold it."

Her hurt dignity, however, vanished before Rick Halmar's face, when he came in to breakfast next morning minus the idol.

"Gone! Oh, Rick! you don't mean it isn't there?" she cried, in not displeased excitement. "John! *do* you hear? It's gone, and you said it was rubbish. What do you say now?" Mr. Macdonald affected not to hear.

"Yes, it's gone," said Rick. "Numbo Jumbo's on the loose. I expect, really, that some of the crofter's children have taken it for a doll."

"It is all very well for your uncle to scoff, Eric, but the young should have more reverence for the wisdom of their elders," retorted his aunt severely.

"But Aunt Will!--you don't really believe--"

"I am not responsible for my beliefs to *you*, Eric, whatever you may be to *me*, and perhaps if you have no respect for me as your aunt, you will please to recollect that I am also your godmother. It all comes of disobedience. 'Thou shalt not make to thyself--'"

Rick leant back in his chair and roared.

"And if you can't even remember that," she went on, bristling with dignity, "you might recollect the punishment meted out to the children who mocked at the bald heads."

She paused, her hand went up suddenly to her coils of hair, she tried hard to keep her countenance, failed, and Mr. Macdonald's deep-toned laughter made a bass to her treble and Rick's tenor. That, nine times out of ten, was the end of Miss Willina's wrath.

"I found it," said Professor Endorwick, laying Numbo Jumbo on the drawing-room table at Roederay, "as I was coming over the moor this morning, in order, Lady Maud, to finish a delightful walking tour by a still more delightful visit. Oddly enough, I found something similar on the Grada Sands yesterday, but this, I fear, is genuine, and therefore quite uninteresting. I have it in my knapsack if you will allow me. There! from the fracture you will observe that it has formed part of a handle, probably the paddle of a war canoe, as this grotesque, which represents the savage conception of Ate or Fate, is generally used for that purpose. It has drifted here, doubtless in the Gulf Stream, is therefore, as I said before, uninteresting, since most museums possess something of the sort. This, however, is very different. It is, you will again observe, of very recent construction. This, joined to the fact that I found it on a *harp* or Viking's tomb famous in local tradition, points, to my mind, conclusively towards the survival amongst this primitive people of some, if not the original, cult of Fate. I need scarcely say that nothing is more difficult to track home than the faint footstep of a discredited belief, simply because rash inquiry results in prompt denial. I must therefore be careful, and I will ask you also, for the present at least, to preserve a kindly silence on my discovery."

He looked round his company as if it were a full meeting of the British Association after lunch. As a matter of fact, it consisted of Lady Maud, her husband, and Eustace Gordon.

They had barely finished breakfast when the professor, ignorant of their discomfort, walked in on them according to previous arrangement. Mr. Wilson, a slight, pleasant-looking man with a short beard covering his chin,—or want of chin,—had been moving restlessly from window to fireplace and back again during this speech, now drumming with his fingers on the sill, now transferring his attention to a fisherman's barometer on the mantelpiece, again slipping his hands to his pockets as if to force himself to quiet. Lady Maud, meanwhile, stood by the table looking at Numbo Jumbo and the despised original.

"So you think the one with the eyes most interesting? and I don't." She raised the flotsam jetsam in her slender hands, scanning it more closely. "I wonder if you would give me this, professor," she said suddenly. "I've taken a great fancy to it."

"My dear lady! I am only relieved to find you have not chosen the other," he replied with a gallant bow. "In either case, however, your desire is my law."

"I believe that beast of a thing is going down again," muttered Mr. Wilson from the mantelpiece. "The *Clansman* will never be able to come in to-morrow. It's too bad of Hooper, upon my soul it is."

"My dear fellow," remonstrated Eustace, "anything will go down if it is continually thumped. It's a lovely day, a bit blowy, but it always blows on this coast. The warmth of the Gulf Stream."

"Ah, confound the Gulf Stream!"

Lady Maud turned to her husband in surprise.

"What is the matter to-day, Edward? I didn't know a valet was such a hero to his master. Why, Josephine hasn't done a hand's turn since she caught sight of the steamer at Oban, but I don't complain."

He muttered something about Hooper having been with him for years and stood looking gloomily out of the window with his back turned to everybody.

Eustace Gordon gave a half-contemptuous shrug of his shoulders and a look at his cousin.

"Come out and see the ghillies, Wilson," he said. "By the way, I sent to the inn for whiskey this morning; you see, professor, nothing can be done without it in these parts, so I hope you are not a total abstainer."

The professor coughed gently. "I believe I am on principle. But having observed the fact you mention, I invariably carry a flask with me on my walking tours, merely, of course, as a means of acquiring information."

Mr. Wilson burst into sudden boisterous laughter. "A good joke that. Come along! We all have a thirst for knowledge on us this morning."

Lady Maud, left alone with the two carved images, took up the sea-waif and carried it off to her own sanctum, where she stuck it in the place of honour on the mantelshelf. Then, walking to the window, she looked out on pale green jostling waves and purple-green swaying heather.

"I wonder when Louisa will turn up," she thought irrelevantly. "After all, she would have done better to come on

with us and get it over, instead of waiting in the yacht for calmer weather. Suppose it were never to calm down?"

She threw open the window with a reckless laugh. The fresh wind raced in, bellying the curtains like sails, catching her slender figure with such force that she was fain to cling to the sash as to a mast. So standing, with that background of surging sea, and one hand keeping her hair from her eyes, she looked as if she were adrift and searching the horizon for some familiar landmark.

"Here's luck, and wissing you may all go back as you came, without any mistakes whatever."

It was the spokesman ghillie from below, toasting the new tenant. She looked down to meet Eustace Gordon's amused eyes raised to hers; she smiled back at him, and, closing the window, returned to the fireplace. There, under the eye of fate personified in the war paddle, the phrase "go back as you came" struck her as a curious wish, perhaps even a somewhat infelicitous one, considering the discomfort of their arrival. Whereat she laughed, as she did at most things. Not all, for Lady Maud, despite many attempts, had never been able to get the whip hand of her conscience. She had to *menager* it by driving round anything at which she thought it likely to shy. Her marriage to Mr. Wilson had been approached in this circuitous way until its manifest advantages completely obscured the central fact that she really loved her cousin Eustace. As yet repentance had not come to her; indeed, it came hardly to one so full of common sense and worldly wisdom as she was, but it came sometimes. Once as a child it had come suddenly in the sunlit solitary room into which she had been set apart for reflection, and she had knelt down to say naively, "Oh, God, I'm sorry now; but please don't make me sorry again, for I don't like it."

That, briefly, was still her attitude towards the ideal. She did not love her husband, but she thought him sufficiently gentlemanlike and pleasing to save herself regret. She did, or rather she had, loved Eustace, but the idea of either of them permitting that past folly to interfere with the present they had deliberately chosen was absurd. To begin with, they would see little of each other, and when they did they would carefully avoid the renewal of any confidential relations; that was the great safety in these cases; for Lady Maud viewed the matter dispassionately, as a case.

She came down to dinner that evening in a pale plush teagown, with long sleeves falling back from her bare arms, and smiled at everything. At the fact that she got on perfectly without Josephine's help; at the furtive way in which Kirsty set down the dinner, as if it were a bomb, and she in a hurry to escape the explosion; at her husband's continued anxiety about the weather; at the professor's profuse apologies for having intruded on them so inopportunately.

"Not at all," she said gaily; "you will make a fourth at whist; Edward loves a rubber."

"I can't play to-night," replied her husband. "I've a headache."

"You do look a little flushed; perhaps it is the wind."

"The wind!" he echoed petulantly; "of course it's the wind. Did you ever hear anything like it, Endorwick? I swear I never slept a wink last night, what with it and that confounded sea. It is enough to drive a fellow distracted."

"You are as bad as Josephine," laughed his wife. "She has been in hysterics all day until Miss Macdonald's cook gave her a whole tumbler of hot whiskey and water. Since then she has been asleep."

"We have all been trying that remedy," put in Eustace. "What with the men coming in, and the boats being engaged, we shall want more whiskey to-morrow, Wilson."

"No, we shan't," retorted his host quickly; "I mean it's beastly stuff, you know. I never take anything but claret myself."

"Awfully difficult to get decent claret nowadays," remarked Eustace with the ease, to him so delightfully new, of the rich man who quarrels with the supply and not the price. So the topic passed.

"I'll have a cigar and go to bed; I didn't sleep a bit last night," said Mr. Wilson shortly after they returned to the bare drawing-room, guiltless of all decoration, where Lady Maud's Parisian teagown looked so oddly out of place.

"Take some hot whiskey and water," laughed his wife. "Won't you all go to the smoking-room? You must be tired, professor, after your long walk."

But the learned man's social beliefs forbade cigars when a charming woman was the alternative, so he elected to remain. Being in reality much fatigued, however, he shortly afterwards gave way to the seductions of semi-darkness and an arm-chair. Semi-darkness because Kirsty's lamp smoking horribly, they preferred the light of the blazing peat fire.

Outside the wind crooned round the house,—a lullaby to ears acquainted with its other notes, but to those accustomed to the stillness of the south, a banshee wail of coming trouble. With the firelight playing on the jet agraffes which held the cunning draperies on her gleaming bust and arms, Lady Maud was a picture few men could look on absolutely unmoved; but if Eustace Gordon felt the charm of her beauty, he gave no sign of it as yet. They sat there in the semi-darkness side by side, sometimes silent, sometimes talking indifferently of indifferent subjects. Alone, as utterly alone in the world as if they two were the only man and woman in it; for the barrier which luxury raises between one human being and another had given way. Supposing, for instance, the butler, instead of bobbing up and down on the Minch in the *Clansman*, had been at his post, would they have been sitting in semi-darkness uninterrupted by inroads for coffee cups, peats, and candles? Again, would any really high-class butler have permitted Professor Endorwick to snooze undisturbed in his chair, for two hours on end? Not that he did any harm by his slumbers; he might have awakened at any moment and joined unhesitatingly in the desultory talk of those two. True enough; yet when, at last, Eustace did rouse the learned man by lighting Lady Maud's candle, they both felt that the *tete-a-tete* had not left them quite as it found them; that in some of those half-indifferent ordinary remarks a virtue had gone out of them.

She took the light from him, decidedly, with a refusal of his offer to pilot her along the dark passages; angry with herself for the very thought, she still felt that it would be wiser to say good-night here under the professor's eye; and as she went up the dim staircase, she paused to give a glance at the sea with a wonder as to when Louisa would find calm or courage enough to attempt the voyage. In a vague way, she recognized that things would go more comfortably if she were there. But beyond a sense of motion in the deep grey plane stretching away to a paler grey horizon, she could see nothing. The tide was flowing one way or another; that much was certain.

She opened the door of her dressing-room softly, so as not to disturb her husband should he have fallen asleep. A great fire burnt bravely in her little sitting-room beyond, and something in the unusual silence of it all enhanced its comfort in her eyes. If Josephine had been awaiting her as usual, she could not have put off the task of undressing in favour of sheer idleness by the fire. Her husband was right; something in that rhythmical surge of the sea made one not exactly restless, but on the alert; disinclined for action, yet prepared for it. A foolish idea, since what could be going to happen to the small household already, for the most part, asleep? The professor would have taken the first opportunity of recommencing that snooze legitimately in his bed, and even Eustace,—why would her thoughts run on Eustace? Irritated at her own self-consciousness, she took up a book impatiently. It interested her, and, by and by, she turned for the second volume, to find that it must have been left in the travelling bag which Kirsty's ignorance had put in the bedroom. Shading the light carefully, she passed through the dressing-room, and so into the room beyond, giving a tentative glance at the bed as she entered, lest she should disturb the sleeper. It was empty. Her hand fell from the light; she looked round the room in surprise, and the next moment was on her knees beside a figure on the floor,—a figure which even in her first alarm brought back a horrible memory.

"Edward! what is the matter? Are you ill?"

Once, as a slip of a girl out blackberrying, she had come upon a tipsy tramp in a ditch; a beast of a man who had met her innocent benevolence by stumbling to his feet, pursuing her as far as his feet would carry him. This was her solitary personal experience of drunkenness, and something in her husband's look and attitude revived the dread which had remained with her ever since. Yet he might be ill—very, very ill—

"Edward! what is it?"

This time he raised an unsteady arm against the candle she held to his face, and she shrank back, shaking all over. Her first impulse was that of civilization,—to ring for help, at least for company. But what good would that do in an empty house? Josephine, until other women came to share her fears, had elected to sleep in a great chamber on the upper storey. Besides, what good would she be? Kirsty slept outside with the other farm servants. Eustace! no, no! not Eustace,—not now at any rate,—not till she was certain. There was the cook, of course; people in that rank of life were accustomed—oh, no! no! it was not possible. What a wretch she was to harbour such suspicions, when he might be ill—perhaps dying. With this protest in her mind, her rich draperies caught over her arm, the candle flaring, guttering, almost out in the swift search, she made her way to the unknown regions beyond the swing door, which separated work from leisure. Here? No! that must be the pantry. There? No! that was the gun-room. So, peering in at each room, she went along the stone passages till suddenly a door right in front of her opened, and Eustace Gordon came out, with a candle in his hand. He had been sitting up over the smoking-room fire, impelled, as she had been, to wakefulness by something, he knew not what.

"Maud! Maud, my darling! What is it? What is the matter?"

She forgot everything in the comfort of companionship as, still shaking with fear, she went swiftly to his side.

"Edward. I think he is ill. Oh, Eustace, I am so frightened!"

And he in his turn, taken utterly by surprise, seemed to forget everything save that the woman he loved passionately was there beside him. His thoughts had been so full of her, nothing but her, and now--

"Oh, come! please come; he is ill. I know he is ill."

"Yes! I am coming," he said with an effort at self-control. "Where is he--in your room?"

Then, with his arm round her, they went back through the silent house together. Those two alone. Yet not, it seemed to her, so much alone as when they stood at last with that drunken figure lying on the floor between them. She knew the truth at once in his quick exclamation, and then everything under sun and stars seemed to slip away and leave them face to face. "Eustace and she." "Eustace and me." The low rush of the waves caught the refrain and repeated it ceaselessly.

"Don't be alarmed; you had better go away."

She heard the words as in a dream, scarcely recognizing the voice in its harsh passion. "Stay, he shall not remain here; not here in your room." Then she felt his hands grip hers, and the voice rang with fierce resentment.

"Maud! Maud! that this should have come to you--to you of all people. By heaven, it is too much. I will not bear it."

She laughed suddenly and broke from him. "You mean that he has taken too much whiskey. Well! plenty of men do that, and you others think--think none--none the worse." Then she broke down, flinging her arms across the bed by which she had been standing. "Oh, my God! what shall I do? what shall I do?"

Her outburst calmed him.

"Go into the other room, dear; I will call some one."

She turned on him as she knelt like a wild animal at bay.

"No! not the servants! no one shall know. I will not have it. Let me help. I am quite strong."

"Do you think I'd let you touch him?" he burst out. "Go! I'll manage."

She crept away, cowed by his vehemence, overcome by the desire to obey which subdues most women when the command is from one they love. Back to the fire she had left so short a time ago. It was dull now, but a touch sent the responsive flames leaping up the chimney. Would any amount of care restore that confidence in herself which but an hour ago had defied fate? Eustace and she--Eustace and me. What evil chance was this?

She started from a maze of confused fear at his knock at her door.

"A light, please. You have no bed here, and none of the other rooms are fit for you to-night; so I have brought this. I had to leave him--there."

"Why should you trouble?" she asked drearily, with lack-lustre eyes on his burden of blankets and pillows. "I can so easily sit up; it must be near morning now."

He gave her a look so full of passionate adoration that her eyes fell before it.

"Do you think I am going to let you suffer one little bit--one atom of discomfort because of *him*? No, that shall not be; you shall never suffer."

"How can you help it?"

"How can you ask? We may have made a mistake, Maud; perhaps we *hav'n't* God knows. But if we have, why then--" He came over to where she was standing and took her hands in his. So they stood, those two alone, with nothing between them save a conscience which could be turned aside; every barrier raised by the world broken down by a strange fate, by a mere turn of the tide.

"Good-night, dear," he said, stooping to kiss her.

She made no reply, no protest; perhaps in her heart of hearts she knew that he said the truth. That if it was a mistake, why then--

The waves caught up that refrain also, as she lay with wide, sleepless eyes on the little camp-bed with which his care had provided her. "It is a mistake--you shall not suffer--it is a mistake--you shall not suffer."

III

When she woke next morning, a be-capped and be-aproned upper housemaid was bringing in her early cup of tea.

"Yes, milady, we 'ave hall come. Mr. 'Ooper 'e 'ave come too, milady. Indeed, if it 'adn't bin for Mr. 'Ooper, we should 'ave bin picking hup cattle in that horful Minch till hevenin'; but 'e took it on 'imself to tell the capting as master would willin' pay hextra for us to come as quick as might be. And thankful we was, milady, for some of us mightn't 'ave lived to see land."

Jane looked as if she certainly would have been one of those to succumb, and Lady Maud gave a sigh of relief.

"Tell Hooper to go to his master,--he wasn't very well last night,--and tell Josephine I shall breakfast in my room."

"Mr. 'Ooper 'ave gone to master," replied Jane in a voice which implied that the reminder was unnecessary; "and if you please, milady, Capting Weeks 'e 'ave come too. We picked 'im up with some cattle in a boat from some place as begins with an 'Hoich."

Lady Maud gave another sigh of relief. The sand-bags of civilization were a great protection after all; and if Captain Weeks had come, Eustace would go out shooting with him. That would give her a whole day to face the situation. Honestly, she thought far more of possible difficulties with him than with her husband. The shock had been terrible at the time, but perhaps, after all, it was an isolated offence. Heaps of men in society got drunk decently out of sight of their legal womenkind, and no one thought-- The recurrence of the phrase she had used the night before made her pause and hide her face in the pillow in sudden horror at herself and him. No! without going so far as that, one could still be rational. Edward was devoted to her, and if a wife by her influence made a better man of her husband, wherein lay the degradation? Last night--great heavens! what had come over her last night? She had been taken by surprise, placed in conditions which no one could possibly have foreseen, dragged by main force from every shelter. Her face burnt as she remembered, and yet how natural it had been! Natural and therefore absurd, ridiculous. To-day, however, was different, and so the little pencilled note from Eustace, which Josephine brought in with the breakfast, received no reply save a message to say she was perfectly well and hoped he would look after Captain Weeks, if Mr. Wilson was not able to go out. A bold parry, which made Eustace Gordon set his teeth.

Yes! to-day was different; a new heaven and a new earth. The very house transformed; for when she came down to lunch, the drawing-room was full of tables, screens, photographs, and ferns, while in the dining-room the butler stood ready to remove the silver covers, and so let loose the pent-up energies of two footmen who, with bent heads, seemed waiting for some one to say grace. Mr. Gordon, the report ran, had taken Captain Weeks to the Carbost beat, and would not be back till late. Her ladyship was to open any telegram which might come, as it would relate to the yacht. Mr. Wilson had gone to shoot rock-pigeon with the head keeper. The professor was exploring, and begged her ladyship not to wait lunch for him. So said the butler gravely as he filled her glass. Through the window she could see the Atlantic guiltless of a white feather, and her own courage rose with the outlook. As she strolled about the heathery knolls after lunch, a boy on a pony appeared with the expected telegram. "Started, should be with you to-morrow." So that was an end of one trouble. Then Cynthia Strong and some others were to come by the next boat. Will Lockhart was cruising about the coast and might look in on them at any time. There would be no more solitude; not even to-day, since there across the moor came Miss Macdonald, attired for calling, and beside her that good-looking young sailor. Lady Maud liked boys, especially handsome ones with palpable adoration in their blue eyes.

The professor, coming in very hot about tea-time, found the trio having it like children out in a bieldy bit by the burn, but with the butler solemnly presiding over the fire. A fire which gave James, the under footman, the hugest delight until his enjoyment was crushed out of him by his superior officer. For the butler knew his duty: afternoon tea was afternoon tea wherever her ladyship chose to take it; that is to say, a function at which a footman must preserve an impassive face. So poor James put on the sticks with funeral calm and burnt his fingers with great decorum.

"Here is a lady, professor," said Lady Maud,—"Miss Macdonald—Professor Endorwick,—who will tell you everything you can possibly want to know about the island. She is a mine of useful information; at least I have found her so."

That gracious voice, face, and manner had been a sort of rapture to young Rick Halmar for the last half hour, and when, after launching the others into conversation, she turned to him with the undefinable change in manner she could no more avoid in talking to men than the magnet can keep its influence, his heart gave quite a throb.

"I didn't introduce you," she said, smiling, "because I only know your Christian name; and I'm not sure of that."

"Rick! Rick Halmar," he replied with a blush which took him by surprise; for he was not as a rule self-conscious.

"Rick?" she echoed curiously.

"Eric. My father was a Norwegian. But it was a boshy name and the fellows on the *Britannia* called me 'Little by Little'—after the book, you know."

She laughed. "A very inappropriate name, Mr. Halmar. You must be six feet."

He shook his head. "Five feet eleven and three-quarters. It's too big for a sailor. You get in the way of the ropes and things."

"Not too big for a man—but listen! the professor is overcome already; how delightful!"

In good sooth he was actually reduced to the position of listener, an isolated assertion of interest being all the speech allowed him as Miss Willina waxed eloquent over the crass superstitions of the islanders and her own select beliefs.

Rick's face grew brimful of smiles.

"Aunt Will is as bad as the best, herself. Why, the other day I carved out a sort of devil,—a thing they worship in the Caribbees,—and she was in quite a taking because it was left out on a *harp*,—that's a Viking's tomb, Lady Maud. She has some rigmarole about 'tribute to the dead,' their sending back things to work evil to the living. But, do you know, Lady Maud, it's awfully rum, but I couldn't find the thing when I went to look for it yesterday morning."

"You couldn't find it? Mr. Halmar, don't speak loud; don't attract their attention by looking surprised! Was it—the devil, I mean—fearfully ugly?"

"The best I ever made."

"Had it white eyes with a shot stuck in them?"

"Lady Maud! did you find it?"

"Not I, but the professor did. It's a footstep of a discredited belief, and he is going to lecture on it to the British Association. Isn't it perfectly lovely? How we shall all laugh!"

"But you will tell him, of course?"

"Tell him! Why should I? These things are one of my chief joys in life."

Rick Halmar winced. "But don't you see, Lady Maud, it's my fault more or less? I oughtn't to go carving devils and leaving them about. It isn't fair."

She raised her eyebrows. "When you are older, Mr. Halmar, you won't be so eager to accept responsibility. By the way, does yours extend to another devil of the same sort which was found on Grada Sands?"

He let his head drop into his hands in comic despair. "How one's sins *do* find one out! It must be the one Aunt Will flung into the Minch. Everything comes round sooner or later to the sands. Has the professor got it too?"

"No, Mr. Halmar. *I* have it."

"You! Oh, Lady Maud—I am sorry."

"You well may be. I have put it into my own room because the professor declared it was genuine--a real savage fate. No--that isn't true, so don't distress yourself. I took a fancy to it. I have a habit of taking fancies to *things* and to *people*; so there it shall remain."

Rick's face lit up. "Let me make you a better one," he began.

"I said, Mr. Halmar, that I took a fancy to *it*; and now, don't you think you should make your confession like a good boy?"

He made it very prettily, but with a frank enjoyment of the mistake, which was infectious. So much so, that the chief sufferer, stimulated into unusual playfulness by Miss Willina's wit, actually went into the house for his discredited belief and brought it out for her to burn.

So, with much laughter, they stood round the fire, causing poor James almost to burst under his efforts after dignity, till suddenly, with something between a chuckle and a cough, the butler himself gave way into the remark that "I 'adn't made a Guy Forks--*kck-kh-kh*--since 'e was a boy,--*kh-kh-kh*,--but if 'er ladyship pleased, Jeames could run round to the gun-room for some powder and 'e'd 'ave some squibs ready in no time."

So Numbo Jumbo was burnt with all the honours, and the butler, going back for his own tea to the housekeeper's room, hummed, "Remember, remember, the fifth of November," until the cook, with a snort, asked wherever to goodness he had picked up such a vulgar ditty.

"Now I have no doubt all you learned people think me very foolish," said Miss Willina, drawing on her gloves with the air of one who has completed a good work; "but I really am immensely relieved in my mind. I had a presentiment about that devil of Rick's; besides, these old superstitions invariably have their origin in some fundamental fact or law of Nature. Don't you think so, professor?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear madam; the Folklore Society--"

But Miss Willina had a profound contempt for all societies and proclaimed it cheerfully. "Therefore, the only remaining thing to be done," she continued, shaking her head at Rick, "is to make restitution for that naughty boy's mischief. So, if you will walk over to Eval some day, Mr. Endorwick, I will give you that bone ring with the Runic inscription about which I was telling you."

"My dear lady," cried the professor with greed in his eyes, "I really could not dream--"

"I don't want to give it to *you*, of course," she went on frankly; "but my brother says it should be in a museum; so you can put 'Given by Miss Macdonald through Professor Endorwick' on the ticket. And, by the bye, it was found on Grada and Malcolm, Aig says."

Meanwhile Lady Maud had turned to Rick with a quizzical smile. "Do you accept the responsibility of my fate, Mr. Halmar? or shall I have a private *auto-da-fé* in my room?"

The boy's face positively shone with pleasure as he took her hand to say goodbye.

"I couldn't do anything that would bring you harm, I think--you are too--too beautiful." The absolute simplicity of the statement rendered it inoffensive, and Lady Maud laughed.

"Take your nephew away, Miss Macdonald; he is paying me compliments."

"I don't wonder at it," retorted the little lady, nodding her head, "and compliments are pleasant things; at least, I used to find them so."

"Why employ the past tense, dear lady?" said the professor with a bow, as he shook hands, whereat Miss Willina declared that the only safety lay in flight; and Lady Maud, as she went back to the house, told herself once more that to-day was very different from yesterday. This background of *persiflage*, with just a serious touch here and there to help out the chiaro-oscuro, suited figures in modern dress. Tailor-made figures guiltless of a wrinkle and oblivious of vitality's claim for an uncrushed organ or two.

"If her ladyship please," said Josephine, when the dressing bell brought her to her mistress' room, "Mr. 'Ooper, he desire a few word of milady."

"Hooper! didn't they say he had gone with Mr. Wilson?"

"Monsieur 'ave just return; Mr. Gordon also wid Capitaine Veeek and--*Mon Dieu! quel gibier!* Sall I bid him come?"

Lady Maud, at the writing-table, rested her head on her hand, feeling a sudden need of courage. They had all come back, and some things must be faced before life could run smoothly once more. Eustace must be made to understand that there was to be no drifting, and her husband must consent to let her hand be on the tiller ropes.

"Well, Hooper?"

Rather a diffident-looking man; nervous too in his manner. "I am sorry to have to trouble your ladyship, but I think Dr. Haddon would wish it, under the circumstances. It is about master, your ladyship."

Her heart gave a great throb. "Your master, Hooper? Well?"

The diffident man, holding on to the doorknob as for support, cleared his throat. "It is a little difficult, my lady, and Mr. Gordon, when he spoke to me, was for saying nothing; but I have been considering the matter and I think Dr. Haddon--"

"Who is Dr. Haddon?"

"I was not quite sure if your ladyship knew--anything. But master was under Dr. Haddon for a time. It--it is for the liquor habit, my lady, and Dr. Haddon is most successful. He was most successful with master. Four years I have been with him since we came back from America, and never till last night--" he coughed slightly and paused. Lady Maud sate staring at him without a word.

"I am very sorry, my lady. The other servants will tell you how distressed I was to be absent from my duty. It arose from my not understanding the porter's accent, my lady; but it will not occur again. I mean, my lady, that--ahem--nothing of the sort will occur again. So there is no need for--for distress or anxiety."

"You mean that as long as--as you are with Mr. Wilson--" so far she managed in a cold hard voice; then came silence.

"Just so, my lady--it is a question of influence. I undertake the entire responsibility. There is really no cause for alarm."

"That--that will do, Hooper; you can go." Her one thought was to get rid of this man, this servant, who seemed to have reached out his common hand and touched her very soul. He paused, still with his hand on the door.

"I beg pardon, my lady, but there is one thing. Dr. Haddon's system is based on influence. It does not allow any appeal to--ahem--to the moral sense. Therefore, if your ladyship could kindly treat the mistake of yesterday with silence, it would be better--for the system. Dr. Haddon ignores failure on principle, it--it is part of the system; and any interference may be dangerous. Therefore, if your ladyship--"

"I quite understand. You can go."

When she was left alone, she sate staring on at the door he had closed behind him. Behind whom? why the man who--oh! it was an impossible, an incredible, position! She had married her husband without caring for him, but she had married him also because she intended that he *should* care for her. And now! What was he but a puppet, dependent on this man? She had not married Edward Wilson, but Wilson-cum-Haddon, -cum-Hooper. And Eustace knew it! Her husband, the possible father of her children! She had known all along that he was a weak man, but that the very possibility of his living decently lay in the will of another was hopeless, horrible degradation. She had often in society talked lightly of the part hypnotism was to play in the future regeneration of the world; but now that even a suspicion of it touched her inner life, it left her in wild revolt. When all was said and done, that man to whom they paid so many pounds a year was master of her fate. It should never be! Better, far better, that her husband should be drunk; and yet what right had she to interfere?

"It will be too late to make milady *charmante*," suggested Josephine, coming in, reproachfully.

She stood up hastily with clenched hands. Eustace should not see her degradation--she would show him--

"There is plenty of time," she said coldly. "Put on my diamonds, Josephine--that dress is dull. They can wait if I am

not ready."

She was worth waiting for, and Mr. Wilson's weak face brightened as she went up to him with easy grace. "Did you have a good day, Edward? I saw Hooper for a moment, but I forgot to ask him about the sport."

She failed in her object for all her bravado. The eyes she sought to blind saw too clearly.

"So Louisa comes to-morrow," she said lightly, as, after keeping all the men, her husband included, at her feet during the evening, she rose to say good-night and let her hand linger purposely in her cousin's, so that he should see she did not care, that she was not afraid.

"No!" he replied coldly; "I've had another wire. She came as far as Portree, and, hearing that the gathering is next week, decided to stay and show off her new dresses. She got about a ton of them in Paris if you remember, and women, even the best of them, love to show off."

His tone roused her to reckless resentment by its assumption of knowledge and condemnation.

"He does not look very sorry for his wife's decision, does he, professor?" she asked with a laugh.

"My dear lady, how could he be sorry for anything, in his present position?"

"Or I in mine?" she retorted, giving a little mock curtsy over the hand she still held.

Eustace Gordon bit his lip, but said nothing.

IV

"You look worried," said Will Lockhart; "the place doesn't suit you. I told you it wouldn't when we hid behind Charity. Is there anything really the matter?" his voice took a softer tone, "anything I could help you to set straight?"

They were sitting by the fire in Lady Maud's little sitting-room, whither they had retired from the bustle inseparable from tea in the drawing-room when bad weather keeps even the sportsmen indoors. He said the truth; she looked worn and fagged, and her pose as she leant back in her easy-chair was one of listless fatigue.

"Nonsense! There is nothing the matter; nothing more than the usual worries of a hostess in tiresome weather. To begin with, it has prevented your coming here till you can only spare us a miserable day on your way to rejoin the yacht. Then Louisa, after wasting a fine week over the Portree gathering, was detained there ten days by storm. Finally, just as she started for the Highlands one at Inverness *pour passer le temps*, it cleared up. Since then it has been what is called unsettled; most of all for poor Eustace, who never knows for two days together what is going to happen. Then Lady Liddell caught cold at a picnic, and Cynthia Strong, whom I invited for the professor;--a Girtonite you know, does mathematics and all that;--seems uncertain whether she doesn't prefer Arthur Weeks, a man who hasn't a penny and can't do a sum beyond the compound addition of his bills."

"A catalogue of evils, certainly."

"That isn't all. The professor, who would make her an excellent husband, being in that set and with a charming house too at Oxford, does nothing but go over to Eval House to see Miss Macdonald--you knew her once, I think--well, he looks on her as an encyclopaedia of discredited beliefs, a unique copy of an ancient work on folk-lore which the lucky finder is bound to purchase. Besides, she has a valuable collection--"

"When I knew her," broke in Will Lockhart hotly, "she did not need any adventitious attractions; she was simply the loveliest--"

Lady Maud's languid hands met in faint applause.

"I thought that would draw you. So she was the *mauvais quart d'heure*. I am not really laughing, so don't be angry; only from the way she spoke of you--"

"Did she speak of me?"

"How can you ask? And women never speak of the men who have loved them in the same tone of voice they use for the dense, indiscriminating multitude who didn't."

"Then Miss Macdonald's voice must change pretty often."

"Ah! was that it? you were jealous."

"Nothing so romantic. We quarrelled over some bread and butter--we were very young. Then circumstances favoured absence, so forgetfulness came, or at least indifference, absolute indifference." He paused for a moment. "And so the professor is there constantly, is he?"

Lady Maud smiled behind the fan with which she screened her face from the fire.

"He is there now, I expect. He went dune-hunting in the south this morning, and was to stop there for the night. Thought he might be late; besides, he must consult the encyclopaedia."

Will Lockhart frowned. "This has made us drift from the point. Your husband, does he like the place?"

"Apparently. And the servants are satisfied too, which is a great gain. They get all their work done for them by the natives. It is an immense relief to shift one's responsibilities to other folks' shoulders, isn't it?"

He looked at her sharply. "There *is* something the matter. Is it only other people's love-affairs? And what, for instance, of that handsome boy downstairs who does Sir Walter Raleigh's cloak for your Majesty's feet all day long?"

Lady Maud leant forward eagerly, her whole face alight. "You mean Rick. Do you remember once, when you were very angry with me, saying I was enough to ruin any man in a week? It wasn't true, Big Bear. I couldn't spoil Rick Halmar."

"Have you tried and failed?" he asked cynically.

She shook her head and a soft half-smiling, half-tearful look came to her pretty eyes.

"You don't know him, and I can't explain. Yet I tell you that I couldn't spoil one of that dear lad's happy days unless--" she broke off suddenly, raising her eyes to the image on the mantelshelf. "He carved that devil up there," she went on with the smile gaining on the tears. "The professor said it was a savage conception of fate, but it isn't. It is Rick Halmar's conception of my fate, and that--well, that hasn't much of the devil in it. Come! it is time I was returning to my duties as hostess."

"Time for me to be going also," he replied, looking at his watch. "I have seven miles before me."

"Not if you make use of the Eval ferryboat." She looked at him mischievously.

"I do not intend to make use of it, even to oblige you, Lady Maud. I might meet the professor, and then there would be a petty-assault case."

"Of course! How tiresome you are! I counted on your being here a week at least, and people can unmake ever so many quarrels in seven days."

"Or make them. But the elements are too strong for you, Lady Maud. I told you so."

Rick Halmar came up as, still smiling over the joke, they entered the drawing-room.

"I'm so glad. I was afraid you might not come before I left, and I must go soon."

"Then you can pilot Mr. Lockhart a little way. He has to walk over to Carbost Bay."

"A good bit of the way, you mean," replied Rick, turning his bright face towards Will Lockhart's. "Our ferry is far the shortest; in fact, it's the only road, for the upper-end bridge gave way in the flood last night and the stream isn't

fordable yet!"

Lady Maud's eyebrows went up archly.

"What a nuisance the elements are at times; aren't they, Mr. Lockhart?"

"I should think so," assented Rick cheerfully. "Why, we have been trying to get to Eilean-a-fa-ash these three weeks--haven't we, Lady Maud?--without catching a fine day and a suitable tide on the hop together. The sea ford might have done last spring, but it was too rough for the ladies to return by boat, or else too wet. But the first fine day. That is it, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Halmar!" cried Cynthia Strong from the window seat where Captain Weeks was blissfully useful over a skein of wool. "And please order the fine day soon, for I have to go by the next *Clansman*."

"Then I shall go too," murmured the captain.

"I suppose the birds will be getting rather wild by that time," remarked the young lady tartly. Theoretically, she felt bound to despise her admirer and his occupations; practically, his murmurs made her heart beat.

"Wild! Why, they lie like stones on this coast. Something to do with the Gulf Stream, I'm told, though I know nothing myself about these scientific things. But you can kick 'em up and shoot 'em like chickens on the last day of the season."

"And when is that?"

Captain Weeks laughed,--the true man's laugh of surprised tolerance. "I thought you knew everything, Miss Strong; but I don't suppose they think it worth while to teach girls. It's the 10th of December for grouse, but partridges go on till the beginning of February, and there's no real close time for--" His voice fell to the confidential tone. Eustace Gordon had meanwhile joined the trio at the door.

"Yes! let it be soon, please; for I may be going also. I've just heard, Maud, from Louisa, and the last idea is that I am to take the yacht, which she is sending here, round to Cowes, and that we are to start at once for less uncertain climes. The Mediterranean, most likely."

"That is very--unexpected. But all my friends are flying south, like the swallows."

"And I have to go furthest of all," said Rick ruefully. "I'm booked for the Pacific Station, as sure as fate."

"Then you must send me home a real Numbo Jumbo if you come across one," she replied, smiling up into his eager boyish face with a confidence absolutely free from all alloy.

"Won't I! and some of those jolly shells too; all the pretty things I can pick up."

"Thank you, Rick; I like pretty things."

He flushed with pleasure at her tone and words.

"Well, good-bye," she said, turning to Will Lockhart. "I hope the elements won't be too strong for you."

"Or for you."

Confidence here also, but of a different sort,--the sort which can give a reason for the faith that is in it. It seemed, however, as if Lady Maud's wish was not to be fulfilled; for as Rick Halmar and his companion set off across the moor, the southwest wind, even at that distance from the shore, sent a shower of spindrift in their faces.

"No leaving Carbest Bay for you tonight," shouted Rick against the wind. "You had better stay at our place. You used to know Aunt Will long ago, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I must get on. It may calm any moment, and the yacht sails as soon as possible."

Nevertheless when, after scudding with the wind at their backs for two miles, they came upon the ferry, one glance showed even Will Lockhart's inexperienced eye that the cockleshell of a boat, bobbing up and down in the backwater, could never fight its way through that mad melee of wind against tide in the middle of the narrow stream. Comparative

calm reigned to one side in the inland loch, and to the other in the open sea; but here the waves leapt at each other in pyramids, sending jets of spray upwards with the very force of their meeting. A good thrower could easily have flung a stone across the channel; for all that, it was impassable till the tired tide should turn and join the wind in its race eastward. So, at any rate, said Rick, adding that his aunt would be delighted at a *contretemps* which would procure her a visit from an old friend.

Why Will Lockhart should have hesitated, when it was raining cats and dogs, and it was two-and-twenty years since he had parted in anger from the hot-headed, quick-tongued chit of eighteen, who was now, by all accounts, a brisk, contented woman of forty, is not easy of explanation. Perhaps the thought of Lady Maud's triumph rankled; perhaps, when all was said and done, he was not quite indifferent to that possible future with the professor. But he did hesitate for a moment. That early love-affair had strangely enough been his first and last: not because it was in itself absorbing, but because other things more absorbing than Love had stepped in to take possession of his life. For a year or two, no doubt, resentment had lingered, not very keenly felt, but sufficiently so to prevent other love-affairs. Then he had painted his first successful picture, and that had been an end of all things, save Art, and a rather unreal remembrance that he had loved and lost.

However, common sense came to his aid, as it was bound to do in that drenching rain. And, after all, the professor was not in the well-remembered drawing-room whither Rick led him; neither was Miss Willina. Fortunately, perhaps, for her dignity, of which she was extremely tenacious, she had been in the potting-shed feeding a late brood of chickens presented to her that morning by an inexperienced young mother, who had preferred a bed of nettles behind the peat stack to the comforts of the hen-house nursery. So she had ample opportunity of seeing them pass up the ferry-path and of grasping the situation; to say nothing of smoothing her hair and washing her hands, before putting in an appearance; the which is a great support to most women in the crises of life. As a matter of fact, however, Miss Willina had never regarded this episode of her earliest years of conquest as one of supreme importance; perhaps some slight inkling that it really did mean more than she was prepared to admit was at the bottom of her deliberate want of romance on the subject. She had had many admirers, had them still for that matter; she was perfectly aware, for instance, of the professor's interest; but, for all that, she had never felt inclined to marry since those salad days when she had drowned her resentment in the knowledge that half the men who knew her were at her feet. Why should she marry? There was plenty of time and opportunity if she wished it; and then, when time passed, leaving her still Miss Macdonald, she told herself and every one else that it was of her own free will and pleasure. As it undoubtedly was. She scouted regrets, and only when the masterful current of her vitality slackened, as even hers had to do at times, did she wonder if that early love-affair had not been at the bottom of her cold-bloodedness.

Will Lockhart did not think her much changed. The daintiness and wilfulness he chiefly remembered were still there, and it was like old times to hear her order him up with Rick, to "change his feet," and see the swift touch with which she rescued an antimacassar from annihilation when he sate down. And this want of change depressed him, by emphasizing the long years which he could not forget.

There she was, much as he remembered her, and he--people told him also that he had changed but little. Yet in those old days it had seemed impossible to conceive of life apart, and here they were, both free, both unmarried, talking calmly, with a new generation for listener, about that past time. What had kept them separate except their own free will? Nothing! and yet had either of them deliberately anticipated this ending when they quarrelled over the bread and butter? And now she was thinking of the professor, or at any rate the professor was thinking of her. That was Lady Maud's account, and there was certainly a suspicion of consciousness when the learned man's name was mentioned; a palpable flush indeed, when a faint whistle overbore that of the wind, and she started from her chair.

"Rick! it can't surely be Mr. Endorwick!"

The blush made her look years younger, and Will Lockhart felt distinctly aggrieved at the fact.

"By George, it is, though," replied her nephew, after a glance through the field-glasses which hung ready for the purpose on the window-knob. "There he is on the other side of the stream. He has hoisted the flag, and is blowing away at the whistle like fits. His umbrella's inside out, and his mackintosh floating on the breeze. Do look, Aunt Will. It's awfully comic."

Miss Willina's face was a study of dignity and humour; the first prevailed. "Eric! I am surprised at your levity. The poor man will be drenched to the skin, and he so delicate; such a distinguished scholar too; we could ill afford to lose him."

"Give me the glass," said Will Lockhart grimly. The sight of his supposed successor signalling for the impossible

gave him a thrill of satisfaction; for he, at least, was on the right side of the stream. And then to the keen little creature at his side came a mood well remembered.

"The born idiot! Any Christian would have stopped at the hotel even if he was wanting to come on. A fool for his pains! Ah! what's the use of blowing like a hooter with the wind and tide against you? Gracious goody! Rick, what's to be done? The gawk can't be left there like a windmill."

The comparison was not inapt; for the professor, seeing them, doubtless, against the firelight within, was waving his arms frantically.

"I'll go down and signal him to that bieldy bit behind the big rock. It's out of the wind anyhow, and the tide will be turning before he could walk back to shelter. And I'll stop in the boat-house; it will comfort him to see me smoking, especially if he has forgotten his matches. Besides, I must put new rowlocks to the four-oar. We'll want her, and the men too, if any one is to cross the stream tonight."

"That's a nice boy," said Will Lockhart, putting down the glasses as Rick's figure on its way to the boat-house blocked out the professor's increasing despair. "Just about the age I was when--" He paused and looked at his companion.

"Yes! You were twenty-one, and I was eighteen."

They were standing close together, the firelight throwing their shadows out faintly against the growing darkness, but on their faces the dull autumn twilight lingered, blotting out all traces of the passage of time.

He came a little nearer to her.

"I wonder why we quarrelled?" he said argumentatively. "I don't mean what we quarrelled about. That was never very difficult to find, was it? But why did we quarrel finally that last time? I don't recollect that you were more wilful than usual."

"No doubt you were more aggravating," she retorted quickly. "Do you wish to begin it all over again? I will if you've a mind to."

"Begin what?"

"The quarrel, of course."

"No, thank you. There's the professor hauling down his flag; he has seen Rick, and acknowledged his defeat. Good man! Don't you think, Miss Macdonald, that it would be more comfortable by the fire than here at the window?"

"More comfortable than the professor is, poor man. That is what you mean. How selfish all you men are, and then you expect me not to see through you!"

"I don't think I ever was quite so *exigeant* as that, was I? And, do you know, I rather wish you would just cast your eye over my innermost thoughts at the present moment. It would save me beating about the bush."

Perhaps, despite her outward calm, she was a little excited; for she had taken up her knitting, half mechanically, and now the needles clashed fast and furious. He was leaning towards her, his elbows on his knees, his hands loosely clasped together, and something of his youth, not so much in its romance as in its imperious desire to know and understand, was in his face.

"Miss Macdonald, I've no right to ask, but are you going to marry--that man on the other side?"

She gave a little conscious laugh, half-nervous, half-gratified. "That is what you call beating about the bush, I suppose? Why--why should I marry anybody?"

For the life of him he could not tell, save that in a vague way that dead past seemed so pitiful: because it was dead and past. "Why did we quarrel?" he repeated. "If the *Clansman* hadn't come in unexpectedly that evening after her time, and so given me an opportunity of going off in the sulks, we should have made it up as usual. It seems such a little thing to come between us."

She laid down her knitting and looked at him thoughtfully. A woman less truthful than Miss Willina might have

allowed the inevitable satisfaction of being remembered to give an extra tinge of regret and romance to that past, which in sober fact had had little of either; but Miss Willina's sense of humour was of the rare kind which is not blunted by egotism.

"Ridiculously little. In the novels--I read dozens of them in the winter--it is always something pathetic. A letter left in a blotting book, or a wrong initial on the envelope, or a false announcement of marriage. Something not to be foreseen or helped. Or if it isn't the fault of fate, they get brain fever and forget their own names. But we! We just quarrelled, and didn't care to make it up. It isn't in the least romantic, I'm afraid."

"But we didn't forget," he said in the same argumentative tone. "At least I didn't."

"Of course not. Does any one ever forget,--absolutely?" Her voice trembled slightly. The pathos of memory was not to be ignored entirely.

"It seems such a pity--you and I leading such lonely lives."

"Lonely? You should see my Noah's Ark."

"Well! Don't scoff at me. I suppose it is absurd, but to-night somehow--"

She interrupted him with a soft hand laid on his. "Don't, please don't. It is like children trying to pretend that their shadows on the wall are alive. But they are shadows; nothing but shadows, and the light which throws them--" she pointed to the window with a laugh that was half a sob. "Poor man! he ought to be extinguished by this time."

"Perhaps you are right," he replied sadly, still holding her hand; "but it seems hard--the shadows were so pretty."

"Not so pretty as the reality."

"What is that?"

"That we have met and forgiven each other--without payment."

"Aunt Will," shouted Rick, bursting into the room, "there's the professor in the front hall dripping like a drowned rat. I got the men and ferried him over on the first chance; now they are waiting for Mr. Lockhart."

Miss Willina was on her feet in a moment. "Take him upstairs, Rick, and put him to bed--between the blankets. I'll come directly with gruel and mustard. And, Rick! give him a good scrub--all over--with the roughest--bath towel--you can find."

The last directions were called up the stairs as she went into the hall to see Will Lockhart put on his mackintosh properly.

"Good-bye, Miss Macdonald. I'm not in the least envious of the professor's immediate future," he said with smiling eyes, but with vague regrets still at his heart. "I'm glad, though, he was at the other side of the stream to-night. I liked the shadows."

"And the reality?" she asked quickly.

He stooped and kissed the pretty little hand browned by sun and wind. "It is like the breath of your sea. The memory of it will help to blow away the cobwebs until I come back--in the summer."

"The summer is over."

"Not St. Martin's, and one often has a spell of fine weather late in the year when the earlier portions have been stormy."

She shook her head.

V

"Well, Hooper, what is it?"

Lady Maud stood at bay once more, with that diffident-looking man at the door. Three weeks had passed since his first interview; only three weeks, and it seemed to her an eternity of fear and anxiety. But now the letters written in reply to hers had come from the American doctor, and she knew the worst. Mr. Wilson's case had at once been easy and difficult. Easy because of his singular lack of will power; difficult for the same reason, joined to a very bad ancestral record. So bad that his maternal uncle, from whom he had inherited his large fortune, being deeply resentful of the treatment his sister had endured from her drunken husband, had burdened his legacy with certain unusual conditions as to sobriety and control. Consequently, when, shortly after his release from the restraints of minority, the inherited tendency had shown itself in Mr. Wilson, he had voluntarily placed himself in Dr. Haddon's charge, urged to the step by his fear of pecuniary loss. That was, briefly, the whole story, save that he, Dr. Haddon, continued to have charge of the case and would be obliged if Lady Maud would co-operate with him in continuing a system which had hitherto been so successful, and which, he did not scruple to add, was Mr. Wilson's only chance of fulfilling the conditions under which he held his fortune. For himself, he believed there was no danger of a relapse; it might even be possible after some years to relax the supervision, and in any case he begged her to remember that the hereditary tendency must needs be weakened by a generation even of enforced sobriety. He had hoped that there might be no necessity for her to be made acquainted with these circumstances, as the whole affair had been dealt with in the strictest confidence, and the essence of his treatment lay in ignoring the difficulty; but now that the untoward event reported by Hooper had occurred, it was better she should clearly understand the position of affairs. Briefly, he was paid for keeping Mr. Wilson from losing a very large portion of his wealth. Apart from that, it was an interesting case. In regard to Hooper, he was thoroughly trustworthy and conscientious,—a most necessary thing when influence was easy to attain. At the same time, if Hooper failed to commend himself to Lady Maud, he could be replaced. In view of the heavy stake at issue, however, he would recommend extreme caution in making any change. As for his reasons for allowing Mr. Wilson to marry under the circumstances, they were manifold; and his belief in the system was so great that he felt confident Lady Maud would never find cause for blame in her husband's conduct. The letter, in its bald statement of fact, its assumption of a perfectly satisfactory state of affairs, carried with it a sort of cold comfort. And yet Lady Maud felt a wild revolt against it such as no verdict of disease or death would have aroused.

Like most women who marry men to whom they are indifferent, she had looked forward, odd as it may seem, to having children who would give a zest to an otherwise insipid life. And now the mere possibility was a terror: not in pity for those who might come handicapped into the race, but from sheer physical horror that they should be his and hers. And this terror came uppermost in the first few minutes of shock.

"I have heard from Dr. Haddon this morning, my lady. In future I am to take my orders from you; so I have come to ask for them."

The disapproval in his tone was audible. She felt a rash, resentful desire to bid him go and leave her free, but the doctor's warning checked the words. What if she should have burdened her life for nothing,—she who had refused money again and again because it seemed vulgar to her fastidiousness? She might appeal to her husband as a man, chance her influence against the Hooper-Haddon system; but what if she failed? During those last three weeks she had silenced the heart which, despite all her efforts, would have its way, by protestations that she was only awaiting the doctor's reply, that by and by she would no longer consent to be this man's wife on these terms. To live on as if she knew nothing; to give neither help nor condemnation; to acquiesce without a word in a future which filled her with shame and horror.

When she knew the facts, she would decide, and now she knew too much.

"I have no orders," she said in a low voice; "no new ones; you can go." Then suddenly a thought flashed through her and she arrested him with a gesture.

"Yes, my lady?"

Still she was silent, one hand gripping the edge of the table, her breath coming fast. "I do not think—this place—is good for Mr. Wilson."

"Indeed, your ladyship," broke in Hooper, relieved, "I have thought so myself,—the—the irregular habits in regard to spirits are trying."

"I think he would be better away."

"Exactly so, my lady; only I did not like--all the arrangements being, as it were, settled."

Her voice had gained in steadiness by this time. "There need be no alteration. I should remain here, of course." She paused, and Hooper shifted uneasily. "Mr. Wilson had an invitation to Perthshire yesterday. I should *like* him to accept it. Do you understand?"

"But indeed, my lady, I cannot. To begin with, I am not allowed by Dr. Haddon--"

She stopped him angrily. "If you cannot obey me, there are others--so Dr. Haddon says. I consider this place is bad for Mr. Wilson, and it is my wish he should leave it. Do you hear?"

For the life of her, try after calmness as she would, entreaty and despair made her command falter. He must go--if only to give her time to think; time to settle what course she would choose.

"If your ladyship takes the responsibility--in regard to Dr. Haddon, I mean."

"I take it all--the responsibility for everything."

"Then I will suggest it. I may not succeed; but I will do my best, and if I fail, your ladyship must remember that I was not engaged for such work."

The grotesqueness of it all struck her sense of humour despite the turmoil of emotion in which she found herself.

"Yes, yes!" she said impatiently; "I will remember it was not your place!"

When he had gone, she stood for some time without moving, her hand still grasping the table, body and mind alike in a state of tension. Then her nerves seemed to slacken, the spirit to leave her. She walked listlessly towards the fire, and, leaning her arms on the mantelpiece, rested her head upon them. So standing, the little curls about her temples outlined themselves against the ugliness of Rick Halmar's devil.

"It is not all my fault," she muttered with a sort of sob; "not all my fault, surely. I must have time. I must have time."

The rest of the day was torture to her. She did not regret the sudden impulse which had decreed her husband's exile, if it could be managed, yet she dreaded to have him say the words which would proclaim the success of her treachery against him. He came over once to where she sate in the twilight pretending to read, and laid his hand affectionately on her shoulder. It was only some trivial remark he had to make, but she started so visibly that Eustace, watching her, as he had watched her every mood during those weeks, came to her afterwards with a frown.

"What is the matter, Maud? Why should you keep me at arm's length? Surely I know too much for that already."

"What do you know?" she asked with the recklessness which of late had crept into her manner.

"I know you are unhappy. Do you remember what I told you that night? You shall not suffer."

Her lips trembled, and she turned from him hastily to join a group gathered round the professor. He had come back from Eval House greatly depressed in spirits, and with a running cold in his head, which Cynthia Strong was treating with pulsatilla, as yet rather unsuccessfully; but it required time, she explained, when the first stages had been badly managed on the old methods. The group was engaged in examining the famous Rhine ring, with which gift, apparently, Miss Willina had tried to content the learned man; but even its possession failed to comfort him.

"I have deciphered the inscription," he said gloomily. "It is, briefly, 'Order, Truth, Honesty.' The last word bears many side meanings, and perhaps Purity would be a better translation. All the terminations being feminine, it may be inferred that the ring was worn by a woman; possibly one of unusual worth. It may even have been a badge of virtue; a tribute paid by the community to merit, or by the lover to his beloved."

If he had said a funeral memento to the dead, his voice could not have been more lugubrious.

"How interesting!" murmured Cynthia Strong. "Even in those days the mental qualities were deemed superior to mere physical attractions."

"I beg your pardon," retorted the professor quite tartly. "Order, as used here, means complete, perfect; according

to our modern speech, beautiful. Truth has also a secondary meaning. A free, but at the same time accurate, translation would be 'Beautiful, constant, chaste.'

Rick Halmar was twisting the ring about in his strong deft hands. "I expect some beggar gave it to his wife," he said cheerfully. "It must have been just as jolly then as now to have somebody to stick by you through thick and thin. To have the dinner ready, and not swear if you hadn't done what you ought to have done. Not brought in enough fish for the kids, for instance; though how they ever caught any with those bone hooks, I can't think. I couldn't."

"You must remember the great incentive of hunger," remarked the professor in the same tone. "Besides, in those days dexterity in the chase was the master key to a woman's affections."

"I say, Weeks, old man! why weren't you born then?" cried Rick, happily unconscious of all complications.

"Never had any luck," muttered the other, "except with the birds."

"Luck! I like that! You call it luck when you never miss; I assure you, Miss Strong," he continued, going up to where the despondent captain was standing, and addressing the nearest lady, "I was out with him yesterday, and he made me feel such a duffer. The prettiest shooting, and then he calls it luck!"

Cynthia Strong looked from one to the other of those two vigorous young faces before her, and then at the professor's pale one. A cold in the head is not becoming, and she sighed.

Rick, with the ring still in his possession, returned to Lady Maud.

"Isn't it quaint?" he said. "Don't you wish I could find another?"

"Why?"

"Because it would be yours, of course. How small it looks! I wonder if it would fit you."

"Miss Macdonald found it too large for her," remarked the professor, still more gloomily; "but it would be interesting, Lady Maud, to try whether it points to any improvement or deterioration--physical, of course--in the race."

"Perhaps you ladies would not mind experimenting 'Cinderella and the little glass slipper,'" laughed Eustace Gordon. "What is to be the prize, Endorwick--the ring?"

"My dear sir," gasped the professor, horrified for once out of his gallantry, "it's unique--positively unique."

"I'll tell you what," put in Rick eagerly, "if the professor will lend it to me for a couple of days, I'll copy it in silver. A florin would make it, and the inscriptions only scratched on. So now, then, ladies, if you please. Weeks, you do herald. Lady Maud, may we use the banner screen as a tabard?"

"What a boy that is!" said fat Lady Liddell to her next-door neighbour. "I've been here a fortnight, and never saw him out of temper or out of spirits. So different from most young people nowadays, who won't take the trouble to enjoy themselves."

"I knew it wouldn't go on anybody's finger but yours," said Rick with joyous confidence to his goddess when the competition was over. "Perhaps it wasn't quite fair, because I'd seen Aunt Will try it on so often, and her hands are tiny."

Lady Maud shook her head gravely. "I'm afraid it wasn't quite fair; but you must make me the ring, for all that."

"Of course I'll make it!"

She put her hand on his suddenly. "Don't, Rick! don't! I mean"--she paused, looking at him curiously--"you may make it if you like, Rick; but I won't promise to wear it--always."

VI

"We ought to have gone over to-day," said Eustace Gordon, looking out to where the low sandy line of Eilean-a-fa-ash lay like a golden clasp between the two headlands. The northern one bold, rocky, heathery; the southern, a mere spit of bent-covered shingle, curving hornlike from the great sweep of the Grada Sands beyond. It was sunset,--a cloudless sunset. Sky, and sea, and sand, bathed in a golden flood of light; only the shallow stretches of water left behind by the retreating tide glowing iridescent here and there like jewels. Far away, almost beyond sight, an edge of foam keeping time to a whispering cadence told where the Atlantic was hushing the shore to sleep.

"Yes!" he went on lazily. "We ought, but we didn't. That fellow Weeks is always on the slay."

They were seated, a party of five,--for the professor still lingered in the grip of cold,--on the base of the northern headland. There, amongst the rocks and heather, Lady Maud and Cynthia Strong had been making tea for the shooters. A brace of setters lay panting beside the game-bags; a faint whiff of smoke from behind a boulder told that the ghillies were enjoying themselves on their master's tobacco--sure sign of a good day's sport.

"Gorgeous weather," continued the same contented voice, "a whole week of it; simply idyllic."

"Ever since Mr. Wilson and the others left," assented Rick Halmar. "Pity they went, isn't it?"

"Mr. Wilson had to go," put in Lady Maud. "The telegram from the works was urgent, and then the Collinghams' yacht happening to come in the same day made it so convenient. Quite a coincidence; one of those things no one could have foreseen." She spoke impatiently, almost in an aggrieved tone; and Eustace, as he lay on his back staring up into the sky, smiled to himself.

"It is very curious how such things happen," remarked Cynthia Strong; "but that they are comparatively common is indubitable. The very proverbs in our language prove it." In the professor's absence she was apt to assume the mantle of his manner in order to annihilate poor Captain Weeks, in which object she generally succeeded. On this occasion, however, emboldened by a recent reception of some golden plovers' wings, for which her new tweed hat had been waiting, he ventured to put in his oar. "The wish is father to the thought, for instance."

"Nothing of the kind--" began Miss Strong scornfully; but Lady Maud rose hastily and, standing a little apart, looked at Eilean-a-fa-ash, her hand shading her eyes.

"Let us settle to go there to-morrow without fail," she said as if to change the subject.

"Not to-morrow, please," broke in Rick eagerly. "To-morrow is Fast Day, and none of the ghillies will do a hand's turn. Besides, I have to drive Aunt Will to the preaching, as uncle won't. Put it off till the next day, Lady Maud. To begin with, it's my birthday, and then the tides are full spring. So we could come back by the sea ford. It is worth doing; nearly two miles with quicksands on either side, especially to the south."

"Very well, the day after to-morrow; that is, Friday certain; or some other coincidence will be carrying off the rest of my party." Still with her hand shading her eyes, she remained looking seawards, much in the same attitude as she had stood at the window a month before. This time her slight figure showed against the gold of sea and sky.

"What is that," she asked, "like a mast--yonder and from the headland?"

Rick, busy as usual with his knife, did not pause to look. "It is a mast, Lady Maud. There is a wreck just to the south. Went ashore ever so long ago, but it is useful still as a sign-post. Up to that spar the sand is pretty safe--most times. Beyond that--by George! you should see it when the tide is coming in."

"Oh! I don't mean the spar close in--yonder, far away."

He came and stood by her. "A yacht, I think, making, I should say, for Carbost. Come to carry some of us away, maybe."

"If it's for me," remarked Eustace, joining them, "I don't intend to go. This is too good a time to be cut short. I haven't had such a good one since those old days at Lynmouth, Maud! And you too! Why, you are looking twice as well as you did--a week ago." There was meaning in his words; more in his eyes.

"Fine weather always agrees with me," she replied hastily. "Come, Rick, let us pick up the tea things and start home."

Yet in her heart of hearts she knew that Eustace was right. That past week had been a paradise of relief, and now it came perilously near to the time when the problem of her life must be faced. She had driven round it so far, had turned back deliberately when she found it barring the road, had claimed time to understand the position. What had she done towards a decision? Nothing! Nothing save bask in the immediate freedom; rejoice like any child in the fine weather, in Rick's open adoration, in her cousin's constant companionship.

As she and the boy walked homewards together, these thoughts came again and again, whilst her nervous fingers busied themselves mechanically with the silver ring which he had made for her; a growing habit of which she was not aware.

"Does it hurt you?" he asked tenderly. "I can easily alter it, if it does."

She shook her head with a faint smile.

"But I have seen you do that so often lately," he persisted; "perhaps the inside is not quite smooth. Give it me, please, and I will set it right by Friday."

"Don't trouble. If it hurts, I can always take it off; can't I, dear?" There was a sudden passion in her tone, a kind of pitiful reproach in her eyes. Rick looked at her, perturbed.

"But if it hurts--" he began.

She put out her pretty hand and laid it on his, almost with a protecting gesture. "Nothing you could do would hurt me, Rick. You said so the first time we met, and it is true. If it hurts, it is my own fault."

"That doesn't make any difference," he replied stoutly. "Let me have it, please."

"Not to-day--on Friday, perhaps; *if it hurts*."

They were standing where the cross-path branched to Eval, waiting for the others to come up; for Rick's way lay across the moor and she would be left alone.

"I believe it does hurt now," he said, still dissatisfied, "and I know I could set it right. Do let me try."

"How serious you are!" she cried with a sudden change of mood. "See! I promise to give it back on Friday if it hurts. It shall be my birthday present. There!"

"All right. I'll keep it for yours; then we shall be quits," he said, laughing.

When he had left them, Eustace took his place, and Cynthia Strong and Captain Weeks were certainly the happier for the change. Lady Maud, likewise, to judge by her light laughter.

Fast Day rose brilliantly. The clear, crisp sunshine poured in through the dining-room windows, when, coming down to breakfast, she found her cousin there, alone.

"Another lovely day," she said gaily.

"The last for me," he replied. "That was the yacht yesterday. It has anchored below the sands, and the captain has strict orders from Louisa to bring me off dead or alive to-night." He laughed, but there was a bitter look on his face as he tossed a crumpled letter towards her. "Catch! that's my warrant of execution."

Not a very nice letter, but a reasonable one in its way. The weather was to blame, of course; still, she had asked him to join her many times and he had not joined her. He had been a month and more at Roederay and now the equinoctial gales were over, she meant to be off southwards. If he could not make use of the yacht, he must send it round to Cowes and make his own arrangements. For her part, she intended to start for the Mediterranean in ten days. Not the sort of letter to be disregarded by a husband dependent on the writer for all save a very moderate settlement.

"I've told them to have the boat ready at the Grada point at five this afternoon to take me on board. Perhaps it is better so. This sort of thing couldn't have gone on much longer."

She was silent, and the professor, bursting in, ended the tete-a-tete.

"What a land, or perhaps I should say sea, of surprises this is, to be sure!" he exclaimed. "The *Clansman*, I am informed by the factor, whom I met on his way to preaching, will anticipate her time by three whole days, owing to this Fast and some local market. She takes Carbost on the out instead of the in trip, and is due to-night, some time between seven and two in the morning. So I am afraid, my dear lady, that my delightful visit must come to a somewhat abrupt conclusion. I propose, therefore, going over--"

"To Eval House," suggested Eustace.

"No-o. To the hotel at dusk, so as to be on the spot."

Lady Maud paled visibly. "And Cynthia! of course she and Captain Weeks will go too. Ah! what a sudden breakup of our pleasant party!"

"You had better come with us, dear lady, and so reduce our regrets to a minimum," cried the professor gallantly.

But the compliment fell flat. That was the fate of most remarks during breakfast, so that conversation dwindled to excerpts from Bradshaw's guide. Captain Weeks, who was generally a stand-by of placid good nature, was peculiarly low. He had made up his mind, come what might, to try his fate with Cynthia Strong before leaving, and now, though still determined, he felt hustled. She, in her turn, knew she had shilly-shallied in a way unworthy of a Girton girl until her opportunities of bringing the professor to book had dwindled to three days; two of them to be spent at sea, where she could not be sure of herself or him. As for Eustace and Maud, their role in the comedy of Life had been touched with tragedy for some time past. They felt dimly that the crisis had come.

"We have never been to Eilean-a-fa-ash, after all," said Cynthia, pausing at the window on her way to pack, and looking regretfully to where the island lay out in the blue sea.

"I thought we shouldn't," murmured Lady Maud in a low voice; "the Island of Rest is not for us."

"It has been within reach all the time. It is so still," replied Eustace in the same tone.

"We might have gone this morning if it hadn't been Fast Day," continued Cynthia, aggrieved. "Couldn't we bribe somebody? I want to go awfully, and so does the professor."

"My failure to do so will be the only regret which can possibly mingle with my memories of Roederay."

"Can't think why you all want to see it," remarked the captain, frowning at the professor's complimentary bows. "I went over one day--yes, I did, Miss Strong--to shoot seals. Didn't get any--worse luck! But it wasn't a bit pretty. Sand and bones and a stone coffin or two. The ghillie told me, too, that sometimes, after a north wind, it was awfully grim. The sand blows off, don't you know, and leaves skeletons and things. Not at all the place for ladies, don't you know."

"I'm sorry to be obliged to differ," retorted Cynthia sharply. "In my opinion, there are no places where a woman should not be."

"Nihil continget quod non ornavit," paraphrased the professor.

The captain's head held itself very high. "Perhaps I am wrong, but I don't think so. However, as you wish to see it, Miss Strong, I shall be delighted to row you over in the small boat. Only we must start at slack tide; that is, about three in the afternoon."

"Too late, I'm afraid," replied the young lady disconsolately. "We ought to be starting for the hotel before six; oughtn't we, Maud?"

"Oh, we could manage it," he went on, seeing in this plan the chance of the tete-a-tete on which his mind was set. "If the wagonette were to pick us up at the cross-roads, we should have heaps of time. It would only be starting two hours earlier--before the others, I mean."

"What do you say, professor?" asked Cynthia sweetly.

Arthur Weeks ground his teeth, and turned away with a murmur about the boat being heavy.

"But the professor will row, of course. Every one rows at Oxford. Indeed, I, for one, think the Oxford style is the

best in the world."

"Then perhaps you will not require my aid. I only learnt off the coast of Cornwall."

Cynthia looked at her usually docile adorer in amaze; she did not understand that the big man had for once thought it worth while to make up his mind. "But we couldn't go without you," she pleaded quite meekly. "You see, you have been there before. Ah, no! we couldn't go without you."

"If I can be of any use--" said the captain magnificently, and the sight of his aggrieved but courteous dignity gave Cynthia quite a pang.

So it was arranged that, about slack tide, he and the professor should row to Eilean-a-fa-ash from the boat-house on the north headland, and afterwards, taking advantage of the full tide and southerly current, slip down the coast across the sands to meet the wagonette. Eustace and Maud proposed to start about the same time for Eval House, so that he might say good-bye to Miss Willina before joining the yacht's boat at Grada point, whence the carriage, on its return journey, would take Lady Maud back to Roederay.

A sombre silence had lain between these two all day, and even when they were left alone on the terrace watching the others disappear shorewards, they said nothing for a time. A great stillness seemed to be in the very air. Not a breath on the water, not a sound on the moor, not a cloud on the sky. The very house seemed asleep; most of the servants away for edification or amusement at the preaching, miles to the south, amongst the peat bogs and heather, singing psalms and eating peppermint drops, praising the Creator and flirting with the creature.

The silence must have reminded Eustace of this fact, for at last he turned to his companion hastily. "They won't be at Eval, so there is no use going. Come, Maud! It is the last time we shall be together, I suppose. Come."

It was not much to grant, she thought, when she might never see him again. So they went out together over the moors, down by the little pools where the water showed their shadows, blended one into the other, upon the cairns where they sate together, looking out over the sea. Together, always together, Eustace and she, as it had been at the beginning. And this was the end, the very end.

Meanwhile the trio in the boat set forth gaily; the professor very straight in the back, and with no little style giving the stroke, whilst Arthur Weeks, gloomily polite, paddled in the bows, debarred from even a fair sight of his beloved. The full flood-tide lapped at the furthestmost scallop of seaweed on the shingly shore, and touched the sea-pinks cresting the rocks.

"Couldn't you pull a leetle harder?" suggested the captain drily, when the professor paused in a long sentence to take breath. "I don't want to hustle anybody, but we have only just got time to manage it. We are making a good deal of leeway, and the channel north is a bit dangerous."

Cynthia glanced nervously towards the Pole. "Oh, yes! please, Mr. Endorwick, pull harder. We can talk when we get to the island."

Easier said than done. The perspiration poured down the professor's face, and bow kept her head straight as a die; yet still the boat failed to respond.

As they crept along slowly, the channel between the headlands and the island began to open up, showing the still, oily water which tells of swift current.

"We are too far north," said the captain, resting on his oar a moment. "The tide can't have been quite slack when we started. However, it doesn't matter; for the current here will take us south in no time."

The professor pausing too, they drifted idly.

"That's the landing-place, Miss Strong," went on the speaker. "Yonder, where the bents almost touch the water, and that square thing behind is a stone cof--" he paused abruptly. "Why, what the devil! we're drifting north--due north. By George, we are, though."

In good sooth they were--drifting north like a feather.

"North! impossible--the current runs south at flood. Stay--by Heaven, I remember--Ronald said something about a change at the equinox. Quick, man alive. Pull, pull hard! Once she gets beyond those rocks, we will have the dickens

and all to keep her out of the eddy. It runs like a race--higher up--amongst sunken--rocks."

The last words came in jerks as he set all his strength to the oar. The boat spun round with the point of the professor's oar as axis; spun round, drifting as it span.

"Damn it all!" shouted the man of war busy on the rowlocks. "I beg your pardon, Miss Strong. Here, man, quick, give me the oar--go forward--lie down in the bows and keep her keel stiff. Now then, Cynthia, don't scream, there's a good girl--there's no danger as yet. Lie down too--then you won't see anything."

She did lie down ignominiously. Right down at his feet, feeling that she would be content to enter Paradise clinging to this man's coat-tails if only that entry was not premature. The whole world, to her, lay in the strength of those arms, and when, meeting her piteous eyes, his face relaxed to something like a smile, and he gasped, "All right--getting along--nicely," she felt once, and for all, that she loved his little finger better than the whole of that abject figure in the bows.

So she crouched, lost in a sort of terrified reliance on him, till with a queer little sound, half sob, half laugh, he slackened, and without a pause proceeded to retransfer a pair of rowlocks to the bows.

"Now then--professor--if you please--sorry to have--been so abrupt--but--one manages better sculling--when there's no rudder." The breaks were caused by his being out of breath. Otherwise he was full of dignity, and Cynthia Strong broke down suddenly into subdued tears.

"You had better lie still," he said. "See--here's my coat." He fumbled it into a pillow with his left hand, as he went on rowing with his right. "Raise your head, please, so;" and, as he bent over her, he whispered, "Don't cry, dear, it's all over now."

What Cynthia Strong did to the hand so near her lips is a dead secret between those two. The captain's fine flush was doubtless due to his previous exertions, but why a pillow should have caused a rush of blood to Cynthia's terror-blanced face, remains a mystery.

"Don't work so hard, professor!" cried the former gaily. "You are pulling me round, and we have to get our head towards home. Eilean-a-fa-ash is out of the question; besides, Miss Strong will be all the better for a cup of tea. This sort of thing isn't fit for women."

And nobody denied it.

VII

A man and a woman looking seawards from Grada point. To the north, the long curve of sands hidden by the flood-tide. A curve ending in the low line of Eilean-a-fa-ash, which, viewed from here, seemed as if it were joined to the mainland. Beyond, the northern headland, whence Roederay Lodge stood out against the sky. To the south, a coast broken into little points and bays, with the slender masts of a yacht standing above a near promontory.

To the west, a spit of rocks running out into the Atlantic, which once more lay like a golden garment stretching far as the eye could reach on either hand. At their feet, a little boat swaying gently against a bare ledge of rock; for the tide was at the full.

"Do come," said the man; "you haven't really seen the yacht, and we can't possibly miss the returning wagonette. I'll send a man to watch, if you like; then there can be no mistake."

He did not look at her, but his voice was instinct with passionate entreaty.

"But the men may not be here till late." Lady Maud did not look at him either, yet the same repressed emotion rang in her tone.

"I can row you. We have only to paddle round those rocks, and the current will take us right on to the yacht."

"But the men?"

"Lazy beggars! let them swim. Besides, they should have been here long ago; it is past five."

"Half-past. They have been here and put the stores in the boat."

"It is we who are late."

He moved a step closer, impatiently. "What have the men to do with it, Maud? Don't--don't be childish! What are you afraid of--not of me, surely?"

There was a pause.

"I am afraid of nothing," she said lightly. "Come, it will be pleasant out on that sunny sea at any rate."

He steadied the boat for her, and she stepped in.

"Where to?" he asked, half in jest, when a stroke or two had taken them from the shadow of the rock into the glitter of the sinking sun, where they lay bathed in light, the water dripping from the lifted oars like drops of molten gold. "Why shouldn't we leave everything behind and set sail for nowhere--anywhere?"

With his arms resting on the oars, he leant forwards, fixing his dark eyes on her face. They were full of pity and a great tenderness.

"You look so nice there, Maud. Take off your hat, dear, and let the sun shine on your hair as it used to do when you were a girl. If I had my will, Maud, you should always be in the sunlight; you know that, don't you?"

The oars fell into the water softly as he rowed on, whilst she sate silent, trailing one hand in the water and watching the great big medusae come pulsating past.

"How pleasant it must be to drift--like that!" she said half to herself, and once again the drip, drip, drip, of those golden tears filled the silence as the boat swayed idly on the breathing of the sea.

"Why shouldn't we drift? There is plenty of time, and God knows ties enough, as a rule. Grapnels fore and aft and a mud bank under all to stick upon."

"Don't talk of that now, Eustace," she broke in hurriedly. "Let us forget it for this last half hour. Isn't it enough to be here--together?"

"Enough for now--" he replied unsteadily; "but for afterwards?"

"There may be no afterwards."

He shook his head. "A man never thinks of that. He can't live on moonshine; or sunshine either. He wants something real; and so do you. Maud! what will you do when you go back to him?"

She put out her hand in entreaty with a little cry. "Oh, Eustace! can you not let me be happy for one short half hour?"

"Happy, when we are going to part? Happy, when I know what your future will be? when I know it will be torture to you? Why did you send him away if it was not because the strain was too great for you to bear?"

"I--I did not send him away," she faltered.

"Pshaw! Hooper told me about it--the fool was afraid. Then the wire came, of course, and there was no need for the other. But you meant it, Maud. Ah, my darling! don't think I am blaming you--Blame! How could I blame you save for too much patience?"

"Maud, let us cut the knot! We have made a mistake, both of us; for you are miserable, and I--I will not bear it. Come--the yacht is there. Let us go into the sunshine. Come, my darling--see how fate points the way. We are drifting, drifting--a little more and the current will take us. Why should you go back to the empty house? the empty life? Maud!"

Maud!"

What does a man say to a woman when he has forgotten everything in the world save his mad desire to keep her for his own? All that could be said, in all its tenderness, its passion, and its selfishness, was hers as the boat drifted and drifted.

"I am cold!" she said suddenly, giving a little shudder, yet drawing closer to him. "We shall be too late."

"Too late to return," he answered joyously. "Oh, Maud, trust me this once--See, the yacht is close." He turned and gave a quick exclamation of surprise. Where were they? Not, as he expected, within a stone's throw of the coast, drifting surely southwards. Here was nothing save sea, and rising slowly from it on all sides a thin mist, golden in the sunlight through which, in the far distance, a shadow or two loomed faint, unrecognized.

Above them the sky, clear as ever; below them the sea, bright, pellucid; but between them a gathering curtain which even as he looked faded from gold to white, from white to grey, as the unseen sun sank beneath the unseen horizon.

"It is a sea-haugh," he said lightly; "the wind must have changed to the north, and the cold condenses the vapour. I have seen them often after hot weather. But it is all right. We must be close to the yacht, for we were well in the current when I stopped rowing; and it runs inshore due south. If I whistle, they must hear and answer."

But none came, and the sound seemed to return resonant from the mist, showing that it had not travelled far. So, whistling, shouting, and rowing, they spent some time in vain, till fear began to invade her courage. What if they had drifted past? What if they were drifting out to sea, further and further from safety? He tried to scoff at her alarm, though his own anxiety grew fast as the mist settled thicker and thicker till he could not see a yard beyond the bows. Suddenly, with a grating shock, the boat stopped abruptly, almost throwing them into each other's arms. His heart seemed to stop also, as he remembered having heard of sunken rocks in mid channel.

"We are aground--stay still, I will see."

He stepped cautiously over the side, one foot into six inches of water and a shelving bottom, the other into three. Then on to firm dry warm sand. His laugh of relief was genuine.

"The adventure is over, Maud. Come! let me help you out. This must be the mainland; but where, I can't say."

A difficult question, indeed, to decide with that grey mist curtain closing in and shutting out all, save a patch or two of bent at their feet.

"Stay here a bit," he continued, "and I will explore. Take the whistle. I won't go beyond its reach or be away long; the road must be close by."

It was not, however, and he returned after a time with a clouded face. "I don't understand it. The sea seems to surround us except in one direction, and that is all sand and bent. I don't remember any such point below Grada."

"Perhaps we are above it," suggested his companion.

"Quite impossible. The current runs south; a sort of back eddy from the big stream. That is what brings all the drift to Grada Sands. The question, however, is what we are to do. Take to the boat again and punt along the shore till we find a landmark, I should say. Best not to desert our ships."

But this again brought a disappointment, and half an hour's rowing, punting, and towing resulted in nothing. By this time it was almost dark, the mist gathered denser than ever, and with the approach of night the north wind rose steadily.

"The sooner we settle ourselves the better, if we have to camp out, and it looks like it," said he at last. "Still, if we light a fire, some one may see it. Anyhow, there are stores and a sail in the boat, so we shall manage. Cheer up, Maud; imagine we are children again. How often haven't we pretended to be cast away on a desert island together, and how happy we were!"

True enough; yet as she helped him to gather driftwood for the fire, her thoughts were on the difference between those days and these. And there was more to them in this mischance than there would have been to others. What had she meant to do when she stepped into the boat? She could not tell; only this she knew, that fate seemed to have

decided for her. If the fire brought some one--well and good. If not, why then Eustace and she had gone adrift. That question was settled forever.

She sate feeding the fire, whilst he foraged for eatables in the boat, and each stick seemed to her another doubt dispelled. How they flamed and crackled and sparkled, as driftwood does out of sheer joy in burning. Yet no one came--no one.

Later on, with the tenderness which was a fierce delight to her, he found her what shelter he could on that bare waste of bent and shingle; though it was only a nook, backed on the windy side by a rough slab of rock half embedded in the sand. Still it was dry and warm, and with the boat's sail wrapped round her, and her feet towards a freshly built fire, she could lean back comfortably and defy some of the growing cold and rising wind. She sate watching him silently as he sate by the fire, turning every now and again to assure himself of her comfort or tuck the sail, loosened by the wind, round her more closely.

Suddenly, during one of these ministrations, her eye caught the sparkle of dewdrops on his coat, and she stretched out her delicate hand to touch his sleeve. It was quite wet.

"There is plenty of room for you here, Eustace," she said quietly, "and the sail will cover us if we sit close together. I--I must not begin by being selfish." Then her calm gave way. "Oh, Eustace! Eustace! we must love each other very dearly or I shall die of shame."

Something in the almost despairing surrender to fate roused the best part in his nature. He drew her head on to his shoulder and kissed her gently.

"Good-night, dear. Go to sleep if you can. I'll watch the fire."

She gave a little shivering sob and clung to him. All was settled now; she had taken her life into her own hands; the struggle was over, and he was a haven of rest--a haven of rest. Her thoughts went no further than that, for she was utterly wearied out; but as he sate beside her, his mind went far afield into the afterwards which he had claimed as his right; and more than once as she stirred in the uneasy sleep into which she had fallen, he bent over her again and kissed her. She was his; the past was at an end; scruples must come later if they came at all. He had foreseen this ending from the beginning; perhaps he had tried to escape from it; perhaps he had not. This much was certain,--the stars had fought for him, and she was his. The wind swept steadily round them, but, safe sheltered as she was, he feared no harm, and when the dawn came their troubles would all be over--forever.

So sheltering her, as morning approached he, too, fell into a doze, and the fire, deprived of fuel, sank by degrees to a heap of smouldering ashes. Then the chill which comes before the day sought them out even in each other's arms, and brought to both a vague, surprised consciousness of their surroundings. Where were they? What had happened? With eyes still full of sleep and dreams, she saw the grey mist hanging round them--the ashes of the fire which had burnt so bravely last night. Last night! Great God, how came she there?

"Eustace!" she cried, starting up wildly, one hand finding aid from the slab of rock behind her. Her pretty hair was damp with dew, her face flushed where it had rested on his shoulder.

For answer he caught her to him and covered her face with passionate kisses. He, too, was fresh from sleep and dreams,--dreams of the hereafter. And now the day had come, and yonder, where the mist showed lightest, the sun was rising.

"Oh, no! no!" she panted, struggling to escape.

"Maud!"--his tone was full of surprised reproach as he fell back a step,--"what is it? What have I done?"

"What have *I* done?" she echoed swiftly. "I can't remember! Oh, God! what's that?" Her voice rose to a shriek; she clung to him convulsively with one hand while her eyes fixed themselves on the stone slab which had sheltered her--and him.

The north wind had done work during the night, and the embedded slab was clear now; more than clear. It formed part of a stone coffin whence the wind had driven the sand, leaving the contents exposed to view. Only a few bones, but, backed by the drifted sand, they still kept the semblance of a skeleton sitting staring out into the mist.

Eustace Gordon recoiled--the best of men would have done so much in such a situation; then memory aided him.

"It is Eilean-a-fa-ash, Maud--Eilean-a-varai--you remember. We must have drifted north somehow. Don't look so scared, my darling. It is only Eilean-a-fa-ash--the Island of Rest--that is all."

She did not heed him; her eyes, full of an almost insane terror, were fastened on the fleshless hand which lay so near--oh! God in heaven!--so near her own as it clutched the side of the coffin.

"The ring," she whispered. "Look! look--the ring, my ring, my ring."

Yes! on the dead as on the living hand he saw the ring with its legend, "Beautiful, constant, chaste." A chill came over even his passion; yet he turned to her with sudden petulance.

"Well! what then?--you know whence it must have come, what it must have been from the beginning, I suppose. Come! let us leave these horrors, let us leave the past and be sensible. Come, Maud."

She gave him one look,--a look he never forgot,--and with a cry of "Rick's ring! Rick's ring!" broke from him and disappeared into the mist.

"Maud! Maud! don't be silly! Maud! where are you going? For God's sake, Maud! come back. The mist--the sea--are you mad? Maud! Maud!"

Then he, too, was blotted out, and the growing light of day found nothing human there save the bones of a woman who had been loved. Nothing but that and the ashes of a fire which had gone out.

"Maud! Maud!" The cry hit on the mist and came echoing back to him, as, following her faint footsteps, he pursued her. Once looming through the fog he thought he saw her pausing as for breath, but his passionate entreaty for her to wait for him, his eager reminder that he was Eustace--Eustace, her lover--brought no response. Did he imagine a faint cry as if she started off in renewed alarm, or was it only some sea-bird hidden in the mist, uttering its plaintive note?

He brought himself up suddenly with a gasp of horrid fears as his feet gave way beneath him--deeper? deeper? No! that was right: firm ground once more, but where was he? Where were those faint footmarks leading him?

"Maud! Come back! It is not safe!" Still he went on. Not safe, indeed! He floundered desperately for a moment, and then stood with laboured breath and a dew of deadly fear on his face, looking round him. The sun rising steadily had, by this time, turned the mist into a golden haze, through which he could see that a few seaweed-hung boulders had been gathered to a heap whence sprang a cross-shaped post. It must be a ford--the sea ford to Eilean-a-fa-ash. That way then lay safety, for a few hours; but which way had she gone? He stooped to see, with fear for her and for himself fighting with his love. Then he stood up, pale as death. "Maud! Come back. Maud! I will not hurt you." Surely, surely there was an answering cry. The relief seemed to blind him, deafen him.

"Here! Here! where are you? It is I!"

The next instant Rick Halmar was beside him, fiercely imperative. "Where is she? Where is she?"

Eustace Gordon looked at the eager boyish face stupidly, and faltered, "She was afraid--she ran away. I don't know why. Call her. She might come to you. Call her."

Those bright blue eyes seemed to pierce him through and through, before they sought the ground. There was not much to be seen; only the print of a woman's foot in the sand, a foot going south; due south.

"Coward!"

The word rang out clear from the golden mist like a voice from heaven, and Eustace Gordon was left standing alone beside the cross pointing towards safety. Rick Halmar had gone south; due south.

Then a new cry beat itself upon the curtain of mist: "Lady Maud! Lady Maud! it is I--Rick! Rick Halmar." And the boy's voice reached further than the man's, as moment by moment the sea-haugh lightened, softened, rose, until it seemed no more than a golden halo round the climbing sun.

"It is I--Rick! Rick Halmar."

His hands clenched tighter and tighter as he ran. To Eustace the danger had been uncertain, unreal, but Rick knew every inch of the ground, and knew that each step left hope further behind. Already his accustomed ear had caught the curious whispering hush with which the land gives way before the sea. And he knew what that meant on Grada Sands. Firm foothold for a second and then a shivering and murmuring sliding gulf. Oh, horrible, most horrible to think of her.

"Lady Maud! it is I--Rick, only Rick."

The thought came to him suddenly that it was his birthday. She had promised to give him something. Ah! fate could not be so cruel on his birthday of all days in the year! Foolish irrational thought which somehow brought him comfort as his keen eyes sought a sign and found nothing but those shining footsteps, whence the water filtered even as he sped past them. Thank Heaven for so much! since it showed that the tide was still far off; that as yet there was time. Lighter and lighter too! Soon he might be able to see her, ghostlike, through the mist, or at least judge the distance of that creeping line of foam which, still unseen, and still, he hoped fiercely, far, far off, yet seemed to occupy his every thought, to fill his memory. Tortuous like a snake, with the snake's low hiss as it curled along the quivering sand. Suddenly his heart stood still, for there out of the golden mist grew the tall black spar of the old wreck with its message of warning: "Pretty safe so far, most times; beyond that--" The recollection of his own careless words prompted another cry.

"My lady--my dearest lady. It is I, Rick--only Rick."

What was that on the sand--blotting the yellow sand just below the spar? A stone? seaweed? No--that was a woman's dress; she was there, face downwards on the sand, fallen insensible perhaps--but saved. Thank God! saved. He stumbled in his mad haste to reach her. Was it a stumble, or had his foot broken through the firmer crust? Again, this time both feet. Could he have come so far, so close, only to fail? Impossible! Then beneath him he felt a tremor, the first slight tremor heralding the dissolution of dry land. With the sudden resolve which, in time of danger, separates one man from his fellow, decisively, absolutely, to the utter annihilation of all cant about equality, he put all his strength into one bold leap forward. The next instant he was clinging to the spar like a monkey, or a sailor. The tremor passed; the sand settled once more with a low gurgling murmur, proclaiming the back draw of the wave still hidden by the haze. Cautiously he tried one foot beyond the single plank between him and destruction. Hopeless, even if he stood still, and to reach her he must take a step or two. Again the tremor came,--the shifting, sliding sparkle of the sand-grains as they parted,--and the figure lying with its face hidden, resting on the right arm, sank a little. Only a very little; yet still it sank. He had come prepared for danger, with a rope wound about his waist; and almost with his first foothold on the wreck, his hands had been busy with the coil even while his thoughts and eyes were elsewhere. A bight here, a bend there, and it was fast as sailor's lore could make it, to the spars and to his body. No! not there; for it had to be doubled to bear the strain, and he could not afford to lose an inch. So, tight over one shoulder with a treble twist round his outstretched arm. That would not give way unless it tore the arm from its socket; and then the rope, being high up on the spar, would give him greater purchase when the time came for strength. How long these thoughts, these actions, seemed to take; yet he could not spare one of them even though, with a soft, swishing rush, the hidden enemy made another sally. This time lingering half a moment round that figure on the sand as if to gain a firmer hold upon it. Perhaps! but not so firm as his would be. Now he was ready! With a swing backwards and forwards to gain additional impetus, the rope coiled loosely so as not to drag, he leapt clear of the wreck towards her. An instant's doubt, and he had her by the hand, the left hand, which lay stretched on the sand as she had fallen. How cold it was! Could she be dead? But the horror of the thought was forgotten in fight; for now, with the same chuckling sound as if the devils below were laughing at him, came the back draw. Not an inch, not a quarter to be yielded, come what might. The rope, despite his bitter clench upon its strands, cut deep into his arm; it seemed as if a red-hot iron pierced his shoulder, as the sinews strained to their uttermost. Ah! that was a relief, but her weight was heavier surely, and that meant less stable support. Hanging as he was, by one arm,--the other outstretched to keep his hold on her,--he could see nothing save the unsteady sand closing round him. He seemed to feel nothing save the little cold hand in his. It was now or never. Grasping the rope as high as he could reach, he put out his whole strength, hoping to move her but an inch nearer to him. Hopeless; and the back draw, coming on him unawares, found him, as it were, on the rack, and seized its opportunity. He set his teeth and endured. How, he never knew, but when the agony passed, a dew, like that of death, was on his face, and he hung nerveless, helpless, save for the desperate resolve to keep his hold--to keep her hand in

his. The wave again. Little bubbles this time, as if some one was drowning close by. Ah! if he could only see her, even though it was to see her gripped in that pulsating horror!

"Maud! it is I--only Rick." The cry came from him as he hung on the rack once more. Perhaps, if he could keep his hold, the coming tide would slacken that grip--it might--it must. How far had she sunk--already? Had the golden head disappeared? Was there nothing left save the little cold hand where he could feel the ring--his ring--slipping under his clasp? Ah! there was the wave again--surging in his ears, whispering, whispering, whispering, surely of some far-off country, of a great rest, and peace, and forgetfulness.

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Rick Halmar hung limp upon the rope. Nature had stepped in; her patience was exhausted, she would have no more heroism, no more delay. Those two hands had held each other long enough. The time had come for them to part quietly, peacefully. Not in a moment, but gradually, as if even in unconsciousness the spirit strove against the flesh, those slender fingers slipped through the strong ones. Slipped and slipped, till, with a little jerk, Rick's hand closed upon itself, and fell back inert, while the other, still stretched in mute appeal, sank slowly into the sand.

The sun, having escaped from its halo, saw the deed done, and smiled down upon the sight cheerfully. Only a boy with a birthday present in his hand. Only one more woman loved and lost. What was that to weep over? A wheeling gull, sweeping by on broad white wings, suggested sympathy, but, in reality, it came to see if the deed portended food for its young ones. There were no other spectators. Had there been, they would have been so occupied by vain attempts to aid, that the essence of it all would have escaped them. Such things are better told than witnessed.

* * * * *

So thought Miss Willina when, three weeks afterwards, Rick, with his left arm still in a sling, tried to make her understand it was not his fault. He wore the silver ring on his right hand; they had found it there tight clasped when, set on the track by Eustace Gordon, they came in a boat to the rescue. Just too late to do more than release Rick from a torture none the less painful afterwards because it was unfelt at the time. Perhaps, with her older eyes, Miss Willina saw further into the blame than he did; but she said nothing.

So Rick kept the ring, with its legend "Beautiful, constant, chaste," as his birthday present. He did not even give it to his wife. It belonged, he said, to the most perfect woman he had ever seen, and when people suggested the propriety of this being a euphonism for the one he had chosen as his life-companion, he shook his head with a smile.

Nevertheless, Miss Willina was not silent of blame. She poured vials of it on her own head for having neglected a clear duty. If she had only insisted on the other devil being burnt as well, this terrible thing might not have come to pass. Anyhow, she would go over to the deserted Lodge without delay, and destroy the wicked idol, lest it should do more harm.

"Let me come too," said Rick in a low voice.

This time Miss Willina did not meet his request with the query, "Was she so pretty as all that, dear?" Indeed, the memory of those words choked her.

So Rick went for the first time into the little sanctum where Lady Maud had stood adrift at the window. The image was still on the mantelpiece, and he started at the sight of it. "Aunt Will!" he cried in quick, half-alarmed tones, "I never made that--it is not my work."

It was not. The professor had been right for once, when he called it a genuine savage conception of fate, brought thither by the Gulf Stream.

Rick took it up in his hands and looked at it curiously. "I wonder," he said, half to himself, "if things would have been different." Then, with a sort of appeal, he turned to Miss Willina. "Aunt Will--you don't really believe--all that rubbish--do you?"

Her answer was decisive. She took the image from him, and marched off with it to Kirsty's peat fire.

So that was an end of the tragic comedy of Roederay. When Rick set off to sail the seas, all the actors in it had disappeared, save Miss Willina in the windblown Noah's Ark at Eval.

Will Lockhart came back the next summer, and painted a picture of Eilean-a-fa-ash, with a golden sea-haugh hanging over drifted sand, and the skeleton of a hand showing from a stone coffin. It was gruesome and morbid; so it was much admired by the Gulf Stream of society in the Royal Academy. Miss Willina, however, still refused to find entertainment in a magic lantern. The past was sacred, she said, and no good ever came in disbelieving in it. Besides, what would become of her animals?

He came again the next summer, bringing with him a tale about the "flusteration midst the bastes of all creation," which followed on the introduction of the "Spirit of fell Denial into the Ark," whereat they both laughed.

And that year he sent a picture to the Royal Academy, which a few critics admired. But then, it was only the portrait of a middle-aged woman with a sick gosling on her lap, and half a dozen zoological specimens grouped around her. Yet you could almost feel the northwest wind which was ruffling the coils of hair, and smell the fresh, salt, wholesome breeze which had swept the sand from those dead fingers at Eilean-a-fa-ash. It was the other side of the picture; but it did not suit the public taste so well. *Chacun a son gout.*