

CHAPTER XI

GARTH FINDS THE CROSS

THE village church on the green was bathed in sunshine as Jane emerged from the cool shade of the park. The clock proclaimed the hour half past eleven, and Jane did not hasten, knowing she was not expected until twelve. The windows of the church were open, and the massive oaken doors stood ajar.

Jane paused beneath the ivy-covered porch and stood listening. The tones of the organ reached her as from an immense distance, and yet with an all-pervading nearness. The sound was disassociated from hands and feet. The organ seemed breathing, and its breath was music.

Jane pushed the heavy door further open, and even at that moment it occurred to her that the freckled boy with a red head, and Garth's slim proportions, had evidently passed easily through an aperture which refused ingress to her more massive figure. She pushed the door further open, and went in.

Instantly a stillness entered into her soul. The sense of unseen presences, often so strongly felt on entering an empty church alone, the impress left upon old walls and rafters by the worshipping minds of centuries, hushed the insistent beating of her own perplexity, and for a few moments she forgot the errand which brought her there, and bowed her head in unison with the worship of ages.

Garth was playing the "Veni, Creator Spiritus" to

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Attwood's perfect setting; and, as Jane walked noiselessly up to the chancel, he began to sing the words of the second verse. He sang them softly, but his beautifully modulated barytone carried well, and every syllable reached her.

"Enable with perpetual light
The dulness of our blinded sight;
Anoint and cheer our soiled face
With the abundance of Thy grace;
Keep far our foes; give peace at home;
Where Thou art Guide, no ill can come."

Then the organ swelled into full power, pealing out the theme of the last verse without its words, and allowing those he had sung to repeat themselves over and over in Jane's mind: "*Where Thou art Guide, no ill can come.*" Had she not prayed for guidance? Then surely all would be well.

She paused at the entrance to the chancel. Garth had returned to the second verse, and was singing again, to a waldflute accompaniment, "*Enable with perpetual light —.*"

Jane seated herself in one of the old oak stalls and looked around her. The brilliant sunshine from without entered through the stained-glass windows, melted into golden beams of soft amber light, with here and there a shaft of crimson. What a beautiful expression — *perpetual light!* As Garth sang it, each syllable seemed to pierce the silence like a ray of purest sunlight. "*The dulness of —.*" Jane could just see the top of his dark head over the heavy brocade of the organ curtain. She dreaded the moment when he should turn, and those vivid eyes should catch sight of her — "*our blinded sight.*" How would he take what she must say? Would she have strength to come

through a long hard scene? Would he be tragically heart-broken? — "*Anoint and cheer our soiled face*" — Would he argue, and insist, and override her judgment? — "*With the abundance of Thy grace* —" Could she oppose his fierce strength, if he chose to exert it? Would they either of them come through so hard a time without wounding each other terribly? — "*Keep far our foes; give peace at home* —" Oh! what could she say? What would he say? How should she answer? What reason could she give for her refusal which Garth would ever take as final? — "*Where Thou art Guide, no ill can come.*"

And then, after a few soft, impromptu chords, the theme changed.

Jane's heart stood still. Garth was playing "The Rosary." He did not sing it; but the soft insistence of the organ pipes seemed to press the words into the air, as no voice could have done. Memory's pearls, in all the purity of their gleaming preciousness, were counted one by one by the flute and dulciana; and the sadder tones of the waldflute proclaimed the finding of the cross. It all held a new meaning for Jane, who looked helplessly round, as if seeking some way of escape from the sad sweetness of sound which filled the little church.

Suddenly it ceased. Garth stood up, turned, and saw her. The glory of a great joy leaped into his face.

"All right, Jimmy," he said; "that will do for this morning. And here is a bright sixpence, because you have managed the blowing so well. Hullo! It's a shilling! Never mind. You shall have it because it is such a glorious day. There never was such a day, Jimmy; and I want you to be happy also. Now run

off quickly, and shut the church door behind you, my boy."

Ah! how his voice, with its ring of buoyant gladness, shook her soul.

The red-headed boy, rather grubby, with a whole pepper-pot of freckles, but a beaming face of pleasure, came out from behind the organ, clattered down a side aisle, dropped his shilling on the way and had to find it; but at last went out, the heavy door closing behind him with a resounding clang.

Garth had remained standing beside the organ, quite motionless, without looking at Jane, and now that they were absolutely alone in the church, he still stood and waited a few moments. To Jane those moments seemed days, weeks, years, an eternity. Then he came out into the centre of the chancel, his head erect, his eyes shining, his whole bearing that of a conqueror sure of his victory.

He walked down to the quaintly carved oaken screen and, passing beneath it, stood at the step. Then he signed to Jane to come and stand beside him.

"Here, dearest," he said; "let it be here."

Jane came to him, and for a moment they stood together, looking up the chancel. It was darker than the rest of the church, being lighted only by three narrow stained-glass windows, gems of colour and of significance. The centre window, immediately over the communion table, represented the Saviour of the world, dying upon the cross. They gazed at it in reverent silence. Then Garth turned to Jane.

"My beloved," he said, "it is a sacred Presence and a sacred place. But no place could be too sacred for that which we have to say to each other, and the Holy

Presence, in which we both believe, is here to bless and ratify it. I am waiting for your answer."

Jane cleared her throat and put her trembling hands into the large pockets of her tweed coat.

"Dal," she said, "my answer is a question. How old are you?"

She felt his start of intense surprise. She saw the light of expectant joy fade from his face. But he replied, after only a momentary hesitation: "I thought you knew, dearest. I am twenty-seven."

"Well," said Jane slowly and deliberately, "I am thirty; and I look thirty-five, and feel forty. You are twenty-seven, Dal, and you look nineteen, and often feel nine. I have been thinking it over, and — you know — I cannot marry a mere boy."

Silence — absolute.

In sheer terror Jane forced herself to look at him. He was white to the lips. His face was very stern and calm — a strange, stony calmness. There was not much youth in it just then. "*Anoint and cheer our soiled face*" — The silent church seemed to wail the words in bewildered agony.

At last he spoke. "I had not thought of myself," he said slowly. "I cannot explain how it comes to pass, but I have not thought of myself at all, since my mind has been full of you. Therefore I had not realised how little there is in me that you could care for. I believed you had felt as I did, that we were — just each other's." For a moment he put out his hand as if he would have touched her. Then it dropped heavily to his side. "You are quite right," he said. "You could not marry any one whom you consider a mere boy."

He turned from her and faced up the chancel. For

the space of a long silent minute he looked at the window over the holy table, where hung the suffering Christ. Then he bowed his head. "I accept the cross," he said, and, turning, walked quietly down the aisle. The church door opened, closed behind him with a heavy clang, and Jane was alone.

She stumbled back to the seat she had left, and fell upon her knees.

"O, my God," she cried, "send him back to me, oh, send him back! . . . Oh, Garth! It is I who am plain and unattractive and unworthy, not you. Oh, Garth — come back! come back! come back! . . . I will trust and not be afraid. . . . Oh, my own Dear — come back!"

She listened, with straining ears. She waited, until every nerve of her body ached with suspense. She decided what she would say when the heavy door reopened and she saw Garth standing in a shaft of sunlight. She tried to remember the "*Veni*," but the hollow clang of the door had silenced even memory's echo of that haunting music. So she waited silently, and as she waited the silence grew and seemed to enclose her within cruel, relentless walls which opened only to allow her glimpses into the vista of future lonely years. Just once more she broke that silence. "Oh darling, come back! *I will risk it*," she said. But no step drew near, and, kneeling with her face buried in her clasped hands, Jane suddenly realised that Garth Dalmain had accepted her decision as final and irrevocable, and would not return.

How long she knelt there after realising this, she never knew. But at last comfort came to her. She felt she had done right. A few hours of present anguish were better than years of future disillusion. Her

own life would be sadly empty, and losing this newly found joy was costing her more than she had expected; but she honestly believed she had done rightly towards him, and what did her own pain matter? Thus comfort came to Jane.

At last she rose and passed out of the silent church into the breezy sunshine.

Near the park gates a little knot of excited boys were preparing to fly a kite. Jimmy, the hero of the hour, the centre of attraction, proved to be the proud possessor of this new kite. Jimmy was finding the day glorious indeed, and was being happy. "Happy *also*," Garth had said. And Jane's eyes filled with tears, as she remembered the word and the tone in which it was spoken.

"There goes my poor boy's shilling," she said to herself sadly, as the kite mounted and soared above the common; "but, alas, where is his joy?"

As she passed up the avenue a dog-cart was driven swiftly down it. Garth Dalmain drove it; behind him a groom and a portmanteau. He lifted his hat as he passed her, but looked straight before him. In a moment he was gone. Had Jane wanted to stop him she could not have done so. But she did not want to stop him. She felt absolutely satisfied that she had done the right thing, and done it at greater cost to herself than to him. He would eventually — ah, perhaps before so very long — find another to be to him all, and more than all, he had believed she could be. But she? The dull ache at her bosom reminded her of her own words the night before, whispered in the secret of her chamber to him who, alas, was not there to hear: "Whatever the future brings for you and me, no other face will ever be hidden here." And, in this

first hour of the coming lonely years, she knew them to be true.

In the hall she met Pauline Lister.

"Is that you, Miss Champion?" said Pauline. "Well now, have you heard of Mr. Dalmain? He has had to go to town unexpectedly, on the 1.15 train; and aunt has dropped her false teeth on her marble washstand and must get to the dentist right away. So we go to town on the 2.30. It's an uncertain world. It complicates one's plans, when they have to depend on other people's teeth. But I would sooner break false teeth than true hearts, any day. One can get the former mended, but I guess no one can mend the latter. We are lunching early in our rooms; so I wish you good-by, Miss Champion."