

The doctor had his faults, but they were not Peter's. He never, under any circumstances, spoke *because* he wist not what to say.

He leaned forward and laid a hand very tenderly on Garth's shoulder. "Poor chap," he said. "Ah, poor old chap."

And for a long while they sat thus in silence.

## CHAPTER XXV

## THE DOCTOR'S DIAGNOSIS

"SO you expressed no opinion? explained nothing? let him go on believing that? Oh, Dicky! And you might have said so much!"

In the quiet of the Scotch Sabbath morning, Jane and the doctor had climbed the winding path from the end of the terrace, which zigzagged up to a clearing amongst the pines. Two fallen trees at a short distance from each other provided convenient seats in full sunshine, facing a glorious view, — down into the glen, across the valley, and away to the purple hills beyond. The doctor had guided Jane to the sunnier of the two trunks, and seated himself beside her. Then he had quietly recounted practically the whole of the conversation of the previous evening.

"I expressed no opinion. I explained nothing. I let him continue to believe what he believes, because it is the only way to keep you on the pinnacle where he has placed you. Let any other reason for your conduct than an almost infantine ignorance of men and things be suggested and accepted, and down you will come, my poor Jane, and great will be the fall. Mine shall not be the hand thus to hurl you headlong. As you say, I might have said so much, but I might also have lived to regret it."

"I should fall into his arms," said Jane recklessly, "and I would sooner be there than on a pinnacle."

"Excuse me, my good girl," replied the doctor.

"It is more likely you would fall into the first express going south. In fact, I am not certain you would wait for an express. I can almost see the Honourable Jane quitting yonder little railway station, seated in an empty coal-truck. No! Don't start up and attempt to stride about among the pine needles," continued the doctor, pulling Jane down beside him again. "You will only trip over a fir cone and go headlong into the valley. It is no use forestalling the inevitable fall."

"Oh, Dicky," sighed Jane, putting her hand through his arm, and leaning her bandaged eyes against the rough tweed of his shoulder; "I don't know what has come to you to-day. You are not kind to me. You have harrowed my poor soul by repeating all Garth said last night; and, thanks to that terribly good memory of yours, you have reproduced the tones of his voice in every inflection. And then, instead of comforting me, you leave me entirely in the wrong, and completely in the lurch."

"In the wrong — yes," said Deryck; "in the lurch — no. I did not say I would do nothing to-day. I only said I could do nothing last night. You cannot take up a wounded thing and turn it about and analyse it. When we bade each other good-night, I told him I would think the matter over and give him my opinion to-day. I will tell you what has happened to me if you like. I have looked into the inmost recesses of a very rare and beautiful nature, and I have seen what havoc a woman can work in the life of the man who loves her. I can assure you, last night was no pastime. I woke this morning feeling as if I had, metaphorically, been beaten black and blue."

"Then what do you suppose I feel?" inquired Jane pathetically.

"You still feel yourself in the right — partly," replied Deryck. "And so long as you think you have a particle of justification and cling to it, your case is hopeless. It will have to be: 'I confess. Can you forgive?'"

"But I acted for the best," said Jane. "I thought of him before I thought of myself. It would have been far easier to have accepted the happiness of the moment, and chanced the future."

"That is not honest, Jeanette. You thought of yourself first. You dared not face the possibility of the pain to you if his love cooled or his admiration waned. When one comes to think of it, I believe every form of human love — a mother's only excepted — is primarily selfish. The best chance for Dalmain is that his helpless blindness may awaken the mother love in you. Then self will go to the wall."

"Ah me!" sighed Jane. "I am lost and weary and perplexed in this bewildering darkness. Nothing seems clear; nothing seems right. If I could see your kind eyes, Boy, your hard voice would hurt less."

"Well, take off the bandage and look," said the doctor.

"I will not!" cried Jane furiously. "Have I gone through all this to fail at the last?"

"My dear girl, this self-imposed darkness is getting on your nerves. Take care it does not do more harm than good. Strong remedies —"

"Hush!" whispered Jane. "I hear footsteps."

"You can always hear footsteps in a wood if you hearken for them," said the doctor; but he spoke low, and then sat quiet, listening.

"I hear Garth's step," whispered Jane. "Oh, Dicky, go to the edge and look over. You can see the windings of the path below."

The doctor stepped forward quietly and looked down upon the way they had ascended. Then he came back to Jane.

"Yes," he said. "Fortune favours us. Dalmain is coming up the path with Simpson. He will be here in two minutes."

"Fortune favours us? My dear Dicky! Of all mischances!" Jane's hand flew to her bandage, but the doctor stayed her just in time.

"Not at all," he said. "And do not fail at the last in your experiment. I ought to be able to keep you two blind people apart. Trust me, and keep dark — I mean, sit still. And can you not understand why I said fortune favours us? Dalmain is coming for my opinion on the case. You shall hear it together. It will be a saving of time for me, and most enlightening for you to mark how he takes it. Now keep quiet. I promise he shall not sit on your lap. But if you make a sound, I shall have to say you are a bunny or a squirrel, and throw fir cones at you."

The doctor rose and sauntered round the bend of the path.

Jane sat on in darkness.

"Hullo, Dalmain," she heard Deryck say. "Found your way up here? An ideal spot. Shall we dispense with Simpson? Take my arm."

"Yes," replied Garth. "I was told you were up here, Brand, and followed you."

They came round the bend together, and out into the clearing.

"Are you alone?" asked Garth standing still. "I thought I heard voices."

"You did," replied the doctor. "I was talking to a young woman."

"What sort of young woman?" asked Garth.

"A buxom young person," replied the doctor, "with a decidedly touchy temper."

"Do you know her name?"

"Jane," said the doctor recklessly.

"Not 'Jane,'" said Garth quickly, — "*Jean*. I know her, — my gardener's eldest daughter. Rather weighed down by family cares, poor girl."

"I saw she was weighed down," said the doctor. "I did not know it was by family cares. Let us sit on this trunk. Can you call up the view to mind?"

"Yes," replied Garth; "I know it so well. But it terrifies me to find how my mental pictures are fading; all but one."

"And that is —?" asked the doctor.

"The face of the One Woman," said Garth in his blindness.

"Ah, my dear fellow," said the doctor, "I have not forgotten my promise to give you this morning my opinion on your story. I have been thinking it over carefully, and have arrived at several conclusions. Shall we sit on this fallen tree? Won't you smoke? One can talk better under the influence of the fragrant weed."

Garth took out his cigarette case, chose a cigarette, lighted it with care, and flung the flaming match straight on to Jane's clasped hands.

Before the doctor could spring up, Jane had smilingly flicked it off.

"What nerve!" thought Deryck, with admiration.

"Ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have said 'Ah!' and given away the show. Really, she deserves to win."

Suddenly Garth stood up. "I think we shall do better on the other log," he said unexpectedly. "It is always in fuller sunshine." And he moved towards Jane.

With a bound the doctor sprang in front of him, seized Jane with one strong hand and drew her behind him; then guided Garth to the very spot where she had been sitting.

"How accurately you judge distance," he remarked, backing with Jane towards the further trunk. Then he seated himself beside Garth in the sunshine. "Now for our talk," said the doctor, and he said it rather breathlessly.

"Are you sure we are alone?" asked Garth. "I seem conscious of another presence."

"My dear fellow," said the doctor, "is one ever alone in a wood? Countless little presences surround us. Bright eyes peep down from the branches; furry tails flick in and out of holes; things unseen move in the dead leaves at our feet. If you seek solitude, shun the woods."

"Yes," replied Garth, "I know, and I love listening to them. I meant a *human* presence. Brand, I am often so tried by the sense of an unseen human presence near me. Do you know, I could have sworn the other day that she — the One Woman — came silently, looked upon me in my blindness, pitied me, as her great tender heart would do, and silently departed."

"When was that?" asked the doctor.

"A few days ago. Dr. Rob had been telling us

how he came across her in — Ah! I must not say where. Then he and Miss Gray left me alone, and in the lonely darkness and silence I felt her eyes upon me."

"Dear boy," said the doctor, "you must not encourage this dread of unseen presences. Remember, those who care for us very truly and deeply can often make us conscious of their mental nearness, even when far away, especially if they know we are in trouble and needing them. You must not be surprised if you are often conscious of the nearness of the One Woman, for I believe — and I do not say it lightly, Dalmain — I believe her whole heart and love and life are yours."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Garth, and springing up, strode forward aimlessly.

The doctor caught him by the arm. In another moment he would have fallen over Jane's feet.

"Sit down, man," said the doctor, "and listen to me. You gain nothing by dashing about in the dark in that way. I am going to prove my words. But you must give me your calm attention. Now listen. We are confronted in this case by a psychological problem, and one which very likely has not occurred to you. I want you for a moment to picture the One Man and the One Woman facing each other in the garden of Eden, or in the moonlight — wherever it was — if you like better. Now will you realise this? The effect upon a man of falling in love is to create in him a complete unconsciousness of self. On the other hand, the effect upon a woman of being loved and sought, and of responding to that love and seeking, is an accession of intense self-consciousness. He, longing to win and take, thinks of her only. She,

called upon to yield and give, has her mind turned at once upon herself. Can she meet his need? Is she all he thinks her? Will she be able to content him completely, not only now but in the long vista of years to come? The more natural and unconscious of self she had been before, the harder she would be hit by this sudden, overwhelming attack of self-consciousness."

The doctor glanced at Jane on the log six yards away. She had lifted her clasped hands and was nodding towards him, her face radiant with relief and thankfulness.

He felt he was on the right tack. But the blind face beside him clouded heavily, and the cloud deepened as he proceeded.

"You see, my dear chap, I gathered from yourself she was not of the type of feminine loveliness you were known to admire. Might she not have feared that her appearance would, after a while, have failed to content you?"

"No," replied Garth with absolute finality of tone. "Such a suggestion is unworthy. Beside, had the idea by any possibility entered her mind, she would only have had to question me on the point. My decision would have been final; my answer would have fully reassured her."

"Love is blind," quoted the doctor quietly.

"They lie who say so," cried Garth violently. "Love is so far-seeing that it sees beneath the surface and delights in beauties unseen by other eyes."

"Then you do not accept my theory?" asked the doctor.

"Not as an explanation of my own trouble," answered Garth; "because I know the greatness of

her nature would have lifted her far above such a consideration. But I do indeed agree as to the complete oblivion to self of the man in love. How else could we ever venture to suggest to a woman that she should marry us? Ah, Brand, when one thinks of it, — the intrusion into her privacy; the asking the right to touch, even her hand, at will; — it could not be done unless the love of her and the thought of her had swept away all thoughts of self. Looking back upon that time I remember how completely it was so with me. And when she said to me in the church: 'How old are you?' — ah, I did not tell you that last night — the revulsion of feeling brought about by being turned at that moment in upon myself was so great, that my joy seemed to shrivel and die in horror at my own unworthiness."

Silence in the wood. The doctor felt he was playing a losing game. He dared not look at the silent figure opposite. At last he spoke.

"Dalmain, there are two possible solutions to your problem. Do you think it was a case of Eve holding back in virginal shyness, expecting Adam to pursue?"

"Ah no," said Garth emphatically. "We had gone far beyond all that. Nor could you suggest it, did you know her. She is too honest, too absolutely straight and true, to have deceived me. Besides, had it been so, in all these lonely years, when she found I made no sign, she would have sent me word of what she really meant."

"Should you have gone to her then?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," said Garth slowly. "I should have gone and I should have forgiven, — because she is my own.

But it could never have been the same. It would have been unworthy of us both."

"Well," continued the doctor, "the other solution remains. You have admitted that the One Woman came somewhat short of the conventional standard of beauty. Your love of loveliness was so well known. Do you not think, during the long hours of that night — remember how new it was to her to be so worshipped and wanted, — do you not think her courage failed her? She feared she might come short of what eventually you would need in the face and figure always opposite you at your table; and, despite her own great love and yours, she thought it wisest to avoid future disillusion by rejecting present joy. Her very love for you would have armed her to this decision."

The silent figure opposite nodded, and waited with clasped hands. Deryck was pleading her cause better than she could have pleaded it herself.

Silence in the woods. All nature seemed to hush and listen for the answer.

Then: — "No," said Garth's young voice unhesitatingly. "In that case she would have told me her fear, and I should have reassured her immediately. Your suggestion is unworthy of my beloved."

The wind sighed in the trees. A cloud passed before the sun. The two who sat in darkness, shivered and were silent.

Then the doctor spoke. "My dear boy," he said, and a deep tenderness was in his voice; "I must maintain my unalterable belief that to the One Woman you are still the One Man. In your blindness her rightful place is by your side. Perhaps even now she is yearning to be here. Will you tell me her name,

and give me leave to seek her out, hear from herself her version of the story: and, if it be as I think, bring her to you, to prove, in your affliction, her love and tenderness?"

"Never!" said Garth. "Never, while life shall last! Can you not see that if when I had sight, and fame, and all heart could desire, I could not win her love, what she might feel for me now, in my helpless blindness, could be but pity? And pity from her I could never accept. If I was 'a mere boy' three years ago, I am 'a mere blind man' now, an object for kind commiseration. If indeed you are right, and she mistrusted my love and my fidelity, it is now out of my power forever to prove her wrong and to prove myself faithful. But I will not allow the vision of my beloved to be dimmed by these suggestions. For her completion, she needed so much more than I could give. She refused me because I was not fully worthy. I prefer it should be so. Let us leave it at that."

"It leaves you to loneliness," said the doctor sadly.

"I prefer loneliness," replied Garth's young voice, "to disillusion. Hark! I hear the first gong, Brand, Margery will be grieved if we keep her Sunday dishes waiting."

He stood up and turned his sightless face towards the view.

"Ah, how well I know it," he said. "When Miss Gray and I sit up here, she tells me all she sees, and I tell her what she does not see, but what I know is there. She is keen on art, and on most of the things I care about. I must ask for an arm, Brand, though the path is wide and good. I cannot risk a tumble. I have come one or two awful croppers, and I promised

Miss Gray — The path is wide. Yes, we can walk two abreast, three abreast if necessary. It is well we had this good path made. It used to be a steep scramble."

"Three abreast," said the doctor. "So we could — if necessary." He stepped back and raised Jane from her seat, drawing her cold hand through his left arm. "Now, my dear fellow, my right arm will suit you best; then you can keep your stick in your right hand."

And thus they started down through the wood, on that lovely Sabbath morn of early summer; and the doctor walked erect between those two severed hearts, uniting, and yet dividing them.

Just once Garth paused and listened. "I seem to hear another footstep," he said, "beside yours and mine."

"The wood is full of footsteps," said the doctor, "just as the heart is full of echoes. If you stand still and listen, you can hear what you will in either."

"Then let us not stand still," said Garth, "for in old days, if I was late for lunch, Margery used to spank me."

## CHAPTER XXVI

## HEARTS MEET IN SIGHTLESS LAND

"IT will be absolutely impossible, Miss Gray, for me ever to tell you what I think of this that you have done for my sake."

Garth stood at the open library window. The morning sunlight poured into the room. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers, resonant with the songs of birds. As he stood there in the sunshine, a new look of strength and hopefulness was apparent in every line of his erect figure. He held out eager hands towards Nurse Rosemary, but more as an expression of the outgoing of his appreciation and gratitude than with any expectation of responsive hands being placed within them.

"And here was I, picturing you having a gay weekend, and wondering where, and who your friends in this neighbourhood could be. And all the while you were sitting blindfold in the room over my head. Ah, the goodness of it is beyond words! But did you not feel somewhat of a deceiver, Miss Gray?"

She always felt that — poor Jane. So she readily answered: "Yes. And yet I told you I was not going far. And my friends in the neighbourhood were Simpson and Margery, who aided and abetted. And it was true to say I was going, for was I not going into darkness? and it is a different world from the land of light."

"Ah, how true that is!" cried Garth. "And how