

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

difficult to make people understand the loneliness of it, and how they seem suddenly to arrive close to one from another world; stooping from some distant planet, with sympathetic voice and friendly touch; and then away they go to another sphere, leaving one to the immensity of solitude in Sightless Land."

"Yes," agreed Nurse Rosemary, "and you almost dread the coming, because the going makes the darkness darker, and the loneliness more lonely."

"Ah, so *you* experienced that?" said Garth. "Do you know, now you have week-ended in Sightless Land, I shall not feel it such a place of solitude. At every turn I shall be able to say: 'A dear and faithful friend has been here.'"

He laughed a laugh of such almost boyish pleasure, that all the mother in Jane's love rose up and demanded of her one supreme effort. She looked at the slight figure in white flannels, leaning against the window frame, so manly, so beautiful still, and yet so helpless and so needing the wealth of tenderness which was hers to give. Then, standing facing him, she opened her arms, as if the great preparedness of that place of rest so close to him must, magnet-like, draw him to her; and standing thus in the sunlight, Jane spoke.

Was she beautiful? Was she paintable? Would a man grow weary of such a look turned on him, of such arms held out? Alas! Too late! On that point no lover shall ever be able to pass judgment. That look is for one man alone. He only will ever bring it to that loving face. And he cannot pronounce upon its beauty in voice of rapturous content. He cannot judge. He cannot see. He is blind!

"Mr. Dalmain, there are many smaller details; but

before we talk of those I want to tell you the greatest of all the lessons I learned in Sightless Land." Then, conscious that her emotion was producing in her voice a resonant depth which might remind him too vividly of notes in "The Rosary," she paused, and resumed in the high, soft edition of her own voice which it had become second nature to her to use as Nurse Rosemary: "Mr. Dalmain, it seems to me I learned to understand how that which is loneliness unspeakable to *one* might be Paradise of a very perfect kind for *two*. I realised that there might be circumstances in which the dark would become a very wonderful meeting-place for souls. If I loved a man who lost his sight, I should be glad to have mine in order to be eyes for him when eyes were needed; just as, were I rich and he poor, I should value my money simply as a thing which might be useful to him. But I know the daylight would often be a trial to me, because it would be something he could not share; and when evening came, I should long to say: 'Let us put out the lights and shut away the moonlight and sit together in the sweet soft darkness, which is more uniting than the light.'"

While Jane was speaking, Garth paled as he listened, and his face grew strangely set. Then, as if under a reaction of feeling, a boyish flush spread to the very roots of his hair. He visibly shrank from the voice which was saying these things to him. He fumbled with his right hand for the orange cord which would guide him to his chair.

"Nurse Rosemary," he said, and at the tone of his voice Jane's outstretched arms dropped to her sides; "it is kind of you to tell me all these beautiful thoughts which came to you in the darkness. But I hope the

man who is happy enough to possess your love, or who is going to be fortunate enough to win it, will neither be so unhappy nor so unfortunate as to lose his sight. It will be better for him to live with you in the light, than to be called upon to prove the kind way in which you would be willing to adapt yourself to his darkness. How about opening our letters?" He slipped his hand along the orange cord and walked over to his chair.

Then, with a sense of unutterable dismay, Jane saw what she had done. She had completely forgotten Nurse Rosemary, using her only as a means of awakening in Garth an understanding of how much her — Jane's — love might mean to him in his blindness. She had forgotten that, to Garth, Nurse Rosemary's was the only personality which counted in this conversation; she, who had just given him such a proof of her interest and devotion. And — O poor dear Garth! O bold, brazen Nurse Rosemary! — he very naturally concluded she was making love to him. Jane felt herself between Scylla and Charybdis, and she took a very prompt and characteristic plunge.

She came across to her place on the other side of the small table and sat down. "I believe it was the thought of him made me realise this," she said; "but just now I and my young man have fallen out. He does not even know I am here."

Garth unbent at once, and again that boyish heightening of colour indicated his sense of shame at what he had imagined.

"Ah, Miss Gray," he said eagerly, "you will not think it impertinent or intrusive on my part, but do you know I have wondered sometimes whether there was a happy man."

Nurse Rosemary laughed. "Well, we can't call him a happy man just now," she said, "so far as his thoughts of me are concerned. My whole heart is his, if he could only be brought to believe it. But a misunderstanding has grown up between us, — my fault entirely, — and he will not allow me to put it right."

"What a fool!" cried Garth. "Are you and he engaged?"

Nurse Rosemary hesitated. "Well — not exactly engaged," she said, "though it practically amounts to that. Neither of us would give a thought to any one else."

Garth knew there was a class of people whose preliminary step to marriage was called "keeping company," a stage above the housemaid's "walking out," both expressions being exactly descriptive of the circumstances of the case; for, — whereas pretty Phyllis and her swain go walking out of an evening in by-ways and between hedges, or along pavements and into the parks, — these keep each other company in the parlours and arbours of their respective friends and relations. Yet, somehow, Garth had never thought of Nurse Rosemary as belonging to any other class than his own. Perhaps this ass of a fellow, whom he already cordially disliked, came of a lower stratum; or perhaps the rules of her nursing guild forbade a definite engagement, but allowed "an understanding." Anyway the fact remained that the kind-hearted, clever, delightful little lady, who had done so much for him, had "a young man" of her own; and this admitted fact lifted a weight from Garth's mind. He had been so afraid lately of not being quite honest with her and with himself. She had become so

necessary to him, nay, so essential, and by her skill and devotion had won so deep a place in his gratitude. Their relation was of so intimate a nature, their companionship so close and continuous; and into this rather ideal state of things had heavily trodden Dr. Rob the other day with a suggestion. Garth, alone with him, had been explaining how indispensable Miss Gray had become to his happiness and comfort, and how much he dreaded a recall from her matron.

"I fear they do not let them go on indefinitely at one case; but perhaps Sir Deryck can arrange that this should be an exception," said Garth.

"Oh, hang the matron, and blow Sir Deryck," said Dr. Rob breezily. "If you want her as a permanency, make sure of her. Marry her, my boy! I'll warrant she'd have you!"

Thus trod Dr. Rob, with heavily nailed boots, upon the bare toes of a delicate situation.

Garth tried to put the suggestion out of his mind and failed. He began to notice thoughts and plans of Nurse Rosemary's for his benefit, which so far exceeded her professional duties that it seemed as if there must be behind them the promptings of a more tender interest. He put the thought away again and again, calling Dr. Rob an old fool, and himself a conceited ass. But again and again there came about him, with Nurse Rosemary's presence, the subtle surrounding atmosphere of a watchful love.

Then, one night, he faced and fought a great temptation.

After all why should he not do as Dr. Rob suggested? Why not marry this charming, capable, devoted nurse, and have her constantly about him in his blindness?

*She* did not consider him "a mere boy." . . . What had he to offer her? A beautiful home, every luxury, abundant wealth, a companionship she seemed to find congenial. . . . But then the Tempter overreached himself, for he whispered: "And the voice would be always Jane's. You have never seen the nurse's face; you never will see it. You can go on putting to the voice the face and form you adore. You can marry the little nurse, and go on loving Jane." . . . Then Garth cried out in horror: "Avaunt, Satan!" and the battle was won.

But it troubled his mind lest by any chance her peace of heart should be disturbed through him. So it was with relief, and yet with an unreasonable smouldering jealousy, that he heard of the young man to whom she was devoted. And now it appeared she was unhappy through her young man, just as he was unhappy through — no, because of — Jane.

A sudden impulse came over him to do away forever with the thought which in his own mind had lately come between them, and to establish their intimacy on an even closer and firmer basis, by being absolutely frank with her on the matter.

"Miss Gray," he said, leaning towards her with that delightful smile of boyish candour which many women had found irresistible; "it is good of you to have told me about yourself; and, although I confess to feeling unreasonably jealous of the fortunate fellow who possesses your whole heart, I am glad he exists, because we all miss something unless we have in our lives the wonderful experience of the One Woman or the One Man. And I want to tell you something, dear sweet friend of mine, which closely touches you and me; only, before I do so, put your hand in

mine, that I may realise you in a closer intimacy than heretofore. You, who have been in Sightless Land, know how much a hand clasp means down here."

Garth stretched his hand across the table, and his whole attitude was tense with expectation.

"I cannot do that, Mr. Dalmain," said Nurse Rosemary, in a voice which shook a little. "I have burned my hands. Oh, not seriously. Do not look so distressed. Just a lighted match. Yes; while I was blind. Now tell me the thing which touches you and me."

Garth withdrew his hand and clasped both around his knee. He leaned back in his chair, his face turned upwards. There was upon it an expression so pure, the exaltation of a spirit so lifted above the temptations of the lower nature, that Jane's eyes filled with tears as she looked at him. She realised what his love for her, supplemented by the discipline of suffering, had done for her lover.

He began to speak softly, not turning towards her.

"Tell me," he said, "is he — very much to you?"

Jane's eyes could not leave the dear face and figure in the chair. Jane's emotion trembled in Nurse Rosemary's voice.

"He is all the world to me," she said.

"Does he love you as you deserve to be loved?"

Jane bent and laid her lips on the table where his outstretched hand had rested. Then Nurse Rosemary answered: "He loved me far, *far* more than I ever deserved."

"Why do you say 'loved'? Is not 'loves' the truer tense?"

"Alas, no!" said Nurse Rosemary, brokenly; "for

I fear I have lost his love by my own mistrust of it and my own wrong-doing."

"Never!" said Garth. "'Love never faileth.' It may for a time appear to be dead, even buried. But the Easter morn soon dawns, and lo, Love ariseth! Love grieved, is like a bird with wet wings. It cannot fly; it cannot rise. It hops about upon the ground, chirping anxiously. But every flutter shakes away more drops; every moment in the sunshine is drying the tiny feathers; and very soon it soars to the tree top, all the better for the bath, which seemed to have robbed it of the power to rise."

"Ah, — if my beloved could but dry his wings," murmured Nurse Rosemary. "But I fear I did more than wet them. I clipped them. Worse still, — I broke them."

"Does he know you feel yourself so in the wrong?" Garth asked the question very gently.

"No," replied Nurse Rosemary. "He will give me no chance to explain, and no opportunity to tell him how he wrongs himself and me by the view he now takes of my conduct."

"Poor girl!" said Garth in tones of sympathy and comprehension. "My own experience has been such a tragedy that I can feel for those whose course of true love does not run smooth. But take my advice, Miss Gray. Write him a full confession. Keep nothing back. Tell him just how it all happened. Any man who truly loves would believe, accept your explanation, and be thankful. Only, I hope he would not come tearing up here and take you away from me!"

Jane smiled through a mist of tears.

"If he wanted me, Mr. Dalmain, I should have to go to him," said Nurse Rosemary.

"How I dread the day," continued Garth, "when you will come and say to me: 'I have to go.' And, do you know, I have sometimes thought — you have done so much for me and become so much to me — I have sometimes thought — I can tell you frankly now — it might have seemed as if there were a very obvious way to try to keep you always. You are so immensely worthy of all a man could offer, of all the devotion a man could give. And because, to one so worthy, I never could have offered less than the best, I want to tell you that in my heart I hold shined forever one beloved face. All others are gradually fading. Now, in my blindness, I can hardly recall clearly the many lovely faces I have painted and admired. All are more or less blurred and indistinct. But this one face grows clearer, thank God, as the darkness deepens. It will be with me through life, I shall see it in death, *the face of the woman I love*. You said 'loved' of your lover, hesitating to be sure of his present state of heart. I can neither say 'love' nor 'loved' of my beloved. She never loved me. But I love her with a love which makes it impossible for me to have any 'best' to offer to another woman. If I could bring myself, from unworthy motives and selfish desires, to ask another to wed me, I should do her an untold wrong. For her unseen face would be nothing to me; always that one and only face would be shining in my darkness. Her voice would be dear, only in so far as it reminded me of the voice of the woman I love. Dear friend, if you ever pray for me, pray that I may never be so base as to offer to any woman such a husk as marriage with me would mean."

"But —" said Nurse Rosemary. "She — she who has made it a husk for others; she who might have

the finest of the wheat, the full corn in the ear, herself?"

"She," said Garth, "has refused it. It was neither fine enough nor full enough. It was not worthy. O my God, little girl — ! What it means, to appear inadequate to the woman one loves!"

Garth dropped his face between his hands with a groan.

Silence unbroken reigned in the library.

Suddenly Garth began to speak, low and quickly, without lifting his head.

"Now," he said, "now I feel it, just as I told Brand, and never so clearly before, excepting once, when I was alone. Ah, Miss Gray! Don't move! Don't stir! But look all round the room and tell me whether you see anything. Look at the window. Look at the door. Lean forward and look behind the screen. I cannot believe we are alone. I will not believe it. I am being deceived in my blindness. And yet — I am *not* deceived. I am conscious of the presence of the woman I love. Her eyes are fixed upon me in pity, sorrow, and compassion. Her grief at my woe is so great that it almost enfolds me, as I had dreamed her love would do. . . . O my God! She is so near — and it is so terrible, because I do not wish her near. I would sooner a thousand miles were between us — and I am certain there are not many yards! . . . Is it psychic? or is it actual? or am I going mad? . . . Miss Gray! *You* would not lie to me. No persuasion or bribery or confounded chicanery could induce *you* to deceive me on this point. Look around, for God's sake, and tell me! Are we alone? And if not, *who is in the room* besides you and me?"

Jane had been sitting with her arms folded upon the table, her yearning eyes fixed upon Garth's bowed head. When he wished her a thousand miles away she buried her face upon them. She was so near him that had Garth stretched out his right hand again, it would have touched the heavy coils of her soft hair. But Garth did not raise his head, and Jane still sat with her face buried.

There was silence in the library for a few moments after Garth's question and appeal. Then Jane lifted her face.

"There is no one in the room, Mr. Dalmain," said Nurse Rosemary, "but *you* — and *me*."

## CHAPTER XXVII

## THE EYES GARTH TRUSTED

"SO you enjoy motoring, Miss Gray?"

They had been out in the motor together for the first time, and were now having tea together in the library, also for the first time; and, for the first time, Nurse Rosemary was pouring out for her patient. This was only Monday afternoon, and already her week-end experience had won for her many new privileges.

"Yes, I like it, Mr. Dalmain; particularly in this beautiful air."

"Have you had a case before in a house where they kept a motor?"

Nurse Rosemary hesitated. "Yes, I have stayed in houses where they had motors, and I have been in Dr. Brand's. He met me at Charing Cross once with his electric brougham."

"Ah, I know," said Garth. "Very neat. On your way to a case, or returning from a case?"

Nurse Rosemary smiled, then bit her lip. "To a case," she replied quite gravely. "I was on my way to his house to talk it over and receive instructions."

"It must be splendid working under such a fellow as Brand," said Garth; "and yet I am certain most of the best things you do are quite your own idea. For instance, he did not suggest your week-end plan, did he? I thought not. Ah, the difference it has made! Now tell me. When we were motoring we