

and, if he realises it, will he not be glad in his loneliness, that his wife should come to him; unless the confessions and admissions of the letter cause him to put her away as wholly unworthy?

Suddenly Jane understood the immense advantage of the fact that he would hear every word of the rest of her letter, knowing the conclusion, which she herself could not possibly have put first. She saw a Higher Hand in this arrangement; and said, as she watched the minutes slowly pass: "He hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us"; and a sense of calm assurance descended, and garrisoned her soul with peace.

The quarter of an hour was over.

Jane crossed the hall with firm, though noiseless step; stood a moment on the threshold relegating herself completely to the background; then opened the door; and Nurse Rosemary re-entered the library.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"LOVE NEVER FAILETH"

GARTH was standing at the open window, when Nurse Rosemary re-entered the library; and he did not turn, immediately.

She looked anxiously for the letter, and saw it laid ready on her side of the table. It bore signs of having been much crumpled; looking almost as a letter might appear which had been crushed into a ball; flung into the waste-paper basket; and afterwards retrieved. It had however been carefully smoothed out; and lay ready to her hand.

When Garth turned from the window and passed to his chair, his face bore the signs of a great struggle. He looked as one who, sightless, has yet been making frantic efforts to see. The ivory pallor was gone. His face was flushed; and his thick hair, which grew in beautiful curves low upon his forehead and temples, and was usually carefully brushed back in short-cropped neatness, was now ruffled and disordered. But his voice was completely under control, as he turned towards his secretary.

"My dear Miss Gray," he said, "we have a difficult task before us. I have received a letter, which it is essential I should hear. I am obliged to ask you to read it to me, because there is absolutely no one else to whom I can prefer such a request. I cannot but know that it will be a difficult and painful task for you, feeling yourself an intermediary between two wounded

and sundered hearts. May I make it easier, my dear little girl, by assuring you that I know of no one in this world from whose lips I could listen to the contents of that letter with less pain; and, failing my own, there are no eyes beneath which I could less grudgingly let it pass, there is no mind I could so unquestioningly trust, to judge kindly, both of myself and of the writer; and to forget faithfully, all which was not intended to come within the knowledge of a third person."

"Thank you, Mr. Dalmain," said Nurse Rosemary.

Garth leaned back in his chair, shielding his face with his hand.

"Now, if you please," he said. And, very clearly and quietly, Nurse Rosemary began to read.

"DEAR GARTH, As you will not let me come to you, so that I could say, between you and me alone, that which must be said; I am compelled to write it. It is your own fault, Dal; and we both pay the penalty. For how can I write to you freely when I know, that as you listen, it will seem to you, of every word I am writing, that I am dragging a third person into that which ought to be, most sacredly, between you and me alone. And yet, I must write freely; and I must make you fully understand; because the whole of your future life and mine, will depend upon your reply to this letter. I must write as if you were able to hold the letter in your own hands, and read it to yourself. Therefore, if you cannot completely trust your secretary, with the private history of your heart and mine; bid her give it you back without turning this first page; and let me come myself, Garth, and tell you all the rest."

"That is the bottom of the page," said Nurse Rosemary; and waited.

Garth did not remove his hand. "I do completely trust; and she must not come," he said.

Nurse Rosemary turned the page, and went on reading.

"I want you to remember, Garth, that every word I write, is the simple unvarnished truth. If you look back over your remembrance of me, you will admit that I am not naturally an untruthful person, nor did I ever take easily to prevarication. But Garth, I told you one lie; and that fatal exception proves the rule of perfect truthfulness, which has always otherwise held, between you and me; and, please God, always will hold. The confession herein contained, concerns that one lie; and I need not ask you to realise how humbling it is to my pride to have to force the hearing of a confession upon the man who has already refused to admit me to a visit of friendship. You will remember that I am not naturally humble; and have a considerable amount of proper pride; and, perhaps, by the greatness of the effort I have had to make, you will be able to gauge the greatness of my love. God help you to do so — my darling; my beloved; my poor desolate boy!"

Nurse Rosemary stopped abruptly; for, at this sudden mention of love, and at these words of unexpected tenderness from Jane, Garth had risen to his feet, and taken two steps towards the window; as if to escape from something too immense to be faced. But, in a moment he recovered himself, and sat down again, completely hiding his face with his hand.

Nurse Rosemary resumed the reading of the letter.

"Ah, what a wrong I have done, both to you, and to

myself! Dear, you remember the evening on the terrace at Shenstone, when you asked me to be — when you called me — when I *was* — *your wife*? Garth, I leave this last sentence as it stands, with its two attempts to reach the truth. I will not cross them out, but leave them to be read to you; for, you see Garth, I finally arrived! I *was* your wife. I did not understand it then. I was intensely surprised; unbelievably inexperienced in matters of feeling; and bewildered by the flood of sensation which swept me off my feet and almost engulfed me. But even then I knew that my soul arose and proclaimed you mate and master. And when you held me, and your dear head lay upon my heart, I knew, for the first time, the meaning of the word ecstasy; and I could have asked no kinder gift of heaven, than to prolong those moments into hours.”

Nurse Rosemary's quiet voice broke, suddenly; and the reading ceased.

Garth was leaning forward, his head buried in his hands. A dry sob rose in his throat, just at the very moment when Nurse Rosemary's voice gave way.

Garth recovered first. Without lifting his head, with a gesture of protective affection and sympathy, he stretched his hand across the table.

“Poor little girl,” he said, “I am so sorry. It is rough on you. If only it had come when Brand was here! I am afraid you *must* go on; but try to read without realising. Leave the realising to me.”

And Nurse Rosemary read on.

“When you lifted your head in the moonlight and gazed long and earnestly at me — Ah, those dear eyes! — your look suddenly made me self-conscious. There swept over me a sense of my own exceeding

plainness, and of how little there was in what those dear eyes saw, to provide reason for that adoring look. Overwhelmed with a shy shame I pressed your head back to the place where the eyes would be hidden; and I realise now what a different construction you must have put upon that action. Garth, I assure you, that when you lifted your head the second time, and said: ‘My wife,’ it was the first suggestion to my mind that this wonderful thing which was happening meant — marriage. I know it must seem almost incredible, and more like a child of eighteen, than a woman of thirty. But you must remember, all my dealings with men up to that hour, had been handshakes, heartiest comradeship, and an occasional clap on the shoulder given and received. And don't forget, dear King of my heart, that, until one short week before, *you* had been amongst the boys who called me ‘good old Jane,’ and addressed me in intimate conversation as ‘my dear fellow’! Don't forget that I had always looked upon you as *years* younger than myself; and though a strangely sweet tie had grown up between us, since the evening of the concert at Overdene, I had never realised it as love. Well — you will remember how I asked for twelve hours to consider my answer; and you yielded, immediately; (you were so perfect, all the time, Garth) and left me, when I asked to be alone; left me, with a gesture I have never forgotten. It was a revelation of the way in which the love of a man such as you, exalts the woman upon whom it is outpoured. The hem of that gown has been a sacred thing to me, ever since. It is always with me, though I never wear it. — A detailed account of the hours which followed, I shall hope to give you some day, my dearest. I cannot

write it. Let me hurl on to paper, in all its crude ugliness, the miserable fact which parted us; turning our dawning joy to disillusion and sadness. Garth — it was this. I did not believe your love would stand the test of my plainness. I knew what a worshipper of beauty you were; how you must have it, in one form or another, always around you. I got out my diary in which I had recorded verbatim our conversation about the ugly preacher, whose face became illumined into beauty, by the inspired glory within. And you added that you never thought him ugly again; but he would always be plain. And you said it was not the sort of face one would want to have always before one at meals; but that you were not called upon to undergo that discipline, which would be sheer martyrdom to you.

I was so interested, at the time; and so amused at the unconscious way in which you stood and explained this, to quite the plainest woman of your acquaintance; that I recorded it very fully in my journal. — Alas! On that important night, I read the words, over and over, until they took morbid hold upon my brain. Then—such is the self-consciousness awakened in a woman by the fact that she is loved and sought — I turned on all the lights around my mirror, and critically and carefully examined the face you would have to see every day behind your coffee-pot at breakfast, for years and years, if I said 'Yes,' on the morrow. Darling, I did not see myself through your eyes, as, thank God, I have done since. And *I did not trust your love to stand the test.* It seemed to me, I was saving both of us from future disappointment and misery, by bravely putting away present joy, in order to avoid certain disenchantment. My

belovéd, it will seem to you so coolly calculating, and so mean; so unworthy of the great love you were even then lavishing upon me. But remember, for years, your remarkable personal grace and beauty had been a source of pleasure to me; and I had pictured you wedded to Pauline Lister, for instance, in her dazzling whiteness, and soft radiant youth. So my morbid self-consciousness said: 'What! This young Apollo, tied to my ponderous plainness; growing handsomer every year, while I grow older and plainer?' Ah, darling! It sounds so unworthy, now we know what our love is. But it sounded sensible and right that night; and at last, with a bosom that ached, and arms that hung heavy at the thought of being emptied of all that joy, I made up my mind to say 'no.' Ah, believe me, I had no idea what it already meant to you. I thought you would pass on at once to another fancy; and transfer your love to one more able to meet your needs, at every point. Honestly, Garth, I thought I should be the only one left desolate. — Then came the question: how to refuse you. I knew if I gave the true reason, you would argue it away, and prove me wrong, with glowing words, before which I should perforce yield. So—as I really meant not to let you run the risk, and not to run it myself — I lied to you, my belovéd. To you, whom my whole being acclaimed King of my heart, Master of my will; supreme to me, in love and life, — to *you* I said: 'I cannot marry a mere boy.' Ah, darling! I do not excuse it. I do not defend it. I merely confess it; trusting to your generosity to admit, that no other answer would have sent you away. Ah, your poor Jane, left desolate! If you could have seen her in the little church, calling you back; retracting

and promising; listening for your returning footsteps, in an agony of longing. But my Garth is not made of the stuff which stands waiting on the door-mat of a woman's indecision.

"The lonely year which followed so broke my nerve, that Deryck Brand told me I was going all to pieces, and ordered me abroad. I went, as you know; and in other, and more vigorous, surroundings, there came to me a saner view of life. In Egypt last March, on the summit of the Great Pyramid, I made up my mind that I could live without you no longer. I did not see myself wrong; but I yearned so for your love, and to pour mine upon you, my beloved, that I concluded it was worth the risk. I made up my mind to take the next boat home, and send for you. Then — oh, my own boy—I heard. I wrote to you; and you would not let me come.

"Now I know perfectly well, that you might say: 'She did not trust me when I had my sight. Now that I cannot see, she is no longer afraid.' Garth, you might say that; but it would not be true. I have had ample proof lately that I was wrong, and ought to have trusted you all through. What it is, I will tell you later. All I can say now is: — that, if your dear shining eyes could see, they would see, *now*, a woman who is, trustfully and unquestioningly, all your own. If she is doubtful of her face and figure, she says quite simply: 'They pleased *him*; and they are just *his*. I have no further right to criticise them. If he wants them, they are not mine, but his.' Darling, I cannot tell you now, how I have arrived at this assurance. But I have had proofs beyond words, of your faithfulness and love.

"The question, therefore, simply resolves itself into

this: Can you forgive me? If you can forgive me, I can come to you at once. If this thing is past forgiveness, I must make up my mind to stay away. But, oh, my own Dear, — the bosom on which once you laid your head, waits for you with the longing ache of lonely years. If you need it, do not thrust it from you.

"Write me one word by your own hand: 'Forgiven.' It is all I ask. When it reaches me, I will come to you at once. Do not dictate a letter to your secretary. I could not bear it. Just write — if you can truly write it — '*Forgiven*'; and send it to

Your Wife.

The room was very still, as Nurse Rosemary finished reading; and, laying down the letter, silently waited. She wondered for a moment whether she could get herself a glass of water, without disturbing him; but decided to do without it.

At last Garth lifted his head.

"She has asked me to do a thing impossible," he said; and a slow smile illumined his drawn face.

Jane clasped her hands upon her breast.

"Can you not write 'forgiven'?" asked Nurse Rosemary, brokenly.

"No," said Garth. "I cannot. Little girl, give me a sheet of paper, and a pencil."

Nurse Rosemary placed them close to his hand.

Garth took up the pencil. He groped for the paper; felt the edges with his left hand; found the centre with his fingers; and, in large firm letters, wrote one word.

"Is that legible?" he asked, passing it across to Nurse Rosemary.

"Quite legible," she said; for she answered before it was blotted by her tears.

Instead of "forgiven," Garth had written: "*Loved.*"

"Can you post it at once?" Garth asked, in a low eager voice. "And she will come — oh, my God, she will come! If we catch to-night's mail, she may be here the day after to-morrow!"

Nurse Rosemary took up the letter; and, by an almost superhuman effort, spoke steadily.

"Mr. Dalmain," she said; "there is a postscript to this letter. It says: 'Write to The Palace Hotel, Aberdeen.'"

Garth sprang up, his whole face and figure alive with excitement.

"In Aberdeen?" he cried. "Jane, in Aberdeen! Oh, my God! If she gets this paper to-morrow morning, she may be here any time in the day. Jane! Jane! Dear little Rosemary, do you hear? Jane will come to-morrow! Didn't I tell you something was going to happen? You and Simpson were too British to understand; but Margery knew; and the woods told us it was Joy coming through Pain. Could that be posted at once, Miss Gray?"

The May-Day mood was upon him again. His face shone. His figure was electric with expectation. Nurse Rosemary sat at the table watching him; her chin in her hands. A tender smile dawned on her lips, out of keeping with her supposed face and figure; so full was it of the glorious expectation of a mature and perfect love.

"I will go to the post office myself, Mr. Dalmain," she said. "I shall be glad of the walk; and I can be back by tea-time."

At the post office she did not post the word in Garth's

handwriting. That lay hidden in her bosom. But she sent off two telegrams. The first to

*The Duchess of Meldrum,
Palace Hotel, Aberdeen.*

"Come here by 5.50 train without fail this evening."

The second to

*Sir Deryck Brand,
Wimpole Street, London.
"All is right."*