

with his ready hot passion, masked by those aspirations of his, and his fiery indignation seconding and applauding the despair of her own heart. For Blake knew the truth now—the truth as Sibylla's imaginings made it; and in view of that truth the thing his passion urged him to become a holy duty. His goddess must be no more misused; her misery must not be allowed to endure.

Knowing his thought and what his heart was towards her, Sibylla turned to him as a child turns simply from a hard to a loving face. Here was a life wanting her life, a love asking hers. She had always believed people when they said they loved and wanted her—why, she had believed even Grantley himself!—and was always convinced that their love for her was all they said it was. It was her instinct to believe that. She believed all—aye, more—about young Blake than he believed about himself, though he believed very much just now; and she would always have people all white or all black. Grantley was all black now, and Blake was very white, white as snow, while he talked of his aspirations and his love, and tempted her to leave all that bound her, and to give her life to him. He tempted well, for he offered no pleasure, but the power of doing good and bestowing happiness. Her first natural love seemed to have spent itself on Grantley; she had no passion left, save the passion of giving. It was to this he made his appeal; this would be enough to give him all his way. Yet there was the child. He had not yet ventured on that difficult, uncertain ground. There was where the struggle would be; it was there that he distrusted the justice of his own demand on her, there that his passion had to drown the inward voices of protest.

It might have happened that Jeremy, with his fresh love and fresh ambitions, would have been a relief to such a position; that his appeal both to sympathy and to amusement would have done something to clear the atmosphere. So far as he himself went, indeed, he was irresistible; his frankness and his confidence were not to be denied. Trusting in the order of nature, he knew no bashfulness; trusting in himself, he had no misgivings. Without doubt he was right. They all agreed that the old ideal of original research and a hundred a year must be abandoned, and that Jeremy must become rich and famous as soon as possible.

"Though whether you ought to forgive her in the end is, I must say, a very difficult point," remarked Grantley with a would-be thoughtful smile. "In cases of penitence, I myself favour forgiveness, Jeremy."

"But there is the revelation of her character," suggested Sibylla, taking the matter more seriously, or treating its want of seriousness with more tenderness.

"I'm inclined to think the young lady's right at present," said Blake. "What you have to do is to give her ground for changing her views—and to give her another ground for changing hers too."

Jeremy listened to them all with engrossed interest. Whatever their attitude, they all confirmed his view.

"You once spoke of a berth in the City?" he said to Grantley.

"Not much fancy there; but perhaps you may as well take things by instalments."

"I don't like it, you know. It's not my line at all."

Blake came to the rescue. The Selfords drew their money from large and important dyeing works, although Selford himself had retired from any active share in the work of the business. There was room for scientific aptitude in dyeing works, Blake opined rather vaguely. "You could make chemistry, for instance, subserve the needs of commerce, couldn't you?"

"That really is a good suggestion," said Jeremy, approvingly.

"Capital!" Grantley agreed. "We'll get at Selford for you, Jeremy, and if necessary we'll club together and send to Terra del Fuego and buy Janet Selford a new dog."

"I begin to see my way," Jeremy announced.

Whereat the men laughed, while Sibylla came round and kissed him, laughing, too. What a very short time ago, and she had been even as Jeremy, as sanguine, as confident, seeing her way as clearly, with just as little warrant of knowledge!

"Meanwhile you mustn't mope, old chap," said Grantley.

"Mope? I've no time for moping. Do you think I could see this Selford to-morrow?"

"I'll give you a letter to take to him," laughed Grantley. "But don't ask for ten thousand a year all at once, you know."

"I know the world. When I really want a thing I can wait for it."

But it was evident that he did not mean to wait very long. Grantley said ten thousand a year; a thousand would seem riches to the Middleman retort folk.

"That's right. If you want a thing, you must be ready to wait for it," agreed Grantley, with smiling lips and a pucker on his brow.

"So long as there is any hope," added Sibylla.

These hints of underlying things went unheeded by Jeremy, but Blake marked them. They were becoming more frequent now as the tension grew and grew.

"There's always a hope with reasonable people."

"Opinions differ so much as to what is reasonable."

"Dora's not reasonable at present, anyhow."

Jeremy's mind had not travelled beyond his own predicament.

The contrast he pointed, the mocking memories he stirred, made his presence accretate and embitter the strife, confirming Sibylla's despair, undermining even Grantley's obstinate self-confidence; while to Blake, his example, however much one might smile at it, seemed to cry "Courage!" He who would have the prize must not shrink from the struggle.

That night Sibylla sat long by her boy's cot. Little Frank slept quietly (he had been named after his godfather, Grantley's friend, that Lord Caylesham who was also the Fanslaw's friend), while his mother fought against the

love and the obligation that bound her to him—a sad and fearful fight to wage. She had some arguments not lacking speciousness. To what a life would he grow up in such a home as theirs! Look at the life the Courtland children led! Would not anything be better than that—any scandal in the past, any loss in present and future? She called to her help, too, that occasional pang which the helpless little being gave her, the innocent cause and ignorant embodiment of all her perished hopes. Might not that come offener? Might it not grow and grow till it conquered all her love, and she ended by hating because she might have loved so greatly? Horrible! Yes, but had it not nearly come to pass with one whom she had loved very greatly? It could not be called impossible, however to be loathed the idea might be. No, not impossible! Her husband was the child's father. Did he love him? No, she cried—she had almost persuaded herself that his indifference screened a positive dislike. And if it were not impossible, any desperate thing would be better than the chance of it. But for Grantley she could love, she could go on loving the child. Then why not make an end of her life with Grantley—the life that was souring her heart and turning all love to bitterness? Grantley would not want the child, and, not wanting it, would let her have it. She did not believe that he would burden himself with the boy for the sake of depriving her of him. She admitted with a passing smile that he had not this small spitefulness—his vices were on a larger scale. She could go to Grantley and say she must leave him. No law and no power could prevent her, and she believed that she could take the boy with her.

Why not do that? Do that and let honour at least stand pure and unimpeached!

The question brought her to the issue she had tried to shirk, to the truth she had sought to hide. Her love for the boy was much, but it was not enough, it did not satisfy. Was it even the greatest thing? As it were, with a groan, her spirit answered, No. The answer could not be denied, however she might

stand condemned by it. Of physical passion she had acquitted herself—and now she was in no mood for easy self-acquittal; but there was the greater passion for intercourse of soul, for union, for devotion, for abandonment of the heart. These asked a responsive heart, they asked knowledge, feelings grown to full strength, a consciousness with an intellect adult and articulate. They could be found in full only where she had thought to find them—in the love of woman and man, of fit man for fit woman, and of her for him. They could not be found in the love for her child. Christine Fanslaw had asked her if she could not be wrapped up in the baby. No, she could embrace it in her love, but hers was too large for its little arms to enfold. She cried for a wider field and what seemed a greater task.


And what was wrong, distasteful, disastrous in the conclusion? She had the old answer for this. "It's not my fault," she said. It was not her fault that her love had found no answering love, had found no sun to bloom in, and had perished for want of warmth. Not on her head lay the blame. So far as human being can dissolve human being from the commands of God or of human society, she declared that by Grantley's act she stood absolved. The contract in its true essence had not been broken first by her.

All! why talk? Why argue? There were true things to be said, valid arguments to use. On this she insisted. But in the end the imperious cry of her nature rang out over all of them and drowned their feebler voices. Come what might, and let the arguments be weak or strong, she would not for all her life, that glorious life Heaven had given her, beat her heart against the flinty wall.

(To be continued.)


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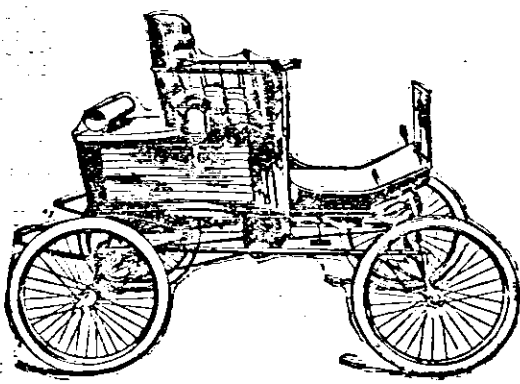


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