

ROMANCE SERIES No. 1

Peg's Angel

by
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"ARE YOU MAD" PANTED PEG.

PEG'S ANGEL

By WINSTON CARDEW

CHAPTER I

THE MAN ON THE CLIFF!

PEG laughed gleefully.

Peg was happy.

She was all alone—miles from everywhere and everybody. It was the first time in her life that she had been miles from everybody, and she was enjoying it.

Not that Peg liked being alone, or saw the charms that sages have seen in the face of Solitude. Peg was a gregarious girl. She liked being surrounded by friends. But this was a special occasion. It was Peg's last day at Bingley-on-Sea—her last day with Aunt Agatha. And it was enough to make any girl happy to be miles from Aunt Agatha.

Peg knew very well that she ought not to have rambled out over Caesar's Cliff. She knew that Aunt Agatha would be angry when she missed her. She knew that she ought to have been packing—getting ready for the journey on the morrow—that tremendous journey which was to change her life so utterly. She knew that she had a score of things to do—and had left them all undone. And she did not care! She just did not care!

She had to get away that day, all by herself, if only to think over the glorious future—so different from the chequered past. She had always wanted to clamber over the high cliff that looked out over the Channel. But Aunt Agatha never would permit her to do so. Peg was twenty—in Aunt Agatha's eyes she seemed to be still ten or twelve. Now, suddenly, almost without thinking, she had taken the bit between her teeth—and here she was.

Breathless, her cheeks glowing, her hair untidy in the wind, she clambered on top of the cliff, and stood there, panting a little, looking at the sea that rolled far below. Bingley-on-Sea was a mere spot in the distance. Far out on the Channel a steamer left a black trail of smoke. The wind blew fresh over the cliff, scattering her hair—she had not even a hat. She was quite unconscious what a pretty picture she made as she stood there. Besides, there was no one to see—nobody ever clambered to the top of Caesar's Cliff—or hardly ever. It was inaccessible from the sea, and tough going on the landward side. She had it all to herself.

But had she?

"Enjoying life, what?"

Peg gave quite a jump as she heard the drawling voice. It was not merely a start—it was a jump. Never had she been so startled. Not for a moment had it crossed her mind that there was anyone else on the summit of the cliff. She had seen no one—she had not dreamed of any company but that of the sea-gulls. And a man's voice came suddenly from nowhere.

She spun round like a top.

"Oh!" she ejaculated, in her surprise.

Then she saw him. He was sitting, or rather lying, on the rock, at a little distance, his back against another rock, facing the sea. She had passed within a few feet of him without seeing him—might never have seen him at all, had he not spoken. She caught her breath.

Peg had seen little of men. Men who came to Aunt Agatha's were few: and the few were all old. Aunt Agatha did not like men—young ones, at all events. She rather seemed to regard them as dangerous animals. More than one young man at Bingley-on-Sea had seen attraction in Peg's pretty face, but Peg hardly knew it: Aunt Agatha had taken care that no masculine contamination ever came near her niece. A Spanish duenna could not have been more careful. Peg would hardly have known what to do with a young man, had one of these dangerous animals been thrown on her hands. She did not know what to do now—except stare at the young man lying under the rock, whose sudden presence had so startled her. She just stared.

He smiled.

Had he risen to his feet, and approached her, Peg in all probability would have bolted. Luckily, he did not. He just remained where he was, lazily, and smiled.

And he had a very pleasant smile. Peg noticed that.

It was a reassuring smile. He was older than Peg—twenty-six or twenty-seven, perhaps. His face was a little tanned, as if it had been a good deal exposed to the weather. His eyes were dark, under quite nice lashes. Peg was conscious that he was a good-looking young man.

She was conscious, too, that he was rather a shabby young man. At all events, his clothes, though exceedingly well-fitting, were well worn. His hat, which lay beside him on the cliff, was a very old Homburg, unshapely and weatherstained. His boots were heavy and thick, and showed many signs of wear and tear. His face was of a grave cast; but the smile lighted it up wonderfully. His voice was very agreeable to the ear. He seemed amused.

"I must ask you to forgive me," he said, "I startled you."

"Yes! No! Yes!" stammered Peg, confusedly.

"You did not expect to find anyone here?"

"No!"

"It is too bad!" said the young man. "Do I spoil the view for you?"

"Oh! No!"

"If you would like me to go——!"

"No! No! Why should I?" asked Peg. "Everyone has a right to climb this cliff. I—I was startled—that is all. I—I did not know anyone was here, and when you spoke——"

"I shouldn't have!" said the young man, gravely. "We have not been introduced. But—you looked such a charming picture as you stood there, and you seemed so happy—it is good to see people looking happy. I've seen so many of the other sort, the past few years."

His face clouded as he spoke. Peg gave him a quick look—she understood at once. A young man, sturdy and strong—of course, he had been in the War. Peg had done vast quantities of sewing and knitting in the War years—Aunt Agatha had stood in the way of anything more strenuous. But he—what had he done, and what had he seen, in those dark and deadly years?

He was quick on the uptake. His eyes were on her face, and he read her thought as it passed through her mind.

"Yes," he said, as if she had spoken aloud, "I was in it. And glad to be out of it."

"You must be glad," said Peg, softly.

She made a movement. She remembered that she did not know this young man, and wondered, guiltily, what Aunt Agatha would have thought—and said!—about her speaking to a young man she did not know.

"Don't go!" he said.

"But—I—I——!"

"You didn't intend to go. I'm the cause! I'll go!" he said. To her surprise, he put a hand to the rock, to help himself to his feet. She would have expected so strong and sturdy a young man to leap up like a jack-in-the-box.

But she saw the reason the next moment. He limped a little, on his feet. He had been hurt.

"Oh!" panted Peg. "You have been wounded."

"Only a bomb fragment—and my knee got in its way!" he said, lightly. "I was lucky. But I have to be careful with it for a time. I was rather an ass to clamber up here, with a game leg—and I had to take a rest——"

"Why should you go?" said Peg. She noticed now a little packet that lay by the rock—obviously a lunch packet. He had come up there intending to remain for a long time—and she was driving him away; and his "game leg" needed a rest, that was certain, after such a clamber. She coloured. "Don't go," she added. "Why should you?"

"I won't—if you won't."

Peg laughed.

"I shall have to get back to lunch before long," she said.

"Why not share mine?"

"Oh!" gasped Peg.

"It is quite a good lunch, for these spare days," he said, gravely.

"There are ham sandwiches, and cheese sandwiches, and egg sandwiches. All sorts of sandwiches, and more than enough for two."

"But——!" stammered Peg.

"I understand." He nodded. "You don't know me. I don't know you. Let's pretend, for an hour or so, that we're old friends. Shall I tell you something? I came up here to be alone to think—to think out a problem which, I believe, has no answer. You've driven it from my mind, with your happy face and your happy laugh, and I'm glad—more than glad—to get rid of it for a time. Let's pretend we've got no troubles and no problems—and be happy children again for an hour. Then we'll part, knowing no more of one another than we know now. What?"

There was a long pause.

Peg realised that she ought to have said No. She realised, at least, that Aunt Agatha would have been most emphatically of opinion that she ought to have said No. But after all, where was the harm? She would go back to Aunt Agatha's—and to her new life on the morrow—and never see him again—and he would go into the unknown, and never see her again—and the whole thing would be as if it had never been.

"Yes!" she said.

"That's good of you!" he said, with the quiet graveness that Peg already liked. "You're doing me a good turn. I'll find you a nice comfortable rock, and we'll sit down to lunch—I'll forget my problems, and you shall forget yours—if you have any, which I suppose isn't possible."

"Oh, yes, I've lots of problems," said Peg. She laughed. "One is, what I shall say to Aunt Agatha about missing lunch at the Acacias."

"Oh! Is Aunt Agatha very nice?"

"Not at all."

"Is the Acacia an attractive abode?"

"Far from it."

"Then I pronounce that you are justified in giving them both a miss for once," he declared. "You simply can't let me down, after lifting me out of the depths of the blues. What I needed—I realise it now—was the sight of a happy face. It makes one more contented, to realise that there are still happy people in the world. You are doing me good."

"I'm glad!" said Peg, laughing.

"And I'm happy!" he said.

She sat down, on a boulder, under the lee of a great rock that kept off the wind. And he unpacked the lunch packet. And Peg, realising that it was lunch time, and that she was hungry, was glad to see that there were plenty of sandwiches. Someone had packed that lunch very carefully for the young man with the limp.

He sat down on a boulder, near but not too near. There was nothing about this grave young man to which even Aunt Agatha could have justly objected—indeed, Peg had a suspicion that he regarded her rather as a child, as Aunt Agatha did, and had no idea that she was twenty and quite grown-up. Anyhow, here she was, lurching on the cliff-top with a young man she had never seen before, whose name even she did not know, and—as she had to admit—enjoying it.

CHAPTER II

"PRIVATE SMITH"

"MIND if I smoke?"

"Please do!"

"And you?"

"Oh, no."

"Are you not modern?" he asked, with a bantering smile, as he leaned back against a rock, and lazily lighted a cigarette.

Peg coloured a little. She liked this young man; and he had talked very pleasantly over lunch—about nothing in particular, yet in a way that seemed to interest. Hardly a word about himself—not a word about the War. She was conscious of sympathy for him. Who he was, what he was, what rank he had held, she did not know; but she surmised that he had not found things easy since peace. His clothes and his hat did not hint of prosperity. It was too bad, Peg thought, that a man who had been through it, should find things hard when he came back. And he had said that he had a problem on his mind. Was it the problem of a "job"—the problem of finding a place for himself in the new, strange world that had followed the years of danger and convulsion?

He was looking at her with a smile—a sort of whimsical smile that she liked, and yet which made her feel a little indignant. She was sure now that he regarded her as Aunt Agatha did—not as a young woman in her twentieth year had a right to be regarded.

"How old do you think I am?" she asked, suddenly.

"I hadn't thought——!"

"Guess."

"Seventeen? Eighteen?"

"Twenty!" said Peg. "At least, nearly twenty. Twenty in a few months, anyhow. Did you think I was a schoolgirl?"

"No! But I did not think you were quite so venerable as all that," he answered, gravely. "If I had known that you were twenty—in a few months—I should not have had the nerve to speak to you."

"Now you're laughing at me," said Peg.

"No! No! But even if you are twenty—in a few months—you are still a charming child!" he said.

"So Aunt Agatha says—only she leaves out the adjective!" said Peg. "She thinks me a foolish, wilful child."

"Are you wilful?"

"Well, to-day, perhaps," admitted Peg. "I'm not supposed to come up here. I ought to be sorting things out and packing. I oughtn't to miss lunch. But—I couldn't help it. I expect I was excited about to-morrow. I felt that I had to cut loose for once. You see, to-morrow——"

"There is some great happening to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" Peg's eyes danced. She forgot that she had not known this young man an hour. She was eager to tell somebody how glad she was. And he was so kind and friendly, and at the same time so respectfully distant—why shouldn't she tell him? It came out with a rush: "You see, I'm going away."

"From your home?" he asked, puzzled.

"It isn't my home! At least, it is, and it isn't!" she explained. "Aunt Agatha's has been my home for three years, ever since—since poor papa——!" Her voice trailed off and her eyes clouded.

"I understand," he said, softly. "Carry on."

"There were two of us—my sister and I. We had nothing left—next to nothing. She went to one aunt, I to another. It was very kind of them, of course. I—I hope I'm not ungrateful. But—but—Bingley-on-Sea is so dull. And the Acacias is the dullest spot in Bingley-on-Sea. And—and Aunt Agatha is good, and she means to be kind, but—but——"

"I can see that there are many buts!" he remarked.

"Perhaps I'm a little beast really," said Peg, candidly. "I'm discontented. At least I was. After the news came this morning, I just had to get away—away from everything and everybody—all on my own! I just had to! I think the Acacias would have suffocated me if I had stayed indoors."

"The news?"

"We're rich now," said Peg, happily.

"That's fine."

"I mean, at least, my sister's rich, and that comes to the same thing. I'm going to her to-morrow, and we're going to live together for ever and ever." Peg almost crowed. "So do you wonder that I am happy to-day?"

"You must be very happy," he said, regarding her curiously. "You are very fond of your sister?"

"Of course. I'm fond of Aunt Agatha, too," added Peg, remorsefully. "But—but she doesn't mind my going. I—I rather think she'll be glad to have me off her hands. I'm rather a bother. Of course, she never meant it, but—but she often made me feel that it was rather unfair for her to have a niece suddenly thrown on her hands. So it was, of course. She's stood it for three years now, and—and I believe she'll be glad of a rest. And—I suppose you'll think it horrid of me, but—but I hate being poor."

"So do I!" he said, grimly.

"I mean, we were quite well off once, and it was a change," said Peg.

"What a coincidence! I found it a change, too," he said. "We're in the same boat, except——"

"Except what!"

"Except that I haven't a sister, and she hasn't become rich!" he said, laughing.

"I'm so sorry!" said Peg. "I'd like everybody to be rich and happy, especially to-day. But isn't it wonderful? When we read the letter this morning, I said it was too good to be true."

"And what did Aunt Agatha say?"

"She said: 'For goodness sake don't dance round the table, child. You make my head ache!'"

They laughed together.

"But I shan't make her head ache any more," said Peg. "I shall send her lovely flowers, and fruit, and things, from the estate."

"So there is an estate?"

"Yes, a lovely old house, in a lovely spot by the river, with lovely old furniture, and acres and acres," said Peg, jubilantly. "I saw it once, when I was a little kid. And now it's ours. It's like a dream. But being with Angel will be the best part of it?"

"Angel?" he repeated.

"My sister," explained Peg. "That's what I've always called her. It isn't her name, of course. But she is an angel, see, that's why."

"Is she as grown-up as you?"

"More," said Peg. "She's twenty-six. And such an angel. She feels just the same as I do—the best part of it is that we shall be together again. I—I haven't seen her, even, for more than a year. We—we couldn't afford the railway fares. And now there's lots and lots—and lots! She never told me till it was all settled, and she was there, ready to receive me home. Home! Real home, you know, just like we used to have—it seems such a jolly long time ago. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Very wonderful!" he said. "I'm glad!"

"That's very nice of you," said Peg, laughing, "and it's nice of you not to look bored, with a silly girl talking about herself all this time. But you see, I'm full of it. I think I should have told the postman, if I'd seen him as I came out. Now I've told you. And I don't know you from Adam."

"And I don't know you from Eve!"

"And we've met, on this cliff, and we shall never see one another any more," said Peg. "Isn't it curious?"

"No, I suppose we shall never see one another any more," he said, with a nod. "But I shall always remember to-day as a very bright day. I'm glad I clambered up this cliff—game leg and all. You've done me worlds of good."

"And you've forgotten your problem?" asked Peg.

"Almost!"

"Is it a very serious one?" Peg could hardly believe that it was herself speaking. But somehow she was feeling perfectly at home with this young man, as if she had known him for years. "Now I've told you all about myself, why not tell me something about yourself?"

"It's not so interesting," he answered, with a sigh. "Like the Mock Turtle in Wonderland, once I was a real turtle. And now——"

"Now you're a man who's fought for his country!" said Peg.

"Yes," he smiled. "I'm that—like a million others. But five years taken out of life—when you're beginning—leaves one rather at a loose end. I am—or rather was—an engineer."

"An engineer?" repeated Peg. "You know all about machines, and—and things?"

"Yes," he said, gravely. "I know quite a lot about machines—and

things. Everything looked rosy—when the war came. That knocked everything out. As it's not my real name, I may as well introduce myself as Private Smith."

"How nice!" said Peg, demurely.

"I was sent home once, with a wound, and fell into angelic hands," he continued. "That was almost the only break. Now it's over, and we have to begin again at the foot of the ladder."

His face had clouded darkly.

Peg gave him a look—quite a penetrating look.

"That's not your problem!" she said.

His eyes rested on her face, startled.

"How did you guess that?" he asked.

"Well, it isn't, is it?" said Peg. "You're young enough, and strong enough, and plucky enough, to face all that, and make next to nothing of it. Your problem is something quite different."

He was silent for a long moment.

"Yes, you're right," he said, at length. "It's something quite different—and all the rest is nothing to it."

"What's her name?" asked Peg.

He gave quite a jump.

"You're a little witch!" he exclaimed. "How did you—a little kid like you—"

"I'm not a little kid," said Peg, warmly. "I've told you I'm nearly twenty. Poor boy!"

"Are you calling me a poor boy?" He stared.

"Yes. Poor boy!" said Peg, teasingly. "Is she very beautiful?"

"Very!" he said.

"And you love her to distraction?"

"No!"

"Not to distraction?"

"Not at all."

"Then—then where's the problem?" asked Peg, in bewilderment. "I—I thought—"

"You are not such a little witch after all," he said, smiling. "In me, my dear child, you do not behold a love-sick swain."

"You're not in love?"

"No!"

Peg's red lips parted in a smile. Why she felt a strange glow of satisfaction, when this utterly unknown young man told her that he was not in love, she could not understand, and did not think of trying to understand. But it was a fact. She had guessed that he was in love—but if he had told her that it was so, it would have hurt her.

"Then I give it up!" she declared. "Perhaps you're like one of Byron's heroes, with a dark, dark secret."

"Perhaps I am," he assented, smiling.

Peg glanced at her wrist-watch, and gave a sudden start. She leaped up from the boulder. His eyes followed her; he was thinking, perhaps, what a pretty picture she made, in her short skirt, and close-fitting jumper, and with her hair blowing in the wind. More slowly, he rose to his feet.

"Must you go?" he asked.

"I had no idea I'd stayed so long," exclaimed Peg. "Aunt Agatha will be having the sea dragged for me. I must run."

"Won't you let me see you to the foot of the cliff?"

"Not unless you hurry. I oughtn't to have stayed so long—I oughtn't to have come at all," said Peg, remorsefully. "I must fly."

"I will fly, too!" he said.

They started down the landward side of the cliff together. It was a steep path, winding among rugged rocks, down to the road that ran amid green fields to Bingley. Peg was active and swift as a young deer—and for some distance, the young man was as active and swift. Then Peg suddenly observed that his face had become pale, and that there was a drop of perspiration on his brow.

She stopped instantly.

"Oh, I'd forgotten!" she exclaimed. "How could I forget! I've made you hurry—with a game leg! Oh, do forgive me."

"My own fault, he said. "The climb up here was rather too much for it. Don't let me delay you, child—run on."

"I wish you wouldn't call me a child," said Peg, petulantly. "And I won't run on, so there! I'm going to see you safe down."

He chuckled.

"The old order changeth, giving place to the new!" he said. "Woman is no longer the weaker vessel." His chuckle died away, and he leaned heavily against a rock. "By gad, it's worse than I thought! Do run on, little one—"

"I'm not a little one."

"No! No! Of course not," he said, soothingly. "But run on; I—I shall have to rest here before I go further. I'm ashamed of being such a creak—but there it is—I can't go further. Good-bye."

"Rot!" said Peg, tersely. "Lean on my arm."

"Wh-a-t?"

"I'm going to help you! Think I'm going to leave you up here on this lonely cliff all on your own?" exclaimed Peg, indignantly. "I'm late already, and I'm going to be later—I don't care! I'm going to help you down."

"But——!" he stammered.

"Dont talk any more—just lean on me, and let me help you."

He stared at her, then smiled, and did as she bid him. Slowly, with the girl's help, he moved on down the steep path. He limped painfully; and before they had gone far, his arm was thrown over Peg's shoulder, and she was taking a good deal of weight. But she did not feel the weight—she felt the pressure of the arm, and it gave her a strange glow of comfort and content. If she was tired when they reached the foot of the winding path, she did not feel tired—she was sorry that they had reached it.

They stood for a moment, on the level. His arm was still round her slim shoulders. Slowly he withdrew it, as if unwillingly.

"Thank you," he said, quietly.

Peg's breath came quickly.

"You—you're all right now?"

"Quite! I will sit here and rest, and then toddle home by the road," he said, smiling. "O.K. now. Many, many thanks, my dear young lady."

"Good-bye," said Peg.

"Good-bye!" he said.

She hesitated a moment, and then held out her hand. He took it in a much larger and browner one.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

Then she was gone.

CHAPTER III
LOVE OR NO LOVE?

"YOUR letter's come, sir."

"Oh!" said Derek Compton. "It's come?"

"Yes, sir! I've put it on the table in your room, as you asked me."

"Thanks."

Derek went slowly up the steep, dusky inn stair. So the letter had come—her letter. He had felt sure that it would come to-day—and he had gone out, and climbed Caesar's Cliff, as if to avoid it when it came. But it had come, and it lay awaiting him in his room; and now he was going to know what Grace had decided. Very slowly he went up the stair, not wholly because of the limp in his leg. What had she written?

He went into his room and shut the door. The open windows looked towards the sea, bright in the sunshine. His first glance went to the letter that lay on the table. He knew the hand—a graceful yet firm feminine hand. The very hand-writing seemed to tell him of Grace Vernon—it was like her, graceful, womanly, firm—she was firm. She was not a woman to change her mind. Why was not he equally firm?

He did not immediately pick up the letter. He stood looking from the window at the sea, his face dark and clouded. She was not changeable—she was loyal to the core, firm and true. Was he changeable—was he a weakling who did not know his own mind—eager for a thing one day, tired of it the next? He had always disliked and despised such a character. Was it, after all, his own?

He did not think so. It had all been so unreal, so feverish, in those wild War days. He had been wounded—and she had nursed him—she had nursed and helped others—one of the brave, good women who had faced, without flinching, one of the hardest jobs of the War. Afterwards, when he was convalescent, he had seen her—and seen her again—they had become friends—and more. His heart had been overflowing with gratitude; and all the more, perhaps because she was reserved, and hard to approach, he had believed that he was in love with her. Indeed he did love her—who could help loving so kind and good a woman, who was so beautiful, too? But did he love her as a man should love the woman he wanted to marry? He knew—now—that he did not.

He had known little of her but her name—but he understood that she was far from wealthy; that she was an orphan and lived with relatives; her outlook after the War as uncertain as his own. Marriage seemed a long way off—neither he nor she inclined to a hasty thoughtless War marriage; though he realised now that had he loved her as he fancied, he would have inclined to it. They had become engaged; his faith was pledged. And he was the man to stand by his pledged faith.

But then had come that strange news. He cursed himself when he saw in it an avenue of escape. The Red Cross nurse—the girl who would probably be looking for a companion's job after the War—was, it seemed, the grand-daughter of old Sir Nicholas Crane, of Crane House, in Berkshire, who had died and left everything to his grand-daughter. She had written him the news, and he had answered, that he could not now think of holding her to her word. She was rich, and he was poor—she had all that wealth could bring, and he had nothing but what might come of his own exertions—he, a demobbed soldier with a game leg. He gave her her freedom.

Surely that had been right?

Everyone would have called him a fortune-hunter—in the long run,

she might have believed it herself. How could he, with a few hundred pounds and dubious prospects, hold her to her word—the wealthy mistress of Crane House? Yes, he had been right to offer her her freedom.

But——!

“You rotter!” he said, in a low voice. “You rotter!”

He knew that he had wanted his own freedom. Grace would never know that—she was too loyal, too true, to think of it, suspect, or dream of it. She would take his letter at face value. And—if she had any worldly sense—she would be glad to take the offered release—to get rid of the soldier lover of the wild War years. But had she?

He stretched out his hand to the letter, but did not take it up. He seemed to dread what he might read when he opened it.

But he knew what was in it. He felt that he knew. That was the problem he had gone up the cliff to think out that day. Little had that “little witch” on the cliff guessed what his problem really was. If she had guessed, probably she would have despised him. He despised himself.

He snatched up the letter, at last, with a hurried hand, and tore it open. He had to know.

Dear Derek,

I have read your letter. It is just like you. I feared that something of the kind might come into your thoughts when I told you what had happened.

But did you think, dear, that I could change? Could you think so?

I will not say, dear Derek, that I care nothing for the fortune that has come to me. But I do say that I care nothing for it in comparison with your love. I do say, most solemnly, that if your pride is hurt, I will give it up—every penny—rather than wound you. The proudest moment in my life was when you asked me to be your wife. Nothing else matters.

You shall decide, dear Derek. If you prefer it, we will be poor. You shall think it over and decide. Rich or poor, I shall be happy and proud to marry the man I love.

Come to me.

Your loving,

GRACE.

Derek Compton crushed the letter in his hand. He seemed to see her before him, with her calm lovely face and kind, grey eyes. Why did he not love her? He had thought and believed that he did.

“You worm!” he said to himself. “You’re not fit to blacken her shoes—you’re not good enough for her to walk on. You’re a rotter—why did the shells spare you, when better men went down?”

He paced the room.

After all, where was the problem? It was not as if he had been in love with somebody else. He was free—heart-free and fancy-free. For a second, a vision seemed to cross his view—a slight girl in a jumper, with hair blowing out in the wind. He shook himself impatiently. He had fancied himself in love once—he was not likely to fall to the same fancy again, for a slip of a girl he had met for an hour on a cliff. Perhaps he was incapable of love, as Grace understood it—the War, perhaps! The War did such things to you! He liked her, he respected her, he admired her—he—loved her! Yes, he did love her, he told himself savagely; and even if he did not love as she loved, why should not such a marriage be happy? What could he ask more

in a wife than Grace Vernon could give him? If he made her happy, what else was there to think or care about? Was he a whining weakling, thinking only of himself? He knew that he could make her happy—he had only to keep his plighted word.

His lips set.

"I love her!" he said, aloud. "I will love her—I do love her! I will make her happy, God helping me."

He sat down to write.

Dearest Grace,

Your letter has driven away all my doubts, dear heart. You shall make no such sacrifice for me as you have spoken of—money matters little between us; and it would be long, long before I could offer you a home worthy of you. I rejoice in your good fortune, darling, as I rejoice in your love.

He paused, and looked at what he had written. It was true—it was true—he was determined that it was true. From this moment, his mind should never waver—no cold doubt should creep in.

He wrote again:

Yes, dear, I will come. In a few days I shall be with you—only a few days now. Love me, Grace, and neither of us will ever think of anything but our love.

Your own,

DEREK.

Five minutes later, the man who had served King and Country as "Private Smith" limped down the road to the letter-box. He stood with the letter in his hand, poised at the slot—and for a strange second, two dancing eyes, and untidy hair blowing in the wind, flashed before his vision. Then he dropped the letter in, and heard it fall. That was that!

CHAPTER IV

HOME!

"ANGEL!" almost shrieked Peg.

The train had hardly stopped. Peg did not care. She raced across the platform to the tall, graceful figure that stood there, threw her arms round her elder sister, and hugged her.

"Oh, Angel, dear!" almost sobbed Peg.

There were tears in her eyes—tears of happiness. It was a year since she had seen "Angel." In earlier years they had always been together—Angel almost as much a mother as an elder sister. Angel had always been so thoughtful, so capable. In the War she had done nursing, and Peg would have been glad to join her, but for the claims of Aunt Agatha. Now—now all was over; the War and its horrors were gone; now they were going to be always together, and happy—happy as the day was long.

"Dear Peg!" said Grace Vernon. "Dear kid! I needn't ask if you are glad to come, Peg."

"Hardly!" chuckled Peg. "Angel, it's too good to be true. I know I shall wake up, and hear Aunt Agatha asking for her tablets. I'm dreaming, Angel."

"You weren't very happy with Aunt Agatha, I'm afraid."

"Oh! Yes! But she wasn't sorry to lose me," said Peg. "Hannah, her old maid, came back when the War was over, so she doesn't need me to give her her headache tablets, and find her knitting needles, and fetch books from the library. She doesn't want me, Angel—but you do, don't you?"

Grace Vernon laughed. Her face was as happy as her young sister's. They were not in the least alike—Grace tall and dark, and statuesque—Peg fair and slim and slight. Few would have taken them for sisters. Certainly no thought of resemblance had struck Derek Compton when he met Peg on the cliff at Bingley-on-Sea.

"Dear child!" said Grace. "Now I must see about your baggage. Shall we walk to the house, Peg—it is only a quarter of a mile. But you remember—you have not forgotten that we came here once, as children."

"I remember," said Peg. "I did not like grandfather, and he did not like me. I believe he liked you, Angel. He couldn't help that, sour as he was."

"His only son was killed in the other war, Peg, and that soured him," said Grace. "I had not the faintest idea that he even remembered me—and when I was told of the will, I could not believe it. But——"

"But now you're rich, Angel."

"We are, you mean," said Grace.

"Of course! Shall we have a car?" asked Peg.

"Little goose, we can have anything we like.

"Not a pony?" asked Peg, her eyes dancing.

"The beautifullest pony that ever was."

"Oh, you dear!" said Peg. "Not that I really care a bean about a car or a pony either, Angel. I don't care about anything except just coming home with you. We're going to live happily ever after, Angel, and be two happy old maids. When we get frightfully old, we will sit and knit, and talk about how lovely it's been."

A slight shade crossed Grace Vernon's brow for a moment. She was about to speak—but checked herself. This was not the moment to tell Peg of her engagement with Derek.

From the little country station, a leafy lane led towards the river. Peg almost danced along the lane. The big iron gates of Crane House stood open, and they walked up an avenue of beeches to the house.

"Oh, what a change from the Acacias!" said Peg, blissfully. "I remember it all, Angel, though I never supposed I should see it again. I remember grandfather's old butler—what was his name—Poole——"

"Poole is still here," said Grace, "and Mrs. Coates, grandfather's old housekeeper. Come this way, dear."

The house fronted the river, with wide green lawns and old beeches between. Peg's eyes danced at the gleam of the water in the sun. Wide French windows stood open, and they entered a drawing-room that Peg faintly remembered. Peg rushed to the piano. There was a crash of far from concordant sound.

"I'm out of practice," said Peg. "Aunt Agatha couldn't stand it—she said it made her head ache! I daresay it did. Poor, dear Aunt Agatha! How happy she will be now! I can practice now, Angel."

"Every minute of the day if you like, dear."

"Well, I shan't do that!" chuckled Peg. "I'll have some mercy on Poole, and Mrs. Coates! And there's the river—and there's going to be the pony! And there will be tennis. And—and lots of things, Angel."

"Lots and lots!" said Grace, smiling.

Peg pirouetted about the room. Peg was twenty—but she did not feel more than ten at the moment. She had been happy, even at Aunt Agatha's—now she was bubbling with happiness. Grace Vernon watched her with an indulgent smile. A grave face under grey hair

looked in at an open doorway. Two solemn eyes grew wide at the sight of the pirouetting Peg.

"My sister, Poole," said Miss Vernon. "You remember her, perhaps?"

"Oh, yes, madam!" gasped Poole.

Peg came to a sudden stop, her face crimson. She suddenly remembered that she was twenty; and that at twenty one did not pirouette about a room like a schoolgirl. Poole faded away, and Peg gave Grace a penitent look.

"I shall have to be serious!" she said. "I've shocked Poole! The sister of Miss Vernon of Crane House must be dignified. But I'm so happy, Angel."

"And I'm so happy, Peg! Now come up to your room, and I will brush your hair, just as I used to do, before tea."

"Oh, what bliss!" crowed Peg.

It was a lovely room, with a balcony that looked on the river. It was still like a dream, to Peg. Was she really sitting in this lovely room, with Angel—dearest Angel—brushing her fair hair, as in the happy old days? She was inclined to pinch herself to make sure that she was really awake. The Acacias and Bingley-on-Sea seemed a long way off now.

"Dear Angel!" said Peg.

"Dear Peg!" smiled Grace.

"And we're really going to live here, for ever and ever, and always be together every day and every day and every day and every day!" crowed Peg. "Every day and every day and every day till we're thirty, and forty, and fifty—world without end, amen! Oh, Angel! Won't it be lovely?"

"Look in the glass, dear." Grace held up a hand-glass. Peg looked at the reflection of a happy bewitching face.

"Why!" she asked.

"Can't you see a reason why you won't be allowed to stay with me till you're thirty, and forty, and fifty?" asked Grace.

"Oh, what rot!" said Peg, scornfully. "No man is going to be allowed to come in and spoil it all. Not for you and not for me, Angel."

Grace's eyes clouded for a moment. Peg knew nothing of Derek—and she would not tell her now.

Not that it would make any difference. Peg's home was with her—Derek would be a big brother to the child. He would like her—he was sure to like her. And she would like him—she could not help liking Derek. Even that strain of weakness in his character, with all his strength and all his courage, made him all the more likeable. Of course Peg would like him. They would all be happy together—till Peg's turn came, as it must come. But she would not tell the child yet.

"Some day, dearest, there will be a nice boy!" said Grace.

"Bosh!" said Peg.

"You have never seen anyone—yet—that—that——"

"Bingley-on-Sea was not much populated with nice boys," chuckled Peg, "and if there were any, Aunt Agatha would have frozen them off. I don't think much of men, anyhow. There never was one I remembered for five minutes, well, perhaps one!" she added, reflectively.

"One that you remember?" asked Grace.

"Well, yes—but he was not like others," said Peg, innocently. "There

was something I rather liked—perhaps because he was down on his luck, poor boy—and had a problem.”

“A problem?”

“One he couldn't solve, I think,” said Peg. “He wasn't in love—he told me that he wasn't. So it wasn't that! I don't know what it was—but I felt sort of sorry.”

“Who was he?” asked Grace, a little gravely.

“I don't know.”

“My dear! You don't know? But Aunt Agatha——”

“Aunt Agatha never knew!” Peg whistled. “I shouldn't have dared to tell Aunt Agatha that I talked to a man I met on the cliff.”

“Peg!”

The hair brush was still. Peg's head spun round to look at her sister. Grace's face was very grave. Peg burst into a laugh.

“Cheerio, old dear,” she said. “No, I'm not a little baggage! I didn't make a habit of talking to strangers on cliffs! I never went on Caesar's Cliff but once—and the poor boy happened to be there, that's all. And he was nice. He never even asked me my name, and he listened as politely as anything when I told him all about our good luck, and that I was going home to Angel—and the poor boy must have been bored stiff.”

“But who—what was he?” asked Grace.

“Ask me another!” said Peg. “Some sort of a demobbed Tommy, that is all I know. But he was nice, and I believe I'm sorry that I shall never see him again. Are you tired, Angel?”

“No, no!” said Grace; and the hair brush resumed. Peg was silent for a few minutes—she was thinking of a tanned face, of an arm that had leaned heavily on her shoulder. But she did not want to talk about “Private Smith”—even to Angel. When she talked again, as she soon did, it was of boats, and ponies, and walks in the woods—rather to Grace Vernon's relief.

CHAPTER V

A SHOCK FOR PEG!

“A WEEK!” said Peg, sinking back in the deck-chair with a sigh of content, her dreamy gaze on the river that flowed by the garden beeches.

“Eight days!” said Grace.

“You've been counting the days!” chuckled Peg.

Grace smiled—but with a little constraint. She had been counting the days for a reason Peg never guessed. Why did not Derek come? Her letter, and his reply, surely had cleared the little cloud that had arisen. She could understand his feelings; he was proud, and it was difficult. Marriage would make him master of Crane House and the wide Crane acres. But it could make no difference to them; and his reply to her letter had assured her of it. Yet he did not come, nor had he written again. Why did he not come? She counted the days, the hours, to his coming, and still he did not come. Every hour she expected a ring on the telephone, or a telegram. But there was no word. Was her money to be a bar between them after all? She would not believe that—she would not think it—but more than once Peg had noticed a little cloud on Angel's brow, and wondered why

“A penny for them, Angel!” said Peg, suddenly.

“For what, dear?”

"Those deep sad thoughts!" said Peg. "You keep on thinking of something you haven't told me, Angel—think I don't know?"

Grace paused. Should she tell her now? She had to know, before Derek came. Would it hurt her to know?

From the house, across the sunny garden, came a plump, solid, solemn figure. It was Poole, with the silver salver he had carried for forty years in the service of old Sir Nicholas. On it lay a telegram.

Grace caught her breath. Her colour came and went. She knew what it was long before Poole reached the spot with his slow and creaking steps.

"A telegram, madam."

"Thank you, Poole."

At last! It might not be from Derek—but she knew it was. And it was. It was brief.

"To-morrow. Derek."

"There is no answer, Poole."

"Very good, madam."

Grace sat with the telegram in her hand. Peg was looking at the river. She was not interested in telegrams. The wonders of Crane House and her new life had not yet become dulled for Peg. She was as eager, as happy, as carefree, as on the day she had rushed into Angel's arms at the station. A week had passed like a flash in her new home, it seemed to Peg.

"Peg, dearest!"

Grace's voice was very tender. Peg had to know now; to-morrow she would see Derek when he came. Surely Peg would understand. That infantile vision of two happy sisters growing old together showed what a child she still was. Her turn would come, soon or late—probably sooner rather than later.

"Yes, old think." Peg glanced round, and started a little at the gravity in her sister's face. "Dear! Not bad news in that beastly telegram?"

"No! No! Good news," said Grace. "The best of news."

"It's made you jolly solemn, for the best of news. Not about the pony, is it?" asked Peg.

"No, not about the pony," said Grace, smiling. "I—I have something to tell you, Peg. I should have told you before, but—indeed, I should have mentioned it in writing to you, long ago, but—" She paused: "You were such a child! And—and it might have been so long before it came to anything. It might never have come to anything. But now—" She paused again.

"Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice said in Wonderland," said Peg, laughing. "What is the dread secret, old thing?"

"I'm engaged."

It came out abruptly. Grace watched her young sister anxiously. She had a miserable feeling that Peg might feel that she had let her down—she, who had never let anyone down.

Peg sat bolt upright. She stared at Grace with wide incredulous eyes. Then her lip trembled.

"You don't mean that, Angel?"

"Yes, Peg."

"Engaged?"

"Yes."

"To a man?" exclaimed Peg.

Peg did not realise that that question was simply idiotic. She was overwhelmed. A week of her new glorious life, every day with Angel,

every day happy and glorious from dawn to eve; and now—this! It had been too good to last. But this— Her lips quivered and quivered and her eyes clouded with tears.

"Oh, Angel!" she faltered.

"Dearest Peg!" Grace leaned over her chair, and patted her hand, like a mother with a child. "It will make no difference to us. You will have a brother as well as a sister, that is all. We shall all be very happy here. You will like Derek?"

"Is that his name?"

"Yes: Derek Compton."

"He is coming here?"

"To-morrow."

"And when—when—when——?" Peg could not go on. An engagement, naturally, led to a wedding. Peg was interested in weddings. But not in Angel's. Angel married—her new happy life suddenly at an end—some wretched man there, always between them—it was a crushing blow.

"That is not settled yet, dear. Soon, perhaps—there is nothing to wait for—now. You will try to like Derek, Peg!"

"Oh! Yes!" mumbled Peg, confusedly. "But—but— Oh, Angel! Where's my hanky? I—I'm not crying—it's a fly in my eye—a gnat! I—I—I'm very—very happy, Angel—if—if—if you are."

"You loyal little darling!" said Grace. "I know it's a surprise—a shock to you, Peg—I know it is. But you're such a child—a dear child——"

"I'm not a child, and I understand perfectly," said Peg, with dignity. "I shall be very polite to Mr. Compton."

"If you call him Mr. Compton, Peg, I shall cry, too!" said Grace, her voice trembling.

"I'm a little beast!" said Peg, with her quick remorse. "But I'm not crying—it was an eye in my fly—I—I mean a fly in my eye. I'm frightfully interested, and—and all that. But—but it's rather sudden, Angel—I—I was thinking that—that—that—oh, dear! Only a week, and now—it's all over."

"It isn't all over, dear, it's just beginning," said Grace. "You will like Derek. You will see him to-morrow, and then—you will like him."

Peg had her doubts of that. No doubt it was natural enough for Derek, whoever Derek was, to fall in love with Angel. That perhaps was not his fault. But she was not going to like him. How could she like anyone who took her Angel away from her? She was feeling that she hated Derek already. But she was not going to tell Angel that. Poor Angel—of course she thought he was the finest creature ever! Poor Angel! For the first time in her life, Peg felt older than her sister. Older and wiser; certainly not likely to lose her head about any Dereks!

"O.K.," said Peg, at last. "I—I—I'll like him, like—like anything. But—I never dreamed— How did it happen, Angel?"

"You know I was nursing, in the War," said Grace. "He was wounded—and I was there. That was the beginning. Afterwards—before he went back—we came to an understanding. But—but it was all uncertain, then—we said nothing about it. And even after peace, all was very uncertain and doubtful, until——"

"Until—this!" said Peg, with a gesture that took in all the Crane estate along the shining river.

"Well, yes. Otherwise we might have had to wait for years—many

years. Derek will make good again. But it will take time. But now—I must tell you, Peg, that when I told him of grandfather's will, he offered me my freedom."

"That was decent," said Peg.

"But Derek will make his own place in the world," said Grace.

Peg looked at her. Evidently, this Derek was a man with his way to make—and in the meantime, Crane House and its fortune! Still, if he had offered Angel her freedom, he was not a fortune-hunter.

"He was in the war?" she asked.

"Yes—little more than a lad when it started. He was studying—he was to have been an engineer——"

"Oh!" Peg's face was less clouded. "I like engineers."

"Do you, my dear? I am glad of that," said Grace, with an amused smile. "Well, Derek will still be a great engineer some day."

"Building railways, and bridges, and things," said Peg. "I think it's fearfully clever to understand all about machinery."

"Derek is clever," smiled Grace, "and—and such a dear, Peg. He gave up everything for the war. Now he has his way to make again, but he will make it."

Peg was thinking of another man who had his way to make.

"He went into the ranks, under an assumed name," said Grace.

"When I first knew him, I thought his name was Smith——"

"Smith!" said Peg, starting.

"Not that I cared what his name was," said Grace.

"What a coincidence."

"What? What is a coincidence?"

"Oh! Nothing! I—I suppose a lot of men joined up under new names—and hundreds called themselves Smith!" said Peg, laughing. "It's the first name that would come to mind. But how romantic, Angel. I suppose he had an old school tie in his pocket all the time."

"Harrow," said Grace. "Not that I cared, or care. It's just Derek."

"Just Derek!" murmured Peg. She smiled—determinedly. Derek was coming to-morrow—coming between her and Angel—nothing would be the same again after Derek came. She knew it, if Angel did not. It seemed to Peg that the sunlight was no longer shining on the river. A week—how happy it had been. And now it was all over—and Angel was going to be married, and she was going to be odd man out. But she mustn't say anything to hurt Angel!

"But what did you mean by a coincidence, dear?" Grace asked, chiefly to break the silence that had fallen.

"The pony is coming to-morrow—and Derek is coming to-morrow!" said Peg, wilfully. "Isn't that a coincidence? You will have Derek, and I shall have the pony! It's no good asking me to swop!"

And Grace laughed—this was happy Peg again. The child had been surprised—disappointed—hurt. She knew that. But she had quickly recovered—now she was her merry self again.

And Peg remained her merry self—till she was able to get alone to her room. Then the tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks. Derek was coming, and it was all going to be rotten, and she hated Derek.

CHAPTER VI

DEREK!

"OH! YOU!" gasped Peg.

Never had she been so astonished.

And never, perhaps, so excited and pleased—not even on the day when she had come to her new home. It was utterly unexpected—

indeed Peg could scarcely believe her eyes when they fell on "Private Smith" in the leafy lane. How could she have expected ever to see him again? She was a hundred miles from Bingley-on-Sea—from Caesar's cliff where she had met that young man with his grave face and whimsical smile.

Peg was tramping along the lane with a pucker in her brow. She ought not to have gone out that morning, she knew that—Derek Compton was expected that morning. But that was why. Just as she had done that day on Caesar's Cliff, Peg had taken the bit between her teeth.

Ever since yesterday, she had been playing a part—for Angel's sake. She had been resolutely cheerful and smiling; she had even affected to look forward to the morrow and Derek's coming. But, that morning, she had felt that she could stand no more. After all, they would not miss her—even Angel would not miss her—when Derek came. She would only be in the way. Much better get off the scene, and when she came in, and found Derek Compton there, it would come easier. Anyhow it would put off seeing him.

So there was Peg, tramping up the lane; when, from the direction of the railway station, a sturdy figure—still with a slight limp—came in sight, and she stared blankly at the man she had met on Caesar's Cliff.

He saw her the next moment. His face had been dark and thoughtful, his eyes on the ground; he looked up, to see Peg. And the sudden brightness that came over his face made Peg's heart beat.

"You—here!" he exclaimed.

He came up quickly. Peg could only gaze at him, astonished, and happy, though why she was happy she hardly knew. Her hand was swiftly enclosed in the brown hand she remembered. He held it, and looked at her—as if he could never look long enough.

"You!" he said. "The little witch of the cliff."

"You—Private Smith!" she said, with a tremulous laugh. "We were never going to see one another again—and it is hardly more than a week—"

"So you live in Berkshire now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"With the Angel you told me of?"

"Yes."

"And everything is as happy as you anticipated?"

"Yes, everything—or—or nearly everything. Do you live in Berkshire, too?" asked Peg.

"No; this is a visit; I am putting up at the village inn."

"Here to-day and gone to-morrow, just like Bingley-on-Sea?" said Peg, laughing, but with a tremor in her laugh. "Have you solved that problem yet?"

His bright face suddenly clouded. He had been holding her hand, as if unconscious of it. Now he suddenly released it.

"That problem!" His voice was harsh. "Oh! Yes! That is all over. But I must not detain you—good-bye, my unknown little friend."

He raised his hat and passed on, leaving Peg staring.

She stood in the lane, watching him as he went, her heart beating. He did not look back—not a glance, even as he turned the corner of the lane and disappeared. Why had he gone so abruptly? He had been glad to see her—his first glance had been like the sun coming out in a dark sky. Why had he gone like that?

Peg was puzzled—and she was hurt. They had become friends, in a

way, in that happy hour on Caesar's Cliff—and this meeting, in a far-off country, was so very strange and unexpected—surely he might have been sufficiently interested in her to waste a few minutes.

Peg walked on slowly.

He was gone—once more they had met briefly, never to meet again—for this strange chance meeting was not likely to be repeated. Such chances did not happen twice. Why had her heart leaped so when she saw him? Was it possible—was she such a little fool as to have fallen for a man she had known only for an hour—a man whose name she did not even know?

The blood surged into her face.

He didn't care about her, that was certain. He had looked glad to see her—only surprise, perhaps—he had wasted only a few words, hardly a few minutes, and then gone on his way, and forgotten her again. And the best thing she could do was to forget him.

But she could not. She walked on, slowly, slowly; and turned into a path by the river, and threw herself into the grass under a shady tree. She had been going to the village—but she forgot that now. She lay in the grass, staring at the shining water, thinking—or trying to think, why had her heart leaped, and her pulses beat, and her blood raced when that brown hand held hers so long? Nothing like that had ever happened to her before.

"Angel!" she whispered.

She understood Angel now—as she had not understood her only yesterday. If that was how Angel felt about Derek—and of course it was—what a little beast she had been to be hurt, and disappointed, and to think that she hated Derek. She had felt that Angel was letting her down—and now she knew—she knew—that a word from "Private Smith" would drive Angel from her mind. What nonsense had she talked to Angel about two happy old maids in that lovely house—what nonsense! What a child she had been—only yesterday—what a child, till this sudden knowledge came to her.

But he did not care!

She would never see him again—and yet, she might. If he was staying at the village inn—visiting somewhere in the neighbourhood—it was possible—indeed, it was likely. Did he want to see her again? It did not seem like it, the way he had left her in the lane. Yet how suddenly bright and glad he had looked when he saw her. Peg was puzzled.

Then she suddenly remembered, and jumped to her feet. She had intended to stay out till lunch—to keep out of hateful Derek's way. But Derek was no longer hateful—and it was mean of her, beastly of her, to avoid the man that Angel loved, the man to whom Angel was engaged. She was full of remorse. She began to walk quickly. Everything had changed in the last hour—since that knowledge had come to her. She was going to like Derek—whatever he was like, she was going to like him, because it would make Angel happy if she did. And what did it matter anyway, with such strange new thoughts in her mind, and such strange new feelings in her heart? She felt as if she had grown years older that morning. She walked quickly, and came in by the garden gate, and crossed the lawns to the open French windows of the drawing-room.

There was the sound of the piano from within. Derek, no doubt, was there—but it was Angel playing. She looked in, her eyes a little dazzled from the sunshine, into the shady room.

Angel was at the piano, playing softly. Peg had a glimpse of the

back of a man's head over the high back of a chair. That must be Derek, and Angel was playing to him.

She stepped in. The music died away. Grace Vernon rose from the music stool, and smiled at her sister across the room.

"Peg, dear! Derek is here."

"I—I'm sorry I was—was out—I've come in!" stammered Peg, incoherently.

"Derek, this is my sister Peg."

He rose from the armchair, and looked round. He made a step—a limping step—towards the girl standing just inside the French windows, and then stopped dead.

Peg stood quite still.

This was Derek! This man, with his tanned face, his limp, the man who had held her hand in the lane and left her so abruptly—this was Derek! This was "Private Smith"—engaged to her sister! It could not be true. Fate did not play such deadly tricks. But it was true. This was Derek.

He was staring at her, as if at a ghost. But she did not see him. Darkness came over her—and only Derek Compton's swift stride, and his strong arm flung about her, saved her from falling.

"Peg!" Grace almost shrieked.

"She has fainted, I think," said Derek Compton, huskily. "The sun, perhaps—this—this—this is your sister, Grace?"

"Peg! Darling!"

But Peg did not hear. When her eyes opened, her sister's anxious face was beinding over her; but Derek Compton was gone.

CHAPTER VII

DANGER!

"I HATE him!" breathed Peg, staring from her window.

Through the beeches, she could see the river, and two figures on the bank. They were standing by a boat; Derek Compton had the pointer in his hand. He had come up the river, and Grace had met him on the bank. He was in flannels, and looked very fit and handsome. The limp was almost gone. The quiet calm happiness in Grace's face struck Peg almost like a blow, as she looked. Angel was so happy, and she—she was so utterly miserable and wretched. And Angel did not know—should never know.

There was some vague comfort in feeling that she hated Derek Compton.

It helped her to keep her head. And she had to keep her head—for she had a secret to keep—a secret that made the hot blushes burn in her face whenever she thought of it. The last few days had been torment to Peg.

Since she had fainted, that morning when she had first seen Derek, and recognized him as "Private Smith" of Caesar's Cliff, Peg had had herself well under control. If that man ever suspected that she cared, she felt that she would die. And Angel?

Derek, certainly, had played up well, and made it easy for her. Every day he was at Crane House—his quarters at the riverside inn at Opley were hardly a quarter of a mile away. Every day, every evening, Peg had to see him—there was no help for that. Every day, every evening, lunch and dinner—but he made it as easy as he could. He was Angel's fiancé—she was Angel's little sister, and he played the part of big brother to perfection. Not a word had passed his lips, or her

lips, about their meeting at Bingley-on-Sea. That was a secret that both kept from Grace. Angel believed that they met as strangers when they met at Crane House—how could she believe otherwise? It seemed like a deception to Peg—perhaps to him also. But how could it be helped?

That earlier meeting had to be obliterated, forgotten, as if it had never happened. Perhaps, Peg wondered, he had really forgotten it—for never by a look, or a word, or a tone of the voice, did he give the merest hint that he had ever seen her before that morning when his arm had caught her as she fell. Men forget easily enough, she reflected.

It was not her fault that this had happened. Had he not told her, on the cliff, that he was not in love? And all the while he was engaged to Angel! Oh, she hated him.

He was taking Grace's hand now—helping her into the boat. She saw Angel glance, from the boat, towards the house, saw her lips move as she spoke to Derek Compton, and saw him shake his head. Angel was thinking of her—Peg knew that—but he did not want the little hoyden sister to spoil sport.

The boat pushed off, and disappeared beyond the trees on the river. Peg was glad that he did not want her; it would have been torture to join them. But the whole world seemed to look blank when they were gone from sight.

She had lost Angel. Many times, in the past few days, Angel had spoken of the future—of the happy days to come, when she came back from her wedding trip, and all three were going to live at Crane House in a happy family. So it might have been, had she never met that man on Caesar's Cliff. Had she known—had she even dreamed—of the truth, her thoughts would never have lingered on him; but she did not know till it was too late.

She would forget him in time—drive him from her mind. But she must not see him—she could not endure that. Again and again, already, she had tried to think of some pretext for going back to Aunt Agatha—to the dullness of Bingley-on-Sea. But what pretext could she invent? Grace would be deeply wounded at the merest suggestion of her going. But later—later—she must contrive to go—she had to go.

Peg went slowly downstairs. As he had not come into the house, there was no further reason to remain in her room. She had only gone there to avoid him. Poole was in the hall, and his solemn eyes turned on her face with a faint curiosity. The happy child, gay and thoughtless as a lark, whom Poole had seen pirouetting in the drawing-room hardly a couple of weeks ago, seemed to have changed into a serious young woman. Poole coughed.

"Shall Rogers bring round the pony, Miss Margaret?"

Peg started. The pony—which was to have been one of the happy delights of her new life—she had forgotten it.

"No, Poole, not now."

She went into the drawing-room. A click of knitting-needles greeted her. No doubt for purposes of chaperonage, Grace had asked Aunt Narcissa to Crane House. Aunt Narcissa, fortunately, was not like Aunt Agatha—she was plump, and round, and rosy, and good-tempered, and incessantly knitting. She looked up and smiled as Peg came in, the needles still clicking.

"Indoors on this lovely morning, child!" she said. "I thought you had gone scampering on your pony."

"I'm going to do some practice—if it won't bother you, auntie," said Peg, remembering Aunt Agatha and her headaches.

"Do, my dear, I shall just love to listen while I knit." Certainly Aunt Narcissa was an improvement on Aunt Agatha!

Peg sat on the piano-stool and idly turned over music. The grand piano at Crane House was a very different instrument from the rather tinny upright at the Acacias, and the mere sight of it had thrilled Peg, on the day of her coming. It was going to be one of the unnumerable joys of her new life. But the joy of life was blotted out now—her fingers wandered idly and listlessly over the keys. She played she hardly knew what, her thoughts elsewhere.

"Is that something very classical, dear?" came Aunt Narcissa's voice. Peg gave a guilty start.

"Oh! Yes! No! I'll play you some Chopin, auntie—you like Chopin."

"I adore him," said Aunt Narcissa, comfortably.

Peg played on. But her thoughts wandered again. Chopin is not to be played successfully with wandering thoughts.

"Dear me, I must get some more wool!" said Aunt Narcissa, suddenly.

Peg spun round on the piano-stool.

"Let me get it for you, auntie."

"No! No! Go on with your playing, Peg."

Aunt Narcissa faded out. Peg smiled faintly. But she forgot Aunt Narcissa the next moment. She sat on the piano-stool, but she was not playing. She thought of the pony, and dismissed it from mind. She was tired—she did not want anything that Crane House could offer her. It would all have been so happy, had not that hateful man come. The only thing she wanted was to get away—to get away anywhere—and she could not get away.

A sound of voices floated in at the open windows, and she came out of a long reverie with a start. They had come back from the river—they were in the garden—coming in most likely by the French windows. They must not find her listless and idle in a brown study. Hurriedly she jammed a song on the desk, and began to play, humming the words as she played. It was Bishop—"Should He Upbraid"—they were going to find her bright and cheerful and happily occupied.

Say he be mute,

I'll answer with a smile:

And dance and play, dance and play.

She was singing softly to the music. She heard a step, but did not look round. They were going to find her too deep in her music to hear a footstep! To the very end she carried on, and then, struck by the silence in the room, and wondering whether they had after all come in at the French windows, she looked round.

Derek was standing there, looking at her. He was alone.

Peg hated herself for the red that she knew came into her face. She spoke—or rather snapped.

"Where's Grace?"

"Grace is speaking to the gardener. "His voice was calm and drawing. "I believe it is a question of the tulips. How efficiently your sister runs this big place, Peg."

He called her Peg—she had to call him Derek. She hated it—but there was Angel to be considered.

She hated being alone with him—perhaps she dreaded it. But to jump up from the piano-stool and run out of the room was rather too

infantile. As she sat, looking at him, he came nearer the piano. But his manner was reassuring. Had he been her big brother he could not have been more indifferent.

"Don't stop!" he said. "Carry on, Peg. Grace will be busy for a few minutes—the tulips are a serious subject."

She had fancied that there was a sneer in his voice—now she was sure of it. Men, of course, did not like efficient women—not their efficiency, at any rate. What a hateful brute he was. Wouldn't he like Grace to run that big place efficiently, when he was master of it—master of a great house that did not belong to him? She felt a quiver of scorn.

"Won't you sing again?" he asked. "I love Purcell—is it Purcell?"

"It's Bishop!" snapped Peg.

He laughed.

"I'm afraid they're much the same to me," he said. "Let us say that I like both. Anyhow, carry on, little one."

He reached to the music on the desk, to turn back the pages. His clumsy hand dislodged the sheets, and they slipped. Peg caught at them as they slid down over the keys. He caught at them at the same moment, and their hands came into contact.

What came next very likely surprised him as much as it surprised Peg. His hand touched hers—the next instant, had clasped it, her hand disappeared in the strong brown fingers.

"Oh!" panted Peg.

He caught her other hand. She was half-lifted from the music-stool—he was so strong. Both her hands were in his, held fast, and his face was close to hers—he was drawing her towards him. Had he gone out of his senses! It seemed, for one awful moment, that he had. Peg struggled, dragging at her hands, her heart beating wildly, frantically.

"Let me go! You beast, let me go." She hardly knew what she said: her voice was almost a sob.

But it was enough. He let go her hands, and stepped back, staring at her, his face white.

"I—I'm sorry—I didn't mean——! He stammered helplessly. "I—I—please forgive me—I—I——!" His voice trailed off.

"I hate you!" breathed Peg.

She ran across to the French windows. He did not make a movement—he stood where he was, staring after her, like a man stunned. She groped out of the window—and there was a startled voice.

"Peg! What is the matter? Dear Peg——!"

She heard Grace's voice, but she hardly saw Grace. She ran past her, and Grace Vernon stood looking after her, astonished, alarmed.

"Peg!" she called, anxiously.

But Peg was gone. Grace stepped in at the French windows.

"Derek! What is the matter with Peg?"

He was himself again now. He smiled, and his voice was cool and drawling as he answered.

"Poor little thing! I am afraid I have little ear for music, Grace—and a schoolgirl's strumming does really get on my nerves. But——"

"Peg is not a schoolgirl, and her playing is not strumming." It was the first time there had been a sharp note in Grace's voice when she was speaking to Derek. "If you have hurt her——"

"I'm sorry. Only a careless jest——"

"It isn't like you to be so careless, Derek. Peg is sensitive."

"I know—now! I shall be very circumspect in future!" he said.

"Don't be angry with me, Grace—from this moment I will be a good boy, for ever and ever."

And Grace smiled again.

CHAPTER VIII

"I LOVE YOU!"

"HE'S rather fresh, miss!" said Rogers, doubtfully.

He was holding the pony's head. Peg did not heed him. She looked a lovely little figure in her jodhpurs, but her face was cold and set. She was going out that morning for a ride—a long ride—before that man came. Grace would not miss her—most likely she would walk to meet Derek on his way—anyhow, she had to keep clear of him. A long, long ride in the shady woods, and she need not return till lunch—if only she need not return at all!

But the groom watched her rather uneasily as she rode away. The handsome pony was, as he had said, "fresh," and he was not quite sure of the young lady's control. But Peg's clouded face cleared, as she rode, by a shady "ride," under over-arching green branches. She loved riding; and it was a fine clear morning, the woods fresh and scented, and the wind on her face helped to drive away the memory of yesterday—and what had happened.

She was galloping. In the thick green grass of the "ride" the pony's hoofs beat and thudded, as he stretched himself to the gallop. Peg's heart was lighter—the old glow came back to her eyes. That rush through the wind brought bright colour to her cheeks. Thud! thud! thud! She felt as if she could ride on for ever—leaving black care behind her—away from pain, away from doubt and unhappiness—away from him! And then, suddenly, she saw him!

He was coming down the ride, tramping slowly, his hands driven deep into his pockets. She had thought to avoid him—nothing doubting that he would come by the lane or the river, as he always did. Anyhow there he was—and the galloping pony would have reached him in a few moments more, but for Peg's sudden, convulsive drag on the rein.

She dragged her mount round suddenly, so suddenly, that the pony nearly fell. She did not care—she had a feeling like a wild creature, to escape. He started, and stared along the ride, seeing her. He ran towards her with a hand uplifted, shouting:

"Look out! You'll be down! For God's sake take care."

Peg hardly heard him. Her pony, startled almost out of its wits, was prancing madly, and in a moment more crashed into a mass of thick bush.

Peg gave a cry.

She had lost a stirrup—lashing tendrils stung her across the face—she strove to control the pony, but she strove in vain. The animal plunged and reared, utterly out of control.

"Peg!" came Derek's wild shout. He was racing towards her.

But he had not reached her, when she lost her saddle, and was tossed from the pony's plunging back.

"Peg!" he shrieked. "Darling! Peg!"

He came on. The pony, tossing its head, with stirrups flying, dashed on up the ride. One of the flying stirrups struck Derek as he passed. He tore on, and reached the crumpled little figure that lay in the thick grass.

"Peg! My love!" he panted.

Peg, dizzy, bewildered, rose on her elbow, trying to recall herself.

The thick grass had deadened her fall—she was shaken, breathless, bewildered, but she was not hurt. She tried to rise—but it was a strong arm that lifted her, picking her out of the grass as if she had been a baby.

"Peg! Are you hurt, my darling?"

"No! No!"

She was in his arms, her face close to his. She struggled; but his arms held her fast.

"You're not hurt, Peg? Oh, heaven, when I saw you fall——!"

"I'm not hurt! Let me go! Oh, let me go! You coward, let me go!" Peg almost shrieked. "Let me go."

"Yes, I'm a coward! A brute! But I love you too much to care! I won't let you go—I can't let you go! Peg, you don't want me to let you go."

"I do—I do."

"You don't!" he said.

He knew that she did not. He was holding her close, her heart beating against his, beating almost to suffocation. She ceased to resist.

It seemed to her as if she were in a dream—a strange restful dream, as if her home were there, in his arms. For a moment, a wild moment, Peg forgot all else. It was not Derek—Grace's Derek—who was holding her in that passionate grasp—it was the man on the cliff, the man she had helped down the steep with his arm about her shoulder—the man to whom her heart had gone out. She was happy—if she did not think. For a long moment she would not think. She lay in his arms, and kisses rained on her face.

"Peg!" Derek's voice was husky. "Peg! It's no good! I've tried—but it's no good—we've got to face it."

She did not speak.

"I love you, Peg! I think I've loved you from the first moment I saw you on the cliff, with your hair blowing in the wind. Oh, Peg! Darling, when I saw you fall——" He choked.

Still she did not stir. Her eyes were closed—and so long as they were closed, he was not Grace's Derek, he was the man of the cliff, the man she loved.

"Peg!" He spoke again. "Peg! Dearest heart, speak to me. Say only one word, dear love—one word, that you love me, Peg."

That broke the spell that held her. Her eyes opened; she stirred, and tried to push him from her. But he held her fast.

"Let me go," she said, faintly.

"You don't want me to let you go!" he said, doggedly. "Peg, we've got past all that. We've got to face it."

"Let me go," she moaned. "Think of—of Angel——"

"I can't think of her. I can't think of anyone but you—whom I love. You love me, Peg—I knew it yesterday."

"O God, O God!" she breathed, helplessly.

"You love me, Peg."

"No! No! I—I must not." Her voice was like the wail of a frightened child. "No! No!"

"But you do," he said. "And we've got to work this out together, Peg. I won't let you go—I can't."

"You must let me go. Haven't you hurt me enough?" she moaned. "Why do you want to hurt me?"

"I love you, Peg. And you love me," said Derek Compton. "I knew it yesterday, if I had not known it before. Isn't it true?"

"Yes," said Peg, desperately. "It's true! Now let me go! I—I

couldn't help it, and I hate myself. But it was not my fault. Why did you lie to me that day on the cliffs—oh, why?"

"I did not lie to you, Peg."

"You did! You did! You told me you were not in love——"

"And I was not."

"You were engaged to Angel," she panted.

"Yes, I was engaged to Angel. But I was not in love. I was never in love in my life till I saw you, Peg."

"Don't!"

"I must tell you the truth now, Peg. You remember I said, that day on the cliff, that I had a problem. That was it."

"Don't!"

"Heaven knows she is an angel, as you have always called her," said Derek. "She was an angel in the hospital—not a man there but would have died for her. I fancied that I was in love. It was not till afterwards—long afterwards—that I knew that it was only gratitude and affection—yes, affection—that I had fancied was love."

"If you had never seen me——!"

"It was before I saw you, Peg! Long before that."

"You'd no right to change."

"I did not change. I only found out the truth."

"Oh, you can talk, and talk!" exclaimed Peg, passionately. "But think of her. Oh, if you never, never had come here—we might have been so happy."

"I wish I never had come," he said, gloomily. "I came to keep my word. God knows I meant to be loyal. Did I betray myself—even for a moment—until—yesterday? Even after that, I meant to carry on. My word is something to me, Peg. But—I can't."

"You can—and must."

"Peg, we've got to face it. We love one another," said Derek, hoarsely. "All else must give in to that."

"Will you let me go?" breathed Peg.

He released her at last. She stood back, facing him. She was very quiet now, and her face was firm and set. Something of the elder sister's steady firmness was in the little pale face under the untidy hair.

"Yes," said Peg. "We've got to face it. You've got your word to keep. I've got to be loyal to Angel. The day I saw you here, and found out that my man of the cliff was Grace's Derek——"

"You poor darling!"

"Let me speak. I wanted to go—but I couldn't go. What could I have said to Angel? But now, I've got to go."

"You can't!" he said. "You shan't, Peg."

"You're not a coward," said Peg. "You went through the War—Private Smith! You had courage then to face things. Where is it now?"

"I can't lose you."

Peg's eyes flashed.

"I'm not yours to lose!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "You've made me tell you what I'd rather have died than have told you. Isn't that enough? Do you want to shame me further? Oh, God help me, if Angel ever knew——"

"Grace will forgive us—she will understand——"

"If Grace knew, I think it would kill me," said Peg. "But there shall be nothing for her to know. That day on the cliff, we said that we should never see one another again. This time it will be true."

"I can't do it, Peg."

"Don't say any more," said Peg, quietly. "I'm going to look for my pony now. You are going to Crane House."

"I will come——"

"You will not come. You are not the man on the cliff now," said Peg, contemptuously. "You are Derek Compton, my sister's fiancé. I suppose men were born to make women miserable."

"I could make you happy, Peg."

"Make Angel happy," snapped Peg. She turned away. Then she turned back, her face pleading, her eyes wet: "Derek, be good to her—love her as you ought to love her. If—if you do care for me—make Angel happy."

She ran up the ride.

He made a movement as if to follow, but stopped. He stood watching the lithe figure in jodhpurs till it disappeared up the ride. For a long, long time he stood, staring in the direction in which Peg had gone.

Then, at last, with a dark and heavy brow, he turned away. But he did not go down the ride towards Crane House. His mind was in a turmoil—he hardly knew what he wanted to do, what he was going to do. But he knew that he could not face Grace Vernon—not then, at all events. With a moody face he tramped away into the wood, deep in bracken.

CHAPTER IX

THE LETTER!

"ANGEL, dear——"

Peg's voice was not steady.

She had to tell Angel, somehow, that she was going. It was hard. Grace would not understand—only the truth could make her understand; and the truth she must never know or suspect. What would she think—what could she think—when Peg told her that she wanted to return to Aunt Agatha—to the dullness of Bingley-on-Sea—to leave her bright new home and her sister? Again and again, during that weary day, Peg had opened her lips to speak—and closed them again, simply not knowing what she could say. But she had to speak.

It was a relief that Derek was not there that day—to Peg, at least, though it gave her a pang to see the shadow on Grace's brow. He was keeping away—because of her. If for that reason alone, she must lose no more time. She came on Grace, standing by the French windows, looking out into the sunset on the river, and spoke unsteadily, timidly.

Grace glanced round.

"Yes, dear Peg! What is it?" She smiled faintly. "Did you wonder why Derek is not here? We shall not see him again for some days, Peg."

"Oh!" ejaculated Peg.

"He had had to go back to London, on some business in connection with his engineering prospects," said Grace. "It was rather sudden—he was able only to phone. Poor Derek! His voice sounded very disturbed——"

"Oh!" repeated Peg. "How—how you will miss him, Angel."

"Yes," said Grace, quietly. "I shall miss him, Peg. But you are with me, dear—and I am a very happy woman, Peg."

"But I—I—I——!" stammered Peg.

"I am afraid sometimes," said Grace, "that you don't like Derek very much, Peg. Now there is no need to turn as red as a peony, you little goose—do you think I blame you? It is natural enough—"

you do not know him yet, Peg. When you know him better you will like him better. We shall all be very happy here, Peg."

Peg was silent.

She, if not Grace, knew what Derek's business in London meant. She knew why he was gone. He could not face Angel—while she was there. Yet, to say that she was going, now that Grace would be left alone.

"What is it, Peg?" asked Grace. "Is something bothering you? Surely you can speak out freely to me, Peg."

"Yes," stammered Peg. "I—I—I—would you mind very much, Angel, if—if—if—"

"If—if—if——!" smiled Grace.

"If—if—if I went back to Aunt Agatha!" blurted Peg. She hardly dared to look at Grace as she spoke. But she knew that startled, surprised glance that was turned upon her—startled, surprised, pained. It was a long moment before Grace Vernon spoke.

"Are you tired of your new home already, Peg?"

"No! No! Never! But——"

"Have I been wanting in any way? Too much taken up with Derek, and——"

"No! No!" mumbled Peg.

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing!" said Peg, lamely. "But—only—you see—I—I——!" Her voice trailed off. What was she to say?

"I think I understand," said Grace, very quietly.

Peg's heart stood still.

"It is Derek!" said Grace.

Peg looked at her with almost wild eyes. Did she know? She could not speak—she could only wait, in terror, for Grace's next words.

"I knew," went on Grace, in the same quiet tones. "I knew, dear, how you felt, the day I first told you of Derek. I hoped that all that would pass away—when you saw him. But—it hasn't."

"Oh!" gasped Peg. Grace did not know!

"You do not like him," said Grace. "I think you had something like a quarrel yesterday. I'm not blaming you, Peg. I hope I am able to understand. But—my dear little sister—Peg dear—won't you try to feel differently? Give poor Derek a chance. You can't let me down, Peg. You know I want you here—that I shall be miserable if you go. Derek will want you, too——"

"Derek——!" breathed Peg.

"I am quite sure," said Grace, "that he would miss you if you went. Peg. Not as I should, of course—but he would. And he would guess that it was on his account, and that would hurt him. You don't want to wound him, Peg."

"No!" breathed Peg. "No!"

"Don't say anything more about going away," said Grace. "It is not fair to me, Peg—you must realise that it is not. It is not fair to Derek, and it is not fair to me. If—later—you feel that you do not want to live with us, you shall have your way, Peg, though it will be a very heavy blow to me, as you know. But I have a right to ask you to be patient, at least for a time, and make the best of poor Derek. So say no more about it now, Peg."

Peg said no more.

After all, the man would be away for a time. She must go—she must—before he returned. But there was time yet.

Nothing more was said on the subject. Afterwards, Grace's manner was as kind, as tenderly affectionate, as ever. But there was a differ-

once, and Peg sensed it miserably. She had hurt Angel—and she could not help it. Grace wanted her to like Derek—of course she did—Peg could have laughed hysterically at the thought. It was not because she did not like Derek that she wanted to go. Far from that.

The next day, and the next, there was no word from Derek—no doubt he was very busy in town. On the third morning, among the letters, was one addressed in type-writing, for Peg.

She opened it, carelessly enough, at the breakfast table. But as she unfolded the letter within, the blood flooded her face in a sudden rush. It was a brief note—she had no time to read it—but the signature caught her eye—DEREK.

She crumpled the letter in her hand, in terror lest Angel should see it. He dared to write to her—under cover of a typed envelope to conceal from other eyes that he had written!

"My dear child, what is the matter?" came Aunt Narcissa's plump voice, as she peered at Peg over her glasses.

"What? Oh! Nothing," stammered Peg.

"But you have gone red and white—child, you are as white as a sheet—are you ill?" exclaimed the old lady.

Peg rose to her feet, unsteadily. Grace's eyes were on her with deep concern, but she dared not meet Grace's eyes. If Angel knew that that man had written to her—!

"I—I—I felt a little faint," stammered Peg. "I—I think I will go into the garden—I—"

"But you have not finished your breakfast, child," said Aunt Narcissa. "Dear me, what is the matter with Peg, Gracie?" she asked, as Peg hurried out into the garden.

Grace did not answer, but her look was very troubled. After a moment or two she rose, and followed Peg. Aunt Narcissa was left to finish her breakfast in solitary state.

Peg hurried blindly across the lawns. She ran into a little summer-house on the bank, overlooking the river. She had to be alone—safe from all eyes—with that letter. How dared he write? How dared he? She was tempted to fling the letter into the river unread. How dared he write?

She sat on the little bench in the summer-house, the letter crumpled in her hand. Should she read it? How dared he write to her? Yet the sight of his name, Derek, on the letter, had set her heart singing. She hated herself—she hated him. She would not read the letter. Yet—

"Peg dearest."

It was Grace's voice. She had just time to thrust the letter under a cushion on the bench, before her sister entered the summer-house. Her hand was empty when Grace came in. Her face was white.

"I—I—my head aches a little," stammered Peg. "It's nothing, Angel—nothing! You've left your breakfast—"

"Never mind that, Peg," said Grace. She sat down beside Peg on the bench. "My dear child, you have alarmed me—"

"It's nothing."

"I have no right to ask to see your letters, Peg." Grace's voice was very grave. "But I am your elder sister, and you are in my care, and I love you more than anything on earth, excepting Derek. Peg, tell me what it is."

"Nothing!" said Peg.

"You don't want to show me the letter?"

Peg shuddered.

"I—I—I've thrown it away."

"Dearest! I cannot help remembering something you told me—the day you came home, Peg," said Grace, gently. "I did not think much about it at the time—but—you remember, Peg—the man on the cliff."

Peg's heart missed a beat.

"I will not ask for your confidence, Peg, if you do not choose to give it to me," said Grace, with a sigh. "But surely you can trust me, Peg. You can trust me to help you, to comfort you, to make you happy if I can. Will you answer one question—was that letter from the man you told me of—the man on the cliff?"

"Yes," said Peg, helplessly.

"The man you described as a 'demobbed Tommy'?"

"Yes!" mumbled Peg.

"You told me," said Grace, quietly, "that he did not know your name."

"Yes, yes, he did not."

"Then how could he write to you here?"

Peg was silent.

"Dearest Peg! Cannot you trust me?" asked Grace. "I only want to help you. What is this man to you?"

"Nothing!" moaned Peg.

"You do not mean that, Peg. If he is some adventurer——"

"No! No! No!"

"If he is not that, there is no reason why you should not see him—why he should not come here to see you. If he is poor, as I suppose you meant by a 'demobbed Tommy,' that matters very little. If he is decent——"

"You don't understand," moaned Peg.

"But I want to understand, Peg. You care for this man, whoever he is—that is plain enough. If there is nothing serious to separate you, I want to be a friend to you both—and I can be, Peg. Won't you let me help you?"

"You don't understand."

"Won't you tell me, and trust me to understand?"

"No!" said Peg, stubbornly.

Grace's face set.

"Very well!" she said, and for once her lips were hard. "Peg—I must think this over. You make me fear, Peg, that a bad man is persecuting you—you make me frightened for you."

"No! No! No!"

Peg rose unsteadily. Grace did not stir. She had told Angel that she had thrown away the letter—hardly realising that it was an untruth, in her terror and confusion. It lay under the cushion. If Grace would have gone—but Grace did not go. Grace Vernon's face was a little pale, and it was set—for once, she was angry with Peg; angrier, bitterly angry, with the unknown man who had written that letter.

"Peg! Dear Peg, if you will only tell me——"

"No!"

"Peg! I think you must."

Peg gave her almost a wild look. She dared not trust herself to speak again—she hurried out of the summer-house, and Grace was left staring blankly after her.

CHAPTER X LIGHT AT LAST!

"DEREK!"

Grace Vernon wondered whether she was dreaming.

Was it Derek's name, in Derek's well-known hand, that she saw? How could it be Derek's name?

It was some time since Peg had left the summer-house. Grace had remained there, deep in troubled thought—distressed, alarmed, uneasy. But for the moment she forgot Peg, as she saw Derek's name there. How came a letter from Derek there, under a cushion on the bench in the summer-house? She had leaned her hand on the cushion, and it had moved—revealing a corner of the letter that lay beneath. All her letters from Derek—they were few enough—were in her own room, trasured under lock and key. Yet here was a letter from Derek—could she conceivably have been careless enough to leave it there? In utter wonder, Grace picked up the letter. It was hers, of course—nobody else at Crane House received letters signed "Derek" in that well-known hand.

The next moment, the summer-house, the shining river, were swimming before her sight. It was as if a cruel hand had struck her in the face.

For a moment or two, all was dark. But Grace Vernon was not the kind of woman who fainted; she pulled herself together. Was this some horrible nightmare in the day time—or was she really reading these words, in Derek's hand?

Dear Peg,

You are right.

I know you are right. I have had time to think it over. Poor child, you are right, and I am a brute—a beast—a cur—and a coward.

It is not your fault, my dear Peg. I don't think it is really mine. Fate has been hard on both of us.

I was your "man on the cliff." Why should you not have cared, my dear child? You did not know—how could you know, when you had never even heard my name?

And I—was I to blame, if my heart went out to you, without my even knowing it? I had never loved before.

I know what it meant to you, Peg, when you found me at Crane House, and found who I was. I know that your loyal little heart would never have failed. I was not so strong.

God knows I meant to play the game. I was not strong enough, that is all. That day you fell from your pony, and I thought you were hurt, I lost my senses.

But it is all over now. Peg, I swear that it is all over, and never, never again shall a word or a look from me cause you uneasiness. Peg, don't leave your sister on my account. Don't!

She has been your Angel—and an angel to me, wretched and undeserving as I am. Peg, we must not hurt her. I know that now. Peg, we've got to forget ourselves, and think of her—God knows she deserves all the love that both of us can give her.

Peg, I'm writing this to keep you with your dear sister. I shall stay away—a long time. When I come back, Peg, all must be forgotten. You may trust me. I swear that you may trust me. Don't leave her, Peg—and don't, if you can help it, waste one more thought on me.

DEREK.

Grace sat very still, the letter in her hand. She had looked at it, believing that it was hers—as how could it fail to be, with Derek's signature on it? But it was not hers—it was Peg's. "O God!" breathed Grace Vernon.

The pain in her heart was like a physical pain. She felt weak—she who had never before known what it was to feel weak.

So this was it?

"The man on the cliff"—the stranger whom that poor child had met—to whom her heart had gone out. Derek!

So that was why she would have gone! No wonder that she had been unable to explain! Poor little Peg!

And Derek?

He had never loved her. He had "never loved before." Grace Vernon's lips set bitterly. The wounded Tommy whom she had nursed—he had fancied himself in love, like so many men in similar circumstances—and then he had held to his word. He had offered her her freedom when her fortune came—the hot blood flooded her face as she remembered that. It was not the fortune—it was because he had found out his mistake. And she—

If he had told her, she would have understood. But she would have been hurt—and he would not hurt her. His word was given, and he would keep it—men were like that. But now she knew.

But what was she going to do?

A shadow passed the open front of the summer-house. Peg was seen for a moment, and then disappeared.

She was thinking of the letter—evidently thrust hastily out of sight—perhaps she had not even read it yet. But she did not come in—Grace was thankful for that.

It was long before Grace Vernon stirred. But at last, she rose, and replaced the letter where it had been hidden, with the cushion over it. She stood looking out towards the river—a slight figure was on the bank.

"Peg!"

Peg looked round.

"I have to go to the village this morning, Peg. We will have the boat out later, shall we, dear?"

"Oh! Yes!" said Peg, staring.

Grace Vernon walked away to the house—her step firm as ever. Peg stared after her, and then ran into the summer-house.

Her heart was in her mouth. But all was safe—the letter out of sight. She tore it from under the cushion.

She read it—read it again—and hardly conscious of what she did, pressed it to her lips. She understood now why Derek had written—he had a right to tell her this. But if Angel had seen it—! Peg shivered.

A few minutes later, Derek's letter, torn into the tiniest fragments, was floating down the current. That was safe now.

When Grace Vernon came back from the village, Peg met her at the gate. She twined her arm in her sister's as they walked up the avenue.

"Angel! You'll think me a changeable little idiot—but—but—I don't want to go away, Angel."

"I'm glad of that, Peg."

"And—and—and that letter——!" stammered Peg.

"The letter from the man on the cliff?" said Grace, her white lips smiling.

"Yes, the—the man on the cliff! I—I can't really explain, but—but it's nothing. He's nothing to me—nothing—nothing! He will never write to me again. I—I shall never think of him. It's all over—I—I mean, it's nothing. We're going to be very happy here, Angel, just as we planned."

"Yes, Peg," said Grace. "We are going to be very happy."

Peg was relieved. She would not have been so relieved, could she have seen Angel, a little later, her face buried in her pillow, crying as

if her heart would break. But Peg did not see that—and there was no sign of it when Grace Vernon came down.

CHAPTER XI

IT IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND WOMEN!

THE dingy, ill-lighted writing-room in the little Bloomsbury hotel was shabby, stuffy, uninviting. It had only one occupant when Derek Compton came into it, she sat by the dim window, her face turned to the light. Derek came across the room.

"I was told——!" he began. He broke off, as she rose. "Grace! What are you doing here?"

He stared at her blankly.

Her face seemed a little paler than when he had seen her last, in Berkshire. It was quiet and calm. She smiled faintly at his astonishment.

"You did not wait!" he stammered. "I was told someone had asked for me—I did not guess——"

"No! I wanted to see you, Derek. I have something to tell you. Sit down, and let me speak."

"She—I mean, nobody is ill?" he asked.

"No! It is a matter between ourselves, Derek. I am afraid it is going to be a surprise to you—perhaps a shock."

He breathed hard, looking at her closely. Could Peg have said anything? Surely not. If she had known, she would not have looked so calm, so quiet, so friendly. It was not that. But what could have brought her to London from Berkshire? He had written that his return was delayed—that he could not yet fix a date. He had never dreamed that she would come to him—in his shabby quarters, without even writing first. What did it mean?

She sat down again—and he dropped into a chair. He had not kissed her. She did not seem to notice it. But now he remembered—and leaned towards her. She drew back a little.

"Wait to hear what I have to tell you, Derek."

"What have I done?" he asked. He tried to speak in his old light way. "What is the naughty boy's fault this time, Grace?"

But her face remained very grave.

"Not long ago, Derek, you offered me my freedom."

"He started.

"That is all over, Grace."

"I know! But now I have come to ask for it."

He sat quite still, looking at her. He hoped that there was no sign in his face of the great bound that his heart gave. His first feeling was amazement, mingled with an almost giddy relief. But something of bitterness followed.

"Are you serious, Grace?"

"Quite."

"You have changed your mind?"

"Yes."

"Can I blame you?" he said. He could not keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "The rich lady of Crane House—to marry the poor devil of a demobbed Tommy hunting for a job!" He laughed: "I gave you the chance, Grace—I did not want you to think that I wanted the money. You have been thinking over it while I have been away—to some purpose, evidently."

"It is not that, Derek. You don't really believe that. I have been thinking, it is true. But not about that."

"Forgive me," he muttered. "But—but this—I never dreamed. You have some reason, I suppose? Am I entitled to know what it is?"

"I am bound to tell you," said Grace, evenly. "That is why I am here. It would have been awkward for you, Derek—a man has his business, or his profession, and it means much to him. A rich wife in a big country-house—a poor husband working his way up from the bottom of the ladder—but you would not have given up your profession."

"To live on my wife's money?" he asked. "No! You never asked it—you could never have asked that. Is that why——?"

"A woman may feel the same, about her profession—about her life's work, Derek," said Grace. "It may be hard for a man to understand—but there it is."

"I could understand," he answered. "But a profession—a life's work? What do you mean? You have none, except to run Crane House."

"But I had!" said Grace.

"You had? What?" He stared blankly. "Oh! Do you mean the hospital work—the nursing—caring for the sick, the halt, the lame? The lady of the Lamp—is that what you mean?"

"That is what I mean, Derek."

"But you never said——"

"I am saying it now," said Grace. "For four years, in the War-time, Derek, I was a nurse. I found it hard at first—very hard. But I came to love it—to know that it was my vocation. If I had never met you, I should never have dreamed of giving it up."

"Not when you became rich?" he asked.

"I think not."

"But the war is over——"

"There are always the sick, the helpless, the unfortunate, the victims of life," said Grace. "In peace as in war, there is never a lack of work for willing hands. And—it is my life's work, Derek."

"And marriage would make it impossible?"

"Yes."

"I suppose it would," he said, slowly. "But—I can't get this down, Grace. Even if you do not care for me." She winced, but he did not notice it. "Even if you do not care for me, and goodness knows I'm not worth it—you are young, beautiful, rich—all life is before you. Why, you've got the world at your feet, Grace—now you're rid of a poor devil of a suitor with nothing in his pockets, at all events." He could not resist that sneer. "Grace! You can't do this! You're not going to throw away your life like that."

"Did Florence Nightingale throw away her life?"

"Well! No, I suppose not. But——"

"It is useless to argue about it, Derek. I did not come here to argue, but to tell you."

He knitted his brows.

"To tell me that you don't want to marry me, after an engagement that's lasted over years, because you want to play the Good Samaritan, and a husband would be in the way?" he said.

Grace Vernon's face became very pale. She loved this man—loved him with all her heart and soul; with a nature that could never change. He did not love her—he loved another woman. He was glad that he was not to marry her. It left him free—for Peg! Yet he was hurt—he was angry—he did not like to be so lightly prized!

After all, he was a man—and men were like that. Men were always like children, and had to be treated like children. That she was giving him up because she loved him, because she would not stand in the way of his happiness and Peg's happiness, he would never know, never guess, and never dream. She had found a reason to give, and he took

it at face value—and it hurt his vanity! But the pain of it was almost more than she could bear, and as the deep pallor whitened her face, Derek started up, remorseful.

"Grace! I'm a brute! Forgive me, dear. It shall be as you like—of course it shall be as you like. I'm a brute, Grace—I never was worthy for you to wipe your feet on. If you knew how unworthy, you'd have thrown me over long ago. I'm a rotter—a rotter in the grain."

"You're not that, Derek. "She smiled, with an effort. "I shall always like you, and surely we shall always be friends. But——"

"But you don't want to marry me!" he said, laughing.

"Not if you will give me my freedom. I will keep my word if you hold me to it!" said Grace. "But—I ask you to let me go."

"There's only one answer any man could make to that," said Derek.

"Not if he loved!" thought Grace. But she did not speak aloud. If he had loved her, how passionately he would have pleaded. But he did not love her. She suppressed a sigh.

"You are free, Grace, of course," he said.

"Thank you, Derek."

"But—but what are you going to do?" he asked, curiously. "There's Crane House—and—and your sister? Have you forgotten your sister?" He did not say "Peg." He was afraid that his voice might betray him if he uttered her name.

"I have been making plans," she said, quietly. "Peg will remain at Crane House, for the present, with Aunt Narcissa—while I go for a hospital course. Later, when Peg marries——"

"Marries!" he repeated, with a start.

"Then Crane House will become a home for service men permanently injured in the war," said Grace. "I shall be able to make many people happy, Derek, and shall be happy myself—very happy. Peg will miss me, poor Peg—but—but——" The words came slowly, but she uttered them. "But sometimes, when you are not too hard at work, Derek, you might run down to Crane House, and see Peg."

He looked at her in silence.

"If you'd do that, Derek——"

"Yes," he said, mechanically. "I'll do that, or anything else you like, Grace. But—I'm going to see you again?"

She shook her head.

"Better not! It may sound hard, Derek, but now that I have made up my mind, I shall make a clean cut, and live only for my work. Even Peg—I shall not be able to see Peg often. I shall throw all the past behind me, and live only for the future, as I have mapped it out."

"There's no understanding women!" said Derek.

He could not help his face hardening. Grace, who had been an angel in the hospital, whose kindness and sweetness had seemed rather of heaven than of earth—Grace was willing to throw over the man she was to have married, the sister who adored her—obsessed with what she called her "life's work." Under all that kindness and sweetness, there must be hardness of heart. She did not love him—she did not even love poor little Peg—not when it came to the test. It was no use trying to understand women.

She rose to her feet.

"You're not going?" said Derek, awkwardly.

"Yes. I have said what I came to say. Thank you for being so—so good, Derek. No—don't come with me. A clean cut!" She smiled bravely. "Good-bye, Derek——"

Her hand touched his for a moment, and she was gone. He stood

stupidly, staring. Had this really happened—was he free—free to woo, and to wed, where his heart was? His face brightened. It seemed to him that the sunlight was brighter at the dim window—the shabby dingy room no longer seemed shabby and dingy.

“Peg!” he whispered.

Grace would go her own way—finding her own happiness in her own way—a noble way, God bless her, if a cold and hard one. And he was free—and Peg was free—and he could work now, with all his heart in it, and make a home for Peg. He went out of the room, at last, and into the dingy square; but it was no longer dingy to him, it seemed to him that it was bright and gay and that the birds were singing. And he did not know that a woman who sat in a railway carriage drew a veil over her face, lest the unshed tears in her eyes should be seen.

CHAPTER XII

AT LAST!

PEG looked again at the letter in her hand, and smiled tremulously.

It was from Grace.

There was autumn brown on the leaves, mist on the river, as she sat in the summer-house, and looked out over the Thames. It was weeks, long weeks, since Grace had gone; and the days had been dull for Peg.

She was no longer the light-hearted child who had scampered up the steps of Caesar's Cliff. Much water had passed under the bridges since then.

And she could not understand.

Grace had told her, quietly, that her engagement to Derek was at an end—it was a mistake, and it was at an end. She had gone to her hospital work, gently refusing when Peg had begged to go too. She had written, often—and her letters were always loving and kind. But Peg knew that she had lost her sister. She hated to think that her Angel had been hard—hard to Derek, hard to her. But she could not help it. Her Angel was an angel no longer.

And this——! She looked at Grace's letter again. There was a sentence that had startled her.

“I am happy here, Peg—I live only for my work. But I think of you too, dear—and sometimes of Derek. And I wonder, sometimes, whether you and Derek—some day—if you liked one another, Peg, I should be very glad. Perhaps some day—— If it should happen, Peg, it would make me happy.”

Peg's eyes dimmed.

If it should happen——!

She was hardly surprised when she saw him. He had waited long—but she knew that he would come. Her “man of the cliff”—no longer Grace's Derek—her Derek. He stepped into the summer-house.

“Peg!” he said.

She held up the letter.

“Look at that,” she smiled.

He looked. And he smiled, too. The next moment she was in his arms, resting there, with a sigh of happy content.

THE END.