

me I lay hid in the bush, hoping to escape to Natal. Then I ran for the river, and saw you on the farther bank. I might have got away, but that child is heavy.' (A pause.) 'Give him food, Macumazahn, he must be hungry.' (A pause.) 'Farewell. That was a good saying of yours--the swift runner is outrun at last. Ah! yet I did not run in vain.'

(Another pause, the last.) Then he lifted himself upon one arm and with the other saluted, first the boy Sinala and next me, muttering, 'Remember your promise, Macumazahn.'

"That is how Magepa the Buck died. I never saw anyone carrying weight who could run quite so well as he," and Quatermain turned his head away as though the memory of this incident affected him somewhat.

"What became of the child Sinala?" I asked presently.

"Oh! I sent him to an institution in Natal, and afterwards was able to get some of his property back for him. I believe that he is being trained as an interpreter."

THE BLUE CURTAINS

I

In his regiment familiarly they called him "Bottles," nobody quite knew why. It was, however, rumoured that he had been called "Bottles" at Harrow on account of the shape of his nose. Not that his nose was particularly like a bottle, but at the end of it was round and large and thick. In reality, however, the sobriquet was more ancient than that, for it had belonged to the hero of this story from babyhood. Now, when a man has a nickname, it generally implies two things: first, that he is good-tempered, and, secondly, that he is a good fellow. Bottles, alias John George Peritt, of a regiment it is unnecessary to name, amply justified both these definitions, for a kindlier-tempered or better fellow never breathed. But unless a thick round nose, a pair of small light-coloured eyes, set under bushy brows, and a large but not badly shaped mouth can be said to constitute beauty, he was not beautiful. On the other hand, however, he was big and well-formed, and a pleasant-mannered if a rather silent companion.

Many years ago Bottles was in love; all the regiment knew it, he was so very palpably and completely in love. Over his bed in his tidy quarters hung the photograph of a young lady who was known to be the young lady; which, when the regiment, individually and collectively, happened to see it, left no doubt in its mind as to their comrade's taste. It was evident even from that badly-coloured photograph that Miss Madeline Spenser had the makings of a lovely figure and a pair of wonderful eyes.

It was said, however, that she had not a sixpence; and as our hero had but very few, the married ladies of the battalion used frequently to speculate how Mr. Peritt would "manage" when it came to matrimony.

At this date the regiment was quartered in Maritzburg, Natal, but its term of foreign service had expired, and it expected to be ordered home immediately.

One morning Bottles had been out buck hunting with the scratch pack kept in those days by the garrison at Maritzburg. The run had been a good one, and after a seven or eight-mile gallop over the open country they had actually killed their buck--a beautiful Oribe. This was a thing that did not often happen, and Bottles returned filled with joy and pride with the buck fastened behind his saddle, for he was whip to the pack. The hounds had met at dawn, and it was nine o'clock or so, when, as he was riding hot and tired up the shadier side of broad and dusty Church Street, a gun fired at the Fort beyond Government House announced the arrival of the English mail.

With a beaming smile--for to him the English mail meant one if not two letters from Madeline, and possibly the glad news of sailing orders--he pushed on to his quarters, tubbed and dressed, and then went down to the mess-house for breakfast, expecting to find the letters delivered. But the mail was a heavy one, and he had ample time to eat his breakfast, also to sit and smoke a pipe upon the pleasant verandah under the shade of the bamboos and camellia bushes before the orderly arrived with the

bag. Bottles went at once into the room that opened on to the veranda and stood by calmly, not being given to betraying his emotions, while slowly and clumsily the mess sergeant sorted the letters. At last he got his packet--it only consisted of some newspapers and a single letter--and went away back to his seat on the veranda, feeling rather disappointed, for he had expected to hear from his only brother as well as from his lady-love. Having relit his pipe--for he was of a slow and deliberate mind, and it rather enhances a pleasure to defer it a little--and settled himself in the big chair opposite the camellia bush just now covered with sealing-wax-like blooms, he opened his letter and read:--

"My dear George----"

"Good heavens!" he thought to himself, "what can be the matter? She always calls me 'Darling Bottles!'"

"My dear George," he began again, "I hardly know how to begin this letter--I can scarcely see the paper for crying, and when I think of you reading it out in that horrid country it makes me cry more than ever. There! I may as well get it out at once, for it does not improve by keeping--it is all over between you and me, my dear, dear old Bottles."

"All over!" he gasped to himself.

"I hardly know how to tell the miserable story," went on the letter, "but as it must be told I suppose I had better begin from the beginning. A month ago I went with my father and my aunt to the Hunt Ball at Atherton, and there I met Sir Alfred Croston, a middle-aged gentleman, who danced with me several times. I did not care about him much, but he made himself very agreeable, and when I got home aunt--you know her nasty way--congratulated me on my conquest. Well, next day he came to call, and papa asked him to stop to dinner, and he took me in, and before he went away he told me that he was coming to stop at the George Inn to fish for trout in the lake. After that he came here every day, and whenever I went out walking he always met me, and really was kind and nice. At last one day he asked me to marry him, and I was very angry and told him that I was engaged to a gentleman in the army, who was in South Africa. He laughed, and said South Africa was a long way off, and I hated him for it. That evening papa and aunt set on me--you know they neither of them liked our engagement--and told me that our affair was perfectly silly, and that I must be mad to refuse such an offer. And so it went on, for he would not take 'no' for an answer; and at last, dear, I had to give in, for they gave me no peace, and papa implored me to consent for his sake. He said the marriage would be the making of him, and now I suppose I am engaged. Dear, dear George, don't be angry with me, for it is not my fault, and I suppose after all we could not have

got married, for we have so little money. I do love you, but I can't help myself. I hope you won't forget me, or marry anybody else--at least, not just at present--for I cannot bear to think about it. Write to me and tell me you won't forget me, and that you are not angry with me. Do you want your letters back? If you burn mine that will do. Good-bye, dear! If you only knew what I suffer! It is all very well to talk like aunt does about settlements and diamonds, but they can't make up to me for you. Good-bye, dear, I cannot write any more because my head aches so.--Ever yours,

"Madeline Spenser."

When George Peritt, alias Bottles, had finished reading and re-reading this letter, he folded it up neatly and put it, after his methodical fashion, into his pocket. Then he sat and stared at the red camellia blooms before him, that somehow looked as indistinct and misty as though they were fifty yards off instead of so many inches.

"It is a great blow," he said to himself. "Poor Madeline! How she must suffer!"

Presently he rose and walked--rather unsteadily, for he felt much upset--to his quarters, and, taking a sheet of notepaper, wrote the following letter to catch the outgoing mail:--

"My dear Madeline,--I have got your letter putting an end to our engagement. I don't want to dwell on myself when you must have so much to suffer, but I must say that it has been, and is, a great blow to me. I have loved you for so many years, ever since we were babies, I think; it does seem hard to lose you now after all. I thought that when we got home I might get the adjutancy of a militia regiment, and that we might have been married. I think we might have managed on five hundred a year, though perhaps I have no right to expect you to give up comforts and luxuries to which you are accustomed; but I am afraid that when one is in love one is apt to be selfish. However, all that is done with now, as, of course, putting everything else aside, I could not think of standing in your way in life. I love you much too well for that, dear Madeline, and you are too beautiful and delicate to be the wife of a poor subaltern with little beside his pay. I can honestly say that I hope you will be happy. I don't ask you to think of me too often, as that might make you less so, but perhaps sometimes when you are quiet you will spare your old lover a thought or two, because I am sure nobody could care for you more than I do. You need not be afraid that I shall forget you or marry anybody else. I shall do neither the one nor the other. I must close this now to catch the mail; I don't know that there is anything more to say. It is a hard trial--very; but it is no good being weak and giving way, and it consoles me to think that you are 'bettering yourself' as the servants say. Good-bye, dear Madeline. May God bless you, is now and ever my earnest prayer.

"J. G. Peritt."

Scarcely was this letter finished and hastily dispatched when a loud voice was heard calling, "Bottles, Bottles, my boy, come rejoice with me; the orders have come--we sail in a fortnight;" followed by the owner of the voice, another subaltern, and our hero's bosom friend. "Why, you don't seem very elated," said he of the voice, noting his friend's dejected and somewhat dazed appearance.

"No--that is, not particularly. So you sail in a fortnight, do you?"

"'You sail?' What do you mean? Why, we all sail, of course, from the colonel down to the drummer-boy."

"I don't think that I--I am going to sail, Jack," was the hesitating answer.

"Look here, old fellow, are you off your head, or have you been liquoring up, or what?"

"No--that is, I don't think so; certainly not the first--the second, I mean."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that, in short, I am sending in my papers. I like this climate --I, in short, am going to take to farming."

"Sending in your papers! Going to take to farming! And in this God-forsaken hole, too. You must be screwed."

"No, indeed. It is only ten o'clock."

"And how about getting married, and the girl you are engaged to, and whom you are looking forward so much to seeing. Is she going to take to farming?"

Bottles winced visibly.

"No, you see--in short, we have put an end to that. I am not engaged now."

"Oh, indeed," said the friend, and awkwardly departed.

II

Twelve years have passed since Bottles sent in his papers, and in twelve years many things happen. Amongst them recently it had happened that our hero's only and elder brother had, owing to an unexpected development

of consumption among the expectant heirs, tumbled into a baronetcy and eight thousand a year, and Bottles himself into a modest but to him most ample fortune of as many hundred. When the news reached him he was the captain of a volunteer corps engaged in one of the numerous Basuto wars in the Cape Colony. He served the campaign out, and then, in obedience to his brother's entreaties and a natural craving to see his native land, after an absence of nearly fourteen years, resigned his commission and returned to England.

Thus it came to pass that the next scene of this little history opens, not upon the South African veld, or in a whitewashed house in some half-grown, hobbledehoy colonial town, but in a set of the most comfortable chambers in the Albany, the local and appropriate habitation of the bachelor brother aforesaid, Sir Eustace Peritt.

In a very comfortable arm-chair in front of a warm fire (for the month is November) sits the Bottles of old days--bigger, uglier, shyer than ever, and in addition, disfigured by an assegai wound through the cheek. Opposite to him, and peering at him occasionally with fond curiosity through an eyeglass, is his brother, a very different stamp of man. Sir Eustace Peritt is a well-preserved, London-looking gentleman, of apparently any age between thirty and fifty. His eye is so bright, his figure so well preserved, that to judge from appearances alone you would put him down to the former age. But when you come to know him so as to be able to measure his consummate knowledge of the world, and to have the opportunity of reflecting upon the good-natured but profound

cynicism which pleasantly pervades his talk as absolutely as the flavour of lemon pervades rum punch, you would be inclined to assign his natal day to a much earlier date. In reality he was forty, neither more nor less, and had both preserved his youthful appearance and gained the mellowness of his experience by a judicious use of the opportunities of life.

"Well, my dear George," said Sir Eustace, addressing his brother--determined to take this occasion of meeting after so long a time to be rid of the nickname "Bottles," which he hated--"I haven't had such a pleasure for years."

"As--as what?"

"As meeting you again, of course. When I saw you on the vessel I knew you at once. You have not changed at all, unless expansion can be called a change."

"Nor have you, Eustace, unless contraction can be called a change. Your waist used to be bigger, you know."

"Ah, George, I drank beer in those days; it is one of things of which I have lived to see the folly. In fact, there are not many things of which I have not lived to see the folly."

"Except living itself, I suppose?"

"Exactly--except living. I have no wish to follow the example of our poor cousins," he answered with a sigh, "to whose considerate behaviour, however," he added, brightening, "we owe our present improved position." Then came a pause.

"Fourteen years is a long time, George; you must have had a rough time of it."

"Yes, pretty rough. I have seen a good deal of irregular service, you know."

"And never got anything out of it, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; I have got my bread and butter, which is all I am worth."

Sir Eustace looked at his brother doubtfully through his eyeglass. "You are modest," he said; "that does not do. You must have a better opinion of yourself if you want to get on in the world."

"I don't want to get on. I am quite content to earn a living, and I am modest because I have seen so many better men fare worse."

"But now you need not earn a living any more. What do you propose to do? Live in town? I can set you going in a very good lot. You will be quite a lion with that hole in your cheek--by the way, you must tell me the

story. And then, you see, if anything happens to me you stand in for the title and estates. That will be quite enough to float you."

Bottles writhed uneasily in his chair. "Thank you, Eustace; but really I must ask you--in short, I don't want to be floated or anything of the sort. I would rather go back to South Africa and my volunteer corps. I would indeed. I hate strangers, and society, and all that sort of thing. I'm not fit for it like you."

"Then what do you mean to do--get married and live in the country?"

Bottles coloured a little through his sun-tanned skin--a fact that did not escape the eyeglass of his observant brother. "No, I am not going to get married, certainly not."

"By the way," said Sir Eustace carelessly, "I saw your old flame, Lady Croston, yesterday, and told her you were coming home. She makes a charming widow."

"What!" ejaculated his brother, slowly raising himself out of his chair in astonishment. "Is her husband dead?"

"Dead? Yes, died a year ago, and a good riddance too. He appointed me one of his executors; I am sure I don't know why, for we never liked each other. I think he was the most disagreeable fellow I ever knew. They say he gave his wife a roughish time of it occasionally. Serve her

right, too."

"Why did it serve her right?"

Sir Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

"When a heartless girl jilts the fellow she is engaged to in order to sell herself to an elderly beast, I think she deserves all she gets. This one did not get half enough; indeed, she has made a good thing of it--better than she expected."

His brother sat down again before he answered in a constrained voice, "Don't you think you are rather hard on her, Eustace?"

"Hard on her? No, not a bit of it. Of all the worthless women that I know, I think Madeline Croston is the most worthless. Look how she treated you."

"Eustace," broke in his brother almost sharply, "if you don't mind, I wish you would not talk of her like that to me. I can't--in short, I don't like it."

Sir Eustace's eyeglass dropped out of Sir Eustace's eye--he had opened it so wide to stare at his brother. "Why, my dear fellow," he ejaculated, "you don't mean to tell me you still care for that woman?"

His brother twisted his great form about uncomfortably in the low chair as he answered, "I don't know, I'm sure, about caring for her, but I don't like to hear you say such things about her."

Sir Eustace whistled softly. "I am sorry if I offended you, old fellow," he said. "I had no idea that it was still a sore point with you. You must be a faithful people in South Africa. Here the 'holy feelings of the heart' are shorter lived. We wear out several generations of them in twelve years."

III

Bottles did not go to bed till late that night. Long after Sir Eustace --who, always careful of his health, never stopped up late if he could avoid it--had vanished, yawning, his brother sat smoking pipe after pipe and thinking. He had sat many times in the same way on a wagon-box in the African veld, or up where the moonlight turned the falls of the Zambesi into a rushing cataract of silver, or alone in his tent when all the camp was sleeping round him. It was a habit of this queer, silent man to sit and think for hours at night, and arose to a great extent from an incapacity to sleep, that was the weak point in his constitution.

As for his meditations, they were various, but mostly the outcome of a curious speculative side to his nature, which he never revealed to the outside world. Dreams of a happiness of which heretofore his hard life had given him no glimpse; semi-mystical, religious meditations upon the great unknown around us; and grand schemes for the regeneration of mankind--all formed part of them.

But there was one central thought, the fixed star of his mind, round which all the others continually revolved, taking their light and colour from it, and that was the thought of Madeline Croston, the woman to whom he had been engaged. Years and years had passed since he had seen her face, and yet it was always present to him. Beyond the occasional mention of her name in some society paper--several of which, by the

way, he took in for years and conscientiously searched on the chance of finding it--till this evening he had never even seen it or heard it spoken; and yet with all the tenacity of his strong, deep nature he clung to her dear memory. That she had left him to marry another man weighed as nothing in the balance of his love. Once she had loved him, and thereby he was repaid for the devotion of his life. He had no ambitions. Madeline had been his great ambition; and when that had fallen, all the others had fallen with it, even to the dust. He simply did his duty, whatever it might be, as well as in him lay, without fear of blame or hope of praise--shunning men, and never, if he could avoid it, speaking to a woman, content to earn his livelihood, and for the rest rendered colourless by his secret and pathetic passion.

And now it appeared that Madeline was a widow, which meant--and his heart beat fast at the thought--that she was a free woman. Madeline was a free woman, and he was within a few minutes' walk of her. No thousands of miles of ocean rolled between them now. He rose, went to the table, and consulted a Red book that lay on it. There was the address--a house in Grosvenor Street. Overcome by an uncontrollable impulse, he went out of the room. Going to his own he found his mackintosh and a round hat, and softly left the house. It was then past two in the morning, pouring with rain, and blowing hard.

He had been a little in London as a lad and remembered the main thoroughfares, so had no great difficulty in finding his way up Piccadilly till he came to Park Lane, into which the Red book told him

Grosvenor Square opened. But to find Grosvenor Street itself was a more difficult matter, and at such a time on such a night there was naturally nobody to ask--least of all a policeman. At last he found it, and hurried on down the street with a quickening pulse. What he was hurrying to he could not tell, but that over-mastering impulse forced him on quicker and quicker yet.

Suddenly he halted, and examined the number of one of the houses by the faint and struggling light from the nearest lamp. It was her house; now there was nothing between them but a few feet of space and fourteen inches of brickwork. He crossed over to the other side of the street, and looked up at the house, but could scarcely make it out through the driving rain. There was no light in the house, and no sign of life about the street. But there were both light and life in the heart of this watcher. All the pulses of his blood were astir, keeping time with the commotion of his mind. He stood there in the shadow, gazing at the murky house, heedless of the bitter wind and pelting rain, and felt his life and spirit pass out of his control into an unknown dominion. The storm that raged around him was nothing to the convulsion of his inner self in that hour of madness, which was yet happiness. Yet as it had arisen thus suddenly, so with equal swiftness it died away, and left him standing there with a chill sense of folly in his mind and of the bitter weather in his body; for on such a night a mackintosh and a dress coat were not adapted to keep the most ardent lover warm. He shivered, and turning, made his way back to Albany, feeling heartily ashamed of himself and his midnight expedition, and heartily glad that no one knew of it except

himself.

On the following day Bottles--for convenience' sake we still call him by his old nickname--was obliged to see a lawyer with reference to the money which he had inherited, and to search for a box which had gone astray aboard the steamer; also to buy a tall hat, such as he had not worn for fourteen years; so that between one thing and another it was half-past four before he got back to the Albany. Here he donned the new hat, which did not fit very well, and a new black coat which fitted so well that it seemed to cut into his large frame in every possible direction, and departed, furiously struggling with a pair of gloves, also new, for Grosvenor Street.

A quarter of an hour's walk, for he knew the road this time, brought him to the house. Glancing for a while at the spot where he had stood on the previous night, he walked up the steps and pulled the bell. Though he looked bold enough outwardly--indeed, rather imposing than otherwise--with his broad shoulders and the great scar on his bronzed face, his breast was full of terrors. In these, however, he had not much time to indulge, for a footman, still decked in the trappings of vicarious grief, opened the door with the most startling promptitude, and he was ushered upstairs into a small but richly furnished room.

Madeline was not in the room, though to judge from the lace handkerchief lying on the floor by a low chair, and the open novel on a little wicker table alongside, she had not left it long. The footman departed, saying,

in a magnificent undertone, that "her ladyship" should be informed, and left our hero to enjoy his sensations. Being one of those people whom suspense of any sort makes fidgety, he employed himself in looking at the pictures and china, even going so far as to walk to a pair of very heavy blue velvet curtains that apparently communicated with another room, and peep through them at a much larger apartment of which the furniture was done up in ghostly-looking bags.

Retreating from this melancholy sight, finally he took up a position on the hearthrug and waited. Would she be angry with him for coming? he wondered. Would it recall things she had rather forget? But perhaps she had already forgotten them--it was so long ago. Would she be very much changed? Perhaps he should not know her. Perhaps--but here he happened to lift his eyes, and there, standing between the two blue velvet curtains, was Madeline, now a woman in the full splendour of a remarkable beauty, and showing as yet, at any rate in that dull November twilight, no traces of her years. There she stood, her large dark eyes fixed upon him with a look of wistful curiosity, her shapely lips just parted to speak, and her bosom gently heaving, as though with trouble.

Poor Bottles! One look was enough. There was no chance of his attaining the blessed haven of disillusionment. In five seconds he was farther out to sea than ever. When she knew that he had seen her she dropped her eyes a little--he saw the long curved lashes appear against her cheek, and moved forward.

"How do you do?" she said softly, extending her slim, cool hand.

He took the hand and shook it, but for the life of him could think of nothing to say. Not one of the little speeches he had prepared would come into his mind. Yet the desperate necessity of saying something forced itself upon him.

"How do you do?" he ejaculated with a jerk. "It--it's very cold, isn't it?"

This remark was such an utter and ludicrous fiasco that Lady Croston could not choose but laugh a little.

"I see," she said, "that you have not got over your shyness."

"It is a long while since we met," he blurted out.

"I am very glad to see you," was her simple answer. "Now sit down and talk to me; tell me all about yourself. Stop; before you begin--how very curious it is! Do you know I dreamed about you last night--such a curious, painful dream. I dreamed that I was asleep in my room--which indeed I was--and that it was blowing a gale and raining in torrents--which I believe it was also--so there is nothing very wonderful about that. But now comes the odd part. I dreamed that you were standing out in the rain and wind and yet looking at me as though you saw me. I could not see your face because you were in the dark,

but I knew it was you. Then I woke up with a start. It was a most vivid dream. And now to-day you have come to see me after all these years."

He shifted his legs uneasily. Considering the facts of the case, her dream frightened him, which was not strange. Fortunately, at that moment the impressive footman arrived with the tea-things and asked whether he should light the lamps.

"No," said Lady Croston; "put some wood on the fire." She knew that she looked her very best in those half-lights.

Then, when she had given him his tea, delighting him by remembering that he did not like sugar, she fell to drawing him out about the wild life he had been leading.

"By the way," she said presently, "perhaps you can tell me--a few days ago I bought a book for my boy"--she had two children--"all about brave deeds and that sort of thing, and in it there was a story of a volunteer officer in South Africa (the name was not mentioned) which interested me very much. Did you ever hear of it? It was this: The officer was in command of a fort containing a force that was operating against a native chief. While he was away the chief sent a flag of truce down to the fort, which was fired on by some of the volunteers in the fort, because there was a man among the truce party against whom they had a spite. Just afterwards the officer returned, and was very angry that such a thing had been done by Englishmen, whose duty it was, he said, to teach

all the world what honour meant.

"Now comes the brave part of the story. Without saying any more, and notwithstanding the entreaties of his men, who knew that in all probability he was going to a death by torture, for he was so brave that the natives had set a great price upon him, wishing to kill him and use his body for medicine, which they thought would make them as brave as he was, that officer rode out far away into the mountains with only an interpreter and a white handkerchief, till he came to the chief's stronghold. But when the natives saw him coming, holding up his white handkerchief, they did not fire at him as his men had fired at them, because they were so astonished at his bravery that they thought he must be mad or inspired. So he came straight on to the walls of the stronghold, called to the chief and begged his pardon for what had happened, and then rode away again unharmed. Shortly afterwards, the chief, having captured some of the officer's volunteers, whom in the ordinary course of affairs he would have tortured to death, sent them back again untouched, with a message to the effect that he would show the English officer that he was not the only man who could behave 'like a gentleman.' I should like to know that man. Do you know who he was?"

Bottles looked uncomfortable, as well he might, for it was an incident in his own career; but her praise and enthusiasm sent a flush of pride into his face.

"I believe it was some fellow in the Basuto War," he said, prevaricating

with peculiar awkwardness.

"Oh, then it is a true story?"

"Yes--that is, it is partially true. There was nothing heroic about it. It was a necessary act if our honour as fair opponents was to continue to be worth anything."

"But who was the man?" she asked, fixing her dark eyes on him suspiciously.

"The man!" he stammered. "Oh, the man--well, in short----" and he stopped.

"In short, George," she put in, for the first time calling him by his Christian name, "that man was you, and I am so proud of you, George."

It was very hateful to him in a way, for he loathed that kind of personal adulation, even from her. He was so intensely modest he had never even reported the incident in question; it had come out in some roundabout way. Yet he could not but feel happy that she had found him out. It was a great deal to him to have moved her, and her sparkling eyes and heaving bosom showed that she was somewhat moved.

He looked up and his eyes caught hers; the room was nearly dark now, but the bright flame from the wood the servant had put on the fire played

upon her face. His eyes caught hers, and there was a look in them from which he could not escape, even if he had wished to do so. She had thrown her head back so that the coronet of her glossy hair rested upon the back of her low seat, and thus, without strain, could look straight up into his face. He had risen, and was standing by the mantelpiece. A slow, sweet smile grew upon the perfect face, and the dark eyes became soft and luminous as though they shone through tears.

In another second it had ended, as she thought that it would end and had intended that it should end. The great strong man was down--yes, down on his knees before her, one trembling hand catching at the arm of her chair, and the other clasping her tapering fingers. There was no hesitation or awkwardness about him now, the greatness of his long-pent passion inspired him, and he told her all without let or stop--all that he had suffered for her sake throughout those lonely years, all his wretched hopelessness, keeping nothing back.

Much she did not understand; such a passion as this was too deep to be fathomed by her shallow lines, too soaring for her to net in her world-straitened imagination. Once or twice even his exalted notions made her smile: it seemed ridiculous, knowing the world as she did, that any man should think thus of any woman. Nor, when at length he had finished, did she attempt an answer, feeling that her strength lay in silence, for she had a poor case. At least, the only argument that she used was a purely feminine one, but perfectly effective. She bent her beautiful face towards him, and he kissed it again and again.

IV

The revulsion of feeling experienced by Bottles as he hurried back to the Albany to dress for dinner--for he was to dine with his brother at one of his clubs that night--was so extraordinary and overwhelming that it took him, figuratively speaking, off his legs. As yet his mind, so long accustomed to perpetual misfortune in this, the ruling passion of his life, could not quite grasp his luck. That he should, after all, have won back his lost Madeline seemed altogether too good to be true.

As it happened, Sir Eustace had asked one or two men to meet him, amongst them an Under-Secretary for the Colonies, who, having to prepare for a severe cross-examination in the House upon South African affairs, had jumped at the opportunity of sucking the brains of a man thoroughly acquainted with the subject. But the expectant Under-Secretary was destined to meet with a grievous disappointment, for out of Bottles came no good thing. For the most part of the dinner he sat silent, only speaking when directly addressed, and then answering so much at random that the Under-Secretary quickly came to the conclusion that Sir Eustace's brother was either a fool or that he had drunk too much.

Sir Eustace himself saw that his brother's taciturnity had spoilt his little dinner, and his temper was not improved thereby. He was not accustomed to have his dinners spoiled, and felt that, so far as the Under-Secretary was concerned, he had put himself into a false position.

"My dear George," he said in a tone of bland exasperation when they had got back to the Albany, "I wonder what can be the matter with you? I told Atherleigh that you would be able to post him up thoroughly about all this Bechuana mess, and he could not get a word out of you."

His brother absently filled his pipe before he answered:

"The Bechuanas? Oh, yes, I know all about them. I lived among them for a year."

"Then why on earth didn't you tell him what you knew? You put me in rather a false position."

"I am very sorry, Eustace," he answered humbly. "I will go and see him if you like, and explain the thing to him to-morrow. The fact of the matter is, I was thinking of something else."

Sir Eustace interrogated him with a look.

"I was thinking," he went on slowly, "about Mad--about Lady Croston."

"Oh!"

"I went to see her this afternoon, and I think, I hope, that I am going to marry her."

If Bottles expected that this great news would be received by his elder brother as such news ought to be received--with congratulatory rejoicing--he was destined to be disappointed.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Sir Eustace shortly, letting his eyeglass drop.

"Why do you say that, Eustace?" Bottles asked uneasily.

"Because--because," answered his brother in the emphatic tone which was his equivalent for strong language, "you must be mad to think of such a thing."

"Why must I be mad?"

"Because you, still a young man, with all your life before you, deliberately propose to tie yourself up to a middle-aged and passeé woman--she is extremely passeé by daylight, let me tell you--who has already treated you like a dog, and is burdened with a couple of children, and who, if she marries again, will bring you very little except her luxurious tastes. But I expected this. I thought she would try to catch you with those languishing black eyes of hers. You are not the first; I know her of old."

"If," said his brother, rising in dudgeon, "you are going to abuse Madeline to me, I think I had better say good night, for we shall

quarrel--which I would not do for anything."

Sir Eustace shrugged his shoulders. "Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad," he muttered, as he lit his hand candle. "This is what comes of a course of South Africa."

But Sir Eustace was an amenable man. His favourite motto was "Live and let live"; and having given the matter his best consideration during the lengthy process of shaving himself on the following morning, he came to the conclusion, reluctantly enough it must be owned, that it was evident that his brother meant to have his own way, and therefore the best thing to be done was to fall in with his views and trust to the chapter of accidents to bring the thing to naught. Sir Eustace, for all his apparent worldliness and cynicism, was a good fellow at heart, and cherished a warm affection for his awkward, taciturn brother. He also cherished a great dislike for Lady Croston, whose character he thoroughly understood. He saw a good deal of her, it is true, because he happened to be one of the executors of her husband's will; and since he had come into the baronetcy it had struck him that she had developed a considerable partiality for his society.

The idea of a marriage between his brother and his brother's old flame was in every way distasteful to him. In the first place, under her husband's will, Madeline would bring, comparatively speaking, relatively

little with her should she marry again. That was one objection. Another, and still more forcible one from Sir Eustace's point of view, was that at her time of life she was not likely to present the house of Peritt with an heir. Now, Sir Eustace had not the slightest intention of marrying. Matrimony was, he considered, an excellent institution, and necessary to the carrying on of the world in a respectable manner, but it was not one with which he was anxious to identify himself. Therefore, if his brother married at all, it was his earnest desire that the union should bring children to inherit the title and estates. Prominent above both these excellent reasons, stood his intense distrust and dislike of the lady.

Needs must, however, when the devil (by whom he understood Madeline) drives. He was not going to quarrel with his only brother and presumptive heir because he chose to marry a woman who was not to his taste. So he shrugged his shoulders--having finished his shaving and his reflections together--and determined to put the best possible face on his disappointment.

"Well, George," he said to his brother at breakfast, "so you are going to marry Lady Croston?"

Bottles looked up surprised. "Yes, Eustace," he answered, "if she will marry me."

Sir Eustace glanced at him. "I thought the affair was settled," he said.

Bottles rubbed his big nose reflectively as he answered, "Well, no. I don't think that marriage was mentioned. But I suppose she means to marry me. In short, I don't see how she could mean anything else."

Sir Eustace breathed more freely, guessing what had taken place. So there was as yet no actual engagement.

"When are you going to see her again?"

"To-morrow. She is engaged all to-day."

His brother took out a pocket-book and consulted it. "Then I am more fortunate than you are," he said; "I have an appointment with Lady Croston this evening after dinner. Don't look jealous, old fellow, it is only about some executor's business. I think I told you that I am one of her husband's executors, blessings on his memory. She is a peculiar woman, your inamorata, and swears that she won't trust her lawyers, so I have to do all the dirty work myself, worse luck. You had better come too."

"Shan't I be in the way?" asked Bottles doubtfully, struggling feebly against the bribe.

"It is evident, my dear fellow, that you cannot be de trop. I shall present my papers for signature and vanish. You ought to be infinitely

obliged to me for giving you such a chance. We will consider that settled. We will dine together, and go round to Grosvenor Street afterwards."

Bottles agreed. Could he have seen the little scheme that was dawning in his brother's brain, perhaps he would not have assented so readily.

When her old lover went away reluctantly to dress for dinner on the previous day, Madeline Croston sat down to have a good think, and the result was not entirely satisfactory. It had been very pleasant to see him, and his passionate declaration of enduring love thrilled her through and through, and even woke an echo in her own breast. It made her proud to think that this man, who, notwithstanding his ugliness and awkwardness, was yet, her instinct told her, worth half a dozen smart London fashionables, still loved her and had never ceased to love her. Poor Bottles! she had been very fond of him once. They had grown up together, and it really gave her some cruel hours when a sense of what she owed to herself and her family had forced her to discard him.

She remembered, as she sat there this evening, how at the time she had wondered if it was worth it--if life would not be brighter and happier if she made up her mind to fight through it by her honest lover's side. Well, she could answer that question now. It had been well worth it. She had not liked her husband, it is true; but on the whole she had enjoyed a good time and plenty of money, and the power that money brings. The wisdom of her later days had confirmed the judgment of her youth. As

regards Bottles himself, she had soon got over that fancy; for years she had scarcely thought of him, till Sir Eustace told her that he was coming home, and she had that curious dream about him. Now he had come and made love to her, not in a civilised, philandering sort of a way, such as she was accustomed to, but with a passion and a fire and an utter self-abandonment which, while it thrilled her nerves with a curious sensation of mingled pleasure and pain, not unlike that she once experienced at a Spanish bull-fight when she saw a man tossed, was yet extremely awkward to deal with and rather alarming.

Now, too, the old question had come up again, and what was to be done? She had sheered him off the question that afternoon, but he would want to marry her, she felt sure of that. If she consented, what were they to live on? Her own juncture, in the event of her re-marriage, would be cut down to a thousand a year--she had four now, and was pinched on that; and as for Bottles, she knew what he had--eight hundred, for Sir Eustace had told her. He was next heir to the baronetcy, it was true, but Sir Eustace looked as though he would live for ever, and besides, he might marry after all.

For a few minutes Lady Croston contemplated the possibility of existing on eighteen hundred a year, and what Chancery would give her as guardian of her children in a poky house somewhere down at Kensington. Soon she realised that the thing was not to be done.

"Unless Sir Eustace will do something for him, it is very clear that we cannot be married," she said to herself with a sigh. "However, I need not tell him that just yet, or he will be rushing back to South Africa or something."

Sir Eustace and his brother carried out their programme. They dined together, and about half-past nine drove round to Grosvenor Street. Here they were shown into the drawing-room by the solemn footman, who informed Sir Eustace that her ladyship was upstairs in the nursery and had left a message for him that she would be down presently.

"All right; there is no hurry," said Sir Eustace absently, and the man went downstairs.

Bottles, being nervous, was fidgeting round the room as usual, and his brother, being very much at ease, was standing with his back to the fire, and staring about him. Presently his glance lit upon the blue velvet curtains which shut off the room they were in from the larger saloon that had not been used since Lady Croston's widowhood, and an idea which had been floating about in his brain suddenly took definite shape and form. He was a prompt man, and in another second he had acted up to that idea.

"George," he said in a quick, low voice, "listen to me, and for Heaven's sake don't interrupt for a minute. You know that I do not like the idea of your marrying Lady Croston. You know that I think her worthless--no, wait a minute, don't interrupt--I am only saying what I think. You believe in her; you believe that she is in love with you and will marry you, and have good reason to believe it, have you not?"

Bottles nodded.

"Very well. Supposing that I can show you within half an hour that she is perfectly ready to marry somebody else--myself, for instance--would you still believe in her?"

Bottles turned pale. "The thing is impossible," he said.

"That is not the question. Would you still believe in her, and would you still marry her?"

"Great heavens! no."

"Good. Then I tell you what I will do for you, and it will perhaps give you some idea of how deeply I feel in the matter; I will sacrifice myself."

"Sacrifice yourself?"

"Yes. I mean that I will this very evening propose to Madeline Croston under your nose, and I bet you five pounds she accepts me."

"Impossible," said Bottles again. "Besides, if she did you don't want to marry her."

"Marry her! No, indeed. I am not mad. I shall have to get out of the scrape as best I can--always supposing my view of the lady is correct."

"Excuse me," said Bottles with a gasp, "but I must ask you--in short, have you ever been on affectionate terms with Madeline?"

"Never, on my honour."

"And yet you think she will marry you if you ask her, even after what took place with me yesterday?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Because, my boy," replied Sir Eustace with a cynical smile, "I have eight thousand a year and you have eight hundred--because I have a title and you have none. That you may happen to be the better fellow of the two will, I fear, not make up for those deficiencies."

Bottles with a motion of his hand waved his brother's courtly compliment away, as it were, and turned on him with a set white face.

"I do not believe you, Eustace," he said. "Do you understand what you make out this lady to be when you say that she could kiss me and tell me that she loved me--for she did both yesterday--and promise to marry you

to-day?"

Sir Eustace shrugged his shoulders. "I think that the lady in question has done something like that before, George."

"That was years ago and under pressure. Now, Eustace, you have made this charge; you have upset my faith in Madeline, whom I hope to marry, and I say, prove it--prove it if you can. I will stake my life you cannot."

"Don't agitate yourself, my dear fellow; and as to betting, I would not risk more than a fiver. Now oblige me by stepping behind those velvet curtains--a la 'School for Scandal'--and listening in perfect silence to my conversation with Lady Croston. She does not know that you are here, so she will not miss you. You can escape when you have had enough of it, for there is a door through on to the landing, and as we came up I noticed that it was ajar. Or if you like you can appear from between the curtains like an infuriated husband on the stage and play whatever role occasion may demand. Really the situation has a laughable side. I should enjoy it immensely if I were behind the curtain too. Come, in you go."

Bottles hesitated. "I can't hide," he said.

"Nonsense; remember how much depends on it. All is fair in love or war. Quick; here she comes."

Bottles grew flurried and yielded, scarcely knowing what he did. In another second he was in the darkened room behind the curtains, through the crack in which he could command the lighted scene before him, and Sir Eustace was back at his place before the fire, reflecting that in his ardour to extricate his brother from what he considered a suicidal engagement he had let himself in for a very pretty undertaking. Suppose she accepted him, his brother would be furious, and he would probably have to go abroad to get out of the lady's way; and suppose she refused him, he would look a fool.

Meanwhile the sweep, sweep of Madeline's dress as she passed down the stairs was drawing nearer, and in another instant she was in the room. She was beautifully dressed in silver-grey silk, plentifully trimmed with black lace, and cut square back and front so as to show her rounded shoulders. She wore no ornaments, being one of the few women who are able to dispense with them, unless indeed a red camellia pinned in the front of her dress can be called an ornament. Bottles, shivering with shame and doubt behind his curtain, marked that red camellia, and wondered of what it reminded him.

Then in a flash it all came back, the scene of years and years ago--the verandah in far-away Natal, with himself sitting on it, an open letter in his hand and staring with all his eyes at the camellia bush covered with bloom before him. It seemed a bad omen to him--that camellia in Madeline's bosom. Next second she was speaking.

"Oh, Sir Eustace, I owe you a thousand apologies. You must have been here for quite ten minutes, for I heard the front door bang when you came. But my poor little girl Effie is ill with a sore throat which has made her feverish, and she absolutely refused to go to sleep unless she had my hand to hold."

"Lucky Effie," said Sir Eustace, with his politest bow; "I am sure I can understand her fancy."

At the moment he was holding Madeline's hand himself, and gave emphasis to his words by communicating the gentlest possible pressure to it as he let it fall. But knowing his habits, she did not take much notice. Comparative strangers when Sir Eustace shook hands with them were sometimes in doubt whether he was about to propose to them or to make a remark upon the weather. Alas! it had always been the weather.

"I come as a man of business besides, and men of business are accustomed to being kept waiting," he went on.

"You are really very good, Sir Eustace, to take so much trouble about my affairs."

"It is a pleasure, Lady Croston."

"Ah, Sir Eustace, you do not expect me to believe that," laughed the radiant creature at his side. "But if you only knew how I detest

lawyers, and what you spare me by the trouble you take, I am sure you would not grudge me your time."

"Do not talk of it, Lady Croston. I would do a great deal more than that for you; in fact," here he dropped his voice a little, "there are few things that I would not do for you, Madeline."

She raised her delicate eyebrows till they looked like notes of interrogation, and blushed a little. This was quite a new style for Sir Eustace. Was he in earnest? she wondered. Impossible!

"And now for business," he continued; "not that there is much business; as I understand it, you have only to sign this document, which I have already witnessed, and the stock can be transferred."

She signed the paper which he had brought in a big envelope almost without looking at it, for she was thinking of Sir Eustace's remark, and he put it back in the envelope.

"Is that all the business, Sir Eustace?" she asked.

"Yes; quite all. Now I suppose that as I have done my duty I had better go away."

"I wish to Heaven he would!" groaned Bottles to himself behind the curtains. He did not like his brother's affectionate little ways or

Madeline's tolerance of them.

"Indeed, no; you had better sit down and talk to me--that is, if you have got nothing pleasanter to do."

We can guess Sir Eustace's prompt reply and Madeline's smiling reception of the compliment, as she seated herself in a low chair--that same low chair she had occupied the day before.

"Now for it," said Sir Eustace to himself. "I wonder how George is getting on?"

"My brother tells me that he came to see you yesterday," he began.

"Yes," she answered, smiling again, but wondering in her heart how much he had told him.

"Do you find him much changed?"

"Not much."

"You used to be very fond of each other once, if I remember right?" said he.

"Yes, once."

"I often think how curious it is," went on Sir Eustace in a reflective tone, "to watch the various changes time brings about, especially where the affections are concerned. One sees children at the seaside making little mounds of sand, and they think, if they are very young children, that they will find them there to-morrow. But they reckon without their tide. To-morrow the sands will have swept as level as ever, and the little boys will have to begin again. It is like that with our youthful love affairs, is it not? The tide of time comes up and sweeps them away, fortunately for ourselves. Now in your case, for instance, it is, I think, a happy thing for both of you that your sandhouse did not last. Is it not?"

Madeline sighed softly. "Yes, I suppose so," she answered.

Bottles, behind the curtains, rapidly reviewed the past, and came to a different conclusion.

"Well, that is all done with," said Sir Eustace cheerfully.

Madeline did not contradict him; she did not see her way to doing so just at present.

Then came a pause.

"Madeline," said Sir Eustace presently, in a changed voice, "I have something to say to you."

"Indeed, Sir Eustace," she answered, lifting her eyebrows again in her note of interrogation manner, "what is it?"

"It is this, Madeline--I want to ask you to be my wife."

The blue velvet curtains suddenly gave a jump as though they were assisting at a spiritualistic seance.

Sir Eustace looked at the curtains with warning in his eye.

Madeline saw nothing.

"Really, Sir Eustace!"

"I dare say I surprise you," went on this ardent lover; "my suit may seem a sudden one, but in truth it is nothing of the sort."

"O Lord, what a lie!" groaned the distracted Bottles.

"I thought, Sir Eustace," murmured Madeline in her sweet low voice, "that you told me not very long ago that you never meant to marry."

"Nor did I, Madeline, because I thought there was no chance of my marrying you" ("which I am sure I hope there isn't," he added to himself). "But--but, Madeline, I love you." ("Heaven forgive me for

that!") "Listen to me, Madeline, before you answer," and he drew his chair closer to her own. "I feel the loneliness of my position, and I want to get married. I think that we should suit each other very well. At our age, now that our youth is past" (he could not resist this dig, at which Madeline winced), "probably neither of us would wish to marry anybody much our junior. I have had many opportunities lately, Madeline, of seeing the beauty of your character, and to the beauties of your person no man could be blind. I can offer you a good position, a good fortune, and myself, such as I am. Will you take me?" and he laid his hand upon hers and gazed earnestly into her eyes.

"Really, Sir Eustace," she murmured, "this is so very unexpected and sudden."

"Yes, Madeline, I know it is. I have no right to take you by storm in this way, but I trust you will not allow my precipitancy to weight against me. Take a little time to think it over--a week say" ("by which time," he reflected, "I hope to be in Algiers.") "Only, if you can, Madeline, tell me that I may hope."

She made no immediate answer, but, letting her hands fall idly in her lap, looked straight before her, her beautiful eyes fixed upon vacancy, and her mind amply occupied in considering the pros and cons of the situation. Then Sir Eustace took heart of grace; bending down, he kissed the Madonna-like face. Still there was no response. Only very gently she pushed him from her, whispering:

"Yes, Eustace, I think I shall be able to tell you that you may hope."

Bottles waited to see no more. With set teeth and flaming eyes he crept, a broken man, through the door that led on to the landing, crept down the stairs and into the hall. On the pegs were his hat and coat; he took them and passed into the street.

"I have done a disgraceful thing," he thought, "and I have paid for it."

Softly as the door closed Sir Eustace heard it; and then he too left the room, murmuring, "I shall soon come for my answer, Madeline."

When he reached the street his brother was gone.

VI

Sir Eustace did not go straight back to the Albany, but, calling a hansom, drove down to his club.

"Well," he thought to himself, "I have played a good many curious parts in my time, but I never had to do with anything like this before. I only hope George is not much cut up. His eyes ought to be opened now. What a woman----" but we will not repeat Sir Eustace's comments upon the lady to whom he was nominally half engaged.

At the club Sir Eustace met his friend the Under-Secretary, who had just escaped from the House. Thanks to information furnished to him that morning by Bottles, who had been despatched by Sir Eustace, in a penitent mood, to the Colonial Office to see him, he had just succeeded in confusing, if not absolutely in defeating, the impertinent people who "wanted to know." Accordingly he was jubilant, and greeted Sir Eustace with enthusiasm, and they sat talking together for an hour or more.

Then Sir Eustace, being, as has been said, of early habits, made his way home.

In his sitting-room he found his brother smoking and contemplating the fire.

"Hullo, old fellow!" he said, "I wish you had come to the club with me.

Atherleigh was there, and is delighted with you. What you told him this morning enabled him to smash up his enemies, and as the smashing lately has been rather the other way he is jubilant. He wants you to go to see him again to-morrow. Oh, by the way, you made your escape all right. I only hope I may be as lucky. Well, what do you think of your lady-love now?"

"I think," said Bottles slowly--"that I had rather not say what I do think."

"Well, you are not going to marry her now, I suppose?"

"No, I shall not marry her."

"That is all right; but I expect that it will take me all I know to get clear of her. However, there are some occasions in life when one is bound to sacrifice one's own convenience, and this is one of them. After all, she is really very pretty in the evening, so it might have been worse."

Bottles winced, and Sir Eustace took a cigarette.

"By the way, old fellow," he said, as he settled himself in his chair again, "I hope you are not put out with me over this. Believe me, you have no cause to be jealous; she does not care a hang about me, it is only the title and the money. If a fellow who was a lord and had a

thousand a year more proposed to her to-morrow she would chuck me up and take him."

"No; I am not angry with you," said Bottles; "you meant kindly, but I am angry with myself. It was not honourable to--in short, play the spy upon a woman's weakness."

"You are very scrupulous," yawned Sir Eustace; "all means are fair to catch a snake. Dear me, I nearly exploded once or twice; it was better than [yawn] any [yawn] play," and Sir Eustace went to sleep.

Bottles sat still and stared at the fire.

Presently his brother woke up with a start. "Oh, you are there, are you, Bottles?" (it was the first time he had called him by that name since his return.) "Odd thing; but do you know that I was dreaming that we were boys again, and trout-fishing in the old Cantlebrook stream. I dreamt that I hooked a big fish, and you were so excited that you jumped right into the river after it--you did once, you remember--and the river swept you away and left me on the bank; most unpleasant dream. Well, good night, old boy. I vote we go down and have some trout-fishing together in the spring. God bless you!"

"Good night," said Bottles, gazing affectionately after his brother's departing form.

Then he too rose and went to his bedroom. On a table stood a battered old tin despatch-box--the companion of all his wanderings. He opened it and took from it first a little bottle of chloral.

"Ah," he said, "I shall want you if I am to sleep again." Setting the bottle down, he extracted from a dirty envelope one or two letters and a faded photograph. It was the same that used to hang over his bed in his quarters at Maritzburg. These he destroyed, tearing them into small bits with his strong brown fingers.

Then he shut the box and sat down at the table to think, opening the sluice-gates of his mind and letting the sea of misery flow in, as it were.

This, then, was the woman whom he had forgiven and loved and honoured for all these years. This was the end and this the reward of all his devotion and of all his hopes. And he smiled in bitterness of his pain and self-contempt.

What was he to do? Go back to South Africa? He had not the heart for it. Live here? He could not. His existence had been wasted. He had lost his delusion--the beautiful delusion of his life--and he felt as though it would drive him mad, as the man whose shadow left him went mad.

He rose from the chair, opened the window, and looked out. It was a clear frosty night, and the stars shone brightly. For some while he

stood looking at them; then he undressed himself. Generally, for he was different to most men, he said his prayers. For years, indeed, he had not missed doing so, any more than he had missed praying Providence in them to watch over and bless his beloved Madeline. But to-night he said no prayers. He could not pray. The three angels, Faith, Hope, and Love, whose whisperings heretofore had been ever in his ears, had taken wing, and left him as he played the eavesdropper behind those blue velvet curtains.

So he swallowed his sleeping-draught and laid himself down to rest.

* * * * *

When Madeline Croston heard the news at a dinner-party on the following evening she was much shocked, and made up her mind to go home early. To this day she tells the story as a frightful warning against the careless use of chloral.

LITTLE FLOWER