

## CHAPTER II

### THE SWEARING OF THE OATH

Arthur Beach, Jane's brother, was standing in the hall waiting to speak to Leonard, but he passed without a word, closing the hall door behind him. Outside snow was falling, though not fast enough to obscure the light of the moon which shone through the belt of firs.

Leonard walked on down the drive till he neared the gate, when suddenly he heard the muffled sound of feet pursuing him through the snow. He turned with an exclamation, believing that the footsteps were those of Arthur Beach, for at the moment he was in no mood for further conversation with any male member of that family. As it chanced, however, he found himself face to face not with Arthur, but with Jane herself, who perhaps had never looked more beautiful than she did at this moment in the snow and the moonlight. Indeed, whenever Leonard thought of her in after-years, and that was often, there arose in his mind a vision of a tall and lovely girl, her auburn hair slightly powdered over with the falling flakes, her breast heaving with emotion, and her wide grey eyes gazing piteously upon him.

"Oh! Leonard," she said nervously, "why do you go without saying good-bye to me?"

He looked at her awhile before he answered, for something in his heart

told him that this was the last sight which he should win of his love for many a year, and therefore his eyes dwelt upon her as we gaze upon one whom the grave is about to hide from us for ever.

At last he spoke, and his words were practical enough.

"You should not have come out in those thin shoes through the snow, Jane. You will catch cold."

"I wish I could," she answered defiantly, "I wish that I could catch such a cold as would kill me; then I should be out of my troubles. Let us go into the summer-house; they will never think of looking for me there."

"How will you get there?" asked Leonard; "it is a hundred yards away, and the snow always drifts in that path."

"Oh! never mind the snow," she said.

But Leonard did mind it, and presently he hit upon a solution of the difficulty. Having first glanced up the drive to see that nobody was coming, he bent forward and without explanation or excuse put his arms around Jane, and lifting her as though she were a child, he bore her down the path which led to the summer-house. She was heavy, but, sooth to say, he could have wished the journey longer. Presently they were there, and very gently he laid her on her feet again, kissing her upon

the lips as he did so. Then he took off his overcoat and wrapped it round her shoulders.

All this while Jane had not spoken. Indeed, the poor girl felt so happy and so safe in her lover's arms that it seemed to her as though she never wished to speak, or to do anything for herself again. It was Leonard who broke the silence.

"You ask me why I left without saying good-bye to you, Jane. It was because your father has dismissed me from the house and forbidden me to have any more to do with you."

"Oh, why?" asked the girl, lifting her hands despairingly.

"Can't you guess?" he answered with a bitter laugh.

"Yes, Leonard," she whispered, taking his hand in sympathy.

"Perhaps I had better put it plainly," said Leonard again; "it may prevent misunderstandings. Your father has dismissed me because my father embezzled all my money. The sins of the father are visited upon the children, you see. Also he has done this with more than usual distinctness and alacrity, because he wishes you to marry young Mr. Cohen, the bullion-broker and the future owner of Outram."

Jane shivered.

"I know, I know," she said, "and oh! Leonard, I hate him!"

"Then perhaps it will be as well not to marry him," he answered.

"I would rather die first," she said with conviction.

"Unfortunately one can't always die when it happens to be convenient, Jane."

"Oh! Leonard, don't be horrid," she said, beginning to cry. "Where are you going, and what shall I do?"

"To the bad probably," he answered. "At least it all depends upon you. Look here, Jane, if you will stick to me I will stick to you. The luck is against me now, but I have it in me to see that through. I love you and I would work myself to death for you; but at the best it must be a question of time, probably of years."

"Oh! Leonard, indeed I will if I can. I am sure that you do not love me more than I love you, but I can never make you understand how odious they all are to me about you, especially Papa."

"Confound him!" said Leonard beneath his breath; and if Jane heard, at that moment her filial affections were not sufficiently strong to induce her to remonstrate.

"Well, Jane," he went on, "the matter lies thus: either you must put up with their treatment or you must give me the go-by. Listen: in six months you will be twenty-one, and in this country all her relations put together can't force a woman to marry a man if she does not wish to, or prevent her from marrying one whom she does wish to marry. Now you know my address at my club in town; letters sent there will always reach me, and it is scarcely possible for your father or anybody else to prevent you from writing and posting a letter. If you want my help or to communicate in any way, I shall expect to hear from you, and if need be, I will take you away and marry you the moment you come of age. If, on the other hand, I do not hear from you, I shall know that it is because you do not choose to write, or because that which you have to write would be too painful for me to read. Do you understand, Jane?"

"Oh! yes, Leonard, but you put things so hardly."

"Things have been put hardly enough to me, love, and I must be plain--this is my last chance of speaking to you."

At this moment an ominous sound echoed through the night; it was none other than the distant voice of Mr. Beach, calling from his front-door step, "Jane! Are you out there, Jane?"

"Oh! heavens!" she said, "there is my father calling me. I came out by the back door, but mother must have been up to my room and found me

gone. She watches me all day now. What shall I do?"

"Go back and tell them that you have been saying good-bye to me. It is not a crime; they cannot kill you for it."

"Indeed they can, or just as bad," replied Jane. Then suddenly she threw her arms about her lover's neck and burying her beautiful face upon his breast, she began to sob bitterly, murmuring, "Oh my darling, my darling, what shall I do without you?"

Over the brief and distressing scene which followed it may be well to drop a veil. Leonard's bitterness of mind forsook him now, and he kissed her and comforted her as he might best, even going so far as to mingle his tears with hers, tears of which he had no cause to be ashamed. At length she tore herself loose, for the shouts were growing louder and more insistent.

"I forgot," she sobbed, "here is a farewell present for you; keep it in memory of me, Leonard," and thrusting her hand into the bosom of her dress she drew from it a little packet which she gave to him.

Then once more they kissed and clung together, and in another moment she had vanished back into the snow and darkness, passing out of Leonard's sight and out of his life, though from his mind she could never pass.

"A farewell present. Keep it in memory of me." The words yet echoed in

his ears, and to Leonard they seemed fateful--a prophecy of utter loss. Sighing heavily, he opened the packet and examined its contents by the feeble moonlight. They were not large: a prayer-book bound in morocco, her own, with her name on the fly-leaf and a short inscription beneath, and in the pocket of its cover a lock of auburn hair tied round with silk.

"An unlucky gift," said Leonard to himself; then putting on his coat, which was yet warm from Jane's shoulders, he also turned and vanished into the snow and the night, shaping his path towards the village inn.

He reached it in due course, and passed into the little parlour that adjoined the bar. It was a comfortable room enough, notwithstanding its adornments of badly stuffed birds and fishes, and chiefly remarkable for its wide old-fashioned fireplace with wrought-iron dogs. There was no lamp in the room when Leonard entered, but the light of the burning wood was bright, and by it he could see his brother seated in a high-backed chair gazing into the fire, his hand resting on his knee.

Thomas Outram was Leonard's elder by two years and cast in a more fragile mould. His face was the face of a dreamer, the brown eyes were large and reflective, and the mouth sensitive as a child's. He was a scholar and a philosopher, a man of much desultory reading, with refined tastes and a really intimate knowledge of Greek gems.

"Is that you, Leonard?" he said, looking up absently; "where have you

been?"

"To the Rectory," answered his brother.

"What have you been doing there?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes, of course. Did you see Jane?"

Then Leonard told him all the story.

"What do you think she will do?" asked Tom when his brother had finished. "Given the situation and the woman, it is rather a curious problem."

"It may be," answered Leonard; "but as I am not an equation in algebra yearning to be worked out, I don't quite see the fun of it. But if you ask me what I think she will do, I should say that she will follow the example of everybody else and desert me."

"You seem to have a poor idea of women, old fellow. I know little of them myself and don't want to know more. But I have always understood that it is the peculiar glory of their sex to come out strong on these exceptional occasions. 'Woman in our hours of ease,' etc."



"Well, we shall see. But it is my opinion that women think a great deal more of their own hours of ease than of those of anybody else. Thank heaven, here comes our dinner!"

Thus spoke Leonard, somewhat cynically and perhaps not in the best of taste. But, his rejoicing over its appearance notwithstanding, he did not do much justice to the dinner when it arrived. Indeed, it would be charitable to make allowances for this young man at that period of his life. He had sustained a most terrible reverse, and do what he might he could never quite escape from the shadow of his father's disgrace, or put out of his mind the stain with which his father had dimmed the honour of his family. And now a new misfortune hung over him. He had just been driven with contumely from a house where hitherto he was the most welcome of guests; he had parted, moreover, from the woman whom he loved dearly, and under circumstances which made it doubtful if their separation would not be final.

Leonard possessed the gift of insight into character, and more common sense than can often be expected from a young man in love. He knew well that the chief characteristic of Jane's nature was a tendency to yield to the circumstances of the hour, and though he hoped against hope, he could find no reason to suppose that she would exhibit greater determination in the matter of their engagement than her general lack of strength might lead him to anticipate. Besides, and here his common sense came in, would it be wise that she should do so? After all, what had he to offer her, and were not his hopes of future advancement

nothing better than a dream? Roughly as he had put it, perhaps Mr. Beach was right when he told him that he, Leonard, was both selfish and impertinent, since was it not a selfish impertinence in him to ask any woman to link her fortune with his in the present state of his affairs?

Let us therefore make excuses for his words and outward behaviour, for at heart Leonard had much to trouble him.

When the cloth had been cleared away and they were alone again, Tom spoke to his brother, who was moodily filling his pipe.

"What shall we do to-night, Leonard?" he said.

"Go to bed, I suppose," he answered.

"See here, Leonard," said his brother again, "what do you say to having a last look at the old place?"

"If you wish, Tom, but it will be painful."

"A little pain more or less can scarcely hurt us, old fellow," said Tom, laying his thin hand on his brother's shoulder.

Then they started. A quarter of an hour's walking brought them to the Hall. The snow had ceased falling now and the night was beautifully clear, but before it ceased it had done a welcome office in hiding from

view all the litter and wreckage of the auction, which make the scene of a recent sale one of the most desolate sights in the world. Never had the old house looked grander or more eloquent of the past than it did on that night to the two brothers who were dispossessed of their heritage. They wandered round it in silence, gazing affectionately at each well-known tree and window, till at length they came to the gun-room entrance. More from habit than for any other reason Leonard turned the handle of the door. To his surprise it was open; after the confusion of the sale no one had remembered to lock it.

"Let us go in," he said.

They entered and wandered from room to room till they reached the greater hall, a vast and oak-roofed chamber built after the fashion of the nave of a church, and lighted by a large window of ecclesiastical design. This window was filled with the armorial bearings of many generations of the Outram family, wrought in stained glass and placed in couples, for next to each coat of arms were the arms of its bearer's dame. It was not quite full, however, for in it remained two blank shields, which had been destined to receive the escutcheons of Thomas Outram and his wife.

"They will never be filled now, Leonard," said Tom, pointing to these; "curious, isn't it, not to say sad?"

"Oh! I don't know," answered his brother; "I suppose that the Cohens

boast some sort of arms, or if not they can buy them."

"I should think that they would have the good taste to begin a new window for themselves," said Tom.

Then he was silent for a while, and they watched the moonlight streaming through the painted window, the memorial of so much forgotten grandeur, and illumining the portraits of many a dead Outram that gazed upon them from the panelled walls.

"Per ardua ad astra," said Tom, absently reading the family motto which alternated pretty regularly with a second device that some members of it had adopted--"For Heart, Home, and Honour."

"'Per ardua ad astra'--through struggle to the stars--and 'For Heart, Home, and Honour,'" repeated Tom; "well, I think that our family never needed such consolations more, if indeed there are any to be found in mottoes. Our Heart is broken, our hearth is desolate, and our honour is a byword, but there remain the 'struggle and the stars.'"

As he spoke his face took the fire of a new enthusiasm: "Leonard," he went on, "why should not we retrieve the past? Let us take that motto--the more ancient one--for an omen, and let us fulfil it. I believe it is a good omen, I believe that one of us will fulfil it."

"We can try," answered Leonard. "If we fail in the struggle, at least

the stars remain for us as for all human kind."

"Leonard," said his brother almost in a whisper, "will you swear an oath with me? It seems childish, but I think that under some circumstances there is wisdom even in childishness."

"What oath?" asked Leonard.

"This; that we will leave England and seek fortune in some foreign land--sufficient fortune to enable us to repurchase our lost home; that we will never return here until we have won this fortune; and that death alone shall put a stop to our quest."

Leonard hesitated a moment, then answered:

"If Jane fails me, I will swear it."

Tom glanced round as though in search of some familiar object, and presently his eye fell upon what he sought. A great proportion of the furniture of the old house, including the family portraits, had been purchased by the in-coming owner. Among the articles which remained was a very valuable and ancient bible, one of the first ever printed indeed, that stood upon an oaken stand in the centre of the hall, to which it was securely chained. Tom led the way to this bible, followed by his brother. Then they placed their hands upon it, and standing there in the shadow, the elder of them spoke aloud in a voice that left no doubt of

the earnestness of his purpose, or of his belief in their mission.

"We swear," he said, "upon this book and before the God who made us that we will leave this home that was ours, and never look upon it again till we can call it ours once more. We swear that we will follow this, the purpose of our lives, till death destroys us and it; and may shame and utter ruin overtake us if, while we have strength and reason, we turn our backs upon this oath! So help us God!"

"So help us God!" repeated Leonard.

Thus in the home of their ancestors, in the presence of their Maker, and of the pictured dead who had gone before them, did Thomas and Leonard Outram devote their lives to this great purpose. Perhaps, as one of them had said, the thing was childish, but if so, at the least it was solemn and touching. Their cause seemed hopeless indeed; but if faith can move mountains, much more can honest endeavour attain its ends. In that hour they felt this. Yes, they believed that the end would be attained by one of them, though they guessed little what struggles lay between them and the Star they hoped to gain, or how strangely they should be borne thither.

On the morrow they went to London and waited there a while, but no word came from Jane Beach, and for good or ill the chains of the oath that he had taken riveted themselves around Leonard Outram's neck.

Within three months of this night the brothers were nearing the shores of Africa, the land of the Children of the Mist.