

IV

He was a young man with an eager soul, and his work in Apple Blossom Court and places like it had torn him many ways. Religious conventions established through centuries of custom had not prepared him for life among the submerged. He had struggled and been appalled, he had wrestled in prayer and felt himself unanswered, and in repentance of the feeling had scourged himself with thorns. Miss Montaubyn, returning from the hospital, had filled him at first with horror and protest.

"But who knows--who knows?" he said to Dart, as they stood and talked together afterward, "Faith as a little child. That is literally hers. And I was shocked by it--and tried to destroy it, until I suddenly saw what I was doing. I was--in my cloddish egotism--trying to show her that she was irreverent BECAUSE she could believe what in my soul I do not, though I dare not admit so much even to myself. She took from some strange passing visitor to her tortured bedside what was to her a revelation. She heard it first as a child hears a story of magic. When she came out of the hospital, she told it as if it was one. I--I--" he bit his lips and moistened them, "argued with her and reproached her. Christ the Merciful, forgive me! She sat in her squalid little room with her magic--sometimes in the dark--sometimes without fire, and she clung to it, and loved it and asked it to help her, as a child asks its father for bread. When she was answered--and God forgive me again for doubting that the simple good that came to her WAS an answer--when any small help came to her, she was a radiant thing, and without a shadow of

doubt in her eyes told me of it as proof--proof that she had been heard. When things went wrong for a day and the fire was out again and the room dark, she said, 'I 'aven't kept near enough--I 'aven't trusted TRUE. It will be gave me soon,' and when once at such a time I said to her, 'We must learn to say, Thy will be done,' she smiled up at me like a happy baby and answered:

"Thy will be done on earth AS IT IS IN 'EAVEN. Lor', there's no cold there, nor no 'unger nor no cryin' nor pain. That's the way the will is done in 'eaven. That's wot I arst for all day long--for it to be done on earth as it is in 'eaven.' What could I say? Could I tell her that the will of the Deity on the earth he created was only the will to do evil--to give pain--to crush the creature made in His own image. What else do we mean when we say under all horror and agony that befalls, 'It is God's will--God's will be done.' Base unbeliever though I am, I could not speak the words. Oh, she has something we have not. Her poor, little misspent life has changed itself into a shining thing, though it shines and glows only in this hideous place. She herself does not know of its shining. But Drunken Bet would stagger up to her room and ask to be told what she called her 'pantermine' stories. I have seen her there sitting listening--listening with strange quiet on her and dull yearning in her sodden eyes. So would other and worse women go to her, and I, who had struggled with them, could see that she had reached some remote longing in their beings which I had never touched. In time the seed would have stirred to life--it is beginning to stir even now. During the months since she came back to the court--though they have laughed at

her--both men and women have begun to see her as a creature weirdly set apart. Most of them feel something like awe of her; they half believe her prayers to be bewitchments, but they want them on their side. They have never wanted mine. That I have known--KNOWN. She believes that her Deity is in Apple Blossom Court--in the dire holes its people live in, on the broken stairway, in every nook and awful cranny of it--a great Glory we will not see--only waiting to be called and to answer. Do I believe it--do you--do any of those anointed of us who preach each day so glibly 'God is EVERYWHERE'? Who is the one who believes? If there were such a man he would go about as Moses did when 'He wist not that his face shone.'"

They had gone out together and were standing in the fog in the court. The curate removed his hat and passed his handkerchief over his damp forehead, his breath coming and going almost sobbingly, his eyes staring straight before him into the yellowness of the haze.

"Who," he said after a moment of singular silence, "who are you?"

Antony Dart hesitated a few seconds, and at the end of his pause he put his hand into his overcoat pocket.

"If you will come upstairs with me to the room where the girl Glad lives, I will tell you," he said, "but before we go I want to hand something over to you."

The curate turned an amazed gaze upon him.

"What is it?" he asked.

Dart withdrew his hand from his pocket, and the pistol was in it.

"I came out this morning to buy this," he said. "I intended--never mind what I intended. A wrong turn taken in the fog brought me here. Take this thing from me and keep it."

The curate took the pistol and put it into his own pocket without comment. In the course of his labors he had seen desperate men and desperate things many times. He had even been--at moments--a desperate man thinking desperate things himself, though no human being had ever suspected the fact. This man had faced some tragedy, he could see. Had he been on the verge of a crime--had he looked murder in the eyes? What had made him pause? Was it possible that the dream of Jinny Montaubyn being in the air had reached his brain--his being?

He looked almost appealingly at him, but he only said aloud:

"Let us go upstairs, then."

So they went.

As they passed the door of the room where the dead woman lay Dart went

in and spoke to Miss Montaubyn, who was still there.

"If there are things wanted here," he said, "this will buy them." And he put some money into her hand.

She did not seem surprised at the incongruity of his shabbiness producing money.

"Well, now," she said, "I WAS wonderin' an' askin'. I'd like 'er clean an' nice, an' there's milk wanted bad for the biby."

In the room they mounted to Glad was trying to feed the child with bread softened in tea. Polly sat near her looking on with restless, eager eyes. She had never seen anything of her own baby but its limp newborn and dead body being carried away out of sight. She had not even dared to ask what was done with such poor little carrion. The tyranny of the law of life made her want to paw and touch this lately born thing, as her agony had given her no fruit of her own body to touch and paw and nuzzle and caress as mother creatures will whether they be women or tigresses or doves or female cats.

"Let me hold her, Glad," she half whimpered. "When she's fed let me get her to sleep."

"All right," Glad answered; "we could look after 'er between us well enough."

The thief was still sitting on the hearth, but being full fed and comfortable for the first time in many a day, he had rested his head against the wall and fallen into profound sleep.

"Wot's up?" said Glad when the two men came in. "Is anythin' 'appenin'?"

"I have come up here to tell you something," Dart answered. "Let us sit down again round the fire. It will take a little time."

Glad with eager eyes on him handed the child to Polly and sat down without a moment's hesitance, avid of what was to come. She nudged the thief with friendly elbow and he started up awake.

"'E's got somethin' to tell us," she explained. "The curick's come up to 'ear it, too. Sit 'ere, Polly," with elbow jerk toward the bundle of sacks. "It's got its stummick full an' it'll go to sleep fast enough."

So they sat again in the weird circle. Neither the strangeness of the group nor the squalor of the hearth were of a nature to be new things to the curate. His eyes fixed themselves on Dart's face, as did the eyes of the thief, the beggar, and the young thing of the street. No one glanced away from him.

His telling of his story was almost monotonous in its semi-reflective quietness of tone. The strangeness to himself--though it was a strangeness he accepted absolutely without protest--lay in his telling it at all, and in a sense of his knowledge that each of these creatures would understand and mysteriously know what depths he had touched this day.

"Just before I left my lodgings this morning," he said, "I found myself standing in the middle of my room and speaking to Something aloud. I did not know I was going to speak. I did not know what I was speaking to. I heard my own voice cry out in agony, 'Lord, Lord, what shall I do to be saved?'"

The curate made a sudden movement in his place and his sallow young face flushed. But he said nothing.

Glad's small and sharp countenance became curious.

"Speak, Lord, thy servant 'eareth," she quoted tentatively.

"No," answered Dart; "it was not like that. I had never thought of such things. I believed nothing. I was going out to buy a pistol and when I returned intended to blow my brains out."

"Why?" asked Glad, with passionately intent eyes; "why?"

"Because I was worn out and done for, and all the world seemed worn out and done for. And among other things I believed I was beginning slowly to go mad."

From the thief there burst forth a low groan and he turned his face to the wall.

"I've been there," he said; "I 'm near there now."

Dart took up speech again.

"There was no answer--none. As I stood waiting--God knows for what--the dead stillness of the room was like the dead stillness of the grave. And I went out saying to my soul, 'This is what happens to the fool who cries aloud in his pain.'"

"I've cried aloud," said the thief, "and sometimes it seemed as if an answer was coming--but I always knew it never would!" in a tortured voice.

"'T ain't fair to arst that wye," Glad put in with shrewd logic.

"Miss Montaubyn she allers knows it WILL come--an' it does."

"Something--not myself--turned my feet toward this place," said Dart. "I was thrust from one thing to another. I was forced to see and hear

things close at hand. It has been as if I was under a spell. The woman in the room below--the woman lying dead!" He stopped a second, and then went on: "There is too much that is crying out aloud. A man such as I am--it has FORCED itself upon me--cannot leave such things and give himself to the dust. I cannot explain clearly because I am not thinking as I am accustomed to think. A change has come upon me. I shall not use the pistol--as I meant to use it."

Glad made a friendly clutch at the sleeve of his shabby coat.

"Right O!" she cried. "That's it! You buck up sime as I told yer. Y' ain't stony broke an' there's 'allers to-morrer."

Antony Dart's expression was weirdly retrospective.

"I did not think so this morning," he answered.

"But there is," said the girl. "Ain't there now, curick? There's a lot o' work in yer yet; yer could do all sorts o' things if y' ain't too proud. I'll 'elp yer. So 'll the curick. Y' ain't found out yet what a little folks can live on till luck turns. Me, I'm goin' to try Miss Montaubyn's wye. Le's both try. Le's believe things is comin'. Le's get 'er to talk to us some more."

The curate was thinking the thing over deeply.

"Yer see," Glad enlarged cheerfully, "yer look almost like a gentleman. P'raps yer can write a good 'and an' spell all right. Can yer?"

"Yes."

"I think, perhaps," the curate began reflectively, "particularly if you can write well, I might be able to get you some work."

"I do not want work," Dart answered slowly. "At least I do not want the kind you would be likely to offer me."

The curate felt a shock, as if cold water had been dashed over him. Somehow it had not once occurred to him that the man could be one of the educated degenerate vicious for whom no power to help lay in any hands--yet he was not the common vagrant--and he was plainly on the point of producing an excuse for refusing work.

The other man, seeing his start and his amazed, troubled flush, put out a hand and touched his arm apologetically.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "One of the things I was going to tell you--I had not finished--was that I AM what is called a gentleman. I am also what the world knows as a rich man. I am Sir Oliver Holt."

Each member of the party gazed at him aghast. It was an enormous name to claim. Even the two female creatures knew what it stood for. It was

the name which represented the greatest wealth and power in the world of finance and schemes of business. It stood for financial influence which could change the face of national fortunes and bring about crises. It was known throughout the world. Yesterday the newspaper rumor that its owner had mysteriously left England had caused men on 'Change to discuss possibilities together with lowered voices.

Glad stared at the curate. For the first time she looked disturbed and alarmed.

"Blimme," she ejaculated, "'e's gone off 'is nut, pore chap!--'e's gone off it!"

"No," the man answered, "you shall come to me"--he hesitated a second while a shade passed over his eyes--"TO-MORROW. And you shall see."

He rose quietly to his feet and the curate rose also. Abnormal as the climax was, it was to be seen that there was no mistake about the revelation. The man was a creature of authority and used to carrying conviction by his unsupported word. That made itself, by some clear, unspoken method, plain.

"You are Sir Oliver Holt! And a few hours ago you were on the point of--"

"Ending it all--in an obscure lodging. Afterward the earth would have

been shovelled on to a work-house coffin. It was an awful thing." He shook off a passionate shudder. "There was no wealth on earth that could give me a moment's ease--sleep--hope--life. The whole world was full of things I loathed the sight and thought of. The doctors said my condition was physical. Perhaps it was--perhaps to-day has strangely given a healthful jolt to my nerves--perhaps I have been dragged away from the agony of morbidity and plunged into new intense emotions which have saved me from the last thing and the worst--SAVED me!"

He stopped suddenly and his face flushed, and then quite slowly turned pale.

"SAVED ME!" he repeated the words as the curate saw the awed blood creepingly recede. "Who knows, who knows! How many explanations one is ready to give before one thinks of what we say we believe. Perhaps it was--the Answer!"

The curate bowed his head reverently.

"Perhaps it was."

The girl Glad sat clinging to her knees, her eyes wide and awed and with a sudden gush of hysteric tears rushing down her cheeks.

"That's the wye! That's the wye!" she gulped out. "No one won't never believe--they won't, NEVER. That's what she sees, Miss Montaubyn.

You don't, 'E don't," with a jerk toward the curate. "I ain't nothin' but ME, but blimme if I don't--blimme!"

Sir Oliver Holt grew paler still. He felt as he had done when Jinny Montaubyn's poor dress swept against him. His voice shook when he spoke.

"So do I," he said with a sudden deep catch of the breath; "it was the Answer."

In a few moments more he went to the girl Polly and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I shall take you home to your mother," he said. "I shall take you myself and care for you both. She shall know nothing you are afraid of her hearing. I shall ask her to bring up the child. You will help her."

Then he touched the thief, who got up white and shaking and with eyes moist with excitement.

"You shall never see another man claim your thought because you have not time or money to work it out. You will go with me. There are to-morrows enough for you!"

Glad still sat clinging to her knees and with tears running, but the

ugliness of her sharp, small face was a thing an angel might have paused to see.

"You don't want to go away from here," Sir Oliver said to her, and she shook her head.

"No, not me. I told yer wot I wanted. Lemme do it."

"You shall," he answered, "and I will help you."

The things which developed in Apple Blossom Court later, the things which came to each of those who had sat in the weird circle round the fire, the revelations of new existence which came to herself, aroused no amazement in Jinny Montaubyn's mind. She had asked and believed all things--and all this was but another of the Answers.