

CHAPTER IX

Next day Smilash obtained from his wife a promise that she would behave towards Agatha as if the letter had given no offence. Henrietta pleaded as movingly as she could for an immediate return to their domestic state, but he put her off with endearing speeches, promised nothing but eternal affection, and sent her back to London by the twelve o'clock express. Then his countenance changed; he walked back to Lyvern, and thence to the chalet, like a man pursued by disgust and remorse. Later in the afternoon, to raise his spirits, he took his skates and went to Wickens's pond, where, it being Saturday, he found the ice crowded with the Alton students and their half-holiday visitors. Fairholme, describing circles with his habitual air of compressed hardihood, stopped and stared with indignant surprise as Smilash lurched past him.

"Is that man here by your permission?" he said to Farmer Wickens, who was walking about as if superintending a harvest.

"He is here because he likes, I take it," said Wickens stubbornly. "He is a neighbor of mine and a friend of mine. Is there any objections to my having a friend on my own pond, seein' that there is nigh on two or three ton of other people's friends on it 108 without as much as a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave."

"Oh, no," said Fairholme, somewhat dashed. "If you are satisfied there can be no objection."

"I'm glad on it. I thought there mout be."

"Let me tell you," said Fairholme, nettled, "that your landlord would not be pleased to see him here. He sent one of Sir John's best shepherds out of the country, after filling his head with ideas above his station. I heard Sir John speak very warmly about it last Sunday."

"Mayhap you did, Muster Fairholme. I have a lease of this land--and gravelly, poor stuff it is--and I am no ways beholden to Sir John's likings and dislikings. A very good thing too for Sir John that I have a lease, for there ain't a man in the country 'ud tak' a present o' the farm if it was free to-morrow. And what's a' more, though that young man do talk foolish things about the rights of farm laborers and such-like nonsense, if Sir John was to hear him layin' it down concernin' rent and improvements, and the way we tenant farmers is put upon, p'raps he'd speak warmer than ever next Sunday."

And Wickens, with a smile expressive of his sense of having retorted effectively upon the parson, nodded and walked away.

Just then Agatha, skating hand in hand with Jane Carpenter, heard these words in her ear: "I have something very funny to tell you. Don't look round."

She recognized the voice of Smilash and obeyed.

"I am not quite sure that you will enjoy it as it deserves," he added, and darted off again, after casting an eloquent glance at Miss Carpenter.

Agatha disengaged herself from her companion, made a circuit, and passed near Smilash, saying: "What is it?"

Smilash flitted away like a swallow, traced several circles around Fairholme, and then returned to Agatha and proceeded side by side with her.

"I have read the letter you wrote to Hetty," he said.

Agatha's face began to glow. She forgot to maintain her balance, and almost fell.

"Take care. And so you are not fond of me--in the romantic sense?"

No answer. Agatha dumb and afraid to lift her eyelids.

"That is fortunate," he continued, "because--good evening, Miss Ward; I have done nothing but admire your skating for the last hour--because men were deceivers ever; and I am no exception, as you will presently admit."

Agatha murmured something, but it was unintelligible amid the din of skating.

"You think not? Well, perhaps you are right; I have said nothing to you that is not in a measure true. You have always had a peculiar charm for me. But I did not mean you to tell Hetty. Can you guess why?"

Agatha shook her head.

"Because she is my wife."

Agatha's ankles became limp. With an effort she kept upright until she reached Jane, to whom she clung for support.

"Don't," screamed Jane. "You'll upset me."

"I must sit down," said Agatha. "I am tired. Let me lean on you until we get to the chairs."

"Bosh! I can skate for an hour without sitting down," said Jane. However, she helped Agatha to a chair and left her. Then Smilash, as if desiring a rest also, sat down close by on the margin of the pond.

"Well," he said, without troubling himself as to whether their conversation attracted attention or not, "what do you think of me now?"

"Why did you not tell me before, Mr. Trefusis?"

"That is the cream of the joke," he replied, poising his heels on the ice so that his skates stood vertically at legs' length from him, and looking at them with a cynical air. "I thought you were in love with me, and that the truth would be too severe a blow to you. Ha! ha! And, for the same reason, you generously forbore to tell me that you were no more in love with me than with the man in the moon. Each played a farce, and palmed it off on the other as a tragedy."

"There are some things so unmanly, so unkind, and so cruel," said Agatha, "that I cannot understand any gentleman saying them to a girl. Please do not speak to me again. Miss Ward! Come to me for a moment. I--I am not well."

Ward hurried to her side. Smilash, after staring at her for a moment in astonishment, and in some concern, skimmed away into the crowd. When he reached the opposite bank he took off his skates and asked Jane, who strayed intentionally in his direction, to tell Miss Wylie that he was gone, and would skate no more there. Without adding a word of explanation he left her and made for his dwelling. As he went down into the hollow where the road passed through the plantation on the college side of the chalet he descried a boy, in the uniform of the post office, sliding along the frozen ditch. A presentiment of evil tidings came upon him like a darkening of the sky. He quickened his pace.

"Anything for me?" he said.

The boy, who knew him, fumbled in a letter case and produced a buff envelope. It contained a telegram.

From Jansenius, London.

TO J. Smilash, Chamounix Villa, Lyvern. _____

Henrietta dangerously ill after journey wants to see you doctors say must come at once

There was a pause. Then he folded the paper methodically and put it in his pocket, as if quite done with it.

"And so," he said, "perhaps the tragedy is to follow the farce after all."

He looked at the boy, who retreated, not liking his expression.

"Did you slide all the way from Lyvern?"

"Only to come quicker," said the messenger, faltering. "I came as quick as I could."

"You carried news heavy enough to break the thickest ice ever frozen. I have a mind to throw you over the top of that tree instead of giving you this half-crown."

"You let me alone," whimpered the boy, retreating another pace.

"Get back to Lyvern as fast as you can run or slide, and tell Mr. Marsh to send me the fastest trap he has, to drive me to the railway station. Here is your half-crown. Off with you; and if I do not find the trap ready when I want it, woe betide you."

The boy came for the money mistrustfully, and ran off with it as fast as he could. Smilash went into the chalet and never reappeared. Instead, Trefusis, a gentleman in an ulster, carrying a rug, came out, locked the door, and hurried along the road to Lyvern, where he was picked up by the trap, and carried swiftly to the railway station, just in time to catch the London train.

"Evening paper, sir?" said a voice at the window, as he settled himself in the corner of a first-class carriage.

"No, thank you."

"Footwarmer, sir?" said a porter, appearing in the news-vender's place.

"Ah, that's a good idea. Yes, let me have a footwarmer."

The footwarmer was brought, and Trefusis composed himself comfortably for his journey. It seemed very short to him; he could hardly believe, when the train arrived in London, that he had been nearly three hours on the way.

There was a sense of Christmas about the travellers and the people who were at the terminus to meet them. The porter who came to the carriage door reminded Trefusis by his manner and voice that the season was one at which it becomes a gentleman to be festive and liberal.

"Wot luggage, sir? Hansom or fourweoll, sir?"

For a moment Trefusis felt a vagabond impulse to resume the language of Smilash and fable to the man of hampers of turkey and plum-pudding in the van. But he repressed it, got into a hansom, and was driven to his father-in-law's house in Belsize Avenue, studying in a gloomily critical mood the anxiety that surged upon him and made his heart beat like a boy's as he drew near his destination. There were two carriages at the door when he alighted. The reticent expression of the coachmen sent a tremor through him.

The door opened before he rang. "If you please, sir," said the maid in a low voice, "will you step into the library; and the doctor will see you immediately."

On the first landing of the staircase two gentlemen were speaking to Mr. Jansenius, who hastily moved out of sight, not before a glimpse of his air of grief¹⁷⁴ and discomfiture had given Trefusis a strange twinge, succeeded by a sensation of having been twenty years a widower. He smiled unconcernedly as he followed the girl into the library, and asked her how she did. She murmured some reply and hurried away, thinking that the poor young man would alter his tone presently.

He was joined at once by a gray whiskered gentleman, scrupulously dressed and mannered. Trefusis introduced himself, and the physician looked at him with some interest. Then he said:

"You have arrived too late, Mr. Trefusis. All is over, I am sorry to say."

"Was the long railway journey she took in this cold weather the cause of her death?"

Some bitter words that the physician had heard upstairs made him aware that this was a delicate question. But he said quietly: "The proximate cause, doubtless. The proximate cause."

"She received some unwelcome and quite unlooked-for intelligence before she started. Had that anything to do with her death, do you think?"

"It may have produced an unfavorable effect," said the physician, growing restive and taking up his gloves. "The habit of referring such events to such causes is carried too far, as a rule."

"No doubt. I am curious because the event is novel in my experience. I suppose it is a commonplace in yours. Pardon me.

175 The loss of a lady so young and so favorably circumstanced is not a commonplace either in my experience or in my opinion." The physician held up his head as he spoke, in protest against any assumption that his sympathies had been blunted by his profession.

"Did she suffer?"

"For some hours, yes. We were able to do a little to alleviate her pain--poor thing!" He almost forgot Trefusis as he added the apostrophe.

"Hours of pain! Can you conceive any good purpose that those hours may have served?"

The physician shook his head, leaving it doubtful whether he meant to reply in the negative or to deplore considerations of that nature. He also made a movement to depart, being uneasy in conversation with Trefusis, who would, he felt sure, presently ask questions or make remarks with which he could hardly deal without committing himself in some direction. His conscience was not quite at rest. Henrietta's pain had not, he thought, served any good purpose; but he did not want to say so, lest he should acquire a reputation for impiety and lose his practice. He believed that the general practitioner who attended the family, and had called him in when the case grew serious, had treated Henrietta unskilfully, but professional etiquette bound

him so strongly that, sooner than betray his colleague's inefficiency, he would have allowed him to decimate London.

"One word more," said Trefusis. "Did she know that she was dying?"

"No. I considered it best that she should not be informed of her danger. She passed away without any apprehension."

"Then one can think of it with equanimity. She dreaded death, poor child. The wonder is that there was not enough folly in the household to prevail against your good sense."

The physician bowed and took his leave, esteeming himself somewhat fortunate in escaping without being reproached for his humanity in having allowed Henrietta to die unawares.

A moment later the general practitioner entered. Trefusis, having accompanied the consulting physician to the door, detected the family doctor in the act of pulling a long face just outside it. Restraining a desire to seize him by the throat, he seated himself on the edge of the table and said cheerfully:

"Well, doctor, how has the world used you since we last met?"

The doctor was taken aback, but the solemn disposition of his features did not relax as he almost intoned: "Has Sir Francis told you the sad news, Mr. Trefusis?"

"Yes. Frightful, isn't it? Lord bless me, we're here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"True, very true!"

"Sir Francis has a high opinion of you."

The doctor looked a little foolish. "Everything was done that could be done, Mr. Trefusis; but Mrs. Jansenius was very anxious that no stone should be left unturned. She was good enough to say that her sole reason for wishing me to call in Sir Francis was that you should have no cause to complain."

"Indeed!"

"An excellent mother! A sad event for her! Ah, yes, yes! Dear me! A very sad event!"

"Most disagreeable. Such a cold day too. Pleasanter to be in heaven than here in such weather, possibly."

"Ah!" said the doctor, as if much sound comfort lay in that. "I hope so; I hope so; I do not doubt it. Sir Francis did not permit us to tell her, and I, of course, deferred to him. Perhaps it was for the best."

"You would have told her, then, if Sir Francis had not objected?"

"Well, there are, you see, considerations which we must not ignore in our profession. Death is a serious thing, as I am sure I need not remind you, Mr. Trefusis. We have sometimes higher duties than indulgence to the natural feelings of our patients."

"Quite so. The possibility of eternal bliss and the probability of eternal torment are consolations not to be lightly withheld from a dying girl, eh? However, what's past cannot be mended. I have much to be thankful for, after all. I am a young man, and shall not cut a bad figure as a widower. And now tell me, doctor, am I not in very bad repute upstairs?"

"Mr. Trefusis! Sir! I cannot meddle in family matters. I understand my duties and never over step them." The doctor, shocked at last, spoke as loftily as he could.

"Then I will go and see Mr. Jansenius," said Trefusis, getting off the table.

"Stay, sir! One moment. I have not finished. Mrs. Jansenius has asked me to ask--I was about to say that I am not speaking now as the medical adviser of this family; but although an old friend--and--ahem! Mrs. Jansenius has asked me to ask--to request you to excuse Mr. Jansenius, as he is prostrated by grief, and is, as I can--as a medical man--assure you, unable to see anyone. She will speak to you herself as soon as she feels able to do so--at some time this evening. Meanwhile, of course, any orders you may give--you must be fatigued by your journey, and I always recommend people not to fast too long; it produces an acute form of indigestion--any orders you may wish to give will, of course, be attended to at once."

"I think," said Trefusis, after a moment's reflection, "I will order a hansom."

"There is no ill-feeling," said the doctor, who, as a slow man, was usually alarmed by prompt decisions, even when they seemed wise to him, as this one did. "I hope you have not gathered from anything I have said--"

"Not at all; you have displayed the utmost tact. But I think I had better go. Jansenius can bear death and misery with perfect fortitude when it is on a large scale and hidden in a back slum. But when it breaks into his own house, and attacks his property--his daughter was his property until very recently-- he is just the man to lose his head and quarrel with me for keeping mine."

The doctor was unable to cope with this speech, which conveyed vaguely monstrous ideas to him. Seeing Trefusis about to leave, he said in a low voice: "Will you go upstairs?"

"Upstairs! Why?"

"I--I thought you might wish to see--" He did not finish the sentence, but Trefusis flinched; the blank had expressed what was meant.

"To see something that was Henrietta, and that is a thing we must cast out and hide, with a little superstitious mumming to save appearances. Why did you remind me of it?"

"But, sir, whatever your views may be, will you not, as a matter of form, in deference to the feelings of the family--"

"Let them spare their feelings for the living, on whose behalf I have often appealed to them in vain," cried Trefusis, losing patience. "Damn their feelings!" And, turning to the door, he found it open, and Mrs. Jansenius there listening.

Trefusis was confounded. He knew what the effect of his speech must be, and felt that it would be folly to attempt excuse or explanation. He put his hands into his pockets, leaned against the table, and looked at her, mutely wondering what would follow on her part.

The doctor broke the silence by saying tremulously, "I have communicated the melancholy intelligence to Mr. Trefusis."

"I hope you told him also," she said sternly, "that, however deficient we may be in feeling, we did everything that lay in our power for our child."

"I am quite satisfied," said Trefusis.

"No doubt you are--with the result," said Mrs. Jansenius, hardly. "I wish to know whether you have anything to complain of."

"Nothing."

"Please do not imply that anything has happened through our neglect."

"What have I to complain of? She had a warm room and a luxurious bed to die in, with the best medical advice in the world. Plenty of people are starving and freezing to-day that we may have the means to die fashionably; ask THEM if they have any cause for complaint. Do you think I will wrangle over her body about the amount of money spent on her illness? What measure is that of the cause she had for complaint? I never grudged money to her--how could I, seeing that more than I can waste is given to me for nothing? Or how could you? Yet she had great reason to complain of me. You will allow that to be so."

"It is perfectly true."

"Well, when I am in the humor for it, I will reproach myself and not you." He paused, and then turned forcibly on her, saying, "Why do you select this time, of all others, to speak so bitterly to me?"

"I am not aware that I have said anything to call for such a remark. Did YOU," (appealing to the doctor) "hear me say anything?"

"Mr. Trefusis does not mean to say that you did, I am sure. Oh, no. Mr. Trefusis's feelings are naturally--are harrowed. That is all."

"My feelings!" cried Trefusis impatiently. "Do you suppose my feelings are a trumpery set of social observances, to be harrowed to order and exhibited at funerals? She has gone as we three shall go soon enough. If we were immortal, we might reasonably pity the dead. As we are not, we had better save our energies to minimize the harm we are likely to do before we follow her."

The doctor was deeply offended by this speech, for the statement that he should one day die seemed to him a reflection upon his professional mastery over death. Mrs. Jansenius was glad to see Trefusis confirming her bad opinion and report of him by his conduct and language in the doctor's presence. There was a brief pause, and then Trefusis, too far out of sympathy with them to be able to lead the conversation into a kinder vein, left the room. In the act of putting on his overcoat in the hall, he hesitated, and hung it up again irresolutely. Suddenly he ran upstairs. At the sound of his steps a woman came from one of the rooms and looked inquiringly at him.

"Is it here?" he said.

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

A painful sense of constriction came in his chest, and he turned pale and stopped with his hand on the lock.

"Don't be afraid, sir," said the woman, with an encouraging smile. "She looks beautiful."

He looked at her with a strange grin, as if she had uttered a ghastly but irresistible joke. Then he went in, and, when he reached the bed, wished he had stayed without. He was not one of those who, seeing little in the faces of the living miss little in the faces of the dead. The arrangement of the black hair on the pillow, the soft drapery, and the flowers placed there by the nurse to complete the artistic effect to which she had so confidently referred, were lost on him; he saw only a lifeless mask that had been his wife's face, and at sight of it his knees failed, and he had to lean for support on the rail at the foot of the bed.

When he looked again the face seemed to have changed. It was no longer a waxlike mask, but Henrietta, girlish and pathetically at rest. Death seemed to have cancelled her marriage and womanhood; he had never seen her look so young. A minute passed, and then a tear dropped on the coverlet. He started; shook another tear on his hand, and stared at it incredulously.

"This is a fraud of which I have never even dreamed," he said. "Tears and no sorrow! Here am I crying! growing maudlin! whilst I am glad that she is gone and I free. I have the mechanism of grief in me somewhere; it begins to turn at sight of her though I have no sorrow; just as she used to start the mechanism of passion when I had no love. And that made no difference to her; whilst the wheels went round she was satisfied. I hope the mechanism of grief will flag and stop in its spinning as soon as the other used to. It is stopping already, I think. What a mockery! Whilst it lasts I suppose I am really sorry. And yet, would I restore her to life if I could? Perhaps so; I am therefore thankful that I cannot." He folded his arms on the rail and gravely addressed the dead figure, which still affected him so strongly that he had to exert his will to face it with composure. "If you really loved me, it is well for you that you are dead--idiot that I was to believe that the passion you could inspire, you poor child, would last. We are both lucky; I have escaped from you, and you have escaped from yourself."

Presently he breathed more freely and looked round the room to help himself into a matter-of-fact vein by a little unembarrassed action, and the commonplace aspect of the bedroom furniture. He went to the pillow, and bent over it, examining the face closely.

"Poor child!" he said again, tenderly. Then, with sudden reaction, apostrophizing himself instead of his wife, "Poor ass! Poor idiot! Poor jackanapes! Here is the body of a woman who was nearly as old as myself, and perhaps wiser, and here am I moralizing over it as if I were God Almighty and she a baby! The more you remind a man of what he is, the more conceited he becomes. Monstrous! I shall feel immortal presently."

He touched the cheek with a faint attempt at roughness, to feel how cold it was. Then he touched his own, and remarked:

"This is what I am hastening toward at the express speed of sixty minutes an hour!" He stood looking down at the face and tasting this sombre reflection for a long time. When it palled on him, he roused himself, and exclaimed more cheerfully:

"After all, she is not dead. Every word she uttered--every idea she formed and expressed, was an inexhaustible and indestructible impulse." He paused, considered a little further, and relapsed into gloom, adding, "and the dozen others whose names will be with hers in the 'Times' to-morrow? Their words too are still in the air, to endure there to all eternity. Hm! How the air must be crammed with nonsense! Two sounds sometimes produce a silence; perhaps ideas neutralize one another in some analogous way. No, my dear; you are dead and gone and done with, and I shall be dead and gone and done with too soon to leave me leisure to fool myself with hopes of immortality. Poor Hetty! Well, good-by, my darling. Let us pretend for a moment that you can hear that; I know it will please you."

All this was in a half-articulate whisper. When he ceased he still bent over the body, gazing intently at it. Even when he had exhausted the subject, and turned to go, he changed his mind, and looked again for a while. Then he stood erect, apparently nerved and refreshed, and left the room with a firm step. The woman was waiting outside. Seeing that he was less distressed than when he entered, she said:

"I hope you are satisfied, sir!"

"Delighted! Charmed! The arrangements are extremely pretty and tasteful. Most consolatory." And he gave her half a sovereign.

"I thank you, sir," she said, dropping a curtsey. "The poor young lady! She was anxious to see you, sir. To hear her say that you were the only one that cared for her! And so fretful with her mother, too. 'Let him be told that I am dangerously ill,' says she, 'and he'll come.' She didn't know how true her word was, poor thing; and she went off without being aware of it."

"Flattering herself and flattering me. Happy girl!"

"Bless you, I know what her feelings were, sir; I have had experience." Here she approached him confidentially, and whispered: "The family were again' you, sir, and she knew it. But she wouldn't listen to them. She thought of nothing, when she was easy enough to think at all, but of your coming. And--hush! Here's the old gentleman."

Trefusis looked round and saw Mr. Jansenius, whose handsome face was white and seamed with grief and annoyance. He drew back from the proffered hand of his son-in-law, like an overworried child from an ill-timed attempt to pet it. Trefusis pitied him. The nurse coughed and retired.

"Have you been speaking to Mrs. Jansenius?" said Trefusis.

"Yes," said Jansenius offensively.

"So have I, unfortunately. Pray make my apologies to her. I was rude. The circumstances upset me."

"You are not upset, sir," said Jansenius loudly. "You do not care a damn."

Trefusis recoiled.

"You damned my feelings, and I will damn yours," continued Jansenius in the same tone. Trefusis involuntarily looked at the door through which he had lately passed. Then, recovering himself, he said quietly:

"It does not matter. She can't hear us."

Before Jansenius could reply his wife hurried upstairs, caught him by the arm, and said, "Don't speak to him, John. And you," she added, to Trefusis, "WILL you begone?"

"What!" he said, looking cynically at her. "Without my dead! Without my property! Well, be it so."

"What do you know of the feelings of a respectable man?" persisted Jansenius, breaking out again in spite of his wife. "Nothing is sacred to you. This shows what Socialists are!"

"And what fathers are, and what mothers are," retorted Trefusis, giving way to his temper. "I thought you loved Hetty, but I see that you only love your feelings and your respectability. The devil take both! She was right; my love for her, incomplete as it was, was greater than yours." And he left the house in dudgeon.

But he stood awhile in the avenue to laugh at himself and his father-in-law. Then he took a hansom and was driven to the house of his solicitor, whom he wished to consult on the settlement of his late wife's affairs.