HIS GOOD ANGEL.
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"SUPPOSE I should, indeed, consent at once, *mon ami?*"

Mrs. Thornbury smiled, her eyes half-sheathed, her hand indolently lying over the chair cushion; it was a most expressive hand in its delicacy, strength, and suppressed force, significant of her whole personality, in which the power of magnetic charm was indefinable, as was the spell of her grace. The impersonal critic would have called her a slender, supple woman with hazel eyes, dark hair, a beautiful mouth, and a tender voice. She was neither old nor young—for in her rare type age is neither factor nor detractor—truly, men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love of the common-place, rather for the love of such as this.

A gleam leaped to the eyes of the young man sitting beside her; his elbow rested on his knee, his face on his hand, as he leaned forward gazing at her.

"I wish to Heaven you would try it!"

She reached a silver bell upon a stand near by and tinkled it. A maid entered from the dressing room adjoining the Star's little boudoir.

"Marie, *gardez la porte. Allez!*"

"*Qui, Madame.*"

When the maid had closed the outer door behind her, a door on the passage-way leading to the stage, she turned upon Gilbert Sherbrook a smile which would have imbued the most *gauche* action with delicacy and grace, but as he fervently kissed her hand she drew it away.

"I would speak with you alone for a few moments before I go on again, *mon ami.*"

"Tell me to-night! answer me now!" he muttered.

"You say that you would to Heaven I would marry you at once. Now, I am sure I cannot tell why I do not take you at your word," she made a negative gesture as his face flushed and he started to speak impulsively. "Wait! I say that I do not know either why I hesitate. You are lovable, *mais oui!*" a slight sigh escaped her, "handsome, *O tres beau!*" she laughed softly, "rich—*bien!* Young—ah, perhaps that is it!" Suddenly he knelt upon one knee, and touched her hand with his lips.

"Stop! After all, do not decide to-night. I am afraid—I am cowardly—but I could not bear it if you sent me away! O let us go on in this way; let things be as they are!"

She smiled slowly, caressingly.

"You say that you love me?"

"You know it!"

"Ah, but I know nothing of the sort, *mon ami!* I know that you are perhaps infatuated. I am older than you," she shrugged her shoulders, her gesture and accent ofttimes revealing more than a trace of foreign blood. "Granted that in this case it makes little difference. Now, I am really not a badly disposed woman, but I have a singularly direct nature, too direct for the average feminine mind to comprehend. I have been married; in my position it was better so. He adored me, but he was docile, and docility palls upon some of us. Alas, it would never have occurred to him to beat me! He irritated me, which interferes with art. Therefore, I should have been forced to divorce him, or kill him, had he not opportunely died—or the notoriety would have been most distasteful to me." She paused, the tips of her slim fingers meeting; a diamond on one and an emerald on another flashing at each other gleams like those from attracted yet antagonistic eyes, "it has occurred to me that I might marry again, because whereas an unattached woman of thirty-five enjoys life,

one of sixty may be a sorry spectacle. If I were only sure that you would learn to beat me I might even sacrifice you and do it!"

"Sacrifice me! Me!" he broke out. "What do I care for the analytic side of such a question? Answer me! Will you marry me or will you not? You force me to ask you to-night!"

She drew a long breath.

"Ah! . . . That is better! You might come to it in time. Thank you, Monsieur, but so far I do not think that I shall. True, you suit me in many ways, but better than I suit you. But yes!" at his protesting word, "Love, of a kind, I could give you, but not that of which I know I am fully capable perhaps. Beauty attracts me less than will, and unfortunately, *mon ami,* you are beautiful!"

He laughed bitterly under this criticism, but she rose, and standing beside him, motioned to the mirror opposite, to the reflection of their two figures; hers sinuous, *seduisante,* subtle-eyed, lustrous, in which the spirit of fascination was as inevitable as is the perfume of a flower. He gazed into the glass, and then down with impassioned longing upon her.

"And you?" he said.

She drew him nearer the rose-lighted mirror and touched her hair.

"See! In twenty years, and, I hate dyes!" she stopped his protesting voice with a movement. *"O c'est vrai, mon ami!* I am not of the stuff which can endure the contrast of a debonair young husband! I am showing you the ugly side, but as I told you, to-day I have actually felt undecided."

The light leaped again to his eyes.

"Then let it remain so!—let us be as we are!"

"No; you told me that this is your birthday. I dislike to take life *au serieux,* but I shall show you things as they are. It means that you are wasting your life, your manhood, *mon ami,* following me about from city to city."

"Don't!" he protested; "don't, it is my life!"

She sighed a little wearedly. "Acknowledge that you have fancied yourself as much—well, 'in love' as you say, before!"

"Never!" he protested vehemently.

"Ah! . . . And what of the little girl in the northern town? She of whom you told me when we first met?"

"That was different," he interrupted hastily.

"Different, but yes," she watched him, her glance carefully veiled. "She was like a strong, pure breeze of the sea; I recall your own words when you have forgotten them! She had a clear, white skin, grey eyes of truth, and was what you call your Good Angel. Eh?" suddenly she smote her hands together and laughed softly in her throat. "Ah, *Ciel!* She is good, with that goodness which has never been tried! . . . What is metal until the flame makes it?" she added passionately; "the diamond until cut? But yes, *mon ami!*" she turned upon him one of her keen, radiant moments of decision, like the flashing of an inward light, the light of a temperament of change and exquisite grace, "but yes, she is the one for you to marry—the young woman to make your home! You loved her! Do you not know it? When you left home you wrote her almost daily, you told her every thought and aspiration; she it was who advised with you when you inherited your fortune. You see, I remember what you told me about her. Strange, is it not? Her love and instinct guided you, she was mother, sweetheart, friend, and she loved you. *Mon Dieu!* When one is young and loves that way it is no taper to be blown out by a passing breath! Then—then you met me. I did not care—I had known others; why should I——" suddenly she flung herself upon a divan, her face hidden, sobbing—"why should I care now? Why should I care now?"

Instantly he was on his knees beside her transported by hope, and pouring impassioned endearments upon her. She sprang up with a peal of delighted laughter.

"C'est tout! Was it not well done, *mon ami?* It deceived you! And for such an artist as this to think of marriage, but no, I shall not. Ah, you thought me in tears of woe—*n'est ce pas?* Me!"

He stood looking down at her, a swift change passing over his face and hardening it like the backward rolling of the wave of unwilling revulsion. His voice sounded alien to himself, but the manhood in him leaped to arms.

"Yes, she was my good angel. She helped me more than any one ever did, and I illy repaid her faith in me. She is the best woman I ever knew and—as you say—I loved her. When you play again let it be at my expense, not at hers."

A strange light leaped to her eyes as she let them rest on him, and she murmured something beneath her breath.

"Ah! . . . 'Tis well. I go on now. To-morrow I leave, Monsieur. Adieu!"

She swept him a half playful courtesy.

"You will wire me?" he said; "if not, I shall follow anyhow!"

She pointed smilingly to the door as the maid entered.

"Go now, *mon ami.*"

He went out, the hard look fading from his face as the closing door separated them, but he did not hear the maid's exclamation.

"But no, Madame, not tears!—*O ma foi,* there is no time now and how she weeps!"

Sherbrook went directly to his hotel room. He dismissed his man, then turned on a desk light, took a magazine from the table and sat down. The fever of unrest into which he had been thrown for months was reaching a climatic point. Love may run its course even into the channel of habit, but infatuation knows no placid shallows. It makes for the rapids and when denied its course the moulten stream is cast back upon itself. He threw the book aside presently, not having seen a word, and sat with his arms upon the table and his head bent upon them, involuntarily retracing the time spent with her that evening, lingering upon her words, accentuating their value, drawing a significance from that which could give no sustenance to the imagination, seeking in vain for sweetness, feeding hope upon possibility, and desire upon flagging hope. Had she not said: "Love of a kind I could give you?" What mattered its quality? Why should women make such distinctions in the face of a master passion such as this? It was so clear and simple to him.—he only wanted her, her fascinating, alluring self, just as she was. He could not analyse or question or look ahead, he wanted her, and cared not even if the future were but a mirage of happiness.

He experienced indescribable relief in her mere presence, and torturing unrest when away from her. The periods of absence were only so much proscribed time to be passed over by any means that would hasten it; yet all resources,—driving, books, riding, billiards,—had become an enforced action of the Will only. She was going on to a new city for her next engagement, but he was accustomed to following.

Suddenly he sprang up, flinging his arms outward, with a groan. She had told him the bitter truth. It was all so hopeless, so pitiful, so unnecessary. What had it amounted to? He thrust aside the sweetness of it—a year and a half of his life flung away—to go forever unreckoned.

Unreckoned? . . .

He paced up and down, and thought rushed upon him in its merciless torrent. Wherein had her charm lain? Why on this evening of all others had she jarred upon his finer sensitivity by playing upon the thought of the purest girl he had ever known? A whimsical feeling suddenly thrust itself upon him, as tears will upon a strong woman, that he should like to hide his face upon his mother's knee, and be the boy he sometimes felt himself,—to sob it out. To strip himself bare of the past year and hold it up for her forgiveness,—to shrive him of himself. Mary would have understood,—Mary was the girl with the truthful eyes.

He went to the window and dropped its curtains behind him, standing for a moment in the darkness of their embrasure. The night was of velvety blackness, and the stars were calm and unchanging. . . . Yes, Mary would have understood. The stars had none of the alluring transition of the sea, they reminded him of her eyes. Alas, he had forfeited his older right to refer to her his boyish questions for opinion. He sighed heavily, recalling how much she had given him of unselfish sympathy, and how her judgment had formed the standard of right and wrong towards which he had instinctively turned until the blindness of the past year had enveloped him.

He came out of the darkness into the brightly lighted room and saw a letter lying on the table and opened it wondering that it had escaped him before. It was in a plain white envelope, and ad-

dressed in a fair hand which had once been very familiar. It had apparently been forwarded from his bankers.

"MY DEAR GILBERT (it read):

"I appreciate the tendency one feels to look at things as one would have them rather than as they really are. But I have discovered that to face facts is only so much moral courage more or less, and face them we must, if we would strip clear our visions of unreality.

"The spring is coming, dear. Does it not seem as though it means alike to nature and to life, regeneration? And that we are unconsciously renewed by life's real forces which always strive upward?

"I think of you, and believe in you,

"MARY."

He stood gazing at this abrupt word wonderingly. It was one of her ready responses, which he once loved,—like the continuation of an easy conversation,—it seemed that he could hear her voice in the words. What did it mean? There was not an echo of rebuke. . . . "To look at things as one would have them rather than as they really are." How could she have known? Then he noticed that the envelope was marked by much mailing. It had no doubt been long on the way. Suddenly he pressed the cool, white sheet to his cheek and closed his eyes. Mary! The thought of her was like the white, passionless light of the steadfast stars over the turbulence of the time through which he had passed since he parted from her.

The next morning, however, the habit of longing was strong upon him, the unrest and desire to see that other face, to be near it, and putting aside the mood of the night he ordered his trunk packed, and wired to his bankers to forward his mail. Then he took the first express for the northern city where Mrs. Thornbury was filling her next engagement.

It was night when he arrived, and he drove to the theatre and secured a seat for the performance, then sent his man to a florist's as usual, for the violets with which he kept her dressing room supplied.

After the first act he sent his card back, but it was refused admission—Mrs. Thornbury's express command,—so the gatekeeper said,—no cards nor notes were to be brought her during this performance. The same met him after the play, and although he waited until the last carriage had rolled off he did not see her. Before he went to bed he wrote her a pleading request to see him, and ordered it to be taken to her hotel early in the morning; but when he awakened with daylight, after a few hours' restless sleep it was wearily. Hope was starving and life was becoming merely an unanswered question. In the hotel office the clerk handed him his mail. In it was a duplicate of the letter which had come the night before. It read:

"DEAR: I wish that you could fully realize as I do the full measure of your manhood—and I do not judge impetuously, do I?—life's finest elements are in your hand, weapons with which you may conquer anything—especially yourself. They are courage, belief, and enthusiasm. You have them to a fine degree"—a groan escaped him—"above all things do not doubt yourself. You are a strong man naturally, not a weakling, and we are only kept strong by striving towards our own possibilities. Ever,

M."

As he stood in the reading room with this letter in his hand, he felt as though the purity of a cool breeze had suddenly swept over him,—or a flood of refulgent light arousing his thought from the fevered channel into which it had too long dwelt. He went quickly to a desk and wrote to her, following the impulse of boyish faith, with which he had so often confided to her. He wrote with a confidence that had never failed to receive her gentle, tolerant sympathy, and told her of the past year, in as few words as he could, and brokenly, but with desperate abandon and insistently facing facts as he wrote. He told her of the year of life which had been flung away upon this hopeless passion for a woman, who—he set his teeth as he wrote it—did not love him, and of his disregard of the faith due to Mary herself, yet of his inability to save himself from his infatuation for this other.

He did not ask her to forgive him,—thank God he had manhood enough left not to expect a woman to suffer indignity and then extend her hand for the asking. He would not ask her to take him back,—not yet, until he was sure of himself. All he begged was that she should not let him go from the safeguard of her belief in him.

It was perhaps a youthful letter, a man is oftenest young when deeply in earnest. Sherbrook signed it, sealed and mailed it without first daring to read it over. Then he set his face towards the longest day of his life. He was determined to conquer himself, yet back of the very determination there lay but little faith in his own strength, and as the day wore through the longing to see *her* became pain. When night came he urged himself that he would make her bid him farewell,—yet he knew that it was only the older cry of passion battling against decision.

He hurried to the theatre, his heart beating tumultuously at the knowledge of her nearness, and not letting himself think, yet knowing well that a word from her would sweep away all else from the universe of his being. He met with a similar fate as on the night before, and was refused entrance. Word was brought him, however, that Mrs. Thornbury would send Mr. Sherbrook a message in the morning. He returned to the hotel stunned and weary with disappointment, and the actual pain which can assail the heart when it has fed too long upon vain hope. That night he fell into a sleep of exhaustion, and when he awakened late in the morning it was with an intense sensation of relaxation which had been unknown to him for months.

The sun was bright and the air cool. Mary was right, the spring was coming. How well he knew its gentle signals on the hills around the old town where she lived. All seasons had meant nothing to him for so long, that something of reality seemed to awaken within him under the light which streamed between the curtains.

His man servant brought him a note, a large, monogrammed envelope, heavy with violet, and he tore it open hastily. It read:

"MON AMI:

"When you receive this I shall already be sailing for summer lands. I have placed an understudy for the last three nights this week. I acknowledge that a woman usually passes on unjustified, but, as you know, I have no toleration for the unselfish beings who follow tradition at the expense of their own characters, and I desire you to know, before I say farewell, that I was indeed playing a part when we last met. But not a part dictated by my true feeling,—alas, no! That I vulgarized to cause a recoil in your own. It was necessary. Forgive me.

"In spite of my disinclination to write the words—I confess it—I shall never see you again, and it is useless that you should follow me, for I am afraid you would never learn to beat me!

"I beg, as a last request, that you will return to the little girl with eyes of truth. . . She loves you.

"Adieu, *mon ami!* . . .

"GENEVIEVE."

She was gone. The sunlight lay in a shaft across the room. It was as though a wave of perfume, passion and thrilling yet disturbing music had passed over him. He told himself that he could follow,—nothing need prevent him from taking the next steamer, not even her command. He sprang up with youth's tide of impetuosity flooding him, and rang for coffee and a time-table. The man brought mail, which was accompanied by a note from his bankers, who wished to explain that certain letters had been much delayed owing to the vain efforts their firm had made at times to reach him in his hurried travel from place to place. Among the letters was another white one, like its former mates, only much marked and scarred by remailing. Its postmarks and dates were nearly obliterated. It held but a line:

"DEAR: When you receive this I wish you to come to me. I shall never ask it again.

"MARY."

And never had she asked so much before. All the stifled love, reverence and respect he had ever known for her surged upward as he read the words,—a love which may be a thing apart from passion's thrall. After all these months she had trusted him enough to send when she wanted him to come to her—she needed him. He thrust the violet envelope down in his pocket,—Italy could wait.

It was sunset when he raised the gate latch of an old garden in the town where he had left Mary. The sweet, impalpable breath of spring seemed to close around him, as he walked slowly between the box-lined borders up the path, and the odour of white lilacs set the world far apart, and embodied the beauty and peace of living here in this quiet spot.

A girl in a white gown stood in the porch, and she came forward as he drew nearer, his heart throbbing under the last letter, which lay like the wings of a white dove that had striven past the bar of pride unto its sure haven.

"Mary!" leaped to his lips. Then he saw that it was not Mary, although her eyes held the same clear light.

"Mr. Sherbrook!" she exclaimed, then paused, looking gently, questioningly at him,—"I thought you would have come before,—I suppose you missed the letters,—she wrote often. She said one never knows when another may need a friend"—she stopped, arrested by the startled whiteness of his face. "O,—can it be possible—do you not know? . . . My sister died at Christmas."

Virginia Woodward Cloud.