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—Robert Hugh Benson.

Contents

Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Epilogue

Chapter I

I

"I am very much distressed about it all," murmured Mrs. Baxter.

She was a small, delicate-looking old lady, very true to type indeed, with the silvery hair of the devout widow crowned with an exquisite lace cap, in a filmy black dress, with a complexion of precious china, kind shortsighted blue eyes, and white blue-veined hands busy now upon needlework. She bore about with her always an atmosphere of piety, humble, tender, and sincere, but as persistent as the gentle sandalwood aroma which breathed from her dress. Her theory of the universe, as the girl who watched her now was beginning to find out, was impregnable and unapproachable. Events which conflicted with it were either not events, or they were so exceptional as to be negligible. If she were hard pressed she emitted a pathetic peevishness that rendered further argument impossible.

The room in which she sat reflected perfectly her personality. In spite of the early Victorian date of the furniture, there was in its arrangement and selection a taste so exquisite as to deprive it of even a suspicion of Philistinism. Somehow the rosewood table on which the September morning sun fell with serene beauty did not conflict as it ought to have done with the Tudor paneling of the room. A tapestry screen veiled the door into the hall, and soft curtains of velvety gold hung on either side of the tall, modern windows leading to the garden. For the rest, the furniture was charming and suitable—low chairs, a tapestry couch, a multitude of little leather-covered books on every table, and two low carved bookshelves on either side of the door filled with poetry and devotion.

The girl who sat upright with her hands on her lap was of another type altogether—of that type of which it is impossible to predicate anything except that it makes itself felt in every company. Any respectable astrologer would have had no difficulty in assigning her birth to the sign of the Scorpion. In outward appearance she was not remarkable, though extremely pleasing, and it was a pleasingness

that grew upon acquaintance. Her beauty, such as it was, was based upon a good foundation: upon regular features, a slightly cleft rounded chin, a quantity of dark coiled hair, and large, steady, serene brown eyes. Her hands were not small, but beautifully shaped; her figure slender, well made, and always at its ease in any attitude. In fact, she had an air of repose, strength, and all-round competence; and, contrasted with the other, she resembled a well-bred sheep-dog eyeing an Angora cat.

They were talking now about Laurie Baxter.

"Dear Laurie is so impetuous and sensitive," murmured his mother, drawing her needle softly through the silk, and then patting her material, "and it is all terribly sad."

This was undeniable, and Maggie said nothing, though her lips opened as if for speech. Then she closed them again, and sat watching the twinkling fire of logs upon the hearth. Then once more Mrs. Baxter took up the tale.

"When I first heard of the poor girl's death," she said, "it seemed to me so providential. It would have been too dreadful if he had married her. He was away from home, you know, on Thursday, when it happened; but he was back here on Friday, and has been like—like a madman ever since. I have done what I could, but—"

"Was she quite impossible?" asked the girl in her slow voice. "I never saw her, you know."

Mrs. Baxter laid down her embroidery.

"My dear, she was. Well, I have not a word against her character, of course. She was all that was good, I believe. But, you know, her home, her father—well, what can you expect from a grocer—and a Baptist," she added, with a touch of vindictiveness.

"What was she like?" asked the girl, still with that meditative air.

"My dear, she was like—like a picture on a chocolate-box. I can say no more than that. She was little and fair-haired, with a very pretty complexion, and a ribbon in her hair always. Laurie brought her up here to see me, you know—in the garden; I felt I could not bear to have her in the house just yet, though, of course, it would have had to have come. She spoke very carefully, but there was an

unmistakable accent. Once she left out an aitch, and then she said the word over again quite right."

Maggie nodded gently, with a certain air of pity, and Mrs. Baxter went on encouraged.

"She had a little stammer that—that Laurie thought very pretty, and she had a restless little way of playing with her fingers as if on a piano. Oh, my dear, it would have been too dreadful; and now, my poor boy—"

The old lady's eyes filled with compassionate tears, and she laid her sewing down to fetch out a little lace-fringed pocket-handkerchief.

Maggie leaned back with one easy movement in her low chair, clasping her hands behind her head; but she still said nothing. Mrs. Baxter finished the little ceremony of wiping her eyes, and, still winking a little, bending over her needlework, continued the commentary.

"Do try to help him, my dear. That was why I asked you to come back yesterday. I wanted you to be in the house for the funeral. You see, Laurie's becoming a Catholic at Oxford has brought you two together. It's no good my talking to him about the religious side of it all; he thinks I know nothing at all about the next world, though I'm sure—"

"Tell me," said the girl suddenly, still in the same attitude, "has he been practicing his religion? You see, I haven't seen much of him this year, and—"

"I'm afraid not very well," said the old lady tolerantly. "He thought he was going to be a priest at first, you remember, and I'm sure I should have made no objection; and then in the spring he seemed to be getting rather tired of it all. I don't think he gets on with Father Mahon very well. I don't think Father Mahon understands him quite. It was he, you know, who told him not to be a priest, and I think that discouraged poor Laurie."

"I see," said the girl shortly. And Mrs. Baxter applied herself again to her sewing.

It was indeed a rather trying time for the old lady. She was a tranquil and serene soul; and it seemed as if she were doomed to live over a perpetual volcano. It was as pathetic as an amiable cat trying to go to sleep on a rifle range; she was developing the jumps. The first serious explosion had taken place two years before, when her son, then in his third year at Oxford, had come back with the announcement that Rome was the only home worthy to shelter his aspiring soul, and that he must be received into the Church in six weeks' time. She had produced little books for his edification, as in duty bound, she had summoned Anglican divines to the rescue; but all had been useless, and Laurie had gone back to Oxford as an avowed proselyte.

She had soon become accustomed to the idea, and indeed, when the first shock was over had not greatly disliked it, since her own adopted daughter, of half French parentage, Margaret Marie Deronnais, had been educated in the same faith, and was an eminently satisfactory person. The next shock was Laurie's announcement of his intention to enter the priesthood, and perhaps the Religious Life as well; but this too had been tempered by the reflection that in that case Maggie would inherit this house and carry on its traditions in a suitable manner. Maggie had come to her, upon leaving her convent school three years before, with a pleasant little income of her own—had come to her by an arrangement made previously to her mother's death—and her manner of life, her reasonableness, her adaptability, her presentableness had reassured the old lady considerably as to the tolerableness of the Roman Catholic religion. Indeed, once she had hoped that Laurie and Maggie might come to an understanding that would prevent all possible difficulty as to the future of his house and estate; but the fourth volcanic storm had once more sent the world flying in pieces about Mrs. Baxter's delicate ears; and, during the last three months she had had to face the prospect of Laurie's bringing home as a bride the rather underbred, pretty, stammering, pink and white daughter of a Baptist grocer of the village.

This had been a terrible affair altogether; Laurie, as is the custom of a certain kind of young male, had met, spoken to, and ultimately kissed this Amy Nugent, on a certain summer evening as the stars came out; but, with a chivalry not so common in such cases, had

also sincerely and simply fallen in love with her, with a romance usually reserved for better-matched affections. It seemed, from Laurie's conversation, that Amy was possessed of every grace of body, mind, and soul required in one who was to be mistress of the great house; it was not, so Laurie explained, at all a milkmaid kind of affair; he was not the man, he said, to make a fool of himself over a pretty face. No, Amy was a rare soul, a flower growing on stony soil—sandy perhaps would be the better word—and it was his deliberate intention to make her his wife.

Then had followed every argument known to mothers, for it was not likely that even Mrs. Baxter would accept without a struggle a daughter-in-law who, five years before, had bobbed to her, wearing a pinafore, and carrying in a pair of rather large hands a basket of eggs to her back door. Then she had consented to see the girl, and the interview in the garden had left her more distressed than ever. (It was there that the aitch incident had taken place.) And so the struggle had gone on; Laurie had protested, stormed, sulked, taken refuge in rhetoric and dignity alternately; and his mother had with gentle persistence objected, held her peace, argued, and resisted, conflicting step by step against the inevitable, seeking to reconcile her son by pathos and her God by petition; and then in an instant, only four days ago, it seemed that the latter had prevailed; and today Laurie, in a black suit, rent by sorrow, at this very hour at which the two ladies sat and talked in the drawing-room, was standing by an open grave in the village churchyard, seeing the last of his love, under a pile of blossoms as pink and white as her own complexion, within four elm-boards with a brass plate upon the cover.

Now, therefore, there was a new situation to face, and Mrs. Baxter was regarding it with apprehension.

It is true that mothers know sometimes more of their sons than their sons know of themselves, but there are certain elements of character that sometimes neither mothers nor sons appreciate. It was one or two of those elements that Maggie Deronnais, with her hands behind her head, was now considering. It seemed to her very odd that neither the boy himself nor Mrs. Baxter in the least seemed to realize the astonishing selfishness of this very boy's actions.

She had known him now for three years, though owing to her own absence in France a part of the time, and his absence in London for the rest, she had seen nothing of this last affair. At first she had liked him exceedingly; he had seemed to her ardent, natural, and generous. She had liked his affection for his mother and his demonstrativeness in showing it; she had liked his well-bred swagger, his manner with servants, his impulsive courtesy to herself. It was a real pleasure to her to see him, morning by morning, in his knickerbockers and Norfolk jacket, or his tweed suit; and evening by evening in his swallow-tail coat and white shirt, and the knee breeches and buckled shoes that he wore by reason of the touch of picturesque and defiant romanticism that was so obvious a part of his nature. Then she had begun, little by little, to perceive the egotism that was even more apparent; his self-will, his moodiness, and his persistence.

Though, naturally, she had approved of his conversion to Catholicism, yet she was not sure that his motives were pure. She had hoped indeed that the Church, with its astonishing peremptoriness, might do something towards a moral conversion, as well as an artistic and intellectual change of view. But this, it seemed, had not happened; and this final mad episode of Amy Nugent had fanned her criticism to indignation. She did not disapprove of romance—in fact she largely lived by it—but there were things even more important, and she was as angry as she could be, with decency, at this last manifestation of selfishness.

For the worst of it was that, as she knew perfectly well, Laurie was rather an exceptional person. He was not at all the Young Fool of Fiction. There was a remarkable virility about him, he was tender-hearted to a degree, he had more than his share of brains. It was intolerable that such a person should be so silly.

She wondered what sorrow would do for him. She had come down from Scotland the night before, and down here to Herefordshire this morning; she had not then yet seen him; and he was now at the funeral....

Well, sorrow would be his test. How would he take it?

Mrs. Baxter broke in on her meditations.

"Maggy, darling ... do you think you can do anything? You know I once hoped...."

The girl looked up suddenly, with so vivid an air that it was an interruption. The old lady broke off.

"Well, well," she said. "But is it quite impossible that —"

"Please, don't. I—I can't talk about that. It's impossible—utterly impossible."

The old lady sighed; then she said suddenly, looking at the clock above the oak mantelshelf, "It is half-past. I expect —"

She broke off as the front door was heard to open and close beyond the hall, and waited, paling a little, as steps sounded on the flags; but the steps went up the stairs outside, and there was silence again.

"He has come back," she said. "Oh! my dear."

"How shall you treat him?" asked the girl curiously.

The old lady bent again over her embroidery.

"I think I shall just say nothing. I hope he will ride this afternoon. Will you go with him?"

"I think not. He won't want anyone. I know Laurie."

The other looked up at her sideways in a questioning way, and Maggie went on with a kind of slow decisiveness.

"He will be queer at lunch. Then he will probably ride alone and be late for tea. Then tomorrow —"

"Oh! my dear, Mrs. Stapleton is coming to lunch tomorrow. Do you think he'll mind?"

"Who is Mrs. Stapleton?"

The old lady hesitated.

"She's—she's the wife of Colonel Stapleton. She goes in for what I think is called New Thought; at least, so somebody told me last month. I'm afraid she's not a very steady person. She was a vegetarian last year; now I believe she's given that up again."

Maggie smiled slowly, showing a row of very white, strong teeth.

"I know, auntie," she said. "No; I shouldn't think Laurie'll mind much. Perhaps he'll go back to town in the morning, too."

"No, my dear, he's staying till Thursday."

There fell again one of those pleasant silences that are possible in the country. Outside the garden, with the meadows beyond the village road, lay in that sweet September hush of sunlight and mellow color that seemed to embalm the house in peace. From the farm beyond the stable-yard came the crowing of a cock, followed by the liquid chuckle of a pigeon perched somewhere overhead among the twisted chimneys. And within this room all was equally at peace. The sunshine lay on table and polished floor, barred by the mullions of the windows, and stained here and there by the little Flemish emblems and coats that hung across the glass; while those two figures, so perfectly in place in their serenity and leisure, sat before the open fire-place and contemplated the very unpeaceful element that had just walked upstairs incarnate in a pale, drawn-eyed young man in black.

The house, in fact, was one of those that have a personality as marked and as mysterious as of a human character. It affected people in quite an extraordinary way. It took charge of the casual guest, entertained and soothed and sometimes silenced him; and it cast upon all who lived in it an enchantment at once inexplicable and delightful. Externally it was nothing remarkable.

It was a large, square-built house, close indeed to the road, but separated from it by a high wrought-iron gate in an oak paling, and a short, straight garden-path; originally even ante-Tudor, but matured through centuries, with a Queen Anne front of mellow red brick, and back premises of tile, oak, and modern rough-cast, with old brew-houses that almost enclosed a graveled court behind. Behind this again lay a great kitchen garden with box-lined paths dividing it all into a dozen rectangles, separated from the orchard and yew walk by a broad double hedge down the center of which ran a sheltered path. Round the south of the house and in the narrow strip westwards lay broad lawns surrounded by high trees completely shading it from all view of the houses that formed the tiny hamlet fifty yards away.

Within, the house had been modernized almost to a commonplace level. A little hall gave entrance to the drawing-room on the right where these two women now sat, a large, stately room, paneled from floor to ceiling, and to the dining-room on the left; and, again, through to the back, where a smoking room, an inner hall, and the big kitchens and back premises concluded the ground floor. The two more stories above consisted, on the first floor, of a row of large rooms, airy, high, and dignified, and in the attics of a series of low-pitched chambers, whitewashed, oak-floored, and dormer-windowed, where one or two of the servants slept in splendid isolation. A little flight of irregular steps leading out of the big room on to the first floor, where the housekeeper lived in state, gave access to the further rooms near the kitchen and sculleries.

Maggie had fallen in love with the place from the instant that she had entered it. She had been warned in her French convent of the giddy gaieties of the world and its temptations; and yet it seemed to her after a week in her new home that the world was very much maligned. There was here a sense of peace and sheltered security that she had hardly known even at school; and little by little she had settled down here, with the mother and the son, until it had begun to seem to her that days spent in London or in other friends' houses were no better than interruptions and failures compared with the leisurely, tender life of this place, where it was so easy to read and pray and possess her soul in peace. This affair of Laurie's was almost the first reminder of what she had known by hearsay, that Love and Death and Pain were the bones on which life was modeled.

With a sudden movement she leaned forward, took up the bellows, and began to blow the smoldering logs into flame.

Meanwhile, upstairs on a long couch beside the fire in his big bed-sitting-room lay a young man on his face motionless.

A week ago he had been one of those men who in almost any company appear easy and satisfactory, and, above all, are satisfactory to themselves. His life was a very pleasant one indeed.

He had come down from Oxford just a year ago, and had determined to take things as they came, to foster acquaintanceships, to travel a little with a congenial friend, to stay about in other people's

houses, and, in fact, to enjoy himself entirely before settling down to read law. He had done this most successfully, and had crowned all, as has been related, by falling in love on a July evening with one who, he was quite certain, was the mate designed for him for Time and Eternity. His life, in fact, up to three days ago had developed along exactly those lines along which his temperament traveled with the greatest ease. He was the only son of a widow, he had an excellent income, he made friends wherever he went, and he had just secured the most charming rooms close to the Temple. He had plenty of brains, an exceedingly warm heart, and had lately embraced a religion that satisfied every instinct of his nature. It was the best of all possible worlds, and fitted him like his own well-cut clothes. It consisted of privileges without responsibilities.

And now the crash had come, and all was over.

As the gong sounded for luncheon he turned over and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

It should have been a very attractive face under other circumstances. Beneath his brown curls, just touched with gold, there looked out a pair of grey eyes, bright a week ago, now dimmed with tears, and patched beneath with lines of sorrow. His clean-cut, rather passionate lips were set now, with down-turned corners, in a line of angry self-control piteous to see; and his clear skin seemed stained and dull. He had never dreamt of such misery in all his days.

As he lay now, with lax hands at his side, tightening at times in an agony of remembrance, he was seeing vision after vision, turning now and again to the contemplation of a dark future without life or love or hope. Again he saw Amy, as he had first seen her under the luminous July evening, jeweled overhead with peeping stars, amber to the westwards, where the sun had gone down in glory. She was in her sun-bonnet and print dress, stepping towards him across the fresh-scented meadow grass lately shorn of its flowers and growth, looking at him with that curious awed admiration that delighted him with its flattery. Her face was to the west, the reflected glory lay on it as delicate as the light on a flower, and her blue eyes regarded him beneath a halo of golden hair.

He saw her again as she had been one moonlight evening as the two stood together by the sluice of the stream, among the stillness of the woods below the village, with all fairyland about them and in their hearts. She had thrown a wrap about her head and stolen down there by devious ways, according to the appointment, meeting him, as was arranged, as he came out from dinner with all the glamour of the Great House about him, in his evening dress, buckled shoes, and knee-breeches all complete. How marvelous she had been then—a sweet nymph of flesh and blood, glorified by the moon to an ethereal delicacy, with the living pallor of sun-kissed skin, her eyes looking at him like stars beneath her shawl. They had said very little; they had stood there at the sluice gate, with his arm about her, and herself willingly nestling against him, trembling now and again; looking out at the sheeny surface of the slow flowing stream from which, in the imperceptible night breeze, stole away wraith after wraith of water mist to float and lose themselves in the sleeping woods.

Or, once more, clearer than all else he remembered how he had watched her, himself unseen, delaying the delight of revealing himself, one August morning, scarcely three weeks ago, as she had come down the road that ran past the house, again in her sun-bonnet and print dress, with the dew shining about her on grass and hedge, and the haze of a summer morning veiling the intensity of the blue sky above. He had called her then gently by name, and she had turned her face to him, alight with love and fear and sudden wonder.... He remembered even now with a reflection of memory that was nearly an illusion the smell of yew and garden flowers.

This, then, had been the dream; and today the awakening and the end.

That end was even more terrible than he had conceived possible on that horrible Friday morning last week, when he had opened the telegram from her father.

He had never before understood the sordidness of her surroundings, as when, an hour ago, he had stood at the grave-side, his eyes wandering from that long elm box with the silver plate and the wreath of flowers, to the mourners on the other side—her father in

his broadcloth, his heavy, smooth face pulled in lines of grotesque sorrow; her mother, with her crimson, tear-stained cheeks, her elaborate black, her intolerable crape, and her jet-hung mantle. Even these people had been seen by him up to then through a haze of love; he had thought them simple honest folk, creatures of the soil, yet wholesome, natural, and sturdy. And now that the jewel was lost the setting was worse than empty. There in the elm box lay the remnants of the shattered gem.... He had seen her in her bed on the Sunday, her fallen face, her sunken eyes, all framed in the detestable whiteness of linen and waxen flowers, yet as pathetic and as appealing as ever, and as necessary to his life. It was then that the supreme fact had first penetrated to his consciousness, that he had lost her—the fact which, driven home by the funeral scene this morning, the rustling crowd come to see the young Squire, the elm box, the heap of flowers—had now flung him down on this couch, crushed, broken, and hopeless, like young ivy after a thunderstorm.

His moods alternated with the rapidity of flying clouds. At one instant he was furious with pain, at the next broken and lax from the same cause. At one moment he cursed God and desired to die, defiant and raging; at the next he sank down into himself as weak as a tortured child, while tears ran down his cheeks and little moans as of an animal murmured in his throat. God was a hated adversary, a merciless Judge ... a Blind Fate ... there was no God ... He was a Fiend.... there was nothing anywhere in the whole universe but Pain and Vanity....

Yet, through it all, like a throbbing pedal note, ran his need of this girl. He would do anything, suffer anything, make any sacrifice, momentary or lifelong, if he could but see her again, hold her hand for one instant, look into her eyes mysterious with the secret of death. He had but three or four words to say to her, just to secure himself that she lived and was still his, and then ... then he would say good-bye to her, content and happy to wait till death should reunite them. Ah! he asked so little, and God would not give it him.

All, then, was a mockery. It was only this past summer that he had begun to fancy himself in love with Maggie Deronnais. It had been an emotion of very quiet growth, developing gently, week by week, feeding on her wholesomeness, her serenity, her quiet power,