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CHAPTER II

Jeanette

The Burtrand family were eight in number, without counting the grandchildren: relations of their own name they had none at all in England, and none to boast of elsewhere. Both parents were alive, and both in the quite early autumn of life; notwithstanding the grandchildren. And there were three daughters and three sons. The family thus sailed on an agreeably even keel—a circumstance from which Mrs Burtrand was thought to distil comfort. Mrs Burtrand had been known (by an intimate friend) to plume herself upon the symmetrical growth of that green young sapling, the Burtrand family tree, and to express a hope that the higher branches would preserve an equally pine-like trim when Maximilian and she were dead and gone. This was just after the Burtrands had bought their country mansion, and been called upon by county families, and thus converted (to Mrs Burtrand’s satisfaction) into a county family themselves. Mr Burtrand, who was unstrained with social ambition, was as indifferent on this point as that relating to the
family tree which his wife said they had planted. Mrs Burtrand, by the bye, forgot wherein this variety differs from all other known trees—which is in growing downwards from the top: but her intimate friends used not to forget it, in repeating Mrs Burtrand’s remark.

A certain recklessness in her manner of speech (but seldom in the matter) was, indeed, a little womanly weakness of Mrs Burtrand’s; so were occasional grammatical lapses; but she was an extremely talented person, for all that. She contrived to carry out almost every scheme that she took seriously to mind: which argues a thought more than mere talent. She contrived, for example, to make Mr Burtrand buy outright a country house some miles out of Illingborough, after they had inhaled contentedly for twenty years, in a commodious villa, the smoke of that town; and this was a case of quick persuasion, into the bargain; for within six months of the melancholy and unforeseen end of Mr Auburn, the former owner, who indeed had built the place, the Burtrands were in possession of the premises. Further, as the family grew up, Mrs Burtrand induced her husband to start a town house as well. Nobody who knew Mr Burtrand could conceive how he was persuaded into enterprises which, though he could very well afford it, meant in each case a multiplication of expenditure—not a mere addition to it; but Mrs Burtrand contrived to persuade him. She worked however still greater wonders. She got the county to call upon her, besides making nice friends in town; and she dropped one
by one all her old Illingborough friends—though this was anything but a wonder. But the most astonishing of all her works was unconnected with her husband and unsuspected by the county. This was the way in which she managed to cloak successfully, under a facile and superficially lady-like manner, a slightly vulgar cast of mind. Her good looks undoubtedly assisted her: she was blonde and stout—but tall—and blue-eyed, with an amazing complexion for her fifty years, and plump, small, snowy hands: she dressed most admirably: she was not ignorant of the convenances: she had tact, address, presence, a dark sense of humour: yet it was wonderful! The vulgarity which saturated the mind of Mrs Burtrand was of that type which is hopeless by reason of its complete respectability; but it did not meet the casual eye. A reckless, rakish way of talking is an affectation (in a usually old woman) rather than otherwise; and faultless grammar is but faulty breeding—in conversation it is only the erratic aspirate, and the snipped tails of participles present, that stamp one; and in such things Mrs Burtrand was immaculate.

Her husband was a less accomplished person—notably in his manner of speech. Though a naturalised Englishman of many years’ standing, Maximilian Burtrand was immovably German—to the tip of his tongue: whereof the “that” was still a deliberate “dat.” Nor was there any patriotic basis for this apparent determination to be Anglicised in law only, and not to acquire so much as the language of the country
which had made him a rich man. The land where he had been born and bred a poor one had no sentimental attractions for him. He never revisited it. The abiding foreignness was due simply to the unprogressive nature of the man. He had not made his own position in England; it had been made for him by an older and an abler Burtrand. That Burtrand had sent for this one; made him, after a few years, a partner in one of the very safest concerns in the Midlands; and died, after a few more, unmarried. Everything was Maximilian’s; and everything was in such admirable order, and the business so peculiarly safe—so essentially sound, that it was not in the least to the younger and lesser man’s credit that he went on making money as rapidly as his relative had done. It requires both energy and intellect to wreck a successful, going concern; there is safety in dullness and indolence; Maximilian Burtrand was very safe indeed. In his home life, however, he had one or two tastes which were very nearly intellectual. He was fond of flowers and of music; and this was particularly why his favourite child was Jeanette, who indeed was a singularly skilled pianist for a girl of eighteen. But as for Mr Burtrand’s music, it appealed to him most after dinner, as a kind of supernumerary course; and he always went to sleep over it then, when the family were by themselves. As for his flowers—well, it may be the mission of flowers to gratify the senses only; and if so it is no disparagement to observe that colour and smell were all that Mr Burtrand found to appreciate in flowers.
There is one quality of which Mr and Mrs Burtrand had not many grains between them. That is Soul. Which is not of necessity, or unconditionally, the most desirable quality one can have. On the other hand, it is a quality never minded by those who have it not—the one quality nobody is sighing for. So there is no need to pity Mr or Mrs Burtrand, nor any harm in stating flatly that neither of them had much Soul.

As for the children, they may be divided into two classes. In the first were the amiable, selfless Emmeline, the eldest child, who had so many children of her own that she was becoming the family jest; the three boys—one at college and two at school—who were athletic, and consequently good fellows; and Sybil, the youngest child, who was spoilt and threatened to resemble her mother in several things. These five were not inconvenienced by Soul any more than their parents. Yet this slightly questionable quality had somehow slipped into the family. Jeanette had it. But Jeanette stars in the other class—by herself.

If Emmeline (who ruined her children) had degenerated after marriage into the family jest, Jeanette, from her tenderest years, had been the family conundrum. As a child she was peculiar, and was mismanaged—not to say ill-treated—in consequence. It is always the way, if a child has Soul; and Jeanette had more than could ever prove an unmixed blessing to her. For Soul involves a peculiarity or two, and peculiarities are sins in some nurseries. In the Burtrand nursery they were crimes, and were aggravated by the fact that
out of six children there was only one criminal. The other children had their faults, but they were not faults of temper, as Jeanette’s were. Jeanette was sensitive, excitable, and passionate: given to tempers, and tears, and silences: as a mite. When they sent her to school, in later years, her little lifetime of mismanagement and unpopularity had ingrained in her a number of more or less regrettable attributes: intense reserve, an unhealthy taste for privacy; the unhappy habit of peering inwards; and, what was worst of all, a precocious recognition of expediency—as in checking its feelings. When she returned from France—for the school was at St Malo—she was first welcomed, and then idolised, as another being.

Certainly she had turned out a lovely girl, also an accomplished one. And school life had developed in her the faculty of ready and sincere sympathy with others—a facility which makes more favourites than any other. But she was not another being. She was still a little peculiar—for instance, in this very matter of sympathy. She could sympathise, but she could not bear to be sympathised with; for sympathy was not a conscious acquirement of her nature; and as for pity, in any shape or form, it galled her beyond endurance. The repression and enforced sensitiveness of her earliest childhood had crystallised into an independence of spirit so intense as to be almost virile. Moreover, the Burtrands discovered in due course that Jeanette was as complete a conundrum as ever. She showed it in her
startling engagement to David Auburn. She showed it ten times more in the sequel.

Yet it was an ideal engagement—in the very beginning. There were romantic points about it from the first—one being a meeting in earlier years, before Jeanette left home; when Auburn, bursting home from foreign parts in a wild, sudden, take-you-by-surprise way, had walked into his father’s grounds to find that they were his father’s grounds no longer, and that his father had been ruined and dead for months—all of which he forced from the lips of a nervous little girl whom he found abroad at daybreak in the garden. Auburn had gone away heartbroken, to make another of his false starts in the world, never thinking again of the small person who had broken to him his terrible news; which had been terrible indeed; for after years of silent absence he had arisen, and was going to his father—who had been dead for months. But though Auburn had quite forgotten the little girl, the little girl had not forgotten Auburn. She remembered him with romantic pity. So there was an ideal foundation, all in readiness, when they ultimately came together and built Love.

And then there was Soul on both sides. It was not plain, just at once, that they were different types of Soul—that hers was of the spirited sort, his the aesthetic. When this transpired there was a little clash, and instead of sweet fusion, a slight recoil. And after that the whole business became too serious to last. This is the fault of young couples with
Soul: they will take themselves, and each other, and the whole thing, too seriously: when the parties to an engagement become blind to its humorous side—the side which would tickle the public—the engagement is pretty certain to be brought to nought.

This engagement was virtually doomed before the close of the season which gave it birth. When Jeanette left town, with the rest of the family, Auburn had not drawn a sincere smile from her for some time. He had made her sorry for him; he was in such tragic earnest. He had made her quake for herself, that little psychological clash seemed, on her side, to have mesmerised a feeling which in the beginning had been of consuming fervour—which was even now, in reality, only fulfilling the law of reaction. It seemed to her to be dead: but it was not so: it only slept. A spark would have quickened it: but from Auburn’s letters there flashed no spark; and the dull perpetual glow of his honest, ardent love, though it moved her to pity, did not awaken the response which she really longed in her heart to feel.

To the country Auburn could not follow her: he was working too hard—for her, as he was a little too fond of telling her. But in the country she saw much of a lighter-minded man, who amused her. This, though Jeanette did not perceive it then, was her mother’s doing entirely. Mrs Burtrand had opposed the Auburn engagement most bitterly, though without success: it was her husband whose consent had been asked, whose old-standing weakness for Jeanette had
caused him to give it; but she had not thrown up her hand. On the contrary, she played her cards cold-bloodedly and well. The lighter-minded man was Pelham Warburton, an army man, and a future baronet. It fitted beautifully: the Warburtons and the Burtrands were now the warmest neighbours; it was Pelham’s distinguished mother who had given the County the hint to call on the Burtrands, by first calling herself; and the young man happened to be having a slow time at home between the end of July and the Twelfth. Mrs Burtrand made it less slow for him. It was all through Mrs Burtrand that Jeanette and Captain Warburton saw so much of each other in that fortnight. It was entirely the fault of Mrs Burtrand that the Captain came to smile (with his hand in front of his mouth) when she whispered to him of Jeanette’s engagement; her way of mentioning the matter excused at once the smile and the accompanying strong impression that the engagement was on its last legs. And Mrs Burtrand had more to do with poor Auburn’s subsequent jealousy (to call it jealousy) than any other person. In fact, she had a powerful unseen hand in everything—in everything save that final letter of renunciation.

It was characteristic of Jeanette that she wrote and despatched her letter without consulting a soul; of her sex—perhaps of her kind—that she was impelled to consult somebody after the event; of her mother (who was the only person to consult) that she contrived not only to soothe her daughter, but to confirm and strengthen her in what she
had done, while delicately expressing the most unequivocal and pained disapproval—on moral grounds—of Jeanette’s conduct. In her own girlhood Mrs Burtrand had done the very same thing herself, in more flagrant circumstances; but there was less than no need to drag in that. It was however the true diplomatic instinct which kept Mrs Burtrand silent on a more tempting topic, and restrained her from making a single reference, direct or indirect, to Pelham Warburton.

And then another characteristic thing happened: a thing characteristic of Jeanette qua conundrum.

Save at that consultation after the event, the girl did not utter one word with reference to what she had done—not one word that night or the morning after. This was a most excellent sign, and it put Mrs Burtrand in real good heart. By her look, by her manner, Jeanette had dethroned the whole thing mentally—a proceeding which her strength of mind enabled her to take with the most unpleasant matters, as her mother very well knew. So Mrs Burtrand, in the triumph of her paltry heart, was in the very act of inditing a note of invitation to Pelham Warburton, when Jeanette herself burst into the boudoir with a flushed, twitching, agonised face which at once cancelled her composure of the first twenty-four hours, and disturbed that of her mother.

She could bear it no longer. She was ashamed, debased, degraded. The house was unendurable: she must go away.
Town was unendurable: she must leave it. The country home would be still less bearable: she must go abroad.

Her heart gushed out in a torrent of tears and sobs and self-condemnation. Then she became calm, and knelt at her mother’s knee—the knee that had none of the sweet, traditional anxieties—and prayed, with touching earnestness, to be taken or sent abroad.

Mrs Burtrand was not moved in the least. “And where to, pray?” asked she, scornfully. “We have made no plans for wintering abroad. Our plans are to winter here. Do you suggest we change everything to gratify your whim, Jeanette?”

“No! I do not want anyone with me. I could go quite well alone! Is there nowhere I could be sent to? Have we no relatives?”

“There is only your old school, that I know of,” Mrs Burtrand answered with a sneer. She was irritated, and employing an ancient manner of hers, a favourite one towards Jeanette in earlier days. “Ah, at that you shudder, you ass! As for relatives, you know that your father has none, and that I have—practically none.”

Jeanette thought. She knew there were no relatives in England. But she had heard—she said she was sure she had heard, though she could not say when or from whom—that there was an unknown uncle living somewhere abroad.
“Ah! You mean my brother William!” Mrs Burtrand spoke as one referring to the long-forgotten dead. “Yes, to be sure: William Joy is in the Colonies somewhere—or he was; but I haven’t heard of him for twenty years, and he may be dead. To be sure! So I suppose you would like to go to him—eh, Jeanette?”

“I should! Oh, I should! Cannot you write to him, mother? Please write to him.”

Still kneeling, the girl peered upward into her mother’s eyes with piteous appeal in her own. Any heart but Mrs Burtrand’s must have been intensely touched. The firelight flickered on the sweet young face, on the hot flush of shame that it deposed, on the fresh tears it turned to crystals. Mrs Burtrand averted her head contemptuously.

“You are mad, Jeanette! Do you suppose I meant it, for an instant? Do you dream that I will allow you to do anything but remain here? You are absurd, you are a riddle, there is no fathoming you! You have the courage to give up the man you never cared for; the man you should never have been engaged to, had I had my way, the way I had a right to insist upon; you give him up of your own free will—and what next? You come and make me miserable by going on like this! You may be ashamed of yourself.”

Jeanette rose meekly to her feet. There was no resentment in her look. Her spiritless humility was a little extraordinary, but not more so than this entire appeal to her mother—of
all people—for sympathy and help. This had but one preced-ent—that of yesterday. But Mrs Burtrand had hit the mark: the girl was maddened, what with the wound she had inflicted upon her own self-respect, and with increasing insight into the depth and deadliness of the wound she must have inflicted elsewhere. And the fact that she had stabbed in the dark, and thus could not know the effect of her letter, piled Pelion on Ossa in the anguish of her soul—as the element of uncertainty always must.

Too miserable to be indignant, too fairly numbed to feel hurt, she moved slowly to the door. Before she could reach it a servant knocked on the other side, and entered, to announce that Mr Auburn waited below.

There was a moment’s entire silence. Then Mrs Burtrand leant forward in her chair, pale with passion, to revile the maid.

“How dare you say I was at home? Go down this instant and say I can see no one. And admit another caller, on any but my day, at your peril!”

The maid explained that the butler had admitted Mr Auburn—not she; and, being naturally put out, dropped a suggestive word or two, to the effect that Mr Auburn had been known to call, on close days, and even to be admitted.

“Don’t answer me!” cried Mrs Burtrand, who had a choice manner with servants. “Go down instantly, and tell Mr Auburn that neither Miss Burtrand nor I can see anyone this
afternoon. And then tell Tomlinson to admit callers again, on any but my day, at his peril!”

The maid left the room. Jeanette prevented her from shutting the door, and followed, deaf to the quick questions of her mother. But Jeanette returned immediately, walked over to the window with strides in a moment grown swift and strong and elastic, and gazed out upon the yellow, darkening, November afternoon.

“What have you done, Jeanette? What have you done?”

“She is bringing him up,” calmly answered Jeanette, staring out of the window still.

“How dare she?” cried Mrs Burtrand, in her favourite formula. “And how dare you, Jeanette, tell her to do so after what you had heard me say?”

Jeanette faced about, drawn up to her full height. She was no longer meek, spiritless, abject, and unlike herself. Her blood had warmed again in her veins; her innate independence and courage had come back to her as in a flash.

“How dare she?—she is under notice, she does not care,” Jeanette answered, scornfully. “How dare I? It is my business to see him—my duty to treat him openly and fairly. And if he is come to reproach me, it is what I desire, and can bear. I will see him. I will listen to him. Here he is!”

The door opened and closed, and Auburn was standing with his back to it, tall and erect. He faced Jeanette, whose
slender form was like a shadow on the yellow pane, her little head resolutely poised, her features invisible. Neither moved. Between them Mrs Burtrand leant forward in her chair, the firelight just reaching the lower level of her face; she was the first to speak; and her tone, under entire control at all times, was as cold and suave as but a moment before it had been violent and heated.

“I think it is almost a pity—for your sake especially—that you thought it necessary to call, Mr Auburn!”

Auburn made no sign that he heard. His eyes never swerved from Jeanette. In the hard unwavering outline, cut so plainly on the pane, he saw the answer to the question he had come to put. And yet he put it:

“Your mind is quite made up, Jeanette?”

“Quite,” she replied, in her clearest voice.

A pause.

“You have thought over it, you have slept upon it, and you are quite sure you meant every word in the letter you have written to me?”

“I am quite sure.”

“Yes? But you were once quite sure of another thing. No one was ever surer! Are you now as sure as that—all that feeling has flown? Think, Jeanette.”

Her hand made a slight movement. “There is no need to think,” she said sadly; “I thought first. Say what you will to
me, think what you must of me, but do not suppose I wrote that letter on a moment’s impulse. It must have come in any case!”

She pressed her fingers to her forehead once, then stood again like stone, and so remained.

“Then this is final,” he said. He stepped backward, and opened the door; then hesitated, closed it again, and stood, with the handle between his fingers, looking at her for the last time.

Until this moment her heart had been bleeding for him. Now, all at once, the bleeding stopped. How little he had to say! How calm and dignified he was! He who had ever said too much rather than too little—he whose love had been one unrestrained, passionate tremor from beginning to end! Then the wound was not so very deep after all! And this thought, which should have rejoiced her, offended her to the soul, and stopped the flow of her honest grief for him.

The soft, comfortable tones of Mrs Burtrand came between them, and jarred them both.

“Dear Mr Auburn—had you not better leave us? I am thinking principally of you. You are prolonging a scene that must be more painful to you than it is even to us. The less that is said now, the less we shall all have to regret. I am very, very sorry for you; come, at least believe that. Believe also that I make no excuse for my child; indeed, I have told
her what I think of her conduct. But as for you, you must go back to your work—paint hard—and forget all about us.”

“I cannot!”

It was a sudden cry from the depths—yet, clipped and choked out into a half-utterance as it was, it escaped him altogether against his wish. The strength of a weak nature, with heart braced up for the event, may be the strength of the strongest. This was the strength that Auburn commanded now. By stern preparation, and by fierce resolve, all that was strong and brave and unselfish in that young man had been worked and concentrated to serve him now. The half-uttered cry came straight from the heart, it missed the mind, or it would not have been uttered at all. But it sped like an arrow into another heart: Jeanette’s was bleeding afresh.

Mrs Burtrand took it differently. “That is so weak!” she said, amiably. “You will throw yourself all the more into your art, I am sure. I am quite convinced such work demands one’s whole heart. You have begun so well, you know. But if only you go on in the same way, and think of nothing but your art, you are sure to be successful, and prosperous—and all that!”

His soul filled with scorn. It was like this false, shallow woman to think lightly of prosperity and success across the open grave of all his hopes—the grave which she, he could swear to it, had helped to dig! He despised her consolation, cheap as it was insincere: but it was the hour of his strong
endurance, of his nobility; and that cannot come without noble intentions.

“I’m going to take your advice, Mrs Burtrand,” he said quite quietly, “I am going back to my work. I am going to put my whole life into it! I have begun rather better than you think; I have received my first commission; it is the first rung of the ladder, the first brick in the building, and I got it only yesterday!” This was unpremeditated, and there was a touch of uncontrollable bitterness in his voice—but a quiet touch. “I am going to work as hard and as honestly as I can,” he went on. “Jeanette! when you hear of me again it shall be in a worthy manner! All is over between us now, I ask for no hope, but you shall hear of me. And you shall never be ashamed, Jeanette, that once you thought you loved me—that once you let me love you!”

He stopped abruptly, in sudden self-consciousness. The fire had fallen inwards, and created a fresh blaze, that reached to his face; and his face was convulsed with agony; though his voice was so calm and clear.

All that was good in the man was condensed at that moment into a single spark. And Jeanette perceived it.

He went forward and held out his hand. Unconsciously she gave him hers. It was like ice. She did not speak. He held it an instant.

“Goodbye, Jeanette!”
He dropped it, and was gone.

He stood a few moments on the pavement, drawn up to the last inch, his soul expanding with noble desires—glorying, as a man should, in his grief and in his strength.

As he stood a hansom drove up, and a man brushed past him up the steps. It was Pelham Warburton.

Auburn had forgotten him!