The Graven Image

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Chapter V

The Graven Image

Whatever were the faults and follies of Jeanette Bur-trand (for nobody is denying that she carried a full list of both), she had ever a sturdy independent nature, real force of character, and a soul that meant sublimely well. If her doings fell infinitely below her aspirations, and even far short of her intentions, she was not peculiar there; and if her standard was an impossible one, she bled freely in her indispensable efforts to reach it—she suffered sufficiently for the youthful indiscretion of having a standard at all. Such natures are made up of opposites: of strength and weakness, of selfishness and unselfishness. In Jeanette these opposites were extreme; so they were there as natural complements, not accidentally: for strength is great only where there is great obstructive weakness, and selflessness supreme when most nearly overpowered by selfish instincts.

Where the character of Jeanette was strongest, it was freckled with the weakest spots; and as for the other matter, she was decidedly self-centred, more especially when
at home, where she had so little in common with any one. What she required was, first to be snatched out of herself, and kept out: then—decentralisation of interests. She was the very girl to thrive through and through in a freer, busier, healthier atmosphere than that of her home life—which her soul detested. She was the odd bud of the tree, the ideal bud for grafting; and for this she must have longed—had not all her girlish longings been focused elsewhere.

Meanwhile she was beloved at home: with one exception. The expressed opinions of old Burtrand and of the boys had the real golden ring. There must have been something sympathetic about her, real or assumed; there was, and in point of fact it was real; the singular thing was that the girl did not require (or was not sensible of requiring: this is a little difference) the sympathetic *quid pro quo*. This was her peculiarity. Self-improvement was in her heart none the less; it had been planted there in her childhood, and a number of weak egotistical shoots had come up in due course. These were not ineradicable, but they made a sweet woman a little egotistical in the days of her youth. This was her weakness. And so her strong soul was environed, as an island with a wavering coast-line. Yet half her sweetness came from this uncertain fringe: had she only known it.

She did not know it: how should she? But she did know of her weaknesses: a few of them, but enough to make her hate herself. She had her own ideas about weakness, and weaknesses. She fancied there were natures that had neither the
one nor the other. Probably there are. And there are rocks with abrupt, unchanging edges, sheer to the sea; but these are a little apt to be sterile. Honest rocks (which one does meet sometimes) suffer from the same complaint; they lack, at all events, nearly all the qualities (good and bad) which made Jeanette—just Jeanette. Yet Jeanette had a passionate admiration for the adamantine nature; it was one she would have chosen for herself, could choice have changed her; but the nature she was forced to put up with was of an opposite description. She realised this at last. It was a failure to realise it at first that had made her act sometimes as though she really did belong to the unyielding, unemotional, strong order—that had made her own mother cold, and unlike her real self. She had thus misrepresented herself to David Auburn—only too often, from the first, but more often than ever towards the close of their engagement. But, as she grew older, she ceased to confuse what she was with what she wished to be, and thus unconsciously to act a part. She became reconciled to herself: and self is head and chief of that set of realities, once a set of ideals, to which we all get reconciled in the end.

Jeanette’s mind developed; though less, perhaps, than one would have thought. She was reckoned an immense reader, by her family: who did not know what they were talking about. In point of fact she read a great deal less than she seemed to read—for the want of a good following mind. Intellectually she was strong on the imaginative side, but
comparatively weak on the receptive. Thus, with a book she really loved, she wasted half her time in dreaming. Suggestive reading suggested too much to her, she read her own fancies, not her author. This was the case especially with certain volumes that deeply impressed the boys (with their externals), and provoked without fail the maternal sneer. So far as it led her to think things out, and to read between lines, this odd way of reading was a good way; so far as it drifted her into private reveries, it did Jeanette more harm than good: for private reverie, as she took it, was her most pernicious habit.

Outwardly, however, her character developed more happily. Here was nothing but improvement: gentler relations with her mother (due entirely to Jeanette); a most excellent understanding (of a more reciprocal kind) with all the others; and the acquisition (to some extent) of the dainty manner, with its subtle blend of freedom and rigidity and its dash of ennui with the whole concern. Nobody guessed how deep and sterling was the ennui of Jeanette; but then nobody dreamt how infinitely little the most entertaining function entertained Jeanette: for nobody knew the girl. Nobody ever had known her. The boys swore by her; they found her sympathetic, genial, and not too readily shocked—with them. A sister who is likewise a friend does not justify her right to exist—quâ sister. Jeanette was the best sister in the world, but her brothers tried in vain to fathom her. Where, as they said, she “stumped” them completely, was in her manner
towards other men; it was a most forbidding manner, quick, cold, and merciless; and the way in which she snubbed certain college friends of theirs (Blues, if you please, who went down to Illingborough as lions and came away lambs) caused the only coolness that ever arose between Jeanette and her brothers. The defect seemed to be constitutional, though lately developed: since her luckless engagement, Jeanette had evidently “turned against” men. The boys could not fathom it, and old Burtrand—who loved Jeanette if he loved anything—was in this respect still more helpless: his lead-line lacking length, and himself the energy to cast it of his own accord. His persona was always for the puzzled state; but his state was rather one of complete indifference on every conceivable subject save those that appealed to his consideration through personal interests or attachments: he had the distinction of being the least inquisitive of men. The only person who had any insight into Jeanette’s heart was Mrs Burtrand—to whom Jeanette had opened it, once only, long ago. And, for a variety of reasons, Mrs Burtrand had kept strictly to herself the key then given her.

It fitted still: Jeanette was still in love; and still with the man whose love she had put away, whose heart she had broken, whom she never expected to see in life again! She had fallen in love with David Auburn—for the first time deeply and completely—when it was just too late. Her real love-story had begun with Goodbye, and gone on in the girl’s own lonely, repentant heart. The man whom formerly she had
underestimated she now idealised: for him from whom she had withdrawn her hand she would now have laid down her life: the reality, lightly renounced, had changed, at the very moment of renunciation, into the ideal to which the life of Jeanette Burtrand had since become consecrated.

It is a sad, strange thing when love comes thus, too late. It is a false thing too: it is loving what neither is, nor was, nor ever shall be—vain ideal! And Jeanette did this with all the natural force, frankness, and purity of her girlish heart; and without conscious hope of anything to come of it—on this side of the grave. She loved now with a passion undreamt of in the days of her engagement—even in the earliest, most ardent days. But it was a passion redeemed and exalted by its very hopelessness. It was practically hopeless: for she could not call him back; she would never see him again; and when she had heard of him, it would be through the trumpet of fame—and that would rend the final chasm between them. The conviction raised her love to a spiritual level, but only to plunge it to a profane one when the scale turned and love became idolatry. The spiritual fervour which she might have given to religion (had religious influences come her way, which they never did) she lavished upon her lost lover—until she broke the second Commandment—until his image was graven in her heart, and her soul bowed down to it, and worshipped it!

This was done unconsciously—let there be no mistake. But, when done, there was no undoing it. When Jeanette
realised vaguely that her ideal had become her idol, the thing was incurable; one could not be pulled down without the other; and to the ideal, at any rate, she had a perfect right. But it was long before she had the first warning of what was really happening in her heart. The morbid passion which slowly grew upon Jeanette is felt by most only while the wound is new and liable to bleed afresh at odd moments. Certainly it is bad to bear in the beginning; but the pain diminishes in a remarkable manner—if you give it time. The wound heals so quickly, so prettily, that it is a private treat to watch it from day to day. Last of all it is only a scar, and then—but who does not know the honest satisfaction to be had from the contemplation of an honest scar? Jeanette did not, it is true—but she was always queer. Jeanette’s trouble was never allowed to degenerate into a luxury, like other people’s. She was never able to take it up and put it down at will; she never could use it as a little work on religion, for instance, to command, when desirable, a sombre tint of mind. It took her unawares often enough to remind her that she sometimes forgot it. It would come back to her in the colours of a sunset, with a chord from the keys. And here is an appertaining point: the keen anguish of these moments made her cling more closely to her trouble, so as to feel it always with her, and thus escape the bitterest stings of all—those of sudden remembrance.

Her subsequent idolatry betrayed her weakness; but it also showed her strength. It betrayed her weakness by play-
ing upon her weakest points—her self-centralisation, her trick of morbid introspection, her suppressed sentiment. It showed her strength in her outward bearing. Her heart was heavy but her head was high, and her face bright. She did not allow herself to fall off in appearance: by pure strength of will she kept healthy in body, if not in mind, and smacked the proverb in its arrogant face. She was reserved, but that she had always been. To men, she was a little too snubbing, perhaps; why, there is no exact saying. For the rest, she made the best of a mode of life quite uncongenial to her; and certainly she knitted herself into the hearts of all around her, though in real sympathy with none of them. Granting the setting up of that profane idol in her heart—which was just as weak and deplorable as you please—the contention is that she gave evidences at this time of a measure of real strength: for the bad thing must have been to become morose, sour, openly discontented, openly selfish, peevish, and dull company; and nobody ever dreamt of applying one of these epithets to Jeanette: which is saying something.

Thus, then, in outward goodness and serenity, in inward grief and idolatry, she passed from eighteen to one-and-twenty—and there very nearly stopped. Her twenty-first year just missed being her last!

It fell out in a commonplace way enough. This is the rule. The beaten tracks to the grave make no pretensions whatever, at their open ends; they are crossed by so many other tracks, just at first, which lead back to the flowers and sun-
shine; and the odds are so heavy that you take one such turn-
ing. The romance begins when you have missed the last of
them, and there is nothing ahead but the fresh-turned earth
and the six foot hole—to be cleared at a bound or tumbled
into. And commonly, it is only here that the danger is felt.

It was so with Jeanette. A rainy August in the country: a
little imprudence, one vile day, when the boys were playing
in a local match which Jeanette could not miss: a damp drive
home: there was little in all this to alarm the most anxious
mother, and Jeanette’s mother was not anxious at all—she
only scolded. Yet this carried Jeanette some distance down
a beaten track with a violent cold. The cold settled some-
where: they thought in the chest: wherever it was, it swept
her onward as far again. The crossing comes between fever
and farther between.

The Illingborough medical man was sent for, but ridicu-
lessly late. The girl was down with acute inflammation of
the lungs. Trained nurses were in possession of her room
within three hours: a good thing: for Mrs Burtrand, from
relative indifference up to the hour of the physician’s visit,
became dazed and helpless from the moment he told her the
danger.

The girl grew worse. It was a rapid case. She seemed to
be sinking: the doctor brought other doctors—not from
Illingborough; and for a day, with the grave in full view,
she rallied.
Old Burtrand spent that day on a cane chair outside her door, and at the end of it he looked ten years older: no one passed him to cross the threshold but the doctors, the nurses, and his wife.

Late in the afternoon Mrs Burtrand came up with hope in her face. The local man had just driven off with the London specialist: through the open window came the noise of their chariot wheels grinding the gravel of the drive. Mrs Burtrand had been seeing them off. She bent and whispered to her husband, and quiet tears ran down his cheeks. She hurried into the room and whispered to the day-nurse—a sweet, winning, feeling woman, who had not been long at her trade.

Jeanette appeared to be sleeping peacefully. By degrees the whispering in the room grew louder. There seemed no danger of waking her.

“They say,” said Mrs Burtrand, “that the great danger now will be the autumn and the winter. She must on no account winter in England. And all our arrangements are made to winter in town! They think the inflammation is subsiding, but they cannot answer for its permanent effect upon the lungs: anyway she is to make haste to a warmer climate before the winter. I don’t know how we shall manage, I’m sure! But I am writing to my brother in Australia, and he may take her—if he is still alive.”
“Australia!” The young woman’s eyes filled with tears: she was a widow: wedded and widowed out there. She told Mrs Burtrand this, with considerable emotion, but barely above her breath.

“How funny!” said Mrs Burtrand. “Now you don’t happen to know Jumping Sandhills, do you?”

The nurse shook her head.

“Because that’s where my brother lived—or did live,” pursued Mrs Burtrand, whose serenity had returned with the professional reassurances. “I have not heard of him for twenty years; but one could never forget such a funny name, you know. I shall write at once. Let us hope he is alive!”

Left alone with the sick girl, the young nurse sat staring through the window: down on the lawn in the great, soft shadow of the house; at Mrs Burtrand’s gay arrangement of the flower-beds; at the first signs of rust upon the early-changing trees. She looked long, yet saw but dimly, through a film of tears. When she turned her head, she was startled to find the patient’s eyes wide open, and watching her keenly.

“So I’m to go out to Australia,” said Jeanette, in her weak, hollow whisper. “Well, I may like it: if I am to get better!”

She spoke as if she had not the faintest desire to get better.

“And you say you have been out there,” she continued presently. “I heard what you said: it was very cruel: I am so very sorry for you!” She paused a little. “Could you tell me
what it is like there, please, or does it hurt you dreadfully to talk about it? If so, not a word.”

The nurse demurred: it might hurt Jeanette to be talked to; or, for herself (poor thing) she should love to speak of it. But Jeanette insisted; and the nurse was new to her work, and not yet case-hardened; and she gave in—for ten minutes by her watch. She told Jeanette much, in those minutes, of the life up country, dwelling instinctively on those points—both in the mode of life and in the scenery—that had no fellow in the old country. She spoke very softly; but while she spoke the scorching heat of the gum-trees was in her nostrils once more; and into her voice and look came a sad but ardent enthusiasm which found a faint reflection in the white face among the pillows. When the minutes were up, the nurse stopped abruptly, according to agreement. And Jeanette just whispered:

“I like that! You must tell me a great deal more when I am better. I mean to get better, nurse—to go out there!”

The will to recover, if it cannot induce recovery, must surely assist it a little. In any case Jeanette was very speedily out of the immediate danger. And then she fell into a very curious mental condition, yet one that is the experience of many who have leapt the grave and barely cleared it: she began to feel a little sorry that she was recovering. One day she said, in quite a matter-of-fact way, to the nurse who had told her about Australia:
“Do you know, I am half sorry I did not die last month! I was never so happy in my life as during that worst day or two. Nothing troubled me: I had not a single care. I was ready to die; I knew of nothing to keep me here; it seemed the right moment, of all others, for me to go. I could not feel grieved on my people’s account, I was past that, and for my own part I was entirely contented to go. And here I am, getting better; I am almost well; and everything has come back to me that I had forgotten then!” A shadow fell upon her face: she sighed. “It is hard to come back to the old troubles, after forgetting them so utterly. I shall never again be so happy as when I lay here, and made up my mind that it was all over, and rejoiced! And I may never again be so ready to go: it would be just like me to want to stay when my time really does come! There—I have shocked you!”

“You have astonished me,” replied Jeanette’s nurse, gravely. They had become firm friends. “You are so young! You have everything to live for! You have everything before you! Now, if it were I—well, it would be very different. I cannot believe that you have had such sorrows.”

Jeanette lay looking at her with large bright eyes. “I dare say it does sound incredible; and I dare say I do exaggerate things,” said she, thoughtfully. “But there: I cannot tell you! I can only tell you that I seemed to have no regrets at leaving this empty little life here: I believe that—without quite knowing it then—I was really looking forward to a new life. And now I am come back to the old, old, old one!”
The girl sighed deeply. The nurse took her meaning: she had already gathered that Jeanette—though loved and loving, in a way—was not really happy in her home life. She said quickly:

“But you are going to a new life! You are going to Australia. Don’t you remember how you jumped at the idea when you were at your very worst?”

“No—I had turned the corner then,” said Jeanette. “Still, I am glad to be going out there. I am looking forward to it. But I cannot help feeling I shall never again be so happy as I was when I was so near the unseen—so very near! Of course, one oughtn’t to wish only to be happy—more happiness is a poor thing!” she exclaimed, with a reminiscence of her old adamantine notions. “But is hard to think the same peaceful feeling can never come over again! I may even be coming back to greater troubles than the old ones—who shall say?”

She sighed yet again. Then the lids slipped over her eyes, her eyes turned inward, and there, in its own niche in her heart, was the idol she had set up to worship. The mists of extreme illness had veiled it from her view, for a little space; and during that little space stillness and rest and perfect peace had filled her soul. She yearned for that perfect peace as she lay convalescent, leaving it farther and farther behind day by day, by the shores of the unknown sea whose murmurs grew fainter and fainter in her ears. She longed for the mists to descend again and hide what they had hidden
before—and hated herself for the longing! She had set up in her heart that which she was powerless to pull down. The image of the man who in his heart had killed her!

She opened her eyes long after. The nurse was still standing at the foot of the bed, watching her earnestly. The nurse now drew her bow at a venture.

“You will forget all about him when you go out there,” she whispered gently.

“I shall never forget! You do not know: if you did you would know that I would not forget if I could!”