The Graven Image

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Chapter VIII

Henry Flood

Henry Flood arrived very early indeed on the Sunday morning; in fact, he rather overdid the matter, and suffered a little for his ardent haste; for not a soul was abroad to receive him. It was rather hard lines on him, for the devoted fellow had been riding furiously. His station was seventy miles from Gunbar; he had left it only the afternoon before; he had rested but a fraction of the night at an intermediate homestead, after the accomplishment of two-thirds of his journey; he had ridden away from there in the still small hours. Now Daisy knew quite well that Henry intended to arrive before breakfast, even if he had to ride all night for it; he had said so in his letter. And she heard the jingle of his spurs in the verandah while she was dressing. Yet she kept him waiting there half an hour. Of course she was specially fastidious about her habit; of course her mirror found her unusually hard to please; so one cannot say much. But there is a certain fiendish fascination in keeping a lover cooling his
heels, and his ardour; and it is conceivable that this also may have had something to do with Daisy’s delay.

In any case it fell out that Jeanette, coming briskly round her corner of the house, was very nearly embraced by a tall young man, who had heard her step, and was hurrying to meet it with a flushed expectant face. His colour deepened, but the light in his eyes went out, and he fell back crestfallen. But Jeanette grasped the situation at a glance, and held out her hand.

“Is it Mr Flood—Henry Flood?” she asked, smiling. “I am Jeanette, the cousin from Home, you know!”

Henry took her slender hand, and slightly hurt it in the friendly fervour of his greeting. “I thought it was Day,” he said simply.

“Well, so it ought to have been, if you haven’t seen her yet?” said Jeanette sympathetically; he shook his head a little sadly. “But perhaps,” she added, “Daisy didn’t expect you quite so early. You have just arrived?”

“I have been here half an hour.”

“How dreadful!” cried Jeanette, in genuine concern. “She cannot know; I will go and tell her.”

“Pray don’t; I’d rather you didn’t bother her.”

“But I am sure she does not know you are here.”
“I think she must,” said Flood, in the uncertain tone of one willing but unable to feel convinced. “I strolled all round the verandah; I know how thin these walls are; did you not hear me?” Jeanette nodded. “She must have heard me too; for your spurs will make a row on the boards,” he ended half apologetically. “But please let her alone; she’ll be out in a moment, I am sure; and I oughtn’t to have turned up at such an unearthly hour.”

He turned his gaze from Jeanette, and the level sun hit it fair and square; the complexion was ruddy, not bronzed like Martin’s, for dark men brown but fair men burn, and Flood was fair; his hair was tawny, and curly at the temples, but his moustache was nearly white, and rather ragged. He had high cheek-bones, a wide mouth, and pale blue eyes. The young man was surely no Adonis; he was just one of those male rarities who are braver than lions yet more unselfish than women; and these qualities he happened to advertise quite unconsciously in his honest face. He was wont also to exhibit there, with the same sublime unconsciousness, the personal emotions of the moment; and Jeanette, reading him like an open book, felt, all at once, extremely angry with Daisy. But Daisy now thought fit to flutter out; Henry wheeled about with his face shining like a saint’s; and Jeanette vanished.

At breakfast Jeanette watched the pair, with the eyes of experience, and some slight anxiety arising from all Daisy’s references to her betrothed, and augmented by her be-
trophed’s manner now he was here at last. She felt very wise in their affair; and there are affairs which are often the better for a third person’s gratuitous wisdom; it depends on the third person, and Jeanette, like many another, could be very sensible indeed when she was not a principal. She watched Henry Flood with intense interest and approving compassion. She saw how he beamed when Daisy gave him the lightest look, the brightest word; how he gazed at her when she did not know it, in mute and humble adoration. Flood was a man who had once done an exceedingly brave thing, of which Jeanette, of course, had heard; but he was so humble a lover; Jeanette had insight when she was not personally involved, and she felt sure of this immediately. She could not help watching Daisy also; and she could not help fancying her a little capricious.

Jeanette established herself for the morning in the back verandah, with a lapful of books. She was, as we know, a keen yet desultory reader; and she loitered in many fields; for a poet, an essayist, and a story-teller—so long as these were all more or less Olympian—might share the provision of her morning’s entertainment, when she spent the morning in reading. Lately, however, she had been reading an author whose fruit was far from the lowest slopes of Olympia, though his eyes were set on its cloudy summit; but she had lost the book without finishing it, or rather, it had vanished; and she was much annoyed about it, as she told Martin, who came in the verandah during the forenoon.
“What’s the name of the book you have lost?”

“Owen Almeric.”

“Come, now, Jeanette! You ought to be thankful to a merciful Providence for snatching it—I don’t know who else has taken it, I don’t know who would take it. Come, I say! You don’t mean to tell me you care for the thing?”

“I am deeply engrossed in it,” returned Jeanette indignantly; “and I should be very much obliged if you could find it for me.”

He promised to do his best, and added, much as Daisy had done: “It must be very bad taste, but I confess I thought the book rather rot; I never heard of the author before, I forget his name now, but I never want to hear it again. Am I interrupting you?” he added abruptly.

Jeanette shook her head and closed her book; she read in a way that brooks many interruptions. Martin sat down on the verandah boards, leant his back against the post, embraced his knees, and asked outright what Jeanette thought of Henry Flood, now that she had seen him.

“I’ve seen him, it’s true,” she answered warily; “but that’s about all. Still, I never yet was surer of my opinion at first sight: Martin, I like him immensely.”

“Shall I tell you what I think of him?”

“Do.”
“I only think him the grandest chap in the back-blocks, that’s all,” answered Martin with artful emphasis—and with one for his beloved back-blocks.

Jeanette gazed down on him, reflecting. “How glad Day ought to be that you all think so much of him!” she presently exclaimed, from the depths of her heart.

“I don’t think it makes much difference to her. The whole Colony thinks a lot of him, for that matter. Of course you know what he did?”

“Of course; she told me.”

“Yes? I am glad she was the one to tell you,” remarked Martin, reflective in his turn.

“Why glad?” Jeanette seemed more interested than surprised.

Martin hesitated. “May I tell you in the strictest—forgive me, Jeanette! What a way to begin—to you! I’ll blurt it out: it’s only this: in my opinion Day doesn’t think half enough of him for that business—not half as much, I mean to say, as everybody else thinks. You raise your eye-brows, Jeanette; and I know, of course, that she ought to value him for what he is, not for what he has done; but Henry Flood’s a hero, and she ought to look at him as one. When a man follows another man—who’s a desperate man—day and night through the bush, alone with a back tracker, as Henry did; when the villain springs from behind a bush with a shooter
in each hand, and the other fellow—Henry Flood—doesn’t bolt, but tucks in his head, and kicks in his heels, and screws in his knees, and rides the villain down—and takes that villain alive, shooters and all—well, it’s a thing people oughtn’t to forget. And I don’t think anybody does forget it except Day, who ought to be the last to do so. It’s like a fellow’s strong point, only stronger: it doesn’t matter a bit if all the world loses sight of it, so long as the girl he cares for never loses sight of it. Yet you may go and see everybody making a fuss about a fellow except the girl who professes to love him; he doesn’t care a shot for their good opinion; for her he would eat out his heart! And I half fear it’s something like this with these two; you don’t know Day as I know her, you may know her impulsiveness, but you don’t know her moods and tempers; for with you nobody could help being in their best mood and sweetest temper. She is fond of Henry, of course, but not half enough, whereas he’s a bit too fond; and he’s a great mate of mine, Jeanette, and she’s the best little sister in the world, after all; so if—by any chance—you could put in a word—"

He faltered to a full stop. He had gone rather further than he had intended to go. He was not at all sure that Jeanette could do any good; he did not know whether she would care to try; in fact he was sorry he had put in those last halting words. But Jeanette was gazing down upon him steadily, with kind, softened eyes: he had hit her hard, but all unconsciously, in nearly every sentence: some of his remarks
would once have applied far more closely to her than now they did to Daisy: he had pressed upon a wound that had never healed: yet never before had she thought half so much of Martin Joy as now, when unwittingly he had caused her acute pain.

“It would not be very easy,” she said gently, “for me to speak; and there may not be the slightest need—while we are minding their business, they may be, and no doubt are, in the seventh heaven within a few yards of us. Still, I must confess that I have thought as you think, Martin, only from hearing Daisy talk about him. As yet, I have barely seen them together; but I think it may be only that Day is a little young and light-hearted and inexperienced—not that I’m posing” (with a little blush and a smile) “as a woman of the world, Martin; only I know so well what this is—and” (in sudden confusion) “she ought certainly to make a great deal of such a brave, noble, heroic fellow!”

Martin’s tone altered. “Everybody can’t be a hero!” he exclaimed; and for a moment his eyes fell.

“But Henry Ford is one,” said Jeanette, more consequently.

“He is!” cried Martin, burying embarrassment in enthusiasm. “Why, here he comes,” he added under his breath. “What can be wrong? Just look at him!”

Jeanette turned her head. Flood was coming along the verandah, alone, and with quick, firm steps. His face was ghastly, but resolutely set, and his head was carried proudly
and high. He walked straight up to Jeanette, and held out his hand.

“Goodbye—Miss Burtrand!”

“Goodbye?” Jeanette and Martin started up together. “Surely you are not going?”

“Yes,” said Flood firmly—with an honest tremor that made his tone seem firmer still—“I am going! Goodbye!”

“But why, man?” cried Martin.

“Daisy wants me to go,” said the young fellow, with a certain pride. “So naturally I am going. Will you help me run up my horse, Martin?”

Martin and Jeanette exchanged glances. Martin hesitated. Then he said savagely, “Very well!” Jeanette warmly pressed the poor fellow’s hand, and the young man was gone. But within a minute Martin came running back.

“I’ve come for my stock-whip, Jeanette; so I’ve told him, and he must never think otherwise; but I’ll have to run back and tell him I made a mistake—for of course I don’t keep it here. What I’ve really come for is to send you to Daisy. No doubt she’s been making an infernal little fool of herself, and the thing may be past redemption. But for Heaven’s sake try to bring her to reason! It’ll take us some time to run up his horse—I’ll take care of that—and you’ll find our little fool in the sitting-room. If anybody can do any good, it’s you; and
if it isn’t absolutely all up—let one of the blinds fly outside the window!”

He was gone before she could reply.

Jeanette waited a minute in painful thought. How strange that she should be called upon in such a case! But it was not a case to brook delay. She must go straight to the room where Daisy and her lover had been sitting together for the first time for many weeks, and, as it threatened, for the last time in their lives. She hurried round to the room. The blinds were all drawn; for the sun was on that side of the building. The door was shut; Henry had shut it behind him; Jeanette gently opened it, went in, and closed it once more. A bluish twilight filled the room. Daisy was sitting on the sofa—she had never risen—one could see where he had sat at her side. She was wrenching at her gown, which would not easily come off; and she had not the wit to humour it; she was blind, and sobbing passionately as she wrenched. Jeanette crossed the room, and took Henry’s place on the sofa; and immediately Daisy’s head was on her shoulder; Daisy’s tears were scalding her cheek.