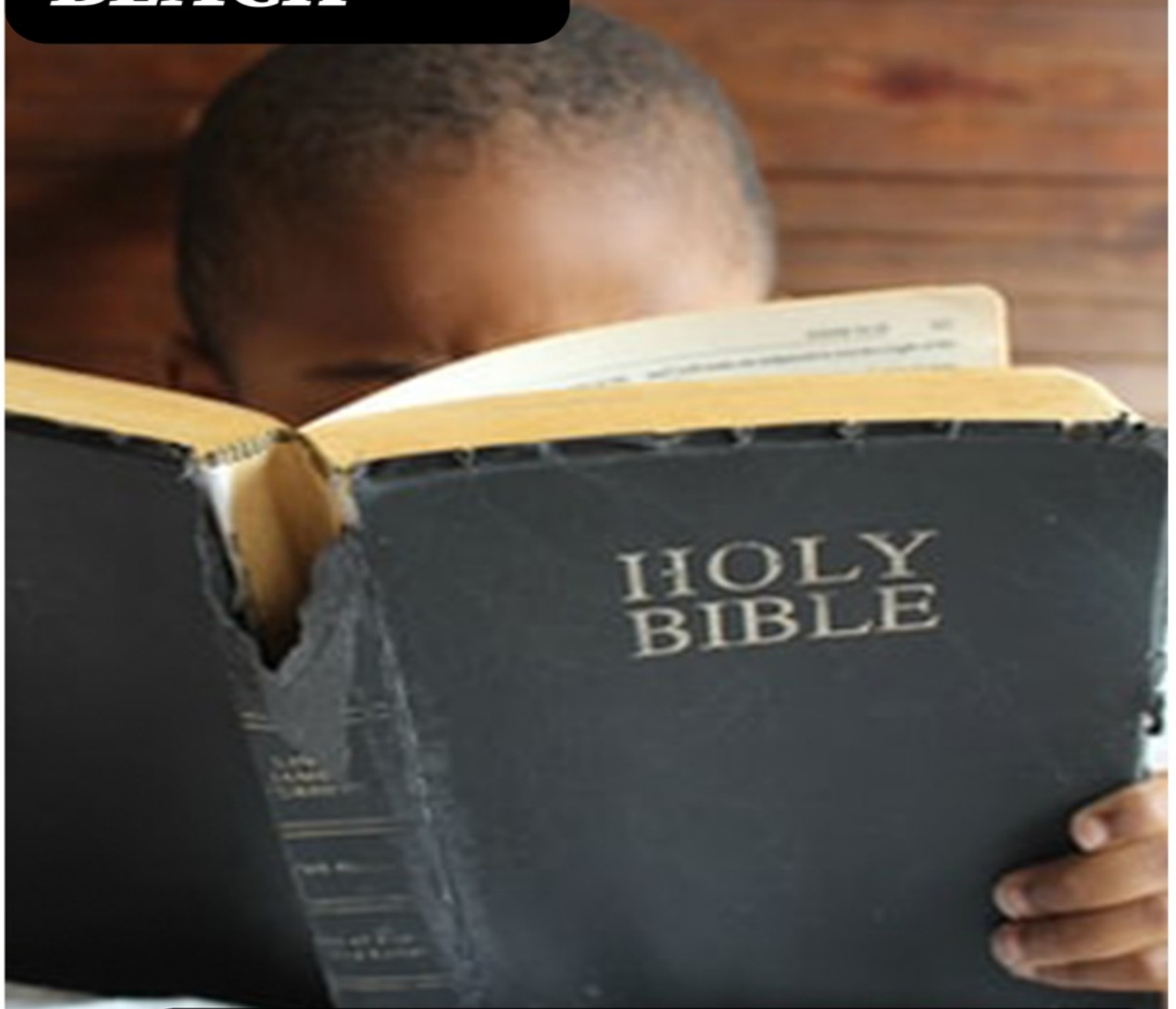


***EDITH
FERGUSON
BLACK***



***A BEAUTIFUL
POSSIBILITY***

Edith Ferguson Black

A Beautiful Possibility

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CHAPTER I.

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In one of the fairest of the West Indian islands a simple but elegant villa lifted its gabled roofs amidst a bewildering wealth of tropical beauty. Brilliant birds flitted among the foliage, gold and silver fishes darted to and fro in a large stone basin of a fountain which threw its glittering spray over the lawn in front of the house, and on the vine-shaded veranda hammocks hung temptingly, and low wicker chairs invited to repose.

Behind the jalousies of the library the owner of the villa sat at a desk, busily writing. He was a slight, delicate looking man, with an expression of careless good humor upon his face and an easy air of assurance according with the interior of the room which bespoke a cultured taste and the ability to gratify it. Books were everywhere, rare bits of china, curios and exquisitely tinted shells lay in picturesque confusion upon tables and wall brackets of native woods; soft silken draperies fell from the windows and partially screened from view a large alcove where microscopes of different sizes stood upon cabinets whose shelves were filled with a miscellaneous collection of rare plants and beautiful insects, specimens from the agate forest of Arizona, petrified remains from the 'Bad Lands' of Dakota, feathery fronded seaweed, skeletons of birds and strange

wild creatures, and all the countless curiosities in which naturalists delight.

Lenox Hildreth when a young man, forced to flee from the rigors of the New England climate by reason of an inherited tendency to pulmonary disease, had chosen Barbadoes as his adopted country, and had never since revisited the land of his birth. From the first, fortune had smiled upon him, and when, some time after his marriage with the daughter of a wealthy planter, she had come into possession of all her father's estates, he had built the house which for fifteen years he had called home. When Evadne, their only daughter, was a little maiden of six, his wife had died, and for nine years father and child had been all the world to each other.

He finished writing at last with a sigh of relief, and folding the letter, together with one addressed to Evadne, he enclosed both in a large envelope which he sealed and addressed to Judge Hildreth, Marlborough, Mass. Then he leaned back in his chair, and, clasping his hands behind his head, looked fixedly at the picture of his fair young wife which hung above his desk.

"A bad job well done, Louise—or a good one. Our little lass isn't very well adapted to making her way among strangers, and the Bohemianism of this life is a poor preparation for the heavy respectability of a New England existence. Lawrence is a good fellow, but that wife of his always put me in mind of iced champagne, sparkling and cold." He sighed heavily, "Poor little Vad! It is a dreary outlook, but it seems my one resource. Lawrence is the only relative I have in the world.

"After all, I may be fighting windmills, and years hence may laugh at this morning's work as an example of the folly of yielding to unnecessary alarm. Danvers is getting childish. All physicians get to be old fogies, I fancy, a natural sequence to a life spent in hunting down germs I suppose. They grow to imagine them where none exist."

He rose, and strolled out on the veranda. As he did so, a negro, whose snow-white hair had earned for him from his master the sobriquet of Methusaleh, came towards the broad front steps. He was a grotesque image as he stood doffing a large palm-leaf hat, and Lenox Hildreth felt an irresistible inclination to laugh, and laughed accordingly. His morning's occupation had been one of the rare instances in which he had run counter to his inclinations. Sky blue cotton trousers showed two brown ankles before his feet hid themselves in a pair of clumsy shoes; a scarlet shirt, ornamented with large brass buttons and fastened at the throat with a cotton handkerchief of vivid corn color, was surmounted by an old nankeen coat, upon whose gaping elbows a careful wife had sewn patches of green cloth; his hands were encased in white cotton gloves three sizes too large, whose finger tips waved in the wind as their wearer flourished his palm-leaf headgear in deprecating obeisance.

"Well, Methusaleh, where are you off to now?" and Lenox Hildreth leaned against a flower wreathed pillar in lazy amusement.

"To camp-meetin', Mass Hildreff. I hez your permission, sah?" and the negro rolled his eyes with a ludicrous expression of humility.

His master laughed with the easy indulgence which made his servants impose upon him.

"You seem to have taken it, you rascal. It is rather late in the day to ask for permission when you and your store clothes are all ready for a start."

"'Scuse me, Mass Hildreff," with another deprecating wave of the palm-leaf hat, "but yer see I knowed yer wouldn't dissapint me of de priv'lege uv goin' ter camp-meetin' nohow."

Lenox Hildreth held his cigar between his slender fingers and watched the tiny wreaths of smoke as they circled about his head.

"So camp-meeting is a privilege, is it?" he said carelessly. "How much more good will it do you to go there than to stay at home and hoe my corn?"

The eyes were rolled up until only the whites were visible.

"Powerful sight more good, Mass Hildreff. De preacher's 'n uncommon relijus man, an' de 'speriences uv de bredren is mighty upliftin'. Yes, sah!"

"Well, see that they don't lift you up so high that you'll forget to come down again. I suppose you have an experience in common with the rest?"

"Yes, Mass Hildreff," and the palm-leaf made another gyration through the air. "I'se got a powerful 'sperience, sah."

"Well, off you go. It would be a pity to deprive the assembly of such an edifying specimen of sanctimoniousness."

"Yes, sah, I'se bery sanktimonyus. I'se 'bliged to you, sah."

With a last obsequious flourish the palm-leaf was restored to its resting-place upon the snowy wool, and the negro shambled away. When he had gone a few yards a sudden thought struck his master and he called,—

"Methusaleh, I say, Methusaleh!"

"Yes, sah," and the servant retraced his steps.

"What about that turkey of mine that you stole last week? You can't go to camp-meeting with that on your conscience. Come, now, better take off your finery and repent in sackcloth and ashes."

For an instant the negro was nonplused, then the palm-leaf was flourished grandiloquently, while its owner said in a voice of withering scorn,—

"Laws! Mass Hildreff, do yer sponse I'se goin' ter neglec' de Lawd fer one lil' turkey?"

His master turned on his heel with a low laugh. "Of a piece with the whole of them!" he said bitterly. "Hypocrites and shams!"

"Evadne!" he exclaimed impetuously, as a slight girlish figure came towards him, "never say a single word that you do not mean nor express a sensation that you have not felt. It is the people who neglect this rule who play havoc with themselves and the world."

"Why, dearest, you frighten me!" and the girl slipped her hand through his arm with a low, sweet laugh. "I never saw you look so solemn before."

"Hypocrisy, Vad, is the meanest thing on earth! The pious people at the church yonder call me an unbeliever, but

they've got themselves to thank for it. I may be a good-for-nothing but at least I will not preach what I do not practise."

"You are as good as gold, dearest. I won't have you say such horrid things! And you don't need to preach anything. I am sure no one in all the world could be happier than we."

Her father put his hand under her chin, and, lifting her face towards his, looked long and earnestly at the pure brow, about which the brown hair clustered in natural curls, the clear-cut nose, the laughing lips parted over a row of pearls, and the wonderful deep gray eyes.

"Are you happy, little one?" he asked wistfully. "Are you quite sure about that?"

"Happy!" the girl echoed the word with an incredulous smile. "Why, dearest, what has come to you? You never needed to ask me such a question before! Don't you know there isn't a girl in Barbadoes who has been so thoroughly spoiled, and has found the spoiling so sweet? Do I look more than usually mournful to-day that you should think I am pining away with grief?" She looked up at him with a roguish laugh.

He smiled and laid his finger caressingly on the dimpled chin. "Dear little bird!" he said tenderly; "but when this dimple captivates the heart of some one, Vad, you will fly away and leave the poor father in the empty nest."

Her color glowed softly through the olive skin. She threw her arms around his neck and laid her face against his breast. "You know better!" she exclaimed passionately. "You know I wouldn't leave you for all the 'some ones' in the world!"

Her father caught her close. "Poor little lass!" he said with a sigh.

The girl lifted her head and looked at him anxiously. "Dearest, what *is* the matter? I am sure you are not well! You have been sitting too long at that tiresome writing."

"Yes, that is it, darling," he said with a sudden change of tone. "Writing always does give me the blues. I think the man who invented the art should have been put in a pillory for the rest of his natural life. Blow your whistle for Sam to bring the horses and we will go for a ride along the beach."

Evadne lifted the golden whistle which hung at her girdle and blew the call which the well-trained servant understood. "Fi, dearest!" she said, "if there were no writing there would be no books, and what would become of our beautiful evenings then? But I am glad you do not have to write much, since it tires you so. What has it all been about, dear? Am I never to know?"

"Some day, perhaps, little Vad. But do not indulge in the besetting sin of your sex, or, like the mother of the race, you may find your apple choke you in the chewing."

Evadne shook her finger at him. "Naughty one! As if you were not three times as curious as I! And when it comes to waiting,—you should have named me Patience, sir!"

Her father laughed as he kissed her, then he tied on her hat, threw on his own, and hand-in-hand like two children they ran down the veranda steps to where the groom stood waiting with the horses.

CHAPTER II.

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A month full of happy days had flown by when Evadne and her father returned one morning from a long tramp in search of specimens. A delightful afternoon had followed, he in a hammock, she on a low seat beside him, arranging, classifying and preparing their morning's spoil for the microscope. Suddenly she turned towards him with a troubled face.

"Dearest, how pale you look! Are you very tired?"

"It is only the heat," he answered lightly. "We had a pretty stiff walk this morning, you know."

"And I carried you on and on!" she cried reproachfully. "I was so anxious to find this particular crab. Isn't he a pretty fellow?" and she lifted the box that her father might watch the tiny creature's play. "I shall go at once and make you an orange sherbet."

"Let Dinah do it and you stay here with me."

"No indeed! You know you think no one can make them as well as I do. I promise you this one shall be superfine."

"As you will, little one,—only don't stay away too long."

He lay very still after she had left him, looking dreamily through the vines at the silver spray of the fountain. The air had grown oppressively sultry; no breath of wind stirred the heavily drooping leaves, no sound except the rhythmic splash of the fountain and the soft lapping of the waves

upon the beach. He closed his eyes while their ceaseless monotone seemed to beat upon his brain.

"Forever! Forever! Forever!"

A spasm of pain crossed his face as Evadne's voice woke the echoes with a merry song. "Poor little lass!" he murmured. Then he smiled as she came towards him, quaffed off the beverage she had prepared with loving skill, and called her the best cook in all the Indies.

"Has it refreshed you, dearest?" she asked anxiously.

"Immensely! Now you shall read me some of Lalla Rookh, and after dinner

I will set about making a Mecca for your crab."

Evadne stroked the dainty claws,—

"Poor little chap! So you are a pilgrim like the rest of us. I wish we did not have to go on and on, dearest!" she exclaimed passionately, "why cannot we stand still and enjoy?"

"It would grow monotonous, little Vad. Progress is the law of all being, and seventy years of life is generally enough for the majority. You would not like to live to be an old lady of two hundred and fifty? Think how tired you would be!"

She laid her cheek against his upon the pillow. "I should *never* grow tired,—with you!"

The evening drew on, hot and breathless. Low growls of distant thunder were heard at intervals, and in the eastern sky the lightning played.

Evadne watched it, sitting on the top step of the veranda, her white muslin dress in happy contrast with the deep green of the vines which clustered thickly about the pillar against which she leaned. On the step below her a young

man sat. He too was clad in white and the rich crimson of the silken scarf which he wore about his waist enhanced his Spanish beauty. A zither lay across his knees over which his hands wandered skilfully as he made the air tremble with dreamy music. Mr. Hildreth paced slowly up and down the veranda behind them.

"What is the news from the great world, Geoff? I saw a troop ship signaled this morning. Have you been on board yet?"

"No, sir, I have been looking over the plantation with my father all day, and only got home in time for dinner."

"You chose a cool time for it!" and Mr. Hildreth laughed.

Geoffrey Chittenden shrugged his shoulders. "When Geoffrey Chittenden, Senior, makes up his mind to do anything, he has the most sublime indifference for the thermometer of any one I ever had the honor of knowing. But the ship only brought a small detachment, I believe; she will carry away a larger one. The garrison here is to be reduced, you know."

"Yes, it is a mistake I think. Will Drewson have to go? He has been on this Station longer than any of the others."

"Yes, his company has marching orders for Malta. He told me last night he was coming to take leave of you next week."

"Our nice Captain Drewson going away!" Evadne exclaimed, aghast. "Why, dearest, he is one of our oldest friends!"

"The law of progression, Vad darling."

"How I hate it!" she cried, while her lips trembled. "Why can't we just live on in the old happy way? You will be going

next, Geoff, and the Hamiltons and the Vandervoorts. Does nothing last?"

Her voice hushed itself into silence and again Lenox Hildreth heard the soft waves singing,—

"Forever! Forever! Forever!"

"Oh yes, Evadne," Geoffrey said with a laugh: "we are very lasting. It is only the unfortunate people under military rule who prove unreliable. Let me sing you my latest song to cheer your spirits. I only learned it last week."

He struck a few chords and was beginning his song when a low groan made him spring to his feet. Evadne passed him like a flash of light and flew to her father's side. He was leaning heavily against a pillar with his handkerchief, already showing crimson stains, pressed tightly against his lips.

They laid him gently down and summoned help. After that all was like a horrible dream to Evadne. She was dimly conscious that friends came with ready offers of assistance, and that Barbadoes' best physicians were unremitting in their efforts to stop the hemorrhage; while she stood like a statue beside her father's bed. She was absolutely still. When at last the hemorrhage was checked the exhaustion was terrible. Evadne longed to throw herself beside him and pillow the dear head upon her bosom, but Dr. Danvers had whispered,—

"A sudden sound may start the hemorrhage again,—the slightest shock is sure to." After that, not for worlds would she have moved a finger.

The day passed and another night drew on. One of the physicians was constantly in attendance, for the

hemorrhage returned at intervals. Just as the rose-tinted dawn looked shyly through the windows, her father spoke, and Evadne bent her head to catch the faint tone of the voice which sounded so far away.

"Vad, darling, I have made an awful mistake! I thought everything a sham. I know better now. Make it the business of your life, little Vad, to find Jesus Christ."

Again the red stream stained his lips, and Dr. Danvers came swiftly forward, but Lenox Hildreth was forever beyond all need of human care.

* * * * *

A week passed, and day after day Evadne sat by her window, speaking no word. Outdoors the fountain still sparkled in the sunshine and the birds sang, but for her the foundations of life had been shaken to their center. Her friends tried in vain to break up her unnatural calm.

"If you would only have a good cry, Evadne," Geoffrey Chittenden said at last, "you would feel better, dear. That is what all girls do, you know."

She turned upon him a pair of solemn eyes, out of which the merry sparkle had faded. "Will crying give me back my father?"

"Why, no, dear. Of course I didn't mean that. But these things are bound to happen to us all, sooner or later, you know. It is the rule of life."

"The law of progression," she said with a dreary laugh. "I wish the world would stop for good!"

When the clergyman came she met him quietly, and he found himself not a little disconcerted by the steady gaze of the mournful grey eyes. He was not accustomed to dealing

with such wordless grief, and he found his favorite phrases sadly inadequate to the occasion. There was an awkward pause.

"Dr. Danvers says your father told him some time ago that, in the event of his death, he wished you to make your home with your uncle in America?" he said at length.

Evadne bowed.

"Well, my dear young lady, you will find it in all respects a most desirable home, I feel confident. Judge Hildreth holds a position of great trust in the church, and is universally esteemed as a Christian gentleman of sterling character."

The grey eyes were lifted to his face.

"Shall I find Jesus Christ there?"

"Jesus Christ?" The clergyman echoed her words with a start. "I beg your pardon, my dear. The Lord sitteth upon his throne in the heavens. We must approach him reverently, with humble fear."

"That seems a long way off," said Evadne in a disappointed tone. "There must be some mistake. My father told me to make it the business of my life to find him."

"Your father, my dear! Oh, ah, ahem!"

An indignant flash leaped into the grey eyes. Evadne rose and faced him.

"You must excuse me, sir," she said quietly. Then she left the room.

And the tears, which all the kindly sympathy had failed to bring her, at the first breath of censure fell about her like a flood.

CHAPTER III.

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Judge Hildreth sat with his family at dinner in the spacious dining-room of one of the finest houses in Marlborough. He was a handsome man, with a stateliness of manner attributable in part to the deferential homage which Marlborough paid to his opinion in all matters of importance. His wife, tall and queenly, sat opposite him. Two daughters and a son completed the family group. Louis Hildreth had his father's dark blue eyes and regular features, but there were weak lines about the mouth which betokened a lack of purpose, and the expression of his face was marred by a cynical smile which was fast becoming habitual with him. Isabelle, the eldest, was tall and fair, except for a chill hauteur which set strangely upon one so young, while her firmly set lips betokened the existence of a strong will which completely dominated her less self-reliant sister. Marion Hildreth was just Evadne's age, with a pink and white beauty and soft eyes which turned deprecatingly at intervals towards Isabelle, as though to ask pardon for imaginary solecisms against Miss Hildreth's code of etiquette.

The covers were being changed for the second course when a servant entered and approached the Judge, bearing a cablegram upon a silver salver. He ran his eyes hastily over its contents, then he leaned back heavily against his

chair, while an expression of genuine sorrow settled down upon his face.

"Your Uncle Lenox is dead," he said briefly, as the girls plied him with questions.

"Dead!" Mrs. Hildreth's voice broke the hush which had fallen in the room. "Why, Lawrence, this is very sudden! We have looked upon Lenox as being perfectly well."

"It is not safe to count anyone well, Kate, who carries such a lurking serpent in his bosom. Only forty-three! Just in his prime. Poor Len!" The Judge leaned his head upon his hand, while his thoughts were busy with memories of the gay young brother who had filled the old homestead with his merry nonsense.

"And what will become of Evadne?" Again Mrs. Hildreth's voice broke the silence.

"Evadne?" the Judge looked full in his wife's face. "Why, my dear, there is only one thing to be done. I shall cable immediately to have her come to us." He rose from the table, his dinner all untasted, and left the room.

Louis was the first to speak. "A Barbadoes cousin. How will you like having such a novelty as that, Sis, to introduce among your acquaintance?" He bowed lazily to Mrs. Hildreth. "Let me congratulate you, lady mother. You will have the pleasure of floating another bud into blossom upon the bosom of society."

"I do not see any room for congratulation, Louis," Mrs. Hildreth said discontentedly. "It is a dreadful responsibility. One does not know what the child may be like."

"Hardly a child, mamma," pouted Marion. "Evadne must be as old as I."

"If that is so, Sis, she must have the wisdom of Methusaleh!" and Louis looked at his sister with one of his mocking smiles. "At any rate she will afford scope for your powers of training, Isabelle. It must be depressing to have to waste your eloquence upon an audience of one."

Isabelle tossed her head. "I am not anxious for the opportunity," she said coldly. "Likely the child will be a perfect heathen after running wild among savages all her life."

Louis whistled. "A little less Grundy and a little more geography would be to your advantage, Isabelle! Barbadoes happens to be the *crème de la crème* of the British Indies. I would not advise you to display your ignorance before Evadne, or your future lecturettes on the conventionalities may prove lacking in vital force."

"Why, Isabelle, my dear, you must be dreaming!" and her mother looked annoyed. "Don't let your father hear you say such a thing, I beg of you! When he visited Barbadoes he was delighted, and he thought Evadne's mother one of the most charming women he had ever met. If she had lived of course Evadne would be all right, but she has been left entirely to her father's guidance, and he had such peculiar ideas."

"When, did she die, mamma?" asked Marion.

"I am sure I cannot remember. Six or seven years ago it must have been. But we rarely heard from them. Your Uncle Lenox was always a wretched correspondent, and since his wife's death he has hardly written at all."

"The house of Hildreth cannot claim to be well posted in the matter of blood relations," said Louis carelessly, as he

helped himself to olives.

* * * * *

Upon the deck of one of the Ocean Greyhounds a promiscuous crowd was gathered. Returning tourists in all the glory of field glasses and tweed suits; British officers going home on furlough from the different outposts where they were stationed; merchants from the rich markets of the far East; picturesque foreigners in national costume; and a bishop who paced the deck with a dignity becoming his ecclesiastical rank. There was a continuous hum of conversation, mingled with intermittent ripples of laughter from the different groups which were scattered about the deck. Among the exceptions to the general sociability were the bishop, still pacing up and down with his hands clasped behind him, and a young girl who sat looking far out over the waves, utterly heedless of the noise and confusion around her.

She was absolutely alone. The gentleman under whose care she was traveling made a point of escorting her to meals, after which he invariably secured her a comfortable deck chair, supplied her liberally with rugs and books, and then retired to the smoking-room, with the serene consciousness of duty well performed; and Evadne Hildreth was thankful to be left in peace. She was no longer the buoyant, merry girl. Her vitality seemed crushed. Hour after hour she sat motionless, her hands folded listlessly in her lap, looking out over the dancing waves. She had caught the last glimpse of her beloved island in a grey stupor. Everything was gone,—father and home and friends,—nothing that happened could matter now,—but, oh, the

dreary, dreary years! Did the sun shine in far-away New England, and could the water be as blue as her dear Atlantic, with the gay ripple on its bosom and the music of its waves? She looked at the tender sky, as on the far horizon it bent low to kiss the face of the mysterious mighty ocean which stretched "a sea without a shore." That was like her life now. All the beauty ended, yet stretching on and on and on. And she must keep pace with it, against her will. And there was no one to care. She was all alone! No, there was Jesus Christ!

She started to find that the Bishop's lady was speaking to her. Evadne recognized her, for she sat at the next table, and several times she had stood aside to let her pass to her seat. Something about the solitary, pathetic little figure, the hopeless face and mournful grey eyes, had won the compassion of the good lady, for she was a kindly soul.

"My dear, you have a great sorrow?" she said gently. "I hope you have the consolations of our holy religion to help you bear it."

Evadne turned towards her eagerly. Her husband was the head of the church. Surely *she* would know.

"Can you help me to find him?" she asked abruptly.

"Find whom, my dear? Have you a friend among the passengers?"

"Jesus Christ."

"Oh!" The Bishop's lady sat back with the suddenness of the shock, "Are you in earnest, my dear?" she asked with a tinge of severity in her tone. "This is a very serious question, but, if you really mean it, I will lend you my Prayer Book."

Evadne smiled drearily. "Oh, yes, I am terribly in earnest. My father said I was to make it the business of my life."

"Oh, ah, yes, to be sure," said the lady a trifle absently. "That is very proper. Christianity should be the great purpose of our life."

"I do not want Christianity," said Evadne impatiently, "I want Christ."

"My dear, you shock me! The eternal verities of our holy religion must ever be—"

"Do you believe in him?" asked Evadne, interrupting her.

"Believe in him? whom do you mean?"

"Jesus Christ."

Aghast, the Bishop's lady crossed herself and began repeating the Apostles' Creed.

"That makes him seem so far away," said Evadne sadly. "I do not want him in heaven if I have to live upon earth. Have *you* found him?" she asked eagerly. "Are you on intimate terms with him? Is he your friend?"

The Bishop's lady gasped for breath. That she, a member of the Church of the Holy Communion of All Saints should be interrogated in such a fashion as this! "I think you do not quite understand," she said coldly. "I will lend you a treatise on Church Doctrine. You had better study that."

"Charlotte," said her husband when she reached her stateroom, "I have arrived at an important decision this afternoon. I have finally concluded to take the Socinian Heresy as my theme for the noon lectures. The subject will admit of elaborate treatment and afford ample scope for scholarship."

"Heresy!" echoed his wife, who had not yet recovered her equanimity; "why, Bertram, I have just been talking to a young person who asked me if I was on intimate terms with Jesus Christ!"

"Ah, yes," said the Bishop absently, "the radical tendencies of the present day are to be deplored. Have you seen that my vestments are in order, Charlotte? I shall hold Divine service on board to-morrow."

In a neighboring stateroom a lonely soul, bewildered and despairing, struggled through the darkness towards the light.

* * * * *

The last snow of the winter lay in soft beauty upon the streets of Marlborough as Evadne's train drew into the railway station. Instantly all was bustle and confusion throughout the cars. Evadne shrank back in her seat and waited. Instinctively she felt that for her there would be no joyous welcome. Inexpressibly dreary as the journey had been she was sorry it was at an end. An overwhelming embarrassment of shyness seized upon her, and the chill desolation of loneliness seemed to shut down about her like a cloud.

A young man sauntered past her with his hands in his pockets. When he reached the end of the car he turned and surveyed the passengers leisurely, then he came back to her seat. He lifted his hat with lazy politeness.

"Miss Hildreth, I believe?"

Evadne bowed. He shook hands coolly.

"I have the honor of introducing myself as your cousin Louis."

He made no attempt to give her a warmer greeting, and Evadne was glad, but how dreary it was!

Louis led the way out of the station to where a pair of magnificent horses stood, tossing their regal heads impatiently. A colored coachman stood beside them, clad in fur.

"Pompey," he said, "this is Miss Evadne Hildreth from Barbadoes."

The man bent his head low over the little hand which was instantly stretched out to him. "I'se very glad to see Miss 'Vadney," he said with simple fervor. "I was powerful fond of Mass Lennux;" and Evadne felt she had received her warmest welcome.

She nestled down among the soft robes of the sleigh while the silver bells rang merrily through the frosty air. It was all so new and strange. A leaden weight seemed to be settling down upon her heart and she felt as if she were choking, but she threw it off. She dared not let herself think. She began to talk rapidly.

"What splendid horses you have! Surely they must be thoroughbreds? No ordinary horses could ever hold their heads like that."

Louis nodded. "You have a quick eye," he said approvingly. "Most girls would not know a thoroughbred from a draught horse. You have hit upon the surest way to get into my father's good graces. His horses are his hobby."

"What are their names?"

"Brutus and Caesar. The Judge is nothing if not classical."

As they mounted the front steps the faint notes of a guitar sounded from the front room.

"Confound Isabelle and her eternal twanging!" muttered Louis, as he fumbled for his latch-key. "It would be a more orthodox welcome if you found your relations waiting for you with open arms, but the Hildreth family is not given to gush. Isabelle will tell you it is not good form. So we keep our emotions hermetically sealed and stowed away under decorous lock and key, polite society having found them inconvenient things to handle, partaking of the nature of nitroglycerine, you know, and liable to spontaneous combustion."

He opened the door as he spoke and Evadne followed him into the hall. She shivered, although a warm breath of heated air fanned her cheek. The atmosphere was chilly.

Marion, hurried forward to greet her, followed more leisurely by Isabelle and her mother, who touched her lips lightly to her forehead.

"I hope you have had a pleasant journey, my dear, although you must find our climate rather stormy. I think you might as well let the girls take you at once to your room and then we will have dinner."

"Where is the Judge?" inquired Louis.

"Detained again at the office. He has just telephoned not to wait for him. He is killing himself with overwork."

To Evadne the dinner seemed interminable and she found herself contrasting the stiff formality with the genial hospitality of her father's table. She saw again the softly lighted room with its open windows through which the flowers peeped, and heard his gay badinage and his low,