CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH MISS SADLER WRITES A LETTER

THE next morning Cynthia's heart was heavy as she greeted her new friends at Miss Sadler's school. Life had made a woman of her long ago, while these girls had yet been in short dresses, and now an experience had come to her which few, if any, of these could ever know. It was of no use for her to deny to herself that she loved Bob Worthington — loved him with the full intensity of the strong nature that was hers. To how many of these girls would come such a love? and how many would be called upon to make such a renunciation as hers had been? No wonder she felt out of place among them, and once more the longing to fly away to Coniston almost overcame her. Jethro would forgive her, she knew, and stretch out his arms to receive her, and understand that some trouble had driven her to him.

She was aroused by some one calling her name — some one whose voice sounded strangely familiar. Cynthia was perhaps the only person in the school that day who did not know that Miss Janet Duncan had entered it. Miss Sadler certainly knew it, and asked Miss Duncan very particularly about her father and mother and even her brother. Miss Sadler knew, even before Janet's unexpected arrival, that Mr. and Mrs. Duncan had come to Boston after Christmas, and had taken a large house in the Back Bay in order to be near their son at Harvard. Mrs. Duncan was, in fact, a Bostonian, and more at home there than at any other place.

Miss Sadler observed with a great deal of astonishment the warm embrace that Janet bestowed on Cynthia. The

occurrence started in Miss Sadler a train of thought, as a result of which she left the drawing-room where these reunions were held, and went into her own private study to write a note. This she addressed to Mrs. Alexander Duncan, at a certain number on Beacon Street, and sent it out to be posted immediately. In the meantime, Janet Duncan had seated herself on the sofa beside Cynthia, not having for an instant ceased to talk to her. Of what use to write a romance, when they unfolded themselves so beautifully in real life! Here was the country girl she had seen in Washington already in a fine way to become the princess, and in four months! Janet would not have thought it possible for any one to change so much in such a time. Cynthia listened, and wondered what language Miss Duncan would use if she knew how great and how complete that change had been. Romances, Cynthia thought sadly, were one thing to theorize about and quite another thing to endure — and smiled at the thought. But Miss Duncan had no use for a heroine without a heartache.

It is not improbable that Miss Janet Duncan may appear with Miss Sally Broke in another volume. The style of her conversation is known, and there is no room to reproduce it here. She, too, had a heart, but she was a young woman given to infatuations, as Cynthia rightly guessed. Cynthia must spend many afternoons at her house — lunch with her, drive with her. For one omission Cynthia was thankful: she did not mention Bob Worthington's name. There was the romance under Miss Duncan's nose, and she did not see it. It is frequently so with romancers.

Cynthia's impassiveness, her complete poise, had fascinated Miss Duncan with the others. Had there been nothing beneath that exterior, Janet would never have guessed it, and she would have been quite as happy. Cynthia saw very clearly that Mr. Worthington or no other man or woman could force Bob to marry Janet.

The next morning, in such intervals as her studies permitted, Janet continued her attentions to Cynthia. That same morning she had brought a note from her father to

Miss Sadler, of the contents of which Janet knew nothing. Miss Sadler retired into her study to read it, and two newspaper clippings fell out of it under the paper-cutter. This was the note: —

"My dear Miss Sadler: Mrs. Duncan has referred your note to me, and I enclose two clippings which speak for themselves. Miss Wetherell, I believe, stands in the relation of ward to the person to whom they refer, and her father was a sort of political assistant to this person. Although, as you say, we are from that part of the country" (Miss Sadler had spoken of the Duncans as the people of importance there), "it was by the merest accident that Miss Wetherell's connection with this Jethro Bass was brought to my notice.

"Sincerely yours,

"Alexander Duncan."

It is pleasant to know that there were people in the world who could snub Miss Sadler; and there could be no doubt, from the manner in which she laid the letter down and took up the clippings, that Miss Sadler felt snubbed: equally, there could be no doubt that the revenge would fall on other shoulders than Mr. Duncan's. And when Miss Sadler proceeded to read the clippings, her hair would have stood on end with horror had it not been so efficiently plastered down. Miss Sadler seized her pen, and began a letter to Mrs. Merrill. Miss Sadler's knowledge of the proprieties — together with other qualifications — had made her school what it was. No Cynthia Wetherells had ever before entered its sacred portals, or should again.

The first of these clippings was the article containing the arraignment of Jethro Bass which Mr. Merrill had shown to his wife, and which had been the excuse for Miss Penniman's call. The second was one which Mr. Duncan had clipped from the *Newcastle Guardian* of the day before, and gave, from Mr. Worthington's side, a

very graphic account of the conflict which was to tear the state asunder. The railroads were tired of paying toll to the chief of a band of thieves and cutthroats, to a man who had long throttled the state which had nourished him, to — in short, to Jethro Bass. Miss Sadler was not much interested in the figures and metaphors of political compositions. Right had found a champion — the article continued — in Mr. Isaac D. Worthington of Brampton, president of the Truro Road and owner of large holdings elsewhere. Mr. Worthington, backed by other respectable property interests, would fight this monster of iniquity to the death, and release the state from his thraldom. Jethro Bass, the article alleged, was already about his abominable work — had long been so — as in mockery of that very vigilance which is said to be the price of liberty. His agents were busy in every town of the state, seeing to it that the slaves of Jethro Bass should be sent to the next legislature.

And what was this system which he had built up among these rural communities? It might aptly be called the System of Mortgages. The mortgage — dread name for a dreadful thing — was the chief weapon of the monster. Even as Jethro Bass held the mortgages of Coniston and Tarleton and round about, so his lieutenants held mortgages in every town and hamlet of the state. What was a poor farmer to do? His choice was not between right and wrong, but between a roof over the heads of his wife and children and no roof. He must vote for the candidate of Jethro Bass and corruption or become a homeless wanderer. How the gentleman and his other respectable backers were to fight the system the article did not say. Were they to buy up all the mortgages? As a matter of fact, they intended to buy up enough of these to count, but to mention this would be to betray the methods of Mr. Worthington's reform. The first bitter frontier fighting between the advance cohorts of the new giant and the old — the struggle for the caucuses and the polls — had begun. Miss Sadler cared but little and understood less of all this matter. She lingered over the

sentences which described Jethro Bass as a monster of iniquity, as a pariah with whom decent men would have no intercourse, and in the heat of her passion that one who had touched him had gained admittance to the most exclusive school for young ladies in the country she wrote a letter.

Miss Sadler wrote the letter, and three hours later tore it up and wrote another and more diplomatic one. Mrs. Merrill, though not by any means of the same importance as Mrs. Duncan, was not a person to be wantonly offended, and might — knowing nothing about the monster — in the goodness of her heart have taken the girl into her house. Had it been otherwise, surely Mrs. Merrill would not have had the effrontery! She would give Mrs. Merrill a chance. The bell of release from studies was ringing as she finished this second letter, and Miss Sadler in her haste forgot to enclose the clippings. She ran out in time to intercept Susan Merrill at the door, and to press into her hands the clippings and the note, with a request to take both to her mother.

Although the Duncans dined in the evening, the Merrills had dinner at half-past one in the afternoon, when the girls returned from school. Mr. Merrill usually came home, but he had gone off somewhere for this particular day, and Mrs. Merrill had a sewing circle. The girls sat down to dinner alone. When they got up from the table, Susan suddenly remembered the note which she had left in her coat pocket. She drew out the clippings with it.

"I wonder what Miss Sadler is sending mamma clippings for," she said. "Why, Cynthia, they're about your uncle. Look!"

And she handed over the article headed "Jethro Bass." Jane, who had quicker intuitions than her sister, would have snatched it from Cynthia's hand, and it was a long time before Susan forgave herself for her folly. Thus Miss Sadler had her revenge.

It is often mercifully ordained that the mightiest blows of misfortune are tempered for us. During the winter evenings in Coniston, Cynthia had read little newspaper

attacks on Jethro, and scorned them as the cowardly devices of enemies. They had been, indeed, but guarded and covert allusions — grimaces from a safe distance. Cynthia's first sensation as she read was anger — anger so intense as to send all the blood in her body rushing to her head. But what was this? "Right had found a champion at last" in — in *Isaac D. Worthington!* That was the first blow, and none but Cynthia knew the weight of it. It sank but slowly into her consciousness, and slowly the blood left her face, slowly but surely: left it at length as white as the lace curtain of the window which she clutched in her distress. Words which somebody had spoken were ringing in her ears. *Whatever happens!* "Whatever happens I will never desert you, never deny you, as long as I live." This, then, was what he had meant by newspapers, and why he had come to her!

The sisters, watching her, cried out in dismay. There was no need to tell them that they were looking on at a tragedy, and all the love and sympathy in their hearts went out to her.

"Cynthia! Cynthia! What is it?" cried Susan, who, thinking she would faint, seized her in her arms. "What have I done?"

Cynthia did not faint, being made of sterner substance. Gently, but with that inexorable instinct of her kind which compels them to look for reliance within themselves even in the direst of extremities, Cynthia released herself from Susan's embrace and put a hand to her forehead.

"Will you leave me here a little while — alone?" she said.

It was Jane now who drew Susan out and shut the door of the parlor after them. In utter misery they waited on the stairs while Cynthia fought out her battle for herself.

When they were gone she sank down into the big chair under the reading lamp — the very chair in which he had sat only two nights before. She saw now with a terrible clearness the thing which for so long had been but a vague

premonition of disaster, and for a while she forgot the clippings. And when after a space the touch of them in her hand brought them back to her remembrance, she lacked the courage to read them through. But not for long. Suddenly her fear of them gave place to a consuming hatred of the man who had inspired these articles: of Isaac D. Worthington, for she knew that he must have inspired them. And then she began again to read them.

Truth, though it come perverted from the mouth of an enemy, has in itself a note to which the soul responds, let the mind deny as vehemently as it will. Cynthia read, and as she read her body was shaken with sobs, though the tears came not. Could it be true? Could the least particle of the least of these fearful insinuations be true? Oh, the treason of those whispers in a voice that was surely not her own, and yet which she could not hush! Was it possible that such things could be printed about one whom she had admired and respected above all men — nay, whom she had so passionately adored from childhood? A monster of iniquity, a pariah! The cruel, bitter calumny of those names! Cynthia thought of his goodness and loving kindness and his charity to her and to many others. His charity! The dreaded voice repeated that word, and sent a thought that struck terror into her heart: Whence had come the substance of that charity? Then came another word — mortgage. There it was on the paper, and at sight of it there leaped out of her memory a golden-green poplar shimmering against the sky and the distant blue billows of mountains in the west. She heard the high-pitched voice of a woman speaking the word, and even then it had had a hateful sound, and she heard herself asking, "Uncle Jethro, what is a mortgage?" He had struck his horse with the whip.

Loyal though the girl was, the whispers would not hush, nor the doubts cease to assail her. What if ever so small a portion of this were true? Could the whole of this hideous structure, tier resting upon tier, have been reared without something of a foundation? Fiercely though she told herself she would believe none of it,

fiercely though she hated Mr. Worthington, fervently though she repeated aloud that her love for Jethro and her faith in him had not changed, the doubts remained. Yet they remained unacknowledged.

An hour passed. It was a thing beyond belief that one hour could have held such a store of agony. An hour passed, and Cynthia came dry-eyed from the parlor. Susan and Jane, waiting to give her comfort when she was recovered a little from this unknown but overwhelming affliction, were fain to stand mute when they saw her: to pay a silent deference to one whom sorrow had lifted far above them and transfigured. That was the look on Cynthia's face. She went up the stairs, and they stood in the hall not knowing what to do, whispering in awe-struck voices. They were still there when Cynthia came down again, dressed for the street. Jane seized her by the hand.

"Where are you going, Cynthia?" she asked.

"I shall be back by five," said Cynthia.

She went up the hill, and across to old Louisburg Square, and up the hill again. The weather had cleared, the violet-paned windows caught the slanting sunlight and flung it back across the piles of snow. It was a day for wedding-bells. At last Cynthia came to a queerly fashioned little green door that seemed all askew with the slanting street, and rang the bell, and in another moment was standing on the threshold of Miss Lucretia Penniman's little sitting room. To Miss Lucretia, at her writing table, one glance was sufficient. She rose quickly to meet the girl, kissed her unresponsive cheek, and led her to a chair. Miss Lucretia was never one to beat about the bush, even in the gravest crises.

"You have read the articles," she said.

Read them! During her walk hither Cynthia had been incapable of thought, but the epithets and arraignments and accusations, the sentences and paragraphs, were printed now upon her brain, never, she believed, to be effaced. Every step of the way she had been unconsciously repeating them.

"Have you read them?" asked Cynthia.

"Yes, my dear."

"Has everybody read them?" Did the whole world, then, know of her shame?

"I am glad you came to me, my dear," said Miss Lucretia, taking her hand. "Have you talked of this to any one else?"

"No," said Cynthia, simply.

Miss Lucretia was puzzled. She had not looked for apathy, but she did not know all of Cynthia's troubles. She wondered whether she had misjudged the girl, and was misled by her attitude.

"Cynthia," she said, with a briskness meant to hide emotion (for Miss Lucretia had emotions), "I am a lonely old woman, getting too old, indeed, to finish the task of my life. I went to see Mrs. Merrill the other day to ask her if she would let you come and live with me. Will you?"

Cynthia shook her head.

"No, Miss Lucretia, I cannot," she answered.

"I won't press it on you now," said Miss Lucretia.

"I cannot, Miss Lucretia. I'm going to Coniston."

"Going to Coniston!" exclaimed Miss Lucretia.

The name of that place — magic name once so replete with visions of happiness and content — seemed to recall Cynthia's spirit from its flight. Yes, the spirit was there, for it flashed in her eyes as she turned and looked into Miss Lucretia's face.

"Are these the articles you read?" she asked, taking the clippings from her muff.

Miss Lucretia put on her spectacles.

"I have seen both of them," she said.

"And do you believe what they say about — about Jethro Bass?"

Poor Miss Lucretia! For once in her life she was at a loss. She, too, paid a deference to that face, young as it was. She had robbed herself of sleep trying to make up her mind what she would say upon such an occasion if it came. A wonderful virgin faith had to be shattered, and

was she to be the executioner? She loved the girl with that strange, intense affection which sometimes comes to the elderly and the lonely, and she had prayed that this cup might pass from her. Was it possible that it was her own voice using very much the same words for which she had rebuked Mrs. Merrill?

"Cynthia," she said, "those articles were written by politicians, in a political controversy. No such articles can ever be taken literally."

"Miss Lucretia, do you believe what it says about Jethro Bass?" repeated Cynthia.

How was she to avoid those eyes? They pierced into her soul, even as her own had pierced into Mrs. Merrill's. Oh, Miss Lucretia, who pride yourself on your plain speaking, that you should be caught quibbling! Miss Lucretia blushed for the first time in many years, and into her face came the light of battle.

"I am a coward, my dear. I deserve your rebuke. To the best of my knowledge and belief, and so far as I can judge from the inquiries I have undertaken, Jethro Bass has made his living and gained and held his power by the methods described in those articles."

Miss Lucretia took off her spectacles and wiped them. She had committed a fine act of courage.

Cynthia stood up.

"Thank you," she said, "that is what I wanted to know."

"But —" cried Miss Lucretia, in amazement and apprehension, "but what are you going to do?"

"I am going to Coniston," said Cynthia, "to ask him if those things are true."

"To ask him!"

"Yes. If he tells me they are true, then I shall believe them."

"If he tells you?" Miss Lucretia gasped. Here was a courage of which she had not reckoned. "Do you think he will tell you?"

"He will tell me, and I shall believe him, Miss Lucretia."

"You are a remarkable girl, Cynthia," said Miss Lucretia, involuntarily. Then she paused for a moment. "Sup-

pose he tells you they are true? You surely can't live with him again, Cynthia."

"Do you suppose I am going to desert him, Miss Lucretia?" she asked. "He loves me, and — and I love him." This was the first time her voice had faltered. "He kept my father from want and poverty, and he has brought me up as a daughter. If his life has been as you say, I shall make my own living!"

"How?" demanded Miss Lucretia, the practical part of her coming uppermost.

"I shall teach school. I believe I can get a position, in a place where I can see him often. I can break his heart, Miss Lucretia, I — I can bring sadness to myself, but I will not desert him."

Miss Lucretia stared at her for a moment, not knowing what to say or do. She perceived that the girl had a spirit as strong as her own: that her plans were formed, her mind made up, and that no arguments could change her.

"Why did you come to me?" she asked irrelevantly.

"Because I thought that you would have read the articles, and I knew if you had, you would have taken the trouble to inform yourself of the world's opinion."

Again Miss Lucretia stared at her.

"I will go to Coniston with you," she said, "at least as far as Brampton."

Cynthia's face softened a little at the words.

"I would rather go alone, Miss Lucretia," she answered gently, but with the same firmness. "I — I am very grateful to you for your kindness to me in Boston. I shall not forget it — or you. Good-by, Miss Lucretia."

But Miss Lucretia, sobbing openly, gathered the girl in her arms and pressed her. Age was coming on her indeed, that she should show such weakness. For a long time she could not trust herself to speak, and then her words were broken. Cynthia must come to her at the first sign of doubt or trouble: this, Miss Lucretia's house, was to be a refuge in any storm that life might send — and Miss Lucretia's heart. Cynthia promised, and when she went

out at last through the little door her own tears were falling, for she loved Miss Lucretia.

Cynthia was going to Coniston. That journey was as fixed, as inevitable, as things mortal can be. She would go to Coniston unless she perished on the way. No loving entreaties, no fears of Mrs. Merrill or her daughters, were of any avail. Mrs. Merrill, too, was awed by the vastness of the girl's sorrow, and wondered if her own nature were small by comparison. She had wept, to be sure, at her husband's confession, and lain awake over it in the night watches, and thought of the early days of their marriage.

And then, Mrs. Merrill told herself, Cynthia would have to talk with Mr. Merrill. How was he to come unscathed out of that? There was pain and bitterness in that thought, and almost resentment against Cynthia, quivering though she was with sympathy for the girl. For Mrs. Merrill, though the canker remained, had already pardoned her husband and had asked the forgiveness of God for that pardon. On other occasions, in other crises, she had waited and watched for him in the parlor window, and to-night she was at the door before his key was in the lock, while he was still stamping the snow from his boots. She drew him into the room and told him what had happened.

"Oh, Stephen," she cried, "what are you going to say to her?"

What, indeed? His wife had sorrowed, but she had known the obstacles and perils by which he had been beset. But what was he to say to Cynthia? Her very name had grown upon him, middle-aged man of affairs though he was, until the thought of it summoned up in his mind a figure of purity, and of the strength which was from purity. He would not have believed it possible that the country girl whom they had taken into their house three months before should have wrought such an influence over them all.

Even in the first hour of her sorrow which she had spent that afternoon in the parlor, Cynthia had thought of Mr. Merrill. He could tell her whether those accusa-

tions were true or false, for he was a friend of Jethro's. Her natural impulse — the primeval one of a creature which is hurt — had been to hide herself ; to fly to her own room, and perhaps by nightfall the courage would come to her to ask him the terrible questions. He was a friend of Jethro's. An illuminating flash revealed to her the meaning of that friendship — if the accusations were true. It was then she had thought of Miss Lucretia Penniman, and somehow she had found the courage to face the sunlight and go to her. She would spare Mr. Merrill.

But had she spared him ? Sadly the family sat down to supper without her, and after supper Mr. Merrill sent a message to his club that he could not attend a committee meeting there that evening. He sat with his wife in the little writing room, he pretending to read and she pretending to sew, until the silence grew too oppressive, and they spoke of the matter that was in their hearts. It was one of the bitterest evenings in Mr. Merrill's life, and there is no need to linger on it. They talked earnestly of Cynthia, and of her future. But they both knew why she did not come down to them.

"So she is really going to Coniston," said Mr. Merrill.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Merrill, "and I think she is doing right, Stephen."

Mr. Merrill groaned. His wife rose and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Come, Stephen," she said gently, "you will see her in the morning."

"I will go to Coniston with her," he said.

"No," replied Mrs. Merrill, "she wants to go alone. And I believe it is best that she should."

CHAPTER XII

"IN THE TANNERY SHED !"

GREAT afflictions generally bring in their train a host of smaller sorrows, each with its own little pang. One of these sorrows had been the parting with the Merrill family. Under any circumstance it was not easy for Cynthia to express her feelings, and now she had found it very difficult to speak of the gratitude and affection which she felt. But they understood — dear, good people that they were : no eloquence was needed with them. The ordeal of breakfast over, and the tearful "God bless you, Miss Cynthia," of Ellen the parlor-maid, the whole family had gone with her to the station. For Susan and Jane had spent their last day at Miss Sadler's school.

Mr. Merrill had sent for the conductor and bidden him take care of Miss Wetherell, and recommend her in his name to a conductor on the Truro Road. The man took off his cap to Mr. Merrill and called him by name and promised. It was a dark day, and long after the train had pulled out Cynthia remembered the tearful faces of the family standing on the damp platform of the station. As they fled northward through the flat river-meadows, the conductor would have liked to talk to her of Mr. Merrill ; there were few employees on any railroad who did not know the genial and kindly president of the Grand Gulf and sympathize with his troubles. But there was a look on the girl's face that forbade intrusion. Passengers stared at her covertly, as though fascinated by that look, and some tried to fathom it. But her eyes were firmly fixed upon a point far beyond their vision. The car stopped many times, and flew on again, but nothing seemed to break her absorption.