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THE BATTLE OF BASINGHALL STREET

By

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THE BATTLE OF BASINGHALL STREET

CHAPTER I

Nathaniel Edgar Pontifex, first Baron Marsom, chairman of the famous textile business known as Woolito, Limited, stood at the head of a long mahogany table in the magnificent library of his Park Lane mansion and looked swiftly around the room with quick, birdlike glances, as though to assure himself that everything was in order. He had purposely outstripped his guests, who were loitering across the winter garden from the dining room. He wanted just this one minute to himself.

They were a strange-looking company, these warriors of commerce who were following him, not one of them bearing in gait or features any suggestion of gentle birth. There were big men and small men, some dark-haired and some fair-complexioned, differing in many respects, but every one of them with the hard mouth and keen eyes of the successful man. That they had met with success was a proven thing, for each one was a member of the board of the celebrated Woolito Company. Their cheeks were a trifle flushed with wine. Most of them were smoking large and very wonderful cigars. They trooped rather noisily into the room and, as each arrived, he was shown to his seat by a pale-faced, bespectacled young man in morning clothes, Andrew Crooks, Lord Marsom's private secretary.

"You will sit here, Sir Sigismund," he indicated, singling out one of the group, a small, elderly man with a narrow chin and prominent forehead, "at Lord Marsom's right. And you, Sir Alfred," he added, turning to another of the little company, a man of heavier build and coarser appearance, "exactly opposite. There are place cards everywhere, according to his lordship's directions."

They all sank into high-backed, but well-cushioned chairs, still keeping up a running fire of conversation, two or three of them leaning forward to hear the end of a story one of the party had commenced in the winter garden. Lord Marsom paused for a moment before taking his own seat. He was a bulky, dark-complexioned man, with huge shoulders; pale—almost olive—cheeks; black hair in abundance; cruel, curving lips which, hard though they were, still contrived to remain licentious; and deep-set, brilliant eyes. A thousand years ago he might have played well enough the part of a great Asiatic merchant at home in his palace. One almost looked for the turban on his head and the rich magenta robes of the Orient instead of the well-fitting but unbecoming dress coat and oversized, but priceless, pearls.... Then he leaned forward to take his place and another likeness presented itself. The moderation, the gentle dignity of the East had passed away. It was the bird of prey who smiled down the table, his white fingers, with their glossy nails, leisurely tapping its polished surface. Civilisation had marched, after all, with halting footsteps.

"My friends," he began in a throaty, but somehow clear voice, "this is an informal gathering in order that we may exchange just a word or two together before the meeting to-morrow week. Some of you, perhaps, have not heard the latest news. The official receiver has accepted our offer for the purchase of the Ossulton Company which went into liquidation last month."

There was a low concerted murmur, which seemed to take to itself the sound of a malevolent chuckle. Lord Marsom moistened his lips.

"The Ossulton Company," he went on, "was the last of the group who ventured to hold out against us. We have bought them up, as we have bought up all the others. They went into liquidation because their obstinate directors preferred that course to being taken over by our larger interests. Events have proved that they were ill advised."

Sir Sigismund Lunt, the small, grey-haired man who sat on the chairman's right, leaned forward.

"Have the board of the Ossulton Company given any public explanation to their shareholders as to why they refused our previous offers?" he asked, in a shrill, parrotlike voice.

"Not yet," Marsom answered. "When they do, we shall be ready for them. With their passing out of the business, no other licencee of the great Woolito patent remains. In other words, gentlemen, competition is dead. If you will continue to give me your attention for a few minutes, I will place some figures before you which should, I think, help your digestion."

They all leaned forward in their places. There were seven of them and the expression upon the face of each one was the same. There was the same rapacious gleam in their eyes, the same satyrlike grin on their lips. They had drifted into their positions through a common passion—the hunger and greed for wealth. They were assisting to-night at a banquet. They were tearing to pieces a carcass.

Upstairs Miss Frances Moore, publicity and social secretary to the great Woolito Company, who by virtue of her office had a small but seldom-used room in the mansion of the chairman of the company, dismissed her typist, smoothed her hair before the glass and prepared to receive her unexpected caller. There was a knock at the door and one of the many footmen of the establishment made an announcement.

"The young gentleman to see you, Miss Moore."

The latter looked curiously at her visitor, who was not in the least the type of person she had expected to see. He was a young man of excellent features and presence, slim and gracious, with the lines of humour abundantly displayed at the corners of his eyes and lips. He had the air of one who found life a great joke, which he was not too eagerly disposed to share with others. His hair was of a pleasing shade of dark brown, brushed up a little behind the ears. He was dressed in informal dinner clothes, with small black pearl studs and a black tie. It occurred to Miss Moore at once that he was not of the type of guests who frequented number 31a, Park Lane.

"Good evening, Miss Moore," he said, in a pleasant and ingratiating voice, as soon as the door was closed behind the departing servant.

"You asked to see me?" she enquired a little dubiously. "Surely you are Lord Sandbrook?"

"Quite true," he admitted. "That is my name."

"You wish to see Lord Marsom, of course," she continued. "I am very sorry, but he is engaged at a meeting."

"I should like to attend the meeting," the young man confided.

"I'm afraid that is quite out of the question," she told him. "Lord Marsom has been giving a dinner to the directors of the company and he is now engaged with them, making plans for the meeting next week."

"Miss Moore—"

She responded to the appeal in his tone.

"Lord Sandbrook," she rejoined more amiably.

"You look good-natured."

"My friends," she said, with a faint emphasis upon the word, "usually find me so."

"Well, consider me as a friend," he begged. "Take me down to the meeting."

"And lose my post and a very comfortable salary?"

He shook his head.

"You wouldn't risk anything. You're too valuable. If you daren't land me amongst them unannounced, go down and ask Lord Marsom whether he will receive me for a few minutes. Say I should like to meet him in company with the directors."

"But why?" she asked curiously.

"Listen," he explained. "I have been down in the country for several weeks and, not having a perfect secretary, my letters have got a trifle mixed up. Looking through them this evening, I found one from Lord Marsom begging me to call and see him as soon as possible, either here or in the City. Well, here I am."

"But can't you see," she pointed out, "that you have chosen a most inconvenient time?"

"I'm not at all sure about that," he protested. "I believe Lord Marsom wishes me to become a director of the firm. Well, before I decide, I should like to have a look at the other directors. This would be such a wonderful opportunity. Please do as I ask."

She considered the matter. There had been rumours of some trouble in connection with his father's resignation from the board, but she could not remember that they were of any vital importance. It seemed to her that, considering Lord Marsom's pressing invitation, he had a certain right to be received if he insisted.

"The situation is beyond me," she confessed at last. "I will grant the last part of your request. I will not risk taking you into the meeting, but I will go down and tell Lord Marsom that you have only just received his letter, that you are here now and wish for a few words. If he snaps my head off, it will be your fault!"

He smiled, and, like a great many other people in the world, she felt the charm of that swift and pleasant lightening of his whole expression.

"You are a dear!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I will wait patiently until you come back...."

Miss Moore's mission met with success. In less than ten minutes Lord Sandbrook was solemnly ushered into the presence of the seven men who, with their chief, formed the board of the great Woolito Company. They all turned to look at him as he walked with long, springy footsteps across the palatial apartment. Marsom, puzzled but determined to take no false step, rose to his feet and awaited the coming of his visitor with a hard, stereotyped smile of welcome. The young man, however, vanquished all hostility from the start. He grasped Marsom's outstretched hand and made a gesture down the table.

"You I have had the pleasure of meeting before, Lord Marsom," he said. "Will you present me—*en bloc* if you will—to the directors of the Woolito Company?"

Marsom laid one hand upon the young man's shoulder; with the other he indicated separately each member of the gathering.

"Sir Sigismund Lunt, Sir Alfred Honeyman, Mr. Archibald Somerville, Mr. Bomford, Mr. Sidney Littleburn, Mr. Thomas Moody and Mr. Mayden-Harte."

"Delighted to meet you all, gentlemen," Sandbrook responded genially. "I flatter myself that I never forget a face, so you are now all known to me. I trust that we may become better acquainted."

There was a little murmur of polite acquiescence. This self-assured young man, bringing with him the fascinating suggestion of another atmosphere, very quickly took their fancy.

"I must apologise for my intrusion, Lord Marsom," his visitor continued, "but I have been absent from London for some weeks and have only just received your message. I happened to be disengaged so I called round on the chance of finding you at home."

"Please sit down," Lord Marsom invited, pointing to the chair, which Mr. Crooks, the secretary, had just wheeled forward.

Sandbrook accepted the invitation. Some part of the geniality of his manner, however, seemed to have left him. There was a more serious note in his tone as he turned towards his host.

"I think I ought to warn you, Lord Marsom," he said, "that I have come here in a terribly inquisitive frame of mind."

Marsom leaned back in his chair. His lips protruded in unpleasant fashion. The light in the hard, dry eyes underneath his clustering brows was almost menacing.

"Inquisitive!" he repeated. "Just what do you mean by that? Your father must have attended at least fifty directors' meetings and never asked a single question, so far as I can remember."

"My father was what you might call an acquiescent type of man," Sandbrook agreed cheerfully. "He found pleasant occupation for his spare time with you and more than ample remuneration for it. The trouble was that towards the end his conscience began to trouble him."

Conscience! Lord Marsom repeated the word. His tongue seemed to linger over it. Somerville, a large, florid man at the end of the table, laughed softly to himself. Sir Sigismund distinctly chuckled. Sir Alfred Honeyman looked puzzled. A gleam of humour shone behind Mr. Mayden-Harte's thick spectacles.

"It was very likely because he had foolish ideas," the young man continued apologetically, "but my father certainly died a very unhappy man. He was flattered at being invited to join your board, but he joined it without the least inside knowledge of your outlook or the details of the business. It was only within the last year that he realised a certain—may I call it, from his undoubtedly old-fashioned point of view—ruthlessness with which the business of the Woolito Company was being carried on. He resigned at once but he never recovered from the shock."

"Do you mean to tell me that your father's health was seriously affected because he suddenly took a dislike to our way of doing business?" Marsom asked caustically.

"That is precisely what I am told happened," was the deprecating reply. "Mind you, I am not associating myself with his point of view, but my father had very old-fashioned ideas. Towards the end Ellerton, our family lawyer, assured me that he was ashamed to walk the streets; he was ashamed to look his friends in the face. Even in the City, you, perhaps, know, Lord Marsom, one hears that Woolito's methods are not looked upon with great favour."

Lord Marsom smiled.

"The banks approve of us," he declared. "Your father approved of his dividend cheques."

"I'm afraid the poor old gentleman had no idea how the money was being earned."

"Rubbish!" Marsom scoffed. "You have a lot to learn yourself, young gentleman, I can see that. The first duty of a firm engaged in a business like ours is to rid itself of competition. We were being undersold by half-a-dozen small concerns who were working on unexpired licences of the Woolito patent which we had acquired. They had to sell quickly or come to grief, so they sold at too small a profit. They were doing nobody any good and they were hurting us."

"So you broke them."

"Exactly. We broke them to prevent their breaking us."

"That sounds reasonable enough. There was a strike at Colwell—"

"Precisely," Marsom interrupted. "I daresay you know the truth and if you don't, you can hear it. We not only engineered it but we financed the strikers. A great many of them are in our employ at the present moment and the mills are ours."

"The Croylton mills, which were burnt down?"

"You are venturing upon dangerous ground," Marsom murmured, leaning back in his chair. "A great misfortune, the burning of the Croylton mills. Fortunately, we were on the spot to take over their contracts and employ as many of their staff as were worth employing."

"Then there came what my father seems to have thought was the greatest tragedy of all," Sandbrook went on. "A group of mills near Nottingham—what did they call themselves?—found somehow or other that the whole of their yarns were infected and their pits poisoned. They lost several hundred thousand pounds' worth of goods and most of their trade."

"Sheer carelessness on the part of the overseers," the chairman declared. "We have inspectors watching the process of our manufacture at every stage, and no raw material comes into one of our mills without passing the most rigorous examination. Have I satisfied your curiosity by this time, my young friend?"

"I'm ashamed to have taken up so much of your time," Sandbrook apologised genially; "but, after all, I did want to hear you deny that these various disasters which happened to your competitors were in any way abetted by you. My father was led to believe that they were. It was for that reason he resigned his directorship, the directorship that you have been kind enough to suggest that I might take over. He died a very unhappy man, you know, Lord Marsom. He was of far too sensitive a nature for the ups and downs of commercial life."

The chairman of Woolito, Limited, leaned even farther back in his seat. He had the air of one endeavouring to assume a purely judicial attitude.

"Young man," he said, "your father was elected a director of this board to give us the use of his name, to help us in our publicity campaign and mind his own business. For a time he was a great success and I imagine the cheques he drew were more than an adequate return for his services. Then one day he became afflicted with that disease—what did you

call it?—conscience. He visited our offices one morning, when most of the responsible directors were away; he asked certain questions of the managers and obtained possession of certain papers which were outside the sphere of his legitimate activities. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly."

"As soon as he broached the matter to us," Marsom continued, "we offered your father perfectly reasonable explanations; but we told him frankly, at the same time, that we should continue to do business in our own way, and that, if he had any qualms about our conduct of it, he had better resign his directorship—which he did. And that's that. We've been glad to see you here to-night, Lord Sandbrook, and we trust that you belong to a more enlightened school than your father."

There was a murmur of assent from down the table. They were all very much inclined to like this young man who was looking a little perplexed, but whose expression was still one of urbane good nature.

"Modern business methods," Lord Marsom went on, "demand forcible measures. If you attend the meeting next week—"

"I can't attend it," Sandbrook interrupted. "I am not qualified."

"What do you mean—you are not qualified?" Marsom asked. "Your father and mother between them held at least eight thousand shares."

"Yes, but no one knows yet to whom they belong," the young man confided. "The estate has not been apportioned and the will was executed so that there need be no forced selling of shares."

Lord Marsom nodded.

"Well, that's too bad," he remarked. "Still, I think if we all club together, gentlemen, there might be enough shares found in our reserve box to entitle Lord Sandbrook to a place with us next Wednesday."

There was a murmur of assent, but Sandbrook shook his head.

"I shall get my own shares all right, some day," he declared. "As for coming to the meeting next week, why, you've told me to-night pretty well all I wanted to know. Very good of you to have received me like this, Lord Marsom," he added, rising to his feet and holding out his hand. "I'll wish you good night now, if I may, and good night, gentlemen. I shall look forward to meeting you all again and to our future association, if it can be arranged."

They were all very cordial, they all considered him a most charming young man.

"Smart young fellow, that," Lord Marsom pronounced. "An aristocrat, right enough, but with the making of a first-class business man in him."

"Likely to be a very useful member of our board, I should imagine," Sir Alfred Honeyman acquiesced.

CHAPTER II

Servants were waiting in the hall, the number and livery of whom seemed somehow reminiscent of musical comedy. One, with perfect gravity, handed the departing visitor his overcoat, another his hat, a third his stick and gloves.

"Taxicab or car, sir?" a superior person in plain evening clothes enquired from the background.

Sandbrook shook his head.

"I think I'll walk, thanks," he decided.

The door was closed behind him. He lingered upon the pavement for a few moments, deliberating. Before he had made up his mind upon the vital subject of his destination, the door reopened and Miss Frances Moore came out. She, too, hesitated. He raised his hat and approached her.

"You appear to be like myself—in a state of indecision," he remarked. "Can I help you make up your mind?"

"My dilemma is too simple a one," she laughed. "I am going home to my rooms and I was wondering whether I ought not to walk a short distance before taking a taxi."

"I can help you," he declared. "A little exercise at this time of the evening is the best thing in the world. You will permit me to accompany you part of the way?"

"How do you know that I haven't someone waiting for me?" she asked, as they fell into step.

"It is a disconcerting suggestion," he sighed. "At the same time, I don't believe in it."

"Why not?"

"Because I imagine you to be a young lady of precise habits. You could not have told beforehand at what hour you would be able to leave that mausoleum of luxury, and I'm quite sure that you would never keep anyone waiting."

"People have been content to wait for me before now," she murmured.

"At the slightest sign of an intervener of whose appearance I approve," he promised, "I will fade into a taxicab. Before that time comes, however, let me thank you for getting me that interview."

"Did you do what you wanted to?" she asked.

"I saw what manner of men they were," he replied, "and I confirmed certain impressions I had about them. I wish I needed a publicity secretary, Miss Moore! I should love to offer you the post."

"Why?"

"Because you have created a halo of romance in an impossible place. After reading some of your articles and interviews, I looked upon the directors of Woolito, Limited, as gods upon the earth."

"I'm sorry if you're disappointed. Anyhow, I'm not thinking of making a change. I'm perfectly contented where I am."

"I can't believe it. I have nothing against them personally, but I cannot imagine you as being content to work for such a gang of money-grabbers."

"If a business man to-day is not a money-grabber," she replied, "he'd better get out of business—sit in the back yard and write poetry or something of that sort. The directors of the Woolito Company are very shrewd business men. Everyone says that it is going to be one of the richest companies in the world. There is not a single competitor who will be able to stand up against them."

"Yes, I suppose they are shrewd," he admitted. "It is a kindly adjective to apply to them, though. Tell me again the name of the man on Lord Marsom's right—the little, wizened-up fellow with grey hair, puckered face and eyes like a cat."

"You are not in a flattering mood this evening," she laughed. "That is Sir Sigismund Lunt, the great engineer. He has just

invented the most wonderful textile machine in the world."

"Surely I have read about it in the papers somewhere lately," he reflected.

"I should think it more than likely," she observed drily. "A model of the machine itself is on exhibition every day to privileged visitors up at Tottenham, together with the most interesting model of the new factory Woolito's are building."

"I must run up and see it," Sandbrook decided. "However wonderful I may find it, though, I sha'n't change my idea about its inventor. A most unpleasant old gentleman: chuckled at my poor old dad's old-fashioned ideas. Then there was another bilious-looking knight who sat on Lord Marsom's left—a man with yellow teeth and a cadaverous expression."

"That was Sir Alfred Honeyman. He is supposed to be one of the cleverest financiers in the City."

"He may be," Sandbrook agreed, "but someone ought to give him the address of a decent shirt-maker. I could see his undervest every time he leaned forward. Most upsetting for his neighbour at a dinner table, I should think."

"Please talk sensibly," she begged. "What did you want to see them all for this evening, and are you really going to take your father's place on the board?"

"Something has been said about it. That's why I was so keen to see them all together and ask a few questions. My father resigned from the board, you know, just before he died."

"I'm afraid he was not exactly what you would call a business man, was he?" she ventured.

"Finicky," Sandbrook acknowledged. "Straight-laced, beyond a doubt. I don't suppose there was ever anything seriously wrong in the matters he took exception to but I felt that I ought to satisfy myself."

"If you belong to the same school of thought as your father, you should keep away from the City altogether," she advised him.

"I don't," he assured her. "All the same, I didn't want to get mixed up with a pack of brigands."

She frowned at him severely. They were passing an electric standard and, glancing towards her, Sandbrook was more than ever aware that she was a very attractive person. She walked, too, with a delightfully easy movement—a free swing from the hips which suggested the gymnasium.

"Englishmen of your position in life," she said, "know nothing whatever about business or business methods. It is very wrong of you to criticise."

"I am properly snubbed. But tell me—how much do you know of the inner working of Woolito, Limited?"

"Nothing at all. Don't you understand, I am publicity secretary? I see that Woolito is talked about in all the newspapers, and where I give advertisements, I expect mention of it in the social gossip and that sort of thing. That's what I have to look after."

"Do you wear any of the stuff yourself?"

"That has nothing to do with it," she told him. "We all made fun of artificial silk when it came out, but it's holding its own, all right. No one believed even then that there could be a substitute for wool, but you see there is."

"All the same, I wish you didn't work for them," he said doggedly.

"What difference does it make to you where I work?"

He hesitated and glanced towards her. For some reason or other, her attitude seemed to him to have become faintly belligerent.

"Have you any great friends on the board?"

"None at all. My father knew Lord Marsom when he was in New York."

"You are American, then?"

"How clever of you! Have I lost as much of my accent as all that?"

"There was something, of course," he admitted, "but it might have been Canadian. I am glad you're American. You like people to be plain-spoken, don't you?"

"Up to a certain point."

He slackened his pace. They were outside his club in Piccadilly.

"I never saw one of them before," he confided, leaning towards her, "but every one of those seven men to whom Lord Marsom introduced me to-night is a wrong 'un. Some day they will be found out. You will have all you can do as publicity secretary to defend them one by one. Woolito may be all right. The men who are making it aren't up to much. However, as you have pointed out, it doesn't matter, if the money rolls in. Good-bye; I'm going in here."

"You are," she declared, with an angry little flash in her eyes, "one of the most prejudiced Englishmen I ever knew. You are exactly what I was told. You are all alike."

He lingered with his hat in his hand.

"What night will you dine with me to discover how shockingly you are mistaken?" he invited.

"I do not dine out," she replied coldly.

"It seems to me," he complained, "that your manner lacks cordiality. You are in a strange country and I am trying to justify our reputation for hospitality."

"It is not a strange country. I have been here for four years."

"And you have not found out these Woolito people yet?"

"I have only been with them for two years and there is nothing about them to find out—nothing bad, that is to say. They are shrewd, that's all. You have to fight the other man in business, or else go under yourself. Americans have always recognised the fact and that's why they are better business people than you English."

"Now I know," he murmured ruefully.

"Now you know," she assented. "Good night."

The old man in the front room of a house on the far outskirts of Finsbury seemed absolutely unconscious that the door had been opened, that anyone else was in the room. He was seated before a complicated piece of wooden machinery, the large wheel of which he worked with his feet, and by his side was a basket filled with wool, one end of which was attached to the wheel. At intervals of a few yards were several exactly similar looms and their respective stools. Two things impressed themselves upon the visitor who had just entered the room. The first was that, for all its seeming complexity, the machine did nothing but wind up the wool, the second that the wool was of brilliant scarlet colour.

"Good evening," the caller said.

"Whoever you are, you must wait," the man on the stool snapped. "Can't you see—this is the most critical point of the whole thing? Stand back out of the light and be quiet."

The speaker had not once turned his head. He was untidily dressed, without coat or waistcoat, and the whole of the energy of his brain and shrivelled muscles seemed to be devoted to pedalling his machine and keeping the wool upon the huge reel. In course of time, the whole of it was through. The basket was empty. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief and, taking up a hand bell by his side, rang it. The woman who had admitted the caller answered the summons.

"Take off the reel, James," the old man directed. "Bring another basketful of yarn."

The woman unfastened the reel with practised fingers, took up the basket and departed. She accepted the whole thing as

a matter of course. The man turned upon his stool towards the waiting figure.

"I am very busy," he said peevishly. "Couldn't they attend to you in the office?"

"I only deal with principals," was the important reply. "They tell me that you are the only one who really understands the great Woolito process. I wanted to see it."

The old man appeared pleased.

"Well, well," he approved, "that's right, lad. If you are a buyer, though, you will be disappointed. I can't supply you. I have orders for ten years ahead."

"That's too bad," the visitor regretted. "I've come quite a long way to have a chat with you."

"No good, my friend. No new customers for us. We have two thousand looms running and eighteen thousand men at work. I could send my manager to the telephone there and book orders for twenty years. All my clever lad, too!"

"I should like to hear about him."

"He doesn't often come to the mills," the old man explained. "He's a member of parliament! He goes about here and there—hobnobs with all the great people. Why not? His brain did it."

"What's his name?" the shadowy person in the background asked.

"That's a foolish question," was the irritable response. "Everyone in England knows his name. Everyone knows Leonard Blunt. Did you see those hampers of wool that just went out?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice the colour of it?"

"I did, indeed. The most brilliant scarlet I ever saw in my life."

The old man grinned. His sunken eyes flashed with triumph.

"That's my Len," he declared. "That's him. I never held with schooling, but it was his chemistry that taught him that. There were other folks that thought they could make wool from imitation yarn—let 'em try. Grey and greasy when they've done with it. Look at ours—scarlet, blue, any colour you like in the world. That's my Len. That's why we employ eighteen thousand hands. That's why the roar of our machinery shakes the countryside day and night. I will tell you something, Mister. I'll tell you something quaint."

"I'm listening."

"There was another firm thought it could make artificial wool," the old man chuckled. "They started like we are now. They went on, and big people they became, and what are they now? I'll tell you, Mister. I can't do business with you. You've got a decent sort of face, but no new customers for us—not for many a year. But I'll tell you something. Not far from here there's an old man sitting in a single room, working an old hand machine, gone crazy because my Len found out the secret and he didn't; and he works all day and he thinks he is turning out Woolito! He fills his basket with nasty, dirty grey stuff and day by day and week by week it comes out always the same colour and they throw it on the ash heap. What do you think of that, Mister?"

The old man rocked with laughter so that he nearly fell from his seat. The door was opened and the woman reentered. She laid another basket of wool, this time a bright green, upon the floor. She fastened the end of it to the reel. The tenant of the room drew a long breath.

"You'll excuse me now, sir," he begged. "I have a hundred looms in this place to look after and the bell's gone. We're off."

He bent over his task. Again his feet were on the treadles—again his fingers were guiding the wool. The woman led the visitor away.

"You can't do any more good," she said. "That's him day by day. He thinks he's working in the greatest factory of the world and you can't get it out of his head, but he don't do nobody any harm and he's got enough to live on, and there you are."

The intruder slipped a pound note into her hand and stepped out into the dirty obscure side street. Inside the room which he had left, the old man, his lips parted with eagerness, the lines of his worn flinty face deepened with earnestness, moved his feet upon the treadles and guided the wool with bony, shaking fingers.



CHAPTER III

Andrew Crooks stepped out of Sandbrook's sporting Rolls-Royce with a sigh of relief. He removed his hat, straightened his hair and paused for a moment to regain his breath. He was a young man of sedate habits and he was not used to being whirled through the North London traffic at anything from thirty to fifty miles an hour.

"I am very much obliged for the lift, your lordship," he said. "If you will step this way with me, I will have your ticket stamped."

"Very nice of Lord Marsom to send you up with me," Sandbrook replied, following his guide towards the turnstile. "I only sent round for a ticket to see this marvellous machine. I didn't expect to be personally conducted. Looks like the entrance to Lords'!"

They crossed the jealously guarded portals and Sandbrook glanced around him curiously.

"I apologise to Lords'," he observed. "Looks more like a filthy dust heap than anything."

"That is only temporary," Andrew Crooks explained. "Over four hundred houses have been demolished to clear this space. It is the site of what may be the largest factory in the world. As you see," he pointed out, "it contains at the present moment only three insignificant buildings. The one opposite is an old-fashioned house which was left when the rest of the property was razed to the ground and is now occupied by various employees of the firm and a staff of draughtsmen from the architects'. The large shed over there contains what you have come to see—the wonderful model of the factory of which everyone is talking. The third building, with the corrugated iron roof which looks like a hangar and which is guarded by policemen, contains the most marvellous machine in the world.... If your lordship will excuse me now, I must go and look after the two visitors I was to meet here. I see them waiting for me in the corner."

Sandbrook glanced across in the direction which his companion had indicated.

"So those are your distinguished visitors," he observed quietly.

"The taller one," Andrew Crooks confided, "is Van Stretton, the great Dutch scientist. The other is an American—a manufacturer from Philadelphia."

"I won't detain you," Sandbrook exclaimed, with a sudden change in his manner. "Many thanks, once more, for showing me the way up."

He moved back towards the turnstiles in time to welcome Miss Frances Moore, who had just arrived. She was wearing a long coat trimmed with fur and a turban hat. Her cheeks were becomingly flushed after the ride in an open car. She looked up at him in surprise.

"Now, whatever are you doing up here, Lord Sandbrook?" she asked.

"My dear Miss Moore," he replied, "you know my interest in Woolito. I have come to see the marvellous model. Everyone in town is talking about it. I presume you have brought Mr. Chalmers on the same errand?"

He shook hands with Miss Moore's companion, the editor of one of the London dailies.

"Quite right," the latter assented. "The idea seems to me so ingenious. I have heard of it in building a theatre—never come across any other application of it."

"It appeals to me immensely," Sandbrook confessed. "A man who's having a house built, for instance. He can have his model made and he and the architect can spend many evenings brooding over it and planning improvements."

"Have you seen Sir Sigismund?" Miss Moore intervened.

"Only once in my life," Sandbrook replied. "At that directors' meeting. A weasel-faced little man with shifty eyes and a mean mouth. I'm thankful to say I've been spared any further vision of him."

"Sir Sigismund Lunt is a remarkably clever man," the young lady said severely. "He is a brilliant chemist as well as being a famous engineer. Anyone might be proud of his accomplishments. What I wanted to know, though, was whether

you had seen him this morning?"

"Heaven has spared me that affliction," was the fervent reply. "I am on my way to see the model. May I join up with you?"

"Mr. Chalmers," Miss Moore explained, "is very anxious to meet Sir Sigismund first. We shall probably come across you later."

"I must find my own way about, then," Sandbrook regretted, with a nod to Chalmers and a farewell salute, half pleasant, half ironical, to his companion. "If in your capacity as publicity agent, Miss Moore, you desire to interview me afterwards and ascertain my impressions, I shall be at your disposal!"

The publicity agent shook her head.

"I cannot believe," she told him, with a demure smile, "that a single person in the world would be interested in them."

Sir Sigismund Lunt, some quarter of an hour later, leaned back in the easy chair of his improvised office.

"That's all for this morning, Harris," he announced. "Many people in to see our little show yesterday?"

"A thousand and seventy-one, sir," his secretary replied. "Also one or two with special passes who were allowed to see the machine."

Sir Sigismund smiled approvingly.

"All advertisement," he chuckled. "That gentleman who was here with Miss Moore is the editor of the *Sun*."

"Indeed, sir ... I saw Lord Sandbrook pass down a short time ago."

"Lord Sandbrook!" Sir Sigismund repeated, vastly interested. "What—the young gentleman—the son of the Earl of Sandbrook who was on our board?"

"Yes, Sir Sigismund. He was captain of Eton and played for The Gentlemen. Lately he's been travelling a good deal. Very fine big-game shot, sir."

"I'm delighted to hear this," Sir Sigismund declared. "Shows he's taking an interest in us. We want Lord Sandbrook to take his father's place, you know, Harris. I shall go down and speak to him. Give me my hat and stick, Harris. I shall certainly go down and speak to his lordship."

Sir Sigismund hobbled down to the shed under which the model of the forthcoming factory was daily displayed to visitors. He paused to accept the farewell greetings of Mr. Chalmers, who was just leaving with Frances Moore, and listened to the former's few words of enthusiastic appreciation. A moment later he came face to face with Sandbrook, who had paused to light a cigarette. For Sir Sigismund, who eschewed the graces and courtesies of life, his greeting was remarkably affable.

"This is a great pleasure, Lord Sandbrook," he declared, holding out his hand with its clawlike fingers. "A great compliment, I call it. I am glad to see your interest in us. I trust that it bodes well for the future."

"Certainly," Sandbrook replied, "I think this is the most amazing model I have ever seen in my life."

Andrew Crooks, with his two companions, who had just issued from the shed, made modest intervention.

"Sir Sigismund," he said, "we were on our way up to your office. May I present two gentlemen who have introductions to us and whom I brought down at Lord Marsom's suggestion? Mr. Van Stretton of Amsterdam and Mr. Solomon Hertz of Philadelphia."

Sir Sigismund displayed a moderate amount of graciousness; he was more interested in his other visitor than in these newcomers.

"We were on our way up to see you, Sir Sigismund," Andrew Crooks continued, "to know if you would countersign these two gentlemen's passes and permit them to see the machine."

Sir Sigismund stroked his chin and looked keenly at the two strangers.

"Interested in the textile business?" he enquired.

"Why, no, sir," the American answered. "I am a large manufacturer of chrome-glazed kids in Philadelphia. It is the amazing arrangement of your factory as shown in the model here which has kept me hanging around. We've nothing finer than that in the States."

"Glad to hear you say so," Sir Sigismund acknowledged.

"The idea of the model seems to me to be so original," Van Stretton observed. "So much more practical than a set of drawings."

"You are quite right, sir," Sir Sigismund approved. "Our architect, by studying it carefully, has already planned several innovations. But," he went on, turning towards the farther and larger building, "if I were a boastful man, if I were one who loved to dwell upon my own achievements, there," he cried, his voice squeaky with excitement, his outstretched finger trembling as he pointed towards the shed which they were approaching, "is the triumph of my life! One of the finest achievements, although I dare to say it, of the century. The monster in there took three years to build. It is the most wonderful machine of its sort in the world. It was scarcely worth the trouble of patenting, although it is patented, because no one else could have designed or made it. That machine, gentlemen, stands as the foundation of the fortunes of Woolito, Limited, and though I do not wish to boast—I am not a man of vainglorious turn of mind—I alone designed it. I alone watched it creep into shape. Other men have wives—there is mine."

It was one of Sir Sigismund's moments. One forgot that he had a face like a ferret and that all the meanness of the world lurked in the secret places of his features. His earnestness for the moment triumphed. The light of the prophet radiated from his insignificant countenance.

"Are we going to be allowed to see this prodigy, Sir Sigismund?" the Dutchman asked eagerly.

The great little man produced his fountain pen. Andrew Crooks passed him the cards of admission, one by one. He scrawled his name across the back of each.

"You will come too, Lord Sandbrook?" he almost pleaded.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything in the world," was the cheerful reply.

They all followed Sir Sigismund up the steps to the shed. The policeman stood on one side at his approach. They heard his orders given in his shrill treble voice to the two brawny commissioners. They followed him into the huge room. The door was closed behind them. They were admitted into the sacred presence....

From behind a highly polished brass bar the four men, like pigmies, looked upwards to what seemed to be a chaos of furious energy, a gigantic medley of harnessed force, stretching farther away than the dazed and weary eyes could follow. Wheels of every size were flashing and piston rods turning in some vague communion with one another. Even a mechanic might well have been bewildered by the amazing power and intricacies of the whirling mass. The inventor, dwarfed into the similitude of some two-legged insect, walked a little in advance of his companions, and every now and then he squeaked out some word of explanation. Hertz came last, his spectacles removed, the man now intensely alive, his eyes everywhere, his hand continually clutching the brass protecting rail. When they stepped out into the daylight, reeling for a moment upon the steps, dazed by the comparative silence and blinded by a sudden flood of sunshine, Sir Sigismund challenged their laudation with an almost childish smile.

"I have no breath for speech," Van Stretton declared. "For the rest of my days machinery is a live and passionate thing."

"I don't know whether I am on my head or my heels," Sandbrook confessed. "All I could see was what appeared to be a stream of grey rubbish go in one end and beautiful baskets full of coloured wool flow out the other."

"I've seen some of our power stations," Solomon Hertz muttered. "I've seen electricity made and water transported five hundred miles—I've never seen anything like that."

Sir Sigismund chuckled and waved them to the gate.

"You are very fortunate men," he told them. "There are not fifty others in the world who have seen my baby at play...."

Outside, Chalmers was talking to the architect, whom he had met in the model shed. Sandbrook, swift to seize his opportunity, drew Miss Frances Moore a little on one side.

"You would doubtless like to know my impressions of that amazing monster," he observed.

She shook her head.

"No one would be interested in them," she assured him. "If you were an engineer, it would be different. I cannot think what made Sir Sigismund take you into the Holy of Holies."

"I am inclined to wonder," he complained, "whether you have not too low an idea of my mentality."

She laughed softly.

"On the contrary," she confided, "I think you are a very intelligent young man. You are so intelligent that there are times when I must confess that I do not quite understand you."

"Capital," he exclaimed. "Look upon me in the light of a conundrum. Devote your time during the next few weeks to solving me. I will be like the illustrated papers—I will offer a prize—"

"Perhaps," she reflected, "you would not care much about being solved."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no dark secrets," he assured her; "if that is what you mean. There is one forming in my brain but I have not the courage to share it with you just yet."

She abandoned her attempt at gravity and laughed in his face.

"You are too ridiculous," she protested. "I must leave now. Mr. Chalmers is ready. Tell me seriously—if you can be serious for a moment—what did you think of that machine?"

"I think that it is the missing wonder of the world," he acknowledged.

She moved her head towards the disappearing figure of Sir Sigismund.

"And its inventor?"

"He must have a gigantic brain," Sandbrook confessed. "Small men with large heads often have. All the same, I don't like him any better than I did."

"You must admire him," she persisted.

"Why should I?" Sandbrook objected. "I don't think that he has a nice nature. I will lend you a handbook on physiognomy if you will promise me to study his features one by one."

"You really are too absurd!" she declared.

"Let's talk like human beings," he proposed suddenly. "You have, I fear, a very low opinion of me, Miss Frances Moore, but I like you. When will you dine with me?"

"You are certainly very British," she smiled. "Do you ask every young woman you admire to take a meal at your expense?"

"It wouldn't ruin me if I did," he replied. "There are not many. Where does one reach you on the telephone?"

"One doesn't—in business hours," she answered.

"In your hours of leisure, then?"

"You will find me in the telephone book," she told him. "But listen, Lord Sandbrook. You have a very glib tongue but I really have something against you. I do not think your attitude is entirely friendly towards Woolito."

"My dear Miss Moore," he protested. "I have never seen the stuff."

"Frivolous again," she exclaimed. "You know what I mean. The interests of the Woolito Company are my interests in life. Do you understand that?"

"Perfectly well," he answered.

"An enemy of Woolito, Limited, is my enemy. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well then. I will dine with you one night after next week. You can ring me up. I see that Mr. Chalmers is ready."

She left him with a little nod of farewell and Sandbrook, having offered a lift to Andrew Crooks and his friends, which was hastily declined by the former, made his way back to his car.



CHAPTER IV

At about ten minutes to six that evening a comfortable private car of the ordinary limousine type was brought to a standstill before a small garage in the neighbourhood of Tottenham. A tall, heavily built man, so closely muffled up that he would have been unrecognisable even to his friends and wearing thick motoring glasses, descended and, after a word or two with the chauffeur, who pointed to a car of somewhat similar appearance which was apparently being prepared for use, entered the place. An employee of the garage, who had been in the act of drawing on a heavy driving coat, came down some steps from the office to meet him.

"Are you Mr. Bostock?" the visitor enquired.

"That's my name, sir," was the civil reply. "What can I do for you?"

"Let me be sure that there is no mistake," the other continued. "You are the Mr. Bostock who takes Sir Sigismund Lunt either to the offices in Basinghall Street or out to Tottenham and fetches him back every day except Sunday?"

"That's right, sir," the man agreed, with a curious lack of enthusiasm. "And not much of a job, I can tell you. If ever there was a gent who knew how to take care of his bobs and half-crowns, it's that little blighter. Meaning no disrespect, sir," he added hastily, "if you happen to be a friend."

"I am only an acquaintance of Sir Sigismund's," the other explained. "The remainder of our business need not take a minute. You are now on the point of starting to pick him up at his temporary office and take him home?"

"Dead right, sir, and I ain't looking forward to it. In ten minutes' time I must be off."

"In ten minutes' time, if you're a sensible man, you will be seated inside the bar parlour of the 'Pig and Whistle' opposite, drinking a hot whisky and with a crisp ten-pound note in your pocket."

"What's the game?" was the suspicious query.

"There's no game," the other declared. "It's a very simple matter of business. You can earn that ten-pound note in this way. Go to your telephone and ring up Tottenham to say that you've had a mishap to your car and that a friend is bringing another one and will be up there for Sir Sigismund at the usual time. That's all you have to do. I shall take the job on and Sir Sigismund will be delivered at his house just as though you were taking him there yourself."

The man shook his head.

"I don't care about a deal I don't understand," he confided, "and I don't understand this one."

"It is really very simple," his client assured him. "Sir Sigismund is a difficult man to get hold of and I want a few words with him to-night. The drive home will give me the opportunity I desire."

"Bit of highway robbery, eh?"

"Don't be a fool. Do I look like a thief? I give you my word of honour that Sir Sigismund shall be delivered at his house only a trifle later than the usual hour and in his usual state of health. All that I want with him is a conversation and a chance to show him something. I'll buy your job from you for the evening, Bostock, for ten pounds, and I guarantee that no harm shall come to Sir Sigismund and that so far as his personal effects are concerned, he shall not be a penny the poorer."

Mr. Bostock glanced across the street to the brightly lit bar parlour of the "Pig and Whistle." He looked down at the ten-pound note extended temptingly towards him.

"I can rely on you, sir, that this ain't going to get me into any trouble?"

"Absolutely," was the unfaltering reply.

"The job is yours and the sixpenny tip that goes along with it."

At a few minutes before half-past six, Harris, Sir Sigismund's secretary, presented himself in the latter's improvised office.

"Your man Bostock has just rung up, Sir Sigismund," he reported. "Something has happened to his magneto and he can't get the car to start, but he has sent a friend who is quite reliable."

"Why doesn't the silly ass keep his magneto in order?" Sir Sigismund grunted. "I hate strange cars. He knows that. Let me know when the fellow comes."

"He has just driven up, sir."

"Had the good sense not to keep me waiting, anyway," Sir Sigismund grunted. "I'm ready."

As usual, Harris helped his employer into his overcoat, gave him his hat and escorted him to the car.

"You've come instead of Bostock, eh?" Sir Sigismund asked.

The chauffeur touched his hat.

"That's right, sir," he assented. "Got a bit of trouble with his magneto, Tom has. You'll find this car quite as comfortable."

"Hope I shall," his prospective passenger muttered. "Don't drive too fast."

It was a blustery evening with squalls of rain and extremely dark. They had scarcely turned out of the temporary gates when the car came to a sudden stop by the side of the pavement. Whilst its occupant was struggling with the speaking tube, a vicious outburst of profanity at the tip of his tongue, the door was quickly opened and the man who had made the deal with Bostock, in all his disfiguring motoring impedimenta, entered and took the vacant place by Sir Sigismund's side. The car started off again immediately.

"What the devil?" the latter began at the top of his voice.

A hand was suddenly pressed over his mouth. The stranger leaned forward and, although he spoke without haste or violence, what he had to say was sufficiently alarming.

"If you take this quietly, my friend," he said, "it is possible that no particular harm will come to you. If you call out or make a fuss you will get it—just here—in the ribs—see?"

Sir Sigismund felt something hard pushed into his side and fear kept him silent for several moments. The car swung round to the right, away from London, and its terrified occupant realised now that they were heading back to the open country.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "Who are you? I am not worth robbing but you can have what I have on me."

"We are not robbers," was the prompt reply. "If you are a sensible man, you will sleep in your bed to-night not one penny the poorer in pocket, so far as we are concerned. There is just one condition, however. You have to keep your mouth closed and do as you're told."

Sir Sigismund saw then that things were indeed serious. There was another man on the box and he realised that the chauffeur too must be concerned in this affair, whatever it might turn out to be.

"Very well," he agreed, in a quavering treble voice. "I won't make any trouble. You see, we passed a policeman just now and I didn't call out. But tell me what you're going to do with me."

"We are going to put you down in the stalls of a theatre," his companion confided. "You are going to watch the performance from start to finish, and after that we shall set you down somewhere just outside London, and you can take a taxicab home in peace and comfort. But—if you show any signs of troublesome curiosity or if you open your mouth too wide, I shall pull the trigger of this little affair which is caressing your ribs at the present moment, and we shall leave what remains of you in the ditch."

Sir Sigismund was too terrified to speak for several moments. Then he gasped out:

"What nonsense is this about a theatre? There are no theatres in this part of the world and I never go to them, anyway."

"Wait and see," was the laconic response.

They passed through a long stretch of semi-rural, semi-suburban country. Sir Sigismund, with the cold hand of fear upon his heart, made no attempt to attract the attention of any of the infrequent passers-by. All the time he felt the pain of that hard object, whatever it was, against his ribs. He remembered the stories he had read and at which he had scoffed of the "bumpings-off" in Chicago, and he felt the perspiration continually breaking out upon his forehead. There came a time when he could keep silent no longer.

"What harm have I done to anyone?" he pleaded. "You can take my money. I have forty pounds in my pocketbook and my watch is worth almost as much."

His neighbour seemed to smile in the semi-darkness, only it was not at all a pleasant gesture.

"We don't want your watch, neither do we want your money," he said. "This is your evening out. You are going to have a little treat. Believe me, if you behave yourself—I am telling you the truth—you can be drinking a hot grog in your house at Hamilton Square within a couple of hours."

"You know who I am then?" Sir Sigismund demanded.

This time his abductor laughed.

"We don't put up a show like this for strangers," he said.

The hired car, with a great deal of puffing and groaning, began to climb a long and steep hill. They seemed to have compassed a semicircle and were still turning. At last they pulled to the side of the road at the summit of the ascent. They had come to a standstill in front of a single, rather gaunt looking house.

"This is where we alight, Sir Sigismund," his companion informed him. "I don't think there is anyone within hearing, but I shall walk arm-in-arm with you and there will be the same little trouble in store for you if you open your mouth."

Sir Sigismund had no idea of opening his mouth. He allowed his companion to assist him up a dozen steps, through a miserable strip of garden, and waited whilst the chauffeur, who had also descended, unlocked a flimsy front door. They mounted a creaking staircase and passed into a room full of gloomy shadows. Sir Sigismund shivered.

"Aren't we going to have any lights?" he asked.

"We are going to do without lights," his companion told him. "As a matter of fact, they would interfere with the spectacle which I have promised you. Here we are, in front of the window. You and I will sit together upon this sofa."

"But what for?" his prisoner demanded piteously.

"No childish curiosity," the other admonished him. "There, now we're comfortable."

They sat side by side on a hard couch. The window was bare of curtains and Sir Sigismund realised that the hill they had climbed must have been of considerable height, for below there was nothing to break the view of thousands of twinkling lights stretching to the eastward and westward horizons all the way to the City. He gave a little gasp as he pointed to four great crystal globes enclosing a vast space below.

"Why, that's our land—the land for the factory!"

"Just so," his companion agreed. "The famous Woolito factory. The pride of the commercial world. The pride, too, of the great Lord Marsom and his henchman, Sir Sigismund Lunt, eh?"

"Why not?" the latter breathed softly. "Why not, indeed? Those four crystal globes even at the present moment enclose the greatest triumph of commercial and scientific attainment the world has ever known. You can shoot me to pieces," he went on, with a faint spark of desperate courage, "but that will remain."

His guardian took out his watch, struck a match and looked at it.

"Jove, we've run it finer than I thought," he muttered. "You have barely five minutes to wait, my friend, before the curtain goes up."

"What curtain?" Sir Sigismund gasped.

The other poured some whisky from a flask into a silver cup.

"Drink this," he invited. "The room is chilly."

Sir Sigismund obeyed. His blood felt suddenly warmer and he felt his courage returning. The window had been thrown open and the rain was beating in.

"You'd better have a blanket over you," his gaoler observed, taking one from a bed in the corner of the room.

Sir Sigismund drew it up to his throat and drank more whisky. The man who had brought him from Tottenham was leaning out of the window, listening intently. Suddenly his lips parted in a grim smile. From somewhere in the distance came a faint regular sound like the ticking of a clock. A single light was travelling through the sky.

"Jove," he muttered, "the man's a wonder!"

Across that chasm of mysterious space, through the open window to their ears, came a sort of crackling roar, following upon a red, lurid sheet of flame which shot up to the skies from below. There was another and a louder report, which bent the trees in front of them like a hurricane, and which set the very foundations of the house in which they were, to rocking. Now the very skies seemed to flame. The whole countryside was lit up. From where they were, the watchers could see plainly every little field and house for miles, men passing like insects along the streets, motor cars and other vehicles lumbering along the main road. The great open space below was as distinctly visible as though the sun were shining, grotesquely spacious amongst those squares and streets of miniature dwelling houses. Then there came another crackling report, a roar of deeper sound, the rocking of the earth, and sheets of flame once more, streaming up to the skies.

"The sheds!" Sir Sigismund suddenly shrieked. "My machine! God, where's the telephone? My machine is there! It has taken me all my life to think out. It took a hundred men three years to build!"

He felt himself held in a grip of iron or he would have thrown himself from the sofa on to the floor, and from the floor through the window into the space beyond. Movement, however, of any sort was a physical impossibility.

"Don't look away, Sir Sigismund," his guardian ordered. "There it goes—the greatest triumph of modern commercial enterprise. There it goes, the treasured secret, the glorious fruit of a man's brain. A life's work flaming out in gasses to the sky. Don't look away, Sir Sigismund. It is worth watching. It happened before, didn't it? It happened somewhere down in Nottinghamshire. Not to your machine, but to a very wonderful one, all the same. You may remember. It is not so long ago. You were responsible for what happened there. Don't forget that."

Through the weird lights which flamed into the room his torturer could see his victim's eyes straining out towards the holocaust. Sir Sigismund's whole body was throbbing, his breath was coming in choked sobs and groans. His guardian poured more whisky down his throat. For a moment the suffering man found his voice again in one unearthly shriek, then he collapsed upon the sofa.

CHAPTER V

Lord Marsom, seated the next morning in a high-backed chair at the end of the long table in his library, had the air of a man very much in his element. He had a far more suitable apartment close at hand but one of his passions in life was for space. He liked large rooms and spacious surroundings. On his left-hand side Crooks, his private secretary, was taking down at lightning speed the thirtieth letter which had been given him without a pause. On his right Frances Moore was seated with a fat notebook in front of her, studying the many pages of instruction and direction which she had received that morning with regard to the press handling of the strange disaster at Tottenham. Marsom was smoking a long cigar, and an empty half-bottle of Veuve Clicquot, the contents of which had been poured into a silver tankard, stood by his side. One of the three telephone bells tinkled. Andrew Crooks stretched out his arm and answered it.

"Lord Sandbrook has called, sir," he announced.

"Sandbrook! What the hell does he want?"

Crooks coughed dubiously.

"I understand that he merely asked if you were at home, milord."

"I will see him," Marsom decided, without further hesitation.

Crooks gave instructions and rose to his feet. His employer waved him to the door.

"You can be getting on with what I've given you," he directed. "Come back in half an hour. No, you stay where you are, Miss Moore," he added, as she also rose. "There are mornings when I don't want you out of my sight. This is one of them. I have a great many ideas...."

Sandbrook brought with him a pleasant odour of the fresh air and the perfume of violets, a bunch of which he wore in the buttonhole of his blue serge coat. As usual, he was gracious, cheerful and inscrutable.

"Felt I must come and offer you a word of sympathy," he remarked, making himself comfortable in the chair which the butler had wheeled up, refusing the cigars but accepting a cigarette. "Most extraordinary thing, that fire last night. I have been reading about it in the *Times*."

"Lucky for us the factory was not built," Marsom grunted. "Lunt's wonderful machine has gone into thin air, though, I'm afraid, and they tell me there isn't a scrap left of the model."

"Any theories as to how the fire started?" Sandbrook enquired.

"Not the ghost of one."

"The police—" Sandbrook began.

Marsom snapped his fingers contemptuously.

"That for the police—" he scoffed. "They can't even make up their minds how the explosions were caused."

"The papers talk about bombs dropped from an aeroplane," Sandbrook ventured.

"Don't believe a word of it," Marsom scowled. "And look here—Miss Moore! Where are you, Miss Moore?"

"I'm here, Lord Marsom," Frances said quietly, from a few yards in the background.

"Show Lord Sandbrook that ridiculous communication. He's not a director yet, but he soon will be, so we may as well take him into our confidence."

Miss Moore handed a card across to the visitor. He adjusted his eyeglass and read the inscription with the utmost seriousness. A single sentence was beautifully printed in old English characters across the glossy surface.

This comes to you with sincere commiseration from one who knows all the facts and who ventures to remind you that Blunt's machine was destroyed by fire at Croylton mills in Nottinghamshire.

"What the mischief does that mean?" Sandbrook enquired.

Marsom shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I tell?" he snarled, with a wicked twist of the lips. "How can anyone tell? All that we know is that one of the mills we took over in Nottinghamshire was called the Croylton mill, and that they had a machine there working on somewhat the same lines as Lunt's. It was a very inferior affair but it made the stuff, somehow or other. As to who sent this card or what the idea is, we cannot any of us imagine."

"Shown it to the police?"

"Not yet," was the gruff reply. "We don't want too much fuss in the papers."

"So far," Sandbrook remarked, with a glance towards Miss Moore, "they seem to have been singularly reticent about the affair."

"You think so, do you?" Marsom grunted. "Well, that's a feather in Miss Moore's cap. She's our publicity agent and her instructions to the newspapers were to cut it out as far as possible. We don't want sympathy from our rivals or the public. The loss of one machine can't do much harm to the firm of Woolito, however valuable it was."

There was a quality of very real admiration in Sandbrook's expression as he looked across at the scowling, contemptuous figure in the high-backed chair.

"You must allow me to congratulate you upon your attitude, sir," he said. "If this unfortunate incident, as one might surmise from the card, is really the result of malice on the part of anyone, or any group of people—"

"Why the hell should it be?" Marsom interrupted fiercely. "We are only an ordinary trading company. We do not wage war against our competitors. We do not cut their throats with prices, either. If anyone can sell cheaper than we do, let them try."

"If your fellow directors share your spirit," Sandbrook remarked, "no business opposition is likely to do you any harm."

"I don't care whether they share it or not," Marsom continued obstinately. "I could do without the lot of them. Lunt is all smashed to pieces. Got some cock-and-bull story about having been dragged to a deserted house to watch the fire. They're taking him to a Nursing Home for a month. We don't do business on hand-to-mouth principles. We are prepared for anything that may turn up. I've already signed the contracts with half a dozen engineers for the rebuilding of the machine and we are laying the foundation stone for the larger part of the factory next week. The machine is a loss, of course, but we shall have another one in its place within two months, as near as possible like it. As for the model, that was only a plaything, anyway. Hurry and make up your mind, young man. I'll make better than a guinea pig of you, if you come on the board at once. You shall work if you have any fancy for it."

"I'll have to wait until the will is proved," Sandbrook insisted.

"We'll fix the shares."

"I'd rather come in on my own, thanks."

The telephone began to clatter. Crooks made discreet reëntrance and Sandbrook, feeling somehow the recurrence of the whirl of activity which his visit had interrupted, took swift and silent leave. In the hall he was escorted in the best Marsom manner by a small bodyguard towards the door. On the way he paused to admire a landscape of Turner's. The servants fell back respectfully. He felt a tap on his shoulder. Frances Moore was standing there, a little breathless.

"Lord Marsom wants to know whether you will dine with him to-night—just his daughter and himself?"

"Shall you be there?"

"Of course not."

"Sorry," Sandbrook replied. "Quite impossible. Thank his lordship all the same."

She lingered by his side.

"What did you really think of that extraordinary card he showed you?" she enquired.

"Some humorist at work, I should imagine."

"Perhaps," she answered doubtfully. "Lord Marsom chooses to believe so."

"Put on your hat and come for a spin with me," he invited. "You look pale."

"I am rather worried," she confided, "but of course, I couldn't leave the house, even if I wanted to. Come into this small room. There are three other Turners there."

She led the way into an annex of the hall.

"You can see the landscapes another day," she said. "I wish to speak to you."

They stood together in the shadows of the dimly lit recess. Apart from the faint expression of trouble upon her face, there was something in her eyes which puzzled him, something almost of suspicion.

"Why did you come to enquire for Lord Marsom?" she asked abruptly.

"It seemed to me a civil thing to do," he replied. "He was a friend of my father's."

"I should say not. Your father and he had disagreed. You look very like your father. You have that sort of aloof air about you sometimes. I should have thought that you would have shared his prejudices and outlook."

"Sorry if I'm dropping below form," he observed briefly. "After all, you know, my father was very much of the older generation."

She reflected for a moment.

"Well, I don't suppose it's up to me to interfere," she decided at last. "You seem to have the knack, every now and then, of making me suddenly curious."

"Change your mind and dine with me to-night," he invited, "and whatever curiosity you may have I'll do my best to satisfy."

"But you are engaged," she reminded him.

"It's an engagement which I could easily break."

"Very well, then, I accept," she replied promptly. "I don't go in for that sort of thing as a rule, but if you are really going to become a director of the Woolito Company, it might be just as well for us to be better acquainted."

"Do you mind coming to my little house in Hill Street? More *intime*, you know. I hate too much music and clatter if one wants to talk."

"Not before half-past eight, please. What number?"

"Eighteen, A," he told her.

She nodded and drifted away from him—a queer, but most attractive figure she seemed in her over-gorgeous surroundings. Sandbrook followed her slowly, with an occasional glance at the pictures. As he pushed back the curtains, he came face to face with a young woman of a very different type. They stared at each other for a moment in surprise. Then, with a little laugh, she dropped the skirt of her riding habit and held out her hand.

"You are Lord Sandbrook, aren't you? I believe we did meet somewhere once upon a time. I am Julia Pontifex."

"Of course we have met," he declared. "My father used to dine here often. I see you have been having some exercise."

She nodded.

"Isn't it old-fashioned of me to ride so late? I was at that terrible party of the Studleighs last night. Heaven knows what time I got home. You don't go out much, do you, Lord Sandbrook?"

"I have only been back in England a short time," he told her.

"We were all so sorry about your father," she continued. "He was a very popular person here."

"Bad luck on the old man," Sandbrook observed. "Just as he had found a new hobby in life too."

"Are you going to take his place on the board?"

"Lord Marsom has been kind enough to speak of it. We have not come to any definite arrangement yet. I must not keep you here, though. I expect you are dying for your bath."

"I am dying for a cocktail a great deal more," she replied. "Come into my sitting-room and I will give you one."

He strolled by her side across the very fine hall, which was a feature of the house. She gave an order to one of the men-servants, who hurried swiftly away. Another opened the door of a very charmingly furnished, but homelike, apartment on the sunny side of the house. She threw down the jade-handled crop she had been carrying and her bowler hat and smoothed her hair in front of the glass.

"Looking rather nice this morning, aren't you?" he remarked cheerfully, from the hearthrug.

"How do you know?" she laughed, happily conscious of the truth of his words. "Notwithstanding our little bluff, I don't think we have ever met before in our lives. I have seen you once or twice playing polo, and years ago at Lords', but I was only one of thousands."

"To show you how wrong you are," he replied, accepting a cigarette from the box she offered him, "you were pointed out to me once at Ranelagh. You were with Janet Studleigh then—one of the leaders of the Bright Young People, I was told."

"You were badly informed," she declared. "We are all as dull as we can be in London nowadays. The people who ought to be staying at home and amusing us spend their time in Abyssinia."

"Wonderful country," he assured her.

She indulged in a slight grimace.

"I find all travelling in foreign countries a bore," she confided. "I like London, Melton, Argyllshire and Paris. I like to be in touch with my own kind. Foreigners, even civilised foreigners, get on my nerves."

"Aren't you afraid of becoming a trifle insular?" he asked.

She flashed a sudden glance at him out of her really very beautiful brown eyes.

"I am afraid of nothing in the world," she told him, "except of being bored."

It was a pity, Sandbrook thought, that the cocktail was served in a priceless Venetian glass and that the shaker should have the appearance, at any rate, of being fashioned out of solid gold. Otherwise it was excellently made and the dry salted biscuits an agreeable accompaniment.

"Stay to lunch," she invited. "Father isn't going down to the City until afterwards, I know, if that's any inducement."

"I have just seen your father," he told her. "I couldn't stay anyhow, thanks. I am lunching at Sunningdale and playing a

round of golf. Like you, I have to keep myself fit."

"Do you ever ride in town?" she asked.

"Never. Except for a week or two at hunting now and then, I keep off a horse when I am in England."

She refilled his glass.

"Melton was great fun this year," she reflected.

"So I heard. I missed that, of course. I was searching for a lost tribe in Mesopotamia."

"That sounds Biblical," she remarked.

"Nothing Biblical about those fellows," he assured her. "They have ugly habits with strangers, as a rule. Anyway, I have to leave them alone now and settle down at home."

"You lost your father and your mother whilst you were away this time, didn't you?" she asked, a little more gently.

He nodded.

"My mother had been ill for a very long time," he said. "My father's death was a great shock, though."

"We are both only children," she told him, leaning over and lighting a cigarette.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Debrett. My father rather dislikes me for not having been a boy. I think he's lucky. I have no head for business and I am far too fond of the unusual. I like, so far as I can, to live my life differently than anybody else."

"How do you succeed in doing that?" he asked.

She smiled. She had a frankness of manner when she looked him in the eyes which he rather liked, although behind it all there lurked a sort of eagerness which puzzled him, a touch perhaps of her mixed origin.

"I have known you for half an hour," she said, "but that is scarcely long enough for me to tell you all my secrets. Cultivate me and you will find them out easily. I am voluble—especially when I talk about myself—and I like people who are interested in me."

"I shall make you the study of my life," he promised her. "To show you how quick of understanding I am, I know that you are dying for your bath."

"Your first mistake," she told him. "I am dying for you to stay a little longer."

He held out his hand.

"I will take my leave," he said, "before I make any more mistakes. As a matter of fact, I shall be late for lunch as it is, and it gets dark so early."

She touched the bell.

"Come and see me again," she invited. "I am at home, as a rule, from six till eight—except opera nights—and twelve to one. If you take the trouble to let me know when you are coming, I shall be sure to have no one interesting here to distract your attention."

"A telephone message?"

"I have a number of my own," she confided. "It is not in the book. 37-70 Mayfair. There are just six people who know it. You make the seventh."

The door was thrown open, the procession outside was reformed. She indulged in a little grimace as they parted in the hall.

"Sorry about this sort of thing," she remarked, with a wave of the hand. "Dad is so Oriental and it pleases him."

CHAPTER VI

At eight o'clock on the same evening Martin Sandbrook was standing in his library with his back to the fire, smoking a cigarette and reading the evening paper. At half-past eight he had thrown the latter down and was walking restlessly up and down the little apartment. At twenty minutes to nine he was staring savagely at the clock. Thirty seconds later the front doorbell rang. He listened to the voices in the hall and his expression relaxed. From the bottles prepared for that purpose upon a side table he mixed a cunning decoction and poured it upon the ice, which was already in the shaker. He was wielding the latter vigorously when the door opened and his butler announced Miss Moore.

"What a lovely sound," she exclaimed. "And don't I need one!"

They shook hands with a touch of formality, then he wheeled an easy chair to the fire.

"I have more congratulations to offer you," he confided, as he poured out the cocktails.

"You'll turn my head," she murmured.

"I could never have believed," he continued emphatically, "that an incident like the destruction of the Lunt machine up at Tottenham, which was certainly a most melodramatic affair, could have taken a back place in the newspapers within twenty-four hours, as it has done."

"The advertisement columns supply the explanation," she pointed out a trifle cynically.

"Yours is practically a new profession in this country," he reflected, "but I should say that your vogue would soon spread."

She shrugged her shoulders—a slightly weary gesture. Apparently she was, at the moment, disinclined for general conversation. He refilled the glasses and stood on the rug, looking down at her. In her plain evening dress, the severe but beautifully fitting lines of which he was too experienced not to appreciate, her hair rather low at the back and plainly brushed away from her forehead, without a trace of artificial colouring on her lips or cheeks, he felt that, notwithstanding the slight hardness of her mouth and those telltale little lines at the corners of her eyes, she was sufficiently unusual to satisfy a person of even his somewhat exacting taste. What she lacked in the softer graces she seemed to make up for in dependability.

She raised her eyes suddenly.

"Aren't you rather staring at me?" she asked.

"I'm the rudest person in the world, I know," he admitted. "I didn't expect to see you looking so nice."

"Am I dressed above my station?" she enquired. "You see, we don't look at things in quite the same way over in New York as you do here. I suppose a secretary should do her shopping in Oxford Street or in one of the huge stores! On the other hand, I earn a very considerable salary and I have nobody to spend it on except myself."

"I'm sorry about that large salary," he said, "because I suppose I shall have to give you a raise when you come to me."

"I shall never come to you," she assured him.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't see the slightest possibility," she replied, "of your ever offering me any work as interesting as the work I'm doing."

He indulged in a little grimace and at that moment the butler announced dinner. They crossed the hall into the dining room. The rather formidable, long table had been dispensed with, and a small round one was drawn up to the fire, with shaded lights and a great bowl of red roses in the centre, substituted for the more formal decorations. It was attractive enough to justify her exclamation of pleasure.

"It does look cosy, doesn't it?" he assented, "On the whole, I think dining at home is good. I don't know a restaurant in London where the chairs are really comfortable or the music, at some time or another, isn't too loud. Besides, we can

talk seriously here, if we want to."

"Have we anything serious to talk about?" she asked, as she helped herself to caviar.

"That depends on your outlook," he replied. "I think myself that there is something peculiarly attractive in the first real tête-à-tête between two people, one of whom at least is interested in the other."

"Very nicely put," she murmured.

"You must remember that I scarcely know a thing about you or your life."

"There I have the advantage," she observed. "Debrett is eloquent about you. There is, fortunately, no volume published that you can buy, in which you can read about my parentage and doings in the world."

"Perhaps, on the whole, I am glad," he confided. "I like to come to my own conclusions in my own time—concerning the things that matter."

"If you ever find it worth while."

They dined pleasantly and exceedingly well. Frances Moore showed adequate appreciation of her host's really excellent cook, and she also approved of the old Hock and single glass of champagne she was offered. All the time, however, both were conscious of the fact that there was a certain element of fencing in their conversation. It was a conversation of tongues rather than of hearts, or even of intelligence. Sandbrook was relieved when she acquiesced so easily in his suggestion that they should take their coffee in the other room.

"This," he decided, when their chairs were wheeled up to the fire, the table with coffee and liqueurs was between them, and their cigarettes were lit, "is the hour for confidences."

"Give me yours, then," she suggested.

His smile had almost the guilelessness of a child's.

"But I have no secrets," he assured her blandly. "My life is an open book. The volume you speak of will even tell you where I was educated, what job I had during the War, in what countries I have been travelling—in fact, it brings me almost up-to-date. About you, on the other hand, there is all the time the aura of mystery. Why do you work for that brave old scoundrel—Marsom? Why do you work at all?"

She reflected for a moment.

"The Woolito job is the most interesting one I have ever had," she declared. "I work because my income is too small for me to exist comfortably without working. But frankly—I enjoy it. I enjoy my independence and I enjoy my independent life. There is no mystery about me at all. My father is a government official at Washington, and my mother keeps house for him and entertains his friends. I have a sister who likes that sort of life and she lives with them. So there we are. If your life is really as colourless as you say, you might at least give me your opinion about something that is worrying me."

"Of course I will, if you think it worth having. I warn you—I'm a terribly prejudiced person."

"About people, perhaps, but not about events, I am sure. I should like your honest opinion about that queer communication which was sent to Lord Marsom after the destruction of the machine."

"Well, I should say," he replied, flicking the ash from his cigarette, "that it came either from a lunatic or a wag letting himself go."

"Or someone in deadly earnest."

"I wish I could feel more interested in this misfortune which has assailed your firm," he observed. "I must confess, however, that I can't. I don't really care. What I do care about is your position as publicity secretary to a firm which seems to me to be likely to come in for more than a spot of trouble."

"You would not suggest," she protested, "that I should leave the firm because they have met with a quite insignificant reverse?"

"Yes, I would," he declared cheerfully. "I've had a look at that board and I know what I think of them. They're wrong 'uns, Miss Frances. They've got the evil eye, and they'll have it on you, if you don't mind. I hate the thought of your working for such a lot of bounders. I don't believe I will ever bring myself to become their associate."

She laughed almost naturally.

"But, my dear Lord Sandbrook," she exclaimed, "I get a thousand a year salary and allowances, a private office in Basinghall Street and a room in the Park Lane mansion! I have twice been invited to lunch with the family. I am not responsible for the character of my employers. I consider my position a most enviable one."

"What's a thousand a year?" he smiled across at her. "Turn me up in Debrett again and see how many thousand acres I own. I can't remember. Think—if you became my secretary, all those might be yours some day. I am very susceptible, and I have never seen anyone in my life look so charming as you do to-night."

"You're too flippant," she complained. "As a rule, I like a certain amount of flippancy—it gives a sauce to conversation—but yours is too obvious and a trifle too personal. You are the only man I have ever met who would dare to say such things to me! Why do you think that I should ever want to marry you?"

"Because of those acres," he answered. "Much better than a thousand a year and luncheon once a week off the crumbs from the Marsom table! How did you leave the old boy this evening, by the way? I'll leave off talking rot and be serious, if you like."

"I have never known him more full of life," she said slowly. "He seems absolutely dynamic. And yet, do you know, I have a queer idea about him? I believe that underneath that overweening pride of his, he has had, ever since he received that strange communication, an uneasy presentiment that someone with brains connected with those Nottinghamshire firms which he has just driven out of business, is working on some scheme of revenge. He doesn't know what fear is but he is angry because he is up against something which he does not understand."

"There's nothing for him to be afraid of, anyhow," Sandbrook observed. "You don't get pushed off in this country for getting the better of your neighbour if you can. You generally get a step up in the peerage. I wish they would give it to old Marsom. A baron's is the most unsatisfactory title there is. A man takes his own daughter about and every one of the uninitiated thinks he is on the loose. Lord Marsom and Miss Julia Pontifex! Why, I doubt if they'd give him rooms at the Metropole at Brighton!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand these English side shows," she reflected, with a smile.

"By-the-by, I met Miss Julia Pontifex this morning. She came in from riding just as you left me."

"Lucky I had left you!"

"Why?"

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know. She is a very vivid and fascinating person, but she is a little old-fashioned in some of her ideas. I do not think that women secretaries meet with her entire approval."

"You mean that she is a snob?" Sandbrook asked.

Frances shook her head.

"I should not call her that. She is too intelligent. She simply does not understand why we exist. I honestly believe that if I met her in the street, she would not recognise me."

"That's quaint," he observed.

"She is an interesting study," Frances went on. "She is so terribly keen and alive to the surroundings and people she affects that outside them the world does not exist. Did you see her picture in last year's Academy?"

"I was not in London," he reminded her.

"It was by a great artist and it was a marvellous piece of work. I never could have believed that anyone could have thrown on to canvas that intense inner vitality, that almost throbbing sensuousness which she undoubtedly possesses. Yet there they are. Julia Pontifex is a very attractive personality, Lord Sandbrook. I know at least half a dozen men who would marry her, if they could."

"I'm not surprised," he observed. "You used a good word just now. She is vital. You can almost feel the life throbbing in her when she talks to you. She reminds me of one of the great Biblical heroines—almost too colourful for this generation."

There was a brief silence. Sandbrook was haunted for a moment by that vision of the slender girl with the proud lips and the mocking eyes, with their partially revealed depths. He tapped another cigarette upon the table and lit it.

"Miss Frances Moore," he said, "I am going to talk seriously to you."

"This is very sudden," she complained. "I don't feel that I have had sufficient preparation."

"I am not going to ask you to be my wife, but if I dared offer you a piece of advice, it would be this. Chuck that job. It's as plain as a pikestaff that someone has got their knife into Woolito, Limited—someone who means business. It's all very well for us men who are likely to get something out of it to stick to our guns, but you will only get yourself into trouble fighting an unpopular cause all the time."

"I shall do my duty," she declared. "I have been well treated there and if I don't altogether approve of their methods, I have come across nothing which I think directly dishonourable. Would you mind asking your man to fetch me a taxicab?"

"Already?" he protested.

"It's ten minutes to eleven," she pointed out. "We loitered over dinner. I ought to be round at Park Lane at eight-thirty to-morrow morning. I have appointments with newspaper men practically the whole of the day."

"What a job!" he scoffed. "You promise them so much advertising and they tone down their news for you. You call that an honest woman's career in life!"

She laughed gaily.

"My dear host," she assured him, "it is most amusing."

The servant answered the bell.

"A taxi and my coat and hat, Groves," Sandbrook ordered.

"Unless," she said, as the door closed, "you are going to that mysterious place which Englishmen call their club, you won't want your coat and hat."

"Mayn't I see you home?" he begged.

She shook her head.

"I live in the most respectable Mews in London," she confided. "Even to go back in a taxi gives cause for scandal."

"But if I don't get out?"

"The white of your shirt would be seen glistening. These idiots of taxicab men always stop under a lamp. Do you mind? It is quite a warm evening and I feel like leaning back, pulling my fur up around my neck, having both windows down and resting for a time. I have had rather a rotten day."

"Why, of course, I don't mind," he replied. "I've bored you as it is, I'm afraid."

She gave him both her hands with a delightful little gesture.

"You are the nicest man I've met in England," she said. "You are very nearly the nicest man I have ever met in my life. It is just bad luck that for the moment you present rather a problem to me. Never mind—I like you."

"And for all my chaff, and I indulge in it too often," he rejoined, "I like you. You have read enough of your country's fiction, I am sure, to know that an English earl is bound to be an ass. Perhaps I am, but I have seen enough to approve of you. I may tell you so again some day."

"And this," she remarked, turning back as he stood upon the doorstep, "is where you intrigue me. I cannot make up my mind whether you are one of the pleasantest idiots in the world or a very clever and determined person, who means having his own way and is getting it."

He smiled.

"Pull both windows down," he advised, "wrap the fur closely around you, lean back in the corner and smooth the hair off your forehead, think hard and you may solve your own conundrum."



CHAPTER VII

Julia Pontifex was riding a little listlessly down Rotten Row the next morning when she heard the sound of horse's hoofs behind. She looked up just as Sandbrook cantered to her side and if he had been a vain man he would certainly have been flattered by the sudden animation which lightened her face.

"Why, Lord Sandbrook!" she exclaimed. "I thought that you never rode in the Park."

"I very seldom do," he acknowledged. "I have to keep something in the stable, though, for my young cousin, when he comes up from Eton. That's a beautiful animal of yours."

She leaned forward and stroked the neck of the thoroughbred mare she was riding.

"Yes," she admitted, "she's a wonderful creature. Father's Christmas present to me. She has carried me twice a week down at Melton and never made a mistake. Like everything else we possess," she added, a little bitterly, "she is as near perfection as possible. Are you very rich, Lord Sandbrook?"

"Well, I'm not poor," he confessed, after a moment's hesitation. "You see, my mother had a great deal of money. That's really what made my father take up some of these City directorships. He hated being the weaker vessel financially."

"And yet money is terribly unimportant," she said.

"Millionaires are generally the only people who have made that discovery," he rejoined.

"Don't dare to be sarcastic," she warned him. "I am not in the humour for it this morning. I had to be hostess last night at one of Father's worst type of dinner parties."

"What do you mean by 'worst type of dinner parties'?"

"The Woolito directors and—worse still—their wives. All City people, bulging with money, oozing with conceit."

"Poor old Lunt was not there, I suppose?"

She shook her head.

"They say he won't be out for months. Of course, he is terribly unscrupulous and very unpopular, but I am not sure that I have not more sympathy for him than for some of the others. Mr. Somerville, for instance. He had to be helped into the room, his gout was so bad, and yet he drank champagne as fast as they could fill his glass! Oh, they're a horrid crowd."

"You have some friends of a different type," he reminded her.

She nodded shortly.

"A few. People of gentler manners and who bring a different atmosphere with them—but they are all terribly obvious. They are either half-commission young men on the Stock Exchange, or in the automobile trade, or wine men. They are charming for a time and then they open out. They want something."

"Aren't you by way of being a little bitter this morning?" he asked.

"So would you be if you had been hostess at that dinner party last night," she retorted. "Sir Alfred Honeyman on my left, trying to fashion clumsy compliments. I detest that man. I am sure he is not honest."

"I'm getting interested in your dinner party," he confided. "Who sat on your right?"

"Lord Hildreth."

"The banker?"

She nodded.

"That's why he came, I suppose. They say that he is a man of great social gifts. If so, I must be a girl of immense perspicacity, for I found everything he said tactless and his attitude almost offensive. He seemed to be trying to impress

one with the fact that he was only there because Woolito, Limited, was one of his largest accounts and that socially he was entirely out of his element."

"Pompous old man, anyway," Sandbrook observed. "You take these people too seriously, Miss Pontifex. They are not worth it. I am sure you have plenty of other friends who are more amusing."

"I call friends people who like you for your own sake," she said, looking across at him. "I know very few people like that. There is one ingenuous youth who sends me roses every day. I remonstrated with him once because I know that they cost a great deal of money, and he only laughed. 'The firm pays,' he assured me, as though it were a joke. They are trying to get an order from Father for three new motor cars! He even hinted at an afternoon at Ranelagh or Hurlingham, if the thing comes off.... One more turn and I must go home. Do you mind if we go up to the top and out by Stanhope Gate? I shall climb another step up the ladder if the right people see us together!"

"I believe you are making fun of me," he complained.

"Impossible," she replied, a faint note of sarcasm in her tone. "On the contrary, I ask myself why you trouble to be decent to me. You have nothing to gain from the Woolito Company or Father or any of us."

"Perhaps I like you," he suggested.

"And perhaps you don't," she rejoined drily. "I wish you did. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be liked by you—but somehow I have instincts. Whatever reason you have for taking notice of me, I do not think it is affection."

"If you only knew how wrong you are," he smiled. "To tell you the truth, you possess one of the qualities I like immensely. You are candid. You tell the truth and you tell it as though it were a natural gift. I have not made up my mind yet whether I like your father and my probable future fellow workers or not, but I am sure that I like you."

She laughed more naturally and without that tinge of bitterness. The ride had brought colour to her cheeks. She sat her mare gracefully and there was a pleasant curl about her lips and flash in her eyes as she challenged him.

"Very well, then," she exclaimed, "come in and have a cocktail with me."

"I was hoping that you would ask me," he told her.

In the hall they met Marsom just leaving for the City. He stared at them in some surprise but with grim approval.

"I met Lord Sandbrook riding in the park, Father," she explained. "He is coming to have a cocktail with me."

"Give him some of my old sherry instead," Marsom suggested. "Beastly things, cocktails. Ruin your taste for wine. You will find that out for yourself, young fellow, before you reach my age."

"I haven't the slightest doubt but that you're right, sir," Sandbrook replied. "The trouble of it is that I like cocktails—not so much the taste of them, perhaps, as the misty appearance, the appetising snap."

"Never tasted one in my life," Marsom broke in, with his usual steam-roller disregard for niceties of conversation. "Stay to lunch, young fellow, if you want to. Julia will look after you. Sha'n't be back myself. I'm going to the City for an hour or two."

He passed on without waiting for a reply, dressed for the City in the old fashion, in dark overcoat, a freshly plucked gardenia in his buttonhole, his silk hat already on his head. Julia looked after him and laughed softly.

"Rather breath-taking, isn't he?" she remarked, as she led the way into her sitting-room. "Why don't you stay, Lord Sandbrook, if a luncheon *à deux* would not bore you? I sha'n't offer to import a chaperon, although it would be rather intriguing to feel that one needed one!"

"Don't forget that I am just home from a savage country," he reminded her, as he watched his glass being filled. "Some of those Abyssinians have queer habits with their womenkind."

"But I'm not one of your womenkind."

"You're one of my race, anyway."

"I'm not sure that I am that. I am a Jewess."

"Well, you're an English Jewess—and you certainly know how to shake cocktails. I am only sorry that I cannot stay to lunch. I am having a formal meal with my lawyer. We have to do that sort of thing once a week until my affairs get settled."

She was frankly disappointed but she made no protest.

"Come another time when I am alone," she invited. "I will show you my zoo. You know that I collect animals, don't you?"

"I have read about them in the newspapers and seen pictures of your lemur cubs," he replied. "Would I do for an exhibit?"

"Too fierce," she laughed. "I wouldn't dare to keep you in a cage."

"I could be as mild as a canary, if I had company," he assured her.

"Well, that might be arranged, perhaps," she told him, with a slight pressure of his arm. "You will come, won't you?"

"Of course I will," he promised. "I am not very good at luncheons, though. The afternoons in London are horrible. I generally go down to one of my country golf clubs, if I have nothing better doing, and have a round afterwards. What about getting hold of two others and coming out to dance some night?"

Julia felt a thrill of pleasure which she took no pains to conceal.

"I should love it," she declared enthusiastically. "Must we," she added, "have those two others?"

"Well, I think just now we had better," he decided, "I am in half mourning, you see, and it would not do for me to be seen alone with an attractive young woman like you! Aren't there any of your father's friends who have young people in the family?"

"I suppose there are," she assented. "I could collect two others, of course."

"There was a fellow named Somerville who was very civil to me at the meeting the other day," Sandbrook meditated. "Has he no family?"

"He has a son and daughter," Julia admitted, a little doubtfully. "Maudie and Joe. Maudie is quite nice in her way, but I'm not sure what you would think of Joe."

"So long as you don't like him too much, I don't mind," was the light-hearted response. "What about calling for you some time this afternoon and we will go and invite them? It will be too late for me to get down to Sunningdale, anyway, after my old josser has finished with me."

"Heavenly!" she exclaimed. "I will be ready any time after four."

"You're sure you are not overfond of this fellow Joe?" Sandbrook asked with mock anxiety.

"As a matter of fact, I dislike him exceedingly. What about Maudie? She's rather pretty. Promise you won't flirt with her."

"My affections," Sandbrook assured her, "are already engaged."

"For such a nice speech," she told him, with a faintly inviting curl of her lips, "you may give me a cousinly embrace and I will let you go."

Sandbrook laughed softly as he leaned towards her.

"I have not a girl cousin in the world," he said, "so I'll have to learn what is expected of me."

He left the house and climbed into his car with a faint sting in his blood, a thrill of which he was somehow ashamed because of its element of unnaturalness.

"What damned hypocrites we all are," he muttered to himself, as he thrust in his clutch rather more brusquely than usual.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Archibald Somerville, director of the famous firm of Woolito, Limited, and putative millionaire, was lying upon his couch, drawn up to a welcome fire in the large drawing-room of his house in Hyde Park Square. He was suffering from an attack of gout aggravated by his excesses at the recent dinner party given by his chief, Lord Marsom, at his mansion in Park Lane. He was a large, fleshy man, rubicund as a rule, but now flabby and grey after several days of inaction. His bandaged foot was carefully adjusted upon a cushion and his slovenly toilet was in forcible contrast to the expensive nature of his surroundings. The role of semi-invalid had been bad alike for his health and his temper. On a chair by his side was seated the young man from the City who acted as his private secretary, and who had just completed reading aloud to him an article from the *Commercial Review*.

"Damn these newspaper fellows," Mr. Somerville muttered, with a scowl. "They ought to be clapped in prison for an article like that. Read the last paragraph or so again, Ellis."

The young man obeyed without comment.

"There is no doubt whatever that the economic laws of to-day have either utterly destroyed or wilfully mutilated the old-time amenities of commerce. Take the case of the man Thorpe whose suicide most of our contemporaries reported last week. Josiah Thorpe, owner of the Hovell Mills near Nottingham, was a man of integrity and very popular in the district. He was an alderman of the city and next on the list for the Mayoralty, an honour which would have realised the ambition of his life.

"One disastrous year brought him from prosperity to degradation. Through a speculative and most unfortunate purchase of inferior yarn, the firm found itself confronted with the loss of a whole season's business. At the same time, their price lists for ordinary trade were categorically attacked by the great Juggernaut firm of Woolito, Limited. The Thorpe concern held up for some time, owing to its old connections, but that one disastrous speculation and the battle of prices brought it down at last; brought it down, too, unhappily, in the very year preceding the one in which Josiah Thorpe should have served as Mayor. The firm went into liquidation, Josiah Thorpe resigned from the Council and committed suicide in November, on the day of the municipal elections. The whole assets of the estate were taken over by Woolito, Limited, a month later. No one can find a word to say against one of the greatest English commercial undertakings of the day, a business which owes a large portion of its initial success to the then manager, Archibald Somerville, J.P. At the same time, this is just a notable instance of the fact that business to-day is a battle fought out without mercy, and with the spoils hung round the neck of the victor."

With a furious motion of his hand, Archibald Somerville sent the review flying from the young man's hand. The latter, who was used to such ebullitions, calmly picked it up and prepared to take his leave.

"Men ought to go to prison for writing such stuff as that," his employer declared. "Show that article to Miss Moore, Ellis, and see that none of the newspapers connected with that organisation ever get another advertisement from us. Find out who printed the rag. See that they never get any of our work."

"Very good, sir," the young man replied.

A parlourmaid, with flying cap strings and starched apron, bustled in. She crossed the room almost to her master's couch before she made her momentous announcement.

"The Earl of Sandbrook and Miss Pontifex have called, sir."

Mr. Somerville rolled over on his side.

"Who?" he demanded incredulously.

"The Earl of Sandbrook and Miss Pontifex, sir," the girl repeated. "What with you being in the drawing-room, sir, I didn't quite know what to do with them, as the dining-room is being cleaned and the morning-room is all in a litter. Shall I show them in here?"

"Of course," was the emphatic response. "Don't keep them waiting, Agnes. Hurry! Do you hear? Bring chairs. Let Mrs. Somerville know. There must be some tea—"

"Very good, sir," the girl replied, hurrying out.

Sandbrook and Julia Pontifex were duly ushered in, passing the crushed-looking little secretary hastening to make his escape into the hall. There was a subdued excitement about Julia's manner and appearance which lent an added and softened charm to her undoubted good looks. Her deep brown eyes were almost brilliant and the colour upon her cheeks, faint though it was, was entirely natural.

"We have come to enquire how you are getting on, Mr. Somerville," she announced. "Lord Sandbrook was calling and he offered to motor me down. Father said I was to get the very latest news and to tell you that if you are blaming his port, it is because you didn't drink enough of it."

"Very good of you, very good, I'm sure," Somerville replied, struggling to raise himself into a sitting posture, a gesture of politeness which was frustrated by Sandbrook's kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't distress yourself, please," the latter begged. "Don't attempt to move. I hope you will forgive this unceremonious call. I thought you were looking a little seedy the other day at the meeting."

"Most extraordinarily kind of you to look in," Mr. Somerville declared. "I take it as a great compliment. Very pleased to welcome you here. My wife, too, will be charmed. Do sit down, please. Sit down in that easy chair near the fire. And Miss Julia, you tell your father I'll remember his message next time I get a chance at that '70 Cockburn! I don't need to enquire about your health. Never saw you looking so fit."

"I'm very well, thanks," the girl answered. "How are Maudie and Joe?"

Their father's reply lacked enthusiasm.

"Maud's as well as any girl can be who keeps such late hours. Joe is giving a bit of trouble, as usual."

"Joe's all right," Julia declared hastily. "You're too strict with him, Mr. Somerville."

"How is the leg?" Sandbrook intervened. "That's the important matter."

"Better," the invalid admitted. "I shall be able to get down to the City in about a week now. The doctor talks about sending me away for a change, though, after I've had a look round."

A young lady, fluffy but rather nice-looking in an undistinguished way, came hurriedly into the room.

"Sweet of you, my dear Julia," she exclaimed, embracing her friend.

Julia drew away after a very perfunctory bout of affection.

"This is Lord Sandbrook, Maud," she announced. "Miss Somerville."

Maud smiled pleasantly and shook hands.

"We came to enquire after your father," he explained. "I was so sorry to hear that he was down with this wretched gout."

"It's better to-day, I think," the girl said. "Are you a fellow director of the Woolito Company, Lord Sandbrook, like your father?"

He shook his head.

"I'm not a director of the company just yet," he confided. "As a matter of fact, I might have been, but there has been some doubt about the disposition of the family shares. I take a great interest in the Woolito Company, though, just as my father did."

"Lord Sandbrook has been to see Dad continually," Julia broke in, a slight undertone of triumph in her voice. "Perfectly sweet of him, I call it. They ought to make him a director, whether he has any shares or not. I think what keeps him off is my latest idea—that I shall go down either to the works or the City, and establish myself as a typist!"

"You wouldn't be any good, dear," her friend assured her. "You would get Worth to dress you and you would turn the heads of half the staff."

Julia glanced at her wrist watch.

"I'm afraid we mustn't stay here talking nonsense any longer," she announced.

"You must have some tea," Mr. Somerville begged hospitably, "or what about a whisky and soda, Lord Sandbrook? Pre-war, I can promise you that."

"Nothing at all, thanks," was the firm reply.

"What are you doing to-morrow night, Maud?" Julia asked. "Lord Sandbrook and I are going to dine and dance at Ciro's, and as he is in half mourning, we ought not to be alone. We wondered if you and Joe would like to join us."

"Why, I should love to," the girl answered, with obvious surprise. "And—well, I suppose—I don't quite know about Joe."

"Of course Joe can go," her father intervened emphatically. "If he has any other engagement, he can put it off. I'll see to that."

"About nine o'clock, then," Julia said. "Good-bye, Mr. Somerville."

"Good-day, sir, and take care of the leg," Sandbrook added.

"I wish you could have stayed a few minutes and seen Mrs. Somerville," the invalid regretted. "She's prinking, I expect, or having her afternoon nap."

"We wouldn't hurry her for the world," Julia insisted. "Besides, we really must go. It is almost a spring afternoon and Lord Sandbrook drives so marvellously that it is a perfect joy to be in the car...."

The parlourmaid was summoned and the two visitors took their leave. Maud came back to her father with a thoughtful expression upon her face.

"Very polite of his lordship," Mr. Somerville, who was in high good humour, declared. "I much appreciate his call. Most gratifying. You ought to be glad to be going out with them, child. A very pleasant invitation, I call it."

"Of course, I'm glad," Maud agreed. "But—"

"But what?"

"I'm a little worried about Joe," Maud confessed.

Mr. Somerville turned back on his side.

"You've got your mother's disposition," he sniffed.

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Archibald Somerville was to receive yet another caller that afternoon, whose visit was very little less welcome than Sandbrook's. Mr. Tobett was announced and promptly shown in—a dapper little man, quietly dressed, of slightly legal appearance, but with the air of one who is used to society. He accepted an easy chair and duly commiserated with his host.

"I hope, Mr. Tobett," the latter said anxiously, "it is thoroughly understood—I think it has been made clear in the Press—that the outrage which resulted in the destruction of the famous Woolito machine was entirely unjustified."

"I have seen nothing to contravene that point of view," Mr. Tobett acquiesced graciously.

"One or two of the Sunday papers," Mr. Somerville went on, "had something to say about the unpopularity of the Woolito Company, owing to their 'ruthless methods of competition' and that sort of thing. There's a concealed attack upon us, too, in the *Commercial Review* this week. They're dragging up the matter of the Hovell mills again, just because of the suicide of Josiah Thorpe. The charges are, of course, absurd. Competition is the soul of business. If weaker concerns have pitted their strength against ours, they are foredoomed to failure."

"I quite understand that," Mr. Tobett agreed. "You need have no anxiety on that point. Affairs, I may say, are progressing quite satisfactorily and your name is practically upon the list which the Prime Minister will sign within the next few days. The only matter where a little investigation seemed necessary—it is always necessary, where a hereditary title is granted—is with regard to your family. We understand that Mr. Joseph Somerville is your only son?"

"That is so."

"He was educated where?"

"At Harrow and Pembroke College, Cambridge. He was only at Cambridge for a short time, as we needed young blood in the works. Ours is a vast industrial undertaking, you know, Mr. Tobett. The amount we pay in taxation makes us feel sometimes proud and sometimes, I must confess, exceedingly unhappy. But there it is. The heads of Somerset House know all about us."

"The reputation of your firm is unquestioned, Mr. Somerville," his visitor murmured. "I have never had the pleasure of meeting your son, I think."

"He works very hard," his father explained.

"Is he interested in sports at all?"

"He takes an Englishman's interest in racing."

"Any athletic distinctions at College?"

"I am afraid not."

"Degree?"

"We fetched him away before he had time to enter for it."

"I see," Mr. Tobett murmured. "Just so."

"The amount we spoke of," Mr. Somerville said cautiously, "was satisfactory, I hope?"

"Most generous," his visitor acknowledged. "Of course, you must understand, Mr. Somerville, that my intervention in these matters is unofficial—purely unofficial."

"I quite understand that."

"And it must never be referred to."

"Naturally not. One more word, Mr. Tobett. If it should come to be a question of money, a few thousands would not

break me. You understand, I hope?"

"Perfectly, my dear sir. Perfectly."

Mr. Tobett declined refreshments and shortly afterwards took his leave, making his way towards the sacred precincts of Whitehall. Mrs. Somerville arrived in time to join with her husband in a little bout of self-congratulation.

"The most interesting call, my dear," the latter announced, raising himself on his couch. "Mr. Tobett, you know—most influential person. Sort of private secretary to someone whom we won't name, eh?"

"Is it all right?" the lady asked anxiously.

"It will be announced next week—'On account of distinguished services to commerce and generous gifts to charity.' That sounds all right, eh? But remember—not a word. Not a word, Margaret. It must come as a surprise. We must be completely taken aback. If Bomford got to know about it, he would never be satisfied with the knighthood he's angling for. It must come upon us as a—well, as a thunderclap. Not a word even to the children."

Mrs. Somerville, who was a person of ample dimensions and florid complexion, smiled happily into the fire.

"Don't you worry, Archie," she said. "I can keep my mouth shut as well as most. All the same, I can't help smiling when I think of the airs that Amy Honeyman puts on every time I see her. It's her ladyship's car, and her ladyship's at home or not at home, every moment of the day. And her husband just a knight! I'd love to be there when she reads it in the paper."

"You be sure she does read it in the paper," Mr. Somerville enjoined, "and not hear it from any gossip that gets about. There's wheels within wheels in this business—I can tell you that. Have you heard what else has happened this afternoon?"

"I've not heard anything," the lady confessed. "I was that sleepy after lunch I never woke till half an hour ago."

"Young Lord Sandbrook, son of the Earl of Sandbrook, who used to be a director with us—he's the Earl of Sandbrook himself now—called. Maud and Joe are to go to a dancing party with him and Julia Pontifex to-morrow night."

Mrs. Somerville was staggered. She sat forward in her chair, open-mouthed and open-eyed.

"God bless my soul!" she exclaimed. "But what on earth brought the young man here?"

"Julia Pontifex, as it happened."

"Is it just them four who are going?"

"So I understand. They're going to Ciro's Club to dine and dance."

Mrs. Somerville meditated for a moment.

"Seems to me there must be a catch in it some way. Julia is a proud little minx. She has never taken any notice of Maudie, or helped her to know people, ever since they moved into Park Lane. She seems to have got hold of Lord Sandbrook, all right, but I can't think what she wanted to risk showing him to Maud for. Maudie would eat her head off for looks."

"Well, that's just how it was," Mr. Somerville observed. "Perhaps it isn't etiquette in those circles for two to go out alone, and Julia thought, so long as she had to have someone, it might as well be Maud. Anyway, the party's fixed up, and after the money I've spent on frocks, if Maud doesn't look all that she ought to—well, that's up to you, Mrs. S."

His better half purred with satisfaction.

"Wherever she goes, there isn't going to be anyone that looks smarter or more the real thing than Maudie," she declared confidently. "I've not let that Frenchwoman dress her for nothing. She's IT with her clothes, Maudie is. If Lord Sandbrook has got half an eye, it won't dwell on Julia Pontifex all the evening, I can promise you that. The only trouble seems to me to be Joe."

Mr. Somerville raised himself a little higher still on his couch. There was distinctly more life in his expression.

"Trouble with Joe is a thing we need not consider," he said firmly. "That young man and me are due to have a few words, and they will come this very night. He has responsibilities coming and he's got to realise them. To-night will be a real chance for him. If he makes friends with Lord Sandbrook and gets pally with a few of that sort, that's all I ask of him. There's money for picking up in our business. He won't have to work as I used to, but he's got to be a gentleman and act the gentleman, and if he won't do that—well, look here, Mother, send him to me directly he gets in. Let me get this off my chest. Joe is no fool if he does take a glass or two sometimes."

Mrs. Somerville rose.

"I'll have a word with him myself, too," she threatened. "How's the leg, Archibald?"

"I've not had time to think about it," he confessed.

CHAPTER X

Julia was ready and waiting when Sandbrook called for her on the following evening. Under the mild but persistent supervision of her highly trained French maid, she had abandoned her usual penchant for colours, and she looked curiously distinctive in her grey dancing frock with a single string of pearls and a wonderful ermine cape, which her maid slipped over her shoulders at the last moment. Her hand crept into her companion's as she took her place in the limousine.

"Oh, dear," she sighed. "I wish we hadn't asked those others."

"It does seem a pity, doesn't it?" he agreed.

"Why were you so keen on having them?" she enquired curiously. "Maud is so terribly obvious and Joe can be awful."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I don't know how I got the idea but I thought they were your greatest friends."

"Well, don't make that mistake another time," she begged, "and please remember that so far as I am concerned, at any rate, those silly days of *les convenances* passed forever, I hope, while you were wasting your time in Abyssinia. I go out with whomever I like, or rather I should do, if there were anyone I did like—and I stay out just as long as I want to."

Her voice had dropped away to a whisper and her eyes were full of invitation. Sandbrook did his duty and kissed the lips which were almost upon his cheek.

"I don't want those others," she murmured.

"Got to make the best of it this time," he regretted. "We'll have an evening to ourselves later on...."

At Ciro's the others had not arrived. They made their way down to the bar and ordered cocktails, whilst Sandbrook sent for a *maitre d'hôtel* and selected the dinner. Just as he had finished, Maud and her brother arrived, the former in a very chic, but somewhat daring, confection of grass green.

"I do hope we are not late," the young lady gushed, as she greeted her host. "They have been busy down in the City today, and Joe was so tiresome. You have not met my brother, have you, Lord Sandbrook?"

The two men shook hands, and Sandbrook realised at once that he was in for a bad evening. Joseph Somerville was certainly not an attractive young man. He possessed heavy, flabby features, watery eyes and a distinct air of dissipation. He was dressed with a good deal of superficial smartness, but everything about him that could be wrong, was wrong. His diamond studs, mercifully set in onyx, were too large and his tie was too small. He was a big fellow, but he seemed, even so early in life, to have developed a slouch.

"What about a cocktail?" he demanded, almost before he had finished shaking hands.

"I've ordered dry Martinis, unless you prefer something different," Sandbrook announced. "Shall we sit down again for a few minutes? Dinner won't be ready for quarter of an hour."

"I'm all for that," Joe declared. "Been in the City all day. Terrible grind it was, too. Charles," he added, signalling confidentially across to the barman, "send me a double one...."

It was half an hour before they mounted the stairs to the restaurant. Julia deliberately took her host's arm and drew him a little behind.

"I think, perhaps," she whispered, dropping her voice, "I ought to have warned you about Joe. I don't know what it is about him, but anything he drinks seems to go to his head so soon."

Sandbrook permitted himself an inward chuckle. He had watched the young man consume six cocktails of full strength while he himself had disposed of two lighter ones!

"Well, we'll go carefully at dinner," he promised. "I'm glad you told me. Hope you'll like the table. I have a weakness for a corner and I don't care to be too near the music."

The table was the best in the room, the dinner perfectly ordered and served. Only the girls looked a little apprehensively at the size of the bottle standing in a special ice pail, which sent Joseph into ecstasies.

"A jeroboam," Sandbrook explained. "They had only two in the place. I couldn't resist ordering it—1911 wine too—but we needn't drink it all."

"Needn't we?" the young man scoffed. "We'll see about that."

Perhaps the tactics of the party, provided they realised the necessity of keeping the young man in good humour, were scarcely discreet. The two girls sat on either side of their host and laid themselves out to attract and entertain him. Joseph Somerville, next to Julia and on the outside, found himself continually confronted by her shoulder and the little arc of her back. The only person who spoke to him was Sandbrook, and a subject of conversation of mutual interest was hard to arrive at. When the dancing commenced, Julia gave her escort no chance of selection but drew him on to the floor.

"Does that young man," he asked, "ever drink too much?"

"My dear," Julia replied, "it's the scandal of the family. He's terrible. That's why I was sorry you asked him out to-night."

"Well, no one told me."

"I ought to have done so," she confessed. "The only reason I didn't, so long as we had to have someone, was that I didn't want to spoil Maudie's chance of a night out. I thought that with you he would be on his best behaviour."

They resumed their seats after the second encore. Maud was looking miserable and the contents of the Jeroboam were greatly diminished.

"Good wine," Joseph declared expansively. "Jolly good wine! Good wine never did anyone any harm."

"Take it quietly, young fellow," Sandbrook advised him pleasantly. "That's got to last us through the evening."

"No need for that," Joe expostulated, his hands in his trousers pockets. "No need at all. They've got some more of the same stuff, I expect. Hi, wine man—"

"This," Sandbrook interrupted quietly, "is my party."

"I can stand a bottle, can't I?" Joe demanded. "It's not much of a party, anyway, with Maudie sulking like that and Julia too cock-a-hoop to speak to anyone."

Sandbrook rose to his feet. Maud obeyed his gestured invitation tremulously and he led her on to the floor.

"Oh, Lord Sandbrook," she apologised, "I'm so sorry. Perhaps I ought not to have brought Joe. He gets like this sometimes when he's excited. But you see," she went on, looking up at him piteously, "I don't often get a chance to go out, and I could not have come without him. Are you very angry?"

"Not in the least," he assured her. "Don't let's think about it. He will probably be all right presently. How well you dance! Don't let's think about anything else but this waltz."

Maud was, as a matter of fact, a very good dancer. She had seen some acquaintances who had recognised Sandbrook, she had heard one or two complimentary remarks about her frock, and soon she was very happy indeed. They had finished the encore before Sandbrook remembered the others. When they returned to the table, they found Julia sitting alone, her expressive lips curved in a faint line of contempt.

"Where's Joe?" Maud enquired anxiously.

"How should I know anything about your brother's movements?" was the cold reply. "I didn't wish to dance, and after I had refused twice, he growled something and got up and left me."

Maud was too ecstatically happy to worry. She looked at the bottle, however, in dismay. It was very nearly empty!

"Perhaps he didn't feel well," she suggested weakly.

"He certainly didn't look well or behave as though he were well," Julia remarked. "I am sorry to say so, Maud, but until he learns self-control, I don't think you ought to bring him out with you."

"Then, what am I to do?" Maud asked bitterly. "There's no one else to bring me. I must stay at home forever, I suppose. I would sooner do that than go to dinner parties at Hampstead or West Kensington with Father and Mother."

"Look here," Sandbrook intervened, "there's no need to worry. If your brother doesn't care for our company, he can look after himself, I'm sure, Miss Somerville. I see a couple of friends over there by themselves, decent fellows, both of them. Shall I ask them if they would like to join up, and then it won't matter?"

An ecstatic suggestion! Two young men, one from the Foreign Office, the other a soldier, were introduced and promptly accepted the situation. There was an hour's dancing and everyone seemed to have forgotten everything about Joseph. Then one of the managers approached Sandbrook respectfully and drew him to one side.

"I think, if your lordship doesn't mind," he begged, "you had better step into the bar. The gentleman who was with you this evening seems to have got into trouble."

When Joseph Somerville, later on, endeavoured to reconstruct the events of that evening, he was consistent in at least one thing. He placed the whole trouble upon two perfectly amiable, and apparently harmless, strangers, whom he had found at the bar during a visit which he had intended to be only a flying one. He had perhaps drunk more than was good for him when he had entered, but he could scarcely be called drunk. The two men, who welcomed him as an old friend, and one of whom he was sure was, or had been, an actor, had invited him to a stool by their side and insisted upon standing him a drink. His excellent intention upon entering had been to drink the best part of a bottle of Vichy, dip his head in a basin of water, and do his duty by his sister and his distinguished host. His good resolutions vanished. He drank a double whisky and soda when he ought to have drunk, if anything, a small brandy. The necessity for counter-hospitality involved more refreshment—and more. Then the trouble began. The barman actually had the impertinence to come round to the front and try to induce him to leave! It was scarcely his fault that the fellow was in bed for a fortnight because his head caught the corner of the table in falling. And then the policeman—two policemen. As a sober young man, Joseph was a coward, as he had proved on more than one occasion. Furiously drunk, he was a madman. His new friend by his side laughed mockingly at the sight of the nearest policeman.

"I bonneted a Bobby last week," he murmured. "Funny sight. Have a try. Whack his helmet over his head."

"You watch me," Joseph declared vaingloriously.

Joseph bonneted the policeman, all right. When Sandbrook, in response to the manager's summons, descended the stairs, he was just in time to see his dinner guest being led off the premises by two stalwart constables towards a very obvious destination. The assistant barman quitted his post and hurried out towards them.

"Very sorry about your lordship's friend," he said uneasily, "but we could none of us do anything with him. Poor Jimmy was most polite, but the young man was raging drunk—raging drunk he was, sir. That was what was the matter with him."

"I feel that I am the one to apologise," Sandbrook confessed. "All the same, he was brought to my party. I never saw him before in my life. Let me know at Hill Street to-morrow morning, please, how the barman is, and if there is anything we can do for him."

Sandbrook reascended the stairs and rejoined the party, now a thoroughly cheerful one.

"I think your brother must have gone home," he told Maud Somerville. "I can't see any sign of him. What do you say to going on to the Embassy? They have an extension and I know that Major Sandes wants to make a night of it."

"We should love it!" the two girls declared in unison.

It was found impossible to keep the evening papers away from Mr. Archibald Somerville after the nurse had dressed his leg for the second time and established him in his study for the rest of the day. Maud herself, however, brought them in

and Maud was accompanied—to Somerville's immense surprise—by Lord Sandbrook.

"Father," Maud said simply, "you've been asking all the time about last night. You will have to know the truth, so you'd better read about it. Anything the *Evening News* doesn't tell you, Lord Sandbrook and I can."

"The *Evening News*," Mr. Somerville gasped. "Why, what's in the newspaper?"

"I'm afraid you had better read the account, sir," Sandbrook suggested. "Most unfortunate affair altogether."

"Damn it all, Maud, I can only read a few lines," Mr. Somerville exclaimed. "Tell me about it; tell me about it quick!"

"Lord Sandbrook and I were dancing," Maud began. "I—I have never enjoyed dancing like it before and I daresay we were some time. We left Julia and Joe at the table. We thought they would dance too. When we got back, Joe had gone and Julia was alone. Julia said that he'd been very disagreeable and he had gone away for a few minutes."

"Was he drunk?" Mr. Somerville asked bluntly.

"He had had too much to drink," Sandbrook admitted. "It seemed impossible to check him. He finished what amounted to nearly a bottle of champagne whilst we were dancing. The last I saw of him, however, I should not have said that he was drunk."

"What happened then?" Mr. Somerville demanded hoarsely.

"Well, Lord Sandbrook saw some friends sitting alone—two very delightful men," Maud went on. "They joined up and we spent the rest of the evening together. Lord Sandbrook went down into the bar to look for Joe, but he was not there. We thought he must have gone home and we all went on to the Embassy. Such a good time we had," the girl added, with a little break in her voice. "Lord Sandbrook's friends were so nice. They had an extension at the Embassy, and it was three o'clock before we broke up and came home. Lord Sandbrook will tell you the rest."

"When I got back to Hill Street," the latter recounted, "I found an urgent telephone message from Bow Street Police Station, begging me to come there and bail out Mr. Joseph Somerville. I went round at once, but when I arrived there, the sergeant told me that the charge was too serious for any question of bail. He refused to let me see your son and recommended me to come round to the Police Courts this morning. I did so, but I'm afraid I was not able to be of very much service. If you wish to know exactly what happened, the evening paper, which I see you have there, will give you a very fair account."

Mr. Somerville hoisted himself up in his chair. A curious change had taken place in his appearance. He was no longer white and drawn. His cheeks were red, his eyes staring.

"I can't read," he declared. "Something's hammering in my head. Tell me."

"You must prepare yourself for something of a shock, sir."

"Get on with it," was the brusque reply.

"It seems," Sandbrook continued, "that your son went down into the bar, met some friends, had more drinks and became quarrelsome. The barman tried to evict him. He knocked him down and his head was badly injured against one of the tables. He is now lying in hospital. They then sent for two policemen, one of whom your son assaulted. He is also in hospital, suffering from concussion. After that your son was taken to the Police Station. He was brought before the magistrate at eleven o'clock this morning. I was there with Sir Anthony Jones, the best lawyer I know, but unfortunately the magistrate took a severe view of the situation. He refused to listen to the suggestion of a fine, and your son was sent to prison for thirty days. The magistrate also advised the representatives of the barman and the policeman to appeal in a civil court for damages."

"My son," Mr. Somerville repeated slowly, "was sent to prison for thirty days. How was the charge stated?"

"Violent and unprovoked assault and drunkenness."

There was a silence, only broken by Maud's barely restrained sobs. The nurse came into the room.

"I think," she suggested, "that you had better leave Mr. Somerville now. He is none too well, and if you've been telling

him the news about Mr. Joseph, I'm afraid he will be upset."

Sandbrook, only too willingly, took his leave, escaping with difficulty from Maud's tearful and clinging hysteria. Mr. Somerville himself, after a brief period of semi-stupor, seemed to completely recover command of himself. He even discussed the tragedy with his wife quite lucidly.

"This," he decided, "is the end of Joe—in this country, at any rate. I shall give him a thousand pounds and send him off to Canada, or wherever he wants to go. I don't say I shall cut him off. I don't say there won't be more thousand pounds to follow, but he is no longer an inmate of this household. Not until he is a changed man."

They soothed him down and later on he slept. About seven o'clock another visitor was announced.

"Mr. Tobett to see you, sir," the nurse told him doubtfully. "If his business is likely to be at all important, I should postpone it for a few days. You've had quite as much excitement as is good for you already this afternoon."

"You show him in and don't talk so much," was the angry rejoinder. "Mr. Tobett is a great friend. I'm ready to see him at any time."

Mr. Tobett, when he entered, had somehow the appearance of an undertaker. His face was drawn and sad. He seemed figuratively to be walking on tiptoe. He accepted the chair to which Mr. Somerville pointed.

"My dear sir," he began, "this is most unfortunate."

"It's a damn' bad business," Mr. Somerville agreed. "It's knocked me hard. No good brooding about it. I shall pack the young man off to the colonies as soon as he—as soon as it's all over. I didn't expect to see you to-day."

"I felt it my duty," Mr. Tobett said, "to ask for an interview with you at once."

"Why?" the man on the couch demanded.

Mr. Tobett cleared his throat.

"It seemed to me desirable," he explained, "to let you know the truth without delay. No doubt you have already—er—surmised what the feeling of those—er—responsible for such preferments as we were speaking about must be. Any question of an inherited title, of a baronetcy, for example, under the present circumstances would be quite out of the question. Mr. Joseph is your only son and would be the apparent inheritor of the title. Impossible, my dear sir, as I am sure you must see for yourself."

Mr. Somerville had raised himself still farther in his seat until he was almost upright. Once more that unwholesome flush was on his cheeks and the glassy look in his eyes.

"Do I understand you to say, Tobett," he demanded, "that I am not to have my baronetcy because of this affair?"

Mr. Tobett half closed his eyes and shivered.

"We must not allude to these matters quite so plainly, Mr. Somerville," he admonished. "Since we are alone, however, I may as well confess that you have divined the truth. It would be perfectly impossible for any Minister of the Crown—whatever the inducement—to recommend to His Majesty for an inherited title a man whose son was in prison. Quite impossible, Mr. Somerville. As regards a knighthood," he added, turning back on his way to the door, "well—there might still be possibilities, but I should recommend you—as an expert in these matters—to let it slide for a time."

"Blast your knighthood!" Mr. Somerville shouted.

The profanity of his invocation was regrettable, for these were the last words Mr. Somerville was to utter on earth.

Lord Marsom returned home from the funeral of his fellow director a few days later, descended from his limousine and passed across the marble hall of his palatial residence. He entered the small study which he sometimes used when alone and took up one of the telephones on his desk.

"Send Miss Moore here," he directed.

Frances made prompt appearance. She gave one look at her employer standing upon the hearthrug, and mixed a drink, which she brought from the sideboard. He swallowed half the contents of the tumbler at a gulp.

"Are you still in touch with those thick-headed chumps at Scotland Yard?" he demanded.

"More or less," she admitted.

"Order a car and take this over to them," he enjoined, throwing an envelope upon the table. "It was attached to the handsomest wreath on the coffin. Read it."

She drew out a highly glazed, thick card on which was beautifully printed a single sentence.

**With deepest sympathy and also
with reverent memories of Alder-
man Josiah Thorpe, who was to
have been Mayor of Nottingham.**

CHAPTER XI

Lord Marsom's Rolls-Royce car, a few evenings later, crept silently up to the front door of Sandbrook's house in Hill Street, and Frances Moore, after a trifling delay, was ushered into the library. Sandbrook, who had just returned from a day's golf at Woking, and was still in his rough tweeds, rose enthusiastically from the depths of his easy chair to greet her.

"Don't look so surprised," she begged, as he wheeled a couch up to the fire for her. "You told me to come in any time I was around between six and seven for a cocktail, and here I am! If I am a nuisance, please send me away. If you can spare half an hour, help me, please, to forget an unpleasant afternoon."

Sandbrook rang the bell and gave an order.

"What can I do further in the way of welcome," he asked, "beyond giving you my best in cocktails and inviting you to stay to dinner afterwards? Tell me about the disagreeable afternoon."

She drew off her gloves and folded them thoughtfully.

"At Lord Marsom's insistence," she confided, "and you don't know how difficult he is these days, I have been down to Scotland Yard to see the sub-commissioner."

"To Scotland Yard! Is there anything fresh, then?"

"Does there need to be anything fresh?" she demanded. "First of all, there was that extraordinary destruction of the Lunt machine and the model of the factory up in Tottenham. Even now neither the police nor the insurance people have made up their minds exactly what happened but, although we got the Press to make light of it—that has been my affair—it will probably cost the Woolito people, taking into account the insurance, at least a hundred thousand pounds, and they say that Sir Sigismund Lunt is next door to lunacy! And now there is this terrible affair about young Somerville. Not that anyone cares a snap of the fingers about him, but his father's sudden death is a tragedy."

"But why associate the Somerville affair and the destruction of the Lunt machine?" Sandbrook asked curiously. "I cannot see the slightest connection between the two myself."

She looked across at him through the firelit gloom of the room with a strange, speculative intensity in her eyes.

"Both of these disasters," she confided, "were linked up by those extraordinary cards. Someone even dared to attach one to a wreath and sent it to poor Mr. Somerville's funeral."

He nodded meditatively.

"I had forgotten about the cards," he admitted. "Even then, they are not necessarily the work of the same person. Both Lunt and Somerville, according to what one hears, might have made a lot of enemies. What was on poor Somerville's card?"

"Something which connected him up with the disastrous closing of one of those Nottinghamshire Mills," she said, watching him with curious concentration. "The mill was owned by a man named Thorpe, who was to have realised what was apparently his life's ambition the following month, and was to have been elected Mayor of Nottingham. When the trouble came, he committed suicide. Somerville was to have been made a baronet, but they cancelled the whole thing as soon as it was known that his son was in prison. You must admit that there is something there which seems more than mere coincidence."

"I don't admit it for a single moment," he declared, tapping a cigarette upon the table. "A disaster happened to the Woolito machine up at Tottenham, and one of the thousands of enemies the Woolito Company must have made sent the firm a little card. They lose another director in poor Somerville, and what more natural than that the same person should do the same thing? Probably, if anything happens to old Marsom in the near future, his relatives will get another one. I cannot see that the sender of the cards is in any way connected up with the tragedy itself. What does Scotland Yard think about it?"

"Don't talk to me about Scotland Yard," she answered irritably. "I suppose they think as you do. A dumber lot of

mummies I never came across."

"Frankly," he assured her, "I don't know how you explained your mission, but I should imagine they must have thought you were—well, a trifle eccentric. Whom did you see there, by-the-by?"

"One or two underlings," she confided, "but I had a few words finally with the sub-commissioner. He would not even discuss the Somerville affair as having any possible significance. He admitted that they were still working upon the destruction of the Lunt machine, but they had nothing whatever to report."

"That may have been the work of a lunatic," he suggested.

"Perhaps. The doctors tell us that there are plenty of apparently sane people going about who are entirely unbalanced."

The cocktails were brought in. She sipped hers appreciatively and he followed suit.

"Not long ago," he remarked, "I read a wonderful article by a German who had a theory that quite half the world was really unbalanced, and that the perfectly normal person was a rarity and only to be found amongst the genuine primitives."

"Theories don't help us much in life," she sighed. "Usually they bear so little relation to things that really happen...."

"Let us talk about something more frivolous," he begged, as he lit a cigarette for her. "I can't bear to think that the moment will presently arrive when you will insist upon going and we shall have spent the whole of our time talking over the troubles of Woolito, Limited."

"For the moment, I'm obsessed," she admitted, looking up at him deprecatingly. "I have not a single frivolous instinct in my body. I can't help it."

"Have another cocktail?" he invited.

"Half a one, please, then I must go. I have to see the chief again before I finish."

"How is the old boy?"

"He's still very much shaken," she confided. "It is not the pleasantest thing in the world for a man at the head of a great business like Woolito, Limited, to lose two of his principal directors, one of them permanently."

He passed her the replenished glass.

"Life," he observed, "is full of inconveniences. I dare say Lord Marsom will get over it."

She looked at him severely.

"I wonder if you are as unsympathetic as you sound."

"I'm brimming over with sympathy, but why should I have any for Marsom?" he demanded. "He has had his own way for a long time now, and a pretty ruthless way, too, if people tell the truth. They say that he is one of the richest men in England. What more does he want?"

"He wants you to be a director of the Woolito Company, for one thing. He consulted me yesterday as to the best way of approaching you, so as to get a definite answer on the spot."

"Well, he has chosen the best way, if he has sent you as his ambassadress," Sandbrook smiled.

"I don't believe," she said deliberately, "that you have the faintest idea of ever taking your father's place on the board or of doing any work at all, for that matter. You are just marking time until you can find an excuse for getting back to Abyssinia."

"Clever girl!"

She snatched up her gloves and rose to her feet.

"I'm going," she announced abruptly.

"You can't do that," he protested. "You haven't finished your business."

"What do you mean?"

"Was not your business here to invite me to take a place upon the Woolito board immediately?"

"Partly," she admitted. "You know you don't mean to accept, so what's the use of talking about it?"

"On the contrary, you can go back to his lordship and tell him that his messenger has been successful."

Her face suddenly relaxed. Her eyes sought his sternly but wistfully.

"You're not in earnest?"

"But I am," he told her. "I found a telephone message from my lawyers when I returned this afternoon. My affairs have been settled. I own a very respectable number of Woolito shares and I am at your chief's disposition."

A smile broke from her lips. There was a great relief in her face.

"You don't know how I feel about this," she said softly.

"But why on earth should you attach so much importance," he asked, "to my joining the company?"

She passed her arm through his in friendly fashion.

"I cannot tell you," she confessed. "I have been stupid. I'm sorry now. I have had stupid ideas. I hope you won't find the work too dull," she went on in a lighter tone.

"If I do, I shall send for you to help me," he threatened.

She made a motion to withdraw her arm. He held it a little tighter, although he made no attempt to draw her nearer to him. His eyes seemed fixed upon a particular space in a distant corner of the room.

"It is sweet of you to worry about me," he said, "but you need not. You ought to have realised by now that I am not a serious person. So long as I get my golf, shooting and hunting in the winter, and my tennis and sea in the summer, I am fairly well content at home."

"Just why are you going on the board of Woolito?" she asked him bluntly.

"Partly for the pleasure of acceding to a request of yours," he replied, "and partly—for a purely personal reason."

She recognised the finality in his tone and asked no further question. At a motion from her, he rang the bell and they walked together towards the door.

"You have not told me anything about the dinner party," she reminded him.

"And I never shall. I hope I never think of it again myself. It was a hateful affair. Miss Pontifex, I admit, surprised me. I found her quite charming."

"Everyone is interested in her," Frances remarked, a little wistfully. "She knows all about the new schools of painting, of etching, of architecture, of music. She can pilot an aeroplane as well as she can drive a motor car. She can read French and Spanish as easily as she can read English. A very popular young woman, I can assure you, and she is free to dine with you any night you like."

"And you?" he persisted.

"I have to be entertained by a sub-editor and a paragraphist this week," she confided.

"I should be such a rest after these brainy fellows," he laughed.

"When I feel that I need that," she promised, as he handed her into the car, "I will ring you up."

CHAPTER XII

The major-domo of the great house in Park Lane drew Sandbrook to one side for a moment after his myrmidons had taken into their charge the hat, coat and gloves of the arriving guest.

"His lordship and—Miss Pontifex," the man confided, after a palpable hesitation, "are in the library. They wish to see you for a moment before the arrival of the other guests."

Sandbrook nodded and followed the speaker across the beautiful hall to the carved door of the library. Marsom was standing there upon the hearthrug, in a characteristic attitude, bolt upright except for his crouching shoulders and neck—a huge figure—the precision of whose evening attire seemed somehow curiously at variance with the unsubdued spirit of the man. Julia was standing by his side and Sandbrook almost started at the sight of her. She was dressed in white—a gown of apparently amazing simplicity, a gown which, fashioned by anyone but an artist, would have seemed immodest in its glimmering transparency and clinging outline. He wondered whether it was his fancy that she was a little nervous. Her eyes seemed to have followed him from his entrance. Although she scarcely spoke, she seemed to be asking him innumerable questions.

"Sandbrook," Marsom said, in his usual harsh voice, "I wanted a word with you alone before these other people came. You know that this is not a formal dinner party, by-the-by?"

"I quite understood that," Sandbrook replied.

"Two things to say to you," Marsom went on. "I am damned glad, Sandbrook, to hear the news. I could scarcely believe it when Miss Moore told me. I can't tell why I wanted you on the board so badly, but I did and you have come. I don't know what good you will be to us—very little, in one way, I should think. We sha'n't ask for much work from you, but I wanted you there and I thank you for coming."

He held out his hand and Sandbrook was thankful that his own were muscular fingers or they would have been crushed.

"There's a piece of news for you too," his host continued, in a lighter tone. "You know my girl here?"

Sandbrook smiled.

"Not as well as I should like to," he said. "Still, I think I may say that we are acquainted, Miss Julia, mayn't I?"

"That proves you aren't," her father answered. "She isn't Miss Julia any longer. She is Lady Julia. Got a step. I only had the news an hour ago. You will see it in the honours' list to-morrow. Quite a surprise. It doesn't make the slightest difference to me, and I don't think Julia cares a lot, but there it is. I am the Earl of Marsom and she is Lady Julia Pontifex. You are the first to know, and you need not think that you are going to drink our healths in cocktails," he added, with a grin. "That's one reason why I had you in here. 1822 Amontillado, young fellow."

Servants had entered noiselessly and sherry from a wonderful decanter flowed into beautifully cut glasses. Sandbrook made his courteous little speech and raised Julia's fingers to his lips.

"I'll still have to go out of the room after you," Marsom observed. "Still, that doesn't matter. Nothing in this world is worth having except for what it represents, and that is why I am glad of my earldom. I shall be proud of it, of course, but I am prouder still of the Woolito Company and the work and accomplishment it stands for. You have drunk our healths, Sandbrook. We will have one to Woolito, then we had better go into the drawing-room and meet these young people."

"I suppose this carousal to-night is in honour of the new dignity?" Sandbrook asked.

"It just doesn't happen to be, because we didn't know," Julia explained. "It's given for another of Dad's directors, a Mr. Bomford. He's becoming fond of them, now there are so few left! Mr. Bomford's daughter is going to be married in a few days and we are entertaining her and her young man."

"Bomford is a shrewd fellow," Marsom said. "You met him the night you came in here, Sandbrook. He's not your type, of course. You won't expect that. It's almost a family party, as you might say, looking upon Woolito, Limited as being a family gathering ground. There's Alfred Honeyman and his wife, Mayden-Harte, Mr. Moody, and Sidney Littleburn and his wife. Littleburn is our man of figures. Probably would have been Chancellor of the Exchequer, if sheer cunning

would have got him there."

"I'm afraid he and I would never be friends," Sandbrook smiled. "I can't even add up a column of figures."

"H'm," Marsom grunted. "Well, in that case, I am afraid you won't find much to talk about with Honeyman."

"And what is Mr. Bomford's special line?" Sandbrook asked.

"He is our man of commerce," Marsom said. "He studies the markets in the Far East and deals with our competitors. Shrewd fellow, too. We owe the Gleddowe Mills to him. A magnificent piece of ingenuity that was."

"Gleddowe—Gleddowe," Sandbrook repeated. "The name seems familiar."

"You've heard of their products, I dare say," Marsom observed. "They made the nearest thing to Woolito that ever has been made. If we had not chipped in, and Bomford hadn't been shrewd enough to buy them out, they would have been by far our most dangerous competitors."

"It was not commercially that I heard of them," Sandbrook reflected. "Of course, I know," he went on. "Young Jack Alleby—Sir Richard Alleby's son—behaved jolly badly to the girl, when her father lost all his money, and she committed suicide. It broke the old boy up altogether. He went to pieces afterwards himself. Gleddowe—yes, that was the name of the girl."

There was a momentary silence. The major-domo, who had entered the room noiselessly, ventured upon a slight smile.

"The guests are arriving, your lordship," he announced, "and—" to Julia—"your ladyship."

Julia laid her hand almost caressingly upon Sandbrook's coat sleeve.

"I hope you don't mind my feline habits," she said. "I'm quite sure I'm half a cat and half one of the Southern races, and not at all British. I love feeling things and people that I am fond of. There's that little jade image, for instance," she remarked, pointing to it as they passed into the hall. "I can take that up and pass my hands over it a dozen times. I like to hold on to people. I am sometimes sorry I am not an East Ender to go arm-in-arm with my young man everywhere. It seems so silly to march a yard apart from anyone you are with, if it is someone you are really fond of."

"I hope that means you are getting fond of me," he observed.

He felt her fingers suddenly slip down his sleeve towards his hand and they seemed to him feverishly hot.

"Perhaps you had better not hope anything of the sort," she half whispered. "I have, like my father, I think, a little of the tiger in me. I feel I could burn up and destroy anything I am fond of—if ever I got fond enough.... Of course, this is not the proper sort of conversation at all for these few moments! You are going to have a dull dinner party. You are going to meet some stupid people. You are going to be very agreeable, I'm sure, but you are going to be very bored. But be thankful for one thing. I knew what was happening, and I sent word to Dante—Dante superintends the butler and the service—that dinner was to be served just as fast as he could get the people to eat it! No lingering. They must be got rid of."

"Well, you are a very considerate hostess, at any rate," Sandbrook remarked, with a grin. "How do you know I want to be got rid of?"

"You need not be," she confided. "The party for you and for me shall end just when you please."

Sandbrook, after having devoted himself valiantly for some time to his right-hand neighbour, Lady Honeyman, a plump, fair-haired woman, voluble and easily satisfied with the ordinary formula of conversation, permitted himself to turn with relief to his hostess. He had a curious fancy that in the exquisitely softened light she resembled one of the velvety white orchids with which the table was simply decorated.

"Well," she challenged, "what do you think of it, dear stranger?"

"Impressions?"

"Precisely. I will admit that you have not had much time to collect any, but I did see you looking around when you

unfolded your napkin."

"Here is an impression for you, then," he said. "I was thinking that the only three things which make the difference in dinner parties, the only things which make the atmosphere, are the servants, the table and the lighting."

"What about the guests?"

"Somehow or other, they don't seem to matter. They all have to talk about the same way. They all have to dress in about the same fashion. They just fall into their places and complete the picture—that's all. Of course, there are always one or two who stand out. You yourself are unusual. Your father is unusual. None other of us is remarkable in any way. We all conform to the type of our sort, and it is amazing how a common form of conversation and a common habitude of dress bring us close together."

"I shouldn't consider you in the least like Mr. Bomford or Sir Alfred Honeyman or Mr. Mayden-Harte," she objected.

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "And yet we are all four wearing white shirts with three buttons and pearl studs, wing collars and ties of the same fashion. Our coats were cut probably by the same or a similar tailor—and there we are. And as for your womenkind. Well, after all, clothes make some difference but I should think they all patronise the same kind of dressmaker. And as to conversation, I have not heard a word about Woolito. Everyone is talking about two plays in particular, whether we are really going to have an opera season, what Augenier sketches are really like, and a few little trifles of that sort."

Mr. Bomford, who was seated on Julia's other side, leaned forward. He was a stiffly built, florid man with an immensely consequential air. He spoke with great deliberation and he loved the words he spoke so much that he parted with them regretfully.

"Did I hear you, Lord Sandbrook, mention the word 'Woolito'?"

"You did, indeed," the other assented.

"It is a source of great pleasure to myself, if you will permit me to say so," Mr. Bomford continued, "and to my fellow directors, to know, Lord Sandbrook, that you are joining the firm. You may have heard that I am one of the oldest associates."

"Lord Sandbrook knows very little about any of you up till now," Julia observed.

"He will find us out in time," Mr. Bomford went on. "The sooner, the better, I trust. You have met my daughter, Lord Sandbrook, in whose honour this party has been given?"

"I have had that pleasure," Sandbrook acquiesced.

"Also my wife, I trust?"

"I believe so."

"We shall be happy, in due course, to welcome you in Pomeroy Square. In the meantime, I trust that you will not consider it a liberty if I send you to-morrow a card to my daughter's wedding?"

"I shall receive it with much pleasure," Sandbrook said. "As to my attendance, I fear I cannot promise. I am not showing up at anything in the nature of a formal function at present."

"A marriage ceremony is an affair which stands by itself," Mr. Bomford pronounced. "Your position as a business associate encourages me to hope that you will see your way to be present. My wife and daughter would be greatly gratified. I myself should be pleased. Let me take this opportunity, Lord Sandbrook, of telling you that if you should desire intimate and comprehensive information as to the workings and the nature of the business with which you have become connected, you can obtain these with the utmost pleasure from me. A few quiet evenings together at Pomeroy Square, or wherever you may prefer, will be quite sufficient. I have lectured in various parts of England upon the commodity we manufacture, and I have all the facts at my fingers' ends."

"You are very kind, Mr. Bomford."

Lord Marsom rose suddenly in his place.

"I beg you to drink the health of Miss Bomford and Mr. Mervyn Nealby," he proposed, "and to join with me in wishing them happiness."

Everyone raised their glasses and everyone was relieved when the young people contented themselves with a bow of thanks. Mr. Bomford showed signs of rising to his feet. Julia pulled him down.

"Mr. Bomford," she said, "Father specially stipulated that there should be no speeches of any sort."

"Not even a word to return thanks?" Mr. Bomford argued.

Julia saw a little roll of paper under his plate but she was merciless.

"Not one single word," she insisted, "unless you want to annoy Father."

To annoy Lord Marsom was the last thing Mr. Bomford wanted to do, so with a stifled groan he resumed his place. Whilst he was surreptitiously returning the manuscript to his pocket, Julia edged a little nearer to her neighbour.

"Don't be too terrified," she whispered. "He's the worst of the lot, by a long way. The prospective bridegroom is quite a good-looking young man, isn't he?"

"The girl is pretty too," he agreed. "They seem to be amusing themselves all right."

"By fits and starts," Julia pointed out. "Curiously enough, I have been watching them. I think the girl is a trifle hysterical."

"You may be right," Sandbrook acquiesced. "The young man has the air of one committed to a desperate enterprise, and yet every now and then they seem to cheer one another up most successfully. Marriage nowadays seems to have lost either its fear or its charm," he went on meditatively. "Even the last time I was in London, people used to be a bit self-conscious about it for a day or two beforehand, and if you met them on their honeymoon, you were almost supposed not to notice them. The other day I met a young couple I know quite well, arm-in-arm the day before the ceremony, going to a cinema, and they begged me to come and have lunch with them the day afterwards!"

"I don't think there is such a thing as self-consciousness left," Julia sighed, "except amongst very sensitive people, like myself. If ever I am married, no one will know it."

"You mean that the bells won't ring in Hanover Square?"

"Nor anywhere else. I should like to be married quite unexpectedly. It is the one American institution I approve of. You can be proposed to at dinner and married before supper. Whether it is marriage or not," she added coolly, "that's what will happen to me some day.... I once met your aunt, Lord Sandbrook."

"What, Aunt Agatha!" he exclaimed. "She was one of the naughtiest old ladies in London."

"I liked her outlook and she was terribly witty," Julia reflected, with a reminiscent smile. "I remember hearing her say that the only indecent thing about matrimony was its prurient Victorianism."

Sandbrook turned back to his right-hand neighbour.

"Our hostess is shocking me with family anecdotes," he confided. "I have a very wicked old aunt to whom all the improper things that are said in London are attributed."

"Tell me this one," Lady Honeyman begged.

"I daren't," he acknowledged. "Besides, I don't really quite understand it. Have you any family, Lady Honeyman?"

"None whatever, except my husband," she replied, "and he takes more looking after than any child."

"I'm surprised," Sandbrook said. "He looks so amiable over there."

"Oh, he's amiable enough," his spouse confessed. "A very earnest man and a very good one. He loves work and little

else. Middle-aged business men are all like that nowadays, I suppose. In the lower orders, the men so often take to drink. With us, they seem to take to charitable deeds and work. The woman suffers, anyway."

"I thought nowadays woman was completely emancipated," he plodded on.

"That depends upon what her looking-glass tells her," Lady Honeyman sighed. "The only alternative is—I am letting you into secrets, mind, which don't concern respectable middle-aged women like myself—plenty of money, freedom to go to the south of France and a taste for gigolos."

"Most astonishingly modern London seems to have become since I was here last," he observed.

"Sir Alfred," Julia drawled, "your wife is becoming improper. I am going to take her away."

Sandbrook breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. He lit a cigarette and moved down the table. A little man with a wisp of a moustache and a thin, wizened face drew up his chair. His voice, when he spoke, was high-pitched, precise but unpleasant.

"I arrived too late to be introduced," he said. "My name is Littleburn. I look after the finances of the firm. That side of it won't trouble you much, I think, Lord Sandbrook."

Lord Marsom rose to his feet—ponderous, non-apologetic, almost abrupt.

"We are ordered into the lounge," he announced. "It's an informal evening, though. Anyone who prefers a glass or two more port may stay."

There was not a soul there who had the courage to prefer a glass or two more port. There was more than one longing look at the decanter, but they all followed their host.

CHAPTER XIII

At a retired table in a small restaurant in the purlieu of Soho on the following evening, two young people—Marian Bomford, for whom the dinner party in Park Lane had been given on the previous evening, and George Argels, a strong, healthy-looking young man with frank eyes and pleasant face—sat almost ignoring the two-shilling *table d'hôte* dinner which, although naturally it could not compare with the Marsom banquet, was really good enough to deserve a better fate. It was not the first meal by many they had shared under similar conditions, but this time there was excitement in the air. Something important to discuss, a rift at last in the clouds which had seemed impenetrable.

"You see," Argels finally pointed out, at the conclusion of a long argument, "your father will work himself up into such a state about the whole affair that he will really be relieved when he knows the truth."

The girl sighed.

"Of course, it will work out all right in the end," she admitted, "but you can't imagine how embarrassing it is even to pretend to be engaged to some other man. The dinner party last night at Lord Marsom's was awful. People kept on congratulating us and I didn't know what to say. Mr. Nealby was all right—I think he must have done a little amateur acting in his day!—but I felt a perfect ninny."

"I am sure you came out of it beautifully, dear," her companion assured her, patting her hand.

"I felt stupid enough," she confessed. "I'm sure everyone put me down as being a nice, shy sort of girl! Then, afterwards in the lounge, to make things worse, I heard Mother confiding to Lady Honeyman that she was especially delighted the way things had turned out, because there had been a young man in the background, of whom she had had suspicions, who was not at all desirable. I'm sure she meant you, George."

Her companion chuckled.

"I'm certain she did," he agreed.

"It gets more and more embarrassing," she went on. "These last few evenings they have left us together more than ever. Supposing he tries to play the engaged young man in earnest!"

"Mervyn is too good a fellow for that," George Argels declared. "We were at school together, so I know all about him. Of course, I'm not liking it, but I know I can trust you both. And, Marian dear—think of it—it seems to me to be the only way. I get a thousand pounds! Quite enough for the start I want in Canada. Mervyn gets the same, which I should think would just about pay for his holiday in London."

For a time they yielded to the mild importunities of their waiter and devoted themselves to the dinner. Marian, however, grew more and more thoughtful.

"George dear," she said presently, "what I cannot help asking myself, whenever I think about this extraordinary offer is,—what does the person gain who is giving a couple of thousand pounds away in such a ridiculous manner?"

"Even Mervyn doesn't know that," the young man confessed, "and I'm not going to bother my head about it. I should think it's someone your father's run up against somehow or other. He is by way of being a little difficult now and then, isn't he?"

"He certainly is," Marian agreed drily.

"Here's Mervyn," her companion announced, as a tall young man entered the restaurant and glanced around. "Looks rather a toff, doesn't he, for a place like this?"

The very well-turned-out young man of the night before waved his hand and approached their table. He greeted them both cheerily and accepted a chair.

"No, I won't have anything, thanks," he replied, in answer to Argels' invitation. "I just looked in to ask my 'fiancée' how she thought we got through last night?"

Marian laughed a little nervously.

"I suppose it was all right," she murmured, without enthusiasm.

"I thought you went through it splendidly," the newcomer declared. "I must confess, however, that the nearer we get to business, the less I understand this stunt. All that I can see clearly about it is that a thousand quid is going to do me a bit of good!"

"And me," Argels echoed.

The newcomer rose to his feet and picked up his silk hat from the chair on which he had deposited it. He smiled good-humouredly at the girl.

"At any rate, Miss Bomford," he observed, "you will have to confess that I am one of the best-behaved fiancés in the world. What do you say to borrowing the car for our last afternoon to-morrow? George here can drive it out into the country and then I will have a quiet smoke somewhere, while he takes my job over? How does that go?"

"It sounds all right to me," Argels declared fervently.

"It doesn't sound badly to me," Marian confessed.

Mr. John Henry Bomford of Pomeroy Square, a man of wealth and substance since he had become a director of Woolito, Limited, was a great personage these days. He was also, even when there was nothing particular to talk about, a great talker. The domestic event which had taken him entirely by surprise was fuel for his conceit and adequate material for his tongue. His daughter, the daughter of Mr. John Henry Bomford, was engaged to be married. It appeared that she was marrying, if not into the peerage itself, into the outskirts of it. The story of the first meeting of the young people and their subsequent engagement seemed, somehow or other, to have been entirely due to the benevolent efforts of Mr. Bomford, mildly assisted by the Deity in the background. What a fortunate daughter! What a kindly and at the same time Machiavellian father! His bumptiousness seemed to increase hour by hour, from the evening of Lord Marsom's dinner party to the date appointed for the solemnization of his daughter's marriage. In his City club and in the offices of Woolito, Limited, he became such a nuisance that his associates began to avoid him. His discourses were always in the same key.

"My son-in-law that is to be, you know. Young Nealby, nephew of Sir George Nealby—in America just now, unfortunately. Important diplomatic mission. Fine fellow, young Nealby. You're coming to the wedding? That's right. St. James's, Hamilton Square, mind. Two-thirty at the church and Claridge's Hotel afterwards. You'll find everything done all right there. I always promised the girls when they made their choice they should have a proper send-off."

"Can't someone muzzle old Bomford?" they groaned at the club.

"The old man is getting worse," they muttered at the offices. "He was wondering yesterday whether we couldn't close for the day so that everyone could go to his wretched daughter's wedding."

"Anyone would think it was Father who was getting married," Marian confided to her mother, in a final fit of irritation. "He talks about Mervyn and the church and our trip and the wedding reception and everything as though I were getting married for his special glorification. He has had at least four pairs of trousers sent home, each lighter than the last, before he was satisfied, and now he has decided to change his tie and to wear a white flower, after all."

"You must make allowances for your father, my dear," the poor, shadowy lady who called herself Mrs. Bomford sighed. "He has been like this all his life. People call him bumptious and conceited, and so I suppose he is, but anyhow, he has worked hard. Remember, you were born in a four-roomed cottage, and look where you are now."

"Oh, don't you get like Father," the girl cried. "To hear him talk, anyone would think that he had invented Mervyn, that he had found him and trained him and educated him purposely to be his son-in-law! The fact that I met Mervyn long before he ever heard his name never seems to have occurred to him."

"Well, you'll be getting away altogether before long," her mother reminded her, with a wistful sigh.

"Good job too," was Marian's undutiful comment. "I don't know what we shall do with Father at the church. He won't be

content to stand anywhere but in the front place.

"My dear," her mother exclaimed, "he will wear himself out before it's all over. What do you think he did yesterday? He made me send a card of invitation to Lord Sandbrook, that nice young man we met at the Marsom's. Why, we scarcely know him!"

"He's a friend of Julia Pontifex's," the girl remarked absently.

"Well, I hope he doesn't come," her mother sighed. "Your father will be running about, introducing him to everybody all the time, and I know most of the people will be laughing at us."

"I don't care," the girl replied, with a twinkle in her eyes. "And if I were you, Mother, I shouldn't worry about the reception."

Mr. John Henry Bomford was one of the practical men in the great firm of Woolito, Limited. Just as Sir Sigismund Lunt was, or had been, the engineer, he was the out-and-out man of business. He was a man of altogether different type to his fellow workers, however. He was short, stout and red-cheeked, but he lacked the air of *bonhomie* which his figure and complexion demanded. He walked with a swagger, he talked with a swagger, he drew every breath of life with a swagger. He was proud of himself—John Henry Bomford. He was proud in a lesser degree of his daughters. He was even proud, inasmuch as she belonged to him and wore his jewellery, of his faded shadow of a wife. He had been a bully from the moment his muscles had hardened, a snob from the day he donned his first black coat and his bank account had commenced to swell. His immediate circle of employees detested him, and the group of mills in Nottinghamshire which he had first broken and then reorganised—reorganised was the word they used—said murderous things about him behind his back. John Henry Bomford had not the slightest regard for any of these things. He had never aimed at or craved popularity from the human point of view. What he wanted was admiration and recognition, for people to turn around in the street and remark that the well-dressed man with the commanding bearing was John Henry Bomford, of Woolito's—a very important person in the City. With it all he was not actually a fool. He knew very well that this young man whom his daughter had introduced to the household was of a different class to the one from which he had sprung. He pretended not to appreciate the fact, but it made him lenient in his enquiries, credulous as to his would-be son-in-law's statements regarding his position and prospects in Canada. It was quite sufficient for him that he had a connection as aristocratic in appearance and bearing as the uncle whom he had brought to see them; that during his stay in London he had played golf at Ranelagh; and that he could talk about titled people with the ease of one accustomed to their society. The young man, too, had been surprisingly moderate in his money demands. Nothing at all until after the wedding, he had insisted. No settlements. After the honeymoon, they would have a meeting and Mr. Bomford could see what sum he cared to allow his daughter before her departure for Canada. All very satisfactory! Probably the young man was only too anxious to get such a father-in-law.

The climax of Mr. Bomford's rejoicing came perhaps on the day when his prospective son-in-law had called to lunch with him in the City and they had come face to face with Sandbrook who, finding himself in the neighbourhood, had looked in to call on Lord Marsom. The two young men had exchanged the usual greetings.

"Hello, it's Nealby, isn't it?" Sandbrook had said, nodding pleasantly. "What are you doing in these parts?"

"Come to lunch with my father-in-law that-is-to-be, Mr. Bomford," was the easy reply.

"By Jove!" Sandbrook exclaimed. "Of course. I had forgotten for the moment that it was you who are marrying Bomford's daughter. Congratulations!"

Sandbrook had passed on with a few more civil words, but the meeting—unimportant though it had seemed—had put the cap on Mr. Bomford's satisfaction. It gave him even more pleasure than the great dinner party in Park Lane. It was a wonderful affair, this which he had arranged. It was a great triumph for the family. The family was Mr. John Henry Bomford.

"Mother," the prospective bride implored, a few days before the ceremony, "do you think you could stop Father talking about Mervyn's pal, Lord Sandbrook? I'm sure Mervyn will hate it if he ever gets to know. He told me distinctly that he

had only met Lord Sandbrook once or twice."

Mrs. Bomford shook her head. There was hopelessness in the gesture.

"No one who was ever born, my dear," she confided, "could stop your father from talking about anything he wanted to. Especially, if it was anything which he thought reflected a little glory upon himself. I gave up years ago. You're lucky to be getting away from it!"

"I sometimes think," the girl meditated, "it sounds an inhuman thing to say, but I mean it—that a severe illness would do Father good. He has too much vitality."

CHAPTER XIV

Marian looked on her wedding day as a girl should look—better than ever before in her life; although, as one of the bridesmaids, probably with a touch of envy, remarked under her breath, that was not saying much. Mr. Bomford, on the other hand, had been a trouble to everyone all the morning. First, his patent-leather shoes were too tight and drew his feet. Then he crumpled the chosen cravat, in his efforts to tie it. Then, in the heat and excitement, his collar had wilted. However, in due course, with the help of everyone, he was satisfied and strutted downstairs to where his daughter was waiting. She looked up, expecting at least one glance of parental admiration, but failed to obtain it. Mr. Bomford had remembered a mirror in the hall, and his fingers were playing with his tie.

"All the other carriages have gone, Father," the bride ventured to remind him.

He extended his arm.

"Come with me," he invited.

The bells were chiming their loudest as they turned the corner of the square and pulled up between two long rows of sight-seers. Any passer-by who had counted upon getting a glimpse of the bride, however, was disappointed, for Mr. Bomford, leaning forward, had completely monopolised the interior of the carriage.

"Quite a good many people," he said complacently, as he alighted. "Now then, my dear, don't lean too heavily on me. I mustn't have my coat crushed. This way. We follow the bridesmaids and don't forget to walk slowly."

They passed up the stone steps. Rather to their surprise, the bridesmaids were still in the outside porch. The verger hurried out to meet them with a look of concern upon his face.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Bomford demanded abruptly. "Why isn't everyone in his place? Just because I couldn't get down here myself, I suppose everything is in confusion."

"The trouble is the bridegroom, sir," the verger confided.

"What about the bridegroom?"

"Well, he hasn't arrived, sir. Neither has the best man."

Mr. Bomford was for a moment speechless.

"Not arrived," he spluttered. "Disgraceful!"

There was an uneasy murmur of voices from the back of the church, where Mr. Bomford's angry outpourings were plainly to be heard.

"What are we to do?" the bride asked the verger.

"His car has probably met with some mishap," the man said soothingly. "If you will turn in a little to the left, there is a sheltered corner. It would be better for you to wait there, out of sight."

"Have the guests all arrived?" Mr. Bomford asked.

"The church is full, sir."

"Is Lord Sandbrook here, do you know?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"Disgraceful of Mervyn," Mr. Bomford muttered. "I hate waiting in these tight shoes. I told Emma that if I had to wait about in them, my feet would suffer. I shall be in misery throughout the whole ceremony. Perfectly disgraceful of him! Here's a car. Is this he?"

The car, however, only contained more guests, who passed on into the church. The bells paused for a moment or two and then went on. The minutes passed. Finally the clergyman, looking very much upset, came out to consult.

"Where does the bridegroom live?" he enquired.

"He has been staying in rooms in Clarges Street, Number Thirteen," Marian answered.

"He was to have stayed with his old friend, Lord—" Mr. Bomford began.

"I should suggest that you send a messenger in a car there at once," the vicar interrupted kindly. "I am afraid that unless he comes very quickly, it will be too late. Probably, though, Mr. Nealby is already on his way. The traffic in the streets at this hour is terrible."

The messenger was sent, but without result. The minutes passed and there were no signs of the arrival of anyone, except one or two belated guests. Mr. Bomford's vociferations were such that the verger had to take him by the arm and lead him into a retired corner. Marian herself was by far the most composed of the little company. At five minutes to the appointed hour the clergyman reappeared.

"I'm very sorry," he announced regretfully, "but it would be too late now to perform the ceremony. It will have to be abandoned for to-day."

Presently whispers went around the church and the rumour of something wrong spread. The guests came streaming out. The bride and bridesmaids had already gone. Mr. Bomford, with a face redder than any turkey-cock, and a shower of words falling from his lips which would have rendered him liable to arrest at any moment, was on his way to Claridge's to countermand the arrangements for the reception. Upon his return to Hyde Park Square, his wife, without any comment, handed him a letter.

"What's this? What's this?" he exclaimed. "Can't read it—I won't read anything."

"It's from Marian," his wife told him.

"What's Marian got to write about?" he demanded.

"Better read it and see."

Mr. Bomford tore open the envelope and read.

"MY DEAR FATHER,

I cannot face any of my friends after this horrible morning. I have done what I have been wanting to do for some time. I have run away with George Argels, your chauffeur.

"You will be terribly angry, of course, but you ought not to mind so much. His family is quite as good as ours and he has a little money. Anyhow, I care for him and I know I shall be happy. I'm afraid you will be very angry but there is nothing you can do about it. We are on our way to Canada. Mother will know where to write.

Your affectionate daughter,

MARIAN."

The letter fluttered from Mr. Bomford's fingers and he sank into a chair. For the first time in his life words failed him.

Frances Moore found Sandbrook that afternoon writing letters in the library of his house in Hill Street. She waited until the door was closed before she spoke.

"You are not going to the wedding reception?" she asked, looking at his tweed suit.

"Not I," he answered. "They sent me an invitation, but I only know young Nealby to nod to, and as for Bomford—well, although he is a fellow director of your beloved Woolito—I must confess that I can't stand him."

"You know what happened?"

"Not an idea," he replied. "To judge from your expression, something pretty tragic."

"The bridegroom never turned up!"

"What, never turned up at the church?"

She nodded.

"Everyone was there, including the bride. They waited until the last minute, but neither he nor his best man put in an appearance."

"Heavens!" Sandbrook exclaimed. "What was the explanation?"

"There wasn't any. He left for the Continent by the nine o'clock train without sending even a message."

"Had there been a quarrel?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"Young swine!" Sandbrook ejaculated.

Frances seemed altogether unduly moved. She was standing quite still, she was very pale, and there had been a note almost of pain in the few words she had spoken. Sandbrook, suddenly realising her condition, led her to an easy chair and ensconced her there comfortably.

"My dear Miss Moore," he remonstrated, "you mustn't take other people's troubles so much to heart! You look quite upset."

"I think it's terrible," she declared. "First of all, there was the destruction of the Lunt machine, then the Somerville tragedy, and now about the most humiliating and horrible thing that could happen to the most conceited and opinionated man the world ever knew—to say nothing of his poor daughter! I am not sympathising with him particularly, but I think no man ever suffered before as he did. They say that he smashed all the furniture in the room in which he locked himself up, and now that he's a little quieter, he's sobbing like a child and swearing that he will never go out again."

"He has been rather above himself lately, hasn't he?" Sandbrook observed.

"I call it a perfectly dastardly affair," Frances Moore insisted.

"I entirely agree with you," he admitted. "There may be some explanation to come later, though."

"I hope to heavens Scotland Yard or somebody will find out who is behind all this devilish business," she went on furiously. "Think! There was the Tottenham fire, the Somerville tragedy and this. All the time it is the directors of the Woolito Company who suffer."

"There doesn't seem very much connection between the burning of the Tottenham sheds and the failure of young Nealby to turn up at the church to-day," he ventured to point out.

"You haven't heard about the wedding present, I suppose?" she demanded.

"My dear Miss Frances," he expostulated, "how should I? I have never been near Bomford's house and I hadn't the faintest intention of going to the reception. How should I know anything about the present? I only got the invitation myself at the last moment, so I didn't think it was necessary to send one."

"Well, listen," she insisted. "Amongst them was a small engraved silver box; inside it the Egyptian finger of fate and a card—just like the others—with something written upon it about an Elizabeth Gleddowes, who had committed suicide."

"Elizabeth Gleddowes!" Sandbrook repeated, with a puzzled frown. "Now, who on earth was she? Come in—Come in!" he added impatiently.

The door was thrown open. Lord Marsom, beautifully dressed in the costume of a wedding guest, made turbulent appearance. He had evidently pushed the butler out of the way and he showed signs of considerable mental disturbance. Sandbrook rose to his feet.

"Lord Marsom!" he exclaimed.

"Saw one of my cars outside, so I looked in to see who it was," Marsom explained. "What's brought you here, Miss Moore?"

"Nothing," she answered composedly. "I simply came in to bring Lord Sandbrook the news of the wedding."

Marsom's face was still like a thundercloud. He made no comment, however.

"Have you heard the latest?" he demanded.

"What about?" Sandbrook enquired.

"The Bomford affair."

"Miss Moore has just told me that the bridegroom never turned up," Sandbrook replied.

"There's a worse development than that," Marsom announced. "Do you know what's happened to the bride?"

Sandbrook shook his head.

"Poor girl," he murmured. "Very much upset, I expect."

"She's gone off with a chauffeur," Marsom exploded. "Bolted with him during the afternoon, when everything was in confusion. Left a note saying she had always cared for him more than anyone else, and she couldn't stand facing her friends after this morning. They say that Bomford has locked himself in his room and is smashing the furniture to pieces!"

"Sensible girl!" Miss Frances Moore exclaimed, with a distinctly relieved expression.

"Poor old Bomford," Sandbrook commiserated.

CHAPTER XV

Julia Pontifex had advanced one step farther in the accomplishment of her heart's desire. She was seated at the most desirable corner table of a famous and dignified restaurant, alone with Sandbrook. Conversation on a somewhat bantering note, perhaps, was still proceeding in pleasant and familiar fashion. A great many other diners in the room had taken note of her presence there and nearly all the women had looked twice at her gown. The famous orchestra was playing very beautiful music, but soon they would be succeeded by the most successful dance band in Europe. If she had failed as yet to break through a certain reserve in her companion which she, a very sensitive person, had always appreciated, she had at least kept him amused, even if she had once or twice shocked him... A tall and very dignified-looking old gentleman, with the collar of Palmerston and the side whiskers of Pitt, paused for a moment at their table. He bowed very slightly but courteously to Julia before he addressed Sandbrook.

"My dear Martin," he said, "I had no idea that this was one of your haunts."

Sandbrook had risen promptly to his feet.

"It isn't, sir," he confessed. "I am afraid, as a rule, I prefer something a little more frivolous."

"Will you not present me to your companion?"

Sandbrook hastened to obey.

"Lady Julia," he said, "this is my uncle, the Duke of Amersham. Lady Julia Pontifex."

The Duke was a little puzzled, for he knew his peerage by heart, but he was too polite to show it.

"I must apologize for breaking in upon your tête-à-tête," he said to Julia, "but we so seldom see my nephew. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to wonder whether he was not off again on one of his mad expeditions."

"Nothing madder than a fortnight's salmon fishing in prospect," Sandbrook declared. "Aunt and all the family well, I hope, sir?"

The Duke inclined his head.

"They are down in Warwickshire for a few days," he confided. "My wife," he went on, turning to Julia, "is a great gardener. She must see her bulbs the moment they are out of the ground. You must bring Lady Julia down to see them some day, Martin, and we will give you lunch. With the type of car in which my nephew delights, we are scarcely more than two hours away from town."

"It would be very pleasant," Julia murmured gratefully.

Julia that night, at any rate, did not lack distinction. She was pale because she was anxious, and she had been too clever to try and interfere with a pallor which was by no means unbecoming. Her lips were naturally scarlet. Her dark hair, parted in the middle and allowed to droop at the sides, looked perfectly natural, although it had demanded the attention of the most famous coiffeur in London for over an hour. The Duke was interested.

"I am developing infirmities," he observed, "in these, my elderly days. I did not quite catch your second name, Lady Julia."

"I am afraid it would be unfamiliar," she told him. "You see, my father only received his title last week. Before then, he was known as Baron Marsom."

If there was any change in the Duke's expression, it was simply one of faint regret. His smile was as pleasant and courteous as ever, as he took his leave.

"It was stupid of me not to remember," he said. "Of course, I remember reading about it, and that Pontifex was your family name. Well, don't forget that little expedition into Warwickshire, Lady Julia. The Duchess will, I am sure, be delighted to welcome you."

He passed down the room with a farewell nod to his nephew.

"What a delightful old gentleman," Julia exclaimed.

"He is one of the old school, all right," Sandbrook acquiesced.

Lady Julia watched his disappearing figure as her companion resumed his seat.

"Is it my fancy," she asked, "or didn't I hear that he disapproved of your father taking a place upon the Woolito board?"

Sandbrook nodded.

"He has old-fashioned ideas," he apologised. "He doesn't think that a nobleman should stoop to making money. Must give him a pretty good shock to stroll round Mayfair nowadays, especially if one took the trouble to tell him who was at the back of some of those small hat shops and dressmakers', and even coiffeurs', establishments. Prejudice dies hard with the living, I suppose. The next generation will have got more used to the new order of things."

"Does he know that you have become a director of Woolito's?" Julia asked.

"If he does, he has not said anything to me about it," Sandbrook replied, a little evasively.

"Why have you?" she persisted.

"Well, why should I not? It is one of the world's most famous trading concerns, I suppose. It gives one a fair amount of pocket money and the directors—are all very interesting men. There's one of them seated over there. He has been trying to catch your eye for the last ten minutes. Mr. Sidney Littleburn, I think he is."

She glanced across in the direction indicated. Mr. Sidney Littleburn was not a person of distinguished appearance and he seemed a little out of place in his grandiose surroundings. His wife's toilette, which was assertive, savoured more of Oxford Street than Mayfair. Their table was one of the least desirable in the room. They seemed somewhat neglected in the matter of service. Julia laughed softly.

"I should think that horrible Somerville affair would have pretty well sickened you of Dad's chosen business associates," she remarked. "Confess—you would not care to make a third in that *galère*, would you?"

He ignored the obvious significance of the question and exchanged a moderately civil nod with Littleburn, who had just succeeded in catching his eye.

"I don't know that I have heard much about Littleburn," he said thoughtfully. "He is the man, I think, who went down to superintend the finances of some of those Nottinghamshire Mills. Your father told me he was a most astute financier."

"He may be," Julia agreed nonchalantly. "Qualities of that sort do not appeal to me. I would really rather you had nothing whatever to do with business. I like everyone I have any interest in to be as far away from my own life and environment as possible."

"Finance makes either giants or pigmies of men," he propounded. "Now, I must do your father the credit to say that it has made a giant of him. I do not know whether I like or dislike your father, Lady Julia, but I admire him."

"Well, that's something," she replied. "I wish you admired me."

"I could think of a more suitable word," he remarked, smiling at her in the way she found so tantalising.

"What would the word be?"

"*Touché*," he admitted. "You are too rapier-like, Lady Julia. I can only say that I admire you too, but in a different fashion."

"I wish you admired me in the right way," she sighed. "I am really not so bad.... Do you know that yesterday was my birthday?"

"Then I think it was very unkind of you," he said, "not to have told me."

"I will make amends," she promised. "I will give you a chance to give me a birthday present."

"Very much at your disposition," he murmured.

"Drive me," she invited, "a little way down into the country—not to-morrow; I have a whole host of stupid engagements—Thursday. I can sweep the page for Thursday."

"There being no directors' meeting," he said, smiling, "I am free. At what hour shall I call for you?"

"At ten o'clock."

"And about what hour shall we be likely to return?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps not at all," she said. "I would not make any arrangements for returning, if I were you."

"I had a dinner party," he ventured.

"Cancel it," she ordered, with a touch of her father's brusqueness. "You are quoted in all the papers as being a famous explorer. I am going to take you on a voyage of exploration, only, you see, I know what we are going to find. I am going to take you into a new country, where new habits and new customs prevail. You will not be afraid to trust yourself with me?"

His momentary hesitation was not without its significance. As a matter of fact, he was a little afraid. There were no signs of it, however, in his tone or manner.

"I will draw," he promised her, "upon all my reserves of courage."

"The loan of you for the day is my birthday present."

"A very poor one, I fear," he laughed. "Wet or fine?"

"Wet or fine," she insisted firmly. "If it is fine, you can drive me down in your two-seater, if you like. If it is wet, we will take one of Father's new atrocities. Armchairs and bijou bars and that sort of thing."

"May heaven grant that it be fine!" he prayed fervently.

CHAPTER XVI

An early spring day came to London and, notwithstanding her unuttered, almost unacknowledged regrets, Julia was whirled away into the country in Sandbrook's somewhat exposed but exceedingly comfortable two-seater. Following her directions—he was not permitted a map—they drove almost due southwards, far out of the region of soot and smoke, to where the tender green grasses lay like an emerald carpet upon the Downs, and the tang of the sea winds was soft and sweetened by the April sunshine. A turn to the right brought them into the country of fir plantations and woods of waxen-budded beeches, copses flushed with bluebells, primroses starring the sheltered ditches, and the most fragrant violets in the world peeping timidly out of the hawthorn-guarded hedgerows. In the by-way villages, stiff rows of crocuses lent splashes of colour to the cottage gardens, and more ambitious beds of hyacinths adorned the vicarage grounds. Everywhere was the twitter of birds, the rollicking puffs of pollen-carrying wind, from which the sting had departed, blue skies, the slow uplifting of winter's hand from the yearning land. They both of them decided that England was a very beautiful country.

"I suppose you know that we are nearing the New Forest?" he ventured.

"We are almost at our journey's end," she assured him lazily.

He left the wheel to her while he lit a cigarette. There had been very little conversation on the way down. The exigencies of the traffic had kept him silent and later on something in the atmosphere, which he was swift to sense, warned him of his companion's curiously nervous, almost neurotic, frame of mind. She too, however, seemed to be revelling in the silence. She lay back very close to his side, with the air of one utterly and languorously content. She had withdrawn her gloves and her slender white fingers, entirely ringless, once or twice touched almost caressingly his share of the rug which covered them.

"This is just such a day as I prayed I might have for my birthday gift," she murmured once. "Away from London here, it all seems so full of life—birds and flowers and winds and everything. One gets a little crushed in a city."

"And yet you blame me for my journeyings," he reminded her.

"It isn't quite the same thing," she objected. "When you get to the top of this next hill, do you mind stopping for a moment?"

He obeyed. It was certainly a very beautiful spot in which to linger. The road was almost like an avenue passing through a great forest—a curling ribbon of white, visible here and there for miles in front of them. On either side, free of any hedge or ditch, stretched the gorse-dotted common, the orange buds already showing a dim flush of colour. She showed him a thin strip of the sea plainly visible now below them to the south.

"What a lovely spot," he murmured, half to himself.

She pointed to a cleft in the hills to the right. By leaning slightly forward, he caught a flash of rhododendron bushes and a vision of thatched gables.

"That," she told him, "is our destination."

"Heavens!" he murmured. "Are we going to pay a call?"

"Not a very alarming one," she assured him. "You have driven like a hero for three hours. Doesn't the idea of an apéritif or luncheon begin to suggest itself?"

"Now that you mention it," he admitted, "there is something curiously inviting in the thought. Is that an hotel?"

"Drive up to it," she enjoined, "and you will see."

He obeyed. Soon they turned off the main road into a narrow lane and arrived in front of some old iron gates. The lodge keeper threw them open with a respectful salute.

"Not an hotel," he remarked, a touch of disappointment in his tone. "Are we booked for a visit?"

"Wait," she begged him.

They threaded their way along an avenue of chestnut trees, already faintly pink and white, and bordered by clumps of rhododendrons on either side. In the farther background was a stretch of meadowland, leading to an open common. As they turned the last bend, and the house which they were approaching came into sight, Sandbrook felt himself unable to refrain from a little exclamation of admiration. The house itself was of no particular period, perhaps. It had started Tudor, been cunningly restored, and preserved still its air of antiquity. The grass patches in front were aflower with crocuses. There was a great hyacinth bed in the middle of the final sweep.

"Whom are we going to visit?" he asked curiously, as he brought the car to a standstill.

"Does it matter?" she enquired.

"I was wondering whether those cocktails were likely to materialise," he confessed greedily.

"Then you need wonder no longer," she assured him. "I shall mix them myself."

The front door stood open. A grey-haired man-servant bowed his welcome. A younger subordinate hurried to the car and relieved them of their rugs. Julia shook out her skirts and smiled at her companion. For a moment or two she seemed to have lost her assurance. There was something a little diffident, something curiously girlish, about her expression. As she laid her fingers upon his shoulder, her eyes were anxiously fixed upon his.

"You hate mystery, don't you?" she said. "There's no mystery about this little place. It was my father's birthday present to me. He thought I might like to have a secret pleasure house where I could entertain my real friends in absolute solitude."

"A marvellous idea," he murmured.

The butler took a step forward and ventured upon a smile.

"The household wish me to offer their congratulations, your ladyship," he said.

"Thank you, Dobson," she answered. "You got all the instructions from Park Lane, I suppose?"

"Everything is prepared as your ladyship desired," the man replied. "Perhaps the gentleman would like to wash before luncheon?"

"In a moment," Julia interposed. "First of all, we want a cocktail, Dobson; then I shall show Lord Sandbrook over the cottage myself."

The man led the way to a charming room upon the ground floor, a room in which the leaded windowpanes and most of the old panelling still remained. A number of bottles, beautifully shaped glasses and silver shakers were set out in inviting fashion.

"I suppose I ought to have had a bar here," Julia remarked, drawing off her gloves and making a selection of the bottles. "Somehow, though, I didn't fancy it went with the room. That will do, Dobson. Have luncheon at half-past one. I will ring if we want anything."

The man, with a quiet bow, departed. For some reason or other, Julia seemed to have become nervous. She mixed cocktails, however, wonderful foaming cocktails, and handed Sandbrook his glass.

"We must drink to the house," he proposed.

"Like the Norwegians," she added, smiling at him. "To the house and the happiness it may bring."

They emptied their two glasses and afterwards Sandbrook was turned loose in a small but perfect masculine suite, with bathroom and shower bath, a complete set of such toilet appurtenances as a man can reasonably borrow, wardrobes filled with tennis and golf clothes and even a dinner suit, shoes and cravats all perfectly new. The sitting-room, with its deep easy chairs, contained a small library of men's books. Some rare sporting prints hung upon the walls. There were boxes of cigars and cigarettes upon the mantelpiece and a hospitably opened cellarette in one corner. Whilst he was still exploring, he heard Julia's voice outside.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course."

She laughed a little self-consciously and he noticed with a start that she had entered through a door which evidently communicated with another suite of apartments. She had changed her leather coat and motoring outfit for a house frock of some softer material, loose fitting, but with a skirt which did nothing to hide that lissome, graceful walk of hers which reminded him always of the crowded bazaars of some far Eastern city.

"Well," she asked, "have you looked around? This is my principal bachelor guest room. Is there anything a man might be likely to need which is not here?"

"Very little, I should think," he assured her. "You seem to have provided even for the poor man who comes without luggage."

"There are so many surprise parties nowadays," she reminded him apologetically. "You are the first man who has crossed the threshold, so I wanted to know whether anything was forgotten. Come and see my rooms," she invited. "Luncheon will be ready in ten minutes."

He followed her, with a little thrill of surprise, through the communicating door by which she had entered, into a small suite which seemed to him the last word in feminine elegance. The colouring was sea-green and white, the toilet table was green, the walls white. The sitting-room was hung with silk tapestry in the same colour scheme. There was a great divan heaped with cushions pulled up to the opened windows which led on to a small terrace. The bookcases of green and white were filled mostly with modern books, and chiefly French or translations from Russian into French. He picked up a volume of Bunin and glanced at it helplessly. Upon the baby grand piano were some sheets of music, too, on which even the names of the composers were unknown to him.

"All affectation," she assured him; "most of my belongings. I am feeling my way. I have not got much beyond Debussy yet. I cannot decide whether I really care for the new era in music or books. Sometimes Debussy's music sends me nearly crazy. Sometimes these new people seem to hurt, like someone who touches you on the raw."

"You play yourself?" he asked.

She sat down on the low stool and before her fingers had touched a dozen notes, he was conscious of an indefinite sense of excitement. She played—looking at him with the faintest of smiles upon her lips—curious, quivering chords which seemed to suggest new harmonies in colour, new and more vivid sensations. In a moment she was up and by his side.

"That's something which was sent me by a new man—a Georgian," she said. "Come, I must show you my bedroom; then Dobson will expect us to eat lunch. I don't know what you think of me, perhaps you don't think anything at all, but I am sure when you see my room you will think I am a *poseuse*."

She laughed as she threw open the door. There was a simple wooden bedstead painted green, two large chairs, a white carpet and a crucifix which might have been by Benvenuto Cellini. She caught his glance directed towards it.

"You are wondering at me, a Jewess," she exclaimed. "Don't. It is just an emblem to me of something—I don't know what—simplicity, self-discipline, anything you like. I have no religion. But emblems do mean something, and it is beautiful. Sometimes," she went on, taking his arm and leading him towards the door, "I am reconciled to all that horrible atmosphere of Park Lane and to the day-by-day life there just because of two things. Wealth may be ugly and gross in itself and draw out all that is worst in everybody, but it enables you, if you love such things, to surround yourself with beauty. I sometimes think," she continued, as they descended the stairs, "that every now and then in his moments of solitude—and my father spends just as much time as ever he can alone—he must have something the same idea, or else he could scarcely have selected all his pictures without making a mistake. Some day you must let me show you the picture gallery, a day when the light is clear, when there is neither fog nor sunshine. They are his own choice, you know, and if there is one thing he is proud of in life it is that Duvaine often comes to him for his opinion, if he suspects a picture, and Father has never been known to make a mistake.... Don't you love the little dining-room? Gloomy, perhaps, with all this black oak, but it is the original. The panels were all in the Friars' Chapel—and these chairs too. I wonder what you care to drink for lunch? Men have such different tastes. Father loves this old Berncastler Doctor. I am rather surprised he spared me any. Another cocktail?"

"Not if I am going to drink that wine," he replied reverently.

"Open that casement window a little wider before you sit down," she begged him. "Don't you love the perfume of those hyacinths? And there must be some sweet-smelling shrubs just outside there.... What do you think of my birthday present?"

"I think it is the gift of an emperor to a princess."

"Shall I be like the princesses of old, then," she said, "when they received guests? Shall I offer to share it with you?"

He took the hand she laid suddenly upon his and raised it to his lips.

"Alas," he answered lightly, "to carry on the fable—if I accept what is offered in such fashion, I lose my heart."

"And if you refuse," she reminded him, "unless the Princess has a thoroughly nice disposition, you lose your head also!"

A silent figure advanced from the background.

"Your ladyship is served," Dobson announced.

Just as the dusk passed into darkness in the black wood at the back of the house, Sandbrook, who had carried himself gallantly yet discreetly through a difficult day, felt himself suddenly enveloped, caught up and held in the meshes of what Julia herself afterwards sardonically explained as being one of her temperamental fits of madness. She had been walking by his side, her arm through his, walking with all the spring and grace of healthful youth. Suddenly, without any warning, he felt her in his arms. Her hands were linked around his neck, he felt her knees trembling, so that he was forced to hold her up. Her heart beat wildly against his. Her eyes flashed one wonderful challenge into his; then they were suddenly closed. She clung to him as though she were drowning, but her quick hurried breathing had lost itself in sobs. Some of the passionate vitality seemed already to be ebbing away. Her eyes were still closed but her lips sought for his.

"You must kiss me," she implored. "You must kiss me or I shall die."

He whispered something, he scarcely knew what. He searched the secret part of his brain for words, but after all, he knew that they reeked of compromise. Nevertheless, he kissed her and she responded eagerly, feverishly, like a starved person. She returned his kisses on the lips. She kissed his eyes. She lay quite still for a moment, as though swooning; then he felt the strength coming back to her lithe, slender body. Almost as quickly as the storm had come, it passed. Before he realised it, they were walking again slowly, and after a few yards they were in sight of the tunnel-like end of the tree-hung walk. They passed out into the meadow.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked gently.

"Angry!" he repeated. "Julia—"

"Look, there are stars out already," she interrupted. "What foolish things these naturalists tell us. They say that only exotic flowers smell at night time. Those violets! You don't mind if I lean on you a little? My knees are trembling. I suppose I was not meant to be a country girl, yet I know something about wild flowers. You see my little spinney of bluebells on the right? Bluebells are such sensible flowers. You pick them and their perfume has gone as the stem breaks. Violets—you pick them and their perfume is sweeter and sweeter, until they fade and die. Forgive me if I am talking nonsense, Lord Sandbrook—"

"My dear," he interrupted, "surely you can drop that absurd name! I'm going to call you Julia and you must call me Martin."

She paused for a moment, broke away from him and stood alone—a slim, very elegant figure in the dying light. For a moment, he thought that she was seized by another paroxysm, then he saw that she was laughing, laughing perhaps a little hysterically, and yet with a queer undertone of real humorous enjoyment.

"My dear," she said, "come along and tell me whether you would like to have an early dinner here or start now for home. After all, I have something out of the day. I am to call you Martin!"

CHAPTER XVII

Mr. Sidney Littleburn, whose wistful persistence had won for him the salutation of Sandbrook and his companion at Marridge's restaurant, was a man of no particular personality. His father had been a City clerk before him and his mother the daughter of a small tradesman. He had a flair for figures, a passionate desire to get on in the world, and a personal love of money which was almost a vice. During the earlier days, after the establishment of Woolito, Limited, he had devoted the whole of his gifts towards the improvement of the finances of the company, and in these efforts he had been remarkably successful. He had won rapid and well-deserved advancement. At the present moment he was the respected tenant of a suite of apartments on the ninth floor of a block of handsome flats in Kensington. He had a plain wife, whom he had married for her moderate dowry, no children, a motor car which he had bought at a great bargain, and the pleasant consciousness that he was not spending half his income. In appearance, he was like thousands of others who pass their days upon the anthill. He was inclined to be short; of pallid complexion; he wore a straggling brown moustache and gold-rimmed spectacles. Away from his work, he had an abstracted air, as though he were perpetually adding up columns of figures. In his private office, when he had changed his coat, when his ledgers were at hand, his bankbook immediately available, the discount rates of the day at his elbow and surrounded by his myrmidons, he presented altogether a different appearance. He was a man who was master of his work and he loved it. In his study, warming his slippered feet at the fire, unfolding his evening paper and sipping a tardy cup of tea, he was a very ordinary individual indeed.

"A young person to see you, sir," the maidservant announced, late on the afternoon of a certain fateful day.

Mr. Littleburn lowered his paper. He was incurious but inclined to be annoyed.

"What sort of a young person?" he demanded.

"Respectable enough, sir, to judge by appearances," the maid replied. "I thought she must have meant the mistress, but she seems quite positive. She said it was *Mr.* Littleburn she wanted a few words with."

"Then she's going to be disappointed," was the irritated rejoinder. "There's no young person who could possibly have anything to say to me. She can go and see Mrs. Littleburn if she wants to."

The maid turned towards the door. Upon the threshold, she looked back.

"Oh, I forgot to say, sir—she mentioned that she came from Nottingham."

Mr. Littleburn, who had picked up his paper again, failed this time to lower it. Nevertheless, the column upon which his eyes rested had become slightly indistinct.

"From Nottingham," he repeated, a moment later. "Didn't she give her name?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps, after all, I had better see what she wants. You can show her in."

Mr. Littleburn waited for his visitor without any show of agitation but with some annoyance. "A young person from Nottingham" sounded ominous, but at the worst she could turn out to be no more than a nuisance. He had no idea of the Nemesis in front of him!

The door reopened presently and Mr. Littleburn found that his visitor had gone one up in the social scale.

"The young lady, sir," the maid announced and, stepping backwards, closed the door behind her.

Mr. Littleburn laid down his newspaper. The graces of life had never come his way, and he made no attempt to rise to his feet. He watched the girl who was crossing the room towards him—a girl of medium height, pretty, dressed in cheap clothes, and with a tendency towards buxomness of figure. She had made indiscreet use of the usual cosmetics and her dress was rather shorter than the fashion of the moment decreed. That she had tried to look her best was, under the circumstances, only natural. Mr. Littleburn removed his reading spectacles.

"What do you want with me, Charlotte?" he demanded. "You have no right to come here. I have answered all your letters

and you know how we stand."

"You might invite me to sit down before you begin asking questions," she complained, in an aggrieved tone.

"I would rather you didn't stay," he told her. "My wife is here and might come in at any moment."

"Well, I sha'n't bite her," the young woman rejoined, as she coolly flopped into a chair. "It's quite true you have answered my letters, but not in the way you ought to have done."

"I should like to know how I could have answered them differently," was the frigid reply. "I have sent you at least four ten-pound notes during the last few months, and less than a year ago I paid for your father's funeral."

"You didn't," the young woman contradicted. "The firm paid for it."

Mr. Littleburn coughed.

"At my instigation," he pointed out. "It was the same thing. You wanted a post in London and I told you at once that there was nothing doing."

"You didn't want me up here, I suppose."

"It's not that at all. We are overstaffed at the present moment. Your friends live in Nottingham, and you are much more likely to settle down there than up in London amongst strangers. Have you come for money?"

"I don't know," she answered, looking at him curiously.

"Because, if you have," he went on, "let me tell you now—you won't get any. I might be inclined to pay your fare back again to the country, but only on consideration that you don't trouble me again."

Still her eyes seemed to be searching his face and, if Mr. Littleburn had been a man of greater sensibility, he might have become irritated or disturbed by that calm scrutiny.

"You were generous enough with Father when he was alive," she remarked. "He got money from you every week—a nice sum too."

"Your father had been my very valued assistant at the mills which I was engaged in winding up," was the cold reply. "He rendered the firm certain services which I considered it my duty to repay."

"You kept on sending him money after he had got the sack," she reminded him.

"If I did," he retorted, "that was my affair. If I chose to be generous to a man who had worked for me, that is no reason why, after his death, I should be expected to transfer my benefactions to his family. If it comes to that, Miss Charlotte, you have had money from me too. Two hundred pounds I spent on furnishing your apartment."

"You got what you wanted for it, I suppose," was the brusque comment. "Now Father's dead and you've come to live in London again, you just want to wipe me out."

"Supposing I do," he answered. "Isn't that reasonable? You're capable of looking after yourself. If you really wanted work, I might consider giving you a letter to one of our branches in your district. They might find you a post, but that is the utmost I can do for you, and it would be entirely in their hands whether they found you anything or not."

She looked at him with a curious fixedness.

"You are not a very nice man, are you?" she said unexpectedly.

Mr. Littleburn was indisposed to waste anything in life—even his emotions—but he was almost inclined to be angry.

"Did you come up here to tell me that?" he demanded.

"No," she replied. "I came up to ask why you should not make me an allowance, like you did Father."

"You're mad!" he scoffed. "I made no regular allowance to your father. I simply let him have some money until we could

find another post for him."

"Eight pounds a week," she reminded him calmly. "It came quite regularly, too, through the bank. I know, because I saw the book. What was it for?"

Mr. Littleburn stretched out his hand and rang the bell. She made no effort to protest.

"That," he said, "is my answer to you."

She rose to her feet. A vague odour of cheap perfume crept into the atmosphere of the room. She stood like a statue of indifference until the maid appeared.

"Show the young lady out," Mr. Littleburn directed.

She departed without a word of farewell or a backward glance. Mr. Littleburn looked steadily at the closed door for several moments. He was not accustomed to the unusual in life, but it struck him that there had been something peculiar about this interview. The fact that he was altogether devoid of imagination kept fear from haunting his pillow that night.

Three evenings later, Mr. Sidney Littleburn was seated in very much the same position in his study, his feet stretched out to the fire, reading his evening paper. Once more the maidservant entered.

"The young person to see you, sir," she announced. "Same as called the other evening."

Mr. Littleburn rustled his paper impatiently.

"What impertinence," he exclaimed. "Harriet!"

"Yes, sir."

"I refuse to see her. Put her in the lift and send her away."

"Yes, sir."

There was a brief interval, but Mr. Littleburn did not resume the study of his newspaper. He found himself vaguely disturbed. Presently the knock at the door was repeated and the maid reappeared.

"The young woman is very difficult, sir," she announced. "She says that her business with you will only take two minutes but that it is of vital importance. You will excuse me, sir, but she told me to add that it was more important to you than to her."

"Impudence!" Mr. Littleburn exclaimed indignantly. "Very well, then, Harriet, show her in. If I ring twice don't hesitate—send for a policeman."

"Yes, sir."

In due course, Charlotte Masters was ushered in. She was dressed in the same fashion as on her former visit—if anything, the odour of her perfume was slightly stronger; otherwise, she was unchanged. She sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"I thought," Mr. Littleburn said, "that I had made myself clear as to how we stood on your last visit?"

"You made it quite clear," the young woman replied, "what a low hound you were."

He turned towards the bell. She stopped him with an imperative gesture.

"You had better not," she advised. "I am here to warn you for your own sake—not mine. I'm all right. The people who found me out in Nottingham and brought me up to London are treating me like Christians. What's going to happen to you I don't know, but you have got to make up your mind quick."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mr. Littleburn asked, with a queer sensation of discomfort creeping over him.

"You and my father," she continued, "faked the books of the Colney mills which your company—Woolito—took over."

When you ordered them to be burnt, my Dad was not quite the fool he seemed, and he didn't burn them. He left them in a parcel under his bed."

"I saw the books thrown into the furnace," Mr. Littleburn called out in a sudden frenzy.

"You saw some books—not the Colney mills' books. That was where Dad was clever, for once in his life. Here, you had better read this letter. It was wrapped up in the parcel."

She crossed the room and handed him a letter. He withdrew it from the envelope, gazed at it for a moment helplessly, then a sudden gleam of hope lit up his face.

"This letter is typewritten," he declared. "Your father couldn't use a typewriter. He told me so. What is all this? A conspiracy, eh?"

He held the letter in his hands as though about to tear it through. She only smiled.

"You silly old jossler," she said. "Knowing you as well as I do, do you think I was going to bring you Dad's original letter? That's a copy—an exact copy too—word for word. I typed it myself."

He adjusted his spectacles and read it slowly through. One by one the sentences seemed to stand out before his eyes in letters of fire.

DEAR CHARLOTTE,

This is in case anything sudden or unexpected should happen to me before Littleburn settles up the amount he promised.

He came down here to wind up the Colney mills. There's no doubt about it, the books had been badly kept. Mr. Hammond, he underpaid everybody and he had no head for figures himself. When Mr. Littleburn had finished going through the books he asked me to stay with him one night. He didn't put it straight at first, in case I was not agreeable, and I must say it was a week before I made up my mind. Then I did what he wanted me to. We were only robbing the company that had ruined us, and I wanted something for you. It was the easiest thing in the world to fake our ledgers so that we seemed to pay out to our creditors a good deal more than we had to, and to receive from debtors a great deal less than we did. Apart from that, we made out entries of returns sold at a very reduced price and, in short, we cleared up about eighteen thousand pounds. All the time Mr. Littleburn was handing me out as much money as I wanted to spend and that was the time I began to drink.

When everything was wound up I wanted my share. First he said the books must be burnt, and as everything was being cleared out from the place to have it got into order for the Woolito staff, that was not difficult. Only it was just then I began not to trust Littleburn. What I thought was—if he would rob his own company just because he loves money, why shouldn't he rob me? And if the books were gone, who was going to believe my word—if ever the defalcations were found out—that he had any hand in them? So what I did was this. I got an exactly similar lot of books from one of the other branches which were going to be destroyed, and I burnt them. He and I did it together one dark night out in the furnace. They were all grey ashes in two minutes. Directly it was over, he shook me by the hand and took me down to the hotel in Nottingham. I had too much to drink. Perhaps that was my fault but anyhow, I remember what he said and I agreed to stick to it for a time. He said that we might have to return the money which he had got put away, so that it could be transferred into the Woolito account at a moment's notice if there were any suspicions. In a year's time, he said, if everything were all right, we would divide up. In the meantime he would send me eight pounds a week. I agreed. It seemed reasonable enough. But the year has gone by and I have seen nothing of my share. If I don't hear something definite in a fortnight, I am going up to London, but am just leaving this note and the real books here, in case anything should happen to me and he should play the dirty. If he won't pay up my share when I get there, I shall give him the fright of his life. I shall tell him I have still got the books and that I am going to take them to the accountants.

I don't suppose you will ever read this note, because I shall get everything settled up, but I am taking the long chance that something might happen to me.

From your

When Sidney Littleburn had finished reading, he doubted no longer. He knew that this was his death warrant. His only hope was the girl. The letter fluttered from his fingers. He gripped the sides of his chair. He leaned forward towards her.

"Charlotte," he pleaded, "you've won. You have got me, all right. You don't want to ruin me? Where are—the books?"

There was sympathy in her eyes but doom in her words.

"They have been sent in to some accountants—to your own accountants," she told him.

"What?" Mr. Littleburn shouted.

"They have gone in to the accountants," the girl repeated, her voice a little harder, as she thought of her own wrongs. "Eight pounds a week you were paying Father and no telling how long that would have gone on for—and about eighteen thousand you put in your own pocket—and as soon as you think Dad is well out of the way, not a ten-pound note for me! You're a nice fellow. Anyhow, you've got what's coming to you!"

Mr. Littleburn tried to speak but something was wrong with his tongue. He tried to rise to his feet but something was wrong with his knees. He looked at this terrible vision of fate, saw her slowly rise and move towards the door. From there she looked back.

"I'm giving you this chance," she said, "in case you want to hop it. I should say the police would be round before long."

Then there was the sound of the door opening and closing. Miss Charlotte Masters had fulfilled her mission.

Mr. Littleburn rang the bell. He was holding on to the sides of his chair when the maid returned, but his voice was fairly steady.

"Some whisky and soda, Harriet," he ordered.

As Mr. Littleburn never drank between meals, the maid received the order with some surprise. She returned with a tray, however, and drew a small table up to the side of his chair. He waited until the girl had left the room, then he poured out half a tumblerful of whisky, added some soda water and had a long drink... He had never at any time in his life even contemplated the idea of suicide. He had played always for safety, and the one great risk he had ever taken had seemed to pass into grey ashes with the burning of those ledgers. Now they were all around him—the mocking, taunting imps—beckoning him on to destruction! The gods of his life were money, respectability, a solid position. He had no vices to come to his aid, no resources of philanthropy or religion to help him through the hell that was yawning at his feet. He crossed the room, threw open the window and slipped on to the sill.

If there was a thought in his mind at all, as he passed the chaos of mist and driving sleet, it was a faint impulse of thankfulness that he had chosen the ninth-floor flat for the sake of the view.

CHAPTER XVIII

Lord Marsom presided, a few days later, over a hurricane meeting of the directors of Woolito, Limited. Besides himself, there were present Sir Sigismund Lunt, the ghastly shadow of his former self, John Henry Bomford, who had lost thirty pounds and whose head drooped feebly upon his shoulders, Sir Alfred Honeyman, a tall, elderly man with aquiline nose and high cheekbones, dressed with meticulous care, formal and precise of speech, Mr. Thomas Moody, who had been for years engaged in the laboratories of the firm, Mr. Mayden-Harte, who was general supervisor of the factories, and Sandbrook, who was the sole representative of the outside or guinea-pig element. Lord Marsom waved them to their places and started the business without preliminaries.

"The minutes of the last meeting will be read when we meet again," he announced. "We are here to elect two new directors to take the places of Mr. Archibald Somerville and Mr. Sidney Littleburn. I propose George Pullen and Morris Grinen, who will join us next month. Moody, here, will second them. Any dissentients?"

"One moment, Mr. Chairman," Sir Alfred Honeyman intervened. "I should like to ask a question. Is there to be no discussion as to the extraordinary series of accidents which have ended in the deaths of two and the serious illness of two more of our fellow directors?"

"Afterwards," Marsom snapped. "Elect the two directors first. I propose. Who seconds? Thank you, Mr. Moody. Hands up. Carried unanimously. Take that down," he directed Miss Frances Moore, who was seated in the background, a short distance away from the table.

"Where's Mr. Crooks, our secretary?" someone asked. "Nothing has happened to him, I hope?"

"Nothing has happened to him, nor is anything likely to," was the curt rejoinder. "I instructed Miss Moore to be here and take down the minutes this morning because, as you know, she is our publicity secretary, and she's been in touch with Scotland Yard concerning these unfortunate happenings to members of our board. Ask her anything you want to."

"Have Scotland Yard any theory?" Sir Alfred Honeyman enquired.

"So far," Miss Frances Moore replied, "they are unable to accept Lord Marsom's idea that these disasters have been due to a single agency. I saw the sub-commissioner again this morning. He pointed out, for example, that Mr. Littleburn's suicide was due, not to the intervention of any other person, but to the knowledge that his defalcations were discovered, and that he was on the point of arrest. There was nothing to connect that, for instance, with the burning of the Tottenham sheds and the abduction of Sir Sigismund Lunt. The fact that Mr. Bomford's prospective son-in-law did not turn up for his daughter's wedding and that a deplorable scandal thereby ensued they look upon as an entirely outside incident. The doctor's certificate proved that Mr. Archibald Somerville had been liable to the sort of stroke from which he died for years, and that the incident which brought it on was an entirely natural one. They feel that the only one of the incidents which comes under their direct jurisdiction is the destruction of the sheds at Tottenham, and they have several men at work on that, up to the present without any success."

"What do they say about those damned silly cards?" Lord Marsom enquired, producing a glazed piece of pasteboard from his papers. "Came this morning, this one," he went on, flicking it across the table. "You see what it says: 'Sidney Littleburn robbed the owner of the Colney mills. Robbers pay!'"

"The sub-commissioner only smiled when I brought up the matter of the cards," Miss Moore replied. "I think they have an idea that it is the work of some lunatic connected with the company."

There was a grim and ominous silence. Two shining points of light flashed like steel in Lord Marsom's shifting black eyes. A line of colour stole up to his forehead and he struck the table with his fist, so that the inkpot rattled and the papers rustled.

"They are a pack of nincompoops at Scotland Yard," he shouted. "A kindergarten of imbeciles! They block the path of justice, instead of clearing it. Gentlemen, there is a conspiracy against our firm. I don't wonder at it. Success like ours will always provoke jealousy and enmity; but, my God, if they think they are going to bring Woolito, Limited, to its knees, they're wrong! It may be my turn at any moment. I'm prepared. My will is made and my executors nominated. Furthermore, my successor is appointed, and there is a long list from which I desire that our future directors are elected.

They can't kill us all off, gentlemen, and I'll tell you another thing. They'll never break Woolito, Limited."

There was a murmur of applause. Some of the more nervous of the little company seemed to have regained courage.

"Gentlemen," Marsom concluded, "you'll find refreshments in the library. I will join you there in a moment or two. I wish to have a word with our publicity secretary here."

They all rose and made towards the door, with the exception of Sir Alfred Honeyman. He lingered at the table, his long fingers caressing the white edge of his waistcoat.

"This meeting has been broken up rather sooner than I expected," he said. "I intended to apply, Lord Marsom, for two months' leave of absence."

"What for?"

"My wife is in poor health and I myself need a holiday."

"Rubbish!" was the curt reply. "This is no time to talk of holidays, with orders rolling in and forty thousand workpeople to look after. Send your wife to the South of France, if she needs a change. You stay here and look after your job till we're running smoothly again."

Sir Alfred would have liked to have pleaded his cause, for fear had settled down upon him, and the prospect of a couple of months away from this disastrous epoch was perilously sweet. Lord Marsom's attitude, however, was as crushing as his words sounded, and his fellow director slipped away.

"Lot of rats," the former muttered, as he resumed his seat. "What do you think of this business, Miss Moore?"

"I'm afraid I can't help thinking there is something in the attitude which Scotland Yard takes up," she admitted. "I can't find the link and I tried as hard as anyone could. Mr. Littleburn, for instance, threw himself out of the window and broke his neck because, if he had lived, he would have been disgraced and sent to prison. No outside person could have been responsible for that."

"Who found out the defalcations?" Marsom growled.

"The daughter of his accomplice, I understand. He was treating her unfairly and she sent the books, which he thought had been destroyed, to the accountants. There isn't a single unusual circumstance in connection with the affair—except that ridiculous card."

"Supposing there is a conspiracy on foot, when do you suppose they will have a go at me?" he demanded gruffly.

"I should think, if there is a band of humorists at work, they would keep you till the last."

"Humorists, you call them! I'll show them a funnier game than they are playing, if ever I get my hands on them!... What do you think of that fellow Honeyman trying to sneak away under his wife's skirts?"

"Not much," she admitted. "Perhaps he's fond of his wife, though."

"So was I fond of mine, in a way, but I didn't want her always around. She used to spend most of her time at her villa in Cannes. As for Honeyman's marital devotion, that's all my eye. He nearly got into a bad mess down in Nottinghamshire. Sacked the foreman at one of the mills down there, when we were taking over, got him up to the north of England, and played around with his wife afterwards! Even now the old humbug has a mistress in Mayfair and dines with her once a week at a little restaurant that we all know in Soho!"

Miss Frances Moore rose to her feet.

"If there is no more business—" she began.

"Sit down," her employer interrupted. "I want to ask you a serious question. You see old Lunt and Bomford—broken men both of them. There's Littleburn and Somerville dead. Four of my directors wiped out in less than as many months. It doesn't matter what Scotland Yard has to say about it. Could any fool in the world believe that this series of vicious incidents are not linked up somehow or other?"

Miss Frances Moore was unperturbed.

"Well, Sub-commissioner Mallinson must be one of the so-called fools," she said, "for he has decided that there is no connection whatever between these happenings. If you want to know what I think, my opinion is that you have chosen a poor class of man to help you carry on your great business. Your directors have gotten into trouble because they have not known how to support success. When you elect new men on the board, I should try and get hold of some of a different type."

Marsom was suddenly conscious of a serious change of outlook, a change in his own psychology, which puzzled him. The fury of a few minutes ago had passed. With her quiet manner and convincing words, this extraordinary young woman had certainly had a soothing effect upon him. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps this idea of his that some enemies were working against his prosperity and the prosperity of the company was madness. Where could the brains have come from to have evolved schemes such as these from which he had suffered? As for the cards, they were scarcely a factor worthy of serious consideration. Any ill wisher with a sardonic sense of humour who read the newspapers might easily be responsible. The whole situation began to group itself in the landscape of his mind from the point of view of this remarkable young woman who was seated by his side, perfectly natural in her manners, well poised and reasonable. He watched her for a few moments quizzically. A new idea had come to him. He was revolving it in his mind. Curious that he had never before realised that she was in her way a very attractive personage. His taste in the sex had mostly run to the easily wooed theatrical type, but he was able also to appreciate the quiet elegance of his present companion's simple toilette and the restraint of her manner. He found himself studying her with new eyes and was suddenly conscious that he was very tired indeed of the flamboyant wiles of Miss Rosie Melton, his latest fancy. For the moment, at any rate, the reverse type was appealing to him.

"What are you doing this evening?" Marsom asked. "Will you dine with me—here in this house? I shall be quite alone. My daughter is away, I know."

"I'm sorry," was the quiet but very firm reply. "That would be quite impossible."

"Just why?"

"It would be contrary to my custom and my inclination," she told him. "If there is no more business to discuss, I should like to leave now, Lord Marsom."

"You'll stay where you are until I've finished," he enjoined furiously. "Customs and inclinations! You talk like a little shopgirl. You know something of life, I suppose, don't you? You attract me. I don't know why, but you do. Stay with me to dinner to-night and I'll give you a pearl necklace worth a thousand pounds. You see, I don't beat about the bush. You know now. You know what I want. The thousand pounds ought to tell you."

The very small lines at the corners of Miss Frances Moore's eyes suddenly creased and a faint smile parted her lips.

"If I were the little shopgirl you called me," she said, "I should pretend to be insulted. As it is, I remain, as you see, quite calm. It's very nice of you, I'm sure, but all the same, I don't want a pearl necklace, and I wouldn't dream of dining alone with you."

"Not if I promised—"

"Whatever you promised, I know what you'd do," she interrupted. "No, Lord Marsom. I'm beginning to have a certain admiration for you, as a man who knows his own mind and dominates others, but I should have to care a great deal more than that for anyone from whom I accepted a thousand-pound necklace!"

"Get to hell out of here," he ordered, the colour mounting in his cheeks once more. "Take your notebook and your smug little face away."

"Do you mean that I'm dismissed?" she asked coolly.

"Yes," he shouted.

She made a little calculation.

"I shall want two hundred and fifty pounds, in lieu of notice," she warned him.

"Woolito can't stand it," he groaned. "Get on with your job, and get ready, too, to change your mind."

CHAPTER XIX

Sir Alfred Honeyman rose sedately from his comfortable easy chair, situated in a corner of the sombre smoking-room of the West End club which had the distinction of counting him amongst its members, and followed the youth who had brought him the message across to the telephone box. Here he closed the door securely, cleared his throat and took up the receiver. A very pleasant, if somewhat affected, feminine voice greeted him.

"Is that Sir Alfred Honeyman?"

"Speaking, my dear Molly," was the dignified reply.

There was a little fluttering sigh of content.

"I'm so glad to find you. I wonder whether you are going to be perfectly sweet and do what I ask you?"

Sir Alfred was not the man to commit himself rashly. There were already several counterfoils in his personal cheque book which needed glossing over.

"If it's anything within my power—" he began.

"Of course it's within your power. I want you to come and dine with me to-night."

"To-night?" he repeated. "To-morrow night is our usual date."

"I would so much rather you came to-night," the voice at the other end of the line pleaded. "I am just lonely. I think that's what it is. I have been bored all day. If you don't come, I shall feel like putting on my prettiest frock and going to a dancing club!"

Sir Alfred reflected for a moment, conscious of a little thrill of anticipatory pleasure. Only a few minutes ago, on his way from the City, it had seemed to him that Friday was a long way off.

"I shall be delighted to save you from such an indiscretion, my dear child," he said. "Where do you wish to dine?"

"What a dear you are! At Costelli's, please. Shall we say eight o'clock, so that we have a nice long evening?"

"Eight o'clock will suit me admirably," Sir Alfred acquiesced.

Sir Alfred rang off, closed the door of the telephone box and returned to his easy chair. His step was a little more buoyant and he was conscious of vague sensations not altogether seemly in a person of sixty years of age, who was very much married indeed. Life had seemed a very dull place a few minutes ago. The sound of Molly's voice—a fascinating creature she was—had changed all that. He rang the bell by his side.

"A glass of dry sherry," he ordered.

The Pomme d'Or is a small restaurant on the outskirts of Soho, kept by an Italian calling himself Luigi Costelli. It is white-fronted, its lurching or dining habitués are concealed from curious eyes by green blinds and, if one took the trouble to glance upwards to the third or fourth story, one might notice that there was again a row of windows with green blinds and a general air of habitation. As a matter of fact, the Pomme d'Or, although it does not advertise the fact, fills the general purposes of an hotel to the initiated. The place is small, the number of waiters few, but the cutlery and linen are of the best and the lighting discreet. The carpet, too, is soft to the feet and the chairs are comfortable. It is not for his compatriots or for the tradespeople of the neighbourhood that Luigi Costelli keeps open his little *hôtellerie de luxe*. His patrons are mostly English or Americans and their names would make a somewhat surprising list. Sir Alfred Honeyman had heard the place spoken of at a men's dinner which he had attended for business purposes. He had visited it for the first time with trepidation, but also with a subdued sense of excitement, which had never altogether left him. The place suggested wrong-doing, but suggested it in an insidious and pleasing manner. It was perfectly possible to dine on any night in his present companion's cosy little dining room, ministered to by her discreet little maid. Like the moth attracted

to the candle, however, this seductive restaurant near Soho filled Sir Alfred with a larger and more satisfied sense of adventure.

From the moment when Molly, looking more attractive than ever, had swept into the little dining-room and come to meet him with outstretched hands, nothing could have seemed more auspicious than the commencement of that black-letter night which was to stand out forever amongst the disastrous memories of Sir Alfred's ostensibly correct life. The corner table which he specially affected had been carefully prepared for him and his companion. The half bottle of their favourite champagne stood in the ice pail, and a bottle of the particular brand of Chianti which they both fancied stood upon the table. The *hors d'oeuvres* and caviare had never been better. Molly had never appeared sweeter or more affectionate. Sir Alfred who, as a rule, monopolised the conversation, became almost silent through sheer content, and his companion, who desired very much to discuss immediately certain aspects of her own financial position, in view of a possible *débâcle*, much appreciated the change.

The swinging open and closing of the door was not an every-minute occurrence in this somewhat exclusive establishment, and both Sir Alfred Honeyman and the lady whom he was entertaining glanced up simultaneously when it occurred during a pause in their conversation. Sir Alfred saw a rather tall, distinguished-looking stranger—clean-shaven and very well dressed—sauntering towards an unreserved table on the opposite side of the room, accompanied by a powerfully built younger man who had the air of a naval officer in mufti. What Molly saw was apparently something more serious. She dropped her knife and fork and a little cry broke from her lips.

"What's the matter, my dear?" her escort asked quickly.

The words seemed to have died upon her lips. She remained silent. The younger man, who had approached the table, appeared to be both angry and surprised. His eyes were fixed upon Molly.

"Molly!" he exclaimed. "Is that really you?"

"Charles!" she cried. "Whatever are you doing here?"

The man's face hardened. Sir Alfred, who had not grasped the seriousness of the situation, ventured upon a gesture of politeness.

"Won't you introduce me to your friend?" he suggested.

Molly grasped his arm as though for protection and shrank back in her place.

"He is not my friend," she gasped. "It's my husband!"

Sir Alfred felt a cold shiver running down his back.

"You told me that your husband was dead," he faltered.

"Dead to me," she murmured. "What I meant was that we were separated—that he was abroad. Charles, what are you doing back in England?"

"If you will be so good as to spare me a few minutes of your time," was the dignified reply, "I will tell you. Afterwards," the newcomer added, with a sudden turn towards Sir Alfred, "I shall have a certain matter to discuss with you, sir."

Sir Alfred looked for his hat.

"You are a stranger to me," he declared. "I know nothing about you at all. There is nothing for us to discuss."

Molly, however, had already left her place. She was standing, unfortunately for her companion's plan of escape, in the direct route towards the door, clinging to the newcomer's arm and endeavouring to pacify him. The latter, however, seemed to be very hard indeed to pacify. Every few minutes he showed signs of wishing to break away and reach Sir Alfred. On each occasion, however, Molly was just able to prevent this. Finally the older man rose from his place, came across the room and joined in the discussion. He was apparently on the side of peace, for at last, without any further glance towards the elderly Lothario, the two men retreated to the door, took down their coats and hats, and left the restaurant. Molly resumed her chair with a sigh of relief.

"Thank God," she exclaimed, "he's gone! Pour me out some wine, please."

A waiter appeared from the background. He was not unaccustomed to such scenes and as he was of fragile build and had a great dislike to pugilistic encounters, he had been keeping carefully out of the way. He filled the glasses of Monsieur and of Madame as desired and both drank eagerly. The former felt some sparks of his courage gradually returning.

"So you are married," he said gloomily.

"My dear," she assured him, clutching at his hand, "I thought that he was gone for good. It was only the other day I heard that someone thought they had seen him. He deserted me most shamefully. I have nothing to reproach myself with. He knows that he has not the slightest right to interfere, whatever I may choose to do."

"He seemed upset enough to see you with me," Sir Alfred observed.

"I can't help that," she replied. "I told him plainly that nothing would induce me to go back to him, and if he made a scene, I would send for the police. He has gone now and he's not coming back again."

"Are you sure of that?" Sir Alfred asked.

"Certain," she declared. "Here's the chicken. Let's enjoy our dinner and forget all about him."

Her companion did his best but without complete success. His spirits rose, however, when, after coffee and an extra brandy, they found no one waiting outside in the street and stepped safely into a taxi. Nevertheless, at the corner of Shepherd's Market and Hertford Street, his courage again wavered.

"I think I won't come in to-night, Molly," he said. "I have some letters I ought to write and—"

Her arm was suddenly around his neck and her lips pressed against his. She drew him across the threshold.

"He won't come back," she whispered. "His friend will see to that. Even if he did, I should know how to deal with him."

So Alfred Honeyman mounted the stairs which he once thought such an enchanting passage to happiness, stepped through the door which Molly opened and faced Nemesis.

Police Constable Choppin stated his case in court on the following morning. Notebook in hand, he took his place on the stand and was duly sworn.

"If you please, your Worship," he began, "I was called to Number 17a, Shepherd's Market at about eleven o'clock last night by a woman, who was leaning out of the window and shrieking. I made my way up to the room and found the prisoner beating up another man. I arrested them both, but thought it best to leave the injured one in the Casualty Ward at St. George's Hospital. I gave him instructions there that the case would be heard this morning at this Police Court, and that he would be expected to attend for purposes of the prosecution."

"Did you take the names and addresses of these two men?" the magistrate asked.

"I did, sir. The prisoner gave his name and address as Charles Bradman, of Number 7, Hazleton Gardens. Profession, a retired naval petty officer. I have since verified the address, your Worship, and found it to be correct. The other gentleman, refused to give his name or address, but I was able to ascertain that he is Sir Alfred Honeyman, associated with the Woolito business in Basinghall Street in the City and residing at Number 33, Lexham Square."

A solicitor rose and addressed the magistrate.

"Your Worship," he said, "I am representing the accused. May I be allowed to explain what happened?"

"Certainly, Mr. Rawlings. You may proceed," the magistrate assented.

"My client who, I may remind you, gave his name and address when asked without hesitation, returned home unexpectedly last night and found his wife in the company of another man, a man well known in City circles, married and

living with his family. My client appears to have given him a thrashing, during the course of which the woman became alarmed and called for the police. My client submitted to arrest quite quietly and the other party in the struggle was taken to the hospital in an ambulance."

"Stop," the magistrate ordered. "Where is Sir Alfred at the present moment?"

"He left the hospital within an hour after his injuries had been attended to," the policeman replied, "and has not been heard of since."

"Were his injuries serious?"

"Not that I could make out, sir. I think he had two black eyes and his cheek was rather badly cut."

"I consider that, on the whole, I was merciful," the prisoner remarked from the dock. "He is an older man than I am or I would have given him a much worse hiding."

The magistrate coughed. He was known to be a man of strict domestic morals.

"I gather, then, that there is no prosecutor here present?" he demanded.

"No, your Worship."

"Case dismissed."

CHAPTER XX

Lord Edward Vannerley dropped his eyeglass and turned towards his companion. The two men—Sandbrook and his cousin—were dining in a secluded corner of Quaglino's.

"Martin, my lad," he said, "do you see a rather queer-looking party of eight on the other side of the room, three tables from the entrance?"

"Yes, I see them," Sandbrook assented.

"There's a girl there—dark, with glorious eyes and a beautiful mouth. Might be a Jewess, or perhaps an Italian. Anyway, she's frightfully well turned out."

"Yes, I see her."

"Know who she is?"

Sandbrook nodded.

"I'm surprised that you don't," he said. "You go out so much more than I do. That's Lady Julia Pontifex—Lord Marsom's daughter."

The young man was immensely interested.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "I've seen old Marsom—huge beast of a man. Fancy his having a daughter like that! She looks like a beautiful wax flower—too delicate to touch."

Sandbrook smiled.

"It's only when she's bored that she looks so thoroughly unapproachable," he said. "As a matter of fact, she is very intelligent and a delightful young woman."

"You know her, Martin?"

"Of course I do. Don't you remember the governor was a director of Marsom's great company, Woolito, Limited? Your old man didn't take kindly to the idea."

"A trifle on the stiff side, when it comes to directorships and that sort of thing," Lord Edward acknowledged gloomily. "He's got about as much idea of business as I have, and that isn't saying much. If it weren't for his prejudices, I should have taken a job of some sort long ago. It's not much fun being the second son of a Duke with three thousand a year to grub along on."

"Your obvious destination," Sandbrook remarked, signalling to a wine waiter, "is the altar."

"I shouldn't mind," the other admitted. "Mother has Closters, of course, and I could have the Tower House any day, if I married. I would rather live there than at the Castle. Worst of it is," he went on, sighing, "the English aristocracy are out of fashion just now. American heiresses all seem to be marrying either cinema stars or Russian princes. A poor lord isn't in the running at all."

"There will be a reaction in our favour presently," Sandbrook declared hopefully.

"You don't need to enter the lists, anyway," was the envious retort. "You're rolling in it."

"I have enough for my needs," Sandbrook acknowledged. "I am not extravagant, fortunately."

"I wonder," the young man by his side reflected, "how much Marsom would give his daughter?"

"A most unsavoury reflection."

"I don't see why. If you marry for money, you at least want to know how much the girl's got."

"Seen the new show at the Shaftesbury?" Sandbrook enquired, with the obvious air of one anxious to change the

conversation.

"Three times," was the enthusiastic reply. "Ripping, Martin! I thought of looking in to-night. That little girl in the second act who sings the French song..."

The young man was off on his hobby. Sandbrook listened abstractedly. Once or twice he had caught Julia's eye and he was quite sure, although her smile was of the faintest, that there was something she was trying to say to him. Presently a *maître d'hôtel* made his way across the room and, with a discreet bow, handed to Sandbrook a torn fragment of paper twisted up in the form of a note.

"From Lady Julia Pontifex, your lordship," he confided, in a half whisper. "I can take the answer if you wish."

Sandbrook glanced at the hastily pencilled line:

"Please come and ask me to dance. I want to speak to you."

"Tell her ladyship with great pleasure," was the brief reply.

The man bowed and hurried away.

"So you are pals, are you?" Lord Edward exclaimed. "You might do me a good turn," he went on eagerly. "Are you going to dance with her? Is that it?"

Sandbrook nodded.

"If you don't mind. There must be heaps of parties here with a left-over girl whom you know. You can find someone, if you want to."

"I would rather dance with Lady Julia than anyone in this room," the young man confided. "If it was not for the little girl at the Shaftesbury—"

The music had changed its tune and Sandbrook was already crossing the floor.

"I didn't introduce you," Julia observed. "They are quite nice people—Father's friends—but I don't think you would like them, and anyhow, I wanted to get away."

"Where have you been?" he asked. "I haven't seen you anywhere for a fortnight."

"So you really noticed?"

"Yes, I noticed."

"Well, I have been playing lady of the manor down at my new domain," she told him.

He stiffened slightly. He seemed suddenly to breathe once more the intoxicating atmosphere of the place, with its sensuous air of luxury, its almost Boccaccio-like suggestions of intimacy.

"A pleasant party?" he asked politely.

She laughed as she swung a little in his arms. She seemed to have brought with her the faint odour of those spring flowers, the primroses and the more pungent hyacinths. They were probably the products of Bond Street, but it was clever of her to have chosen them.

"A delightful party," she assured him. "I fancy that I am going to be very happy down there."

Sandbrook looked through the walls of the crowded room. He had quaint principles, but he was only a man like other men and he was remembering.

"Your father must have very broad ideas, or great confidence in his daughter, to make you a present like that," he said.

"A delightful speech."

Sandbrook, who was a very careful dancer, narrowly escaped a collision with an enterprising couple.

"Father is broad-minded enough," she went on, smiling up at him, "except with regard to his own family. So many men are like that!"

The music changed, but Julia showed not the slightest inclination to let her partner go. They started again.

"You seem to have a perfect butler and a complete range of servants down at Weatherlees," he observed. "The only person I didn't notice was a chaperon."

"I provide her myself."

"I didn't notice one when we were down there."

"That was entirely deliberate," she assured him. "I didn't mean to have one. I didn't know whether you were dangerous or not; I rather hoped you were."

This tune was a waltz. She lay in his arms a little more closely. The weariness had gone from her face. She seemed serene and happy.

"And this last house party?" he persisted.

"Consisted of two," she confided. "Alice Greatleys whom I think you know, and myself. We took down a stock of books and we didn't have a single visitor."

"Alice Greatleys is a dear," he remarked, "but isn't she rather an elderly companion for you?"

"I don't find her so," Julia replied. "She has brains anyway. We read the same books and play the same music.... Father knows I have queer tastes and he told me, when he gave me the house, that he would never ask me who my guests were. If you had stayed down with me that week-end," she concluded, lowering her voice a little, "he would not have said a word."

The music was throbbing in their blood. He leaned towards her.

"Not even if we had been alone?"

"Not even if we had been alone," she answered. "I meant you to stay, when I took you down. Whenever you choose to come again, there will be no chaperon and, unless you wish them, there will be no other guests."

The music stopped. Sandbrook, who had thought himself in perfect condition, was a little breathless. Julia was absolutely composed, except for the fires of her deep, slumberous eyes. Suddenly Sandbrook felt a hand upon his shoulder. His young cousin, who had been dancing and had disposed of his partner, was standing there, his expression very clearly indicating what he desired.

"I say, Martin," he begged, "won't you present me to Lady Julia?"

"By all means," Sandbrook assented. "Lady Julia, this is my cousin, Lord Edward Vannerley. Lady Julia Pontifex."

The young man bowed and fingered his tie nervously.

"May I have the next dance, Lady Julia?" he asked. "They are starting up almost directly."

"I am so sorry," she answered, "but I have just promised it to Lord Sandbrook."

"Greedy fellow," the young man complained. "The next one, then?"

"If my party haven't gone," she promised. "At present, they are a little restless. I don't like the way my hostess is fidgeting with her cloak and looking at me."

"There's a show on for ten minutes now, anyway," Sandbrook reminded them. "We will come and bother you again, Lady

Julia."

"Please do," she begged, "but don't trade my next dance away."

The two young men threaded their way through the crowded room.

"So you are in high favour with the Salome-like beauty," Edward Vannerley remarked discontentedly. "I can't see why you don't stand aside and make room for an impoverished member of the family. You don't want to marry the girl yourself."

Sandbrook smiled slightly. He had the air of one to whom the idea had been presented for the first time.

"Perhaps I don't," he agreed. "On the other hand, there is no reason why I shouldn't."

The young man considered the matter whilst he fitted a cigarette into his long holder.

"I suppose not," he assented doubtfully. "At the same time, you fellows that can afford to do it ought to stick to the type."

"Ought we?" Sandbrook murmured, allowing himself to be served with some fresh coffee. "I don't know why. I am rather a stickler for race, and all that sort of thing, but we Christian landholders are not the only aristocracy in the country, you know, Edward. I have not seen so very much of Lady Julia—I should want to see more before I gave a definite opinion—but she does seem to me to have attained a definite standard of Epicureanism in life."

"What the mischief does that mean?" his cousin asked bluntly.

"Briefly, it means appreciation of the best things in art, literature, bearing and manners."

"What about morals? I know she doesn't mix with the real go-hell-for-leather set, but I have heard of her at their parties sometimes."

"She is a girl," Sandbrook pronounced, rising to his feet as the music recommenced, "who would make up her own mind as to what she chose to do in life, and what she chose would probably be right from her own standard."

"Well, can I have this dance with her?" Edward begged. "The Donnisthorpe girls are looking at you all the time. You really ought to go and make yourself agreeable there. I have just danced with Mary."

"Then you can dance with her again," was the uncompromising reply. "I'm going to keep my engagement."

"Pig!" was his cousin's smothered expletive.

"This is really to be the last," Julia told him, with a sigh, as he approached her table. "May I present you to my hostess—Mrs. Felixstowe, and Captain Felixstowe, her nephew. You know Mrs. Armadale already, I think, and Major Armadale."

Sandbrook exchanged greetings.

"Took a toss at polo last week," the younger man explained ruefully. "Fortunately you were here, or I am afraid Lady Julia would have had a dull time, so far as dancing is concerned."

"Sorry about the toss, but I certainly have the luck," Sandbrook remarked, as they moved off.

"Where are you going after this?" Julia asked.

"Bed," was the prompt reply. "What sort of a night-hawk do you think I am? Unless, of course—"

"Unless what?"

"Well, something more interesting turned up."

"There's an extension night at the Embassy," she told him. "Couldn't you get rid of your very ornamental cousin and come there for an hour?"

"With you?"

"With me alone. I hate parties. I went to one or two last week and I was never so bored in my life. I knew just which man was going to ask me to dance and exactly when he was going to do it. I knew just what we were going to talk about, and the whole thing was deadly. I have come to the conclusion, Martin, that conversation, to be vital, is only possible between two persons. General conversation is always broken into by the wrong person at the wrong moment and diverted into the wrong channel. I don't like it, anyway. I like probing the thoughts, trying to creep a little farther into the personality of the companion I am interested in."

"Well, we sha'n't have much chance for that sort of thing at a night club," he reminded her.

"Who cares?" she murmured. "I shall be there with you. Absolute silence would be better than the chatter I have had to listen to this evening. What about the Embassy?"

"Let's go there, by all means," he assented. "Where shall I find you?"

Her eyes flashed their content.

"You will see us get up," she said. "Send your car away. We will take mine. And perhaps you had better tell the ornamental cousin we'll have our dance next time we meet."



CHAPTER XXI

The ornamental cousin took the affair badly.

"I don't see why you want to choke a fellow off in this way, Martin," he protested. "You know very well you wouldn't think of marrying the girl yourself. That sort of marriage isn't necessary for you. It is for me. Besides, she attracts me. You're not a woman's man, you know, old chap, but believe me, that girl has something about her—can't describe it, but if only she were not the daughter of old Marsom, she might turn the head of anyone in Europe."

"I'll look out for it this evening," Sandbrook promised him. "I'm not sure that I have not discovered a trace of it myself," he added, signing the bill.

"It isn't as though she went about a great deal," Lord Edward continued gloomily, as he lit a fresh cigarette and leaned back in his place. "I should say I'd been to pretty well every party in town this last week and she wasn't at one of them."

"You'll come across her some time," Sandbrook assured him, rising to his feet. "Stay on here if you like, but I have to go...."

Julia was already fastening her ermine cape when Sandbrook reached the exit. They passed out together and entered her car, which was drawn up by the kerb. She glanced for a moment into the mirror as they drove off, then extinguished the interior light and took his hand.

"Be sweet to me, please," she begged. "I adore even your simulated affection. You have all the reserves I love."

"Hope I live up to my reputation," he laughed, drawing her head down on his shoulder. "As a matter of fact, I don't go in for this sort of thing at all, you know, and I'm not sure—"

"My dear," she interrupted, "why worry your brain as to being sure about anything. I left that off long ago. I do what pleases me. I suppose I ought to be thankful that my tastes are what they are. I do not claim to be in the least different from other girls, but there is this about me—I loathe promiscuous petting. I adore the touch of anyone I am fond of, especially when there is just that delightful instinct of reverence about it—makes one feel somehow a sort of priestess of the affections."

"That's all very well," he smiled, "but that probably comes from inexperience. I might break down at any moment."

"If you break down," she said dreamily, "it would probably be in just the one way in the world, and it would mean everything. But you won't, and I adore you as you are."

"I don't mind telling you," he confided, a few minutes later, as they continued their slow progress, "that I was glad to hear about your house party at Weatherlees. You gave me rather a shock at first."

"If I did," she said, "it was your stupidity, or shall we call it inexperience? To descend to the vernacular, you ought to know really that I am not that sort of girl."

"I had that idea," he admitted frankly, "but you do seem a little reckless sometimes."

"I may be—I often am," she confessed. "Sometimes I have tried to work myself up to standing on the brink of the last ditch. I couldn't even reach the ditch. You see, I think fineness of taste has so much to do with it. I think I have good taste. Don't you, Martin?"

"I'm sure you have," he told her.

"Sorbonnier, the great critic, dined with Father one night a few months ago. He examined my books—French and English. He made me talk about the pictures. He took me to galleries. We went to several of the plays. You know that he is really the greatest international critic we have. Before he left, he paid me a great compliment. He told me that he had never met anyone before whose taste was unerring, who was a real undraped hedonist, and he asked me to marry him.... We are in the park now, Martin. Do kiss me, please...."

He drew away from her a little breathless. She looked into his face and laughed at the things which he was trying to conceal.

"My dear," she whispered, "how happy you are making me. Will you tell him to drive to the Embassy now?"

"I thought we were on the way there," he answered, rubbing the windowpane.

"We have been going around the park," she told him. "It is the first time I have ever given such an order. The chauffeur is probably thinking that I am crazy. Though, why should he? Everyone's turn for craziness arrives. Now I am going to drink a glass of champagne and waltz with you. Life is very good."

The Embassy was very full but exactly the corner table they desired was there for Julia and her companion. They started dancing almost at once. They were known to most of the crowd there and whispers went freely around. Edward Vannerley, with his little lady from the Shaftesbury, scowled at his cousin from the dancing floor.

"There's your cousin again," Julia pointed out. "I don't think he likes us very much."

"I am the only one who is in his bad books," Sandbrook replied. "He wanted me to give up my dance with you."

She laughed quietly.

"I knew you would not do that," she said. "I am just beginning to feel sure enough of you for that. A pleasant youth, I should think. But why so unintelligent?"

"He's a very good fellow, really," Sandbrook declared.

"Yes, but what's the good of being a good fellow," she argued, "if you have no brains? Look at his mouth—his forehead. Charming, aristocratic perhaps, but brainless. I should think that to live with him for a month would drive any woman crazy."

"You know the old saying," Sandbrook reminded her. "The second son of a Duke never has brains. The eldest—possibly. Never the second. It is God's evil dispensation, perhaps, as the poor fellow generally has to earn his own living. Not that Edward is so badly off."

The music changed. Julia listened to the rhythm and disapproved.

"We will sit down for a few moments," she insisted. "Our little corner there is almost impregnable. I have a terrible idea that your cousin means to descend upon us and bring that flipperty little creature with the baby eyes. I could not bear it to-night. I can see her trying them on you. Are you susceptible to baby eyes, I wonder?"

"I don't think so," he answered, "but we won't risk it."

They returned to the safety of their retired corner. The music became louder, the room more crowded, the drifting perfumes from the women and flowers more exotic. In the midst of it all they talked seriously. Whatever effect their surroundings had had upon their senses, their brains still seemed dominant.

"I have spent three quarters of the time since the War," Sandbrook observed, *à propos* of a remark of hers, "travelling. The aftermath of the War in England and civilised places was like a bad taste in my mouth. That's why I am so ignorant. I want to understand a little more. You trusted me alone with you down at Weatherlees. You turned out the light of your car this evening and encouraged me to kiss you. When I was a lad, those things meant one thing, and one thing only, between such as you and me. They meant marriage. Don't you ever think of marriage? Don't you ever consider it when you give so many of the things which belong to it?"

She deliberated for some time. His question seemed so vital. Her reply might mean so much.

"Not with you," she answered.

He fingered the stem of his wineglass for a moment in perplexed silence.

"That may be a judicial answer," he decided, "but somehow or other, it does not seem to carry all the way."

"It will sound banal if I explain," she said, "but have it your own way. If I had taken anyone else to Weatherlees, and said to him what I said to you, the question of marriage would have been inevitable. If I had driven anyone else around the park, instead of coming directly here, and turned out the light and asked for caresses, the thoughts of marriage would have been there. If I had advertised myself alone with any other man, as I have done with you to-night, and set a hundred gossiping lips chattering, the thought of marriage would have been present. Because, after all, like most others in the world, I am a self-seeker. But with you it is different. From you I ask frankly for what I want and you give it to me."

"You mean, then, as a suitor I should fail?"

"I have not said so," she answered. "What I say is that I do not expect marriage from you. I am content to give and ask for no return. On consideration, that should make you very proud."

He considered the matter carefully. The floor was emptier now, the music softer and more melodious, the scent of the room more overpowering.

"Supposing we dance," he suggested.

She drew on her gloves, finished her champagne and suffered herself to be led to the floor.

"I obey," she murmured, "my lord and master."

They drove home in the grey and somewhat fantastic dawning, with heavy clouds hanging low from the skies. There were black pools of darkness in hidden corners, where the lights had been extinguished, but which the coming day had failed to reach. There was a slanting drizzle of rain, the promise of wind moving away across the open country. Julia lay like a tired child, her arm around his neck; her tumbled gown was like a beautiful shield to her graceful body, doubled up now in an effortless tranquillity. The faintest of smiles played about her lips—an almost virginal note in her repose stirred him to draw her a little more closely into his arms. He had almost to wake her when they drew up in front of her house, before which a seemingly unconscious servant stood waiting upon the pavement.

"Julia," he said, "before you go—you must go, you know; the lights are all flaring up in your hall—may I ask you a question?"

She sat up, clutched her wrap around her, and it seemed to him that she was shivering. There was a flame in her eyes, though, which spoke of other things.

"Not now, Martin," she begged. "Some day ask it me, if you will, but not now."

She suddenly kissed him—kissed him upon the lips—and a moment later, without waiting for his help, without a farewell word, she was gone, a gleam of white across the pavement, almost invisible under the sheltering umbrella. The car drove off to Hill Street.

CHAPTER XXII

Ciro's downstairs bar, which had been the scene of the downfall of Mr. Joe Somerville, was popular at cocktail time, even with many who were not lunching or dining on the premises. It was a favourite haunt of Lord Edward Vannerley's, and one morning, not long after his dinner with his cousin at Quaglino's, in a very smart brown suit, beautifully polished tan shoes, a bunch of violets in his buttonhole, and his bowler hat precisely at the angle affected by the bloods of the moment, he was seated upon a stool enjoying, in the leisurely fashion of an epicure, an excellent dry Martini. An acquaintance who had just come in, a man of youthful appearance, fair and with closely clipped moustache, who carried himself like a soldier and might have resembled one, but for his narrow eyes and his hard, unpleasant-looking mouth, touched him on the shoulder.

"Have a drink with me, Lord Edward," he invited.

"My dear fellow, I'm honoured," was the astonished reply. "To the best of my belief, this is the first time I have ever heard you offer a drink to anyone!"

There was a faint grin from the barman and the habitués who were lounging round. Mr. Leopold Klein was certainly not noted for his hospitality and was quite used to being chaffed upon the subject.

"Needless to say, I want something from you," the latter admitted, "or I should not be so generous. Come and sit down for a minute."

The two men took possession of chairs in the background, where their cocktails were presently served. Klein tapped a cigarette upon his case and lit it. Vannerley followed his example.

"Lord Sandbrook is a cousin of yours, isn't he?" the former asked.

"That's so," was the cautious reply. "He wouldn't be the slightest use to you, if that's what you're aiming at. He's rolling in money. Father and mother both died within the last twelve months and the mother left him over a million."

"I was not thinking of him from a business point of view exactly," Klein confided. "There was another matter I had in my mind."

"I am afraid," Vannerley explained, "that he would not be of any use any other way. He is a cut above us fellows, who waste our time knocking about town. Rather on the serious side, although he is very fond of sport and travel. We're cousins, right enough, but I see scarcely anything of him."

"His father was a director of this wonderful Woolito Company?"

"That's right," Lord Edward agreed vaguely. "I have heard him speak of it."

"There have been rumours in the City," the other continued, "although it has not, as yet, been officially announced, that the present Sandbrook is taking his late father's place on the board."

Vannerley nodded in noncommittal fashion. He had not yet made up his mind what his acquaintance was driving at.

"I was wondering if, by any chance," the latter suggested, "you had ever heard Lord Sandbrook talk about any of the other directors."

"I think I have heard him mention the names of one or two," the young man admitted. "I've not taken any particular notice, though."

"There's a chap named Mayden-Harte."

"Could anyone forget a fellow with a name like that?"

"Rather young for the job and a bachelor," Klein continued. "I suppose, as he's a director of the Woolito Company, he must have plenty of money?"

"I know no more about that than the man in the moon," Lord Edward confessed. "One would think so. The Woolito

Company is supposed to stink of money."

Klein scratched his chin:

"Just so," he acquiesced. "But you see, it's like this—the whole world knows that Lord Marsom, the chairman, is a great autocrat. He rules his directors and his whole staff with a rod of iron. Hates gambling too, doesn't he?"

"Never heard a thing about him," Vannerley acknowledged blandly.

"Well, you can take it from me that he does, then," Klein went on. "Now, listen, old chap. I want you to help me with a problem I'm up against. You can quite understand, can't you, that a young single man who had commercial gifts might be a director of the Woolito Company without having an enormous amount of stuff behind him?"

"Quite so," Vannerley agreed. "He might have been promoted from the staff."

"You can also understand," Klein proceeded, "that if he did anything Marsom didn't like, out he would go like a comet."

"That's natural enough."

Klein sipped his cocktail in silence.

"Of course, this fellow Mayden-Harte may have plenty of money of his own," he admitted.

"I bet you know a lot more about him than I do," Vannerley observed.

There was a crafty gleam in Klein's eyes.

"Your cousin might know more than either of us," he suggested.

"So that's what you are driving at, is it?" his companion laughed. "I shouldn't think it probable, but if he does happen to know anything about the fellow, I can find out for you, if you're really interested. It just happens that I have a standing invitation to drop in for a cocktail in the evening and, if you like, I'll stop at Hill Street to-night and see if I can pick up anything."

"If you would do that for me, old chap," was the grateful response, "I would take it very kindly from you."

"I can guess why you're interested, of course," Vannerley reflected, "but I'm hanged if I can see why a young unmarried fellow, who is a director of Woolito's, should need to borrow money."

Klein slapped him on the back and rose to his feet.

"Doing anything after dinner to-night?" he enquired.

"Nothing."

"Meet me here at twelve o'clock," Klein invited. "Bring me any information Lord Sandbrook may have about Mayden-Harte and I will give you a *quid pro quo*."

"It's a deal," Vannerley promised.

Edward Vannerley whistled softly to himself as the taxicab in which he and Klein were seated pulled up, shortly before one o'clock, in front of one of the most imposing mansions in Belgrave Square.

"Now," he murmured, "I begin to understand."

"You have heard of the place, then?" Klein enquired, a little uneasily. "I would have sworn that there were not half a dozen people in London, outside the habitués, who knew about it."

"It happens that I do," Vannerley confessed, "but you needn't worry about that. I heard it in an odd sort of way and I was

sworn to secrecy. I have never breathed a word to anyone."

They paid off the taxi. In the hall, which was lit in the modern fashion and beautifully decorated, as if for a reception, they were met by an elderly man who appeared to be a sort of major-domo. At a sign from him, a footman hurried forward to take their coats and hats. There were other servants in the hall, apparently doing nothing, but obviously on the watch, and while they loitered about for a minute, a couple of well-known society women and a sporting peer passed them and climbed the stairs.

"Your friend, Lord Edward Vannerley, will be the guest of the management to-night, Mr. Klein," the major-domo said obsequiously. "Afterwards, if he cares to join, the fee will be one hundred guineas until the end of the year. You will find a very pleasant party upstairs, Mr. Klein. His Grace has been playing and has just won a banco of seventeen thousand pounds."

They made their way up to the first floor. A young man of agreeable appearance, who appeared to be doing nothing in particular, met them on the landing.

"I must introduce myself," he said pleasantly, "to such a distinguished visitor as Lord Edward Vannerley. I am Major Markham—Mr. Van Wildte's private secretary."

The two men shook hands. The Major escorted them to the door of what must have been several large rooms made into one. There were two *chemin de fer* tables, both of which were thronged with players. In the far distance one caught a glimpse of a supper restaurant with small tables, and set gracefully back in a corner of the room was a very attractive-looking bar. Edward Vannerley, who rather flattered himself upon being a man about town, could scarcely conceal his surprise.

"I hope Mr. Klein will give you a pleasant evening," Major Markham continued, smiling. "You will find the supper room beyond and they say that our cocktails are nearly the best in London, if you care to visit the bar."

"Before you go, Major," Vannerley begged, "tell me how on earth you manage, in the heart of London, to keep an establishment like this going?"

The secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"To tell you the truth," he confessed, "the place is rather a hobby of Mr. Van Wildte's. He likes the sporting chance of it. He gets a good deal of publicity as a popular American, who gives wonderful parties and, so far, the police have never been near us. If ever they do pay us a visit, well—then we shall all be in trouble," he concluded, with a nod of farewell.

"Let me take this in," Vannerley meditated, dropping into an easy chair. "I have to pinch myself to realise that I am alive. Why, it's exactly like the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo, in the height of the season, and a great many of the same faces too!"

"It's the biggest thing that's ever been done in London in the gambling line," Klein confided. "Naturally, they're very particular about whom they let in. I had to go round and see the secretary about you. There are no cards of membership or that sort of thing. A stranger simply never gets beyond the hall downstairs. They ask for his card of invitation and treat him like a gate crasher. That's the only reason I can imagine that the place has not been raided. The police can't go blundering in everywhere, unless they have a complaint, and the people who come here—even those who lose their money—love the place too well to gossip about it. I suppose some day a wrong 'un will lose a few thousands and pay a visit to Scotland Yard. Until that happens, I should put the profit down at about fifteen thousand a week."

"Is it baccarat or *chemie*?" Vannerley enquired.

"*Chemie*. Baccarat Sunday nights only, and an amateur bank then, when possible. They have professional croupiers for the *chemie*, of course."

"Is the game straight?"

"Absolutely," Klein assured his companion. "Straight as a die. They let you know what they are going to do to you before they start. There's a double *cagnotte* and small players are not welcome. They like the bank started with twenty pounds at least.... There's our man—with the Baroness too. Sworn off for a month, he told me, and yet there he sits, the second

from the croupier, next to the woman with the flaxen hair parted in the middle."

Vannerley looked curiously across the table. Mr. Mayden-Harte, at that moment, had more the appearance of a professional gambler than an earnest man of affairs and director of the great company of Woolito. His long, thin face was wrinkled and anxious. He kept fumbling at his straggling, light moustache and handling the pile of chips in front of him nervously. The lady by his side, with an impatient little gesture, took ten of them away and pushed them out in front of him. This was apparently the largest bet, for the man who was running the bank gave Mayden-Harte the cards. He took one and threw down on the table with an air of triumph a ten, a five and a three. The banker disclosed a ten and a three, and took one card—a six. There was a ripple of excitement around the table. The croupier scraped in the money. Mayden-Harte, with a futile attempt at indifference, watched his little pile swept away.

"Another two hundred gone," Klein murmured. "Those are twenty-pound counters. Two hundred pounds she made him put up. The Baroness is a charming lady, but I sometimes wonder whether she is not a very good friend of the management here. What about a drink over at the bar and a chat? You have seen your man and you can judge for yourself the sort of game he plays. It doesn't take long to get rid of a spot of money that way!"

They found a comfortable corner some distance from the tables. Both ordered whisky and soda and Vannerley lit a cigar.

"And they pretend," the latter remarked, leaning back, "any pal you talk to about playing these games in London—they pretend that they do it for a bit of a spree! I never saw Mayden-Harte before, but he looks to me like a Wall Street bull who has lost his nerve on a falling market!"

"Without a doubt," Klein agreed, "there are a good many young fellows—and older ones too, for that matter—who do come here, in the first instance, for what they call a spree. Mayden-Harte is not one of them, though. He has lost too much money, for one thing. Just now, as it happens, he is in a hell of a mess."

"What on earth can your interest in him be?" Lord Edward queried, adjusting his eyeglass and looking at the money-lender curiously. "The fellow may be a fool but, as my cousin Martin pointed out to me, he is not likely to risk more than he can afford to lose."

Klein's fingers played with his closely clipped moustache. The situation was not entirely clear to him.

"You think so?" he observed. "Very well, then, I will lay my cards upon the table. Mayden-Harte owes me eighteen thousand, nine hundred pounds and an acceptance of his for two thousand pounds, due yesterday, which he wanted me to renew. I didn't feel inclined to, without further security, so I passed it through the bank. It was returned dishonoured this morning."

"Stamped by the bank?"

"Absolutely. If a man doesn't meet his engagements and I don't feel inclined to renew, I present the bill, even though I know it can't be paid. A dishonoured acceptance is one of the easiest things to sue on. I am very much afraid that I am going to make a bad debt with Mr. Mayden-Harte. He owes me not only the amount I have spoken of, but he has backed bills for the Baroness to rather a large amount."

"The little flaxen-haired filly?"

"You keep away from her," Klein advised. "She's just as hard about this sort of thing as I am myself, and that's saying something. It's business with me and it's business with her. Now," he went on, summoning a waiter and ordering two more whiskies and sodas, "I have shown you exactly why I wanted to know how this fellow, Mayden-Harte, stands financially. What about it? Was your cousin able to tell you anything?"

Vannerley shook his head.

"I couldn't get him interested at all," he said. "The sound of the fellow's name even seemed to bore him. As to his means, all he could tell me was that it didn't take money to be a director of Woolito, Limited. The old man loves taking his head men out of the staff or promoting one of the managers. He even wanted to put Martin on, without waiting for him to qualify with shares."

"Let's have it plain," Klein persisted. "I take it that a fellow director of Woolito is utterly ignorant of Mayden-Harte's

means and believes it possible for him to occupy his present position without any sound financial standing?"

Lord Edward grabbed the whisky and soda which had just been brought.

"Always clear-headed, my dear Klein," he agreed. "The words you have spoken are words of wisdom. You make piles of money out of most of the saps who come your way, but I should be inclined to think—yes, I should be inclined to believe—that so far as Mayden-Harte is concerned, you have got hold of a wrong 'un."

Klein's face was not an agreeable sight. He had drawn in his lips, his eyes were cold and angry.

"Then Mr. Mayden-Harte," he said, "will have to pay for some of the lies he has told me."

CHAPTER XXIII

On the night following the initiation of Lord Edward Vannerley into the gambling club at Belgrave Square there was a gorgeous but a solemn dinner of three in the Park Lane mansion of Lord Marsom. Mr. Thomas Moody was a man unused to the social amenities of life and he had obeyed the summons of his chief in suffering and with distaste. His seldom-used dress suit was creased and ill fitting. The trousers were too short and the tails too long. No one had ever thought to tell him that woollen socks without garters were not *de rigueur* for evening wear, nor had there been anyone to point out to him that a black tie and a swallow-tailed coat were not usually associated. Nevertheless, having a clear conscience so far as his host was concerned, he was at least as much at his ease as his fellow guest. Mayden-Harte from the first had dreaded this summons. Once a year the whole Board of Directors had been accustomed to receive a similar one, but under present circumstances there seemed a certain mockery in the invitation, something hard to define, which hung like a cold shadow over the splendours of the table. In the presence of the servants, of whom there were never less than four, conversation jogged along the well-trodden roads—politics, a new chemical discovery which it might be well to look into, the health of a prominent statesman. As soon as the dessert had been placed upon the table, however, Lord Marsom ordered the port to be set in front of him and dismissed his servitors with a wave of the hand. He leaned towards his two guests.

"Mayden-Harte and Moody," he said, "I wanted a word with you in a different atmosphere to that of Basinghall Street or the works. That is why I asked you to come here to-night. I do not need to speak of the tragedies which one by one have broken up our confederation. You know what has happened to the other fellows. There are only we three left and Lord Sandbrook, who has joined us too recently to enter into the matter, who are still sound of wind and limb. I ask myself whether there is anything we can do to protect ourselves against the unexpected."

Both men listened—Mayden-Harte with rapt and nervous interest, Moody with a curious sort of detached fatalism.

"It seems that all these other men," Marsom continued, "had a secret chapter in their lives which was rudely broken into. Are either of you two in the same position? Are either of you two in trouble? Do you need help? Is there anyone working behind the scenes who might bring disaster of any sort into your lives?"

Moody's full red lips curled outwards scornfully.

"Outside the laboratory," he confided, "I could not be said to have a life at all. For seven years I have not been to a place of entertainment, made a new friend or talked after business hours to anyone, except my landlord and his wife. Anything sinister which I may feel in the present atmosphere is not personal."

"And what about you, Mayden-Harte?" Marsom asked.

The young man was scarcely in a position to reply with such confidence.

"Well, I don't know, Lord Marsom," he answered hesitatingly. "I won't pretend that I have not altered the standards of my life a little since I came up to town, but I don't see that there is anything that looks like troubling me particularly. I live a different sort of life than Moody, of course. I go out into the world more and I meet more people."

"You are not in any sort of financial trouble?"

But for the glitter in those strange eyes of his host, Mayden-Harte might have told, if not the truth, some part of it. As it was, he only faltered ever so slightly.

"Certainly not," he declared. "I draw between six and seven thousand a year and that is quite enough for my requirements."

"Married?"

"No."

"Mistress?"

"Nothing permanent," the young man replied, with a slight flush.

"Understand," Marsom continued contemptuously, "your private lives do not interest me a snap of the fingers, except for their possible bearing upon this bloody business. Half these troubles come of women. You can keep a harem if you want to, for all I care. What I want to know is this—you are not either of you living under the shadow of any threats of any sort?"

"So far as I am concerned," Mayden-Harte said, "I can answer definitely—certainly not."

Moody's face was untroubled, but if anyone could have seen the eyes behind those thick spectacles, they might have detected the spectre of a lurking fear, more speculative than actual.

"With me," he said, "there exists nothing but that one vague and rarely realised apprehension known already to you, Lord Marsom. Every time I speak of it, you scoff at it. You are probably right. It is not I even who am threatened."

"Still got that bee in your bonnet?" Marsom sneered.

"What is he talking about?" Mayden-Harte asked.

"There was a man who died in Nottingham, who knew more about the secrets of our business than was good for one man to know," Lord Marsom said grimly. "He appears to have an idiot relative alive—a lunatic. I leave nothing to chance. Every year he is visited by a doctor. Every year the report is the same—the man's reason is hopelessly and entirely gone. What harm can such a person do us?"

Moody wiped his lips hard with his napkin.

"No one can do us any harm," he agreed. "I have no reasonable reply to your question. On those rare occasions when fear comes to me, it is more the fear that I, too, may be losing my senses."

Marsom passed the port and helped himself.

"I am only interested in real dangers," he said. "A lunatic weaver does not trouble me. One more glass, gentlemen, and I will excuse you. I have to be at the Prime Minister's at eleven and you, too, probably have your own engagements."

It chanced that that particular evening was one of the more brilliant which the habitués of Number 17a, Belgrave Square ever remembered. From midnight until two o'clock in the morning taxicabs and motor-cars had been setting down distinguished passengers and, according to the strict law of the place, making swift departure to a neighbouring garage. Very-near Royalty had been present, with a brilliant little company, and had departed, highly pleased with some insignificant winnings. Two Indian princes were still playing with inscrutable faces, notwithstanding the fact that they had both lost large sums. The regular clientèle, too, were present in force, a motley crowd of titled paupers and notorious millionaires, bookmakers—the modern type, of course, noticeable only on account of their perfectly tailored clothes and the flawless etceteras of their toilet—stockbrokers and mysterious capitalists. Mayden-Harte was there in his usual place, by the side of the Baroness, a little unnerved by his very sombre dinner party with its menacing suggestions.

"I really don't know that I wish to play this evening, Elsa," he announced. "I have had a very disagreeable evening with my chief. If he had any idea that I went in for this sort of thing," he added in a whisper, "affairs would go badly with me."

She leaned back and laughed at him mockingly.

"You are stupid," she exclaimed. "You should be afraid of nothing. You have lost money. What does it matter? You must get it back. The game goes like that, you see—up and down. I, with my small stakes, have found that out. To leave when you have lost—that is folly. Give Monsieur Mayden-Harte two thousand pounds' worth of chips," she added, turning to the croupier.

"Too many," Mayden-Harte protested. "I don't wish to gamble. Five hundred pounds will be enough."

She laughed. Perhaps the touch of her fingers upon his hand had its effect. At any rate, the croupier was deaf to his objection and two thousand pounds, in hundred-pound, fifty-pound and twenty-pound chips were neatly arranged in front

of him. He signed the chit with trembling fingers.

"Now have courage, my friend," his companion begged. "Play as though you meant to win—not as though you feared to lose."

A valet was passing along, with glasses of champagne. The Baroness leaned back and took one for herself and one for her companion.

"Now," she went on, "you must have luck. I bring it to you myself."

Mayden-Harte drained the contents of the glass and temporarily forgot his good resolutions. He won several small bancos, ran his own bank three times and drew it in. The Baroness pouted.

"You should have gone on," she complained. "To-night the luck is with you. Was I not your partner as usual?"

"You were not," he replied, with for him unexpected firmness. "There's one hundred."

The Baroness accepted the chip discontentedly. The game proceeded. The bank passed on until it reached one of the two young Indians who frequented the place—a Rajah of boundless wealth.

"He always loses," the Baroness whispered. "He told me he was going to gamble to-night. Wait till you have a chance."

The Rajah started with a five-hundred-pound bank. Contrary to expectation, he won, and won again. The critical third time arrived. The people at the other end of the table became unexpectedly cautious. The Rajah's enquiring glance reached Mayden-Harte.

"You will go banco," the Baroness insisted fiercely. "It's your chance."

He hesitated.

"But it's two thousand pounds," he muttered.

"Banco!" called one of the onlookers.

Then Mayden-Harte did the rashest thing of his life.

"*Banco table*," he countered.

The young Indian bowed solemnly, threw two cards to Mayden-Harte and gave himself two. He looked enquiringly across the table. His opponent glanced eagerly at his cards and his heart sank. He had a king and a ten.

"Card," he demanded.

The Rajah gravely disclosed his own two and Mayden-Harte drew a breath of relief. He was, at any rate, no worse off than his opponent, who had a queen and a knave. He picked up the card thrown across to him. Then indeed he felt that Nemesis had arrived. His card was an ace, making his total score one—the lowest possible except baccarat. The Rajah followed suit and a loud murmur went round the table. He had drawn another queen, making his score nothing! Mayden-Harte told himself that it was incredible. It was impossible that he should win two thousand pounds with a one, and all the time he was telling himself so the croupier was gathering in the money and passing it across to him. The little flutter quickly subsided and the game proceeded. The Rajah lit a cigarette and signed an order for more chips. He was to all appearance utterly unmoved by his ill luck. Mayden-Harte, on the contrary, could scarcely sit still. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and busied himself changing some of his smaller chips for those of larger denomination.

"And my share?" his companion whispered softly. "I made you do that."

"I'll talk to you presently," he answered. "I am not feeling very well to-night."

She shrugged her shoulders petulantly and turned away to speak to a neighbour. Mayden-Harte pushed the whole of his chips to a chef who was standing by.

"I will cash in for a time," he said. "I am playing again later."

The man swept the chips into a bowl.

"Four thousand two hundred pounds," he announced. "Monsieur will receive the notes at the desk."

"Where are you going?" the Baroness demanded, as her companion rose to his feet.

"I am going to rest for a time," he said. "I told you I was tired. I had a trying dinner party before I came."

He gave her no opportunity for argument but walked away. From that time on, he made a perfect nuisance of himself by asking everyone in the room whether they had seen Klein and besieging the secretary's office, asking the same question. At a few minutes to two Klein arrived. Mayden-Harte practically tore him away from some acquaintances and steered him into a retired corner.

"Klein," he exclaimed. "That acceptance of mine for two thousand pounds?"

"It was returned to me dishonoured," Klein confided gravely. "I sent you formal notice this morning."

"Never mind about that," was the eager reply. "I have had a wonderful stroke of luck, and just at a critical time too. You see the dusky prince over there—the Rajah of some place or other—worth millions, they say. He was running a bank and—listen, Klein," his companion went on, digging his fingers into the other's coat sleeve, "I had an inspiration! I bancoed him for two thousand pounds and I won with a one to a baccarat! What do you think of that, Klein? I felt cold all over. I had been doing pretty well before but I have never had a coup like that. I want the bill, quickly. I can do the whole two thousand and rotten expenses as well."

"Congratulate you, I'm sure," Klein said, without overmuch enthusiasm. "I'm always glad to hear of anyone winning, but you don't suppose I carry dishonoured acceptances about with me, do you?"

Mayden-Harte's expression was one of pained disappointment.

"You haven't got it," he groaned.

"Of course not. If I were to carry about with me all the dishonoured bills of exchange I've had during the last few months, I should need a wallet."

His companion summoned a waiter.

"Look here," he proposed, "we'll have a whisky and soda to celebrate my luck."

"With pleasure," Klein agreed.

"And now, old chap, do me a great favour," Mayden-Harte went on. "I can't exactly explain to you, but there is an urgent and special reason why I want that dishonoured acceptance. The old governor had me to dine to-night in Park Lane and he asked me some very curious questions. I'm not at all sure someone hasn't been giving him a hint that I've been fool enough to do a little gambling lately. I'm going to chuck it after to-night. I can pull myself straight again easily, within a few months, but I don't want anything on paper going about. You've got the keys to your office. Call in there and get it for me. I can cash in here and you can have the notes."

Klein shook his head.

"Can't be done, my dear fellow," he regretted. "I don't mind telling you that I've made what turns out to be a damned rotten bargain. I sold the acceptance just as it was for fifteen hundred quid."

Mayden-Harte stared at him in terror.

"Do you mean to say that you parted with my acceptance to someone else? Sold it? You can't do such a thing!"

"Indeed I can," was the emphatic response. "You can do what you like with a dishonoured bill. I've ten thousand pounds' worth of them I'll sell you for ten thousand shillings, if you like."

"Who's got it? To whom did you sell it?"

"I'm not bound to tell you that, but I will," Klein replied. "I sold it to the representative of a small but, if you ask my

opinion, scoundrelly firm of solicitors. Alexander and Company is the name, but the only partner in it is a man named Ernest Jacobs."

"What the hell did he want with it?"

"God knows. I think he must be a sort of tout for another firm. Anyway, we were talking about business—"

"You were talking about my business?" Mayden-Harte interrupted fiercely.

"Look here, young fellow," Klein remonstrated, "it's no use getting angry. Perhaps I was a trifle hasty, but I didn't think that little fellow from Alexander and Company was in earnest. I'll help you to get the bill back, if you want it. I expect he'll be very glad to take his profit."

"What's his address?" Mayden-Harte demanded.

"I shall have to look it up in the telephone book. He is a member of *Ciro's*, where you often go. I saw him there yesterday."

Mayden-Harte rose to summon a telephone boy. Before he could do so, Klein also had sprung to his feet and was gripping him by the arm.

"What the hell is this?" he exclaimed.

His companion swung round and looked towards the door. A stream of men of ominous appearance directed by a uniformed inspector were taking up positions around the *chemie* table. Klein made a backward spring. Too late. Both exits behind the bar were already guarded by the police. Several women were screaming. The officials were making violent protests. It was all useless. Nemesis had arrived!

"By God, we're raided," Klein groaned.

The fate of Mr. Mayden-Harte was summary and bitter. He had no sooner taken his place at the desk in his director's room at Basinghall Street on the following morning than his secretary knocked at the door. There was sympathy in her face, for she was herself a somewhat gay young lady.

"His lordship would like to see you at once in his room, Mr. Mayden-Harte," she announced.

He accepted the summons with ill-assumed indifference. His compulsory attendance at Bow Street had resulted in his being two hours late, and he was conscious that he was by no means looking his best. Lord Marsom was writing when he entered the room and did not look up for several moments. When he did, there was a very strange light indeed in those curious eyes of his. He embarked upon no ordinary form of salutation.

"I understand, Mayden-Harte," he began, in his harshest and most rasping voice, "that you were arrested last night in one of those damnable, pestiferous places—a private gambling house."

"It is quite true, Lord Marsom."

"How is it that you're not in prison?"

Mayden-Harte's cheeks flushed.

"I'm out on bail," he admitted. "It is not a criminal offence to be discovered in a place like that. Lord Portington was there, the Marquis of Hammersmith, Lady Joan—"

"I understood you to say last night, when dining at my house, that you were not a gambler," Lord Marsom interrupted.

"I am not," Mayden-Harte declared. "I was there as a looker-on."

"I have reason to believe that you're a liar," was the brusque comment. "Can you explain this remarkable document?"

Lord Marsom pushed an oblong strip of blue paper across the table with the end of a pen, as though the touch of it were defiling. For a moment the room went round. Mayden-Harte knew then that he was a broken man. He tried to speak, but found it impossible. His inquisitor was immovable. He sat quite rigid, tapping the bill with the end of the pen.

"That is an acceptance of mine for two thousand pounds," Mayden-Harte admitted, in a voice which he himself did not recognise as his own. "I mistook the date and forgot to advise it. I have the money now. I tried to take it up last night. I signed it to oblige a friend."

"As I remarked before—you're a liar," Marsom repeated scornfully. "The drawer of the bill is a money-lender who seems to do most of his business in a gambling hell. Get your coat and hat, Mr. Mayden-Harte, and be very sure that you are outside this place within five minutes. Any financial settlement necessary will be made from the cashier's office. To hell with you, Mayden-Harte! I am an angry man, and when I am angry I am dangerous."

Lord Marsom had risen to his feet. His lips had slipped sideways and his teeth were flashing. There was an ugly light in his eyes, a stain of colour in his cheeks, veins standing out upon the clenched fist, which smote his beautiful writing table such a blow that papers, inkpots and inkstands all rattled and shook together. Mr. Mayden-Harte had just so much discretion mingled with his folly that he turned and fled.

Behind him, Marsom, his face convulsed with fury, his angry fingers trembling with passion, was tearing into small pieces the card which he had found pinned to the reverse side of the bill and on which were six words beautifully engraved:

**Another Woolito Director looking
for trouble?**

CHAPTER XXIV

Marsom, like most of the cultivated men of his race, was a man of taste. He was dining alone, a few nights later, in Park Lane, but the fact that he had no guest interfered in no manner with the strictly disciplined régime of the service. A small dining table, a bijou counterpart of the one which stood in the middle of the room and which held sixty, had been drawn into the sweeping bay window, from which little flushes of the April twilight were faintly visible. The subdued roar of the world changing from its work-a-day life to play-time was like music in his ears. He loved action. Silence of any sort was unendurable to him. The silence of death was the one terrible apprehension which he refused to face....

The flowers on his table were crystal white lilies—pink under the shaded lamp. A freshly gathered bunch of his favourite violets, with the evening dew still upon them, rushed up from his private farm in the country, rested on the table by his side. He ate sparingly but everything was choicely selected. He had toyed with a little smoked Volga salmon and sipped a glass of vodka. He had drunk a half cup of turtle soup—somewhat too rich for his taste—and he was waiting at the moment for the plainly grilled sole which was to precede his quail. The deeply graven lines, which marked the hardness of his day of battle, had passed from his face. Other men, giants in commerce or literature, might have been pitied that they should have had to spend the last few hours of the day alone, even in a solitude which had in it something of the magnificent. Marsom himself found something strengthening in his detachment. They had fallen back into their places in his scheme of life, those with whom he had dealt through the hours of the day. His hand had been lifted from the controlling lever of the great affairs which he had directed, only at the call of nature herself. It chanced that the evening papers were full of the harsh doings of a self-appointed political dictator who had driven his cabinet council back to the obscurity of their homes, leaving him to reign alone. It was very much what he himself was doing. That day he had launched a great advertising scheme on much sounder lines than would ever have occurred to Sir Alfred Honeyman. He had bought yarn upon seven European and English markets at a lower price than ever before. He had organised a new batch of agents, with some slight aid—he was generous enough to admit—from Sandbrook, whose knowledge of the East and the various necessary languages had been invaluable. He had had hourly telephone reports from every one of his factories and in no single case was there any slackening in the output. All that a board of directors could have done he had done a little better himself. There had been one slight disappointment, perhaps. He brushed that away as he would have pushed down into oblivion the vanishing end of a disturbing dream.

The lights at the other end of the room had been left unlit and she came to him simply enough, without haste, perhaps even without any consciousness of the effect which her appearance was likely to have. She was wearing one of the plainest black gowns the artist dressmaker had been able to produce, but she had conceded a small black cape which hung over her shoulders, and her fragment of a hat, with its few inches of veil, was another tribute to the usual. The servant from behind Marsom's place moved uncertainly forward. The butler, who was just arriving with the sole, showed as much surprise as his curiously set features were capable of displaying. Marsom looked with steady eyes at the approaching figure but made no motion to rise. She, on the other hand, appeared utterly unperturbed, as though her coming were the most usual thing in the world.

"So you came, after all," he said, a little gruffly. "I have finished the better half of the dinner. You know that I never wait for anyone."

"I shall take the fag end of anything you choose to give me," she said, smiling. "I shall only venture to remind you that if I am late it is because I have been working in your service."

He motioned with his head—an imperious gesture—and one of the high-backed Chippendale chairs was placed by his side. Cutlery and glass seemed to appear as though by magic.

"I have had smoked salmon and turtle soup," he announced. "I recommend the Volga salmon and a glass of vodka. Sole and quail to come."

"I can't resist the smoked salmon," she observed. "I happen to know how it comes to you. No vodka, please."

"A dry cocktail?" the butler suggested, almost under his breath.

She had the tact to refuse. She knew how her host, who collected his wines with the same care as his pictures, felt about any sort of mixed apéritif.

"A glass of sherry, if I may," she begged. "What a miraculous blending of lights! I think, after all, Fouquois must be an artist."

"It was a greater hand than Fouquois' who painted that line of sky," Marsom replied, pointing through the window. "Man's accident that those lights shine out so in between the trees of the Park just before the dusk. You are right, though. It is a study of lighting. Some of the earlier Dutch painters would have made good work of it. Have you changed your mind, Miss Moore?"

"In all respects except one," she said calmly.

"The least important," he retorted.

"A man always calls it the least important," she sighed, "but he is so apt to forget."

"I never forget," Marsom replied. "Likes with me are likes for eternity. Dislike may grow into hatred, but it never retreats. Try some of that Berncastler Doctor. Have some of your gassy stuff later if you like."

"You know that I don't care for champagne," she told him. "Where is Lady Julia?"

"She has flown over to Paris with the Brinsteins to see the *répétition générale* of his new play. Coming back in time for lunch to-morrow, I think. Sort of mad thing young people do nowadays."

"I am beginning to have a theory," she confided, "a very pleasant one it is, too. I believe that wholesale lunacy is coming upon us like a plague—like one of the plagues from the East the hermit apostles used to threaten us with. It would be rather an odd finish up, wouldn't it, if the whole world went mad?"

"It won't," he assured her. "The brain as yet is an unfinished article. It is when the brain gets too much crammed into it that danger threatens. There are plenty of our greatest men who are a little mad, as it is. They are not great enough to be real lunatics, though. I am not much of a reader myself but this new man down in Odessa, whose stories everyone is reading—you would not call those the production of a sane man, would you?"

"You work me too hard here," she sighed. "I have only read one. That was amazing enough but there was balance in it, after all."

Regretfully Fouquois drew the curtains. The twilight had passed into dusk.

"Coffee in my smaller study," his master ordered. "Serve some Armagnac for me and anything the young lady fancies."

Marsom rose to his feet. The lamps at the other end of the room were as yet unlit and for a moment he loomed almost terrible in his unwieldy bulk, his sullen face with its powerful features. His eyes glittered as he stood back to let the girl precede him—his first act of courtesy.

"So you meant to come all the time," he said, as he walked by her side across the hall, his hands behind his back.

"I suppose I did, subconsciously," she admitted. "But I never do anything upon conditions."

"You women are all the same," he sneered. "You think men only want one thing from you. They treat those sort of affairs better in the East. If you only knew, when it is materialised and the haze of sentimental fancies around it are dissolved, how unimportant that thing is, you would not imagine you carried priceless jewels about with you!"

She laughed gaily. Some of the savageries of his humour always appealed to her.

"You really know why I came?" she asked.

He shrugged his great shoulders.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I have been wondering. Got some reason tucked away in your head, I expect."

"I have come," she announced, "to talk about Woolito."

They sat in two enormous easy chairs, piled with cushions, on opposite sides of the hearthrug. At the right-hand side of each stood a little table. Upon Marsom's was the latest edition of the evening paper, a small goblet of Armagnac, a box of priceless cigars, a lighter and coffee. Upon hers also was coffee, a box of cigarettes and matches. Frances, even more than her host, seemed to be basking in the relaxation of the hour.

"What about Woolito?" he asked commandingly.

She hesitated for a moment, realising that she might find him in a difficult frame of mind.

"Seventeen and a half to-night, I see," she observed, lighting her cigarette. "That is a point up."

"Pooh!" he exclaimed. "What does the Stock Exchange know of Woolito? The Stock Exchange quotation is not worth looking at. We know—you and I, and those of us who are driving the chariot. Woolito is the greatest commercial enterprise in the world."

"Does it never disturb you," she enquired, "to think that the company has enemies?"

He snapped his great thumb against his third finger.

"Not that much," he answered contemptuously.

She flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"I used to feel the same," she reflected. "Just at present, I'm not so sure. Let me see—there were Lunt, Somerville, Bomford, Littleburn, Honeyman and Mayden-Harte, all victims of ignoble happenings. As Superintendent Mallinson said to me this afternoon at Scotland Yard—"Too many coincidences."

He showed his teeth at her in almost bulldog fashion.

"Oh-ho," he exclaimed. "So Scotland Yard is coming round, is it?"

"Scotland Yard is beginning to take more interest in the case," she admitted. "Six catastrophes, one after another, all directed against members of one firm, whose unpopularity," she added drily, "is almost a byword in the trade, takes some explanation. Let me see, how many are there left?"

"You know quite well," he answered brusquely. "There's Moody, Sandbrook and myself."

She nodded.

"Lord Sandbrook, I should imagine, can look after himself," she said. "Besides, he has not been associated with the business long enough to have become a part of it. Moody has no personality. He seems only to exist in the abstraction of his work. There remains—you."

"What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Scotland Yard suggests," she announced, helping herself to another cigarette, "that you allow them to provide you with a bodyguard."

He watched her lazy, shapely fingers groping in the cigarette box. He followed the line of her white arm up to her face. Her expression was unchanged, except that it was slightly more grave. She remained exactly herself—a thoroughly efficient, capable young woman of the world.

"So Scotland Yard suggests that I have a bodyguard, do they?"

She nodded.

"It is not at all an unusual thing in my country," she said. "When a big deal is being put through between various corporations, which is against the interests of others, the police are on the look-out all the time. I could tell you of a dozen of our prominent men, purely commercial, who are watched day and night when some particular deal is being put through."

"Bunkum," he declared.

She slipped a little lower into her chair. Her eyes seemed to be seeking for pictures in the cigarette smoke.

"You are not afraid," she admitted. "I know that. I am not afraid myself, so far as you are concerned, but there is the Woolito Company."

"Yes," he echoed. "There is the company."

"You are responsible for one of the greatest commercial enterprises in the world," she reminded him. "I do not flatter. I would not dream of attempting to flatter a man of your temperament, but there are certain facts which can never be altered. Woolito, Limited, is heavily capitalised. There are enormous sums sunk in property, in raw materials. Supposing that all these things that have happened are part of a scheme for a great financial drive against the company—not in your lifetime, I don't mean," she added, when she saw the black storm gathering in his face, "but after your funeral."

"As bad as that, eh?" he laughed harshly. "So far, our friends have stopped just short of murder."

"Murder may come any day," she warned him.

His eyes twinkled. She frowned.

"Courage," she continued, "can carry a man through many dangers, but it can never stop an assassin's bullet. Look the facts in the face, Lord Marsom, as I have done. What would happen to Woolito, Limited, if you were out of the way, with only Mr. Moody and Lord Sandbrook down at Basinghall Street?"

He grinned.

"It would go to everlasting pot," he admitted.

"Then, don't you think you had better abandon your prejudice and let me telephone to Scotland Yard?"

He shook his head.

"Don't get me wrong, young woman," he said. "Woolito, Limited, means everything in the world to me, but if I am going to be led by the nose I don't much care what happens to it. It is the ambition of my life. I never meant it to be my mausoleum. I will take care of myself and if they get me—well, then, they can have the Woolito Company as well. It is the end of everything I know or care about. Shall I leave you that pearl necklace in my will?"

She looked at him with rather sad eyes, in the depths of which, however, was lurking some gleam of humour.

"You know so much about Woolito and so little about women!" she remarked. "I would sooner give you what you ask for in exchange for your promise to let me send those men down from Scotland Yard, than for a pearl necklace."

"So the bargaining is commencing, is it?" he jeered.

She looked him over reflectively and, if ever Marsom had blushed in his life, he blushed then. She leaned across and rang the bell.

"I have kept my promise to Superintendent Mallinson," she said. "I have kept my word with you. Both have been difficult. I shall now take the liberty of giving an order in your house, which I suppose is quite wrong. Send for a taxi, please," she directed the man who answered the bell.

Marsom stretched out his hand for the evening paper. He rose grudgingly to his feet as she passed.

"There's a caricature of you on the back page of that paper, at the top of our Woolito advertisement," she pointed out. "I did it myself. I think it's rather good. You look like a little boy of naturally unpleasant disposition, who is endeavouring to look even worse than he is. You look like that so often. Good night, Lord Marsom."

He was obstinately silent, obstinately motionless, screened behind his newspaper. It was not until he heard the taxi come and go that he crushed it into a ball and flung it from him.

CHAPTER XXV

In the dusk of a particularly gloomy afternoon, about a week after the directors' meeting, Sandbrook caught up with Mr. Thomas Moody on the pavement of Piccadilly. He offered genial greetings and fell into step.

"The last of the Mohicans, eh?" he exclaimed pleasantly. "Well, I'm glad to see that you're keeping fit."

Mr. Moody coughed.

"I don't quite—" he began, with some hesitation.

"Well, you're the last of the old gang of directors who hasn't met with a spot of trouble, aren't you?" Sandbrook remarked, with a cheery smile.

"Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I am," his companion admitted uneasily. "Most extraordinary ill fortune we have had in that direction."

"Doesn't seem to have affected the commercial prosperity of the firm."

Mr. Moody stopped in the middle of the pavement in order to become more impressive.

"So long as Lord Marsom is alive and well," he declared, "it seems as though nothing in the world could check us. You know, of course, how he has dealt with the situation?"

"I should be very interested to hear again from you," Sandbrook confided. "Naturally, I don't turn up in Basinghall Street every day."

"He has elected a few more directors for formal purposes and then completely ignored them," Mr. Moody recounted. "He has inaugurated weekly meetings of the heads of the departments, over which he himself presides. He listens to what everyone has to say, comes to lightning-like decisions and he is never wrong. Believe me, Lord Sandbrook, if our chairman, the chairman of Woolito, Limited, were put at the head of the affairs of this country, with unlimited discretion, England would be a first-class Power again in five years. There isn't anything his brain can't grasp."

Sandbrook glanced curiously at the man by his side. The latter was dressed in poor taste and his clothes were ill fitting. His walk lacked dignity and his general appearance was unimpressive. His dark, straggling beard needed trimming, as did also his greying hair. Even the umbrella which he clutched was badly folded and shabby. He had the air of a seedy professional man who was already on the downward path. He seemed, in this busy and fashionable thoroughfare, a strange companion for a fastidious person like Sandbrook.

"What are you doing in this part of the world?" the latter asked.

"I am waiting upon Lord Marsom at his house in Park Lane, by appointment. I happen to have time on my hands, so I am walking part of the way."

"You have never paid me a visit," Sandbrook observed. "We are close to my house now. Will you come in and have a drink and I can send you on to Park Lane in my car?"

Mr. Moody was obviously surprised at the invitation, but he did not hesitate.

"I am a very small drinker," he confessed, "but it will give me great pleasure, especially as we are now associates."

Mr. Thomas Moody was not greatly improved in appearance by the removal of his bowler hat and bulky overcoat. It transpired that his tie had slipped from its position, disclosing a bone collar stud, and that his boots, seen at close quarters, were thick and ungainly. He seemed, however, to appreciate the comfort of an easy chair drawn up to the fire and he sipped his mild whisky and soda with evident relish.

"I do not, as a rule, take alcohol until I reach home at night," he explained. "Some of my experiments are very delicate

affairs and need a steady hand."

"Terribly interesting work—a chemist's," Sandbrook remarked.

Mr. Thomas puffed at the cigarette which he had hesitatingly accepted.

"Yes," he admitted, "my work has always been interesting. I started life as a toxicologist, then I gave that up for commercial work.... Yes, it's interesting, but science, Lord Sandbrook, is a hard taskmaster. It drives you along a narrow passage through life."

"Perhaps that is as well, sometimes," Sandbrook reflected. "Perhaps that is why you are the survivor of seven!"

"Pardon?" Mr. Moody queried.

"Don't you realise that you are in rather a unique position? A few months ago you were one of seven directors of Woolito, Limited. To-day you are the only one remaining who hasn't passed through some disastrous experience. Two are dead, and the others are in Nursing Homes or taking rest cures!"

"It is, without a doubt, the truth," Mr. Moody agreed, his fingers playing with his unkempt beard. "Fate seems to have passed me over."

"Perhaps it isn't altogether Fate, whatever that mysterious agency may be," Sandbrook meditated. "You see, every one of these men who has come to grief, with the exception of Sir Sigismund Lunt, had a dark corner in his life, a chapter of evil-doing for which he paid. I know that Lord Marsom's secretary had at one time the idea that there was a conspiracy on foot against the firm. Absurd! Men who are in public positions and who have been indiscreet at various times in their earlier lives are always liable to be found out."

"Precisely," Moody murmured, in a tone which seemed to indicate that his thoughts had wandered far away.

"You have the distinction of being the one exception," Sandbrook continued. "Hence you alone have survived. You have given Fate no hold upon you. You have lived a blameless life. Hence you, like Sir Galahad, the knight in shining armour, share the board room of Woolito, Limited, alone with Lord Marsom—unless I happen to pop in. What about another small whisky?"

If Mr. Moody heard the invitation, he rather impolitely ignored it. He was gazing intently into the fire. Sandbrook, who looked over carelessly enough in his direction, was startled. There was a striking change in the pudgy, intensely commonplace face. Sandbrook's first idea was that the man was about to have a fit. Then, the convulsion of his features took more familiar shape. Mr. Moody began to laugh. He laughed internally, silently and with a sardonic enjoyment which seemed to transform him from the realms of the ordinary plodder through life to kinship with an altogether different and intellectually superior order of beings. Sandbrook stared at him, speechless. He had, however, prescience enough not to interrupt. He even waited until the spasm was over, until Mr. Moody showed signs of returning to normality before he asked his plain, matter-of-fact question.

"May I know the joke?" he begged.

Mr. Moody removed his spectacles and, with a handkerchief which wasn't much to talk about, carefully wiped them. He then deliberately finished his whisky and soda and rose to his feet. His abnormal outburst had passed. More than ever he appeared to be a very ordinary human being.

"Lord Sandbrook," he said, "you are a newcomer to all this Woolito trouble, so I see no objection in confiding to you the cause of my amusement, which may have seemed somewhat ill-timed. I was laughing because I happened to think of Leonard Blunt. You spoke of the peccadilloes in the lives of my various fellow directors as being responsible for their divers misfortunes, and you congratulated me on being the one member of the board who had escaped disaster by reason of my sober and upright living."

"That's right," Sandbrook agreed, with a sudden rigidity of tone and posture. "Quite right."

"The circumstances of my own wrong-doing are so obscure," Mr. Thomas Moody continued, "and your concern in the matter is so slight, that I feel no hesitation in explaining to you, Lord Sandbrook, the cause of my mirth. There is not a single one of all my fellow directors, who is now suffering or dead, who has committed a crime which would compare

in horror and evil with the one of which I am guilty. And no one knows. Probably no one ever will know. That is why I laughed, Lord Sandbrook."

"The car is waiting for the gentleman, milord," Groves announced.

And the gentleman had slipped away before Sandbrook had recovered his senses sufficiently to frame even a single question.

Lord Marsom received his surviving director in the room which he called his sanctum, a luxurious and delightful apartment on the fifth floor of the mansion in Park Lane. It was fitted with extensions of all the telephones and private wires with which the house was equipped, and the large Queen Anne writing table at which Marsom was seated had been a show piece at Christie's. Mr. Moody, brought up by a footman in the electric lift, was received by his chief graciously enough, but with some evidence of impatience. Marsom was working hard these days.

"Get at it as quickly as you can," the latter begged. "Glad to see you, of course, and all that, Moody, but our departments are rather far apart these days. No trouble, I hope?"

Mr. Moody did not immediately reply. He was looking out through the, as yet, uncurtained window at the glittering expanse of lights stretching to the far horizon.

"I met Lord Sandbrook on my way here," he observed, with apparent irrelevance. "He asked me to step in and visit him for a few minutes. We had a drink together."

"Sandbrook?" Marsom repeated. "I had no idea you knew the fellow, except in a business way."

"I have only met him here," Moody acknowledged. "He remembered me, though. We met in Piccadilly not far from his house. Apart from the directorate, he seems to be very interested in the personalities of the firm."

"In what way?" Marsom asked sharply.

"He remembered the names of every one of the directors and pretty well what had happened to them. He congratulated me upon being the last survivor."

Marsom frowned.

"I wish to the devil these people would mind their own business," he muttered.

"He congratulated me," Moody went on, still looking out of the window, "upon being the only one of the directors who had led a blameless life."

Marsom jeered.

"And what did you say to that?"

"I believe that I laughed. I couldn't help it."

"Do you good," Marsom declared. "I've never seen you laugh in my life. You take life too damned seriously. As to the blamelessness of it, there's nothing troubling you, is there?"

"Not conscience, if that's what you mean. No, I have never suffered from conscience. Once, when I was contemplating a certain action, I yielded to expediency. I may have made a mistake there. That's a different matter. It had nothing to do with conscience."

"Did you come here," Marsom demanded impatiently, "at a critical time in the history of the firm, and when I am doing the work of twelve men, to indulge in these personal ramblings? If so, I will leave you to it. I have plenty of work waiting for me sent up from Basinghall Street."

"You must not hurry away," Moody insisted. "No, don't hurry, Lord Marsom. I have something to say—something I had

to come and tell you. It is," he confided, joining his hands together and looking for a moment at the bony knuckles, "in the nature of a confession."

"Get on with it, then," Marsom enjoined. "Words were meant to spit out the truth with and not for mumbling."

The even course of Mr. Moody's semi-soliloquy failed to respond to the lash. He continued with the same detached air.

"Many years ago, there was a very troublesome man occupying a post in our laboratories. A very clever man, perhaps I should say a brilliant one, but to Woolito, Limited, a danger. You remember that time, Lord Marsom? The man's name was Blunt—Leonard Blunt. Blunt is an English name but I believe that the man was of Belgian descent."

"So you are going to drag up your own little peccadillo, are you?" Marsom jeered.

"It has become necessary," Moody acknowledged.

This time his companion forebore to crack his stimulating lash. His eyes were fixed steadily upon his visitor. He had the air of one willing and able to drag the truth from the man's slowly moving lips before the words were spoken.

"You and I, in those days," Moody went on, "had many conversations about Leonard Blunt. We made him various offers—none of which he was willing to accept. We began to have suspicions. In time, we found that there was good ground for them. Then, one day when the time had come for action, you called me to your office. You reminded me of that branch of my profession which I had abandoned when I entered your service. You told me that Leonard Blunt must be removed!"

"Well, that was simple enough," Marsom said. "I told you that. I showed you what your duty was and you did it."

"Yes," Moody replied, "I did it. But not quite in the way you thought. I have asked myself ever since why not. I have never been quite sure. It was not conscience that stopped me; it was not ordinary fear; it was not any liking or affection for the man himself. I believe, as a matter of sober fact, it was the fear of retribution. At any rate, even when I was contemplating the best way to accomplish our end, another idea came to me. I decided to avoid the supreme risk. I was younger then and life seemed to be of more importance. There were several experiments I still wished to make, several problems to be solved. Therefore I took a line of my own. All that I had promised you was that Leonard Blunt should be removed. Well, I removed him, but not quite in the way you thought."

Marsom's chair creaked audibly. He had moved a little nearer to the edge of the table.

"You mean that you did not kill him?"

"I did not kill him. I decided upon an action which absolved me from criminality. I treated him with a toxin which I was the only man in Europe in those days to understand, which produced softening of the brain and ultimately madness. Leonard Blunt as a lunatic could, I fancied, do us no harm, and there was no scientist in any part of the world—even if he had cut open the man's brain—who could have sworn to the fact that this disease from which he was suffering could come from outside infection. Very safe, I thought, very humane.... We lunched together every day in the laboratory, Leonard Blunt and I, so it was easily done. You heard of his illness. You were told of his death. The latter, however, was a fiction. He was removed, on the day of his supposed funeral, not to the cemetery but to the lunatic asylum."

"Well?"

An icy monosyllable, yet with a spit of something burning in it, something which Moody apparently failed to recognise.

"That was many years ago," Mr. Moody continued, glancing once more thoughtfully at his knuckles. "He had no friends. His father lost his reason, as soon as he was told the truth. The few acquaintances he had believed him to be dead. No one has ever been near him. It was a pauper asylum. Many years ago."

"Why are you telling me this?" Marsom demanded.

"Because it appears," the other confided, stroking his chin gently, "that the effect of the toxin was not entirely lasting. Some impulse—I cannot explain it—prompted me one day last week to call at that asylum on visiting day and make enquiries concerning Mr. Leonard Blunt. They looked at me in surprise. They told me that during these years I was the first person who had made any enquiry whatever concerning him, and the strange coincidence about it was this—that only the day before he had been discharged as cured!"

Marsom uttered no exclamation. Perhaps he had realised before what this narrative was leading up to. A little more of his knee was in evidence. He had withdrawn the other one from the open space in the middle of the table.

"So Leonard Blunt, the man whom you told me was dead, for compassing whose death you were given your directorship, is alive!" he said.

"It would appear so," Moody admitted. "I certainly made him mad. I condemned him to what I thought was a lifetime in a pauper asylum, and the young man I met in Piccadilly, young Lord Sandbrook, he congratulated me—congratulated me upon my blameless life, that unlike the other directors I had never committed a single action which was likely to bring retribution upon my head! It seemed to me strange that,—when I was on my way to tell you what had happened! I have a good memory and I looked back and I remembered that day of the final dose. He had slept after lunch and he woke with a start, shrieking and clawing the air. He had one moment of sanity.

"My head is going, Moody,' he shrieked. 'There's something clawing at my brain!'

"Then all his words faded into gibberish. But I remember his eyes and the froth on his lips, even to this moment. He was quite violent when they took him away. The doctor who certified him—he thought he was a gorilla and he wanted to tear him in pieces. All those years ago. And I watched them bundle him into a sort of prison van, tied hand and foot—A blameless life! That's what the young lord told me I had lived...."

The muscles were straining in the sleeves of Lord Marsom's well-cut clothes. There were points of fire now in the pupils of his eyes. He was halfway out of his chair, leaning across the room. Moody was looking out at those far-flung lights, when suddenly he began to laugh. Perhaps the beginning of his emotion saved his life, for the man who was watching him so steadily felt an element of surprise, almost of stupefaction, paralysing for a moment his limbs, arresting the passion which had flamed up within him.... Mr. Moody continued to laugh. He rocked in his chair and his sides shook. He beat his hands one against the other. Tears welled up in his eyes. It was impossible to divine his sensations while the fit lasted. Whatever it may have been, it was not strong enough, to conceal the paroxysm of fear which suddenly swept over him, as he felt himself torn from his chair, felt the hot breath of a man mad with anger upon his cheeks, felt the scorching bitterness of that storm of words, not one of which took coherent shape. Then, with the grip upon his throat contemptuously slackening, the lash of the abuse abruptly terminated, there was a far-away yet distinctly recognisable sound. Somebody was knocking at the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

Even Groves, most sedate of all butlers, seemed a little breathless as he threw open the door of the library.

"Miss Frances Moore, your lordship," he announced. "She assures me that her visit is of such urgent importance that I took the liberty of showing her in."

Frances almost pushed her way past him. She had evidently come as no ordinary visitor. Her hastily donned furs barely concealed the fact that she was wearing only her thin working frock underneath. Her hat was arranged without its usual precision, her hands were gloveless. There was an expression on her face which Sandbrook failed to grasp.

"Can I speak to you for a few minutes, please?" she begged.

Sandbrook, murmuring reassurances, drew her to a chair and established her comfortably. Then he touched a bell and gave a swift order to Groves.

"Now, tell me," he insisted sternly, "who's been frightening you?"

"Give me—just a few moments," she gasped.

He took note of the indrawn breath, the still quivering eyelids, and he responded immediately to her agitated mood. He moved away to the fire and threw on another log, listening for a moment to the almost noiseless traffic in the street outside, punctuated only by the incessant blare of the motor horns. With the opening of the door, he strolled back again, dismissed Groves at once, shook and poured out the cocktails himself, and even handed her an already lit cigarette.

"Buck up, little lady," he enjoined cheerfully. "More bad Woolito business, eh? Never mind, you're in sanctuary here. What's wrong?"

She raised her glass to her lips and drained the contents. Then she set it down deliberately on the small table by her side. She looked up at him. Her eyes, with their veiled but terrified appeal, had never seemed more eloquent, but her mouth was strained and piteous.

"Mr. Moody, the last of the old Woolito directors, has gone mad!" she gasped. "I was in the room and I saw it."

"You saw what?" he cried, in blank bewilderment.

"I saw Lord Marsom apparently in a furious temper with Mr. Moody," she moaned, "and Mr. Moody did nothing but laugh."

There was a moment's blank and utter silence. A log fell from the fire, a taxicab honked its way towards Berkeley Square. Metaphorically speaking, Sandbrook shook himself. He, too, had heard Moody laugh that afternoon.

"There was a quarrel?" he asked.

"If so, it must have been before I arrived. I was sent for, so I walked right up to Lord Marsom's private den at the top of the house. Mr. Moody was sitting upright in a high-backed chair, with the most awful look on his face, giggling like a child, and Lord Marsom—oh—"

"Go on," he insisted.

"Lord Marsom was smoking a cigar and standing with his hands in his pockets, looking down at him. He scowled at me when I came in and I was afraid. 'See what a few plain words have done to Moody,' he pointed savagely. 'He's gone out of his mind. I'm going to telephone for a doctor.' He pushed past me and I heard him walk down the stairs, though the electric lift was waiting, and there were a couple of telephones in the room. I forced myself to cross the floor—to go over. I tried to speak to Mr. Moody. He only laughed. It was perfectly awful. I nearly had hysterics myself! I opened the window and leaned out for a moment and the rain did me good. Then I don't know how—I left the room, Mr. Moody shouting after me all the time. I locked the door and came here. Will you go back with me, please?"

"At once," he promised. "This moment. Don't be so terrified," he added kindly. "Very likely the man is only having some sort of a fit."

She shivered from head to foot.

"I saw his face," she moaned.

There were no signs of commotion about the mansion in Park Lane when Sandbrook and Frances Moore arrived there, a few minutes later. A smiling man-servant relieved the former of his coat and hat, and would have ushered them into the library on the ground floor but for a gesture on Frances' part.

"I'm taking Lord Sandbrook upstairs first," she explained. "We shall see Lord Marsom later."

The man opened the door of the lift for them and they ascended to the fifth floor. Frances' fingers trembled so that she nearly dropped the key, when she drew it from her bag. Sandbrook took it from her, as she indicated the door. There were lights burning softly in the corridor, but no one about.

"The switch is on your right-hand side," she whispered. "Turn it on directly or I sha'n't dare to come in."

"I'll do exactly as you say," Sandbrook promised her, "and don't be scared. He was a nasty fellow, Moody, anyway."

Whether he was a nasty fellow or not, there were no signs of Mr. Moody, dead or alive, when Sandbrook, having turned on the switch, advanced into the room, followed a short distance behind by Frances. He looked round at the orderly apartment and back at his companion for an explanation. She could only shake her head in bewilderment. She pointed to the chair where Moody had been sitting. Even the cushion upon it was undisturbed. There was, so far as he could see, nothing unusual about the apartment. Sandbrook was genuinely puzzled.

"You're sure that this was the room?" he ventured.

Perhaps this was a little too much for Miss Frances Moore. With the hesitatingly asked question, a larger measure of sanity returned to her. She made a genuine effort and, when she spoke again, both her tone and her manner were more normal.

"Don't look at me as though you thought I was crazy," she begged. "Of course, it is the same room. Strange things have happened here—before I came—and after I left."

"For the scene of a violent quarrel," he observed, "the place bears a peaceful aspect."

"You are very gullible," she snapped. "Come downstairs with me, please. We are going to talk to Lord Marsom."

"What do you think has happened?" he asked, as they shot downward in the lift.

"I think the cleverest man I know on earth and the devil himself in hell have taken this affair into their joint charge," she replied....

Marsom, indeed, as he looked up at their entrance, might well have served for a type of the modern Apollyon. A deep flush was upon his cheeks, his underlip protruded, his eyes were like spots of fire under his fierce brows. He seemed to have swollen in size. He had chosen to sit at the head of that long table with a mass of papers in front of him, a shaded light and a row of telephones. He was bulky, terrifying, dominant.

"Well, my nervous little publicity secretary," he jeered, "have you come back to have another look at the lunatic?"

"Look here, sir," Sandbrook intervened, "wouldn't it be as well if you treated this matter rather more seriously? We want to know what's become of Thomas Moody?"

"His body or his soul?" Marsom demanded.

"We have more interest in his body at the present moment. Miss Moore declares that she left him raving mad in your upstairs library, that she locked the door and came out to look for help and advice."

"Quaint thing that she should have gone to you, Sandbrook."

"Not at all," the latter contradicted. "I have known Miss Frances Moore a very short time, perhaps, but she permits me to call her a friend. I returned with her at once and we found that the locked room had been unlocked, that Mr. Moody had disappeared, and that the room had been restored with suspicious skill to its usual appearance. I think that Miss Moore is entitled to ask for some explanation. I think—by-the-by, that reminds me; I am a magistrate myself—I think that I, too, am entitled to an explanation. Strange things have been happening to your directors. What have you done, Lord Marsom, with Thomas Moody?"

Lord Marsom's eyes flashed angrily upon them both.

"Young man," he said, "I have had a sort of liking for you, but I am not going to mince words out of politeness. Apart from the fact of your being a director of the firm, what the hell business is it of yours?"

Sandbrook deliberated for a few seconds and replied with a faintly deprecating smile.

"I am not at all sure that it is my business, sir. There is Miss Moore, here, though, who is in a great state of distress. Perhaps you would not mind telling her."

Marsom looked from one to the other with anger in his eyes and a bitter curl to his lips. When he spoke, however, it was obvious that his fury had burnt itself out. He spoke almost calmly.

"The last of my directors," he confided, "is, or probably will be within a week, in a madhouse! I sent him home and telephoned for a doctor to go and see him half an hour ago—Goldbrun, Number 14b., Harley Street, if you want any further information. I don't. Now, be off, both of you—this minute. I am subject to curious whims, as Miss Moore knows. I have a fancy to be alone."

His fingers pressed the bell. His two visitors took their leave.

In the bare front room of his small house amongst the back streets of Finsbury, the same old man with straggly grey beard, pale blue eyes half hidden by horn-rimmed spectacles, knotted fingers and narrow shoulders, was bending over his rough wooden loom, working the treadles with his slippered feet, fingering the wool and continuing his eternal but profitless task. There was the basket of drab, grey material on one side of him, skeins of coloured wool on the other. As he worked, he mumbled to himself. The door opened without his noticing it and his wife ushered in a visitor.

"Samuel, here's the old gentleman who comes to see you most months. He's willing to work for a spell, he says."

Mr. Thomas Moody shuffled on to the vacant stool, adjusted his spectacles and picked up a skein of wool. The old man scarcely turned his head.

"I am forgetting your name," he said severely, "but you should know better than to disturb the head of a great firm when he's as busy as I am."

"I'm sorry," Moody mumbled. "I've met with an old friend lately who was connected with the business, though. Orders still rolling in?"

"We have orders enough ahead for years to come," the old man replied, a throb of triumph in his shaky tones. "What we will do now is more than I can tell you, for there's word of Len coming back and he was always one for the big turn-over. Eighteen thousand hands already, and if Len had his way, we would have twenty-five! It's no good your offering us your orders, Mister," he went on, pedaling away without looking up. "We have every scrap of machinery in the place being worked at full pressure, as you can see, and we can't turn the stuff out fast enough."

"You don't mind my staying and watching the machinery for a minute or two?" Moody demanded. "I am a worker too. Every little helps."

"Ay, you're welcome, Mister," the old man acquiesced, treadling still more vigorously. "It's a grand sight, for sure."

"I see you have one machine vacant," the caller remarked, pointing to an old wooden loom which was standing in the same place as on his previous visit.

"Ay," the other assented. "Him as was to work it—it's a long time behind his date, but he'll be here. Not much good to us these go-ahead days, though. That's the sort of muck we used to turn out in his days—what's in the basket by the side."

Moody glanced down into a decrepit waste-paper basket full of cheap, grey knitting wool.

"That's where my Len beat him," the old man went on. "My Len, the great chemist, you know. They was all thrusting that colourless muck through the looms, and everything they turned out was drab. What's the good of going on with that? The others will try their best but their best will be a poor lot. We've got the secret and we'll keep it."

"Who did you say was coming to work this machine?" Moody asked hesitatingly, pointing to the ramshackle loom.

"My Len," was the stolid reply. "He may be coming any day now."

Once more the door was pushed gently open. Very quietly, very unobtrusively, carrying his umbrella in his hand, a middle-aged, bent man, of highly respectable appearance, came towards them. Old Blunt half turned his head.

"You're late, Leonard," was all he said.

"Am I?" the newcomer observed. "Never mind, it was difficult enough to come, anyway. For many months—sometimes I think it was many years—they kept me in a country hospital. They thought I was ill, but I wasn't. Then there came a doctor who really knew his job. He tapped me all over and he asked me questions, and he made me sign my name in a book. 'What do you want to do?' he asked. 'I want to get back to work,' I told him. He went away. Then he came back with others a few days later. I didn't understand all they said, but they agreed that I was cured. They took me downstairs. Outside there was a beautiful car waiting. Here I am! Where's the yarn?"

The tenant of the room, still treadling, pointed to a vacant machine. Mr. Leonard Blunt took off his overcoat, took off his other coat and turned up his sleeves. He seated himself on the three-legged stool and picked up a handful of the grey material.

"It's hard stuff to make—Woolito," he murmured.

"Ay," was the scornful answer. "And it ain't much, when it's made the way you others have to go about it. Look at my basket, man. Did you ever see stuff like that? Look at the scarlet of it. Look at the blue of the first lot. No wonder you had to knuckle under."

Mr. Thomas Moody had risen to his feet—a wild, gaunt figure. He stood staring at the latest comer.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Leonard Blunt," the newcomer acknowledged. "I have been away for some time. That's my Dad, all right, although he seems to have gone queer. I used to know you too," he went on, staring at Moody. "You were our chemist in the old days."

Slowly and painfully Moody staggered a pace forward. The skein of wool slipped from his fingers, a half-strangled cry seemed to come from the back of his throat, as he collapsed onto the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII

Marsom, glancing through his morning papers in his cheerful and sunny breakfast room, gripped the *Financial Times* in his left hand, his cup of coffee in the right and remained for a brief space of time transfixed. Then he read out to himself the headline which had attracted his notice. It was the most prominent feature of the Stock Exchange news.

"SHARP FALL IN WOOLITOS!"

"Woolitos were a curiously weak market during the latter part of the afternoon. They have remained steady for several days round about 18¾ but a burst of selling orders brought the price down at one time to 17¼. They finished at 17½, a fraction above the worst."

Marsom rang the bell furiously. His secretary, who had been expecting this summons, hastened in.

"Have you seen this, Crooks?" his employer demanded, tapping the newspaper.

"Certainly I have, sir," the young man replied. "It was in the special edition last night. None of the offices in the City will be open just yet, so I took the liberty of ringing up Mr. Rawson at his private house. He tells me that the weakness developed quite unexpectedly and he can only imagine that one or two large estates are being wound up."

"Ring him up again," his chief directed, "and tell him to buy me a thousand at opening price. See that the car is round punctually at nine o'clock."

"Very good, your lordship."

Marsom continued his study of the morning papers and poured himself out another cup of coffee. The few minutes' tranquillity, however, which he usually found enjoyable, had been rudely disturbed. In these days of overwhelming success, success which he knew well enough was thoroughly substantial, he very seldom troubled to look at the quotations of his own stock. With the bonuses which would be distributed during the year, the interim and final dividends, it was obvious to everyone behind the scenes that at 18, Woolitos were still undervalued. From what corner of the world, he asked himself, could come this extraordinary burst of selling? However, so much the better for him! A thousand shares would represent a thousand pounds' profit before the end of the day—enough to buy the necklace for that elusive little jade, if only she would leave off playing the fool and accept it. Nine o'clock, her time was supposed to be in the morning, in case he wanted her before their ways parted. He'd bet she wasn't there! He rang the third of the row of bells which had been moved over to his table. In less than a minute Miss Frances Moore opened the door and came quietly across the room. She was wearing her hat and gloves and carrying a small despatch case.

"Just arrived, eh?" he grunted.

"No, I'm just going out," she replied coolly. "I've been here half an hour. Just finished my correspondence for the morning. I'm going down to the City now, and then on to Tottenham with Mr. Maunsell, the editor of the *Illustrated Press*. He wants some pictures of the building and a few different views of the new model."

"Humph!" he ejaculated. "You're energetic this morning."

"Energy is one of the essential qualities of a publicity secretary," she rejoined.

He shook the *Financial Times* at her.

"Seen this?" he asked.

"It's in all the papers," she told him. "The *Express* points out that a very large estate is being liquidated this week."

"I am buying enough to give you that pearl necklace as soon as the market opens this morning," he observed.

"There are other more deserving objects of charity," she replied calmly.

"You're a little prig!" he scoffed.

"For a man whose brains I respect as much as I do yours," she retorted, "you can sometimes be very foolish!"

Marsom stretched out his hand, took a cigar from the box upon the table, clipped and lit it. It was his one resource when he was in danger of saying something rude.

"Want a lift down to the City?" he asked. "I'm starting at once."

"Thank you, no," she replied. "I have my own little car here and I shall need it for later on."

"Do as you please," he snapped. "Report before luncheon. I may have some instructions for you. By-the-by, did you see that article in the *Looker-on* entitled 'Commercial Coincidences'?"

"I did," she admitted.

"Well, what about it? The editor ought to have known better than to have put it in."

"The name of Woolito is not mentioned," she reminded him.

"You don't suppose there is anyone who doesn't know to whom the article refers."

"Perhaps not," she admitted. "At the same time, you can't expect to keep all mention of this business out of the papers. Nothing like it has ever happened before to any commercial undertaking—to lose seven of their directors within a year. The article is very sympathetic and treats the affair simply as a series of coincidences."

"Well, just warn the editor to go light," Marsom enjoined, rising to his feet. "There's another illustrated paper with a caricature of me at the helm of an empty ship. That isn't the sort of publicity we want, Miss Moore."

"Considering everything," she said deliberately, "you get very little of it. I've had proofs of dozens of articles submitted to me that I've blue-pencilled."

"Stick to the blue pencil," he growled. "I don't want any more of that stuff like 'The Wonder Man of Commerce'—that article in the *Eagle* last week. It's the stuff we want talked about, not the man."

"Unfortunately," she concluded, as she took her leave, "it's a very personal age."

Marsom's daily drive to the City would have been in its concluding stages something of a triumphal progress, but for his fixed habit of leaning back in his car and looking neither to the right nor to the left. His crude and striking personality lent itself equally well to the caricaturist, the photographer and the memory of those to whom he had been pointed out. Lord Marsom, the Merchant Prince! The man who was declared to be making millions faster than any other person in the world of commerce. Lord Marsom, the founder of the great Woolito Company, with twenty-five factories in Great Britain alone and branches all over the world. A nod from the great man might mean nothing, but it was worth having. Few, however, ever succeeded in obtaining even this limited gesture of recognition. In so far as Marsom was a *poseur* at all, he aimed at being the detached Napoleon of commerce, the man of deeds and not of words.... In the great building over which he reigned, he unbent so far as to exchange good mornings with anyone who caught his attention, but there was never anything of affability in his tone or manner. His eyes swept the glass-enclosed suites of counting-rooms critically each morning but without geniality. Behind, reaching the whole of the way down a side street, were five-storied warehouses into which he seldom penetrated. He made his way to his own suite of apartments in these days as rapidly as possible. He had no fancy for passing along that corridor, where each one of the secretaries outside at her desk was reminiscent of an absent chief. It was perhaps the one touch of sentiment he allowed himself.

Once in his room, the man's Herculean labours began. There were his two commercial secretaries on one side, with a *précis* of the important matters requiring his attention during the day. On the other was a line of ambassadors from the different departments, bringing matters which required a decision from him. It was half-past eleven before he permitted himself to lean back in his chair and escape from the drudgery of detail.

"Give me Rawson on the telephone," he directed Crooks.

"Mr. Rawson has rung up three times already this morning, sir. He is on the 'phone now."

Marsom grunted and took the receiver in his hand.

"Marsom speaking. What was the meaning of that weakness yesterday afternoon?"

"God knows!" answered a worried voice. "Have you had this morning's quotations?"

"Not yet. More important things to see after. Did you buy my thousand?"

"I bought them at 16¾."

"What?" Marsom roared.

"16¾. If I'd waited a quarter of an hour, I could have got them at 16¼. At the present moment they're 15½."

Marsom was speechless. It was several moments before he could collect himself.

"What the hell's the meaning of it?" he got out at last.

"I'm off to the House to see if I can hear anything," was the agitated rejoinder. "I didn't like to go till I'd spoken to you... Shall I do anything?"

"Buy me ten thousand," Marsom ordered.

There was a brief period of rest. Then Frances appeared, a little breathless.

"I've left the others up at Tottenham," she announced. "I thought you'd like me to get the newspaper men round."

"Sit down and wait till Rawson rings me up from the House," Marsom directed. "What do they say about this business?"

"I've scarcely heard a word," she confided. "Mr. Crooks rang me up at Tottenham and said he thought I'd better come back."

Marsom nodded.

"Good man, Crooks," he flung across the room. "I've just put an order in for ten thousand," he went on. "I should think that would stop the rubbish. If not, get a representative lot round at once."

She nodded.

"Much better to make it a concerted statement," she suggested. "There are two or three newspaper men here now. I'm telling them to wait."

There was a further rush of business. Pen in hand, Marsom swung back to his desk, signed a dozen cheques and several contracts. By the time he had finished, Rawson was on the 'phone again.

"I'm coming straight round, Lord Marsom," he announced. "I don't trust the telephone just now."

"What's the market?"

"Fifteen."

Marsom lit a fresh cigar with steady fingers.

"Go down to the cashier's department, Crooks," he directed. "See Mr. Phillips and that man Goldenberg—find out if they've heard anything. If they haven't, send them out. Let them go to the bars or anywhere. I want gossip."

"Certainly, sir," the secretary agreed. "You'll see Mr. Rawson at once, I suppose?"

"Right away," Marsom assented.

Mr. Rawson, one of the most distinguished figures in the House, a man of presence and dignity, nevertheless, presented a somewhat harassed appearance when, a few minutes later, he was ushered in. His forehead, when he removed his silk hat, was wet with perspiration. He was distinctly out of breath. Marsom pointed to a chair.

"Sit down and have a rest, man," he invited. "What's it all about?"

"That's the funny part of it," the stockbroker observed discreetly, whilst he wiped his forehead. "No one seems to know. We should have thought it came from America, but America won't be open for several hours yet. However, whatever the reason may be, Lord Marsom, this much is certainly true—there's a concerted bear attack upon Woolitos by some twenty or thirty houses, all of fairly good repute. No one has divulged the names of their clients. No one has offered any explanation. Each one has orders to sell Woolitos up to a large amount. I heard 14¾ mentioned as I left the House."

Marsom smoked thoughtfully for a moment.

"Looks as though someone were asking for trouble," he remarked.

"In the whole course of my thirty-four years' experience," the stockbroker continued, "I never remember such an occurrence as this. A bear attack upon what would generally be considered, I think, the strongest share in the industrial market. Why, there were sales of over eight thousand before the price even wobbled."

"Amazing," Marsom muttered.

There was a brief silence. Mr. Rawson was becoming himself again.

"One might have thought," he went on, "that some lunatic had got loose, except for this one very sinister fact—the operations are spread out amongst at least twenty firms. That is my excuse, Lord Marsom, for asking to have a word with you in private."

The latter glanced round the room.

"This young lady," he explained, "is Miss Frances Moore, my publicity secretary. I wouldn't have her miss a show like this for anything in the world. Crooks, my personal secretary, you know. You may consider these two, Rawson, as non-existent. Out with anything you have to say."

"All I want," Rawson declared, "is to ask you—as man to man—at a crisis when only truth is of any avail—do you know of the slightest reason why this attack should be made upon your stock?"

"Not the slightest," was the calm reply, "unless some company of philanthropists wants to aid me in making a few more millions."

"Your affairs just lately," the stockbroker reminded him gravely, "have encountered the reverse of what you might call philanthropic interest on the part of someone or other."

Marsom's lip curled outwards. It was the first sign of anything approaching emotion which he had shown.

"You mean the various accidents to my directors?"

"I do. There certainly appears to have been some malevolent influence at work."

"I'm afraid, Rawson, in your spare moments," Marsom said, "that you've been dipping into sensational literature. I have had bad luck with my directors, but when the cause of the misfortunes which have happened to them has been properly investigated, it has turned out—in every case—to be due to some irregularity in their private lives or character. My new board, who will be presented at the next general meeting, will consist of a very different type of person."

"There has been no falling off in your sales?" the stockbroker persisted. "There is no new form of competition with which you are threatened?"

Marsom laughed scornfully.

"Don't ask me these silly questions," he begged. "I'm sending for the newspaper men this afternoon, and I'm having my accountants here at the same time. Come and meet them. Hear the truth from the one type of man who never lies—the chartered accountant, with a row of letters after his name and a baronetcy in the firm. Notwithstanding the loss of Lunt's machine, we made more money during the last six months than ever before in the history of the business. We shall have to give away a ridiculous autumn bonus to get rid of our surplus profits, and next month we shall declare, as we did last year, an interim dividend of thirty per cent."

Mr. Rawson almost collapsed. He motioned to Crooks.

"The tape," he begged.

"His lordship won't allow it in the room, sir," the secretary replied. "I'll give you the latest news in a moment."

Crooks hurried out but returned almost immediately. His expression was grave.

"Woolitos are 13½, sir," he announced.

Mr. Rawson was in despair.

"There could be nothing wrong at your Nottinghamshire factories," he suggested.

Marsom smiled.

"Our private line has been going all the morning," he confided. "They are working overtime and they have been able to put on several hundred fresh hands yesterday."

"I'm beaten," the stockbroker confessed, rising to his feet.

Marsom waved him back.

"Wait a moment," he directed. "So far as one can regard this position from a common-sense view at all, I imagine that this afternoon's proceedings will at any rate steady the market. I have never needed to gamble in my own shares, but the people who are responsible for this absurd business must pay for it. Make out purchase orders, Crooks, for fifty thousand Woolitos."

Rawson's eyes flashed.

"My God, what a battle!" he exclaimed.

"There's no battle at all, that I can see," was the cool reply. "I know my shares are worth buying at twenty. I have all the money I want in the world. I have already all the luxuries an ordinary millionaire permits himself, but what can I do? I can't let my own shares be kicked about by a gang of lunatics. The men who attack us must pay."

"You don't mind if I spread this out, of course?" the stockbroker observed, as he took the sheet of paper which Crooks handed to him. "No one firm could deal with it."

"Just as you please," Marsom conceded. "All that I care about is that I get the shares."

A page-boy opened the door.

"Woolitos, 13¼," he announced.

"Seems as though you'll get the shares all right," Mr. Rawson muttered, as he took up his hat.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The meeting that afternoon in the magnificent board room of Woolito, Limited, was almost an historical event in the City. Lord Marsom sat at the head of the table, entirely his usual self, inscrutable, unemotional, with the air of one a little bored by the whole proceedings. On his right hand sat two members of the most famous firm of chartered accountants in the City, on his left no ordinary bank manager even of a City branch, but Lord Hildreth, a banker with all the dignity of title and inherited position. Below them were a motley group of journalists, one or two members of the staff and Frances. There were also three accredited members of the Stock Exchange, amongst them Mr. Rawson. A page-boy, detailed for that purpose, put his head in at the door just as the meeting was settling down.

"Woolitos, 12¾."

The proceedings were opened by Lord Marsom tapping the table in front of him with a little ivory hammer. He neither spoke, however, nor rose to his feet. It was Sir Francis Seddons, the accountant, who stood up.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is the most extraordinary meeting which I have ever attended. It is for you others, if you can, to explain the situation as regards the shares of Woolito, Limited. I cannot. My business here is to speak on behalf of my clients and to tell you of their grace and free will what the position is from the point of view of their accountants. Wiping off the losses ensuing from the disastrous fire, I should estimate their profits for this six months at five hundred thousand pounds more than for the corresponding six months last year. Allowing half the amount claimed from the insurance companies for the loss of the Lunt machine and the model of the factory, I should estimate them at a million pounds more. At the end of the six months which are rapidly coming to a close, it is the intention of the company, and it is a course in which they are entirely justified, to offer an interim dividend of thirty per cent. and a bonus of one free share for every ten held. I only wish to add to this the fact that eighty members of my staff are continually employed with the affairs of Woolito, Limited, here, in the provinces and abroad, and there is no single branch of their vast undertaking which is not in a sound and healthy state. I have come here to tell you this, gentlemen, and having told it to you, I can only express my utter amazement at the condition of affairs prevailing on the Stock Exchange."

Almost as he resumed his seat, the door opened. The same monotonous voice was heard.

"Woolitos, 12½."

Lord Marsom, without rising from his place, leaned forward.

"Gentlemen," he said, "no one can do more than turn his father confessor loose on you. Sir Francis Seddons knows more of the financial affairs of Woolito, Limited, than I do. You have heard what he has said. You can ask me any questions you like."

A member of the Press rose to his feet.

"Lord Marsom," he asked respectfully, "may I venture to enquire whether you have any idea whatever as to the cause of this onslaught upon the shares of Woolito, Limited?"

"Not the faintest idea in the world," was the prompt answer.

Another pressman rose to his feet, even more hesitatingly.

"Lord Marsom," he ventured, "may I ask you this—do you connect in any way this extraordinary attack upon the solvency of your company with the series of disasters which have happened to your directors during the last few months?"

This time Lord Marsom's underlip told its story. His voice, however, was just as distinct, if a little more bitter.

"No one in their senses could do so, sir. There was only one of the troubles which have arisen—the incendiarism at Tottenham—which could possibly be connected. The rest of the affairs were all accounted for by incidents in the lives of the men concerned."

Lord Hildreth, in suave and pleasant tones, asked the next, which might have been a very poignant question.

"May we ask, Lord Marsom, since you are treating us with such complete and praiseworthy candour, what has been your

own attitude and course of action with regard to this attack upon your shares?"

"You may ask and I will reply," was the grim response. "At breakfast time this morning, I had the first intimation of what was happening. My only impulse was to make my pocket money for the day. I told my broker to buy me a thousand shares at opening price. When I arrived at the office and had dealt with all the affairs connected with my business which needed attention, I turned once more to the Stock Exchange. I heard of the continual fall in the shares and I at once ordered my secretary to telephone to my broker, Mr. Rawson, who is now present, and instruct him to purchase a further ten thousand shares. Later in the morning, Mr. Rawson himself came to see me and, learning that the attack still continued, I decided to begin serious operations. I gave him a buying order for fifty thousand, which order I understand, with the help of his friends, he has already executed."

There was a chorus of exclamations, a sort of concerted murmur of agitation, in which nearly everyone at the table joined. The door opened once more.

"Woolitos, 11¼ to 11½," came the singsong voice.

"That price," Mr. Rawson croaked across the table, "is after the purchase of fifty thousand shares on behalf of my client."

There was an amazed silence. The banker cleared his throat.

"Are there any indications of foreign selling?" he asked.

"On the contrary," the stockbroker replied, "the selling comes from a very small compass. I know three or four of the firms concerned, but they are absolutely unapproachable."

"Such a situation," Lord Hildreth declared, leaning back in his chair, "is outside anything I could ever have conceived."

"Taking the shares," Sir Francis Seddons said, "at the day before yesterday's quotation of only eighteen pounds, at which price they are undervalued, the bears have committed themselves to losses which run into several millions. The situation is outside my comprehension. I have told you the figures, so far as regards my clients. You must form your own conclusions."

The pressman who had spoken first rose to his feet.

"May I ask the chairman of this meeting one more question?" he begged.

"Get on with it," Marsom invited.

"Woolitos are being quoted to-day at eleven and a quarter," he said. "Your accountants value them at eighteen. Are you proposing to move further in the matter?"

Lord Marsom was losing something of his equanimity. He scowled down the table.

"It's a damned impertinent question," he said, "but I'll answer it." He drew a half-sheet of paper towards him, scribbled a few lines upon it and passed it down to Rawson. "I'm buying another fifty thousand shares at the market," he declared. "I have been a holder of two million pounds' worth of stock for many months. To-day I'm more than doubling my holding and glad of the chance."

That was the last word spoken at the meeting for, with the hurried departure of Mr. Rawson, the pressmen rushed for the nearest telephones, the bankers returned to reassure their clients, and the two accountants, who were forbidden by the statutes of their partnership to deal upon the Stock Exchange, hastened off to find friends with whom they could make amicable arrangements. Frances and Marsom were left alone in the deserted board room.

"I'm going round to a few newspapers," she announced, "and I have several paragraphs already written. Is there any particular line you would wish me to take?"

He rose heavily and painfully to his feet, like a man who had been suffering from cramp.

"Come into my room for a moment," he invited.

She followed him. He sank into the chair behind his wonderful desk and she saw the lines gather in his face.

"Lord Marsom," she said quietly.

"Well?"

"Tell me," she begged, "are you putting up a magnificent bluff? Do you realise that you are risking the whole of a great fortune? Is there something you know of which you have never disclosed?"

"Before God—no," he assured her.

"You seem ill," she murmured compassionately.

"I'm not ill," he answered. "I don't want to ring. I don't want anyone to see me like this. Go to that cupboard. Get me a drink."

She hastened to obey him. She found whisky and soda, filled a glass and brought it to him. He drank greedily and the effects showed themselves almost at once.

"Frances Moore," he confided, "I'm telling you the truth when I tell you that I'm like a man in a dark wood. What I know is what you and the others know. I have backed my faith with more than half of what I possess. The other half will go into the fight before I finish."

"You're a brave man."

"Not so brave," he continued. "Woolito itself is untouchable. I tell you that we're turning out one million five hundred thousand pounds' worth a month and a tenth of that is clear profit. You heard my accountants? You saw my bankers? Get pencil and paper for yourself and work out what Woolito shares are worth. There are eleven days yet before settlement. Who do you suppose is going to have the banks on their side when that day comes?"

"There isn't any possible catch anywhere?" she persisted feverishly.

"Not one," he answered. "The books of the Woolito Company have been kept like the Judgment Books of God."

CHAPTER XXIX

Sandbrook, tanned with the hot sun and the wind, returned home from a day at Sunningdale to find Frances awaiting his arrival. He welcomed her hospitably.

"What a delightful surprise!" he exclaimed. "But, my dear Miss Moore," he added, in a suddenly changed tone, "don't tell me that you are up against fresh tragedies."

For the first time in her life, she was conscious of a certain irritation as he bent over her fingers. His eyes were full of concern and he seemed genuinely shocked at her appearance. Nevertheless, she felt herself resenting acutely his health and vigour, his light-hearted smile and the buoyancy, almost the gaiety, of his movements.

"Yes," she admitted quietly. "There are more tragedies. I'm tired."

He rang the bell and gave an order.

"What's wrong?" he asked, drawing a chair up to hers.

She felt suddenly helpless. It seemed impossible to explain all that she was suffering.

"I have been standing on the edge of a battlefield all day," she said. "I could not help or hinder. I suppose it has got on my nerves."

"I'm sorry," he sympathised. "I wish you'd give up this wretched work. I can't bear to see you looking as you do."

The personal touch in his tone brought her no pleasure. She again felt a perfectly unreasoning resentment of his health and well-being.

"Why should I give it up?" she asked. "I like it. I am very sorry indeed for Lord Marsom and it gives me all the pleasure in the world to help him. Just to-day has been terrible, but it's not always like this. So you have been playing golf?"

He nodded.

"Two rounds at Sunningdale: perfect day for it too. I wish you had been there. It would have done you a great deal more good than stewing down in the City. What's gone wrong?"

"You don't read the papers, I suppose?" she asked scornfully.

"Not I," he answered. "Why should I? Social news doesn't interest me, politics nowadays are a washout, and there's no cricket news yet. Is there anything going on I ought to have known about?"

"You should be interested," she said. "The whole City of London has been in a ferment. There has been the biggest bear attack ever known upon Woolito shares!"

"I saw something in last night's paper about their being a trifle dicky," he remarked carelessly.

"The price was over eighteen yesterday morning," she told him. "They closed to-night at six."

"Something rotten in the State of Denmark!," he observed, without any great show of interest. "I'm glad my executors didn't take them in at the full value. You have not been speculating, I hope?"

"Don't be absurd," she answered. "I've only been a spectator. It's Lord Marsom who has been fighting the Stock Exchange practically all alone. He has spent millions to-day defending his own property—and yours."

"The gauntleted hero of finance," Sandbrook chuckled, with a smile at the corners of his lips.

A sudden light flashed in her tired eyes.

"At any rate," she scoffed, "I should consider his more a man's work than chasing a ball for four or five hours round the golf links—especially when you are a director of the company yourself."

There was a moment's silence. Perhaps the entrance of Groves at that particular juncture was fortunate. He was carrying

the usual tray and Sandbrook joined him at the sideboard. There was the sound of the popping of a cork.

"I am making you a champagne cocktail," her host announced. "The only thing when one is really done up. The finest tonic in the world. Steady with the Angostura, Groves, and pass me up the Hennessy Brandy, not the *fine*. Good. Now a round of orange peel cut thin and a lump more ice."

"It all sounds awfully good," Frances murmured.

"It's going to be good," he assured her. "You will feel a new woman when you've had a swallow or two of that. You won't mind if I have a whisky and soda, will you? I'm thirsty and I've not had a drink all day. We had a really desperate four-ball this afternoon and I only had a light lunch first."

She raised the glass, which the butler had brought, to her lips and set it down by her side half empty.

"It's perfectly delicious," she told him gratefully. "I feel much better already—and much better tempered. I'm sorry if I was rude, Lord Sandbrook."

"You weren't, in the least," he assured her. "I suppose to you I must sometimes seem a terrible slacker. You are used to all these men around you doing things all the time."

"I never thought of that," she told him. "I have no right to judge, anyway. I always admire courage, though, and to-day I think Lord Marsom has given a fine show of it. You see," she went on, "money, after all, is the greatest thing in life with him, and though it may be a poor sort of inspiration, it takes courage to do as he did to-day—practically risk a huge fortune."

"Did he stop the trouble, whatever it was?" Sandbrook enquired.

"For the time being," she answered. "No one can tell what is going to happen to-morrow. I only know that another day of it will send me crazy."

"It's not your job," he pronounced a little brusquely. "Chuck it all and go back to America for a time. You can't do any good at your job while these fellows are fighting a Stock Exchange battle."

"Indeed I can," she answered. "I arranged a meeting to-day with the accountants and Lord Hildreth and the Press. To-morrow there may be all sorts of developments. The reason for the whole thing may come out."

"You think there is a reason, then?"

"You are not a business man," she said impatiently, "but you are not an idiot. You know quite well that one of the best industrial shares in the world, like Woolito, couldn't drop from eighteen to six without a reason."

"There must be a reason, of course," he admitted; "but you don't know it and I don't know it, so why not stop worrying until to-morrow? To judge by your appearance, you have had quite enough Woolito for the day."

She rose to her feet, moved across the room and studied her reflection in a mirror. There were lines under her eyes and a general look of strain about her tired features.

"I certainly do look a sight," she confessed. "I didn't know I was so sympathetic. I sha'n't inflict myself upon you for a moment longer."

She hastened towards the door. He rang the bell, making no effort to detain her. Suddenly she swung round. She waved the servant away.

"In five minutes will you please let them call me a taxi," she begged. "Why is Lady Julia flying home from Paris to-night so as to dine with you alone?" she added abruptly.

Sandbrook felt suddenly like a guilty schoolboy. Frances was certainly very much in earnest.

"Does that matter?" he asked.

"It matters very much indeed," she answered, with a flash in her eyes. "Lady Julia is exactly nineteen years old. She is in

this dangerous position. She has picked up all the mannerisms and ideas of the fast smart set with whom she has been passing her time, and I honestly believe that it is only a certain emotional delicacy which has kept her out of trouble. But that is not going on, Lord Sandbrook. She is passionate, she is generous; she is, I believe, very much in love."

"With whom?" he demanded.

"With you."

To have attempted argument would have been to have courted failure. Sandbrook leaned against the mantelpiece and he said nothing.

"The thought of this," Frances went on, "has been among my troubles the last few days. In these critical hours I have been able to keep it in the background. To-day I looked through the engagement diaries—that's part of my duty—and I saw your initials—9 o'clock to-night. Suddenly I was afraid."

"Why?" he asked.

"I have seen a brave man attacked all day," she recounted passionately, "attacked by scores of enemies, trying to drag him to his knees, to take from him the millions which he is supposed to prize more than anything in the world, and then I had a chill feeling, and I knew that there was one thing which he prized even more. His daughter."

The end of a log fell spluttering from the fire. Sandbrook made no effort to remove it. He seemed fascinated by the girl's words.

"I had a terrible feeling," she went on, her eyes searching for his. "I asked myself whether any man would be so mean, could stoop so low, having failed in one, at any rate straightforward, assault upon his enemy, as to attack a tottering giant in this base, this unspeakable fashion."

Sandbrook had recovered himself to some extent. He picked up the log with a tongs and lit a cigarette.

"Almost melodramatic, Miss Moore, aren't you?" he remarked.

"And impertinent, I suppose you are thinking," she added.

"Impertinent by suggestion, at any rate," he admitted.

Curiously enough, the severity of his tone brought her reassurance.

"Perhaps you are right," she confessed. "I have said more than I have the right to say, only I am beginning to have a most intense sympathy with Lord Marsom. I suppose I am like all women. I loathe to see a strong man on the rack. How the present struggle may end I cannot tell. It is beyond me. But in the background—"

She hesitated and he came to the rescue.

"Miracles have torn to pieces men's finest resolutions," he interrupted, lifting his head at the sound of footsteps. "Save for a miracle, you have nothing to fear."

Groves had quietly opened the door.

"Your taxi has arrived, miss," he announced. "If I might make so bold—the fog is thickening and there are very few about."

Frances Moore hurried away with a parting wave of the hand. There were no further words between them.

CHAPTER XXX

For once, on the following morning, there was a unanimous press. Lord Marsom was the consecrated hero of the moment. The certified figures given as to the position of Woolito, Limited, were amazing. The magnificent resistance to an utterly unprincipled attack upon the shares of the company was sung by many a modern Homer. The market opened with a stream of buying orders. Woolito, which had closed at six, went up to thirteen, with scarcely a check. Then, towards midday, there was a pause. The buying orders were exhausted. Very slowly a fresh drop began. At its first signs, Marsom sent for his stockbroker. Rawson was a man of weak temperament and he arrived in an utterly demoralised condition.

"You know what your commitments are?" he asked his client.

"Why should I trouble about that?" Marsom grunted. "I want you to finish this business, once and for all. Get some other brokers together—I don't care how many you employ—and buy me a hundred thousand Woolitos."

"Lord Marsom," the stockbroker remonstrated tearfully, "we're safe enough. I know that. It's you I'm thinking of. You're one of our best and oldest clients. Why not hold off for a time? There's something wrong somewhere. There are rumours about the Exchange now. I can't get hold of them. Nothing definite, but I believe this selling is going on. Hold off for a bit. You're a millionaire, but you're not the Bank of England."

"Buy me a hundred thousand shares," Marsom ordered savagely. "I'll pay you cash for them, if you like. Out you go."

Rawson went out, dazed.

"Give me Lord Hildreth on the telephone," Marsom directed.

Crooks hurried out. The connection was quickly established.

"Marsom speaking. Is that Hildreth?"

"Speaking. Any news?"

"I want to draw on you for a million pounds."

"Good God! What for?"

"I'm going to buy every Woolito share on the market, if necessary," was the fierce reply. "You hold two million pounds' worth and about six hundred thousand pounds' worth of War Loan, beside a few oddments. Isn't that right?"

"Two million pounds' worth of Woolito," Hildreth answered, reckoning them at eighteen. "At to-day's price—less than a million, and they tell me they're beginning to fall again."

"No more hesitation, please," Marsom said to the greatest banker in London. "Am I to draw a cheque for a million or am I not?"

There was only a moment's hesitation.

"You may draw it!"

One million pounds sterling. Marsom signed the cheque in his ordinary, neat handwriting.

"Take this round to Mr. Rawson," he directed. "Tell him to let me have a full account at Park Lane to-night. I've guests to dinner. I'll look into the figures afterwards. Tell him that I shall probably want to buy another hundred thousand as soon as the market opens to-morrow."

Wonderful Crooks! Others had expostulated, others had gasped. Crooks received the cheque as he might have done the signature to an ordinary letter.

"Very good, sir," he said, and slipped out of the room.

"What's the matter with those shares of yours?" a famous Duke asked his host that night, as they loitered over their brandy in the library of the Park Lane mansion.

"Hanged if I know," was the perfectly candid answer. "I haven't much time to bother about the Stock Exchange side of my business. Someone's having a knock at them, I suppose. Did you notice what they closed at?"

"Five and three-quarters," His Grace replied. "Would it be a good egg for me to go for a few?"

Marsom poured out a little more brandy for himself and his guest. His wine butler looked reproachfully at him from the background, but Marsom had always a fancy for handling these cradled and dust-encrusted bottles with the remains of the crown so dimly visible.

"I wouldn't like to advise you," he said. "They're worth more—a very great deal more—than five and three-quarters—but whether they'll go lower or not before the turn comes, I can't say.... Madame Norfinda and her troupe from Covent Garden have just arrived. Perhaps we ought to go upstairs and show ourselves."

"You never can get anything out of these City fellows nowadays," the Duke complained to a friend at luncheon the next day.

At twelve o'clock the following morning, Woolitos touched four. Lord Hildreth presented himself at the Woolito offices. Marsom kept him waiting for several minutes and then appeared with half a dozen skeins of wool in his hand. He flung them carelessly on to his desk.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Hildreth," he apologised shortly. "I've been in the warehouse for a time. What can I do for you? I thought we'd had a heart-to-heart talk already."

"I know," Hildreth replied. "We, that is, my directors and I, fully appreciate your candour in every way. But listen, Marsom, as man to man now—"

"Well, out with it," Marsom snapped. "Let money talk. I'm listening."

"You drew a million pounds yesterday," Hildreth pointed out. "A week ago Woolito shares stood at just under nineteen. To-day they're four. Now, come on, Marsom; we're both men of common sense. Notwithstanding all the accountants in the world, all the stockbrokers, all the balance sheets, shares don't go from nineteen to four in a week without a reason, and it's absolutely impossible that the man at the back of the business doesn't know why. Let's get this straight, my friend. What's the matter with Woolitos?"

"You blithering fools!" Marsom shouted, losing his self-control for the first time. "There's nothing the matter with Woolitos. I've proved it in every way I can. Start your bullying the other end. Go to the brokers who are financing this bear attack. Find out who and what they've got behind them. They're the people to tackle—not me."

"Since you take it that way, Marsom," his visitor pronounced coldly, "there is only one thing to be said. You will please consider your account dormant. We shall be glad, of course, to receive credits, but be so good as not to draw upon us."

Marsom did not wait to ring a bell. He threw open the door himself.

"You and your damned bank can go to the infernal regions," he exclaimed fiercely. "I'll never enter it again, and see that your people keep away from here."

The boy from below put his head in at the other door.

"Woolitos, 3½," he droned, and disappeared.

Another day. Again every newspaper was filled with the Woolito crisis. Hundreds of strange explanations. Nothing

tangible. Woolitos at three-and-three-quarters! Marsom swallowed his coffee and pushed away the rest of his breakfast. He lit a strong cigar and looked down at the pile of newspapers at his feet. It was half-past eight. Soon the battle in the darkness would commence again. A battle in the darkness it surely was, for during those days Marsom had not the glimmering of an idea as to why or by whom he was being attacked. Frances was the first of his visitors. She set down her attaché case and sat on the arm of the empty chair opposite his.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

He hated the note of sympathy in her tone and tried to ignore it.

"What can anyone do in a world of fools?" he snarled "Your work's all right. You're fighting all you know. Keep it up. They may crock at any time. I'm not broken yet and Woolito's all right."

"Woolito is all right," she repeated, picking up her attaché case. "That's my war cry for the day. I won't forget."

At nine o'clock Crooks appeared, for once in his life with signs of haste.

"Your lordship," he begged, "take my advice—don't go to the City this morning. There's a crowd round the offices in Basinghall Street ten or a dozen deep. They're waiting for you. They want to know what's wrong with Woolito. They're a rough lot and it isn't worth while. You'll tell them you don't know, and you don't know, but it won't be any good. They won't believe you. Keep out of it for just this morning. There isn't the slightest difference between your being in Basinghall Street and here."

"Never heard you make such a long speech in my life," Marsom acknowledged, with a grim smile. "I'll stay here till the market's open, anyway."

He lit a cigar, leaned out of a window to breathe in the sweetness of the May air and sunshine and, with his hands in his pockets, strolled off to the picture galleries. He was no mean judge of a picture, and he derived a pleasure from them for which few people would have given him credit. He wandered about for nearly an hour. When he took leave at last of his favourite Corot and strolled into the great library, he felt a pleasant sense of detachment. For once, he was the man outside his work. He seated himself at the end of that long table and looked at the row of telephone buttons. Crooks came in just as he was pressing one of them. Even his immutable countenance had grown darker.

"Bad opening, sir," he announced. "Perfect panic everywhere."

"What price?" his employer demanded.

"Two and three-quarters," was the hesitating reply.

Marsom never flinched.

"What's my balance at Dunster's?" he asked, naming a bank where he had a private account.

"Forty-four thousand pounds."

"Make out a cheque to self for forty thousand pounds."

It was done swiftly and with precision. Marsom signed it calmly.

"Dunster's hold the deeds of this house, I believe?" he enquired.

"They do, sir."

"Very well. Ask to see Mr. Critchley, the manager, on my behalf. Find out from him what overdraft he will allow on the security of the title deeds for thirty days."

Crooks shivered slightly. Overdraft was a new word to him.

"When you've done that, go straight down to the City—leave Rawson alone—go to Peabody's; they're a respectable firm. Hand them over the forty thousand pounds cash and tell them to buy Woolitos at the market."

Crooks took his leave. Then Marsom embarked upon an enterprise which he very seldom attempted. He took down a

telephone directory, found a number, rang it up and demanded a word with Mr. Bertheimer. There was a little flutter in the office where his message was received and in a very few minutes the greatest picture expert in the world spoke to his most valued patron.

"Yes, Lord Marsom. Delighted to hear from you. I hope you have made up your mind about the Correggio."

"What I want," was the terse reply, "is that you get into your car, if you have it there, or a taxicab if you haven't, and come round to see me in Park Lane within five minutes."

"I am already upon my way," Mr. Bertheimer declared, hanging up the receiver and ringing off.

CHAPTER XXXI

The picture dealer was as good as his word. In less than ten minutes he was shown into the stately library. He smiled as he recognised the preparation which had been made for him. Marsom and he understood each other and on the table, covered with a cloth from Florence, were two exquisitely shaped glasses, a silver-chased ice cooler and a gold-foiled bottle of champagne. A butler, who had appeared almost as though by magic, cut the wires, removed the cork, filled the two glasses and bowed to his master before taking his leave.

"In perfect condition, milord," he announced.

"Don't sit down," Marsom begged his visitor. "Drink this first glass with me; then I want to take you for a little promenade."

"The first part of your invitation," Mr. Bertheimer said, "I find most attractive. 1904 Pommery, even if it is ullaged, is a drink for the gods. And this is not ullaged. My compliments to your cellarman. And all the best to you!"

The two men helped themselves to the thin biscuits upon the table and drank.

"Come with me into the picture gallery," Marsom invited afterwards.

The inspection took three quarters of an hour. Bertheimer loved every picture he had sold. Marsom loved every picture he had bought. They were talking eagerly about the merits of a disputed Turner when they returned to the library.

"And now," Bertheimer asked curiously, "tell me why you have sent for me to come and look at your pictures."

"I wanted you to see that they were there," was the terse reply. "Adding them all up, I see that I gave you one million seven hundred thousand pounds for them. What will you lend me on them for thirty days?"

Bertheimer dropped into a chair.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't make a fuss. This is a moment of crisis. Take your time. I want all the cash you can spare to-day. The pictures are there. I'll sign what your lawyer sends me. How much?"

Bertheimer never hesitated. He held out his hand and grasped Marsom's.

"My friend," he said, "there will be no lawyer. This morning I had occasion to ask for my balance. It is seven hundred and forty thousand pounds. Leave me forty thousand pounds. Give me a pen. By the mercy of Providence, I have my cheque book."

For a second there seemed to be a dimness in those brilliant eyes of Marsom's. He poured out a glass of wine and drank it quickly. In a few minutes he was alone with a cheque for seven hundred thousand pounds clutched in his hand!

The next morning before ten o'clock, Marsom, exultant, with the air of a conqueror, a red carnation in his buttonhole and smoking one of his famous cigars, made semi-triumphant progress to the City. The clerks and employees whom he passed in the crowded corridors saluted him with a new and wondering respect. Here was the man who, stripped of all his helpers, had faced the attack of a powerful syndicate upon his interests and defeated it single-handed! Every financial paper bore upon its placards flaming tribute to his victory. Outside in the streets the newsboys were calling:

"SENSATIONAL RECOVERY OF WOOLITOS"

Everywhere smiles and congratulations. Life was worth something to Marsom that morning. He laughed softly at Frances as, in response to his summons, she glided into the room with a basketful of press cuttings and correspondence.

"Well, young lady," he greeted her. "Woolito is not dead yet, you see!"

Her smile was a little forced.

"Lord Marsom," she said, "before we go through my correspondence, I wish you would have a word with Mr. Crooks. He has a letter which has just been brought in by special messenger."

Marsom nodded assent and Crooks moved gravely to his side.

"This has just been brought over by hand from Dean and Masters, the solicitors, sir," he announced. "I opened it, according to your instructions."

Marsom took the letter carelessly enough. As he read, his face seemed to become petrified. Expression died away. The finger of a living death might have touched his features.

GENTLEMEN,

We are addressing you on behalf of our client, Mr. Leonard Blunt, who has been absent from business for some years. Mr. Leonard Blunt finds, very much to his surprise, that you have been manufacturing the Woolito goods for a considerable period of time in colours, as well as in the natural material. We desire to point out to you that your action in this respect constitutes an infringement of the patent belonging to our client, particulars of which you will find in Volume Number 7 of Textile Patents, at the Head Office in Cornhill.

Our client instructs us to institute action against you in this matter and places the damages, so far as they can be ascertained, at Five Million Pounds, subject to the examination of your books. We are applying forthwith to the Courts for an Injunction restraining you from manufacturing the goods in question and for permission to examine all books containing records of your sales.

Be so kind as to send us the address of the solicitors who will accept action on your behalf.

Yours faithfully,

DEAN & MASTERS.

The outburst which both Frances and Crooks were expecting never materialised. Marsom read and reread the letter in silence. As she looked at him, Frances was frightened. His eyes were as dark and penetrating as ever, but his complexion was ashen.

"I always felt that Moody was keeping something back," he groaned. "Crooks, go round to the Patent Office at once. Miss Moore, tell them to telephone to Sir James Abercrombie—Abercrombie and Watts, Solicitors—tell him to leave whatever he's doing and be here within a quarter of an hour...."

But no solicitors in the world could help Lord Marsom this time. The whole thing was hideously clear. Moody had considered a certified lunatic as being equivalent to a dead man. The patent granted was of so abstruse and technical a character that no one was likely ever to dream of its existence. Therefore the Woolito Company had made colours when it chose and, with the coming back to earth of Leonard Blunt, faced ruin.

The atmosphere of Number 31a, Park Lane, was perfectly serene that night. No news of the final catastrophe had leaked out, and Woolitos had held their own bravely on the Stock Exchange throughout the day. Lord Marsom had spent the whole of the morning in his warehouses, a part of the afternoon at Tottenham, where the building of the great factory with night and day shifts had become almost an epic for the journalists. He had returned to Park Lane, calling at his gunmaker's on the way, to find Frances waiting.

"What do you want?" he asked a little brusquely.

"I wondered whether there was anything I could do. You are going to fight, I suppose? If one got in a few articles quickly —"

"I am not going to fight," he interrupted.

"That doesn't sound like you," she said.

"When I fight, I win," he answered. "There is no chance of winning in this case. The patent is good. I don't know that I blame Moody altogether. Lunacy should have ended everything. Anyway, there it is. Our lawyers have approached Dean and Masters but they had already received definite instructions. Mr. Leonard Blunt demands his pound of flesh. Let him have it. Woolito will pay its creditors. I shall pay mine. But when it is all over, Woolito will belong to Leonard Blunt! We have made nothing but colours for five years. Probably the company will keep you on, Miss Moore. I shall have no further use for you after to-night."

"You are very hard," she complained.

"You have been very hard with me," he rejoined. "Never mind, you were quite right. You were like the rats—you scented disaster."

"You're a brute!" she declared angrily.

"You're not the first woman who has called me that," he replied, with an ugly grin. "Run along and play."

She picked up her book and despatch case and tucked them under her left arm. Her right hand she held out.

"Won't you shake hands?" she invited.

"Do you want to?"

"Of course I do. I loved Woolito. I would drown Mr. Leonard Blunt in one of his own dye pits if I could!"

A transfiguring smile changed his whole expression. He grasped her hand cordially.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, looking at him fixedly.

He laughed.

"Probably pack a bag, turn up my coat collar and catch the Continental Express," he replied. "Stay and have dinner with me and see me off."

"I would," she assured him, "but I have something even more important to do."

Lord Marsom spent the usual twenty minutes in his private gymnasium, and afterwards bathed and changed for dinner, exactly according to his usual custom. He found the tying of his cravat unsatisfactory and insisted upon his valet changing it. Of the three boutonnières submitted for his approval he chose one of dark violets. A persistent rain of telephone messages he utterly disregarded. Before sitting down to dinner, he sent for his wine butler and ordered for service with his very choice meal a Berncastler Doctor of rare vintage, which had come from a sale at Christie's and, with his coffee, which was served in the library, one of his few remaining bottles of Napoleon brandy. In his high-backed chair, surrounded by all the amenities of a luxury which he half despised and half worshipped, he entered into a period of deliberation. He filled many sheets of paper with figures as he smoked his Laranaga and slowly sipped his priceless brandy. In the end, the decision was very much what he had always known it must be. His hand stole into the pocket of his loose dinner jacket and drew out the little present he had bought for himself on his way home from the City. He examined, with the appreciation of a man who always aimed at perfection, its faultless mechanism. He slipped in the cartridges and closed the breech. The world always expected something sensational from him. It looked as though it might be going to get it.

Crooks, who alone was permitted entrance to the room, glided through the shadows of the spring twilight to his side. Marsom looked at him with fixed eyes.

"I should not have disturbed your lordship lightly," he apologised, "but someone has called requesting to see you and has presented this card. I had an idea, perhaps, that it might interest you to receive him."

Marsom's glittering eyes were fixed upon the card. For a moment his fingers doubled it up. Then a thought seemed to come to him. He tapped his jacket pocket.

"Show him in," he directed. "Have the lights turned on and show him in."

He looked once more at the card. There it was, highly glazed and beautifully finished, but utterly blank, bringing with it a sudden wave of sinister memory. This time there was no message.

"The Earl of Sandbrook, your lordship."

The young man came down the room swiftly and with a somewhat cryptic smile upon his face. He seemed perfectly at his ease as he slipped unbidden into a chair a few paces away from Marsom. He waited until the doors were closed.

"So now you know, Lord Marsom," he said.

"So now I know," Marsom assented wonderingly. "You have been the devil behind the machine, eh? What the hell harm have I ever done to you?"

"It is my object," Sandbrook observed, "to avoid the melodramatic. When I say that you killed my father, I'm launching no fresh accusation. I'm simply stating a fact. You don't mind if I smoke?"

Marsom neither moved nor answered. Sandbrook tapped a cigarette upon the table and lit it.

"My father," he continued, "was a very sensitive man. In his last hours I discovered how much he had suffered from his association with your business. Those Nottingham mill owners—you set yourselves out to break them."

"I had to," was the calm acknowledgment. "They were in my way. Your father should never have come on to the board. He was the wrong type of man."

"Anyway, he was my father, and meant more to me than anyone else on earth," Sandbrook said. "I made up my mind that you and your fellow conspirators should be made to suffer for what they had done. You were right in some of your wild surmises. Every one of those untoward incidents—the burning of your marvellous machine before the eyes of Sir Sigismund Lunt, the family disaster of Archibald Somerville, the humiliation of Bomford, the discovery of Littleburn's embezzlements, the scandal of Alfred Honeyman, Mayden-Harte's secret gambling and Thomas Moody's fiendish crime—all these were discovered and dealt with by a small firm of private detectives and a retired actor named Churn, who acted as my agent. Your directors, Lord Marsom, have all met with the fate they deserved. Last of all, we come to you. You yourself are not in the happiest of positions."

Lord Marsom's right hand crept into his jacket pocket.

"Was it you," he asked, "who helped Leonard Blunt out of the asylum?"

"That stroke of genius was denied to me," Sandbrook confessed, "but I had Leonard Blunt at the back of my mind all the time and it was I who discovered him in Finsbury at his father's house a few days after his release. It was I who beared Woolito stock to the last penny I possessed in the world, even of the fortune left me by my mother. You beat us there, Marsom. We were obliged to come out into the open. To-morrow the truth about the lost patent will be in the papers."

"You're a brave young man to come and tell me all this," Marsom said, his hand now out of sight in his jacket coat pocket. "Did you think I was the sort of man who could be taunted in such a fashion without retaliation? Why did you do it?"

Frances, who had entered the room unnoticed, a few moments before, came swiftly up from the shadows into the circle of light. She stood between Marsom, haggard now, dour and threatening, his underlip thrust forward, anger flaming in his eyes, and Sandbrook—stern, fearless and yet with a keen premonition of danger.

"It was I who made him come," she said.

"And what have you to do with it?" Marsom demanded. "Have you been in the plot too?"

"I have not," she assured him. "I have been the faithful and exceedingly valuable publicity secretary of Woolito, Limited, and I have been working at my job until an hour ago. I suspected Lord Sandbrook, but I never really believed until to-night, when he confessed.... Would you like to shake hands with me, Lord Marsom? I have been your faithful servant. Your right hand, please."

Marsom hesitated for an instant, for he recognised the subtlety of the request. There was an ugly thought in his mind but it faded away. His right hand came out, hot from clutching the butt of his revolver. It was a tense moment with a hundred possibilities. Sandbrook adjusted his seldom-used monocle and took up the bottle of Napoleon brandy.

"The real stuff," he murmured reverently. "May I?"

"Help yourself," Marsom invited gruffly.

Sandbrook poured some into the goblet with meticulous care and raised it to his lips.

"Here's luck!" He set down the glass. "Marvellous!" he murmured.... "What about wiping out the past now, Marsom, and all that sort of thing?" he suggested. "You Woolito fellows were a ruthless gang and the leaders have only got what was owing to them. What about waving the olive branch? Especially," he added, as he felt her soft fingers around his neck, "as I am going to marry your daughter."

There was a moment's acute silence. Julia had crept into the room like a shadow but she was there now—luminous-eyed, pleading, her arm around Sandbrook's neck, her body shielding his, as though she felt some vague apprehension of the tragedy which still threatened. Marsom was speechless.

"I always knew that mine would be an unusual love affair when it came. I told you that, didn't I, Dad?" she pleaded.

"What do you mean—a love affair?" he demanded hoarsely. "He's been working to ruin me, that fellow! He has ruined me—and you—all of us."

Sandbrook shook his head.

"I can assure you that I have done nothing of the sort, sir," he said. "The men who have suffered deserved what they got. You tied me up, and with Julia here, I couldn't go on with it. That's just what happened. You win."

Marsom laughed bitterly.

"You forget Leonard Blunt. The man's right. He can smash us. We thought he was in his grave and we've been using his damned patent for donkey's years."

"Leonard Blunt," Sandbrook said impressively, "is—for what he has gone through—one of the mildest men I have ever known. We had to send you that letter. That was the last drop in the bucket. Finished! I've done a stroke of business on your account, Lord Marsom, or rather on account of Woolito, Limited—justified my position on the board, after all! I bought Leonard Blunt's patent and all accumulated claims against Woolito, Limited, for fifty thousand pounds. He'd have come along to-night, but he's gone down to Bournemouth to look at a small estate he's in treaty for. Fifty thousand pounds is every penny he needs in this world and all he'll accept."

"And now you will hear what I have been doing for the last hour," Frances intervened. "To-morrow morning every paper in London, at the instigation of your publicity secretary, instructed by your youngest director, will announce the fact that the sensational fall in Woolitos during the last week has been due to rumours of the existence of another patent for the manufacture of coloured artificial wool. That patent has now been acquired by Woolito, Limited, with all liabilities attached, and the matter is at an end!"

It seemed afterwards to Marsom that in those few minutes he fought the greatest battle of his life. There was a roar in his ears, the foundations of the Park Lane mansion seemed to rock beneath him. Away they went into the mists—the suave young man with the kindly face, Frances with her sweet eyes and gentle voice, Julia so pleading and human—back they came. Now they were talking to him, now they faded away. Frances had filled his glass with brandy. He was sipping it. Now he was drinking it—the Napoleon brandy of the house. He moved his tongue, over which a few moments before he fancied that he had lost control forever. There was blood in his veins! His brain was acting once more.

"But this Stock Exchange business—there's the settlement next Tuesday—"

"I think I've squared that all right," Sandbrook explained. "Dunster's Bank and Barclays are doing it between them. The basis is simple enough. My joint account with Blunt's—it was really all mine—will be set off against yours. That is to say—we pool both profits and losses. We don't know exactly what you paid, of course, or what the price will be on Tuesday, but in any case, it won't matter much. The thing must work out about level."

Lord Marsom rose to his feet and drew a long breath. There was something magnificent about the man in this moment of his passionate but suppressed victory. It all grouped itself before his eyes. It was so simple. A move here—a move there. He saw it all. It seemed like a smiling landscape before his eyes as he gazed into the promised land.

"Very well," he agreed. "The banks can take care of the Stock Exchange transactions. As you say, on the pool basis, everything will level itself up. We will have a new board announced in a week. You will stay on, Sandbrook? I'll promise you this—you sha'n't have anything to complain of. We will let the others live. Woolito can afford it."

"Capital!" Sandbrook exclaimed. "And Julia, sir?" he added, drawing her towards him.

"She has had her own way since she was a child," Marsom said, with an unaccustomed softness in his voice. "I'm glad of it. She has chosen a man, at any rate. Sandbrook—I am glad."

The two men shook hands.

"There's only one thing," Marsom concluded, and it seemed to those two that for a few seconds he was curiously changed, this man whom at times all three there had dreaded, hated and admired. "You will have to put up with a stepmother."

"Cat!" Julia laughed between her tears. "I hadn't an idea of it."

"Neither had I," Frances declared breathlessly, as she felt herself taken gently into the arms of the man she worshipped.

Sandbrook rose to his feet.

"Congratulations, sir," he said. "I admired Miss Moore from the first day I entered this house. She has brains—almost brains enough to have found me out. Come along, Julia," he added, leading her away. "Lucky you and I are dining out!"

THE END

Transcriber's Note

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's error has been addressed.

Page 301 'selfcontrol' to 'self-control' 'losing his self-control'

[End of *The Battle of Basinghall Street*, by E. Phillips Oppenheim]