



SANDS
OF FORTUNE

SINCLAIR MURRAY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR



JOHN FRENHAM, K.C.

HUMAN CLAY

SANDS OF FORTUNE

BY
SINCLAIR MURRAY

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Sands of Fortune

CHAPTER I

THE REVOLT OF MR. CREWE

FROM whatever angle one may regard the Crewe affair it seems that no member of the family was more profoundly affected than little Mr. James Crewe, who was the head of it; because to him more than to any of the others it meant the rediscovery of himself: and if one makes this sort of thing at the age of forty-seven it is a matter of considerable importance.

He was a small man with a rather wistful face and a manner slightly apologetic. He was apologetic because he was forced to do his work, so to speak, under the nose of the family instead of being able to carry it away and reappear later with the finished product. Behind this manner lurked a satirical streak in which he was but seldom able to indulge, because there is small opportunity to be satirical with seven hundred and fifty a year, a wife and two adult offspring. The seven hundred and fifty—it averaged this—was earned by writing potboilers, and the production of these stories—one every four months—had been his vocation for years past. As in many another case, it was the matter of making profit out of an emotional outlet. And to get a fair picture of little Mr. Crewe, you must visualise him seated in the one double bedroom the house possessed—and which he re-entered every morning the moment the bed was made—banging away at his typewriter, one eye on the clock, his tongue in his cheek, while his fancy conducted him through scenes that were far distant from the clatter of dishes in the kitchen below, and the rattle of the milk cart as it halted at the rusty gate of Acacia Villa. The thing had gone on now so long and so regularly that to Matilda, his wife, to Humphrey, his son of twenty-three, to Joan, his daughter of twenty, the unending click of those tilting keys expressed the head of the family perhaps better than anything else.

They all accepted it; Matilda with a certain amount of resignation that in no way affected her belief that she was made for bigger things, the other two with

that kind of affectionate pity so often entertained by youth when it realises that a middle-aged parent has gone as far as he is likely to go—which is not very far. They were all genuinely fond of him, but in all these years nothing had happened to show how really deeply they loved him. Tragedy often does this, or great danger, or a great loss—and none of these had visited Acacia Villa.

The day used to begin—that is up to the time of the Crewe affair—in something after this fashion. Mrs. Crewe would come down early to see that breakfast was ready, inspect her letters and those of everyone else, then call up to Joan in a voice that, though tired, had retained a thin musical trill. Joan would appear a quarter-hour later, very fresh and fair, followed by Humphrey, who descended the stairs like an avalanche and brought with him an appetite like that of a horse. These two also inspected the letters, and when Joan slid one into her pocket without saying anything—as she sometimes did—Humphrey winked knowingly at his mother. The meal was always half-way over before Mr. Crewe came down, when his wife would say that without an electric heater it was impossible to keep things hot. She had been hoping for a heater for years. James would rub his small hands, nod to them all in the kindest way possible, say that he was not hungry, and butter a triangle of cold toast. Then, with a cup half-way to his lips, his mild eyes would take on a far-away look, and, jabbing the air with the toast as though marking off invisible paragraphs, he would say, “My dear, with regard to the fourth instalment, I’m going to have the villain take her to his rubber plantation and not the desert—which is far too much overworked nowadays.” Immediately one could see the little man on his way to the plantation. Long before he got there, Humphrey would be off to the office, Joan be clearing the table, and upstairs Mrs. Crewe might be heard tidying the double bedroom.

It was Mr. Crewe’s closely-guarded secret, guarded even from his wife, that a good deal went on in that bedroom with the gas grate—the lithographs—the picture of Ralph Simonds, a fish-faced relative of James of whom more will appear presently—the worn carpet, and the neat pile of manuscript on the mantel—a good deal more went on than was at all visible on the surface. Had Matilda been able to disembody herself and leak in under the door, she would not infrequently have found her husband leaning back, his small face transfigured with a passionate hunger, because at this particular moment the big thing he aspired to write had smothered the thing he was forced to write, and he was wandering afield, seeing himself accepted as an author who had made his mark in the world of letters.

He was not perfectly sure he could pull it off, given the chance, but, heavens, how he longed to try; and would sit like this for some moments, till, a step sounding on the stairs, he would stiffen up and set his fingers going, while the villain became more villainous with every sentence, and the heroine stood

in more imminent danger at every click. So if one says that tragedy had not yet visited Acacia Villa, it is as well perhaps to qualify and explain that a thing is not a tragedy unless it beats down and crushes the sufferer. Mr. James Crewe was not beaten down in any sense, nor did he propose to be.

His wife also harboured secret ambitions. As a girl she had been very pretty, and at forty-five was still assured that with a month's rest, change of air, and a slight aid from modern art as personally applied, with these touches and a little more money the world would be a different place. It occupied her mind more frequently than she was aware, this mirage of the impossible—the more alluring because it was out of the question. But, she asked herself, what was the use. It came to the top one morning when, with James clicking away upstairs, she found Joan reading a letter in the living-room.

“Stephen again?”

Joan nodded. “It's always Stephen now.”

“Where did you go last night?”

“An Italian restaurant in Soho. You wouldn't know it.”

“I shouldn't think that would interest him much.”

“It didn't—but I liked it.”

Mrs. Crewe sat down and began her weekly accounts, but the figures were rather meaningless. Stephen Hollis obtruded himself, with his square, strong face, subdued dress, punctuality, and general air of quiet decision. Not much romance there, she admitted.

“You don't care for him at all?” she hazarded over her shoulder.

“Not in that way—and he doesn't understand.”

“What, child?”

Joan made a gesture. “Art—if you like—or me. I know what you're thinking, mother; but did you marry father to help your people?”

Mrs. Crewe sat up straight. No, she married because she loved. And she had gone on loving in a faithful if rather weary fashion, though life had been a humdrum affair for years past. The muffled sound of a typewriter seemed to confirm the fact.

“I don't want any advice in that matter,” added Joan. “I'd sooner do the other thing, but I don't like that either.”

Mrs. Crewe felt depressed. The other thing was to go into an antique shop and begin at ten shillings a week. Then, suddenly, she stopped thinking about her daughter, and began on herself.

“Has it ever occurred to you that I might want any thing myself?” she asked in a strained tone.

“What do you mean, mother?”

“It does sound queer, doesn't it?” answered Mrs. Crewe plaintively. “But the word mother, as young people seem to use it nowadays, generally

describes a woman who isn't credited with having any desires or ambitions of her own. Of course she's past all that. She's just someone there for the purpose of being useful and keeping house, and is supposed to be contented with arranging for what other people want."

Joan gazed at her with a sort of awe. "But, mother——"

"Exactly—that's it—I thought you'd be surprised. I know it's appalling to speak like this before you, and I've never hinted at such a thing to your father, who, thank heaven—no—if I'm honest I can't be so frightfully thankful—anyway he's quite contented sitting at that old machine—but this morning—well—I couldn't help it." She dabbed at eyes which were moist with her own emotion. "Now you just think of your mother as not feeling nearly so old as she probably looks, and with a heap of things she'd like to do, but never will, and Stephen won't seem such a poor alternative to an antique shop where you'll be on your feet all day showing things to people who have no intention of buying them."

Joan gulped down her astonishment, and became at once very soothing.

"You're not a bit old, mother, but a perfect marvel. I'll never look as well as you do at your age. Humphrey and I often speak of it."

"My figure is all right," put in Mrs. Crewe reflectively, "but my skin! Oh, my dear, do you think I don't know—and the beginnings of wrinkles that I try not to see—though I suppose the best type of mothers don't mind a few wrinkles." She sighed despondently. "Another five hundred a year would do it—all the difference in the world."

Joan nodded. "Is there no chance of father——?"

"Not the slightest. His prices are established, and he'll never earn any more. He can't, the poor dear."

"And Uncle Ralph?"

Mrs. Crewe pursed her lips. "Not a chance of a penny—which is really your father's fault. Ralph is very satirical, but he's so rich that he can afford to be. He's accustomed to great deference from his relatives—all except your father, who has no deference at all, and lets Ralph see it."

"Isn't that very short-sighted?"

"Of course—and very surprising in so gentle a man. But there you are. Ralph is going to Italy to-day for some time. The others all called, but not your father, and Ralph said in a sort of prussic-acid way that he assumed he was not to have the privilege of seeing James. If you knew him, you'd know what that meant. It may have cost us thousands. So you can forget about him—worse luck."

"It seems to be up to me," said Joan shakily.

Mrs. Crewe came over and kissed her. "My dear, don't expect to love as much before marriage as afterwards. I found that out for myself, and

practically all women do. Young people begin by thinking of marriage as a sort of fairyland—but it's the sort that needs a fence round it, if you know what I mean."

Joan nodded. "Yes, I see," and slipped off to her own room to fight the thing out. Her mother went back to the household accounts. Presently she stared into the wall mirror over the desk, and saw a small, delicately-shaped face, brown hair that as yet had no sign of grey, lips with a piquant little arch, a nose slightly tilted, hazel eyes that were still limpid, and a small round neck with a distinctly girlish curve to the shoulders. She was smiling wistfully at the image—and how wistfully it smiled back—when the door of the double bedroom opened, and she heard the voice of Mr. James Crewe on the upper landing:

"Matilda, could you come here a minute?"

She sighed a little, and went up, knowing what he wanted. He was pacing the room, nodding to himself, his eyes quite bright.

"Sit down a minute, my dear, and lend me your brain."

She folded her slim hands, managing to look really expectant.

"It's about the heroine at the plantation," he began. "I've given rather a neat twist to the plot. You see, when he gets her there all to himself, and she remains adamant to—er—his wishes, he has a tremendous struggle—not with her but himself. That takes place out under the rubber trees. Finally, moved by her beauty and helplessness, he conquers himself, and, giving her the bungalow, lives in a tent. Then she begins to love him. She thinks he is only the manager of the plantation, but he owns it, has sunk all his money in it and has been losing for years. He gets fever and she nurses him. While he is delirious, rubber jumps from eight pence to four shillings a pound—you know it really did that—and when he comes to his senses he is rich. They are married. You see, she thought she was nursing a ruined man, while in reality his fortune was going up with his temperature, the difference being that it stayed up—while the temperature came down. Rather a neat point, don't you think?"

He walked up and down, a little carried away with himself, shooting at her innumerable little glances that all demanded approval, while she sat, hands still folded, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Every word of it assured her that the family of Mr. James Crewe would never get any further except by their own unaided efforts.

"It's too wonderful," she said, with entire truth, "and I don't know where your ideas come from. But I wish you had some other place to work in."

That pitched his thoughts toward the unattainable, and he did not answer at once. A study to himself—panelled in mellow oak—a big table—a hearth fire—mullioned windows opening to a velvet lawn—a study where firelight

would flicker on winter evenings, and thoughts—big immortal thoughts—would encompass him like spirits waiting for expression. Then he gave his characteristic little laugh.

“Of course I’d like it, but, really, my dear, we’re quite happy as we are—aren’t we?”

“Perfectly.”

He kissed her. “I often wonder if you would have been even happier with a man who could have given you more. As to myself, I’m quite contented if I can just jog along, not mortgage my future, and write this kind of thing. Not much blood, you know. I’ve only written one bloodthirsty thing—and hated it.”

“We should never expect you to do that again, James. Now I ought to go out.”

“Just a moment—it’s about Humphrey. He asked me yesterday if I could find him a hundred pounds. It seems that he and a friend in the office have the opportunity to make a quick turnover with very little risk and a large profit. I was sorry to have to tell him that I could do nothing. So if he’s a bit out of sorts, that’s why.”

“Wouldn’t the bank let you have it?”

“They might—they’ve always been most civil—but on my income I don’t feel justified in asking. I hope Humphrey won’t be upset.”

Mrs. Crewe sighed. “He knows if it had been possible you would have done it. But nothing extra seems to come our way, does it?”

The little man shook his head. “No, but we’re not poor compared to many. I often think that the worst kind of poverty is when one forgets what one has and dwells on what one desires. And, thank Heaven, none of us are like that.”

His wife sent him an odd smile. “I never heard of a more thankful man than you, James.”

On the morning after these various heart searchings, a letter lay beside the plate of Mr. Crewe, a missive with “General Fiction Syndicate, Limited” on the envelope. Mrs. Crewe saw it first, and her pulse gave a flutter, for she had been told many times that if her husband could get in with that lot it would mean a good deal. So she laid the letter, flap up, in the middle of his plate. Joan saw it next, then Humphrey. He gave a low whistle.

“Think the governor’s struck it at last?”

“It would be too wonderful, dear.”

“Hasn’t sold them anything—ever?”

“Not yet.”

A tense silence fell over them, while in three minds the dream and the

vision stirred again. Mary, who had a letter to Stephen in her pocket, was rather pale. Mrs. Crewe had her own thoughts. Humphrey reflected that he might yet wangle that hundred. They exchanged glances that were almost furtive. The toast grew cold. Then the step of Mr. James Crewe as he came into the upper hall. It was very, very suggestive.

They regarded him breathlessly as he entered, rubbing his palms. He nodded brightly, because the heroine now knew that rubber was going up, and he felt as though he had some shares in the plantation himself. His eye fell on the letter. He opened it—and made a little sound in his throat.

It seemed possible to follow the contents by his changing expression; first hope—a sudden acute interest—a gasp of pleasure—a shade of doubt—an exclamation of protest—and—finally—a look entirely baffling. His face turned almost hard.

“Well, James?” Matilda’s voice was high and rather ragged.

He glanced round the table, licking his lips which had become dry, blinked rapidly several times, balanced his glasses, sent a signal to his wife that might have meant anything, and began to read:

“Our attention has been drawn to a recently published serial of yours entitled ‘The Stain of Blood.’ We are interested in work of this kind, and are prepared to negotiate with you for your entire output for——”

“James!” breathed his wife. “It has come at last!”

“——your entire output for a period of, say, three years. We would expect three serials a year, and are prepared to pay four hundred pounds for each on completion to our satisfaction.”

A gasp ran round the table, the moment being too great for speech. Invisible hands were twitching away the curtain that hung over the future, and a profound exaltation pervaded the room.

“We would require, however, that these be all of the type of ‘The Stain of Blood’ and contain the same vivid action. Mr. Hugh Summers, our assistant fiction Editor, will indicate the general trend of each story.

We will be glad to hear from you at your earliest convenience, as we are at present in need of red-blooded material of this nature.”

Mr. Crewe put down the letter. His face had screwed itself into a sort of mask and had a strange rigidity. Then he spoke in a small voice, quite gentle, but saturated with decision.

“It’s very complimentary—in a way—but unfortunately quite out of the question.”

This announcement, made with a calmness that rendered it doubly impressive, produced a stupefying effect.

“You are disappointed,” he went on, “and I dare say think me mad. I would be if I entered into this contract. I hate sanguinary stories—and ‘The Stain of Blood’ is enough. My dear, you assured me only yesterday that——”

“I know,” gulped Mrs. Crewe, “but this possibility was far from my thoughts. Won’t you reconsider it?”

He shook his head, so small it was, but at that moment so formidable.

“I am sorry—very sorry—but I can’t. Let us forget it. We are all really very happy here, ar’n’t we?” He knew that he wasn’t happy himself, but they didn’t know it.

Joan looked at him with large reproving eyes. Stephen Hollis seemed to be waiting at the door. Didn’t her father see what a quandary she was in? If he didn’t, he was blind. If he did, he was cruel.

“I can’t picture anyone turning down twelve hundred a year,” she said stiffly, “not even you, father.”

Mr. Crewe noted that she said “father” and not “Dad,” which brought a little flush to his cheek, so that he looked like a guilty schoolboy prematurely aged. But she did not know, nor did any of them know, that he was in arms to defend what he took to be his immortal soul. Then, much to his surprise, Humphrey struck in.

“I don’t think we ought to say anything at all. It’s Dad’s business, anyway.”

That, thought Mr. Crewe, was a good deal from Humphrey under the circumstances, and he gave a little sideways nod.

“I thank you, my son.” Then he began on his toast, which was now like leather, eating as a squirrel might eat at quarter speed, and watching his wife and daughter with a dwindling hope that they might be moved to forgiveness and mercy.

But neither felt any prompting of this kind. Mrs. Crewe was struggling with a vision of a hundred a month, and the struggle swamped all else. James had dashed the cup from her lips. Joan was readjusting her previous ideas of fatherhood, much to Mr. Crewe’s detriment. Presently something broke loose.

“I won’t marry him! I won’t!” she exploded violently.

Mr. Crewe held his toast motionless. “Eh—what in the world——”

“I think,” put in his wife, “that—well—I quite sympathise with Joan—to say nothing of Humphrey and myself.”

Mr. Crewe lost every remnant of appetite. He had had his own secret battle before giving voice to the contents of that letter, and what he considered the

unfairness of this remark was no less bitter. He blinked, pushed back his chair, and looked extremely uncomfortable. Then Humphrey plunged in again.

“You can leave me out of that last, mother; and, Joan, you’re not playing the game. You needn’t sacrifice yourself for anyone if that job is still open. I thought you liked Stephen. If not, why not wash him out? He won’t be lonely for long.”

He stalked off, head rather high, trying not to think of the hundred pounds that for a moment was so near. Mr. Crewe, who felt distinctly touched, was sorry to see him go and had an odd sense of being left unprotected. So he gave a little sigh, slipped the offending letter into his pocket and betook himself upstairs. It would have been wiser to say nothing—but that was impossible. A man’s club came in here, he reflected, where his correspondence was all his own. But Mr. James Crewe had no club.

He gave a long sigh, settled himself at the machine—the table on which it stood had one leg shorter than the other and needed a new paper wedge every day—and began wrestling with the hero’s temperature. He was sending it up in giddy leaps—though his own seemed to be dropping steadily—when, with a tap at the door, his wife came in and pretended to look for something in a bureau drawer. But James knew better than that.

“I wonder if you realise what you’re doing,” she said, with no respect for his poised fingers.

“I hope so, my dear. I’m doing it with my eyes open.”

“Not to the needs of the family, James.”

Mr. Crewe looked puzzled. “I hesitate to say it, but I think I have always considered the family—though that doesn’t sound modest. It is not easy for me to decline that offer, Matilda.”

“Easier than it is for the rest of us to——”

She was interrupted by Joan, who came in, very excited.

“Mother, I think it must be Uncle Ralph who’s just getting out of a car. There’s a lot of luggage on top.”

“Impossible! He hasn’t been here for ten years!” She darted to the window. “James—it is Ralph!”

Mr. Crewe displayed surprisingly little interest. “Will you see him, please.”

She stared. “How ridiculous! Change your coat and come down at once.” She vanished in a flutter, and he heard her voice in the hall. “What an unexpected pleasure! Do come in.”

“Pleasure!” murmured Mr. Crewe sardonically, and changed his coat. He found his wife and daughter sitting with their eyes fixed on the person of an elderly man who wore sombre, perfectly cut clothes and seemed the same width all the way up. His long face was sallow and quite expressionless, his mouth hardly moved when he spoke, and in general he was about as

communicative as a clam. His face did not change when Mr. Crewe advanced and shook hands mechanically, and the hand he put out was as cold as a fish. But there was a slight change in James—whose lip had an unaccustomed curve.

“Well, Ralph, how are you?”

“Passably well. I’m on my way to Italy.”

Mr. Crewe wondered if he had come to say that, and there ensued a chilling pause till his wife put in the appropriate thing about Italy.

“How wonderful. I always hope that Joan will go there some day. Her art, you know.”

Judging by the visitor’s face, Joan might walk. Perhaps Mrs. Crewe saw it too, for she experienced a renewed pang of revolt, contrasting these two men, one with so little, the other with so much.

“This morning I did think there was a chance—just for a moment,” she added significantly.

“Eh?” said Mr. Simonds.

“Yes; James declined an offer of twelve hundred a year.”

The fat was in the fire now, as she had meant it to be, for surely she could count on this man’s support. No one ever knew him to refuse money.

“Ah!” said Mr. Simonds. “Declined it?”

“Yes—exactly.” Mr. Crewe’s cheek held a faint colour. “It meant selling my immortal soul, and it’s not for sale. Life’s too short.”

Mr. Simonds stroked his chin, so that one could almost see him doing some appraising on his own account. Then Matilda, realising that it was a field day for her, came in again. The opinion of this man of affairs should carry considerable weight with James. The eyes of Mr. Simonds seemed a little less glazed while she talked, and he looked at the culprit with what nearly amounted to interest.

“Have you actually committed yourself?”

“No—but I shall by to-night’s post.” Mr. Crewe didn’t care a hoot what outsiders thought of him, least of all this one.

“Then I can only be glad that the question of money is of so little importance here. Quite unusual in my experience.”

Mrs. Crewe had anticipated nothing of this kind, and her heart sank rapidly, but her husband only smiled. He appeared to have enjoyed the remark.

“It is not the most important—here.”

Mr. Simonds looked at him again. “You have not asked my advice in the matter, so of course I do not offer it.”

“Thanks,” said Mr. Crewe, “that’s quite all right. Will you be long in Italy?”

“Yes—for some months. Well, good-bye, Matilda; good-bye, Joan. And

you, James,” here he paused for a fraction of a second, “I trust you will not regret your valuation of your immortal soul. Ha!” He gave a dry chuckle. “Excellent!”

Mr. Crewe, feeling rather like a Crusader, showed him out. The car purred—slid forward—vanished. The door of Acacia Villa closed again. Mr. Crewe, heading for the stairs, ventured to look round. His wife and Joan stood staring at him, and there was no question of what the stare implied. He did not speak, but, mounting hastily, shut himself in with a defiant click. Then he drew a long, long breath.

“Gad,” he whispered, “I’ve torn it now!”

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST SWEET TASTE

IT will be understood that the atmosphere of the Crewe house was distinctly strained, and three members of the family took each their own way of escape. The little man voyaged to his phantom plantation, and juggled the temperature of his hero against the fluctuating price of rubber. But the story dragged, and his tilting keys seemed full of mockery. Joan made her way to the pillar box, and dropped in her letter to Stephen. She imagined it nestling among other letters, perhaps from lover to lover, posted in anticipation and happiness, with promises and half-divulged secrets. Then she went moodily back to the house and found her mother on the doorstep.

Mrs. Crewe regarded her daughter with the maternal solicitude of one who knows that her offspring believes herself to be a burnt offering on the family altar.

“Won’t you come with me, dear?”

“Where to?”

“Oxford Street.”

Joan shook her head. “I thought I’d just look in at that antique shop again—just in case.”

“Shall I go with you?”

“No thanks, mother.”

Mrs. Crewe knew better than to say more, and went off on a pilgrimage that to-day would have a very poignant interest. She had acquired the habit of walking up Bond Street, along to Oxford Circus, and down Regent Street on what she privately called imaginary shopping expeditions. This had become rather a science. To begin with, she would, so to speak, credit herself with an imaginary sum—quite a large one if she felt metaphorically rich—moderate if she felt poor. She would look for bargains, mentally wrangle for and buy them, be more or less contented and definitely tired by one o’clock, then take a bus back to Acacia Villa and tot up her purchases on the way. In this fashion she must have acquired enough to furnish several country mansions, and the tragic thing about it was that she did, in actuality, discover amazing bargains. This morning, however, she had to give up early. The thing became too unbearable.

Joan walked toward the antique shop in Fulham Road, in case she might yet discover something about it that was preferable to Stephen Hollis. Nearly there, she saw his thick-set figure approaching, and, not wanting to meet him yet, turned to stare into a shop window.

“Hullo! What luck!” His voice boomed over her shoulder, and a smiling face appeared in the glass.

She tried to behave as a girl should when she meets the man she had decided to marry, but the attempt fell short. It had just occurred to her that she was by no means playing the game with Stephen. He sent her a quick glance.

“I say, are you all right?”

“Yes—perfectly. Why?”

“I thought you looked a bit down.”

“Nothing to be down about,” she parried.

“Joan—my letter—did you get it?”

She nodded nervously, trying not to meet his eyes. They were very bright and penetrating. Queer that she couldn’t love a man like him, with his steadiness, qualities, and the suggestion of reserve force that sometimes peeped out and surprised her.

“Yes—and I’ve just posted one to you.”

“By Jove—I—I——”

He got quite pale, and his voice trailed out. She saw his hand tighten over his stick till the knuckles stood out in hard, white hillocks.

“What about it, darling?”

That nearly did for her. *Why* couldn’t she love him? Perhaps had he been less devoted—if he had vagaries that puzzled without antagonising her—if she had been able to see him less clearly—if there had been another girl—this affair might have had a taste it lacked from the beginning. There was no electricity about it—no spark.

“I wrote that if—if we saw less of each other for six months—I don’t mean deliberately avoid each other—but not write and—and just meet in the ordinary way—that then perhaps I’d feel more sure.”

“Six months?” he said huskily.

Compunction stirred in her heart. “Would you still want me even if I didn’t feel about you as you do about me?”

He sent her a look. “I don’t believe that anyone has felt what I do.”

After that she did not venture further, but got away, not allowing him to follow, and with a sense of having been lowered in her own opinion. The stuff in Stephen was too good to be used for such purposes as hers. The antique shop seemed preferable to a marriage like this. At that she felt rather dizzy, and turned homeward. It was the first time that home had ever looked like a harbour of refuge.

The cup of the family of Crewe was not yet quite full. Three days later came a note from Mr. Ralph Simonds from Paris.

“DEAR JAMES,—

Without any desire to pry into your affairs, I have been wondering whether you finally declined that offer. If you have, permit me to say that it was interesting to meet a man who put so high a value on something so intangible as his soul.

I enclose fifteen pounds, five each for your wife, Joan, and Humphrey. It may purchase a few moments' forgetfulness of a situation of which they do not seem to approve—although I did not see Humphrey."

Mr. Crewe missed nothing of this thrust, but was thankful it came in with the afternoon Continental mail, and not in the morning. He disliked those breakfast letters. Of course Ralph Simonds had no soul himself, but certainly got on amazingly well without one. The little man, rubbing the sheet slowly between his fingers, experienced that greater irony that life sometimes exhibits when the world is out of joint and one's finer sensibilities seem only targets for other folk to shoot at. Far better if he had said nothing about his immortal soul but simply that he could not write as required and to order.

He was, in truth, in deep water. The present story hung fire, and the hero would long since have died of fever. Mr. Crewe was definitely out with his wife and Joan. For the very first time they put him down as selfish and inconsiderate. And when adjectives like this are applied to one who has anchored himself to a battered typewriter for the sake of others it means that seeds of discord are being sown.

Mrs. Crewe took her five pounds with something more than resentment. Existence had been embittered. She would never forget that offer. It was graven on her heart in letters of biting acid. As to Joan, she took hers, trying to look ennobled and exalted by the sacrifice she contemplated making, but only succeeded in looking grumpy and unmarriageable. She was aware of this, and it made her grumpier than ever. The thought occurred that Stephen might notice it, and not want to carry on.

Humphrey took his, engaged a corner table at a fashionable restaurant, and had a family dinner-party. He felt that something should be done to slacken the tension, and could think of nothing better. His mother and Joan were in a flutter, as they had never been to the place before, while Mr. Crewe was rather timorous about the velvet collar on his evening dress coat—which had been quite the thing—once. But he soon became absorbed in his surroundings. How pretty his wife was! How fresh and young Joan looked! What a fine sturdy chap was Humphrey! He forgot all about Mr. Ralph Simonds, and touched his wife's arm with a sort of delicate pleasure.

"My dear, this is going to be a great help."

"How, James?"

"Well, you see I've often wanted to use a scene like this, but never felt

quite at home. It's the little gestures and mannerisms of such people that go so far to make them live on paper."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mrs. Crewe did not want to be reminded of fiction while surrounded by so many absorbing facts. The frocks, absolutely first-rate—minimum of material—maximum of cut—the art of them—the jewels, not too many but all good—the stockings and the sheen of them—the complexions—she thought the marble-white was striking, but one would tire of it. And there was not a woman in the place who felt more exactly what suited her and what to avoid than herself. She knew this instinctively, and sighed. Then Humphrey danced with Joan.

"Well matched, I think—yes—very—how nicely they dance. We should be proud of them, eh, my dear. Do you see that woman in the far corner—the very dark one with the violet eyes—I think I'll use her for a type. What a different world this is!"

She did not want to be cross, but every word he said had an unsuspected edge. Just then he gave an exclamation.

"Next table but one—the man who is turning—know who that is?"

"No."

"Ephraim Manners—the author. His last book sold fifty thousand copies in England alone and twice that in America."

"Do you know him?"

Mr. Crewe shook his head regretfully, and eyed the demigod with reverence.

"Unfortunately, no. My circle is very modest—too modest for him. He's not in town much, but lives in the country—where I would like to——" He stopped, with a vague gesture.

"You never said that before, James: and what would I do in the country?"

"Well, if I could afford to live there, you could afford to be in town as much as you wished, and look me up—er—at week-ends." He said this with a little flourish because it seemed suited to the present atmosphere.

But he had made a bull's-eye. That would have suited her exactly. No eternal click—no half-digested plots at breakfast—James where he ought to be—herself where she wanted to be—free—well dressed—her own circle—enough good works to establish her with a certain set—enough entertaining to enable her to mingle with another—a car—a maid! It all rolled in on her, so that any intelligible reply was out of the question. Her husband was looking at her, puzzled, when Humphrey came back with Joan and insisted on dancing with his mother.

"But, Humphrey, I don't know how."

He laughed. "Come along. You have the best figure in the room and your feet will take care of themselves."

She danced, loving it, while with every step the fascination of the place grew on her. She wondered if Humphrey felt the same, and concluded he did not, being too young to taste the joys of feeling younger. When she came back to her husband her cheeks were flushed.

“You look just as you did twenty years ago,” he said, quite happy because he had stored up a number of most useful types.

She gave a little sigh. The sight of him reminded her of facts to which she was about to return. She did not dream that this was selfish and narrow, but seeing herself revolving in the tall mirrors about the room had had a poignant significance. What a wonderful thing to be like James, perfectly content with the same thing year after year and not caring how old one got.

On the way home her eyes met those of Joan in silent agreement. Humphrey’s evening had been almost too much of a success—perfect while it lasted, but with a sweetness that would be paid for later on.

It must be that the gods who sit in high places and concern themselves with the affairs of men have certain human attributes of humour and whimsicality, for how else can be explained those confusing transitions to which this life is so subject. Be that as it may, they gave the cards another shuffle, when four months later another letter lay beside the breakfast plate of Mr. James Crewe.

Again Mrs. Crewe inspected it first, deciding that it looked ominous. No name on the flap and thick, substantial paper. Joan and Humphrey saw it, but as it could not be more demoralising than a certain other one they experienced a vague hope. By common consent nothing was said. Then Mr. Crewe, looking tired. The story had dragged dreadfully.

He said good morning in a toneless voice, saw the letter, and put it in his pocket. As a result he got at his toast before it was quite cold. Humphrey chuckled. Mrs. Crewe and Joan sipped their tea, eyes meeting over their cups. Then curiosity, the undying element in human nature that survives all shock and disaster, got to work. Mrs. Crewe put down her cup.

“Well, James?”

He coughed slightly. “My dear, I have doubts about opening any more of my letters at the table. It is not long since I committed a tactical error, and there was rather a scene. I’m sorry, but you see it was not my practice to keep anything from the family.”

Humphrey was the only one whose mental condition harboured no resentment whatever, and it was he who spoke.

“Why have any now, Dad? What happened a while ago wasn’t your fault.”

Mrs. Crewe felt that this was a thrust at her, but smothered a protest, because her husband’s hand was sliding into his pocket. He meant what he said

about the family, and hated any kind of secret. Then he opened the letter with a good deal of indifference. It was a three-page affair. Watching him, they saw his face change.

Surprise—a queer sort of surprise—a hasty glance at the signature—a gasp—a knitting of small brows—frantic concentration—another gasp—a long, long breath! All these were registered in turn. Finally he looked round the table, his eyes full of awe.

“For Heaven’s sake, James, what is the matter?” quavered his wife.

Mr. Crewe put down the letter. “What would you all do if you had all the money you wanted?” he said in a thin, squeaky voice.

Their first sensation was one of anxiety, so odd were his eyes, so altered his face. Perhaps he saw this, for after a little choky sound he began again in a good deal steadier voice.

“A few months ago you thought I was mad, but I wasn’t—nor am I now.” He tapped the letter. “This proves it.”

“What did you mean by what you said?” asked Mrs. Crewe, utterly bewildered.

“Exactly what I did say. What would you do if you had all the money you wanted? I’d like to know before giving it to you.” He chuckled, regarding his toast with an enquiring gaze.

“How much?” faltered Joan. “Two thousand a year?”

Mr. Crewe waved his hand. “Far, far more than that.” He was now enjoying himself exceedingly.

“I think,” said his wife, with an effort at control, “it would be better to tell us exactly what has happened.” Then she added “My dear” in a tone of decided affection.

He nodded, fingering the letter. “I think Ralph must be dead.”

The family blinked simultaneously.

“Listen to this!”

“DEAR SIR,—

Some months ago we received from Mr. Ralph Simonds, who was then in France, a letter instructing us to pay to you the income from securities lodged with us, and that——”

“He’s off his head!” exploded Humphrey.

Mr. Crewe only looked at him.

“——and that this should continue until notice from him cancelling such instructions. The desire thus expressed was, in our opinion, so unlike our client that we felt bound to make sure that this letter was genuine, and sent

our representative to France to interview Mr. Simonds in person. We may say——”

“James—it can’t be true!”

“Please, Matilda, do not interrupt.”

“——may say that he left us in no doubt whatever. He stated on this occasion that his action was decided by the fact that the attitude of his relatives toward himself was, with one exception, that of a lively anticipation of benefits to be received, and that you alone had displayed any independence.”

“James—you wonderful man!”

“We felt constrained to wait before acting, and subsequently tried to get in touch with our client again, but have failed completely. He had left the Riviera, unaccompanied, for a trip through the Maritime Alps, and has not been heard of since. This, of course, is not proof of death, but such proof may be forthcoming at any time. The income from the estate is approximately [here Mr. Crewe’s voice faltered for the first time] forty thousand pounds a year, and has been accruing to your credit for——”

Mrs. Crewe leaned back, stunned. “Forty thousand a year!” she gibbered.

“——credit for some months. Please communicate with us on receipt of this.”

“You mean,” asked Joan chaotically, “that your income amounts to more than three thousand a month?”

Mr. Crewe nodded. “Yes—and no. *The* income does, without question, because forty thousand a year,” he used the words quite lightly, “is rather more than a hundred a day—but what you say brings up another matter. I have been thinking of it while I talked. I cannot imagine myself in control of that sum, and it occurs that there are four of us, and four goes evenly into forty thousand, so that—well——”

His wife and daughter rushed at him, enveloped him, while Humphrey, who had not said a word, got up, his face rather red.

“Look here, Dad, that’s too much,” he stammered.

Mr. Crewe came to the surface, his cheeks quite rosy. “Let us look at it in this way. We all have our ambitions—that is why I asked you what I did to begin with. But you only asked ‘how much.’ So it seems to me that if we each had exactly the same amount with which to gratify those ambitions, the result

should be very interesting. Such an arrangement would be quite in line with the—er—satirical comments of my cousin Ralph. He probably left us that money because he thought we would do less harm with it than any of the rest.”

His wife gazed at him with a sort of wild interest. *He* had been the rebel where Ralph was concerned; *he* had not kowtowed; *he* had declined to write sanguinary stories and then braved the subsequent storm; *he* had told Ralph that advice was not wanted. In other words, he had been honest with himself. As a result fortunes were thrown at his feet. Was it possible that she had been living with a hero like this for twenty years, and not known it? She tried to say something, failed completely, and a few tears trickled down.

Mr. Crewe came round and patted her shoulder. “My dear, I’m going upstairs for a while, and want to think. Perhaps we all do, and I’ll—ah—go on with my story in the meantime. I cannot leave that poor chap in his present condition any longer. To-night we shall talk. Humphrey, my boy, I’m very glad that should anything inviting come along now you will be free to act. Joan, my dear, you’ll feel—well—I can imagine that. Matilda, if I might have a cup of hot tea made, perhaps you’ll have it sent up, if it’s not too much trouble. Nothing to eat, thanks.”

He took an odd glance at the letter, folded and put it in his pocket, and went off very quietly. To the others it seemed that some new kind of deity had visited and just left the room. They stared at each other without speaking. Then Mrs. Crewe dabbed at her cheeks.

“Of course I can’t believe it yet, and none of us can, but there’s no reason we shouldn’t.”

Joan awoke as from a trance. “Ten thousand a year each!” she whispered.

“You can take the income tax off that,” said Humphrey, who had been doing mental arithmetic in figures of gold. “And did you ever hear of any father acting like him?”

“What a shame!” murmured his mother. “I mean the tax. How much will it leave?”

“Roughly, seven thousand.”

Mrs. Crewe thought this was robbery, then began spending what remained. No more imaginary shopping now. Joan was chiefly conscious that she had handled the Stephen Hollis affair very wisely, and got the credit for being ready to make a sacrifice that was now unnecessary. She smiled at having taken it so seriously. Then Humphrey jumped up with an exclamation.

“Lord—the office!”

“Humphrey, you’re not going——?”

“Why not?” He laughed contentedly. “I like my job, now that I needn’t worry about the pay. I’m glad it’s the kind it is, to keep me in balance. Remember that other letter the governor opened at breakfast?”

His mother nodded guiltily.

“Well, he’s been the same all the way through. That’s what I’d like about him, even if he weren’t my father.”

He went into the hall, paused at the hat-rack, and impulsively mounted the stairs, halting at Mr. Crewe’s door.

“Come in,” said the small voice.

The typewriter held a blank sheet of paper, and a cup of cold tea stood beside it. Mr. Crewe was leaning back, his body limp, and when Humphrey saw his face that looked very tired too.

“All right, Dad? I didn’t want to go off without saying how splendid you _____”

Mr. Crewe lifted a narrow hand, the finger tips a little flattened from long hammering at his machine.

“Don’t, my son. We understand each other, and I’m thankful for that—very thankful. But do you know that since coming up here I’ve had a discomforting thought? It worries me.”

“What is it?”

“This—that when one comes to look at life it seems that it’s very often the lack of money—the having to do without things—that holds families together. If money comes—lots of it—they’re very apt to split up and go off on their own tangents. That’s not the view usually held, but I fear there’s something in it. If it works that way in our case it would upset me very much.”

Humphrey felt a lump in his throat, and put his big hand on the shoulder of this loving self-sacrificing little man who was full of so many surprises.

“Not enough money in the world to come between you and me, Dad.”

Then, moved by an impulse he did not attempt to control, he stooped, kissed his father’s brow, and went quietly out.

Mr. Crewe sat for a while, quite motionless. He had found it impossible to go on with the story, which now seemed tawdry and superficial. It was not the real life, that being the one he intended to live himself. His mind fell to wandering till, presently, the double bedroom faded away and he saw a study with panelled walls and——! At that he gave a gusty sigh of pure pleasure, put the typewriter back in its worn case—how well one knew the click of the catch—noted the address of Haskins and Butters, and, going out in rather a sheepish manner, took a bus in the direction of Lincoln’s Inn.

Joan heard the door close, and watched the small figure out of sight.

“Mother, Dad’s off to see the solicitors; what are you going to do?”

“I thought of a little shopping. Want to come?” Mrs. Crewe’s lips had quite a different curve from the usual one.

They exchanged glances, these two, glances that were very expressive. The first real shopping expedition without the brakes on. A new taste in life. Their appetites rose in prospect, and they visioned a Bond Street orgy, with lunch, say, at the Berkeley, Humphrey's dinner being responsible for that. Mrs. Crewe settled her hat on with a reckless dig of the fingers, and hailed the first taxi. The sensation was worth anything.

"The Western County Bank on the Fulham Road," she commanded, being about to draw twenty-five pounds—one day's income—from the savings account. "If you want any cash, Joan, I can let you have it," she added largely.

"Thanks—I was thinking about Stephen."

"What about him, child?"

"Well—everything is changed now."

"I don't suppose he has."

"I have. I mean there won't be any more of that."

"Are you going to tell him so?"

Joan hesitated. "I suppose I ought to." She was thinking very hard, because Stephen had been obtruding himself with a certain persistency. Mrs. Crewe was thinking also; and the point in both minds, though neither voiced it, was that a girl with seven thousand a year, tax paid, was a different person from the Joan Crewe of twenty-four hours ago. Then Mrs. Crewe had an idea.

"I don't think you'll have to say a word."

"Why not?"

"Well, Stephen is too delicate to press the matter now."

"Because of the money?"

"Yes."

"If he really loves me, and I believe he does, would the money make any difference?"

"Probably, with him. But it's sure to attract the kind you should not marry."

There was nothing depressing about that at the moment, and Joan smiled contentedly. She visualised a pleasing perspective of ardent young men—all with perfect manners—all in society—all vowing eternal devotion. How intriguing. In the middle of this the taxi stopped at the bank, Mrs. Crewe drew her money, and, coming out with a packet of crisp notes, pressed half of them into her daughter's hand.

"You can pay me back later; and just to think that your father is probably talking to those solicitors now."

They pictured him, and the respect with which he would be received, and the picture had nearly carried them to Bond Street when Mrs. Crewe tapped on the window and descended at the shop of a certain florist on Piccadilly.

"It's about a wreath for your Uncle Ralph's grave, if he has one," she said

cheerfully. "I rather want the first money we spend to be for that. If the poor man knows what's going on I think he ought to be pleased."

So on up Bond Street on foot, with the sun shining and opportunity opening wide. There was something curious about it all. They went into shops, examined lovely things, turning them over as Mrs. Crewe had so often done before, but when it came to buying, the desire was strangely absent. Joan had a grotesque thought that, after all, the things she most wanted, such as a sapphire necklet in Boucheron's window, were still beyond her reach. Mrs. Crewe had similar sensations. The power to buy now existed, but the fancy had mysteriously dwindled. There came the premonition that they should not plunge, but wait a while till they got more used to the possession of wealth. Also there was a secret feeling that what they brought home should appeal to the judgment of husband and father. Queer that he loomed up with such importance at a time like this. Finally they compromised by buying presents for him, Humphrey, and each other, and Mrs. Crewe was amused to find that she had just enough left for lunch. It was at a corner table that she broached another idea.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "we ought to get someone to introduce you. I can't."

Joan pursed her lips. Here was another difficulty not solved by the mere possession of money. Odd to think of a mother not being able to introduce her own daughter.

"That's easily arranged, isn't it?"

"Yes—Personal Column of 'The Times.' I see it every day, and have always thought of you."

"I wonder who those people really are?"

"Titled—almost all of them—lost their money and kept some of their friends. It's a sort of marriage market to all intent, and they often get a commission on a good match."

Joan played with her entrée. It was good to look forward to choosing instead of being chosen, and privately she scoffed at what she called the humility of so many women where men were concerned. Such views did not go with ten thousand a year.

"I want to express myself before I marry anyone."

"How, Joan?" Self-expression was just what Mrs. Crewe intended for herself.

"Art." The girl made a gesture as though the air was full of art and she could put her fingers on it.

Mrs. Crewe ordered a meringue, and looked unusually wise. "That's all right for a while—even your art—but you're not any different from other girls and you'll need a husband, so it will be one of my first objects to find you

one.”

“Thanks, mother, but I’m independent now.”

It was quite true. She was free to come and go as she pleased, and had as much money as any of them. All at once it seemed to Mrs. Crewe that her husband had been generous to the point of recklessness. Queer to have a daughter who could do as much as her mother. Then, to make sure that Joan did not contemplate anything silly, she went off on another track.

“A house—we’ll have to think of that at once.”

But she could not pin the girl down to anything. Joan was too conscious of the easy and opulent atmosphere around her, too reminiscent of her feeling on the first and only night she had dined here. She saw herself coming often, with a kind of young male god across the table, very smooth of face, sleek of hair, perfect of dress, the sort of god who said delightful things in a way that betrayed no desire to flatter, and suggested others that were a little intoxicating. She would dine and dance with him—with each of him—and at the end take the one that pleased her best. So it was no use her mother bringing up practical things at that moment. The golden gates had swung too wide.

Humphrey got through the morning mechanically. Just before noon the man who had a few weeks before invited him to put a hundred into a small syndicate, came to his desk. This was Newbold, one of the firm’s accountants, and considered a safe chap by those who knew him.

“That matter,” he said, “the one I spoke about a month ago. Do you remember?”

Humphrey remembered very distinctly.

“Well, Peters has to drop out—has to realise before the fruit is ripe. You can get his share for a hundred and fifty, and the assured profits so far are seventy-five pounds each—with more to come. I can place his share in ten minutes, but wanted to give you another chance.”

Humphrey felt a sort of inward glow. It was good to be thought of, better still to be able to act. He saw himself waving a careless hand and offering to take Peter’s share and any others he could get. Then, curiously, he felt a slight reaction. He did not understand it at the moment, but it was as though this were not his proper game and he had no use for it at present. There began to stir in him the conviction that he should husband his resources now that he had them, must not waste his time in small speculations, however promising, and must train his mind to bigger things. If these other fellows had done that, they might not be employees to-day. Strange that though the power had come he should feel a reluctance to use it!

“It’s awfully good of you,” he said slowly, “but really——”

Newbold slapped his shoulder. “That’s all right, old man, I quite understand. Lots of us in the same box. Perhaps something else—later on, eh?”

“Perhaps,” nodded Humphrey. “And thanks just the same.”

It was at lunch that the big idea came to him. He was in a position now to talk to anyone, and no better man presented himself than Cassidy, for whom he worked. Cassidy was junior partner in the firm, an Anglo-Irishman with a quick brain, an amazing memory, and a “market” sense that was not his least asset. He had always been decent to the staff. How would Cassidy see a thing like this?

Humphrey plugged away methodically till the exchange closed, then tapped on a door marked “private.”

“Can you give me a few minutes, sir?”

“Yes, lad, what is it? Sit down.” Cassidy had had a good day and felt amiable.

Humphrey sat, took the bit in his teeth, and drove ahead. He gave it all, withholding nothing of his own instincts in this affair—his feeling that he did not want to fritter away his time—his refusal of an offer just made—his desire to be wise and do the best with what he had. Cassidy listened, studying the square young face and strong skin. There was that about Humphrey which inspired interest, the sort of fellow one liked to have about the place.

“You’ll be leaving us, then?” asked the junior partner.

“I don’t know even that. I’m not long in the business and haven’t learned much of it. The wise thing—that’s what I’m after, and”—he added with a grin—“that’s why I’m here.”

“Thanks,” said Cassidy. “I began with three thousand capital and no other income at all, at all. That isn’t a patch on what you have without moving a foot.”

This, from such a source, meant a good deal, and Humphrey got his first real glimpse of the significance of wealth.

“It’s a sort of financial father you’re looking for?” went on the other man, his eyes twinkling.

“Or perhaps brother,” said Humphrey with a sort of inspiration.

Cassidy stared at him. “’Twas that brought you in here?”

“Yes, if you like, sir. Nothing would please me better.”

“A partnership?”

Humphrey had not imagined such a thing, but the idea appealed to him vividly. “I didn’t know if—if you would care for that.”

As a matter of fact Cassidy did care. Humphrey’s youth—his sincerity—his modesty—and, above all, the compliment he implied—these struck Cassidy very forcibly. There ensued a little silence. Then Humphrey went on, speaking slowly and thinking hard.

“I know I’m not qualified to be anyone’s partner yet, but if you thought there was something in it I might go on working here, while you see that I get

all the experience possible—and after a while—well—the partnership.”

Cassidy grinned broadly. “Faith, but your head is screwed on right. Your solicitors—mind if I have a chat?”

“No, I’d like it—they’re Haskins and Butters. Shall I speak to them first?”

Cassidy nodded. “Yes—and while it’s not necessary, I’d like to meet your father. He must be a remarkable man.”

“You will, and he is,” said Humphrey with earnestness.

“Nothing else you want to ask about?”

“I don’t think of anything, sir.”

“Bedad, but you take a lot for granted about myself.”

Humphrey laughed. “I was going by what others think of you and what you are here.”

Cassidy almost blushed. As it happened, he had been extraordinarily interested for the last ten minutes. There were four partners in the firm, and he the youngest. A long way yet to the top. The feel of the market was in him, he was innately shrewd, entirely honest, and very ambitious. So while Humphrey’s brain unrolled itself, Cassidy’s was working very rapidly.

“That’s a good word for anyone to hear,” he said quietly, “but I’d ask you to have your solicitors investigate me before anything is done.”

“I was going to do that, anyway,” chuckled Humphrey.

Then they shook hands very heartily.

That was Humphrey’s morning. Mr. Crewe, for his part, betook himself to the solicitors, where he was indeed received with great deference, and shortly found himself looking over a list of securities. These were solid, substantial, rock-bottomed shares representing the best England had to offer. Nothing questionable here—though he didn’t know that—but the sort of capital one might sleep on and not worry. It interested him, a total abstainer, to note that much of his money was in breweries. And to think that he had never tasted beer.

He had finished the reading of this list, which left him quite confused, when Mr. Butters leaned forward, and asked in what way he could be of immediate service. He had been studying Mr. Crewe with considerable interest, and was vastly intrigued to learn that the income was to be divided equally amongst the family. Quite mad, he thought, but smelled the possibility of more legal work as a result.

“Well,” said Mr. Crewe, “you mentioned that if I was—er—in need of _____”

“Quite, sir; I quite understand. Would, say, two thousand suit?”

Mr. Crewe looked surprised. “Is that available already?”

Mr. Butters smiled. "You are in the fortunate position of not having to worry about that. Two thousand—yes—certainly—with pleasure. We are happy to oblige. May we expect to hear from your solicitors?"

"I never had any," said Mr. Crewe. "I thought that perhaps you might act for me too. Would you?"

Mr. Butters, concealing his joy, and exhibiting only a certain well-bred acquiescence, agreed at once. Then a cheque was passed across the desk, the biggest cheque the little man had ever seen in his life, and his counsel asked if Mr. Crewe would do him the honour of taking a glass of sherry. Mr. Crewe was about to decline, but a new instinct bade him accept. Evidently a formality, he argued, and one that could hardly be avoided when it signalled the acquisition of forty thousand a year. So the sherry was brought in by a head clerk who looked like a bishop and was as superior as an American ambassador.

Mr. Crewe, putting the glass to his lips, felt a bit of a dog, and wished Mr. Butters a very good health. He was aware of a delicate glow in the central part of his person.

"Do you know," he said thoughtfully, "that's the first glass of wine I ever drank?" Then, as though to justify his downfall, he added, "But, of course, it's the first fortune I ever came into."

"I hope it won't be the last, sir."

Mr. Crewe found himself in Oxford Street West a few moments later, wondering whether Mr. Butters referred to the wine or the fortune. Perhaps it didn't matter. Then he had lunch, and on account of those brewery investments indulged in a half-pint of ale that happened to be very old. So out again. What a corking day! How warm was the sun for November. Perhaps he had been a bit bigoted in the matter of total abstinence.

Pausing at a corner, he glanced up Great Portland Street, the cheque seeming to crackle in his pocket. As far as he could see the roadside was lined on both sides with motor-cars, a perspective of glistening bodies and shining tonneaus. Thousands of them! More cars—any number of them—their noses poking out of wide-open doors as though lying in wait for the unwary stranger—as indeed they were. The scene attracted him, and he walked slowly along in a sort of mechanical dream till one car looked exactly like another. Then more cars, vistas and battalions of them, shepherded by sleek young men. There was a faint smell of petrol. His brain began to whirl, and he felt in the grip of some unseen power, having never dreamed of owning a car till this moment. He paused opposite a glittering monster from whose bowels came a low, rhythmical purr, and touched its nose with his stick.

"How much?"

Its sleek young man—he had the Oxford manner—sized up Mr. Crewe on

the instant and added fifty pounds. "Nothing better on the road," he added, and went off into a rhapsody about gears, magnetos, and valves. "Like a trial run, sir?"

Mr. Crewe, knowing he was doomed, nodded automatically. He was quite ignorant of the make of the car, but liked the shape of the doors, the electric cigar-lighter, and the thing that wiped the rain off the wind shield, so he seated himself beside the sleek young man, was wafted luxuriously toward Regent's Park, and, once there, found himself hurled through the air at what he considered a frightful speed. Houses and trees were reeling by when he touched the driver's arm.

"I—I rather think this car is too fast for me."

The young man smiled and subsided to walking speed. "You won't think so out in the country, sir."

"You see," went on Mr. Crewe, "I don't know anything about cars, but liked the shape of this one."

"You know enough, sir, to have selected the biggest bargain in the market."

That settled it, and the seats were certainly most comfortable. Mr. Crewe invited the young man to drive to the Western County Bank on the Fulham Road, deposited his cheque in the most offhand manner possible—told the manager he might expect more later—made another cheque in payment for the car—arranged for driving lessons and was wafted toward Acacia Villa.

"Mind waiting a minute?" he asked, and descended like a homing pigeon.

His wife and Joan were in the living-room. They smiled and regarded him with affectionate interest.

"Well, James, you saw the solicitors?"

"Yes, my dear. Everything is in order. And you—what have you been doing?"

"I arranged for some flowers to be sent to Ralph's grave—when we know where it is—and just a few odds and ends." Mrs. Crewe was keeping the presents till Humphrey came home.

The little man smiled, led her to the window, and made an imperious gesture:

"See what I got!"

CHAPTER III

SPREADING WINGS

A SHORT time after the events already recorded, Mrs. Crewe turned over in bed and pressed a button. Ten minutes later a maid appeared with breakfast. The lady of the house—the new house in Sussex Place—sipped her coffee and read through the social column of a certain London daily. From her expression it did not seem that what she read gave her any satisfaction whatever. She laid aside the paper and yielded herself to thought.

It is no part of this record of the Crewe affair to say more about the period of transition from Acacia Villa to Sussex Place than to mention that it took effect with a sort of volcanic energy. The new house was available on long lease, and the Crewes lapped it up as a cat laps milk. Toward the expense they each contributed equally. Then, when they moved in, Mr. Crewe sprang one of his little surprises. He seemed full of them of late.

“My dear,” he said, “I have decided to gratify an ambition of many years. I have taken a small place in the country—Sussex—about forty miles from town. Its chief attraction is the study, an admirable room, oak-panelled and opening on to the lawn. It is exactly what I have often pictured to myself.”

It was at breakfast when he said this—he always chose breakfast for his announcements—and Mrs. Crewe felt rather a thrill. The wife with one establishment—the husband with another! It sounded like something out of a novel.

“But, James, I thought you——”

Mr. Crewe made a little gesture. “I cannot do my work in town—the kind I propose to do now—because it will be very different from my past output. I need solitude in which to arrange my thoughts. Just to think,” here he leaned forward, speaking very earnestly, “that my opportunity has come to be numbered amongst the elect.”

Joan was immensely intrigued. Queer that he should have done the sort of thing she contemplated herself after a fling.

“What are you going to write, Dad?”

He waved a small hand. “A classic-something that will live after me and be included in standard libraries.” His gentle eyes became moist at the prospect.

“Aren’t we going to see you till it’s done, James?” put in his wife.

“On the contrary, I hope you will drive down often to see me, especially for week-ends. I can put you all up. You see, I never had your—well—your social instinct. I like people, I think, but I like things and thoughts rather better,

so when I am with others—especially women—I'm often at a loss. So my being out of London will not upset you.”

It was all quite true, and she knew it. He had shown signs of unrest for a month, then took his car—which he drove oblivious of all other traffic—and, alone, scoured about the southern counties till he found what he wanted. When he found he bought, not questioning the price.

Now, standing on the verge of this new, real life, he got his family in a different perspective. They were destined to travel their road, he his own. But he did not want to lose them. He actually did fear society because he was abnormally modest, but by himself and in his new surroundings he reckoned that he could develop a novel side of himself. Why else should one have the promptings and soaring ambition that stirred so restlessly in his heart?

“Can you put us all up, James?”

“Yes, my dear, easily; if you will be contented with the simple life.”

That conversation had taken place weeks previously, and now Mr. Crewe was installed. It was odd not to have him in Sussex Place, but Mrs. Crewe got more used to it every day, and life afforded many distractions. This morning, however, after reading the social column, it seemed that there was a long way still to go. She was steeped in reflection when Joan came in, perfectly shingled and looking very fresh and young.

“Morning, mother. See the paper?”

“Yes, we're not mentioned.”

“I suppose we shouldn't expect it for a subscription dance.”

“I don't see why not. You looked awfully well, dear, and I wouldn't have left early if I hadn't been tired. Was Mr. Courtney nice?”

“He's all right,” said Joan indifferently.

“Has he known Humphrey long?”

“Not very—and he didn't introduce any other men. I say, mother.”

“Yes?”

“We're in wrong; I mean we're not in at all.”

Mrs. Crewe murmured something inaudible.

Joan indicated the paper. “Take those names—they're of people who've either done something worth while, or know everybody, or are of good families. They're in it. We come into some money, and that's as far as we've got. There's only one thing to do.”

“Well, child?”

“Buy friends. You've got to engage someone to launch us. It's a waste of time and money till we do.”

“I was thinking of the very same thing. There's a place in South Molton Street where——”

Joan shook her head, picked up “The Times,” and read:

“Peer’s daughter, aged twenty-four, seeks position as social secretary and personal companion. Unquestionable references given and required. Box 19991.”

“That’s the sort of thing—you mentioned it yourself two months ago.”

“I wonder who that is,” said her mother vaguely.

“No one we know; I never met a peer’s daughter.”

“How much does one offer in such a case?”

Joan shrugged her shoulders. “Probably less than you imagine. That advertisement means that some girl is very hard up.”

“Did you speak to Humphrey about it?”

“No, it isn’t his affair.”

Mrs. Crewe reflected that if Humphrey fell in love with a peer’s daughter and married her it would solve everything. Perhaps that was what the P.D. was looking for.

“You might as well write,” she hazarded.

“I’ll ask her to call here, and we can have a look at each other.”

Joan went off, and Mrs. Crewe began to dress. She was really very lonely. As a trial trip she had subscribed to various charities, on the committees of which were well-known names, in the hope of being asked to serve herself. All she got was a series of letters beginning, “The Board directs me to express its grateful thanks for——” So that took her nowhere. Subscription dances—well—Humphrey went to one or two, then, being very busy himself and hard at work with Cassidy on most evenings, he introduced young Courtney—whose ticket was always bought for him. Courtney danced well, as he was expected to, but Joan found him getting rather too attentive. And he didn’t know many people either. Then there were concerts and theatres, with the big car—Mrs. Crewe’s own car—always in attendance, but that didn’t advance matters. They had the Morgans to dinner several times—old friends who lived near Acacia Villa—but the Morgans were too overwhelmed with servants and seven courses to dare to reciprocate. So what with one thing and another, with James buried in the country, with shopping losing its thrill, with the empty luxury of the big house, with what Mrs. Crewe took to be the condescending manner of the butler, life seemed to have become a sort of golden desert surrounded by a mirage of desirable people who evaporated every time she tried to approach.

Three days later, at tea time, the butler announced: “The Honourable Angela Veering, madam,” in a voice that carried rather a new tone.

Mrs. Crewe had just time to exchange a swift glance with Joan when a girl came in, tall, very fair, in a perfectly cut black tailor-made. Mrs. Crewe had an instant of uncertainty whether one should use “The Honourable” in speech or not, then held out her hand. The girl smiled at them both, accepted tea, and

looked up with the frankest possible expression. Joan, who was studying her very hard, liked her at once. There ensued a little silence, slightly strained.

“You came about the—er—advertisement,” began Mrs. Crewe, conscious that this was the first time she had spoken to the nobility.

The visitor nodded and smiled again. “Yes, and I suppose we’ve each been wondering what the other would be like. I know I have.”

Mrs. Crewe felt more at home. “We have too. You see,” she went on, making up her mind to be as frank as the situation permitted, “my time is very much taken up and my daughter doesn’t know many people in London. So it’s rather lonely for her, and we thought from what you said that—well—it might be just the thing.”

Miss Veering seemed to understand perfectly, and Mrs. Crewe went on with gathering assurance.

“My husband is an author and lives in the country, where he has taken a place, and my son is a financial man and very occupied.”

“Thanks so much for telling me.” It would have surprised Mrs. Crewe to know that what interested the visitor most was the fact that Mr. Crewe was an author. “About myself; my father—he was Lord Veering—died last year, and things were left in such a mess that now I’ve got to do something. So here I am.”

“Of course you know London very well?” said Joan.

“One does—which is just the trouble and makes life too expensive.”

Mrs. Crewe felt a glow of satisfaction. “One does—too expensive.” Matters began to look extremely promising.

“Everything is very costly nowadays,” she murmured in a tone suggesting that she did not care in the least. “Had you thought of the—ah—salary you would ask?”

Miss Veering nodded. “I’ve thought a lot about it—that is if I find I can do just what you want done.” She hesitated a moment, then, very much liking the look in Joan’s face, decided not to be influenced by the evidences of sudden wealth all around her. Also she was thankful at not finding the purse-proud family she had dreaded. “I thought of two hundred and fifty pounds a year, found, if that was all right; and since you’ll want to know about me personally, you might write to some of my friends.” She mentioned a few names, most of which Mrs. Crewe remembered from the social columns. “You’d entertain, I suppose?”

Mrs. Crewe, trying to keep all eagerness out of her voice, assured her of this, also that the salary mentioned was quite reasonable, after which Joan joined in and the talk became general. Then Joan, with no further thought of references, took Miss Veering upstairs to see her proposed room. Once there she gave a little laugh, and spoke without any formality whatever.

“You see,” she said, looking the other girl straight in the face, “we’ve got money, but not much else. Father came into it—a lot of it—two months ago; and though you’ll think me an idiot, neither mother nor I know just what to do with it. Father is not interested in money, and has gone into the country to write a classic. Humphrey is going to be a financial man, and I believe he’ll make more money. There are a lot of things we want, but we don’t know the best way of getting them. That is why we answered your advertisement. I—I thought I’d better tell you this as soon as we were alone—I couldn’t expect mother to say it.”

“May I smoke?” queried Miss Veering.

“Of course.”

The visitor lit a cigarette and paused for a moment. She looked very thoughtful, and distinctly handsome with her delicate nose, small ears, faintly pencilled brows, and rather large mouth. Her eyes were grey, very frank, and expressive. To Joan she seemed to have lost a touch of coldness that characterised her at first.

“I’m awfully glad you said that, because it lets me know just where I stand if you really want me. We seem to fit, don’t we, for though I’ve only two hundred a year of my own I’ve heaps of friends. We had a house in London as well as Veering Hall before the smash came. I’ll tell you about that some day. But if your mother agrees, I don’t think we should decide on more than a six month engagement to begin with. If that’s all right we can carry on. I say, do you mind if I ask a beastly personal question?”

“No—what is it?”

“Are you engaged?”

Joan laughed. “I awfully nearly was, but kept out of it, thank Heaven.”

Miss Veering looked relieved. “I’m glad, and it makes everything much more simple. I was too, but—well—perhaps I’ll tell you some day.”

Almost at once on her arrival in Sussex Place Angela discovered that Mrs. Crewe hoped for a good deal more than she was able to provide. So far as concerned Joan, the same difficulty did not exist. It was one thing to introduce a girl of nearly one’s own age to one’s friends, but quite another to launch a middle-aged woman in the uncharted seas of London society. The thing weighed on her mind, and she decided to put it straight to Joan.

“I don’t see what I’m to do,” she said, “and before it goes any further I ought to tell you. It’s easy enough about you, because we can do things together. That dance to-night, for instance. I’ve got two men, you’ve got the car, and that’s all we need. But where does your mother come in?”

Joan, sitting on a table, swung her slim legs. “She is rather left out: but what do you mean by ‘before it goes any further?’”

“That perhaps, after all, it might be better for you to pay a fee to be

introduced—it's often done—quite a big fee. They ask you to their house—to stay, of course, for the season—and your mother could go too. On the face of it, you're old friends of the family—though everyone knows you're not. Then that person, whoever it is, entertains—and you're it. Lady Pendringham got a thousand pounds and all exes for bringing out a girl last year; and, of course, she needed the money very much. Had you thought of this? I hope it doesn't sound as though I don't like my job, but I felt I ought to tell you. You see, I'd look like a fool going round to people twice my age and saying, 'Please be nice to Mrs. Crewe who is paying me two hundred and fifty a year.' ”

It seemed to Joan that her mother's position in this undertaking was rather pathetic, and it was the daughter's turn to feel a sense of responsibility. Her own way was clear enough, but what was one to do with one's mother? Angela was secretly amused, and reflected that since these were the days of youth and not middle age it was up to middle age to look after itself. Queer to think of people being so anxious to get into society when it meant so little to those already there.

“I think your mother is doing the best thing now,” she hazarded.

“Subscribing to those charities?”

“Yes, and that's the same old game very often. They get a marchioness or someone as patron because she's a drawing card. The marchioness has her eyes open too. I think if your mother is just patient and keeps up her subscriptions the thing will work. And, after all, it's a good cause.”

Joan laughed. “You ought to hear Humphrey on mother and me.”

Angela, feeling that the ice was rather thin, said nothing. Humphrey was to be at Sussex Place for dinner that night for the first time since she arrived, and she had given him more than a passing thought. Her experience had been that where both men and money were involved, the men were much the same. If they had it they overvalued themselves—if they wanted it they were unscrupulous. The effect, so far as Humphrey was concerned, was to make her feel rather stiff.

The feeling lasted through dinner, though there was nothing about Humphrey to object to. She quite liked his eyes, though she knew that she was being studied with a shrewdness much keener than she encountered on her first visit to the Crewe's new house. It made her a little self-conscious. She noticed that Humphrey joked about the days in Acacia Villa, and that the jokes were not very welcome. But he seemed in earnest about life.

Had she known it, he found himself rather in earnest about her too. He was not impressionable, but remembered things about people, their gestures and mannerisms, and was rather susceptible to their atmosphere. As a result of his study of Angela he decided that someone or something had wounded her deeply. He was thinking about this, and watching the graceful way in which

she used her hands, when Joan asked if he would not come to the dance with them.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to meet Cassidy later. We’re going to be partners,” he added, with a glance at Angela.

“Do financial men work all night?”

“I’m not one yet,” he laughed, “and you have your men, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but I can easily find another girl.”

Mrs. Crewe was quite puzzled. Apparently young people went to people’s houses and brought whom they liked—uninvited.

“No thanks,” said Humphrey, “I can’t to-night.”

He had hoped she would say that she would dance with him and tell one of the men not to come. But there was no suggestion of this. It seemed that her face was definitely cold, though quite lovely. She wore black that night, and it made her skin like alabaster.

“When is the partnership coming off?” asked his mother.

“Next month: we got the office to-day.”

Mrs. Crewe looked quite proud, and from that her imagination moved on, bracketing Angela with Humphrey. “Mr. and the Hon. Mrs. Humphrey Crewe!” How well they’d go together.

“He’s so busy now that I see very little of him,” she remarked plaintively. “And when he takes up company promoting it will be worse than ever.”

“My father did that, and we lost everything,” said Angela in a strained tone.

Mrs. Crewe was quite shocked. “My dear, I’m so sorry.” She had a vague feeling that subjects like this were not ventilated at dinner.

“It was called the Colonial and Foreign Land Company,” went on the girl. “Did you ever hear of it?”

Humphrey shook his head and tucked away the name in a retentive memory.

“So be careful of foreign land.” Then, with a sudden wistfulness, “I wish you could have seen Veering Hall: it’s so lovely. Some people called Burdock bought it—Manchester people—I don’t know them. They got furniture and everything.”

Humphrey wanted to explain that he had no intention of speculating, but said nothing because now he saw what had hurt the girl. He compared her as she must have been in her father’s house to a social secretary at two hundred and fifty pounds a year.

He saw the two girls into the car, and went off, still thinking about Angela, very much attracted in spite of her distant manner, and in no way impressed by the fact that she was at home in those spheres to which his mother and sister so ardently aspired. His own ambitions ran in other directions. When he met

Cassidy he told him about the new arrival in Sussex Place and asked about the Land Company. Cassidy remembered the details perfectly.

“It was a queer thing—about two years ago—deuce of a smash, and the only smash I know of that left a good taste behind it. Lord Veering wasn’t a business man at any time, but one of those high-principled, soul-of-honour, old chaps who are best out of business. They put him into the chair on account of his title, where he was naturally the drawing card to a lot of small investors, and took other people’s word for what was being done. When the crash came the shares dropped from thirty shillings to two bob in a week. The old boy sat up, took notice, and decided that he was personally responsible. You may remember that when the printing business in which Sir Walter Scott was interested failed, he came to the same conclusion and wrote the Waverley novels to pay the creditors. Well, old Veering couldn’t do that, but, since he felt there was a stain on his name, he sold all he had, lock, stock, and barrel, and made good the losses as far as he could. He died soon afterwards, and his daughter is paying the shot to-day. The thing is still in the liquidator’s hands, I believe, but nothing more will ever come out of it except his expenses.”

“He ruined his daughter to save his own name,” said Humphrey thoughtfully.

“You can put it that way. I fancy there are others of his sort who would do the same thing. Sounds foolish to me, but perhaps it’s a sort of leaven in the national character. Veering Hall wasn’t long in the market.”

“Bought by a man called Burdock?”

“How do you know?”

“Miss Veering told me.”

Cassidy nodded. “He’s in a big way in the Midlands. Used to do business with us—good client, and I’d like to get him again for ourselves. I’ve an idea he won’t fit in very well down there. Not enough ‘county’ about him.”

Humphrey asked nothing more on that subject. Quite clear what had hurt the girl, and he wondered that she displayed no resentment. If this thing had not happened she would probably have been married by now and he would never have seen her; and if his own father had not told Ralph Simonds that advice was not wanted he would never have seen her either. How tangled were the threads of life. Then he had one of those glimpses of something wild and fantastic that only come to the eyes of youth. It was distinctly alluring, but, putting it away for the future, he suggested to Cassidy that they now go on with their study of foreign exchange. It was one of Humphrey’s strong points that he could keep his secret thoughts to himself.

Joan, who was revolving round the ballroom of the Hyde Park Hotel in the

arms of Mr. Frederick Foster and enjoying herself exceedingly, felt a little surprised when that young gentleman regarded the gathering with a cynical air and hazarded the opinion that they were wasting a perfectly good evening.

"Fed up with this," he announced. "How about you?"

"I thought it was rather nice, but perhaps I'm not blase yet."

"Ever try the Pork Pie?"

"I've tried *a* pork pie, and found it rather heavy."

"Nothing heavy about the one I mean. Are you on?"

He looked so devilish that she hesitated. "Why not ask Angela?"

"You're a sort of fledgling under her wing, aren't you?"

She laughed. "Am I too young to have any feathers at all?"

"Youth is a good asset nowadays, so hang on to it. There's Angela. Bobby is wondering if he's making an impression—but he isn't. I say, let's foregather a minute."

Angela steered her partner back to the wall, and Freddy unfolded himself. "This is a bit sticky, so Bobby and I would like to show you life as they lead it in Soho. We click, don't we, Bobby?"

Mr. Robert Blackwood, a languid youth to whom the byways of Soho were as a well-lighted highway, signified his agreement.

"Respectability is the curse of modern existence. Let us go hence."

In the big car they glided up Shaftesbury Avenue against the packed stream from emptying theatres. Joan, leaning back, looked out on this hour of London's night with a sense of bliss. Men with girls in brilliant opera cloaks—silk hats in a vista—other cars, large and shining, with impeccable chauffeurs of lordly manner—the maze of lights—the imperturbable policemen—the polite scrimmage for taxis—the look in the girls' eyes—the gaiety—the assurance—the resolve for enjoyment—all these came to her in a rising flood, deepened by the knowledge that it was for her to take as much of them as she wanted.

"More promising than Knightsbridge, what!" said Freddy, who missed nothing of it. "There's Clive Oakley with that Durnford woman. She ought to be clubbed. See him, Angela?"

"Yes."

Something in the voice made Joan look out quickly. She saw a tall boy, very fair, with a long jaw, yellow moustache, and very blue eyes: with him a woman, also tall, hatless, her shingled hair a blue-black, wearing a black cloak through which gleamed a frock of vivid red. They were lost in a surge of the crowd.

"Heading Pork-Piewards, I'll bet," murmured Bobby. "There, little Joan, is a striking example of the predatory woman who is old enough to know better. Got a son my own age—a complaisant husband who makes twenty thousand a

year and only wishes to be let alone—and the figure of a debutanting vamp. Result—the Durnford spends her life on the warpath devastating peaceful homes where there are too many latchkeys, and scalping innocent youths like—well—Clive isn't exactly innocent—but like Freddy and me. You see her at everything—in fact you see far too much of her. Yes, she certainly ought to be clubbed.” He frowned judicially, then grinned at Blackwood. “I take it that my learned friend agrees with me?”

“The court is of your opinion, Robert, and I smell pork. Ladies, we are arrived; and if that old villain Coutour hasn't a corner table I'll brain him.”

The Pork Pie was under a theatre. One descended. One's wraps were seized and disappeared automatically. One entered a sort of subterranean pavilion surrounded by a balcony where one could imbibe nourishment, mostly liquid, if one did not happen to be attired in evening clothes. This was the outer inferno. The main floor was surrounded with the usual small tables. The glass was crystal, the china almost porcelain, and the service was the kind that whisks out a fresh damask napkin if one's own happens to slip to the spotless floor. At the far end was a slightly raised platform, where were seated five negroes, their expansive white-shirted bosoms inflated with their own importance, emissaries whose parents inhabited the banks of the Congo, and who now condescended to contribute their primordial strain to heighten the enjoyments of London nights. Their eyes rolled. Their teeth shone in anticipation. The brass of their formidable instruments had been polished till it glittered like gold.

Came a strident bray from a saxophone, a shriek from a tuba, and the negroes began to sway in primitive ecstasy. Their souls were transported back to the banks of the Congo. It seemed that a good many other souls went with them, for the place was instantly in motion. Bobby got up with a galvanic jerk and whirled Joan away. She had often heard jazz before, but none like this—which seemed to pick her feet from the floor and divest her body of weight. Her eyes sparkled. Bobby held her a good deal tighter than she had ever been held before, but perhaps that was necessary. Anyway, she rather liked it. Then she found herself close to Mrs. Durnford and Oakley.

The scarlet frock was cut lower than anything Joan had ever seen. Her eyes were violet, half-closed, and holding a sort of langour that was faintly insolent. The carmine lips exactly matched her frock and there was a dusky warmth in the blue-black hair, where a jewelled circlet added a touch of flame-like colour. Her body was lissom as a girl's, her skin a marble-white, her brows the thinnest dark line imaginable. She nodded to Bobby, took a hard look at Joan, and said something under her breath to Oakley. Then his eyes met Joan's and fascinated her.

The impression lasted, being in an odd way a part of everything else here.

The music grew wilder, developing into a rude cacophony through which marched the same irresistible beat of time. It was registered in the expressions of those around. Joan saw elderly men assume an infantile glee and cut capers that would have astonished their grandchildren—and themselves some twelve hours later. Angela took it all rather calmly, and presently gave Joan a quizzical look. Blackwood and Foster were deep in an argument about a girl on the other side of the room.

“You’re doing rather well, you know. Two conquests in a night.”

Joan shook her head. “Fairy tales.”

“No, really, and Bobby is one. He’s quite a dear, works very hard and only takes an occasional fling like this. Don’t judge him by his conversation. That is only camouflage for what’s inside.”

“And the other?”

“Clive Oakley is pretending to talk to the Durnford, but has been watching you for the last half-hour. There—he’s just got rid of her. Prepare to receive cavalry!”

Joan saw him steering toward them. “It’s you,” she said.

“I happen to know it isn’t.” Angela’s voice was cool, but the smile did not leave her lips. Oakley came up, and she gave him a half-nod.

“Laying up trouble for the morrow, aren’t you, Clive?” It sounded a little mocking.

He glanced over his shoulder. “That’s all right for half an hour. May I please be introduced?”

“Joan, this is Clive Oakley—and be careful.”

He laughed at them both. “A stab in the back to begin with. Will you dance—please do?”

Joan nodded, and they drifted off. Instantly she knew that never before had she had a partner like this. He was motion—grace—strength—ease—all in one. She yielded to it with delight, and was at once aware that she had never danced so well.

“Jove!” he whispered, his lips close to her hair. “I believe we were meant to dance together. Where did you get it?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed, “but it’s just right. Don’t stop.”

“Perish the thought.” His arm tightened round her, and she knew that his lips were very near. She had seen girls kissed already that evening. They had only laughed, and seemed to think nothing of it. Perhaps it was part of her education. Then his mouth just brushed her cheek.

“You’re a wonder—let’s have a lot of this.”

She tried to be vexed, and failed completely. It seemed that she too must appear not to notice a touch that probably meant nothing. How blue his eyes were. She got a vision of herself three months ago—and Stephen—and Acacia

Villa—and, contrasting it with to-night, laughed outright.

“I say, does the idea seem so absurd?”

“I wasn’t laughing at a polite invitation.”

“Then tell me.”

“Not yet—I don’t know you well enough.”

“Some day soon?”

“Perhaps.”

“When?”

“That depends.”

“Angela’s with you, isn’t she?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Heard it last week. When can I see you again?”

“Come to tea with us to-morrow.”

“I hate tea, and it’s you I want to see. You come with me.”

She was still in his arms, revolving slowly to a diminishing air, and thought as she looked up into his face that never had she liked a man so much at first sight. His cheeks were rather thin, he was not less than six feet and the electric lights lit small golden fires in his tawny hair. She put his age at twenty-five, and wondered how he bridged the gap between that and Mrs. Durnford’s forty. Then she frowned a little.

“I think you’re far too interested elsewhere really to want me to come to tea,” she said daringly.

He put back his head and laughed. “Ah, the Durnford! I suppose Freddy put you up to that?”

“I have eyes of my own.”

“Nice eyes, too,” he assured her. “Never saw a better pair—but they misled you this time. I’ve never asked her to tea or anything else in my life. She wanted to play about to-night, so asked me.”

“She’s rather a lovely person,” said Joan dubiously.

“H’m—yes—I suppose she’d be called that. Now will you come to tea?”

“Where?”

“Rumpelmayers—to-morrow—four-thirty—perfectly respectable—like myself.”

“I don’t know—perhaps—yes, I might.”

“Noble and trusting child, your confidence is not misplaced. Now I see Freddy making unmistakable signs of anger.” He guided her to the others. “Freddy, don’t look so murderous. Dance, Angela?”

“No, thanks.”

“Clear out, Clive,” put in Freddy, “and go back to your siren. I propose to unfold your past history to this select group in which you have no place. Didn’t know you were so fond of red. Run along.”

Oakley laughed, waved a hand, and went off. Talk proceeded, and Joan found herself more and more intrigued. This was to her a new type of youth that discussed everything with utter freedom and no reservations whatever. It sounded cynical at times, but was certainly amusing. They touched on subjects which, in the region of Acacia Villa, girls might sometimes speak of to their mothers—but then only occasionally—shooting off at tangents to plays, actors, actresses, the latest books, Chelsea studios and the like. Joan felt rather out of it, and quite uneducated, when the mention of Chelsea prompted her to join in.

“That’s what I want—a studio.”

“In which case the child will undoubtedly have it,” murmured Bobby. Then, regarding her with a bright and curious eye, “You one of the arty lot?”

“I want to paint,” she said.

“H’m—hope springs eternal in the feminine breast. *Do* you really and actually paint or merely swing a gleeful brush?”

“A little. I believe I could if I had a studio of my own. It’s the”—she hesitated a little—“the atmosphere one has to get first.”

Bobby nodded. “Good sound word that—atmosphere. I was down in Church Street last week, and the place was crawling with it. Divans all round the room piled with Chelsea soul-mates. The girls looked underfed, and as if they’d shingled each other—that wild, arty effect, you know. More soul-mates on the floor—everyone smoking gaspers—things they called pictures strewn about—lot of chatter on ‘motifs,’ whatever they are. I don’t imagine you could sell the pictures to a shooting gallery, but everyone seemed happy.”

Joan laughed. “That’s not quite what I want. Aren’t you interested in art?”

Mr. Robert Blackwood shook his sleek head. “Know what attracts me?”

“No.”

“Electric vacuum cleaners—their insides are simply fascinating and fascinatingly simple. I’m in the business, and am better posted on them than half the long-haired Chelsea tribe are on art. I can sell ’em too; and that’s more than you can do with most pictures.” He gave a little laugh. “Like to know what you were thinking a few minutes ago?”

She made a face at him. “You can’t tell me.”

“Bet you a dinner two weeks from to-day for all of us. I can’t afford it before then.”

“Taken.”

“Well,” he said, with a sort of mock gravity, “you were thinking of Freddy and me as decadent persons who whiled away their youth in festive scenes like this without any serious mission in life. Freddy, as it happens, is in the accounting department of a big shop in spite of the fact that he’s suspected of having fairly blue blood. Now, be honest.”

“It’s my dinner,” admitted Joan, turning pink.

Angela was rather quiet on the way back, while Joan was thinking too hard to want to talk. When they said good night, Angela gave the younger girl an odd look as though about to speak, then went off with the word unsaid. Perhaps she decided that it was part of Joan's education to discover certain things for herself. After a restless night in which Joan dreamed that she was buying vacuum cleaners from a tall fair youth with very blue eyes, she woke to find her mother in her room. Mrs. Crewe's expression was more contented than for some time past.

"Was it a nice evening, dear?"

"Yes, awfully jolly. What did you do?"

"I wrote some letters and telephoned to your father."

"How is he?"

"Well—apparently very happy and busy on his book—the book."

"How's he getting on?"

"He hasn't actually started yet—says there's more preliminary work than he expected, but the atmosphere of the place is just right."

Joan smiled a little. "What are you going to do to-day?"

"I had a note last night from Lady Rockwood—Angela's aunt—asking us all to lunch with her informally." Mrs. Crewe tried to be casual, but did not quite succeed.

"On one of those committees, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if Angela arranged it."

"Perhaps—it would be quite natural if she did. Have you anything special to-day?"

"I won't be at home for tea."

Mrs. Crewe felt curious, but perhaps she should not ask too much of a daughter as financially independent as herself.

"Oh, by the by, Stephen called up soon after you went out."

Stephen seemed to belong to a vanished period, and Joan was only faintly interested. "What did he want?"

"Asked if you were at home. I told him you'd gone to a dance, but thought you'd be in this afternoon. Shouldn't you let him know?"

Joan, for some unexplained reason, funk'd that. Stephen had really no place in the new setting of life. It had been a near thing. She was rather amused now by the fact that she had once let him make love to her. He suggested a sort of crude strength, the kind that to-day made no appeal to her imagination, therefore she was not sorry for him. And he understood so little about the things that touched her most nearly.

"Don't you think that if I just let him come, and left a message that I was sorry I couldn't be at home, and not say anything about his coming again, it

would—well—finish it?”

Mrs. Crewe did not answer at once. In the back of her head she liked Stephen. So did her husband. So did Humphrey. But Joan's present prospects, she considered, discounted Stephen—and he might have seen that for himself.

“Well, my dear, it's one of those things you'll have to settle now without me, and there may be a good many others in the future. I certainly don't want you to throw yourself away.”

Curious how circumstances alter cases. If three months ago Joan had married Stephen, there would have been no suggestion of throwing herself away. And Stephen had not changed one whit since then. Also it began to seem that in this new phase of existence love was not so necessary to a successful marriage. Attraction—yes; position—certainly; good tone—absolutely essential; the right circle—of course; but the old-fashioned, everyday, and perhaps stick-in-the-mud or stick-in-Acacia-Villa kind of love—well—that hardly suited a girl like her Joan with ten thousand a year.

CHAPTER IV

JOAN IN LOVE

LADY ROCKWOOD'S luncheon was the most informal thing Mrs. Crewe had attended since she became rich. The house was a small one in Walpole Street, furnished with antiques which the visitor knew enough about to admire but not to discuss, and their owner was the most interesting antique of all. She was very tall, had white hair, an animated sallow face very pointed as to the chin, and wore a quantity of old paste. She pecked at Angela's cheeks, greeted Mrs. Crewe in a voice so dry that it seemed almost brittle, and took a long frank stare at Joan.

"So this is your charge, Angela?"

"Yes, aunt." Angela was unusually subdued.

"H'm—there shouldn't be much trouble. You've got a good skin, child."

Joan was uncertain whether to say thank you or not, and the old woman went on with the assurance of those who have lived to an age that is past the possibility of contradiction.

"Quite a business, isn't it? But of course you can afford it. So differently done in my time. Now we'd better go into lunch or the food will be frozen. I'd like to have had central heat in this house before I die, but can't afford it." She turned to Mrs. Crewe. "Angela's been telling me about things—Sussex Place, isn't it?"

Mrs. Crewe nodded. She had been duly impressed by the occasional murmur of "m'lady" from the two maids who waited on them, and was not quite sure how often she ought to say "Lady Rockwood" herself. Angela only said "aunt"—which did not help at all. Then, stealing a glance at the shrewd old face, and noting the lines of humour around the eyes and mouth that must once have been very compelling, she had a flash of intuition, put away the little private rehearsal she had given herself that morning, and decided to be perfectly natural.

"Yes, we took it about two months ago."

"You lived in London before that?"

"Out Ealing way, till my husband came into the money."

Joan looked up quickly, but Ealing seemed to mean nothing to Lady Rockwood.

"I gather from Angela that it was quite unexpected."

"Yes," said Mrs. Crewe candidly, "it came from a connection whose advice my husband declined only a few weeks previously. He writes books—I mean

my husband.”

“Interestin’, very. Poor old Rockwood never took advice either, but that’s why I’ve no money at all. As for books—he never even read ’em. By the way, I see you sent fifty guineas to the Home for Blind Dogs. I’m on the Committee. Got a dog yourself?”

“No,” said Mrs. Crewe with great courage, “not yet.”

“You’re very wise. I hate ’em personally, but one must do something. What kind of books does your husband write?”

“He’s done a good many serials for various papers, and is now on something more ambitious. That’s why he’s down in the country.”

“Bring him here next time you come—I’ve never met a live author. Angela, what are you arranging for this child?”

Angela explained while the old lady listened critically.

“H’m, all right as far as it goes, but not far enough. The Fitz-Edwards want to sell their box in Albert Hall—they have to, poor dears, so why not buy that? There’s nothing people like better than to have that sort of thing offered ’em when you don’t want it yourself.”

“We’d be very glad to,” put in Mrs. Crewe earnestly, “and thanks so much for suggesting it.”

“And men, Angela; what are you doing about men?”

Angela explained again, but this time Lady Rockwood shook her white head.

“I don’t agree. Of course this isn’t my affair, but you’ve overlooked the most likely one of all. That’s young Fossiter. It’s an old title,” she turned to Mrs. Crewe, “the Bedfordshire Fossiters, you know, and the boy succeeded two years ago. He simply has to marry money. It’s a sweet place, and the park is a mile square—but I know that repairs are needed. I remember going to a dance there fifty years ago and the carriage breaking down in the middle of it—I mean the park.”

Joan listened. It was rather amusing to hear her own future discussed like this, otherwise she would have resented it. Supposing she didn’t like Lord Fossiter? They all seemed—at any rate her mother and Lady Rockwood—to be moving her about like a pawn as the game might require. Then, to her own amazement, she said:

“Perhaps I wouldn’t care for Lord Fossiter.”

Mrs. Crewe looked startled, and the old lady a little amused.

“H’m—it’s my idea that’s not so important to begin with. People—especially the young ones—are so independent nowadays. I used to feel that way about Rockwood at first, but I soon got used to him. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” said Joan.

“A most difficult age. You’ll enjoy life much more when you’re forty.

You'd really like that box, Mrs. Crewe? You can see right into the Royal one, if that interests you."

"Yes, indeed." Mrs. Crewe already had dreams and visions.

"Then I'll call up Bertha at once."

She went into the next room, and they could faintly hear her at the telephone. Angela gave a little laugh.

"There's business for you—she'll get a good commission."

"Eh!" gasped Mrs. Crewe.

"Of course: that's why she wanted you to take it. There's a commission on everything of that kind now."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"It's the only way some people have of picking up a little money," said Angela calmly. "She won't make any bones about it."

Lady Rockwood came back looking rather triumphant. "That's all arranged, and you can get it in time for the Kreisler concert next week."

"Thanks so much," said Mrs. Crewe in a tone not overthankful.

"Not at all. It doesn't cost you any more than the usual price, while I get a little out of it. Any time you don't want it I can suggest where it will be most appreciated."

Mrs. Crewe wondered how much she had been let in for, but did not like to ask, and they left after another half-hour, during which the old lady unfolded her views with surprising candour. She knew everyone she thought worth knowing and had no illusions whatever. Mrs. Crewe, who was thinking very hard, began to be persuaded that perhaps social position did not mean as much as she had imagined, because it seemed to depend on wit and intellect and birth and not the heart. Was it at times rather an empty affair?

"Bring your husband," said her hostess at parting.

Mrs. Crewe promised—if she could lure him out of his panelled study, but the picture of these two together was almost too much for her, and they drove off conscious that the old lady was watching the big car from the drawing-room window. What would she say about them to her next visitor? Joan stopped the car at the Piccadilly end of Knightsbridge.

"I'm going for a walk—I want to do some thinking."

Angela shot her a glance, but said nothing, and her mother, remembering that this was a habit of old, murmured acquiescence. The car shot northward at Hyde Park Corner, and Joan strolled thoughtfully along Piccadilly with a sense of liberation. It was a quarter-past four. A hundred yards from Rumpelmayer's she saw Oakley crossing the street towards her, his eyes very bright.

"What ho—you managed it!"

"I'm twenty-one," parried Joan, "why shouldn't I?"

"Why indeed? You look ripping."

“I don’t feel ripping,” she said, missing nothing of his young attractiveness.

“Anyone been saying the wrong thing?”

She nodded, and, reaching their table, she gave a hard little laugh. “How would you like to have your personal and intimate future discussed before your face?”

“Dunno—nobody interested enough in me for that. What’s the rest?”

She told him. “So the suggestion is that I marry Lord Fossiter—if it can be arranged.” Then, with growing irony, “Do you know him?”

Oakley wrinkled his lips, having no idea of her marrying anyone but himself. “Don’t know him—but of him. He’s looking for twenty thousand a year. That’s no secret. Matter of finding some girl who can afford him.” He was about to go on, then stopped, wondering if she might say something that would hint at the amount of her income.

“It isn’t a question of my affording anyone.” Her cheeks were pink now. “Sugar in your chocolate?”

“Please. Why not forget Fossiter and try and put up with me—for a while?” he added slowly.

She smiled at him. “I’ll try!”

“I say, our one and only turn made me want more. Will you dine and dance with me?”

“I’d love to, but——”

“Why but? I thought you were of age, and, anyway, one hasn’t to be of age for that. Much nicer when one isn’t.”

“It’s Angela,” she said.

“Angela your guardian?”

“N-no, but we’re supposed to do things together—and she told me she’d known you for some time.”

“That all she said?”

“Yes—why?”

He laughed a little. “Oh—nothing.”

Joan was suddenly convinced it was not nothing. There had been something in Angela’s manner with regard to Oakley, and his expression gave a similar hint. She had never been jealous of anyone in her life, but at this moment felt the first stirrings of that most uncomfortable spirit.

“I think,” she said stiffly, “that if we’re going to be good friends we ought to—to——”

He put his hand on hers for a second and his blue eyes looked very honest. “Right—I agree—and I want to be friends more than you’d like me to say yet. I’ve known Angela for three years. We thought we were fond of each other—then decided we weren’t. I found that she was cold—can’t put it in any other

words—and coldness in other people chills me. I want response. There’s so much to do and enjoy when one is young, and we’re only young for a while. So between me and Angela it didn’t come to anything—and that’s all.”

Joan felt unreasonably happy. “But that’s nothing. I’m so glad you told me, and I do think she’s a little cold, but doesn’t mean to be, and she’s frightfully honest. I don’t seem to know her as well as I do you already.”

He sent her a long steady look. It held a sort of challenge, the provocative signal that youth sends to youth—the demand to know whether there moves in another the same daring and hunger—the same enthusiasm—the same capacity for enjoyment that one feels oneself. That is the first question of youth. Later on one seeks for qualities—which are different and cooler things.

Joan flushed. Stephen had never looked at her like this. His expression was more masterful, more—well—appropriating, with not so much of the invitation about it, more of a demand for surrender. It didn’t suggest that they should do things together, but rather that she needed a protector like himself. Of late the idea of a protector seemed rather ridiculous.

“I was nearly engaged once,” she said musingly.

Had Oakley not been a very astute young man, he would have hinted that now was the time, but he only grinned approvingly.

“How moderate. Glad you kept out of it?”

“Awfully.” Her cheeks were pinker than ever. She had been studying him, his look of breeding, the delicacy of his skin, the restless and rather satirical humour of his mouth, the grace of his lean figure, and it struck her that a man built like this would wear well and retain his physical charm and never get fat and heavy. It all made her feel as though she were on the edge of something.

“Yes, I’m glad now.” She avoided the blue eyes.

He gave her a cigarette and lit one for himself. “You see,” he went on, as though putting the end of a thought into words, “when I telephone you I don’t want Angela to answer. You’ll understand why. So can that be avoided?”

“It can’t.” She frowned a little, then sent him a daring glance. “But it could be if I were to telephone you.”

“You darling!” The voice was low but very distinct. He gave her his number. “If I’m not there it will be my man Bethune. I wouldn’t give him your name—better say Miss—Miss——”

“Miss Nemo?”

He chuckled. “Right—but you’re far from being that. Tell me the best time for meeting you—and try for that evening off as soon as you can. You will, won’t you?”

She promised rather tremulously. This thing was beginning to take hold of her senses, and there was something intoxicating in the air. Oakley was leaning toward her, so that their shoulders touched, and though she pretended not to

notice this it made her breathless. Then she felt a little frightened and wanted to get away and see herself in this new light. Oakley did not protest, but, putting her in a taxi, stood like a demigod in salute till she moved away. She peeped back out of the rear window. He was still standing there.

At Sussex Place, Humphrey, who had turned up early, found Angela in the drawing-room and felt oddly pleased that she was alone.

“Where’s Joan?” he asked.

“She’s out for tea.”

“Who is it this time?”

“She didn’t say: we dropped her on the way home after lunch.”

Humphrey smiled a little. In former days each of the Crewes had known to a dot what the other was doing or about to do.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “that single unimportant fact brings things home more than a lot of bigger ones.”

“I don’t understand.”

He explained. “Queer how one gets used to things,” he added.

Angela looked at him gravely. He seemed very honest, if to her a bit unfinished.

“Perhaps—for some people.”

He blamed himself silently. “I—I shouldn’t have said that. But what a splendid thing your father did.”

Angela’s face was almost blank. “Do you think you would consider it so splendid if you were me? I suppose I ought to, but I don’t get used to change so quickly.”

Her manner was still what he thought distant. Then he was aware that in spite of this he felt for her a strange sense of protection. But why should one have to climb over the impalpable wall that seemed to surround her? There occurred again the wild fantastic thought of the day before.

“Your people had been a long time in Veering Hall?” he ventured, guessing that her memories of the place were what she held most dear.

“My great-grandfather was the first, but it was never entailed, or my father couldn’t have sold it. There’s the village too—at the park gates. I know everyone there. Such dears they are, and”—she smiled wistfully—“far more conservative than ourselves.” She paused, sending him a straight sudden look. “Do I sound very selfish?—I do to myself.”

“No,” he said, “I’ve a dim sort of comprehension of what it all means. It couldn’t have happened to ourselves, because we Crewes never had anything except what we earned, and that wasn’t much. My grandfather was a valuator to an insurance company, and when the Simonds money came we didn’t very

well know what to do with it.” He laughed a little. “I expect you’ve seen that for yourself.”

“What do you want to do with it now?”

“Make more—a lot more.”

“Isn’t that rather ordinary?”

“Yes, perhaps,” he said soberly, “but I’ve an object.”

“I suppose one mustn’t ask?”

Humphrey shook his head. “It won’t stand analysis yet.”

They were silent for a moment: Angela in a brown study, and he wondering what had got hold of him. Something had. No doubt of it. He had rather prided himself during these last two months on his own judgment and self-control—yet here he was giving way to images that seemed very far from ever being realised. Just then Joan came in, rather amused with herself. On the way home she had realised that all thought of Mrs. Durnford had escaped her mind.

“Hullo, Joan—where’ve you been?”

“Having tea,” she said crisply.

He winked at Angela. “Full of information, isn’t she?”

Joan took off her hat, observing in the glass that her cheeks were a little flushed, and gave him a sisterly pat.

“Yes—having tea. How’s the financier? Angela, we’ve decided that he will develop into a regular Cræsus. Here for dinner, Humphrey?”

“Yes—and I want to be a Cræsus.” He looked at her curiously, seemed about to tease her, then moved toward the door. “You evidently enjoyed your tea. I’m going to dress.”

She made a face at him and, when he had gone, tortured the fire for an unnecessarily long time. “I liked those boys last night,” she said presently, “especially Bobby.”

“I thought you would—and they liked you. The London youth is a bit of a cynic nowadays,” she added.

“Do men usually leave their own partners at a place like that? I thought you always danced with the one you went with.”

Angela laughed. “You mean Clive Oakley. I fancy the Durnford gave him leave.”

“Odd he should want it—she’s perfectly lovely.”

“Perhaps not so odd, you innocent, but for her age she’s a wonder—though if you take better care of yourself than of anyone else and think only of the appearance you make it does help to stave off the inevitable.”

“But why should a boy like that dance attendance on her?”

“Do you mind?” laughed the other girl.

“Not a bit,” bluffed Joan, “only it seems absurd.”

“I can’t blame Clive—and it may be his father next week. A boy can’t always get out of it when a woman calls him up. They do, you know, lots of them.”

Joan pictured Clive and Mrs. Durnford at the telephone, and experienced a rooted antipathy for that dark-haired siren. Did she give her own name if Bethune answered, and was Clive as charming then as he had been an hour ago?

“He dances awfully well,” she hazarded.

Angela turned her face a little. “Yes, he’s the best dancer I ever knew.”

The tone was meant to be indifferent, but missed it just enough to set Joan’s brain working very fast. As between these two was the affair really ended in Angela’s heart? Was something still at work under that calm exterior? “We decided we weren’t really fond of each other,” he had said. Complications began to loom up. “Suppose,” whispered Joan to herself, “suppose she still wants him?” She pondered over this for a moment, then the blue eyes seemed to send her a signal, and she heard “you darling” very low and distinct.

“It must be awfully difficult when a woman goes on like that,” she said casually.

The offices of Cassidy and Crewe, Stockbrokers—Humphrey had insisted on that, arguing it was more euphonious than the other way on—were in Old Broad Street, and it was a week after they opened shop that Humphrey, going into his partner’s room, found him in conversation with a large round-faced visitor who seemed very sure of himself and had not what may be called the London manner.

“This is Mr. Burdock, Crewe; you’ll remember I spoke of him.”

Humphrey shook hands, seeing in Burdock the present owner of Veering Hall rather than a possible and profitable client.

“He wants us to do some business for him,” went on Cassidy. “Mr. Burdock, this is Mr. Crewe—we’ve hitched up for better or worse.”

Burdock had a big flabby palm and was dressed in opulent fashion. His watch-chain drooped across his stomach like a cable, he wore a diamond ring, and to Humphrey the man reeked of prosperity. There ensued a talk about shares in which it was evident that he knew his own mind. Presently he gave a short laugh.

“I haven’t seen you since I bought Veering Hall, eh?”

“No,” said Cassidy; “how do you like it?”

“Right enough for me, but the wife and daughter don’t cotton to it as much as they expected.”

“You bought it cheaply enough.”

“Perhaps—but,” he gave his thick lip an odd twist, “there may be things you can’t buy. Never saw the place, did you?”

“No. By the way, Crewe knows Miss Veering.”

Burdock looked thoughtful. “We never met her. I’d like to ask her down for a while, but she wouldn’t come. She knows the house—not us. Fond of the country, Mr. Crewe?”

“Yes, very, but I don’t get much of it. Going down to see my father next week: he has a place in Sussex.”

“Shooting?”

Humphrey smiled. “No, he’s a writing man.”

“Shoot yourself?”

“Whenever I get the chance, which isn’t often. I’ve only shot two or three times in my life,” he added cheerfully.

“My place is alive with pheasants.” Burdock spoke casually, but he had been studying the young man with a good deal of interest. “Why don’t you come and kill some—say this week-end? Guns there—and everything.”

It was all very abrupt, and ordinarily Humphrey would have declined. But to see Veering Hall, to inspect its new owners, to absorb as much as he could of the place, and then think of Angela in the light of this new knowledge was very alluring.

“Very kind of you,” he said. “I think I can manage it.”

“Right, send me a wire what train to meet.”

Humphrey promised, and after assuring him that Mrs. Burdock and the daughter would be delighted to see him, Burdock shifted back to bonds and shares. Humphrey’s mind went exploring. What did he mean by “there are some things you can’t buy”? The man looked utterly successful, yet not altogether contented. What were the wife and daughter like—and how did they fit in Veering Hall? After Burdock left he was about to pump Cassidy in the matter, then decided that he did not want to discuss Veering Hall with anyone but Angela. He only put one question.

“What did Burdock pay for that place?”

“I believe about fifty thousand. He bought at a time when big estates too far from town for development were very cheap. And Lord Veering had to take what he could get.”

“Thanks,” said Humphrey. “I notice that War Loan is up an eighth.”

Removed from scenes of so great interest to his family, Mr. Crewe sat at a large oaken table in his panelled study watching the rabbits hop across a wide and shaven lawn. It seemed to him of late that a good deal of his time was thus employed. There were innumerable rabbits, and he began to feel like one

himself.

In front of him lay a large manuscript book bound in flexible leather, with "James Crewe. Personal" embossed on the morocco cover. The pages were of fine linen paper, and numbered. They were also entirely blank. On one side was a sheaf of scribbled notes under various headings, fastened in a file marked "Reflections on Subject." A dozen sharp pencils were close at hand. The fire burned brightly, and save for its murmur an utter silence pervaded the study. The room was, in fact, supercharged with the atmosphere for which he had hungered during so many arduous years.

Mr. Crewe himself had changed slightly. His cheeks a bit fuller, his hands a bit plumper, his shoulders a trifle heavier—he presented the appearance of an improved edition of his former self. His eye lacked the somewhat restless and wistful light it reflected in Acacia Villa, but though he ought by all the rules of the game to look contented, his expression was not that of one completely at peace with the world. He began reading over his notes, took up a pencil, frowned, put the pencil down, then touched a bell. The door opened almost instantly.

"Mary, I'm going up to town and probably won't be back to-night."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Crewe so liked the way she said it that he often gave unnecessary orders just for sake of hearing that response, but this time let it go at that. An hour later he was darting along the lanes of Sussex at a speed indicating his belief that he had the road to himself. He arrived safely, however, at Sussex Place with only a crumpled mud-guard and quite calm. The opinions of other motorists, no matter how forcibly expressed, never disturbed him.

In the drawing-room he found a young lady with fair hair and very clear steady eyes. She looked at him and smiled.

"Isn't this Mr. Crewe?"

"And you're Miss Veering?" He knew all about her and her affairs, being completely informed by his wife the very day the arrangement was made. "Really, I'm very glad to see you. Is my wife in?"

"I'm sorry, but they're out for lunch. I don't think they expected you."

Mr. Crewe was rather intrigued, and felt a bit of a dog. "Then perhaps you'll give me some, and we can make each other's acquaintance." His eye twinkled genially.

"How very nice." She had liked him at once, as most discerning people did, because he never pretended to be anything but his very sincere self. He liked her too, finding her interesting as a type as well as a person, and wished they had met before. Very useful, he reflected, for some of the things he used to write. Then, impressed by the spaciousness of the house—he had only been in it twice before—he made her a little bow and, offering his arm, proceeded to

the dining-room.

“What a dear, courtly little man,” she thought. Then, aloud, “I was so interested to hear about your book.” She sent him a glance of genuine admiration. “For how long in the day do you write?”

Mr. Crewe nodded, very pleased. He was not actually writing, yet, but he let that go.

“It must be wonderful to sit down and see the thing grow under your hand.”

It was not actually growing either, but again Mr. Crewe side-stepped. “There is a great deal of preparatory work about it,” he said reflectively. “Up to quite lately I wrote because I had to—to live, you know; but now it’s the thing I want to write.”

“How splendid. When will it be finished?”

“Ah—too soon to say that.” He began to feel a shade uncomfortable, and had a touch of that rabbit-like feeling—of hopping about in circles without getting anywhere. “My young people well, I hope.”

“Yes, and Joan is making lots of friends. Your son seems very busy—he went off for the week-end yesterday evening.”

“I rather thought he was coming down to me. Where did he go?”

“He didn’t say, but it was to the house of a country client—quite an important one, he said.”

“Sorry not to see him. You know, my dear,” there was a very kindly note in his voice when he called her that, “I think Humphrey may go far. It was in my mind when I—er—divided up what came to me. It seemed fairer to all concerned. Don’t you agree with me—you must know all about it?”

“I think it was a wonderful thing to do.”

“No,” he said with a little smile, “not wonderful, and, now that I look back at it, certainly it was much the easiest thing for me. You see, I don’t know anything about money myself, but I welcome it because it brings my opportunity.”

“I’m sure it will be a splendid book.”

It was a splendid book, though, so far, not a line of writing was in it. This came home with satirical point. He had read about manuscripts of Dickens and Conrad and Hardy being sold for fabulous sums, and this was why he decided on the morocco-bound thing for himself. He had visions of the auctioneer at Christie’s or Hatchard’s holding it aloft and saying, “Now we come to the gem of the whole collection—original manuscript of ‘The Philosophy of Life,’ by the late James Crewe, O.M.” He didn’t mind being “late” at the picture of this.

“Do you think,” he asked, branching off, “that my experiment with Joan has been a success—I mean making her as independent as the others?”

“I think so, quite, and of course she’s likely to marry soon.”

“Anyone in view?” He blinked at her, thinking how fast the world moved nowadays. “She very nearly married an admirable young man when we were in Acacia Villa.”

“I know several who would jump at the chance,” said Angela, smiling. “My job is to be a sort of watchdog.”

“I wonder they don’t marry the watchdog,” twittered Mr. Crewe, who, unconsciously, was on his second glass of port.

She laughed. “I haven’t ten thousand a year.”

“My dear, that shouldn’t matter—with you.”

He put it so sincerely, so simply, that she felt touched. “That’s the nicest thing that’s ever been said to me.”

“I quite mean it, and when the time comes you must be married from here—if you will give us the pleasure.”

Angela drew a long breath, for there came to her a fantastic idea. And if it did not prove to be fantastic there was no reason for not accepting.

“That’s awfully kind of you.”

He rubbed his small hands. “Then that’s settled. When do you expect the others back?”

“About four.”

Mr. Crewe put his head a little on one side. “Then why shouldn’t we do something, you and I—say a theatre?”

Angela caught the spirit of it. “Splendid.”

“Then I think we’ll take my wife’s car. Mine is here, but I don’t employ a chauffeur, and while I get along fairly well in the country, I do sometimes hit things. You see, I’m apt to think about my book and forget the traffic.”

They returned three hours later, both feeling that a firm friendship had been commenced. They had never known anyone like each other before. Angela felt perfectly at home with him and said much more about herself than she perceived at the time. His honesty, his entire lack of self-consciousness, attracted her greatly. As for Mr. Crewe, he remodelled certain preconceived ideas about the stiffness of the British aristocracy.

At Sussex Place they found Mrs. Crewe and Joan. The lunch had hardly been a success, and Mrs. Crewe could not imagine that anything socially desirable would come of it. She was surprised and pleased to see her husband. Then Angela left the family together.

“You’re getting fatter, James, and how’s the book?”

“My dear, I’ve an excellent cook—I hope you’ll come and try her soon—and I’ve come up here for a rest from the book. Now tell me about everything.”

He was extraordinarily interested in them all—what they were doing—and the outcome of his experiment. Also during the past few hours he had conceived a novel idea that appealed to him very much. He thought his wife looked very young and well-groomed, while he recognised in Joan the attractive type that, when he passed it on the street, made him think of flowers and springtime. Odd what clothes could do for women.

Mrs. Crewe told him of the Albert Hall box, of Lady Rockwood and various people she had met, and things done, but he rather missed in her voice something that told of contentment. He wondered if perhaps she felt a little as he did.

“I was much struck with Miss Veering,” he said; “a very charming young lady. We lunched together here and did a theatre. She’s evidently very fond of you, Joan.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I do—and she’s very level-headed.”

Joan, who had dined and danced frequently and was very much in love with Clive Oakley, felt a shade uncomfortable. She was convinced that whatever might have taken place between himself and Angela was not quite over yet—so far as Angela was concerned. And they had had no more talk of Clive.

“I think she’s a very good sort, but rather cold,” she said.

Mr. Crewe disagreed. “No—not that—but proud—with the right kind of pride. I hope Humphrey will marry a girl like her,” he added reflectively.

“Humphrey isn’t thinking of getting married.” The idea was not at all welcome to Humphrey’s sister. “Is he, mother?”

Mrs. Crewe gave a little start. She had thought a good deal about that possibility herself, but did not imagine that it would occur to her husband. At one time she would have been very energetic and forwarded it in every way, but of late it seemed that young people were so independent about their affairs that, as things stood, she could only wait and see. If her son married the daughter of a peer and niece of a peeress, what relation would she herself be to either. None! But the connection was there. Then she stole a look at her husband and felt a throb of resentment because he seemed so less dependent on her than before. Was the possession of money going to divide them?

There was further talk about London and the new angle of life—but none whatever about family finances, which made the difference between past and present more striking than ever. Presently Mr. Crewe, whose eyes had taken on a far-away look, got up and fingered something on the mantel.

“I think I’ll be off now, Matilda.”

“James! Won’t you stay till Monday?”

“Thanks, no—but next time it will be for longer. The fact is I’ve just had

some ideas about my book and would like to work them out.”

“You can have the library to yourself—we won’t disturb you.”

He shook his head with the gentle decision they knew so well. “I’m afraid I could not work in London now. If I could be of any service to you of course I’d stay—but I can’t. Tell Humphrey I’m sorry to have missed him.”

He really did not want to go, but missed in this mansion a certain quality that spelled home and was always observable in Acacia Villa. His wife and daughter, too, looked like transients who didn’t belong here. They were surrounded by all the substantialities of life, but there lacked an element which, though unsubstantial, meant a good deal. Queer how the lack of some things, coupled with the presence of certain well-worn, commonplace, unvaluable other things, should have made a home. There came into his mind a remark someone had made about a room being best furnished by the state of mind of those in it.

He climbed thoughtfully into his car and started off with a series of fierce explosions audible through Sussex Place, while Mrs. Crewe glanced at her daughter rather uncertainly. She also was aware that something lacked. But neither of them made any reference to their husband and father.

CHAPTER V

CONCERNING ANGELA

HUMPHREY travelled down to Paxton Junction and was met by his host in an enormous car that glittered like a leviathan in the sun. Projected through country lanes with the velocity of a comet, Mr. Burdock began to talk. He had done a good deal of thinking about Humphrey since they met, and decided that here was just the type of young man he had been hoping would turn up.

“Sure you won’t find it slow here—no one but yourself?”

“Thanks, I’m sure I won’t.”

“Shoot to-morrow?”

“Excellent,” said Humphrey.

“I’m not much of a shot myself, and it cost me fifty pounds last time I pinked a beater.” Mr. Burdock’s ideas of sport were not unconnected with the cost thereof. “Eleanor will be glad of someone of her own age,” he added parenthetically.

“Your daughter?”

“Our only child. She does find it slow now and then—and says so. That’s one of the lodges—two, you know.”

They flashed past an ivy-covered cottage, got a glimpse of a red-cheeked woman curtsying, and on up a wide drive that curved through an avenue of elms very tall and ancient. The branches were bare now, but Humphrey could imagine what it would be in a few months. Then Veering Hall, a rambling pile, very spacious, with high stone-mullioned windows, a great velvety lawn, and wide flagged terrace from which one could see the far lift of the South Downs. Veering Hall was immense, but seemed to be incorporate with the green sod from which it rose.

“Good, isn’t it?” Burdock’s voice was complacent—as though this were his own work.

Humphrey nodded. It was very good—but how much better if he could have seen Angela on the terrace. The place was already eloquent of her.

“I wonder if Eleanor will keep it—that is, later. We’re giving it to her—or its equivalent.”

“Some present,” smiled the visitor, hazarding what a girl thus dowered would be like.

“Not bad, is it? I bought the whole thing as it stands, contents and all—just as the Veerings left it.” He gave a short laugh. “I don’t match my taste against

theirs.”

“Honest,” thought Humphrey, and, descending, passed through a panelled hall with groined roof in Gothic stone. Then a vast morning-room where two women were seated beside an array of tea-things in front of a log fire. This place had an atmosphere that could be felt at once, but there was only time to glance at some full-length portraits of departed Veerings when Mrs. Burdock put out her hand.

“So glad to see you; this is my daughter Eleanor.”

They were very much alike—plump, round, good-natured people, with large busts, small mouths, fair peachy skins, and the suggestion that all they wanted was brought to them at once. If the Veerings were drawn in lines, the Burdocks were better expressed in curves. Eleanor was attractive in a physical way. “Comfortable sort of girl,” thought Humphrey, “but what about her temper if she’s crossed?” Then, in a flash, he saw why Burdock had asked him down here.

They talked for a while before he went up to change, and the impression deepened. Burdock accompanied him, an obvious pride of possession written on his broad face as they mounted the wide stairs, pausing on a great balustraded landing where a stained-glass Veering looked down on them clad in steel-grey armour. There was something of Angela in the level set of his eyes. So to a big room commanding the lawn. It had an Adams fireplace and Grinling ceiling.

“This was Miss Veering’s. Hope you’ll be comfortable,” observed Burdock.

Humphrey could not forbear to smile. “Thanks—I’m sure I will.”

He went down at the sound of a gong. Mrs. Burdock seemed plastered with diamonds. Eleanor, a similar figure from a slightly smaller mould, was dressed as for the opera, her eyes very bright, her lips very carmine. Humphrey glanced at a full-length portrait of a former occupant by Peter Lely, a tall fair girl in black, with a ruby on her wrist, bare shoulders, slender throat, and repose in every line of her. Then Burdock came in, rubbing his hands, and they crossed the hall to the dining-room, where it seemed that Bond Street had emptied itself onto the table. More portraits on the wall here. Was it possible that in these painted faces lurked the least trace of irony?

“It’s a wonderful place,” said Humphrey over his soup.

“Yes”—Mrs. Burdock’s voice betrayed no satisfaction—“I suppose it is. Lots of people ask to be shown over. But perhaps I’m too old for it—or it for me. I don’t know which.”

Burdock made a gesture. “Takes time, my dear; takes time. We can’t begin where others left off.”

“The tenants here are different,” she said, turning to Humphrey. “I find

them hard to know, and that applies to the village too. We come from Manchester—where things are freer and easier.” She went on, volubly regardless of the presence of two men-servants. “Of course, we’re carrying on exactly as Lord Veering did. Nothing is changed—except us. The same lot in the same cottages, and all that, and yet”—she shrugged her plump shoulders—“there’s something about it I don’t get. I asked old Martin about it one day—and what do you think he said?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Well, mum, we just takes ’em as we finds ’em—and not another word.”

She was continuing in this strain, while the idea of a misfit became more and more sharp in Humphrey’s brain, when Eleanor broke in with a laugh.

“Mother’s off again. I like the place and wouldn’t mind living here a bit.”

Humphrey intercepted a swift glance between her parents. “I can’t imagine any more delightful place to live in,” he said.

“None of us would be here if Lord Veering’s company hadn’t lent a lot of good money on Florida swamp land,” put in Burdock. “That brought about the crash. The liquidator’s got it yet, and can’t unload.”

Humphrey tucked that away in a special compartment of his brain. “Go up to town often, Miss Burdock?”

“Quite often, but we don’t know many people there.”

“Care to dine and dance with me next time?” he asked, feeling that the situation demanded something from him.

“I’d love to. When?” she said promptly.

It rather took his breath away. “I’ll make my day suit yours.”

The atmosphere of the room seemed to ease considerably at that, and there came from Mrs. Burdock no more complaints about the conservatism of the estate tenants. It struck Humphrey that here was a case something like that of his own family, in which certain individuals were trying to buy something not in the market, and, naturally, not making much progress. Then the ladies rose, Eleanor sent him a special smile, and the door closed.

Burdock gave a little sigh that sounded almost of relief, pushed over the port and lit a big cigar.

“How’s business?”

“Very good, thanks—for a start.”

“I told Cassidy he could have all mine. I like that fellow.”

“One of the best, sir.”

“You’ll stay in it, you think?”

“Till I make my pile,” said Humphrey evenly.

“I thought you had one already.”

It was very blunt, but perfectly sincere, and therefore quite inoffensive. Humphrey laughed.

“As a matter of fact I have—but I didn’t make it myself. There’s a difference.”

“Bully for you. You like business, then?”

“Yes—it makes me think. I’d like nothing better than to do business in town and live in the country.”

“What makes women lonely?” asked Burdock with startling abruptness.

Humphrey smiled. “Dunno—I’m not an authority. I suppose—generally—the lack of their own kind.”

The big man nodded. “Their own kind—yes—I guess you’re right. You see,” he went on, with a wave of his hand, “this place is a bit of a disappointment, to speak candidly. Not the place itself, but what my wife gets out of it. In Manchester she knew everyone—here no one. County crowd sort of resents us following after the Veerings, I guess. Seems odd to be talking like this, but it hurts no one to be honest. I like you, Crewe, liked you when I saw you first, and I speak as one man to another. Those pictures—take a squint at ’em now—worth a couple of thousand each—know what they’re saying?”

“What?” Humphrey quite understood, and it made him sympathetic.

“Intruders—get out!” Burdock pushed forward his lower lip. “Shouldn’t be surprised if they talk about us when they’re alone, and seem to get a sort of whisper round the room sometimes.” He laughed. “Maybe they’re right too. Made one big mistake in life, I did.”

“Eh?” said Humphrey.

“Money can’t buy everything. I missed that—but it’s true.” He laughed again, but a little ruefully. “I’ve kind of wanted to say this because—well—I didn’t want you to see it for yourself and think I didn’t. I miss my kind too—fellows at the club who look at things the way I do.” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “Just got an idea.”

“Yes?” said Humphrey.

“Any client of yours who might care to make an offer for this place?”

Humphrey stared at him. “Is it in the market?”

“Officially, no: but between you and me, yes. It ought to fetch what I paid. That is,” he added with an odd inflection, “unless Eleanor marries and settles down here. She can afford it. Maybe I’ve talked enough. More port?”

Humphrey shook his head, and they went into the drawing-room, where Eleanor sang about the rose of yesterday in a rich throaty voice. Then bridge, after which Humphrey said good night. He wanted to think.

He sat for a long time in front of the fire, probing its ruddy heart—not alone because this was Angela’s room and the spirit of her was co-tenant with himself. Proud she was, as he wanted a woman—his woman—to be proud. Utterly loyal she would be to the man she married, and behind her calm exterior, he was convinced, moved that which, awakened to life by the touch

of love, would make life a thing of charm and beauty. But he must prove himself first.

His only thought of Eleanor was that never had he seen a girl more ready to be married and more easily to be won. Too easy! It did not appeal to the youth in him, the youth that awaited the test and struggle so welcome to every man of a stout heart and clear mind. He had no fault to find with the new owners of Veering Hall. Decent people—honest people—sound people they were, yet in spite of this a little pathetic. So much existed that for all their money they would never have. Burdock knew that already. The other two—well—that was not for Humphrey to say. “Lord knows,” he assured himself, “my own job will take all I have to put into it.”

He smiled at that, climbed into the four-poster, laid his head down and stared at the shadows that danced at the flickering finger of the fire. How much those shadows had to say, and how often must Angela have done this with her head in just the same place. It took him a long time to get to sleep that night.

Next morning he stood at the edge of a covert blazing at pheasants. The day, the air, and the distance all were grey. At his left elbow was his loader, an elderly man with quiet grey eyes. Two hundred yards off was Burdock, making surprisingly good work of it for a man who had shot so little. From the covert came a rattle of beaters’ sticks. The birds kept tobogganing down hill toward the shelter of a neighbouring wood, and the guns grew warm in Humphrey’s hands. Presently he tired of this slaughter, and lit his pipe.

“I’ve had enough,” he said.

Martin nodded. “There’s most too many of ’em, sir. Fact is, the place ain’t shot over enough. Not what it used to be.”

“No?” said Humphrey.

“Nothing like it. Four years ago you’d have seen ten gentlemen out day after day—some of the best shots in the county, too, sir. I’ve knowed six hundred brace counted when the ladies turned up for lunch.”

“Times have changed, eh? By the way, I know Miss Veering in London.”

Martin sent him a quick look. “That so, sir? Well, I’m proper glad to hear of her. Is Miss Angela well?”

“Yes,” said Humphrey, “quite well.”

“And happy, I hope, sir. That ain’t quite the same thing, is it?”

“Not exactly.” Humphrey wondered whether he should say what Angela was doing, and decided not to. “You miss her down here, don’t you? I think she’s as happy as anyone could be—under the circumstances.”

“Not married yet, sir, is she?”

“No.” Humphrey suppressed an impulse to add “thank God.”

“I reckoned not, or we’d have heard it.”

“Everything goes on here as before, I’m told?”

“Yes, sir, and—no. It goes on, and that’s all you can say for it. Mr. Burdock’s a fair man, but”—here the keeper deliberated a moment, and, seeming to find something in Humphrey’s face, made the plunge—“he don’t understand. I reckon you can’t do that right away.”

Humphrey nodded, and Martin’s eyes looked very reminiscent.

“When you get used to the people your fathers and grandfathers knew—I mean the family—you miss ’em if they go. It ain’t for me to say anything more, but if you’d be so kind as to tell Miss Angela that there isn’t a man, woman or child in the place as wouldn’t give their boots for a sight of her, I guess she’ll understand.” He sent Humphrey a quick, searching glance in which all difference of station was eliminated. “I reckon you understand, sir. There’s Miss Eleanor now, in the lunch cart. She’ll be making for Blackbird Spinny—the gentry most always eats there.”

He said nothing more, but tramped along, his brown face very thoughtful, the cartridges rattling in his big, loose pockets. “Give their boots for a sight of her,” thought Humphrey. That was what he felt himself. He was glad that Martin had, so to speak, only suggested the present state of affairs at Veering, because it left one the more free to make one’s own pictures of the past. Then he found Eleanor sitting on a log while a man-servant laid out lunch.

“Good sport?” she asked, noting with approval how well he looked in shooting rig.

“The sport was wonderful, but I’m not much of a shot.”

“I expect you’re a lot better than you say. Tell me about things in London and what day would suit you for dinner. I can come up any time.”

He talked, watching her with an eye that missed nothing. Again he felt rather compassionate. Queer to feel that about a good-looking girl with money to burn. What he missed in her was sensitiveness—and perception—and that breeding which enables one to be instinctively at home and make others feel at home under any circumstances. Perhaps she was sex-conscious. Well, he could never be fond of a girl who considered her body before her brain. He could see her being married to some man who knew a good soft thing, and, he reflected with an inward smile, it would be some wedding.

Then he seemed to see Angela sitting in the same place, the slim grace of her, the level gaze, and imaginatively shared in the little silences that would occur and are the basis of all understanding. She was of this place, Angela, one with the grey air, the misty coverts, the memorial landscape, and the many-chimneyed roof of Veering Hall just visible through the autumn haze.

“Father says you know Miss Veering.”

“I do,” said Humphrey.

“Is she in business now?”

“No, she’s acting as a secretary.”

“I never met her.” The tone was regretful. “And father and Lord Veering always communicated through an agent. There’s a picture of her upstairs by some famous man—I forget his name.”

“May I see it?” Then, casually, “I think she’d be difficult to paint.”

“It’s a lovely picture. I heard from someone that she was to be married just about the time the crash came. Is it on yet?”

Humphrey blinked. “I didn’t know anything about that.”

“I heard it here. His name was something like Blockley or Lochley, and awfully handsome. There’s father now.”

Burdock came up, a healthy glow in his cheeks, and Humphrey thought he looked better for it. “I’m hungry—how did you get on?”

“Thirty-two birds, I think, and a couple of hares.”

“Not so bad; take some up to your friends.”

“Thanks, I will.” The idea of Angela eating a pheasant from the Veering coverts was distinctly appealing. “How did you do yourself?”

“So so, but I like it. Having a crowd down from Manchester next weekend. Join us?”

“Sorry, but I’m booked,” lied Humphrey, picturing that shoot and feeling that he’d be safer at home.

“Well, as you like. Some other time soon?”

“Thanks very much.”

Burdock nodded and devoted himself to a prodigious lunch. Eleanor was rather silent, wondering how well Humphrey knew Angela Veering. Silly to be jealous of a girl she’d never seen. She had made up her mind as to Humphrey that very morning after a talk with her mother—who hated lunch in the open because her back got chilled. And since Eleanor was twenty-one, and now very rich, her mother agreed thankfully—if the thing could be pulled off. She didn’t pretend to guide Eleanor—one couldn’t guide young people nowadays. As for herself, she only wanted to get back to Manchester.

“Speaking of your father being an author,” said Burdock, who had an excellent memory, “didn’t he write a story called ‘The Stain of Blood?’ ”

Humphrey laughed. “I’m afraid he did.”

“Afraid! Why? It was a great story. I read it five—no, four years ago.”

“He doesn’t like it himself, sir, though it went very well.”

“Why doesn’t he? Good strong stuff, I call it.”

“Too sensational—he says too much blood—too much stain. He’s writing a better thing now—what he always wanted to write.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“I think he calls it ‘The Philosophy of Life.’ ”

Burdock shook his head. "Then it's not for me. I want what the Americans call a 'kick' out of what I read, and there was lots of kick in 'The Stain.' And we all make our own philosophy of life, anyway. You don't get that out of any book. At least I don't—I've troubles enough."

Humphrey laughed. Burdock did not appear afflicted with troubles as he sat absorbing caviare sandwiches, washed down with champagne. He looked very sure of himself, very competent, practical, and successful, as indeed he was, but Humphrey saw in him a man trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. It never would fit. Why desert one's natural surroundings and acclimatise oneself to a new setting at his time of life. Then the young man blamed himself for being unreasonably critical.

He shot no more that day, but spent the afternoon tramping round Veering with old Martin and getting the place from every possible angle. For this purpose he could have had no better companion, and learned far more than the old keeper realised. There was nothing loose or neglected about Veering, it being obvious that this land had for centuries been loved of its owners. Humphrey wondered what it would be like to start a new breed of owners, the Crewe-Veering stock—to carry on the same work. When he reached the Hall the wild idea of a few weeks ago had crystallised into one great abiding resolution.

Eleanor it was who accompanied him to the station on Monday, the big car with its luxurious fittings suiting her absolutely. This was her setting. No suggestion of effort, but a smooth gliding through life on perfectly oiled wheels over a perfect road. Humphrey was too much of the bulldog breed for that. She pressed his hand when they said good-bye, and her eyes were soft.

"Then you'll pick me up at the Carlton a week from Friday evening?"

"Yes, say at eight. Look here, would you like me to get Miss Veering and my sister and two more men?"

She crumpled the lips that seemed never to lose their carmine. "If you think that a whole evening with me would be too difficult."

Cassidy looked up at his partner with a grin. "Well, what about it?"

"It's a wonderful place."

"And a lovely daughter?"

"She's a nice girl," said Humphrey; "depends on what you call lovely."

"She'll have a pot of money some day."

"I suppose so. What's on this morning?"

Cassidy tossed over a letter. "Want to go to America? I can't."

"Who is it—and what part of America?"

"Georgia—one of the Southern States. Rumford wants a report on the

timber situation out there; he's got a bit too much money locked up, and offers a good fee. There's no particular hurry, I fancy."

"Georgia—that's next to Florida, isn't it?"

"Yes. Got a girl in Florida?"

Humphrey did not propose to explain, and only laughed. "Look here, am I qualified to make that report?"

"You will be if you swot up the subject a bit. Rumford's a complete ass himself."

"Then I'll go if he can hold off a little."

"I'll tell him so. How do the Burdocks make out at Veering?"

"It's a bit difficult," said Humphrey, "but they're doing all they can."

He dined at home that night, and spent a good deal of the dinner hour in watching Angela. He seemed to know her better now, and could understand and make fewer mistakes in tactics. "Mustn't expect to begin where other people left off," Burdock had said, and everything about the girl pointed the remark. She seemed very gentle, and, for her, rather wistful. Humphrey contrasted her face with that of the portrait Eleanor had shown him, the one done when she was nineteen, and decided that all its beauty was still there and needed only joy to illumine it.

"A good week-end?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes—and very interesting. I got a few pheasants. Was with a client of ours."

Mrs. Crewe felt very inquisitive, but when Humphrey did not volunteer information it was generally accepted in the family that it was better not to ask for it. And perhaps there were reasons.

"Your father was here," she said, "he had expected you out there."

"I'll go on Saturday. How's the book?"

"He said hardly anything about it."

"And you, mother?"

"We went to the Albert Hall yesterday. Everybody was there."

Humphrey smiled. "I may have to go to America later this year—the Southern States—Georgia, and perhaps Florida."

Angela looked up. "My father was interested in Florida lands. In fact, that was the unfortunate part of it."

"I'll try and dig something up. How's the world, Joan?"

Joan had been very silent, there being that which occupied her thoughts to the exclusion of all else. Oakley dominated them—Oakley and Angela. Something would have to be said very soon, and the puzzle was how to say it. She had been meeting Oakley almost every day for weeks, thinking of him all day, dreaming of him by night, the blue eyes seeming to meet hers from all angles. How strange that it should be him—and Angela here in Sussex Place, a

member of the family. She jerked herself up at Humphrey's question.

"I believe she's in love," he scoffed.

Joan reddened, a blush that dyed her cheeks scarlet, tried to meet his eyes, and failed utterly.

"Don't talk nonsense."

"Not in love—swear to it?"

She bit her lip, and Mrs. Crewe, herself startled at such vivid evidence, interposed with a nervous opinion that Joan's affairs were hers only, and when she had anything to say she would doubtless say it. Angela's expression was a little strained. Humphrey, watching the two, had a premonition. Was it the same man with them both?

Dinner ended with spasmodic talk about nothing in general, and Joan escaped at once. Then Angela excused herself. Humphrey lit a cigar and ranged himself at the mantel.

"Something's up, mother. Any idea what it is?"

"Not the faintest. I'm not consulted in that sort of thing nowadays."

"She's in love all right. What made Angela look so queer?"

"I didn't notice anything."

He let it go at that, rather sorry that he had mentioned Angela. "Well, I suppose it had to come, anyway. Can you see Dad giving her away?"

"He'd do it perfectly. Have you seen one of Angela's friends called Oakley?"

"Oakley?" His voice lifted.

"Yes—what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Who is he?"

"I don't know him, and thought you might. Very good-looking. He brought her to the door several times, but didn't come in. You know," she added plaintively, "I don't pretend to any control over Joan now; everything is so changed."

"Isn't it a change for the better, mother?" he asked, with a keen glance.

She looked round the big room with the expression of one who hopes to find an answer somewhere. "I'm not quite sure, Humphrey. I wish I were."

Joan, in her room, felt her pulse steadying a little. Owing to Humphrey's thrust the situation now seemed rather impossible. The night before last, when she had danced with Oakley hour after hour, had decided her. With his arm round her, he had asked for his answer, and it was now more than a week since she had admitted that she loved him.

"Marry me, Joan, marry me quickly and let's get it over," he begged her.

"But why so quickly?"

“Heaps of reasons. I want you—that’s the biggest. Why wait? We’re our own masters. Do you want a big wedding? I don’t—hate the thought of it.”

She reflected. If she had really arrived she would have loved a big wedding. But she knew in her heart she had not. There were social vistas stretching out of sight that the Crewes would never explore. It would upset her mother to miss those functions for which the house was so well adapted. Her father would be mildly surprised. But he would not scold her.

“I want you—you—you—all to myself—no relations or friends or anyone but us two just at first,” whispered Oakley, his lips touching her cheek. “We’ll go to Italy or Algiers, have a perfect time, and come back when we’re ready. People will be far more interested in us too.”

“Without telling anyone?” she murmured, loving him all the more.

“Do you want to tell anyone in particular?” His face grew a little hard.

That frightened her. Above all, she least relished telling Angela. She did not know how much was behind the Angela affair, or how far it had gone, and she dreaded the faintest possibility of losing him. Old fires had a fashion of rekindling very unexpectedly.

“There’s no obligation to tell anyone,” she admitted.

He held her closer, and she felt for him a great wave of love and longing. What was marriage like? Like this? Always? If so, she wanted it.

“Clive, I’m rather frightened. And there’s Angela. Tell me that I’m justified in keeping it from her. She’s been awfully good to me.”

“No reason, but it isn’t necessary. I never really loved her—good friends—that’s all—with a dash of flirtation.”

“You were never engaged to her?”

“Never,” he said, and kissed her.

That settled it, and she promised with a sort of terrified delight, so that the rest of the evening went in a dream like nothing on earth. They were so much to each other—and to think that she had ever considered a man like Stephen Hollis. Clive’s eyes were full of wonderful messages that brought the colour to her cheeks and kept it there. When they said good night he held her so long and so close that she began to tremble and pushed him away. When he left her at Sussex place she could hardly speak. It was agreed that he should get the licence at once.

All this and a thousand other things were in her mind when she heard Angela at her door.

“May I come in?”

“Do.” The tone was shaky.

Angela entered. There were two pink spots in her cheeks. She slipped into a chair and clasped her hands over her knees. They were beautiful hands, and Joan sometimes envied them.

“I say, Joan?”

“Yes?”

“Would you think me frightfully impertinent if I asked you a certain question?”

Joan knew what the question had to do with, and smiled nervously.

“Not if it’s what I imagine.”

“Are you going to be married?”

“Yes,” said Joan, in a hard little voice. “I am.”

“Is it Clive Oakley?” The tone was almost impersonal, but Angela’s fingers had tightened.

Joan nodded mechanically.

“May I go on asking?”

“Yes, if you think you have a right to.”

“You can decide that yourself afterwards. Then when?”

“Very soon, almost at once. In a way I don’t mind your asking, because—well——”

“Because of Clive and me?”

“Yes—just that.”

“Is it fair to ask what he said?”

Joan felt a faint suggestion of uncertainty. “He said to me what I suppose a man generally says—and that you and he had only been great friends—with a dash of flirtation, then decided that you didn’t care for each other—and so it just died away.” Joan got this out with a strange feeling that it was somehow very important she be entirely honest in this matter.

“Only that?”

“Yes—nothing else. And even if you had been engaged and you broke it off, that’s no reason I shouldn’t marry him now, is it?”

Angela stared at something she seemed to have found in the fire. Her face was grave and oddly tender, her eyes holding a light in which there was a trace of amusement that was not amusing and a sort of distant pain.

“I’ve tried to play the game,” she said presently, in a low voice, “especially about Clive; but, Joan, you mustn’t marry him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that he isn’t good enough.” She stopped abruptly, and sent the other girl a strange glance. “Can you realise how hard this is for me?”

“I realise you’re acting very queerly.”

“If I told you that Clive *was* engaged to me, and that he—well—dropped out when father lost his money; if I told you that since then he tried to marry an American girl, whose father discovered just in time; and that since then he’s been looking for someone like yourself—would all that make any difference?”

“Can you prove it?” flashed Joan.

“Will you read part of the proof if I give it to you?”

The world began to go round for Joan. Angela had taken some letters from her pocket, and was turning them over slowly in her lap.

“Here it is—if you want it.” She held out a sheet on which Oakley’s sprawling characters stood out very distinct. “That is his withdrawal—written a week after Veering Hall was sold. This other was written a month before the failure. Would you care to see the difference? As to the American, ask Freddy or Bobby—they both know. They’ve said nothing, because they don’t think this their affair.”

There was no answer. Angela got up, put her hands on Joan’s shoulders and looked straight into her face.

“Those are my letters, Joan—all love letters but one. At least I thought they were love letters. I know better now. Read them if you doubt me. They’re from a man who wanted to live easily—on someone else’s money. He had none of his own. He says so in this last one. And if ever you lose your money, and some man tells you he can’t marry you on that account—you’ll know. I expect Clive wanted to get your affair through very quickly—so as to make himself safe. Did he?”

Joan nodded, unable to speak.

“It’s what I expected. I found it awfully hard not to say something before this, but I didn’t want to seem to interfere till—till I felt I must. I loved him too, Joan—it was so”—her voice faltered—“so easy to love him, and, perhaps”—here the voice dropped to a whisper—“perhaps I haven’t quite got over it yet. Do you think you understand better now?”

Joan stared. The thing was astounding—but she understood. And, this being the case, what must it have cost Angela to speak?

“I never dreamed of such a thing,” she murmured.

Angela smiled wistfully. “One’s dreams are of another sort, and I had them too. I suppose there are many men like that. Perhaps they can’t help it. They don’t fight for themselves, but manoeuvre—till they get what they want. Don’t let Clive get you, Joan.”

“I don’t know what to—to say. It was only yesterday that——” Joan buried her face in her hands.

“There’s another thing,” went on Angela slowly. “I don’t think I’d better stay here any longer.”

“You’re not going!”

“I think I must. You see it would be difficult for us both. And there’s much less to do than I thought. You see, it won’t take you as long as it’s taking me to get over a certain complaint, but we’d both have the same ailment over the same man. Do you think it queer I should still feel anything about him.”

“I don’t know—I can’t think—but don’t go,” begged Joan.

Angela stooped and kissed her.

“If I were you I’d take that studio in Chelsea and go on with your painting. They say”—here she gave a mirthless little laugh—“that tragedies in love often produce great works of art.”

“Would you come?” said Joan, with a touch of interest.

“Come in to see you—yes—often. Now, will you forgive me?”

Joan took a long uncertain breath. “You’re the bravest girl I ever knew,” she said with profound conviction. “I wish you were my sister.”

CHAPTER VI

HUMPHREY REACTS

ANGELA told Mrs. Crewe next day that she would like to leave, and Mrs. Crewe gave way to consternation.

“But, my dear, you simply can’t—and whatever would we do without you? What’s happened?”

“I’d sooner that Joan explained.”

“Is she going to be married?” said Joan’s mother at random.

Angela smiled. “Not yet, at any rate.”

“Have you and she had a difference?”

“No—I hope we’re better friends than ever.”

“Then I can’t understand—unless you’re not happy here.”

“No one could have been kinder than you all.”

“Will you promise not to decide before I’ve had a talk with Joan. My dear, we’re all very fond of you.” She hesitated, and had an inspiration. “Would you wait till I see my husband about it too. I know he’d——”

The door opened, and Mr. Crewe came in, smiling benignantly. Never had his wife been more glad to see him.

“James, dear, where did you come from?”

He kissed her, and greeted Angela affectionately. “From my study, of course. I had a slight delay over a dispute with a van driver on the way up, but he turned out to be an excellent fellow.”

They both laughed, and the atmosphere seemed to clear. Something about him spoke of tranquillity—very restful and soothing.

“Can you stay for a day or two this time?”

“Yes—I must put in some hours at the London Library. There are one or two aspects of the philosophy of life that I appear to have overlooked.” He gave Angela a quick glance, discerning, he thought, something unusual in her expression.

“James, she wants to leave us, and I’m broken-hearted. I was just coming down to see you about it.”

“Oh!” The little man lifted his brows and looked rather shocked. “I—I hope that will not happen.”

Angela made a gesture. “Please speak to Joan,” she begged—and fled to her room.

Mr. Crewe examined the door, marvelling. “Any trouble with Joan—hadn’t we better ask her here at once? You see, my dear, I have a very high

opinion of that young lady.”

Joan, summoned downstairs, did the only thing possible, and made a clean breast of it.

“You see,” she concluded, “it was frightfully hard for Angela to speak, because she ran the risk of my thinking it was jealousy on her part. She still cares for Clive—in spite of everything.”

“There isn’t a grain of jealousy in her,” asserted Mr. Crewe.

“I know that, but she’s awfully proud. I made a fool of myself, I see that now.”

“I should like to meet this young man,” bristled Mr. Crewe.

Joan kissed him. “Perhaps you’d better not. He’s finished.”

“Then I shall write, and express exactly what I feel. You know, Joan, parents have their uses—if only occasionally. Perhaps Humphrey will take care of the rest of it.”

Joan shook her head. “Say nothing to Humphrey—I think he’s in love with Angela.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Crewe rubbed his hands. “I’m delighted. Matilda, did you know that?”

Mrs. Crewe’s head began to swim. People seemed to be falling in love with each other all round her. As to Angela and Humphrey, that had been her secret hope for months past.

“Why don’t you speak to her, James? She thinks a lot of you, and told me so.”

The little man blinked. “Isn’t that—er—rather a delicate subject? But I will if you think it’s any use.”

“Please. I can’t let her go, and she probably hasn’t thought of Humphrey in that way.”

He went up, and found Angela in her room looking rather unhappy.

“My dear,” he said, “I know all about it, and the Crewe family—one and all—refuse to part with you. There’s no reason you should go unless you don’t like us. We’re very much in your debt.”

“But I do,” she protested. “That’s what makes it so hard. I like you all—awfully. But if Joan and I are both fond of the same——”

“You only think you’re fond of him,” he said calmly, “and Joan won’t think so long. There’s no real heartache there. And let me say this. You know I write fiction—at least I used to—a good deal of it—and while I never pretended completely to understand a woman’s heart, I’m aware that there is a certain type of woman who rather clings to the thing that has hurt her. Personally I always thought she was a silly ass—nothing personal, I assure you—but my feminine readers ate that part of it up and seemed to understand exactly. So there must have been something in it.”

“Please go on.” Angela’s lips had begun to twitch.

“I take it that while one woman may interpret others with an accuracy that is sometimes painfully accurate, she’s prone to be misled about herself,” here Mr. Crewe smiled a little, “which may be just as well, as her friends will look after that. And some women have certain crude ideas of constancy to men who use them very badly indeed, because they think—well—Lord knows what they think—but you see my meaning, don’t you?”

“Crude?” said Angela.

“Exactly. Now this young Oakley—with whom I am about to communicate—any sentiment you may have about him is a trace of the primitive in you, a faint suggestion of days when your ancestors were hit on the head with a club by their lovers, and dragged off to a cave, and thought they liked it because they didn’t know any better. Oakley is much too cowardly to be even a caveman. In fact you and Joan are jolly well out of it, and you ought to shake hands on it or do whatever young ladies do on such an occasion. This being the case, there’s no earthly reason why you should leave people who are so fond of you—all of them,” he concluded with a faint emphasis.

Angela gave him a look in which amusement was tempered with a suspicion of tears.

“I think you’re a perfect dear and I’m a perfect idiot.”

“I like your kind of idiocy,” he smiled; “yes, I like it very much. Now promise me you’ll stay and won’t forget one thing.”

“Yes, I’ll stay. What’s the other promise?”

“That when the time comes—whoever the man is—you’ll be married from this house. I think it would do us all good.” He patted her shoulder. “I’m very much in earnest about this.”

She had a chaotic glimpse of herself walking down the front steps with Humphrey—but that was too ridiculous. “I promise,” she said.

“Excellent—and there’s the lunch gong. I’ll ask my wife to drive me to the London Library afterwards. Something dropped out of the inside of my car after I hit a van this morning, and it seems disinclined to behave properly.”

In the course of the next few days, Joan felt a great deal better and began to look sideways at the Oakley affair as one of those intimate, rather sad, but still rather intriguing episodes which no girl really desires to escape in the course of her sentimental experience. She did not see Clive again for a week, and then only by chance, when he bowed distantly. As a matter of fact he had been carrying about a marriage licence in the same pocket as Mr. Crewe’s letter, and the juxtaposition of these two documents had given him much food for thought.

Mr. Crewe cut loose in what he wrote—quite enjoyed the occasion—and expressed himself in a fashion that would have done credit to any outraged parent. He was further fortified by the fact that if he ever got back to fiction—for which he was beginning to have a secret and shamefaced longing—this matter would be of practical use. The entire family indeed, with their new setting, new opportunities, new entanglements, would make very good fodder for his literary mill. And a certain amount of philosophy about it too. He quite expected that Joan would make similar excursions on a similar nature before she settled down—and almost looked forward to them.

With Humphrey it was different. Humphrey seemed to know what he wanted and go straight for it. His share of Ralph Simonds' money—Mr. Crewe had begun to wonder whether the thing was actually true and would go on for ever—was already earning more money. As to what he might feel about Angela, he said not a word. Mr. Crewe got him alone in the library the day he returned to "The Philosophy of Life," and tried to worm something out of him.

"How's business, my boy?"

"Very good, sir." He used "sir" rather than "dad" since they left Acacia Villa. "We made a profit in the first three months."

"Then you see your way clear?"

"Barring some national calamity—yes."

He talked just like a City man, thought his father. "And then what?"

Humphrey grinned. "I hadn't got any further."

Mr. Crewe studied him with interest, the decision in his face being rather impressive.

"Well, my son, what I feel is that if happiness doesn't come of what you might call this transition of ours we would have been better without it. And," he added reflectively, "one can't buy happiness."

"No, but you can buy things that help to make one happy; and I don't mind saying that's what I'm after."

"Really! I suppose I'd better not ask any more?"

"Perhaps not, sir. I've got to make my money first."

"H'm—you need more than you've got?"

"A good deal more."

Mr. Crewe was impressed. "I won't spend half mine this year, and the balance is at your service."

Humphrey felt greatly touched. "Thanks, Dad, but it's my show and I'll pull it off."

"I'm sure you will. You—er—you're aware that Angela nearly left us?"

Humphrey nodded.

"Did you know this man Oakley?"

"No, never saw him. Want me to do anything?"

“Thanks, but I fancy I’ve polished him off myself. It appears that Angela has some sort of lingering affection for him in spite of everything. But she sees her mistake now.”

Humphrey looked at him. “Sure of that, Dad?”

“I think so—quite sure. Why?”

Humphrey, leaning against the mantel, flushed a little. “I don’t mind saying that I’m very much interested. The others know nothing about it, and I don’t want them to.”

Mr. Crewe’s eyes brightened and he felt a genuine thrill. “You’re perfectly safe with me, my boy, and you always were. She’s a wonderful girl—proud—plucky—honest as they make ’em.”

Humphrey scanned this father of his who had always understood and encouraged him, always been generous up to the limit and never asked anything for himself, and there came over him a wave of confidence and affection.

“It’s good to hear that, and you can’t think half as much of her as I do. She’s my objective, but there’s something I want to do off my own bat first. It’s big, but it would help me to reach her. As it stands now I wouldn’t have a chance. And,” he added thoughtfully, “she’s different from me—and the rest of us.”

“How—different, Humphrey?”

“She’s somebody—her people always have been somebodies. We’re not. You know what I mean—no reflection—it just happens that way. I want to prove that I’m somebody too—with my brain. Her lot are conscious of their own class, though the best of them don’t show it. They’ve got traditions, while we’ve got hopes. I want to make a tradition for myself, and I can’t do better for myself in her eyes than prove that I respect and understand her point of view. Sounds a bit of a contract, doesn’t it?”

Mr. Crewe put his head a little on one side. “What you say makes me very happy, and I’ve a feeling that you’ll accomplish your object—whatever the rest of us do. But can you think that she is—er—entirely unaware of your sentiments?”

Humphrey grinned. “Search me. If she is she won’t mind my keeping them to myself for the present. I think she’s that sort.”

“Is Oakley in your mind at all?”

“I’m not afraid of things like Oakley.”

“I couldn’t imagine that you were. Well, my boy, good luck to you. Such an outcome would make us all very happy, but I don’t quite see how you’re going to remain in love and not say anything about it. I spoke to your mother almost at once—it was so natural.”

“Perhaps young people may be a little different in that way nowadays. You

can see a good deal of the girl you know you love without making love to her. She knows what you're up to, of course, but it's more—well—oblique than it used to be." He was going to add that girls demanded more, but checked himself in time.

"Perhaps—I'm sure I don't know. You young people are so mysterious sometimes to me. And Joan—what do you think?"

"She'll have another crash or two, then settle down," said Joan's brother contentedly. "Can't hurt her, and they're bound to come."

"H'm—and your mother—just between ourselves—is she happy?" Mr. Crewe put the question as though he alone of them all had found his *ultima Thule* and was looking down at the others with a paternally interested eye.

"I'm not sure. She's rather friends with Lady Rockwood and a few others, but she's spending to-morrow with Mrs. Morgan in Ealing—so there you are. She seems betwixt and between."

Mr. Crewe polished his glasses and examined them rather wistfully. "I said to her last night that there are some things money can't buy, but she didn't quite like it."

"I think she's lonely without you, Dad."

The little man's eyes grew moist. "My boy, that's what I'm working for—to be back with you all, and my book finished. I confess that the subject baffles me at times because it seems to embrace so much, while at other times I've even been tempted to knock off a serial or two for a change—just like old times. But that"—here he inflated his narrow chest and threw a bit of ring into his voice—"that is out of the question. Whatever ability I have was meant for higher things. This is how we must use Ralph Simonds' money, eh—spend it on giving our higher selves a chance. You'll come down for a week-end soon?"

Humphrey promised, and Mr. Crewe went off thinking so hard about his higher self and what he would do with it, that he entirely overlooked the presence of a large traffic policeman at the Marble Arch.

One safeguarding attribute of the younger generation of to-day is that the sexes can see a great deal of each other without being overcome by what is termed sex attraction. Perhaps that is because there are fewer secrets. Forty years ago it was not thinkable that a girl should dine and spend more than half the night dancing with a man and not involve herself in something more serious than dancing. Thus there arises out of the new order of things an opportunity for friendships such as never came to our forbears.

Along these lines a quadrilateral alliance was arranged between Angela, Joan, Freddy Foster, and Mr. Robert Blackwood. The two latter were more or

less aware of Oakley's manœuvres, but never learned how nearly his tactics succeeded or that the counter-move had been made by Angela. All they knew was that Oakley faded away. The four dined together and sampled in a sort of joyous concord the various resorts of youth and merriment in that remarkable area bounded by Charing Cross Road and Regent Street.

Humphrey, it seemed to them, had no predilections of this nature. He was very cheerful and direct, but at any rate, in Joan's eyes, missed too many of the joys of youth. He only said he had no desire to mar the symmetry of the square. He never criticised, found opportunity to talk to Angela as often as he could, worked hard, and developed the initial sign-marks of a financier.

That was one side of it—their side. They never guessed that Humphrey was afraid—afraid of spoiling his chances—afraid of the effect of having his arm round her—afraid of speaking too soon. Nothing that she did escaped him. He studied her manner, her gestures, the changing light in her eyes, and the little things she said that gave him a more complete understanding. He found that they could be together without talking the frivolities at which Joan was becoming so apt—that she was interested in his work and practical affairs, and that she loved to dwell upon Veering Hall.

This made him question his own silence. It was difficult not to divulge where he had been. At times he would have told her, but, again, that would only make his silence seem the more peculiar. He cursed himself for his impulsive invitation to Eleanor and wished the evening were over. "Why couldn't I trust the girl I love?" he argued with himself. "If she can't trust me that far she'll never marry me. But I'd look like a fool to tell her now." As far as he could see it, and he thought about it constantly, the thing was to carry out his big idea.

On Friday morning Joan glanced across the breakfast table, feeling that she would like to recapture her brother just for once.

"Got a suggestion, Humphrey, a good one."

"Yes?"

"Come with us to-night: Angela will find a girl if you haven't one of your own."

"Sorry," he smiled. "Booked up."

"He's got a girl," said Joan with conviction. "Look at him, mother."

Humphrey did seem a little self-conscious. Of late he had in a way acted as the head of the family—the man of the house. And he was in business, with an office of his own. This put him on a certain footing, and the others were apt to take what he said for granted. But the idea that he had a girl—who was not Angela—disturbed Mrs. Crewe very much.

"Isn't Humphrey capable of looking after his own affairs?" she asked, a shade doubtfully. "It isn't that he wouldn't like to go with you."

“I would.” He was trying to read Angela’s expression. “But the fact is, I’m engaged. Any other night you like.”

“Full of information, isn’t he?” said Joan reminiscently.

Angela seemed a little amused. “Hope you don’t disapprove of us.”

He shook his head vigorously. “I’d much sooner go than not.”

“You know, Humphrey,” remarked Joan, “you’re doing the heavy act a bit too much. Why not shake your foot occasionally?”

“Perhaps there’s something I can do better than dance. Nor am I suited to your gay life.”

“It is a girl,” asserted Joan. “Sounds like a librarian in a museum, too. You never told us where you spent that week-end, though you did fill the house with pheasants. Also I know something.”

“What?” he scoffed.

“That they came from Paxton Junction—wherever that is.”

Angela looked up, but said never a word. Humphrey flushed a little and felt very unbrotherly. Mrs. Crewe perceived in the air a suggestion of disturbance that reminded her of occasions in Acacia Villa. Then Angela gave a little laugh that sounded rather hard.

“Joan, you sound like a cross-examiner, and the pheasants were awfully good, weren’t they? I never used to like seeing them shot, but later on it always seemed justified.”

She glanced at Humphrey, and in the glance he discovered a faint distaste—the look of a girl who wondered why she had not been told more. Had she not begun to think of him rather often her face would not have expressed what it did. Humphrey realised several things all at once, cursed his stupidity with great earnestness, and only nodded.

“Hope you’ll ask me some other night. I must be off.”

“Only too delighted to have your distinguished presence next time,” said Joan caustically.

Humphrey went out, at war with the world. There was only one thing more that might happen before he unloaded Eleanor, and he had a feeling that it would. He was tempted now to go back and explain, but if he did Angela would probably only look at him with those clear eyes of hers and wonder why the thing needed explanation.

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Cassidy at the close of business that day. “We’ve done well, but you look like a bear with a sore nose.”

“Nothing the matter,” growled Humphrey.

The Irishman laughed, clapping him on the shoulder “It’s in love you are—Lord help you.”

“I’m not.”

“There’s no liar like a lover. I can guess her name too.”

Humphrey glowered at him.

"It's Eleanor!" cackled his partner. "Eleanor Crewe—'twill make a mighty pretty name at that."

Mr. Robert Blackwood was in very good form, the reason being that since he could only afford one night out a week he enjoyed that one exceedingly. He thought Joan attractive, and was genuinely interested in the celerity with which she emerged from what he called her Ealing husk. As for Angela, she was one of the best. He had no intention of proposing to either, and rather fancied himself as a bachelor till, say, about forty, when he would select some well-groomed, dainty widow too old to be kittenish and too young to be staid. These being his views of matrimony, he found himself free to enjoy all that life offered to such as himself. Life, in fact, bubbled up in him.

"I think," he said, with an approving glance round their table, "that with the exception of Freddy we present a superior appearance to the rest of this cheerful gathering. But, Joan, will you please explain something?"

"About what?"

"Your brother."

"Anything the matter with Humphrey?"

"Ever hear of St. Anthony?"

"Fellah who declined everything with thanks?" grinned Freddy.

"That's the bird—especially the attractions of the more delicate and dangerous sex. Hadn't any truck with 'em at all. I understand that the most noted beauties of his day went after him—and missed fire. Something left out of his stern, silent nature. Now it strikes me that Humphrey must be of the same kidney, and we ought to get together and save him before it's too late. Amongst those present the most likely saviour is Angela."

"How funny," laughed Joan. "We were talking about the very same thing this morning."

"I agree," put in Freddy. "Angela hasn't any sleeve to-night, but she generally has something up it. Can't you stupefy this too worthy person. He's spending his life in the amassing of wealth for which he has no need."

"Perhaps he has one that we know nothing about," murmured Angela. "Who am I to interrupt his career? My job is to do the governess act for Joan."

"Speaking of St. Anthony," remarked Bobby, who, eyes narrowing, was staring obliquely at the main entrance, "if I were to bet that's all bluff on his part—that he ain't no hardworking hermit—that he's a natural he-man like the rest of us and knows a good thing when he sees it—if I were to bet that, would anyone take me?"

They all offered with great promptness.

“Done—in dinners over the next three weeks. Now I suggest that you scrutinise the husky gentleman at the door who is just coming in with the buxom super-blonde. She’s got ’em all on to-night, hasn’t she?”

They looked, and there came a curious sound from Joan. “Humphrey!” she squeaked. “It’s Humphrey; but who on earth is that girl?”

“I think I know,” said Angela very quietly.

Humphrey, in complete ignorance that he was under very acute scrutiny, succeeded in getting a table, and Eleanor seated herself with a little sigh of pure pleasure. This was the sort of thing she liked, and, in preparation, had adorned herself with lavishness. Rich—she looked frightfully rich: too rich, thought Humphrey. He had felt that at once when she emerged, glittering, from the Carlton. His own taste was rather quiet.

“I’ve never been here before,” she said, with an approving glance about the place.

“Neither have I. Heard of it—and that it was all right.”

“Awfully nice-looking people.” Her eyes were roving, and rather wistfully. How good it would be to recognise some friends. “Know anyone here? Who are those four at the corner table—I think I’ve seen that fair girl somewhere.”

He turned, and found himself looking straight at Angela.

The blood flew to his temples. Angela was regarding him with a distant smile, not altogether that of recognition. Joan, opposite, was leaning forward and staring with a sort of fascination. The two men were smiling broadly, one of them twisting at his small brown moustache and saying something that greatly amused the other. Humphrey gulped. What rotten luck! Then he heard Eleanor.

“I believe that’s Miss Veering.”

“It is.” Humphrey bowed stiffly, at which Joan and the two men seemed to have a convulsion of mirth. Angela nodded casually, as though uninterested. But there was a curve on her lips that made him very discomforted.

“They’re awfully amused about something. Who’s the other girl?”

“My sister, Joan.”

“Are they friends?” Eleanor’s expression altered a shade.

“I forgot to tell you that Miss Veering lives with us—a sort of secretary to my mother and companion to Joan.”

Eleanor took a long breath, and felt rather as though she had been struck.

“What a queer thing to forget when we were talking about——”

“You see,” he put in a bit lamely, “it was her show, and I didn’t know if she wanted anything said about it.”

“But there’s nothing to be ashamed of in it.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest that there was. Will you dance?”

They danced, and with his arm round her Eleanor felt a little happier. She

had thought a great deal about him during the past few days. Her type, she decided. And if he were in love with Angela, she herself would not be here to-night. Now she would meet Miss Veering, and satisfy her curiosity at last. That still further cheered her, and she danced with a bounding exuberance that drew a good many quiet and observant smiles.

Humphrey was thinking hard, knowing that he had put his foot in it and cursing the luck that brought them here on this particular night. So easy to have made a few casual enquiries beforehand. He also knew what Angela must be thinking—if she was sufficiently interested to think anything. Now she was aware where he had spent that week-end, and doubtless was drawing other conclusions. He was in wrong—whatever way one looked at it.

Then, of a sudden, he felt ashamed of himself. He had brought Eleanor here and was already forgetting her. That was hardly cricket. He knew that she was beginning to feel for him what he would never reciprocate, and that while she was not his sort she evidently accepted him as hers. But there was a certain honesty about her that he could only admire—however extreme her fashion of dress. And she had greatly looked forward to to-night. Only a churl, he decided, would spoil her pleasure. So, with a courage that did him credit, he vowed to perform his devoir as a host whatever might follow.

“Good floor?”

“Yes, it’s perfect.”

“Care to meet the others afterwards?”

“I’d like to very much. Who are the men?”

“Blackwood and Foster—they generally make the quartette. Know what was amusing them?”

“What?”

“Joan asked me to go with them to-night. I said I was booked, but didn’t say what for. They think they’ve caught me out.”

That pleased her, and she gave him a straight look. “Do you mind being caught?”

He laughed. “Not in the least.” Then, very successfully, he devoted himself to amusing her.

Eleanor felt quite happy at that, and it intrigued her to see the man she was beginning to care for showing a new side of himself. She was, in truth, far more sensitive than he imagined, and had been instantly aware when she entered the room that for the occasion she was over-dressed. This all the more when she saw in Angela that subtle thing called “form,” which, she secretly admitted, had not been achieved by any member of her own family. In her anticipations of this evening, she had never lost sight of the fact that she was, in a way, going on exhibition, but her natural instinct, coupled with the possession of great wealth, made her prone to overdo things rather than

otherwise. At this moment she would have been glad to hide half her jewels were there anywhere to hide them. Presently Humphrey took her across the room, and she found herself shaking hands with the quartette.

He left most of the talking to others, being very keen to see how Angela took this, but could discern nothing that was the least strained in the meeting. He watched them, thinking how perfectly Angela did it. Eleanor was a little flushed and nervous, Joan obviously very curious, Blackwood and Freddy as cheery and impersonal as one could expect. Angela mentioned Veering Hall at once, hoped Eleanor liked the place, asked something about the tenants, and said something amusing about her having pulled Humphrey out of his shell after the rest had failed. Then the duo merged tables with the quartette, Freddy descended on Eleanor, and Humphrey danced with Angela. He would have given worlds to know what she was thinking.

“You were surprised to see us?” he hazarded.

“A little—after what you said.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to bring in anything about Veering Hall.”

“I don’t understand. Why?” This with her characteristic glance.

“I went there for business reasons—and——”

“Why shouldn’t you go—for any reason you chose?”

“There was another.”

“Oh?”

“I’d—I’d like to tell you about that—some day.”

Her expression was quite baffling, so he went on: “You’d said so much about Veering that I wanted to see it, and when Burdock asked me down, I accepted. There I learned—at least it looked that way—that Miss Burdock felt—well—rather out of it as life goes. So I suggested that we dine and dance; and,” he added like an awkward schoolboy, “here we are.”

“That’s all perfectly natural, and I don’t see why it needs any explanation. I wonder why you give any.”

The voice was so light, so cool and clear, that he was more at sea than ever.

“It is important,” he blurted, “but I can’t explain—yet.”

She turned her head a little so that he could not see her eyes. “You’re very mysterious—and I think you make a very good host.”

He cheered up a good deal. “Glad of that. Why?”

Angela laughed. “I’ll tell you—some day—perhaps. Can’t explain now.”

He had little more chance to talk with her, as the party broke up rather early, Freddy having balance sheets to face on the morrow, and Bobby pleading that this was the rush season for vacuum cleaners. When Humphrey took Eleanor back to the Carlton, she insisted that he come into the lounge for a few moments. He settled into a chair beside her, very vague about what was to follow.

"I've had an awfully good time, thanks to you," she said. Her eyes were large, and he fancied that some of the carmine had disappeared from her lips. "I was so interested to meet your sister and Miss Veering—who is just what I expected. Do you think she's unhappy?"

"About what?" he asked.

"My being in Veering Hall—and really owning it. It hardly seems fair. I think she's frightfully plucky."

Humphrey, not expecting this, was rather touched. "She's bound to feel the loss of it, but you can't be associated with that. It's her father's doing."

"But I must have reminded her of so much. What did she say when she heard you'd been there?"

"She didn't know till to-night."

"You never told her!"

"No—I—well—it seemed kinder not to. I had the same sort of idea as yourself, and wanted to keep off the subject."

Eleanor made a little gesture. "I'd hardly expect a man to think of things like that."

Something in her tone and expression told Humphrey quite clearly that it would not be difficult to win her here and now. The place was in a restful half-light and they had it to themselves; the girl looked a little wistful, paler than earlier in the evening, more alluring, less physical and exuberant, with a suggestion in her young face that she was capable of a very faithful and unquestioning devotion. And, murmured the practical side of Humphrey, Veering Hall would go with her. Queer that all this should leave him so unmoved that not a pulse of him throbbed.

"Men think of all sorts of things at times," he said lightly, "even stockbrokers. You ought to be in bed now—and thanks so much for coming."

"I should thank you. You'll be down for another week-end soon?"

"That sounds very nice. Please remember me to your people."

She gave him her hand. He felt it cling warmly for an instant. Then a faint shadow clouded her eyes.

"I wonder if you—you—good—good night," she whispered, and vanished.

Humphrey drew a long breath and started on foot up the Haymarket. He walked thoughtfully through a deserted Piccadilly and the whole length of Park Lane. A voice was speaking to him now—the voice that youth hears at times and disregards only to its great loss. It told him to pitch his hopes high and match them with all his effort—that the only thing worth having was what had been fought for—and that ripe fruit, dropping into one's hands, lacked the savour of the prize that seemed far out of reach.

At Sussex Place the click of a latchkey brought him back to earth. But that night was for him a night of dreams.

CHAPTER VII

SELF-EXPRESSION

JOAN, while superficially healed of the wound inflicted by Clive Oakley, had really not completely recovered. Her pride as well as her affections were hurt, and now she turned to the possibility of developing another self, less frivolous, more constructive, and a good deal more worthwhile. She did not discuss the matter with her mother because Mrs. Crewe seemed to her own children to be rather vague about things in general and to lack any objective of her own.

This state of affairs brought up the subject of art, which had been quite obscured for months, so that after the Oakley affair Joan decided to adopt Angela's suggestion, get a studio and set to work. To express herself—to cultivate things for a while rather than people, and especially men—to show that she could accomplish something of her own—that seemed a most desirable goal.

Being uncertain how to begin, she discussed the matter with Freddy, who, to her relief, took it quite seriously.

"Thing is to start right," he said. "I dunno how far you've gone already."

"Not very far," she admitted.

"Means a bit of toil, eh, like everything else. You can't lie about in a blue smock with a smudge on your cheek and a dangling cigarette and call yourself an artist. Of course some of them do, but it's all bunk."

She looked quite determined. "I'm not afraid of work, Freddy."

"Well, you can get studios anywhere between two quid and fifteen guineas a week—if you want one; or you can go to an art school; or you can take private lessons in some johnny's studio."

"I want a place of my own."

"How like a pampered child. But it may be wiser to commit your first atrocities in private."

Joan laughed. "Just what I felt."

"Of course," he said, "there's the right lot and the wrong one. You've got to be careful. Lots of Oakleys hanging about Chelsea."

"I can imagine that." She flushed a little.

"Want me to hunt up a studio?"

"Would you?"

"I'll parley with a long-haired pal of mine at the Three Art Club and telephone you. As to your teacher, well, my child, you'll have to decide that

for yourself. Why not talk to Wetherby's?"

"Wetherby's?"

"Good old crusted art school in St. Giles. They'll put you on to someone."

A week later Joan took possession of a big studio in Flood Street, Chelsea. North light—a good fireplace—mezzanine at one end, with a tiny bedroom—balustraded landing—lounges—easy-chairs—a refectory table and a few old rugs of softened colour. The last tenant had been a famous man, recently dead, whose works were now bringing fabulous prices. Mrs. Crewe and Angela came, inspected, and admired.

Then to Wetherby's. She was talking to the principal when a man came into the office, nodded, and passed on to the big atelier where a class was at work.

"Who is that?" she asked, struck by his appearance.

The principal smiled. "One of the very latest school—you might call him a self-expressionist."

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, to put it crudely, he believes that self-expression is the first duty of everyone. If you really feel a thing, get it down somehow—anyhow—in paint or chalk or words—or any kind of medium. That's the first obligation. If you do that, you're justified, no matter what others may think of it."

Joan was interested at once. It was her own view. She felt a good deal just now, and anyone who could help her interpret it was just the teacher she sought.

"I don't know much about him myself," went on the head of Wetherby's, "but he's supposed to be founding a new school—a bit revolutionary, of course. He's thirty, I'm told, lives in Church Street, is unmarried, and is acquiring a following of his own."

"May I see the atelier?" murmured Joan.

They went into a big room where a dozen young people of both sexes were working from the nude. All very casual and offhand. Joan gulped, felt pink inside, and pulled herself together. This was art. She glanced hastily at the model, then at Lorimer, trying hard to look unconcerned. He was tall, rather lean, with a broad forehead, sensitive mouth, large restless eyes, and a short brown pointed beard. She noted the length and delicacy of his fingers. He wore a large loose collar, flowing tie, and his hair was full of little waves. At the moment he was talking to a girl student. A clock struck, the model slipped behind a screen, and there rose a babel of voices.

"Lorimer," said the principal, "I'd like to introduce you to Miss Crewe. You might be able to help her—she wants to work by herself."

Joan shook hands. His touch was very light and quick, and she thought his expression rather quizzical.

“Help you?” he said. “How in the world can I help you, finding it so hard to help myself?”

She laughed, explained, and told him about the studio.

“Ah—that was Thurston’s. You read about the sale last week?”

“Yes—wasn’t it wonderful?”

“H’m, not bad, but his stuff won’t last. Good drawing, but no life in the paint. What’s your line?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she said candidly, “but I want to work.”

“Oil—chalk—water-colour—what?”

“I—I’m only a beginner, Mr. Lorimer.”

“And you took Thurston’s studio! Ye gods!”

“I was advised to perpetrate my first crimes in private,” said Joan.

“What regal privacy!” he thought, and looked at her curiously. Other people’s first crimes had, in his circles, been perpetrated in bed-sitting-rooms, or even bedrooms, or the kind of studio one shares with other and similar criminals to oneself. Here was a girl who by her own admission knew little about painting yet took one of the most desired places in Chelsea. That and a good deal more flashed through his mind.

“Tell me what I can do to be of use.”

“I was wondering if you could give me some lessons.”

Lorimer fingered a cigarette, and hesitated. It was exactly what he had been hoping she would say—and more than hoping. Nothing about him revealed the depressing truth that he was very hard up. No shadow of this in his quizzical and often cynical manner. The real situation was that for months he had earned very little. His work was acclaimed by his own set, but they had no more money than himself, and one could not live on the plaudits of admirers. What he needed, and needed badly, was some reliable source of income however small. Something that would assure rent and food. And this tyro had taken Thurston’s studio and asked to be shown the rudiments of art! It was unbelievable—the way it fitted into his own needs.

Yet he hesitated. Something warned him that she would never really paint, and was one of those to whom art is a phase—like measles—from which there would be an inevitable recovery. He was honest about his conceptions of art, and wanted to be honest with her. But no kind of candour would justify his telling her what he felt. And, no doubt, such as she were sent to feed such as him just as manna fell on the hungry tribes from a kindly heaven. He smiled openly at the thought.

“You seem rather amused,” said Joan, noting the smile and feeling hurt. “You don’t think I can paint.”

“God forbid I should say what anyone can or can’t do. I’ll show you what I know, with pleasure—or what I think I know. There isn’t a man who can go

further than that. The rest is up to you.”

It struck Joan that this was very reasonable, and she liked him the more for it. Then they left Wetherby's and walked along Oxford Street together.

“It's only fair to tell you that there are lots of teachers as good as me,” he said, with a little shake of his head, and still trying to run straight in this matter. “Good schools, too, like the Slade, that turn out plenty of pupils all made to pattern. I'm different—I hate a pattern. If you do my sort of thing—and that's all I can teach you—don't be surprised at anything—or hurt. Lord knows I'd welcome a pupil, but I want you to go into this with your eyes open.”

“My eyes were never more wide open,” she said, feeling more sure of him any minute.

“Right then—I'll charge you a guinea a throw.”

He said it casually, and with no more apparent thought about it, but anyone who had known him well would have seen that he had not emptied his mind. He looked very distinguished, standing at the corner of Oxford Circus, oblivious of the traffic, his sensitive face quite unlike any in the crowds that pressed past him. He was keenly aware of Joan, her youth and enthusiasm, and found something attractive in the courage of her ignorance. He perceived that life was going to be easier for himself, and on the surface of it there was nothing about which to hesitate. But for all this he did hesitate, till, with an odd smile, he suddenly lifted his hat and turned down Regent Street.

“It's a fool I am,” he said to himself, “not to grasp at a good thing. Elisha didn't make any bones about eating what the ravens brought him, so why should I. I'm crazy to think of such things at all.”

He walked all the way back to Church Street, let himself into his studio, and surveyed its disorder with a cynical eye. The remains of his breakfast still stuck to a plate—a pot of tea, stewed to a vinegar, stood cold on the hob—cigarette ends littered the hearth—on an easel in a corner was a half-finished painting, an impressionist thing, strong of colour and as yet of no form—footmarks were traceable on the dusty floor—a stack of canvasses leaned against the end of a divan, half covered by a thrown-back blanket—to the walls were pinned haphazard sketches of heads, busts, legs, and arms. A certain genius was observable in these studies. It peeped out here and there, though the work was hasty, impatient, and often impudent—the work of one who feels for the real thing but has not yet found it.

He stood in the middle of all this, his brow wrinkled, his expression a question mark, regarding these symptoms of himself, this evidence of a career that he felt in his own soul might never be completed. Then, with a characteristic gesture, he went to the telephone, the one luxury that he always demanded. He called a number, his eyes roving, the smoke of a cigarette

curling through the fingers of his left hand.

“That you, Flora? Come over, will you—the tide has turned.”

A voice said something, at which he laughed.

“It’s true. I don’t know how long it will last, but I won’t be the one to stop it. Eh—no—certainly not. Come at once—I want to kiss you.”

Mrs. Crewe, with a renewed feeling of helplessness, listened to Joan’s announcement of the plan. Humphrey was so reserved, and her daughter grown so independent, that she seemed to have lost both her children.

“But, Joan, aren’t you going to live here? What did we take the house for? I think it’s mad.”

“You mean sleep? Yes, often, but there’s so much going on in Chelsea in the evening that I’ll just as often sleep there. I’ve got a woman to look after me.”

“But you have the car, so can’t you fit up a room and work here?”

Joan demurred. “It’s difficult to explain, but Sussex Place isn’t Chelsea. As for the car—well—it doesn’t go with atmosphere. A bus is more like it. The car would be rather out of place. I’ve thought it all over, mother, and picked up a good many pointers.”

Atmosphere! It seemed to Mrs. Crewe that her family was developing an extraordinary appetite for atmosphere. Her husband had it first—in fact at once, and decided that he could not work in Sussex Place either. So he fled to the country, and she missed him more every day. Humphrey very often dined with Cassidy in Cassidy’s rooms, not returning before midnight. In Acacia Villa, when he had been out, he used generally to come into her room when he got back for a little chat while she finished doing her hair, while Mr. Crewe sat up in bed wearing his old dressing-gown and working at a cross-word puzzle for what he called brain relief. Nothing like that here. Now Joan was off. As a first result the big house would be practically empty. Of course there was Angela, of whom Mrs. Crewe was very fond, but what use could Angela be to Joan in Chelsea?

“I hardly see anything of you and Humphrey,” she said plaintively.

Joan laughed, but there was nothing unkind in it. “I’m afraid you’ll see still less of Humphrey soon. I didn’t tell you what happened last night. We had the surprise of our lives.”

“What happened?”

Joan explained. “She was really quite a nice girl after one talked to her,” she concluded, “and frightfully keen on Humphrey. Anyone could see that. I liked her, though she had everything on but the kitchen stove. Humphrey turned all sorts of colours when we spotted them. That’s where he’d been that week-end—with her people—the one he was so silent about. And,” she added with a touch of real regret, “I thought he was in love with Angela.”

“How did Angela take it?” asked Mrs. Crewe nervously.

“Like everything else—she didn’t turn a hair—though there was the girl who had everything she once had.”

Mrs. Crewe felt that something was being kicked from under her. “Oh dear, what a mistake that he took her out at all. But everyone seems to be taking everyone else out nowadays.”

“There’s no reason he shouldn’t—if he’d only told us—unless she asked him to do it. I thought his tastes were—well—rather quiet, but there’s nothing quiet about her. And of course she’ll come into Veering Hall.”

Her mother looked quite at sea. Humphrey was practical—very practical. The moment he got his money he knew what he wanted to do, and was making solid progress. Natural that to a young man as unemotional as she took him to be the prospect of the Veering estate should count for much. And unless there was something in all this, why should he have been so silent?

“I also hoped he was in love with Angela,” she murmured.

“Well, mother, whoever it is he’ll settle it for himself. And, you know, young people of our age would be awfully obliged if their parents wouldn’t try to help them in matters of that sort. When Humphrey’s affair is fixed up, he’ll tell us. That’s his way.”

“I’m going down to have a talk with your father,” retorted Mrs. Crewe. “Want to come?”

Joan had other plans, so she went alone. During the hour’s run she did a good deal of pondering, feeling rather small and lonely in the big car, to which she could never get quite accustomed. They turned, with a subdued hoot, into the small gravelled drive that fronted her husband’s hermitage, and she was pleased that he should reach the hall as soon as she did.

“My dear Matilda! I’m so happy to see you—and so unexpectedly.”

He looked happy too, and the sight of him did her good. He was wearing a double-breasted waistcoat, very smartly cut, that made his chest fuller, and a chocolate velveteen lounge jacket that matched well with the mellow walls of his study. She had never seen either of these garments before, and admired them very much. “So literary and suitable,” she thought, and felt quite proud of him. Queer how a woman is apt to think more of a man when he demonstrates a little independence of her!

“I recognised the horn,” he said; “so different from mine—which, by the way, fell off yesterday. We’ll sit here in my workshop and have tea at once.”

He pressed the bell—the perfect maid appeared on the instant—she was privately in love with Mr. Crewe—he ordered tea in his kind little voice—got the perfect answer he liked so much—poked the fire into life and rubbed his small hands.

“Well, my dear, how goes life in the world of fashion?”

She told him, first of Joan and her new plans—then of Humphrey. Mr. Crewe listened attentively, puckering his lips now and then, but seeming in no way disturbed. In the big chair he looked like a benign and under-sized judge who, beneath his wig, was fond of humanity. While she spoke she envied his power to be placid over things like this.

“So you see,” she concluded, “it all makes me anxious and lonely, and I came down here.”

“From the mansion to—er—the cottage, eh? But you did quite right, and that’s what I’m here for. I wouldn’t worry about these youngsters, my dear. They’re just feeling their way. Natural instincts at work—and all that. They’ve got to go through the process. I did.”

He was so serious that she did not smile. “But, James, I know that Joan can’t paint. She’s wasting time and money.”

“H’m—it seems like that, but it’s not till afterwards that one can tell whether it’s a waste or not.” He paused, glancing rather uncertainly at the morocco-bound thing on his desk. “Joan is sound at heart—her instincts being like yours—so she’ll avoid what should be avoided. We can’t decide for them, my dear.”

Mrs. Crewe was quite touched. “It’s sweet of you to put it that way. I hope you’re right.”

“I hope so too. Now, as to Humphrey?”

“Oh, James, I was so counting on his marrying Angela.”

Mr. Crewe, certain in his own mind of Humphrey’s intentions, was nevertheless unable to disclose what he knew.

“Perhaps the boy said nothing about his visit to Veering, just to spare Angela any further regrets. He was entertained there—well—what more natural than to offer some return? He was always conscientious in such things. What is this young lady like?”

Mrs. Crewe described her, omitting nothing of what Joan had said, and adding unconsciously a few vivid touches of her own.

“She’s a bold-looking thing, James, and not Humphrey’s sort at all.”

The little man smiled and nodded. “Then you’d better leave that young man to paddle his own canoe. He’s quite capable. I believe he of all of us will prove to be the one who makes the best use of a situation which I can hardly believe will go on for ever.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Consider for a minute. Here we are lifted suddenly out of a life to which we—er—at any rate I was quite resigned, and endowed with wealth by the action of a man from whom I had no right to expect anything. In fact there was every reason against it.”

“I know, James—but here we are.”

“Quite so; but I’ve a prompting, ridiculous as it may sound, that even so the thing isn’t real. We haven’t worked for it.”

It came over Mrs. Crewe that she had done a heap of work in her time—and so had he. She used occasionally to hope that he would attain something like this. Those were moments when she had forgotten to be dissatisfied. But now he seemed contented with so little that his contentment came near to vexing her. And why should he feel so oddly about the money. She became nervous, and had a vision of another Acacia Villa. Too horrible for words!

“But you saw the solicitors and went into the whole thing.”

“Yes, my dear, exactly as I told you all. I remember it very well. They estimated the income from the estate at forty thousand pounds for this year, and saw no reason why next year should be any less.”

“Then I can’t see what’s upsetting you.”

“Matilda,” he said thoughtfully, “remembering as much as I can of my life, I begin to see that it has not been the things from outside that have really troubled me, and I’ve done most of the upsetting myself by what comes from inside me—here.” He touched his breast. “Perhaps that’s one of the disadvantages of a certain amount of imagination. I would be very glad indeed to take these matters as—well—easily and with as few questions as the rest of you—but I can’t. I have an idea, too, that the solitude here has increased the tendency. It makes me imagine even more.”

“That ought to help your book, James.”

“Candidly, I doubt that. My book is—er—of course my life work—when I finish it, but I have still much to do. Sometimes I have a disturbing hankering to knock off just a little fiction. I see certain points in fiction now—even my kind—that are quite attractive, while philosophy can be a bit depressing. That’s another reason why I’m so glad you turned up this afternoon. You’re much more like fiction than philosophy, Matilda. Now if you’re for no more tea we might have a little walk. But first—I must see about dinner. And of course you’ll stay to-night?”

“I didn’t bring anything,” murmured Mrs. Crewe, who really wanted a bit more of the quiet of the country.

“Martha—the parlourmaid—very superior and clean—I’m sure she would provide everything.”

“Perhaps, but I think I’ll send the car with a note to Joan.”

She wrote it, gave it to the chauffeur, and Mr. Crewe bustled off to his kitchen. His wife went back to the study and sat, hands folded, waiting for him. He was really very peaceful and comforting, and she felt more relaxed than for a long time past. She would have liked to go with him to order dinner, but knew that this was his domain.

Presently her eyes roved to the morocco-bound book. Here was the

manuscript of his life work. In days gone by she had never read his manuscript because it simply meant so many thousand words at three guineas a thousand—which further meant so much butter or prunes or bread. But this would be different, and something in which the very soul of the man was revealed. So, rather furtively, she opened the book.

On the first page she saw three lines of fine and careful script.

“In the consideration of a subject of such magnitude as is indicated in the title of this volume, one must——”

That was all! Not another word! One must what? She sat staring at this, wrinkling her brow and quite confused. She saw the notes neatly filed beside the ink-stand, pencilled scraps that often broke off in the middle. No typewriter was visible, no scattered sheets—such familiar things they would be—on the floor. The desk drawers were full of notepaper, neatly arranged and unused. A copy of the “Britannica” had a paper slip in the portion marked “P.” She stared again at the morocco-bound book, then, suddenly, her eyes rounded and she understood. And James, her James, had been buried here for months!

Her gaze grew misty. At that moment he came in, very pleased.

“A clear soup—roast fowl—salad—some simple sweet—and our coffee is excellent. Will that do you, my dear? It will be quite delightful, just you and I.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. They had a walk through leafy Sussex lanes, talking about old times. Then dinner, with him smiling at her across the table, she loving him as perhaps she had never loved him before, and the parlourmaid feeling out of it and rather sour. After that another talk by the fire, with Mr. Crewe looking quite handsome in a velvet smoking-jacket.

He went to sleep that night with her head on his shoulder, dreaming that he had finished the “Philosophy” and was reading it aloud to a huge audience from her box in the Albert Hall. But Mrs. Crewe lay awake for a long time—wondering—wondering.

CHAPTER VIII

CERTAIN ENTANGLEMENTS

A WEEK or two later, Cassidy came into Humphrey's office with another letter from Rumford.

"Our friend is getting impatient, and I don't blame him. What about that trip to America? Got a grip of the timber business yet?"

Humphrey opened a drawer and took out a notebook. "A good deal of it—production and exports for the last ten years, both of which are dwindling—prices—amount of timber reserves still standing—Government reports and all that. My idea is that they're sweeping the country clean of everything that will cut, with no thought for the future."

"Just like 'em. Americans were always prodigal of their resources. Think they've got so much that it will last for ever. When can you leave? If Rumford's going to get out he's got to move soon."

"Next week do?"

"Right—I'll tell him. Better book a passage now."

"Look here," said Humphrey, "there's another angle to this—sort of side-issue that may be the big end of it."

"Eh?"

Humphrey explained very carefully what was in his mind, while Cassidy listened in a silence that was rather admiring. "Imagination," he said to himself. "The boy's loaded with it." Then, aloud, "Pretty tidy gamble, that, if you ask me."

Humphrey leaned forward. "Admitted—but isn't everything a gamble? I may be mad—won't know till I get there. I saw the liquidator last week. He's asleep. If we move in this we'll have to be as quick as cats on each side of the water. I'll be up against a lot of slick Yanks. So if you get a cable from me saying 'yes,' you just jump. Things leak out, and I want to be on the ground before they do."

"It will be make or break for Cassidy and Crewe," murmured the Irishman.

"I know it. Are you on?"

Cassidy put a few very keen questions, then his eye took on a bright little flicker. "Perhaps we're both mad, but the chance comes once in a lifetime. It all depends on you. I'm for it."

Humphrey was rather quiet at dinner that night, and it was not till dessert that he said he was going to America the next week. Mrs. Crewe lost interest in her food, Joan was surprised, and Angela ventured something about an

interesting trip.

“How long will you be away?” asked his mother.

“Perhaps a month.”

“I’ll miss you, Humphrey. I see very little of your sister now.”

“Afraid you haven’t seen much of me either, mater. Will the governor be in town before I go?”

She could not tell, and pictured her husband sitting mutely in front of the morocco-bound book. She had not been able to put that out of her mind, and now waited till he should come and tell her himself. She quite yearned for that moment, there being something she wanted to say too—and of a similar nature.

“If he doesn’t, I’ll run down and see him. Anything I can do for anyone in America?”

Angela smiled wistfully. “If you could find a purchaser for a lot of swamp land in Florida I’d be awfully interested.”

His pulse gave a jump, but his face betrayed nothing. “I’ll try—if you’ll tell me about it.”

She told him all she knew after dinner, and he listened with an infinitely closer acquaintance of the matter than herself. He studied her while she talked, holding himself in leash as the woman in her, loyal, proud, and brave, unfolded, giving him glimpses of the inner Angela he so greatly desired. They talked in the library, and Joan, who had come over from Chelsea for dinner, exchanged glances with her mother in the drawing-room.

“Of course,” said Angela, “I don’t suppose there’s a chance left, but you’ll see the place, won’t you?”

“I’ll certainly go there,” he promised.

“Father used to speak about it, often. He always believed that that part of the country might become suddenly popular.”

“It might. Anything can happen in America.”

“Isn’t it queer to think that Florida should have cost us Veering Hall?”

Humphrey, at that, swore a great silent oath, then nodded. “I’ll do every blessed thing I can. I say, you won’t leave mother while I’m away, will you?”

“I promised your father that I wouldn’t—for the present.” She smiled a little at the remembrance of the rest of that promise.

“Good—I’ll be a lot happier about her. Look here, may I call you Angela?”

“If—if you want to?” Her lips took on a delicious curve.

“Well, Angela,” he blurted, “I’ve got to go down to Veering Hall before I sail. I’m telling you this time.”

The lips took on a different curve. “Do you really think it’s necessary to report your doings to me?”

“Yes—frightfully important. I—I’ll tell you why when I get back.”

“You assume that I want to know?”

Humphrey winced. “I daren’t assume anything, and that’s the truth. I’m going to Veering on business, and——” He broke off, aching to tell her what the business was.

“She has a lovely skin,” murmured Angela wickedly.

He was immeasurably angry—and helpless—and immediately loved her the more. “If she hadn’t any skin it wouldn’t affect me.”

“But what a brutal sentiment!”

“Angela!”

“Yes?”

“Wish me luck, won’t you?”

“I’m sure that you’ll get all that—that you go after.”

“Please Heaven I do. Won’t you wish it?”

“If it’s going to be of any assistance—which I don’t see at the moment—I will and do.”

“Angela!”

“Yes?”

“Please call me Humphrey, or any old thing you like.”

“Well, Humphrey, I hope you’ll have a pleasant visit at Veering Hall; and, Humphrey, remember me to Martin and old Mrs. Coggins at the south lodge; and I’d be awfully obliged if you could make that Florida land worth something, Humphrey, because I’ve a lot of shares in my trunk. Is there anything else I can say, Humphrey?”

He glowered at her, whereupon she gave a laugh and vanished.

Humphrey went down to Veering realising that he had a very delicate job on hand. This time it was Eleanor who met him at the station, and the minute he saw her he was sorry for her.

“Very glad to see you. I wondered whether you really would come. I haven’t been in town since.”

“But why?”

“No one asked me,” she said candidly.

“I would again, with pleasure, but I’m off to America on Wednesday.”

“Oh! Did you expect to go?”

“I thought I might. It’s business for one of our clients.”

“Be away long?” she asked rather soberly.

“Can’t tell, but I think not more than a month or so.”

“I wish I could go to America.”

“You will, some day.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You struck me as being the sort who get what they want,” he smiled.

Eleanor didn't laugh, wondering whether this time she would get what she wanted. “Did they tease you much about the other night?”

“A little: they've forgotten it now.”

They talked till the car swept into the long drive and he saw the frosty red face of Mrs. Coggins at the lodge door. That set him thinking hard.

“How's Martin?”

“All right. He's been talking about you; he likes you.”

“I'm glad to be liked by those of Martin's sort. Look here, will you tell me something?”

“That depends.”

“Then is Veering all you expected—and hoped?”

“What a queer question!” She sent him a sudden and rather furtive look. “Why do you ask?”

“Dunno. I wondered whether you were happier in the country or in town.”

She concluded that something lay behind this, and, if so, it could only point in one direction. “It's a little hard to say. I love it in summer but not in winter. It's so far from too much. And the neighbours—as you know we haven't met many. If I had to choose I'd choose London—with a smaller place than this in the country. And you?”

“I rather feel that if you take a place like this you've got to live for it as well as in it.”

“But I don't want to live for any place—much sooner live for myself,” she said practically. “And we're not county people. Now you tell me something.”

“What?”

“Your great ambition. Of course you've got one.”

That stumped him, and he became red in the face. She saw the signal and again misinterpreted. “I'd like to know—awfully,” she added gently.

He side-stepped rather clumsily for the next few minutes and was thankful when the car stopped. So to the big morning-room—the fireside—Mrs. Burdock, who was very welcoming—and Burdock, more genial than ever. Humphrey could tell at once that they had been talking about him.

No shooting that afternoon. Bridge—then the same bedroom, with everything in it speaking of Angela—dinner, with the same display on the big table. Eleanor and her mother were more quietly dressed. Humphrey noted it, noting also that there was a different atmosphere about this meal, so genuine, so honest and hearty that only the transparency of the reason enabled him to steer a non-committal course. Burdock suggested that he wouldn't mind putting some money into Cassidy and Crewe and becoming a silent partner which, thought Humphrey, was about as far as a man of that sort could go. It sounded like the move of a prospective father-in-law. He laughed it off, saying

there was enough for their present moderate needs. Then Mrs. Burdock spoke of how much Eleanor had enjoyed her dance and meeting Humphrey's sister and Miss Veering. She ventured something about a week-end party.

"Sorry," said Humphrey, "but I'm off to America next week."

"Then when you come back. I was just telling my husband that I hoped you'd drop in here at any time. We shall always be pleased."

So it went for the next hour, with the Burdocks trying to show him in a perfectly disingenuous manner that they wanted to see more of him and that the door of Veering Hall was on the latch where he was concerned. Eleanor was oddly quiet, playing with her dinner and missing nothing of all this, and looking every now and then at Humphrey with a breathless sort of interest she did her best to conceal. He felt more and more uncomfortable.

"If ever a man was expected to take a certain course, *I'm* the one," he said to himself.

When the ladies went out, he manœuvred the conversation round to Veering Hall, with Burdock in no wise unwilling.

"You happened to say when I was here last that if we had a client who might be interested in taking the place off your hands I was to let you know."

Burdock twisted his glass. "Yes, I did say that."

"Well," Humphrey spoke almost casually, "I've someone in mind. Can't say if it's feasible yet, but there's an off-chance."

His host reflected a moment. "It's a bit difficult to—well—decide. Depends a good deal on how Eleanor feels about it. If she wants Veering after she's married I wouldn't sell. I told you that. I suppose," here he gave Humphrey a straight glance, "that more or less brings in her future husband too—whether he would want it."

"Then she's not engaged?"

"No," said Burdock slowly, "not yet."

Humphrey saw his eyes as he spoke and read in them the unmistakable signal that only a word or two was needed from himself—just enough to indicate if he was interested in Eleanor and Veering, and the rest would be made quite easy. It was an extraordinary occasion, and not to be misunderstood. It took his breath away. Also it was clear that the matter must have been discussed by the Burdocks. Eleanor was not going to propose to him, but what it amounted to was that Eleanor's father had undertaken to find out. Then Humphrey braced himself for the plunge.

"I don't think you'll have her long, sir. And," he added with all the calm he could command, "I hope to be married myself in about a year. Girl in London."

Burdock took it like a sportsman, and Humphrey, his own nerves tense, felt a throb of admiration for the man whose eyelids only gave one flicker as he

refilled his glass with a steady hand.

“Ah—good luck to you—whoever it is.”

He lit a cigar, emitted a long trail of smoke, and measured his guest with a quiet gaze. No one could have assumed that he felt very shaken. He loved Eleanor with all his heart, and for her sake had aspired to this thing very earnestly. Now he was wondering how he should impart the news, but there was no indecision on his broad face.

“This Veering matter—I’ll have to think it over.”

“Naturally. I didn’t expect you to say anything now. May I make a suggestion.”

“Well?” The voice was a shade dull.

“Just that should you decide to sell you’ll give us the first refusal. In case I’m not in the country, Cassidy will look after it.”

“That’s fair enough, but you’ll understand I’m not committing myself to anything else. I can’t—it depends on my daughter.”

Humphrey observed that it was “my daughter” now and not “Eleanor.” “I take it that the place can be made to pay its way?”

“Yes, by those who know it well enough to run the show themselves. I’m told Lord Veering cleared expenses—though I don’t by a long shot.” He broke off, his mind obviously distrait. “Like a game of billiards?”

Humphrey agreed, thankful for anything that would bridge the next two hours. Burdock played very silently and very well, shoving the red into pockets with a certitude that was almost vicious, his face a trifle grim, but never forgetful that he was a host.

“I’m not in your class: you’ve won very easily, sir.” This at the finish of the second hundred.

Burdock gave a wry smile. “I sometimes do—at billiards.”

They went into the drawing-room. How it was done Humphrey never knew. Either Burdock’s manner was sufficient—or he contrived to convey certain information. At any rate the atmosphere modified. Talk lagged. Eleanor did not sing. To Humphrey’s imagination the painted Veerings were rather amused. Presently Mrs. Burdock complained of a headache and went off escorted by her daughter—who seemed to avoid the young man’s eyes. Humphrey then declined a drink and escaped forthwith. Why should one be made to feel so damned awkward simply because he said he was going to be married? He left Burdock standing in front of the hearth, hands deep in pockets, looking as though he had a distasteful job not far ahead.

Sunday dragged, as was to be expected. The Vicar and his wife came to tea—with many enquiries about Miss Veering. Humphrey told them, knowing that Eleanor was a sort of automatic receiver for all he said. She bade him good night with an abruptness that she tried to make breezy, but it didn’t quite come

off. He got away immediately after breakfast, and found in the car—which he had to himself—a note

“DEAR MR. CREWE.—I do hope you will be happy, and I think I know who it is.

Yours,
ELEANOR BURDOCK.”

“Sporting,” he thought, “like her father,” then asked himself savagely why he had made this second visit to Veering. Couldn’t he have got the option by letter just as well? But that would not have made opportunity to say direct to Burdock what seemed so necessary to be said.

In Chelsea one can find pretty much what one wants to find. Wealth jogs elbows with penury, ability with the lack of it, success with failure, cheerfulness with gloom, age with youth, and sedateness with what are loosely termed the improprieties. Joan, in front of an easel, clad in a blue smock and with a dab of paint on her cheek, had not yet realised all this, but was vastly interested and perfectly happy. She was at last expressing herself. Her form of expression was a painting of a girl in a red frock standing in a very green field and regarding a yellow cow. Lorimer had suggested the cow, explaining that it introduced another *motif*. The thing, he said, was to give it as you saw it.

Joan, surveying the cow, began to doubt whether she had ever seen an animal even remotely resembling this one. There was a good deal of the horse about it, and—could it be?—a touch of the pig. But the sun was bright over Chelsea that day, she felt extremely well and her feet were on the high road to art. She had already met a number of young people who piqued her imagination, and was distinctly intrigued with Lorimer. What more could one ask?

Lorimer was not what she used to call “attentive.” She found him invariably amusing and often witty. He seemed to have not a care in the world—and no illusions. With a touch or two he would correct her distorted work. It all looked so easy. In between times he talked, giving her glimpses of Chelsea and its notables. He was not in the least conceited, and, occasionally, almost what she called “keep off the grass.” That was when women came into the conversation.

He arrived while she was thinking about him, threw his hat on the lounge and stood beside her. Then a sharp glance at the easel.

“Ever have a red dress?” he asked.

“Yes, years ago, and my best.”

“Did it hang like that?”

Joan nibbled the end of a brush. “I—I don’t believe it did.”

“You’d have cried your eyes out if it had. Ever see a cow?”

“Millions of them,” she said indignantly.

“Ever see one with a camel’s hump in its back and a head like a tapir?”

“What’s a tapir?”

“The wild pig of South America.”

She laughed. “Please go on—there’ll be nothing left soon.”

“Look here,” he said, “I don’t want you to buy a photograph of a cow and copy it, but merely to paint something that will suggest that invaluable animal. Let it go at that. But don’t suggest a camel. How long have you put in at this to-day?”

“Two hours,” said Joan ruefully, “and the longer I work the worse it gets.”

“Sit down and have a gasper.”

She settled on the lounge beside him and awaited a discussion on art.

“Have a good time last night?”

“Yes—splendid. I liked every one I met except one girl.”

“Which was that?”

“Flora something. Didn’t catch the other name.”

He examined his cigarette with apparent interest. “What’s the matter with her?”

“Perhaps nothing, but she doesn’t like me. One can always tell.”

“That’s imagination.”

Joan reflected. Perhaps she was talking foolishly. But something about Lorimer invited confidences. She had felt that from the first. It had been a very gay party in his studio, to which Chelsea contributed its chosen. They came in strange garments, talked without ceasing, expressed new views on Old Masters, danced on a twelve-foot square and ate in corners, on divans, or on the floor. And they were very nice to Joan, about whom there was a certain curiosity along the King’s Road. All quite cloudless till she saw the girl Flora watching her with large dark eyes that, privately, she thought distinctly insolent.

“Who is she?”

“Nice girl—been in Chelsea three or four years—does black-and-white for the magazines—lives in Glebe Place.”

“Old friend of yours?” she asked, noting his too casual tone.

“We’ve known each other the last two years or so.” He laughed. “Does that affect your progress in art?”

She made a face at him. “Why should it—only I want to be friends with all your friends.”

“There’s no reason you shouldn’t. You’ll find some of them a bit of a

variation from——” He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said Joan, getting up hastily. From this it will be noted that she was recently arrived in Chelsea.

The door opened, and Stephen Hollis stood on the threshold.

“Stephen!” She was very astonished. “Who’d have thought of seeing you here.” She put out her hand impulsively, feeling that now she had been saved from Stephen she could afford to be very nice to him.

“Well,” he said quietly, “I met your mother a day or two ago, and she told me about it.”

Joan smiled. “Mother seems rather nervous about me. This is Mr. Lorimer, who is showing me how little I know about art. Remember the days when I used to disfigure china cups?”

It was an opportunity for Stephen to say something neat and graceful—but he didn’t. He just looked at Lorimer—and disliked him on the spot—and nodded.

“So you’re going to be a painter?”

“I hope so.” She was glad that the canvas faced the other way.

“You one, Mr. Lorimer?”

“Yes—of sorts. We have all sorts here. By-by, Joan—same time on Wednesday. Morning, Mr. Hollis.”

He lounged out, and Stephen looked after him doubtfully. “Calls you Joan, eh?”

“Why shouldn’t he—it’s the Chelsea fashion. Stephen, I haven’t seen you for months.”

He nodded, stared stolidly round the studio, then stepped to the other side of the easel. He stood there a moment, his face quite expressionless.

“How do you like it?” he said presently.

“You mean that painting?”

“No—life in Chelsea.”

“So far, very much. I only came here a week ago.”

“This some of your work?” He was staring hard now.

“Yes,” she said hastily, “but please don’t look at it. It’s only a suggestion so far.”

“Of what?” he asked stubbornly. His brow wrinkled a little.

“It’s a study—what they call a *motif* of a girl on a lawn watching a cow.”

“Which is the cow?”

She went into a gale of laughter. “Stephen—how dare you. I told you it was nothing yet. I can’t explain any more—but an artist would understand.”

“Does Lorimer understand?” he asked bluntly.

“Of course. How ridiculous!”

From Stephen’s expression his opinion of Lorimer’s understanding was not

flattering. "I say, are you going to stick to this?"

"You don't sound very encouraging."

He glanced at her with a sort of dog-like fidelity. "I don't mean to be rude, and I don't know anything about art, but I do like a good picture. I hear Humphrey's in America?"

"He should land in New York to-day."

"And your father's working in Sussex?"

"Yes, and so happy to have a place to himself. He ought to finish the book soon. And you, Stephen, how are things going?"

"I got that rise four months ago," he said quietly, "and another nearly due. Doing rather well for me." He fell silent for a moment, took another glance round the studio, and gave a strained little laugh. "All rather different from old times, isn't it?"

She nodded. "So different that sometimes it doesn't seem real. Why have you not been to see me all this time?"

"I came once, left a message, got no answer, and—well"—he got rather red in the face, "I didn't suppose I was missed amongst your new friends. Was I missed?"

She hesitated, because something commanded her to be honest with him.

"I didn't mean to be unkind," she said very gently.

Stephen got up and took a long breath. "I say, Joan?"

"Yes?" She thought she knew what was coming.

"Engaged yet?"

"No, Stephen, I'm not."

"That's queer."

"I don't see why."

"Thought you'd have been snapped up before this."

It sounded not over complimentary to her personal attraction, but she knew him too well to misread him.

"There has been a certain amount of snapping going on," she murmured, "but I didn't feel like being snapped."

"Good," he said.

It was all very odd, and he seemed to her like a fish that had swum in from alien waters. Nothing of Chelsea about him—just the same bulldog, blunt, steady-going, dependable, unimaginative, unartistic old Stephen—who would doubtless be extremely successful and become a rich man in his early forties. She could imagine the sort of house he would have, with everything very plain and solid and comfortable—and even the sort of meals. No *motifs* there.

"I say, Joan."

"Yes?" she smiled.

"That fellow Lorimer." He paused, giving his head a little shake.

“What about him?”

“Bad egg, I think. Look out for him.” He grinned and disappeared.

CHAPTER IX

HUMPHREY'S OPTION

HUMPHREY had a very enjoyable voyage. Nice people and a noble ship. He took regular exercise in the gym, and did a lot of hard thinking, with Angela, Florida lands and Georgia timber all mixed up. Cassidy had told him of the opinion generally held in the land of the free about the tortoise-like methods of the British business man. Humphrey didn't quite see this, believing that as much and as good business was done in an hour in London as in New York. And London still remained the financial centre of the world. He was deliberating over these things when an idea came to him.

He wasted no time in New York, travelling immediately to Pressburg, where were the mills and offices of the Georgia Cut Pine Company, and remained very busily engaged in Pressburg before he said who he was or visited anyone. He felt a good deal surprised at what he found. No evidence of depression in this town. It was built entirely of lumber and stood in the middle of a flat plain from which the trees had long been cut, leaving it naked and shadeless. The place was very much alive. A mile away were the mills, from which came the ceaseless and singing drone of saws. The stores on the one main street were doing a flourishing business. There were the usual negro loungers loafing at shady corners, a blazing sun, and the sharp clean odour of freshly cut wood. From town to mills along the railway were sidings that penetrated neatly stacked piles of new lumber. He observed that this—though just from the mills—was already being reloaded for shipment.

He poked about for twenty-four hours, asking a lot of questions, and not minding at all that he was put down as an extremely ignorant Britisher, "Beats me," he said to himself at noon on the second day. "I think I'll change my tactics."

Then he went to a small office near the screaming machinery and found the man he wanted. "Mr. James K. Jessup, Prest. and Gen. Mgr.," it said on the door.

He had wired that he was coming, and Mr. Jessup expressed himself as real glad to shake hands with a Britisher—especially after the war the boys had won together.

"Now, sir, I'm as busy as a dog with a tin tail, but I'm at your service. I understand you represent the British shareholders in this concern."

"Only one of them—a Mr. Rumford. He asked me to have a look about."

Mr. Jessup bit off the end of a long black cigar, ejecting it with

extraordinary accuracy into a tin vessel beside his chair.

“Sort of dissatisfied, I reckon.”

“You evidently think that Britishers are hard to please. Perhaps I’d like to pick up a few of your shares.”

Mr. Jessup looked at him sharply, laid aside the cigar with obvious regret, and stood up.

“Friend, before you ask any questions, or talk about buying shares in this concern, just you take a little promenade with me. Darned if I didn’t think you’d come out here to sort of expostulate. This way.”

He led, Humphrey following, into the nearest mill. Immediately the visitor’s ears were split with sound. He saw logs snatched out of a small lake that lay at the foot of an inclined trestle, jerked up the trestle, gripped mechanically in carriages that travelled back and forth like shuttlecocks, and sheared instantly into planks an inch thick. The saws, revolving at high velocity, gave forth a sharp, high, piercing note as they cut through the wood like cheese. No time lost here. The planks were grabbed by a travelling platform and carried out of sight. Work progressed in a sort of frenzy and was done mostly by sweating negroes. The great building was open at both ends, so that logs came in at one and lumber poured out of the other.

Presently Jessup touched Humphrey’s elbow and beckoned. They went into another mill and saw the lumber matched and planed. In another it was cut to lengths and made into window frames and doors. Another produced wooden shingles for roofing. Everywhere was vibration, speed, and a sort of mechanical mastery that to Humphrey was very impressive. Then Jessup guided him back to the office, offered a cigar which Humphrey declined, and lit his own.

“Smoke a pipe, don’t you?”

Humphrey took out his brier, filled it, and with his thumb in the bowl put his first question.

“How long have things been going like this?”

“About a month now.”

“You’re selling all you can cut?”

“We could sell four times our cut.”

“Why?”

Mr. Jessup regarded his cigar with a meditative eye. “Well, I put it down to a sort of *deementia* that’s started down this way.”

“Eh?” said Humphrey.

“Mr. Crewe, I want to tell you something. The hundred per cent American is about ninety per cent speculator. He’d sooner speculate than eat pie. Now about three months ago, a few wise guys down in Miami—that’s in Florida and straight south of here—woke up to this fact and started in on some stunt

publicity for their particular section of Florida. They advertised the part where they happened to have a pile of real estate they couldn't sell. It was slick work, all right. They wanted to know why good Americans should go to any darned place abroad to winter in, when the fairest, brightest, warmest, most beautiful spot on God's green earth was right here at home. They gave temperatures, and rainfall—which there isn't any to speak of, and tarpon fishing, and surf bathing, and oranges and grape-fruit hanging over the lagoons, and, by gosh, they did it well. At the same time they sort of hinted that when the American nation realised what a dodgasted fine place Florida was to winter in, the price of real estate would go up like when some Chicago man corners wheat. Meantime they could let a few—just a few, mind you—in on the ground floor.”

“And then?” Humphrey's brain was very much alive.

“Well, sir, all you have to do is tell an American there's something he may not get—and leave the rest to him. Darned if a lot of folks didn't wake up and say, 'this is good enough for me.' They started for Florida—quite a raft of 'em, and that was enough to give real estate the first boost. The boost started others a coming, and up went real estate another notch. Say, friend, did you ever throw a fistful of salts into a pail of water to doctor a cow?”

“No,” grinned Humphrey.

“Well, if you had you'd have noticed that what slipped through your fingers started the first fizzling. Then more salts and more fizzle, till she's all a-boil. Something like that going on in Florida now, but the boiling-point ain't reached yet. Meantime the folks down there are pushing up houses and shacks quicker than an ape can catch fleas. See where the lumber's going?”

Humphrey nodded. He saw that and a good deal more. He had come out prepared to wire Rumford that he had sold his shares and cut his loss. Nothing like that now—so far as loss was concerned. At the same time some instinct warned him that this hectic condition would not last. Americans were sentimentalists—therefore gamblers—therefore their opinions were apt to change very abruptly. “Tactics!” he said to himself. “Tactics!”

“How long do you suppose this state of affairs will go on?”

“There's a hundred and ten millions people in the United States of America,” said Jessup cheerfully, “and only a few of 'em has woke up yet—the nearest ones to Florida.”

“What about picking up a few of your shares?”

“Friend, if you'd asked that three months ago you'd have been obliged so quick it would have made you dizzy. To-day—well—it's different. I'm looking for shares myself.”

Humphrey fingered the bowl of his pipe. “Par is a hundred dollars, and the total issued is two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Yep—that’s right.”

“Give you twenty-five dollars over par for five hundred shares.”

Mr. Jessup looked mournful. “If you’ll tell me where I can get ’em for that, I’ll be eternally obliged.”

“Get how many?”

“Most any number.”

“Say one thousand?”

Mr. Jessup was about to speak when an excited clerk burst in with a wire from a building company in Miami. It asked the Georgia Cut Pine Company to charter a special freight train, load it double shift, and secure special right of way over the Florida and West Coast Lines. Mr. Jessup glanced at this and shook his head despairingly.

“Wire ’em we’re choked with orders we can’t fill in two months. They’ll have to send for it by air, I guess.” He turned to Humphrey with a grunt. “Temperature’s going up, friend. Did you say twenty-five over par?”

Humphrey nodded. He knew he was taking a long chance, but knew also that Rumford had held those shares for ten years without dividends. This year should bring a dividend, but it seemed to the Britisher that prices were inflated, and that when the fever passed they would come down with a thud. He might be all wrong, and the thing might be permanent. But Cassidy had often told him that the wise course was to leave some of the profit for the other fellow. Now he could only trust to his instinct.

Mr. Jessup stroked his chin and reached for his cheque-book. “Give you ten over par.”

“I thought you said you’d be grateful for some at twenty-five over.”

The other man laughed. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to come in out of the rain. Look here, I’ll either buy or sell, and here’s my power of attorney.” Humphrey said this, depending solely on what he took to be the latent gambler in this American. He knew also that his sort preferred to buy.

“At twenty-five over par?”

“I hadn’t mentioned anything else.”

A long-distance call from Jacksonville settled it. Jacksonville was begging for lumber, any kind of lumber that would hold a nail, and at any price. Mr. Jessup wrote his cheque, and Humphrey gave an undertaking to transfer the shares—when the cheque was accepted by the bank. Jessup noted that and smiled.

“Had quite a training for a man of your age, and you Britishers are more spry than I thought. Why not take that money and put it into land round Miami?”

“It isn’t mine, but I’ve a little of my own, and I was going down that way

in any case. Good-bye, and good luck.”

He got off by the next train, the scream of the whirring saws still in his ears, Jessup's cheque—now certified—for a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars in his pocket, and wondering very much whether he had done right. Jessup would pocket the next dividend, which would probably be a good one, but what about the next after that? From what one could see and learn, the Company's supply of standing timber could not long resist the present inroads. And Rumford, he knew, would be surprised and delighted. He would cable from Miami.

Miami is a seaport of sorts, approached by a shallow and shifting channel from the Gulf of Mexico, and lying a little north of the broad thumb-end of Florida. Since those days when the buccaneers infested the Florida keys—or low coral islands—Miami has been overlooked by the rest of the world. The country all around is flat, being only a few feet above sea level, and intersected by lagoons where alligators lie basking in a semi-tropical sun. For the most part it is covered with palmetto and pine scrub, from which hang trailing curtains of a grey, vine-like moss that give the woods a strangely funereal appearance.

So, year after year, Miami dozed in the sun, shipping pineapples, grapefruit, tobacco and the like to the north, its languid population leading an easy-going life, till the group of speculators of whom Mr. James K. Jessup had spoken conceived the big idea. Then things began to happen. But few there were who anticipated the proportions of the trek that was destined to move southward.

Humphrey, standing on the platform of the rear coach and watching the clicking rails slide from under him, noted a good many things as he approached his journey's end. Clearings everywhere—wooden shacks and tents with large signs outside, signs on which the paint was hardly dry—Florida Realty Co.—Miami Land Corporation—Southern Belle Holding Co., whatever that was—men in shirt-sleeves at improvised tables—telephone wires being strung—land surveyors with their instruments—boundary lines with rows of new pickets—motor-cars in which glib salesmen could be seen haranguing fascinated visitors from the north—quick-lunch counters where men choked down slabs of pie, gulping at it lest they lose a deal—new roads being cut—mosquito-infested swamps, whose shores were being laid out in building lots over which an occasional flamingo winged its heavy flight—glimpses of a blue sea with long smooth beaches bordered by tufted palms—sidings curving off from the main line into a tangled jungle.

He was rather thrilled, but did not allow himself to be excited. The

holdings of Lord Veering's company lay some ten miles south of Miami, and he wondered if the excitement had penetrated that far. The survey plans were in his pocket, and he knew them nearly by heart. Also there was an option given by the Liquidator, in virtue of which Cassidy and Crewe could at any time within the next two months purchase those lands for the sum of ten thousand pounds—which meant just ten pounds an acre. The Liquidator, making a mental note of Humphrey's youth, had smiled faintly when he signed that option, though the price was one-fifth of what Lord Veering and his directors had been misguided enough to pay. Humphrey, reckoning back, saw that this document had been secured just after the southward trek began. Was that luck—or prevision?

Miami—a town in the dislocating process of transformation. He had difficulty in finding a room in the best hotel, but something in his manner, coupled with the fact that he hailed from London, induced a harassed clerk to stretch a point. Here was evidence that the old country had its eye on Miami. Then what the Americans call supper—in a vast room where people ate hurriedly from things that looked like bird baths. There was hot bread, hot biscuits, fried chicken, and sea fish that lacked the savour of a Dover sole. The guests fed themselves, as a fireman stokes a furnace, half the men picking their teeth as they went out to congregate in the big rotunda, where it seemed that much business was being done. From the hotel grounds came a continual hum of motors that shot off with parties of investors going to inspect possible purchases by moonlight, and many were accompanied by their women folk in evening dress and wearing jewels. The talk was all in money—hundreds of thousands and even millions. The more excited it grew, the more Humphrey steadied his jumping nerves, knowing that there had come to him that which arrives but once in the lifetime of most men.

“Gad!” he said to himself, “a week later and I'd never have got that option.”

He dropped into a wicker chair on the wide verandah, looked at the calm sea—the only calm thing in that neighbourhood—smoked, and listened to two men talking close by.

“Ten thousand I gave last week—a thousand down—and sold her to-day for fifteen.” It seemed that a plot—or lot—was usually referred to as “she.”

“Sold too soon,” said the other.

“Well, it pays expenses for Jane and me this winter, and there's plenty more coming. Been down Sunnyland way yet?”

“Nope—where is it?”

“Eight miles south. South of that again is the mystery lot.”

“The one held by the Britishers?”

“Yep—that's her.”

“Who’s handling that?”

“No one, far as I know. Sort of curious about it myself, but I don’t get anywhere.”

“Little game on there, I guess.”

“You can search me—I don’t know what it is.”

Humphrey leaned forward. “I wonder if you’d kindly tell me something?”

The two looked at each other, glanced swiftly at him, and signalled that here was a real live Britisher.

“Why, sure,” said one.

“I have a friend who has landed interest in the vicinity you mention. A fairly large area, about a thousand acres, and about ten miles south of town.”

They glanced at him again, and the first man whistled. “Fairly large area! Say——” He laughed ironically. “Darned if that doesn’t beat me. This ain’t Texas.”

“Quite,” said Humphrey. “Why does it beat you?”

“Quite what? I don’t quite get you. My folks have been cabling to England twice a day for the last week to get an option on that land—if a thousand acres is what you call a fairly large area. Only answer we got when they woke up is that the property is being otherwise dealt with. Affable kind of message, ain’t it?”

“I assume there was no other information to send you. You think it’s a good holding?”

The American, who forthwith announced that his name was Mr. Nathan P. Stokes, and produced his card to prove it, stroked his chin and regarded his companion.

“Got your car here, Chris? Mine’s gone out to Palm Grove with a St. Louis party.”

“Sure—it’s right here.”

“Then suppose we run Mr.—Mr. Crewe—much obliged, Mr. Crewe—out to that fairly large area. I want to watch his face.”

Chris—Mr. Christopher B. Stebbings, according to the card that was instantly produced, signified his approval with a flourish. Then he made a circle in the air with his lighted cigar, and a car moved forward from amongst a hundred others parked along the hotel drive. A capable-looking negro was at the wheel.

“Sunnyland, George,” barked the owner, and waved Humphrey into the corner seat.

It was a curious drive. The Miami they passed through was still wide awake and still doing business. Offices were open—rows of people stood at soda-water fountains, sucking at luscious-looking drinks through long straws—new houses and frames of shacks everywhere—plots being prepared for the

erection of business premises—tramcars loaded full. Mr. Stokes, corroborated by his friend, pointed out property that had changed hands four times in a week at advancing prices.

“Where does the money come from?” asked Humphrey, who had adopted the rôle of the uninformed, because it made people talk more freely.

“The little old U.S.A. is the richest country on top of God’s earth,” said Mr. Stebbings complacently, “and we don’t owe any nation a cent.”

Humphrey was about to mention a matter of some thirty million pounds that some of the Southern States had owed England for fifty years past, and which there was no apparent intention of paying, but decided that that wouldn’t help. Then Mr. Stokes struck in.

“There was a sort of snide boom down this way about five years ago. I guess that was when your friends took holt.”

“Probably. What do you think the land is worth now?”

An American palm was laid on a British knee. “Friend, do you reckon you could stand in with us and get an option on that property?”

Humphrey laughed. “Want to buy it?”

Mr. Stokes drew a long breath. “It’s a big thing to swing—we’d need help.”

“And its value?” The voice was very cool.

“Three months ago, maybe a dollar an acre—with no buyers. Now”—he waved a hand in the air—“what about her, Chris? What’s she worth?”

“Maybe four hundred an acre, if the Biltmore folks go on with that Coral Beach development. Darned if I know. Anyway it ain’t what it’s worth, but what you can unload it for.”

Humphrey blinked, and was glad it was rather dark. Four hundred dollars an acre meant eighty thousand pounds. His heart gave a great leap. Then he tried to think of himself as someone entirely disinterested, with nothing to buy or sell, who had come to study this boom in relation to other and similar booms. “Temperature too high,” he said to himself. “Can’t last, no matter how rich the country is. Steady now, Crewe.”

Mr. Stebbings indicated a clearing showing indistinctly in the jungle. “Silver Strand subdivision, and not more than a mile from the shore. Putting up cheap bungalows—five thousand each, with your first meal ready on the table—pond in the front yard with three palmettos—baby alligator in every pond. Some stunt, eh, and selling like sin, too. ’Taint a matter of price with us folks if we think we see what we want.”

“Considering all this,” suggested Humphrey, “wouldn’t you say that four hundred an acre was low for the other property?”

“Maybe, friend, maybe, but it struck me as a fair price as she’s pointing now. Depends some on who you’re talking to, of course. Give the purchaser a

chance to sell a bit and he'll pay more. Hold on, George. We're there."

Humphrey stared at the stretch of unbroken bush presumed to be worth eighty thousand pounds. Surveyors' stakes ran up against it, and stopped. No roads pierced the masses of palmettos. The thing was still the ragged untouched wilderness of the days of the buccaneers. All he could discern was swamp land, clouds of mosquitoes and the croaking of innumerable frogs. He nearly laughed outright.

"Great, ain't it?" breathed Mr. Stokes with a sort of awe. "Just lying there resting and waiting for the invigorating hand of capital. Say, do you imagine those Britishers know all about it, and are just standing round till prices reach the top and they let her go?"

"Quite possible," murmured Humphrey, "and our people sometimes know more than they're supposed to. To be fair with you, I should say that I'm interested in this property myself."

Mr. Stebbings slapped his thigh where a mosquito had done its work. "Darned if I don't think you're right, and I sort of tumbled to it that you were interested. Say, what about an option from you and your friends?"

Humphrey shook his head. "I don't believe they'd consider anything but cash down. So far as I know it's their only investment out here, and they would prefer to clean the thing up."

"Look here, suppose Stokes and yours truly made a merger of our two concerns and formed a new company—we could fix that up right away—what about your crowd putting in the property and taking shares for it?"

"I'm afraid there's no chance of that, so please don't trouble any more. I'm going to have a talk with some New York people to-morrow. And thanks so much for the drive."

Stebbing looked worried, and did not fancy any New Yorkers being consulted in this matter. He reckoned they'd be only too ready to take the thing up at somewhere about the price mentioned. He said little more on the way back.

Humphrey talked to a dozen people within the next hour, and from what he could learn the figure mentioned was fair enough, considering everything. Then, having managed to keep to himself the fact that he was interested personally, he went to his room, took off his coat and began on a cable to Cassidy in the Rumford matter. That done, he sent another which was just one word "yes." It meant that Cassidy, on its receipt, would take up the option given by the Liquidator. He was sitting smoking and wondering if this thing was really true, when there came a knock. Entered his two friends. Stokes camped on the bed, while Stebbings perched at the open window.

"Say," he began, "we've been thinking over that proposition of yours. First we want to know if you're in a position to do business right now?"

“Not to-night,” said Humphrey. “Got some letters to write.”

Stokes gaped at him. “Got some letters to write! Gosh, I begin to see what made the old country what she is.”

Humphrey laughed. “Poor business can wait, and good business should keep over night. Yes, I’m in a position to deal, but the matter is too important to hurry over.”

There followed a stunned silence, during which Mr. Stebbings swung a leg over the window-sill as though in a saddle. “It’s a great night for a little business,” he remarked helplessly.

“Also for sleep,” laughed Humphrey. “And I’ve had rather a heavy day.”

“Mean to say you can sleep with that deal on your chest?”

“Much better than if there was no deal.” Humphrey was in reality boiling with excitement, but made a desperate effort at calmness.

The two stared at each other, quite at a loss, then Mr. Stokes gave a short laugh.

“Say, friend, if you’re ever out of a job—which I don’t expect—just send me a card, will you?”

Mr. Stebbings allowed that he was of the same mind. “I sure admire your nerve,” he added. “Do you suppose——” Here he hesitated a moment. “Suppose we could reckon on an option.”

“At four hundred dollars an acre—spot cash—option for three days from ten o’clock to-morrow morning,” said Humphrey, hardly recognising his own voice. “Want it in writing? And I haven’t shown you my credentials—or authority.”

Mr. Stebbings made an airy and rather graceful gesture. “I don’t mind saying that if more British guys like yourself projected themselves into the U.S.A., and fewer of the kind that is sort of sorry for us for not being like them, it would be a blamed good thing for that Anglo-American ententy I read about. And I’ll take your word for that option—three days at four hundred an acre—spot cash. That’s the way she stands. And, say, Nathan has a receptacle in his hip pocket. Join us in a little drink to the ententy?”

Humphrey did not sleep much that night, being tired out with excitement and—perhaps—self-repression. He had been playing a difficult game, one that demanded all his ability, and at pains to remember the countless guiding points he had picked up from association with Cassidy. He pictured the condition of mind of the Liquidator in London—who must know a good deal more now than three months ago—and thanked his stars that instinct had served him well when he took it into his head that that option must be secured without delay. He pictured also Cassidy and Angela. Half the ten thousand Cassidy would pay

next day would go to Angela, as Lord Veering died owner of half the issued shares of the defunct company. He thought of these now reposing in Angela's trunk, worthless bits of paper as she believed, reminders of shattered hopes and vanished dreams.

When his cogitations got round to Angela, they stayed there. The big idea was going to work out. He knew that now—failing some cataclysm—and so exciting was the prospect that he lay awake till nearly morning listening to freight trains coming in from the north—perhaps loaded with Jessup's lumber—thanking Providence that he was alive and in love. There were no fears for the future, only confidence and a great immeasurable longing.

He woke with the sun in his face, bathed in tepid water—it appeared that there was nothing cold in Florida except artificial ice—and went down to breakfast. The day's excitement had already begun. Mr. Stebbings, who had long since finished his breakfast, was waiting.

“Get that sleep?”

“Fair to middling,” said Humphrey.

“I didn't. Have to raise a slew of money to-day. Say, you didn't happen to know Lord Veering, who was President of the company that owned that land?”

“I never met him, and he died two years ago.”

“Queer sort of fairy tale drifted out here about him. I'm told he coughed up all the dough he could raise when the concern busted—and went broke over it.”

Humphrey nodded and gave the story. “You see,” he concluded, “as Chairman—that's what we call the President over there—he held himself personally responsible for the failure.”

“Beats creation, don't it? There'd be a lot of empty chairs in the little old U.S.A. if that was expected over here. Seems sort of a pity he couldn't have held on a little longer. I'd like to see some of that money going back.”

“You never can tell, and perhaps it will,” said Humphrey mysteriously.

He spent the day exploring, talking, and picking up all possible information. As things looked, the boom would last for a while yet. Big hotels were being built and private country palaces at a fabulous cost, though a lot of it seemed to be done on credit. Prices promised to rise still higher in the near future, but Humphrey again reminded himself that the wise course was not to try and grab all the profit. He tried to be content with that axiom. After supper Stokes and Stebbings cornered him on the verandah.

“Come on up to our rooms.”

He went up, and they produced a certified cheque for four hundred thousand dollars. Stokes gave it a little pat.

“There she is, John Bull, and here's what you sign undertaking to transfer the property. We reckon to ask the bank to hold the cheque till the lawyers

have been through the papers. The registry office records are all right. We've searched those."

Humphrey felt quite dizzy, then shook his head. "You'd better hold it yourself for a day or two."

Stebbing was much surprised. "We thought you'd like to see it safe in the bank."

"Well," Humphrey gave him a straight smiling look, "I'm not sure that the property is mine yet."

"Holy Smoke! Are you stringing us?"

"Stringing you?"

"Sure—are you on the level?"

"I'm trying to be. The way the thing stands is that I have to buy before I sell. My option is perfectly good, and I cabled my partner last night to take it up. But I haven't heard from him yet, and I don't care to sign anything till I know that the purchase price has been met on the other side."

Stokes, quite bewildered, pointed to the cheque. "But you can pay the purchase price out of this."

"I know it, but I prefer the other way—if you don't mind."

They regarded him with sudden and profound interest, and Mr. Stebbing emitted a low whistle. "Say, wouldn't that paralyse you?"

"What?" asked Humphrey, genuinely puzzled.

"You know your option's good, and the taking up of it is bound to go through, but you won't sign anything till it does—if I get you right."

"Exactly. I'd feel much more comfortable."

The two stared at each other, then, advancing, shook his hand very formally. "I'll tell the world," said Stebbing. "Say, there was a Britisher up in Cincinnati last year, and we told him that you could establish as big a business in the U.S.A. in four years as would take forty over in George's country. Know what he said?"

"Haven't any idea."

"Well, he just drawled out that where he came from if it took forty years to build up a business it would take another forty to knock it down. By heck, I begin to think he's right. Sure you don't want that cheque in the bank?"

"The day after to-morrow will be soon enough," said Humphrey—though it was hard to get the words out.

The cable from Cassidy came the next afternoon, and the following day he left for New York. Two cheques in his pocket now. That was his youthfulness, because he admitted they should have gone through a bank. Impossible to describe what he felt as he traversed the palmettos of Florida, the pine of Georgia and the rolling farms of Virginia. He wanted just one thing now, which was to get home, where there awaited him a job much more important

than any deal in land. He realised that to him had happened something that never happens unless exactly the right man is in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. He had clicked, and to a degree that almost stupefied him. Ralph Simonds and his father had provided the opportunity. Well, what he proposed to do now was to raise a golden sheaf from each grain of Ralph Simonds' money.

Cassidy could not leave the office to meet him at Southampton, but Rumford did come down, and they talked all the way up, whirling across velvet fields that had never looked more lovely. Humphrey gave his story of Pressburg, omitting nothing, while Rumford, with twinkling eyes, smoked in silence.

"So you see I felt that I ought to act quickly—and I did. But you might have got a bit more for those shares by holding on."

"I paid seventy for 'em." Rumford's voice had a contented purr. "What you got more than makes up for the loss of dividends. You've done right, and extremely well. Know what I expected?"

"What?"

"Say twenty, not over twenty-five. There's ten per cent to Cassidy and Crewe on this—and, of course, your expenses."

"More than fair—and I paid my expenses out of another deal."

"Perhaps; but you went out for me, so I'll pay 'em too. What do you make of the Yanks?"

"Plungers from the word go. I like them."

"Bit of a boom in Florida, I read this morning."

"There is—some boom too. I went down for a few days."

"Might as well put in some of that money. What do you think?"

"All right, if you don't leave it more than, say, three months."

"Why?"

"That's my guess. I dug into things as much as I could in a limited time."

Rumford nodded. "Thanks—I'll remember that."

Victoria—and the office—and Cassidy. Humphrey breezed in like a conqueror, telephoned his mother, made very sure that Angela and the others were well, then settled down for a long talk with his partner. Cassidy was voiceless, save for an occasional exclamation, his face rather red, his lids fluttering like a lighthouse. A dramatic and very human story, he thought, and drank in every word of it.

"So I'm glad you hustled when you got my cable. I had a bad two days waiting for yours."

Cassidy grinned. "The Liquidator wasn't particularly pleased to see me,

because the papers began to print things about Florida the week you sailed. But we were safe enough. How did you hit it off with the Americans?"

"They don't love us—but they trust us—which may be better."

"Rather felt that myself. So Cassidy and Crewe make seventy thousand out of this and twenty-five hundred out of Rumford. You've paid travelling expenses, my son. Got those cheques?"

Humphrey, trying to act as though this was an everyday matter, flattened them on the table. Cassidy did not touch them, but presently gave an incredulous little laugh.

"I suppose you realise that if you and I had cleared two thousand apiece our first year we'd have been more than satisfied?"

"That occurred to me on the way over."

"Queer how things happen. You didn't need this money—got enough already."

Humphrey laughed. "That's all you know about it. My share is earmarked already. And what I had before I didn't make for myself. How's the market going here?"

"About as you left it. Little spurt in Bats and Rhodesians. By the way, your friend Burdock came in a week ago. Was enquiring for you."

Humphrey looked up rather sharply. "Leave any message?"

"Nothing particular, but wanted to see you. Seemed off colour and a shade liverish. Looks to me like a fish out of water. I wouldn't be surprised if he was thinking of selling that place. I suggested that I understood that you'd found a possible purchaser, and let it go at that. Who is it, Crewe?"

"Mind if I don't say just yet? He is possible, in fact"—here Humphrey hesitated a moment—"he's what I would call probable. But the matter is rather delicate."

"Right. Tell me when you're ready."

"You'll be the first to know—I mean the second. I think I'll push along now."

He got away to Sussex Place, leaving the cheques in front of his partner. Potent slips of paper, these, and it seemed to Cassidy that they were earnest of more to come. Young Crewe was very much alive in his brain just now, and he perceived in him a certain quality that ought to go far—the discerning quality enabling one to steer surely over a difficult course. Humphrey was not impulsive—he had nerve—he had a poise beyond that of his age. Also there was the initiative to act quickly—which meant everything to a man of finance. A queer product this to have emerged from Acacia Villa.

"But who the devil is it that wants to buy Veering Hall in times like these?" he said to himself as he locked the cheques in the safe.

CHAPTER X

JOAN'S LITTLE PARTY

THE development of Joan Crewe along the lines of self-expression brought with it a good many variations, far more than she anticipated. At the outset it made her feel very independent. Headquarters of her own—work of her own—money of her own. She dropped in irregularly at Sussex Place, where her mother thought her a little patronising. She contrasted her present position with what it had been a year ago, and blessed the name she once did anything but bless—the name of Ralph Simonds. That her father should have acted in so free-handed a way was, in her view, now only natural. How could he have used all that money himself?

She felt, too, that there was a good chance of becoming a bigger feature in Chelsea than out of it, from which it is obvious that she had not yet grasped the inner significance of Chelsea, where the biggest figures are those who care least what others think about them. She had been privately disappointed that neither Blackwood nor Freddy Foster had made love to her. Against that there was no consolation in putting the Oakley affair—her one conquest, if it could be so called. As to the visit of Stephen she was amused, and perhaps a little touched. Stephen was so completely out of it. The more he said the more he indicated that he would never comprehend what self-expression meant to the girl he once expected to marry. What a fatal discovery they would both have made later on!

She had not liked his parting thrust about Lorimer, with whom in comparison he was clumsy, developed only in one direction, and hopelessly at sea on the true meaning of art. Yet, oddly enough, he stuck in her thoughts. She could not imagine him thinking one thing and saying another—or sidestepping some awkward question—or doing anything one couldn't take to pieces and put together again. Yes, he had all the qualities, but how few of the characteristics and tastes that appealed to her present mood. That was where Lorimer came in.

She admitted that already she was very fond of Lorimer. Perhaps it was because he never made love to her, but used to talk about all sorts of things with the whimsical humour she found so fascinating. So different from the talk of any man she had ever known. But why didn't he make love to her? He was not married. Not even engaged—so far as she knew.

She was thinking of this one morning, deliberating over it with a sort of mesmerised curiosity, the significance of which she did not begin to realise.

Such a man must be attractive to many women. His independence, apart from anything else, would make him so. There must be a girl—somewhere. That bit rather deep, and she found herself resenting it. Then what girl? She didn't know Chelsea well enough yet to be inquisitive with any success, and so far had heard nothing—of this sort—but of course young people like these had their secrets. Then, with a queerly vivid certainty, she thought of the girl Flora. Lorimer had never spoken of her since the first time. Why was that?

He came in while she was thus probing herself, and scrutinised her work through half-closed but very keen eyes. It was an effort to talk art to-day, for that morning had been very unpleasant—as unpleasant as a morning can be made by a jealous and suspicious woman when she taunts and attacks the man she is afraid of losing. Lorimer, remembering what he said in return, was regretting it keenly. His present affairs were, in fact, in a deplorable shape, and left him in poor condition to assume the rôle of teacher to anyone.

There was also another side to it, about which he felt very secretive. What an infernal habit forgotten chickens had of coming back unexpectedly to roost! They were always the ugly ones. That was happening to him now. Glancing at Joan, he felt suddenly and unreasonably envious of her, of her youth, her means, her freedom from care. What would not these mean to him to-day. Then, suddenly, he laughed. It was a shade mirthless, but still a laugh. He jerked his chin at the canvas.

“How do you feel about this yourself?”

“Rotten,” she said, with Chelsea candour. “I'd like to go back to painting tea-cups.”

“Dissatisfaction with yourself is the first proof of progress. What do you see out of the window?”

“A lot of roofs—chimney pots—a carpenter's shop—blue sky and white clouds.”

“Well, why not paint that for a change?”

She nodded, being very weary of the yellow cow and red dress. She hoped never to see a cow again—they were too baffling. This one had had innumerable legs, countless tails, a varied assortment of horns—and yet remained entirely devoid of any really bovine aspect. Then she knew that Lorimer was looking at her rather hard, and determined to find out what he really and privately thought about her work.

“Is it worthwhile my going on—honestly?”

“Of course. You'll get the knack before long.”

“How do you know?” He seemed detached and remote, as though there were a sort of veil around him. She wanted to tear this open.

“It's difficult to explain,” he said, “but I'd go on.”

“It isn't real to me—as I thought it would be.”

“Know why?”

“I wish I did.”

“You haven’t given yourself a chance yet. That’s why.”

“What else can I do? I’ve tried ever so hard—and look at that.”

“It’s because you haven’t felt enough yet in your life—haven’t got under the skin of things. Perhaps you’re too young, but I don’t think it’s that. You must feel—before you can interpret anything.”

“Is that the secret of art?”

“Art has many,” he said slowly. “That’s one of them. Without it life’s a veneer—with no extremes, and it’s the extremes that produce big work.”

This was something new, and it struck deep. Joan, trying to regard herself as it were from outside, admitted that there had been no extremes in her life so far. One could not call the Oakley affair very serious—as she saw it now.

“Sometimes,” he went on, “you can recognise in people’s faces the evidence that they have felt, suffered, aspired, been lifted up and thrown down by the powers within and around them, and they have been participating in things real and big that gripped the heart and stirred the soul. That is what I mean by extremes. And out of them come triumphs of art and music and literature that are alive with flame and suffering and joy and beauty.”

“Go on,” she said under her breath.

“But you can’t have all this without paying for it.”

“No—I can see that.” Her voice was tremulous. It seemed that curtains which had obstructed her vision were being rolled back.

“You’ve got to pay—desperately sometimes—unfairly often—but it’s worth it, even when the things you did with the most joy turn out to be the most bitter later on. There are days when nothing seems impossible, and one is full of fire and the world is one’s friend. On other days you are down in the pit, and the sky is black, and the things you wanted or tried to do stand on the edge of the pit and jibber at you.”

He stopped, looking pale and unnatural, then gave a wry smile. “Encouraging kind of address from a teacher, isn’t it?”

Joan was pale, too, and moved more than ever before in her life. This man’s soul was being unrolled before her, and another Lorimer sat revealed. She felt irresistibly drawn to him now, because he opened avenues that she was hungry to explore—whatever it might cost. Who would have dreamed what lay beneath this casual, whimsical exterior? Then she wondered if he disclosed himself like this to others—especially one other.

“You never told me before what you felt,” she said, trying not to show how much she was affected.

“You’ll learn it all yourself some day, Joan.”

There was a little silence after that, and she was thankful that she had

begun to learn it from him.

“How does one learn?” she ventured.

“So easy,” he said quietly, “so easy. Don’t suppress what rises in you. Live it—because that’s you, the real you, and is not brought about by anything you think other people expect. It will hurt—often—and you’ll look back and wonder, and perhaps regret—yes—you’re sure to regret, but you will have lived the real you. If you don’t, your spirit will dry up and wither. You’re too young for that, Joan.”

She felt mysteriously convinced that someone had hurt him grievously—or that in this moment he was bitterly regretting some mistake of his own, and it made her ache to help him. She believed in him now, utterly, in his gifts, his imagination, his skill. What might not such a man accomplish if his sky were clear and nothing jibbered at him from the edge of the pit. She would remember that picture. It haunted her already. Then, with a swiftness that startled her, she perceived how help might best be brought about. How many other girls must have done the same thing for the same reason—and been proud of it afterwards?

“I promise not to let my spirit dry up,” she said gently. “And you—if you could do what you wanted—what would that be?”

He sent a look at once grave and mocking, and put his finger to his lips.

“Promise not to tell a soul?”

“I promise,” she said, quite thrilled.

“Then I want to get out of Chelsea—out of London—out of England. I want Italy for a year—old clothes—red wine—a villa on the Ligurian coast, where you can hear people singing on the water—moonlight—the grey mountains behind and the grey-green olives on their terraces.”

“It—it sounds rather wonderful.” He was the second man who had talked of Italy to her—but this was different.

“My grandmother was Italian, so it’s in my blood. I’ve only been there twice—the first time when I was a boy. But I’ve dreamed it a thousand times. Something about it that’s—well—unlike all else. You can stop by the roadside and talk Verdi’s operas to the man who’s breaking stones. He’ll understand. The country allures you—and responds to all you feel. It seems to have feelings itself. As for creative work, it seems to roll away a stone from your imagination. You become convinced that all things are possible—and that’s the wine of life. So it means everything to an artist—if I’m one,” he added a shade bitterly.

“Then why don’t you go?” she asked, knowing well why he didn’t.

“Non sono bastanza ricco, cara signorina.” He made a gesture, the Latin in him very eloquent.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” But, she thought, how musical.

“Ways and means,” he laughed. “The curse and incentive of most of Chelsea. Queer that those who do things for the love of them generally go off the deep end where money is concerned. I’m tempted to envy the other kind.”

He talked a little while longer, giving her continual glimpses of the man she was now discovering for the first time. It all marched with what he said when they met in Wetherby’s atelier. Now she felt much older and more experienced herself, and saw in him one who only needed the opportunity to become great. That was her mood when he went away, leaving her rather surprised that he had gone no further. She glanced critically at her own easel, and determined to be candid with herself. No improvement there over her first attempt. Perhaps china cups were her line after all, at which she thought of Stephen’s question, and smiled. This being the case—though she did not accept it finally yet—could she do better than open the gates to another—whom she knew she could learn to love?

The Ligurian sea—the grey-green olives—the man who longed for them down in a pit, gibbered at by the things he had tried and failed to do—the man who thirsted for the wine of life! That picture glimmered in her mind for many an hour.

At the same time it was distasteful to admit that her own ambitions were ill-founded. That sort of confession made people smile, especially in Chelsea, where reputation was something like a bubble. But, gradually—and she wondered that she had not seen this at once—she realised what the future ought to mean. She would express herself in another and even more delightful way. The wife of a successful artist, it might be a great one—the managing of a house full of lovely things, and how lovely she would make it—life spent between Italy and England—the entertaining—mingling with other artistic lions—the public recognition—her portrait by him in the Academy—the indescribable pleasure in having a background to which she felt she could do justice. She began to visualise all this, and it appealed to her tremendously. That would be spending money in a fashion beyond criticism, and she would share in what she helped to produce.

Thus ran her contented thoughts, when there came another—not unpleasing. Flora—or whoever it was! She had meant to bring Flora into the conversation to-day, but Lorimer had swept on too fast. Well—this would be the end of that affair—if there was one. Nor did she propose to waste any regrets over Flora.

Humphrey descended from a taxi at Sussex Place, convinced that he was much more mature, worldly wise, and balanced than when he left it. That opinion was strengthened when his mother greeted him with the pride mothers

feel on such occasions, but it evaporated when he realised that once again he was in the same house as Angela. She was not visible on his arrival, and he was too wary to begin by asking for her.

“My dear, dear boy—you’re back before you expected. I’m so glad.”

“Yes, mother, it didn’t take so long after all.”

“And all went well?”

He nodded. “Yes, thanks to a bit of a boom going on over there. We’ll make a very good profit out of it.”

“Mr. Cassidy must be very pleased with you.”

“He does look rather contented. You’ve been quite well?”

“Yes, all of us. You haven’t fallen in love with some American girl?”

“Hadn’t time—I only talked to American fathers. How’s my artist sister progressing?”

“She doesn’t show me any of her work, but always covers it up when I go to the studio.”

“H’m—think she’s making anything of it?” he asked, his mind very much removed from Joan.

“I really don’t know. Of course I don’t pretend to understand art. She seems happy. Stephen has been in to see her.”

“That’s hardly the reason she’s happy.”

Mrs. Crewe laughed. “No, I don’t think it is. I’ve an idea there’s someone else—though she didn’t hint at it. You know that secretive look she sometimes wore, and it always meant something. Well, she’s got it again. It was usually some man.”

“What does Angela think?”

“She doesn’t know what to think, and of course it’s a little difficult for her.”

“Perhaps I’d better drop in,” said Humphrey, remembering that he was acting head of the family.

“I wish you would—but don’t say you’re coming. And, oh, Angela had such a pleasant surprise yesterday. She’s frightfully excited about it.”

“What’s his name?” demanded Humphrey.

“I’ll let her tell you herself.” She paused with a glance both teasing and affectionate. “Care to see her now?”

Humphrey lit a cigarette and stretched his legs. “Don’t interrupt her if she’s busy,” he said casually.

Mrs. Crewe laughed and went out. Presently Angela came in.

“Welcome to the traveller.” She put out a slim hand, looking, he thought, absolutely stunning. Nothing like that in America. “Had a good trip?”

“Just fine—as they say over there.”

“You haven’t lost much time over it.”

“No, I reckon I was pretty spry. Got any kick out of life yourself lately?”

She laughed. “Is that how they talk?”

“Some of them. I found I understood American though I couldn’t speak it.”

“Like to live there?”

“Not for a barrel of money—though I believe I could make my pile before long.”

“Speaking of piles,” she said, “a funny thing happened yesterday—even more nice than funny.”

“Corking combination that. What was it?”

“I’ve been wondering whether your going over had anything to do with it.”

“My behaviour has been nothing short of admirable. What was this thing?”

“I had a letter from the Liquidator of father’s company—and what do you think?”

“Why this torture? I’ll think whatever you like.”

“Well, the man’s actually going to send me three thousand pounds. He called it a distribution of assets at the rate of sixpence on the pound. Isn’t it perfectly marvellous?”

“Splendid fellow. Has he got any more?”

“You know,” she went on, eyeing him very keenly, “that Florida land has been sold.”

“Well—well. Bit of luck— isn’t it?”

“Yes, sold for ten thousand pounds—and I was told a year ago it wasn’t worth ten thousand shillings.”

“Some rise that—what!”

“It’s because there’s a boom on in Florida. Didn’t you know that?”

“I was not entirely unaware of it—in fact it boosted the business I went out on considerably. I stumbled on what looked like a boom in Georgia, too.”

“Did you know anything about that land? Tell me.”

He nodded. “I did, and—er—I had something to do with the sale. Might as well tell you I put that sale through myself, with the approval of the Liquidator. Saw him before I went out. Decent old bird, isn’t he, but it must be a rotten job. Has the beginning of all his letters ready printed: ‘Dear Sir, I regret to inform you that——’ ”

“You arranged it!”

“Yes, Angela, I took that liberty. You asked me, if you remember, to try and do something with the property.” He spoke lightly, aching to take her in his arms.

She stared at him, fascinated. He might have been a man from Mars. “I think that’s too wonderful. How did you do it, Humphrey?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “that boom, you know, and there was the land—and there was I—and there was a purchaser. That’s how such things are

generally arranged. And thanks for remembering to call me Humphrey, but I started in first.”

“Of course,” she said, turning a little pink, “your explanation is so complete that there is nothing more to be asked.” Then, with her head tilted at a divine angle, so that Humphrey’s brain began to swim, “Is the boom still going on?”

“It was pretty hot stuff when I saw it last.”

“Hotter than when you saw it first?”

“I haven’t much experience with that sort of animal—in fact that’s the first I ever saw—but I think the answer is in the affirmative. Yes, undoubtedly hotter.”

“Then is the land worth more to-day than when it was sold?”

“I’m inclined to think it is.”

“Then why did you sell so quickly?”

Humphrey gave it up, fearful lest some of the truth slip out and he be forced in self-protection to disclose the big idea before the moment had arrived. Only half of it had been achieved so far—though it was the most difficult half—and there was a heap yet to be done. “Tactics!” he said to himself, smiling inwardly. “Tactics, young Crewe, tactics!”

“I don’t suppose any man ever does the best possible in every deal, unless he’s a financial Napoleon—which I’m not. All I can say is that the Liquidator, when I saw him a month ago, said he would be greatly relieved and pleased—don’t forget that ‘pleased,’ Angela—to get ten pounds an acre. Well, I went out there, and—er—he got it.”

Angela was conscience-smitten. “Humphrey, I think you’re frightfully modest and extremely clever, and I’m a grasping greedy pig. Please forgive me. I’m only intoxicated with unexpected wealth—which is your doing. And I thought those shares were so much waste paper.”

“All goes to show one should be very careful about destroying papers, doesn’t it?”

“Rather. Now I’m fearfully excited and awfully puzzled.”

“What a dangerous combination!”

“I know, so it mustn’t go on. Will you take that money and do something for me?”

“Cassidy and Crewe are at your service, Angela.” He said the last word very slowly, liking the sound of it so much.

“You won’t think me foolish—I mean what I want to do with it?”

“Cassidy and Crewe merely carry out their clients’ instructions. We express no opinion unless it is asked for.”

“Then I want to buy the little dower house near the south gate of Veering,” said Angela, very earnestly and very fast. “You know it’s just outside—the last

house you pass—or perhaps,” she put in wickedly, “you were too occupied to notice it when you passed—anyway, the last house you come to before the south lodge.”

“But, look here, you——”

“You said Cassidy and Crewe expressed no opinions unless asked to,” she interrupted. “I know what you’re going to say—that Mr. Burdock won’t be willing to sell just a piece of the property. But I want that piece, you don’t know how badly, and it’s the only bit of the estate I’ll ever have a chance at. I want it for my old age, and I don’t believe it’s worth more than three thousand, and you seem to know the Burdocks quite well, and are so good at arranging sales that you ought to be able to arrange this.”

She got it all out at high speed, and paused breathlessly. It was almost too much for Humphrey, and he was wondering how to manœuvre, when it occurred to him that here was the opportunity to open direct communications with Burdock. But now he must say no more than he could help.

“You seem awfully anxious about your old age, ANG-E-L-A.”

She made a face at him. “Most women of my age are. Going to help me?”

He faltered on the brink, struggled and barely recovered himself. What a demoralising person she could be.

“I’ll see Burdock, if you say so—but I’m not at all hopeful.”

“Please don’t stop at that. See them all.”

He laughed. “Perhaps it may be necessary. I understand the property is going to the daughter in any case.”

Angela pulled down her level brows. “How nice for you,” she said frigidly. “Then there shouldn’t be any difficulty—neither of you would miss four acres.” She whisked out of the room and left him staring.

Joan turned up for dinner that night, also Mr. Crewe, who was intensely interested in all Humphrey had to say. The little man kept glancing round the table in his shy kindly fashion, thinking how seldom they had all been together like this and how very nice it was. His wife—looking most attractive, with a skin like a five-year-old, and her short golden hair—it was even more golden than in Acacia Villa, he reflected unsuspectingly—in waves that seemed to catch and prison the light, and the pretty little figure that never lost its girlish outline, and was, perhaps, more girlish than before. Joan—more concentrated and in a way more definite than she used to be, in a style of dress much favoured along the King’s Road, and which her father decided was an admirable example of applied art. He did not dream that Lorimer had chosen it with her. Angela—very fair, very straight without being stiff, her shoulders white like snow, her eyes bright, and such a look of charm and breeding on her

well-shaped face. She sat on his right, and was so glad to see him that he felt quite tender and affectionate toward her. Then Humphrey—that wonderful son of his, with new wisdom and experience, just back from his initial and very successful business trip for an important client, the first of the family of Crewe who at that age was already making a mark in the world of finance, his dark features with a certain power in them, his strong chin suggesting determination. Mr. Crewe's gentle little heart swelled with pride as he observed these four. How privileged he was! So privileged indeed that he forgot to eat, and was recalled to his dinner by his wife.

"Not hungry after your drive, James?"

There had been a slight difficulty on the way up when, coming through Clapham, he found that the distance between two trams was considerably less than it seemed, and the result made him lose his appetite for the present. But he didn't mention that.

"No, my dear, not very. I have been watching you all, and it has occurred to me that these developments in which we are taking part would make an excellent story—if one were writing fiction."

"You must write it some day, sir," said Humphrey. "How's the book going?"

"A little slowly, my boy, at the moment—which is partly the fault of my family."

"But, James, what have we done? I thought things were just as you wanted them."

Mr. Crewe smiled at her. "You've done nothing except be yourselves—which, of course, is quite as it should be. But I confess that I find my family—which naturally includes Angela—just as interesting as 'The Philosophy of Life.' Indeed, I am inclined to think that when a man reaches my age his family ought to be his philosophy. Perhaps that sounds a little obscure?"

"It sounds awfully complimentary, James."

"Thank you, Matilda. When I see you enlarging your circle, as I know you meant to; when I see Joan making a place for herself in—er—the halls of artistic fame; when I see how much my dear Angela contributes to everyone's happiness; and Humphrey going to foreign countries and doing big business with very astute people on a big scale—when I see all this, it makes me feel that I lag far behind the rest of you in accomplishing things."

"But your book will live when the rest of us are forgotten," said Angela promptly. "I'm hungry to read it. I need something substantial and solid with a lot of thought in it."

Mr. Crewe's lids quivered faintly. "I hope you will, some day. Joan, my dear, what subjects are you painting now, and do you find them inspiring? In my fiction days I always got bored with the subject before I'd finished."

“Nothing special, Dad. Cattle—figures—the view from the studio window. But I’ve only sketched them in.”

“You find your teacher illuminating?”

Joan nearly laughed out. He was much more than that, and she was already in love with him. But no breath of this had reached Sussex Place.

“Yes, Dad; very.”

“And, Angela, good fortune has come your way?”

“Yes, thanks to Humphrey.”

“Bless my soul! Humphrey?”

She explained, while a sort of glow enveloped Mr. Crewe’s spirit. How admirable, he thought. Here was Humphrey already serving the girl he hoped Humphrey would marry. Could anything be more fortunate? He wanted a long private talk with this son of his, but that was difficult with Matilda in the house.

“Capital,” he said, rubbing his hands. “I congratulate you both. Tell you what, Humphrey, you come down with me to-night. I’d like to pump you about the Americans—their philosophy of life, you know. It would be a great help.”

“Won’t you stay here, James?” asked his wife plaintively.

“Thanks, my dear, a little later—but not to-night. I find the perfect silence of the early morning hours are most conducive to—er—creative effort.”

Mrs. Crewe nearly choked. She had never forgotten the morocco-bound volume. As for those early morning hours, on the occasion of her visit he had slept like a top till nine o’clock, and there was every evidence that he did so with unflinching regularity. But since it is often a wife’s first duty to betray nothing of what she feels and knows, she only gave him an affectionate smile and expressed her regrets. In the next instant she felt impelled to say something.

“Wouldn’t it be exciting if your book were published and Joan’s first picture hung on the same day?” she remarked serenely.

Joan laughed, while Mr. Crewe felt that he was more likely to be hung than the picture.

“That would be almost too much.” This with a deprecating gesture. “Joan will arrive first, I’m sure. Which reminds me that I’ve never seen her studio. May I come in next time?”

Joan, wondering many things, said that it would be delightful, after which there was more talk till, in the middle of it, Mr. Crewe glanced at the clock and said he and Humphrey must be off.

“On the very day he arrives?” protested his wife.

“Yes, my dear; and you’ve seen far more of him during the past few months than I have. Come along, my boy.”

Humphrey remembered that drive. He froze stiff as they dodged tramcars

in Brixton and hurtled blindly through narrow country lanes further south. Mr. Crewe appeared to be following a star. One headlight did not work, complaining groans came from the gearbox, and the brakes—which he seldom touched—seemed undependable. The little man leaned back, talking cheerfully, his hands resting casually on the wheel, and was interested in everything except his driving. Near Dorking, he grazed a traction engine, and swept on southward followed by a stream of profanity from an infuriated and grimy-faced stranger. Mr. Crewe, smiling triumphantly, explained that there was sufficient mud on his licence plate to render it practically illegible.

Then the panelled study—Mr. Crewe, in his smoking jacket, with a cigarette—Humphrey with his pipe—peace—and the understanding that too rarely exists between father and son.

“Tell me all about it, my boy.”

Humphrey talked, and Mr. Crewe was quite absorbed.

“Really very remarkable. So you actually make thirty thousand pounds—yourself?”

“About that, sir.”

“An enormous sum—nearly four years’ income in about nine months. Something strikes me at once.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“Well, four of us have had at the rate of ten thousand a year for about nine months—and you alone have put it to practical profit. That’s an achievement, my son. There’s another reason I’m very glad.”

“Tell me.”

“This—that though nothing has been heard of my cousin Ralph—the solicitors wrote me to that effect last week—I still cannot make myself believe that he is dead.”

“If he isn’t it has cost him thirty thousand to lie low,” grinned Humphrey, “and I don’t believe he’s that kind.”

“It may be so; but, anyway, that’s what I feel. Your mother and Joan laugh at me and refuse to entertain the idea. Supposing he were to walk in at that door—now?”

Humphrey stared at the door. “Not a chance of it—he’s dead right enough, and later on you’ll have to try and get that letter interpreted as a will—there’s some legal phrase for it. But he’s dead. Fell over a cliff, or something.”

“Assuming that he didn’t—and isn’t,” persisted Mr. Crewe. “He was—or is—something impels me to be careful of my terminology—a man of a strange turn of mind. That is shown in the reason he gave for doing what he did. Assume that the income ceases. The situation is that I—er—have hardly yet finished my book—your mother has become accustomed to a very expensive way of living—I may tell you, privately of course, that I had to lend her five

hundred pounds last week—and Joan has been gratifying her own desires regardless of expense. Don't you see how awkward it would be if Ralph should, unfortunately, not be deceased?"

"I don't need him now," said Humphrey. "He can come to life so far as I'm concerned. I've turned the corner."

"Quite! Well, my boy, perhaps I'm too fanciful—but there you are. By the way, I think Angela missed you."

"I wish I were sure of that."

"There's no one else, from all I hear."

"I'm not ready to ask her yet, sir."

"With all that money?"

Humphrey explained, in confidence, what he proposed to do with the money, and Mr. Crewe was fascinated. "A wonderful idea, my boy!"

"It isn't that I think it would decide her, or that she could be bought, but if I can pull that off it may justify me in her eyes—I mean my qualifications."

"They're lovely eyes, Humphrey, I saw that at once."

Thus for an hour, till Humphrey, glancing at the morocco-bound book with a good deal of respect, admitted that he was very sleepy and asked if his father worked in the evening, whereupon Mr. Crewe said that he would just polish off the end of a chapter. So Humphrey bade good night and left the little man sitting in a sort of stinging silence and very much alone.

Presently he turned to his desk, and opened the book. He dipped his pen and waited, shoulders stiff, fingers poised, a look of intense abstraction on his features. Thus for some moments, quite motionless, the clock ticking out its inexorable truths. Gradually his expression changed. His shoulders relaxed. He seemed to settle deeper in his chair. A pathetic curve took possession of his lips. The pen slipped from his fingers, and with a long, long sigh he put his small face between his hands.

Joan, back in Chelsea, was a good deal impressed by Humphrey's achievement, and surmised, rather shrewdly, that the whole of it had not yet come out. It would be like Humphrey to keep back a bit of it. This affair was his method of self-expression, and it suggested that something of the same nature on her part would be very much in line.

For a few days she purposely saw very little of Lorimer, feeling that because he was considerably older than herself this matter was a serious affair. She didn't mind his being older, but rather liked it, since it helped her to persuade herself that this was not a passionate adventure like the last one. It had a definite objective. Nor did she want to put her people in the position of saying "I told you so" later on.

It seemed also a wise step to show that there was nothing to conceal, so after careful thought she gave a tea in her studio, asking her family, Angela, Stephen, Lorimer, and a dozen of her new Chelsea friends. At Lorimer's suggestion, and after demurring a little, she asked Flora Banning.

"It's much better," he said. "Too pointed if you don't."

They were at the list of invitations when he argued this, Joan nibbling a pencil, he on the lounge watching her with an expression she found it hard to analyse. They had reached the stage of intimacy which by its conscious evasion of any admission of love so surely prepares the way for it. There had been no avowal as yet, but they both knew that it was trembling in the air. And Joan was aware that tongues had begun to wag.

Lorimer was very distraught. He came constantly to the studio, staying late, and plunging into talks that took much for granted as concerned them both. As to his not having made love to her, she assured herself that this was because he was older, and found it hard to frame a petition to a girl.

Of late her lessons had gone by default, and the studio took on the atmosphere of an ante-room from which would shortly emerge a drama, full fledged and surprising. But before she finally committed herself Joan wanted Lorimer to meet her people. She liked him for withholding his proposal till after that. It was the attitude one would expect from a sensitive man who had nothing of his own.

The studio looked very well on the day of her party. Joan wore a new frock of unconventional design, which she felt was an appropriate form of self-expression. Lorimer had raided the studios of his friends and ravished them of pictures which, when assembled in Flood Street, were at least impressive. Joan's productions of the past few months were banished by mutual consent, and their banishing seemed to tell her quite plainly what Lorimer really felt about her future in art. But that did not hurt her now. A log fire blazed on the hearth. There was not too much light, and the general effect of the big room with its high roof, polished floors, tawny rugs, and array of pictures was distinctly attractive. She felt happy about greeting her friends in this setting.

The affair was successful. Lorimer did not appear till it was well under way. She blessed him for his perception, and immediately presented him to her people. Mr. Crewe, who had motored up for this occasion, was greatly intrigued by the assemblage. Such types—such evident genius—such enthusiasm! And so useful in case he knocked off a little fiction. He greeted Lorimer with the spirits of a child.

"Most interesting," he said, his bright gaze, slightly startled, resting on a girl all in black, with a skin like dusty white marble, a pair of dangling fuschias under her ears, glowing lips and large languid eyes. "Such unusual types—and all new to me."

Lorimer, who by now knew all about Mr. Crewe, and how he had subdivided his fortune, was all attention. One would be—with the source of ten thousand a year.

“Yes—there is something about a Chelsea party.”

Mr. Crewe was already aware of this. It gave him a sense of freedom and youth. He began to feel rather doggish, and was prepared to enjoy himself. Good to look at Joan—who had evidently found herself at last. Such a favourite, he thought. How nice these people were to her.

“And I understand you are supervising my daughter’s studies?”

Lorimer nodded, though the supervising was not exactly what Joan’s father assumed.

“She gives satisfaction—and promise, I hope?”

“She’s very painstaking,” said Lorimer. “It’s a long way to the top in art. As an author you will agree with me.”

Mr. Crewe, with visions of the morocco-bound book, agreed instantly. Nothing could be more true, and he was glad that Lorimer appreciated the fact.

“I smile when I think of the days when she used to paint tea-cups,” he remarked, with a wave of his hand.

“And you, sir, I hear are deep in work?”

Mr. Crewe looked a little grave, and lowered his voice. “Tell me—as an artist, and just between ourselves—did you ever—yes—you must have—embark on something with great enthusiasm and high hopes, then gradually realise that you were—well—let us call it rather insufficient for the purpose?”

“Naturally, we all do. That is part of the struggle. It’s the acknowledgement that one’s work is bigger than oneself—which is quite right.”

Mr. Crewe felt that this was the exact truth in one case that he knew of. “And you’ve felt defeated and disillusionised?”

“Very often. It’s part of the game.”

This was distinctly encouraging. “Then you think that’s no reason one shouldn’t go on—even though no progress is—er—apparent?” continued Mr. Crewe, watching the fuschia girl out of the tail of his eye.

“The greatest minds most often feel that way. It’s part of the history of art.”

Mr. Crewe felt much better. “That’s very comforting. May I say that I’m very glad the guidance of my daughter is in your hands?”

“Thank you. And if you’ll let me know when your book is coming out I’d like to get it at once.”

“Very kind, I’m sure,” murmured the little man. “Who is the long-haired gentleman in the corner?”

“A poet of the subjective.”

“I wonder where I could get his works?”

"I fancy they're not in print yet. Isn't that your wife talking to him?"

Mr. Crewe nodded, steered Lorimer into the corner, and left him there. Mrs. Crewe was a little excited with her surrounding. Her husband, noting that Stephen Hollis had just come in and was making straight for Joan, sidled toward the girl with the marble skin. Astonishing how free and easy one felt here.

"May I get you something to eat or drink?"

"No, thanks; but I'd like a cigarette."

He flourished out his case. "With pleasure. Now tell me what you do in Chelsea. I'm so interested in seeing so many young producers together."

She sent him a heavy-lidded glance, knew who he must be, and liked him at once. There was something irresistible about Mr. Crewe. His kindness, his sincerity, his entire lack of affectation were so obvious. She understood all this perfectly.

"You're much more of a producer than I am. Don't you write serials?"

"I did—once." There was a tone of regret in his voice.

"Did you do one called 'The Stain of Blood'?"

"I'm afraid I must plead guilty."

"Why guilty?"

"That story was not—er—really my type of work."

"Didn't you like writing it? I lost a week's sleep over it."

"My dear young lady, I loathed it."

"So few of us know what is really their best work," she murmured. "I think many thousands must have revelled in that story. I did. It clicked."

"What is your work?" he asked, anxious to get away from "The Stain," and gazing fascinated at the fuschias. Whatever made her think of them?

"I make coloured drawings for 'The Little Folks' Annual,'" she drawled, a thin trail of smoke escaping from her marble nostrils. "Commercial stuff."

Mr. Crewe felt disappointed. He had never seen anyone look less maternal. But, still, she was very attractive. "Is that what you want to do?"

She shook her dark head. "If you asked nine out of ten people here whether they were doing what they wanted, they'd say no. It's what we talk about most. Is your daughter going to stick to art?"

Mr. Crewe knew no reason why she shouldn't.

"I wonder. You know—or perhaps you don't—that she and Lorimer are—well——" She broke off with a laugh. "But of course you must know it—if you're her father."

Mr. Crewe felt that being a father didn't imply much general knowledge of one's children nowadays. "To what do you refer?" he asked very politely.

"We're all waiting for the announcement. I think they're awfully well matched. Who's the man talking to her now?"

“A Mr. Hollis,” said Mr. Crewe, experiencing a slight dizziness. “An old friend of the family. But, my dear, surely you don’t mean——?”

“Such things often happen in Chelsea. It’s the magnetism of art, I suppose—and frightfully sudden—generally.”

He took a quick look about the room. Lorimer was at the other end, with a dark girl who seemed anything but happy. Joan busy at the table. Mrs. Crewe and the poet had been joined by others, and a hot discussion was proceeding. Angela and Humphrey were deep in conversation, Humphrey apparently uninfluenced by what Mr. Crewe recognised as the atmosphere of the place. He knew why Humphrey had come. There was a buzz of voices, and the room swam in a faint blue haze. All these young people trying to do something, create something, just as he was. Even Joan.

That brought him back with a jerk, but it would never do to reveal that he was vastly surprised. Presently the marble-faced girl drifted away to talk to a man in rough tweeds. He had a short brown beard and a Victorian air. Then he caught Stephen’s eye. Stephen had just been captured by the poet, but was apparently uninterested in poetry, and stood, brows pulled down, resembling a puzzled bulldog. He grinned at Mr. Crewe, and came over.

“I haven’t got a word in edgeways—pace is too hot for me. What’s an iambic?”

“A form of verse used in the classics. Why?”

“I thought it was a new Italian car.”

“Well,” smiled Mr. Crewe, “this is Chelsea, you know. I find it rather intriguing—just a taste of it. A great change for Joan, eh?”

Stephen nodded, looking not overpleased.

“I was very surprised to hear just now that she and Lorimer are rather talked about—in the nicest way possible, of course.”

“Do you mean they’re engaged?” demanded Stephen bluntly.

“No—no—not yet. I’m sure she would have told us; but it’s apparently to be expected. Do you know him—that tall man talking to the dark girl? I had a chat with him just now; most intelligent and understanding. It seems such a long time since you were rather devoted yourself, eh, my dear boy?”

“I—I don’t fancy the chap,” said Stephen chokily. “Notice the girl with him, how she’s watching Joan?”

Now that his attention was drawn, Mr. Crewe did notice it. He saw it repeated twice, with the least pulling down of the dark brows and a tightening of the large mouth. It seemed out of place in this gathering, expressing resentment, with something almost primitive in its intensity.

“Yes—how odd—but you know, Stephen, that all these young people are living under the high pressure of creative work, and no doubt they are different. By the way, have you seen any of Joan’s work?”

“No, sir,” lied Stephen, determined to keep clear of that.

“Neither have I—I’m sorry to say. And of course they’ve a common ground in art, and probably feel very keenly. Of course there’s a great deal of freedom.”

“Perhaps too much freedom,” growled Stephen. He had been much upset at finding Joan alone with Lorimer on his first visit, and had not got over it yet. He pictured Lorimer making love to her, and the picture remained provocatively alive. Not jealous of Lorimer, but merely wanted to kick him into the Thames. Then, again noting the dark girl’s expression, he disentangled himself from Mr. Crewe, went to Joan and asked to be introduced. He did this very deliberately, not quite knowing why.

Joan, whose nerves were tight strung, was rather amused and took him over. “An old friend—Mr. Stephen Hollis. Stephen, this is Miss Banning.”

Lorimer got up, met the newcomer’s eye, murmured something and moved off toward Mrs. Crewe. Stephen sat down.

“I’m a rank outsider, so please tell me about some of these people.”

She told him a good deal—who the man in tweeds was, and the girl with the marble skin. He listened, nodding.

“And Mr. Lorimer?”

“I thought you knew him.”

“We’ve only just met.”

“There’s nothing very special,” she said carelessly. “He paints a bit and teaches drawing and colour.”

Stephen thought it a shade too careless, and took a chance.

“He teaches Miss Crewe, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.” It sounded very curt.

He smiled. “What I hear is that the lessons may not last much longer.”

Flora looked at him hard. “What do you hear?”

“That the engagement may be announced any time.” He said it casually, but with difficulty, following every shade of her expression. “I suppose lessons often end that way down here.”

She blanched visibly, then gave an unnatural little laugh. “Where did you hear that?”

“From her father—just now. Someone told him. It was the first he’d heard of it, too.” Stephen realised that he was taking an extraordinary course with a complete stranger, but the conviction grew that he was doing the wise thing. If he was wrong—well—he was content to be wrong.

“Does her father approve?” The voice was low, but very tense.

“He hadn’t had time to disapprove. Of course she’s her own mistress. Do you know Mr. Lorimer well?”

Flora nodded.

That nod was very significant. It made him feel as though he were walking on a crust of hot lava and might break through.

"I never quite understood her coming here," said the girl presently.

"It's a free country."

"I know—but you see she can't paint. And"—there was a slight pause—"she never will."

"May I ask who told you that?" It was exactly his own conclusion, unexpectedly confirmed.

"Mr. Lorimer."

A world of meaning in this, and Stephen missed none of it. He could leave the thing now, and let the leaven work. Queer to come here to see the girl he loved—even though he couldn't see much of her—and spend his time apparently stabbing her in the back. But he felt desperately sure that any course was justified that would save her from the wrong man. Then he heard Humphrey's voice at his elbow, turned to speak to him, and, when he looked back, found that the girl had disappeared. A moment later he made for Joan.

"Good-bye." He put out his hand.

"But you're not going already?"

He laughed. "I can't absorb any more atmosphere." Then, with a straight look, "I say, Joan?"

"Yes?"

"Give me three minutes."

She settled on a divan, he beside her. "Anything on between you and Lorimer?" he asked with startling abruptness.

"Have you a right to say that?" she replied, flushing.

"Yes," he said doggedly. "Nothing's changed with me—I've got your letter yet."

"A good deal has happened since then, Stephen."

"I know it, but that makes no difference. It never will."

"Never is a long word."

"It suits the case. Aren't you going to answer my question?"

"It has nothing to do with you," she protested.

"Yes—everything. I haven't tried to impose myself lately, have I?"

"No," she admitted.

"And this"—he glanced round the room, "it isn't you."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Just that these surroundings are no more natural to you than to me."

"I'm sorry you don't like my friends," she parried, "and I've chosen these surroundings."

He shook his head with complete stubbornness. "Don't do it, Joan."

"Do what?"

“You know perfectly well. It’s a jump in the dark. You don’t know anything about him—you can’t in this time.”

“I know enough,” she flashed.

“From whom? You hate me for talking like this. But it isn’t good enough. I wanted you before there was any money—and I want you now. Give the money away if you like. It makes no difference to me.”

“I don’t believe it would,” she admitted involuntarily.

That was honest of her, but it put him no farther ahead. “Look here,” he urged, “you think I don’t know anything about art. Well, perhaps that’s right, but I know a man when I see one. You feel that I don’t fit in with your present ambitions—and that may be right, too. But whether it’s Lorimer—or anyone else of that type—I can’t stand by and see you doing something I know you’ll be sorry for. I wouldn’t lie to you even to win you, nor am I going to hang about and whine, but you can bank on me—when you want me. Good-bye, Joan.”

He went off, leaving her rather troubled, a little touched, and determined to show him how wrong he was. She wanted to talk to Lorimer, but found he had gone too. Also Flora Banning. Why was that? She had had a chat with Flora, and tried to be as impersonal as possible. Then, counting on Lorimer’s coming back later, she devoted herself to her guests.

The Crewes and Angela lingered after the rest had gone, and there was one of those family half-hours that usually follow a party—and would be so illuminating if they got outside the family. Joan knew by her father’s expression that he was thinking hard—and knew why. Her mother, who had heard nothing, still palpitated with a quite new sensation of seeing Joan in her new setting. They talked for a while. Then Humphrey went off with Angela—and Mr. Crewe began at once.

“My dear,” he said, “I’ve had no opportunity to tell your mother. Matilda, I’ve just heard a rather exciting piece of news—or is it gossip, Joan?”

“What’s the news?” Mrs. Crewe jumped to the natural conclusion.

“About Joan and Mr. Lorimer.”

“Nothing is settled,” said Joan hastily. “I wanted you to see him first. Who’s been talking?”

“I gathered it from a very striking-looking girl with a marble skin, and _____”

“Joan!” gasped her mother, “you don’t mean that——”

“I don’t mean anything yet. How do you like him?”

Mrs. Crewe felt that this was something of a concession. “I never thought of him in that way. Has he proposed?”

“No,” said Joan blandly, “but he’s going to.”

“God bless my soul!” breathed her father. “How very extraordinary!”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I didn’t mean what you think, but your way of putting it leaves me rather—well—what do you think of it, Matilda?”

Mrs. Crewe was not prepared to say anything as yet. She was impressed by the afternoon, it being the first of the kind for her. And she had liked Lorimer—a refreshing social change. Also she felt rather helpless about Joan. At the same time she thought that matters were moving too fast for security.

“We want nothing but your happiness—if we can be sure of that,” she murmured doubtfully.

“Of course,” put in Mr. Crewe, looking at Joan with great affection, “there is this time the bond of art, which did not apply in—er—the last case.”

Joan smiled, the art being so much on one side. Then she explained, quite fully, for this was due them, and felt carried away while she talked about what she wanted to do for Lorimer and what it would mean to her.

“I was rather a fool last time,” she admitted, “but now I’m not thinking entirely of myself.”

Mr. Crewe was touched. “That does you credit, Joan. Naturally I should want to see Mr. Lorimer before anything was decided.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“We would expect to know about his family and—er—associates. I assume that he has learned the source of your income? I say this because—well—you know what I always think is possible.”

“James, is it necessary to be so disturbing?”

Mr. Crewe shook his small head. “It would not be fair to you if I did not impart my feelings in this matter. You and Joan have invariably pushed away the idea, but with our child considering such a step I feel bound to reiterate. Let us suppose that Joan has just been married to Mr. Lorimer—and the income ceases. Would she be content with such an establishment as he can provide—if one calls it that? I hate to be disturbing, but there you are.”

“Can you imagine Ralph Simonds coming to life again and saying ‘that money is mine?’ ” demanded his wife.

“From what I know of Ralph I can imagine anything. Well, let us hope I’m wrong. Joan, my dear child, good-bye. You’ll promise to keep us fully informed in this matter?”

“Yes, Dad.”

He kissed her very affectionately and went off with his wife. Joan curled in a divan and sat for a long time, thinking hard. She would have felt so much strengthened in her own mind if they had opposed her. She glanced at the clock, wondering when Lorimer would turn up, but the only arrival was the woman who came to tidy the studio. After that she tried to imagine herself without the ten thousand a year, and the picture made her feel cold and naked.

She was thrusting it away when a knock came at the door.

"Come in, Philip." She was hungry for the sight of him. Flora Banning stood at the threshold, very pale.

"I want to see you for a few minutes."

"Yes?" said Joan uncertainly. "Please sit down."

The girl slipped into a chair, put her elbows on her knees and stared into the fire for a moment.

"I'm going straight at it," she said huskily, "so you can think anything you like. Do you intend to marry Phil Lorimer?"

"I—yes—I think so," stammered Joan.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"You're rich—we all know that."

Joan's eyes rounded. "You can put it that way if you wish."

"I'm twenty-eight—and earn very little—and have nothing else. I want to tell you something."

Joan, not answering, studied the girl's face. She knew what was coming, and steeled herself to oppose it. "Mine!" she whispered to herself.

"About four years ago," began the husky voice, "a man came to live in Chelsea and I met him very soon. He was a little older than me, attractive looking, and the Chelsea sort. He was as poor as myself—but that didn't matter in Chelsea. We seemed to know each other at once. He was imaginative—or perhaps fanciful—and always expecting to do big things, but didn't. It took him more than a year to find out that he couldn't. I don't pretend to be anything myself—only a commercial artist. What he found was rather bitter for him and he became horribly depressed. He used to come to my rooms at all hours to be cheered up. Often he hadn't had enough to eat, and we shared what I had. The result of this was—well—what you can imagine. We were alone in the world and in trouble. It isn't fair to judge anyone else till you've been like that yourself."

The voice trailed out. Joan, whose heart had begun to race, waited in astonishment, then made a gesture. She said nothing.

"I learned to love him. To everyone but me he was gay and whimsical and casual—but I knew otherwise. He used to talk for hours about dreams and visions that I knew would never be realised, because he wasn't big enough. You can't kill genius by semi-starvation. He described himself as being in a pit, with his failures mocking him from the edge of it. I used to lie to him because I loved him, and say his day was sure to come. The more he leaned on me the more I loved him, and till the other day we were everything to each other—do you understand—everything. We couldn't marry. What would have been the use?"

“Go on,” said Joan in a tremulous whisper.

“There’s nothing more to say. You came here, and the change began, though not at first. I think he wanted to play straight with me—if he could, and it meant that he was earning something. You see his pictures won’t sell. It may be all right to express yourself if you’ve got something worth expressing. Then, during the second month, I knew. I don’t think he loves you. It’s not in him to love anything—really—but the picture of his possible self—which isn’t possible. You and your money gave him the dream and the vision again, and the chance of Italy, about which he talked for half the night sometimes. Perhaps he doesn’t love me either. You wonder why I still care if that’s the case. Well, it’s because he’s mine—all I’ve got—and I bought him with everything a woman can pay. That’s my side of it. What’s yours?”

There was no breakdown, or cry, or any other emotion than was expressed in the tenseness of her face, the pathos in her large dark eyes, and the vibrant feeling in the voice that never lost its level husky tone. She now sat, quite motionless, demanding in her gaze to know what Joan was going to do. There was neither anger nor revolt, just the manner of a woman whose dispassionate utterance took on the quality of fate.

Joan, in the presence of this, felt stunned at its inevitableness. She showed no consternation, and, in that she had paid nothing herself, was humbled at the contrast. Truth had come into the studio with Flora Banning, truth of such sharpness and proportion that rebellion had no place here. How puny were her own emotions compared with those of this girl who had given all, and only asked to continue to give. Her answer was characteristic of the best in her.

She put her arm round Flora’s shoulder, and kissed her.

“Can you doubt what my side of it will be?”

The girl looked at her strangely, and went away without another word. Silence again—and the whole world changed. The thing Joan had pictured was gone like her vanished guests. She felt lonely, shaken, and a little afraid. Then, moving as in a dream, she put some things into a bag, took a long stare around the studio, knowing that she would never see it again—this place where she had so misread herself and others—wrote on a card the name of the agent through whom she had leased it, and fastened the card to the door.

At the corner of Flood Street and the King’s Road she hailed a taxi.

“Forty-seven, Sussex Place,” she said.

CHAPTER XI

HUMPHREY'S DAY

MR. BURDOCK came into Humphrey's office with the air of one who finds existence not over attractive. During the past few weeks life had been a little difficult, as it is apt to be for any man, however well intentioned, when his family discern that they have made a tactical error. But Burdock liked Humphrey in spite of what had happened. He hoped they would always be friends, and that when he did acquire a son-in-law he would like him half as well. So now he subsided into a chair, gave the young man a glance that would have been whimsical were it not quite serious, and took a letter from his pocket.

"About this," he said, "I don't believe I can consider it."

"I thought you mightn't, but it's a very small acreage, and outside the Park. I don't fancy you'd miss it."

"Who's your client?"

"A single lady, good family, and all that. Wants a place for her old age, she says."

"She knows that house well, I assume?"

"She must, from the way she speaks, but hasn't seen it since your time. Anyway she's quite taken with it."

Burdock shook his big head. "Sorry—but you can see for yourself. It would be breaking up the estate, and a possible purchaser of the whole place might object. By the way, have you heard any more in that direction?"

Humphrey pressed his knees together to steady himself. "You mean the client I spoke of?"

"Yes."

"As a matter of fact, I saw him yesterday. I told him what you had paid, but he won't touch it at that."

"What I paid wasn't out of the way."

"Well, I happen to know he hasn't that much to put into it."

"If you can get an offer from him I'm prepared to consider it," said Burdock with a touch of finality.

"He spoke of that too. He won't go a penny over forty thousand."

Burdock pushed out his lips. "I paid fifty, and the place has been kept up. You could see that."

"I did—but country property isn't what it was two years ago. And you can't chop up Veering and make anything out of it. It's too remote. I'd say

forty was a fair enough figure to-day.”

Burdock reflected. He was a very rich man and getting richer every year. A few thousands more or less meant very little. And what might be called the atmospheric condition of Veering Hall had of late oppressed him greatly. He wanted to get rid of the place, buy a town house, and put his wife in a position to launch Eleanor in good style. Someone had told him of a dowager who was prepared to do it perfectly—for a consideration. That was one side. On the other he surmised that Humphrey had found a purchaser, and didn't want to drop any more money than was avoidable.

“You understand the place will carry itself?”

“My client wouldn't consider it unless it could.” Humphrey was very brief and businesslike, but if Burdock could have known what was going on inside that young man he would have been startled.

“Yes. And it's quite clear—no mortgages?”

“Lord Veering discharged them with the proceeds of the last sale and put the balance into his company. Look here, would the separate disposal of the dower house affect your client?”

“That might be left to him to deal with as he saw fit.”

“H'm—yes. I suppose it doesn't happen to be the client for the dower house?”

“No—nor the same sex.”

The big man took out his cigar case, examined it thoughtfully, and slid his broad thumb over the glossy leather. Then he gave a grunt.

“I'm asking fifty—your man says forty—I'll split the difference with him. That's fair enough.”

Humphrey, mustering all his daring, shook his head. “Nothing doing. I tell you he hasn't that to put into it. Split it again, and I think I may do business.”

“How are Rhodesians to-day?”

“Strong. Your lot up two points on the average. Want to sell?”

Burdock made a little noise in his throat, which was the only sign of satisfaction he ever gave. “Look here, I'll make it forty-three thousand and not a cent less. Take it or leave it.”

Humphrey gulped and wondered why little red spots began to swim across the office wall. Then he pulled himself together.

“I think I can do business at that figure. What about possession?” His mouth was dry and he had a savage desire to yelp.

“Say two months—from date of acceptance—but I fancy we can do it in less. My people want to come to town.”

“Contents as per inventory at time of your taking over from Lord Veering?” murmured Humphrey, sending the other man a quick glance that he tried to make not incredulous. The thing was too amazing for belief—but it

was the big idea nearly accomplished.

“Yes—pictures and all that—with the exception of one of Lady Veering that I’d like to send to Miss Veering with my compliments—if you think she’d accept it.” He had the manner of one who is relieved and sorry at the same time. “Better put this in writing, hadn’t I?”

Humphrey was quite touched. “I know she’d welcome it very much. Nice of you to suggest it.”

He summoned a typist, and the thing was done. Burdock folded his copy of the letter and stood for an irresolute moment. Then he pushed out his hand.

“Well, Crewe, I assume we can take that for settled?”

“I think so—yes, we can. I’ll write you in a day or two.”

“I wish—well—damn it—I suppose we can’t have all we wish. Good luck to you.”

He went out. Humphrey, in a semi-dazed condition, reached for the telephone and demanded Sussex Place. He got Angela at once.

“I say, lunch with me to-day?”

“Is it important?”

The voice sounded rather cool, but that didn’t worry him now. “I hope you’ll think so. It’s business.”

“The dower house?”

“Yes.”

“Can I get it?”

“The Berkeley at one,” he laughed. “Hold your horses till then.”

He hung up the receiver and began a series of calculations, perfectly useless, as he had already made them mentally a thousand times. Forty-three thousand! A big figure, but it didn’t frighten him. Against it he put thirty-five thousand—twelve hundred and fifty—say another thousand, being half of the year’s profits of the firm—his share—leaving five thousand five hundred to be found. His private income would supply some of that. He laughed aloud, remembering that less than a year ago he had tried unsuccessfully to wangle a hundred pounds.

The whole thing was incredible—yet true. Striding along Piccadilly he was full of hope, determination, and the joy of life. What a wonderful place this world was—when you had achieved something off your own bat. What would it be like though without Angela? Why think of such things?

Five minutes later he looked into her face and swore that she got more adorable every day. This in spite of the fact that her expression was a little strained. How natural, he thought.

“Well,” he said, “there’s news for you. The unexpected has happened again.”

“I can have the house?”

“You can get it at the three thousand. I saw Burdock this morning.”

She only nodded. Odd that she should be so distraught. She seemed relieved—but wistful.

“Did Mr. Burdock mind selling it separately?”

“He jibbed a bit at first, but we got round that.”

“You must be very clever at that sort of thing,” she said.

“Thanks.” Humphrey began to feel a shade uncomfortable. “It’s quite an important sort of thing, isn’t it, for me?”

“I suppose so. How soon could I go over the house?”

“Any time after two months. You don’t want it at once, do you?”

“I might—I’m not sure.”

“Going to let it?”

“Perhaps. I—I can’t say yet, and I’m awfully obliged for what you’ve done. I should give you a commission, shouldn’t I?”

“We might leave that till later on,” said Humphrey, shakily.

“If you prefer.” She opened her bag. “I brought the cheque with me. Shall I endorse it?”

“Not now, please. There’s no hurry. Papers to go through first.”

She laid the bag on the table and sent him a strange look.

“I saw the Liquidator this morning.”

“Yes?” Humphrey felt what was coming now.

“Well?” Her voice was very uncertain. “He told me what surprised me very much.”

“Did he?”

“That you bought the Florida land yourself.”

“That’s quite true,” he said flushing.

“But you told me that you’d arranged the sale.”

“That’s correct too. I both sold and bought—for him and myself.”

“I’ve been reading about Florida in the papers ever since. Have you got the property now?”

“No, I sold it.”

“While you were out there?”

He understood in a flash. “Yes, practically at once. I say, Angela, is this a cross-examination?”

“I won’t say anything more if you’d rather not.”

“That’s all right. Drive on.”

“Did—did you make much profit? I know about the boom.”

“I think you can call it good,” he said uncomfortably. “Anyway, enough to buy a cottage for—er—my old age.”

Angela’s temples grew pink. “Then considering all the circumstances—and that my father ruined himself over that property—and what he did at the end—

wouldn't it have been—well—reasonable if you had sold it for the Liquidator instead of yourself. If that sounds selfish try and put yourself in my place. I told you about it first, didn't I?"

This, following the exaltation of the previous hour, hurt him dreadfully. Quite plain what she felt, and from her angle it was only natural. But how hopeless to attempt his justification to a girl who knew nothing about business. It was all mixed up now—his efforts—ambition—love—and what she thought of him. Nor was this the hour in which to reveal the rest of the big idea. Watching her troubled and lovely eyes he summoned fortitude to wait a little longer.

"I'm sorry you feel that way. You told me you expected nothing out of those shares, and you had a trunk full. Then, when you did make something—unexpectedly—you seemed pleased and satisfied. Now, because I make something too, you—well—you think I haven't played the game. Is that how it stands?"

"I think any woman would look at it that way," she murmured, trying to forget that this was his lunch and that he looked extremely capable and attractive.

"Supposing," said Humphrey slowly, "I were to tell you that it was because I did make something that I was able to get you the dower house?"

"I don't understand."

"It's this way. I was successful in Florida, and on account of that am able to put through a fairly large transaction with Burdock. As a result, he's turning over the dower house to me, and I'm transferring it to you—without any advance in price this time."

She coloured and bit her lip. "But why couldn't you buy it in that case directly for me. Am I frightfully stupid?"

He would have given anything to tell her what he thought she was. This being out of the question, he only smiled.

"I thought you might not want your name mentioned till the thing was closed. Burdock knew me, seems to like me, so—perhaps—anyway he agreed."

Angela, staring at him, jumped to exactly the wrong conclusion. Easy enough, she decided to see what was in Burdock's mind—and most likely someone else's too. But in that case why should Humphrey turn over the dower house to her. She would never dream of living in it if——

"No, I didn't want it mentioned. How did you know?"

"I jumped at it," he said serenely.

"Of course I don't know anything about business, and I'm awfully obliged about the house, and I do congratulate you on making a lot out of the Florida land." She got it out all in a breath, feeling that she had been exacting and

ungracious.

Humphrey beat down his emotions with a mighty effort. He wanted to tell her that he hoped she'd congratulate herself later on—if one could put it that way—that he adored and worshipped her, and had been slaving for this and her as he never expected to slave for anyone. She, looking at him, wondered why a man of whom she had become very fond, and in whose future she had great faith, should be so obsessed by the trading instinct and desire for profit that he missed what was an opportunity for something fine. Her father would not have missed it. Then, with a sort of regretful affection, she realised that her father had been a poor trader.

It must be admitted that for the next few days Humphrey shamefully neglected his duties to the firm. He interviewed his solicitors, the same ones who acted for his father and the estate of Mr. Ralph Simonds, arranged with them to act for him in the purchase of Veering Hall, and saw to it that his own name did not appear in the matter as yet. That would occur when they finally transferred the property to him—if, as he smilingly reflected, they ever did. He slept very little, puzzled Cassidy a good deal, and at Sussex Place fell into the habit of staring at Angela with a sort of adoring incredulous look that she intercepted more than once.

She thought of Humphrey very often now, there being in him a kind of fearless modesty that was very attractive. One couldn't help contrasting this possible suitor with one's father, and she was keenly aware of their difference of type. One could be fairly prophetic about the late peer, but not about Humphrey, who seemed to have the instincts of the well-bred without the somewhat hampering restrictions of tradition and custom. That, in her mind, left him free for accomplishment. And without doubt he was clever. There was nothing passionate in his manner, but she could not misinterpret the strength of his dark features and the latent fire in the eyes she encountered so often.

He had been, she thought, very wise and tactful about Joan. Not once since the night when she returned dry-lipped and shaken from Flood Street, and slipped into her old room like a wounded thing, had he made any reference to that event. Nor did Mr. Crewe, who tore up to town when he heard of it, thirsting for the blood of Philip Lorimer. Mrs. Crewe had found it much more difficult to avoid the subject, harking back to it with well-meaning maternal solicitude, till Joan flared up and violently declared that she never wanted to hear the word Chelsea again.

The girl was infinitely more shaken over this affair than the Oakley one. She had meant to be judicious and not conceal the man, but exhibit him to her parents. The parents had seemingly accepted him. Then of a sudden he stood revealed, and claimed by another woman, who had made good her claim in no uncertain fashion. Had Joan been older, less simple-minded, and more weaned

from the moral standards of life in Acacia Villa, had her parents been less unsophisticated, had Humphrey been a young man about town, she might have received Flora Banning in another fashion, and declined to give up Lorimer on account of his immediate past. But that he should have kept Flora in ignorance of his purpose, should have told her that he knew Joan would never paint—and knew it from the first—that he should have drawn upon Flora’s self-sacrifice with the identical arguments he used to Joan, all that was too much. She was infinitely hurt and felt spiritually betrayed. He had made a mockery of her hopes.

Stephen seemed mixed up in this affair, because he had spotted Lorimer as a bad egg. How did he know? He couldn’t know, but just jumped, and jumped straight. It struck Joan now that all through these last months Stephen had been dignified and consistent. He displayed a rather fine sense of pride. Honest too—honest as the day. Said he didn’t know anything about her kind of art—and asked which was the cow. She smiled when she thought of that. Well, it seemed that she didn’t know anything herself. She remembered thinking that Stephen in her studio looked rather out of place. But no more than she had proved to be, though what made him look and actually be out of place was his unashamed honesty. He didn’t assume a knowledge or perception that wasn’t in him. He said he liked a good picture, evidently meaning he didn’t see any there. Right again!

Stephen, in fact, came out of it exceedingly well. When her money arrived he didn’t follow in its wake. When he called at Sussex Place and left a message and got no answer, he did nothing. At the studio he was his old sincere and simple self. Now, with her ten thousand a year and a considerably enlarged store of experience, Joan wondered why she had not perceived his real quality before. It evidently needed a few bumps for that. She thought she would like to apologise to this man who had wanted her before there was any money.

Humphrey, in his office, was trying to concentrate on work when Burdock was announced. When he came in he looked in a way happier.

“Just come from my solicitors. That thing is all right now.”

“You got the cheque?”

“Yes—and now the matter’s done I’m glad of it. A week after I bought the place I knew it was a mistake. It took my wife and daughter longer to find out. How’s your affair going?”

“As well as I’ve any right to expect,” grinned Humphrey.

“Lucky dog. Look here, you haven’t told me who your client is.”

“No, but I will very shortly.”

“Well, of course it’s none of my business, but”—here he hesitated and

looked a shade sentimental—"I hope it's someone who will understand those tenants and make 'em satisfied. They want the old days over again—though they can't have 'em. But it's important, if one lives there."

"I rather think that my client, or at any rate his wife, is that sort," answered Humphrey, trying not to chortle. "She's country bred."

"Good. I don't suppose the dower house will be sold now?"

"I fancy not."

"Sorry not to oblige you in that matter."

"Quite all right," Humphrey assured him. "We'll leave that to my client."

Burdock got up. "Well, I just came in to say that you've carried through this transaction in a very businesslike way. We're up in town for a week, looking for a house."

"No one down at Veering?"

"Only the servants."

Humphrey stroked his chin. "I think my client might like to have a walk over the place this afternoon."

"Right. I'll wire you're coming."

Burdock went out. The door had hardly closed when Humphrey snatched at the telephone, snapped out a number and waited impatiently.

"That you, mother?"

"Yes, Humphrey."

"Do you want the car to-day?"

"No, dear. Do you?"

"Yes, please. It's important. Is Angela there?"

"Yes. Do you want to speak to her?"

"No. Put her in the car and send her here. Will you do that at once?"

"But I don't know that she can come. Wait a minute."

"She's got to. Tell her it's business—dower house. And I say, mother, put lunch for two in the car."

"But, Hum——"

"Don't let your first-born starve—I'll explain later. Fearfully busy—frightfully sorry."

He hung up the receiver, eyes bright, a choky feeling in his throat. He was living at a tremendous rate. It would be make or break with the big idea within the next few hours. Life was the most magnificent thing imaginable.

A little later Cassidy came in, took one swift look, and roared with laughter.

"What's the matter with you?" grunted Humphrey.

"With me—nothing. Why, man alive, it's crazy with excitement you are. What's her name?"

"Tell you to-morrow—and I'm not excited."

“It’s myself that wouldn’t trust you with a fifty-pound deal this day.”

Humphrey chuckled. “You’re right. Not big enough for me to-day.”

“Who’s your client for Veering Hall? Come on, out with it.”

“Tell you to——”

“Lady in a car waiting for you, sir,” said a voice at the door.

Humphrey seized his hat and bolted. The big car was there, Angela looking very puzzled on the back seat. Humphrey beckoned; the chauffeur stepped down.

“I won’t want you. Go back to Sussex Place and tell Mrs. Crewe that we shall not be in for dinner.” He got in and took the wheel. “Come along, Angela.”

“But I thought you——”

He patted the seat beside him. “Don’t think—just come. Clients are expected to follow their agents’ advice—also they are committed by the acts of their agents.”

She took one look at him, and obeyed. “I think you’re the most extraordinary agent,” she murmured. “What next?”

“Tell you in exactly two hours,” he said, as the car glided forward.

Say what one will about the transports of hopes fulfilled, and those transcendent moments when the object of one’s love surrenders to the avowal of it, there remains the fact that in the hours of uncertainty which precede the established fact there lies a charm not inferior to anything that follows. The knowledge that one loves—the provocative question of whether one is loved in return even though the indications be favourable—the explorations of the beloved one’s face for little signals and symbols of that to which one aspires—the half-yielding, half-unconvinced moments when the future sways in the balance—the ecstatic dawn of reality over what has been heretofore a dream—the perception that one may speak more warmly, more impetuously, without offence—the hand that is not withdrawn—the little ineffable sigh for which there are no words in any language—these things are not to be matched by aught that comes later. It is given to men and women to participate in them but once. And Humphrey was enough of a psychologist to get hold of a good many of them.

“Where do you think of going?” asked Angela, trying hard to look unconcerned.

“Dower house, of course. This is a business trip—of sorts.”

“But I know it very well. I didn’t want to see it to-day.”

“Then we’ll have a look at something else,” he said cheerfully.

“What else is there?”

“Well, Burdock was in the office this morning and told me they were all in town for the week. So since it’s an extra fine day, and we’re both young, especially you, I thought you might like to have a squint at the old place and Martin and Mrs. Coggins.”

Angela bit her lip. “It’s awfully good of you, Humphrey, but it’s rather hard.”

“Sooner not go?”

“If you’d asked me before we started I’d have said no. But now that we have started——”

“Good. That’s what I hoped.”

She thought it all rather strange, and a glance at his face gave her no clue. If the truth were told, every bone in her was aching to get back to Veering for even a few hours. Humphrey did not know that, but had made an astonishingly good guess. Rather comforting to be with someone who settled things for one after years of settling them for oneself.

“I say,” he remarked presently—they were getting clear of London now, and the car moved more quickly—“what do you think of our lot—really? Go ahead, and don’t mind what you say.”

“Your lot?”

“Yes—we Crewes.”

“I think myself very happy to have found the family,” she murmured, taken aback.

“Go ahead and particularise. I’m frightfully keen to know. It won’t go any further.”

She laughed. “You mean I’m to work through the lot?”

“That’s it.”

“Well, I will, because there’s nothing that isn’t nice to say. Your mother’s a dear, awfully good to me, doesn’t treat me like a secretary at all, and is rather lonely for your father. And I think she’s a bit disappointed because she doesn’t find society what she expected.”

“Full marks for that. Now the governor?”

“He’s a darling. I can’t say any more than that, can I? And I hope he’ll always stay the same and never change.”

“He won’t—and amen to that. One of the best ever. Now Joan?”

“Far too good for the men she was interested in, but in a way she needed something like that to discover herself. If she’d been opposed it might have been serious. She’s uncovering all sorts of qualities now. Know who she’s thinking about?”

“Hollis?”

Angela nodded. “She talked about him last night for a long time, and thinks because she has money it will keep him away. She’s really impressed with him

now.”

He tucked that away for future reference. “And Humphrey?” he grinned. “What about Humphrey? Quite unworthy, but still——”

“I don’t feel equal to the occasion.”

“Then I’ll start you off. You see him as a decent sort—has a certain ability—of a commercial type of course—will probably be successful—a bit pigheaded and fond of his own way, which is nothing unusual at his age, and rather apt to take a purely business view of matters which if—er—he had had the advantage of, let us say, an ancient lineage he might have looked at differently.”

“I didn’t,” she said hotly.

“Didn’t what?”

“Say that.”

“I know you didn’t. I did.”

“It’s very incomplete and unfair,” she protested. “I never thought anything about lineage—it doesn’t matter two straws. And as to taking a business view, I think you were perfectly right—if you mean that Florida business. You won’t get anywhere if you don’t,” concluded this astonishing girl.

“So I’m actually acquitted on that count?”

“I behaved horribly,” she confessed, “and am glad you made a lot out of it. You did, didn’t you?”

“A tidy bit. I’m putting it into land.”

“Not Florida?”

“No—something much more attractive.”

“I hope you’ll do awfully well.”

“It will break my heart if I don’t. Shall we pull up here for lunch? And, look here, I told mother we wouldn’t be back for dinner.”

She sent him a wavering glance. “Is this all part of an agent’s duty?”

“The best part. What about under that tree?”

He never felt so near to her as during that picnic. Here, in the blessed country, she seemed to draw added life and charm from sun and wind while he gazed at her in sheer content. What she thought could not be determined by him, but, whatever it was, the light in her eyes shone very clear that day; and, listening to her, there appeared to open before him gate after gate all leading to the secluded walks and scented beds of some fairy garden. It was a wonderful hour, and he never forgot it.

Then on till Paxton Junction slid by, and they wound slowly through the narrow streets of a village, halting opposite a low, stone-walled, tile-roofed house beside which was a parterre of all the old favourites, larkspur, roses, pinks, honeysuckle, lilies, and the rest. The blinds were drawn behind polished windows, but the place looked a fit abode—for anyone.

“The home of your old age,” said Humphrey. “Congratulations!”

“Isn’t it charming?” she remarked serenely. “Can’t you see me with my knitting and a white lace cap?”

Humphrey strangled a wild desire to embrace her where she sat, for the village grocer was standing outside his shop in a white apron only a hundred yards away, regarding the car with a fascinated eye.

“It’s Tubbock,” she exclaimed. “I must speak to him.”

She waved a hand. Tubbock came forward, his face glowing, and it seemed that some kind of mysterious communication was in action, for in a few moments the car was surrounded by villagers all wanting to know how Miss Angela was, and whether she had come to stay now that the Hall was sold.

She turned to Humphrey, pink and bewildered “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“Tubbock says that the Hall has been sold!”

He nodded, trying to look unconcerned. “I heard it had been.”

She was full of puzzled questions, but something in his face stopped them. Presently he got the car into motion, turned past the south lodge—where Mrs. Coggins glanced out of a tiny window and emitted a loud cry—and swept up the drive. Half-way between lodge and Hall, where the rhododendrons made a screen, he jammed on the brakes.

“Shall we leave the bus here and have a walk—say up toward Blackbird Spinney?”

“How do you know about Blackbird Spinney?” Her voice was a little high and breathless.

“Had lunch there,” he said calmly, though his heart was beating fast.

She looked at him again and smothered her curiosity. A clear fine day it was, and as they got higher the lift of the Downs became visible, lying in a soft blue mass against the southern horizon, distant and infinitely tender. He watched her as they climbed, noting how she yielded to the welcome this land, these trees, and fields and coverts seemed to have for her, and wondering what it must be like to feel for this memorable place the love she must have for it. It was a sort of private and almost holy moment, and he made no move to intrude. Then, with the colour bright in her cheeks and her lips parted, they seated themselves at the edge of the spinney, and counted the hen pheasants sunning themselves in security. So much more mercy and beauty in this than in the slaughter when he was here last. But he did not think of that for long. Angela turned to him, and he knew that the greatest moment in life was approaching.

“Don’t you think I’m rather a patient person?”

“I’m thinking a great many things. Patient about what?”

“When did you know that the estate had been sold?”

“Definitely—a short time ago. Not many days.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“Would you mind asking that a little later on?”

She was quite puzzled. “Why not now. It’s all so strange. Months ago you came down here and didn’t tell anyone. It sounds as though anything connected with Veering ought to be kept from me.”

He shook his head. “Is that the way you feel?”

“How else can I feel?”

“I hope you won’t presently. Yes, I did come down here, and my visit resulted ultimately in the sale of the property. That was what I hoped when I came.”

“Who bought the place?”

“I did,” he said shakily.

She was utterly amazed. “You—you bought it!”

He nodded.

“With the money you made out in Florida?”

“The same old money.”

She sprang to her feet, staring incredulously. “You bought my father’s place with that, and his loss was your gain!”

“If I hadn’t made the money I couldn’t have bought.”

“Then is this your speculation in land?”

“That’s it. I—I say, Angela!”

“Oh——Oh!” Her face had changed, and she regarded him with hostile eyes.

“I didn’t buy it for myself—but a client.”

“Who was the client?” The voice was suddenly weary.

“You.”

There was a long, long silence. Humphrey held his breath, then very gently and as though she were a small child he took her hand.

“Angela, I want to tell you something.”

She sent him a look quite dumbfounded, and at the touch of her—the first time he had ever touched her like this—his heart began to race.

“Angela, sit down a minute.”

She sat, not looking at him now, but at the many roofs of Veering that nestled in a mass of green a mile away. And no one could have interpreted that look.

“I’ll begin at the beginning—back last year—when you came to us. I was a bit frightened of you then, but tremendously attracted. Soon after that I knew.”

“Knew what?” she quavered.

“That I loved you.”

It seemed to Humphrey that he had said something more important than

anything ever uttered in the world before. She did not speak, and, seeing her lids droop, he hurried on, desperately anxious to put his case quickly and well. And her hand was still in his.

“It was like that almost at once. You didn’t know, and I didn’t want you to because—well—I wasn’t anybody, though I had some money. You were used to somebodies—and I knew that just money would do.”

“Did you think that of me?” she said very gently.

“Of course. I felt it so much that I swore to demonstrate myself somehow. Then I got the big idea—at least I hope you’ll think it was that.”

“The big idea?”

He made a gesture toward the Hall. “It was after I learned about that—and what happened. I thought about it all the time. That put the Florida scheme into my head. I loved you more every day, but dared not say a word. When Burdock asked me down here I came, because I wanted to see the place and find out what I was up against. I wanted it for you.”

She looked at him now, and there was that in her eyes which stirred his very soul, but he hurried on just a little longer.

“Before going to Georgia for Rumford, I got an option on the Florida land thinking I might make a turn. I made a good one—thirty-five thousand pounds. That three thousand you got was part of what I paid the Liquidator.”

She made a swift impulsive gesture. “But why didn’t you tell——?”

“One minute and I’ve done. I didn’t count on anything—I didn’t dare—till it was actually accomplished. When you wanted to buy the dower house I nearly let the thing out, but that helped me open business with Burdock. He wouldn’t subdivide, as I expected, but was in a mood to sell out altogether because his people don’t hit it off here. I knew that too. This morning”—here his voice faltered a little—“the transaction went through. Burdock got his money. No one but the solicitors knows who the buyer is—not even Cassidy. So,” here he moved close to her and captured the other hand, “the solicitors are waiting for the name in which to make out the deeds. I’ve tried to prove myself, darling. Will you take me too?”

Silence, while he hardly dared breathe. Then a strange thing happened. She looked at him for an instant with eyes full of trust and tenderness and wonder, wrenched her hands free, hid her face between them and burst into a flood of tears. He put his arm round her, holding her close, knowing that in this moment something was unsealed, a fount of joy and pride and love, a river that would flow through his life, helping and healing, limpid and lovely. It was the essence of the love that women can bear for men.

“Angela!” he whispered. “Don’t cry. You must never cry again.”

The storm in her breast subsided. She looked up, pale and transfigured, more than ever exquisite to him because the woman in her was revealed, and

through the mist of her eyes he could see into her very soul. What he saw there was the fulfilment of all desire.

“Humphrey,” she said in a ghost of a voice, “is a little bit of it true, just a very little bit?”

Their lips met and clung. And that told her.

CHAPTER XII

THE UNEXPECTED

IT was quite another world half an hour later when they found old Martin watching a brood of young partridges under a hedge. They saw him first, and had a hasty consultation.

“What shall I tell him, Humphrey? He’ll be frightfully suspicious to see us here alone.”

He kissed her where she stood. “What do you think would please him most?”

“About us?”

“If there’s anything more interesting I’d like to know.”

She got pinker than ever. “But, Humphrey, I can’t.”

“Remember when you called me that first?”

“Yes—you were going to Florida; and, oh, what about Martin? He’ll see us in a minute.”

“If he saw me kissing you he wouldn’t need to be told much. Let’s try that.”

She raced away from him. Martin wheeled, and his face became a panorama of surprise and pleasure.

“Well, well, miss, this is a treat. We’ve been wanting to see you this long time.”

“Thank you, Martin. Are you well?”

“Yes, miss. I needn’t ask about you, seeing the colour you’ve got. I thought London folk was most-ways pale.” He touched his cap to Humphrey. “Mr. Crewe was telling me about you last winter. Poor kind of winter it was, to be sure.”

“Yes, but it’s going to be a splendid summer.”

“Likely enough, miss.” He hesitated and looked at her doubtfully. “They do be saying in the village as the Hall has been sold. You’d know. There’s a lot of talk this way and that.”

“It has, Martin. You’re quite right.”

The old man scratched his head. “Happen you know who’s bought the place? We don’t take kindly to this chopping and changing, and it makes a heap of difference down here.”

“Well, Martin,” she said gently, “Mr. Crewe bought it.”

He blinked and stared, then gulped audibly. “That’s good news, sir. A lot better than I feared.”

“And after Mr. Crewe bought it he gave it to me,” added Angela, her face very sweet and tender.

Martin rolled his eyes at them each in turn, became a dusky red, and examined them as though they had just arrived from Mars. He tried to speak, produced a series of strange throaty sounds, and finally snatching the cap from his head, jumped on it in a sort of ecstasy. Then, without a word, he set off in a lumbering trot for the village. He made no salute, bade no farewell, but projected himself homeward across the fields, his arms doubled up, his head forward, burdened with news that would burst and destroy him unless he unloaded it at once.

“I think,” said Angela, looking at the dwindling figure, “this is the most wonderful day in his life.”

“Same here,” announced Humphrey as his arms went round her again.

He demonstrated this fully, with illustrations, in the shelter of the hedge, whereupon she demanded truce, and they went hand in hand toward the car. So up the curving drive till they stopped under the mullioned windows of the Hall. No lovemaking here, except what looks can convey, and a great understanding on the part of Humphrey, who had a very accurate conception of what Angela must be feeling now.

She was silent for some moments as they stood on the terrace from which a wide lawn dipped gently southward, then turned to him a gaze full of confidence and devotion.

“Dearest, can I ever repay you?”

“Easily—so easily—though the debt’s on the other side.”

“How?”

“Marry me soon,” he said.

To state that Mrs. Crewe was delighted when she heard the news on their return long after dinner, would be underpainting the fact. Joan was just as greatly pleased. Humphrey, feeling much as Hannibal must have felt after crossing the Alps, tried to put it calmly, but on this occasion his control failed him. His mother kissed Angela a great many times, patted her cheeks, said a multitude of loving foolish things, and decided that after all her London season had not been a failure. Then, when Angela slipped off with Joan, she had the whole story over again, and Humphrey did not mind repeating himself.

“Are you going to live there, dear?”

“Yes, we think so.”

“Can you afford it—the place sounds so big?”

He explained that the place could be made to pay its own way, and added that his income from the firm—if all continued to go well—would be

sufficient, even without the ten thousand a year.

“So if Simonds comes alive again it won’t matter,” he concluded.

“It would, very much, to me,” she said with a shiver. “And, oh, I wish poor Joan were as happy as you—and I ought to telephone to your father.”

“Too late—after eleven.”

“He works late—he’ll be up.” She had not forgotten the morocco-bound book, but that stage must have been passed long ago.

There was no answer for some time, then the voice of a sleepy maid informed her that Mr. Crewe had been in bed for more than an hour. Was he to be wakened?

“No,” said his wife. “Ask him to call me in the morning.”

Humphrey laughed when he heard that. “I don’t believe he’s burning as much midnight oil as you think.”

Mrs. Crewe did not say what she thought, and got back to Joan.

“You know I wouldn’t be surprised if she was ready to finish up by marrying Stephen.”

“Good chap, and doing well.”

“Yes, but I’m afraid he’s too proud.”

“Of what?”

“Well, she didn’t want to marry him when she had no money, and he wouldn’t make a move now.”

“You think he loves her?”

“I’m sure he does.”

“Then he’s a silly ass to let the money stand in the way,” objected the practical Humphrey.

“He’s awfully sensitive.”

“If he asks himself what other people would say, he’s wasting time. People don’t care a hoot.”

“Perhaps, but you could hardly persuade him of that. Angela says that Joan is really in love with him this time.”

“If they’re in love with each other it’s up to them.”

“You wouldn’t do anything to help it along?”

“Not a thing. You’d mess it up. Thankful I wasn’t helped along—might have botched the whole show. I say, do you suppose she’s in bed yet?”

“If she isn’t she ought to be, and you too. Don’t disturb her. Good night, Humphrey, boy. Kiss me. I’m very proud of you.”

She lay awake that night thinking about Joan and whether there was anything that might be wisely done in the matter. Joan was changed of late—gentler—more thoughtful—revealing charming sides of herself—less cool—more loving and lovable. She had been enquiring about Children’s Aid work, and meant to spend some of her time and money on it. Her mother longed for

the days she would spend over her own children, but was thankful meanwhile.

It began to appear to Mrs. Crewe that London, as known from Sussex Place, was far more dangerous for girls than from Acacia Villa—so many predatory men who were never heard of when one lived say west of Gloucester Road and north of Kensington High Street. For herself the golden key had not turned in the social lock. Mayfair and its charmed circles were just as far away as before. Lady Rockwood had introduced her to a few friends, and let it go at that. So had the friends. How affable people could be on first acquaintance—and how different thereafter. How many of them were openly on the make. What invitations to invest—even at lunch. How few other invitations. So many of these people had money troubles. A favourite topic. Out Ealing way one's associates said nothing about their money troubles. Odd how many things were apparently beyond the reach of women who wore sables. This and a lot more. Finally she fell into a tired sleep, and dreamed about Joan and Stephen and the Honourable Mrs. Humphrey Crewe.

Her husband came tearing up to town next morning—a Saturday, and the Stock Exchange closed. He kissed his wife, kissed Joan, kissed Angela several times, and slapped Humphrey on the shoulder till his arm ached. His eyes twinkled, his face was a picture of pleasure.

“My dears, I'm so happy—so very happy about this. You're going to carry out your promise, Angela?”

“Yes; but it looks as though Humphrey had put you up to it.”

“No—really—quite my own. I had a faint glimmer of hope at the time, but nothing more. And you, Joan, must be delighted to keep her?”

“I think it's perfectly splendid,” said Joan, feeling privately lonely and out of it.

It was a little difficult. The contrast was rather poignant, and they all felt sorry for her. To Mrs. Crewe came the vision of Stephen, and she made up her mind to get in touch with him, very impersonally, of course, and quite casually. He ought to be aware that the coast was clear. Then Mr. Crewe rubbed his hands and got back to the affair of the moment.

“I think we ought to celebrate. Let us dine together.”

“That would be very nice, James. You'll stay in town to-night?”

“Yes, my dear. This is the real thing and philosophy can wait.”

She did not ask how the book was getting on, nor did anyone else, books at the moment being negligible. Mr. Crewe was thankful for that. He was also thankful that this affair of Humphrey's had come off before anything happened, and wished it were so with Joan, because during the past few weeks the ghost of Ralph Simonds had been floating about at his elbow, asking what he had done with his time and money. Queer that this should be so when Ralph was probably at the bottom of a ravine in the Maritime Alps with a large rock

resting on his stomach. Mr. Crewe sighed a little, and metaphorically rolled on another rock. But he had seen the solicitors only a fortnight ago. They had no further news—only more money.

“Where will we dine?” asked Joan.

“I thought of just here, if nobody minds. I’d like, perhaps, to say a few words that one couldn’t in a restaurant, and my dress clothes are in the country.”

Mrs. Crewe said that would suit admirably, and went off to see the cook. Angela and Humphrey appeared very occupied, so Mr. Crewe suggested a little walk with his daughter. Months since he’d had one. Now that he came to think of it, he had hardly ever been alone with his daughter. They went down Bayswater Road, crossed into the Park, and found a comfortable spot beside the Serpentine.

“Of course,” he said, “you’re very large in my mind just now, my dear. I hesitate to speak because—er—Mr. Gorimer——”

“Lorimer, Dad.”

“Mr. Lorimer struck me rather favourably. Also I feel that we have both left you too unprotected.”

Joan bored a series of neat holes with her parasol. “It wasn’t your fault—only my own. It’s rather difficult for a girl to explain what she feels when everything becomes possible, and she’s free to do what she chooses, and she tries it and finds she’s over-rated herself. You couldn’t understand that side of it.”

The little man gulped. As a matter of fact he understood perfectly. Suddenly he had a great longing to unburden his soul of the secret that had been weighing it down for months. Joan was in the same case as himself, disillusioned, sobered, reminiscent. Who more likely to sympathise and get hold of the right end of the thing? He looked at her, perceived the real Joan—of late emerged from its shell—and gulped again.

“We’ve both had—er—a slap in the face, my child.”

“You mustn’t worry about that, Dad, I’m getting over it.”

“I mean something quite different. Myself!”

“Yourself!”

“Promise not to tell a soul—even Humphrey or your mother?”

“Yes.” She was greatly puzzled.

“Then I’ve had a bump too—a hard one. I felt all that you did and found that I’d over-rated myself too.”

“You can’t mean the book?”

“There isn’t any book,” he said gently, “and there never will be.”

“But, Dad, I thought it was nearly finished.”

“I am, not the book. It isn’t begun. My dear, it’s strange for one of my age

to be confessing like this to one of yours; but for some time past I've needed a confession very much. Your mother is so busy with social affairs—Humphrey so prosperous and successful—and your—ah—your art to occupy you—that it did not seem possible for me to tell anyone. So many kind enquiries about my work—everything just as I wanted it down there—all that I had longed for—the study, the rabbits, and perfect peace—and then the gradual realising that I wasn't big enough. It's been a little hard sometimes to smile and be cheerful, and of course I ought to be very thankful to Ralph—but there you are. Months gone, and nothing done!”

So wistful was his face, so pathetic the look in his eyes, that it made her want to cry. She patted his hand.

“Dad, you've been perfectly marvellous to us all.”

“Well,” he said slowly, “perhaps I may have discharged some of the duties of a parent, but when it comes to developing what I thought was my higher self I—well—there simply wasn't any. And I haven't so many more years left to work in, Joan. That's the depressing part of it.”

“You're only forty-eight,” she said stoutly, feeling nevertheless that forty-eight was a terrific age.

“Thanks, my dear, for the ‘only,’ but the fact remains, and if one hasn't arrived at forty-eight the inference is obvious. My only hope now is that I've been mistaken.”

“How mistaken?” It seemed a queer thing to hope for.

“With regard to ‘The Philosophy of Life,’ frankly I thought it was something one could get between the covers of a book. I begin to doubt it now. It seems to be something simpler and more tender and less—well—laboured, if I can put it that way.” He paused for a moment, his eyes moist. “Perhaps it's something we learn from each other, a thing that we live rather than write about, and could never get out of a reference library—even the London. So in telling you all this you'll see that forty-eight has its aspirations and mistakes as well as twenty-two—but not the same chance of readjustment.”

“Dad, you're a perfect dear,” she stammered, greatly touched, “and no one ever had a father like me. We all adore you. Is there nothing I can do?”

“Just keep a little closer to me in the future. I'm aware,” he added hurriedly, “that I haven't given you much chance lately, but I'm going to change all that.”

“Would you like me to go back with you to-morrow?”

“That would be just right,” he said gratefully, “and, please, Joan, not a word of this to anyone. I told you—well—I don't know why I told you—but I feel ever so much better now.”

Early that afternoon Stephen Hollis was setting out for his golf club when he met Mr. Crewe on the doorstep. The little man shook his hand warmly, and enquired how he was.

“Well, thank you, sir. And you?”

“The same. Now tell me what you were going to do this afternoon.”

It was quite obvious that there was a reason for this the first visit that Mr. Crewe had ever paid him, and Stephen lied promptly.

“Just off for a walk, sir. Care to come, or would you prefer something else?”

“If you’ll remember that my legs are not as long as yours I’d like a turn in the Park.”

Stephen, now convinced that something was up, agreed at once. They were half-way round to the Marble Arch when Mr. Crewe picked out a shady bench.

“Things going well with you, my boy?”

“Yes—even better than I expected—in a business way. Good chance of a junior partnership next year.”

“Excellent—capital! We haven’t seen anything of you lately. I think the last time we met was in Chelsea. What unusual types.”

Stephen, nodding, began to perceive the drift of things.

“You know—or perhaps you don’t—that Joan has—er—given up art?”

Stephen, who had discovered the card on the door twenty-four hours after Joan put it there, nodded again.

“I heard that she’d changed her plans.”

“Yes, she’s at home now, I’m glad to say.”

There was a little silence, then Mr. Crewe took the bit in his teeth. He had been thinking hard for the last hour or so and it seemed to him that nowadays young people were pigheaded and foolish. Here were two of them, each wanting each other, and kept apart by a silly something they thought was pride. As he now saw life, it was much too short for that kind of pride. Happiness was the thing. And since they jibbed at making each other happy, he was going to have a shot at it no matter what happened.

“What’s your philosophy of life, my boy?”

“Eh?” grunted Stephen, a little confused.

Mr. Crewe laughed. “You haven’t told me, but I think you’re all wrong.”

“You mean about Joan?” countered the young man bluntly.

“About Joan—precisely.”

“Well, sir, things have changed in more ways than one—though I feel just the same. I didn’t mind hanging about Acacia Villa, but——”

“You’re hanged if you hang about Sussex Place, eh?”

“That’s it.”

Mr. Crewe took out an amber cigarette holder six inches long with an

amberfied fly in the thick end, inserted a specimen of the cheapest kind of gasper—which he maintained were the only ones with any taste to them—and struck a match. With the holder tilted up from his small mouth, and his hat on the back of his head, he looked very arresting and doggish.

“Did it ever occur to you,” he asked thoughtfully, “that money—a lot of it—all of a sudden—is an expensive thing?”

“Expensive?”

“Yes—quite. First it’s apt to cost you some old friends, the ones that somehow you don’t replace out of the new lot.”

“But would real friends allow it to make any difference?” said Stephen imprudently.

“What about yourself?” demanded Mr. Crewe, the amber holder oscillating like a semaphore.

The boy flushed. “I didn’t look at it that way.”

“I think you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself,” went on the little man in the most friendly manner possible, “downright ashamed. If you decline to associate with people who have money, you—upon my word, I’m surprised at you.”

“I’m very much in love with her, sir,” said Stephen miserably. “I always have been. You know that she put me off for six months, but before the time was up she had ten thousand a year. That tore it. I’ve got about twelve hundred. She made other—er—friends, too. I didn’t think I was missed. Nor could I stick that last lot she was with, and I’m a fool about art.”

“I’m inclined to think that there are a lot of fools about art—of both sexes,” said Mr. Crewe, sucking studiously at his gasper, “but you’re not included. And if you are in love with Joan why the mischief don’t you tell her so? I find—at any rate it’s always true in serials—that no woman is antagonised when a man tells her that he’s in love with her, no matter what sort of man he is. She’s touched, and feels all the better for it—even if she has ten thousand a year. In fact, my boy, they like it, and the average female cannot be antagonised in that way. As to Mr. Gorimer—if he’s in your mind—I may say that he’s rather less than non-existent so far as Joan is concerned. I have left him”—here Mr. Crewe puffed hard and looked as fierce as a King Charles’ spaniel—“in no doubt of my views in the matter. So I think it would be a good act if you were to drop in at say nine-thirty to-night and have a chat with her.”

Stephen brightened considerably. “You really think that, sir?”

“I’m sure of it. And would you mind making no reference to our happening to meet this afternoon? Now suppose we went on to the Marble Arch and listened to some of those interesting Anarchists. Their philosophy of life is extraordinary.”

When the gong sounded that night and they all went in to dinner, the spirit of Mr. Crewe was seething with the milk of human kindness. He felt that he had done a fair afternoon's work, and was now considering what he should say when he proposed the health of Angela and Humphrey. It seemed a little difficult to express what they all felt without at the same time emphasising the contrast with Joan. He wished very much that he had told Stephen to come before dinner, in which case the double event might have been possible. He was tremendously proud of Humphrey, so proud that it did much to soften the grim fact that he would shortly have to confess his own literary failure. It helped a good deal that Joan knew about this—and understood. Now, looking at Joan, meeting her softened and sympathetic eye, it was hard not to confess what he had done in the Park. On the way into the dining-room he had squeezed her arm and nearly let the thing out.

He was, unexpectedly to himself, rather silent at first, and had a great many novel sensations. He saw himself as the temporary husband and parent of these others, playing a part that would only last for a given time. Then the curtain would be rung down. He wondered if he had done the best for them, especially in the matter of money. No question in Humphrey's case. But the others? If Joan hadn't had ten thousand a year she would probably have married Stephen months ago. If Matilda—well—dear Matilda—it had been a delightful change for her, even though she had begun to look wistful and undirected. As for himself, this last nine months had been a poignant revelation—a shattering of dreams—a dissolution of ambitions. He felt like a nut without a kernel. Now the thing for them all—except Humphrey—was to make better use of their money, lengthen their vision, and do some good work outside home. But he would suggest that in a week or so. Not to-night. The thought cheered him greatly, he being the kind that sheds his own troubles in considering those of others.

When dessert was on the table, he got up, filled his glass, and surveyed the two with pure affection.

“My dear girl, my dear boy, what shall I say? It's very difficult, there being so much I'd like to say. Angela, God bless you. Your being here has meant everything to us. Always so charming, so thoughtful, and understanding. And that it should begin with an advertisement! How indicative of the power of the Press! You're going back home to the pheasants and—er—the peasants, and we'll miss you very much. But you have a London home, always, in Sussex Place. And you, Humphrey, it seems only a little time since I was waiting downstairs and your dear mother was—er—upstairs, and the doctor came smiling and said, 'It's a boy, Mr. Crewe, a fine big healthy boy,' and——”

“Please, James, please!” said Mrs. Crewe, rather pink.

“Quite, my dear, quite; but look at Humphrey and see how right the doctor

was. Well, my boy, I'm aware that we men shouldn't pay compliments to each other, but you'll forgive me this time. I won't do it again. When your mother and I think of what you've accomplished in less than a year, it amazes us. It was less than a year ago that I couldn't find you that hundred pounds you wanted. And I'm very glad you took your profits out of the Americans, because what with war debts and golf and—er—various matters with which I'm not very well acquainted, they seem to be getting rather more than their share lately. I will conclude by saying that in the days when I used to write serials I depicted many a successful young man winning the girl of his heart—which doesn't always follow in life but is absolutely essential in a serial—yet never have I depicted in my pages any young man so quickly successful as yourself. It wouldn't be credited. Once again, my dear boy, bless you both, and may the halls of Veering—er—Hall soon resound to the happy—er—peals of childish laughter.”

Whereupon Mr. Crewe, remembering what the romantic hero did in his serial called 'The Magic of Love,' drained his glass—it was his fifth that evening—snapped its stem very neatly and sat down.

It was Angela's turn to get pink. Humphrey got red. Mrs. Crewe, missing the significance of the broken glass, sent her husband a slightly anxious look. He could take so little without feeling it. Then Humphrey rose, jerked out something about being the happiest man in the world, owing all to his father's generosity, made no reference to the halls of Veering, and sat down abruptly. After which Mrs. Crewe suggested an adjournment to the drawing-room, where Joan showed them the game of fan-tan, beloved of the slant-eyed Oriental. It was an immediate success, and they were in the middle of it, Mr. Crewe keeping one eye on the clock, when a visitor was announced. Mr. Crewe put down his cards, winked at his wife, and sent Joan a beaming smile that he tried to make as intelligible as possible.

“Now I wonder who that can be.”

“The gentleman says he's a friend of the family, sir.”

Mr. Crewe chuckled, and at that moment the clock struck nine. “The boy couldn't wait,” he said to himself. Then, aloud, “I think it must be for Miss Crewe.”

“No,” said a dry voice in the hall, “no mistake. May I come in?”

They all turned simultaneously. There was an instant of appalling silence—and Mrs. Crewe gave one sharp loud scream.

Mr. Ralph Simonds stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT THEY GOT OUT OF IT

ONE could hear the clock tick, while the five stared at him with a profound and fascinated interest. No mistake about it whatever. There he was in the flesh. He had apparently the same amount of blood as before—but no more. There it was, the same long fish-like face that meant so much and betrayed so little, the same cool contemptuous eye, the same bony figure, the same width all the way up. The corners of his mouth were twitching ever so faintly. He advanced three steps and stood waiting.

Joan felt rather sick and weak at the knees. She hated the sight of him. Mr. Crewe was surveying the visitor with a horrid and mesmerised attention—as one would survey a powerful stranger who was about to kick away the chair on which one sat. Humphrey, on the other hand, had begun to grin. He was the only one of them in any position to do this, and the fact made his grin the wider.

Angela, for her part, did not know what to do. She knew at once who the visitor was, and knew also what his arrival involved. She saw the dreams of the family of Crewe dissolving into mist—all except Humphrey's, the member in whom she was most interested. In consequence of this she conceived a violent antipathy to Mr. Simonds, and ached to ask him what he meant by it. But he hardly looked at her. Then Mrs. Crewe, her mouth still open, her expression that of one who is about to take an anæsthetic, got weakly to her feet and put out a timorous hand. It was like saying "how do you do" to the dead.

"This is—is a g-great surprise, Ralph." Her voice was very small and tremulous. "We—we were afraid something had happened to you. In fact we—we thought you had passed away in France."

Mr. Crewe made a hasty and deprecating gesture. "No, Matilda, I never really credited that. There was no news we could call official. And Ralph certainly never sent word that he was dead—I mean the fact was never established to my satisfacti—that's to say, you'll remember that I always told you that——"

A muffled sound escaped from Humphrey. He advanced, his face a medley of conflicting emotions, in which mirth was painfully apparent, and put out his hand.

"I'm afraid Uncle Ralph won't think much of the welcome he's getting. How do you do, sir? You're looking much stronger than you did a year ago."

The young man's voice was remarkably natural, but Mr. Simonds indulged in the least suspicion of a smile.

"Thank you, Humphrey, I am. Better than I've been for years."

"How do you do, Uncle Ralph?" quavered Angela, her lips very dry, and feeling horribly depressed at the news of his improved health.

"The Honourable Miss Veering, Ralph," added Mr. Crewe as an afterthought. "She's one of the family now—or will be very soon."

"Eh?" Mr. Simonds fixed a glassy eye on Angela, who looked so fearlessly back at him that he rather liked it. "Going to marry Humphrey?"

Angela nodded cheerfully. "Yes, isn't it nice and aren't you going to congratulate me?"

He made a formal bow. There was something about it suggesting that it was their funeral and not his, but that he was ready to approve anything that would reduce the cost of living.

"I'm glad to know that Humphrey feels sufficiently sure of the future for marriage, and I wish you well."

This sounded prophetically ominous, and it sent a shiver through Mrs. Crewe and her daughter. Mr. Crewe took it without flinching, and felt oddly pleased with himself at having in the past refused to believe that the golden rain would fall for ever. But, at the same time, there were several very serious questions in his mind. What could one get for a second-hand car, for instance, one slightly the worse for wear. Humphrey however, seemed quite unaffected.

"That end of it is all right," he said, sticking out his chin, and looking, thought Angela, very fine and determined.

"Well," replied Mr. Simonds, "it's your end."

There followed a perceptible gap—a lull—in which at any rate five brains were working very fast.

"The last we heard of you was that you had gone off on a trip through the Maritime Alps," ventured Mr. Crewe presently. "Was it a—er—successful trip?"

"Fairly so, James, only fairly so. The scenery is impressive, but the country has no commercial importance. A little farming is done in poor soil, the people are intelligent, and there are more rocks than anything else."

Mr. Crewe remembered how he used to try and picture his relative at the bottom of a ravine with some of those rocks piled on top of him. How brutal—and yet—he argued now—how natural! Then he remembered the morocco-bound book and felt sick at heart. Finally it struck him that after all he was now possessor of a small country house and could always earn enough to live in it. At that he had a touch of his old satirical humour.

"How do you like this house, Ralph. Bit of an improvement on Acacia Villa, eh?"

Mrs. Crewe thought that this was like playing with a live shell, and her husband had gone mad. Why ask for trouble? Joan thought the same thing. She was thankful she had got a good many clothes in the last few months, and wondered how long they could be made to last. Humphrey, who missed nothing, chuckled audibly. He had begun to enjoy himself.

“Yes,” said Mr. Simonds, after a long circumambient stare, “it’s a nice house, but a very big one.”

“And so comfortable,” put in Mrs. Crewe in a valedictory tone.

“Been here long?”

“We came practically at once, after getting the wonder—the surprising news from the solicitors. Joan helped me to choose it, then James went to live in the country. Nothing like a change, is there?”

“No,” said Mr. Simonds. “Even a short change makes a decided difference with most people.”

She sent him a sickly smile. “The solicitors were splendid—and so helpful to James, especially Mr. Butters.”

“Butters is a good deal of an ass,” responded the visitor, “but not more so than most of them. I saw him this morning.”

Mr. Crewe pictured him talking to his solicitors, and it was not a pleasing picture. Nor did he quite like the way in which Ralph was responding to efforts on the part of Mrs. Crewe that were at any rate polite. He felt a throb of resentment. Ralph was a very rich man and, for him, not much the poorer in spite of the last three months, but he didn’t own the earth—or the Crewe family either. And he must know perfectly well how this most ill-timed reappearance of his had affected everyone. Much more delicate if he’d simply written, without coming himself to do a bit of gloating. The more Mr. Crewe thought about this, the more truculent he became. And, after all, there was nothing more to lose. So he pulled himself together and straightened his narrow shoulders.

“I think, Ralph,” he said, with a certain dignity, “that under all the circumstances something is due us from you. What’s more, I don’t mind saying that your tone and attitude do not strike me at all favourably.”

Mrs. Crewe blinked. Mr. Simonds did not blink, but looked at his cousin with some interest. That was the curious thing about him—he didn’t mind people being short with him, but seemed to like it a good deal better than the somewhat fawning attention so many of his relatives thought wise to bestow. James, however, had never bestowed it, and he felt reasonably sure that James never would.

“Something more?” he asked almost affably.

“Yes, Ralph, something more. And I don’t mean in a financial way.”

“That’s fortunate,” murmured Mr. Simonds. “Perhaps you’ll kindly

enlighten me.”

“With pleasure.” Mr. Crewe inflated his chest, and prepared to empty his mind of a good deal that was in it. And he wanted the family to hear him too.

“I’ll put the matter very straight. We are in our present condition and circumstances owing to your—Angela, my dear child, if this is at all difficult or painful to you, please don’t feel compelled to stay, though, all things considered, I’d rather you would, since Humphrey is so directly interested—what I was going to say, Ralph, is that while of course our natural instincts as human beings prevent us from deploring the fact that you are alive still, and we’re doing our best to be glad to see you, at the same time your arrival to-night is admittedly a trifle disconcerting.”

“I noticed something of that sort,” said Mr. Simonds blandly.

“Please don’t misunderstand what James is trying to say,” put in Mrs. Crewe nervously.

“James has never given me any chance to do that, and there’s none whatever now,” Mr. Simonds assured her.

“You may leave this matter to me, Matilda.” Mr. Crewe’s voice was not at all excited, but curiously penetrating. “Well, Ralph, your disappearance was signalized by the arrival of forty thousand a year. Absolutely unexpected—but it arrived. Now you reappear, and I assume that is to be signalized by the disappearance of the forty thousand. Am I anywhere near the truth?”

“So near that you might be said to be stepping on it,” replied Mr. Simonds, in a more cheerful accent than he had yet used, “and what’s more I don’t see that you’ve anything to complain of. If you ask me, I think you’re a little hard to please. If I had the habit of allowing people’s attitude to disappoint me, this would. Supposing that before I went away I came to Acacia Villa and said, ‘Here’s forty thousand pounds, and it’s all you’ll get, would you have been disconcerted?’”

Mr. Crewe wanted to suggest that he couldn’t see Ralph doing any such thing, but his guns were spiked there.

“No,” he said doubtfully. “But I would have been surprised.”

“Exactly—of course you would, and so would I. I only got the idea after I landed in France—but I haven’t quite reached that yet. No one ever told you this income was to continue indefinitely—or that I was dead—though Butters did tell me this morning that you were getting ready to try and prove it. If I had been found under a pile of rocks in”—here Mr. Crewe started violently, and turned quite pale—“the Maritime Alps, you would all have squeaked with pleasure and I wouldn’t blame you for it either. I’d squeak myself for a good deal less. No, no; the trouble is that you’ve got used to forty thousand a year since you’ve enjoyed my income—at least I assume you’ve enjoyed it—though no one has thought of saying ‘thank you,’ as yet.”

Mrs. Crewe sniffed. "I assure you, Ralph, that we all thought of you with the deepest grati——"

"We didn't, Matilda, so what's the use of talking like that. We simply thought Ralph was off his head—and that's the truth," interjected Mr. Crewe.

Mr. Simonds gave an almost human chuckle. "I see you've not changed in the last few months, James. But, getting back to the point, it seems to me that what's upsetting you all is that you have formed certain habits and are afraid you can't get rid of them, now that this may be advisable."

"I have no habits that I'm ashamed of," replied Mr. Crewe tartly. "Humphrey can speak for himself, but you won't get much change out of him, and if you propose to criticise my wife's habits, or Joan's, you're making the mistake of your life."

Mr. Simonds put out a long cool hand as though he were stroking a nettle, while Mrs. Crewe stared at her husband as a small bantam hen might regard a resplendent turkey-cock.

"Glad to hear it. Suppose I put it this way—do you think that what little I've done entitles me to ask what you've done—all of you? I don't propose to offer any advice one way or the other in this matter."

Mr. Crewe looked rather grave.

"In other words, you want to know what we've done with your—no—our money?"

"It would be a matter of distinct interest."

"But, James!" expostulated his wife, "it's not Ralph's affair at all. What has he to do with it?"

"Let him have it, father," grinned Humphrey, "we've nothing to conceal—and there were no stipulations anyway."

"I suppose we're to infer that since you've come to life again, Ralph, the money is not going on any longer. We didn't ask for it in the first place. I don't want to seem ungrateful—but that's a fact."

"If you have nothing further to say, Matilda, neither have I."

With these words Mr. Simonds rose from his chair, and started for the door. Mr. Crewe interposed himself hastily.

"Don't go like that, Ralph. Matilda's a trifle upset, which is natural enough, but I think Humphrey's right, and you are reasonably entitled to know. Of course you could find out anyway from Butters."

Mr. Simonds moved his head slowly up and down.

"Just what I was going to do."

"Well, you needn't." The little man paused, wrinkled his brow, and took a long breath. "As a matter of fact you're partly answered already. It's like the lines on Wren's tomb in St. Paul's, which say that if you want to see Wren's tomb, just take a look round. I refer of course to this house—and won't you

have a glass of champagne?"

"Champagne!"

"Certainly—why not? We've just been celebrating Humphrey's engagement."

"Thanks, but I haven't touched drink for thirty years."

"Try a cigar, sir?" ventured Humphrey. "I brought these over from America."

"Thanks, I never smoke." Mr. Simonds announced this in a tone of extreme righteousness, at the same time turning a coldly critical glance at the amber cigarette holder into which Mr. Crewe had nervously inserted a gasper. Mr. Crewe met the glance with a defiant stare, struck a match, and began to puff with apparent content. The die was cast now, and he proposed to take no more backwater.

"As the—er—head of the family, Ralph, when the solicitors' letter arrived I decided to share the income equally with Matilda and my children."

"Butters told me that."

"So we have each had at the rate of ten thousand a year for just about nine months."

"I know what my own income is, James."

The way he said it made Mrs. Crewe and her daughter shiver, but the little man seemed in no way disturbed. Once again his satirical sense came to the rescue, and he was almost prepared to enjoy himself.

"For my own part, I bought a car, a very serviceable vehicle which I drive myself—I'll run you home a little later if you like. Also for three thousand pounds I purchased a small place in the country."

"I knew that too. Which did you buy first?"

"The car," said Mr. Crewe firmly. "I couldn't have found the place without it."

"Perhaps not. Might one ask why you went to live in the country?"

Mr. Crewe had anticipated the question and dreaded it. But here it was, and he rose to the occasion like a man.

"Because I wanted a place where I could write my book in—er— isolation."

"I'm interested to hear it. Writing books now?"

"Yes."

"No more serials?"

"None," said Mr. Crewe, with a slight choking sensation.

Mr. Simonds caressed his lean chin. It was shaped something like a hatchet.

"Do you mind telling me if that is for the sake of your immortal soul? You may remember you touched on the point the last time I saw you."

“Yes—something like that.”

“You evidently value it very highly. Is the book finished?”

“Not as yet, Ralph. The subject is a difficult one, and I want to do it justice—if I can.”

Saying this, Mr. Crewe glanced involuntarily at Joan, praying in his soul that she would betray nothing. But Joan was too stiff with breathless attention to dream of betraying anyone. Also, she was divided between a growing admiration for her father and a great doubt about what she would say when her own turn came. She would be thankful to do half as well as he was doing.

Mrs. Crewe was also motionless, possessed of much the same thoughts, and wishing she could make something like the showing Humphrey would put up when he had the floor. Humphrey, all this time, was grinning at them—Mr. Simonds included—with a sort of unnatural mirth that the rest of the Crewes considered rather out of place. He had captured Angela’s hand, and the owner of the hand did not seem to notice it.

“Would you care to say how much longer the book will take?” came in Mr. Simonds’ dry tones.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. It depends very largely how the spirit moves me. One cannot measure creative work with a clock or a yard-stick.”

Joan gasped, and Mrs. Crewe made a little noise in her throat. But James was her husband, and she was going to stand by him whatever happened.

“I assume that the house is paid for?” continued the Inquisitor.

“Yes—entirely. I arranged through Butters for the money and paid for it in cash.”

“Then the spirit won’t have to move you out of it, and it remains your property. So that’s that.” Mr. Simonds shifted slightly in his chair, and looked enquiringly at Mrs. Crewe.

“Well, Matilda, would you care to tell me how you’ve got along?”

She recovered herself with a jerk. James had the house anyway, that was something. As for herself, there were the clothes on her back, some more upstairs, and a few jewels. She had been too timid about buying jewels to be extravagant. And the box at the Albert Hall might be worth something near what she paid for it. The sensation of being stunned that she experienced when Mr. Simonds arrived had begun to pass, and the future was not, perhaps, quite so black as it seemed half an hour ago.

“I’ve done just what I’ve wanted to do all my life, Ralph, and thanks to you. I’ve been very interested for the last nine or ten months.”

She said this quite sweetly, and the change in her manner was very noticeable. From something in her tone Mr. Crewe got the fleeting idea that she spoke of the past almost as an experiment—very absorbing and all that—but one which, somehow, she was not over anxious to repeat. But that couldn’t

be true.

Mr. Simonds indulged in the ghost of a smile.

“Might I ask if you have acquired anything you didn’t have before—I don’t mean clothes or jewellery or anything like that?”

She sent him a glance, very quick and penetrating. “What do you mean? I’ll tell you if I can.”

“May I put it this way—and don’t think me curious, because I am really interested—are you happier than before?”

“No,” she said, with surprising candour.

“Would you care to tell me why?”

“I’ve seen far too little of James.”

Joan squeezed her hand, and Mr. Crewe, much affected, dropped his cigarette holder.

“My dear, dear Matilda,” he murmured, “why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“You were so busy over your book that you didn’t seem to notice it.”

Mr. Simonds, entirely unaffected, took out a folded handkerchief, tapped the end of his long nose, and, still folded, replaced it in his breast pocket—the sort of thing a presiding judge might do while he weighed the evidence. Then he regarded Joan with the same unrevealing expression.

She had been following the proceedings with helpless fascination—there seemed to be a certain amount of method about them—and Mr. Simonds had offered no criticism. And, without doubt, certain interesting facts had been brought to light. But there was still the secret of “The Philosophy of Life.” Uncle Ralph must never get hold of that.

“Well, Joan?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t much to say.”

“H’m—perhaps much isn’t to be expected at your age. But if you don’t mind——?”

It was not complimentary, but nevertheless a little reassuring, and she made the attempt. The family watched her intently.

“I’ve been studying art,” she said; her voice a little hard. “I took a studio in Chelsea.”

“Ah! Were you there long?”

“Some months, Uncle Ralph.”

Mr. Simonds examined the drawing-room walls with a kind of expectancy.

“Do I see any of your work here?”

“No,” she said hastily. “There isn’t any of my work anywhere.”

“You surprise me.”

“I destroyed it—I found I couldn’t paint. Does that interest you too?” she added a little wickedly.

Mr. Simonds inclined his head in what was for him a quite amiable manner.

“It interests me—yes—because it is in line with a good deal else I have observed in life. I trust you realise the value of your discovery?”

“It isn’t worth much to me, if that’s what you mean.”

“My experience,” he said calmly, “is that it is just as useful to discover what you can’t do as what you can, and if you make that discovery first it’s all the better in the long run. If you wait till you’re fairly well on in life, and then”—here he paused thoughtfully and his glance wandered in the direction of Mr. Crewe—“find out that you’ve tackled something too big for you, it’s apt to be a good deal more disturbing. In youth it doesn’t matter so much. There is generally a certain amount of expense attached to the discovery; but in your case you’ve not had to worry about that. And I’m told there are far too many bad pictures in existence as it is.”

This was all so true that Joan could find no words in which to protest. And, she reflected, there had been no worry about the expense. Nor was there any doubt about the discovery. So, taking it all in all, she was getting out of it rather well.

Mr. Simonds was now looking at Humphrey with more animation than he had heretofore displayed. Humphrey was looking back at him in no way disconcerted. He actually seemed to relish the situation.

“Well?” said the dry voice.

“I’ve made forty thousand pounds—started a good business—and am going to marry the finest girl in the world—thanks to what you and father did for me,” announced Humphrey cheerfully.

It was electric—dramatic. It cleared the air like a flash of lightning. Everyone seemed younger and relieved. Mr. Crewe squared his shoulders and drew himself up. This was his son. Mrs. Crewe made a little clucking sound of pleasure. Angela’s expression was what may be imagined under the circumstances.

“Forty thousand pounds!”

“A little over that, sir.”

Mr. Simonds lifted his thin brows. His eyes became less fish-like and perceptibly brighter, while he regarded the young man as one might examine a new animal in the Zoo.

“Been speculating?”

“I bought low and sold high, sir, if that’s speculating.”

This had a direct appeal, it being what Mr. Simonds invariably did himself.

“Then you quadrupled your income?”

“Rather more than that.”

“Would it be fair to ask how you did it?” The Inquisitor was leaning

forward, completely alive.

Humphrey told him in few words, encouraged by a series of muscular contractions of the hand that was still enclosed in his own.

“Then you made this money out of the Americans?”

Humphrey nodded.

“Good business—very good business. Not enough of that nowadays. I hope you will repeat it soon.”

“Just as often as I get the chance.”

Mr. Simonds stroked his chin as though it were the one thing in the world he really cared for.

“And you said you’ve started a business also?”

Humphrey explained, concluding with the suggestion that Cassidy and Crewe would welcome any transactions that Mr. Simonds might care to put through their hands.

The latter took out a small notebook, made a methodical entry of the name and address, and nodded to himself in rather a human manner. Then he caressed one hand with the other so that the rubbing of dry skin against dry skin was quite audible.

“So I take it that you’re quite independent now?”

“I’ve got a lot to learn yet, sir; but I see no reason why I shouldn’t be.”

Mr. Simonds nodded again, and surveyed his relative with an expression that might have meant anything.

“Well,” he began slowly, “it has all been very illuminating, and I thank you for the information from all concerned. There is one question that none of you have asked. I appreciate your reticence.”

“You’ve been doing most of the asking yourself, Ralph,” responded Mr. Crewe.

Mr. Simonds made a gesture. “I refer to my intentions as to the immediate future. I had proposed to resume my entire income forthwith—which you’ll admit is natural enough for one who has come alive again—but owing to the manner in which I have been received I now intend to continue the present arrangement till the full twelve months have expired. This will give you opportunity to prepare for—er—a certain readjustment in the near future. Now, about this house?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Crewe nervously, “what about it?”

“It is leased, I assume?”

“Yes, Ralph, and rather a long lease.”

“At how much? I do not worry about the term. Houses can always be subleased.”

“Nine hundred a year, furnished.”

“Then I will take it off your hands in three months and redispense of it.”

“Thank you, Ralph,” she said faintly, marvelling that she should feel thankful at getting separated from something she liked so much.

“Owing to your husband’s foresight you already have a house in the country—so that’s all right. You can look after him while he’s finishing his book, eh James?”

“There is nothing I would like so much,” said Mr. Crewe. “Intellectual solitude is not what I thought it was. And with regard to the income, Ralph, I would like to say that I think you are acting very handsomely. Don’t you, Matilda?”

“Indeed, yes—most handsomely. We are very much obliged, Ralph.”

Mr. Simonds looked as though he were about to visit a morgue, then placed the tips of his long fingers together and, looking anything but handsome, cleared his lean throat.

“Before wishing you good evening, I would like to make a few explanatory remarks. In my observation one section of modern society spends and wastes a considerable amount of time in wishing they were as well off as the other section, and in picturing what they would do if such were the case. This is a futile pursuit. If my means were divided amongst my relatives while I was still alive, I rather think I would live long enough to get most of it back, and they would soon find themselves much where they were before—with perhaps the exception of Humphrey. In the case of your family, James, I had an impulse to ascertain just what would happen if money came their way. And, without any desire to criticise, the result has been much what I expected.”

The family said nothing—and for excellent reasons.

“The wise use of money by those who acquire it suddenly is a very rare thing. It is apt to shift, like sand, and the best use of sand is to employ it in making something solid—like concrete—before it has time to shift. James, you, so to speak, made a little concrete, and I hope you will make more from the royalties on your book. Humphrey, you made a good deal, and I congratulate you.” He paused for a moment. “I do not intend to do any further experimenting with the present generation, but, Humphrey, if your marriage results in children, and you, Joan, if you marry and have a family, the next generation will find that I am not entirely devoid of natural feelings.”

Joan got rather pink, while Humphrey grinned at Angela in the most obvious way possible. Mrs. Crewe felt too weak and tired to say anything.

“Very thoughtful of you, Ralph, I’m sure,” murmured Mr. Crewe with a glance at the clock. He had totally forgotten his talk of that afternoon and the expected visitor.

Mr. Simonds rose and shook hands with the four in turn, leaving in each palm a sort of unhuman chill. He made a formal bow to Angela.

“It is a satisfaction to know that your future is secure owing to my little

experiment,” he said.

“Thanks very much, but it would have been quite secure anyway—owing to Humphrey.”

He actually smiled. “I rather agree with you. Perhaps you will kindly let me know when the event is to come off.”

Mr. Crewe, feeling a little uncertain of his legs, went with him to the door.

“Shall we not see you again soon, Ralph? either here or in the country?”

“I doubt it, James. I’m thinking of a trip to Algiers.”

“Soon?”

“In a few weeks.”

“May I run you home now? I can have my car round in a jiffy.”

“Thank you, James, but I would feel safer on my own legs.”

Mr. Crewe sniffed. “Then have a taxi.” He said nothing about his wife’s car, feeling that this would be a tactical error.

Mr. Simonds shook his head. “No, the fares in England are too excessive. Good-bye. I’ll be on the look out for your book. By the way, what do you call it?”

“‘The Philosophy of Life,’ ” said Mr. Crewe with unparalleled dignity.

Mr. Simonds looked at him curiously. “Have you discovered that?”

“I think so, Ralph. Anyway, I’ll match mine against yours.”

The Inquisitor chuckled. “Got a publisher?”

“I have not selected one yet.”

Mr. Simonds, descending one step, halted and turned.

“If you should have any difficulty let me know, and I’ll find you one. I am largely interested in the General Fiction Syndicate—of which I think you know. I told Butters not to mention it. But you certainly ought to dedicate the book to me.”

“I’ll send you a copy when it comes out,” stammered Mr. Crewe in a depth of ironical surprise. “Good-bye, Ralph?”

“Good-bye, James.”

“Take care of yourself.”

Mr. Simonds actually laughed outright, and the little man stood gulping incredulously as the lean figure melted into the dusk.

He did not want to go into the house at once, there being too many things in his mind. He anticipated, also, the chorus that would greet his return. Ralph interested in the Fiction Syndicate! Perhaps he knew all about that letter. Perhaps he had inspired it! Well, if he had, and if the three bloodthirsty serials a year proposal had been accepted, there wouldn’t have been any further experimenting. So that was something to be thankful for.

Then while he waited irresolute, a young man strode along the pavement, bounded up the steps, and bounced into him.

"I'm frightfully sorry, sir, and I'm ten minutes late." Stephen was rather out of breath. "Collision between two cars, and I had to do what I could."

Mr. Crewe's eye took on a curious gleam, and he seized the newcomer's arm in a talon-like grip.

"My boy, I've something surprising to tell you."

His face was so strange that Stephen felt suddenly very anxious.

"Nothing gone wrong, I hope?"

"Yes—everything; no—nothing. Did you pass a tall elderly gentleman a moment ago?"

"I did—he was laughing to himself as though he had to but didn't want to."

"Well, that's Ralph Simonds who has just come to life again. Also, he's taking his money back again. He just dropped in to tell us so. It appears that he was never dead at all. We've had a sort of mass meeting about it in the drawing-room with him in the chair."

Stephen gaped at him. "Then Joan hasn't——"

"Ten thousand a year any longer—that's exactly it. None of us have. We're back where we were in Acacia Villa, with a few minor differences. So you see, my boy, the coast is unexpectedly clear. When he dropped in I thought it was you half an hour early."

The young man drew a long, long breath. He pulled down his brows, blinked, stared hard at Mr. Crewe. Gradually his face took on an expression vastly different from what might be expected at the news that the girl he loved was back where she started from. He was obviously delighted. Mr. Crewe, watching him intently, gave a sigh of satisfaction. What good providence had superintended his activities that afternoon? There were in this affair compensations that he had never dreamed of. Matilda was lonely without him! Stephen seemed pleased that Joan had lost her money! What a wonderful world it was. He didn't think of himself at all.

"The sands of fortune have run out, Stephen, so you can carry on just as though we were all back in Acacia Villa—though we've no intention whatever of going there."

Stephen drew in a lot of fresh air, and looked very determined.

"You just leave it to me, sir!"

They went into the drawing-room, where Humphrey was attending to his rather hysterical mother. Mr. Crewe glanced at his wife, and did not seem in any way anxious. Then he shot a remarkably eloquent glance at Joan.

"Here's another old friend of the family. Quite a lot of visitors this evening." He spoke a little recklessly, feeling in an odd way a sense of emancipation.

Mrs. Crewe regarded the young man with a smile that was hospitable, if a little dazed.

“How do you do, Stephen? It’s a long time since we’ve seen you, and I’m afraid you’ll find us rather upset. An extraordinary thing has just happened.”

“He knows all about it, my dear,” chirped her husband, “and,” he added brazenly, “it doesn’t make any difference to him at all.”

Humphrey gave a smothered laugh, and shook hands. Joan came forward, blushing violently. She felt about five years old—and very defenceless. Angela said the proper thing. For a moment conversation seemed suspended in the air.

“If you’ll excuse me, Stephen, I’ll take my wife upstairs,” struck in Mr. Crewe, assuming complete control of the situation. “And, by the way, Humphrey has just announced his engagement to Angela, so perhaps you’ll excuse them too. Joan, my dear, will you entertain Stephen?”

“Yes, father,” she stammered, “I—I’ll try.”

“I’m so sorry, but really I’m not feeling very well,” added Mrs. Crewe. “It’s all been rather a shock.”

Stephen realised that he ought to say something—congratulate Humphrey and Angela for one thing—also express his solicitude for Mrs. Crewe’s nervous condition—but his tongue stiffened in his mouth. At that moment he caught Humphrey’s eye. Humphrey slid his arm round Angela, at the same time giving his friend the most inescapable wink possible. Then he grunted something about hoping that Stephen was quite fit, and convoyed Angela out of the room. After him went Mr. Crewe, his arm being also similarly occupied.

Thus, as the result of the most barefaced bit of work imaginable, within about sixty seconds of Stephen’s entrance he found himself alone with Joan. He sat beside her, quite close.

“Everyone seems fearfully upset except your father and Humphrey.”

“Yes—isn’t it awful?”

“What?”

“Uncle Ralph coming alive again like this?”

“Your father said that the sands of fortune had run out.”

“That’s just it. Yesterday we were rich—and now——!”

“Nothing worse than that?”

“Isn’t it bad enough?”

“I know of plenty of worse things.”

“Then I hope they’ll never happen to you.”

“They won’t if—if I get what I’m after.”

She looked at him, then looked away.

“I say, Joan?”

“Yes?”

“Nothing else you’re worrying about?”

It happened there was a good deal else. At that moment she tingled with many emotions. She confessed to herself that she was extremely glad to see

him just at this particular instant, because he imparted a sense of something solid that she found distinctly comforting. She found him tremendously real—the most real thing in a swiftly changing world.

“You’re trying not to wish that Mr. Simonds was dead once and for all,” he suggested calmly.

“I’m not,” she protested, “he needn’t have been dead—if he—simply left things as they were. And it looks now as if he wouldn’t be dead for ever so long,” she added chaotically. “Anyway, I’ve only about four thousand left instead of ten thousand a year.”

“Four thousand is a pot of money where I came from.”

She smiled, faintly and ruefully.

“For instance, one can buy a topping house, freehold, furnish it, and have something left over to put into a War Loan.”

“It is something—if you look at it that way,” she admitted.

“I do, because I happen to have just that amount available myself. Been looking at it like that for some time too.”

Joan did not answer, but he saw the corners of her mouth quiver ever so slightly.

“Your father said to try and imagine you all back in Acacia Villa.”

She shuddered. “Anything but that.”

“I say, Joan?”

She smiled at him openly this time. “What?”

“I did imagine it for just about five seconds, then put it out of my mind.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you know?”

“How could I know?” she parried.

“I had other plans for you.”

“Did you really? How thoughtful!” She sent him a glance, mocking and provocative.

“Yes—other plans for you—and they are completed now.” He took her hand and examined it with close attention. “You and I haven’t been seeing nearly enough of each other.”

“Oh!” She rather liked her hand being taken. Also since the announcement of Mr. Ralph Simonds, she had done a good deal of casting about to discover some plan of her own, and failed signally. So this last remark had something intriguing about it. And it sounded restful.

“The last few months begin to seem like a dream,” she hazarded presently.

“They were—more or less. Do you remember that my last letter from you was dated about a year ago? That was no dream.”

Joan nodded silently.

“Well, I have never really answered that letter till now. The time you

mentioned is a good deal more than up. Something happened just after you wrote it.”

“I know what you mean,” she murmured.

“Yes—you went off in a stream of sparks—golden sparks—into regions where I couldn’t follow, so I kept to my knitting. You’ve had no end of a burst, haven’t you?”

She smiled reminiscently. Clive Oakley—art with a big A—Chelsea—Lorimer—yes, it had been a bit of a burst in the short time it covered. And she was surprised for being able to smile at it so soon.

“I suppose you might call it something like that.”

“Well,” said Stephen, far too wise to do any more digging, even of a superficial character, into the past, “it’s my turn now. Time’s up!”

“I don’t understand.” She got very rosy, understanding perfectly.

He took a quick breath, and enfolded her in arms from which there was no possible escape.

“Look here, I’m not going to do without you any longer. Had too much of that. I’ve wanted you ten thousand times more than you ever wanted ten thousand a year. I’m glad the money has dried up.”

“Stephen!” she exclaimed, feeling remarkably comfortable.

“Yes, I am. It was like a wall between us—a wall with broken bottles on top—and I couldn’t make myself try to scale it. I’m no good at that kind of climbing.”

At that she met his eyes, and recognised in them the kind of man to whom such attempts were entirely foreign. Her fortune affected him oppositely from the others. What would have happened to her had she married either Oakley or Lorimer before Mr. Ralph Simonds came to life again?

“I don’t know anything about art,” he went on doggedly, “and I’ve no society tricks, and I dance like a camel, but I love you with all my soul. I want to do a heap of things worth doing—with your help.”

She remembered that Lorimer had also wanted to do a heap of things—but with her money. Oakley too.

“But could I help, Stephen?” she quavered, “just me?”

“Wait and see. Let old Simonds keep his money. I wish he’d always kept it, and we wouldn’t have lost so much time. Don’t move—it’s no use. I want my answer, and I’m going to wait for it if I wait till breakfast.”

It would have been useless to try and move, so she didn’t. There was something very consoling about his arms. They suggested those strong curving walls that stretched out to sea enclosing a harbour—a refuge—where one can lie at anchor and hear the winds whistle overhead without touching one while it blew great gales in the open.

“Stephen?” she whispered presently.

“Yes?”

“I want to try and explain something—if I can.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been a perfect idiot.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he replied peacefully. “Most girls would have taken it the way you did.”

“But I was,” she replied with surprising meekness. “I—I got all mixed up with money and art and self-expression.”

“Tricky thing, that art.”

She nodded. “And I worked so hard to enjoy myself, but was never quite persuaded that I pulled it off. And I got two bumps.”

“Two in nine months is fairly reasonable,” he said magnanimously.

“And that man was a bad egg, just as you said, and the other one wasn’t any good either.”

“Well,” said Stephen, “they’ve both been informed of that, so why worry?”

“Who informed them?” she asked, puzzled.

“I did, for one. Let’s wash that part of it out.”

She stared at him, unable to speak, till two small bright tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

“You did!” she stammered after a struggle.

“Yes, and while I knew it was a bit of a liberty on my part I wanted to make sure it was done thoroughly. So it was.”

She put her face on his shoulder and gave him a convulsive hug.

“Stephen, I don’t in the least know why you still want me.”

He smiled down at her with eyes as faithful and honest as were ever put into a lover’s head.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that myself, and it’s going to take a long, long time to tell you.”

CHAPTER XIV

MR. CREWE'S PHILOSOPHY

TWO months later, Mr. Crewe sat in his panelled study. The amber cigarette holder was tilted at an insolent angle from his small mouth. The windows were open, and one could see rabbits hopping across the lawn. In front of him was a battered typewriter, and quarto sheets littered the polished desk. His coat was off, his shirt-sleeves rolled up. The morocco-bound book was nowhere in sight. His features wore an expression of determination coupled with a great content.

He was ready to begin typing when there came a light tap at the door, and his lifted fingers poised motionless.

“Yes—come in.”

“Am I disturbing you, dear?”

“Not at all, Matilda. Sit down and make yourself comfortable.”

She settled into a chair with the little sigh that bespeaks a completely satisfied mind.

“I really admire you, James, for being able to work at all. My mind is in a perfect whirl yet.”

“There are plenty of things to occupy one's mind, but there's always work to be done.”

She nodded. “What a picture Angela made—and Joan looked just as pretty—her expression so gentle and sweet, just as it used to be.”

“Yes,” said the little man, smiling, “they were a remarkable pair, and Humphrey and Stephen might have been brothers. I never noticed their similarity before. Looking back at it, I think those young people were wise to get the matter over quickly. The question is now which of them we visit first.”

“Angela insists that we come to Veering Hall because it will take Joan much longer to get settled.”

“I think that will be best.”

They exchanged glances, each smiling at the other, the mind of each very busy with impressions of the double event pulled off in London the previous week. This was Humphrey's idea, and Stephen backed him up triumphantly. Nothing to be gained for anyone by waiting. So it came that a day or so before the house in Sussex Place was vacated, it was used as headquarters for a very notable, practical, and delightful purpose. Angela was married from it after all.

Mr. Crewe did give her away, as he had hoped to do, and in almost, the same breath disposed of his own daughter. As he afterwards remarked, in a

sparkling speech at the wedding breakfast, he had felt very free-handed about the whole matter. What Humphrey said in reply covered his father with blushes. Then the going away, the scene at the Dover train at Victoria Station, the clearing out of Sussex Place, and the run down to the country in Mr. Crewe's car with Mr. Crewe at the wheel—such memories, such pictures, such food for thought and reflection.

“You know,” he said after a pause, “when one thinks it over calmly, it seems to me there's been a good deal of success about this past year—even though it was a bit hectic. It's the young people who are really the important ones nowadays, and ours have nothing to complain of.”

“I should think not, James.”

“And, looking back at it from this angle, Ralph appears to have been much more reasonable and justified than we thought him at the time. I feel that it is only fair to Ralph to admit that.”

“It was a rather expensive experiment for him,” she admitted with a smile. “Do you think it will help you in your work?”

She asked this with a covert glance at the scattered sheets that revived so vividly the days that were past. No mistake about what they meant now. But there was not the slightest hint of it in the expression of Mr. James Crewe.

“I am bound to say that I have acquired a rather intimate knowledge of certain phases of life that would not have come to me under ordinary circumstances—if that is what you mean.”

“That should be useful in connection with your book, shouldn't it?” she ventured, going as far as she dared.

“Yes,” he said cheerfully, “quite useful—when I reach that phase of it.” He hesitated an instant. “Now tell me something very frankly.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“Are you quite comfortable here? I ask this realising it is all very simple compared to—well—the house you have just left.”

“Quite comfortable, dear. But we'll have to find another maid.”

“Why?”

“Martha is leaving at the end of the month. She gave notice an hour ago.”

Mr. Crewe looked unhappy. “Dear me, why can that be? She's been so quiet and attentive and agreeable—and such neat hands and wrists. Did you ever notice them?”

Mrs. Crewe had noticed them. Furthermore, although she thought it wiser to say nothing, she had known at once why Martha was leaving. One thing to take amiable suggestions from an attractive little grass widower who was oversolicitous about other people's feelings, but quite another to take orders from the grass widower's wife—especially if the latter knew her way about. This, however, could not very well be explained. Then, rather thankfully, she

remembered what she had really come in to say.

“Don’t worry about Martha, dear, and everything will be arranged quite comfortably. When I interrupted I meant to speak about something quite different.”

“What is that, Matilda?”

“I wanted to tell you, James, that I do admire you very, very much.”

“My dear wife—how charming of you!”

“Yes, I do, and it’s not in the way the standard wife is expected to admire the standard husband either—whether she does or not.”

“That is very exciting, Matilda. Just what do you mean?”

“I mean there’s nothing—well—connubial about it. It’s just as a woman would admire some unusual man she’d met away from home—if you follow me.”

Mr. Crewe was greatly intrigued. “I shall certainly follow you if you acquire habits of that nature. Would you mind telling me why you feel this?”

“It’s when I think of all you’ve been and done for all of us in the past year, and how perfectly your philosophy of life has worked out in practice. I’m simply amazed. That’s what I wanted you to know.”

He put his small head a little on one side, and she noticed that his neck had become considerably thicker.

“It means something nowadays when a husband can amaze his wife and yet remain within the limits of—er—of propriety.”

“Well, James, you’ve done it.”

“Thank you, Matilda, though I don’t understand in the least. Then I take it that you’re quite prepared to settle down here. Frankly, I was a little afraid that _____”

“This is my place, dear. I know now that there are a lot of things that money can’t buy. I had them without realising it in Acacia Villa, and begin to recognise them here. And, James, it has been a wonderful year, hasn’t it?”

“More like fiction than fact,” he smiled.

She sent him a provocative look as though inviting him to come half-way and meet her.

“With no family matters to worry you, you’ll be able to get on with your book, won’t you?”

He flicked the ash from his cigarette to the floor with a casual flip of the wrist. In Acacia Villa he always used the cover of the soap dish, and the difference did not escape her.

“Ah yes—the book. I was just going to speak of it?”

Mrs. Crewe held her breath, waiting for the confession. She would make it as easy for him as a wife could make it.

“I rather thought that before I tackled the conclusion I would do a bit of

fiction as an interlude, so to speak, to the sterner stuff, which, I admit, rather takes it out of me. It's—well—a little exacting."

"But you're satisfied with what you've done, aren't you?" She admired the daring of him, and wondered how far he would carry it.

"My dear Matilda, one is never satisfied," he said with a touch of dignity. "That would be fatal to creative work. But the intellectual strain is beginning to tell, so I have decided to dash off something a little looser, so to speak, in the joints."

"I'm sure you know best, James," she murmured.

"I think I ought to by this time. Anyway, I've turned up that uncompleted serial 'Love under the Rubber Trees.' You may remember I was in the middle of it, then the offer came from The Fiction Syndicate, which rather upset my thoughts and I never got back to it."

"I remember." She was trying hard not to laugh outright.

"Well, I find that I've left that unfortunate chap in a very high fever for more than a year, and I can do no better than go back and save his life. The girl is nursing him, you know. I told you the point about his temperature and the price of rubber. Altogether it's really a vital story."

She looked at him fixedly, and, realising that he had no intention of confessing, loved him more than ever. She didn't want him to. If he had, she in turn would have been bound to tell him what a hash she had made of things herself. His secret would now be hers also. It was nice, she reflected, to have a husband who had only that kind of a secret—or thought he had—and whose mind was to her as unblurred as the pages of the morocco-bound book she knew she would never see again. She wondered for a moment what he had done with it; then because she was really very happy, and had achieved a new philosophy of life on her own account, she kissed the bald spot that he fully expected would some day be rethatched, and went out.

Mr. Crewe took a long breath, and swooped down on the tilting and familiar keys.

"A faint smell of rubber drifting in on the tropic breeze seemed to penetrate the wandering consciousness of the fevered man. He groaned heavily, then, opening his haggard eyes, saw leaning over him the figure of a lovely——"

He paused, lit another gasper, and tucked his sleeves a shade higher.

"That's the real thing after all," he murmured contentedly. "Perfectly corking! Hanged if I don't raise my price. I'll get it, too."

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Sands of Fortune* by Alan Sullivan (as Sinclair Murray)]