

WHISPERING
LODGE

Sullivan Murray

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By the Same Author.

JOHN FRENHAM, K.C.

HUMAN CLAY

SANDS OF FORTUNE

WHISPERING LODGE

BY
SINCLAIR MURRAY

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Whispering Lodge

CHAPTER I

HOMECOMING

TONIA CHARTERS sat in the corner of a first-class carriage, staring at the shaven fields of Kent. Presently she made a little grimace at her father, who had been watching her with quiet amusement.

“Funny, isn’t it?”

He put aside his paper and studied her face with an interest that, at the moment, was even more keen than usual. Her mouth was rather large, her lips continually in suggestive motion, her face rather square and broad across the brows. She had a short, piquant nose, impudently tilted, turbulent, bronze hair, intensely alive and electrical, and a smooth, white skin. Altogether an arresting young woman.

“What’s funny about it?”

“It all looks predestined and—well—so tidy. Too tidy for me. It’s as though people had been staying up at night for a thousand years putting the place in order—picking up things. Know what I mean?”

Charters smiled. “They have—more or less—for the last couple of thousand. You’ll get used to it.”

Tonia’s brows arched a little. She doubted that, having no immediate desire to get used to it. All very well, she thought, that her father should come into an unexpected inheritance, but quite another thing to root a girl out of the Canadian setting she loved with all her soul and stick her down in Kent.

She felt she was going to be stuck. She didn’t question his authority. That was where it came in to be a man. Authority! To be a woman—to be what well-meaning people called “womanly” suggested being something like a sheep.

She glanced obliquely at her mother, wondering if her parent—whom she

really adored—faintly resembled the docile ewes of which they seemed to have passed millions since leaving Charing Cross.

“I won’t say I won’t try to get used to it, but you’ll have to be awfully lenient while it’s going on. Wouldn’t it be much easier for you if I’d been born a boy?”

“Thanks—we’ve got a rather nice one who seems fairly content.”

That made it a little difficult, so she gave an expressive shrug. Julian, her only and elder brother, was waiting for them at The Dene, the old Charters mansion, to which they were now bound. The last time she had seen Julian was three months ago, and three thousand miles away in Canada. She wondered if he had begun to change already.

And with Julian now was Rodney Bethune. Her mind fastened rather unwillingly on Rodney, and she pushed out her lower lip. With Tonia this meant something.

“John,” said her mother, pointing, “isn’t that charming?”

He glanced at an old Tudor farm-house and nodded. Queer impulses were at work in him—this expatriate whose forbears had left England and crossed the sea a hundred years ago. He began to feel that in some other life some essential part of him had lived here. It was new, yet not new; old, yet amazingly young. And what would it express to his children?

“I suppose this is the calm before the storm, and we’ll be up to our eyes in work in no time,” said his wife thoughtfully.

“It’s something like that. The London agents told me there was a heap to be done.”

“Work for you, Tonia,” went on her mother cheerfully. “You’ll be expected to call on all the old women and make friends with everyone in the village.”

“Do you really own that village, dad, own it outright—the whole thing?”

“I am the proud and somewhat puzzled owner of two villages.”

“Gosh! How did your people get them in the first place?”

“From Bill the Conqueror, who gave them to one of your progenitors after the Battle of Hastings. He seemed to be pleased with what we did in that affair.”

“Two whole darn villages!”

“Tonia!” expostulated her mother. “Please!”

“Yes, two whole ones, though I assume there was nothing but a collection of huts at the time.”

“But what about the hutters—or whatever you call them? What did they think of it?”

“I fancy they were wise enough to say nothing—whatever they might have thought.”

“Gee!” breathed Tonia, with a touch of awe. “Think of it. Could you sell them?”

“No—the property is entailed. That’s why no part of it has ever been sold.”

“Just sort of run to seed?”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit that way.”

“And nothing there but The Dene and a lot of pheasants and peasants?”

He laughed. “Perhaps a bit more than that. Let’s hope so, anyway. And if you want a picture of English country life, why don’t you ask Rodney? He knows all about it, and I don’t know anything yet.”

“No, thanks; I’ll try to pick it up without his help.”

“You’re going to be nice to him?” put in her mother, a shade anxiously. “You promised.”

“My behaviour will be both dignified and restrained, but I wish Julian hadn’t brought him.”

“Julian says he’s been a tremendous help.”

Tonia said nothing, and apparently began to count sheep. But instead of the pastoral landscape east of Maidstone, she saw a very different scene. This was the lake district of Ontario, where lay the island with the big bungalow, whither the Charters family repaired with great joy every summer.

There young Bethune, an Oxford man on his first visit to Canada, brought a letter of introduction from a friend, and there, following the example of several other men, he fell in love with Tonia. She had not tried to attract him—in fact, she tried not to, and with the usual result.

It came to a climax when, canoeing home from a regatta, and landing on another island to make tea in camp fashion, Rodney made the grievous mistake of taking her both by surprise and in his arms. This only lasted an instant. Tonia, suddenly robbed of speech by astonishment, became a young fury.

He was amazed. Never, in his experience, had a girl’s words and actions been quite so extreme before, and they paddled back to the bungalow in a silence that could be felt. And now Julian, by a turn of the wheel, was also taking a post-graduate course at Oxford, and apparently worshipped Rodney. Was ever anything so awkward?

Dusk had already fallen when they were met by the two at Charterden Station. A little delay ensued there, the arrival of the new lord of the manor not being a thing lightly passed over; then they glided off toward The Dene, Julian doing most of the talking.

“It’s all right, I think, and the whole staff want to stay on, though I don’t see what there is for ’em to do. Manders, the butler, is the chief push.”

“No member of your sex ever could see that,” smiled his mother. “What about the house?”

“Big as a barn—or several barns—no central heat and old as the Ark. It’s

full of what Manders calls period furniture that he handles with great reverence.”

There proved to be a good deal to be said about the house, and while Julian unfolded himself, Rodney sat silent, his eyes catching Tonia’s with an expression he tried to make not too triumphant.

But he felt triumphant. The last thing she had said to him was that she hoped she might never see him again, and said it with a fiery earnestness. The cards, however, had fallen to him, and here he sat, one, so to speak, of the deputation that welcomed her to a new home of which she knew nothing and he already knew a good deal.

And in his country this time, not hers. From the curve of her lower lip he concluded that she had sensed something of this herself.

Presently the car turned in through great iron gates, beside which was a tiny cottage where an old woman was forcing her stiff knees into a curtsy, and along an avenue of lofty elms. Looking ahead, this seemed interminable.

“It’s a regular landmark hereabout,” said Julian. “You can see it for miles. There’s a lovely view in daytime, and——”

The car stopped as he spoke. The chauffeur turned, touched his hat and looked extremely vexed.

“Flat tyre, sir. Shall I go on or change the wheel?”

“How far is it?”

“Matter of half a mile, sir, and the road none too good.”

“Change the wheel.”

Rodney threw off more local information, and Tonia peered into the gloom around her. The car had halted opposite a low thicket, from the middle of which rose the blasted trunk of one great tree. Behind this was a high stone wall over which she could see the roof of a fairly large house.

There were no lights that one could observe, and the place was dipped in a sort of hush that struck the girl with an odd significance. It seemed to be enclosed in walls except, probably, on its southern front. Over it rose the great tree, shattered forty feet above the ground, a huge column some fifteen feet in circumference ruined in mid-air as though some Titan, inhabiting the house, had sheared it off in retribution for unwelcome curiosity.

It must be that certain physical things give off certain emanations to which some individuals are sensitive. In this case Tonia was instantly aware of something she could neither see nor understand. This place had for her a definite significance. It was elusive, yet positive. It meant something.

She was staring at it with a dreamy fascination when Julian’s voice came in.

“That’s the Lodge—Whispering Lodge, they call it. Some people named Danello have it.”

“Why ‘whispering’?” asked Tonia sharply.

“There’s romance for you right away,” laughed her father. “No well-founded English country place is complete without something of the kind. Probably called ‘whispering’ on account of the wind in the trees. Heard much yet about the shooting, Julian?”

“Yes. Hammond—he’s head keeper—says there are a lot of them.”

“Like shooting, Rodney?”

“Yes, sir; nothing better.”

“You must come down. Ah—I see the end of our journey—aren’t those the lights of The Dene?”

His wife took a quick little breath, and for an instant the eyes of these two, who understood each other so well, met and exchanged messages.

They realized; but the young people could not—as yet. A new home, new friends, new duties! Such was the colour of their thoughts as they went in at the big door beside which stood Manders, looking very like a Bishop. As for Tonia, she hesitated a moment before crossing the threshold, and then, stepping forward, found herself entering abreast of Rodney. It struck her suddenly that it was just as though they were returning from a honeymoon—which made her secretly furious.

The next day was rather mixed, a day of impressions, surprises and discoveries, for Tonia had never seen anything like The Dene before. Her parents were excessively busy with Julian, and she felt in her bones that Rodney, who so far had said very little, but seemed extraordinarily at home considering it was someone else’s house, was about to renew that attack. He caught her after lunch.

“Well, what do you make of it?”

He began thus, then went on exactly where he had left off. That was one of the things about him that annoyed her. He was so consecutive and persistent. She measured him with brown eyes that held little flecks of light.

“You think,” she said, in her husky voice, “that when a man tells a girl he loves her she ought just naturally to get busy and love him back. I don’t see it.”

“You don’t care what I feel?”

“Not exactly. I don’t know whether I do or not—yet—I suppose I do up to a point. You pay me a sort of compliment, of course, though I’m not wanting one.”

“I’m not trying to be complimentary. I love you, Tonia.”

He put this very bluntly, with no flinching from that straight stare. “Is it because I’m English, and you don’t care for England?”

“Only partly,” she said with perfect truth.

“Nothing unusual about us, is there?”

“The English wouldn’t be what they are unless they thought there was.

And they're so frightfully thankful they are English," she added calmly.

He almost decided to be angry, then laughed. One could not be long angry with a nature like hers. Her quick wit and husky voice fascinated him. She had no little airs or affectations, these being impossible to one with her sense of humour; she was completely fearless and did not know how to hedge. Her girl associates used to think it strange that one so unsentimental should be so attractive to men. But Rodney understood—as had several others.

Presently she saw something in his eyes that was unmistakable, and added hastily:

"What happened before had better not happen again. I want to be quite clear about that."

"You may depend on the most formal behaviour on my part, if that's any help," he assured her.

"It will certainly help you."

"And not make the slightest difference to the facts of the case," he added cheerfully.

"There is no case—therefore no facts."

Blue eyes met brown and crossed like rapiers. She rather liked him at that moment, because she liked a fighter. His type, she admitted, was good, being straight Saxon with clear skin, smooth and rather long face, flaxen hair, good shoulders that were not too heavy, and a sort of litheness about him, so that he moved with the flexible ease of a well-bred horse.

He had made a decided hit with her friends in Canada, though he seemed oblivious to it at the time. "I'd trust and believe him," she said to herself, "but I'll never, never marry him!"

"Well," he said with imperturbable good nature, "have it any way you like, but remember you're in my country now."

"Do you expect to be asked here again if you talk in that fashion?"

"I've already been asked, and accepted with peculiar pleasure. Ostensibly I'm coming to shoot. You'll note the 'ostensibly.'"

Tonia gulped. "Listen! Do you really think you're irresistible?"

He took her suddenly by the shoulders so that they stood facing each other, two superb young animals each on the road of destiny, one revolting, the other rejoicing.

"There's something about you, Tonia, I don't pretend to understand, but you're all I want in the world. That's the prodigious fact, and it will never be altered. Now, if it's war, let it be war. That doesn't make any difference—and I'm ready for it. But you're beaten before you start."

A wild tumult set up in her heart, and she wrenched herself free.

"How utterly characteristic—and English!" she said with a stony stare.

Julian and Rodney departing next day, the Charters family began the

process of acclimatization. To Charters his new, yet ancient, surroundings brought a strange sense of unreality. Men and generations might pass, but this rambling mansion, in its deer-park, remained unaltered and unalterable. Not for a hundred years had The Dene belonged to his side of the family, and now he had a glimpse of the unchangeable order and custom that for centuries had governed this peaceful land.

He was the surviving elder son of his branch, and his dead ancestors seemed to throng these panelled halls, saluting him with ghostly hands as the one who would take up their task and live for it—as they had. He had, in a way, just come from another world, but in bone and blood and everything memorial he was one with them. He had made his fortune across the sea, but The Dene claimed this, as it claimed himself.

He wondered a little if, really, it was on account of what his wife said when the news reached them in Canada that he had come. That hour would always be vivid—on the bungalow veranda—the speeding mail launch furrowing the lake—the thick letter on stiff paper—the talk with his wife that followed—then her confession that she had always longed to live in England.

“I know you could have bought a place over there at any time within the past few years, but you weren’t ready for it. And it wouldn’t have been the same. I’ve nothing to be memorial about, yet I’m far more so than you. A thousand times I’ve fancied ourselves all at The Dene, and now that you’re free in a financial way, don’t you think there’s something nice about England’s sons coming back to her? Just like homing pigeons,” she had concluded a little nervously. And that had settled it.

But it unsettled Tonia. Only her mother realized how passionately the girl loved Canada and its life. Her enjoyment of it was that of a young colt in new pasture on a spring day. Rule and order were anathema, and she delighted in the unexpected happenings of a new country. She was intensely curious—with a candour that her friends found utterly disarming, and it appeared that at nineteen she had no use for men—except as playmates.

Yet she demoralized men. Her father laughed at this, but Mrs. Charters, who had long since learned to recognize the premonitory symptoms, used to sigh as she saw their first faint development in each new victim. They made her feel helpless, and Tonia seemed to spread a sort of emotional plague.

On her side there would be a month or two of friendship and a sense of thankfulness at finding a man too sane to be sentimental. Then the inevitable upheaval. Tonia would emerge from this with flaming cheeks, and, vowing that she had done with men as companions, cultivate girls with volcanic energy for the next months. Presently it would happen all over again.

And it was, thought Mrs. Charters, the depth of irony that the final thing of this sort in Canada should have been over Rodney Bethune, who, so to speak,

had awaited them on the threshold of their new home in England.

All this was running through her mind as she sat making notes of a thousand things to be attended to. The Dene, she had discovered, was deplorably short of many everyday essentials both as to the kitchen and linen closets. She was in the middle of a list when Tonia came in.

“Well, child, do you find it rather slow?”

“No, mother, there’s a heap to see.”

“Your father and I have been thinking a good deal about you.”

“Oh!” said Tonia. “Why?”

“Well, in a way, this is more of a change for you than anyone else, and till we get settled and begin to meet people you may feel a little at sea.”

Tonia wished she were at sea, but only laughed. “What else, mother?”

“I know how you feel about English things in general, but advise you against coming to conclusions too soon over here. First impressions are very apt to be misleading. I’m sure you will find everyone very kind, and don’t think people stiff when they don’t mean to be. I think you ought to be very happy.”

Tonia gave a little sigh. “I don’t say I’m not.”

Mrs. Charters laughed outright. “I’m glad, because you’re not a very cheery picture; but, really, child, it’s wiser not to express any fixed opinions till you know a good deal more. Just study people and their ways for, say, three months, then tell us what you think.”

“I suppose I’m rather uncomfortable to live with sometimes, but I can’t be anything but me,” she said laconically.

She wandered about for a while, ending up in the dining-room, where she found Manders busy after lunch.

“Does it rain in England all the fall, Manders?” she asked, staring disconsolately at the dripping trees.

Manders gave an apologetic little cough. “Beg pardon, miss, all the what?”

“Oh—autumn—I forgot.”

“I would say, miss, that this was a remarkably fine autumn for this part of Kent. The rainfall has been less than usual.”

Tonia shrugged her supple shoulders and scrutinized a group of fallow deer grazing peacefully two hundred yards away. “Too peaceful,” she murmured.

Beyond the deer one could see the Maidstone road and the glistening tops of shining cars. The deer took no notice of these whatever. She contrasted these placid pets with the last buck she had seen darting like a bullet through the Canadian woods, and it made her disgruntled.

“Thanks about the rainfall. Anything ever happen down here, Manders?” She called him Manders now without effort, but it had taken careful practice.

“Just the usual, miss; what you’d expect in a place like this—births,

marriages and deaths, with now and again a bit of poaching. One man got a year for taking pheasants last winter. Went for the keeper, but keeper nabbed him.”

“A year in prison for that?”

“Crime, miss, nothing short of crime.”

She gulped down her indignation, and thought it over. It seemed she had done more hard thinking in the last few days than in all her life before. Such odd people one found here—and so frightfully polite. That must be because her father owned the houses they lived in. Such houses, too! Pretty enough to look at—if you didn’t look too close—but she wanted to pull most of them down, rebuild and put in electric light.

“Did Mr. Philip entertain much?”

Manders could not repress a smile. Mr. Philip Charters, recently deceased without issue, had asked the vicar and his wife to dinner on the second Tuesday of the month, for the last thirty years. At Christmas he gave a depressing entertainment for the school-children, during which he delivered a long address on the early Christian Fathers that heightened the gloom. Very occasionally his neighbours, Lady Netley and her son, came to dine. That and nothing more.

“There was weeks, miss, when none but himself came in by the front door.”

“Must have been cheerful for you. Who are our nearest neighbours?”

“That would be Lady Netley and Mr. Bruce, her son. About two miles away. Sir Stephen died last year. You pass their place, it’s called Fidlow, motoring to town.”

“I see.” Tonia was silent for a moment, her mind turning to the one thing that had really interested her, then decided to approach the matter by the oblique route. “Who are the Danellos—the people in the Lodge?”

Manders put down his tray. “Who they rightly are, miss, I cannot say, except they’re very respectable tenants—though I wouldn’t exactly call them gentry—and have had the Lodge for some years. There’s him and his wife, and the young lady, Miss Olga. She’d be about twenty-one. Mr. Danello is foreign—French, they say—though others have it he’s a Bulgarian. Very quiet, all of them, miss, and you hardly ever see them. They never go out anywhere, and he has some kind of a business in town.”

She tucked that away, decided not to be unduly curious too soon, and watched a big, twin-engined Farnam gliding like a great grey ghost above the elms toward Paris. Their main route passed directly over the property.

“Have any of those machines ever come down here?”

Manders shook his head. “Never, miss.”

“What’s it like in summer?”

“A good deal more life about then, miss. What with the hoppers and——”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“The hop-pickers, miss,” said Manders with extreme dignity. “They come down from the East End by hundreds for a matter of two or three weeks. And there’s always some gipsies about.”

Tonia grew attentive. Gipsies were the liveliest things she had heard mentioned so far.

“Do they tell your fortune?”

“They’ll tell you anything, miss, for sixpence. When it comes to fortunes I’d sooner take old Mother Goddard in the Gate House.”

“Was that she with the white hair and long chin we saw when we drove here?”

“I believe, miss, there hasn’t been anyone but her at the Gate House for the last forty years.”

Tonia nodded, and dropped into the nearest chair to think. It had thin curving legs, a delicate harp-shaped back, and collapsed under her with a crash. She picked herself up and laughed when she saw the butler’s expression of utter horror.

“Miss Tonia,” he stammered, awestruck; “that was two hundred years old, and genuine Queen Anne!”

“What would you call it now, Manders? I’m going to say how-do-you-do to Mrs. Goddard.”

Mother Goddard had one tooth, a crooked back, very white hair and a memory that compassed generations. Tonia, settled on a stool beside the fire, regarded her with intense interest, spread her hands to the blaze and went straight to the point.

“Manders says that you tell fortunes.”

“I do, my dear, in a manner of speaking. Whatever is wrote in your hand.”

“Would you like to tell mine?”

She hobbled across the hearth, swung a singing pot out of the flame, and tilted it, hissing.

“Whiles it’s drawing, Miss Tonia.”

The girl stretched out her palm, narrow, firm and well-shaped. The old woman put on her glasses, studied it a moment and made an odd sound in her dry throat.

“It’s heart and head, miss, that’ll make trouble for you.”

“Why?” smiled Tonia.

“Head goes one way, heart t’other. You’re the kind that sometimes loves and hates the same one.”

“At the same time?” asked Tonia soberly.

“Yes, miss, that’s here, and you don’t stop long enough to think. And

things hurt you often and you'll be married in two years."

"Not I—I know better."

"Well, miss, maybe you do, and maybe not. It'll be natural like then, though it ain't now."

Tonia, in spite of herself, was rather impressed. This aged crone, with the cracked voice and beady eyes—this leaning cottage, so old that its bricks seemed ageless—the puttering fire and singing pot—the dancing shadows that filled the tiny room—the feeling that perhaps when people got as near eternity as this they might see further than others—all began to work in her brain.

"Mrs. Goddard, if what you say is true, doesn't it make you feel queer to look at a person and know what's going to happen to them?"

The old woman sipped her tea peacefully. "Well, my dear, that is as it may be, but it don't worry me. It's their business, not mine. But there's one family here whose fortunes or misfortunes I've never had the chance to tell."

"Which?"

Mrs. Goddard crooked her wrinkled thumb. "In the Lodge—the Whispering Lodge. They've never come near me."

"Do they know about you?" Tonia was instantly aroused.

"Yes, miss, everyone does hereabouts. It's us that don't know about them. There's some that lives in the light and others in shadow. They've took the shadow. But it won't last long now."

"What?"

"The shadow, miss. I'm old, but I'll live to see it go."

"Mrs. Goddard, if there's anything wrong, why isn't it seen to?"

"It ain't what you could put your finger on. There was one must have touched it somehow, but he never spoke again. Your hand, miss!" Her parchment finger traced the thread-like lines for a patient moment, then she looked up with a touch of awe.

"It's here, miss, I see it now. Light will come through you."

Tonia, neither believing nor disbelieving, felt breathless. And yet——!

"What could I have to do with it?"

The old woman did not answer, but pointed to the fire, where a log subsided into a glowing mound that took on a multitude of shapes. It meant nothing to Tonia, but Mrs. Goddard, her bony chin supported on a skinny hand, studied it intently. Presently she took a long breath.

"Nothing more to-night, miss. I can't get no further."

Such was the utter finality of this that Tonia rose, completely puzzled. "You must finish it some other day. I'm going home now."

"Alone, miss?"

"Yes—why not?"

"Then when you do be passing the Lodge, step quickly, my dear, very

quickly.”

Tonia set out, smiling to herself. Night had come quickly, the avenue was dark, and for the half-mile between her and The Dene the world was steeped in silence and gloom. An owl hooted in a spinney as she drew near the Lodge. Clouds came up, obscuring the sickle of a new moon, and Tonia, shivering a little, felt she was about to do something foolish. But, after all, why was it foolish to wait a while?

As though obeying a signal, she halted, left the road, and leaned motionless against a giant trunk. Still darker now, and her lips became a little dry.

A breath of wind stirred in the trees. Faint sounds reached her from the invisible village, the bark of a dog and horn of a distant car. Rabbits hopped about her feet, making sudden startling noises in the dead leaves.

The mass of the Whispering Lodge loomed indistinctly over the stone wall, showing no light whatever. It seemed huge, formless and vaguely threatening.

She did not know how long she waited thus, and was getting cold and stiff, when she felt in a strange but certain way that there was movement close by. Time had now ceased to exist.

In a sort of trance it was impossible to break, she found herself staring at a spot where surely one shadow was blacker than the rest. Presently it appeared to detach itself—and move.

It did move! At that she nearly ceased to breathe, and, straining her ears, distinguished an infinitely faint, crumpling sound.

Squeezing her eyes tight, she made out a figure, at first formless, but gradually taking the shape of a woman. This neared the road, then halted as though perceiving the watcher. Tonia distinguished something pale—a face—dead white—with large, luminous eyes.

At that she gave a loud, irrepressible cry and rushed forward. There was nothing! The shadow had vanished, and she found her own face scratched by the opposing thicket.

The cloud slid from the moon. She stood for an instant, panting, whereupon recklessness took her, and she pushed desperately on. The thicket thinned. She passed the great blasted trunk and stopped dead.

Twenty feet away rose the stone wall—with no opening whatever.

At that moment a light sprang to life in a rear window of the Lodge. The outline of a man's figure was cast against a blind, and she heard a laugh, clear and intensely ironical.

CHAPTER II

THE TENANT OF THE LODGE

MR. CHARTERS sat in his study, a big panelled apartment leading directly off the drawing-room, a long table beside him covered with maps, plans and account books. On the other side of this array was Jollands, agent for the estate.

At the moment Charters was thinking very hard, while Jollands, with an extraordinary sense of ease and liberation, was smoking the best cigar he had ever put between his teeth. Presently Charters cleared a space of very old oak, set his elbows on it, leaned a little forward and spoke thoughtfully.

“Then, as a result of all this, I assume that the estate about clears itself—but without any proper upkeep?”

“Yes, sir, with practically no upkeep.”

“So that its value now is nothing like what it used to be?”

Jollands nodded. “Exactly.” He hated to say disagreeable things over a cigar like this, but saw his chance. It had been hard going in his office for the last few years, and it made him feel old before his time.

“What would it cost to put the place in decent shape?”

Jollands breathed rather hard and swallowed a lot of smoke, which made him choke. So many things crowded on him at that question—things he knew should have been done long ago—but were not done because there was no money. Houses to be repaired and painted, new roofs, drains relaid, roads remetalled. He saw them all at once.

Charterden was proclaimed one of the prettiest villages in Kent, but he, better than anyone else, knew it to be the beauty of old age in decay. Hundreds of things that ought to be done! And here was the new owner talking about decent shape! He wondered what Canadians actually meant by “decent shape.”

“Three thousand a year for three years would transform the property,” he said in a curiously incredulous tone.

Charters made a note on his writing pad. “I’ll find that. What next?”

“I assure you, sir,” began Jollands, hardly believing his ears, “that this will be splendid news in the vill——”

Charters waved an amiable hand. “Forget it. I’ve seen quite enough myself. Now what else?”

There was a deal else, such as falls to a man who is for several hundred people all round him quite the most important person in the world, a man

whose nod or frown was to be remembered, whose mood made all the difference in life!

A sense of this had begun to take hold of Charters. He was getting more used to the touching of caps and bobbing curtsies of women on their doorsteps, but he didn't misinterpret it as being anything more than a sign of respect and perhaps a little fear of the master. Queer, too, to have a clerical living in his lands, to see his own name on the church brasses and the swinging sign of the public-house.

He owned it all, houses and timber, deer and pheasants, covert and hopfields, where the naked poles stretched in mathematical ranks over the bare brown soil. Fifteen hundred acres of this ancient county were his, with all that stood thereon.

"And my other tenants—I don't mean the cottage ones—what about them? The occupants of the Whispering Lodge?"

"You've heard that already, sir?"

"My son mentioned the name as we came past the other night."

"That's Mr. Danello and his family of two. Couldn't be quieter people. They have the place for seven years—four still to run—at a hundred a year, plus rates. I only hear from him once a quarter."

"Are they foreigners?"

"They are, sir, but came to Mr. Philip well recommended."

"Are they the sort one meets in a social way?"

Jollands shook his head. "They don't go anywhere."

"Anything else of local interest—you seem to have a very peaceful community in Charterden? Fortunate that, since I'm told I'll have to do duty as a local magistrate."

"Yes, sir, it is peaceful. Almost too much so, your young people may think. One murder in thirty years or so?"

"When was that?"

"Just three years ago—and inside The Dene gates. A poacher, we think, since the victim was the local constable."

"Never been cleared up?"

"No, sir—not a sign of it. It happened behind the Lodge. The Danellos were asleep and knew nothing till next day. But it gave the spot a bad name."

"And the Lodge a new one, eh?"

"Just what happened. I fancy the new naming took place at the Charters Arms after the inquest. But people haven't forgotten it."

"I suppose not; still, I wouldn't mention it to my daughter till we have settled down and got used to the place. Young people's imaginations sometimes run away with them, you know."

Jollands smiled and nodded.

“Anything else at the moment?”

Jollands got up and began to gather his papers. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’ll let the rest stand to another day. There is just one thing—I have inquiries as to when Mrs. Charters will be receiving.”

“Shortly, I think—I’ll let you know. Good morning, Mr. Jollands.”

It was the first time in his business life that the agent, who had been born a gentleman, had been thus addressed by his employer in this room to which he had made so many futile visits. He made a jerky bow.

“Good morning, sir. I—I—in fact, everybody thanks you.”

He went out burdened, but with an infinitely lighter heart, and Charters relapsed into thought. It was all a good deal bigger contract than he expected. Presently he got up, stood for a moment at the window regarding his stretching acres with a distinctly quizzical smile, and betook himself to the morning-room, where he found his wife.

“Well, my dear, I see you’re at it, too.”

She gave a little sigh. “Oh, John, I feel all mixed up with all kinds of things. Just now I’ve been trying to get hold of rank and precedence in the servants’ hall. They seem to be so much more aristocratic there than we are, and frightfully superior. And do you mind if housekeeping is rather more expensive than I told you it would be?”

He laughed. “That sounds familiar. Do you mind if I spend three thousand a year—perhaps four—more than I mentioned the other day?”

“That’s not so much, dear.”

“Pounds, I mean. We’re English now.”

“Twenty thousand dollars!”

He told her of his talk with Jollands, while she nodded approval of all he said. Finally he sent her a rueful grin.

“I begin to wonder whether I’ve come into The Dene, or been let in for it; but it makes one more understanding about life on this side of the Atlantic. Remember what you said about families here with a dwindling income, and the sacrifices in keeping up a place like this? Philip was evidently swamped, with nothing coming in from outside. He didn’t spend anything on himself, from what Jollands tells me, yet there wasn’t enough—nearly enough.”

“I understand better, too,” she said gently. “It’s really this, John, that in middle life we have tackled something new.”

“And if I can look after my end as well as I know you’ll look after yours, I’ll be satisfied.”

She sent him the little smile she kept for him alone, and they were both silent for a moment.

“It’s lucky about Julian,” she said presently. “We couldn’t have arranged the Oxford affair unless he’d had his B.A. But I don’t think Tonia is very

cheerful.”

“She’s lonely, with nothing special to interest her yet—which reminds me that Jollands was asking when you would be receiving. It seems that people want to know.”

“Perhaps next week. I suppose he had a lot to tell you.”

“It was about what I expected from what we learned in London, with the three-year-old local murder as a *bonne bouche*.”

“Murder, John!”

“In the avenue, just inside the gates. It was never cleared up, evidently the work of a poacher, and the ripples of it are still reflected in village talk.”

“Tonia doesn’t know about that, does she?”

“No, and I told Jollands to say nothing more. She’ll hear it in due course, I assume, but I want her to get settled first.”

“The place is perfectly safe now?” said Mrs. Charters, rather anxiously.

He laughed. “I was thinking a moment ago that it would be impossible to imagine a quieter, more established and cut-and-dried state of affairs than we’ve found here. It makes me feel that, for Tonia’s sake, we should get in touch with people as soon as you’re ready. Jollands says the pheasants are eating their heads off, and we ought to have a shoot.”

“Doesn’t that sound English, John—to begin by killing something?”

He laughed again. “Part of the British ritual, my dear. You’ll soon get used to it.”

By daylight the place was quite ordinary. So concluded Tonia, when, that afternoon, she strolled casually down the avenue and cast a sharp glance at the scene of her recent adventure.

She walked round the thicket from each side, examined the stone wall—a solid structure with no door or opening—turned back through the thicket, observed the great trunk lifting a sheer and branchless forty feet to its shattered top, then regained the road with a sense of disillusionment. Presently she thought of someone else who ought to know something.

Hammond, the head keeper, had, like Manders, stepped after his father. He was a short, thick-set man, with bright red cheeks, wind-whipped into tiny squares and triangles of glistening skin. He wore canvas leggings, whipcord breeches, a moleskin vest, and his boots had soles an inch thick. Usually he carried an old single-barrelled breechloader in the crook of his left arm. Tonia saw him coming out of a spinney and waved her hand.

“What’s on to-day, Hammond?”

He touched his cap. “Just having a look at the birds, miss. Plenty of pheasants, and I’ve put up ten woodcock.”

“When is there going to be a shoot?”

“About ten days, miss. It ain’t quite settled.”

“Hammond,” she demanded presently, watching a cock pheasant strut out and sun his shimmering plumage, “how do you feel about those birds?”

“Same as anyone, miss, just natural. Our birds ain’t any different from others.”

“You don’t mind feeding them and watching them like pets, then having them driven out to be shot?”

“That’s what I feed ’em for, miss. I’d mind if they weren’t well fed.”

She glanced at him sharply, seemed about to blurt something, then bit her lip. Hammond, not understanding the drift of this, and wondering at the queer ways of Canadians, stood rubbing his broad thumb over the stock of his gun.

“Why do they call it Whispering Lodge?” she asked suddenly.

He blinked at her. “Who’s been telling you stories, miss?”

“That’s not an answer—but it’s old Mrs. Goddard in the Gate House for one.”

“She ought to know better,” grunted the keeper. “Forget it—nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid,” she flashed, “but terribly interested. I—I came past there alone last night, and nothing happened.”

Hammond’s lips tightened a shade. “Don’t you do that again, miss, and it’s never been any use poking into that business. There was young Cramp found dead in the avenue behind the Lodge with a hole in his head, and no one knows who made it.”

Tonia caught her breath, remembering the creak in the old woman’s voice when she spoke of someone who touched something and never spoke again.

“Had he seen or found anything?” she asked tensely.

“Well, miss, since you’ve got that far, you might better know the rest for your own protection. Cramp had been made local constable the week before. He was found in the avenue at ten o’clock on a dark night a week later. He couldn’t speak, though he tried hard enough to get out something. But likely enough he got his from some tramp he found in The Dene grounds—or it might have been a poacher. That was three years ago, and as nothing’s took place since ’tis as well let alone.”

He touched his cap, regarded a distant spinney and was about to move off when Tonia stopped him.

“Hammond! Tell me something!”

“There ain’t nothing more.”

“Have you never seen anything yourself in the avenue since that time?”

He made a clucking sound in his throat, reddened to the temples and scraped the earth with his heavy heel. “Well, miss, if you’ll have the truth, I’ve

seen her, but not him; and, begging your pardon, I ain't saying anything more."

"But you must, in fairness to me." She spoke calmly enough, but her pulse was beating fast. "Are there two of them?"

"Man and woman—though they ain't usually seen together," grunted Hammond unwillingly.

"Oh, we haven't any ghosts in Canada, so you must help me to find these some day—or night. Will you?"

"I didn't say they was ghosts—and ghosts never bashed in a man's head. You let it alone, miss."

"Then I will"—here she smiled at him and turned back toward The Dene, adding in a murmur, "do nothing of the sort."

She walked slowly through the grey of evening, lost in thought. Hammond, like the rest of them, was living beside a mystery, had accepted it, and left it alone for fear of burning his fingers. But it was the most absorbing thing Tonia had found in England.

And it suited The Dene. She remembered what her mother had said about exploring the people around her, and, much more to the point, the prophecy of the old crone in the Gate House. This was in her mind, mixed with vague disturbing thoughts of Rodney, when she encountered Manders in the hall.

"Mrs. Charters was asking for you, miss. Mr. and Mrs. Danello have called with their niece, Miss Vinen. They're in the drawing-room now."

Tonia stared at him, then went straight into the big room where the fire was casting gigantic shadows that the electric lights did not overcome.

"Tonia," murmured her mother, "our neighbours are kind enough to come and see us. Mrs. Danello, this is my daughter."

Tonia shook hands with a middle-aged woman and a slight man with bright eyes and greying hair.

"My niece, Olga," said Mrs. Danello.

A girl moved forward, dark, white-faced, with large black eyes, a girl of about Tonia's height. It struck Tonia that something about her was vaguely familiar.

And she moved like a shadow!

* * * * *

It all seemed unreal, so unreal that Tonia wondered how her mother could be so calm till she remembered that there was no mystery about the Lodge so far as her mother knew. So she studied the girl's face, trying hard to be natural.

"I hope we'll see something of each other," she said in her abrupt way.

Olga smiled, but with her eyes only—a curious smile that was remotely pathetic. It suggested that she had given up hope of seeing much of anyone.

"That would be very nice, but I don't go out much." The voice was extraordinarily gentle.

“Do you hunt?”

Olga seemed almost amused. “I don’t ride; my aunt doesn’t think I should. Do you like The Dene—it’s a great change, isn’t it?”

Tonia pursed her lips. “I don’t know yet; I’m in the process of getting Englishified. Couldn’t we go up to town together some day?”

The other girl looked wistful, and just then Mrs. Danello cut in with a very definite note.

“That’s very kind of you, but Olga isn’t up to much yet. Are you, my dear?”

It was the most ordinary possible remark, but Tonia fancied that she caught in it an inference not at all ordinary. Olga bit her lip and smiled again, though very faintly, then relapsed into silence. She seemed almost happier saying nothing. Mrs. Danello turned to Mrs. Charters.

“Had you always lived in Canada till you came here?”

“Yes, all my life.”

“You must find it very different. We do—don’t we, Henri?”

Danello nodded. “Yes, after France we still do—and it’s three years since we are here. That was on account of Olga, Mrs. Charters. Nothing but complete quiet, said the doctor. So we came to Kent.”

He spoke with only a slightly foreign accent, making innumerable quick gestures, his eyes very alert. Tonia, watching him as closely as she dared, put him at about forty, marked the delicacy of his pointed chin, and did not miss the long, sensitive, well-manicured fingers. Nothing of the country gentleman here. Mrs. Charters, having said the appropriate thing, he went on:

“Business brought me to England at that time, and it did not matter where we lived, provided within a reasonable distance of London, where I have organized a private bank. And my wife fortunately prefers the country.”

“Do you shoot?” asked Mrs. Charters, “because if you do I’m sure my husband would——”

The delicate hands lifted a little. “Alas, no!”

“He reads in his spare time,” put in his wife, “reads everything he can get.”

“That is practically true. There is a certain, shall we say, tension about banking”—here he gave an inscrutable smile—“that demands relaxation—mental diversion. Therefore I read—everything, especially in French. I am half French, and lived in Lyons for years. Also, it is necessary that I keep in touch with Continental affairs.”

Tonia missed nothing of this. It seemed to her to be all at random, and they were both here for the sake of producing a certain impression. That and nothing more. She admitted to being prejudiced beforehand, but this talk sounded thin and artificial.

As to Mrs. Danello, the woman was of a definitely French appearance,

looked extremely capable, and did not strike one as the sort who would be content to be isolated in the country for the sake of the health of a niece. She seemed practical to a degree, and suggested a type of mastery that most likely expressed itself in the direction of the girl beside her.

And that someone had mastered Olga was obvious. Tonia turned to her again.

“We’re just on the air route to Paris, aren’t we?” she said at a hazard. “Have you ever flown over? I’d love to.”

Olga shook her dark head. “No,” she half whispered. “I’ve never been in the air.” The voice was nervous, and she sent her aunt an uncertain glance.

“Some of those machines look as though they were going to land here, don’t they?” went on Tonia, fumbling for any kind of clue.

“They never do—never,” struck in Danello with odd precision. “There is no suitable landing-place—it would mean a crash.”

Tonia was unconvinced. She had seen a good deal of flying in Canada since the war, and knew that a machine could land and take off safely within a few hundred yards of the Lodge.

“I believe a good pilot could come down comfortably quite near your house. It doesn’t need much ground now.”

He seemed unreasonably vexed. “Let us hope no one will try it.”

Mrs. Charters laughed. “I should say it’s most unlikely that anyone will, and as for——”

At that moment her husband came in. If he was surprised to find visitors he concealed it successfully, and after making himself agreeable turned to his wife.

“Sorry, my dear, but I’m off to-morrow for a day or two.”

“But why, John?”

“A cable from Canada, and I must go to Paris. You see,” he explained to Danello, “I’m supposed to have retired from business, but a company with which I was formerly associated has asked me, as a favour, to attend to something over there at once, and I can’t very well refuse. It’s rather a large transaction. I’ll be at the Crillon.”

“I have a banking office in Paris—can I be of any use?”

“Thanks—all I need at the moment is some French money, and I don’t see how to get it in time. I’m leaving from Croydon at ten to-morrow by air.”

Danello gave a little smile. “It happens that I have four thousand francs at the house. Is that of use? It is, say, twenty pounds at present exchange.

“Just right, if I may have it.”

“With pleasure. The franc is now at 200—and very unsettled,” he added thoughtfully. “I will send you the money within the hour.”

This was a bit of luck, thought Charters, and let it go at that; and of them

all only Tonia saw the quick, almost incredulous glance Mrs. Danello had cast at her husband. It passed in a second, but struck the girl with an odd significance.

“Father!” she burst out, “take me!”

He shook his head. “Not this time; the next perhaps, if there is a next. I’m going to be extremely busy.”

“Then take us both, and we’ll see what the place looks like from the air. I want to fly right over the Whis——”

She broke off, colouring hotly. Danello was looking at her with calm, penetrating eyes, but she perceived a sudden clinching of his white hand. Then Mrs. Charters laughed good-naturedly.

“Your mother is much too old-fashioned, and declines with thanks. I’d sooner look up than down. I’m sorry you feel you have to go, John.”

“So am I, but I can’t very well get out of it.”

The Danellos went off a moment later. Charters made for his study, and Tonia stood watching Olga’s figure dwindle down the drive. Mrs. Danello seemed to be talking volubly, her husband occasionally nodding agreement.

Tonia tried to piece together the innumerable and faint impressions produced by this meeting, but they were too indefinite to form any real pattern.

One could not identify an individual from a shadow, and if the shadow had been the individual, how did it pass a solid stone wall? And why should Olga haunt the avenue?

As for Danello, he presented nothing mysterious. A banker, half French, with a French wife and a delicate niece, what more natural than a country house? Mrs. Danello looked too practical to have association with mysteries.

So much for the visitors. But what Tonia could not displace was the picture of the shrouded form under the elms, and the vision of young Cramp in his blue uniform, eyes glazing, trying to get something out and dying with the secret on his lips.

“Well, Tonia, what did you think of them?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “We didn’t get very far, did we?”

“One doesn’t expect to, the first time. How did you like the girl?”

“Couldn’t make anything of her. She’s so negative.”

“She looks very lonely,” said Mrs. Charters with sympathy. “And she’s certainly lovely.”

It struck Tonia that this was quite right. It was a lovely face, and Tonia, who laid no claim to beauty, had recognized that at once. It was unusually sensitive, but, in a way, a dead face, with a suggestion of fixed hopelessness and far from any animation. Animation would make it arresting and fascinating. There was a depth of feeling there, and the eyes were those of one who brooded over the past.

“The uncle seems very much alive,” went on Mrs. Charters, “and a good business man, I should think, but his wife seems not quite in his class—though very capable, like most French women. Did you arrange anything with the niece?”

Tonia was afraid of saying too much. “She doesn’t ride, and looks as though she couldn’t walk far, but I’ll suggest something when we call there. How soon will that be?”

“Very soon: I’m disappointed you haven’t more in common.”

“I am, too, but we may hit it off.”

It was all she said, but there persisted an unexplainable certainty that there would be much more than this. Olga’s face seemed now more distinct than when the girl was in the room. Then, it being no present use to try and get any further, Tonia wandered about, finally gravitating to the study, where she perched on the corner of the long refectory table.

“Sure you can’t take me, Dad?”

He pushed back a pile of papers. “Sorry, child. If there’s any little thing in the Rue Royale——”

“Thanks—I don’t want anything. Next time?”

“Why so eager?”

“Can’t explain exactly, but I do want to see this place from the air.”

“Having seen it, would you be any happier?”

“Can’t promise that—but perhaps a little wiser.”

He laughed at her. “You’ll notice that, so far, we haven’t been too curious about your impressions of England.”

“You’ve both been wonderful. Are you curious now?”

“Not unless you feel—well—expansive.”

“I’m getting interested,” she confessed.

“Good! Think Julian can come down for the shoot?”

“I think so.”

“Do you want Rodney?” he asked casually.

Her slim legs stopped swinging. “Just as you like—it doesn’t affect me.”

Charters’ eyes twinkled, and he was about to speak when Manders came in with a small parcel.

“It has just been left with Mr. Danello’s compliments, sir, and the man is waiting.”

Charters nodded, filled up a cheque after counting the French money, and sent it off. There was also a small packet and a note:

“DEAR MR. CHARTERS,—

“Of your kindness, and if quite convenient, would you be so good as to hand the enclosed to my agent, who will be waiting at

your hotel on your arrival. I have wired him to this effect. It is a small remembrance my wife sends to her sister in Paris for her birthday. The date was overlooked till a few moments ago, and there is no other way of being sure that this little gift will reach her on her anniversary.

“Sincerely yours,

“PAUL DANELLO.”

He slipped the packet in his pocket. “Rather an odd couple to find in a place like this, eh? And certainly the odd chance that he should have French money. Pretty bright chap, I should say.”

“I suppose so. Send us some kind of a signal when you’re flying over, Dad, if you can; and have a look at the ground south of the Lodge. I believe it would be just right for landing on.”

“Please Heaven, I won’t have to use it,” grinned Charters, and turned to his papers.

She was rather silent for the rest of the day, trying to rid herself of a feeling of disappointment about Olga. Not much prospect of any real companionship there, and, as to the Whispering Lodge, nothing that could be called evidence. When she went to bed she could not sleep, then tossed about for hours, and finally sat at the open window, wrapped in a blanket.

The world was obscure and dipped in windless silence. It must have been after midnight that through the murk she saw one star, red as blood, a tiny pinpoint in the immensity of sky.

While she watched it became three stars—close together. These seemed to approach. They descended a little, held a level line, disappeared and winked back into life.

They must have been over the Lodge when they took a slanting dive, dipped below the elm-tops, soared into vision again and dwindled rapidly.

Tonia, staring, knew that they were on an aeroplane. What aeroplane? Why circle over the Whispering Lodge—and vanish? And in the midst of this riddle she suddenly realized that the machine had been absolutely silent.

CHAPTER III

COUNTRY LIFE

LADY NETLEY, a tall, thin, austere woman of fifty-five, with greyish hair, squirrel teeth and a cold-storage manner when not in action, finished balancing her monthly accounts. She noted with disapproval that the grocer's bill slightly exceeded that of the previous month, checked the figures, made a note in her diary, and took a thoughtful glance at her son Bruce, who was deep in the sporting columns of the morning paper.

"Bruce," she said suddenly, "I suppose you know that the new people have moved into The Dene?"

He nodded. "Yes, and I also see the Beaufort killed twice yesterday."

She rapped with her pencil—short, commanding raps that as a signal he was too experienced to disregard.

"Canadians—ain't they?"

"Yes, but they can't help that. There's a girl of twenty or thereabouts, and a son at Oxford. I believe they're quite nice, and am told that the father is spending a fortune on the place. I'm going to call."

"Why so keen?" he asked cynically.

She gave him a look that seemed to question his intelligence. "Why shouldn't I?" Then, with the shadow of a smile, "One can never tell."

Bruce, a masculine edition of his mother, put aside his paper. "Not inspired by maternal solicitude, I hope. Nothing doing here."

She did not laugh, nor did he expect it. "I don't cotton to strangers very much," he added casually, "so please don't make any commitments for me."

She pondered a moment, then took from a locked drawer a letter that, after a careful reading, she held out to him. Presently he looked up sharply and frowned.

"I say, I didn't know things had gone as far as this!"

"I couldn't be sure of it myself until this month; but now we've reached a point where—where——" She paused, and set the rapping pencil in motion again.

"Where, with me in the back of your head, you've decided to run over the ground, eh?"

Their eyes met—blue-grey Saxon eyes that at this moment reflected nothing either parental or filial.

"Well," she said coolly, "why not?"

He picked up his paper. "Thanks—but I don't fancy the imported article."

She opened another drawer and took out a small bundle of papers. "I would like half an hour's serious talk with you, Bruce."

* * * * *

"DEAR MRS. CHARTERS,—

"I have not disturbed you by calling, knowing how busy you must be, but since we are such near neighbours may not the usual formalities be put aside? There is to be a meet here on Friday next, and if your daughter rides and would like to hunt, we will gladly lend her a mount. My son would be happy to look after her. A lot of young people will probably turn out, so it seems a good beginning point.

"Sincerely yours,

"JOAN NETLEY."

Mrs. Charters smiled contentedly as she read this. "Mr. Netley brought it himself, Manders?"

"Yes, madam; he's in the drawing-room now."

"Please ask Miss Tonia to come there."

Two minutes later Tonia was talking to a tall young man with reddish hair, reddish face, small brown moustache, a mouth which she thought rather like a rabbit's, with its slightly protruding teeth, and a rather indefinite air. Yes, he hunted every winter—they usually killed—ought to get a fox on Friday—there wasn't too much wire—and so on.

He volunteered this, quite at his ease, and measuring her with eyes distinctly sharp and that betrayed nothing of the growing surprise he really felt. She did not know whether she liked him or not, but was quite ready to explore. She thought she didn't. A bit patronizing.

"I can ride a little, but I've never hunted." As a matter of fact, she rode like a cowboy, having learned on the western prairie.

"That'll be all right if you just follow me."

"Awfully kind of you," she said, dangerously demure. "I hope I won't make a fool of myself before a lot of strangers."

Mrs. Charters recognized the symptom with apprehension, but Netley only gave a satisfied laugh.

"Do what I do and you'll find it perfectly simple. Do you ride side or astride?"

"Either—it doesn't matter." She was measuring him now, not definitely antagonistic as yet, but with a rising tingle in her blood. Then she felt secretly amused, because here might be an admirable foil for Rodney.

His reddish brows lifted a shade. "You can try both before we start. Please

come over a little before ten and I'll motor you back. Main thing," he added casually, "is not to ride down the hounds."

"I'd assume that—since one is hunting a fox." Her voice was quite devoid of expression.

He laughed, not in the least offended, being privately and unexpectedly attracted. She was totally different from anything he had expected, and positively refreshing compared to a dozen girls he could mention. She was electrical and stimulating. Something in this, after all, he concluded, remembering the serious half-hour with his mother.

After a little more talk, in which there was more than a little open sparring, he went off. Mrs. Charters looked at her daughter and shook her head.

"I wouldn't—really. It's most kind of them both, and you must take people as you find them."

"But, mother, he began by thinking I was a fool, and I wanted to give him something else to think."

"It's only his manner, and he doesn't think that at all."

"He doesn't—now."

"Why didn't you tell him that you rode perfectly?"

"Does one—in England? I'd sooner keep something up my sleeve. And he came prepared to be patronizing and looking as though his mother had sent him. Didn't you notice that?"

Her mother, who fancied she had noticed something of the sort, only smiled. "Shall I write to Julian about the shoot, or will you? It's settled for Saturday week, and if possible, they ought to be here on the Friday."

Tonia grinned broadly, and strolled off to her own room.

"DEAR OLD JULE,—

"The shoot is fixed for the 10th, and you're wanted. Mother says it's best to arrive Friday night. Hammond's pets—I mean the pheasants—are as tame as turkeys. You can almost walk over them, so I don't see where the fun is coming in.

"I'm asking a man called Netley. He lives near here with his mother, who has a big place, is rather nice-looking for an Englishman, and doesn't do anything but kill things. I'm going to hunt with him on Friday. And father says he will be very glad to see Rodney if he can come, too.

"There's another reason for your being here. I want to see you *privately*. There's something in which you've simply got to help me. I can't put a word of it on paper, but it's the one thing that so far has reconciled me to living in cold-storage in Kent."

She read this, her head a little on one side, then added:

“About Rodney—if he tries to sound you about me, all you know is that he’s quite welcome, as far as I’m concerned, but he hasn’t any more privileges than anyone else. In other words, I’m feeling rather independent.

“TONIA.”

She read this over, lips twitching a little, then went out on the wide lawn fronting The Dene. At 10.28 came a low familiar drone, and she saw the twin-engined Paris machine heading like a great grey gadfly straight for Lympne.

Queer to think that her father was in that metal box of hurricane speed. In three minutes it was over the elms, dipped into a gentle swoop, regained its elevation and hurtled on. Another three minutes and it was out of sight.

She struck off down the drive with a feeling that life in some odd fashion was about to unfold into something unexpected. Also it would be amusing to see Rodney and Netley together.

She had no idea of matching them in a sort of sentimental dog-fight, but had read with remarkable accuracy what went on in young Netley’s head during that first short meeting, and decided that his further reactions would be interesting.

Then, of a sudden, as she was passing the high stone wall of the Whispering Lodge, she wondered what Julian would have to say about that. How fortunate that he was not impressionable.

Walking thoughtfully under the great arched gateway of St. Cyprian’s College, Julian crossed the quad, with its stone-slabbed paths and symmetrical turf, and made his way to Rodney’s rooms. He found that youth divided between a pot of strong tea and a book of logarithms.

“Huloo, Charters; sit tight a minute, will you?”

Julian took a battered chair near the fire. The room was comfortable, the furniture nondescript. A pair of skulls were hung over the mantel above a print of Beatrice D’Este. No frills or ornaments here, and everything testified to hard and continuous usage. Rodney was running his fingers through his flaxen hair and murmuring unintelligible fragments of higher mathematics. Presently he pushed away the book, gulped some cold tea and grinned at his visitor.

“How that stuff is going to help my future career beats me. What’s doing in your shop?”

“Nothing to keep one awake. I’ve had a letter about that shoot. It’s on Saturday week.”

“We are interested—but Saturday week—well—I don’t know.”

“My mother wants us to turn up on the Friday, if possible.”

“Anyone else coming?”

“Tonia’s asked a man called Netley.”

Rodney’s brows went up a little. “Who’s Netley?”

“Some neighbour—I don’t know him. She’s going to hunt with him this week.”

“She’s in luck,” said Rodney cheerfully, but thinking very hard. “I suppose they’re getting settled down by now?”

“Yes, but the governor says there’s a lot to be done. Can you come for that shoot? They’re expecting us both.”

He asked this with a shrewd suspicion of what was going on in Rodney’s mind. “Had difficulty with Rodney.” That was what Tonia confided the day he left The Dene. There was nothing unusual about this, and her brother knew personally of six others with whom there had been difficulties. But they all got safely over it.

Suddenly, Rodney swung round and sent his friend a straight stare.

“I say, Charters?”

“Well?”

“It’s awfully kind of your mother, but do you, as between ourselves, think I’d better come?”

“Sure!” said Julian heartily.

“You know she’s furious with me?”

“My mother!”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“She’s been furious with several others,” remarked Julian reminiscently.

Rodney scanned the teapot with a reflective eye. “I know that, and suppose you just regard me as another lamb being led to the slaughter—but you may take it that I’m in earnest about this thing.”

“That’s what they all said—and so she was—only more so.”

“I gathered as much, but it makes no difference in my case. And what’s more, I don’t expect to get anything without fighting for it.”

“You’ll be accommodated in this case all right. And there may be others.”

Rodney laughed, but his jaw was projecting a little. He pictured Netley—older than himself—established—a man of evident means—a neighbour. Serious competition this, however one looked at it. He himself would have six hundred a year in two years, and a job in the shipping office of a man who traded with South America.

But already most of the things he aspired to were in the possession of this Netley—who probably never did a day’s work in his life. He began to dislike the very name of Netley. Then, since beneath his exterior calmness he was really very disturbed, he ventured greatly:

“How would you feel yourself suppose—well—supposing——”

“All right as far as I’m concerned,” said Julian promptly, “but I’m the

wrong sex.”

“Ever been knocked out yourself?”

“Not on your life—that’s left out of me.”

Rodney regarded the book of logarithms with positive loathing. “Perhaps you’re fortunate. I never felt this way myself before, but there’s something about her that no brother could see.”

“They all said that,” murmured Julian, “and, what’s more, they all came to me when they got stuck, were frightfully civil, and asked if there was any little thing I could suggest.”

“What then?” demanded Rodney, startled with the similarity to his own condition.

“I told ’em all the same thing—cut it out. You can’t influence that girl—which perhaps you’ve begun to notice—you can’t drive her—and I very much doubt if you can lead her either. She settles things for herself.”

“Right! You can count on me for Saturday week,” said Rodney crisply.

* * * * *

Bruce was waiting when Tonia stepped out of her car. Beside him a groom held the bridles of a roan mare and a big raking bay.

“Morning!” he said briskly. “We ought to get away.”

She glanced about with keen interest. Hounds and huntsmen were in an adjoining field. This was the New Kent pack. Through the cool air came their first faint whimpering and the whinny of horses. A near-by road was filled with a line of cars. Groups of men and boys stood back against the hedges or hung over stiles. Mounted folk formed into clusters, broke up restlessly and reformed. Riders examined their girths. It was the first picture of the kind Tonia had seen, and she felt fascinated.

“Give you a leg up?” asked Netley impatiently.

She shook her head, and, making love to the roan, liked her on sight—clean-built—a sensitive mouth and large, intelligent eyes. The girl stroked the silky neck and slid into the saddle as a fish slides into water. She felt her knees gripping leather, and became very contented.

“Any instructions?” she asked demurely.

“Don’t rush your fences,” said Netley, eyeing her very hard, “and lean well back when you land. You’ll dislocate your neck if you don’t.”

“Thanks—I’ll try and save my neck.”

“Right! It’s too nice to risk.”

He said this with no change of voice, and was mounted before she could think of an answer. “Not so slow,” she reflected. Perhaps it was an English beginning, and more would follow when he was ready.

She admitted that he looked extremely well in pink, and his critical brown eyes missed nothing of her own appearance. Then they joined the rest of the

field, and she got her first view of the hard-riding set of the New Kent. Six women, about thirty men and some of the finest horses she had ever seen.

“I’ll tell you who most of ’em are later on. There we go!”

Hounds disappeared into a spinney, a whip cantered round either end of it, and there followed a tense silence, broken only by the uncertain voice of an excited hound.

“One marked in there yesterday,” said Netley coolly. “I bet——”

He cut off at the note of a horn—then a long-drawn “Gone away.” Forty dancing horses woke into furious life. Netley got away first of them all, and Tonia made after him. At the corner of the spinney she had a glimpse of a brown speck a quarter of a mile off travelling very fast. She found herself next to Netley, and had not dreamed that the roan could move so fast and with so little effort.

Ahead, the countryside dipped gently to the southward; fair, open country, with wide sheep-scattered pastures and low hedges. The pace was hot, and the roan’s polished hoofs drummed rhythmically over the springy turf. Tonia, utterly exalted, thought nothing of the rest of the world, when suddenly the roan rose to a hedge, took it like a bird and landed heavily. She felt a violent wrench in back and neck. Her jaws clicked together, her spine seemed dislocated, and she recovered herself with an effort.

“Darn it, he was right,” she admitted through gritting teeth. “Now I’m going to show him something!”

* * * * *

Tonia pushed on, the roan buckling to her work as though she loved it, and drew alongside Netley. He waved a hand and grinned.

“How’s your neck—why didn’t you do as I told you?”

She was too breathless to answer, which made her angrier than ever, so touched the roan with her heel. The result was like being shot out of a gun, and the wind whistled past her face. She heard the soft tumult of many hoofs behind. Then Netley, who was a little way ahead, waved his arm, shouted to her to follow, and, knowing his country like a book, made for a low gate in the corner of the big field they had just entered.

Tonia wondered why. Two hundred yards directly in front was an innocent-looking hedge, not as stiff as the one she had jumped. The pack had swarmed straight through, but she was aware that the rest of the field had struck off on Netley’s tangent.

She darted a look at the hedge, and the thing settled itself in her brain with a twang. This time, she vowed, she would not do as she was told. A sort of madness took her, and she patted the great throbbing neck. The mare twitched her silky ears forward.

“Now, you beauty, let’s take it,” whispered Tonia in a sort of prayer—and

used both heels for the first time.

The mare became a roan thunderbolt and hurled herself on. Tonia heard a thin singing in her ears. Suddenly the roan's flanks gathered under her and she was launched into the air. Then, and not till then, did she understand. Past the hedge lay a wide, water-filled ditch. In the fraction of time that the hedge was directly beneath she sent up a wild supplication, clutched the pommel and leaned sharply back.

Came a dead shock that otherwise would have thrown her headlong. She felt the mare's hind legs splashing viciously at the sloping sides of the ditch. The barrel body gave a side-twist—a lurch—she found herself calling queer, foolish, encouraging things—and with a final effort the mare stood on sound ground, shivering. Presently she began a spasmodic trot.

At that moment Tonia saw Netley riding furiously toward her, his face like chalk.

“Why the devil did you try that?” he called shakily.

Tonia, really very frightened, gulped down the lump in her throat. “Try what?” she called back, and urged the mare into a gallop. Her blood was up.

He forced his own horse close alongside. “You might have killed the mare!” he shouted, his eyes large and round and hot.

Tonia blinked. Killed the mare! So that was what struck him! Never in her life had she been so completely astonished.

“Follow me for a change!” she flung back, and pressed on.

A sharp twenty minutes' burst and the pack ran down their fox in the open. Tonia was well up. She saw what happened, saw the small, draggled furry thing at bay, and turned away feeling green. Netley, whose eyes had never left her, moved close.

“What's the matter?” he said quietly.

“Get me out of this,” she whispered, “or I'll make a fool of myself.”

He took another look, understood perfectly, and thought it very foolish. Unusual, too, nowadays. Their horses were walking down a quiet lane when she gave him a grateful glance.

“You got me away just in time.”

“A bit odd why you hunt at all in that case, eh?”

She was cornered, and his cool way of taking it made it worse.

“Never have any impulses of mercy yourself?” she countered, not grateful any more.

He shrugged his pink shoulders. “Sport is sport. No sport without killing something or other.”

She swallowed that, but couldn't digest it. “I don't agree—and you weren't very nice about that jump.”

He watched the mare's paces for a critical moment before answering.

"I was scared stiff that you'd lamed the roan, and it wasn't your fault you didn't. I suppose you know it was a whale of a jump?"

"I—I thought it pretty good at the time," she said casually.

He pulled down his reddish brows, examined her as he had the mare, came to what was apparently a similar conclusion, then gave a chuckle.

"Rather set out to pull my leg, haven't you?"

"I've other things to occupy me, Mr. Netley."

He laughed outright. "Well, you did, but for a minute only. The thing didn't work. As soon as you got on that horse I knew you were at home. Look here, I wouldn't bluff any more if I were you. You can have a corking time in Kent if you'll take us as you find us."

This left her oddly silent. She could not lie, and she *had* been bluffing. He kept shooting at her curious little sidelong glances, finding in her face a magnetic attraction quite new to him, and arguing to himself that when she got over her Colonial nonsense she'd be one of the best, and a sight more interesting than any girl he knew.

Money, too, from all one heard of what was going on at The Dene. And, as matters stood, money would be veritable manna to Bruce Netley.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go home," said Tonia after a long pause.

He did mind, minded a good deal, and had counted on keeping her for most of the day, but thought it wiser to agree.

"And I do hope I haven't hurt the mare. I'd feel awful, and what would your mother say? Her horse, isn't it?"

He could imagine what would have been said, but didn't tell her, and only laughed.

"The mare's all right," he grunted. "I'll drive you back."

That was as far as he got in expressing any relief on her own account, which, concluded Tonia, was probably the view of the average hunting man. Horse first! In the car she occupied herself chiefly in watching his profile. Well-bred, she thought, with a shade of contempt about it, and perhaps a little cruel.

"We're having a shoot next week," she hazarded, "and you're being asked. Will you come?"

His eyes glinted. "Rather!"

"Fond of it?"

"Next to hunting. Funny old place that Lodge of yours. Know the Danellos?"

"Yes, they called the other day."

He seemed surprised. "All three of 'em?"

"Yes."

"What do you make of 'em?"

“Nothing yet. Why do you ask?”

“Because they generally keep that girl shut up.”

“How queer—and why should they?”

She spoke almost with indifference, but this growing evidence had deepened the fascination of the mystery. Netley was the fourth who knew something. But how much? There seemed to be a point they all reached and at which they all stopped.

“Funny sort of thing any way you look at it,” he ruminated. “I believe the girl is a beauty, but they don’t take her anywhere, and don’t leave her quite alone—at least, that’s what they say in Charterden. They told someone she was weak-minded. See any signs of that?”

“No—but she’s very quiet.” Tonia was going to add, “And frightened,” but checked herself.

“Well, there’s something out of joint there. And what does Danello want with two hundred acres he never uses? They don’t farm it—don’t graze it—and never shoot over it, though he got the shooting. Looks as though he doesn’t want anyone near him. And those spinneys are stuffed with pheasants.”

“Oh,” she said thoughtfully, not letting him see how sharply the thing had taken hold of her.

“It’s that bit directly in front of the Lodge. However, perhaps most of what one hears is only village talk—except that murder. That wasn’t talk.” He pointed. “There’s about the spot.”

They had swung in past the Gate House, where old Mrs. Goddard was busy on her doorstep with a birch-broom. Farther south was the Weald of Kent, ancient and very opulent, dotted with fat farms, hopfields, grazing ground and spinneys, and stabbed with the steeples of many a greystone village church. Tonia marked carefully the spot he indicated and gave a little nod.

“It all seems too old and peaceful to be very formidable.”

He did not say anything more, and, presently halting at The Dene, waited to be asked in. But she had other things in mind.

“Thanks so much, and we’ll see you next week. Julian, my brother, will be here, and a Mr. Bethune.”

“A Canadian?”

“No. He’s English, and a great friend of the family. He was staying with us this last summer. He’s twenty-two.” She said this with an inflection that suggested that Bethune’s coming meant a great deal to her. “I do hope you’ll like each other,” she added sweetly.

Netley, driving himself home, thought that never had her voice sounded so soft as when she said this.

CHAPTER IV

WHISPERS FROM THE LODGE

TONIA found her father at home. He had come by way of Folkestone and motored to The Dene.

“Hullo, Dad! We began to think you were lost in Paris. At your age, too!”

“I didn’t see much of Paris—too busy. Did you get my air signal?”

“Yes—rather graceful, we thought. How did you like it?”

“There’s practically no sensation after you get off the ground. The country just drifts astern and you don’t realize how fast you’re going. The Dene looks rather insignificant from the air.”

“Could you make out the Lodge, too?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, perfectly; and I’m told the avenue is a regular landmark.”

“Then this would be an easy place to find?”

“I don’t see how a pilot could miss it.”

Tonia nodded thoughtfully. “Did you deliver that parcel?”

He nodded. “The man was waiting at the Crillon.”

“What sort of a man was he?” she asked indifferently.

“Well, it’s a queer thing, but it struck me he looked something like that Miss Vinen—same shaped head and rather dead eyes, if you can put it that way. He was very polite, but didn’t seem at all interested. Just said ‘Thank you’ and went off at once. Naturally, I didn’t ask any questions.”

Tonia stood for a moment at the window, very deep in thought. If Julian had not been coming so soon she would have emptied her mind to her father, but as it was she decided on the obvious.

“It might be her brother. She’s a niece of Mrs. Danello’s, isn’t she?”

“Of course—I forgot that. How did you get on with the New Kent Hunt?”

She sent him a quizzical glance. “I kept on—which is something.”

“You liked it?” he laughed.

“Part of it, but not the end. My sympathies were with the fox.”

“So I judged, from what your mother tells me. And Netley?”

“I never met anyone quite like him,” she said candidly. “Of course, he lives for that sort of thing. I couldn’t.”

“He’s coming to shoot?”

“He wouldn’t miss it.”

“And Rodney—with Julian?”

“Yes; perhaps they’ll shoot each other,” she said wickedly.

Charters chuckled. "Is Netley in love with you?"

"He's thinking about beginning—when he's ready. It's rather fascinating to see his mind work—because you can. I happened to make a bit of a jump—not knowing what was on the other side—and he was only anxious about the horse. Simply furious! A few minutes before that he told me not to risk my neck, because it was too nice. He doesn't understand Canadians. So now he expects to meet Rodney, and Rodney expects to meet him, and all I've got to do is to help play hostess and be polite to them both."

Charters, from past experience, wondered what form the politeness would take. "That leaves Julian without anyone to play with. Why not ask the Danello girl?"

Tonia hesitated. "I'd like her for dinner, but could we ask her without the others?"

"They can come another time."

"Then for Saturday?"

"Yes, if you want her."

Half an hour later Tonia entered the Lodge grounds from the main Charterden road, and, eyes very busy, walked up the short drive. The Lodge faced a lawn, beyond which was a small rose garden and a low hedge bounding the two hundred acres Danello had leased. Nothing broke the clear view southward. The house was grey stone, the windows of severe simplicity. She rang and heard a faint tinkle.

The door was opened almost immediately by a man she had never seen before. He looked at her with unconcealed surprise, recovered himself, and gave an awkward bow. There was nothing of the manner of the trained servant.

"Is Miss Vinen in? I'm Miss Charters."

He bowed again, showed her into a chilly morning-room, and disappeared without a word. At the same instant Tonia, staring curiously about, her ears tense, caught Danello's voice across the hall, speaking in rapid French, high-pitched, excited and very angry.

"It is always the same, and why be so afraid of nothing. I tell you there was no risk. These simple fools were meant to be used, and I shall use them!"

* * * * *

"Who were the simple fools—and how to be used?" Tonia stood glancing about the room, aware of a queer mixture of ornaments. The room told her nothing. Bits of ivory medallions—a gilt clock under a glass dome—coloured prints—elaborately bound books on a centre table—cushions that clashed in hue—nothing intimate, comfortable or personal.

Her eyes took it in, but at the moment it mattered nothing. Then the door opened, and there entered not Olga, but Mrs. Danello. She had a smile that seemed strained.

“It is so kind of you to come. My niece will be here—yes—in a minute.”

“It’s not a formal call at all,” said Tonia quickly. “I wanted to know if she could dine with us on Saturday, quite informally. There’ll be my brother and two other men.”

Mrs. Danello smoothed the dress over her knees. “That is so hospitable, but I fear Olga is not well enough.”

Something in the prepared way she spoke gave Tonia the determination not to be refused.

“But won’t you make an exception this time? We’ll take great care of her and bring her home.”

Mrs. Danello looked worried. It was quite evident she did not want the girl to go, equally difficult to justify a refusal. She was about to speak when Danello himself came in looking very cheerful. Tonia held out her hand, wondering if Olga was locked up.

“Ah, an unexpected pleasure. This English weather, Miss Charters, how do you like it? For myself, it makes me long for France.”

“One seems to get used to it. What a lovely view you have from here!”

He glanced at the Weald of Kent. “Yes—very fine—but it does not exactly make up. Your people are well?”

“Quite well, thank you.” Again she had that sense of unreality, and again she waited. No trace of excitement was visible in his face, and she began to wonder if she had actually heard anything.

“It was very kind of your father to take that parcel. I have heard from my wife’s sister. Think of it—only three hours for delivery from London. You know France?”

“Very little. I have only been there once.”

“You understand French, perhaps?” He asked this very lightly, his head a little on one side, and looking at her with the bright, quick eyes of a bird.

Something signalled Tonia to be very careful. “I was the worst French scholar in my school,” she laughed.

This was quite true, and it was not till afterwards, when she spent a summer in Quebec, that she learned to speak French like a native.

Danello smiled, seeming more cheerful than ever, and her glance turned casually to his wife. She made a little gesture that might have meant anything.

“Miss Charters is so very kind to ask Olga to dinner on Saturday, but I explained that——”

“Ah, but are you not over-cautious about that girl? Yes, most certainly she should go. When good friends are sent to us,” he added, with a little bow to Tonia, “how inhuman not to use them! And here is Olga to speak for herself.”

The girl entered, smiled at Tonia and shook hands with a sort of listless grace. Her eyes seemed unusually dark and large.

“Olga,” said Danello, apparently resolved to do the rest of the talking, “Miss Charters asks you to dine at The Dene. Your aunt was uncertain, but”—here he waved a hand—“I have persuaded her.”

Followed an odd little silence. Tonia, susceptible to an indefinable tension in the air, felt again that this was all artificial. Olga looked at her uncle with a startled surprise that she forced into an expression of pleasure. Tonia shot a glance at the elder woman and detected the faintest frown. This vanished in a flash, and her husband’s voice came in again.

“One must not stand in the way of youth, Marie, and it is doubtless wrong not to avail oneself of kindness like this, even though health be not of the best. Also”—here he shrugged his narrow shoulders—“it seems that these young people should know each other while they can.”

He said this with an impersonal lightness that seemed to be understood by the others, though it conveyed nothing to Tonia. Olga drew a long breath, and Mrs. Danello made a little movement of finality.

“I’m so glad you can come,” said Tonia to the girl; then, turning to Danello: “Are you thinking of leaving the Lodge?”

“It is perhaps too soon to say, but finance on the Continent is very disturbed, and I may be called back. Let us hope not.”

“I hope so too. Shall I send the car?”

He shook his head vigorously. “No—please—it is but a step, and we will provide an escort both ways. You are most kind.”

“Then seven-thirty on Saturday?”

Olga nodded, said in a low voice how glad she was to come, and Tonia found herself in the hall. The front door was opened by the same man who had let her in. He waited awkwardly till Danello said one word in some foreign language. The little man gave one of his quick smiles.

“Servants in the country—what a trouble! Life was not endurable here till I brought over my own Hungarians—who know nothing except their work. You like this English life—yes?”

“It’s all very different,” said Tonia diplomatically.

“Exactly, and so firmly established. And so slow, especially in a hamlet like Charterden. But,” he added with a curious inflection, “even here it is not all on the surface. For instance, I hope you do not go about late in the evening unattended.”

She sent him a straight, uncomprehending stare. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Well, I wouldn’t. That murder of which you will have heard. It was close to us—only that stone wall between—and no one knew anything. Imagine our feelings. Since then Olga has not moved out alone.”

“I did hear about it, and how dreadful!” Tonia’s brown eyes fixed on him unwavering. “And they never found the man who did it!”

Danello made a cigarette, his long, delicate fingers light as feathers. "With permission?" He struck a match and inhaled with the gusto of an epicure. "No, he was not found—nor will he be found."

"Why? How can anyone know that?" Tonia demanded abruptly.

"No motive has ever been established, so the matter remains a mystery. Motives! That, mademoiselle, is the great factor explaining all things." He gave a little laugh. "It would be well that more people stopped themselves to ask, 'What is my motive in this affair?' before they go too far. Especially young people. How foolishly impulsive are the young at times! Au revoir, and a thousand thanks for your kindness to our dear niece."

His smile was very polite, but so elusively mocking that it followed her all the way home. It expressed many things, and chiefly a cynical contempt for anything she might do. But, she argued, it was at the same time a sort of admission.

Trying to ferret out the truth, she perceived that he had said nothing she could fasten on, nothing she could use to justify her own suspicions to another. Yet she was assured they were well founded.

And if Olga, with her dark, mysterious eyes, knew what went on behind the screen, why was she permitted out of their sight? What hold could they have on her except that of fear?

* * * * *

"Tonia," said Mrs. Charters on the Thursday, "wouldn't it be a good idea if you wired Julian to meet us in London? We can all dine there and come down later by car."

The girl agreed with a swiftness that made her mother laugh, and on Friday she sat opposite Rodney at a corner table in a certain well-known restaurant not a stone's-throw from Devonshire House. Her eyes were very bright, and Rodney controlled himself with difficulty. They were talking haphazardly but guardedly, and she told him about the New Kent episode. He grinned at the way she put it.

"You think that men have the best of it in England, don't you?"

"You can trust them for that—they're so frightfully sure of themselves."

"Sooner have 'em uncertain?"

She looked at him critically and very coolly. The old antagonism was born again, and she felt once more the former secret attraction. He was very particular about his clothes, and the result justified his care. But there was nothing of the fop about him. His skin was very clear, he moved with undeniable grace, yet was essentially virile.

The combination rather puzzled Tonia. She admitted that she had never seen a more engaging type, and grew angry with herself for the admission. She was aware that other girls at other tables were regarding him with approving

eyes.

Presently one of them, flaxen-haired like himself, waved a friendly hand. Rodney bowed, but did not go over.

“Who’s that?” asked Tonia with an oblique glance.

“Letty Pethick—properly speaking. Lady Letty Pethick. We used to play together.”

Tonia took a second glance. “She’s awfully pretty.”

“Fair to middling,” said Rodney cheerfully, “and rolling in money of her own, but the nose is too long for me. I like ’em short and a shade tilted. Dance this?”

She made a face at him and nodded. He danced perfectly. She forgot about the Pethick girl and began to enjoy herself; then, of a sudden, thought of the last time Rodney’s arm was round her. She fought with herself, and felt a little frightened. Her body stiffened, communicating something that reached him instantly. “He’s not going to have me,” she whispered to herself, “and he needn’t think so. No one is.”

“Tonia?” he said, his lips close to her face.

“Well?”

“Why do you give yourself such a hard time of it?”

“What do you mean?” she asked sharply, knowing full well what he meant, and the more frightened because he had perceived it.

“If that is your answer, I can’t explain.”

She was silent for a moment, aware that the eyes of Lady Letty were following them observantly. She hated to be watched like this, and read the other girl’s thoughts. She frowned a little.

“Rodney!”

“Your humble servant.”

“I hope you’re not going to spoil the week-end for me?”

“I didn’t leave Oxford with any such intention. What’s up?”

“You want to be friends?”

“Put it that way if you like,” he said calmly.

“Then don’t put questions like you did just now.”

He smiled, regarding her with unruffled good-humour. “Are there plenty of pheasants at The Dene, and how do you like living in England, and is it very different from Canada—something like that?”

She bit her lip. “Yes, if it’s the best you can do.”

“You rather cramp my style. Still angry with me?”

“About what?” Her face was child-like with innocence.

The music stopped, and he steered her back to Mrs. Charters’ table, thinking rather hard. It was impossible to tell what she felt—if anything. But he was expected to keep off the grass.

Why? The idea of Netley obtruded itself, and he was inwardly disturbed. The next time he danced with Tonia she was very gay and utterly impersonal.

It was the same in the car going down to Charterden. The arterial road flung itself across Kent in a wide grey ribbon, over which was the continual lisp of speeding tyres. The country slept, only an occasional light blinking drowsily in the distance.

Julian, who wanted to smoke, sat outside with the chauffeur. Tonia tucked herself into a corner. She hardly spoke till, east of Maidstone, they passed a great arched gateway, and she sleepily explained that it was that of Fidlow, the Netleys' place.

"You'll meet Bruce to-morrow," she added. "He's the only son."

Rodney was still wondering if she was in love with Bruce when the car left the main road and they were amongst the ivy-grown cottages of Charterden.

Mrs. Goddard's windows were blank, the Lodge was like a house of the dead, and the headlights illuminated a ghostly perspective of great grey trunks. Suddenly in the middle of this glare appeared the figure of a man carrying a gun.

Mrs. Charters rapped on the dividing window, and Julian put his head in.

"Who can that be?" she asked nervously.

"Dunno," he said blankly. "Shall we shoot past him?"

"No—I can see now—it's Hammond. But what's he doing here at this time of night?"

"Who's Hammond?" asked Rodney sharply.

"The head keeper. Stop the car beside him, Julian."

Tonia grew breathless. The car pulled up, and the keeper stepped to the door, touching his hat.

"What's the matter, Hammond?"

He sent Tonia an extraordinary glance, and hesitated a moment. "Can't exactly say, ma'am, but there's something queer been going on in the avenue."

"Please tell me—exactly."

The man cleared his throat huskily.

"Well, ma'am, it's this way. I was taking a turn round late thinking happen there might be some poacher trying to get ahead of us to-morrow, when my dog—that's the black lurcher, Miss Tonia, the one you liked—started off by himself. Matter of ten minutes later he began to howl. It seemed about here, and he wouldn't come, so I goes after him. The howling stopped like with a sort of choke—and sudden.

"I couldn't see him anywhere, and he didn't answer, though he's well broke. Presently I found him at the edge of yon thicket you've just passed. Dead, ma'am—with his throat cut."

There was a blank silence, broken only by the soft purr of the engine.

Hammond, his red face very grim, cast a significant glance at Tonia, as though asking whether his warning were not now justified. Tonia felt shaky. There was something indescribably savage about this—almost more inhuman than murder.

“Dog!” burst out Julian. “Why should anyone butcher a dog?”

“Poacher,” said Rodney laconically. “I’ve known it happen before.”

Mrs. Charters made a nervous gesture. “What do you make of it yourself, Hammond?”

Another glance at Tonia, and the keeper caught an unspoken but imperative signal.

“I’m thinking myself it must have been a poacher,” he said with slow deliberation. “Bob—that’s the lurcher—might ha’ been following him. He didn’t want to shoot, knowing I’d be somewheres near, so finished the dog that way.”

Julian seemed unconvinced. “In that case it’s queer the dog howled instead of barking. How long ago did this happen?”

“Matter of fifteen minutes, sir, and I haven’t seen a soul in the last two hours. Don’t you worry, ma’am. There ain’t anything else to it, and I reckon we’ll have a good day to-morrow.” He touched his cap, stepped back, and the car moved on.

Tonia’s heart beat fast. It was quite evident now that her mother knew nothing of the murder of young Cramp.

Half an hour later she was sitting curled up on her bed, smoking one of Julian’s cigarettes and talking very fast. Her brother, in dressing-gown and slippers, listened intently, interjecting an occasional question, and staring into the fire as though he suspected the solution lay there.

“That girl,” he demanded presently; “does she look as though she knew something she was afraid to say?”

“In one way, yes—in another she looks blank.”

“And the man who opened the door?”

“Hungarian probably—short and square, with black eyes and hairy hands. He didn’t look like a servant at all. He must have understood English, but never spoke.”

“Any idea why Danello should differ with his wife about the girl coming here?”

“No, but he hinted that they might not be at the Lodge much longer, so perhaps it didn’t matter much.”

“Then he’s not afraid of her letting the thing out?”

“It doesn’t seem so.”

“And since the Cramp murder nothing out of the way has happened till to-night?”

“Nothing I know of.”

He pulled down his brows. “There’s one thing we ought to do.”

“What?”

“Let Rodney into this—and I’m not sure we shouldn’t tell father.”

“But suppose it’s nothing at all?”

“It’s the off-chance there is anything,” he admitted. “In fact, it’s all understandable except about that machine with the red lights. Seen it since?”

“No.”

“If we could find out whether it had ever landed there we’d know that Danello is communicating with the Continent by air. Thing is, with whom? That sister-in-law is a bluff.”

“Yes, and why should he send a parcel by dad when a machine was coming for it? That’s what he meant in what I overheard about ‘simple fools.’ We’re the fools. That’s why he’s letting Olga come—more bluff. But if Danello or anyone in the Lodge had to do with the Cramp matter or killing the dog, wouldn’t it be risky to run round that wall? They couldn’t get over it.”

“Rope ladder—might do it with that. Anyway, it’s evident that both Cramp and the dog had seen something or found something that was no ghost. It meant death.”

Tonia nodded gravely, realizing that curiosity had led her to the edge of very deep water.

“Rodney,” ruminated her brother, “we ought to tell him. He knows the people and the country better than we do. Why not tell him?”

She hesitated, not wanting to share any secrets with Rodney lest it lead to other developments. But, she admitted, he might be very useful.

“Is he coming here for Christmas?” she asked dubiously.

Julian laughed. “Don’t you want him?”

“I don’t mind—if he’ll hold on to himself,” she said, wondering secretly if that was what she really hoped.

“He’s one of the best,” maintained her brother stoutly. “You ought to hear what other men think of him.”

She was on the defensive at once. “Your letter covered that ground pretty fully. I have no opinions at all.”

“That’s what makes me suspicious. It means you’re thinking about him.”

“I’m not!” she flamed.

Julian got up, yawned prodigiously, and examined the fire with renewed interest.

“That chap Netley—how about him?”

“No opinions there, either. Wait and see.”

“And the Olga person?”

“Same answer. Good night, Julian. I’m going to bed.”

“Well, thanks for the information, and I’ll tell Rodney to-morrow night. Won’t have a chance before the shoot. Going to be a nice little job for the Vac, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid it may be anything but nice,” said Tonia.

CHAPTER V

OLGA COMES OUT OF THE SHADOW

THERE was a nip in the air next morning when the guns met Hammond beside the big spinney. For the keeper this was the most important day of the year, and for the moment the event of the preceding night was submerged. He was flanked by a dozen youths of Charterden, armed with sticks. When the guns came up the beaters disappeared beyond the spinney, and he indicated four stakes a hundred yards apart.

“Mr. Charters, you’re No. 1, sir. Next drive you’ll be No. 2.”

Charters smiled and placed himself obediently. He had never shot much, was quite aware that he would shoot badly now, and didn’t worry at all. Netley, No. 2, was very businesslike, having two guns and a loader, his groom. Then Julian and Rodney.

Tonia hung about, seeing everything and saying nothing. Hammond sounded a whistle, and there set up a faint rattle of sticks on the other side of the spinney.

It was all very peaceful. The bare trees made a filagree against the bare sky, a rabbit ran along a ditch and popped out of sight, a dog whimpered, and the clock of Charterden church struck ten. The first pheasant flung himself out of the spinney. Netley fired when it was almost overhead; it hit the ground with a thud, its glossy wings aquiver.

That was the opening of a hot quarter-hour. Tonia, prepared to be shocked, found that she was too excited, and devoted herself to the guns. Her father shot with a cheerful hopefulness, only occasionally rewarded. Julian did little better, and seemed distinctly vexed. Rodney, who had a good eye, did well, and the thing resolved itself into a contest between himself and Netley.

Netley was very mechanical and exact. The birds, crowded to the edge of the spinney, were now coming over fast. Tonia stood a little behind him, noting the puff of feathers, the elevation of helpless wings, the catapulting swoop to earth and the audible thump.

His eyes were very bright and hard, his lips tight, and though he knew she was there he spoke not at all. Charters watched him too, forgetting his own gun. He had seen good shooting before, but nothing like this.

The beaters’ faces became visible in the spinney, and Netley lit a cigarette with a contented grunt.

“Twenty-five—not so bad, eh?”

Tonia glanced at him with a sort of fascination. "You're a wonderful shot." He looked pleased. "Fair, but the birds are fat and lazy. They're not travelling fast. How about you, Bethune?"

Rodney shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't get my eye in at once. I'll do better next drive."

Charters and his son said nothing, but Julian winked eloquently at Tonia, whereupon Hammond struck off into another field, where the performance was repeated. At noon Mrs. Charters appeared for lunch in the house of a tenant farmer, and after lunch Tonia found herself with Rodney and a little sick of the slaughter. Rodney, now shooting his best, was anything but sick.

"Gad, this is the best day I've ever had!"

"Thank you," she said caustically.

"Best day's shooting, I mean."

"I know what you meant."

He gave a little sigh. An English girl would have understood and not caught him up, but it seemed that always he was unintentionally rousing Tonia. There she stood, her brown eyes very bright and provocative, ready to scrap about nothing, difficult to interpret, hot-tempered—and yet the one girl he wanted.

"This is the best day's pheasant shooting I've ever had," he repeated, staring straight at her. "Yes, you did know what I meant, and I don't see why you jump on me."

This was, perhaps, a shade unfortunate. And it was just like Tonia to pull in Netley's name at that moment.

"He's a wonderful shot, isn't he? Almost too wonderful. I began to hope he'd miss."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Mr. Netley."

"If he does nothing else, he ought to be good. Known him long?"

"Only two weeks. He lent me a horse and took me to the meet of the New Kent."

"You liked that?"

"Yes, all but the fox part of it."

Rodney was going to laugh, but didn't, picturing Netley far too close to The Dene, independent, with all the chances on his side. The thing began to hurt.

"I don't fancy him much," he said a little stiffly; "got a bad mouth. You can't tell much about his sort—too much manner and all that—but put 'em in a tight box and you find out."

"You're not very flattering to my guest," countered Tonia.

He looked at her in a way that made her vexed and uncomfortable. This

was what she feared, and if in her heart he had not meant something she would not have feared. Why should a girl like herself delight in men's companionship yet rebel at the least symptom of tenderness?

She could not help this, always feeling that presently they would ask for her secret and intimate self—for themselves.

It was a sort of curse, this continually having to stand guard over what she was determined not to surrender. The thought of love—of what men meant by love—appalled her. The picture of herself being brought to the point of passionate self-giving was monstrous. But, for all of this, her kind did not run from what they feared. They stayed—and fought it.

Conversation dragged after this, and she spent the rest of the afternoon with the others, not rejoining Rodney till dusk. Then, feeling a little penitent, she suggested that they walk home by another route. He acceded rather dully.

"I suppose this time Netley has killed more birds than he used cartridges?"

"I didn't ask," she laughed. "Rodney, don't be angry with me."

"I'm not—but with myself."

"Why?"

"I shouldn't have come."

She shook her head. "That's wrong, and you're coming for Christmas."

"Awfully kind of you," he said listlessly. "What's that house across the field?"

"The Lodge. Has Julian told you anything?"

"No—but he said he wanted a chin-chin before dinner. What's up?"

"It's a queer sort of thing, and he'd better tell you. It's one reason you must come for Christmas."

Rodney looked puzzled, and just then a pheasant got up close by. He fired like a flash. The bird, wounded, covered another two hundred yards before it fell.

"I'll get it," he said, and climbed a locked gate.

"That's Lodge property," she said doubtfully, "so hadn't you better send the keeper?"

There was no keeper in sight. "They can't object, and it isn't really trespassing. Wait a jiffy."

He walked quickly. Half-way there she saw a man come out of a covert, where he had obviously been watching, and run toward him. Rodney hastened his steps, and the two arrived over the pheasant at the same instant.

Tonia recognized the figure of the stranger as that of the man who had opened the Lodge front door. Then came Rodney's laugh, abruptly cut off at something the man said with forcible gesticulations.

Rodney picked up his bird and came slowly back, the stranger still watching intently. Presently he turned toward the house.

“Funny thing,” said Rodney, “but that chap was furious, and ordered me off. I offered him half a crown and apologies—but he wasn’t having either. Nasty, hairy-looking beast, too. And there’s another queer thing.”

“What?” said Tonia sharply.

“Well, as it happens, I know a bit about flying—took a course in a Moth last year—and I’ll bet a machine has landed in that field in the last twenty-four hours. I could see marks of the wheels where she took the ground and the drag of the tail-skid as plain as you like. Now, why should anyone come down there?”

The temptation thus created was too great, and by the time they reached The Dene he had heard the whole story.

“So you see,” concluded Tonia, “it may be nothing, and perhaps a good deal. That’s why I haven’t told dad.”

“It’s not nothing,” he said seriously. “Think you could get something out of that girl to-night?”

“Could one use her in that way when I only wanted to be—well—polite. She seemed so horribly lonely?”

Rodney flushed a little. “That’s right—you couldn’t. I’m trying to connect the killing of that dog with the landing of the machine.”

She shook her head. “I can’t work it out at all, and I’m puzzled at Olga’s being allowed to come. Julian says that’s bluff.”

They were at The Dene now. Mrs. Charters was pouring out tea, while her husband gave a humorous account of his bad shooting. Julian was explaining to Netley that in Canada one walked up the birds, while here the birds walked up. The whole atmosphere was so foreign to mystery of any kind that Tonia began to question her own suspicions. Presently Charters produced a game card.

“Hammond reports two hundred and two pheasants, twenty rabbits and four partridges. Three pheasants and one rabbit are mine. I remember them very distinctly,” he chuckled. “Netley, you were an object-lesson—you too, Rodney. The Charters family comes a very poor second. Julian and I need private instruction—very private. Well, Tonia, what did you make of it?”

“Quite a revelation,” she said, “and I couldn’t have imagined it. Glad I’m not a pheasant—an English one. More tea, please, mother.”

They all laughed, especially Netley. “What kind of a revelation was it?”

Mrs. Charters turned the conversation a little nervously. Presently the four drifted off to hot baths, and she sent her husband a curious glance.

“What do you make of Mr. Netley, John?”

“Nothing very special. His type is produced chiefly in this country, and he’s hardly responsible for that. Everything is done for them and nothing very much expected—that is, in an original way. They’re consumers, my dear. Born

at the table, so to speak. But they come up to the scratch when they're needed—as in the war.”

“I wonder if Tonia is interested? She spent most of the afternoon with him.”

“Yes, but she came home with Rodney. I think we're safe in assuming she's quite aware of them both.”

“I know.” His wife paused thoughtfully. “I feel that the best we can do is to do nothing. She's been more contented of late, more equable, and if she makes a friend of the Vinen girl so much the better.”

“I wonder? I'd like to know who the Danellos really are first, and what they were before they came here. Jollands tells me his bank references were exceptional, and Philip Charters didn't ask anything else. The Lodge wasn't in good condition, and as he was only too glad to find a tenant I think we ought to go slowly.”

“Perhaps—yes—I think you're right. Has Hammond discovered anything more about last night?”

“No—I asked him first thing this morning. He says very little, feels blue about his dog, and has a wild idea of using bloodhounds. I told him to forget that till something else happened.”

“I'm not very comfortable about it,” she confessed.

Charters, who had occasionally thought about the Cramp affair, but carefully avoided mentioning it to the others, made a careless gesture.

“I can understand that; but if I were a poacher—and knew the penalties for poaching, as they all do here—and met that lurcher when I was doing a little private stalking, I'd attempt the same way of getting rid of him.”

“You bloodthirsty man!” laughed his wife. “Come and dress for dinner. I hope our visitor won't be too shy to talk.”

* * * * *

They were in a group round the fireplace in the big drawing-room, and the stroke of the clock still echoed in the hall, when the door opened and Manders' bland voice announced Miss Vinen.

There ensued one of those curious moments which, in reality, are over in a flash, but which, nevertheless, seem to the participators to persist for an appreciable time.

Olga stood framed in the great oak doorway, the milk-white of exquisite shoulders accentuated by the sheer black of her dress. Her dark, unshingled hair, curving low across her temples, was fastened in a Grecian knot that lent a charming contour to her small, shapely head. Her brows were fine, dark lines delicately arched. Her eyes, large and questioning, held an elusive appeal, and there was the faintest suggestion of colour in her cheeks.

Her neck, small and round and circled by a single row of pearls, had a

peculiar and dainty poise, and the line from ear to shoulder would have been the despair of an artist. The perfection of form, no less than the sheer finish of her appearance and the lovely oval of face, held the others for a breathless second.

She stood as though hesitating at the entry to a new world, asking them, its arbitrators, whether she was acceptable. Mrs. Charters suddenly gave a little gasp and advanced quickly.

“My dear, I’m so glad to see you. You know my husband and Tonia, and may I introduce Mr. Netley, our neighbour of Fidlow, Mr. Bethune and my son Julian. Mr. Bethune and Julian are here from Oxford for the week-end.”

Looking back, as she often did, at the hour that followed, it seemed to Tonia that never had she observed more interesting and characteristic behaviour on the part of three young men who had been suddenly confronted with a very beautiful stranger. She herself sat at her father’s left, Olga at his right. On either side of Mrs. Charters were Netley and Rodney. Thus Julian was next his sister.

Rodney was very gay, betraying no surprise whatever, and divided himself between the two ladies with perfect aplomb. Netley’s eyes were almost furtive. Tonia found him staring at Olga without turning his head, then recovering himself with a jerk. He talked rather at random, and seemed to be weighing something with particular care.

Julian, on the other hand, was plainly disconcerted. He hardly touched his food, and was so unlike his usual self that Tonia felt disturbed.

This was one thing she had never counted on. Olga, in a low but very clear voice, had been describing summers spent along the French coast between Toulon and St. Raphael, when Tonia caught a whispered aside.

“Isn’t she perfectly lovely?”

“Yes, Jule, but go on with your dinner.”

“Don’t want any—think of finding that here!”

“Eat something, silly, or you’ll give yourself away.”

“I’m ready—if she’ll take me. Did you ever see such eyes!” He played with his glass till his chance came to join in. “That’s where I want to go next year, Miss Vinen.”

“Do, because you’ll love it, and don’t forget to go behind the Riviera into the Basses Alpes—which hardly anyone knows.”

“You are French, aren’t you?” put in Charters.

“Yes, one half of me. We generally talk it at home.”

“There are two million of your people in Canada, descendants of families from Brittany and Normandy. By the way, Tonia tells me you may not be at the Lodge much longer.”

“That may be so, but I do not know. There is disturbance in banking circles

on the Continent, and my uncle says he may be called back.”

Charters nodded. “I heard of it in Paris. The franc is falling very fast.”

“Was it anything special you heard?” she asked with a touch of eagerness.

“No—but I was told to be careful of French money. Thanks to your uncle, mine was all right.”

“He is very careful about such things. It is his business.”

Tonia, notably silent for her, listened to the talk, trying to fit this charming person with her daintiness and perfect manners into the riddle of the Lodge. Did she know anything at all? It was hardly possible that she did not. And what accounted for a change so striking? She was a little shy—but did not shrink. The fear had left her dark eyes, there was a natural colour in her cheeks, and her shell was opening visibly.

A certain bewilderment had also fallen over Rodney and Julian. It was visible in their expressions, and they exchanged glances of the peculiar blankness which is so eloquent. Also, there was something about the set of Julian’s face suggesting that this girl had found a champion instead of an inquisitor. Tonia felt distinctly uncomfortable.

“Have you ever had your fortune told by old Mrs. Goddard?” she asked suddenly.

“In the Gate House—no—I did not know she could.”

“Yes, rather, I’ve had mine done, and I’m taking Mr. Bethune and Rodney to learn the worst about themselves to-morrow. Won’t you come?”

Olga gave a strange smile. “My future—I wonder? You believe in such things?”

“Why not? I’m sure we all believe in more foolish ones.”

“And you accept what she told you?”

Tonia, with inward protest, felt the colour rising to her temples. “I don’t say I’m satisfied, but”—she stammered a little—“I’ll have to wait and see.”

“Better come,” put in Julian impulsively: “then we’ll all know where we stand.”

There was a general laugh at this, in which he did not join. Olga was looking at him with a faint surprise, as though she had just made the discovery. Nor did she laugh, but for a fraction of time bestowed on him a glance in which wonder mingled with a sort of fascination.

He felt this like quicksilver in his veins, and it seemed to open a range of possibilities that left him tingling. The look was not affectionate or flirtatious or an advance of any kind, but just a sudden consciousness that apparently established him in some fixed relation. What that was he could not remotely imagine, but somehow it made a tremendous difference.

“I’ll try to come,” she said quietly.

Netley looked a little piqued. Separated from Tonia, he had done his best

with her mother. Olga had hardly spoken to him, Rodney seemed indifferent, and he was not in the best of humours when the ladies went out. The door closed, and Charters sent round the port.

“I’m glad that no one has mentioned that affair of last night,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s evident that Miss Vinen knows nothing about it.”

Rodney looked a shade incredulous. “Don’t they get the village gossip, sir?”

“I fancy not, and Danello’s Hungarians are probably poor mixers. It’s a queer thing. One must suspect the same agency as in the Cramp case, but that’s hardly possible.”

Rodney, who had strict orders from Tonia to say nothing of what he had seen, felt rather guilty. “She’s a wonderful-looking girl,” he hazarded.

“Yes, and seems to have waked up since the last time I saw her. Well, Netley, what do you think of The Dene shoot? Don’t hesitate to say, because I’m quite an ignoramus myself.”

They drifted into a discussion, during which Netley did most of the talking, and presently moved into the drawing-room. Julian, pulled as by a magnet, went straight to Olga.

“You will come to-morrow? It will be rather an eye-opener, from what Tonia tells me.”

“I can’t promise, but I’ll try.”

“Could we have a walk?”

“I don’t think so. You see, my aunt——” Her voice trailed out uncertainly.

He stayed beside her as long as he could, making conversation, exploring persistently, but with no progress. Never had he known anyone so elusive. It was all vague, yet to him all the more tantalizing. She did not look at him again as she had before, nor did he expect it. She did not understand bridge, which Mrs. Charters suggested, but went to the piano and played strange Slavonic airs with a lingering touch that Julian found hypnotic.

It was a queer evening, real and yet unreal, and ended when Manders announced that Miss Vinen’s car was waiting.

Netley got up at once. “Can’t I drop you at home? I pass your door.”

“Thank you, but Oscar will take me.” Then she said good night. To Mrs. Charters’ invitation for another day she would not commit herself. “It isn’t that I don’t want to come—it depends upon my aunt.”

“I’ll call on your aunt and persuade her.”

The dark eyes opened a little wider. “My uncle—perhaps—but you will find my aunt very strict. Again, I thank you so much.”

Tonia and Julian went into the hall with her, where Oscar, the man who had opened the door of the Lodge, stood waiting. He wore a short cape and carried a wide-brimmed hat. At sight of Tonia he made his jerky bow. It was

then that Julian, whose eyes were following Olga, saw a sudden change come over her.

As a lamp is extinguished, the light seemed to leave her face. All in a breath she looked older. Not only this, but her serenity gave way to what he could but decipher as despair. It was as though Oscar, or what he stood for, had signalled her that the hours of freedom were over, and she must return to what they both knew awaited her at the Lodge. At this transition Julian felt the birth of revolt. He suffered with her, and, suffering, swore to unravel the knot.

Manders opened the door, and the girl went out, Oscar following. At the step he put on the wide-brimmed hat, and, doing this, the cape slid back, dragging his sleeve with it. Tonia, with a start, saw that his right wrist was freshly bandaged, and in spots the blood had oozed through.

“Your arm!” she exclaimed. “Have you hurt it?”

He blinked, twitched back the cape, and did not speak. Olga gave a sudden nervous gesture and answered for him.

“Yes—at his carpenter work yesterday—but it is not serious, is it, Oscar? Good night, everyone.”

She slipped into the car and was driven rapidly away.

* * * * *

Tonia returned to the drawing-room in a state of excitement that swamped all efforts of Netley to secure her attention. After ten minutes of this, during which she was distraught and unresponsive, he admitted to being distinctly out of it.

Netley had found the evening rather difficult. Intensely aware of Olga, he had measured her with a very observant eye. She made him feel possessive; he had never been more surprised in his life, and he reacted as would any man of his age who was not already in love. But, he argued coolly, who was Olga, and what had she? The pearls, he admitted, were suggestive, but one asked more than that, even though they encircled a perfect neck.

As for Tonia, on the other hand, there was no doubt. No beauty there, but something less definable and even more intriguing. And, to be practical, she was the only daughter of a very rich man. These were his conclusions when he pressed her hand unnecessarily hard and said good night.

“You’ll come again and finish off the rest of those birds?” said Charters in the hall. “They’re perfectly safe so far as I’m concerned.”

He promised very readily, and presently they heard his car swing down the drive. Mrs. Charters settled herself comfortably, and took a long breath.

“I never had such a surprise in my life. What a ravishing beauty that girl is!”

Tonia nodded. She wanted to get Julian and Rodney to herself as soon as possible, but that being out of the question as yet, there ensued a talk, mostly

about Olga. Julian took no part in this, and stared moodily into the fire. It was a quarter of an hour later when Manders came in with a note.

“Mr. Danello’s compliments, sir, and he says this should have been given you by the man when he brought Miss Vinen for dinner. He’s just been sent back with it now. There’s no answer.”

Charters looked a little surprised, opened the envelope and glanced casually at a single sheet of fine, pointed script. He read it and smiled broadly, with the manner of one whose mind has been cleared of something discomfoting.

“What is it, John?”

“Very simple and satisfactory. Have you ever noticed that when one is puzzled by something one doesn’t understand the tendency is to begin and build up a sort of home-made mystery, and this is afterwards proved to be very far from the actual truth?”

“Perhaps—yes. Is that what the letter is about?”

“Yes—and that dog of Hammond’s. It’s as plain as a pikestaff.”

Tonia sent Rodney a lightning glance. “What about it?”

“Listen!”

“DEAR MR. CHARTERS,—

“I have just learned that one of my servants who was taking a walk in the avenue last night was attacked by a dog, and to defend himself has apparently killed the beast with his knife. The man is a Hungarian, which may explain his rough-and-ready action. He knows very little English, and could not have been aware that he was trespassing. At any rate, he kept the matter to himself till this moment, and I send you this note by the car that takes Olga.

“I am very sorry this should have happened on your grounds. The matter will, no doubt, have been reported to you. I do not consider myself legally liable, but if at your convenience you could inform me who is the owner of the dog, I am quite willing to pay him any reasonable compensation.

“Yours faithfully,

“PAUL DANELLO.”

“That,” concluded Charters, “was written at six o’clock this evening, so he evidently let us know as soon as he did himself.”

His wife gave a sigh of relief. “Then the whole thing is cleared up. I’m so glad.”

“Evidently. I’ll tell Hammond—or you might, Tonia. I don’t fancy the dog was worth much.”

“May I see that letter?” she asked suddenly.

“Here you are—curious writing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and awfully small.” She pushed it into her pocket. “Julian and Rodney are going to play billiards, and I’m marking. Come along, Jule.”

When the three were alone she began by examining the letter very closely. The writing was fine, remarkably regular, done with a fine steel pen, and had a sort of copper-plate perfection that reminded one of early exercise-books. The sheet had been taken from a pad with the address embossed in the corner. There was no telephone number. She looked up, puzzled.

“But they have a telephone.”

“One needn’t publish the number,” said Rodney, feeling as though a promising bubble had been pricked. “Come on, Julian, I’ll give you twenty and beat you.”

“Do you mean to say you don’t see through this?” interrupted Tonia, still staring at the letter.

Rodney took down a cue. “Nothing to see through—it speaks for itself.”

She shook her bronze head with complete conviction. “It was written *after* Olga got back, not before she came.”

“But what’s the point?”

“Simply that, it would not have been written at all if I hadn’t seen the man’s arm and spoken about it.” She made an impatient gesture. “How can you be so stupid?”

Julian looked at her sharply. “There may be something in that.”

“Of course there is! Danello knew about the dog as soon as it happened—intended to keep it quiet, but now has decided to bluff—because this is a bluff. He’s laughing at us again as simple fools. It amounts to this,” she went on, speaking very slowly and carefully, “he’s admitting the main fact because he’s satisfied it’s the safest thing to do, and invites us to make anything of it if we can. It’s clever—awfully clever.”

Julian frowned and looked distressed. “Then Olga knew! She couldn’t live in the house and not know.”

“But she said that the man cut himself while carpentering,” objected Rodney.

Tonia nodded. “I thought of that the minute dad read the letter, and hoped you wouldn’t mention it. You see, the letter hadn’t been written when she said it, and she never imagined it would be. And,” added the girl, now completely convinced, “if Olga had told Danello that she mentioned carpentering, there never would have been any letter. Just one little slip there—but don’t you see how it all fits together? She knew the truth all along.”

Julian fingered his cue, inwardly disturbed, revolting against connecting this girl with any kind of subterfuge.

“She never lied intentionally,” he burst out.

There was a sort of impasse, and Tonia recognized a new complication. Presently the light dawned.

“Perhaps she didn’t, and the actual fact was kept from her—in which case there’s no reason why you shouldn’t help to ferret the thing out. No one wants to hurt her.”

Julian, frowning, was silent for a moment. Rodney felt inclined to laugh, but a signal from Tonia stopped that. Never before had her brother taken any girl as seriously as this, and it made the affair infinitely more delicate. Julian was his own master now, and she imagined the possible climax. Suddenly Julian gave a short, unnatural laugh.

“Well, I don’t suppose there’s anything to be done to-night. Let’s have our fortunes told first. Come on, Rodney, and I don’t want your twenty.”

CHAPTER VI

DANELLO AT HOME

NEXT afternoon the three walked down the avenue toward the Gate House, Julian saying nothing, the other two talking fast. When they came opposite the thicket Rodney paused.

“Hereabouts, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, opposite the big tree.”

He pushed through the bushes, peered carefully about, and came back shaking his head. “This where you saw the Thing?”

“Yes, just here.”

“And you think it was Olga.”

“It moved like her, was her size, and the face very pale. That’s all I could make out.”

“Supposing the dog saw the same thing, it might make him howl instead of bark.”

“Perhaps; but, as Hammond says, a ghost never killed a man.”

“Then the inference is that Oscar finished off Cramp?” he said in a grave voice.

It was a sobering thing, this picturing of the Hungarian with his black eyes, heavy shoulders and big, hairy hands. Murder! The three stood for a moment with no words, each visioning the motionless body of Cramp. It must have been found within a few yards of where they now halted. If Rodney was right, they were on a trail that might lead a man to the scaffold!

And, thought Julian, if Rodney was right, where did Olga stand in this affair? Suddenly he was aware of a blinding fear that the web might close on her also, and saw her again as she had looked last night, more lovely than any dream. He felt his heart beat quickly, and regarded the others with something like hostility.

“You’ll have to be sure of a good deal more before you saddle Oscar with that,” he said stiffly. “You don’t even know if he was here then.”

Tonia shook off a feeling of depression and walked on. “We’ll get that much out of Mrs. Goddard, anyway. Are you two coming up to the Lodge with me?”

They found Danello himself pruning rose trees in front of the house. His back was turned and he worked with a kind of dainty precision, humming a French air and standing now and then, his head a little on one side, to criticize

his own efforts.

At the sound of steps on the gravel walk he wheeled, dropped his heavy knife and came quickly toward them. Tonia thought that never had she seen a man more care-free.

“Ah,” he smiled, after being introduced, “you go to consult the oracle at the gates. Olga has told me.”

Tonia nodded. “Yes, and we want her to come too.”

“That she has already asked. Certainly—why not? In a moment she will be here. She was very happy with you last night.”

“So glad. I hope she’s not tired to-day.”

“On the contrary, she seems stimulated by young society. I think that perhaps my wife has been too strict on her behalf. Your father—he got my letter?”

He asked this in so casual a tone that she had a throb of admiration. “Yes”—she hesitated an instant—“and it cleared up something we were all wondering about.” Then, daringly, she added: “I knew that dog, and he never struck me as being dangerous.”

Danello picked up his knife and felt the point with a long, delicate finger.

“Ah, but one can never tell; can one, Mr. Charters? You doubtless understand dogs. They change in temper. Up to a time they may be peaceable, then, of a *sudden* become a menace. When that happens one puts them out of the way. Nothing else is safe. But Oscar was making a trespass, as I admitted to your father. To whom did this animal belong?”

“To Hammond, the head keeper,” said Tonia, marvelling at the man’s nerve and adroitness. “I’m going to see him about it to-morrow. We arrived in the car just after it happened and found him there.”

Danello lifted his brows. “I did not know that.”

“Yes, and if we’d been ten minutes earlier it might not have happened at all.”

“*Quel malheur* that you were not in time to save the poor beast, also the arm of Oscar. He would have been very glad. But such things will occur. Ah—here is Olga!”

Julian and Rodney went to meet the girl, but Tonia, held by a queer fascination, did not stir. Danello was looking at her with an amusement that but slightly masked an underlying defiance. He seemed to be mocking her youth, inviting her to do her worst, and conveying the idea that for his part he rather enjoyed this passage of arms. And she, temporarily robbed of every weapon, admitted that he understood tactics, and was forced to see the strength of his position.

She was racking her brain for the next move, and finding none, when his voice came in again, very quiet and polite:

“You understand roses as well as dogs, mademoiselle?”

She smiled a little nervously. “I’m afraid I don’t very much.”

“Then these”—he pointed to a newly-pruned tree—“are Madame Butterfly, pink, and most charming; those Mrs. Herbert Stevens, all white; next you have the Etoile de Hollande, dark red, for contrast, and very sweet of scent. One could go on thus for some time. There is so much to be learned in a garden.”

“You’re fortunate to have so much time. I thought you were a banker.”

“I am,” he said coolly, “but a well-managed business like mine affords a little leisure.” He laughed contentedly, and began humming the air she had heard before. She remembered it now.

“Ernestine, Ernestine,
Tu t’obstines, et t’as tort——”

He broke off in the middle. “You, mademoiselle, may remember the rest?”
She nodded carelessly:

“Tu disputes, tu discutes,
Nous sommes jamais d’accord.”

She completed the couplet, then, all too late, realized what she had done.

Danello had moved closer and was staring at her with eyes like gimlets. His lips hardened into a tight line, then slowly took on a curve of utter satire.

“Mademoiselle, for the worst French scholar in the class, you speak the language marvellously well. One recognizes the purity of your accent. Let that part of it pass. As you have truly said, we are not of accord. But I should regret it very much if owing to childish curiosity on your part the matter went any further, and you would regret it still more.”

He made a little bow, gave a laugh amazingly natural, and waved a hand to the others, who now came toward him. “Your fortunes—you go to learn them. Very interesting, but I have just told this young lady how to avoid misfortune—which, perhaps, is just as useful. Au revoir.”

* * * * *

Tonia, furious at her own forgetfulness, found little to say on the short walk to the Gate House. It wounded her vanity to know that Danello had scored the two first points, was perfectly aware of what she attempted, and regarded her efforts with nothing short of derision.

Also, he had thrown down the gage in a most unmistakable manner. She brooded over this; then, in a quandary, told Rodney what had happened. Her only present comfort was that Rodney had not attempted to make love to her.

“So all we can do at the moment is to find out whether Oscar was at the Lodge at the time of the Cramp murder,” she concluded.

“I don’t see anything else,” he admitted, “but that doesn’t really establish anything else.”

She glanced back at the two figures following so slowly.

“There’s Olga.”

“And Julian?” he asked quickly.

“Yes—if things go on as they seem to have begun. That might be the way out.”

Rodney whistled. “Pretty thin ice, that. And if Danello suspected anything he’d soon stop it.”

“If it’s the real thing, can anyone stop it?”

“You’re right there,” he said meaningly. “One can’t stop the real thing.”

She flushed a little. “I’m going on the assumption that it’s mutual. Julian’s never displayed the symptoms before.”

“Things become mutual quite suddenly sometimes,” he replied cheerfully. “You suggest that for Julian’s sake she might blow the gaff?”

“Blow what?”

“Take the lid off—tell the whole thing.”

“I think she would if she was really in love.”

“It’s not safe to assume that. You don’t know what other influences are at work on her. From what you said yourself she was partly hypnotized the first time you saw her.”

“Yes—but what a difference now!”

“Love versus hypnotism?” he asked with a grin.

“I fancy it’s quite possible,” she said coolly, and, waiting, waved to the others. “Come along; the oracle sits beside the fire.”

* * * * *

If Mrs. Goddard was surprised by this incursion, she gave no sign of it while her keen, old eyes rested on each young face in turn. On Olga’s she dwelt, perhaps, a little longer, then, pulling up an oak bench and her two spare chairs, bade her visitors be seated.

She herself occupied a stool beside the hearth, folded her wrinkled hands over her bony knees, pushed back the wisps of silver hair from her hollow temples and nodded into the glowing embers.

“Well, young masters and ladies,” she said in her cracked voice, “what can an old woman do for you?”

“Tell us a lot of things about ourselves,” replied Tonia promptly.

“There do be questions hard to answer even at your time of life.”

“What made you say that, Mrs. Goddard?”

“For the first quarter of one’s years life is all a question, my dear, be it spent in The Dene or the Whispering Lodge.”

Olga started, but Tonia sent her a warning glance. “You told my fortune ten days ago—will you tell Miss Vinen’s now?”

“I’m not so sure of that. You came asking for it outright, and them that

would know must do the asking.” She moved her head slowly, and peered into Olga’s large, dark eyes. “What does the young mistress say herself?”

It was then, while they waited for the girl to speak, that a strange thing happened. Her lips quivered, though no sound came, and she felt her gaze drawn irresistibly to Julian, who sat back from the fire and more in shadow than herself. Her eyes met his, and she gave him once again the inexplicable signal of the previous night, a wordless communication as baffling as it was significant.

Tonia could only guess that in some mysterious fashion the girl believed that her future and Julian’s were inevitably linked, and she wanted to know if here and now he was willing that a corner of the curtain be lifted. This lasted for an appreciable moment, while over the parchment features of the old woman crept an expression of secret satisfaction.

“Yes,” said Olga jerkily, as though coming out of a trance. “Please tell me all you can.”

“Your hand, miss?”

She bent over the slim palm, while Julian leaned a little forward with a curious mixture of indifference and attention. For a moment there was heard only the putter of the fire that flickered on the faces of these young people and touched into ruddy life the features of this old, old woman. Her age amounted to all of theirs together.

“Water and shadow and fire,” she muttered. “I see ’em here, miss, and there be danger in all. The water—was that a while past?”

“Ten years ago,” said Olga evenly.

“The shadow—that is now—with three in it. You, miss, and two men. You walk in and out, not knowing it. Be careful of the shadow.”

“And the fire?” she asked in a whisper.

“That is close by, too. ’Twill come between a short sleep and a long one. The smell of burning will be on you, miss, and a great fear. Then a new life—with no shadow.”

“Anything else?” The voice was shaky now.

Mrs. Goddard shook her aged head. “The rest don’t matter. It’s just ordinary.”

“Can you tell me anything?” interjected Julian abruptly.

The oracle examined the strong, young hand and chuckled dryly: “Aye, for you, too, the shadow holds danger. After that you will cross water as the bird flies, and, returning, look for a house and find only ashes.”

“But after that?”

“Just ordinary, master.”

Another hand—Rodney’s—was thrust out, and she turned the wrist toward the fire.

“For you, master, there be this to say. You be your own best pilot, and ’tis writ that hidden fires do last the longest. Head and heart work together here, and the bird that all day long do be fighting the wind comes surely to shelter when the sun goes down.”

She made a little sound, as though having given what it cost something to give. Olga, who had grown very pale, rose unsteadily and fumbled with her purse.

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Goddard. May I——”

The old woman shook her head. “’Twas not for that, miss. Three years I’ve been expecting you here, and I do not sell my words. I’m content.”

Olga swayed a little and Julian was beside her in an instant.

“Are you faint?”

“It’s nothing. I—I think I’ll go out for a minute.”

He saw his chance. “Do. Come for a turn with me.”

She smiled at him. The door closed, and Tonia, pulling her wits together, signalled swiftly to Rodney.

“May we stay a little longer, Mrs. Goddard?”

“Surely, my dear, surely; but your hand is already told.”

“I don’t mean that; it’s something entirely different.”

“Is The Dene asking the Gate House about the Lodge?” said Mrs. Goddard shrewdly.

Tonia blinked at her. “How in the world did you guess that?”

“’Twas in the mist I saw it, my dear; the mist that comes before the dark. Sometimes there be holes in the mist, and I see things.”

“Mrs. Goddard, do you know a man at the Lodge called Oscar?”

The old woman gave a wizened smile. “Surely, miss, I know many that don’t know me. ’Tis the man with the hairy hands.”

“Was he here when Cramp was killed?”

She nodded slowly. “Aye, and a month before. There were comings and goings at the Lodge after Mr. Danello got the place. They set up with servants from the village. Then there came some small, heavy boxes from foreign parts that was hard to lift, and two foreigners with them. One was Oscar. And the day before they came the other servants left.”

“Did you hear any sound the night Cramp was killed?”

“No, miss, not a whisper; but I seen him that evening about five in his new uniform on a bicycle. Whenever he come this way he would stop and pass the time of day, seeing it was me that saw him into the world. And five hours after that he was on his back with a gert hole in his head. Hit from behind, he was. His eyes was still open, and with that in ’em that nearly spoke.”

“Hammond said that too—something he tried to say, and couldn’t.”

“Aye, miss, and the same with Hammond’s dog. I heard him a-howling,

and reckoned his end wasn't far off. 'Twas done quick—in the dark—like the last time.”

Tonia did not miss the inference, and shivered a little. “Mr. Danello himself—have you seen him often?”

“No, miss. The first time were when he came into Hackett’s shop, cursing in foreign languages because they’d sent him white lanterns instead of red as ordered. Four of them lanterns there was, and him in a blazing fury about nothing.”

“But what use could he have for red ones?” put in Rodney.

“Well, master, that is as it may be. Happen it might have to do with them lights I saw in the sky soon after that for the first time. Miss Tonia, what might you be driving at with all this?”

Tonia was now quite breathless. “The secret of the Whispering Lodge,” she said in a low voice. “Mrs. Goddard, promise you won’t tell anyone.”

The old woman hunched herself nearer the fire, and there followed a silence in which one could hear the faint drone of wind through the great elms that towered so high over the slate roof of this tiny dwelling. The cottage walls were thick and strong, built as The Dene itself was built to withstand the creeping assaults of time. But to-night they seemed insecure against some brooding danger that lurked in the shadows close by.

And the old, old woman herself, with her penetrating eyes, and scanty locks, this aged crone, poised, as it were, between one life and another, over her there hung an inescapable significance. She might have lived thus for centuries, no older, no younger, her withered finger on the pulse of things that were hidden from the common world.

“No, my dear,” sounded the cracked voice, “but it’s in my mind that it’s for stronger hands than yours. All that’s come of it so far is death for man and beast.”

* * * * *

“You’re feeling better now?”

Julian and Olga were walking slowly along one of the sunken, hedge-bordered lanes that wind downhill from Charterden toward the Weald of Kent. Mutually they had avoided the avenue and its grim associations, and the girl already felt an extraordinary sense of emancipation. But her mind was charged with many problems. At Julian’s question she nodded brightly.

“Yes; quite all right. I was rather foolish—and a little frightened.”

“Wasn’t it queer? I felt creepy myself.”

“Do you believe in it?”

“I want to—but I wonder. Do you?”

It was hard to answer that, because she did believe. It must have been hope—the strange, unexpected upspringing of hope—that brought her to it. She was

intensely aware of this new-comer who had been linked with herself in so mysterious a fashion. Some premonition of it had seized her when their eyes met and clung the evening before, and then it had set up a tumult in her breast.

And, too, there was the sudden achievement of apparent freedom. This concession on the part of Danello, who knew what she knew, puzzled her enormously. One day practically a prisoner, on the next she was leading the life of the ordinary girl. How could Danello have risked it? All in a flash, she saw why—and felt terrified. Julian must be kept off that forbidden ground. Her brain was in a whirl.

And Julian, tingling with the first great emotion he had ever conceived, was grimly resolved that no word of his would make life harder for her. She knew the secret of the Whispering Lodge. Of this he was convinced. It was hard to watch her lovely face and not beg her to trust and tell him everything, but he felt in his soul that the hour of revelation was not far away. Till then he could but hope—and love.

They walked on, he rejoicing in her nearness, she very silent, both caught up in that which it was too soon to declare or confess.

“I’m going back to Oxford to-morrow,” he hazarded with an effort at lightness.

“So soon?”

“Yes, and I’m bringing Bethune back for Christmas.”

“Oh!” she said uncertainly. “He’s a great friend of your sister’s, isn’t he?”

“Perhaps—not yet—he’d like to be. Tonia isn’t very keen. Look here, I won’t be seeing you for another month. May I write?”

“No—please!” she said, startled. “My aunt wouldn’t like that.”

“Then will you write to me?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.” Her voice was low and unsteady.

“Olga!”

She looked at him with wide-open eyes that presently faltered and drooped. In the next moment his arms went round her.

“I love you, Olga,” he whispered passionately. “I adore you.”

CHAPTER VII

IN THE AVENUE

FOR a moment she remained quite still in his arms, her face a mirror of a thousand emotions, while through Julian ran the supreme joy that a man feels not often in life. He bent over her, held her more closely and, with his lips close to her ear, poured out an infinity of endearing and extravagant things.

While he gazed he saw in her eyes that which rejoiced his heart. Then, slowly, this was superseded by a look of intense fear. It was as though for an instant she, too, wanted him to know that she loved him, and, this accomplished, yielded to the thought of something menacing that dominated the whole background of her existence.

“Olga!” he reiterated. “Olga! Do you hear me?”

She gave him a smile, intensely pathetic, and drew away from his embrace.

“Please—please,” she begged pitifully, “you don’t know what you are saying!”

Julian was too triumphant to concede that. “I know it better than anything in my life. Nothing else matters. Olga, tell me that you care!”

How strange it is that sometimes, even in the moment of one’s worship, the object of our adoration changes semblance and becomes, as it were, foreign to its own picture! It was thus now with Olga. Mounting fear had hold of her. While his eyes caressed her, she appeared to alter. The beauty of face and form remained and all the nameless grace of a woman whom nature had endowed as she was, but the soft light that beamed for an instant went out, and was replaced by a sort of hopelessness that struck Julian to the heart.

She seemed to age, to bow to some invisible burden, to lose the buoyancy of youth, and become the gentle repository of knowledge that chilled the blood and dimmed the sun’s rays. And when she spoke it was in a hollow whisper:

“Julian!”

“Tell me, dearest. Nothing matters but what I’ve told you.”

“It’s impossible.”

He shook his head passionately. “I’ll never accept that—never!”

She stood, summoning her strength and regarding him with strange eyes. All he could feel was the inevitableness of the thing, that it had been meant from the beginning of time, and all his previous life was consummated in this one moment. Nothing must come between them now. Nothing!

“You love me?” she said unsteadily.

“As much as a man can love a woman. It will never be any other way.”

“Is your love great enough to make you do something hard?”

“If it keeps us together.” His voice was dominant.

“It can’t be, Julian, and I can’t explain. Do you love me enough to accept that?”

“I love you too much to accept it,” he said proudly.

She made a gesture of infinite sadness. “It would mean disgrace for you—danger for me.”

He stared at her dumbfounded. Disgrace to claim a girl like this! Her picture, as she had looked the previous evening, as indeed she had looked a moment ago, was enough to stir any man who had blood in his veins. Then, because he saw that the battle she was fighting with an invisible enemy was straining her fortitude to the utmost, he became filled with so great a tenderness that it was hard to breathe.

“I don’t know what lies behind all this. It’s you I love—just you. No one else on your side or mine has anything to do with it, or ever will have. I’m my own master—and I adore you.”

At that she trembled, and the tears ran down her face. “I was all wrong,” she faltered, “all wrong.”

“In what?”

“To come last night, to come this afternoon. I didn’t dream that we should find each other yesterday. Does it help you to know that I feel what you feel—or does it make it harder? Tell me, Julian.”

“Bless you for that, darling. It would kill my soul if you didn’t love me,” said he. “I want nothing but you. Can’t you tell me anything more?”

She shook her head, as though to tell him it would be defying destiny. “I know you can’t understand, and yet I can’t tell you. That is the deadening part of it.”

“I am going away to-morrow morning,” he said dully.

She put her hand to her throat. “Julian—Julian—don’t misread me, dear love. We can’t help this, either of us. When we looked at each other last night I knew what was going to happen—yet I had to look. If I hadn’t wanted this—wanted it—I wouldn’t have come this afternoon.”

“You adorable girl!” he exclaimed, kissing her again.

She smiled at him bravely. “You see, I’m just like every other girl in that way. I wanted my man to tell me he loved me. You’re almost the first one of my age whom I’ve met since coming to England, and——” She broke off suddenly. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I’m going away to-morrow,” he repeated. “What can you say?” He paused, searching her face with hungry eyes. “Something—anything for me to live on. And, darling, I must see you again!”

“But, Julian, you can’t!”

“This evening—to-night—you must manage it. I know what I’m asking, but you don’t know what it means to me. I can’t and won’t go without seeing you again. If it isn’t possible any other way I’ll come to the Lodge.”

She was looking at him now, startled, round-eyed, as though this suggestion were amazing.

“Don’t, Julian. I beg of you don’t do that. You can’t guess what might happen.”

“I don’t realize why anything should happen,” he argued stubbornly. “This is a civilized country. Why shouldn’t I call at your uncle’s house and ask to see you?” He hesitated, longing to take her in his arms again, aching for the warmth and nearness of her. A million things he wanted to say and prove. Then, hunger getting the better of him, he repeated: “If you can’t arrange anything else, I will come.”

At that the strength seemed to go out of her body, and she gave a sigh that pierced his heart.

“Then to-night, at eleven, on the avenue. Wait in the middle of the road for me between the Gate House and the thicket. It can only be for a moment.” With this she gave him an extraordinary glance, as though wondering why he could not see what this concession involved.

“You darling—yes—I’ll go when you tell me to.”

“And you must make no sound and not attempt to follow me. Promise that.”

He promised, loving her the more, picturing her in his arms with only the high stars to see them. Then, of a sudden, came a creeping fear lest in coming she might be exposing herself to danger.

“Olga—your part of it—are you safe?”

She flung herself into his arms with a little cry of love.

“Dearest, don’t you understand? I want to come.”

At that he held her very close, till, quite clear and just round a bend in the lane, he heard Rodney’s voice.

“Well, I can’t make head or tail of mine, except that it’s comforting to be called your own best pilot. The rest might mean anything. What did she tell you when you went?”

Olga started back, Julian put on his most offhand manner, and the four met. Tonia came forward quickly.

“Miss Vinen, are you all right now?”

“Quite, thanks.”

“I’m so glad. Won’t you come back for tea?”

Olga shook her head. “I’d like to, but I can’t. We’ve had such a nice walk.”

Rodney glanced at Julian, noted the blankness of his face, and came to a

very correct conclusion. "Mixes things up properly," he said to himself; then, aloud: "I say, Miss Vinen, can we ask what the old woman meant by danger from water to you some time in the past? You said she was right, and it happened ten years ago."

"Yes, it was right—at St. Raphael on the Côte d'Azur. I was only a child, and got into deep water off the rocks, which are very steep there. A fisherman saved me at the last minute."

Rodney whistled. "Funny to find that in a person's hand. Makes one wonder if she's as sound on the future, doesn't it? I notice you're going to fly, Julian."

He laughed. "I'd sooner fly than face the Channel any day. And apparently you're going to have something to do with seagulls. Come on, Tonia; the rest of us have been exposed. What about you?"

Tonia demurred. "Wouldn't you like to know? That's my guilty secret."

"Going to be happily married?" scoffed Julian.

"She certainly is," said Rodney promptly, "though she won't admit it."

Tonia flushed and her brother laughed. "Splendid—but as a matter of fact, I was rather impressed!"

There was a little silence. It seemed that each of them was interpreting their own personal message. Rodney's sharp eyes dwelt for a moment on Olga, then turned to Tonia, who made a little gesture, signalling that they could not discuss what was uppermost in their minds while Olga was with them. He wondered whether the same argument ought not to apply to the presence of Julian, and again perceived an infinite number of possible complications.

"When will we four meet again?" he hazarded absently.

"The day after we come down. Better fix up something now." Julian's voice was quite even.

"You'll be here for Christmas, won't you?" asked Tonia of Olga.

"I think so. My uncle hasn't made any plans yet for moving. It all depends on his Continental business."

"Then you'll come to lunch that day. Can we call that much settled?"

"It is very kind of you," murmured the girl.

Julian said nothing. The possibility of her leaving Charterden hit him hard. Here was something he hadn't reckoned on, and it would have to be thought out and settled to-night. Oxford and a post-graduate course could hang themselves if it came to that.

At the gate of the Lodge, and from the Charterden road, they saw Danello still busy over his roses, and Julian comforted himself by reflecting that this did not look much like moving. Danello straightened up, and as they said good-bye to Olga lifted his hat with what Tonia thought was derisive politeness. When they had passed the Gate House, Rodney took out his pipe

and lit it very deliberately.

“Seems to me that, as far as further investigation goes, we’re up a tree.”

“Why?” demanded Tonia, suffering from her recent reverse.

“Well, I suggest you ask Julian.”

“What do you mean? Julian’s in it as much as we are.”

“Are you?” asked Rodney cryptically.

Julian frowned a little. “In what?”

“Getting to the bottom of this thing without any aid. There’s crooked work going on—all the evidence points to it—and for my part I’m game to see it through, even if I do get hurt. Where do you stand?”

Julian faltered. This was too straight to dodge. He knew that the eyes of them both were watching him, but even more clearly he saw those of the girl he loved. What affected the rest in this mysterious business would inevitably affect her. Crooked work! If there was crooked work, she knew of it. She must know! But even the love she had confessed did not make her speak. It was hideous that she should be so involved. And what could the man who loved her say now?

“Look here,” he began jerkily, “if you agree at the start that it’s impossible for her to be even remotely responsible for what you call ‘crooked work,’ I’m with you. If not, I’m not.”

Rodney’s brows went up, and Tonia took a long breath.

“Poor old Jule,” she said softly, “but I’m not a bit surprised. I’ve never seen anything just like her. Does she know?”

“I’ve just told her,” he answered miserably.

Rodney slipped his arm into his friend’s. “The point you made—you’re afraid that in hurting others we may hurt her?”

Julian nodded. “Yes, and she has told me nothing, nor will she. I’m sure of that. She knows—whatever it is—and can’t help it. I gathered that much.”

Tonia racked her brain over this remark. It meant so much—meant that Olga knew who killed young Cramp—and why—and yet joined in the screen of secrecy that shielded the murderer. A grave thing to know about any woman. And yet she had let Julian tell her he loved her, and seemingly loved in return. What was it Rodney had said about hypnotism overcoming love?

“You’re both going off to-morrow,” she began thoughtfully, “so really there’s nothing can be done till you get back. I’m rather helpless by myself. That man’s suspicions are roused; he’ll probably watch me like a cat, and watch Olga too. So, isn’t the best thing to let the whole affair stand till your return, and I’ll pick up all I can in the meantime?”

“Do you suggest pumping Olga for information?” put in Julian nervously. “Because, if so, I——”

“Nothing of the kind. If I can do anything to make her happier, I’ll do it if

I'm allowed to. But perhaps it won't be any use trying. I'd go mad if I led the life she does. And if there's anything you want me to say on your account, Jule, I'll say it, since you won't be seeing her again for weeks. It must be rotten to feel the way you do. Any messages?"

"No," said Julian briefly; "no messages."

Rodney, who had been studying his friend's face, remained silent. Here was the chap who maintained a few days ago that sentiment had been left out of him—yet surrendered at sight. The situation was delicate enough, but now reached a stage where one false move would be serious. How could they count on Julian with matters as they stood?

And in a curious way this development brought Rodney nearer to Tonia. She was the instigator of a venture that now looked more grave than ever, and if only for that he was determined to see it through. Tonia might need him before it was over.

He realized, nevertheless, that Charters ought to be informed. Charters might laugh at it, but—again—the thing had become cumulative, and there were links that coupled Danello with the murder of three years ago.

"Julian," he interjected, "I'm not quite comfortable about this. It looks nasty—we all know what it may lead to—and shouldn't your father be told?"

Julian flushed, then turned a little pale. "No—no—nothing of the kind. Tonia started it—you and I are in it—and we'll see it to a finish, but always with the understanding we've come to. I couldn't bear its getting past us—to anyone."

"Well, he's your father, not mine, and it's his property, so it's for you to say. But one thing ought to be agreed before we leave."

"What?"

"About you, Tonia. You shouldn't go prowling round the Lodge any more by night; and if you have to be near there you certainly oughtn't to be alone."

Tonia felt at first amused, then her brown eyes softened a little. It was an odd sensation to have a man thinking about her in this way—anxious about her. In the past there had always been the strange mingling of attraction and revolt—then the inevitable clash. But that now Rodney should regard her as something to be protected was novel, and, she admitted, rather nice. In the next instant she crushed back this feeling, vexed at what she took to be her own weakness.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she said stoutly.

Rodney differed. "Perhaps that's what young Cramp thought, but Hammond's dog was afraid. Matter of fact," he added candidly, "I wouldn't be over keen about exploring that place myself alone at midnight. Eh, Julian?"

Julian looked up with a jerk. "What? No—I suppose not! There's no necessity at the moment. Better leave it, Tonia."

“When will you be back again?”

“In three weeks.”

“If you think it’s best I won’t do anything,” she said unwillingly.

“Right! Now, you two, there’s something I’ve got to say about—about myself and Olga.”

Tonia’s eyes met Rodney’s in a glance so blank as to be very expressive.

“I fancy I know what it is,” she murmured.

“You probably do. For heaven’s sake, don’t give me away. It’s that. I’m dead in earnest about this thing. If you think I’m a fool—well—you’re at liberty to think so. It doesn’t make any difference, and you couldn’t understand, anyway. But facts are facts, and this is the biggest one in my life.” He shot this out, his eyes defiant, his face looking strangely old.

Tonia frowned ever so slightly. She didn’t like being told that she couldn’t understand—because she did. But perhaps, judging by her immediate past, Julian was to some extent justified. At the same time, it was rather punishing to be placed outside the circle of those who understood what love meant. At this moment she avoided Rodney’s eyes, and for once in her life was not prepared to differ.

“I won’t breathe a word of it,” she promised in a subdued voice.

“You can bank on me—and perhaps I do understand a little,” said Rodney.

They arrived at The Dene, possessed by their own thoughts, and so preoccupied that Mrs. Charters, aware of their serious young faces, felt a little puzzled.

“Your fortunes don’t seem to have been very promising,” she began cheerfully. “Better have some tea. Tonia, what did she say to you?”

“Tonia had hers told privately days ago,” volunteered Rodney, “and won’t give herself away. Julian and I didn’t unearth anything special.”

“Did Miss Vinen go with you?”

Tonia nodded. “We wanted to bring her back, but she couldn’t come.”

“I’m sorry—I hoped she would.” Mrs. Charters was busy for a moment, then looked up with a wrinkle in her smooth brow. “What did the old woman tell her? I’d like to know.”

“Warned her against water, shadow and fire. It seems the water part of it was right, as she was nearly drowned ten years ago.”

“How odd! Does Mrs. Goddard think the Lodge is going to burn down?”

“She explains nothing, so it’s hard to know what she thinks.”

“That girl is a mystery to me. Think of the difference between the first time we saw her and last night. Like another creature—years and years younger. How was she this afternoon?”

“Just the same, and quite bright.”

“Did you walk with her, Julian?”

“For a little while.”

“I’m surprised you’ve come back heart-whole.”

“Julian boasted to me a week ago that that sort of thing was left out of him,” laughed Rodney.

“I’m afraid he’s right, but I hope he won’t keep it up too long. I can’t imagine a bachelor master of The Dene. We’ll see you for Christmas, I hope, Rodney?”

“I’d love to come,” he said, looking straight at Tonia.

“I’m so glad that you don’t find Kent too slow.”

“Anything but slow,” he smiled.

“Julian tells me you both want to get the nine-thirty from London, so if you left here by car not later than seven-thirty you should have time enough. Is that too early?”

“It would help tremendously to have the car,” he said gratefully.

At half-past ten Julian cautiously opened the door of his room which gave directly upon the main upper hall, and listened intently. The Dene was a house of darkness and silence, save for one light that burned on the great oak landing, and those unexplainable sounds that every old mansion produces when its corridors lie untenanted and the night is deep—faint creaking sounds as though the structure were stretching its ancient limbs.

He stood rigid for some moments, noting the narrow glow leaking beneath Tonia’s door and catching a slight murmur of voices from his mother’s room. Then, carrying his shoes, he crept downstairs without making the faintest noise.

In the hall he unshackled the heavy door-chain and slid back two great bolts. How well oiled they were, and how he blessed Manders!

The night was black, and he moved immediately on to the wide lawn, following its edge to the shelter of the rhododendrons. Safely out of all possible observation, he hastened his steps. Five minutes later he had reached The Dene end of the avenue.

His heart was now beating violently. He seemed to have cast off from all the former mooring-posts of life and to be embarked on a venture as inspiring as it was compelling.

Glancing up at the arching frames of the tall elms, ghostlike in the gloom, it made him breathless to realize that beneath this screen the girl he loved with a wild unquestioning worship would soon be in his arms. That was incredible. It was all incredible. He hungered for the touch of her—the low sweetness of her voice—the clinging warmth of her caress.

And that she was to come to him from a house of mystery, where she lived

in fear and under the shadow of disgrace, did not alter anything. Nothing counted but the one thing. He loved—and was ready to face the world on her behalf.

The night grew darker, and he followed the middle of the road. Shapes formed in the blackness, took on grotesque outlines—and melted into nothing. Traversing the colonnade of great trunks, he came opposite the Whispering Lodge, discerning its bulk as a slightly blacker mass, devoid of life and sound.

Nothing stirred here, and Julian felt himself an explorer on the verge of the unknown. Half-way between Lodge and Gate House, he stepped back off the road and merged himself with the elms. He could not imagine that Olga would come past the cottage—but how else *could* she come?

The church clock was striking eleven when, of a sudden, he saw her quite close, a shadow amongst shadows. She *had* come from the direction of the Lodge, and for a second he was too amazed to speak. Then he put out his arms.

“Beloved! It’s too wonderful! Kiss me.”

“Not so loud,” she said very gently. “No, dear, don’t kiss me. You must not.”

He stiffened with surprise. “But——”

“I know,” she whispered, “and I’m sorry about this afternoon. It’s just because I’m so sorry that I’m here. I forgot myself. Make it easier for me, Julian, won’t you?”

She stood close beside him, protected seemingly by some impalpable armour he made no attempt to pierce. How different she was now—and yet no less distracting.

“I thought—thought—that——” He broke off, stammering.

“I understand everything,” she went on very gently, “and everything you feel. I feel it myself, dear: and there’s nothing unsaid of what I did say—not a word of it.”

He fought grimly with himself, crowding back emotions that well-nigh choked him, tremendously conscious of her appeal, and resolving desperately not to overstep the boundary she so suddenly and strangely established. They were alone in the world—yet he must not touch her! He made a little gesture of compliance.

“All right,” he said unsteadily.

She did not stir, only sending him a look that in its simplicity and sweetness nearly broke his heart. She, too, was having her struggle, for her heart longed like his, but in her soul of souls she perceived that here and now every declaration of love must inevitably bring its own succeeding torture. And silence was better than any additional suffering.

Presently he took a long breath like that of a swimmer reaching shore.

“Olga, tell me something,” he said in a low voice.

“That is the hardest thing about it, dear. I can’t tell you anything.”

“You must, if I come first. It’s about your—about what goes on in the Lodge—why is there danger and possible disgrace?”

She turned pale as he spoke. “It’s just that I can’t tell you. The cloud hangs over others I love, and the danger is theirs too.”

“Danello?” he demanded swiftly.

“I fear him more than any man alive,” she whispered.

“His wife?”

“They are the same.”

“Olga!” he begged. “How long has this been going on?”

“For five years—since my mother died.”

“Is Danello a criminal?” he demanded sternly.

“I think he would break any law man ever made.” She glanced nervously into the dusk. “But I am not in any physical danger—I never have been.”

Julian struggled for words. “Tell me, darling; if you love me, tell me. I can’t leave you like this. It’s too horrible.”

“I don’t think it can last much longer,” Olga said, shivering a little. “I believe he has almost accomplished what he set out to do. And the risk is getting greater all the time. That was behind his words when he said that business might call him back to the Continent. In the meantime it is best that nothing be done—absolutely nothing. I want to see as much of your sister as I’m allowed to. It lies with Danello. I can’t think of him as my mother’s brother. Sometimes I feel as though he’d hypnotized me.

“He suspects that Tonia is spying. Tell her not to—it’s too dangerous. I don’t know if they’ll let me go to The Dene again, and my seeing you depends on a thousand things I can’t tell you now. Isn’t this a strange way for a girl to talk to—to the man she cares for?” she added, with a wistful smile. “You must love me, Julian, or you couldn’t accept it.”

The pathos of it hit him hard, and never in his life had he been more convinced of hearing truth than at this moment. He had come determined to find light—and discovered only a further darkness. Not a single question could he put now without trespassing on forbidden ground.

“Then I can do nothing—must not write—you cannot write? It’s all a blank till I get back?”

“Not blank, dear, if you feel as I do. I’ll be happier than in years.”

At that it was hard not to take her in his arms, but the sweet trustfulness of her dark eyes gave him strength. Questions were trembling on his lips—one question above all others. He thrust it back. Who killed Cramp—and why? Was it possible that the knowledge was locked in this gentle breast? A thousand times no!

But it seemed, nevertheless, that a poisoned arrow was pricking its deadly

essence into his heart, and the poison would work when he was alone. This girl the screen of a murderer?

“Dearest,” he ventured shakily, “for your sake, for both our sakes, let me speak of one thing. I’m in torture about it.”

Her lips trembled, and she stared at him affrighted. His suffering increased because she suffered, but something in the boy’s essential nature, something strong and straight and clean and proud, demanded to be heard. If this love of his was worth anything, it could not be nurtured by maintaining secrets that should be no secret, and the man who could not face the truth was but half a man.

“You doubt my love?” said Olga under her breath.

“No—never! I would doubt creation first. It’s about Cramp—in the avenue—you remember, three years ago?” He ground out the words, rebelling at the very sound of them, searching her exquisite face, torn between love and a dark, nameless fear.

But Olga only looked at him, round-eyed. “Who was Cramp? I never heard of him.”

At this Julian was caught up in an irresistible revulsion. The thing was amazing, but—again—he knew it for truth. How or why she could be ignorant didn’t matter. The one blazing fact remained.

“Olga!” he stammered, putting out his arms, “Olga—best beloved—once, before I go. You’ve told me all I wanted to hear.”

She swayed toward him ever so slightly. “But, Julian, dearest——”

Her voice hung, abruptly suspended, and in that instant she sprang forward, her face suddenly transfigured with fear, her eyes full of horror, while she thrust at something invisible to him.

“Oscar!” she shrilled frantically. “Oscar—don’t!”

Julian, putting out an arm to protect her, swung round on his heel, but not quite quickly enough. He felt a dull shock at the back of his head, the shadowy elms all seemed to run together—then nothing! Pitching forward, he lay very still.

CHAPTER VIII

COMPLICATIONS

TONIA, who had also gone to her room early that night, could find no present interest in books, and sat for a while plunged in thought. She was anxious about Julian, and it seemed that by a turn of the wheel she and Rodney were thrown together to protect her brother. In the past he had been immune against anything sentimental—in fact, she had concluded that there was no sentiment in him—but now she saw that his capitulation was utterly spontaneous.

In this sort of thing she had never underestimated the attraction other girls had for men, and was often puzzled that she should exercise anything of the kind herself. Olga's appeal was, she admitted, unmistakable, being not only that of sheer beauty, but also of a petitionary charm that might well disturb the heart of any man. Realizing this, she felt in a detached way surprised that Rodney should be so untouched. But why should it give her a throb of secret satisfaction?

Thrusting this aside as an indication of weakness, she gazed absently at her book, while her mind turned to the Whispering Lodge. That Olga was housed in this mysterious abode—that she was in intimate touch with a man like Danello—under the influence of a woman like Danello's wife—and must be aware of that of which she dared not speak—all this had made no difference to Julian. What had he and the girl talked of? How much had Julian really learned? How would his mind react during the next few weeks?

Suddenly she wanted to talk to him, and talk in a way she had had no opportunity to speak yet. His future—the family—The Dene, of which he would be master—these must be considered.

She went into the hall, treading softly, and gave a gentle tap at his door. No answer! She moved on opposite the light in Rodney's room, and listened. All she heard was Rodney stirring about and the creak of straining leather as he fastened down a suitcase. She stood for a moment, frowning in the dark. Where was Julian? Then she went back, turned the handle and set his door just ajar.

“Julian?” she whispered.

Again no answer. She stepped inside and switched on the light. The room was empty, and Julian's luggage lay ready for the morrow.

She stared about, puzzled, till, slowly, the possible truth came to her. It seemed to hit her in the face, and, after a moment's hesitation, she returned to

Rodney's door.

"Come in, old man," he said at her tap.

She took a step forward, halted, and put her finger to her lips. "Don't make a sound! Where's Julian?"

"Asleep, I suppose. I haven't seen him since we came up. What's the matter?"

"He's not in his room or in the house. Can you guess where he's gone?"

Rodney gaped at her. "He's not such a fool."

"But he has gone out, and I hate to think of it. What can we do?"

"I'll go after him." The boy's face was suddenly grim. "The chap's mad."

"Then I'm coming, too."

He shook his head emphatically. "No, you're not. It's my job."

"If you go, I'm going," she persisted stubbornly. "Why shouldn't I? He's my brother. And if you argue you'll rouse everyone."

Sending her a sharp glance, he read the resolution in her face. It was a mad affair, and Julian was evidently off his head, but there was something intriguing about a midnight exploration with Tonia. Queer that Julian should bring them into contact like this!

"All right, then—if you must. Got a revolver about the place?"

"There's one in the gun-room, but why take it?"

"My name isn't Cramp and I'd feel healthier if I did. Come on."

Creeping downstairs like cats, they found what they sought, and noticed that the front door was unfastened. Then across the lawn to the curving drive.

"Did you notice the time?" asked Rodney coolly.

"It was a quarter-past eleven when I went to his room."

"Then he must have gone out after half-past ten. We came up then. Give me your hand—it's pretty black under these trees."

She gave it without a word, a cold little hand that lay very trustingly in his. This was the first time he had ever held it.

"Do you think Olga promised to meet him?"

"She must have—but she can't climb that wall, and it would be risky coming past the Gate House. I don't see it at all."

"He's fearfully in love—I've never known him like this before."

Rodney wanted to answer that it was a peculiar symptom to one of her family—or that perhaps now she could understand better about himself, but he said nothing.

It struck him as a strange thing that in this black night both he and Julian should be alone in the darkness with the girl he loved, and wondered if Julian would speak out as he himself wanted to speak. But between these two was an avowed love, while Tonia—well—he only ventured to press her hand, and got not the faintest response.

But he did not know why. For the first time in her life Tonia would have welcomed his arm around her—not in love, but protection.

The night, with its dim arch of impalpable cloud—the night air, cool and moist—the vague distance that stretched before them—all seemed filled with whispers. Amongst these she discerned those of her own heart, as though, tired of isolation, it was silently taking down its barriers. Then, as always, she became critical of herself.

They were in the avenue now. A faint mist rose from the damp soil, like the exhalations of a sleeping earth, shrouding the elms so that they stretched in a phantasmal procession out of sight. This spectral panorama imposed a silence that neither of them was inclined to break. Perhaps in the silence something was transmitted, because Tonia felt less at war with herself and Rodney than ever before.

Presently they came abreast of the thicket behind the Lodge.

“If we don’t find him soon, he isn’t here,” she whispered. “He wouldn’t have gone any further.”

Even as she spoke they heard steps, curiously uncertain steps, and a figure moved toward them in the fog. Rodney slid his hand into his pocket.

“Who’s that?” he demanded sharply.

“Julian—it’s Julian!” exclaimed Tonia, running forward. “Julian, where on earth have you been?”

He did not answer, but stood, swaying a little, his face deathly pale. He slipped an arm into Rodney’s and made as though to walk on.

“Been?” he said unsteadily. “Just having a little stroll. What brought you two down here?”

“I went to your room for a talk; couldn’t find you and got anxious. Then I told Rodney.”

He gave her a wan smile. “Nothing to be anxious about. Can’t a chap have a rendezvous without being trailed?”

Tonia, noting his pallor, was disturbed, feeling convinced that he had told only half the truth. Rodney said nothing, counting on some later hour in which to hear more. He found himself turned in the direction of The Dene with Julian leaning heavily on his arm and walking as though in a trance.

“What’s the matter, old man? Haven’t been in a scrap, have you?”

“No, I stumbled and banged my head against one of these infernal trees: I’ll be all right in a minute.”

“It’s certainly dark,” said Rodney, not believing a word.

“Look here, you two, I saw Olga. I suppose you assumed that?”

“Something very like it. Anything more you care to say? We think you’re a bit mad, but that’s your affair.”

“Yes, there’s just this, that I’m the happiest man in the world.”

“Have a run at another tree and see how you feel then,” remarked Rodney satirically.

Julian shook his head. “No, thanks, and I did see Olga, and she told me what I wanted to know.”

Tonia blinked at him. “You’ve solved the thing?”

“Enough to go on with till we get back. I asked her about the Cramp matter. I couldn’t rest till I knew, and the thought of her being mixed up with it was killing me.”

The two exchanged glances, that being the point which pricked the most sharply in their own minds.

“Well?” asked Tonia, trying to keep her voice steady.

“It’s perfectly amazing, but she had never heard of Cramp. There’s no doubt about it. She’s as innocent as a child of the whole affair. Think of it—within a few feet, yet absolutely ignorant!”

“Did you tell her?” asked Rodney, marvelling.

“Of course not—and you can see what this means to me. Danello has somehow kept the whole matter from her. There must be reasons for that. Another point that may explain a good deal is that she says that sometimes she feels as though she’d been hypnotized. If that’s possible, I begin to see light.”

His voice trailed out in weakness, and he put his hand to his head. “Later—some other time—I feel a bit queer. Let’s have your arm too, Tonia.”

They got him back to the house at a snail’s pace. As they crossed the lawn Mrs. Charters’ window opened. She stood peering, her husband beside her.

“What is it?” she called. “Has anything happened?”

“It’s nothing,” said Tonia cheerfully.

“But where have you all been at this hour? We’ve had rather a fright.”

“The boys went out for a smoke and I went with them. That’s all.”

Charters shook his head doubtfully. “You mustn’t do that again, and these boys had better get to bed. They’re going to be called at six-thirty.”

Regaining his room, Julian sank into a chair and waited. Presently Rodney appeared in dressing-gown and slippers.

“Anything I can do?”

“Can you get me a drink without making a sound?”

Rodney grinned, disappeared, and returned successful. The colour began to creep back into Julian’s cheeks.

“By gad!” he said with a long breath. “Who’d have thought it!”

Rodney lit a cigarette. It occurred to him that a man desperately in love was not the safest kind of guide under existing circumstances.

“You speak in riddles. What’s to be done next?”

“Nothing—absolutely nothing till we get back. Any move on Tonia’s part might make a horrible mess for Olga. She says that herself. She’s in no

physical danger, but fears Danello, and believes he'd break any law man ever made."

Rodney whistled. "He didn't happen to break your head?"

"That was Oscar. Olga saw him behind me, but not quite in time. I expect Danello missed her, and sent Oscar to look. Two search parties on the same night, eh? How he got there—or she—I don't know. It's their secret—part of the bigger one. She thinks Danello may chuck it soon because it's getting too risky. That may be on account of Tonia's curiosity, and he's warned her to drop it. If I made a row now about getting a knock on the head it might mix things up for Olga—so I'm saying nothing except to you. Keep that to yourself, will you?"

"Yes, if you say so, but it's a bit thick."

"Think I'm something of a fool?"

"I didn't say that."

"Did you ever see anything lovelier?" demanded Julian with a straight look.

Rodney admitted that she was very beautiful, and relapsed into thoughts of his own. He was more traditional than his friend, and took things more deliberately. Also he was unused to the quick decisions and precipitous changes of life in a new country. He, too, was in this affair really to look after the girl he loved.

Everything was clear there. One knew the Charters and all about them. But Julian would one day be master of The Dene. He would have position, wealth and the family name to uphold. Difficult to do, this, if the mistress of The Dene should be an unknown, and perhaps not quite clear of the fringe of suspicion. He considered this, watching his friend with an odd gravity, then decided that the point was, properly, for Tonia's consideration.

"I know what you're thinking," said Julian suddenly.

"Let's have it."

"That I've gone off my head over a pretty face. Also, you're harking back to what I said in Oxford the other day. You dragged that in rather neatly this afternoon."

"You're not so far out, but," added Rodney slowly, "it isn't my business."

"Anything else? You can say what you like."

"Only what you can imagine for yourself. It struck me that there were others to be considered."

Julian looked grave. "I know; you're right about that. It's my people—and the rest of it. Well, I'm going it blind this time, trusting that everything will be straightened out. I'm as sure of what I feel about my girl as you are with regard to my sister. I can't say more than that. What she is is written in her face, and that's what I'm going on. I don't care how far it takes me. There's bound to be

a flare-up at the Lodge before long, and I want to be here when it happens. So now you know just where I stand,” he concluded, with an odd smile.

Rodney tossed his cigarette into the fire.

“With a slight modification of facts, that’s where I stand myself.”

* * * * *

“John,” said Mrs. Charters to her husband a day or two later, “I’m not very comfortable about Julian.”

“Eh! What’s up?”

“I don’t know if anything is—I wish I did.”

“He seems quite normal to me.”

She shook her head. “Did you notice anything at dinner on Saturday night?”

“You mean the Vinen girl? Julian isn’t impressionable.”

“He wasn’t—but I’m not so sure now.”

“He’s hardly the sort to capitulate at first sight,” demurred Charters, “especially to a girl of whom he knows nothing.”

“I don’t believe that in your own case you waited to make many inquiries,” she said reflectively. “As I remember it, you simply plunged. It certainly took my breath away.”

“Right enough,” he laughed; “but I’d been watching you without your knowing it.”

“Nonsense! You’ve often said you saw me once and that was enough. And, John, even if that wasn’t true, don’t destroy my little illusions.”

“No illusion about it, my dear,” he said affectionately. “You’re perfectly right. Now what about that boy of ours?”

“Well, I intercepted just one look, but that was so eloquent that I haven’t been able to forget it. I fancy Tonia knows the truth, whatever it is—but she hasn’t hinted at anything, and I don’t like to ask.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you. Those two have always been straight from the shoulder. As to Julian, if he’s in love, I rather think he’ll make some investigations on his own account before saying anything to me. He would take a good deal of trouble to anticipate questions and make out a good case.”

“Did you come to any conclusions about the girl?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Not from that angle, because it never occurred to me. I’ve never seen anything more attractive and lovely, and she strikes me as being much better bred than Mrs. Danello—just as the husband is. No doubt about that. The woman is of the middle *bourgeois* class—you find the same lot by thousands in Quebec—but there’s a good deal of the aristocrat about him. Those long delicate hands, for instance; the small ears and a certain distinction about his features. I shouldn’t be surprised if he were extremely well connected.”

“Have you made any inquiries?”

“No, there wasn’t any occasion, and I’ve only what Jollands told me. Why don’t you call, and come to your own conclusions?”

“Will you go with me? I’ve an idea it may be important.”

“You take it as seriously as that?”

“I wouldn’t if it were anyone but Julian. There was a look on his face on Sunday evening that I couldn’t mistake. And when the car left on Monday morning he seemed decidedly pale. I just had time to wave to him.”

“And no wonder—those boys had been up half the night. Yes, I’ll go to the Lodge if you like.”

“I’m glad. And, John, there’s another thing.”

“On the same subject?”

“Yes, though you’ll think I’m hipped on it. I’ve a strong feeling that it would be very wise to find out all we can about Danello. Couldn’t you make private inquiries—there must be some source of information—about his past and connections on the Continent? I’d like to know what he’s been doing for the last few years, who his associates are, and something about his family. His wife doesn’t matter so much.”

“I could see my solicitors,” he suggested doubtfully; “but don’t you think you’re making a mountain out of a molehill?”

“My dear, you’ve been married long enough to realize that women—every kind of women—have unexplainable instincts and impulses that seem foolish at the time, but often turn out to be quite well founded. I have one now.”

He patted her hand. “I know a man who owes a good deal to his wife’s instincts, so we’ll see what can be done. When do you want to call?”

“This afternoon?”

“Yes, I can manage it.”

“Then we might have a walk first. And, John, do remember that when a boy is really in love he’s conscious only of that one great fact and it’s apt to obliterate everything else. To be quite fair about this, we’ll have to see it through Julian’s eyes.”

“I seem to have vague recollections of something of the kind,” laughed Charters, “and, thank heaven, the fact remains. While we’re on this sentimental subject, is there anything new about Tonia—any development there?”

His wife’s face grew tender. “Poor child—I’m sorry for Tonia.”

“Sorry for her!”

“It’s the transition period, John. She’s been a big, healthy tomboy till quite lately. Now she’s becoming conscious of a thousand other things in life. Mentally she’s been more like seventeen than twenty because she’s found such a riotous pleasure simply in being alive. Life was all wine and ambrosia. She’s had her affairs, of course, as you know, but all the real feeling was on the other side. Now she’s beginning to feel for herself.”

“Rodney?” he asked in a very gentle voice.

“I can’t tell. She knows it will be someone, and the mere fact is enough to make her revolt. I can see it in her eyes. She’s the sort that will feel tremendously when the genuine thing comes along. Meantime I’m glad for many reasons that she should see a good deal of Rodney.”

“He’s the right sort—that boy.”

“I think so too; and I’ve an idea he understands the situation. I don’t think he tries to make love to her.”

“As I remember it, those who did came off second best,” smiled her husband. “Then your policy at the moment is one of masterly inactivity?”

“It seems best. Neither of them—I mean she and Julian—needs protection, in one sense; and it seems to me that the youth of to-day is very well armed—much better than in our time.”

“What about that other chap—Netley?”

“Thank goodness, there’ll always be some other chap. It’s only another safeguard. As to him, of course he has much more than Rodney ever will, and I believe Fidlow is a lovely place.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that. Tonia will be quite independent.”

“Yes, but she rather likes him. One good thing is that to me she seems much more interested. She’s so abrupt in her decisions that I shouldn’t be surprised if she settles down very peaceably.”

“There’s nothing unpeaceful here,” smiled Charters.

“I’ve discovered that. By the way, Lady Netley telephoned, inquiring if I’d be at home to-morrow.”

“Need I be on hand? I’m not in society, like you.”

“That’s one of your pet illusions—but you needn’t turn up this time.”

“Good! Then, as to Tonia and Julian, we simply stand by?”

“I think so. Where have you been all morning?”

“Had a walk about the place with Jollands—in the village, mostly.”

“Well?” she asked provocatively.

“A regular education. A thousand things to be done—none of them costly, but all meaning something to comfort and health. I’m not blaming Philip. He knew about them, right enough, but couldn’t raise money without selling land. And he couldn’t do that.”

“But it’s going to be different now,” she said sympathetically.

“As far as I can make it. What strikes me as a bit pathetic is the local acceptance of these conditions by the tenants. The pheasants are better looked after than they are. At the same time, I can see how Philip was helpless. It’s a serious thing—this burden of unprofitable property.”

“Can you make The Dene carry itself, John?”

“I hope so, with new capital and new methods. But one has to step

carefully. These country folk are very conservative. I'd like to leave the place in good shape—for Julian's sake."

His wife nodded. But who would be the next mistress of The Dene?

CHAPTER IX

THE ROSES OF DANELLO

MR. PAUL DANELLO paced the gravel walk in front of his house, head a little forward, eyes half shut, face very thoughtful, his long, flexible hands locked behind him. He maintained a very mechanical movement—so many steps forward, which brought him to the edge of the lawn—a military twist of the heel—an equal number of steps back. It was a mild afternoon, and he wore no overcoat. Presently his wife came out on the door front and looked at him inquiringly.

“Well,” she said, “what news from Hungary?”

He gave a contemptuous sniff, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“Those fools in Budapest—they have what these English call the wind-up. They suggest that operations should cease. Pah! Never have I heard of such fools.”

“But you can’t do that just now, Paul.”

“It is what I will tell them. All is going so smoothly here that at times I cannot believe it myself. It is amazing, with”—at this point he made a scornful and eloquent gesture “—with but one small tiny cloud in the sky—a female cloud. Already it evaporates.”

“That Charters girl?”

He shrugged his slim shoulders. “It is but the shadow of a cloud. She looks intelligent—yes—but what she suspects she cannot tell. So like a woman!” He shook his head, exhaled a long trail of smoke from one nostril, which was a favourite trick of his—and tossed away the cigarette. “I now make one little guess. She does not know which way to move. I caught her neatly on the point of French—which she won’t forget. Some day I’ll have that confirmed by her family. And now that Olga”—he broke off, sharply scrutinizing the Lodge windows—“exactly, where is Olga?”

“Reading in her room. Oscar is on the lookout.”

“Good! Well, now that Olga has made an impression on the future master of The Dene, can you not see that this too inquisitive demoiselle, his sister, is what the Americans call up a tree about continuing her investigations here?”

The woman nodded. “All of that seems clear; but next week—or the weeks after that—have you anything to say?”

He laughed cynically. “The chief maxim of a business such as mine is not to be over-anxious about the future. It detracts from the accuracy and, shall we

say, the daintiness of one's work. The present should occupy one quite fully, provided plans are carefully laid—as in our case. As to the rest that follows, a quick brain will take care of that. Mon Dieu, let us be thankful that these beef-fed English are so slow. Could they make a good sauce, I would be anxious.”

“Let us hope they will remain so. You say things go well in Buda?”

He lifted both hands. “Twenty million francs at one coup—if that is going well! Everyone is guessing—which is equally important. The whole affair is stupendous. In three months I shall retire with the world at my feet.”

He glanced at her triumphantly, but she only shook her head slowly and looked very serious.

“Paul, I'm frightened. Yes—I admit it—frightened for the first time since we came here.”

“The sun shines—we make money—why be frightened?”

“I don't know—but it's true. We women feel that way sometimes—and without any special reason; but we're often right. Can't you be content with what you have?”

“Marie, I have a discontent.”

“You often say that—but what use can you have for more money?”

“Use!” He laughed in her face. “What use is there for anything in this world except to give one power? It is power that I seek—the one kind that is recognized the earth over. In three more months—in that time you will say to me, ‘Paul, I was foolish and you were right.’ Till then we are as safe as”—he hesitated, smiling, then pointed to the square, ivy-grown tower of Charterden Church—“as safe as that edifice, and much more alive.”

“But is it not that people wake out of sleep sometimes?” she asked dubiously.

“Not in this so drowsy and respectable corner of Kent. Why is it”—here he laughed softly—“why is it always the most respectable ones who are most sleepy? And how unconscious do these English become at night!”

“There was one who did not,” she murmured uncomfortably.

“Ah, yes, that is true.” His voice was calm and reflective. “But there was, unfortunately, no alternative. I regret it; but one cannot always avoid such things—otherwise where would be my share of the twenty million?”

She glanced at him with a sort of lurking fear. “And the son of this new family—what do you make of him?”

He made a little purring sound in his throat. “Marie, you are not as quick as you were. Think for a moment! Mr. Julian makes love to my niece in the dark, also he desires to discover what it is not meant he should discover. He has therefore a sore head. With that sore head comes also the knowledge that too much curiosity on his part will be awkward for the girl he admires. I foresaw most of this, but not the rendezvous on Sunday night, though, as it happens, we

profit there. So both this youth and his sister have, as the English say, spokes in their wheels."

"Perhaps," she said uncertainly. "I would like to believe that."

Danello pulled on his gardening gloves. "In my business the bold policy is the only one. That is why I accepted the too kind invitation to Olga for dinner. I hope she will dine there very often. And I can assure you that what you call my influence over the girl remains unbroken. Now to my roses! What a day for cultivating the best thing in this most chilly island!"

"You and your roses, Paul! One might think there was nothing else in the world."

"Marie, when you can suggest something more attractive than money and roses it will have my serious attention. So, now——" He glanced up the drive, his expression changing swiftly. "Là-là! Here are visitors," he added in a whisper. "Remember that Olga is not very well to-day." He advanced toward Mrs. Charters. "Ah, madam, what a pleasure! But you catch us unprepared. Observe my disreputable clothes!"

"It's a most informal visit," she smiled. "We were so glad to have your niece on Saturday. How is she?"

Mrs. Danello made a gesture. "Not so well to-day, and will be sorry not to see you. As you know, she is not strong."

"A matter of nerves," interjected Danello, "which we hope will pass with time. Your son has doubtless returned to Oxford?"

"Yes, with Mr. Bethune. They will both be here for Christmas—when your niece must make the *parti carré*."

"How delightful for her. Your coming has introduced a new angle to life at the Lodge. Mr. Charters, you were most kind about that little parcel to Paris." He paused, looking smilingly into the air. "If I am ever a rich man I shall travel by the higher route."

Charters laughed. "It's rather interesting when you get up, but not exciting. I had an excellent view of your place. My daughter thinks that some day she'd like to have her private landing-ground here."

"Perhaps that will be—shall we say?—next year."

"Are you leaving then?" asked Mrs. Charters, surprised.

"I rather think so—in which case I shall ask your husband's permission to—what you call it—yes—sublet the Lodge."

"I'm sorry; that would break up the *parti carré*," she said, wanting, but not trusting herself, to catch Charters' eye.

"Ah, madam, we business men are but the creatures of our business—till we retire—and sometimes even after that. It may be that I shall give up my business—if certain transactions are shortly complete. I note that madam speaks my language."

“Yes, it’s very useful in Canada.”

“And your young people doubtless?”

She nodded. “Tonia best of all—like a native. She does most of her reading in French.”

“Capital!” he smiled approvingly. “Modern languages are most important.”

“I expect you’re a linguist yourself.”

“I speak six,” he said contentedly. “A useful thing for international finance.”

“How wonderful! And Olga?”

“French, of course; Italian, and a smattering of Hungarian. By the way, Mr. Charters, I go to Paris for a day or two next week. Can I in turn be of any service? I confess,” he added with an odd smile, “to being an excellent amateur smuggler.”

“I think not, thank you. We’ll probably take a run over ourselves after Christmas. And, while I think of it, are you quite comfortable at the Lodge?”

“It is, of course, at times a little chilly without the central heat, but otherwise there is everything.”

“The reason I ask is that in many ways I find a good deal to be done to the houses on the estate, so my agent is making a tour of inspection—a quite thorough one—and reporting on their physical condition. Would you have any objection to his going over the Lodge for that purpose?”

Danello’s brows lifted a shade. “But how thoughtful! And may one say a great change? No, I assure you, nothing is needed, and the place is in excellent repair. Our wants are very simple, eh, Marie?”

“We have absolutely everything,” she said hastily.

“Then, with all acknowledgment of your kindness, I suggest that the matter be left for three months. My plans will be settled by then.”

“Right!” said Charters.

“Tea, Marie—what about tea? We are in England, you know. Meantime, may I show my visitors my roses?”

“So much better than ours!” exclaimed Mrs. Charters admiringly. “And how late they flower.”

“Ah, yes, that is a matter of careful cutting back, also a treatment of the soil. You will accept a few Gloire de Dijon?”

He talked away, an admirable host, clipping neatly as he talked. Presently he handed her a bunch of surviving blooms, and turned to Charters with an apologetic gesture. “That dog of your keeper’s—how unfortunate!”

“What happened? We came upon Hammond in the middle of the night beside the body of the poor brute. It was rather bloodcurdling and dramatic.”

“My man, Oscar, was only partly at fault, as I explained at once when I knew. He had kept his slight injury from me; then I wrote to you on the instant.

One cannot be too prompt about such things. He was trespassing—as I admitted—but men like him do not really understand the English rules of trespass. He comes from the hills behind Budapest, and speaks no English. It seems that he was walking, smoking, on your avenue when the dog leaped at him. In the habit of his people, he drew his knife to defend himself, and perhaps under such circumstances men like him become themselves a little wild. However, I have sent Hammond my cheque for five pounds. Would you consider that enough?”

“Quite. It wasn’t, I believe, a very valuable dog. By the way, that other affair in the avenue three years ago was rather near you for comfort, wasn’t it?”

Danello nodded gravely. “Imagine our astonishment!”

“If I believed in the supernatural—which I don’t,” hazarded Charters, “I’d assume that the same agency affected both the dog and poor Cramp.”

Danello put his head a little on one side and looked very amused. “The same agency—pardon me—but I do not understand.”

“I mean if the place were haunted—which is ridiculous. Of course, Jollands has told me about the Cramp matter.”

“Ah, yes! Was it not tragic—and so mysterious? Does it happen that Jollands has learned anything more of it since?”

“Not a word—not a whisper. I thought it better to tell him to say nothing about it to my young people.”

“Exactly.” Danello gave an approving nod. “Nor have I said anything to Olga—it might work on her imagination. And here is Oscar—which means that tea is ready. Such a lonely soul is Oscar. He will be glad to get back to his own country.”

Charters turned. The man, dark-eyed, heavy-shouldered, made an awkward bow and motioned toward the house. It struck Charters that he might be an ugly customer to meet in the dark.

* * * * *

“Be sure and tell your niece that we hope to see her as soon as she feels better,” said Mrs. Charters at the gate of the Lodge half an hour later. “And thanks so much for your roses.”

Danello smiled, promised, bowed his good-bye and returned to his house. His wife regarded him with unconcealed admiration.

“Paul—I must say it—but you are rather wonderful.”

“I thank you—yes, some more tea, with lemon. What astonishing mixtures these English drink! No, there was nothing wonderful. It simply illustrates the value of a garden when properly used. You no doubt observed that the good lady came here full of curiosity, and determined to find something for herself. You will also have noticed how much she found. She is without doubt

concerned for the sentimental future of her son. And those roses, by the way, were not Gloire de Dijon but Lady Fortescue. She did not know the difference. The Gloires are long over.”

“But what her husband said about inspecting this house! What a surprise—and how well you took it!”

He laughed. “In three months they may inspect as much as they please. Is Olga coming down?”

“No; she says she does not want tea.”

“Is she, then, a little angry with me? The young man passed here in good health at 7.30 on Monday morning. Oscar made sure of that.”

His wife gave a negative gesture and did not answer. By nature a hard woman, she had, by long association with Danello, become his creature. In years past the life she led with him was a chequered one. Brilliant, persuasive, fascinating when he desired to be fascinating, of extraordinary will when he chose to exercise it, he lacked, nevertheless, the saving grace of honesty. He loved that which involved risk, ached for the unattainable, and found his chief pleasure in deluding those who considered themselves wiser than himself.

And he was now daring more greatly than ever before. His wife knew this, and feared accordingly; while for Olga, during these past few days she felt the stirring of a feeling both new and strange. The contemplation of beauty in distress had begun to touch her heart. But, knowing what she knew, one false step meant ruin for them all.

“Paul,” she said, in a queer voice, “I want you to be more kind to Olga.”

He sipped his tea, looking faintly surprised. “Since when am I unkind? And if you refer to Sunday night, what if Oscar had not carried out my orders? The boy would have followed her.”

“It is not only that the girl is in love, but also she fears greatly for her brother. All she knows is that he is somewhere at the other end.”

Danello made a grimace. “In love! A most demoralizing thing, this love.”

“You never felt it yourself,” she said, in the manner of one who conceals a lurking resentment. “Therefore you know nothing about it.”

“Perhaps that is so, but I have been far better occupied. Wait, however, for three months.”

“Were you always cold—even before I met you?”

“I could not afford this thing you call love. To fall into it would for me have been a disaster. But presently you shall see a new Paul, playing like a boy. Now I go to visit my charming niece.”

He went upstairs, humming softly to himself, and rapped at Olga’s door. She was sitting by the fire, a book on her lap.

“Ah, my dear, will you not come out in the garden? The air is mild.”

“No, thank you,” she said in a low voice.

“I bring you Mrs. Charters’ good wishes, and the hope of seeing you soon.”

“What do you really mean?” she flared out suddenly. “Why do you speak like that?”

He made no answer, showed no surprise, but did a curious thing. Sitting down close beside her, he leaned a little forward and bent on her a stare of extraordinary intensity. It was not menacing—or insolent—or even unkind—but seemed rather as though his whole intelligence and will were concentrated in his fixed eyes, the pupils of which had contracted to mere pinpoints.

He remained thus, quite motionless for perhaps thirty seconds, while she, as if this were the repetition of some familiar and dreaded ritual, shrank back, unable to unleash herself from his burning gaze.

Then, as she cowered, anticipating her own dull acquiescence in whatever he cared to say or command, she became secretly aware of a subtle but profound difference. It seemed that this time there was in her that which enabled her to offer some kind of resistance. One part of her, the external, physical part, the flesh-and-blood Olga, still feared him; but the rest of her, the spirit, will and intelligence, was casting out fear. Nerves and muscles she could not control, but brain and consciousness now for the very first time accepted the challenge.

This set up such a mingling of emotions, such wonder and relief, that she found herself unable to utter a word. She had discovered some other and unassailable Olga, another self beyond this man’s reach. And, in a flash, she saw that he must never guess that.

“Olga,” he said, in a dead level tone.

“Yes, what is it you wish?”

“I will tell you shortly. You know that I know about young Charters?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he is not really hurt. It was foolish of you to disobey my orders and go out at night, especially to go where you did.”

“I see that now,” she said with complete docility.

“So it must not happen again—or the end may be more serious.”

“Like the dog’s?” Her voice was a mere whisper.

He nodded. “Yes, and I would be very sorry. To avoid it will be simple. You will go to The Dene as often as you are asked. Do you understand that?”

“I understand.”

“You will talk about everything except myself and this house. Is that clear?”

“Quite clear.”

“In three months you will be quite free, also your brother. I will set him up in a business of his own, and will give you a dowry to marry the young man

Constantine. He will join us in Buda.”

A sudden revulsion took her, and it required all her control to master the antipathy she actually felt; but it would be doubly fatal should Danello get the least glimpse of the truth that was so close beside him.

“Must I marry Constantine?” she said faintly.

“It is already arranged, and your dowry”—here he paused impressively—“will be one million francs. Constantine knows that.” He could not conceal a touch of pride at the sound of his own words, but immediately became his former dominant self. “You—will—marry—Constantine,” he repeated in a strangely metallic tone.

She gave a hopeless little sigh that demanded all her art, and thrilled to note his look of satisfaction.

“Then you will take care of Raphael?”

“I have said it, also promised your aunt. Raphael will be a rich man after three more months of simple work. Then you will both be free.”

“Where is Raphael?”

“At the other end. That is enough for you at the present. You understand that if you are foolish, he will spend the rest of his life on bread and water?”

“Oh, not that!” she murmured.

For answer Danello only fixed his steely eyes on her again. Presently she sank back, her own lids drooping, and seemed asleep. He got up, stood for a moment looking down at her, then gave an indescribable shrug and went out, closing the door very softly. In the lower hall he met his wife.

“You have not scolded her again?” she demanded, an odd frown on her broad face.

“On the contrary, I have promised her a million francs if she will be good for three months. She is dreaming of them now.”

He laughed and passed on into the garden, humming in a light tenor:

“Ernestine, Ernestine,
Tu t’obstines, et t’as tort.”

But Olga—Olga was standing, shaking with excitement, her eyes like stars, a song of hope in her throbbing breast. The new god who had come into her life was laughing at Danello and his powers. She loved, therefore she feared not any more, and Danello was faced with something stronger than himself.

CHAPTER X

THE EXPLORATIONS OF LADY NETLEY

CERTAIN people when they arrive at the intermediate stage of life lying between, say, forty-five and sixty, fail to realize that they have lost the peculiar charm of youth and not yet achieved the dignity of old age. They are then apt to be peremptory, fail to make legitimate excuses for others, and are, in short, what may be called difficult.

Something of this was in young Netley's mind as he listened to a diatribe from his mother on his early failings and the blue outlook for his future.

"And, Bruce," she concluded, "you'll have to admit that I've done everything in my power."

He nodded, because she had, though at times it had been a bit too obvious, and at other times misplaced. But she had lived for him, and in the hope of seeing him set Fidlow on its feet again. Now that seemed rather remote. It weighed heavily on her mind while she recalled a half-dozen or so really nice girls who had spent week-ends at Fidlow during the past year or so. And Bruce hadn't turned a hair.

Of late the pressure had increased. Fidlow had been left to her for her lifetime by the late Sir Stephen, and rents were down while taxes were up. Like Philip Charters, she hated to sell, though in her case she had the authority. So, in the main, conditions at Fidlow were much the same as they had been at The Dene before the arrival of John Charters. And, she reflected, she knew of several other places in the same case.

"So that now you know the real state of affairs, what are you going to do about it?" resumed his mother. "You don't seem to like English girls, and while I don't care for the idea of a Colonial in the family, still, as far as I can see, you might do much worse."

Bruce sent her an odd look. He had, to his own great surprise, been impressed by Tonia, and this last remark roused in him a curious and unexpected sense of loyalty to the "Colonial." It was a quick turn for him, and he didn't understand it in the least, but, rather than betray a vestige of what he felt, he adopted the usual attitude of indifference. Queer to be thus affected by one who made not the slightest effort.

"I don't fancy being pushed into anything at the moment," he said coolly. "You take it for granted that the thing is feasible in any case."

Lady Netley sniffed. "I can hardly imagine the Charters not being pleased

with the idea.”

Something about this remark had an unusual result, because it made the young man for the very first time in his life ask himself why the Charters—or any other family for that matter—should be pleased. He was heir to Fidlow—and its embarrassments, but what more could one really say?

At the tail end of the war he had been old enough to go to France, take a place in the rear of the big push, and come back with a service medal. Beyond that he had shot innumerable pheasants, seen the death of many a fox—and this was about all. Looking back at it, there wasn’t so much to his credit.

At the same time, this was not the kind of argument he cared to put forward at the moment. Self-depreciation was a trifle superfluous for anyone in close association with his mother.

“I think I’ll call at once,” she said with the characteristic tap-tap of her balanced pencil. “There’s something rather attractive about the two young Charters having places close to each other.”

He gave a chuckle. “Doesn’t it occur that you may be reckoning without your host?”

“What do you mean, Bruce?”

“Well,” he drawled, “you haven’t seen that girl yet—and I have.”

* * * * *

“Lady Netley, madam, in the drawing-room,” announced Manders in his most episcopal tone at the door of Mrs. Charters’ boudoir next afternoon.

She made a little face at her husband. “The social inspection has begun at last. Do come in for tea.”

He promised, and she descended, wondering what her visitor was really like. Lady Netley, whose observant eyes had been very wide open, and was also wondering, rose and extended a hand.

“It’s good of you to see me when you must be frightfully busy.”

“It’s very kind of you to come, and I think the worst is over by now.”

“Well, I can realize what you must have found to do. As to Charterden, I came through the village and saw signs of change there already.”

“Yes, my husband is very interested. You are about three miles from us, aren’t you?”

“In the Maidstone direction. It just occurs to me that this is the first time I’ve been in this house for three years. My husband only knew Mr. Philip Charters very slightly. Your branch has been in Canada for a long time, I hear?”

“About a hundred years, and when the news came to us about The Dene it was the greatest surprise. At first I wasn’t sure that we would leave Canada. I think we really decided on account of the young people.”

“I’m glad you did decide, and it will be a capital thing for the property.

New blood, you know.” Lady Netley put on her most ingratiating smile. “It would be an excellent idea if most old families like ours had some kind of Colonial infusion every now and then. By the way, my son tells me that your daughter rides extremely well. Really most important in a county like Kent.”

“That was very kind of you and she enjoyed herself so much.”

“Really, it was nothing. Now that they know each other, I hope they’ll do it often. One is only young for a while, and of course we can’t be very sure of the hunting with this foot-and-mouth going about.”

“I suppose so.” Mrs. Charters wondered what on earth she meant. “We haven’t had time to get Tonia a horse yet.”

“She can always use the mare—good exercise for them both.”

Mrs. Charters expressed further thanks, and just then Tonia’s voice was audible in the hall.

“Whose car is that outside, Manders?”

The reply was inaudible, and, apprehensive of any further developments being overheard, Tonia’s mother moved to the door rather quickly. “Come in, dear, and see Lady Netley.” This was accompanied by a glance that was warning enough. Tonia wrinkled her nose and obeyed.

“How do you do? It was awfully good of you to lend me that mare. She travelled like a blue streak.”

Lady Netley smiled indulgently. The simile was new to her, but obviously complimentary. She was in the habit of making quick appraisals of those she met, missed nothing of this girl’s abruptness, and began to see what Bruce meant by his last remark.

“I’m glad you liked her, but Bruce says you came home far too early. They had a splendid run after you left.”

“Didn’t he say anything else?”

“Just that you rode extremely well and very straight. He was surprised, considering you’d never hunted before.”

“I think the reason he was surprised was because I tried a jump I shouldn’t have tried, and might have lamed the mare. I didn’t know what was on the other side of the hedge. He was vexed, and I suppose he was right.”

Lady Netley, who had also been vexed, only laughed. “For your satisfaction, the mare was never better, so use her as much as you like.”

“Thanks—it’s awfully good of you.”

“Not at all—and my son enjoyed his shoot here too. I assume”—here she turned to Mrs. Charters—“that your husband has definitely retired from business?”

“I hoped he had, but since reaching here he seems to be busier than ever. There’s a great deal to be done—far more than we could have imagined.”

“Yes, but with so much Socialism in the county it rather takes away the

satisfaction, doesn't it? The reports I get of the talk that goes on are simply dreadful. Pure Bolshevism!"

Mrs. Charters felt uncertain on that point. Her conclusion from what she had seen of the conditions in some of the Charterden cottages was that they might well be beds of revolt. But that idea would find no acceptance from Lady Netley.

"There's a great deal to be learned," she said gently. "My husband has offered to send several men to good positions in Canada, but they find it too hard to pull up roots here. I can sympathize with that."

Lady Netley sniffed. "Perhaps, but one has to be very careful not to spoil people in this part of the world. I suppose you've met very few of your neighbours as yet?"

"Only the Danellos—who are tenants on the estate."

"Ah—in the Lodge—the Whispering Lodge, isn't it called?"

"I believe so."

"Of course, you heard about that dreadful murder three years ago and just close to their house?"

Mrs. Charters, trying to look indifferent, was aware that Tonia seemed in no way surprised. "Fortunately, that's behind us," she said hastily. "And really this strikes us all as a most peaceful spot."

"Do you know why they call it 'Whispering' Lodge?" asked Tonia suddenly, in her husky voice. "I heard about the murder soon after we got here, but that doesn't explain the name."

"Well, some say there's something about the position of the house with regard to that part of the avenue. Of course, it's at the top of a long, gentle slope, and when there's nothing stirring anywhere else a breath of wind is said to collect in those big elms, making a queer kind of murmur. That's one explanation. The other is that the Lodge itself—the very house, I mean—is whispering the truth about the murder, and no one can understand.

"That's ridiculous enough, you'll think. But the queer fact is that I had a scientist at dinner last week who maintains that houses—old ones—do acquire some kind of mysterious voice of their own, or, if not a voice, then some way of expressing themselves. He called it 'the pulsations of the inanimate,' but I call it perfect rubbish. Do tell me, who are the Danellos? I hear they've a perfectly lovely niece who's kept locked up in the cellar."

Mrs. Charters smiled. "I haven't noticed any pulsations in The Dene, thank heaven, though there are a few creaky floors; and the Danellos' niece—no—she's not kept in the cellar, but dined here last week. An unusually beautiful girl, and not very strong."

Lady Netley was obviously surprised, but Manders' arrival with the teatray, followed by Charters a moment later, changed the conversation. The

visitor studied her host for a moment, then wagged a reproving finger.

“I hear you’ve already begun to spoil your tenants, Mr. Charters.”

“I hope not. A little very simple comfort won’t do them any harm.”

“You’re a new-comer, and I’ve lived at Fidlow for thirty years, so you won’t mind if I say something?”

“Please,” he assured her.

“It’s to warn you against expecting any real gratitude. People are too suspicious for that nowadays. They’ll take all you give them, criticize it, and wonder what’s your reason for doing it.”

Charters shook his head good-naturedly. To him, considering what he had learned during the last few weeks, it was quite understandable why they should be suspicious; and he neither expected nor wanted any show of gratitude. Glancing at his visitor’s hard face and tight, squirrel mouth, he perceived her to be the sort who would never have anything in common with what he felt and hoped.

“I believe that, in the main, human nature is perfectly sound,” he said with quiet sincerity. “My past experience is that you get from it pretty much what you credit it with—in other words, you take out just what you put in. As for the mass of the English population, from my angle it’s made of splendid stuff. Is that too like a homily?” he added with a little laugh.

“It sounds very fine, and I’m sure I hope it will work. Of course, you come from a country where all things are possible, don’t you? They aren’t here, and experiments are frightfully expensive.”

“I’m beginning to find that,” he admitted ruefully. “Were you speaking of the Danellos just now?”

“Yes, and your wife tells me they don’t keep that girl in the cellar after all. That’s the village talk as my maid gets it.”

“She showed no signs of it when she was here.”

“I suppose you haven’t solved the mystery about him, too?”

“We didn’t know there was one.”

“Well, no doubt it’s more talk, but people say that he makes midnight trips in an aeroplane to goodness knows where, and that he has escaped from justice from some southern country in Europe.”

Charters laughed. “If he travelled by air, we’d certainly know it, especially on a quiet night; and as for the escape, he has two Hungarian servants. They came here with him. No—as a matter of fact, he’s a private banker with offices in London and Paris.”

“Also he’s an authority on roses,” put in Mrs. Charters. “We called there yesterday, and he gave me some Gloire de Dijon that still bloomed. One doesn’t see such roses in Canada.”

Lady Netley fingered her gloves. “Dear me! It all sounds quite ordinary

after so much gossip: I hope you'll come and dine with us soon—say some day next week—and I'll let this young lady know about the next meet."

Mrs. Charters murmured her thanks, and the visitor departed in the runabout she always drove herself. Her eyes were very thoughtful. As to Charters, she felt a little resentful, because—though no doubt with the best intentions—he was doing things others could not afford to do. This would only raise expectations elsewhere that would not be gratified. That was the worst of new-comers—too apt to make experiments and upset the established order of things.

Rich! Quite obviously he was rich. One felt that immediately one entered The Dene, apart from what was going on in the village. But one wanted to know how rich—and where his financial interests were. Money came easily and was apt to go quickly in America. So that would need looking into, and she thought she knew her way.

As to Tonia, the old lady felt a slight difficulty, or, rather, she foresaw the possibility of one. For a Colonial, the girl was really most presentable, and from that angle Bruce might do much worse. But there arose a faint question as to whether, with her characteristics, her abruptness and definite manner, she would readily fall in with the plans of those who were wiser and older. But that could wait. The thing to be established first was the real financial standing of John Charters.

Such were her thoughts. Meantime the master of The Dene, after watching the runabout out of sight, had returned to the drawing-room, his eyes atwinkle.

"Well, my dear, what do you make of it?"

"She seems sceptical about village improvements, John."

"I can imagine she's rather sceptical about a good many things. She strikes me as an anxious woman. A widow, isn't she?"

"Yes, and really she wants to be kind. How do you like her, Tonia?"

"I'd hate to say, mother. She's exploring—that's all."

"What do you mean, child?"

Tonia hesitated. "What I mean wouldn't sound very well, and I don't believe you'll like her either by and by."

"Aren't you a bit premature?" asked her father.

"Well, mother asked me, and I had to come out with it. Are you going to dine there?"

"Of course, when we're asked. Why not?"

"Then need I come?"

"It's really on your account that we're invited," expostulated Mrs. Charters.

"Which is exactly what I'm driving at," said the girl sombrely. "Don't you see?"

Tonia pushed through some bushes at the edge of a spinney, rubbed her muddy shoes against a tussock of grass, chose a sunny spot that was sheltered from the wind, and curled herself up in a dry corner for what she called a spell of solid thought.

There was a good deal to think about, and her mind had been very occupied since Lady Netley's visit three days previously. The figure of Danello was presenting itself with compelling vividness, it being now clear that he was regarded by his neighbours with a suspicion that was in no way allayed by the calm of the last three years. Further, it was evident that others besides herself had observed the mysterious machine and even seen it land.

There was also the problem of Olga. Lady Netley's talk, haphazard though it might be, was nevertheless very suggestive, and the riddle was only deepened by the girl's recent emergence from seclusion. To determine what Olga must know—to understand why her restrictions were so suddenly loosed—that seemed to be pressingly important.

Against it was Julian's earnest request that nothing further be attempted before his return, lest Olga herself be imperilled. Quite understandable, admitted Tonia, from his angle, but not so easy when one felt convinced that whatever was going on in the Whispering Lodge was drawing swiftly to some breathless conclusion.

This certainty, as real as it was unexplainable, made the girl intensely restless. She felt in her soul the Lodge did have a voice, that it did whisper. Now she visioned it suddenly empty—the birds flown—Olga with them—and the baffling question for ever unsolved. And what would Julian say to that when he returned? There remained ten more days before that return—in which anything might happen.

With this quandary confronting her, she observed Hammond emerging from a covert a hundred yards off, a rat-tailed pointer at his heels. She watched him for a moment, then stood up, waved a hand and walked toward him.

"Hammond, I want to talk to you a minute. Awfully busy?"

"Nothing more than ordinary, miss. Been having a look at they birds. There's too many cocks yet. Hope they'll get a bit of a thinning when the young gentlemen come back."

"I've no doubt they will. What dog is that?"

"Picked him up last week, miss. He's fair, but nothing like old Bob."

"Did Mr. Danello pay you for Bob?"

"Sent me a fiver, which was more'n he were worth, but I'd a sight sooner have him back."

"You never quite got to the bottom of that, did you?"

The keeper looked at her soberly. "I don't reckon as I ever will, as things

goes.”

“Hammond!” she said abruptly.

“Yes, miss?”

“Just for a few minutes I want you to reckon a whole lot of other things. For instance, that I know as much about the Cramp matter as anyone seems to know—and that Mr. Danello or one of his men is believed to be mixed up in it. Also that he’s said to make trips by air in a mystery machine that lands every now and then in front of the Lodge. I’ve seen that machine myself. It came over the Lodge at night and must have got some kind of signal not to land, because it went off in the direction of Dover. A queer thing about it was that it didn’t make a sound from the engine. I didn’t know there could be such a machine.”

Hammond gaped at her. “Well, miss, since you——”

“I haven’t nearly finished yet. About your dog—I believe the reason he got killed was that he’d discovered something behind the Lodge that Mr. Danello couldn’t afford to have known. It was probably the same with Cramp. Also it’s rumoured that Mr. Danello is a fugitive from justice somewhere on the Continent. Also that my father has heard a good deal, but doesn’t say a word to me because he thinks it might upset my nerves. No doubt he’s told you that already. Has he?”

The keeper reddened. “ ’Twas Mr. Jollands spoke to me, miss.”

“Then father told him to. Now, here’s something you don’t know. Mr. Danello suspects me, and has actually warned me against being too inquisitive about his affairs. And there’s something else—very important—that I can’t say a word about.

“Now, after all this, if I tell you that I’m determined to carry on and learn all I can, would you be inclined to help me in any way you could, and without discussing the matter with anyone else? I’d feel—well, a good deal safer than I do at the moment.

“It’s just for the next ten days or so. Of course, I know perfectly well that you could now go straight to my father and tell him that I need watching, but I don’t fancy you’d do that, would you?”

There followed a considerable silence, and Hammond’s red face twisted itself into a series of peculiar shapes. He was very surprised and obviously equally impressed. One could see him begin to oscillate between Jollands’ instructions and the entirely new viewpoint now put before him.

Tonia stood quite still, regarding him with a look both determined and provocative, so determined, in fact, that he realized that whatever he himself might decide, her own mind was made up.

“I’d hate to have my dog killed in cold blood and pretend that five pounds put me back where I was before,” she said.

Hammond's jaw protruded a trifle. This touched him very closely, and he had visions of Bob's faithful brown eyes, and felt again the moist, cool muzzle pushed into the slack of his hand. And Bob was killed in cold blood. No doubt of that. The cheque, still uncashed, began to burn in his pocket, and beneath that he felt the hotter glow of the sudden fires of resentment. Then caution asserted itself.

"I've a good job with your father, miss," he said slowly, "and he treats us all as we've never been treated before. I wouldn't like to risk——"

"Don't worry about that, Hammond. The job won't be affected one way or the other; you can take my word for it. And you may do a very great service—really, you may."

He twisted his heel into the moist earth. "What might you be wanting, miss, to start with?"

"Have you noticed anything during the last few days?"

He paused thoughtfully. "I ain't seen nothing queer. There's only what Buckitt told me."

"In the shop?"

"Yes, miss. Mr. Danello come in there two days ago making a proper fuss about some red lantern globes he wanted. Seems they'd sent him green ones, an' he gets in a regular passion, because he was wanting them for to-day sure."

"What happened then?" she demanded tensely.

"Buckitt, he promised to have 'em sent special from Maidstone and deliver 'em at the Lodge this morning. So I reckon they're there now. Putting one thing with another, miss, you'll know what they're likely for."

"Signals!" she breathed.

The keeper nodded. "That's in my mind."

"And they may be used to-night?"

"Seems likely enough, miss."

"Well, Hammond, you and I are going to keep watch—that's all there is about it. I'm not afraid to be alone, but——"

"Don't you think of it, miss!" he put in hastily.

"All right, I won't; but where should we wait? It depends a good deal on the wind, doesn't it?"

"Won't be a stir of wind to-night," said Hammond, glancing heavenward.

"Then if the machine does come one would assume it'll land as near the Lodge as possible—or—or"—she knitted her straight brows and began to frown—"but we can't be sure of that either."

"Why not, miss?"

"Well, just think. It would be awfully risky to use the same landing-ground every time, so why not take any big pasture field near here? That could be easily arranged beforehand and the machine met."

“Best we can do is to watch round here first,” ruminated the keeper. “It’s a matter of three hundred yards between the Lodge and the nearest spinney on Lodge ground, an’ there’s a blind ditch running out from the spinney toward the house. If you didn’t mind crawling along that we might be close to hand. It’s the best place, an’ the ground’s lumpy farther south.”

“Hammond, you’re a trump, and I’d crawl through a drain-pipe if you said so. But where and when do we meet?”

He sent her a smile, half-shamefaced, half-admiring. “For you to say, miss, seeing as I don’t exactly know when——”

“When I can get out? Well, say at eleven o’clock at the end of the rhododendrons farthest from the house. Sounds just as though you were courting me, doesn’t it?” she added, with a sudden laugh.

He turned a brick-red. “Begging your pardon, miss, if I was it would be eight o’clock, not eleven—which is full late for these parts.”

“I stand corrected. Any suggestions?”

“Old clothes, please, miss; not them you have on now.”

“I’ll be simply disreputable. And, Hammond——”

“Yes, miss?”

“Why don’t you look more excited?”

He grinned broadly this time. “To tell the truth, miss, I don’t exactly know as that ditch is quite dry.”

* * * * *

“DEAR OLD TONIA,—

“I’ve done a lot of thinking since last Sunday, and expect you have, too. I’ve been trying to get the thing in a clearer light, but it’s all horribly confusing. Have you seen her—and how does she look? Not anxious, I hope. There are special reasons for asking.

“What I fear most is that Danello may take it into his head to make some sudden move, and she may find herself helpless and not able to communicate. I don’t know if you can get in touch with her, but wish you would try at once. If you do, tell her that I’m feeling first-rate. There are reasons for that, too.

“If you do go to the Lodge, go in broad daylight. I know it’s not safe to prowl about at night. I’d come back to-day—now—this minute, only it would mix things up and rouse suspicions at home. I don’t suppose they know anything about my end of it, but if they do say they’ve noticed something, just laugh it off. If you manage to see her, send me a wire just saying ‘Well.’ It would help me a lot. If when I come back it seems that she’s in any kind of danger, I’m going to put the whole thing to father.

“One thing more—about Rodney. You know he’s most awfully fond of you, though he never mentions it. I’m satisfied he never thinks of any other girl. I’ve got an idea that somehow you’ve hurt him—though you couldn’t have meant it. I know it doesn’t help anyone with you to repeat what I think of them, but I wish you knew what other men here think of Rodney. That might surprise you.

“So when we come down, try to remember that beneath that cheery manner of his he’s really awfully sensitive where you’re concerned.

“And don’t forget that wire. It will make all the difference to me.

“JULE.”

Tonia captured this letter from the postman on his way up the avenue, read it the second time, glanced at her watch and turned deliberately in the direction of the Whispering Lodge. Her lips were rather compressed, her brown eyes very reflective. Whether or not she was successful in seeing Olga made no difference to the night’s programme, but, if she could, she wanted to help her brother.

She wished, however, that he had said nothing about Rodney. Of late she was trying to think of Rodney as a sort of ally, instead of a would-be lover. But she didn’t quite manage it, and secretly admitted that it would be rather dull not to have some man vividly conscious of herself.

As between Rodney and Bruce Netley, whose intentions—or whose mother’s intentions—seemed very obvious, there was in her mind no comparison, and Rodney came nearer than anyone else. Queer to feel this way about a man who had calmly told her that there was no escape from him!

But how had she hurt him? She tried to put this aside as a bit of Julian’s imagination, but the thing came persistently back at her. Presently, with a vague surprise, she discovered that it worried her.

Hadn’t she been fair? The possibility of it rather shocked her, because fairness in herself and others was the supreme thing—almost the breath of life. Where was she unfair? There crept into her mind what he had said that night in London about fighting herself. Could that be unfair to him?

Slowly it began to seem that perhaps it might—that she was beating down something that he had recognized before she did—some odd provision or prearrangement of nature or destiny, in virtue of which she was meant for him and he for her.

Could such a thing be true—and, if true, how could he have seen it? Had he the quality of love that enabled him to understand her better than she did herself? At this she gave a smothered exclamation and felt the blood mounting to her cheeks.

CHAPTER XI

TONIA IN ACTION

IN THE isolation of the Whispering Lodge, life had taken on a new colour for Olga since her last interview with Danello.

Outwardly existence was the same, a pliant obedience on her part, a mute acceptance of the regime that had dominated her for years past. Danello, with no reason to suspect that his hypnotic control was in any way weakened, treated her as he always had with a curious mixture of patronage and the sort of casual complaisance one extends to a child.

His wife, however, though she gave no sign of it, was conscious that a certain romance now attached to the girl. This seemed to give Olga a significance, a right to recognition that did not exist before, and the woman found herself thinking of it very often.

In her own life there had been so little romance. Danello discovered his in his venture, while his ecstasies were reserved for his flowers. Queer, she thought, that a man of so sensitive a nature, so susceptible to the beauty of a garden, could at the same time be so cool-blooded where humanity was concerned.

What his wife now desired with all her heart was that the business in the Whispering Lodge should be wound up as quickly as possible, and the free air of liberty be breathed again. But that lay entirely with Danello.

Olga's discovery of her own mental liberation brought with it a new difficulty as well as a new joy. Raphael! She loved Raphael with all her soul. This brother, two years older than herself, was also under Danello's thumb.

As Danello put it—Raphael was busy at the other end, and, concluded Olga, probably under another name. Danello was using him to the limit—as he used everyone; and, inevitably, there were in existence at the Lodge clues which would involve Raphael.

As matters stood, it was imperative first to find Raphael, then to warn him.

Her mind fastened helplessly on this. She could not find him! She pictured him with, perhaps, no full conception of what he was doing, yet involving himself more and more deeply. As a boy he was always too trusting, and refusing to believe that others were less straight than himself.

She was recalling those days when they went to school together in Avignon, and suddenly felt convinced that instead of an accomplice Raphael was only a dupe. She caught her breath at that. Supposing Danello were using

him without disclosing the purpose? Quite possible in the case of a naturally guileless youth.

Raphael, for instance, was nothing like Constantine, who had come to the Lodge twice in the past year. Immediately he had begun to make love to her with his bold eyes, and it was not long before he went further than that. Danello approved, joked about it and made mysterious prophecies concerning Constantine's gilded future.

And Olga, half mesmerized, half helpless, with no hope of her own, her life constricted to these narrow boundaries, never knew what that meant.

It was quite extraordinary, but she did not actually know. She suspected. She felt that much—indeed everything—was wrong at the Lodge; but had she been free to speak she could only have advised that search should be made in certain places. There were rooms in the cellar she was never allowed to enter. But Oscar did, and Carl, the other servant, and Danello himself most frequently of all.

One secret alone she did know. But there was no guilt attached there, and it was not safe to reveal it yet—even to Julian.

That was the strange thing about her. She lived, spotless, in the Whispering Lodge, beneath the shadow of a crime of which instinct informed her—but with no details whatever. These were hidden with all Danello's art, because he had long since perceived that individuals like her would face anything rather than silently participate in crime.

So the long months had gone, with undecipherable things in the very atmosphere of the place, while she moved in this atmosphere—wistful, gentle, lovely and innocent. And day after day she became the more aware of some brooding danger and disgrace. Raphael—she must warn Raphael. He was at the other end. The other end of what?

Filtering through all this, illuminating it with a divine tenderness, was the thought of Julian. She blamed herself bitterly for exposing him on the night of their rendezvous, but had imagined that she was only exposing herself.

Then Oscar's figure looming up suddenly in the shadows. But how had Oscar known she was there?

Then a ghastly moment while she bent over Julian's unconscious form, till at his first faint groan and movement, Oscar had touched her shoulder and muttered, "It was the master's order lest he follow you. Come—it is nothing of a blow."

She had obeyed, still under Danello's spell, and next morning saw The Dene car shoot down the drive, with Julian's white face staring up at the blank walls of the Lodge.

She thanked God for that, crept back to bed, and with the instinct of true love knew that what had happened would bind them together more closely

than ever. But nothing in Danello's manner that morning had suggested anything unusual. He did not refer to it till days later.

Occupied with a multitude of these thoughts, Olga was in the garden where there still persisted a slight blooming of colour, when she saw Danello sauntering toward her.

"Ah! My charming niece has joined the other flowers. How is she to-day?"

She hated him when he talked thus, because it was generally the preamble to some new show of authority. But this was no time for hate, and the mantle of simulation fell over her. It came much more easily than before.

"I'm quite well," she said, with a faint smile.

"Good—and you have forgiven me for my frankness?"

"Perhaps you know best, but you frightened me very much."

He studied her for a moment with a sudden inexplicable interest, and it occurred to him that in the case of this girl he was shouldering a grave responsibility. He had no objection to her enjoying life—if it involved no interference with his plans, but the angle of responsibility had not cropped up before.

Now, in a moment of abstraction, it seemed that to marry her, deliberately, to a man as crooked as himself, was in a way violating some law that he realized must exist—the sort of law that cannot be written except in letters of fire.

"Constantine is a clever chap, and already very successful," he said, with an indefinite gesture. "Do not condemn him before you really know him."

Olga looked him straight in the face.

"What is success, uncle?"

The grey eyes wavered a little. What was success? Here he stood, with everything at risk—including freedom—his brain stretched like a banjo string, concentrating every ounce of energy and ability—on what?

Would it be success when and if he got it? The power he sought so recklessly—the power of which he boasted to his wife—the millions that daily and hourly came more nearly within grasp—did these, after all, spell success? Was it success when one was afraid of one's dreams?

These questions leaped at him, weighted and pointed by the clear gaze of the girl who asked it, and for once in his life Danello had no answer ready. Presently he gave his shoulders a characteristic shrug.

"You are not old enough to know yet—in which you are most fortunate. Success is—well—the realizing of your aspirations—continuing to be active—and not living here in the country as these English do, like one of their favourite Brussels sproutings. And what you will do with Constantine is to share his success."

"I shall not like that very much. Is it that we leave here in three months?"

He sent her a sharp glance. "That may or may not be, but I have thought well to give a hint to our landlord."

He leaned a little forward, stared the harder and noted with satisfaction that she shrank from his eyes.

"That is for your private information, and you will not repeat it—to anyone. Otherwise, you are not at home when your friends call. You understand?"

She nodded like a child. "Does Raphael know?"

"Raphael knows nothing except what he is expected to do. And, lest you be tempted to tell him, I say nothing of where Raphael is."

"At the other end—that is all I know."

"Excellent—it could not be more accurate. And now I am going to bring you a trinket from Paris."

"You are going to Paris?" Her pulse quickened a beat.

"Yes—to-morrow. I leave early by car to catch the Folkestone boat. I wish I were rich enough to travel by air like our friend Charters. Such a bad sailor I am, with so reversible a stomach." He made a grimace at his own thoughts. "What keeps this country as it is? Nothing but the fact that the foreigner is weak with sickness when he lands. *Mon Dieu*, but the wind rises already!"

"Then I shall not see you to-morrow?" she said dully.

He shook his head. "I return in perhaps three days. Now about that trinket—a chain, perhaps, for an engagement present?"

"No, please do not bring me anything."

To her astonishment he actually looked hurt.

"You decline to accept a small gift?"

"You will not give me what I want," she replied, with a resentment she tried in vain to smother.

"And what might that be?"

"Freedom!"

He regarded her with sudden gravity. Some tone in her voice had struck deep, and he wondered if perchance this pliant creature were at last revolting—now—at this time when, of all others, the issue hung in the balance.

But that was absurd. He gave an amused laugh and shook his head.

"For how many years have I supported you and Raphael—the orphans? To-day, when I say that in three months you will be free to marry, you rebel. Is that it?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured penitently, "but sometimes it's very lonely here."

"*Là-là!* But that will soon end. Trust in Constantine—an admirable companion. And meantime observe the young lady at the gate."

Olga looked round. Tonia, just lifting the latch, waved her hand. She

advanced, eyes bright, smiling cheerfully.

"I'm so glad to find you out of doors. Isn't this a perfect afternoon? How do you do, Mr. Danello?"

"As you find me, mademoiselle, and charmed to see you." His glance was distinctly mocking.

"You look very fit. May Olga come for a walk with me—and tea?"

"That will be delightful—for her. For myself, I would be tempted to ask if I might not come also, were I not so busy."

She looked straight in his face. "What a Continental compliment, and roses do take a heap of time, don't they? Au revoir, monsieur!"

She hooked her arm into Olga's and went off humming:

"Ernestine, Ernestine,
Tu t'obstines, et t'as tort."

* * * * * *

The two girls struck off, not into the avenue of grim memories, but through gently descending lanes that wound down toward the far-flung Weald of Kent. Olga felt a strange sense of liberation, and it was inspiring to be with one so confident and independent. At the same time she was aware that it was necessary to tread very carefully, so she waited for Tonia to begin.

The Lodge was well out of sight when Tonia gave her a frank and very interested stare.

"I haven't seen you since it happened," she blurted.

"Since what happened?"

"Julian! My dear, you don't think Julian could keep it to himself?"

Olga had an instant of fear lest she referred to the rendezvous and its untoward ending, but at once it was evident that Tonia knew only that they had met.

"Of course," she went on cheerfully, "I saw it begin that night at dinner-time—then Sunday afternoon—and later. You didn't know that Rodney and I missed Julian late that night and went out to look for him?"

"Did you?" said Olga tensely.

"Yes, and met him coming back. He'd banged his head against a tree in the dark, and I don't wonder either." She broke off, regarding the girl's startled face with a sort of quick, impulsive affection, and squeezed her arm. "I heard from Julian this afternoon, and he begged me to try and see you. I—I want to help—if I can, but it's all so frightfully mixed up, and I don't feel that I'm very free to ask questions."

Olga tried to steady her agitated brain. "I think I can understand why."

"Then can't you suggest something? You see, I've the reputation of generally putting my foot in it, and most likely I will now, because I don't know where I am. None of us do. But our minds are quite made up about you

—if you care to know that.”

“How dear you are!” said Olga in a whisper.

They walked for a little while in silence, when Tonia came out with it.

“I’ve got to begin somewhere, but what can I say till I know how it stands between you and your uncle?”

“I hate him,” said Olga in a low voice, and was immediately aware that the step thus taken could never be retraced.

Tonia smiled quite happily. “So glad—because I hate him too. So does he hate me—which makes it a sort of mutual affair, doesn’t it? Well, that’s that, but I suppose I mustn’t ask why you hate him?”

Olga shook her head, and the vision of Raphael floated between her and the hedgerows.

“Yes—and no. For one thing, I’ve been under his thumb for his own purposes—at least so that I don’t interfere with them. That’s been going on for three years. As to the rest of it, or what the purposes are, I don’t know. But he would do anything rather than have them discovered.”

Tonia nodded gravely. “He sees that I’m suspicious, therefore he hates me. Look here, I mustn’t ask you direct questions: I can see that.”

“I couldn’t answer them if you did.”

“You really mean that you’re as ignorant as I am?” said Tonia, utterly astonished.

“Not quite—but almost.”

“And you knew nothing about the Cramp matter? Julian told me you didn’t.”

“Who was Cramp?” asked the girl wonderingly. “Julian spoke of him, but didn’t tell me.”

“The local constable—found murdered in the avenue just behind the Lodge. That was soon after your uncle took the place.”

“Murdered!” gasped Olga.

“Yes; and I’m telling you because it isn’t fair that you should not know. I heard of it very soon after we came to The Dene, and, of course, told Julian. That”—here she hesitated an instant—“was before we met you. What made Julian so thankful when he heard you didn’t know was—well—you can imagine that. Then, a few days ago, Hammond’s dog. That was Oscar?”

Olga took a long, uncertain breath. “Yes, Oscar. I saw his wrist the morning after, and he told me he’d done it when carpentering. He works in a room in the cellar that I’ve never seen. When it was noticed at your house, I said what I believed was the truth, and when I got back to the Lodge I told my uncle. He was very angry at something, wrote a note at once and sent it off. And now you think that Cramp and the dog were both——”

Her voice trailed out, and she grew so white that Tonia became anxious.

“My dear, don’t worry about that now; there are a heap of things more pressing. Julian wants to be sure that he’ll find you here when he gets back. Your uncle has already hinted that he may not be here much longer. What shall I tell Julian?”

There were a multitude of other questions in Tonia’s brain, but she thrust them aside. That first night in the avenue, for instance. The woman who appeared out of the shadows and vanished as though she had been obliterated! Olga—undoubtedly Olga! How did she get there—and how escape?

Olga knew, but showed no inclination to explain. Why not, when she must now be convinced that her friend had become her ally? It would help to explain so much else. Then it seemed that Olga must have been reading her thoughts.

“It is so difficult,” said the girl in a low voice, “and so dangerous. There is one thing I do know, but must not tell you. That will make me seem to screen Danello. It is not him I think of—but my brother, Raphael.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” Tonia, beginning to see a great light, spoke very quickly.

“Yes, and I have not seen him for three years.”

“Did he see my father in Paris?” Tonia’s eyes were very keen.

“I do not know—but how could they meet?” She paused, making a hopeless little gesture. “He is at the other end, as Danello puts it. I think he is Danello’s dupe. If anything happens in the Lodge—if the house were searched—it is almost certain my brother would be involved. And not knowing where he is, I cannot warn him.”

“But that explains so much,” said Tonia excitedly. “It must have been your brother who received the parcel in Paris.”

“What parcel?”

“The one Danello asked my father to take over by air. It was a birthday present from your aunt to her sister.”

“But my aunt has no sister,” said the girl, mystified.

“Then that man and I are even. He caught me out over my French—now I’ve got him.”

“Caught you out?”

“Yes. I heard him say that we—I mean my family—were simple fools, and meant to be used. He was speaking French and suspected me from that minute.” She knitted her brows, thinking very hard. “The thing is, what can be done now? I must write to Julian.”

“Danello goes to Paris early to-morrow morning for three days.”

“How do you know?”

“He has just told me. He takes the car to catch the Folkestone boat.”

Something clicked in Tonia’s brain. What if he were actually going to

France, but not by the Folkestone boat? Red lanterns were dancing suggestively in her imagination, and she felt as though her feet were at last on the right trail. But that was her end of it.

“If he is away for three days, nothing will happen here,” added Olga. “And Julian will come a week after that?”

“Yes, with Rodney.”

“Then I shall be much happier. Will you tell him this?”

“I’ll tell him a lot more,” said Tonia significantly.

Olga sent her an appealing look. “Tell me something, and—oh!—so truly—something I have thought about for hours.”

“I could never give you anything but the truth, especially knowing what I do.”

“It’s just this. You know about Julian and me—but—would your people approve? It may be a great deal to ask of them that their son should marry me—the girl of the Whispering Lodge. I can see what they might feel. Any girl could see that.”

She said this with so great a wistfulness, so simple a sincerity, that Tonia was deeply moved. But the point was well raised. Also it was much to Olga’s credit that she raised it at all. It made Tonia, who hated any show of emotion, feel like putting her arms round this girl and assuring her that all would be well. But would it? She tried to imagine Olga as a sister-in-law, and failed completely.

“I wouldn’t worry about that part of it now,” she answered soberly. “My people only want Julian’s happiness, and money or anything like that doesn’t count. And since Julian was never in love before, as far as I know, this is going to be taken very seriously.”

Olga nodded. It was, after all, as much as one like herself could expect. She hesitated a moment, wondering whether to tell about Constantine and the promised dowry, but, deciding that this was for Julian alone, began to talk about Raphael and their childhood on the Mediterranean coast. Tonia listened, her mind roving a little.

“I should have told you that my people know nothing as to what I’m trying to find out about Danello. I haven’t said anything, because there wasn’t enough to say.”

“Then I think you’re a very brave girl.”

“Perhaps I’m only a foolish one. May I ask you just one thing—it concerns only us two?”

“What is that? Or perhaps I know.”

“That first night in the avenue—when I was watching. I saw someone—a woman—who moved like a shadow among the shadows. Was that you?”

“Yes,” whispered Olga with sudden agitation. “But I——”

“That’s all I wanted to know. I’m not asking how you got there or where you went. You’d have told me—if you wanted to.”

“I do want to—but must not—not yet. Can you trust me that far?”

“My dear,” said Tonia huskily, “I’d trust you to any length, and you must do the same for me. Now let us try to forget all about it, and go back to the house. My mother expects you for tea.”

* * * * *

That was in the grey of the afternoon. At a little before eleven a light-footed figure emerged from the side entrance to The Dene, and flitted toward the shelter of the rhododendrons. Beside the last one waited Hammond. He carried a dark lantern and a heavy stick.

“I’m thoroughly disreputable,” said Tonia cheerfully, “and after what you said about the ditch I’ve put on my rubbers.”

“Beg pardon, miss?”

“I mean goloshes. You see, I find English a little difficult compared to Canadian.”

“Thought they was the same, miss.”

“Only in spots, but we understand each other. All ready?”

“Yes, miss, and we’d better be getting along. The moon may come out most any time.”

It was a queer walk. Hammond, saying not a word, and knowing every foot of the ground, took a circuitous route over fields, through gates and hedges, till a quarter of an hour later Tonia found herself on hands and knees looking through the edge of a spinney at the loom of the Lodge three hundred yards to the north. Hammond crawled forward, and she heard a gentle splash.

“I was right, miss,” he said in a hoarse whisper, “and if you don’t mind a drop of water we can make a bit nearer.”

She grinned in the dark, and followed. The ditch was not more than four feet deep, heavily grassed on both banks, and with a trickle running at the bottom. She felt the water rise over her boots, bent her back and pushed on. Fifty yards farther, a clump of coarse growth made a screen, and, crouching low behind this, she parted the stiff stalks and peered.

Half an hour passed with only the chime of the Charterden church, then at one window of the Lodge appeared a glimmer of light. Immediately afterwards appeared a figure that moved slowly toward them. It halted. She saw the spurt of a match—a transitory glow of red—then nothing. This was repeated three times.

“What’s he doing?” she whispered excitedly. “Those looked like red lanterns, but they’ve gone out.”

Hammond gave a contented little grunt. “They ain’t out, miss, and likely they’re signals. Something’s going to happen soon.”

“But, Hammond,” she expostulated, “they can’t be signals. Those lanterns are out.”

He shook his head. “No, miss, they ain’t. You look hard just to the left of the Lodge, and you’ll see what’s like a bit of a red glimmer. What’s happened is they’ve been put in holes in the ground so as you can see ’em clear from the air, but not on the level. And you can only see ’em when you’re right over ’em.”

Staring hard, she did perceive what he meant, a very faint glow of suspended illumination, made the fainter by a moon that now shone quite clear. Then, slowly, she made out three others. They seemed to form a rough square with sides two hundred yards long.

“I believe you’re right. And with this moon we wouldn’t have got so far if we’d waited.”

“It’ll be like this off and on all night, miss. All I hope is we ain’t spotted when the machine comes over.”

“Heavens! I never thought of that.”

“You try and work some of that grass over your back, and we’ll be all right. And, begging your pardon, miss, I’ll put this bunch over your legs.”

An hour passed. Tonia grew stiff and wanted to exercise. Her blood became cold, and she envied Hammond his ability to lie motionless without any apparent discomfort. That, she assumed, came from long practice in watching for poachers. He talked in a low voice of Charterden affairs in years past, and the lean days under the late Philip Charters, of old Mrs. Goddard and a host of other notables. Finally he spoke of young Cramp.

“The chap that got him got my old Bob, right enough,” he said grimly. “All I hope is that we’re on his track now.”

The church clock struck a melodious note, the moon’s sickle cut through a drifting procession of trailing clouds, and all Kent was dipped in profound slumber. Tonia’s very bones were sore now, the damp was penetrating her clothes, and she was about to give up when Hammond touched her arm and pointed.

“To the left, miss, in the south-west and quite low down. Do you see it?”

She saw it almost at once, a tiny speck of red light like a floating star. At first it seemed not to move, but rapidly it grew in sharpness, and presently she saw another that seemed to touch it. These twin eyes came nearer without a sound.

Suddenly there took shape the filmy lines of an aeroplane, and, all in a breath, it passed with a sort of whistling swoop. Its course was fifty feet up and half-way between them and the Lodge. It looked like a great grey phantom, and she could hear the wind screaming through its taut wires.

“He’ll turn now and come back,” breathed Hammond. “Don’t lift your

head.”

He did turn, in a sharp bank that lifted him momentarily over the elms, then dropped swiftly earthward. A hundred yards away the machine touched earth ever so lightly, gave a long hop, touched again, and rolled forward perhaps a hundred and fifty feet before stopping. Tonia had seen landing practice at night before, but never a more perfect control than this.

“He’s a wonderful pilot,” she whispered, “and that machine must have those new patent wings. Who’s that now?”

The red lights blinked out, but still they could see the propeller revolving slowly. A man climbed out of the cockpit, stood on one of the wings for an instant, and seemed to stare toward the Lodge. Presently he jumped to the ground, stretched his arms over his head, and lit a cigarette, shading the match carefully with his cupped hands. They could see its faint glow rest for an instant on a smooth, swarthy face.

Simultaneously two figures moved rapidly in his direction from the house, and Tonia with a quiver of excitement made out Danello and Oscar. Danello carried a small bag.

“That’s the way he catches the Folkestone boat,” she said under her breath. “He’s going to France by air.”

“That fellow came from France.” Hammond’s voice was a very soft rumble. “ ’Twas the route over Lympne he took.”

There followed a talk between the three in quick, low tones, during which the pilot took the bag and stowed it in the cockpit. After this it seemed that Danello was giving Oscar important instructions, emphasized with imperative gestures at which the man kept nodding his obedience. Tonia strained her ears, but could distinguish nothing except the words “Raphael” and “Budapest.”

It was a matter of not more than three minutes before Danello climbed into the machine, took the rear seat and seemed to be strapping on his belt. After him the hooded pilot. At once the propeller revolved more swiftly and the mechanical bird began to move.

Strange that with all the engine effort there should be only a low musical murmur that was barely audible. Leaving the ground it flew straight till, after making a little height, the pilot banked and began to climb. All his lights were out now.

“Try and keep your eye on him, miss,” warned Hammond. “That turn is going to bring him pretty near over us.”

Tonia stiffened and forgot the cold. The machine was half round now, and its sweep would bring it very close. A sudden fear took her as she discerned two black heads and shoulders outlined against the sky. The moon had come out clear with a pale white light, and she held her breath.

Then, with the machine at the nearest point of its curve, she saw quite

distinctly that one head turned, appeared to lean in her direction and seemed to be looking directly at her. In the same moment this figure bent forward, and she made out an arm that touched the pilot's shoulder.

"Hammond," she gasped, "they have seen us! Get me out of this—quick!"

He did not wait an instant, but, with a little growl, doubled back like a hare, and, bending low, made for the spinney. Tonia was very close behind. Glancing round at the machine, she saw, dry-lipped, that it had already taken another bank and was about to retrace the same curve. At that she splashed on.

By the time they were half-way to the shelter of the spinney, Danello was skimming the earth close above their late hiding-place. Suddenly his voice rang out clear above the whistling wires.

Another voice answered from the direction of the Lodge, and Oscar could be seen running swiftly. The machine touched earth. Tonia could hear a crackling order given by Danello and Oscar's unintelligible reply. There was no mistaking the purport of that order. The machine leaped into the air again, and Oscar lumbered forward.

"Go on!" gasped Tonia. "I'll keep up somehow. Oscar's coming, and he mustn't see me."

Hammond glanced back over his shoulder. "I'll take care of him, miss, if you say so. But we're trespassing, right enough."

"No—no! I don't care if we are. Go as fast as you like. Just get me out of this."

There was no chance of concealment now, and they gained the edge of the spinney just as Oscar reached the end of the ditch. He stopped, stared down, stooped, it seemed, to pick up something, then came plunging on.

"What did he do that for—have I dropped something?" Tonia's heart was pounding.

Hammond fingered his stick, more than ready to settle scores here and now.

"I'll go and ask him, miss, if you say so." His voice had a little lift in it.

"No—and whatever happens, he must not see me. Can't you understand that? I've got a stitch and can't go a step farther. Hammond—what *are* we going to do?"

The keeper stopped dead, staring up at a stunted thick-set oak. A shroud of mistletoe had enwrapped its trunk. He gripped a lower branch, swung himself up with catlike agility and reached down. Tonia felt the strong clasp of a leathery hand, and was hoisted into mid-air. A few moments later she was straddling another branch twenty feet up, and perfectly screened from beneath. Hammond, a little lower, put his finger to his lips.

Her breath came more slowly and she wanted to laugh outright. The thing was ridiculous—she and Hammond festooned in mistletoe in the middle of a

spinney at one o'clock in the morning. She already heard the shouts of mirth with which her recital of this would be greeted by Julian—if she ever told him. But there was nothing funny about it now.

Came a crashing in the undergrowth, and the muttering of a strange tongue. Presently she could make out the heavy shoulders of Oscar as he forced himself through. He drew abreast of the oak, where there was a small clear space, stopped, stared slowly round and stood listening intently.

What he hoped to hear was their retreating steps, but all that reached his ear was the squeal of a rabbit in the jaws of a stoat, the flurry of a frightened pheasant that rose under his feet and the bark of a distant fox.

Tonia, too, stared and shivered. The man looked a menace to humanity. The moon came clear, and, forty feet away, she saw him in sharp relief, his dark face in a sort of insensate fury that mingled with a brutish fear. He, too, was afraid. His lips were lifting like a dog's, he leaned a little forward on the balls of his feet as though in readiness for pursuit, and in his hand gleamed the naked steel of a knife.

She looked down at him in a dream of unreality. This, without doubt, was the knife that had sunk into the throat of old Bob. Hammond must be seeing it, too, and she wondered vaguely what Hammond must be feeling at this moment. But nothing stirred in the leafy screen where the keeper, red with suppressed hatred, kept his twitching muscles in complete control. His day might come later.

And Oscar—Oscar had entered that spinney at Danello's orders—ready to kill again. The picture of this engine of death made Tonia a little sick.

He stood thus, quite motionless for some moments, his quarry but a few feet above his head, his broad thumb unconsciously rubbing the blade of the knife, obviously puzzled at the utter silence. Then, after what seemed a long time, he turned and went slowly back, stopping momentarily to listen, his big head half twisted round, his body still tense. Presently—an eternity later—Hammond spoke.

"All right now, I reckon, miss." His voice was quite cheerful. "We'll get out of this. No cause to hurry."

She wormed her way downward, and dropped stiffly into his strong arms.

"Hammond—did you ever see such a brute?"

"Weren't very pretty, miss, of a sure he weren't. Sort of cove as would do with a bit of catching up, I'd say."

"It was an awfully near thing. Thank goodness, you thought of the tree. It was frightfully clever of you. Didn't Robin Hood do it?"

"Couldn't exactly say, miss; but there weren't no real danger. Looked sort of ugly—that's all there was to it."

"Great Scott! What do you call danger—he would have killed us."

Hammond grinned with a Saxon superiority that for once in her life she admired very much.

“Meaning that bit of a knife, miss? ’Course, I know now well enough for what he used it a while ago, but this time he wouldn’t ha’ had a chance. I ain’t no lurcher. He’d ha’ been brained as quick as you like. That’s the way with them dirty foreigners—first thing they do is feel for a knife. But give me a good bit of oak every time. We’ll be moving this way, miss. Likely you’re a bit cold?”

“Hammond, I’m scared stiff and frozen to death. What are you going to do about it?”

“I was thinking, miss, that if ’twould suit you could take a drop of tea at my cottage on the way back. ’Tain’t nothing for the gentry, but there it is. We’ll be passing right close.”

“You’re a trump. Didn’t I tell you that before?”

“You did say summat of the kind, miss.”

“Well, I’ll write it down this time and sign it. Would it be all right if I had a cigarette?”

“Safe enough. We won’t be in sight of the Lodge again.”

She felt in her pocket, gave a little gasp, and felt once more.

“Hammond, do you know where my case is?”

“Ain’t seen it, miss.”

“Then I do. Oscar’s got it.”

CHAPTER XII

CHECK

MADAME DANELLO was ill at ease. She had become more or less resigned to the situation till, very recently, there came a change. The affair of Olga and Julian contributed to this, and there was also a growing and uncomfortable conviction that her husband, in spite of all his quickness and assurance, was riding for a fall.

She could not explain it, but in the back of her mind had begun to admit that behind all trickery and crime moved something which, though periodically invisible and silent, was nevertheless stronger than them both.

She felt that now, and watching Olga's delicate face with the sensitive mouth and exquisite eyes, questioned herself as never before. Her chief difficulty was that she loved Danello.

Queer that she should love him at all! Perhaps it was fascination rather than love. He did fascinate her. He had never wasted any emotion in her direction, took all she did for granted, and trusted her completely. It was this trust, coupled with his ever-agile brain, this free-handed putting of himself in her power—if she chose to use it—that, curiously enough, had kept her faithful in his support. He had mesmerized her—as he did others.

Then the Julian affair. Danello had told her about it and the interrupted love scene—told it with an airy lightness that appeared infinitely cold. It convinced her that he himself would never experience real love for anyone. And that seemed to light the long-delayed spark of resentment in her disciplined breast.

She saw clearly enough the danger to which he was exposed, the disgrace that would attach to them all if discovery came now. But even that did not justify his attitude in her eyes. She listened to the story as he himself had got it from Oscar—and said nothing. But from that moment she had a changed feeling toward Olga.

Thus it happened that she experienced a definite sense of relief the morning after her husband departed for Paris. She knew how he had travelled, and nothing more. Olga, who had seen Oscar come back in the car in the next mid-forenoon, knew nothing. All part of Danello's plan that Oscar should drive away with unnecessary noise at sunrise.

His wife also saw the car. She gave a little sigh at the multiplications of deceit in which she was involved, and went into Olga's room.

"It is a fine morning, *chérie*. Let us have a walk."

The girl looked up in surprise. Such a strange beginning for the day. Then, having also a sense of relief, she nodded quite brightly.

"Yes, it is too fine to motor. I heard Oscar returning. It is for three days my uncle will be away?"

"Three days. Come—put on your hat." The woman wanted to lose sight of the place with all its reminders for a while. They had gone a mile in the direction of Maidstone when she gave a short laugh.

"An idea—I have an idea!"

"What?"

"That you and I go to London."

"For the night?" asked Olga, amazed.

"For two nights at least. We shall visit the theatre, see pictures and hear some music. It is now a long time since you have been away from Charterden."

"Three months, *Tante*," said Olga, unconsciously using a word she had not used for years.

The woman's eyes softened, and she glanced oddly at the young face beside her. "You have been a good girl, Olga, and it will soon be over."

Olga did not answer. Three years of practical imprisonment could not be effaced by one friendly sentence, and she wondered what would come next.

"You do not like this Constantine—no?"

"You know that I don't."

"And you do love this young Charters. Paul laughed very hard when he told me that."

"Then what do you mean when you say it will be over soon?" asked Olga dully. "Do you also expect me to marry Constantine—who is to be paid a million francs for walking to the altar with me? Is it really worth that much?" she added with infinite scorn.

The woman took an almost startled look around them, and laid her hand on the girl's arm.

"You have changed—yes—something in you is different. A week ago you would not have spoken thus. But I tell you, now, to marry but for one thing only—that is love."

"You tell me that?" stammered Olga. "You?"

"*Chérie*, it sounds like the voice of someone else, but it is mine. Something has changed in me also—I know not what—and for the sake of the love that was never mine, I do say this."

"Then you will help me?" The girl had become very pale, but her eyes were large and shining.

"Help—who am I to help? What I can do, I will; but because I love Paul—

yes—in spite of all, I love him—there is but little in my power. I cannot move to injure him. Perhaps, after this three months, he, too, may change, but he has been determined that you shall not marry in England. Do not ask me any questions, for I cannot answer. You are the more safe because you know so little.”

“I know who killed Cramp!” said Olga with startling suddenness.

Madame Danello gave a sharp little cry, clapped her hand over her mouth, and stared with bulging eyes.

“You know that!”

“Yes.”

“And how?”

“I cannot tell you, but I know.”

“What else?” demanded the woman shakily.

“Is that so important? Well, I know enough to tell me that Raphael must be saved before the blow falls.”

“*Mon Dieu!* What blow?”

“The one I read in your expression,” said the girl earnestly. “You feel it’s coming—so do I. But from where? That neither of us knows—nor does this too smiling uncle of mine. You say that I have changed. Yes, that is true. Two weeks ago I feared Paul as a man with a heart of ice and the spirit of a devil. To-day I do not fear. Why? Because I love! Am I mad, *Tante*, to go on like this?”

The older woman made a swift, expressive gesture.

“No, not mad, child. Talk on. It is the first human talk for so many months, because the heart speaks now.”

“Then you will ask why I do nothing, being no longer afraid. That is for Raphael’s sake. I cannot destroy him, too. But where is he? At the other end of the line, says Paul, but what does that mean?”

“Everything—or nothing; I cannot tell. Paul has not spoken of Raphael for months.” She paused, and continued in a strange voice: “This love—it is making life hard for both of us. But you—you have not talked to the Charters girl?”

“I have told her nothing that would involve Paul.”

The woman drew a long breath. “Nor how it was that you reached the avenue to meet her brother?”

“Of that I said nothing.”

“Then listen. Till Paul is ready to move we must both keep silent. After that I will do what I can in the matter of Constantine, also to find Raphael. For myself,” she added, with a sad smile, “I expect nothing. It is too late. But are not these your friends coming?”

A turn of the lane had brought Tonia and her mother into sight. They met,

stopped, and after a moment's talk Madame Danello turned back with them in the direction of the village. She was not unwilling for a little diversion, and her legs were tired.

Olga, breathless at this meeting, dropped a little behind with Tonia. It was Tonia who spoke first in a voice very low but excited.

"Can you do something for me—quickly?"

"What is that?"

"Frightfully important, and I'll have to tell you a great secret."

"It will be safe with me."

"I know it. Well, last night the keeper and I watched near your house for the aeroplane."

Olga blinked at her. "But what aeroplane?"

"The one your uncle uses. Didn't you know that?"

"No! And last night?"

"I can't tell you any more now—just that. It came some time after midnight." She went on tensely, describing the adventure with Oscar and the discovery of her loss. "That's what Oscar picked up, and I must get it back somehow before your uncle returns. Otherwise—well—I hate to think."

"Oscar has it now?" Olga was suddenly alarmed.

"He must have—but what can *I* do? Can't you help?"

"If one only knew where he kept it! Was it marked?"

"Yes—my monogram—it was gold—with the crest in blue enamel. Julian gave it to me last year." She bit her lip nervously. "Olga, we must get it back!"

"I'll do anything I can, but——"

She broke off. Mrs. Charters had turned and was waiting for them. "It must be a little slow at the Lodge," she said hospitably, "so I'm trying to persuade your aunt to bring you to dinner to-night—very informally. What do you say?"

"That is very kind, and if my aunt——"

"Yes, she's willing, so shall we say at eight, or—if she prefers—we might make it three days from now, when your uncle will be back. Would that suit better?"

Madame Danello nodded. "Yes, he will be very glad to come."

"Then on Friday, at the same hour. Tonia and I are turning off here to see one of the cottages my husband is rebuilding. So good-bye, till Friday."

They disappeared up another lane, and Olga sent her aunt a puzzled glance. Why had this sudden change come over life at the Lodge? Why, after years of isolation, were invitations now accepted so promptly? Why did Danello's wife act so independently?

There could be but one reason. The finale of Danello's scheme was in sight.

That thought kept her silent for a moment till, inevitably, she reverted to

Tonia's appeal. But what could one do? It was only an added mystery, this midnight flight to Paris, and she put that part of it aside for the present. But Oscar! Who was she to face Oscar? She could not face him. But if Oscar could be got out of the way for an hour or two, there might be a chance. The only comfort lay in the fact that he was ignorant that she knew.

She gave her aunt a little smile. "The Charters are very kind."

"Yes, and it is likely that they know nothing of the heart affair of their son. But it is policy for us to accept. You will understand that later. The son will not be there?"

"Not for ten days."

The woman made a sympathetic little sound. "Do not worry about it now. It may be that——" She broke off, a vexed tone in her voice. "But I have nothing to wear at this dinner. My best dress—three years old—a rag, that is all. And the women of France are expected to be *bien soignées!*"

Something tingled in Olga's brain. "I have an idea," she said quickly. "Take the car to Folkestone this afternoon, and get something."

"Does one buy clothes in Folkestone? I should prefer London."

"But if we go to London you ought to have something."

Madame Danello looked interested. "Perhaps—yes—and you will come and help me. So often I buy something at which Paul laughs."

"Not this afternoon. I'm rather tired. But I'd love to go to London tomorrow, and Oscar can get you to Folkestone in not much over an hour. This is a longer walk than I realized."

"Then—yes—I will do that. Otto can take care of you."

Olga was amused. Otto—the other Hungarian servant—a good-natured man who lived in the kitchen, where he compounded strange dishes about which Danello talked with the enthusiasm of an epicure. Otto had never taken part in the real work at the Lodge. Danello thought him too stupid for that.

"If Otto will only give me tea, it's all I'll want till you get back," said the girl, her heart beginning to beat fast. "And, *Tante*, don't get anything with green in it. You can't wear green."

"*Mon Dieu*, child, there are so few things that a woman with my skin can wear. However, we will see, and perhaps this time I shall satisfy Paul. Come—we must lunch early."

* * * * *

The cellars of the Lodge—built in days when labour and material were cheap—had a cavernous spaciousness, with thick stone walls and wide arches. Here was a subterranean mansion of itself. Two of these vaulted rooms were Danello's—his and Oscar's. Here they retreated for hours at a time, and he had left orders that they should never be disturbed. These rooms were always locked, whether occupied or empty.

Olga had never entered them—nor had she the faintest conception of what went on there. One point of this great cellar she did know, and to her cost. Standing now on the lower step of the stone stairs, she glanced very cautiously about, then turned to the business in hand.

Two padlocks faced her, and she was aware that there existed two keys for each. One pair she knew to be attached by a steel chain to Oscar's belt—and Oscar was half-way to Folkestone. The others were kept by Danello—and he was across the Channel. But they were heavy and clumsy, she reckoned, and perhaps, having every faith in Oscar, he had not taken them. It all turned on that. She hesitated for an uncertain moment, took a long, furtive stare, and climbed back to the kitchen.

Five minutes later she left Otto full of enthusiasm over a sort of *olla podrida* that demanded all kinds of ingredients and called for all his skill. He did not dream that she had compounded the recipe on the spot when she assured him that this dish was the creation of a master chef and required unremitting attention. Then, assured by his quick interest, she went swiftly to Danello's room and set to work at his desk.

It was very bare for that of a man of business. He wrote, seemingly, few letters, made no copies and kept no answers from correspondents. There were no household receipts or accounts, these being in the hands of his wife. Olga found a bundle of newspaper clippings dealing with the variations in international exchange over a period of two years, to which were attached unintelligible memoranda. There was a copy of the Lodge lease and other things of lesser importance. And that was all—save that one of the shallow drawers was locked.

She dared not force this open, and was about to give the thing up and search elsewhere when she discovered a small steel key, pushed to the back of a pigeon-hole. This, to her relief, fitted the closed drawer. She twisted at it with an extraordinary certainty that she was about to unearth what she sought. Inside lay two large, heavy keys, fastened together with copper wire!

Again in the cellar, she made not a sound. The padlocks yielded without complaint, and she entered the first underground chamber, which was dimly lit by a small wall grating that had been glazed with opaque glass. There was little to see except two strong benches and a strange-looking machine with a large, iron-handled screw. This stood on small steel wheels with rubber tyres. She blinked, wondered, and passed on.

The other room was not so bare. She counted four small metal tables, also on wheels. These carried neatly arranged blocks of woods, piles of flat metal plates, an apparatus that resembled a camera, and in one corner was stacked a heap of rectangular parcels she did not wait to examine. The place was immaculately clean, a stout floor had been recently laid, and two powerful

lamps were suspended from the ceiling.

She stood motionless for a moment, staring about this forbidden spot, while Otto's slow movements could be heard overhead. She was now directly beneath kitchen and scullery, and there came to her an odour, faint but rather penetrating, that certainly did not emanate from above and was curiously familiar. She could not place it, but in her mind it was associated with some intimate everyday affair of no special significance. Memory, however, could recall nothing.

She moved from point to point, not touching but searching with all her eyes. What she saw had obviously and only to do with whatever activity went on here, and no cigarette case was in evidence. The room was too bare to offer any place of concealment. She felt a sudden fear of what she was doing, and was about to give it up when she noted a small cupboard in one corner.

Its door was unfastened and she jerked it open. There were a series of narrow shelves loaded with corked jars of dark-blue glass and all labelled with some hieroglyphic. They bore numbers from one to ten.

And there, in the corner behind the lowest jar, was a neat flat parcel. She opened it breathlessly and found Tonia's case. It had been folded in a bit of tough white paper and closed with an elastic band.

She gave a gasp of relief, reclosed it, slipped it into her pocket and fastened the padlocks. She stole light-footed upstairs. Otto was whistling cheerfully.

A succulent odour had begun to steam from the stewpan when he heard a clear young voice, and hurried into the garden.

"Otto, are you deaf?"

"No, miss."

"But you must be—or else you are absorbed in that new dish."

He shook his big head like a Newfoundland dog. "Perhaps it is that I am getting old. How long have you been calling?"

"Ever since I came out here—when I left you."

"Then undoubtedly I am getting old. Do you want something?"

"Of course—I want my tea."

"Out here?" He lifted his hands in surprise.

"Yes, I'm going to spend the afternoon here, and I'm warm enough in this coat. So please bring the tray."

He went off shrugging his shoulders, returned with tea, and retired to the kitchen, grinning at the strange fancies of young people. When he was busy again Olga put down her cup and thought hard.

The question was how to restore the case to Tonia without delay. She could not leave the Lodge grounds for enough time to go to The Dene. That would only be inviting trouble. Nor was there any available messenger.

She puzzled over this, staring absently at the gabled roof of the Gate House

which was just visible from where she sat. Suddenly she gave a contented little laugh, felt in her pocket, listened to Otto, who was now whistling the Volga Boat Song, and darted out of the front gate.

Thirty seconds later Mother Goddard started violently, dropped her best cup on the stone-flagged floor and blinked at a panting young woman who stood on her doorstep.

“Mrs. Goddard,” exclaimed an excited voice, “will you please do something awfully important and very private? It’s got to be done at once and nothing said about it.”

The old woman blinked at the tense young figure and gave a cracked smile.

“What might it be, miss, that’s so important? You took me a bit sudden like, and I broke my cup. ’Twon’t mend, neither.”

“I’ll give you a new one—a dozen, if you like—but you must do something for me. I want this parcel to go to Miss Charters at once.”

Mother Goddard tittered, showing her one tooth. “My old knees are too stiff, miss, for the likes of that. I ain’t walked a hundred yards this ten year.”

“But can’t you get someone to take it—someone you can trust? Oh, please be quick!”

“You sort of takes me off my feet, miss, that you do. There ain’t no messengers, hereabouts. But Hammond, he’ll be along in about half an hour for his mail. Would that serve?”

“Yes, splendidly. Give him this, and tell him to hand it to Miss Charters himself. He mustn’t let it out of his possession.”

Mrs. Goddard put her ancient head a little on one side, and looked very knowing. “’Twill likely be something valyable, then?”

“Yes—it’s her gold cigarette case—she lost it, and is awfully anxious, because it’s a present. And I can’t take it myself.”

The old woman put out a skinny hand. “Lucky you found it, miss. No message about where you did find it?”

“No—nothing. Here it is—and thanks, awfully—and I’ll send those cups, no—I’ll bring them from London myself. Good-bye. And, oh, any particular colour that you’d like?”

Mrs. Goddard cackled noisily. “No, miss, most any colour will serve. At my time of life they all looks alike, anyway.”

* * * * *

“Tonia,” said Mrs. Charters that evening after dinner, “I thought it would be more interesting to have someone else for dinner on Friday, so telephoned Lady Netley. She and her son are coming.”

The girl looked up quickly. “Good Lord, why did you do that?”

“But why shouldn’t I? She has never met Mr. Danello, and he’s certainly a very interesting man. Don’t you find him so?”

"I do, rather," admitted Tonia with a slow smile. "But do you think those people will fit?"

"Well, they may not, but it should be all right. I talked it over with your father, and he agreed that we might as well make the experiment. I wonder what your friend Bruce will make of Olga, and whether she'll look as lovely as she did last time. By the way, I rather thought Julian looked impressed. Did you notice anything?"

This was dangerous ground, and Tonia hedged as skilfully as she could.

"He's never struck me as being impressionable."

"That's just it. Your father had the same idea: and one must admit that a face like hers is enough to upset most young men. You like her, don't you?"

"I think I'm going to like her very much," said Tonia loyally.

"I'm so glad, because we were both worried about your not having a girl of your own age. Did you see her to-day?"

"Just for a moment." Tonia took out her cigarette case, tapped it reflectively, and closed it with a contented snap. "What would happen if Julian did fall in love with her? I mean, what would you and father say?"

Mrs. Charters looked rather serious. "We hadn't got as far as that." She paused, sent her daughter a glance that was just a shade uncertain, and went on: "Of course, with both of you, the first thing we want is your happiness. But there's more than that. We want you to have the right associations and to be connected with people about whom there is no question whatever."

Tonia nodded. "I can understand that."

"Yes—you know what I mean. It's not marrying a title—I'm not thinking about anyone in particular—but marrying someone with traditions and standards—the kind that don't always go with a title. Does that sound too democratic?"

Tonia shook her bronze head with much decision. "It's just right, I think. For instance, if Jule were in love with that girl, you'd want to know about the Danellos?"

"I would—and at present we don't really know anything. He's a cultivated man, his wife is less so, and the girl is—well, she'd be an ornament anywhere."

Tonia wanted to go a little further, but prudence forbade. She pictured Olga at the head of The Dene table in years to come, took a fleeting glance at her mother's face, and decided that the ice was too thin. Characteristically, she went off on another tack.

"And Lady Netley—what do you feel about her?"

Mrs. Charters smiled. "I think she's one of those much worried women you meet occasionally who don't quite succeed in hiding their worries. Her expression suggests that to me. At the same time, she can't get much

companionship out of her son—though she seems to live for him.”

“Women are pretty sacrificial over here, aren’t they?”

“Possibly—yes—I think they are.”

“Is that because there are so few men?”

“Probably.”

“The men seem to know it, don’t they?” ruminated Tonia. “I never saw such a spoilt lot in my life.”

“Well, my dear, they may be a bit spoilt without being actually spoiled, if you know what I mean. The war showed that.”

Tonia looked a little contrite. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“At the same time,” went on her mother reflectively, “they might exert themselves a little more to be—well—entertaining. Look at the difference between the average Englishman and a man like Mr. Danello. You’re going to sit between them on Friday, so you can see for yourself.”

Tonia caressed her cigarette case with a long, brown, flexible finger.

“That will be an opportunity, won’t it?”

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS OF CONSTANTINE

DANELLO, for reasons known best to himself, returned via Folkestone on the second day, not the third, and stepping off the gangway of the Channel steamer, looked round for his car. He had wired from Paris that he desired to be met.

No car was visible. He became worried, searched again, asked innumerable questions without satisfaction, then, in a fuming temper, engaged a motor to take him the twenty miles to Charterden. The swift motion had a soothing effect, and presently he began to smoke, smiling to himself. Why be upset about a message that had evidently miscarried?

Affairs had really gone very well, and it had not been necessary to travel farther than Paris. Here he had been met by three men—from Vienna, Belgrade, and Budapest. The reports they gave were all satisfactory, especially that of Constantine, a tall, lithe young man with very quick eyes, a restless mouth and a manner that was suggestive of the diplomatic service.

Statements were produced, written in script on single sheets of paper, unsigned and bearing merely numbers. Danello perused these, smiled shrewdly, put a few pointed questions, and the conference broke up. When the other two had left he turned to Constantine.

“Well, *mon vieux*, now that our little business is disposed of, you will want to know about something else.”

The young man nodded. “What does she say?”

“Nothing very affectionate but”—here he shrugged his shoulders—“that does not matter. The thing is to all practical purposes settled—and she brings one million francs with her.” He laughed a little. “Can you live on that?”

Constantine smiled. “With care—yes—I think we should. But why does the lady rebel?”

“Because she is a woman. It is her privilege.”

Constantine stroked his small dark moustache. “Perhaps she does not like my looks.”

Danello shook his head. “I shall give you the truth. No—it is not your looks—which are irreproachable—but there has intruded himself another young man. What can you expect with a face like hers? But this is nothing—a mere incident *en passant*.”

“Who is this man?” The voice was curiously untroubled.

“By name, Charters, and the son of my new landlord. There was but one little rendezvous—one only—and that came to a sudden end by the intervention of our good Oscar. That man—he is a jewel.”

“She loves this Charters?” demanded Constantine persistently.

“Pah! What is this love? You, who are of the world, know that what a young girl takes to be love is nothing but a passing spasm. It is nothing. I have told her that in three months she will be free: but as the result of our meeting to-day it will be less than that—yes, very much less. Perhaps only one month. And when I move I move very quickly. You will understand the reasons for that.”

The other man nodded and gave Danello a strange look. “Yes, that part of it I do understand; but this matter of Olga—it is different. I am not sure that I desire to marry any woman in the attempt to make her love me. One lives but once. For myself—yes—I am a man of the world—with all that this means to men—but what I feel for Olga I find it difficult to explain. Her face—her eyes—what lives behind those eyes——”

He broke off, flushing a little, then gave an awkward laugh. “You think me a sentimentalist! I see that in your face.”

Danello, oddly enough, did not smile. It had flashed into his brain that perhaps this very sentiment on the part of Constantine, this admission of something genuine, that was not affected by the promise of a million francs, might do much to reconcile Olga to her fate. It was the sort of thing he thought she would understand, though, for himself, it left him cold. So he only patted Constantine’s arm and nodded approvingly.

“My friend, I apologize. I have misjudged you. Now I see that with you it is the veritable ‘amour,’ that most baffling disease. So to Olga I shall say nothing more, and you will plead your own cause in perhaps one month. At the same time, do not turn up your most handsome nose at one million good francs. *A la bonne heure!*”

Constantine sent him a significant glance. “You leave, then, at once?”

“Alas, yes, and what a tribulation to return to that land of Brussels sproutings! Some day, when we are at our ease, I shall tell you about their food. *Mon Dieu*, but what food!”

“You do not go by air?”

“Not this time. There is growing a slight curiosity on the part of a foolish young person that makes it inadvisable. I go by boat, and already my poor stomach revolts. Adieu! Silence and speed—that is our motto. And more especially silence.”

This was the scene the remembrance of which gave Danello a glow of satisfaction as he sped through the rolling fields of Kent. Kind—yes, he could now afford to be kind to Olga. He nodded to himself and felt in his pocket for

a small box from the Rue de la Paix. It contained a little gift for each of them. And Marie—that well-meaning though slightly stupid woman—he would shortly make life more interesting for her.

In complete good-humour he descended at his own front door, paid his driver and called for Oscar. The place seemed unusually quiet.

Oscar hurried forward with an exclamation of surprise.

“Well,” said Danello briskly, “I have returned. Where is madame?”

“In London—with mademoiselle. They come back to-morrow morning.”

Danello’s brows went up. “But why?”

“I do not know. They were both very cheerful, and I heard madame say that a change would do them good.”

“*Là-là*—what an unexpected woman! Then, of course, she did not get my wire?”

Oscar picked up an unopened telegram from the hall table.

“This came last night, but as your orders were to open nothing in your absence I did not touch it.”

“You were right, and an order is an order. But now, quickly, what of that affair two nights ago? I could not wait, but left it to you. I thought I saw two people in hiding.”

Oscar nodded triumphantly. “Yes—two people—a man and a girl. They saw me coming and ran very fast into the wood. There I lost them.”

Danello clenched his fingers. “*Diable!* I think I know who that was. The Charters young lady?”

“The same.” Oscar looked very pleased with himself now.

“And a spy—a trespasser—yes—but you did not catch her. How, then, can you prove it? I would give much to prove it!”

Oscar drew himself up. “The proof is downstairs. Her cigarette case!”

“What—you found that?”

“Yes—where she had been hiding at the end of the ditch. It is in the workroom, where I put it to be safe.”

Danello chuckled softly and felt enormously pleased. It was the perfect and finishing touch to a successful trip. He gave Oscar’s big shoulder a pat of approval and chuckled again.

“Let me have this thing of so great importance—how great you do not know. I shall remember this to your credit.”

They went into the cellar, Oscar swinging his keys. In the workroom Danello looked critically about, saw that all was in order, and made a little purring sound in his throat.

“We have been very busy here, you and I, but it will soon be over now. Then you shall buy a ticket for Buda. *Là-là!* But there have been some anxious moments in this affair. Now, the cigarette case.”

Oscar opened the cupboard door, put his hand in behind the jar marked ten, spread his broad fingers and stood quite motionless, an extraordinary expression on his swarthy face.

“It—it is not here!”

Danello laughed. “The wrong shelf—try another.”

Oscar shook his head, a dark flush rising to his temples. “It was here I put it—nowhere else. Now it is gone.”

The other man stared at him with contracting eyes. “What is this nonsense? Tell me exactly what happened.”

“As I have already said,” stammered the Hungarian, “I put it here, wrapped in paper, when I came back from the wood. I locked the door with these keys”—here he fingered the steel chain at his waist—“and since then I have not entered the room.”

“In paper?” creaked Danello, in a strange voice. “What paper?”

“A piece of *the* paper,” replied the man chokingly.

Danello gasped. “And that is gone too!”

“Everything is gone.”

A curious thing happened. Danello did not speak, but stood, swaying a little, his face suddenly pale. He devoured Oscar with his eyes, his features growing sharp and old, then gave a little cry, darted upstairs and snatched open his desk.

Oscar lumbered after him, and Otto put his head out of the kitchen, listening in sheer bewilderment. Danello thrust a trembling hand into the pigeon-hole and touched the small steel key. Still silent, he opened the shallow drawer.

“This is as I left it, and no one but you knew that these were here. What happened on Wednesday? Tell me exactly!”

“I went to Folkestone with madame in the afternoon. She bought a dress. That was for London—where they both went yesterday.”

“Did Miss Olga go to Folkestone?”

“No. She was here—with Otto?”

Danello breathed quickly, stepped out into the hall and called. Otto came up at once, wiping his hands and looking blandly astonished. Never before had he known such excitement in the Lodge.

“Otto—the day before yesterday—now think—what was Miss Olga doing?”

“Doing? She was doing nothing that she does not always do. In the morning she walked with madame. After lunch madame went in the car with Oscar and no sooner had she gone than mademoiselle came to talk to me about a new dish. I tried—but, no—it was not a success.”

“Never mind that,” snapped Danello. “And afterwards?”

“She went into the garden, wearing her old coat, and sat there reading till madame returned. And her tea—yes—even that I took out. The sun, she said, was warm.”

Danello frowned. “Then she did not go into the cellar?”

“Of a certainty—no! Then next morning, early, the ladies went to London, and——”

“That will do.” Danello made an impatient gesture, Otto retreated thankfully to his own domain, wondering about many things, and Oscar was left facing his master. There was murder in the smaller man’s eyes.

“Well,” he said with a terrific effort at control. “You realize what you have done? Or is it a lie you have told me?”

Oscar’s big hands slowly opened and closed. “I have told you the truth—and where it has gone I do not know.”

Danello sent him a dreadful look. “Perhaps you remember a murder of three years ago. I told you to knock a man down—and you killed him.”

Oscar’s lips began to twitch. “I struck too hard—that is all.”

“Yes—and risked everything. But if I lift my finger you will be hanged.”

The man stared at him. Something long dormant, but human and unquenchable, was upheaving in his breast. Revolt! To what end were these years of obedience under threat? Danello had promised a fortune in return for silence and help—but could one trust Danello? Having killed one man, might it not be as well to kill another and have done with all this?

“Perhaps,” he said thickly, “it is not all in your favour. I, too, can talk!” He took a long breath. “Just a word—before I hang.”

Danello felt a cold blast. Here, on the very verge of a tremendous coup—one that would startle a continent—everything was imperilled. He made a gigantic call upon his will, mastered the hot flame of his temper, felt a fleeting surprise at this conquest of himself—and actually smiled.

“Tchut, tchut! We must not be foolish, my friend—either of us. There is too much at stake. The thing is gone—yes, obviously. But the paper? I worry about that.”

Oscar did nothing to break the silence that followed, but looked obliquely at the man he called his master. He had a slow mind, this Hungarian, apt to yield a sort of dull, instinctive superiority to the intelligence of others, but, once in motion, it was something like fate, persistent and unshakable. Now he was measuring Danello as he had never measured him before.

And Danello knew it. He perceived it like lightning, and, on his side, was equally busy contriving how to restore the atmosphere of the past three years. They could not—dared not—do without each other—yet. That was the situation. Presently he shook his head, regretfully and without a trace of anger.

“Well, let us hope that that paper will be thrown away. And now—at once

—these locks must be changed. You will see to that?”

Oscar nodded.

“Also, you will be glad to know that all goes well elsewhere. The profits will be more than I told you, in which you will share. And, yes—while I think of it—we will change, too, the lock on the third door. You understand?”

“I will change them. Do we work to-night?”

Danello made a negative gesture, went upstairs, and gave himself up to reflection. He was entirely at sea in this matter. He knew that Oscar had told the truth, also that the only person who could have done this thing was Olga. But there was not a vestige of proof. It occurred that he might put his will at work and force the secret out of her, but of late something in her manner had made him question the real efficacy of this procedure.

Nor did it seem wise to expose his hand to Marie. Silence and speed! That was it! If Marie had known of this she would hardly have taken the girl to London. Also—if she knew of it—he could infallibly read it in her eyes. And if the case had found its way back to the Charters girl—well—he would doubtless be able to establish that, too.

He was puzzled, most of all about Olga, and that brought up Constantine. Constantine had been co-operating now for some months, a very useful man, at home in all the capitals of Europe, acceptable to women and attractive to men. Strange that Olga should rebel, and, stranger still, that Constantine should have raised the point he did. Sentiment was all very well if one could afford it, but why be so weak with a rebellious beauty.

From Constantine his mind turned to Raphael. Queer that for Raphael he should feel something like sentiment, but, he concluded, it was more likely pity. Raphael was so guileless—so simple. One told him to do a certain thing—and he did it without question. Important things, too, such as his duties for the last few months. The patent innocence of the boy was valuable there, the sort of natural innocence that would make it impossible for the suspicious to fasten their suspicions on him. It had not been necessary to bring Raphael to Paris. So much the better.

He finished his third consecutive cigarette with his programme fairly clear and went out to his roses. Pruning a Lady Willingdon, he heard the horn of a motor coming up the Charterden hill, and a moment later it turned in at the Lodge drive. He went forward, smiling.

“*Là-là*, but the truants have decided to return! What extravagance is this? I turn my back—and behold a pair of spendthrifts!”

His wife, relieved to see him in a good humour, smiled back. “It is not serious what we have spent. But how do you come here? I thought you said to-morrow.”

“*Ma foi!* But you seem disappointed. No, my business went quickly,

hastened by my desire to return to so charming a family. *Tiens*, Olga, I have disobeyed your wish and brought you both a trinket. At dinner you shall have them."

Saying this, his eyes met hers with so clear and bright a glance that she was utterly bewildered. She had prepared herself for an ordeal, had been terrified when she saw him thus unexpectedly, and, astonishingly, there was no ordeal. He knew—he must undoubtedly know—there had evidently been time enough for him to hear everything from Oscar, yet he gave not a sign of it. This made her infinitely more nervous than had she been able to read suspicion in his eyes. Then she, in her turn, put her will to work.

"You are very kind," she murmured.

"Also I bring you the homage and salutations of young Constantine. He was overjoyed when I told him we might all be in Paris before long."

It was strange, but instead of shaking her, that actually helped. It was definite. And it flashed into her mind that it might be the best policy to adopt her uncle's attitude of lightness and banter, and use as delicate a touch as possible.

"What a matchmaker!" she said, and actually laughed. "Have I nothing to say about all this?"

Danello blinked at her without knowing it. He was utterly and suddenly puzzled. Never before during the past three years had she sounded so independent, and never had she and her aunt seemed on such intimate terms. This was noticeable in a nameless way one could not describe.

Her temperament seemed to have changed, and he fumbled mentally—and for him clumsily—to determine what had brought this about. It could only be something that had taken place during his absence. Secretly he admitted himself at a loss.

"We have an invitation for dinner to-morrow, Paul," said his wife.

"But where?"

"From Mrs. Charters. She asked us when she and her daughter met us on a little walk. That was on Wednesday morning."

"Did they come back to the Lodge with you?" he asked casually.

"No, we parted some distance from here."

"Ah—and you accepted?"

"Yes. It was kind—and I thought best. It suits you?"

Danello felt the edge of his pruning shears and thought rapidly. Any kind of social activity was the best possible blind for one's other pursuits. Also here was evidence that whatever Mrs. Charters' daughter might think had not been communicated to her mother. Furthermore, what better opportunity could there be for exploring that daughter—whose knowledge he so earnestly wanted to probe? Taking it all in all, he was distinctly pleased.

“Yes—of course. They are most hospitable, and it will be a change for our niece. Do you happen to have seen your friend, Olga, since I left?”

He asked this with a smile that she did not for an instant misread.

“Only as *Tante* told you—when we met on our walk. And when *Tante* went to Folkestone I made love to my books in the garden. It was warm here—like spring. Otto took care of me. And Paris—is Paris very full of people?”

“I was too busy to leave my hotel—where the cooking is admirable. Otto would not be allowed to wash a dish in that place.”

She laughed. “I tried to teach Otto something, but he had to eat it himself. *Tante*, aren’t you going to show uncle your new things?”

Danello confessed to a throb of admiration. She knew—he felt convinced that she knew—yet she had exposed not one single point on which he could fasten. He wondered how long and how dangerously he had been underestimating his niece. On the other hand he knew equally well from his wife’s expression that she knew nothing.

The situation mocked him. Was he—was Oscar—was Constantine—was all the rest of his intricately woven group—in the hands of this smiling girl?

But it was of the temperament of Danello that he only returned the smile and nodded.

“Yes—it is my great curiosity to see everything. That is one attempt I never make—to buy clothes for a woman.”

But Olga—Olga got to her room as swiftly as she could, threw herself on the bed, and buried her frightened face in the pillow.

CHAPTER XIV

DANELLO AT THE DENE

LADY NETLEY, beside her son in the two-seater, was very thoughtful as they climbed the hill leading into Charterden village. There was a certain aspect of affairs at Fidlow which she had never discussed with him—this being her own age. Ostensibly she was an anxious, determined, unemotional and ambitious person. In reality she was a tired, old woman.

So far she had refused to sell a foot of land. Fidlow, with all that pertained thereto, was sacred. Sir Stephen, whose income contracted at his death, had impressed this on her when he departed this earth, leaving her with a thousand mortgaged acres and a son of whose future, privately, he had not thought very hopefully.

“Make the lad marry money,” was almost his last injunction. “He’ll never get it any other way.”

The arrival of the Charters family looked something like a climax to several unfruitful efforts, and what she thought on this occasion was that if Bruce did not now play up, he could take over Fidlow and plough his own furrow. With that large in her mind, she regarded his profile with its small and perhaps rather spoilt mouth, and spoke.

“I wrote to Canada the other day.”

“About what?”

“The Charters.”

“What for?”

“It’s only right we should know more than we do. One simply can’t accept people without any outside information.”

He frowned a little. “They’re all to the good. Who did you write to?”

“The Beckwiths—they went out to Toronto four years ago. He’s in some bank—and will be able to tell me. The Charters can’t live as they propose to live, from what I hear, on less than ten or twelve thousand a year.”

“You’re thinking about that girl again.”

“Isn’t it natural? You’re interested, aren’t you?”

“Never said I was.”

She only smiled knowingly, and, noting it, he became a little irritated.

“Suppose she isn’t interested?” He snapped this out with a strange sense of wanting to play fair with Tonia.

“Mrs. Charters told me that they came to England really on account of their

children—in other words, to have them marry here and settle down. Most sensible.”

Bruce turned in at the Gate House with a quite unnecessary skid. “I’d rather you’d be a bit less—well—commercial about it. You put the girl on one side as having—well—not much to do with it. If you want to know, I am interested. Colonial, and all that, but I like her better than anything you ever brought up on parade. But I’ve an idea it isn’t going to be any use. Also I think you made a mistake in writing to Canada. Furthermore, a chap called Bethune is quite in the running.”

“But he’s a mere boy!”

“Come to that, she’s a mere girl. I don’t want to sound squiffy about this, mater, but you just sit tight and hold your horses.”

“There won’t be any horses to hold much longer, Bruce.”

“Well, perhaps if you hadn’t been so active submitting samples, I’d have been married before this.”

Lady Netley bit her lip. She wanted to look well this evening and quite care-free, but here was a poor beginning. She felt weary. Also she was sick of this two-seater with its incurable rattle.

Age has its dreams no less than youth, and one of hers was a good landaulet with a stern-faced young man in livery to drive it. That would never be: and every pound spent at Fidlow was earmarked first. So when Bruce was not using the two-seater she drove herself about, sitting very straight, looking very haughty, with keen blue eyes and frosty little patches in her thin cheeks. And no one knew how fed up she was.

This had gone on for years. Her favourite subject with her intimates was money and the lack of it and the cost of living and how money had got into the wrong hands since the war. But, oddly enough, she had automatically avoided this with the Charters. The subject of money never seemed to occur to them—which convinced her they had plenty of it. But one wanted to be certain.

“Probably I’m not the marrying kind,” interjected Bruce as they pulled up at the door of The Dene. “Fact is, I can hardly picture myself with a wife. Wonder if that Vinen girl is going to be here?”

* * * * *

Tonia had felt in particularly good form ever since Hammond, with an odd look in his eye, handed her a small packet, remarking briefly that it came from Mother Goddard. He grinned while she stared, pinched and tore it open. Then she gasped.

“But, Hammond, how on earth did she get it?”

“Dunno, miss. I was passing just now when she sort of clawed at me through the window. Then she gives me this. There weren’t no message. Beats me how she got it, too.”

It was at this moment that the truth dawned on Tonia, but she said nothing, and slipped the packet, paper and all into her pocket.

“Please tell her that I’m awfully obliged, and I’ll go in and thank her myself. And, Hammond?”

“Yes, miss?”

“Of course, I’ve forgotten all about last night—that is in one way—while in another I’ll never forget it. Does that make any sense?”

He smiled broadly. “Quite a lot of them sort of things in life, ain’t there, miss?”

This happened half-way between the stables and The Dene, and she walked thoughtfully back to the house, rubbing the packet with sensitive and welcoming fingers. The paper was a sort of parchment and crackled a little. In her room she took it out, saw it was neatly cut, and being a methodical person tucked it away for further use. What a lot could happen in twenty-four hours!

On Friday she felt a little breathless. Something warned her against making any further attempt to see Olga before her uncle returned, and for the past two days her mind was full of unanswered questions. How had Olga retrieved the case? What risk had she run to do it? Had Oscar discovered his loss before Danello’s return? If he had, was it possible that he would say nothing about it to Danello?

She dressed for dinner in an abstracted mood, glanced a little uncertainly in the glass, made a face at herself and went down. Mrs. Charters was already in the drawing-room and nodded approvingly.

“You look very nice, dear. Why don’t you wear that dress oftener?”

“Think Mr. Netley will like it?”

Her mother laughed. “I don’t know whether he notices such things—but Mr. Danello does—he’ll like it. The Nile green goes awfully well with your hair.”

Tonia played with her cigarette case. “You like him, don’t you?”

“Yes—so far; and Olga is certainly very appealing. She seems much brighter of late.”

Tonia wondered whether she would continue to be brighter to-night, and was reminding herself to write to Julian next day, when the Netleys were announced. Lady Netley had recovered her poise on the doorstep, and felt very affable.

“So awfully kind of you,” she said, “and I’m so glad we were free.”

“That was very nice for us,” smiled Mrs. Charters. “I wonder if you know the Danellos? We expect them.”

“The people in the Whispering Lodge! How exciting! Bruce told me he met the niece here after the shoot. I hear she’s a beauty.”

“We think she’s lovely,” said Mrs. Charters, feeling rather comforted.

“And the uncle is quite an interesting person.”

“What does the man do—he’s a sort of mystery, isn’t he?”

“No,” put in Charters, “nothing mysterious but one of those desirable tenants who never asks for anything. He has a private banking business in London and Paris.”

Lady Netley looked a shade disillusioned. “I’m so disappointed. We heard that all kinds of queer things went——”

“Mr. and Mrs. Danello—Miss Vinen,” said Manders blandly, as he opened the door.

To Tonia, who was rather silent, it seemed that the guests of the evening mingled very well, and whatever inward feeling she might have about Lady Netley as a designing woman, that person was certainly very chatty and gracious. Olga looked as attractive as ever, Madame Danello wore the product of her London excursion, and her husband brought with him the debonair manner so invaluable on such occasions. It seemed that all in a moment he took charge of the conversation.

“From Paris,” Tonia heard him say, “yes, I returned yesterday, and glad to get back to my roses. In France at this time of year there are no outdoor roses north of Lyons.” He turned to Tonia, smiling. “You, perhaps, have seen them lately, mademoiselle?”

“No,” she said coolly, “not since you went away. You were very busy in Paris?”

“Yes—one can say that. But I hurried home.”

“I wonder you don’t go by air—and save time,” she hazarded.

In that instant she saw his pupils contract ever so faintly, and knew that the game was on. There had been a purpose in what she said, and she wanted him to know that she was not afraid. More than that, she was ready to take the field first. Then, merely by chance, she caught an oblique glance from Madame Danello. And madame seemed nervous.

“I am not very brave about the air,” she said rather awkwardly, “and my husband has promised not to travel that way.”

“I’ve promised to take Tonia over next time, and give her the chance to look down on The Dene,” volunteered Charters. “I really think that now it’s as safe as any other way.”

“Except at night,” said Tonia recklessly. “I don’t believe that’s very safe.” She sent Danello a look out of which she tried to keep the mockery she meant. “I can understand how a machine can take off at night, but surely the landing must be very difficult.”

“They say not.” He looked her full in the face. “Modern science and skill has taken care of that. So many things that used to be dangerous are now safe—and, on the other hand, so many that look simple are really dangerous. What

a *mélange* life has become!”

“Hasn’t it?” she replied cheerfully. “*Quelle mélange!*”

They went in to dinner, and, glancing round the table, it seemed to Tonia that the whole performance was unreal with the exception of the parts played by her mother and father. There was Lady Netley, making talk to her host, but the girl knew perfectly well what was uppermost in her mind. Bruce was less diffident—less utterly English, she thought—but there was a look on his face not to be mistaken.

Olga was obviously nervous, and kept sending Danello quick little observant looks, from which Tonia drew her own conclusions. Madame Danello was rather laboured in her talk, but by some strange process of reasoning Tonia concluded that she knew nothing about the event of Wednesday night, though any discussion of the advantages of flying made her ill at ease.

Of the five guests only Danello himself seemed perfectly at home. But Tonia made no mistake there, and prepared herself for the passage of arms that would inevitably follow soon. Before that, however, she wanted a moment with Olga. It came immediately the ladies returned to the drawing-room.

“However did you get it?” she began in a low, quick voice.

“I—I can’t tell you that. I found where Oscar had hidden it.”

“When did Oscar know that you’d taken it?”

“I’m not sure whether it was before my uncle got back or not.”

“What did your uncle say—was he furious?”

“He must have been—if Oscar told him at all?”

“But how could he conceal it?”

“Well, don’t you see that if he discovered it had gone before my uncle got back, there’s nothing to make him say he’d ever found it?”

“I never thought of that,” said Tonia breathlessly.

“And don’t you see this, too, that since he had hidden it in a place which till Wednesday was absolutely secret to those two, he couldn’t confess to the loss without confessing to the fact that the place had been entered by some one else—which would be a very bad thing for him?”

Tonia pondered deeply. “Then as it stands you can’t say whether your uncle knows anything about it or not?”

“No, I can’t—and I can’t find out.”

“He got back before you did?”

“Yes, very unexpectedly.”

“Anything changed in his manner?”

“Yes, he was much nicer and gentler than usual.”

Tonia blinked at her, and admitted secretly that Danello was something more than a diplomatist.

“Well,” she said doubtfully, “he suspects me—I’ve proved that already this evening—but he can’t prove anything to his own satisfaction without that case. On the other hand, I’ve got Hammond as a witness—if it’s ever wanted. Did he say nothing special after he got back.”

“Enough to make me feel that we won’t be at the Lodge many weeks longer.”

Tonia’s pulse quickened. “There’s something I want to say—and it’s difficult—so I’ll put it this way. Am I right in assuming that the person who went into the forbidden place to get that case now knows the secret of the Whispering Lodge?”

Olga sent her the strangest possible glance. “She thinks she knows—but can’t be quite sure.”

“And would what she thinks she knows explain everything? Surely you can tell me that much.”

Olga nodded nervously, then turned a little pale. The dining-room door had opened, and Danello was walking straight toward them, smiling as he came.

“Ah, Miss Tonia, we men have discussed politics and finance, so now to something more interesting. Your father tells me you are becoming more interested in this most watery country. Olga, *chérie*, I think Mrs. Charters is looking your way. Go and talk to her.”

The girl crossed to the sofa, where Mrs. Charters was smiling at her, and Danello lifted his shoulders a trifle.

“She is much better of late, for which you are partly to be thanked. It is my regret that the Lodge is not very suitable for entertaining in return.”

Tonia murmured something polite and waited, aware of the keenness of his eyes no less than the utter blankness of his smile. The man might know everything—or nothing. And for one of his quick brain she could hardly believe that it was nothing. But could she find out? She began to conceive a definite admiration for him, and wondered not a little that this should contain no fear. Perhaps she was thinking too hard to be afraid.

“Olga, perhaps, has told you of her engagement?” he said easily.

“Engagement!”

He nodded. “To a young man named Constantine. Most charming! I have known him for some time. I hope the affair may be completed next year. Most suitable in every way. I am glad that she has not contracted any—what shall we call them—any sentimental links here.”

“But she’s met so few people, hasn’t she?” Tonia’s nerves were quite steady now.

“That is so, but one knows of such affairs taking place in spite of every what you might call obstruction. However, in this case there are no entanglements. And your brother—when does he return?” He added this with

not the slightest change in tone or expression.

“In a week or so,” said Tonia, taking up the challenge. “And I don’t know how we’re going to do without Olga, now.”

Danello’s lips took on a peculiar curve. “One has to learn to do without, and it saves much trouble to begin early in life. Youth has inevitably many disappointments to swallow.”

Tonia laughed. “But youth has a wonderful digestion. Did you have a good crossing?”

“Never in my life have I had what the English call a ‘good crossing.’” It was his turn to feel admiration, and he was thinking cynically what a wonderful colleague this girl would make in a venture such as his own.

“Neither going nor coming?” she asked casually, and yielded to a wave of recklessness.

Their eyes met, and his brows came down just a fraction. “It is charming to have you so sympathetic about my comfort. What have I done to deserve it? Ah, mademoiselle, with all due respect, I fear that you have a demoralizing effect on my sex. Later on you will be dangerous.”

“But not yet awhile?” she parried.

“I hardly think so. You are quick—yes; you have imagination and perception—yes; but, of necessity, you lack experience.”

“Perhaps, but I’m trying to get over that. You’re not smoking to-night?”

“Unfortunately I have left mine at home.”

Tonia opened her bag. “Try one of these.” She smiled, and held out her cigarette case.

* * * * *

The stage missed a great actor in Paul Danello. That thought came to Tonia often in days that followed, but never more vividly than at this moment when he took the case in his slim hand, turned it over, nodded to himself as he noted the blue enamel monogram, and pressed the spring. He selected a cigarette, snapped the case shut, and gave it back.

“Thank you, mademoiselle. A valuable little possession that. Are you not afraid of losing it?” His lips were just a shade tighter, but his eyes as baffling as ever.

Tonia felt a sudden joy in this test. He knew—undoubtedly he knew, but his manner, though as elusive as before, had changed in some sudden though subtle fashion. It suggested that at last he regarded her with respect, that he admitted her ability and courage, and in some odd fashion welcomed her as a worthy opponent and no longer a merely curious child. And nothing could have more completely fortified her than this. In a metaphorical way, she licked her lips and carried on.

“I did lose it the other day for a few hours,” she said coolly, “but not for

long. Lucky, wasn't it?"

"Luck takes strange shapes sometimes, mademoiselle. I have known it to be misfortune in disguise." Unmistakably there was a touch of anger in his tone now.

"Not if you know what you're doing. Wouldn't you agree with me?"

"You desire me to speak out—yes—I see that—but in this house, and as your guest, I find it not natural. Would it suit your convenience that, say tomorrow, we had a little talk?"

Tonia's bronze hair prickled a little on her skull. It was not through fear of him, but of things suggested by her own imagination. She saw pictures—ugly pictures of a dying man trying to speak, and a black lurcher with his throat cut. At the same time she noted the delicacy of Danello's features, and marvelled that she should associate him with things like this. But the features were only a mask. Small chance for the woman who fell in love with them.

"Would you mind if I brought Hammond with me?" she asked sweetly. "Or if it would do when my brother comes back, I could bring him."

The man actually laughed. Here he was, immaculate in evening dress of a French cut, a cigarette between his long, smooth fingers, believing that the girl to whom he talked knew the secret of the Whispering Lodge—the secret on which his future and security hung, yet regarding the whole affair much as the artist, thumb in palette, brush poised in air, regards his canvas, aware that the success or failure of his work lies in the next few strokes.

It had come to that with Danello now. The next few strokes. He took a long, deliberate look at Olga.

"Mademoiselle, you see that beautiful girl beside your mother. You have for her a certain affection. You would not willingly do her harm?"

Tonia, oddly impressed, wavered a little. "No," she said in a low voice. "I want to keep her from harm."

"Exactly, and so do I. Does that surprise you?"

"I—I think I have ceased to be surprised."

He smiled cynically. "You become blasé at too early an age—so let me tell you something. You have said to yourself: 'I will solve this problem—without any aid I will do it.' I am aware that it is your mind at this moment to smile at me in your too-innocent manner and ask: 'What problem?' But, mademoiselle, we have gone past that point—far past it; how far you yourself do not imagine. You will pardon me for speaking to you like this in your father's house?" He made a gesture. "But you leave not any alternative."

"It's all right—go on," said Tonia rather jerkily.

"I return to Olga. She knows nothing. When you seek to draw information from her, you approach a well that is empty. Also," he added, with an extraordinary look, "you endanger her."

“I never tried to get anything out of her.” This with a touch of warmth. “And,” she went on, beginning to feel that perhaps she was actually imperilling Olga, “I saw that from the first. She didn’t even know about Cramp.”

At that name Danello winced, but recovered himself in a flash.

“Quite true—and it was kept from her. Perhaps you were misguided enough to tell her yourself—but I hope not.”

Tonia could not keep the truth out of her eyes, and Danello frowned.

“A very grave mistake you made there—nor can I undo it. Now I take a liberty and give you a warning. You feel brave—yes, I can see that—but, in reality, you are only foolish. Again, being your guest, I ask your pardon. Another touch from you, and this girl for whom you say you care, will suffer grievously. I can see that neither you nor she realizes how this will come about.

“If, from your security as the daughter of this house, you place Olga in danger, that will not be of my doing. It is my ambition to keep her out of it. Nor can you attack me without also attacking her. So many, many things, mademoiselle, that you do not know. And just one little thing more, but so true a thing. It is that never till your arrival in this forgotten spot did I regard Olga as in any slight way the hostage for my own security. Mademoiselle, if she is that to-day, it is you who have made it so.”

He rose, gave her a formal little bow and strolled over to Lady Netley. “I have had the pleasure of a chat with Miss Tonia. What a most original girl she is.”

Lady Netley, very ready to talk, and, like most women, immediately attracted to the man, expressed her entire approval of the whole Charters family.

“And you,” she added, “how is it we have not met before?”

“Ah, madam, what I follow for gain in one direction is my loss in another. Inevitable, but sad. No, I have had but little time for society here.”

“Mr. Charters tells me you’re banking in London and on the Continent?”

“That is quite true.”

“Then I wish you could make some money for me. Can’t you?”

Danello smiled. “It would be a privilege—but the making of money is rather difficult for oneself.”

“I got a tip to sell francs yesterday. What do you think of that?” Lady Netley was now fairly embarked on her favourite subject.

Tonia overheard this and involuntarily glanced at Danello. He was still smiling. Then something drew the girl’s eyes to his wife, and she caught a look swift and indubitably anxious. It was as though in the woman’s opinion a great deal turned on what her husband would say next. Natural enough that a banker should be interested in francs, but the look suggested far more than this.

“Ah, francs are very, shall we say, tricky things, either to buy or sell at the moment,” said Danello easily.

“French exchange has dropped a lot in the last three months,” observed Charters. “What’s the reason? The country is perfectly sound.”

There was a little pause, and they all looked at Danello. And while they looked it seemed to Tonia that a subtle change came over the man’s face. This was a faint expression in which, to her, pride and amusement were oddly blended. It was as though the man could, actually, answer the question if he chose, but for reasons of his own had decided to say nothing.

“There are possibly many reasons,” he began quietly, “and I heard the matter discussed in Paris two days ago. Opinions differed. For myself, I naturally know no more than many others, but should I make a guess I believe that francs will fall still further till they drop below two hundred to the pound.”

“If I were a gambler I’d sell some,” chuckled Charters.

Danello lifted his slim hand. “May I suggest that you wait till perhaps I have further information?”

“Will you telephone me, too?” said Lady Netley hastily. “It’s frightfully important.”

“At that, madam, I am a little nervous.” He took an oblique glance at Tonia. “You ladies are such gamblers, and to-day you can lose more money in French exchange than at Monte Carlo. *Là-là*, but a suggestion has come to me!”

“Do tell us.”

“Then, as an illustration of what you English call ‘the spirit sporting,’ when the opportunity comes I shall buy or sell for myself—entirely outside my business, in which I have European partners—say twenty pounds’ worth of francs. It will be like something thrown into the air to determine which way blows the wind. At the same time, if you so desire, I will also buy or sell the same amount for you and Mr. Charters. You cannot lose much, and you may make a five-pound note. Well—what do you say?”

Charters laughed. “All right for me; I’ll send you my cheque.”

“But no. Let us leave it this way. If I win I shall send you your profits, while if I lose I shall let you know the extent of your debt.”

“You mean you don’t want me to put anything up?” asked Lady Netley with a certain briskness.

“Nothing—if you please. The amount is too small.” He laughed a little and looked blankly at Tonia. “What will really be at risk is my reputation as a prophet. Is it not so, mademoiselle?”

Tonia got out of it without any direct answer, and the conversation became general. Charters proposed another shoot when Julian came back, at which Bruce brightened considerably, and after some obvious manœuvring captured

a chair next Tonia.

“Who is that fellow, really?” he asked in an aside.

“Didn’t you hear? He’s a banker.”

“Perhaps, but what else? I don’t believe banking’s the big end of it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you any more.”

“Well, there’s something queer about him. He’s as clever as paint, as cold as a fish—don’t believe he has any real feelings at all, and I believe that girl is afraid of him.”

“But why?” demanded Tonia, considerably startled.

“I’ve been watching her, and she’s been watching him out of the tail of her eye. And what’s more, there’s something behind that talk of his about francs. Shouldn’t be surprised if he was speculating heavily in ’em this very minute, and keeping out of the way while he does it.”

“I never thought of that,” she said soberly. “But he’s not important enough or big enough to make any difference to francs—I mean any real difference in their value.”

Bruce shook his head. “You can never tell,” he went on in a lowered voice. “It’s the big fellows who lie low—and very often work through others. They don’t appear in it themselves. I was talking to some men at the club in town yesterday, and they said there’s a regular conspiracy on to depreciate francs, that it’s very successful, that all sorts of queer things are happening, and other Governments are getting involved. The French authorities are all worked up about it, and they can’t spot the real men. Queer go if that chap should prove to be one of them.”

Tonia’s brain began to reel a little. She had not credited Netley with any particular perception, but, she admitted, he might be absolutely right. At any rate, here was food for serious thought.

“Is a thing of that kind illegal—or just gambling?” she ventured.

“From what I’m told of what’s going on, it’s penal servitude if they catch the Johnny. How would he look in stripes and whatever they use instead of the broad arrow?”

“Don’t!” she protested swiftly. “It’s too awful! Think of Olga.”

“Well,” he went on stubbornly, “such things do happen in the best society. And if that girl knows about it—and she can’t live in the house without knowing a good deal—it would explain those frightened looks. I’ve a good mind to try and get a rise out of him now.”

“No—please don’t!” Tonia’s brain was in a whirl, but, in spite of this, she perceived something ludicrous in the situation. She was actually defending Danello. Then, to her astonishment, the man himself made a little bow to Lady Netley, came across the room and stood looking down with the blandest smile imaginable.

“I couldn’t help catching a word or two about francs. You are interested, Mr. Netley?”

Bruce nodded. “Yes—a bit.”

“Then I will make a little small bet with you.”

“What’s that?”

“That you will be far more interested in, say, two months from this date. Mademoiselle, my salutations, and thanks for an evening which, for me, has been most unusual.”

CHAPTER XV

THE COMING OF CONSTANTINE

“DEAR OLD JULE,—

Olga was here for dinner to-night with her people, also the Netleys. They've just gone, and I write at once. I had a bit of a talk with Danello, and, to be honest, he's rather scared me. I can't put it in a letter, but, as the matter stands, I'm sure we'll have to be awfully careful or we'll get Olga in a bad box. So you and, I suppose, Rodney had better get here as soon as you can. Something is going to happen pretty quickly now. I feel sure of that, and have a hazy idea of what the man's up to.

Yours ever,
TONIA.

“PS.—She certainly is a dear, and I'm getting very fond of her. I tried to draw mother, but didn't get very far, being afraid of giving the whole thing away. She looked as lovely as ever to-night. Come the very minute you can.—T.”

Tonia read this over, decided that it would be a mistake to try and say more, then picked up her cigarette case and examined it thoughtfully. If only she knew where it had been found—and how! This brought up the look in Danello's eyes when she handed him the thing.

Yes—a great actor; but to-night he had dropped the mask. It was queer to have cornered a man like him, and one so much more astute than herself. And she was oddly convinced that there had been more truth in what he said than ever before. He had bluffed with the truth! Especially, concluded Tonia, in the part that had to do with Olga.

There lay the difficulty. Olga was anchored to her brother, and Danello knew it. The devilish cleverness of the man came in here, because he relied on the girl's natural instincts—sometimes far more tender than he had ever felt himself—and used these in his own protection. And so long as he could dangle Raphael's safety in front of his sister's eyes, and at the same time conceal Raphael's whereabouts, the man knew that her mouth was sealed. The thing, then, was to find Raphael.

Tonia set her brain to work on this, recalling everything Olga had ever said

about her brother. He was being used. He had not a strong nature, and could easily be made a dupe. Danello knew where he was—and kept that to himself, except that he dropped the ambiguous information that Raphael was at “the other end.”

The phrase took on a certain significance in Tonia’s mind, because it sounded like something a man like Danello might say—a remark that actually did convey something, but was at the same time beyond the intelligence of Olga to interpret. It was what one might call “Danellish,” in that it probably had a substratum of truth put in a baffling and rather contemptuous form. And, on account of this, Tonia worried at it like a terrier. The other end of what?

She stared at the elm-tops just visible against the darkling sky, and one possible explanation came to her. Since this evening, she had imagined a group of men allied in Danello’s scheme to depress francs in various countries of Europe. Probably, if such were the case, other groups worked with them and for them.

In such circumstances one could hardly imagine an “end” anywhere. Nor could one think of the weak-natured Raphael being engaged in any such enterprise. He might, however, serve as a messenger, a go-between, whose duties were very simple and demanded only implicit obedience.

She had got thus far, when the obvious solution jumped at her. The other end of the air-line!

At this she gave an involuntary exclamation, and blamed herself savagely for not having seen it before. Immediately she pictured Danello’s silent cruiser of the air descending from the clouds, probably somewhere in France, and met by the too-trusting Raphael.

What did he then get? Documents, no doubt, and, equally without doubt, forged documents that involved the French Government, and set up complications with other Powers. One could understand the punishment for such an offence being penal servitude.

There followed a strange moment, during which she visioned the man in prison garb, doing convict work. That had begun to seem brutal to one like him, when down in the avenue the body of Cramp seemed to signal that justice must be served. At that, Tonia shivered a little. The thing got more grim every moment—and who was she to put anyone in chains?

As though in answer to this came the vision of Olga’s lovely eyes—Olga, whom Danello proposed to thrust into the arms of a man she detested—Olga, who loved and was loved by Julian. This was the strongest appeal of all, being armed with youth and beauty and honesty. The very spirit of Olga as well as her body was at stake, and none who saw the girl could mistake her for being other than she was.

It was at this point in her thoughts—and never had they been deeper than at

this moment—that something else obtruded itself. She realized with a curious certainty that she wanted the support of some one else—not Julian, who was bound to be prejudiced, but some one who could stand off and see the thing clearly and uninfluenced. Her first impulse was to go straight to her father. Heretofore there had been no secrets from him.

But there were objections. The very concealment on which she had prided herself would weigh against her there. And others would be dragged into it. Hammond, for instance! And Olga herself!

Complications piled up. Her father might feel compelled to consult the authorities before he moved, which, in turn, might negate everything. Perhaps, in his own straightforward fashion, he would go direct to Danello. Tonia quivered at the mere idea of that.

Only one possible person presented himself. Rodney!

Strange that she should be forced back to him. It made her feel a little weak, because it would bring Rodney closer than ever before. Her pride suggested that he was the one man she would like to be able to do without, but another part of herself—one in which pride had no place—seemed to announce that she was no stronger than any other woman of her age, and that what was written was written.

Then, for the first time in her young life, she suspected one great truth. It was that the greatest conquest is often the fruit of a great surrender.

* * * * *

Half a mile away Danello pushed some papers into his desk and turned to his wife, who sat, twisting her fingers nervously and watching him with strained attention.

“Well, now that you know what has happened, have you anything to say? Perhaps it does not matter much—as I have a great deal to do, and in a short time. But it is incredible that you should have been so thoughtless.”

“Yes, Paul, I know. But who would have suspected it?”

“What person of ordinary intelligence would not? For the very first time the girl is left alone with that fool Otto. Yes, she arranged it. For that I give her credit. Also it is impossible that she should enter that room and not understand at a glance. There is but one slight hold on her now.”

“Raphael?” ventured the woman.

“Exactly. Should discovery come, he could not imaginably be acquitted. It is therefore all-important that his slow mind be not aroused. Ah! The idea comes at last!”

“What?”

“In one moment I will tell you. Let us assume, first, that Olga now knows everything. For instance, only to-night she learned of the Cramp affair.”

“But how?” Madame Danello was greatly startled.

“The other young fool of a Charters told her.”

“But, Paul, I feel sure that is all she knows.”

“How can you feel so sure?”

“I cannot explain. If she knew everything she could not disguise it.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps it is so much the better if she does. At any rate, what has happened makes necessary a change in my plans; and, *Mon Dieu!* in the plans of many others. I spoke of leaving here in three months—but it will actually be in three weeks. That is for you alone. Let no whisper of that escape you, Marie, or it is possible that I shall have but one hand free to wave you farewell.”

“Don’t, Paul!” she whispered, terrified, suddenly forgetful of all else.

“Then breathe it not. On the contrary—and this is the idea—you will tell Olga that we leave here in six weeks, and not before that time will it be possible for me to arrange what I have promised for Raphael. You will lay stress on this point.”

“I see,” she said, with a sort of grudging admiration. “And meantime she must not associate with that girl?”

He made an impatient gesture. “What a cabbage of a mind! Exactly the opposite. Let them be friends of the bosom, if they wish. Immediately she will tell the regrettable Miss Charters of the six weeks’ plan, but give no whisper of the reason. So by the time Miss Tonia has provided for the denouement of which, without doubt, she is thinking at this moment, the Lodge will be available for a new tenant. Olga loves her brother—I, yes, I love my little enterprise—therefore I set one against the other. Come—have you a criticism?”

She looked at him with an extraordinary expression. It was this phase of him, this alert and ever-agile quality of imagination, that from the first had fascinated her. Long before now she had given up any expectation of gaining his love, because she had gradually realized that it was not in him to love like other men. His only passions were for the ventures of life, and the greater the venture in risk, the greater the passion. He represented to her now a sort of rare if unscrupulous human thinking-machine, which, on account of its very rareness, was worth every effort of preservation.

“Paul,” she said, with a sudden gentleness in her voice, “when this is all over—when the millions are yours—will you be content with what you called the power of money? That seems too simple an occupation for you, merely to exercise power because you have money. Will you not get tired of it, and try something like this again—perhaps only for the amusement?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “But life will then, most naturally, be full of amusement.”

“Of what kind?”

“Watching the bewilderment of those who are trying to find how it was done and who did it. Already I begin to smile. To-morrow, then, you will impress on Olga what I have told you. You will encourage her to see her friend. Olga, since I have said nothing to her of the matter of the cigarette case, will think that, after all, it is not important. That is, if you are right in assuming that she has not read the secret of the cellar room. On the other hand, if she has read it, she is not likely to impart it to her friend, since Raphael stands with me in this affair. *Là-là*, what a useful boy is our Raphael!”

“I understand,” she said. “But what are you telling Oscar? Does anything strike you concerning that man?”

Danello frowned a little. “I am not blind. In his thick mind he is trying to wash the blood from his hands. Also he blames me for that blood. I told him to hit—yes—but not to kill—except in the case of that much-to-be-condemned dog. It seems, however, that for him it is simpler to kill—for which reason I am now glad he caught no one on Wednesday night.”

“His eyes,” murmured the woman uncomfortably, “his eyes are different.”

“Do I not see that for myself? But one must not show it.” He paused, stroking his chin, and his own eyes began to reflect a cold, hard light. “It occurs to me now that, perhaps——” He broke off and sent her a strange glance.

“No—no, Paul!” she protested, terrified all in a breath. “Do not say it! One is enough—too much!”

“You are nervous to-night, *chérie*—a night when one should be calm and think quietly. Who is Oscar, and what is he worth to this world? The answer is nothing. I do not propose to offer him as a sacrifice but it may be advisable to use him adroitly as a human screen for the movements of others. There is no evidence to connect him with the affair of Cramp once I am out of this deplorable country. *Soyez tranquille*, Marie. It is not a matter that need be discussed yet. Now go to bed, and dream of the villa we shall buy in Monaco. It will overlook the sea—and such a garden!”

“Monaco?” she said curiously.

“Yes—that independent monarchy—so independent and so safe—lying next a country that is greatly interested in my present efforts. *A la bonne heure*, Marie.”

She went to her room as in a dream, her heart beating fast. She did love him after all, and in a strange definite way not to be explained. Also she loved Olga, and with the voiceless yearning of a childless woman. Something called to her, and, opening the door of Olga’s room very softly, she stole in.

The girl was asleep, her cheek cushioned on her arm, the dark hair in a soft confusion. Young, utterly lovely, utterly defenceless she looked now, and as she slept she smiled ever so faintly. Madame Danello caught her breath at the

sight, and pressed her hand against her own barren breast.

“*Pauvre petite!*” she whispered. “*Ma pauvre petite!*”

* * * * *

There followed for Tonia three anxious days, during which she was genuinely bewildered. Impressed by what Danello had said, and at the same time uncertain how much of it to believe, she felt in this period something like a deserter with regard to Olga. And meantime Danello’s plans were without doubt maturing fast.

Finally the suspense became too great, and she set off down the avenue. Coming out on the Charterden road, she glanced up the Lodge drive.

Olga was in the garden, and alone, and at Tonia’s low whistle she turned and waved her hand.

“Do come in and have tea with me. I haven’t seen you for ages.”

Tonia gulped with surprise and went in. No one but Olga was visible, and the place seemed rather deserted. She took a quick look round.

“I’ve wanted to come awfully, but thought I’d better not. Is no one here?”

“They’re both in London.”

“There’s just Oscar and the other man?”

Olga nodded. “Yes—and it makes me feel queer. They didn’t give me the usual instructions, but just went off. Have you heard from Julian?”

“Yesterday, and he’s coming at the end of the week. Does that help?”

The girl sent her a wistful smile. “If only it could help—really!” She paused, then shook her head with an expression of despair. “We are going away in six weeks.”

“All of you?” stammered Tonia.

“Yes—I think to Austria. Aunt told me the morning after your dinner. From the way she said it, I don’t think she cares whether I tell you or not. Raphael is to meet us there, and—and Constantine!”

“Constantine?” murmured Tonia gravely.

“Yes. It is this way, that in six weeks my uncle’s affair will be finished. After that—well—Constantine.”

“Never that!” flashed Tonia. Again she glanced round, scanning the windows with wary eyes. “And I have something to tell you. What else did she say?”

“Only that if I am imprudent I will risk Raphael’s safety. The safety of everyone hangs together.”

“Do you believe it?”

“I am afraid not to believe.”

“Did he say anything about the cigarette case?”

“No, not one word. He knows that I took it, but has reasons for not speaking.”

Tonia, feeling still more baffled, put that phase of it aside. Six weeks? Supposing, on the other hand, that what was contemplated was a quicker move than this—that Danello reckoned the information would be handed on, and it suited him to have it so? The more she reflected the more probable it seemed. It would be like him to throw out the most misleading thing of all—the half-truth.

“Then, apart from the matter of Constantine, it is Raphael for whom you fear?”

“Yes—not knowing where he is, I cannot warn him.”

“I think I know,” said Tonia very gently.

The girl caught at her hand in an agony of suspense. “Where?”

“Danello told you himself. At the other end.”

“But of what? That tells me nothing.” The voice was tremulous with sudden hope.

“The other end of the air-line. It is like Danello to give you the truth, but to put it in a form that apparently means nothing.”

Olga breathed quickly, her eyes very large and wondering. “It may be that you are right. I had not thought of that. But, even so, how am I to reach him? That pilot would carry nothing for me. He has never even seen me.”

Tonia patted her arm assuringly. “We must be very wise, and not attempt anything before Julian gets here. Mr. Bethune”—here she hesitated an instant—“we can count on him, too. And there’s always Hammond. Now I’ll tell you something more. I believe your uncle is in a conspiracy against the French Government. It’s making international trouble, this conspiracy, and the Government is looking for the men behind it. Also, I’m told, that if they’re found the punishment is penal servitude.”

“Then it *is* true!” gasped Olga.

“What?”

“What my uncle told me—that if Raphael is caught he will live on bread and water!”

Tonia stared at her open-mouthed. “But that tells us everything! Don’t you see?”

There was a little silence, during which the two felt very much alone, and rather frightened. Tonia perceived that the thing she was dabbling in as an amateur detective had very great proportions. Danello’s warning to this girl was also his own confession, and out of his own mouth it came. Tonia saw the whole case take definite form, with Olga as a witness. Then, with a jerk, she remembered that Olga could not speak.

It was on top of this, and with a rush that made her blink, that the final revelation came. The facts on which it was based, the walls behind which it had been screened—all these came apart and sorted themselves out into a

pattern so simple and unmistakable that, had the situation been less serious, she would have laughed at her own stupidity.

The secret of Whispering Lodge was hers—vividly hers—and she might have guessed it long ago. There it was, plain as day. She choked back her excitement, aware that Olga was looking at her strangely.

“Yes, I see that there is a conspiracy. But of what kind?”

Was it imaginable that she did not know? Tonia floundered over this, and was forced to the conclusion that she did not. It was amazing—but true. Instantly, then, it was obvious that in her very ignorance lay her own safety. Not only innocent of the cause of the death of Cramp, she was also innocent of the secret of Whispering Lodge. How could this be?

Tonia, marvelling, and still conscious of those questioning eyes, concluded that Danello himself, and none other, was to be thanked. To safeguard himself he had kept her in ignorance. More than that, he had dominated her mind, charging it with what he desired it to hold, ridding it of all that might in any way risk his enterprise. And now, when the enterprise hung by a thread, of them all only this girl was secure.

There was more than this. Olga must not know—even now. At once this seemed of paramount importance for a thousand reasons, none of which could be put into so many words. Tonia’s mind became flooded with thoughts. She felt inarticulate.

“You do not answer me,” said Olga. “Why not? What is the conspiracy?”

“I—I did not hear any details, but the fact is known. Do not worry about that part of it—there’s too much to be done. First, about that aeroplane. It will not come to this landing-ground again. We can be sure of that.”

Olga nodded. “I think you are right there, but there is another, and not far off.”

“How do you know?”

“It is nearly a year ago that I heard my uncle talking with Oscar about it. The place is below the old mill at the brow of the hill on the other side of Charterden. In the war it was used. I think that sometimes my uncle has used it also.”

Tonia’s eyes rounded a little. “Does Danello—I can’t think of him somehow as your uncle—know you overheard this?”

“No, I was on the other side of a hedge. It did not seem important at that time. Is it important now?”

Tonia wanted to get away by herself and think—think. A plan—her own plan—had begun to formulate, nebulous at first, but gradually assuming definition. She wanted to attack this plan—tear it to pieces—and see if it would go together again. And she must try it alone—make herself sure of it—before putting it to Julian and Rodney.

There came back to her now something that Rodney had said which might be very applicable. Then, suddenly, she asked herself who was she to undertake a thing like this?

“It may be very important,” she said thoughtfully. “Could you walk over there?”

“Perhaps I might. It really depends on Oscar.”

“Why Oscar?” asked Tonia abruptly.

“It is possible that he has been told to follow me.”

“Let him follow till he’s blue in the face. He can’t hear what we say.”

Olga’s colour had crept into her cheeks when the two passed through the village and turned westward along the shoulder of a small plateau that dipped sharply to the misty Weald of Kent. At its extreme point stood the conical framework of an old mill that overlooked a wide stretch of fertile country bounded on the south by the high ridge that parallels the Channel coast. There were no houses close by, and one got the sensation of distance and space. At the foot of this slope, well sheltered from northerly winds, was a hundred acres of nearly flat ground.

“You are looking at it now,” said Olga in a low voice. “I’m sure the machine has come down here.”

Tonia nodded, and made a mental photograph. “I think it’s very likely to land again. It could, and without anyone knowing of it. Olga—tell me something!”

“Yes?”

“Did you know that that machine was absolutely silent?”

“I never saw it myself,” was the extraordinary reply.

“You didn’t know that Danello was communicating with the Continent by air?”

“Not till you told me about it last Wednesday night. But I have heard my uncle speak of the silencer. That must be it. It’s the invention of the pilot—whoever he is. They expect to sell it for a very large sum.”

Tonia, picturing the use of the thing in warfare, jumped to the conclusion that it would be worth a fortune, and realized what it must have meant to Danello already. She perceived in this private cruiser of the air the possible salvation of Raphael; but of that she dared not yet breathe a word to Raphael’s sister. The intensity of her thoughts began almost to hurt, so, presently, she sat down, cupped her chin in a smooth brown hand, and talked.

“It’s really awfully difficult, and between ourselves I’m a bit frightened. Danello simply hates me—if I understand that smile of his. You say he’s going in six weeks, but I don’t believe he’ll dare to wait that long. If I told you what was in my mind, you’d get excited—you couldn’t help it—and that might mix things up badly. I—that is, we—I mean Julian and Rodney and I—want to

save Raphael whatever happens. I think it's possible—if certain things can be done.”

Olga stared at her, murmured something inaudible, then made a pathetic little gesture.

“That—and one other thing—makes me happier than for years. But what am I to do?”

“Nothing. Just be as natural as you can. I suppose we three are mad to keep all this to ourselves—but you know why. Now I'm thinking of Julian. I've written asking him to get here as soon as he can. This man Constantine—do you want to tell me anything about him?”

“Yes, what little I know. Strange to say, I do not dislike him. I have only seen him twice—each time at the Lodge—and he was always respectful. I know he admired me, but he did not try to make much love. After he left the second time Danello told me what had been arranged.”

Tonia frowned. “Is he, then, very important?”

“I have heard my uncle say he is more so than any of the rest. He seems to travel a great deal, and is not Greek, like his name, but a Frenchman of good birth, my uncle says.”

“What does he look like?” asked Tonia bluntly.

“Tall, and—yes—perhaps handsome, with good eyes, a straight nose and a manner very polite.”

“And he has never made real love to you?”

“Not at any time.”

Tonia actually laughed. “How unnatural! I think we ought to be getting back now.”

There was no one in sight at the Lodge when they returned, and Olga breathed more freely.

“You will come in and have tea?”

“Yes—I'd like to.”

Oscar, his face quite impassive, had served them, when there came the crunch of wheels on the gravel and a car drove up. Olga started to her feet, glanced out and gave a sharp little cry.

“What's the matter?” demanded Tonia. “Am I not supposed to be here?”

Olga, greatly agitated, shook her head. “It is not that. It is Constantine!”

* * * * *

To Tonia it was exactly as though she had stepped out of the audience in a cinema and become part of the picture. There was Danello with his inscrutable smile; Olga, her face full of mingled astonishment and fear; Madame, nothing more than the creature of a master-mind; and Constantine himself, very dapper and polite, a faint amusement visible on his decidedly good-looking features.

There followed a very brief but dramatic pause, then Danello, who was

enjoying himself to the uttermost, stepped in with his accustomed *savoir-faire*.

“Ah, mademoiselle, I am delighted to find you here to behold the little surprise prepared for Olga. Permit me to introduce Monsieur Hugo Constantine. Hugo, you have the privilege of meeting Miss Charters—of whom we were speaking only this morning.”

He said this with a sort of gaiety that Tonia perceived to be genuine. He liked saying it, and was obviously revelling in all it implied. Constantine bowed, and when Tonia put out her hand he raised it to his lips, and for the first time in her life the hand was kissed in Continental fashion.

She felt the faint tickling of a small black moustache, felt a wild desire to shout with laughter, and had a warning thrill as she realized that this personable young man knew everything. But, superficially, he was like any other young man—only more handsome. Then Olga’s hand was similarly saluted.

“I am charmed to be here, if only for an hour or two,” said he in perfect English.

Olga seemed smitten into silence, and Danello smiled. “You have taken away the breath of my niece. But why not speak French? Mademoiselle Charters talks our language like a native.”

Tonia gulped, decided that she was no match for the two of them, and relapsed into French. “You’re not staying at the Lodge, then?”

“No. It grieves me that we meet only to part, but I return to Paris to-night. I have snatched a moment to pay my respects to Olga, who, perhaps”—he glanced at her suavely—“would favour me with a little promenade?”

“I—if you like,” she said timidly.

Danello nodded, blandly content. “Yes, and, *chérie*, you must put on a warmer coat. One is capable of a chill in this abominable country, whatever the date—or circumstances. Mademoiselle, I am glad that Constantine has had the opportunity to meet you—if only to say adieu.”

“A very short acquaintance, monsieur. You live in Budapest?”

His brows went up a little. “The knowledge of mademoiselle is surprising. How does she know that?”

“From Olga, of course. Are you to remain there after you are married?”

“Ah—who can tell where one will live? It depends so much on one’s wife.”

“And you and Mr. Danello are in the banking business together?”

“Yes, we are what you might call partners—except that in this business the senior partner gets most of the profits—eh, *mon vieux*?”

“Well,” smiled Tonia audaciously, “I suppose he tells you how hard he works in London, but it seems to me he spends more time over his roses than his desk.”

Danello chuckled. "My dear Hugo, nothing escapes this young lady—at least that is what she thinks. But she has an imagination which is too active for these damp and memorial surroundings. For instance—she observes me pruning a rose-tree, and concludes that I do nothing else. *Là-là*, but it is unfair. *Nous sommes jamais d'accord*. But here is Olga!"

The girl came in, very pale, not daring to glance at Tonia. Constantine made a formal little bow to her, then another to Tonia.

"Au revoir, mademoiselle—or more likely—it is adieu."

For a fraction of time she did not reply, but, summoning all her will, recorded that smooth, dark face in a memory that would never let the picture fade. At this moment she felt many things, and chiefly that it was enormously important to remember this man.

Danello had never expected them to meet, but, when they did, he grasped the situation in an instant, and carried it off with his usual bravado. But, oddly enough, Constantine did not suggest a dishonest man—a weak man—a man who would risk penal servitude. It was good evidence of the ability of Danello that he should have enlisted such individualities as this in his cause.

"It's strange," she said, "but I've a queer feeling that we're going to meet again before long. I don't believe we're just passing like ships in the night."

"I shall look forward to this most welcome possibility, mademoiselle. And," he added with a little smile, "so will Olga." He slipped his arm into that of the girl, bowed again and disappeared.

"Might I be permitted to escort our visitor home?" asked Danello, with a provocative look. "It is getting dark in the avenue now."

"No, thank you," said Tonia, with her very sweetest expression. "I've got over being afraid in the dark."

"You are to be congratulated." His voice was very cynical. "And I trust you were favourably impressed with Constantine?"

"So much so that it makes me wonder. Au revoir, m'sieu'."

She took out her cigarette case, borrowed a match, struck it, laughed in his face, and went off with her nose in the air.

Once out of sight, her pace slackened. To tell the truth, she did not fancy the avenue under the circumstances, so took a roundabout way home, thinking very hard. Constantine's appearance had something of the nature of a bluff, but at this moment she felt it to be very significant.

Something was brewing! The harder she thought, the more convinced she became of it, also that early action on her own part was very necessary—if it was to amount to anything.

It seemed, to begin with, that two things were imperative. She must get word to Raphael—and get Olga out of the Lodge. Olga, in short, must disappear. But whither—and how? And Olga would not act herself until

assured of her brother's safety. Thus it all turned on Raphael.

Suddenly it was quite clear that the time had passed when it was safe to play a lone hand any longer. The risk was too great. Danello, without doubt, had his plan—but what had she to match it with?

Again the imponderable element of time presented itself. Now—this very moment—he and Constantine probably had their heads together. And for this, and no other reason, Constantine had come to Charterden. She took a quick breath, hurried back to the village, and scribbled a telegram.

Next morning she went on Hammond's trail and found him at the edge of a spinney, a gun under his arm, his face rather red.

"What's on, Hammond? You look very determined."

"To tell the truth, miss, I'm after a fox."

"What! You'd shoot a fox! I thought that was worse than high treason."

"Well, miss, there's foxes and foxes. The one I'm after ain't more'n half a fox. He skulks round here all day, an' thieves all night. Got seven of my fowls last week, he did. He won't run before hounds because he don't know the country, an' what's more, there ain't no heart in him. I guess he's one of them laid-down foxes—which never was any good."

"I didn't know you could lay down a fox like you could—or a hen could—an egg. And there's something I want to ask you."

"What's that, miss?"

"Will you keep it to yourself?"

Hammond grinned broadly. "Seems like as though I'd started that already."

"Can you find me a man, or a couple of men—or boys—you can depend on—to sit up at night?"

Hammond looked puzzled. "To-night, miss?"

"For several nights—I don't know how many—perhaps for three weeks or so. You can guess what it is."

"I could," he said soberly, "but how about keeping it quiet? What one person knows here, most everyone knows."

"They needn't keep it quiet after it's over. It's that machine—I can't sit up all night myself, but I've simply got to know when and where it lands again. It's frightfully important and there's no one but you to turn to."

"There's one place I reckon it won't land."

"Where?"

"Where it did before. I saw a man come out an' fill up them holes the last thing last night."

"Splendid—and we both know why. I'm counting that the next will be below the old mill. It may be in a week—or ten days—I can't tell anything about it, but that's what I feel. Now whom can you find?"

"Got to be them as will keep their traps shut," ruminated the keeper. "What

about my two young brothers as lives with my sister? 'Taint far from the old mill neither. Got their holidays now, they have, an' they won't talk if I tell 'em not to."

Tonia took a long breath of relief. "Hammond, you're a wonder. But how am I going to get you if you're wanted in the middle of the night? And I may want you—for Oscar."

"Well, miss, seeing as what's going to happen, if anything, will likely be before two in the morning, a little less sleep won't hurt my health none. An' if it so be that Mr. Jollands thinks I'm a bit late on mornings like, I'll put it to them thievin' foxes."

"Yes, do—and what should I give your brothers? Five shillings a night each—is that enough?"

Hammond grinned at her. "They'd stand on their heads till sunrise for a bob. You leave that to me, miss."

She went off feeling vastly fortified. And now to warn Olga! But that, she decided, could not be done before reinforcements arrived.

* * * * *

They came in thirty-six hours, and her heart felt lighter. Rodney looked as cheerful as ever, but Julian's face was significant of strain. His mother, kissing him, was unaccountably anxious.

"My dear boy, it's wonderful to see you a day ahead of time. Have you been working very hard?"

"No—thanks—I'm quite all right."

"Has he, Rodney?"

"I don't know much about these post-graduate courses, but they're not supposed to overtax the youthful mind. Sort of pick-and-choose game, I understand. Of course, you can't kill a natural thirst for knowledge."

She laughed. "But the climate? I've heard Oxford was so damp."

"A good deal of the place will be under water later on. No—it isn't over-damp."

"I never heard an Englishman call England damp," remarked Tonia. "More jam, please."

"Well," he said promptly, "we who have the privilege of being English ought to know. Like the county of Kent any better yourself?"

"I suppose it's all right—as counties go here."

"So they say—in Kent. Any pheasants left?"

"Thousands—simply asking to be shot—you butcher."

"Quite—and a most ancient and honourable trade. You ought to see the silver of the Master Butchers Guild in London. Perfectly corking. Now, why don't you and Julian show me some of these pheasants you rave about?"

This got them out of the house very quickly, and no sooner were they on

the drive than Julian turned to his sister.

“How is she?”

“Perfectly well, Jule; rather frightened and longing to see you. After yesterday I felt I ought to wire.”

“Tell me about yesterday—and how *am* I going to see her?”

“The best way is to go straight there—and bluff it. I’m getting good at bluffing. Danello and I have been at it ever since you left.” She went on rapidly, giving things as they happened, her voice huskier and huskier with excitement. “Then, yesterday, Constantine turned up. I thought I’d die, but don’t think I showed it. And you ought to have seen Danello’s face when he trotted him out. He thought he’d stumped me, and he nearly did—for a minute.”

Julian whistled. “The man he wants to make her marry!”

“Yes, and”—here she gave a chaotic little laugh—“really, he’s very good-looking. Much better than you are.”

Rodney cackled. “One on our post-graduate! Carry on, Tonia.”

“Well, we slung compliments in French at each other for a while—Danello actually had the nerve to tell him that I spoke good French—then he went off for a promenade with Olga. She looked as though she were going to be beheaded. I haven’t seen her since.”

Julian made a large, soft sound of swallowing something. “You’re dead sure she really dislikes him?”

“You’d better find that out for yourself. And, look here—don’t be solemn—as you are at present, but as offhand and cheery as you know how—and we’ll see that you have a few minutes together. What we’ve come for is to ask her to motor over and see a meet near Fidlow. Wouldn’t it be a joke if there is one.”

CHAPTER XVI

CONSPIRACY

DANELLO was at his desk when the voices of the three visitors became audible outside. At the same moment his wife hurried into the room.

“Paul, she is here again, that girl, with her brother and his friend. What am I to say?”

He looked in no way disturbed. “It is very easy. Say nothing except that—yes—it is as well to suggest that in six weeks we move to—let us say—France. And, above all, *restez tranquille*, Marie. This is no time for excitement. You will make my excuses—I am too occupied to appear.”

“And Olga—she is free to go with them?”

“But why not? There is nothing more disarming than freedom, if it is only apparent. Compose yourself.”

She went down, followed shortly by Olga. Ostensibly there was nothing very significant in this meeting. Acting—they were all acting—and Tonia had never dissimulated more completely than she did now. She saw the look in Julian’s face when Olga came in, noted the tension in the girl’s lovely eyes, and marvelled at the poise of Madame Danello. How much more this woman must know than she appeared to know! Then, because play-acting was so difficult, she spoke out brusquely.

“May Olga come for a walk, and could she drive over to a meet near Fidlow next week, Mrs. Danello?”

“But, certainly, and it is most kind. We are anxious that she does everything possible in the short time that remains.”

Tonia, perceiving by Julian’s expression that he could not be trusted to say much at the moment, promptly shook her head.

“Then you really think of going in six weeks?”

“Alas, yes, that is so.”

“I know it’s awfully rude, but I do hope something will upset all your plans.”

Madame smiled a little grimly. “That is so very graceful, but this time I fear that my husband’s plans are too important to be upset. He is about to write to your father in the matter of the lease.”

This sounded so definite that Julian controlled himself with difficulty. He had been studying Olga’s face with a hunger that was unbearable, and Tonia, missing nothing, thought wise to manœuvre her party into freer air. Once

safely on the Charterden road, she made a gesture to Rodney and forged blatantly ahead. When they were out of hearing she sent him a straight glance, and felt a throb of satisfaction at his clean-cut, athletic build. A useful man in any kind of corner.

“Look here—you weren’t taken in by that talk of six weeks?”

“You evidently haven’t any doubts.”

“I haven’t; and we’re all in the air unless you’ll accept my version of it. I know I’m right. Does that seem a bit stuck up?”

He grinned at her. “Good enough, as far as this matter goes. What’s my end of it?”

“Well,” she said, trying to iron the excitement out of her husky voice, “that machine is coming back—some time, and it’s in my bones that that will be the wind-up of things at the Lodge. It’ll come for something—documents that have to do with the conspiracy. Danello evolves them in the cellar with Oscar. They go by air to Olga’s brother Raphael. That’s clear. He dare not trust them to the post—and actually used father a few days after we got here. Now don’t you see?”

“Hanged if I do.”

“Really, Rodney, I thought better of Oxford. We’ve got to do two things—at least you and Julian have. Either Danello or Oscar will meet that machine with whatever is to go over. We can’t enclose anything to Raphael in the packet, and even if we could manage that, I’ve an idea that it isn’t his job to open it himself. He probably just passes it on—perhaps to Constantine. At the same time, we’ve simply got to warn him, because Olga won’t move hand or foot till that is done. And the pilot is one of Danello’s group. Do you speak French?”

“My French would give you a pain.”

“Then that settles it. Julian will have to go.”

“Go where, child?” he asked blandly.

“To France in that machine.”

He stared at her. “From what you say, it isn’t exactly in the passenger business.”

“Rodney! Please pull your wits together. Oscar—or Danello—must be held up—the packet taken. Whoever takes it must fly over as though sent from Danello—must warn Raphael—and then”—she hesitated a moment—“well, then it’s simply a matter of getting back here. We have all the evidence we want. Raphael is safe and Danello is up a tree. If we don’t do that the Danellos simply make a formal call to say good-bye; they move off, Julian never sees Olga again, and we are done for.”

“I’ll be darned!” breathed Rodney softly. “I’ll be darned several times.”

“You will if you don’t co-op,” she said coolly. “Probably all you’ll have to

do is to knock out Oscar. Aren't you in training?"

His jaw advanced a shade. "Look here, you can't reach me that way, and it's just as well to remember that what you propose is a pretty grave proposition, any way you look at it. What is Danello up to? That's one little point I'd like light on, and it's entirely outside the matter of Olga and Julian."

"Anything else?" Her voice was demure and distinctly provocative.

He looked her straight in the face. "You know what else. Why go on dodging it?"

"That has nothing to do with this," she argued hurriedly. "And I don't see _____"

Rodney lit his pipe with extreme deliberation. "In other words, you suggest that I should knock a man out and rob him, merely with the view of helping Julian to get the girl he wants. Well, we Oxford chaps are apt to hang together, but that's stretching it—just a bit. No other inducement?"

Tonia, glowering at him, felt an undeniable thrill. Here it was again, the old conflict, the same secret subdivision of herself, the same lurking fear, the same unnameable attraction. His eyes were fastened on her, clear and wide open, the eyes of a man who has nothing to hide. There lay his strength. He had nothing to hide—nothing to conquer. She knew in her soul that she might go on year after year, meeting other men, fighting the same battle, and never find anyone nearer her own classification of what really composed a man. And yet——?

"You demand promise of pay in advance?" she said unsteadily.

Rodney drew a long breath. It seemed that in this moment he began to understand. How it was he could not tell, but there came to him the suggestion that there were better ways of attaining the citadel than by direct storming of its walls.

There might be a traitor inside, an old, old traitor, old as time and young as love, who would lift the latch as he had lifted it a million times before. And perhaps Tonia, who was not looking at him now, but over the hills and far away, also suspected this traitor. But, perceived Rodney, this was no hour in which to make love.

"Suppose," he said very quietly, "that I accepted anything you suggested as being good enough, and simply did it, and left the rest to you?"

"Even though I were to tell you beforehand that there wasn't any rest?" she ventured, trying him as much as she dared.

"Yes, even if you did."

The hidden self of her began to waver, till, all of a sudden, she knew. Never before had any other man approached her like this; or put himself so aside; or left himself so completely in her hands. They had all protested, implored, besought, sometimes raved, and in various ways lost hold of themselves. Thus they lost hold of her.

But here was one who did nothing of this sort—and left the rest to her—keeping a firm hold of himself. For a chaotic moment she wondered if this was the real significance of what she called “being utterly English,” then, aware of the steady eyes, made a prodigious effort, and nodded cheerfully.

“You’ve gone up ten points, and why couldn’t you be like this before? Now, as to what Danello is doing, if you can get hold of those papers from Oscar, the French Government will buy them at your own figure. I heard that not long ago.”

“From whom?” he demanded dubiously.

“Bruce Netley—you remember him.”

“Has he been here?”

“Yes, Rodney, he has—with his dear, sweet mother—such a gentle, appealing old soul. Lately she’s been appealing to Bruce to marry me, as a sort of kindly act to a colonial, I assume.”

“Really?” said Rodney heavily.

“Quite!—if it’s right to use ‘quite’ like that. She’s overlooked one or two small points, but it doesn’t matter. Bruce himself is all right as a sort of automatic game-killer, but he doesn’t go much further—which isn’t his fault, but of what I suppose is the English system.”

Rodney chuckled and felt considerably relieved. “What does he know about Danello?”

“Nothing, but he’s quite well posted on what’s going on on the Continent in a political way. So, putting that with what we know, it doesn’t leave much doubt.”

“Then Danello is forging documents?”

“You grab that packet when the time comes and see for yourself. Now I’ve got to talk to Olga. Can we pry those two apart?”

“Sounds a bit brutal to me,” he murmured. “Are you going to give her your plan?”

“No—I’d better not. All we want is a letter to Raphael telling him to get lost in the dust. I wouldn’t put in any other information at all. The idea is that as soon as we get that packet and get Olga out of the Lodge we’ll turn the thing over to the police.”

“And suppose the packet doesn’t contain what you expect?” he asked cheerfully.

She shook her head at that. “Weigh all the facts that go to make up what we know so far, and you can’t conclude that he isn’t crooked. Anyway, there’s our little gamble. If you don’t fancy it, why——”

Rodney laughed. “In a year from now you’ll know me better than to talk like that.”

“What do you mean?” she blurted.

“Oh, nothing special. Got a match about you?”

* * * * *

Julian, meantime, was not quite certain whether he inhabited the upper or nether regions. Olga’s presence suggested the one, and his own fears the other. He studied the outlines of her lovely face, met the tender light in her eyes, and at times was robbed of speech. It was amazing that she should care for him at all.

Their talk was broken by eloquent little pauses, during which their eyes met and clung, each seeking out the thing that was so obvious, and of which they were so tremendously aware.

“You’re not going away from Charterden,” he protested. “You must not.”

“I don’t want to,” she whispered. “For the first time in my life I don’t want to.”

“Nor are you going to marry Constantine.” This with a lift of his head. “That’s settled already.”

“But how—Julian—how?”

“I can’t tell you yet, but you’ll know soon. Tonia has a plan. It’s all being worked out. She explained about Raphael, and I understand that part of it. And we can count on Bethune. If the worst comes to the worst, I’ll put the whole thing to my father. He’ll understand, too. Olga?”

“Yes?”

“I mustn’t ask any questions?”

She shook her head. “It’s all so unnatural, like something make-believe. On the surface there’s nothing—but underneath”—here she shivered nervously—“it’s all dark. It’s like putting out your hand at night and touching something that wasn’t there before—something that has moved there.”

He turned, longing to take her in his arms, but fearful that this would obliterate all else. “Look—they’re waiting for us. Tonia said we must get together for a minute. Tell me—quickly—do you trust me absolutely?”

“In everything, Julian.”

“And you’ll do what we think best when the time comes? It can’t be long now.”

“If it includes taking care of Raphael, I’ll do anything.”

“It will, you blessed, blessed girl! Tell me one thing more.”

“What, Julian?”

“Could you love anyone else as much as you do this brother?”

Pink patches crept into her cheeks, and her eyes grew very tender. “It wouldn’t be quite the same, would it?” she murmured.

* * * * *

Danello, still at his desk, added up a long line of figures, committed the total to memory, and tore the sheet into small pieces. These he put in the fire,

and sat watching the crumbling ash with a strange expression.

He felt tired, unusually tired, and, as happened very often when it was like this, the alertness left his face so that there remained but a weary man to whom both present and future seemed to offer but little.

Had one seen him now, eyes half closed, figure relaxed, hands slack, the whole figure of him touched with unmistakable dejection, it would have been hard to recognize the deft and debonair person who found such satisfaction in crossing his wits with those of others.

But this afternoon, when the young voices died away down the drive, and he heard the click of the gate-latch, he had dropped into a curious mood. He began to wonder whether life—his life—was really worth while. He did not trouble about standards, either his own or others', but merely questioned in his own cynical and quite good-tempered manner whether, putting the prospective profits on one side, and the tension and stress of the game on the other, the thing was good enough. Looking back—would he do the same thing over again—if he could choose?

Crime? Well, there were different kinds of crime, and, as to that, his kind was against the community and not the individual—excepting that the individuals who had been induced to join him had also become criminals. That was not his affair, and merely meant that they, too, considered the game good enough—considering the profits.

True—there had followed one murder he knew of—and probably others of which he did not know—but these were matters he could not very well prevent. It was odd that the point which should trouble him now was Olga's future.

He had never thought much about women. Women—as women—did not attract him. He had married Marie at a time when he was anxious about a perfectly legitimate business, and wanted someone to provide a comfortable home for which he was ready and able to pay; and in that respect Marie had been satisfactory.

But he did not really consider her as a human soul. Perhaps this was because he thought her unbeautiful. She contributed nothing to his æsthetic sense. Sometimes she hurt it.

How different with Olga! Here was a poem in flesh and blood. When he decided it was necessary to intimidate her, he revolted at the necessity. Olga never guessed this, nor indeed did Marie, but the fact existed, had existed for some time, and was directly connected with his choice of Constantine as the girl's future husband.

What fixed his mind on Constantine, the latest recruit to the continental group, was the evidently gentle birth of the young man, his widespread acquaintance in Continental circles, his artistic tastes, and, above all, his

indifference to other women since he first met Olga. That was very soon after he became Danello's trusted ally.

Now, alone in front of the fire, Danello argued that he was doing well for the girl in spite of herself. Love, well—involuntarily he shrugged his shoulders—the thing called love soon passed, especially in men of the higher intelligence, and there were left one's tastes, inclinations and abilities. On these depended the really important phases of life, the ones that came after one's impulsive and primitive nature had been sobered down.

And it was just here that he felt he could depend on Constantine to wear well. Olga would find that, too. He was nodding at this conclusion when Marie came in.

"You have finished your work, Paul?"

He nodded. "For this afternoon, yes; but to-night Oscar and I shall be busy."

"This will be your last lot?" she asked nervously.

He pulled himself together and laughed lightly. "Yes, the very last, and it will take, I think, not less than the three weeks. I must not disappoint them."

"It goes to the same places as before?"

"Yes, and for the very last time. Sometimes it does not seem that this is possible. Yes, to the four centres. There is Josef Orczy, in the Davidstrasse in Pest—ostensibly a tobacconist, and with what a beard! It is stained yellow and brown like a Persian carpet. In Vienna there is Rudolf Wagner, in the Planken Gasse, a small man, very active in the importation of sugar.

"In Prague I depend on the amiable Ivan Strahov, that human mountain of good nature. Ivan is a moneylender, whose opportunities are many. And in Milan have I not the incomparable Sebastian Neri? In the Calle Caterina is his office. It smells of garlic, as I tell him every time I enter. To-night I think of these men. What a human panorama!"

"And Constantine?" she suggested curiously. "What of him? That is so important now."

"Ah, I agree. Constantine, for obvious purposes, also has an office in the new town of Pest. From his windows one looks up at Buda to the castle of forgotten kings. But Constantine moves—he travels—he is, so to speak, in circulation. He is in touch with all—but responsible only to me."

"Does he know all?" she asked in a strange tone.

Danello made a cynical grimace. "Nearly, but not quite. It does not appeal to my intelligence that anyone but myself should know absolutely all. There is always the slightest chance that"—here he made an indescribable gesture—"it is not entirely safe to trust anyone as one trusts oneself. I have taken other means to assure myself of the complete fidelity of Constantine—apart from the little matter of his profits."

“Olga?”

“But why not? I was considering that when you came in.”

“She does not love him, Paul.”

“*Là-là*—we have discussed that much-over-estimated disease. This very evening I have put our Hugo in the balance of my judgment, and he weighs well. But now, while we speak of her, there comes a new idea. I think I am about to change my mind concerning Olga.”

“How?”

“In this matter of her liberty for the next three weeks. Let us suppose that she has suspicions. Being in love with the young fool of a Charters might easily occasion suspicions on her part. Assume also that, believing she is not to see him again after six weeks, she is tempted to talk—or perhaps even act. In that case comes a debacle in the Lodge. No, the mind that is not flexible enough to change is a dangerous possession, and I have changed mine.”

“Just what do you mean, Paul?”

“That it is better she does not leave the grounds again till—well—I will tell you when.”

“But would not that make her the more suspicious?”

“Every prisoner is——” He paused, made an odd movement of his shoulders and gave an involuntary little grunt of aversion at the sound of the word. “Every prisoner,” he repeated calmly, “becomes a parcel of suspicions, but, being in confinement, is no longer a menace. Marie, I am not sure that I express myself very gracefully to-night. It annoys me.”

She did not smile, but looked at him gravely as though divided between thoughts that were many and deep. Presently she came forward and put a hand on his forehead. He pressed it with his own.

“Your head is hot, Paul. Can you not leave the work to Oscar and go to bed?”

“Impossible. His hands are too heavy. You were asking about Constantine, and I did not tell you what he did not know. But you know it.”

“What is that?”

“Who is at the other end, and just where that end is. He knows that the—shall we say?—the documents reach him via a certain route that begins somewhere in France; also that they reach France by air—or sometimes through the kindness of a friend like our good Mr. Charters—but that is all he knows.”

“Nothing of Raphael?”

“I have not suggested the existence of such a person, much less his relationship to Olga. It seemed wiser and—yes, more kind—to omit all that.”

The woman drew a deep breath of relief. “And Olga does not know this?”

“Obviously not. The less she knows the better for them both—and us all.”

Looking at him earnestly, she gave a pathetic smile. "Is it that perhaps at some time you said to yourself that we have no children, and this made you—made you——" She broke off suddenly and covered her face with her hands.

He nodded gently, patting the rather shapeless arm. "Tchut-tchut, Marie, you and I are too old to lose sleep over that which can never be. Yet perhaps it was something like that; but you know how it is—that I must not catch myself being sentimental, or forthwith I stop to laugh at myself. And already something has occurred!"

"What, Paul? Always it is something that occurs."

"You asked me what I proposed to do, say, next year. I told you. But I have not asked of you. Assume, therefore, that you had several million francs to spend as you saw fit—what would you do with them?"

"But I cannot think of having that."

"Well, you shall tell me in two months, then a button will be touched by Paul, the Magician, and, behold, the francs! Is it those young people I hear on the drive?"

"Yes, they are at the gate."

"Then presently I shall have a talk with Olga. Meantime, I would see Oscar."

The woman lingered a moment, as though about to speak, then went out, closing the door very gently.

* * * * *

There now set in a period which to the three conspirators at The Dene very much resembled a stalemate. Tonia began to fear that it was more—even checkmate. This was suggested when there arrived a very civil note from Madame Danello, regretting that Olga was not well and unable to accompany them to the Fidlow meet.

On receipt of this, Tonia frowned, and thought all the harder. And she was assured that the time had passed for any further fencing with Danello. The man was in grim earnest at last.

It seemed also that Nature was taking a hand in the affair. The clear weather ceased, and there ensued a period of fog that lay over England in a vast blanket, grey, moist and unpenetrable. Train service was demoralized, and the cruisers of the air no longer plied between England and the Continent. In the mist of this obscurity, Charterden slept like a dead village, and the isolation of Whispering Lodge was complete.

On the hill-side by the old mill, two shivering schoolboys lay out night after night, and to them the figure of Hammond loomed up out of the fog at odd hours, till, toward the grey of morning that was but a simulated sunrise, they crawled thankfully into bed.

Tonia fretted and fumed, feeling more hopeless as time passed, and knew

that Danello was laughing in his sleeve while his own plans moved swiftly to their culmination. She had never reckoned on a state of affairs so confusing.

Thus it went in Charterden. Three miles away, at Fidlow, Lady Netley was no less concentrated on her own project. Bruce had shot once again at The Dene, and, not staying to dinner, had returned in what she decided was a very difficult mood.

Well as she knew her son, she was not yet sure that he could care for any woman as much as he cared for himself. She did not worry about that phase of it, concluding that it was perhaps congenital, but, very honestly, she now wanted him to care for Tonia sufficiently to make a favourable impression. Her own final attitude in the matter would depend on what she heard from the Beckwiths.

Her letter to Canada had gone off two weeks ago. It consisted of several rather searching questions which, if answered, would definitely establish John Charters in her own mind, especially with regard to his financial standing.

She had read these over carefully before sending them, nodded with a sort of tight-lipped approval, and rested content with the fact that the Beckwiths were distant connections who would perfectly understand—and from the English point of view—how reasonable it was that she should be informed in these matters. But, she admitted, one couldn't write to a Canadian or American like that.

The answer was to be cabled, and need only be a few words. She expected it now at any time, and, meanwhile, greatly desired to know where Bruce actually stood. In any case, it would be politic to ask the Charters party to dinner, and one might as well include the Danellos. She was attracted to Danello—and perhaps he would make some money for her. Having decided what she would do, she asked Bruce what he thought of it.

“All right,” he said diffidently. “I don't care much either way.”

It sounded rather thankless, because it involved a good deal of effort on her part, also an extra expense that was very unwelcome, but she let that pass.

“I thought of the Danellos, too. He's a rather unusual person.”

He smiled without any particular amusement. “Don't understand that chap—yes—I suppose one might as well clear 'em all up together.”

Her resolution wavered a little. “Aren't you interested, Bruce?”

He got up, thrust his hands in his pockets, and stood in front of the fire, a sinewy and physically-capable-looking young man, the development of whose body much surpassed that of his brain. This was natural enough, since on his body had been bestowed much the greater attention.

“Supposing I said that I was interested?” He jerked this out in an oddly stiff tone.

Lady Netley felt suddenly very much happier. “My dear boy, I'm very glad

to hear it.”

“Well,” he went on, “I wouldn’t be too glad. There’s nothing in it. It’s queer, too, because—well—it’s the first time.”

She glanced at him sharply. “But why nothing in it? You’re your father’s son.”

“Ye-es—I know—but it rather stops there, doesn’t it? Besides—I haven’t made any impression. Bethune’s the man—though she doesn’t realize that yet.”

“Wouldn’t she think more seriously of you than of such a boy?”

He shrugged his sloping shoulders. “I rather feel that in this case you can’t apply the standard arguments. They don’t work. There’s the sort of nice, amiable, nice-minded, and what you can call the naturally thankful sort of girl, who’s willing to marry almost any man so long as he’s decent. You’ve trotted some of ’em out down here. This one is different, and—well—I suppose that’s why I’m interested.”

“But, Bruce, why take so gloomy a view of it?”

“Not gloomy—only trying to see the thing as it is. The first question her sort asks is: ‘What has he done for himself?’ Who he is doesn’t cut much ice, as I take it. And if she’s asked that about me—I mean asked herself—the answer can’t have been long in coming. Bit queer, isn’t it, when meeting a girl makes you turn round and size yourself up? Well, that’s what I’ve been doing lately, and it doesn’t make me over-cheerful either.”

His mother felt an unaccustomed pang. So long she had slaved for him—and him only. Too much of a slave! There was a good deal of acid in her blood so far as concerned the rest of the world, but for him she felt all the devotion of which her calculating and rather domineering nature was capable. And now, after all these arduous years, he didn’t think much of himself!

She tried to be angry at Tonia, was forced to admit that there was no cause for anger, and became very thoughtfully silent.

“You know,” he ruminated, “I’ve an idea of going out to Canada myself for a few years. I’d rather like to talk to Charters about that. He’s a good sort—and knows. I’ll never tear off anything worth while so long as I stick here.”

He paused, gave a mirthless laugh, lit a cigarette, strolled across the room and patted his mother’s angular shoulder.

“So it might not be such a bad thing if she does turn up her nose at me, eh?”

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT CAME BY NIGHT

IT STRUCK CHARTERS, as he glanced across the long refectory table at his agent, that Jollands was looking considerably younger. The lines in his face were less marked, his voice had a bit of a lift in it, and altogether he seemed to be finding more pleasure in life. The thought was rather encouraging. So the master of The Dene gave a satisfied nod, took a letter from the top of a heap and handed it over.

“What do you make of this?”

“Ah—Mr. Danello! I’m not surprised. It seemed to be generally understood that he would leave soon.”

Charters pondered a moment. “He’s responsible, of course, for the rental for the remainder of his lease. That was four years?”

“It was, sir.”

“Well, as you see, he does not attempt to evade that. Any difficulty about finding a sub-tenant?”

“Not as much as formerly. Things, if I may say so, are looking up in Charterden. But the Lodge would have to be inspected before he vacates.”

“Rather interesting to inspect that house of mystery, eh? He wasn’t keen about it when I suggested that you give the place a look over a few weeks ago. What does one do—advertise?”

“A good agent in Maidstone would be better. Shall I see to it?”

“Please—yes. You will write to him about the inspection?”

“To-day, sir.”

“Have you formed any recent ideas as to what that man’s interests really are? As a mere matter of security the information would be worth having. I don’t fancy asking him to make a deposit before he leaves—but what business assurance have we that he’s good for the money?”

Jollands promised to go into the matter at once, and went off to his duties. Charters, chin in hand, sat for awhile, his eyes very thoughtful. Julian—how would this affect Julian? How far had the boy gone in his affair, and how far had the girl come to meet him? But if Danello was about to leave, the girl would know, and it was not the sort of thing she would hide from a man she cared for.

He was still pondering over this, wanting to do the right thing by his son, but not at all sure what was the wise thing, when Manders came in with a

telegram. He fingered it absently.

“Thank you, Manders. Where is Mrs. Charters?”

“In the morning-room, sir.”

“Then please tell her that I will—no, ask if she would mind coming here for a minute.”

“Very good, sir.”

The door closed and Charters opened the envelope. He read swiftly, whistled, read again, and sat staring at the sheet with an extraordinary expression. Nor did he move till his wife came in. She glanced at him, and immediately felt anxious.

“What on earth is the matter, John?”

He sent her a whimsical smile. “Matter of fact, I wanted to talk to you about something else, but we’d better attend to this first. Do you remember the Beckwiths?”

“That nice young English couple? Yes, the ones you were so good to. What about them, and why do you look so queer?”

“Perhaps I feel queer, though there’s nothing wrong with me. Read it.”

CHARTERS, Charterden, Kent.—Have received strange letter from distant cousin Lady Netley asking detailed information your financial standing—stop—believe her to be present neighbour of yours—stop—please advise what action if any you wish me to take.
—BECKWITH, Provincial Bank, Toronto.

The two gazed at each other in mutual bewilderment, and presently Charters gave a short laugh. Very seldom in her life had she heard him laugh like that.

“John, do you really think that——?” She broke off uncertainly.

He nodded. “There’s nothing else to think. The cards were against her when she wrote to Beckwith. Curious it should have been him.”

Her mind went back to the Beckwiths—the young English couple her husband befriended, the loan so cheerfully made and so faithfully repaid; then, with Charters still behind him, the appointment in the Provincial Bank. And after that he had forged ahead.

“But, John,” she said, “surely the woman might have known that with your multitude of friends out there you would certainly have heard of it?”

“I don’t think that matters much, but the fact that she did write is rather an eye-opener. What to do now—that’s what I ask myself.”

She gave a whimsical smile, and put a note in front of him.

“That came an hour ago—an invitation to dine at Fidlow.”

“Do we accept? And, if not, what excuse?”

“That’s easily arranged, and of course we don’t. But it’s unfortunate that anything like this should have happened so soon.”

“Is Tonia interested in the young man, because there’s no mistaking the purport of that letter?”

“I can’t be sure, but I don’t think so.”

“It’s out of the question, even if she is. There’s one point about it.”

“What?”

“That the son knows nothing of this—nothing whatever. I think it’s the foolish act of an anxious mother in which she has over-reached herself. As to the son, he seems——”

A gentle tap at the door preceded the appearance of Manders.

“Mr. Netley is in the drawing-room, sir, and asks if he may see you for a few moments.”

“I’ll be there in a moment,” said Charters, blinking at his wife. Then, after a pause: “Now, what in the world has brought him? This sounds like business. Is it Tonia?”

“My dear, you know as much as I do. It wouldn’t be the first time. And if it is Tonia, what are you going to say?”

He grinned reflectively. “What I always have on those occasions—simply ask them to thrash the matter out with Tonia—then come back, if they feel like it.”

In the drawing-room Bruce lifted his length out of a big chair and shook hands very formally. “Awfully good of you to see me, sir.”

“Not at all. Your mother quite well?”

“Yes, quite; she’s hoping you’ll dine with us next week.”

“Very kind of her,” murmured Charters uncomfortably.

There followed a little pause, during which the young man displayed certain symptoms similar to those Charters had learned to recognize in time past. He got rather red in the face, cleared his throat and unburdened his soul.

“Been wondering if you would tell me something about Canada. I’m thinking of going out there.”

Charters could not repress a stare. “*You* going out there?”

“Yes—er—that is, I thought I might as well. Doing nothing here to speak of, you know, except killin’ things in season. Fact is, I’m a bit fed up with life in general. But one doesn’t know just where to jump off in Canada. Thought p’r’aps you’d feel like suggesting something.”

Charters wanted to shout with laughter, but the young man was too obviously serious. And, he realized thankfully, Bruce could have no anticipations as to Tonia. The present situation suggested indeed that he had very recently seen this himself, and there followed a curious half-hour during which Netley laid himself far more open than he realized to the penetrating but entirely friendly gaze of the older man.

At the end of it he came out rather well. Charters saw quite clearly that he

was innocent of any letter to Canada. He saw also that it would do Bruce all the good in the world to get away from feminine rule and match himself against other men. So, as was his habit, he went straight to the point, made several valuable suggestions, and, to his own secret amusement, and fingering the cablegram in his pocket, promised to write to Canada on the matter.

Bruce nodded gravely, his eyes very earnest, and with quite a new expression on his narrow face.

“That’s frightfully decent of you, sir. I haven’t actually told the mater I’m going yet—wanted to see you first—and now I feel bucked no end. But I suppose I’m bound to raise a few cheerful haw-haws out there, eh—what?”

“Quite probable,” grinned Charters, “but it won’t hurt you.”

“Thought as much. I say, would you mind not mentioning this?”

“Might I tell my wife? Her opinion is as good as mine.”

“Yes—of course. Can I take it the thing stops there? Certain—ah—reasons for that.”

“Yes, I can promise that,” said Charters, struggling with suppressed mirth.

The young man shook hands again, almost more formally, and departed in the decrepit two-seater. Charters took a long breath, and returned to the morning-room.

“My dear, what on earth did he want?”

He told her.

“It’s Tonia again,” she said with conviction.

“I think so too—but not Tonia’s fault.”

“It never is, as far as I can see. The men can’t help it.”

“Well,” laughed Charters, “neither could I over Tonia’s mother. Now what about that dinner? I think that, considering this last half-hour, we can afford to accept.”

She nodded. “I think so too. And, John, you have the most generous mind of any man I ever heard of.”

* * * * *

Tonia, in the billiard-room, had exacted twenty in a hundred from Rodney, and was playing him level. With but ten still to go she made a neat red loser and left him a double baulk.

“I’ve got a queer feeling down my spine,” she said cheerfully.

Rodney topped his ball. “So have I—I’m going to be licked.”

“Of course—and it never hurt anyone. But that isn’t it?”

“What?”

“This is the first really clear, quiet night for more than a week. I don’t believe we’re going to get much sleep.”

Julian, stretched at length on a big lounge, sat up straight. “By George, I wonder if you’re right?”

She went to the door, glanced cautiously up the hall, stepped without a sound to the drawing-room, and came back reassured.

“Nothing like early habits in one’s parents, bless them. They’ve gone to bed. Who’s on duty to-night?”

Julian yawned. “I am.”

“And are you ready?”

“I’ve got some French money, a good map of Picardy, and am determined not to be sick in the air—if I ever get into it.”

“Got a revolver?” she asked curtly.

“Found a new automatic in the gun-room.”

She felt an odd spasm of fear. “I suppose I’m to blame if we all come a fearful crash. Do you mind?”

Julian shook his head. “It’s more my business than anyone else’s, and I don’t know where I would be without you. To tell the truth, I wouldn’t mind holding up Danello this minute and demanding to see her. He knows there’s something on.”

Rodney nodded. “There can’t be any other reason for shutting her up; but there’s just one thing that troubles me.”

“What?” they asked simultaneously.

“How are you going to convince Raphael, if you do find him, who you are?”

Julian gave a contemptuous sniff. “If that’s all it is, you needn’t worry. Thing is for your lot to get me on board that machine.”

Tonia frowned a little. “You’re rather stupid to-night, Jule. If that pilot sees you running toward him with us at your heels, making ourselves objectionable and trying to catch you, he’ll come to only one conclusion. I hope you won’t break your neck when you’re climbing on board, and you’re dead safe as far as we’re concerned. We’ll never catch you.”

“Thanks. Have you decided what you’ll do with Oscar—if it is Oscar—after you’ve robbed him? It’s not a delicate question, but I’m rather curious.”

“My idea is to let him get back to the Lodge. The longer he stays there the better for us.”

“And Olga—going to bring her up here?”

“You leave that to me,” she said mysteriously. “It’s better you shouldn’t know anything about it.”

“But if you——”

He broke off abruptly, for at this moment came a tap at the billiard-room window, and Hammond’s broad face could be seen flattened against the pane. Rodney wrenched the frame open.

“Danello an’ Oscar’s just gone over the hill toward the old mill, miss. Reckon you an’ the young gentlemen might as well hurry along. There’s

nothing else in sight yet. I'll wait down the drive a bit."

Tonia gave a gasp and felt extremely frightened. "Wha—what did I tell you! Put on a coat, Jule, and we'll run for it."

Julian shook his head. "Not much. You don't find me landing in France in these togs. You two go on, and I'll join you at the Gate House in ten minutes."

The two went on, and never before was Tonia so thankful for Rodney's nearness and calmness. His manner suggested that he might have been going to the Boat Race.

"Tut—tut—take my arm and squeeze it, will you!" she said in a sort of chatter, her knees very weak. "And when we get to the Lodge, you're to keep Otto busy while I get Olga out of the house. I don't care how you do it. He's big—but he's slow and fat. I want Olga for five minutes, that's all."

"What for?"

"To hide her, silly!"

"Good act—but where?"

"I'll tell you afterwards. Rodney, I'm scared stiff, and if you ask anything more I'll crack. Pinch me again, will you—gosh—that's enough!"

They waited a moment at the Gate House, where, strangely enough, a candle glimmered within. At sight of this Tonia gave a sigh of thankfulness and pushed on into the Lodge grounds. Summoning all her courage, she ran up the steps and rang sharply.

It seemed that the house was awake, for almost at once heavy steps were heard in the hall. The door opened slightly.

"Now!" creaked Tonia. "Quick!"

Rodney took a long breath and went for the Hungarian in a low tackle. Came a crash that shook the floor. Simultaneously a door opened above and madame could be heard calling hysterically. Another door opened, and Tonia, by this time half-way upstairs, caught sight of Olga in a dressing-gown, pale and frightened. She raced up and caught the girl by the arm.

"Come!" she stammered. "Now—at once—never mind anything else! You're both safe if you come." She glanced desperately into the lower hall, where Rodney seemed to be making good work of it, and dragged Olga forward. "Never mind your aunt—come!"

The wife of Danello stood as though petrified. Olga stared at her, and, to her amazement, the woman made a deliberate gesture as of dismissal. Tonia saw this too, and marvelled, but there was no time for anything but action. In the next moment she had Olga on the stairs, in the lower hall—out of it and on the way to the gate. The two fled out into the Charterden road and vanished.

Rodney saw nothing of this. Otto, though fat, was also very strong, and it was only his perfect training that saved the younger man. Finally he got home on the Hungarian's mark; Otto went down like a log, and there ensued an

instant of complete, and astonishing, silence during which Rodney became suddenly aware that Tonia had vanished.

That was enough for his quick mind, and he dived through the front door. Peering about and gasping for breath, he distinguished a figure at the Lodge gate.

“That you, Rodney?” The voice was quite calm.

“Where’s Olga?” he grunted painfully.

“Thanks awfully for what you did to Otto, and Olga’s staying overnight with Mrs. Goddard. If you’re all right, I think we’d better hurry on.”

* * * * *

Beside Charterden Church is a clump of memorial old yews, and Hammond waited, screened in their shadow. He stepped toward Tonia, and his burly, thick-set figure gave her a swift sense of comfort. Simultaneously came the quick pad-pad of running feet from the direction of the avenue, and Julian raced up.

“Made a bit of a record that time. Where to next?” he panted.

Hammond jerked his thumb toward the old mill. “The two lads are there watching. Oscar and Danello turned down here, and they’re somewhere between us and the lads. What’s to do now, miss?”

“We’ve got to get between them and the landing ground as quickly as we can. How can you manage that?”

“Well, if the machine comes down there, it’ll be at a spot about two hundred yards from the toe of the hill, so they’ll likely be hiding in yon little hedged lane. It’s a short cut to the low ground. We can strike the end of the lane by going round to the south. Then”—here he grinned darkly—“thinking we might snare ’em like, I brought a bit of wire that’ll stretch across the path.”

There was a suppressed titter at this, and Tonia felt Rodney’s arm slip into hers.

“Don’t say anything about Olga to Julian,” she whispered. “He’s got enough to think of, and hasn’t the faintest idea of what I’ve done. Which way, Hammond?”

“You follow me, miss.”

He stepped off very lightly for a man of his bulk, left the main road opposite a smithy, traversed a cottage garden and a small field, and, turning to the right, followed a ditch to the bottom of the slope on which the old mill rose naked against the sky.

A hundred yards ahead was the end of a stony little lane, and here, with no sound whatever, the keeper took from his pocket a coil of soft copper wire, stretching it tight from hedge to hedge some eight inches above the ground. That done, he motioned to the others, who disposed themselves close by and safely out of sight.

“This’ll stop ’em for a bit, miss. What next?”

“Danello will have the packet we want,” said Tonia in a small shaky voice, “so you must keep Oscar very busy. I don’t care if you rather hurt him, either. The rest of us will get the packet from Danello somehow, and then we two will chase my brother toward the machine. He will be running hard, and shouting French, so, for Heaven’s sake, don’t you let go of Oscar. Be sure you do shout French, Julian, or that pilot will be off in a jiffy.”

Hammond nodded with obvious interest. “How long be I to keep a-hammering this here Oscar?”

“Till the machine gets away,” she said hysterically, “and for pity’s sake remember you’re not a policeman. Till we get that packet we’ve no evidence at all. Then you can let him go. He’ll make for the Lodge like a rabbit—they both will.”

“That’ll be all right then, miss. Happen we’d better hush up a bit now. They beant far away this minute.”

They hushed. Tonia found herself on one side of the tail of the hedge with Rodney. She began to shake, and his arm went promptly round her, this time with no protest whatever. Her brain was in a whirl, and she began to wonder whether or not she had gone mad over this affair.

What if she were all wrong? Why had the Danello woman made that gesture of dismissal to Olga? Why didn’t she intervene? Was it all a trap spread for the foolish, and had she fallen into it? And if it was a trap, what might not be the disastrous outcome?

“Rodney,” she quavered.

His arm tightened in a most strengthening fashion. “Steady, old thing! What’s up now?”

“I’m scared to death.”

“That’s all right,” he breathed, his lips close to her ear. “Jolly sort of night, isn’t it? Look at those stars.”

“Rodney?”

“Cough it up and you’ll feel better. What’s the secret?”

“If I prove to have been a complete idiot over this business, what’ll you do—be beastly and savage?”

He gave the faintest possible chuckle. “You’ll have every opportunity to make good later on.”

This silenced her, because she now knew in the heart of her that it was Rodney and no one else. The consciousness pitched her mind into a sort of maze in which present, past and future were all grotesquely mingled. After that she felt quite helpless and leaned against him, wondering if he were going to kiss her. There was nothing in the world to prevent it, and she shamefully hoped he would.

“Gad!” he said regretfully, “I’d give my shirt for a cigarette.”

She sat up very straight, not looking at him but out over the spreading fields dipped in the pale light of a waning moon. Charterden was out of sight over the shoulder of the hill, and the eye roved south-eastward toward Lympne and the great rounded ridge that runs down to the sea at Hythe. Kent—all Kent—seemed asleep except at one point, where the wakeful blink of a lighthouse came from the cliffs behind Hastings.

A train threaded the distance like an animated glowworm, the noise of it softened to a faint mechanical rumble, while an owl hooted with clocklike regularity in some near-by and invisible spinney. All of this produced a queer mental inertia, abruptly shattered by the recollection that close to her were also hidden Oscar and Danello; Oscar the killer of Cramp and Danello the master strategist. And who was she, Tonia Charters, to match herself against these two?

Then, oddly she thought about Constantine, by now back in Budapest. How might not he retaliate? For it was Constantine, with all his courtly manner, who now struck her as being possibly even the superior of Danello in subtlety. Well, if she was mad it must run in the family of Charters, for Julian was no less demented than herself.

It was after midnight, when a slight haze had spread from the sea and the stars were softened, that Rodney pressed her arm and pointed silently. Straining her eyes, she made out a tiny red light, suspended in the air toward the south-east. It grew, just as before, and presently she could discern the great grey bird-like thing, an aerial ghost speeding mysteriously between earth and sky.

It approached—it increased. Her heart seemed to stop altogether when it swept overhead a hundred feet above-ground. Above Charterden it went, and, beyond the Lodge, banked and came swiftly back, skimming the flat fields while the pilot marked the spot where his spinning wheels must touch. It lifted a little, banked once more and settled like a weary bird. And all the time there had been no sound save the whistle of wind through its straining struts.

In that same second came heavy footsteps higher up the lane. They broke into a run, and Tonia felt paralysed. Other steps were with them—lighter and quicker. Still nearer they came. Tonia heard a man’s hard breathing, and the cool voice of Danello.

“Moins de ce bruit, Oscar. Mon Dieu, mais vous allez comme une vache!”

At that she smiled in spite of herself. It was like Danello to call Oscar a cow at such a moment. Then, so close that she could almost touch it, lumbered a heavy body that tripped, plunged and came down with a shattering thud. On top of it was immediately precipitated another. Danello ripped out an oath.

It was answered by a British grunt from Hammond, a grunt that sounded

almost contented. There followed the sudden impact of his body on Oscar's, Danello's startled shout at finding himself in the grip of Rodney and Julian, and after that the smothered sounds and quick breathing of men who put forth every physical effort.

A moment later Rodney withdrew from the mêlée with a packet, thrust it into Tonia's trembling hand, and turned to extricate Julian, about whose throat Danello had fixed his long, flexible fingers. For a small man he displayed amazing strength, rolling and twisting like a cat, and it was while the girl stared, fascinated and helpless, that out of the gloom appeared another figure, unnoted by any of them, and snatched the packet from her grasp.

She screamed, and in a flash recognized the face of Constantine. In the next instant he vanished.

Then—and it seemed that all this happened at once—Julian broke free, and forgetting all else, dashed toward the machine. Its propeller was ticking over, and the hooded pilot had swung one leg out of the cockpit.

"N'arretez vous pas!" he shouted. *"Il y a de danger-nous partons sur l'instant!"*

Tonia saw and heard this as in a dream, aware that her hands were empty, sickeningly aware that the whole project of things was shattered. Constantine! Who could have imagined that he would be here?

The pilot had climbed back. Julian put one foot on the trailing edge of a wing, hoisted himself up and disappeared. The propeller whipped the air more rapidly, the machine lurched forward as though alive, and was clear of the earth in a hundred yards. It commenced to climb—it banked—it dwindled—it vanished as though in a mirage. All this to the accompaniment of the scuffle that still went on close beside. Then came a complete silence.

Tonia shook like a leaf and perceived a little knot of men standing over a prostrate figure. It was Oscar. A naked knife lay on the ground. Hammond, turning, made a clumsy apologetic gesture.

"Had to hand it to him, miss, or he'd ha' stuck me. There's no real damage done. He'll be round in a minute."

She tried to speak, but was trembling too violently. Followed an astonishing calm in which sounded the voice of Danello, perfectly even, utterly contemptuous and faintly amused.

"Mademoiselle, my felicitations on your little drama. It was worthy of the Comédie Française, or, better, the Grand Guignol. But let me suggest that you entirely overlooked a part for my good Constantine—therefore I took the liberty of providing one. If there is nothing else arranged for to-night, may we be permitted to say au revoir? It most certainly is not adieu. I trust your brother will have a pleasant passage. I will arrange a warm welcome for him at the other end."

With the help of the greatly embarrassed Hammond, he got the heavy arm of the Hungarian round his slight shoulders and moved off, his figure straining under the load. Rodney looked after him—then at Tonia—whistled and said nothing. The keeper coughed into his sleeve and mumbled something about the man having a thick skull and being himself in a few hours. But, palpably, Hammond was distinctly uncomfortable.

Tonia stared at her two supporters, and felt the tears trickle down her cheeks. They were not of fear, but of sheer anger with herself.

“Well,” she said chokily, as the halting steps died away toward the Lodge, “it’s a good deal of a mess, and I don’t see how it’s going to end, but we’ve done half of what we wanted.”

“Good business,” remarked Rodney, taking out his cigarette case. “Which half?”

“We’ve got Olga out of that house, and she’ll never go back. That woman doesn’t want her back. And Jule’s perfectly able to take care of himself. Oh—I’d like to strangle Constantine. Where did *he* go?”

“Being rather busy, I didn’t notice.”

Nor did Hammond know. Constantine seemed to have vanished as mysteriously as he came.

* * * * *

Julian was over Lypne. Immediately in front of him in the double cockpit rose the broad shoulders and leather flying-cap of the pilot. From the engine came a low throbbing murmur. Beyond that and the singing of the taut wires and deep-throated note of the propeller, there was nothing to make the usual hurricane of sound.

He glanced down, sighting the ribbon of foam along the coast, the tapering neck of Dungeness, with its wide-swinging arc of radiance, and other lights of Channel towns as far as the eye could reach. The sea was a flat carpet. He had no sensation of speed save that the twinkling panorama below was drifting steadily astern.

Suddenly he realized that conversation was quite possible, and he would certainly be expected to explain. He leaned forward.

“That was a quick affair,” he said in French. “I was afraid your engine would stop.”

“No, it did not stop. What was the trouble?”

“I have special duty with Raphael,” confided Julian, risking everything.

“At the same place—near Hardelot?”

Julian’s heart gave a leap. “Of course! He will meet you there?”

“But naturally—why not?” The leather-covered head twisted round suspiciously. “Who are you—tell me that. I have not seen or heard you before.”

"I am in England from Vienna," hazarded Julian. "No, we have not met. You know that Danello is about to conclude the business very soon?"

The man gave the machine a sudden wrench. "That tells me nothing. Who are you—and what is the address in Vienna?" His voice had become hard, and he leaned forward, putting out his free hand toward a recess in the cockpit.

He halted thus, suspended and motionless, for against his cheek was pressing the muzzle of Julian's automatic. Then while they winnowed the upper air, Julian spoke.

"Listen, my friend! We are both too young to die with any satisfaction, but you will certainly die if now you play any tricks. I go from Danello in Charterden to Raphael, near Hardelot. Let that be sufficient for you, whose duty it is to take orders. To Hardelot we go and nowhere else. How long will that take you?"

"A matter of twenty minutes," grunted the man.

Julian swallowed his astonishment. "You ask what the trouble was, but that is not your affair."

"And after Hardelot, what then?"

"Back to the hangar till you are sent for again. Now, lest you forget, or have any little accident, I shall keep this little friend of mine whispering in your ear. When we land you will get out first and call Raphael. This in order that there be no misunderstanding. *Parbleu!* but I hope for your sake that my finger does not twitch—and if it does I have accomplished my solo flight, and can make a fair landing—even with a dead passenger. Is it enough?"

The man nodded sullenly, and for the next quarter-hour Julian was aware that France was unrolling beneath him—that they were speeding westward from Calais—that they were passing Boulogne—had passed it—and at last the machine dipped into a long slant that brought the sand-dunes near Hardelot—for it must be Hardelot—climbing up toward them out of a gulf of profundity.

Then scattered scrub pine over which they swept, ever lower, and what looked like a small parade ground in the sand wilderness between railway line and coast. Here there was a perfect landing in a spot close to a city, yet amazingly isolated. The pilot, still covered by the automatic, climbed out, and at the sound of his voice a figure advanced rapidly from a small hut in a tangle of green.

"*C'est vous, Raphael?*"

"*Qui, c'est moi, mais qui est ça?*"

"*Il viens de Danello vous cherchez. Pourquoi je ne sais pas.*"

With that the pilot turned and came back. Julian met him half-way, and, also turning, watched him clamber into the machine and set his great bird in motion.

Whither he went now did not matter, but Julian's eyes followed the swift

flight till the grey wings vanished over the dunes, and he was left utterly alone with this young man whose face had just such a delicate oval as another he knew full well. Then, with a quickly-beating heart, he went forward and put out both hands.

“I have come not from Danello, but from Olga, the sister who loves you and whom I love. And the word is to save yourself with no delay. Now I will tell you everything.”

CHAPTER XVIII

CONSTANTINE AGAIN

“WELL, HAMMOND,” ventured Tonia dubiously, “what about it?”

The keeper stared in the direction of the vanished machine, then up the narrow lane, and wiped a spot of blood from his face. The thing that struck him most at the moment was that Oscar had been as dirty a fighter as he ever heard of.

“Well, miss, seems like there’s a bit of a mess. You didn’t get that parcel?”

“I did—and lost it,” she admitted soberly.

“Then just where do we get off?”

“That’s the trouble—we don’t—we stay on.”

Hammond felt very unhappy. He had risked much for this young mistress of his, risked even his job. That fact now became portentous, and he began to wonder what madness had possessed him in this affair.

“Happen you’ll see me through, miss, if it gets out. Mr. Charters won’t be having much use for me if you don’t.”

“Of course I will,” she said promptly. “Whoever gets into trouble, you won’t. I’d take that knife if I were you.”

He picked up the wicked blade, thumbed its edge, and, wrapping it in his neckcloth, saw again in his imagination the dead lurcher and the limp body of young Cramp. So far as he was concerned, he hoped this was not the end of the matter as between himself and the Hungarian. Touching his cap, he moved off without a word.

“I suppose,” said Tonia desperately, “we might as well go too. I’ve got to see Olga; she’ll be frightfully anxious.”

Rodney’s brows went up a little. “Will she stay where she is?”

“Yes—till Julian comes back.”

“Won’t Danello look for her there?”

“If he does, he’ll never get past Mother Goddard. She’s taking the whole thing as though it were a cup of tea. It’s the most interesting bit of life, she says, she’s struck in years. That’s what she told me when I fixed it up. Didn’t seem a bit surprised, either.”

“Where on earth does she put Olga?”

“In her own old four-poster—which looks like a hearse. She’s going to sleep in a chair by the fire. Rodney, have I gone completely crazy?”

"I expect so," he said cheerfully, "and you'll get your death of cold if you stand here shivering any longer."

The only satisfactory thing after that was the feeling of his arm round her. For the rest of it, she was too bewildered to think in any coherent fashion. At the Gate House she stopped, tapped and the door was instantly opened. She went in, had five minutes with a very agitated Olga, and came back more mystified than ever.

"Rodney, just think of it! She's all right and perfectly calm. That's that. But here we are without a fraction of evidence against that beast Danello—I've had him attacked and robbed on my father's estate—Julian has held up his pilot and gone off on his machine—we've assaulted his servant—stolen his niece—and hid her! In fact," here she broke off with a high-pitched hysterical laugh, "I've left my father open to the most frightful damages and scandal—if the brute is in a position to go to court."

This was a formidable statement, and Rodney realized its full gravity.

"Well, why don't you put the whole thing to him just as it happened, starting from the first? He'll understand."

"He certainly will—that I've been a fearful ass and tackled all sorts of things I shouldn't have touched. Nice beginning for the family in England, isn't it? And supposing Julian is delayed? What am I going to do with Olga when I—well—when I let her out? I can't tell when he'll be back, and I can't keep her like a rabbit in a hutch. Anything may happen in France—I see that now. Can you picture me saying to father: 'Please, dad, here's Olga, and Julian wants to marry her. He's stolen her uncle's aeroplane in the meantime?'"

"Sounds a bit thick to me, and why didn't you think of some of it before? Where did Constantine get to?"

"I simply can't imagine. He appeared out of nowhere, grabbed that packet, and evaporated. And all the evidence went with him—darn him."

"You're dead certain it was evidence?"

"Don't give me the creeps. And if it wasn't, why such secrecy?"

Rodney frowned a little. "Well, admitting that, why didn't he stay to help Danello. He was badly needed."

"How should I know? He probably decided it was safest to get the thing away."

"Then why not give it to the pilot? Isn't it what he came for in the ordinary course of business?"

"It's no use asking me anything now," she said helplessly. "I admit I'm a fool—my brain is mud—I don't know anything worth knowing, and, generally speaking, I've gone to pieces. I wish we'd never come to this beastly country."

Rodney's arm stiffened, and she found herself swung round so that he looked straight into her troubled face.

“You wish what?”

“That we’d never come here at all,” she said miserably. “That is”—here she stammered a little at the expression of his eyes—“you—well—you’re probably wishing that yourself.”

“Look here, Tonia,” he said peacefully, “you leave me to do my own wishing. You’re certainly pretty deep in this affair—but I’m in it, too. So is Julian. I’m glad I’m in it—wouldn’t have stayed out for anything. Understand?”

“You’re glad?” she said shakily, and rejoicing secretly that he was glad.

“You know I am, don’t you?”

“You seem to be fairly bright about it,” she admitted with an oblique glance.

“Yes, and I’m in anything you’re in, good, bad or indifferent, for the rest of my life. It will always be like that, and I don’t care how this show winds up. If you’re in trouble up to the neck, I’m up to the ears. Get that?”

“You’re very free-handed about it,” she said in a small voice. “You seem to like trouble, but please don’t look for it on my account. I—I wonder what’s going on in there now.”

She pointed to the dark mass of the Lodge, and while she pointed a light was turned on in an upper rear window. Then another and another, till the whole house was in a blaze of light. Simultaneously there came dull sounds as of heavy objects being moved. Finally the voice of Danello, clear and very imperative.

“Dépêchez! Dépêchez!”

“Rodney!” she gasped. “What is it? I’ve never seen the place lit up like that before.”

“Dunno,” he said, puzzled. “Things being carted about a bit, aren’t they? Suppose he’s getting ready to clear out? That would let us out, too.”

“But he mustn’t yet; he mustn’t.”

“Look here, my child, it’s a bit late in the day to say what that bird may or may not do. If he clears out and leaves Olga, you’re more or less justified in the slight liberties you’ve taken, aren’t you?”

“I—I suppose so,” she admitted, only half convinced.

“Well, from my end of it, I’m ready to drive him to the station.”

“But that would leave nothing cleared up, would it?” she persisted doggedly. “If he’s a forger of international documents, he’ll simply go on with the same thing somewhere else.”

“Supposing he does, I don’t see that a person of your tender years can stop him. Got anything more personal against him?”

“He fooled me—twice.”

Rodney chuckled. “It doesn’t like being fooled, does it? Pleasant journey to

him, I say. And those lights are going out now.”

While they watched the house became again dark, the noises ceased, and the Whispering Lodge resumed again its mantle of mystery and silence. Whatever Danello had desired to arrange, was obviously completed.

Tonia pictured him at this moment with his wife, his eyes very keen, and hearing the tale of Olga’s disappearance.

What would he make of that? Or was it—and this now seemed more and more probable—all part of his general plan? Might he not have kept the real secret from Olga, and thus be the better without her in this time of stress? But, even so, where did Constantine come in? The puzzle became too intricate at this point, and Tonia gave it up.

“We might as well go on,” she said wearily. “It’s frightfully late, and I’ve got to think about to-morrow morning. I hate to think of it at all.”

“Good enough. You look dead beat, and——”

He stopped, stiffened, and she, looking up, gave a little scream. They had been standing opposite the thicket, and from its tangle now advanced a tall figure, very familiar and unmistakable.

“It’s Constantine!” she whispered, greatly agitated. “How did he get there? Rodney, he must have heard everything!”

Rodney clenched his fist, preparing for more trouble, but the man’s attitude gave no suggestion of any attack. He came up, absolutely at his ease, lifted his hat and made a very polite bow.

“Ah, mademoiselle, we meet again. I had thought by this time you would have returned home.”

“We—we are returning—aren’t we, Rodney?” she stammered.

“Yes,” said young Bethune with a shade of insolence, “we thought of it—presently.” He was watching the man, measuring his height and distance and the best way to land on his jaw.

“And what’s more—you’re trespassing,” added Tonia with reviving courage. “I don’t know how you got here, but this is my father’s property, and I can have you put off.”

The man sent her a flashing smile. “I compliment mademoiselle on her excellent nerves, but after what has happened to-night I suggest that the matter of the trespass is too small to consider. As to how I got here, that will be explained later. But there is one small point on which I would like information.”

He was so perfectly calm, so completely master of himself, that Tonia felt a little crude in comparison. The man was an artistic crook—she had to admit that.

“What is it?”

“Olga has disappeared!”

“Well?”

“Then, knowing where she is, mademoiselle will doubtless tell me?”

“Not in a thousand years,” came the abrupt answer.

“*Mon Dieu*—what an eternity! Imagine us all at the end of that period! Suppose we were to look at it in another way.”

“There is no other way,” she said hotly, and determined to cleave to the one thing she had actually accomplished.

“Your pardon, but may I be permitted to say this? You have to-night taken a certain action. Let us not analyse it, because if you do not appreciate what you have done, monsieur, here, will no doubt explain. I have been fortunate enough to recapture what you took, and am willing to forget that part of it, provided you shall tell me where Olga is. I have excellent reasons for wishing to see her—and alone. This is more important than you can imagine.”

Tonia wavered, but only for a second. In spite of his associates, this man seemed to carry with him an atmosphere of trustworthiness that did not escape her. He was a criminal and a forger, but at the same time she could not entertain for him the antipathy she felt for the others. He looked decent, and she had a fantastic idea that, notwithstanding his profession, he might make some girl a tolerable and almost attractive husband. She knew that these were mad thoughts, but everyone was mad to-night.

“Is Danello and every one else leaving the Lodge?” she asked with sudden bluntness.

He nodded. “That is perfectly correct. His business is”—here the man paused with a very peculiar smile—“is, shall we say, practically concluded.”

“Is he going back to France?”

“Mademoiselle, had I not special reasons for being very amiable to-night, I might ask permission to decline to answer that question. But as it happens I am amiable. As to Danello, I think, at this moment, he has not quite decided, but the indications are that it will be to France, and before long.”

“And we won’t see any of you again?” demanded Tonia hopefully.

Once more the flashing smile. “Speaking for myself, I should be dejected were that the case, and it is possible—as all things are—that we may meet. But to return to Olga. Am I to understand that she is in such a place that neither Danello nor myself can reach her?”

“You’ve said it,” snapped Tonia defiantly. “You couldn’t find her with a ferret and a searchlight. You think you’re going to marry her! Well—you’re not!”

He made an odd little sound as though swallowing something. “Mademoiselle, is it the habit of all Canadians to settle the affairs of others in this fashion?”

“That’s the first time you’ve been really rude, Mr. Constantine.”

He took off his hat and made a sweeping bow. “Mademoiselle, I am rebuked—and apologize. I look forward to our next meeting with feelings of sharp interest. Monsieur Bethune, au revoir.”

That was all. He turned, and they watched him saunter easily down the avenue, pause for a moment opposite the Gate House—whereat Tonia clutched Rodney’s arm and trembled—then, rounding the corner, he disappeared.

Rodney gave a low whistle. “By Jove! His nerves are all right, but how did he get here? He came out of that thicket.”

“The way Olga got there, and Oscar when he attacked Julian—and I don’t know anything about it. I’ve been trying to find out for a month, and Olga won’t tell me. She’s under some kind of an oath.”

“It’s my idea she’ll tell you that and a lot more in the morning. I say, Tonia!”

“Ye—es?”

“What are you going to say to your people in the morning?”

“I wish I knew. It isn’t much good trying to explain till Julian gets back.”

“Know what I think about Constantine?”

“What?”

“He’s perfectly aware where Olga is. Strikes me he hasn’t said a fraction of what he actually knows.”

“Then why should he try to pump me?”

“You’ve got me there, but that chap is clever as paint, and if you were to put your arm round me—this way—wouldn’t it—er—you know—help a bit?”

That was at two in the morning. Seven hours later Tonia’s father knocked at her door and found her dressed, wide-eyed, and looking very distracted. He glanced at her pale face and kissed her affectionately.

“Come down to my study, dear, for a minute.”

“Dad!” she exploded, “I want to talk to you first.”

“That’ll all keep, child. There’s someone downstairs you must meet. You can talk to me afterwards.”

She followed silently with a sinking heart. He opened the study door, and she saw her mother talking to a man whose back was turned. At sight of him her lips became dry.

“Tonia,” said her father in an odd voice, “may I introduce Monsieur Jacques Vibert, of the Sûreté Générale—the French Secret Police?”

The man wheeled. Again the flashing smile, again the courtly bow.

“Ah, mademoiselle,” said Constantine, “*c’est toujours l’imprévu qui arrive!* How often does the unexpected happen!”

Tonia put out her hand blindly, felt the black moustache just graze the back

of it, and flopped weakly into a chair. She realized that they were all smiling at her. Smiling! How could anyone be cheerful at a time like this? Then the man who had been Constantine turned to her father.

“Mr. Bethune, might I suggest that perhaps he, too, would be interested?”

Charters nodded, touched a bell and despatched Manders for Rodney. That young gentleman appeared a moment later, pulled himself up short on the threshold, and stared blankly from Vibert to Tonia.

“Oh, my hat! What’s on now?”

Vibert laughed. “Only that I desire to make my apologies to both—also a slight explanation.”

“Slight!” creaked Rodney.

“Let us put it that way.”

“Julian?” murmured Tonia, hardly knowing what she said. “What’s happened to Julian?”

“*Soyez tranquille*, mademoiselle. No harm can come to him.”

“You seem to know all about it,” she ventured chaotically.

“Tonia,” put in her father, “I have had a half-hour talk with Monsieur Vibert. Also I have seen Hammond.”

“Hammond only did what he did because I made him,” she protested quickly. “If there’s any fault—and of course there is—it’s all mine—all of it.”

“Don’t worry, child. There’s one point you must clear up, though. Where is Olga?”

Tonia choked a little. “In Mother Goddard’s four-poster—but he’ll never get her. She’ll never marry him—never—never! That is—oh—I’m all mixed up.”

The lips of Vibert took on a very amused curve. “Naturally, she will not. Already I have the most charming of wives, and a child that—well, I shall not attempt to describe that child.”

“Would—would you please go on?” asked Tonia faintly.

“With pleasure. It is necessary to go back six months to a period when there began to appear on the Continent counterfeit French notes of——”

Tonia sprang to her feet. “Wait a minute—I’ll show you something!” She dashed upstairs and raced back with a bit of folded paper that once wrapped the recovered cigarette case. “That—you recognize that?”

Vibert rubbed it between very smooth fingers. “Exactly! I know how you came by it. Now to resume! Just as I am not Constantine, but Jacques Vibert, an inspector of the *Sûreté Générale*, so Danello is not Danello, but Paul Peridot. That name means nothing to you, but a great deal to the *Sûreté*. For years we have known of him. His first crime was ten years ago—the forging of bonds of the Argentine Republic—amazingly done. Then others, less important. But it was not possible to trace anything. Then he disappeared

altogether, and we wondered what project was hatching in that too fertile brain.

“My friends, it was no project—but the cultivation of roses! He loved flowers, and his garden near Lyons was a marvel. Our agents visited him there under the guise of vendors of new blooms. Peridot recognized them at once—laughed—bought—and asked them to call again. They would describe the man to me, his smile, his gaiety, his aplomb.”

Mrs. Charters made an odd little sound. “He gave me a lovely bunch of Gloire de Dijon not long ago.”

“Madame, he would, and with all possible grace. He had the insolence to send me some to Paris from Lyons; myself, whom he had never seen. Ah, I admired him for that.”

Tonia sat up stiffly. “How can you go on talking like this with him still in the Lodge?”

Vibert made a gesture. “He is not in the Lodge—but I shall come to that in a moment. Three years ago he forged a passport under the name of Danello, and came to England, where he also forged his own references. When the counterfeit notes began to appear in Vienna and Prague we were sure of their source, there being something about the hand of the artist that one learns to recognize in such matters.

“Skill has a certain type, and in these notes we saw the delicate touch of our friend Peridot. Simultaneously the exchange value of the franc began to fall; men of high station were involved, so the public thought, and the affair became international.”

“But how on earth did you trace him here?”

“That was curious. The Government learned that a mechanic named Boisseau had invented a silencer for the *avion*—the aeroplane—an appliance of great perfection which did not detract from the power of the engine. That was all-important to any Government, but when it came to the finding of the machine—well—here Vibert gave an expressive shrug—“it was not to be found. Orders were given to all air lines to watch for it, and six months ago it was traced to England—to Kent—and finally to this most picturesque village.”

“Good Lord!” breathed Tonia. “So that did it?”

“Partly—but there was much more to be learned. Peridot’s associates—his system of distribution in four great cities—in short, the circle of his operations. So I became personally active. I met Peridot—I even co-operated to a small extent—I ingratiated myself with this most attractive villain—and, mademoiselle, I asked finally for the hand of his niece—I, a married officer of the Sûreté, with a child—the most adorable in France!”

Rodney gaped at him. “The deuce you did!”

“Monsieur, I applied—that and nothing more. It was necessary to install myself absolutely in his confidence. Followed five months, during which I

gradually learned all. Then appeared Mademoiselle Charters, of the insatiable curiosity. How Peridot hates you, mademoiselle, yet not without a certain admiration!”

Charters broke into a laugh. “I thought that you thought England slow, Tonia.”

She made a face at him. “I suppose I’ll never hear the end of this.”

“My part is nearly concluded,” went on Vibert. “The operations of mademoiselle hastened those of Peridot—also my own. I found the hangar of the mysterious machine, which had been engaged at a formidable price. I found Raphael Vinen, who, I am glad to say, knew nothing of the contents of those packets, but sent them on as directed, including the one received from Monsieur Charters.”

“Take that, dad!” flashed Tonia.

“Well, finally, last night. It is true that the men from Scotland Yard were a little late. That was my fault, not theirs. In consequence I was compelled to rob mademoiselle of something most important to us. Am I forgiven?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” stammered Tonia, whose brain was revolving like a catherine wheel. “But where is Julian?”

Vibert glanced at his watch. “Your brother is now in the train between Boulogne and Calais. He will be in England this evening. Raphael is running away—well—from nothing. We will let him run for a day or so—that is all.”

“And Danello?” she quavered.

“Ah! Peridot and Oscar are in seclusion, while madame and Otto are being detained as material witnesses. The little party is now in London. The Lodge was occupied this morning at four o’clock, there being a slight difficulty with Oscar, who is not seriously hurt.”

“And Danello—he wasn’t hurt?”

Vibert smiled reminiscently. “No—and was so kind as to congratulate me. Also he sends you his compliments, and remarked that you and he were *jamais d’accord*. Yes, actually I admire the man. Now I would ask one little favour.”

Tonia looked incredulous.

“That you will present me in my proper name to Mademoiselle Olga—who is of a very old family, and really the niece of our friend—to make my profound apologies. I have here a photograph of a child I would like to show her.”

Tonia got to her feet, blinked at her parents, crooked a finger at Rodney, and the three went out. Down the drive and down the avenue she walked as in a dream, till opposite the thicket she stopped and pointed.

“How did you get there last night?”

He pushed through the tangle to the other side of the big elm trunk, and pointed. She gave an exclamation of astonishment.

A section of the rough surface had swung open, and the trunk was now seen to be hollow. This section had been faced with bark, marvellously fitted and matched, so that when closed only the very faintest line marked the junction. The line might have been an ordinary crack in the thick bark. No secret panel was ever so secret as this. Inside, the end of a ladder was visible, nailed for security into the shell of still solid wood.

“A passage,” said Vibert serenely. “It leads to the cellar of the Lodge. The whole affair was constructed with amazing skill by our friend Peridot, with the help of Oscar. The unfortunate Cramp undoubtedly found it, also the dog of the keeper. You will examine it at your leisure.”

Tonia blinked again and led on to the Gate House. Here she entered with Vibert and presently appeared alone, an extraordinary expression on her face.

“Rodney!” she gasped.

“Here we are, child. What’s up now?”

“He asked if he might be allowed to withdraw his proposal in private,” she said in a strangled tone. “And first of all he’s going to reassure her about Raphael. He knows all about him—everything.”

Rodney nodded approvingly. “That chap’s got the right end of it.”

“Do you know I liked him—really liked him—the first time I ever saw him?”

“Did you? Well, you can get over liking him now. And if proposals have to be withdrawn in private—which I can well understand—it seems they ought to be put in equal privacy. Do you agree?”

“I don’t know what on earth you mean,” she said feebly.

“Well, we seem to have the avenue to ourselves—and—this—is—what—I—mean.”

His arm went round her very swiftly. It was only Hammond, who had noted their approach, and dodged behind a near-by tree just in time, who retained any clear recollection of what transpired immediately afterwards.

* * * * *

There was something that might be described as disconnected about lunch at The Dene that day. Even Manders had lost his usual impeccable calm, and served the entrée before the fish.

Tonia ate but little, choked a great deal, and made extraordinary grimaces at Olga, who, very pale and lovely, ate nothing at all. Rodney, on the other hand, did very fairly well, and Tonia decided that he already looked rather like a conqueror. She would attend to that later on.

The Charters not infrequently exchanged little signals of amusement, while Charters himself gave way to periodical and unrestrained laughter in which Rodney callously joined. In the middle of all this Manders presented a telegram from Julian. It was addressed to Tonia.

“Arriving Dover four o’clock. Everything all right on this side and our young friend is taking a short trip for his health. My best love to you know whom, and please send car to Dover.”

Tonia read this out with a burst of bravado, and held her breath, while Mrs. Charters glanced at her husband and sighed thankfully. She had been very anxious about this impetuous son of hers. Olga turned extremely pink, murmured an excuse and escaped into the drawing-room.

There followed a little silence, till Mrs. Charters grasped the situation and went in pursuit of the girl, of whom she was already very fond. Her husband leaned back in his chair and surveyed the two survivors with fatherly benignity. Matters had been moving very fast in the last twenty-four hours, and he realized that conditions were hardly normal yet.

“Would you two care to drive over and meet Julian?”

Rodney sent Tonia a perfectly obvious frown, and for the first time in her life she yielded automatically.

“Is it necessary, dad? I’ll go if you say so, but I’m a bit used up.”

“And I’m dead beat too, sir,” said Rodney cheerfully, having arranged a long afternoon with Tonia in the least accessible corner of the estate.

Charters laughed understandingly. “Well, that leaves it up to Olga. Perhaps Julian would prefer that she goes alone.”

Thus it was that Julian, staring from the forward deck of the Calais boat, saw a slim figure on the dock, and could hardly believe his eyes. He raced down the gangway, and was met by a very nervous and lovely young person, who seemed to be moving in a world of dreams.

What she told him as the car cleared the town and sped over the high-shouldered hills toward Charterden only Julian knows: but at the Gate House they halted, spent a little while with Mother Goddard, and, sending the car ahead, walked slowly up the avenue.

Julian stared at the Whispering Lodge, now but a lodge of memories, saw the elm trunk with its swinging door, heard at last the tale of that well-kept secret from Olga, and, passing on, held his girl very close. Presently the turn in the drive, the rhododendrons, the friendly roof and clustering chimneys of The Dene.

“Home!” he said, with a sudden quickening of the pulse. “Your home now and mine, my dearest!”

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 *Whispering Lodge* by Alan Sullivan (as Sinclair Murray)]