The Usurper

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THE USURPER

By the Same Author

THE MORALS OF MARCUS ORDEYNE

THE BELOVÉD VAGABOND

WHERE LOVE IS

DERELICTS

IDOLS

THE WHITE DOVE

A STUDY IN SHADOWS

AT THE GATE OF SAMARIA

THE DEMAGOGUE AND LADY PHAYRE

THE USURPER

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

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THE USURPER

CHAPTER I

IT was at the opening by Royalty of the new General Hospital which his munificence had provided for the suburb of North Ham that they first met.

Jasper Vellacot's eye caught her slender figure and kind, serene face as soon as she drove up with the Member for the borough and his wife, and he wondered who she was. In his character of host, he stood at the top of the flight of steps down which ran the conventional strip of red baize, and received his guests. Over the shoulders of the preceding arrivals he watched her approach, curiously interested. He shook hands with the Member and his wife, and was introduced to their companion. He did not catch her name, and before he could say anything intelligible, the Mayor, gorgeous in robe and chain, mounted the steps, and she passed on. After that the Royalties arrived, and henceforward he was in close attendance upon them; but at intervals his glance wandered over the well-dressed crowd and rested upon the woman, and the sight of her gave him a queer sense of relief. Once or twice he met her eyes, and fancied he read in them a reciprocal look of interest, half grave, half humorous. He began to chafe under the constraint, to wish that he could escape from the gracious compliments of the Personages and the circumambient odour of flattery, and talk quietly with her. She seemed to hold out a promise of restfulness.

Up to now he had been keenly interested in the hospital. It was to be the most perfect institution of its kind that modern science could devise. The densely populated, grimy suburb with its thousands of workmen's dwellings, its works and gas factories, had to send its maimed and its sick whom the inadequate local infirmary could not accommodate to one of the great London hospitals, miles away. His gift, therefore, was of incalculable value. He had taken an almost childish delight in watching it grow up, brick by brick, from the great concrete-filled excavation in the midst of a ragged piece of waste ground to a noble block of buildings in a pleasant garden. He had familiarised himself with its infinite details,—the ingenious intricacies of plan; the complicated ventilation system, worked by fans in subterranean regions; the

electrical installation; the shoots for soiled linen; the laundries; the operating theatres with the latest inventions in glazed-tiled walls and in antiseptic appliances; the countless new devices for saving labour or securing hygienic conditions. He had come there that day full of pride in his hospital, in the enthusiastic group of physicians and surgeons who welcomed him, in the staff of nurses in their snowy caps and aprons. He had even surmounted his repugnance to the glaring publicity of the opening ceremony. But now he felt a too familiar sense of weariness. He seemed to be moving in a world of importunate shadows, to be himself almost an unreality. It grew hateful to stand there and play the part of Philanthropist and Public Benefactor. The suave tones of Erskine, the eminent architect, explaining arrangements, as he conducted the royal party over the building, began to strike painfully on his nerves. Instinctively he looked around for the woman, saw her at the further end of the ward, and felt foolishly comforted. He speculated on her age. A little over thirty, he thought. Who was she? Sir Samuel Dykes, the Member, happened to be by his side. He put the question, and learned that she was Lady Alicia Harden, daughter of the Earl of Illingham.

The proceedings drew to a close. There were a few speeches. The title-deeds were formally handed over to the Mayor and Corporation. The hospital was declared open, and the Royalties, after graciously drinking tea, drove away with great bouquets of flowers, through the lines of humbler spectators who cheered them as they passed.

Guests and officials crowded round the donor of the hospital, offering congratulations. He spoke little; his attitude was deprecatory, and he had not the manner of one accustomed to large social gatherings. He did not seem to concern himself as to the impression he made on others. His pale blue eyes, hidden deep behind overhanging brows, looked on every newcomer with a queer timorousness, as if he were uncertain whether the hand outstretched would greet or smite him. The superficial went away saying that Jasper Vellacot was a limp creature, with no individuality. But his mouth, long and flexible and firmly pursed, and his long sensitive chin gave evidence of character, and the rugged lines on forehead and cheeks spoke of cares and past struggles. He was still a young man, scarcely forty, but he looked older. He wore the conventional frock coat and silk hat, but his clothes had an unfashionable cut. He had a Sundayfied appearance, seemed constrained in unfamiliar garments. In figure he was tall and spare, and he had a slight stoop in his shoulders. No one would have suspected him of being a man of boundless wealth and the originator of vast philanthropic schemes.

He moved, with a small knot of men with whom he was talking, from the vestibule into the Board Room, where a polite crowd scrambled for tea. And

there, near the entrance, stood Lady Alicia Harden. In her eyes, as they met his, was the same half grave, half humorous look of interest. He felt irresistibly drawn to her. Overcoming a natural shyness, he turned aside from his companions.

"I hope you have had some tea?" he said enquiringly.

"Oh yes, thanks, one of your nice blue and white china nurses has been attending to me," said the lady, with a smile. There was a noticeable pause. Then, as he remained standing in front of her pathetically helpless, the smile on her lips mounted very pleasantly to her eyes, and she continued,—

"I have been wanting to meet you for a long time, Mr. Vellacot. I am sure you did not catch my name when Sir Samuel introduced us. I am Lady Alicia Harden."

"I didn't hear," said he, "but I enquired and learned afterwards."

"I scarcely know whether you have heard of me before," said the lady, "but my desire to meet you is quite a year old. I have never had the chance of even seeing you till now."

He thought she had the kindest hazel eyes and the tenderest voice in the world. Her light brown hair fell in soft waves over a high forehead, thus modifying by a subtle touch her appearance of a woman of the world. For a moment the crowd vanished, the hum of talk and the clatter of china died away, and he was conscious of nothing but the sweet smiling face before him. Words formulated themselves somewhere in the back of his brain.

"She is the one woman on the earth for me," they ran, and they repeated themselves quickly and foolishly. His eyes lost their timorousness and grew bright.

"I am a happier man than I had realised," said he.

"Why?" she laughed. "Because you have escaped me for a year?"

"Because of your interest in me," he rejoined quickly. "I hope you won't lose it now that I have had the pleasure of meeting you."

"A man in your position must have many people anxious to meet him,—people with beautiful axes they want him to help them grind. How do you know I am not one of those, Mr. Vellacot?"

He smiled, and Lady Alicia was almost startled at the change that came over the man's face. It was like a wave of sunshine passing over a rugged bit of rock.

"I can see the axes hidden under their jackets afar off," said he. "Every kind of animal is gifted with an instinct that warns him of the approach of his natural enemy. In your case I have been wanting to talk to you all the

afternoon. I really have," he added, with a quick return to simple earnestness.

"While you were basking in the smiles of Royalty?"

"I am not used to this sort of thing," he replied with a vague gesture, "and I feel as if I were enjoying the smiles under false pretences. I can't explain. I should greatly have preferred to open the hospital myself quietly,—to have come down alone and received the first patients transferred from the infirmary."

"You can't expect to escape from the vulgarities of the age," said Lady Alicia. "All we can do is to try to render them less vulgar. You hate advertisement, and so do I; but we have to endure it. The whole world clamours for it, and we can't withstand the world, can we? I see Lady Dykes signalling to me that she is going. I am so sorry. I wonder if I dare ask you to come and see me? My desire to meet you is my excuse."

"I should be delighted," said he.

"I will send you a card then. Where shall I address it to?"

"I live in Gower Street," said he.

"Gower Street?" exclaimed Lady Alicia, involuntarily; then she bit her lip and flushed, realising her little breach of good manners. But it was an astounding address for the possessor of many millions.

He smiled one of his rare smiles. "I am not in lodgings there," he said. "I do have the whole house; in fact, I have two knocked into one. It suits me. I am fond of that part of London. My friend Erskine, the architect here, once said that there was a Greek feeling all over Bloomsbury; I suppose he meant that it was restful. Besides, Gower Street is near the Underground and the omnibus routes, so it's very convenient. Perhaps I oughtn't to live in Gower Street, but I can't help it."

"You must forgive my rudeness," said she, holding out her hand, "and come and see me in proof of pardon."

Sir Samuel and Lady Dykes having passed out into the vestibule, the two followed them slowly. Jasper felt prouder, as he walked by her side, than he had done all day. She was more royal than any of the Personages. She had a stately way of holding her head. He noticed that her ears were very small and delicate. She had also a frank way of looking at the world.

She glanced round the spacious vestibule. Through an open door was seen one of the sunlit wards with its long vista of white beds.

"Noble work like this must make you very happy," she said.

He regarded her wistfully.

"It's good for a man to do what he considers to be his duty. But happiness

—”

He broke off, not knowing what to say, scarcely aware of what he wanted to express. He could not tell her that these few moments had been delicious. Nor could he explain the burden of his wealth. It would have been easy to quote King Solomon, but he was far from the phase of existence in which all things are vanity.

“It is happiness to hear you praise my hospital,” he said after a pause.

“I do praise it very much,” she remarked decisively. “And now that I am going let me remind you that you have never asked why I wanted so to meet you.”

“I never thought of it.”

“Nor why I asked you on ten minutes’ acquaintance to come and see me?”

“No,” said he, simply.

“It was to claim cousinship with you,” said Lady Alicia.

“Cousinship!” he echoed, coming to a halt. The lady smiled and nodded her head.

“My mother’s name was Vellacot,—not a common name,—and her brother, my uncle, was called Jasper, which also is not a common name. He went out young to Australia, led a wild life, and disappeared. Now, your name is Jasper Vellacot, and you come from Australia. You are too young to be my uncle, but it seems absurd that a Jasper Vellacot from Australia should not be his son. Therefore I fancy you must be my cousin.”

He stared at her for a moment, and his face grew pale.

“I never knew who my father and mother were,” said he. “I was a foundling. I got the impression, from the rough people who brought me up, that my name was Jasper Vellacot. But they died when I was quite a child, and I fell into other hands. I have used the name as my own—I can’t be your cousin—it is impossible.”

“But you must be. The foundling part of the story proves it. Besides, the romantic is always true. I see no shadow of doubt,” smiled the lady, moving again with him towards the door.

He cleared his throat, and moistened his lips with his tongue. “It can’t be,” he said in a low voice.

“You mustn’t be distressed,” she remarked. “I should make quite a desirable cousin.”

“You are the daughter of the Earl of Illingham,” said he.

“Father is entirely respectable,” she laughed. “We’ll thresh it all out when

we meet again."

He accompanied her to the carriage, where Sir Samuel and Lady Dykes awaited her. Mechanically he muttered a few commonplaces of farewell. The carriage drove off. He ascended the red-baize-covered steps like a sleep-walker. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and his lean nervous hand clenched the handkerchief into a tight ball.

"My God, it's horrible!" said he to himself.

A little man with closely cropped head and a face like a battered bird's, having on it no hair save two wisps of grizzly moustache, darted from a corner of the vestibule, and regarded him with concern through a gold-rimmed eyeglass.

"Jasper, what's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"The shadow of the inevitable, Tom." He put up his hand as an expression of alarm came into the other man's face. "No, not that. I have only found my relations!" and he laughed mirthlessly.

"I never knew you had any."

"There are other Vellacots in the world besides me. One has just claimed cousinship."

"Well? What of it?" The little man looked up at him, his head on one side, bird-fashion. "Pull yourself together, my dear Jasper," he continued. "Do you remember what Lady Macbeth says to her husband?—'Things without all remedy should be without regard.' And you're not a Macbeth, Jasper."

"My ghosts may come and sit at my table any day, Tom," said the millionaire.

"If they do, I'll eat them with oil and vinegar. They'll be of no more importance than a salad. Now don't worry your head any more about them. Go and shine among the luminaries who have come to do you honour."

He patted the millionaire affectionately on the shoulder and pushed him away. Jasper went off with a laugh, and Tom Cudby watched his retreating figure until it was hidden among the people pouring out of the tea-room. He turned to a nurse who was leaning against the wall near by, and surveying the scene.

"If anybody asks you whether you have ever seen the reincarnation of St. Francis of Assisi, say, 'Yes,' " he remarked, nodding in the direction of Vellacot; " 'observe him with all care and love.' You'll never look upon his like again."

"I hear his charities are enormous," said the nurse, interested in this small creature whom she had seen treat the great man so familiarly. "You seem to

know Mr. Vellacot very well."

"I am his secretary, and my name's Cudby. Doubtless I've had the pleasure of corresponding with you. I would not change my position for that of a Secretary of State. Not only because I know I should make an awful mess of the State—I'm afraid I hash up Jasper Vellacot's affairs pretty often—I'm not at all clever, you know—but—have you ever served an angel with wings hidden under a Jaeger undervest?"

The little man's head comically jerked to one side made the nurse laugh. Then suddenly, being a young woman to whom life had brought certain disillusions, she grew serious.

"I would give a great deal to have your enthusiasms," said she, with a sigh.

"Give yourself the trouble of calling on Mr. Vellacot when you are unhappy and you'll have 'em," replied Cudby.

> " 'For his bounty
> There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
> That grew the more by reaping,'

as Cleopatra says of Antony. I was a dead-beat in Australia, when Mr. Vellacot met me. He took me in and fed me and tended me when I was sick, and clothed me when my sole asset in this world was a battered sixpenny Dick's edition of Shakespeare, which by the grace of God I've got to this day—and then he was nearly as poor as I. For his farm was just black dust on which nothing would grow. And he watered it with his tears, and I with profuse perspiration. And one day up rides a man who happened to be a mining engineer. Vellacot bemoaned his luck as usual. Nothing would grow. The man bent down and examined the soil in the palm of his hand. 'What the devil do you want to grow?' he asked. 'I'm a modest man,' says Vellacot; 'a blade of grass peeping up there would send me crazy with joy.' 'Blade of grass be d——d,' says the man. 'You silly fool, don't you know what this is? It's tin. You are the absolute owner of a tin mine. You are worth millions.' And so he was. And he's just the same man with his millions as when he had as many pence. Enthusiasms! I should think I did have them. He has kept me by his side all through—as useless a beggar as ever lived. I could tell you stories about him for a month on end. He's a 'miracle of men.' "

He screwed his gold-rimmed glass more firmly into his eye, nodded in a friendly way to the nurse, and went in search of his patron.

Meanwhile Jasper, as soon as he had re-entered the tea-room, had been drawn aside by a military-looking man, whom he recognised as Major Sparling, the chairman of the local Conservative Committee.

“Can I have a few words in private with you, Mr. Vellacot?”

Jasper assented, led the way into the Secretary’s office close by, and motioned the other to a chair. He himself sat on the corner of the central desk, with one leg dangling, prepared to listen to some request for a subscription to party-funds. Those who solicited always began with that air of mystery. At the moment he took but a languid interest in the politician. Things that mattered more to him were filling his mind. However, with a polite gesture of the hand, he invited his interlocutor to speak.

“I must ask you to be kind enough to regard what I have to say as confidential and unofficial,” said Sparling.

“Quite so,” replied Jasper.

“And I only want an expression of your views. The point is this. The seat for this division will be vacant at the end of the session. Sir Samuel told me definitely this afternoon that he intended to apply for the Chilterns. Of course I have known for some time that things were tending that way. Ill health and so on. Anyhow we are face to face with a by-election before next session. We must find a strong man. He must have local influence or he’s no good. The radicals are infernally strong down here, and not even the Diamond Jubilee and its imperialism will carry the ordinary Tory through. In the event of our Committee inviting you—mind you, I only say in the event—would you care to stand for North Ham in the conservative interest?”

Jasper Vellacot rose to his feet, and looked at Sparling long and steadily beneath his heavy brows; then turned abruptly and paced up and down the room. It was part of his scheme of philanthropic ambition to enter Parliament. He knew that even in the House of Commons human nature was such that a man with the power of his great wealth would obtain respectful hearing, and he had many things to say and to do. An hour ago his reply would have been an instant affirmative. But now—He stopped, stared out of the window. For a few seconds the world had grown dim, and he seemed to see Lady Alicia with dainty uplifted palm barring his way. Suddenly he turned, almost fiercely, as if he were thrusting the vision aside.

“You honour me greatly, Major Sparling,” said he. “With certain reservations I should accept with pleasure.”

“Might I know the general nature of these reservations?”

“I am a Conservative,” said Jasper, “because at the present hour I can’t be a Liberal. I have lived my life in the Colonies, and necessarily I am an Imperialist to the backbone. The time has come when it isn’t England, but the race that has to assert its supremacy over the other races. I believe therefore in expansion and cohesion. There I am Tory. I am Tory in my dislike of such

measures as Local Option. The Liberalism of the present day is a misnomer. It is restriction. It is the converse of Freedom which its name connotes. In my love of Freedom I pass beyond modern Liberalism and come round the circle to Conservatism. But I approach it on a different side from you. Please notice that. There are many things on your programme I will not accept. I know nothing of Church matters, for instance. My only training in religion was from an old Wesleyan parson, who for seven years fed me and gave me what education I possess. I have no views at all on the question of disestablishment, and should never express any. At heart I am a democrat. I believe in the ultimate triumph of the people. God in his inscrutability of purpose has given me a gift of wealth, and I am devoting that and my life to the service of the people. To give them the means to procure better food, better homes, better pleasures, better hopes; to provide for the sick and the weary; to save children from slavery; to guard women from Dante's gate; I have soberly and irrevocably given up my life to this work. I take no credit for it. My Maker and myself know my reasons. Should any constituency select me to represent them in Parliament, what I consider to be for the welfare of the people must come first, and the claims of the Conservative party must come second. That is the nature of my reservations."

He had spoken warmly, with some excitement, and in the rough Australian accent that was absent from his ordinary speech. Major Sparling looked at him somewhat puzzled. He was quite different from the shy, reserved man he had reckoned him to be,—one that would have voted placidly at the bidding of the party whips and have poured unheeded gold into the party coffers. And Vellacot spoke like a man conscious of his power and inflexible in his designs regarding its application. It was clear that the constituency would have to go Vellacot's way, not Vellacot that of the constituency. Sparling tugged at his moustache in silence, wondering whether the subordination of the wirepullers would matter so long as the gold was poured into the coffers aforesaid.

"Am I too uncompromising for you?" asked Jasper, at length, with a smile.

Sparling slapped his thigh and sprang to his feet.

"You are a man, anyhow, Mr. Vellacot," said he, "and that's what we want here. Pledge yourself to support the integrity of the Empire, and the House of Lords, and that sort of thing, and, as far as I'm concerned, you can do what you like as regards popular measures. I have your permission, therefore, to bring your name before the committee? You may imagine it will not be a novel suggestion to them."

They parted. Half an hour afterwards, Jasper and Cudby were travelling back to London by the District Railway.

“Tired, Jasper?” the little man asked after a long silence.

“Thoroughly,” replied Jasper. “Don’t talk to me, there’s a good fellow. I have several things to size up in my mind.”

Cudby nodded and pulled from his breast-pocket a little edition of “Timon of Athens” with text heavily scored and annotated, and appeared to immerse himself in it with great satisfaction. But every now and then he would steal an anxious glance at his friend who sat with wrinkled brows staring in front of him at invisible things. At last he could stand it no longer. He bent forward and touched him on the knee with the book.

“Jasper,” he said. “Damn the ghosts!” Jasper started.

“I was wondering how many votes they control. I am standing for Parliament in the autumn.”

Cudby thrust his “Timon of Athens” into his pocket and his eyeglass into his eye.

“The devil you are!” said he. “Tell me all about it.”

CHAPTER II

IT was half-past nine, a few days afterwards, and Jasper and Cudby sat at opposite sides of the library table dealing with the morning's correspondence. Letters lay in long stacks before them, and the table was covered with baskets into which the letters were sorted. Between them sat a young woman typist, with pencil and note-book, taking down short-hand replies. Envelopes strewed the ground. The post was immense. Circulars of every trade and industry under heaven; prospectuses of every bubble company; unsolicited press-cuttings from every agency in London; begging letters from all over the empire, some genuine, telling piteous stories of want, some obviously impudent frauds, the majority doubtful; letters in scented envelopes addressed in feminine handwriting which turned out to be invitations to subscribe to bazaars and charity concerts; bills; receipts; business-letters from architects, solicitors, bankers, stock brokers, secretaries of companies, financiers; invitations to public dinners and functions; a few invitations to private parties; and fewer still, pathetically so, the private notes from friends.

His affairs required a large staff of clerks and agents. He had taken one of the adjoining houses in Gower Street, for office accommodation and thrown it practically into one with his residence. And here, in the centre of things he sat, controlling everything, working from morning to night, giving his personal attention to the smallest detail. From here he directed the vast mining enterprise in Australia and the petty charities of every day. The begging letters were so numerous, it is true, that he had been forced to organise an enquiry department to report upon the various cases; but he considered these reports himself, and delegated to no one his authority. Then there were hours of close thought over financial operations of great responsibility. He could deal in large figures, and his individual buying or selling of shares affected the stock-market and thereby the fortunes of unknown thousands. He had far-reaching philanthropic schemes of which he alone held the threads. His interviews took up two or three hours of his day, and if he were disengaged he denied no man access, however poor. And this life of strenuous and incessant toil was the life of a man worth many millions.

During one of the intervals between the going and coming of a typist, a clerk entered the room with a telegram. It was a cypher cable from his broker in New York. It ran: "Rock oil new springs found. This morning 120. Acting on instructions, sold." Jasper tossed it over to Cudby.

“Will this avalanche never stop increasing—will it go on infinitely?” he said wearily.

“This means that you’re worth a million of dollars more than you were yesterday. I wouldn’t be sad about it, you know. After all, *vous l’avez voulu, George Dandin*. You told Odgers peremptorily to sell when the shares reached 120. I wrote the cable myself.”

“That was when they were at 75, and he was worrying me to sell. I bought them at 40. I named a fantastic figure. Told him practically to sell on the Day of Judgment. I know these things. A boom to-day. To-morrow they would have fallen. Next week they would have been at the same steady price. My sale will ‘bear’ the whole thing down. You’ll see. This gain of mine is others’ loss. Oh, Tommy, I hate it!”

“Well, my dear old chap, you can’t say to it like Flaminius in ‘Timon of Athens,’ ‘Fly, damned baseness, to him that worships thee.’ ”

“For once in my life I can cap one of your infernal quotations. You were reading me the passage the other night, after the North Ham affair. He goes on to say, ‘Let molten coin be thy damnation.’ By Heaven, it has been mine. There was a heathen king,—I forget his name,—he had the gift of turning everything he touched to gold. It was a curse on him for his impiety. And the flowers he plucked turned to gold, and the hands of friends he shook, and the food he ate, and the wine he drank turned to solid gold, and he starved—I read it as a boy—and the curse is on me for my wrongdoing and I’m starving.”

“Rot,” said Cudby. “The royal gentleman’s name was Midas, and he had ass’s ears. You haven’t. That makes all the difference. As for the million dollars you can easily find use for it. Here’s a letter from Blaine at Rio. Two dead-beats shipped per homeward steamer, consigned to Jasper Vellacot, Esq., —this side up with care,—lest all the whisky should run out of them before they arrive. You can divide the dollars between them, and send them away to play Trinculo and Stephano in this little island. They’ll find a Caliban to show them round at the first street corner.”

He turned the matter into a jest, glancing in his anxious bird-like way at his patron, eager to see a smile dispel the gloom on his face. It was his constant preoccupation to present to Vellacot the lighter aspect of things. In this instance he was successful.

“You are talking drivel and wasting time, Tommy,” said Jasper, with a laugh. “Note the names and details and let me see the men when they come. Now ring the bell and let us get on.”

This “Agency for the Propagation of Wasters,” as Cudby irreverently termed it, was one of Jasper’s pet schemes, which he had been able only lately

to bring into complete working order.

"We have been wasters ourselves, Tommy," he used to say deprecatingly, "with no one to stretch us out a helping hand. We've been there and know what it is."

For want of a better name, he had called it a Repatriation Agency. He had appointed agents in many of the great parts of the world, Sydney, Rio Janeiro, Hong Kong, Cape Town, San Francisco, from whom dead-beats, men who had mistaken their vocation in choosing a colonial or adventurous career, and were evident forlorn failures, could obtain a free passage home, a little ready money, and an introduction to himself. They had to be British subjects and obvious incapables. When they arrived in London, he helped them and found work for them, and put them under the kindly eye of his little enquiry department. Cudby, in a teasing mood, would sometimes rail against this importation of congenital drunkards, criminals, and idiots, and prophesy horrible catastrophes.

"I myself am a case in point. You could get a smart young fellow, trained in business, to do my work infinitely better for £120 a year. How do you know what latent criminal instincts I may have just waiting for occasion to develop them? You are too confiding, Jasper. You think that there's a good solid stratum of the angelic in every ruffian you meet, and that kindness is the way to get at it. You are sitting on the highest mound of the Hill of Illusion, and one of these days it will burst like an egg-shell, and down you'll come flop and hurt your spine awfully."

At which Jasper would smile indulgently, and with the wistful look in his eyes would thank God for the illusions left to him.

The morning's work proceeded. Jasper opened a letter from Major Sparling. He had sounded the committee. They were unanimous in their desire that Mr. Vellacot should stand for North Ham when the vacancy occurred; would give him freedom of action in dealing with the proletariat, consistent, of course, with constitutional methods. He handed the letter to Cudby, who glanced through it, nodded, murmured an inaudible quotation from the Third Part of "King Henry VI.," and threw the letter into the "private" basket. Then he continued the reply he was dictating to the typist. Jasper, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head, went off into a daydream. He saw himself standing amid the green benches passionately declaiming, working the House up to rapt enthusiasm, sitting down amid a storm of applause and cries of "Divide! Divide!" Then suddenly he leaned forward again, rubbed his eyes, and broke into a laugh.

"You are wrong. I've got the ears," he said across the table.

Cudby looked up for a moment perplexed. Then his quick perception and instinctive knowledge of Jasper came to his aid.

"Visions about?" he asked.

Jasper nodded. Cudby pointed to the mass of correspondence still unread.

> " 'Stay we no longer dreaming of renown,
> But sound the trumpets, and about our task,' "

he quoted.

"If I hear any more Shakespeare this morning, I'll call in a policeman," said Jasper, in a lighter mood. And as the typist, having got her complement of notes, retired, he rose and stretched himself and walked about the room.

"Do you know, Tom," said he, coming to a halt, and putting his hands in his pockets, "if things were different I could be as light-hearted a fellow as ever lived. I've longed all my life to be light-hearted. In old days, save with the dear old parson, poverty made it heavy; now wealth does—and other things."

He went to the window and looked out into the street. The golden July sunshine flooded the pavements, and the strip of sky above the roofs of the houses opposite gleamed gloriously blue. A great craving for happiness welled up within him, a desire to escape from the formalism of humanity, from the constraining streets and the restricting laws of conduct, a nostalgia of wide rolling distances, and the smell of the eucalyptus, and the peace of a soul at rest. By nature a visionary, by will a man of action, he seemed to be maintained stationary by the continuous and equal impulse of the two opposing forces, like a ball in the jet of a fountain. That was why the superficial judged him to be a man of no individuality. But when one or other of the forces slightly preponderated, the man's personality leaped forth. He acted quickly, definitely, masterfully. Or he showed himself to be a dreamer of dreams, an inarticulate poet brooding tenderwise over the world's misery that he could not relieve, or yearning after its loveliness that he dared not clasp.

He gazed at the golden sunshine and the radiant strip of blue, and he longed for the wide rolling distances and the smell of the eucalyptus. He turned away with a sigh.

"Do you know what I should like to do this afternoon?" he said meditatively. "I should like to go down to Kew Gardens on a penny steamboat."

"You can reasonably afford it," replied Cudby.

"Perhaps, if I get through the letters, I may go after lunch," replied Jasper, resuming his seat. "Are there any more that I need see?"

“I’ve put them in your basket while you have been street-gazing,” said Cudby, rising and taking up the basket containing the letters with which he was to deal in his own office. “I’ll see all the cranks who come, so that you can get off on your treat this afternoon.”

Jasper acquiesced. He would be inaccessible to everybody save the two dead-beats from Rio Janeiro. It was to be clearly understood that he made a point of interviewing all the dead-beats. Cudby winged an ironical remark Parthian-wise and retired. His master turned to his correspondence. After an hour’s work he came upon a card in his basket he had not previously noticed. It bore the announcement that Lady Alicia Harden would be At Home on Friday evening a week hence. His name was written in the left-hand top corner. The letters R. S. V. P. were below. The writing was dainty, feminine, characterful. It gave an odd air of strength to the name “Jasper.” It evoked the woman in whose presence he had found the heart-rest he had craved for many years. She stood before him and looked at him with her kind eyes, and her eyes stabbed.

He took a sheet of note paper, wrote thereon that Mr. Jasper Vellacot very much regretted that a previous engagement did not allow him to accept Lady Alicia Harden’s kind invitation. He addressed an envelope, closed it, and threw it aside for post. Then he resumed his work. A clerk came in, collected such letters as were ready, and disappeared. A short while afterwards the clock struck twelve, and he knew that, by the rule of the house, his note to Lady Alicia had been posted at the pillar-box outside in time for the midday collection.

The thing was done. He was glad. He would not see this woman again. Intimacy with her was doubly dangerous. His life had already been too much the sport of the irony of circumstance for him not to recognise the preliminaries of the game. Besides, what had he to do with high-born women? What, for the matter of that, had he to do with women at all? The love of them and the sound of children’s feet in his house were things within that Paradise whose gates he himself had barred and locked; and he had thrown the key irrevocably into the abyss. He stood outside for ever. Yes; he was glad. Had he not been expecting, with some irritation, during the past few days, to have to make this decision? Now it was over and done with, and could be relegated to the limbo of other resisted temptations.

Still, when he walked to the window again, the sunshine did not seem quite so golden nor the sky quite so blue. And later, at luncheon, he told Cudby that he thought his desire to go to Kew Gardens on a penny steamboat was rather childish, and that he proposed to attend to some business in the city.

CHAPTER III

IN coming to his irrevocable decision to see no more of Lady Alicia, Jasper Vellacot had not reckoned with rheumatic gout. That so prosaic a malady should be a factor in his romantic destiny (save that perhaps eventual crippledom might place him beyond the pale of romance altogether) never entered into his calculations. But when a man sets up to be a law unto himself, and disregards trivial things,—*de minimis non curat*,—the trivial things are apt to assert themselves.

The rheumatic gout was slight. He had been troubled with it before and had freed himself from symptoms. But this year it had returned. His doctor prescribed baths, and mentioned Aix-les-Bains. Jasper suggested Harrogate. It would be nearer to London. He could run up when his affairs needed his presence; could transact his business so easily. The doctor ordained an absolute holiday. Jasper still stuck to Harrogate, the doctor to Aix. Cudby supported the doctor, quoted the inefficacy of the waters of Abana and Pharpar, scolded, implored, cajoled, and at last prevailed. One August morning he saw his patron off at Charing Cross, and returned to Gower Street to have a peaceful time with his Shakespearean commentators.

So Jasper, accepting the inevitable, went to Aix-les-Bains to cure himself of his rheumatic gout. He put himself under the care of a specialist, began his prescribed course of douches, and for a time enjoyed the change exceedingly. The little town, all hotels and gardens, nestling by the side of its fairy lake in an amphitheatre of mountains, full of sunshine and idleness, gay with laughter and colour, seemed to knead the weariness from his heart just as his shampooer at the Établissement des Bains kneaded out the rheumatism from his limbs. Always modest in his personal expenditure, and somewhat morbidly shrinking from luxuriousness of life, he put up at one of the less expensive hotels, made friends with his American neighbours at the dinner-table, and enjoyed the pleasures of simple companionship.

Now at Aix-les-Bains the whole of its afternoon and evening life is concentrated in its two casinos, the Grand Cercle and the Villa des Fleurs. Each stands in its own pretty grounds, and the grounds adjoin. When you sit and sip your coffee on the terrace of the Cercle, you can watch the fireworks in the gardens of the Villa. When you have won money at the baccarat tables of the Villa, you can run round in two minutes and lose it at the Cercle; which is

most convenient. Or when you are tired of the indoor afternoon concert at the Cercle, you can stroll across to the Villa and find a crowd of women in cool dresses and men in flannels, talking and reading under the shade of the great lime-trees, while waiters move about with glasses in which ice tinkles deliciously and straws stand invitingly, and while an orchestra in the kiosque at the further end discourses lively music. With characteristic twinges of self-reproach for leading this existence of frivolous peace, Jasper surrendered himself, as we have said, to the inevitable. He went on excursions in the little old paddle steamers about the lake. He dozed in the Villa grounds. He took three English children and their grandmother for drives about the country, while their mother went off to gamble. He found unexpected entertainment in fireworks. He wandered amusedly around the baccarat tables, and grew as fascinated as a child with the eternally gyrating little horses in the outer hall of the Cercle. For a week things went happily.

On the eighth evening he stood in the gaming-room of the Villa watching some high play at one of the four tables. The heat was great, the air charged with over-scented femininity. A discreet murmur of talk filled the room, and above it rose the monotonous cries of the croupiers. Each table had its crowd, but the throng around the table where Jasper stood was three or four deep. The spectacle half amused, half saddened him. This horrible greed of money moved his pity. Here were those who came to Aix mainly for the gambling,—well-known London money-lenders, keepers of gaming-hells in Belgium and Mexico, elderly women in cotton blouses and with untidy hair; there were many who had come for the treatment, looking as though they had rheumatism in their bodies and gout in their souls. There were American millionaires, cool, white-bearded, urbane; American women, elaborately costumed, tapping their hundred-franc plaques nervously with the sharp points of their pink, manicured nails. There was the ubiquitous cosmopolitan Hebrew of dark and devious finance, bald-headed, hook-beaked, with great moustache helped out by whisker, with hard, evil goggle-eyes, in irreproachable dinner-jacket, with a hothouse flower in his button-hole, a diamond in his shirt-front and diamonds on his hands. There were Parisian demi-mondaines stretching out over-jewelled fingers through the rows of players to receive the red louis counters handed up from the green cloth. There were fresh, laughing English girls in simple frocks taking their innocent fill of the excitement; there were clean-limbed Englishmen; pretty Frenchwomen grown for the moment hawk-eyed, as the chances of the game wavered.

“You don’t play, Monsieur?” said a girl in broken English to Vellacot.

“No,” he replied simply. “I am afraid.”

“Of what?” she laughed.

"Of winning."

The girl raised her eyebrows, turned away, and reached hastily over the crowd in order to stake a louis on the hand.

"You are nothing if not original, Mr. Vellacot," said a voice by his side.

He turned, with a great leap of his heart. There stood Lady Alicia, smiling serenely, a little teasing shadow hovering over her lips.

There was no help for it. The unreckoned rheumatic gout had its revenge. He must either pack up his things and escape from Aix at once, or he must put up with a course of Lady Alicia's society. For Aix is really only one very big hotel where everybody meets everybody else a dozen times a day. Vaguely, dazedly, the alternatives passed through Jasper's mind. All that he could do for the moment, however, was to apostrophise her by name in tones of astonishment.

"I come here for three or four weeks most years," she explained calmly. "Not for myself, but for the sake of my aunt, Lady Luxmoore, who is a martyr to gout, poor dear! She lives with me, you know. When did you come?"

He answered the conventional question. They exchanged the commonplaces of opinions on the charms of Aix. Again he felt the curious restfulness of this woman even when she spoke stereotyped phrases. In his fancy her voice was like the murmur of many waters. He hated himself for listening enraptured. She was dressed in a pale rose-coloured gown, high to the neck, set off at the bosom with impalpable chiffon, and there were roses under her hat nestling against her adorable light brown hair. While they discussed the chances of baccarat, he wondered why on earth she had never married; breathed under his breath an impious wish that husband and children had come between him and those eternally kind hazel eyes. She explained her presence in the rooms that evening. She had been dining at the Villa with the Seagrims, Hertfordshire people, her neighbours, who were staying at her hotel, the Europe, next to the Villa. They were over there, on the opposite side of the table.

"So you don't play because you are afraid to win!" she said at last. "You might lose. I don't believe in such superstition."

"I do," he said.

"It would be interesting to try the experiment."

"Whom could it possibly interest?"

"Me," said Lady Alicia.

The banker at that moment retired; whether he had won or lost neither could say. The croupier was crying the auction of the bank.

"Why not take this bank?" asked Lady Alicia. "Do."

The bank was going for five hundred louis. He cried six. The bank was adjudged to him. An American railroad magnate recognised him, and whispered to his neighbour that he was Jasper Vellacot the Australian millionaire. Like an electric flash the news went round the crowded table. The American called *banco*. The cards were dealt. Jasper won. A murmur went round. There were heavy stakes in the punt, the sum in the bank made up. Jasper won on both hands. The croupier with his flat spoon lifted all the stakes into the bank. The cards were dealt again. Jasper won again. He won six times running. An enormous sum was in the bank. The cosmopolitan Hebrew happened to hold the hand for his side of the table. He staked the maximum. There was breathless excitement as Vellacot looked at his cards and then threw down a nine, the winning number. He rose, gathered his winnings into the lacquered dish, and changed them for thousand-franc bank notes at the counter. He came up to Lady Alicia with a weary expression.

"Are you interested in any charities?" he asked her.

"Many. I am on the committee of the 'Officers' Widows Benevolent,' for instance."

"Then let me implore you use this for me as you think best," he cried, thrusting the notes into her hand. "No, no—you must. It was you who made me play. I hate it. I am a sort of magnet for gold. You can't understand how horrible it is. I should win on a million to one chance. It is more than a superstition; it is a doom. For Heaven's sake, give it to your officers' widows, Lady Alicia, or to whom you will."

She had refused at first. But the man, speaking quickly in low tones, looked almost haggard in his earnestness.

"I accept—gratefully," she replied, putting the notes in the rose-coloured satchel slung at her wrist.

"Will you come outside for a little?" he asked. "It is suffocating here."

She assented, and they went out into the small garden at the back of the gaming-rooms and separated from them by a narrow terrace. The garden was deserted. The cane armchairs and tables gleamed in the starlight. From the terrace came the sound of women's voices and laughter; through the open doorway beyond, a brilliant aperture of light and moving colour, came faintly the cries of the croupiers.

"I was wrong to have made you play," said Lady Alicia, softly. "I never thought that these things could affect anyone so deeply. You must forgive an idle woman in a light mood for not checking her caprices. The atmosphere of that horrid room demoralises one. You do forgive me?"

What could he answer? Plenary absolution mumbled apologetically was given. As a matter of fact, he explained, his unvarying luck had got on his nerves. There was in it something uncanny, necromantic.

“Like the horrible luck of a man who has sold himself to the devil,” he said on a sudden impulse.

Lady Alicia shivered a little. She had lived all her life among well-to-do people; she herself had inherited an ample fortune. She had met millionaires upon whom the burden of wealth sat lightly, who took the most human interest in the making of money. There was Judge Blenkinson of Chicago, colossally rich,—he was standing even now at the doorway rattling his chips in his hand,—who was as delighted as a boy when he had won twenty francs. But she had never come across a man like Vellacot before; his point of view was original, brought into sight startling possibilities.

The sincerity of his tone touched her. The man was, in a certain sense, a pathetic figure. Lady Alicia knew that she passed among her friends for a sympathetic woman, and she took a delicate pleasure in acting up to her reputation. She was fond of sheltering the unfortunate under the white wing of her pity, glancing down graciously now and then to see how they did; to add this multi-millionaire with mediæval superstitions to the number was a temptation. She rested her chin on her ungloved hand and reflected before she spoke.

“I think I understand,” she said. “You feel that all this wealth coming to one individual is not in the kindly order of things—that it marks you as a man apart—separates you from your kind—sets some sort of brand upon you.”

“Yes, yes. That is just it,” he said eagerly.

“If there is a supernatural agency at work, why shouldn’t it be divine instead of diabolical? Look at the enormous amount of human suffering you are able to relieve. And as for the isolation, every man and woman who fulfils a great mission must stand alone to a certain extent.” Then, conscious of the danger of platitude, she shifted her position and changed to a lighter key. “But after all, you know,” she added with a laugh, “you will find lots of people who will be glad to be nice and kind to you and to help you along your way. Only you must not refuse all their invitations.”

“I have only had one, which I was unfortunately obliged to decline,” replied Jasper, making the best of it.

“Is that a reproach?” she asked good-humouredly.

“It is a regret.”

“And a promise by implication?”

“How could it be otherwise?” he answered politely.

“I seldom have great crushes,” she explained. “My At Homes are quite small affairs,—a few friends who I hope learn to like each other. But perhaps I was audacious in asking you, you must be sought after by so many.”

“I go out very little,” he said simply. “I haven’t many friends. You see—I have enough knowledge of the world to know, and I can say it without fatuity—I could be lionised if I liked. But what is the good? If it were for the sake of my brilliant intellect, my artistic powers, my personal charm, I should feel flattered perhaps. At any rate it would be a tribute to something intrinsic in me. But simply to stalk around drawing-rooms to show myself off in a suit of gold armour—no. I neither think what these people think, nor feel what they feel, nor hope what they hope. They are glittering beings out of my world. And humbler people—well, they’re afraid of me somehow.”

“My friendship is not worth much,” said Lady Alicia, gently. “But if you care to accept it, it is yours—in all frankness.”

She rose and stood in a stately attitude, as he leaped to his feet. The stars were dazzling in the velvet blackness of the sky. Her eyes seemed to catch the soft mystery of the starlight. Again he came beneath their spell.

“I haven’t a woman friend in the wide world,” said he, holding out his hand.

They said no more, but went into the rooms, where the Seagrims joined them. He was a red-nosed, pale-eyed, hunting English squire; she a faded lady who had once been pretty. Introductions were effected; commonplace civilities interchanged. As Jasper walked up to his hotel alone, he wondered what companionship a bird of paradise could find among crows,—good, honest birds, basing all their actions upon the most respectable of corvine traditions, but plain, common crows all the same. And he put it down to the infinite, tender sympathy of the bird of paradise.

This was the beginning of a daily comradeship. He was brought into her circle of friends, as a matter of course was included in arrangements for excursions, dinners, little festivities. He hired a carriage for the Battle of Flowers, and took in it Lady Alicia, her aunt, and the Seagrims, Seagrim sitting on the box-seat. He filled the vehicle with nosegays, and losing himself in the childish sport (Lady Alicia with flushed cheeks and hair adorably ruffled was sitting opposite), became as gay as any fresh, laughing girl who pelted him from the stands.

“I’m afraid I have made a dismal idiot of myself,” he said, in comic deprecation, as they parted.

“You have been DELIGHTFUL,” replied Lady Alicia.

All this was wrong. He knew it. His conscience ached with hourly questionings. By what right was he making merry in this frivolous little town? By what right was he resting in the sweet presence of this woman? But his iron bands of self-repression had burst and he could not rivet them again. Life, colour, gaiety were thrust before him, and his starved heart took its fill. When he went, of afternoons, into the grounds of the Villa, and his eye, with astounding instinct, rested upon the skirt of her dress and the top of her hat as she sat in a cane armchair with her back towards him, something new and strange, like a bird, fluttered within him, and he approached with a fearful joy. It was wrong. Yet what could he do? To leave Aix was to leave his cure unaccomplished. If in the pantheistic hierarchy there is a god of rheumatic gout, he must have hugged himself in much sardonic amusement. Jasper stayed. Lady Alicia was as restful as he had imagined her to be when he had first seen her at North Ham. She had the woman's quick intuition of the soothing, understanding, or inspiriting thing to say. He gave her his confidence like a boy, sketched out his great philanthropic schemes, discussed his chances at the by-election next month against the Radical candidate. Lady Alicia professed great interest in the election. She liked his position of Tory Democrat. It appealed to her own temperament. She construed it into a standpoint remote from the great unwashed, whence he could look down upon them with broad benignance, scattering untold blessings the while upon their heads. It would be playing her own favourite part of Deputy Providence. Unaccustomed to search the by-ways of a woman's mind, he did not perceive the fallacious reasons for her political sympathy; which was just as well, since perception might have caused him disappointment in his Egeria. As it was, her interest charmed and inspired him.

"You are looking a different man from what you were in London," she said one day.

The change was not entirely due to the grey flannel suit, brown shoes, and alpine hat, which became him more than the awkwardly worn frock-coat.

"You look happier and brighter," she continued.

"A holiday is good for everyone," said he.

"I hate this place, in a general way, but I'll feel kindly disposed towards it for having benefited you so much."

"That is sweet of you," said he, smiling. "To me it has been a little Eden."

"Forbidden fruit and all?"

"I am afraid I have been living on nothing else since—since I came."

"Now who forbids it you?" she asked, unconscious of the little break in his last remark.

“Who but himself can forbid a man anything?” he replied. “Who but myself can forbid me to slay this waiter who I see is bringing us milk with our tea when I ordered lemons?”

He stepped agilely back from the edge of perilous depths to the rippling shallows.

“I refuse to be metaphysical,” said Lady Alicia, looking inside the teapot. “Can you tell from inspection the difference between China tea and Ceylon tea?”

He joined in the examination of the teapot. His face was close to hers. The moment’s intimacy was very sweet.

“For if it’s China, we’ll have the lemons, and if it’s Ceylon, the milk,” she added.

“I’m afraid it’s a mixture,” said he. And they both laughed at the problem presented.

The milk was retained. The waiter departed. Lady Alicia poured out the tea. Her white fingers holding a square of sugar hovered enquiringly over his cup before they dropped it in. Fingers and sugar and tea and all were forbidden fruit; only he dared not tell her so. To change the topic, he took from the table a slender volume backed with parchment, which she had brought with her, and opened it.

“I saw quite an enthusiastic review of this in ‘The Times’ yesterday,” said he.

“Did you really?” she cried eagerly. “You must show it to me. Bunny will be so glad—that is Bonamy Tredgold. He’s a dear fellow. One of my great friends. Everyone calls him Bunny. He was born so. I can’t help feeling that he is going to be a great poet,—a very great poet. ‘The Times’ has taken six months to review the book, though, which is very unfair.”

Lady Alicia sipped her tea, as if to soothe her resentment. Jasper’s eye caught a lyric printed on one page. He read it through. An elusive thought in it caused him to re-read. Then, grasping the meaning, he felt as if a message had come to him from regions far away. The lines lingered in his mind with a haunting sense of the sound of sea-shells and the moan of the sea. He looked up at Lady Alicia and met eyes full of expectancy.

“The man who wrote that is already a great poet,” said he, surprised at the little emotional catch in his voice as he handed her the open book.

“Oh, I am glad you think so,—gladder than you can imagine,” she cried, with a flush in her cheeks. “This lyric is beautiful. It is one of my favourites. I love his work because it is so sane, the work of a clear healthy mind. There is

nothing morbid or decadent about Bunny."

"How old is he?" asked Jasper.

Lady Alicia poured him out another cup of tea. "I am afraid he is quite young," she said, helping him to sugar.

"Afraid?" he echoed. "But we should be glad. Fancy what it means! To be young, and a poet; to have all the glory of the world inside one's soul and to be twenty! what can man ask more of God?"

"Bunny is very poor," said Lady Alicia.

"I would give ten years of my life for an hour of his," said Jasper. "I have read very little poetry, I'm ashamed to confess. It hasn't come my way. But I have a curious reverence for the great poet. A curious reverence," he repeated, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head. "He explains the half-hidden things that a common man knows form an integral part of himself and yet cannot grasp. Somehow he seems to be in touch with Heaven, and is given charge of the things of the spirit. It can't possibly matter to such a man whether he is poor or rich. He commands the earth,—the honour of men and the love of women. Money can't buy these."

There was a moment or two of silence, during which he dreamed vague dreams. Then Lady Alicia spoke lightly.

"When you come to see me in London, Mr. Vellacot, I should like you to meet Bonamy Tredgold. You could not help loving him. He is a man—to his finger-tips. And besides you are distant connections. He is another cousin of mine, but on the Harden side. Our grandfathers were brothers."

Jasper's thoughts dropped from heaven to a troubled earth. This was the first time that she had re-opened the question of cousinship. Foolishly he had fancied that she had either forgotten or had accepted his disclaimer. He saw now that, in her smiling, serene way, she had taken the relationship for granted. A chilly wind seemed to rustle through the leaves. The light went out of his face. He answered mechanically. To his relief the Seagrims came up with Lady Luxmoore in search of Lady Alicia. After a few moments' desultory talk he left them and strolled moodily towards the gaming-rooms. He dared not think,—not just yet. He would find distraction in watching the play. But in the vestibule he came across Judge Blenkinson, the American millionaire, seated happily at the sparsely attended *petits-chevaux* table, staking francs. The old man greeted him, rose, and taking him to a quiet spot talked to him, until it was time to dress for dinner, of deals and corners, and entertained him with the fairy tales of Chicago.

Jasper, in repayment of various hospitalities, had invited a pleasant party to dinner at the Restaurant of the Cercle. As a matter of course, Lady Alicia was

there by his side. He strove to play the genial host, and was morbidly conscious of failure. His old shyness returned. The people around his table seemed to be transformed into the glittering beings of another world of whom he had once spoken to Lady Alicia. She herself, with her sweet high-bred face and easy charm of manner, seemed cruelly remote. Nervous apprehension seized him lest she should jestingly proclaim the cousinship. The meal dragged on interminably.

At last it came to an end. The party split up, moved instinctively towards the baccarat. He vowed to himself that he would not be alone with her again. But the gods, and perhaps Lady Alicia herself, thought otherwise. In spite of his blundering diplomacy, he found himself walking by her side in the rear of the others. He quickened his pace. Her fan laid a detaining touch on his arm.

"Not those hot, greedy rooms," she said. "One can only breathe in the open air on such a sultry night. I feel I need it. Do you mind?"

"Where shall we go?"

"Oh, into the grounds, where there is most air."

They sat on a rustic seat in the half light cast by the brightly illuminated building. She referred no more to the cousinship, but chose to be very kind and restful. He gave himself up to the tremulous delight of her presence. He felt the rhythmic beat of her fan, and every beat seemed to bring him a subtle breath of her. She led him to talk of his early days, his wanderings, his struggles. It was many years since he had spoken of them. Never had he done so to a woman. Things that had long ached in his heart were charmed away.

The hour flew by magically. She rose to depart. He accompanied her to the gate of the Hôtel de l'Europe.

"Thank you for telling me all this," she said, as they parted. "Now I know that we are friends."

The sympathetic pressure of her soft palm sent the blood leaping in his veins. He went away filled with her—as a man is filled with a woman in the first flush of a great love. He wandered for a time almost drunkenly about the streets of the little town.

In his hotel bedroom he stared for a long time at the image of himself in the glass. It seemed to fade into a mist, and out of the mist came a dead man's face; and the dead face faded and the living face of the same man, as he had seen it years afterwards, appeared framed in a railway-carriage window.

He turned away with a shiver, passing his hand over his eyes like a man awaking from sleep. Then he sat by the window and looked out, over the roofs of the dim white hotels, at the mountains sharply cut against the dark luminous sky. He was sane now. He knew that he loved this woman with all his heart.

And he knew that he must add the burden of this love to that other burden of his life. He faced the future with set teeth, as he had done before. He was a strong man.

CHAPTER IV

HE left Aix-les-Bains the next day by the morning train, having despatched a note to Lady Alicia, regretting the suddenness of his departure. Urgency of affairs summoned him to London. He had to thank her for pleasant hours. A matter of courtesy; nothing more. On the following evening he appeared before an astonished Cudby, and vouchsafed little explanation of his unexpected return. He was sick of the place, said he; pined for the comforting routine of work. Yes, he was cured of his gout. Incidentally he mentioned his meeting with Lady Alicia, and in the same breath discussed Judge Blenkinson the Chicago millionaire. The lady's name gave Cudby the key of the situation, and he smiled ironically at the diplomatic airiness of his patron.

Jasper took up the threads of affairs somewhat feverishly, sent Cudby off against his will on a short holiday, and worked from morning to night. He had several important schemes on hand. There was a fever hospital in a northern town; an experiment in farming on the lines of the Salvation Army settlement in Essex; an attempt to solve the housing problem in Bermondsey. The election at North Ham was drawing near. This involved speech-making, canvassing, interviewing party agents, endless correspondence. When Cudby returned he found him a cheerful Atlas, bearing a world of work upon his shoulders.

Meanwhile Lady Alicia remained at Aix till her aunt's cure was accomplished, accompanied her for the traditional week or ten days' after-cure in Switzerland, and returned to England. A dutiful fortnight was spent with her parents at the family seat in Norfolk, after which she was free to rejoin Lady Luxmoore at her own little place in Hertfordshire. It was not till the middle of November that she came back to London.

Besides the little place in Hertfordshire, Lady Alicia had a charmingly appointed house in Onslow Square. She had inherited them, together with a considerable fortune, from her uncle, Simon Vellacot, who in marked contrast with his scapegrace brother, Jasper, had led a decorous life as a stockbroker, and, though a bachelor, had died in the richest odour of respectability. Her mother, the late Countess, had died during Alicia's girlhood. Her father after a few years' widowhood had married again, and had followed his wife into the paths of extreme and militant nonconformity. The Countess was an agreeable woman; the old Earl a kind and accomplished gentleman; and for a while Lady

Alicia bore with the new austerities she saw practised in her home. But when her father formally joined the confraternity of Plymouth Brethren, Lady Alicia bade him adieu and set up for herself. She was young, independent, and the bright world seemed to her everything else than the Aceldama of Sin which it was proclaimed to be at the Castle. Besides, during her girlhood she had been trained in a nice appreciation of its graces and its pleasures. If she could not join her parents in their discovery that these same pleasures were snares and vanities, it was scarcely her fault. They bemoaned her blindness, but as sweet reasonableness was the distinguishing quality of all Lady Alicia's actions, they could not accuse her of unfilial behaviour. The stepmother comforted herself with the feminine reflection that, after all, the daughter would eventually have to go the way of a husband, and all the old Earl's fervour could not drive away a lurking unregenerate surmise that the Almighty would not send to perdition a lady of her quality. So Lady Alicia set up her two establishments without committing the tiniest breach of the Fifth Commandment, and played the dutiful daughter for a fortnight a year in the dreary, preacher-haunted Castle.

She had been leading this independent existence, with Lady Luxmoore as chaperon, for the last six years. She was now three and thirty. Her continued spinsterhood surprised her friends. So sweet a woman they chorussed. So sympathetic. So pretty. So exceedingly well off. Such a favourite with men. She had a dozen or two always at her disposal at a moment's notice. Men whom one had to implore almost abjectly to come to one's parties went to Alicia's uninvited—actually to afternoon tea. She could take her pick of all the eligibles in London, said her friends; but they were unaware of any affair of the heart. She smiled serenely on everyone. There was not an instance of a man retiring from her circle discomforted and rushing off to shoot rhinoceroses in South Africa or bears at the North Pole. Her friends could not even hear of proposals. When they asked her point-blank whether she had had any, she laughed a bright "Of course I have!" but, further, remained sweetly impenetrable. In this way she provided them with food for much conversation. She was getting on. In a few years, did she continue in her celibacy, she would be irrevocably on the shelf. They *wished* Alicia would marry—why, the lady herself could never rightly determine. But her hopeless behaviour brought with it one advantage. Her friends allowed her a freedom in her relations with men which they would not have tolerated among each other. She became a chartered though chaste libertine, a Diana of South Kensington, whose doings were unquestioned. In her heart she was rather proud of her free-pass through the lines of scandal; perhaps, being human, she used it somewhat frequently.

"Alicia," said Lady Luxmoore, "that man will certainly fall in love with you."

“My dear aunt, *which* man?” asked Lady Alicia, turning round in her chair, with a mother-of-pearl pen-holder in her hand. It was a November afternoon, the day after her arrival in London, and she was sitting at her escritoire sending off to her friends intimations of her return. The room was cosily lit only by the fire and the rose-shaded lamp on the escritoire. Lady Luxmoore had been dozing over her knitting by the fireside.

“Why, Jasper Vellacot. Didn’t you ask me just now whether I thought he was in town?”

“That was twenty minutes ago,” laughed Alicia. “You have been asleep, dear. I had forgotten all about him.”

“Anyhow, he will fall in love with you. Mark my words.”

“They all do, according to you, Aunt Phœbe. To listen to you, one would think I was the most be-fallen-in-love-with woman in London. There’s Bunny and Charteris and Mainwaring, and hosts of others—and now Jasper Vellacot.”

“Well, you’ll see,” said the elder lady, in placid prophecy.

“On the contrary, I think he has treated me rather shabbily. He ran away from Aix without a hint of good-bye, and I’ve had two wooden little notes from him since,—one, when I offered to come and canvass for him, to say that his canvassing had been done already, and the other acknowledging my congratulations on his election. I think I am very forgiving to write to him now.”

“Oh, yes,” she went on, in answer to a murmured reiteration from the fireside, “he likes me in an abstract, far-away fashion, from somewhere behind his hospitals and institutes and industrial dwellings, but those fill his heart. Besides, why should men and women be always falling in love with each other? Can’t we be frank and friendly? He is just the dear sort of person to be a friend to a woman. He is like a shy, elderly child.”

“If you think Jasper Vellacot is nothing but a shy, elderly child, you are making a mistake, Alicia,” said Lady Luxmoore, clicking her knitting-needles.

“Fundamentally he is that,” replied Lady Alicia, with cheerful assurance. “I saw a good deal of him at Aix, remember. Of course he is shrewd in business matters; but that is not saying anything. It is his general attitude toward life that is so timid and childlike. He is a pathetic figure with all his wealth. Do you know that he asked me one evening what that green stuff was with ice in it which people were drinking through straws? He had never heard of crême de menthe. It was a trivial thing, but it signified so much!”

“I am not saying anything against him, dear,” said Lady Luxmoore. “Don’t think that for one moment.”

“Why, of course not, Aunt Phœbe. How could you?” smiled Lady Alicia, resuming her note-writing. “Doesn’t he practically sell all that he has and give it to the poor? Besides,” she added, looking round over her shoulder, “he is my cousin, you know.”

Of that she was firmly convinced. His obvious disinclination to discuss the question she attributed to his shyness, to the tragedy of his birth. His mother, he had told her truly, had dragged herself midway between life and death, whence no mortal knew, into a rough mining-camp. She had lived there three hours, during which he was born. That was all he knew, all he had been able to discover of his parentage. The rough people who had reared him during early childhood had told him, said he, that his name was Jasper Vellacot. Now it was certain that Lady Illingham’s brother had married in Australia; so much Lady Alicia had discovered. The presumed date of the marriage corresponded with the millionaire’s confessed age. Then the name, or rather the conjunction of the two uncommon names, was in itself an identification; the long arm of coincidence could scarcely be held accountable. The whole story was romantic —the mysterious entry into the world, the many years of obscure wandering, the sudden possession of colossal wealth, the Midas touch that turned everything into gold, the pathetic frugality and the earnest purpose of his life. Unconsciously the unsatisfied emotionality of the woman drank in the romance, and she was unaware how deep her interest in him lay.

The noise of her aunt’s knitting-needles ceased. Lady Alicia bit the end of her mother-of-pearl pen-holder, and contracted her brows as she looked at her half-finished note to Vellacot. Her aunt’s words had created a moment’s misgiving. She really knew very little of this man to whom she was writing in so friendly a way. But if it came to that, what did she know of any of her men friends? Even the most independent and frank of women have these little frightening doubts, and the doubts become more frightening in proportion as the women are proud and innocent-minded. Then they feel humiliated by the limitations of their sex; they rebel, being women of spirit, and forthwith deceive themselves into greater confidence than ever in their own serene judgment. Thus did Lady Alicia. She smiled with renewed self-establishment, and dashing the pen into ink wrote off a very friendly little note indeed, which she regarded with satisfaction. Then she wrote to Bonamy Tredgold, which was a longer affair. Her eyes grew tender over it, and as she put up the letter in its envelope she breathed a sentimental little sigh.

The result of all this note-writing was a small gathering of friends a few

evenings later in Onslow Gardens. There came Vane Edory, R.A., and his wife and his daughter Paulina; Guy Charteris, home on leave from his legation; John Mainwaring, a younger son about town; Sir Samuel and Lady Dykes; Elinor Currey, who had gone everywhere and had done everything and adored Lady Alicia; Bonamy Tredgold, slight, wiry, nervous, athletic, with brown, bright eyes and short, black curly hair, and, latest to arrive, Jasper Vellacot, M.P.

Lady Alicia rose smilingly to meet him as he entered.

"How charming of you to have come! I should have felt myself incomplete if you hadn't. I have been longing to congratulate you on your victory—it was more than that—a triumph!"

He could look her in the face now without any fear of the heart leaping to the eyes. He had schooled himself to it during the months of absence. Yet her genuine welcome, her stately fairness, the graciousness of her presence harmonising with the subtle refinement of her drawing-room, all forced itself upon his consciousness with a pang. They conversed awhile.

"You are not looking as well as you did in Aix," she said with friendly concern.

"I was getting fat and lazy. Now I am normal. You—you are just the same—except—Do you know that this is the first time I have seen you without a bonnet?"

"You mean a hat!" laughed Lady Alicia. "I'm sure no one has ever seen me in a bonnet for years. Yes, at Aix one lives in a hat from the time one gets up till one goes to bed. I hope now you'll often see me without a hat."

"As often as you'll let me," said Vellacot, with his little awkward bow.

She launched Vellacot into the circle, effected introductions. Sir Samuel and Lady Dykes he knew. The ex-member offered his congratulations, discussed the election, drew a critical sketch of personalities in the constituency. Could give Vellacot any number of tips in that way,—indicate all the constituent corns that lay in the way of incautious treading.

"There's a tremendous potentate in North Ham," said Sir Samuel. "Wickens, I hear he's the new Mayor this year. He has about seventeen little butcher's shops about London and owns a rookery in Bethnal Green. You know the kind of man—sweats the blood out of pauper tenants."

"The brute!" said Jasper.

"Yes, I suppose he is. And he's a nasty-tempered beggar; but he's got a deuce of an influence down there and you'll have to conciliate him."

The word was a touch of the spur to Jasper. He drew himself up sharply.

“I’ll be shot if I do,” said he.

“You’ll have to fight him.”

“Well, what then? One can crush a brute like that, I suppose.”

“Oh, no doubt he can be crushed,” replied the amiable Sir Samuel. “No doubt, no doubt. And so he ought to be. I saw it myself. Only it required a younger man. That’s one of the reasons why I resigned, you know. But, my dear Vellacot, if you set to work to reform the morals of that constituency, you’ll have your hands full.”

“I’m going to be master there anyway,” said Jasper. “And it’s just that type of blood-sucker landlord that I have been longing to get my knife into.”

Sir Samuel’s time-serving suggestion roused his indignation. The prospect of battle pleased him. He held up his head proudly, feeling his strength. Sir Samuel shifted his ground and rambled on pleasantly. After all, politically speaking, it was a beautifully organised borough. The conservative club was a model throughout the country. Of course there were Radicals who bombarded you with caustic letters; but a soft-answering secretary could turn away a lot of wrath. While listening, Jasper forgot his anger in speculative interest in the other’s attitude towards life. No scourges had ever lashed this well-fed elderly gentleman into action. No spiritual suffering had ever cleared his vision to ideals. With easy good-nature he had adopted—nay, been born with—the Panglossian theory of the universe. How many Sir Samuels sat on the government side of the House, below the gangway, serving time under the placid misapprehension that they were serving their country! And yet these men were held in honour in the state; their position was unassailable, their fathers had built it up for generations. And what was he, Jasper Vellacot, with all his millions? A nameless man, belonging to no social caste, an Ishmaelite—a Pariah if the whole truth were known. He stood remote, fighting for his own hand.

Lady Alicia broke upon his musing and carried him off from Sir Samuel to a group where Elinor Currey was talking animatedly. She was a thin dark girl with a sallow complexion, and no points of beauty save luminous dark eyes and white teeth.

“Please support me, Mr. Vellacot,” she said, making room for him on the couch. “I am maintaining that there is no material for romance in modern life.”

“And I maintain there is,” cried Bonamy Tredgold, boyishly.

“First tell me what is romance,” said Jasper, the usual wistfulness returning to his eyes.

“It is the picturesque, the unusual, the unexpected. It is colour, imagination, mystery, religion,” said Elinor Currey.

“Romance is the artistic expression of the joy of life,” cried the young poet. “Miss Currey has only enumerated some of the things of which the joy of life is made up.”

“It comes to the same thing. Bunny is too logical for a poet. But take the quality of mystery, which he allows is a component of the joy of life whose artistic expression is romance—”

“Oh, dear lady! what a house-that-Jack-built sentence!” interrupted Bunny.

“It isn’t finished yet,” said the lady. “I’ve a good mind to say it all over again. But I continue. Where can one find mystery in these modern days of spiritual negation and of scientific explanation of phenomena, like thunder and wind, that once were supposed to be voices of gods and wailing of lost souls? There is no mystery about unknown parts of the earth,—the railway and telegraph have made practically every square inch as unromantic as this drawing-room.”

“How on earth do you know there is no mystery, nothing romantic in this drawing-room?” said Bunny. “What more awful mystery can there be than another human being? What do you know of the extraordinary, subtle, complex, secret thing that is I? What do I know of you? Just think of a man and a woman who love one another,—with one of the immemorial passions of old romance,—whose hearts and souls and beings seem to be fused into one,—in spite of all must not each remain an inscrutable sphynx to the other? It is the constant striving to solve this mystery that is the joy of love, and any expression of this joy is romance. And as regards the wind and the rain, the wind will always blow and the rain will fall, and flowers will bloom, and the earth will be magical with beauty, and man will face it all and speculate on its relation with himself; and that is an eternal mystery.”

“Well, I’ll yield you the mystery,” said Elinor Currey. “But colour has died out. Everything is dull monotone.”

“The sunset, for instance; the night-fires in the black country; Oxford Street with its whirling mass of colour.”

“But the grey lives of people.”

“Our lives are kaleidoscopic compared with those of our ancestors,” exclaimed Bunny, excitedly. “Because people don’t wear cloaks and swords, and fight duels, and catch young women up round the waist and carry them off on horses, you say romance is dead. It’s idiotic. You say our lives are restricted by law, by convention, that we can’t do any of the wild and wicked old things that people used to do. By Jove, can’t we! And it’s because we have to crash through the Statute Book, the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes of Mrs. Grundy, in order to do them, that they show up all the more vividly. As for the

unexpected, isn't it happening day by day? Aren't great crimes committed? Don't great tragedies occur? Do you mean to tell me that grand passions are dead? I say there is infinite material for romance in the world. The earth is full of its glory! What do you think, Mr. Vellacot?"

The eager, boyish face appealed strongly to the wearier man. He would have given much to have such radiant faith in life. Thus challenged, he could not but agree, but he spoke more soberly, out of a deeper experience.

"As long as the two elemental passions—Hunger and Love—remain," said he, "there will be eternal material for romance."

"But the ordinary person does not suffer from hunger," remarked Lady Dykes, with complacent stupidity.

The eyes of Jasper and Bunny chanced to meet, and the mutual gaze was held for some seconds; and the freemasonry of sensitives who have suffered worked reciprocal understanding. The two men's natures went out to meet each other, and the moment was the beginning of their friendship.

The evening wore on. Guests departed. Bunny came to Lady Alicia to bid her good-bye. She withdrew with him into the curtained-off back drawing-room, and scanned his face, which was paler than usual.

"You are not looking well," she said. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Alicia. I'm as strong as a horse."

"You have been working too hard, Bunny, without a holiday. Why didn't you come down last month to Greybrooke? It was lovely; the whole place breathed of peace. And," she added with a smile, "there were hundreds of partridges dying to be killed."

"I was kept in town," said he. "I really was."

"If I only could get you to go down, now, even," said Lady Alicia, somewhat wistfully. "The house and all that is in it are at your disposal. You know that."

He took her hand—no one was in sight, the thick portière hiding them from the drawing-room—and kissed it, and held it for a while in his.

"You are the sweetest and dearest and generousest lady living," said he. "And I should be an unhung wretch if I weren't grateful to you. But I couldn't—I really couldn't come to you last month. And now—"

"And now?"

"I am still kept in town. Besides," said he, with his frank laugh, "what should I do there without you? Don't you know how tremendously good it is to see you again?"

“Is it?” she asked with a little turn of the head.

“Of course,” said he. “Who would look after me, if you didn’t?”

A sigh fluttered at her throat. She pressed his hand.

“Well, good-bye, Bunny dear. Let me see you looking less white when you come again. And come soon.”

He promised, went out with her into the drawing-room. Jasper came forward to take his leave.

“I am delighted with Tredgold,” he said. Lady Alicia’s eyes grew bright. She expressed her gladness. It was his youth, so strong and sane and joyous, that captivated him, said Jasper.

“Youth? Yes, he has youth,” she replied, rather blankly.

Jasper met him at the foot of the stairs getting into his overcoat, and they went out of the house together.

“Which way are you going?” asked Jasper.

“Bloomsbury.”

“So am I. How are you going—cab, train, walk—?”

“I must walk,” said Bunny. “But you, Mr. Vellacot—”

“I always walk, if I can.”

They trudged along at a brisk pace. There was a first touch of frost in the air. The sky was clear, and now and then a meteor flashed like a sword across the firmament. Bunny flung up a hand.

“The dear young lady saying there was no mystery!” said he.

They discussed the question further, Jasper glad to hear the fresh young talk. Suddenly, before they had reached the top of Sloane Street, the young man swung round, staggered, and caught hold of a lamp-post. Jasper had his arm round him at once, saw by the gas-light that his face was white. “I feel queer—half dizzy—fainting.”

Jasper hailed a cab, helped him in, stopped at a tavern, and brought out a glass of brandy. Bunny put it to his lips, shrank from it, gulped some of it down. The drive was resumed. Arrived at Gower Street, Jasper and the cabman conveyed him to the dining-room. He lay on the sofa for a few moments with closed eyes. Then he roused himself, looked round somewhat astonished.

“Better?” asked Jasper, taking off his hat and laying it on the table.

“Yes,” said Bunny, sitting up. “I still feel a bit queer—but I must get home to Great Coram Street.” Then he coughed a little nervous, throaty cough. The light from the electric wall-bracket fell full upon him, shewed pitilessly white seams in his dress-coat, a patch on boots that were not of patent-leather. The

cough awoke Jasper's suspicions. He had heard it before. He remembered the exchanged glance at Lady Alicia's. The sight of the patched boots made him certain. With rough kindness he gripped the young fellow's shoulders.

"Look here, when did you have your dinner?"

Bunny laughed foolishly, and rested his head on his hand.

"I'm afraid I didn't have any dinner," said he.

Jasper seized biscuits and wine from the sideboard.

"Go on with this till I come back," he said, and left the room.

All his modest household were abed. Even Cudby was sleeping peacefully upstairs. Jasper entered his kitchen and pantry with the excitement of a man exploring the blank unknown. But he had too often in past years conjured up meals from impossible places to have forgotten the trick of it. He clattered noisily upstairs with a tray full of food, and set it before his guest, who had been nibbling biscuits. Bunny began to apologise. Jasper cut him short. He, and thousands of better men than he, had been there before.

"Eat and don't talk," said he, and he sat down by the side of Bunny and cut himself a hunk of bread and cheese which he ate while the distressed young poet attacked his plateful of cold pie. The food and wine soon revived him.

"It's awfully good of you, Mr. Vellacot," he said boyishly. "I don't know what I should have done—but I'm horribly ashamed of running down like that."

"It's no good being ashamed of Nature," said Jasper. "She is too frank. Now tell me straight. Do you often go without your dinner?"

Bonamy Tredgold glanced around him with the quick artist's sense of observation. The quiet homely room, furnished with less ostentation than a hundred other dining-rooms in the same street, the table with its simple red cloth on which lay the tray and plates and simple food and Jasper's hat and gloves, the careworn, kind face of his host, and his homely munching of household bread and gruyère cheese—all, contrasting with his knowledge of the man's enormous wealth, impressed the young fellow with a great feeling of respect for him, of trust in him, of faith in the mere man, of comradeship. At first, when he had been alone, gnawing the biscuits, the pride of the well-born gentleman had risen up and stabbed him as hard as the pangs of hunger. That he, Bonamy Tredgold, should be beholden to a rich man for a meal to save him from starvation was a thought almost unendurable. But now it was different. With those kindly, wistful eyes looking at him from behind the rugged brows, he felt that reserve would be no longer pride, but only that which was contemptible. He answered with a laugh.

“Not often. I’ve only gone from breakfast to breakfast once before this year. You see,” he said with engaging confidence, “it would be all right if these infernal editors and publishers would pay up to time. But they won’t. I ought to have had some money this morning. It didn’t come. Went round to-day. Proprietor had a cold, and they didn’t like to bother him to sign the cheque. Anyway it will turn up to-morrow morning.”

“But at the present moment you haven’t a penny in the world?”

“Not a halfpenny,” replied Bunny, cheerfully. “What does it matter?”

“By God!” cried Jasper, “it doesn’t matter the half-penny that you haven’t got!”

CHAPTER V

THEY became great friends. Jasper stood towards the young poet in the double relation of guide and disciple. The dreamer in him saw to the heart of the matter in Bunny's work, and he never lost the awed reverence for the genius that could interpret in magical words the vague formless impressions that had haunted him from boyhood. In this wise the young man was to him as the angels. On the other hand the concrete experience of a hard life passed amid crude elementals made him conscious of a wisdom far exceeding Bunny's. The boy beheld the earth and cried aloud that it belonged to him; the man knew, with the knowledge that comes of living, that he belonged, for all his divine gift, to the earth, to its joys and its sufferings, its hopes and its despairs.

It was good to have his fresh laughter in the dull house, to listen to his enthusiasms, to warm the heart in his sunny illusions. An imperfectly educated man, Jasper was amazed at the other's literary range, which seemed boundless. He regarded him almost as the rustics in Goldsmith's poem did the village schoolmaster. Even Cudby owned to a rival in Shakespearean knowledge. The two would engage in excited duels, capping obscure quotations from the plays and sonnets, while Jasper would sit in amused and silent wonder. It was good, also, to have the boy's frank and absolutely disinterested friendship. The fact that one represented zero and the other infinity in the scale of wealth never seemed to strike Bunny as one that could make any possible difference in their relations. He had the pride of the infernal hierarchy. Jasper knew that the first hint of patronage would set him ablaze. He had walked up and down the library gesticulating in fine wrath because Lady Illingham had sent him a ten pound note. How dared she? He was a man with his work in the world to do, not a beggar to live upon alms! It was insulting. He had sent the cheque to the Royal Literary Fund as a donation from the Countess of Illingham. This was not the only indication that Jasper received of his young friend's magnificent independence. The friendship therefore was entirely sincere, and Jasper, who had sedulously shunned all intimate companionship save that of Cudby, felt his heart open gratefully to the long-denied comfort.

The months passed. Jasper learned the many stairs that led up to the two back-rooms which Bunny occupied at the top of a house in Great Coram Street.

On the occasion of such visits Bunny would empty the one dilapidated armchair of books and biscuit tins for his guest, and entertain him with cheap whisky drunk out of cracked and dubious tumblers and watered from his bedroom water-bottle. He did the honours of his limited establishment with the simple air of a young prince. A few years before, when he lived in his Cornish home with its liveried servants and stableful of horses, he would have offered his father's hospitality with the same unthinking ease. The fact that his father died hopelessly involved, leaving him just thirty pounds a year out of the estate, was an accident that did not affect Bunny at all in his relations with men and women. When he cut the cake with a paper knife and handed it to Jasper on the lid of a biscuit-tin, his only apology was for fresh inkstains on the ivory. Personally, he explained, he liked the flavour of ink; but it was an acquired taste. And Jasper, a man of simple habits who had not accustomed his palate to the differentiation of fine flavours, drank the oily whisky and ate the cheap cake with as much relish as his host.

As time passed on, the friendship had consequences involving closer relations with Lady Alicia. Jasper's appreciation of Bunny warmed her heart towards him. The friendship which she had so gracefully offered passed into a feeling stronger than the original pretty sentiment, and imperceptibly a pleasant fireside intimacy grew up between them, Bunny being the connecting link. They devised schemes for his good, and, as Cudby said, formed a sort of Wild Animal Protection Society. But while their schemes generally came to naught, owing to the impossibility of inducing the wild animal to be protected, his recalcitrancy only awakened fresh sympathies, such as spring from a partnership in failure. Jasper viewed the intimacy somewhat fatalistically. It was written that his life should cross this woman's, and he accepted the inevitable. Yet the common interest formed a neutral ground between his heart and Lady Alicia, whereon they could meet without battle. And therein lay exceeding comfort. He could talk with her alone in the charming confidence of the fireside without holding guard over his words and looks lest the struggling passion should escape them.

Possibly their friendship was not of as much account to Bunny as to Jasper. It is the way of youth to take its friendships, like its fortunes, lightly. Besides, he lived in a queer world of his own, peopled with visionary shapes and lit with an elusive glory and murmuring with strange songs. He had his ambitions, his dreams. He let himself be loved by his friends in the happy and unconscious egotism of his twenty years. The future was his, full of golden promise. Jasper Vellacot had but the grey, haunting past that arose and spread itself in impenetrable mist before the future. It was a joy to stand with the young man on the mountain top and watch the rise of the young man's sun.

Thus, from the nature of things, the friendship could not be the same to Bunny. But his clear healthy mind saw the straight simplicity, the sincerity, the large-heartedness, and the underlying sadness of the man of millions, and on his side the impulse of affection was sincere and strong.

The discreet messenger entered a sleepy House of Commons one March afternoon and handed Jasper Mr. Bonamy Tredgold's card. Scottish railroad business lulled members to repose. Jasper went out into the lobby to be pounced upon by the owner of the card and greeted excitedly.

"How jolly of you to come out at once! I couldn't wait—I've got it, you know. Was close by in the Strand, so I came down straight to tell you."

"Your mind is confused, Bunny," remarked Jasper, with his hands in his pockets. "I'm not in it. Try again. But first, why don't you wear your overcoat this diabolical weather?"

"Oh, confound the overcoat! I'll call for it on my way home. I didn't come to talk about overcoats. I've settled it with Campion."

"Campion?"

"Yes, Campion. But where do you live? The one and only Lester Campion, one of the leading theatrical managers in London. But perhaps I didn't tell you about it? It's an order for a play, a poetical one-act play,—in verse, you know. Contract signed. We haggled over terms a bit—It's beastly, isn't it? But even a chap who writes poetry must live. It's ripping, Vellacot. You see, a one-act play is the thin end of the wedge. Then will come a great poetical four-acter. And it may be the torch that will rekindle the poetic drama in England. The vista seems infinite. Never mind the metaphors. I'm so happy that I can mix them like drinks. It's splendid, isn't it?"

"Of course it's splendid. I'm delighted. Have you told Lady Alicia?"

"Lady Alicia?" echoed Bunny, sharply. "No. How could I, seeing that I've rushed forthwith to you."

"I'll send her a wire from here."

"No. I'll write. Women don't understand wires. She'll jump to the conclusion that a new 'Hamlet' is going to be produced the day after to-morrow. I'm not a cynic. It's only her way, and I'm doing it for her good."

He laughed, tilted back his round felt hat, and rested, his hands behind him, on his umbrella, round the point of which a little pool of water collected on the flagstones. His dark face was flushed with excitement and the walk through the wind and rain. He looked to Jasper like a young conqueror unconscious of the responsibilities of his empire. He could be forgiven—such was the fascination of his youth—for his disregard of royal ladies, even of the royalest and most

high-enthroned one. A paternal rebuke, however, for convention's sake, hovered on Jasper's lips. Bunny forestalled it by a quick change of attitude.

"I wonder if you could give me a tremendous treat?" said he. "To mark the occasion. Could you dine with me? You never have, you know. You are not busy here, are you? I looked at the Orders of the Day on purpose. They seem dulness petrified. Do come."

"Very well. I can be free till ten, when I must be back here. But why not dine with me?"

"That wouldn't be the same thing at all. I know what you're thinking of. You imagine that I've pawned my overcoat. I haven't. I was with Fuller when the rain came on; he was out in a thin suit, with a cough like the neighing of the White Horse of Death, so I sent him home in my coat. Besides, Campion has given me an advance, and I've heaps of money at home." He had become perfectly frank in such matters.

"Very well," laughed Jasper. "It will be delightful. I tell you what—you'll take me to—the—that place you're always talking about—"

"Antonelli's—the Hôtel Bomboni? It's awfully primitive, you know," said Bunny, deprecatingly.

"So am I primitive, Bunny. Haven't you found that out yet? I've been meaning to ask you to take me there for weeks."

"Well, your indigestion will be upon your own head. But the food is not so bad when once you've got outside it," he added.

It was raining so heavily that Jasper, contrary to his habits of personal economy, took a cab. It was his duty to his constituents, he explained gaily, a politician with a sore throat being a vain thing. Bunny was too much accustomed to the frugalities of the millionaire to wonder at the apology. Indeed, it was these very frugalities that made the odd comradeship possible. It was hard to realise that the man who lived in a plain house in Gower Street, and dined off plain joint and sweet, had all the luxuries of the earth at his command, and wielded the enormous power of wealth that no one could estimate. In ordinary intercourse he forgot the fact.

The cab turned up a small street off Old Compton Street, Soho, and stopped at a door over which "Hôtel Bomboni" was inscribed in black letters on a large semi−circular white glass fascia that had seen better days. A cat performed its toilette leisurely on the threshold, and made way for the visitors with an air of aggrieved surprise. A glass door in the dark short passage admitted them into the restaurant. It was a low room, lit with gas and tarnished and blackened with gas. There were half a dozen small tables, two of which were occupied by somewhat seedy nondescripts, male and female. A very

young waiter, with elaborately curled hair, wide collar, narrow black tie, and dingy linen, conversed in a posture of elegant ease with the occupants of the table next the door. An older waiter, in dingier linen, greasy and perspiring, hurried to and fro with plates and dishes. In a parlour at the back a glimpse could be obtained of a man in dirty shirt-sleeves, sitting by a table, and the click of dominoes proclaimed his occupation. A counter, with dishes of sad fruit and pallid pastry, and an array of liqueur bottles, ran half-way the length of the room. Behind it stood an exceedingly attractive girl, neatly dressed in black, to whom Bunny, as he entered, bowed politely. It was a dingy, fly-blown, decaying little restaurant, and the girl struck an odd note of life and freshness—like a dewy dark rose on a dust-heap.

"You would have it," laughed Bunny, as they took their seats. "Here, Giuseppe!"

The perspiring waiter, a low-browed fellow, with a servile, flabby face, shuffled up. What did Messer Tregolo desire? There was *soupe aux oignons*—very good. There was *stufatino milanaise*, *ossabucco*, *rosbif*. He hadn't seen Messer Tregolo for two days. The Signorina had been asking after him. Perhaps he would like an *omelette aux rognons*. Bunny, who had been scanning the bill of fare, cut his suggestions short by ordering the dinner. Giuseppe went away, wiping his forehead with his napkin.

"That's the greasiest varlet unhung," remarked Bunny. "I'm sure he's an awful scoundrel. He looks as if he had stepped out of some Vision of Sin. You could imagine him as a confidential scullion of the Borgias."

Jasper smiled indulgently. His young friend's expressions of likes and dislikes were generally forcible.

"They seem to know you here," he said.

"Oh yes. I often come. I found out the place a little while ago. That's the proprietor, Antonelli, in there playing dominoes. He's always at it. Heaven knows how the thing is run. I think the unspeakable Giuseppe does most of it. And Vittoria—the *demoiselle du comptoir*—she's old Antonelli's niece. And this thing waddling in here is the cat. I've christened him *Corpo di Bacco*. The other waiter's name is Auguste. Now you know the whole family."

Giuseppe arrived with the soup. Bunny ordered half a flask of Chianti. He expatiated on the merits of the wine of the country. You got all the oil, earth, and acidity of the Italian character. And it was true red wine withal. Besides, the wickerwork base always made him think of Keats's ode. Jasper had forgotten it. How did it run? Bunny laid down his spoon and repeated some lines in the reverential monotone which a poet seems instinctively to adopt when reciting verse. He started off on lyrical eulogy of Keats. The man sang

colour. He intoxicated you with the swirl of luminous reds, woke you with the ripple of blues, made you tremulous with the frosty shiver of whites, and then drowned you in tumultuous seas of purple. Jasper pointed out that meanwhile his fish was getting cold. He damned the fish in his youthful way, ate it hurriedly, eager to talk. Joyous life radiated from him like warmth from the sun. Jasper took him back to the new play. Had he an idea? Bunny pushed aside his plate.

"It's all going to be colour and wine and music," said he. "I want to send the blood rushing back into the anæmic veins of the modern stage. Don't you see what a pallid thing it is? Oh, if I could only do it! I've got a story. Love. Young love. Passion, glow, a touch of tragedy behind to sweep the thing along. Everything is to be elemental. No subtleties, no perplexities of mood. Just the old, eternal natural passions of love and hate, and the joy of coming together of the fierce man and the fierce woman. For strip us and that's what we are,—the modernest and most complex of us. Any man worth this wine would rush through hell-fire to get the woman he wanted, and a woman would crawl through it to her man with the flames licking her breasts—I've got it all dancing, floating about inside me. If I only can get it out as I want! But we never do, I'm afraid. It's like this *poulet en casserole*. Has it never struck you how *poulet en casserole* appeals to the imagination? One thinks of ambrosial tender delights coming out of that earthenware pan—and when one gets it, it's the same tough old hen. Giuseppe! I ordered fowl and you've given us emu."

"If there is a mistake, I will ask the signorina," said Giuseppe, politely.

"My dear boy, it's delicious," said Jasper. "It's as tender a chicken as I've ever eaten."

"You needn't trouble the signorina, Giuseppe. This gentleman is kind. He calls it chicken. You're awfully good, Vellacot. Do you know, I'd sooner eat hen than chicken. It seems such a shame to cut a young life short, before it has had its fling,—before it has taken its fill of sunshine and freedom and love and happiness. And I hate eating larks. It's like running a spit through joy incarnate and roasting it with lard. It's like converting the 'Moonlight Sonata' into soup. By the way, did it ever strike you how the genius can turn this soup of human affairs into the 'Moonlight Sonata'?"

"That's what you seem to be trying to do every day of your life, Bunny," said Jasper. "That's what being a poet means, I think. Here's to the play."

He lifted up his wineglass and drank. Bunny acknowledged the toast. There was a little silence, during which he fingered the stem of his coarse glass and reflected. Then he lifted up his head in his quick way.

"You are so much older than I am, Vellacot. Do you think I make too much

of youth? I know intellectually that a man of forty is young still, but I can't realise it. It seems as if everything were behind you at forty. I wish I could always remain three and twenty. Tell me if I am simply silly."

"Yes and no," said Jasper, looking at the young man with the wistful expression in his eyes. "Perhaps it is the advantage of forty that it teaches us the relativity of things. You will be young at sixty. I was elderly at nineteen. It depends upon what you've got to feed on. When you die—"

"I hate death," interrupted Bunny. "Should I have to die, I'll die, I hope, like a gentleman; but I hate it. My God! Vellacot, there is so much to *do* in the world."

And as Jasper saw him flushed with youth and hope, with the sinewy young body of the athlete (had not Bunny been the hope of his College eleven at Cambridge before his career there closed?) and the frank, clear-cut face of the artist, he thought that never did the shadow of Death hover so far from human creature.

"For the always young there is ever so much to do," said he. "For the always old there is little. You will find more to do—of the things that matter—at eighty than I do to-day. And when you die at eighty you'll complain that you've been cut off like the chicken you were talking about, whereas I—"

He finished the sentence with a shrug and a sip of the Chianti. Bunny burst out fervently,—

"You? You've got a whole wide world full of misery to alleviate. Look at the thousands that bless your name now—the thousands who would be the poorer and unhappier if you died to-morrow! It makes my brain reel sometimes to think what a god you must feel yourself to be!"

"Only a pitiful god out of the machine, Bunny," said Jasper. "A stage property, lowered down into the world, against my will and against my nature, by the Great Scene-shifter."

"It strikes me," said Bunny, "that we have our wine sad, as they say in France. We oughtn't to, you know. Just hold this stuff up to the light and look through it. Look at the flames of ruby, the red, lucent mysteries of it. Doesn't it suggest the promise of glory? And if one sees it in this cheap stuff, what mustn't it be in 'the true, the blushful Hippocrene,' that has lain years and years and years in the cool earth, till it's like love, 'a spirit all compact of fire.' By the way, how is Cudby?"

Jasper's duller brain could never quite follow the other's quick sequence of ideas. Why Cudby should have come into Bunny's head à propos of the colour of cheap Chianti, he was at a loss to determine. However, he gave sober news of the little man. He was very well. Had been cursing the ignorance of second-

hand booksellers, having been lured into a pilgrimage to Canterbury by an advertisement of a first folio of Shakespeare, to find it only the reprint of 1807.

"But why a man should hanker after a first folio, when he can get a decent edition of all Shakespeare's works for three or four shillings, is much more of a mystery to me than the Trinity," said Jasper.

"Your bibliophile is an angel with a bee in his—halo," said Bunny, oracularly.

They talked on. The dinner drew to a close. Bunny ordered coffee and kümmel, and drew out his cigarette case. Jasper smoked his pipe. The nondescripts at the other tables had departed. They were alone in the frowsy, gas-lit room. Antonelli of the sombre shirt-sleeves was still in evidence through the door leading into the back-parlour, and the click of dominoes still broke the silence. The young woman behind the counter, who had interrupted her reading to give Giuseppe the bottle of kümmel, sat on her stool for some time watching Bunny and his friend. At last she swung out of the narrow space and crossed the restaurant.

"Good-evening, Bon Ami," she said, coming up to the table. "I hope you've had a good dinner."

"Excellent," said Jasper, kindly answering for his host. "I've put myself into Mr. Tredgold's hands and he has made me fare sumptuously."

"That is well," said the girl, "for we don't go in for much purple and fine linen at the Hôtel Bomboni."

"You read your Bible," said Jasper, amused at the quick reference.

"I read all good literature I can come across, even Bon Ami's poetry."

She had the most curious accent in the world. It was half Cockney, half Italian. The vowels were pure. The consonants had the London throatiness. The intonation was Neapolitan and languorous. The last sentence was not sarcastic, but a playful lazy caress.

"This is Miss Vittoria Antonelli," said Bunny, by way of introduction.

Vittoria held out to Jasper a delicate brown hand.

"It's quite an event for Bon Ami to have a friend to dinner," she said. "He generally sits over there," pointing to a table under the lee of the counter, "like a hermit."

As she stood there, with the light of the gas-bracket of the wall shining full in her face, Jasper saw that she was exceedingly beautiful. Olive skin, with the flush of health beneath; great lustrous brown-black eyes; a wealth of hair; rich lips; full young figure. She had a proud way of holding herself, her bust thrown out. She looked alive, glowingly alive. Bunny's words flashed across

his mind,—"the fierce man and the fierce woman." Here was a pair physically mated, with all the divine fire and splendour of youth. He smiled to himself at the foolish notion.

The young Juno bade them good-evening. She had to get her supper.

"*What* does she call you?" asked Jasper.

"It amuses her to pun upon my name, Bonamy," said Bunny.

"Oh, I see," said Jasper.

"It's miraculous how she has managed to cultivate herself as she has done," said Bunny, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"A handsome girl," said Jasper.

"She has walked straight out of one of Andrea del Sarto's canvases," said Bunny.

As Jasper had very dim notions concerning the artist mentioned, he acquiesced vaguely. The talk continued for a few minutes. He looked at his watch. It was half-past nine.

"I am due at the House," said he. "Would you care to hear the debate? A Poor-Law question. I may speak."

Bunny excused himself. Practical politics were not in his line. When the hated stroke of thirty sounded, then he would fling himself into statistics and stony facts. Till then he would go on living in the air.

"Then come a bit of the way with me," said Jasper, in whom weariness had not killed a little teasing spirit. But Bunny had good reason for declining. He would sit there for awhile longer and rough out the idea of his play. Jasper smiled and rose from the table. Bunny helped him on with his overcoat, accompanied him to the door.

"Good-night, my dear boy," said he, shaking hands. "You've given me a capital dinner and a delightful evening. And now—well, 'gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' Bunny, but keep a lookout for the thorns."

CHAPTER VI

THE fragrant-minded unmarried woman of thirty, to whom material care has never come and upon whom the finger of passion has never been laid, is apt to hanker unconsciously after things which the pride or self-sufficiency of earlier maidenhood has serenely rejected. Growing more sensitive, she begins to feel the faintly stirring outermost ripples of the splash which Mother Eve made in the Waters of Life. She welcomes the scarcely perceptible thrills, the dainty lapping of the wave against her heart. Soon is the delicate emotion to her as the breath of her being. She will seek it in painting and music. She will divine it in poetry. Possibly she will write a novel about the fair loves of a boy and girl which she may or—more often—may not publish. If she has no brains, she will lavish exaggerated affection upon a poodle and tie bits of ribbon in lover's knots all over it. If she is a woman of the world, she will find a pleasant subtlety in her necessarily franker relations with men. She will reclaim fugitive little impressions, will delight in innocent little experiments. She will love to exercise the power which the charm of her riper wisdom puts into her hands. Each sign of a man's submission will be an exquisite flattery. She weaves around herself a gossamer veil of sentiment which would be torn to piteous shreds by the vulgar charge of flirtation. Such a woman is the Diana who would tremulously kiss the brow of the sleeper on Latmos, but would feel never a warm heart-throb for the awakened man.

Lady Alicia was fragrant-minded, over thirty, unmarried, a woman of the world. She had established between herself and two men, Jasper Vellacot and Bonamy Tredgold, relations which afforded her the most delicate pleasure. She loved to bring out various phases of their characters, to contrast them, to compare the personal impression that by a word or an act she had made on each. Each man had his own picturesqueness, his own pathos, his own little need of her sympathy which appealed to her sentimentalised temperament. But she toyed most pleasantly with her tenderness for Bunny.

One evening in May she dined early and drove to the House of Commons. Jasper had sent her a seat for the Ladies' Gallery with a message that he was to bring in his Amendment that night. It had been long arranged that she should hear him make his first important speech, and in order to do so, she had sacrificed first-night tickets for an interesting production at a West End Theatre. She began to put on her gloves in the brougham, quite contented with the world. The feminine thought that her exquisite heliotrope dress and her

daintily done hair would be quite thrown away in the murkiness of the cage in the roof of the House of Commons gave a piquancy to the sense of friendship's duty accomplished. For whether she would attend an evening party afterwards depended upon a great many things. In her bosom was a little flutter of trepidation that made for happiness. He was so good, so gentle, she said to herself, so diffident of his powers; the House so stern, so unpitying. Would he break down? Would he convince? She vowed him balm of consolation in case of defeat. She would be exceedingly nice to him. The vision of herself as healer of wounds was attractive. She smiled. It held her thoughts longer than her fundamental common-sense considered dignified; for suddenly she drew herself together and completed the gloving of her hands with a businesslike air.

She arrived towards the end of the dinner-hour. The House was thin, and a monotonous voice kept up the debate on the government measure. Lady Alicia nodded to an acquaintance in the gallery, and armed herself with her woman's virtue of patience. The Speaker returned from his hasty meal. Members began to saunter in. Gradually the green benches filled. Jasper entered by the door beneath the Reporters' Gallery and spoke to one of the clerks at the table. Then he looked up towards the Ladies' grating, wondering whether she was there. Lady Alicia made a sign with her fan, but he evidently did not perceive it, for his face was unsmiling as he turned and went to his seat below the gangway. The debate continued. It was an hour and a half before Jasper's amendment was arrived at. The Opposition had stigmatised the government measure, which dealt with factory legislation, as the tinkering up of an old Act with intent to delude the public into the belief that it was a new one. The minister in charge of the bill had prayed that the principle should be accepted. Jasper's amendment, without attacking the principle, extended the scope of certain clauses beyond the prescribed limits of the principle. It made the bill broadly humanitarian instead of specifically benevolent. When Jasper rose in a rather listless House, there was the familiar rustle of interest. The glamour of his wealth, the vague legends of his previous life, the obscurity of his present social existence, were not without their influence. Lady Alicia felt some pride in the attention he commanded. He began nervously, sought anxiously for his words. A stick of Lady Alicia's ivory fan broke with a snap. Gradually, however, as he reached broad issues, his voice grew fuller and deeper, phrases came readily, the rough Australian accent returned. He felt deeply. The legislation he advocated would set free one of his own schemes hitherto balked. With emotion his face grew stern, his shoulders lost their stoop, and he faced the House like a strong man. The House listened to him with evident appreciation. Lady Alicia beheld an astonishing transformation with absorbed eyes. She sat spellbound until cordial cheering announced the end of his speech. Then she leaned back in her seat, feeling somewhat unstrung, absurdly

angry at the Draconian laws that prevented her relieving pent-up emotion by applause. The reaction over, the warmth of gladness overspread her. A chord within still vibrated with the deep throb of the man's voice. She checked the action of her fan and regarded the broken stick kindly. How foolish to have been afraid! The monotonous tones of the seconder of the amendment floated unmeaningly through the grating. With feminine instinct she brought the new and the old Jasper into harmony, adapted herself agreeably to the fresh conception. On the surface of these subtleties lay honest pleasure at his success.

The minister in charge of the bill rose to criticise the amendment. He paid a handsome tribute to Jasper's eloquence and sincerity of purpose, but pointed out the difficulties that his proposals scattered in the path of practical legislation. The urbanity of the minister's remorseless logic vexed the woman in Lady Alicia. And when Jasper, after obtaining a half pledge from the government that the ground left untouched by the present bill would be covered to some extent by a future measure, withdrew his amendment, she felt oddly disappointed at the tame conclusion. Primitive instinct desired blood with victory.

She made this confession to him awhile later, when he met her outside the Ladies' Gallery, the second reading of the bill having been carried.

"I had no desire to upset the Government altogether," he laughed. "What would my constituents have said? It was a grand thing to get that promise out of them. At first I thought I was going to miss it."

"I didn't," said Lady Alicia. "At least," she corrected, with a glance at the limply drooping fan-stick, "not after you once got into your stride, as Mr. Mainwaring would say. Then you were splendid. I feel quite proud. I have so wanted you to become a force here as you are outside. Here you are at the heart of the great machine with all the levers to your hand. It must be glorious."

"One must remember that there are six hundred and sixty-nine other fellows all hankering after these same levers," he replied brightly, "and that the number of them is limited."

"Ah, but you'll be one of the chosen," she said.

He passed through a moment of delicious happiness. The success of his speech had excited him. The charming faith of the adored one carried him upward on rapturous wings.

"Such praise as yours—alone—it would be worth any man's fighting for," he said incoherently.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked, colouring with pleasure.

"Mean it? Of course I mean it."

"How sweet! I shall always remember what you have said." She looked him happily in the face out of untroubled hazel eyes.

"To have won your friendship is my proudest achievement," said he.

He escorted her down the stairs and saw her to her brougham.

"Home?" he enquired through the carriage window.

She had not thought of her destination. His question threw her back upon herself. She was seized with a sudden longing—inexplicable to her then and ever afterwards—to see Bunny. He had been invited in his quality of young literary lion to the evening party she had half thought of attending. He had told her that he might put in an appearance. She wanted to see him, she could not tell why.

"Mrs. Durfey's, Eccleston Square," she said. Jasper gave the order to the coachman, and she drove off. At the Durfeys', however, there was no Bunny awaiting her. Nor did he appear at all before her departure. Lady Alicia drove home with a new and discomforting sense of irritation. Something was oddly wrong in her beautifully mapped out cosmical scheme. Resentfully she wished she had asked Jasper to accompany her to the Durfeys'. Then she reflected that he had not been in evening dress. Her mind ran worryingly into exasperating little blind-alleys. Eventually she went to sleep on the forlorn reflection that life, after all, was a hollow affair, a matter of much vanity, if not of vexation of spirit. And the worst of it was that she couldn't account for her mood; an impotence generally hated by women.

Jasper, meanwhile, walked home with a heart full of emotions. He had spoken well; he had established himself as one to whom the House listens with respect; he had gained his immediate end. His own scheme for the amelioration of the lot of factory hands could not in any case come to fruition within three years. There was ample time for the Government to redeem their promise; and he meant them to do it. He had his hand on the lever, to use Lady Alicia's figure. Her enthusiasm swept through him. He had spoken truly. To bring that light into her eyes he would have faced anything on earth,—rush through hell-fire, as Bunny had said. Why should he not traverse the fires of his conscience and win her? He shuddered with joy at the thought. Why should he not gratify the personal ambition he had kept crushed and despised within him? What was not within his power? A parliamentary career lay before him. He could give the chiefs of his party organization a signed strip of paper torn out of his cheque book, with the sum left blank. His enormous charities, his political services would soon entitle him to demand a baronetcy, perhaps in years to come a peerage. Would not that wash out the stain upon his name,

give him a fresh honourable standing among men, so that he could go to her with his love, win her as his wife? Surely she would not reject his offering. If he spoke all the passion that was in him, those kind eyes could refuse him nothing.

He walked with swinging step, through the sweet May air, up Parliament Street, Whitehall, across Trafalgar Square, up Whitcombe Street, Wardour Street, without thinking where he was going, sensible only of general direction. The name of Old Compton Street, lit up by the gas-lamp, caught his eye. His way lay eastward. At the end of the little street he saw the fascia of the Hôtel Bomboni. An idle fancy for the tortuous route drew his step down the street. As he passed by the restaurant, he glanced through the open door. The room was clear of nondescript eaters and waiters. Even the cat, *Corpo di Bacco* had retired. But under the lee of the counter sat Bunny, with his eyes fixed, not on the plate in front of him, but on the face of Vittoria Antonelli, who was leaning lazily over the counter. The two looked perfectly happy.

Jasper went away laughing. Their happiness chimed with his own. He could not blame Bunny. The girl was so beautiful. And youth was so beautiful. And love was beautiful. And forty was still youth. Could he have desired more passionately at twenty? Could he have walked with more elastic tread? Her words sang through his brain. Perhaps in her shy, dainty woman's way she loved him. It was a thought to send the stars whirling in madness about the sky.

He slept but little that night.

In the morning Cudby flourished "The Times" at him. His speech was reported nearly in full.

"Tell me all about it," cried the little man.

" 'This fierce abridgment
Hath to it circumstantial branches, which
Distinction should be rich in,'

as Cymbeline remarks. Do you know there is not a situation in the whole range of human life for which that marvellous man hasn't chosen the exact, the inevitable phrase? And here's this other Radical rag with half its leader devoted to you, hailing you as a Rienzi in Tory clothing. You awake and find yourself famous, my Jasper."

"I think these tell you everything, Tommy," said Jasper, scanning the newspapers. "I got out what we had arranged I should say, and everybody seemed to be pleased with it, and you have read the result."

Cudby, who was recovering from a chill which had kept him in bed for

some days, and still confined him to the house, deplored, by a quotation from "The Two Noble Kinsmen," the fate that had prevented him from witnessing Jasper's triumph.

"I've been longing so for you to make your power felt in the House," said Cudby.

Jasper smiled as the memory of Lady Alicia's words—almost the same words—came thrillingly back to him.

"And now, do you honestly think I have, Tom?"

"You can do anything you damn well choose," said Cudby.

Jasper went on with his breakfast. There was a silence. Cudby re-read the report of the epoch-making speech. "Tom," said Jasper, suddenly, "what do you think of Lady Alicia Harden?"

Cudby put up his gold-rimmed eyeglass, and looked at his patron in his quizzical birdlike fashion.

"The immortal one, as usual, dictates the answer. 'She is a woman, therefore may be woo'd; She is a woman, therefore may be won; She is'—pardon the liberty for the sake of the metre—'She is Alicia, therefore must be loved.' That's what Demetrius says in 'Titus Andronicus.' You can bet he was right."

"Do you think me a fool, Tom?"

"My dear chap," replied Cudby, stretching out a lean brown hand, "you deserve every blessing the earth can offer."

A little while later Jasper went into his library, humming an air. The usual pile of correspondence awaited him. The typist sat demurely at her place, sucking the end of her pencil. The day's work began. The routine went on for a couple of hours.

"A person to see you, sir," said a maidservant, entering the library. "His name is Burke."

"Has he an appointment?" asked Jasper.

"I don't know, sir."

"Know anything about him?" he inquired of Cudby.

Cudby consulted a diary. Yes, he was a dead-beat from San Francisco. Kelly the agent had invoiced him all right.

"I'll see him," said Jasper.

The maid retired. Cudby dismissed the typist.

"Here's a letter from Erskine," said he. "He 's having rows with the Borough Surveyor. I wish Borough Surveyors were dead."

“So do I,” laughed Jasper, glancing over the letter.

The maidservant entered. The door was behind Cudby. Jasper faced it.

“Mr. Burke, sir.”

Following her came a shambling man, with a black unkempt beard and watery eyes. He had an odd circular scar on his cheek. He stood on the threshold twirling a cloth cap. Cudby turned round impatiently to the servant.

“Not here! why can’t you heed instructions? Shew Mr. Burke into the waiting-room, and Mr. Vellacot will see him when he is disengaged. Confound these new maidservants!” he said irritably, when the door was shut behind the intruders. “Why can’t you have men about the place, Jasper, instead of these silly women? Hallo, what’s up?” he cried, rising from the table.

Jasper’s face was as white as paper. He pointed to the door.

“The man!” he said hoarsely. “The man!”

“What about him?”

“He is *the* man. The man you know of—come to claim his own. The real Jasper Vellacot.”

CHAPTER VII

ON that far-off day when the wandering mining engineer had pointed to the vast wealth lying at his feet, Jasper nearly lost his reason. He spent the night praying incoherently to a vaguely remembered but still believed-in God. An army of unknown shapes with accusing voices broke the great silences that encompassed him, and his soul sought refuge from fear.

Hitherto a sensitive conscience had accepted the barrenness of this land as a punishment for wrongdoing. Although the accredited owner, with government grants duly signed and sealed in his possession, he knew the land to be his shameful inheritance from a dead man. For, two years before, he had left a dead man in a rough shanty many miles away in the bush, and he had taken with him the dead man's papers and the few shillings his pockets contained. What were the man's antecedents he knew not. From their three days' comradeship before the man sickened he had gathered that he was as friendless and as drifting as himself. He did not even know his name. In the rare conversation they had held together they had called each other "mate." But the papers were documents relating to a government grant of land far away, and the grant was made out in the name of Jasper Vellacot, and the old letter-case containing the papers had also "Jasper Vellacot" inscribed in it, and so "Jasper Vellacot" the survivor called himself thenceforward. He travelled many weary miles, registered his title to the land at the nearest township, and found it a mockery of black barrenness. He accepted his lot with resignation.

Most of his life had been a hopeless struggle with circumstance. His mother had come no one knew whence into the rough mining-camp, in her supreme agony, to die an hour after he was born. A miner and his wife took charge of him, called him John Taylor, because one name was as good as another. He lived a rough, half-starved, half-naked life for ten years; then the man in a fit of delirium tremens killed the woman and got hanged himself. The child was left to battle with the world. After that came a term of happy years. An elderly Wesleyan minister and his wife, themselves childless, took pity on him and adopted him. He became part son, part servant. From the minister he received education, religion, and a knowledge of the amenities of gentle life. He accompanied them from Australia to the little town in Natal whither the minister was transferred by the Wesleyan authorities; there he saw something of the great world. The old man set his heart upon the lad's entering the ministry. For a time he saw visions and imagined that he had received the

Grace of God. Then came doubts and lukewarmness of faith, and the visions ceased, and he grew aware that the saving of souls was not his vocation. But he learned what sweet things are kindliness and love and simplicity of heart, and the lesson remained all his life long. Then he became acquainted with death and sorrow. First his adopted mother died; two years afterwards the old man followed her, and the little money he left went to relatives in England. From that time forward, ill-luck dogged the young man's steps. He wandered over South Africa; returned to Australia, and wandered over the Continent. Now and then fate seemed propitious; but a year's plenty ended in invariable and familiar disaster. Again and again he set out penniless to retrieve his fortunes. He had done all things whereby the vagrant man in a new country earns precarious livelihood. He had prospected for gold; served the hard servitude of sheep-farms; laboured at the soil; performed menial offices in cities; begged his way from station to station. This had been his life till thirty. Strangely enough, he had not the instinct of the colonist, the shiftful man that turns to profit everything that comes to his hand. He was constitutionally shy, trustful, easily imposed upon, one whose individuality did not impress itself upon others; and yet with a dogged will that bore him uncrushed from one reverse to another. At last he heard of new settlements far up country. He started penniless, friendless, staring at starvation. And on that journey he met the man who died, and from the dead man's pocket he drew his vast wealth.

He prayed that night for guidance, as he had not prayed for many years. This wealth was not his. It belonged to the heirs of the dead man. Its vastness filled him with terror. At dawn he awoke Cudby, then a shivering wretch recovering from rheumatic fever, through which he had tended him night and day, and for the first time in his life he poured out his heart to another. And the little man soothed him, and reconciled him with his conscience, and bade him accept bravely the responsibilities of his fortune.

From that hour the touch of Jasper Vellacot was as that of King Midas. Under it all things turned to gold. He lost his scruples. His head reeled with colossal speculations. The months flew by on whirlwind wings, like the hours of the gambler. He grew dazed, bewildered by the cataract of wealth that fell about him. He lost sleep, appetite, conscience.

At last, one day, came the lightning flash that changed his life, as another flash changed Saul's. Cudby and himself were travelling from Adelaide to Brisbane. The train stopped at a small station. Another train going in an opposite direction stood beside them. And there in the carriage next to them, his face framed by the window, sat the man whom he had left for dead in the shanty in the bush. There was no mistake. The features were too well remembered. And the curious circular scar on his cheek left no doubt of his

identity. The man did not look aside, but sat like a sphinx staring in front of him. Jasper made a sudden step to pull open the window, then reeled, fell back fainting in Cudby's arms. The trains moved on. The living man he had thought dead was carried irrevocably out of his life. For Jasper this was the shock that determined a general break-down, primarily caused by the tension of the past two years. He lay long ill. He rose from his bed an altered man. The wealth that was another's lay upon him like a curse. His soul hated it. Every effort to find the man failed. For years he employed all the resources of his wealth. At last he abandoned the search. Why the man had never come to claim the land to which he had been entitled was an insoluble enigma. For the name of Jasper Vellacot the millionaire was known all the world over.

"Let me interview him alone," said Cudby. "I can arrange the preliminaries of a settlement better than you."

"Settlement?" echoed Jasper. "Every penny is his. The clothes you and I stand up in."

He rose, took three or four turns in the room. Then stood before Cudby, his hands deep in his pockets, his face like corrugated iron.

"Fetch him in. I will see him at once."

"For God's sake, think of the consequences, Jasper," cried Cudby.

"Do as I say," replied Jasper. "You can remain as a witness."

Cudby unlocked a drawer, took from it a revolver, which he slipped into his pocket.

"One never knows," he remarked.

"Put that away," said Jasper sternly. And as Cudby hesitated, he broke out in anger. "Damn it, do as I tell you, Tom."

Cudby obeyed. "If I had my ass Dapple, we should be complete," said he, retiring.

The reference to the immortal knight was lost upon Jasper, who moved across the room and took up his position on the hearth-rug, with his back against the mantel-piece. His heart beat achingly.

"This is Mr. Burke," said Cudby, introducing the dead-beat. He closed the door behind them, left the man on the threshold, and took up his position beside Jasper.

Jasper looked in the man's face long and piercingly from beneath his

overhanging brows. There was silence; a state of tension. The man dropped his cap, picked it up, and looked with watery eyes from one to the other. He uttered no word. To Jasper it seemed as if he had been searching the man's face through all the ages. This was the man he had left for dead. This was the man he had robbed. This was the man whom he had seen two years later in the railway carriage. This was the face that had haunted his sleep. This was the rightful owner of all his possessions. This was Jasper Vellacot, the cousin of Lady Alicia Harden,—this wrecked, pallid, ignoble creature. The man had very small hands. He remembered noticing their delicacy when he crossed them over his breast. Now they shook. The man returned his gaze uneasily.

"Well," said Jasper at last, and his voice seemed remote and toneless in his own ears. "Tell me what you want."

"I come from the gentleman in San Francisco," replied the man. "This is the letter of indication, sir. He told me you would give me some assistance. I've been down on my luck for many a year."

"Is that all you want?" asked Jasper, in the same voice.

The man made a deprecating gesture. "I only want to be put on my legs again, sir."

Jasper's jaw dropped. His stern gaze turned into one of stupefied amazement. Was it possible that the man did not recognise him? It was incredible. But neither the face nor the voice nor the words of the man shewed the faintest sign of recognition.

"I was given to understand that if I presented this paper you might find me a berth," said he.

"Yes, quite so, quite so," said Jasper, bewildered.

Cudby drew a deep breath, fixed his gold-rimmed eyeglass firmly in his eye. Grasping the situation, he stepped forward in a brisk, businesslike way, and took the document from the wastrel's hand.

"Ah, this is from Mr. Kelly. Yes, it's quite in order. That your real name—Burke?" he inquired casually.

"Yes, sir. That's my name. Henry Burke."

"You never had another?"

"Not that I know of."

"Sit down for a bit, and let Mr. Vellacot hear all about you," said Cudby, cheerily. He pushed a chair to the man, who sat down. Then he drew Jasper to the further end of the room.

"Thank God, it's a mare's nest," he whispered.

"No," returned Jasper, struggling with his self-control. "It is the man. Every moment recalls a fresh memory. He has a heart tattooed on his left forearm. Ask him."

Cudby went to the table, took up some papers, glanced through them.

"Yes," he said. "It seems all right. Personal description tallies. We must get the identification right, Mr. Burke. There have been such things as people assuming another's identity. And that wouldn't do, would it?"

Not a betraying muscle twitched on the man's features beneath the narrow scrutiny of two pairs of eyes.

"I'm the right man, sir," said Burke.

"Mr. Kelly says something here about tattoo-marks," said Cudby, mendaciously.

"This is all I've got," replied the other, pulling up his left coat-sleeve.

And there on the forearm was a heart, as Jasper remembered.

"That proves it beyond a doubt, Cudby," said Jasper, slowly. Then he turned a sharp glance on Burke.

"Have you never met me before—in Australia?"

"Not that I remember, sir."

"You had an illness ten years ago—a severe illness—in the bush up Torowoto way."

Burke started to his feet.

"How, in the name of God, do you know that?" he exclaimed.

"Ah!" struck in Cudby, with his head on one side, "that doesn't quite hang with the story you told Mr. Kelly. As for our knowing it, well, it's Mr. Vellacot's business to know everything. There's precious little we don't know.

'The Emperor's court is like the house of Fame,
The palace full of tongues and eyes and ears.' "

"Have you lost your memory?" asked Jasper.

Burke did not meet his glance. He shifted uneasily in his chair. His manner grew sullen.

"There's lots of things I can't remember, and lots of things I won't," said he. "Yes, I must have lost my memory."

"That illness in the bush?" said Jasper.

"I suppose so," replied Burke, shortly.

"Don't get angry," said Cudby.

“I don’t think it’s fair to cross-examine a man on his past life,” said Burke. “If I had lived like a Sunday-school book, I shouldn’t have come down to this. What tramp’s life would bear looking into, sir?” he asked, addressing Jasper, —and there seemed to Jasper to lurk a baffling expression in the man’s watery eyes. “You yourself sir, have roughed it a bit, and ought to know.”

“Whatever you tell me about yourself shall be of your own free-will,” said Jasper.

“Well, sir, I’m stone-broke. I’m not in good health. I can’t do manual labour. If you could help a poor devil to earn a decent living, I should be grateful.”

“Can you write a good hand?”

“Yes. I’ve been a clerk in my time. I’ve been most things.”

Jasper noted the ragged and dirty condition of the man, his trembling fingers, his unhealthy skin. He drew four bank-notes out of a pocket-book and handed them to Burke.

“Go and get yourself a set of respectable clothes, and when you’ve put them on, come and see me again. I may want a clerk myself.”

Burke regarded him with an expression in which the tramp’s professional gratitude mingled curiously with sullen suspicion. He muttered thanks. Cudby shewed him out, accompanied him into the passage.

“Order a decent rig out, please,” said Cudby. “No loud checks and thunder and lightning ties.”

“I know the way gentlemen dress. None better,” replied Burke.

Cudby returned to the library. Jasper’s face had grown haggard.

“Do you doubt still?” he asked.

The little man threw himself into a seat. The brisk debonair manner in which he had spoken to Burke was gone, and his face was profoundly troubled. He rubbed his cropped grizzled head.

“No. You’re right. It’s the man.”

“He knows me,” said Jasper.

“He doesn’t.”

“He is playing some deep game.”

“No, no, Jasper. His memory has gone. The illness and drink have done for him. He’s no good for anything. Hasn’t the nerve to play a game like that.”

“What does it matter? The loss of memory does not alienate his rights. Whichever is the case, I must re-establish him, account to him for my stewardship. Man alive! don’t you see I must face it?”

“Give him everything, Jasper?”

“Yes,” said Jasper, hoarsely. “Everything. It is his. I have been a thief these ten years, but it has been against my will. Everything belongs to this man. He must have it.”

“Have you the right to dispose of it?” asked Cudby.

“What do you mean?”

“You are not the only party interested in the disposal of all this money.”

“I alone,” said Jasper.

“Pardon me. Your personal interests are the least important. Thousands are eating your bread. The happiness of thousands is in your hands.”

“My God,” said Jasper, the truth dawning awfully upon him.

“You have usurped a kingdom, my dear, my very dear king and hero and friend,” said Cudby, with great earnestness. “And you have taken on your shoulders a kingdom’s responsibilities. Many a crowned monarch has wielded less power than you. The welfare of your people, the unknown thousands who are dependent upon your will, binds you to your throne with bands of iron. You dare not abdicate in favour of a wastrel, however just his claim, who would plunge the whole realm into chaos and let your people starve. You haven’t the right. You have given all your personal rights to your kingdom, and your kingdom claims you.”

“My God!” cried Jasper again.

He clasped his head in both hands. His brain reeled as the sense of the responsibilities of his wealth crashed down upon him.

CHAPTER VIII

I TELL you, Bon Ami, that you are foolish."

"And I tell you, Vittoria, that you are beautiful."

This is what the two were saying to each other when Jasper looked through the door of the Hôtel Bomboni. It was an edifying and delightfully novel conversation.

"I am fairly good-looking, perhaps pretty," she admitted, glancing round lazily at the fly-blown mirror behind the bar, and adjusting the comb in her hair so that it came a millionth of an inch nearer the centre; "but beautiful? That's different."

"It is my trade to be nice in the use of the English language," replied Bunny. "I state a fact accurately by saying that you are beautiful."

"It's too hot to quarrel. Suppose it is so. What then?"

"There is no 'then,' " said Bunny. "Beauty is its own completion."

"So, for all it matters, I might be as stupid as an owl and as spiteful as a cat. I hate you, Mr. Bonamy Tredgold."

She drew herself up with a charming air of mock dignity.

"I ought to go home and dress for an evening party," remarked the young man, with apparent irrelevance.

"Why don't you?"

"*Ubi bene ibi patria.* That's Latin, you know."

"I'm glad you told me. I might have thought it was Japanese. I believe it means 'Where I am well off, there is my fatherland;' which is a very—what do you call it when a man says beastly things about his mother to shew how clever he is?"

"Cynical?" suggested Bunny.

"Yes. Cynical. Well, it's a very cynical thing to say. A man's country is his country."

"I'm not going to argue the point. I translate my Latin proverb by 'Paradise is the spot in space of the moment's happiness.' That's why I'm not going to my evening party. And if you were as stupid as an owl and as spiteful as a cat, I shouldn't be happy and the Hôtel Bomboni wouldn't be Paradise. I am a logical person, Vittoria."

“I repeat that you are foolish, Bon Ami,” she said, softening and leaning over the bar again, her chin supported in her palm. The boy looked into her eyes. They were very deep and dark, like pools, and something warm and mysterious slept far down beneath the surface. They smiled, they invited, they mocked, they baffled. Long, soft lashes shaded them, seemed to add to their slumberous depths. He had never before lost himself in such eyes. He was young, and he was a poet, and he could see glories in many things. Often they were only the reflections of his own soul. That is where the poet comes to grief in this world. He rushes to his vision of golden gates leading to a land of enchantment, and to his dismay knocks his head against a granite wall. But it is well to have the vision, “sorrowful great gift” though it be.

Besides, Vittoria had full young lips and a delicate chin and an adorably sweeping contour of cheek, and the warm colour of health glowed through her dark skin. And her hands were small and studiously cared for, and the palms were pink. They felt like rose petals when he touched them.

Bunny, gazing his fill, shook his head. “You are masquerading here in this black dress,” said he. “You have escaped from the frame in which Andrea del Sarto put you after he had made you.”

“ ‘The faultless painter,’ ” she murmured.

“Now, how on earth did you know that?” he asked, surprise planting him back on the commonplace.

“How do I know what?” she asked, straightening herself up.

“Why, the classical epithet of Del Sarto,” replied Bunny, “the *senza errore*.”

“*Accidente!*” exclaimed the girl, and her eyes flashed darkly. “Do you suppose you have a monopoly of general information—or the people you mix with? If a girl at the evening party you were going to had made that remark, would you have asked her how on earth she knew it? Tell me,” she said, stamping her foot. “Would you have asked her?”

“No,” replied Bunny, blankly, “I wouldn’t.”

“But you ask me, Vittoria Antonelli, because I am a low-class, half-bred English and Italian girl with a pretty face in a shabby little eating-house. You informed me just now that what you said was Latin; and you’ve done the same sort of thing before, and I’ve let it go by. But I’m not going to let it go by any longer. It’s hateful. There was your friend the other night. He was surprised that I had read the Bible. Why shouldn’t I read the Bible and books that girls in your class of life read, and know the smattering of things they know? I call it horrid of you!”

The young goddess was decidedly angry. Her words came out with Italian

volubility, and were accompanied by Neapolitan gesture, flashes of the hand and quick little turns of her supple body. Distressed as he was, Bunny could not resist a secret satisfaction in having provoked her. She looked magnificent in her offended dignity. A touch of shrewishness would have brought vulgarity to spoil the charm. And though Vittoria could be a shrew on occasion, when she rated Giuseppe or her uncle in their native vernacular, she carried her present outburst, either tactfully or instinctively, to a higher plane of indignation. Bunny sat in ashamed, although admiring silence. She was unquestionably in the right. The consciousness of it stung the gentleman within him. He, Bonamy Tredgold, had committed an inexcusable act of discourtesy toward a woman, a social inferior; and he was suffering rebuke for it at her lips. “Yes, I call it horrid of you,” she concluded with an emphatic toss of her shapely head.

So Bunny rose and made her a little courtly bow as if she were a very great lady.

“I offer you my sincere apologies, Vittoria, and I humbly ask your pardon,” said he. Then he drew himself up and looked at her in his frank way. The deference in his manner, the little touch of the aristocrat, caught the girl’s quick appreciation. She softened at once.

“You must forgive me for losing my temper, Bon Ami. It is because I’m half Italian. If you had laughed at me, I should have been capable of throwing a knife at you.”

“I should have deserved it, anyway,” said he, “for an unpardonable offence.”

“But you must forgive me too, Bon Ami,” she repeated, holding out both hands, palms downward and moving rather shyly towards him. So they held hands over the counter.

“I am afraid you’ll never think me any more like a Madonna by the faultless painter,” she said, doing feminine penance for her crime by dragging into light the secretly detested cause of it.

“You look more like one than ever with all that sweet forgiveness in your eyes,” cried Bunny, fervently.

Then she was pleased, and the forgiveness and sweetness and all the divine qualities thereto appertaining were veiled by a gathering moisture.

“I want you to think well of me, Bon Ami. You are so different from any one else, and so far above me.”

The offended young Juno who had changed into the Madonna aforesaid was transformed by the start of a tear into a swimming-eyed, pleading little girl, all humility and submission. The transition of mood was startling. The

effect was a bewildered young poet who expressed his feelings in language of a picturesque confusion. What he said matters no great deal; but sentiments were interchanged which resulted in a complete and satisfactory understanding.

Presently Vittoria eyed the clacking little Swiss clock on one of the shelves behind the bar.

"It is getting late, Bon Ami," she remarked pathetically.

He denied the lateness. Then started impulsively on the track of a sudden and brilliant idea. Why should they always have to converse across that abominable counter? Why shouldn't she come with him now for a half-hour's ride on the top of an omnibus? Outside were moonlight and starlight and divine cool air. He pleaded. She hesitated.

"Do," said he, "or I shall not feel that you have quite forgiven me."

The venerable plea prevailed, as it always will prevail. Vittoria yielded, ran into the back parlour to command her uncle Antonelli to transfer himself, his dingy shirt-sleeves, his friend and his game of dominoes to the bar, and soon reappeared driving pins into a neat black sailor hat. A few minutes afterwards they were sitting side by side on the front seat of a Hammersmith omnibus. Bunny talked of the eternal calm of the stars above and of the hurrying glittering life beneath them; of women and wine and the Hôtel Bomboni; drew from his young poet's inexhaustible store of legend, and explained the proper treatment for a spavined horse. Vittoria was gradually accustoming herself to his discursive talk, and her nimbler woman's wit followed him more closely than Jasper, who often puzzled himself to find relevance in Bunny's conversation. Sometimes she insisted on having her share of the dialogue, but to-night, being in a chastened mood, she contented herself with contributing an occasional opinion or pointing a witty allusion which set him off delightedly on a fresh track of thought. Altogether she enjoyed the ride hugely. But she was very hungry. He had kept her talking in the restaurant long beyond her usual supper hour. She wondered whether he realised that she had come out supperless just in order to obey him. Evidently he did not. She rather admired his masculine disregard of such trifles as a woman's food. And while she listened to him with her outer senses, pleased and smiling, inwardly she imagined herself avowing her emptiness when they got back and his man's exclamation "Why on earth didn't you tell me?" and his utter inability to divine the reason. And she knew that she would rather starve all night long than tell him. The little sense of martyrdom (and the sense of moral superiority thereby occasioned) was too sweet. This is about the only reason that can be found for quite a peculiar class of feminine phenomena.

By walking and changes of omnibuses they completed the round: Shaftesbury Avenue, Piccadilly, Park Lane, Oxford Street, and Charing Cross Road. When they arrived at the Hôtel Bomboni, Giuseppe was lounging by the door. It was past the usual hour for closing, as no business was done in after-theatre suppers. They parted with the conventional handshake. Bunny raised his hat and started off. He had hardly walked half a dozen steps when he heard Giuseppe address her in Italian, in a tone, as he fancied, of insolence. The quick blood made him turn, grip his stick and rush swiftly back. But they had already entered as he turned; then the door slammed, and all was dark and quiet in the murky little street. He laughed, after a few seconds, at his obvious mistake; for of all miscreants he had met upon earth, Giuseppe was the most servile to his superiors.

So while Vittoria and Giuseppe in the privacy of the closed restaurant exchanged views as to each other in choice Neapolitan, Bunny marched with the swinging pace and the light heart of three and twenty home to Great Coram Street, his head full of his Andrea del Sarto Madonna. There he sat up till half-past two o'clock, writing and polishing an impassioned little poem full of the dusky splendours and the glowing mysteries of Vittoria's eyes. So good did he know it to be that he made a fair copy and posted it straight off to the weekly review that had the honour of printing most of the fugitive poems of Mr. Bonamy Tredgold. Then he went to bed, and slept the profound and solid sleep of youth till ten o'clock the next morning.

This poem was the first of a series which afterwards were collected together under the title of *Carmina Amoris*. To speak of the collection is to anticipate events; it is sufficient now to say that the weekly love poem in the review attracted considerable public notice and increased Bunny's reputation. For reputation, if nothing else more substantial, he had succeeded in achieving. His little volume of poems had fallen eighteen months before like rain upon a parched land. The old poets had gone; and though they had voiced the eternal verities, yet they had voiced them through the aspirations of their own times. The new generation found itself unexpressed. There were many men, truly ranked as poets, of graceful fancy, of prophetic vision, of trumpet clangour, of classic calm, of symbolic revelation, who spoke to England. But these did not satisfy. There is a thirst in the souls of men for the sane magic of the music that can harmonise all the complexities of their life into that which is elemental, unchanging, eternal. The great utterance had been wanting and men had striven to find comfort in lesser voices. So when this young man had come with his careless, tumultuous burst of song, the men who had been watching the arid sky welcomed him with grateful hearts and prophesied concerning him.

Bunny took his success with much the same feeling of elation as when he

had walked to the cricket pavilion amid the cheers of his side after making his sixty or seventy runs. It was jolly to make runs, it was jolly to write poetry, and it was jolly to have one's skill appreciated. He was too young, too wholesome, too boyish to have his head turned. It was a far more important matter to him to earn his living; and he was not quite sure of his livelihood even now.

He had been accustomed to spend money freely. At home, in Cornwall, he had horses to ride and covers to shoot, and a valet to help him on with his trousers. All this came to an end at the beginning of his third year at Cambridge, when his father died hopelessly involved in financial difficulties, leaving Bunny to face the world with thirty pounds a year, and a pretty talent for verses. He came to London, too proud to seek the help or patronage of his friends, and began to write. He scraped along somehow, struggling with very fierce poverty. At one period he lived in a garret up Islington way, and subsisted chiefly on two pennyworths of fried fish, and a weekly orgy of meat, which he bought at selling-off prices late on Saturday night in Farrington Street, and cooked, according to a recipe evolved out of his inner consciousness, in a borrowed frying-pan, over his landlady's kitchen fire. One can do these things and enjoy them when one is twenty, and not too cold and hungry. It all depends whether hope is in front or behind you. The first regular work that he found was on the "Islington Weekly Chronicle." Then a poem or two found its way into a London evening newspaper; he called on the editor, who agreed to accept a weekly contribution. Gradually work came, and he moved to Great Coram Street, and fed himself on choicer viands. He managed generally to make both ends meet, but occasionally there was a gap. Though constitutionally spendthrift, he was peculiarly sensitive in the matter of debt. His horror of it, a reaction perhaps against his father's extravagance and unscrupulous borrowing, caused him to undergo avoidable privations. If he had no money to pay for his dinner, he went without it, as he had done on the day of his first meeting with Jasper. But that was the last day of his fasting, for money had been coming in more steadily since then, and to his great satisfaction he had been able to afford a pair of patent-leather boots for evening parties.

So Bunny, "rich in the glory of his rising sun," led an enviable though precarious existence. Many literary houses in London were open to him. More than one woman sighed after him, and treasured his notes of reply to invitations. Lady Alicia petted him to the full extent of cousinly privileges. But Bunny remained unspoiled by feminine flattery, and the young barbarian in him went forth instinctively to find a mate in the Hôtel Bomboni, where Vittoria's splendid womanhood sat enthroned. It was her glowing vitality that compelled him. His nature demanded of life its colour and strength and

joyousness. The delicate fair women in his own social circle lacked the fulness of the inspiring wine. In Vittoria he seemed to find the complete woman; of warm glad beauty in face and form; of bewildering mood; of strong intelligence quick to grasp. She was the untamable creature, sex to the inmost, whose yieldings were of infinite seduction. She promised fulfilment of his needs. The glamour of her beauty blinded him to her imperfections. And these, as far as it was not in her power to hide them, were not numerous or important. The pretty Italian accent saved her speech from the vulgarity of Cockneyism; added, in fact, a curious charm to her talk. Her manners had a cat's innate gracefulness. An artistic temperament helped by a certain superficial education kept her taste refined. Her woman's tact and instinct of adaptability shewed her how to tread without jarring upon the susceptibilities of gentle breeding. When she talked with Bunny she lived in a network of quivering little feminine instincts. The ugly things in her life she put aside with a woman's power of abstraction.

The omnibus ride was the first of many jaunts. It was much pleasanter to walk round the calm Bloomsbury squares, or to wander in the Regent's Park, than to sit in the summer heat of the reeking little restaurant, exposed to the gaze and comments of the vulgar. They could talk more freely, forgetful of the dividing counter. One Sunday they had a long and delightful day in Epping Forest. How was he to know the sordid miseries in which she paid for these outings! He saw her as radiant and as glad with life as himself or the great oaks that waved the fulness of their green June glory above their heads.

She had taken off her hat, and was lying with her head against the root of a tree. Bunny sat close by, embracing his knees, a cigarette between his lips. She looked up among the leaves, and murmured something to herself. Then she glanced quickly at him.

"I wonder whether any one will ever write poetry like that about me," she said.

"What poetry?"

She moved, leant forward, and repeated, at first hesitatingly, but soon, gathering confidence, with glow and meaning, and perfect appreciation of thought and rhythm, his lyric in "The Weekly Review" of the day before. The southern accent, the rich low tones of her voice, lent an indescribable passion to the little verses. Bunny sat open-mouthed.

"My God!" he cried, starting to his knees, "what music you give to it! I had no idea it was as good as that! You have never told me that you read these things of mine. Do you remember any others?"

She repeated the first of the series. Bunny knelt entranced.

“I never dreamed it could be like that,” he said again. “You seem to have filled up a skeleton with warm flesh and blood, and the magic of passion and life.”

She smiled and shook her head, her eyes in his. “No, Bon Ami, no.”

“But I say, yes, yes,” insisted the fervent young man.

“And I say no again. It’s no use arguing, Bon Ami. The poems are beautiful. They make me feel all sorts of things. If I were clever I could explain; but I can’t. They made me wish they were about me.”

“But, confound it all!” cried Bunny, springing to his feet and dashing his straw hat to the back of his head, “they were about you. Every blessed word and thought. It is you from your feet to your hair. Your eyes, your bosom, your heart, your soul, your everything!”

She grew suddenly quite pale.

“You mean me?” she asked, putting her hand to her breast.

“Of course, you,” said Bunny.

“I thought—I thought,” said the girl, lamely, “it was about no one in particular—that it was just poetry.”

“I hope it is just poetry,” laughed Bunny. “You have made me believe it is deuced good poetry. But it’s the gloriousest creature on God’s earth that has inspired it.”

She rose and turned away from him and shook the twigs and dust from her skirt. She could not bear him to see the pain that rose into her eyes.

“Don’t you think it’s time for us to look about for some tea?” she asked in an even voice. But Bunny was by her side and his touch upon her shoulder.

“I haven’t vexed you, have I? I couldn’t help writing of you. And I mean every word I have said in those poems.”

“Of course I’m not vexed,” she answered, half turning. “But if you talk about it any more I shall cry. And if I cry,” she added with the familiar impatient stamp of her little foot, “I shall hate you!”

“But you said you wished the poems had been about you,” said the mystified poet.

“Don’t you know that to wish is better than to have? All that one has is horrible. Oh, come and look for tea and let us not talk about it.”

She went on, Bunny by her side. To his masculine intellect this mood was incomprehensible. The only rational explanation was that she had taken offence at his using her personality for purposes of “copy.” She walked with head averse. Black clouds gathered over Bunny’s heaven. There was a long

silence. His brow was perplexity incarnate. Presently she slid her hand beneath his arm and drew close to him, and he felt a little happier. Then her long lashes slowly uplifted and her dark eyes sought his.

“I’m the proudest girl in all the world to-day,” she said in a voice of perilous softness. “But you mustn’t talk to me of such things, Bon Ami. If you do I shall never, never come out with you again. You wouldn’t like me to hate you, would you?” she asked, with a sudden change to fierceness.

Then Bunny grew fierce. He threw his strong young arms around her, and, despite her struggles, kissed her, for the first time, twice on the lips.

“I don’t care what you do,” said he.

After that she went on submissively. The reaction from the sudden whirl of passion left him silent. For a little while they walked almost as enemies strangely suspicious. Presently he began to feel an irritable desire to know what was passing through her mind, mingled with self-reproach for having taken brutal advantage of her lesser physical strength.

“Vittoria,” he began.

The woman seized triumphantly on the apologetic note. She had been waiting for it.

“I forgive you,” she said. “But you are a gentleman, Bon Ami; and I must beg you never, never, never to refer to this again.”

Her attitude of dignified pardon precluded further demonstration of passion, even of explanation. Bunny bowed, and they talked on general topics for the remainder of the afternoon. Although he strove to amuse and interest, he was much cast down. He had obviously spoiled her outing, and was deeply touched by the sweet resignation with which she accepted his detestable society. When they were parting at the door of the Hôtel Bomboni, he wondered whether it would be an effort for her to shake hands with him.

What was his bewildering amazement when, having opened the side door with her latch key, she took his hand, raised it to her mouth, kissed it, wrung it hard, and disappeared like a flash, slamming the door behind her.

After that, Bunny entirely gave up trying to understand Vittoria.

CHAPTER IX

BUNNY'S Epping Forest adventure took place some five weeks after the advent of the man Burke. During these weeks Burke had been living under Jasper's roof, while Jasper brooded over his tremendous problem.

The decision was too momentous to be made hurriedly. All that first day of upheaval he had remained silent, and Cudby, knowing the nature of the man, forbore to question him or to insist further upon his argument. Especial weight was added thereto by the day's business. It seemed to be almost purposely arranged so as to stimulate the imagination with regard to the enormous interests involved in the possession of his wealth. Returns of labour employed in the mines, formal documents ordinarily set aside after a casual glance, became significant of thousands depending for their livelihood upon one man's act. The schedule of wages shewed a rate of pay higher than that fixed by economic conditions. The report of some trivial alterations to a miners' club-house and reading-room, one of many in three continents, proclaimed his personal interest in the welfare of those who toiled in his service. A cablegram from Wall Street invited him to join the sender in forming a corner in some commodity. The coup in the special circumstances and with his inexhaustible capital was sure to be successful. A less scrupulous man would not have hesitated an instant. But Jasper, knowing the ruin it would cause to hundreds of small dealers, refused curtly. He was aware, too, that his refusal rendered the scheme impracticable. The letter from Erskine the architect about his difficulties with the Borough Surveyor suggested but one of his philanthropic enterprises. A begging letter from a hospital secretary necessitated reference to the list of institutions that benefited by his yearly subscription. It had never struck Cudby or himself before how long that list was, how important the sums assigned. A telegram from the North Ham branch of a Trade-Union thanked him for last night's speech. He knew that through his efforts alone would the Minister's half-pledge be redeemed and legislation effected concerning the welfare of every factory hand in the kingdom. And this was but a foreshadowing of the immeasurable political power that his will and his wealth might create for him in the future.

These vast interests had arisen one by one, had been elaborated one by one. The organisation of each undertaking had been simple and separate; and once the organisation had been effected, it was merely a matter of keeping the machinery going. The process had been so gradual, the executive authority in a

hundred departments perforce so delegated, that he had never realised the integrated mass of his responsibilities. He saw himself now the keystone of a colossal fabric. He was the very heart of a stupendous machine with human lives for cogs and wheels. That keystone removed, that heart stilled, all would be chaos, confusion, ruin. Cudby had not talked the picturesque language of exaggeration. He was a king, an absolute monarch; almost with the power of life and death in his hands. There were corners of his kingdom that he knew but vaguely. It was of the nature of a shock to remember that, in fact, he was the owner of a cotton mill in Lancashire. It was worked under the name of the previous owners: he knew nothing about its management; but a couple of years ago, his signature on a few scraps of paper had brought the mill absolutely into his possession. Here were some other odd hundreds of human souls dependent upon him, for whose welfare he had as yet done nothing. Where his direct responsibilities ended no man could tell.

Once during the day he laughed mirthlessly. Cudby raised his head and darted a sharp, birdlike glance.

“That South-American Republic—last year. Would I finance the revolutionary party? Dictate my own terms. Ha! My God! I could have run a whole nation!”

Once again, in the evening, he spoke of the matter.

“No man is indispensable. What if I died?”

Said Cudby: “Better so. You have made an elaborate will. Everyone would be provided for. Living, you have chosen to take things into your own hands. You give subscriptions, not endowments. You love giving; but you love the power of taking away. You don’t like to surrender your working interest in any concern.”

“Tom, have you read me like that?” said Jasper, sadly. “It’s true, Heaven forgive me. I’ve hated the wealth, but I’ve loved exercising the power. Good Lord! what vanity there is in man.”

Cudby patted him affectionately on the shoulder. It was a harmless vanity; one of the weaknesses that endear. Shakespeare, as usual, supported his statement.

“Again,” said he, changing ground, “if you died, all your wishes and intentions would be scrupulously carried out. If you simply surrender unconditionally while living, everything would be at six and seven. By the way, that’s another of those infernal misquotations, Jasper, that I was talking of. People will say at sixes and sevens, you know.”

“Tom,” said Jasper, “do you think anything matters, after all, in this infernal world—even a misquotation?”

By the next morning he was calm. Cudby eyed him anxiously at breakfast. What had he decided?

"That man shall stay under my roof," said Jasper. "He shall see me face to face every day. If he claims his rights, I shall yield. I shall throw myself upon his mercy."

"And if he doesn't claim?"

"He shall stay here until God makes these dark things clear to me."

"But why the devil should he live here?" asked Cudby.

"I am at least answerable to God for his safety and comfort."

Cudby protested against morbidness. It was the morbidness of people who go to bed on top of their coffins. Where was the advantage of having this skeleton at the feast?

"And look here, Jasper," cried the little man. "I am not a self-assertive chap, as you know; but I'm damned if I'm going to sit day in and day out on the opposite side of the dinner-table to that fellow's ugly face!"

Jasper smiled wearily. "Mine is the only ugly face you'll have to put up with, Tom. Our friend shall have quarters next door."

"He'd be just as safe and comfortable a mile away," said Cudby.

"Let us drop the subject, please," replied Jasper, quietly.

At noon Burke presented himself, attired in a neat dark suit and respectable linen. He had purchased a silver watch and chain and modest shirt studs; he also carried gloves and umbrella. He had shaved off his straggling black beard. A great drooping cavalry moustache contrasted oddly with the weakness of his watery eyes, his slightly receding chin, and his broken nose. Again Jasper scrutinised him narrowly. Burke's features remained expressionless. Not a gleam or quiver betrayed recognition. Only once did he start with surprise,—when Jasper mentioned the handsome salary he proposed to pay him for clerical services. He regarded Jasper open-mouthed.

"I am to have free quarters and table and five hundred a year?"

"If you care to accept it."

"Do you treat all the dead-beats that come to you like this, sir?"

"No," replied Jasper. "I have my special reasons for making you the offer."

"May I ask what they are?" said Burke, with a quick look of suspicion.

"They are private. If you like, you can take it that I am making an experiment. Remember that I know more about you than you told Mr. Kelly."

"The illness in the bush?" ventured Burke.

"Precisely, and other things."

“Suppose the experiment doesn’t come off, sir?”

“It must have results,” replied Jasper.

“I suppose I am perfectly free to go about and do as I like, barring the office work?”

“Perfectly free,” said Jasper.

“I accept gratefully,” said Burke, in an even voice. “When can I—”

“You can take up your quarters when it pleases you—to-day, if you like. And to-morrow you can begin work. Mr. Cudby will arrange with you. Is there anything more you would like to say to me—about your loss of memory, for instance?”

“I’ve not lost my—” he began sharply. Then checking himself with a half laugh, “Oh, yes, I was forgetting. We arranged it. We’ll keep it at that. No, I’ve nothing more to say, sir, except to thank you.”

“Then good-morning,” said Jasper, and the interview ended.

Jasper threw himself into a chair and put a hand to a moist brow. He felt faint from the strain of the part he had been playing. It had been an effort to prevent a perturbed fancy from reading “liar” on the man’s lips. His conscience flamed. He bowed his clasped head and lost himself for some seconds in agonising appeal for guidance. No help came. Suddenly he started to his feet, straightened himself up, collected his faculties, coldly considered the recent interview. Burke’s attitude caused gnawing doubts. It was not that of a man raised as in a fairy tale from abject poverty to affluence. No gush of gratitude towards a benefactor had leaped forth. He had accepted with dull indifference the bounty lavished upon him; with suspicion; at the most, with polite expression of thanks that did not lack a touch of the sardonic. Did he know or did he not? Had he lost his memory or had he not? The occasion to declare himself had been pointedly offered and had been almost as pointedly disregarded. The man was a torturing enigma.

Cudby, who had not been present at this second meeting, entered the room for instructions. In a few words Jasper acquainted him with the perplexity. The little man’s shrewd common sense swept it aside.

“ ‘Command these fretting waters from your eyes With a light heart,’ as the immortal one says. The man has lost his memory. We can take that for granted. He comes to you as a stranger. He is simply a broken-down dead-beat. If you had put him on to a job at thirty shillings a week, he would have grovelled before you. Instead of that you receive him like your long-lost brother and give him an apocalyptic salary. For no earthly reason. The man naturally thinks you’re getting at him. You tell him you know his past life. By his own

confession it has not been immaculate. He gets suspicious. Wants to know what game you're playing at. Where does Jasper Vellacot, Esquire, millionaire, come in? he asks. J. V. is bound to come in somewhere. If you were to get to the bottom of that creature's muddy mind, you would probably see that he believes you to have selected him for some dirty transaction for which you pay him handsomely. Being a turbid philosopher, he gives you a cynical acquiescence. He's by way of being an educated man, remember."

"You are generally right, Tom," said Jasper. "I can but walk straight in the path that I've chosen."

"That your stars have preordained, *mon prince*," said Cudby.

So Burke took up his residence in Gower Street. He had a couple of comfortably furnished rooms, a servant to wait upon him, and abundance of food and drink. A seat among the clerks in an office below, and moderate work of an irresponsible nature were assigned to him. He performed his duties in a dull, taciturn way, seldom speaking to his fellow-clerks, who regarded the highly favoured new arrival as one of the chief's old colonial chums who had fallen upon evil fortunes; an impression which Burke said nothing to remove. When Jasper addressed him, he was sullenly respectful. Yet now and then Jasper caught a fleeting perplexity in his eyes that confirmed Cudby's solution. One day Jasper drew him into conversation on Australian topics, wandered purposely with him into the Torowoto district, where they had met in past years. Suddenly, with the impassive face that was beginning to be habitual to him, and with steady eyes beneath the overhanging brows, he put the question, —

"What happened to you immediately before and immediately after that illness?"

Unconsciously his tone was that of the accuser. The man blanched, almost trembled.

"Some I forget. I do forget. It's a blank. The rest I won't remember. Why the blazes are you always harping on that illness?" he exclaimed in a sudden heat.

" 'Sh! That is not the way to speak to me," said Jasper, quietly.

Burke sank into cowed humility. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said in a low voice. "I lost my head."

"I am sorry to have touched on painful associations in your life," said Jasper, with cold courtesy. "Be assured I shall not do so again."

This outburst was the only spontaneous, genuine expression that he had as yet obtained from the man. He mentioned the incident to Cudby, who triumphantly glorified his own sagacity. Instead of Jasper being the salmon

cunningly played by Burke, it was the salmon Burke who felt in his gills the hook that the unwitting Jasper commanded with his rod. The mention of the illness was a sudden strike causing the tortured fish to leap madly. Jasper ended the discussion by his usual phrase,—

"Perhaps you are right, Tom."

A strong man may defy his conscience and commit himself irrevocably to a course of conduct, knowing within himself the strength to pursue it with unfaltering tread whithersoever it may lead; but if, with all the strength, the man is nervous, sensitive, imaginative, tender of heart, passionately craving the highest, that same conscience is a sword of fire through his vitals. It is easy to talk of ruthless destiny. No man in his heart believes in it. A man's destiny is a man's will. And a man's will is under his control. At least, so does it appear to him when he is face to face with that terrifying, accusing, spiritual thing that is himself. This self, this strange, subjective realisation of self, for which conscience is a vague term, stands forth in hot denial of destiny, bringing no comfort. At such times is the awfullest isolation of the human soul, which no love of man or woman can one whit modify.

Through such a period of isolation did Jasper Vellacot pass. Reason proved inexorable fate pointing to his path—the continued rulership of his kingdom. Unpitying conscience held before his eyes the wrong done to the man beneath his roof. Day and night the accusing spirit haunted him. He could not sleep. His medical man prescribed opiates. He took the drugs, slept, carried on, somehow, physical existence. The routine of life continued. Society he shunned. Night after night he sat gloomily in the House, his chin on his breast. The weeks went by. He neither entered his little haven of rest in Onslow Gardens, nor climbed the stairs of Great Coram Street. To Lady Alicia's kindly notes he replied distantly, declining invitations on the plea of the urgency of parliamentary and other affairs.

He remembered bitterly the wakeful night of exaltation after his factory speech, the folly of his glittering and short-lived hope. With avenging speed the high gods had sent the man Burke to shake him from his dream. She was as remote from him as the pure moon in heaven. He would not avow to himself how much he ached for her.

At last he met her at a great garden party at Buckingham Palace. The invitation, which probably was suggested by the royalties who had opened his North Ham Hospital the year before, he had felt bound to accept. He wandered gloomily through the grounds, indifferent to the brilliance of the crowded scene, exchanging greetings with those he knew, till suddenly with a heart-beat he saw her smiling at him. The man talking to her rose, as Jasper approached, bowed, and went away. She pointed with a pretty air of command to the vacant

chair by her side, turned towards him, rated him for neglect. He murmured apologies, wondering stupidly how it was that her garments always seemed to be part and parcel of herself, like the petals of a flower. They were a feathery, dreamy palest-primrose chiffon tabernacle not made by hands, enshrining her delicate body and her delicate face. Influence emanated from her like a perfume. He felt the peace of a man coming to a palm-shaded well in a thirsty desert.

"I used to believe in work being an antidote to fatigue," said he. "I'm beginning to doubt it."

"What is the new remedy that has made you abandon your paradox?" she asked.

"Your company," said he.

"I am flattered, Mr. Vellacot. But if that is so, why—" The tiniest gesture completed the question.

"I have no right to use your drawing-room as a dumping-ground for my wearinesses. They would mount up and get in the way."

"Couldn't you leave them on the front doorstep?" she laughed.

Her laugh was music that for the moment gladdened the world. He drew a long breath and looked around him with brighter vision. He laughed with her.

"I leave them on so many people's doorsteps," he replied, "and when I come out again, the weight seems heavier than ever. It would be paying you a poor compliment to treat you so. I must come to you with the whole pack or not at all. The only question is: 'Have you room for it?' "

"I think I have," she answered, shutting her parasol. "My own life is so easy that I can spare all the space that is generally taken up with one's own grievances. In fact, my life is a little too easy. I think every one ought to earn his right to live, don't you?"

"If I were a courtier," he remarked with a humorous twitch of his lips, "I would say that some people confer an honour on the world by living at all."

"That's very pretty," she said happily.

"I'm not so sure it isn't true," said Jasper.

"Oh, I'm quite sure," she replied. "When I look at people like you working night and day and making every moment of their existence useful to their fellow creatures, I feel as if I were shirking all my duties to society. I wish I had more work to do."

"It is your part to help others to work."

"Tell me how to do it."

Burke was forgotten in a magical inspiration. He turned upon her eagerly.

"Would you help me?"

"Could I?"

"Why, of course. There are many tough problems I have to deal with which a woman's judgment could solve, while I stumble about helplessly. Will you be a kind of consulting partner in my little schemes?"

"Why, nothing would give me greater pleasure," she said enthusiastically. "But aren't there others who could help you more?"

"No help could be like yours—and I want help."

"Yet you are a strong man."

"I am what God made me," replied Jasper, with a smile, "and he made me in need of Lady Alicia Harden to counsel me."

This was arrant love-making. He knew it and he did not care. The Royal Artillery Band were playing the Intermezzo in the "Cavalleria Rusticana," which perhaps is a tune that ought to be prohibited in polite assemblies. To look in the eyes of the woman one loves, while that strain of primitive undisguised passion sets the heart a-beating furiously, is of itself perilous. Then there were the sunshine and the great patches of shadow, the waving green of the trees, the freshness of gay summer dresses, the musical laughter of girls, the fragrance of the sweet woman by his side. And then there was the amazement of finding joy possible on the gloom-stricken earth. Jasper was human.

So was Lady Alicia—as the untouched woman is human. Secure in her own imperviousness to passion, she was unaware of all that underlay the man's words. But she flushed, pleased at the tribute they conveyed, her sex satisfied with the sense of power over the vigorous-brained masculine. Homage from men had been her privilege for so many years that she had scarcely a twinge of misgiving as to her capacity for collaborating with a philanthropist in vast schemes. She sat embowered in her serenity, which no disturbing wind had come as yet to ruffle. It was a psychological condition, be it noted, as remote from conceit as the mist of the moon is from the steam of a tea-kettle; yet so strange a thing is humanity that sometimes in after years the memory of a flush like this will enwrap a woman in flames from head to heel.

Suddenly Lady Alicia spied enemies, in the shape of dear friends, bearing down upon her from afar. She notified the impossibility of escape. Jasper, set down in front of the commonplace, realised his recklessness, and hurriedly brought into review order the scattered companies of his emotions. He sought information as to the name and quality of the approaching friends. Alicia said that they were the Dusante-Peakes of Shropshire with the everlasting Bobby,

which did not add much to his store of general knowledge. In the haste of farewell she questioned him about Bunny.

"What is he doing? Have you seen him lately? He too has neglected me."

Jasper had not heard of him for five weeks. The last time he had seen him —He remembered the glimpse into the interior of the Hôtel Bomboni.

"I forget when it was," he corrected himself quickly.

"And those love poems in 'The Weekly Review'?"

"I haven't come across them," said Jasper, this time truthfully.

"I don't like them a bit," said Lady Alicia.

"I'll go and see him to-night and ask him what he means by it," he returned, laughing.

"Perhaps you need not mention my disapproval," she said. And her eyes, meeting his, were as guileless as those of a child of three.

Jasper remained awhile longer, regarding with less jaundiced gaze the brilliant scene. One of the Royalties above mentioned was graciously pleased to summon him by an equerry and stand with him in affable conversation for five minutes and thus render him the object of much envy and comment. He walked home, fretting somewhat at the white waistcoat and tight patent-leather boots which Cudby had insisted on his wearing, but feeling a much more uplifted person than the sombre man who had entered Buckingham Palace gates an hour or so before. Life was not so bitter but a smile could make it sweet, and she had smiled upon him with unchanging graciousness. If she could be no nearer than a friend, still as a friend she was secure. Why obstinately reject the modicum of happiness apportioned by the high gods? He pulled off his grey suède gloves, which he hated, and thrust them into his pocket, and tilted the brand-new silk hat to the back of his head, and strode up Piccadilly. He could think better so. Again he resolved to look ghosts and bogies and avenging furies and angels with flaming swords impenetrably in the face.

"By God!" said he, half aloud and swinging his stick emphatically, "I can be a man, if nothing else."

He narrowly missed being a corpse or a cripple, for he happened to be crossing the end of Albemarle Street and a cab nearly ran over him. His undignified scuttle to safety, incongruously cutting short lofty reflections, provoked his laughter. Cudby stared at him through his gold-rimmed eyeglass when he entered the house. If there were two things that Cudby knew by heart, they were Shakespeare's plays and the Book of Jasper.

"God save the Queen!" he cried with enigmatic enthusiasm.

CHAPTER X

FOR that evening Jasper had made an engagement to dine with the Tanners Company. The Court, being associated with him in one of his charitable enterprises, had sought to do him honour, and had invited him as the chief outside guest on the annual occasion of their entertaining the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs. He had accepted the invitation under the compulsion of public affairs. At all times he disliked these elaborate banquets. The profusion of food and drink shocked his ascetic habit of mind. The gastronomic talk and the gross feeding around him awakened a physical aversion. He was uninfluenced by the mellow atmosphere of good-fellowship. In this respect he lacked the civic instinct, and could not appreciate the principle that a full stomach maketh a full heart. To him it was no pleasure to lie back replete in his chair, and let his digestion be soothed by glee singers and soloists, and the distant droning of a gentleman making a speech. Still less did he enjoy making a speech himself to this flushed and complacent audience. But as such festivities occasionally came within the sphere of his duties as a public man, he attended them with as good a grace as possible. The prospect, however, of the present dinner had added a depression to the burden of the last five weeks. He had shrunk almost morbidly from prominence, seeing himself as a swindling impostor, in spite of his sense of the responsibilities of the usurping monarch. And he was to respond to-night for the House of Commons. His morning had been troubled. Before him had been a Royal Garden Party and a City Dinner, with a speech at the end of it. He would have preferred a day on skilly in the casual ward of a workhouse.

And yet at six o'clock he found himself on the top of an omnibus in Holborn, humming the Intermezzo in the "Cavalleria Rusticana." At a quarter to seven he ruined his neighbour the Sheriff's enjoyment of clear turtle by manifesting a keen interest in his conversation, and at half-past nine he surprised himself by the ease with which he forgot every word of the speech laboriously prepared beforehand, and by the flood of spontaneous eloquence that came from his lips. He had drunk that afternoon of the woman as of wine, and his heart had been gladdened and his strength had returned to him. He sat down amid great applause. He felt that his words had pierced through the fumes of wine and food, and had shaken his hearers for a moment from the easeful torpor of their congestion. A throb of pride pulsated swiftly through him. He was a man, at any rate. For the moment the lofty hall rich in its

armorial bearings, the long tables glittering with gold and silver plate, the civic dignitaries resplendent in robes and chains, the gorgeous flunkeys behind their chairs, the vistas of smiling, well-fed faces turned towards him, the dignity and power and honourable traditions of this ancient Livery Company, all seemed an appanage of the kingdom over which he ruled. And he ruled it not only by reason of his wealth, but by reason of himself, his will, his personality, his gift of rulership. His pride was overweening through reaction from abasement.

"In spite of your eloquent arguments, Mr. Vellacot," said the Sheriff, who was a member of the Court, "I am afraid we shall never acquire parliamentary powers for the purchase of the land."

In the after-glow of excitement Jasper brought his hand down upon the table.

"I have just promised publicly to obtain them, Mr. Sheriff," said he, "and I have never broken a promise in my life." He felt capable of manipulating the British Empire. To defy a mere committee of the House of Commons was a small matter.

"They only want one insistent loud-voiced man who is in earnest and says it must be done," he added. "There are all kinds of unknown mysterious forces behind the man who says 'must.' He speaks with the authority of his enthusiasm and special knowledge, and must prevail over a lukewarm body who in their hearts don't care a button one way or the other. He also saves them the trouble of thinking. They follow the line of least resistance. The majority would sooner be led than lead. The leadership is always for him who cares to seize it. Perhaps this sounds somewhat high-handed—filibustering," he said with a laugh; "but it's the only way for reforms to be carried out. It's the principle of the *coup d'état* applied to small things. It is always successful. Cromwell breaking into the House with his 'Take away that bauble;' Danton with his 'Audacity, again audacity and always audacity,'—men like that realised the truth I'm speaking of. There is an old proverb, 'A wilful man must have his own way.' Put the pitch of it a little higher and we get 'A man of will *shall* have his own way.' A psychological law."

The Sheriff sipped his old port, and his enjoyment of the lingering fragrance on his palate was marred by thoughts of a domestic hearth where this psychological law was exemplified to his own discomfort. He could not but agree with Jasper, who had unconsciously been fortifying his own moral position with the argument.

"Well, we will trust in you blindly," said he. "You are the only politician I know who takes his own course without caring a damn for anybody. I wish I could do the same."

"Why can't you?" asked Jasper.

But the Sheriff only answered with a sigh.

The speeches over, the assembly adjourned to the parlour for tea and coffee. There were some insatiables who actually ate the hot muffins, a survival from barbaric times. Talk, and cigar smoke, and the fragrance of coffee filled the air. Jasper was drawn into a little group, remote from the rest of the company, as befitted personages of eminent position. In it were the Lord Mayor, the Master of the Company, and Lord John Revelby, an Under Secretary of State. There he was made much of, flattered, listened to with deference. His speech scornfully disposing of the vested interests which stood in the way of the desired powers of purchase had impressed them with a sense of his power. For the first time he found himself openly recognised as a political force. He felt the great weight of the city behind him.

"You should strengthen your position by joining our Company," said the sheriff.

"Mr. Vellacot's position requires no strengthening," said the Master. "But when he succeeds, it will be the least we can do to show our gratitude if we ask him to do us the honour of accepting the Freedom."

Solitude and the cool night air, as Jasper walked westward, restored his somewhat disturbed equipoise. He broke into a laugh, half ashamed of his vapourings and his little arrogant thrills of triumph. He reviewed the day, the evening, and sanely accounted for things. He had been taken unawares. The reaction had jerked, as it were, his self-control from his hands. This was dangerous, he reflected seriously. For the future he must be on his guard. Highly strung nerves when suddenly relaxed are apt to jangle with irresponsible and incoherent clangour. The dissonance in its acutest form is hysteria. The idea of his ever growing hysterical was comic; and again he laughed.

His watch marked half-past ten. A vagrant humour disinclined him from home. Also a twinge half of conscience, half of angry defiance, rendered momentarily distasteful the roof beneath which Burke was sleeping. He hardened his heart against the man.

"I must lead my life as God wills, and I'm damned if Burke shall spoil it," said he, with his quaint duality of temperament.

Instinct prompted him towards Lady Alicia. At such a moment she could divinely settle his mood. Common-sense pointed to the hour as too late for a casual call. If she were not out, she would probably be in bed when he arrived. He bethought himself of Bunny, of his promise that afternoon to Lady Alicia. His mind leaped at the suggestion. The boy's unspoiled egotism would just set

him, off the too personal track, replace him on the rails of his mild, half-wistful altruism. He did not thus analyse the feelings with which he quickened his steps, but he felt vaguely their significance. A Bayswater omnibus overtaking him carried him down Holborn as far as Southampton Row. Then he walked up to Great Coram Street and knocked at Bunny's door.

The young poet threw down his pen and jumped to his feet, upsetting the chair behind him, when the weary servant-girl announced Jasper.

"How jolly of you to come! How awfully jolly of you!"

There was the usual bustle to dispose of Jasper's hat and coat, and to clear a seat, and to unearth a box of cigarettes from a concealing mass of litter.

"I am such an untidy beggar," he explained, "and the servant is untidier, and so between the two of us this picturesque effect is produced. If you remained long enough in that armchair, you'd get mislaid too, and have to be hunted wildly for and dug up. But I say, it is good of you to come! I haven't seen you for ages. It isn't altogether my fault. I have been round once or twice in the evenings, but you've been away legislating. Do have this cushion; without it the chair is a refined rack undreamed of by the Holy Inquisition."

He rattled on, hospitable, boyishly delighted at Jasper's visit. Suddenly he stopped short, dismayed.

"By Jove, I have no whisky. I'm so sorry. I'll run round the corner and get some."

The impetuous youth was already plunging after his boots beneath the dilapidated sofa when Jasper restrained him. He had eaten and drunk, he explained, to a horrible extent that evening. He would not even allow Bunny to obtain bottled beer from the landlady. Tobacco and Bunny's conversation, two plentiful commodities, were all he desired for his entertainment. Bunny yielded with a laugh, and threw himself down amid the books and newspapers on the sofa.

"Yes, I suppose there's enough talk here to drown an army. You turn a tap and it pours out. Some people can't talk, you know. It always seems odd to me, just like not being able to whistle. There's such a lot of things, little and big, that one wants to get out of one."

"Especially when you have turned anchorite and given up human society for five weeks," said Jasper.

"Oh! I have had lots of human society, I assure you," replied Bunny, with great truthfulness. "But who has been telling you I've turned anchorite? Somebody. Ten to one, it's Lady Alicia. I'm afraid I haven't been near her for a long time. Tell me, Vellacot," he cried, starting to his feet. "She is not hurt, is she? She is the sweetest soul alive, and I should hate her to think I was treating

her badly. She is one of the women I love."

"One of them?"

"I could love a hundred, in a way," said Bunny. "Couldn't you?"

"I am a weather-beaten politician, not a poet, my young friend."

"We'll see you floundering up to your eyes in love one of these days."

"I may be senile enough to fall in love," said Jasper; "but if you imagine you are going to behold the process, you are very much mistaken."

He smiled in half-grim amusement. The idea of his going about with bonnet unbanded and shoestring untied, and everything about him demonstrating a careless desolation, was humorous. He to be an Orlando carving verses on oak-trees! And yet he would have given all his money to be the free youth in the Forest of Arden. An oak-tree or the pages of a sixpenny magazine—what did it matter? The principle was the same.

"But, to go back," said Bunny. "Alicia is not vexed with me?"

"Forgiveness is ready for you, but you must go and claim it."

"I'll go on Sunday. But I've been so busy, you know. First there was the one-act play. I've only just finished it. I tore up most of the first draft. I didn't quite know then what I was talking about."

"And you do now?"

Bunny coloured under the elder man's kind, shrewd glance.

"I told you I wanted it to be all wine. I found it come out watery. I think it's right now."

"You must bring it to Onslow Gardens on Sunday, and read it to us," said Jasper.

Bunny passed his fingers through his curly black hair, and looked whimsically at his friend.

"Do you know," said he, "I don't fancy Alicia would care for it."

Jasper was struck by the sudden memory of an expression of disapproval that afternoon. Bunny's instinctive knowledge of Lady Alicia startled him. He remembered her allusion to certain poems in "The Weekly Review." His mention of them set Bunny disinterring back numbers.

"Here are one or two," said he. "I'm not conceited, but I like those I care for to see my work. It's about the best stuff I've done. It means such a devil of a lot to me," he explained apologetically.

Jasper read one of the lyrics. A subtle influence, dusky and warm and passionate, rose from the lines. They pulsated with southern music, rich and odorous. They glowed with the splendour of burning depths. The poem was as

sensuous and spiritual as incense, and the flood of reds and purples streaming through Gothic windows. Jasper's eyes grew dim with thoughts too deep for him as they rose from the page to the young face of the inspired being who had made this intoxicating word-music, and who stood eagerly awaiting his judgment as if the masterpiece were a rather cleverly constructed rabbit-hutch.

"Wonderful, wonderful," he murmured. "How could Lady Alicia not like it?"

"She is the silver star in the night," said Bunny, "and cannot sympathise with the crimson flower in the sunshine."

Verily truth is not always beauty. These men were maintained on a far higher spiritual plane by the poetical illusion than they could have been by the knowledge of the prosaic fact that the star in the night was most humanly and femininely jealous of the crimson flower, whoever she might be, that inspired Bunny's love songs. The limitations against which humanity is eternally in revolt are blessings that render possible the spiritual life. What, after all, is love but the immortal confluence of two illusions? What is a man's better self but a kind of astral shape made up of vague aspirations and vanities and impossible idealisations,—a shadowy photograph of the soul printed from an unconsciously touched up negative?

"There is a red flower then, Bunny?" asked Jasper, kindly. And as he put the question, there flashed upon him the picture he had seen through the open door of the Hôtel Bomboni. Dismay sobered him. He rose and put his hand on the young fellow's shoulder.

"Are you sure it's a flower and not just a common weed?"

"She's the throbbing beauty of the earth," said Bunny.

"With Italian eyes? Am I right?"

"Yes. I don't care who knows it."

"And she is the beginning and end of all this?"

"She is the beginning and end of existence."

He drew himself up to his full height and looked defiance at a doubting world. Jasper filled his pipe from a tin of tobacco on the writing-table and lit it gravely. The affair between Bunny and the young woman of Soho appeared in a different light beneath this rapturous glow. He saw in it more than the mere pagan attraction of two beautiful young creatures astonished at the newness and joy of life. It held the peril of wild passion. The commonplaces of worldly wisdom that occurred to him seemed strangely futile. He had seen enough of Vittoria to know that she was not the tawdry Hebe that often captivates the senses of unwary youth, her betters. She had remarkable beauty, wit,

personality, and yet he feared for Bunny. The last man in the world to be influenced by caste conventions, he could not disassociate her in his mind from the smell of the dingy eating-house. There were sweet girls in Bunny's own world who would have been fitter mates for him. He sat down again in the armchair and smoked in silence.

"Well," said Bunny, "what have you to say against it?"

"What can I say?" asked Jasper.

"A wilderness of wise things. I know you are meditating a sermon. I see it in your face. It's no good. I've got to go my own way. Man alive, how can I help loving her? She is fashioned inside and out by God Almighty expressly for me. To love her is as inevitable as to be warmed by the sun. Look here, Vellacot, I've done nothing but talk about myself. You always make me do it. It's because you are so confoundedly sympathetic, just like Alicia. One pours oneself out to you."

"But you haven't confessed Vittoria to Lady Alicia, I presume," said Jasper.

"My dear sir," said the youthful sage, "it is a safe rule in life never to discuss one woman you are fond of with another. You understand Vittoria right enough, but Alicia—" A long breath of cigarette smoke completed the sentence.

And Jasper with all his love and reverence had an uneasy feeling that Bunny was right.

"You had better read me the one-act play now," said he.

It was two o'clock when he stood outside his own door in Gower Street. Somehow he seemed to have added Bunny's love affair to his responsibilities, and for the first time for weeks he mounted the stairs to his bedroom unthoughtful of the man Burke.

CHAPTER XI

IT fell out however, a short while later, that Bunny did read his play to Lady Alicia. In her sweet unawareness of the fiery influences that were at work on Bunny's genius, she had insisted upon it.

"You were never going to send the play in without letting me hear it?" she had said reproachfully. And the young man, who could by no means plead a habit of shy secrecy as to his productions, consented with a somewhat simulated eagerness. So one Sunday evening Lady Alicia gathered her coterie together,—Jasper, the Edorys, Elinor Currey, and one or two others,—and Bunny, with picturesque descriptions of stage effects, read *The Chian Wine*. At first he felt a certain embarrassment in revealing his heart of flame to this polite assembly, and to her who had been in some measure his Egeria. His voice faltered over the opening lines. But soon he lost everything in the poet's absorption. Time and space were not. He read with dramatic glow, all his soul trembling in eyes and voice, and poured forth unheedingly the flood of his young passion. He ended on a note of exultation, leaped to his feet, and dashed down the manuscript, carried away; and he stood still, breathing hard, amid a tense silence; for the passion had gripped all his hearers, and they looked at him somewhat pale, scared, vehemently struggling to regain balance. It lasted but two or three seconds; then the reaction came and they broke into enthusiastic applause.

"By heaven!" cried Edory the Royal Academician, "I'll design the setting for you. Campion can have it as a gift if he likes. The amber sky and turquoise sea, and the white temples gleaming out of the cypresses, and the marble steps, and the blood-purple tent. Where the deuce did you get your 'blood-purple' from? What a colour scheme I could make of it! For God's sake, don't let your scene-painter desecrate it."

"You'll send Upper Tooting home thinking, Bunny," said Mainwaring.

"Feeling, you mean," cried Elinor Currey, "shaking to their Tooting depths."

"Not to say drunk," said Mainwaring. "You'll be responsible for all kinds of volcanic eruptions."

"But who'll play it?" said Elinor Currey. "Campion? With his sentimental Orlandoish airs and graces? The model exponent of the histrionic art for every school for young ladies in London? You want someone 'beyond a mortal man

impassioned far' to carry it over the footlights in spite of Mr. Edory's scenery, and you're not going to get him."

" 'I'd as lief the town-crier spoke my lines,' " chimed in Cudby, from the corner where he sat nursing his leg. Lady Alicia had only recently made his acquaintance, and divided her newest delight between him and a yellow majolica cat with magenta whiskers that stood with a wistful look of unutterable sadness, penate-like, on her summer hearth.

"The drama," he continued, "would be the highest of all the arts if there were no actors."

The talk proceeded in a light vein of admiration. It was a typical cultivated English audience, seeking refuge in conventional wit from confession of elemental stirrings. Meanwhile Lady Alicia had gone to Bunny with outstretched hand.

"It is very, very beautiful, Bunny," she said in a low voice. Her eyes were somewhat pathetic. In a dim way she knew that she had no concern in the making of this passionate thing, that he had escaped far beyond the fragrant sphere in which his earlier verse had been written and in which it had enchanted her to guide him by subtle feminine revelations. For the first time she felt certain of the existence of the crimson flower in the sunshine.

"I'm so glad you like it, Alicia," he cried, with the glow of his excitement still upon his face. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"You don't like primary colours and primary emotions, as a rule, I thought this play might be too violent for you."

"I love all beautiful things," she returned sweetly, "and I hope, Bunny dear, that this will bring you great fame and great happiness."

She smiled upon him with exceeding kindness, and went to her other guests, an odd little ache in her heart. Bunny's apology was somewhat self-conscious. It was half a confession. She remembered the weekly love-verses. Hitherto her hyper-refinement of temperament had merely revolted at their sensuousness. The kissing of eyelids and the trembling of parted lips and such things in Swinburne and even in Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" had always been repugnant to the delicate chastity of her unawakened womanhood. So were the imageries in Bunny's newest lyrics. But now she saw them drawn from the same source of inspiration as the play. She liked neither the play nor the passion nor the inspiration, and she felt absurdly hurt by the fact of Bunny having fallen in love, and with an entirely unknown young woman whose personality baffled speculation.

Later in the evening she stood for a few moments alone with Jasper on the

balcony. They discussed the play, touched on Bunny's future.

"He is getting beyond us," sighed Lady Alicia.

"He must drink his fill of life," said Jasper. "It may be good for him and it may be bad. Who can tell?"

"I half wish it might be bad."

"So that the prodigal may return and be stuffed with fatted calf?"

"More or less. It sounds cruel and selfish. But I don't like his running riot in his poetry. I want him to sing in my way—the way I love. You see," she added after a pause, with a little embarrassed laugh, "I have been a kind of godmother to him. He used to shew me his verses as soon as they were written. Now I see them first in print, and they appear the work of a certain Mr. Bonamy Tredgold and not of the Bunny I know. He does seem like a prodigal, wasting his poetical substance with riotous living. Yes, perhaps that is why I want him to return to us—before he has had any husks to eat. The fatted calf won't do him any harm."

"I'll keep a sharp eye upon him," said Jasper, simply.

She murmured deep thanks. London held so many temptations for a man of Bunny's temperament. His genius must not be destroyed or harmed. A word from an elder man whom he loved and respected might keep him from precipices. She hovered round the edge of the question she dared not ask. Jasper, blinded both by his ignorance of woman in general and by his ever hungering love of the particular divinity, saw in her solicitude nothing but godmotherly affection. Yet he was acute enough to perceive that she suspected unhappy influences in Bunny's life. He felt embarrassed. It would have been delightful to go knight-errant at her bidding to deliver this young fairy prince of song from the wiles of dark enchantresses, but his knowledge of men assured him that any attempt to stand between Bunny and Vittoria would be futile, if not disastrous. He hastened to deprecate Lady Alicia's gratitude.

"I shall always love the boy and befriend him," said he. "But you know, dear Lady Alicia, every man has to walk unaided through the flames he has lit for himself."

"A friend can stop his hand."

"A man lights his flames unknown to all save himself and God."

"But why do men do it?" cried Lady Alicia.

"Not only men—women," said Jasper. "It is a blind law of life."

"No," she protested. "No. Anyone can lead a calm, rational, equable existence. So long as one is sane, I can't understand how one can be driven by any law into crime or crazy passions. This play of Bunny's—it is not true to

normal life—it makes me shiver as if I had been among mad people. The normal intellect sees things in their right proportions. Yours does. I hope mine does."

"Perhaps a poet sees things in their divine proportions," said Jasper.

"When the poet is inspired from on high—certainly. When the inspiration is tainted, his vision is distorted. I wish you would agree with me."

Lady Alicia was vexed, and she spoke with some petulance. His persistence in not recognising her desire for definite information concerning Bunny irritated her. His quiet acquiescence in Bunny's ruin made her angry. And she did not like her postulates to be questioned. He looked at her in some alarm. How had his clumsiness offended her? Then through the veil of his dear illusion he saw her as a pure crystal soul into which evil had never entered, and like a foolish and simple man he reverenced her the more.

"It is right that I should agree with you," he said.

Something in his odd dignity and tenderness touched her. She was also ashamed of having fallen from her standard of impeccability, and anxious to right herself in his eyes. She obeyed an attractive instinct.

"Forgive me for being cross—Cousin Jasper," she whispered.

The word was like a stab and a kiss. It sounded unutterably sweet from her lips. It hurt like a pain through his vitals. Yet to hear her say it was worth all agonies. He grew reckless.

" 'Cousin Jasper' implies 'Cousin Alicia,' " said he.

" 'Alicia,' if you like. Why not, since you at last recognise our cousinship?"

She had recovered her unruffled air of one who gives largesse of favour to humble folk, and she was conscious of royal atonement for her pettiness. She also thought it was very nice of Jasper not to refer to the forgiveness.

The suggested intimacy of the Christian name warmed him.

"It would be a very sweet privilege to call you so," he said in his old-fashioned way.

He sought tremulously to accustom himself to this same privilege on his way home with Bunny. At the second mention of the untitled name Bunny glanced at him sharply.

"I'm glad you've got to that," he said. "It's rubbish to have 'Misters' and 'Ladies' and things between cousins."

"You know of the relationship, then?" asked Jasper.

"Of course. Am I not of the family? My mother was a Harden. Alicia's

mother was a Vellacot. The two lots have been mixed up once or twice before. I know the respectable history of the crowd. I never referred to your connection with it, because Alicia gave me to understand that you seemed not to like it mentioned. Anyhow I'm glad. And in a sort of way you're my cousin too. That's ripping."

"Do you know, Bunny," said Jasper, sedately, "that for a poet your colloquial English is abominable."

"My hat!" laughed Bunny. "You can't expect a fellow to ride Pegasus all day long. You'd give the poor beast a sore back!"

They parted at the bottom of Bloomsbury Street. As soon as Jasper was well on his way homewards Bunny slipped back down Shaftesbury Avenue in the hope of catching a glimpse of the shadow of the beloved one behind her bedroom blinds. Her window was illuminated, but there was no shadow. In happy ignorance of the fact that the girl was sobbing her heart out on her bed, he kissed his hand to the square of yellow light and went home to sleep, the happiest poet in London.

And while he slept like a healthy young animal, after a few brief, delicious, drowsy dreams of Vittoria, Lady Alicia lay amid dainty and unwhisperable frills, and wooed slumber with the *De Imitatione Christi*, which she felt pathetically to be the work of a very worthy but most unpractical saint.

And Jasper, when he let himself in with his latchkey, was startled to see a human form lying in the hall at the foot of the stairs. It was that of a man in pyjamas and barefoot. He approached and recognised Burke. Shaking did not arouse him. Then it dawned upon Jasper that Burke was dead drunk. He switched on the full electric light in the hall and bent over the man. There was no mistake. His convulsed features and stertorous breathing and the stale smell of whisky left no room for doubt. But why should he, who lived in the adjoining house, be lying there in night attire? Jasper was puzzled as well as deeply disgusted. In spite of the vicissitudes and sordidness of his early colonial life, he had always had a temperamental repugnance to drunkenness. Genial good-fellowship induced by alcohol he could understand; but the sheerly bestial was loathsome to him.

Burke, however, could not be left there all night. It was nearly one o'clock, and the house was quite silent. He would have to carry him unaided to his room. To prepare for this adventure he walked alone up to Burke's apartments, turning on the electric lights as he went. In the sitting-room he found an empty bottle of whisky and a couple of empty siphons on the table. A corkscrew with a cork at the end of it prettily completed circumstantial evidence of the amount consumed. Lighting up the bedroom, Jasper saw that Burke had already gone

to bed at some period of the evening. He retraced his steps, and with a strength with which few would have credited his stooping figure, he picked up the drunken man, threw him over his shoulder, and staggered with the burden through corridors and up stairs to the man's bedside. Then he shut doors, turned off lights, and went to his own room.

He fell asleep, grimly unrepentant of the acknowledged cousinship. Burke was not a blood-relation for Lady Alicia Harden to be proud of.

CHAPTER XII

THE kiss in Epping Forest was the first of an infinite series. It was bound so to be, in spite of wise feminine prohibitions. Not only were Vittoria's fresh lips maddeningly alluring, but also Bunny had an imperious way with him that compelled the young female not loath to be subdued. And after all, what were kisses? At last she ceased to remonstrate. Sometimes of her own accord she would lay her cheek to his and coo adorably into his ear. Sometimes she teased him, assumed the airs of a woman of business whose serious thoughts were rooted in the conduct of the restaurant, and treated him like a spoilt boy. It amused her to see his cheek flush and to hear the impatient note in his voice. At other times she hinted darkly of days when this sweet fooling must end, talked sombrely of the complications of life. In these moods she gave utterance to profound and bitter pessimism which startled him and caused him to press her for definite statement of grievances. She replied vaguely, deep melancholy veiling her beautiful eyes. Once she burst into a passion of tears, wishing to God that she had never left the convent. It was the only place where peace could be found on earth. At other times, again, it pleased her to dazzle him with her intellectual attainments. She talked art, books, love, religion, the philosophy of life. Intuitively she said the right word, leaving him to discourse in his favourite fashion, and to rate her comprehension highly.

For all the kisses and soft murmurings and rapturous moments of abandonment, he had not yet obtained from her a confession of love. His own passion he had poured out to her like the floods of an inexhaustible river. But, coquette to her lips, she kept him in a state of delicious torment. Also her deeper nature held her back in a kind of terror from such an avowal.

"I shall not let you go till you tell me," he would say, holding her, half playfully, half fiercely. She would throw back her head and look at him languorously, mockingly; and then suddenly he would feel a shiver run through her, and her face would grow hard, and she would wrench herself free with an expression of anger, which outburst would be immediately followed by an atoning mood of sweet humility. He found her an amazing epitome of woman.

One evening in August she announced to him her departure the next morning for a visit to Italy. She would be away two or three months. Her

object was partly business, partly pleasure. Bunny looked at her aghast. He was supping at his usual table. She had left the bar, as the restaurant was empty, and sat opposite to him, her elbows on the table, watching him eat.

"Three whole months?"

She nodded. "Among my own people. We are very funny, we Neapolitans. How would you like to see me come back with the *sfregio* across my face?"

"The what?" asked Bunny.

"When a man of the Camorra has a sweetheart and wants to keep her from other men, he marks her across the cheek—so—with a razor. That is the *sfregio*."

"Shall I send you away with it?" he asked, his eyes deep in hers.

For answer she rose, met his gaze with responsive fire, and bending over him threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately on the mouth. She had never before kissed him of her own accord.

"If you only would!" she cried hoarsely.

Then without another word she rushed away through a side-door which she slammed behind her.

It was an astonishing leave-taking. He did not see her again that evening, though he lingered impatiently while Antonelli, who came in later, unfolded to him his childlike views on English politics. The next morning he learned that Vittoria had started for Italy. The prospective three months of separation from the adored one loomed before him like an eternity. But the memory of the passionate kiss filled him with hitherto inconceivable happiness. The bewildering wish that he should cut her cheek open with a razor was beyond his philosophy of woman. As he could not fathom its significance, he dismissed it from his mind. The kiss is enshrined in one of his lyrics over which, afterwards, Lady Alicia shed not a few tears.

The weeks went by. In late September Bunny found himself staying at Greybrooke, Lady Alicia's place in Hertfordshire. This year, Lady Luxmoore's gout having contented itself with Harrogate, Lady Alicia remained at home, and gathered together a house party which included most of her favourites. Bunny, who had repented him of his neglect since her sweet reception of the play and had re-established his old friendly relations with her, shot partridges all day to his heart's content, and argued fiercely with Elinor Currey most of the evening. To Alicia's gladness he plotted with her the outline of a pastoral drama, all in Dresden-china colours. One could not always erupt molten lava, he said. Even Vesuvius had its vine-clad moments. He reserved his raptures for his letters to Vittoria, of which Alicia fortunately knew nothing. Vittoria's replies were few and enigmatic. This is a specimen:—

DEAREST BON AMI,—You mustn't write like this. I have to lock up your letters. Where, the whole Camorra would not drag from me —nor you, either. If Cicilio saw them, he would come to England and stab you. Cicilio is my cousin. He is a tremendous person. He keeps a wine-shop and conspires against governments. You have to penetrate through a ten-foot wall of garlic to arrive at the Presence, and then you see a hook-nosed thing with a red handkerchief, on his head, and earrings, and about five shades darker than I am. Giuseppe is here too, conspiring like anything. He is also running a lottery syndicate from which we are all going to make our fortunes. If you were a real poet you would give me a lot of winning numbers. I wear the costume of the country. It is most becoming. I do look like a Del Sarto contadina now. You would write a pretty poem about me, Bon Ami. Do you know, I must be quite two persons. One is just like any girl here, with not an idea in her head beyond an occasional *gita* with her lover, and the lottery and Mass, and the quarrel between Luigi and Felipe. The latter had five stabs. We counted them as the police took him away. I danced the night before with Luigi. And somehow the Neapolitan *I* still thinks him rather nice. The other person is the s o p h i s t i c a t e d (there, I've got it out—you taught me the word, *ti ricordi*?) young London person who looks upon them all as the impossible people of comic opera, and longs for her nice neat clothes and the talks about the things that matter with her dear Bon Ami. The one *I* has read Browning; the other can't read or write and doesn't want to. It almost went to Gianelli who keeps the stationer's shop round the corner and asked him to write this letter to you. Giuseppe's sister, Marietta, always does this when she wants to write a love letter. But she hasn't anything to say except, "Tell him I love him *molto molto*—and—*ebbene*—that I love him." Would you like to get such a letter, Bon Ami? The Italian Vittoria is as happy as the Bay of Naples on a sunny day. The English Vittoria is sad—oh, so sad, dear. She longs for Soho—for the sound of your dear voice—for other things that only you and I know of. Oh, Bon Ami, I want you so much.

Yours sincerely,

VITTORIA.

P. S. You will observe that it is the sophisticated *I* who writes.

Her swift intelligence had caught the trick of the epistolary style. Odd scraps of Bunny's talk appeared in her letters, such as "the things that matter."

She was clever too in hiding her real feelings behind this ingeniously devised dual personality. She kept him in a lover's sweet torment. He idealised her into a unique creation among women. She was a thing apart, an anomaly, a splendid creature with a genius of personality that took its own rank in the body social. He developed his views with much poetic imagery to Jasper, who had stolen a week from affairs to join Lady Alicia's house-party. Jasper posed as the man of the world and gave him sound advice. He was laughed at, detected in his imposture. Once, while they were out shooting together, he attacked the youth on the side of his art. Had he considered what deteriorating influence this infatuation might have? Whereupon Bunny sprang up like a young wolf, dashing back his black curls and showing his white teeth, and drew a crumpled sheet from his pocket.

"Read that!"

So Jasper read.

"It's devilish good, Bunny."

"Good? I should think it is good, and if infatuation can produce that, it's a state to thank Almighty God for. Hurt my art! Why, it's the infinite dazzling variety of her that stimulates it from every side!"

"There is such a thing as super-stimulation. Physiology teaches that it leads to insensibility—or madness."

"Bosh!" said Bunny. "What has physiology got to do with poetry? No, I'm not going to argue. It's too hot. I'd like to lie on my back on a wisp of that cirrus up there. Just think of the ecstatic loneliness of it—one human soul poised in illimitable ether."

He talked on in his discursive way, eating sandwiches beneath a hedge, sometimes addressing Jasper, who lunched by his side, and sometimes a yellow setter, who listened with profound attention.

It ended by Jasper becoming convinced that Vittoria was specially designed by Providence as a mate for Bunny. He forgot the smell of the eating-house, saw only the splendid night-eyed Del Sarto woman of Bunny's dream. It became a beautiful romance whose reflections coloured his own life. He was surprised to find how dear the boy had grown to him.

The late autumn saw every one back in London. It was a time of depression. England was at war, and prophets of evil arose and uttered jeremiads, and anxious hollow-eyed crowds gathered in the War Office lobbies. Bunny worked at his pastoral drama somewhat forcedly. A newspaper from which he drew a couple of guineas a week failed. Other journalistic work was scarce, as the public wanted nothing that did not refer to the war. Campion postponed the production of *The Chian Wine* to the spring. Bunny was like to

fall back onto evil days. And Vittoria was still in Italy. He hungered for her. Jasper's life pursued its strenuous course. Money poured into his coffers; he was indefatigable in the Danaid task of emptying them. Burke got drunk once or twice, and began to grumble and grow careless over his clerical duties. He threw out hints to Cudby that he was lonely. Why couldn't Mr. Vellacot introduce him into some society? Eating in solitude drove a man to drink. Cudby met his hints with sarcastic replies, and forbore to mention the matter to Jasper for fear of adding to his anxieties. And Jasper, although he could not fail to see the beginnings of discontent in Burke, dismissed the matter as much as possible from his mind. Bunny's financial affairs began to trouble him. He discussed with Lady Alicia many schemes for putting him beyond the reach of want. Of course there were posts under his own control that Bunny could have filled. But there was the sensitive pride of the young man to reckon with. Any suggestion of charity would have been furiously rejected. At last one evening they conceived a brilliant idea. Jasper would start a Sunday newspaper on Tory democratic lines. Lady Alicia could put her hand upon an ideal editor, Humphrey Gittens, who had just retired from controlling an important weekly. Jasper knew him. The very man. And of course Bunny could take over the literary editorship. Jasper left her at a late hour, his head full of the project.

Meanwhile things were happening. Some days before this Vittoria returned to London. In the joy of seeing her Bunny forgot his difficulties. She had grown more beautiful, more lithe in her movements; a duskier glow burned in her eyes. It was unutterable happiness to be back, to see her dear Bon Ami again. Had he pined much for her? Could he write his poetry without her? She herself had longed, had felt things—oh, things that could only be whispered, not set on paper.

"Then you do love me, dear?" he asked.

They were walking amid the November fog in St. James's Park. Bunny had said that it was a kindly veil shrouding them from the noisy world. It was the loveliest day for three months, Vittoria being the sun and the moon and the light thereof. Her cheek, flushed with past sunshine and the walk, was wet with the moist air, and she looked infinitely to be desired.

He repeated his question. She glanced shyly at him, let her head sink on his shoulder, and murmured unimportant things as he kissed her. And Bunny went home drunk with happiness. Of course she loved him. He had been a fool to doubt. The whole soul of the boy was aflame. He could not sleep. He wondered how he had slept so calmly all these months. Could he have loved her, wanted her, as he did now? Suddenly he became aware of crisis. This indeterminate state of things could not last. He awoke to an imperious craving that occasional speech with her would not satisfy. She must be all and

everything in his life. Together they would conquer the earth.

For two or three days he could not see her alone. Impatience became intensified to torture. He burned to carry her off there and then from the dingy cave of the Hôtel Bomboni to his palace in the clouds. At last the fly-blown restaurant was empty. The youth Auguste had shut the door behind the last of the diners and had retired to his supper. The cat, Corpo di Bacco, blinked comfortably on the counter, while Vittoria caressed its back. It was cold, and the door leading into Antonelli's domino-parlour, as Bunny called it, was shut. Then Bunny leaped to his feet.

"For God's sake, Vittoria, come out for a little with me."

"Oh, you've frightened Corpo di Bacco away. He must have thought you some horrible destroying angel. Come out with you? Why, my dear Bon Ami—it is pouring wet. Listen to the rain."

"It's not raining," said Bunny.

But a quick rush to the restaurant door shewed him that it was. He came back, took both her hands in his. Somehow his ready flow of talk failed him. He looked into her eyes.

"Vittoria, I can't stand this any longer."

"Bon Ami, be sensible."

"I am mad—mad for love of you, Vittoria."

She turned her face away from him and glanced at him sideways.

"I am your very humble servant, Bon Ami," she said.

"You're the wife that God has appointed for me," he said in a rush, "and I can't live without you, and you must leave this infernal place to-morrow and we'll be married as soon as we can."

She drew herself up, and a mischievous mockery was in her dark eyes.

"Married?" she echoed. "Oh, but you go fast, Bon Ami."

"I have waited long enough, dear," said he.

"But supposing, sweetheart, I said I couldn't?"

"That is supposing folly."

"Oh no," she replied teasingly. "You are not the only man who wants to marry me. I am already betrothed. It was about this that I went to Naples—true as true can be."

Bunny released her hands, and smote the counter with his palm, his eyes on fire with sudden jealousy.

"What foolery are you talking, Vittoria?"

She smiled at his anger, and stood with her arms behind her, away from the counter.

"I told you I was two people, Bon Ami," she said. "The English person loves you. The Neapolitan person has to obey Neapolitan customs. Marriages among Italians are family affairs, arranged, oh, ever so long ago. A girl isn't consulted. She has to do as she is ordered. Uncle Antonelli arranged it, and I went to Naples to see my fiancé's relations. I stayed with them. They said I was the prettiest girl they had ever set eyes on and that I could cook beautifully."

"Are you going mad?" said Bunny, unsteadily. "I am not jesting. I have asked you to be my wife."

"You know I should love to marry you, Bon Ami," she said, thrilled to the soul with the joy of seeing her power over him, "but a good little Italian girl must do as she is told. Giuseppe is going to buy the business and me with it. It is very simple."

Bunny looked at her stupidly. Her words had dazed him.

"Giuseppe,—who is Giuseppe?" he stammered.

At that moment the service-door opened, admitting a stream of light and in the midst of it appeared the head waiter, greasy, grinning, and ignoble, who had come, according to custom, to present Bunny's bill. Then Bunny understood.

"You are going to marry *that*?" he cried hoarsely.

"I am betrothed to it," said Vittoria, with a provoking smile.

Bunny felt sick, horribly dazed and sick. He clapped on his hat, threw a handful of shillings and pence onto the floor, and went out.

"But, Bon Ami! Bon Ami!" cried Vittoria in sudden ringing accents of remorse, running behind the bar towards the door.

But Bunny passed unheeding into the street, and walked aimlessly, blindly through the pelting rain and mud, jostling passers-by on the pavement, escaping death in the roadways by sub-conscious, animal instinct. For two or three hours he was practically insane. He never remembered afterwards where he had gone, how long he had walked, what his thoughts had been. His vague object was to fly from a pursuing horror.

At last he recovered consciousness of external things and found himself mounting a narrow staircase in a house. He looked around him, bewildered, and saw by the dim point of gas left burning that he was on the way to his own rooms in Great Coram Street.

CHAPTER XIII

THE millionaire was bending down before the grate, trying to make a bad fire draw by means of an open newspaper, when Bunny stumbled into the room.

"I've just been devising a great scheme to make the fortunes of both of us, so I've come in and waited," he said in friendly fashion without looking up.

Bunny did not reply, but remained on the threshold, the door open, staring at him stupidly. Flames having appeared behind the newspaper, Jasper rose to his feet.

"There!" said he, triumphantly. Then turning, his eyes fell on Bunny.

"Good heavens! lad, what's the matter?"

He went forward, laid his hand on Bunny's arm. Bunny was sopping wet, caked with mud from head to foot; he had obviously fallen down; the water trickled from the brim of his bowler hat and dripped from the edges of his jacket. Jasper shut the door.

"Change all these soaking clothes and come and warm yourself," said he. "I'll help you."

With singular docility Bunny obeyed, shivering and muttering below his breath, and checking queer little sobs like a child recovering from a fit of temper. Jasper, who had seen men hard hit before, said nothing, but aided him to strip to the skin, threw him a towel to dry himself with, and made him get into some old flannels which he found hanging behind the bedroom door. He discovered a bottle of whisky in the cupboard and forced him to drink a stiff glass. Then Bunny sat down in front of the fire, looking straight before him and holding out his sensitive hands to the blaze. After a while Jasper gripped his shoulder.

"Take it like a man, sonny, whatever it is," he said kindly.

"Yes, yes, I must. I'm ashamed of myself. I don't quite know what has happened with me," said Bunny, in a queer voice.

"What's the trouble?"

"Oh, nothing," he said between his teeth. "I asked her to marry me, and she replied that she was going to marry the waiter!"

After a short pause he shook off Jasper's hand and leaped to his feet and

broke into a shriek of laughter that was not pleasant to hear.

"Steady on, Bunny," said Jasper.

But Bunny still laughed.

"Don't you see the humour of it? The howling, screeching farce? I give her, by God, the whole of my soul, and she elects to marry the waiter! That greasy bestial devil who would lick any man's feet for sixpence! My hated rival—mine—a greasy scullion! It's colossal, it's unimaginable! The whole of earth and heaven is shaking with inextinguishable laughter! The anti-climax—the immeasurable bathos! Why don't you laugh?"

Jasper shook him in his powerful grasp. "Shut up, Bunny. This sort of thing won't do you any good. Sit down quietly."

He pushed him back into the chair, and there he sat hunching his shoulders and shuddering with disgust.

"Yes, you are right, Vellacot. But, by God—it's more than a man can bear. The horrible nausea of it. Perhaps she is hugging and kissing the satyr now. A man—yes, it would have been different—but that animal!—It's like dreaming of paradise and waking up and finding oneself wallowing in unutterable filth. O God! O God!"

He rocked to and fro, his hands before his face. Jasper put some more coal on the fire and stood on the hearth-rug, with his hands in his pockets. His heart ached for the lad.

"Most men have got to carry their souls through hell once in their lives, Bunny. I've done it; perhaps I'm doing it still. One can only grit one's teeth and be a man."

"I shall be all right soon," said Bunny. "Stay with me a bit. You've been damned good to me. I always felt you had been hit somehow, and that's why I've been able to talk to you."

So Jasper sat with him most of the night, doing what he could, in his cool wise way, to comfort him in his varying moods. Sometimes he would sit and shudder. Then he would walk about the room raving of his horror. Once he seized the manuscript of his Vittoria poems which he had been preparing for the press in book form, and which contained many unpublished lyrics, and threw it into the fire. Jasper leaped forward, rescued it, stamping out the springing flame on the hearth-rug, and put it into the pocket of his frock-coat. The author angrily demanded its return. Jasper coolly refused.

"I am not going to let you be a silly fool, sonny. The script is safe with me. It's the finest work you've done. Those lyrics couldn't have been written by another living creature."

“That’s the unspeakable torment of it,” cried Bunny. “They are the children of a damned foul harlotry. I want them blotted out of the memory of man. They are poisonous, leprous, horrible!”

“They are the work of a great poet who is now going into hysterics,” said Jasper. Whereat Bunny grew somewhat calmer.

Later, after a spell of brooding before the fire, he bent his head and broke into a sob.

“She has killed it all forever. I shall never write a line of verse again. Two damned faces will be between me and my art all my life long. They will gibe and gibber at me. She has struck death into my soul. Never another poetical thought will ever come out of me.”

“My dear boy,” said Jasper gently, looking at him with his wistful eyes under their rugged overhanging brows, “time has kindlier uses for his scythe than cutting short human lives. His chief use of it is to cut off the tops of human memories.”

Bunny looked up at him. “Saul among the prophets! Are you turning poet too, old chap? It’s a bad trade. It’s a pseudo-science,—the science of false analogy. Stick to being good and kind as you are. God bless you. I’ve brought it all on myself. A man ought to live outside himself. I’ve been shutting up myself inside my heart—yet, my God—I thought she was a big creature. Heaven knows what she is. There are such things as moral monstrosities. Women of genius and beauty have thrown themselves into the arms of swine in human form before now—O God! O God!” he cried, losing control again. “I shall go mad.”

Jasper soothed the paroxysm. There was the man’s tenderness in him, which is sometimes greater than a woman’s. And Jasper knew what it was to stretch out hands to the unknown God in agony of soul to ask for guidance. He knew that this same agony had to be borne by a man’s own solitary, remote, unaided self. He knew that nothing human or transcendental could abate one jot thereof. And he knew that for all this stern unvicariousness of pain the human heart in its eternal futility craves knowledge of its pain from another. To borrow a musical term, it is only the overtones of suffering that can be dispelled by sympathy; yet these overtones cry aloud, and a trained ear like Jasper’s heeds them.

The night wore on. Bunny grew more rational, spoke out his love story from first to last. Yet here and there he gave way to the shiver of horrible disgust of flesh and soul. It was in one aspect a pathetic comedy, in another a tragedy of unmitigated bathos. A splendid and conquering Emperor, suddenly, in the presence of his court and his armies, stripped by a freakish Olympus to

mother nakedness and ludicrously bepainted and befeathered, could not present to the world a more piteous spectacle. There are spots on the unexplored frontier between tears and laughter that are burning with the flames of all the hells.

"And the remedy, Bunny—do you know what it is?" said Jasper.

"Action—battle, murder—best of all, sudden death. 'How can a man die better,' et cetera, et cetera? I'll go out and fight."

"You'll stay at home and work, my dear fellow. Life demands that you give of your best to it, not your worst."

"There are places 'where the best is like the worst,' " quoted the young man.

"They are undesirable spots to reside in, sonny. Believe me. I've been there. You have just got to work here like a man. I have as much for you as you can worry through. I need your help. That's why I came in to-night. I'm starting a Sunday newspaper for my own purposes, and I want you to be literary editor and help me work the thing out."

Bunny nodded his head unenthusiastically. "I'll think about it. I can't now. Don't consider me ungrateful. I shall never forget how good you've been to me to-night. But I am sick to my soul. It's physical—the nausea. But I mustn't go on any more. I really believe you have saved my life. I would have probably sat here all night in my wet things and caught my death of cold. And you have kept me more or less sane. I shall be all right now."

Seeing him in this more normal frame of mind, Jasper extorted a promise that he would go to bed at once, and left him. It was nearly four o'clock. Jasper went to sleep somewhat tired.

The next day affairs kept him busy till the afternoon. He had to address his constituents at North Ham in the evening and explain his attitude with regard to the war. A stormy meeting was anticipated. Wickens, the truculent Mayor, against whom Sir Samuel Dykes had warned him, and over whom he had hitherto quietly triumphed, was blustering loudly against the government and asking where the working man came in. The proletariat, learning from him that bread was to be a shilling a loaf and coal five pounds a ton, and that the exemptions on Income Tax were to be abolished, were inclined to side with him. Jasper's speech had therefore to be carefully prepared. Not a moment was free till four o'clock. Then, anxious about Bunny, he went round to Great Coram Street.

The landlady met him at the door with the information that Mr. Tredgold had given up his rooms and had gone away. He had taken with him one Gladstone bag. He had left at noon; had said that a friend of his, Mr. Vellacot,

would probably look after the rest of his belongings. If not, they could be disposed of as the landlady chose.

"He left no address?" asked Jasper.

"No, sir. He seemed to be in some trouble. He had not slept in his bed all night, and ate scarcely any breakfast this morning."

"I am Mr. Vellacot," said Jasper. "I was here with him last night. Keep the things for a day or two, when I will come again."

He went home profoundly troubled. It was only amid the inevitable excitement of a fighting speech at North Ham that he was able to forget his preoccupation. At night when he returned he found a letter from Bunny. It bore no heading.

> "I have thought it all out," he wrote. "I never was so acutely sane in my life. My reason for existence here is gone. I can no more write verse in the future than a painter who has gone blind can paint. If I accepted your generous offer, I should have the pain of ever holding the brush with darkened eyes. But I can ride, shoot straight, and tell the truth. And I have a passionate faith in my country. She can never betray a man. I am giving her the best that remains of me. I am enlisting as a Tommy in a regiment which I happen to know is off in a week's time to the front. The colonel was a friend of my father who knew half the army, and he will see that I am not left behind among the recruits. Don't worry about me. Physically you know I'm as hard as nails. As for the life in the ranks, I know what I am going to, and I am quite content. I've never yet met the man I couldn't get on with. I am going out to grapple with the realities of life instead of the shadows.
>
> "I enclose what I have a vague idea is called a Power of Attorney. If it's childish, please don't laugh at it. I am not a man of business. Deal with my affairs as you will. Publish any poems or things you like. Open any letters you please; but for the love of God don't forward any to me,—that is to say, if you ever have an address whereby letters may find me. I should not dream of troubling a man with a myriad calls upon his time and thought like you, were it not for the affection I bear you, which I feel somehow you have for me.
>
> "Give our dear lady, Alicia, my love. I have tried to write to her, but I can't. Tell her whatever you think best, the whole story if you like. Anything but let the sweetest woman on earth feel that I am unthoughtful of her.

"We humans are funny people. If I asked you now for twenty thousand pounds, you would say 'Certainly' and would give me a cheque on the spot. And yet your good, kind hand on my shoulder last night was a gift more precious than if you had made over to me the fabulous millions you possess. God bless you.

"Yours ever,

"BONAMY TREDGOLD."

Jasper sat for a long time before the dying library fire smoking his homely briar-root pipe. He remembered a hastily scribbled note which he had received from Bunny a few days before. It had been a thing alive, quick with fun, pulsating with the extravagance of youth. He compared it with this commonplace, self-conscious letter, and heartily cursed the feminine perverter of Bunny's epistolary style. He also cursed himself freely for not having brought him bodily back to Gower Street the night before and mounted guard over him till such time as he could have been brought to his senses. The whole affair was an unrelieved disaster.

Then he contemplated with some dismay his explanatory interview with Lady Alicia. And as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, he thought of Joseph's brethren fearing to face Jacob with the account of the missing Benjamin.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHAT is this report of Bunny having enlisted and gone to the front?" cried Elinor Currey from the threshold of Lady Alicia's drawing-room.

"It is true," said Lady Alicia, sadly.

"I'm afraid it's a fact," said Jasper, rising, teacup in hand.

"Oh!" said Elinor Currey. Then in an absent manner she kissed Alicia, shook hands with Jasper and sat down.

"I've just heard of it from Paulina Edory, so I came on here at once to get fuller information. Tell me the whole preposterous story."

"There is scarcely any to tell," replied Jasper.

"What in the world did he go for?"

"To fight for his country," answered Alicia.

"It's madness, it's immoral," said Miss Currey, sharply. "He has no business out there. Why did you let him go? You should have chained him up to the wall. Suppose anything should happen to him?"

"Don't talk of such a thing, Elinor," said Lady Alicia. "Nothing must happen to him."

"But why didn't you keep him at home, Mr. Vellacot?"

"He took French leave of us—without drum or trumpet. He had an impulse of patriotism and it's his way to obey his impulses. I suppose a poet is different from us sober folk," he added reflectively.

"That is why I say it is immoral," cried Elinor, "just because he *is* a poet. A great poet has more sacred duties to his country than marching and countermarching in the ranks of an infantry regiment. We could get a million Tommy Atkinses quite as good as he, but there is only one Bonamy Tredgold. No, Alicia, I won't have any tea, thank you. I am far too upset. Besides, I've had some. I was hoping it was a silly rumour."

"I think it is very noble and brave of him," said Alicia, looking at her rings. "A man can't properly be a man who has not something of the fighter in him. And Bunny inherits soldier traditions from his family. Ancestors of his fell at Naseby and Blenheim and Fontenoy and Vimiera. His grandfather was a V. C. It was in his blood, I suppose. He was bound to go."

Elinor Currey looked at the placid lady, very much astonished.

“I thought you regarded war with such horror, Alicia! You’ll be saying next that you buckled on his armour and put the sword in his hand like a Spartan mother and sent him forth. Do you believe in a man of genius wantonly making himself food for powder in this way, Mr. Vellacot?”

She turned from one to the other in desperation.

“I believe in a man going straight at what he considers to be his duty,” said Jasper. “I would give much to have him back again, but I agree entirely with Lady Alicia.”

“You agree with Alicia?”

“I am bound to,” replied Jasper.

“Then you are most incomprehensible people. To hear you talk one would suppose you had conspired to send him away. I can’t understand anything about it. What regiment is he in?”

“We don’t know, and have no means of knowing,” replied Jasper.

“Have you no address that will find him?”

“None whatever.”

“Then you don’t know any more than Paulina Edory. I might have saved a double cab-fare. I think you two are the most exasperating people I have ever come across!”

“Don’t be too hard upon us, Miss Currey,” said Jasper. “We are both very anxious about Bunny.”

“If you weren’t, I shouldn’t have the right to hector you like this,” said the young woman, more graciously. “All his friends must be anxious. But what I can’t make out is this—why did he enlist as a private? Why didn’t he go like a gentleman?”

“My dear,” said Lady Alicia, “of one thing you may be quite sure. Bunny couldn’t go anywhere except like a gentleman.”

“Good-bye, dear,” said Miss Currey; “when are you coming to see me? Then we can have it out together. Now you are two to one, which isn’t fair.”

Jasper opened the door for her, and turning, met Alicia’s eyes.

“I’m glad to hear you talk like that of Bunny,” said he.

“One must say something to people, you know. There will be many asking questions, like Elinor.”

“Quite so. But I am glad you spoke up for the man in Bunny. After all, perhaps he may come back the bigger poet for his experience. And as to the love affair, well, there is nothing like the sound of bullets to put the stiffening into a fellow—unless the bullets stiffen him in a different way—which God

forbid!”

“Oh, don’t!” exclaimed Alicia, with a shiver.

“Why not?” asked Jasper. “We must face possibilities. We can’t evade eternal laws. War is a discipline of life for those who stay at home as well as for those who fight.”

“Oh, why should we need all this discipline?” she sighed.

“The only argument I can find to hand,” replied Jasper, “is in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis.”

This was about a month after Bunny’s disappearance. When Jasper had come to her with the news, she had consented to hear only as much of the story as was necessary to explain the letter which he put into her hands. She begged him to mention no names, to spare her unhappy details. It was enough to know that his flight was due to a disastrous love affair. After she had read the letter she had looked at the fire, a little frown wrinkling her forehead. Then she had turned to him.

“A man may do worse than fight for his country,” she had said.

During the short interview she had maintained a sad but dignified demeanour, reproaching Jasper in no way for neglect. But when he had gone she sat for a long time quite still, feeling very much dismayed, absurdly sore. If she had been jealous of the feminine inspirer of the love poems and the play, she now hated most bitterly the woman who had driven Bunny to this madness. And she had looked blankly upon an environment in which there was no Bunny.

Although she had agreed with Jasper to bury this lamentable love affair fathoms deep and to strike the patriotic note when questioned by anxious friends, in her heart she thoroughly agreed with Elinor Currey. She did not feel at all thrilled by the idea of Bunny fighting heroically for his country, being irritatingly aware that love for a mysterious young woman (concerning whose personality she was too proud to enquire), and not patriotism, was the cause of Bunny’s soldiering. But loyalty both to herself and to him maintained her unwaveringly in the attitude she had adopted, and she lied with considerable stoutness. Indeed the lie became a sweet self-sacrifice for Bunny’s sake, and in course of time she grew to regard herself as the Spartan mother of whom Elinor Currey had spoken.

And so for many months nothing more was heard of Bunny. What regiment he had joined Jasper failed to discover. Like a bucketful of water emptied into a river, he had disappeared into the amorphous brown stream of men that was pouring out of England. His not very involved affairs he had left in perfect order. His bills had been paid. He had made arrangements for the

disposal or transference of the work he had in hand. Jasper found his trusteeship a very light matter.

Of Vittoria Jasper had heard only once. The news came through Bunny's landlady while Cudby was superintending the removal of the young poet's slender possessions from Great Coram Street. A few days after Bunny's flight a handsome dark-eyed girl had called and enquired for Mr. Tredgold. The landlady, who brought the love of imparting information into harmony with an aggressively virtuous mind, had told the young woman curtly that Mr. Tredgold had gone for a soldier and had left no address. Whereupon the girl had turned very white and had gone away without a word. This, Jasper sincerely hoped, was the end of Vittoria.

To a woman in Lady Alicia's social position and with Lady Alicia's temperament the times brought much occupation. While the strong hands of men wage war abroad, the soft hands of women at home work to alleviate their hardships. At least so Alicia was told at more than one inaugural meeting of helpers. There were socks and caps to be knitted, tobacco and pipes to be collected, wives and families to be looked after, bazaars and concerts to be carried through to a financially successful end. Alicia found herself on half a dozen committees and president of two or three societies; whereupon she gave herself graceful airs of a woman of some importance. In spite of the thought of Bunny marching footsore under the blistering sun all day and sleeping in the wet all night under a hail of the enemy's bullets, Alicia was not entirely unhappy. She delighted in taking the lead in so many excellent works.

Her correspondence was voluminous. In her private morning-room converted into an "office," she conducted interviews with all sorts of people in a most business-like way. After learning from Cudby how an office should be organized, she engaged a typist and dictated letters. Most of these she had to reduce afterward to grammar and coherence and have them re-typed, but that didn't matter. Elinor Currey said once to Jasper that she was the sweetest deputy providence that ever supplied a starving soldier with silk pyjamas. But Jasper smiled indulgently, not displeased at Miss Currey being jealous of his lady's excellencies.

Naturally he was drawn into many of Alicia's schemes, to which he contributed with his usual lavishness. Indeed one cheque she returned, saying that it was so large that it would wreck her society altogether. It took him some time to appreciate the situation, and then only after Cudby had explained. The devotion of his patron gave the little man some pathetic amusement, but he was annoyed when Jasper sat up of nights to finish off the arrears of work that he had neglected in order to give Lady Alicia consultations or to attend her committee meetings. There was one scheme, however, conceived and carried

out by Jasper, in which she was content to act as adviser and lieutenant. And this, on account of her intimate association with it, grew to be one of his dearest undertakings. It was the establishment of convalescent homes for the wounded in various parts of the country. Sites were selected; temporary buildings constructed; country-houses, rows of sea-side cottages bought or leased and converted into homes. All were furnished, staffed, fitted with every convenience they could devise. Together they pored over plans and discussed contracts and leases and nurses and the quality of pillow-cases. One morning she was announced in Gower Street.

"No place is sacred," said Cudby.

"Henceforth this will be, Tommy," replied Jasper, jumping to his feet in high good-humour and colouring like a boy.

He rushed into the little room beyond, where she awaited him. This was the first time she had entered his house. To see her standing regally at ease by the fire, warming one small foot on the fender, shot a thrill of pleasure through him. His deprecation of her pretty apologies for disturbing him was eagerly sincere. She explained her visit. On her way from Mudie's it had occurred to her that they had forgotten the literary needs of the convalescent warriors. She had thought he wouldn't mind her running in and telling him. He wished something fresh would occur to her in like manner every morning. She smiled.

"They ought to have books."

"They shall."

He sat by the table and scribbled on a piece of paper: "Ten homes, bookcases with 100 light books in each. Wait for Lady A. H.'s list."

"If you will submit a list to me, the order shall go out at once."

She promised. The business was over. She admired the masculine despatch.

"I've been thinking of another thing," she said. "The nurses ought to have a pretty uniform."

"Bless me," said Jasper, "so they ought! What should I do without you?"

He wrote on the paper, "Pretty uniform for nurses," whereat Alicia, peeping over his shoulder, laughed. He looked up into her face.

"Who is to design it?" she asked. "Mr. Cudby?"

She felt immensely superior. He saw an offer in her eyes and gaily accepted it. Her taste was perfect. He added to the paper: "Wait for Lady A. H.'s design."

"You must not make it too fascinating, for the sake of the convalescents' hearts," said he.

"I suppose they are susceptible in their weak condition."

"Weak or strong, it doesn't seem to matter much," said he. "It's natural for a man to fall in love."

"Friendship is more satisfactory. Don't you think so?"

"I have only had friendship given to me, so I can't judge. However," he added, quickly turning as usual the talk from dangerous channels, "it might be more satisfactory for the nurses."

He saw her into her brougham, delighted by her visit. She was to come again, at any time, whenever she wanted to consult him. They were partners now in a business concern, and in business, letters often meant delay. There was nothing like an interview. He went indoors humming an air, and returned to his work.

The weeks passed. The fitting up of the homes progressed. He saw Alicia frequently, sometimes in Gower Street, sometimes in Onslow Gardens. She was full of shrewd sense and fertile in suggestion. To several of his other projects that were being carried out simultaneously, she added elements of grace which unaided he would never have thought of. In spite of the depression of the war, the anxious effort to keep a turbulent constituency true to its ideals, and the continuous and grim menace of the man Burke, this was the happiest time he had known in his life. He had found leisure to negotiate with a publisher for the publication of Bunny's *Carmina Amoris* and had exacted liberal terms. He corrected the proofs himself, meeting with many difficulties that could be solved only by consultation with Cudby and Alicia. He devoted terrific earnestness to the unaccustomed task, and Cudby would often smile when he saw him wrinkling his rugged forehead as he wrestled with the problem of the right placing of a comma.

"I am as fit to do this as I am to make baby-linen," he said once.

"You would make excellent little petticoats if you really set your mind to it," replied Cudby, "and so you are going to turn out an ideal editor."

And Cudby was right, for the man's simple earnestness could accomplish many things.

In spite of Burke's drunkenness and lowering looks he was happy. Strangely enough, the terrible burden of his wealth seemed to have grown lighter. With a shrug of his shoulders it had slipped from them. That is to say, the curse of Midas ceased to oppress him. The responsibilities of his kingdom weighed heavy as before. But his soul was strong to bear them, and his brain clear to execute, and his heart, if not drinking in the full wine of joy, was at least quenching its parchedness with the waters of great comfort. The sweet starlike woman was his companion, sharing all that was noble in his life,

tenderly feminine in her solicitude as to little things. One evening he had hurried from the House dinnerless to keep an appointment with her, and she had discovered his famished condition and had set food before him with her own hands and had waited on him with charming condescension. She would tell him of her little worries, the treacheries of the dressmaker, or the undignified pieties of her parents. Then they talked of Bunny (from whom not a line), and devised plans for his home-coming, when the famous newspaper should be started. But no more reference was made to the perturbing influence that had driven Bunny abroad. In the simplicity of his heart Jasper imagined that she had forgotten or at least forgiven the young poet's lapse into the romantic. He was also convinced that Bunny would return cured and heart-whole. All was beginning to go quite for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Yet he was having trouble with Burke. The man neglected his duties and spoke in a surly way when reprimanded. The discipline of the office was threatened. Jasper ordained that he should henceforth work in his own sitting-room and appointed Cudby his sole task-master. This transference, as it appeared later, was one more grudge added to those which he was gradually amassing against Jasper. One morning he entered Jasper's private room unceremoniously. The latter looked up from his papers for a moment, then finished the sentence he was writing and leaned back in his chair. His eyes grew hard beneath his overhanging brows.

"Why didn't you knock at my door?"

"I didn't know it was necessary," replied Burke, with a shade of insolence.

"It is but common manners," said Jasper. "Kindly go out, knock at my door, and come in again."

"What are you playing at?" asked Burke, who was not quite sober.

"The master," replied Jasper, quietly; and he pointed to the door.

"Well, I apologise. There's no use quarrelling," said Burke, not making a movement.

Jasper's hand came down with a thump on the table.

"By God, you shall do as you are ordered!" he cried.

Burke shrugged his shoulders sulkily, and went through the prescribed performance.

"Now what do you want?" asked Jasper, when the other re-entered the room.

"I'd rather tell you some other time. I've offended you, Mr. Vellacot. I'm very sorry."

His face was pallid and unhealthy, his eyes slightly bloodshot, and in spite of scrupulously correct attire and the swaggering cavalry moustache, he still looked a mean figure of a man.

"I'm not offended," said Jasper, ironically. "I only exacted obedience. What can I do for you?"

"I came to ask you for a hundred pounds," said Burke, with one of his swift glances.

"Isn't your salary sufficient?"

"A man can't live like a gentleman upon it."

"What claim have you to live like a gentleman?"

"You ought to know."

Jasper took the thrust without a quiver. He had many reasons by now for assurance that the man was playing the game of bluff.

"I know of none," said he.

"Well, it's no use arguing the point. The fact remains. I thought you would let me have a hundred. It would make no difference to you and would clear me out of a hole. Billings has been dunning me like the deuce."

"Who is Billings?"

"Why, the bookmaker, of course," replied Burke.

"There is no 'of course,' " said Jasper. "I am not acquainted with bookmakers."

There was a pause. Jasper looked straight at Burke, who, as usual, showed signs of discomfort under his gaze.

"It is only a hundred," he muttered at last.

Jasper did not reply. Once more the struggle within him was renewed. Dare he refuse this man any part of that which was legally his own? On the other hand, was it right for him to submit to blackmail and thus give the other an incalculable power over him? For good or evil he decided. His eyes had not left Burke's face.

"I am wondering," said he, "how you can have the impudence to come to me to pay your racing debts. I shall not give you a penny."

Burke grew a shade paler. This time he was genuine. "For God's sake, Mr. Vellacot, help me this once," he said. "I am in a tight corner. I've got paper out which I can't redeem."

"I have said my say," replied Jasper. "I am not a man of two words. That will do."

He resumed his writing, and Burke went crestfallen out of the room. But

the moral side of the question teased Jasper exceedingly. He laid down his pen, rested his head in his hands, and remained for some minutes in deep thought. Then he rang for Cudby.

"Keep an eye on Burke, Tom," he said. "Get into conversation with him. He'll tell you he wants a hundred pounds which I have refused him. Offer to lend it him yourself, in a friendly way, on his I. O. U. You needn't bother about getting it back and I will make it all right with you."

Cudby nodded promise of obedience.

"Trying it on?" he asked.

"Apparently."

"If you had started him on thirty bob a week as a kind of hall porter at the start, it would have been better. He'd have been grateful. Now he scents mystery—thinks his precious skin is in some way valuable to you—and so is bumptious. But, as for his bumptiousness, ' 'Twas but a bolt of nothing shot at nothing,' as Imogen observes. You mustn't be 'frighted by false fire,' my dear friend."

"I'm frighted by nothing but my conscience, Tom," replied Jasper, wistfully.

As Jasper had foreseen, Burke, being at his wits' ends for money, applied to Cudby for a loan. Cudby put his head on one side and looked at him through his gold-rimmed glass. He had a disconcerting way of looking at Burke.

"Why don't you ask the chief?" he asked.

Burke grumbled that he had already done so. Cudby expressed surprise. Couldn't he try again? The chief did not often say no to an appeal for money.

"Not often," said Burke, "but when he does, he has a damned way of saying it."

So Cudby lent Burke the hundred pounds as a great personal favour, and that was the end of the incident. Really the end, for Burke never paid it back. He reflected over the matter, however, and realising the futility of his attitude towards Jasper, assumed a less morose demeanour and made a plausible pretence of earning his living. Still, he continued to do strange things, to the annoyance of his benefactor.

One night Jasper, coming home late from the House, discovered him in the dining-room. He stood with his back to a small safe in a further corner, and seemed somewhat confused by Jasper's sudden entrance. The latter regarded him suspiciously. A heavy day's work and a long weary sitting had strained his nerves. He exclaimed irritably against Burke's presence. Burke moved from the safe, and disclosed not evidence of burglarious intention, but a glass of

whisky and soda on the marble top.

"I thought perhaps you wouldn't grudge me a drink," he said. "I was so thirsty."

"You should keep what you require in your own room," said Jasper.

"I haven't got in whisky, on purpose," replied Burke; "I've been trying to swear off."

He was perfectly sober, had been so, in fact, for some time.

"But you have no right to come here and help yourself," said Jasper.

"You don't know what temptation is, Mr. Vellacot. I have it to fight against."

He spoke in a tone of such unusual sincerity that Jasper put aside the first swift assumption that his words implied a taunt. The idea of a man struggling, however feebly, to a higher self, always aroused his sympathy. Now his heart softened. He forgave the intrusion. Then the eternal conflict began again. He had provided for the material welfare of the rightful, but unthroned monarch; was it not equally his duty to stretch out a hand to save him from moral wreck? To this end he had done nothing. The man's life was aimless, friendless, abandoned to temptation. Perhaps his sudden prosperity had been a curse instead of a blessing.

Jasper filled his pipe from a jar on the mantel-piece and passed the tobacco to Burke.

"Sit down and let us have a pipe together," he said kindly.

Burke obeyed with a furtive glance like that of a boy expecting a moral lecture from a detested master suddenly become affable. The momentary gush of sincerity was frozen. He replied monosyllabically or in his usual tone of rudeness mingled with servility. Neither during this interview, nor thenceforward on the occasions when they met alone, could Jasper evoke any friendly response from the man. He hugged a mystery the heart of which Jasper could not touch, still less pluck out. Never, since the first day when he had appeared, a hungry and disreputable tramp, before Jasper's stricken eyes, had he changed his attitude of covert hostility. He snapped dog-like at the fingers that fed him. Said Cudby: "He hates you like the devil and would knife you with great content."

The result of the talk, however, was that Jasper did not come upon him again committing trespass in his private house; and he forgot the incident, just as he had forgotten the occasion when he had picked him up drunk in the passage and had carried him upstairs. So too he forgot, after three minutes of puzzledom, a little circumstance that occurred a week or two later. In a drawer

in his bedroom he kept a strange collection of tobacco-pipes. Some were new, little tokens of gratitude from recipients of his bounty, or odd shapes that had caught his fancy, and some were old, burnt out, having earned an honourable retirement by long and faithful service. To collect these, to arrange them in his methodical way, in their cases, was Jasper's one harmless lunacy. No one interfered with this drawer, whose neat arrangement was based on a scheme of his own. But one day he noticed that a large meerschaum whose place should have been at the back of the drawer was lying across some cases in the front. For three minutes he wondered; then more serious thoughts claimed the working of his ever-busy brain, and the trivial problem passed from his mind.

Once again, lying awake at three o'clock in the morning, he thought he heard the sound of footsteps downstairs. He went down, assured himself that it had been merely imagination, and returned to bed. But as soon as the click of his bedroom-door struck upon the silence of the house, Burke, barefoot and in pyjamas, emerged from behind the couch in Jasper's private room, and turning on a little electric pocket-lamp, resumed his interrupted occupation of searching Jasper's drawers, which he opened with a master-key.

CHAPTER XV

THE Chian Wine was produced, the *Carmina Amoris* published, and Bunny became a star of the first magnitude. The fact of his heroical exchange of the lyre for the sword was duly set forth in every panegyric. The lucky yet hapless poet could not have invented a more stimulating advertisement. On the first night of the one-act play, when admiring ignorance clamoured for the author, the Actor-Manager, stepping before the curtain, seized the golden opportunity. The author, he regretted to say, was not in the house; in fact, he was in distant lands fighting for Queen and country. Deafening applause greeted the announcement. The success of the piece was assured, and the manager saw before him a long continuance of the run of a somewhat tottering comedy. He also glowed with patriotic fervour, and felt as if he too were covering himself with glory on the battlefield. Riches unimagined by Bunny in his Great Coram Street lodgings were accumulating to greet his arrival, together with much fame and many things that go to the gladdening of the heart of man. But as no one knew where Bunny was, no one could acquaint him with his good fortune.

Suddenly, in the spring came the first tidings. Lady Alicia saw them for a brief second in a morning paper and then tears hid them from her eyes. A casualty list contained the name of Private Bonamy Tredgold, seriously wounded.

She rose from the breakfast-table—since her adoption of business-like habits she had thrown off idle and luxurious ways and had come down to a solitary meal in the dining-room—and walked to the window, the newspaper clenched tightly in her hand. The gardens were lit by the fresh morning sun, and the trees laughed at her in their young spring verdure. But before her stretched the horror of a treeless waste drenched with pitiless rain and a poor lad lying in a pool of blood. Her face grew very white and tears fell down her cheeks. She dashed them away, read again. Nothing but the cold, naked entry, —the engagement, the regiment, the name, the parenthetical qualification “seriously.” A gush of pity and self-reproach filled her heart. All her old fondness, dulled of late by engrossing little activities, burst again into new life. She sank into a chair by the window and wept helplessly, with her arms on the sill.

The sound of the opening door made her spring to her feet and face the

window. No one should see her crying.

"Miss Fargus has come, my lady," said the servant, according to formula. Miss Fargus was the typist, and this announcement of her arrival constituted a signal for Alicia to enter her "office." The servant withdrew. Alicia was brought back to diurnal things. She dried her eyes, somewhat ashamed of having given way to her feelings. But she had not heart to work that morning. The needs of an abstract soldiery paled before the lurid necessities of a concrete individual. What could be done for him? For once in her life she felt by no means self-reliant. Then suddenly, as if it were a picture in her mind, she became aware of Jasper's strong, kind face. A half-smile came into her eyes.

"Of course," she said aloud, and her heart seemed, in an odd way, to grow lighter. She must see him at once. The thought was in itself promise of comfort. Instinctively her nature cried for him. A tremulous hesitation, such as she had never experienced when impelled to seek his counsel on matter-of-fact questions, she did not understand. Her resolution, however, was formed. She ordered the victoria, and soon afterwards was driving to Gower Street.

Jasper met her in his grave way, and his eyes held more than their usual sadness.

"Yes, I have seen the news. Poor lad!"

His tone rang with so true an emotion that again Alicia's vision became blurred.

"We must do something for him, Cousin Jasper," she said with interlocked fingers. "We must. He can't be allowed to stay in that awful country. What can we do?"

"We must bide our time. I have already cabled out for particulars. Reply paid. I have also cabled to Bunny himself. I took the liberty," he added apologetically, "of including your name in my message to Bunny. Of course, Heaven knows whether we will get any replies."

But Alicia had paid no heed to the last sentence. She gave Jasper a grateful look and held out her hand.

"How good, how kind of you! I might have known. Only you would have thought of cabling at once—and letting me share in the message. What made you think of me?"

"Are you ever out of my thoughts, Alicia—where our dear lad is concerned?" he added, somewhat disingenuously. "I sent him our love, told him he must let us get him back and we would pull him through. I also said that when he came home he would find himself rich and famous. I thought it would comfort him, you know."

“But how are you going to get him home?”

“Oh, I’ll manage that somehow,” said Jasper, cheerfully.

“He must come down to Hertfordshire and be nursed,” said Alicia.

“The very thing. But,” said he with a smile, “you mustn’t expect him to turn up the day after to-morrow.”

Then Alicia laughed and held out her hand.

“I won’t worry any more. Now that you have made yourself responsible for his welfare I feel that it will go well with him.”

“I am afraid I am not always infallible,” said Jasper.

“But you are going to be this time. I am sure of it,” she replied.

As he opened the front door for her, the freshness of the morning burst upon him, and revived the colonial-bred man’s nostalgia for wide spaces and sky and sunshine.

“Oh, the sweet air,” he exclaimed, drawing in a deep breath. “I wish—I wish I were not going indoors again.”

“Why need you?”

“Work,” he laughed.

She lingered on the step, vaguely conscious of being loath to say good-bye. Gradually he had grown to represent to her counsel and comfort and strength. Never so much as to-day. How widely her point of view had changed since the beginning of their friendship, when she had regarded him as “a shy elderly child,” she did not at all realise. She glanced at him and then at the neat victoria standing invitingly open by the kerb. She blushed, lost for a delicate moment her royal air.

“Come for a little drive with me,” she pleaded.

He had not heard before that tone in her voice or seen that soft shyness in her eyes. An impossible hope, an irrational fear vibrated through him. His nature hungered for her as it hungered for the pure, fresh air. The morning was subtle with all the temptations of spring. For a second or two he looked at her dreamily, deliciously, the visionary in him filled with swift sense of green fields and working sap and the song of birds and the breath of the passionately loved woman fluttering on his lips.

At that moment the door of the next house opened and Burke emerged, gaunt and pallid. He raised his hat and went down the street. The sight of him brought Jasper back to earth and its immutable conditions.

“Let me decide for you,” said Alicia.

He started. It seemed as if it had been an hour since her last words were

uttered. He stammered an apology for keeping her waiting for an answer. There were so many things to be thought of. Yes, he would dearly love the drive. It would clear long-gathering cobwebs. Would she wait two minutes?

After handing her into the carriage he went indoors to give necessary orders, and presently came out and joined her. They drove off. He knew now that he was safe from temptation, no matter how yielding were her mood, no matter how subtle were the influences of the spring morning. For a while he remained silent, depressed by the reaction. It would have been so natural, so easy to tell her that he loved her. And it was so impossible. But soon his will threw off the burden. The actual happiness of the moment demanded appreciation. Was there not the fresh air and the sunshine, and promise of fuller measure in the open country of Hampstead whither they were driving? And was she not very close to him, sharing the carriage rug, in charming intimacy? These were blessings that the shadows of a hundred Burkes could not depreciate. So he became his wise and kindly self again, and this drive brought them nearer together than they had been before, and served, although neither knew it, as a little landmark in their lives. They talked of many things; inevitably came back to the one topic.

"If we only knew that he was out of danger," said Alicia.

"He is young and strong."

"But those whom the gods love—"

"The gods don't love anybody. God does," replied Jasper, "and those whom He loveth He chasteneth. He doesn't kill them for sport. He has marked out a great future for Bunny. So the lad will come home with the seal of God upon him and be one of the teachers of the nation."

"You are right," said Alicia. "The other is a foolish saying."

Eventually she put him down at his own door. He thanked her for the drive. It had done him a world of good.

"And me too," said Alicia. "It has put courage into me. But it wouldn't if you hadn't been there."

She spoke simple truth, for she went home greatly comforted, having found strength to endure suspense and faith in the rightful ordering of things. And these qualities were needed by those who held Bunny dear. Grave news reached them. The wound was through the body. An attack of rheumatic fever complicated matters. They passed many anxious weeks. At last summer came, and Bunny was invalided home. Jasper bought his discharge from the army, and arranged for his voyage to England in luxury befitting a wounded field-marshal.

They travelled together to Southampton to meet the boat. A special invalid

carriage, bright with flowers and clean white pillows and dainty invalid food, was attached to the London train. They stood on the quay, by the long line of sheds, among the crowd waiting to welcome relatives and friends. Some were laughing gaily; some dressed in black were silent; others, unmistakable soldiers' wives, stood with lined faces set in the dull certitude of ill-tidings. The basin with its many wharves stretched about them. At one, an outward-bound ship flying the Blue Peter was taking in cargo. Here and there a great liner bearing on her stern an almost historic name lay at her moorings. Under the shed behind them stood Custom House officials and porters with trucks, patient and unexpectant, contrasting with the nervous visitors. All had eyes upon the funnels of the approaching ship. Presently she entered the harbour, majestic, colossal, nearing with slow and certain grandeur. Her crowded decks became a-flutter with white handkerchiefs. Those on shore responded, and broke into cries of recognition. The vast bulk of the steamer slowed down to the quay side. Happy greetings were exchanged. Alicia and Jasper strained their eyes among the thousand figures on deck.

"Oh, he isn't there," she said in a tone of disappointment.

"We could hardly expect it," he replied.

She took his arm instinctively as she made way for porters wheeling a gangway.

"It was foolish, I know, but I had set my heart upon seeing him up to welcome us."

The gangways were fixed. The decks, the quay, were alive with hurry and movement. There were embracings and handshakes and tears and laughter. Now and then a gaunt brown man would answer a group of anxious women, of whom one would turn as white as death and fall widowed or childless into the arms of her sisters. And an endless stream of broken, bandaged, fever-stricken men carrying shapeless bundles poured out of the ship and filed in a straggling line through the sheds toward the train.

"This is his cabin," said the ship's doctor, with his hand on the door-handle; "you may go in."

He pushed open the door, and they entered. A nurse rose from the couch beneath the port-hole. And there, in the lower berth, propped up with pillows, and dressed, for the first time since his illness, in loose flannels with which Jasper's agents had provided him, lay Bunny. But it was a very different Bunny from the strong, laughing lad they had known a year before. All his air of a young Apollo with the music of earth at his command had gone. His face was white beneath the lingering tan, and his lips were drawn and pinched, and his cheeks were hollow and lined, and his eyes were haggard. He looked many

years older. A thin drooping moustache altered him and added further to his appearance of age. He stretched out both hands as they came up to him.

"Oh, God bless you. Thank God you've come."

"My poor Bunny!" said Alicia after a while, her bare hand on his forehead. He took the hand and kissed it.

"I don't care what happens to me now."

"That's very sensible, sonny," said Jasper. "The less you care the more chance it will give those who are looking after you."

"Still, you had no business to do all this for me," said Bunny in a weak voice, indicating the gorgeous state-room. "I was only a blooming Tommy. I was helpless and couldn't object."

"Well, I wash my hands of you now," said Jasper. "Do you know what your fate's going to be?"

Bunny looked gratefully up at each in turn.

"Some silly bed of roses, I suppose."

Then he closed his eyes and turned his head on the pillow, still holding Alicia's hand.

"He hasn't much strength yet," said the nurse, in a low tone, to Jasper. "But he is a lot better than when we sailed. I hardly thought he would get through the voyage. Thank goodness it has been fairly smooth all the way."

The doctor summoned Jasper into the corridor. The nurse followed, and went off to her own cabin to complete her landing preparations. Bunny and Alicia were left alone.

"I want to carry you off to Greybrooke straight away, Bunny dear. That's what Jasper meant when he said he had washed his hands of you. He has done everything and as yet I have done nothing. You'll come, won't you?"

Bunny opened his eyes and looked at her dreamily. "Greybrooke, among the apple-trees—I was longing for it."

"That's settled, then. You are very good to do what you are told in this sweet way."

"Was I so hard to manage before? I suppose I was. And a graceless beggar to boot. But I won't be ungrateful any longer. I swear I won't, Alicia."

"But you never were ungrateful, Bunny."

"I should have written to you. As soon as they read me the cable—the first one—I cried like a baby, I think I was held together in health by original sin. Doctor says my heart's gone wrong. I hope it's because the turpitude has left it."

Alicia laid a soothing touch on his forehead.

"Are you in much pain now?"

"A little—nothing to speak of. But I'm so tired. Tell me what you have dipped your fingers in—honey-dew or the milk of Paradise? They are so soft and cool. Don't take them away."

Her woman's heart melted over him, as she traced in voice and phrase and feature the faint echo and shadow of the old Bunny. The little tribute to her touch was exquisite, called up a flush to her cheeks and moisture to her eyes. She bent over him, saying nothing, deeply shocked at the evidence of his suffering, deeply happy at having him at last under her sole protection.

"You've done your hair differently," said Bunny, breaking the silence. "Is that this year's fashion? It is very charming."

"Fancy your noticing," replied Alicia, making the instinctive and inevitable feminine rejoinder and smiling with pleasure. "Do you remember how it was done before?"

"I've been living on memories for a long time," he answered. "Often there was nothing else to live upon."

"My poor Bunny," said Alicia, saddened by his tone.

But whether he referred to spiritual or material needs she could not then and there determine, for at that moment the door opened and Jasper and the doctor and the nurse and the ambulance-bearers came in to transfer him to the train. They wrapped him up in blankets and carried him on shore, Jasper and Alicia walking by the side of the stretcher, and the nurse, who was to continue her care of him at Greybrooke, followed with the little bag that contained Bunny's worldly possessions. On the way Alicia touched Jasper's arm.

"I shall never be sufficiently grateful to you," she murmured.

Jasper regarded her somewhat uncomprehendingly. "Why should you be so at all? The lad is as dear to me as he is to you. We each do our share."

"Without you, I should not have been able to do mine," she replied quickly.

In a few minutes they were speeding Londonwards. Bunny lay on the invalid bed in the saloon carriage, propped up so that he could see the sweet green English land and the old grey churches brooding over quiet English hamlets and the pleasant trees around English homes. He had yearned after the sight, he said. It surpassed expectation. He whispered to Alicia that it was like her fingers. There were times when weakness forced him to lie back and shut his eyes, and then his face looked very peaked and sharp. But he exerted himself to show his appreciation of the love into which he had entered. He

tried to express it to Jasper, but for once his ready tongue failed him. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Jasper blew his nose loudly and told him to go to sleep. When he waked up in London he would find himself famous. Bunny pressed his friend's hand, but shook his head and stared for a while absently out of the window. Instead of heartening him up, as Jasper had fondly anticipated, the reference seemed only to depress him. Once he drew their attention to a rustic couple—she waist-encircled—in a deep lane embowered in June foliage.

"Idyllic," said Jasper, with a smile.

"The setting makes it so."

"Not entirely, Bunny dear," said Alicia. "You will write a sweet little poem about it when you get well and strong."

But Bunny once more shook his head mournfully.

" '*L'oiseau se tait, l'aquilon a grondé*'—the bird is mute, the storm is in the wind," said he.

"No, my dear chap, it's sweet summer weather now," said Jasper.

"Well, we'll change the metaphor," replied Bunny, with a faint return to his old insistence. "The clock's got wheezy and the cuckoo won't come out and cuckoo any more. I think I shall learn to make boots. Have you any professors of cordwaining at Greybrooke, Alicia? I'd love to make shoes for you. I'd kiss them before you put them on—and after."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," she answered. "You have to go on being sweet and doing as you are bid."

"I'll be good," said Bunny.

He was exhausted from excitement and fatigue when they put him to bed in the pleasant southern room at Greybrooke, in spite of the tender care with which they had conveyed him across London and from the little Hertfordshire station to the house. He sank asleep almost immediately and they left him in charge of the nurse.

Jasper dined with Alicia and Lady Luxmoore. Then took an early evening train back to town. Cudby met him at King's Cross. Out of pure, idle friendliness, he explained. Besides, he wanted early tidings of the warrior-poet. As they walked homeward, Jasper told him of the day's happenings. At the corner of Russell Square and Keppel Street, Cudby stopped dead and put up his gold eyeglass and quizzically regarded his chief.

" 'My good Lysander,' " said he,

“ ‘I swear to thee by Cupid’s strongest bow,
By his best arrow with the golden head,
By the simplicity of Venus’ doves—’ ”

“What damned nonsense are you talking, Tom?” said Jasper.

“My good Lysander Jasper or Jasper Lysander,” continued Cudby, “I swear to you that you are holding the candle to a very pretty love-affair.”

Jasper took him by the collar and dragged him a yard or so beneath the neighbouring gas-lamp, and regarded him half angrily, half-contemptuously.

“I never imagined,” said he, “that your cynicism could have landed you in such unplumbed depths of idiocy.”

Then he released the offender and strode off. Cudby shrugged his shoulders, followed, and entertained Jasper with office details until they parted for the night.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR some time Bunny lay in bed, ministered unto by his nurse and by Lady Alicia, and content to dream away his days in animal comfort. He had not the energy to repeat the gallant effort he had made under the excitement of meeting. He was neither lying on his stomach in the mud with his rifle against his cheek, nor marching wearily with blistered and burning feet, nor gasping for hours on his back under the shelter of a rock whither a comrade had dragged him, half delirious from the thirst of his gunshot wound, nor longing for death, a sentient agony, in the crowded field hospital, nor thrown painfully to and fro by the pitch of the steamer, while the vibration of the screw rattled his brain about. These things were over; what else might happen he did not care. Sufficient for the day was the slothful ease thereof. He did not mend as rapidly as they expected. Bond, the country doctor, shook his head. A London physician came down and met him in consultation. Diagnosed a general condition of asthenia and functional disturbance consequent on his wound and his illness, and told Bunny he must have had the constitution of a rhinoceros to survive rheumatic fever on top of a bullet-hole through his body. When he walked awhile later with Lady Alicia in the sweet old garden, with its fair-stretching lawn, its rook-haunted elms, its rhododendrons and acacias and laburnums and windings and secret recesses, and she asked him what he would prescribe for the invalid, he made a circular sweep of his hand in which she herself was included.

"This," said he.

"He may grow weary of it."

"I wish I were an invalid and had this cure prescribed me," he replied. "By the way," he continued sharply, "has he had any mental or emotional worries?"

Lady Alicia looked bravely into his keen eyes and smiled and for the moment detested him cordially.

"He is a poet and he is young," she answered with some demureness.

"Then keep him as quiet as ever you can."

"He will be sure to get well and strong again?"

"Give him rest and quiet and there is no earthly reason why he shouldn't."

The physician conferred with the country doctor, and went back to London, leaving Alicia greatly comforted. Of perfect health herself, and unaccustomed

to sick-rooms, she had become alarmed at Bunny's apathy. She had felt vaguely disappointed that, after the first day at Greybrooke, he had not grown lusty and strong, like the palsied after their dip in Bethesda. His retarded convalescence seemed like a reproach both to her personality and to her sanatorium. And though Lady Luxmoore argued the matter from ripe matronly experience, she refused to be convinced. Now she took heart of grace, however, and looked forward to better days.

They slowly came. Bunny's interest in things began to revive. Soon he was able to leave his room. At last the day arrived when he could be wheeled into the garden by the footman. This happened to be a Sunday when Jasper and Elinor Currey had run down for the afternoon. They were awaiting him with Lady Luxmoore in the shade of a sycamore on the lawn. Near by stood a tea-table daintily set with china and silver and strawberries. Alicia appeared, bringing Bunny up to them in triumph. Then there was much handshaking and congratulation; the three women petted him, in their several ways, to the content of any young man's heart, while Jasper looked on in mild approval.

"It is lovely to see you," cried Elinor Currey, pouring cream over his strawberries; "but oh, Bunny, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Dear lady," replied Bunny, "I've had a bullet-hole through my body and it has let all the shame out. I felt it escaping like gas."

"Did it hurt you very much?" she said in a low voice, suddenly grown tender.

But he would not be serious. "It was a great relief. It all went. If you were to offer to feed me with that strawberry mush you are making, I'd swallow the spoonfuls unabashed."

She returned a laughing answer, and they sparred as they had always done. Once, eager for personal experiences, she referred to the war. Bunny's face suddenly clouded over.

"Some day—by yourself—I'll tell you," he said.

A few minutes later Alicia drew Elinor Currey aside.

"You mustn't talk to him about the war or his poetry. I ought to have told you. It depresses him."

"I thought he would be full of it. He was always bursting with anything that interested him."

"He is a bit changed," said Alicia with a sigh, instinctively looking over her shoulder towards the invalid chair by which stood Jasper hiding Bunny from view. The corners of Elinor Currey's strong mouth went down mockingly. Then she said in her blunt fashion,—

“Don’t you think we ‘re all of us just a bit in love with him, Alicia?”

Alicia turned her head, but she did not look at her questioner.

“Are we?” she said dreamily.

“Yes, we are,” replied the other, with a short laugh and a tug at her unbuttoned glove, “and we oughtn’t to be. He’s too good to be spoiled, and we are all of us foolish women.”

A little spark traversed Lady Alicia’s candid eyes. She recovered her serenity and laid her hand kindly on her friend’s wrist.

“Dear Elinor,” she said, “I never thought that you cared for Bunny in that way—I am so sorry.”

And before Elinor Currey could find words to express her feelings, Alicia turned and swept gracefully towards the others. Elinor came up with a little red spot on each cheek and the unspoken rejoinder on her lips.

“Elinor says we are spoiling him, Jasper. What are we to do?”

“What would Miss Currey suggest?”

“I never said any such thing, Bunny!” cried the accused young woman, hotly.

“Then you ought to have done so, Madonna, and spoken the truth for once. I seem to want to do nothing else all my life long but sit in this sweet garden—and wrangle with you.”

“Oh, I should drive you crazy in a week.”

“Alicia would come and rescue me when you grew unbearable.”

He leaned back among his cushions and laughed, enjoying languidly the companionship from which he had so long been separated; anxious to live in the fleeting moment of content away from the past and to give himself up to the soft afternoon sunshine and the shady garden and the pleasant and well-loved faces. It was sweet, too, to talk again, to express the fancy of the instant to understanding listeners. Without realising it he had suffered considerably from suppression.

“I believe she is jealous, Alicia,” he remarked, “because she isn’t lotus eating like me. I hope you’re not running short, are you? If Jasper were a real philanthropist, he’d buy one of the Fortunate Isles—they are going cheap these days—and grow lotus for the European market. And another island might be set apart for the manufacture of amaranth couches. You could regulate the prices—charge the millionaire seven-eighths of his fortune and give the stuff away in workhouses.”

“There would be precious little work done in the world, my friend,” said

Jasper. “The race would soon come to a full stop.”

“Why shouldn’t it?” said Bunny.

“You *are* getting spoiled,” cried Elinor Currey. “If you go on talking this silly pessimism, I’ll never let you see me again.”

“Don’t put temptation in my way, dear Madonna,” he retorted.

He was delighted, boyishly, at his thrust and at the final discomfiture of his antagonist. Then with a laugh he stretched out his hand to her.

“No malice, is there?” said he. “It is like old times.”

The conversation became general, drifted on to homely topics; at last the hush of the waning afternoon spread itself over the little party, and they sat for a while in the sweet silence of mutual trust and intimacy. The rooks cawed from the neighbouring elms, the bells for church-going folk sounded faintly from the Gothic tower half a mile away, and the smoke-wreaths from Jasper’s pipe curled lazily upwards through the still air. And Bunny went fast asleep.

After dinner, when Elinor Currey was putting on her things in Alicia’s bedroom, she turned somewhat desperately on her friend.

“You didn’t understand what I meant this afternoon—about Bunny. If you think it was a confession, you are mistaken. It was a warning.”

Alicia pulled down Elinor’s jacket in front and smoothed it at the waist.

“I quite understood you, dear. But it is best not to speak of these things.”

“Because we women are so little.”

“No, dear,” replied Alicia,—“because the issues involved are so great.”

Then in her stately way she bent down and kissed her. Elinor returned the embrace.

“You would put the whole hierarchy of heaven in the wrong, Alicia,” she said, adjusting her veil.

Alicia could be the great lady at times. “I am sure I should, dear,” she answered, “if it were necessary.”

When her guests were gone, she went up as usual to Bunny’s room and knocked softly. On the response from within, she opened it and stood on the threshold and asked if he were comfortable for the night. He motioned her near to him, she bent over the bed, he took her hand and laid it against his cheek.

“Bless you for this very sweet day,” he said. “How can I ever repay you?”

“By getting well and strong, Bunny dear, and taking your place as a man in the world again,” she whispered.

Her lips were so near him. For the second it seemed quite natural to bring them nearer and kiss him on the forehead. Then with a murmured “Good-

night," she left him and went downstairs. Lady Luxmoore had gone to bed. The French windows of the drawing-room were open on to the terrace. It was a warm still night, and a bright gibbous moon, low on the horizon, stared in at her. She drew a chair to the window and sat down and thought of what Elinor Currey had said. Vague desires and sweet, dreamy sentimentalities crystallised into coherence. Why should it not be true? He had always been dear to her. Why should not this sweet affection be the love that had never yet come into her life? Memories crowded in upon her,—half-understood things, which suddenly this touchstone seemed to bring into order and clearness. The newer tenderness that had stirred her since Bunny had come home welled up in her heart. She still felt the touch on the back of the hand which he had pressed against his cheek. Why should it not be true?

The unconscious appeal that Bunny made to all that was responsive in her would have shaken a stronger and a colder woman. The glamour of youth was over the lad; the glamour of his poetical inspiration and his fame; the glamour of the soldier's manhood and heroism. The man who has faced death and has dealt death with his own hand is ever a strange personality to women, stirring the remote but ineradicable barbaric. Youth has its own superb enchantment and genius compels wonder. And when this paragon of disturbing qualities lies wounded and ill and helpless as a child, at the mercy of a woman, what can she do but pour upon him all of her heart that is solvent? It is indeed a very antiquated story. To Alicia it was new.

For a long time she sat in the moonlight tremulously viewing a possible future. She saw herself for ever brooding tenderwise over Bunny, shielding him from the rough uses of the world, and inspiring him to immortal verse. His happiness would be her aim in life, her happiness. It was an exquisite vision to be beheld as something sacred in the soft pale light of the moon.

The entrance of the servant coming to shut up the house for the night aroused her. She rose with a little shiver, slightly chilled in her thin dress, and passed her hand over her eyes as if to clear them from the dream and focus them to the unchanging aspect of accustomed things. A clock in a corner struck the half hour after eleven. She drew a long breath that ended in an odd little sigh, and went up to her bedroom. When she had dismissed her maid, she stood before the mirror regarding herself with a woman's piteous hope that the inevitable had not happened. She peered closely and anxiously. But the lines were there—very, very faint—but there all the same, across the forehead, below the eyes, down the upper lip and at the corners of the lips, all ready to deepen, with fatigue or illness or deep grief, into accusing signs of an age greater by several years than that of the lad asleep beneath her roof. She turned away very sadly. At a further distance she regarded herself again; and then she

could see nothing but a fair and stately woman whose light brown hair waved royally over her brow, whose hazel eyes looked with undimmed serenity out of a high-bred, delicate face that still held the unmistakable soft contour of youth, whose lips, parted in a smile of relief, were still fresh and firm. She took what comfort she could from the sight and went to bed.

Waking in the morning, she suddenly remembered and flushed hot with shame. She rose with the proud resolve to dismiss such thoughts from her mind. They were neither wise nor womanly, she told herself. Whatever place Bunny occupied in her inmost heart, he should sit there unrecognised and unwitting. She would be to him what she always had been. Things that looked dreamy and poetical in the moonshine glared somewhat nakedly beneath the sun. So her cheek was still hot when she met Bunny. But she felt secure. In pride of her Lady Alicia Harden-ship she disdained flight from temptation. She looked it courageously, and, as far as imperiousness of will went, scornfully, in the face. But it was very sweet.

Convalescence progressed. Bunny drove out with the two ladies, occupying the place of honour, Lady Luxmoore by his side and Alicia with her back to the horses. Now and again, on these drives, they would stop at a neighbour's house, and Bunny would hold a reception in the carriage. He found himself to be a personage, gradually grew familiar with the idea, and Alicia noted with satisfaction that it began to give him pleasure. He regained his interest in literature. This too Alicia noted, and any book he evinced a desire to consult found itself the next day in the Greybrooke library. He was surrounded by newspapers and reviews, and concerned himself with the affairs of the world. Soon he was able to walk a little without support, although somewhat bent from his wound, and Alicia watched his progress with a mother's admiration of the early tottering steps of her first-born.

His favourite seat in the garden was in a sheltered corner behind two large rhododendrons, hidden from the house by the shrubbery. A high box hedge, with a gate in it, ran a few yards away the length of the garden and separated it from the kitchen garden and greenhouses. In front of him was the high road, screened by an ivy-covered wall, above which towered the elm-trees. From the long Indian chair in which he sat, he could see nothing round about but green, and above, the mild blue English sky; and the green English turf was at his feet. He would sit here for hours with his books or his thoughts, content to be alone, but welcoming with his smile Alicia when she appeared to him from behind the rhododendrons, work-basket and camp-stool in hand. No other country but England could produce such a spot, he said; that combination of utter restfulness with rich warm life. It was like Alicia herself. She expressed in terms of womanhood what the green corner expressed in terms of nature,—

the peculiar boon of England. When she was there woman and nature were complementary. The resultant unity was England's heart's self.

"Do you love all that is English so much, then?" she asked after one of these rhapsodies.

He looked up at the sky for some time without answering. She watched his face and saw that he had grown older, immeasurably older. And she did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

"I ran after false gods," he said in a changed voice, "and they turned into devils, and I went out to fight them. It wasn't love of England that drove me into the army. I tried to delude myself into the belief that it was; but it wasn't. There was a man in my company, a Devonshire man. The only man I disliked, God forgive me. I thought him an awful blackguard. Perhaps he was. But one day we were attacking a position, and he got hit. He fell down, picked himself up and waved his rifle and cursed. Then he fell down again and the blood came out of his mouth. I was near him. I propped up his head on my knee and loosened his collar. He turned up his face and lifted his arm. 'England's bloody well good enough to die for, isn't it?' he said—those were his words—then his whole body shuddered and he collapsed, dead."

He paused for a moment, still looking, with set face, upwards at the sky. Alicia was speechless.

"I learned it then, and when I was knocked over I knew it to be true. My God, how I yearned for England! The old West Country where I was born. I would have died fifty times for her. And when I came home, she took me in her arms and nursed me on her bosom. She was my mother and she gave me speech,—the grandest, holiest speech the world has known. The All-Mother of those that speak it the wide world over. If a miracle could happen and I were strong and well to-morrow, I would go out again. This time for the real thing."

"I am glad you can't," said Alicia. "You have other work for England—which only you can do. Besides, Bunny dear, I shouldn't let you."

"You would let me," replied Bunny, ignoring the first half of her remark, and looking full at her out of his dark eyes which illness had rendered very bright. "You are too thoroughbred an Englishwoman to do otherwise. The more you cared for me, the bigger sacrifice would you be willing to make."

She did not reply. Not much advantage could be derived from argument on impossible premises. England was less to her than the young warrior who spoke with such fine frenzy of patriotism. She also felt an irrational jealousy of England, which at the same time magnified Bunny to heroical proportions. The story of the dead Devonian gripped her. She glanced at Bunny's knees where the man's head had lain, and into Bunny's eyes which had seen death so near.

It was well that he was safe at home, she thought.

This was one of the rare occasions on which he spoke of his fighting experiences. It excited and exhausted him. To his sensitive temperament war had meant orgies of horror. He had sung of life in its fulness and glory, had regarded the idea of death with passionate resentment. War had merely familiarised his nerves with peril which he had faced like many thousands of brave and commonplace comrades. But the bright spirit insistent on life had grown deadly sick at the slaughter and disease. Even now in the peaceful garden he could not free himself from the nightmare. He shrank from speaking of it. His infrequent allusions came from the depths. The tumult of his nature had not been quelled but diverted into a fervour of patriotism. In spite of the hourly crucifixion that active warfare inflicted on his hypersensitiveness, his readiness to go back, did his bodily condition allow, was sober yet passionate truth. But he knew that the aspiration was vain. His brief fighting career had closed. Only the lapse of easeful years could restore him to the soundness of wind and limb with which he had shot over the Greybrooke stubble not twelve months before. Other desires had failed, and when he did not, in dark moods, feel himself to be a cumberer of the earth, he was content to sit among his English greenery, not seeking to pass the time, but letting the time pass him. He was happiest when the discussion of some light topic stirred his quaint humour and excited him to his old boyish talk.

Alicia did not reply. After a while she gathered her work and scissors and reel of thread from her lap, and thrusting them into her little work-basket, rose and bent slightly over his chair.

“Tired, Bunny?”

He smiled up at her and shook his head.

“I see that you are,” she said in mild reproach. “You mustn’t talk so vehemently. It’s bad for you.”

He took her hand, held it, kissed it without a word. Released, she passed it lightly over his hair and went away through the green door in the box hedge.

Bunny lay back in his chair and looked wistfully at the tops of the elm-trees.

CHAPTER XVII

CUDBY returned from a reluctant holiday in Switzerland, whither Jasper had sent him, and immediately set to work to drive his beloved chief out of London. He needed rest, he needed country air, he needed fattening on the bread of idleness, said Cudby. He was a spectre, an elf-skin, a dried-neat's tongue, a lean and envious Casca, a Picture of Nobody, a whole catalogue of Shakespearian synonyms for the attenuated human. By dint of sheer worry Cudby prevailed upon him to consider the question seriously. His heavy year's work had told upon him. During the session he had exhausted himself in trying to stir a languid government. The government would not be moved. He saw a dissolution ahead,—a new government in power smilingly repudiating the pledges of its predecessor. He found himself striving to no purpose, and, like most obstinate folk, strove all the more. To attune the fierce Imperial note with the passionate cry for home reform and convey the chord as harmonious to government and constituency taxed his energies, kept him on continuous nervous strain. Of Wickens, the North Ham butcher, he had made a deadly enemy. He had attacked the rights of property, which Wickens as an Englishman held sacred, inasmuch as he had examined the rookeries out of which the ex-Mayor reaped a golden harvest, and had found that he had leased the property at a moderate sum from a careless landlord and levied inordinate rents by oppressive means. The filth, squalor, and tyranny justified Jasper's original indignation. He bought the freehold at a high figure from a delighted landlord, found a clause in the lease which made it, under certain conditions, terminable at six months, and gave Wickens the necessary notice. Wickens, having been previously warned not unkindly by Jasper to mend both his manner of dealing with his tenants and the crazy tenements in which they dwelt, had devoted himself to eternal perdition if any plutocrat on earth should interfere with his business. He was furious, and went up and down North Ham cursing Jasper by all his gods. From a respectable Liberal he became an inflammatory Radical. The insolence of wealth, the lickspittle slavery of the constituency that cringed to it, the mean, underhand methods of Jasper Vellacot, M.P., were themes on which he expended much eloquence. He contested the point in the lease that gave Jasper determining powers. Jasper smiled wryly, and producing a schedule of rents and executions duly attested, enquired whether an ex-mayor of North Ham would care to have it made public in a court of justice. So he triumphed over the ungodliness of Wickens

towards his tenants, but he found it hard to arrest a waning popularity in his constituency.

One day, having to run down to North Ham to attend a Board meeting of his hospital, he came across Burke and Wickens coming amicably together out of a public-house in the High Street. He summoned Burke with a nod, taking no notice of the butcher, who glared and sauntered off.

"Why are you here?" asked Jasper.

"I left my umbrella at the George, where you sent me to Major Sparling last Monday, and I thought I would come and get it."

"What are you hobnobbing with that brute for?"

"At the mines, when you wanted to serve your friend, you went and stood drinks to his enemies," replied Burke, with his furtive glance.

Jasper's eyebrows beetled over a cavern from the depths of which his eyes pierced. But Burke's pallid features remained impassive. Jasper, who, since the night when he had discovered Burke in his dining-room, had treated him with unwearying kindness and consideration, laid his hand on his arm.

"I thank you for wishing to serve my interests, Burke," he said, not without irony. "But not in that way. The straight road's the best, man. As you're here, come to the Board meeting with me and take some notes. We'll go back together."

But Jasper did not forget the incident. It added one more to his many preoccupations. He did not believe Burke's ingenuous explanation. Why should Burke and Wickens be on boon-companion terms? "*Arcades ambo*—blackguards both," said Cudby. Whereupon Jasper replied that Cudby was developing a singular gift of ineptitude. He had scarcely forgiven the little man for the amazing folly of his pronouncement concerning Lady Alicia and Bunny.

He was overdone with incessant and tremendous work. There had been difficulties with the forgotten cotton-mill in Lancashire; the establishment of the convalescent homes had required endless attention to detail; he had devoted much labour to procuring parliamentary powers for the purchase of the land on behalf of the Tanners Company; he had attended to the current business connected with all his philanthropic schemes; he had borne the usual weight of his industrial and financial enterprises. At last, when Lady Alicia came to the support of Cudby and preached the necessity of absolute rest and change, he yielded. Where should he go? Alicia came with one of her serene solutions. Her neighbours, the Widdringtons, were dying to get a summer tenant for their house. Why shouldn't Jasper take it? It would be delightful to have him within call. Bunny started an enthusiastic huzzahing which shot a

spasm of pain through his crippled body, and so he ended with a “Do come, old chap,” which was rather pitiful to hear.

“Very well,” said Jasper, “I will come down. Nowhere should I feel happier. But not at the Widdringtons’.”

“Why not?” asked Alicia.

“It’s far too swagger,” said Jasper, lightly. “I’ll find a place to suit me.”

He happened to be spending the week end at Greybrooke. It was a Saturday afternoon. With characteristic promptness he strolled down the high road to a cottage standing back in its own garden, which had taken his fancy, and rented a couple of rooms for a month. Then he came back and told Alicia what he had done. She raised protesting hands. Mrs. Bell was a most respectable widow-woman, but who would do his cooking?

“The respectable widow-woman, of course,” said Jasper.

“But she has never cooked anything beyond bacon and dumplings all her life, my dear Jasper.”

“Then she ought to be able to cook them to perfection,” said he.

“But she will kill you with anything else.”

Said Jasper, “I have survived many years of my own cooking, and I defy any other person’s to harm me.”

Alicia gave him up. Why a millionaire should choose to live in cottage lodgings with a rough peasant to do for him, like any bank clerk of slender means, she could not understand. For the matter of that, why did he reside in Gower Street, without a valet, without even a butler or footman, without horse or carriage of any sort, without beautiful furniture or pictures or engravings, the things that make smooth and sweet the life of a rich man? It was neither meanness, nor affectation, nor (by this time) ignorance. Bunny explained that it was incurable simplicity; at present he must be passing through an acute phase. Cudby, who knew his Jasper, told him that he swallowed a kingdom, but strained at a decent bedroom in the palace. But Lady Alicia, not having the advantage of Cudby’s frankness, accepted Bunny’s explanation and abandoned Jasper to his fate and the respectable widow woman.

He had a long talk with Bunny the next morning. The ladies had gone to church. It was rainy, and Bunny sat in the cosily furnished library that had been given over to his particular use. Jasper produced an array of documents and notebooks. He was going to account to Bunny for his stewardship. Bunny waved him away. If there was one thing he hated more than pounds, it was shillings, and than shillings, pence. Why couldn’t he be left alone with his lotus? He hadn’t got half through it yet.

“My son,” said Jasper, “this is a commercial world, and you’ll find lotus quoted on the market at so much a peck. It’s right for you to see how much of it you can afford. Here’s a statement of your account with the house of Jasper Vellacot, up to date. Here’s a banker’s pass-book with the first entry on the credit side, and here’s a brand-new cheque book.”

“What beastly-looking things!” said Bunny. But he opened the pass-book. Then he glanced up, with a sudden flush in his pale cheeks.

“It’s damned good of you, Jasper. But you know I can’t accept all this. You mustn’t do it.”

“I’m not giving you anything, you young idiot,” cried Jasper, somewhat tartly. “Look at the statement and the vouchers.”

Bunny obeyed, and then suddenly his hatred of pounds, shillings and pence vanished with amazing rapidity.

“All this is really mine? Out of the poems and the play? I’ve never had so much money all at once in my life. It’s because you’ve had to do with it. You make a clutch at thin air like a conjurer and extract from it a fistful of sovereigns. I wish I were you.”

“Don’t, sonny,” said Jasper. “This same conjurer business is the curse of my life.”

He shifted quickly from a subject ever perturbing, and went into details of the account. Thence he passed to Bunny’s fame, to the glad future before him when he should set to work again. Bunny shook his head; gradually his face clouded over. The melancholy dawned drearily in his eyes.

“I shall be no good again,” said he. “I have told you so before.”

Jasper rose to get a match for his pipe from the mantel-piece. Having lit it, he remained standing.

“My dear fellow, you are young—a boy still. You have never expressed yourself as a man.”

“It’s because I’ve grown into a man that I can’t express myself. The boy’s heart has been seared out of me.”

“The foolishness has been burned away, but the gold remains.”

Bunny clasped his head with both hands.

“Oh, God, man! I’ve been through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I’ve seen life in its utter nakedness. A woman I loved tore my heart to bits and threw them in my face. I have bayonetted through the body a fresh blue-eyed lad whom I could have loved like a brother—I see his lips now. Oh—what is the good of poetry?”

“She came to Great Coram Street to enquire for you, a day or two after you left,” said Jasper, referring to the heart-rending woman. “I think you ought to know that. Perhaps she wasn’t as bad as you fancy. There’s not one of us that isn’t a miserable sinner somewhere, wanting a lot of allowances made for him.”

Bunny gazed straight ahead and worked his lips.

“Do you know anything about her?” he asked in a low voice, after a pause.

“Nothing at all. Perhaps I ought to have kept an eye on her. But,” with a sigh, “one can’t do everything.”

“You’ve done superhuman things for me. You did wisely to let her go into the *Ewigkeit*. I never want to hear of her again.”

A smile of great sadness and pity flickered over the older man’s face as he watched the boy’s profile. The former question, the latter disclaimer, the tone and the manner were betrayals. He congratulated himself that he had lost sight of Vittoria, hoped that she lay hidden as deeply as Naples could hide her; in the depths of Vesuvius for choice. Poor lad!

He took a few steps about the room. They brought him to a writing-table on which some characteristic sheets lay scattered. He seized upon one.

“Hallo, my young friend,” he cried in his cheery way. “You *have* been writing poetry. Why deceive us?”

“Oh,” said Bunny, turning round wearily. “That’s not poetry. It’s doggerel verse. I’ve got to write it to keep the thing off my nerves.”

Jasper collected the sheets, read the verses, twice, three times over. Then holding them in his hand, he came and stood before Bunny, regarding with a kind of awe the being whom he had just been rating, patronising, pitying. His voice quavered a little as he spoke.

“You are not the only man that has gone through the Valley of the Shadow,” said he, “but you are the only man living who can tell us what he has seen there.”

“It’s worth nothing,” said Bunny. “I could go on turning out that stuff for ever.”

“But, dear lad,” said Jasper, bending down and laying both hands on the back of the chair, by Bunny’s head, “these are the greatest lines you’ve written. I don’t know much about poetry, but I’m learning more than I used, and I know these are great. There are tears in it, and—” he paused for a word, seeking and suddenly finding an inspiration, “and tears in the major key—anyone can be pathetic in the minor.”

“Do you know, Jasper,” said Bunny, with one of his unexpected and

irresistible changes of mood, “you are a bit of a poet yourself.” He laughed and stretched himself. “Put the silly stuff away with all these papers and documents and let us talk sense.”

Jasper put the verses into his pocket. “They shall appear on Tuesday morning,” said he.

“For heaven’s sake, man, not in that state!” cried the author, in alarm. “I can’t print work like that over my signature. I must file and polish. Do you think a poem comes out dollop! like an egg out of a hen? There are two lines that are not even rhymed.”

“If I give them back you will polish them for immediate publication?”

“If it will make you any the happier,” said Bunny.

“Good,” laughed Jasper. “Things are getting more healthy.”

The ladies came in from church, Alicia a fragrant vision in heliotrope. They stayed a few minutes in the library enquiring after the invalid, then returned to prepare for lunch. Jasper followed Alicia into the hall, thrust the verses into her hand.

“Bunny’s writing again.”

A light shone in Alicia’s eyes.

“Oh, I am so glad.”

She read the verses, handed them back, with an air of disappointment.

“They are so sad. I wish he could write of brighter things.”

“But they are very beautiful.”

“Yes, they are beautiful,” she said with a sigh in her voice. “All he writes is beautiful. But—”

She went upstairs without finishing the sentence. Jasper turned into the garden, the rain having ceased, and pondered over the incomprehensible feminine. It was the one flaw in his perfect divinity that she did not appreciate Bunny’s best work. It brought her down from lofty solitudes to the warm earth. She was the more human and lovable for the fallibility. Just as a musician breaks a too rhythmic flow of cadences with a discord, or a painter brings up the tone of a too harmonious scheme with a sudden dash of conflicting colour, so did the Contriver of Alicia work this flaw into her nature. Of course, to appreciate all this, you must be respectively either a musician or a painter or in love with Alicia.

Jasper returned to town to make preparations for his approaching holiday. He looked forward to it with boyish impatience. It would be respite from intolerable strain. It would be in itself great happiness. As he sat one breathless

evening by his open window, with weary mind and jaded body, picturing for his comfort the restful Hertfordshire meadows and the restful woman who dwelt among them, the sense of his life's loneliness weighed heavily upon him. Of all the world's creatures there were only three whom he held in any way dear,—Cudby, bound by imperishable memories and devoted service, and those two in Hertfordshire, bound to him by spurious ties of blood. In spite of the ache of the eternal lie and in spite of the ache of his eternal love for Alicia, he had grown to regard those two almost as his own people, and he passionately craved their affection. If those two, discovering the lie, were to draw away from him, he would have but one solitary friend on earth. This indeed had been his fate two years ago, and he had not complained. It scarcely mattered then. But now it would be vastly different. The two years had meant much to him. With all their pain they contained the only happiness he had known in his life.

He longed for Greybrooke. But before freedom came he must pay a worrying visit to the cotton mill in Lancashire. The policy of the titular owners, now the managers, did not accord with Jasper's ideas, which they deprecated as quixotic. To be just he felt it necessary to see things with his own eyes. On Thursday he went down. He was to return on Friday and start on Saturday morning for his holiday.

Now on Thursday night, Cudby, whose sleep was none of the best, was aroused from his perusal in bed of Schlegel's "Shakespearean Characters" by strange sounds in the room below, which was Jasper's bedroom. His watch marked two o'clock. After reflecting for some moments on the improbability of Jasper returning from Lancashire like a thief in the night, he rose and thrusting his gold eyeglass into his eye and looking more like some strange bird than ever, crept quietly downstairs. To his surprise Jasper's door was open and a stream of light fell athwart the landing. It must be Jasper. He walked carelessly in. But on the threshold he saw so strange a sight that he checked himself quickly and shrank back behind the door, round which he peered.

Burke, half dressed, was standing by the dressing-table, on which lay open an old-fashioned wooden desk. He appeared in half profile, beneath the light of the suspended electric lamp. One hand clutched his thin hair. The other held up before him an old greasy letter-case. His mouth was half open, his eyes set glassily. He shook all over. It was this melodramatic attitude that arrested Cudby. Then he turned slightly away, and what Cudby did not see was the gradual dawn of an illumination on the man's face. Nor did he see that the letter-case had a "J. V." in tarnished gilt letters on the outside, and "Jasper Vellacot" written within between the pockets. Burke swayed to and fro drunkenly. Then he restored the letter-case to the desk, which he locked and

replaced carefully on the shelf whence he had taken it, and reeled out of the room, uttering inarticulate sounds through chattering teeth. He brushed by Cudby without noticing him and dashed down the stairs. Then Cudby, turning on the light on the landing, followed him, and at the bottom of the flight swung him fiercely round by the arm. He fell back against the stairs, and for a moment or two sprawled there, regarding his aggressor with mazed, half-mad eyes.

"What the devil are you doing here?" cried Cudby.

Burke stared about him, with heaving chest.

"How did you come?" he panted.

The man's behaviour was so extraordinary that it checked Cudby's righteous indignation. He recovered his cool mocking manner.

"I fancy I'm the questioner, my friend. Kindly explain why you were making yourself at home in Mr. Vellacot's bedroom?"

Burke shook his head. "I don't know anything about it. I find myself here. You have thrown me downstairs."

He picked himself up, rubbed his eyes, and looked with sullen imperturbability at Cudby.

"I have been walking in my sleep," said he.

Cudby was staggered. He had not thought of this explanation. Burke's dazed condition, the fact of his having passed him at the door without seeing him, gave it plausibility.

"Are you often taken that way? he asked.

"Yes. Since that illness in Australia."

"Ah, that famous illness. It accounts for a lot of things, doesn't it?"

"It was bush-madness. I suppose you know what that is."

"The deuce it was," said Cudby, with a start.

"There aren't many who have pulled through. I feel it in my head now and then still—a buzzing and a shivering. Sometimes you think me drunk and I'm not. I suppose this sleep-walking has got to do with it."

"Why didn't I know of this bush-madness before?" asked Cudby.

"How should you?" retorted Burke.

Cudby cursed himself inwardly for a fool, for he could only have learned it from Jasper. He made no reply. Yet it was strange that Jasper had not specified this terrible madness of disorientation as the cause of his three days' companion's apparent death.

"By chucking me downstairs when I was in that condition," said Burke,

after a pause, “you might have sent me as mad as a hatter.”

“I’m very sorry,” replied Cudby, “but if I catch you somnambulising in Mr. Vellacot’s bedroom, I’m afraid I shall have to do it again. Good-night.”

They parted. Cudby went back to bed with a shaken faith in Burke’s turpitude. After bush-madness anything cerebral was possible. The illness did account for a lot of things,—Burke’s furtive manner, his suspicious jealousy, his insolence and servility, his drunkenness. Why should he not believe in this sleep-walking? Perhaps, like Lady Macbeth, Burke had some cursed spot which he tried to “out” in somnambulistic trance. It was more than probable. At any rate, he had not gone to Jasper’s bedroom to steal. Like a wise man, Cudby went to sleep. But Burke lay awake all night with throbbing heart and brain.

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHAT will be, will be," says the Italian fatalist.

The intelligent Cudby had seen it coming, warned his chief, and, like many another prophet, got snubbed for his pains. Elinor Currey had also prophesied to her own undoing. Lady Luxmoore, though she kept urbanely silent, was aware of a romance and of her own elderly, vicarious enjoyment. In fact, any reasoning being, except Jasper, could have set up as an oracle; for, given the circumstances, it was bound to be.

Why it should have happened on that particular day, neither knew. Perhaps it was because Bunny, somewhat excited by the immediate success of his war poem and by the emotional effort expended on a second, both looked and felt more tired than usual. Perhaps it was because the August day enveloped them in languorous breath. Perhaps he kissed her hand just a little too gratefully, looked at her with eyes just a little too full of yearning after lost life and happiness; so that the woman was troubled and spoke things that she had hitherto kept unspoken. But when a rock has been imperceptibly undermined into a state of unstable equilibrium, at last the flight of a bird may bring about catastrophe.

They were in Bunny's retreat by the rhododendrons. They had been talking for a long time. He had grown impatient over his slow convalescence. Then despaired. His heart was as sore as his body, and he dreaded the future. She comforted him and her words were soft and easeful. By chance arrangement, or the ironic workings of *che sarà sarà* fatality, her seat was drawn up alongside of his Indian chair, so that when she rested her elbow on its long arm and supported her chin in her hand, her face was not so very far from his; and the woman's foolishness that trembled on lips and eyelids had but a little way to flutter.

"I'm not a coward," said he, "but it seems as if I had not the heart to face the world again."

"Why need you?" she asked.

"I must. I can't live for ever in this dear garden and in the kindness of your dear eyes."

"Why can't you?" she asked again, in a tone that held but one signification.

"Do you mean—?"

“Yes, dear,” she said; “why not?”

“It would be heaven,” said he.

“Would it?”

“Dear heaven. You are all that I care about in the whole world.”

He stretched out both arms, took her as she bent forward, and kissed her. Released, she averted a burning face and swimming eyes, and picked up the book that had slid from her lap.

“I am afraid I am very foolish, Bunny dear,” she said.

“You are—for taking pity on a poor wreck like me.”

She turned round in quick reproach.

“Don’t say such things. They hurt. I love you for yourself. I can’t help loving you. I am only foolish because—”

She paused. He smiled, took her hand. Asked why. She drew her face near again and looked at him wistfully.

“Because I am too old for you, Bunny dear.”

Tears came. It was the young man’s turn for tenderness. She obeyed a guiding pressure of his hand, sat on the foot-rest of the chair and was brought close to him, her head on his heart. And he proved to Alicia, hungering for conviction, that it did not matter, that she would for ever and ever and ever be the sweet, fair woman that she was now, and that he, Bunny, had grown as old as the everlasting hills. She dried her eyes, adjusted her hair, and sat beside him again and they talked quietly. Nothing particular seemed to have happened. There had been no shock, no sudden opening of the firmament disclosing bewildering visions of glory. Spirits had not rushed tumultuously together at the touch of lips. The immediate present was the same as the immediately antecedent past. The vague future was constituted of easeful summer moments like the present. His kisses lingered as things infinitely delicate, such as she had never known before; yet no vibrating after-thrill confused the clearness of her eyes, and no sweet shame hung deliciously on her eyelids. A serene tenderness suffused her being. A little sense of triumph quickened her pulses. But that was all. It was a day of the half-gods. But Alicia was wholly content. It never occurred to her to enquire what more there could be in life.

They talked away the golden August afternoon in entire peacefulness. Lady Luxmoore had taken the landau in order to visit an elderly crony a dozen miles away. Jasper, who had been established for over a week in his cottage, and was a daily visitor at Greybrooke, had gone off for a day’s cross-country tramp. They were alone and undisturbed. A servant announced tea set under the

sycamore on the lawn. They walked slowly thither, and it was with a sweet sense of right that Alicia insisted on Bunny leaning on her arm.

In front of them stretched the formal terrace, approached from the lawn by a stately flight of steps, flanked with cleft yews and planted with geometrical flower-beds; and above it rose the Elizabethan manor-house, of warm red-brick, spacious and reposeful. Lady Alicia waved a graceful hand towards it.

"This too is thoroughly English, isn't it?" she said.

He acquiesced. Then he added with a knitted brow:

"But I mustn't live on your money, Alicia. That wouldn't be English at all."

"You won't," she replied. "As soon as you are well, you'll make a fortune by your plays and poems. That is quite certain. We won't talk of the matter any more. Perhaps it is well to speak once, but it would spoil everything to let money come between us. You'll have quite enough of your own to prevent your ever having such feelings. Look how much you have made already. The *Carmina* has reached its twentieth thousand. I saw it advertised in last evening's paper. Promise me, Bunny dear, you'll never refer to this again."

It was easy to promise in the warm, golden haze of an August afternoon, and in the languor of convalescence, when fame was assured and its money value loomed nebulously large before dreamy and poetical eyes. Unconsciously he submitted his pride to the keeping of the half-gods that controlled the day. The prospect of the long untroubled life with the dear devoted lady, so fragrant of heart and soul and mind and body, for whom he had always had a very deep affection, who indeed for a brief season in his boyhood had been his first extravagant and romantic love, lay before him like a vista of sweet years in which all troublous things would be forgotten.

"I am very happy, Alicia," he said after a long silence.

The words were music. "I will try to keep you so always," she replied.

In rising to go indoors, he made too sudden a movement and sat down with a little gasp of pain. She was all tenderness.

"I wonder when I shall get fit again," he said. "I'll have to soon, for I swear I sha'n't let you marry a crock, my dear."

"I'm going to marry whom and what I choose," said Alicia, with a smile.

The next morning Jasper was leaning over the gate of his cottage smoking a meditative pipe, just as he had leant over gates and smoked in long-past labouring days on the other side of the world. He had enjoyed every moment of his holiday, was enjoying now the scented morning, the green stretching meadows and corn lands in front of him, and the easy lounging life that passed

by on the high road. He had returned late from his tramp the evening before, and after his homely supper, which he had eaten with the good sauce of hunger, slept for nine solid hours. It was good to be out of London, and to wander about in God's green fields and sunshine. He felt already a new man. Besides, he had thrown off cares and responsibilities. Even Burke's malevolent glance and peculiarly ironical smile of adieu, when he was starting from Gower Street for King's Cross, failed to disturb him. Of Cudby's interview with the somnambulistic marauder, however, he knew nothing. He had looked so jaded on his return from Lancashire, and was so schoolboyishly happy the next morning on starting for his holiday, that Cudby had not the heart to add to his worries or mar his pleasure by relating cock and bull stories about Burke. But if the little man had done so, Jasper would have associated them with other queer proceedings on Burke's part and have drawn certain definite conclusions. The eternal shadow of the man would have darkened his holiday, and he would not have been leaning over the gate and smoking his pipe this morning with such placid enjoyment.

He was meditatively watching the hind quarters of some cows in charge of a boy disappear at a turn of the road, and recalling past days when barefoot and ragged and hatless he himself had herded cattle, when a familiar "Good-morning" made him turn round and behold Lady Alicia. She wore a coarse straw hat with yellow roses under the brim against her hair and a pale straw-coloured morning dress and country gauntlets. On her arm was slung a little empty basket. She explained that she had been administering jellies to the sick and had passed the gate twenty minutes before. He had not been there. Now she was going home. He had better walk up with her.

"And how is the invalid?" he asked, as they strolled along the high road.

"He is very happy this morning," she replied demurely.

"So he ought to be. Every one ought to be happy on a morning like this. 'God's in His Heaven, All's right with the world.' "

She glanced up at him shyly. He noticed a heightened colour on her cheek.

"It is right with me," she said. Then after a pause she added, "Something has happened. I ought to tell you, Jasper."

He looked at her with smiling enquiry.

"I wish you could guess," she said softly.

She slid her gloved hand beneath his arm. The tone and act were so full of tenderness that a mad thought crossed his mind and his heart began to beat. Had she in some mysterious manner discovered his love for her and was this a sweet confession? A man even tragically in love can be wrought at moments to sublime idiocy.

"Well, if you won't guess, I must tell you. You are our dearest friend. Bunny and I are very happy. We are to be married as soon as he gets well."

He moved instinctively away from her and halted. Her hand dropped from his arm. For two or three endless seconds he looked at her stupidly. Then recovering himself with an effort, he broke into a laugh and said aimlessly,—

"I should never have guessed that. I was thinking of something else."

"But you are glad, aren't you?"

"Oh yes. Very glad. I hope for your happiness. I have no one else on earth to love but you two. It is the best thing that could have happened."

He scarcely knew what he was saying. God had suddenly abandoned His Heaven and the world had fallen into chaos. Till that moment when she was irretrievably snatched from him he had not realised how furiously he desired her. The struggle in the heart of this man of deep passions was fierce pain. Yet of this the woman, looking at his grave, rugged face, knew or suspected nothing. They walked on a few steps in silence. And once more Jasper crushed down madness and folly and grasped life grimly and conquered.

"I had no idea it was like that between you," he said. "Not the faintest idea. You must forgive my surprise, Alicia, and accept all my warmest good wishes."

He smiled very kindly on her and pressed her hand. They reached the house. Bunny received his congratulations somewhat shamefacedly. Quoted the Spenserian lines about "sleep after toyle, port after stormy seas, ease after warre." It was the haven where he would be. *On revient toujours à ses premières amours.* Did not Jasper know that Alicia was his first love? As a boy of seventeen he had been desperately in love with her. Then he had flown from false goddess to false goddess and had returned to the one divine woman at last. He was blocking out all the seditious matter in his past life as the press censor in Russia did to newspapers. He was going to start fresh. Jasper must also submit his own private chronicle of Bonamy Tredgold and have it duly censored.

"I'll begin then," said Jasper, and meeting an instinctive look of apprehension in Bunny's eyes, drew his chair nearer to him.

"Tell me one thing," said he. "Lady Alicia is worthy of any man's whole-hearted worship. You can give it to her? The other matter is all dead and gone?"

"It turned to hate long ago," replied Bunny. "Alicia has everything."

"That is as it should be," said Jasper, gravely.

But he was not convinced, and he went away, declining lunch, to work out

the matter in solitude. His heart was very heavy, oppressed by a sense of disaster. Only in so far as it forbade any action on his part did he think of his own love. That had been futile, criminal, impossible from the first. Mere animal unreason had made him stagger at the blow it had received that morning. It was the higher part to efface himself and rejoice in whatever happiness came into the loved one's life. But was it subject for rejoicing? No two seemed more unfitted to each other. This very unfitness had made him dismiss Cudby's warning as folly. He had regarded Alicia's solicitude as sweetly maternal, had thought that they both extended their affection to the lad from the same standpoint. He did not blame her now. Who could help loving Bunny? But it was a bad day's work.

The disparity in their ages of itself did not make for happiness. And Bunny did not love her truly. It was obvious to one who had been admitted into the furnace of the lad's heart. He was marrying her from gratitude, in the illusion of his long and weary convalescence that never again would he ask of life anything but restfulness. When he regained his old magical vitality, he would discover his mistake and would break either her heart or his own. And his genius would suffer. Jasper knew too well her attitude towards the work that came from his depths. His temperament clamoured for inspiration, for the closest sympathy. He would either fly abroad in spirit and lead an emotional artistic life apart from her, or else he would yield to the softnesses of existence and write no more. In either case it would be unhappiness for the dear woman.

He could not act. In spite of heroical strangling of his own love, it escaped at times from his grasp. How far he would be pleading for himself, for the mere savage satisfaction of feeling that if the woman he loved could not be his, she at least should belong to no other man, he could not tell. His sensitive nature shrank from the self-imputation of such baseness of motive. To the purest and holiest in his life he would be loyal. His hands were tied.

Two days passed. He dined at Greybrooke. On previous occasions he had faced Alicia at table, taking the end by virtue of age and dignity. This evening he drew Bunny into the seat, and sat at Alicia's right hand opposite Lady Luxmoore. Alicia blushed and looked pleased.

"You'll always look upon this place as yours, Jasper, won't you?" she asked, with pretty reference to the future.

"Of course he will," cried Bunny. "Isn't he the bulwark of our constitution? Our fairy godmother in trousers? Dear old Jasper! We ought to have an alabaster statue of him always sitting there in his absence."

"He'll sit in our hearts, which will be better," said Alicia.

"You are both in mine," said Jasper, simply.

They made much of him; with the instinct of fine natures strove to prove that the change in their relations could only draw him the closer to them. Bunny proposed his health in a little speech half mockery and half tenderness. Jasper grasped a hand of each and said, “God bless you both.”

“Now I know that you are glad,” whispered Alicia.

Yet, for all their love, Jasper in his heart was not glad.

Afterwards, while the two men were smoking—the invalid had lately been permitted an occasional cigarette—Bunny knocked off his ash meditatively against the side of his coffee-cup and said,—

“Does Alicia know anything about Vittoria? I have never asked you.”

“She knows that you went out on account of a love-affair,—with some girl to whom you wrote the *Carmina*. Nothing more.”

“Thanks,” said Bunny. “It is just as well.”

He precluded further reference to the dismal subject by rising and suggesting that they should join the ladies. Jasper understood that this was part of the blacking-out process and followed him into the drawing-room. There the ladies were engaged over the evening post which had just arrived. Alicia handed Jasper a note.

“It is from the Seagrims. You remember them at Aix, don’t you? They have only just heard you were here, and want you to come with Aunt Phœbe and myself to their garden-party to-morrow. They are neighbours of mine, you know. I had almost forgotten the garden-party,” she added after a little pause, during which Jasper had glanced through his invitation; “other things put it out of my head.”

She smiled and coloured delicately. Jasper’s brow wrinkled, while he twirled the note in his fingers.

“I’m not a garden-party man,” said he. “Couldn’t I stay here and keep Bunny out of mischief?”

“I’m blest if you do,” cried Bunny, in his old way. “I’ve got my living to earn and am not going to be disturbed.”

“And I’ve seen you appear to enjoy a garden-party very much,” said Alicia.

“I derived great profit from it,” replied Jasper, remembering Buckingham Palace and the change that her smile had wrought in his dark mood.

“The second experiment may be equally successful,” said Alicia.

He yielded. There was laughing talk. The evening ended pleasantly. It was arranged that the ladies should call for him at his cottage on their way to the

Seagrims'.

"You'll be the lion of the entertainment," said Bunny, "so spend the night in cultivating the appropriate roar. It ought to be mellow and urbane, but still have a note to awe the presumptuous."

Jasper took his leave. Bunny, in his character of probationary host, hobbled out with him to the front door.

"Good-night, Bunny," said Jasper.

But Bunny held his friend's hand and looked very earnestly into his face.

"I want to say a word to you, Jasper. You have been father and brother and mother to me, and I can only try to repay you by loving you more than any man living. Tell me if I'm wronging Alicia by marrying her. She is worth infinitely more than a poor devil like me."

"If you love her truly, you are not wronging her."

"I do. But that's not quite what I want to get at. Suppose some other man, a thousand times worthier than I am—oh, I don't mean the poetry—any damned wordmonger can write poetry—but a *man*—one who could make her happier, wanted her—do you think I ought to stand in his light?"

"There's no one of that description hanging around, so you may make your mind easy."

"Sure? Quite sure? For God's sake, tell me."

Jasper put on an air of sudden surprise.

"Are you referring to me by any chance, sonny?" he asked sharply.

"Bluntly—yes."

"My dear boy," said Jasper, "I've lived my life long ago, and I could no more marry Lady Alicia Harden than I could marry the Sultana of Zanzibar. I've found in her friendship a refuge from many cares, and other thoughts haven't entered my head."

"You won't think I've made an ass of myself by speaking?" asked Bunny.

Jasper laughed. "What if you have? A blameless and happy young donkey is a more enviable being than a remorseful poet. As for being worthy of Alicia, your heart's the only guide. God bless you, sonny. Don't stand in the night air."

He started off with the cheeriest of "good-nights," but the laughter died from his face as he walked home. Even the tragical farce of his denial to the boy brought but a sour smile momentarily to his lips. A meditative lounge over the gate of his cottage while he finished his pipe beneath the quiet stars brought no comfort. An owl hooting dismally in a neighbouring chestnut-tree

got on his nerves. He went indoors and found two or three letters that had come by the last post. One was from Cudby. A cutting from a half-penny evening paper was enclosed with “Who says the age of Romance is dead?” sarcastically pencilled by him on the margin. The paragraph was headed “The Vanishing Bride,” and narrated in jocose journalese a curious story. That morning Carlo Antonelli, proprietor of the Hôtel Bomboni, had applied to the magistrate for a warrant for the arrest of his niece Vittoria Antonelli, who had disappeared from his house the night before, the eve of her marriage with his partner, Giuseppe Scarpi, who was present in court. On the magistrate enquiring whether she had absconded with any property not belonging to her, the two Italians entered upon a confused story of financial arrangements from which it appeared that by not fulfilling her contract she had defrauded one of them of moneys due from the other. The magistrate angrily dismissed the absurd application, and informed Signor Antonelli that if he desired to discover the whereabouts of his missing niece he must advertise through the usual channels. The two Italians left the court, wrangling in their native tongue.

Jasper folded the slip of paper and thrust it into his pocket with a shrug of the shoulders. The reporter’s racy vulgarity had brought into correct light the sordidness of the comedy.

“Thank God, the boy is saved from all that, anyway,” said he, opening his other letters.

CHAPTER XIX

BUNNY was sitting in his retreat behind the rhododendrons. He had just come there from afternoon tea, which had been served to him in solitary state in the drawing-room. The spot was a little patch of shade in a world of fierce sunlight. The air was oppressive, as it often is on the last day of a spell of fine weather before the thunderstorm comes and ends it. Not a leaf stirred on the acacia behind him or the tall elms along the wall in front. His fever-racked body was grateful for the warmth, but it somewhat enervated him. He had felt not so well as usual all day, and only his insistence that she should go out and enjoy herself prevailed upon Lady Alicia to set forth after lunch to her garden-party. A pencil and a writing-pad with a few scribbled lines upon it lay on a small table by his side. A rug, spread solemnly every sunny morning by the footman, was beneath his feet. Alicia's fox-terrier sprawled asleep across his knees, and the dog's back formed a book-rest for a novel which he was not reading.

The great heat rose from the ground and encircled him. He felt languidly content. Fate had been kind to him, after all. Now that he was quite sure that he had made a fool of himself in thinking that Jasper might possibly be in love with Alicia, he argued that he was the happiest man in the world. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the sky, and rhymes jingled in his head. He had written no verses for Alicia since his return. It was just the afternoon for idle fancy. The rhymes fashioned themselves as fitting the alternating refrain of a villanelle. A chance triplet flashed out at once. It ended in the line

"A valley in Avilion."

The refrain haunted him, and he began to frame tags of the alternate triplets of which it should form the end. They ran so musically and the scheme promised so well that he set himself purposely to weave the gossamer nineteen-line fabric on its two warps of rhyme. He tore off the scribbled page of his writing-pad and on the clean page jotted down the germ of the idea. Then he lay back with closed eyes, his lips moving to the tune. It was the sweetest delight to work at dainty verse again after countless years of grimness. All that was most fragrant in Alicia should perfume the villanelle. It would be a masterpiece in its way. And that evening he would give it her.

. . . . . .

"And feet that never can forsake
A valley in Avilion,"

murmured Bunny.

Presently the fox-terrier on his knees struggled violently to gain a foothold, scrambled to the ground and stood with uplifted paw, uttering a fox-terrier's sharp barks. Bunny came back with a start from Avilion to the workaday world, instinctively scolded the little dog, and then turned his eyes in the direction he was pointing.

Then he sat up, gripping the arms of his chair, amazed, bewildered, his heart thumping like the clapper of a mad bell. Before him stood Vittoria. She had just entered by the little door in the box hedge, and remained on the gravel path, her dark eyes full upon him. She wore the old black sailor-hat and black dress. Her hair was untidy, her shoes and skirt white with dust, her face sunburnt, wearied, with streaks of moist dust across it. Her bodice was unbuttoned at the throat, and she held crumpled in her hand a wet black ball that was once a pair of gloves. She looked worn, travel-stained, desperate. Yet she held herself erect, as of old, with bust thrown out, in the pride of her splendid young womanhood. The sun blazed down fiercely upon her. She too had come upon him unexpectedly, and for a while she was motionless. Then she crossed the strip of lawn to the side of his chair.

"Bon Ami," she said pitifully. "Bon Ami."

His bewilderment found vague utterance. "My God! Is it you? What are you doing here?"

"I came in by the tradesman's entrance,—not the big gates," she said, rather huskily. "I lost my way; I opened that door and saw you asleep. Then the dog barked and waked you."

"You had better go away again," said Bunny, "and attend to the business you have come about—whatever it is. I have nothing to say to you."

He was still confused by the Homeric apparition of this dusty and detested young Juno; could not account for it; dimly conjectured she had fallen upon evil days and was seeking the assistance of Jasper the philanthropist.

"I came to ask whether you would let me see you and speak with you again, Bon Ami," she said humbly. "Only for a moment. I have walked all the way from London to see you."

"To see me?"

"What else should bring me here?"

“And you have walked from London, seventy miles? But why should you walk? There are trains.”

“I left home—the Hôtel Bomboni, the night before last. When I had gone a short distance, I found I had left my purse behind me. I was afraid to go back, for they would have heard me and kept me. I hadn’t the money for the railway fare. So I walked.”

“Sit down for a moment. You must be tired,” said Bunny coldly, indicating Alicia’s chair.

She burst out with a passionate gesture: “I would have walked to the other end of the earth to find you. I am not tired. I only want a kind word, Bon Ami.”

She bent forward, laid her hand timidly on the arm of his chair, and looked into his face.

“How you are altered, Bon Ami! How ill you are looking! Oh, it is terrible!”

Her voice ended in a sob. Her nerve gave way. She threw herself down against the little sloping bank of turf that shored up the bed of the rhododendrons and sobbed and cried, hiding her face in her hands.

“I drove you to it—I have killed you—I am not fit to live—I wish I were dead.”

These and other disconnected ejaculations of a weeping woman’s remorse reached Bunny’s ears. Then anger flamed up in his heart. He turned upon her fiercely.

“What right have you to come here? I wished never to set eyes on you again. You saw that I was a fool and played with me like a damned harlot, and when the game was over, went back to your scum and left me. You took all from me and threw it in my face. How dare you track me down to this house? How dare you speak to me? You have played the devil with me enough. I’m not going to have any more of it.”

He rose, with a wince, from his chair and stood over her as she crouched with heaving shoulders, and threw a sovereign into her lap.

“There is money to buy food in the village and pay your fare to town. It’s a loan if you like. You can pay me back. You can stay here and rest yourself. I’ve done with you. Good-day.”

He turned away sharply. But before he had gone three paces, staggering in his unusual haste, Vittoria was on her feet and her hands were on his shoulders.

“Don’t go, Bon Ami, for God’s sake, don’t go! Hear me. Just a little

moment."

In her passionate earnestness, she put forth her young strength so as to detain him. It was like holding back a bulrush. He swayed to and fro in her grasp, grew white, uttered a few short gasps of pain. Then she half understood and released him. He put his hands to his side and tottered back to the chair and lay half fainting. Frightened, she threw herself on her knees beside him.

"*Santa Madonna mia*, what have I done?"

Seeing him so pale, she sought for something to use as a fan. Finding nothing, she unpinned her hat, and her dark hair, loosened, fell in a coil about her neck. He motioned her away.

"It's nothing," he panted. "I had a hole through me—and it's not quite right yet. Cripples have to be gingerly handled. It isn't your fault. You didn't know. I'm getting better—only it hurt like the devil."

She reached for a cushion that lay in the other chair and still kneeling, put it behind his head. He nodded thanks.

"Don't trouble any more," said he. "I'd like to rest a bit. So, if you don't mind going—"

"Don't send me away, Bon Ami," she pleaded. "Not without a word of forgiveness."

"I told you it wasn't your fault. Besides, no harm's done."

"Oh, not for this. For the other thing. For everything, Bon Ami. Oh, don't look like that at me. I know I've brought suffering on you and I've been in hell fire all the time. I have, Bon Ami. I don't quite know what I came for. I was mad perhaps. I thought if I saw you once more and asked you to forgive me it would be enough. Bon Ami!"

He drew his hand away with a shudder from her touch. Abominable associations made her unclean.

"There are things beyond reach of forgiveness," he said between his teeth. "Go back to the husband you chose and leave me."

"But I have no husband, Bon Ami, I am a pure girl, and I have loved you, loved you, loved you, all the time!" she cried in a wild breath.

Bunny passed his hand over his forehead, looked at the ground on either side of him in a hunted fashion. She saw her advantage. Her eyes grew eager.

"I hated him, loathed him. My God, Bon Ami, can you think I didn't loathe him? They were trying to force me to it. Uncle Antonelli was in his power, owed him money—the other had a hold upon him, compromising papers which he threatened to give up to the *Mafia* in Naples. The *Mafia* would have sent an agent to kill Uncle Antonelli. You don't know what Italian secret

societies are, Bon Ami. A Neapolitan comes to the Hôtel Bomboni with introductions—a game of dominoes in the back parlour—Giuseppe guards the door. Then suddenly, *flan!* and a knife is in Uncle Antonelli's heart, and Giuseppe lets the man out the back way and then goes and finds Uncle Antonelli dead, and calls in the police—oh, it's as easy as drinking wine—I had to agree. I never meant to keep my word—when you went I held out as long as I could. Then there was a betrothal and contract signed and Uncle Antonelli got back his papers. We don't break contracts like this. The marriage was fixed for yesterday. Uncle Antonelli was to be forgiven the debt and make Giuseppe chief partner. Giuseppe bought me clothes to wear, because I wouldn't buy them myself. The night came. I was going to be married to-morrow. In a few hours. Oh, but it was horrible, horrible, Bon Ami. I shivered in bed. Then suddenly I leaped out, threw on my clothes, and crept downstairs so softly, softly—and when I was in the street I ran. And so I walked all night and all yesterday, and my one idea was to see you and when I had seen you I didn't care what happened. And I have seen you, Bon Ami, and you must forgive me."

She had told the story dramatically, with Italian vividness, using her hands, swaying her body, changing the inflections in her flexible voice. The realism of absolute truth stirred the depths in Bunny. Deadened emotions quickened into life. He struggled against them.

"You have made me suffer as much as any woman has ever made a man suffer," said he, unyielding.

Vittoria sat back on her heels and looked at him sadly.

"I know," she said. "I have made shipwreck of you. You are different. Your face has grown stern, and your eyes don't laugh any more, and your voice doesn't ring. But did you never think I might have loved you? I thought I let you see it often enough. I couldn't always."

"We have a doggerel verse in English about dissembling one's love," said Bunny, with an ironical lip. "Why did you kick me downstairs among the scullions when I offered you what was best in me?"

Her shoulders gave an expressive Italian shrug. "I said what I did in joke, Bon Ami. It was half true. Only I wasn't going to let it be true. I called you back to tell you so. But you wouldn't stop to listen. You rushed out. I thought you would return. I stayed awake all night. The next day you didn't come, nor the next. Then I grew frightened and went to your house. They told me you had gone for a soldier and had left no address. But I said it in joke, Bon Ami."

"In joke? Did you think that such a horror was a joke, Vittoria?"

He was miles from her point of view. Forests of different spiritual and

social instincts separated them.

"I was only teasing you. I liked to see you angry. I loved you most when you had that fierce look."

The conversation had established itself upon possible lines, had found the rails, so to speak. She was sitting now on the grass, supported by her hand. The other held her hat, with which she fanned herself. Bunny made no reply. He was busily engaged in reconstructing a theory of woman out of hideously broken fragments. Vittoria dropped her hat and took a handkerchief from the low table.

"May I?" she asked. "Mine is useless."

Bunny nodded. She turned her face away, buried it in the clean cool linen, rubbed vigorously, and when the handkerchief had done its utmost she thrust it in her pocket. Then she raised her hands behind her head, abstracted hairpins which she put in her mouth, shook out the masses of her glorious hair, and quickly recoiled it with deft fingers into something resembling neatness. Bunny regarded her fascinated. The free movements of her uplifted arms showed the curves of her young, ripe figure, and as she threw back her head brought out the fulness of her throat disclosed by the unbuttoned neck of the bodice. Colour had returned to her cheeks, and the soft duskiness to her eyes. In spite of travel stains summarily wiped away, she glowed in her southern beauty. When she had fixed the last hairpin and felt both sides of her hasty coiffure with feminine touches, she met his glance with shy uplifting of her dark lashes.

"Am I still *senza errore*—by the 'faultless painter'?" she asked.

The astounding assurance took his breath away.

"By heaven, you are," he exclaimed unthinkingly.

"Ah! there you are like the Bon Ami I used to love," she cried happily.

He shifted his position in his chair.

"I don't see where all this is leading us to, Vittoria," he said. "What has been can never be again. You know that as well as I do. Nothing will make you understand that what was joke to you was death to me."

"But I do understand. I have thought about it hundreds of nights, after I had been crying, crying for hours. I thought I should cry all the brightness out of my eyes. It is you that don't understand. What seemed horrible to you did not seem so horrible to me, because it was part of my every-day life. I did not mean to marry Giuseppe—but I was looked upon as Giuseppe's betrothed by all the girls in Naples. I lived their life, Bon Ami. I used to tell you there were two people in me. But I loved you, Bon Ami, with all my heart and soul, and I

was afraid to tell you so. I used to suffer there when you came. After I had been speaking to you, or been out with you, there were quarrels, and once Uncle Antonelli tried to beat me, and I tore the stick out of his hands—I am strong, Bon Ami—and if he had touched me I should have killed him. They sent me to Naples to be away from you, Bon Ami—and I didn't care, for I knew you loved me. And when you came that night, and asked me to marry you I was so happy—I felt as if all the *Mafias* in the world couldn't hurt us. And then the devil got into me and I said 'I love to see him get angry,' and it was wonderful to a poor common girl like me to see how she could move a man like you, Bon Ami, to any passion by just saying a few words; and then I wanted to tell you of Giuseppe—and oh, Bon Ami dear, dear, I don't know why I said it. I was burning, quivering with love for you all the time. And if you had just turned back I would have thrown all my arms round you, and defied them all and gone out there and then into the street with you—to the end of the world."

She talked on. Bunny, with set face and great pain in his eyes, stared at the elm-trees. Her voice—the rich, half-English, half-Italian voice—seemed to mingle with the warm scents and the heavy air of the hot afternoon and lap him round. He almost lost sense of her words, their sound was so perilously alluring.

"If it had been a man of your own rank, Bon Ami, it would not have mattered—not so much?" she asked suddenly.

"No," he replied in a low tone, "not so much."

"But you see, Giuseppe was of *my* rank. I didn't realise what it meant to you."

"It meant all filth and horror and abomination to me," he answered, looking round quickly into her eyes. She met them, bent her face a little nearer him.

"I swear to you, Bon Ami, by the soul of my mother, that I have let no man on earth kiss me but you."

Bunny put out a trembling hand. "Hush!" he said weakly, "you mustn't talk of those things. I'm not quite fit." Vittoria sank back again on the grass.

"Don't you care for me any more?" she asked sadly.

"The same meteor can't flash back again across the sky, Vittoria."

She sighed for answer. On the grass a few feet away lay the sovereign which he had thrown into her lap and which had fallen when she had risen to detain him. Suddenly she noticed it, stretched out for it, and handed it up to him. The coin lay in her open palm. Her palm was one of her curious beauties—pink and soft, crumpled like a baby's. He had often kissed it. The sight of it

recalled startlingly dear foolishnesses of dead days.

"I can't take this from you, Bon Ami."

He closed her fingers over the coin. The touch sent a thrill through him.

"You must, for my sake, Vittoria. You will require food—and it would be foolish to walk back to London."

"I will keep it, if you will forgive me."

"Yes, I forgive you. We each misunderstood the other. There is no more to be said. I am glad you came, for you have taken a shudder out of my soul."

Silence fell upon them for a while. The shadows had crept far down the gravel path, and only the wall in front half hidden by the elm trunks glowed in hot sunlight.

"I must be going," said Vittoria.

"What are your plans?" he asked.

"I have none. I never thought. I walked crazily—only wanting to see you."

"That was the Italian you."

She laughed as if the future were all harmoniously arranged for her.

"I suppose so. But I never dared hope that I should be so happy. I thought perhaps I could die after I had spoken to you again—and nothing mattered. Nothing matters now."

"But where are you going—not back to the Hôtel Bomboni?"

"To have them marry me by main force! Oh no. I know a place. I will think it out in the train."

She put the matter aside. The hour was too precious for discussion of things so unimportant. She entered upon a brief but characteristically told narrative of her doings since they had parted. She had lost him. The Hôtel Bomboni grew hateful. She longed at least for sunshine and absence from the abhorred Giuseppe. For months she lived in Naples. There she had seen no English newspapers, did not know Bon Ami was wounded. Only when she returned a month ago did she see a reference to him in connection with his poems. A quite recent paragraph in a column of literary gossip had told her how desperately ill he had been and where he was staying. She had written five letters and torn them up. These last few days she had been as one paralysed. The approaching marriage had been like a doom. They had watched her like cats. She was like a fowl under the eye of a snake. She shuddered.

"It's all over. I will never see the Hôtel Bomboni again."

Bunny listened silently. On the surface of deep emotion ran an irritating current of concern for her immediate welfare. She could not throw herself

penniless and friendless upon London. Suddenly Jasper occurred to him as the very god out of the machine. He would find her a refuge. Let her go to some decent lodging for the night and trust to Mr. Vellacot.

"He is staying here—close by. I shall see him this evening. He is the wonderfullest man on earth—the nearest to the *bon Dieu* that ever was. You must do exactly what he tells you, Vittoria. I sha'n't sleep to-night unless you promise."

"I promise, Bon Ami, if it will make you happier," she replied.

She sat contentedly by him, though as physically tired as girl could be. Her feet were burning and blistered. Her limbs ached. She had walked seventy miles in two days and a night along the baked high road. The night before she had slept some hours in a barn. She had lived on bread and cheese purchased at wayside inns out of a shilling she had found in her pocket. But she did not care. She had reached that blissful stage of feminine abasement when self matters little so long as it is under the foot of the beloved man. And hope of unutterable things sang in her heart.

Bunny looked at her and saw she was perhaps more beautiful than she had ever been. All the dusky glow of summer evenings was in her eyes. The crimson flower in the sunshine had deepened in passionate colour. For the first time he saw her face spiritualised by love, elementary, unblushing, unashamed. And he knew that she offered him virgin heart and body and lips.

"It is time for you to go, Vittoria," he said, somewhat unsteadily.

"I suppose so," she sighed. She rose slowly to her feet.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Oh, not good-bye, Bon Ami."

"Yes. It's good-bye. I shall not see you again, Vittoria."

The joy died out of her face. "Why not, Bon Ami?"

"Because, after all that has passed between us, we can meet neither as friends nor enemies nor lovers. No relation is possible. I am going to marry my cousin, Lady Alicia Harden."

It was the man with grey face that spoke, not the boy that still lingered in him. He dealt the blow mercilessly, knowing it to be right. She held him with her eyes, moved very slowly and sat on the footrest of his chair, as Alicia had done a few days before.

"Do you love her?" she asked.

"I love her truly," said Bunny, meeting her gaze as he had met death.

"You lie, Bon Ami. You have loved no one else but me in all your life.

You love me still, and no woman on earth shall take you from me. You love me all the more because you have suffered through me. Dare to tell me that you don't love me."

"Go!" he cried, shaken and white, thrusting out his hand involuntarily.

It met her in mid-bosom. She caught it, held it fast to her young breast, that rose free behind her bodice. Her grip was of iron. The pressure of his hand unlocked floodgates. She was less a woman than a swirling passion. She bent forward and her mouth drew close and her breath was on his lips. Elm-trees, sky, and the sweet shadows of the waning afternoon melted into infinite depths of burning agate. He yielded. Time stood still.

At the sound of a woman's voice Vittoria started, drew herself from his arms; was rising to her feet, when the woman followed by a man sharply turned the corner by the rhododendrons.

CHAPTER XX

VITTORIA sprang up and regarded the intruders like a young lioness. Bunny too rose and stood supporting himself with his hand on the back of the chair. Jasper, the first shock of surprise over, touched Alicia's arm gently.

"Come with me, I can explain this matter," he said.

But Alicia paid no heed. She had drawn herself up to her full height and was returning the girl's stare haughtily. It was the first crisis in life she had been called upon to meet. She came, as she had once told Jasper, of a fighting stock. Instinct compelled her to immediate battle.

Bunny passed his hand rapidly over his forehead and through his curly black hair, and held himself as erect as illness and wound would let him, and kept his eyes proudly on Alicia. But his face was so white and pinched that Jasper instinctively crossed the three or four yards of lawn that separated them, and stood by his side. Everything was very still. They were in a little world of shadow. Only the tops of the elms were warmed by the setting sun. And for an eternity of a few seconds the two women fought silently,—one hatless, dishevelled, dusty, superb in young barbaric beauty; the other tall, perfectly dressed in pale lavender, with darker shade in a toque setting off a queenly head, delicately coloured, aristocrat to her feet, English to the bloom on her fair cheek. The southern girl's bosom rose and fell beneath her thin black dress. Alicia turned to Bunny, indicated Vittoria with a slight swing of her parasol.

"Can you introduce me to our guest?" she asked with subtle intonation.

"Lady Alicia," said Bunny, "this is Miss Vittoria Antonelli. I once asked her to be my wife. She did me the honour of refusing."

"May I ask if you have repeated your offer?"

"I was not at liberty to do so, even if I had so desired," replied Bunny, very haughtily. "Miss Antonelli came here to clear up an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"And now that it is cleared up?"

"My heart is lighter, and I shall walk in the way that honour dictates."

"Only honour? If it is only that which ties you, I will give you back your freedom."

“Alicia,” said Bunny, “Miss Antonelli, for reasons she has explained to me, has come on foot for seventy miles from London to tell me what she has told me. She is in need of food and rest. By ourselves I will inform you with absolute frankness of all that has occurred. Don’t you think we might end a very painful situation?”

“There is but one way of ending it,” said Alicia.

“I will go,” said Vittoria, moving swiftly round the footrest of the chair and coming up to Bunny. “Good-bye, Bon Ami.”

She held out her hand; he gave her his; she kissed it three times quickly and looked up with passionate face.

“You dare not say that you don’t love me,” she repeated in a voice full of deep vibrations. Bunny remained quite still, trembling from head to foot.

Vittoria turned, walked away; in passing Lady Alicia she regarded her with face and eyes aflame with triumph.

“Stay!” cried Alicia, shortly. The word rang out curiously sharp in the quiet air. “I said there was but one way of ending. It must be done at once. I give you back your word. You are free to choose. Make your choice now.”

She was wrought to full pitch of exaltation. The romantic which had daintily guided all her emotional life joined itself with pride of race and pride of self and compelled an heroic folly. She had ever loved to play with delicate drama. Her nature craved it. Now that melodrama came her way she was powerless to resist its fascination. The dramatic moment was the most intense that she had lived through. She realised it. Through the midst of anger and scorn ran a shivering thrill of conscious rectitude and magnanimity. Besides, warmly woman, she resented to her inmost the girl’s insolence of triumph. Another instant of doubt was intolerable.

Vittoria paused. Bunny put his hand to his side. The two women fronted him. He clutched Jasper’s arm and looked from one to the other. Alicia’s fox-terrier ran up from behind the rhododendrons and stood with ears a-cock as if waiting for what would happen. Then Bunny let go his hold of Jasper’s arm, staggered three steps, and with a little choking sob fell at the feet of the two women. To which one he was going none of the three there could tell.

The fall was so sudden and so ghastly that for a second there was a deathly silence. Then Alicia screamed and bent forward; but in a flash Vittoria was on her knees with Bunny’s head on her lap, while with her free hand she waved the other away.

“Leave him. Don’t touch him. You have no right to touch him. You don’t love him—you can’t love him. Bon Ami—my God!—Bon Ami!”

Jasper, who had rushed up, loosened his collar. Then he looked round gravely at Lady Alicia, who stood white-faced and helpless.

"I will run to the house for some brandy and send for the doctor."

He disappeared. Vittoria hung over the unconscious lad and gazed at him with terror dawning in her eyes. Alicia stooped again, and wiped the froth from his lips with her lace handkerchief.

"It is only a fainting fit," she whispered desperately.

But Vittoria did not hear. She called his name, poured into his unheeding ear a torrent of anguished speech. For her the other woman did not exist. But at last the gloved fingers of Alicia happened to meet her hand and she wrenched them away. Then Alicia touched the girl's shoulder.

"I have given you equal rights," she said very gently; "but remember that I love him too."

The girl looked at her, speechless, and the look haunted Alicia in the after days.

Jasper returned with brandy. He threw himself down at Bunny's side. Something in the rigid young face and glassy eyes which had not struck the women, smote him with an awful conviction. He put his hand upon the boy's heart for a breathless moment. Then he rose to his feet.

"He is dead," said he.

Vittoria upturned a face of unspeakable tragedy. Alicia stood frozen. Jasper took her by the arm.

"Leave them together for a little," he said; and she suffered him to lead her away. She walked with him dry-eyed through the shrubbery and across the lawn. In her ears rang the wail of a woman's great agony. A shudder ran through her. Mechanically she tried to strip off her gloves without unbuttoning them, and tore the soft kid from the palm upwards. They passed through the French windows of the drawing-room and into the hall. At the foot of the stairs she turned, very erect, very much the great lady. Her lips framed a "Thank you, Jasper," and she dismissed him. He watched her ascend and disappear at the turn.

He retraced his steps. The household had not been alarmed. The coachman had driven off full speed in the dog-cart to fetch the doctor. Jasper came upon Vittoria still kneeling, with Bunny's head in her lap. The girl was a piteous sight. When he touched her and spoke to her, she shrank and enfolded the boy's body tighter to her bosom.

"Stay here until I come for you," he said. "I know all that there is to know, and I promise that you shall see him again."

He firmly loosened her grip. It relaxed and she fell sideways upon the grass. Jasper took all that remained of the divine young spirit in his arms and walked back with it to the house.

Then it became known, and there was hurry and consternation, and Jasper became aware of a phantasmagoria of white faces and sobbing women. Lady Luxmoore helped him to lay Bunny upon his bed. He explained the tragedy in a few words. The poor lady could scarcely comprehend. She had loved Bunny as all those who had known him had loved him. She had known many sorrows in life. Her only son had died in the flush of his manhood. In this dead boy she wept for him again.

Jasper left Bunny's body in the hands of women. Outside the door he met Alicia. She had taken off her hat and gloves. Her face was very white and drawn, but her eyes were dry.

"That girl?" she queried.

"I am going to her," said Jasper. "I knew their story from the beginning."

"He said she walked from London."

"Yes."

"She must stay here. I will have a room prepared for her. If you will bring her to the house, you will find all in readiness."

Jasper regarded her in amazement.

"You are the noblest woman that God ever made," he said.

"No," she replied, meeting his eyes full. "I am trying to be just. Can I go to him?"

For answer, he opened the bedroom door. She entered, and the door closed. He went back to the little nook behind the rhododendrons. All things were wrapped in August twilight. Vittoria still lay upon the ground. Some distance off was her black straw hat. In the long Indian chair the cushion retained the impression of Bunny's body, as he had rested upon it. At the foot of the chair was a crumpled piece of paper; on the little cane table Bunny's cap, his case of cigarettes, and a writing-pad with a pencil across it. Vittoria did not move. Jasper took up the writing-pad, saw that there were words upon it, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he went to Vittoria. With patience and tenderness he conveyed to her frantic brain the fact that she was to remain at Greybrooke, at least for the night. He raised her to her feet. She followed him stupidly. Halfway across the lawn he met the housekeeper.

"Is this the young lady?" she asked. "Her ladyship has given me her instructions."

He resigned Vittoria to her charge. Then sat down upon a garden-seat

under the sycamore-tree, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. Bunny was dead. The bright eager life was quenched. To realise it staggered thought. It seemed as if, for the first time in man's experience, death were in the world. And the world seemed to shiver with the despair of a great darkness. Bunny was dead. The words struck upon his brain with dull iteration like the tolling of a bell. The quick spirit so much in love with living in spite of the lassitude of latter days, so filled with the pagan horror of death, would no more make its joyousness felt upon the earth. The voice was mute. There would be no more music. An irreparable calamity had fallen upon the land. Bunny was dead. And Jasper sat there and cried like a woman.

Twilight was deepening. The sultry oppression of the day had culminated in suffocating heat. Black clouds hung low over the trees. There was a flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and the storm burst. Jasper crossed the lawn and entered the drawing-room again. The doctor arrived, gave a certificate of death. Failure of the heart's action. The rheumatic fever had produced cardiac complications. It was to be regretted, said he to Jasper, that the lad should have been subjected to sudden emotional strain, especially with his sensitive temperament. It was a shocking thing. A young man of genius. It would be a great blow to her ladyship. Nothing more could be done or said. Jasper, who usually suffered all classes of men gladly, was not sorry when the kind-hearted platitudinist had gone. Left alone, he stood at the window regarding the storm. He remembered how Bunny delighted in thunder and lightning. He used to say that it exhilarated him, sent the blood dancing in his veins. Only a few days ago he had been describing in his wild, picturesque way a terrific storm at sea on his voyage out. And at the end of his gorgeous imagery he had added, "It really was *ripping*!" And now the lightning flashed before blind eyes, and the thunder crashed upon deaf ears, and the blood danced no longer in the veins.

A servant came to say that her ladyship begged that he would remain, as she desired to see him. Dinner would be ready in five minutes. Her ladyship hoped that he would excuse Lady Luxmoore and herself from joining him. He sent the reply that he held himself entirely at her ladyship's service. A short while later he made a pretence of dining. His place had been laid at the seat which he had occupied the evening before. Only twenty-four hours ago Bunny had sat at the end of the table at his right. He had looked so happy. It was the first time he had worn a dinner-jacket which he had ordered from London on his sudden accession to a vast banking-account of a couple of hundred pounds or so and a cheque book. Just before dinner he had anxiously consulted Alicia and Jasper as to the fit of the garment. And during dinner Jasper had clasped a hand of each, and out of his heart had prayed God to bless them.

Coffee was brought him in the library, where he lit his pipe. It was the

room especially apportioned to Bunny. Sad traces of his occupancy were everywhere. He had thrown his pen across the open blotting-book on the writing-table; and Bunny had a schoolboy trick of chewing the end of his penholder. Jasper put the maimed thing in his pocket. His pipe over, he returned to the drawing-room, resumed his station by the window. The thunder had ceased, but the rain fell steadily through black night. He wondered whether they had remembered to bring in Bunny's chair, and then an instant afterwards it flashed upon him drearily that it did not matter.

Presently Alicia entered. She wore a tea-gown of dark material. Her face looked very white by contrast. He met her in the middle of the room and held her hand, which was quite cold.

"You have been crying," she said in an even voice. "I wish I could. Tears would help me. Something inside me wants unlocking. I don't know what it is."

"Tears will come," said Jasper. "You must wait. I wish to God I could be of help to you."

"You are everything outside myself that I have. It is God's mercy that you are here."

He yearned over her in her tearless grief.

"It is a good thing, my dear, to have loved him," said he.

Her eyelids fluttered for a moment. "Let us sit down," she said. "I can't rest until I know all between those two. Tell me everything that has come within your knowledge. It would be truest loyalty not to try to spare me—loyalty to me and to him."

He regarded her with wondering admiration.

"You have a heart of steel, Alicia."

"It is not a thing for a woman to be proud of," she said with unaccustomed bitterness.

"Surely the brave soul—" he began. But she cut him short.

"The story, Jasper, the story!"

So he told her all the sorrowful tale as he knew it, from his first introduction to Vittoria, when he dined with Bunny at the Hôtel Bomboni, to the last frantic night in the rooms in Great Coram Street; and Alicia sat and listened with a set face.

"Why do you think she came this afternoon?" she asked, when he had finished.

He drew from his pocket-book the newspaper cutting that Cudby had sent

him yesterday, and handed it to her.

"If only I had shown it to Bunny this morning!" he said remorsefully.

"Which of us is more guilty, you who tried to save him pain, or I who didn't. Which of us loved him more?"

"My dear," said Jasper, very tenderly, "I loved him as a father or an elder brother. You loved him as the woman who was to be his wife. The two things are very different."

"It was also for my sake—chiefly for my sake that you did not show him this."

"Your interests and his were one to me."

"But in your heart you think that this girl would have been a fitter mate for him than I."

Her words flashed a tragic illumination on his mind, in the instant of his saying in inspired conviction, "No, a thousand times, No!" Either woman would have been disastrous for Bunny. Alicia continued in her calm unemotional tones,—

"Yet you knew they were all in all to one another—otherwise you would not have led me away this afternoon, telling me to leave them together."

Said Jasper: "The time had passed for her to do him harm."

"Still you knew that it was her place to be beside him, and not mine."

Jasper drew a long breath. All his love for her could not avail for tenderness against this deadly logic, yet he tried to smooth her path.

"It was the only way to avoid horrible pain. You were a great lady who had learned self-restraint—she an undisciplined girl of the people who would have fought for possession."

Alicia shook her head sadly.

"Your heart is infinite kindness, dear Jasper. But you are speaking now to the bare soul of a woman that can't be deceived. You are a man of absolute uprightness and justice. You are a man of strong will. If you had felt that it had been my right and not hers, it isn't Jasper Vellacot that would have surrendered it. Be frank, Jasper."

"Why insist? Why run knives needlessly into yourself?"

"I must put myself right with my dead. I felt it in the stupor of this afternoon, and I told you that the girl should stay here. Now you have told me the story. I understand it all. I know what was in her mind when they parted. I know what she went through during the time of absence. I know why she ran away the night before her wedding day without money to pay her railway fare.

One day she will tell me and it will be mere details that I shall have to learn. For instance, I don't quite see how she knew Bunny was here. It was through no action of Bunny's. He never wrote to her, or she to him."

"Upon that I would stake my immortal soul," cried Jasper. "He was a man of fierce honour."

"And so would have come to take my hand to-day," replied Alicia, slowly. "That is why I will put myself right with him. She is in his room now beside him. And she shall stay. And I can't cry, Jasper."

"Go into the library, where all his things are lying about," he said unsteadily.

"I would I were dead by his side," said Alicia. She put her hands to her head. "Oh, God," she exclaimed, with a sudden rush of passion, "if I hadn't you to speak to, I should go mad. You are the one being in the world to whom I can speak."

"And I have only told you painful things, I am afraid."

"Things that only the most devoted of friends could say. I shall never forget."

They talked awhile longer. Of yesterday and of the days before. Of his poetry. And then Jasper remembered the writing-pad that he had thrust into the side pocket of his tweed jacket. He drew it out.

"These must be the last lines he ever wrote," said he. They bent over the pad together. On the top was written, "The Villanelle of the Fair Queen Alicia," and below was scribbled the random triplet that had first shaped itself in his mind to the refrain. It ran:—

"Of all the queens, the queenliest one
Points out to me across the lake
A Valley in Avilion."

Her very lips grew white.

"It is prophetic," she said in a breathless voice.

"Prophetic?" he echoed. "Why? Wasn't Avilion a name for the Fortunate Isles—the Land of Heart's Desire? I remember Cudby and he once had a long discussion about it. He was looking forward to the happy days of your married life."

"It was to Avalon that the dying king was rowed across the lake by the weeping queens."

"And the legend was that he would come back glorious and strong again to rule the world. And that was what our dear boy meant," said Jasper, seizing at

the first specious argument to hand, so as to comfort her. He took a paper-knife from a table near, and slipped the page off the pad, and folded it neatly.

“Keep it, my dear,” said he. “This at least is your very own.”

Alicia looked at the hastily written words for a long time. Then she shook her head.

“No, I had better not keep it,” she said. She rose and went to the mantelpiece on which two wax candles were burning beneath red shades. Unfixing the shade of one, she burned the paper until only a little white flake remained between her finger and thumb. The ashes fell on to the hearth. She turned quietly to Jasper.

“Would you care to see him?”

He assented. They walked slowly up to Bunny’s room. Outside the door he paused.

“Are you strong enough to bear it?” he whispered.

“The world does not seem to hold the burden I could not bear,” she replied.

They entered. The room was dimly lit. On the ground, huddled against the bedside, rested Vittoria. They saw she had dropped asleep, through exhaustion, her head on her arm. Alicia passed her, treading softly, and took a lamp from the dressing-table, and returning, held it with steady hand over the bed where Bunny lay, his bright eyes hidden for ever beneath the closed lids.

CHAPTER XXI

THEN there came days of hushed voices and muffled sounds and darkened rooms and an oppressive sense of life at half pressure. The weather had broken. The hours of rain from a sad sky harmonised with the dreariness of things. The intervals of hot sunshine jarred. And one day a train from town brought many sorrowful faces to Greybrooke. Among them Cudby—tears making his gold-rimmed eyeglass difficult of control.

Elinor Currey was there, red-eyed. Alicia took her to her heart, whispered "My poor Elinor." The girl, comforted by kind arms around her, confessed miserably. She had strung herself up to play the consoler. Alicia in no way demanded consolation, and positions were oddly reversed. The appearance on a heart-rending scene of a girl with wan face and dusky Italian eyes moved Elinor to wonderment in spite of her misery. When the decencies of life permitted, she questioned Alicia.

"The one woman he loved: the one woman who loved him." And seeing a flash of contradiction on the other's face, she added, "No, dearest. Don't let us deceive ourselves. Let us face facts."

"And the facts?"

"You shall know them all. One winter afternoon, before the fire, when you and I can talk."

"She is beautiful," said Elinor, heroically.

"She is *The Chian Wine* and the *Carmina Amoris*."

"You have her here to stay with you? What are you made of, you dear woman?"

"I have been trying to find out for the past week," said Alicia.

Elinor did not question further. It was not an hour for beguiling confidences. Besides, the heart of Alicia's poor mystery needed no very deep plucking. The eye to see beheld it beating piteously beneath her impassiveness. Elinor turned off to common memories and shed not a few tears, thereby claiming the tenderest in her friend.

The anguished day came to an end and the sorrowful company departed. All that remained of the well-beloved lay beneath the wet grass in the little churchyard clustering round the Gothic steeple that could be seen from the lawn of Greybrooke; and to Alicia her house was left finally desolate. After a

mournful travesty of a meal with Lady Luxmoore, she retired to her own morning-room upstairs, craving loneliness. A small fire burned on the hearth, as the evening after days of wet was chilly. Much of her committee work had been carried on since the early summer in this room; and evidences of it in the shape of neatly docketed papers, reports, patterns of woollen stuffs, tracings of architectural plans were scattered about amid many luxuries—dainty furniture, rare china, delicate water-colours, a world of costly knick-knacks. A photograph of Bunny enlarged on porcelain stood framed in old Italian silver on the mantelpiece, and on a Sheraton table near by the slim volumes of Bunny's verse reposed in sumptuous bindings designed especially for her by Edory the Academician. It was a chamber of many vanities. Alicia summed them up one by one as she sat before the fire.

Her maid came in with a packet and a note. Mr. Vellacot's messenger had brought them. "I have made Bond," wrote Jasper, "give me a sleeping-draught for you. You will please take it. If you don't sleep, you will get ill and that would be silly. Do be your own sweet self and please, Yours, J. V." She gave the bottle to the maid.

"Put this in the bedroom. I will take it before I go to bed."

She dismissed the girl, wondered at Jasper's kindness and perception. She had told no one, not even Dr. Bond, of her sleeplessness. How did he know it? He seemed to have the genius of helping humanity in great things and small. Perhaps in the small things he rose higher than in the great—for in them the heart speaks most humanly. Two or three days before a trunk full of necessaries had come for Vittoria Antonelli—her own belongings. Jasper, unasked, had gone to London and brought the trunk back with him. How he had prevailed over the baffled Italians he had not said. It was his way to do things masterfully. But the fact of a man with all his burden of cares and responsibilities thinking of a poor girl's wardrobe had given her a wondering and disquieting conception of Jasper's wider horizon.

He was a man who saw life steadily and whole. She saw it in little glittering bits. It was herself that she beheld reflected in the room. All her philanthropies were elegant triflings. Her delicate emotionalities skimmed like agreeable swallows over the surface of sentiment, ever and anon dipping the tip of a wing. A fald-stool, its rest supporting an open illuminated missal, stood in a far corner. She had played at religion as she had played at enthusiasms for art, for poetry, for benevolence. And she had played at love. It was the appalling knowledge of this that had kept her awake of nights, had paralysed her woman's heart.

She had not loved Bunny.

She had not known what love meant. She had mistaken the moon for the sun. It had been reserved for this half-wild girl not only to teach her the first elements of love, but to overwhelm her with full revelation of passion's significance. By its side her own adumbration of it had become a thing of naught. In the hot sunshine the moon is a pale futility.

The girl's glance of scorn when she had claimed to love him equally withered all the pretty flowers beneath which she had hidden her soul. The soul was bare now, and the glance still beat upon it, and the torment banished sleep. It dried the fountain of her tears. It robbed her of normal expression of grief for one who at least in the way of kinship and sweet friendship was inexpressibly dear to her. The days had been a nightmare of isolation from human sympathies. She felt herself to be like an iridescent bubble that had burst and had no further existence for the world around.

The essential pride and uprightness of her nature saved her from prostration. She had spent her life in agreeable trifles, but yet she was capable of great action. She despised pettiness. Race helped her. In performing what she considered to be an act of justice she was scornfully merciless to herself. Pride caused her to exaggerate perhaps the deference with which she commanded that Vittoria should be treated in her house, and to disregard the wagging of conjecturing tongues. It kept her calm, impassive, outwardly sympathetic. Also, something of the eternal woman felt agonised satisfaction in turning the knife in the wound. Woman is an instinctive martyr.

Her head ached and her eyes burned. The gold-topped phial of smelling salts that lay by the lace handkerchief in her lap gleamed the grotesque parody of a restorative. She could not rest, began to move about the room among her vanities. Looked long and fearlessly at Bunny's photograph, taken since his return. Opened the *Carmina Amoris* and read some pages. Smitten with sudden understanding, she sat down again and read with her new and torturing vision the palpitating passion which once had conveyed no meaning to her, which she had once condemned as extravagant and abnormal. She remembered how she had said to Jasper, after the reading of *The Chian Wine*, "Any one can lead a calm, rational, equable existence. So long as one is sane . . . This play makes me shiver as if I had been among mad people." The memory scourged her. She felt an aching jealousy of the girl to whom these things had been as real as the sun that warmed her and the air she breathed. Why had she herself, with all the fairness of the world within her grasp, lived her life without knowing them? Why had he not taught her? The answer to the question added to her humiliation. She was not the woman for him to teach.

And remorse poignantly tragic dwelt terrifyingly at the back of her mind. How far was she personally responsible for Bunny's death? Before she took

her sleeping-draught that night she fell on her knees and prayed to God the prayers of a soul in need.

She awoke the next morning physically better. She had slept. She rose and breakfasted, and faced the small routine of her day. Life had to be lived. She went out of doors to discuss deferred questions with her gardener. The weather was fine, and she drew refreshment from the sunshine and the clear air. Jasper, calling to make enquiries, found her on the terrace in consultation over flower-beds. They conversed awhile, then he left to attend to his correspondence, promising to return for lunch. They had not had a meal together since the night of Bunny's death. She went back to her flowers. A few moments later she saw Vittoria, dressed for walking, with gloves and hat, approaching from the other end of the terrace.

Alicia gave a final order to the gardener and advanced to meet her. Beyond an occasional salutation when they passed, and an occasional enquiry as to the guest's comfort they had as yet had no speech together. This morning the girl obviously sought an interview. She spoke first.

"I have come to say good-bye and to thank your ladyship for your most wonderful kindness."

"Why need you go?" asked Alicia. "You are very welcome here as long as it is convenient to you to stay."

"My only excuse for staying is gone, your ladyship."

It was only then that Alicia remarked the rich sweetness of her voice and her admirable refinement of manner. Her last words were toned with deep pathos. The defiance had melted from her, and she stood before Lady Alicia, humble and sad. Alicia felt pity for the girl.

"I should be sorry to let you go without knowing more of you,—if you will let me?" she said.

"Your ladyship is all generosity," answered Vittoria.

"My friends say 'Lady Alicia'—not 'your ladyship.' "

"But I am not your equal. Oh no—no! You don't know who and what I am. You have treated me as if I were a lady. I am only a common girl."

"Hush, my dear," said Alicia. "What we have passed through abolishes difference of rank between us. I know all that need be known—believe me. Let us walk up and down a little."

They paced the terrace slowly, side by side. After a pause Alicia continued, —

"I have no wish to pry into your affairs. But before you leave my roof I should like to have some assurance as to your immediate future."

Vittoria turned wondering eyes upon her.

"I don't understand. Why should you care what happens to me?"

"In the first place, you are my guest—and a young girl. And as I am much older than you, I feel some responsibility. Besides—for the sake of some one lying over there."

Tears started to the girl's eyes. She wiped them away hastily and checked a sob. To Alicia's further urging she murmured incoherent words of thanks. In her present chastened mood she felt acutely the difference of social—almost of spiritual—level. She had never met a great lady before. She was seized by shyness mingled with wonder and ungrudging admiration. In Lady Alicia was the same indefinable quality of the aristocrat which she had been quick to note and to prize in Bunny. Like him, Lady Alicia viewed things from an unattainable standpoint. The loftiness of mind and scorn of meanness which she had attributed to no other being but him, she found were the portion of both. Superior to her own class, she had been fond of speaking slightingly of women—provided of course that no man, not even Bunny, joined in the depreciation, for then her sex took up defensive weapons. But here was a woman who stood immeasurable heights above her vulgar category, and Vittoria beheld her as a legendary queen who had revisited the earth. At first the girl had been too much dazed with misery to be conscious of surroundings. External forces placed her by the side of the passionately loved dead, and there she had remained and had her being. Dream hands had given her food and aided her to change her raiment and led her to rest, and dream figures had withdrawn before her when she moved towards the darkened room. Her passage from torpor to speculative life had been but gradual. It was only on the morning of the day before that she had awakened to the full knowledge of what had happened, of where she was, of the marvellous kindness she had received from the woman whom she had taunted and to whom all around her referred almost reverentially as "her ladyship." Vittoria had burned with shame, and to-day had come to take her leave. But until this walk on the terrace she had not been guided to the sources of the lady's magnanimity. Now they were revealed to her abashed eyes. Now for the first time she realised the atmosphere that had been Bunny's inheritance. Poor as he was, he entered by inalienable right this world of grace and chivalrous feeling. Women, fragrant of soul, delicate of thought, noble of deed like the perfect fair lady by her side, were his natural companions. She thought, with inevitable rush, of the Hôtel Bomboni. She saw, infinitely magnified, the depths to which he had stooped to offer her his love. Lady Alicia in this fair garden: herself leaning over the counter of the fly-blown restaurant, with Giuseppe in the background—the contrast brought a shudder. How had she dared love him? How had she dared

send him away? And for the first time too she realised in the fibres of her being how horrible had been to him the abomination of her words.

For some moments she lost herself in this woeful dismay, just conscious of the music of a kind voice in her ear. Then she roused herself with an effort, and the voice grew articulate and Lady Alicia seemed remoter in her serene heights than before.

"You see, I know all the circumstances in which you left your home," she was saying. "Do you propose to go back?"

"Home? to the Hôtel Bomboni?"

"Yes. Are you returning?"

"Oh no—no—never in life," she cried. "It is too horrible. It is too unclean. It reeks with all that was worst in me, all that he should never have known. Oh, I should not have dragged him down there. It is through me he is dead now. I wish he had killed me instead. But I loved him so. Oh, I loved him so!"

She flung her arms upon one of the stone vases that flanked the flight of steps leading from terrace to lawn, and broke into a passion of sobs. Alicia put her arm round her shoulders and spoke tenderly. The paroxysm over, Vittoria lifted a tear-stained face.

"What does it matter what happens to me? The sun and moon and all the bright stars have gone out of the sky."

"You said that just as he would have said it," whispered Alicia, startled by an echo of a dead voice. And for the first time her eyes filled with tears.

"It is because I loved him so. I remember the tone of every word he has ever spoken to me."

"You have loved a brave gentleman and a great poet. It is something."

"And the most beautiful soul God ever made," cried the girl.

"Yes," said Alicia, looking at her wonderingly through a mist, for the phrase was an illumination,—"a beautiful soul. You have seen more than we others. You were nearer to him than any of us."

"Ah no!" said Vittoria. "It was you that were nearest to him, my lady. He should have married the queen that was fitted for him."

"No woman was fit for him—not even you, my dear, with your beauty and your love and your understanding—but you were the fittest."

She moved away from the side of the steps where they had been standing, and Vittoria moving with her, they continued their walk along the terrace, not speaking. Alicia was still bewildered by the illumination. "He was a beautiful soul." Human speech could not have presented the truth she had missed more

vividly. The girl had touched the stars while she was creeping on the earth. Thus each abased herself and exalted the other.

The footman approached. Miss Antonelli's luggage had been taken to the station, as she had ordered. The train was due to start in twenty minutes. It was an easy ten minutes walk to the station.

"Miss Antonelli particularly said she would walk, my lady," added the man in response to gathering rebuke in her ladyship's eyes.

"It is my fault," said Vittoria, as the footman retired. "I took upon myself to give emphatic orders. I must go."

"But where?"

"Friends I know will house me till I can get work."

"But what work? You must let us help you, my dear child. We—I—Mr. Vellacot—can provide easily for your future."

"Mr. Vellacot talked to me yesterday," said Vittoria, regaining her independence of bearing, "and I said 'no.' He used all the arguments."

"He's a wonderful man," said Alicia. "He thinks of everything. But because you said 'no' to him yesterday, that is no reason why you shouldn't accept to-day. Let us help you to-day, for your Bon Ami's sake."

She looked yearningly into the girl's eyes. Vittoria softened.

"I am not ungrateful. I shall think of you as of the Madonna in heaven until I die. But I have a little pride—all I have left—and I can accept nothing—I will work and keep myself clean for him. I shall never love another man all my life. I will do penance for my sins—for all my grievous sins, my lady. As long as he lies under that grass, I can come to no harm."

She stood superb, and held Alicia with her deep passionate eyes. Alicia said,—

"Will you—will you kiss me?"

She advanced a step. Their lips touched; and then as if frozen barriers were melted in a miraculous instant, the two women's arms were around each other and their hearts rushed together.

"You will always let me know your whereabouts—you promise?"

"I promise," said Vittoria.

"Once more—won't you let us provide—not for your happiness—but for your comfort?"

"Your love is all I want, and all I'll take."

She flung her arms suddenly again about Alicia and then was gone. Alicia went indoors, and—why, neither man nor woman knows, but only the God that

fashioned the mystery of her soul—she cast herself upon the nearest resting-place and cried her heart out.

CHAPTER XXII

SO Bunny was dead and Vittoria had gone forth into the unknown with the inspired notion, poor girl, of rearing her life as a monument to his memory, and Alicia and Jasper were left to face each other alone; not only for the remainder of Jasper's holiday stay in Hertfordshire, but for a far-reaching period whose end was hidden mistily from them both.

The link that had curiously bound, yet separated them had disappeared. They could converge backward upon a common memory, but between them stood no living presence holding a hand of each. No matter how tender and how hallowing was that memory, each was inwardly confronted with the complex problem of a life to be lived through, and perceived, according to temperament, intensity of vision and standpoint that the other was a resolving factor in the problem. Jasper saw it, because he loved Alicia in the simple way of man and because his untellable love was the rain and sunshine of his existence. Alicia felt it, because she beheld him as the one unchanging thing in the unfamiliar transformation that upheaval had brought about in her inner life. He was the one human being to whom she could look for understanding and for comfort. The woman was in sore need. She stood alone among the shattered emptinesses that had been her very self, and this man with the grave rugged face and wistful eyes, so strong, so tender, was the only creature that could aid in the work of reconstruction. She had talked bitterly, remotely to Elinor Currey, with proud humility to Vittoria; in both cases there had been certain concealment. To the world at large the inevitable mask must be presented. But from Jasper, who knew all, no concealment was necessary. When Jasper found her with face buried among the sofa-cushions at the sobbing end of her first passion of tears, and sat beside her, she felt inexpressibly grateful and comforted, as a child crying in the dark welcomes a familiar presence. It was she who bade him not cut short his holiday; to stay there—for her sake. He had urged the fear of intruding on the privacy of her grief. She had answered that she was not the strong and self-sufficing woman she had thought; she needed guidance. Was he not one of her nearest of kin? To whom else could she turn? Any one but he, knowing all, would have despised her.

"For a mistake of the heart?" Jasper had said. "To err is human—to acknowledge it as you have done, divine." Whereat she had smiled wanly and had confessed her shame at realising herself as the weak-willed woman

drifting helplessly at sea. Jasper accepted the position of guide and consoler in his sober way, though he was dismayedly conscious that the ineradicable instinct of her sex pinnacled him too high. To Alicia he was the lighthouse tower, the same after as before the shipwreck.

She told him so one day. He looked away from her with the patient wistful gaze that had touched her to pity when they first had met at the opening of his hospital at North Ham.

"A lighthouse? I would to God I were. I walk on planks. The sea might swallow me up at any moment."

"How can that be?" she asked. "No man is on firmer rock than you."

He checked a sigh. Half-confidences were dangerous.

"What do you fear?"

"Nothing. Nothing save the loss of your friendship."

"You might as well fear a volcanic eruption here at your feet."

"Things more impossible have happened, you know," said he, reflectively. "A man is apt to judge the chances of the future by the chances of the past. You can count on my life-long devotion to your interests, but not upon the certainty of it always being valuable to you. Things may happen. You may reject it."

"Never—" she began.

He restrained her with uplifted hand. "Don't make rash vows. David says, 'Put not your trust in princes.' I am a sort of prince—I rule a fair-sized kingdom, according to Cudby—it is his picturesque manner of expressing an oppressive fact. And the kingdom muddles along comfortably, most times, like the British Empire. But as I'm not a constitutional monarch, only an adventurer that has come along and seized the throne, my seat is insecure."

"But you didn't seize upon the throne. You created the kingdom."

They were taking an afternoon stroll together through the fields behind Greybrooke. Her reply brought them to a rustic stile in a fence. He helped her over. The incident broke the train of conversation. It gave him pause to reason down a sudden craving to tell her the secret history of his kingship. When she steadied herself, after the little jump, relinquishing his hand, and broke woman-like into an irrelevant cry of admiration at the warm, peaceful landscape, he felt unspeakably relieved. He took up the new thread and adroitly kept it from entanglement with his own affairs until they halted at Greybrooke gates. Then she said with a half-smile:

"Whether you like it or not, Jasper, I've become a naturalised subject of your kingdom, and I'm a High Tory, you know, and believe in Divine Right. If

you meet presumptuous claimants, call me in to help."

"You are more royalist than the king," said Jasper.

"All good subjects are," she replied, her head moving in the little stately nod with which she generally clinched an argument.

That was her view of the matter. She regarded Jasper's disclaimer of eternal stability as an expression of his modesty; of a philosophic outlook on the mutability of things mundane; perhaps of mere weariness beneath the weight of stupendous responsibilities. Her faith in him, so far from remaining unshaken, was strengthened by her avowal of loyalty. But Jasper went back to his cottage with the lie burning into his flesh. He considered grimly, as was his way, the possibility of confession. He was not Jasper Vellacot. He was not her cousin. He was not the real king. His vast wealth belonged to a man even now living beneath his roof. He was but a nameless adventurer. Suppose he told her this, what would happen? He found a dull blank for answer. If she loved him, he could put her to the cruel test. It would be his duty to come before her in all nakedness of soul, so that she should see him as he was. But the sacred obligations of love did not exist in friendship. Nothing would be gained. All that was precious to him in life would be lost. She, too, would lose his help, which he saw was of value. For her sake as well as his own he must play out the sorry game.

Yet now that Bunny was dead and Alicia came into more direct relations with him, making claims upon his friendship for the fulfilling of her deeper needs, the lie which at times he had half forgotten grew to be ever present. It was as if a hair-shirt which he had hitherto worn hair outward was now turned hair inward. And inevitably this torment was accompanied by a recrudescence of the pain of his hopeless love which all the gritting of teeth could not suppress. The man suffered greatly.

"I've about come to the end of it, Tom," he said a day or two afterward, when the little man had run down for a few hours on business, and had found him in an unusual state of depression.

"My dear man, death is death—the human lot. You mustn't take it so to heart," said Cudby, for once in his life misreading his chief's mood.

"You silly fellow," said Jasper. "It isn't that. I don't grieve enough for the poor boy, though God knows I loved him dearly. I've come to the miserable conclusion that it was for the best. The gods did love him after all, and took him and spared him a life of unhappiness. Either way he would have been unhappy, Tom—whichever of the two he had married. His genius would have been cramped—you know what I mean. He had given the world the best that was in him. Both we and he have been spared the tragedy of the second-rate,

which would have happened had he lived in the conditions that seemed inevitable—married life here or with Vittoria. My God, Tom, how we do manage to tie our lives up in knots! And when we do, the best thing that can happen is for—for—"

" 'The fury with the abhorred shears,' " quoted Cudby.

"Yes—for the Fates to do the Gordian business. I've tied mine up in a devil of a knot."

"Oh," said the little man, turning his cropped grizzled head on one side. "That's what is troubling you, eh? You mustn't let it. I thought you were getting over it all. What's the use of worrying?"

"None, I suppose," answered Jasper, clasping his hands behind his head and stretching out his long legs. "But worries come, Tom. Sometimes they seem a bit too tormenting. I've been awake the best part of three nights, and, as I said, I've about come to the end of it. Did you ever love a woman, Tom?"

Cudby puffed three or four smoke-rings from his cigarette and watching them said,—

"She drove me to Shakspeare. I owe her a debt of gratitude. But I had a damned bad time."

A short silence gave emphasis to this revelation. Jasper pulled at his pipe. Then finding it was choked and would not draw, he laid it impatiently on the gaudy red cover of his square dining-table, and rising, paced about the cottage sitting-room.

"It's getting on my nerves, Tom. The eternal lie. I'm obtaining the heaven of that woman's soul under damnable pretences. I'm a contemptible impostor. She thinks I'm her cousin, her equal in birth, an honest—an honourable man. She has a woman's silly faith in me. If I told her to go into a convent to pray for Bonamy Tredgold's soul, she would do it without question. If I asked her to marry me, she would do so. By God! she would. She doesn't love me—but I could make her. I know I could make her. She is only unawakened. Bunny couldn't have done it—for the boy's love was elsewhere. But I love her with every drop of blood in my veins and I could make her love me. She has given me the heaven of her soul, I tell you—and I've got it by fraud, like everything else I've got. It's sending me off my head. My God, Tom, look at this wealth pouring in daily from all over the world—all fraud. You know what a curse it has been to me."

"I know that you have given it away as fast as you have made it and that the world is a happier and a brighter place."

"That's just where the ironical hell of the thing comes in," cried Jasper, with a passionate down stroke of his arm, "I can give away the money. I can

take it up in handfuls and throw it to the poor. I won't have it for myself. I can rid myself of it. I can clear the damned weight of it from my conscience. But this—this pure and sacred woman's soul that I have got—by the same accursed fraud—I can't get rid of. I can't throw it into the world and salve my conscience by saying that I'm easing the lives of my fellow creatures with it. It's inalienable. And I can't throw it back upon her. She needs my friendship as much as woman ever needed friendship in the world. She said, God forgive me, that I was a lighthouse-tower in her shipwreck. I must accept it. And I must look into her pure eyes and keep the knavish, contemptible, skulking lie out of my own. It's very hell, Tom."

He turned to the little window and looked out over the row of potted geraniums on the ledge outside. Cudby wrinkled up his face in anxious solicitude, till it looked like a very old vulture's and further contorted it by screwing in the gold-rimmed eyeglass.

"My dear old chap," said he, lighting a fresh cigarette from the stump of the old one, and watching Jasper's profile closely so as to gauge the effect of his words, "I hope you are not contemplating the insanity of giving yourself away. The morbid impulse to confess is a feature in the psychology of the neurotic criminal classes. That way madness lies, Jasper."

"If she loved me," cried Jasper, wheeling round, "I'd go to her this instant with the whole story."

"But she doesn't."

"No. She doesn't."

"Well," said Cudby, "ponder over what I have told you."

"I suppose you're right, Tom," said Jasper, wearily. "You're the Mr. Worldly Wiseman of Bunyan with a redeeming bit of Faithful and Hopeful thrown in. Yes. I'll have to go through this as I've gone through the rest. I hope God'll forgive me."

"*C'est son métier*," murmured Cudby below his breath, with a reminiscent smile.

"I've done what I could in extenuation," said Jasper.

> " 'Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
> Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
> Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
> Two chantries where the sad and solemn priests
> Sing still for Richard's soul.' "

So Cudby quoted. "Other fellows, kings and emperors have been there

before, old chap," he added affectionately. "Some of them the salt of the earth —like you."

Jasper shrugged his shoulders. He had grown moody after his outburst. For a few moments he busied himself with the cleaning of his foul pipe. When blowing down the stem had achieved a satisfactory result, he placed the pipe tenderly on the mantel-piece. The respectable widow-woman, his landlady, came in to prepare the table for tea. She laid a coarse, clean table-cloth over the red cover, set plates and a huge loaf and jam and butter and water-cress, and great breakfast-cups, and a tray bearing cream and sugar, and a huge Britannia-metal teapot full of strong black tea. The two men drew chairs to the table. Cudby looked quizzically at his chief.

"Is there another millionaire in Christendom who sits down to such a meal?"

"It's a deuced sight better than tea-party tea," said Jasper, pouring out the syrupy liquid. "This is *tea*. Trust an old colonial. Remember the old days—the tin pannikins, Tom? On that infernal farm that wouldn't grow anything? My God! And yet, sometimes I regret them."

"I don't," said Cudby, filling his cup with hot water out of an earthenware jug with a broken spout. "I was born for civilisation. In externals I should have made the better millionaire of the two. What does Lady Alicia say to this?"

"Oh, she thinks I'm harmless," replied Jasper, with his wistful smile.

"Well, so long as syrup of tannin does you good, I suppose it's all right," said the little man, delighted to see his chief sipping his tea with primitive enjoyment. If poppy or mandragora could have medicined Jasper into temporary forgetfulness of his tormented conscience, he would have administered them in gallons. He drew the talk into impersonal channels, managed to interest Jasper in the account of a glacier which he had come across in his Swiss holiday, and then sprang upon him the news with which he had been bursting since his arrival.

"The dissolution is definitely decided upon. There will be a general election in the autumn."

"What?" cried Jasper, dropping his knife.

"A general election. You know what that is. A day will come in the near future when you'll no longer be Jasper Vellacot, M. P.—when you'll have to seek the suffrages of the independent electors of North Ham."

"How do you know?"

The little man hugged himself to see Jasper's keenness. This was just the thing he needed.

“I met Sparling in town this morning. He had been hoicked out of the Tyrol by a telegram from Headquarters. Was to be on the spot at once. Of course the public don’t know. The newspapers are still speculating academically.”

“I looked upon the newspaper talk as idiotic,” said Jasper.

“It isn’t. A bombshell will soon burst over the country. Only the inner ring know. That’s really why I came down to see you. The papers I brought might have been sent by post.”

“Why on earth didn’t you tell me at once?” said Jasper.

“This is devilish good tea, after all,” said the little man.

CHAPTER XXIII

JASPER called at Greybrooke in the morning. Alicia received him in her own private room, into which the scents of the garden stole through the open window. He noticed that the framed photograph of Bunny had disappeared from the mantelpiece and the vellum-bound copies of the poems from the Sheraton table. Unconsciously, after he had shaken hands, he glanced around to discover the whereabouts of the familiar objects. She interpreted his glance instinctively.

"I have given them away," she said, with a motion of her head toward their old resting-places. "They were all that I was allowed to give. *You* won't think that I didn't value them."

"I know," he said. "It is your way to give royally."

"And yours to judge royally, my good Jasper," she replied, with a little air of pathetic deprecation. "Sit down and tell me the news."

"How do you know that I have any?"

She smiled. "I see it in your face."

"Am I so transparent?" he asked. "Well, there is news. The dissolution has been decided upon. Cudby had it confidentially from Sparling. A general election in the autumn."

"Oh, I am so sorry," cried Alicia.

"Why?"

"The strain upon you—your shoulders bear enough as it is. And you have had so disastrous a holiday. You are not made of iron, Jasper."

"Oh, yes, I am, pretty nearly," he returned, with a short laugh. "I shall pull through all right. The excitement will do me good. But I must bring my stay here to an abrupt conclusion, I'm afraid. The election will be a hard fight—and I have to go and set my house in order before we begin. So in a day or two I must say good-bye."

"I shall miss you," she said, looking at him frankly.

"And I you. But you yourself will be coming to town soon."

She reflected for a moment. "Yes; I suppose so. When you are gone, this house will seem peopled with ghosts, and they are morbid companions. I'll go to Illingham for a fortnight or so—then London."

“You will help me with the election? I shall need every hand that can work—yours above all.”

“But I should be of no use.”

“Where could I find an abler canvasser? Stay—it isn’t because I refused your services when you offered them at the last election?”

“A month ago I should have offered them again—Ah! don’t look so puzzled, Jasper. The desire is a hundred times stronger, but somehow I feel less confident about things. It strikes me that I can’t do much.”

Jasper did not argue against this proper humility. He knew what she had passed through. Intuitively he struck the right note. He bent his brows upon her, and kindliness strove with mock severity in his eyes.

“You can obey orders, can’t you?”

She smiled, looked up at him fleetingly, with some shyness.

“Yes,” she said.

“Well, you will receive instructions. A list of houses shall be given you. You will call at these one after the other and you will flatter the men and kiss the children no matter how many inches deep they are in mud-pie and treacle, and so win the mother’s heart; and you will not leave a house till you’ve convinced everybody from the grandfather to the baby that the Golden Age will come again if they elect me and the Deluge if they don’t. You see it is very simple.”

“You are too good to me, Jasper,” she said, holding out both hands to him. He took them in his.

“Then I can count upon you?”

“On my obedience—yes,” she said submissively.

Jasper gripped her hands and turned sharply away; then plunged back into serious discussion of the election.

“I may lose my seat. The other side have been working for months against me. I wonder who they’ll put up. Not Blayden again. He’s too weak. Most likely Jepson, who is in bad odour at Middleton and wouldn’t get in there in these patriotic days. He has spoken once or twice at the Radical Club in North Ham. He’s a strong man, you know. I have an idea it will be the toughest fight in England.”

“You will win, Jasper. You always do.”

“Luck is capricious. It may desert me.”

“It isn’t luck,” she maintained. “You do yourself injustice. It is your own qualities as a conqueror. You are ordained to great things. You must win.”

“I’ll try,” he said grimly.

“Perhaps, after all, it will do us good—this election,” she remarked with a little sigh.

“I’m sure of it,” said Jasper.

When he had gone, Alicia returned to the letter which she had been writing. But the flow of epistolary inspiration had been checked. Her mind was full of the approaching contest. It loomed with sudden all−importance before her. The retention of his seat in Parliament was vital to his schemes. He must win. The image of a defeated Jasper presented itself for dismayed contemplation. For a vivid moment she realised how tremendous would be his disappointment, and for the first time in their acquaintanceship she arrived at a serious appreciation of the grave import of his work. Her own petty interests and industries faded from her mind as things of no concern. She tore the letter she had been writing into little pieces and let them fall absently from her finger-tips into a small heap on her desk, and sat for a long time with knitted brows, thinking very deeply.

Jasper returned to town with the lust of battle within him. He was aware of his waning popularity at North Ham. Personally it was due to the machinations of the ineffable Wickens, whose influence was great; politically, to the nature of things. The borough was essentially radical. Sir Samuel Dykes, his predecessor, had only got in by a narrow majority on the crest of a unionist wave, and Jasper had triumphed before mainly on the strength of his philanthropies and his popular programme. Now that the war had prevented the redemption of pledges and had heaped millions of public debt upon the taxpayer, the faith of the constituency in a Tory government was shaken, and it had returned to its old gods. If he could win, it would be a victory indeed. And Jasper was in that exalted frame of mind when a man means to win.

First, as he said, he had to put his house in order. His month’s holiday had caused arrears of work to accumulate with which Cudby’s smaller capacity and his lack of authority had prevented him from grappling. Jasper had the napoleonic grasp. As it was, Cudby had made a mistake costing his chief some thousands, and Jasper had to set his wits to work to recover them. In spite of the curse of the golden touch, he chafed at losing. He was not without the vanity of the conqueror. And it was as a conqueror that he resumed the direction of his multitudinous affairs. Coming back to it all from the quietudes of human love and suffering, he felt with a new and fierce joy the throbbing of

the vast machine which he controlled. He held the levers of a thousand interests in all quarters of the globe, and their pulsations vibrated at his finger-tips. It gave him a sense of uncrushable power. Reaction from the bitter humiliation of soul through which he had passed in the latter days of his intercourse with Alicia drove him upwards to unwonted altitudes of pride. He viewed his kingdom with a passionate craving to govern, to direct, to see the result executed on the flash of the command. He exulted at the thought that all was his own creation, that his brain alone devised, his will alone compelled. From the management of his tin-mine in Australia to the pensioning of a broken-down hurdy-gurdy man, his was the sole hand that guided. In this fever he began to long for vaster enterprises than any he had undertaken. Had his wealth been greater by a few millions he would have bought London, and turned it into a paradise for the poor.

Into these days of waiting till the battle should begin he crowded weeks of strenuous labour. In the few moments of leisure he allowed himself he would take Cudby by the arm and walk him round the deserted Bloomsbury Squares, talking of his projects for the future. These were many; some feasible, others sheerly fantastic. He knew of a desolate tract of country east of the Yukon where gold could be found in trainloads. He would acquire rights, have it worked, and devote the proceeds to a vast Assurance Company for the working classes, which would solve forever the question of Old Age Pensions. Only those who paid no income tax would be allowed to insure in it. He would open co-operative kitchens in all the great cities of the kingdom. He would do wonderful things; among them he would win this election. There had been rumours last session of changes in the ministry if the government were returned again. Why should he not be offered a position? Hints had reached him. Once there, the next step would be into the cabinet. And then in years to come, why should he not rule the Empire?

“Beware of megalomania, my dear friend,” said Cudby, one day as they were returning after one of these inspiring rambles.

“What’s that?” asked Jasper, who now and then betrayed curious little ignorances.

They were on the doorstep of the house. Cudby paused, latch-key in hand.

“The ultimate evolution of swelled-head,” he answered chasteningly.

But the appearance at the suddenly opening door of the man Burke, pallid and ironical, coming, as he so often did, like the shadow of a Fate across Jasper’s path, furnished Jasper with a reply. He had a sure guarantee of sanity. But he laughed at the shadow. Burke had grown decent, almost respectful. Jasper had been watching him. The man was quite content. Indeed, why should

he not be? He would reward the poor fellow for well doing by giving him a more responsible position. An interest in life was everything to a man. There would be plenty of exciting work that he could do at North Ham.

"I'm deuced sorry he has turned sober," said Cudby. "I had hopes once that he would drink himself to death. Oh, don't look shocked, my good Jasper. I don't set up for a benevolent altruist. If I had been king I should have beheaded him for reasons of State. Also because I don't like the shape of his nose or his mouth or anything about him. As it is, don't encourage him to have interests in either life or elections. Make him a birthday present of a dozen cases of champagne—or a box of dynamite cigars."

"Don't talk like a devil, Tom," said Jasper, with one of his stern looks. "It doesn't become you."

Cudby shrugged his shoulders. You might as well "use question with the wolf" as with Jasper when he adopted that tone. Indeed, like the average wolf, the more he was questioned the more were his contrary instincts stimulated.

So Jasper scheming out all things restlessly, with his napoleonic grasp of detail, apportioned Burke his post in the approaching campaign. Burke's dull eyes were lit with a gleam of satisfaction when Jasper announced his intentions and instructed him in the duties which it was proposed that he should fulfil. He professed gratitude; so genuinely that Jasper was touched. The man had something in the nature of a heart, after all. If only he could be trusted, like Tom Cudby, to keep from drink and interest himself in the working of the kingdom, to what heights might he not rise? Somehow Jasper could not help bringing him into the sphere of his *folie des grandeurs*. Strangely enough, in his present condition, he had lost remorse for wrong done to the man. He only regarded the woman.

Yet, though he forgot the torment in this new intoxication of power, the lie did not cease to burn red-hot at the back of his soul. And though he passionately repudiated the possibility of defeat at this election, it haunted him none the less. It was symptomatic of his fever that he should somewhat exaggerate the importance of victory. In soberer intervals he had irrational and morbid presentiments that North Ham might be his Moscow. The thought was unendurable fear. He would win. He must win. His prestige as conqueror required it. He lost sense of proportion.

The official announcement of the dissolution of Parliament and the beginning of the electoral campaign drove the intoxication from Jasper's brain. The work in front of him was too severely practical for excited imaginings beyond its scope. Fundamentally, he was one of the sanest of living men. For a short period, under stress of psychological circumstances, the two entities in

him, the visionary and the man of action, had commingled and melted together in a strange passion. Now the madness was over. He saw clearly. But the imperious necessity of victory was even more vivid before his eyes. The visionary replaced Moscow by Waterloo. The man of action plunged into the turmoil with every energy of brain and body.

As he had anticipated, Jepson, abandoning hopes of success in his late constituency where patriotic fervour consumed a respectable multitude, accepted the invitation of the Radical Committee of North Ham. His candidature was vociferously welcomed. The battle began in earnest. Wickens's red face and light suit and yellow chrysanthemum in his buttonhole pervaded the streets. He made no secret of his hatred of Jasper, and spread abroad abominable lies. For one that reached his ears, Jepson, who was a high-minded man, apologised to Jasper, and published his apology.

These were days of ceaseless activity, intense strain, when Jasper slept dreamlessly like an exhausted animal and ate he scarce knew when. His courage lit the enthusiasm of the more timorous of his supporters who at first had despaired of success. He worked indefatigably among them, would not hear of defeat. Imperialism and Popular Reform—on that platform they could conquer any constituency. At his headquarters he was accessible to every one, answering questions, setting doubts at rest, speaking out of accurate knowledge, with the air of a vast reserve of strength behind him. He spoke in halls, in the open air. Convinced of the righteousness of his cause, he scattered abroad a rough oratory that had the magic of genius. The hopes of his party began to run high. In the streets his tall, stooping figure in its awkwardly fitting clothes had long been familiar. Now it was as ubiquitous as that of Wickens. His instinct of organisation led him to every weak spot. He was always on foot, in all weathers. One drizzling, grimy day, he halted, with dripping umbrella, his boots and trouser-hems caked with mud, his back splashed, before a poster of the enemy:

"Liberal voters, do not bow your knees to the Plutocracy."

A little knot of passers-by in the busy street paused out of curiosity. He turned round upon them and met their eyes with a humorous smile. The incongruity between the bloated-looking word and the bedraggled person it referred to could not fail to arouse a sense of the comic. The spectators broke into laughter. Jasper nodded pleasantly and passed on, delighted at having thus accidentally discounted the poster's effectiveness.

Lady Alicia came down daily and joined the band of workers, showing herself as indefatigable as Jasper. She too was in a fever,—of self-doubt, of desire to convince, of gnawing anxiety. The work of the world, which when played at had seemed such a gracefully easy occupation, faced her now as

something grim, iron, to be carried through with aching muscles and throbbing brain. Her canvassing for Jasper was work deadly serious. She too lost sense of proportion; but then she was obeying a law of a non-humorous sex.

Jasper met her in the street one day. They had few chances of private talk during the turmoil. He asked her for her news. She handed him her note-book with an air of timid apology.

"I'm afraid I haven't done much."

"What do the ticks mean? 'Sound'?"

"Yes, and the crosses are 'doubtful'—and the naughts 'irreconcilable.' "

"But there's a tick against Wheeler, the greengrocer in Smith Street!"

"Why, yes," she replied. "He was easy."

"But he's one of the most pig-headed radicals in the constituency!" cried Jasper, in great delight. "If you've got him, you've got a hundred votes. How do you manage it?"

She coloured with pleasure at his praise and looked at him, faltering on the brink of tears.

"They all seem to know so much more about it than I do," she said. "So I let them talk."

"That's just it!" he cried gleefully. "First let them empty out the stale stuff they call their opinions and then pour the sweet sense in." He scanned the note-book. "You're doing wonders. If they all are as successful as you, it's simply a walk over."

"I hope things are going well," she remarked with a shade of anxiety.

He pounded the pavement with his umbrella—"They *must* go well. They've got to! But we'll see more clearly after Friday."

"Friday?" she queried, forgetful for the moment.

"You know. The great field-night—our pitched battle. All has been skirmishing up to now. Did I tell you Lord John Revelby was coming down to give me a hand? He's a power among the better class. He will address himself to them. I shall go straight for the people. I have been saving myself up for it. You will come?"

"I should love to," she said.

They parted. Jasper went off to keep an appointment with Sparling and the organising Committee who were busy with preparations for Friday's meeting. They dreaded a disturbance, the populace of North Ham not being of the gentlest. He put heart into them. He wanted a hostile crowd. He had things to say to it. They suggested precautionary measures.

"As many as you like," he said, and sitting down with them he planned the battle.

His genius of perception of great issues assured him that he must stand or fall by Friday night's engagement. It would bring the waverers enthusiastically to his feet or leave them cold. He had to fan a dying patriotism into flame—to open despairing eyes to visions of hope. By the magic of his will he had to clear away mountains of prejudice—prejudice against his wealth, which the other side had skilfully piled up stone by stone. Already he had done much. He felt victory electric in the air.

Except the love of Alicia, he had never desired anything in his life with such passionate fervour. He had never striven for anything with such vehemence. Emotion not being based on reason, he felt that victory over the hostile forces arrayed against him would be the crowning triumph of his career. It would show him to be indomitable. And through the queer by-ways of his soul, with the lie still burning deep down, ran a vague presage that it would be a sign of God's consecration of him at last as rightful king. Meanwhile his nerve was braced for the struggle on Friday.

On Thursday evening Wickens met him as he was leaving his Committee Room.

"Going to win, Mr. Vellacot?" asked the butcher and ex-Mayor.

"I hope so," said Jasper, coldly.

"I don't."

"I'm glad that we are on different sides," replied Jasper, loathing the man with his red brutal face and flaring flower in his coat.

"You needn't be so damned glad as all that," said Wickens, turning away.

"It's rough on Jepson that he should have such scum as a right-hand man," Jasper remarked to Sparling, who had just joined him.

"It would have been policy to have conciliated Wickens all the same," said Sparling.

But Jasper cried out against the suggestion. There could be no compromise with such vermin, the blood-suckers of the poor. They must be taken by the throat and strangled and thrown into the ditch where they belonged. He rejoiced that the brute was his enemy. He had a lofty scorn for the man's power to harm. All the forces of good were fighting on his side.

Friday morning came. Jasper rose with a rare sense of exhilaration. As he was starting for North Ham, Cudby put a telegram into his hand. He tore it open, read it, with an inarticulate exclamation of surprise. It was a cablegram in cipher. It came from the mining expert he had commissioned a year ago to

prospect east of the Yukon. He had almost forgotten him till, in his surrexcitation, he had raved to Cudby of the famous Assurance Company. The message brought tidings of a new Pactolus. He flourished the paper before Cudby's eyes, his own lambent with a strange excitement.

"Megalomania!" he almost shouted. "Read this."

And Cudby owned to himself that the man was irresistible.

"It is the gift of God," said Jasper. "I can no longer despise it. I take it as an omen."

He had a moment of grandeur. "Why should I not be ordained to great things?" he added, remembering Alicia's words.

CHAPTER XXIV

LORD JOHN REVELBY was speaking. As an Under Secretary of State in the late administration, with interesting explanations of policy to give, he commanded polite attention. He was mildly sarcastic, mildly humorous, silky-voiced, somewhat scholarly, yet distressingly practical, the type of the professional politician in easy circumstances. The packed audience in the drill hall listened with respectful apathy, waiting for the revelations that never came. In Lady Alicia's ears his words droned somewhat unmeaningly. From her seat on the platform she regarded the mass of human faces. They stretched before her in endless lateral rows until they became blurred bands of pink in the distance. They extended in three tiers, right and left along the two sides, with here and there a break for exits, the two lines going off in perspective to the end, where, above the central door, ran a gallery, also filled tier on tier with the same pink indistinguishable blur. The three gangways between the lateral benches were blocked with standing men and women, while far off in the dimness beyond the open doorway could be discerned vaguely the black mass of the heads of those who had been unable to gain an entrance.

The seats on the platform, arranged in horseshoe form around a table in the middle, were as crowded as those in the body of the hall. Sparling was in the chair. Lord John Revelby stood at his right. Jasper sat on his left. Near by was Cudby, within easy reach of his chief. Alicia had been assigned a chair in the front row, at the end of the horseshoe on the stage right. Thus Jasper on the other side of the table had his face towards her.

Though the meeting was entirely open to all comers, there had been little disorder. Under Jasper's generalship the organising Committee had stationed strong companies of his supporters at various points of vantage. The unanimity with which they had broken into patriotic songs during the hour of waiting had somewhat cowed an unorganised opposition, which for decency's sake had been constrained to join in the choruses. The entrance of Lord John Revelby, Jasper, and the Committee, from the room at the back of the platform, had been the signal for enthusiastic cheering which drowned a counterpoint of groans. The groans, however, had struck painfully on Alicia's sensitive ear. She looked at this audience, for the moment so placid, and shivered at the thought of its likeness to a wild beast asleep. It was an ill-dressed, sweaty, rough, labouring audience,—its units, as she had learned from her canvassing experience, individuals appallingly remote from her in their outlook on life,

their aims, aspirations, their social and moral code. For the individuals she had felt a remorseful pity, a fervent desire to devote her resources to the amelioration of their position. But in the mass they frightened her.

At some conventional appeal to the flag on the part of the speaker, a man in the body of the hall cheered and waved a Union-jack wildly. A voice behind him bade him angrily put the blanked thing down. There was beginning of uproar. A smile hovering round the politician's thin lips restored adequate silence.

"With less blasphemy," said he, "and more patriotism, perhaps, I might support the gentleman's request. When we want to tame raging bulls we don't flourish the hated red ensign of Britain's glory before their eyes."

The audience laughed and cheered and hooted; but they were pleased, and went on listening, though with more alertness and more spirit of question in face and attitude. Alicia felt the change and looked across at Jasper, who, meeting her glance, flashed her a sign of encouragement. His eyes were still lambent with the certainty of predestined triumph. She smiled back to him all her hopes.

Cudby leaned forward and pulled Jasper's sleeve. Jasper bent his ear to receive the whisper.

"It's a good thing we had this Downing Street machine to speak first. You'll come in all the stronger as a man."

Jasper nodded brightly, surveyed the countless faces, and knew that he had it within him to master them. Things were going splendidly. He noticed Wickens, who sat in the third row of the benches near the central gangway, conspicuous with his red face, light suit, and yellow buttonhole, look round now and then anxiously, as if unable to account for the amiable disposition of the audience. Jasper derived much satisfaction from these signs of discomfiture. Then he forgot the man in the swelling consciousness of greater issues. His gaze again embraced the crowd. In a few moments he would grapple with it, lift its heart on high, set it athrob with the passionate ideals of an Imperial Britain, mistress of the world, filling her marts with the produce of the five continents, her poor fed from overflowing granaries, the land stately from end to end with palaces for the mitigation of every human ill and for the cultivation of every noble instinct. The informing spirit of the great speech before him swam in a brain, for all its intoxication, luminously clear.

Lord John Revelby exchanged a glance with the chairman, swallowed the rest of his speech, came to the peroration, and recommended Mr. Jasper Vellacot to the continued suffrages of the electors. He sat down amid some applause. Sparling explained that he had no need to introduce Mr. Vellacot.

Jasper sprang to his feet.

Deafening noise greeted him; cheers, howls, hisses. The aspect of the audience changed like a dull grey sea suddenly lashed into storm. Popular or not, his personality had the power of exciting passions. He stood facing them in silence while the tumult lasted, a smile on his lips. He let them yell and whistle and groan and wave Union-Jacks and tear them down and struggle in clamour until Alicia thought the demoniac uproar would never end. Suddenly he threw up his hand, and as if by witchcraft the sea calmed. He was thrilled to the heart. The obedience of the mob had all the startling swiftness of a miracle. Alicia drew a quick broken breath.

Jasper began to speak, his words at first coming with the hesitancy of a flood that seeks its natural channel. Then the torrent burst forth. It swept from his lips the refined tones of speech that he used habitually and left the natural rough Australian accent, homely, broad, allied to that of his hearers, in itself eloquent of his upbringing among the people. He appealed to his grim, labouring audience in their own Doric, from their own standpoint. Raised them to unimagined heights. Each point and pause met with cheers and fierce clamour. The innermost was touched, for adhesion or revolt. The hostility fanned eloquence into flaming utterance. The action and reaction between speaker and hearers grew electric. Jasper lost himself. Nothing seemed to exist but a soul pouring itself out in tumultuous words. The spiritual and mental exaltation of the past weeks culminated in inspired oratory. The Under Secretary of State stared at him wide-eyed, like a man who, seeing a herdsman, suddenly finds him transfigured as Phœbus Apollo. And Alicia stared at him frightened—no longer by the people, but by the man himself.

And as he talked the dissentient sounds became fewer and fainter; until a certain point when the great audience cheered as one man. He had won the victory. Through his veins ran sheer exultation. Radiant with triumph and inspiration, he continued. Again he lost himself in the thrilling joy of uplifting hearts to high hopes and high endeavours. Was vaguely conscious of a passionate personal appeal to be received among them as a man among men, when a word hurled at him swiftly, fiercely, hit him like a stone between the brows.

“You lie!”

He stopped short, staggered. Wickens was standing a few yards away, regarding him with hate in his eyes. For a breath or two the relevance of the word puzzled him. Then he remembered. He had been saying that his wealth had not been wrung from the poor; it had come unsought; had been put into his hands by God, for His purposes. And Wickens had cried, “You lie!”

“You lie!” cried Wickens again. “You stole it.”

Three seconds of amazed hush had separated the man’s two utterances. The fourth second brought a mighty hubbub of shouts and hoarse angry voices and threatening yells. One of the stationed companies of Jasper’s supporters tried to rush the position which Wickens had taken up among his own men. But the throng was too great. There were screams of crushed women. The attackers desisted from a futile attempt. A man struggling towards the front through the crowd in the central gangway diverted attention.

Jasper leaped to the front of the platform and thundered for silence. His supporters obeyed. Gradually order was established. Wickens, who did not lack courage, had remained standing.

“Now then,” said Jasper. “Speak!”

Sparling as chairman tried to interpose. The whole proceeding was out of order. Mr. Vellacot must continue his speech. Jasper waved him aside.

“Let him speak.”

“I have got to say that you are not fit to represent this constituency,” said Wickens. “I say that you are an impostor. Your real name isn’t Jasper Vellacot at all. I say that you stole your name and your millions from a man whom you have been keeping for the last year or two in your house—a man who you thought had lost his memory.”

“This is not the place to answer such a charge, and you are not the person I should answer,” said Jasper, steadily.

“I’ll find the person soon enough,” exclaimed Wickens, turning round.

And with the help of two or three of his friends he dragged from the crowd in the central gangway the man who had been struggling to the front, and brought him into the row of seats in full view of the platform. Burke eyed Jasper sullenly, and Jasper looked at Burke.

“If that man says I have wronged him, he is the one to accuse me,” said Jasper.

The audience sat breathlessly still, waiting for the result of this unexpected drama.

Even as he stood there before Burke’s accusing eyes, Jasper still felt a remaining thrill of mastery. In the tiny dim flashes of introspection that such a crisis allowed, he was surprised to find how little he was agitated, how little out of the normal the incident appeared to be. He was quite calm, quite collected. His voice had not an uncontrolled tremor.

“Your name is Henry Burke. I knew you years ago in Australia, though you had forgotten when I took you into my house destitute. I have fed you and

clothed you and admitted you into my confidential service. What have you to say?"

Burke cleared his throat and spoke, and but for the intensity of the stillness, his words, uttered as if learned by rote, would not have been heard. Wickens kept a grip upon his arm.

"I am Jasper Vellacot. You left me for dead in the bush, stealing from my pocket a pocket-book containing the title to the land which is now the tin-mine. If you deny it, I can prove it in a court of law."

"You cannot prove it," said Jasper, quietly.

"Can you deny it?" asked Burke, at a prompting whisper from Wickens.

The chairman rose. "Surely, Mr. Vellacot, we must end this unprecedented scene,—I cannot allow you to reply further to such preposterous charges."

Jasper looked around at the set, amazed faces of the audience; at Cudby, who sat huddled together in blank fear; at Alicia. For a long time, as it seemed to them, their eyes dwelt on each other's. Then Jasper turned quietly to Sparling.

"The charges are not preposterous at all," said he.

Wickens again whispered into Burke's ear. Burke cried out in louder tones, —

"Your name and every penny you have belong to me."

Impatient voices shouted clamorously: "Turn him out!" "Take him to an Asylum!"

Jasper faced the audience with uplifted hand. It was the supreme moment of his life. He had to make an irrevocable choice. Yet from the instant of Burke's appearance by the side of Wickens he had not known a quiver of hesitation. Forces worked within him of which he was not conscious till afterwards. He had an odd sense of its being a very simple, commonplace matter.

"Gentlemen," said he, "this person's story is true in every particular, and his claims are just. I have nothing further to say."

Then he walked quietly to his chair and sat down. It was indeed his hour of victory.

But Cudby sprang to the edge of the platform.

"At least you will admit publicly that you have no proof. It was your word against Mr. Vellacot's."

"Yes, I'll admit that," said Burke.

"You damned fool," growled Wickens.

The drama was over. A gasp of amazement, incredulity, wonder, rose from the audience. What had happened had been too remote, too impersonal to them to create riot. They broke into a surging roar of talk, each questioning and discussing with his neighbour. Many began to leave the hall.

Jasper looked up at Sparling, who stood stupefied, unable to grapple with the fantastic unreason of the situation.

"Dismiss the meeting," said he, "and ask them to go home quietly."

Sparling spoke the necessary words. The meeting rose, prepared to leave the building as if it were a church. Suddenly a man raised a voice like a trumpet.

"Three cheers for Mr. Vellacot—our Mr. Vellacot!"

And with the fluid emotionality of crowds, they followed the fugleman's lead, and cheered loud and long and waved handkerchiefs and hats, their eyes on the platform where Jasper sat regarding them impassively. Then the great audience began slowly to melt away.

Mingled motives of delicacy and consternation kept the crowd on the platform away from Jasper. At last Lord John Revelby, after a hurried talk and a hand-shake with Sparling, approached, and Jasper rose to his feet.

"Mr. Vellacot, words cannot adequately express my regret at this unhappy occurrence."

He bowed adieu. Jasper bowed gravely. The politician crossed to Alicia, who sat rigid, wearing the face of stone that Jasper had seen when he had led her across the lawn from the spot where Bunny lay dead.

"Can I see you to your carriage, Lady Alicia?" said the Under Secretary.

"Thank you," she replied mechanically; "Mr. Vellacot is looking after me."

He stared polite disapproval, bade her good-night, and made a courtly and diplomatic exit.

Jasper, who had been watching the dispersing throng, beckoned Cudby to his side.

"See Burke? He is just disappearing through that door. His friend Wickens has given him the slip. Run out and put some police on his track to see him safely away. He is half drunk as it is, and harm may happen to him."

"I'll see him damned first!" said Cudby, fiercely.

But Jasper gripped him by the shoulder.

"By God, Tom!—to-night, at any rate, you shall obey me—go! I'll wait for you here."

With a thrust he sent the little man staggering. And Cudby without further

question shot away in quest of Burke.

By this time the platform had thinned. Only the Committee and a few ladies remained. Jasper turned to the group of which Sparling was the centre.

"Gentlemen," said he, "an apology from me would be ironical. I must beg you to accept the resignation of my candidature."

They all regarded him dismayed. It was just possible to get another candidate in time. A wire to headquarters would bring something human and conservative down in the morning. But it was entirely impossible for the said conservative human to win the election. They stumbled about in the dilemma of a lost seat or a discredited candidate. During this short consultation one or two had desperately proposed the retention of Jasper. Sparling twirled his moustache in agitation. As no one replied, Jasper continued.

"You honour me greatly by your hesitation," said he. "But after what has happened my candidature would be a grotesque scandal. To-morrow my name will be a byword throughout the Empire."

He drew Sparling aside. "Spare me any more now. Get them away quietly. I have to wait here for my secretary. If any man ever belonged to himself, I do to-night. You shall have my formal letter of resignation to-morrow."

"Mr. Vellacot," said Sparling, holding out his hand, "two years ago, when I asked you to contest this Borough, I said that you were a man. Allow me to say it again to-night."

The great doors at the end of the hall clanged, as the last straggler left. The porter's footsteps echoed through the empty building as he went to close the side exits.

Jasper went to Alicia.

"I will ask Major Sparling to see you to the carriage," he said tonelessly. "Pray consider it entirely at your service."

She had come down by train; but they had planned to drive back together to London in a closed landau which he had hired from a livery stable.

"I can return by train," she replied. "The station is not far. But first I should like to have a few words with you. If I am selfish, refuse me without hesitation, and I will await your convenience, for you have gone through a great ordeal this evening."

He made one of his awkward, stiff little bows.

"I hold myself absolutely at your ladyship's disposal," said he.

He turned away to be caught by two or three of the Committee hanging back behind the others, who were disappearing through the door at the back of the platform.

“Good-evening, Mr. Vellacot. A brave fight.—I should like to shake you by the hand, sir, before we part.”

The kindness of the honest souls touched him. He shook hands with them at the door, which closed after them. Espying the porter standing at the foot of the platform with an air of enquiry, he went down and gave directions to the man. He could put out the lights in the hall. The lady and himself would go into the Committee Room to wait for his secretary, Mr. Cudby.

A small fire was burning in the grate of the little room, half office, half cloak-room, into which Jasper conducted Alicia. He put on some coals, made a blaze, set a chair for her, himself remaining standing.

She looked at the fire, not at him.

“Is that man’s story true?”

“Quite true.”

“And you are not—my cousin?”

“No.”

“Who are you?”

“I told you at our first meeting. A nameless man. All the facts of my life that I have told you are true. My lies” (she winced at the word) “have been those of omission.”

Her body swayed slightly from side to side, as she stared in front of her.

“It is difficult to realise you as a thief and an impostor. It seems as if no human being is real. I regarded you as the impregnable rock.”

“I told you I walked on planks. You would not believe me.”

“I scarcely know why I am talking to you now,” she said, after a little pause. “Perhaps because I felt I must have the whole story from your own lips. You are not a vulgar charlatan. You are a great man. Nothing can alter that,—you have shown it to-night—twice. You are a leader of men. You won a victory, threw it away and accepted ruin and disgrace.—That man has no proofs?”

“None. He admitted as much.”

“You have colossal courage,” she said. “I can’t understand you. I want to. I want to see what part of you I can believe in—whether friendship between us is still possible. I can’t throw you out of my life at once. The threads of it are too closely woven with yours—the most sacred threads. The dead binds us. What you have been to me I have told you. Also, I think my friendship has been of a little value to you—why, I have questioned very often lately—and I would not lightly withdraw it. In fact, I couldn’t, in spite of all. . . . Some day,

perhaps, you will tell me the whole story. But the essential facts seem clear. He came to you destitute. You recognised him as the rightful owner. You thought he had lost his memory. Why did you keep him in ignorance?"

"Because," said Jasper, crushing a black lump of coal on the fire with his boot, "because the interests of a kingdom sometimes demand that the usurper shall sacrifice his conscience and his honour for its welfare—and keep the real wastrel king in the background."

For the first time she raised her eyes to him, and they were very wide and beseeching, full of pain.

"Then why did you give up all to-night?"

Then suddenly, like the swift, magical loosening of snow over northern plains beneath the new sunshine, the cold grip that had kept him imperturbable, unfeeling, icily master of himself and of his destiny, melted away. In his heart grew flowers and green corn, and the laughter of life sang gladly. About him the air was fragrant with all the springtimes of all the years. Against his cheek whirred the down of invisible wings.

He closed his eyes, pressed his hands against them, dazed, bewildered at the transformation. He was free. Free at last. Free from the lie's intolerable weight.

In an illuminating flash he saw the one pure, absolute, uncontaminated answer to her question. It was vitally, essentially true. His surrender had been the only possible action of his soul. The dispassionate, unfearing avowal had been forced by spiritual currents of which, till this ecstatic moment, he had been unaware. Had not the lie burned into his soul? Had not it driven him to madness? What had been the history of his life from Bunny's death till now, but the history of the lie? And had not God given him the sign of victory which he had misinterpreted?

So he stood by the fire in the cheerless little room, with its rows of lockers and piles of dusty papers and one unshaded jet of gas flaring noisily, his hands before his eyes, a disturbing sphinx to the woman who questioned.

She rose, touched him on the arm.

"I must know. Why did you give up all to-night?"

Then his eyes met hers.

"Because I loved you."

She reeled back, as if from an unexpected blow. It struck her in mid heart. Nothing remotely like this had occurred to her as a possible answer to her question. She could only re-echo his words, very stupidly.

"I loved you here—in this place the very first moment I saw you—before

we spoke together—when I saw you drive up to the hospital in the Dykes' carriage. I have loved you every instant of my life since then."

"Why did you not tell me?" came from the outer woman, the inmost struggling in terrifying depths.

"With that lie in my heart?" cried Jasper. "You ought to know."

The outer woman still spoke. "Why do you tell me now?"

"I am free. You see me as I am. There are things a man can do and things a man can't do. While the lie was on me I could take my love by the throat and strangle its voice. Now I can't."

Instinctively she had shrunk back several paces from him. In a calmer moment he would have been staggered at the sight of her. The cool, serene, stately woman had vanished beneath the touch of a finger that had never laid itself before upon her. She had become a primitive thing. Her breath came quickly between stiffened lips.

She had found at last the fundamental reality of existence. It terrified her. She strove to strangle the new-born thing as Jasper had striven. Voices within mocked her. The seed had been sown since their first meeting. She had always loved him.

"If you had loved me," said Jasper, "I should not, perhaps, have told you now. I don't know. Anyhow I have eased my heart. You know me exactly as I am. What will become of me I have no idea. I have had no time to think. I have faith in God—He will temper the wind—I have done my best. I have had the joy of loving you. It has been all a wonder and a wild desire. And I have had the joy of telling you. You will not grudge it to me, for joys have not been too many in my life. If I have forfeited your friendship by telling you my love, I can't help it. Neither love nor friendship is possible between us. I am the most ruined man at present walking the earth, and I must say good-bye to you. So it doesn't matter."

She came close to him. "It does matter," she said in a queer voice. "It matters all the world to me—I throw our friendship away for ever and ever and ever. I want never to hear of it again. But I shall love you to the end of my life."

Then the door leading into the street burst open and Cudby appeared on the threshold. He was in great agitation, so great that he did not appear to notice the emotional faces of the two. He was out of breath.

"My God, Jasper—Burke—I couldn't find him at first—then I came upon him. He has been nearly kicked to death. I've had him taken to the hospital. He is there unconscious."

CHAPTER XXV

THAT she gave herself to him heart and soul in the hour of his utter disaster will always be Alicia's most blessed memory. That she stood by his side unfaltering during the following days of derision and humiliation and suspense will be her title to accomplished womanhood, whatever chances of high achievement the years may bring. Everyone of these days is cut clear in imperishable marble in her mind, and they are her most precious possessions. The world rang with the scandal. A thousand wires carried it to the ends of the earth; a thousand pens chronicled it; a million tongues voiced it. Alicia regarded the world with serene and defiant eyes, living intensely. The man was a man, and he was the man for her; and that was the beginning and end of the matter. She had found herself. She knew that whatever vain things still lingered in her imperfect humanity, the core of this grand emotion was henceforward the vital principle of her being. The awakened woman obeyed her sex and forbore to judge. Love was enough. At last she had gained the indisputable right to stay by the side of a man in life or death. Her place was eternally appointed. Doom or destiny, she accepted it in passionate gratitude.

Love meant faith, glorious faith in him. She no longer questioned what in him she could trust. He was greater in his downfall than she had ever seen him in his power. Brave and strong, he faced the world during those bitter days, while Burke yet lay incapable of affairs in the hospital at North Ham, and his name was a byword in the streets. In spite of complete catastrophe in which he had lost name and fame, fortune and power, he never wore the air of a defeated man. He had been ordained to great things. Alicia remembered her saying; believed it now with sublime fervour. They were much together and he spoke his inmost. She knew that his surrender was absolute. He would strain all nerves of mind and body to safeguard the kingdom he was resigning; that done, he would disappear from it like a man dead. He would reserve nothing. He would re-enter upon life penniless, bearing his old, half-forgotten name. And he would build up another kingdom, this one secure and lasting, for the happiness of men. He was one of the world's conquerors. There is no radiance in earth or sky like the faith of the woman who loves a great man greatly.

From the first moment when they had rushed from the Committee Room to the hospital and Jasper in terrible anger had said to Cudby, "This is at your door!" and Cudby had replied: "By God, it is not! I obeyed you like a dog, as I have always obeyed you and always shall obey you!" she had felt in her home

among elementals. She had known that she could walk beside him in whatever path he trod.

She cast aside convention. She put her life unreservedly into his hands. She loftily scorned Society's judgment of herself, and challenged him to scorn the obvious imputation that he was profiting by a weak woman's generosity, and thereby acting the dastard towards her. She claimed from him the contempt for petty things that was the main fibre of her own nobility. The fears and prudences that rightly restrained lesser natures were not made for them. Both had gone through the furnace.

So one evening they stood before each other, clean soul to soul.

"As God hears me," said Jasper, "if I looked upon myself as a beaten man, I would not marry you."

"As God hears me," she answered, looking into his eyes, "I ask of Him no higher boon than to be your wife."

He took her into his arms and kissed her long and tremulously. It was their first kiss. Her face was pale and her eyes were closed when he raised his head.

"For better or worse," said he.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"No, for better. A million times better."

Thus had they vowed themselves to each other. Thenceforward Alicia inhabited a new universe, in which the old order of things had changed. Jasper's glory was her glory; his disgrace her disgrace. Amid the hubbub and the shrieking around his fallen throne, she remained the fragrant, cool-fingered woman she had ever been, with a newer flush upon a younger cheek and a newer tenderness in serene eyes. In her pride she denied her door to no one. Friends poured in upon her full of eager enquiries, knowing her intimacy with the astonishing hero of the great scandal. To all she announced her engagement. Her intimates protested. It was madness. It was social ostracism. No one would know her. Alicia replied, putting on, with a touch of conscious humour, her air of a great lady,—

"I am not in the habit of being known. I know other people."

"You will not be received at Court."

"My house will be my Court," smiled Alicia, thinking of the new kingdom that Jasper was to win.

Only to Elinor Currey did she open her heart frankly, because of all the women who knew her Elinor alone understood. The others went away mystified and despairing. Even Lady Luxmoore bewailed her folly in secret. The old Earl, her father, wrote her letters of fervent piety which amounted to

prayers that God would restore her to a more worldly frame of mind. Her stepmother sent tracts. Both urged her rank. Alicia replied that the man she loved ranked with the princes of the earth; the honour conferred by marriage was on his side. To no one did she yield an inch, and after the first expostulation no one dared to continue. In her own proud sharing of Jasper's destiny, she fought his battles.

But to him she was utter woman, redeeming in unimagined measure the promise of rest which the first gracious sight of her had given to the weary man over two years ago. She discovered hidden founts of tenderness within her, at whose charm upon him when he drank she wondered with a new and tremulous joy. The first great kiss of passion had unloosened a thousand instincts, some of which caused her delicious fear. He came to her stern, strained, exhausted by the efforts to arrange for the welfare of the human beings dependent on him against Burke's recovery; by the sense of tremendous responsibility; by the planning of new schemes to win back, a penniless man, his place in the world as a great controller of men; and at a touch and a tone his face would brighten from twilight to morning, and then from morning to happy noon, and he would leave her with the sunshine in eyes and heart. And it was she, Alicia Harden, who had accomplished the miracle. On those nights she went to sleep aglow with a wonderful proud happiness. But what had she done with her womanhood all the years past? It was her only regret. It is the piteous regret of every woman to whom love comes late.

Burke was injured more severely than had been at first supposed. The surgeons found more than broken ribs and broken skull. The hurts that he had received from the brute gang of Jasper's partisans, who had begun by hustling him and then, as the beast passion grew, had kicked him on body and head, were found to be internal. But of this Jasper said no word to Alicia. It was enough that one should bear the horrible suspense and fight down the murderous hope that the man might die. He flung the evil thing out of his heart, but he spared her a like struggle.

Thus the news of Burke's death came to Alicia quite suddenly. She was seated at luncheon with Lady Luxmoore when Jasper called, sending down an urgent message. She met him in the drawing-room.

"I have come at once to tell you very serious news," he said without formal greeting. "You have a right to know. Burke has no longer any claims to my estate."

She looked at him searchingly; then guessed the truth.

"Do you mean—he is dead?"

"Yes," said Jasper, very gravely. "He died this morning."

He allowed her some moments to recover from the shock. Then he added in the same tone,—

"If his claims had been just, I should have had his death upon my conscience. But God has spared me. The man was not Jasper Vellacot."

"Not Jasper Vellacot?" she echoed. The quick colour went from her cheeks. She strove to realise what his words implied. The man was an impostor. The man was dead.

"You gave up all—made this terrible sacrifice for nothing?" she cried piteously.

He took her hand and kissed it. "I gained infinitely more from Burke than I surrendered to him, my dear. Let us never forget that. Having you, there is nothing I could wish undone. I may be presumptuous, but I seem to have seen God's protecting and guiding hand in everything."

She could only murmur a grateful woman's acquiescence. There was a short silence. Then her thoughts flew back to the bewildering news that Jasper had brought.

"Who was he?" she asked.

"A kinless tramp like myself."

"But I don't understand. Where was or is the real Jasper Vellacot?"

"Burke had killed him in a quarrel, the day before I came across him in the bush."

"How do you know this?"

"He confessed. At first to a priest—it seems he had been bred a Roman Catholic—and then, as he knew he could not live, he confessed publicly. I have it in writing, signed and witnessed. Let us sit down, and I will tell you the whole story."

It can be told here in a few words. Burke had killed in a quarrel a chance-met mate, and partly through idea of gain and partly through desire to remove traces of identification, had stripped the pockets of the dead man. When Jasper had met him he had been dogged by terror and remorse. The illness had come upon him, and Jasper had left him for dead. He had recovered, crawled away, and fallen in with human creatures in whose company he journeyed far from the scene of his illness. When he had met Jasper in Gower Street, he did not recognise him. He had forgotten their three days' companionship. The name brought back no definite memory. He had a vague idea that somewhere he had heard it, once before, long ago. That was all. From the slaying of the man to his solitary awakening in the remote hut, his memories were dim. The conscious hours had been a nightmare terror. Jasper's reference to the illness in

the bush brought back his fears. Who was this man? What did he know? From that moment he stood on the defensive. Jasper's magnificent bounty staggered him. He was cunning enough to see that it did not proceed from pure philanthropy. In the school in which he had been reared men gave a hard sixpennyworth for sixpence. Jasper was playing some deep game, connected in some unguessable way with the deed that his soul still shuddered at. He feared and hated Jasper from the first. There was no place for gratitude. Then he was not slow to perceive that he, for his part, had some mysterious hold upon his benefactor. His insolences were condoned. He presumed on his apparent impunity, claimed greater consideration than he received, and not obtaining it, fed his heart with hatred. At the same time he set himself to work to ferret out the mystery. The discovery of the old pocket-book was the key. It brought back in a flash all that terror and madness had obscured. The man he had killed had spoken of this piece of land, on which he hoped to find tin. He remembered the pocket-book. He remembered the name. He remembered the moody tramp with the stranger. He remembered the stranger's face. The whole of Jasper's course of action became intelligible. Then he felt that Jasper had robbed him, that this boundless wealth was rightly his. He burned for an opportunity of asserting his claim. Meanwhile Wickens, with whom at first he had consorted as a choice boon companion, had seen in him a possible tool which he might use on some occasion, to wreak his spite against Jasper. He gradually got the weak and drunken man under his influence, and when one day at the beginning of the electoral campaign Burke told him the story of Jasper's wealth, he felt that the Lord had delivered his enemy into his hands. And Wickens triumphed; but the poor wretch who procured his revenge was foully done to death.

When Jasper had ended the miserable story, they spoke long and earnestly together, awed beneath the clouding wings of the tragedy.

"You can enter on your kingdom again with a free heart, Jasper," she said at last.

"The free heart is there, yes," he answered. "I have nothing to hide now from man or woman. But the kingdom?" He smiled wistfully at her. "The death of the man to whom it never belonged can't make it mine."

"It can," she said, with wet eyelashes. "Don't you see, dear, that I can give you more than my unworthy self? I can give the kingdom back to you."

He looked at her with a little puzzled air of enquiry.

"Hasn't it struck you?" she asked, taking his hands in hers. "I am my cousin Jasper's next of kin. I inherit. It is all mine, to do as I like with. So I give it back to you—and now it is all yours, your very, very own. No one on

earth can claim it from you."

Before Christmas they were married. The great world forgot the amazing scandal as the great world with its multitudinous interests must forget individual incidents. But the smaller social world still called him adventurer, and held up shocked hands at Lady Alicia's folly. Proudly they placed themselves beyond the pale, living in retirement, devoting their lives to the administration of their vast wealth for the good of humanity. Their happiness was rooted in infinite depths.

Spring passed, and summer came, and in August they were once more at Greybrooke.

One golden morning she joined him on the terrace where he was smoking his pipe and looking over the lawn which seemed to be haunted with memories. She slid her arm through his.

"Shall we go, dear?"

"I thought, perhaps—" he began, with hesitating delicacy.

"No, dear. You and I. He would have it so, if he could speak."

They went across the lawn and through the shrubbery; paused for a moment at the sheltered nook behind the rhododendrons, and passed through the small gate in the box hedge into the kitchen garden, and by the back entrance reached the high road. A few moments' walk brought them to the quiet Gothic church that brooded over the grey shapes and green hummocks spread around its base. And so they came to the white marble slab beneath which Bunny lay. She stooped to place on it some flowers which she had brought with her, and then they stood hand in hand, looking down. The inscription was very simple. The name. The date of his death—exactly a year ago. His age—twenty-five. A line from "Adonais."

Tears were in her eyes, and tears were in Jasper's; and through the tears they looked at each other.

"We must love each other very, very dearly, Jasper," she said.

For answer he drew her close to him, as if to renew, by the dead boy's grave, the vows he had taken to love and cherish her. But being a man he only half understood the quivering complexity of emotions that had expressed itself in her words. By the quenching of this bright spirit she had been brought into the light. Her awakening had been purchased by the greater creature's eternal sleep. The love that now was the very life within her had come only as a heritage; a heritage of glory, but compounded of innumerable tears and immemorial pain; a sacred element of the divine to be enshrined in their holy of holies. To debase it in the light of common day were to profane the dead. Only thus, by loving each other very dearly, did the woman feel that they

could justify themselves before God.

They walked slowly away from the white slab, close together. They were alone in the peaceful English churchyard. The noontide vapours shimmered over the green grass and the moss-grown grave-stones. It was very silent; an idyllic hour. Their hearts were too full for speech, and irresistibly their lips met.

They passed along the south side of the little Gothic church, and as they turned the corner of the western tower, they saw enter through the lych-gate and come up the path towards them, an erect familiar figure, dressed in black, carrying a poor little bunch of flowers in her hand.

Then they knew that their idyll was a hushed tragedy. Only such endure.

THE END

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.

Hyphenation as been left as per original with no attempt to make consistent throughout the book.

[The end of *The Usurper* by William J. (John) Locke]