THE OLD BRIDGE

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THE BODLEY HEAD

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BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

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PART I

PERELLA

CHAPTER I

PERELLA ANNAWAY found herself in Florence. She was one of those inconsiderable beings who find themselves in places almost without an act of conscious volition; who drift, like an autumn leaf, from spot to spot, at the wind's caprice. Not that there was anything autumnal about Perella. She was young—three-and-twenty—accepting with youth's cheerful fatalism the will of any wind.

Perella was pretty in a dark, Italian way. Her main cause for railing against Fortune was that there was so little of her. To herself she always seemed so small as to pass unperceived in a vast world. In a crowd she could see nothing but the lower part of the shoulder-blades of those in front of her. Wherefore she hated crowds. Her physical dislike had a moral correlation. She had grown up with a sense of her entire insignificance in the cosmic scheme.

Of her faded Italian mother she retained only childish memories. The photograph which she always carried about with her revealed a spiritual, frightened thing in an old-fashioned dress, who seemed to wonder why she was alive in a flabbergasting world. Sometimes, in moments of depression, she would kiss the photograph in sentimental sympathy. Never could she reconcile her parents one with the other. How had they come together? Her inexperience of life was a barred door to the solution of the question. For her father, John Annaway, still alive—robustiously alive—was as remote from this terrified slip of a mother as an ogre from a fairy. Of course she adored him. He had brought her up in a fashion of his own, and he stood in her serious eyes as a sort of rapscallion Jove. It never occurred to her that the daughter of the starving poet in Rome had, as inamorata and wife, been carried away by those very vividly male qualities that had bound herself as a daughter to the hairy and joyous pagan that was her father.

Perella sat in her little back room of the Pension Toselli on the Lungarno Torrigiani, and looked out on uninspiring chimney-pots, and grey desolate sky from which fell stern, pitiless rain. There is no gentle rain in Florence. She had just come in after her day's work at the Uffizi, and was very wet and cold and miserable. The famously advertised central-heating of the Pension Toselli did not extend to the tiny back bedrooms. A radiator of three tepid pipes would probably pretend to warm the stuffy *salon*, where the old trouts (such was Perella's maiden jargon) of Anglo-Saxonia sought to exhilarate their fishy blood with weak tea and strong scandal; but that wouldn't dry her soaked

shoes and wet stockings which lay forlornly on the floor awaiting the slatternly nondescript maid who was far too busy to take notice of back bedroom bells. . . . A dismal trickle from the poor little wet umbrella crept sinuously across the uncarpeted floor. Half-unclothed, barefoot, Perella looked anxiously at her hat. There was only a little soaked inch at the back. Perhaps it wouldn't show, after all. She sighed. Hats were so dreadfully expensive, and, lured by the morning's sunshine, she had put on her best. Why she had selected her newest Sunday-go-to-meeting hat just to go to her daily routine of copying the Franciabigio, she didn't know. It was silly of her. But the early spring had sung a lilting song, and she had obeyed a blind instinct.

The stain would pass. She refused to contemplate heartbreak. Luckily the ribbon was untouched. She put the vanity tenderly on the deal chest of drawers. Her legs and feet were frozen. She debated for a moment. Should she re-attire herself in dry clothes and descend to tea among the old trouts who worried her because she was a painter, questioned her curiously because she was the daughter of a well-known journalist, and criticized her clammily because she was young and possibly good-looking, or should she sacrifice the tea which she wanted, and frankly go to bed and stay there in warmth until the hour came for the farinaceous and oleaginous evening meal? She decided on bed. After all, for the moment, she was mistress of her destiny. So, sticking her cold little feet into the arms of a woollen sweater, and dragging the body of it as far as it would go up her legs, she snuggled into bed, and gave herself up to philosophic reflection.

In ten minutes she was as warm and as physically contented as a stray kitten curled up before a casual fireside. Beyond this easy comfort she did not look. She had lived all her young life in cold back bedrooms, and been nourished on haphazard meals. When her father was busy on his copy, the delivery of which he ever put off to the last moment, he disregarded food. When he was idle, he preferred drink. She had lived in a series of poky flats in West Kensington, Putney, Battersea—one scarcely distinguishable from the other. Her father naturally had the best bedroom; one of the two reception rooms served as his study, the other as dining-and drawing-room; the spare bedroom at the back—always at the back, either overshadowed by the buildings on the other side of the dull courtyard or commanding a view of forests of chimney-pots—had been assigned to Perella. . . . She had been accustomed from childhood to look after herself; mainly through instinct of self-preservation. If she felt hungry she would go into the tiny kitchen and beg the unkempt servant to cook something for her, wherefore her main fare had consisted of kippers and bacon and tea. To look after her great, hairy, untidy father had been an impossibility. So long as his den was left undusted, his bed

made for the night, and his morning repose held sacred, he scorned domestic ministrations. He spent most of his life at his clubs; one, when he was more or less respectably dressed and attuned to social amenities, being the Savage; the other (his favourite) a dissolute den cynically styled the "Fuddlers." He was a man who cut himself adrift from responsibility. While Perella was a small girl, he gave her over to the care of a poor-spirited and impecunious cousin who came daily to the flat of the moment and gave the child elementary instruction. Later, when the conscientious Mentor recommended boarding-school, he bade her make inquiries. She reported. The fees demanded filled him with a sense of outrage. Good God! It would mean at least a couple more columns a week! He couldn't do it. Education? So long as a child knew how to read a book, it could educate itself, and wasn't his study crammed from ceiling to floor with books? What more was necessary? Of course she could have the run of his library while he wasn't there, so long as she didn't make a mess of the place. . . . And so was Perella educated. . . .

Now and then his cronies came in to smoke pipes and drink whisky, eat bread and cheese and cold ham, and talk. They were writing-men, out-at-elbow painters, or black-and-white artists; now and then stray musicians who would thump out strange harmonies on the battered old cottage piano. Perella would sit for an hour or two and listen to the talk or the music, and regard them as demi-gods grouped around the feet of her Olympian sire, which was more or less true. With one or two satyr-like exceptions they were all younger men, he having fallen out of the race of his own generation. Anyhow, among them Perella felt herself the most infinitesimal of mortal atoms. She made mental notes of the books they talked about, and, having hunted them up in her father's study, read as much of them as she could understand.

Then, one evening, a young man from Chelsea took up a girlish sketch or two which she had left lying about the careless room.

"Hullo, Annaway! Who did these? Perella?"

He took them over to the bearded Jove. Perella wished herself less than an atom, an invisible electron.

"Yes, I suppose so," said her father casually.

"They're jolly good," said the young man from Chelsea.

He bored the Olympian dreadfully, but he set every nerve throbbing in Perella's small body.

"Of course she can go to your rotten Art school if she likes," said her father at last. "There's only the bridge to cross." This was the Battersea flat. "What about it, old thing?"

"Oh!" breathed Perella.

And that was the end, or rather, the beginning of it. She became an Art student in Chelsea, and, for the first time in her life mingled with youth of her own age. . . . Then, when she was twenty-one, all kinds of things happened. First, her Aunt Euphemia, a maiden lady whom she had seen but transiently and at long intervals, and who had renounced for many years John Annaway and all his works, died, and left her sixty pounds a year. Secondly, she sold some drawings. Thirdly, she found herself in Paris, she scarce knew how, with another girl. Fourthly, when she returned to the parental flat, she found installed there a lady who made no pretence of being her adopted sister.

"My dear," said the Jovian reprobate, "I'm growing old and infirm"—he was on the sunny side of fifty—"and I need some one to look after me during my declining years. You have lived among the riff-raff across the river, and, to my knowledge, you have accepted the hospitality of *ménages* that it pleases the world to call irregular. So it would be hypocritical of you to be shocked. . . . Of course, my dear, my home, small as it is, is always yours; but I'm sure you would like to be independent. And why shouldn't you? You have your own little fortune. You're selling pictures like hot cakes. You have youth, ambition, hope. My God, how I envy you!"

He drank half a tumbler of whisky and soda, and, in accents of deep emotion, repeated:

"How I envy you!"

Upon which he gave her his blessing and a bewildering cheque for fifty pounds, and smiled her out into the wide world.

Over these things did Perella ponder as she lay thawing in bed in Florence. That morning she had received one of her father's rare letters which brought back the past, so near in actual time, and yet so pathetically remote. He had said:

> "Always thinking, my dear child, of your welfare, I have written to my old friend, Professor Gayton—*the* Silvester Gayton, you know—to ask him to do something for you. He once was very kind to me—so why shouldn't he be kind to you?"

During her two or three years' solitary drifting, she had learned something about the world, and the queer ways of the men and women that peopled it. Her Jovian sire no longer dwelt on Olympus. She knew him for what he was—a brilliant man, sodden with drink and self-indulgence, only whipped out of sloth by the necessity of earning the minimum livelihood adequate to his tastes. . . . The lady was still there, guiding the feeble footsteps of forty-nine. . . . Perella, although she knew that the Winstanleys and the Borrowdailes

—good friends of hers—were not married, winced at the thought of the lady. As a matter of fact, as far as a diminutive waif can hate, she hated the lady. She knew not why; for, apparently, from all reports, she was a decent soul who had rescued him from the fumes of the Fuddlers' Club. But why didn't he marry her? Some Puritan atavism, exemplified by the late Aunt Euphemia, rebelled against the situation.

Still, she couldn't help adoring him, his smiling geniality, his imperturbable good-nature, his splendour of intellect when he was at his best, his giant's baby-helplessness, ever fascinating to woman; all his qualities, as she thought of them, warmed her heart. And then this trouble to which he had put himself—to write to Professor Gayton. . . . Yes, she adored him in spite of everything. In spite, too, of the introduction to Professor Gayton. She had seen pictures of Professors in the comic papers, and once a prototype had visited the flat in Battersea. The latter (like the pictures) was stuffy and snuffy, and wore a white beard reaching down to his middle. She was very young, ten years old, at the time, and he had kissed her; but the smell of snuff and stale white beard had lingered in her memory. If he had worn a full growth, strong and ruddy, like her father, it wouldn't have mattered. But the Professor had a long, soiled, clean-shaven upper lip, which seemed to make a world of difference. She sighed, having little use for white-bearded professors. Then, the reflection that nowadays she was too mature for casual oscularity brought consolation, and she gurgled a little comfortable laugh. The world was not a bad place, after all. Rosenstein, the dealer in the Rue Bonaparte, had promised her two thousand francs for a copy of the Madonna del Pozzo on which she was now engaged, if it came up to the sample of her work at the Louvre. Perhaps, after all, that was why she found herself in Florence. Payment in thousands conveyed splendid suggestion. . . . She felt quite warm now. Sweater arms were the only wear for cold toes. . . . Had she got the little St. John's thighs all right? Of course in Franciabigio's original picture they were hopelessly out of drawing. Wouldn't the accurate reproduction rather glare in the copy? On the other hand, to put the Immortal Master right—the easiest thing in the world to do—would not only be an act of unpardonable presumption, but might put the whole of the picture wrong. The Infant, though, was lovely. She thought she had got Him—especially that little adorable bit where the Madonna's hands pressed into the tender baby flesh . . . and the sweet little puckers in the legs. . . . Two thousand lire! She could afford a couple of pairs of silk stockings, and another best hat if this one was ruined, and she could buy "A Wanderer in Florence."

The clatter of a cracked gong dimly heard from far below aroused her from vagrant musing. Seven o'clock already? She rose, made her ablutions in the fitted wash-basin—running-water, hot and cold, in every room, as per

advertisement—shrinking a little from the ice-cold stream that poured out of the hot tap, put herself into some sort of flimsy semblance of an evening frock—she had but two, one faded mauve, the other yellowed cream; she chose the mauve—and hurried down three flights of stairs to the *salon*, where the inmates assembled before dinner.

It was a stark, moth-eaten room, and the guests had the appearance of being somewhat the worse for wear, and of braving it out with forlorn perkiness. The two Miss Brabazons had lived there for fifteen years. They were the authorities on Florentine History, Topography and Art. It was considered a breach of etiquette to contradict them. The Rev. Edward Grewson and his wife were five-year-old pillars of the establishment. He was squat and asthmatic, and perspired freely in cold weather; he also did an occasional clerical turn at Holy Trinity or St. Mark's, being an amiable and much-respected man. Mr. Enderby, a sprightly young man from Cook's, also regarded himself as a pillar. The others were birds more or less of passage. Two or three American girls in feverish chase after culture, and a vague Rumanian widow; also a young English garden-city honeymoon couple, both sandy-haired, with whom Perella had formed a timid acquaintance. The last seemed to spend their days tramping over Tuscany, bare-headed, with weird luggage strapped to their backs. The young man wore his collar outside his jacket, the lady conformed so far to convention as to attire herself for the evening in a shapeless green garment with holes cut for head and arms. They had inscribed their names on the register as Mr. and Mrs. Basil Merrywether.

They greeted Perella as she shyly entered. They had walked to Fiesole and back.

"A glorious excursion," said he.

"And the lovely cathedral. And the Roman Theatre. Too fascinating for words," said she. "You know it, of course?"

Perella sighed. There was so much in Florence for her yet to see, and the copying of the picture took up so much of her time. She looked at the privileged couple in admiration.

"You don't mean to say you went all the way up there in this pouring rain?"

"We did," said Basil Merrywether triumphantly. "It was splendid—so fresh, so exhilarating."

Said Mr. Grewson, who was standing by:

"You believe then in always taking the rain of the country?"

Perella caught a waggish eye, and laughed. Mrs. Merrywether looked at him blankly.

“My husband’s holiday is limited, and we must see as much as we can, rain or fine.”

Mr. Grewson mopped his forehead. “Quite so, quite so, my dear lady. We must make the best of things. Otherwise what would be the function of Divine Providence?”

“That’s very true,” she acquiesced.

“Besides, I like the rain,” her husband declared. “It sets the atmosphere of the landscape just as often as the sunshine. To see everything in the sunshine is to go away with—well, not false, but unrectified impressions. Impressions in life are the things that matter.”

“My husband,” said Mrs. Merrywether, by way of supplement, “has written a play from that point of view. It’s going to be produced when he gets back at our new theatre at Goldstead Park.”

Perella eyed her with awe.

“I didn’t know Mr. Merrywether was a dramatist.”

“I’m not,” he replied heartily. “I wish to goodness I were! I’ve got to toil and moil at sordid things all day long. But my nights belong to myself, and then I try to express myself, as my wife says, impressionistically.”

“And I must encourage him, you see,” said Mrs. Merrywether. “An artist’s wife is no wife unless she’s prepared to make sacrifices.”

Mr. Grewson mopped his forehead again, and, not daring, this time, to let Perella catch his waggish eye, turned away to the elder Miss Brabazon.

Madame Toselli, dark, plump, smiling, but with deep and anxious perpendicular lines between her brows, entered the room. Why an Englishwoman who had married an Italian (now defunct) should be addressed as “Madame,” no one knew. Mr. Grewson, always humoristic, would whisper that it was because she once had an aunt who had divorced a Portuguese Admiral. It is true that she always spoke of “my uncle, the Admiral,” with an air that compelled respect. Her lips smiled greetings, but her eyes were busy counting heads. The perpendicular lines deepened. She turned suddenly and went out of the room, returning presently on the stroke of the cracked gong. Dinner was served. The company drifted into the bleak dining-room, where the old-fashioned custom of the long common table was retained. Punctuality was the essence of economic service. A guest who arrived late must forfeit the courses he had missed. If he strolled in when the meal was over, he had no meal. Median and Persian were the laws of the Pension Toselli.

Madame Toselli took her place at the end of the long table flanked by its double row of yellow backed cane chairs, and meagrely adorned by a few

vases of artificial flowers set on the central line. The old custom of seniority prevailed. The Misses Brabazon sat one on each side of the hostess. Then came the Grewsons. And so in order. Perella, the last comer, stole into her chair at the very end. Her neighbour was a deaf old lady who, according to Madame Toselli's reiterated assurances, belonged to a Swiss noble family, but ate spaghetti in the fresh and joyous way in which a certain nation recently tried to wage war. As Perella couldn't talk Swiss, and couldn't have been heard even if she did, she let her neighbour eat her food in (figurative) silence, and retired into the funny world of her own thoughts and sensations. Her opposite neighbours across the narrow table were an elderly Italian couple, who disregarded the existence of the other alien guests. Thus it will be seen that, up to the present, Perella's meals had been rather lacking in convivial charm.

But on this evening, when she sat down beside the deaf old lady, she noticed a vacant place below her, whose set-out for a new-comer was made startlingly conspicuous by a clean, fan-wise folded napkin stuck in a tumbler. Her own napkin wore the reproachful dinginess of days. She felt a mild thrill of excitement. She was no longer the last new girl at this elderly sort of boarding-school. Some newer girl was coming. She hoped she would be English and nice and companionable. She dreamed of suave possibilities, and her thin soup was swept away before she had half finished it; whereupon she resolved to concentrate her mind on the *ravigioli* which was beginning to be handed round at the far-off head of the table.

Then the door opened. In came a careless young man in a dinner-jacket —*solus mortalium*, alone thus vested of men who were dining there—who, after standing for a disconcerted moment, strolled up to Madame Toselli. Madame Toselli looked up at him rebukingly, and pointed down the room. He smiled and nodded, advanced, and, taking his place beside Perella, unfolded his fan-folded napkin with the air of one accustomed to clean and freshly folded napkins at every meal of his life. Before sitting down, however, he met the stony Italian stare of his opposite neighbours, and made them an easy bow, to which they responded punctiliously. To Perella, too, he made the faintest little suggestion of a salutation. Then, while waiting for the slowly advancing dish, he scanned the table in a humorous glance.

He was a clean-run, brown-haired, blue-eyed youth, who gave Perella a queer magnetic sensation of pulsating life. The *ravigioli* was served; she wondered whether he would speak to her. She noticed that he ate his *ravigioli* with a very healthy appetite. Suddenly he said to her:

"Do you happen to be English?"

She smiled shyly. "Yes, of course."

“Why of course? By the look of you, you might be a gipsy or anything.”

She coloured. He went on:

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m living here,” said Perella.

“Since when?”

“I came here a week ago.”

“None of these people are your friends?”

“Oh, no,” said Perella truthfully.

“Then look at them,” said the young man with an engaging smile. “Cast your eye up and down them. Did you ever see such a job lot of fish in your life?”

CHAPTER II

DURING the course of her Art studies in Chelsea and that of her driftings in London and Paris, Perella had come across many young men—clean, dirty, vehement and modest. With none of them, however, had she been on terms of comradeship, lingering, as she was, under John Annaway's Olympian spell. She translated the masculine into terms of her father, and shrank, in a shy woodland way, from a dominant sex. For which reason, self-centred young men, accustomed to facile friendship with unreserved young women, passed her by as a young female of no account. Sometimes, in half-hours of poetic meditation, she envied the bolder of her sisters who, with the splendid air of goddesses conferring favours, went alone with young men to tea-shops, cinemas and theatres. She pictured to herself the thrilling experience. But, on awaking to prosaic life, she knew that these were crazy dreams, and that none of her men acquaintances would be bored with her for more than five minutes at a time. So she shrugged her little shoulders and went her little lonely way.

The easy young man with the irreverent outlook, sitting next to her at table, was a revelation. He talked to her not out of perfunctory politeness, but because he appeared to enjoy her company. He had the manners of a prince travelling incognito, and gave her the feeling that he found her of birth so kindred as to include her in his sphere of remoteness from the other guests of the Pension.

"It's all very well to say you're living here," he remarked, "but what are you doing here save living?"

"Trying to earn it," replied Perella audaciously.

He laughed. "I wish you'd tell me how to do it. That's what I've come for. What do you do?"

"I'm a copyist."

"Painter? Yes? How great! Splendid! I've come to paint or draw, or do something, I don't quite know what. You'll put me right. I'll stay here for ever and sit at your feet. Now that I come to look at you, you have the painter's face—the wide-set eyes, you know. I'm sort of half-trained as an architect. If it was all art, designing cathedrals and mausoleums and casinos, I'd love it. But nowadays it's a matter of stresses and strains and ferro-concrete and drainage systems and sticking in hot-water pipes so that a cook can wash up greasy

dishes without any trouble. You don't call that art, do you?"

"It's all very necessary," said Perella.

"Then let's leave it in the hands of the Necessarians."

"Why not be one?"

"Can't," said the young man. "I went into Armstrong's office, you know—Halliday Armstrong, R.A. Thought I was going to help him in International Competitions, Designs for Palaces in Siam and Sweden, all pediments and pinnacles—that's just a pretty figure of speech, because they don't gee together." Perella smiled. "But you see what I mean. I wanted to be an artist, and the last job the beastly fellow put me on to was the working drawings of the sub-basement of a Monster Hotel. Can you imagine it? Every conceivable horrible pipe, tube, furnace, boiler, ventilating shaft, hygienic cockroach pen. . . . I went to the Great One in modest expostulation. I was born to higher things. He had the nerve to say—he's one of those nasty, precise people with a squeaky voice: 'Young man, you were born to do that which is good for your soul. Clear out and go back to your work.' "

"And you cleared?" asked Perella, vastly entertained.

"Eventually. I couldn't stick it. I put it to you, as a practical, sensible girl, quivering, at the same time, like me, with the sense of beauty, the beauty of line and colour, I put it to you—could you have stuck it?"

Never had man made to her an appeal so personal as this frank and mirthful youth. She coloured adorably, and laughter shone in her eyes.

"So long as I didn't have to draw the cockroaches."

He laughed again at this mild jest, helped himself to the veal which, after tasting, he declared to be the sweated calf, the right portion for prodigals. She asked him when he had arrived. That very evening, he said. He had put in a day or two at Milan to see the Cathedral and the Brera. Being broke to the wide, he explained in his lucid English, he had asked a Florentine resident to recommend him a hole where he could eat and sleep at minimum expense. The friend had paved his way to the Pension Toselli.

"When I came to the dining-room, my first impulse was to bolt like a rabbit who finds himself in a den of foxes, but you make all the difference. Now that we're on intimate terms, do tell me your name. Mine's Blake—Anthony Blake."

"Miss Annaway," she replied primly.

"Annaway?" He flicked association-seeking fingers. "Anything to do with the John Annaway who writes that column in the Sunday-what-d'ye-call it?"

"He's my father."

He radiated delight.

"How splendid to know all about you at once! What's your Christian name? I've told you mine."

"It's rather odd. Perella."

"Odd? It's unique. You must be the only Perella in the world."

With such stimulating discourse did he hold her attention to the end of the meal. She learned odds and ends of his ingenuous history. Harrow had prepared him for Cambridge, and Cambridge had prepared him for the perfect enjoyment of hedonistic existence. His father, a partner in the old-established firm of Blake, Bislett and Smith, stockbrokers, had reserved a seat for him in the decorous office. He described it to Perella, in an exaggerated way, as a place of horror, nerve-racking with the rattle of type-writers, the clicking of tapes, the clang of telephones, the epicene roarings of distant bulls and bears; the whole filthy place a tangle of unintelligible arithmetic. With perfect filial courtesy, of course, he had turned it down. The best day's work, he said, that he had ever done in his life.

At this point of his story, dinner being over, Madame Toselli rose, and the company filed out of the dining-room, back to the moth-eaten *salon*.

On the threshold he apostrophized the Deity and seized Perella's wrist.

"I can't stand it. I should go mad. What do they do? 'Sit and hear each other groan' like the gentlemen in Keats? What do *you* do?"

"I get into a corner and read up Florence for an hour, and then I go to bed," said Perella. "Or else I listen to Mr. Grewson talk."

"But suppose you want to talk yourself?"

Perella blinked at the startling suggestion.

"I don't," she murmured.

"But I do," he declared. "I love talking."

"Well, go in and try," she said, her heart ever so little a-flutter. "They'll love to listen to you."

"I like to choose my audience," he said. "I want to go on talking to you. Where the Hades can I do it?"

"Here," said Perella helplessly.

He shivered. "In this awful draught? Isn't there some dreadful, deserted Picture Palace in the town where one can gossip in comparative warmth?"

From fluttering, her heart progressed to beating hard. The crazy dream was coming true. A young man—and, to boot, a young man of elegant accomplishment and fascination—was for taking her out, all by herself, to the

Cinema. Hitherto, on male-escorted picture jaunts, she had been dragged as a third party, damping undesirable ardour. He misunderstood her blushing effort to collect confused wits.

"Won't you come with me? Really I'm quite harmless. Or are you afraid that, when you get back into the Aquarium, the dreadful fishes will tear you to bits?"

"Oh, they don't matter!" said Perella.

"What does, then?"

"Nothing," said Perella.

"Come along, then. We'll hat and coat ourselves and meet at the bottom of the stairs."

They met. She had put on her one smart coat over her flimsy evening frock—it was very thin—and her one little bit of fur round her neck, and the precious hat on which the rain-stain (oh, beneficent Providence!) no longer showed. He was smoking a cigarette in the dim hall. She drew a quick breath.

"Oh, I haven't kept you waiting?"

He took out his watch and consulted it by the dim light.

"Thirty-five seconds," he said.

The rain had ceased, and given place to a night of scudding cloud and watery half-moon and a vapoury air through which Florence across the river rose luminously fantastic. They walked up the quiet Lungarno Torrigiani and the Via de' Bardi, Anthony Blake talking into enchanted ears. But, once on the Ponte Vecchio, conversation, save in confidential staccato, became impossible. As one inured to the conduct of damsels, he tucked his hand under her arm, and guided her through the welter of the crowd that, from time immemorial, has ever found its vagrant yet sheltered pleasure in the public streets. Horse and motor traffic divided it perpetually, as though ploughing a way through dry sand; and, as perpetually, the sand of humans closed in again, unconscious of disturbance.

"Isn't it fascinating?" he said, with a little squeeze of her arm. "Must have been just like this when Savonarola was a boy. I've often heard of it—never seen it. I wonder where we're going to?"

"Don't you know your way?"

"Lord, no! Didn't I tell you I struck the place only two hours ago? I'm a babe in your hands, crying for a picture-palace with nobody in it."

"If we go straight on and follow that tram," she said, with a new sense of authority, "we'll come to the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, where all the cinemas and things are. That's modern; but if you'd like to go a little bit out of your

way, down this street here, you may see something quite as good as a cinema."

"Nice and warm and gossipy?"

She chuckled happily. "You'll see."

The short Vaccherecia brought them into the comparatively quiet Piazza della Signoria. The moon, escaping from tormenting cloud, spread sombre majesty over the dimly lit expanse of wonder. The young man, Anthony Blake, dropped the girl's arm, and stood agape. There, in the mysterious light, loomed the grim, gigantic, heavily machicolated and battlemented mass of the Palazzo Vecchio, surmounted by its grim machicolated and battlemented campanile. There in shadow gleamed, mysterious and compelling, the fountained Neptune of Michael Angelo. A turn, and full and serene in the moonlight stood the cloister of the Lanzi, delicate-coloured, round-arched, spandrel-decorated, with its frieze of proud yet gracious heraldry; and, below, the baffling mystery of its immortal dwellers in bronze and stone.

"Of course you can't see it now, but that's the Perseus of Benvenuto."

His hand sought hers, and, like fairy-tale children in an Enchanted Castle, they wandered round the square in awed silence. After a while he said:

"Now we're at it, let us see it all."

"All what?"

"Florence."

"It would take a year at least."

"We'll do it. You and I together," he said. "But let us see all we can to-night."

She felt herself growing more audacious every minute.

"That wouldn't be fair to Florence. It's a bit trippery, isn't it?"

"Eh? I, a tripper?"

He smote his chest in protestation.

"That's why. You're not. You can afford to see it bit by bit. I rushed around when I first arrived, and I couldn't sleep for two nights. Everything went round and round, and got hopelessly mixed up. But perhaps you've got a stronger head."

They came out into a patch of watery moonlight, and he became aware of her little pale face.

"I've got a stronger body, and I'm a selfish brute. You've been standing up all day in some frowsty place before a horrid easel, and you're dead tired."

She protested valiantly that exercise was the one thing in the world she needed; that the grounds of her counsel had been purely æsthetic. Why not

keep this one wonderful impression, instead of muddling it up with a hundred others?

"Perella," said he, "I adopt you as my artistic conscience. We will now take a cab to the ghastly warm Palace of our dreams."

But cab she refused. Was he a millionaire to take cabs, on a moment's whim, to drive but a few yards? Said he:

"To-night I feel the Lord of the Earth!"

She gave him a little upward, fleeting glance. The proclamation was an echo of her father in his uplifted moments. But these moments had been ever uplifted by spirituous liquors, whereas her companion had drunk nothing but the thinnest of red wine, and sparingly, because it was not over-alluring. She became half conscious of a quick blacking out, as on a film, breaking the sequence of high romance. Her practical little mind worked swiftly. Lords of the Earth dwelt in Grand Hotels, not Pensions Toselli. Besides, had he not confessed to being broke to the wide, and to seeking a modest hole? She must check this magnificent but spendthrift boy on the road to ruin.

"We walk, or I don't come," she declared.

"So long as you come," he said, "I'll crawl on all fours."

She laughed, and the film of romance flashed out again. They set forth on their quest of comfort. On their way they came to the half-arch of the Or San Michele. He paused, looked on either side at the phantasmagoria of sculpture in the confused light.

"You must blindfold me, or I'll have no further use for you as a conscience."

Again she laughed. "I'm so glad you feel like that about it. Beauty *is* something isn't it? Just Beauty?"

"It's everything," he proclaimed.

"All these people at the Pension talk of Florence as if it were a collection of postage-stamps."

"My dear Conscience," he said, joining her after a forced separation by half a dozen free young Florentines, "more than ever do I desire to make your better acquaintance."

Around the approaches to the great Piazza the crowd grew thicker. It was mainly composed of men; but of men, not hurrying feverishly in pursuit of tram-cars, girls, wives, homes, dog-dealers, and other pleasures, but standing, lounging, strolling a step or two and then returning; and talking, talking, smoking, spitting, taking their curious jostled ease, and, as casually individualistic as their ancestors, indifferent to the convenience of would-be

passing man, woman, or child. Only the hoot of a car, or the crack of a cabman's whip, and the familiar curse on his tongue, caused the resentful movement of self-preservation.

They emerged into the Piazza di Vittorio Emanuele, once the most picturesque, squalid, ancient, and fascinating network of fever-and assassin-haunted slums in Europe, but now a vast square blazing with electric light; and surrounded by those square blocks of commercial buildings put up by Italian engineer-architects which make one ædile say to another: "We are citizens of no mean city." And there are electrically lighted shop-fronts, and glittering open-air cafés, and illuminated, multi-coloured entrances to Picture Palaces. And in the middle of it, on a prancing horse set on a monstrous plinth, sits King Victor Emanuel, obviously agreeing with the ædiles.

"You're quite right," said Anthony Blake. "We've done the only thing possible. This is the acid, or whatever it is, that fixes the photographic plate—the other Piazza, you know."

"Of course I know," said Perella.

They entered the cinema portal—no mere door was ever equipped with its gorgeousness. He took tickets. They passed through turnstiles, and mounted carpeted stairs, and a torch-equipped attendant took them through a curtained doorway into the high tier of a dim amphitheatre. The benches were sparsely occupied. Perella whispered reproachfully:

"These are the most expensive seats."

"If you think one can get warmth and privacy for nothing, you're mistaken. How could we talk down there?"

He pointed to the crowded floor-space; then took her hand, and groped to the highest and most desolate corner.

On the screen, the monochrome human shadows performed their pale and dismal antics. Square-jawed men sat at roller desks and talked telephonically to each other. Large-eyed pseudo-maidens, difficult to distinguish one from the other, registered sorrow and joy. Automobiles dashed up to modest wooden clipper-built houses, whose interiors, vast and stately, would make Knowle or Longleat fade into the drab of a third-rate hotel. There were horses which slept and ate at galloping speed; there were old homes with cradled babies whose venerable grandmothers must have been well over seventy when their mothers were born; there was every flatulent negation of Truth as interpreted through the medium of Art, that commercial imbecility at its most nervous tension could conceive. The drugged public accepted the inanity in stupefied content. The orchestra played "Madame Butterfly" while a brave little two-seater car, driven by a big-eyed girl, swam a boiling river.

“This is just the place for us,” said Anthony, as they took their seats. “Now we can talk like people in a Dostoievsky novel. You’ll tell me all about you, and I’ll tell you all about me; and then we’ll compare notes, and find we haven’t been listening to each other at all, and we’ll have to do it all over again, which will be lovely, won’t it?”

“You begin,” said Perella.

But youth is youth. And the irony of youth is that the subjective fades before the insistent objective. The idiot story, all the more unintelligible because it was half told when they entered, gripped their delighted and satirical attention. When the end came, they eagerly awaited the re-unfolding of the reel, so as to see the joys which they had missed. It was only when they caught up with their first scene that interest waned. They remained silent for a time. The projected talk would not come spontaneously. Perella suggested the lateness of the hour.

“And we can’t watch this dreadful thing going on over and over again. We’ll go mad!”

He rose. “You’re right. You’re always right. But it seems to me as though I should never be able to tell you the story of my life.”

Yet, when they found themselves in the narrow, thronged streets, again, and he took her arm under his in a protective, companionable way, Perella felt a delicious sense of intimacy, of a vast Highest Common Factor of existence between them. Their souls had throbbed in unison before the majesty and beauty of the Past; and now their common modernity had rocked in sympathetic laughter. And then he said:

“It doesn’t matter, dear Miss Conscience. We’re having a splendid time.” He hailed a victoria. “So splendid that I’m not going to let you get dog-tired and hate me. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s being hated.”

She yielded meekly, too happy for argument. The drive was the sensuous end of the most amazing chapter of her life. She shivered a little, more from realization of wonder than from cold. Whereupon he pulled off his coat and threw it over her, and tucked it up around her as far as it would go. Her protests rang feeble and unconvincing.

“Except when I came from the station, this is the first time I’ve driven in Florence.”

“We’ll drive like this together every day and all day,” he declared.

“I don’t see how you can afford it,” she said.

“Neither do I.” He laughed gaily. “But think of the joy of doing things one can’t afford! I often wonder whether I’m a very lucky chap or the son of

Misfortune. It all depends on the way you look at it. Here was I brought up in luxury. Just had to stick both hands in my dear old father's pockets, and out came all the money I wanted. And then, suddenly—everything went phut. There wasn't a bean among the lot of us. It killed my poor old father. I'll tell you about it some day."

Her hand instinctively crept beneath the overcoat and sought his.

"Oh, how dreadful!"

He squeezed her hand. "You're a dear. It was. We were great pals, you know. Well—what was I saying? Oh, yes. The problem. One fellow says that it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Another, that sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things. I don't know. At any rate, I've learnt how to enjoy life when I get the chance." He squeezed her hand again, and, bending forward, smiled into her face. "I'm enjoying it now."

They came out on the Lungarno, by the Palazzo Tempi. The scudding clouds had cleared, and opened out a night of stars. Florence stretched away across the river. The dome of the Duomo loomed vague and far away; but Giotto's campanile leaped gleaming into the firmament. Below them, the river ran dark with many shadows.

The cab drew up at the door of the Pension Toselli.

"My dear Lady Conscience," he said, when they entered the fusty vestibule, "let us shut our eyes and run upstairs and go to bed, and never open them again until all is cool and beautiful darkness."

The foolish yet romantic phrase rang in Perella's ears as she lay in the darkness of her little back room, wide awake for most of a wonder-whirling night. Towards dawn she fell asleep, and—alas, for Michael Angelo and Benvenuto and Giotto! or, on the other hand, they may have had a great deal to do with it—her last drowsy sensation, with the rough blankets drawn up close under her nose, was the comfortable smell of a rough tweed overcoat.

CHAPTER III

ANTHONY BLAKE, orphan, faced the world, like Orlando, with "but poor a thousand crowns," or pounds in this case, his heritage from the welter of his father's affairs. What should he do with it? One of his sisters, married to the Head Master of a Public School, advised profitable investment. His other sister, the wife of a Major-General, and a woman of swashbuckling flippancy of outlook, said: "Blue it at once." As neither of these counsels appealed to a young man standing mid-way in temperament between his two sisters, he rejected them off-hand. He had already broken away from the soul-building projects of Halliday Armstrong, and had spent some time in the Art School of the Royal Academy, where he learned the rudiments of drawing from the figure.

Prudence urged him back on bended knees to Armstrong, who combined a squeaky voice with a robust kindness of heart. Besides, he had gone through the Architectural school at Cambridge, and was well on his way to the Final Examination of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The gates of a liberal profession were open to him. Why not turn and enter them while yet there was time? But Anthony Blake exceedingly disliked falling down on bended knees. He had his pride. He also viewed, with profound distaste, the prospect of being even an eminent R.A.'s assistant on a very few hundreds a year for the rest of his life, unless there happened the absurdly fantastic: to wit, Armstrong's offering him a partnership, or the winning of a gigantic competition which would enable him to put up a brass-plate outside an office of his own.

Originally, when he had set his face against the dreary dealing with stocks and shares, he had conceived Architecture as a congenial avocation for a gentleman of artistic taste and ample fortune. The underground drudgery, good for his soul according to the sensitive artist, Halliday Armstrong, who knew that in no form of art can the butterfly emerge except from the chrysalis stage of humility, was repugnant to his ideal of existence. He would not drudge; sooner die. For him the untrammelled life of brush or pencil. Here, there was no bending over drawing-boards, ruling lines by **T**-squares and drawing curves by geometrical formulæ, and measuring distances off finikin rules divided up into infinitesimal parts of inches, all for the guidance of a blockhead builder. Here one was free, with eye and arm and wrist and hand, to sweep lines and curves according to a man's own bountiful inspiration. No setting off a sweep of body, millimetre by millimetre, with a pair of wretched dividers. A bit of

chalk and a sheet of drawing paper, and the rest was whatsoever he chose to make it. He had a very pretty free-hand talent, and a cartoonist's knack. His short career in the R.A. Schools was not without distinction. The prudent side of him tested a foundation for artistic hope. The flippant and devil-may-care side which he had in common with his sister, Gloria, dreamed the delicious dreams of youth.

"My dearest girl," he said to her, towards the end of the discussion on the disposal of the heritage, "Ellen is impossible. She looks at me through Everard's archpedagogic eyes, as a Small Boy in an Eton collar who has to be trained in the Christian Virtues, and the Proper Conduct of Life. The nerve of it! She's only ten years older than I am."

"And I'm twelve," said Gloria.

"I'm fed up with you too, although you've got more sense, though not much more, than Ellen. According to you I should have a couple of months' good time and then take the dole. Are you and Frank going to supplement it?"

"My dear boy! . . ."

"Of course not. You're a flaunting, extravagant quean. Poor old Frank's up to his eyes in debt. As to Ellen—she's off the map. If I went to her starving, and asked for a meal, she'd calculate it out in vitamines and calories. No, my dear; I'm not going to come down on either of you. I'm going into the wide world to seek my fortune and I shall husband my thousand pounds to the last penny. I'm going first to Italy to soak myself in the spirit of masterpieces. No one can be a painter who doesn't know everything from Cimabue to Canaletto. My address for the next hundred years will be 'care of Luck, Chance & Co., Earth, Cosmos. Please forward.' "

And that is how Anthony Blake came to Florence, and, in conspicuous dinner-jacket, arrived late for dinner in the Pension Toselli, and, in his light, generous and irresponsible way, turned the bewildered little head of Perella.

The only comparatively elastic meal at the Pension Toselli was early breakfast. A plate supporting a hunk of bread and a pat of butter remained at a guest's place at table from eight to half-past nine. At any time during that hour and a half the guest could ring, and Giuseppe, the melancholy serving-man, would bring coffee from some simmering vat in the kitchen. After 9.30 the table was cleared, and the would-be late breakfaster could press the electric button until the battery burst before anyone would take the slightest notice of him. Only the Brabazon ladies were privileged to breakfast in their own rooms. Those recklessly spendthrift or gluttonous, who craved a relish to the meal,

had their own little half-consumed store of marmalade, jam, sardines or fruit set beside their plates. Two indecently de-shelled cold hard-boiled eggs marked the seat of the Rev. Mr. Grewson. Mrs. Grewson, pallid and severe, seemed to have a passion for potted anchovy.

She, sitting sternly beside the hard-boiled eggs of a sluggard husband, was scooping out the remains of a tin, when Perella entered, about half-past eight, and frigidly acknowledged the girl's shy salutation. The American young women ate bananas, and squabbled over a map of Florence. The Basil Merrywethers, to judge by unclean remains, had been long since up and on their sturdy, pedestrian way. The Italian couple opposite ate morosely, and made obvious their non-appreciation of the coffee. Perella slipped into her seat, and, after the fashion she had learned in France, broke her bread into her coffee cup, saving up the pat of butter and a crust of bread as a last *bonne bouche*. She lingered over the meal, hoping that, through the open door of the dining-room, would appear the fascinating youth of the night before. But he came not. Mrs. Grewson, after much screech of chair against the tiled-floor, swept out with the air of a woman determined to tell her husband that his eggs were getting hot. The American girls went off in a clatter of tongues. The Italians called for fresh coffee, and, consigning it with expressive gestures to the sewer, made a Fascisti exit.

Perella alone, feeling, as usual, small in the big room, lingered wistfully, wondering what apostle of the bilious could have designed the dreadful wall-paper with its sickly yellow background and its dead blue trellis-work.

Mr. Grewson bounded in, wheezy and rubicund.

"My dear young lady. I am indeed fortunate. I thought I would have a solitary meal." He sat down and helped himself to salt. "I hope you and that charming young fellow, who seems to be quite an acquisition to our circle, had a pleasant evening together?"

"Very," said Perella.

She rose. From his end of the long table he held up a protesting hand.

"You're not going?"

"I've finished, and there's my work at the Gallery."

She fled, her face aflame, conscious of a violent hatred of Mr. Grewson, and his waggish, clerico-paternal leer. He was the mouthpiece of all the cats and trouts, male and female, of the Pension. Her feminine instinct divined beastliness of innuendo. The moth-eaten *salon* had shrilled with cackle about her sudden elopement with the magnificent young man in a dinner-jacket. She rushed up to her back room, hating Anthony Blake, vowing that she would never see him again; or that, should he ever recross her field of vision, she

would look at him without seeing him. . . . Yes, that was why Mrs. Grewson, who never smiled otherwise than acidly, had grimaced that vitriolic greeting. That was why the American girls had ostentatiously taken no notice of her. . . . Oh, the whole thing was damnable!

She sat on the edge of her yet unmade bed and cried over the desecration of the only wonder-hour of her life.

Soon afterwards she sat with easel and bedaubed canvas and painter's paraphernalia before the miracle of paint she was trying to copy. She wished she knew more about Franciabigio, the friend of Andrea del Sarto. Obviously he was influenced by the Great and Faultless One, but he had his own conception of loveliness which redeemed his work from the charge of imitation. It had not the other's quality of perfection which made you take a little quick breath as soon as one of his masterpieces first met your eyes. But it had infinite charm, and magical solace. To copy the Madonna del Pozzo was a joy. She felt that it lay within the limits of her comprehension. Had she been set before del Sarto's majestic Madonna dell' Arpie, her spirit would have failed, crushed beneath the sense of her littleness. But here was something exquisitely human. Just a pair of soft-fleshed babies, and the smiling Mother of Comfort. And, as she worked, she thought of Franciabigio, and wondered whether he was in Vasari. . . . She wanted to know more about him. But where could she find a Vasari? She thought of all kinds of technical and romantic things that hovered round about the central picture, in order to close her mind to any chance incursion of the young man, Anthony Blake.

A fresh English voice behind her, pleading hunger to a zealous friend, aroused her to a sense of time, whereupon she packed up her things and hurried through the great galleries and down the lift, and tripped quickly along the familiar road to the Pension Toselli.

She entered the dining-room a minute or two late. All the aquarium—the irreverent young man's description would enter her head—were assembled, with the exception of the Basil Merrywethers. She saw Anthony Blake smiling at her from the far end of the table. Other folks seemed to smile at her, even Mrs. Grewson. Madame Toselli stopped her as she passed, and handed her a visiting card.

"You've had a caller this morning."

"And a very distinguished one," said the elder Miss Brabazon, with an air of patronage.

"Why didn't you say you knew Mr. Gayton?" asked the younger.

Perella reddened, and said "Oh!" and looked at the card—that of Mr. Silvester Gayton—with an address in the Viale Milton.

She carried it in her hand and laid it beside her plate, as she took her seat beside Anthony Blake, to whose cheery greeting she replied distantly. But he was irrepressible.

"They're all frantically excited about that," said he, pointing to the card. "The Archangel Gabriel coming to make an Announcement wouldn't have caused a greater sensation."

"I don't see why," said Perella primly. "Professor Gayton is only a friend of my father's."

"But the old insect's the greatest bug in Florence—don't you understand that? Don't you know his books on the gaudy place? If one fellow four hundred years ago jabbed a brush of paint on another fellow's picture, he spots it at once. The Italian Ministry of Belle Arte grovel before him. The old pussies up there were once introduced to him after a lecture, and were purring about it when I came in."

She helped herself to vague food.

"How do you know all about him?" she asked.

"How do I know about God and the Equator and Beecham's Pills? Besides, I, humble worm that I am, have a letter of introduction to him in my pocket."

She might have guessed it. If he had told her that he bore introductions to the King and the Pope, she would not have been surprised.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Old man Armstrong, of course," he replied carelessly. "Who else?"

A cloud swept across her vision of his splendour. She had a quick little practical mind.

"But wasn't Mr. Armstrong rather hurt at your leaving his office?"

"Not so much as I. I've made a point of blotting out of my memory the words he used to me."

"Then," said Perella, "it was very kind and forgiving of him to give you this valuable letter of introduction."

"My dear Conscience," said he, "I'm admiring you more and more every minute."

Isolated by the deaf old lady on her right, and the morose Italians opposite, next whom were the vacant seats of the Merrywethers, they had all the talk to themselves. He described his morning in the City of Wonder. He had wandered about, and, by the aid of a map, had established his topography of Florence. He declared it a marvel of a place. At every street corner you were jostled by history. He had felt so sore and so black and blue that, after two or

three hours of it, he had to crawl into Doney's and have a cocktail.

"But that's a most expensive place," she cried. "Of course I've never been there. . . . Besides, how did you know where it was?"

Said Anthony, with his engaging smile:

"When you know me better, you will realize what a man of infinite resource I am. I was in fainting need of stimulant. I approached a florid gentleman glued to the window of an antiquity shop. I took off my hat in the manner of the Old School. 'Pardon me, sir,' said I, with unerring instinct. 'Are you an American?' He said: 'I am.' 'Then,' said I, 'will you have the kindness to tell an English stranger where he can get a cocktail in this city?' He smiled, and said: 'I will'—and directed me to the Via Tornabuoni."

Finding no suitable response, Perella went on with her eating.

"If you're a good little untroublesome Conscience, I'll take you to tea there."

She shook her head. She had to work.

"But you can't work after the galleries close. They turn you out. Just in time for tea."

"I don't like that kind of tea."

"But why?"

"Because——" said Perella.

He noted an impatient gesture of her shoulders, and a tiny look of distress in her face; and a glimmer of her reasons dawned on his careless man's mind. Who went to Doney's otherwise than in furs and silken hose and dainty shoes? She confirmed his intuition by adding:

"I've looked through the windows and don't care for the kind of people I've seen there."

"We'll avoid it then, like the plague," he said. "All the same," he continued, "I'm glad I went in. I've had an adventure."

In his glad, picturesque way he told her the history of a chance encounter.

Sitting at a small table in the crowded middle room, along one side of which runs the bar, was an old Cambridge friend, Charlie Dent, entertaining a charming American lady. "Oh, quite an elderly lady, Conscience dear—let us say, in motor-jargon, nominal thirty-five." It was Dent who had recommended the Pension Toselli. Anthony had thought him still in Rome, whence he had last heard from him. Dent was a very clever fellow, an engineer with an unhealthy passion for numismatics. Having come into much money, he had abandoned the bridge-maker's trade and found the Meaning of Life in dangling

over ancient coins and modern tea-cups.

"The desperate fellow was drinking chocolate," said Anthony.

"I love chocolate," said Perella demurely.

"But you're not a numismatical engineer who has run off with a proctor's cap. It's a great come-down for Charlie."

Of the nature of a proctor and the sacrosanctity of his cap, Perella had but a vague idea. She accepted meekly the condemnation of Charlie Dent.

This was by no means the end of the Adventure. Who should walk in when he was half-way through his second cocktail—Perella's subtle mind could gather that he had been entertained at Doney's free of expense—but the very American of whom he had asked his way, with a "Hullo, Beatrice, hullo, Charlie," and sit down at the table. His name was Cornelius Adams, and he had a villa outside Florence. Anthony was going to see him one of these days.

He rubbed his hands together.

"Pretty crowded morning, wasn't it?"

"And the lady?" asked Perella.

Anthony thought she lived in Florence. A Mrs. Ellison. Answered, according to the Adams man, to the name of Beatrice. She was off by car to Paris on the morrow, but hoped to see him when she came back.

Perella crumbled her bread, and looked depressedly at the black and grey banana on her plate. He had already mounted into the Doney sphere that was his own, peopled by butterfly numismatical engineers, American millionaires who owned villas, and wealthy women, all furs and pearls and violets, who thought less of taking motor-cars to Paris than she of taking tram to the Cascine. For all his gay and intimate talk, he seemed piteously remote.

But soon afterwards she found herself accompanied by him on her return walk to the Uffizi; more than that—to her easel in front of the Franciabigio, in spite of almost tearful protest. But his frank and vehement admiration comforted her artistic soul. She was the most amazing little tame Conscience that ever was. Henceforward he would follow her the world over, humbly holding up her train. He went off by himself to see the glories of the gallery, and returned towards closing time to the earnest little dark-eyed figure putting in the last few touches of the day.

"Now we're going to be really happy," said he. "We've got hours and hours in front of us. The world is ours—to say nothing of Florence."

"Don't you want to go to your friends?" she asked.

"When you're about I snap my fingers at the whole lot of them."

He had a merry eye and a persuasive laugh and a lithe young figure, and the impression she had of his dress was a careless yet elegant harmony of blues and browns. All her men acquaintances were distinguished by sloppy and untidy shoes. Anthony's shoes were as neat as those best brown ones of hers which she had saved up for months to buy. And, as they walked together, she glanced, with an idiotic pride, at the young man's shapely feet.

He gave her tea, not at Doney's, but at the establishment of a humbler and more discreet panderer to British superstition. Apparently unknown, it wore a dismal and stale appearance. Only two tables were occupied, each by drooping tourist women. But to Perella, with Anthony's gay smile opposite her, it seemed a Palace of all the Lovely Verities. And a flush came to her pale cheeks, and a light in her eyes. And at last Anthony, looking at her whimsically, said:

"Do you know, Miss Perella Conscience, that you're *jolie à croquer*?"

"What's that?" she asked, for, though she had roamed solitary about Paris, her French seemed to be deficient.

"Pretty enough to eat—like a chocolate out of an expensive box."

Which, though exceedingly silly, pleased Perella more than any heretofore recorded utterance of man; and it deepened the gold of the afternoon sunshine when they went out into the street, and, when they emerged into the Piazza del Duomo, invested Giotto's Campanile in the pink of porphyry soaring into the Empyrean.

She mounted the fusty stairs of the Pension in a dream.

"It's rotten," he said, "that I've got to go out to dinner to-night. Charlie Dent asked me. You see," he added hurriedly, "I've got to earn a living somehow, and he may put me in the way of it. It won't do to miss chances."

"Of course you must go," she said, as though she were already responsible for his career.

"But you?"

"I've had such a lovely tea," said Perella.

She was content. To ask more from the high gods than what they had given her that day would have been presumption such as in the mythical times of which she had read would have been punished by some peculiarly unpleasant metamorphosis into a toad or a stinging-nettle or a Mrs. Grewson.

"I'll pick you off your little stool at the gallery to-morrow morning," he said, as they parted on the landing.

In the dark passage leading from the *salon* to the dining-room was fixed the screen where the guests' correspondence was hung in clips. Now, few

human beings are so forlorn that they abandon hope for a message from the outside world. Perella, as she passed the end of the corridor, cast an instinctive wistful glance at the screen. And there, in very truth, was a letter.

It was written in a small, beautifully clear, pointed, scholarly hand. She turned the page to find it signed: “Yours sincerely, Silvester Gayton.” It ran:

> DEAR MISS ANNAWAY,
>
> May I introduce myself as an old friend of your father, who wrote to me a day or two ago telling me that you were in Florence? He did me so many a good turn in the years gone by, that, if it is in my power to be of any service to his daughter, I shall be only too pleased to render it. There is much to be seen in Florence that is closed to the general public.
>
> I was so sorry to miss you this morning when I called, but I was comforted by the information I received that you were at work at the Uffizi.
>
> I wonder whether you will do me the pleasure of taking tea with me to-morrow afternoon? I am diffident in asking you, for the Viale Milton is a long way from the Lungarno. But, if I hear by telephone that you accept, you will find at four o’clock, standing outside the Uffizi public entrance, a car with a royal purple handkerchief spread over the steering-wheel. If you will honour me by entering it, the chauffeur will do the rest.
>
> I have one or two things in my little collection which I hope may compensate you for your journey.

Perella dined, not disconsolately, talking across the table to the dusty Basil Merrywethers who had travelled by tram, train and on foot God knows where; and, after the meal, suffered gladly the facetiæ of the Rev. Mr. Grewson and the newly-stirred curiosity of the Brabazon ladies, who deferred for twenty minutes their sacred evening rubber of bridge in order to impress upon her mind their knowledge of what the eminent Professor Gayton knew about Florence.

She went to bed early, a very happy Perella, trying to reconcile the long white beard and the patronizing manner with the tenor of the letter which she had just received. The final touch of puzzledom was the royal purple handkerchief on the steering-wheel. No stuffy, snuffy old fossil could have thought of such a thing. There was something imaginative, simple, childlike about it.

It was comic. She laughed. But it was very, very kind. She snuggled into her hard and nubbly little bed. It was almost a sacrilege to blot out all this Wonder of Life in animal slumber. She must live the day over again.

Whereupon, in order to do so, she turned over with a happy sigh, and slept the profound, happy sleep of youth through the livelong night.

CHAPTER IV

THE serviceable, old-fashioned car from whose steering-wheel the chauffeur had swept the royal purple pall, drove up to the decorous pile of apartment houses on the bank of the Mugnone. Perella stepped out and mounted the stairs. An elderly woman servant opening the Professor's door, showed her into a room, a very beautiful room, she thought, with a view far away over the northern hills, Monte Morello towering among them. A wood fire was burning below a Renaissance fireplace. A few pictures, mostly Primitives, hung on an austere wall. The room was sparsely furnished; but Perella's eye quickly appreciated the severe charm of the old rugs on the polished floor, and the perfection of chairs and tables and old Florentine book-cases filled with leather-bound volumes. Some old ivories lay about. A paper-knife with chased silver handle lay across an open, half-cut French novel, the only note of modernity. She peeped at it—it was one of the Arsène Lupin series. She found it hard to reconcile a Professor with a reader of detective novels.

This was the home of a man, a notorious bachelor—so much practical information had she gleaned from the Brabazon ladies. In her concept of man it was always difficult to rid her mind of parental impressions. A man's room was her father's ramshackle, dirty den, littered with pipes, tobacco, magazines, newspapers, manuscript, slippers, and bananas, of which he was inordinately fond. She could not imagine Anthony in this prim setting, though of course he would like it kept clean, and a fresh cretonne put, now and then, on his arm-chairs. . . . But, anyhow—she looked round again—it was a singularly beautiful and restful room.

The door opened. Some one entered.

"My dear Miss Annaway. Do forgive me for keeping you waiting. It seems so rude, but I really couldn't help it."

It was no doubt her host, Silvester Gayton, but where were the white beard and the stuffiness and snuffiness? She beheld a little brown-haired man, with a bald patch on the top of his head, and a little brown moustache, who looked at her apologetically through thick, near-sighted pince-nez. He was very neatly dressed. Obviously he was no longer young; his lined and withered face proclaimed the touch of the years; but he might have been any age, from forty to seventy.

He fluttered around her with the air of a shy, elderly boy.

"Do sit down." He pulled a heavy old Florentine chair towards the fire. "I think this is fairly comfortable. And you'd like some tea. Of course you would." He rang a bell. "And won't you take off your coat? There!"

He gave it to the servant who entered immediately, and, having ordered tea, sat on a high-backed chair on the other side of the fireplace. Then he half rose. "Would you like a footstool? No? You see, I live so much alone that I don't know. . . . If you can think of anything to make you more comfortable, please tell me."

Perella declared herself to be perfectly content; and then it dawned on her feminine mind that this eminent and awe-inspiring professor was even more nervous than she herself. She gathered up her courage.

"It's most kind of you to ask me to come and see you."

"Not at all. Not at all. Your father once did me a very great service. He fought a splendid battle for me in the press. I should have never been able to do it for myself. You're too young to remember. . . ."

"Do tell me about it," said Perella.

"It wouldn't interest you. It's Ancient History."

"But I'm tremendously proud of my father," said Perella.

In a shy and diffident way he outlined the story of the battle. A Prussian critic had attacked him. . . . He had written a little book about Italian Art. Those being days when nothing thorough could come from anywhere but Germany, all the English critics leagued themselves with the Teuton. He had falsified the philosophical history of Art; his attributions of disputed masterpieces were idiotic—in fact, the book was the work of an amateur ignoramus. A great London newspaper invited him to defend himself—he was in England at the time. They sent John Annaway to see him. John Annaway, convinced, and in possession of indisputable facts, took up his battle-axe and, in Silvester Gayton's mild and archaic words, "went like billy 'o for the whole lot of them." He raked up the Prussian's dreadful critical past. . . . There was a certain statue bought by him for Berlin as an authentic Praxiteles which no one on earth, except the then Kaiser, recognized as being other than an impudent modern fake. . . . He poured ridicule on the German's theory of the Weltgeist manifesting itself in Fra Angelico and his followers, and . . . "Well," said Gayton apologetically, "he won the battle for me. And then I wrote a little article for the *Quarterly Review*, which finished the thing up."

"But father wrote me that you were very kind to him," said Perella.

"No, no," said Silvester hurriedly, "that's absurd. It's his charming way of

putting it."

Tea was brought in. He fussed round the table. He hoped she found what she liked. He had told them to get the biggest, thickest and stickiest cake in Florence, and such odds and ends as would lead artistically up to it. The table creaked under the odds and ends, and groaned under the cake. Perella caught a little breath of wonder at the old silver tea equipage and the egg-shell china cups. He stood, deferential, before her.

"Is the tea as you like it?"

She realized that she hadn't tasted it, flushed, and said simply:

"Everything you have is so beautiful."

He smiled. "I'm so glad you like beautiful things. If I dared give you advice, I should say, don't let the instinct grow atrophied. It's the greatest gift a human being can have. Life's full of beauty and the happiest people are those who know how to collect it. It has infinite forms. What you see around you is a poor little form. It has just happened by chance to have come my way. But there are spiritual forms—I don't know whether I'm making myself clear—memories of sunsets and bits of cool reaches of river, and a white city dreaming in the moonlight—which the connoisseur can collect. . . . And then, of course, there are the most sacred beauties of all . . . your collection of what is most precious in the souls of human beings. . . ." He laughed, shyly, and sipped his tea. "That, of course takes a good deal of courage."

"What?" she asked.

"Why, don't you see? It's like hunting for hidden treasure, or diving for pearls—every time an adventure. It isn't everybody that's adventurous."

Perella wondered whether that was the reason of his bachelordom; whether at the back of his little speech there did not lie an apology for filling his existence with the interpretations (however beautiful) of life, instead of the actualities of life itself—love, wife, children. . . .

He cut her a hasty wedge of the juicy cake and then went off to throw logs on the fire.

"And now"—he turned—"your father said I might help you. If I can I will, of course. But first I must be impertinent enough to ask you what you are doing?"

Emboldened by the tea, the warmth, the nervous figure of the deferential elderly boy in the opposite chair, she narrated her simple history—or as much of it as mattered. Perella thought him the most sympathetic listener to whom she had ever spoken. He had an odd and delightful little way of getting ahead of her thoughts and finishing up her sentences. They discussed the Madonna

del Pozzo. It used to be attributed, said he, to Andrea del Sarto—he and Franciabigio had, she must remember, once worked on the same canvas. His Prussian enemy had done his best to perpetuate the old error. But anyone could see the difference.

"With half an eye!" cried Perella, forgetting that she was talking to one of the World's Greatest Authorities.

He made a pleased little gesture, as though accepting her on the spot as a Sister Authority. Having learned how far she was advanced in her work, he said:

"I know how painters hate it, but—if you could put up with me—I should so much like to see your copy. The growth of artistic things is so fascinating. I once went through the rehearsals of a friend of mine, rather a famous actor. He was so flattering as to ask me to look over a Renaissance Italian setting, and really, to see an acted play in the making—the men and women struggling hour by hour in the throes of artistic creation—was a revelation. To me far more interesting that the finished product. . . . You will let me come and see your copy soon, won't you?"

"Of course; I should love it," she exclaimed.

"May I come to-morrow?"

Then suddenly she remembered, and went hot and cold all over, and knew not whether her cheeks were ashen or flushed scarlet. The Greatest Authority in the World was coming to see her poor little copy—and there was that impossible out-of-drawing bit of thigh of the chubby St. John. She gasped.

"But as yet it's dreadful. It's all so difficult."

"Not if you treat it reverently. The moment you try to improve the fault of a masterpiece you're lost."

His insight was uncanny. She looked at him in amazement.

"How did you know?"

"I happen to know—what shall we call it?—the snags of the picture."

Suddenly he rose in concerned apology. He was the worst host in Italy, which was saying a great deal. There was a box of chocolates which he had overlooked. And a box of cigarettes. He presented both. Her chastened mood prompted the choice of chocolate. He lit a cigarette. Then took her the tour of his treasures in his dining-room, work-room and an outer hall.

"I suppose it's childish," said he, "but I do love showing these things to people who can appreciate them."

At the end of the tour she took her leave. He accompanied her to the flat door; and, as he held her hand, he looked at her rather wistfully, his head on

one side.

"My dear child—I can call you so because I'm years older than your father—in order to get along in a rough world we all need plenty of courage—and I think you've got it. Good-bye till to-morrow."

He opened the door. Then he suddenly left her and quickly reappeared with the ornamental box of chocolates.

"Forgive me—I'm an awful idiot. But I got them especially for you."

The waiting car took her back to the Pension Toselli. She wondered how old he was. He said he was years older than her father. He couldn't be ninety. That was absurd. At moments, he seemed quite young. Altogether he was a puzzle—a delightful one, but a puzzle. Now and then, through his shy desire to please flashed a shaft of authority, revealing him for a moment as a man of a certain greatness of soul and mind.

When Anthony asked her at dinner: "Well, did you see the Grand Panjandrum?" his note of irreverence jarred. Instinctively she administered rebuke.

"I didn't personally; but I've no doubt other people might have done."

He laughed. "Which means, my Guide, Philosopher and Conscience, that when I visit him I must go clad in the garments of humility."

"You'd better choose the garments carefully," she retorted.

Presently she relented.

"He's a very big man of course, Anthony; but really he's the very dearest of dears."

"Is there a man who wouldn't be that for the sake of your *beaux yeux*?" said he.

Perella, who was very young in the ways of men, met his laughing eyes and flushed and forgave him. And the wise youth adroitly pursued the turn of the conversation.

There followed for Perella some weeks of unspoiled happiness. Professor Silvester Gayton, a meek little figure in an old-fashioned bowler hat, had appeared in the gallery, saluted deferentially by the uniformed attendant at the door, and had praised her copy of the Franciabigio, and, in his hesitating, apologetic way, had made valuable suggestions. The fruits of his approval manifested themselves shortly afterwards by an offer from a Florentine dealer for a copy of the Deposizione of Fra Bartolomeo in the Pitti, on behalf of an Argentine millionaire who was adding a Renaissance Picture Gallery to his

palace in Buenos Aires. The road to fortune gleamed golden before her. Through Silvester Gayton she made the acquaintance of the Marchesa della Torre, an elderly English lady, a widow, who lived in a queer little old Palazzo poked away behind the Strozzi. The relations between the Marchesa and the Professor suggested to Perella's nostrils the perfume of an old romance.

When she told the Marchesa that her mother was an Italian, the daughter of a Roman poet, the old lady fervently insisted on her learning the language of her mother's country, and produced from the whirlpool of her late husband's family a pretty girl, one Lucia Demonetti, who was willing to give Italian lessons in exchange for English. The lessons were given in the Demonetti apartment, delightfully reminiscent, in a queer way, of the Battersea flat, for which, now and then, she felt a child's nostalgia. As a medium of communication the two young women employed a dreadful French.

And there was Anthony all the time, gay, delightful, holding her heart in tender hands. Her wan and fragile beauty began to bloom from insignificance into definition. Even to herself she seemed to occupy a greater space in the world. To her further content, Anthony had begun to work. All owing, said he, to the example and precept of his adorable Conscience. His Cambridge friend, Charlie Dent, had made him show his portfolio of old drawings to Cornelius Adams, the American gentleman who had set him on the cocktail path. Cornelius Adams had invited him to his villa and commissioned a crayon portrait for a favourite daughter in Scotland. Anthony had a bold line and a flourish and a magical trick of portraiture. The drawing commanded instant appreciation. Exhibited proudly by the possessor to the Anglo-American colony, it brought in two or three stray orders. He began to discuss with Perella the most suitable locality in which he could set up a studio. It became the nominal object of many walks during which they incidentally saturated themselves with the intimate atmosphere of beauty in paint and stone, which to all but Italians is the only reason for the existence of Florence. Thus Anthony Blake, dismissing with a supercilious hand the pulsating spirit of New Italy. Why should he or any foreigner care a hang about the modern significance of the place? Would a cultivated Italian go into the mildest of raptures over Glasgow or Manchester or Birmingham, which, as cities, could swallow up modern Florence and forget all about it. Florence only lived as an eternal message of the centuries. The very type and temper of the citizens were the same as in the days of the Gonfaloniere. The black-shirted Fascisti going about the streets might have burned—or stopped the living cremation according to Piedmond—of Savonarola.

He had the superficial history of the place at his tongue's end. His academical studies in architecture at Cambridge had led him into the pleasant

paths of Italian art which are inextricably intertwined with those of Italian history. He could put dates on arches and traceries and pilasters and cornices with incredible ease. She thought him wonderful. The travelling card of the Royal Institute of British Architects, duly visé-d by the Italian Consul in London, and the card of recommendation given to Perella by Professor Gayton, gave them privileges denied to the casual sightseer. Now and again old instinct would compel him to an architectural sketch. Perella looked longingly at his deft fingers. Hers were of no use for delicate drawing. . . . She wished some one would commission her to copy frescoes in Santa Maria Novella, or the cloisters of San Marco, while Anthony should look on. . . . Meanwhile, they did not find the studio.

Anthony had presented his letter of introduction to Professor Gayton, and been politely received.

"He gave me the impression," said he to Perella, "that he had just been pulled by a conjuror out of a hat, and didn't know where he was."

Perella laughed, the incorrigible youth having established in her eyes his charter of libertinage. But she would have liked more cordiality in the relations between Anthony and the Professor. The latter's verdict was:

"Yes, my dear. Quite a talented young man. He'll make his way, no doubt. I find he knows a number of people in Florence already. They'll be of considerable service to him."

And then he broke out into a panegyric on that really great man, Halliday Armstrong, R.A., whose erudition was equalled only by his artistry. Which was his nervous way of indicating that he had no peculiar use for Anthony Blake.

"He really does love the old things," said Perella.

"As an artist he must," said Silvester Gayton. "But he doesn't love them quite in the way that you and I do."

This little talk took place one afternoon at the Marchesa's, where she had met him taking tea.

She had met him several times since his inspection of her picture—once or twice she had gone, on his invitation, to the flat in the Viale Milton—refusing, with discreet wisdom, the offer of the car, and journeying thither quite comfortably by tram. One Sunday he took the Marchesa and herself up to Fiesole where, losing shyness of speech, he breathed the breath of life into the crumbling tiers of seats and the broken columns of the ancient theatre, and made the majesty of Rome live again before their eyes; filled the cold place with eager citizens, and enacted, so that they saw it vividly, the drama on the strange and unfamiliar stage. Here Perella, accustomed to rare gleams, came

under the spell of his lambent genius. Now she understood why men had called him the inspired teacher and why half the governments and universities of Christendom had showered honours on his bald and modest head. By the magic of his art he had transferred, almost hypnotically, his perfect vision to her brain. . . .

She remembered afterwards that the guardian had welcomed him with reverent obsequiousness and had addressed him as Commendatore, which explained to her the meaning of the little rosette he wore in his buttonhole.

Later the Marchesa had shown her his record in a treasured old *Who's Who*.

"If he wore all his hoods and decorations at once," laughed the lady, "there'd be nothing left of him visible."

Perella caught the date of his birth. Yes, he was quite old, far older than her father, who was not yet fifty.

She remembered that, when they turned away to visit the cold little archæological museum near by, the Marchesa had said to him:

"My dear Silvester, what a wonder you are! How you make the past live!"

And he had replied:

"If you can't see the past as a living thing, what's the use of worrying about it? The present facts about ruins are as valueless as patient measurements of any old bit of jagged rock on a mountain side. And what's the good of reconstructing the ground plan of a site like a geometrical puzzle, unless it leads to an accurate imagining of the whole building? To go to painting—what's the good of staring like an idiot at my belovèd Primitives, unless you can project yourself into the historically-conditioned outlook on life of the painter and the people for whom he painted? Primitives are either dead or they're astonishingly alive. When silly asses call Primitives 'quaint,' I see red, and want to bite them."

Perella thought of Anthony who had dismissed the whole lot of them—Cimabue, Giotto, Ducio, Spinello, Aretini—with a gay wave of the hand.

"They get at one somehow," he had said. "One's sorry for them, I suppose. They meant well, but they're funny old fowls just the same."

She wondered what the Professor would have said to this. She pictured him perched on a chair and savagely biting Anthony's ear.

But this was only a passing sense of the comic, which made for endearing rather than disillusionment. She began to adore him in her young and tender way.

His shyness, his horror of publicity, kept him remote from the ever-

changing, semi-cultivated Anglo-Saxon society that, were it given its way, would have flowed an embarrassing, adulatory stream through his pleasant leisure from year's end to year's end. Hence, almost against his will, and certainly without his knowledge, there had gone up a legend of his unapproachable Grand Lama seclusion. On a lecture platform, inspired by his poetic vision, he was a compelling force; in a cosmopolitan drawing-room, he became but a bewildered and stammering undergraduate. Yet he was not unsociable. To a few houses in Florence he went in secrecy as a delighted guest; and his intimates were welcomed in the beautiful rooms in the Viale Milton. All of this Perella knew; on the one side, from the gossip of the Pension Toselli, where, as one living under the ægis, as it were, of the awe-inspiring dictator, she felt humorously inclined to put on airs; and, on the other, from her own observation and the confidences of the Marchesa della Torre.

His courteous, ever apologetic kindliness warmed her young life. Why he should ever have given a second thought to so insignificant a speck on his horizon as herself, she was at a loss to imagine. She supposed it was on account of her wonderful father, to whom she wrote reams of glowing description which bored the uninterested journalist to tears.

"All about this dismal fellow," said he, displaying the sheets to the devoted lady who kept him out of the Fuddlers' Club, "and not a word about my liver and my gout and my dreadful struggle for existence. Lear is the typical father of all time."

Still, he was generous. On her birthday he sent her a Treasury Note for a pound, bidding her buy a nice little frock with it. Perella wondered whether father was ever more adorable than hers.

This by way of parenthesis, to show one of the many gleams of the soft radiance under which Perella had her being. Star-dust, as it were, with her dear Professor serene and restful moon. But Anthony blazed in her firmament a wondrous sun.

The day of days dawned for her on the Saturday before Easter. For then, against even ecclesiastical astronomics, the sun and moon were to be in conjunction.

The first thrill of it had been communicated a week before. Scarcely had she sat down to dinner when the dilapidated waiter rushed out and returned and whispered to Madame Toselli. Madame Toselli, commanding silence, apostrophized Perella.

“Miss Annaway, Professor Gayton wants you on the telephone.”

The light of expectation danced in her eyes, and she fled out, no longer feeling herself the smallest of all possible persons in the greatest of all possible worlds. Her intimacy with the Great Recluse had gained her the envious respect of the Pension. The Brabazon ladies had invited her to tea in their musty little private sitting-room at the back, and, before seeking to pump her dry, had endeavoured to set themselves on the same plane by exhibiting a couple of letters, ornamented with butterflies, written by Whistler to their aunt. Madame Toselli had transferred her to a room with a less chimney-potty outlook, and offered, if she swore inviolable secrecy, to let her have her early breakfast in bed. Also, one evening the Grewsons had invited her out to dinner to meet a pair of lost Archdeacons (male and female, and conjugally bound) from Demerara.

Said Anthony: “If you make love to him over the telephone, I’ll commit suicide by eating everything that is offered me.”

Thus it was a Personage that, in the guise of a tiny scrap of humanity, slipped along the side of the table and out of the room.

She returned, flushed and excited.

“Oh, Anthony, isn’t it lovely? He has asked us to go to the Scoppio del Carro on Saturday!”

“Us?”

She nodded brightly. “Yes—us. You and me and us two. He goes every year, and always has the same balcony. Of course I said you’d come. You will, won’t you?”

“Naturally. It’s jolly decent of him,” said Anthony. “I wonder what made him think of me.”

A rare mood of gaiety caught her.

“Who could ever see you, Antonio, without thinking of you?”

He responded with uplifted hand.

“Enough, woman. I’ve heard that sort of thing before.”

That is why the wings of the dawn awoke her to happiness on that Saturday morning.

The whole of Tuscany seemed to be pouring through the narrow streets towards the Piazza del Duomo, as they made their way to the scene of the historical Burning of the Car. To keep her by his side, Anthony tucked his hand beneath her arm, and steered her happily through the welter of men and

horses and groaning automobiles. Every one looked excited and happy and anxious, for it was a most important ceremony that was to take place—nay more—the last lingering augury sanctioned by the Church forecasting the summer's harvest. The Babel precluded coherent speech. But what did words matter when his arm bent strongly round her to save her new hat from the wet nose of a cab-horse?

The Piazza was seething with humanity when they reached the shop on the western side above which was Professor Gayton's balcony. They mounted to the welcome of the proprietor who for years had placed his *salon* at the Professor's disposal. They were the first comers; but the Commendatore would soon arrive—he looked at his watch—always in time for the great procession. Here was the best view of the Scoppio in Florence.

They went on to the balcony. On the right the white and black marble front of the domed cathedral flanked by the towering Campanile gleamed in the keen April sunlight. On the left stood the lesser but exquisite mass of the Baptistery. The only place, from skyline to ground, clear of human heads and faces lay between the two buildings. And in the midst thereof, close to the Baptistery and centred with the great West Door, and, so, with the far away hidden High Altar of the Cathedral, rose heavenward the red and gold structure of the Car, from whose shafts had been withdrawn the four pure white oxen, whose sole duty in life was to drag the Carro from and to its resting-place on one day of the year. And, just visible as the sunlight glinted here and there on them, two wires ran from the car across the Piazza straight into the Great West Door.

Humanity everywhere, at windows, on roofs, on rough deal stands; an ever thickening crush below, as all Tuscany crowded into the great square from its many tributary streets. Year after year, for centuries, the same crowd had gathered to see the same queer and childish, yet soul-uplifting spectacle.

"Charlie Dent," said Anthony, "is the miserablest worm of a fool unstamped on."

Perella asked why. He swept a hand.

"He wanted me to cut this out and motor to some rotten villa for lunch. Talked through his ugly hat. By the way, he wears the filthiest hats I know—soft brims turned down. I hate 'em. Never trust a man with that kind of hat. . . . Lord! I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Don't you feel the thrill of it?"

They were leaning over the balcony rail and their arms were touching. Perella drew a little breath of content. Certainly she felt the thrill of it.

Soon they were joined by the Professor, neat in a new tweed suit of old-fashioned cut, the jacket tightly buttoned, bowler hat and gloves; the old

Marchesa, stout and rather lame; the Master of the Cambridge College, his wife and daughter; and a deliciously rugged, untidy, red-headed man with an eye-glass, whom Perella felt sure she would love, long before she realized him as Mr. Haddo Thwaites, sculptor and Royal Academician.

"My dear," said Gayton, in his fussy, nervous way, "I want you to take good care of Miss Edwardes, you being a resident, she a visitor." His eyes beamed behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "I count on you to do the honours."

Thus was her function prescribed in the somewhat lordly company. But what of Anthony? Out of the tail of her eye she saw him bracketed with Mrs. Edwardes, a severe, high-nosed lady with a mission in life, hovering on the tantalizing borderland of the obscure and the obvious.

It was only afterwards that Anthony resolved her problem.

"A channel," said he, "through whom run Dons past, present and future."

Dr. Edwardes, layman, scientist, up-to-date Head of a venerable college which he was pushing to the front with almost American energy, was paired with the Marchesa, an old friend. Thus were the six chairs in the front of the balcony occupied. Again, out of the tail of her eye, did Perella glance backward at the Professor. He caught her glance, almost winked, so that she was delightfully conscious of a confidential message. He was perfectly happy with Haddo Thwaites, who stood over him with a grip on both shoulders, shaking him as though he loved him.

She turned to the pale girl by her side, who seemed a curious negative of feminine coquetry in attire and manner. Miss Edwardes wore black stockings and stout black shoes with which could woman born, pulsating with a thousand spring certainties, hopes and fears, refrain from contrasting with the juxtaposed fawn silk and dainty fawn *suède*? And in her timid, gentle way, Perella tried to carry out her host's behest. Said Amelia Edwardes, in her second year at Girton, in reply to the obvious commonplace:

"Of course I've read all about it. It has an archæological interest; but doesn't it strike you as being dreadfully silly?"

She waved her hand to the surging crowd below, to the barbaric car, for which the banks of the Ganges were perhaps a fitter setting than the banks of the Arno, to the quivering, dancing wires.

"Just look at them now."

A child's balloon—there were many vendors in the crowd—had escaped, and came soaring, a red, miniature Mars, over the Bargello, into the infinite height of the blue. In an instant the massed Piazza became a shimmering mass of upturned faces, like a vast field of wild flowers stirred by the breeze.

The young lady from Girton cast upward a scornful glance.

“Did you ever see anything so idiotic? These people are really in the same state they were in four hundred years ago.”

Perella spent a few deliberate moments in travel towards this new point of view. She failed to reach it.

“But that’s the beauty of this—well, this show—to-day. It bears out what Professor Gayton is always saying. He said it wonderfully the other day. ‘So long as the past lives, the present can’t die.’ ”

“What about the future?” asked Amelia Edwardes, with a twist of her thin lips.

Parrot Perella quoted:

“It’s the child of the Present, and the grandchild of the Past.”

“Plausible, but damned nonsense,” said Miss Edwardes. “There’s an undistributed middle somewhere in the logic. Dead things are dead, and they can’t come to life again. If anybody handed me my great-grandmother’s skeleton as a great treat, I’d say: ‘Take it away and burn it and make chlorate of potash, or whatever you make of bones, with it, and use it for manure, but don’t ask me to be sentimental.’ ”

Perella again pondered awhile.

“But the chlorate of potash, or whatever it is, would make things grow, wouldn’t it? Even the old bones would carry on.”

Miss Edwardes dismissed the argument.

“We’re talking of psychology, not chemistry. Just look at this. What can it mean to human reason?”

From the cathedral, heralded by a murmur of the populace, streamed an august procession, incense-swinging, crosier-bearing, chanting; boys gorgeous in scarlet and white lace; priests in Easter vestments; mitred bishops, dazzling in gold brocade; each personage who emerged from the western door seeming the last word in ecclesiastical splendour, till the appearance, under the velvet canopy, of the scarlet-robed Cardinal Archbishop of Florence. Majestically it wound across the open space, and gradually and inevitably it disappeared into the Baptistery.

“What meaning can it have?” asked Miss Edwardes scornfully, after having watched the pageant with unconscious interest.

“They’ve gone to bless the fonts in the Baptistery?” replied Perella literally.

“I know that. But what’s the good of blessing fonts when none of these

people have baths once a lifetime?"

"They wouldn't be any cleaner if the fonts weren't blessed," said Perella.

"Oh, yes they would. Of course I'm talking symbolically. You only have to preach hygiene with the same fervour as you do mystical theology."

"You'd miss all this picturesqueness and colour—and spirituality—even though you mayn't believe in it," said Perella.

Amelia Edwardes sniffed. She had met reactionaries like Perella before. People like her would condemn their fellow-creatures to die of ague in rotten, moss-sodden, thatched cottages, just because they looked so pretty. Perella, no great arguer, lent a meek ear, but kept a keen eye on the happenings in front of her. They were interesting. A ladder was brought up to the car, and a man ordinary to view, but the most important and nerve-racked being there that day, mounted it to secure the wires; for, if the burning of the car should fail, grievous were the hopes of Tuscany, to say nothing of the man himself, execrated by the populace, going without payment. In fiercer and more resolute times, his unskilful predecessors were put to death. And while he was nervously employed the stately procession returned to the Duomo.

The hour of noon approached. Professor Gayton squeezed behind the chairs and touched Perella's shoulder. She turned up a smiling and grateful face. She felt it characteristic of him to leave all these important people and raise her, as it were, out of her own insignificance.

"Keep your eyes on the door," said he.

On the first stroke of twelve there whizzed from the west door along the wires, a silver dove with a train of flame, lit at the High Altar from the sacred fire brought from the Holy Land six hundred years ago. It flew across the Piazza straight into the heart of the car, and then like a flash made its return journey. In one instant the car became a bedevilment of fireworks and smoke. The vast multitude yelled with joy. The bells in the great belfry clanged a deafening triumph. The car thundered like a battle. The scene shimmered before Perella's eyes as an apotheosis of human rapture.

"Damned silly," said the young lady from Girton.

Perella awakened. "It isn't," she cried indignantly. "It's lovely!"

The company on the balcony waited for the melting of the crowd. The last squib in the car exploded all alone, by quaint way of anti-climax. The four white oxen were harnessed to the car for the completion of their year's work. And the proprietor of the balcony handed round a tray of glasses of vermouth which they drank in the *salon*. Anthony came to Perella's side, glowing with enthusiasm. Childish the show, of course, but beautiful, like all legend and the survival of legend. There were times when it was good for the soul to be a

child and think and not to put away childish things, in spite of the good St. Paul—or was it St. Peter? He thought it was Paul, because Peter, being a married man, was more human.

Silvester Gayton, hearing him, advanced a nervous step or two.

"So glad you appreciated it. So glad. So very glad."

Perella was overjoyed. At last Anthony had won the Professor's heart. Now all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

"I wish I'd been sitting next to you," said he.

"So do I," said Perella.

"Never mind. We felt everything the same. And that's the main thing, isn't it?"

Two minds with but a single thought! Two hearts that beat as one! (*Vide* a funny old play of the long ago.) Of course that was the main thing. Perella nodded at him with shy brightness.

The world transcended her imagined possibilities of bestness on that remarkable day. She discovered that the Professor had invited them all to lunch at a restaurant. At Betti's she lost sense of time and space until she found herself sitting at a round table between Dr. Edwardes and Haddo Thwaites. Anthony across the table sped her a wry glance, as though to say he was still on duty. She responded with a little sense of proprietorship. On occasion, discipline was good for young men.

There followed a miracle of a meal. Young women brought up in back bedrooms by shaggy, out-at-elbows members of the Fuddlers' Club, and then thrust out into the world to fend for themselves on sixty pounds a year, seldom eat in lordly banqueting houses. They also seldom have as luncheon neighbours the Head of a Cambridge House, and an eminent sculptor. But for the happiness racing through her veins and going to her head like wine, she would have felt the most frightened insignificant atom on earth. And lo! the jovial artist, though flanked on the other side by the latest product of Girton intelligence, began to talk to her as if he had known her, not all her life, but all his—which was considerably longer. And he knew her master at Chelsea, a personage stern and aloof, whom he alluded to as Binkie though his name was Cochrane, and many of his Chelsea contemporaries; and he had fraternized with her father at the Savage Club of which he was a member. He told her stories which made her laugh; he demurely stuffed Miss Edwardes' Economics full of squibs, and at the right moment exploded them, as the Dove did those lurking in the Carro. The lady, as she was reading for the Political Essay Tripos, grew angry. He, a Cambridge man, made her angrier, by bewailing the fact that the University seemed to have Triposes for every thing—Cabbage

Planting, Tripe Dressing, Assassination. With regard to the last, he deplored the passing away of the old order of seniority. The Senior Assassin of his year—what a distinction! Amelia Edwardes gazed fishily at him for a second or two, and her eyes said: "You poor fool," and she went on with her food, not without commendable gluttony. Thwaites caught Perella's eye and laughed, and, after a while, entered into controversy with the courteously dogmatic Master, and upheld Perella and himself as brother artists inseparably leagued to fight materialism in the sacred cause of Art.

Her pulses throbbed. People like Haddo Thwaites were her people. After all, she was the child of a magnificent reprobate and a half-remembered mother of unknown Italian ancestry. And across the table was Anthony, on his best behaviour, knowing, shrewd fellow, that his worth was being tested by his timid yet powerful little host, conversing in debonair fashion with the two Edwardes ladies, mother and daughter, but all the time pricking an envious ear to the robust and laughing talk of Haddo Thwaites. He, too, was of her own people; the people who could see and feel and understand all in a flash. She conceded to the Edwardes folk an important place in the intellectual sphere. But that sphere would never be hers. Sociology as formulated crudely by Amelia Edwardes, and subtly, and indeed, humorously, by the young lady's father—for the progressive, non-clerical Master of a great College must necessarily have the charm and the quick touch upon life of the accomplished man of the world—was as meaningless to her half-educated mind as the technical engineering details of a battleship. As for Mrs. Edwardes, she seemed to be nothing but an Hotel Register of Academic personalities, without any other obvious reason for existence. No. They were not her people. She belonged to the big, generous sculptor, to the quick and impulsive Anthony. . . . Yes, and to the shy, antediluvian boy of a bald-headed professor who knew all that there was to be known about beauty.

About three o'clock on that magical April afternoon, Perella and Anthony found themselves happy wanderers in the streets of Florence. He threw his arm round her shoulders in a transient grip.

"Thank God I've got you to myself at last!"

She laughed. "I think we've behaved ourselves very nicely."

"Not much merit in your behaving nicely, Perella, my Conscience," said he. "It's I who have been noble."

"Let us find a site for a statue for you. It'll be something to do," said Perella.

“You’re two foot nothing and you weigh about three pennyweights, and you’re the only really adorable thing I’ve come across in my devastated life. Where the blazes can we go so that I can tell you exactly what I mean?”

“There’s quite a respectable *salon* in the Pension Toselli,” said Perella.

“There is also the Boboli Garden where there are fountains and statues and all the marvels of spring. And here’s a chariot especially sent down from heaven for us by the goddess.” He held up an arresting hand. “Strip the horse-hide off them, and you’ll find a pair of doves and the young bandit on the box has wings under his jacket, and his whip is only a camouflaged bow.”

They entered the chariot. The journey to Cythera began. He put his arm around her.

“I had an idea, when I first sat down by you in that place of abomination, that you had come straight out of a fairy tale.”

In the welter of her pride and her humility she whispered:

“Why? I don’t seem to be of much account.”

“You’re a sensitive flame, my dear, labouring under the delusion that you’re a woman.”

His arm gripped her little body tighter. His free hand caught her chin. In her eyes was the tragic look of the most radiantly happy woman who, for the first time, gives herself. He kissed her in the open streets of Florence.

Little of importance remained to be said in the Boboli Garden.

PART II

ANTHONY

CHAPTER V

FOR a young Orlando with scant heritage, Anthony Blake found life exceedingly pleasant. He had fallen in love with an elfin thing responsive to any chord he cared to strike, yet reserving in the depths of her all kinds of delicious and delicate mysteries which, he knew, she would shyly, gradually, yet never completely reveal during a lifetime. He was an honest youth, and a poet in his way. It did not occur to him that his dainty lady had made unconditional surrender on the first magical night of their meeting. In his masculine way he gave never a thought to her half-starved and a-hungered emotions. In the days of his prosperity he had been on the modern hail-fellow-well-met terms with a hundred young females of his class. Some were good friends whose disconcerting frankness precluded sentimental relations. Others, with a frankness equally disconcerting, offered themselves to him—they were his for the marrying—and, when he declined, gave him to understand that he was rather an ass, but bore no further malice. Living cleanly (for all that mattered), loving the bubbles of life in healthy fashion, he passed through the galaxy of nymphs unscathed. Time to marry when he was thirty, by which time he would find the one and only girl in the world.

He argued it out once with his eldest sister, Gloria, who had up her sleeve, so to speak, a desirable and desiring damsel. He would live, said he, all being well, till he was at least seventy. Married at thirty, he would have forty years to live with the same woman, supposing for the sake of argument she was as tough as himself. Well, didn't the dear thing see that he wasn't going to gamble away his existence except on a certainty? On the one hand, he refused to go bald-headed for a girl who obviously didn't care a hang for him, but who might marry him on account of the position he could offer; and, on the other, young women who threw themselves at his head made him positively sick. If social law allowed the trial trip, all would be well. At the end of a year or so, if it didn't work it would be, on both sides, "Good-bye, old thing. Sorry. Better luck next time." And so *da capo*. All might be exceedingly well. He would go so far as to say that it might be a succession of fascinating experiences up to the various snag-times. But no. All these young things expected you to take them on—on sight—for forty years. It couldn't be done. Of course there were such things as divorces—but those were beastly. You didn't marry a girl with the mirage of divorce shimmering behind the parson in his white surplice. Forty years! It took a lot of thinking about.

Thus Anthony, *passim*. Said Gloria, a comfortable lady, in love with life:

"I was engaged to Freddie after a three weeks' acquaintance, and married him after seven."

"And look at the poor devil now!" exulted Anthony.

Of course, said he, she had sat up and begged for it. Her concerns were beside the question. His own were under discussion. Did she know her Rabelais? No. Did Freddie? She replied that modern Major-Generals with their hands full of armies and wives hadn't time to fool about with stuffy old French classics.

"If only he had occupied the seven weeks you talk about," said he, "in studying the arguments between Pantagruel and Panurge on the advisability of Panurge marrying, you'd be having a very thin time now, my dear."

Heart-whole, his head a medley of delights over material and spiritual things—from broiled lobster to Michael Angelo—he arrived in Florence, sat down at the dreadful Toselli table, and there, next to him, was a tiny something in a wisp of an old mauve frock with a sensitive little face and adorable little hands, and a pair of quiet dark eyes, which was like nothing he had seen or thought of in the world before. . . .

He remembered her first utterance—in answer to his question if she was English. "Yes, of course." The dainty music of it!

And her shy woodland ways!

He disdained the thought, almost the knowledge, that she had spent her life in back bedrooms overlooking bricks and mortar.

And her name—Perella—it might be the name of a bird.

There was, indeed, something bird-like about her. "And all a wonder and a wild desire." What damned useful people poets were!

Anthony was in love, as much as a healthy and poetical and artistic young man can be. He discovered new beauties and reticences and delicate veins of humour and wisdom in Perella day by day. When, in pursuit of his making crayon portraits of the opulent, he was not retained to lunch, they often met for their midday meal in a haunt remote from the atmosphere of austere decay of the Pension Toselli. This was a restaurant running through the cellars of a house or two. You dived off the pavement into a dark hole, passed hissing, steaming, bubbling pots and pans, presided over by white-capped cook and myrmidons, and emerged into yellow-washed vaults furnished with tables and rough appurtenances, and adorned with flaming posters. The food was good, the wine was cheap, and the company of endless variegation. To pay twice over for a meal was sinfully wasteful, but alluringly extravagant. They ate

coarse dainties such as Madame Toselli would not dare offer to her genteel guests, and smoked between mouthfuls, a joy forbidden by the stern etiquette of the Pension. Indeed, the Brabazon ladies manifested displeasure if anyone lit a cigarette before the last woolly mouthful of the last wizened apple was eaten, and only tolerated the smell of tobacco for the few moments necessary for the consumption of their tepid coffee. Here, on the other hand, at Fratello's, was freedom of body and speech. They could talk as loud as their neighbours—louder, if they were wise—for then they had the chance of hearing each other across the table.

Now and then Anthony brought his friend, Charlie Dent, a fresh and pleasant youth who, knowing the betrothed relations of the pair, treated Perella with a gay deference which pleased her mightily. Now and again, too, Perella brought Monica Despard, a vague girl who had been a fellow-student in Chelsea, and whom she had run across in Florence, vaguely continuing her art studies. Once or twice Charlie Dent entertained them at Betti's, and took them afterwards to his queer apartment in order to feast their eyes on his collection of Roman coins. Perella, so long as she was with Anthony, would have gazed with rapture on a collection of skeleton ribs of beef, and been perfectly happy; but Anthony, in his masterful way, consigned Roman coins to Hades, strummed the newest airs from musical Comedy on the piano, and turned the scientific gathering into a vocal orgy. Then they walked home together lover-wise.

"Anthony dear, will you always care for me like this?"

All the grim palaces of Florence, which had listened to lovers' impassioned vows for centuries, heard her and smiled cynically.

They were engaged. He bought her a ring—an exquisite onyx intaglio set in a thin rim of gold. But the engagement, they decided, should not be announced, in view of its prospective inordinate length. The Pension Toselli must be kept in abysmal ignorance, wherefore Perella wore the ring on any old finger except the one of significance. Their ambitions were modest: a little Montparnasse flat in Paris, a bungalow on the river, within easy reach of London, a handy little car, and a faithful, hard-working Italian cook who would follow them everywhere. There would be studios in both places where they would work, one at each end. Perella's copying drudgery would be over. She would paint figures from the live model, and make much money; while he would portrait himself into celebrity. What could be wrong with the plan? They furnished the flat and the bungalow twice over with treasures seen through the windows of the antique shops of Florence the Beautiful.

Anthony wrote to his sister, Gloria, a letter of extraordinary length and conscientious rhapsody, to which she replied by telegram: "Dear silly ass!"

This made him very angry; for he had minutely explained that, though Perella would marry him to-morrow without thought of the future, such being her unique, unprecedented character, yet it would be wicked of him to take advantage of her ultra-human trust until he could provide adequately for her comfort.

"I'm through with Gloria," said he. "I thought she was my friend. I'll never speak to her again."

"You must have written her awful drivel, dear," said Perella.

"Oh, you sympathize with her, do you?"

Perella nodded. "Do write to her again, and tell her I'm dying to meet her. I think she must be the dearest thing in the world."

"She's just a cat of no intelligence," said Anthony.

Thus Anthony and Perella. Meanwhile the days lengthened through the sweet of May into the flame of June. In July Florence began to grow comfortably warm, whereupon many residents fled to the imaginary climatic perfection of London or Paris, leaving the pencil of a young portraitist ready but idle.

Now, things had happened. No one who, within three or four months, has established for himself a happy vogue in making portraits of the nobility and gentry of an important locality can pass through such a social range like a ghost untouched by adventure. Anthony's facile art, and his gay manner had carried him through Florentine society. He had made influential friends. As he told Perella, he wallowed in advice.

Among his main advisers were his first friend, Cornelius Adams, and the American lady, Mrs. Beatrice Ellison, whom he had met for a few fleeting minutes on his first entrance into Doney's.

Mrs. Ellison returned to Florence at the end of April. She lived in an historical villa on the way to Fiesole, where she entertained the select world of Italo-Anglo-American Florence.

Thither in early May was Anthony conducted by Cornelius Adams and Charlie Dent.

It was afternoon. On a marble loggia, south of aspect, from which could be seen, through soft blue mist, the fairy cupolas and towers of Florence, tea was being served to an elegant company. Dissemble the lower parts of ladies in sweeping trains, accentuate those of men by parti-coloured trunk-hose, substitute cool silver flagons for china tea-cups, and there might have been seated Pamfilo and Filostrato and Dioneo and Pampinea and Filomena and

Elisa, the immortally delectable idlers of the Decameron.

The analogy was Anthony's in talk with his hostess. The conceit pleased her, for she had gaiety and imagination. She declared that she must inaugurate a series of symposia on Boccaccian lines, one story per symposium.

"But where," bewailed Anthony, "are the exquisite amateur tellers of stories? All that—such is the modern spirit of commercialism—has fallen into professional hands, and the modern professional wouldn't dream of giving out his stories except at his market rate of so much per thousand words."

"What would you suggest then?" smiled the lady, for Anthony was one of the fortunate youths on whom ladies smiled instinctively.

"A perfect communion of chosen souls, where speech would be forbidden. You would be much happier—wouldn't you?—if, instead of being bored to death by me whom you're so indulgent as to talk to, you could sit just there and look at the black cypresses against the blue sky, and the shimmering city, and know that beside you some one sympathetic was feeling exactly the same things and was saving you the worry of polite conversation."

"It sounds lovely," she laughed, "but I'm afraid in modern Italy it wouldn't work. The Fascisti would get to hear of it, and, as they couldn't conceive such a party was not under the influence of drugs, they'd arrest us all for dreadful people trafficking in cocaine."

Anthony left behind him a favourable impression, and carried away, in a jubilant head, a commission to make a portrait of his hostess, in her setting on the loggia, as one of the Queens of the Decameron.

A commission from Beatrice Ellison would have flattered any young and ambitious artist. Not only was she a beautiful woman, but also one of those aristocratic ladies to whom Americans, secretly hating their self-condemnation to Main Street democracy, point with pride and unquestioned justification as the finest product of modern civilization. With the ripe experience of the world which a woman has gathered by her early forties, she was at the height of her influence and charm. Like most women of her class, she devoted certain pains to the preservation of her youth, whereby she remained young in health and looks and enjoyment of life. She reigned somewhat as a queen in Florence, holding a position in the social world analogous to that of Silvester Gayton in the world of Art and Letters. The two were friends; but when they met it was generally in pleasant quietude.

Anthony Blake made the most graceful little finished sketch of Mrs. Ellison. The lady proclaimed her delight. Her Court paid tribute to the artist. In her pose he had divined the irony of her languor and the truth of her authority. Without using colour he had, by some trick of legerdemain, conveyed the

sense of the blueness of her eyes and the fresh pink of complexion beneath the mass of black hair. Anthony took rank, at once, among the *Illuminati* who formed the nucleus, the Household, as it were, of the Court of Beatrice Ellison. His position, within modest limits, was honourably lucrative. It was also one of great social value; for, by its virtue, exclusive doors were thrown open to him. He began once more to move among the great and wealthy. He would apologize now and then to Perella for apparent neglect.

"Often I'm bored to tears, bird of my soul," said he one day over lunch in the cellar restaurant, "but it's the only way to establish my connection. People don't come to a young man who lives on the top of an inaccessible mountain or at the bottom of a coal mine, begging him, for God's sake, to paint their portraits. He must be there on the spot, in the midst of them, so that a fellow happening to catch sight of him says: 'Hullo, that's young Blake who did Jones's wife so well. I wonder whether he'd do mine. By George! I'll ask him.' And he asks, and young Blake puts on dog and condescends to take the order and sticks the money in the savings-bank against the day when he can carry off Perella for a honeymoon in a bungalow on the Thames. That's how it's done."

And Perella, dazzled by his magnificent prospects, agreed that nothing could be better done by the best of all possible lovers.

"You're such a miracle," said he. "So big in your tininess. You never reproach me for leaving you so much to yourself, and you scorn jealousy."

She replied, with one of her elfin smiles: "I'm too happy to be jealous. But sometimes I wonder."

"What?"

"How you can leave princesses in palaces for Cinderella in a kitchen."

"Cinderella's going to have a Taj-Mahal palace of her very own, and wear nothing but diamond slippers."

A most comforting assurance. It made the cheap Chianti, which he poured into her glass from the vast, long-necked *fiasco* swinging in its cradle, glow with the fire of Love and Rubies consummating their union.

Mrs. Ellison commissioned a second portrait—just a head and shoulders—a sketch for her daughter Emilia, a girl of eighteen who was taking a course of Theoretic Motherhood at a university in Minnesota.

"This time make me respectable. The other was too Decameronian to send to a girl of a lamentably critical temperament."

One morning, while she was sitting to him, there drove up Silvester Gayton, in his rattling old car. Invited to lunch, he had arrived early, so as to

enjoy the coolness of the country air. He would not interrupt the sitting, said he, for worlds. He would walk the grounds. Anthony laughingly wiped the chalk from his hands. By no means; Mrs. Ellison was already tired. He would come again, his time being always at her gracious disposal. But the lady had planned that the young artist should stay for lunch. Her word, both in and out of her own house, was law. She could sit for another half-hour, during which her dear Silvester could rest just there—she waved to a neighbouring seat—and when he was sick of the sight of his eternal Florence in the blue distance he could occupy himself in watching a work of art in process of creation.

Silvester put down his bowler hat and drew off his grey *suède* gloves, and sat on his appointed chair just behind the artist.

"The old school and the new school—and—what am I? the in-between school. It's rather interesting," said the lady.

"There's only one school, dear Beatrice, don't you think?" he said diffidently, "and that is the True school. I don't see much difference in method between the sketches of the quattro-centisti and that of our friend here. . . ."

Anthony flushed red, and turned quickly round.

"I know what you mean, sir. You're not comparing my work in value to the old people—it's just the method. But that's a tremendous compliment."

"Well," returned the Professor, rather pleased, "I did intend to be agreeable. It's always nice to be that and truthful at the same time. All I meant was that you had the simple desire to draw a thing as you see it, and the gift of the free line in order to do it. So you belong to the one and only school, founded by the first primitive man who scratched the outline of a reindeer on the walls of his cave. You know," he turned to Mrs. Ellison, "some of these cave drawings are tremendous works of art. The reindeer live."

Beatrice Ellison smiled.

"According to you, that's the only criterion—Life."

"Yes, my dear," said the Professor, bending forward, "you can test everything by it. Even a Stilton cheese."

The drawing progressed. After a while, Anthony rose and stuck his drawing on his chair, and looked at it from a distance.

"That's all I can do for to-day. The time comes when one doesn't know whether one sees too much or too little."

Mrs. Ellison murmured admiration of the likeness. Silvester Gayton peered at it through his thick lenses.

"Quite good. Yes, quite good. But"—he bent a thumb "if you'll pardon my venturing to criticize, don't you think that shadow on the cheek is a bit heavy?

A question of values. A thing like this should give the impression of being done in an inspired instant. Nobody should be conscious of the agony and sweat that goes to it."

Anthony nodded, looking anxiously at his drawing. Mrs. Ellison laughed.

"Professor Gayton's nothing if not a Counsellor of Perfection."

Anthony flashed in his charming way.

"Has there ever been a Teacher in this world who wasn't?"

Lunch-time approached. Ten minutes for washing of hands and powdering of noses, said the hostess. She disappeared. The men went together into the house.

"I'm very grateful to you for your kindness, sir," said Anthony.

After lunch Mrs. Ellison left them alone for a while. She knew her Silvester and what fruits a discreet whisper in his ear would bear. This time Anthony had made a favourable impression. He had conducted himself with deference and humility—no longer the young man knowing most things and on the eve of knowing all that were left, who had at first driven the sensitive Professor far back into his shell. The compass needle, carefully set by Mrs. Ellison at the young man's prospects, remained steady.

"Your work is quite good and interesting," said Silvester Gayton, after preliminary talk. "But have you thought what it will lead to? You can't go on making crayon portraits all your lifetime."

Anthony supposed he couldn't. But what would the Professor suggest?

"The obvious career for a portraitist is that of a painter."

"I wish to goodness I could paint," cried Anthony. "But when I get a brush in my hands, it's such a clumsy thing that I can only make a beastly mess. Of course I know that if I went into a studio in Paris, say, and threw my heart into painting, I'd get the hang of it. It's really a matter of technique. Pencil or brush—after all—well—— But I can't afford a couple of unprofitable years. Here I am beginning to make a lot of money in a modest way."

"Quite so—quite so. But soon you'll exhaust your public—numerically, I mean, of course. And then?"

That was the devil of it. The thought had worried Anthony exceedingly every night for five minutes before he went to sleep, and for five minutes between awakening and jumping impatiently out of bed.

The wise Professor counselled the two years' sacrifice in Paris. Anthony urged the possibility of fame and fortune from black and white.

"Pardon me, my dear Mr. Blake," said Gayton, "but why do you clamour

for fame and fortune so soon? Believe me, there's the greatest joy in waiting, if faith and hope are strong enough."

Anthony gave meek assent. He realized somewhat ruefully, as many millions of men have done, that the best advice in the world has been given on insufficient data, and therefore, logically, is valueless. Now, if he had told him about Perella! But he couldn't bring in Perella, even though he knew that Gayton, departing from instinctive habit, had taken Perella under his special protection. A new and incomprehensible shyness inhibited reference to Perella. The timid little great man imposed himself on the habitual irreverence of his youth. He feared reproach, however delicately veiled, for penniless impudence. He took it for granted that Gayton saw Perella, through his eyes, as a thing of elfin flame, not to be desecrated by vulgar breath.

As they rose from table the Professor said:

"I hope you don't mind my prying into your private affairs in this way, but there's my good friend, Halliday Armstrong, originally, and now our dear hostess—I knew her husband, poor chap—much older than her, you know. . . . He was the greatest living authority on Italian stained glass, and that's how I came to know him. Well, I'm afraid I'm getting mixed up. What I wanted to say was that two friends, Armstrong and Mrs. Ellison, have been responsible for my indiscretion—to say nothing of my opinion of the work of yours that I've seen."

Said Anthony, responsive to the elder man's courtesy: "I'm only too fortunate in having you take any notice of me at all."

They joined Mrs. Ellison in the loggia, when coffee and liqueurs were served.

"Has he given you sound advice?" she asked Anthony.

"The wisest and the kindest," replied the young man with a bow.

A while afterwards she offered the artist another hour's sitting. Silvester Gayton took his leave, one glove on and the other off, in the old-fashioned way, and his jacket closely buttoned.

"You've won his heart; I'm so glad," said Mrs. Ellison. "It's a heart of gold, but it takes some winning."

He started to draw, but presently threw down his crayon. The light was wrong. There were all sorts of shadows and conflicting tones. She must change the sitting to some room with a quiet, north light. She avowed herself too lazy to move. He could come, if he liked, to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, the drowsy afternoon lent itself to comfortable talk.

She lay back in a cane chair, slim and graceful, and drew a cigarette from

her case. He bent over her with a lighted match. A little earnest pucker of her brows relaxed, and she looked up at him with a nod and a charming smile of thanks. Perhaps, for the first time, he looked upon her with a non-professional eye, and realized her as a very beautiful woman.

"I want to know more about you," she said. "I don't mean your pedigree, or even your past, however interestingly dreadful it may be—but your present and your ideas for the future. Does it bore you to talk about yourself?"

He made the obvious modest reply. She laughed.

"If I were doing penance for my sins, the last mortification I should dread would be boredom." She gave him a lead. "What has my good Silvester to say?"

They sat in the colonnaded marble loggia, a slant of sunshine across the far end, but they in secure cool shade. It was the blue and golden afternoon of early Italian summer. Away below dreamed the domes and towers of the city, man's immortal handiwork consecrated by the smile of God. On the loggia, everything seemed far away and delicate. A touch of the scent of magnolia was in the air, but the tree was not near enough to drench the senses. Far off, too, a cicada made dainty music to his mate. A cowbell on the mountain above tinkled just perceptibly in the still air. From far away at the back of the house came now and then the notes of a manservant singing, as every Italian must when he is finding joy in his work. All the horns of Elfland were faintly blowing. The young man living, who, invited in such conditions by a beautiful lady, near and yet remote, to make the very most and best of himself, does not respond, is a young man with no music in his soul, and, as the poet tells us, is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils, and must not be trusted even to watch the tin can of a blind man's dog. As a tulip unfolds its heart to the sun, so did Anthony unfold his life to the Lady. . . .

She listened intently, throwing in, here and there, a soft and humorous word. She had the great gift of making men—and women too—feel that, to her, they were the most important factors of the universe. Unconsciously he surrendered to her enchantment. Little Perella seemed far away, mingled somehow with the shimmer of temples, and the elusive perfumes of flowers and the far-flung music of fairy bells away up on the side of the scented mountain.

Loyalty strove to wrest her from the ambient fairyland and set her there on the loggia, warm and human, before the lady. But a curious fear froze loyalty into an inactive block; the intuitive fear of the man, ignorant of being born to the love of many women, yet sensitive to their touch. Instinctively he knew that the hour was golden because the woman lazily holding him with her dark

blue—here and there in shadow almost violet—eyes, had willed its transmutation into gold. . . . She had lured him from the commonplace into talk of beauty and emotion and God knows what. He spoke, and she wove grace around his utterances. For the first time in his clean and careless life, he found himself under the spell of woman. Perella, an alien elf, would have broken a spell too sensuous to be broken.

The butler came in with a jingle of silver and china on a tray. Beatrice Ellison rose from her long chair.

“I am dying for tea.”

She busied herself with the dainty ceremony of the futile meal. The talk fell to common earth. At last, however, she said with a sigh:

“I suppose one of these days you, like the rest of you, will be mad to marry some flibbertigibbet of a modern girl, and you’ll wave your hand to all your friends—*Bonsoir la compagnie*—and off you’ll go. But, if you re a wise man, you’ll realize you’ve still half a dozen years of sense in front of you. Have a cucumber sandwich?”

How could young man say: “Madam, I will not have a cucumber sandwich, because I have already the girl of my heart”?

He laughed, in a silly sort of way, and accepted the sandwich.

CHAPTER VI

THAT glowing afternoon set the date in Anthony's life of a new set of influences; for, a few minutes after his Edenic eating of the cucumber sandwich, there drove up Cornelius Adams to tell and hear of plans for the approaching exodus from Florence. Mrs. Ellison put before her new guest the problem of the young man's career. Anthony was flattered by hearing himself discussed, not only as a personage of importance, but as a joint possession for whom these two kind friends were responsible.

Cornelius Adams drove him to Florence, saving him from the dusty return by the inconvenient vehicles of democracy. Anthony was one of those easy philosophers who accept discomfort with a tolerant smile, but luxury with whole-hearted delight. A good cigar between his lips, he lay back on the cushions, the King of Tuscany.

His host summed up the late discussion. "The three of us—Professor Gayton, Mrs. Ellison and myself—are agreed upon one thing. You're wasting your time here. The Professor thinks you ought to paint. Mrs. Ellison thinks you ought to do something, I don't quite know what. I think you've got a special gift which you can use, for some years at any rate, to your great advantage. You want a field. I'm an American, and so, of course, I say New York. I know a hundred people there; Mrs. Ellison a thousand. There's your chance."

A dazed young man sat by Perella's side that evening at the Pension Toselli dinner. They had been promoted to nearly the top of the long table. In fact, they sat next to the younger Miss Brabazon, on Madame Toselli's left, their opposite neighbours being the Grewsons, who flanked the elder Miss Brabazon on Madame Toselli's right. Vague people in whom they took no interest filled the lower seats. Theirs, of course, was the honour of seniority, but the intimate talk of obscure position was a thing of the past. Anthony listened during most of the meal to an intricate tale concerning an ancestral Brabazon, belonging to the British Embassy in Paris, who arranged the *entente cordiale* between Monsieur Guizot and Lord Aberdeen when Sir Robert Peel formed his ministry in 1841. Ancestor Brabazon shone as Monsieur Guizot's guiding star, and lit the stormy way to peace between the two countries when Lord Palmerston returned to office in 1846.

"My great-grandfather, in his day, was considered the handsomest man in Europe. And the wittiest. He was an intimate friend of the Empress Eugénie.

She said to him one day when, as the French say, he had been engaged in *conter fleurette* to Her Majesty: 'Ah, Monsieur Brabazon, if only I had been born twenty years earlier, who knows whether the History of Europe might not have been changed?' And he replied with a sigh: 'Ah, Madame, who can foretell the past?' I call that pure wit, don't you?"

"Attic, my dear lady, *merum sal*," said Anthony.

The Rev. Mr. Grewson leaned across the table, a facetious cleric. "I'm thinking of writing an article for the *Quarterly Review* entitled: 'The Future: A Retrospect.' "

The elder Miss Brabazon by his side, who had not been listening to her sister's favourite tale, turned to him:

"But surely, Mr. Grewson, that's a contradiction in terms!"

"Yes, dear Miss Brabazon," he replied, "but what a delicious contradiction!"

Anthony wiped a moist brow—the air of the room, tight-shuttered against mosquitoes, was heavy—and whispered to Perella:

" 'I die, I faint, I fail,' " he quoted. "How can we get out of this dreadful place?"

As very often happened, a friendly cinema sheltered them later from the intellectual debauchery of the Pension Toselli. They had acquired the habit of disregarding the forlorn entertainment provided, and using the palace as a private sitting-room. The worse the film and the emptier the house—their choice had become expert—the more did they find themselves at home. On this evening Anthony put before Perella the brand-new suggestion of his bid for fortune in America.

She listened with a smile in her eyes and a queer little droop of the corner of her lips. America seemed desperately far away.

"You see, my dear," said he, "old man Gayton's perfectly right. There's the future to look to. I can't carry on at this game all my life, and I don't see any great point in becoming a hack black-and-white man. It isn't as if I were a comic chap, and would do humorous stuff—which pays of course; but think of the dreadful strain of it, being funny every day, year in and year out, until one's last breath, and then having people hanging around expecting you to breathe the last joke. No, that's not my line. Frankly, am I funny?"

"Only unconsciously," said Perella.

"That wipes out a means of livelihood, doesn't it?"

She agreed. But she was not convinced that the career of a black-and-white artist, a successful magazine illustrator, for instance, was one to be despised.

“But I want money, my dear. Lots of money. Bankfuls of money,” he declared.

“But is money so very important?” she ventured.

“How can I give you your crystal castle with a golden throne in Rainbow Land without money?”

Craving none of these monstrosities, Perella sighed.

“I should be more than happy in our little bungalow.”

“With a neat little maid in white cap and apron. And you and I going about like those comic people we met at the Pension when we first came—the Oscar Merrydevils.”

She laughed. “Basil Merrywethers.”

“*E tutti quanti*”—he waved a hand. “Can you imagine me with a beastly collar over my coat, hammering up hen-pens and bee-sheds and pruning potato trees in our dear little patch of garden? Or driving you in our own little petrol can to the nearest village to buy scrag of mutton and tinned lobster and Bird’s custard powder? No, no, my fairy princess. Bungalows are off. If you yearn for the river, and until I can decree you a Kubla Khan’s stately pleasure dome, let us think in terms of a dignified early Georgian house standing in its own grounds. Let us think, temporarily, in terms of terraces and peacocks.”

Perella laughed again. “I’m all for peacocks.”

“And the decoration of life. ‘Life is real and life is earnest’—but so is the drivelling existence of the inhumorous ant or the other survivors of my family burrowing somewhere in the unclean subterranean passages of the City of London. But life is meaningless without colour and decoration. Peacocks are just what we want. Do you know—we talk about a herd of cattle, a flock of sheep, a flight of wild duck, a covey of partridges, but—listen—isn’t it decorative?—a muster of peacocks. We’ll have a muster.”

“It’ll cost a lot of money,” said Perella.

“That’s the whole point. Money. Merely the means to decorate life. If I decided to go to America to buy you peacocks, what would you say?”

She said nothing, fearful lest she should appear ungracious. Her shoulder rubbed his in the semi-darkness. Her right hand lay in his warm and comforting clasp, and with the thumb of her left she fiddled with the cameo ring which was the symbol of their troth. The surrender of her bungalow caused her a pang, that of a fibre suddenly severed; but she strove loyally to readjust her sum of values to the Georgian mansion. After all, he had passed his life among musters of peacocks, and not, like herself, among sooty sparrows chirruping around the windows of back bedrooms. But could she live

up to the peacocks? Also, the period between the Pension Toselli and the Georgian terrace loomed a yawning gulf, indefinite, enveloped in black and intimidating fog. If the gulf were to be crossed, hand in hand as they were now, she would be as bold as a lion, fearing no evil; indeed, a fine streak of instinct at the back of her mind suggested her possible leadership over here and there a dangerous pass where they must walk gropingly.

But the more he talked in his young magniloquence, the less significant of atoms did she feel. Why he loved her, why he desired to enthrone her among rainbow peacocks and diamonds, she could not imagine. She would be content with so little, having so much. She sat unutterably happy, poignantly hurt, entirely baffled. Of all his ambitions she was the end. He made that flatteringly clear. Yet, after all, was it so flatteringly? She preferred herself, preferred his conception of her, as the little Perella of no account, to his imaginary apotheosis of an impossible Perella in impossible glory. Anyhow, and after all, she was flattered by the proclaimed end of his ambition. But the means to the end? That was where her modest little soul felt the hurt. She counted for nothing. As far as she could gather from his picturesque discourse, she would be left at the Pension Toselli, waiting until such time as he, having made sufficient money in America by drawing millionairess beauty from New York to Hollywood, should study portrait painting seriously for a year or two, and then, having made his fortune as a great portrait painter, should stand on the terrace of the Georgian mansion and beckon to her to come across the gulf. He gave her the impression that, at a breathlessly awaited moment, he would send for her—despatch a messenger on wires for her, somewhat after the fashion of the dove in the Scoppio del Carro. The mixed figure confused her. She strove to clear her mind of images and get to the solid and undecorated fact. Anthony proposed to go away for two years, for the advantage of them both. Two years. The attuning of her mind to such an infinite chord of time made her head reel. After all, what could she say?

Meanwhile Anthony continued his parable, unconscious, after the way of men, of the commentaries and glosses and conjectural readings that occupied the soul of Perella. She said little or nothing. He took for granted her acquiescence. It was only on their walk home under the June stars that he became aware of unusual silence, and now and then a little convulsive, almost reflex, pressure on his arm.

“You haven’t yet told me what you think of the idea,” he said. “And of course it’s only an idea. If you don’t want me to go, wild Crœsuses wouldn’t drag me.”

Thus challenged, her conscience smote her. She had been sadly lacking in loyal sympathy. She clutched his arm.

“Dear. Dear Anthony. Don’t you know that whatever you do must be right? How can I begin to advise you on these big things?”

He slipped his arm round her and said tenderly: “You see, Perella *mia*, life isn’t all moonlight and the glimmer of stars. I wish to God it were. For that’s where you belong.”

She protested. She was but a dull little moth fluttering round the candle of happiness. A farthing rushlight, if such there were in these expensively illuminated times, would suffice her heart’s desire. He countered with the query whether the world had ever seen elf poised on lighter wings of fancy.

On the dim and smelly landing of the Pension Toselli he kissed her good night, very much in love.

It was the beginning of July. Florence broiled under a freak of summer heat. The *scirocco* crept up soft and enervating over the plains. The city gasped for breath. The thin leaves of Baedekers in the hands of post-war German tourists stuck clammily together. Even the cold white David under the dome of the Accadémia de’ Belle Arte (so said Anthony) stood limp, in pathetic request of the loan of a pocket handkerchief. All the reds in the gallery where Perella worked glowed hot and hurt the eyes. The brush slipped between her moist fingers. She abandoned the impossible task. The Pension Toselli smelled of every meal and of every human who had eaten it since its walls had shut out the breath of heaven. You could pick up the nerveless flies in the dining-room between finger and thumb.

Perella, having left the Gallery, lay all but unclothed on her bed in her furnace of a room. She took the *scirocco* philosophically, as she had been trained to take most of the phenomena of existence. It was part of the day’s work. It would be over soon, and there might be rain or honest sunshine, scorching but pleasant. That a sentient human being should lie damp and gasping, like a trout landed on a hot bank, suggested a picture of the humorous. It was also a new experience for the Northern born. This, said she to herself, was the famous *scirocco*; as a hardy and curious voyager might say: “This is the much talked of typhoon, or the fabulous floundering in the sea, after collision with an iceberg.”

She was tiny, delicately made and exceedingly healthy. She consoled herself with the thought that, were she twice her size, she would be twice as uncomfortable. At lunch the buxom Madame Toselli had been a piteous spectacle. But Perella lay on her back, arms beneath her head, and crinkled her bare, moist toes, and laughed—perhaps the only happy animal in Florence on that sulphurous day.

For one thing, she had no reason to drift elsewhere for an indefinite period. Autumn commissions would be sure to come. And Anthony had promised to stay until he set sail for the conquest of the Western world. That dreadful day would be somewhere about the end of September. She shut her mind to the contemplation of it, as most of us shut our minds to that of the Day of Judgment. For two months, at any rate, she would have him all to herself. They would explore Tuscany in third-class railway carriages and trams and funny, ramshackle omnibuses, and rub up against the peasants smelling lustily of garlic and wine and babies, and eat at quaint vine-trellised *trattorie* far away from the dust of vulgarly splendid automobiles. And she would be interpreter, her lessons with the Signorina Demonetti having borne their fruit. For the language had come to her almost in a gush, swifter than she could realize. After all, it was her mother's tongue, and her father had told her that she had lisped its soft vocables in her baby-hood. But Anthony, splendid, brilliant Anthony, was master of only a few scattered words which he pieced together, as one doing a puzzle, into stiff and often unintelligible sentences. She felt the delicious thrill of superiority. She, the dust beneath his chariot wheels, could rise up like a pillar of cloud—if you can't muddle up metaphors when you're young, when can you do it?—and guide him on his way. And then there were the towns they would get to somehow—Siena, Perugia, Urbino, Pisa. . . . They had already visited Siena one Sunday, a day of delights, but the museums were shut. She must show him the Ducios beloved of Silvester Gayton in the Accadémia. . . .

She would have him all to herself. In a few days his rich and influential friends would have gone far away. She had no envies or jealousies. Their companionship was his right, accorded to him by birth and by the Eternal Stars. But, all the same, her heart sang the song of their dismissal. He, too, must be bored to death. Even to-day in this sweltering, breathless heat, he had been summoned to bid farewell to his patroness, Mrs. Ellison. Poor Anthony!

Poor Anthony, fetched from the Pension Toselli by a motor-car which lacked in luxury only fans beating iced air around him, was lounging at that moment in a long cane chair on the northern veranda of Mrs. Ellison's villa. At her invitation he had cast off his coat and sat in grey flannels and a silk shirt. Beatrice Ellison, in the coolest of thin, pink frocks, lay near by on another long cane chair. A table held glasses and cool beverages, and a great crystal pail in which the ice melted gradually with the tiny crack of fairy avalanches. The shade was absolute, but the sultry breath of the *scirocco* stole round the corner of the veranda and deadened nerve and will and even desire.

There had been a long silence. Even Italian politicians talk less than usual in time of *scirocco*. Beatrice Ellison looked idly and languorously on the young man—and in his strength and his frankness and his English cleanness he was good for a woman to look upon.

At last she spoke.

"What's the difficulty?"

The difficulty happened to be Perella, whom he had vaguely and lightly assured of his companionship in Florence during these summer months. He mopped his forehead on which fresh perspiration gathered. It was far too hot for delicate explanation. Beatrice added:

"You can't stay here all the time."

"I suppose not," he said lamely.

"Then why not do as I ask you and come to Dinard?"

The argument was the result of a proposal hinted for some time by his hostess and at last, on this day, the eve of her departure from Florence, set into definite shape. To a young man of no fortune, but with every incentive in the world to make one, it was alluring. Why should he not spend the remainder of July and the month of August at her villa in Dinard, which was on his way to England whither he must go to arrange petty affairs before starting on his American adventure? As far as the Proprieties were concerned, she laughed; one stray man, more or less, in her houseful of guests would pass technically unnoticed. He must not imagine that she was inviting him to the idyll of a *solitude à deux* in gilded but guilty splendour. Besides, she was old enough to be his mother—which, physically, was not quite exact, as the young man, proclaiming his mature years, indignantly declared. The Villa Mignon she described as a rambling castle German-built and German-owned before the war; since sequestrated by the French Government, and sold to her for a song. She found it difficult so to people it with inhabitants as to make a show—like a stage army. She could offer him a little wing—bedroom, bath-room, studio—where he could work from morning to night. He gathered from her talk that she reigned in Dinard with greater authority even than in Florence. Her ukase having gone forth, he could carry on his late lucrative profession in the certainty of fortune. At her word Casinos and great hotels would open their vestibules to exhibitions of his drawings, and would provide myrmidons to take orders and made appointments. In view of New York expenses, the extra money earned in this way was not to be disdained.

Beatrice Ellison, herself the daughter of an old family of modest means, looked at things from a sound and practical point of view. On occasion she had already rated him for extravagance. Why, for instance, waste money on

English brands of Turkish cigarettes, when the Italian Regie Dubecs were quite as good and many times cheaper? Since their first meeting she had established a pretty and quasi-maternal hold on the young man. She regarded him as a discovery, perhaps also as a possession. At first, he was a bright thing to have about the house: his charm and gaiety decorated her luncheon table. Her pride in him grew with the encomiums of her friends. She began to feel responsible for most aspects of his welfare; especially of late, since she had become a party to the American scheme. Then she perceived that his delightfulness rested on an instability of character which, if left to itself, might crumble one day into ruin. He needed support.

Woman, with the best, sweetest, cleanest, most altruistic intentions, is responsible for many a human tragedy. If she would only let the stray man go to hell in his own way, all would be well. But she won't. She wrecks her nerves in trying to make him go to heaven in her way. And he can't. Even when he wants to, which is not very often. In many cases they find themselves in a purgatory uncontemplated by either of them, whence they have the devil to pay to get them out.

Beatrice Ellison felt herself called on by destiny to underpin, shore up and make generally secure, the existence of the young man, Anthony Blake, and, like every generous-hearted woman with the pulses of youth still throbbing, failed to interpret the call as a summons to disaster. What could be more reasonable, more protective, more impeccable, than her plan for the young man's summer? It shone in the beauty of perfection. And yet he hum'd and ha'd, of course with perfect politeness, until she had to ask him what was his difficulty.

"Why not come to Dinard?" she asked. She added banteringly: "One would say you were afraid of trusting yourself with me."

Anthony smiled. "Now you really have my secret!"

What less could common courtesy suggest to gallant youth? But a bright glance, in which she read sincere tribute to her beauty, brought a flush to her cheek. She laughed.

"I'm glad to hear it. It betrays a modesty rare in these post-war times—a different attitude from that of the ordinary modern young man. 'Poor little girl, poor lady, poor dear old thing . . . if she *will* bump into me and burn her wings, I'm awfully sorry, but it's her funeral, not mine.' That's the way of it nowadays, isn't it?"

Anthony defended his generation, a shy and penniless brood. Naturally—since, in the Beginning, male and female created He them—there were attractions and actions and reactions and interactions between the sexes, which

always had been and always would be world without end, for ever and ever, amen. But when his congeners knew that the only girl in the world, clasped to their bosom and asked to marry them, would respond with protestations of readiness for every sacrifice, but would murmur between burning kisses that she must have at least a thousand a year to keep her hair shingled—what were the poor devils to do? Unless the girl could pay for her own shingling they couldn't afford to marry her. Whereupon she married some opulent elderly beast who sweated pearl necklaces, or threw herself away on a He-Cave-Man who, by way of learning her to be expensive, shingled her hair with his teeth.

Thus were modest Anthony and Company branded with the mark of the ineligible, and socially used as male mechanical toys, dancers, diners, hewers of wood and drawers of mineral water, *cavaliere servente*, and serventing often under humiliating conditions. If now and then they raised the banner of revolt, asserted their independence, who could blame them? Their misinterpreted attitude was only that of the turning of the worm.

"Further exposition in time of *scirocco*, dear Lady Beatrice, is not to be demanded, I know, by your gentlest of natures."

She lit a cigarette. He noticed that the blue spirals of smoke struck a note of relief against the coppery sky. Her hand, holding it, standing out in relief, was white, graceful and pleasantly dimpled.

"All you've been saying," she remarked, "is most agreeable, but it hasn't anything to do with Dinard." She paused for a moment or two. "You must come, Anthony. I want you there, whether you're afraid of me or not. Besides, I'm not accustomed to being turned down."

He gasped, threw out his hands in a gesture of horror. Turned down! She suggested the unthinkable. She shrugged adorable shoulders.

"*Qui m'aime me suive*," she said.

It was an ultimatum. Nothing between taking or leaving her powerful patronage. The heat rendered him too nerveless to resist. He yielded.

He drove back to Florence in the comparative cool of the evening, a young man seeking to calm an uneasy conscience. Of course it would have been more delightful to wander over Tuscany with his Perella. But in this uncompromising world idyllic fancies must give place to stern realities. His career meant everything to them both. The sooner he made an assured income, the sooner could they marry. This was a proposition to which her sound common sense would immediately assent. Besides, the summer journeyings had been planned in the same half-playful and unreal way as the bungalow on

the Thames. He had not definitely bound himself. It was a project to be executed if nothing else came along; that was tacitly understood. She herself had said; “Supposing I suddenly had an order to copy the Ansidei Madonna in the National Gallery, I should have to run away and leave you on top of the Monte Morello.” That settled it.

He would stay a month—five weeks at the outside—say, August with its thirty-one days, in Dinard, and rush back to Florence to spend the remaining time in Europe with Perella. Better still, why should she not come north—a change of air would be good for her health—and join him in Paris and go with him on a Belgian tour—Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp—to see pictures and cathedrals and the things they loved?

The stagnant air of the Pension Toselli choked him as he mounted the stairs lit with the dimmest of light. He shuddered in his nice disgust. He must get out of this sort of horror as quickly as possible. All the inmates had gone to bed. The silence of the house was as heavy as its smell. Habit guided him, match in hand, to the letter frame in the corridor. Under the fly-blown cardboard letter “B,” he found a telegram. He read it in his room:

> “Duchesse Montfaucon daughter John D. Blaydes Chicago agrees portrait. Will be Dinard mid August. Great chance. Consult our gracious lady of Fiesole. Adams.”

Well. This was Fate. Sheer Destiny. Perella, shown the telegram, would not dream of flying in the face of it. The Duchesse de Montfaucon—Peggy Blaydes, the most brilliant woman in Europe, who had brought a colossal fortune to the rehabilitation of one of the proudest titles of France—of course he had heard of her from Mrs. Ellison. They had been girls together. A replica, or even photograph of a portrait in his portfolio, would carry him professionally through the wealthiest boudoirs of America from New York to the Pacific coast. Recognition of social values had been part of his life’s training.

He sat on his stuffy bed, nearly tearing down the dingy mosquito curtains, and read the message over and over again.

Naturally the order was the result of a conspiracy between Beatrice and Cornelius Adams. He blessed them for perfect dears. To meet with rebuff their disinterested kindness were the act of an ungracious hog or a tortured genius. And he was neither. Now that he came to think of it, he had divined something definite beneath his patroness’s vague assurances of fortune. This commission was the kernel of her plans. But until she had received the report of Adams, her emissary, she had been bound to silence.

Was ever youth more fortunate? He abased himself in contemplation of the great and splendid goodness of human beings.

Perella would understand. Of course she would. That was one of her subtle beauties—her instant, delicate comprehension.

He undressed and went to bed. Half through the suffocating night he thought of Perella. Now, indeed, his compensating scheme grew easily practicable. His dear conspirators would see to it that his Dinard prices would far exceed the modest bread-and-butter earnings of Florence. He would have money to burn. He would burn it by paying all Perella's expenses—*wagon-lit* to Paris, where she should join him. After that, the spending of a penny of her own was an idea too preposterous for thought.

Qualms arose within the clean-run Englishman with his inbred Puritanic delicacy so hopelessly unintelligible to the Latin races. That she would accompany him he had no manner of doubt. The unconventional world of her upbringing—she had made him familiar with John Annaway and his friends and his doings—would look upon the jaunt as an everyday matter of no importance. But that was not his world, not the world into which, when fortune was made, he would bring her. As frank companions, all the Anglo-American tourists of Belgium would look askance at them—particularly at Perella. To travel as brother and sister offended his sense of integrity.

There was only one suddenly conceived, amazingly simple and exciting solution to the problem. Why should he not marry Perella out of hand? The Belgian trip would then be a honeymoon of all the raptures. The bond of marriage would inspire him with supernatural powers of work during their separation. Money would flow into eager coffers.

He got out of bed and walked about the breathless room, moist and sanguine. Why should he go to America at all? Having married Perella, how could he leave her? Hundreds of artists in Europe made an honourable and decent living, without dabbling in paint. . . . He went to the open window and looked out on to the black, sulphurous night. Half an hour passed. Thirst assailed him. His water bottle afforded him a lukewarm draught. Mosquitoes played around wrists and ankles. He felt a sudden desire for sleep, worn-out by this emotional creation of his destiny. He went back to bed and slept like a log.

He awoke at about half-past ten, feeling sluggish and unrefreshed. There was no polite calling of guests and entering of bedroom and pulling back of curtains and such-like amenities of life at the Pension Toselli. The weary nondescript Giuseppe, who cleaned boots and windows (generally it was half a pair and half a window), manhandled luggage, ran on errands, washed plates and dishes, maintained a miraculous growth of a two days beard without ever

having been known to shave, never left the Pension day or night, and yet managed to lead a presumably satisfactory domestic life, in that a Signora Giuseppe, living in Bergamo, added a reputably born citizen a year to the population of Italy, slept among the cinders of the basement central-heating furnace, on days of high pressure helped to wait at table, unofficially washed silk stockings and other intimate garments for the reward of a smile, minded trunks, soothed refractory locks with oil and irresistible murmur of blasphemy —Giuseppe, whom, for some queer reason of his own, no bribe could induce to call a guest, except on leaving by a very early train, went through the corridors every morning three-quarters of an hour before the first breakfast was served in the dining-room, beating a cracked gong of a shrill and soul-affrighting dissonance. Deep was the slumber that remained indifferent to its clangor. Yet such was the profound sleep that morning of Anthony Blake.

At a little past eleven he descended, resentful of headache and dry mouth. A young man of spirit, he was not unfamiliar with such aftermath of dissipation, and accepted it with the debonair grace of one who scorns to question the reckoning. But, in the present instance, there had been no dissipation whatever. No soberer being in Europe had laid head on overnight pillow. He was the most ill-used inhabitant of this fly-and *scirocco*-blown world. And not even a cup of coffee for a man conscious of rectitude. Idly he put his head through the *salon* door. A female writing letters by the window table turned round and glared at him through fishy eyes set over a thin red nose. God! why did Dante fool about with tepid Purgatories and Infernos when there was this hell of a world to his hand?

Giuseppe, chance met on the stairs, told him that the Signorina Annaway had gone out as usual. Her cool disregard of one who had spent a nightmare of a night thinking of her added to his sense of grievance. She was always cool—inhumanly cool. There she was sitting primly at her easel before a blazing-hot picture, in an atmosphere of a Turkish Bath in Hades, working away as though God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world. “The snail’s on the thorn.” Silly ass of a snail to sit on a thorn! He had no use for poets. He went out on to the sweltering quay. A tented cab drawn by a heat-atrophied horse took him to the Piazza di Vittorio Emanuele, where he breakfasted on wretched coffee and a sweet biscuit. Another tired horse took him to the Pitti where Perella was painting. Only horses and Perellas could walk in this airless heat. Reckless, he told the cabman to wait. He found her in her place, careworn, white, damp, untidy. Everything around her was in a mess. Her canvas was in a mess, her palette, her box of tubes. Her hair stuck to her forehead. She had a streak of green paint across her cheek. There seemed to be nothing of Perella but a pair of tired, dark eyes, staring out of a tiny mess. She

drooped when he came up.

"Isn't it awful?"

"Awful," said he.

She rose and braced herself, tense against the coming tears.

"You needn't have said so!"

"But it is. Everything's awful."

She flung a hand to the canvas, and blurted out before the sob choked her:

"It's the best I can do." She wiped her face on the paint rag. "Go away. You're horrid. I wanted you to say it was all right, and you say it's awful."

"But I didn't," said the amazed young man, groping, as young men grope, towards the first false light of disillusion. "I wasn't thinking of your old picture. What does that matter? I said everything was awful. Come out and lunch; I've lots of things to tell you."

She had mother-wit, woman's logic. She dismissed the picture.

"If everything's awful, it means that you've got something awful to say to me."

She stood resentful, the least attractive thing in that small world of calm Madonnas and shy lady saints. They were alone. The most hardened copyists had not brought out their easels that morning, and the last German tourist and his cubistically attired wife had gone in quest of cool beer. The attendant nodded in his chair in the doorway. Perella stood resentful, bedraggled—so far conscious of bedragglement as to betray the poor little vixen latent in every woman taken at a sex disadvantage. She stood before him in her dishevelment and her grotesquely smeared face and red eyes and uncared-for nose; and he stood before her floundering about among the more simple sex complications of a man's nature. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"This *scirocco* is playing the devil with both of us. Pack up and wash and lunch in our cool tavern. I'll be sitting in a cab downstairs waiting for you."

Docile, she obeyed. They had never shared so uninspiring a meal. Although her face was now clean (perhaps because she had been horrified by the realization of the need of cleanliness) she was less the elf of his imaginings, than a poor, plain, tired, poverty-stricken little girl of not much account. Deep down in her heart she still repudiated his protestations that her copy was not included in his proclamation of the general awfulness of the world.

Perella was at her woman's worst. If Anthony had taken her in his arms as soon as he had entered the gallery, she would have cried and cried and cried and been beatifically, miraculously, celestially happy. But he hadn't done so.

He had ill-temperedly laid on the world a curse regardless of the exorcizing power of her love. She sat resentful. He sat resentful. How could he tell her now that, in this awful world to which he had awakened, the awful thing he had to announce was his fantastic overnight resolution to take her as a bride on the Belgian tour?

Having to say something about the immediate future, he mentioned the Dinard project. She took the announcement fatalistically. America she had accepted. Now Dinard. After all, what was she but a mote on the sunbeam of his life? It was damned hard lines, but what could she do? So her tired thoughts ran.

"It's so idiotic of people to say they despise money," said he. "Money means the command of the joy and delight of the earth."

"It all depends on what you mean by joy and delight," said Perella wearily and wistfully.

Anthony tipped over the great *fiasco* of Chianti in the cradle swing, and filled her glass. He said gaily:

"I'm not going to be content, Perella *mia*, with love in a cottage. I want passion in a palace. I want everything!"

She sighed, with a sense of death in her soul.

"I'm afraid, Anthony dear, my everything"—she marked on the table-cloth a pitiful little circle with her forefinger—"is too small for you."

CHAPTER VII

THAT was the beginning of tragedy. Perhaps that was the way in which Perella saw the future. She drew the little circle of her life, in which she would find fulfilment of her needs. His was the limitless horizon. She was the linnet happy in her cage; he, the hawk, existing only in free aerial space.

Anthony accompanied her to the great door of her gallery, and lounged to a café whence he telephoned to patrons whom he thought might still be in Florence. Chance favoured him. They would be pleased if he came out to tea. He sighed with gladness at the thought of the cool disposal of a sultry afternoon.

Conscience pricked him for temporary abandonment of Perella. Yet he felt relief at his prudence in not giving effect to his night thoughts. For night thoughts are so often nightmare thoughts, and the dry light of day reveals their fantastic relative values. It would have been idiotic to talk with Perella of immediate marriage. Obviously, the idea had never entered her head. Some epigrammatic wiseacre of his acquaintance had once said: “The greatest folly a man can commit is to exceed a woman’s expectation.” He sipped his glass of thin beer and turned over the saw. A sound saying. Let her have always something to hope for. Not only was it good for a woman’s soul, but it was a protective covering for a man. Idly he traced back the dictum of Halliday Armstrong, who was speaking of delicate professional problems in domestic architecture. He laughed. His master had spoken psychological truth of far wider import than he knew.

Anyhow, Dinard was a matter henceforward freed from discussion. Belgium could look after itself.

She did not reproach him when she saw him off at the railway-station a day or two afterwards. A speck of stardust scattered by the hands of the high gods, what did she matter in the Cosmos? After all, he had come into her room that morning, defying all the proprieties of the Pension Toselli, and had taken her into his strong arms and had kissed her more continuously and perfectly than she could conceive any woman to have been kissed before, and had sworn more eternal fidelities than had ever reached woman’s ears and heart. The dear prettinesses of elf and fairy and dainty conscience had paled in the glow of warmer protestations. She could not doubt but that she was his belovèd.

He kissed her once more before he mounted into the great international train, and hung out of the window, until the tiny figure waving hand from lips to air disappeared from his view. He threw himself back in his seat. A wonderful thing, his Perella. A bright-eyed mouse with the heart of a lioness! God! he would work for her. His nerves still vibrated with the close and innocent clasp of her—the melting into him of her wondrously delicate body. With shut eyes he thought of the rapturous minutes. Phew! it had been a hell of a temptation. Thank God, he had not been a cad. The flower of love was still in the exquisite purity of its bloom. Thank God, he had no cause for self-reproach. Thank God, there were beauty and honour surviving in this muddy, post-war world. Thank God, he hadn't been the damnedest of all damned fools!

Now, when a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love, not, as in the spring, lightly, but somewhat obscuredly, with all sorts of flashes, red and livid, passing athwart, he may be excused for being a bit muddled as to season. Which is another way of suggesting a dire confusion of emotional values.

He rested for a day or two in Paris, scrambling up in the mornings in time for lunch, after all night dancing with friends at the dismal Anglo-American palaces of cacophony beloved of his kind. This heartened him against bereavement from his Perella. He still had friends of his own old world, glad to see him, glad to give him expensive meals and unlimited champagne, and bacon and eggs and beer at three o'clock in the morning. He found in this normal existence idyllic repose after the strenuously simple life of the Pension Toselli. Delicacy forbade over-insistence on it in his letters to Perella. Wise youth, however, he did not flaunt it at the Ritz or the Plaza Athenée, but contented himself with a modest room in a little hotel in the region of the Halles, where hundred franc notes had not yet become, in the eyes of a modest staff, the lowest unit of international currency. He had learned from sudden experience that self-indulgence at one's own expense is a fool's game, which may be accounted to him as a virtue, in view of a temperament essentially generous. He had received teaching in the matter too, both from Perella, professional economist, and from Beatrice Ellison, shrewd theoretician. By thus saving up the pennies towards Perella's peacocks, and living in the meanwhile on the fat of the land, he was pleasantly conscious of walking in the way of Wisdom.

Dinard crowning the hill at the mouth of the estuary received him on a soft, golden afternoon. Across the water the venerable walls of St. Malo glowed in an early sunset. The Villa Mignon, a miniature palace, built on a bluff, had cool lawns and terraced gardens leading down to the sea. It was filled with the hum of voices and the freshness of summer dresses. The servants of the

Florence villa welcomed him as a friend who had come to help them out in a strange land. Beatrice, looking miraculously young, came forward, both hands outstretched.

"My dear Anthony. How lovely to see you!"

She presented him here and there to casual guests; after a while took him out to see the view and wandered with him round the rococo, Teutonically imagined house, dreadful in design and ornament, but solid in its assurance of inner comfort. Suddenly she pushed open a door of a small pavilion attached to the main building.

"You see, I keep my promises."

They entered a small vestibule. There he found the studio with its kind, cold north light, and its windows looking straight across the sea, and a bedroom and bath-room, just as she had described. And there were tapestries and open fireplaces, ready with great logs and warm-coloured rugs and all the dainty furnishings at the command of a woman of wealth with a sense of beauty. She handed him a key.

"Keep the front door locked as often as you can, on account of bats and owls and thieves and such-like inquisitive people. But you see, you're your own master to go and come as you please."

He laughed, took her hand and kissed it.

"You place great trust in a mere artist adventurer."

"I can imagine no greater hell," she replied, "than life without faith in those we"—she paused for an imperceptible second—"take to our hearts."

He flushed, bowed his head.

"Dearest of ladies——"

She moved to the studio window and pointed straight out.

"I wonder what's there."

"I should say, 'Tintagel half in sea and high on land, A crown of towers.' "

"Romantic. Also, nice of you to be able to quote Tennyson." She smiled with a ripple of rounded shoulders. "Have you ever thought of the only legend that binds the two countries together—Tristram and Iseult? Odd, too, that Wagner should have set on it the final seal of immortality. The Anglo-Saxon in me resents it."

She turned again, giving him no time for reply, and prepared to show him the devious way through the house to the ordinary living rooms. He recognized the quick drop of the curtain over the sentimental, and praised the *toile de Jouy* with which the passages were hung. She bestowed on him the grateful glance

of the woman perfectly comprehended.

“I do hope you’ll be comfortable there,” she said, in the tone of any hostess.

In drawing-room and on veranda, she introduced him to various members of the house-party who still lingered before retiring to dress for dinner. He realized from complimentary greetings that his arrival had been heralded. Indeed, his portrait of Mrs. Ellison, neatly framed, occupied a place of honour in the drawing-room. In that first half-hour he tasted the sweets of flattery. He had caught a remarkable photographic likeness of the lady, and that was all the polite group really cared about. After all, when people have their portraits drawn or painted, they and their friends expect it to look like what they and their friends would see in a mirror, and not like something that a queer-visioned, kink-brained artist decides that they should resemble.

Thus Anthony Blake entered the Villa Mignon as a finely advertised and already successful young man.

The multitude of the dinner-party gave him a first shock of bewilderment. At Florence Mrs. Ellison had lived alone—with perhaps now and then a stray woman guest passing through.

Here she was hostess to some score of cosmopolitan folk, with here and there the sparkle of a famous name. He realized humorously her protest in Florence against any offence against the eternal proprieties. She might have invited half a dozen young men like him, and they would have been lost, unquestioned, in the crowd.

At the head of the table she had an English General and an American ex-Ambassador to a Central European State. Down the table Anthony sat between the wife of one and the daughter of the other. They listened to his gay talk on art and life with such interest as to make him enchanted with himself. Once he caught a grateful smile from his hostess. He smiled back in acknowledgment of mutual understanding. He was flattered at her recognition of his repayment of hospitality in the only possible social way. She saw that he was exerting himself, all *ad* her *majorem gloriam*, which is an epigrammatic, though hybrid, way of expressing the perfect guest. The fellow who sits mumchance at table between two elegant ladies, and pushes food into his face, is a stumbling-block and an offence, one never to be invited again, unless he may chance to be a mechanical jazz pirouettist or a financial oracle, in which case the hostess knows that if she puts a truffle into the slot and presses a button the figure will work. But that is the cynical side of social life. Beatrice Ellison had need neither of automatic dancers nor of plethoric financiers. She gave generously for generously given gifts, and she had the genius of choosing her beneficiary

donors. Perhaps that was why, in pleasantly triumphant self-congratulation, she sped her glance to Anthony who, dancer as might be, and oracle as certainly was not, gave to his end of the table of his delightful best.

In this fashion began the most delectable life of lotus-eating and artistic work that young men could desire. Fair ladies sat to him in the mornings for their portraits at double his Florentine fee. For this Beatrice Ellison, as agent, took responsibility. Florence was modest, she declared, but Dinard flaunted. There was scarce an inmate of the Royal Hotel but had a Rolls Royce and a Hispaño-Suiza in attendance outside, and scarce a woman that was not spending ten thousand francs a day at the vanity shops on things to stick on her back or her head. When people were burning money, it was an act of grace to rescue bank-notes from the flames.

Anthony opened a French banking account with his earnings, and wrote to Perella that he was on the high road to Fortune.

Apart from the studio he led a life of tennis and bathing and dancing and yachting with such Casinodom thrown in as his hostess countenanced. One evening he gambled, and, after modest beginnings, plunged deep, and at four in the morning let himself into his studio apartment, the winner of twenty thousand francs. Later, he proclaimed his triumph to his hostess. She put both hands on his broad shoulders—she was an upstanding woman—and looked him squarely between the eyes.

"The next time you feel tempted to put even a louis on the table, come right back here and pack up and bid me a polite farewell."

He laughed in his charming way, and touched her wrists with uplifted hands.

"Isn't that a reflection, dear Lady Paramount, on my common sense?"

"It is," she declared. "You haven't got any, as far as I can make out. So I must supply it. Process of forcible feeding, my dear Anthony."

He removed her hands, and kissed them.

"But making money in that den of idiots is as easy as falling off a log."

This conversation took place one morning in his studio, whither she had gone to inspect the half-finished portrait of a friend. Unperceived by him she pressed an electric bell button.

"I'm sorry you think so," she said. "There's scarcely even an idiot in the Casino who's of the same opinion. Anyway, a condition of your staying here is your promise that there'll be no more gambling."

He stood for a few moments facing her, hurt in his young pride and his manhood. He spoke in fierce resentment:

“You’ve been very, very kind to me, Mrs. Ellison, but you’ve no right to dictate what I shall do and what I shall not do.”

“I have rights that you possibly may not be aware of,” she said.

“And what are they?”

“I’m a woman who knows the world. You’re a man just beginning to discover it. You’ve had the misfortune to win a large sum of money at the tables. You think you’ll go again and win more. You won’t. You’ll lose it all, and everything else you’ve got besides. I know. I happen to be fond of you, in the way of dignity that a woman of my age can be fond of a man of yours.”

“I’m overwhelmed and embarrassed,” said Anthony, “but I’m a free agent.”

“Just as you like,” she replied. “Only you must choose between your den of idiots and me.”

At that moment a manservant entered the studio. Mrs. Ellison said nothing. Anthony, unaware of summons, stared at him blankly.

“You rang, sir?” said the man.

“I rang for Mr. Blake,” said Beatrice. “He has something to say to you.”

There followed a few tense moments of conflict of wills. The ultimatum, masterfully contrived, Anthony appreciated. But man-like, he was the first to realize and fear the absurdity of the situation. He glanced at the manservant standing in an attitude of respectful inquiry. His brain worked quickly. He went to the writing-table and scribbled off a message on a telegraph form which he handed to the man, who retired at once.

Intrigued, and within herself greatly disquieted, she asked:

“What are you cabling about?”

He had dashed it off from a full pen and blotted it on a clean piece of blotting-paper. This he took up.

“Like to see it?”

He held it up for her inspection in front of a mirror. She deciphered, with a little knitting of the brows:

“Jones. Clerkenwell Road, London. Buy bananas. Fondest love. Eric.”

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“That I leave you to guess,” said he.

Very much on his dignity, he drew a cigarette from his case, and tapped the end.

She broke into honest laughter.

"You're rather a dear, after all, aren't you?"

Her eyes were so clear, her words rang so true, that the laughter, too, came into his face.

"I yield," said he, "unconditionally." Then he went to a drawer and pulled out a great wad of *mille* notes. "If you think I oughtn't to keep this, take it. Charity, you know. Home for rheumatic swans—anything you like."

She bade him pay the money into the bank and think no more about it. Which, like a prudent young man, fortified by the consciousness of having made a *beau geste*, he immediately did.

July melted deliciously into August. Cornelius Adams arrived full of plans for Anthony's future. Why should he bother with oil painting at all, when there was a fortune before him in black and white? Cornelius Adams posed before him, a florid, coolly dressed, prosperous Mæcenas.

"When you get to New York, I'll see that you talk big money," said he.

In mid-August came the Duchesse de Montfaucon, bright, dark, alluring, wearing her pearls with the air of a great lady of France. Her French was of the purest. She even spoke English with a touch of French accent that was not affectation.

When Anthony expressed his astonishment of this exotic product of Chicago, his hostess rebuked him.

"That sort of thing from English people always makes me mad. If the Duchess were Italian or Greek or Rumanian, you would take her aristocracy for granted, but because she's American you wonder how she has the nerve to live up to her position. There really are wealthy Americans who haven't started life by selling papers at street corners and married wives who took in washing. Peggy Blaydes comes of a proud old colonial Virginia stock, and belongs perhaps to the fourth generation of carelessly wealthy people. I can't see much difference between her, from the point of view of breeding, and your Cavendishes and Seymours. John Blaydes never went about killing pigs in the Chicago stockyards. He is the owner of immense real estate which came to him from his forbears, just like your Dukes of Portland and Westminster, and so forth. Peggy Blaydes was born a great lady, brought up as a great lady, and—as anybody with a grain of sense can see—is to-day, in every sense of the word, a great lady."

"I humble myself before you," said Anthony, having listened to this and a further diatribe. "But, mind you, I never said she wasn't *grande dame*. That's obvious. Yet, you know—forgive me for certain prejudices—even I, in my limited way, have met greater *grandes dames* than the Duchesse de Montfaucon."

“Mention one,” she cried indignantly.

He spread out his hands and smiled in his charmingly humorous way.

“Beatrice Ellison,” said he.

The compliment pleased. There was a short interval for pleasant adjustment of points of view. Then he asked:

“What about the Duke?”

Mindful of Shakespeare, she replied:

“Quite a good egg as eggs go, but ill-roasted—all on one side. You can guess the side.”

“The inconceivable ass!” cried Anthony.

Beatrice nodded. “Isn’t he? But don’t you go and fall in love with her and make the mess thicker.”

“I? Good Lord, no. Not me.”

She smiled at his vehemence, and said teasingly:

“After all, why not? What’s the matter with her?”

His mind flashed back to the bit of packthread of a girl he had left in Florence; to Perella as she stood on the station platform, in her cheap hat and shabby daffodil frock, a heat-exhausted tiny thing of no account, save that of her great dark eyes which, following him, seemed to have eclipsed all her features. . . .

He frowned, racked his brain for words, found them, and smiled.

“A wise British moth doesn’t cultivate desires for stars”—he waved a vague hand towards the Duchess’s possible whereabouts—“even of the second magnitude.”

“Second?” cried Beatrice, amused and taken off her guard.

With a low bow he expostulated.

“Dearest of ladies!” said he. “Why make a poor man explain the obvious so often?”

She laughed. “You’ll make your way. I don’t see why I should bother about you.”

A glance, tender and wistful, hung on him and robbed her words of any reproach save that of the playful. It did more. It established, as nothing had done up to then, a little secret, sentimental, mutual understanding. It dethroned her from a regally maternal position; set her by his side, more or less, as an attractive, still young woman, on a level with an agreeable and somewhat accomplished young man. And then:

“The fact of your bothering about me is so marvellous,” said he, “that I can’t think of anything else all day long.”

What other riposte was possible to an artistic Anthony, trained in a hedonistic world and temperamentally averse from the vulgarities of its modern expression?

A day or two before he had told her that he should have loved to live in the days of lace ruffles and courtly gesture and observance. He had defended the sincerity of that so-called artificial age. If a girl was Queen of your Heart, why not call her so in set terms? If a woman suggested to you the fragrance of May, why not tell her so in such imagery as was at your disposal? Why pay her, poverty-stricken, in coppers, when you could lavish on her the gold of language? The inarticulate, he recognized, had to get on as best they could. He had conjured up a typical scene. A bench on Hampstead Heath. A youth and maiden in close proximity. From him a dig in the ribs and a grin. “Eh?” From her a downcast look. “Aw.” A rough arm thrown round a neck. “Give me a kiss.” Kiss taken. “Oh, Freddie!” Interval. “I’m a straight girl, you know.” Indignation. “Do you suppose I’d have done it if I didn’t want to marry you?” Rapture. Et cetera. But there were the infinite octaves of woman’s sensibilities left untouched. Just one note of sex struck. Never a chord played, never a harmony. . . . He had carried his theme from the vulgar on Hampstead Heath to the expensively attired in drawing-rooms and restaurants. The same old sex note struck with perhaps the accompaniment of a slang-jazz dissonance, the girl still awaiting, craving in her immortal soul, although she knew it not, the essential music of a lover’s tribute, and getting only a jingle of “old things” and “rippings” and “sticking it out together.”

“I often wonder,” he went on, “why other women in this place have the effrontery to sit to me for their portraits.”

“Why ‘effrontery’?”

“I might have said ‘cheek,’ but I hate using slang to express my deep emotions.”

“That’s perilously near what used to be called a declaration,” she said gaily.

He waxed audacious. “And if it were?”

“I should point out to you the first item in the Table of Affinities in the Book of Common Prayer.”

It pleased her to be merry. She waved his protest away with a laugh, and made a graceful retirement which, a while afterwards, she could scarcely account as one of victory or of retreat.

No artistically temperamental young Anthony could come out of such an

encounter with a great and gracious lady without a flattering sense of triumph. One may be accepted for one's power, one's money, one's talent—all that is very well. But the thing that is dearest and closest to oneself is one's own personality; and to be accepted for that is the highest of tributes. So may cry a man in a mean street: "I may expend my life's energies in dressing tripe, but *She* sees the real glowing ego beneath the greasy surface." And Anthony, perhaps by his temperament and education, had a higher sense of his ego-value than his brother, the tripe-merchant.

Thus two people parted, for a few hours, on an August afternoon, each in an agreeable frame of mind.

Anthony attacked the Duchess's portrait with peculiar fervour. It was his most important commission. She was by far the most beautiful woman who had sat to him. . . . Yet, as he watched her between the strokes of his rapid crayon, he became conscious of a myriad radiances and darknesses following each other in infinite succession, across her perfect features. She seemed to hold the pose as though unaware of his presence, giving herself up to a fantastic and unconjecturable procession of thoughts.

When the sitting was over and she desired to see how far he had progressed, he begged to be excused. At the present stage it was only a horrible *gribouillage*—he had picked up the term for the first rough smears from Perella, who had studied in Paris—and was unfit for human inspection. As a matter of fact, the thing was well on its way to completion; but it was wooden and dull and had none of the quickening spirit of life that even the most ignorant must perceive in the great unfinished portrait.

"To-morrow," said he, "all will be different."

For twenty-four hours Anthony was the most depressed of artists. His great chance had come. Success meant everything. Failure, he knew not what. So far did he think it desirable to retain nerve-control that—unprecedented sacrifice—he refused champagne at dinner. He slept badly, tortured by dreams of elusive beauty. In the morning he looked at his drawing. In an artist's exaggerated way he had the feeling of a creator looking on what he had made and beholding it very bad, instead of very good. He tore it across and threw it away.

When the Duchesse de Montfaucon arrived, he made his apologies. . . . His attack was wrong. He had tried to do the impossible. He went off into technicalities. She, most charming and understanding of women, smiled her readiness to place herself at his entire disposal. He posed her at a new angle, worked with a despairing fever he had never known before. At the end of two hours, he asked, quivering "Can you stand another fifteen minutes?"

“Thirty, if you like.”

He worked on. At last, clammy and faint and spent, he threw his crayon across the studio and handed her the drawing.

“That’s the best I can do.”

She held it out before her.

“Charming, delightful,” she said politely. “You will send it to me when you have ‘fixed’ it?”

“Of course,” said he.

He conducted her through the studio door and round the house to the front where her car awaited her.

“I shall be so glad to have it,” she said. “A thousand times thanks.”

She smiled adorably, and drove off. He went back to the studio, poured the fixing spirit over the drawing and set it to dry. He looked at it, dead-beat, defeated, down-and-out. The far-off warning gong sounded for lunch. He felt a sudden horror of the polite crowd. A summoned servant bore a message to his hostess that he would be lunching elsewhere. In half an hour he was in the St. Malo ferry-boat. He had a meal among French people in a crowded little commercial hotel in the middle of a narrow flag-paved street, smelling damp and fishy in spite of the gorgeous sunshine of the August day. Anything to get away from his kind. He found a place at a table where everyone, men, women and children, was fat and perspired and had table napkins tucked under their chins, and ate bread by the yard, and mopped up sauce with the crumb, and used toothpicks vaingloriously, and were very full and very happy, and fortunately failed to perceive that among them was an artist who had made an utter failure of his career.

The golden sands of Paramé lured him. He fell fast asleep; awoke late in the afternoon with a headache, and made his way back to Dinard. He entered his studio by the private door. On his table lay a letter. Opening it he found a polite little note from the Duchesse de Montfaucon and her cheque for the amount which Cornelius Adams had arranged.

He dressed for dinner and found Beatrice in the great drawing-room. She rose and came to him.

“I’m so glad of this moment or so alone. What’s the meaning of your letter to the Duchess?”

“How do you know about it?”

“She telephoned me to go round. I went, saw the picture and your letter.”

“Don’t you think I was doing the only honest thing in telling her she could tear up the dreadful portrait as I was tearing up her cheque? My God! Even a bootmaker refuses to charge for a pair of ill-fitting boots.”

“But he keeps the boots,” said Beatrice.

He flung up his hands. “That’s the only difference between the bootmaker and the artist.” He made a turn about the room. “It was vilely bad, wasn’t it?”

His voice broke queerly. She saw a suspicion of tears in his eyes. Her woman’s heart melted over him.

“My dear boy, Sargent himself couldn’t have painted her!”

And she kissed him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE motherly, sisterly, sentimental kiss, and the motherly, sisterly, sentimental attitude of Beatrice did much to heal wounded vanity. The Duchesse de Montfaucon came too, pathetically praising the portrait and imploring him to accept the cheque. She was the most hopeless sitter that ever was, she explained. As soon as she got into a pose, she became like a stuffed bird, all expression gone, and her conscious effort not to look stupid only intensified the blankness of her face. World-famous painters to whom she had sat had told her so. All of which was more balm, most graciously applied. But he stood out resolute against payment. His artistic integrity proclaimed a failure disconcerting almost to tragedy. It marked in blood red, as on a war map, the zone of his limitations. . . . Perhaps if he had seen Peggy de Montfaucon in the distance, a pretty woman unknown, and, struck by her air and her beauty, had made a rapid sketch of her, it might have been a success. He would have got the superficial resemblance, in his facile way. But, set down to achieve something more, he had failed—failed lamentably. It was a brutal revelation of his superficiality; and the knowledge hurt. In his own words to Beatrice: "It hurts like hell!"

He was an honest boy. That was why she liked him, was beginning to love him.

He told her this, in the stern sheets of a little sailing boat on a sunny afternoon. They were going through dancing water to the island of Césambres for a tea picnic. The rest of the party, preferring to dance on dry land, were to make a swift crossing in the motor launch. Anthony held the tiller under the captaincy of a wizened Breton who looked after the sails filled with a stiff breeze. The blue-green sea swirled on a level with the gunwale on the starboard side where Beatrice lounged lazily on the cushions, bare-armed, her hand swept by the water.

"I'm a charlatan, a fake," said he.

"You're the only clever modern young man I've met who's not devoured by conceit, and that's why I like you," she said.

"But I am eaten up with conceit," he cried. "And I've come to the point when I find that there's nothing left for conceit to eat up."

"*Attention, monsieur, attention,*" shouted the Breton, as the self-accusing young man forgot for an instant the tiller so that the mainsail flapped and the

boom swung over and they shipped a considerable wave.

"You see," said he in humiliation, after things were righted, "what a helpless fool I am. If anybody had told me half an hour ago that I couldn't sail a boat I'd have cut their throat for the insult. I've done it since I was ten years old. And now, see what an ass I've made of myself. I nearly capsized the darned thing. I'm not fit to live."

The course again set, and her fingers trailing in the sea, she said:

"If the world were really populated by the survival of the fittest, it would be rather a dreadful planet. Fancy nobody left in the world but people like Aaron and Hannibal, the mother of the Gracchi, King Arthur, and Peter the Hermit, and John Knox and Hannah More and Michael Angelo and the Prince Consort and Mr. Gladstone and Dempsey. There'd be nothing left worth living for!"

He laughed. "You mean to be consolatory, Madonna Beatrice, but it's a bit of a back-handed compliment, isn't it?"

"I've no use for people without flaws," she said.

"So long as you have the least little bit of use for me," he ventured, "my life is justified."

Thenceforward were their relations on a sentimental basis, mutually though silently confessed.

In him she saw the best of youth—gaiety, honesty, pride, manliness; quick response to woman's mood; ungauged potentiality of success. Except for the gambling episode, she could find no fault with his outlook on life, and his manner of expressing it in conduct; and that in itself was one of the flaws she valued so highly in the human gem. He was amenable, sensitive, honourable, yet weak, self-doubting. If ever young man with a future before him needed a woman's guiding hand, that young man was Anthony Blake.

The instinct of creation in human beings is so insistent as to be incomprehensible, were it not to be referred to the primary sex instinct of continuity. No great creator of art or empire, no synthesist, has ever been sexless, as so many of the philosophers, the analysts, have notoriously been. Poor little physically useless Immanuel Kant, who made the final dissection of the human mind and soul, stands on the one side, a lusty Fra Lippo Lippi, with his masculine wonders of begotten flesh and blood and beauty, stands on the other. Every normally sexual human being is guided through life by the secondary impulses towards the creation of something. In its fervent form the result is art, conquest, the monument of the ego, whatever it may be, which, if sought, is there for the looker-round to behold. Did ever drab and flabby lady give a successful dinner-party?

Beatrice Ellison, superb in the matronly plenitude of her forty years, yearned blindly towards creation: the creation of a man's career. She obeyed, indeed, a secondary impulse. Of course there were primary impulses too; but clean-minded women are accustomed to kick primary instincts into a dark corner and pretend to forget all about them!

In her, Anthony found a mellowness and a wisdom hitherto undreamed of in his crude, though far from cynical philosophy of woman. He styled her Madonna, in the old Italian fashion, and the term, in its romantic nicety, signified his appreciation of her warm and courtly personality. There were times when the grey veil of twenty years fell from her, and she stood radiantly young, tall, slim, a paradox of colour, with her black hair, deep blue eyes, and sea-shell complexion. Still holding the dignity of command, she could relax into girlish charm. Wherever she went, she carried with her, according to the boy's poetic fancy, an invisible retinue of pagan Amori trailing exquisitely crinkled ribbons. . . .

In the meantime, he played tennis, and bathed, and danced, and talked fantastic nonsense to appreciative damsels, and generally conducted himself to his own whole-hearted enjoyment, like any ordinary, well-bred young man in a pleasant and idle society. The delight of it was enhanced by an occasional command from his Madonna.

"One duty dance with me, and that's all—just to show that you're a polite young man."

"But I want to dance with you every time and all the time."

"So do I. *But.* And it's a final *but . . . Va! Oust!*"

She shoo'd him away enchantingly; so that, dancing with unconsidered matrons and maidens, he had the thrill of her stepping spiritually in his arms to the rhythm of the music, ever renewed by her eyes' laughing recognition of his virtue when they crossed on the crowded floor. The subtle understanding was worth a hundred dances.

August passed, leaving him with the assurance that it had been the best of all possible Augusts, and a visit to his bank—in order to make financial arrangements for impending change—made him certain that it was the best of all possible fairy-godmother banks.

In the meanwhile there was always Perella writing him brave little letters from Florence. For the moment she had no orders for copies, for which she was almost inclined to thank Providence, considering the August stuffiness of picture-galleries—and was taking advantage of the off-season to stick her easel

out of doors at San Miniato, Fiesole—wherever she could—and paint bits of blue Tuscan hills. Perhaps one of these days some one might buy them, and the proceeds might go to the projected purchase of peacocks. If she were very successful, they might even run to a white one, which she had always understood to be the final symbol of luxury. She made playful comment on the Pension Toselli. The Brabazon ladies had gone on their yearly visit to a brother's house in Tunbridge Wells, while the brother himself and his wife did their yearly cure in Vichy. In this way were family ties held perdurable and strong. The Grewsons had taken a month's locum-tenancy at a church in Brixton. Mr. Enderby, the young man from Cook's, had returned from a holiday at Margate, and, doyen of the Pension, sat on Madame Toselli's right hand, while she, next in seniority, sat on her left. The rest of the inmates were weird birds of passage. Many English and American school-mistresses—most of them the most pathetic of dears, who wanted to suck out of pictures and architecture something that pictures and architecture couldn't give them. She shyly indicated that she might be like unto them had she not her Anthony! . . . And there were Germans who booked rooms under English names, and spoke the most careful English, and gave themselves away at every turn of a mouthful. There was one widower who even went so far as to adopt a Yorkshire accent, saying that he came from Sheffield, but who forgot that only the most eccentric inhabitant of a town least conspicuous in the world for eccentricity would wear a broad gold wedding ring, and boots with elastic sides, and would profess fulsome admiration for the poetry of Fiona Macleod. To the credit of Madame Toselli, patriotic Englishwoman, her way with Teutonic transgressors was short. In Perella's words—she just heaved them out. The Italians might think German money good; she thought it filthy. Her brother having been done to death in a German prison camp, she would not have his possible murderer sitting at her table. "I could turn you all out to-morrow," cried the ample and excellent lady, "and fill up the place with Germans who would pay me three times your terms. But I'm not going to do it. I stick to what I said before the war, and all through the war. There never has been a good German, there isn't a good German, and there never will be a good German. If you think I'm narrow-minded, thank God I walk in the straight and narrow path that leads to salvation, and not in the broad way that's going to lead a world of fools to eternal bonfire."

Madame Toselli emitted now and then unexpected literary flashes. She had been a High School mistress in the days gone by, and on one of her holidays had met the fascinating and now defunct Toselli.

Thus, in her letters, Perella, *passim*. She had a dainty trick of narrative and description. Her account of Mr. Enderby of Cook's "personally conducting"

her to a cinema was a masterpiece of sly humour.

To these happy, care-free letters Anthony replied in kind. He dwelt much on the sterner aspect of his work, impressing her with his self-sacrificing industry. There he was, pencil in hand, during the golden hours when the idlers hung about pleasant beaches and cool bars. At times, however, he, too, was descriptive, illustrating his letter with neat little free-hand sketches—the great gate of St. Malo leading to the port, bits of the wall, the Pont Roulant at low-tide, that four-legged, forty foot high, spidery thing that has carried the ferry between St. Malo and St. Servan for years innumerable. He longed to see Perella before their cruel separation, and she could count on his rushing down to Florence were it only for a few days. He explained that affairs purely commercial detained him in Dinard. He had arranged for an exhibition early in September where he would show, not only various portraits made on commission, but also many odds and ends of sketches of local types, Breton farm and fisherfolk which, if sold, would swell the funds for the Great Campaign.

He said nothing of the Belgian project or of its corollary, respectable marriage, those being the fantastic children of *scirocco* and nightmare. At last a letter came in which even he noticed a break in her courage:

"Oh, my dear, if you don't come and kiss me just once again, I think I'll wilt away."

Of course he would go. The exhibition could look after itself. After all, he wasn't going to stand behind a counter and sell his pictures like silk stockings. The Casino authorities, who levied their percentage, were perfectly honest and capable.

He waylaid his hostess in the garden on the top of the cliff, her favourite resort for morning air and meditation. The weather had broken, a blustering wind whipped a grey Channel, and great breakers dashed on the bastion of rocks far below and sprayed even the terrace where she sat. She smiled up at his approach, commended him for common sense in wearing a sweater beneath his jacket, and commented on the fascination of turbulent elements. Her welcome checked the already formulated apology for disturbing her during the half-hour of solitude she claimed from her guests. She bade him sit and enjoy the vapour bath of sea-salt; pointed out a poor black tramp pitching and rolling in the trough of mid-channel.

"Poor devils, they're having a doing," said he, by way of obvious remark.

"If only it was clean and free from cockroaches, I should love to be on board."

She rhapsodized prettily about the sea, and told him idly the joyous history

of a yacht's wreck off Honduras when she was a girl. Then suddenly, her face aglow, she pointed to an angry wall of water that rolled towards them with the majesty of Fate, and, just before it broke, she seized his hand instinctively and waited during the second's suspense for the thunder of its attack. They leaned forward over the parapet and watched the wave and froth and spray leap madly up the cliff, and caught on their faces the tiny arrow-points of salt.

"You're a most sympathetic and tactful person to have thought of coming to enjoy this with me."

How could Anthony destroy a happy mood by telling her that he came to announce his immediate departure for Florence? Sympathetic and tactful young men don't do such things. Besides, in the setting of scudding cloud and angry sea and grey, wind-swept garden, she looked young and strong, extraordinarily fresh and vital. And the plague, or the thrill, or the devil of it was that the fine, capable hand that had caught his wrist now lay quite contentedly in his clasp.

"One of these days," she said, looking out to sea, "when you've done a lot of work and earned a holiday, we must charter a yacht and three or four picked souls and let ourselves loose on whatever ocean we fancy."

"There's only one ocean," said he.

"And that?"

"The Pacific."

"The South Seas? Herman Melville, Stevenson, Conrad. . . ."

She laughed and pressed his fingers. "Romantic boy! But I wouldn't have you different. . . . My idea was Scapa Flow, or Norway, or Cape Horn, or this sort of thing,"—she waved her free hand—"yet if you prefer Honolulu or Samoa—why not?"

"With you, Madonna *mia*, all oceans would be equally adorable."

She sprang to her feet, with once more a laugh, lithe, alluring, the incarnation of health, and dragged him up with her playfully. She sighed.

"We must go in. Duty calls."

The wind across the garden had risen to a gale. She took his arm and mere elemental forces drew their bodies very near together.

It was only in the evening before dinner that he had another chance of speaking with her alone. And then it was she who gave him the opening.

"What are your plans between leaving here and sailing for America?"

He made a desperate leap. "That's just what I was wanting to tell you, but I've not known how. I'm afraid I must get away to-morrow or the day after. I

must go back to Florence for a bit."

"Florence?"

He nodded. Her brow wrinkled into lines of perplexed incredulity.

"What for?"

He had debated in a worried mind whether he should give Paris or London as alternative destinations. London, with the stress of family affairs, was good; but here he was on a main sea-route to England. Beatrice, in the kindness of her heart, would see that he was shipped comfortably off to Southampton by the midnight boat from St. Malo. To get to Florence he would have to do the Channel crossing all over again. Paris had the merit of perfect convenience. But what could he say he was going to do in Paris in early September? In both cases she would have to hear eventually from him in Florence. To leave a lady who had showered such graciousness on him without news of his doings for weeks, after one bread-and-butter letter, was unimaginable. His declared destination therefore must be Florence. But he had not counted on her amazement.

"What on earth can take you to Florence?" she added.

The moment which he had secretly been dreading for the past week or two had arrived. Her eyes glowed dark with suspicion. What else in a woman's mind than another woman could drag him back from the Brittany coast to Central Italy? In the simplest formula of speech he could confess the other woman. But he knew—good God, how could anyone but a fool help knowing?—that such confession would sweep the regal lady and all that the grace and power of her queendom meant to his third-rate artist's career—he was honest in his self-valuation—for ever out of his life. He stood for a second or two—it seemed an immeasurable space of time—in a sweating agony of indecision.

"I've left a trunk behind," said he, at last, "with lots of sketches and some important family papers. I must go and get it."

"Why did you leave it behind?"

He recovered his assurance and laughed.

"Pure cussedness. I didn't want to be bothered with the dreadful thing."

His air of candour reassured her, and her eyes regained their serenity.

"A telegram or two, and my people at the villa will go and collect your trunk and put it on a train, and send it to any place you like."

He murmured that it was kind of her, while wondering how the deuce he could see Perella. He found himself resenting the distance of Florence from ordinary civilized centres. If Perella lived in Paris, things would be comparatively simple. There was nothing for it but that she must join him

somehow in London. After all, he had booked his passage for the 28th September, and no one could question a month's busy preparation in England.

"I only asked you about your plans," she said, "because mine have been suddenly changed. I must go next week to Hungary."

It was his turn to echo. "Hungary?"

"Why not?" she cried, with a laugh. "It's a country of some repute, and quite nice people have lived there in their time."

She told her trivial story. It was the question of an estate, her property, that, in fact, of her late husband, who besides being a connoisseur of stained glass had been a mighty hunter before the Lord. A shooting-box in the midst of goodness knows how many square miles of forest. Farms, too, were attached to the property. She had not seen it since pre-war times. Things were going wrong. The house was falling to pieces. Bela Kun's people, a few years back, had helped themselves to timber. The tenants were sweating blood to pay her, at the present rate of exchange, about ten dollars a year. In fact, the ridiculous place had been worrying the life out of her. Now, as she heard from her lawyer and agent in Budapest, a Dutchman had turned up desirous of purchasing the estate. He was undecided whether to make it an international shooting gallery for wild boar, or a sanatorium for the over-eaten. In either case the tenants of the little farms would be like to come off badly. And there were all kinds of other complications which she couldn't understand, much less explain. At any rate, she must go to Budapest to see her lawyer, and thence, with him and the Dutchman, to Ipolysag, near which her property was situated. The Dutchman was already there. No time could be lost.

"It's a long journey to take all by myself," she said. "I was wondering whether you'd have pity on me, and see me through. It's a new country for you, most picturesque, and you could fill sketch-books while I wrestled with the Dutchman."

He felt the meshes of a strange net closing round him, and made an effort to escape. He repeated to her the argument he had used to himself. The booked passage, the need of two or three weeks in England, to arrange his affairs, see his family, replenish his wardrobe so that the immigration authorities should not regard him as an out-at-elbows emigrant, and throw him into the dungeons of Ellis Island.

"You've only to put off your sailing," she said serenely. "A month in Hungary will be quite as valuable as a month in New York. It's just a matter of setting back your calendar. Cancel your cabin. I can get you one at a week's notice by whatever line you care to travel." She smiled, with the air of one conscious of power. "Don't you believe me?"

“I’m sure,” said he, “that if you sent out a wireless message: ‘Beatrice Ellison requires a first-class ocean liner immediately,’ in the course of a few hours the *Olympic* would come dashing up, with the captain on the poop, his hand on his heart, putting himself and his poor craft at your disposal.”

The imaginative touch pleased her. She swept away with a laugh, as one of the few remaining guests entered the drawing-room, and said over her shoulder:

“It’s settled, then?”

He bowed. “As your ladyship pleases.”

The net was drawn tight. And drawn by the kindest and gentlest hands in the world. He was caught, as the owner of the hands undoubtedly considered, for his very great good. What could he do? The devil of it was that the place with the funny name, Ipolysag, caught his fancy; pictures rose before his mind of a fantastic, comic-opera population. He would go there, not as vacuous tourist, but as the guest of a great landowner before whom all ways would be made smooth. And no common landowner withal, but an enchanting châtelaine. Such an opportunity might not recur in a lifetime.

On the other hand, there was a little point of delicacy, of sensitiveness, of what you will. Any young man can, in all honour, without thinking twice about it, accept the hospitality of a rich woman in a large house, in the company of fellow-guests. But to be the guest of a woman on a long railway journey, in hotels and at restaurants, was a different matter. His young pride winced.

Another member of the house-party entering the drawing-room, Beatrice left the two together and returned to Anthony.

“I think it’s perfectly angelic of you. I’ve been trying to make up my mind to ask you for the past day or two, and I haven’t dared. I dreaded that long lonely journey.”

He seized his chance.

“My dear Beatrice,” said he, “don’t you know that I’m ever your most humble servant to command? But of course it’s understood that I pay my travelling expenses.”

She led him to the embrasure looking out over the sea.

“I don’t see how there can be any, save for mere food on the journey. I’ve got practically a whole *wagon-lit* carriage to myself.” She laughed at his puzzled brow. “You see, I’ve got to take rather a crew with me—my maid, and Fargus, my secretary, whom you know——”

“A charming fellow,” Anthony interjected.

“And my chef, and my housekeeper, Mrs. Riardon, and Baratelli”—she

counted them on her fingers—"so as to make life possible at the shooting-box. The Hungarian servants there do nothing but keep the place clean. That makes a party of eight already booked and paid for."

He scratched a knitted brow. "I make it six."

"No, eight. Listen. I must have a compartment to myself. That's two, isn't it? My maid and Mrs. Riardon, another; that's four. The chef and the major-domo, that's six. Fargus and an empty berth, that's eight."

"But why should Fargus have such luxury?"

"I don't want any dreadful German Jew calling himself Hungarian, or an American drummer butting into the middle of my household. . . . Well, there it is. Anthony: if you don't mind chumming with Fargus, you're as much at home in that train as you are here—and as you will be at Ipolysag."

Again Fate was against him. She had bought the four compartments—railway fares for eight—without thought or reference to him. If he did not go, a fare and bed would merely be wasted. There was no point of honour at all about it. He could only yield and call her wonderful.

"In the meantime," she said, "the car will find its way there and bring us back to Paris, and if you offer to pay half the petrol bill, you'll reduce the delicate to the absurd."

He slept badly that night. The calm and unboastful power of enormous wealth disturbed him. She had taken the booking of eight places for six people as a matter of course. She had not even looked at the cheque which Fargus, in charge of arrangements, had presented to her for signature. She signed a dozen, from a hundred to a hundred thousand francs, every day. It was Mrs. Riardon's and Fargus's business to see that the bills were correct. As far as cash was concerned, she thought no more of this migration to Hungary than of a bunch of violets bought in the streets. . . .

And Perella. Poor, tiny, white-faced, luminous-eyed Perella. She seemed appallingly far away; a sprite flitting through a world of spaghetti and stained table-cloths and abominable odours and rankly pretentious tenth-rate humanity; yet a sprite taking damnably the colour of her disgusting environment. He saw her again, the poverty-stricken, heat-mangled wisp of a child who had waved her soiled rag of a handkerchief to him at the station of Florence, and unconsciously set her against the women of his surroundings during the past month, the laughing care-free girls of assured position who played tennis, swam and danced with him, sat to him, daintily dressed, exquisitely finished, and flaunting even their modern vulgarity with a captivating air and a flourish; to say nothing of the proud and irreproachable ladies into whose company he had been thrown, the Marchioness of

Leominster, English aristocrat, the Duchesse de Montfaucon, and his marvellous miracle of a Madonna Beatrice.

Yet, he must write to Perella, explain himself as best he might, as an impotent something or the other—he knew not what—caught up on Fortune's Wheel. She must be patient. In London, in October, they would have together the wondertime of their lives. He was getting rich steadily. The Hungarian trip would fill his portfolio with drawings which would dazzle the dealers of Bond Street and St. James's Square. She need not worry her head about expenses. He, Fortunatus, would provide. All that he was doing had the symbolical aim of their happiness—the white peacock. He composed the letter over and over again in the darkness.

In the morning he wrote a shame-souled précis.

A week later, in Beatrice Ellison's shooting-box in Hungary, he received a telegram from Florence.

"Father dead. Starting for London."

PART III

SILVESTER

CHAPTER IX

MRS. ANNAWAY, who had no right to the name, poor lady, received Perella in the Battersea flat, and fell into her arms, and they mingled their tears together.

"He was the best and dearest man in the world," she sobbed, "and God knows how I loved him."

She was racked with sorrow, and Perella became her comforter. A touch of commonness, a lack of restraint added poignancy to her despair. She was a slim, fair and way-worn woman to whom life, except during the last three years with Annaway, had been a merciless pilgrimage, and now, with the swiftness of the end of a cinematograph scene, her happiness had ceased. She had loved him with a passion of gratitude, for, in his Jovian way, he had been very kind to her. Conscious brutality to any human being—or to dog or mouse, for the matter of that—was alien to the nature of John Annaway, always, in his own estimation, the gentlest and most generous of men. He was proud of Caroline to whom, as he openly declared, he owed a hitherto undreamed of weird and wonderful thing called a balance at his bank, due mainly to a decrease of seventy-five per cent in his whisky bill. She had lured him by her devotion and a certain feminine charm, not without daintiness, into the path of comparative sobriety. Never had he done such good work, never had he talked so brilliantly, as during the past two years. He had entered on a new lease of life, physical, intellectual and moral, when, all of a sudden, without a moment's warning, he slipped from his chair at the dinner-table an unconscious, and, in a few minutes, a dead man.

All this did Perella gather from the distracted lady's incoherent talk during the first hour of their meeting.

"If I've kept you out of your home all this time, my dear, forgive me. But it wasn't my fault, how could I help it?"

Perella put her arm around the helpless shoulders.

"Don't talk like that. You did wonders for him that I could never have done. It was horrible of me to stay away from him so long, but I was abroad—drifting about—and, when one drifts, time passes without one knowing it."

The other nodded. She, too, had drifted. . . . Presently she raised her head.

"They're coming soon—nine o'clock—to—— I asked them to wait till the last moment in case you . . ." She motioned to the next room. "He's there."

She broke into a passion of tears. Perella took her by the arm.

"Come with me, dear," she said.

Grey Fanshawe, the editor of one of John Annaway's papers, and a friend more or less intimate, had undertaken the dismal arrangements. He had inserted a notice in the *Times* with date and hour of the funeral which was to take place the next day. A few wreaths had been already sent. Among them Perella found one with Silvester Gayton's card bearing two addresses—that of the Viale Milton and the Athenæum. The sight of it gave her a queer little thrill of consolation. It was a friend's hand stretched out in comfort across the body of the erring but ever beloved being that was her father. The other wreaths came from strangers, journalist colleagues. Even Grey Fanshawe she but dimly remembered.

When they left the best bedroom where the coffin lay, Caroline said:

"You must be broken up with tiredness. There'll be some dinner in a minute or two. But first, you'd like to go to your room and have a wash?"

"My room?"

"I've kept it for you all the time, dearie, in case you should ever have wanted to come back. I've never slept in it—and it's all ready."

"But you——?" queried Perella, knowing that there were only two bedrooms in the flat. "What have you done—since——?"

"I've lain down on the couch in the library. What were you thinking of doing to-night?" she asked nervously.

Perella was vague. Her little trunk was downstairs in charge of the porter. She had wired to a Chelsea friend, Maggie Mills, asking for a shake-down in her studio.

"But you'll stay here, won't you?"

"Of course," said Perella, with a catch in her voice, for Caroline stood piteous. "But I never thought there'd be room for me."

Desperately tired and aching in head and limb, after the long second-class journey from Florence, and dazed by grief and a new and confused emotion, she could not, however, be unconscious of a change in the once ramshackle flat. The little drawing-room was neat with dainty chintz and curtains, and the furniture shone with polish. Her own little room was a miracle of freshness. The bath-room, once a den squalid in disrepair and dingy toilette appurtenances, where the only thing clean was the water, gleamed in spotless elegance. The brown stains from dripping taps had gone. There were towels

without holes in them. There was an enticing wooden bowl of soap, with a nice yellow brush on a bright wire bridge, and beside it, instead of the well-remembered dark brown thing which, if improperly held, dangled a foot long, were two crisp, daffodil-coloured spongy sponges. There was a crystal vase of bath salts. . . . Instead of the uncertainly attired and dilapidated domestic of her youth, there came in attendance the neatest of maids in white cap and apron. All was full of memories, yet almost intolerably unfamiliar. She missed a smell. Yet there was a smell. It took her exhausted mind time to realize that the old frowstiness of dirt had given place to the fragrance of cleanliness. She saw in the general ambience a symbol of Caroline's saving grace, of the sweeter life her father had lived under this woman's influence.

A decent supper was served, vastly different from the sketchy, sloppy meals of long ago.

She said once: "You must have been very good to my father."

Soon afterwards she went to bed, less a woman than an ache incarnate, and slept till morning.

In Florence, between receipt of the telegram and the departure of the first train north, she had bought a ready-made black frock. In the morning she put it on, and appeared in the sitting-room, very pale and insignificant. . . .

Fanshawe came, a worried, lined, middle-aged man, and took charge of things. Two or three more wreaths arrived—one from "A club of Good Fellows." It took Perella some time to realize a delicacy in the avoidance of mention of the club's disreputable name. There was only one mourning carriage following the hearse, and in it sat Caroline and Perella and Fanshawe. The plodding journey to Fulham Cemetery seemed interminable. Caroline wept silently, incapable of conversation. She was dressed in black, but not in widow's weeds. Perella wished she had worn them, entitled thereto by devoted wifehood. And who would have known? Perella's heart yearned towards Caroline. Yet such things could not be touched upon. Fanshawe sitting on the back seat spoke to Perella dryly of her father's position in the journalistic world. He was just coming belatedly into his own when ironical fate checked his career. Then he talked disconnectedly of Florence and pictures, and, as they passed Fulham Palace, having crossed the bridge, he wondered how bishops, taxed like ordinary mortals and with the purchasing value of the pound sterling about five shillings, could manage to keep out of the Bankruptcy Court. Perella looked out of window and derived a melancholy pleasure from the occasional uncovering of heads as the poor little procession passed on. In a foolish way she took it as a tribute to her father.

About half a dozen men, with here and there a wife and a daughter, were

assembled in the bleak mortuary chapel. She went up the aisle with her two companions and sat in a front pew, while the coffin was carried in by the bearers, the weary surpliced chaplain waiting to begin the service. It was only half-way through the chapter of Corinthians that she glanced aside, and there across the aisle she saw Silvester Gayton, small, bald-headed, elderly boy, sitting back with the finger-tips of his black-gloved hands joined together. She caught his eye. They exchanged a glance. Tears came. It was wondrously kind of him to pay this tribute.

Only when the dreadful ceremony was over, and the few unknown friends had scattered away from the graveside, after formal expressions of condolence, did he come up to her with words of sincere but hesitating sympathy. He shook hands with Fanshawe, whom he knew. Caroline stood apart. Perella took her by the elbow.

"Caroline, this is my dear father's friend, Professor Gayton—Mrs. Annaway."

In the noon-tide September sun the myriad tombstones flashed white and unearthly. The carefully tended paths presented a decorum of despair. Up one of them, after formal leave-taking, the back of the white-surpliced chaplain was visible, hurrying either for lunch or another dreary burial service. Behind the little group of four, the grave-diggers were already busily shovelling in the soil.

In response to the introduction, Silvester said:

"The world's loss is great, but yours is infinitely greater. If I can be of any service to you, please let me know."

Caroline looked at him for a timid moment as he stood before her, in a little old-fashioned attitude, all courtesy and commiseration.

"You are very kind. John often spoke of you, and Perella, last evening, when she found your beautiful flowers. But you must know I've no right to be called Mrs. Annaway."

He stuck his silk hat on the back of his head, so that he could reach out both black-gloved hands to the lost lady.

"What does it matter if you are that to Perella, to say nothing of Fanshawe and myself?"

They wandered away towards the main path where the funeral coach awaited the three chief mourners, Silvester Gayton and the widow behind the others.

"We might have been married," said Caroline. "There was no particular reason against it. But we were so happy as we were that it seemed a shame to

spoil things."

"I don't venture to breath a word of blame," said Gayton in his kindly, precise way, "but don't you think marriage might have regularized the situation?"

She shrugged despondent shoulders. "He offered, of course. But I wouldn't. My fault. I felt I could keep him better as we were. The word you used—'regular'—was as a red rag to a bull to him. Getting his copy in by a certain hour drove him mad. If he could have had leisure to write, he would have been famous. . . . He hated to feel bound. I loved him too much to make him feel bound. Besides, who was I to bind him? There—you have it all. . . . I don't know why I should tell you this—except that you've been"—she choked a sob—"so sweet to me."

They walked a few steps in silence. Presently he touched her arm.

"My dear," said he, "I like honest people."

They reached the waiting vehicles, the family mourning-coach and Silvester Gayton's taxi-cab.

"I can take one," said Silvester.

There was a friendly discussion. In any case Fanshawe must go back to the house. He had the will in his pocket. He had induced Annaway to make it about a year ago. A very simple affair. . . . What it came to was that everything was equally divided between Mrs. Annaway and Perella. But, as these things were best done in decency and in order, perhaps Gayton would not mind being present for five minutes while he read it, before putting it into a solicitor's hands. Whereupon Silvester drove off with Perella, and the other two followed.

"If I could only tell you how grateful I am," said Perella.

"Nothing at all to be grateful for, nothing at all. Did you get my wire?"

"No."

"You must have left Florence, of course. . . . But it might have been forwarded."

And then the thought hit her like a hammer that, what with the shock of the news and her telegram to Anthony and the fluster over arranging the train-journey and getting a black dress and hat and stockings, and selecting and packing half her belongings and worrying Madame Toselli for change so that she could tip the earnest Giuseppe, she had forgotten to leave behind her a London address. All this, while thinking of Anthony, she told the sympathetic Gayton with an air of apologetic remorse. He patted her hand. What did it matter? Presently he questioned her, with some concern, about her prospects.

What was she thinking of doing?

"I'll carry on just as usual."

"But this must make some difference to you—in spite of your little inheritance."

She smiled and explained ingenuously that, apart from her tiny private income, she had been earning her own living for the past three or four years. Her dear father couldn't afford to keep a prodigal daughter and a house of his own. He tugged at his little moustache and looked gravely out of window; then turned and said:

"I never guessed you were such a valiant little lady."

She flushed, for the Professor was not a man of vain words.

"When everybody's kind to me and gives me work, I don't see there's much to be brave about."

"Ah—but when everybody isn't?" said Silvester.

"I don't think that'll ever happen," she replied, with a dream in her eyes.

"But if it does, my dear, if it ever should," he said in his diffident way, "do remember you've always got at least one friend."

She half turned, and laid light fingers on his knee.

"After to-day I should be an ungrateful little wretch if I ever forgot."

"Then that's all right, a contract made," said he hastily, like any undergraduate or subaltern betrayed into a shameful path of sentiment.

He made abrupt change.

"Do you like copying?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Why?"

She meditated for a moment or two, and then answered:

"Don't you think it's rather wonderful to live for weeks in the reflection of a great soul, and to try to get at his spiritual message, and when you step back and look at what you've done, to try to guess what *he* would think of it? I know what I say must seem very silly to you, Professor," she added, after a pause, "but I do really feel something like that."

He nodded.

"That's more or less how I feel when I look at masterpieces. What I should feel if I could copy them, like you, I don't know. I tried to be a painter once, but it was no good. I can only *see* pictures and tell people what I see. Good Lord! Here we are."

The taxi drew up before the Battersea Mansions. They mounted to the flat. The maid had set out, daintily, a modest meal in the one sitting-room—a cold tongue and salad and cold fruit-pie. Funeral baked meats may be deprecated as cynical, but the poor human system, after the strain of burial rites, instinctively craves sustenance. Perella cast a hungry glance at the table, pleasantly anticipating satisfaction. She pointed hospitably:

"If you will stay to lunch, Professor . . . it's one o'clock. . . ."

"Dear, dear," said he, pulling out his watch. "So it is. . . You're very kind. But—er—Mrs. Annaway—I don't want to intrude. . . ."

"You can't help knowing," said Perella, with a thrill of audacity, "what a comfort and support to her it would be if you stayed."

He pulled off his black gloves, and stuffed them into the tails of his morning-coat.

"You've got a funny way of picking the best bits out of the back of people's minds. Of course I'll stay, my dear child. . . . Of course."

Intuitively knowing that all traces of Caroline's nocturnal occupation would be swept away, she said:

"Come into my father's study."

It was the first time that she had entered, since her arrival, the once nightmare room of slovenly untidiness. She beheld a miracle of order. It was a fair-sized room, the originally projected dining-room of the flat. The same remembered deal book-cases lined it, but instead of the old dusty, higgledy-piggledy disarray of books, there reigned the decorum of a classified library. The leather arm-chair whose seat, from her childhood's days, had ever shown grey stuffing and a glint of steel spring, when it was not heaped with newspapers and periodicals and dog's-eared manuscript, now gleamed free in the freshness of new upholstery. The long Cromwellian table at which he always worked, once a scandalous foot-high horror of papers and pipes and dirty gloves, booksellers' catalogues, cigar-ash, unanswered letters, bills—mountains of them—all surmounted by a drunkenly inclined empty tumbler or two smelling villainously of whisky, and the end of a forgotten sock suspender dangling in the midst of the mass, and a filthily blotted pad reserving the only space at which a man could put paper to write, now displayed the stern and coquettish order of the desk of a Cabinet Minister, supervised by his official private secretary.

Here, too, was seen the masterful hand of Caroline. Gayton's bookish man's instinct took him round the shelves. They were mainly filled with review copies of books of every kind of subject. One or two he took from their places and glanced through. Perella said shyly:

“I wonder if you would like to have any little thing of his as a memento?”

Thus invited, he cast a courteous glance around, touched a discoloured ivory paper-knife, and smiled.

“This looks like an old friend.”

She put it into his hand.

“Perhaps the oldest thing of his I can remember. He told me I cut my teeth on it.”

“But——” he began to protest.

“No——” she interrupted, and looked at him.

He yielded. “It’ll be all the more precious to me, my dear,” said he, with a little formal bow.

The more slowly driven pair arrived. They sat down to lunch. The talk, led by Fanshawe into channels of contemporary art and literature, lay mainly between the two men. The meal over, Fanshawe drew the will from his pocket, and, putting on a pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, read it aloud.

The testator bequeathed the contents of the library and the spare bedroom, as they should stand at the time of his death, to his daughter, Perella; the remainder of the contents of the flat to Caroline Langton, his devoted companion. The residue of his estate, after necessary deductions made, to be divided equally between the two women. Fanshawe was appointed sole executor.

Perella broke the inevitable awkward silence that followed.

“Was that your idea, Mr. Fanshawe, or my father’s?”

“We hammered it out together, Miss Annaway,” he replied, rather coldly. “It was not very easy to make a man of your father’s temperament sit down and do a thing like this.” He tapped the paper. “Knowing his circumstances I thought I was acting for the best.”

“I’m sure you were,” cried Perella. “But don’t you see, it’s awfully unfair?”

Three startled and pained people looked at the tiny figure standing erect in the midst of them.

“In what way?” asked Fanshawe.

She flashed round on him.

“Why should I have any of the furniture? I left the flat a perfect pigsty. My fault. She has turned it into a place of beauty—look at it—and she made my dear father very happy—and I don’t care for wills or lawyers or law or anything—it’s all hers, and I’m not going to take it away from her.”

Then, of course, the silly woman, Caroline, began to cry through sheer reaction, and Perella went over to comfort her. Whereupon the two men retired to the library in order to talk common sense.

"Of course she can do what she likes when probate is granted," said Fanshawe. "A deed of gift to regularize matters. But the young lady is somewhat quixotic and absurd."

"I think she's a splendid little girl," said Gayton, lighting a cigarette. "I wouldn't check her splendidness for anything in the world."

The worried Fanshawe shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"I've only seen her once before, when she was a child."

"Ah—well—yes," said Gayton. "But, perhaps she has grown since then."

Like Pilate, Fanshawe washed his hands. Anyhow, it was none of his business. The whole affair was an infernal nuisance. The greatest curse of civilization was the parasitic growth of altruism on a man's self-consciousness. Primitive man didn't care an auroch's tooth for his neighbour's womankind—unless he wanted to haul them by the hair of their heads into his own cave. From such an idea he, Fanshawe, a married man with eight girl children, shrank with the repugnance of satiety. Why the devil should he have worried about these women? For years Annaway, sodden with drink, had been as difficult to catch as a will-o'-the-wisp over a swamp; but, of course, when fastened down, could do things like nobody else; and he had turned his editorial hair prematurely grey, and he had wished the fellow comfortably dead and done with; then, lo and behold, there had come a change, and the said fellow gave him no trouble at all, and was more brilliant than ever, so that he, idiot that he was, began to take an interest in him as a human being, to be followed by this dreadful and inescapable Nemesis of altruism.

"Now that you've got all that off your chest, my dear Fanshawe," said Silvester Gayton in his precise and pedantic accents, "don't you think you might laugh, by way of reaction?"

And Fanshawe laughed.

"I suppose we're all damned fools without knowing why."

"And perhaps, my dear fellow," said Gayton, "the damneder fools we are, the greater is our state of grace."

"Grace be hanged," said Fanshawe. "All I want is bread and butter for an idiotically miscreated family." He pulled out his watch. "Good God!" he cried. "The owner's coming on board at three, and I've barely time to meet him at the top of the gangway steps. Hell! what a life! This poor thing thinks himself God—he's obese enough for a Burmese deity—and expects us all—me, the editor

of the *Daily Millionograph*, to bow down and worship him, and, my dear Gayton, he's the most disastrous, colossal ass stuffed with straw and wind that your beastly sentimental altruistic world has ever seen. But I've got to secure bread and butter for my horrid brood. Good-bye, my friend. Continue your beautiful life on the peaks of philosophic celibacy, and don't care a damn about anybody or anything. If only I can find a taxi!"

He dashed, Gayton following, into the sitting-room, where the two young women sat, more or less sedate and composed, and took hurried leave.

"How little we know one another," said Gayton, after the flat door had slammed behind him. "I should never have suspected such vehemence from our melancholy editor."

"If he wasn't vehement—really—beneath the surface—why should he have done all this for us?" asked Perella.

"I believe human beings are capable of anything good when they're put to it," he said.

Well, there was the end of the funeral and the baked meats and the ceremony. Gayton went off on his own affairs. He was due in the Viale Milton at the end of the week. Perella must let him know when she returned to Florence. In the meantime, the Athenæum would always find him. He shook hands and bowed in an old-fashioned formal fashion. To Perella, who showed him to the flat door, he said:

"Courage, my dear, courage. Always courage."

During the next day or two the two women sat on a committee of Ways and Means. Fanshawe, by letter, reported no debts save for current modest weekly bills, and assets to the amount of about two thousand pounds cash balance at the bank. This vast fortune took Perella's breath away. She remembered the time when horrid people used to stand at the door and, in malevolently chosen language, vainly demand instant payment.

"But how can it be?" she asked Caroline.

"I suppose I persuaded him to earn more and spend less."

"You were his Guardian Angel."

"And yet I couldn't stop him going off like that—at fifty," said Caroline mournfully.

The immediate future gradually pieced itself out like the pattern of a puzzle. Caroline, with fresh capital, would return to the Chelsea light-luncheon and tea-shop which she had been running with another woman, and in which she had sold her share when Annaway had caught her up, eagle-wise, to his Battersea eyrie. The business was paying satisfactorily. Her ex-partner, Miss

Pritchard, a genius in her way, had made the place famous for *œufs Chicago*, always served on a plate, with dainty finger-napkin and roll and butter, the said dish being presented in a two-handled *bouillon* cup, consisting of a raw egg beaten up with brandy and a few other esoteric and alcoholic subtleties. Perella, untrained in abstract laws of morality, thought it a splendid idea. How often had she craved a little pick-me-up after a hard morning's work, and not known how to get it! On the other hand, she was vaguely aware of licensing laws. Was there no danger? Caroline declared that the excise people hadn't a leg to stand on. If they were free to provide *sole au vin blanc*, or brandy butter for Christmas pudding—an incontestable proposition—why should a flavouring of brandy be prohibited with raw eggs?

Perella's admiration of Caroline swelled daily. She learned her artless history. She came from Bilston, unattractive town, where her father was a Don Juanesque clerk in a factory, and her mother the acid daughter of a Wesleyan minister who lived under the right or wrong impression that she had married beneath her. Caroline had escaped from an unhappy household to join the chorus ranks of a touring musical comedy company. Cast jetsam in London, a girl with a certain beauty of face and figure, she had become an artist's model. Her parents, finding common ground for renunciation of actress daughter in Bilston Nonconformist respectability, renounced her. She had her adventures, like any other, including marriage with a man—a so-called financier met in a sculptor's studio—who beat her and left her stranded and disappeared for ever into eternity. Possibly he might have been killed in the war. She didn't know. Then there was a serious liaison for a few years with a man who really was killed and left her the little money which she had invested in the Pritchard tea-shop. And then came Annaway, the real love of her life.

"I suppose the good folks of Bilston are right in calling me an immoral woman," she said, "but things have been against me and I've done my best. I don't think I've done wilful harm to any human being."

"You're a very brave dear," said Perella. "And if you're not able to keep on the flat I'll be heart-broken."

Telegrams—her lean purse quivered at the expense—to Florence and Hungary brought the Professor's message of condolence, a vague telegraphic reply from Anthony, and, two days later, a letter.

She sat, one soft September morning, on a bench in Battersea Park reading the letter over and over again. The leaves were yellowing, and already some had splashed drearily on the gravelled path. The ornamental water in front of her was colourless—as colourless as her life without Anthony. For the first

time she doubted him, his love and his constancy.

"Perella *mia*," he wrote, "you flit like a pale little ghost from Florence to haunts in England unknown to me. I've been waiting for days to learn where a message of sympathy would reach you. The Pension Toselli would have been a vain address, for we know the fly-blown letters in that dreadful rack in the corridor. My dearest, I grieve with you. I know how you, in your romantic great little soul, loved your father. I wish I could come and sit by you, your dear hand in mine, and comfort you in your sorrow. But a web of affairs from which I can't escape holds me here far longer than I had anticipated. I'll be in London in a month's time. I wonder if you could wait for me. . . ."

And so forth, and so on, and *ainsi de suite*, et cetera, et cetera.

First America, then Dinard, then Hungary, and now this indefinite date in England. . . .

Her heart was so cold that it hurt physically, and she put her hand to it. She stared hopelessly across the water, conscious of little else but a shrinking of body and soul into an imponderable speck of agony.

Should she cling to the forlorn hope and wait for him?

A man sat down at the other end of the bench. He was gaunt, unshaven, and clad in lamentable garments. She glanced at him out of the tail of her eye. He bore a curious resemblance to a dilapidated and disreputable Fanshawe. He pulled out of his pocket a copy of the *Daily Herald* and began to read it, with a deep puckering of the brows.

Presently a nursemaid and a chubby child came up and paused on the water's brink to feed a couple of Muscovy ducks that swam near the edge. The nurse's casts of bread reached the ducks whose gobblings gave the child great amusement. But the child's cast of a considerable hunk fell on the strip of grass screened from the path by low wire-netting. The careless nurse led the child away.

Perella folded up her letter and stuffed it in her bag. Should she wait for him? Tears started afresh from eyes that already had wept, and impatiently she wiped them away with a rag of a handkerchief. She swallowed lumps and rose and walked away. After about fifty yards she discovered that she had left the handkerchief on the bench. It was a good handkerchief with a bit of lace on it —worth retrieval. She began to retrace her steps, when she saw the man that had been her neighbour rise and pick up the piece of bread miscast by the child and put it in his pocket.

She turned and fled. The handkerchief did not matter. The act in itself was poignant with horror. If the man spied discovery he would die of shame. . . . Instinctive womanhood suggested a ghastly moral. She saw herself waiting,

waiting for the crust of love thrown carelessly by Anthony, and pouncing upon it like a thing starved. Her pride rose in a torture of revolt. No. She would not wait. She would return to Florence. If he loved her, he would seek her there.

CHAPTER X

IN late October, Perella drifted to Venice. Her Argentine patron, having found that his Renaissance Palace would be incomplete without a Giovanni Bellini, had (not without taste and judgment) selected one of the smaller Madonnas in the Accadémia de' Belle Arte. His agent, the Florentine dealer, had offered her the commission, and Silvester Gayton, whom she consulted, had counselled acceptance. Madame Toselli, to whose care she would return after her business in Venice, secured for her a room in a friendly and inter-recommending Pension on the Zattere; which was very convenient, since, as all the world knows, the Accadémia is on the Santa Maria della Salute side of the Grand Canal, and less than a quarter of a mile from the Zattere, and the Pension Polonia.

She loved her work. She adored the blue-hooded Madonna of the soft, loving mouth and downcast eyes, and hands clasping the body of the Child with the dark golden curls, and the fascinating folds of baby flesh around His throat. She saw in the picture motherhood in its most perfect and exquisite flower. Never henceforth, she felt, could she thus surrender her soul to a Raphael for all its unreachable impeccability. She drenched herself in the Bellini, the nepenthe of consolation.

Not that Venice, unique of cities, failed to make its appeal. The artist in her reacted instinctively to its waterways and sunsets and the black, high-prowed gondolas of which she had dreamed since her fanciful childhood amid the chimney-pots. She could stand on the Ponte de' Belle Arte before twilight and let the aching sense of beauty grip her heart until she could almost gasp with the pain of it. But the pain was too poignant, seeing that she was alone. There was no arm to clutch in compensation for caught breath; no ear into which to murmur inarticulate wonder; no eyes in which, looking up, she could see the thrilling reflection of her emotions; there was no response that would translate the ache into rapture. Often she shut her eyes and fled, hurt, wounded by the beauty that was incommunicable. She dreaded the hours when she was cut off from the companionship of her adored Madonna.

Yet was she driven forth into Venice. The Pension Polonia was but the Pension Toselli transferred from the banks of the Arno to those of the Canal of the Zattere. She found the same Anglo-American types, the same spaghetti and stringy veal, the same pallid Giuseppe, the same uninspiring and familiar smell. There lodged in the Pension even a young man from Cook's, who was

thrilled by the coincidence of her acquaintance with his Florentine colleague.

One Sunday afternoon he took her for a couple of hours in a gondola through the unknown marvels of the little canals—hitherto her water trips had been confined to those that could be thriftily made by steamer or motor-launch—and she saw many churches and palaces, and wandered into tiny piazzettas, with a masterpiece of a well-head in the middle, where for centuries the world had stood quite still. She enjoyed the sensuous restfulness of the gliding through the sluggish water, and the anticipation of what of beauty the next turn of a corner would reveal. But, towards the end of the jaunt, the foolish youth, who, up to then, had been an intelligent and amiable companion, began to make indiscreet love to her. And that spoiled a dreamy afternoon of oblivion. He was an honest English young man. There was nothing Don Juanesque about his sudden wooing. Perella, in her miniature way, was physically attractive, and she had a bright wit and—perhaps her father's only educative gift—the sense of epigrammatic phrase. The young man—small blame to him, and yet, the pity of it!—lost his head. Perella found instant means of retrieving it, and stuck it back firmly on reluctant shoulders.

Perhaps there is a deal of philosophy in the old tag:

" 'Tis not so much the lover who woos,
As the lover's way of wooing."

The way of the young man from Cook's was a million miles from that of Anthony Blake. He played the devil's own discord on every nerve suddenly strung tight in Perella's little body. A pale and angry girl, and a sulky, rueful young man landed at the steps on the Zattere, and parted on the landing of the Pension Polonia after the most perfunctory salutations.

Thenceforward, she took her Venice in solitude. It was better so. Alone, she could transpose its beauty into a minor key, so that her young soul could sing its sad accompaniment. For into terms of lament must she translate all things for her own consolation.

Anthony had gone from her for ever. She read the truth behind his letters spaced out tactfully at longer and longer intervals. He deplored, not ungenerously, as one seizing an occasion of quarrel, her departure from London before he could arrive, but despairingly, with the air of one helpless before the buffetings of Fate. Destiny's iron hand had guided his movements. In London he was on the point of taking aeroplane, the lightning's back, any means of instantaneous travel, so as to pass a day or two with her in Florence, when his brother-in-law, the Major-General, Gloria's husband, was carried off to an operating-table, and for a week lay between life and death, during which

interval Gloria, at madness-point, had detained him by her side. Perella apart, Gloria was the only being in the world he loved. Perella, with her magical sympathy, would understand. His only free time was thus taken up. He could not once again cancel his passage to New York, and the American engagements made for him by the kindest of friends.

He had gone to America. And the last time she had seen him was at the Florence railway station on that stifling morning in July. She knew that she would never see him again. The *New York Herald*, with its deadly chronicle of the movements of prominent Americans, and also the English illustrated weeklies, on fly-blown back numbers of which she would pathetically pounce, supplied her with much news omitted from Anthony's letters. She saw him mentioned by name—twice snap-shotted—in a world into which she could never dream of entering, the world of which Doney's in Florence, filled with women, all furs and pearls and violets, was still the symbol. There was one snapshot showing him bending forward, tennis racket in hand, with his heart-rendingly familiar grace, in conversation with two ladies, the Duchesse de Montfaucon and Mrs. Ellison. He belonged to their sphere. The fact, proclaimed by the vulgar reproduction, jumped to the eyes. . . . From the lists of arrivals at the Ritz Hotel in Paris; she picked out the names of Mrs. Ellison and Mr. Anthony Blake. Anthony had made no mention of the lady in his letter from Paris. Again she read that, in London, Mrs. Ellison had given a luncheon party; and, among the guests—kings, queens, princes, dukes, duchesses, Prime Ministers, ambassadors; the list dazzled her poor little eyes—she saw the name of Anthony. Finally, paragraphs, almost juxtaposed, to the effect that Mr. Anthony Blake, the distinguished young English artist, was sailing on Thursday by the *Homeric*, and that by the *Homeric* were returning to America, for the autumn, Mr. Cornelius Adams and Mrs. Ellison, the popular hostess of Florence and Dinard. He had never mentioned the fact that he would be fellow-passenger with Mrs. Ellison.

If she was jealous, it was not of the woman, for often in Florence Anthony had anticipated such a possibility by assuring her that the lady was old enough to be his mother: indeed, in his account of their first meeting in Doney's, on his famously victorious pursuit of cocktails, he had characterized her as quite old. The villainous photograph, too, intensively inspected, showed her a woman attractive only by the magic of expensive clothes. And there was a daughter of twenty in Minnesota, for whom, as Anthony had frankly said, he had made the second portrait of Mrs. Ellison. In spite of Perella's queer knowledge of the world and its ways—for, in her Bohemian waif's upbringing and subsequent career, what veils, protective from life, had been cast over maiden eyes?—she never suspected the possibility of sentimental relations

between Anthony and his patroness. To her, Beatrice Ellison was but a symbol of the ineluctable forces that had carried off Anthony—from the plane to which he had descended to meet her—back to the plane on which he had been born and was ordained to have his being.

As far as she could hate, she hated the woman. It was all her doing. She pictured her as a remorseless fairy godmother who had plucked a reluctant prince from the goat-herd's hut, regardless of his possible feelings for the goat-herd's daughter, in order to set him on the throne where he should be.

Thus, perhaps, in her hours of humiliation and forgiveness, did Perella envisage the fading of her happiness. But there were hours also when her heart was near to breaking, and she sobbed in helpless misery, remembering the tones of voice that had stirred her fibres, kisses and clutches of body that she had held sacred, and the first smell of the rough tweed overcoat under her nose. And then, again, her pride would revolt, and she would spring up, and dip her towel in the inadequate ewer, and fiercely sluice away the traces of tears, and steel herself to the confrontation of life.

That she inherited, indeed, from her father—the lust of life. No matter how small a speck she was on the world's surface, she was conscious—now, curiously enough, after all this intolerable pain, more vehemently than ever—of her own intense and vibrating personality. Nothing lay farther from her philosophy than the attitude of the poor soul that sat sighing by a sycamore tree and sang rubbish all about a green willow. The said poor soul obviously hadn't to earn her own living; still less at such a fascinating trade as hers. She had neither sense of personal dignity nor of duty towards the world at large. In a vague, semi-religious way, Perella was conscious of that sense of duty. If she, no matter how insignificant, was not set in the world for some purpose, what was the good of living at all? So pride and stalwartness of faith saved her from breakdown. She threw her heart into her picture and sought to project her soul into that of Bellini while he thought he was painting the Mother of God.

One day, when she had nearly finished her task and was standing away from her easel with bent brows, her earnest gaze travelling backwards and forwards from original to copy, and from copy to original, a familiar voice sounded in her ear.

"Splendid, my dear; splendid."

She turned swiftly, and saw the kind eyes of Silvester Gayton smiling at her through the thick lenses of his pince-nez. He had bowler hat in hand, and one grey *suède* glove on and the right hand one off. The fact of this elderly but angelic friend dropping down suddenly from heaven into her environment nearly brought tears of gladness to her eyes.

"You, Professor! How extraordinary!"

"Not so very." He stuck his hat on the back of his head. "I received an urgent summons to Venice from Professor Brabiani. You know—the famous Brabiani—friend of Ruskin and the Brownings. Wrote to say he's dying, poor old man. So I packed up at once and arrived last evening."

"But how extraordinary you should find me here, at once."

"Not at all," said he. "I knew the exact spot where you would be likely to be, and came to look for you."

She put her hand on her bosom. "You came to look for me?"

Her little air of puzzlement, and her ingenuous accentuation of the last word made him laugh.

"Why not, my dear? Don't you think you're worth looking for?"

She gave an instinctive tidying touch to her hair, and said with a sigh:

"You're always too kind to me." She moved aside, with a tiny gesture of invitation. "Do you really think it's anything like?"

"I don't call a thing splendid when it isn't. I've got a reputation to keep up."

"Yes," she argued. "But my father used to say that adjectives can be used positively, comparatively, and superlatively. That was when people used to accuse him of slinging his tremendous words about."

She stopped, rather scared at her temerity.

"Well? . . . go on." He regarded her amusedly.

"Well, you might have used the word comparatively. Splendid for a beginner. Splendid as an effort. You see what I mean?"

"A professional critic has to use words positively. If he doesn't he gets into a devil of a mess. Perhaps in deference to your modesty I'll modify the word."

He put his gloved left hand on her left shoulder, and looked over the right. "It's jolly good. Really, jolly good. There!"

"I'm so glad. But," she sighed, "that wonderful tone. I should never get it if I lived a hundred years."

"Do you think John Bellini got it, or any of these old humbugs? It's their partner, Time, that has done the trick for them—and not a hundred years but four hundred. If you want to see what Claude Lorrain really painted, go and see the two or three cleaned pictures of his in the National Gallery. You try and give the effect of Time to it, and you're not a sincere copyist, but a faker like the abominable people that bore worm-holes in pseudo-antique furniture. . . . When our friend, Giovanni, painted the picture, it looked just like that—and he

was delighted with it."

She murmured something about his being very comforting.

"Thank God," said he, "for a sound reason for giving anybody comfort! Now," he added, "if I may venture . . . I know the thing isn't finished—that's why . . . if I may presume . . ."

He glowed enthusiastically, and, with curved thumb, subjected her work to his marvellously constructive criticism. She had the impression of being divinely taught. Infinitesimal details of modelling and shadow and tone that had escaped her eye were revealed to her through his uncanny vision. She remembered his first inspection of her work at the Uffizi in the spring—his diffident yet valuable suggestions. It was the same little elderly, boyish man, clad almost in the same clothes. Yet then he had been precise, apologetic. Now, just as he had done on the occasion of her visit with the Marchesa della Torre to the Roman theatre at Fiesole, he became once more the inspired teacher, sensitive artist speaking to artist through the living soul of a great genius.

"Look at that—see?" said he, at last; thumb went back from Bellini to Perella. "I can tell you how it ought to be done, and you can do it, and you will do it to-morrow. But I could no more do it myself than kill a bull in a bull-ring. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course. I'll try to do it this afternoon."

"No. Better wait till to-morrow. It'll take twenty-four hours to convince your artistic conscience that I'm right. Intellectually, you recognize it. But there's something in us, God knows where"—he thumped head and heart—"which is far beyond intellect. If you rush at it, you may spoil the whole thing. Size it up subconsciously, and to-morrow you'll do it delicately. In the meanwhile, put the whole matter out of your mind."

Said Perella: "But I must work this afternoon. The days are shortening."

Mechanically he pulled on his other glove, and the teacher vanished behind the courteous and shy gentleman.

"I was wondering whether you would do me the honour of lunching with me and cheering my loneliness for this afternoon. I'm, in fact, at a very loose end. Professor Brabiani is too ill to-day to receive visitors, so, if you can put up, my dear Perella, with a boring old fellow, you'll be doing an act of human charity."

"But—Professor——" She caught a rapturous breath. "It would be simply lovely!"

They lunched comfortably at a corner table in the Hôtel de l'Europe where

Gayton was staying. He sketched out the object of his journey. Professor Brabiani had devoted most of a lifetime to a monumental work on the Ducal Palace. It was a mass of typescript practically finished. Illness postponing and finally precluding the author's revision, he had prayed his *caro confratello* to undertake the editing, to which Gayton had willingly agreed. To be associated with the illustrious Brabiani was an honour that any scholar would have accepted with humility. Now, all of a sudden, the illustrious one's illness had taken an ugly turn. His family was in despair. He, too, but rather over the unfinished history than over either himself or his family. The necessary personal talk between Gayton and himself, till lately a matter to be arranged for an indefinite date of common convenience, became one of urgent importance. So Silvester Gayton had obeyed the summons of a despairing, obedient, and none too understanding family, who for years had loathed the sight and sound and all that therein was of the dull, useless and accursèd book—it's always well to consider things from other folks' point of view—and, on arrival, had found the doors of the illustrious Brabiani closed against him.

"I know people in Venice, of course, in my own line of business," said he. "But they're a stuffy lot. The erudite Latins expect you to be intellectual every time and all the time, without a moment's interval for refreshment. They're the most unhumorous dogs in the world. I like to be human and crack a joke now and then . . . so, you see, I thought you might be indulgent enough to let me come and crack a joke with you."

They spent a mellow afternoon together, drifted in a gondola, in and out and round about the Grand Canal, and only saw one picture—the Giorgione in the Vendramini Palace. In the intimate comfort of the cushioned seat, he became the simple and charming companion of whom Perella had had glimpses here and there in Florence. He told her the funny little stories which every man with a quiet eye on human foibles has harvested during the years. He set her talking about herself, her queer but innocent Bohemian past, her present fight for existence. Her small paternal heritage, conscientiously invested by Grey Fanshawe, added to her aunt's legacy, would give her over a hundred a year to live upon. With her earnings, she would be quite rich. His sympathy warmed her, and by the time they journeyed down the Grand Canal she saw everything in the colours of the sunset—gold, green, blood-red—behind the dome of Santa Maria della Salute.

They landed by the Piazzetta and, passing San Marco, crossed the Piazza to Florian's, most historic of cafés, where they had tea. She forgot that he was the great Commendatore Silvester Gayton, carrying in his head knowledge enough to sink a super-Dreadnought, and chattered away to him as to a friendly girl.

Only once did a chance word from him rob the pleasant world of its colour,

and transform it for a short while into a drab wilderness.

"And our young friend, Blake—what's become of him? Gone to America to make his fortune?"

She braced herself to casual reply. "Yes, I think so. In fact, he sent me a line just before he sailed. . . ."

"He is a clever boy. Perhaps a bit too clever. Too facile. But he'll bring it off, I'm sure. . . . A nice boy too, with most agreeable manners."

"Oh, charming manners," said Perella.

She caught the sound of an unusual rasp in her voice. But it was a question either of a rasp or a sob, and she was not going to betray herself to anybody on earth, not even to the gentle friend who had unconsciously set her back again amid grey sorrows. She was unaware that, in making her pronouncement, she had looked away from him, and that his shrewd eyes behind the glasses had seen the little twitch of lips that framed the words.

"I believe, my dear," said he, "that every man eventually gets what he deserves."

She braced herself again, and regarded him bravely.

"And what do you think Anthony Blake deserves?"

"It's early yet to say. He has got to prove himself. . . ."

He touched her hand, drew her attention to a couple at the next table—a mean little man with a scrubby, thin, black moustache and a grenadier of a woman. They were disputing the bill. Four cakes, said she, had they eaten, and not five. The man at last confessed to surreptitious greed. The wife turned on him the most furious of shoulders. He paid the bill which happened to be in even lire. The waiter lingered. The man put down two pennies and slunk out behind his stalking mate.

Silvester Gayton beamed. "Don't you think I'm right? Hasn't that fellow got what he deserves?"

"But the poor waiter hasn't," cried Perella, diverted by the unseemly comedy. "How can people be so mean? And the worst of it is that they were English."

Silvester beckoned the waiter.

"My friend," said he in Italian, "if those were English, for the credit of my country I will raise the twenty centesimi they have given you to the sum to which you are honourably entitled. I see they have had chocolate, ices and cakes."

The Commendatore, said the waiter, was very kind, but he could not abuse

his generosity. Those were not English or Americans.

"What were they, then?" asked Perella.

"Tedeschi," said the waiter with a mountainous shrug. And, with a wave of his hand, he went about his further business.

"But they seemed to talk ordinary English," said Perella.

"You didn't hear the lady, when she got angry, say, 'more as'—*mehr als* in German—instead of 'more than'? It's a shibboleth. No matter how perfectly a German speaks English, yet, once he gets off his guard and excited, the 'more as' is inevitably bound to come out sooner or later."

He took the ball on the bound, according to the old French metaphor, and entertained her with stories of Teutonic psychology until she forgot their logical sequence from his mention of the name of the young man, Anthony Blake.

After tea he accompanied her to the Zattere by gondola, and took leave of her within a few yards of the Pension Polonia.

She did not see him again in Venice until the end of the following week. The illustrious Brabiani having rallied, and being possessed with the fury of despair, had kept him busy night and day over the monumental work on the Ducal Palace, until, perhaps to the relief of everybody, a merciful Providence threw him into a syncope from which he died. Silvester stayed to attend the gloomy ceremonial of the funeral, to which flocked half scholastic and official Italy, somewhat against his will, for the family, having loathed the monumental work for years, and accusing it of slow murder, glowered upon Silvester as an aider and abetter, an accessory, as it were, before the fact. During the interim between the death and the funeral, his time had been taken up by the Venetian intellectuals whose lack of humour he had deplored, and by research, necessary for the editing of the book, in the Archivio Centrale di Stato. There were also certain legal difficulties connected with the immortal work, the only typescript copy of which he had carried off to his room in the Hôtel de l'Europe. When the black-vested gathering melted away from the graveside in the Campo Santo, after the dismal orations, Florence summoned him on urgent affairs.

Perella, rung up on the telephone at the Pension Polonia, felt a little thrill of wonder and pride at hearing him apologize, as though he had been a boy, for his criminal neglect. He, who had set his heart on showing her Venice, had lamentably failed. Would she forgive him? Would she forgive him to the extent of deigning to have tea with him at Florian's before his imperative return to Florence?

"Dear Professor—what?—I said 'Dear Professor'—very dear Professor—

of course I'll come," said Perella. ". . . Why, it's only too delightful of you to think of me."

So at the appointed hour they met. Silvester stood awaiting her on the terrace, and greeted her bare-headed with bowler hat and right-hand glove in gloved left hand, and umbrella crooked over left arm.

Lonely and abandoned atom in a big world, she had lived since their last meeting in the glow of his friendship. She had warmed her hands, her heart even, before its glow. She derived from it an almost inexplicable sense of comfort. She knew that, for some obscure reason, she had now the affection of the gentle, little great man. He was a shield and a buckler and a tower and all sorts of engines of defence behind which, at any given moment, she could fly for certain security. And his service was not given, like that of Fanshawe, irreproachable in consideration and mansuetude, for her father's sake. It was for her own. She caught herself speculating on his loss in not having a daughter who could devote herself to his happiness. She herself would have devoted herself to the happiness of her worshipped hero of a father, had that flame-like anomaly of manhood ever expressed the desire to be so cockered. But he had affectionately thrown her out, for no other reason, of course, than her own inefficiency. Before Caroline she paled as a rushlight before the sun. But, without depreciation of her father, Professor Gayton was cast in different mould. Save for a common ground of intelligence and love of laughter, never were two men farther apart. Silvester Gayton needed a woman about him. That did intuitive sex divine; yet it translated the need not into terms of Carolines, but into those of sweeter and more exquisite relations. . . .

During this week's interval she received a letter from the Marchesa della Torre, with whom she maintained a pleasant acquaintance.

"My dear," wrote the elderly lady, "if you see our dear Professor in Venice, make him take you about a bit. You needn't be afraid, for he's fond of you; and it will do him good. I'm an old, old friend of his, and I know his life inside out, so I'm not talking foolishly. He has been very unhappy most of his life—and of course he'll never marry. But he's the dearest of creatures, and I know how he appreciates any silly little attention that an old woman like me, or a young, clever girl like you, can pay him. He's fed to the teeth with his great reputation and the bores of the earth who worry his life out, and he'd far rather spend a couple of hours talking about any old thing with a woman—me antiquated, or you young—provided the woman has the rudiment of a brain, and a beat of the heart, than with all the high-brows of Europe. So don't have any compunction, my dear. Treat him as if you were his daughter, claiming his companionship and his guidance, and he'll respond like a starving man presented with a good dish of spaghetti. . . ."

The letter crystallized vague fancies of Perella, hitherto held, as it were, in solution. So when they sat over their tea and ices in the Café Florian, she viewed him in a new and clearer light. The awful veil of his reputation fell away from him, and the natural gentleness of the man was enhanced by the pathetic. She noticed, with a queerly stirred vision, that the edge of his collar was frayed. This was not a sign of poverty. Nor, as in the case of her father's old slovenliness of attire, one of loose and careless living. It was evidence of a woman's neglect. Caroline would not have admitted such a collar into her father's drawer, so he could not possibly have put it on. But there was nobody except the elderly Italian housekeeper, ignorant and uncritical of niceties, to throw offending articles of attire into, say, the dust-bin of charity. She saw him thrust a mechanical finger between collar-corner and throat. The thing was like a fret-saw. One of the buttons, too, of a glove, was hanging by a thread. The imp of the beautifully idiotic sped her, with a vague word of excuse, from the table to the desk of accounting women. Her breathless earnestness, her pretty, calculated Italian so prevailed, that a busy clerk dived into some secret feminine recess of her own and gave her what she demanded. She returned triumphant to the table, threaded needle in hand and thimble on finger.

"My dear," said the astonished Silvester, "what on earth are you doing?"

Perella laughed. "I give you fifty guesses."

"You're sewing the button on my glove."

"Fancy your guessing right first time!"

He watched her slim fingers. When she handed the glove to him he thanked her in his prim courteousness.

"I'm sure," said he, "this is the only button that has ever been sewed on for me except by those who are professionally supposed to sew on buttons. And you know, my dear Perella, the professional button-sewer, like the plumber, is artistic, temperamental, forgetful."

He tested the sewing. "You're the most accomplished and kindest of button-sewers. Really it was very sweet of you to think of it."

That was the end of the matter; for all the needles and threads and thimbles in the world would not have mended the serrated collar, and she could not go out and buy him a new one.

Besides, she had much to tell him. The Bellini was finished—ready to be packed and despatched to Buenos Aires. She had done her best to profit by his vision, and had been hoping he could see the picture. He deplored his inability. Florence, a meeting of a certain dreadful set of *eruditi* of which he was president, claimed his immediate presence. But, the Bellini done, what kept her in Venice? She broke on him her triumphant news. Another commission! A

copy of the Vittore Carpaccio in the Accadémia—the Presentation in the Temple, with the delicious people playing lutes and flutes at the foot.

"Then we shan't see you in Florence till goodness knows when," said Silvester.

"It's a great big picture," said Perella. "All one side taken up by three stuffy old gentlemen in difficult vestments."

"I know," said he, "but there's a great big lot of love to be got into it, and that takes time—a devil of a time." He poised a hesitating spoon over the liquid remainder of his ice, and laid it down again. "Don't," he went on, "accept another commission in Venice without letting me know. Of course big things are big things. But I can fix up Florentine orders for you, I know, so don't catch hold of anything here. Besides, I don't like to feel you're all alone in Venice. I should like you to be in Florence where I, if you'll allow me to say so, my dear, can keep an eye on you."

She divined something more than solicitude for her welfare. He had struck a faint minor chord of self which vibrated through her very gratefully. She said in a tone in which raillery was redeemed by a soft tenderness:

"Do you think I shall run away with a gondolier?"

"You might run away with anything." He tapped her hand across the table. "Often an old bachelor knows more about women than the most multitudinously married of married men. At any moment—all alone here—you might do something, if not desperate, at least fantastic. You might get religion, and go into a convent, or get pneumonia and go into the Campo Santo; in either case, I shouldn't be there to give you a helping hand out of the muddle."

Perella, looking down, made three separate little movements. With her forefinger she pushed away from her, first her tea-cup, then her ice-glass, then her glass of water.

"I can't understand," she said, at last, "why you bother your head about me."

"Can't you?" He leaned across the table. "And yet you're a little person of very quick intelligence."

She started, flushed. What did he mean? She raised her dark eyes to meet his smile, very kindly and somewhat sad.

"That's why," she answered. "My intelligence tells me that I'm of no particular account to anybody . . . so why should you worry about me?"

"Just because I'm a selfish old fellow, my dear, and I've given you my affection. That sounds horribly patronizing, but I don't mean it that way. Who could help it? Personally and selfishly, I should prefer to feel that you were

near me in Florence rather than far away, out of call in Venice. So that if there was a glove button . . .”

Here was the unhappy great man of the Marchesa’s letter revealing himself, as it were, from behind her words, and pleading for himself. In the confusion of thought and emotion, tears dimmed her eyes.

“I’ll cancel the Carpaccio and go back to Florence,” she declared.

He shot out both hands in protestation. “My dear child, you’ll do no such lunatic thing.”

He fussed and called the waiter, and paid the modest bill and led her out into the mysteriously lit Piazza.

“If you did such a wicked and sinful thing for me, I’d take train to Naples and climb up Mount Vesuvius and throw myself into the crater. All I ask you is to come back to Florence as soon as you’ve done the Carpaccio.”

So, as they crossed the Piazza and the Piazzetta to the steps where the gondolas were moored, the little pact was made. It was made in a drizzling rain, under Silvester’s umbrella. It was a miserable evening for those who could not see the astonishing effects of conflicting lights across the wet and gleaming flagstones. . . . San Marco was but a black mass against blacker darkness. The Campanile caught here and there a fugitive and perplexing illumination. The shops in the arcades shone dazzling, but beyond the fringe of glistening brown edges to the sides of the square, they accentuated the central mystery of gloom. The electric lights on the Piazzetta cast no shadows.

The day had been fine and the gondolier had not thought of a *tenda*, the historic coach body stuck over the seats. In the soft and penetrating rain they entered a gondola and, side by side under the Professor’s umbrella, they made their slow way round the point of the Salute into the Canal of the Giudecca.

She felt a criminal, a poisoner, a murderer, in allowing him to endure such discomfort. Protestations had been vain. He had summoned her, said he, for his own egotistic pleasure, from the Zattere, and to the Zattere would he safely conduct her. The rain was gentle, the umbrella fairly adequate, the journey not unromantic. Quivering spears of light shot across the still, yet fretted, waters.

“It’s very beautiful, all the same,” said Perella.

“I think I’ll reckon it the most charming quarter of an hour in my life,” said Silvester.

At the steps of the Zattere he landed briskly. He stood, one hand holding the umbrella, the other outstretched to help her.

Owing both to the confused light of the long line of buildings, and the slipperiness of the wet steps, she missed his hand, caught at nothing, and fell,

her right arm under her. Picked up, at first she laughed at her clumsiness, then became conscious of a darting agony so acute that she nearly fainted.

The women of the Pension Polonia carried her to her room, and Silvester sat in the *salon* until a doctor came and made his report. It was somewhat alarming.

CHAPTER XI

AS a matter of fact, as far as Silvester's unscientific mind could gather from the Italian doctor's explanation, Perella was in a devil of a mess altogether. Her arm, doubled up under her, had been broken into all kinds of compound fractures, chiefly of the wrist and upper arm, and, as her side had caught the edge of the last stone stair, there was fear of some internal injury.

Silvester, whom a retired celibate life had rendered unfamiliar with such crises of existence, wrung his hands in his despair, like the Rover gentleman in the idiotic old poem. What was to be done? He did not care for the look of the doctor, a seedy, garlic-emanating person of middle-age, who, being resident on the Zattere, had been summoned as the nearest to hand. He had the worried air of the unsuccessful man. He had set the bones as best he could. Spoke of plaster of Paris for weeks. A trained nurse, of course. . . . The lady of the Pension Polonia also wrung her hands. The Pension was full to bursting point. Only as a favour to Madame Toselli had she reserved a room, disappointing another client, for the young lady. As to a nurse . . . there was no corner in which she could sleep; and no service available for the special needs of an invalid. There was, of course, the British Hospital on the Giudecca, across the Canal. . . .

By telephone they learned that not a bed in the hospital was available. Didn't they know that there was an influenza epidemic? Also a ship from Egypt had landed them with more typhoid patients than they knew what to do with. The hospital bitterly resented the doctor's suggestion. He began to wring his hands too. There was only the General Hospital.

"Never in this world," cried Silvester. "Can't you suggest something else?"

He spoke Italian with Italian gesture and a certain amount of Italian fire. The signorina was the daughter of his old friend, to him *preciocissima*. It was through his fault that she had fallen. Had he grasped her hand, this would not have happened. The best that the science and luxury of Europe could offer was at her disposition. The seedy doctor made the humble suggestion that he would welcome a consultation with the eminent Dr. Farini, one of the greatest surgeons in Italy.

"If that is so," said Silvester, "send for him at once."

The doctor went to the telephone. Silvester and the lady of the Pension

mounted to the little room with windows overlooking a noisy, re-echoing *calle*, where lay Perella, a sorry white-faced thing, done up in splints and bandages. She smiled wanly, and declared herself perfectly comfortable.

"I'll never forgive myself," said Silvester.

"But it was my stupidity, dear Professor. There was your hand. I thought I was grabbing it, but the light must have been tricky. It's I that can't forgive myself for causing everybody all this trouble."

"You're the most marvellous little angel I've ever met," said Silvester.

The next hour or two were nightmare. Perella fainted. The lady of the Pension bundled him out unceremoniously to fetch the doctor. He sat in the *salon*, solitary among the alien inmates who trickled in to await their dinner. Then came the hour of dinner to which he was invited. But he had no use for food. He sat alone and looked at the pictures of stray summer numbers of the *Sketch* and *Tatler* and *Je Sais Tout*.

The great Farini arrived, and greeted him with the flattering remark that the call of the illustrious Commendatore Gayton was a command. He went up to Perella. Stayed for the major portion of eternity. Came down eventually, with a grave face, and, as the diners had flooded the *salon*, drew Silvester into the private bureau of the Pension. The original diagnosis had been correct. The first treatment had naturally been in the nature of first aid. He, forewarned, had brought the necessary appliances. There were internal lesions. No danger to life, of course, but the case was grave.

Like Sir Ralph, in the same old poem, Silvester tore his hair—or the greying fringe of it that was left.

"For the love of God, doctor, what can we do? She can't stay here. There's no room in the British Hospital, and I can't leave that little girl whom I love like my own daughter alone in the Ospedale Civile. My God! If it had only happened in Florence."

"What then?"

"What then? Why, I have an apartment five times too big for me, where she could have beautiful air and a hundred nurses and delicate food and everything she needs."

Dr. Farini smiled professionally. "There's no reason why she shouldn't be moved. In a civilized country like Italy there are ambulance carriages. Already I have telephoned for an English nurse from Florence. In Venice there are none available. She can take her back. Perhaps, too, Dr. Bardi would accompany her. But, my dear Commendatore, all that is expensive."

"Will it be under a million lire?" asked Silvester.

"You jest, Commendatore!"

"Then it shall be done," cried Silvester, and he wrung the doctor's two hands with extraordinary fervour.

When he became aware that his presence in the Pension Polonia was a matter rather of hindrance than of usefulness, he made his way to the Hôtel de l'Europe. There he found his modest luggage in the hall, and, for the first time, remembered that he was due in Florence on the morrow. He bade the porter take it back to his room. If the Society of Archivisti of Florence could not get on without his presidency, they could kill each other, and throw themselves into the Arno, or dissolve in any old way they pleased. He was going to see Perella safe into the apartment in the Viale Milton.

He mounted to his room, drew his gloves from his pocket, and threw them on the table. Memory smote him. He took up one, and the picture arose in his mind of her little dark head bending over it amid the crowd and clatter of the Café Florian, and her deft fingers plying needle and thread.

So it came to pass that, after dreadful disorganization of easeful official life, Perella found herself installed in the Viale Milton, with a view from her bed over the hills and Monte Morello, with walls discreetly graced by the warmest and most comforting of Silvester's Primitives, and with a pleasant woman in blue uniform by her side. In spite of pain and the heavy discomfort of imprisoned arm, she felt curiously contented. Never in her life had she awakened in a room so gracious, or to ministrations so tender and noiseless. She reflected that this was the first time she had ever been so ill as to stay in bed, having been a young creature of surprising toughness. It was an odd experience.

The mellow autumn days passed almost uncounted, filled by sick-room routine, delicate meals, orgies of books, magazines and periodicals, and the visits of friends. For, when she recovered sufficiently from the injury to her side, she had many visitors. The Pension Toselli supplied Madame herself and the Grewsons and the Brabazon ladies. The last brought her a knitted magenta silk bed-jacket, and a copy of the late Professor Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, which they still regarded as the final pronouncement on the reconciliation of science with religion. And Perella reintroduced them to Professor Gayton, who was very shy and charming, and so sent them away exceedingly happy. There was also the Marchesa della Torre, who came nearly every day, and, after the way of discreet and capable old English women, deputized for Silvester, incapable head of household, and shared with the nurse the doctor's confidences and instructions. There was the

Signorina Demonetti, who brought humble little offerings of chocolate; and a stray girl or two came, fellow-copyists whose acquaintance she had made in the galleries. And of course there was Silvester fussing in at odd moments, after many precautionary taps, to get the last minute's news of her progress, and to bring flowers or an armful of the newest and lightest literature.

Once he suggested summoning Caroline Annaway. It must be so dreadful for her to be all alone, in a strange old bachelor's house.

"Dreadful," she said. "And you're a perfect stranger—*perfettissimo*," she smiled.

But she would not let him send for Caroline, having a delicate sense of environment. Caroline, contented as far as it was possible for widow of John Annaway to be, prospered in her Chelsea tea-shop. She wrote glowing accounts of crowded tables and of new curtains she was putting up in her flat. Perella took counsel of the Marchesa.

"Of course," said she, "if the dear Professor thinks it's a compromising situation, and would like . . ."

"Good God! my child," cried the Marchesa, "I'm here. What more could the prim little man want?"

"He isn't prim," Perella declared. "He's a darling."

"Then what's all the fuss about?"

Thus came the decision which she announced to Silvester.

"It was for your sake entirely," said he. "I thought——"

"I know," Perella interrupted. "It must be awful for you not to be able to give me the things that would make me happy. I'm simply dying for a couple of kangaroos and a diamond tiara."

She stretched out her left hand, took his, and, before he knew what she was doing, kissed it. He bent over and touched her hair gently.

"You're the very dearest child," said he.

And then he went and looked for quite a time at the Monte Morello.

At first she was much worried about the Carpaccio. She had set her heart on painting the three little musicians in the *predella*. But Silvester assuring her that Rosso, the dealer, had promised to keep the commission open until such time as she could execute it she felt greatly comforted. The world was a charming place, populated chiefly by angels.

One morning the nurse slit open for her an envelope bearing an American stamp, extracted the letter, and left her to read it. Returning half an hour later, she found Perella with eyes that looked as if they had been cried out.

It was an airy letter from Anthony, telling her of skyscrapers and bootlegging and the Players' Club and a private exhibition of his work that Cornelius Adams was arranging for him. But competition was ferocious. Every square-or lantern-jawed young man he came across seemed to be a black-and-white artist. He would have to do something new or die. He was thinking of blood—real blood—as a medium. Human blood would create the greatest sensation, but it was expensive in many ways. Rabbit was banal. If anybody would ship him a cheap consignment of quaggas, a colossal fortune was at his command. And then, hey! for peacocks in England. But, failing this, the future was darkened by the conglomerate sticks of charcoal upheld by the myriad horde around him of hungry artists exactly in his own position.

"So Heaven knows, Perella *mia*, when our dream can come true. Heaven knows whether it ever can. But it was a beautiful dream and at any rate we've had it. If I don't come up to what your romantic little soul has pictured me, I can only ask for your forgiveness. I'm just a middling artist, without a dog's chance of doing sincere work. So, my dear, forget all about me. I'm not worth your thoughts. Perhaps one day I may come to you with a miraculous muster of peacocks, and, if your heart is free, and if I and they make humble obeisance before you . . . well, you see, my dear . . ."

"My dear" saw. She saw with an agony of soul that surpassed the agony of shattered arm and bruised organs. It was the end. Really the end. And the anguish of it was that the letter was all Anthony. She could picture him talking of darkening spears of charcoal and musters of peacocks. She hoped to God she would never see a peacock again. She would slay it on sight!

Well, it served her right, the goat-herd's daughter, for giving her heart to the prince in disguise. . . . At any rate, that was the end of it. . . .

Later in the day she asked the nurse to write a letter at her dictation.

> "I am desired by Miss Perella Annaway, who has unfortunately sprained her arm and is unable to write, to acknowledge your letter, and to say that she quite understands, and that there's nothing more to be said."

"And that's that," said the nurse to herself, wondering what kind of miscreant could be the "Anthony Blake, Esquire," who had turned down so fragrant a flower of womanhood as her little patient.

She would have given much to receive Perella's confidences; but Perella's pride kept her heart in oyster-shells, so that no one could get at it save by painful opening. She did her best, like a kindly and tactful woman, to relieve the following hours of depressed reaction. One clings to a dream as long as one

can, even though one knows that one is in process of awakening to the dull reality of night or day. But when the awakening finally comes the dream has gone for ever, vanished into the awful Limbo where are stored, like shadow plays, the myriad despairs and beauties of human dreams.

"I'm very anxious, nurse," said Silvester, meeting her outside the room, after one of his visits to Perella. "She says there's nothing wrong; but she seems to have lost vitality. That dreadful internal injury . . . don't you think we ought to have another opinion?"

The nurse smiled.

"You needn't worry about her health. She's getting along splendidly."

"Then why . . .? She looks as white as a ghost, and one can see that, for all her sweetness, talking is an effort."

And the nurse told him about the letter which she had not seen, and the reply which she had written.

Silvester nodded. "We'll go slow with her for the next week or so."

At a door in the hall where they had met he turned, and laid a finger on his lips.

"Not a word. Make her think you think she has had a slight set-back. Much better."

"Blessed babe," muttered the nurse, when he disappeared.

He went into his own library on the other side of the building, whose southern windows commanded the compact majesty of Florence. It was a large room lined with books from floor to ceiling. Over the mantelpiece beneath which a wood fire was burning, hung an Adoration by a *pictor ignotus* of the school of Fra Bartolomeo. There was Virgin and chubby Child, considerably advanced for His presumed age, and wooden oxen and a premature, golden-haloed saint or two in attendance, and the Three Kings, with their animals and offerings of jewels, and the usual background of hills. He had discovered it years before in a musty *palazzo* belonging to a decaying Italian family. Save for an agreeable colouring of blues and mellow reds, it was not very good. Not a critic in the world could have supported the family's claim to its Fra Bartolomeo authorship. It had a hundred unforgivable crudities. But there was one little white impudent ass, curvetting under a dull and bearded Melchior, whose sleek, arched neck and indescribably satirical eye had caught his fancy. He had bought the picture when death's final decay had rendered the family a fringe of nobodies, and the contents of the *palazzo* had been sold by auction. He grew to love the ironical ass. None but a Great Master, a Great Thinker, a Great Philosopher, a Great Seer, unless he was a mere fortuitous bungler, could have proclaimed for all time so devastating a criticism of things human

and humanly supposed divine. At first one thought it was just a trick of a bit of white paint; but then one saw that the eye was the resolving point of the carefully drawn, truculent attitude of the sneering animal.

He caught the ass's abominable eye as he entered the room. The ass was laughing. The ass said:

"I've looked upon many damned fools during the five centuries of my existence, but of all of them, friend Silvester, I think you're the damnedest."

For the first time for twenty years, Silvester loathed the beast. Hitherto he had regarded him as a friend, one who saw eye to eye with him, through mundane vanities and superstitions, and aided him to resolve values and thus apply to human phenomena his serene analytical vision. And now this cynical party to one of the most soul-stirring scenes in the world's history was jeering at him and calling him a damned fool.

Now, the picture hung on the north wall facing the window, and sometimes the sun in summer fell hot upon it, so that, in view of blistering and crackling of canvas, he had rigged up a protective curtain. Yet on this November evening, the room only lit by shaded mellow electric lamps, he drew the curtain, with an angry gesture, over the abhorrent ass, and sat down at his great and generous old Venetian table to what, up to that moment, he had considered a labour of love—the reduction to lucidity of the late Professor Brabiani's monumental work on the Ducal Palace. In his chair with the curved arms and the crossed, inlaid planks that made the supports, he leaned back uneager. He drew a cigarette from his modest silver case, and sought around for matches. He rose, with a little gesture of impatience, and turned to the mantelpiece where always, in a cunning casket, lay an emergency reserve. He stood with his back to the fire, smoking reflectively and regarding, across the rug-strewn floor, the manuscript-and typescript-laden table, with its two shaded lamps concentrating their beams on nothing less than abstract Work.

"I suppose I must get on with the beastly thing," said he.

He made a pace or two about the room; looked up at the drawn curtain. Ashamed of previous childishness, he flung it back.

"I must get on with the infernal book," he repeated.

And then he caught the ass's mocking eye. From the foul and bitter lips beneath the scornful nostrils came:

"Who, of God's insects, is ever going to read the dull stuff, anyway?"

He drew the obscuring curtains once again very angrily.

"Oh, hell!" cried the mildest man in Europe, and the World's Greatest Authority on Pre-Raphaelite Italian Art; and he rushed out of the intolerably

enchanted library and sought refuge with a novel, before the fire in the restful atmosphere of the drawing-room, sanctified by his serene Primitives. There his thoughts could dwell, without the ironical comment of a devil in ass's guise, on the unhappiness of the beloved waif under his protection. His heart being filled with pity and indignation, the novel had no meaning for him. It sprawled on the floor by his side. His acquaintance with the poignancy of life had been greater than that with which a careless world credited him. Few had known, still fewer remembered; perhaps one creature left in the world still cared and sympathized—the Marchesa della Torre. It was only the oldest and wretchedest petty drama in the world. He had adored and married, ever so many years ago. And then a gayer gallant had ridden up and carried off the lady, and she had died soon afterwards. There had been no divorce, no anything to arouse even private attention. Thenceforward he called himself a bachelor—of late, an old bachelor. The wound had never healed, as the saying goes. . . . He could scarcely find it in his heart to reproach her, because the other man was six foot high and handsome as a god, and was in process of doing devil-may-care things in wildernesses, and sang like an angel. He, Silvester, had no chance against him. Nature, for good or evil, took its course. But it hurt like any of the tortures devised for damned souls by his friend Orcagna. . . . And the man had died a year ago, covered with medals and orders and decorations, and narrowly escaped a national funeral.

So the sensitive little man, who had kept his heartbreak hidden from the world for nearly thirty years, sorrowed over the lamentable plight of Perella. Yet what could he do save call Anthony a damned young scoundrel, and wonder how a man of such apparent intelligence, having in his hand a pearl richer than all his tribe, should throw it away like Othello's base Indian. He made fierce resolve never to have anything to do with the unutterable young man. . . . The accursèd part of it was that, between Anthony Blake and the Other Man in his own life, there were the most vital points of resemblance. . . . The poor little girl! Oh, it was a beastly shame—the poor little girl! He rose and went, in his instinctive connoisseur fashion, round the room, peering at his Primitives. A little Madonna, of the school of Giotto, looking straight out of the cracked canvas gave him most comfort.

It is a question whether Silvester, if at that sensitive and emotional moment he had met the glance of the malevolent ass, would or would not have slashed him out of the picture, and cast him into the flames.

As it was, he picked up his novel, and enjoyed it for the rest of the evening.

Every balm that human affection could apply to bruised hearts was

lavished on Perella. Unconscious of such treatment, her pride led the way to remedy. In a day or two she became once more the Perella of jest and laughter.

"I'm wasting such a lot of time," she cried. "Rosso thinks he can place another copy of the Franciabigio, and there's still the Carpaccio to be done. Do you think I'll be able to stand somewhere in Italy and paint with one hand in Florence and the other in Venice?"

And then there came a day, a dark day, of storm cloud and whirling sleet, that obscured all vision of Tuscan Hills and pleasant things, when three wise men, two of them the greatest surgeons in Italy, and the third, the greatest authority on Italian painting, stood by the bedside. All three looked very grave, and one of them had eyes filled with unaccustomed tears. Perella's arm, released from its plaster-of-Paris bandage, lay limp on the bed. The bones of the upper arm had set, and so had those of the wrist. But the wrist tendons had been torn irremediably. . . .

With her right hand she would never be able to paint again.

PART IV

BEATRICE

CHAPTER XII

ABEWILDERED Anthony wandered about New York, when he had nothing else to do, in order to study the ways and subways of the city. Finding that a comfortable stock of francs reduced itself to a miserable sum of dollars, he quickly moved from the sedate hotel to which he had been recommended, to a humble hostelry in a street whose number conveyed no social meaning to his polite friends. Only a humorous outlook on life saved him from unbearable sense of grievance. Here he was, accustomed for many months to the fat of the land, condemned again, figuratively (and sometimes literally when he dined alone) to the leanest of diet. Had not the proceeding been comic, he could have danced in impotent fury at having to put on unclean shoes in the morning, and to go out and sit in a sort of circus and have them shined. He quickly found that taxis were beyond his means, unless he cared to spend his fortune on a fortnight's transport. Thus, perhaps for the good of his soul, he familiarized himself with methods of democratic travel alien to his nature and his habits. At one custom his soul revolted. He would not wear his ticket in his hatband. The fact of being swallowed up, an unimportant unit, in perpetual crowds, at once fascinated and confused him. Hitherto such grey-faced, hurrying folk had been far apart from his existence. His idea of congested traffic had been limited to the square mile or so of the West End of London; his notion of crowds confined to the return, generally by motor-car, from a big race-meeting or a football match. He had viewed, from the door of a first-class carriage, excursion trains packed with perspiring people, and wondered how the poor devils could stand it. He found that all the inhabitants of New York, except the very wealthy—and even millionaires could not afford the time to get from their millionaire homes above Central Park to Wall Street by automobile—crammed themselves into trains underground and overhead, and into the tram-cars ceaselessly clanging up and down the great avenues. The whole day of New York reminded him of the dreadful six o'clock exodus from the city when he had tried, for a few months, to attune himself to the discords of the office of Messrs. Blake, Bislett and Smith.

He was bewildered by a thousand unfamiliar things. It seemed so absurd not to be able to call for beer or light wine at a restaurant; so demoralizingly vicious to drink a friend's cocktails or whisky behind closed doors. The standard of living awed him. These people, great and small, thought in dollars as he had of late thought in lire and francs. There were no poor. Even the

humblest of his acquaintances possessed automobiles, and only forbore to use them because there was no room for them in the crowded streets. The racy, allusive talk bewildered him; the frantic interest every one seemed to take in unintelligible politics. Personalities—Senators, Judges, Mayors, State Governors, Washington officials, Presidents of Companies and Universities—of whom he had but vaguely heard, assumed in conversation vivid importance, world-shaking influence. And everybody seemed to be a personal friend of the President of the United States. It was only when he found himself alone, and held his racking head between his hands, that he realized that America was a mighty big country, and that these personalities, nebulous to him, directed, consciously or unconsciously, the destinies of more of mankind than even inhabited the American continent.

He was bewildered, too, by the eager hospitality of all to whom, in a decent way, he was accredited. Beatrice Ellison opened drawing-rooms of distinguished ladies who, in their turn, opened others. Through Cornelius Adams's introduction to the Players', he went the round of the pleasant clubs, the Lotus, the Lambs, the St. Nicholas, and became a member of one or two unhoused lunching clubs. Although welcomed, invited to dinners and dances and suppers and parties and male reunions, he yet found himself a stranger in a strange city.

"What's the matter?" said Beatrice, one day.

"I never knew what astigmatism was before. Now I do. Every line I know to be straight and parallel with others is going about in front of my eyes like forked lightning. I need properly corrective lenses."

She laughed in her lazy way.

"I think you are the first Englishman who has come over and, finding things difficult to understand, has laid the blame on himself and not on America."

"It's only a criminal lunatic," he cried, "who would blame a country where everybody is suffocating him with kindness."

" 'Suffocating'—doesn't that imply a bit of blame?"

He rose—he was in her drawing-room—and flung out his arms.

"My dearest Madonna, don't be so literal. Well, perhaps I do feel overwhelmed. Here am I, an obscure artist, an Englishman, and everywhere—I know thanks to you—I'm received with open arms. And I stand in the perfectly charming embrace and feel that I'm a sort of odd lizard mistaken for a man."

"You are a man, my dear," said Beatrice, "and a man, provided he's white in both senses of the word, is always welcomed in our country."

“Madonna Consolatrix,” said he.

She was, indeed, his consoler in that queer sensitive civilization of an unfamiliar scale of values.

“Were I,” said he once to her, “the ordinary young Englishman coming out with good introductions in order to enjoy myself, I shouldn’t worry about anything, and I should have the time of my life. But I’ve got to earn my living, my bread and butter. I’ve got everything to learn. I’m up against it. Don’t you see?”

“If you realize that, it’s half the battle. You’ve only got to make good.”

“Do you think I can?”

“If I didn’t, do you suppose I should have brought you here? And you’re beginning to do it.”

Again the lady of consolation.

Under the auspices of Beatrice and Cornelius Adams he had already found himself doing a few portraits. His young gaiety, and his easy manner of the well-bred man of the world, no doubt weighed down the balance in the mind of hesitating sitters. He had the gift of talking amusingly while he worked, thus converting a sitting from an hour’s stiff boredom into a few quickly passing moments of laughter. A dull, scrubby fellow, with twice his talent, would not have had half his chance. This, perhaps, Anthony did not realize. He was a modest youth, devoid of self-consciousness. He was bred in a world where one laughed and talked and made oneself agreeable without thinking anything more about it. As a human being he took himself for granted. But, as an artist, he abased himself before his own standard, often with terror-stricken misgiving. He still felt sick at the thought of his adventure with the Duchesse de Montfaucon. In the making of the first few portraits, he sweated the blood of his soul.

Cornelius Adams, bluff, florid, good-humoured, was always a force behind him. He proposed a studio, right away up town, shrewdly saying:

“People will think ten times more of you—and people’s opinions are, as a general rule, translatable into dollars—if they’ve got to come to you instead of your going to them.”

Anthony explained that a fashionable studio was as remote from his financial possibilities as a steam yacht.

“Don’t worry,” said Cornelius. “I’ll fix it up. On a business basis, of course. Come round with me to my attorney the day after to-morrow, and we’ll draw up a little agreement.”

Anthony expressed his gratitude.

“But why——?”

Cornelius Adams laughed. “Put it that I just like you. I liked you from the moment you accosted me in Florence and asked where you could get a cocktail.”

“It was awful cheek,” said Anthony.

“The same thing can be done impudently, or with an air. . . . You assumed at once that I was one of the *cognoscenti*.”

“You and everybody are a damned sight too kind to me,” said Anthony.

Thus he became more than ever bewildered, spending his nights in the obscure eyrie which his purse compelled, and his days in the comfortably furnished studio of a pastellist who was going round the world.

Unseen influences caused a magazine editor to send for him. A fantastic story needed illustration, and the editor was trying to discover the new note that would express the fantasy. Would Mr. Blake care to submit a couple of drawings without prejudice? Anthony took away a typescript copy and set to work in his new studio, feeling that, at last, the Great Opportunity had come. A fortnight afterwards a crushed and humbled artist sat in Beatrice Ellison’s drawing-room, declaring himself the most incompetent dog who had ever mistaken his vocation.

The bitter months of winter passed. He knew what it was to go about in over-shoes, the goloshes only familiar to an English mind through curates in ancient farcical comedies, along streets of snow piled four feet high on the kerb, with here and there a hewn outlet; what it was to linger cowardly in a room’s delicious warmth, dreading the moment when he should have to emerge into the icy air. And yet, there was a strange exhilaration in it all. Pulses throbbed, brain was clear, work was easy.

His little show of portraits and pencil drawings—Breton and Hungarian types—had been encouraging. There had actually been sales. . . . By February he found that he could earn enough to support himself, if not in comfort, at least in decency, while paying Cornelius Adams for the studio according to the terms of the contract. But the fortune that would be available for peacocks and Perella was as far as ever from attainment.

And Perella?

He had written protesting against the terms of the nurse’s curt note. He had received no reply. As a salve to conscience he sent a cable:

“Is this really the end?”

To which he received the reply:

“*La commedia è finita.*”

He shrugged his shoulders. Well, that was the end of a romantically impossible episode. She had definitely turned him down. The play was played out. Everybody, man and woman, made mistakes in life, and the frank recognition of the fact, as in this case, obviated tragedy. This final cable filled him with immense relief. He held her dear in his memory as a strange ultra-human thing, a laugh, a sprite, a will-o'-the-wisp lucency; but as the woman who would march with his ambitions triumphant, through the cohorts of the women of the great world which was his own, she had no existence.

Farewell, Perella, thing of fire in the spirit, of weary, pallid nothingness in the flesh, of poor, little, cheap, drooping finery on insignificant body, as he had last beheld her at the railway station of Florence. Yet she was a memory of exquisiteness, a perfumed scarf which he would keep for ever in a secret drawer.

He saw much of Beatrice Ellison, his patroness, though she sought by every delicate device in the world to disclaim such a worldly relationship. Months before he had christened her Madonna, after the old Italian way. And this was much better, connoting, as it did, something of the spiritual. She worried unduly over the one room in the obscure hotel with which he professed (mendaciously, as it seemed to her) to be quite content; and she chafed at the thought of a censorious world which would criticize her morals if she gave him quarters in her own roomy house. Both in Dinard and in the shooting-box near Ipolysag she had regarded him as a part of her establishment. After their leave-taking on the Customs quay, she realized with a queer gasp of pain her prospective loneliness, in spite of the cohorts of friends even then and there surrounding her. . . . Of course there was Fargus living under her roof. But Fargus, as every one knew, was her secretary. Nobody had ever been idiot enough to find his residence there the least bit scandalous. But with regard to the charming and accomplished Anthony, it was a different matter altogether. Fargus would not dream of calling her Madonna, and she had never run her hand over Fargus's hair and kissed him. . . . If only Emilia would come home and give the association her prim young chaperonage. But Emilia had gone mad over the study of Eugenics and the practice of the simple life, and preferred, as she frankly said, being perfectly happy in Minnesota to being acutely miserable in New York. Beatrice sometimes sighed over her daughter.

"I don't think she takes any interest in a man except anatomically," she said. "What's one to do with a girl like that?"

As no one could give her adequate counsel, she left Emilia alone. But she

looked forward with dread to the time when, with accrued authority, Emilia would be heading Movements and sounding Slogans and doing all such kinds of commendable yet dreadful things. At any rate, Emilia was of no use whatever. And, moreover, she felt, with a little prick of shame, that should Emilia come she would be most embarrassingly in the way.

Beatrice lived in the Ellison house in Sixty-fifth Street, one in a brown stone modest row—suggestive of Bloomsbury, or an old by-water of Kensington, where once the gentry had their unostentatious habitation. On the other side of the door, however, there was revealed a house spacious and dignified; large rooms, with curtained doorways, opened in to one another in pleasant vistas. Most of the furniture and pictures and statuary were of a bygone age, for when Emilia occasionally slept a night there she was of the third generation of Ellisons who had done so.

"If I were you, mother," she said once, "I'd scrap the whole of this mouldy stuff—it's reeking with germs—and refurnish the place hygienically with properly chosen scientific colours."

"When it comes into your possession, my dear," said Beatrice, "you can do what you like. But, while I'm alive, I like to look round and feel that somewhere in the world there's something to show that there's something at the back of us which money can't buy."

"All right, when you're crumpled up with typhoid——"

"People aren't crumpled up with typhoid. You're mixing it up with cholera. Besides, the sanitation of the house is the last word in modernity."

Emilia bit her lip—this was two years before, when she had just started into the rosy flush of her Eugenic career.

Thus it will be seen that Beatrice held the old-fashioned house in sentimental affection. Of course, it was dark and stiff, and a row of eighteenth-century ancestral samplers in the drawing-room, surmounted by a full-length portrait of Alexander Hamilton, robbed a wall of artistic joy; but, besides being comfortable, it sounded, as one might say, an urbane proclamation. . . . Of course, also, after a time it got on a sensitive modern woman's nerves. She missed the self-expression to which she had given free scope in her houses in Florence and Dinard and her little flat in Paris. Three months of New York, too, sufficed her. At the end of that time, her mind drenched with plays and operas and music and startling social dramas and great finance and the inner whirlpool of politics, she usually longed for the peace and grace of her Florentine home on the slopes of Fiesole.

The winter went on, and the set of rooms at the top of the house, one with a good studio light which Anthony might have occupied, remained empty. And

she felt peculiarly lonely in the gloomy place, in spite of the myriad calls on her time and her daily touch with the young man, either by voice over the telephone or by personal meeting in her own house or elsewhere.

Once when she felt the usual call of Florence she said to him: “Have you ever thought that, one of these days soon, I must go back to Europe?”

“I’ve tried to put it out of my mind, as one does inevitable things,” said he. “For God’s sake don’t talk of it till the day comes. Then ring me up, and say: ‘I’m sailing to-night.’ ”

She smiled. “We’ll have a little longer run in New York.”

February still found her lingering. The January snows had melted, and milder air whispered the first promise of spring. Whether blizzards sweeping down from Arctic wastes would turn March into a torment, no man could know. In February the sky was blue and the sun shone and the road to Cornelius Adams’s comfortable house on Long Island was pleasant and the week-ends there an illusion of the South.

Now, Cornelius Adams was a half-bachelor or semi-widower, seeing that he had a wife, a Detroit lady, who found that she could only live in Copenhagen. As Copenhagen bored the good Cornelius to death, and as she never expected him to go there, they had not met for a couple of years; but, all the same, they were a devoted pair, and the marriage was the happiest thing imaginable. He took her intellectual dryness—she was bent on becoming an authority on old Scandinavian literature—and her scorn of coquetry and professed dislike of children, humorously; and, as she was perfectly contented, went along his own agreeable and often, no doubt, secret paths, with no offence to decorum. The amiable man had, at any rate, a genius for friendship. For Beatrice Ellison he would have fought any flame-snorting dragon you pleased. She went to him in her troubles with the eight-ninths open heart of the woman who consults a confessor. He had, as it may have been indicated, given his friendship, just because he liked him, to the young man, Anthony Blake. As he gathered from her confidence that Beatrice was sighing for the companionship of Anthony, whom she could not house with her in New York, and as he took for granted Anthony’s worship of his Madonna, he had instituted week-end parties in his Long Island home to which the pair, with a sprinkling of odd guests, were invited. In the hard weather he could provide them with skating and sleighing and even a small toboggan run. These week-end visits were Beatrice’s happiest days in America. Before she slept, it was a silly comfort to her to know that Anthony was under the same roof; awaking, she looked forward to the bright face and the smile and the laughing glance round and the hasty kiss; in the evenings she looked forward to the few manœuvred moments of privacy before they retired, and the gentler kiss

beyond the range of spydom; the “good night, Madonna” and the “good night, my dear,” and the sight of him below, as she paused on the turn of the stair, gallant, waving her a last salute of hand and lips.

She was happy in an idiotic way; and her sound sense told her that the way was idiotic. She was forty-one, fifteen years older than he; but she did not look it or feel it. Her glass showed her a woman whom the world called beautiful. She had cared for skin and hair and figure, in the modern, matter-of-course way among women of her class, just as she cared for teeth and finger-nails. And she was in the resplendent health of her twenties. What did the years matter? Her heart was fresh. She had mourned for ten years the elderly husband who had been her friend, which, after all, was adequate suttee to expect of any woman. The most virtuous and honoured widows of her acquaintance had remarried after a conventional twelve-month or so. The frozen sap of ten years re-worked in her veins. Why shouldn’t it? And yet. . . . these quivering moments were so sweet and delicate, holding an unutterable poetic charm. Could they only last in their present perfection, she would ask for nothing more. So, at least, she told herself; and, hammering into her brain the asseveration, she grew almost to believe it.

On the Sunday of a February week-end at Marjoram Farm, on Long Island, they sat together in the entrance lounge where, under a high chimney-piece, great four-foot logs of unsplit pine were burning. Through the casemented windows opposite could be seen a pale blue sky mottled by pleasant clouds, and an effect of mild and gentle sunshine. The two or three other members of the house-party had trudged off to church. Cornelius, very amateur farmer, had gone off to look, with an air of wisdom, at Rhode Island turkeys and white Wyandottes and a litter of Berkshire pigs, whose grandparents had been brought from England. Anthony had breakfasted late, with hearty appetite, and had waited with a book for Beatrice to descend. And she had come down, fresh, slim and graceful, her dark blue eyes shining under the mass of black hair that clustered about her brows.

“You here, Anthony? Why haven’t you taken advantage of the beautiful morning?”

“Madonna,” said he, “you are the morning.”

What woman would not be glad to kiss a happy young man who made such a pretty speech? She passed by the table on which he had thrown his book, glanced at it idly, and put it down again. It was Kinglake’s *Eōthen*. She sat down.

“Do you like it?”

"Does one like Chambertin of an historic vintage?"

She proclaimed her joy in his appreciation of a book, one of her favourites, now half-forgotten; a book of undying beauty. So few people nowadays seemed to have time for the beauty of a past age, and missed whatever there was of beauty in the present. They discussed the points in agreeable sympathy.

"Which reminds me," she said at last, "of my dear friend, Silvester—Professor Gayton, you know. If he heard us now he'd be calling us his disciples. I've just had a letter from him."

Anthony politely hoped that he was well.

"He's more than well. He's radiantly happy. He's married."

"Married!" cried Anthony. "Why, he must be getting on for seventy."

"Silly! I happen to know that he's fifty-five."

He might be anything, Anthony conceded. He asked idly, not very greatly interested in the matrimonial affairs of Professor Gayton: "Who's the lady?"

But Beatrice, woman-like, was, on the contrary, vastly interested. The permutations and combinations of human destinies never presented anything more romantic. A little girl painter, daughter of an old friend, breaks her arm when he's helping her to land on slippery steps in Venice, has nowhere to go to for Christian care but to his flat in the Viale Milton; arm so smashed up that she will never paint again; a waif upon the world; the most wonderful and adorable waif that ever fell out of fairyland; and so he had married her. . . .

"Why, what's the matter with you?"

She broke off suddenly, conscious of him staring at her with wondering eyes.

"Good God!" he cried, losing his head for a moment, "you don't mean to say he has married Perella?"

"Perella? Yes. That's the girl's romantic name. Do you know her?"

Under her quick flash he recovered his nerve. He laughed. He had to laugh—disarmingly.

"Of course I know her. She was one of the inmates of the Pension Toselli. A copyist. A dear little girl."

"Why haven't I heard of her before from either of you?" asked Beatrice.

"It never occurred to me to mention her," he said, lighting a cigarette. "And as for Gayton—well, I suppose the question didn't arise until this romantic situation. It's a bit fantastic, you know," he went on pleasantly. "For, though you say he's only fifty-five, yet, at the most, she can only be four and twenty. So there's over thirty years' difference."

“Well, well, that’s their look-out,” said Beatrice, in a reflective tone that sounded immense relief in Anthony’s agitated ears. “I’m only thinking of Silvester. If she’s a decent girl.”

Anthony could afford to be generous.

“Oh, she’s the gentlest thing that ever happened. Tiny. Half a head shorter than he. They’ll make a funny couple. But she was so awfully in earnest over her art—this thing that’s happened to her is a tragedy—but I know what you’re thinking of. I’m sure she couldn’t let him down.”

“If she did,” said Beatrice, “with one of the best men God ever created to look after her, she’d deserve to be struck by lightning.”

Anthony’s quick brain worked towards a position of security.

“I’m sure I mentioned her at least once to you,” he said quite truthfully. “When I told you about the Professor’s party last year, at the Scoppio del Carro.”

She smiled. “I meet so many people in the course of a year that you can’t expect me to remember those I only hear of.” She looked into the fire. “Anyhow,” she said at last, “I’m delighted—I was so afraid—one never knows—I’m delighted to learn that my dear Silvester hasn’t made a fool of himself.”

At that moment entered their host, golf-clad, beaming.

“My God! You must come and see them. Pink as the dawn—each a little rose-tinted Aurora. The poetry of suction.”

“What’s the man talking about?” asked Beatrice.

“Pigs,” cried Cornelius, radiantly vehement.

They went out to the Carlton-Ritz sty, where lay the black Berkshire sow with the complacent smile of the millionaire mother and the spoilt piglets of fortune breakfasting voraciously.

Anthony escaped as soon as he could to the solitude of his bedroom, where he walked about in a dizzy sort of way, with his hands over his eyes. A young man who had promised an elfin lady a palace and a throne of gold and a muster of peacocks, he had a lot to think about.

And he could not understand why it hurt like the devil to think of Perella as a married woman.

CHAPTER XIII

MARCH came. There were blizzards in New York and violets in Tuscany. Beatrice had not stayed so long in the Ellison house for years. She began to regard it as a sedate and not too modern sepulchre. The climate of New York had never agreed with her. She was nervous, depressed, drained of vitality. A slight, feverish cold keeping her in bed for a few days necessitated the attendance of her doctor. He advised her to get out of the nerve-racking place as quickly as possible, and go and rest among her spring flowers in Fiesole. No rushing across the ocean in Super-Gigantics for hectic weeks in London and Paris, before settling down; but she must take a comfortable boat by the Southern route to Genoa, whence she must head straight for Florence. In his quick, American way he proposed to instruct Fargus there and then to make the necessary arrangements. . . .

The first recurrent blast of winter had sent Cornelius shivering across the Atlantic. He had urged her companionship, as they had made an almost unconscious friendly pact to go backwards and forwards together. He had been a trifle impatient, knowing the pikestaff-plain reason of her lingering. Of course he gave her no notion of his knowledge. She was not a woman whose confidence even so close a friend as Cornelius Adams could dare to force. He left her with an injured air, protesting his rough luck at being compelled, after all these years, to make the abominable voyage alone. She professed to pity him in his desperate plight, and laughed at him without mercy. For the first time he saw the young man, Anthony Blake, through jaundiced spectacles.

Beatrice recovered from her cold and still hesitated. The blizzard turned out to be a fortnight's freak. Mild weather returned, and there were, statistically, more violets in New York than in Tuscany. A dear childhood's friend, coming to visit her, cried: "My dear, you're looking like nothing on earth; you're worn-out. You must get away for a change." Whereupon, fear entering into her soul, she denied the door to Anthony for a couple of days. Then the Fates, the great Dramatists, who know the value of cumulative effect, contrived a cable informing her that the Florence garage and a wing of the villa had been burned down. From that moment, until the steamer slowly moved away from the quay, Fargus's existence had less relation to life than to a nightmare.

On the day of her decision Anthony was summoned to dinner. There was no help for it. The time had come at last. Back to her burning house she must

go.

"I suppose you must," said he helplessly. "I've been dreading the inevitable, as I've told you."

He stood, a very genuine picture of misery.

"Will it make such a lot of difference to you?"

"I've lived for nine months by you and through you, and I can't imagine what life will be like when you're not there to colour it. I don't want to be absurd and say insincere things. . . . I know that you won't forget me when you're away and that you know I won't forget you . . . but I can't say I'll be happy here all alone. I shan't be. I'll be miserable."

"And so shall I," sighed Beatrice.

"Really?"

"Oh, my dear, don't you know?"

The break in her voice was one of those trivial things on which the Fates rely in their sardonic bedevilment of human destinies. She gleamed near him in an old gold gown, very beautiful, desirous, alluring. The close embrace in which they stood for some moments was a matter of common instinct. Passion spoke mutely in the joined lips.

She freed herself from him half reluctantly, and they looked at each other in the shy, glad shame of mutual confession. The delicate idyll of daily kissing had glowed into a sudden splendour.

She said, turning idly to a silver box, and taking from it a cigarette which she threw back again:

"That makes it all the more difficult, doesn't it?"

He sprang forward. "I'm sorry—I——"

She faced him, smiling. "Why?"

He took her in his arms again, and kissed her. She murmured:

"Sorry now?"

"Not a bit," said he.

Baratelli, the Florentine major-domo, announced dinner. They followed him, hand in hand. She felt very young and radiantly happy. They sat down in the discreetly lit, old-fashioned, oak-panelled dining-room, she at the head of the table, he at her side. It was delightful to have him there in his new quality of declared lover; but the formal ministrations of Baratelli and the footman were provokingly superfluous. At the back of her mind swam lunatic regret that they were not all alone together in some little far-away inn, so that they could whisper lover-wise and drink out of the same glass, as she had read of in

Gallic romance.

Yet they pledged each other in an old and true champagne, of which a good stock still lay deep and inviolable in the Ellison cellars, and, in spite of public ceremonial, dined in the happy comfort of intimacy.

It was only later, when they talked in her own little boudoir, off the main drawing-room, the one room which she had redeemed from Ellison austerity, that the Seven Devils of Civilized Convention stalked in between them, and had their say. And to two honest, honourable, and sensitive people, they said it very plainly indeed.

"So you see, my belovedest dear," cried Anthony, at last, "that we're up against it."

Of course they were. Romance bade them marry out of hand, and lead blissful lives defiant of an ironical world. But there was a logical fallacy in the counsel. It took the bliss for granted. Also, the same world which would point deriding fingers was a pleasant one to live in—the only one they knew. A sensuous, practically desert island, where they could live wrapped up in each other for an indefinite time, was, with the wealth at her command, a matter of practical attainment; but it did not appeal to either of them. They must live in stimulating touch with humanity. And they must be reasonably happy.

At one moment of the talk conducted by the aforesaid Seven Devils, she said weakly:

"I wonder whether it would really matter?"

He proved to her that it would. Even though she might be valiant enough to take a husband on whom the world looked askance, as a penniless adventurer living on his wife's money and trying to save his face by dabbling in amateur art, and to stand, at first vehement in his defence, yet the time would come when the situation would get on her nerves. All the more so when her husband, as far as he knew himself, was the least fortune-hunting rotter in the world—a man who, though he didn't gas about them, had his clean ideals of life, his ambitions and his personal dignity. If he accepted the situation, he would chafe, for all his love for her; and she would know that he chafed. She was offered the dilemma: to be conscious of her husband either as a happy rotter or a proud man crushed by the intolerable.

It took them some time to develop this analysis.

"Money's a curse," she cried.

"And yet, my dear, if you—in a way through money—hadn't been my lady Paramount of Florence and Dinard, how should I have had the opportunity of falling in love with you?"

She agreed. The whole thing was impossible. Yet it was actual. She felt tired.

“Don’t let’s talk any more to-night. Come and sit by me.”

She lay in a great arm-chair. He threw himself on the ground by her knees. Soon his head rested on them. Her hands caressed his hair. She loved him with all the folly of full womanhood. She knew in him a man, honourable and sensitive, commanding her respect and her admiration. At last she broke a long, sweet silence.

“Oh, my dear, how are we going to get out of this dreadful quandary? I want you with me, Anthony, so much. . . . You don’t know how I want you.”

Her voice trailed off into the throb of a whisper. With a sudden movement, she clasped his head and drew it to her bosom. The boy, lost in her love and her perfume and her loveliness, threw his arms around her, and clasped her tight.

“My God! I want you a million times more.”

At the back of swooning senses she realized the moment of danger and madness. She held his face away with both her hands.

“We can’t . . . I can’t . . . I love you so . . . there’s a way out . . . a secret marriage. No one need ever know . . . until we choose.” She still held him and passed her fingers over his eyes. “This can’t go on. It’s impossible for both of us.” She kissed him hurriedly, and glided out of her chair and stood shivering.

He sprang to his feet; she waved him off.

“No, no, my dear. The primitive isn’t the way of happiness.”

He approached her with outstretched hands very tenderly. All within her reacted to him in a thrill of gratitude. She took his hands.

“Well?”

“It’s the solution,” said he.

It was in April that they parted, husband and wife, when the great liner slowly carried her away. She must go and attend to her burned-down house and face the expectant European world, and he must stay behind and earn his living as a decent man with the hope of success. Work lay before him in a shimmering vista. By it he must gain name, position, independence, so that he could, with head held high, claim, or remarry in the eyes of the world, the exquisite woman that was his wife. In the meantime, they had arranged—for there are limits to the repression of human nature—that he should repeat the last year’s visit to Dinard. They lamented sore over the sale of the Ipolysag

shooting-box. For then there would have been no need of Dinard and its necessarily idiotic complications.

Beatrice sailed away, torn with longing, yet rejoicing in the strength that kept the betraying tears from her eyes as she waved him farewell from the steamer's deck. The parting was imperative. Things could not be otherwise. The position of an idle young man, living on a rich woman's money, and an older woman's at that—there came a hateful twinge—was not that of the husband whom a woman could adoringly respect. As it was, save for the sweet and secret bond, they were two independent human beings, each honourable in the other's eyes, whose private emotional life had nothing to do with the world at large. She felt sure that the secret would be kept. Apart from impersonal officials, the only two people who shared it were Fargus and Dennever, her confidential maid. Fargus must know, for his was the administration of a vast estate, from the watching and skilled manipulation of securities, to the detail of an imperfect boiler in one of her establishments. He was a dry, elderly, devoted man who had known no other service than her husband's, and had grown grey in hers. Whithersoever he accompanied her, he had his own quarters in the house, and lived his own bachelor life on a salary of which he could only spend the half. The Ellison affairs were his affairs, the reason of his existence. He had to know of the marriage. Only by a few adust words did he manifest to Beatrice the glow in his heart when he learned that there were no marriage settlements and no financial transactions whatever between his worshipped client—for in some such way did he regard his employer—and the young man whom she had married.

And Dennever, from English yeoman stock, who had been with her for eighteen years, except for a disastrous two years' matrimonial interval, was equally devoted. In her elderly ancillary way she surrendered to the spell of Anthony, who had the gift, at once careless and shrewd, of making himself adored. By the end of the short and camouflaged honeymoon on the coast of Florida, she was his mother and his aunt and his servant and his slave. All of which delighted Beatrice exceedingly, for the looks of Dennever, in spite of matrimonial adventure, were not prepossessing.

Thus Beatrice faced the world, happy in the knowledge that her secret was hidden inviolably in the hearts of the two people whom it was imperative that she should take into her confidence.

In Florence she found that the garage and only a bit of the servants' quarters had been destroyed. Already, owing to the vigilance of Fargus, repairs were in progress. There was nothing to worry about.

She went through her spacious rooms, her own creations, and stood by the wide-flung windows, breathing in the perfume of pines and all the spring, and looking away down below at the dreamy domes and towers of Florence, and wondered how she could have lived these many months in the fusty old New York house, where everything belonged to a crumbling and meaningless past, and in which there was nothing of herself. But here, in this delicious spaciousness, in this atmosphere of exquisite colours and shapes and curves, of startling figures of marble, of warmly yet gaily painted bits of furniture, of cool plaques of the della Robbias, in shining white and blue and yellow—here she recognized the reflection of that of herself which had ever craved the joy and the freshness and the spirituality of life. She sat deliberately in a particular spot in the drawing-room where, through the window, could be seen a replica of the blue Tuscan background of hundreds of Quattrocento painters. That moment alone was worth living for. In her happy round she came, in the cool morning-room, upon a subject picture of the school of Pinturicchio. Silvester had helped her to buy it, flattening out the dealer by an authoritative denial of its Pinturicchio authenticity. But it was delightful all the same, so gay, so brave, with its youths in short jackets and perkily feathered caps, and tight vermilion hose reaching high above the waist. It was a joyous thing. And there, in gallant attitude, one arm outstretched, the other offering his purse to a kneeling bearded beggar, stood a youth, the very image of Anthony. She laughed happily. With just such an air and a grace would he give largesse. . . .

There had been a day in Florida when, a longish walk having unexpectedly tired her, he had hired a car from a wayside garage to take her back. The man's charge at the end of the short journey had aroused her indignation; for, woman of boundless wealth though she was, she had kept the sense of values of her none too opulent girlhood, and had many a time checked Anthony's impulsive extravagance; but Anthony, with just such an air and a grace, had waved her away and handed the man the seemingly uncounted bills, without discussion.

Yes, there was Anthony. And she was a very happy woman. If he could be there now, by her side, in the midst of this dear beauty, in the midst of this emanation from her spiritual self, she would faint from happiness too intolerable for woman. . . . One can't have everything; she had much—oh, so much! . . . Instead of sighing, let her praise the God of Bounty. And there was Dinard to look forward to.

Every one knew that Mrs. Ellison had arrived in Florence. There was a telephonic chorus of welcome. Old friends claimed her. Cornelius Adams came the morning after her arrival and sat, unheralded, figuratively on her doorstep, until it should be her good pleasure to descend. She swept out to him on the loggia, fresh as the spring day.

"My God!" said he, "what has happened to you?"

She started back. "Why? What? It's a beast of a motor-journey from Genoa, but I can't look as tired as all that!"

"Tired? You silly child, what have you been doing with yourself? You look eighteen."

She laughed at the exceedingly pleasant announcement and, for a moment, looked hesitatingly into his honest face. Here was a loyal friend who, not only might be very useful, but also might be hurt at being left in ignorance.

"Perhaps I've been bathing in the Fountain of Romance," she said.

His shrewd eyes twinkled. "The devil you have! And where's the other bather?"

"In New York, poor fellow. . . . If you tell me I've been a fool I'll never speak to you again. Besides, you helped it along."

"Let me hear all about it."

So he heard and commended the pair for their sanity, and departed wishing them well. Away from her, he may have shaken a wise and dubious and perhaps also a sad head. What did the Frenchman say? "There are many good marriages but no delicious ones." He would not recommend a good marriage such as his own, with a wife two thousand miles away. His adored Beatrice deserved more than a taste of the delicious. However—he shrugged tolerant shoulders—when two people marry, the conduct of their lives is their own very particular and private affair. And he was very fond of Anthony, and was gratified by the boy's determination to make good before coming forward as the husband of Beatrice. All the same, women were mysterious beings.

Amid the clash of telephone wires humming with welcomes, she managed to put a clear call through to the apartment in the Viale Milton. Before anyone else must she see her dear Silvester and his bride. But the answer came that the Commendatore and the Signora were away on their travels, God knew whither. They had taken a *vapore* at Naples and all their letters were sent to a Steamship Company. Would the Signora wait until she found the name and address?

She waited, rang off and contemplated Silvester's felicitous Odyssey with just a little bit of a pang. She remembered the foolish talk with Anthony on the stormy day at Dinard. He for the glamour of Pacific Islands; she for the spirit-lashing buffeting of the North seas. Any kind of old ship on any kind of old sea would be heaven to her now, so long as they two could be together, fearlessly in the eyes of the world. She wrote to Silvester.

"Most fortunate and enviable of mortals," she began, and continued in an

allusive strain which, when he received the letter at Saragossa, set him greatly wondering. He did not show it to Perella, although he tried to share with her every thought he could think; for he was a delicate-minded man, and the letter seemed to contain some baffling soul-secret of a woman, meant for him alone, and therefore sacred. So he tore it up and put the small pieces in his jacket pocket, and, Perella and himself making a short railway journey that afternoon, he seized an opportunity when she was not looking, and scattered them through the carriage window.

Beatrice confessed her folly most charmingly and tenderly to Anthony; and, as there was nothing else to do, gave herself up, for the season, to the pleasant life of Florence.

CHAPTER XIV

BEATRICE'S first impression of Perella was that of a tongue of flame flickering for a second in the curtained doorway of the drawing-room. She was clad in an evening frock of vivid tangerine, and one single diamond flashed pendent on her bosom. A chance light caught her great dark eyes, which illuminated an oval sensitive face.

Beatrice, who had risen at Baratelli's announcement, was checked in her advance by the shock of unimagined beauty. She had thought of Perella as a little artist-girl of no account, whose pathetic adventure had led her elderly friend into matrimony—and, lo, here was she confronted with a will-o'-the-wisp, a luminous dragon-fly, a tiny fairy queen of a thing. She ought to have borne a wand with a pale green star on the top of it. It was an appreciable moment before she became conscious of the bald head and smiling face of the little Professor.

She greeted the guests with outstretched arms.

"My dear, I am so glad to have met you at last. You must know that your husband is one of my oldest and dearest friends."

This was in early July, the day after the return to Florence of the errant pair. They had traversed Spain and France in a leisurely way, and had spent a few weeks in London. Beatrice had called at the Viale Milton, and, not finding them at home, had bidden them to dinner with Cornelius Adams.

She noticed that Perella wore a silk bandage round her right wrist, and gave her left hand in greeting. Perella looked up at her shyly.

"I know. I've heard so much about you, Mrs. Ellison."

Beatrice turned to Silvester, who wrung and kissed her hands.

"You ought to be the happiest of men."

"I am. Indeed I am, my dear Beatrice," he cried, all aglow. "Ask Perella."

Perella met Beatrice's humorously questioning eyes, and a flush came into her cheeks.

"I do my best to make him so."

Cornelius Adams, bluff, florid, was announced, coming in on their heels. His, too, was the first revelation of Perella. He whispered to his hostess:

"Lucky old devil. She's fallen from the sky."

It had been a day of dismal rain, and the outside air was rude and moist. They dined, with curtains cosily drawn, in the octagonal antechamber of the great dining-room, at a round table lit with shaded lights. The walls were soothingly tapestried.

The men ate happily; talked of travel, of art, of manners and customs, of politics. The women joined in the easy flow of conversation; but, whereas the men had apparently no thoughts underlying the discussion, the two women were conscious of a mutual scrutiny. Beatrice observed Perella with ever growing and disconcerting interest. The girl had some quality of the unseizable. At one moment she gave the impression of a bit of flotsam on the waves of chance and, at the next, she would flash a gleam of lambent wit which placed her as a woman of the world, intelligent, self-possessed. Silvester adored her, beyond question. Something far stronger than his old-fashioned pernickety courtesy compelled his eternal reference to her in confirmation of his statements and opinions. He had found something beyond the physical, beyond the charm which a young and dutiful woman can bring into an elderly man's life. He gave the impression of a man who had found a spiritual essence towards which he had been groping through many lonely years. Beatrice, with an older woman's sigh, envied her youth and fragile daintiness. The silk bandage round the dropped wrist concealed an appliance that enabled her to make a little use of fingers. Even lame manipulation of knife and fork had a dainty grace. . . . Beatrice found herself hanging on her words, trying to appraise her by them, to discover whether she was an enigma or not, and, if so, what was the solution.

Silvester spoke of things domestic. One reason for their long tarrying was the befitting re-arrangement of the home in the Viale Milton. He had taken over the lease of the adjoining flat; he had moved something more immovable than Heaven and Earth, that is, an Italian landlord, to allow him to fit the place with two bathrooms, the only two, he believed, in the whole Viale Milton. He had torn down partition walls; he had re-partitioned other rooms for servants' bedrooms. He had improved the central heating. His good architect friend Grisi's hair had grown white during the struggle.

"And all for me," said Perella, "who take up no space whatever, and could be quite happy strung up in a cage in the vestibule. He spoils me"—she turned to her hostess—"I've lived *sur la branche* all my life, and I don't know what to do with so many rooms."

Beatrice laughed. "You can furnish them."

"Silvester says my idea of furnishing a room is one uncomfortable chair, a bit of colour in a cushion, and a picture. I've had a sort of Topsy-like bringing-up. To this day I don't know how many pairs of sheets ought to go to a well-

conducted bed. I'm afraid he'll have a lot to put up with."

"Don't you believe her," cried Silvester. "She's a marvel. There'll be two rooms furnished by her entirely from Spain. They'll be gems."

"Look at all the shoddy stuff I should have bought, if it hadn't been for you."

"That's a different matter, my dear," said Silvester gently. "A question of expertism. But you never wished to buy a thing that wasn't in itself beautiful."

"And it nearly broke his heart," said Perella with a happy laugh, "when he had to tell me that a thing I fell in love with had been turned out the week before last from a factory in Toledo."

"The destruction of illusions is the terrible side of my profession," said Silvester.

"But he has his own way of doing it," said Perella.

After dinner Beatrice left the men to themselves, and took Perella into the drawing-room, spacious and exquisite in its subdued light, with here and there in corners the mysterious gleam of statuary.

"I've so often wondered what you were like," she said.

"I too," said Perella. "But then people have described you to me—and ——"

"And what?"

"Their descriptions have been so lame and stupid. It's my way to picture things, and I couldn't picture you—not as you are."

"What did you think I was like?" Beatrice asked, amused.

"I thought—do forgive me—but I thought you were older."

"White hair neatly piled up *à l'américaine*, and rimless pince-nez, and plump little hands?"

"I don't know," said Perella; "but I never dreamed you were so young and beautiful."

"May I return the compliment, my dear?" said Beatrice.

The women's eyes met and held the gaze for a fraction of a second, and each felt her own little pang of suspicion and surmise. Between their eyes flitted the vague, shadowy shape of Anthony.

In an instant Beatrice recovered balance, and she spoke of Silvester, his gentleness, his sympathy, his loyalty to ideals.

"You needn't tell me," said Perella half-wistfully. "I know only too well. I suppose you know all about it, Mrs. Ellison?"

"Indeed I don't."

Perella lifted her right arm. "I was down and out, you see. My means of livelihood gone. It was the only thing I could do—and I loved it! I cried my eyes out over it—never to hold a brush again seemed the end of all things. . . . And then he was so perfectly wonderful——"

"And the romance began," said Beatrice, with a smile.

"And goes on," said Perella.

A footman brought in coffee and liqueurs and cigarettes. When he had gone, Beatrice said, after a preliminary puff or two of smoke:

"We have a friend in common, I believe. Anthony Blake."

Perella started. "Why, yes. We lived in the same Pension. That's how I got to hear of you in the first place."

Beatrice leaned back lazily in her chair, with an ironical smile.

"Did he give you the impression that I was old and frumpy?"

"Oh, no," Perella protested, with a subconscious sense of mendacity. "He always said you were charming. I didn't see much of him," she lied hurriedly. "I was busy all day with my copying, and he had his work to do, and knew so many people here."

"Did you like him?"

Perella hated the clamp of ice that gripped her heart. But she smiled bravely.

"Of course I liked him. Everybody did. He was so gay. He went to America. Do you know how he's getting on?"

"Very well, I think. Mr. Adams has been a very good friend to him."

"I'm glad," said Perella demurely.

The men came in. The talk was impersonal and intelligent.

Bidding good-bye to Perella, Beatrice wished her good luck with her housekeeping. Perella laughed.

"Once I had a dreadful dream that I was supposed to conduct the Queen's Hall Orchestra, and I scarcely knew a note of music. I just remember lifting up my baton. It was awful. I feel like that now."

"She needn't," said Silvester, in his funny little precise way. "If called upon, she could lead an army into battle."

Cornelius Adams laughed his great laugh, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"And bring off the victory. I'm sure of it. Good night, Mrs. Gayton. Take

my advice. Refuse to believe he has ever grown up, treat him kindly, and he'll eat out of your hand."

Beatrice, alone, clapped her hands before her eyes, and gave herself up to tormenting wonder. How could Anthony and Perella, thrown together in the promiscuity of a small pension, have failed to be attracted one to the other? She knew her Anthony, sensitively responsive to every current of beauty and delight. How had he not yielded to her extraordinary fascination? Yet he had spoken of her only in terms of casual commendation that were almost echoed by Perella herself. She had no reason to consider the subtle added charm with which six months of a new and serene life had invested Perella. The half-wild, penny-counting waif, thrown hither and thither about the world, badly-fed, over-strained, cheaply and flimsily clad, whose main attraction lay in her pathetic fragility, and the unconscious appeal for kindness in her great eyes, had developed, under fresh conditions, into a ripe woman of curious beauty. For the first time in her existence she had been surrounded by all the little luxuries of life. Of no great wealth, Silvester was yet a man of reasonable fortune. His personal expenditure during the long years, having been that of the modest scholar and gentleman, he had saved automatically. Before his marriage he had made some inquiry into his financial affairs, and the result had afforded him childish delight. On Perella he could lavish all that the world could reasonably hold of luxury. So the physically delicate plant that was Perella found itself under glass, tended with loving care, and bloomed into exquisite flower.

All this Beatrice, wondering, could not know. She could not know that Anthony had never dreamed of her as she had entered the drawing-room that night, a tongue of flame; that the peach-bloom of her face was a phenomenon of a new Perella; that Anthony had never seen her in a Paris gown with a diamond pendant gleaming on her warm neck. . . .

And the other amazing side of the problem was that she had frequented Anthony for months without giving him a sentimental thought. Her Anthony, over whom all the women in Dinard had done their best to make fools of themselves! Just as she herself had done. She shrugged her shoulders. *Eh bien! Tant mieux.* What was all her worry about? She laughed. Yet she could not but ascribe to Perella a certain obtuseness, a lack of fine womanly emotion, that had rendered her indifferent to Anthony, and had thrown her into the arms of the delightful, but peculiarly unromantic Silvester. In a humorous way she was idiotically angry with her for not having fallen in love with Anthony.

And then came the warm gush of pride which she nursed in her heart till she fell happily asleep. Wasn't all this a proof of Anthony's love?

Perella rested her head against her husband's shoulder as they drove home in the old motor-car that had waited for her, it seemed infinite ages ago, with a purple handkerchief spread over the wheel, outside the Uffizi.

"Tired, dear?"

"A little."

"You can have a good month's rest, at any rate."

"Oh, it's not the travelling. I love it."

He put his arm round her.

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know. Loss of magnetism, perhaps."

"Didn't you like Mrs. Ellison?" he asked, in a voice of some concern.

She gave a little reassuring laugh.

"Of course. She is beautiful and charming and as kind as can be. But there's something. . . . One must learn to live up to her. Oh, not to her wealth," she added quickly. "That would be silly and snobbish. But to her personality." She took his hand and measured off the nail of his little finger. "Without knowing it she makes one feel that high."

His arm tightened round her. "You aren't much bigger," he laughed. "Still, seriously speaking, Beatrice would be dreadfully hurt—she's so straight and simple—if she thought——"

"Oh, no," Perella protested. "It's nothing to do with her. It's me."

"Yet you went through all sorts of strange Paris and London drawing-rooms without turning a hair."

"I was there as the wife of the great Professor Gayton, and I was so proud that I didn't care a row of beans."

"And to-night?" he asked gently. "Where did the difference come in?" He drew her close to him, and, without waiting for a reply—"Well, well, I think I see," he said. "It's only because Beatrice Ellison is such a dear friend that she wanted to make sure that your old husband was quite happy, and of course you felt the reaction. But she's convinced now, bless her heart—you'll find her the most lovable of women. Oh, no! I've never been in love with her."

"Why?" she whispered idly.

"The gods were good, and kept me heart-whole for you."

"Oh, the dear, silly gods!" said Perella.

She lay awake far into the night, conscience-pricked by ever so little a sin

of disingenuousness. She had let Silvester remain happy in his diagnosis of her fatigue. But how could she tell him of his error? It was a grotesque impossibility. She had never imagined a Mrs. Ellison so radiant, so compelling. Before her she had shrivelled into nothingness. Why should Anthony have given her a thought when this commanding lady had bidden him follow? "Quite old," had Anthony reported her; and the neat white hair and plump hands of Beatrice's sally had literally been part of her conception. Why had he persisted in the maintenance of this impression? There could be only one answer. She flamed in discomfort of soul. Mrs. Ellison was young; young enough, at least, for all that mattered; when one possessed that regal beauty and that significance of personality, what were a few years more or less?

Everything intuitive, instinctive in her womanhood, showed her Anthony's inevitable path. To feel bitterly towards him or to the woman who had taken him from her were disloyalty to the husband to whom she owed all the beauty and comfort and perhaps the mere continuance of her life.

She rose, entered the adjoining room, and turned on the switch of a shaded lamp. Silvester was fast asleep. A glint of light fell upon the bald patch of his head. She paused irresolute. It would be silly to wake him—to tell him what? That she was tired? That she was frightened? That she needed reassurance that he alone of men filled her soul's horizon? That would mean confession of the poor little pitiful story. . . . To what end? . . . Were he awake she could plead mere sleeplessness and a pretty desire for companionship. But Silvester, ever dogged by the horror of insomnia, was sunk in the slumber of a child. Noiselessly she returned, and went back to bed. The little wifely act, however, soothed her nerves, and, before she fell asleep, she went through the tale as she had done a hundred times before, of Silvester's goodness and his wonder.

Yet, how they had eventually come together she could scarcely ever determine. For a long time after the tragic announcement of her painter's doom, she had stayed on in this sweet and fragrant place. She had been blown thither like a fallen leaf, and, like a leaf she had felt powerless to move of her own volition.

"To-morrow I must really go back to the Pension Toselli," she would declare.

And Silvester, in his primly affectionate way, would find some good reason for her staying on for another week. There was the massage of her wrist, which could not possibly be administered in the confined precincts of the Pension Toselli. There was the verification of a hundred statements marked in blue pencil on Professor Brabiani's typescript, which could easily be made in his own library by a Perella pining for occupation. There was his own dreaded novelty of loneliness when she should depart. . . .

"But why should you be keeping me in all this luxury?" she would protest.

"Haven't I told you how much I owed to your father?"

And once, in counter to such a reply, she said, with a little ironical curl of her lips:

"I don't believe you. Father was a wonderful man—but he wasn't an altruist doing good actions for the sake of abstract goodness. You are. You're just keeping me here because you think I can't earn my living any longer. You think you ought to adopt me. You would as soon think of throwing a baby, put on your doorstep, out of window, as of letting me go back and earn my living. But I can earn my living. I'll learn to paint with my left hand. There have been people who painted with their toes. Haven't you told me of the famous armless copyist of Antwerp? Or I can teach. Or I can get a job as a secretary. I can correct anybody's faults in English, French and Italian. And I've got a strong left hand that's got to do what it's told."

"And supposing I tell that strong left hand," said Silvester, taking hold of it, "that it's got to stay here and be my strong right hand?"

Even then—searching her memory—she had no idea of the diffident little man's purpose.

"If it comes to that, dear Professor," she said, with a laugh, "I'd work my fingers to the bone for you."

He sighed, in what she thought at the time was rather a silly way.

The light had broken on her very gradually. She had gone through ordeals that had centred her mind on her own little suffering and chance-driven self. There had been Anthony, the gay lover who had ridden away with her heart; there had been brave struggle and the painful replacement of a new organ; there had been the ecstatic surrender to the souls of the old painters who saw God, and proclaimed Him in terms of Immortal Beauty. And then had come the axe of destiny, cutting her off from her communion with these celestial ones. . . .

It was not only a shattered arm that had kept her invalid and fevered for all those weeks in the calm, Primitive-hung bedroom of the Viale Milton.

A wraith of a fragment of humanity had arisen from the sick-bed. Only half her faculties had been able to cope with the newly presented actualities of life. . . .

How the knowledge came, stealing through her being, like far-off music, at first dimly heard, and then coming nearer and nearer, she could not tell. It was all so sweet and so delicate. First the John Annaway myth faded away into nothingness. It was too outrageous for a twentieth-century child to swallow.

And then, intelligent sceptic, she began to doubt the abstract altruism of her gentle protector. But how and when set in the warm current of her blood whenever he approached, she did not know. All she remembered was, that something deliciously ironical flickered within her when he continued to invent irrational reasons for her staying in the Viale Milton.

And then, of course, one day it all came out, and she was astonished to realize that she was not in the least surprised.

He had chanced upon her weeping over a futile effort to paint with her left hand. On his entrance into the room which he had assigned to her as studio and boudoir, she rose, dabbed her wet eyes hurriedly, and tried to smile. But he said:

"My child, you're crying. Good God! What for? I'd give my life to save you from shedding a tear."

He advanced with outstretched arms, and somehow the next thing she knew she was sobbing helplessly in his embrace, and he, equally helplessly, was patting her on the back.

"There, there, you've only got to say a little word, and you need never have a care, if I can help it, in the world again."

And of course, driven leaf that she was, she said the little word.

She adored him with all the fervour of veneration and gratitude; and therein was mingled terror lest she should fall below his pathetic conception of her worth. Had he not been the sweet and gentle soul that was Silvester Gayton, she would have gone forth bravely and faced an impossible world. But there was his kind arm protecting her from the abyss; and he had been markedly miserable of late, and now he proposed for himself a means of happiness. That he should want her was a lunatic affair of his own; that she should not accept, surrender, be to him what he desired, was past thought.

He took her to Betti's for dinner that evening, and ordered the oldest bottle of champagne in the cellar.

"I've half forgotten Life," he declared. "You've never seen it. We're going to see it together."

They finished half the bottle between them and went home exultant in a sense of the joy of living.

Perella remembered that engagement evening very tenderly. He had thrown off the burden of the years, and had left his scholarship in a lumber-room. He was young, eager, full of pretty and silly courtesies. The stool for her feet; the chair at the table behind her removed, lest she should be contaminated by the ungracious back of a chance Tedesco; the bunch of snowdrops from God

knows where which he had ordered to be placed before her under pain of his eternal anathema of Betti and all his food. . . .

And, after their marriage, this sweet and anxious courtesy had persisted through every hour of their travels. His attitude was that of the unrecorded lover of the princess in Hans Andersen's story, who might have said:

"My dear, I hope you're not inconvenienced by that terrible dried pea beneath the seven mattresses, which are all that this dreadful country can provide for you."

She had a personal maid; a skilled Italian girl who spoke English and French and, at first, seemed to have her being in a phantasmagoria of *lingerie* and toilette appliances. She also looked after Silvester's clothes.

One day Perella said to her husband, in despair:

"For God's sake, let me do something for you! Let me mend your socks. That I really can do."

"Socks, my dear?" he queried, with a pucker of the brow. "I've not worn darned socks for years. I buy the very cheapest I can, and whenever I see a hole in the toe I throw them into the waste-paper basket."

"You'll never do that again as long as you live," said Perella.

Sensitive and adaptive, she attuned herself to the new conditions. She learned, or, more rightly, invented many tricks of wifely service, at which he never ceased to marvel. He proclaimed himself an unworthy sultan.

She had been happy, free of care, her alert spirit ever eager to catch whatever conditions of beauty, of poignancy, of laughter, were afforded by their comfortable Odyssey.

"I shall never accustom myself to it," he said one day. "It'll be a perpetual wonder."

"What?" she laughed.

"That God should have given me for a wife the most vibrating human instrument on His wonderful earth."

She had been happy, too, in all the sacred intimacies of their union. She had given freely, gratefully. How often, in the dead of night, awaking from some vague dream of desolation, had it not been comfort unspeakable to reach out a timid foot and find warm protecting contact!

She was so safe. She had a vague memory of something she had read in Shakespeare about a woman so sheltered by a man that the airs of heaven should not blow too roughly on her. She worshipped him. But for her own Puckish sense of humour, she would have made daily obeisance to him as to a divinity.

Then, their wandering over, when they entered the great world and she took her place, with proud little head held high, as the wife of a distinguished man, she adored him all the more for commanding her triumphant progress. She had been presented at Court; she had worn ostrich feathers in her hair and an embroidered train. She had heard a man, all over gold lace, whisper, “Enter Titania.” . . . All kinds of nightmare people with titles, and race-horses, and palaces, had shown her deference, welcome, affection. . . . Haddo Thwaites, the sculptor, whom she had met long ages ago at the Scoppio del Carro, gave a dinner-party for her in his Kensington Wonder House, where she met the simple great ones of the land. There she tasted the sweets of flattery, hailed as an artist, a personage, and a beautiful woman. Duncan Lowe, whom she had regarded breathlessly as the arch-priest of modern painting, carried her off, almost then and there, and painted her portrait in a fervour of inspiration for next year’s Salon.

Each day brought its anodyne for regrets or past sorrows. To the great artist, haunted by dreams of masterpieces, the dropped wrist would have been tragedy of tragedies; to the humble copyist, free from the care of earning her livelihood, and with her sense of beauty untouched, and her past experience a key to the mystery of the grand old technique, what did it matter? And then, besides, how could she feel pain in the atmosphere of devotion in which she had her being? Often the bright day passed without her remembering that, outside her charmed sphere, stood a man who had once made her suffer very terribly.

And now, somehow, for a few evening hours, the disturbing figure had broken through, and had smiled mockingly between herself and the radiant lady before whom, in spite of all her triumphs, she had seemed to fade into her little, old-time Perella insignificance. For the first time since her marriage in February she felt frightened. That was why instinct had impelled her to her husband’s room. The sight of him in the eternal pathos of sleep, loyal and trusting, had sent her fears packing, and she had gone back to bed, humbly glowing with the memories of his infinite goodness.

CHAPTER XV

THE next two years counted in the life of Beatrice Ellison as a period of dark romance and vivid multi-coloured pain.

That is where your conscientious dramatists, pinning their faith to an astute but nevertheless absurd dogmatist by the name of Aristotle, go desperately wrong. The dramas of life are not enacted in the same spot within the limit of twenty-four hours. The infernal intrigue (to use the word technically) goes on for an indefinite time, during which all kinds of human emotions bloom and fade, are reborn and die, or remain sempiternal, according to particular psychological conditions. And the average human is a sentimental fatalist. He accepts to-day's gloom and hopes for sunshine to-morrow; or he revels in the day's glory and retires to bed shrugging happy shoulders at the possibility of to-morrow's rain. And so his life goes on from week to week, from month to month, from year to year.

A clever young man with a facile pencil does not often spring into fame and affluence during a New York season. At the end of two years, Anthony was very much in the same position as when he married, save for one little difference. His position, for what it was worth, was, at any rate, secure. He had assured himself such a livelihood as had entitled him to move from the gloomy eyrie in the down-town hotel to a commodious studio-apartment in an agreeable quarter of the city. He took his pride seriously, and worked like a slave. He had a good firm line, a sense of character, an almost pedantic conscience for detail. Magazine art editors gave him as much work as he could get through. Without being startling, he was sound. They knew he would never let an author down; that he knew his world; that he wouldn't stick men in silk hats and cloth caps around the gaming-tables of Monte Carlo, or draw a Master of Foxhounds riding encouragingly ahead of a pack in full cry. Art editors, who have to take many things for granted, often receive nasty sarcastic letters which they don't like. "I'll be even with you yet," may run the legend beneath the picture of a square-jawed, clean-shaven man glowering at his enemy. The Art Editor thinks it's splendid, till he is snowed under with letters. "Hasn't the —— illustrator read the text? 'I'll be even with you yet,' he cried, '*tugging at his ragged beard*.' " Or again: "Why are these members of the Alpine Club ascending the Jungfrau on skis? I might understand if they wanted to jump down some thousands of feet; but then they'd carry them under their arms. And, even then, parachutes would be better." Yes, Art Editors have to deal

with nasty, sarcastic readers, and with artists of over-riotous imagination. So when they struck a safe man like Anthony, they were happy. If he had to illustrate a North-West story, he would not be content with inventing some kind of cross between a bull-dog and a jackal, but he would comb New York for models of genuine huskies and business-like sleighs.

But with all this, except in a tiny magazine world, he had achieved neither fame nor fortune. He had not made good, in the great sense. He had found a place in the comfortable ruck, where, as far as he could see, he was likely to remain.

At the end of two years, they were more or less at the point from which they had started. He had spent two summers in Dinard which had been to both of them, after the first fine raptures, sojourns of irritating despair. At first the stolen interviews had a semblance of guilt which invested them with an atmosphere of delicious comedy; afterwards they assumed an aspect that was ridiculously stern. To creep noiselessly through the passages of a rambling house in slippered feet might be romantic for a lover, but, to a husband, it became a pilgrimage of humiliation. Complaint, on his part, would have been the act of a creature destitute of reason. Beatrice flamed for acknowledgement of the honourable bond. If they were caught by guests, or servants, where would be her reputation? She had everything to lose and nothing to gain by the compact of secrecy. But the most commanding of women, accustomed to rule, a gracious queen, over all with whom she came in contact, surrendered to the pride of the young man whom she loved and whom she knew that she would cease to honour, although all the tendrils of passion would cling desperately around him, if he derogated in any degree from that pride of his manhood. There had been unromantic little quarrels.

In New York, where she made longer stays than ever, the situation was obviously absurd. Work claimed his days. The most lunatic convention of conventions claimed their nights. Only now and then in the confidential environment of Cornelius Adams's Long Island home could they pass a week-end in open conjugal serenity. Their genial host treated the matter as a radiant jest; for which, ungenerously, now and then, they tore him to pieces.

After the first spring, Beatrice abandoned Florence. She gave out that the climate no longer suited her. Indeed, one year she let the villa to friends, on the urgent counsel of Fargus who had an idea that, unless a house is kept instinct with the human spirit, it moulders into decay. So her life was spent between New York and Dinard with an odd week or two in Paris, which seemed little else than a phantasmagoria of clothes.

During this period she had felt bound to admit her daughter into her confidence. Emilia, having learned all that there was to be known of the Eugenics of maternity in Minnesota, had gone to London on a Woman's Congress, whose mission, according to Anthony, was to instruct England how to perpetuate her race, and there had suddenly been translated from the realm of theory to that of practice by an excellent young Conservative Member of Parliament whom she professed to adore. "To avoid the usual idiotic fuss," she wrote, "I thought it far more intelligent to get married first and tell you afterwards. . . . He's the perfect type of Englishman, legislates with a sweet serenity unknown in our country, dances well, has made a profound study of the divorce laws of the State of Nevada—when he was a barrister he went to Reno for a joke: there's something awesome and sacred in the English sense of humour—is an Authority on cookery, knows everybody, but loves nobody but me, and has the divinest house in Somersetshire, with walls plastered all over with ancestors. There's one who was Court Tale-bearer, or some such functionary, to Queen Elizabeth. He stood in front of it and said: 'Look at him—beef all through—and look at me. I'm the image of him. What's wrong with English Eugenics? Do you still call us poor fish?' I had to say I couldn't. . . . And, as I'm as healthy as a woman can be, I don't think I'll worry very much about sound progeny. That's what I've learned here about the difference between the two countries. America worries. England doesn't. . . . By the way my husband's name is Scrympe—Arbuthnot Scrympe—answers to the name of 'Butts.' He's a baronet 300 years old—something to do with Nova Scotia. Anyway, dear, when you write, address me as Lady Scrympe. . . . I'm awfully happy . . ." and so forth, and et cetera.

Whereupon, to Beatrice it had only seemed fair to acquaint Emilia with her own matrimonial adventure. Yet, when the letter had come, she sighed, feeling all of a sudden disconcertingly old. Emilia's gay reference to progeny gave cause for disturbance. Emilia a mother, she herself would be a grandmother—in reasonable course of nature, say, this time next year. Beautiful women with young husbands don't like to be grandmothers. Generations are apt to become confused, and few women appreciate confusion.

Emilia's cabled reply was characteristic. "So glad. Me for godmother," which shocked the more delicate mind of Beatrice, and tended to further confusion of the generations.

When she told Anthony about it, he said:

"Matre pulchra, filia not worthy to kiss your beautiful feet."

"She's modern, of course," said Beatrice weakly, "but she's rather a nice child in her way."

“Her way is not our way, Madonna *mia*, thank God,” he cried, debonair, always the lover.

What exactly he meant she didn’t know, but his graceful trick of speech and intonation always stood for music in her ears. Airily he dismissed Emilia from their joint contemplation. Their hours together, he declared, were for themselves alone.

They had ended the second summer of their concealed married life at Dinard, and, with frayed nerves and reckless disregard of appearances, had settled down for a spell in the flat off the Champs-Élysées. Gossip of the previous year had developed into scandalous talk. They had attempted the impossible. It was all very well, the first summer, for Beatrice Ellison to include in her house-party a talented young protégé of an artist, and get her friends to give him a start. It was rather odd to find the same young man installed at the villa next year in a house-party far more restricted, and obviously *persona gratissima* to his hostess. It was still more odd to find him again, lodged in the studio wing, with scarcely a house-party at all, and apparently disdaining the portrait drawing which had been the reason of his former existence there. As a matter of fact, the Dinard standard of payment had become absurd. He had brought over to Europe blocks of fiction in typescript for the illustration of which he received in dollars what he would have earned in francs as a Dinard portraitist. And, even had he desired to keep up the pretty illusion of Beatrice Ellison’s protégé, he hadn’t the time. American editors are human, kindly men, but they expect their artists to treat them too with human kindness; and when an artist fails them they fire him through a flood of tears. Anthony, now that he had found his vocation, had no intention of being fired. He boasted that he had abandoned his former careers on his own initiative. “This,” he had said to the senior partner of the firm of Blake, Bislett & Smith, “is the most soul-destroying sphere of human effort I can conceive, and I’m not coming back.” In the same clear spirit of independence he had thrown off the discipline of Halliday Armstrong, R.A., who was as kindly disposed towards him as an eminent architect could be towards a perfect-mannered and artistic pupil. Beneath his attractive flamboyancy ran full veins of determined character, in whose recognition Beatrice found justification for her unwise love.

“I’ve found my job, adorable one,” said he, “and I’m cleaving to it even as I cleave to you. I do it well. I know I do it well. I’m not going to leave it to do things that my conscience tells me I do badly. I’m not proud of my crayon portraits. Any poor, pallid, long-haired, half-starved wreck on the Riviera can

beat me at the game. Our dear friend, the Duchesse de Montfaucon, gave me the lesson of my life. I'm a secondary artist. I can interpret other fellows' ideas. I've none of my own. But I *can* draw. And I've got a sort of line of my own—individual—which I'm working at like hell. Nobody knows it, but it's coming. I feel it. Sometimes it gives me the creeps, like a man groping about for hidden treasure. If I were an ass I'd do the half-baked stuff right away. Here"—he scattered experimental drawings before her—"is enough to *épater le bourgeois*, but it's all wrong as yet. You must let me evolute my own way, *carissima*."

And she, knowing that he spoke in deep sincerity, flung over him the love and sympathy of her being. It would be folly for him to act otherwise. In the meantime his retirement from portrait painting at Dinard dissolved the ostensible reason of his living at the villa. So evil tongues wagged hard. Dinard became a hateful place; she vowed she would not return; she would sell the villa. It was idiotic to have so many houses. You were bound to inhabit them some time or the other, and therefore you were tied to a yearly round of two or three spots in a multi-spotted world. Fargus, given the order to sell, manifested delight. He himself disliked Dinard, and, during his leisure, opened his lungs to the vast spaciousness of the sands of Paramé. His Anglo-Saxon soul rebelled against the Teuton architecture of the house. He could also sell it at a million francs' profit, which appealed to him as the administrator of the Ellison fortune.

They breathed freely in the Paris flat. Besides the maid, Dennever, the other servants had been admitted to confidence. There was no further need of humiliating subterfuge. They promised themselves an unclouded month. In October Anthony must return to New York, where Beatrice would join him soon after in their detached and unsatisfactory existence. But this month in Paris out of season was their very own, like the week-ends on Long Island, precious for its uncensured intimacy. It happened, too, to be the golden end of a leaden summer. Dinard in pouring rain and blustering wind is primarily a lamentable place of sojourn, and secondarily a forcing-bed of gossip. It had been a dismal August. But now the sun shone benignly and the leaves in the Bois were still brave and green and the City of Light laughed its full.

There was a fair sprinkling of folk at the open-air luncheon-tables of the Pavillon d'Arménonville. The air outside a suddenly baked Paris was suave. Flecks of sunshine fell through the overhanging foliage on the table-cloth, and played pretty tricks of colour through the glasses half filled with wine. Anthony cast a hand.

“Look at these reflections. I’d give anything to be a painter. If I were, this is the sort of fairy bedevilment of light and colour I’d like to paint. And I’d like to paint you this very minute with that impudent splash of sunshine over your chin.”

She leaned forward.

“You’re a dear. It’s nice to be told that you still want to paint me.”

“My Beatrice,” he cried with his gay laugh, “hasn’t it been, isn’t it, and won’t it ever be my despair that I can’t paint you as you are?”

“But you have me, Anthony, for what I’m worth: so what, after all, is the good of a picture?”

“For posterity. Also, if I could paint you, you would know how my soul really sees you.”

The *maître d’hôtel* came up with the card. He took it with the air of a young prince.

“Don’t order the impossible,” she said.

“Madam,” said he, “you will eat whatever I choose to have set before you.”

Such, now and then, were his hours, when he could be freed from her unescapable, inevitable bounty, and fate and circumstances permitted him to play the ordinary husband’s part.

“We’ll have canteloupe melon and Marennes oysters and the first little illegitimate young partridges of the season, and some peaches which I see over there in cotton wool, and a half bottle of Montrachet and a bottle of 1911 Chambertin, and then we’ll see. My dear, it’s the simplest and most possible lunch in the world.”

She sighed happily, for he was in his dear, gay humour. On occasion, at Dinard, he had been fractious, irritable, rebellious. He had danced much with a girl of no particular value, the daughter of English Army people; and had obviously turned her head with his irresponsible talk. She was very young, and Beatrice had often looked at them with a hateful ache in her heart. And when she had reproached him, with all the tact of which she was mistress, he had turned on her in indignation. She must let him lead the life of a human being and a gentleman. Things were difficult enough already; but if jealousy crept in they would be intolerable. Where was her self-respect? How could she dream of setting up against herself this immature thing of skin and bone, with the knowledge of life of a Dorsetshire field-mouse, who was having the thinnest of times, poor child, in a resort of vanity where nobody wanted her? If there ever was an altruistic Galahad, rescuing maiden from the dragons of Boredom, Unhappiness and Despair, it was he, Anthony Blake. That awkward child! He

had been practising the merest Christian charity. And, in spite of horrible jealousy, she knew his indignation was sincere.

"But my dear," she had said, "what about the girl? Is it fair? She may be crying her eyes out for you."

"Oh, damn," he had replied. "I give it up. If you tell me I'm a sort of poison-flower to maidens, I'll agree for the sake of a peaceful life. But, after all, what the hell shall I do? I can't stick labels on me, front and back: 'I am the Deadly Nightshade. Avoid me'—can I, my dear? And, all said and done, I'm a modest, clean-living sort of chap, and your suggestion of me as the shatterer of young women's hearts rather shocks my notions of ordinary decency."

Whereupon she had said, yielding to his arms which stiffened around her convincingly:

"I believe you, my dear. But you are young and kind and brilliant, and the charm of you is your modesty. You give free-handed to women, and you don't realize what damfools women are. When you saw that colourless girl in her Eau-de-Nil frock—it was very badly made—why did you say: 'Charming. A spray of sea-foam'?"

"I wanted to please the poor child. I love giving pleasure to people."

"But she went away thinking herself Venus Anadyomene."

"You're right," he admitted. "Really, she looked like Dowsabella fallen naked into a pond and come up covered all over with duck-weed."

Thus, blank truth having prevailed, peace had been established. But in the older woman's heart there was always the cankerous dread of youth, and in the young man's mind the impatience of unreasonable suspicion. This was but a foolish instance among many during their two years of abnormal married life.

But here, in this frivolous, mellow garden with its rococo chalet and its gleam of napery and silver and the reds and yellows and blues of women's attire, and its tempered sunlight, she forgot Dinard, glad to have him incontestably her own. She loved the perfection of his hostship, the boyishness of his pleasure in receiving, after an expectant moment, her commendation of the melon which he had chosen. Like many Americans, she did not greatly care for European oysters, but to-day she would have swallowed whelks with rapture. During these years she had grown very gentle, somewhat fearfully deferential to him, which gave her an added and pathetic charm. Careless, like most men, he never guessed how she manœuvred to catch his smile and the light in his blue eyes. And to-day there were light and laughter in them enough for her heart's content.

"Strange, my Beatrice," said he, "how we love things transferred from their particular sphere. Aboard a steamer I don't take much stock of the ocean—

perhaps because I'm either miserable at leaving you, or longing to see you—but now these oysters bring back all the odour of brine of the Atlantic and its romance. Wonderful. Perhaps the soul has something to do with it. Just a touch of perfume, or a far-off chord of music awakens the soul—whereas the senses have got to be drenched. See how one can moralize an oyster. But——"

He stopped short, somewhat agape, aware that she was not listening to him or looking at him. He turned involuntarily to follow her glance over his shoulder—and there, entering at the gate of the shrub-encircled enclosure, welcomed by the uniformed *chasseur*, he saw Silvester Gayton and a transfiguration of the waif that once he had called his Perella.

A glance of recognition, and the Professor hastily skinned off his right-hand glove and hastened up, bowler hat in hand, followed more composedly by Perella. He had grown balder, and his hair was turning from grey to white; his little grizzled moustache was snow-white, but he was the same nervous, precise, little courteous man, peering kindly at the world through the thick lenses of his pince-nez, whom Anthony had met in Florence, as it seemed, many years ago. And his grey tweed suit, the coat tightly buttoned, was of the same old-fashioned cut. Both Beatrice and Anthony rose in greeting.

"My dear, what a wonderful pleasure." Silvester kissed her hand. "Mr. Blake, I think you used to know my wife."

"Indeed I did," said Anthony, and, for a second her left hand lay in his.

"I thought you were in New York," said Perella.

"That's my home, but Europe once a year is my holiday. But you—what are you doing here?"

"Holiday-making too. You don't suppose this"—she gave one of her remembered significant and ironical glances round—"is the Professor's usual environment?"

Silvester was saying: "Why have you abandoned Florence? Perella will tell you I get more and more heart-broken every year."

"He misses you dreadfully," said Perella.

"You must join us," said Anthony. "Why, of course. We're only beginning. Look." He snapped a finger to a *maître d'hôtel*, who hurried up. "Two places. It's done." He took Silvester's hat, gloves and neatly folded umbrella from him, and handed them to a myrmidon whom he waved away. Silvester turned to Perella.

"My dear, before such impetuosity it seems that we're helpless." Then to Beatrice. "May we?"

She reached out an affectionate hand, and laughed at him.

“My dear old Silvester, anything else would be impossible. When Anthony’s impetuous, he’s always right, Mrs. Gayton.”

She flashed a possessive glance at Perella. Chairs were brought. Anthony pushed Perella’s ceremoniously into position. She thanked him with an upturned glance. In the far-off days she had once said to him: “You’re a master of little courtesies.” She remembered the words now. He had not changed. Mrs. Ellison’s tribute to his impetuosity proved the same Anthony who had driven her home in a cab on that first night of his in Florence, and had covered her with the rough overcoat that had so comfortable a smell.

Anthony looked at her, exquisite in her ripe and miniature beauty set off by delicate apparel, and marvelled at the change. For some time it was only with the outer mechanical fringes of his mind that he could concern himself with his duties as host. She had lost the old wistfulness of the stray elf, but her fairy daintiness had stayed, and she had gained something of loveliness and repose which he could not gauge. A new expression—was it sadness, was it content, was it an ironical philosophy of knowledge?—had crept into her dark eyes. While commanding food and drink, he had the sensation of having been the fool of benighted fools, of being the most embarrassed, not to say tormented man that day in Paris.

Silvester, honest soul, gave himself up to the joy of meeting his adored Beatrice; poured into her interested ear the inner gossip of Florence; bewailed the absence of a Lady Paramount who might have solved so many social problems which, alas, had found their only solution in disaster. He himself had pined so often for the delicious peace of her loggia, and the joy of the serenity of her cool della Robbias. And Beatrice, bound to Silvester by ties of old and loyal affection, was held by his shy yet eager talk, so that, when Anthony’s task of host was done for the moment, he found a guest waiting, with a ghost of a smile, for him to make polite conversation.

“Your hand,” said he. “I was so distressed when I heard of it. But it was long after it happened.”

“I was lucky in falling upstairs instead of down,” said Perella.

A flush came into his cheek. His sensitiveness recognized her old gift of epigram.

“You must have gone through a dreadful time,” he said lamely. “After all, a painter’s right hand . . . well . . .” He shrugged, sympathetically.

“I’ve got mine in my husband,” said Perella.

“That’s changing ground from the literal to the figurative,” said he. “What about the joy of the working?”

“I’ve found greater joy outside painting,” she said, with a glance at

Silvester, “than I ever thought possible.”

Something primitive, which he realized the moment afterwards as horrible, impelled him to say in a low voice, looking down on his plate:

“I don’t believe that’s true.”

Without looking at her, for, ashamed, he dared not, he felt her stiffen. She made a pretence of eating. Presently she said:

“Paris is delicious at this time of year, isn’t it?”

“Fantastic. All English and Americans and cinemas. The theatres are all presenting their famous old play ‘Relâche’ except one, where, if you’re careful not to appear in evening dress, you can see ‘Le Maître des Forges.’ I had a maiden aunt who, when I was a little boy, told me it was the most beautiful play she had ever seen.”

Gathering courage and command of himself, he talked frivolously, until to his relief Beatrice turned from Silvester and, in her gracious way, took charge of Perella.

“I was so glad to see things of yours the other day in an American magazine—forgive me if I forget the name—but I never forget pictures,” said Silvester. “You’ve got a line of your own”—he made the curious gesture of the painter’s thumb—“quite original—very pleasing. May I tell you something? You young men think that an old fellow like me can’t possibly know anything about anything. It’s not a criticism of your work—which is really admirable—but a suggestion of a possible tendency.”

“My dear Professor,” cried Anthony, “I’m only too honoured and flattered that you should have condescended to look even once at my stuff—let alone twice.”

“Why twice?” Silvester asked sharply.

Anthony threw out a graceful hand.

“Would an eminent critic like you, sir, judge a drawing at a casual glance, as he turned over the leaves of a magazine? He must stop, and, thinking it worth judging, look a second time. That’s why I’m so flattered.” He turned towards him impulsively, so that his back was almost against Perella on his right. “It would be of the greatest value to me to hear what you have to say.”

Silvester took off his pince-nez, rubbed the sides of his nose where they pinched, and put them on again.

“Forgive me for saying it, but there’s just the danger of missing in a trick of line—perhaps a hard and virile line—the capture of beauty. I may be old-fashioned, but I’ve lived all my life by the gospel that Beauty is God made manifest. . . . Lately I’ve been greatly distressed by the product of a man on the

verge of genius. He has had to commemorate in sculpture a modern Francis of Assisi, loving all things great and small, and the result is the pretentious, ugly work of a swollen-headed ass with a filthy soul. I grant you," he continued, carried away by his thesis, "that things of beauty have come apparently out of human cesspools—we can count up twenty artists, poets, painters, etc., in so many seconds—yet below, there was always the pathetic glimmer of the divine. But nothing degradingly beastly has ever come out of the soul of a sweet and beautiful human being. In that way—by their fruits—you shall know them. The man who expresses in paint or marble his conception of woman as a foul beast must himself be a foul beast. Why the modern world, which rapturizes over outrages on man, woman, beauty and God, can't see it, is a mystery. There's no alternative to my proposition. . . . Now and then a clever young man thinks, without thinking or feeling, that he's going to be devilish clever and do the Great Ugly Thing. And so he finds the way of Damnation. He hasn't the sewer of a soul that can do it with the necessary conviction, and so he falls out by the way. . . . I'm sorry," said Silvester, looking around, for his three companions were silent, "but while trying to point a moral I find I've been over-adorning a tale. My dear Mr. Blake, what I set out to say was—with all diffidence—if you could soften your line a bit, your work would fall more in accordance with my old-fashioned, but I believe God-decreed, ideas of the sacredness of Beauty."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Anthony. "Indeed, that's what I'm trying to do. In my case, the hardness you detect is want of technique. Thank goodness I hate the ugly people just as much as you do."

"He is working most desperately hard at it," Beatrice added. "If you could see his studies you'd recognize it at once."

"I should be delighted to see them," said Silvester. "I gave up teaching long ago, but the instinct of the pedagogue still survives."

Anthony glowed; renewed his thanks. His time in Paris was at the Professor's disposal. When could he come?

"My dear," said Silvester, looking at Perella across the table, "what are our engagements?" He turned to Anthony courteously. "I should like to see everything you would care to show me."

"It would be much more charming if you two came to us," said Beatrice, in a voice so clear and significant that the mild September air around them grew suddenly tense. "For lunch or dinner. Any day or any hour would suit us, as we have no engagements. The same flat, Silvester, Avenue Gabriel. It would be much more comfortable for you and Anthony than your hotel."

"Of course, of course," said Silvester nervously. "Delightful."

Beatrice saw Perella's dark eyes fixed questioningly upon her. Anthony took a sip of wine. She broke into a laugh which had a queer sound in her own ears, and she laid her hand on Silvester's arm.

"My dear old friend. I must let you and your beautiful wife into our secret. We're not living together in sin. We've been married for nearly three years."

Anthony, with a gesture, said to the company at large:

"Now you hold my reputation in the hollow of your hands."

Silvester lifted his glass, and bowed from one to the other.

"My sincerest congratulations."

Perella, too, touched her glass with her lips, and smiled decorously; but it shook in the fingers below the clamped and bound wrist.

Later, they stood by the garden entrance awaiting car and taxi. Perella and Anthony found themselves a few paces behind the others, who were deep in sudden talk. Anthony knew that Beatrice, with hurried eagerness, was explaining to Silvester the reason of the concealment of their marriage. He could read his wife's face and her glance. A shaft of light caught her cruelly, and showed criss-cross lines about her eyes, and a line on her neck, which, carelessly acceptant of her charm and beauty, he had scarcely noticed before.

Perella said: "You might have told me."

"Why?"

"Let's call it courtesy."

"You married first, my dear, without letting me know. Your husband wrote to Beatrice. You——" He paused.

"You're not going to say that I turned you down?" she said, looking at him defiantly.

"I'm not so eaten up with egotism as all that," said he.

"You acknowledge then, that if there was any wrong between us—I don't say there was, but if there was—it was all on your side?"

"I might make excuses which would seem to you very lame, but I won't. You have every reason to believe that I behaved filthily to you. I did."

"And that's that," said Perella, with an air of finality.

"And now," said he, with a glance at the still occupied pair some yards away, "I realize what a fool and a cad I've been."

"That," said Perella, "is another matter. Nothing to do with me. It's between you and yourself. I've wanted all this time a clean conscience-sheet,

and now you've given it to me. It's almost worth a Government stamp."

"You have the law on your side, Perella, and can say what you will," he admitted.

The *chasseur* came up politely. The taxi for Monsieur. Anthony explained. It was for the other monsieur. The *chasseur* evidently grappled for a second with an unexpected situation.

"Ah, pardon," said he; "I thought the taxi was for Monsieur and Madame."

PART V

ANTHONY AND PERELLA

CHAPTER XVI

THE Gaytons dined in the Avenue Gabriel. Anthony showed his drawings spread out under a good light on a drawing-room table. Silvester, seeing the technique towards which the artist was striving, gave cordial encouragement.

"And you, sister artist? What do you think?" asked Anthony.

Perella replied calmly: "They're a tremendous improvement on those you once showed me in Florence. You've got a mastery"—she took up a drawing and looked at it critically, her head on one side—"the Professor can see faults, but I can't. Still——"

"Still what?" he asked.

"There doesn't seem to be much love in it."

"What do you mean?" asked Beatrice.

They were all standing around the table. She took the drawing, with the least little possible touch of displeasure, from the younger woman's hand.

Perella smiled. "I don't quite know. Such things are only a matter of impression. I know when I was copying, which, after all, was very mechanical, that, if I didn't really love a bit of a picture, I worked twice as hard on it, for conscience' sake, and it came out half as good."

Anthony laughed. "Why shouldn't I love what I've set my heart on?"

"That's for you to say," said Perella.

"I don't know that I quite agree with my wife in this particular instance," said Silvester pleasantly. "But I think I know what's at the back of her mind. She has a perfectly logical little philosophy that nothing can be done well in this world unless there's something which she calls love in it."

"It's not mine, but my father's," said Perella. "He used to say that two people could make exactly the same cocktail, using the same ingredients and measurements, and that one might come out entirely different from the other, because one maker had left out love, or lovingness, and the other hadn't."

"And she makes it a touchstone of life," said Silvester proudly. "But here, perhaps, she's over-applying it."

"I hope she is," cried Anthony. He turned to Perella. "I know exactly what you mean. But your touchstone shouldn't be applied to purely technical exercises, such as these. I don't claim any kind of inspiration for them. You

might just as well criticize the soulfulness of a singer practising scales."

Perella laughed, and turned away from the table. "I stick to my guns. If there was no love in a singer's scales, they would be useless. My father always had the last word in argument over this. He would quote Izaak Walton, who said you must put the worm on a hook as if you loved him. . . . I wouldn't say all this, Mrs. Ellison," she added quickly, "if I hadn't belonged to the same trade as your husband. Artists are in the habit of being frank with one another."

"That's so," laughed Anthony. "How often haven't we heard the criticism: 'Rotten. Can't you do so and so, and pull the thing together?' "

He gathered up the drawings, and tied them in the big portfolio.

Silvester moved away with Beatrice.

"I take back much of what I said a day or two ago. Anthony's on the right track with his work, in spite of my little wife; on the way of salvation. One of these days something will come, just like that"—he snapped finger and thumb —"and he'll wonder why he never was able to do it before, and he'll be a big man. I tell you so, and I've got a reputation to maintain."

"You always were the dearest of all dears," said Beatrice gratefully.

Anthony, at the other end of the drawing-room, was fiddling with a knot in the portfolio strings.

"Damn," said he.

"Let me try," said Perella.

"If I can't, how can you?"

"I can put love even into the undoing of knots."

She motioned him away, and, with her left hand and the half helpless fingers of her right, she freed the strings with ease. He tied it, lifted it, so as to stack it against the wall.

"Do you think you're generous to-night, Perella?" he said in a low voice.

"Not a bit. I'm truthful. Have you put love into anything you've ever done?"

As she said this she did not look at him. At first her eyes were downcast. Then he was sure that her glance had strayed down the room to where Beatrice stood regal, smiling down at Silvester.

"I should never have thought you could be bitter," said he.

"Neither should I," said Perella.

He stacked his portfolio, and returned to her. She admired a Chardin on the wall. He turned on the tiny canopy of electric light. She called her husband.

"Silvester, have you seen this?"

He hurried up. Yes, of course. Was there a picture of his dear hostess he hadn't seen and verified?

"Your husband has been my artistic conscience for I don't know how many years," said Beatrice.

Perella linked her arm in his.

"Don't you think he's the most wonderful man you've ever known?"

"He's the dearest of my friends," said Beatrice.

Anthony laughed his gay laugh.

"You're quite at liberty to agree with her, my dear. Husbands don't count."

After the guests had left Beatrice said:

"I hope she'll make him happy. He's one of God's elect."

"Why shouldn't she?"

"A touch of the shrew, perhaps."

"You don't like her?" he challenged boldly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"In the world we live in, it's silly to like or dislike people at first sight. I love Silvester, who evidently adores his wife, and I wouldn't do anything in the world to hurt him, and that's enough for me."

Whereupon Anthony felt that, just as Perella had declared war against him, so was Beatrice prepared to declare war against Perella. He went to bed very unhappy. The emergence of a fantastically new Perella had spoiled the pride of his little month's matrimonial felicity. He couldn't get her out of his head. She danced through his troubled dreams. A shrew? Even at that estimate, if any man had merited a show of shrewishness from a woman, it was he, Anthony Blake. Yet shrewishness a man could set aside as a luckily undiscovered fault in a woman he had proposed to marry. No. There was nothing of the shrew in Perella. Something far deeper. Something he could not fathom. The word "scorn" flamed across his uncomforted soul. The scorn of a shrew was an idiot conception. Scorn was the quality of the great. . . .

There had been some talk of another meeting in Paris. But, the next morning, he was relieved to hear by telephone that the Gaytons had decided to leave for Florence almost immediately. He sent Perella an immense basket of flowers, to which was pinned a conventionally regretful card. But in his heart he almost rejoiced. In a fortnight or so, he would be in America, out of infernal danger, and Beatrice would be with him: a protection, and a gage of honour.

There came over Paris the capricious wave of a few days' intense heat. The flat was a furnace. Emilia, whom he had not seen, and her husband, chose this

very week to visit Paris. Lady Scrympe, tall, dry, pretty, with queer suggestions of her mother in glance and gesture, seemed as vital in the blazing heat as a salamander in the flames. Arbuthnot Scrympe, a fleshy, clean-shaven, black-haired youth, with a passion for food and statistics, appeared to do exactly what he was told. Emilia led the quartette a nightmare dance through Paris, attended by a Circean rout who deposited a pallid Anthony and an exhausted and two-hundred-year-old Beatrice in the Avenue Gabriel at four o'clock every morning.

Emilia called him Anthony from the first moment, appointed him, without question, her *cavaliere servente*, sent him errands, took him with her shopping, filled him with information, and bored him to unprofitable tears. When Beatrice pleaded the heat or fatigue as an excuse for this pandemonium of a pace, Emilia was all solicitude, treated her as an old lady with whose natural infirmities youth must needs reckon. Whereupon Beatrice would flash forth a vehement repudiation, and drag a protesting Anthony into the exhausting and inane whirlpool of Emilia's rabble rout. At the same time, she began to put more than the conventional touch of colour on her cheeks.

"For God's sake don't do it, my dear," said Anthony one day.

"I must. I don't want to look like a hag."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned aside. The Paris illusion was over. Thank Heaven, they were soon leaving the place. His life in America, anyhow, was saner than this.

And then an ironical god whispered a word into the ear of the Editor-in-Chief of an important group of magazines, from whom he had hitherto received his main commissions; and the editor, thus inspired, sent a long cable to the young artist:

"Mailing you typescript of Olney Burge's new book; scene laid Florence, Monte Carlo. Do drawings on spot and charge up expenses."

"Damn!" said Anthony, for, to those of any sense who worked under the Editor-in-Chief, his will was law.

On the other hand, when he showed the cable to Beatrice, she pirouetted in joy and cried: "How lovely!"

"I can't see that it's lovely at all," he said ill-humouredly. "I thought we had finished with Florence."

"I had—without you," she corrected. "But it has been tugging at me all the time. I never told you."

He reflected for a moment on the sacrifice she had made of the home that really mattered to her.

“I’m sorry, dear,” said he. “I shall never finish realizing what you’ve had to give up for me.”

“I would give up more than you could ever dream of for your happiness,” she replied wistfully.

His conscience was sorely pricked. He went off to a lunch of discomfort with Scrympe, who had said the night before:

“My dear fellow, can’t you and I get together, by ourselves, away from this hell-cat mess, and have a good real talk? I know a little place on the other side of the river with wonderful Toulouse food, and a cellar to dream about. There’s a sanded floor, and the table-linen is coarse but spotless, all in the old French style. . . .”

Anthony called for his son-in-law at Claridge’s, and they drove to the Petit Cassoulet in a little street off the Boulevard Raspail. The place was crammed with Americans and English, with a few stray Dutch. The small room was airless, and, according to Anthony afterwards, reeked like an inferno with the steam of hell-broth.

They got a little table, from which a pair had just risen, littered with the unsavoury remains of the late meal. Scrympe put up his eye-glass and apologized. The last time—in April—that he had been there, the place was just discreetly full. It was beastly how people got to know of these places. Anyhow, he was sure the cooking would be good. He ordered the luscious meal of Gascony—insisting on the Cassoulet, the classical dish of the house. The landlord himself had come from Castelnaudary, the inmost shrine of Cassoulet. Anthony, suffering from lacerated conscience, disliked the place more and more. It was the act of an idiot to make a man eat a stew of goose and fat pork and brown sauce and garlic and heavy white beans in a temperature of 95° in the shade. And when it came, such was the inadequate service, it was tepid, with a horrid little film on the sauce. The vaunted wine was heavy and sour. And Scrympe, beaming and apoplectic, ate voraciously, praising the dreadful stuff, and could find nothing more cheery to talk about, during this solicited heart-to-heart interview, than exports and imports, the inner reasons for the depreciation of the franc, and the taxation of land-values in England.

Later Anthony found Beatrice alone in the flat. She smiled as he came in, and looked very cool and restful. She listened amusedly to his picturesque account of the feast. Now, he sympathized with Emilia’s passion for whirling Arbuthnot around jazz-places. It kept Arbuthnot quiet.

“If I were Emilia,” said he, “I’d swing him round and round in a salad cage until he died! Just picture him stuffing himself with cold goose fat and cooing about land-values!”

“She likes him,” said Beatrice.

“I don’t. They’re not our kind, Madonna”—she started, for he had not given her the old name for a long time—“and their ways aren’t ways of pleasantness and their paths aren’t paths of peace. Let’s cut it all out and start for Florence to-morrow.”

“The house won’t be ready. Fargus’ll have to be fetched from Dinard.”

He confounded Fargus. A wire would secure the dusting of rooms, the airing of sheets, and a scratch meal when they arrived, which was all that mattered.

She said, with a queer look in her eyes and a tremor of the lips:

“Have you decided to stay at the villa?”

He planted himself in front of her, hands in jacket pockets.

“Yes. If you’ll have me. But not as at Dinard. I see I’ve made you suffer too much with all this subterfuge. Let us put a notice of our marriage in the papers and be done with it.”

She leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes, and nodded faintly and smiled.

“Yes, dear. Let us have done with it.”

“The whole fault has been mine,” said he.

She opened her eyes, smiled again and rose, catching at his courteous, assisting hand.

“No. Not all. Mine. Perhaps mine more than yours.”

He looked at her uncomprehending.

“Your fault?”

She nodded.

“But what do you mean?”

She crossed to a table for a cigarette. A woman can’t explain when she is answering thoughts of her own that have never entered into a man’s head. It’s one of woman’s engrained habits that make them often irritatingly enigmatic to men.

“Well, we start to-morrow?” asked Anthony, taking refuge in the concrete.

She laughed. “Technically, yes. But give me a day or two’s grace.”

He swore that she could have all the grace she wanted.

“But there’s a big full early moon to-night. Let us cut Arbuthnot and Emilia and run away by ourselves to Versailles and dine on a terrace.”

“And imagine ourselves, for the last time, naughty lovers instead of a respectably recognized old married couple.”

“Why,” he cried, “you don’t regret, do you?”

“The old life had its points,” said Beatrice.

Soon, they settled down in Florence. The fact of their marriage had been announced in half a dozen newspapers, and now was being spread and commented on in sixty. It was more than the bare fact that occasioned comment, for the date was given, two and a half years before. Hundreds of tongues wagged, many of them lyingly, claiming for their owners exclusive knowledge of the marriage from the very beginning. Special reporters from Paris and Rome infested the Villa Corazza. The New York papers gave first-class sensation head-lines to the romance. The Ellison family and fortune belonged to the national life of America, and American citizens are deeply interested in that life’s assets. The postman groaned under the day’s mail. Sheaves of telegrams were handed in. Fargus had to engage a special shorthand-typist in order to cope with the mass of correspondence.

“Did you ever dream of such a to-do?” asked Anthony. “Just like throwing a stone into a wasp’s nest. Can’t we get under cover until it’s over?”

“Don’t worry,” said Cornelius Adams, who had already gone into residence in Florence. “To-morrow a millionaire trying to commit suicide will miss himself and shoot a cinema star, and you’ll both be forgotten.”

“It’s only like being photographed by a magnesium flash,” laughed Beatrice.

“At the same time,” said Cornelius reflectively, “there’s a lot of publicity in it for a rising young artist. If you could rush off to New York now—you could——”

“I’d just as soon rush off to hell,” Anthony interrupted.

“Your husband’s spirit, my dear Beatrice,” laughed the other, “has always been his great attraction.”

The excitement of the great world was soon diverted into other channels; but the ferment of Florentine society took longer to subside. Felicitations to a Lady Paramount must take a nobler form than even the most flowery lines of ink. The wedded pair were entertained almost beyond the limit of physical endurance. At first Anthony was hard put to it even to read the typescript of the Olney Burge novel, the determining factor of the whole business.

At many of these festivals he met the Gaytons.

That marriage, too, had been a Florentine sensation, though less flamboyant, and there had been many conjectures whether the Professor would seal up his pretty young bride in his hermitage, or whether he would let her go forth to see the world. The upholders of the latter theory triumphed. Silvester appeared only too proud to show his beautiful elf of a wife to anybody. She was young, he told those to whom he could speak in elderly confidence; she had a touch on life as sensitively creative as that of a musician on strings or keys; it was a joy to him to see her in the outer world of mountains and gardens and cities and flowers and men and women. And there really were people who thought he would stick her on a shelf in his musty old library? Did they think he was an unhuman abstraction? He might have been once; but now all was different. . . . To the Marchesa della Torre he opened his heart. To her, he could speak of Perella's sunless days, her outlook on happiness through the smoke-obscured panes of back-bedroom windows. She was a thing of joy made for the sunshine. Every gleam that he could give her she should have. His work? He had done most of it. Laid foundations for younger men to build on. What remained he could do in peace and at leisure, for that, too, appealed to his wife's many-sided joyousness. No. His work had become a secondary pursuit. His interest lay in the gladness of Perella. Why shouldn't she excursionize and picnic with fellow-youth? Why shouldn't she dance? When she danced, she danced on flowers. Were they daisies, she wouldn't even leave them rosy, so light were her feet. When he waxed lyrical, the Marchesa laughed comfortably, and he grew red. It was a fact, he would declare. He loved to watch her. . . .

"To tell you the truth," he said one day, "I really enjoy gadding about. I've longed to gad about all my life."

The Marchesa stared at him.

"Then why on earth haven't you done it, with all the drawing-rooms of the civilized world open to you?"

"Perhaps that's why," he replied hesitatingly. "They seemed to yawn—like caverns, you know—and I felt afraid to go in by myself. I always seemed to be walking about in a queer envelope of my own loneliness. It was only with you, and perhaps half a dozen people, all told, in the world, that this sort of cylindrical atmosphere in the middle of which I stood up seemed to be dissipated. I know it all exuded from myself—some lonely people can blow and swish it away, like you, my dear; but others, less brave, can't. So you see, when you feel you can't get into contact with other human beings who are

wandering about free from cylinders, you get frightened and stay by yourself. . . . I'm sure I never could have dared enter the Kingdom of Heaven, no matter how polite St. Peter might have been—unless perhaps he had told me I'd got to lecture."

"And now?"

"I'm not lonely"—he beamed—"I haven't got a cylinder. I'm like ordinary happy folk."

So it came to pass that, when Beatrice returned to reign in Florence, with Anthony as consort, they found Perella quite a great little lady, and Silvester an almost indefatigable social personage.

The inner social world of Florence is cosmopolitan. There being scarcely a noble Italian family which has not some matrimonial connection with well-born English or Americans, the nationalities must perforce mingle. This world therefore though exclusive, is fairly large. It presents a social phenomenon practically unknown in France or Spain or any other European country, and in Italy only perhaps in the two cities—Florence and Rome.

Here therefore did Anthony and Perella continually meet, and talk and dance. The first time he led her out, he said:

"It's comic that we've never had a dance together . . ." and a moment or two later: "Are you really dancing?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"What I say. Are you dancing, or am I carrying about a bit of thistledown in my hands?"

"I oughtn't to have risen," she said. "I had almost forgotten you. I won't again."

"Which? Rise, or forget me?"

"Both."

"The balance is on the side of comfort," said he.

But though they were often thrown together, it was always in a crowded drawing-room or garden, or at the latest *thé dansant* upon which Fashionable Florence had set the seal of its approval. There was time for little but the interchange of light talk. Besides, Perella held a little court, and Anthony found himself taking his turn with the rest of her retinue, mostly composed of young Italians, idle members of old families, or officers sprucely uniformed and gaily deferential. There was one of the former category—a Prince Panini—whom Anthony soon grew to hold in fierce abomination. He was a man in

the early thirties, clean-shaven, London dressed, with a little fair moustache and fair hair thinning on the top, and pale grey eyes, and a reputation not of the most saintly. Silvester liked him because he was an authority on Quattrocento gems of which he had inherited a fine collection; that to Anthony was comprehensible, although to be deplored. But why Perella should obviously like the brute also he was at a loss to determine. Prince Panini was ever by her side. He paid her compliments with an unpleasant look in his eyes; he touched her shoulders when he helped her on with a wrap; he held her when dancing in a way in which, according to Anthony, no man should hold Perella. Once he said to her:

"I hate seeing you with that fellow."

She turned her calm glance on him.

"Do you expect me to make any comment? You might remark: 'I hate parsnips.' What then?"

"You wouldn't serve them up to me when I came to dinner."

She looked round the tea-room.

"Did I ask you to dinner here? When I do, perhaps I'll be courteous enough not to ask the Prince Panini, since you don't seem to like him."

She left an angry Anthony, as she had a trick of doing, putting him in the wrong. He suffered from her resentment of any interest in her that he might manifest. He vowed that, henceforward, he would leave her alone; meeting her he would bow and kiss her hand, pay her a flowery compliment, after the manner of her Italian gallants, and pass along. On one or two occasions he tried to keep his vow, and underwent the torture of a repressed craving to throw the Prince Panini out of window.

It was rather an irritation than a consolation to see Panini conduct himself towards Beatrice in the most irreproachably charming manner. Indeed, in spite of his unsaintly reputation, the two were rather good friends. He amused her. He had travelled all over the world—maybe in pursuit of unsaintliness; but he had gathered by the way a pleasant knowledge of men and things. He came to the Villa Corazza, where Anthony, titular host, must give him civil welcome; and the scoundrel was excellent company. What reason then could Anthony give his wife for his hatred of her friend? To bring Perella into it were to outrage decency. At last he began to shrug cynical shoulders. If Perella chose to encourage the man, it was her own affair. She had a husband to look after her. Besides, in her new development she was more than ever able to look after herself; and to think of wilful wrong on her part was an insult. The next time they met, he talked to her in high good humour. Prince Panini, however, was nowhere about.

Then, one day, they ran into each other in the Via Tornabuoni. He had come into town to buy some artist's materials; she was vaguely shopping. It was a soft and windless morning in early November. The city dreamed in the blue haze of a pale blue sky and amber sunshine. Even the grim Palazzo Strozzi at the end of the street relaxed into a smile.

Perella stood before him, the incarnation of the morning, a Wedgwood-blue thing on her head, and a Wedgwood-blue coat trimmed with fur at neck and wrists, her once white face glowing in tones of mellow peach. She held out her hand in friendly fashion.

"What are you doing in Florence at this time of day? I thought you worked?"

"I was getting in new plant for the factory. Besides, I often come in to sketch. Last month I was here every morning. Now it's a bit chilly for the fingers. And you?"

She dangled a parcel before him.

"Which way are you going?" he asked.

"I came from that way—as you must have seen—and, not being an ant, I'm not turning round again."

"May I walk a bit with you?"

"If you like."

He accompanied her for a few steps in silence, on the sunny side of the street, towards the Arno. Suddenly he said:

"Am I ever to be forgiven, Perella?"

"It depends on what you mean, Anthony," she said, looking up at him.

"You no longer feel bitter towards me?"

"I never felt bitter," she interrupted. "I don't say I didn't suffer—I did. I was a sort of fatalist in those days . . . I feel that you're sorry for hurting me ——"

"God knows I am," said he.

"That being so, I've forgiven you. If you weren't, I don't think I could ever bear to speak to you again. And now, we've ordered our lives differently. You're happy and I'm happy. So—well——" She smiled.

"We can be friends," he added quickly, "in the light of day. Up to now we've been groping about in the dark—not exactly avoiding each other, but afraid of coming into too violent collision. Isn't that something like it?"

She agreed. As Fate had brought their paths together again, it was good to have come to this understanding. At the corner of the Via Tornabuoni and the

Piazza Santa Trinità, she turned down the narrow Via delle Terme, crowded and bustling. He laughed.

"This reminds me of old times when we used to try to talk and couldn't."

She nodded, looked down, memory-smitten. Her glance fell upon his neat, brown shoes, and she flushed as she remembered their first daylight walk together, when he seemed born to millions of pairs equally shapely, while she had but one little cheap brown pair of best, whose soaking in foul weather would have been a tragedy. Now, within sweet reason, it did not matter how many pairs she had, or what she paid for them. She seemed to be quite a different Perella altogether.

At the end of the street she hesitated.

"The morning is young," said he, "to say nothing of humanity being tumultuous. Let us have a stroll of spaciousness in our beloved Signoria."

He took her elbow in his old, careless, commanding way, and they entered the Piazza by the Loggia dei Lanzi. They caught their breath as they came into the calm, vast enclosure of immortal beauty. There to their hand was Benvenuto's Perseus, triumphant, with the Gorgon's head; and Donatello's Judith and Holofernes and the rest of the illustrious company in the exquisitely vaulted tabernacle. And away before them frowned the sombre majesty of the Palazzo Vecchio, and the Uffizi, and the Fountain of Neptune. And all shimmered beneath the half veiled noon-tide sun that cast no shadows.

"My first rapturous vision of Florence. Do you remember?"

It was with something like a sigh that she answered: "Yes, I remember. The moonlight." She forced a laugh. "That made it romantic."

She glanced at the Palazzo clock, gave a little cry:

"I didn't realize it was so late. I must hurry."

"Why?"

"I promised to run in and see Madame Toselli. She's ill in bed."

"Poor old dear!" said Anthony. "A good soul." He touched her arm again. "*En route*, then."

They left the Piazza by the way they came, and turned down the narrow street leading to the Lungarno and the Ponte Vecchio. He accompanied her across the street to the head of the bridge, so picturesque and alluring, with its double row of buildings, and its gay booth-like shops and its arches, through which can be seen the Arno flowing, yellow and sluggish, as it has flowed for all appreciable time.

Then Perella halted and put out a dismissing left hand. He made a gesture of protest.

“I’ve nothing to do. I’ll see you safe to the Pension.”

But she shook her head. “No. No. I’d rather you didn’t.”

He insisted, with a laugh.

“Why?”

She looked at him squarely.

“I don’t know whether I’m superstitious or sentimental or idiotic—perhaps all three—but I feel I don’t want us to cross the Old Bridge together ever again.”

CHAPTER XVII

MEANWHILE, Anthony had many reasons to regard himself as Fortune's Favourite. One of the first cables he received from America on the announcement of his marriage had been from the Editor-in-Chief who had sent him to Florence.

"Congratulations. Hope good news won't affect your putting through Burge illustrations."

Anthony cabled back indignantly. Not only would the drawings be delivered in accordance with agreement, but it was more imperative than ever for him to get as much work as he could possibly carry through.

The reply came: "Good boy. Mailing special contract. Till you see it, hold off any other offers. Writing."

To his astonished admiration of the prescience of the Editor-in-Chief, on the heels of the last cable there came glittering propositions from America. But when the contract arrived, the covering letter gave explanation.

"You're the most talked about black-and-white artist in New York. People want you for your publicity. You could get big money even in the movies. But it wouldn't last. Now I want you for your work, which suits our public, for a long time, and so I enclose a serious contract honestly based, as far as I can see, on bed-rock. Let me know what you think of it."

It was a contract for five years, during which he should work exclusively, in respect of drawings for reproduction, for the Magazine Company; and the terms, though not fantastic, were beyond his present dreams of artistic income. It set him, at a swoop, on the high level; it gave him command of the trivialities of luxury, his wife's daily bread, but hitherto humiliatingly beyond his reach. Outside the house, for instance, he could have his own car and man. . . . He would be dependent on his wife only for sheer board and lodging, which, after all, mattered not a row of pins. To pay for his keep would be hypersensitive idiocy. Of course towards his personal expenses never a penny had she dared offer. But at restaurant dinner parties she had slipped into his hand the settlement notes, which had burned his fingers and scorched his nerves. And only through dread of wounding her had he used her cars instead of hiring taxi-cabs. . . . In the generous innocence of her heart she had given him, for a birthday gift, a resplendent dressing-gown of brocaded silk. He had thanked her charmingly—but the damned thing had been a Nessus shirt to his

pride. Now he could provide himself with one equally gorgeous, and, should she give him another, it would be a gift between equals. . . .

Clad in this dressing-gown, he entered her room on the morning on which he had received the contract. It was his custom to come in while she was breakfasting in bed; hers to have prepared herself daintily for his visit. When she had glanced through the document her eyes were moist.

"I always said that you'd make good. Wasn't I right?"

He saw her pride in him, and it checked a generous impulse to attribute his success to the publicity of their marriage. Why kill the joy of any human being?

"And that leaves you free for portraits—pictures?"

"Anything except for magazine reproduction."

She dried her eyes and smiled. "I'm silly—but it must make you so happy."

It did. He went about exultant. A day or two later he fetched her out from within to the broad marble flight of steps in front of the villa.

"There," said he. "For you and me."

Below stood a smart two-seater Fiat car.

She laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What a child you are! As if we hadn't got enough cars already."

"Ah, but this one's different altogether."

"I'll put on a hat," said she, "and you shall drive me round."

It had been in his mind to offer Perella a lift home—for car and man awaited him in the Piazza del Duomo—when she had announced her intention of visiting the Pension Toselli. But the chance was missed. He turned with a sigh, as he lost the tiny little figure among the bustle of the Ponte Vecchio, and walked very thoughtfully up the Via Calzaboli to the Duomo and his car.

She was still the same: a thing of illusion, elusion, allusion. He repeated the words foolishly until they lost what he had originally taken for their meaning. Friends—up to a point—up to the crossing of the bridge; the bridge that led to the old life, to the dreadful Pension, with its Brabazon ladies, its Grewsons, its ever smiling and perspiring Giuseppe, its heavy fatted flies, its smell of the week before last's veal and spinach; and, also, as he turned the corner of the stair at the drawing-room floor, its subtle fragrance, like the music of the hyacinth bells of Shelley, leaving an odour within the sense of the passing upwards of the delicate elfin thing that was Perella. And the Pension

held, too, the prim little room in which one day just before his abandonment of her, poor Ariadne, he had taken her into his arms and she had sealed his vows with consecrating kisses. . . . Verily, she was right. The Ponte Vecchio led to grounds that must never be retrodden.

"Oh, damn!" he cried, as he swerved in order to avoid a telegraph pole that seemed to be standing in the middle of the road.

The new chauffeur drew a breath of relief when the car halted unbroken, with its two occupants alive, in front of the steps of the Villa Corazza.

There came a spell of thick autumn mist and dreary rain and cold that enveloped like a garment. The very della Robbias in the loggia looked numbed.

"It's high time we went to Monte Carlo," said Anthony, "to finish the Olney Burge drawings."

"We go whenever you like, dear," said Beatrice.

The next day the Gaytons were bidden to lunch. Silvester came alone, perturbedly apologetic for Perella's absence. If it were only the slight chill that had rendered it advisable for her to stay in bed, it would be no great matter. But for the last ten days or so, she seemed to have been running down like an old-fashioned clock. Of course her valiancy had repudiated suggestion of the process, until this chill had caught her and proved the need of winding up. He was anxious. The doctor advised change of climate; she must be put down somewhere where the sun shone hot and the sky was blue. He was thinking of Rapallo or Portofino.

"That's odd," said Anthony. "We're off to Monte Carlo the day after to-morrow."

"And the good Cornelius is coming too," said Beatrice. "His *chauffage central* has gone wrong, and he's perishing with cold in that marble villa of his."

"I wonder——" Silvester began. He took off his pince-nez and wiped them, and put them on again. "I wonder," said he, putting his head to one side. . . . "Do you know I've never been to Monte Carlo, though I know something of the rest of the French Riviera—I think it might do Perella good—I wonder if you'd mind——?"

What could kindly woman do but lay her hand on that of her gentle friend and declare her delight in the suggestion?

"It'll be splendid!" cried Anthony. "There'll be five of us. The ideal number. If the four of us quarrel, we can always turn on Cornelius and rend

him in pieces."

Silvester went away happy, full of the idea.

"If ever there was a fortunate young woman . . ." said Beatrice. "To be adored like that! Silvester at Monte Carlo! As useful as an Archbishop in—is there any really wicked place in Paris nowadays?"

"No. Say an East-side night club in Hades."

"Something like that. But she's lucky, isn't she?"

"It's fifty-fifty," said Anthony. "Without Perella he'd have gone greyer and greyer until he withered away into a little heap of dust and ashes, with his pince-nez on top."

But when Silvester propounded the scheme to Perella, he met with incomprehensible opposition. In spite of the Monte Carlo season not having begun, there would still be crowds of people. People who went there only for the gambling. Just the kind of people Silvester disliked. Besides, they had had such an orgy of people in Florence. Wouldn't it be a greater change for them just to go to some quiet place, and sit in the sun—they two, all by themselves—and take little walks among pine-woods and carry out the plan devised in the early days of their marriage, and read Tasso and Ariosto together from beginning to end?

She was sitting up in bed, clad in a vermilion wrap, the colour, she declared, of the hose of Pinturicchio's young men, and her pale face, topped with its black hair, made sleek according to the day's fashion, peeped out of it, like the head of some dainty goblin out of a peony.

Silvester, who had dressed himself for the day, his old-fashioned jacket buttoned up with its four buttons, sat primly on a chair by the bedside.

"Of course, my dear," said he, "your will is not only law, but a beneficent decree."

She laughed, and blew him a kiss. He went on, with a wrinkling of the brow:

"But I've rather compromised ourselves with Beatrice. It was I who gave the hint. Rather a strong hint, I'm afraid."

"Did Beatrice appear to want me?" she asked.

"Want you? Could there be anybody so dead in the world of living people as not to want you? Of course she does."

"She's a woman I should like to love," said Perella, "but—I wonder——"

"What?"

She smiled and shrugged.

"I don't know."

He took a cigarette from the battered old silver case which he had carried about for thirty or forty years.

"May I?"

"You silly dear."

He lit the cigarette contentedly. It was curiously delectable to be called a silly dear by Perella; on the other hand, it was disconcerting to discover this impalpable veil between her and Beatrice. Perella, who had her own unavowable shrinkings from the jaunt in common, felt her heart go out towards the simple man whose thoughts she read.

"I should like to see Monte Carlo—every one ought to see it—but I don't think I should care to stay there. My father was there once for a month. I remember his coming back cursing it. No, my dearest, he hadn't lost his money; he had won. He bought me, out of his winnings, a beautiful pair of high-heeled patent leather shoes, the first I'd ever had (I was fourteen at the time) so he didn't look at it with the jaundiced eye of the ruined gambler——" She lifted up a hand, and the wide sleeve fell back, revealing a slender, dark arm. "He viewed it with that wonderful sanity of his. He said it was the only place on earth actively and passionately devoted to the negation of the spiritual. . . . And that's not the place where Silvester Gayton can be happy. Nor Perella Gayton, if it comes to that."

He agreed with her; agreed, also, with the late John Annaway.

"But, my dear," said he, "what are we to do?"

"Aren't there quiet places near? I've heard of Beaulieu, Menton . . ."

"Mentone!" cried Silvester, whose Italianate ear could not attune itself to the newer French name. "You've hit it. You've solved the problem. Mentone for general quiet, Monte Carlo for dashes of hectic gaiety. You have a witch's touch on things. Whatever should I do without you?"

"You'd sit in your study, happily oblivious of rain or sunshine, and never dream of thinking of leaving the Viale Milton."

A while afterwards he went into his library, and the first thing that met his eye was the leering glance of the ironical ass in the Adoration over the mantelpiece. For the first time he experienced the shock of heart-rending association. The young man Anthony!

Could distaste of such enforced companionship be the basis of Perella's strange disinclination to join the Monte Carlo party? The thought hurt like a sudden stab in the dark. . . . Presently he laughed, and sat down to his morning's work. A boy and girl flirtation, perhaps, years ago. What kind of

young man could he have been to look at Perella with indifferent eyes? But now all that was over and forgotten. She suffered him with the same cool gladness as she suffered all the other young fools who buzzed about her in Florence. His attitude was irreproachable. The use of Christian names—why not? When one husband to another's wife was Silvester to Beatrice, it would be absurd if wife to another's husband should not be Perella to Anthony. Cornelius, too, was on Christian names terms with them all. In fact, the only one of the quintette who addressed him with impeccable respect as "Professor," and called him "Sir," was the young man, Anthony. . . . He turned in his chair and stared the ass out of countenance. If he had taken this asinine devil's advice years ago, he would not now be the happiest elderly scholar in all the world. The eternally lingering boy in him prompted articulate speech.

"You beastly ass!" he cried.

Whereupon he chuckled, and, arranging his papers, went on with his half-finished article.

Now, there is not much to be said about the Riviera jaunt, except in so far as now and then it threw two young people into new scenes of emotional beauty. Anthony and Beatrice and Cornelius stayed at the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo; the Gaytons at Menton. Anthony filled sketch-books with drawings and notes. One of his finest drawings, one that was to bring him afterwards a measure of fame, was that of the weird old lady in old-fashioned lace who has haunted the outer rooms of the Casino since the beginning of Monte Carlo time. Cornelius confessed himself but an amiable feeder and gambler. Beatrice lived the pleasant little social life with the odds and ends of friends that happened to find themselves on the coast, and identified herself, as far as it was possible, with Anthony's work. Her happiest hours were spent with him alone, sitting by his side, in some mountain town—Roquebrune, Peille—while he experimented in a newly-adopted craft of water-colour drawing. It was here that she began to suffer the dreadful fear of losing him. And the fears were so vague and evanescent that they shamed her. For, since the episode of the inconsiderable little girl at Dinard, with whom he had danced out of Christian charity, never by flighty act or glance had he wavered from his loyalty. He still proclaimed her his Madonna. She fed her heart with his proclamation. Yet the nourishment was scant.

One of the first letters she had received at Monte Carlo was from Emilia.

"My dear, I've done it. A new little Scrympe is making its way out into this absurd world. Whether it's going to be a future baronet or a title-less female remains to be seen. I'm not going to marry anybody next time under the rank

of an Earl; for then a poor girl-child will at least have the satisfaction of being the Lady Mary something or other. . . . This civilized world is hard on women. . . . But, in any case, I don't suppose you'll care a damn, for you'll be the thing's grandmother in any case. . . ." The chords of silly nature draw her towards this unborn Thing. But it had so chanced that, just as she was more or less through the reading of the letter, Anthony came up, smiling, in the gaiety and promise of his twenties—and her heart sank within her like a cold stone. She put the letter into her vain embroidered bag.

"From Emilia. Nothing exciting."

She couldn't have told him the real news for anything on earth.

And another dread, for she was a woman full of fears, arose from his newer independence. This she tried to lay aside scornfully, as a mean thing, for she glowed with pride in his achievement. Yet she saw the quickened spirit manifest itself in almost imperceptible impatiences and little flashes of imperiousness, to which, had she been twenty years younger, she would have yielded with joyous humility.

As all the world knows, South Kensington and Hampstead are farther apart, as the car flies, than Menton and Monte Carlo. In spite of Perella's desire for tranquillity in which to read Tasso and Ariosto, there were, perforce, many meetings and excursions. There were also the tables. Silvester, to whom such things were new, found childish fascination in the fantastic chances of roulette. Beatrice, who played for amusement, like thousands of wealthy women of her class, guided him in his modest apprenticeship, in the not too crowded rooms of the Salle Privée. Cornelius Adams sat, the florid, imperturbable pillar of a solemn table of Trente-et-Quarante. Anthony did not play. When Beatrice questioned him laughingly, he reminded her of his first and only quarrel with her—at Dinard. But things, she said, were different now. He laughed. He was not to be taught the same lesson twice. She yielded, coming across one of those streaks of character which she respected. Yet, such was the unseen gulf between them that he could not tell her the reasons of his Puritanical abstention. For one thing, his newly-gained independence was too precious for him to risk; for another, if he did risk it, play a high game like Beatrice herself, even the least evil of tongues would have charged him with playing with his wife's money. His pride was always a tender skin for any gnat to bite. And Perella, herself penniless, and terror-stricken after losing a thousand-franc note which, with a "Go and try your luck, my dear," Silvester had thrust into her hand, foreswore gambling for ever after. On such gambling occasions Fate threw Anthony and herself into pleasant companionship.

They would wander round the tables; they would sit over mild refreshments in the Bar; they would get sheltering garments from the *vestiaire*

and creep out on to the fresh and deserted terraces and sit, with never a soul, save for those aboard some unseen passing ship, between them and the Barbary Coast.

The air was keen, the short, golden day having changed into silver night. A full moon chanced to irradiate the sea and show in velvet outline the cape of Menton and, like a far-flung beam of elusive cloud, the point of Bordighera. And near them, to the right, loomed the black promontory of Monaco twinkling with the mysterious lights of Monagasque homes, for ever a secret to those hundreds of thousands who inhabit or visit the coast of enchantment. Beneath them the waves of the tideless Mediterranean lapped lazily. A *képi*-covered *gardien* passed on his inscrutable round, thinking, good human man, of the *sauté de lapin* with lots of good garlic that awaited him on the rock out there, when his spell of duty would be over, or worried to death by lack of recent news of family whooping-cough. But he passed by impersonal, a symbol of the awe-inspiring vigilance of the cynical Hell in Paradise that is Monte Carlo.

The mass of the building towers behind them, from which there issues no sound. The occasional hoot of an automobile, the faint few bars of a *forte* passage from the band of the Café de Paris far away, an Italian sailor singing below in the little light-starred harbour . . . no other sounds can break the silence of the fragrant and moonlit night.

There is a clean nip in the air, for coming Winter in the Temperate Zone calmly disregards the daily flourish of the sun. And two young people, none too heavily clad, sitting on a bench, instinctively draw close together for warmth, to say nothing of emotive forces of moon and stars and silver-banded sea and the soft, dark mysteries beyond.

If, in such conditions, Anthony found that the new Perella was but the old changeling Perella, disguised as a wife in easy circumstances, and if Perella found that Anthony was the same Anthony as ever had been, whose was the fault but that of the moon and the stars and all the rest of the planetary influences that dominate the will of mortals?

Not that they overstepped the limits of the friendship agreed upon between them in Florence. What they said mattered little. They did not cross in allusion the forbidden bridge, but talked of hitherside things, of travel, of painting, of his career. He was proud to tell her of the contract, eager to right himself in her eyes as a rich woman’s husband. She described her left-handed attempts at painting. The telegraph system between brain and hand seemed to have broken down. The brush refused to do what she wanted it to do. The result was the loveliest mess he could ever see on canvas. She longed to send it in to the Salon des Indépendants, or some even more modern exhibition, where she was

sure it would have a wild success; but Silvester, with his notions of artistic integrity, would not allow her. When they returned to Florence she must paint a portrait of Anthony with her left hand; going back to child-technique she would achieve truth. Thus they jested and laughed beneath the stars, and they knew not that their hearts sang together the song of youth, or that, obeying Rupert Brooke's behest, they heard the "calling of the moon."

They would re-enter the gambling den, each making at the other a little grimace of disgust at the contrast between the late perfume of the terrace and the sour stench of the human emanations that has accumulated for fifty years in the dismal, crowded, outer rooms through which they must pass in order to reach the Salle Privée. There they blinked at the cruder light, and looking at each other, saw the laughter of understanding in each other's eyes. And they scanned the roulette tables until they found Beatrice, most amused of professors, side by side with her elderly and fascinated pupil. Silvester would look up at Perella, touch the hand laid on his shoulder, and point to the pile of counters in front of him. Winnings, seven hundred francs. An absorbing and profitable pastime. Then Anthony:

"And you, dearest?"

"About twenty mille down. Stay by me and bring me luck."

"Such a heavenly night!" So Perella, regardless of the spinning wheel.

"Sh!"

Seventeen! Silvester had backed the number.

"Entrancing, my dear, entrancing."

And Beatrice to Perella: "He's the youngest thing in the room."

Whereupon the erratic pair would drift away in polite search of Cornelius at his Trente-et-Quarante table, and, after a polite word or two of commiseration or congratulation, according to circumstances, would drift into the bar where they awaited, so they said, final rescue from boredom.

And there was a mellow November day when the blue sea danced, and the party, having stayed overnight in Cannes on purpose, went over to the Islands: Ste. Marguerite, where, in the spacious cell dug out of the living rock, the Man in the Iron Mask was imprisoned, and whence the traitor Bazaine made his dramatic escape; and St. Honorat, with its monastery founded far back in the Dark Ages, and its vineyards, and its grim keep built centuries ago on a point of land by the monastery as a refuge for the monks against the Saracens, whither they would fly as soon as the eye of the Watcher caught the ghostly flash of oars on the horizon.

They had lunched in the soft sunshine outside the primitive restaurant,

whose patron had been chef in great houses, and had eaten sausage and *bouillabaisse* and grilled fowl; and the only sight remaining to be seen before returning to Cannes by daylight—and thence to Monte Carlo and Menton in time for dinner—was the fortress on the other side of the miniature island.

As you enter, you find yourself in an eleventh-century cloistered court with a well-head in the middle. A winding staircase leads to another cloister—'tis all, alas, an open ruin—off which is the chapel. Another short spiral brings you to the machicolated battlements. . . .

Descending the last flight, Perella made a false step, put out her useless hand to steady herself and slipped. Cornelius, in front of her, helped her to rise. She limped across the cloistered court to the doorway. The stout, brown-vestured, straw-hatted lay-brother in charge of the tower, stood stolid and benevolent, like a novel, full-length statue of Buddha. Outside she collapsed. The four gathered round in concern.

"I'm so sorry," cried Perella, sitting on the ground, "I'm afraid I've sprained my ankle. I'm not to be trusted to go upstairs or down. . . . Next time, I suppose, I'll break my neck walking on the flat!"

They held hurried counsel. Silvester was for demanding an ambulance at the near-by monastery door. Beatrice, stripping off tiny shoe and stocking, found the ankle already beginning to swell. She handed Cornelius a gay silk scarf which she wore twisted over around her neck, and bade him climb over the neighbouring rocks and soak it in sea-water.

"That's very thoughtful of you, Beatrice," cried the anxious Silvester. "Indeed, there's nothing like a cold water compress. But how are we going to get my poor dear down to the boat?"

Anthony laughed in his gay fashion.

"If I can't carry this wisp of nothing at all a couple of hundred yards, I'm not worthy of the name of man!"

Whereupon he picked her up. She surrendered whimsically, obeying his bidding to hang on to his neck; and so the procession started, along the beach and then down the calm cypress avenue that crosses the island from shore to shore. Beatrice and Silvester attended them, one on each side, anxious, sympathetic, both, in their respective ways, admiring with something of poignancy the careless vigour of the boy's twenty years.

Behind them marched Cornelius Adams, heavy and florid, carrying the gaudy and idle scarf.

CHAPTER XVIII

A YOUNG man may carry in his arms a distressful lady *en tout bien tout honneur*. Anthony had picked her up laughingly, with the most honourable intentions in the world. When he surrendered her to the brawny boatman who came rushing up along the jetty, he was uncomfortably aware of a warmth and a fragrance and a pulsation which had been unspeakably precious, and of which, with a sense of loss, he found himself bereft. Perella was almost demurely silent during their short voyage to Cannes; but then she was the centre of kindly solicitude, expected to do nothing but submit to the petting. On the quay the cars awaited them. Boatmen and chauffeurs transferred her to the hired car which was to take Silvester and herself back to Menton. There the party broke up. In the other car Beatrice and Anthony and Cornelius returned to Monte Carlo.

In a day or two news came that the ankle was mended. Perella, able to put foot to ground, prayed them to lunch at the Menton hotel. Beatrice and Anthony went the day before their return to Florence. It was nothing more than a pleasant meeting. Neither Beatrice nor Silvester gave a thought to what tumultuous beating of hearts the romantic journey across the island might have occasioned.

Said Beatrice on their way home:

"The more I see of that little thing, the more I love her."

"I'm glad. She's a dear," said Anthony casually. "But, at first—it wasn't a case of love at first sight?"

"I was critical on Silvester's account," she replied somewhat disingenuously. "I'm so fond of him, and it was a bit of an experiment, wasn't it?"

"Well, it seems to have panned out all right," said he. "They're as happy as two dear little grigs in a griggery. They ought to live in a tiny thatched house in a forest; and be served by a major-domo in a red cap and a white beard, and a staff of funny little things with sticking-out ears and green jerkins."

She joined in his light laugh. She could see the pair in the forest. He swore he would make a drawing of it, and send to Perella for a Christmas present.

Beatrice left Monte Carlo, if not a radiantly happy, at least a contented woman. The most jealous eye could have seen nothing but boy and girl comradeship between Anthony and Perella. And, as she said, she had begun to

take Perella to her heart. The child had quality.

Florence again, with its agreeable life, together with Anthony's work, occupied her time and thoughts. She was proud of his industry, his ever increasing mastery of technique. She sang his praises, not as a husband, but as a laborious and successful artist, wherever she went. One day she put down (to Anthony's joy) a sceptical Panini, whose aristocratic Italian mind could not conceive the possibility of a man being fool enough to work for a living when he had a rich woman only too anxious to support him. She urged Silvester to confirm the fact of Anthony's independence. He fell in love with an ancient lady of high lineage, a queenly woman whose dark eyes flashed command of the homage that had been hers for eighty years, an artist's joy in stately old lace and rustling lavender silk. On bended knee, almost, he craved the grace of a few sittings, and produced a triumph of portraiture. Excited and flushed, he called Beatrice into the studio, after his last few touches without the model, and said:

"There! Who says I can't draw?"

The ancient lady was startlingly alive; alive in black and white, with the witchery of her lace and lavender silk. Tears came into Beatrice's eyes at the wonder of it. His arm went around her, her head sank on his shoulder.

"The earth's now yours for the taking," she said.

"Don't I hold it now, Madonna?" said he, drawing her close to him.

On a moment like that she could live for days.

The young man's time was filled with glad things. His Cambridge friend, Charlie Dent, made one of his meteoric passages through Florence, ever in search of the numismatic. Anthony swept him about the country in his Fiat car to view private collections of which he had heard, or to bargain for a coin of which the owner possessed a duplicate.

"Sheer madness, my dear," he would say to Perella, now in Florence, presumably the better for her month's sunshine on the Riviera, and acquainted with the young numismatist presented by Anthony to Silvester, who considered him a most praiseworthy person. "Sheer madness. If he could only put it to some imaginative use! You and I, with a gold coin of Nero in our hands, would think of its fascinating history. What kind of things did it buy in its time? Was it slipped into a ruffian's hand as the price of murder? Was it ever clutched in a little pink palm as the price of love? . . . One could go on for ever imagining. Silvester's the only archæologist I know who can take a dead bone of the past and make it live. This damn fellow can't. All he cares about is the authenticity and the inscription and the general condition of the coin. I love him, but he's the Man with the Muck-rake of Bunyan. Don't you hate men

with muck-rakes, Perella *mia*?"

Perella laughed, because she liked immensely the eager young man, Charlie Dent, who danced perfectly, and jested with easy grace, took his hobby humorously and treated her wonderful Silvester with the respect due to an eminent man. . . . She laughed too because it was always the old Anthony who talked. Since their return from the Riviera, he had slipped into the old mode of address when they were alone. Perhaps it was wrong. But the "Perella *mia*" sounded in her ears like the music of bells far away.

Anthony had dreaded for some time the summons to America. It came with disconcerting abruptness. A man on the staff of a great American magazine company can't linger, no matter how industriously, for an unlimited time in Europe. He must pack up his traps and take early boat to New York. Thither would Beatrice, who had postponed business affairs connected with her estate, accompany him. She looked forward to the excitement of flaunting a handsome, distinguished husband before the social world; also of converting the Ellison house from a distinguished mausoleum into a cheerful home for the living. She loved movement and a change of environment, having the idea that it kept her mind fresh and her body young. Anthony's lack of enthusiastic outlook disappointed her. It not only dulled the fine edge of her gladness, but reduced her to vague depression. He pleaded dread of the New York winter, of the awful publicity; pictured reporters poking up their inquisitive heads like mice from every unexpected cranny of the house. And when could they get back? He went about like a man carrying a heavy doom on his shoulders.

He saw Perella at a crowded tea-table at Doney's, and found a moment to whisper the dreary tidings into her ear. Watching her intently he noticed a quick tensity of face and hands. She said, after a while:

"I'm glad."

He asked why.

"You'll have a good time. You're going where everybody'll make a fuss of you."

"I don't think that's very kind," said he, and that, for the moment, was the extent of their talk.

They met again a few days after at a luncheon party given by the Flemings, Americans of wealth, in honour of an Ambassador passing through. They had bought a villa just outside Florence, a Quattrocento combination of fortress and country-house, belonging, till recent years, to one of the historic princely

families of Florence. Having taken it more as a grim ruin than a dwelling-place, they had spent years of love and reverence on its conversion into a palace suited for modern needs. The stone-flagged *salle d'armes*, which once resounded to the clang of mailed feet and the clatter of weapons, immediately over the dungeons, was now a stately dining-room, with the heavily-vaulted roof untouched, with its old windows pierced in the formidable thickness of the walls, and hung around with ancient and sombre tapestries. Beneath the vast, carved chimney-piece at the far end, a great log fire burned for show, but cunningly dissimilated radiators warmed the once bleak hall where many a man-at-arms, bored with lounging, must have shivered with cold, and blown upon his frozen fingers.

There were between twenty and thirty guests, half Italian, half Anglo-Saxon, at the ceremonious meal, which was like a formal luncheon party the world over. Silvester, Perella, Anthony and Beatrice were scattered without chance of speech one with the other, about the table. Next to Perella sat the Prince Panini, on the opposite side to Anthony. He could see that the Italian was making love to her within the limits of social discretion, and he loathed the man more than ever. His neighbour, an elderly Italian woman, said:

"The good Commendatore will have to look after his pretty young wife. I know my Panini. He's out for conquest."

"The Commendatore needn't worry. Mrs. Gayton hates the sight of him."

"And may I ask," said she, with a honeyed irony, peculiarly unpleasant to Anthony, "how you know?"

"Mrs. Gayton and I were boy and girl together," he replied, with some exaggeration of fact, "so naturally I know her likes and her dislikes."

"Ah, pardon," said the lady, "I was not aware of the intimacy."

Whereupon Anthony felt a fool, which is not a sentiment conducive to unclouded enjoyment of the passing hour.

It was only when the party streamed into the big drawing-room that he found himself near Perella. Panini was still in attendance. They exchanged frigid commonplaces on the beauty of the villa and the impeccable taste of their hosts. The latter, meanwhile, at the request of the ambassador, took straggling guests on a tour of the historic stronghold. Outside, there was the moat and the barbican and the restored old gardens, stately with cypresses and formal hedges and fountains and long-paved vistas, with here and there statues gleaming mellow in the late December sunshine. Most of the guests stood on the brink of the garden, admired and shivered, and took the opportunity of bolting back into the comfortable warmth of the house. Anthony and Perella lingered. Panini, separated from them for a moment or two, came up. Mr.

Fleming was going to show the company the view from the battlements.

"Many thanks, Prince," said Anthony, "but Mrs. Gayton and I are fascinated by this beautiful Italian garden."

Panini bowed politely.

"The intolerable beast," said Anthony.

She laughed. "Why shouldn't you like him?"

"A fellow who dares to look at you as he does . . . I'd give my soul to be able to kick him from here to Hades."

They strolled, alone, down the flagged path.

"After all, my dear boy, I don't see that it's any of your business," she said.

"That's the devil of it," he replied gloomily. Then: "You're not cold? You don't mind walking a bit? I hate all these people to-day. They're none of them real. All jerking themselves about like *fantocchini*. . . . We'll go in, if you like."

But she declared that the air was sweet after the super-heated house, and on these southern walks the sun was comfortably warm.

They wandered they scarce knew whither in the maze of a garden; cypress and laurel and statue and fountain and vistas to the snow-topped hills already glowing pink in the reflections of the approaching sunset. They found a marble pavilion, an untouched, exquisite bit of Cinquecento design, a dainty dome supported on classical pillars with composite capitals. A marble bench with cushions, facing the nesting sun, invited them. Again he asked:

"Not cold, Perella *mia*?"

She smiled. "Not a bit." She had kept on her fur coat, dreading the possible cold of vast old Italian palaces—at dear Cornelius Adams's house one perished, except in his cosy coal-fire-warmed library, but here she had been oppressed by the heat.

"Toast-warm," she said.

"I'm glad of this precious minute with you," said Anthony. "It's good-bye."

"For how long?"

"God knows."

"I'm glad," she said again, and again he asked why.

"Don't you see? It's best for both of us," she said in her direct fashion. "We agreed that the bridge should be a sort of symbolical barrier—between this side and that side of our lives—perhaps that side doesn't count much for you, but it does for me. I'm nothing if not frank—and we've been crossing it

over and over again without quite noticing it. So it has got to stop. I should be happier if you stayed in America altogether and never came back to Florence."

He put his elbows on his knees and buried his head in his hands. That calm little voice yet had a vibration in it to which he felt a response in quivering nerves. He groaned.

"What a damned fool I've been!"

"Possibly," she said. "But that's no reason why I'm going to let you be a damneder fool."

The reddening sun, which hovered over the low-lying hill, swept a golden path towards them in their marble temple, flushing on its way the cheek of a Diana, chaste huntress, and flooded them in its warmth. Anthony raised a miserable face.

"In a way it has been my fault—in another way it hasn't. It's your own dear fault, which you can't help, of being Perella. Of course you're right. It's best I should stay in America, and be in Florence as little as I can. But what the devil am I going to do without you, my dear?"

"The same as I'll have to do," said Perella.

"It's a bit impossible, isn't it?"

"Let us go," she said. "All this is foolishness."

"Just two more minutes," he pleaded. "The sun will go down and we'll be driven in anyhow. It's our last moment together for God knows how long."

"What's the good?" said Perella. "We have our loyalties—you and I—which matter more than anything else in the world."

"Yes. Don't I know?" said he helplessly.

And so, while the sun on the top of the hill grew a vast and blood-red symbol of passion that in an instant was to be plunged into darkness, they fought out the elemental battle between love and loyalty. And at the end, though unyielding, she broke down and wept bitterly, and his arms went around her. The arms of no living man could have done otherwise.

She hid her face.

"I was so happy until you came to Florence. Why did you come?"

"It was Fate. God knows I didn't seek you out."

"I thought it was all over as far as you were concerned. So I carried on without thinking much. But it has been lately when I see that you still care. . . . You do, don't you?" she asked somewhat tragically.

"I do, God forgive me," said he. "I know I oughtn't to use the word 'love'—between us I've made it rather cheap. But you're the love of my life."

“I believe it now, but it’s all so hopeless and wrong.”

“Yes. Hopeless and wrong. What are we to do?”

They looked at the blood-red sun touching the hill-top with its lower rim. But it gave them no help.

Silvester and Beatrice, the tour of the villa completed, met among the guests, some of whom were already taking their leave, and agreed upon departure. They were going back to Florence together, as they had come, in her large car.

“Where are those two?”

“They went out into the garden, I think,” said Silvester.

On the first terrace they met Panini. He said, with smiling politeness:

“Are you looking for——?”

“Yes. My husband and Mrs. Gayton.”

“I have just seen them,” said he, “in the little marble temple”—he waved an indicating hand—“at the end of the terrace where there are the Canovas.”

He bowed and went into the house.

“I can’t bear that man,” said Beatrice. “He smiles like a jaguar.”

“I take men as I find them, my dear,” said Silvester.

She laughed. “You’re always like the tender-hearted Scottish minister: ‘Let us now pray for the puir deil. Naebody prays for the puir deil!’ ”

He stoutly repudiated the charge of softness. Some people he disliked very much indeed. He gave her to understand that his dislike was as devastating as poison-gas.

Beguiling the way with such innocent discourse, they followed the flagged cypress-hedged paths in search of the truants. They turned the corner of the Canova walk, where the statues glowed, and there in the Temple at the end, in the full red of the setting sun, they saw, as Panini had told them, Anthony and Perella. But it was an Anthony kneeling by Perella’s side, with his arms around her waist, and a Perella bending down with her arms around his neck, and their lips were meeting.

The elder pair stood for a moment, stone-stiff in frozen terror. Beatrice first recovered. She dragged Silvester back, beyond the corner, out of the dreadful vista.

“My God!” she said. “Oh, my God!”

Silvester stood stricken, as though by the sweep of twenty years. He took

off his pince-nez, put them absent-mindedly into his jacket pocket, and passed both hands over his eyes. He murmured foolishly:

"I ought to have taken the warning. Two warnings."

"You suspected."

"No, no."

"But you talk of warnings."

"They were nothings. Mere silliness."

Afterwards he could not make out how the eye of the ironical ass occurred to him in this, the most desperate moment of his life. To Beatrice he could not confess the triviality.

She said again:

"My God!" And then: "What are we going to do?"

He fished out his glasses again, and put them on.

"We can't take them by surprise, like that. It would be too—too—indecent—horrible——"

She moved up the path mechanically, like a sleep-walker.

"Yes, I suppose it would."

"We had better walk back to the house," said Silvester, after a few steps in silence. "They'll join us there soon, for the sun will have gone down. We must do nothing rash, unconsidered. . . ."

"My heart is breaking," she said with a sob.

He took her arm in a kind, firm hand.

"Mine too. But our souls must be stronger than our hearts."

She murmured a hopeless "Yes," and they went on their way. They mounted the steps of the great terrace that swept the garden front of the house, and there, as though he awaited them, stood Panini in fur coat and hat cocked at a truculent angle, with a vague woman who, in their eyes, had scarce existence. Panini saluted.

"Have you found the runaways?"

Beatrice pulled herself together.

"No. The temple was empty. I have already noticed that you have a genius for inaccuracy, Prince Panini."

They entered the house where a sprinkling of guests still remained. The hostess came up cheerfully suggesting tea and bridge. They declined; affairs in Florence called them.

"We're only waiting for my husband and Mrs. Gayton, who are just

coming in from the garden."

Other people came up for an anguished moment's polite chatter. Left alone, they went into one of the deep embrasures.

"We haven't yet decided what to do. If I'd only myself to think of I could grapple with it—perhaps—I don't know—but you're in it with me. It's you and I. I don't want to do anything that may hurt you. Say quickly what you think."

Again she felt his kind, firm touch on her arm.

"Say nothing. We've seen nothing. What we saw was not meant for us to see. We must think, each of us, very deeply, and then we must meet and talk heart to heart, as you and I, my dearest friend, can talk, and then only can we decide on the best course to follow."

"Perhaps you're right," she sighed assentingly. "But it'll be hard."

"If I feel equal to it, how much more must you!"

"Yes. But you're a man," she said, impressed by his nervous strength, "and I'm a woman. That makes a lot of difference."

"I never thought that you, of all folk, would condescend to plead woman's weakness," said he.

She winced under what she felt to be a tiny lash. She drew herself up.

"I won't. I'll do as you say. I promise."

They turned into the room to see Anthony and Perella making way towards them.

"I see everybody's going," said Anthony, master of himself. "I hope we haven't kept you waiting?"

"Well—er—we were waiting a little," said Silvester, falling into his shy manner.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault," said Anthony.

"We went farther than we expected, and got a bit lost," said Perella, with calm eyes. "But you see, we've found our way back."

"Yes," smiled Anthony. "Here we are."

It was not a merry drive back to Florence. Anthony chose to sit outside next the driver. On the journey out, said he, he had taken up too much room inside and made everybody uncomfortable. Perella insisted on sitting on the little seat, so that Silvester should be at the back with Beatrice.

"He loves it—hates *strapontins*. While I'm just like a fly and can be perfectly happy anywhere."

So intensely enwrapped in their own thoughts were the three, that none of

them realized, till the car stopped in the darkness at the door in the Viale Milton, that not a word had been spoken during the journey.

Having put down the Gaytons, Anthony entered the car.

“A dud party,” said he.

She replied, for the sake of saying something:

“Typical of Florence.”

“What’s wrong with Florence?” he asked.

“Let us call it provincial,” she said. “I’ll be glad when we’re back in New York, won’t you?”

“I suppose so,” said he, looking out of the car window.

At the villa she declared that her head was splitting—the cause, the idiotically over-heated rooms. Perhaps, also, she may have caught a chill in the car. Anthony was as ever solicitous. Anyhow, she would go to bed, and feed on aspirin and bouillon for dinner, and would see him in the morning if she were better.

Anthony rang up Charlie Dent at his hotel, and arranged with him to dine together at Betti’s. He was in no mood to eat out his heart alone in that vast and accusing house.

PART VI

SILVESTER AND BEATRICE

CHAPTER XIX

TWO forlorn conspirators met, the following afternoon, in Silvester's library, almost with a sense of guilt, having been put to indignified subterfuge so as to arrange a secret interview. To shut themselves up in a room, either in the Villa Corazza or the flat, with Anthony or Perella, as the case might be, wondering what they were talking about, had been repugnant to their honest minds. For Beatrice it was a simple matter to leave the villa without explanation. She had pleaded headache so as to lunch, listless and silent, opposite a none too ebullient Anthony, and then had announced her intention of paying vague calls after her customary siesta. Anthony said he might run down to Doney's to see whom he might see. Would Beatrice be looking in after her visits? Possibly not, she said. Her head could not stand the clatter and the chatter of the place. Thus, her unquestioned freedom of movement.

Silvester, too, might have gone forth unchallenged on his own errands. But, as they had arranged, over the telephone, this meeting at the Viale Milton, Perella must be spirited away. He had to summon the aid of the Marchesa della Torre as a benevolent djinn, who, on the ground of depression, illness, loneliness, should bid Perella to lunch and keep her the rest of the afternoon. The Marchesa swearing loyal obedience, he had gone into Perella's studio, where, in the northern December light Perella, pale and wraithlike in a black painter's blouse, sat before a great canvas trying to make a charcoal copy of a drapery on the lay-figure with her left hand. Her eagerness to accept the Marchesa's invitation had hurt him horribly. He said, a heart-rent Machiavelli:

"She seems to be so down on her luck. Stay with her as long as ever you like—till dinner-time if you can."

Already, even as he spoke, she was wiping her blackened fingers on her blouse.

When Beatrice was announced he met her in the vestibule and brought her into the library, where a cheerful wood fire was burning. Over the mantelpiece the curtain was drawn across the disturbing picture of the Adoration. But the room glowed rich and warm in the shaded light which half revealed the mellow books in the cornice-high cases, and the restful pictures here and there in their dull old-gold frames, and the graceful lines of furniture and the great

library table neatly laden with books and papers and the virtuoso's accessories to the writer's craft.

He would have relieved her of her furs, but she motioned him away, and, sitting down, spread out her hands before the fire.

"It's cold—damp and penetrating. Such a change from yesterday." She laughed blankly. "Everything seems to have changed since yesterday. Even the weather."

He stood about her in his nervous way.

"Will you have some tea? It might warm you."

She shook her head. "No thanks. At the best its only a fussy futility. Besides, it isn't my body that's cold, really. It's my heart that's frozen." She stared at the blazing logs, and, after a pause: "What are we going to do?"

"That, my dear," said he, "is what we've met to discuss."

He offered her a cigarette from his battered silver case, which she declined, and lit one himself and drew up a chair.

"How far do you think it has gone?" she asked.

He made a quick movement. "Yesterday was the farthest. I'd stake my life on it."

She assented wearily. "But it was far enough. If this is a hell of twenty-four hours what must a Hell of Eternity be like?"

He rose and threw his half-smoked cigarette into the fire and touched her crouching shoulder.

"A bad time, my dear?"

She nodded, miserable. He sighed.

"I too."

There was silence, for there was an agony in their hearts too poignant and too sacred for mutual avowal. How could they admit each other beyond the veil of last night's anguished vigil?

Could she tell him this . . .? That wretchedly, with all her pride in the dust, she had crept in the small, dead hours to Anthony's room, and, with infinite precautions of noiselessness, had held the door a moment ajar, only to hear the rhythmic breath of the untroubled sleep of youth. That she had closed the door with the same infinite care, and had crept back, whipped and scourged and beaten, to bed. Anthony awake, tossing restlessly like herself, she could have staked everything on one desperate emotional appeal; but, Anthony asleep, calmly unconscious of the pangs of conscience or love or desire . . . how could she wake him, how could she await the rubbing of eyes, the pleasant, casual,

half-sleepy, inevitable question? And how could she tell Silvester that, with a frantic woman's disloyalty, she had broken their compact of silence?

She stared at the flames. Presently, her body warmed, she threw her fur cloak on the back of the chair, and her comfortless hat on the floor. And Silvester, who after nervous pacing about the room, had sat by the library table, his head in his hands, was too much preoccupied with the memory of his vigil to notice her action.

For, how could he, on his part, admit her, all dearest, save one, of women though she was, and bound to him by this chain of common suffering, into the secrecy of last night's abominable pain?

They had dined together; a cheerless meal. Perella, pale and tired, had striven valiantly to talk; of household things, of the meal, of his little comforts, of patterns of cloth that had come that day from his London tailor. She wore the last theme jestingly threadbare. Since his university days he had gone to the same old-fashioned, historic firm, and they had supplied him—both sides, tailor and Silvester, too proud to try on—with the same old historic suits. His sensitiveness perceived an underlying pathos in her jests, and his kindly responses seemed to be made over a swallowed sob.

The meal over, he had gone into his library where—he invented an urgent telegram—he must make speed with a tough and worrying article. He had kissed her good night confusedly somewhere, but not on her lips, which she did not offer. In the library, the eye of the white, curvetting ass carrying his contemptible burden of a credulous Mage, gleamed with the cynical mockery of all the Devils concentrated in one unutterable Beast. He drew the curtain angrily. . . . He had sat on in his library chair, and the memories of his married life, such as only God can share with the soul of a good yet pitiable man, smote him to despair. And the bleak hours passed by, until, impelled by God knows what complexes of desperate emotion, he, too, had crept to a dear and sacred door. He had listened in the silence of the night. He had heard sounds coming from within which, at first, puzzled his confused senses. Then, at last, he recognized the catching of the breath of a woman's sobs. He had heard it once before—and it had torn his heart to ribbons—when Perella had received her sentence of the useless hand. He had shrunk back as though he had come, miserable eavesdropper, upon some soul secret in which he had no part. He made his way to his own room, gropingly, like a blind man, leaving the electric light blazing in library and passages.

He, too, in intention had broken the compact of silence.

The glowing, half burned-out logs fell in a clatter on the hearth. This roused them. He started up and threw a couple of fresh logs on the fire. Said

Beatrice:

"We don't seem to be getting on, do we?"

"It takes a little time to establish a common atmosphere. There's such a thing, you know, as refraction," said he in answer to a querying glance. "When we see the sun disappear below the horizon, it has really sunk some time before. But we all see it sink simultaneously because we look at it through the same refracting medium. If everybody had his own atmosphere, every mortal eye would see the setting sun at a different height from the horizon, and there would be dreadful confusion. We have only to extend this truth from physical to spiritual phenomena. You and I must get the same atmosphere so as to have the same angle of refraction. Otherwise we can never come to the same conclusion. Perhaps sitting quiet a while together has helped us more than we realize."

"I was thinking of the last twenty-four hours," said Beatrice.

"So was I. Which may go to help my little pedantic theory."

She sighed:

"We're both of us wretchedly unhappy."

Silvester rose, took a cigarette from the chased box on the mantelpiece, and mechanically threw it back again and resumed his seat.

"I must say something—something that must hurt, my dear—but I've had it in my mind ever since yesterday. It's a proposition—a dreadful proposition. It's this: supposing I had been of my wife's generation—two or three years, say, older than herself, and you had been younger than your husband, should we have acted yesterday in the way we did?"

She covered her face with her hands, and answered the underlying thought rather than the words.

"That's the torment of it." After a bit she dashed her hands away rather wildly.

"I can't bear you to reproach me. Perhaps I deserve it. But I've tried—God knows how I've tried—to keep young; not only in my poor face and figure and so on—the physical side of life—but in mind and outlook and freshness of enthusiasm . . . everything that could blind him to the gap of nearly twenty years between us . . . and it has been no good . . . I've seen things coming . . . and now . . ."

She broke down and buried her face in the curve of arm and forearm, on the side of the easy chair, and cried helplessly.

Silvester, unromantic, bald, scrubbily white-moustached, looked at her for a few moments, and his eyes behind the thick lenses were red. He came and sat

on the farther arm of the chair, and touched her with a diffident and tender hand.

"Between Perella and me there is a difference of over thirty years," he said gently. "I've given her all that a doting man can give to a woman. All except the one thing beyond my power. Do you know what that is, my dear?" He confirmed her head's faint motion. "Youth."

He rose. She lifted a tear-stained face, and stretched out her arms.

"But I could give him——" She paused, making queer gestures with her fingers as though to conjure up in the man's mind all the sexes' differences, and blurted out on a strained note: "youth."

He caught her agitated hands and held them for a few moments, and again she felt how kind and strong were his.

"My dearest friend," said he, "we have broken, you and I, an inexorable law of life. Some have done it and gone scot-free and been happy. But others, like us, have had to pay the penalty. . . . It's not a case," he continued, "of the old formula: 'The woman pays.' For here the man pays too—equally."

She rose impatiently and moved about the dimly-lit scholarly room.

"I know. We're both in the same hell. We've got a common atmosphere right enough. And I suppose we must pay the same penalty, each in our respective ways. Anthony and I are going to America very soon. I can say I'm bored with Florence, and I can sell the Villa Corazza and buy a place in England, which will please him. We never need come back to Florence. You two can stay here untroubled by us. We can keep up the pretence of ignorance, and trust to luck. But we'll lead, neither of us, anything like human lives, with this at the back of us. We'll all the time have the problem of those other two. What will they be feeling? What undercurrents . . . perhaps what treacheries, for they mayn't be able to help themselves . . .? It isn't as if they had just met, and it was a mere flare-up—Anthony's young, and has a way with women; I've seen it a hundred times—but up to now he has been loyal to me, I know. Trust a woman who looks after a young man with the eye of an old cat to know. . . . I've been jealous, of course, but without reason. And now—this! It isn't recent. I'm certain of it. They lived in the same Pension here for months. It's against reason that they shouldn't have been drawn together. Against reason. I've had a dread of it since the first night I met her in the villa. She stood like a tongue of flame. Any man would have been mad for her. We've been fools . . ."

She swept a hand.

"Youth to youth. The eternal law. Yes, we've been fools," said Silvester.

She turned on him quickly.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Sit down, dear Beatrice, and I'll tell you the little that I know."

It was but a little, yet it illuminated dark spaces. There was the nurse's report of cabled answer to a letter on the evening of his first encounter with the jeering stare of the white ass. There was also a trivial something, noted mechanically by an eye trained to the observance of artistic detail, to which, however, his mind, working in paths apart from social convention, had attached no particular importance. In Venice she had worn a ring, a pretty gem, an intaglio of dainty quality. During her illness she had kept the ring on her finger. With a queer suddenness it had disappeared. Then things so emotional had happened that he had forgotten its existence. But now he had remembered. The ring had been on her left hand—for the right had been in plaster of Paris—and his accurate visionary memory showed it on the engagement finger. Therefore there had been between them all the love and romance and passion of Romeo and Juliet, frozen beyond doubt by unkindly circumstance, in what to them was the long ago. And now the sun of circumstance had thawed the frozen love, and it had burst into new strength, and many waters could not drive it out. Such was the text of Silvester's sorrowful homily.

"I can understand Perella marrying you," said Beatrice. "She's blameless. A God's good angel—that's you, my dear—came down from heaven and took her away from every kind of suffering. But Anthony. Why?" She clutched her bosom with both hands. "Why, when he was bound to this girl?"

Silvester made the little Latin gesture of helplessness. "That," said he, "is outside my philosophy."

"But can't you think?" She leaned forward in her chair, with eager and wrinkled brow. "Why? I was a rich and foolish woman, ready, in the inside of me, to throw myself into his arms. If he had been a mere waster, a fortune-hunter, it would have been so easy for him. But no. To give him the honour he deserves, he has always treated that side of things with scorn. Our two years of secret marriage, for instance. Every little gift of mine must be a trifle. . . . So why? Why? All the time it was I who . . . I who——"

She broke off suddenly and, stiff in her chair, stared in front of her as at instantaneously evoked ghosts of memories; memories that should have been so radiant in beauty—now stricken and withered, haggardly reproachful.

They showed the clutching fingers of the woman who, never having known love, desperately resolved to grasp it before it should be for ever beyond her reach. They showed her the imperious wiles which she had exercised with the command of her wealth and her influence and her lingering beauty. It was she who had willed, and he who had obeyed. She had held out lures of increasing

intensity which he could not resist. Had she been siren of the sirens, leading youth to destruction, she could not have used her sex with more diabolical subtlety. . . . It was she who had dragged a first unwilling yet fascinated boy away from his young love. . . . She had done it unknowingly. That was her sole defence. That he had not told her of Perella was her ground of accusation. But it was she herself who had willed it from the beginning. She had never been honest with herself. From the first she had spread the snare that had eventually drawn him where she had craved him to be, within the hungering and foolish clasp of her arms. . . . And all the memories of their lives together stalked before her like unhallowed spectres.

The sweet-natured woman shivered in an agony of self-abasement. Her integrity exaggerated the stain on her soul. . . . Other women of her acquaintance had married young men or taken them more or less openly as lovers, and in either case paid them for ostensible fidelity, and a cynically tolerant world had accepted every situation, reserving to itself the right to say devastating things about them behind their backs. In this contemptuous criticism she had taken her share. Yet it had never occurred to her to desecrate her love by comparison with these horribly venal matings. It had been a thing apart, with never a sordid thought to mar its beauty. But now, in her agony of self-indictment, she confessed that she would have paid—like any of the scorned women who took young boys as husbands and maintained them in idleness. It was to Anthony himself that she owed salvation from that depth of the abyss. Had he wavered, she would have had no right to hold herself higher than the others.

There were memories that passed, ghastly in their sentence of humiliation.

Again the picture recurred, as it had recurred with maddening iteration throughout the past twenty-four hours, of the despairing and passionate embrace of those two. Would she ever forget, till she died, the tensity of the girl’s face?

She collapsed, huddled up in the chair. The time for tears was past. How long she had been staring at the ghosts she knew not. It seemed hours. She glanced, with some concern, at Silvester who sat, apparently unaware of any state of catalepsy, looking drearily into the fire.

“You have no more reason to reproach yourself for marrying Anthony than I have for marrying Perella,” he said, as though carrying on a conversation broken by a few moments’ pause. “The past is irrevocable. That’s the worst of platitudes—they’re always so true. We’ve got the present and the future to consider. Tell me. Do you think they know or fear we saw them yesterday, or suspect that we have any idea of what’s between them?”

“I’m quite sure he doesn’t,” said Beatrice miserably.

“I, too, feel certain about Perella.”

“Does that help us very much?”

“Considerably.” He rose and made a few steps to and fro, his hands behind his back. “It helps vitally. It, in fact, clears the ground. My dear,” he said, halting by her side, “I’m afraid I can’t help my dry, analytical mind working in its usual way, in spite of what I’m feeling. You must forgive me. As far as I can see, there are only three courses open. One. Tell them what we know, as gently as possible. It would be very painful for everybody, yet we could stake our faith in human values. It would be an honest course; the one we should undoubtedly follow if we were of the same ages as they. Of this we have already spoken this afternoon. I think we realized the hopelessness of it.”

“Oh, God! yes,” said Beatrice.

“Therefore we must eliminate it. Two. Let things drift. You and Anthony cut yourselves away from Florence; Perella and I anchor ourselves more firmly here. That seems reasonable. But is it? One or two things must happen. Either what you yourself said about us leading anything like human lives with those two eating out their hearts for each other—the Atlantic between them—all the gladness of life gone out for everybody, and a poor forged imitation of happiness, if it’s even that, for us all; or—let us face it—the call of Love and Youth will be too strong, and Anthony will not go back to America—at least not with you. If he goes, it will be with Perella.”

Beatrice hid her face and moaned. “Oh, they couldn’t, they couldn’t.”

“They could, my dear,” said he, with a catch in his voice. “Seven hundred years ago—in this city—the pair are immortalized and live enshrined in the pity and sympathy of all the ages. And, a hundred years ago—or so it seems—what I thought was the impossible happened.”

She turned round swiftly, and caught his hand.

“My poor dear—I never thought—I had almost forgotten——”

He said very gently: “You see it can happen. But it mustn’t happen. You agree to that?”

“Anything but that.”

“So we have to eliminate course number two,” said he. “There remains the third. Are we willing, are we strong enough, to take it?”

He paused. His tone sounded in her ears like a doom. She sat upright and stared at him.

“I can’t guess what you mean.”

“Why should four lives be ruined when two can be saved?”

“You mean Anthony’s and Perella’s?”

“Yes.”

Her lips twitched, and her eyes were very piteous and it took all her courage to find her voice.

“You wouldn’t have suggested this—what it is as yet I don’t know—but, whatever it is, you wouldn’t have suggested it if—if we were the same age as they—if we weren’t old—old——”

The wretched tears came again. He touched her hand tenderly.

“Not old, my dear. At least, not you. But older than they are.”

“Oh, what does it matter—a few years more or less—I know. You and I, man and woman, are of the same age. Tell me straight what’s in your mind. The only way out.”

The top button of his jacket was unfastened. He buttoned it, straightened himself and drew his jacket tight around him.

“Why shouldn’t we go out of their life and leave them to remould it—to their hearts’ desire?”

“That I’ve grasped. But, even if we could bring ourselves to such a thing, how could it be done?”

When it came to the agony point of clear proposition, Silvester broke down. He had kept himself strong by intellectual effort, marshalling facts and arguments in his clear brain. He had hoped that Beatrice would have divined his scheme in its broad purpose; that she would have accepted or rejected it according to her vision of the future. Through her lack of perception, the altruistic dream that had inspired his simple soul had faded into the light of common day. He must reduce it to dreadful details. He lost his great confidence.

“If you can’t see, how can I tell you?”

He turned away, and gave her the spectacle of an old man’s tears. Then only did the cloud that hung over her brain begin to lift, and there lay revealed to her the most fantastic proposal that ever man made to woman.

It is a factor in their sex’s defensive scheme that women, in such crises, should be more brutally direct than men. She rose, and said:

“You mean that you and I—somehow—should deliberately give those two grounds for divorce?”

He raised a hand from a hidden face.

“What else?”

Reaction came, with a clamour within her, and swept her on a wave of unreason.

"Never. Never in this life. How can you make such a suggestion?"

In the surge, all that had been said in the past two poignant hours was forgotten.

"How can a man, loving a woman, coldly think of throwing her into another man's arms?" She said many foolish things. Then: "Love her! How can you love her?"

He waited until she had calmed.

"I love her so much," said he, "that I am willing to sacrifice all that I hold dear for the sake of her happiness."

"I can't," she said desperately. "I can't. I'm not big enough." She flashed defiant. "Why should I sacrifice what's dearer to me than to you—to a woman than to any man—my good name? Why should I make myself the laughing-stock of America, England and Italy, so that Anthony should go off with another woman? Let him go, but not with my connivance. . . . No, my friend. The scheme's insane. Better let things drift and trust to life from day to day."

"As you will," said he. "God help us all."

She left him, went home, conscious of herself as an outer shell of a woman with all within her torn into formless shreds. A footman opened the door of the villa. Baratelli received her in the vestibule. She put the mechanical question:

"Any telegrams, telephone calls?"

"Only one," said he. "From the Signora Gayton. It was for Mr. Blake. I told the Signora that she would find him at Doney's."

She went up to her room and tried to rest. Later she heard Anthony's step along the corridor. A slammed door signified his entrance into his own room. The maid, Dennever, came, dreadfully, impersonally punctual. Beatrice let herself be dressed. Towards the end of her toilette Anthony entered, young and spruce in dinner-jacket. She held up a protective garment.

"I'm not quite ready. I'll meet you downstairs."

When she went down she met him in the small *salon* that led into the dining-room. She noted that the conventional cocktail which he always drank before dinner remained untouched on its usual little table.

He was walking up and down the room. He smiled politely as she entered.

"I hope you didn't go to Doney's to look for me? I was called away. I left a message."

"No. I hadn't time to go to Doney's."

"I'm glad," said he. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"A call or two. Then home. And you?"

"I met a couple of stray Americans—artists—you don't know them. . . ."

Her heart sank cold. For the first time she knew that he deliberately lied to her. His Americans were Perella. They had met either at the Marchesa della Torre's, whither Silvester in his subtle innocence had sent her, or elsewhere. Beatrice disdained further question.

Dinner was served. They sat at a small table at the end of the stately room. A mirror in an old Florentine frame faced her. She would have risen to save herself from the inexorable reflection, but she dared not. Her unbalanced sense saw her image horribly, as that of an over-rouged woman with haggard eyes and sunken cheeks.

He said: "Are you really keen on taking up our reservations on the *Aquitania*?"

"Why, yes. Everything's arranged. Haven't you got to be in New York?"

"I cabled yesterday for the latest date Styvers could give me. Reply this afternoon that they don't need me or another month. That's their way. They like to put the fear of God into you—and when you show them that you're unmoved, they climb down!"

"So you want to stay here another month?"

"If you don't mind," said he. "Of course there's no reason why you shouldn't go by the *Aquitania*, my dear, if it puts out your plans."

"Why do you want to stay in Florence?" she asked, with a show of casualness.

"To escape the New York winter as long as possible. Brrr! You know I've never got accustomed to it."

She thought for a few racked moments.

"Very well," she said with a shrug. "We can cancel the bookings."

"You're perfectly sure you wouldn't like to go ahead of me?"

"Perfectly sure," she said. "For me, this is my real home. It's poor old Fargus that'll be upset."

"Oh—Fargus!" said Anthony. He added—and her jealous ear seemed to catch a note of compunction: "You're a great dear, you know, Beatrice."

"I wonder," she said, "whether you really think so."

"Madonna!" he protested.

But his cry rang untrue.

The meal over, coffee was served in the octagonal *salon*. She dismissed the servants. As she handed him his cup, he rose to take it. She almost wished that married life had dulled those little instincts of courtesy. If only he could have lain back in his chair and smiled up at her and touched her fingers as she served him!

She said desperately:

"I wonder how long you're going on loving an old woman, Anthony."

He replied: "My Madonna has no age. I'll love her till the end of time."

She made a pretence of laughter.

"An Antonio might have said that in an eighteenth-century comedy."

"Why not," said he, "if he was sincere?"

"Ah, but was he?"

"That," said he, sipping his coffee, "is known but to his God and his dramatist."

"And whether he was real or artificial?"

He laughed away the words.

"Have no fear, Madonna. I'm real enough."

She took up a magazine; he a novel. There was silence between them; not, as once, intimate, companionable, with now and then eyes meeting eyes lifted from the page in a mutual smile of understanding; but silence cold and hard, only broken for her by the dragging minutes clicking almost in her brain. Her head ached violently; her eyes burned; her limbs were lead. Presently, at the end of her strength, she rose. Anthony looked up from his book, obviously unaware of the torment within her. She threw the magazine on the table.

"I'm going to bed."

"Already?" He sprang to his feet.

"I'm tired," she said. "I don't think Florence in winter suits me. It gets on my nerves. . . . It's really a place for Latins, not for Anglo-Saxons."

"There's something in that," said he politely.

"Besides, I need a change . . . my restless, American blood. Perhaps, after all, I'll go by the *Aquitania*—especially as it won't make very much difference to you."

"My dear Beatrice," he protested.

"We'll see."

She reached the door which he held open for her.

"Good night," she said.

She passed out. He went a step after her.

"What's the matter, my dear?"

"I've told you. I'm tired," she replied, on a half turn. "I need a change." Moved by sudden impulse, she completed the turn and faced him in the corridor, as he stood with his back against the open door. "There comes a time in a woman's life when change is inevitable. You're too young to understand. Good night, Anthony."

"Good night," said he.

She crossed the marble-paved hall, not daring to turn again, hoping with a forlorn agony of hope that he might stride after her, in his wonderful way, and take her in his arms. But she only heard a slow step and the clicking of the *salon* door behind him. It was the first night during their married life that they had not kissed on parting. He had made no attempt, murmured no hint, made no gesture, however conventional.

That click of the door, echoing sharp in the marble hall, sounded in her ears like that of doom. It signified the end.

In her room she found the bundle of last post letters spread out on her writing-table, with which she had been too weary to concern herself before dinner. She opened one from Emilia. . . . "The little baronet, or, if women had their rights, the little baronetess, is still doing well, thank you. . .!" She threw it aside. . . . Yes, later, when the new thing that had sprung from the thing to which she had given birth, was born, the natural woman's tendrils in her would entwine themselves around it. But not now. . . . Instead of a comfort, it was a mocking pain. . . .

Her eyes wandered gropingly over her own private and almost sacred collection of bedroom books. In the depths of her she was a spiritually-minded woman, and read many things almost in secrecy. As she scanned the backs, the beginning of a paragraph of St. Thomas à Kempis came hauntingly into her head.

"*Think not thyself totally abandoned, although for a time I have sent thee some tribulation, and have even withdrawn some cherished consolation. . . .*"

She sought the volume, a beautiful edition bound in vellum, and she remembered that, a fortnight or so before, she had lent it to Anthony, who had heard vaguely of *The Imitation* as a spiritual classic, but had never set eyes on it. It was not the kind of volume he would take downstairs. Therefore, it must be in his bedroom. She craved the book, so that she could continue the haunting passage. As the chances of Anthony having retired were remote, she turned the handle of his door and switched on the lights. The room had been

prepared, things set in order, the bedclothes turned down. She surveyed, with a pang, a husband's familiar and intimate odds and ends. The vellum-bound book she found beneath a pile of French and Italian novels. She drew it out, and was about to depart when, her sense of smell being acute, she became conscious of a perfume, all the more strange because Anthony had every healthy man's loathing of artificial scent. To please him, she herself used it only in the subtlest fashion. But here was frank perfume; different from her own, but none the less exquisite. She thought she recognized it. Whence could it proceed? Almost unawares she traced it to the bed where the gay silk pyjama suit was laid out. From the pocket of the jacket she drew a crumpled, mangled, almost still moist square of a handkerchief which, when she shook it out, disclosed an embroidered "P" in the corner. And the scent was somewhat stale.

He had taken it yesterday to dry Perella's eyes. He had kept it. He had put it in his pyjama pocket to keep the tears and perfume of her while he slept. She knew there had been no other wrong. And, characteristically careless, Anthony had let it stay where he had put it. . . . But it was youth, youth clinging with all its emotional fibres to the tears and the perfume of youth. She felt a powerlessness that was almost strength. She returned the pathetic rag to the pyjama pocket, and went back to her room, where she had neither the heart nor the faith to open the *De Imitatione Christi*.

Very early next morning Silvester received a message.

"I'm in your hands. I'll do whatever you think is right."

CHAPTER XX

ANTHONY stretched himself luxuriously, while his man drew the heavy curtains and let the pale December daylight into the room. He watched the servant with the still fresh pride of independence. It was his own man, a handy Englishman, who combined the duties of valet and chauffeur. In his latter capacity he had little to do but keep the two-seater Fiat clean. In his leisure he laid out Anthony's clothes, brushed his suits, and treed his shoes. He was a brisk person, and the possession of him was an unceasing delight to Anthony.

He laid the breakfast tray on Anthony's lap as he sat up in bed, and a folded pile of newspapers by his side. He picked up odds and ends of garments that lay about the room. He paused by the door.

"I beg pardon, sir, but Mr. Fargus's compliments, and he would be glad to see you as soon as it's convenient."

Anthony poured out his coffee and milk.

"Tell him to come along whenever he likes."

He unfolded a paper and scanned the news. The same old Mussolini jealousies, the same old unintelligible Reparations question, the same old sanguinary drama somewhere or the other. He buttered his roll and sipped his coffee. It was a very comfortable world, in spite of emotional upheaval. Beatrice's attitude for the last two or three days had disturbed him. She had gone about surrounded by a strange atmosphere which he could not penetrate. For the last two nights, for instance, on parting, she had made it obvious that she did not desire his usual kiss. Out of delicacy the first night, and perhaps out of pique the second, he had held back. Yesterday he had scarcely seen her. She had been in Florence all the morning and had lunched out. He had spent most of the afternoon at the Anglo-American Club playing bridge, and, on his return before dinner, he had found her in the hall saying good-bye to Silvester, who apparently had dropped in for tea. Again she had asked him whether he minded her dining alone upstairs. She alleged headache, fatigue consequent on the winter climate of Florence. She had met Cornelius and asked him to dine, but now she didn't feel equal to his oppressive optimism. Anthony must make her excuses. Anyhow, he would have an amiable dinner companion. She had gone away with a vague "good night."

It was perturbing. He didn't like the delicate balance of their relations to be

upset. Analogous incomprehensible moods had often worried him during the past two years, and had caused him to grip his head in perplexity and wonder what the devil he had done to offend. Something trivial in his eyes, but magnified absurdly in the woman's, had always been the cause. It must be the same now. Conscience suggested jealousy of Perella. Reason proclaimed the absurdity of such a hypothesis. He had been a model of astute discretion. . . . And, as for Perella herself, there was but one way out. He had been a fool a couple of days ago to plead for an extra month in Florence. His head had been full of her since their meeting at Doney's—an instant's meeting too casual to be noticed by the tea-drinking crowd—followed by the walk on the Lungarno, and his drive with her in the two-seater to the corner of her street. She was the valiantest thing on earth; her decision had been as irrevocable as the Last Judgment; and there was only one way out of the difficulty. He must make things up with Beatrice and go with her to America on the *Aquitania*. And he must never come back to Florence. It was a dreadful, heart-rending muddle. . . . But the bed was warm, the rolls were crisp, the coffee was hot, and he had a morning of pleasant drawing before him. Mechanically he sought a handkerchief, and drew from his pocket Perella's little rag. What an idiot he was to have left it there for two or three nights! He hoped that Jackson, the brisk man, had not noticed it. Then he laughed. Women's handkerchiefs must be one to Jackson. Why shouldn't he have one of his wife's handkerchiefs in his pocket? All was well. He kissed the poor little emblem of love and misery and put it back. . . . Yes. The *Aquitania*. His mind was made up. He must play the game. It was hell to leave her now that he knew she loved him; but it would be worse hell to do otherwise. Beatrice, Silvester, Perella herself. . . . No—it was one of those things that only cads and devils could do. The *Aquitania*, and the clean cut.

There was a tap at his door, and, on his response, there entered Fargus, small and grey and wizened.

"You'll be kind enough to excuse me, Mr. Blake, for disturbing you," said he, "and perhaps for taking a liberty; but as I'm in a position of trust, I should regard it as a favour if you told me something about Madam's sudden departure this morning."

Anthony stared. "Sudden departure? What do you mean?"

"Dennever went into her room this morning as usual, found it empty, the bed not slept in, everything in a mess, drawers opened, jewellery gone. She goes downstairs and learns from the under-chauffeur that Madam started at half-past six in the big car with Reid, taking only a dressing-case with her."

Anthony dumped the tray beside him on the bed, and swung out from beneath the clothes.

“Are you mad, Fargus? I don’t understand!”

“It’s so extraordinary that Madam shouldn’t have told Dennever to pack her things.”

“Of course. Of course. Fantastic.”

“You know nothing about it, Mr. Blake?”

“Not a thing.”

He huddled on his Joseph’s coat of a dressing gown.

“Let us look into it. It’s absurd.”

He went out and searched Beatrice’s room. Nothing there gave a clue to her secret flight. The maid had restored confusion to order. There was no trace of a message. Nothing. The under-chauffeur told his bald and unsatisfactory story. Later, Dennever reported that Madam had taken the set of personal cheque-books (Fargus’s despair for many years) from her private drawer. This betokened more than a day’s excursion. What could it mean? Pending an answer, Anthony washed and dressed and waited.

Perella was awakened much earlier. The servant brought in a letter or two. One of them was unstamped and addressed in Silvester’s handwriting. She was in the middle of it, and in a state of dire perplexity, when Marietta, the old servant, began to upbraid her for letting the latter go without due ministrations.

“He was called away suddenly,” said Perella.

“But there was his valise to be packed and carried downstairs. I could not long have gone to bed. I ought to have been awakened.”

“We did not like to disturb you,” said Perella gently.

The old woman went out grumbling. She had been in the Commendatore’s service for twenty years, and resented this breach of trust.

Perella re-read the letter. It ran:

> MY DEAREST PERELLA,
>
> By the time you get this I shall have started on a long journey, the reason for which I shall tell you later. I need not say more now than that it is urgent, that it has to be secret, and that, much as I regret it, I have not seen my way to take you into my confidence. I shall be greatly obliged if you will carry on here as though nothing has happened until you hear from me again, which will be as soon as possible. I’ve paid some money into the joint account at the Banca d’Italia, which I see was getting somewhat low. So you will have

plenty, my dear, to go on with.

Please keep all correspondence until I let you know where to forward it, as my movements may be uncertain. As you may imagine, I feel very much averse from leaving you with this vague information, but other interests with mine are involved in this affair.

Yours affectionately,

SILVESTER.

The more she read the cold words in the familiar, precise handwriting, the more was she baffled. Only twice during their married life had he had occasion to write to her; both times in England, once when hospitable friends of his had insisted on her prolonging a week-end visit when business took him up to town on the Monday, and once when she spent a couple of nights with Caroline, while he was lecturing in Edinburgh. And those letters had been full of his kindness and his charm and his pedantic playfulness—as different from this as a sonnet from a paragraph of news. If Marietta felt a sense of grievance, how much more did she! Instinct, however, had compelled her to keep the truth of her ignorance from the old servant. But when could he have started, so that she had heard no sound? He had been curiously preoccupied and absent-minded at dinner. The article which he had undertaken to write for an Art Magazine on Persian Seventeenth-Century Painting, nominally a review of a French treatise, was growing, he had complained, in length and ineptitude. She knew that he took his scholarship over-seriously. To him, an inaccuracy was as grievously terrible as to a surgeon would be a slip of his knife into a vital part. But she had never known work occasion such depression. The only man who knew anything about the subject, he had declared, was a Finlander who used to live in Constantinople before the war. God knew where he was now; perhaps back again in his old university of Abo. If time wasn't pressing, it would be almost worth while to seek him out either at one place or the other, and look over his collection. After dinner he had bidden her a hurried good night and retired into his sacrosanct library.

She, innocent yet guilty, her mind distraught with thoughts of Anthony, had not resented her husband's nervous apologies for leaving her, and, after an hour or two with an absently read book, had gone to bed. From his bedroom near by there had come not a sound. She had not fallen asleep till late. When could he have left the house?

She went miserably through the flat. His fur coat with its old-fashioned and dilapidated mink collar, which he could never be persuaded to replace, and his lighter overcoat, were missing from the hall. From the box-room she noticed the absence only of his old suit-case. The library was in its usual scrupulous

order. A great mass of ashes of burnt paper, however, lay beneath the Renaissance chimney-piece, flecks of white showing here and there. She kneeled down and looked at them. They were fragments of his article on Persian Painting which he had destroyed.

The mad idea entered her head that he had run off to track the Only Authority from Constantinople to Abo.

She passed the morning desolate. Innocent, yet guilty, again she thought of Anthony. But how could Anthony have anything to do with this sudden journey of Silvester's? She had been fighting him and her heart with all the strength that was in her. Of only one indiscretion, remembered with remorseful anguish, had she been culpable, when her will was numbed and her limbs were like water, and her head swam and the blood surged up from her heart; and that had been secret from all the world. True, she had seen him since then and walked with him, so as to insist on the hideous impossibility of their love. She had left the Marchesa's, shown herself at Doney's, where she had made a trivial purchase of sweets, like any woman in Florence, and had greeted him as the friend and acquaintance they were known to be. They had gone out separately and met and walked the dim streets for a while, and he had driven her home. Anthony was out of the question.

The muffled sound of the telephone came to her ears. Presently Marietta entered.

"The chauffeur wants to know if the Commendatore wants him this morning. I told him the Commendatore had gone on a journey, but I would ask the Signora."

Perella put a hand to her bosom for a moment or two before replying. So even Giacomo, the chauffeur, did not know of Silvester's departure. She had taken it for granted that Giacomo had driven him to the railway-station, and she had intended to ask him discreet questions. But now the mystery was darker than ever. Night cabs are scarce as sunflowers in the neighbourhood of the Viale Milton. How did Silvester get to the station?

She dismissed Marietta.

"Tell Giacomo I'll ring up the garage later."

She felt incredibly lonely. Her impulse was to put on a hat and coat and walk. But it was a day of dreary rain. She occupied herself restlessly till lunch, a futile break in the monotony, for she could eat nothing. At last she determined to put into execution a gradually growing resolve. She would order the old car and drive to the Villa Corazza and see Beatrice, and tell her the extraordinary news, and ask her advice. This she could do in all loyalty, for she had definitely finished with Anthony. She was fond of Beatrice, admired her

for her kindness and graciousness and wisdom beyond all women; and Beatrice was Silvester's dearest friend. On a day like this she would certainly be at home. The drive, too, would be a distraction. She ordered the car.

She rushed across the pavement through the rain into the car, and gave Giacomo the destination. He put his head in at the open door, smiling in his Italian way.

"Marietta tells me that the Commendatore went away last night. If only he had told me! What are hours to me in the service of the Commendatore and the Signora?"

"He was called away suddenly by a telegram," said Perella. "There was just time to telephone to the Cercolo for them to send up a taxi."

It was humiliating to lie, but how much more so to let the servants know that she was as ignorant as they?

She felt pathetically small as she jolted along in the car, whose rain-splashed windows soon blurred the sight of outside things. It was a newly revived sense of smallness, for her happy married life had given her stature; now she had dwindled again to the drifting waif of Chelsea, Paris, the Pension Toselli, Venice. Physically she realized with a shock that, for protection against the jolts, she must sit forward so that her feet could find purchase in the floor of the car, and not dangle as they always did when she leaned comfortably right back.

The car drove up the stately steps of the Villa Corazza. She ran quickly under the shelter of the glass awning.

"The Signora——" she began as soon as the door opened.

"The Signora is away from home," said the footman.

"Oh," said Perella, disappointed. "Will you tell her when she comes in I should so much like to see her?"

"She has left Florence, Signora," said the man.

"When?"

"This morning, early. She was called away suddenly."

The coincidence gave her, at first, the shock of unexpected comedy, such as one experiences by casually dipping a hand in the tank of an electric eel.

But the master was there, said the footman. He was much perturbed, and doubtless he would like to see the Signora; *molto turbato*. All elements of comedy vanished. Something abnormal had occurred. She must see Anthony. He came rushing into the octagonal boudoir into which she had been shown.

"You've come to see Beatrice?"

“Of course. Who else?”

“She’s gone. I’m half crazy. I don’t know what it means. Started at half-past six this morning in the big car, with just a dressing-case, without saying a word to anybody. Not even her maid. Where she’s gone to, God only knows.”

Her dark eyes stared at him out of a white face.

“But Silvester’s gone too.”

The situation was beyond their experience of human phenomena. She showed him the letter.

“He says nothing in it about coming back,” he remarked.

“That’s what frightens me,” said Perella.

That the missing pair had gone off together was obvious; but for what purpose was as dark as midnight. It must have been a carefully planned stroke, each fulfilling, in identical manner, a compact of secrecy. But why? And whither? Silvester’s simple needs could be provided for indefinitely by the contents of a suit-case; but Beatrice, accustomed to travel with a mountain of luggage and a retinue of servants, how far could a little dressing-case take her?

They talked, half scared, wandering round and round known facts to find some door for conjecture. They regarded each other blankly like two young lost souls. Perella began to cry. Anthony put his arm comfortingly around her shoulders. But she shrank away and held him off and dried her eyes. Out of delicacy he renounced his attempt at consolation.

“There’s nothing for it but to wait and see what happens,” she concluded. “It’s strange that Beatrice left no word.”

“We don’t even know which way they’ve gone,” said Anthony for the tenth time.

“We don’t,” said Perella helplessly.

Even her crazy theory of the Constantinople to Abo hunt must be dismissed, for Beatrice would not accompany him on that preposterous Odyssey.

He rang for tea. It revived a drooping Perella. Anthony, declaring the need of sterner restorative, drank a brandy and soda.

Presently the footman entered with a couple of letters that had come by the afternoon post. One Anthony threw aside: the other he tore eagerly open.

“From Beatrice.”

“Read it.”

She gazed at him intently as he read, her heart throbbing; for here most likely was the key to the mystery. When he had finished, he handed it to her without a word, and, mechanically lighting a cigarette, went and stared out of the window on to the dripping terrace and the mist-enveloped hills.

She read:

MY DEAR ANTHONY,

I'm taking a step which I fear may cause you pain. But I'm doing it for what I think the best. Your loyalty has never let me perceive in you a recognition of the disparity of our ages. I, on my part, have tried to keep up the fiction of my youth, but the time has come when I can do so no longer. It's not your fault; it's entirely mine. I can't enter any more into your fresh enthusiasms, and the future has frightened me, for I shall be an old and withered woman when you're in the very pride of your manhood. So I've made up my mind, without scenes or painful arguments, to go out of your life. I shall be many miles away when you get this. That's why I shall post it, instead of leaving it behind me.

You must not think I am doing this unselfishly. Far from it. My need of happiness is even greater than ever, and I shall find it for certain on the path I have chosen. With all these struggles and emotions going on inside me, I feel I have drawn myself very far apart from you of late, and I fear I've not made you very happy. But you must not judge me harshly. There are hundreds of people who will do that.

Please do me a last great favour. Stay on in the Villa, at any rate until I can give Fargus necessary instructions, and until you hear from me again. Also, will you cancel the *Aquitania* bookings.

I hate leaving you, but, as I said, my happiness and that of others calls me away.

Yours affectionately,

BEATRICE.

Anthony turned and crossed the room, throwing his cigarette, on his way, into the fireplace.

"What do you think of it?"

She said hesitatingly: "There's only one thing to think—I'm sorry, Anthony—it must hurt you dreadfully—in spite—well, in spite of what you've said about me. There's some one else—she has gone to him."

"With him," said Anthony.

"What?"

"Silvester."

She sprang to her feet, and held her bosom tragically.

"No! No! It isn't possible. He loves me. He was happy. I did everything to make him happy. Everything he wanted. It's impossible. . . ."

She went on declaring her faith. He waited somewhat grimly till she ended.

"How do you account for their going off together?"

"I don't know," she cried. "He was her friend. Devoted to her. He's a man that would sacrifice anything of himself for a friend, as he has done over and over again. He's simply accompanying her, helping her, comforting her. . . ."

"You know him better than I do," said Anthony.

"Naturally. A man like that—to a woman who loves him, he's transparent. She can see his heart beating. That's why there can be nothing more between you and me."

After a while he said: "Will you let me see your letter once more?"

She drew it from her bag and handed it to him. He glanced it through and gave it back to her.

"Read it again," said he.

"I know it by heart. Every word bears out what I've said. The journey is urgent—has to be secret—for Beatrice's sake. 'Other interests than mine are involved'—Beatrice's interests."

" 'Other interests *with* mine'—if you'll look again. The word makes all the difference."

"Little words like that make no possible difference," she replied contemptuously. "I hate quibbles."

"You'd make a bad lawyer, my dear," he remarked gently.

"I hope I should," said Perella.

He forebore argument. The case against Silvester was ridiculously clear. Apart from the damning word, the letter did not ring true; it lacked the noble frankness of Beatrice; it was the letter of an ashamed man. He admired, though he deplored, Perella's loyalty. Time, however, would bring disillusion.

"If you think for a minute," said Perella, breaking a spell of silence, "you'll see how impossible it is. They've known each other for over twenty years. If Beatrice wanted to have fallen in love with him she could have done it any time—when he was a young man."

“Let us hope you’re right,” said Anthony. “But——” He paused, and looked at her as she stood before him in the dainty glamour of her beauty and strength—“But if you’re wrong——”

“I’m not.” She held up two protesting hands. “So don’t let’s talk of it.”

“Perhaps,” he admitted, “this is hardly the occasion.”

“It isn’t,” said Perella decisively.

The dull days passed. Nothing could move her faith in Silvester. Nothing could move Anthony’s convictions that if Beatrice’s path to happiness led towards a particular man, that man could only be Silvester Gayton. Yet, was his hypothesis certain? She might be bent on any course pathetically desperate. At the back of her sweet worldliness and gracious common sense ran a streak of mysticism which she kept hidden, and betrayed even to him only at rare moments. Though nominally Protestant, she loved the incense and the bells and the far-off chants and the breathless silences of the Roman ceremonial. In her room she kept a little library of devotional books. Had she not, only recently, lent him Thomas à Kempis? Why shouldn’t her path lead her straight into a convent—the mystical religious life which had lured thousands of women far less likely devotees than Beatrice? In that case, Silvester’s quixotic escort could be explained. He communicated this theory to Perella, who grasped at it eagerly. Anthony went about leaden-hearted, like one stranded, left out in the cold. The wife to whom he was sincerely attached by a thousand ties, a nun in a convent! The woman whom he loved and who loved him, unshakably loyal to her husband. He stood a pitiable figure of a man.

But if, on the other hand, the obvious theory were correct, then was his pride as a husband lacerated, himself subjected to hidden yet intolerable jeers. Yet, in that case, the way lay honourably open to Perella. He dared not think of it now. To finer feelings it seemed an indecency.

While waiting, they gave out to the world that Silvester and Beatrice had been summoned to the dying bed of a beloved friend in Paris. Not even to Cornelius Adams, whom he met daily at the club where he spent much time over the mild bridge table, did he give a hint of what really had occurred.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE never was such an elopement since the world began. It had been plotted in secrecy and accomplished with the impatience of the flight of two young lovers. They had decided that drama must be the essence of the action. For, they argued—and argument of some sort was imperative—that if he were to be summoned on urgent business, say, to Milan, one day, and she to Paris, (where they might meet), on another, there must needs be preparations, explanations, seeings-off, leave-takings, which would rend their hearts beyond human endurance. What had to be done must be done with sudden and dreadful finality.

Of Beatrice's servants the only one forewarned was Reid, the Scotch chauffeur, an unquestioning man interested in journeys only so far as his car's efficiency was concerned, and, on a hint from Beatrice, silent as the apathetic grave. The big car must be ready to start at six o'clock on a long day's journey. He touched his cap. It was nobody's business but his own.

Not Fargus, not Baratelli, not even Dennever, were told. Dennever made the usual preparations for the night, was dismissed, and went to bed and placidly to sleep.

In the raw cold of December dawn, the car drew up in the Viale Milton and, swallowing up a wizened, fur-coated figure and a suit case, went on its way.

"Plain sailing?" she asked.

"Yes. Not a sound. And you?"

"Only the under chauffeur who heard Reid in the yard and came down to see what was the matter—and Reid sent him back to bed."

"And your luggage?"

She pointed to a dressing-case at her feet. That was all. She would pick up some things at the flat in Paris.

A fine rain was falling. It was still almost dark and miserably cold. Neither had thought of food or hot drink before starting. Their way took them along wintry countrysides and dreary villages. They scarcely spoke, for there was nothing to say. After a while they both began to cry, and held each other's hands.

Their journey was that, from Paradise, of a new Adam and a new Eve, who had not even the beautiful and newly-found consolation in each other of the First Pair blindly groping their way through strange lands, bleak and uninspiring, but with the Will-o'-the-Wisp of Hope guiding their footsteps. The Gates had clanged behind them, and the inexorable clangor rang in their ears and deafened them to whatever of music the air might hold, and their tears blinded them to any glimmer that might betray the beauty of the earth. In the great car, with rugs and furs and electric heaters for their feet, they were spared the commonplace discomfort of frozen flesh. Vague towns gave them food and shelter, saving them from starvation. But their hearts were like ice and their souls went a-hungered. . . . Beatrice retained few impressions of the endless flight into universal desolation beyond that of the gentle little man with his white moustache, hard bowler hat, and red-rimmed eyes queerly distorted through the thick lenses of his pince-nez, fussing round her when they halted, nervously eager for her physical well-being.

Only now and again could they bear reference to that which they had left behind them.

"Are you sure you made it clear?"

"Quite."

"Where did you post your letter?"

"I left it in the letter-box."

"You should have posted it. It would have given us more time. I posted mine on my way to you."

"What does it matter? We have gone out into the world. The four points of the compass, North, East, South and West. How will they know which road we've taken?"

"That's true."

And then the dismal silence once more.

After weary waiting at Milan they found places in the express to Paris. Reid, the chauffeur, received orders to find his way to London with the car as best he could. He touched his cap with the vapoury smile of the man who thinks in terms of carburettors.

"Perfectly easy, madam." He made a swift mental calculation. "What time would you like me to call for you on Monday morning?"

She replied off-hand:

"Eleven o'clock."

"Where?"

"Claridge's. If I'm not there I'll leave a message."

"Very good, madam."

"Wonderful fellow," said Silvester as they entered the bustling station. "Is he a demi-god? Is it the triumph of mind over matter, or matter over mind?"

For the first time she laughed.

"There's a race of men and women who take an intense pride in being infallible machines. If Reid didn't keep his appointment, his heart would break. I think I'm the only human being to whom he's attached. He has been with me for seventeen years, and I've never heard of any woman anywhere near him."

"That's extraordinary," said Silvester. "I'm not very observant in these things, you know, but only a fortnight ago I passed him in the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, arm-in-arm with a most attractive girl."

Again she laughed. "I've never known you talk such upsetting scandal before."

This was the only gleam of gaiety that shot across their drab firmament. By mutual consent they stayed recluse on train, in Paris, where they broke their journey, and in London.

She had passed the night in the flat in the Avenue Gabriel, of which an old French woman servant was in permanent charge, and had slept the sodden sleep of misery and fatigue. She had desperately hoped to find a telegram from Anthony, sent on chance, when she arrived, and she clung to the forlorn hope until it was time to start for the midday train to London. But no message came. She sat in her cabin on the Channel Crossing, huddling her furs around her in the bitter December weather, when the air was nothing but an ice-soaked shroud. She felt leadenly alone. For the first time in her life she was going beyond reach of telegrams or letters. The Paris flat was the final address for anyone's surmise. The only being who knew her projected resting-place in London was Reid, now making his way thitherwards, God knew how. So long as his car ran sweetly, Alps and precipices and glaciers held no terror for him; and to see that his car ran smoothly was the reason of his existence. She believed in Reid, almost, according to Silvester's words, as in a demi-god. She wished she could meet him at Dover. The sight of him would reduce crazy adventure to terms of sanity. Of crazy adventure she lacked the thrill. Depression weighed her down. She stared at the future across a hopeless waste. Her loneliness was that of one drifting on an uncharted Arctic Sea, cut off from contact with humanity.

And she was alone, without a maid.

In the Pullman from Dover, Silvester ordered tea. They sat facing each other across the table.

"If you feel you can't stick it," she said, "let me know. I'll understand."

"And you must be equally frank with me. I'm sure you will."

Later she said: "We seem to have been travelling for Infinite Time through Infinite Space."

He sighed. "It has been a long journey."

"And it'll have to be looked upon as the most romantic thing that ever happened."

"Perhaps it is, my dear," said he. "God only knows."

They stepped out of the train at Victoria into the blue glare of an ugly and fantastic glacier cavern peopled by rushing, hurrying, embracing folk from whom she felt poignantly remote. Not a welcoming familiar face in the alien mass. The smiling, efficient porter who took charge of their luggage was magnified into the semblance of a benevolent gnome, belonging to the phantasmagorical world into which they, the most modern of Adams and Eves, found themselves projected. Adam Silvester, by her side, seemed to have shrunk into nothingness within his long fur-lined coat with its old-fashioned and worn mink collar.

Their luggage passed through the Customs, the efficient porter, as though he were the gate-keeper of a New Paradise, sped them off in separate taxis to their lonely destinations.

In her hotel bedroom the thick Telephone Directory lay beside the instrument. She could ring up dozens of people in London. A couple of minutes, and then the gladness of a friendly voice. But she resisted the sore temptation. Was there one soul who could understand her incomprehensible elopement? It was better to give rest to the weary body and let thought benumb itself in the torpor of fatigue.

Leeds is a great city. It has a Lord Mayor who looks after the comfort of nearly half a million citizens. It has many noble buildings, which, if washed and put out somewhere to air, would command the admiration or mankind. But it is given up to the making of material things, earthenware and machinery and leather, and Heaven knows what utilities; and these things cannot be made without factories, and factories must have chimneys, and chimneys, in spite of all kinds of legislation, must smoke, and smoke must affect stone; so that the buildings of the great city are inky black, as though they were composed of tired and corroded coal hating its second time on earth. It is a great city, but not

a stately one; for the noble buildings are perforce separated one from the other by unstately gaps. The half a million inhabitants, mostly engaged in the making of things, must go backwards and forwards from homes to factories; from homes too exiguous for the broader joyousness to lurid amusements in dreadful palaces whose entrances are vaulted with glaring light. And so, to convey this crowded mass of humanity to its myriad avocations of work or pleasure, great high-decked trams, fantastically illuminated after dark, like ocean-liners on rails, clatter and scream endlessly, indistinguishably, remorselessly all day long, and seemingly all night long, up and down and round about all the thoroughfares, broad and narrow, of the great city. And it is a city rather of dust-hung mist and rain that stains grey than of sunshine. It is a city of vast power and wealth and imperial meaning. Its vicarage is the only one in England which is traditionally regarded as the last stage before a Bishop's palace. But there is not a member of the Corporation who would not accede to the proposition that it cannot provide the environment for romantic dalliance.

And yet, one evening, the revolving-doors of its best hotel admitted into a fog-hung hall, a miserably romantic pair: a little, near-sighted, elderly man in a worn fur coat, and a proud and pale-faced lady, attended by a red-coated porter with odds and ends of luggage. The little man went to the desk and registered their names as Mr. and Mrs. Silvester Gayton. A clerk unhooked a key, accompanied them to a lift, and mounting with them, conducted them through corridors and opened the door of a suite of rooms. A long vestibule had a bath-room at the end. A central door opened into a cold vault of a sitting-room with bedrooms off, right and left.

Beatrice drew her furs around her and shivered.

"Why isn't there a fire?"

"I don't think one could have been ordered, madam," said the clerk.

"I'm so sorry, my dear," said Silvester. "I ought to have thought of it."

"It can be lit at once," said the clerk, pressing the bell for the chamber-maid. "And in the bedrooms too, if you like."

"Yes, of course," said Beatrice.

The clerk retired. The red-coated porter distributed luggage according to directions and disappeared. The chamber-maid entered and concerned herself with fires. The two travellers hung about aimlessly in their furs, in the ugly, comfortless room. A faint smell pervaded it; it seemed like the smell of raw leather. In spite of double windows hidden by heavy curtains, the cold air vibrated with the hell-sabbath of shrieking and shattering trams outside. Beatrice peeped through the murky panes, and found that this suite of honour

was situated at a noble architectural corner of the hotel, in front of which met all the points of all the trams of the restless city.

She sank on a couch and put her hands to her ears.

"I feel mad enough already; but if this goes on I'll grow madder. I'll scream and rave."

"It's rather dreadful, I admit," said Silvester.

She questioned the kneeling chamber-maid.

"How long does this noise go on?"

She gathered that there was a long interval of comparative quiet between two and five.

"Sleep's impossible."

"I'm afraid so," said Silvester.

The fire had been well laid, the chamber-maid was skilful, and presently a cheerful blaze warmed the chilly room. They cast off their wraps. Beatrice threw her hat on a chair. They sat down to warm themselves. She broke the silence by a statement of the obvious.

"Well, we've burned our boats."

"We've done what is right," said Silvester. "As the Buddhists say, it will be counted to us as merit."

"And yet——" She paused, with a sigh. He queried. She went on; "and yet it isn't as though we had had our day. We really haven't. Mine, years ago, wasn't very much of a day, after all. There wasn't much romance about it, was there? You knew Frank, perhaps better than I did. And your life hasn't been overcrowded with happiness."

"We must look forward," said he, and repeated: "We must look forward," as though he were pronouncing a newly discovered verity. "Let us hope the future has some happiness in store for us. An Indian summer after storms."

She acquiesced. "Possibly. At any rate, there'll be safety for both of us. That's to say, if you can trust me."

"You're the noblest of women," he answered in his shy manner. "Though perhaps this is not quite the time and place for me to say it."

She was urged to a laugh which ended on a note faintly hysterical. "I should have thought this was the very time and place. Thank Heaven for a sense of humour!"

She checked herself as she caught the wintry smile on his lips. "You're God's best man, Silvester," she declared. "If ever I seem to forget it, you must remember that I don't."

He lifted a protesting hand: “Oh, my dear!”

The trams clattered and shrieked as they turned on the points. She rose, restless, and looked around the few Leighton reproductions on the walls. He followed her.

“An exquisite colourist with a real vision of beauty; but, after all, a great decorator. These soulless, monochrome things betray him. A pity.”

“You knew him?”

“Yes. When I was a young man. When I wanted to be a painter myself. I was at his show—Show Sunday used to be a tremendous function in the studios in those days—when this picture was exhibited before being sent into the Academy. I thought it the wonder of all time.” He turned away. “It seems to be infinitely long ago.”

She laid a consoling touch on his shoulder—sheer womanly charity bade her lift him from this slough of depression.

“My dear friend, you’re not as Methusalesque as all that.”

“Leighton died in ’96. You were eating rice pudding in the school-room then, with pigtails down your back.”

“And you were a doddering old gentleman of thirty.”

They returned to the fire. In the unprecedented circumstances in which they found themselves, with their respective wells of despair for ever rising in their hearts, talk, no matter how artificially sprightly, could not be other than sporadic. Presently she asked him the time. He consulted his watch.

“A quarter to ten.”

“I should have thought, at least, it was past midnight. Truly the wages of sin is boredom to death.”

“I’m afraid I’m a dull fellow,” said Silvester.

“And I’m a hysterical woman, my dear. So we’re even. If you tried to be brilliant I’d make a scene and the hotel people would rush in, and we’d spoil the whole thing. You must forgive me.”

Again she went to the window, drawing the curtain aside.

“Would you care to see sights of the town?” he asked. “There’s a certain amount of light and movement in Briggate—one of the main thoroughfares—perhaps rough, but interesting.”

“It’s pouring with rain,” she announced, returning. “The fire, at any rate, is cosy. Perhaps I was wrong, Silvester, in turning down your proposal of a quiet little hotel in the South. I thought we’d be sure to run into people we knew, and suggested a Pittsburg of a place like this. You told me it would be noisy,

but I never dreamed of such a Pandemonium."

"It'll be only for one night," he said apologetically.

"Yes. But we've got to get through it." She smiled so as to redeem the words from querulousness. "We can't talk all the time."

"My dear," said he, "do you remember that years ago you and I used to play picquet together?"

"I do. A pack of cards would be a godsend. But how can we get one?"

"I always carry about a little Patience set," said Silvester. "Often when I can't sleep—I—well, I find a game soothing. I'm afraid they're rather small—but if you wouldn't mind——"

"Go and get them for goodness' sake," cried Beatrice.

So the reprehensible pair filled in the long guilty hours at the corners of a heavy centre table, with the old-fashioned, courtly game. Now and then he rose to throw some coal on the fire that warmed them, or to see to those in their respective bedrooms. "A point of six. A quint to a queen. A major tierce. Point in hearts? I have a major quint," et cetera, et cetera. The hours passed somehow.

Eventually they became conscious of comparative peace without. They played the last hand, and reckoned up the score. Beatrice had lost ten shillings; and fumbling in her bag, she handed him the note. Silvester packed the cards in their leather wallet, and, crumpling up the scoring paper, threw it on the floor. Beatrice picked it up. He sprang forward.

"My dear, why bother?" said he.

She put it into the fire.

"It might be used against us in our trial," she said.

He took off his pince-nez and rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

"Yes. Yes. I see," said he.

She laughed. She couldn't help it. The dear man stood before her so helpless, so guileless, just as though a puckish imp had set him down on some stage in the middle of a dramatic scene to play a part of which he knew not one line. Of such ludicrous situations woman is always the mistress. Raillery was her defence against the tragic or the insane.

"The worst is yet to come. We breakfast here—English breakfast—in garments of unquestionable intimacy. Can you face it? I've quite a pretty kimono—a real one."

She grasped the handle of her bedroom door; then let go and threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

“My dear, don’t be too unhappy. We’ll see this thing through together. I’ll not fail you.”

He wrung her hand and kissed it.

“You’re splendid, Beatrice. You give me courage. I never told you—but God knows I need it.” He opened her door. “Good night, my dear, and God bless you.”

The door closed behind her and all the agony that he knew she had kept hidden in her brave heart. His pain too was great, and he knew that, yet awhile, he could not sleep. He made up the fire, sought a book from his room, and read for a while unintelligently. Then he spread his two packs out in a complicated Patience. After an hour or two it came out—the game that only came out once in fifty times. It were folly to try it again. He resumed his book in a comfortable arm-chair before a replenished fire.

The chamber-maid, entering the sitting-room in the early morning, found him fast asleep, his old-fashioned tweed jacket buttoned up to his collar.

PART VII

THE FOUR

CHAPTER XXII

TWO depressed pariahs went back to London and parted at Euston. Never had apology been so piteously unromantic as that of Silvester for falling asleep before the fire, and thus rendering nugatory the projected breakfast scheme. She had forgiven him because they had a common woe and she had the kindest of hearts.

They met by appointment at a lawyer's, an urbane, silver-haired gentleman, a specialist in matrimonial afflictions, who listened to their artless talk and instructed them as to the conventional procedure. He conveyed to them the impression that the course of action on which they had entered was the most commonplace thing in the world.

"We might just as well have been consulting an architect about alterations to a house," said Beatrice.

"He would have shown some enthusiasm," replied Silvester. "Say, rather, a consultant physician."

"He would have been depressing. Our friend was merely bland," said Beatrice.

After this they fell into the habit of passing much time together, chiefly through Silvester's timid shrinking from his kind. Already he seemed to bear upon his brow the brand of dreadful notoriety which would be obvious to every Bishop in the beloved Athenæum, wherein consorted most of his congenial acquaintance. Even should he put on a bold front, thereby disguising the mark, he had the sensitive fear of claiming their esteem under false pretences. Once, while on his way to his bank in Pall Mall, he stood for an instant, disconsolate Peri at the gate of that portentous Paradise, tempted to enter; but only for an instant. In order to resist the temptation he made a fair bolt of it towards St. James's Street. For a home he took refuge in the Burlington Fine Arts Club, which, as all the world knows, is as interesting as a museum and about as merry. Beatrice, with a woman's greater courage and less scruple, would have made her presence known to many of her friends. Indeed, to some she did. But pity made the lorn Silvester her main concern; him and some clothes to supplement the contents of the Paris trunk. Together they visited the Tower of London, Windsor Castle, the British Museum of Natural History, and a fashionable dressmaker in Hanover Square, whose denizens he viewed with alarm and embarrassment.

Eventually she took him off to a caravanserai in Brighton, whence had come rumours of sunshine. There they stayed under their own names, deeming that the nightmare of Leeds did not need repetition. Reid, who, imperturbable, had reported himself at the appointed hour, took them down in the car.

"All erring couples go at least once, in their career of guilt, to Brighton—or so I've heard—so why not we?"

That had been her argument, not devoid of satirical humour. Also, she felt that the vulgar would bring them more comfort than the exotic. And she set herself out to comfort him, locking up her own pain and misery tight in her heart. They sat together in the vast Moorish lounge and discovered an entirely new zoological interest in their fellow-creatures. They walked along the Parade in the pale sunshine, and, on the Pier found, to their surprise, stimulus to wearied nerves in the stiff, salt wind. She opened her lungs to the blessing of it. Sternly she drove from her memory her tempest-swept cliff at Dinard. She turned to her companion. His eyes watered beneath the thick glasses; but there was a spot of colour in his cheeks. He professed enjoyable invigoration.

Unconsciously he yielded to the charm of encouragement. They fell into the pleasant paths of talk in which they had found companionship for twenty years. Although it was he who, in his sad and reasoned Quixotism, had counselled their unparalleled adventure, it was she who strove to mitigate its torment. It was she who lightened for him the burden of the yoke of Florence.

For, before this sardonically tender jaunt into Bathos, they had burned their boats finally behind them. The letters suggested and supervised by the eminent specialist had been written. The Dark Powers of the Leeds hotel had been invoked, and the damning document of the Hotel Bill had been declared existent. The past was no longer their concern. The future was more or less blank. But in the present there were to be found elements of peace and consolation. Thus, for them both, each dawn grew less haggard. And Beatrice, looking each morning into an anxious glass, saw comfortingly in her face the reflection of the dawn. Her beauty lingered. There was not yet a white hair in the rich and noble brown, and, to her challenging scrutiny, the deep blue of her eyes had not faded.

What there were of clouds passed from the sky; the sun shone; the wind dropped. There came a halcyon day or two. Once Silvester, moved to self-expression, murmured a quotation from Milton about birds of calm sitting brooding on the charmèd wave. She took his arm and walked close to him. Incredible derelicts in the seething ocean of mankind, they felt very near to each other. They found a couple of chairs on the Parade. Brighton's unique procession of flashing Jew and gaudy Gentile passed them by, set apart by their respective traditions from its immanence, as from a pageant in Mars.

They exchanged a smile significant of the mild rapture of their isolation.

A thought exploded suddenly in her head like a comical bomb. For all their torture of discussion, their future relations had never been explicitly determined. She took his hand, clad as always in the grey *suède* glove.

"My dear," she said, "when all this terrible trouble is over, do you think you can find it in your heart to make an honest woman of me?"

And, at his dear and protesting agitation of assent, she laughed out of the fullness of her generosity.

The thunderbolt of the impossible fell upon Perella and Anthony, shattering the fabric of existence about their young ears. For Anthony the grotesqueness of an hypothesis lost itself in the cold damnability of a fact. Perella at first was stunned, and then, like one who, recovering consciousness from a physical blow, seeks to realize the objects in a familiar room, groped dazedly towards a sense of human values.

The documents, the handwritings, the signatures, were incapable of misinterpretation. Each was invited, should either deem it desirable to take necessary action, to put lawyers into communication with Sir Edward Lovell (name of terrific import!) in whose possession lay the convincing evidence, the scrap of paper from the Leeds Hotel.

The letters were kind, strangely formal. It was Anthony, with his man of the world's general knowledge, who perceived the lawyer's drafting or revising hand. Each guilty party confessed to the mistake of marriage, to the concealed unhappiness of the past two years, to the revival of an old affection which had become too strong to resist, and offered the legal partner the way of freedom.

Fargus, apprised in confidence of the possible divorce, received instructions to shut up the Villa Corazza as soon as Mr. Blake should have departed, and to send Dennever on a fixed day with Mrs. Blake's luggage to the Duchesse de Montfaucon's country house at Esher, in Surrey, where she would spend the approaching Christmas. The firm of Bellingham and Browne, Silvester's old solicitors, wrote Perella a scarcely comprehended letter to the effect that they were instructed to make certain financial arrangements to supplement the securities which lay at her bank, settled on her on their marriage by her husband.

Yet, even in front of this livid evidence, the central fact remained almost incredible.

The letters gave at last an address for Silvester—an hotel in De Vere Gardens. A foolish, anxious letter which she had sent to the Athenæum had been re-addressed to Florence by the hall-porter.

Their one certainty therefore had been that Silvester was not in England.

And now the letter-heading of this modest little hotel in Kensington. Perella, although Silvester gave her no hint of his requirements, spent a tearful day in going through his clothes, packing them and despatching them to England. From the library she had chosen certain odds and ends of which he was fond, and which had always accompanied him on his travels. During her search for these, she found at the end of a long bureau drawer something soft wrapped up in tissue paper. Opening it she found an old glove, the glove on which she had sewn the button in Venice. She threw it into the trunk.

"It's no use saying it's incredible, Perella *mia*," said Anthony, "because it isn't. The facts are blatant."

And Perella had to suppose they were.

To stay longer in Florence than necessary was out of the question. They must go to London, consult lawyers, see what could be done. Christmastide was nearing, with all its upset of stern affairs. They must reach London before Christmas. Once more she was overwhelmed by the old sense of drifting loneliness. Save Silvester's friends, Dr. Edwardes, Haddo Thwaites, and so on, from whom she could not ask hospitality, there was no one in the length and breath of the land that would take her in; no one but Caroline.

"But we can go to my sister, Gloria," said Anthony. "She's a dear. She'll take us in and mother us in the nest of a British Major-General's respectability. The King's Proctor will slink away from her threshold like a baffled hyena."

They were in her Viale Milton studio. The curtains were drawn. Opposite the high divan on which they sat stood the easel still bearing the great canvas with its left-handed charcoal experiment, interrupted when Silvester had bidden her go to the Marchesa della Torre, and since then untouched. She laughed, surrendering to the spell of the old Anthony. He would have put his arm around her, but she drew away, resisting a temptation to lay her head on his shoulder. She was very tired, needed sleep, and her heart was torn in twain.

She murmured:

"Must we do it, Anthony?"

"What else can we do? They need their freedom, and, God knows, we want ours. This time next year it'll all seem like a crazy dream."

She sighed. "I couldn't bear to think I was hurting him."

"But it's he who, as far as he's concerned, is deliberately hurting you."

She sat up. "That's what I can't understand. He is so kind, so—so almost

inhumanly kind."

"For the matter of that," said he, "so is Beatrice. Save the star of my life, she's the noblest woman I've known or hoped to know. But—there's the devil of a 'but'—there are these, as I've said, blatant facts."

"Oh, I'm so tired, dear," she said, leaning back against the cushions. Then she whispered: "Don't talk for a little: just let me feel I'm not alone."

She found, for the moment, deep rest in his presence and in the strength of his hand-clasp; the revival of a celestial felicity of years ago, when her head had lain near his heart. And the sense of mad guilt, that had rendered so poignant their one passionate kiss in the blood-red sunset, no longer racked her delicate fibres. She was there, in the haven of God knows how many dreams, safe at last. Her fingers crept to the muscles of his arm. She looked up and beheld the smiling tenderness of his young eyes. Their lips met.

"Now, Perella *mia*, you are really, wholly and absolutely mine," he laughed after a while. "And, for your good, you're going to do exactly what I tell you."

She faced him, fascinatingly rebellious.

"I'll do whatever my heart tells me."

"But your heart's mine."

"No, no," she said. "That's where you make a mistake. I am yours now, perhaps—I don't know; but my heart's my own."

"A pretty question of casuistry," said he.

It was their first hour of reaction from abominable strain. The wonder of love in his eyes was a fascination. Even while some obstinate cell in her brain insisted on opposition, she longed for the moment when once more she should lose herself in his embrace. She drew quickly away from danger.

"You to Gloria. I to Caroline. We'll meet as often as you like. Battersea and Wimbledon. They're practically next door."

She prevailed. They sat down by her writing-table and drafted telegrams.

The night before they were to start for England, she moved about the sweet bedroom that had been hers since the day when, with maimed body and cemented arm, she had been laid upon the bed. She had loved the room, and the love that had gone to the making of it, with a passion of gratitude. It was only when she had recovered from the internal lesions and had been conducted on her first halting tour through the flat, that she realized that Silvester had given up to her his own spacious room, and had contented himself with a small

guest's chamber near his library. The reconstruction, on his taking over the other flat on the same floor, had afforded him a room equally beautiful when they had returned from their long honeymoon journey. But this room, in its simple and exquisite beauty, had been hers and theirs from the first. And she knew that, for her delectation during her illness, he had caused it to be hung with the most restful of his Primitives, and adorned with old reliquaries and crosses that should give tranquillity to her eyes. The blue-hooded Madonnas with their heads aslant and their calm brows and their passionless hands holding the Child passionlessly conceived, and the haloed, nut-brown and wrinkled saints either cross-armed or stretching out oblatory hands, had for three long years filled her being with the grandeur and beauty of their message, elusive, yet as strong and eternal as music.

She was but a tiny, green-water clad thing as she wandered about the charmed room. There her girlhood lay buried like a sweet phantom in the comforting ambience. There had her womanhood begun, and had continued untroubled, guarded from harm by those immortal serenities.

Only once, but a short while ago, had she desecrated it with the shedding of guilty tears.

And now, some strange destiny that, since her birth, had seemed to scatter her, a fallen leaf, about the world, was sweeping her away from this shrine of peace and spiritual direction.

She could not sleep. She went out and made a pilgrimage through the dear, bleak rooms of a half-awakened married life. To-morrow, after she had gone, Marietta would cover everything, hang sheets before the book-cases. It would be a corpse of a house in its white shroud. Her tour oppressed her with the sense of a dying grace that to-morrow would be dead.

The sight of Anthony at the station the next day gave her the sudden joy of one who had emerged from the valley of the shadow into fields of spring. She met his gay smile, his clasp of hands, the love in his eyes, and his tender salutation with a gush of reaction that caused her to halt for a moment and lay hand on a throbbing bosom. The past was past, on both sides. The future, such as she had dreamed of it in the Pension Toselli, was almost to become true. He took possession of her in his old masterful way, ordered porters, relieved her of all the little responsibilities of travel. She was a princess, he her humble courier to command. Although she surrendered, she could not repress the smile of an irony that had never tinged her thoughts of him in the old days of glamour. Then he was a directing god. Now he had lost Olympian status, and become merely the Anthony that she could not choose but love.

While the great international train took them northwards, they had many

talks, some lover-like, some serious. She reflected that they were three years older than when they first met. She was now twenty-six. As a married woman it seemed a staid and matronly age, at which she could regard the world with an eye of mature wisdom. When she offered him the harvest of these reflections he laughed as (she felt) only Anthony could laugh, and she laughed too, responsive to his mood. He planned out their lives when they should be free to marry. New York must be their head-quarters for financial reasons; but every year there would be the chance of Europe. No longer were they airy castles which he had to offer, but solid habitations. A peacock could be a commonplace reality instead of a fantastic dream.

"I don't think I should want a real peacock," said Perella. "Let us go one better and set our hearts on a phœnix."

"Belovèdest," said he, "isn't it already shimmering young and flame-like before us?"

So she gave herself up to present happiness. The long, long journey passed through its stages more quickly than ever she thought journey could pass, for Anthony was always there, the perfect lover.

It was strange to wake up, after the heavy sleep of fatigue, in her own little back bedroom in the Battersea flat. When she had spent the couple of nights there during her honeymoon travels, it seemed to have grown queerly small. Now, accustomed to the airy spaciousness of her Florentine room, she found it absurdly diminutive, the nest of a sparrow. Yet, faithful to promise, Caroline had preserved it as a nest of fresh daintiness. The neat maid came in, lit a fire in the tiny grate, and drew the curtains. Perella snuggled under the bedclothes, for the radiation from frosted window cast a sudden chill on the air. She looked around her and felt as though she could stretch out a hand and touch the opposite wall. Once, long ago, she seemed to be an inconsiderable speck in the room. Why the change? Had she grown in physical bulk, or had her sense of values changed from the far-off days?

Caroline herself brought in the breakfast-tray, trim, pleasant-faced, affectionate. Perella rallied her on the elegance of the kimono she wore. Said Caroline:

"When a woman living alone lets herself go to pieces, that's the end of her. A sloven indoors is a sloven out of doors. This means efficiency over the way"—she waved a hand towards the tea-shop across the river. "Besides, I love clean, beautiful things."

She laughed, sat companionably on the end of the bed. The night before, a

weary Perella had sketched the amazing situation in which she found herself. Now, in the morning, Caroline hungered for detail. Her ultimate verdict was that Beatrice was a designing woman, and that Professor Gayton had been caught in a trap.

"I shall never believe that perfect dear left you of his own free will and accord," she said.

"But why should she design?" Perella contended. "With her wealth she can command the earth, and as for men——"

"My dear," Caroline interrupted, "I'd sooner trust a thousand men than one woman."

On the other hand she was vastly interested in the romance of Perella and Anthony.

"After all, my dear, each generation has its own way of thinking and feeling too. Eighty and eighteen can never meet on equal terms. When I'm eighty I'll want a nice old crock of the same age to talk to. You and your Anthony seem matched in heaven. Am I going to see him?"

As he had arranged to call for Perella at half-past twelve, Caroline shirked her duties across the river until he came. He came, saw, and conquered. Caroline followed Perella into her room, whither she went to put on her hat, and avowed subjugation. She clasped the fortunate girl to her bosom, and shed the kind tears of sympathy.

Anthony carried Perella off to lunch at the Carlton. They mustn't do it very often, said he, for King's Proctors lurked under every restaurant table. But for the present they could go hang. He was in happy mood. Gloria was the dearest thing on earth. So was Frank, her husband. Never had family Prodigal such a return. Gloria almost rent her hair because he preferred coffee to champagne for breakfast. She was counting the hours until she could meet Perella. He was the bearer of a note. . . . The taxi drive through London stimulated his gaiety. He counted up the years of his exile. He sniffed the pavements through the cab windows as though they had been flowerbeds of summer. They must have their fling, he declared; feed their hungering souls, dance at night, as his elfin Perella had never danced before—Gloria was going to see to that—in a word, squeeze London dry. He praised Caroline. A dear. If he had a bit of a heart to spare he had lost it to her. Perella must convey the message.

There was quickening frost in the air. The thronged streets were dry. There was some kind of a sunshine. The Great Shops disgorged their throngs of happy people with Christmas parcels in their hands. Piccadilly sparkled. Women's cheeks were whipped into rose. The born Londoner in Perella responded to the environment, responded more to the Londoner in Anthony.

The blood danced through her veins.

He pressed her hand.

"Happy, belovèdest?"

"It's Fairyland," said Perella.

They lunched magnificently in the great red-upholstered room. To him it was a vital part of his old London; to her it was filled with the glamour of a new London of which she had had but dizzying glimpses three years ago. It was full. Gaiety and beauty and happiness seemed to reign, invisible deities in the air. She said, like a child:

"What a lot of lovely people there are in the world."

He laughed. "What would you say if I stuck you in a little octagonal cylinder of mirrors?"

"I should invite you inside with me," said Perella.

Presently his quick eye, eagerly roving for English faces after exile, fixed on a man with bushy white hair and keen dark eyes.

"By Jove," said he. "There's Armstrong. Halliday Armstrong, you know; the architect, my old boss. I'd love to have a word with him."

"I met him at a party Haddo Thwaites gave," said Perella.

"Then perhaps I'd better not," said Anthony. "He's the world's arch-questioner. Never mind, I'll look the old boy up some time."

He dismissed Halliday Armstrong from the sphere of his sensations, and talked gaily. For Perella the sudden association had broken a thread of the charm.

She forgot the sinking of the heart a bit later, when he drove her down to Wimbledon to have tea with Gloria, shy and nervous, but taking pleasant refuge in the consciousness of his protection. At the first greeting her trepidation was conjured away. It was another Anthony who came forward in the pretty, dim-lit drawing-room, with the same spontaneous gesture of outstretched hands, the same intonation of voice, the same irresponsible assurance. She was many years older than he—in her early forties—but she looked amazingly young. She led her to a comfortable chair by the fire, gave her tea, showed her quick little courtesies. Just like Anthony.

"My husband's so sorry not to meet you to-day. He's at a Committee Meeting of his Golf Club. It seems that some members have been eating their fish with niblicks, and the Committee are determined to put a stop to it."

She helped her off with her coat, and sat on the fender stool by her feet and fed her with scones. She had Anthony's gift of instant establishment of

personal relations. Perella passed a happy hour in an atmosphere all sympathy. Before her departure, Gloria drew her aside.

"My dear, do you think you could make a friend of me?"

"I couldn't help it," said Perella, smiling. "You're so like Anthony."

"Then we'll swear a little compact."

Perella yielded to inviting arms and kissed her.

She went to bed happy that night in the comforting assurance of the love of two women, Gloria and Caroline. There was a yawning gap of many months before her during which she must be once more a waif with a dropped wrist, unfitted for any reasonable avocation. She could not even hand trays in Caroline's tea-shop. Not that she would be put to desperate straits to earn her livelihood. But there would be the loneliness of waiting with no interest wherewith to fill her days. She had great trust in Gloria.

The next day brought the pain of hateful doings. Anthony called for her by appointment.

"Couldn't we put it off for a little?" she asked.

"I wish we could. But my time in England is short. Besides, dear, I've made the appointment with the lawyers."

"It seems to make your going so much nearer, and the long spell when I'll be all alone. You don't know how I dread it."

He comforted her. "I'll see what has to be done on the spot there. A lot, I know, could be done just as well in Timbuctoo. Only this morning there came in an English short-story—a couple of London drawings . . . I'll see Stryver. He's a good fellow. Very possibly he'll let me come back in a month or two."

She braced herself up and dabbed a powder puff on her face in front of the drawing-room looking-glass.

"Well, let us go and get the hideous business over."

In the taxi he said: "When the way to happiness, Perella *mia*, is paved with roses, what's Happiness itself paved with? It's much better to get to it through dreadful swamps beset with dragons."

They had to wait some time in a shabby anteroom, characterized by nothing but a note of hopelessness. Even the grimmest dentist cheers you while you await his pleasure with tattered copies of last year's *Punch* and old catalogues of the Army and Navy Stores. But a lawyer's waiting-room is devoid of these amenities. There are straight-backed chairs against the wall, on which you sit and look at a long, dusty library table in the middle.

When the door opened and they were shown into the presence of the brisk

solicitor, Perella's courage oozed out of her finger-tips. In the great arm-chair where she sat, she shrivelled into physical nothingness; was conscious of being only a small pain in a big room. Anthony laid their case before the lawyer who, leaning back in a swivel-chair, with finger-tips joined, now and again asked searching questions. She replied as best she could.

"It's a pity, a pity," he said. "I've met Mrs. Blake, when she was Mrs. Ellison, and of course I know Professor Gayton by repute."

He again scanned the letters which Anthony had brought.

"There seems to be nothing else to do. It will be quite simple. I'll get into touch with Lovell's and let you know. I'll make an appointment."

"Must I come again?" asked Perella.

"I'm afraid so, my dear Mrs. Gayton. You see, you're bringing two separate and really disconnected actions. I shall be happy to see you by yourself if you prefer it."

"Oh, no!" said Perella.

"In the meanwhile, Mr. Blake," said the brisk man with an engaging smile, "do you think you could send me a cheque for a hundred pounds on account of both sets of fees."

"Certainly," said Anthony.

On their way back to Battersea, she suddenly cried:

"Oh, I feel as if I had been dragged through mud. The details, the horrible technical words, the money. . . . And to have to go through it over and over again. . . ."

He took both her hands very tenderly.

"What did I say about swamps and dragons? It's only a matter of courage and faith. At the end there's our life—our lifetime, dear—together."

He kissed her. She crumpled, helpless. Southern blood ran through her veins, and his kisses made it run quick to fainting-point.

"If you'll always love me, Anthony—I've no one in the world but you."

What could lover do more than reassure her in the only way that lovers have found since love began?

Her life for the next few days escaped her powers of analysis, being alternatively darkened by pain and illuminated by elusive ecstasy. The enigma of Silvester shrouding her mind was cleared only by the joyousness of a real Anthony. Her friends did their best to induce forgetfulness of the past. Caroline, now a woman of substance, lavished on her a great-hearted woman's affection. Gloria, adopting her as sister, took her to dinners and theatres, and

the Embassy and various haunts of jollity, where she met bright, careless folk, blissfully ignorant of the existence of such beings as Professors of the Fine Arts. Her unusual elfin beauty commanded success. Her youth responded. Also, was not Anthony always there? Dancing with him was a dream of strange restfulness.

Christmas arrangements were made. Caroline and her partner, Miss Pritchard, for the past two years had given a private midday revel at the tea-shop, to which they invited some of their artist customers stranded in Chelsea over the gay season. It was a Christmas Dinner in fact, with champagne and pelting balls and false noses and dancing, and all the fun of the fair. To this mild orgy were Anthony and Perella invited. In the evening they must dine with Gloria. The General, whose character many years of married life had developed, took the world humorously, and embraced Perella in his purview. The children, a boy and a girl, aged eight and nine respectively, were to join the party. To Perella, who had never known a child in her life, they burst like the new planet did upon the ken of the watcher in the poem; they were a breathless discovery; she had fallen into an instant adoration of them. They shone in her thoughts like the stars of the Christmas night.

When Anthony announced the receipt of a communication from the lawyers suggesting an appointment for the 28th, she agreed with impatience.

"But let us put it out of our heads over Christmas-time. Do you know I've never had a real Christmas—with children—in my life?"

She had come home drunken from the new debauch of buying toys in Harrods' stores. She claimed her unclouded hour.

Yet, on the morning of Christmas Eve, an indignant Anthony burst into the Battersea flat.

"What have you been doing to that foul beast, Panini?"

She stared. "What do you mean, Anthony?"

"He's got his knife into the whole lot of us."

She grew suddenly pale. "Yes, there was something I didn't tell you. It seemed better not, as we were leaving so soon. It was after—after they went away. I was at the Marchesa della Torre's, and Prince Panini turned up. When I was going, he rose to go too. I couldn't help it. Giacomo was at the door with the car. It was pelting with rain. He asked me to give him a lift as far as the club. I couldn't refuse. In the car he tried to make love to me. He tried to kiss me. I knocked on the window and Giacomo stopped and opened the door, and I turned Panini out into the rain. What else could I do?"

"Nothing—except kill the swine, and you had nothing to do it with. But he's out for his revenge in his damned Italian way. This is what I get from

Cornelius this morning."

He handed her a letter.

"I think I ought to warn you, my dear fellow," wrote Cornelius, "that the unspeakable Panini is giving a spice to the inevitable comment on the exodus of two households from Florence. His story, which he told in the Folcis' drawing-room, and afterwards at the club, is this. That at the Flemings' party to Ambassador Hicks, he turned a corner of the garden, and at the end of a long walk he saw Perella and yourself in the little temple—in—well, I can't hurt you by repeating what the beast said. Anyhow, he went on to describe how he, model of discretion, vanished from the corner. Then, meeting Silvester and Beatrice on the terrace who were looking for you, he had suavely sent them where you could be found. He regarded it as a great *scherzo*. The Italian company seems to have agreed with him. But when he tried it at the club, Colonel Wheeler called him a bloody cad, and threatened to wring his bloody neck, and there was the roughest house in Florence. But the slander has spread. Now, as you know how I love the whole four of you, do put me wise, so that I can fight your battles. . . ."

Perella sank white and shaken on a chair.

"They saw us. They must have done."

"Of course. But can you imagine such a swine?"

She waved Panini aside. "He's of no account."

He stood checked. "How, of no account? First, he does what he thinks funny because neither of us was particularly polite to him that day; and then, because you showed him what you thought of him, he gets even with you in spreading this slander. By God! I wish I were in Florence!"

"But, my dear," she cried, "what does Panini matter? There's only one thing that matters. They saw us. And they must have seen us——" She dashed her hands over her eyes, and rose to her feet. "You know, Anthony, it would never have happened unless we had decided to go out of each other's lives for ever. It was an end that broke us down. . . . And they saw it. And they thought it was a beginning."

"If they saw us, why did they creep away? Why didn't they confront us?" he asked.

The sensitive leaves in her shrank together.

"How could they?"

He made a turn or two about the room.

"Well," said he, after a silence, "let us take it for granted they did see us—at the worst. All kinds of odds and ends in Beatrice's behaviour and speech

came into my head, and make it seem probable that they did. But don't you see? The gods were on our side. The gods gave them the excuse, or the sanction, that they'd been looking for. That side of it's as clear as daylight. It's Panini. The Italian has never developed beyond the Court of the Borgias."

"Do you really think," asked Perella, "that they looked on it as—what did you call it?—their sanction?"

"It stands to reason, my child. People like them don't run off and live together unless they're assured they'll give no pain and misery. Beatrice would tear her heart out sooner than hurt me. So would Silvester rather than hurt you. And, as for us, it never entered our heads, as honourable man and woman, to do anything else but sacrifice ourselves so as not to inflict pain on them."

She sat on by the fire. "I wish I could think so."

"You must. There's no other way to think. Beatrice and I have not been very happy—well, she's nearly twenty years older than I am. There are things we don't talk about, sweetheart. But there they are. . . . And the gap between you and Silvester's more. . . . If we feel it, in our way, our way of full youth, don't you think they feel it in their way? Of course they do. They've been, very sweetly and gently, in love with each other for years. They discovered, since the whole lot of us have been thrown together intimately the last few months, that their real happiness lay in a life together. They've found their chance and taken it. And we're left free."

"But they saw us," said Perella. "They put their own interpretation—so natural——"

"They put the interpretation that suited their case—also naturally."

He looked at her for a few moments and said, with a touch of irritation: "I wish I hadn't shown you the silly letter. Only I was so mad with Panini. It made me see red. . . ."

He laughed and changed to the key of gaiety.

"We'll kill Panini for ever, darling, and bury him in the unconsecrated ground of our memories. Come out and lunch in town. Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow is Christmas."

"Aren't you lunching with Mr. Armstrong at the Arts' Club?"

"Oh, Lord!" said he, "so I am—I forgot. My Conscience, as always, Perella *mia*." He looked at his watch. "I must fly. To-night, then. I call for you and Caroline at seven."

She rose, and he took her face between his palms and lifted it and looked into her eyes.

"I wish I could think of a flower to call you. But there's none this side of

heaven.”

The flat door, whither she had accompanied him, closed. She was left alone. She went, like a sleep-walker, back into the prim, chintz-hung drawing-room, and sat on the couch and stared in front of her at fantastic and appalling visions.

Presently she put on hat and coat and went out. She crossed the bridge. The morning was fine, and the frosty air whipped colour into her cheeks. At the Chelsea end, she hailed an empty taxi-cab.

CHAPTER XXIII

SILVESTER, on his return from Brighton, took up his quarters again at the Vanloo Hotel. Beatrice had gone straight to Esher to spend Christmas with Peggy, Duchesse de Montfaucon, recently widowed, and living solitary in her great house. Both women had urged him to join them, if only, they said, to strike a masculine note at their tame meals. The Duchesse had written him the most charming and tactful of letters.

Beatrice, who had confidentially revealed to her friend the blacker side of their elopement, had counselled prudence.

"For God's sake, my dear, don't let him think you dream of anything wrong between us. Assume that he has come to England on business, and may be stranded in London. If he has nothing better to do will he take pity on two lone women? His old friend Beatrice is staying here. . . . You would love to renew your acquaintance with him. . . . That sort of thing. Otherwise he'll shrink from the publicity of one—you. I know him. How we're going to manage afterwards, Heaven only knows."

And she herself had written a despairing letter. Apart from Dickensian sentiment, Christmas was a time when the consensus of society had determined that a lonely creature, usually contented in his loneliness, should feel himself thereby accursed, being shut out from the glad communion of his kind. She herself would be incarnate wretchedness at the thought of him mouldering alone in that tomb of an hotel with a management's artificial tokens of holly and mistletoe over his head. And, after all, why should he not give pleasure to his none too joyous Beatrice, and to a woman who mourned a husband whom, for all his scapegracedness, she had astonishingly loved?

In the face of this, what could the nervous man do but yield? He packed up his suit-case and went to Esher, where two kind women ministered to his comfort.

It was only on meeting him, after the few days' interval since their Brighton trip, that Beatrice realized in him a certain brokenness of will, a snapping of fibre. When he had counselled their drastic act, he had shown the streak of iron that must run through any man who achieves greatness in this stormily competing world, and it was from him that she had derived strength. Now he seemed spent with the effort, the iron had grown rusted and unavailing, he hung his head as though guilty of the basest betrayal, and, at

times, began to look like an old man. Yet he had the courage, like herself, never to hint a regret at what they had done, or to lament a happiness that had fled.

Her heart melted over him so that it half forgot its own ache. She would win him back, if not to happiness, at least to content of life. It was a woman's task anyhow, worth living to accomplish.

"People will forget," she said comfortingly when they touched on the future. "Those who don't will smile on what they will call our elderly romance, and love us all the more for it. And I shall hold my head high, a very proud woman."

"And," said he, "the very greatest that God ever made."

Once, when referring to the delicate subject—for Peggy de Montfaucon had not only natural feminine curiosity, but could assert the privilege of friendship—she asked:

"But the little wife? I saw her with him in London somewhere, two or three years ago. A pretty thing—I didn't meet her personally. What about her?"

Beatrice braced herself to answer: "There's a man somewhere about—young like herself. *Elle se contentera.* There's no great crime on either side. Can you imagine a lamb like Silvester tearing out a dove's heart?"

With which Peggy de Montfaucon had to be content. Her other curiosity she could not gratify. She could only guess the reasons that sanctioned Beatrice's abandonment of Anthony. She had never come under the spell of the young artist who had made so dismal a failure of her portrait, and she had always deplored her friend's infatuation. On the other hand, she loved Silvester, his sweet outlook on human things, the exquisite breeding cropping up like gold in a reef through his queer timidities. As a guest in her house, she set herself to spoil him.

He had arrived in time for dinner on the twenty-third. She had devoted herself to his welcome, identifying herself with the provision of his little creature comforts—fire, flowers, books in his room—thus warming him against the cold efficiency of servants. In the morning, which was fine, she had conducted him round the gardens and the conservatories, and had stuck an orchid in the buttonhole of his old-fashioned jacket, and had taken his arm and talked with tactful sentiment about Raoul, her late husband, so that his sympathy was awakened, and he patted her hand.

The three lunched agreeably. Under the glow of two dear women, the cloud of his depression melted away. They talked of France, of Burgundy, where was the rude château of the Montfaucons, of the peasant life and customs rooted far back in the centuries, when Burgundy warred with France.

At dessert the hostess commanded a Château Yquem of historic vintage—one bottle of three survivors, which she had opened in his honour. Encrusted with the webs of age, it lay startling in its wicker cradle, as though proclaiming its eternal youth. As the old butler, ministrant of august ceremonial, filled the glasses, a perfume like that of hyacinths filled the air.

"This," said Silvester, "is one more proof of the bountiful beauty of God."

They went into the morning-room for coffee; a bright room with an air, its door-windows leading on to a wide terrace beyond which stretched winter lawns flanked by clipped yews; a room in accord with the grace of water-colours around the walls. A great fire blazed cheerfully. Peggy de Montfaucon, slim, dark-eyed, her bare arms and neck relieving the deadness of a black frock, busied herself with the tray; brought him his coffee, imperiously commanding him not to rise, and hovered over him with tong-held lump of sugar. Life was gracious after all. And there, close by, sat a great and, to his elderly vision, very beautiful woman, queenly browed, whose honest blue eyes conveyed to him their message of courage and consolation.

"My dear hostess," said he, holding out his cup for the sugar, "I am the most pampered of men."

The door opened and the old butler appeared and went up to Silvester.

"I beg your pardon, sir; but a lady has called who would very much like to see you."

"A lady?" he cried involuntarily.

"Yes, sir. A lady."

No one but an old English butler could give so delicately subtle an emphasis to a word.

"She would not give her name."

Silvester stared through his thick lenses.

"A little lady?"

"I should say quite a little lady, sir," said the butler.

Silvester rose, and, meeting Beatrice's questioning gaze, made an agitated and helpless gesture. It was some moments before he could speak. The butler stood imperturbably deferential. Peggy de Montfaucon sat embarrassed.

"I think I'd better go to her," said Silvester.

"No," said Beatrice suddenly. "Burford, will you show the lady in here."

The butler retired.

"At first, at any rate, I'd better be with you." She motioned him to silence. "No, no, my dear. I know the child's not a virago going to make a scene. She

wouldn't come here without reason."

Peggy de Montfaucon rose.

"I'll leave you."

Beatrice took her arm.

"Please stay, and support us. You must know that he and I are as innocent as two babies."

Before the astounded lady could reply, the door was thrown open and Perella stood on the threshold. She advanced a pace or two. Beatrice moved forward.

"This is our hostess, the Duchesse de Montfaucon—Mrs. Gayton."

Perella bowed. Silvester stood with hands clasped in front of him and his knuckles showed white.

Beatrice said gently:

"Why have you come here?"

"I've come to get my husband," said Perella.

The soft south light fell full on her, a tiny figure lost in the dark furs, showing nothing of her but a startlingly calm yet eager face.

Silvester passed a hand across his lips. "How can you, Perella, after all that has happened?"

"I'm convinced that nothing has happened," said Perella.

"The proofs are in your lawyer's hands. I presume you know that?" said Beatrice.

Perella put her hand on a chair back. "May I sit down? I'm rather tired."

Peggy de Montfaucon sprang forward. "Do forgive me. . . ." Then, with a swift look, "Where have you come from?"

"London—in a taxi."

"Then you can't have had anything to eat. . . . I'll give orders. . . ."

"Oh, please, please don't," cried Perella.

But her hostess had already swept from the room.

"It was very foolish of you to go without your lunch, Perella," said Silvester. "I can't imagine why. If you wanted to see me—well—an appointment. Besides, how did you know I was here?"

"I went to the Vanloo Hotel. They told me you had gone into the country. I told them who I was, and made up some sort of a story about travelling and missing telegrams, and they gave me your address. So I took the taxi on."

"What I can't understand is, why you're here at all," said Beatrice. "As I

said a moment ago, your lawyers have the proofs."

"I've come to say that I don't believe in the proofs," said Perella.

Silvester came up to her with quivering lips, as she sat in the straight-backed chair.

"But you must. They're formal. And can't you see it's for the happiness of everybody?"

She looked up at his face that had grown so worn and old since she had last seen it, and, with a half-laugh that cracked shrilly, cried:

"Yes. You look so happy, don't you, dear?"

And the next moment she broke down into sobs, with hidden face.

Silvester moved around her helplessly. After a while Beatrice approached, and, in her gentle way, touched her shoulder.

"I'm afraid things have gone too far."

Perella flung herself away, and confronted them with tear-stained face.

"You know they haven't. Not for any one of us. I never dreamed of being unfaithful to Silvester. Anthony never dreamed of being unfaithful to you. It was the foolishness of years ago that came up between us gradually—and at last we found it getting too strong for us, and we made up our minds never to see each other again . . . and then you saw us—in the Flemings' garden——"

"My God!" cried Silvester, "we thought . . ."

"Yes. You thought we didn't know. And we didn't till this morning. A letter from Cornelius. Panini had seen us and told you where to find us. He's spreading the story about Florence . . . I've never been able to understand why you did this thing—it went against my reason. Now I know. That's why I know the proofs are rubbish. That's why I couldn't rest until I had come to ask you to forgive me for causing you all this misery."

She said her say valiantly, as she had determined during the racking drive from London. There followed a sequel of distracted talk. Before her clear vision the heart-rent elders could not keep up their pretence of guilt. They kept on saying in pathetically lame reiteration:

"We did it for the best, dear, so that you and Anthony . . . you were young. We felt we had unknowingly wronged you both. . . ."

And Perella. "But I? Didn't you know that the thought of hurting you would kill me?"

At last Beatrice put the tremendous question.

"And Anthony?"

Perella echoed vaguely: "Anthony? I don't know. He had no idea I was

coming down. The idea—what I had to do—find Silvester—only occurred to me after he had gone. He had to go, all in a hurry—a luncheon engagement with Mr. Halliday Armstrong."

"Doesn't he see things as you see them?" asked Beatrice.

Perella turned on her. "He must. How can he help it?"

Beatrice smiled very sadly, and shook her head, and crossed to the door.

"If he did, he would have let any Royal Academician, or any Royal Anything in the world go hang, and he would have come here too. Don't you know Anthony?"

She went swiftly out, leaving the two nervously alone in the large and gracious room. The snap of the door struck a note of human destiny. They knew that she had shut the door upon Anthony for ever. The eyes of both had followed her. It was a poignant moment. They stood silent, pathetic statues. At last Silvester moved towards the fireplace, repeating the foolish formula:

"We did it for the best, Perella; you mustn't blame us."

"You don't seem to understand," said she, "that it's I who am asking forgiveness."

"My dear child," said he, "what have I to forgive?"

Perella looked at him half tragically. Would he never understand? She went up to him and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Did you get a trunk from Florence?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes, I think I did," he replied absently. "A day or two ago."

"I packed it."

"You?"

"Yes. And didn't you find a bit of my heart inside?" said Perella.

A light dawned on his face.

"That was why—the old glove? . . ."

"Yes, the glove," said Perella. "Didn't you guess?"

At seven o'clock she awaited Anthony in the little drawing-room of the Battersea flat. Caroline, who had looked forward to the dinner and theatre jaunt, sat disconsolate, yet feeling philosophically justified, in the dining-room. Anthony arrived punctually, gay, handsome, magnificent in fur-lined coat thrown back revealing white waistcoat and tie. His entrance was checked by the sight of her morning frock. He made the obvious remark, with a touch of light reproach.

“Not dressed yet?”

“I’m not going out to-night, Anthony. You must forgive me. All that’s over.”

“Over?”

“Yes. Please sit down. I’ve something to say to you.”

He obeyed her, slipping off his coat.

“I suppose it’s about that rotten letter this morning. I can’t for the life of me see why it should worry you.”

“Don’t you?” With the fingers of her maimed hand she nervously twisted her wedding-ring round and round. “Hasn’t it occurred to you to-day that two very heroic people resolved to sacrifice themselves so that we should be happy?” His face was all puzzlement and incredulity. “Well, think,” she went on. “They’re both much older than we are. They saw us. In their eyes it seemed obvious what we were to each other. Then they raked up in their minds all sorts of other trivial things—Monte Carlo—Cannes—your carrying me to the boat that day. . . . How do I know? Anyhow, they agreed that they had lost us, and so, my dear, they took the only crazy way that noble people like them could think of—and invented this foolish, lunatic, wonderful fake of theirs.”

Anthony’s puzzlement gave way to a burst of laughter.

“My darling child! Those two—their running away—a fake? How did such an insane idea get into your head? No, no. They’re human beings with every beautiful quality, but they’re not monsters of altruism.”

“If you like to put it that way, they are. I know,” said Perella quietly.

Her tone brought his mirth to an end. Aware of his Perella, he saw that she was dealing with things more solid than fantastic. But, still half-incredulous, he said:

“Even so, for the sake of argument. What then?”

“I put it to you,” said Perella.

She awaited his answer breathlessly, knowing that on it depended a secret and precious solace in the life that lay before her. He made a few steps about the little room.

“I can’t conceive myself being in such a phantasmagorical situation—but if I were—well—I couldn’t accept such a sacrifice. It wouldn’t be decent.”

She gave a little cry of relief. “I am so glad, so glad.”

“Of course,” he said, “there would be another way out—a more——”

She rose, interrupting him. “No, no, my dear, there isn’t. I know what you were going to say. There’s only one way. I found that out this afternoon. I

went down to Esher."

"Esher?" he echoed.

"Yes."

"And saw Beatrice?"

"And Silvester."

"My God!" said he, sitting down and staring at her helplessly.

"I'm going back to him," said Perella. "He took on more than he can carry through. I got the truth out of them—it wasn't very difficult—they've been through hell, both of them. . . ." She turned away, and was silent for a moment or two, struggling for self-control.

"So you see, Anthony, we can't spend Christmas together."

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Do you think I'm going to lose you a second time? Not for anything in life, Perella."

He came to her passionately, but he only met brave and unresponsive eyes. He could take her in his arms merely because he had the strength, but he would meet unyielding lips. The elf had become woman, a sad woman, upheld by a love within her that exceeded love. He knew that not all the rant of passion in the world would move her.

"What's the good?" she said.

"You're right." He lifted dejected shoulders. "You're always right. But we don't seem to have a chance, do we? Of course I had it once, and missed it."

They talked awhile. She touched on her visit, on immediate plans. To-night she would stay with Caroline. To-morrow, Christmas Day, Silvester would meet her at Victoria and they would start for Florence together. They would break their journey at Paris. Question of reservations.

"That means the end of everything," said Anthony.

"Or a new beginning."

"A bit of a wreck, our Christmas."

Yes; but things had so happened. He must explain all to Gloria who would understand. And the children—well! She sighed. Then they sat together in dull anti-climax.

"What do you think I'd better do?" he asked at last.

"That's for you to decide."

He shifted his ground, viewing things through his emotional temperament.

"I see now the splendour of the sacrifice she was making—oh! not giving

me up—I don't seem to be worth very much. But her name, her position, everything. But, on the other hand, Perella, there's you and I. What's going to happen in the future to you? If you didn't love me, it wouldn't much matter. But you do."

"I've always loved you, dear, and always shall," said Perella.

"Then what's going to become of it all—that love?"

"I shall lay it away in lavender. Perhaps that's the wisest thing to do," she added wistfully. "Then it's always beautiful and sweet and fragrant."

"Not much life in it," said he, with some bitterness.

"It depends on what you call life," said Perella.

"Perhaps. The flesh or the Spirit."

"Just so."

"I suppose being a man I feel things differently," he said. "I want you, and I can't get you, and what the hell's going to happen to me, I don't know."

She looked away. "Don't make it harder for me," she said.

"God!" said he. "It's hard on both of us."

"What about Beatrice?" she asked. "Isn't it hard on her?"

"Of course. Yet if it hadn't been for this mad Quixotism of theirs things would have righted themselves."

"I wonder," said Perella. "We should always have been wanting each other, longing for the impossible. We should never have realized what we had got."

"What have I got now?"

"Beatrice."

He shook his head. "That's all over."

"Why not go down and see her?" she suggested softly. "This evening. It's only an hour's run. A telephone message to prepare her."

"Always my Conscience . . . oh! my God." He laughed bitterly. "Yes. I'll do it. But it'll be no good. Her first letter was final. I might pretend. But she's too proud and fine a woman to put up with shams."

A heavy silence fell on them.

Perella stared into the fire, still twisting the wedding-ring. She remembered the snap of the drawing-room door at Esher. What could she say? Her mind wandered into the future. Anthony was young, with his man's career before him. Other women, strange, unknown women, would yield to his fascination. There would come one especial woman whom he loved. The vague, inevitable shadow passed before her eyes, and she winced in pain. But it must come to

that. And Beatrice, great-hearted, would give him his freedom whenever he might ask for it. Her pity went from him to Beatrice. He was young. He could grapple with life. . . . Beatrice, Silvester, from the point of view of youth, lay away remote from Anthony. That was where women differed essentially from men. All the fibres of her soul closed round Silvester. Beatrice stood before her tragic, heroic, beautiful, facing life with courage in acceptance of inexorable verdict. Silvester and Beatrice loomed before her as the real people. Anthony melted into an abstract force that had racked her with delicious and unprofitable thrills. There was no longer an Anthony.

She was aroused with a start by his saying:

"I suppose that's the end of it."

He had risen and put on his coat. She made a step towards him.

"It must be. I'm sorry, dear."

He shrugged his shoulders, sought his cigarette-case.

"Do you remember that morning in Florence, when you wanted to see me to the Pension Toselli, and I stopped you at the Ponte Vecchio? I had a feeling I couldn't cross the bridge with you again. It seems silly and superstitious. But we've tried to cross, and it hasn't been allowed. The bridge was barred mid-way."

"For the life of me, even now," he cried with a last show of passion, "I can't see why we shouldn't break down the barrier."

"We can't," said Perella. "It's too strong. It's made of human hearts."

THE END

SOME PRESS OPINIONS
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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Old Bridge* by William J. (John) Locke]