

*The Guarded
Halo*

**Margaret
Pedler**

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The Guarded Halo

BY
MARGARET PEDLER

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The Guarded Halo

CHAPTER I A DIFFICULT CHOICE

Fen Wyatt had passed smoothly and automatically from father to son for a couple of centuries or more. A kindly, comfortable old house, mellowed by time and the care of generations who had lived in it and loved it. It had cradled their coming and periodically its darkened windows looked down regretfully upon their going, as first one and then another head of the family had been borne, shoulder-high, to his last resting-place. But Fen Wyatt remained—and hitherto there had always been a son to step into his inheritance.

And now it seemed as though the old house was waiting—gravely, rather surprisedly waiting for someone to come and take up the reins of government which Nicholas, the last member of the family upon whom the churchyard gate had closed finally and for ever, had unexpectedly let fall a month ago.

Outside, everything appeared just as usual. There was no perceptible change to mark the fact that Nick Wyatt—bluff, good-hearted, prejudiced Nick Wyatt—had stepped abruptly out of this world into the next. Commonplace, everyday little sounds filled the garden—the hum of a mowing machine as it was driven forward and back across meticulously shaven lawns; the slow, occasional footstep of a gardener followed by the metallic clip, clip of his shears as he trimmed a privet hedge; blithe singing of birds in the green-frosted trees, the piercingly sweet note of a blackbird fluting high above the twittering chorus. No, life was going on just the same outside the old house.

But inside, in an old-fashioned, low-ceiled room, with the May sunlight pouring into it through criss-crossed diamond window-panes, two people were facing the fact that, with the passing of Nick Wyatt, the whole of their world had come unstuck—suddenly and unbelievably.

“We’re right up against it.” Bob Wilson spoke with a definiteness which seemed to imply that he had mentally scoured every nook and corner wherein a grain of hope might lurk, and found them conspicuously empty.

He was sitting on the arm of a chair, his long legs stretched out dejectedly in front of him, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and an expression of half-incredulous dismay on his face. It was rather a nice face. It possessed no pretensions to good looks, but there was a certain dogged strength about its square-jawed plainness, and a humorous frankness in the direct gaze of the pleasant gray eyes, set somewhat wide apart, that was not without attraction.

“Right up against it,” he repeated dispiritedly.

The girl to whom he vouchsafed this depressing piece of information was sufficiently like him, although darker in colouring, to justify the assumption that they were brother and sister. A slim, eager slip of a girl, she had the same wide-apart gray eyes, their rain-clear grayness in her case accentuated by a double rim of short black lashes, and the same determined mouth, only more delicately cut. But whereas Bob’s hair was of a nondescript brown and unequivocally straight, hers was black as a crow’s wing—satiny, shingled hair with a fugitive wave in it that denied it severity. Narrow, straight black brows gave a characteristic touch to her small, pointed face, and in the thin, sleeveless black frock she was wearing, sharply contrasting with the warm pallor of her skin, she conveyed rather the impression of a black-and-white etching.

She regarded her brother curiously.

“Do you mean,” she said slowly, “that we haven’t any money *at all*?”

He gave a short laugh.

“That’s about the size of it,” he admitted ruefully. “Actually, we’ve about enough to carry us on for a few weeks, with care and circumspection. But after that’s used up we shall have to fend for ourselves—unless there are any lineal descendants of Elijah’s ravens flying about!”

Shirley’s incredulous gaze passed bewilderedly from her brother’s face to the glimpse of garden visible through the windows. Just within sight, Tomkins, the ancient head gardener, was busily engaged in tying up some rose trees, while Mugs, the wire-haired terrier, occupying a strategic position behind him, was equally busy surreptitiously burying a bone in the rose-bed’s sacred precincts. It all looked so accustomed, so *ordinary*, that it seemed impossible to realize the cataclysm which had suddenly changed the whole of life as far as she and her brother were concerned.

A month ago they had been living what appeared to be a perfectly safe and secure existence, the favoured niece and nephew of a devoted bachelor

uncle, surrounded by all those pleasant ways of living which plenty of money can procure, and with the ultimate prospect, when the time should eventually come for Nicholas Wyatt to be gathered to his fathers, of being left in possession of a sum which would at least maintain them both in independence for the rest of their lives.

More than that it had been out of Uncle Nick's power to assure them. Fen Wyatt itself, together with the monies which provided the big annual income he enjoyed, was entailed, and at his death must go to Alan Wyatt, son of his younger brother James. As long as that brother had lived, so long had Nick quarrelled with him. As is not infrequently the case with blood relations, the two men had nothing in common, and they had split finally and completely on the subject of their sister's marriage, Nick approving whilst his brother fiercely disapproved the man of her choice—James's disapprobation being based upon the fact that the man in question was painfully lacking in this world's goods. And when at the last the death of the younger put an end to the ceaseless warfare between the brothers, the hostile sentiment had been carried on into the next generation, and Nicholas and his nephew and heir, Alan Wyatt, had had nothing to do with each other beyond the interchange of occasional acrimonious letters relating to family and estate matters.

Meanwhile, Nicholas had concentrated his whole affections upon Bob and Shirley, the children of his much-loved sister. The latter had been suddenly and very tragically left a widow, and practically penniless, a few weeks after the birth of her daughter, and thenceforward he had charged himself with her entire welfare. His first proposal had been that she and her children should come and live with him at Fen Wyatt, but when she rejected this, with all a woman's innate craving to have a home of her own, he had established her in a house a few miles distant. Never very strong, however, and brokenhearted by her husband's death, her grip on life had gradually and almost imperceptibly weakened, until at last, at the end of two years, she quietly faded out of existence.

It was then that Nicholas showed that, just as in the case of his brother death could not soften his ingrained hostility, so death had no power to stem his devotion. Equally with his dislike, his affection also carried itself into the next generation, and when his sister's death left her children entirely bereft, he had put into practice his original idea and brought them to Fen Wyatt, together with the nurse who had seen them both come into the world and had stood devotedly by their mother throughout the tragedy which had broken her.

That had been eighteen years ago, when Bob was a sturdy youngster of nine and Shirley seven years younger, and since then the brother and sister had learned to look upon Fen Wyatt as so completely “home”—their own home—that, now, the realization that it was no longer theirs but their cousin’s, Alan Wyatt’s, that with the death of Nicholas they had become merely interlopers, had descended upon them as a stunning blow.

Shirley had never associated the thought of death with Uncle Nick—big, striding Uncle Nick, with his jolly, weather-beaten face and cheery smile, riding hard and straight to hounds three times a week, driving his fast sports car with unhesitating steadiness of nerve and judgment, vital and gay and optimistic as many a far younger man. Twenty years hence, perhaps, when fifty-five had translated itself into seventy-five. But not yet—not yet. . . . And already it had happened. Uncle Nick was dead, had been dead three weeks, and here she was sitting listening to Bob while he enlightened her as to the precise circumstances in which his death involved them. Added to the shock of his sudden passing and the sick, aching misery which had succeeded it, the illimitable sense of loss of which they were both so desperately conscious, there was to be this new and acute consideration—a sordid counting up of pounds and shillings, the necessity for facing the question of ways and means.

A rather wistful smile curved Shirley’s lips for a moment. How stricken and self-reproachful Uncle Nick would be could he have known the circumstances! Fortunately he didn’t know. It had always been his chief desire to make secure the future of his sister’s children. He had a certain small patrimony of his own, quite apart from the Fen Wyatt monies, and his aim and object had been so to increase this during his lifetime that it should be sufficient for their needs after he was gone.

“You’ll never be rich,” he used to say discontentedly. “There’ll not be a twentieth of what that damned young rotter, Alan, will come in for. But you’ll have enough to carry on in a little place that’s your own. Bob knows enough about the management of land to run a small farm off his own bat.”

Practically it had amounted to an obsession with him, this determination to make them independent, and latterly he had speculated pretty heavily with his small personal fortune in his endeavours to accomplish it. At first he had been amazingly successful, and his capital had augmented itself by leaps and bounds. Then the tide suddenly turned, and in a few weeks he had lost it all. But he was still undaunted and optimistic. Only the day before he died he had been full of fresh plans.

“We’ll economize a bit,” he declared, “and invest whatever I can save out of the Fen Wyatt income. After all, the income’s mine to do what I like with as long as I live, provided I keep the place up adequately.” He beamed cheerily at niece and nephew. “There’s nothing to make a song about. The luck was out and my castle’s tumbled down. But there’s plenty of time to make a fresh start and build it up again. I’m not much more than half-way through life, after all.”

But sometimes Fate doesn’t give a fresh start. Nick Wyatt didn’t get one. Instead, he died that night, passing quietly in his sleep from this world to the next, and Bob and Shirley were left alone to face the music.

“I’m glad—glad he never knew,” said Shirley, speaking her thoughts abruptly. “He would have hated it so for us.”

“We shall hate it pretty badly ourselves before long, I expect,” rejoined her brother grimly. “You’ve not realized it yet. Neither have I. That we’re practically penniless. . . . We shall begin to realize it when we turn out of here.”

She glanced round the room and her eyes misted suddenly. The dearness of it all! Dearness of books, their covers faded with much fingering, of the little low stool on which she used to sit in front of the big fire, yawning about the day’s sport with Uncle Nick when they had come home together from a day with hounds; above all, dearness of the big, old-fashioned arm-chair where he himself had always sat. Instinctively she and Bob had avoided its use since he was no longer there to fill it.

“Yes, I suppose we shall have to go,” she said unevenly. “It doesn’t seem real, does it? When—when do we go, Bob?”

“Well, Alan Wyatt’s been quite sporting over that. He wrote at once, you remember, saying that there was no hurry. And now I’ve had another letter from him.”

“Another? What about?”

Bob foraged in his pockets, finally producing the letter in question and unfolding it.

“He says that of course he knows Uncle Nick’s death will make a great difference to us and—and all that. And he suggests making us an allowance—thinks it would be only fair in the circumstances.”

A swift flush dyed Shirley’s face scarlet.

“Oh, Bob——!” She broke off, then added quietly: “May I see the letter?”

He handed it across to her in silence. There was a curious expression in his eyes as he did so, half deprecating, half interrogative, as though he wondered how she would regard its contents.

“. . . Naturally,” ran the small, somewhat pedantic script, *“I am quite aware that my father and my Uncle Nicholas hated each other cordially, and perhaps there was good reason for it. Nor do I imagine that there is the least likelihood of anything in the nature of friendship between ourselves. We have been too long reared in an atmosphere of mutual hostility. But the fact remains that we are branches of the same family, and for the credit of that family I should prefer that you and your sister were not dependent upon others for your livelihood. For this reason, therefore, I propose to make you each an annual allowance which would provide you with at least a livable income.”*

Here the letter branched off into details of amount and mode of payment, concluding rather pompously:

“And I trust that you will see your way to accepting this in the spirit in which it is offered.”

Shirley read the letter in silence. Then she looked across at her brother, and in her eyes there was the same interrogative, uncertain expression that had been in his.

“It’s very unexpected, isn’t it?” she said at last. “And rather nice of him—in the circumstances.”

“And it provides a way out,” he answered briefly.

“No.” She shook her head with decision. “It doesn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

A look of sudden anxiety, of apprehension, sprang into her face.

“Why, you couldn’t—we couldn’t possibly accept this,” she said swiftly. “You think that, too, Bob? Oh, you must think that!”

“Must I? What’s your reason for saying we can’t accept it?”

“Uncle Nick is the reason. You know, and I know, that there is nothing he would have hated more than for us to accept anything whatever from the James Wyatt family. He would never have allowed it while he was alive, and it wouldn’t seem straight or—or honourable to do the very thing he would have loathed now he’s dead.”

Bob slipped off the arm of the chair on which he had been perched, and stood up.

“Well said, old thing. Them’s exactly my sentiments—only I didn’t want to express them till I knew how you felt about it.”

A little sigh of relief escaped between her lips.

“Then that’s all right,” she replied. “Do you know, for a moment you quite frightened me, Bob. I thought”—slowly—“that you wanted to take this wretched money.”

Bob’s eyes twinkled.

“I do,” he said. “I want it no end. I feel exactly like a donkey who sees a bunch of carrots dangled in front of his nose—just out of reach.”

“Well, as long as you *know* they’re out of reach——”

“I’m afraid they are,” he admitted with a short sigh. “It’s a pretty stiff temptation, though, Shirley. A livable income—just what Uncle Nick always intended us to have—and we’ve only got to say ‘Yes, please’ for it. I suppose”—thoughtfully—“we are right in refusing it?”

“Right? Of course we’re right,” she answered impetuously. “Uncle Nick’s been a perfect brick to us all our lives, and we can’t be so utterly low-down as to have taken everything he’s always given us—and then respond by taking the very thing of all others he would hate us to do. Can you imagine what his feelings would be if he knew that we were living on the charity—for that’s what it would amount to—of the James Wyatt family. . . *choosing* to live on it?”

Bob nodded.

“Yes, I can pretty well imagine,” he said gruffly.

“We couldn’t do it. It would be—disloyal, somehow. We owe everything in the world to Uncle Nick, everything we’ve ever had.” Her voice shook a little at the remembrance of how much of love and thought and kindness had been comprehended in that “everything.”

“We can’t let him down over this,” she went on quietly. “You can’t let down anyone who’s been so unutterably good to you. I should feel ashamed all my life if we took this money.”

Bob lit a cigarette and stood smoking in silence for a while, staring down into the fire. Inwardly he agreed heartily with every word his sister had spoken. Scrupulously honourable himself, Nick Wyatt had inculcated the same fineness of perception in these two for whose lives he had made himself responsible—a fineness that carried loyalty and honour to its uttermost limit. Nevertheless, Bob had all a man’s practical sense of the value of money, added to which, as considerably the elder of the two, he had a heavy feeling of responsibility regarding his sister. And although her impulsive refusal to consider Alan Wyatt’s proposal met with an instant response in his own heart, he could not but realize that to turn down an offer of a livable income, in the circumstances in which they found themselves, would be regarded by most people as an act of quixotic folly.

Rapidly he envisaged the future. To refuse this offer meant that both he and Shirley must find work of some kind. Later on he might be able to earn enough to support them both, but he recognized that unless he had phenomenal luck it was unlikely he would be able to do much more at the outset than keep himself. And phenomenal luck rarely comes your way at the moment when you particularly need it. At length, tossing his cigarette half smoked into the fire, he turned back to his sister and put the matter squarely before her, pointing out the advantages of Alan Wyatt’s offer and painting the alternative future, should they decide to refuse it, in no uncertain colours.

“After all,” he wound up, “we live in a material world and we’ve got to look at the thing from a practical point of view. Most people would say we were utter fools to refuse an offer which means sure and certain bread-and-butter.”

But Shirley remained unmoved.

“I’d rather be a fool than a knave,” she returned composedly. “And that particular bread-and-butter—bought with Alan Wyatt’s money—would choke me. Every mouthful would be a sort of insult to Uncle Nick.”

He nodded assent.

“I know what you mean. Then the alternative is a job for each of us.”

“Well, *you* won’t find any difficulty in getting one,” she answered, with sisterly pride in this big brother of hers. “And even I must be of some sort of

use in the world. I know a bit about poultry-keeping and dairy-work, and I can drive a car and speak French. There must be lots of people who want that kind of thing.”

“Oh, lots,” agreed Bob.

Both were speaking in happy ignorance of the efficiency demands of the present day, their viewpoint based on life as it had come to them with every sharp edge and corner rounded off by the smoothing action of money.

“Then write to-day and refuse the offer, Bob,” said Shirley. “I shall feel much happier when we’ve put it right behind us.”

So that same evening a coolly courteous refusal was dispatched to Alan Wyatt, and Shirley went to bed with a little warm glow of thankfulness at her heart. She felt as though, had they accepted, they would have been letting Uncle Nick down, and that was unthinkable. As she said to Bob, when she kissed him good night:

“One must play the game by someone who has played it so splendidly by us. I’m glad you refused, Bob.”

But there were days to come when they were to count to the last farthing the unreckoned cost of “playing the game,” when Bob was to ask himself bitterly if the price had not been too heavy a one to pay.

CHAPTER II THE BIG ADVENTURE

Looking out of her bedroom window, Shirley was conscious of a sudden pang. A fortnight had elapsed since the day she and Bob had taken their decision regarding their cousin's offer of an allowance, and from that time onward arrangements for their departure from Fen Wyatt had proceeded apace. There had been a great many things to see to—rooms to be secured in London, a selection made of what to take with them of their own personal possessions and what to discard—since they both recognized that henceforth they must “travel light”—farewell visits to be paid to friends and neighbours, and, finally, the packing up of trunks and boxes. The time had simply flown by in the accomplishing of these things.

And now the actual morning of departure had come, and Shirley felt a poignant tug at her heart as she stood at her open window for a moment before going downstairs to breakfast. Mid-May sunshine flooded the garden below, where an early rose or two had already pushed crumpled petals up between green calyx leaves; Mugs, the terrier, was light-heartedly chasing a cat off the lawn, and in the meadows beyond cattle were lazily cropping the young, sweet grass. It was all typical of the life she had known, the life that with to-day was coming to an end, giving place to one that would be new and strange and untried. Never again would she stand at this same window looking out on the familiar landscape, background against which almost the whole of her days had been lived, and the dull insistence of the word “Never” clanged against her consciousness, as it has clanged for each of us at some time or another, with a horrible finality that was almost unbearable.

Stifling a sigh, she turned from the window and took her way downstairs. In the hall, trunks and suitcases stood strapped and ready, emphasizing afresh the imminence of departure, and, as she hurried by them, two of the servants passed her with the quiet tread and half-averted gaze of their class when trouble is in the air.

It had been arranged that the household staff should remain on in the service of the new owner, all except old Nanny who had been the Wilsons' nurse when they had first come to Fen Wyatt. Alan Wyatt had offered her a post there as linen-room maid—he could be relied upon always to do the conventionally correct thing—but, when Shirley had conveyed the offer to her, she had indignantly refused it.

“Not for me, miss, thank you,” she had asserted with some asperity, her eyes suddenly dimmed with loyal, indignant tears. “Fen Wyatt’s no place for me with old master gone and not even my own bairns to look after. I’ll take a temp’r’y job, and perhaps when you and Master Bob’s settled down somewhere you’ll have me back. I can cook as good as anyone, as well you know, miss.”

“I know you can, Nanny,” Shirley had answered unhappily. “But I’m afraid Mr. Bob and I will never be anywhere where we can afford to keep even a ‘staff’ of one. You see, we’re really poor people now.”

“There’d be no question of wages, miss,” rejoined Nanny simply. “I’d work my fingers to the bone for you and Master Bob without a penny piece, and that’s the truth. And if so be”—she twiddled the corner of her apron awkwardly between her fingers—“and if so be you—you haven’t got quite enough to start a little home of your own, for furnishings and what not, why, miss, I haven’t been here all these years on good wages and not saved a bit. I’ve two hundred pounds put by in War Savings ’Stificates, and that’s yours—yours and Master Bob’s—to-morrow, if it ’ud help.”

Shirley, touched to the quick, had thrown her arms round the old woman’s neck and hugged her. Then, quietly and soberly, she had explained to her exactly the circumstances in which Uncle Nick’s death had left them, and how even two hundred pounds couldn’t help them to start a home of their own. To poor old Nanny it was all very terrible and difficult of belief—that her “bairns,” as she had always called them, should have to “turn to and work.” It was a subversal of the whole order of the universe, and the worst of it was there didn’t seem anybody in particular upon whom the blame for such a state of things could be laid. Nor would she relinquish the idea that somehow and at some time a home would materialize in which she could once more serve and care for her adored young master and mistress.

“So I’ll just take a temp’r’y job, as I said, Miss Shirley,” she repeated doggedly. “And then you can send for me when you want me.”

Many a time, during the heart-breaking days that followed, days devoted to the preparations for departure, the recollection of Nanny’s unshakable belief in that future home had served in some queer indefinable way to comfort Shirley, even though she could not share it.

But this morning, on this last day of all, she could find no comfort anywhere, and she entered the sunny breakfast-room weighed down with an overwhelming sense of sadness. Bob had been standing leaning against the framework of the open French window, his face grave and a trifle drawn

looking. The wrench of leaving Fen Wyatt was trying him hard, while the thought of the future filled him with anxiety.

At the sound of Shirley's entrance he turned swiftly, and, seeing the sadness in her face, forced a smile to his own.

"Morning, old thing. Come along and partake of your last breakfast as one of the idle rich. It's a jolly good one, anyway"—lifting off the dish covers as he spoke—"fish kedgeree and the succulent kidney and bacon. Which will you have?"

Shirley shook her head. The idea of food was repulsive to her.

"Neither, thanks. I'm not hungry. I'll just have a cup of coffee."

"Nonsense. You must have something." He became persuasive. "See, I'll choose for you—the S. K. and bacon, as being more sustaining than kedgeree." He came round to her side with a plate on which reposed a kidney cooked to a turn, flanked by crisp, golden-brown curls of bacon. "Now be a good girl and eat it up. Remember, to-morrow you may have to breakfast off a fried sardine"—smiling—"so make the most of present opportunities."

She yielded at last to his kindly coaxing and made a valiant effort to eat. But she felt as though each morsel would choke her, and Mugs, leaning an eager, palpitating little body against her knee, came in for more than his usual share of titbits.

"I wonder how Mugs will like being a poor man's dog," continued Bob, talking at random in an endeavour to distract her thoughts a little. They had decided to take Mugs with them, feeling that to part with him would be the last straw on their already overburdened young backs. "Reared on the fat of the land and the very *best* bones, he will have to get used to his daily dog-biscuit—with a rabbit-neck sometimes by way of a treat."

Shirley smiled wanly, and tried to repay Bob's manful efforts by making a pretence of cheering up. But it was a poor pretence and petered out altogether later on when, breakfast over, she made a last pilgrimage round the house and garden, bidding a voiceless good-bye to the place which had been home so long but never would be again. Mugs followed close at her heels, his eyes wistfully puzzled, his short tail at half-mast, sensing, in the way dogs will, that all was not well with his beloved mistress.

Last of all, she bent her steps in the direction of the stables, and here the sight of Uncle Nick's favourite hunter, with its sleek brown head thrust over the door of the box next that which housed her own thoroughbred mare, was

almost more than she could bear. Several other brown and chestnut heads were quickly pushed over the wooden doors of different stalls, and little whinnies of pleasure mingled with an impatient stamping of hoofs. The half-dozen hunters in the stables knew very well that Shirley's morning visit usually coincided, when the head groom wasn't looking, with surreptitious gifts of apple or sugar or an illicit handful of corn.

She went down the line as usual, stroking velvety noses that nuzzled affectionately against her palm, and the tears were running unchecked down her face when at length she made her way back to the house. Bob met her on the threshold.

"The servants are all waiting to say good-bye," he announced, his voice a trifle uneven. These final moments were straining even his self-control far more than he had anticipated.

Shirley made a shrinking little gesture of protest.

"Oh, Bob—I—I can't!" she said shakily.

Instantly his self-control returned. These two were such close friends, meant so much to one another, that either was always ready to help the other at no matter what personal cost.

"Yes, you can," he declared sturdily. "It 'ud break their hearts if you didn't say good-bye to them, and they've always been such a decent crowd. So pull up your socks, old thing, and come along."

She sighed heavily. The whole of her being, at the moment, seemed merged into a single agonizing essence of farewell—farewell to the old home, to all the dear, familiar ways of life, above all, farewell to that beloved personality whose spirit, in some intangible way, still seemed to pervade the place he had known and loved. And she would have been illimitably thankful if she could have avoided this final ordeal, have crept silently away, wrapped in her own grief, without any further last words or elaboration of good-byes.

But she realized the truth of Bob's prompting in regard to the servants—the claim they had on her. And a recognition of what was due to other people, the necessity of playing the game by them, was an inherent characteristic of her make-up. *Noblesse oblige*, or, at least, its modern equivalent, had been a basic axiom of Uncle Nick's whole life, and she could not fail his teaching now. So she rallied pluckily to Bob's urgent demand and accompanied him into the old, high-raftered hall where a little crowd of subdued-looking maids and men had assembled.

But at length it was all over—the leave-takings in the hall, the parting glimpses, through half-opened doors, of rooms which had held so much of happiness and laughter, even the final poignant moment when, for the very last time, Shirley and Bob crossed the threshold of Fen Wyatt and stepped into the car that was waiting to bear them to the station.

As it rounded the curve of the drive they had a brief vision of the flock of servants still clustered about the doorway, of the fluttering handkerchiefs of the maids, and in the forefront of the group old Nanny, her wrinkled face twisted and wrung as her eyes strained after her heart's children. Then the car turned the corner and swept out of sight.

Shirley's hand suddenly clutched Mugs's small body very tightly as he sat beside her, so tightly that he uttered a little yelp of protest.

“Bob,” she said a trifle breathlessly, “I think I feel rather like Ishmael when he was driven out to live in the wilderness.”

He glanced down at her whimsically.

“Don't think of it like that. Let's think this is only another bit of the Big Adventure, as Uncle Nick used to say.”

Her pulses, which had been jerking unevenly, steadied down. The memory of Uncle Nick's cheery philosophy was like the reassuring touch of a friendly hand.

“Never get the wind up about life, kiddy,” he had said to her on one occasion. “Always think of it as a Big Adventure, with lots of queer turns and surprises—and take good luck or bad just as it comes, without funkng. There's only one thing bigger—the Biggest Adventure of all—and that's death.”

And now Nick himself had gone on that Biggest Adventure, leaving her to fare forth alone, without his kindly guidance, on the next stage of her journey. Her mouth set itself determinedly in a straight line of courage. Whatever the future held in store, she would try to remember that it was all part of the adventure of life, and meet it “without funkng.”

CHAPTER III PAGAN STREET

Shirley sat back on her heels and poked viciously at the small, unresponsive fire which flickered spasmodically in the grate, threatening to come to an untimely end at any moment. June had blustered in unsmilingly, bleak with chilly rain and wind, and a fire was a necessary extravagance. Only this obstinate, black-looking handful of coals in the high-barred fireplace—which last was not nearly as black as it should have been, but showed unsightly patches of red rust here and there—compared very unfavourably with the cheery, crackling log fires that had prevailed at Fen Wyatt.

But then, as she admitted with a sigh, everything at No. 7, Pagan Street, where she and Bob had found temporary quarters while they looked for work, was as different as it could possibly be from Fen Wyatt. A narrow, drab-looking street, with tall, grimy houses on either side, many of them boasting a fly-blown card in the windows which bore the legend, APARTMENTS, in large letters. Shirley could not conceive why it rejoiced in the name of Pagan. There was certainly, as she had remarked with a faint smile to Bob, no suggestion of pagan luxury about it.

In fact, luxury, even the smallest modicum of it, was a thing she was beginning to rule out of her life. A brief three weeks in London had sufficed to bring both Bob and Shirley sharply up against the meaning of actual shortage of money—something entirely outside their previous experience. A week, and they had found it necessary to readjust their ideas as to how long their limited funds would hold out if—and this was becoming a much bigger “if” than they had anticipated—they did not both find jobs before long. The cost of their lodgings in Pagan Street, consisting of two ill-furnished bedrooms and a diminutive sitting-room, was making deep inroads into their small amount of capital, and to the actual rent had to be added the price of food and various other items of existence. The “fried sardine” for breakfast had become an actual fact—and it wasn’t even always fried, either.

Neither of the Wilsons, in the beginning, had expected to find much difficulty in obtaining a position of some kind, but their optimism had been speedily quenched. So far, daily perusal of the “vacancy” advertisements in the newspapers, and manifold visits to different agencies, had proved quite barren of results. Between them they had written dozens of letters of application for various posts, the majority of which had not even brought an

answer, while Bob had often tramped the streets all day in order to save bus fares, applying personally for any work that seemed to offer, only to find himself one of hundreds of other candidates similarly situated—either too young, too old, too inexperienced or inefficient to be considered by those in authority. And, on her side, Shirley had been equally unsuccessful.

So that the end of three weeks found them with a sadly depleted exchequer, no prospects, and still occupying the same depressing rooms in Pagan Street. And even their continued tenancy of the latter had seemed at the outset to be a matter of speculation, since Mrs. Barnet, their landlady, had eyed the young couple with considerable suspicion—a fact which supplied them with one of their few moments of genuine amusement. Even Shirley's assurance that they were not "theatricals," and that Bob was her very own brother, had at first failed to allay her doubts.

"They all calls 'em that, brother or cousin or somethin' of the sort," she averred skeptically. "And 'aving always kep' me lodgin's respec'able, I'm not goin' to start no other at my time o' life."

"I don't know what 'they' do," Shirley informed her at last, firmly. "I've told you that Mr. Wilson is my brother, but if you're not satisfied we'll look for rooms elsewhere." Although, even as she delivered herself of this ultimatum, uttered with all the dignity she could muster up, she was conscious of an inward tremor of apprehension. For she was well aware that, handicapped by their small acquaintance with the cheaper parts of London, she and Bob would find difficulty in discovering fresh quarters at short notice. Moreover, the loss of time entailed in hunting for them would be little less than a calamity, when the search for work was so all-important.

Perhaps something in the clear gray eyes which challenged her convinced Mrs. Barnet of the groundlessness of her doubts, for she shuffled away at last with a muttered apology.

"No offence meant, miss, and I 'ope none taken. But one 'as to be pertic'lar in lettin' rooms."

And later on, downstairs in the basement she confided her considered opinion to the charlady who "obliged" her twice a week.

"'E don't neglect 'er enough to be 'er 'usband, nor 'e ain't sloppy enough to be anythink else, so I dessay 'e *is* 'er brother, after all."

But sidelights of amusement, such as that provoked by Mrs. Barnet's dark suspicions, were becoming less and less frequent in the lives of Bob and Shirley, and the girl's face, as she tried to persuade the sulky fire to burn

more brightly in readiness for her brother's return, seemed to have acquired a gravity that was foreign to it. There is nothing in the least funny about being hard up, and when, with each day, the prospect of obtaining work seems to draw no nearer, an element of panic begins to enter in.

There was a look almost of desperation in Shirley's eyes as she awaited Bob's coming. He had gone out once more in search of a job, and she wondered wretchedly whether he would have any success to-day or would return with only the usual depressing report of failure.

"Oh, Mugs, it's thoroughly *beastly* being poor!" she exclaimed at last, out loud. She felt she simply must confide her thoughts to someone, and for the moment Mugs was the only possible audience. He had been sitting on his small haunches, thoughtfully contemplating her efforts to coax the coals into a blaze, and probably wondering in his doggy mind why there should be such an immense difference between the caloric values of London and Fen Wyatt fires. At the sound of Shirley's voice he leapt up, wagging his stumpy little tail and thrusting a warm, moist nose eagerly into her hand. He did not know what the trouble was, but he was quite aware there *was* trouble in the air, and he attempted the only form of consolation of which he was capable. She stroked his head in silence for a minute or two.

"And even you are an extravagance," she remarked at last, ruefully. "An extravagance we've really no business to indulge in. Only"—clasping him suddenly very tightly in her arms—"we simply can't do without you, Mugs."

The "extravagance" merely settled himself happily on her lap and went to sleep, and for another half-hour Shirley sat there holding him, vaguely comforted by the feel of his small warm body against her own.

Presently she caught the sound of Bob's footsteps on the staircase outside, and, letting Mugs slide down abruptly to the floor, she sprang up to welcome him.

"Well, what news?" she asked eagerly, as he entered the room. But she knew, the moment she saw his face, what the answer would be, and her heart sank.

"No luck," he said moodily. Crossing to the fire, which had at last consented to burn up, he flung himself down into a chair and held out his hands to the warmth.

The three weeks in London had left their mark on him. He was thinner in face and his eyes held the same expression of secret anxiety which dwelt in

Shirley's.

"I never imagined before," he went on with a short, half-resentful laugh, "that I was such a useless cumberer of the earth. My services appear to be entirely at a discount wherever I offer them."

"But they won't always be," she put in hastily, speaking with a cheerfulness she was very far from feeling. "You're bound to come across the right person soon—I mean an employer person."

"Am I? I see no particular reason why I should," he returned gloomily. "Have you? What about that Lady Somebody you wrote to who wanted a companion-secretary? Any good?"

"None whatever," replied Shirley, smiling. "She wants shorthand and book-keeping—household accounts, you know—and someone who can play accompaniments, and do her sewing for her, and who understands face massage and can look after two dogs. I think the last is about the only thing I'm qualified for."

Even Bob's face lightened with a brief smile.

"Gosh! The woman wants a sort of walking Whiteley's, I should think," he commented. "Well, so that's that," he went on. "Three weeks—and we're just where we were when we started."

"Except that we're a trifle poorer," subjoined Shirley dryly.

He nodded.

"Precisely. And we really can't reduce expenditure much more. We must remain civilized—at least to the extent of clean towels and soap, et cetera."

"Cleanliness being next to godliness."

He grinned.

"It may be. But it's a damned sight more expensive." Then, the grin fading swiftly from his face: "Seriously, kiddy, we're in a very tight place. Funds won't hold out much longer, and I'm beginning to feel a bit desperate about it. We simply *must* find jobs."

"Well, I'm sure we've tried hard enough. I don't know what more we can do."

"Nor I. Unless"—bitterly—"we're prepared to eat humble pie and ask Alan Wyatt to renew his offer."

“Never!” declared Shirley, with spirit. “That’s the one thing we can’t do.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“It would be more to the point if you could think of one thing we can do.”

“I might go out as a housemaid,” she suggested, a little hysterically. “Only I’ve no references from my last place.”

Bob got up suddenly from his chair and, coming to her side, laid his hands on her shoulders. His eyes searched her face.

“Shirley, are you sure—quite sure—you never regret my refusing the money Alan Wyatt offered us?”

She met his gaze with the clear honesty of her own.

“Never,” she answered steadily. “At least I feel—clean—now, even though things are more difficult than we ever expected. I shouldn’t, if we’d accepted.”

His hands fell from her shoulders.

“Then that’s all right,” he said, with a sigh of relief. “It was only for your sake that I asked. I hate your living—in this.” He waved his hand expressively, indicating the meagre little sitting-room with its shoddy furniture and threadbare carpet. “I can stand things for myself, but not for you.”

Shirley smiled his apprehensions aside. She had been down into the depths to-day, but now her courage was mounting up again, answering to the call on it.

“I can stand my own share, Bob,” she returned gamely. “So don’t worry about me, old thing. After all, something’s bound to turn up before long, and we’ll just hang on somehow until it does.”

And, as though Fate had been charmed into a more kindly mood by the cheery optimism which defied it, something did turn up, the very next day. Shirley, eagerly scanning the advertisement columns of the morning paper, suddenly gave vent to a little shout of delight.

“At last! Listen, Bob, here’s the very thing for me:

“An English girl, someone bright and jolly, required as companion for two or three months to a young married lady

travelling on the Continent. Principal qualifications required: A good knowledge of French and a good sense of humour.’ ”

Bob looked up from his own perusal of another newspaper.

“Are you making it up as you go on?” he inquired skeptically.

“No, indeed I’m not—though it does sound too good to be true, doesn’t it? I’m sure the person who put it in must be nice—it’s so unlike the usual run of advertisements. And I really think I answer to the description wanted.” She glanced down once more at the advertisement. “Let me see: ‘*Apply between eleven and one o’clock at 15, Fremingham Place.*’ Bob, I must fly, so as to get there before any other bright and jolly English girls.”

She disappeared, to return a few minutes later dressed for the street.

“Wish me luck!” she commanded gaily. “I’m off to apply for ‘a temp’r’y job’—just like old Nanny.”

CHAPTER IV PARTNERS

Apparently June had suddenly recollected that she was supposed to be a summer month and decided to behave accordingly, for blue skies and sunshine greeted Shirley as she closed the house door behind her and stepped into the street. Her spirits, already on the up-grade, rose still more. It seemed like a good omen that, after so many days of rainy weather, the sun should elect to shine again on this particular morning, and she hurried along on eager feet. As though the Fates were definitely on her side, she caught the omnibus she wanted without any delay, and was soon being carried swiftly toward her destination.

It was not until she was once more on foot, and actually making her way along Fremingham Place, that the good spirits with which she had set out on her errand all at once deserted her, to be replaced by gathering qualms of apprehension. Supposing she didn't get the job, after all, and had to return to Pagan Street with the same depressing report of "No Luck" that had so far attended every effort to find work which she and Bob had made? In spite of the encouraging assurance she had given him that "they would hang on somehow till something turned up," she knew very well that they were rapidly approaching the end of their tether, for, although sixpence may be being made to do the work of a shilling, there is nevertheless a limit even to the number of sixpences at one's command.

Sheer panic lest to-day should prove only a repetition of the failures of all the previous days overtook her, and when finally she reached the brief flight of steps which led up to No. 15 she was sorely tempted to run away without waiting to hear those unpleasantly familiar words: "The situation is filled."

Summoning up her courage, however, she pressed the bell-push and, during the brief interval which elapsed between the ring of the bell and the opening of the door, she did her best to fight down the rising tide of nervousness. But, in spite of all her efforts, when finally the door swung back, it was in rather a breathless voice that she addressed the manservant who had opened it.

"I've called in answer to an advertisement."

The man regarded her with the impassive gaze of the well-trained servant, and stood aside to admit her.

“Come this way, please,” he said. And, still feeling as though her heart were in her throat rather than in its proper place in her anatomy, she followed him across an attractive, irregularly shaped hall into what appeared to be a man’s study.

The room was situated at the back of the house, and looked out on to a small oblong space of garden—one of those spaces, attaching sometimes to an old house, which the owner has treasured and kept sacredly preserved against the surrounding onslaught of encroaching bricks and mortar. A very charming garden, Shirley thought it, as her glance took in the path of crazy pavement which ran down betwixt a narrow strip of lawn and a herbaceous border, bright with old-fashioned flowers. At the farther end a big horse-chestnut tree in blossom spread itself like a green, candle-lit tent above some gaily-coloured wicker chairs, and, in the warm sunlight, the whole aspect of the tranquil little garden brought her a curious thrill, half pleasure, half pain. It was such a refreshing contrast to the drab outlook from the windows of the rooms in Pagan Street, and sent her mind travelling wistfully back to Fen Wyatt—Fen Wyatt, with its shaven lawns and shady trees, its riot of summer flowers, its atmosphere of leisured peace.

The sound of a door opening behind her recalled her thoughts sharply to the exigencies of the moment, and she swung round to see, not as she had anticipated, the “young married lady” of the advertisement, but a man’s tall figure standing in the doorway. For an instant a sudden feeling of dismay rushed over her. She had not expected to be interviewed by the husband. It made the whole thing seem so businesslike, far removed from the pleasantly informal impression created by the advertisement. And then a quick glance at the face of the man who had just entered reassured her. It was a well-cut face, though rather thin and worn-looking, with lines on it that spoke of physical suffering. His hair, too, which was so dark as to be almost black, was slightly touched with gray at the temples, and Shirley mentally guessed him to be about thirty-eight or nine. His eyes were dark gray, and it was in these and in the sensitively moulded mouth that she had found reassurance; both held kindness and a quiet, rather whimsical sense of humour.

Nevertheless, she explained her errand a trifle shyly. The recent rebuffs she had met with had taught her that, regarded from the standpoint of the average employer, she was possessed of really very few marketable qualifications.

“I saw your advertisement,” she said, when she and the gray-eyed man had shaken hands. “And I thought perhaps I might—might suit.”

The ghost of a smile flickered over his mouth.

“I think perhaps you might,” he said quietly. He pulled forward a chair. “Won’t you sit down, Miss——” He paused interrogatively.

“Wilson—Shirley Wilson,” she supplied.

He nodded, and as she seated herself, continued:

“And now, tell me what you can do?”

Her heart sank. If this situation depended primarily on what she could “do,” it differed very little from others which she had tried to obtain and failed. However, she met his grave-eyed glance quite candidly.

“I’m afraid,” she said, “there isn’t a great deal I can do. I can speak French—*really* fluently. And—and I suppose I could make myself generally useful.”

For a moment he returned no answer. He had not seated himself when she did, but had remained standing, leaning against the chimney-piece and looking down at her thoughtfully. The silence and his quiet, appraising scrutiny drove her into further speech.

“I thought—the advertisement,” she murmured lamely. “You didn’t seem to want any very special qualifications.”

“But I do,” he said, speaking at last. “I want—very special qualifications.” He paused, then, regarding her with a curious directness, continued: “I want someone who can ‘be’ more than someone who can ‘do’—someone who could be a real understanding pal to a woman who has just been through a very rough time.”

“Then, your—your wife——” she began.

“My wife?” he said in a puzzled voice. “Oh, I see. You thought I was advertising for my wife?”

“Yes, I thought so.”

“Evidently you think I look the type to give a wife a thoroughly bad time, then,” he observed dryly.

Shirley’s face broke into a smile, and she shook her head.

“No, I don’t,” she said. “I don’t believe you’d give anyone a bad time.”

“I’d prefer not to. There seem so many people ready to do that, that to add to their number would be superfluous. But come, suppose we clear the

ground a bit, and then you'll see whether my job is one you would care to undertake. What I'm looking for is a travelling companion for my sister, Mrs. Harford. My name, by the way, is Drake—Simon Drake. She—my sister—is badly in need of a change, and unfortunately I'm prevented by certain legal matters which require my attention just at the moment from taking her abroad myself. Even if I could," he went on thoughtfully, "I don't know that I would. I think, in the circumstances, she would be better for a little while away from everyone who's been associated with recent events in her life." He paused, then added: "She has just lost her husband."

"Oh, how sad!" Shirley's quick sympathy shone warmly in her eyes. "It—it's so terrible when someone you care for—dies." She knew what the loss of even an Uncle Nick had meant, and she could guess a little what it must mean to a woman to lose the one man in the world whom she had loved well enough to marry.

"Yes," answered Drake quietly. "Death is very sad. But sometimes other things are sadder. Kit's husband—my sister's husband isn't dead." In answer to Shirley's look of surprised interrogation he went on quickly, as though he disliked what he had to say and was anxious to get it over and done with. "He made her very unhappy—so unhappy that there was only one way out. She divorced him."

"Oh!" It was a little cry of utter dismay. To Shirley's sensitive imagination those three short words conjured up a tragedy that hardly bore thinking of. She was young enough to have an untarnished belief in love as the most wonderful thing in the world, and it always seemed to her unbelievably tragic that two people who had once cared enough to want to go through life together should ever drift so far asunder that an irrevocable parting of the ways was the only solution of all their pitiful misunderstandings.

"Perhaps," she hazarded, "they will make it up again some day. Don't you think they might?"

A curious expression crossed his face.

"No, I don't think there is any likelihood of that," he said. "So you see, what I want to do is to try and take her thoughts away from it—from all the worry and trouble she has been through—and get her to take a fresh grip on life. And I want someone to help me do it—a partner in the job"—with a sudden charming smile. "That's why I advertised. I thought I might be able to find somebody—just the right kind of person—who would be willing to."

“I should think you’d find heaps of people *willing* to,” answered Shirley. “The question would be whether you thought them the ‘right kind.’”

Drake’s eyes sought and held hers a moment.

“I think I’ve found the particular kind of partner I want,” he said. And as he finished speaking there came a queer little whimsical twist to his mouth, as though something in the wording of his speech had secretly and unexpectedly amused him.

Shirley caught her breath. Intent on the matter in hand, she had missed that fleeting expression.

“Do you mean you really think I might suit?” she queried half incredulously.

He nodded.

“I really do. That is, if you’re willing.”

“But perhaps your sister may not like me?” she suggested seriously. “After all, it’s as companion to her that I’m wanted.”

“True,” he answered, with equal gravity. Yet in spite of his becomingly serious tone two irrepressible imps of amusement twinkled in his eyes for an instant. “True. I’ll go and ask her to come downstairs and meet you.” With a brief, reassuring nod he quitted the room, and as he crossed towards the door she noticed that he limped a trifle. In the trepidation which had seized upon her at his first entrance she had failed to observe this—or, if she had, her mind must have registered the fact unconsciously, owing to her nervous preoccupation at the moment. In any case, it was so slight a lameness that it was only just perceptible.

Left to herself, her thoughts concentrated on the man with whom she had been talking. There was something oddly arresting about him, in spite of—or, more truly, perhaps, because of—the quietness and simplicity of his manner. His lameness, and the suggestion of physical fragility written in the rather worn lines of his face, hinting that he was no stranger to pain, contrasted curiously with his tall, muscular build. And in the gray eyes, for all their kindness and whimsical humour, there was an underlying expression of weariness, as if their owner had found life not quite worth while—as though it had disappointed him in some way.

Shirley wondered what lay behind that unsatisfied expression. It had not been bred by any such lack of this world’s goods as had abruptly taken the sheer unthinking joy of living out of her own and Bob’s lives. Everything

about No. 15, Fremingham Place betrayed that quiet, unobtrusive expensiveness which points to the possession of plenty of money. No, she was sure that no question of limited means was responsible for that weary look in the eyes of Simon Drake. Probably, she reflected, it was his physical disability. Lameness, even as slight as his, to a man so obviously built for splendid strength, must be a very bitter burden to carry. Shirley's heart ran out in sympathy to him, and by comparison, her own lot in life suddenly appeared much lighter. After all, health was hers, even if wealth was not, and she knew very well which she would choose if she were compelled to make a choice between the two.

At this juncture her thoughts were interrupted by the reappearance of the subject of them, accompanied by his sister, and, as Shirley shook hands with the newcomer, her first impression was that rarely had she seen two members of the same family who resembled each other so slightly.

Some fourteen years younger than her brother, Kit Harford was an attractive-looking little person, somewhat below medium height, with russet-brown hair and big, wide-open eyes of the deep, soft, velvety brown you find in certain wallflowers. It was a softness, however, which was only that of colour, for the eyes themselves looked out on the world with a certain cynical mockery. She greeted Shirley very kindly, none the less, and as soon as she smiled the girl could discern her kinship with the man beside her. Both had the same charming smile, which flashed out unexpectedly, irradiating their faces and completely obliterating, for the moment, that something sad and bitter which had stamped itself on each of them.

"Well, I'll leave you two to have a little talk together," said Drake, after a short time, during which he and his sister had drawn from Shirley, in a friendly, sympathetic fashion, the particulars of her brief personal history. "You'll get along better without a mere man shoving his oar in." And, picking up a book which had been lying on a desk near at hand, he tucked it under his arm and strolled out through the open French window into the garden. Half unconsciously Shirley's eyes followed him as he went down the paved path and established himself in one of the wicker chairs beneath the horse-chestnut. Then the sound of Mrs. Harford's voice recalled her wandering attention.

"My brother tells me he hopes you're going to consent to go abroad with me," she said. Adding, with a pretty, appealing graciousness that would have made refusal difficult even if Shirley had not already decided in her own mind that she didn't want to refuse: "I hope so, too."

“Are you certain you want me?” asked the girl earnestly. “I should love it, of course, but, after all, you know very little about me. And, you see, I’ve no references to back me up. Mr. Drake may be quite wrong in thinking I should suit you.”

Mrs. Harford laughed and shook her head.

“I’m sure he isn’t,” she said. “I’d stake anything on Simon’s opinion of anybody. He has an almost uncanny instinct as to what people are really like. He only made one mistake in his life over anyone,” she went on, her face suddenly clouding. “And in that case he was blinded. . . . Blinded.” A new note had crept into her voice with the last words, a note of passionate resentment. It was as though some smouldering bitterness had place within her, liable to flame up at any moment. Almost instantly, however, it died down, and when she spoke again it was so composedly that Shirley could almost have persuaded herself she had only imagined that sudden flash of anger.

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Harford resumed, “whether my brother has recommended me to you as highly as he recommended you to me. Probably he’s told you something of the circumstances——”

“Yes, he did,” broke in Shirley impulsively. “And I’m so sorry—so terribly sorry.”

“Are you?” Kit Harford gazed abstractedly in front of her for a moment. “I don’t know whether I’m sorry, or angry, or unhappy, or only just horribly humiliated. Each of them in turn, I think,” she went on, her brown eyes suddenly mocking, as though she were jeering at herself. “But, in my case, I’m not a particularly pleasant person to live with just now. I’ve a grudge against Fate, and it makes me decidedly fractious at times. Do you think you could put up with me?”

In spite of the harsh raillery of her tones, Shirley could intuitively sense the soreness of heart which it concealed. This woman had been hurt to the very core of her being, and she was trying to pretend to the world at large—as women always have and always will—that she wasn’t nearly as badly hurt as one might think. She was even trying to pretend it to herself.

“Do you think you could put up with me?”

The lightly uttered question, upon its half-derisive inflection, cloaked a desperate appeal to which all the girl’s ardent young sympathies responded.

“I’m sure I could,” she said simply. “I—I should love to come to you.”

“Would you really?” Kit Harford’s face held an almost hungry eagerness. “Then, my dear, do come. Come and prevent me from making a fool of myself.”

Afterwards, when Shirley had gone back to Pagan Street, hurrying to share with Bob the good news of her engagement, Drake and his sister sat together in their precious little strip of garden, discussing her. The low rumble of London’s traffic came to their ears pleasantly dulled by the surrounding houses.

“However did you find her, Simon?” asked Kit wonderingly. “She’s quite unlike the average girl who wants a job.”

“Quite,” he agreed, smiling. “I don’t suppose she’s ever ‘wanted a job’ before. She’s gloriously unbusinesslike—never even asked what salary was offered! However, we can settle all that later.”

“You’ll be decent to her over that, won’t you?”

His gray eyes were slightly quizzical.

“I think she’s the sort of person one would rather want to be decent to—over most things,” he said slowly.

CHAPTER V THE GAP

“Bob, I’m to have four pounds a week—and ‘all found,’ as the servants say. Isn’t it simply too marvellous?”

It was a few days after Shirley’s first visit to Fremingham Place. There had been other visits since, which had only served to increase her liking for both the brother and sister, but on each occasion, by a sort of common consent, business matters had been shelved, and the question of the salary her engagement carried with it left in abeyance. And now the morning’s post had brought her a letter from Mrs. Harford, definitely fixing the amount, and she tossed the news excitedly across the breakfast table.

“It’s exactly like a fairy-tale come true,” she declared.

“Yes, it is, rather,” agreed Bob soberly. “Especially as the ‘all found’ part of it includes travelling about on the Continent.”

“Just what I’ve always longed to do!” sighed Shirley blissfully. Then, her face clouding over a little: “The only thing I wish is that you were coming too, old thing.”

“Luxury jobs of that kind aren’t likely to come my way,” he answered shortly. “I’d be grateful to Providence for merely a plain bread-and-butter one.”

“You’ll get it soon. I’m sure you will,” she averred.

His mouth tightened.

“I *must*,” he said, his voice hard. “I’ve been reckoning up, and when we’ve paid Mrs. Barnet’s bill this week we shall have exactly ten pounds left. Ten pounds doesn’t go very far in London for two people.”

“It won’t be for two people. Mrs. Harford wants to start next Monday, so I shall be off your hands.” Shirley got up and came round to his side. “More than that, *I* shall be able to help the family exchequer. I shan’t want half my salary—I’ve got heaps of clothes——”

Bob interrupted energetically.

“If you think I’m going to take any of the money you earn, you’re jolly well mistaken, kiddy. I won’t touch a penny of it.”

“Oh, yes, you will,” she answered, her eyes very soft. “Don’t be absurd, old dear. We’ve always pulled together, and we’re always going to. I shall just keep part of my screw for pocket-money and send you the remainder—until you’ve found a job.”

“No”—firmly.

“Yes”—with equal firmness. “Bob, you *must* agree to this. I should be miserable if you didn’t. And you don’t want to spoil all my pleasure in travelling, do you?” she went on beguilingly. “You know I shouldn’t enjoy a minute of it if I thought you were living on bread and scrape here in London. Besides, I don’t need the money, honestly, and with the ten pounds you’ll have left and what I can send you, you’ll rub along all right until you can get a job.”

But Bob’s expression remained uncompromising.

“No, you’ll keep your money,” he said curtly. “I won’t touch it.”

“That isn’t fair to you!” she objected. “We’ve always gone shares in everything. If you’d got a job and I hadn’t, you know you’d share what you made with me.”

“That’s different,” he returned stubbornly. “I’m a man and you’re a woman.”

Shirley resorted to extremes.

“Very well, then, if you won’t agree, I shan’t take the engagement at all—I’ll write and tell Mrs. Harford that I can’t come. And then”—triumphantly—“we shall *both* have to live on that ten pounds! So you see what your beastly pride will bring us to.”

In spite of himself, Bob smiled.

“Don’t be silly,” he said.

“It’s you who are being silly,” she maintained. “Look here”—she cast about in her mind for some way of persuading him—“will you take the money as a loan? You can pay me back when you’re earning yourself, if that will satisfy you.” She paused. “Do, please, Bob,” she pleaded, her voice not quite steady.

Perhaps it was that anxious little quiver in her voice which made Bob at last haul down his flag of masculine pride.

“Very well,” he agreed, slowly and reluctantly, “I’ll accept it—as a loan.”

“Then that’s settled.” And Shirley heaved a sigh of relief.

Her heart was lighter than it had been since the death of her uncle. Unconsciously to herself, the urgent need of finding work, and the anxiety of the last few weeks, had in a great measure helped to allay her first poignant sorrow at his loss, forcibly concentrating her thoughts on the imperative necessities of each day as it came. The search for work, the mending of her own and Bob’s clothes, and the housekeeping for their limited *ménage* had left her little time during the daylight hours to indulge in retrospect or nurse her grief, and at night she had usually been so tired that she had fallen asleep almost as soon as she laid her head on the pillow.

And this was all to the good. The first sharp edge of her loss had been inevitably dulled in a much shorter time than it might have taken had she been less fully occupied and less worried about actual ways and means. So that she was much better prepared now to make a fresh start in life than she would have been before her experience in Pagan Street. And the fact that, through her engagement with Mrs. Harford, she would be able to lighten Bob’s burden, give him a longer time in which to find a job himself—another three months’ searching must surely bring forth some kind of fruit in the shape of a suitable berth for him!—added enormously to her content.

Beyond that, there was a peculiar interest attaching to the job she herself had just obtained. She had been easily able to fill in the blanks in the brief outline which Simon Drake had given her of his sister’s affairs, and the whole tragic little story tugged at her sympathies. In spite of the satirical mockery with which Kit Harford cloaked her feelings, it was quite evident that she had been vitally hurt, that she had once cared tremendously for this man whose dealings with her had forced her to put him out of her existence. And Shirley felt that it was going to be up to her to help smooth the path for this other woman while she was in process of readjusting her life. Simon had implied as much, and in a way she was secretly rather proud of the fact that he had trusted her so far. She told him so one evening when he was seeing her home after she had dined at Fremingham Place. It was a warm, starlit night, and they had decided to walk back to Pagan Street in preference to taking a taxi.

“It wasn’t very difficult to trust you,” he said simply. “Don’t you think that there are some people one trusts on sight?”

“Yes. But one may be mistaken, all the same,” she returned. “For instance, Kit”—at Mrs. Harford’s suggestion she had dispensed with any more formal appellation—“Kit must have trusted the man she married.”

Under cover of the starlit dusk his face darkened.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “Most of us make a bad mistake over somebody one time or another in our lives.”

There was a queer note in his voice, a hardness which seemed foreign to it, and she glanced up quickly, trying vainly to read his face through the semi-darkness.

“You say that as though—you—had made a mistake once,” she said uncertainly, after a pause.

“I did”—briefly. “But a man is either a fool—or confoundedly unlucky—to make the same kind of mistake twice.” And then, with a deliberateness that warned her he did not mean to continue the conversation, he went on: “Actually, though, I don’t consider Kit made a mistake in trusting Nap Harford in the beginning. He’d have been all right if he’d been left alone. The trouble was that the other woman in the case wouldn’t let him alone. And Rita Conyers, the woman in question, was the type to whom most young men of Nap’s age would have fallen if she’d made up her mind they should.”

“You talk as though you yourself were a Methuselah,” she protested with a smile. “‘Young men of Nap’s age’! Why, he must have been at least twenty-eight.”

“Twenty-nine, as a matter of fact. I suppose”—he hesitated a moment—“I suppose that seems quite old enough to know better from the point of view of twenty—you said you were just twenty, didn’t you?”

She nodded.

“Yes.”

“And I’m thirty-eight.” He spoke rather heavily. “There’s a big gap between us, isn’t there?”

Without quite realizing it, she was conscious of a certain wistfulness in the question and instinctively tried to meet it.

“I don’t think age makes much difference between friends. Do you?” she suggested sturdily.

He was silent for a moment.

“No,” he said at last. “Not between—friends.”

By this time they had reached No. 7, Pagan Street, and were standing together on the doorstep. She slipped her hand into his.

“I’m so glad. Because now you won’t let the ‘gap’ make any difference between us,” she said happily. Then she turned and fitted her latchkey into the lock, unconscious of the half-sad, half-quizzical gaze of the gray eyes which were following her movements.

A moment later she was mounting the ill-lit staircase to her room, while Simon Drake took his way slowly homeward, a curiously conflicting expression on his down-bent face.

CHAPTER VI DEPARTURE

The Monday fixed for Shirley's departure came round in due course, and the last breakfast she and Bob shared was somewhat of a melancholy meal. It was the first time since their schooldays that the brother and sister had ever been separated for more than a few days together, and in some vague fashion, hardly realized, the occasion signalized to each of them a great change in their lives, a dividing line betwixt a past which had been mutually shared and a future which would be intrinsically separate and individual. Never again, probably, would they be so close to one another in feeling and outlook as they were now. The mere fact of the unshared experiences which the future would bring to each of them must inevitably create differences in their points of view and their understanding of each other.

Shirley concealed the heart-sickness of which she was conscious by lavish attentions to Mugs, who, although he could not quite understand the unusual indulgence accorded him on this particular morning, entered into the spirit of the thing *con amore* and made the most of opportunity.

"You'll keep him, won't you, Bob, whatever happens?" she said a trifle huskily, stroking the dog's small rough head.

"We'll share our last bone together," replied Bob with conviction. "You needn't worry about that."

"I only wondered what you'd do with him if—when you get a job."

"Well, if it's a daily one, he'll have to make the best of things in whatever rooms I have. But if I get what I want, a job as agent on somebody's country estate, he'll have the time of his life, rabbiting and so forth—imagine himself back at Fen Wyatt."

At the mention of Fen Wyatt Shirley felt a sudden constriction of her throat, and rose hastily.

"I'd better go and get ready," she said. Adding randomly, just for the sake of saying something to cover up her inner perturbation: "You'll come and see me off, won't you?"

Bob stared.

"Why, of course——" he began. Then, divining what had prompted the idiotic question, he threw a friendly arm round her shoulders. "Here, buck

up, old thing,” he said smilingly. “We’re not saying good-bye for keeps. You’re only off on a two or three months’ trip, remember.”

“I know. But a lot can happen even in two or three months,” she answered soberly.

And then the bustle of departure caught them up, driving away Shirley’s gathering depression, and half an hour later found them at Victoria Station. Here they were met by Drake and Kit Harford, and Bob, after he had made their acquaintance, found an opportunity to whisper to his sister:

“You’re in luck, kiddy. They’re just as nice as you said they were.”

She nodded, and presently he and Drake established the two women comfortably in their seats on the Pullman. Drake knew all about “seeing people off,” Shirley reflected. He had purchased enough newspapers and magazines to keep them amused to Paris and beyond, a beribboned box of chocolates adorned their table, and almost at the last moment he conjured up from somewhere—presumably from the hands of a florist’s errand-boy who stood on the platform below, gazing in pleased bewilderment at the two-shilling tip in his grimy hand—a fragrant sheaf of long-stemmed roses.

A bell rang. Followed the frantic banging of doors and cries of “Stand away, there!” and then the train began to glide slowly along. Shirley, still standing at the window exchanging last words with Simon and Bob, heard a sudden confused shouting, two figures rushed frantically by, and the next moment a man leapt on to the moving train, while a porter flung a suitcase in after him.

“That was a near thing, sir,” remarked the conductor of the Pullman as he preceded the late-comer into the compartment and indicated the seat allotted to him—one facing Shirley but on the opposite side of the car. The man nodded curtly, took his place, and immediately immersed himself in a newspaper, so that when, prompted by a mild curiosity as to who had so nearly missed the train, she glanced across at him, all that was visible was the top of a very dark head and a pair of well-shaped, sunburnt hands that held the newspaper with a certain firmness of grip which a shrewd observer might have marked down as indicative of the man.

Shirley’s glance lingered absently a moment on the hands in question, and then, without the slightest warning, as though becoming all at once aware of her regard, their owner lowered the newspaper and she found herself staring straight into a pair of very blue eyes—eyes that were almost

startlingly blue in contrast with the brown, sun-tanned face out of which they looked.

There was an odd concentration in their gaze, something so curiously definite and personal that she was conscious of a trivial sense of shock, such as one receives when the lights are suddenly switched on in a darkened room. Flushing a little, she looked hastily away, picked up a magazine and began to read, and it was not until half an hour later, when she had reached the end of a short story, that she ventured to steal another glance at the man opposite. He was staring abstractedly out of the window, evidently absorbed in a brown study and quite remote from his surroundings, and to judge by the bitter, clouded expression in his blue eyes his thoughts were not particularly pleasant ones.

Secure in the fact that he was oblivious of her scrutiny, Shirley quietly observed him. There was something attractive about the lean brown face, despite the fact that on more prolonged inspection the bitterness which showed in his eyes seemed to have stamped itself on the mouth too. There was an unmistakable hardness about it, the clean-shaven lips closing in a reticent, straight line. She mentally decided that he was a man who would not be very easily influenced—that he might even prove stubbornly inflexible in the carrying out of anything upon which he had set his mind, whether it was for good or ill. And then Kit Harford addressed some casual remark to her across the little table which separated them, and the man opposite passed out of her thoughts as completely as she had apparently passed out of his—for he had never once looked in her direction again after that first concentrated gaze which had startled her into an odd consciousness of his presence.

The advent of lunch served still further to occupy her thoughts, and finally came the arrival at Dover, with its attendant bustle of collecting hand-baggage, showing of passports, and scrambling on to the boat. Kit, never a good sailor, had booked a cabin, and made her way thither forthwith.

“I’m going to lie down at once,” she told Shirley, smiling grimly. “If I can get settled before the boat starts moving, I may cross peacefully—with any luck. You’d better go up on deck and get hold of a deck-chair, as I’m sure you won’t want to spend your first Channel crossing cooped up in a cabin.”

So Shirley tucked her up comfortably on a couch and returned to the deck. She herself had no fear of seasickness, having proved her mettle in that respect on many a yachting holiday in the Solent with Uncle Nick, and

everything about this first experience of leaving England interested and amused her enormously. The sense of movement, as people hurried hither and thither, shepherded to cabin or deck-chair by cheery members of the crew, the gabble of voices, English and foreign, punctuated now and again by a crisp command from one or other of the ship's officers—even the big crane swinging quantities of luggage smoothly from the quay into the vessel's hold carried its own thrill of interest, leading one to speculate whither all the different owners of that luggage were bound, and whether fear of the law, or misery at home, or anticipated happiness with a beloved someone abroad were the driving-force of their going. Probably most of them, Shirley reflected, like herself and Kit, were merely in search of health and recreation.

Presently came a last warning scream from the black-mouthed funnel of the steamer, and a responsive increase of activity on board, while the throb of the engines seemed to run through the boat like a great, eager pulse. She was moving, and Shirley, cosily established in a deck-chair with a rug round her knees, watched the water below go dancing by in the sunlight. Suddenly, without rhyme or reason, the memory of what she had said to Bob flashed back into her mind: "*A lot can happen even in two or three months,*" and simultaneously a shadow fell across the strip of white deck boarding in front of her. She glanced up instinctively, to find standing beside her the man who had so nearly missed the train at Victoria.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I think this belongs to you, doesn't it? I found it on the floor of the Pullman, near where you were sitting." And he held out for her inspection a small, flat notecase.

Shirley stared at it, the startled colour rushing up into her face. It was hers—she must have let it fall out of her handbag—and it contained every penny she possessed! She gave a little gasp of mingled horror and relief.

"Yes, it's mine," she said. "I never even knew I'd dropped it. Do you know?"—looking up at the man beside her with a smile—"it contains my whole worldly wealth. So you can imagine how thankful I am you found it."

He smiled back, an amused, boyish smile which robbed his face of all its harshness. She felt she could imagine what he must have been like, ten years ago possibly, before life had managed to impress that look of bitter reticence on his features—gay, a trifle reckless perhaps, but spontaneously merry and kind-hearted, and eminently likeable.

"Then I'm very glad I found it," he answered. "It's a catastrophe to lose all one's worldly wealth in one fell blow." And even as he spoke, the shadow

came swiftly back into his face, as though something in his own speech had suddenly recalled an ugly memory.

“Well, it’s lucky for me you were an honest person,” said Shirley. “I can’t think”—rather blankly—“what I should have done if you hadn’t been.”

He leaned against the taffrail, looking down at her with a somewhat curious expression.

“Honesty is rather a relative term, isn’t it? You may be quite honest over mere pounds, shillings and pence, but totally dishonest over life itself.”

She regarded him with puzzled eyes.

“How do you mean? I don’t think I understand,” she queried. He had spoken abruptly, as if the remark were the outcome of some sudden thought that had crossed his mind and forced itself into speech.

He jerked himself upright.

“No,” he said. “I don’t suppose you would understand—that.” He paused, then went on lightly: “Anyway, I’m glad I’ve been able to restore your lost property. I couldn’t find you at first, or you should have had it before.”

He bowed rather stiffly and, disregarding her thanks, moved away with a brusque decisiveness that seemed to suggest he regretted having been betrayed even into so brief a conversation with her.

Shirley watched him return to his own deck-chair, nearer the bows of the boat, when he apparently immediately forgot her existence once more, and sat staring out to sea with the same look of brooding dissatisfaction on his face as it had worn during the journey down to Dover.

CHAPTER VII FATE WITH A STICK

Shirley lay in her bunk, wide awake, staring into the darkness as the Paris *train de luxe* thundered its way through the night *en route* for Port St. Luc, a gay French watering place southerly situated on the Bay of Biscay.

For five weeks now she and Kit had rambled about Europe together, wandering from one place to another as the spirit moved them. They had spent a few days on the shores of Lake Como, then, driven away by the stuffy heat of a wet season there, had fled to Chamonix. Here Kit, who, as she had warned Shirley, was inclined to be fractious, declared that the mountains "got on top of her," so they had quitted Chamonix and established themselves at Aix-les-Bains, where Kit commenced operations by taking the cure—"just for something to do," as she said. Within ten days she was tired of it, and proposed a week in Paris.

"The season's over, of course," she said. "But we can pick up some clothes there, and then we'll go on to Port St. Luc. I think," she added restlessly, "I'm longing to be by the sea. It's—it's always so satisfying, somehow. And I'm used to it, you know. Our country home—Simon's and mine—is near the sea, at a little place called Beriscombe, in Devonshire."

Sometimes Shirley wondered sadly if Kit would ever be satisfied in life again. Out of these five weeks of companionship had sprung a very real friendship, and gradually, as they came to know each other better, Kit had confided the two tragic happenings which had contrived to spoil both her own and her brother's happiness. It was at Chamonix that the assumption of cool mockery behind which she usually entrenched herself had first broken down—on the day when she had declared that the mountains got on top of her and that they must go elsewhere.

"You're very patient with me, Shirley," she had said apologetically. "It must be simply maddening to travel with someone like me, who wants to up sticks and go on somewhere else almost as soon as we've settled down anywhere. Aren't you getting fed up with packing and unpacking?"

Shirley shook her head, smiling.

"No," she had answered. "You must remember that every new place is a thrill to me, never having been out of England before. But I wish," she added a trifle shyly, "that you were—were happier."

“Happier?” There was an undertone of derision in Kit’s voice. “I never expect to be *happy* again anywhere. But I’d be glad if I could just get back my self-respect—haul my beastly little rag of pride up to the top of the mast once more.”

Shirley threw a quick glance at her.

“I don’t see why it need ever be anywhere else,” she returned coolly. “You weren’t in fault. You couldn’t help what happened.”

“Couldn’t help it that my husband grew tired of me—preferred another woman? No, I suppose I couldn’t,” replied Kit musingly. “It’s rather a humiliating confession of failure, though, isn’t it, when either husband or wife grow tired of the other?”

Shirley’s clear, candid eyes questioned her.

“Is that all you mind about?” she said.

“I think that’s all now,” answered Kit. Then with a sudden catch of her breath, as though at the memory of some sharp pain: “Except—sometimes. . . . But at first—at first, that didn’t enter into it at all. I—I’d worshipped Nap, you see. And he worshipped me—until he met Rita Conyers. Then, somehow, it was as if she just wiped me out—wiped me out of his mind. Like a sponge wipes something off a slate. I didn’t count any longer. . . . I could see it all happening under my eyes, every day. He only lived for the times when he was with her.”

“Was she very beautiful?” asked Shirley.

“Yes,” acknowledged the other frankly. “She was. But she’d got something more than beauty. That kind of attraction—physical, I think it is. She would have drawn men after her even if she hadn’t been lovely. . . . I put up a fight against it. For a year I fought, and Nap knew I was fighting. I think he was sorry about it, but he simply couldn’t help himself. Everybody could see it. And they were pitying me.” Her lip curled a little, defiantly. “Simon wanted me to divorce him long before I agreed to. I thought it might only be an infatuation which he’d get over. . . . I kept on hoping. And then one day Nap himself came to me. I shall never forget that day. ‘I want you to let me go, Kit,’ he said. ‘I’m a cur and I’m behaving rottenly to you, and I know it. But I can’t help it.’ . . . I knew then, and I knew he knew, that we’d reached the end of things.” She paused. “I suppose you can’t really—ever—go back in life and pick up the pieces. When everything’s come to smash—it’s smashed. And that’s all there is to it. So I divorced him.”

Shirley made no answer, except to squeeze Kit's hand very tightly. Words seemed out of place.

"I'd much rather Nap had died," went on Kit presently. "Then I should have had something to remember, something I could keep. Now, you see"—in a small, bleak voice—"I've got nothing—not even a decent memory."

From the day when Kit had made this confidence Shirley felt that she understood her much better—understood the irritable restlessness that drove her from place to place, the frequent sharp, satirical speeches she rapped out, which were nothing more, really, than a pathetic armour to hide the rawness of her hurt. And inwardly she hoped that some day in the future Kit might meet another man whose love should make up for the bitterness of the past. But on this subject she remained discreetly silent; she could well imagine the mocking irony with which any such suggestion would be greeted.

For some time after this confidential outburst it seemed as though Kit had retired into a shell of reserve once more, but on the day they were leaving Paris for Port St. Luc, a chance remark of Shirley's, to the effect that they were both equally lucky in the possession of bachelor brothers to spoil them, elicited the happening which had darkened Drake's life just as the wreck of her marriage had darkened his sister's.

"Simon ought to have been married years ago," Kit had vouchsafed bluntly. "But we've no matrimonial luck in our family. The girl he was engaged to chucked him."

"Whatever for?" asked Shirley in astonishment. Drake, with his rather distinctive good looks, his innate personal charm, and his plentiful endowment of this world's goods, did not seem precisely the kind of man to get lightly thrown over by any woman.

"It happened during the war," Kit answered. "He was engaged to a girl called Maisie Foster. He was terribly in love with her. I don't know"—sardonically—"why men nearly always fall in love with the wrong sort of woman. . . they never seem to see below the surface. Maisie was charming on top. But underneath she was nothing but a shallow little egotist—an only child, very pretty and very spoilt." She paused, gazing broodingly in front of her for a minute or two, as though envisaging the past. Then she resumed: "They became engaged during the last year of the war, and they were to have been married the next time Simon came home on leave. He never had that leave. Instead, he got his leg nearly shot to pieces, and he lay out in a wood, in drenching rain, with a smashed leg, for three days and nights before he was found and brought in."

Shirley gave a cry of sympathy.

“Then—then that’s why he still limps a little?” she ventured.

“That’s why. And the exposure crocked up his health for keeps. But at first they never thought they could save his leg. In fact, it was decided he must lose it. And the idea of being tied for life to a one-legged cripple was too much for Maisie. That wasn’t at all the kind of marriage she intended making. So she promptly wrote and broke off the engagement.” Kit paused again, and her face hardened. “Simon got the letter in hospital, on Armistice Day—just when the doctors had discovered that they could save his leg.”

And it was of this that Shirley was thinking as she lay in her bunk, speeding through the night toward Port St. Luc. The grim, brutal irony of it all! If poor shallow little Maisie Foster had only been able to stand the test, to hang on to her pluck for another four-and-twenty hours, till the news came through that Drake was not to be a cripple after all, she would have brought off the eligible marriage she had been seeking, and Simon’s face need never have worn that rather weary, thwarted expression which was habitual to it.

Or must the awakening still have come inevitably, sooner or later? Only, instead of the man’s faith being shattered by one irrevocable blow, would it have been gradually destroyed, bit by bit, day by day, as Maisie failed to meet the demands of life? That, Shirley thought, would be even worse—that slow, deadening decay of everything upon which one had counted. Perhaps, though, Maisie might not have fallen short so miserably over the ordinary current affairs of daily existence. It was just that that particular test had been too hard a one for her.

It was all very puzzling and confusing, these questionings of behaviour in life—of how much people were to be blamed for what they did, or failed to do, and of how much could be laid to the account of that dark fate which drives them on—fate with a stick in her hand, a stick of which the component fibres are heredity and environment and opportunity?

Shirley felt as though she had grown years older during the last few weeks—years older, at least, in knowledge and experience of life, even though some of that experience was vicarious and had come to her through the medium of Kit and Simon. She wondered how she herself would have acted—in Maisie’s place, with Maisie’s temperament and upbringing to contend against? In Kit’s place, with the man she loved, who had once loved her equally and to whom she had confided her whole life, now caring recklessly for someone else?

Life was not nearly so simple as she had imagined it to be in the old, unheeding days at Fen Wyatt. A first indication of its possible complexities had come to her with the necessity of making a choice between accepting or refusing Alan Wyatt's offer. At the time it had seemed to her that there could be no question in the matter—to refuse was the only straight and decent thing to do. And she still thought so. Yet she was beginning to realize the linked consequences which hang on every decision which life puts up to us to make. By that refusal she had altered the whole course of her own and Bob's existence. It was a curious, rather breath-taking reflection. An odd sense of panic, of foreboding, stirred within her, a frightened shrinking from the bewildering problems which—to judge by the experiences of these new friends of hers, of first one and then another—were bound sooner or later to crop up for her own solution as she took her way through the world.

She sat up in her swaying bunk, leaning on her elbow, suddenly conscious of an immense aloneness. The impalpable darkness, close and black around her like some intangible curtain, and the shattering roar of the train, shutting out all other sounds, seemed to emphasize it. They held terror—the terror that comes by night. She felt an almost desperate longing to open the communicating door between her own cabin and Kit's adjoining one, just to convince her frightened senses that Kit was really there—lying in her berth, comfortably human and reassuring.

She threw back the bedclothes impulsively, bent on carrying out this intention, and then the recollection that Kit was a terribly bad traveller checked her abruptly. If she were by any chance asleep it would be sheer cruelty to waken her, since she would probably get no more sleep that night.

The spontaneous little thought, commonplace and sensible and natural, served to restore the balance of Shirley's mind. All at once, that sheer dread of the future, of life itself, which had caught hold of her for a devastating moment, receded almost as swiftly as it had come. She stretched out her hand and switched on the light, and the familiar sight of her suitcase reposing in the rack above, of the flap-table with a book she had been reading lying on it, of her own clothes hanging from a couple of pegs at the side of the cabin, brought everything back to normal again. And then, most comforting of all, there floated into her mind the recollection of Nick Wyatt's sturdy counsel: "*Never get the wind up about life, kiddy.*" She could almost hear him saying it.

"I won't," she said, unconsciously speaking aloud as though she were answering him.

Switching off the light, she lay down once more in her bunk. That queer sense of foreboding which had so suddenly overwhelmed her had passed, and before long she fell asleep, unconscious that any brooding Fate, armed with a triple goad, was standing back in the shadows—waiting, waiting to drive her as relentlessly as others had been driven.

CHAPTER VIII A RACE WITH DEATH

“Well, thank heaven the journey’s over!” exclaimed Kit in heartfelt tones as, arrived at Port St. Luc, she and Shirley stepped out of the motor-omnibus which had brought them from the station to the Hôtel Splendide. And Shirley, who retained a vivid recollection of the panic which had attacked her during the night, inwardly echoed her remark with fervour.

Like almost any Continental hotel at eight o’clock in the morning, when most people are comfortably partaking of *café complet* in the seclusion of their rooms, the Splendide presented a desolate and depressing appearance. The big lounge, overlooking the sea—gray and gloomy beneath what was at present a sunless sky—was entirely empty. So was the restaurant which opened off it—and few things are calculated to convey a more forsaken and more melancholy impression than a collection of vacant chairs and tables. Shirley regarded them rather blankly, trying to conceal a faint sense of misgiving. Blue sea and skies, the cheerful bustle of holiday-makers bent on enjoyment, a dominant sense of quick, vibrating life were inextricably associated in her thoughts with any mental picture of a French watering place, and she found Port St. Luc, in its early morning state of half-awake *négligé*, a trifle dampening to the spirits.

“It doesn’t look particularly inspiring, does it?” commented Kit, with a short laugh, as she perceived the other’s dismay. “But you needn’t be afraid you’ll be disappointed here. I’ve been to St. Luc twice before, and it’s one of the gayest and jolliest places imaginable. That’s why I’m banking on it to— to make me forget things”—hastily—“as soon as I’ve recovered from the journey. Let’s order some breakfast; there’s nothing makes one take a more gloomy view of life than an empty tummy.”

Hot coffee and crisp little rolls and butter certainly went a long way toward modifying Shirley’s first feeling of depression, and presently she was busying herself, as cheerfully as usual, with the unpacking of her own and Kit’s belongings in the pleasant suite of rooms allotted them, whilst Kit, whom a night journey reduced, as she herself described it, to the condition of a limp rag, lay on a sofa and directed operations. She was looking very white and tired, and Shirley, upon whose buoyant vitality neither sea nor train journey produced any ill-effects, regarded her with friendly commiseration.

“You poor dear!” she said. “You do look used up. I’m afraid your brother wouldn’t think I was looking after you at all well if he could see you now.”

Kit smiled.

“Oh, Simon would discount my present appearance—he knows I’m a wretched traveller. I think I shall go straight to bed after lunch and stay there until to-morrow morning—every separate bone of me aches after a night in a *wagon-lit*. Should you mind very much if I did? You could go out and explore Port St. Luc, couldn’t you?”

“I could—but I shouldn’t. I shall stay around in case you want anything.”

Kit sat up suddenly on the couch.

“If you do that, I shan’t go to bed,” she declared firmly. “I won’t have anybody making a martyr of themselves on my account.”

“I shouldn’t feel in the least a martyr.”

“But I should feel that you were. So promise you’ll go out—and let me retire to bed with a clear conscience.”

“Very well,” agreed Shirley, smiling. “Have it your own way. I’ll go for a stroll by the sea.”

So it came about that after lunch, when she had tucked a very weary Kit comfortably into bed, she set out for the shore. At some future time, she promised herself, she would explore the picturesque old town, with its anachronism of modern luxury shops that had sprung up like mushrooms in its ancient streets since Port St. Luc had become a fashionable resort. But today she would follow her instincts and seek the companionable solitude of a tramp along the coast. Companionable because she never felt entirely lonely by the sea. The stillness of the country-side sometimes oppressed her, the immutability of hill and valley, but the sea, never still, never silent—although sometimes its voice was muted to the merest whisper of baby waves feathering the shore—appealed to something within her which she could not quite explain, even to herself.

As she passed through the hall the *concierge* handed her a letter, and, seeing that it was a fat one from Bob, she slipped it into her pocket to read at her leisure when she should have found some comfortable corner amongst the rocks where she could bestow herself.

The grayness of the morning had given place to a blue sky, swept by big white clouds. The sun shone brilliantly, turning the yellow sands to gold, and

Shirley, taking her way as near the edge of the water as she could, drew in long breaths of the fresh, salt-laden air. All along the coast great cliffs, strewn with boulders at their feet, curved in and out in a succession of bays, and curiosity to see what was round the next corner drew her on much farther than she had intended, until at last, suddenly aware that she was beginning to feel rather tired, she halted. Whatever lay round the next corner, she decided, would have to wait for discovery until another time, and, flinging herself down on a sun-warmed patch of sand, she proceeded to open Bob's letter.

DEAR OLD THING (it ran):

From your last epistle I imagine that at this date you'll be fixed up at Port St. Luc, so I'm sending this there—although, judging from the variableness of Mrs. Harford's arrangements, you may have set off for the North Pole or the Equator by this time, for all I know. Anyway, I hope the trip's doing you good and that you're enjoying life. The latter is rather more than I'm doing at the moment. I'm still wearing out good shoe-leather, wandering round to see people about jobs, and Mugs is still complaining about the absence of meatiness of his bones. (I don't leave much on them, I must admit.)

Here followed a few brief sketches of fruitless interviews Bob had had with possible employers, and although they were recounted humorous side up, as it were, Shirley could read his growing weariness and dejection between the lines, and her heart sank. Her own engagement with Kit would probably terminate in four or five weeks' time, and then, if Bob had still found nothing to do, they would both be, as he expressed it, up against it once more.

Nevertheless, went on the letter, there is just one blessed gleam of hope on the horizon at last. I answered an advertisement the other day merely on the barest off-chance of its proving any good, as the advertiser appeared to want a sort of private secretary plus estate agent plus son-of-his-old-age all rolled into one, and I didn't think I possessed the full variety of qualifications necessary! However, he seems to think I may have them. His only son died some time ago, and apparently he is finding managing all his own affairs himself too much at his time of life. At least, that's what he says. The only snag in it is that he and his wife—he has a wife, by the way—are abroad just now, so, as of course nothing can be

fixed up without an interview, the thing's hanging fire at present. Still, we've exchanged several letters, and it seems the nearest I've got to a job yet. So here's hoping.

Love from BOB.

Shirley folded up the letter and slipped it back into her pocket. She felt unaccountably cheered. In spite of Bob's expressed doubts she had an inward conviction that this was going to be a job that would suit him exactly—it so much resembled the relation which had existed betwixt him and Uncle Nick—and that he was going to get it. After all, it is a very long lane that has no turning, and he had waited fairly pluckily and patiently for that elusive turning to materialize, and now she felt sure that at last he was going to have his reward. Soothed by this reflection, a sense of unwonted tranquillity descended upon her, and her eyes closed drowsily. Unconsciously she yielded to the bodily fatigue which first the necessity of unpacking, and afterwards the freshness of the sea air and the interest of Bob's letter had kept at bay, and presently, lulled by the rhythmic beat of the waves on the shore, she fell fast asleep.

An hour later she was roused to sudden wakefulness. Something cold and wet had splashed down on her face, and as she unwillingly opened her eyes that first chilly splash was followed by another and yet another. A cold wind, too, had arisen, blustering about her, and whipping the crests of the waves to foam. Instinctively she glanced upwards, to discover that the blue sky had completely disappeared behind a thickening bank of cloud, and that those first few drops of rain which had disturbed her were the prelude of a coming storm. She sprang up, wide awake in an instant, and prepared to make a dash for home. And then, with a sudden start, she realized that the waves, which had been breaking over the sands a long way out when she first fell asleep, had encroached almost to her very feet.

She looked hastily in the direction from which she had come, where the sheer cliff thrust forward, forming one arm of the bay in which she had been sleeping. The scatter of rocks at its foot, together with the broad strip of sand beyond, which she had crossed as she came along, had entirely disappeared from view, hidden by a tumble of angry gray water which beat up against the face of the cliff itself.

One look behind her convinced her that at high tide the sea must cover the whole curve of the inlet to a depth of at least six or eight feet, for she

could discern seaweed, oozy and green, clinging considerably above her own height to the rock foot of the cliff. She caught her breath sharply—what a fool she had been not to make sure of this before! Then she set off running as fast as she could. Perhaps the water at the point of the bay was not yet too deep for her to wade through it to the other side. But, even so, she was not sure if she could reach St. Luc. A succession of bays, some large, some hardly more than tiny coves, lay between her and the town, and she could not recollect how far the arms of each one stretched out into the sea.

Still, it was useless to stand hesitating, envisioning future difficulties. If she stayed where she was, with an incoming tide, she must inevitably drown, so the first necessity was to make good her escape from the trap in which she already found herself before she considered whether there were still others ahead. She raced on, stumbling now and then in the yielding sand, slipping sometimes on a flat boulder half concealed by slimy weed, and at last, breathless, she reached the point of the bay. Then she stood back aghast. Useless to plunge into that seething swirl of deep waters! Each wave, as it surged up, would fling her headlong, dashing her helplessly against the jagged rocks.

For the first time actual terror gripped her. She hadn't really believed that the promontory would prove impassable, but now, as she stood staring dumbly at the angry tumult of gray water, she knew that on this side of the bay at least her retreat was cut off. She glanced wildly in the opposite direction, and a faint hope sprang up in her heart. The farther arm of the bay did not seem to project nearly so far toward the sea, and, if she could only reach it in time, she felt sure that she could get round it with nothing worse than a wetting. What lay beyond it she could only guess. But, whatever it was, she must chance it.

Once more she set off, her feet winged with fear. The rain, which was coming down now in good earnest, beat in her face. The roar of the waves breaking on the shore sounded menacingly in her ears, like the triumphant cries of some pursuer who knew that he was gaining on her and must infallibly win in the end. Even the gusty wind fought against her, buffeting her this way and that as she fled on. Once she thought she caught the sound of a human voice, of someone shouting, but the sound—if sound there were—was swept away on the wind, and a swift, desperate glance over the empty sea convinced her that she had been mistaken. There was no boat afloat whence someone, seeing her danger, might have hailed her.

Her heart was pounding in her side by the time she reached the farther end of the bay, but with a gasp of relief she saw that it was still possible to

skirt the point. Knee-deep in the swirling water, she plunged through, slipping and sliding on the weed-grown rocks, and at last she scrambled out on to dry land, only to find that she had emerged into yet another cave.

She was no nearer safety. Even from where she stood she could see that the sea had already reached the foot of the next promontory, although she could not tell whether the water were too deep for her to wade through or not. She felt utterly tired and exhausted, almost too weary to make another effort.

But the determination not to die—die like a rat in a trap, hemmed in by the sea against those towering cliffs—spurred her on. She started once again, physically unable now to cover the ground at any speed, but pushing doggedly forward, half running, half walking. She had no longer any very great hope of escape. Her limbs felt leaden; her senses seemed to be gradually becoming stupefied and dull. The lash of the rain and the pounding of the breakers on the shore dazed and bewildered her. She was only conscious that she must still struggle blindly on. . . on. . .

And then, through a brief lull in the wind, she heard again the sound as of someone shouting. This time there was no mistaking it. The voice sounded quite near. . . imperative, urgent. . . . Words knocked suddenly against her numbed consciousness.

“Stop! Stop! Come back!”

She halted, turning slowly, almost incredulously, in the direction of the sound. A man was running toward her, racing across the bay, each eager step flinging back a spatter of wet sand. A queer, confused sense of familiarity gripped her as she watched his approaching figure. Then, with a curious inward jerk, she recognized him. It was the man who had spoken to her on the Dover-Calais boat—the man who had restored her missing notecase.

CHAPTER IX THE BLACK SHEEP

Shirley stood still, panting for breath, while she waited for the man who had been following her to draw level. Gradually, however, her laboured breathing eased, and by the time he reached her side she had almost recovered herself and was able to muster up a faint smile of greeting.

“So it’s you,” she said rather shyly.

“Yes,” he answered bluntly. He, too, was breathing somewhat fast from his recent exertions, but his face betrayed no sign of pleasure at the unexpected meeting. “I thought I was never going to succeed in attracting your attention.”

“Had you been trying before, then? I mean, before I heard you calling just now?”

“Had I not! I should rather think I *had* been trying.” He threw an upward and backward glance toward the summit of the cliffs. “I was up there when I first saw you, and I shouted at the top of my voice, because I knew you were going to get caught by the tide if you went on. But you didn’t hear me—too windy, I suppose—so I set off in pursuit.” He paused, adding with a slight note of exasperation in his voice: “It seemed to me you were going on running for ever.”

Shirley smiled spontaneously. She was still feeling shaken and exhausted, but the position of affairs had improved so much during the last few minutes that she could even see a certain humour in the situation. The heavy rain had ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun, resolving itself into a light, wind-blown drizzle, and somehow, with the advent of her former fellow-traveller, all actual fear had left her. He must know some way back—a rough track up the cliff-side, probably—since he had been able to get down to her.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, “I was very nearly done. I couldn’t have run much farther. I was trying to reach that next point—as a forlorn hope.”

“A very forlorn one you would have found it, too. Just round the corner the shore dips sharply and the water there will be about nine feet deep by now and eddying like a whirlpool.”

“Oh!”—blankly. “Then—then I suppose if you hadn’t come after me I really should have drowned?” She shivered a little at the recollection of

those terrible moments when she had first realized the danger she was in.

“You most certainly would,” he answered, continuing rather irritably: “Didn’t you know this coast was a dangerous one—a regular death-trap—that you should go wandering along here when the tide was coming in?”

She shook her head.

“I knew nothing about it. We only arrived in Port St. Luc this morning.”

“What madness!” he muttered, as if to himself. “Madness!”

She made no answer; her thoughts were preoccupied with the fact that she had actually had a very narrow escape from death.

“It’s funny,” she remarked speculatively at last, “to think that I might have been dead soon.”

“I fail to see any humour in it,” he retorted curtly. “In fact, there’s nothing in the least ‘funny’ even about the present position of things.”

“The present position? What do you mean? We’re quite safe, aren’t we? If you could get down here, then of course we can get back the same way you came.”

“It isn’t ‘of course’ at all. I scrambled down the cliffs of the last cove before this one. It’s a possible job for a man, but quite out of the question for any woman. And to return that way is out of the question for either of us. It’s a ‘one-way street’ ”—grimly.

“Why?”

“Because there’s a clear ten-foot drop to the ground at the bottom of the cliff. I was able to hang on to a jutting-out ledge of rock with my hands and let myself go—and fell in a heap on the sand. But neither you nor I could climb up ten feet of sheer smooth-faced cliff.”

Shirley’s glance swept the incoming sea rather anxiously. The waves were much nearer—steadily, irresistibly advancing over the sand.

“Then—then what are we going to do?” she faltered. Apparently the danger was not yet over.

For the first time a smile crossed his face, half-amused, half-compassionate.

“Well, we’re not going to drown, if that’s what you are thinking,” he observed.

“But if the sea comes right up to the cliffs at high tide, I don’t see how we’re going to avoid it,” she returned stoically.

He pointed to the face of the cliff behind them.

“Do you see that dark patch—away there to our left?” She nodded, her gaze following the direction he indicated. “It doesn’t look much like it from here, but it’s actually a cleft in the rock and leads into some caves. We shall be quite safe in there, so come along.”

“But”—she held back nervously—“but the sea will soon fill any cave. And—and it would be worse to die shut in there than out here in the open. We shouldn’t have a chance, even of swimming.”

“And do you think you’d have a chance, anyway, of swimming—in those?” He gestured toward the big breakers pounding in from the Atlantic and crashing in a fury of upflung spray on the beaten shore. “I’m a fairly good swimmer myself, but even I shouldn’t have an earthly. Those waves would batter the breath out of your body in five minutes.”

Still Shirley hesitated. All her fear had returned with the knowledge that there was no way up the cliff. Once more she had the terrible feeling of being caught—caught like a rat in a trap.

Her companion’s blue eyes sought her face.

“Look here,” he said quietly. “Are you going to trust me—or not? I can’t do anything to help you if you won’t, you know.”

She looked up at him, and something in the lean brown face bent above her suddenly reassured her. He looked so untroubled, so wholly confident. Moreover, he had already run a pretty big risk, accomplished a difficult task, in descending the cliff face in order to come to her help, and here she was bluntly doubting his ability to complete her rescue.

“Of course I trust you,” she said impulsively. “It was only that—that I was——” She paused, shivering involuntarily.

“Cold and wet and have had a bad scare,” he finished for her, and there was a very kindly note in his voice. “I wish I had a brandy-flask with me. You want something to warm you up. Unfortunately”—with a smile—“one doesn’t usually go about armed with brandy-flasks for emergencies.”

The unexpected kindness in his voice brought a sudden glow of warmth to her heart. Up till now he had seemed more annoyed by her foolishness in getting into danger than anything else, and at the alteration in his attitude her spirits rose unaccountably.

“Oh, I’m only a bit damp,” she camouflaged cheerfully. “And that’s ever so much better than being dead.”

“Ever so much,” he agreed gravely. “And to make quite sure that the latter contingency doesn’t occur, suppose we take refuge in my cave at once.”

While they talked they had involuntarily retreated every now and again, as an advance-guard billow of the incoming tide rolled threateningly up to their very feet, and now, side by side, they crossed the narrow strip of sand which was all that still remained uncovered by the sea and plunged into the cleft which slashed the rocky face of the cliff. The sudden change from daylight to comparative darkness was so abrupt that for a moment Shirley could hardly see, and she stumbled and almost fell over a protruding lump of rock on the cave floor. In an instant her companion’s hand closed round her arm, steadying her.

“This way,” he said. “Keep to your right. The ground’s more level that side.”

She was conscious of a fleeting wonder as to how he knew, and then, as her eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, she discerned that they were in a large cavern, very high, but with walls so smooth and sheer that they offered no possible safety from the incoming sea. Not a single ledge or projection large enough to support a human being broke their surface, and she gazed about her doubtfully.

The man beside her followed her inquiring glance with a smile.

“No,” he said. “This isn’t my chosen place of refuge. The sea comes in here to a depth of about seven or eight feet. When there’s a *grande marée*—spring tide—it reaches to the roof. But there’s a perfectly good sea-proof cave above this one. Here we are.” And he paused at what looked to Shirley like the mouth of a black hole.

“It’s a passage,” he vouchsafed. “You’ll have to stoop to get through it. See, I’ll go first, and lead the way—I’ve explored these caves before.”

He suited the action to the words, and, bending very low, disappeared into the dark aperture. The next moment she felt his hand on hers, guiding her.

“Stoop well down,” he commanded, “or you’ll bump your head.”

She obeyed, following him step by step through a dense, almost suffocating darkness. The passage was only a matter of fourteen or fifteen

feet to traverse, but their progress was necessarily very slow as with bent shoulders, and feeling their way as they went, they edged along its stony, uneven floor. But for the clasp of that firm hand holding hers and impelling her onward, Shirley would have been half afraid to go on.

At last, however, the darkness gave way to a faint, dim twilight, she could discern her companion's figure straighten up to its full height, and a moment later she was standing beside him at the foot of a short flight of roughly hewn steps.

"Up here," he said, indicating the steps. "And go carefully—it's a very rough-and-ready stairway."

It was. But she stumbled up it in his wake, and finally they emerged into what was quite a spacious cavern, lit by a broad shaft of daylight that came through a jaggedly cut hole in the outside rock.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it's actually got a kind of window in it! What an excellent cave!"—smiling.

Crossing to the aperture, she peered out. Below, the cliff fell sheer away to the shore and already the sea was beating at its foot. She drew back hastily, feeling all at once a trifle sick. But for the man who had come to her rescue, she would be standing down there now, back to the wall, waiting for inexorable death.

"Don't think of it." He had divined her thought, and his voice cut friendlily across the silence. "You're *not* down there. And you *are* up here—as safe as if you were in your own hotel."

"Does—does the sea *never* reach here?" she asked uncertainly.

He shook his head, his eyes meeting hers with quiet assurance.

"Never," he said. "It isn't a very comfortable refuge, I'll admit, especially as we shall have to stay here two or three hours—until the tide has gone down sufficiently for us to start for home. But that's the worst that can happen to you. You are perfectly and absolutely safe."

"Two or three hours!" she exclaimed in dismay. "Good gracious! Kit—Mrs. Harford will be half out of her mind with anxiety, wondering what's happened to me."

"Mrs. Harford?" he said interrogatively.

"That's the friend I'm travelling with," she vouchsafed. Adding: "My own name is Wilson—Shirley Wilson."

He smiled.

“And mine is Neil Kenwyn. As we’re going to spend some time together we may just as well know what to call each other.”

Neil Kenwyn. She thought the brief, clean-cut name somehow suited him. Very often people’s names appeared to bear no relation whatever to their owners—to convey no impression of their individuality—but “Neil Kenwyn” seemed to her to belong quite characteristically.

“I’m afraid”—he was speaking again—“that we can’t save your friend a certain amount of anxiety. But, after all, it will be much more cheering for her in the end to discover that you’re really safe and sound instead of having been conclusively drowned.”

Shirley smiled in spite of herself. Then her face grew grave again.

“It’s rather wonderful to—to feel safe once more,” she said, with a quiet depth of feeling. “I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done.”

He laughed.

“Don’t thank me,” he answered lightly. “Thank old Robert le Noir.”

“What has he to do with it—whoever he is?”

“Well, this place is always called the Caverne de Robert le Noir. He was a very famous and intrepid smuggler of bygone days, and on one occasion he is said to have held this cave, single-handed, against the armed forces of the law from the time the tide went out until it came in again and compelled the soldiers to retire, leaving him victor.”

“How sporting of him! Then I expect it was he who made those steps up which we came?”

“Probably nature had begun the job and Robert and his friends completed it for their own convenience. Anyhow, we can be grateful to him for having facilitated matters for us—however unintentionally. Meanwhile”—smiling—“as there are no seats provided, and as I don’t propose we should stand for several hours, I’m afraid we shall have to accommodate ourselves on the floor.” As he spoke, he stripped off his coat and, folding it up so as to form a kind of cushion, held it out toward her. “Sit on that. You’ll find it a trifle less hard than the solid rock.”

But she protested energetically.

“No, *please*. I couldn’t think of taking your coat. I shall be quite all right here”—pointing to a place where the rocky side of the cave was hollowed

inward a little. "I can lean against the wall." Then, as he remained waiting, obdurately holding out the coat, she continued urgently: "You'd catch cold without it."

"Catch cold!" He laughed outright. "I think I can risk that." Disregarding her protests, he proceeded to arrange the coat on the ground so that it should afford as much comfort as possible. "Now," he said, standing back and regarding her quizzically, "are you going to obey orders or not?"

"What will happen if I don't?" she inquired with some curiosity.

"I shall pitch the coat through that hole in the wall—your 'window'—and then it won't be of any use to you or anyone else."

"You wouldn't!"—incredulously.

"I most certainly would. I always do what I say I will. So are you going to make use of it?"

"I suppose I've no choice. It would be idiotic to waste its usefulness altogether by throwing it into the sea."

Rather reluctantly she seated herself on the coat he had spread for her. She hated being forced into giving way over the matter, but she was fain to acknowledge, when she had seated herself with her back against the hollow in the wall, that the thickness of the cloth served to ameliorate considerably the undeniable hardness of the ground.

"You're a very self-willed person, aren't you?" she observed, as he seated himself beside her.

He paused before replying, as if her direct question had provoked a train of thought, and an oddly bitter expression came into his face.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I suppose I always have been. But if I am, I've paid for the privilege."

He relapsed into an abrupt silence, staring absently in front of him as though mentally reviewing some happening of the past.

"How—paid for it?" she said at last, rather tentatively.

His glance came back quickly to her face.

"Don't you know that you can't have your own way in this life—do just as you like—without paying heavily for it some time or other? But, no," he went on, "of course you're too young to have learned that yet."

"I'm twenty," she said, with an air of protest.

“And I’m thirty-three”—harshly. “You see, you’ve a few more years to run before pay-day comes. And I don’t suppose there’ll be any ‘pay-day’ for you at all. Your future”—he regarded her with a kind of sombre speculation—“will probably be one of rewards and compensations.”

“I don’t see why it should be—any more than yours,” she rejoined. She was puzzled by the contradictions in the man, his swift changes from kindly gaiety to moroseness.

“Don’t you? I should have thought it was quite evident. I’m one of the black sheep of the flock—and Fate never omits to chastise the black sheep as they deserve. They’re more easily seen and picked out for castigation than the middling gray ones.”

Shirley winced at the hard cynicism in his voice. Somehow, at some time or other, life had contrived to hurt this man very badly—so badly that the sting and smart of it still remained. Rather youthfully, she wished that she could think of something to say which might help, even a little, to minimize that soreness.

“But—but even if you *were* a ‘black sheep’ at one time——” she began timidly.

“You can’t be a black sheep ‘at one time,’ Miss Wilson. Once a black sheep, always a black sheep. Can the leopard change his spots? Of course he can’t. And the black sheep has to wear the same soiled fleece for ever. The virtuous people in the world see to that very carefully.”

A long silence fell between them. From below came the increasing clamour of the sea—the dull thud and boom of the waves now rushing in and out of the cavern underneath. The sound echoed hollowly through the cave in which they sat, and Shirley felt her pulses quicken a little. It was an eerie thought—that she and the man beside her were completely cut off, imprisoned by a seething depth of water. Every now and again she could hear it fling itself against the rough steps up which she and Kenwyn had climbed to safety, as though striving to reach them, and then, baulked, go swishing and droning down again, sucked out by a receding wave.

She looked across at her companion. He seemed oblivious of the tumult down below, wrapped in his own sardonic thoughts. Her heart ached for him.

“You are very bitter,” she ventured at last, rather tremulously. “I think, if I felt as you do about things, I shouldn’t find life worth living.”

“I didn’t at one time.” He gave a short laugh as though at some remembrance. “I nearly got out of it, too.”

“You mean—you don’t mean that you tried to commit suicide?”

His glance flashed over her startled face amusedly.

“No. If I’d tried, I’d certainly have succeeded,” he answered. “I wouldn’t have bungled the job. But I once seriously considered the idea.”

“Whatever for?”

The glint of amusement deepened into a smile.

“Obviously, because life didn’t quite seem worth going on with at the moment.”

“Whose fault was that?” she queried.

“My own entirely,” he replied blandly. “I’d careered gaily through life, enjoying myself without any sense of responsibility, and—as usually happens to people who do that—I came up against a brick wall. Hard against it.”

He was very difficult to understand, she reflected. In spite of his apparent ironical candour, she was conscious all the time of a deep, guarded reticence. He had no intention of really confiding in her—of letting her into that secret citadel where he hid the past.

“Why *didn’t* you commit suicide, then?” she demanded daringly.

“Why not? Oh, it struck me that there was still quite a lot left in life. . . . I was right in that, too—there was this day with you still to come.”

As he spoke his blue eyes met hers with a curious intensity, and she turned her face away, suddenly self-conscious. He smiled a little, as though to himself, then continued calmly:

“Besides, it didn’t seem quite fair to—to certain other people to clear out of life. For years I’d lived to please myself—without considering other people—so I thought I’d better try considering them, by way of variety. . . . I’d got brought up short, shown suddenly, and very plainly, what a fool—and worse than a fool—I’d been.” He paused. When he spoke again it was very quietly and soberly, without any of the harsh cynicism which had tinged his speech hitherto. “It’s a curious—and humbling—thing to look back and see what a very complete hash a man can make of his life. And of other people’s. All without any particular intention to do wrong.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Shirley gently, almost beseechingly, as though she were pleading with him against himself, “perhaps you were much younger when—when all this happened?”

“Yes, I was younger.” He gave a short laugh. “And youth’s a good peg to hang excuses on, isn’t it?”

“You could begin again.”

“No,” he said with decision. “That I could never do. I effectually closed that door—the beginning-again, second-chance kind of door—on myself, once and for ever. And Fate obligingly turned the key in the lock. . . . Mind you, I’m not complaining. I deserved all I got in the way of punishment—but to know that it’s entirely your own fault doesn’t make matters any pleasanter. Rather the reverse, in fact.”

“Don’t you think you are rather hard on yourself—unnecessarily hard?”

He appeared to consider a moment.

“Perhaps I am—perhaps not. I wonder”—he looked at her with a sudden curiosity—“I wonder what *your* opinion would be.”

“I can’t say, can I, unless you tell me a little more?”

He smiled enigmatically.

“True. And I can’t do that. You’ve been very patient to listen to my bletherings for so long. I’m afraid I must have bored you horribly.”

He was shutting up like an oyster, and Shirley knew instinctively that he would say no more—on this occasion, at any rate.

“No, I haven’t been at all bored,” she said quietly.

“It’s just your Christian charity which makes you say that. However, I won’t impose on it any longer.” He sprang to his feet. “Instead, I’ll go and reconnoitre below, and tell you how much longer you are fated to be a prisoner here.”

Without waiting for any reply, he crossed the cavern and disappeared, and an instant later she heard his footsteps descending the uneven stairway. He was not gone long, and when he came back it was to report that they would have to wait at least another hour before the tide would have receded sufficiently to allow of their returning to St. Luc.

He dropped down once more into his place at her side.

“Don’t you think you could sleep a little?” he suggested. “It would make the time pass sooner for you. If”—he paused a moment, then went on deliberately—“if you would just lean against my shoulder, you’d find it a trifle more comfortable than the wall.”

She hesitated.

“Regard me merely as the back of a chair,” he recommended nonchalantly.

Something in his eyes, a whimsical something that seemed to laugh at her and entreat her at one and the same moment, decided her.

“Very well,” she said composedly. “Only, I warn you, you’ll probably get cramp and regret your offer.”

She felt his arm slip round her, drawing her against him, and she yielded obediently, letting her head drop lightly against his shoulder. It certainly was much more comfortable than the knobby wall of the cave against which she had been leaning.

“Isn’t that better?” he inquired gently, after a few minutes.

His voice seemed to her to come from a long way off. She had been perfectly sure that she would not go to sleep, but the warmth and comfort as she leaned there in the curve of his arm, the fading daylight, and the rhythmic sound of the waves—now receding and proportionately quieter—had combined to produce a curious sensation of drowsiness. She felt disinclined even to make the effort necessary to reply to him, but a misty sense of politeness impelled her.

“Much better,” she murmured sleepily.

And that was the last thing she remembered until an hour later, when she became aware of someone gently shaking her and of Kenwyn’s voice telling her to wake up.

“We can start for home now,” he said. “The tide has gone out far enough.”

It was very dark as they made their way down Robert le Noir’s stairway, through the passage, and back into the lower cavern, but when they emerged once more on to the open shore, sea and sand were flooded with the pale afterglow of sunset. A fugitive thought passed through Shirley’s mind that she might never again have seen the sun set if Neil Kenwyn had not chanced to be taking a walk on the top of the cliffs that afternoon. She had an impulse to thank him once more, then checked herself. He seemed to have

grown curiously impersonal and aloof, now that their adventure was over, marching along beside her in an abstracted silence which she felt shy of breaking.

When finally they reached the *Hôtel Splendide*, Kit herself, together with the *concierge*, and an interested visitor or two, welcomed their arrival with very manifest relief. Refreshed by a long sleep, she had dressed and left her room with the intention of dining downstairs, and then, as the usual hour for dinner came and went without any sign of Shirley, she had become a prey to the keenest anxiety. She folded the girl in a warm embrace.

“I was just contemplating informing the police and sending out to search for you,” she said. “I’ve been having horrible visions of you tumbling off a cliff or getting caught by the tide and drowned.”

“And that—getting drowned, I mean—is exactly what would have happened,” Shirley informed her, “if Mr. Kenwyn had not come to my rescue.”

Kit turned to Kenwyn with that same quick, appealing charm of hers which had so attracted Shirley on the occasion of their first meeting.

“Then, Mr. Kenwyn, I shall always regard you as one of my best friends—if you’ll let me,” she said, holding out her hand. Adding simply: “What you’ve done isn’t a thing one can just say ‘thank you’ for, but I expect you can guess how I feel.”

“I expect I can,” he answered with equal simplicity. “You must have been very anxious.”

A few minutes later, with the briefest of farewells, he had taken his departure, and Kit hurried Shirley upstairs.

“A hot bath, and a hot drink, and a hot dinner—that’s your programme,” she remarked succinctly.

Later on, when this arrangement had been carried through in detail, a surprisingly revived and wide-awake Shirley lay comfortably tucked up in bed, recounting the afternoon’s experiences to Kit. Even after the latter had gone, leaving her alone in the soft darkness of her room, it was a long time before she slept. Instead, she lay tossing restlessly, with the ceaseless sound of the waves beating on the shore borne to her ears through the open window of her room.

And when she finally did fall asleep, it was to dream that she and Neil Kenwyn were both struggling in a terribly stormy sea. She knew he was

trying to get to her, and she too was straining to reach his side. But each time they had nearly drawn together, a big wave would rise up between them, dashing them apart once more.

She could see Kenwyn's lean, dark face, with the blue eyes that always seemed to be hiding something, appearing and disappearing as the waves rose and fell. She thought he called to her, but she could not hear what he said. And then, all at once, she saw that he was being swept irresistibly away from her. She made a desperate effort to reach him before it should be too late. But it was useless. Every instant widened the space between them. And even as it widened, a monstrous billow arose and came rushing toward them. For a moment of sheer agony she watched it towering above them, relentless and implacable, before it crashed down upon them and she felt herself sinking, sinking down into the uttermost depths of the ocean.

Presently, after what seemed an immeasurable space of time, she found herself rising to the surface again, only to discover that Kenwyn had disappeared from sight. She was alone. . . utterly alone in a limitless expanse of tossing sea.

CHAPTER X UNDER LOCK AND KEY

“Oh, how perfectly splendid! Simon is coming out here to join us.”

It was a fortnight after Shirley’s adventure on the shore when Kit, looking up delightedly from her morning’s mail, made the foregoing announcement.

“He’s finished up that tiresome legal business which was bothering him,” she went on, “and says he thinks he deserves a holiday.”

Shirley was aware of a thrill of very genuine pleasure at the prospect of Drake’s advent. Even in the short interval which had elapsed between her first interview with him and her departure with Kit for the Continent, she had recognized intuitively that he was a man in whom, if circumstances ordained that they should see much of each other, she would find a congenial spirit—curiously sympathetic and understanding. It happens like that sometimes—just as though some infallible inner sense flashes a signal to the conscious mind: “Here comes a friend!”

“What good news!” Shirley’s first instinctive pleasure manifested itself spontaneously in her voice. “You’ll enjoy him here enormously.” And then a second thought followed hard on the heels of the first, and her face clouded suddenly.

Kit caught the abrupt change in her expression.

“I shall. But”—regarding the other quizzically—“judging from your expression, you won’t. What’s the matter, Shirley? Don’t you want Simon to join us?”

“Of course I do. Only”—she hesitated a little, then continued quickly: “Only I was thinking that if—if your brother comes out to Port St. Luc, you won’t really want me with you any longer.”

Kit burst out laughing.

“You ridiculous child! Of course I shall want you—we shall both want you. So you can just put that absurd idea out of your head at once. As a matter of fact,” she pursued, a flicker of amusement in her eyes, “we should be rather a jolly foursome if we adopted that nice knight-errant of yours into the fold—Mr. Kenwyn. He seems to be somewhat of a solitary soul. And as

Simon's bringing the car—he's driving here from Calais—we might all have a good time together."

Shirley flushed a little.

"There being only one objection," she observed dryly. "Namely, that my 'knight-errant,' as you call him, shows no disposition to be adopted."

It was true. Since the occasion when he had come to Shirley's assistance, Neil Kenwyn had evinced no inclination whatever to pursue the acquaintance. He had called at the hotel the following day to inquire if she were any the worse for her unpleasant experience, and had remained chatting for a few minutes. But Shirley had received a strong impression that nothing beyond a kind of bald civility had prompted the visit, since he had cut it as short as common politeness would permit, and his manner throughout had been particularly cool and detached.

Several times since then she and Kit had encountered him, both in the town and on the *plage* in the mornings when they were bathing, and upon each occasion, although he had exchanged a few words with them, he had given not the slightest indication of wishing to resume the friendly footing bred of his and Shirley's enforced sojourn together in the cavern of Robert le Noir. Inwardly, she had been both puzzled and indignant at his behaviour. After the deeps which they had occasionally touched during their intimate talk on that memorable occasion, it seemed extraordinary that his attitude toward her should have changed so abruptly, and she felt somewhat sore and snubbed over it. Some of that inner soreness crept into her voice as she discounted Kit's light-hearted suggestion of a *partie-carrée*.

"I think," she pursued, "if you invited him to join up with us, you'd only get a polite refusal for your pains."

"And yet he looks somewhat lonely," rejoined Kit musingly. "We've never seen him with anyone else since we came here. He's always been by himself."

"Perhaps he's the kind of person who prefers his own society," suggested Shirley, still with a little edge to her tones.

Kit shook her head as if this idea did not commend itself to her.

"He may be, now—possibly," she said. "But I'm pretty sure he wasn't always like that. He's too vital a person." She paused a moment, then added, with a gleam of mischievous amusement: "I shall turn Simon on to him—he has a great capacity for digging a perfectly good friendship out of the most unpromising material."

She was as good as her word. Before Simon had been at Port St. Luc more than a few hours, and as soon as the warm-hearted little furore of excitement attendant upon his arrival had simmered down, she had poured out to him a graphic description of Shirley's adventure and subsequent rescue by Neil Kenwyn.

"I should like to meet him," said Simon quietly. There had been a rather tense look on his face as he listened to his sister's account of the danger Shirley had run.

"That's just the difficulty," she replied. "He doesn't seem to want to be 'met'! Here am I, all sort of overflowing with gratitude and friendliness, and that man is about as responsive as a log of wood."

"Perhaps he's a bit shy of being over-thanked," submitted Drake, with a smile. "Still, I'd like to make friends with him, if it's at all possible."

"Do try. If you don't, I shall probably die of suppressed hero-worship," declared Kit.

And Simon, struck by the unwonted interest in the man which he thought he detected underneath his sister's airy flippancy, wondered in his kindly soul whether this stranger were perhaps destined to heal the hurts another man had dealt her. He mentally resolved that he would do his utmost to break down the barriers of unsociability behind which Kenwyn had entrenched himself. It never occurred to him that it was a woman's incurable romantic instinct at work—an instinct which not even utter disappointment in her own marriage ever seems to quite eradicate in any woman—prompting Kit to throw Shirley and Kenwyn into each other's company. Later on, he was to reflect that it savoured of the sharpest irony that he should have been selected to be the principal factor in the coming together of these two—one of the sardonic little jokes which Fate seems to enjoy perpetrating on mankind.

In the meantime, circumstances played into his hand. The very next day he and Kit and Shirley had been for a run in the car, to a small place some distance along the coast, and were caught by a heavy shower of rain on their return journey. It was only the matter of a few moments to put up the hood over the big touring car, and then, as they sped onward once more, they overtook a solitary figure plodding doggedly along through the downpour.

"That's Neil Kenwyn," said Kit, touching her brother's arm. "Stop, and we'll offer him a lift back." And in this wise Simon made the acquaintance of the man who had saved Shirley's life.

Even so, however, everything was not immediately plain sailing. When they reached the Hôtel Splendide, Kenwyn joined them in a cocktail in the friendliest manner possible, but when Simon invited him to dine with them that evening, he suddenly froze up and became unapproachable. He thanked him punctiliously for the lift back in the car, but quietly and firmly declined the invitation to return again for dinner. So, as Kit observed dryly: “We’re exactly as we were.”

Shirley made no comment. Only that odd little, hurt, snubbed feeling came back upon her again with renewed sharpness. She had forgotten it during the drive home. Kenwyn had sat beside her in the back seat of the car, and had become once more the man of her first acquaintance—the man who, despite a certain cynicism of outlook, had still managed to convey a sense of underlying friendliness and comradeship, something which his subsequent aloofness seemed designed almost deliberately to deny. Yet, while they were driving back through the pouring rain, he appeared to have entirely shed that mantle of remoteness. She felt intuitively that he was pleased to be with her again—and a woman is rarely under any delusion as to whether a man really likes being with her or not—and they had talked together with a happy freedom from constraint, laughing and joking about their mutual imprisonment in the cave. So that it gave her a disagreeable little shock when he retired abruptly back into his shell and refused, with a rather chilly courtesy, Simon’s cordial invitation to dinner. And there, for a few days, the matter rested as far as Shirley was concerned. She had too much pride to let anyone see that she took the least interest in a man whose interest in her seemed to be of such a variable quality.

But Drake was frankly puzzled.

“He’s an unsociable devil, that friend of yours, Kit,” he remarked. “He refused to come to dinner rather as though he thought we might bite his head off if he came.”

“I know he did. And yet, when he forgets himself and talks a bit, as he did when we were having cocktails, you’d say he was the kind of person to make friends quickly.” Kit paused, then added reflectively: “He gives me the impression of someone who is deliberately keeping himself under lock and key, as it were.”

Drake regarded her with some amusement.

“And of course, out of sheer feminine perversity, you want to drag him out into the open.”

For a moment the faint mockery which always seemed to lurk in the brown depths of her eyes faded out of them, leaving them strangely soft and gentle—the kind of eyes they were intended to be until Nap Harford set that bitter glint in them.

“No, it’s not perversity, Simon. It’s because I’m sorry for him, somehow. I’m sure he’s intentionally keeping himself to himself, and not enjoying it at all—that it goes against the grain with him. But he’s still bent on doing it. If—if he had had a bad knock some time or other he might feel that way—afraid to trust anyone again. I can understand that”—the old hardness creeping into her voice.

“Even if he has had a bad blow he needn’t necessarily let it make a misanthrope of him,” observed Simon quietly. “We most of us get our hard hits in life one way or another.”

Kit flashed him a glance of affection.

“I know, my dear,” she returned. “But there are precious few of us who can take them as you did—and not get embittered in the process. I can’t, for one.”

He smiled.

“Your bad knock is of rather recent date,” he said. “And anyhow”—contentedly—“you’re improving. I think my prescription was a flash of genius. Shirley has done you a whole heap of good, whether you’re aware of it or not.”

She smiled back at him.

“I’m quite aware of it,” she acknowledged whimsically. “But I’d defy anyone to be much with Shirley without—mellowing. She’s so transparently honest and warm-hearted—as straight as a die. I’m so glad you found her, Simon.”

He nodded absently, his brows drawn suddenly together. His expression at the moment was difficult to interpret. It was as though his mind were pursuing some difficult problem of thought prompted by his sister’s speech—engaged in a self-communing that was rooted in doubt and conflict. She glanced at him curiously—it was unlike Simon to be all at once so oddly unresponsive. As if becoming suddenly aware of her regard, he raised his head and met her gaze with a somewhat inscrutable smile.

“Yes,” he said briefly. “I’m glad I found her.”

CHAPTER XI A TEMPORARY FRIENDSHIP

The sun blazed down brilliantly on the Côte des Paysans, the particular *plage*—for Port St. Luc, with its undulating coastline, boasted several—which Shirley, together with Simon and Kit, usually selected for their morning dip in the briny. It was a magnificent bay—a wide expanse of firm, golden sand, backed by tall cliffs, stretching almost as far as eye could see. On one side it was sentinelled by a picturesque old château, which had been converted into a smart Russian restaurant, and which perched itself on an out-thrust arm of solid rock, its cone-shaped turrets sharply etched against the sapphire sky. On the other, far across the water, the dim outlines of the Spanish mountains could be seen curving out toward the blur of the horizon.

At times the bathing on this particular *plage* was by no means too safe. There were days when the big Atlantic rollers roared in on to the shore with such a swirl of conflicting currents that no one was permitted by the paternal authorities of the town to venture into the sea at all. And, as is usually the case at any French coast resort where the bathing is considered dangerous, wet or fine, rough or smooth, a little company of *guides-baigneurs*, men whose duty it was to watch over the safety of the bathers, were in attendance.

At first Shirley had been disposed to regard these recognized *guides* with a certain amount of rebellious annoyance, as they waited there throughout the long hours, some of them grouped together on the shore, others, wearing thigh-deep oilskins, standing waist-high in the water, shepherding the flock of bathers away from danger. She was a fairly good swimmer, and she had resented being ordered by them—sometimes rather peremptorily—to stay nearer in to shore or to keep to this or that vicinity, as their knowledge of the shifting currents directed. But since the day when she had happened to see a man who disregarded them swept helplessly toward the rocks, tossed hither and thither by the powerful currents like a bit of driftwood, and witnessed the risks which a couple of the *guides* had been compelled to run in order to save him from his own foolhardiness, she had come to feel for these keen-eyed, bronze-faced men, tirelessly on the lookout, a very genuine admiration. She had even become on quite friendly terms with them and learned their names, bidding them a cheery “*Bonjour, Jean,*” or “*Bonjour, Louis,*” as the case might be, when she entered the water, and they in their turn had always a smile for “*la petite anglaise.*”

To-day she was taking her morning swim alone, since Kit and Simon had elected to motor over to the quaint old city of Bayonne. The sea looked comparatively calm, and there were a number of people disporting themselves in the water, a kaleidoscope of gaily-coloured bathing suits and caps bobbing up and down in the waves. Nevertheless, there was apparently a treacherous current to be avoided, notwithstanding that innocent surface appearance, for one of the *guides* threw her a warning as she passed him. She nodded acquiescence, having no intention of running any risks, and it was the sheerest inadvertence on her part that, swimming easily along, she drifted gradually toward the dangerous area which she had been cautioned to avoid.

The chief of the *guides-baigneurs*, a weather-beaten old man, armed with a megaphone, who stood on the shore, keeping a lynx eye upon the bathers, bawled at her through his trumpet unavailingly. The sound of his voice was drowned by the waves, and Shirley swam placidly on without changing her direction. Then, shrilling over the water, came the piercing scream of a warning whistle, blown by another of the *guides*, and simultaneously a voice yelled imperatively close beside her:

“Turn back, you fool! Where the devil are you going to?”

The voice, roughened by extreme urgency, yet sounded a familiar one, and Shirley glanced round in astonishment to perceive Neil Kenwyn swimming rapidly toward her. He had nearly come up with her as he shouted, and now, as she looked over her shoulder to see who could be addressing her so forcibly, his expression altered almost ludicrously from indignant fury to a blank amazement.

“Good Lord, it’s you!” he gasped. All he had hitherto been able to glimpse was the back of a close-fitting helmet-cap which, as far as he was concerned, had entirely concealed the identity of the wearer. And irritation at what appeared to be a deliberate disregard of the frantic signals of the *guides* had prompted him into speech that was considerably more forcible than polite. Now, as he recognized the owner of the cap, a grim smile crossed his face for an instant and was gone.

“You’d better turn back at once,” he said briefly. “There’s a bad current a few yards farther on, and the *guides-baigneurs* are becoming agitated about your safety.”

Shirley glanced shoreward and realized that she had been innocently creating quite a ferment of alarm amongst the appointed sentinels of the *plage*, several of whom were shouting and violently beckoning her to return.

She smiled a little at their excess of zeal, but turned obediently and swam back beside Kenwyn with long, even strokes, to be greeted with a frenzied gabble of reproof from the *guides-baigneurs* the instant she came within speaking distance. Mentally she could not help contrasting the characteristic excitability of the Latin with Kenwyn's imperturbable calm on a previous occasion she knew of.

"I think they were making a great fuss about nothing," she told him rather plaintively as, a few minutes later, wrapped in their respective *peignoirs*, they strolled along the sands together. "I wasn't in any danger."

"No," he agreed. "But you might have got into difficulties a bit farther on where there was a tricky current running. You see," he pursued cynically, "it doesn't exactly popularize a seaside place if too many bathing fatalities occur, and the town authorities, having a keen French eye to business, don't intend to let anyone get drowned if they can help it."

She flashed him a glance of quiet raillery.

"Then I suppose you have some sort of financial interest in St. Luc?"

"I?" He stared at her in amazement. "Why on earth should you suppose that?"

"Oh"—demurely—"because you seemed equally anxious to prevent me from running into danger."

"Naturally," he returned coolly. "If you had done, I should have had to get you out of it again, being the only person in your vicinity at the moment. And I didn't want to have to perform the rescuing act a second time."

"I'm sure you didn't," she retorted, with a slight acerbity in her voice. "In fact, you seem to regret that you ever had to."

He made no reply. Instead, he halted and surveyed the surrounding ground with a speculative eye. By this time they had reached the upper slope of the shore, where the sand lay thick and soft and dry.

"This looks a good sort of place for a sun-bath," he remarked irrelevantly. "Shall we sit down here?"

The shore was dotted about with people similarly engaged—lying prone on the sand, in various stages of dress and comparative undress, allowing the blazing sunlight to pour beneficently over their bodies. In fact, the daily sun-bath occupied quite as important a position in the estimation of the visitors to Port St. Luc as did their matutinal dip in the sea.

Somewhat surprised at Kenwyn's proposal, seeing that on previous occasions he had carefully avoided her company on the *plage*, Shirley assented, and they sat down side by side. From the pocket of his *peignoir* he produced a cigarette case.

"I know you smoke," he said, proffering it. She nodded and helped herself with a brief word of thanks. "Pity I'd run out of cigarettes that day we were cooped up in the cave," he added retrospectively. And then fell silent.

It was not until both their cigarettes were lit and drawing well that he spoke again. Then he said abruptly:

"Now what, exactly, did you mean by that remark of yours?"

"Which remark?" she asked, somewhat mystified.

"That it 'seemed as if I regretted rescuing you.' Why should I regret it?"

All Shirley's secret resentment at his recent treatment of her found utterance in her answer.

"Oh, I suppose because it forced upon you an acquaintance that you didn't want," she said coolly.

"Is that how it appears to you?" There was a curious expression on his face as he spoke.

"Certainly it does. How could it appear otherwise? You've avoided me as much as possible ever since."

"And I suppose," he said dryly, "it hasn't occurred to you that I may have done so because I thought I might possibly be an acquaintance you—and your friends—wouldn't want?"

"No." She regarded him in a startled fashion—questioningly. This aspect of the matter had certainly not presented itself to her.

A faint smile flickered over his face.

"I'm not—honestly—a man to be made a friend of," he went on judicially. "I can't conscientiously recommend myself in that capacity."

"But if we—want you to be a friend?" she faltered.

He shook his head.

"There are too many excellent reasons against it. Our lives—mine, and that of you and your friends—lie very far apart, of necessity."

“I don’t see why they should,” she objected.

“Don’t you?” He picked up a handful of sand and let it sift slowly through his fingers while he seemed to be mentally debating some of those excellent reasons.

“For one thing,” he said at last, “you’re one of the idle rich. I’m not—and never shall be. You and your delightful friends—they’re very delightful, by the way—belong to what are commonly called ‘the leisured classes,’ while I have to work for my living.”

“So do I,” replied Shirley promptly. “That puts us on level terms.”

“You—work?” he said, with not unnatural incredulity. Then, with a smile: “When?”

“Well”—she yielded the point with a laugh. “It isn’t a very hard job, I’ll acknowledge. But, all the same, I do earn my own living.”

And then very simply and unselfconsciously, prompted by an interested question here and there, she told him her brief history—of Fen Wyatt and Nick’s death, of the difficulties with which she and Bob had been faced, even of Alan Wyatt’s offer of financial help and their rejection of it. Somehow, in his present softened mood of friendliness, it seemed quite easy and natural to confide in him.

“You and your brother have plenty of pluck,” he commented when she had finished.

“I don’t think it was a question of pluck,” she returned. “It was simply that—that you just *couldn’t* let down anyone who had been as good to you as Uncle Nick had been to us, could you?”

“I’m sure—you—couldn’t,” he replied, evading a direct answer. “And I suppose you’d have no forgiveness for anyone who did do such a thing—or its equivalent?” As he spoke, he regarded her narrowly, as though seeking to read her thoughts in the expression of her face.

“No, I don’t think I could forgive that,” she answered. “Not to play the game by someone who had been a simply splendid friend to you seems to me about the worst thing anybody could be guilty of.”

Kenwyn nodded, as though that were the answer he had been expecting, but he made no rejoinder, and she reverted to the original subject under discussion.

“So you see,” she went on with a gleam of mirth, “I’m really one of the world’s workers—like yourself. And although you mayn’t be one of the ‘idle’ rich, you’re still rich enough to travel *de luxe* and spend weeks at a place like Port St. Luc.” She threw him a glance of gay defiance. “Please observe that I’m demolishing, one by one, all your ‘excellent reasons’ for declining to make friends.”

“No, you’re not,” he retorted swiftly. “My ‘riches’ are only a flash in the pan, so to speak. I’m merely a temporary Cræsus. Usually I’m working as hard as any common labourer—on a farm in Africa. But a relative of mine—a great-uncle, to be exact—shuffled off this mortal coil a short time ago and left me a fairish legacy. Just enough to keep the wolf from the door—no more.”

“And are you squandering it all on a few weeks’ trip to Europe?” demanded Shirley rebukingly.

“No. I’m not quite fool enough to do that. I’ve had one experience of what it’s like to be penniless. *Really* penniless, mind you—hungry because I hadn’t a coin to buy food with. And I don’t want another.”

His voice held the harshness of keen and quick remembrance, and Shirley looked across at him with puzzled eyes.

“Then why—why——” she began rather hesitatingly.

“‘Do you spend as you are doing?’ ” he finished for her. “Isn’t that what you were going to say?”

“I was,” she admitted, flushing a little. “Of course, I know I’ve no right to—to criticize——”

“Oh, yes, you have. One’s always got the right to try and stop anyone from coming to grief—if one can. But in this case”—smiling at her reassuringly—“you needn’t be anxious on my behalf. Life itself has taught me the cold value of money—and the idiocy of blowing it away.” He paused a moment, as though glancing back into the past, then resumed quietly: “Circumstances brought me back to Europe. My great-uncle was an American, and I had to meet a representative of his in London, as there were certain final messages to be delivered along with the legacy. The poor old gentleman had treated my parents rather badly years ago, and this legacy was a sort of salve to his conscience, I suppose. Anyway, as business reasons had brought me back to England, and as the legacy provided the wherewithal, I decided to take a holiday—the first for two years. So I

appropriated a thousand pounds of the money left me as a ‘holiday fund,’ and carefully invested the remainder.”

“Quite a respectable holiday fund,” commented Shirley, with a small smile. From her present viewpoint, a thousand pounds represented riches.

“Quite,” he agreed gravely. “It means precisely fifty pounds a year less for the rest of my life, but I thought it worth it.”

“You must have set a high valuation on the holiday idea.”

“I did. . . . I wonder if you’d understand,” he said musingly.

“Try me and see,” she suggested.

For a moment he was silent, then, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, he spoke.

“Very well, I will—if it won’t bore you. It was this way. Up till a couple of years ago I’d lived as you and your friends are living now—a luxury life, doing everything I wanted. Then along came Fate and slammed the door on that kind of existence for me once and for all. . . . I’m not complaining—I’ve told you it was my own fault. . . . Since then, I’ve sampled another kind of life—a life of physical hardship, of doing mostly what I didn’t want to, and leaving undone—compulsorily—all the things I did want.”

“You must have found it terribly difficult,” interpolated Shirley gently.

He gave her a quick glance, hard and bright as steel.

“Difficult? Yes. But eminently salutary for a black sheep, remember. Anyway, that’s the programme destined for the remainder of my days, and—as even black sheep have feelings, you know, inappropriate as they are—the prospect wasn’t particularly exhilarating. Therefore, when an unexpected windfall came along in the shape of my great-uncle’s legacy, I decided that it would be rather amusing to slip back, just for a few weeks, into the kind of life I used to live. I hadn’t appreciated it, then, at its full value. You see, I’d never known anything different to contrast it with. Now I do.” And the dry intonation of his voice intimated grimly how different that “anything” was. “So, recollecting from old acquaintance with the place that Port St. Luc provides to the fullest extent all the advantages which a highly organized civilization can offer, I came here as soon as my business in London was settled up.”

“That was when you crossed from Dover in the same boat as we did?”

“Yes. That was when.”

Shirley reflected for a moment.

“Then that explains it,” she said suddenly.

“Explains what?”

“Oh, nothing very much. Only something you said when you returned the notecase I’d lost.” She coloured a little as she spoke, rather embarrassed at having betrayed so clear a recollection of her first meeting with the man beside her.

“What did I say?” he persisted curiously.

“That it was ‘a catastrophe to lose all one’s worldly wealth in one fell blow.’ And you said it as if you meant it,” she added with a faint smile.

“I remember. Only I wasn’t thinking only of money when I spoke of ‘worldly wealth,’” he rejoined slowly. “I should be inclined to include friends, amusement, the possibility of leading a decent life, in the word wealth.”

A silence followed. The man’s thoughts had gone back to the time before he had forfeited all these things. Shirley’s were occupied with the sense of something desperate and tragic lying behind his clipped recapitulation of events—the first cause, of which these were only the outcrop—the one point upon which he volunteered no information.

“And what will you do—when your holiday is over?” she asked at last.

“Go back where I came from,” he answered briefly. “Back to my wilderness.”

She felt her heart give a jerk. He would go—sooner or later he would infallibly go right out of her life. She was conscious of a disturbing sensation of blankness. But she kept it out of her voice, that sudden inexplicable fear which had clutched her. Not by the faintest quiver did it betray her, although it held an undercurrent of entreaty.

“Then, if you count friends as part of a person’s wealth, why won’t you let—us—be friends while we’re together? If—if Simon asks you to join us again, won’t you accept?”

He turned toward her with a movement so abrupt that it almost startled her. His eyes searched her face intently.

“Do you want me to?” he demanded. “Remember, it can only be a temporary friendship—hardly worth your acceptance.”

She hesitated, nervously silent, and her eyes fell uncomfortably before the intentness of his gaze. Then, with an effort, she forced herself to meet it.

“Yes,” she said. “I do want you to.”

“You’re sure?” he persisted.

“Quite sure.”

“Very well, then. If your friend, Simon Drake, is magnanimous enough to ask me again—to give me a second chance—I’ll take it.”

CHAPTER XII AT THE CASINO

It seemed as though, having once decided to embark upon what he had declared could only be a "temporary friendship," Kenwyn thrust completely out of his mind all recollection of the reasons he had advanced against it, and allowed himself to drift along on the tide of deepening intimacy.

Simon had given him his "second chance"—Kit had seen to that—and now hardly a day passed without a forgathering of the little party of four, either for a picnic lunch, or for a gala dinner at one of the many restaurants where dancing out-of-doors constituted the particular attraction, or for a long motor-run through the beautiful Basque country in the midst of which St. Luc was situated.

It was a very pleasant interlude, this unpremeditated holiday time they all shared together, and one which, in the light of later happenings, they were each of them to look back upon with a wistful nostalgia for a happy time gone by. The two men got on well, as people of very differing temperaments sometimes do. Perhaps the fact that they had both been through the mill of loss and disillusion formed some intangible bond of union—drew them unconsciously together. Not that either had shared his secret with the other, but the intuitive perception which is born out of suffering gave them, opposite in nature though they were, a queer understanding of one another.

Kit frankly avowed her liking for the man they had deliberately drawn into the circle of their friendship. "I'm certain he's a real good sort," she declared. "But he reminds me of a box that closes with a hidden catch—and of course I'm just longing to find out how to open it and see what's inside." As for Shirley, she allowed herself to drift serenely through these summer days, content that Kenwyn was sharing them. For the moment, the knowledge that they were friends, that they saw each other almost every day, sufficed her. She never attempted to look forward, asked herself no questions as to whither this new friendship might be leading her. That faint inner sense of tumult which had disturbed her, when he had so definitely emphasized the transience of any possible companionship between them, had passed, drugged into tranquillity by his continued presence, and she was quite unconscious that, beneath what she honestly regarded as a friendship, something quite other, something stronger and more imperious, was quickening into life.

Now and again she received an abrupt reminder of those happenings which lay hidden in his past, as on one occasion when Kit had suggested that they should all go down to the Casino after dinner. Kenwyn had assented readily enough, but when they arrived there Shirley found that he had no intention of gambling. Kit and Simon had disappeared at once into the baccarat rooms, while she was contenting herself with a mild flutter at the *boule* table. She had staked and lost, then staked and won, and won again before she suddenly observed that Kenwyn, standing next her at the table, was not wagering at all. Instead, he was watching the run of the game with a somewhat enigmatic smile on his face.

“Aren’t you going to put on?” she asked with some surprise, as the croupier pushed her winnings on the last *coup* across to her.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said briefly.

“*Faites vos jeux, messieurs et mesdames.*” The croupier’s monotonous voice intervened, and, recalled to the business of the moment, Shirley hastily staked her counters afresh as the ball began spinning.

“*Rien ne va plus!*”

The words came snapped out like a pistol-shot, followed almost immediately by the announcement of the winning number: “*Le six!*” And a whisper of mingled pleasure and dismay rippled through the throng pressing up against the tables.

Shirley had backed the nine, doubling the amount of her previous venture, and with a rueful smile she watched the croupier’s hungry rake sweep her stake away. Then she turned once more to Kenwyn.

“Don’t you care for gambling?” she asked.

“I loathe it.”

There was so much emphasis in the curt reply that she gazed at him in astonishment.

“Perhaps you’ve never given it a fair trial as a method of amusement?” she suggested, smiling.

“I’ve tried pretty well every form of it,” he returned grimly. “And it did me in—as it does most people sooner or later. Only in my case it was sooner, that’s all.”

He seemed disinclined to pursue the topic, so she let it slide, and presently, when he proposed a turn on the terrace outside which overlooked the sea, she yielded amicably. But the incident lingered in her mind. She wondered to herself if gambling had perhaps been the first cause of the troubles which he acknowledged had overtaken him, the rock upon which he had originally foundered, and ultimately her cogitations on the matter found expression in the course of one of her intimate little talks with Simon.

“I suppose—gambling—might easily lead one into doing something—something really wrong,” she remarked thoughtfully one evening, on a day when she had had a very bad run of luck at the tables and Simon had been good-humouredly chaffing her about her losses, telling her that at heart she must be a confirmed gambler.

Kit, who had done proportionately badly at baccarat, had retired to bed, refusing to discuss the hazards of the evening’s play. “When I’ve lost a lot of money, I don’t want to brood over the subject as you two seem to enjoy doing,” she informed them succinctly and left them sitting out on the hotel terrace in the balmy summer moonlight.

“I’m glad to see you appreciate the risks you’re running.” Simon answered Shirley’s remark with a gravity that was belied by the twinkle in his eyes. “How much did you say you had lost? Three hundred francs? Scandalous!”

She laughed.

“I wasn’t thinking of myself,” she said. “Although, actually,” she went on seriously, “I suppose I’ve no right to chuck away even three hundred francs when poor old Bob is still out of a job and probably living on tinned sardines or something equally unsatisfying.”

“Then, if you weren’t concerned with your own lapses from virtue, of whose were you thinking? Mine?”

“No, I was really thinking of Neil.” She used his Christian name quite naturally. By common consent any more formal mode of address had been discarded betwixt the little company of four. “He always refuses to gamble, you know. He seems to regard it with a kind of loathing, as though it had been the cause of—of everything.”

“‘Of everything’? What do you mean by that?”

“Well, he’s very hard up, and—and at outs with life, so to speak.”

“Hard up?” Drake looked genuinely surprised. “He certainly doesn’t convey that impression.”

“No, I know he doesn’t. I wonder”—she hesitated—“I wonder if I could tell you? He never actually asked me not to tell anyone, and somehow I should like you to know. I think—I think Neil needs a man pal rather badly just now.”

Simon’s gray eyes flashed quickly over her face in the moonlight.

“Tell me, then, if you wish to,” he said quietly. “You know that whatever you say will be safe with me.”

“I know that,” she answered. And then, carefully skirting anything that seemed of too intimately personal a nature, any of the sidelights which Kenwyn had vouchsafed to her, she recounted briefly the circumstances which had brought him to Port St. Luc.

“So, you see, he’s not really rich at all. And I think,” she added rather low, “I think he’s rather unhappy.”

“Loss of money doesn’t necessarily mean—unhappiness,” commented Drake slowly.

“No.” She was very quiet for a moment. Then, on a swift impulse, she went on: “Do you know, Simon, I sometimes wonder if he has ever done anything wrong. It—it sounds awful even to think of such a thing, I know, but—well——” She faltered into a confused silence, and Drake regarded her curiously.

“Do you mean you think he may have broken the law in some way—committed a crime?”

“No—oh, *no!*” she replied with hasty emphasis, colouring scarlet at the bare idea. “It’s—it’s a bit difficult to explain what I *do* mean. But he’s always said that everything that’s happened to him is entirely his own fault, so it’s as if he considered he’d done something rather rotten once, and—blamed himself a good deal.”

“And yet you’re still willing to be friends with him?” suggested Simon pertinently.

There was a queer little gleam of amusement in the honest, wide-apart gray eyes that met his scrutiny.

“Why, of course,” she said, as though it were a matter that understood itself. “You don’t rule people out of your life just because they may have—

have made a bad mistake some time or other.”

A slight smile crossed Simon’s face—a fugitive, rather tender smile.

“No—you wouldn’t,” he answered, with a faint accent on the pronoun. “But there are people who do.”

Shirley laughed softly.

“I may make a bad mistake myself one day,” she observed, “and I should think it very rotten of my friends if they shelved me on that account.”

“I don’t think you need have any fears on that score,” he replied quietly. “In fact, I imagine your friends would be glad of the opportunity to stand by you.”

“Perhaps I shall give it them some day,” she responded lightly. Adding, with an underlying touch of gravity: “I should certainly come to you, first of all, if I were in a real hole. So be prepared.”

Drake leaned forward suddenly.

“Would you?” he said, with an odd intentness in his voice. “Will you promise me that, Shirley?”

She glanced at him quizzically.

“What? Promise that I’ll come and heap my worries on your shoulders if they get too overpowering for my own?”

“Yes. Just that,” he said gravely. “Promise me that if you’re ever in any difficulty in which a man friend can help you, you’ll let me be that friend. Will you?”

Touched, and a little shaken by his quiet intensity, she slid her hand impulsively into his.

“Of course I will,” she answered rather tremulously. “It’s—it’s dear of you to let me feel I may.”

“Then that’s settled,” he said, and there was a note of curious contentment in his voice.

He did not speak again for a few minutes, and when he did it was to revert quite composedly to the subject of their previous conversation.

“About Kenwyn,” he said reflectively. “You say he’s got a job in Africa. Doesn’t he like it there?”

“Hates it, apparently,” she answered. “Why?”

“Because perhaps I might be able to put him in the way of something else—in England. Something that would suit him better.”

“Could you? Could you really?” Her voice throbbed with unconscious eagerness. He would be in England—instead of Africa! And spared that bitter return to the “wilderness”—to the place which, beautiful though it might be, yet signified servitude and exile.

“Would it please you if I did?”

“Why, of course it would. I think he’s dreadfully—lonely—out there.”

Simon smiled. She was such an eager, warm-hearted child, the way she espoused the cause of anyone in trouble.

“In that case, we must see if something can’t be fixed up to improve matters,” he said. Then, getting up from his chair: “And now I think an adjournment to bed is indicated, seeing that we’ve more or less settled the affairs of the nation—and that it’s nearly two o’clock.”

She nodded. Together they reentered the hotel and the lift carried them up to their suite of rooms. Someone had evidently forgotten to draw the window curtains, for the lobby, as they entered it and closed behind them the door which gave egress to the corridor, was dimly lit by a shaft of moonlight, slanting out through the open doorway of the sitting-room. Shirley paused and held out her hand.

“Good-night, Simon,” she said gracefully. “You’ve been terribly nice to me this evening.”

“Nice!” He bit the word off sharply. Then, with a sudden movement, he stooped and his lips rested a moment on the small dark head so close beside him.

“Good-night, child,” he said. And, turning abruptly, he strode down the lobby in the direction of his room. An instant later his door closed with a curious sound of finality—as of some definite decision.

For a short space of time Shirley stood quite still where he had left her. Then she crept into her own bedroom and proceeded to undress, moving very quietly about so as not to awaken Kit, who occupied the adjoining room. She felt puzzled and a trifle dismayed. She had looked upon Simon as so entirely a friend—a good comrade—that that last moment before he quitted her had given her an odd feeling of disturbance. It had been different from any other moment they had shared together—fraught with some new emotional significance.

She lay long awake, staring with wide-open eyes into the moonlit dusk, realizing with a nervous sense of recoil that a fresh element might be entering into her life—an element out of which would spring unforeseen complications. She hoped she was wrong, for somehow she knew quite definitely within herself that if ever Simon should ask more of her than the friendship which had hitherto bound them together, she wouldn't be able to give it to him. All that could ensue would be the loss of a rare comradeship. And she didn't want to lose that. It had come to mean something very distinct in her life.

CHAPTER XIII A GALA NIGHT

The Pavilion Fleuri certainly deserved its pretty name in summer time. Once a very beautiful private villa, built near the edge of the cliffs and a mile or so beyond the town, it had been recently transformed into a restaurant *de luxe* where, when the weather permitted—which was very often indeed in this southern corner of sunny France—dinner was served outdoors in an immense paved court overlooking the sea. In the centre of the court was set a raised dancing-floor, made of glass. And this evening, being the occasion of a gala night, when half the gay and expensive world that flooded Port St. Luc during the season had motored out to the Pavilion to dine and dance, the management had grudged nothing that might make for success.

It seemed to Shirley, as she and Kit preceded Simon and Neil Kenwyn down the shallow flight of steps leading from the villa to the court, as though positively hundreds of white-clothed tables were clustered round the big glass dancing-floor which, illuminated from below, glowed like a huge topaz jewel in their midst. Each of them was decked with flowers, and beneath the brilliant lights, which made of the encompassing night a dim and shadowy background touched with mystery, the frocks of the women—a medley of contrasting colours against the black coats of the men who accompanied them—seemed like the scattered petals of other flowers of larger growth.

The scene, almost pagan in its atmosphere of concentrated luxury, made one catch one's breath. It was amazing—the kind of extravagant, fantastic fairyland which a lavish expenditure of money can be relied on to create, given a favourable natural setting.

“Not a very good preparation for my return to the wilderness,” murmured Kenwyn smilingly in Shirley's ear, as they took their places at a table close to the dancing-floor. “This is a sort of millionaires' playground, isn't it?”

She nodded.

“It is, rather. But, after all, quite a lot of it is real and not artificial—the sea, and that wonderful starry sky, and the mysteriousness of those woods on either side. It would be nothing without all those.”

Before he could make any answer Kit had broken in with a rapid summary of the amusements promised for the evening.

“There’s to be a display of fireworks—it wouldn’t be France if they didn’t have that!” she announced. “And some Russian singers who, I believe, are really marvellous, as well as a trio of Spanish dancers. And the special turn of the evening is to be Arlequin and Columbine—those two French dancers that half of Europe has fallen for. Quite a good programme, isn’t it?”

Everyone agreed, and apparently Neil determined that no further thought of the future “wilderness” which awaited him should mar his enjoyment of the present moment, for he seemed to enter into the spirit of the evening as wholeheartedly as anyone there, laughing and joking as though he hadn’t a care in the world. There was something very boyish about him to-night—an irrepressible gaiety that charmed by its sheer spontaneity. And again, as once before, Shirley felt she could picture the man as he must have been in the days before he had learned to keep himself “under lock and key,” as Kit put it.

The evening progressed delightfully. The Pavilion *chef* had excelled himself, and the “display of fireworks” and the three clever Spanish dancers each contributed their share of the entertainment. General dancing to the strains of a wonderful negro band filled in the intervals betwixt the various items on the programme, and while the throng of dancers fox-trotted hither and thither over the glass floor, an unseen electrical magician varied the colours of the lighting underneath it, so that now it seemed as though the shifting figures were bathed in the rosy afterglow of sunset, now wrapped in a pale green fire that bestowed a strange, almost unearthly shimmer on the women’s dresses, or again a soft blue luminance would diffuse itself over the whole assemblage.

With the advent of the Russian singers came a more sombre note. There were half a dozen of them, all men and wearing Cossack dress, and all of them incomparable musicians. Unaccompanied by any instrument, their voices floated out into the still night, blending in songs that held the underlying sadness which always dwells in Russian music, and seeming to melt and die away into the plaintive sighing of the sea below.

Shirley, sensitively responsive to every shade of feeling, sighed unconsciously as at last the tall, grave-looking Russians withdrew to the sound of a thunder of applause. It was almost a relief to come back to the

everyday world once more, to shake off the sense of tragedy their songs had held.

The return to normal was hastened by the appearance of a dapper little member of the Pavilion management, conventionally attired in evening dress, who mounted the glass floor and announced with profound regrets and apologies—and much gesticulation—that Arlequin and Columbine would be unable to appear, the latter having had the misfortune to sprain her ankle. Having allowed this information to sink in, so that a full sense of disappointment had permeated through the crowd of merrymakers, he proceeded, with an artistic sense of values, to raise his audience to a corresponding pitch of relief, tintured by a pleasurable curiosity, with the further announcement that *la direction*, having been apprised of the accident in good time, had been successful in securing the services of two other dancers—equally, if not more gifted—who had never yet performed in France. With a final gesture of triumph he concluded:

“Thus, *messieurs et mesdames*, I have the honour to present to you the famous dancers—*Nicolette et Romana*.”

“*God!*” The word seemed almost jerked from Kenwyn’s lips.

Amid the applause which followed the announcement of the dancers’ names, neither Kit nor Simon caught the half-smothered exclamation. But Shirley heard it and turned startled, questioning eyes on the man beside her. His face had whitened under its tan, and the hand that rested on his knee had clenched itself involuntarily. As though he sensed the query that trembled on her lips and wished to stave it off, he spoke at once, randomly:

“Rather like a conjuring trick, isn’t it? One couple out of action—and the Pavilion management promptly produces another, out of its hat, so to speak.”

“Have you ever seen these other two?” asked Shirley. “Nicolette and Romana?”

A curious expression flitted over his face.

“I saw them dance—several years ago,” he responded briefly.

And then, as a stringed orchestra broke into a swaying waltz measure, all heads turned toward the flight of steps which the exhibition couple could be seen descending.

They were unusually good dancers—that much was evident the instant they glided on to the glass floor. Their technique was faultless, and every

pose and gesture instinct with a delicate artistry. But, beyond this, they were each individually attractive, and Shirley's glance followed them with unstinted admiration. The man was beautifully built, of the slender Latin type, with a dark-skinned, chiselled face and a pair of long-lidded, sombre dark eyes which seemed to follow every movement of his partner with a worshipping intentness that was almost like a caress.

"He's a very beautiful person, isn't he?" commented Kit. "Like a dark-haired Greek god."

Drake smiled.

"Yes," he agreed. "And they're remarkably good foils for each other as far as appearances go."

It was true. Nicolette's fairness made an almost dazzling contrast against the dark good looks of her partner. She had deep red hair which looked dyed but wasn't, with bright gleams in it like the rind of a horse-chestnut when the sun shines on it, and her skin was of that clear, transparent whiteness which not infrequently accompanies hair of this colour. Her eyes were hazel—a warm golden-brown—with long lashes that lay like two tiny dark fans against her cheeks when she looked downwards, and the "make-up" that added colour to her cheeks and reddened the passionate young mouth emphasized the effect of peculiar vividness, of glowing, pulsating life, which she conveyed.

A perfect hurricane of shouts and clapping greeted her and her partner at the conclusion of their first dance, and it was very evident that the audience was thoroughly delighted with the couple who had taken the place of Arlequin and Columbine. Shirley, applauding with enthusiasm, turned impulsively to Neil, ready to break forth into a small pæan of admiration. But the words died on her lips. He was leaning back in his chair, looking so entirely detached that her eagerness wilted.

"Don't you admire them?" she demanded.

"Very much," he returned coolly.

She felt puzzled. It was not in the nature of things that Kenwyn, so recently returned from the back of beyond, should be bored by the performance, yet that was the impression his manner seemed to suggest. She noticed, too, that when Nicolette and Romana began to dance for the second time he still remained curiously uninterested. Her own seat was next to the dancing-floor, his next again to hers, so that unless he bent forward it was quite impossible for him to see very much of the dance. But instead of

bending forward he was leaning back—almost as though he neither wished to see nor to be seen.

And then, all at once, as the course of the dance brought the two performers close to the table, Nicolette's smiling gaze seemed suddenly caught and held. Shirley was acutely conscious that it passed her by, absolutely unseeing, to rivet itself on the face of the man beside her. Beneath its "make-up," the dancer's own face whitened. She made a false step, and sank to the ground. But before the audience had even gripped the fact that she had made a mistake, her partner covered it. With complete *sang-froid* he stooped and swung her up on to his shoulder, where, recovering herself instantly, she posed, smiling and waving her hand in response to the roar of applause which uprose as he bore her triumphantly off the floor and up the broad flight of steps leading into the villa.

It all happened so quickly that Shirley had no time to consider the import of the little incident. She only knew that Nicolette had stared at Neil with an almost stunned expression in her eyes, as though she had seen a ghost, and that when she herself turned round instinctively to look at him, she fancied that his face seemed somewhat paler than usual. But he had not altered his position by a jot, and his expression was quite impenetrable. In fact, so entirely unmoved did he appear that she began to wonder if, after all, she had not imagined the whole incident. Perhaps Nicolette's apparent false step and subsequent graceful subsidence on to the ground had been really—as her partner's presence of mind had certainly made it appear to be—only part of the dance.

At this juncture a renewed outburst of clapping broke across her train of thought, and, finding that Romana had returned to give a solo dance, she allowed her attention to be speedily engrossed in her performance. But it was only for a moment. Hardly had the puzzle of Nicolette's behaviour passed temporarily out of her mind than a waiter approached the table and, pausing beside it, looked doubtfully from one to the other of the two men of the party.

"Monsieur Kenwyn?" he murmured inquiringly. And, upon Neil's signifying that that was his name, tendered him a letter.

Kenwyn slit the envelope and, drawing out the sheet of paper it contained, read the half-dozen words which were scribbled across it.

"All right," he said, nodding curtly to the waiter. Then, leaning forward, he addressed his hostess.

“Will you excuse me for a few moments, Kit? Nicolette, whom I once knew, has asked me to go round and see her.”

Kit assented, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

“An old flame, Neil?” she challenged gaily.

The set lines of his face relaxed into a faint smile, and he shook his head.

“No, not guilty,” he replied. And, getting up from the table, walked quickly away in the direction of the villa.

As he rose, something white fluttered unheeded to the ground, and instinctively Shirley stooped and picked it up. It was the note that he had just received, and in the brilliant limelight which was being directed upon Romana while he danced, the single line of writing upon it leapt into clarity: *“Please come and see me, Neil.”*

A simple enough message, yet by its very simplicity—the unstudied intimacy of it—it struck Shirley with all the force of a blow. It explained so much. Made everything which had puzzled her quite clear—horribly clear. It had been no premeditated part of the dance, that stumble and fall of Nicolette’s. She had been startled into it—taken aback by suddenly perceiving Kenwyn amongst her audience. And for him, too, the meeting had been a shock, although, with that peculiar self-control of his, he had been better able to conceal the outward manifestation of it.

Shirley’s mind raced precipitately along, one thought linking itself swiftly to another from that initial discovery. Nicolette, whoever she might be, must once have played a part in Neil’s life, in that locked-up past of his—she was sure of it. Probably they had loved and quarrelled—his fault, since had he not said that he alone was to blame for the whole wrecking of his life? Scattered phrases of all that he had told her came back to her, lightning clear, now, in their significance, cutting into her consciousness like knives. *“I’d lived to please myself—without considering other people.”* And again: *“. . . what a complete hash a man can make of his life, and of other people’s.”* His own—and Nicolette’s! Afterwards, of course, Nicolette must have gone out of his life, leaving him to reap what he had sown. And it was this reaping which had turned him into the unhappy, embittered individual who had come to occupy—she realized it now—so big a place in her own life.

She shivered a little, swept by a new and feverish emotion that set her pulses jerking unevenly. Her throat felt constricted. The knowledge that Neil was even now with that other woman, with Nicolette, made her feel

physically sick—sick and maddeningly helpless. For the first time in her life she was experiencing the raw misery of jealousy.

“Come along, Shirley, let’s dance this.”

Simon’s voice brought her back abruptly to a sense of what was going on around her. Romana had finished his solo dance, and now the negro band was playing a fox-trot, while one by one the couples were drifting back on to the dancing-floor again.

Mechanically, in response to Drake’s invitation, she got up to dance. For a moment the lights and tables, and the swaying figures circling the floor, seemed to run together into a huge indefinite blur, which swung round and round her, and she gripped the back of her chair to steady herself. Then her vision cleared, things suddenly resumed their normal appearance, and with a composure at which she inwardly marvelled, she found herself accompanying him on to the glass floor where they mingled with the other dancers.

CHAPTER XIV CASTLES IN SPAIN

In the dressing-room which had been allotted to the dancers, Neil and Nicolette stood regarding one another with speculative eyes—with that inquiring intentness of people who have been long apart and who are trying to read in each other's faces whether or not the interval has bred any changes, spiritual or physical.

"I wasn't at all sure that you would come and see me," said Nicolette slowly, after that first searching scrutiny.

A faint smile flickered across his face.

"Why not—since you deigned to acknowledge the prodigal?" he returned. "All the same, I think it would have been better if you had decided not to recognize me."

"I don't see why."

"No? And yet I should have thought it was self-evident. No good can possibly result from reopening a closed chapter of events."

She lifted her big golden eyes questioningly to his face.

"Didn't you—want to see me, then?" she said falteringly.

He stared down at her with a gleam of sardonic amusement.

"I did not. Surely you can understand that? I've cut loose from the past—completely."

"I know." She sighed. "I suppose it was the only thing to do."

"Absolutely."

He spoke with a cool, clipped detachment that contrasted sharply with a certain quality of wistful appeal which lurked in her own utterances. She seemed to recognize it suddenly.

"How much you have altered, Neil!" she exclaimed.

"And you too. You've changed a good deal since we used to know each other—only all for the better in your case." It was true. From the young, rather empty prettiness he remembered, her face had altered into a beauty which held something that was faintly tragic and amazingly alluring. "But I suppose your mirror has told you that much," he added.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I wasn’t thinking of looks when I said you had changed,” she said. “You’re—you’re different, somehow.”

His mouth hardened.

“That’s not altogether surprising, is it?”

Before she could make any rejoinder the door was hastily thrown open, and Romana, returning from his solo performance, came quickly into the room. At the sight of Neil he paused, and a curious expression flashed over his features—a mingling of dislike and suspicion.

“Kenwyn!” he ejaculated. “Neil Kenwyn!”

The two men shook hands, while Nicolette launched into hurried explanations.

“Yes. I caught sight of him amongst the audience, so I sent him a note to come round and see us.”

Romana’s long, dark eyes regarded her with a look of sudden understanding.

“I see,” he said expressively. “You never mentioned it, but I suppose that’s what put you out in our last dance?” In spite of his foreign appearance he spoke English quite fluently and with hardly a trace of accent.

“Yes.” Nicolette nodded eagerly. She had flushed a trifle underneath his scrutiny and appeared a little uncertain of herself. “I was so startled, you see, Miguel. Neil was the very last person I was expecting to meet.”

“So I imagine.” He glanced slowly across at Kenwyn. “We heard you had gone to South Africa.”

“I had. But I came over to Europe on business.”

“Business? At Port St. Luc?” Romana’s tone sounded broodingly skeptical.

“My business was in England,” explained Neil composedly. “I’m taking a short holiday here before returning to Africa.”

This piece of information seemed to afford Miguel considerable satisfaction.

“Oh, you’re returning there, then?” he said more pleasantly.

“Certainly I am returning. I don’t think there’s much—demand—for me in England?”—with a brief smile.

A look of comprehension came into the other man’s face.

“No, I suppose not,” he assented. Then, turning to Nicolette, he went on: “It’s time you changed your dress, Niki. We’re due to go on again in a few minutes.”

“In that case I’d better take myself off,” said Kenwyn. “Good-bye, Miguel.” He nodded to Romana, then held out his hand to Nicolette. “Good-bye, Nicolette. You dance as charmingly as ever—more charmingly, if possible.”

But apparently she had no intention of letting him vanish out of her ken so easily. With a little rush of light footsteps she followed him out on to the landing upon which the dressing-room opened, pulling the door to behind her.

“Neil, you’re not going like that,” she protested, speaking in a rapid undertone. “I want to see you again—for a long talk. There’s so much to say _____”

He shook his head.

“Better not,” he said, a note of tolerant kindness in his voice. “There’s no use in looking back across the years. Let it all go.”

“No, no, I can’t!” she persisted. “I *must* see you. Come and see me at my hotel—the Hôtel des Anglais. To-morrow. To-morrow at three. Miguel will be away—he’s going over to St. Jean-de-Luz to arrange about our appearing there.”

At that moment Romana’s voice sounded imperatively from the other side of the closed door.

“Come *on*, Nicolette. You must come and change. You’ll never be ready in time.”

She laid an imploring hand on Kenwyn’s arm.

“To-morrow, then?” she begged. “Say you’ll come, Neil. Promise!”

He yielded at last to the urgency in her voice.

“All right. To-morrow, then.” And as she retreated into the dressing-room to prepare for the next dance, he made his way downstairs and out of the villa.

Simon and Kit were waltzing together, while Shirley was sitting alone at the table when he returned to it. She greeted him rather snubbily.

“Well, I hope you’ve enjoyed your visit ‘behind the scenes.’ I can’t see why you didn’t tell us that you knew Mademoiselle What’s-her-name—Nicolette—personally. There was no need to make a mystery of it.”

“I didn’t imagine that she would claim acquaintance with me,” submitted Kenwyn mildly.

“No? Even so, you might have told us all that she was—or had been—a friend of yours. One or other of us might have come out in all innocence with some awkwardly uncomplimentary remark about her.”

He smiled a little.

“I don’t think there was much danger of that,” he said. “Do you?”

She smiled back in spite of herself.

“No. She’s very beautiful,” she admitted rather reluctantly.

“Yes, she’s very beautiful. And not very happy,” he subjoined.

He had touched the chord to which Shirley’s essential warm-heartedness never failed to respond.

“Isn’t she?” she said sympathetically. “And yet you’d think she had everything to make her happy. Beauty, and a great gift, and success—and a delightful partner who is obviously very much in love with her,” she added with a hint of raillery in her voice.

“Oh, yes, Miguel’s in love with her all right.”

“Miguel? Is that his name? Do you know them both, then? Do tell me about them.”

“I knew them—some years ago. They’re both of mixed nationality. Romana’s father was a Spaniard—a dancer like himself—who ran away with a pretty English girl of very good old family. He married her, but the ‘very good family’ would have nothing more to do with their erring daughter—cut her off completely, and I believe the Romanas fell on rather bad times. Ultimately they both died, leaving one kiddy—Miguel—practically unprovided for, and her people then came to the rescue and brought him to England and had him educated over there. But it ended in a break between them. Miguel was a dancer born and bred, an artist to his fingertips—incidentally, he’s a very fine musician—and the ‘good old

family' bored him stiff. So, as soon as he was old enough, he shook their respectable dust off his feet and returned to his father's profession."

"And Nicolette?" prompted Shirley, as he paused.

"She, too, is of mixed parentage. She was the daughter of an English country doctor and a very beautiful Russian woman. I always think there must have been a dancer somewhere there, too, tucked away in the branches of the family tree, because Nicolette was crazy about dancing from her earliest childhood."

"Is that her real name—Nicolette?"

"Yes. Nicolette Arden—her father was a Dr. Arden. Twice she ran away from school to join up with a travelling company as a dancer, and at last I think her parents must have come to the conclusion that it was no use trying to suppress such a pronounced tendency, so they allowed her to train seriously for the dancing profession."

"Then you've known her from a child?" said Shirley. Somehow the idea brought with it an unaccountable sense of relief. Nothing can be much safer and less liable to romantic development than a friendship which dates from childhood.

"Oh, no." Uncompromisingly Neil's quick negative cut away that comfortable assurance. "I first met her soon after she and Miguel Romana had come together as dancing partners—round about five years ago. She must have been twenty then and Miguel a year younger. They made a rattling success in London, and the public went wild about her."

"I suppose—are she and Romana married?" asked Shirley hesitatingly.

"No. She married someone else, when they had been dancing together for a year or so, and then he had to do without her as a dancing-partner for a time."

"And do you mean to say that her husband allows her to go touring all over the place, dancing with him, now?" she exclaimed in astonishment.

Kenwyn's expression altered curiously. Bitterness and a profound sadness seemed conflicting together in his face, and he paused before replying.

"Her husband makes no further demands on her now," he said at last, slowly. Then, as though he wanted to cut the conversation short, he went on: "But we've gossiped enough. Come along and dance for a bit instead."

Shirley acquiesced. But somehow her light-hearted enjoyment of the evening had been all at once wiped out. Ordinarily she loved dancing with Neil—now it left her feeling curiously flat and indifferent, and she danced mechanically. With those last words of his: “Her husband makes no further demands on her now,” an immense fear had descended upon her. In a flash of insight she felt she knew what they meant—what inner significance they contained, although she tried desperately to push the knowledge aside—to hide it, even from herself. But it was there all the time, and the remainder of the gala night was spoiled for her—its gaiety suddenly converted into dust and ashes.

She was glad when it was all over, when at last, in the solitude of her own room at the hotel, she could take that secret fear out and examine it. Face it, and face, too, the fact out of which it had been born—the fact that she was beginning to care for Neil Kenwyn.

Nicolette’s appearance on the scene, the way in which her life had in the past been obviously linked up with his, had made Shirley realize abruptly how much he had come to mean in her own life; that, actually, it was his presence which had constituted an integral part of all the happiness these weeks at Port St. Luc had held.

And now. . . “*Her husband makes no further demands on her.*” With those guarded words it seemed as though a sudden light had sprung into being, illuminating all the dark places, all the puzzling and bewildering twists of recent happenings. It appeared to her clear enough now what part this dancing-woman had played in Kenwyn’s past. She had been his wife! Shirley was convinced of it. Bit by bit she felt she could piece the whole story together. Caught by Nicolette’s beauty—he had acknowledged that he thought her beautiful—he had married her and taken her away from the stage world which she knew and loved. Then had come the struggle between her temperament, volatile, elusive, passionate, and his own, with the unmistakable streak of self-will, of arrogance, which ran through it like iron. Shirley could picture the resultant conflict and perpetual misunderstandings—Kenwyn striving to impose his will upon Nicolette’s wayward butterfly spirit, and failing. And finally he had made, as he said, “a hash of his life.” Of his own life, and of hers too. When the ultimate crash came, she had evidently resumed her dancing partnership with Miguel Romana, and Kenwyn had exiled himself to South Africa.

That there were other contributory causes for that self-imposed banishment, Shirley was ready to concede. Everything Neil had ever told her had implied that he had suffered a general wreckage of all that counted in

life, but she felt perfectly convinced that Nicolette had been the moving factor in the main catastrophe. She was so exactly the type of woman to walk into a man's life and make hay of it—beautiful and temperamental, instinctively selfish, and as irresponsibly unmoral as some untutored child.

But—and this was the bitter crux of the whole matter to Shirley—Neil might have told her, might have let her realize that a woman had played a part in that unhappy past of his. He had given her so many glimpses into it, gained her sympathy so completely, and had yet concealed what, from a feminine point of view, mattered most of all. She felt that he had betrayed her—won from her something that would never have been given if she had known he was not as free as she was herself. Her face burned with shame as she thought of it.

And then came the recollection of the caution that he had given her—that theirs could only be a “temporary friendship.” After all, he *had* warned her—warned her that he was not free. Only she hadn't understood the warning—had connected it merely with his ultimate enforced return to Africa. . . . Oh! She had been a fool—a fool! But at least no one should ever guess her folly—neither Neil nor anyone else. She would remember always that Nicolette was the woman he had once loved—probably loved still—and that she herself was only, as he had once told her, a temporary friend.

It wouldn't be easy, she knew that. But it was one of those strange and difficult things in life that have to be faced. And she would face it gamely—with the same pluck as that with which she had faced other difficulties. She had let her heart slip unawares—given love where only friendship had been offered in return. The same thing had happened to other people before—to both men and women—and they had had to get over it. Well, *she* would get over it. . . .

And, as though to strengthen her determination, something happened the very next day which unequivocally destroyed any faint, fugitive doubts she might have had as to whether Nicolette still counted in Kenwyn's life. Simon had proposed motoring into San Sebastian, across the Spanish frontier, for the afternoon and evening, returning the same night, and, as usual, he had invited Neil to make one of the party—an invitation which the latter had briefly refused on the plea of a prior engagement. The plea was one of which he had never made use, since he possessed no other friends in Port St. Luc, and in her own mind Shirley felt certain that the appointment in question must be with Nicolette.

She was conscious of a queer inward stab of loneliness, of a feeling of being set aside, which she tried to conceal by simulating an eager—almost too eager—interest in the projected trip.

“What an absolute kid you are!” Simon chaffed her, as she chattered blithely away on the subject during lunch. “As excited as though we were contemplating a journey to the moon.”

“Well, we *are* going to Spain,” put in Kit, “the place where one builds romantic castles, remember. Perhaps Shirley is building one.”

The unconscious irony of the remark brought a wry little smile to the girl’s lips. Building! When she was in reality pulling down, destroying a dream-house of happiness which had had no foundations.

A small mishap to the car delayed the start for San Sebastian beyond the time appointed, and it was nearly three o’clock before the trio finally set off. Shirley heaved a sigh of relief as, at her own request, she established herself in the back seat. There would be no longer any need, there, for her to make conversation, to play up, and she could withdraw once more into her own thoughts.

The even pulse of the engine was pleasantly soothing, and, as the car purred along, the scent of the feathery tamarisk trees bordering the road filled the warm air with a delicate, pungent sweetness. There were few people about in the streets at this hour of the day. The noontide sun had driven most of them indoors, there to enjoy a quiet siesta, and Shirley noticed absently that even the hotels exhibited very few signs of life as the car slipped past first one and then another on its way out of the town. Presently, a little ahead, where the road curved outwards before making a sharp turn, the words “Hôtel des Anglais” sprang into view. The broad gilded letters, glittering in the sunshine, conveyed nothing in particular to her—merely indicated another of the great caravanserais that almost seemed to jostle one another, shoulder to shoulder, in the streets of Port St. Luc. With its closed green shutters and down-dropped sun-blinds, the hotel seemed almost as though it were basking, like a big cat, half asleep in the heat of the day.

But, as the car approached, Shirley’s preoccupied gaze was all at once arrested by a movement on one of the balconies. A woman had stepped out on to it, and, leaning her arms on the wooden balustrade, peered anxiously up and down the street. The slender, supple figure was unmistakable. It was Nicolette, the dancer, and Shirley, with a sudden catch in her breath, looked quickly away. Then, in the same instant, she saw Kenwyn come striding

along the paved footpath. He was walking with his head bent, obviously completely absorbed in his thoughts, and did not appear to notice the oncoming car. Outside the entrance to the Hôtel des Anglais he paused. Then, mounting the steps, he pushed open the swing doors, and Shirley saw him disappear within.

As she watched him enter, the last stones of her castle of dreams came toppling to the ground.

CHAPTER XV TWO MEN AND A WOMAN

“So you’ve come!”

Nicolette spoke with a little breathless catch in her voice as Kenwyn was shown into her sitting-room by a waiter.

“Of course I’ve come,” he replied tranquilly. “Did you think I shouldn’t—after promising that I would?”

“I didn’t know what you’d do,” she said. “And—and I wanted to see you so much.”

There was something rather appealing about her—even about her very anxiety lest he should not have been going to keep the appointment, and Neil, who had looked forward to the interview with a certain repugnance—it was bound to recall so many incidents which he would gladly have forgotten—found his feeling of distaste subsiding.

“That was nice of you,” he returned. “Because after all”—with a faint smile—“I’m still the outcast.”

She made a pretty, fluttering gesture of white hands—all her gestures had a natural grace—as though brushing aside something of no importance.

“As if I cared about that!” She indicated a chair. “Sit down and let’s talk. A cigarette? You smoke Turkish, I know, like me. Now tell me all you’ve been doing since—since you went away.”

“I’ve become a hewer of wood and a drawer of water.”

“You?” She looked at him unbelievably. “I can’t exactly picture you in that capacity.”

“Both are highly necessary occupations on a farm.”

“Oh, have you bought a farm, then?”

He smiled somewhat ironically.

“No. To purchase a farm requires capital—and I had none. I’m simply a farm-worker, that’s all—one of the ‘hands,’ you know.”

She was silent a moment. Her eyes held a dismayed, stricken expression.

“You—as a farm-hand!” she whispered under her breath. “Neil, how—how awful!”

“Oh, my boss is quite a good chap,” he responded lightly. “Not what *you’d* call a ‘gentleman’ precisely—although he’s behaved like one to me. He engaged me without a character or reference of any kind—and he’s been a white man all through.”

“And do you propose going back to—that?”

“Certainly I do.”

“But you must have got some money—to be staying here at St. Luc,” she protested in a bewildered kind of voice.

“Yes, I have.” And he briefly explained about the legacy to which he had fallen heir.

“Then why must you go back?”

“Why not? I’ve nothing to return to England for. Nor is the money enough for me to live upon without working, remember. In any case, before I came away I made a bargain with my boss that I’d return to him for a time. So that point’s settled. Now, supposing we let my excessively dull affairs slide for a bit and you tell me, instead, how things have been going with you, Niki.”

“It’s nice to hear you call me ‘Niki’ again,” she observed inconsequently. Then, after a brief pause, she vouchsafed: “I’ve gone back to the dancing world once more—with Miguel, as you saw last night.”

“I knew of that a year ago. I found a picture of you both in an out-of-date number of the *Tatler* which I came across one day.”

“My dear parents-in-law were horribly shocked at me, of course. Still, I’ve managed to remain friends with them. I even go and stay with them occasionally.”

“How are they both?” asked Neil. There was a veiled eagerness in his voice, and his eyes had darkened with some inward emotion.

“Quite well.” She glanced at him rather distressfully. “But they won’t speak of you—or allow anyone else to. Your name’s never mentioned in that house. You might never have existed.”

Kenwyn nodded, as though this was only what he had expected to hear.

“To every man his deserts,” he commented dryly.

She turned on him with a sudden swift movement.

“Tell me, Neil, why did you do it—whatever it was? Why did you do it?” Her voice, her big, asking eyes, her whole lithe body seemed instinct with an overwhelming demand—a desperate desire to *know*.

“Why?” He shrugged his shoulders. “Does one ever know why one does things? On impulse, probably, without ever thinking of the cost. The day of reckoning doesn’t come till afterwards, you know.”

She sprang up restlessly from her chair.

“I know. . . . It came for me—very quickly—after I was married.”

Instinctively he had risen to his feet when she did, and now he stared at her as though altogether taken aback. What she had just said had evidently amazed him beyond measure.

“For you?” he said slowly. “What on earth do you mean, Niki? Weren’t you—happy?”

“Happy?” She smote her hands together. “*Happy?*” She paused a moment, as though fighting against the impulse to unburden herself, struggling to keep herself in hand. Then something seemed to break within her, and, with a gesture of abandonment, she let the smothered misery of years rush out in words. “I was never happy! *Never!* How could I be? Didn’t you know—didn’t you ever guess that it was you I cared for—you, all the time?”

“I?” Neil felt stupefied. He had no words with which to meet this sudden passionate avowal.

“Yes, you. Never Ronny. I liked him well enough, but, if you want the truth, I married him because he was rich and terribly in love with me, and I was poor and desperately miserable.”

“Miserable? Do you mean miserable because——”

“Because I couldn’t make you care!” She was reckless now, her reserves utterly down. “Other men don’t seem to find it difficult to love me. Only you—you. And I tried—I tried so hard, and all the time you remained simply kind and affectionate and brotherly. So at last I married Ronny—just because he wanted me and you didn’t.” She broke off and stood beside him, her hands clasping and unclasping, her slight breast rising and falling tumultuously.

Kenwyn’s face was full of a perturbed gravity.

“Niki, I’m terribly sorry about this,” he said at last, and then felt smitten by the inane baldness of his own speech.

“Is that all you can say?” she whispered shakily. “You couldn’t—you couldn’t possibly care, even now? Now that Ronny’s left me?”

He winced at the pitifulness of it.

“My dear,” he said gently, taking her hands in his. “Things are best as they are. Try to believe that. I’m not qualified to be anyone’s husband. I’ve nothing to offer any woman; neither money—nor reputation, if the truth were told.”

“But it need never be told! It never *will* be told!” she exclaimed eagerly. Her restless fingers clung to his, urgent and beseeching. “The old people will never give away what you did. And I don’t even know what it was. Nor do I care! What you’ve done or left undone doesn’t matter to me. Oh, Neil, listen—listen. Couldn’t you try to like me—to care a little bit? You needn’t marry me—not till you’re sure. But I care so horribly it—it hurts.”

He loosened her clinging hands very gently, but with a finality there was no mistaking.

“I’m sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry, Niki. But it’s no use. Put me out of your mind, dear, once and for all. There are so many other men who could—and do—love you. Better men than I. Miguel worships the actual ground you walk on, I verily believe. And he’s been very faithful. He loved you before Ronny ever came on the scene——”

“Miguel? Bah! He’s all right—as a dancing-partner.” The casual tolerance in her voice showed, far more effectually than any sign of anger or aversion could have done, that Romana simply didn’t count in her scheme of things.

She fell silent, her foot tapping the floor uneasily. Suddenly she shot a long, searching glance at the man beside her.

“I believe,” she said slowly and with an odd, awakened note in her voice—“I believe there’s someone else—some other woman you do care for.” She flung out an accusing hand. “It’s that girl—that girl who was sitting at your table last night—sitting next you. You’re in love with her!”

Kenwyn’s face became curiously impassive—expressionless as a mask.

“If I were, it would be utterly useless,” he said quietly. “I’ve just told you: I’ve nothing to offer any decent woman—thanks to the mess you and I”—he hesitated—“and Ronny made of things between us.”

“Then you blame us?” she interjected quickly. “Him—and me?”

He shook his head resolutely.

“I blame myself—myself alone. I was the eldest and most experienced of you all. I ought to have stopped you, put the brake on. Instead of which, I went full steam ahead with you both—and let the devil take the consequences. He’s taken them, too,” he added grimly. “And he’ll go on taking them as long as I live.”

Her sudden flare of passion seemed to have spent itself. She appeared to be reflecting, considering something in her own mind.

“I don’t see why you should hold yourself responsible, either for Ronny or me,” she said at length.

“I was so much older—that’s why. I ought to have pulled up—and pulled him up, too. Instead of which, I encouraged him.” He gave his shoulders a twist. “However, what’s done’s done. We can’t—any of us—go back, more’s the pity.”

“I don’t want to go back.” She shivered a little. “And now—now I daren’t look forward.” Her expression told him why, and he bit his lip.

“You’ll forget,” he said compassionately. “After to-day we shall probably never meet again, and one day you’ll meet someone else, and wonder what hallucination ever made you think you liked me well enough to put up with me as a husband.” He smiled down at her with a half-bantering tenderness, striving to soften the ragged edges of departure. But her big eyes regarded him dumbly, unconvinced, smouldering with a mixture of passion and resentment.

“I must go now,” he went on, holding out his hand. “But it’s good to know that one person, at any rate, doesn’t utterly condemn me. Thank you for that, Niki.”

Her hand slid into his.

“I should never condemn you—you know it,” she said sombrely.

“I do know,” he answered. “And it’ll be a cheering memory, sometimes, when I’ve gone back to South Africa. Good-bye, Niki. Good-bye—and good luck—always.”

He turned to leave, and she accompanied him to the door of the room. Then, just as he was going, she caught back his hand in hers and for an instant pressed her lips passionately against it.

“Good-bye,” she said in a choked voice. And almost pushed him out of the room, slamming the door to behind him.

When Miguel entered an hour later it was to find her sitting alone, staring blankly into space. He came in with the quick, springing step of one who is the bearer of good tidings, but he halted abruptly as he caught sight of that still, quiet figure gazing seaward with dazed eyes that saw nothing.

“Niki!” he called sharply. “Niki, what’s the matter?”

At the sound of his voice she turned rather stiffly, as though she had been so long in one position that movement was difficult, and gradually a more natural expression came back into her eyes. It seemed as if the soul, temporarily withdrawn, suddenly looked out of them again, all at once on guard to preserve its secrets.

“Nothing’s the matter,” she said. “Why should there be?”

He regarded her doubtfully.

“No particular reason,” he replied. “Only I thought you looked rather queer.”

She smiled up at him.

“I don’t feel at all queer—sorry I look it. Well”—hurriedly turning the conversation—“what’s your news? Have you fixed up anything about St. Jean-de-Luz?”

He nodded.

“Rather. They saw our show at the Pavilion last night and liked it, so they’ve booked us for a week’s engagement now and a return visit later in the season.”

“That’s satisfactory, then. We can fit in Madrid and those other Spanish places in between.”

“Yes.” Miguel was prowling restlessly round the room. Finally he lit a cigarette and came to a halt in front of her. “What have you been doing with yourself this afternoon? Haven’t you been out?” His voice was casual enough, but there was a certain contradictory tenseness in his regard.

“No, I haven’t been out.”

“Why not?”—swiftly. “It’s not like you to stew indoors all afternoon on a gorgeous day like this.” Then, as she made no response, he went on: “Why

haven't you been out?"

She saw that he was determined to have an answer.

"For the very excellent reason that I've had a visitor," she replied with assumed nonchalance.

Romana made a movement, hastily checked.

"Kenwyn?" he demanded.

"'M." She uttered a little affirmative sound.

"I won't have it." He spoke with sudden vehemence. "I won't have him coming to see you."

Nicolette gazed up at him blandly.

"*You* 'won't have' this—*you* 'won't have' that! Whatever are you talking about, Miguel?"

"I'm talking about you and Neil Kenwyn," he said doggedly. "I believe you care for him."

"Really? Well"—laughing softly—"I don't know that it much matters what you believe."

He took no notice, but continued rapidly and with rising heat:

"If you don't care for him, why did meeting him last night startle you into making a bad mistake? Why did you send for him to come round and see you? And why was he here again this afternoon?" He strode over to her side, and taking her by the arms almost lifted her to her feet. "Listen," he went on, staring down at her with eyes that burned with the dark fires of jealousy. "I've been very patient with you. I've waited—tried to make you care. But whether you care or don't care for me I swear you shall be no other man's wife." Suddenly his grip of her tightened. "Don't torture me, Niki," he exclaimed huskily. "I love you—God, how I love you!"

He bent his face to hers, but she struggled away from him, twisting in his grasp.

"Don't, Miguel!" she cried out sharply, quick fear in her voice. "Don't! Let me go!"

But the pressure of her soft, resisting body against his had broken his restraint—set his hot southern blood racing through his veins.

"Let you go!" he muttered. "God, no!"

His arms closed round her, almost crushing her, and his mouth on hers smothered her protests into silence, as he kissed her with a reckless, headlong passion there was no withstanding.

“There!” he said triumphantly, releasing her at last, shaken and unstrung with the vehemence of his desire. “Now do you understand? Put Kenwyn, put every other man in the world out of your mind. You shall marry me—me and no one else. I swear it. You’ve come back to me, and you shall stay with me.”

With an immense effort Nicolette regained her poise.

“You’re mad. Mad to talk like that,” she said contemptuously. “I’ve come back to you because I wanted to dance. For no other reason. I shall never marry you. There will never be anything more between us than a professional partnership, and the sooner you understand that the better.”

“You *will* marry me,” he repeated with a kind of sullenness. “That fool who is dead took you from me once——”

“I was never yours, Miguel.”

“You would have been if he hadn’t dazzled you with his money—bought you. But I’ll let no one take you from me a second time.”

She had entirely recovered herself by now, and she threw him a queer little smile, half sad, half humorous.

“You needn’t worry or get into a Spanish frenzy on that account,” she said dryly. “No one wants to take me from you.”

His face altered.

“Is that true?” he demanded eagerly. He was like a big child, the way his moods would change. Now, in an instant, he was all tenderness and humble pleading. “Then, Niki, let me just love you, let me try to make you happy. *Adorée*, if you only knew how much I want you—worship you!”

She shook her head, smiling. She knew she had won for the moment, and she proceeded to dismiss him with an airy kindness.

“No, no, Miguel. You make a very good dancing-partner. And you’re rather a dear at times—when you’re not too violent and tempestuous! But you’d make a shockingly bad husband.”

“Try me,” he implored. “Give me a chance.”

Again she shook her head.

“No, thanks. I’ve made one trial trip in matrimony—which wasn’t exactly a success. I’m not taking any more chances. Next time, I’ll be *sure*.”

CHAPTER XVI A NEW TANGLE

A week had passed since the day when Shirley, with a dull pain at her heart, had watched Kenwyn disappear within the portals of the Hôtel des Anglais, and from that moment onward it seemed as if he had vanished completely out of her life. The only news of him had been a laconic note addressed to Simon, which merely said: "*Shall be away a few days. Expect me when you see me.*" Judging by the unevenness of the pencil scrawl in which it was written, it might have been hastily scribbled, as an afterthought, while on the train.

To Shirley it had been a long and unhappy week—unhappy because she thought she could guess only too well what it was that had taken him away. She knew that the dancers, Nicolette and Romana, had left St. Luc, and presumably Neil too had left with them, in order to be near the woman he loved. It was a very bitter thought, but it was a bitterness, she told herself, to which she would have to get accustomed. Hardest of all was the necessity for concealing her real feelings from Kit and Simon, pretending a light-hearted enjoyment of things which she was far from feeling, and joining in the very natural wonderment they expressed concerning Neil's unheralded departure.

"What an odd thing for him to do," remarked Kit, "to rush away like that without giving us any warning. What on earth do you suppose is the reason, Simon?"

"It's difficult to say," returned Drake. "Possibly he's heard that some friends of his are in this part of France, and has gone off to visit them." But he spoke without conviction.

Later on, when he and Kit were sitting alone together, she propounded another solution of the matter.

"I wonder," she said slowly, "if Neil's going away has anything to do with Shirley. I'm pretty sure he was getting to care for her rather badly. Do you think she's turned him down?"

Drake rose abruptly and walked across to the window, turning an inexpressive back upon his sister.

"Perhaps you're right," was all he said, but something in his voice made her look at him with a suddenly contemplative expression in her eyes. And

then the following day brought a piece of such totally unexpected news that, for the time being, it completely overshadowed the subject of Kenwyn's disappearance.

The news in question was contained in a joyous epistle that Shirley received from her brother, in which he informed her that he had at last obtained a job.

"It's the job I told you about some weeks ago," (he wrote), "the one that was hanging fire because the man who offered it was abroad with his wife. And it's gone on hanging fire ever since—so much so that I'd come to the conclusion that the whole thing was off. And then, two days ago, I had a letter from Sir John Somerville—that's the name of my future chief—asking me to come and see him in London. I was nearly down to my last bean, so you can imagine that I bundled off post-haste to the interview, and the upshot is that I've got the job and start work to-morrow.

"Incidentally, I was perfectly frank about the condition of my finances, and Sir John rose nobly to the occasion and advanced me twenty pounds of my salary—so now I can go and get those gold cuff-links you gave me out of pawn!

"Well, it's rather difficult to describe my future 'duties' to you, old thing, as they will be anything but cut-and-dried, I can see that. Sir John owns a lot of property in the north, and actually, I suppose, I'm to be a sort of confidential secretary and estate agent. I'm to have my own rooms at Somerville Towers—that's his place—as the house which really should be the estate agent's is occupied by a working bailiff who has been with Sir John for thirty years or more—and who is likely to remain where he is as long as he lives.

"But now comes the interesting part, as far as you're concerned. There's a job for you, too. Sir John's wife, Lady Beth (she was Lady Beth Ashton before her marriage), is rather delicate and wants a kind of secretary-companion-daughter, and when I told her about you, and showed her your photo, she fell for you at once. You'll adore her, I'm sure. She's like somebody who's just stepped out of an old picture—makes you think of lavender and old lace, you know.

“The important point is: How soon could you be free to come to the Somervilles? I know your engagement with Mrs. Harford is only a temporary one, but I don’t know when it actually ends. And Lady Beth is very anxious for you to come as soon as possible. Talk to Mrs. Harford about it, will you, and let me hear as quickly as you can. Remember, this is a permanent job for us both. It will be simply topping to be together again—you and I and Mugs. Like old times. . . .”

Shirley finished reading the letter, conscious that it filled her with a curious conflict of feeling. At one time she could have pictured no more delightful ending to Bob’s patient search for work than a proposal such as this which had at last materialized—the offer of a post for him and for herself as well, and one which would enable them to be together once more. Why, it was like a fairy story—almost too good to be true!

And yet, now that it had happened, it brought her no thrill, no rush of joyful excitement at the prospect. Instead, her chief feeling was one of sheer dismay at all it must entail. For she realized instantly that it would mean a speedy ending to her stay at Port St. Luc, and, more than that, it meant putting a thousand miles or so betwixt herself and Neil Kenwyn. That the parting between them was bound to come sooner or later she had always known—though she had tried to push the thought aside—and that she occupied no considerable place in his life she had recently discovered. But, in spite of this, each hour with him held a strange, bitter sweetness of its own—something which, even though it hurt, she would not have been without. And now it was possible that there might never be another of those hours together. If Neil elected to remain away from Port St. Luc for any length of time, she herself might have already left for England before he returned.

Nevertheless, however she might flinch from writing “finis” to these dream-weeks at Port St. Luc, she had no intention of refusing the post which the Somervilles offered her. The plain fact that she was compelled to earn her own living must definitely shape her life, and she was not free to choose where she would go or stay. So, screwing up her courage, she imparted to Simon and Kit the news contained in Bob’s letter, and derived a certain measure of comfort in the blank looks of consternation with which they greeted it.

“Oh, Shirley, however shall I do without you?” exclaimed Kit in dismay. “We’re having such a topping time. And you’ve been such a little brick over

everything. I don't think," she declared rebelliously, "that I shall allow you to go!"

Drake shook his head.

"Rubbish, Kit." His eyes were grave almost to sadness, but there was a note of absolute decision in his voice. "You know very well that neither you nor I would let a temporary engagement such as ours stand for one moment in the light of a real permanent job for Shirley."

The girl's glance dwelt affectionately on first one and then the other of her two friends.

"You've both been so terribly good to me," she said rather tremulously. "I shall simply hate leaving you."

"And we shall hate your going," replied Simon. "Still, this job sounds an ideal thing for you and your brother, and you mustn't miss it just for the sake of staying on here a few weeks longer."

"I should have liked Shirley to stay with us for keeps, as a—what is it Bob calls it?—a secretary-companion-sister," objected Kit. "But, of course," she added gloomily, "you'll want to be with your brother, now the chance offers."

"Yes. I shall want to be with Bob," said Shirley simply. And all at once it struck her how very much she did want to be with him—to have that strong, stable brotherliness to lean against once more. There had always been a curious sympathy between herself and Bob—a subconscious sense of understanding that ran from one to the other like some invisible, intangible wire. He was the only person in the world in whom she might some day bring herself to confide about Neil Kenwyn; who she knew would understand without overmuch telling. It suddenly flashed across her how, when he was trying to cheer her up just before her departure from England, she had said to him: "A lot can happen, even in two or three months." Now, looking backward, it seemed almost as though something prophetic had informed her words.

"Well, you'll have to come and stay with us sometimes in England." Shirley came back to the present moment to find that Kit was speaking to her. "We're not going to lose sight of you altogether now we've found you. How soon do you think you'll have to go to these Somerville people?"

"I'm afraid they want me as soon as you can spare me," answered Shirley rather unhappily. "It seems as though I were treating you very badly to leave so suddenly."

“Not a bit,” returned Simon. “Especially as I’m here now to look after Kit.”

The girl’s gray eyes met his loyally.

“If you hadn’t been, I should have turned the whole job down without ever mentioning it,” she said bluntly.

He smiled across at her with a whimsical kindness.

“I can quite believe you’d have been sufficiently regardless of your own interests to do even that,” he replied. “However, as I *am* here, and as—thanks to you—Kit is a different being now from when you took her in charge, you can go to the Somervilles with a perfectly clear conscience.” He rose. “I’ll go along to the *wagon-lit* company and see when I can book you a sleeping-berth.”

Kit laughed rather forlornly.

“It seems almost as though you were in a hurry to get rid of her, Simon,” she remarked.

He paused, a curiously arrested expression on his face.

“You—and Shirley—both know very well that I’m not,” he said with unusual curttness. And strode quickly away.

It was over an hour before he returned, and then it was to find Kit, moving restlessly about, alone in the sitting-room.

“Have you got Shirley’s berth?” she asked, as soon as he entered.

“Yes. I’ve been able to book her right through—a week from to-day. Where is she, by the way?”

“She’s gone out for a walk,” vouchsafed Kit. “I think she’s rather upset about this whole business of going away. I wish,” she continued vexedly, “that Neil would come back before she goes.”

Simon could guess her thoughts without much difficulty.

“Probably he will,” he said tranquilly.

She whirled round on him.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Do you know where he is? Are you going to let him know that Shirley’s returning to England?”

“No,” he answered composedly. “I’ve no idea where he is.”

“Then why—why——”

“I think Kenwyn’s gone away to have something out with himself—to decide something in his own mind. And it can’t take him much longer. That’s all. So I imagine he’ll be back before Shirley goes.”

“I wish she weren’t going at all,” said Kit moodily. “We shall miss her terribly.”

“Yes. We shall miss her.”

“Still, I suppose she’ll get holidays sometimes. She’ll have to come and spend them with us, of course.”

Instead of the ready acquiescence which she had anticipated, Drake remained unexpectedly silent. She regarded him with some perplexity.

“Simon!” Her voice was pitched on a little sharp note of surprise. “Simon, you’d *like* her to stay with us, wouldn’t you?”

He had been standing staring absently down at a bowl of roses which occupied the middle of the table. Now he suddenly wheeled round and fixed her with grave eyes.

“No,” he said quietly, “I shouldn’t like it.”

“What!” Kit’s voice rose in a crescendo of astonishment. “But why not? Simon, what do you mean?”

And then, all at once, she seemed to read an answer in the steady regard his gray eyes bent upon her—an unexpected, bewildering, puzzling answer which, for an instant, startled her into silence. After a moment she moved across to his side.

“You’re in love with her—with Shirley,” she said, as though stating a definite fact.

He bent his head.

“Yes.”

Again she fell silent. In her mind a hasty process of readjustment was going on. Simon’s simple acknowledgment jostled against her inward conviction that Neil and Shirley secretly cared for each other, creating a new and unsuspected tangle, a triangular situation which involved her in a confusion of clashing hopes and desires.

All the three people concerned had their own particular niches in her heart; she wanted each of them to find happiness, and she felt pulled in

every direction. But, *au fond*, she knew that more than anything else she desired the happiness of this beloved brother of hers.

“Then why,” she demanded at last—“why don’t you want Shirley to come back to us? I don’t understand, Simon.”

“Don’t you?” He smiled rather wearily. “It’s simple enough. She’s not in love with me.”

“How do you know? Have you ever asked her?”

“No, I’ve not asked her. There’s no need. She looks upon me just as a good pal. Nothing more. And, honestly, it’s best she should.”

“I don’t see that. Oh!——” Kit broke off, inwardly visioning the glorious possibility of ultimate happiness for him. “Ask her, Simon,” she urged eagerly.

But she could find only a definite negation in his face.

“No, I shall never ask her,” he said quietly. “Think a moment, Kit. She’s twenty—and I’ve just turned thirty-nine. Close on forty. . . . That’s why I shall never ask her.”

“Ridiculous! There have been heaps of very happy marriages where there was a big difference in age,” she retorted. “And very unhappy ones where there wasn’t,” she added, her thoughts going back almost inevitably to her own individual experience.

Still the gravity of Simon’s face did not lighten.

“It’s too big a risk,” he maintained.

“For you—or for her?” snapped Kit pointedly.

“Did you imagine for one moment that I was thinking of myself?”

The hurt look in his eyes roused her to swift repentance for the small barbed dart she had let fly.

“Oh, my dear, of course I know you weren’t!” she protested hastily. “Do you ever think of yourself, I wonder—I mean really think of what *you* want, what *you’re* going to get out of life, in the ordinary normal masculine way?”

He smiled that faintly whimsical smile of his.

“Yes. I guess I think a whole lot about it,” he said. “But sometimes—as in this case—I manage to stop short at thinking what I want instead of trying to snatch at it.”

“But it’s just in this case that I consider you’re being needlessly self-effacing,” argued Kit. “You’re exactly the man to make a woman happy—really happy, Simon. And I think you’d make Shirley happy,” she went on, speaking with a simple earnestness from which the touch of irony which usually flavoured her speech was entirely absent. “You’d understand that queer sort of idealism which is part of her—and wouldn’t knock it all to bits before you’d been married a year. And, although you *are* approaching forty, you’d understand her youth. After all, the difference between twenty and thirty-nine isn’t so impassable.”

“No,” he assented. “But what about the difference between forty and fifty-nine? That’s where the big gap would come. A woman of forty nowadays is still a young woman—you present-day women have an amazing quality of youth, you know. But a man of sixty—oh, well, you know what a man of sixty’s like. He’s a bit of a bore, and likes a good dinner and a comfortable chair, and his own opinions. And he’s lost all real quality of youth. He couldn’t keep pace with a woman twenty years his junior—why, she’d dance him off his feet in a single evening.” He paused. “*That’s* what I won’t condemn Shirley to—even if she were willing to risk it.”

Kit searched his face, but there was no sign of relenting in it. She knew this brother of hers, and she knew that he had thought the whole thing out and that it would need something in the nature of a volcanic upheaval to make him alter his decision, regardless of what it might be costing him to keep it.

“So that’s why you don’t want Shirley to stay with us later on?” she said at last, slowly.

“That’s why. When she leaves us, let that be the end of it. I want”—a twinge of pain crossed his face—“I want to cut it all out.”

“You mean you want us to let the acquaintance slide—altogether?”

“Just that.”

“Shirley will be terribly hurt, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, it can all happen very naturally,” he said. “She’ll be fixed up in the north of England—far enough away—while we shall be either in London or down in Devonshire. A letter or two at first—and then gradually let it drop. After all”—somewhat bitterly—“absence is a wonderful cure for friendship—and other things. We grow away from people very quickly in this world—especially at Shirley’s age.”

Kit remained silent for a few minutes. She had taken Shirley so entirely to her heart that the thought of a complete severance filled her with blank dismay. Long before the Somervilles' proposal had come, she had frequently pictured the girl as a welcome guest of hers and Simon's, staying with them perhaps in London or, more probably, at their home in the country. Often enough she had described to Shirley the quaint little village of Beriscombe where she had spent all her life until her marriage with Nap Harford, and whither, after he had left her, she had gone back to share the old home once again with Simon. And now she was face to face with a complication she had least expected—with the fact that Simon didn't want Shirley at Beriscombe, that her coming could only bring him pain and add yet another bitterness to a life that had already had its share of bitter things.

Her mouth curved derisively—with the old familiar mockery which was her sole weapon of defence against fate—a fate which hurt, and went on hurting, apparently for the fun of the thing.

“‘Unlucky in love, lucky at cards’. . . We'd better take up cards as a profession, Simon,” she remarked grimly. “It looks as though anyone in our family might make a success of it.”

CHAPTER XVII THE RIGHT TURNING

Now that the date of her departure was actually settled, it seemed to Shirley as though the remaining days positively flew by, each hour as it passed irrevocably lessening whatever length of time she might still have to spend with Neil—if, indeed, they were ever to have any more time together at all.

Every morning she woke to an eager, restless wonder as to whether the day would bring him, and every evening she went to bed oppressed by a deadly feeling of blankness because it had not. If only she could know the reason of his going she felt that she could have borne it better. It was this sudden wordless ending to their friendship, this not knowing why he had left her so abruptly, that was so unendurable.

But the day actually appointed for her departure came round, and still there was no word or sign from Neil. Her packing was finished, trunks strapped and labels written. There remained nothing further with which she could distract her thoughts, and finally, while Kit was taking her afternoon siesta, she wandered out, armed with a book, for a last solitary stroll along the shore.

Drawn by a vague desire to say good-bye to the place where she and Neil had come first to know each other, she took her way to the bay which sheltered the cavern of Robert le Noir. There was no danger of her being caught there by the sea to-day, for the tide was unusually far out, and in the distance the tiny, summer-warm waves were curling daintily over on to the sand like the soft tips of ostrich feathers.

Shirley settled herself comfortably in a hollow, where a big boulder offered a screen from the sun's heat and a support for her back at one and the same time, and opened the novel she had brought with her. Someone in the hotel had lent it her, and she was anxious to finish it before she left St. Luc. She had found that reading—losing herself in the joys and sorrows of the characters of a story—was the only way in which she could keep her thoughts at bay, forget for a little while her own hopes and fears, and before long she was completely absorbed in the pages of her book.

It dealt with the life of a professional singer, and into the excitement and adulation which are inevitably part of a great artist's life was interwoven a

very touching and sincere love story, skilfully strung to the words of a favourite song from the artiste-heroine's repertoire.

DREAMS

There's a shining thread in the grayest life,
The thread of some treasured dream,
Of a dear remembrance, guarded still,
When the days are gray and the way uphill,
And there's nothing an empty heart to fill
Save a memory yet a gleam.

O Destroyer of Dreams, keep far, keep far
From the secret place we guard,
And leave us the little happiness
Of a memory that still may bless
The barren hours which none can guess—
Leave us our dreams unmarred!

May some Keeper of Dreams stand close, stand close,
And with kind and friendly fingers
Tenderly veil from our tired eyes
All that would hurt if we grew too wise,
And woke to find that a loved dream dies—
For life's sweeter while it lingers.^[1]

To Shirley the three simple verses of the song seemed to hold a strangely wistful appeal, and she read them over a second time. Then, letting the book lie face upward on her lap, she sat musing on their sad significance—their peculiar application to the two people with whom she had recently come most in contact. Simon and Kit. . . for both of them the Destroyer had wiped out all sweetness from the past—all belief in those whom they had loved and who had played so big a part in their lives. He had opened their eyes to the ugly, naked truth, and now they had no dreams left to treasure. As Kit had once said: "I've got nothing, you see—not even a decent memory."

Shirley scanned the lines of the song once more.

". . . leave us the little happiness of a memory that still may bless the barren hours." It was surely the supplication of all human hearts.

She had read thus far when a hand was suddenly laid across the printed page and a familiar voice said decisively:

“I’m quite sure you’ve been reading long enough.”

She uttered a startled cry, then found herself staring up incredulously into the face of Neil Kenwyn. He had come back! As the realization raced through her being, her heart seemed to give a single huge leap and then start thudding almost sickeningly in her side.

Something of her inward tumult showed itself in her face. It was drained of all colour, and the pupils of her eyes dilated so that the eyes themselves looked almost black. Her mouth was tremulous, and involuntarily her hand flew up to hide its quivering. Kenwyn dropped hastily on his knee at her side.

“Oh, my dear!” he exclaimed remorsefully. “Forgive me! I never meant to startle you like that. I thought you would have heard me coming.”

“No, I never heard you.” She hoped her utterance didn’t sound as gaspingly weak and difficult as it felt. “You—you did startle me, you know.” From somewhere out of her woman’s desperate pride she conjured up a smile. “I almost imagined Robert le Noir had come to life and leapt out at me from his cavern.”

(“My dear”—he had called her that. In an unguarded moment the two little words had sprung from his lips like a caress. My dear—my dear! The words thrilled against her consciousness.)

“Ah! The cavern.” He had seated himself beside her, and now he glanced up at the great cliff behind them. “I shall always bless wicked old Robert for that. He has one good deed to his credit if he never had any others.” He paused, then went on deliberately: “I’m glad you came here this afternoon. It seems a peculiarly fitting place for us to have our last talk together.”

“Our last talk?” she faltered.

“Yes,” he answered steadily. “I’m going away—very soon.”

Shirley’s mind leapt to Nicolette.

“On account of a woman, I suppose,” she said. “Men always seem to go and come on account of a woman.”

“Yes,” he replied gravely. “It’s on account of a woman.”

And Shirley, although she had known it, been inwardly sure of it all the time, felt her heart sink forlornly.

“I presume that’s why you’ve stayed away all this time,” she suggested, forcing a smile. “Following the star.”

He gave a short laugh.

“I wasn’t following any star,” he returned grimly. “In fact, I was really plunging about in the dark—trying to find the right turning.”

“Couldn’t—couldn’t anyone have helped you?”

He looked at her very directly.

“No,” he answered. “There are times when a man has got to be alone with his own soul—to decide things for himself. No one can ‘help’ at those times.”

His face seemed to harden at the recollection. Only he and one other, Simon Drake, knew the subject of that difficult decision.

“And did you find it—the right turning, I mean?” asked Shirley wistfully.

“Yes. There was only one road I could take, after all. I suppose I really knew that all the time.”

His eyes fell on the book which still reposed on her knee and, picking it up, he glanced at the page which had been engrossing her thoughts when his advent interrupted them.

“What have you been reading?” he asked, as though intentionally putting an end to the topic under discussion. “*Dreams*—what is it all about?”

He perused the three short verses of the song in silence, and there was a curious expression on his face when at last he looked up from the book.

“Do you agree with that?” he asked abruptly. “Does a happy memory mean so much?”

It seemed as though Kit’s voice sounded again in her ears: “*I’ve got nothing—not even a decent memory.*” She met his glance with eyes that held a kind of mystic brooding in their depths.

“I should think it must mean everything,” she said, with quiet conviction.

“Perhaps it does,” he agreed thoughtfully. “Anyway, it’s all that some people have left, isn’t it?”

She wondered of whom he was thinking. That it was of someone other than himself she felt sure.

“It’s the people who haven’t even that—even a happy memory—I’m sorriest for,” she said. Adding with a little smile: “I think there ought to be more ‘Keepers of Dreams’ about in the world, don’t you?”

“If there were, I imagine you’d be one of them,” he answered, speaking with unwonted gentleness. Then, with a swift return to his usual manner: “Nevertheless, dreams are dangerous things—sometimes. I’ve had more than one that will be hard work to get rid of.”

“Do you want—to get rid of them?”

“Yes. We all have them, I suppose—queer, unexpected glimpses into paradise. And then. . . a gate slams. . . and you find yourself on the wrong side of it.”

She was silent. As usual, he was keeping her outside his confidence, erecting a barrier between them which she had no means of breaking down.

“So I’m going away,” he went on moodily. “But before I go, I’d like you to know you’ve cheered a lonely devil on his way more than you can guess, perhaps. . . . Only too much sunshine isn’t good for devils. The outer darkness is their proper sphere.”

“If you’re going away on my account,” she retorted quietly, “because I’m—over-cheering, you needn’t trouble, as I’m going away myself. To-night.”

“To-night!” The words broke from him hoarsely. For once she had pierced through his guard. But only for an instant. The next he was replying quite composedly:

“So you’re off this evening? Where are you going? Back to England?”

“Yes, back to England.” In a few brief words she told him about her new job.

“Of course I hate rushing off and leaving Kit in such a hurry,” she pursued. “But I’ve really no choice in the matter. Lady Beth Somerville _____”

“*Who* did you say?”

There was that in his voice which brought Shirley’s glance swiftly to his face—a face which had taken on a sudden grayish pallor. In his eyes was a look which she had never seen there before—a tense, concentrated look of dismay that amounted almost to horror. She stared at him dumbly for a moment, shocked by the change in him.

“Why, Neil. . . Neil. . .” she stammered, finding her voice at last. “What on earth is the matter? Tell me.”

With an effort he recovered himself, forcing a smile.

“Nothing, really,” he said. “I was only”—he hesitated—“immensely surprised. The Somervilles were the very last people I expected you to mention.”

“Why? Do you know them? Are they friends of yours?”

“I knew them—once.” He paused, as though carefully weighing what he was about to say. “But I’m no longer counted amongst their friends. And I should advise you not to mention my name to them—not to tell them that we have ever met.”

“Not to tell them?” she repeated in amazement. “What has it got to do with them whether we’ve met or not?”

He avoided answering this directly.

“Anyway, it would do you harm in their eyes if they knew you had admitted me to your friendship,” he said. Adding bitterly: “On the principle that you can’t touch pitch without being defiled, you know.”

Shirley’s small dark head went up defiantly.

“I should never be ashamed of acknowledging my friends,” she rejoined. “I think you might have known that, Neil.”

He smiled.

“I do know it. It wouldn’t be you if you were. So I’ll put it another way. As a favour to me, will you avoid mentioning my name to the Somervilles? It’s connected in their minds with something of sadness—with an event that caused great unhappiness to Lady Beth—and I don’t want them to be inadvertently reminded of it.”

This put a somewhat different complexion on the matter. Yet still she felt reluctant to agree to what he asked. She could not have told why, but somehow she had a feeling that one day she would regret it if she did.

“Will you promise me?” insisted Kenwyn, sensing her reluctance.

Her clear gray eyes met his unwaveringly.

“I’ll promise, Neil, as long as nothing happens to make the promise an unfair one—either to you or them.”

He appeared content, and turned the conversation away from the topic of his one-time acquaintance with the Somervilles, and presently, with a start, Shirley realized that it was time for her to be returning home. They walked slowly back together along the curving shore, and just before the Hôtel Splendide came into view round the bend of the next promontory, halted as though by common consent. There was no one in sight; the rocky arms of the bay shut them in alone in a little world of their own. Neil stood looking down at her.

“So it’s ended,” he said. “My holiday—and a good many other things with it. To-morrow you’ll be in England, and I shall be preparing to go back to my wilderness again.”

“*Must* you go?” There was unconscious entreaty in the bleak little question.

“Yes, I must go.”

The words fell on the tranquil summer air like the fiat of fate. Shirley’s hands, hanging at her sides, slowly clenched as she struggled to retain her grip on herself. He was going away. This was the end—irrevocably the end. And he would never even tell her why it need be. . . all her life she would never know. . . .

And then, all at once, she felt his arms about her, met his eyes, profoundly sad and tender, gazing down into hers.

“You’ve given me my glimpse of paradise,” he said unevenly. “And even though it can never be anything more than a glimpse, no Destroyer of Dreams will ever take that from me.” He stooped, cupping her face in his hands, and she felt his mouth against her own.

Neither of them spoke again. Words had grown meaningless. Only presently she heard the soft dulled sound of his footsteps on the sand. . . retreating footsteps. . . and she knew that she was alone—quite alone.

Several hours later Shirley leaned from the corridor window of the night express to Paris, exchanging last words and hand-clasps with Kit and Simon, who were standing on the platform below, waiting to see her off. Up to this moment there had been a faint, fugitive hope in her heart that Neil, too, might come to the station. She was conscious of an almost overwhelming craving to see his face once more, feel the touch of his hand just once again, and, in spite of herself, her glance kept travelling up and down the bustling crowds on the platform in fruitless search. But the actual time for the

departure of the train had almost arrived, bringing no sign of him, and now Drake and Kit were demanding all her attention.

“I hope you’ll have a comfortable journey.” “Be sure you don’t lose your *bulletin de bagages*.” “Remember us to your brother”—these and other kindly last injunctions and assurances pattered maddeningly in her ears. Then came a sudden increase of the general bustle and activity attendant on the departure of any big express. The engine vented a warning screech, porters were shouting excitedly: “*En voiture, messieurs, ’dames!*” while remaining odds and ends of luggage were being hoisted up and thrust through the train windows into the anxious arms of their owners.

“Good-bye! Good-bye!”

Shirley leaned out for the last time as the train began to draw slowly away. And, at the same moment, a tall, lean figure came racing along the platform at full speed, almost knocking over a couple of blue-bloused porters in its headlong pace. Kenwyn, who had been fighting a battle with himself, inwardly determined to keep away, had yielded at length and made a dash for the station at the very last moment. He arrived in time to catch a sight of Shirley’s small pale face, framed in the open window, and see her hand waving desperately as the train bore her away.

“You’re a minute too late,” said Simon, turning to him, his voice full of kindly regret. “You’ve just missed her.”

Kenwyn stared back at him with eyes which held a kind of bitter frustration.

“That appears to be my *métier* in life,” he said harshly. “Some people seem foredoomed to—miss things.”

[1] Musical rights reserved.

CHAPTER XVIII SOMERVILLE TOWERS

The long journey from the south of France to the north of England, with its solitary break of a night spent in London, was over at last, and an excitable rough-haired terrier and a tall young man in tweeds were the first things that greeted Shirley's eager glance as the train, which had been thundering its way northwards for hours, finally drew up at the small wayside station of Somers' Halt.

Almost before it came actually to a standstill, she had opened the carriage door and sprung to the ground, precipitating herself into the young man's arms and leaving the solitary porter that the station boasted to collect her hand-luggage.

"Oh, Bob, Bob! How perfectly top-hole it is to see you again!" she exclaimed, hugging him with a complete absence of self-consciousness. "And Mugs—how he's grown!" pausing to lift the latter's small white body, fairly wriggling with excitement, into her arms. "Why, you're almost a grown-up dog," she remarked disparagingly. Mugs, however, was far too elated to object to criticism, provided he received adequate attention, and merely licked her face with an ecstatic pink tongue in return.

Bob, although equally elated, was somewhat less demonstrative, and having given the porter instructions concerning the luggage, he tucked his arm into his sister's and led her to where a big limousine awaited them outside the station. Presently, when the car was slipping smoothly along the broad country road, he twisted her round as she sat beside him and surveyed her appraisingly.

"You look remarkably well," he commented judicially, noting the golden-brown bloom on her skin for which sun and sea were responsible. "Apparently earning your bread by the sweat of your brow agrees with you."

She smiled.

"Oh, I've had very little actual work to do. Mostly, we were having a kind of glorified holiday."

"Then you've had a thoroughly happy time?"

Her hesitation was almost imperceptible.

“The gayest time I’ve ever had in my life,” she assured him, evading a direct answer. “It’s practically one continual round of amusement at Port St. Luc, you know.”

Bob flashed her a quick glance.

“Still you haven’t answered my question,” he returned. He paused a moment, then, as she volunteered no reply, threw at her suddenly, “What was the fly in the ointment?”

A faint flush ran up under her skin.

“The fly? Why should there have been one?”

“I can’t say, I’m sure,” he answered composedly. “Never mind,” he added, with a half-quizzical, half-indulgent smile, “you shall tell me all about it another time. For the present, I’ll give you an idea of what life is like at Somerville Towers instead.”

Shirley jumped eagerly at the suggestion. She was not prepared, just yet, to tell him what it was that had cast a shadow over her visit to St. Luc, and she kept him plied with questions until the car turned in at the gates of Somerville Towers and swept up an avenue of old trees to the door of a long, stone-built house, flanked by an adjoining tower at either end. Then with the realization that she was going amongst strangers once more, that she would have to “make good” afresh with the Somervilles, just as she had done with Kit and her brother, a sudden excess of shyness overtook her.

“Oh, Bob, I do hope I shan’t let you down!” she whispered frightenedly, as an impeccable-looking manservant opened the door and proceeded to lead the way into a lofty, raftered hall.

“I’ll inform her ladyship that Miss Wilson’s arrived, sir,” he said, addressing Bob, and forthwith disappeared, leaving the brother and sister together.

Mechanically Shirley took in the curious mixture of severity and comfort which characterized the hall—severity in its stern, four-square walls and gray stone floor, comfort in the fine tiger and bearskin rugs and big cushioned easy chairs scattered about, and in the suggestion of cheery fires conveyed by the vast, old-fashioned hearth where big logs lay piled in readiness for lighting should summer happen to belie its name in this northern country-side.

And then, while Shirley was still fighting down her shyness, someone stepped quickly forward out of the shadows of the hall, and a voice said:

“So this is Bob’s sister! My dear, welcome to Somerville Towers.”

Always, afterwards, it seemed to Shirley that in that first moment she received a curiously complete impression of Lady Beth from her voice alone. It was unusually sweet in tone, one of those lovable kind of voices that find their way to your heart at once, and underneath its sweetness lay something wistful and appealing—something which, as someone had once described it, “roused all your protective instincts and made you want to take care of her and do things for her.”

Her appearance matched her voice. She was very daintily built and rather fragile-looking, with a soft pink-and-white skin—like a rose-leaf that has just begun to fade—which still flushed as quickly as a girl’s, notwithstanding her fifty-four years. Poudrée-white hair framed the delicately cut face, and her eyes were hazel—eyes that looked as though they must have cried a lot at one time—a trifle weary, with a deep sadness at the back of them.

“One would know at a glance that you were brother and sister,” she went on, looking smilingly from one to the other of the young people. Then, bending forward impulsively, she gave Shirley a warm kiss. “I hope you’ll be very happy here,” she said simply. “And now, I’m sure you must be tired after the long journey you’ve had. Come along and we’ll have tea.”

Tea was served in a spacious, sunshiny room which opened off the hall, and Lady Beth, as though sensing the girl’s shyness, chatted away very charmingly, so that she was soon feeling completely at her ease—and feeling sure, also, that it would be an easy enough matter to become extremely fond of the wistful-eyed little lady to whom she was to act as companion.

She was not quite so sure, however, about her brother’s chief, who came in later on, and to whom she was duly presented. He was a tall, angular old man, and, in marked contrast to his wife, who looked younger than her age, he appeared considerably more than his. Actually he was only five years her senior, but at a cursory glance anyone would have assessed him as being more like ten or fifteen years the elder of the two. There was a certain kindness in the wrinkles round his eyes, but the eyes themselves were of a fightable steel-gray, and the same fightable quality characterized his beaky nose. His mouth was long and thin, a straight line of a mouth which looked as though its owner might be of a rather relentless and unforgiving nature if once provoked to anger.

When tea was over, Lady Beth, at a glance from her husband, carried Bob off into the garden on the pretext of showing him some particularly rare plant which had just burst into bud, and by the end of her subsequent *tête-à-tête* with Sir John, Shirley had come to the conclusion that he somewhat resembled his own mediæval hall—severe, but with a streak of indulgent kindness thrown in which ameliorated the severity.

“I’m glad you felt able to accept the post we offered you,” he began formally, as soon as they were left alone. “You and your brother should be able to work in together here quite satisfactorily, I think, and fulfil our requirements.”

“I hope we shall. I’ll do everything I can,” she replied. The old man’s rather stilted manner brought all her shyness to the fore again, and her thoughts flashed backward ruefully to the easy informality of her first interview with Simon Drake.

Sir John nodded, his fierce old eyes scanning her face narrowly.

“Your brother has certainly made a good start—although that’s not much to go by. Most people make a good start. But what we want, Lady Beth and myself, are people about us who will begin well—and go on well.” He hesitated before continuing brusquely: “Perhaps you think I’m inclined to be unduly mistrustful, but we have been disappointed in the past—badly disappointed—by someone whom we both trusted implicitly.”

“I’m quite sure Bob will never let you down,” said Shirley, a slightly indignant note in her voice.

“I certainly hope not. As regards your own department: I want you to help my wife in every way you can. She’s not very strong, and she has never really got over the death of our son about two years ago—that, and other things.” He paused, then added: “He was our—our only child.” The measured tones shook a little, and Shirley began to feel her indignation evaporating, replaced by a wave of sympathy. Somehow, in spite of his imposing surroundings, all of which breathed wealth and position, and in spite of his somewhat haughty and autocratic manner, she saw him for a moment exactly as he was—just a saddened, bereft old man, hiding his heartbreak and bitterness beneath a harsh exterior.

“Your duties will be more or less the duties of a daughter of the house,” continued Sir John. “I particularly want you to shield my wife, as far as you can, from any worries. Her heart is not very strong and I want her to be spared in every possible way. She has suffered a great deal of trouble and

anxiety in the past, and if you could bring a little brightness into her life again—the brightness of youth—I shall be very grateful to you.”

Shirley’s heart softened still more toward the stiff old man. Behind his rather rigid formality lay an anxious solicitude for his wife that was unexpectedly touching. She leaned forward impulsively.

“I’ll do my very utmost,” she said, with simple directness. “I shall love doing everything I can for Lady Beth.”

Once again his steely eyes seemed to search her face. Apparently what he read there satisfied him, for he gave an affirmative nod as though in reply to some question that had been lying unanswered in his mind.

“Thank you,” he said gravely. Rising to his feet, as if to indicate that the brief interview was at an end, he moved across to the open French window, whence his wife and Bob could be seen strolling slowly up and down the terrace outside, and beckoned to them.

“Miss Wilson and I have finished our business talk, Beth,” he said, as they approached in response to his gesture. “I dare say she would like to go to her own rooms now.”

“I expect she would,” replied Lady Beth warmly. She cast a quick glance at the girl’s slightly flushed face—the interview had not been without its trying moments—and then regarded her husband with rebuke in her eyes. “I think you should have left your ‘business talk’ until Miss Wilson had rested from the long journey she’s just made to come to us, John,” she said reproachfully.

“It’s better to have a thorough understanding from the commencement,” he replied with decision. “I don’t think I’ve added materially to Miss Wilson’s fatigue. At least, I trust not?” he added, formally addressing Shirley herself.

“Oh, no—no, not at all,” she answered hastily.

He had once more become the rather alarmingly imperious old man of her first impressions, and she was thankful when he suggested that he and Bob should adjourn to his study in order to attend to some correspondence, leaving her free to accompany Lady Beth upstairs.

“You mustn’t be frightened of my husband, my dear,” said the latter, as she preceded Shirley along a wide, soft-carpeted corridor. “He’s inclined to be distrustful of strangers—and lets them see it. It’s the result of circumstances—of something that happened in the past. But once he’s given

you his confidence, you'll find there's no better or stauncher friend in the world."

She paused, and throwing open one of the many doors that gave egress on to the corridor, led the way into a pretty sitting-room—the first room of a small suite which comprised an additional two bedrooms and a bathroom.

"These are called the Tower rooms," she said, "and they are to be your 'home'—yours and Bob's. I already call him that, you know," she explained, "and I hope you'll let me call you Shirley. He's told me so much about you that I felt as if I almost knew you before you came. . . . Here you'll be *chez vous*. I shan't intrude"—smiling—"unless I'm invited. As we had no house to offer you, we thought that your little suite in the Square Tower would be the next best thing."

Shirley gave a cry of delight. She had been so long without anything approaching a home that the thoughtfulness of it all filled her with a warm glow of gratitude. Turning impulsively, she threw her arms round Lady Beth's neck.

"How good of you!" she exclaimed in a stifled voice. "How good of you!"

Lady Beth returned the embrace of those affectionate young arms with equal warmth. There was a suspicious moisture in her eyes.

"My dear," she said, "I'm so glad—so very glad you like it. You see, I've had no one to 'be good to' for such a long time." Her voice was a shade tremulous as she finished speaking, and with another kiss she released the girl a little abruptly.

"Now, shall I send one of the maids to help you unpack—or would you rather rest a little?" she said kindly.

"Oh, no. I'd ever so much rather unpack," declared Shirley. And soon, with the deft help of an experienced maid, she was busy settling into what was to be her future home—hers and Bob's.

The recollection of the last so-called "home" which they had shared together in Pagan Street flashed in whimsical contrast across her mind, and sharply on its heels came the thought of how much had happened since the days when they had contended with their many difficulties at No. 7. Life had taken a long stride since then.

She caught back a sigh. But she knew that, even though they had left a dull ache at her heart, she would not have foregone those weeks at Port St.

Luc—been without her memories of Neil.

CHAPTER XIX THE YEARS OF REMEMBRANCE

Shirley's first dinner at Somerville Towers passed off uneventfully. It was rather a ceremonious function, with a lordly butler and two tall footmen in attendance, as befitted what, with a gleam of inward mirth, she mentally characterized as her "baronial surroundings." Immediately the meal was concluded, and without even waiting to partake of coffee, Sir John proposed that he and Bob should stroll over to the home farm, and accordingly the two men set off across the park, leaving Lady Beth and Shirley to have their coffee alone together.

The former smiled, a little contentedly, as she watched them disappear.

"That nice brother of yours is rather a marvellous person," she observed. "He never shows, by word or look, the least surprise at any of John's sudden whims. He's always ready to fall in with anything he suggests. I think, somehow, that eventually he'll make up to him something of all he's lost. I hope he may." And she sighed. "I'm afraid, my dear," she resumed after a moment, "that you've come to a somewhat sad household. Perhaps we ought not to have asked you to."

"I'm sure you ought," replied Shirley swiftly. "I may be able to help—just a little."

Lady Beth covered the girl's hand with her own for an instant.

"It's rather like a new beginning for us, having you and your brother here," she said. "For years we were such wonderfully happy people—my husband and I and our son, Ronny. And then, trouble came."

"Sir John told me that you—you lost him?" Shirley spoke with natural hesitance. It seemed like touching on a sore place, yet she somehow sensed that Lady Beth was anxious to confide in her, to unburden herself of the unforgotten sorrow which lay locked up in her heart.

"Yes. He died—terribly suddenly. He was knocked down by a motor-car one foggy evening in London and killed almost on the spot. He died within an hour."

Shirley gave a stifled murmur of sympathy. The stark, simple tragedy held her speechless.

“At the time,” Lady Beth continued quietly, “at the time I think I wanted to die too. I’d worshipped him so, you see. And I had waited so long for him—for my son. I was married for ten years before he came. And then, when he was barely twenty-two, he was taken from me.”

She got up, and crossing the room to an old oak writing-bureau, took down a framed photograph which was standing on the top of it.

“There’s his photo. That was my Ronny,” she said, putting it into the girl’s hands.

A young, gay face looked out from the frame, with twinkling eyes and a humorous mouth that seemed to be just on the eve of smiling. Shirley gazed down at it in silence. The portrait was so instinct with vitality, with irrepressible buoyant youth, that it seemed almost impossible the original of it could be dead.

“He was such a dear,” pursued Lady Beth. “And there was hardly anything he couldn’t do. He was good at all sports, and a perfectly natural musician. He could make you laugh or cry—just as he wished—when he played the ukelele and sang to you. Of course, he was a bit wild at times—wild and extravagant. And his wife didn’t help him to steady down——”

“His wife?” broke in Shirley in astonishment. “Was he married?” Anything more unmarried and irresponsible-looking than this young man, who seemed to smile at her out of the picture she was holding with a kind of breezy, audacious impertinence, she had never seen.

Lady Beth returned the photo to its place on the bureau and resumed her seat.

“Oh, yes, he was married,” she said. “But not to exactly the kind of girl we could have wished. She was very lovely—a professional dancer—and when she married him, of course, Sir John insisted that she should give up dancing in public. Poor Nicolette! I’m afraid it irked her——”

“*Nicolette!*” Again Shirley broke in, almost breathlessly. “Was her name Nicolette? Then I believe I’ve seen her dancing at Port St. Luc. Had she red hair? This girl’s partner was a Spaniard named Miguel Romana, and she herself was called Nicolette Arden.”

Lady Beth nodded. She showed no surprise.

“That’s the same girl—and the same man with whom she used to dance before she married Ronny. She went back to the stage almost at once after

his death. I suppose we ought not to have blamed her, but it seemed to us very—very heartless, somehow.”

Shirley’s thoughts were in a whirl. So it was Ronny Somerville who had been Nicolette’s husband! Never Neil. And the whole story with which she had tortured herself so thoroughly at Port St. Luc—her belief that Neil and Nicolette had married, parted, and then come together again on the gala night at the Pavilion Fleuri—had been nothing but a fabrication of her own imagination. Then why had both of them been so obviously agitated by the unexpected meeting? Why had Neil gone to see her the following day? And how did he come to be mixed up with the lives of the Somervilles—connected in their thoughts with some unhappy event, as he had told her? Was it with Ronny’s death? A dozen bewildering questions clamoured in her mind for answer, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask for some solution of the tangle when, all at once, she recollected her promise to Neil—her promise not to mention his name to Sir John or Lady Beth. Her lips were sealed.

“. . . a wayward, attractive creature.” Shirley mastered her impulse and came back to the realization that Lady Beth was still speaking of Nicolette. “She never seemed to me really to care much for Ronny—only for what she could get out of her marriage with him.”

“Oh, surely she must have cared!” protested the girl, with a glance toward the gay, persuasive face which looked out of the photo frame on the writing-bureau.

Lady Beth shook her head.

“I don’t think she had it in her to care deeply for anyone—neither for Ronny, nor for Romana, the man she danced with—a charming creature. We were very fond of Miguel—he used to visit us sometimes.”

“And do you never see Nicolette now?”

“Yes, we see her. She stays with us occasionally—when it suits her. And we feel that by letting her come here when she wants to—when she needs a rest—we just keep our hands on the reins. After all, she *was* Ronny’s wife. He’s not here to look after her now, so we do our best.” She paused, then smiled suddenly. “And now I’m going to have you to take care of, as well.”

Shirley laughed.

“I thought it was to be the other way round—I’m here to take care of you. Sir John was very explicit about that.”

A rather humorous apprehension showed itself for an instant in Lady Beth's hazel eyes.

"You mustn't take John too seriously," she said quickly. "His bark is far worse than his bite, you know. As I told you, he is suspicious of people—now. He wasn't always like that," she went on wistfully. "You see, my dear, about two years ago we had blow upon blow. A man in whom we had complete confidence—whom we had known and loved since his boyhood—betrayed our trust, and it has taken all this time before my husband could bring himself to replace him. Now, Bob is beginning to fill the gap. And then, immediately following the discovery of—of this man's conduct, in fact at the same time practically, came the awful shock of Ronny's death. It seemed as if our whole world was falling to pieces." She paused, then added with deep sadness: "So now we have only memories, John and I."

Shirley felt almost overwhelmed at the double tragedy which had been revealed to her.

"But even those memories must comfort you a little," she said tremulously. It seemed cold comfort to offer. Yet the sudden brightening of the face opposite her showed that it counted.

"I wouldn't be without them for anything in life," said Lady Beth quietly. "I always think of Ronny just as he was when he was alive—so gay, and merry, and lovable. Everyone adored him—and spoiled him. We even grew to like Nicolette—because she was *his* wife. Of course he had faults. All lovable people have, I think. And they were only the faults of youth. But the years he was with me were all beautiful—radiant years which not even his death can take away. Those are mine still—those years of remembrance, thank God."

There was an unspeakably touching quality in Lady Beth's tender reminiscence. Bereft and sorrowful she would always be, but, at least, out of the tragedy which had overwhelmed her she had kept and held her happy memories—garnered something that comforted her.

Shirley, listening to her, marvelled at the quiet courage with which she was able to look back and draw from the unclouded past strength with which to face the future. The words of the song she had been reading that last day at Port St. Luc recurred to her with renewed significance:

There's a shining thread in the grayest life,
The thread of some treasured dream,
Of a dear remembrance, guarded still,
When the days are gray and the way uphill,
And there's nothing an empty heart to fill
Save a memory yet a gleam.

"I think Lady Beth is simply wonderful," she told Bob, later on, in the seclusion of their own sitting-room. "It must have been the most terrible blow to her to lose her only son like that."

"Yes," he agreed seriously. "It knocked them both—old Sir John, too—badly."

Shirley felt a spontaneous rush of affectionate sympathy for these two lonely, middle-aged folk who had lost so much that counted in their lives—everything except each other.

"Oh, Bob!" she exclaimed fervently. "All we could do wouldn't be too much to make up to those two dears for what they've suffered."

He smiled across at her understandingly.

"No, it's rather up to us, isn't it, old thing? I knew you'd feel like that as soon as you had met them. Well, we'll do our d—dest. And now let's talk about ourselves."

So they talked about themselves, re-knitting the threads which had been sundered by Shirley's absence in France and bringing one another up to date in regard to their mutual affairs. It was only when the grandfather's clock in the corridor outside struck two resounding strokes that they realized for how long a time they had been talking.

Shirley sprang to her feet in dismay.

"Two o'clock! I'm off to bed. If not, I shall be late for breakfast, and then"—smiling—"I expect Sir John would order me to be put in irons or consign me to the deepest dungeon. Are there any dungeons here, by the way?"

"Oh, yes, there are some dungeons. One minute, though, kiddy." Bob laid a detaining hand on her arm. "There's something you haven't told me yet, isn't there?"

She flushed painfully at the direct question, and though she made an effort to reply, no words came. She looked away from him helplessly.

“May I guess?” he said very gently.

Somehow his gentleness broke down her reserve. He had always shared her confidences in the past. She would not keep him outside this one.

“No,” she said at last, in a low voice. “You needn’t guess. I’ll tell you. While I was away, I met someone I—I cared for.”

“Well? What happened?”

The ghost of a smile crossed her face.

“Nothing happened, old dear. That’s just it.”

“Oh, I see.” Bob spoke very soberly. “And—won’t things come straight some time or other?”

She shook her head.

“No. I don’t think they can come straight—ever.”

“That’s damned rough luck.” It was characteristic of him that he sought to probe no further. He slid an awkward, affectionate arm round her shoulders. “I’m no end sorry,” he said simply. “But don’t let it down you, will you, kiddy? Buck up.”

“I am doing,” she said firmly. “Bucking up, I mean. Don’t let’s talk of it any more, Bob. Only—only I’m just glad you know.”

And she slept more tranquilly that night because there was somebody who knew and understood.

Two days later came a letter for her—a letter in a handwriting the sight of which seemed to drive every drop of blood from her heart. Incredulous, bewildered, she carried it away to read in secret. It bore no address, and the postmark on the envelope was Paris. A sudden mist obscured her vision, and for a minute or two she was unable to decipher a single sentence. Then gradually it cleared away, and she bent over the closely written sheet.

BELOVED:

I’m going to call you that just this once, because that’s what you are and always will be to me. I’ve no right to use the word, I know, yet I think, if circumstances had been other than they are— if I had been free to try—I should some day have been able to teach you to let me use it. But as fate—or, if you prefer the plain, unvarnished truth, my own madness, has built up an impassable wall between us, I shall never ask you if I may.

We're not very likely to meet again in this world, not, at least, until some luckier—and very much more suitable—man has made you his wife and taught you a proper abhorrence of black sheep. That being so, I'd like to thank you for my one brief glimpse of paradise. You gave it me—at Port St. Luc of blessed memory. It will have to last me a lifetime.

NEIL.

For a long while after she had finished reading it, Shirley sat very quietly with the letter in her hands. It both gave and took away. Gave her the one thing for which her woman's soul had craved—the knowledge that as she loved, so was she loved in return. Took away whatever secret, half-unrecognized hope of happiness there might still be lingering fugitively in her heart.

Suddenly she bent her head and crushed the letter against her lips.

“Oh, Neil. . . Neil!” she whispered.

CHAPTER XX RETROSPECT

Twelve months, fifty-two weeks, three hundred and sixty-five days—reckoned thus, a year which has still its length to run seems a long period, a fairly large slice of life. Yet, regarded in retrospect, its magnitude diminishes amazingly, and Shirley, her thoughts turned to the consideration of anniversaries by the fact that it happened to be Lady Beth's birthday, could hardly realize that it was a whole year ago, this very month of June, since she and Bob had been grimly coping with the difficulties of finding a job.

It was a far cry from No. 7, Pagan Street to Somerville Towers, and a good deal had happened since the time when they had sojourned at Mrs. Barnet's shabby abode. Nevertheless, looking back, it seemed to Shirley that it was only the other day she had suddenly caught sight of Simon Drake's advertisement and had rushed off to Fremingham Place to apply for the offered post.

The year had flown by. That pulsating, feverish summer at Port St. Luc which had left its tangled memories of happiness and pain; the gray, quiet autumn that followed with the Somervilles—getting to know and love them, carving her own little niche afresh in a new world; the bleak, northern winter, broken by a couple of flying visits from Nicolette—one alone, one accompanied by Romana; and, finally, the chill months of an uncertain spring during which Lady Beth, whose frail physique had barely weathered the severity of the winter, had been so dangerously ill that more than once both doctors and nurses had despaired of saving her life. And when at length, a fragile ghost of herself, she had been restored to the ordinary ways of life, the medical fiat had gone forth that she must seek a more southerly climate before the winter came round again.

But quickly as the year seemed to have passed, it had brought with it, as most years do, an increase of knowledge. Many things which had puzzled Shirley in the past became clearer to her very shortly after her advent at the Towers. One of these was the relation which had once existed between Neil and the Somervilles. It was not long before someone in the neighbourhood mentioned to Sir John's new secretary that his predecessor in the post had been a man named Kenwyn, and Bob had very naturally shared this information with his sister.

“Was he called Neil—Neil Kenwyn?” asked Shirley. And when he responded in the affirmative, she had vouchsafed as non-committally as

possible: "Then I've met him. He was the man I told you about who came to my rescue at Port St. Luc when I was cut off by the tide."

"Oh." Bob regarded her gravely. She had given him a full account of this particular episode but had refrained from supplying the name of the hero of it, and, since he had privately guessed that it was the same man with whom "things would never come straight," he had hitherto tactfully forbore to ask her anything beyond what she had chosen to volunteer. Now, however, he crashed deliberately through the last fence of reticence between them.

"Then, in that case, kiddy, I think it's a very good thing you and he never got as far as an engagement. There must have been something pretty wrong with him. As you know, the Somervilles never mention his name, but I find that the general impression in the neighbourhood is that he wasn't straight over money matters."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Shirley indignantly. "I should never believe a thing like that about Neil."

"All the same, he must have done something rather bad. I've picked up a good deal of information since I came here. I don't mean that I've tried to find out anything. But it's been pushed at me—you know how gossipy country districts are."

"Of course I know. And that's what I expect it all amounts to—backstairs gossip, and nothing more."

Bob looked unconvinced.

"Some of it, possibly," he conceded. "But the actual facts look a bit ugly. This Kenwyn appears to have lived with the Somervilles since he was a child—they more or less adopted him, I gather. Anyhow, except that he helped the chief in the management of his affairs—just as I do—he was treated exactly like a son of the house. Old Lord Rainborough, Sir John's most intimate crony, told me all this, so you can bank on its being the truth and not mere gossip. The Somervilles made no difference between Kenwyn and their own son, Ronny. And then, all at once, without giving anybody any reason, they fired him out of his job and broke with him completely. It happened just about the time Ronny Somerville died."

"But they wouldn't fire him out without giving any reason," objected Shirley.

"They've never told anyone their reason. Of course they must have had one—and a jolly good one, too. The chief and Lady Beth aren't the sort of people to treat anybody unfairly."

Shirley was silent. Much as she might rebel against the idea that Neil could have been guilty of anything very heinous, inwardly she knew that Lady Beth was far too kind and Sir John, despite his severity, too just to wipe anyone out of their lives as completely as they had done Neil Kenwyn without good and sufficient reason. Fragments of what they had both said came back to her. “*We were disappointed in the past by someone whom we trusted implicitly,*” Sir John had told her. And later had followed Lady Beth’s sorrowful admission: “*A man whom he had known and loved from boyhood betrayed our trust.*” It sounded very much as if Neil had been found guilty of something actually dishonourable. There seemed no other possible interpretation of such speeches. Yet it couldn’t be—that couldn’t be true! Shirley’s faith in the man she loved asserted itself in fierce denial.

“I shall ask Lady Beth,” she began impulsively. Then checked herself. “No, I can’t do that. I promised Neil I wouldn’t mention him to either of them. *You* must ask Sir John, Bob.”

“Do you mean that Kenwyn made a special point of your not mentioning his name to them?” he inquired curiously.

“Yes. But only because it was connected with some sad event in their lives, and he didn’t want them to be reminded of it.”

Bob gave a contemptuous laugh.

“That was rather a good get-out on his part,” he commented. “And you mean to say you swallowed it, Shirley?”

“If you mean, did I believe it—yes, I did. And I do still,” she replied valiantly. “Nothing will ever make me believe that Neil has done anything really wrong. He may have made—mistakes. Everyone does that.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you—and quite natural, perhaps. But I’m afraid, kiddy, you’ll have to face the fact that undoubtedly he *has* done something—and something pretty low down, too.”

“Still, ask them!” she urged. “Ask Sir John.”

He shook his head.

“I shall do nothing of the kind,” he answered with decision. “They’ve shown plainly enough that they don’t wish the matter referred to in any way, and it’s up to both of us to respect their wishes.”

Shirley sighed.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” she acquiesced reluctantly.

But the thing preyed on her mind. All the facts which had come to light dovetailed in so horribly accurately with Neil's own account of himself. How often had he not implied that it was entirely his own fault that his life was spoiled—that he was paying now, and would always pay, for something which he had done in the past? If only he had told her what it was he had done! She *could* not believe that it had been anything actually dishonourable. Selfish, headstrong, hot-tempered—she could believe all that of him—but not that he had ever let down anyone who trusted in him.

Sometimes she wondered if the trouble could have had anything to do with Nicolette. Had Neil possibly cared for her at one time? She could well imagine that the Somervilles would not easily forgive anything that might have hurt their son's happiness. Their love for Ronny amounted almost to a religion. It seemed as if death had blotted out all remembrance of any faults or failings he might have had—at any rate, in Lady Beth's eyes. All, at least, except "lovable faults." He was her sweetest and most perfect memory. And Shirley realized that if Neil's presence at the Towers had ever militated in any way against Ronny's happiness, this would be the one and only instance in which the Somervilles' sense of justice might possibly be overruled by their blind devotion to their son.

And, on one occasion, an accidental sidelight was flashed upon the past which served somewhat to support this theory of hers as to what had been the cause of all the trouble. She happened to be going along the corridor which led past Lady Beth's bedroom, and through the open doorway drifted the voices of a couple of housemaids occupied in turning out the room.

"This is Mr. Ronny's portrait, isn't it?" asked one voice—that of a new recruit to the household staff.

"Yes. Good-looking young gentleman, wasn't he?" replied the voice of an older servant. "But, all the same, Mrs. Ronny was a lot keener on Mr. Kenwyn, what used to live here, than on her own lawful husband."

Shirley fled onward along the corridor, her previous supposition almost confirmed, and wondering grimly within herself if any family secret is ever hidden from the lynx eyes and ears of the dwellers in the servants' hall.

But, later on, when Mrs. Ronny herself paid one of her flying visits to the Towers, her ideas were once more tossed into confusion. At first Nicolette had appeared disposed to regard her with some suspicion. Nevertheless, both being young feminine things thrown together by circumstances, the two girls were soon upon a more or less friendly footing with each other. Nicolette, like everyone else at the Towers, seemed quite

aware of the unwritten law by which Neil Kenwyn's name was never mentioned in the hearing of either Sir John or Lady Beth, but she showed no reluctance in discussing him with Shirley. On the contrary, she was apparently anxious to probe into the quality of the latter's acquaintance with him during her visit to the south of France.

"You saw quite a lot of him at Port St. Luc, didn't you?" she demanded, a kind of latent hostility in her voice.

"Quite a lot," answered Shirley dispassionately. "He was very friendly with the people I was with."

The non-committal answer, and even more the assumption of indifference with which it was given, seemed to reassure the dancer. Perhaps, after all, ran her inward reflections, she had been premature in anticipating danger from this quarter. This companion-help of her mother-in-law's appeared to have no special interest in Kenwyn. Like many other women possessed of an unusual degree of good looks and charm, Nicolette's suspicions, provided there was no obvious evidence that they were well founded, were easily allayed. She was so sure of herself, of the power of her own beauty. And she did not consider that Shirley was particularly pretty, even though she allowed her a certain attractiveness.

She resumed the subject forthwith.

"You know Neil lived here at one time? He had your brother's job."

"Yes, I've heard that," replied Shirley.

"I never knew what was the cause of the bust-up," continued Nicolette conversationally. "I was too knocked over myself by Ronny's death, and various other things, to bother much about it at the time, and afterwards there was no finding out anything. Neil disappeared, and Sir John and Lady Beth were absolutely mum on the subject." It was characteristic of Nicolette's relations with her parents-in-law that she had never adopted any more intimate mode of address than that by which she now referred to them. "I got into hot water once by asking point blank where Neil had vanished to. I shall never forget the glacial silence which followed my inquiry!" She chuckled a little at the remembrance. "Then Sir John said in a sort of cast-iron voice: 'We neither know nor wish to know where he is. Please recollect in future, Nicolette, that I will not have his name mentioned in this house.' And it never is. Even I daren't break the 'hush-hush' regulation."

"'Even you?'" said Shirley interrogatively. Apparently Nicolette assumed that an exception might conceivably have been made in her case.

“Well, you see, I used to know Neil rather well,” returned the dancer, explanatorily. “He and Ronny shared a flat together in town—at Errishall Mansions—at one time. They’d have been bored stiff, of course, if they’d had to stay all the year round in this dull hole! So should I. When I married Ronny, Sir John actually wanted us to go to Holm Birches—one of his properties up here, a few miles from the Towers—and settle down there. Imagine it! Of course I refused point blank to be buried in the country like that, and finally Ronny and I took over the flat he’d shared with Neil, while Neil rented a smaller one, next to ours, in the same building. We had lots of fun—we three together,” she finished reminiscently.

“But how did Ne—Mr. Kenwyn manage to be in London so often? Hadn’t he much work to do here?”

“Oh, yes, of course. But he used to run up to town constantly for weekends and so on. Old Sir John gave him a very free hand—and a pretty big allowance. He treated him more like a son than anything else. Still, we were always short of money, we three.” Nicolette laughed enjoyably, as though this were only to be expected. “You see, we all gambled like blazes. And—well—night clubs and cards and race-meetings *do* run away with money, don’t they?”

“I don’t know,” responded Shirley soberly. “I’ve never tried any of them.”

“Bless your innocence!” exclaimed Nicolette. “Why, it’s almost incredible these days. No wonder the Somervilles have fallen for you! You’re someone just after their own hearts. And yet, you know,” she added naïvely, wrinkling up her charming brows, “there’s nothing saintly about you—you’re really rather a good sort.”

Shirley found her quite amusing as a companion, and undoubtedly her brief visit temporarily lightened the somewhat gloomy atmosphere of the Towers. But neither she nor Bob felt any violent stirrings of friendship for her. She was too volatile, too nonchalant, apparently without depth of feeling. It would have been like trying to cultivate a friendship with a butterfly. Sir John obviously merely endured her, her presence at the Towers being a conscious concession on his part to the fact that she had been Ronny’s wife, and it was equally evident that even Lady Beth, kind hearted as she was, could find no real place in her affections for this difficult daughter-in-law.

Nevertheless, Shirley missed her when she went back to London where, thanks to the generous allowance which the Somervilles made her, she still

retained the flat at Errishall Mansions which she and Ronny had occupied during their brief married life. Later on she paid a second visit to the Towers, this time accompanied by Miguel Romana, and Shirley discovered that the latter was, as Lady Beth had described him, a really charming person. His dark good looks, the touch of foreignness in his manner, his impulsively affectionate disposition—he was more like a warm-hearted child than anything else—all had their appeal. Even his outbursts of fiery temper left no bitter taste behind them. They were like the flame that spouts up sometimes from the crater of a volcano—natural and inevitable.

His devotion to Nicolette was something to marvel at—an ardent worship which she treated with a good-natured indifference that disturbed Shirley at times, recognizing as she did the uncontrolled nature of the Spaniard's passions.

“I think you're very unwise to treat him as you do, Niki,” she warned her once. “You'll drive him beyond endurance one day.”

But Nicolette only laughed.

“Miguel quite understands our relative positions,” she said. “He's my dancing-partner—and nothing more. And he knows he's only that on sufferance—just as long as he behaves himself.”

The presence of the two dancers kept Shirley's memories of Port St. Luc vividly in front of her. Once, to amuse some friends, they had executed a dance in the big ballroom of the Towers—the very dance they had given at the Pavilion Fleuri—and the rush of painful recollection which it brought her was almost more than she could bear.

Curiously enough, they had become her only remaining link, nowadays, with those weeks at St. Luc. During the first month or two after she had come to live with the Somervilles, she received several letters from Kit. But with each one they had grown briefer and more sketchy, and finally, after an interval of several weeks came merely a hastily scribbled postcard, conveying regrets for not having written latterly. Shirley could only assume that, with absence, the enthusiasm of Kit's friendship had waned a trifle, and when two further letters on her own part brought forth no response at all, she was fain to recognize the truth of the old adage: “Out of sight, out of mind.”

She felt disappointed—conscious of that flat, bewildered feeling which the unresponsiveness of a friend inevitably provokes. But still she never doubted the actuality of Kit's friendship. Some people, as she knew, are no good at letter-writing, and she felt quite confident that if ever she were to

meet Kit and Simon again they would meet on the same footing as that on which they had parted—begin again just where they had left off.

And then, a few weeks after Miguel and Nicolette's return to London, came Lady Beth's serious illness, and in the midst of the anxiety which followed, and with every day bringing her fresh and unaccustomed duties, Shirley forgot about everything except the necessities of the moment.

The tension of those dreadful days when Lady Beth's frail life seemed to hang upon the merest thread, and the long weeks of subsequent convalescence, bore heavily upon everyone concerned, and they were all worn rather fine by the time the strain was over. Sir John's hair was many degrees more grizzled and his face furrowed with several fresh lines when at length his wife, still frail although actually recovered, was able to come downstairs and take her place as of old. Shirley, too, who, in addition to the anxiety she had been through, had had to deputize for Lady Beth throughout her illness both in regard to household matters and the many village charities in which she was interested, had become a rather pale and shadowy likeness of herself, and even Bob had not escaped the effects of so prolonged a strain.

But since mutual suffering almost inevitably draws people together, transmuting acquaintance into friendship and friendship into love, out of these weeks of anxiety had emerged a new depth of understanding and affection, an altogether different relation between the Wilsons and the two people who were nominally their employers. Lady Beth put it very simply one day when she said: "God took Ronny, but I think He's given us both a son and daughter instead." And old Sir John had astonished everyone by a brusque endorsement of the new attitude which his wife had tried to express.

So that it seemed more or less a family party which gathered together in the big hall one sunny April day to discuss how the warmer climate, which the doctors had declared a necessity for Lady Beth, could best be assured her.

"It's nonsense, John," she had protested. "The summer's coming and I shall be quite strong again before next winter. After all, we can't leave the Towers."

"Why can't we leave the Towers?" demanded Sir John.

If he had dropped a bombshell into their midst he could hardly have created a greater sensation. That he would ever contemplate the idea of forsaking the Towers, where Somervilles had lived and died for generations, was beyond the wildest imaginings of any one of the party.

“Leave here?. . . Our home?” stammered Lady Beth in amazement. “Why, John, you couldn’t do that. You’d be miserable.”

“I might be more miserable if I stayed,” he returned fiercely.

Afterwards, in the privacy of his study, he had confided the true state of affairs to Bob. “It’s got to be, lad,” he told him. “That big specialist from London, Sir Graham Crowle, told me quite definitely that we must quit here and go south. If not, she’ll die.” And since then he had been secretly accustoming his mind to the idea, hardening himself to withstand the wrench which leaving Somerville Towers must inevitably entail.

“We can let this place,” he went on, firmly brushing aside Lady Beth’s startled objections. “In any case for a year or two, until you’re stronger, my dear,” he went on guilefully. “And meanwhile we’ll find another place—smaller and more manageable—in the south. Devonshire or Cornwall would suit us.”

Human nature has a wonderful facility for adapting itself to the inevitable, and, after the initial shock of blank surprise was past, the idea of leaving Somerville Towers became first credible and ultimately accepted as a definite plan. The fact that a tenant for the estate was found almost at once probably contributed considerably to the quickness with which the new scheme took shape and was adopted, for the immediate chance of letting a big property such as the Towers was too good an opportunity to be missed. It followed, therefore, that within a week or two of Sir John’s first propounding his ideas, discussion was rife as to where the Somervilles should make their new home, since the Towers had to be handed over to the prospective tenant by the end of June at latest.

“I stipulate for either Cornwall or Devon,” announced Sir John autocratically. Actually it was the London specialist who had limited the choice to these two sunny counties, but he was not going to admit it.

“I don’t know anything about the one or the other,” said Lady Beth.

“They’re both warm. That’s the main thing,” returned Sir John briskly. “Do either of you two know anything? Ever been anywhere there?” he continued, addressing Bob and Shirley who, as usual nowadays, were sharing in the family council.

“No,” said Bob. “We’ve never been farther west than Wiltshire.”

“But I know something about Devonshire,” asserted Shirley. “Kit Harford and her brother live there. She was always talking about it—how warm and sunny and delightful it was.”

“What part do they live in?” demanded Sir John.

“In South Devon,” she answered. “At a little place called Beriscombe, near the sea.”

“Beriscombe,” repeated Lady Beth. “What a pretty name! It sounds so simple and countrified. I like it.”

“You do?” Sir John’s piercing old eyes rested eagerly, almost hungrily, on his wife’s thin, delicate-looking face. He was ready to snatch at the least clue, the smallest suggestion of somewhere that appealed to her, where she might be happy. “You do? Then Beriscombe goes down first on the list of possibilities.”

Shirley was conscious of an inward thrill. She had mentioned the place merely in response to Sir John’s inquiry—without any real thought that they might actually go there. But now it rushed over her what an immense difference it would make to her if they did. She would be back again within reach of her two beloved friends—of Simon and Kit.

Torquay, Dawlish—the names of various other places tentatively suggested afterwards by one or another passed her by. She could think only of Beriscombe, and inwardly trust that some kind Fate would see to it that Sir John should find a suitable new home there and no otherwhere.

And for once Fate had been in a benevolent mood. When the month of June came round and found Shirley mentally reviewing the happenings of the past year, the Towers household was upon the eve of departure for Beriscombe. Lady Beth had persuaded her husband to let them all remain at the old home over her birthday. “Just for old sake’s sake, John, I’d like to spend it here,” she had told him—and so it had been arranged. But the following day the Wilsons, accompanied by some of the servants, were to go down to Beriscombe and get everything in order at The Friary, a charming old manor-house which Sir John had finally decided to purchase. He and Lady Beth were to follow as soon as everything had been made ready for them.

One advantage that The Friary possessed over Somerville Towers was that it was considerably smaller, which would make matters easier for Lady Beth. And a second advantage, from the Wilsons’ point of view, was that there was a jolly little cottage on the estate in which it was proposed they should install themselves.

Lady Beth had been reluctant but quite firm on this point.

“I shall miss you, dear child,” she told Shirley, “but you can come up and help me every day, and it’s a chance for you and Bob to keep house together—to have your own home. And everyone ought to have their own fireside. Other people’s are never quite the same.”

So it had been settled that Bob and Shirley should live at Corner Cottage, as it was called, and old Nanny—Nanny of the Fen Wyatt days—who had never taken anything but a “temp’r’y job” since her two adored bairns had had to go out of their old home and fend for themselves, was summoned to take up the duties of general factotum at the cottage. Her answer was characteristic.

DEAR MISS (it ran):

I’ve been waiting to hear from you. I knew you’d be sending for me sometime because I’ve prayed about it every night regular since you and Master Bob went away. I can leave here at a week’s notice, as I’m only in a temp’r’y job as I told you I should be.

Yours respectfully,
NANNY MARTIN.

CHAPTER XXI THE GREEN-PAINTED GATE

“I think our new home is almost perfect now,” declared Shirley, subsiding into an arm-chair and surveying with an approving eye what were in future to be regarded as their household goods. And, indeed, several days’ concentrated effort upon Nanny’s part, supplemented by fleeting assistance from Bob and Shirley whenever they were not occupied in preparing The Friary for the reception of the Somervilles, had worked wonders at Corner Cottage.

Few things are more depressing than arriving at a house that has been untenanted for many months, and the Wilsons’ advent at the cottage, where sheeted furniture and cobwebbed windows prevailed, had been no exception to the rule. But now the little house, silent and shuttered and soulless when they first entered it, had come alive, as it were.

Corner Cottage was quite a small place, consisting of no more than three bedrooms, a fair-sized living-room, and a tiny, sloping-roofed dining-room. But, apart from a bathroom which had been interpolated by some practical modern hand, it was genuinely old. Big beams, black with age, supported the low ceilings, the latched windows were all leaded and diamond-paned, and a slippery, dark oak staircase, with somewhat uneven stairs, led from the lower to the upper storey. And now, since Nanny had worked her energetic will upon its contents, the old oak furniture gleamed with a smooth, waxen polish, the ancient brass shone like pure gold, while the pewter jugs and plates which adorned the tall old-fashioned chimney-piece in the living-room glimmered faintly like silver-gray ghosts. So it was not at all surprising that Shirley regarded her new home with satisfaction and announced the fact to all who it might concern, of whom Nanny was one.

“Yes, miss, it don’t look so bad,” the latter agreed judicially. “It’s diff’rent as chalk from cheese alongside Fen Wyatt, of course, but it’s a bit of a place I’m not ashamed to see you and Master Bob in, when all’s said and done.”

“Anyway, we’re jolly glad to be seen in it, Nanny,” asserted Bob. “If you’d had a ‘close-up’ of us in our rooms in Pagan Street, you’d appreciate the glory and the glamour of Corner Cottage.”

“Why, it’s positively splendaceous in comparison!” supplemented Shirley. Adding gaily, as she caught a dubious glint in the old woman’s eyes:

“And anyway, Nanny my own, having you here with us makes it more like home than anything we’ve encountered since we left Fen Wyatt. There, now!”

Nanny winked away a tear.

“Thank you, miss, for saying that. And it’s true as I’m standing here that there’d never ’ave been anywheres that ’ud ’ave been home to me without you and Master Bob littering up the place just like you used to.” And, conscientiously plumping up a sat-upon looking cushion as she passed, she bustled away into the back regions.

“And now,” said Shirley, as the door closed behind her, “I’m going to give myself the amusement of walking over to East Wyck Manor and marching in unannounced upon Kit and Simon. That is, unless you want me up at The Friary? But I think everything’s ready there, isn’t it?”

Bob nodded.

“Quite ready. I’m only going over to the home farm to give a few final orders, so that everything shall go smoothly the first few days after Sir John and Lady Beth arrive. He won’t want to be bothered with things the minute he gets here.”

“I can hardly believe they’re coming to-morrow,” she remarked. “Doesn’t it seem ages since we left the Towers? And it’s actually only a few days!”

“That’s because you’ve been thoroughly occupied all the time, my child,” replied Bob sententiously. “Well, run along and spring your surprise upon Drake and Mrs. Harford. And give them both my best salaams. I shall look forward to meeting them again.”

“I’ll ask them to come and have tea with us soon in our new abode,” replied Shirley, and forthwith departed to make ready for her expedition.

It was a good two-mile walk from Corner Cottage to East Wyck Manor, and she had to inquire her way thither at the outset, since this was the first occasion upon which she had adventured very far beyond The Friary grounds. Her own time and Bob’s had been much too fully occupied, getting things ship-shape both at the cottage and the “big house,” as Nanny called it, to admit of anything more than the necessary exploration of such shops as were to be found in the village of Beriscombe, a bare quarter of a mile away. So that it was with quite a small thrill of excitement that she passed through the village and out on to the winding country road which lay beyond it.

For a time all went well. The road lay clear and uninterrupted ahead of her. But before long she had to make decisions at first one cross-road and then another, and finally met with one of those V-shaped divergences which leave the wayfarer in hopeless doubt as to whether to follow the left or right-hand branch. Shirley chose the former, an uphill climb—and chose wrong, and half an hour's further tramping along twisting, high-hedged lanes which, to her unaccustomed eyes, appeared exactly like each other, brought her finally to a group of rather tumble-down farm buildings. Discovering an old labourer at work in the yard which fronted them, she inquired how far she was from her destination. The old man leaned leisurely upon the handle of the spade with which he was shovelling manure into a heap and regarded her with the inquisitive eyes of the true Devon yokel when he sights a "vurriner."

"Wur be yew vrom?" he demanded, by way of a preliminary to telling her where she should go.

"From Corner Cottage—The Friary, you know," she explained. "And I want to get to East Wyck Manor."

"Aw, zo yew be the young leddy vrom Vrairy?" he remarked with interest. There had been plenty of gossip in the village concerning the newcomers at Beriscombe, and as this was the first opportunity he had had of seeing one of them in the flesh he proposed to make the most of it. He stared at her for a minute or two in silence. "Yew've come a long ways out of yur road," he vouchsafed at last, contemplatively.

Shirley's heart sank.

"Have I?" she said. "Then which would be my quickest way from here to East Wyck?"

"Well, yew c'ud eitherways go back along a mile"—her heart sank still lower at the prospect—"an' then turn away past Varmer Westacott's, else yew c'ud cross them yields"—he jerked his thumb over his left shoulder—"if so be yew bain't feared of a bit o' mud. They'll bring 'ee straight tew Old Wyck Varm."

"And is Old Wyck Farm near the Manor?"

"Maybe quarter-mile away."

That being the utmost guidance she could elicit from the old fellow, Shirley decided in favour of crossing "them fields" instead of retracing her footsteps, as at least this would appear to be heading in the right direction.

The fields in question covered a steeply rising incline, and as she toiled upwards she could tell by the fresh, salty tang in the air that she was approaching the coast. Presently, scrambling over a wooden stile, she found herself on what appeared to be a stretch of downland, crowning far-reaching cliffs. Far below she could see the sea, bluely sparkling in the sunshine, and some distance to her right a low, whitewashed farmhouse with a newly thatched roof. A track across the downland, where the ground had been worn bare of grass by the tread of feet, led past the stile she had just negotiated, and straight onward to the gateway of the farmhouse. Evidently, she reflected ruefully, by way of the cliffs there was a far more direct route from the village to Old Wyck Farm than the meandering inland one by which she had come. Well, she would waste no time, but go to the farmhouse and there inquire the nearest way to the Manor. And accordingly she bent her steps in that direction.

The farmhouse appeared to be in reasonably well-cared-for condition. A dense, trimly clipped thorn hedge, broken only by a wide, green-painted wooden gateway in the centre, fenced off from the surrounding land the little garden on to which it fronted, and, within, a riot of old-fashioned country flowers bordered the flagged path which led up to a honeysuckle-covered porch. Shirley observed these characteristic details with inward satisfaction. Presumably she would meet with more intelligence from the owner of Old Wyck Farm than from the ancient labourer who had last directed her. She rapped smartly on the solid oak door beneath the porch and, while she waited for a response, stood idly picturing to herself how attractive the entrance must look when the thick growth of honeysuckle which curtained it was all in bloom.

Came the sound of a man's striding footsteps, followed by the grating of an iron latch as someone jerked it up. An instant later the heavy door swung back on its hinges, revealing a big farmhouse living-room, and Shirley turned quickly round to make her inquiry.

"Can you tell me——" she began. And then her throat closed up, choking the words into stunned silence, and she stood staring dumbly at the man who faced her in the open doorway.

At length, after what seemed an eternity, a single word forced itself between her lips—a thin, shaking whisper of sound.

"Neil." And again, a little louder: "Neil."

She swayed suddenly and immediately felt his arm about her, steadying her.

“Yes, it’s I,” he said. “Come in. Come in—you must sit down.”

Scarcely conscious of what she was doing, she yielded to the pressure of his arm and let him draw her into the room. Her knees were trembling under her, and she was thankful to sink into the chair he hastily pulled forward. For a moment or two she made no attempt to speak, only sat gazing hungrily at the face of the man she loved—the dark, bitter face she had not seen for so many weary months. And he stood gazing back, his eyes seeming to devour every line of her, his arms drawn backward a little at his sides as though he were forcibly restraining them from closing round her, his hands clenched like those of a man trying to resist some overpowering impulse.

At last:

“Why—why are you here?” she muttered confusedly.

He threw up his head abruptly.

“I wanted to save you this,” he said. “I hoped we needn’t meet. I intended to get away before it happened.”

“You hoped—we needn’t meet?” she repeated.

“Yes”—violently. “Because it can do no good, our meeting.”

She brushed her hand dazedly across her forehead.

“But I don’t understand. What are you doing here? I thought you were in South Africa.”

“I was—until six months ago.” He took a few restless paces across the room, then came back and stood in front of her once more. His face was very pale, mouth twisted. He hesitated a moment, then spoke with a dry incisiveness as though he were saying something that had got to be said, and the sooner it was over the better.

“Listen,” he said. “When we were at St. Luc, Drake offered me a half share of this farm—Old Wyck—and a salary to manage the other half for him. I refused because—though I could have got out of it—I’d half promised to stay with the man I was with in South Africa for a few months longer. . . . And there was another reason.”

“Another?”

“Yes. *You* were the other reason. Do you remember when I went away from St. Luc for a time?”

She nodded gravely.

"I remember. I thought you'd gone to be near Nicolette."

He stared at her dumbly for a moment, then uttered a sudden, harsh laugh.

"You thought that? How funny!" He paused. Presently he went on: "No. I went away to decide certain things for myself. Drake's offer was a temptation—a maddening temptation. I knew you were living with his sister. So that offer meant England, a decent life—and seeing you sometimes." His blue eyes seemed all at once to burn down into hers. "I wanted to take it more than anything on earth."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Why?" He came a step nearer to her, and half instinctively she rose to her feet and stood beside him. "Why didn't I? Haven't I told you that I've cut myself off from certain possibilities—*those* possibilities? So I decided to go back to South Africa."

Shirley's gaze never left his face.

"Still I don't understand. I'm afraid I'm stupid." Her hands gestured vaguely. "Why did you change your mind—come to Old Wyck after all?"

"Because you told me, when I returned to St. Luc, that you were going to the Somervilles. I knew then that you were as safely shut away from me as though I were dead—that there was no likelihood of our ever meeting. At least, that's what I thought. No one, knowing Sir John, could have conceived of his ever leaving the Towers. I don't know why he has done. . . . So, several months later, I accepted Simon's offer—he'd left it open. Then, a few weeks ago, I heard that Sir John had bought The Friary. I'd have cleared out at once but that I'm tied here. Drake and his sister have been travelling out of Europe for the last four months, and I'm in charge. I couldn't quit till they came back. And they don't return for another week."

She was silent a moment. Then she spoke impulsively.

"Neil, why won't you meet the Somervilles?"

"It's they who won't meet me."

"But why won't they?" she persisted. She felt that here at last was her one chance of clearing up the mystery of the accusations which lay against this man whom she loved.

Kenwyn's face became curiously blank—like a mask.

“Because I once did something which Sir John never forgave,” he said at length.

She felt suddenly stricken. They were true, then, true—some of these things that people said about him. If he would only tell her what it was of which he had been guilty! She was sure that she, at least, would be able to forgive it. She must know—she *must*! She went on deliberately:

“Is it true that you were in the same job which Bob has now?”

“Quite true—until Sir John kicked me out of it.”

“And—and did you deserve that?” Her voice quivered on this last crucial question.

For an instant he hesitated. Then coldly, composedly, with a definiteness which left no smallest room for doubt, he answered her.

“Yes. I deserved it.”

She leaned toward him, her face upraised beseechingly.

“Neil, can’t you—won’t you tell me what it was you did—what happened?”

He met her gaze with eyes that were as hard and impenetrable as granite.

“No,” he said quietly. “I can’t tell you that.”

She drew back from him with a little cry, hiding her face in her hands. She felt as though he had struck her.

A heavy silence fell between them. Presently he spoke again.

“Shirley, did you get a letter from me—after you had left St. Luc?”

She dropped her shielding hands from her face and looked up at him.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Well”—steadily—“I wrote that letter in a moment of madness—of temporary aberration. Will you please forget it—consider it unwritten?”

The colour ebbed from her face, and for an instant she stared up at him with a desperate questioning in her eyes.

“Do you—want—me to forget it?” she said at last, difficultly.

He bent his head.

“Yes, I do,” he answered with decision.

She seemed to shrink back as he spoke—shrink into herself.

“Very well,” she said. Then, turning toward the door: “I think I’d better go now.”

In silence he went with her and opened the heavy door for her to pass out. Outside, the June sunlight lay all across the little garden, dappling the path with changeful shadows as the tall hollyhocks wavered in the breeze, and the air was full of the mingled scent of flowers. The sweetness of summer seemed as if it mocked her, and Shirley hesitated, shivering a moment on the threshold. As she paused Neil spoke again. His voice sounded wrung.

“Why did you ever come here?”

“The Somervilles bought The Friary because Lady Beth was ordered to a warmer climate,” she said, as though reciting a lesson. “And I came here today to ask the way to East Wyck Manor—I was going to see Kit and Simon. . . . It’s—it’s all rather funny, isn’t it?” she finished up a little hysterically. Then, lest her rocking self-control should desert her, she fled down the flagged path and out through the green-painted gate.

Not until her figure had disappeared out of sight did Kenwyn move. Then slowly he turned away into the house, and the oak door swung to, shutting him in alone with his thoughts.

They went back to a day at Port St. Luc when Simon Drake had made him the proposal which had brought him ultimately to Old Wyck Farm. Before that he had been drifting, taking no thought of past or future, content only with the present which meant Shirley, the woman who had come into his life when he had no fit life left to offer her. And it had been a brief conversation he had had with Simon which had forced him into making a decision.

“Wouldn’t you ever care to come back to England, Kenwyn?” Drake had asked him suddenly one day. And Neil, taken unawares, had answered the question as directly as it was asked.

“I’d give my soul to go back.”

“Then, if that’s so, I’ve a suggestion to make. I’ve an off-farm at home in Devon simply running to seed because I can’t be bothered to look after it. What do you say to taking it over? I’d sell you a half share and pay you a salary for managing the other half for me.”

Neil stared at him.

“But you know nothing about me,” he objected. “Morals or capabilities.”

“I know all I want to,” returned Simon quietly. “I know you’re the man to suit me.”

Kenwyn laughed hardly.

“I’m afraid not,” he answered. “You’d want at least a character for honesty in anyone with whom you made such an arrangement as you’ve just suggested. And I can’t offer you one. I don’t propose to tell you in detail why I lost the job I had in England, but I’ll tell you this: It was because my employer found I wasn’t trustworthy.”

Simon listened quite placidly to this statement. Apparently it left him unmoved.

“I don’t care a twopenny damn why your employer sacked you,” he remarked, when it was finished. “I haven’t asked you why and I’m not going to. What I do ask is that you should come and help me run Old Wyck Farm. I’m too bone lazy to run it single-handed.”

The temptation to accept was overwhelming. To be near Shirley—the woman he loved. To go back to England. To work for a man like Simon Drake and be trusted by him. Was it sometimes possible, even in this life, Neil wondered, to get clean away from the past, blot it out, and start again? It almost seemed as though it might be.

And then came that night at the Pavilion Fleuri, when Nicolette had danced, and all at once the tentacles of the past had reached out and coiled themselves around him once more, and he knew that the most difficult thing in the world is to escape from yesterday.

So he had quitted St. Luc and gone away into the mountain quiet of the Pyrenees, there to fight out the question as to whether he were justified or not in accepting Simon’s offer. He had returned determined to refuse it, to cut himself off from Shirley once and for all; then the discovery that she was going to live at Somerville Towers, that circumstances were taking her right out of his ken, had altered his decision.

“I’ll accept, if you can wait for me,” he had told Drake. “I practically promised the man I’m with in South Africa to return to him for another three months, anyway, and I can’t leave him in the lurch.”

And on this understanding the matter had been arranged.

“The offer remains open as long as you like,” Simon informed him. “If you never come, Old Wyck can go to rack and ruin for all I care. But I’d

rather it didn't. I'd rather," he added, with that peculiarly charming smile of his, "have a pal living there."

And to-day Shirley had come to Old Wyck Farm and gone again! As Neil shut himself in alone with his thoughts, he reflected with a grim sense of irony that, after he had done his utmost to keep out of her way—to cut her right out of his life—Fate, by a single touch of her incalculable fingers, had set all his efforts at naught.

CHAPTER XXII SIR JOHN'S DECISION

Bob's fingers drummed irritably on the arms of the chair in which he was sitting. Dinner, excellently cooked by old Nanny, was over at the Cottage, and he and Shirley had since been discussing how to meet the latest development of events—the fact that Neil Kenwyn had established himself in the same neighbourhood as that in which the Somervilles had decided to make their new home.

"It's damned awkward," he said, continuing his devil's tattoo on the chair arms. "The very last thing one would have expected to come up against."

Shirley, who was smoking, regarded the red tip of her cigarette meditatively.

"The question is," she rejoined, "are we to tell Sir John and Lady Beth—or leave them to find it out?"

"Well, we can't exactly hurl the information at them the first moment they arrive. It would upset them pretty badly, I'm afraid." Bob cogitated awhile. "I think we'd better let things rip for the present," he went on at length. "They're not likely to hear of it for a few days, anyway, so we may as well give 'em that much peace."

He twisted round in his chair and cast a somewhat anxious glance in his sister's direction.

"What I'm more concerned about," he went on deliberately, "is how it's going to affect you—Kenwyn's being here, I mean?"

"Affect me?"

"Yes. I suppose"—grudgingly—"you still care for the fellow, in spite of what he's done?"

A queer little smile tilted her lips.

"I don't think 'what people have done' makes much difference as to whether you still care for them or not," she said quietly. "Unless, of course, it's something utterly rotten, so that they're not really the people you thought they were. And, in this case, we don't actually *know*—anything."

"Well, then? What are you going to do about it?"

Shirley's straight black brows lifted rather humorously.

"I'm not going to marry Neil, if that's what you're afraid of," she vouchsafed.

Bob heaved a sigh of relief. He had been inwardly very much perturbed at the news that his sister and Kenwyn had met again.

"Thank goodness you've got that much sense," he said gruffly.

"Oh, I haven't." She answered him with the utmost serenity. "I'd marry him to-morrow if he asked me to."

"What! You'd——"

"Don't get excited, old thing. The point is he's not going to ask me—he's made it perfectly clear that anything there may have been between us is quite over as far as he is concerned."

"The skunk!" burst out Bob with illogical wrath.

"On the contrary, he holds the same opinion about his unfitness to marry me—or anyone else—that you do."

"Oh, does he?"—in more mollified tones. "In that case, then, he's possessed of rather more decency than I gave him credit for."

"I think he has quite a lot of—decency," said Shirley. And, stubbing out the end of her cigarette, she rose abruptly and left the room.

Bob's eyes followed her dubiously. He could not quite understand her mood. She seemed so cool and collected about the whole matter that it baffled him. He did not know that she had been keeping up by sheer force of will ever since the moment she had encountered Neil on the threshold of Old Wyck Farm. And now she contrived to quit the room with her flag still flying. But when she had stumbled up the winding staircase and reached the solitude of her own bedroom, she gave way. Flinging herself on the bed, she broke into a passion of weeping, and cried unrestrainedly—cried until at last tired nature came to her relief and she fell into a sleep of pure exhaustion, utterly worn out.

The following morning, when she came downstairs, she looked rather pale and there were dark shadows underneath her eyes, but she appeared elusively cheerful and "ordinary" in her manner, as far as Bob could judge. She laughed and talked just as usual, and immediately after breakfast announced her intention of filling The Friary rooms with flowers in honour of the Somervilles' arrival.

“It will make the place look ‘homey’ if there are lots of flowers about when they come,” she said. “So bye-bye till lunch time, Bob, old thing; it will take me the whole morning to arrange all those bowls and vases.”

After that, the first few days which followed the advent of Sir John and Lady Beth were so filled with the details of settling them into their new abode—with unpacking and sorting and arranging, with reorganizing a diminished household staff to meet the needs of a much smaller establishment than the Towers, and with attending to arrears of correspondence—that what had seemed to Bob the paramount question of Kenwyn’s unlooked-for presence in the neighbourhood slipped unconsciously into a back place in his thoughts.

About a week later, however, the problem once more presented itself for solution, brought to the surface again by a characteristic little note which arrived for Shirley from Kit Harford.

MY DEAR (it ran):

Simon and I have just got back home and learned the great and glorious news that you’re actually here in the flesh. We’re coming down to see you at once—to-morrow afternoon—of course. But Simon’s provincial sense of propriety insists that we pay a formal call at The Friary en route, before we descend upon Corner Cottage. So we’ll go and make the acquaintance of the Somervilles first and then come on to you. And don’t you dare to be “not at home”—even though I haven’t written to you for such ages!

Yours,
KIT.

This note, had Shirley but known it, was the ultimate outcome of a conversation which had taken place between Kit and her brother when they had first learned who was to be the new owner of The Friary. The news had been conveyed to them in a brief, non-committal sentence contained in one of the periodical letters Neil sent to Drake, during the latter’s absence from home, reporting on matters relating to the farm.

Kit had been openly triumphant.

“There!” she exclaimed. “Now you see, Simon, all your stupid self-effacement has been worth just that much!”—snapping her fingers. “You’re going to meet Shirley again. She’ll be one of our nearest neighbours, so you

can't avoid it—and *I* don't intend to. And all that camouflage—my hardly ever writing to her, and so on—has been simply a wash-out. All it's accomplished, probably"—with a rather rueful grimace—"is to make her think that, regarded as a pal, I'm a very inferior article."

Drake smiled.

"I'm not afraid of that," he returned quietly. "Shirley is a very tolerant little person and has probably merely put you down as a somewhat incomplete letter writer."

"Well"—Kit regarded him defiantly—"I suppose you won't want me to keep up this sort of pretence when we get back to Beriscombe and find her living practically next door, so to speak?"

Simon made no immediate answer. He appeared to be engrossed in his own thoughts—withdrawn into himself. At last he emerged.

"No," he said. "I don't want you to do that. When Fate takes a hand in the game one can't fight it. It's a case of *che sarà, sarà*—what will be, will be."

And in her own heart Kit had known very well what she ardently hoped might be the outcome of this turn of the wheel which would bring Shirley to Beriscombe—an Indian summer of happiness for this beloved brother of hers.

So that, upon their return home, it was without any delay that she sped her letter to Corner Cottage, completely unconscious that its arrival would create consternation there and force a definite decision upon its recipient.

"I think that settles the matter," said Shirley, handing Kit's letter across to Bob for perusal. "Those two dear things must be told this morning about Neil's being at Old Wyck Farm."

Followed a moment's silence while he absorbed the contents of the letter. Then he looked up with a wry grimace.

"Yes, you're right. If not, they may hear of it accidentally through Drake or Mrs. Harford. And naturally they'd think it rather queer of us never to have mentioned it."

"Exactly." The time had come when the promise she had made to Kenwyn had become unfair to the Somervilles. "The point is: Who's going to undertake the job? You—or me?"

“Oh, you, of course,” he answered hastily, with all a man’s distaste for a possible “scene.” “You’ll do it ever so much better than I should.”

“Coward!”

Bob grinned.

“Well, in your case, you can break the news to Lady Beth, you see,” he explained. “Whereas if I took on the job I’d have to tell Sir John about it. And he’d go up in one of his worst rages, probably.”

“Very well. I’ll do it then,” consented Shirley. And half an hour later found her up at the “big house,” closeted with Lady Beth.

It was obvious that, tenderly as Shirley broke it to her, the news came upon her as a great shock.

“Neil here—here at Beriscombe?” she faltered. “And you knew him before in France? It—it all seems incredible!” Then, in an agitated way: “Oh, why did you never tell me you’d met him?”

Shirley reminded her gently of that inflexible rule of silence concerning Kenwyn’s name upon which Sir John insisted.

Lady Beth nodded.

“Yes. I know—I know. And of course John is right. Of course he is,” she repeated, as though trying to convince herself. “But tell me how Neil was looking. Did he seem well? Happy?”

She bent forward, her wistful hazel eyes fixed hungrily on the face of the girl beside her. It was very evident that her heart yearned over the black sheep who had been cast out from the fold. Black he might be, and her loyalty to her husband would never allow her to defy the latter or even to question the judgment he had pronounced. But the mother love she had given Neil had suffered silently ever since he went away.

“Yes, he looked well.” Shirley, touched by her eagerness, hastened to answer the anxious, longing questions. “But happy—no. I don’t think he has ever been happy since he left you and Sir John.”

Lady Beth’s mouth quivered.

“No—no. I suppose not. He couldn’t have been. It was all too dreadful. Did he—used he ever to speak of us?”

“Yes. And he must have been terribly fond of you both. I could tell that.”

A definite disbelief crept into Lady Beth’s face.

“Oh, no,” she said. “We thought he was, but we were mistaken. If he had cared for us, he could never have done what he did.”

“What, actually, did he do?” demanded Shirley, with sudden courage.

“That I cannot tell you. We—we never speak of it. But it was something that showed us that the man we loved—whom we had looked upon as another son—was utterly bad, rotten to the very core.”

There was an unexpected hardness in Lady Beth’s voice. Her attitude seemed surprisingly opposed to the gentleness which was so strong a characteristic of her make-up. Shirley could scarcely credit it. She forgot that even the softest skin will harden if seared with a red-hot iron. The cicatrix remains. And somewhere in the tenderness of the old woman’s soul there was a certain place—a scar—where the sweetness of her nature had once been so hurt that it had hardened in self-protection.

“Don’t you think, perhaps, that you may have misjudged him?” ventured Shirley at last.

Lady Beth’s sad eyes met hers with a bleak, unalterable conviction in them.

“There is no possibility of that,” she answered quietly. “He owned up when—when he was found out.”

Shirley remained silent. Notwithstanding the other’s obvious, although reluctant, belief in Neil’s guilt, her own queer faith in him remained unshaken. He had made some bad, perhaps irretrievable mistake—that she now thought was almost certain. But that he was “utterly bad—rotten to the very core”—was something she neither could nor would believe.

Lady Beth rose with a sigh.

“We must tell John, my dear,” she said. And at that moment Sir John himself came into the room.

His reception of the news concerning Kenwyn was less vehement than might have been anticipated. But it was stony—stony and relentless. He asked a few brief questions: How had Shirley met him? What was he doing at Old Wyck Farm? And then delivered his ultimatum.

“Drake’s chosen to give him a fresh chance in life. I hope he’ll never regret it.” His tone implied that he had no doubt he would. “I shall certainly not interfere in the matter or try to prevent Neil’s making good with someone else—if he can. But for me and for Beth, he doesn’t exist.”

“And what about Nicolette?” asked his wife rather nervously. “I had a letter from her only this morning asking if she might run down to us for a few days. . . . Then there’s Shirley, too. You see, she knows him quite well—and his friends at the Manor.”

“I don’t propose to lay any embargo upon Nicolette or Shirley—or on anyone else,” replied Sir John decisively. “All I say is that I decline—both for myself and for you, Beth—to meet the man. And The Friary is closed to him.”

CHAPTER XXIII OLD FRIENDS

Shirley, her errand at The Friary concluded, made her way back to Corner Cottage, reflecting, as she went, that Sir John had exhibited considerably more tolerance over the matter of Kenwyn's unexpected presence in the neighbourhood than she had anticipated he would. Implacable in his own attitude toward him and in that laid down for his wife, he had yet not sought to impose his will upon others.

"All the same," she told Bob ruefully, when they met again at lunch, "I'm afraid it's going to make things a trifle complicated. Life will be sort of divided off into compartments—one compartment with you and me and the Somervilles in it, and another one reserved for Simon and Kit and Neil. And so on."

But, in spite of her misgivings, during the course of the afternoon when Drake and Kit paid their promised visit, the "compartment" problem resolved itself somewhat.

The brother and sister arrived a little late, as they had first been to call upon the Somervilles, and Shirley was standing at the Cottage threshold, anxiously on the lookout, when finally they appeared in sight. Kit, she could see, was looking splendidly well as the result of their recent trip abroad, but she noticed that Simon's face still showed its usual somewhat worn look, and his familiar, slightly limping gait brought back with a rush the old pang of tender regret she always felt for this handicap of his.

"Oh, you two dears!" she exclaimed, flying down the garden path to meet them. "*How* good it is to see you!"

In the excitement of reunion she embraced them both impartially, and never noticed the sudden fire that woke in Drake's eyes at the touch of her soft young lips against his cheek. Linking an arm in each of her visitors' she drew them into the Cottage, where Bob was waiting to add his welcome to her own.

"It's very nice to meet you again," Kit greeted him cordially. On the one occasion when she had encountered him for a few brief moments at Victoria Station, on the day she and Shirley were leaving for the Continent, she had taken a great liking to this frank-faced brother of her young companion's.

“Not half as nice for you as it is for me,” responded Bob, and something more than mere empty politeness glowed underneath the lightly uttered answer.

Kit’s brown eyes danced humorously.

“Then that’s two people pleased,” she said. “And I’m sure there are two more over there”—nodding toward the window where Simon and Shirley were deep in conversation. “What a delicious old cottage you have here!” she went on, glancing round appreciatively. “I’m all agog with curiosity. Can’t I be shown over the new domain at once?”

“Of course you can,” returned Bob eagerly. “I’ll take you round now, if you like, while Nanny is getting tea ready.”

“‘Nanny’! That really makes the picture quite complete. Ancient cottage, old family retainer—and you two excessively modern folk dumped down in the middle of it!”

He laughed.

“A study in contrasts,” he agreed, as he led the way out of the room on the promised tour of inspection.

“It’s rather wonderful seeing you again,” said Simon, when he and Shirley found themselves alone. “I never expected to. You were just a fleeting vision, I thought.”

His quiet tones held an unmistakable depth of feeling. That and the curiously intent look in his eyes brought a quick flush into her face. They reminded her vividly of a certain occasion at Port St. Luc when she and he had sat out on the hotel terrace together, talking until far into the night, and she had been a little afraid that their pleasant comradeship was going to be threatened by some more ardent feeling on his part.

“Oh, I’m not so easily choked off!” she asserted, with deliberate nonchalance. “Although I do think you and Kit take the palm for being the world’s worst correspondents.”

“I’m afraid it does look like it,” he admitted. Adding with a deliberateness that matched her own: “I didn’t write because I should have said either too little or too much.”

“Then perhaps it’s just as well you refrained,” she replied hastily. “Anyhow, now that we’re all three together again I shall be magnanimous and overlook your past delinquencies.”

She was inwardly grateful that any further *tête-à-tête* conversation was precluded by the entrance of old Nanny, bringing in tea, followed by the gay and talkative return of Kit and Bob who had completed their inspection of the cottage.

“You’re a couple of thoroughly spoiled people,” declared Kit. “Your cottage is adorable. And so are the Somervilles—at least, Lady Beth is. Sir John, I think, I should prefer to adore from a distance. He looks to me rather an explosive person. Is he?”

“You’d probably find him so, if you were to mention your manager at Old Wyck Farm to him,” answered Bob.

Drake’s eyes rested tranquilly on the speaker.

“Is that so?” he asked. “Does Sir John know him, then?”

“Kenwyn used to hold my present job,” said Bob. “You may as well know as much as Shirley and I do. It may keep you from putting your foot in it.” And he briefly outlined the circumstances.

Simon listened in silence, making no comment until he had finished. Then he vouchsafed quietly:

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about. There need be no collision between Somerville and his former secretary. Neil never visits anywhere except at the Manor—and now that we know all this, of course we shall be careful not to ask him and Sir John at the same time.”

Later on, just as he was leaving, he referred to the matter once more.

“Whatever may be said about Kenwyn’s past, you can take my word for it, Wilson, that his present is dead straight—and that he’s a man worth having as a friend.”

And Bob, impressed in spite of himself, answered frankly:

“There’s no one whose word I’d sooner take.”

The two men shook hands, and Simon made his departure. He had some business to see to before he returned to the Manor, he asserted vaguely, and Bob eagerly volunteered, therefore, to see Mrs. Harford home.

“I’m really quite capable of seeing myself home,” remarked the latter firmly. “But I’ll pretend I’m not, if you like to come with me.”

So they walked back to East Wyck together, and on the way he discovered that underneath Kit’s slightly mocking manner lay a very kindly

heart. The conversation rather naturally reverted to the subject of Neil Kenwyn, and Bob expressed a certain amount of brotherly concern that Shirley should have seen so much of him while in France.

“Why?” asked Kit bluntly.

He stared at her.

“Well, it’s pretty evident, isn’t it, that there’s been something rather shady in his past?”

“Quite probably a good many of our ‘pasts’ wouldn’t bear microscopic inspection,” she returned dryly. “And yet we can’t do anything about it, can we? What’s the use of raking up old sins, anyway? They’re done, and they can’t be undone. No one, perhaps, knows that better and is more utterly sick about it than the sinner himself. In my opinion, it’s the future that counts. It’s all we’ve got that we can do anything with, really. So why waste time brooding over the sticky past?”

“Is that what you honestly think?” asked Bob, with some surprise.

And for once the ironic little devil that lurked in her brown eyes hid himself so that there was nothing but sweetness and honesty in them.

“Yes, I do,” she answered simply. “I think that whatever mistakes a man may have made he should be permitted to carve out a new and decent life for himself—if he’s got the grit to do it.”

Meanwhile, Simon had made his way along the cliff path to Old Wyck Farm, and dropped in unexpectedly upon his manager there. He found him in a black and bitter mood.

“Well,” demanded Neil truculently, almost as soon as he had entered. “Have you come to give me the sack?”

His head was thrown back defiantly. There was a white, pinched look about the corners of his mouth, and his eyes smouldered resentfully.

Simon regarded him mildly.

“The sack? No. Why should I?”

“You’ve been to The Friary to-day.” Neil almost ground out his words. “So I suppose you’ve learned full details of the particular kind of blackguard you’ve put in here as manager.”

Simon sat down and lit a cigarette.

“My dear fellow, your name was never mentioned,” he said.

“What?” Neil stared at him with open disbelief in his face. “Do you mean Sir John didn’t warn you against me?”

“I’ve told you—your name was never mentioned. As a matter of fact,” went on Drake imperturbably, “I understand it never *is* mentioned there. Somerville doesn’t like the sound of it apparently.” He smiled quizzically, and his kindly gray eyes met Neil’s angry ones rather like those of a nice dog trying to make friends with a half-tamed panther and a little doubtful about making a success of it.

“Then you have heard something—even if not at The Friary?” flashed back Kenwyn.

The older man nodded.

“Yes,” he said frankly. “Bob Wilson thought I’d better know what he knows—which isn’t very much—so as to avert the possibility of my ignorantly bringing you and Sir John together under one roof and—er—causing unnecessary fireworks.”

“I was going to tell you myself,” said Neil sullenly. “But I didn’t want to bother you with my affairs the moment you came back.”

“I’m sure you were. However, now you’re saved the trouble, which is all to the good.”

“And when do you want me to leave?”

Drake regarded him with faint amusement.

“I don’t want you to leave, you fool,” he answered placidly. “We’re as we were.”

Neil swung round abruptly and stood staring out of the window for a few minutes in silence. When he turned back again all the anger and resentment had died out of his eyes. They were only profoundly sad.

“Thank you,” he said in a queer, clipped voice. “That’s like you, Drake.” He paused, then went on hurriedly: “And I can only make you a very poor return. You refuse to dismiss me. The only alternative is for me to hand in my notice. I’d like, if you’ll let me, to leave at once—or as soon as you can get another man to take my place.”

Simon made no movement.

“I see no reason why you should leave,” he said steadily.

“No, no—but sooner or later you will.” Kenwyn spoke nervously. He was standing beside the table, and with his right hand he kept restlessly shifting the position of a book which lay in front of him. “God! A man might have thought himself safe in this little corner of the world,” he muttered to himself.

“You *are* safe,” returned Simon, who had overheard the muttered words. “Here, or anywhere else. But particularly here, as my manager—and friend, Neil.”

Kenwyn’s face hardened.

“When you’ve heard the truth about me—as you inevitably will one day—I shall be neither the one nor the other,” he said bitterly.

Drake got up from his chair.

“I judge a man as I’ve found him,” he answered quietly. “Not as other people may say he is. And for six months I’ve found you the man I want. Now what have you to put up against that?”

“There are other reasons—outside my job with you. Social ones, perhaps you’d call them. For instance, I know Nicolette, the Somervilles’ daughter-in-law, who stays with them sometimes. And Shirley Wilson—Lady Beth’s companion. Oh, good Lord! Can’t you see, Drake, that it’s an impossible tangle—quite outside the question that I should stay on here now?”

Simon shook his head.

“Seeing that you live like Diogenes in his tub, all those reasons you’ve brought forward leave me quite cold.”

“I tell you I can’t stay here,” insisted Neil irritably.

“And I tell you you must. By the terms of our agreement you have to give me a year’s notice if you want to quit. I can stand on that agreement.” Drake paused, then added quietly: “But I’d rather stand on our friendship—on the fact that I want you and that you’d stay for that reason and no other.”

He waited, but there came no response from the other man, and he stifled a sigh.

“Very well, then,” he said, at last. “I’ll tear up the agreement and you’re free—free to go, if you wish.”

It was his last card—the last card he could play to keep this man from going back into the wilderness once more, from hiding himself in some far-distant outpost of the civilized world, there to live out the mental and

spiritual death-in-life to which this final break with his own kind would irretrievably condemn him.

Simon's gaze fixed itself on his face, searching, concentrated, tense with suspense. And suddenly Neil yielded.

"You win," he said. "I'll stay."

CHAPTER XXIV A CROSS-THREAD

Nicolette arrived at The Friary within a few days of having invited herself there, accompanied by a trunkful of ravishing frocks and a long-suffering maid. She and Miguel, it appeared, had had dancing engagements almost every night during the London season, and she was looking a trifle tired and overwrought in consequence. But beautiful as ever. In fact, Shirley was inclined to think that the slightly fine-drawn look for which a heavy season's work was responsible rather added to than detracted from her appearance, lending a certain illusory spirituality to her features.

"This is a beautiful place," she declared, as Shirley, having escorted her to the room allotted for her use, lingered there chatting. "Thank God, my dear parents-in-law have at last decided to quit the chilly north." She had slipped off her travelling frock, and now lifted bare white arms above her head, stretching herself luxuriously, with all the feline grace and satisfaction of a cat which approves of its surroundings. "It's really quite ideal here for a holiday—although deadly dull, I should imagine, for keeps."

"How were you able to fix up a holiday now, before the season's over?" inquired Shirley practically.

Nicolette's long, golden-brown eyes regarded her with mild amusement.

"By the simple process, my dear, of not booking any engagements for these few days. I left the space vacant on purpose."

"And does Miguel like that?"

"He doesn't. But he has to put up with my little vagaries—if he wants me for a dancing-partner."

"I wonder if you will ever marry him?" asked Shirley suddenly, thinking, with a flash of sympathy, of poor Romana's manifest devotion.

"Marry him?" Nicolette sat up in her chair abruptly. "Good gracious, no! Miguel would be a perfect tyrant as a husband. Besides, I'm not in love with him."

"Aren't you, really? Yet he's terribly in love with you."

"Well"—the dancer sprang lightly to her feet—"his ardour's not reciprocated, anyway." Then her eyes clouded curiously. "No," she added rather tensely. "I'm not in the least in love with Miguel."

She proceeded to saunter aimlessly about the room, pulling open a cupboard door here, altering the position of an ornament there, stooping over this or that bowl of flowers to inhale their fragrance.

“Have you nice neighbours here?” she asked presently, coming to a halt beside the window and looking out over the fair expanse of parkland to where, in the haze-blurred distance, she caught glimpses of an occasional country house, red-roofed or gray, nestling amid surrounding trees.

“We hardly know yet,” returned Shirley, smiling. “Remember, we’ve only very recently arrived. But my friends, Simon Drake and Kit Harford, live here, and they say there are plenty of nice neighbours around.”

“Those are the people you were with at Port St. Luc, aren’t they?” said Nicolette, nodding. “Lucky for you, having them so close at hand. I’d like to meet them.”

“Oh, you will, of course,” answered the other. She paused, hesitating a moment. Then she went on slowly: “There’s someone else here, too—someone you know already. I expect I’d better tell you, because—well, it’s rather awkward, really, his being here.”

Nicolette swung round from the window.

“Someone I know?” she said quickly, a queer little thrill in her voice. “Who—is it?”

“Neil Kenwyn.”

“*Neil!*” The word seemed to leap from her lips, and a flush of vivid colour ran up under her clear skin. Then, as though conscious of the betraying flush, she forced a laugh. “That’s rather a good joke on the part of Fate, all things considered, isn’t it?” she said. “How did it happen?”

Shirley explained the circumstances, supplementing the information with Sir John’s ultimatum on the subject. It almost seemed as though a faint sigh of relief escaped Nicolette at this latter intimation.

“That simplifies matters, doesn’t it?” she said. “Because, naturally, I should want to be able to see Neil.” She eyed Shirley challengingly. “You know, we are old friends, we two.”

Somehow these words seemed to Shirley as though they were meant to shut her out—asserting a definite assumption on the dancer’s part of a greater right to be acquainted with Neil than any she could possibly have. And, as the days went on, it was forced upon her that this was exactly what she had been intended to understand.

Nicolette lost no time in arranging matters so that she should meet Kenwyn again at the earliest possible moment. She insisted that Shirley should take her to East Wyck Manor the very next day. "I must meet these charming friends of yours," she declared. And Lady Beth, glad of anything that might serve to keep this volatile daughter-in-law of hers entertained, innocently seconded the proposal.

"Why, yes, my dear, I think that would be a very good plan," she said. "Mrs. Harford and her brother are both delightful people. I should like you to get to know them while you're here."

Accordingly the two girls motored across to the Manor, and very shortly after their arrival Shirley discovered that Nicolette was arranging to walk down with Simon to Old Wyck Farm immediately after tea.

"I adore tramping over fields," she asserted. "And of course I want to meet Neil again. You see," she explained frankly to Drake, "I had no quarrel with him, and I've never seen any reason why I should be influenced against him by my respected father-in-law's attitude."

All of which struck Shirley as quite kind and nice of her, and Shirley, left alone with Kit, mentally decided that Nicolette's handling of the situation had been masterly. She had no wish herself to seek out Neil again. Meeting him was too fraught with pain, since there could never be anything—not even friendship—between them. For you cannot perpetually simulate friendship where you love; whatever guard you may put up to keep the deeper emotion at bay will slip and betray you sooner or later.

Nevertheless, the hour she spent alone with Kit held its own hurt. Do what she would, she could not free herself from the knowledge that even while she was chatting with her about old times at Port St. Luc, about the Somervilles, the Corner Cottage—supplying the various small details of her new life which might interest her—Nicolette was with Neil.

Unconsciously she pictured it all—the old farmhouse living-room, simple and austere, exactly as she had seen it on that day she had gone there unawares, Neil clad in a tweed coat and breeches and leggings, just as he had come in, probably, from riding over the farm—unseen herself, she had once caught a glimpse of him like that—and Nicolette, like a slender-winged firefly in her diaphanous summer frock, flitting hither and thither, a pervasive spirit of femininity in that plain masculine abode.

There were to be many subsequent occasions when Shirley's mind was to re-create this same picture. As the days went on, she discovered that

Nicolette frequently contrived to absent herself from the family circle at The Friary. She always had some cast-iron excuse for doing so. Either she was tired and was going upstairs to lie down, or she wanted to practise some new steps before her mirror—would Lady Beth give orders that she should not be disturbed? She could never rehearse a dance properly if she were liable to interruption—it made her nervous. And so on. But on one occasion, when the dancer was duly supposed to be reposing on her bed, Shirley, who had walked over to have tea with Kit, chanced to catch sight of her slim figure in the distance, crossing one of the fields of Old Wyck Farm, side by side with Kenwyn. And, after that discovery, she shrewdly suspected that very often when Nicolette disappeared from the family ken it was in order to go and visit Neil.

The thought of it fretted her. All her old doubts returned upon her in full force—the doubts she had had to contend with at Port St. Luc, when she had first learned that these two knew each other, had seen the obvious agitation which their sudden meeting had caused them both, and had watched Neil go into the Hôtel des Anglais while Nicolette waited for him on the balcony above.

Over and over again, against her will, the thought returned: Had she been right in her original surmise that in the past they had once cared deeply for each other? Even Neil's attitude toward herself seemed rather to give colour to the idea. So often, since she had known him, what he had bestowed with one hand he had taken away with the other—had afterwards revoked, as it were, the love he had so plainly indicated, implying that something held him back, must keep them forever apart. Could that something be an earlier bond betwixt him and Nicolette?

That Nicolette cared for Neil, Shirley felt inwardly convinced—loved him with all the passion of her wayward, undisciplined nature. Not infrequently she would come back from her surreptitious visits to Old Wyck Farm visibly athrill with some suppressed emotion, invested with that kind of inner radiance which the mere presence of the man she loves will sometimes wake in a woman. Or, alternatively, she would now and then return nervy and depressed, her brown-gold eyes full of a queer mingling of resentment and dogged determination. Oh, yes, Neil was the man she loved! Of that Shirley was beginning to be sure. And if she had any lingering doubts they were very shortly to be swept away by someone as intimately concerned in the matter as she herself.

CHAPTER XXV MIGUEL'S RETURN

Nicolette's visit had prolonged itself from "a few days" into practically three weeks when, without any warning, a disturbed and impetuous Miguel suddenly presented himself on the scene.

The day this occurred Shirley happened to be in the village, executing various small commissions for Lady Beth, and as she emerged from the local grocer's shop the station omnibus, drawn by a lethargic-looking horse, crawled slowly past her. The next moment she became aware of someone shouting imperiously to the driver to stop, and looking round, perceived to her astonishment a familiar head and shoulders thrust out of one of the vehicle's open windows, whilst its owner was using his best endeavours to arrest its progress. Apparently his purpose penetrated the lethargic horse's intelligence before it did that of the driver, for the animal came hopefully to a standstill, and the bucolic Jehu's attention was only attracted in time to see his solitary passenger, a slender dark-haired young man of obviously foreign extraction, leap to the ground, suitcase in hand.

"Miguel!" exclaimed Shirley in amazement, as he rushed up to her. "You're the very last person I anticipated seeing down here. Is Lady Beth expecting you? She never mentioned it."

"No. I'm not going to The Friary," he explained hastily. "I'm going to put up at the village pub—there is one, I suppose?"

He was looking thin and worried, Shirley thought, his dark eyes restless and burning.

"Of course there's a hotel of sorts," she answered. "But why didn't you let us know you were coming? Lady Beth will be terribly hurt if you stay at the hotel."

"I didn't let anyone know," he rejoined, "because I wanted to take Nicolette by surprise. She runs down here for a couple of days—and stays three weeks! Writes that she's not well enough to come back to London!" He had put his suitcase down on the cobbled pavement, and was gesticulating excitedly. "And I want to know the truth. Is she really ill? Why won't she come back? Have I offended her in some way? God in heaven! What has gone wrong?"

He was obviously in a state of desperate anxiety and tension, and his words came pouring out. Shirley involuntarily drew back a pace, somewhat startled by such an outburst, and seeing this he made an effort to subdue his vehemence.

“Please tell me, Shirley,” he begged simply, like a child only asking to be reassured. There was something rather pathetic about him at that moment, as he stood beside her, his dark eyes eagerly searching her face, and her heart sank. She knew there was so little reassurance she could give him.

“Nicolette’s quite well,” she answered baldly.

“Then what is the matter?” he demanded, flaming up once more into excitement. “I’ve had to put off first one engagement and then another, and I can’t even make any fresh bookings because I don’t know when she will return. Do you know if she is angry with me about anything?”

“No, I don’t. She’s not taken me into her confidence if she is. Look here, Miguel, don’t you think you had better come straight back with me to The Friary? I’m sure Lady Beth will want you to stay there rather than anywhere else. Then you can see Nicolette yourself, at once—I left her in the garden.”

He reflected a moment, then nodded.

“Very well, I’ll do that—come back with you. Is there a boy anywhere about who’d carry my bag?”

He glanced round impatiently and a small urchin, who had been only waiting for the opportunity, his shrewd young eyes hungrily fixed upon Romana’s suitcase, detached himself from a group of his fellows and eagerly offered his services.

As they made their way toward The Friary, the small ragamuffin with suitcase complete bringing up the rear, Shirley mildly endeavoured to lead Miguel’s thoughts into some other channel than that of Nicolette’s behaviour, and she had at last reduced him to conversing quite peaceably, when, all unwittingly, she roused him to a fresh outburst of fury.

“By the way, if you’re going to stay at The Friary, you may as well know that Neil Kenwyn is living in the neighbourhood—so, of course, we all have to be rather tactful about it. But I dare say Niki’s told you that?”

Miguel stood still abruptly.

“Told me!” he cried out. “No, she’s not told me!” He threw back his head and laughed bitterly. “Now I understand why she ‘wasn’t well enough’

to come back to London! Now I see why she, who detests the dullness of the country, is willing to put up with it for so long! Oh, *mon Dieu!*” He seized Shirley impulsively by the arm, propelling her onward. “Hurry! Hurry!” he insisted feverishly. “Let me see her—let me see her, and tell her that I know.”

“Good gracious, Miguel!” she exclaimed, hurried along willy-nilly. “What on earth is the matter? Niki won’t run away before we get there.”

His dark eyes glowered down at her, but he made no effort to reduce his pace.

“She won’t run away—after,” he said significantly. “Neil! *Peste!* Why need he have come here?”

“Why shouldn’t he?”

Romana halted once more.

“Don’t you understand?” he broke out impulsively. “She’s in love with him—always has been. And he with her, curse him! Now, come on!” And, thrusting his arm through hers, he once more hurried her along as fast as possible.

Shirley made no further effort to talk. For one thing, the pace Miguel had set left her little breath for speech, and for another his last utterance was ringing in her mind like the clapper of a bell—insistent, ceaseless, striking on the same nerve every time.

“*She’s in love with him—always has been. And he with her.*” A dozen words—and with them it seemed to Shirley as though a black shutter had suddenly descended, blotting out the whole of life. At least, the whole of everything that mattered in life. They epitomized the secret fear which had tormented her, converted the doubts which had assailed her into dreadful certainties. Only now did she realize that until this moment she had still subconsciously clung to some faint hope that she was wrong—had still believed it possible she might be mistaken as to the feeling which bound Neil and Nicolette together. And now, with a single stroke, Miguel—Miguel, who had known them both so intimately years ago—had cut this hope out by its very roots.

It seemed as though everything had become all at once very clear to her, terribly clear, the scattered pieces of the puzzle fitting together with a deadly accuracy. Kenwyn and Nicolette had evidently loved each other once, and parted—perhaps in consequence of that unknown something which had spoiled his career. Then, later on, she herself had come into his life and he

had learned to care for her. For he *had* cared—she had that knowledge still to comfort her. Then, unexpectedly, Nicolette had reappeared upon his horizon, been thrust into his proximity once more by the turn of events. And the old love had surged up again, stifling and crushing out the new.

Shirley walked silently along at Miguel's side, absorbed in bitter thought, and it was almost with a shock of surprise that she realized they had passed through the gates of The Friary and were making their way up the avenue. They found Sir John and his wife pacing contentedly up and down the flagged terrace, arm-in-arm, enjoying the sunshine. Both halted with astonishment at the sight of Romana, and Lady Beth gave a cry of pleasure.

"Why, Miguel!" she exclaimed, leaving her husband's side and hastening forward to meet him. "This is a very charming surprise."

Romana swept off his hat and raised her still pretty hand to his lips. As he bent his dark head over it, with an unconscious faun-like grace that was characteristic, Kit's description of him flashed back into Shirley's mind: "He's like a dark-haired Greek god!" And she could not help wondering how Nicolette, with her pagan delight in beauty, could remain unmoved by the worship he was ready to pour at her feet.

"Dear milady"—Miguel was greeting Lady Beth in his soft southern voice—"you are always so kind. For me, far more than for you, it is charming to meet again. You are better—well?"—his quick glance flashing questioningly over the gentle face which still bore signs of delicacy.

"I'm *quite* well again," she asserted firmly. And then drew aside to allow her husband to welcome the new arrival.

Sir John greeted him with a blunt kindness. When first he had made Romana's acquaintance he had regarded him with a mixture of suspicion and contempt, inspired partly by his half-foreign blood and partly by his choice of a profession, and had been wont to refer to him as "that damn dancing-fellow." But Miguel's unforced charm, his transparent sincerity, whether boyishly gay and enjoying life or roused to a temperamental passion of anger, had entirely transformed the autocratic old gentleman's first impressions, and now he welcomed him with genuine cordiality.

"Always glad to see you here, Miguel," he said. "If we'd known you were coming, we'd have sent to meet you at the station and saved you a tramp."

"I didn't mean to trouble you," explained Romana quickly. "I intended to stay at the inn, and then Shirley insisted I should come here."

“But of course!” chided Lady Beth. “You don’t mean to say you thought of staying at that dreadful little hotel in the village? You absurd boy!” Her kindly hospitality was outraged by the bare idea.

“I wasn’t sure if you would want me,” he answered rather shyly. “I didn’t know what other visitors you had. And I thought you mightn’t have so many rooms to spare as at the Towers.”

“Of course we want you,” rejoined Lady Beth. “And even The Friary has several guest-rooms.” She paused, then added with a twinkle of mirth in her soft eyes: “You’ll find Nicolette in the walled garden.”

Miguel’s face altered like a summer sky when a sudden tempest arises.

“You’ll excuse me, then,” he said, with a little foreign bow—by a trick of phrase or manner here and there his Spanish blood occasionally betrayed itself. His eyes were stormy as he turned to Shirley and asked: “Where is this garden? Which way?”

She showed him, accompanying him down the path that led to it, and as she left him at the gate she wondered a trifle ironically what kind of welcome he would receive.

He discovered Nicolette reclining in a *chaise-longue*, a gaily-coloured parasol held over her face to keep off the burning heat of the summer sun. As his shadow fell across her feet she idly twisted the sunshade to one side and glanced up from underneath it to see who the newcomer might be.

At the sight of Miguel she sprang to her feet with a startled cry. For a moment her face went milk-white and her long, brown-gold eyes, staring at him, glowed with sudden anger. She lifted her hand almost as though she were going to strike him.

Romana stared back, an equal anger in his own eyes.

“Yes. It is I,” he said grimly.

While he spoke she seemed to pull herself together. Slowly, with a lazy, impertinent grace, she furled her sunshade and regarded him with delicate inquiry.

“And why are you here?” she asked.

“‘Why am I here’? Is that your welcome?” he said unsteadily. The mere sound of her voice shook him—shook him momentarily out of his anger. His gaze melted, resting adoringly on every lovely line of her.

“It wasn’t intended as a welcome,” she answered with the utmost coolness. “I don’t know”—consideringly—“that you are particularly welcome just now. You see, I’m taking a holiday and I don’t want to be reminded of—work.”

“Is that all I represent to you? Work?” he broke out passionately. “I, who only live because I love you? My God, Niki! You’d drive any man mad!”

“I’m sorry. But, after all, it is our work that keeps us together, isn’t it?”

“No, it is not. It’s my love for you—and nothing else,” he retorted vehemently. “If it were work—why are you here? You said you were going to The Friary for two or three days. And what have you done? You’ve kept writing to me that you weren’t well enough to come back, that you were tired, that you must have more rest! Lies! Lies—every one of them!” He paused, then went on with rising indignation: “And I’ve had to lie, too—to break our contracts, to explain away your absence. To be fooled to the top of my bent—and all because that fellow Kenwyn is down here!”

Nicolette’s slender figure seemed to tauten.

“Oh, so you know that, do you?” she remarked indifferently.

“Yes, I do know it, now. But I might have guessed it before—knowing you! Nothing else would have kept you here in the depths of the country for so long.”

“No.” Nicolette gazed dreamily past him into space. “No. I suppose nothing else would. You see”—she turned back to him with a queer little smile—“you see, I love him.”

A smothered curse escaped him.

“And I suppose he loves you?” he rejoined bitterly.

Again her eyes turned to him. They held a curiously unwonted expression—a shy radiance mingled with a patience that was almost maternal in its tenderness.

“I think he does,” she answered simply.

“You think? You *think*?” A new light sprang into Romana’s face, a light of unexpected hope. “And you’ll humble yourself to hang round a man whom you only ‘think’ may love you? A man who is under a cloud—and deserves to be!”

She flashed round on him defiantly.

“How do you know that? You *don't* know any more than any of us know. He did something foolish, probably—and Sir John hounded him out of England in consequence. That's all you know!”

“It's quite enough. Sir John would never have fired him out of his job without good reason—he's not that sort. I should say”—Miguel paused, then spoke deliberately—“I should say, from all one hears, and from the fact that he cleared out of England in such a hurry, Neil had probably been juggling with his accounts.”

But the contemptuous accusation left her indifferent.

“I don't care two hoots *what* he's done,” she asserted calmly. “I think you're very likely quite right in your idea. He had charge of all Sir John's affairs—I know that. So he'd have every opportunity.”

Miguel stared at her in stupefaction. Nothing he could say seemed to move her. His weapons, one by one, snapped off useless in his hand.

“Are you trying to tell me that you're in love with a common swindler?” he demanded with angry scorn.

“I'm in love with Neil,” she answered tranquilly. Adding, after a pause: “Isn't that sufficient for you, Miguel? Don't you think you'd better go back to London and find another dancing-partner—or else confine yourself to solo dancing—until I know whether I'm going to win or lose down here?”

Her small head was flung back, defying him, and the sheer, calculated impertinence of her suggestion roused him all at once to fury. With a sudden movement, swift and supple as a tiger-cat's, he came to her side and snatched her up in his arms, lifting her clean off the ground, so that she hung helplessly in his grasp.

“You—little—devil!” he said slowly, between his teeth.

Then he bent his head and kissed her, on mouth and eyes and throat, with a deliberate, concentrated passion that held something triumphantly—frighteningly—possessive about it, as though it were his right and he were affirming it—a right which no man should take from him.

When he released her, setting her on her feet again, she shivered slightly. Even her cool nerve was shaken. He regarded her with a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

“You shouldn't make me do these things,” he said apologetically.

She looked at him curiously, as though uncertain how to deal with him. The odd, incalculable mixture of man and artist and child that was Miguel often left her confounded and perplexed.

“What do you mean to do?” she asked uneasily. “You’re not going to stay here—at The Friary?”

He bowed, still with that flicker of amusement in his eyes. But his mouth was steady—very steady.

“Yes,” he said. And it was the man Miguel who spoke this time. “Yes, I’m going to stay—stay and see that you don’t marry Neil Kenwyn.”

CHAPTER XXVI A MATTER OF MONEY

Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since Miguel's unheralded advent at The Friary, and to all outward appearance it had made no difference to the smooth running of affairs in general. Lady Beth, with whom he was always a favourite, pressed him to stay as long as he liked, and he had promptly accepted her invitation and sent to London for some further contents of his wardrobe—"Since," as he remarked, "a solitary suitcase cramps one's style."

The initial storm which had occurred betwixt him and Nicolette had simmered down, as all their previous storms had done, leaving little apparent trace behind it, and on the surface they were perfectly good friends. She alone knew that what he now gaily described to everyone as his "summer holiday" covered a definite and unswerving intention, and that, as far as she was concerned, he was determined to act as watch-dog.

In all other respects he was a delightful and rather endearing visitor—ready to discuss politics and the prospects of the potato crop with Sir John, or to dance attendance upon Lady Beth, frequently contriving to bring unexpected laughter into her wistful eyes by his half-quizzical, half-tender humour. And he popped in and out of Corner Cottage at any moment that the spirit moved him thereto, as innocently confident of his welcome as a child might be.

Simon and Kit both fell to his spontaneous charm at once. It had become something of a custom for them and for the Wilsons to forgather at The Friary once or twice a week, joining the Somervilles in their after-dinner coffee, which was always served on the terrace these warm summer evenings. On such occasions, Miguel, having swallowed his own coffee at a gulp like a thirsty schoolboy, would slip back into the house through the open French windows and seat himself at the piano. And presently the music which came streaming from the tips of his wonderful musician's fingers would drift out on to the still evening air, until gradually the cross-fire of friendly chatter on the terrace died into a listening, magic-filled silence.

Neil had been quite right, Shirley sometimes reflected at these times, in describing Romana as a very fine musician. He might equally as well have adopted music as dancing for his profession. Probably it was merely the fact that his father had been a dancer before him which had made him choose the latter. All emotional art appealed to him, giving him the wherewithal to

express the passionate, uneasy soul within him, and Shirley often wondered what woman would ever have the infinite patience and understanding, the threefold love of mother, wife, and mistress, to respond to all his needs. Of a certainty, not Nicolette.

The latter had appeared to be considerably subdued by Miguel's advent. She had not dared to make any further opportunities for slipping secretly across to Old Wyck Farm. In consequence, she had only seen Neil once or twice—and then not alone—if he had chanced to be at the Manor on an occasion when, together with Shirley and Miguel, she had gone there at Kit's invitation. And a shadowy, haunted look had taken birth in her eyes. Sometimes, after such a meeting, they even seemed to hold something of that same quality of aching wistfulness so apparent in Lady Beth's.

To Shirley, as well, these accidental encounters with Neil were fraught with very mingled feelings. It was true that she had schooled herself to meet him quite composedly, just as an ordinary acquaintance, and it seemed that he, too, had imposed the same obligation on himself, so that a curious neutrality apparently prevailed between them. But sometimes, when they were exchanging the customary small-talk of two people meeting at the house of a mutual friend, she felt tempted to burst into wild, hysterical laughter, or else to cry her heart out—she didn't know exactly which.

Other things, in addition, contributed to the tension of her nerves. The consciousness that Neil was living near at hand, combined with the fact that occasionally they were bound to meet—even though not under Kit's hospitable roof, a chance encounter had occurred more than once in the streets of Beriscombe—made the rigid silence regarding him imposed upon her at The Friary a matter of deliberate effort nowadays. It is very difficult persistently to avoid mentioning the name of someone who is thrust by circumstances frequently into one's thoughts, and involves a constant mental watch and guard that is in itself a severe strain.

There was also another factor in her environment which exerted a fretting influence on Shirley's nerves, although quite unconsciously to herself, and that was the obvious inclination for each other's company which was beginning to manifest itself between Kit Harford and Bob. Very often, it appeared, when the latter had ridden or motored over to the big market town of Berihampton, about ten miles distant, on business for Sir John, his return journey had led him past East Wyck Manor. It meant taking the longer of two possible routes, but the explanations Bob offered to his sister were always convincingly casual. Either he had been executing some small shopping commission on Kit's behalf and had called at the Manor "to

deliver the goods,” or else, perhaps, he had happened to come across Simon, several miles from home, taking a constitutional on foot, and had given him a lift back.

And at other times, when The Friary and the Manor people forgathered together for mutual diversion, Kit and Bob in some mysterious way invariably appeared to gravitate toward each other. On one occasion, indeed, when a picnic on Dartmoor had been the order of the day, they had completely vanished from the ken of the remainder of the party very soon after lunch, and only reappeared shortly before it was time to be making a start for home, tendering the time-honoured explanation that they had lost their way, “and tramped—oh, miles!” as Kit emphatically declared.

It was on this same evening that Bob confirmed what Shirley had been inwardly suspecting—the fact that he had fallen head over ears in love with Kit. The brother and sister were strolling in the Cottage garden together, both smoking, when all at once he flung his cigarette away, half finished, into the bushes.

“Money is a curse!” he announced suddenly.

Shirley flashed a fleeting glance of amusement at him.

“Is it?” she said quizzically. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you give vent to such an opinion.”

He laughed a trifle forlornly.

“No. I used to think it could get you all you wanted. It never struck me that it could come between you and what you want.”

Her heart melted at the note of bewildered, boyish trouble in his voice, and the mirth faded out of her eyes. They had always stood by each other. He needed her to stand by him now.

“And is it doing that?” she asked gently.

“Yes. You may as well know, old thing. You’d guess, even if I didn’t tell you, I expect.”

“Still, tell me,” she persuaded.

He hesitated a moment. Then at last he spoke rather awkwardly.

“Well, if Kit weren’t a rich woman, she’s the woman I should ask to be my wife.”

Shirley was silent for a few minutes, recollecting the very real cynicism and distrust of men which had at one time underlain Kit's superficial mockery. During the weeks which had elapsed since they had all been together at Beriscombe, she had watched it gradually melting away—seen her natural charm and kindliness of nature slowly but surely coming out on top. And now this acknowledgment of Bob's made the reason clear. For no woman is unaware of the fact when a man begins to care for her, and there is a sweetness in being beloved which infallibly acts as a solvent upon acquired hardness and bitterness of spirit. Kit, Shirley reflected with an inward gleam of humour, was probably as aware as Bob himself of what he wanted to ask her—and of the reason which held him back.

"I'm quite sure that she wouldn't let any consideration of money enter into such a matter," she assured him quietly.

"But *I* should!" All Bob's arrogant young pride of manhood concentrated in his swift reply. "A man in my position can't ask a wealthy woman to be his wife."

Shirley's gray eyes regarded him with mild surprise.

"You don't mean to say you'd let that stand in your way?"

"It isn't a case of 'letting' it. It simply does stand in the way. No man with any decent self-respect, who has nothing but a small-salaried job of his own, can ask a rich woman——"

"What utter rot!" Shirley broke in impetuously. "No decent man would ask a rich woman to marry him just because she was rich, I grant you. But neither would any decent man let her money stand in the way if they both cared for each other. If he cared enough, he'd swallow his beastly pride and not allow two people's lives to be spoiled because one of them had some money."

She paused, breathless, and it was Bob's turn to look amazed.

"Do you really mean that, Kiddy?" he asked curiously.

"Of course I mean it."

"And do you think," he paused, "that other women would look at the matter in the same light?"

"I don't know about 'other women.' You can't lump us all together in one big generalization like that. But I'm quite sure of this: That a woman who really cared about a man, and knew that he really cared about her,

would think of it that way. Why”—with increasing ardour—“it would be perfectly idiotic to consider her money before her happiness!”

Shirley spoke with conviction—conviction born of the weary knowledge which had been forced upon her that there were many mightier things than money which could separate two who loved—intangible things which no one could control.

Bob pondered what she had said in silence for a while.

“I wish I could believe you were right,” he said, at length. “But, you see, it’s even more difficult to think of it that way in regard to Kit than lots of other women. She—she had such a bad knock with Harford. And it’s left her distrustful.”

“Naturally,” agreed Shirley rather dryly. “And that’s what you’ve got to get over with Kit. It won’t be easy for her to trust a man a second time. It’s up to you to make her trust you. And you won’t do that by letting your pride—because you’re not well off and she is—stand in the way.” With which sage final piece of advice she bade him good-night and departed to bed.

But not to sleep. When your own love affairs have gone completely awry, the process of taking an intelligent and sympathetic interest in someone else’s is apt to prove a somewhat painful one, too full of sad reminders. And now, to Shirley’s already sore and lonely heart, was added the prospect of still further loneliness. She had lost Neil; soon she was going to lose Bob, too. His happiness and Kit’s—for somehow she knew that happiness was waiting for them round the corner—would be always before her eyes, throwing into sharp and shadowed contrast her own lack of it, emphasizing her own desperate loneliness of soul.

For the first time her courage began to fail—that courage to meet life which Nick Wyatt had instilled into her. Hitherto she had pluckily contrived to bear the constant strain of Neil’s being so near and yet so infinitely far away, of the Somervilles’ blank wall of silence concerning him, of Nicolette’s carefully schemed visits to Old Wyck Farm, where she herself had never yet set foot a second time. But all the while she had had Bob with her—someone she loved to think for and look after, to spend herself upon. They had grown up together, rarely separated throughout their whole lives, sharing good luck and bad as it came their way, and they had been bound to one another by a deeper and more complete devotion and understanding than are most brothers and sisters. And now she was to lose Bob—step aside and surrender him to another woman, just as she had had to surrender Neil to Nicolette.

She felt as though she were encompassed by a ring of spears, all with their points directed toward her—whichever way she turned there was something that stabbed and hurt. It was no use trying to stand up against them any longer. She must escape, get away, seek some other place where she would not be eternally reminded of all that she had lost—of all that she had missed in life.

CHAPTER XXVII THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

It was a glorious afternoon. From far below, at the foot of the cliffs, came the pleasant murmur of a lazy summer sea. Overhead, white, filmy drifts of cloud floated leisurely across the deep blue August sky, while underfoot the dry, springy turf of the downs yielded as softly to Shirley's footsteps as cushioned velvet.

But neither the beauty of sea and sky nor the flood of golden sunshine which bathed the country-side brought her any wanted thrill of pleasure. She seemed completely oblivious of her surroundings and walked onward with bent head, her face set in lines of conflicting thought. She had sought the wide expanse of downland simply for the sake of the solitude it promised—a solitude wherein she could think things out, weigh the pros and cons of the idea which had sprung suddenly into her mind last night, following upon her talk with Bob—the idea of escape from her present surroundings.

Life, as she lived it now, had become too hard for her. Hardly a day passed without bringing its sharp reminder of what might have been, of that wonderful holiday in France which could never come again and which had left a sting and bitterness behind it that would last for all time. Even this afternoon, less than half an hour ago, in her search for the solitude of the great headland, she had caught a distant glimpse of Old Wyck Farm. And the mere sight of its white walls and yellow-thatched roof—the walls and roof which sheltered the man she loved—had brought her a sickening pang. It was as though a hand had laid hold of her heart and given it a sharp, agonizing twist.

And the worst pain of all was still to come, when Nicolette should tell her—as inwardly she felt quite sure that one day she would—that she was going to be Neil's wife. A certain type of woman would have fought Nicolette with every weapon in her armoury when she realized that the man she loved was torn between an old love and a new. But that woman was not Shirley. She had been too proud, too sensitive, to lift a finger on her own behalf. Hurt and bewildered, she could only shrink into herself—stand aside and endure the slow crucifixion of gradual and inevitable loss.

But she felt that at last she had reached the limit of her endurance. Threatened now with the ultimate loss of Bob, she realized that when this happened there would be nothing left for her, nothing to keep her at Beriscombe except her warm affection for Lady Beth. But she knew that the

latter could easily find someone else to take her place, and as far as she herself was concerned, although it would be a big wrench to part from the Somervilles, it seemed the only thing to do. She would go, leave The Friary, and find work in some other place—some place where there would be no reminders. It would be easier to start life all over again—steadily and deliberately to put the past behind her.

Her decision once taken, she was conscious of a curious sense of relief. Also conscious that, absorbed in her thoughts, she had walked a considerable distance and was feeling proportionately tired. A deep dip in the ground, curving gently downward to the edge of the cliff, offered an inviting resting-place, and rather wearily she sank down upon the soft, cushiony grass which carpeted it. Lighting a cigarette, she relapsed once again into her thoughts, her eyes absently watching the little spirals of smoke as they floated upward from its smouldering tip.

She wondered what Nick Wyatt would have thought of her resolve to leave Beriscombe. Would he have called her a “quitter”? Blamed her for running away from things that hurt? His blunt, breezy philosophy, that bulldog tenacity of his, seemed very far away these days. She wished unspeakably that he had never gone away on that “biggest adventure of all,” but were still beside her to cheer and counsel—to let her lean her tired and troubled spirit against his strength. A wave of indescribable loneliness came over her. Bob and Kit, Neil and Nicolette, Lady Beth and Sir John—each of them counted above everything in the world to someone else, whereas she felt that she herself mattered to nobody in particular—counted for nothing very much in anyone’s life.

She brushed her hand almost fiercely across her eyes, ashamed of the tears which misted them.

“Shirley, my dear, it’s time you started to walk home,” she apostrophized herself sharply. “You’re getting maudlin.”

Tossing away the end of her cigarette, she sprang briskly to her feet and was on the point of setting off on her return journey when a sudden ominous sound arrested her. It was distant but unmistakable—the thud of a horse’s hoofs, hoofs beating the ground in reckless, panic-stricken speed. Her glance strained in the direction whence the sound seemed to come. For a single instant she could see nothing more than the undulating downland—tenantless and deserted. The next, over the brow of the nearest slope streaked a riderless brown horse, galloping toward her like a mad thing,

empty stirrups banging at his sides, reins swinging dangerously in front of him.

She recognized the horse—Satan, a hot-tempered four-year-old which she knew Kenwyn had been schooling latterly. Neil's horse. . . and that empty saddle! . . . A sharp cry of horror tore its way between her lips.

The terrified beast was heading straight for the brink of the cliff, thundering along at a terrific pace, and she watched him helplessly—rocketing toward what must mean certain death. He flashed past her. Then, as though some instinct warned him of the hidden danger close at hand, the big horse suddenly reared straight up into the air and tried to swerve. Untrammelled, he might just conceivably have saved himself, but bridled as he was he had no chance, and his forelegs, pawing the air convulsively, caught in the dangling reins that hung in front of him. With a scream of terror that seemed to rend the air with its sheer agony, he pitched forward and toppled headlong over the edge of the cliff.

For a moment Shirley remained stock still. She felt unutterably sick, shaken with the shock of horror. Then, slowly, she forced herself to walk toward the place where the animal had disappeared, and, lying down flat on the ground she peered over the cliff edge. Far below, where the little waves rose and fell softly on the shingly beach she could discern a dark, crumpled-looking blotch of something that had once been a horse. With an uncontrollable shudder she drew away and rose to her feet again. At least she could thank God that the man she loved had not been on the poor beast's back when it plunged helplessly into space.

But she realized that Neil must have been thrown, and might yet possibly be lying somewhere, hurt or unconscious. She set off running in the direction from which the horse had come tearing toward her, hoping against hope that when she mounted the next slope she would see Neil himself hurrying in pursuit of his truant mount. The rising ground compelled her to slacken her pace, but at last she scrambled to the crest of the incline, whence she could see clear across the intervening downs to where the pasture-fields and cultivated land of Old Wyck Farm began.

There was no sign of anyone coming in search of the runaway horse, and she halted, raking the wide expanse in front of her with eyes that held an unutterable fear. Then she drew a quick, sobbing breath. Far away, under a hedge that fenced one of the green pasture-fields, she could discern a man's figure lying prone upon the ground—motionless.

She started running once more as fast as she could. Sometimes she tripped over a bit of rough ground and nearly fell; sometimes an upward slope forced her back into a walk. But she still went on, desperately, stumbling, her heart pounding painfully in her side. And at last, her breath coming in laboured gasps, she fell on her knees beside that still figure on the grass.

Neil was lying on his back, arms outflung, his eyes closed, and for one awful, anguished moment she thought that he was dead.

“Neil! Neil!”

All the long pent-up love in her heart rushed out in that agonized cry. Fumbling with terrified urgency, she thrust her hand inside his shirt to feel if his heart yet beat, and when the throb of it came reassuringly against her palm she gave a convulsive sob of relief.

“Oh, my dear! . . . Thank God!” she gasped. Every vestige of pretence torn from her by the raw agony of those moments when she had believed him killed, she stooped her face to his and kissed him with all the passionate, worshipping thankfulness of a woman whose beloved has been given back to her from the arms of Death.

And it was just at this moment that Kenwyn returned to consciousness—groping his way dimly back from the darkness that had followed swiftly upon that final buck of Satan’s wicked, twisting body which had unseated him and flung him clean out of the saddle.

He stirred, and presently, opening his eyes, gazed vaguely up at Shirley’s face as she crouched at his side, bending over him.

“Neil!” she whispered hoarsely. “Neil, are you hurt?”

His eyes closed again for an instant, then opened once more, blinking rather dazedly at her. Finally he spoke.

“Why am I lying here?” he questioned, a slow bewilderment in his tone.

“You’ve had a fall—Satan threw you,” she replied. Then, her voice breaking suddenly: “I thought you were killed!”

He made an effort to sit up, and with a quick movement she slid her arm underneath his shoulders, supporting him.

“Tell me, where are you hurt?” she asked anxiously.

His eyes sought her face in a rather puzzled fashion.

“I’m not hurt. Why should I be?” he answered. “Do tell me, what am I doing here?”

“I think you must have been exercising Satan,” she explained, speaking very slowly and clearly so that the meaning of her words should penetrate his befogged consciousness. “And then he threw you and bolted.”

All at once a look of understanding dawned in his face.

“Jove, yes! I remember. The devil was bucking like a broncho and got me off.”

He tried to raise himself, but Shirley’s eager arms prevented him.

“Don’t! Oh, don’t try to get up yet!” she besought him nervously. “You must be hurt somewhere.”

He shook his head. Complete consciousness had returned to him now, and gently putting her arms aside he scrambled to his feet. She sprang up instantly, ready to support him if necessary, but he appeared to be entirely unharmed and not in need of any assistance.

“No. I’m not hurt,” he said. “Only a bit bruised and sore”—with a wry smile. Then, regarding her curiously: “You look rather white. Were you very frightened?”

“I—I thought you were dead,” she said chokily. “I saw Satan had bolted. And then—and then I found you—lying here.”

Neil glanced toward the downs.

“I wonder where the brute’s got to by now,” he remarked grimly.

“He’s dead. . . killed,” she answered, shivering in spite of herself. “He went straight over the edge of the cliff.”

“Did he?” Instinctively his eyes sought the distant rim of the headland. They held an odd expression, vaguely resentful. “Pity he chucked me off beforehand,” he said, with quiet bitterness.

He spoke abstractedly, as though for the moment he had forgotten her presence. But the vision conjured up by those few bleak words of his was too much for her, coming on the top of all that she had been through.

“Don’t—oh, don’t!” she cried. And suddenly broke down into shuddering sobs, hiding her face with hands that trembled uncontrollably.

For the fraction of a moment he stared at her dumbly. Then, with a single stride he was beside her, drawing those small, shielding hands of hers down

from her face with an exceeding gentleness.

“Shirley. . . beloved. . .” His voice was unsteady—shaken with a deep, unspeakable longing. “Oh, my dear, do you care so much as that?”

“*Do I care?*” She was at the end of all concealment—could no longer pretend or deny the love which she had fought against so long. “*Do I care?* Oh, Neil, you’re killing me. . . . I can’t bear it any longer. I can’t—I can’t!”

“But, Shirley, you know why——”

She nodded.

“Yes, I know. There’s Nicolette. You loved her first—before you met me.” She rushed on recklessly. “And now she’s come back, and I don’t count any more. But I can’t bear it, Neil—I can’t, indeed. And so I’m going away——”

“Going away?”

“Yes. Going to some place where I hope I’ll never see you again. I know this is all wrong—that I’ve no pride left to let you see I care when you don’t care any more——”

“When I don’t care!” With a swift, impetuous movement he swept her up into his arms and pressed his mouth passionately to hers. “Darling—dearest, don’t you understand? Don’t you *know* that you’re the one woman in the world to me?”

She leaned her head away from him so that she might see his face.

“But—but Nicolette?” she stammered incredulously.

“Nicolette?” His voice held honest amazement. “You surely don’t imagine I’m in love with Nicolette?”

“Yes, I thought you were. Before you knew me—and now, since you’ve met her again. She often comes to Old Wyck Farm”—jealously.

“Poor Niki!” he said. “Yes, she has often been to see me. We’re old friends——”

“She doesn’t think of you as a friend,” flashed back Shirley swiftly.

“No,” he answered quietly, his face grave. “She doesn’t. But need we talk of that?” he went on, with all a decent man’s instinct to shield a woman who has given him her love unasked. “Does it matter—since you are the only woman I love, or ever shall love?”

It didn't seem to matter very much at the moment, with his arms holding her so closely. Nothing mattered except that they loved and were together. She felt all at once amazingly light-hearted.

"Then why have you behaved so badly to me all this time?" she demanded with mock indignation.

His face darkened, and unconsciously his clasp of her relaxed a little.

"You know why," he said. "I daren't give myself the right to behave in any other way. I've told you—I'm an outcast."

"You're not! Or if you are, then I'll be one, too!" she answered. "Now that you've told me you care, now that you know I care—nothing is going to separate us, Neil."

A little whining breeze ran past them, presage of the dying day. The sun, sinking slowly toward the horizon, dipped behind a cloud, and the long shadows cast by the tall hedge under which they stood deepened suddenly around them. Involuntarily Shirley shivered.

"Neil——" His name broke from her like a low cry of foreboding. "Neil——"

Slowly he released her from his clasp and drew away from her.

"I think I must be going mad," he said. He brushed his hand across his eyes. "That fall knocked all sense out of me. . . . Listen, Shirley. I'd no right to tell you what I *have* told you. . . that I love you. I'm not a man any woman can ever marry. I've no future. . . . Try to understand—and forgive me."

He turned as though to go, but she caught him by the arm and held him back. She was not going to let happiness slip away now that she knew it was his happiness as well as hers. She faced him bravely.

"You're a man I can marry—in fact, the only man," she said steadily. "I'm not bothering about your future—anyhow, it will be *our* future, and we'll make it a good one. I know you say you spoiled your life in the past. I don't care if you did. We'll make the future different—together. Now"—eyeing him with a glorious defiance in her clear gray eyes—"are you going to send me away, after that?"

"I must," he said, his voice wrung. "I never meant you to know how much I cared. I thought you'd forget me, after St. Luc—that we should never be likely to meet again. And so you'd be safe. Then you came to Old Wyck Farm that day. And I tried to make you think I didn't care."

“And you almost succeeded,” she said, “when you told me to consider the letter you’d sent me—unwritten. But now I shan’t ever believe again that you don’t care. So what are you going to do about it?” And she smiled up at him, a small gamin smile tinged with gentle amusement. Utterly secure, now, in her knowledge of his love, she was determined that no silly scruples he might have should come between them again.

“Dear,” he said, his eyes desperate, “what can I do? I’m not going to spoil your whole life by marrying you. I’m Drake’s farm-manager. And I shall never be anything else—or better. The past stands in the way of my ever making a decent place in the world. I’m an outsider—and I’ve got to remain one. But I’m not going to ask anyone to come and join me outside—outside everything that really means life.”

All the mirth had gone out of her eyes now, and, as she lifted them to his, they were serenely tender and courageous. She stretched out her hands to him with a gesture of indescribable sweetness and appeal.

“But supposing I would rather be ‘outside’ with you than ‘inside’—alone?”

He made a movement toward her—the instinctive movement of a man who longs to fold his woman close against his heart. Then checked himself abruptly.

“Impossible!” he muttered.

But she swept his doubt aside.

“It’s not impossible. Oh! Can’t you believe me? It’s just the simple truth that I’ve been telling you.”

Still he hesitated, fiercely holding on to his self-mastery, although in his eyes a great, unbelievable hope was slowly dawning.

“Have you realized it all, Shirley? Listen—and for God’s sake try to understand what you’d have to face! First of all, you’d cut yourself off from your friends—from the Somervilles. You’d be marrying a man who—in England, at any rate—could never come out into the open and build up a future as other men do. And you’d have to remain in ignorance of the reason why. That would always have to be something I couldn’t share with you—and a secret between a man and his wife is a rotten rock to build on. There should be none. But, whatever happened—even if we married and you became my other self in everything else—I could still never tell you what took place in the past. The matter involves someone else, and my mouth is closed—now and always.”

“I don’t care,” she answered steadily. “I don’t even want to know what you did. And I’m ready to give up any friends who give me up. All that matters is you, and me—and our love. Nothing else.”

Her face was transfigured. A mystic mingling of love and faith and utter self-surrender shone in it. For a long moment he searched it, hardly daring to believe the truth. Then, convinced at last, he drew her into his arms and kissed her on the mouth—a kiss that held all the supreme passion of possession and the profound tenderness and worship which is man’s love for woman.

“Beloved!” he said. “Beloved!”

And with that word against her lips Shirley knew that the final barrier which he had striven so long to hold between them was down at last. The way to happiness was open.

CHAPTER XXVIII DEBT AND DISHONOUR

“What was it you wanted to talk to me about, dear?”

Lady Beth, sitting knitting by the open window the following morning, looked across at Shirley with gentle eyes of friendly inquiry. The girl was standing leaning against the window-frame, her face wearing the rather worried expression of someone who does not quite know how best to broach a particular subject. Her lips parted once as though she were about to speak, then closed again irresolutely.

The frail little lady sitting opposite her smiled.

“I don’t think you need be afraid to tell me about it, whatever it is,” she suggested. “I’m not a very awe-inspiring person, am I?”

Shirley’s frank young gaze rested on the faded rose-leaf face affectionately.

“You’re a perfect darling,” she said bluntly. “That’s just the difficulty. I’m afraid what I have to say will—will disappoint you.”

A sudden light of intelligence came into Lady Beth’s eyes. She had observed various little matters since they had come to live at Beriscombe which had more than once suggested a certain possibility to her mind—a possibility which had given her considerable inner satisfaction notwithstanding that it would involve a definite loss to herself.

“Perhaps it may disappoint me—in one way. But not in another,” she said cryptically. “Shall I guess what it is?”

“I don’t think you could,” rejoined Shirley doubtfully.

Lady Beth smiled again—a small, pleased smile of secret amusement.

“Let me try. Old people like me have opportunities for observation which you young folks miss,” she said. “We’re not so busy *doing* things, you see. Now, am I very far away from what you want to tell me if I guess that a certain somebody has asked you to marry him?”

A swift rush of colour flew up into Shirley’s cheeks; the guess had been so surprisingly near the mark. And then, as Lady Beth, watching that tell-tale flush, went on speaking, every drop of blood gradually drained itself from the girl’s face and she stood staring at the older woman in piteous consternation.

“Well, my dear,” Lady Beth had continued happily, “it will mean losing you, I know. But not altogether. East Wyck isn’t so very far away from The Friary, is it? And there’s no man in the world I would more gladly trust you to than Simon Drake.”

“Simon?” gasped Shirley.

“Yes”—nodding. “I’ve seen all along that he cared for you. It was written in those nice gray eyes of his whenever they looked at you—and a woman who has once been loved can always interpret that look, even when it’s for another woman. The only thing I wasn’t sure about was whether you were as fond of Simon as he is of you. And I’m so glad, dear child, so very glad to think that you are.”

“But I’m not! And—and it *isn’t* Simon!” Held silent by sheer dismay while Lady Beth had been speaking, Shirley at last found her voice, and blurted out the truth. “It’s not Simon. It’s Neil Kenwyn.”

For an instant Lady Beth gazed at her as though she thought she must have heard the girl wrongly.

“Neil?” she said at last, whisperingly. “Oh, no, not Neil?”

And when Shirley nodded wordless assent, all the brightness, the secret glow of inward satisfaction which had illumined it, died out of her face, leaving it puckered with distress. With an immense effort she pulled herself together.

“You can’t marry Neil,” she said slowly. “You can’t—possibly—marry him.”

“I shall never marry anyone else,” answered Shirley.

Lady Beth clasped her hands tightly together and her knitting slid to the floor, the needles clattering on the polished wood, making a sharp little staccato sound like vindictive laughter.

“You had better never marry at all than marry Neil,” she said, with an unusual note of decision in her soft voice. “He will only break your heart—as he did mine.”

“Yours?”

“Yes, mine.” She paused a moment, then gathering her frail strength together, she went on earnestly: “I see I must tell you the whole story. You *can’t* marry Neil—you must know the whole truth about him.”

“Tell me, then,” replied Shirley simply. “But, darling Lady Beth, I don’t think it will make any difference.”

“It will. It must. . . . Listen. I told you long ago that I had no child of my own for many years after I was married. I thought I never should have one. And so it came about that we adopted Neil, who was the son of my dearest friend. She and her husband were crossing to America. Gerald—the husband—had an uncle there, Silas B. Harkman, who had offered him a job in his own firm. The Kenwyns were terribly hard up—Gerald was a bit of a ne’er-do-well and hitherto Mr. Harkman had always declined to help him. This was to be a sort of trial, and as the Kenwyns weren’t sure, therefore, that they would settle permanently in the States, they left their small son, Neil, in our care. He was such a darling. . . .” She broke off, her eyes filling with sudden tears. This looking back over the years that had gone was very full of pain, but for the sake of the girl beside her she was prepared to go through with it.

“I suppose that was the great-uncle who left Neil a legacy,” remarked Shirley inconsequently. It was odd that this little connecting fact was the first thing that leapt to her mind. Then, seeing how much this delving into the past was costing Lady Beth, she said hastily:

“Don’t tell me any more. It’s only hurting you unnecessarily.”

But Lady Beth shook her head.

“I must tell you the rest. Gerald and his wife were both drowned at sea. Their boat was wrecked on the way to America, and so it seemed quite natural that we should keep their son with us. Mr. Harkman refused to do anything for the boy; he had no other relations and had been left entirely penniless. And meanwhile John and I had grown to love him as much as though he were our own child. Even when my darling Ronny came, five years later, it made no difference. We had our two boys, instead of one—that was all. Then, when he grew up, Neil became John’s secretary and agent—his right-hand man—and we trusted him completely, just as one would trust one’s eldest son.”

“Well?” queried Shirley doggedly, as she paused. “Are you going to tell me that he wasn’t to be trusted?”

“Yes. It’s—it’s terrible to think of, but it’s quite true. He wasn’t. Of course, he was always a bit wild and extravagant—he inherited that from his father. Indeed, both he and Ronny were terribly fond of gambling—horse-racing and cards. But lots of young men are that, and John and I didn’t mind

it, in a way. We could afford to let them have good allowances, and we thought they'd settle down as they grew older.

“Then Ronny married, and Nicolette proved to be even wilder and more extravagant than they were. My husband paid their debts several times, and at last told them all three that they were going too far and that he would pay no more debts for them. So when Neil came to him one day and asked for a quarter's advance of his allowance, because he was again in debt, John refused point-blank. He and I were going abroad for a short trip, just at that time, and I remember so well his saying to me: ‘Neil must be made to pull up. He'll have learnt a lesson by the time we come back. There's nothing like going short for a few weeks to teach you the value of money.’

“And then, when we came back, the first thing we were greeted with was a cheque for a hundred pounds, payable to ‘Self,’ drawn and endorsed apparently by my husband. It had been cashed, but it appeared that afterwards, comparing the signature with his, the bank had doubted its genuineness and had written to him about it. . . . The signature was a forgery.”

“But that doesn't say that Neil forged it!” broke in Shirley almost violently.

“It *was* Neil who had forged it. John feared so at once, because of his having asked him for money to pay off some pressing debts and having been refused. He wrote to him asking if he could tell him anything about it—Neil was in London at the time. And the reply we had was a confession.”

“A confession?” The word broke incredulously from Shirley's lips. She had listened more or less quietly and composedly to Lady Beth's narrative. Proudly sure in her own heart of Neil's absolute innocence of that of which he had been accused, she had waited quite confidently for the word “denial.” And she would have trusted blindly to his denial—challenged the whole world with it. But instead. . . confession! . . . *confession!*

“Are you sure—sure?” she insisted, still struggling against the terrible truth that was slowly forcing itself upon her. “You may have misunderstood him—been mistaken?”

For answer Lady Beth got up and went to her writing-bureau—the bureau whereon Ronny's photo stood. Unlocking it, she took out a small flat tin box, and opened this with a tiny key that was attached to a long chain which she always wore round her neck and from which were suspended, as well, an old-fashioned ring and a small gold and ivory cross. From the tin

box she withdrew a single sheet of note-paper and handed it to the girl in silence.

The handwriting on the paper was unmistakably Neil's. Shirley recognized it at once. And then the few brief phrases of the letter seemed to burn themselves into her brain.

“Yes. I am responsible for the cheque. I realise now of what I have been guilty. Will you consent to see me and let me try to explain how such a thing happened?”

“NEIL.”

“You see?” said Lady Beth, in a quiet tone of resignation—the sorrowful resignation which time had taught her. “You see? He acknowledged it. . . . I wanted to destroy that letter, but John refused to let me. All he would agree to was that I myself keep it amongst my private papers, where no one could possibly see it without my knowledge and consent. Everything in this box”—touching the tin box from which she had taken the letter—“is to be destroyed unread at my death.”

“But the explanation?” cried Shirley, pointing to the last lines of the sheet she still held. “He said there was an explanation! You don't mean—Sir John didn't refuse to see him? He couldn't have been so cruel!”

“Oh, no. John interviewed him a few days later. But not immediately, because we were overwhelmed by such deep trouble. The selfsame morning that we received Neil's letter came a telegram bringing us the news of Ronny's death. . . . I shall never forget that day. Everything we loved and valued torn from us at once!” Lady Beth's face was white with the anguish of remembrance.

Shirley could vision it all with a terrible clarity—the telegram despatched from London overnight and being delivered, together with the morning letters, by the rosy-cheeked postman who daily carried the Somerville private mail bag to and from the village post office. She could see Sir John, just as she had seen him every morning at the Towers, unlocking the bag—it was quite a little ceremony—and solemnly distributing its contents to their various owners. And that morning Neil's letter and the telegram of death must have jostled each other side by side in the bag.

But there was something else she could dimly vision, too—something that touched her more nearly. The final interview between Sir John and

Kenwyn.

“What did Neil say? How did he explain?” she asked, her voice shaken with suspense.

Lady Beth stifled a sigh.

“My dear, you must try to bear it,” she said gently. “There was no explanation—except the obvious one that he was in pressing need of money, and as he couldn’t get it any other way he had forged John’s name. There was no excuse—no palliation. I was present at the interview between them—when Neil admitted everything.” Then for a moment her control deserted her. “And once—once he was just my own little boy!. . . Yet he could care so little—treat us who loved him like that!” With a visible effort she forced back the tears that threatened. “Oh, Shirley, there is nothing more bitter in life than to find that someone you’ve loved and trusted, and believed in and been proud of, is utterly worthless and disloyal. And it’s from that I want to save you. It’s for that reason only that I’ve told you the whole miserable story—to spare you the bitterness of such an awakening as I had.”

Shirley stared out of the window in silence. Her face was white and pinched looking. Even her lips seemed devoid of any colour. Presently she turned back again to Lady Beth.

“It’s too late to save me—that,” she said dully. “I love him.”

“But you won’t marry him? My dear, you can’t—you mustn’t!”

The girl shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I shall never marry him—now.”

She turned to leave the room, then, as though struck by a sudden thought, paused half-way toward the door.

“Has Neil been in prison, then—for forgery?” she asked.

“Oh, no, *no!*” Lady Beth assured her hurriedly. “Of course we never dreamed of prosecuting. John put matters right with the bank—acknowledged the signature as his.”

“I see. Not that it matters much—just the actual forgery or prison or anything like that.”

Lady Beth looked puzzled. It was generally conceded that such things as forgery and imprisonment mattered a good deal.

Shirley, seeing her mystification, smiled wanly, as she tried to explain.

“To me it isn’t so much what a person does that matters—it’s what makes them do it. You’d been so unutterably good to Neil—you and Sir John. Loved him so. And all he could do in return was to let you down. He—he couldn’t play the game by you. That’s what hurts.”

CHAPTER XXIX SET APART

It was very quiet in the living-room at Corner Cottage. A sudden heavy silence had descended upon it, broken only by small familiar sounds that drifted in through the open window—the murmurous cooing of wood pigeons in the trees, the distant whirr of a reaping machine, the cluck of an old hen who was conducting her brood of chickens on an illicit tour of exploration.

The afternoon sunlight flickered gaily into the room—dancing on brass and pewter—deriding the white, strained faces of the man and woman who stood there in silence, staring at each other across the impassable gulf which had suddenly yawned between them.

Very quietly, with a queer, dry-eyed composure which had surprised herself, Shirley had repeated all that Lady Beth had disclosed to her that morning, her words dropping like hard little pebbles into a dreadful pool of silence.

“So that’s the end of it,” said Kenwyn, at last. “The end of everything between us.”

“Do you mean that it’s *true*—all of it?” Only now did she realize that subconsciously she had been hoping all along for some impetuous denial, some swift self-vindication from him. “Neil”—with sudden violence—“there must have been some explanation. Some—some excuse, or reason?”

“There was none,” he said shortly. “None whatever. Did you ever really think there would be? I told you, as long ago as when we were at Port St. Luc, that I had made a hopeless mess of life—of my own and other people’s.”

“I know you did,” she answered very low. “But I never thought, never dreamed of anything—like this.”

“You thought I’d draw the line at forging another man’s signature, I suppose?” he said harshly. “Well, you see you were mistaken.”

“Oh, it’s not the actual fact that you committed forgery. I could have forgiven that, I think, if you’d forged anyone else’s name—not Sir John’s.”

A look of astonishment crossed his face.

“Most people regard forgery as a fairly serious offence,” he commented dryly. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you.”

“Don’t you?” A faint, very weary little smile crossed her face. “I didn’t mean that I regarded forgery, and stealing, and crimes like that, any differently from other people. I don’t. But I think they’re infinitely worse if they’re committed against a friend—against someone who trusts you. . . . The Somervilles had been such splendid friends—” her voice shook —“loved and trusted you and given you everything. . . . And you couldn’t even play the game by people who had been so good to you. That’s what makes it so—so horrible.”

She had put it very crudely—the sheer, blank recoil she felt. That fine, delicately tempered sense of honour and fairplay which Nick Wyatt had inculcated in her from her earliest childhood had risen up—a fixed, insurmountable wall betwixt herself and the man she loved.

“Anything else, Neil—*anything*—I think I could have forgiven,” she went on, a tortured look in her eyes. “But this makes you seem to me different, another person altogether—rotten inside, somehow. . . .” She broke off with a gesture of helplessness, as though she could not quite express her meaning.

“Thank you,” he said swiftly. “You’ve said enough. You needn’t try to add to it. I’m mud in your eyes—I see that. Well”—with a stark kind of bravado—“that’s so much to the good. You’ll be able to forget you ever loved me all the sooner.”

“Forget?” For an instant she lifted her eyes to his—eyes which held pain immeasurable, but no power of forgetting. Then she turned away from him and stood staring bleakly through the window, seeing nothing of the world outside but only a vision of that desolate inner world which faced her—a world where there would be nothing left but soiled memories. “No,” she said slowly. “I shan’t do that. I suppose I shall always love you—and I shall always feel ashamed of loving you.”

She did not see him wince, see the sudden white, drawn look which came into his face as she spoke. His lips moved, but no words came. He turned and walked quietly to the door, and the next moment she heard the click of the old-fashioned latch as it dropped back into its place behind him.

The sound seemed to sting her into realization that this was the end. She looked wildly round the empty room. He had only just gone. . . she could still call him back. She ran to the window, clutching its framework with

desperate hands, her gaze straining after him as he marched slowly and heavily across the adjoining meadow. But she did not call. No sound passed her lips, closed in a straight line of piteous endurance. All that Nick Wyatt had ever taught her held her silent.

So she stood and dumbly watched Neil's going, and presently the steep slope of the meadow hid him from sight. Then, with a little moan, she sank on to her knees, and it was thus that Bob found her an hour later, huddled against the wall, staring in front of her with dry, tearless eyes.

CHAPTER XXX ILL NEWS TRAVELS APACE

“I can’t believe it,” declared Kit blankly. “It all sounds like a horrible bad dream.”

It was the following day, and Bob, sorely troubled in spirit by the trend of recent events, had motored over to East Wyck, turning instinctively for advice and help to the woman who, although he had not yet dared to tell her so, had come to mean so much to him.

He had just finished pouring out the whole story of Shirley’s tragically brief engagement—one afternoon completely happy in the love of the man she was going to marry, the next morning set apart from him beyond all hope or remedy—and had added a short description of the subsequent interview which had taken place between himself and Sir John.

“I wish the dickens it were only a bad dream!” he burst out. “It’s knocked poor old Shirley all to pieces. The kid looks dazed—as if someone had hit her on the head.”

“It’s bad luck Simon’s being away,” observed Kit unhappily. “He’s always so splendid in any difficulty like this. Still, he ought to be here soon now. He’s been staying overnight with some friends in Exeter, but he’s sure to be back in good time to dress for dinner. I’d like to know what he thinks about it all. Bob, do you really believe it’s true?”

“There isn’t any doubt about it. Sir John went into the whole thing with me, told me all the facts. He was quite fair and impartial—not in the least violently prejudiced in the way he discussed it. Besides, I’ve seen the letter Kenwyn wrote. Oh, hell”—jumping to his feet and striding savagely up and down the room. “I’d like to horsewhip the fellow—give him the best hiding of his life!”

Kit flashed him a funny little smile.

“Only I don’t quite see Neil letting you do it,” she observed dryly. “He’s no coward, whatever else he may be.”

“He’s a damned scoundrel.”

“I wonder?” she said, her brown eyes thoughtful. “One sin doesn’t make a scoundrel—any more than one swallow makes a summer. . . . Do sit down,

Bob, instead of marching up and down like a regiment of soldiers. It's doing no good—unless it's relieving your feelings?"

She patted the empty place beside her on the divan and he came back and obediently re-seated himself.

"I'm sorry," he said repentantly. "Was I getting on your nerves? But I'm so sick about the whole business that I hardly know what I'm doing. Forgive me, Kit."

"Of course." She smiled at him with adorable understanding. "But don't you think you're looking on the very blackest side of things? I don't really see why Shirley shouldn't marry Neil and live happily after all."

"She doesn't want to marry him."

"Perhaps not—just now. She's had a shock. But when she gets over the shock Neil will still be Neil, you know—the man she's in love with," said Kit wisely.

"I wouldn't dream of allowing her to marry him, even if she were ever fool enough to be willing to," he rejoined with some heat. "Good heavens, do you think I'd let any sister of mine marry a cur like that? If she marries with my consent it's got to be a man of decent reputation."

Kit gazed musingly in front of her.

"Neil might still make a very good husband—in spite of his muddy past," she suggested. "Personally, I should never recommend a husband with a halo—it so soon falls off."

"Nonsense. You're just trying to be broad-minded and tolerant—because you've got the kindest heart in the world. Shirley wouldn't have an earthly hope of being happy with a man like Kenwyn. If he'd let down the Somervilles, who'd been so unutterably good to him for years on end, he'd let down anyone—his wife included. No, the man's rotten to the core."

She threw him a swift glance, tinged with the old familiar mockery.

"So many men are," she observed. "At any rate, in patches."

Bob's features clouded over. He faced round on her, an odd, boyishly hurt look in his eyes.

"Because one man has let you down—badly—need you tar us all with the same brush?" he demanded.

She was silent a moment.

“Answer me!” he persisted.

“I don’t know—oh, I don’t know!” she said at last, rather forlornly. “I wish—sometimes—that I were able to feel differently.”

“If I could only—if things were only different!” he broke out impetuously. Then, springing up again from his place beside her: “But what’s the good of talking? They never will be any different!”

“They might be, perhaps, if you weren’t so—so proud,” she suggested softly. “You’re rather a proud person, aren’t you, Bob?”

He looked down at her, all his fierce young pride and rebellion written in his face.

“Yes,” he said doggedly. “I *am* proud. Too proud, at any rate, to ask when I can’t give.”

A fugitive smile came and went in Kit’s eyes, and the corners of her mouth quivered almost imperceptibly. Then she glanced at the clock.

“Simon ought to be here directly,” she remarked. “I do wish he’d come.”

As though in answer to her thought came the sound of a motor purring up the drive, and a minute or two later Drake himself walked into the room. When he had greeted his sister and Bob there followed a pause—the awkward, difficult pause which precedes the telling of unpleasant news. Simon glanced with an odd kind of expectancy from one to the other of the two worried countenances which confronted him. Curiously enough, his own face also wore a gravely troubled expression.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded abruptly. “Has anything gone wrong?”

Between them they told him the whole miserable story, and as he gripped it, detail by detail, his expression grew ever graver and more concerned.

“So that’s what’s at the bottom of it!” he ejaculated, when they had finished.

Kit stared.

“At the bottom of what?” she asked blankly.

“Of the village gossip I’ve been hearing. Everyone’s full of it. I stopped at the post office on my way back, and almost the first thing the postmaster said to me was that ‘it was a sad thing about Mr. Kenwyn.’ I thought at first

Neil must have met with an accident. And then Farmer Westacott, who happened to be there, joined in and explained with much gusto that my farm-manager had been found out to be a thief and a forger. Of course, Westacott was delighted,” added Simon disgustedly. “The farmers round here all dislike Kenwyn because he’s not one of them—and farms Old Wyck so well that he puts them all to shame.”

“But—but how could the story have got out?” exclaimed Kit in astonishment. “No one knows anything at all about it except ourselves and Shirley, and the Somervilles.”

“Well, the whole neighbourhood will be ringing with it to-morrow,” returned Simon grimly. “I think I can guess how it’s happened,” he went on. “I challenged old Westacott as to where he’d got his information, and he said it came from one of The Friary staff—‘straight from the horse’s mouth,’ as he observed with unctiousness. Windows are mostly kept open this hot weather, and, I expect, if the truth were known, one of the gardeners overheard Lady Beth and Shirley talking.”

“Oh!——” A gasp of absolute dismay came from Kit. She realized instantly that this dissemination of the story—with all the lurid additions which it would probably gather on its way—must complicate matters disastrously. It would make it impossible for Neil to remain in the district—cut out all likelihood that he and Shirley would ever bridge the gulf that separated them. The healing qualities of time, the possibility that they might ultimately find a mutual road to understanding and forgiveness, would all be wiped out if they never met again.

“It’s the devil of a mess,” said Bob. “And the very last thing the Somervilles would have wished to happen.”

Simon nodded gravely.

“Yes, it’s meant reopening an unhappy past for them, poor things.”

“I suppose Neil will have to leave Old Wyck now?” submitted Kit rather wistfully.

“He’ll do as he chooses about that,” returned her brother. “I think I’ll walk straight down to the farm now and see him,” he went on. “I’m a bit afraid of how he may take this business.”

She glanced up at him, startled, divining his thought.

“You don’t mean you think he might—might try to shoot himself or anything silly like that?” she asked swiftly.

“You can’t ever say what a man will do if he’s pushed beyond his strength,” he answered. “And a gun accident is a very easy thing to manoeuvre.”

He turned to go, and she accompanied him to the house door.

“You don’t seem to worry much about Shirley,” she remarked, a note of reproach in her voice.

He looked at her curiously.

“Don’t I?” was all he said. Adding, after a moment: “There’ll be all the time there is to worry about Shirley. This is a first blow to her; she’ll weather it. It’s one more blow on the top of a dozen others to Kenwyn.”

And with that he was gone, striding across the gardens till he came to a side-path which offered a short cut to Old Wyck. As he approached the farm he discerned Neil pacing slowly up and down in front of the house, smoking a pipe. His head was bent as though he were engrossed in thought, and in the distance he looked so like his usual self that Simon breathed an involuntary sigh of relief. But when, at the sound of the gate’s opening, Neil glanced round toward him so that his face was clearly revealed, he was conscious of an immense sense of shock. It was lined and haggard as though the man had not slept for days and nights, and his eyes burned feverishly in their hollows. He greeted Simon jeeringly.

“Well?” he said. “The cat’s out of the bag at last! You’d better have let me quit when you came back from abroad, as I told you at the time.”

“I don’t see why,” replied Drake quietly.

“Why? Because it would have saved your having to kick me out now that you know the whole story. I suppose”—looking at him suspiciously—“you *do* know it?”

“Yes. I know it. The trouble is that everyone in the place knows it—or soon will. Someone must have eavesdropped.”

“That so?” Kenwyn shrugged his shoulders and smiled derisively. “‘Be sure your sin will find you out’—as we’re taught when we’re children. And mine’s found me out all right. I ought to have known it would if I came back to civilized life again.” He squared his shoulders defiantly. “That being so, I won’t trouble you long. Give me houseroom here until to-morrow, and then I’ll clear.”

“I shall be very sorry to lose you, Neil,” said Drake simply.

The other man stared at him.

“D’you mean it?” he demanded harshly. “Or are you merely trying to be funny?”

“I mean it. I don’t want you to go—unless you feel that you must. I’d be very glad for you to stay, but I leave the decision in your hands. Once and for all, will you understand that nothing that’s occurred makes any difference to me? You happen to be a man I trust and believe in. And you’re a friend of mine. At least”—with a whimsical smile—“I hope you are.”

Kenwyn turned away to hide the fact that his face was working. When he looked round again something that was hard and mocking and cruel had gone out of it.

“Drake, you’re an incredible fool!” he said unsteadily.

“Am I?” replied Simon with mild patience. “Maybe I am. But, if so, I’m too old to alter.”

“Who on earth wants you altered?” growled Neil. “If there were more men like you, perhaps there’d be fewer like me.” His eyes met Drake’s very directly—almost challengingly. “I’m sorry I can’t tell you I’m not guilty in the matter of that rotten affair. I wish I could.”

“I don’t want you to. I’m not asking anything about the past. I didn’t know you then. I do now, and what I know is enough for me. We’ve no right to other people’s pasts.”

He held out his hand and in silence the two men gripped.

“But, none the less, I must go,” said Kenwyn steadfastly. “You see that?”

Drake assented.

“I was afraid you’d probably wish to. But remember: The job’s still open, Neil—any time—if things come right for you.”

“They can’t,” answered the other. And on that note of quiet inevitability, which both men recognized, they parted.

CHAPTER XXXI NEIL'S LAST VISITOR

It was a very different Neil who reëntered the farmhouse after Simon had gone. The latter's visit had taken away part of the corroding bitterness which had been eating into his heart and had left behind a sense of confidence and trust that had done much to restore his mental and moral balance, and he set about packing up his belongings, in readiness to leave Old Wyck the following day, with a certain calm acceptance of things as they were which would have been impossible to him prior to Simon's advent.

By the time he had finished he realized that he was genuinely hungry, and, as the woman who came in daily to cook for him had long since gone home, he foraged in the larder for some food, and prepared and ate his supper—practically the first square meal he had partaken of for two days.

Presently, as he sat in the kitchen, brewing himself a cup of coffee, he heard a light tap at the house door. For a moment he thought he must have imagined it—for who would be coming to see him at ten o'clock at night? But the sound came again—tap, tap, tap—light, but yet conveying an imperative sense of urgency. He got up and went into the living-room, and as he entered it the knocking was repeated and someone outside fumbled nervously at the latch. He strode over and flung open the door, and, swift as a wild creature, a woman's figure darted across the threshold, the long fringe of the Chinese shawl which swathed it shimmering like strands of mist in the faint moonlight that drifted in through the open doorway. From beneath the shawl gleamed a gold frock.

"Niki!" exclaimed Kenwyn, staring at the unexpected apparition. "Niki!"

Nicolette nodded.

"Yes," she said. "It's me. Shut the door, Neil. I want to talk to you."

Her brown-gold eyes were peculiarly bright, shining with an almost feverish brilliance, and her face was very pale except for two vivid patches of colour high up on the cheek bones. Her russet-red hair had been lightly ruffled by the evening breeze as she had fled across the fields, taking all the possible short cuts betwixt The Friary and Old Wyck which she had learned in the course of her former visits to the latter. It flashed across Neil's mind that he had never seen her look more beautiful. Something, some profound emotion tinged with a lesser element of self than her emotions were prone

to be, had written itself on her face. It was as though a soul were struggling to life there.

“Shut the door,” she repeated, as he stood hesitating by the open doorway.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said, making no movement to obey. “You can’t stop here now. It’s getting late.”

“I know it is. But if you’ll shut that door, at least no villager passing by will see that I’m here,” she retorted swiftly.

Realizing that, discreet or indiscreet, she intended to remain where she was, he closed the door and came over to her side.

“Why have you come, Niki?” he asked gravely. “It was a most foolish thing to do.”

“Foolish?” A strange little smile curved her mouth. “Perhaps it was. But I’ve got beyond minding whether it’s foolish or not.”

“Someone else will mind, though. If Miguel discovers that you’ve been here it will make fresh trouble between you.”

“Miguel? What does Miguel matter?” With a quick, expressive gesture she consigned Romana to some unimportant place completely outside her present scheme of things. “*You’re* the only person that matters. I’ve heard everything, Neil,” she went on rapidly. “Everything! But I couldn’t get here—couldn’t come to you before. . . . Miguel again! He wouldn’t let me out of his sight. But to-night I gave him the slip. I’m supposed to be in bed with violent neuralgia.” She laughed with a gleam of genuine humour as she added: “I even went without my dinner to make it more convincing.”

“But, my dear girl, why? You can do no good by coming here—beyond telling me you’re sorry for me! And no one’s sympathy can really help one jot.”

“No.” Her voice vibrated, deepening to a low note of intense feeling. “No one’s sympathy. I didn’t come to offer sympathy.”

“Then why did you come?”

With a sudden passionate movement she flung aside the fringed shawl she wore as though it were stifling her, and it fell in a shimmering pool of colourful embroidery on the floor behind her.

“I came—because I love you,” she said simply. “Neil—no, listen to me!”—as he would have checked her. “I do love you—you know it as well

as I do. But before, there was Shirley. Now—she doesn't want you any longer. She's thrown you over, finished with you—just because you once did something reckless—wicked, if you like.”

“Yes,” he answered dully. “She's finished with me. You're quite right.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I'm going away. There's no longer any place for me in a civilized world. I've realized that. The back of beyond is the proper place for derelicts like me.”

“Then take me with you!” Before he could prevent her she had slipped to her knees beside him, flinging her arms round him. He could feel her warm, supple slenderness pressed up against him. “Take me with you, Neil. I don't care what you've done—or what you ever will do. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, live in a wilderness if you wanted it—anywhere, so long as I could be with you. Let me come with you—let me try to make up to you for all you've lost!” Her voice, queerly sweet and shaken with passion, implored him more poignantly than any words.

Stooping, he loosened the clasp of her arms from about his knees and drew her to her feet.

“My dear, it's impossible. You know it is,” he said, speaking with great gentleness. No man, as raw with pain and bitterness as he was, could have been anything other than inexpressibly touched. “You've done something that few women would have had the pluck to do, and I shall never forget it. But—forgive me, Niki—even though Shirley has finished with me, I shall never care for any other woman; just as I believe”—even more gently—“you will never care for another man quite in the same way as you care for me.”

“Never!” The word came chokingly, through quivering lips.

“Then you'll understand. It sounds silly to say I'm sorry. But God knows I am. If you could only find even a little happiness with Miguel——”

She gestured hopelessly.

“I shall never be happy—without you, Neil. I thought, perhaps, now you were quite alone and—and unhappy, you might be able to put up with me. . . . Make do, you know, with a second best,” she added, with a faint half-sad, half-bitter smile.

He turned away abruptly. That tragic little smile hurt.

“Oh, my dear,” he said at length, his voice unsteady. “No man ought to ‘put up’ with you. Some day you’ll meet one who’ll give his very soul to marry you, and then——”

“And then you think I shall ‘put up’ with him?” She shook her head. “No, Neil, I shall never do that. There’s only one man in the world for me, just as there’s only one woman for you. . . . There’ll never be any other—who counts.”

She stopped and picked up her shawl, flinging it round her bare shoulders with careless fingers.

“I’m going,” she muttered, moving toward the door and opening it. Then suddenly she paused and turned back to him, her hand still on the latch.

“No one can bear loneliness—always,” she said, speaking with a kind of reckless defiance. “One day you may want someone. . . some woman. If—if you do, let me come to you then, Neil.”

Then, like a slender flame in her gold dress, she fled across the threshold and out into the starry night.

It seemed very dark beneath the trees as Nicolette, panting a little with the exertion of her nocturnal cross-country walk, turned at last into The Friary avenue. The fields which she had traversed had been wet with heavy dew, and her thin evening shoes were clammy and sodden. She felt utterly exhausted—too physically weary to realize the deadly weariness of soul with which her visit to Old Wyck had left her. The future was blank. Just blank. She was dimly conscious that later on it would be shot with pain—tortured with a desperate, aching longing for the man she loved.

But that would come afterwards. All that seemed to matter now was to force her tired limbs to stumble along the last stage of her journey home. The avenue appeared interminably long, and the idea seized her that perhaps, absorbed in her thoughts, she had taken a wrong turning and entered some other gateway than that of The Friary. The trees, even, looked unfamiliar. Her imagination began to run riot. And when, having wandered from the middle of the roadway, she tripped and almost fell over the projecting root of a giant oak, a cry of real terror escaped her. The next moment she felt her arm roughly seized and held. Someone peered down into her face.

“God!. . . It’s Niki!”

Miguel's voice, hoarse with surprise and with a sudden furious suspicion, sounded in her ears. She tried to release herself from his grasp, but his hand only tightened on her arm.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "You were supposed to be in bed—ill."

A flash of her old spirit rose up to meet the impending storm.

"I might ask the same question: What are you doing here?"

"I came out for a breath of fresh air before going to bed," he answered levelly. "But that doesn't matter. What does matter"—and all at once his breathing became laboured and his voice grew harsh and overbearing—"what does matter is *your* reason for being here. What is it?"

Nicolette threw back her head.

"My reasons have nothing to do with you," she said defiantly. "They're not your business."

"I'm going to make them my business. Tell me at once where you've been. If you don't. . . if you lie to me. . ."

"Well? If I don't? Or if I lie?"

In the gloom she could sense his fury rising—rising like a flood that might presently overwhelm her. His other hand closed suddenly round her free arm and he held her as in a vise.

"I shall kill you one day, Niki—I know I shall!" he said between his teeth.

It was like the menacing growl of some baffled and savage animal. And for the moment the savage animal held her completely in his power. She recognized that Romana was in no mood to be played with. It would be better to let him have the truth—and have it quickly.

"Then—if you must know," she said, very clearly and distinctly, "I've been to Old Wyck Farm to ask Neil to take me away with him."

The storm broke then—a hurricane of mingled love and jealousy and bitter wrath, beating about her with a savagery that horrified and humiliated her. For once, as the tempest of words, brutal in their candour, broke over her, she saw herself as Miguel saw her, as other men had seen her—beautiful and predatory, taking all and giving nothing, selfish to the very centre of her being, driving them to madness. Only one man had never seen her so—Neil, to whom she had given her love as wholly and as recklessly as to other men

she had given torment and disillusion. And in that love she was to find the pangs of birth—the birth of a soul.

When at last Miguel ceased speaking, she stood quite still, making no effort to release herself from the grip of his hands. She felt half stupefied—stunned by the violence of his anger, by the ugly truth of his indictment. Then all at once she felt his grasp relax. He almost flung her from him, and a sudden animosity flared up within her. She took a step toward him, her hands stiffly clenched at her sides, her eyes blazing.

“This ends our friendship,” she said in a curiously controlled voice that covered an intense resentment almost equal to his own. “I’ll never dance with you again as long as I live. I’d rather never dance again at all!”

She turned and left him, making her way swiftly up the drive, no longer conscious of any bodily fatigue, upheld by sheer nervous force until she reached the house.

There was no one in sight as she entered it, and unseen herself, she mounted the stairs to her bedroom. Her breath was coming in curious suffocating jerks when at last she reached her own door, and she stood in front of it, swaying slightly. Then, with an effort, she pushed it open and closed it again behind her. The room was in darkness, and she felt blindly for the electric switch. But her fingers, suddenly nerveless, only scrabbled weakly against the wall. The next moment she toppled over on to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXXII SIMON'S ADVICE

It was with a heavy heart, the following morning, that Shirley set out on her customary daily walk from Corner Cottage to The Friary. Bob, to whom Simon had vouchsafed the information on his return from Old Wyck Farm, had told her that Neil was leaving Beriscombe to-day—and stumbled unhappily over the telling of it. And the realization that he was actually going—going completely out of her ken this time, once and for ever—had put the finishing touch to her desolation of spirit.

It seemed so queer, so *unbelievable*, that life would go on just as usual after he had gone! There would be flowers to arrange, letters and notes to write for Lady Beth, shopping to be accomplished—all the hundred and one small occupations that went to make up her daily existence. . . . But Neil would be gone.

With an effort she forced the thought into the background of her mind. There still remained her job in life—to make things easier and happier for Lady Beth. She would concentrate on that. It was at any rate something to live for, a definite object to set herself, and the kindness and sympathy of both Sir John and his wife during the misery of the last few days had been so understanding, and shown so touchingly, that it had deepened her already great affection for them.

With these thoughts in her mind she arrived at The Friary. Lady Beth and Nicolette had both breakfasted in their rooms and not yet made an appearance downstairs, she learned from a manservant who met her in the hall, and Sir John was closeted with his solicitor in the study. Having presented her with this information, the man paused and regarded her uneasily, as though there were still something else that he wished to say.

“Well, Barker, what is it?” she asked, smiling a little. Probably he wanted a few hours off duty and, since Lady Beth herself was not available to grant permission, he proposed to ask it of her deputy.

The man looked stolidly in front of him.

“Mr. Romana’s gone, miss,” he said at last.

“Gone? Gone where?” exclaimed Shirley in astonishment.

“To the station, miss, I surmise. He had his breakfast with Sir John as usual, and then a few minutes afterwards he came running downstairs,

carrying his suitcase, and marched straight out of the house. I took it upon me to ask him—seeing that Sir John was engaged in his study—if he wouldn't have the car, but he said 'No,' and gave me this letter for you, miss." And, with rather the air of a conjurer producing rabbits out of a hat, Barker whipped up from the hall table behind him a salver on which reposed an envelope addressed in Miguel's sprawling handwriting.

Shirley picked it up, and, conscious of the man's suppressed curiosity, took it into Lady Beth's sitting-room to read.

"I'm going back to London," ran the brief note. "If you want to know why, Niki can give you the explanation. Please break my sudden departure prettily to Lady Beth, Shirley my dear, and have the rest of my things packed and sent after me. I'm only taking a suitcase, so can't exist long on that.

*"Yours,
"MIGUEL."*

Shirley could not help smiling as she perused the letter. It was so exactly like Miguel to go off in that airy fashion, leaving the unpleasantness of explanation and the practical details of packing his trunk to someone else! She supposed he and Nicolette had had another of their frequent squabbles, presumably of larger dimension than usual on this occasion, and she forthwith made her way to the latter's bedroom.

Nicolette received her in a gorgeous painted chiffon *négligé* and waved her to a seat with the cigarette she was smoking.

"Good-morning," she greeted her carelessly. "You're rather an early visitor, aren't you? Sit down and have a smoke while I finish dressing."

But in spite of her apparent nonchalance, Shirley detected a forced, metallic note in the other's voice, and, although it was evident that a very careful make-up had been applied to her face, it yet had a drawn, pinched look and the eyelids were slightly swollen as if their owner had been weeping.

She handed her Miguel's letter.

"What explanation am I to give to Lady Beth?" she asked.

Nicolette's eyes flashed along the hastily scribbled lines. An ejaculation of annoyance escaped her.

“Why do people always want to wash their dirty linen in public?” she demanded irritably. “I’m going back to town myself to-morrow. He might just as well have waited and let us leave respectably together.”

“I suppose you’ve quarrelled again?”

“Yes. Do you also want to know why?”

There was something definitely defiant and inimical in the swift answer. It was as though Nicolette were daring her to ask the reason, and Shirley suddenly sensed that behind this quarrel between the dancers lay a more far-reaching motive than was usually the case—an element that impinged in some way upon her own affairs.

“Yes,” she replied. “I should like to know—if you care to tell me.”

Nicolette pitched the end of her cigarette on to the tiled hearth, where it smouldered slowly away into dead ash.

“I’ll tell you. But I don’t suppose you’ll exactly ‘like to know,’” she said. Her long hazel eyes regarded Shirley insolently between their faintly swollen lids. “Miguel’s enraged because I went to see Neil last night.”

“You went—to Old Wyck?”

“Yes. I went to Old Wyck,” answered Nicolette rapidly. “I suppose you know Neil’s leaving there?”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Well, I went to ask him to take me with him.”

An instant’s utter silence followed. Then Shirley spoke slowly and incredulously.

“You asked him to marry you?”

“Marry me!” Nicolette gave a low laugh, half-bitter, half-amused. “I shouldn’t care a row of pins whether he married me or not. I want to be with him—that’s all. I don’t suppose you’d understand—you, the woman he loves, who have chucked him over just because his past isn’t all it might have been. God!”—smiting her hands together—“imagine being loved by Neil—and sending him away!” She paused, breathing quickly, then flung out passionately: “Oh, you fool! You utter, narrow-minded fool!”

Shirley was white lipped, but she faced the other more or less composedly.

“Perhaps forgery and—and all the things connected with it in Neil’s case don’t matter to you,” she said coldly. “I don’t suppose you’d mind very much whether he’d played the game by people to whom he owed everything in the world, or not.”

“I shouldn’t,” acknowledged Nicolette. “If he’d been willing, I’d have gone with him if he’d committed a few other things besides forgery. I love him, you see.”

“And have you forgotten,” returned Shirley painfully, “that I, too, loved him?”

Once more Nicolette’s eyes surveyed her, this time with a kind of contemptuous pity.

“I suppose you must have—in your own way,” she said. “But you loved yourself more. You wanted your man all surrounded with a nice, tidy halo of respectability—a kind of sinless hero. I don’t. I just want him”—her voice thrilled warmly—“good or bad, I want him.”

Entirely primitive in her love, there was something almost splendid in Nicolette’s utter disregard of anything outside it. Her scorn of Shirley, for allowing principles of right or wrong to stand betwixt her and the man she loved, was obvious and sincere.

“Oh, go!” she burst out. “Go away! Whatever happens in the future, it will be all your own damned fault.”

Shirley left her, feeling curiously confused in mind. That Nicolette loved Neil she had long known, that she would be willing to take him from another woman—if she could—did not surprise her. But more than one of the dancer’s bitter thrusts at her, personally, had pierced deeply into the girl’s sensitive consciousness. “You loved yourself more”; “Narrow-minded fool. . . wanting a sinless hero.” Had she been to blame, then, in sending Kenwyn from her? Censorious? Narrow-minded, as Nicolette had said? At least, she told herself jealously, the other had been wrong when she had accused her of loving herself more than she had loved Neil. Making an end of things between them had been like tearing her heart out by the roots. In doing so, she had hurt herself as irretrievably as she had hurt him.

Gradually the sharp edge of these new thoughts wore off. With Nicolette’s departure to London Shirley found herself practically surrounded by people who thought as she did, who, even in face of all the misery it had brought, still considered that she had acted in the only possible way.

Once she had diffidently broached the subject to Bob, and he had summed up his opinion with very definite severity.

“It isn’t even only the fact of Neil’s having forged a cheque,” he maintained. “But it was such a particularly dirty job in every way. To repay years of kindness with an abominable trick like that! Besides, he’d always lived rather a wild life—and helped Ronny and Nicolette to do the same.”

“I don’t think Nicolette would want much helping in that direction,” she returned with bitterness.

“Well, Neil was old enough to have known better, anyway,” said Bob conclusively. “After all, Ronny was only a boy of twenty-two when he died, and Nicolette, too, was very young.”

Shirley sighed. Bob seemed to have grown a little away from her lately, to be less sympathetic and understanding than formerly. If she had stopped to reflect, she would have realized that just now he was very much absorbed in his own affairs—in his love for Kit and the utter hopelessness of his ever being able to marry her. But when one is very sad and lonely oneself, it is difficult to recognize that others may have their own sadness and loneliness to contend with, and during the ensuing weeks, feeling somewhat hurt by Bob’s attitude, Shirley withdrew into herself and brooded inwardly.

She was careful not to reopen the matter with Lady Beth. Indeed, the old custom of silence concerning the very name of Neil had resumed its sway at The Friary. And from one point of view Shirley was glad that it should be like that. It was easy to see how much the whole affair of her engagement to him and its breaking off had tried the frail little lady who had once loved him almost as her own son, thrusting the past vividly before her eyes again, and forcing her to go through the anguish of recounting Ronny’s death. At least, Lady Beth must be shielded from all further reminders, allowed to dwell only upon the happy and beautiful memories which had hitherto sustained and comforted her—her unspoiled memories of Ronny’s short and joyous and unshadowed life.

But, since it is given to few of us to be able to stand alone, to bear our burdens single-handed, the strain of inward brooding was telling upon Shirley. And at length Simon, who had a curious faculty for discerning when people were nearing the end of their tether, broke quietly through the silence in which she had enwrapped herself.

It was on a day in late September, when she had been to tea at East Wyck and he was seeing her home afterwards across the fields. He had

carefully steered a course which would not take them by way of Old Wyck Farm, but in the distance the house itself, closed and shuttered, was plainly visible. He watched Shirley glance toward it and then look away again quickly with a sudden sharp intake of her breath.

“Isn’t it getting any easier, child?” he asked, without any preamble.

She met his question frankly.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think it ever will.” Somehow she had never found it difficult to confide in Simon. His touch was so light, so tender, that there was never any need to keep things—things that hurt—secret from him.

“Then— isn’t there some other way?”

She felt his eyes upon her, questioning, suggesting, almost pleading. She turned impulsively toward him.

“Is there? Oh, Simon, tell me—have I been all wrong in what I’ve done—in sending Neil away?”

“Surely your own heart can answer that question better than I,” he submitted gently.

“You know how I feel,” she said swiftly. “That it was so shabby of him—so low down—not to play the game by people who had played it so wonderfully by him.”

“Yes, I know that. You feel quite sure he didn’t—play the game?”

She stared at him.

“Why, of course, there can be no doubt. He owned to everything—in that letter.”

“That’s true. Well, even if he didn’t——”

“Even if he didn’t?. . . Tell me, Simon, would you have sent him away—you yourself, I mean, in the same circumstances?”

“I didn’t send him away. I asked him to stay.”

“You asked him to stay—knowing what he’d done?”

Simon halted and looked down at her—looked down very compassionately at the thin, weary young face upturned to his.

“Oh, my dear,” he said quietly. “Life is so terribly short that when a sin has been sinned—and bitterly repented—do you think it’s worth while

throwing away all the present—friendship, and love—on to the ash-heap of the past?”

Shirley made no answer. Together they walked on in silence, and presently, when he spoke again, it was upon some totally different subject. He left her at the gate of Corner Cottage, and returned to East Wyck to find yet another tangle of human making awaiting him.

“Bob Wilson’s been here,” Kit informed him abruptly. “He only looked in for a few minutes on his way home from somewhere.” Then, after a pause, she added rather helplessly: “I do think men are fools.”

“Probably,” agreed her brother. “But what particular form of foolishness is Bob exhibiting just now?”

“You know,” she answered, tapping her foot restlessly on the floor. “You know without my telling you, Simon.”

“I’m not omniscient. Supposing you tell me—just in case I’m wrong in my assumptions.”

She flushed, hesitated a second, then plunged.

“Well, if you want it flat out: Bob is never going to ask me to marry him, simply because he’s not well off—and I am.

“And if he got over that fence—I grant it’s a stiff one—would you marry him?”

“I suppose I should. I seem to be very fond of him,” she replied, with a quaint note of bewilderment in her voice. “I can’t imagine why. I’ve had my matrimonial lesson once, haven’t I?”

“Don’t look back. Look forward,” he counselled.

“The only thing is,” she went on, nervously fingering the lapels of his coat, “if I *did* do anything so idiotic as to marry Bob, I should be leaving you all alone, poor old boy.”

He vouchsafed no answer. Perhaps inwardly he was facing that prospective loneliness.

“You know what I once hoped for you, Simon,” she went on wistfully. “Do—do you still care for Shirley?”

He smiled.

“Shirley and I are perfectly good friends,” he answered non-committally.

“Really only friends, now?” she persisted.

“Really friends.”

It was quite convincingly done, and Kit heaved a small sigh of relief.

“Still,” she said, rather unhappily, “even so, it means you’ll be rather lonely if ever I do marry Bob.”

Simon looked down at her with a wry wisdom in his eyes.

“There are always some people in the world who have to be lonely,” he said. A statement of one of the simple and inevitable tragedies of life which would have found a bitter echo in Shirley’s heart.

“That being so,” he added whimsically, “don’t add to their number by putting your own and Bob’s names down on the list.”

CHAPTER XXXIII KIT'S DAY

It had happened so suddenly that it was difficult to realize. Such a trifling accident—one which might occur a dozen times and have no ill result—just a false step and the missing of a single stair. Then a helpless pitching forward of the body . . . and death.

Shirley still sometimes felt as if it were all impossible—could never have taken place. Yet that was how Sir John had died. A brief flight of three or four stairs led from his bedroom into the adjoining bathroom, and in descending them one morning he missed his footing—stepped into the air instead of on to the next tread of the stairway—and crashed head foremost down on to the hard white tiles of the bathroom floor.

It happened on a very sunshiny day toward the end of October, the kind of bright, brisk autumnal morning when no thought of impending tragedy would enter anyone's mind, and now it was nearly two months since he had been laid to rest in the little churchyard at the top of the village street. It had been Lady Beth's own wish that he should be buried there.

"I shall never be able to live in the north again," she said. "So I'd like to feel that he's sleeping somewhere near until—until I go to him."

At one time, indeed, Shirley had thought that it wouldn't be very long before she fared forth, from a world that had grown too lonely for her, in search of her loved ones—husband and son. The shock of Sir John's death had been almost too much for her fragile health, and for a week or two she had hovered on the verge of collapse. But there was a very brave spirit in her delicately fashioned little body, and gradually she had rallied and begun to take hold of the reins of life again. Quietly she put her grief aside—at least, all outward manifestation of it—and showed the same kindly interest in everyone about her as she had been wont to do. Only sometimes it seemed to Shirley, catching her unawares when her face was in repose, as though she were only waiting—quite patiently and without protest—until the summons came for her and she could lay down the burden of life and pass on.

She was touchingly appreciative of the kindness and affection which was shown here.

"It's really amazing, Shirley," she said one day, "how much better and nicer people are than one sometimes thinks them. You and Bob, and that dear Simon and his sister—well, you've all been just what I expected, what I

knew you'd be to me at a time like this. But Nicolette! The sweetness and tenderness of her first letter, and the way she came down here at once, in spite of not being at all well herself! And even Miguel—queer, elusive kind of creature that he's always seemed—was as dear and understanding as my own Ronny could have been. And they actually made up their quarrel so that they could both come here and be with me! I feel as if I've misjudged those two dreadfully."

But the chief thing which upheld her was the unsullied memory she cherished of each of her two men.

"I've been wonderfully happy," she said on another occasion. "Happier, I think, than most women. Because neither John nor Ronny ever fell below my thoughts of them. I was able, always, to love them—and be proud of them. They never gave me anything to regret."

And Shirley, out of her own sad disillusionment, realized to the full how much—how infinitely much—that meant to any woman who loves.

Shortly after the death of Sir John, it had been arranged that she should leave the Cottage and take up her quarters at The Friary. She had gone there to begin with only temporarily, in order to be with Lady Beth through the first terrible days and nights which had followed upon the accident. But when the time drew near for her to return to Corner Cottage, Lady Beth had begged her to make her home with her altogether, and the older woman had seemed so in need of her, so frail and dependent and lost without Sir John, that Shirley had consented.

It didn't appear to her to matter very much, now, where she lived, except for the fact that Bob might be lonely without her. And then, while she was still hesitating, undecided as to where her real duty lay, something occurred which altered the whole complexion of affairs and left her free to do what Lady Beth had asked her. Kit Harford and Bob suddenly announced that they were engaged to be married.

Somehow, between them, they had learned what splendid fun it is to sacrifice a cast-iron determination for the sake of someone you care for. Bob had trampled his pride underfoot in consenting to marry a woman who was so much wealthier than he could ever hope to be, and Kit, the one-time mocking cynic, had found her faith again and made a present of it to Bob.

This new development helped considerably to lighten the gloom which had descended upon The Friary. The wedding was fixed to take place very quietly in the New Year, but the necessary preparations and the affectionate

interest which Lady Beth took in the subject of Kit's trousseau went far toward distracting the former from her own sad thoughts and turning them into happier channels, and she had insisted that the wedding lunch must take place at The Friary.

It was settled that Bob should continue to manage all the Somerville affairs, just as he had done when Sir John was alive, and, immediately it had been decided that Shirley should make her home with Lady Beth, Kit announced her intention of living at Corner Cottage after her marriage.

"If Nanny doesn't throw me out, I'm going to try the simple life," she informed Shirley gaily. "Keep chickens and things, and take up gardening. Of course, later on, we might move into a larger house, or even build a wing on to the Cottage. But we're going to start like that. Don't you think it's a top-hole notion?"

And Shirley, listening to her light-hearted babble, realized that beneath the suggestion, so inconsequently put forth, lay a fine and tender consideration for the man she loved. He was never to be allowed to feel the difference of their relative financial position until they were so in harmony, so completely one in understanding, that that difference had lost its power to hurt. She would go to him as any wife to any husband—live in his house, not hers. And later on they would learn how to share everything quite simply and enjoyably—material treasure as well as those things which cannot be reckoned in money.

It was a very simple ceremony in the village church which ultimately converted Bob and Kit into man and wife, with no one present except their own little intimate circle of friends and a few of the village folk who had slipped diffidently into the vacant pews to see the wedding of "young maister vrom Vriary."

Nicolette and Miguel came down from London for the occasion, prepared to stay for a day or two with Lady Beth. They had, as the latter had said, made up their quarrel to the extent of being on outwardly quite amiable terms with one another, but Nicolette, in spite of Miguel's supplications, still firmly refused to dance with him any more. She vouchsafed no reason beyond saying that she "felt rather fed up with dancing," which to poor Miguel sounded an extremely hollow and unsatisfactory explanation. He had essayed dancing with another partner, Estelle la Rivière, but had not found it a particular success. He was too temperamental to adapt himself to anyone else, and acknowledged it with rueful candour.

“I made a damn failure of it with Estelle,” he told Nicolette. “We couldn’t hit it off with each other. In doing a lift I always felt a wild longing to let her *drop!*”

But even this distressing picture failed to move Nicolette from her decision. At times Miguel was just like a big, hurt child over the matter, boyish and appealing; at others, he raged furiously. “I could wring your neck, you little devil!” he would scream at her, and Nicolette would merely respond by suggesting that he should confine himself to solo dancing for the future and add to his income by opening a school for students of the ballet.

However, when they arrived together for Kit’s wedding, it appeared to be the occasion of one of their rare intervals of mutual peace. Even had it not been so, the simple service, devoid of all extraneous trappings and display, would have subdued and mollified them. For they were each intrinsically lovers of beauty in all its forms, and whatever of outward show was lacking in the little church that morning the beauty of simplicity and sincerity was there.

Bob and Kit both looked extraordinarily happy in a tranquil, steadfast kind of way, and in the hearts of two at least who watched them taking those tremendous vows—so easily uttered and sometimes so immeasurably difficult to keep—new promptings stirred, odd doubts and wonderings arose. To Nicolette came a muddled realization of what had been the rottenness of her own attitude toward marriage. She recalled that Kit, too, had once known it as it ought not to be, and now, both in the expression of her face and of Bob’s, she caught glimpses of what might be its most exquisite significance. For the first time in her life it dawned on Nicolette’s tempestuous, passion-swayed mind that real love means self-sacrifice.

And Shirley, who had known Kit in earlier days, when bitterness and distrust had darkened her whole outlook and she had concealed her shrinking fear of life behind a shield of mockery and satire, recognized what a splendid “comeback” she had made. She was no longer afraid to risk everything once more for the sake of love—for the sake of living life to its fullest.

Against that, impelled by some strange inner force, Shirley was constrained to put her own reaction to the test which life had brought her. Compared with Kit’s joyful adventuring, the supreme gesture with which she had flung the past behind her, she herself had made an utter failure of things. Above all, she had failed Neil—she who should have been the one to stand by him unshakenly—failed him at the time when he needed her most.

If he had transgressed, at least it had been no transgression against her. And just when he was slowly and painfully emerging from the wreckage of the past, she had pushed him back into it—bound his sin securely on his shoulders and left him to it.

She was very quiet as she came out of church when the wedding was over, so quiet that Miguel rallied her about it. With an effort she forced her difficult thoughts into the background of her mind. This was Kit's day, and it must not be spoiled by the shadow of someone else's trouble. There would be plenty of time, later on, when bride and bridegroom had departed, to think about her own affairs. So she joined in the little flurry of fun and laughter which attends even the quietest of wedding lunches, and when finally Kit and Bob had driven away to the station, blissfully ignorant of the old shoe which Miguel had tied to the back of the car, she insisted that Lady Beth, who was looking very pale and tired, should go upstairs and rest.

Accordingly she escorted her to her room, tucked her up comfortably on a sofa, and descended to the hall again with the intention of rejoining the rest of the party. Apparently some discussion was in progress. As she approached, the quick give and take of voices came to her from the room where they had all been lunching. And then, following a brief silence, she heard Nicolette speaking, a curious new note of gravity in her usually careless tones.

"I wonder whether we make life—or are we all letting it make us? Drifting about like straws on a stream? Is that what's the matter with us nowadays?"

Shirley paused outside the room, listening with unconscious eagerness for the answer. It came in Simon's voice.

"Chiefly, I think, we want to have our cake and eat it. We're not ready to give up anything for anybody. And most of us want something—if not everything—for nothing."

"We're not ready to give up anything for anybody."

The words seemed to sweep through Shirley's mind like a searchlight, swift and steady and illuminating. And all at once she knew that she was ready to give up anything—everything—if only she might be with Neil. Nothing that he had done, nothing that other people thought, nothing in the whole world mattered except their love for each other.

Only she had found it out too late.

CHAPTER XXXIV A BLIND ALLEY

“Well, so everything’s over, Shirley. I think I feel rather as though there’d been a shipwreck and you and I were the sole survivors cast up on a desert island.”

Simon spoke with a kind of whimsical sadness, as if he were trying to make light of something that was inwardly hurting. A week had elapsed since Kit’s wedding had taken place, and an hour ago Nicolette and Miguel—whose visit had characteristically prolonged itself beyond the projected two days—had left for London. Lady Beth, as had become her habit latterly, had had her tea sent up to her own sitting-room. Since her husband’s death she had seemed to feel the need for an hour or two’s complete solitude and quiet each day, so now that Miguel and Nicolette were gone it came about that Simon and Shirley were sitting alone together in the firelit dusk of the afternoon. He had been almost a daily visitor at The Friary since the wedding, apologizing to Lady Beth for the frequency of his appearance there by laughingly declaring that he felt like a lost dog without Kit and hadn’t yet got used to the feeling.

There had been more than a substratum of truth in the explanation, and Shirley was conscious that the same sense of loneliness underlay the remark to which he had just given utterance.

“One always feels rather flat after a wedding,” she answered. “And, of course, you’re bound to miss Kit terribly. . . . You and I are both rather lonely people, aren’t we?”

A curious expression crossed his face, then vanished, his mouth straightening into a line of resolution. It was as if some impulse had sprung up within him and been instantly repressed. Shirley, gazing absently into the heart of the fire, missed that self-revealing flash.

“It’s funny,” she went on, pursuing her own train of thought, “how we never recognize our chances when they come—our chances of happiness, I mean. It’s only afterwards we look back and see how we’ve missed them through cowardice, or selfishness.”

Drake’s eyes fastened on her face with an odd intentness.

“Is that what you’re feeling?” he asked.

As though conscious of that searching gaze, she turned her head and met it for a moment. Then she looked away once more into the fire.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I think if Neil and I could only see each other again our whole lives might be different. But of course it’s too late. He’s probably somewhere in the wilds of Australia or Africa by now—gone back to his ‘wilderness.’”

A silence followed. To judge by his expression Simon seemed to be weighing some question in his mind—some question that occasioned him sore inward conflict. At last he spoke.

“Neil is still in England,” he said.

Shirley caught her breath.

“In England? Where in England?” she asked almost in a whisper.

“Not very far away. He’s in North Cornwall—on a remote little farm called Moor’s End which he has taken. He lives there under the name of John Lee—as much cut off from the world, as alone, as he could be in Africa or anywhere else.”

“How do you know all this? Have you—seen him?” Shirley was surprised, now that the first shock was over, to find how collectedly she was able to speak.

Drake shook his head.

“No. I’ve not seen him. He wrote to me—once. That’s all.”

He relapsed into silence—a silence which for a long time she made no effort to break. In that one thing, that solitary letter to Simon, she thought she could read a definite significance. Neil still clung to a thread of hope. He had left a loophole of escape from the blind alley of despair into which they two had wandered—a way out, if she should ever wish to use it.

“Simon.” Her voice cut quietly across the immense silence which seemed to have enveloped the room since he last spoke. “Simon, do you remember a certain evening at Port St. Luc?”

He smiled a little.

“I remember a good many evenings there.”

“But this one in particular. It was one night when we had been down to the Casino, and after we came back you and I sat out together on the terrace of the Hôtel Splendide, talking. You made me promise you something.”

“Yes?”

“To come to you if I were ever in a difficulty in which a man friend could help me. . . . Well, I am now. And I want your help. Will you give it me?”

“You know I will,” he returned quietly.

She hesitated a moment. Then, looking him squarely in the face, she said:

“I want you to take me to that farm in Cornwall—‘John Lee’s’ farm.”

There was a pause before his answer came. A faint, ironic smile crossed his mouth. This was a very different kind of difficulty from any he had imagined when he asked her for that promise. He could almost hear the low, glibing laughter of Fate—chuckling sardonically over the fact that it was by his own request, as it were, that it was now demanded of him to hand over the woman he loved to another man.

“Will it make you happy if I do, Shirley?” he asked at last. He must make sure—quite sure of that.

She lifted her face to his and her answer glowed in the sudden radiance that lit her eyes.

“It is the only thing in the world that ever could make me happy,” she said.

“Then I’ll take you,” he answered.

On Lady Beth’s account, since she could not be left entirely alone, the putting of the project into execution had to be deferred until Bob and his wife were back from their honeymoon and established at Corner Cottage. And then, in order to cover the real object of the expedition into Cornwall, Simon had talked vaguely about inspecting some land he was considering buying there and had asked if Shirley cared to accompany him.

Lady Beth innocently thought that, despite the somewhat unseasonable time of year, the trip might serve to distract the girl’s mind a little. She had noticed with inward anxiety the increasing apathy and depression which seemed to be growing on her, and when Drake assured her that by making an early start, taking train part of the way and motoring the remainder, he could deliver Shirley back at The Friary the selfsame evening, she had been quite delighted at the arrangement.

And now Simon and Shirley were approaching the end of their journey. Moor's End was a matter of at least twenty miles from the little wayside station at which they had descended, and the car that had met them there was speeding along what appeared to be an interminable dusty white road—a road from either side of which spread miles of rough, gorse-tufted land, with here and there a handful of leafless trees, twisted and misshapen by the stark winds which blew unchecked across the flat, desolate sweep of country.

"I shouldn't think Neil could do much farming on land like this," commented Shirley, for the sake of saying something.

"There are patches of better soil here and there which have been cultivated," answered Drake. "Moor's End is one of them, he wrote me—just big enough for one man to work single-handed."

Presently the sparse trees which flanked the road gathered together into a straggling wood that extended for half a mile or more, and to Shirley, watching the long ribbon of white that still stretched ahead, it seemed as though the drive would be an endless one. And then, without warning, the chauffeur suddenly swung the car round a corner which had been hidden from sight by the trees and pointed to a house which came abruptly into view some few hundred yards farther on.

"That's Moor's End, sir," he said laconically.

"Then pull up here," commanded Drake quickly. "We'll walk the rest of the way." He had a sudden prophetic vision of Kenwyn, perceiving a car at his gateway, swiftly secreting himself in one of the outbuildings until the intruding element had departed.

So on foot he and Shirley approached the place of refuge Neil had chosen—the only human habitation within sight—a small, four-square house, not much more than a cottage, built of stern gray Cornish stone and sturdily impervious to any storm that swept around it. The few cultivated fields at the back of the building must have been wrested from the ungrateful soil by years of unremitting labour.

Shirley felt as though she were in a dream. Was it really possible that in a moment or two she would be with Neil once more, within sound of his voice, touch of his hand—able, with a little courage, to break down the terrible wall of silence of these last few months?

She watched Simon raise the iron knocker on the door, but the sound of its rapping was drowned for her by the violent thudding of her heart. Then the door opened—almost grudgingly, it seemed—and Kenwyn's figure

appeared in the aperture. For an instant a look of utter incredulity sprang into his eyes. Then his glance leapt past Drake and rested upon Shirley, and there was hunger in his eyes—the passionate, aching hunger of a man who sees the woman of his soul and body’s worship whom he had thought never again to see in this world.

Simon gave the slight figure at his side a gentle push, helping her, as it were, across the threshold.

“I’ve brought her back to you,” was all he said. Turning away, he pulled the door to behind him and walked quickly down the road in the direction of the car. And as the door shut them in alone together, Shirley felt herself swept into Neil’s arms, strained close against him, while their lips met and clung in a kiss that held all the love and longing of the empty months that were gone.

At length he put her from him.

“Why have you come?” he asked unsteadily, a kind of gathering anger in his voice. “Haven’t I suffered enough—without your coming here to torture me still further?” With a sudden violence he put his hands on her shoulders as though to push her from him. “You must go,” he said. “Go back where you came from.”

She resisted the pressure of his hands, and finally drew them down from her shoulders.

“No,” she said firmly. “I won’t go. I’ve come back to you, Neil. Can’t you understand? I’ve come back—if you’ll have me.”

“‘If I’ll have you’! Have you gone mad, Shirley? Nothing is altered—nothing changed. I’m still the same rotter you turned down—and quite rightly, too—‘the man you were ashamed to love.’” The exceeding bitterness in his voice smote her like a lash.

“But I’m not still—still the same fool I was,” she answered. “Oh, Neil, I’ve come back to ask your forgiveness——”

“Mine? *My* forgiveness?” he broke in bewilderedly. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, your forgiveness,” she said simply. “I know, now—oh, I seem to have known it for so long!—that I ought never to have allowed the past to stand between us. That’s dead—done for. It’s only the future that counts—that, and our love. You do still care?”—with sudden terror. “I haven’t killed your love?”

“I shall always love you,” he answered steadily. “Nothing can ever alter that.”

“Then—then will you marry me, Neil?”

“Will I marry you? Do you mean——” A new look, the dawn of some thought almost too wonderful for belief, came into his face. “Do you mean that in spite of everything—in spite of all you know I’ve done, you’re still willing to marry me?”

“Yes. That’s just what I do mean. Please say you will.” A faint little smile crept to the corners of her lips; happiness was so very near now—so close at hand. “You—you can’t be so rude as to refuse me,” she added whimsically.

But there came no reflection of her smile upon his own lips. Instead, his face seemed to grow suddenly haggard—old and lined with the inward travail of his soul. Once his arms moved gropingly toward her. Then, deliberately, he forced them down again to his sides and drew away from her.

“No,” he said. “No, I won’t marry you.” And there was a harsh decision in his voice which struck against her ears like the knell of every hope that had just sprung into new life. “What happened at Beriscombe showed me once and for all that I can never marry any woman. The past is *not* dead—*not* done for. It never is, and never can be. Once, I thought it might be—that a man might begin all over again and make good. Now I know that he can’t. That’s why I won’t marry you.”

“But, Neil”—she crept toward him and laid a shaking hand on his arm. “Why were you willing to before? Why not—now?”

“God! Don’t you see the difference? Then, no one knew except the Somervilles—and they had held their peace. I thought I’d still got something left to offer you—a clean life in the future if you could forgive that secret of the past, if you didn’t mind taking me as I was—Drake’s farm-manager. But now it’s impossible. I’ll have no woman I love smeared with the open shame of being the wife of a man who has committed forgery. So many people know the story now that it would be bound to crop up again wherever we went—there would be no safety for you anywhere.”

“But if I don’t mind? If I don’t want—safety?”

“I mind for you. . . . Dear, I’m down on my knees to you because you’re willing to do this thing for me—it’s incredible, the sweetness and pluck of you. But you’ve got to be saved, even from yourself. And that’s my job.”

She stood silent, helpless against his steady resolve. Then one final chance of moving him flashed into her mind.

“Neil, why, if you didn’t think that I might come to you—if you only meant to send me away again if I came—why did you write to Simon and tell him where you were?”

“For one reason only. He’d been so supremely decent to me that I felt I couldn’t go clear out of his life, leaving no trace. There might some day come a time when I could be of use to him—pay back some of the debt of kindness which I owe him. So I meant to let him know, always, where he could find me if he ever wanted me. I never thought”—slowly—“of his telling you where I was.”

“I suppose I practically made him tell me,” she said drearily. “I—I had to see you. Neil”—on a sudden note of wildness—“*must* it be like this? Must it?”

He made no reply, only looked at her with eyes that held immeasurable pain and behind that pain unshaken purpose. But his silence answered her, and she turned stumblingly toward the door. Before she reached it she felt his arms go round her, and for one brief moment he held her against his breast while she clung to him in a desperate agony of realization that this was the end—the very end.

Then they were outside in the cold bleak air that swept across the plain. The car was still waiting where she had left it. Vaguely she saw Drake get out of it and come toward them, and presently they were all three standing together in the roadway. Neil spoke to him rapidly, in low urgent tones. She did not hear what he said; it was like a jumble of words that failed to penetrate her numbed consciousness. But at the end she knew he took her hand and thrust it into Drake’s, whose own hand closed round it firmly—with a kind of warm strength that seemed somehow sustaining.

Neil stepped back.

“Take care of her, Simon,” he said unevenly.

And Simon, who would so willingly have “taken care” of her now and to the end of life, knew that there was nothing he could ever do except compel the lover in him to stand aside so that she might always find the comrade which was all she needed from him.

Presently the car slid smoothly away once more along the dusty white road. Kenwyn stood watching it until it turned the corner. Then he went back into the house and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXXV THE SECRET FIGHT

Nicolette walked slowly down Harley Street. The April sunlight brightened even that solemn street of tall portentous houses—houses where daily verdicts of life or death were given, wrapped in the tactful phraseology of the medical specialist. And Nicolette had received her own sentence this morning. Not the death penalty of which she had been so frightened—far more frightened than anyone could have guessed since those dreadful occasions, when breathing seemed a suffocating impossibility, had become more frequent. They followed upon any very exacting physical exertion and often culminated in a fainting fit.

She had fought against it valiantly, swallowed all the medicine, obeyed all the medical advice she had been given, taken things easily and refrained entirely from dancing. (And Miguel had thought it was because she was “fed up” with it! What fools men were—accepting everything you told them at its face value!) Now, after months of uncertainty, alternate hoping to be better and feeling sure she never would be, Sir Binton Watts, the big heart specialist she had at last nerved herself to consult, had told her, gravely and quietly—and with genuine regret in his tones, for he happened to be a great admirer of her marvellous artistry—that she must never dance again. “And then,” he added encouragingly, “you’ll probably live to be an old woman.”

Who wanted to live to be an old woman? Particularly if the one thing in life you cared for was to be ruled out. One might almost as well die. Almost—but not quite. Life still beckons in the twenties.

She recalled the first time that that queer breathlessness had overtaken her, when from a terrifying feeling of suffocation she had passed into a dead faint. It had happened on the night she had gone to Old Wyck Farm and asked Neil to take her away with him. It seemed a very long time ago, now—æons ago—eight months in actual point of fact. But she knew that in eight years or eight times eight—if she lived so long!—Neil would still mean for her just exactly what he had meant on that August night.

She had seen him once since then—a chance encounter in Bond Street early in February—and had been stricken to the heart by his appearance—gaunt and haggard and seeming years older. And essentially un-Bond Street looking in his tweed coat and breeches and leggings! She might almost have passed him in the crowded street but for that.

He had accounted for his presence in town by explaining that he was up for one night only—on some legal business connected with the title-deeds of a small farm he was at present renting in Cornwall and which he purposed purchasing. She had persuaded him to come and have tea with her in a neighbouring tea-shop—brushing aside his scruples anent his unsuitable attire—and as they had talked together she realized that, just as he was the only man in the world to her, so Shirley would always be the only woman for him. It hurt her—hurt her abominably—but by some feminine artifice she contrived to conceal this fact from him, so effectually, indeed, that she saw he genuinely believed that all she felt for him now was friendship, and that any deeper sentiment had died.

“I knew you’d get over it, Niki,” he had said, smiling. “It was only just a flash in the pan out of those bad old days when you and I and Ronny had such lots of fun together.”

“Yes, I’ve got over it,” she had lied back valiantly. “And they weren’t such bad old days altogether, Neil. They were rather good—some of them.”

“Yes—until everything crashed.”

A shadow from the past seemed to fall across them then, and as though the memory of it reminded him in some special way of Lady Beth he had inquired after her.

“She’s not very well,” Nicolette told him sadly. “I had a letter from Shirley about her only this morning. There’s no specific disease; she seems simply to have lost hold since Sir John died. They haven’t told her, of course, but the doctor says she may go out any time—or she may live two or three years.”

“Poor little Lady Beth.” Kenwyn’s voice was not quite steady. “She lived in those she loved.”

“Yes,” she assented. “And now that they’re both gone, she appears to be just quietly fading away.”

They said good-bye soon after that, as Neil had an appointment to keep, but before they parted Nicolette asked him to give her his address. She was determined not to lose sight of him again completely.

“I might want your help some day, Neil,” she explained. “I’m rather a lone female, you know, and I’d like to feel there was a big—brother—to call upon in an emergency.”

His eyes had met hers with quiet friendship.

“You know that if ever you wanted help in any difficulty, Niki, I’d come to you at once. A wire would bring me at any time.”

She was thinking of this meeting as she made her solitary way back from Harley Street to her flat. She wondered. . . if she summoned Neil now, when she was so down on her luck, so crushed by the doctor’s verdict. . . would there be any chance—any hope that, knowing himself cut off for ever from all prospects of personal happiness, he might be willing to try and make what remained of her life a little easier? It might not be for very long. She could tell him that truthfully; anyone with a heart like hers *might* go off quite suddenly at any moment. (She deliberately closed her ears to the doctor’s opinion that she might equally as likely live to be an old woman.) And if she could have a year—even a month—as Neil’s wife, she felt that life would have been worth living.

The idea glowed in her mind. It didn’t seem so impossible, after all. Neil was condemned to as desperate and hopeless a loneliness as she herself. Couldn’t they try to ease that loneliness a little for each other? Bring some small human warmth into two rather desolate lives? She began to walk more rapidly, eager to get home and put her plan into action. A taxi crawled by. She hailed it, and, jumping in, was driven swiftly back to Errishall Mansions.

As soon as she entered the flat, without even waiting to remove her hat and coat, she flew to the old mahogany bureau at which she always wrote her letters. It was a beautiful piece of antique furniture which had originally belonged to Ronny, and now she pulled down the flap and dragged out some note-paper from one of the innumerable pigeon-holes which faced her, spilling several sheets on to the floor in her nervous haste.

She wrote swiftly, her pen flying over the paper—telling Neil of the doctor’s verdict and how miserable she felt about it and begging him to come up and see her. Then, with an envelope in readiness, she reached out mechanically toward a drawer into which, for safety, she had slipped Kenwyn’s written address the day she had had tea with him. It was rather a crowded drawer. Nicolette had a habit of slipping things into it “for safety” if she happened to be in a hurry—private letters, addresses, patterns of material for frocks, oddments of all kinds.

Periodically, when it was full to overflowing, she cleared it out and got rid of such items as had no longer any interest. And, apparently, on this occasion the “clearing out” period was considerably overdue, for when she essayed to open it the drawer stuck fast. She pulled and tugged at it, but

without result. It refused to budge. Finally, with a jerk, it yielded a bare half-inch and then settled down once more into maddening immutability. Something inside was acting as a wedge, and she strained at the handle in vain. The address . . . Neil's address!. . . The drawer must be *made* to open! Picking up a paper-knife she inserted the thin, pliant blade into the half-inch aperture and prodded about with it. The drawer was overfull, she could feel that, and she endeavoured to press down first one and then another obstruction and so release it.

For a minute or two it appeared as though her struggle with the paper-knife were going to prove as barren of result as all her other efforts. And then, so suddenly that she flinched back, startled, there shot outwards toward her not only the drawer she was endeavouring to open, which had yielded at last, but also another much shallower drawer which appeared from just above it, where she had thought there was nothing but the delicately carved woodwork that supported the pigeon-holes.

She remembered, then, that Ronny had once said there was a secret compartment in the bureau but had teasingly refrained from ever telling her where it was. "A married man must have some secret hidey-hole!" he had insisted laughingly. The matter had since passed completely out of her mind, and now, poking blindly about with the paper-knife, she must have inadvertently touched a spring and released the secret drawer.

There appeared to be very little in it—only a letter written in a man's hand and beginning "Dear old Ronny." Nicolette drew it out, and, as she unfolded the doubled sheet of note-paper, the fragments of a torn cheque slipped out from between its pages and fluttered on to the desk. Instinctively she picked up the pieces and fitted them together, and found it to be a cheque made payable to "Self" and bearing the signature of John Somerville. At least, it bore a signature which purported to be his. But Nicolette, who knew her father-in-law's handwriting well enough, realized that the writing on the cheque, though amazingly like his, was not a perfect facsimile.

She turned to the letter which began "Dear old Ronny." It was only a brief note inviting him to dine and play bridge somewhere, and left plenty of room for what actually covered the pages which the sender had left blank—the written repetition of a single name, sometimes in its entirety, sometimes only in part. . . . The name of John Somerville. The imitations of the old man's writing varied. Some, obviously the later ones, were amazingly good.

Nicolette laid the sheet of note-paper, covered with those tell-tale scribblings, down in front of her and stared at it. In a sudden revealing flash the whole meaning of her discovery became clear to her. It was Ronny who must have forged his father's name! Ronny, not Neil, although somehow the latter had contrived to shoulder the blame.

Her mind went back into the past, going step by step over those last scenes of her husband's life, striving to elucidate what must actually have taken place. Sir John and Lady Beth had been abroad at the moment. She remembered that. And she and Ronny had been desperately short of money for some time. So desperately short that she herself had been a fool and had allowed a man she knew to liquidate her bridge debts—receiving in return her lightly written I O U's. And then one day the beast in the man came uppermost and he offered her back her I O U's if she would go away with him for a week-end. Otherwise, he proposed to press for payment—demand it from her husband, if necessary.

Subconsciously she had always known the man was a beast, but she had relied on her power—which she had proved a dozen times or more—to deal satisfactorily with that side of mankind and emerge scatheless from the contest. On this occasion, however, the man in question proved adamant. He gave her two days in which to pay or accept the other alternative he offered, banking on the fact that she would never dare to approach her husband over the matter. Even if she did, he knew very well that Ronny was not in the position to pay up on her behalf. And in that case he could—if Nicolette still proved obdurate—circulate such a pretty little story that neither of the Ronny Somervilles would be able to show their faces again amidst their own particular circle of gambling friends.

To Nicolette's eternal credit be it said, she had had the pluck to go straight to her husband and confess the whole truth of her amazing folly, asking him to pay the money that was owing.

She recalled now his set white face—stony in its absolutely stunned expression when she told him—and his eyes that had held sheer desperation. At the time she had attributed it to his natural jealousy and anger at the position in which she had placed herself. . . . What a fool she must have been! Men don't wear that look of dumb, blank misery when they can set a matter right by the mere drawing of a cheque.

And thinking back, she realized that Ronny hadn't been very angry with her—he had really been amazingly decent over the matter as far as she personally had been concerned. The trouble was—she recognized it in the

light of her recent discoveries—he simply hadn't been able to lay his hands on the actual money with which to pay her debts. And he knew they must be paid. So he had forged his father's name.

He would have had no difficulty in abstracting a couple of cheques from Sir John's cheque-book. The latter had a big account with a London bank in addition to his account at a country branch in the north, and Neil invariably had a book of cheques payable on each of the two banks at his flat, so that when he was up in town he could fill them in and send them to Sir John for signature in the ordinary course of his secretarial work. And as Neil and the Ronny Somervilles possessed keys to each other's flats—since they ran more or less a *ménage à trois* whenever the former was in London—Ronny would have found access quite easily.

Nicolette could picture him, practising copies of his father's signature at this very desk at which she was sitting until at last he succeeded in writing a cheque that he believed would pass muster under the bank cashier's sharp eyes. Then, interrupted just as he had succeeded, thrusting the completed cheque into his pocket and those tell-tale attempts at his father's handwriting into the secret drawer, whence he had doubtless intended to remove and destroy them later. Only, meanwhile, death had come—and left them there.

She pressed her hands against her eyes, shivering bodily as the picture painted itself vividly before her mental vision. There was one other picture, too—of a Ronny crushed and unconscious in the narrow hospital bed to which he had been carried. She remembered kneeling at his side, wondering if he would regain consciousness or would die without ever coming out of that obliterating silence. And then, just before the end, he had opened his eyes and muttered weakly: "Tell Dad. . . tell them I'm sorry. No one's fault but mine."

Lady Beth had always gathered a special comfort from those last broken sentences of his. She had taken them as being an expression of his sorrow for their inevitable grief. "His last thought was of others," she had been wont to declare, with brokenhearted pride in her dead son. "Of us, and of the man whose car had knocked him down. He wanted to exonerate him from any blame."

But in the light of the torn scraps of paper which Nicolette had to-day unearthed, she could read another meaning into those last faltering utterances of a dying man. It all seemed terribly clear to her now. The guilt of that forged cheque was Ronny's, although Neil had borne the burden of it.

Quite how that had been accomplished she could not understand. There was something—some link in the chain—which Neil alone could supply.

Two things she realized amid the welter of confused surmise and thought which her discovery had brought her. One, that she herself, by her own folly, had been primarily responsible for the whole catastrophe. The other, that in her hands she held the absolute proof of Kenwyn's innocence. And it was his guilt alone—so she believed, knowing nothing of that fruitless visit paid by Shirley to Moor's End—that stood between him and the woman he loved.

It would stand between them always, if she chose to hold her peace—to burn these fragments of a torn cheque and an old letter, as Ronny would have burned them had he lived. In that case, Neil could never marry Shirley, and some day possibly, out of sheer overwhelming loneliness, he and she herself might at last come together—build up some mutual life on the foundations of her love for him and the friendship which she knew he felt for her. On the other hand, if she made known her discovery, placed the proofs of his innocence in Neil's possession, it would break down the only barrier which kept him and Shirley asunder—meant giving the man she loved to another woman.

Nicolette went down into the depths then, into that spiritual underworld where men and women fight alone with their own secret temptations—temptations of which those about them are completely unaware, wherein none can help them, and where victory brings no meed of praise and failure no rebuke. Only the soul itself knows, at the end of the struggle, whether it has fought well or ill.

Whether it was an hour or a whole lifetime later when she came back to the consciousness of things material Nicolette could hardly have told you. She passed her hand wearily across her forehead and drew it away wet. She felt curiously exhausted. But her decision was taken. She glanced at the almanac, standing in a corner of the desk, which announced in lettering of large type the fact that to-day was Monday.

“Black Monday,” she murmured with an odd little smile. Then, quietly and collectedly, she drew a couple of blank telegraph forms toward her and began writing rapidly. When they were completed she laid them side by side in front of her and read them over.

*Kenwyn, Moor's End, Treferry, Cornwall. Please come here
Wednesday. Am in a difficulty. Do not fail me.*

NIKI.

Miss Shirley Wilson, The Friary, Beriscombe, Devon. Have had bad news. Please come and see me at once. Can put you up here. Shall expect you to-morrow without fail.

NIKI.

“I think those should bring them both,” she said half aloud.

Then she rang the bell, which was answered by a rather glum-looking woman whose looks belied her, for she had been a most devoted servant both before and since her mistress’s marriage.

“Have these two wires sent off at once, Martha,” said Nicolette.

CHAPTER XXXVI THE KEEPER OF DREAMS

Nicolette had received, in answer to her two SOS telegrams, the affirmative replies she had anticipated. Neil and Shirley were both people who could be depended upon to respond to any emergency call, and the latter duly arrived at Errishall Mansions the following day.

“I felt I couldn’t stick being alone just now,” Nicolette explained, when she had confided Binton Watts’s ultimatum to her. “Did you mind coming up all in a hurry?”

“Of course not,” Shirley assured her. “I’m very glad you sent for me. It must have been an awful blow to you to be told that you must give up dancing.”

Nicolette nodded.

“Yes. I’m beginning to think life has been a little too much for me. It’s taken away—everything,” she said blankly.

Shirley felt her sympathy rush out warmly toward her. Inwardly she told herself that she had never before realized quite how much Nicolette’s dancing must have meant to her. It was very evident that she had received a bad shock—a very much bigger shock in reality than Shirley in her ignorance suspected—and the latter exerted every effort to cheer her up and induce her to take a brighter view of the future. She was touched, too, by the fact that Nicolette had sent for her in her trouble.

“Kit has promised to look after Lady Beth while I’m away,” she volunteered. “So I can stay as long as you want me. Perhaps the best thing would be if you came back with me in a few days to Beriscombe? The change might do you good.”

“Perhaps it might,” returned the other indifferently. “How is Lady Beth, by the way?”

Shirley’s face saddened.

“No better,” she said sorrowfully. “I think one day she’ll just slip quite naturally out of life simply because she’s no one in particular left to live for.”

Nicolette was silent for a moment.

“It would be rather nice,” she remarked reflectively at last, “if you *did* just stop living—automatically—when you’d no one left to live for.”

But the following morning Shirley was glad to see that she appeared to have recovered in a great measure from the depression of the previous day. Apparently she was rallying from the shock of the bad news Sir Binton Watts had given her. She seemed to be rather restless and excitable, however, unable to settle to anything, and Shirley’s proposal that they should go out for a walk was received without any enthusiasm.

“No,” she answered. “There’s no sun to-day. And it’s cold.” She shivered a little. “Let’s sit by the fire and talk.”

Shirley yielded, although privately she thought that a good sharp walk across the Park would have been a better remedy for the other’s jumpy state of nerves. So they established themselves by the fire in the little morning-room where they had breakfasted, while Nicolette talked at random and kept lighting fresh cigarettes and tossing them away half smoked.

Presently the front door bell trilled through the flat, and if Shirley had been looking at her at the moment she would have seen the dancer’s supple figure suddenly go taut and rigid for an instant. Almost immediately afterwards the door was quietly opened and Martha’s apathetic voice announced:

“A gentleman to see you, miss.” She had never properly cured herself of the habit of addressing Nicolette as “miss,” even after the latter’s marriage, and since Ronny’s death she had placidly fallen back into the familiar usage of earlier years. “I’ve taken him into your sitting-room,” she added, and without waiting for an answer the woman withdrew from the room as unobtrusively as she had entered it.

Nicolette jumped up from her chair.

“You won’t mind my leaving you for a few minutes,” she said. “You can amuse yourself with the morning papers, can’t you?”

And upon Shirley’s nodding assent, she, too, left the room. Rather slowly she crossed the hall and, reaching the sitting-room, paused outside it. Then, with a quick, decisive gesture, she turned the handle of the door and went in.

Kenwyn, who was standing at the window with his back toward the entrance of the room, swung round as she entered.

“Well, here I am, you see,” he said, as they shook hands, “according to promise. I came up by the night train.”

“I knew you would come,” she answered.

“And now, what’s the trouble?”

“It isn’t exactly a—trouble. I think”—with an odd expression in her eyes—“it’s the setting right of an old mistake. Only, I couldn’t do it without your help, Neil.”

“You know you can count on that.”

“I have—counted on it.” She moved across to the bureau, and, opening it, withdrew from the secret compartment, the workings of which she now understood, the torn cheque and the letter upon which the trial signatures had been written.

“Will you look at those?” she said, handing them to him.

He took them from her mechanically, and then, when he had examined them, a profound silence descended upon the room. It seemed to Nicolette as though he would never speak—never break that quivering, waiting stillness. At last:

“Where did you find these?” he asked.

“In the secret drawer of this bureau. . . Ronny’s bureau. They—they clear you completely, Neil—prove you innocent.”

He laid the papers down on the table by which they were standing.

“Yes. They clear me.” He paused a moment. “I’m glad in a way. It’s good to know that a proof exists. Though it doesn’t make any real difference.”

“*No difference?*” Nicolette stared at him in stupefaction. “No difference? Why, it makes all the difference in the world.”

Kenwyn looked across at her. It struck her suddenly how steady and direct was the gaze of those very blue eyes of his. She wondered how they had ever, any of them, believed him guilty of anything dishonourable. He tapped the papers where they lay.

“You don’t suppose I’m going to—use these, do you?” he said.

Like a flash her hand closed over them. She faced him defiantly.

“They’re mine. If you don’t use them, I shall,” she asserted.

“And undo all I’ve done? Smash up the whole purpose for which I’ve stuck it out all these years?”

She regarded him curiously.

“Ever since I found that letter and cheque,” she said, “I’ve wondered how—and why—you managed to take the blame. Will you tell me, Neil?”

He thought a moment.

“Yes,” he said at length. “You know so much, you may as well know the rest. Do you remember when you had to ask Ronny for some money for a special purpose?”

She flushed.

“Yes. I remember. I’ve realized that actually it was I who caused the whole trouble.”

“You couldn’t know,” he rejoined quickly. “You couldn’t ever have guessed that it would lead to what it did. You mustn’t blame yourself too much. Well, Ronny asked me to help him, but I hadn’t a bean at the time and was overdrawn at the bank as far as I could go. He didn’t tell me then what he wanted the money for—only that he was short of ready cash. And as a day or two later he seemed quite cheery again I supposed he’d been able to borrow a bit from someone else. It was only when Sir John wrote to me about that cheque that I guessed what must have happened. I examined the cheque-book I had of Sir John’s, and saw that a couple of cheques had been torn out, counterfoil as well. Then I taxed Ronny with it, and he owned up and told me the whole story.”

He paused. Nicolette’s eyes never left his face.

“Go on,” was all she said.

“I don’t suppose I can make you understand what I felt. I blamed myself—utterly and completely. I was so much the elder I ought to have pulled him up long before things had got to that pass. Pulled him up—and you, too. Instead of which, I’d been going the same mad pace with you both. I swore to Ronny I’d set things right for him with his father, and I wrote that letter—the letter you all know of now. It was done on impulse, to shield Ronny until I could see his father and explain everything. I meant to take the full blame on myself of the wild pace we’d all been living at, and make Sir John realize that Ronny—who was only a youngster—had got out of his depth, and not entirely by his own fault.”

“That was extraordinarily decent of you, Neil,” Nicolette interposed in a low voice. “There was no reason why——”

“There was every reason,” he replied. “I *was* responsible, morally, for all that had happened.”

“Then—then how was it things went wrong? Wouldn’t Sir John believe you when you explained that it was Ronny, and not you, who had forged his name?”

“He never had any explanation. Ronny was killed the same night—the night before my letter reached his father—while it was on its way. . . . After that, my lips were sealed as to what had really happened.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Don’t you? Remember, I’d written to Sir John—foolishly, perhaps, but still, I’d done so on the impulse of the moment—written to him that I was ‘responsible for the cheque.’ I couldn’t, the very next day, put the blame on a dead man—and that man his own son.”

Nicolette drew a sharp breath. She recognized now how irretrievably and completely Neil had been caught in the web of Fate—bound hand and foot.

“And afterwards? Later on?” she said tonelessly. “Couldn’t you have done anything when—when the shock of Ronny’s death was over?”

“No,” he answered quietly. “You know how Lady Beth idolized him—he was far more to her than even her husband. And I realized, when he was dead, that all she had left in life was her memory of him—a clean memory. . . . I couldn’t take that away. I think it would pretty well have killed her if she had known the truth. And, after all, as I’ve told you, I felt in a way terribly responsible over the whole affair. I’d betrayed their trust in me—Sir John’s and Lady Beth’s. They’d relied on me as a kind of elder son. And I’d failed them. . . . The only way I could repay them for their infinite goodness to me ever since I was a boy was to leave them an unstained memory of their own son.”

Tears were trickling quietly and unashamedly down Nicolette’s cheeks by the time he had ceased speaking. She bent forward and kissed him—quite naturally and unselfconsciously.

“Oh, Neil, what a brick you’ve been!” she exclaimed shakily. “What an utter brick! But you’re not going to bear any more, my dear. Shirley is here—in the next room. Go to her and tell her all you’ve just told me.”

“Shirley?” His face went suddenly ashen.

“Yes”—simply. “I sent for her as soon as I knew the truth about that cheque.”

“And you’ve told her?” he ejaculated in dismay.

“No. You must be the one to tell her.”

He shook his head.

“I can’t do that. Don’t you see that—these”—he pointed to the papers—“have altered nothing while Lady Beth lives?”

“They’ll at least convince Shirley of your innocence.”

“She was willing to marry me even though she believed me guilty,” he said. The wonder of it still dwelt in his voice. “She came to Moor’s End and told me so.”

Nicolette stared at him.

“I didn’t know that,” she rejoined very quietly. “That—that was rather splendid of her.” Then, seizing upon the advantage which this new fact offered, she went on quickly: “Then the only possible return you can make her is to let her know that you are not guilty—and can prove it.” She hesitated and pursued urgently: “You must, Neil. If you don’t, I will. I swear it. . . . But she’d much rather hear it from you.”

“If I do,” he said, “if I tell Shirley, will you undertake to keep all that you’ve discovered secret—never to speak of it to *anyone* as long as Lady Beth lives?”

“Oh, I can’t do that! It isn’t fair to ask it.”

“It is fair. I owe Lady Beth everything in life, and the least I can do is to save her from this knowledge.” Then, as he saw she was still unwilling to give him the promise which he demanded, he continued, pressing his point with every argument he could find: “As you say, in a way you were the first cause of the whole trouble. Let this be your share in remedying its consequences.”

“But have you thought of Shirley—how intensely she will want you cleared?”

“Have I not? But Shirley is young and able to wait until I can be openly cleared. Lady Beth is old—and the old have so little that we can’t take away from them the little which they have. Promise, Nicolette.”

Voice and eyes compelled her.

“Very well,” she agreed at last reluctantly. “I promise, if you on your part will keep nothing—*nothing*, mind you—secret from Shirley.”

Thrusting the letter and torn cheque into his hand, she led the way to the morning-room and, opening the door, almost pushed him in.

“It was someone to see you, after all, Shirley,” she said. And went away, leaving them alone together.

“No. You’re giving me credit which I don’t deserve.” Neil spoke with quiet sincerity. He had told the whole story, made everything clear to a wide-eyed girl who suddenly saw the shadows lifting from both their lives. And now he checked the spontaneous tribute to which her pride in him gave utterance.

“I’m not a quixotic fool, and I never intended, in the first instance, to take the actual blame of having forged that cheque. That was forced upon me—afterwards. I wrote to Sir John as I did simply to gain time, to protect Ronny for the moment, until I could explain the whole matter and soften things down to his father. Then Ronny died. And I realized that there was no way out. I had been taken at my word. I’d closed the door, so to speak—and Fate had turned the key in the lock, as I told you once before.”

But Shirley hardly listened to these last few sentences. She only knew that Neil was cleared—proved scrupulously honourable where he had seemed covered with dishonour—that he had played the game from start to finish.

“Neil! . . . Neil!” she cried. “How could I ever have been fool enough to imagine you other than you are? . . . Oh, my dear, will you ever be able to forgive me?”

She was in his arms now, and she heard him laugh softly above her head.

“Forgive you for being willing to marry me when you thought what you did think of me—what you couldn’t help but think? Darling, I’ll find it a very easy thing to forgive a woman for loving so splendidly as that.”

“How soon do you think we can be married—now?” she asked.

The light died suddenly out of his face.

“Sweetheart, have you realized that even now I’m not cleared in the eyes of the world? No one but you and Nicolette must ever know the truth.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and gazed at him with startled eyes.

“No one but me. . . and Nicolette?” she stammered. “Why not?”

“Because, don’t you see, if they did, all that I’ve fought for would be undone. I’ve lived as I have solely to keep for Lady Beth the one thing in life she values—her memory of Ronny. And as long as she is alive my lips are closed just exactly as they have been ever since his death. She was more to me than any mother, and I can’t take away her faith and belief in the son she simply worshipped. Do you understand now—that even if we married, it must still be under a cloud? All we have gained is the knowledge that we can prove the truth. And that—you—know it.”

Something out of the past flashed into Shirley’s mind—the words of a song she and Neil had once read together on the shore at Port St. Luc.

“It isn’t easy to be a keeper of dreams, my Neil,” she said wistfully.

“No, it isn’t easy,” he replied.

Very plainly but with a quiet courage she envisioned what the future would be if she married Neil—married him still bearing the burden of Ronny’s sin. Some day—in a year, two years, five years, perhaps—their way would be clear and Neil vindicated in the eyes of all who knew him. But, till then, that frail life at The Friary, loosening its grip gently and imperceptibly on a material world, must be kept sweet and untroubled. The halo which Lady Beth’s loving hands had placed about a boyish head, the halo which Kenwyn had guarded so enduringly, must be guarded to the end.

“Neil.” Shirley lifted her face to his, and in her eyes there was no fear or shrinking—only a great and understanding love. “When will you marry me? Then we shall be able to keep her dreams—and our own.”

* * * * *

Later, when the first perfect hour of reunion had spent itself, they went in search of Nicolette, but could find only Martha, vigorously occupied in dusting her mistress’s bedroom.

“Miss Nicolette went off to her dressmaker’s in a taxi, half an hour ago,” she informed them. “Said she needed a new frock, though I told her she’d got more frocks than she could wear hung up in the cupboard there”—with an indignant flick of her duster in the direction of the wardrobe. “But all she says is that there’s days when a new frock means salvation to a woman. An’ off she goes.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

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[The end of *The Guarded Halo* by Margaret Pedler]