

WHERE THREE ROADS MEET



ETHEL · M · DELL

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THE PRISON WALL
THE WAY OF AN EAGLE
THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS
THE ROCKS OF VALPRE
THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR
THE BARS OF IRON
THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE
GREATHEART
THE LAMP IN THE DESERT
THE TOP OF THE WORLD
THE OBSTACLE RACE
CHARLES REX
TETHERSTONES
A MAN UNDER AUTHORITY
THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY
THE BLACK KNIGHT
BY REQUEST
THE GATE MARKED PRIVATE
THE ALTAR OF HONOUR
STORM DRIFT
THE SILVER WEDDING
DONA CELESTIS

WHERE THREE ROADS MEET

By
ETHEL M. DELL

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A BIRTHDAY	3
II. THE MUTUAL BENEFIT	15
III. THE LAST OF THE LINE	28
IV. THE BIRTHDAY NIGHT	35
V. THE BOSOM OF THE FAMILY	42
VI. NIGHTMARE	49
VII. THE WHEEL OF LIFE	60

PART I

1. THE HEIR	69
2. THE SECOND EVENT	76
3. TRAVELLERS	83
4. THE MASK-MAKER	91
5. THE NEW MOTTO	100
6. THE HUMAN WRECK	106
7. THE SUMMONS	114
8. THE STABLES	124
9. THE MESSAGE	131

INTERLUDE

THE IVORY MASK	141
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PART II

1. THE HOUSE OF AUBREYSTONE	151
-----------------------------	---------------------

2. BEDTIME	<u>158</u>
3. THE LESSON	<u>167</u>
4. THE STRANGER	<u>174</u>
5. THE GAUNTLET	<u>182</u>
6. THE OFF-CHANCE	<u>191</u>

PART III

1. HIS FATHER'S SON	<u>209</u>
2. THE KNOTTY POINT	<u>223</u>
3. IVOR	<u>233</u>
4. THE ARRIVAL	<u>245</u>
5. CRAVEN FERRARS	<u>253</u>
6. THE TEST	<u>262</u>
7. THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME	<u>271</u>
8. AN OLD FRIEND	<u>279</u>
9. A MEMORY	<u>289</u>
10. THE BARGAIN	<u>298</u>

PART IV

1. THE JOURNEY	<u>309</u>
2. THE VISION	<u>318</u>
3. THE MEETING	<u>325</u>
4. DISCOVERY	<u>336</u>
5. THE IMPOSSIBLE	<u>343</u>
6. THE ORDEAL	<u>354</u>
7. THE CHOICE	<u>365</u>
8. AN ACT OF GRACE	<u>377</u>
9. THE GUEST NIGHT	<u>384</u>
10. THE OPEN GRAVE	<u>394</u>
11. THE OASIS	<u>402</u>
12. MIDNIGHT	<u>408</u>

EPILOGUE

DAWN

[415](#)

PROLOGUE

WHERE THREE ROADS MEET

I

A BIRTHDAY

IT was the twentieth anniversary of Molly's birthday—a June day of most entrancing beauty—and she sat on the lower step of a stile that led into a deep green wood that was decked with coral patches of campion, and watched over a small round boy of two who sprawled in infant slumber at her feet. Only a few yards away a nightingale was pouring liquid music into the leafy glade—flute-like, elusive as the pipes of Pan—an invisible singer with the gift of a ventriloquist.

It was such music as had awakened her heart to wildest rapture three years ago, but to-day, though something within her stirred with a vague pain in response, she was not even listening to the tender, love-inspired notes. They floated past her almost unheeded. She was hearing something very different, something which had nothing to do with the splendour of June in a Kentish woodland, something which was more like a throbbing in the air than sound, something which now and then sent a swift shudder through her light frame.

Only twenty—and already a widow of nearly three years' standing! Only twenty, and stricken to the very soul of her by that far, far rumble that was throbbing rather than sound!

The baby boy slept and heard it not; the bird sang its pure and heaven-sent song in utter disregard; but far away the earth rocked and the tremors spread like waves from the heart of the tempest. Many miles distant, the guns were roaring like giant fiends let loose, and in the fairy beauty of the June evening the still air pulsed with the message of Death. And the girl who was just twenty gripped her thin brown hands together round her knees to still the quiver of anguish that from time to time assailed her. Life was so terrible when there was time to think.

Rollo did not often fall asleep during the day-time. It was only when it was hot and sultry that his usually abounding energy ever flagged. She stooped to whisk away a fly from his rosy cheek, and looking down upon his relaxed form some of the tension went out of her own. He was so lovely in repose, perfectly shaped, like a tiny woodland faun, she told herself; and though the burning blue eyes were shut, the beauty of the black thick lashes against the apricot-shaded skin made up for their invisibility. She thought him the most exquisite thing that she had ever looked upon, not realizing that had she retained her own youthful plumpness he would have been an almost exact replica of herself.

Her eyes were blue also, but their colour was of a still bluebell intensity rather than the fire of molten spirit which was Rollo's. Her features were straight and fair save for the warm browning of the June sun, but they were sharpened out of all childish roundness, the nose was thin, the mouth somewhat anxious; the delicate chin, very dainty in its poise, was more pointed than the chin of a girl of twenty should have been. Her brown neck was thin also, and the collar-bones stood up in strong relief. Her whole personality seemed to betoken an amount of nervous strain which was pathetic in one so young. For she still retained the look of youth—youth that had been cheated, youth that had lost its spring.

Sitting there, all a-quiver with the muttering of that hell in her ears, she looked like a lost fairy waiting on the edge of the wood for some guardian sprite to take her by the hand and give her refuge in its depths. She was indeed in sore need of refuge, but the sleeping child at her feet was the barrier that kept her where she was. The far-off thunder behind her and the green sweet glade before were mingled in the one great ache that possessed her spirit. She would fain have taken advantage of the boy's slumber to marshal and compose her thoughts, but the pain was too present and too overwhelming. She could not crush out memory—that poignant, disturbing essence of the soul. She could not annihilate the past with those booming guns as a perpetual background, and give herself to a steady contemplation

of the future. Neither could she blot out the haunting sweetness of that springtime wood that tugged perpetually at her very heartstrings.

It was impossible. A great sigh broke from her, and she stooped again over the chubby body of her little son, trying—as she had tried many myriads of times before—to stifle the heavy pain within her with the sight and touch of the beloved being who, while greatly complicating the issues thereof, alone made life worth living.

But for Rollo, she would have been across the sea in that war-tortured country where the guns were roaring, working with the zeal that smothers heartbreak to ease the sufferings of the men who stood as a living wall between England and the foe. But for Rollo, the gaping wound within her might by now almost have begun to close, lulled into some sort of dormancy by the perpetual urge of self-forgetting activity. But for Rollo, she could have hewn her own way, independent and untrammelled, and the problem which now confronted her—the ghastly problem which must be dealt with however persistently her bewildered brain might shirk the task—would never have arisen.

And yet Rollo was her whole world now, and slipping to her knees beside him she gathered him passionately close, cooing softly into his ear to soothe his frowning murmur at being disturbed. It was better to provoke a complaint from him than to continue to listen in immobility to the dumb rolling of those terrible guns.

The nightingale sang on, spreading the illusion of peace in a war-racked world, and the girl who knelt at the edge of the charmed wood heard its rhapsody with a kind of quailing amazement. There was something almost awful in its unconscious sweetness. She wondered if any man hanging from a gallows at a cross-roads had ever heard the singing of a bird close by ere his soul had escaped from his agonized body. Beauty and destruction dwelling side by side—love and death forever mingled!

She hid her face against her baby's soft round body and prayed a broken prayer. "O God, deliver us—from evil! O God,—deliver us—deliver us!"

...

A long time passed before she looked up—not until the nightingale, grown tired, had dropped into silence.

Her face when she did so was strangely composed; it even had a fateful look. There was a baby's chair on wheels on the other side of the stile. With the child in her arms, she got to her feet and climbed carefully over.

He was very sleepy and complained again as she did so, but she hushed him tenderly and laid him for a moment in the grass while she returned for the rug. This she spread in the chair, arranging it as far as possible to accommodate his relaxed figure. It was growing late, and she told herself reproachfully that he ought to have been put to bed long ago. Just because it was her birthday she had come to this enchanted wood, and it had been foolish as well as selfish of her to have done so. For the place was haunted by ghosts of the past.

It was here—it was here—only deep in the green shade of the trees—that Ronald Fordringham had first thrown his eager arms about her and held her against his breast. The memory of that first overwhelming kiss went through her like a stab, transfixing her heart. It was sheer anguish, yet she clung to it with closed eyes for a few moments.

“Roy!” she whispered. “Roy! My Roy!”

Then again the shuddering vibration in the air that was scarcely sound came to her. She set her lips resolutely and looked up.

A shadow had fallen over the quiet woodland. The nightingale had ceased to sing, and all was still. Only the throbbing of the guns remained.

She drew a long, hard breath and, stooping, lifted little Rollo from the grass. He opened his eyes as she did so, and, smiling, stroked her face. Something in the action pierced her composure, catching her unawares. She gave a quick sob, but in a moment, seeing his round face begin to crumple, she turned it into a laugh, shaky but determined.

“Little darling! And you’re so tired!” she said. “We’ll go home quick—quick—and you shall have your lovely milk and biscuits and go to bed.”

She settled him in the chair, softly kissing him, and laughing again when he tried to clasp his fat arms round her neck.

“Mum—Mum—Mum!” he crooned.

“We must go home, Rollo,” she said, and strapped him in with tender care. “What will poor Granddad say?”

Rollo had no suggestions to make on this point, but, having now quite recovered from his drowsiness, he said a great deal in a language of his own about nothing in particular. He could be very talkative when the spirit moved him, and his mother’s smiling encouragement always spurred him to fresh effort. She was ever an appreciative listener.

The hay was lying in the fields through which they returned. They had some distance to traverse, but there were no more stiles to negotiate, and dark clouds had rolled up to obscure the sun, so that the heat, though still oppressive, was less intense.

Molly moved quickly, as if hastening to leave the haunted wood far behind her, and the elasticity of youth was in her gait if the fire of it no longer quickened her veins. A lovely warm flush bloomed on her sun-tanned face. She gave soft crowing answers to her baby boy in response to his unintelligible speech. They had almost developed a language of their own with which he at least was hugely content.

It took nearly half an hour of quick walking to reach the road that led to the village, but it was a relief to be moving after the emptiness and pain of that strange birthday-treat of hers.

“I mustn’t go again,” she told herself, as she opened the last gate that led out on to the highway. “I won’t—ever—go again.” But somehow it hurt her to say it, as though it had been a disloyalty to Ronald—that dearly loved and adoring lover who would never come to her again.

Out on the road the journey became both physically and spiritually easier. There was no traffic, and she was able to increase her pace. Rollo ought to have been in his bath nearly an hour ago. No wonder he had become sleepy in the wood! She would be busy now for the rest of the evening, and she was glad. She would be more glad still when her birthday was past. She was getting too old for birthdays, she decided. The ordinary humdrum days were much easier to cope with.

So, with Rollo’s funny broken chatter in her ears, she came at length within sight of the first cottage of Little Bradholt—her native village. It was a picturesque spot—typical of the English by-ways. Practically all its houses were ancient, and it had a green with a pond in the middle. There were also two yew-trees of great antiquity which once might have helped to point the way of pilgrims to the saintly shrine of Canterbury; for these yew-trees were continued at uneven intervals beyond the park gates of Aubreystone Castle where the lords of the manor had reigned from time immemorial, possessing and governing Little Bradholt in a long line of succession which claimed direct descent from a baron who had arrived with William the Conqueror.

Molly had always regarded the Aubreystone family with a certain amount of awe. They had always done their duty unfailingly by the village which they owned. It was a model place in every respect. Old Lady Aubreystone was a terrible person, firm of lip and strong of will. No one

ever smiled in her presence without her permission. She had known many sorrows, but they had left no apparent mark upon her. Her husband had been killed years before in the hunting-field. People believed that she had been deeply attached to him, but they had no means of knowing it. She had borne him four sons, of whom one only—the present Lord Aubreystone—remained. He was the youngest of them. The two above him had been killed, one in France and one at sea, and his eldest brother and immediate predecessor, with his wife, had fallen victims to one of those mysterious diseases manifesting themselves in England at that time which were commonly regarded as having their origin in the trenches and battlefields of Europe. They had died childless. Lord Aubreystone himself at the age of thirty-eight was unmarried, and for the first time almost in history the fate of the family succession hung in the balance. He also was in the Army and had seen Staff service in Egypt, but—it was whispered, through desperate efforts on his mother's part—he was now employed in a responsible position at the War Office, and likely to remain there until the War was over.

If indomitable human will could be held as a deciding factor in the destiny of any single being at that time, then this youngest son, who had never expected to enter upon any sort of heritage, was safe until such time as he should marry and beget a son. His mother had never greatly cared for him before, but now her whole soul was centred upon the achievement of this end. It had become almost an obsession with her, and nothing else counted in the whole of her existence. He was the only thing left in a world of complete desolation, and if she entertained but slight affection for the man himself, her whole being was wrapped up in the accomplishment of her end, and he was the only means remaining.

Besides her four sons, she had given birth to three daughters, the eldest of whom—the Honourable Caroline—had never married, and, at the age of fifty-six, was her mother's right hand, or perhaps it would be fairer to describe her as an auxiliary, had such been required. The two younger daughters had married, possibly to escape the stringency of the maternal rule. But Caroline was understood to scorn all men, and only to her mother did she accord any sort of deference. Treading in her father's footsteps, she led a sporting life, following the hounds every season with unfailing regularity and very often leading the field. In many ways she closely resembled Lady Aubreystone, being hard of feature and gruff of speech, and they were generally regarded as a redoubtable pair. But in Molly's opinion the daughter was almost more formidable than the mother, and she often marvelled that two people of such pronounced character could continue to live together. But if they ever quarrelled, it was behind closed doors, and not

even the servants of Aubreystone Castle knew it. Lady Aubreystone often made very crushing remarks to this single daughter of hers, but she never provoked any reply in the hearing of anyone else beyond a somewhat raucous and sarcastic laugh. Caroline had never been beloved by her mother on account of her sex, but she was by no means downtrodden on that account. In fact, some people were uncharitable enough to say that she was merely biding her time till old age should incapacitate the tyrant of the family. There was no doubt that so long as Caroline lived, a tyrant in the house of Aubreystone would not be lacking.

All this Molly knew and appreciated to the full with a somewhat quailing apprehension. Her thoughts dwelt upon it as she wheeled little Rollo past the village green towards her father's tumbledown abode next door to the village inn. But though she quailed, she braced herself with resolution to meet the future which somehow—for Rollo's sake—seemed inevitable. Her vigil in the wood was over, and Ronald—her lover—was gone from her. Hope was long since dead within her so far as he was concerned. Rollo alone was left. And for him there could be no future at all unless she embraced the destiny held out to her.

For Lord Aubreystone, urged by his mother, had at last begun to look around him for a wife, and—to Molly's vast amazement—he had decided that she was the only one who could occupy that high position to his satisfaction and to the comfortable fulfilment of his ambition to perpetuate the succession.

That his choice should have fallen upon her seemed to be mainly due to the fact that she alone was always to be found in the same place and available when wanted. All other women were occupied in some national work that called them in all directions. Molly only—so it seemed—had home duties to occupy her, a house to run, a father to care for, a baby to tend. She was always on the spot whenever he had time to spare to visit his ancestral home, and at first idly, but now seriously, his fancy had been caught. She seemed somehow to be planted there in readiness for his requirements, the very thing he needed; too gentle and unsophisticated to clash in any way with his redoubtable mother and sister—probably quite useless from a hostess point of view, but who wanted hostesses in these hard days of war? And doubtless, being young, she would prove adaptable and easy to train if ever the necessity should arise. Caroline could teach her. Caroline knew everything; even if his mother should fail, which in itself was almost unthinkable. He fully recognized that something ought to be done towards providing an heir, and this girl was already the mother of a

bouncing baby-boy, whom he would have given a good deal to have called his own. Of course her father was a drawback—a man who had never been a success in life, trained for a schoolmaster, but without the ability to teach, and now stricken with heart-disease. But his days were so obviously numbered that he was hardly worthy of consideration.

Molly was the thing that mattered and upon which he had set his heart. Matrimony had never appealed to him before. A fourth son, without prospects, could hardly expect to please himself in such matters; but now that matrimony was practically forced upon him, and with Molly Fordringham all ready to his hand, so to speak, he was quite prepared to approach the matter in a proper spirit, prepared even to adopt her son and educate him as he hoped to educate his own.

It was this—and this alone—which held any attraction for Molly. Her husband had possessed genius, or so she imagined, but his career had been cut off at its very beginning, and when he had met his fate in the trenches he had been merely a private in the British Army. Her father was even now living on the little he had been able to save and when that was gone, there would be only her widow's pension left. She might work. She was willing to work; but she could never hope to make enough to give Rollo a fair start in life. And Rollo too had genius. She was certain of it. His astuteness and inventive powers often astonished her even at this stage. He would make his mark some day, but if she threw away this one great chance he would be hopelessly handicapped by poverty.

She had no right to throw it away. She owed it to him—and even in a sense to Ronald—that greatly beloved one who had never even known of his son's coming—to enlarge the scope of his opportunities to the utmost limit.

Ivor was not deeply in love with her. She had sensed that already, she to whom love meant so much. So, if she brought herself to accept him, she would be doing him no wrong. For she knew within herself that she could never love again. Soul and body shrank together from the prospect of remarriage—true union it could never be. But for that very reason she would be giving more than she received. To her personally it would be as the burnt offering of her very self. To Ivor—Lord Aubreystone—it would be quite possibly the most enjoyable episode of his life, and probably the accomplishment of what had become the main ambition of himself as well as of his mother.

No, he would not be a loser. She would play an honest game with him, even though she did violence to every instinct of her being. He was coming

to her to-night for her answer, from his castle on the hill to her humble dwelling-place in the little village below. And she felt—albeit with a shrinking perception—that she knew already what that answer was going to be—though something closely imprisoned within her was crying out wildly through its confining bars that it was wrong—wrong—wholly and most horribly wrong.

II

THE MUTUAL BENEFIT

HER father was out when she reached the cottage. He often went forth for his slow walk in the cool of the evening. He would probably linger about in the scented lanes until supper-time.

She had put everything in readiness for that simple meal before leaving the house, and there remained only Rollo's milk to warm up. She carried him into the kitchen with her and there let him toddle about while she prepared it. He took the keenest interest in everything, and she had to keep a sharp eye upon him to save him from the pitfall of the coal-scuttle which possessed an irresistible attraction for him. He was perfectly good-humoured over this frustration, for he knew already that she would never refuse him anything within reason, and he had a baby adoration for his mother which was greater even than his spirit of adventure. His faith in her judgment was absolute, and on the very rare occasions when she was obliged to rebuke him he invariably wept inconsolably, not as a spoilt child weeps, but from sheer heartbreak. Molly was his whole world, and he had a shrewd suspicion that he was hers—poor old Granddad coming in a very bad second. As a matter of fact, Granddad counted for so little in his life that he was apt to regard him with something of contempt. He was not even as interesting as the aforesaid coal-scuttle, and there was one fact in relation to him which Rollo resented acutely. He was never allowed to make a noise in his vicinity, and as making noises was at that time one of his chief joys, perhaps he was hardly to be blamed for trying to scamper in the opposite direction whenever he heard the slow and rather shuffling step approaching.

He was extremely pleased on that June evening that he and Molly had the cottage to themselves. After his nap in the wood, he was by no means anxious to have his energies quenched a moment sooner than was necessary. It was such fun to potter round and hammer things just as the fancy took him, and—except in the matter of the coal-scuttle—Molly was very tolerant. She even laughed at him once or twice, showing her pearly teeth in a fashion which Rollo found quite entrancing. He would have paid her a great many

compliments had he possessed the vocabulary. Certainly she would never lack an admirer while the breath remained in his sturdy young body. She would always be exquisite in his sight—as he would be in hers.

The heating of the milk was not a lengthy operation, not nearly lengthy enough for Rollo. Armed with a saucepan-lid he was beating everything with which he came into contact with uproarious enthusiasm, and it was hard to be deprived, however gently, of this fascinating weapon.

But Molly was firm. It was already past bedtime, and the undressing and bathing process had still to be accomplished. Tenderly silencing his protests, she led him up the old rickety stairs that emerged rather disconcertingly into the tiny little room in which he slept. There was a gate at the top which she was careful to close. So much a rule of the household was this that Rollo himself always closed it if Granddad, who was inclined to be absent-minded, failed to do so.

A door out of Rollo's chamber which was perpetually open led into Molly's, and another which was kept shut and through which Rollo was never allowed to wander led from hers to that of her father. The rooms were low, and it was very hot. Rollo's little tub, poured out in the early morning, was quite tepid by evening, a device which in summer saved a considerable amount of trouble. In the winter months he took his bath in the kitchen.

He played his usual joke of trying to get into it without undressing, and received the usual phantom slapping from Molly with shrieks of delight. She had a most satisfying sense of humour where he was concerned. That little farce over, he submitted with a good grace to being divested of his few garments, and then proceeded to wallow in his bath with great contentment.

He splashed rather more than usual that evening, but Molly uttered no reproof. When Rollo was not making a definite bid for her notice, she was inclined to be abstracted. Behind his back her brow was puckered in deep thought. When at length he was ready for supper and bed she held him closely in her arms for several silent moments. Then, when he was in his cot at last, she set about putting everything in order in a mechanical fashion, and finally drew the curtain and left him to sleep while she went downstairs to lay the supper.

It was very quiet in the little oak-beamed parlour. Only the gruff voices of a few old men in the bar of The Plough next door were audible now and again. The lattice-windows were wide open, but no air was stirring. It would be a hot night up under the slanting roof.

She was tired after her walk in the fields, but she scarcely knew it. She was conscious only of a dreary sense of being pushed forward—a helpless pawn in the game of life—whither she had no desire to go.

When she had finished she dropped down upon the window-seat and leaned her head against the woodwork with a sigh. Evidently Rollo had fallen asleep. The drone of bees in the old-fashioned pinks outside gave an illusion of restfulness. She tried to marshal her thoughts for a final review of the situation before her father should return.

But weariness tricked her, and before she had even realized that she was drowsy she had dropped into a doze. It was scarcely sleep, but rather that floating state of consciousness between slumber and waking in which visions sometimes take shape. And for the first time in all the long aching period of loss and bereavement, in a dream that did not seem to be a dream, she saw her husband. He was very far away from her. She might have been looking through the wrong end of a telescope; but his figure, his attitude, were quite unmistakable. His face, owing, apparently, to some flaw in the medium through which she looked, was as though veiled. She felt, rather than saw, his eyes. And in the same fashion she sensed—rather than heard—his voice.

“I’m not dead, Molly,” he said. “I can’t come back to you. I can never come back. But I’m not dead.”

She clasped her hands fast together. The words seemed to go through her, setting every pulse and nerve a-quiver. “Sweetheart!” she said. “Sweetheart, I’ve never thought you dead. No one like you could die.”

“No—not dead,” he said again. “Only—gone away. Think of me—like that, dearest—and love me still!”

“Love you!” she cried, and suddenly speech and breathing were alike choked with sobs. “My darling, as long as I live I shall love you—first—and best—and always.”

“Ah!” he said, and there was a pause.

Into it she cried with a wild and piteous entreaty. “Ronald—Roy—darling—don’t go away! Tell me you love me too! Tell me—tell me!”

The vision was fading like a shadow from a screen. Her very agony was defeating her, bringing her out of her trance. But ere her full physical consciousness claimed her again, she caught—or thought she caught—a wandering echo from the eternal spaces: “Only God knows—how much.”

Sobbing she awoke and started up between anguish and ecstasy. That his spirit had for those few fleeting seconds found hers, she had no shadow of doubt. It had been soul-communion of an unfathomable description. Most people would have called it a dream, but Molly knew otherwise with that deep conviction which defies all reasoning. Somehow the gulf between them had been bridged; she did not ask how. She only knew that it was so. His body might lie in a nameless grave among all those myriads in the land where the guns were thundering, but his spirit was alive and able to call to hers. It filled her soul with awe and longing. She had a wild yearning to cry out to him again, but something held her back. Something told her that the means of communication had been cut off and she would cry in vain.

Dazed and strangely bewildered, she put her hand to her head and stood listening. It was then that other sounds, purely of earth, came to her—the quiet and purposeful tread of a man’s feet on the narrow flagged path outside. Someone was coming up to the door, and she knew who that someone was. Her heart gave a hard, sickening throb that seemed to constrict her throat. She waited without breathing for a knock upon the panels.

But it did not come. There was a moment’s pause, and then a voice spoke instead, and she remembered that the door was open.

“Can I come in?”

The voice had breeding and a semi-conscious note of superiority which yet was free from intentional condescension. Molly freed herself with a violent effort from the invisible bonds which seemed to be holding her. “Of course! Come in!” she said.

He entered, bending his tall frame to do so. He was a fine man, well-proportioned, self-possessed. All the Aubreystone family were thus distinguished. His hair was brown and rather sparse, his eyes a calm mid-grey.

“Well, Mary!” he said. “I am a little early, but I thought I should find you in. Are you alone?”

He held out his hand to her—a cool, steady hand that closed upon hers before she even realized that she had moved in response.

“There has been an air-raid warning,” he continued with the utmost composure. “They probably will not pay us a visit or waste any bombs upon us if they do. But I thought I would come all the same.”

“My father’s out,” said Molly somewhat breathlessly. “Do you think _____”

“He is quite as safe out as in,” said Lord Aubreystone. “There is no need for anxiety. As I said, a place like Little Bradholt is quite unworthy of their notice. They probably will not even pass over it.”

“Oh, I hope not,” murmured Molly. “I think I will run up and fetch Rollo.”

“My dear child—ridiculous!” protested Lord Aubreystone. “This cottage is no more likely to be struck by a bomb than by a flash of lightning. The chances are infinitesimal. We must allow ourselves a little commonsense. Leave the poor child in peace!”

He smiled at her with the words, and, though nervous still, Molly felt reassured. His deductions were so abundantly obvious, and she did not want to startle Rollo unnecessarily now that he had settled down to his night’s rest.

“Won’t you sit down?” she suggested.

“May I?” said Lord Aubreystone.

He had kept her hand in his, and he drew her down beside him on the couch, as if to give her confidence.

“You know what I have come for, don’t you?” he said.

“Oh!” said Molly.

She made a little movement to draw her hand away, but he detained it in a quiet but slightly imperious grasp.

“We are going to be very sensible,” he said, and there was a hint of admonition in his voice, “and treat the matter as, in my opinion, these matters always should be treated, in a frank and business-like spirit. Believe me, I am not pretending that in offering you marriage, I am proposing to place you irretrievably in my debt. It is true that in my position I have a good deal to give, but you will give in return. It will be a mutual benefit. So you need not feel overwhelmed from that point of view.”

“Oh, I haven’t—I don’t,” began Molly tremulously.

He swept her scarcely heard rejoinder aside.

“There are many ways of giving,” he said, “just as there are many ways of withholding, as I am sure you realize. I am prepared to give a

considerable amount myself. In fact, there is nothing in reason which I would deny you. I think that is the sort of spirit at which we ought to aim, in order that the foundations of our mutual happiness may be well and truly laid." He smiled a little and pressed her hand more closely. "Don't you agree with me?" he asked.

Molly snatched at her ebbing courage, aware that she was being borne down by superior weight and wisdom before she had been given a chance to express her own point of view. She quivered with embarrassment as she made her stand, but her voice was resolute and her look unwavering.

"I am very sorry," she said, "if I have let you understand that everything is settled. I'm afraid it isn't. I think I ought to have said 'No' from the very beginning. You see, Lord Aubreystone, there are some things which it isn't in my power to give. I ought to have told you that—only you wanted me to take time to consider." She paused in distress.

"Come—come!" he said. "We're not going over all the old ground again, are we? I'm not proposing to be a very exacting husband. I haven't asked you to fall deeply in love with me, for instance."

Molly shivered. "I am sorry," she said again. "That's just it. I'm afraid I am the sort of person that only does that once."

"Well?" he queried. "And does that make it impossible for you ever to have any sort of affection for anyone else again?"

"No," said Molly. She paused, but her steadiness was returning and she faced him unflinchingly. "It only makes it impossible for me ever to forget that once."

"I understand," said Lord Aubreystone. He made a large and tolerant gesture with his free hand. "You want to keep your little garden of memories undisturbed. Well, my dear, you are quite at liberty to do so. I fully realize that every nature must have its reserves, and I should be the last to wish to trespass upon ground which I have no doubt you regard as sacred. You have had your day of happiness and it has been all too short. You think you can never be happy again. At twenty years of age, one does,—and I must not forget that it is your birthday. I have not forgotten it. But you must forgive me if I fail to recognize in your objection a serious obstacle to our marriage. In my opinion it merely constitutes a further reason for urging it upon you."

He stopped, looking at her with kindly temperate eyes that somehow made her feel that she was being childishly unreasonable. She turned away from them with that desperate sense of being overborne.

“Don’t persuade me too hard!” she begged in a low voice, “There are some things it’s impossible to explain which make it very difficult for me.”

“That I can quite understand,” he said. “You have had a very tragic experience, but I don’t think you are quite justified in letting it spoil your whole life. Remember, it is not only yourself that you have to consider!”

“Oh, I know—I know!” Molly said, and released her hand almost forcibly to rise to her feet. “That’s what is troubling me so. Little Rollo! But he is *his* child. It seems like an act of treachery.”

She began to pace the uneven floor, while he stood punctiliously attentive, watching her, still in a fashion controlling her, or so she fancied.

“My dear,” he said after a moment, “I think you’re taking rather a morbid point of view. There can be no talk of treachery to one who is dead.”

She turned round, her face curiously convulsed. “Dead to you!” she said. “To me—never—never!” She stopped a second or two to steady herself; then: “He is as much alive to me,” she told him, “as if he were upstairs at this very moment with Rollo. In fact—I don’t know—he may be. He was with me—only just before you came in.”

“My dear Mary!” said Lord Aubreystone.

She advanced towards him, her hands clasped tightly over her breast. Her eyes were strangely bright; she seemed to be looking beyond him. “I know it sounds absurd to you,” she said, speaking rapidly but very clearly. “And I admit it is purely a spiritual connection. But it is there, and nothing will ever alter it. You must understand that, if you really want to marry me. There may be times when he will be so close to me that nothing else will count—times when I must walk in my secret garden and be alone with him.”

She ceased to speak, her face still strained and unnatural, her whole attitude one of tense aloofness.

But her companion betrayed neither resentment nor discouragement. He merely smiled at her compassionately.

“My dear,” he said, “I quite understand. All this is quite comprehensible—almost inevitable to any but a superficial nature. But I assure you, it does not count with me. The world is full of grief, especially at the present moment, and it behoves us to make the best we can of the unfortunate circumstances in which we find ourselves. You are young and, whether you realize it or not, your trouble is partly physical. That is the part which I shall hope to heal. I have no desire to intrude upon any spiritual territory. I am

merely asking you to place your physical well-being in my hands. I am quite willing to leave anything beyond that to take its ordinary course.”

“You want me to bear you children,” she said in a voice that sounded too weary to express active repugnance.

He made a slightly deprecatory gesture. “I think it would make for your own happiness as well as mine that you should do so,” he said. “You are too young to live alone. And it would make for Rollo’s happiness also. An only child is always handicapped, and, as I have already promised, though I could not make him my heir, he would share all educational advantages with any children of my own.”

Her lower lip twisted as if from some sudden pain. She turned from him with an almost fierce movement. “Oh, I know it’s only the body,” she said, “but I don’t think I can—I don’t think I—possibly—can.”

It was at that moment that through the summer stillness there came a sound—a humming as of a swarm of bees high up in the air—a disturbance of the atmosphere that seemed to drift down as it were from another planet.

Lord Aubreystone heard it and sharply turned his head towards the window.

In the little inn next door a dead silence had fallen, but almost immediately, as the sound swelled, a voice cried out, “That’s them! They’re coming! They’ll be over us in another minute!”

It was the voice that reached Molly rather than the sound to which it alluded. Her expression changed to swift alarm.

“Oh!” she gasped. “An air-raid!” and sprang to the door.

In a moment her light feet were running up the steep stairs, and the man was left alone.

He leaned from the window and listened. The sound was approaching very rapidly. It no longer resembled the humming of bees, but was obviously the roar of machinery overhead. The heavy foliage of some chestnut trees obstructed his view, but he judged that the advancing horror was at no great distance.

And then suddenly—like a thunderbolt—it came. Something swift, piercing, appalling, fell from the heavens. A thunderous crash and a roar in the village street—a fearful smell of explosive—flame and smoke and shrieks—all intermingled like a ghastly nightmare! And after it the running to and fro of many figures, and the cracking and smashing of falling

masonry—while the terrible death-machine sped on in search of its objective a few miles beyond.

There came a child's frightened crying from the room above, but it was swiftly drowned in the general commotion outside.

"It's the church!" shouted a man's voice, and another, "No, it's the school!"

And then suddenly the little garden gate was pushed open, and a scurrying, dishevelled countrywoman tore up the path. She was calling out hysterically at the top of her voice.

Lord Aubreystone went to meet her, gripped her and held her up as she stumbled at the step. She practically fell into his arms in the doorway.

"Steady! Steady!" he said. "It's no good panicking. You're as safe here as anywhere."

"Safe!" she screamed. "Safe! There's a whole crowd more of 'em up there. I seen 'em as I run along the street. And I've come to tell Mrs. Fordringham as 'er poor father is lying dead in the road."

III

THE LAST OF THE LINE

OLD LADY AUBREYSTONE sat in her boudoir, very upright, unbendingly self-assured, facing her son who, somewhat stiff and ill at ease, sat opposite and smoked a cigarette.

They had been talking for some minutes, but a silence had fallen, and the mother was better at silences than the son. She conducted the present one with an air of magisterial equanimity which was weightier than any speech. She had very nearly—though not quite—said all that she had to say.

Of this Ivor Aubreystone was aware, but he knew better than to attempt to hurry her. Given plenty of time she would probably express herself with less acerbity.

She spoke, and he stirred in his seat as if he had found a thorn.

“I am sorry,” she said, “that your ambitions have not led you to look any higher than the daughter of an out-at-elbows pedagogue, but I suppose I should be grateful that your fancy has not directed you in any less desirable direction. I do think, however, that I might have been consulted before you actually brought this girl and her child on to the premises.”

Her son shifted his position again and cleared his throat. “As to that,” he said, “I should quite agree with you, Mother, if the circumstances were normal, but they are not. The poor girl was left with a choice of sleeping in a tiny cottage with her dead father lying in the sitting-room, or finding a lodging next door at a cheap and by no means commodious village inn. I could not have allowed that, for, as I have already told you, it is my full intention to make her my wife within the next week if possible; and in consideration of that, I thought it the most natural thing to do to bring her here to you for shelter.”

Lady Aubreystone bent her head slightly. “I can appreciate that, but as I scarcely know her, perhaps you also can appreciate that I am hardly in a position to receive her with enthusiasm. Of her antecedents—and of her

previous marriage—I know nothing whatever. I hope that you have taken some steps to satisfy yourself upon these points.”

Ivor made another small movement and brought his grey eyes directly to hers. “I knew her father,” he said. “He was a gentleman of the old school—the scholarly type. I did not know her husband, as he did not live here. He was, I understand, the son of an old friend of her father’s, now dead. But the child is obviously of decent birth, and I only hope that I may some day possess a son as presentable.”

A quick gleam shone in his mother’s eyes at the words. He had sounded the right note. “In that respect,” she said, “I entirely agree with you. And for that reason alone I do not altogether condemn your idea of a hasty marriage. The matter is one of great urgency, and in these days of battle and murder, etc., it seems almost criminal to count upon the future. Even to-night, for instance, you might have been caught by that bomb—and you are the last of the line.”

“Quite so!” Ivor’s mouth twitched a little, but he had deliberately conducted the conversation into this channel and he could hardly take exception to a remark which he himself had intended to utter, had the necessity arisen. “I am glad you realize that,” he said. “We don’t want to risk a complete wipe-out like that. By the way, the bomb itself did no actual damage beyond knocking down the churchyard-wall. Mary’s father died of shock, not injury. But there is no knowing what might happen next time. As you say, we can’t count on anything. I am going to make that clear to Mary herself, for she is rather inclined to try to delay matters.”

“Indeed!” Lady Aubreystone suddenly became more upright. Her black brows met. “D’you mean to tell me that this girl—this little village nobody upon whom your choice has fallen—considers herself to be in a position to dictate terms—to you?”

Ivor smiled, and the tension went out of his attitude as he rose. “No, Mother, no! She will be most reasonable, and I am sure most grateful. But she is a faithful little soul, and still worships the memory of her dead husband—probably more than she would his actual presence if she had it. She will get over all that as soon as she has other things to think about. She would probably have forgotten it long ago if she had not been cooped up in such a narrow space and thrown back on herself at every turn. Her father was a dreamer and no help to her whatever, and the child is only just beginning to be old enough to be interesting. She must have other children—plenty of them. That will take her mind off back numbers.”

Lady Aubreystone smiled somewhat grimly. "I hope you are right," she said, "and that she will at least be prepared to do her duty in that respect. For, frankly, Ivor, to my mind the situation is desperate. I could never give my consent to your marrying such a girl were it not that she would probably have greater health and strength for the production of children than anyone of your own standing. One puny heir is not enough. I should like to see you with at least four sturdy sons to your credit, and even they"—her voice trembled a little—"might not be enough."

He came across to her and patted her shoulder. "That'll be all right, Mother. Don't fret or be anxious on that score! Mary knows my wishes, and I have no fear that she will not be able to supply them. But you will be kind to her, Mother, won't you? She is shy and unused to grandeur. I had great difficulty in persuading her to come here. In fact, I almost brought her by force."

"She will have to do as she is told," said Lady Aubreystone with firmness.

"Yes, of course," agreed her son patiently. "I know you will find her very amenable and get very fond of her. But please be kind to her now, for she is in very great trouble! And I think a good deal depends upon your attitude in getting her to agree to the immediate marriage which we both think desirable. She wants to stop and think. But, Mother, there is no time for that. She must take life as it is and make the best of it. Everyone has to now."

"But of course!" said Lady Aubreystone. "And she ought to consider herself very lucky into the bargain. Surely she realizes that you are doing her a very great honour!"

"Yes, yes, I am sure she does. But she is scared. Goodness knows she has had enough to frighten her, poor child! I want you to guide her, Mother, to help her and advise her. When we are married, it will all be very much easier, but until then—oh, don't you see she may be frightened away altogether?" Ivor's voice had a note of urgency.

His mother looked sardonic. "Very unlikely, I should say!" she remarked. "But I see your point. If it must be this girl, and you certainly haven't been in a hurry to marry till now, I will see what I can do to further your wishes. Heaven alone knows what is going to happen to us all, but it is no good thinking of that. We can only act for the best."

"And quickly," said Ivor with emphasis. "Thank you, Mother. I am very grateful to you."

He turned to the window and stood looking out over the valley and winding river below the Castle garden, his brows slightly drawn as though the situation had not developed entirely in the direction he desired.

His mother's voice came after a pause from behind him. "Well, there's no more to be said, except that I remain the mistress here—which seems superfluous."

Ivor barely turned his head. "My dear Mother, of course! No one ever suggested anything else. You will find her most unassuming. All she has ever done hitherto has been to run her father's cottage and look after her baby."

Lady Aubreystone sniffed a little. "She sounds an absolute rustic, but we may be able to make something of her if she is willing to learn. Have her in if you like, and I will speak to her!"

He turned round. "Mother, don't—please—treat her like that, or I shall have to take her away! I intend to marry her, and I also intend that she shall be happy. But if I can't count upon your helping me to make her so——"

"And have I refused to do so?" His mother's voice was stiff with righteous indignation. "Have I done anything whatever to obstruct your wishes? You have expressed your desires—or should I say your intentions?—and I have so far done my best to fall in with them. But, my dear Ivor, there are limits, and you are very nearly approaching them. I may remind you that, but for the absolutely exceptional circumstances, nothing would have induced me to agree to the type of alliance which you are about to make. It is wholly against the principles which I have observed throughout my life."

"I quite understand," said Ivor, and he also spoke stiffly though with a certain wariness. "But we are agreed that circumstances have altered this particular case, so there is no need to go into it again. All I do say is that in her present frame of mind it would take very little to scare her away entirely, and I must beg you to consider her feelings and to treat her as a guest and not an interloper."

"As to that," said his mother, "I reserve to myself the right to treat her exactly as I choose. I have never been dictated to by any of my children before, and I am not going to submit to such a state of affairs now."

Ivor swallowed back all rejoinder with an obvious effort. There was a note in Lady Aubreystone's voice that warned him that he could not afford to lose any further ground. He had never loved her, having always been

aware that her feeling for him was of a very tepid description. It was only of late that he had entered into her scheme of life at all. Who could have foreseen that a fourth son would ever inherit the family title and honours? He had been a mere adjunct for the greater part of his existence. But he could not afford to quarrel with her, nor had he any wish to do so. He was not naturally aggressive, and he liked a quiet life.

So after a few moments he walked quietly to the door with the remark, "I will see if I can find her."

And Lady Aubreystone was left to contemplate her approaching dowagerhood in solitude.

IV

THE BIRTHDAY NIGHT

THAT birthday of Molly's was destined to be branded upon her as it were in letters of fire for the rest of her life.

The awful shock of her father's death and the masterly removal of herself and her child from the old tumbledown cottage which they called home, bereft her for the time of the power to think coherently, and when her full faculties returned she found herself an inmate of the Castle and almost, it seemed, a prisoner. How it had come about she hardly knew, but a will that was stronger than hers now encompassed her, and her own fate as well as that of little Rollo had passed out of her control. Circumstances had combined to defeat her, and she was no longer capable of resistance. As one borne upon an irresistible current she was swept forward towards an unknown goal, and however she might fear the issue she lacked the strength to hold back.

When Ivor came to her that evening, she was crouched in a low chair beside the bed in which Rollo lay asleep, and the look she turned upon her visitor was one of pathetic resignation. He knew before he spoke to her that the battle was over. The sight of her great eyes gazing up at him like the eyes of a lost child moved him to compassion.

"You're very tired," he said. "Why don't you go to bed yourself?"

"I couldn't possibly sleep," she answered. "Besides, I must be ready—in case the aeroplanes come back."

"There's no fear of that now," he said. "And, anyway, I shall be at hand. Have they brought you anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes," said Molly with a sigh. "They were very kind, and it was very good of you to bring me here. I don't know what I should have done." She repressed a sharp shudder. "I haven't really grasped it yet," she added apologetically.

He bent over her. "You must have a rest," he said. "You'll be ill if you don't. Try to realize that you are in safe keeping! I will arrange everything for you. There will be nothing for you to worry about."

Her look went to the round dark head on the pillow. "I couldn't leave Rollo," she said somewhat irrelevantly.

"My dear, I haven't the faintest desire to separate you from him," he assured her. "But you couldn't go on living alone with him now that your father has gone. You are much too young. Besides, what have you got to live on?"

She shook her head. "I really don't know. Life is difficult. One never has long enough to decide."

He laid a quiet hand upon her. "I think you will have to let me decide for you," he said. "I am older than you are, and I have had more experience of life. You may rely upon me not to let you make a mistake."

She leaned her head against his arm almost involuntarily while a deep sigh broke from her. "It's Rollo I think of," she said with a weary sort of iteration of the thought. "Things happen so suddenly. I might die too. And then—what would become of him?"

"As my stepson, I should naturally provide for him," said Ivor. "I am quite ready to accept responsibility in that direction, as I have already told you. I cannot make him my heir, but I can do everything else that is necessary to fit him for the life of an English gentleman." He stooped a little lower over her. "Do you think you are quite justified in holding back?" he asked in a tone of gentle reasoning. "Doesn't the very uncertainty of which you speak make you feel that there is no time to be lost? I assure you that thought has been in my mind a great deal lately. We are bound to make quick decisions in times such as these. It is only those who do so who can hope for any kind of security."

He paused. She had made no attempt to respond, but her head still lay in utter weariness against his arm. Save for a certain throbbing which seemed to denote some hidden agitation, he could have almost believed her to be sleeping.

He tried to look into her downcast face, but could only do so by deliberately turning it up to his own. This, after a few moments, he did with quiet compulsion; and then, as she made no resistance, merely suffering his action with closed eyes, he stooped and kissed her.

Her lips quivered under his own, but she remained quite passive in his hold.

“I think that decides it, doesn’t it?” he said. “You have made up your mind to marry me at last.”

“Have I?” she murmured weakly.

His arms closed about her, strongly yet restrainingly. “Yes,” he said with steady emphasis. “The matter is settled. And, now that you are left alone, I am going to take everything into my own hands. There is nothing to prevent our immediate marriage. In fact everything is in favour of it. And then you will be able to stay quietly here in my mother’s care until the end of the War. You agree with me, my dear?”

Her trembling lips moved in answer. “Yes, if you wish it. I agree.”

“Good!” he said, and kissed her again as one who had earned the right. “I shall arrange for our marriage to take place within a week. No, hush!” For she had made a faint sound of protest. “I know what is best, and delay is only painful. I could never allow you to go back to the cottage after the funeral. We will put all that is morbid and sorrowful behind us. It is far better that you should enter upon your new life at once. Believe me, you will never regret it.”

She made no further effort at remonstrance, but sank again into quivering passivity. The steady pressure of his lips upon her own again deprived her of the power of speech, and when he released her at length the will to act and free herself had somehow been subdued. He had taken her at a moment when her strength was at a very low ebb, and in making the decision irrevocable he firmly believed that he was acting in her interests as much as his own.

He remained with her for a little while, but not for long, for after all she had undergone she was plainly worn out, and his caresses—though they served to strengthen his own proprietary attitude—seemed almost too much for her tottering strength.

“I will leave you now,” he said finally. “I think there is no need for me to press my sympathy upon you. But before I go, I should just like to give you my birthday gift, and then you must go to bed.”

It was as if he spoke to a child, his voice kindly, compassionate, slightly condescending. But Molly did not even raise her eyes in answer. She was tired to the soul.

He took a little paper packet from his pocket and unwrapped it. The glint of diamonds shone in the shaded light.

“Just a token!” he said. “Let me have your hand—yes, the left one. Ah, splendid! It may be a little loose, but I expect you will grow to it—as to everything else.” He began to slip the ring on to her third finger, but paused. “I think the old wedding-ring must come off,” he said. “You may wear it on your right hand till we are married, if you like.”

She uttered a sudden hard sob and drew her hand away. “It—has never been off,” she said in a choked voice. “I couldn’t—I couldn’t!”

He caught her hand back again and firmly held it. “Oh, come! This is nonsense!” he said with a touch of austerity. “I can’t allow it. Morbid sentiment, my dear Mary,—nothing else! Perhaps, however, I am the most suitable person to take it off.”

Her fingers clenched. “No!” she said. “No!”

He opened them out with quiet force and drew the gold band, which was loose enough, from her finger. She gave a low cry as she felt it go.

“It is best,” he said. “It is far best. There! You shall have the engagement one instead. I will take this one away. It will only give rise to sad memories.”

“No!” she cried. “No! Give it to me!”

But he withheld it, faintly smiling, fully determined. “I know what is best for you,” he said. “You are very young and impressionable. What I do is for your good. You will realize that later. I want to help you over the bad places and make you happy.”

“Happy!” she repeated in a wrung whisper. “Happy!”

“I know,” he said. “It seems impossible to you now. That is because you are young, poor child, and have been through so much trouble. But very soon things will be quite different. You will learn to look forward and leave your sorrows behind. Good night, Mary, my dear! By this time next week you will be wearing—another wedding-ring.”

She moaned in answer; words seemed to have failed her.

“Go to bed,” he said, “at once! You are worn out: but you will feel better in the morning.”

He drew her to him, kissed her once again on lips and forehead, paused a moment, and then—as she still found no words—patted her hand and turned

away.

He was gone. She was alone with her child. But for the first time in the whole of her widowhood she was unaware of him there beside her. A great passion of feeling shook her, such a tempest as her slender frame was scarcely able to endure. Her hands were clenched. She dared not throw away the alien ring. Yet it seemed to be searing her flesh like a hot iron. She had suffered it, she had accepted it, she was powerless. But her agony of soul was such as even in her deepest sorrow she had never known before.

Softly, with a subdued violence, like a caged creature, she paced the room—the sumptuous prison to which she had been brought—driven, despite all weariness, by the fire within.

Wild thoughts and impulses rushed through her brain in a confused medley. At one moment she was terrified, at another desperately brave. And all the time within her the dreadful yearning gnawed—too deep for words or any physical expression, the longing that must go for ever unsatisfied for Roy—Roy, her husband, most precious, most beloved—to whose memory a bitter fate compelled her to be false.

How long she wandered through that terrible wilderness of despair and anguish she never knew. It was as a blackness that pressed upon her, shutting out all sight and sound, even smothering the thought of her father lying alone in death in their little cottage in the village. So cruelly was her spirit rent that all power of concentration was gone from her, and only the agony remained.

Later it seemed to her that all night long she wandered piteously crying for Roy, and receiving no answer because by her own action she had placed him beyond her reach. But when morning broke with the singing of many birds she was lying exhausted and sleeping on the bed with little Rollo in her arms.

V

THE BOSOM OF THE FAMILY

MOLLY'S first interview with Lady Aubreystone was not as alarming as might have been anticipated. In the first place she was too weary and too bewildered to be aware of any acute embarrassment, and in the second her appearance with its youth and pathos made a more favourable impression upon the old lady than that hard critic had deemed possible.

Her greeting was in fact wholly different from what she had intended it to be. "Heavens, child! You look like a ghost!" she said. "Why didn't you stay in bed?"

Molly's smile was one of pure courtesy. "I'm not ill, thank you," she said. "I always get up early."

"Then you'd better go back again," said Lady Aubreystone gruffly.

Molly shook her head. "I couldn't, thank you very much. I have my little Rollo to see to."

"Rollo? Who's that? The child? Sounds like a dog," was Lady Aubreystone's comment.

Molly flushed rather painfully. "It's only a pet name," she explained. "His real name is Ronald—after his father."

Lady Aubreystone frowned; but in a moment softened and drew the girl to her. "Well, well, I suppose that's natural. So you're going to marry again, I hear, and make my son happy!"

Molly's flush faded so completely that the old woman, watching, thought that she would faint. But she answered with a composure that reassured her. "He says I must, so I expect I shall. But it's difficult for anyone to be happy now, isn't it?"

Lady Aubreystone made a brief sound of sympathy. "I know what you mean. When you get to my age, you'll expect it. But it's hard at yours. I don't suppose you'll believe me when I tell you that you'll get over it, but

you will for all that. Unless I'm much mistaken, the happiest time of your life is in front of you."

Molly's lips compressed themselves, but she uttered no contradiction.

"Oh yes, it is," asserted Lady Aubreystone, still watching her. "You wait till you're married! It's a pity to keep all your eggs in one basket. You'll be happier when there are more of them."

Molly spoke in a low voice. "I'm not thinking about happiness any more. Perhaps I've had my share. Anyhow, I suppose one can do one's best without it."

Old Lady Aubreystone gave her a shrewd look. "You're a queer girl," she said. "But for goodness' sake, don't cultivate sadness! I must have cheery faces round me. I don't want to hear anything about your troubles, any more than I ever want to talk about my own. You certainly can't do your best for anyone if you're being miserable. And it takes time to be unhappy, remember that! No busy people ever are."

"I am sure you are right," said Molly humbly. "Only sometimes I can't help feeling that it would be a help if only one had a little time to think."

"Not a bit of it!" rejoined Lady Aubreystone with a kindling of the eyes that denoted her determination to crush every vestige of an opinion that differed from her own. "Absurd nonsense! Girls never stop to think, and a good thing too! They'd never get married if they did. There are too many of them nowadays."

Molly regarded the indomitable old lady with steady blue eyes that were not wanting in courage. "Yes," she said. "It seems rather mean for any of us to marry twice, don't you think?"

Lady Aubreystone frowned upon her, then laughed—a raucous laugh that was like the croaking of a raven. "Oh, you and your theories!" she said. "You're one of the lucky ones. Just you realize that! I believe I can get rather fond of you, if you behave yourself. But mind—you've got to make a study of it! Being a good wife is a whole-time job, and you must give your mind to it."

"Being a good mother is the same," said Molly, almost under her breath.

"Yes, and you're going to be that too." Lady Aubreystone put an arm suddenly about the slender figure. "Heavens, child! How scraggy you are! Who would give you credit for producing that bouncing boy of yours? I must take you in hand and feed you up before any more come along. How

old are you? Twenty? Well, well, plenty of time—if only this miserable War will stop! But not much to be wasted till it does. You’re going to be a good girl and do your duty as my son’s wife, eh?”

She looked up at Molly with a gleam of persuasion in her hectoring old eyes, but her arm held like a vice.

Molly hesitated a moment, and then she stooped and quietly kissed the withered face. “Yes, I’ll try hard—to do my duty,” she said.

She did not expect to be caught closer in that steely embrace, and she was startled the next moment to find herself drawn irresistibly downwards, and pressed against Lady Aubreystone’s breast. It was a novel and not wholly pleasant sensation, for she could not have checked the gesture had she desired to do so. But she sought to smother her discomfiture by surrendering completely to the old woman’s whim.

“That’s right,” said the harsh voice. “I’m pleased with you. I think my son has shown some good sense, and the sooner you’re married the better. You leave everything to me, and don’t fret! Your own child shall be looked after. I’ll see to that.”

“You’re very kind,” whispered Molly, hoping to escape.

“Kind!” said Lady Aubreystone. “I’m sensible, that’s all. Now don’t you go and disappoint me! I can’t endure much more at my age.”

“I will try to be everything you want,” Molly said.

“Good! That’s a promise.” The grim arms tightened. “I’ve borne seven children in my time. I thought it was enough, but it wasn’t. Nearly half of them were girls. Ah, here’s Caroline! I suppose I mustn’t say that in front of her. Here Caroline! Come and look at this child! She is going to be your very younger sister. No, you stay as you are, child! You’re all right.”

The door had opened to admit Caroline Aubreystone who entered with an athletic swing and stopped short to stare.

Molly, greatly disconcerted, managed to lift her head and turn a scarlet and apologetic face in her direction. She had never even spoken to the Honourable Caroline, and the situation embarrassed her beyond words.

But Lady Aubreystone only laughed—her raven croak. “Come on in, Caroline! She can’t get up to drop you a curtsey. You’ll have to take her as you find her—my adopted daughter—your adopted sister.”

Caroline spoke briefly as she advanced. Her look was somehow scathing. “My prospective sister-in-law, I suppose?” she said in a voice that was extraordinarily like her mother’s. “I didn’t expect to find you quite so literally clasped to the family bosom, I admit. Well, I suppose it’s all in a good cause. You may be interested to hear”—her hard-featured face suddenly twisted in a mirthless smile—“that I have just interviewed your charming infant, who is still shrieking himself blue in the face over the ordeal.”

That was more than enough for Molly. All scruples were scattered, and she accomplished her release with a swift and violent effort that admitted of no further restraint. “Oh, I’m sorry. Forgive me! I must go!” she panted, and fled through the open door before either mother or daughter could attempt to check her.

They looked at each other—the older woman with an expression of semi-angry frustration, the younger with open contempt.

It was the latter who spoke. “It’ll be a case of weaning the mother from the child with a vengeance. Ivor will have his work cut out.”

“But he will succeed.” Lady Aubreystone spoke in an undertone but her words were fateful. “I can conquer that slip of a thing single-handed, and amongst us all we shall manage to break her in to the Aubreystone traditions. She’s young and fairly plastic yet. Anyhow, I have accepted her.”

“So I perceive,” said Caroline drily. “Well, I never expected to be consulted, but I wouldn’t have chosen a bereaved widow with a child if I’d been Ivor. They are not plastic as a rule. However—we shall see. It’s three to one, as you say.”

“If she fails to give us an heir——” said Lady Aubreystone in a voice that shook too much to continue the sentence.

Her daughter snapped her fingers in the air. “That’ll be her look-out. It’ll be for us to find some cause or impediment for terminating the contract. But she’s young enough. She’ll probably have a dozen.”

“But she’s got a will of her own,” said Lady Aubreystone. “I can sense it. And girls are beginning to get so headstrong. That’s why I say she must be broken in.”

Caroline swung to the window with her man’s gait and looked out. It was a day of perfect June. The green world that stretched below her was like a peaceful dream.

She made an abrupt scornful sound and swung back again. “Well, she shall be—if Ivor doesn’t go soft over her. He’s well on the way.”

“Oh—Ivor! I can manage him,” said Lady Aubreystone with sweeping self-confidence. “There’s not one of my children who can say he has ever had the better of me.”

Caroline laughed sardonically. “You put that very tactfully, but I quite realize that the feminine gender doesn’t count in your estimation—except as a means to an end. What a comic world we live in! The brainless male forced into a position of authority which he is totally unfitted to occupy! It’s a good thing there are a few brainless women left—from his point of view.”

“Oh, my dear Caroline!” her mother protested irritably. “What nonsense are you talking now?”

Caroline laughed. “Not nonsense, my dear Mother; heresy is a better word. You used to punish me for it as a child, but you never managed to exterminate it. I probably inherited it from you.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Lady Aubreystone testily. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m not interested. All I care about now is to get Ivor married as soon as possible. I’ve given my consent, so there’s nothing to wait for.”

“Really an ideal romance!” commented her daughter. “Well, I’m off to the stables to do some gingering up. I’ll march the bride to the altar if she requires an escort. But I don’t think on the whole you’ll find that the prospect of becoming Lady Aubreystone is one which she will desire to postpone indefinitely—unless she’s a bigger fool than she looks.”

With which caustic surmise she tramped to the door, paused to light a cigarette, and then swung it open and went away, leaving a draught behind her.

VI

NIGHTMARE

AFTERWARDS, when it was all over, Molly used to wonder by what mystic means she was rendered so submissive. Up to her birthday she had been mistress of herself; after it, she became a mere puppet in the hands of others, forced into subjection by wills so dominating that her own gave way with scarcely a struggle. Always in her heart was the knowledge that she did not want to marry again, but she lacked the strength to act upon it. Somehow everything was taken for granted in such an irrevocable fashion that there seemed no possibility of turning back. She was as much a prisoner as if she had been kept under lock and key, and even if panic had urged her to flee from the situation, there was always Rollo to keep her where she was. For his sake she never dared to make the attempt.

As one in a dreadful dream she went through the ceremony of her father's funeral, while yet she could not bring herself to realize his death. They had never been very close companions. He had led his life apart from her, immersed in his books, but he had constituted home to her, and without the familiar figure she felt lost and outcast.

When Ivor told her that he had made arrangements for their marriage two days later, she felt too stunned to protest. It had got to be. Like a slave sold in the market, she had no choice. There was no one to whom she could turn for deliverance, and there was Rollo—always Rollo—to provide for and protect.

Had she been even a little older, she might have held her own; but, worn down as she was, by a long struggle against pitiless odds, there was nothing left for her but to go the way she was driven. Her father's small savings were gone, and she and Rollo were practically destitute. So, without further remonstrance, she accepted her lot and made ready for the sacrifice.

Ivor was very kind to her—but always from the possessive standpoint. He never let her lose sight of the fact that she was to be at his complete disposal, and without words he managed to convey to her that she was very

fortunate to find so safe a harbourage. She began to suppose that she must be, and anyhow—shrink as she might from the life that lay before her—it was bound to be better for Rollo.

But she would not have him at her wedding. There for once, strangely, her wounded spirit asserted itself. She would go through it without raising the faintest difficulty, but it must be alone. Upon this point her resolution concentrated, and they let her have her way.

After all, as Caroline humorously put it, who wanted a squealing brat in church at a wedding which was supposed to be conspicuously quiet?

It was a quiet ceremony enough, but the old men and women of the village thronged to see it, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. It was an event not likely to be forgotten in the village where the pathetic bride was so familiar a figure, and they were unanimous in congratulating her upon her good luck. Some there were who were surprised that Lord Aubreystone did not look higher and wondered at the reason for his choice, but to most of them his motive was fairly obvious. Molly was already the mother of one robust child, and he needed an heir. The dwindling of the ancient line had caused something approaching to panic in the family. If he were to die childless the title would lapse. So upon mature consideration he had probably chosen wisely. It was no time for taking risks. No one could afford to do that, the Aubreystones least of all.

Yet it was generally conceded that he seemed very pleased with his bargain. It was only Molly with her strained smile and rather scared eyes who showed any lack of confidence. But this was as it should be in one so young scaling the social ladder with such unexpected rapidity.

“Poor dear! She’ll feel out of place up at the Castle,” was one woman’s verdict. “And the old lady and her daughter won’t make it any easier for her neither.”

“Well, she’s done better for herself than she did last time,” snapped back a neighbour. “That young man she married first time wasn’t nothing to boast about—and no money.”

“Money isn’t everything,” said gentle Miss Mason the postmistress. “I hope she hasn’t been induced to marry for it this time.”

The two other women smiled at one another. Miss Mason was known to be on the romantic side, but even she surely could scarcely have been proof against rank and money combined. Was there any woman living who could—especially now when times were so hard?

“Well, she won’t have to wait for her meat rations outside the butcher’s any more,” was their envious verdict, with which, at least, Miss Mason was obliged to agree.

And Molly went through it all as one lost. No further message had come to her out of the unknown, nor ever could again; for she had locked the door. She and Rollo had been left to fend for themselves, and she had taken the only possible course open to her. Her widow’s pension was totally inadequate to educate him as he must be educated; and for herself, what did anything matter now?

And yet, deep in her soul, she knew that what she was doing mattered intensely. She knew that the dreamy feeling would not last, and that she would awake and suffer acutely. She went through her wedding like an automaton, but within, her spirit waited in shrinking expectation of the anguish to come. She did not even see the gaping villagers as she walked down the churchyard path when it was over. She only saw her father’s grave with its little heaps of withering flowers, and the great gap that had been torn in the wall close by, where he had died. But, averting her eyes from these things, she saw nothing else; for the whole world seemed dark.

She was aware of Ivor putting her into the car at the gate, but she lacked the strength to take active notice of anything, and during the brief drive to the Castle she lay back as if unconscious.

He did not worry her. Perhaps he realized that she was incapable of further effort for the moment. But when they reached his home, he did not wait for his mother and sister who were in another car immediately behind, but led her straight through the hall and gave her wine.

That restored her somewhat, and she looked at him with misty eyes of gratitude. “I must go and see if my Rollo is all right,” she said.

He made no demur, though he frowned slightly at the suggestion. Rollo had been left in the charge of a girl from the village under the supervision of Mrs. Pitson, the housekeeper. Ivor followed his bride as she hastened to Mrs. Pitson’s room, and was in time to hear her boy’s shout of welcome as he sprang into her arms.

Molly held him very tightly, covering his round baby-face with kisses. He had a lot to tell her in his eager inarticulate way. Both Mrs. Pitson and his temporary attendant, Rose, had been superlatively kind to him, but he scorned them both. He wanted only Molly, and firmly refused even to look

at the tall man behind her whom he knew quite well but had never very greatly liked.

But Ivor wanted Molly, too, and after a discreet pause, he made his desire known.

“Let him be taken out into the garden!” he said. “We must go back to my mother.”

“Can’t I bring him too?” murmured Molly.

Ivor negatived the idea instantly, though not unkindly. “I think not, dear. A little later on, perhaps. But we must consider my mother. I can’t have her worried.”

So Molly caressed her baby tenderly once more and put him down. He sought to follow her and set up a shriek of disappointment when he was frustrated by Rose.

Molly stopped short and would have turned back, but in a moment the indomitable encompassed her once more. Ivor put a firm arm around her and drew her away.

“Don’t spoil the child!” he said. “He can see you again later. We must be sensible.”

He led her with quiet compulsion from the scene, and Rollo’s yells of impotent indignation pursued them until they were out of earshot.

Molly made no resistance, but her face was set to endure the first stab of returning sensibility. It was for Rollo that she had taken this step, and there could be no return.

They joined Lady Aubreystone who, with Caroline, was entertaining a few guests from the neighbourhood who had attended the ceremony, and there followed a subdued buzz of congratulations to which Ivor made suitable reply.

No, they were not contemplating a honeymoon. He had not been able to get leave at such short notice, but he hoped a little later on perhaps—anyhow, duty first! And Molly, straining her ears and imagining that she still heard Rollo’s cries in the distance, scarcely answered at all.

Her mother-in-law treated her with punctilious kindness, and Caroline scarcely noticed her. The dream was turning into a terrible nightmare, the awakening from which would be the most intolerable of all. An insane longing to break away from the little gathering of local magnates, snatch up

her son and flee, possessed her, but she kept it under control, conscious of the iron wills around her and her own powerlessness through all. Already she was subdued and held in check by the very atmosphere she breathed, and sometimes an inner fear shook her which she dared not even face. It was being silently but very persistently borne in upon her that she would never be her own mistress again.

The dreadful function came to an end at last. Tea was brought in and partaken of, and the handful of guests departed.

Molly threw a nervous glance around. Surely now she might escape and go to Rollo! She began to edge towards the door, and Ivor, entering, met her and took her by the arm.

“Now,” he said, “we’ll have a little time to ourselves. Poor child! Don’t look so scared! They’re not so formidable as they look, and they all mean well. Have you had enough tea? Come along then! We’ll sit in the study.”

“I was wondering—if I might just go to Rollo for a little while,” she pleaded anxiously. “You know, he is never away from me night or day, and I’m sure he’ll be fretting.”

He smiled at her, but it was the implacable smile she was beginning to know and dread. “You can see him afterwards,” he said. “Let them put him to bed! The girl will sit with him till he’s asleep. She is to spend the night with him, by the way. I don’t believe you have even seen your new room yet.”

She had not, nor was she interested, for consternation was at her heart. She had a sudden vision of Rollo waking up in the morning and looking in vain for his mother’s face. Absurd of course! He would get used to it. He was such a baby. But her heart tore at the thought notwithstanding.

“Please let me see him,” she begged, “if it’s only for a moment!”

He shook his head laughingly. “Later, my dear, later! I know what it would mean. You would want to stop and bath him yourself, and then I should see nothing more of you till dinner-time. He would never consent to part with you again if you went near him now, and I am sure he’s perfectly happy. I’ll send and ask if you like.”

He was not to be moved. She realized it with a hopeless sigh. Rollo and she were both to be trained by quiet degrees to do without one another. It was the inevitable, and she yielded as she was bound to yield. Ivor had the right to demand her submission now.

She heard a curt laugh from Caroline as they went away together, and knew that she had overheard her brother's calm assertion of authority and was exulting over it. That inner fear made her quiver again. There was something so cruel about the situation that she was almost panic-stricken. And yet on the surface all was calm, if not conventional.

She went with Ivor to the study, but he had scarcely closed the door upon them when an interruption came from the telephone, delivered by Bridges, the ancient butler, ceremonious and apologetic.

Ivor turned back at once. "You stay here, my dear, and amuse yourself! There are plenty of books. I shan't be long."

But the moment he was gone, the ache at Molly's heart suddenly asserted itself and became unbearable. She could not leave Rollo in the hands of strangers any longer. He had said that he had no intention of separating them. That meant apparently that they would continue to live under the same roof, and no more. Her very soul cried out against it. Rollo—who had been with her always, for every minute of his life! Rollo—who was probably at this very moment crying for her! Or was he already learning to do without her?

Something swelled in her throat and her eyes were suddenly full of tears. What a dreadful day it had been—a crushing, unforgettable day! But she dashed the tears away. Now was her chance—now or never! She made a spring for the door.

It opened before she reached it, and Caroline stood looking at her with eyes of contemptuous amusement. Molly fell back a step in confusion. She had almost collided with her.

Caroline came forward with a quiet determined step and shut the door with finality behind her.

"Now," she said, "let me have my share! I've hardly spoken to you yet. Ivor has had a call from the War Office, I hear."

Molly was trembling. She felt cold and curiously clammy, as if she were standing in a vault that chilled her to the bone.

"I don't know where it was from," she said. "He didn't tell me."

Caroline nodded. There was something behind the amusement in her eyes; they held a sort of detached determination—the look of the cat that plays with the fluttering bird it means to kill.

“Yes, it was the War Office,” she said. “I hope it doesn’t necessitate his going up to town to-night. If so, you will have to go too, I suppose.”

“Oh no!” said Molly quickly, and it was as if her heart spoke rather than her lips. “I couldn’t—I couldn’t!”

Caroline’s firm brows went up. “My dear girl, I scarcely see how you could do otherwise on your wedding-day,” she said. “If it weren’t for this job of his you’d be off already on your honeymoon.”

Molly locked her hands together. Time was passing, and time was precious. Ivor would be back before she could escape. She threw a piteous glance at the inflexible figure that barred the way. “I couldn’t,” she said in a stifled voice, “I couldn’t possibly leave Rollo.”

“Really!” said Caroline, and there was more than contempt in her voice this time; it had a cold inflection of anger. “So—Rollo—is to come before—your husband, is he!”

“My—husband!” Molly felt as if even her lips had turned to ice; and surely ice was being pressed against her heart, freezing her blood at the very source! She tried to say more, but could not.

Caroline repeated the words in her slow hard voice, driving them pitilessly home. “Your husband—yes, your husband. I don’t think you quite realize—yet—that Ivor is—your husband, and that he has a perfect right to control all your actions. You will have to realize it, and the sooner the better.”

Molly said nothing. She had retreated another step and was supporting herself against the back of an armchair. The frozen feeling prevented speech, and this woman with her dominant features and relentless strength of purpose was a force against which she had no power to assert herself.

The grim voice went on speaking, and Molly could only stand and listen, with that awful coldness at her heart.

“And there is another thing which you will have to realize, and that is that Ivor has shown an almost quixotic generosity in adopting your child, and—if for that reason alone—you owe it to him to give your very utmost in return, and also to acknowledge that he has earned the right to control the child’s future and upbringing. You will be very ill-advised if you attempt to interfere in this, Mary, and will probably do untold harm both to yourself and the boy.”

She paused, but Molly still said nothing; only stood there waiting, wondering how long it could possibly last.

“Well?” Caroline said at length. “Am I making any impression?”

Molly caught her breath. Impression! When her very soul was quivering in an almost intolerable anguish! But—suddenly it came to her—how could this grim sister of Ivor’s possibly understand all that she had suffered, was still suffering, for the sake of her dead hero? Had Caroline ever stooped to learn the meaning of love? She was certain that she never had, and for that reason she could never know the heights or the depths. It was hard to believe that she had even been created for these things.

Caroline waited inexorably, her back to the door through which she was shrewdly aware that Molly was yearning to escape. If Molly had burst into tears she might have been moved into some sort of compassion, but that white-faced silence had the appearance to her of sheer idiocy. She hoped that Ivor had not married a half-wit.

“Well?” she said again in a voice that implied that her patience was running out. “Are these subjects of so little interest to you that you have nothing to say about them?”

Molly moved sharply, throwing out her hands with a gesture curiously like that of a drowning person. Her voice came stifled, as though indeed deep waters surged around her. “Oh, I feel—so funny,” she said. “Do—do let me go!”

With the words she tottered, feeling vaguely for support; and, blindly missing the chair against which till then she had leaned, she fell, crumpling downwards, in a huddled heap at Caroline’s feet.

VII

THE WHEEL OF LIFE

WHEN MOLLY opened her eyes again, she was lying on a couch in a strange bedroom and Ivor was bending over her. His look was full of kindly concern.

“Ah, that’s better,” he said as she recognized him. “I’m afraid it has all been rather too much for you. I think you had better go to bed.”

Her eyes travelled nervously all round the room and she realized that they were alone. “Oh, Ivor!” she said, gasping a little. “Let me—let me see—my darling Rollo!”

She thought his brow contracted, but he smiled a moment later, and she was reassured. “Yes, dear, yes. Certainly you shall see him,” he said. “He is probably asleep, but you shall satisfy yourself as soon as you are fit.”

“I’m fit now,” she protested, sitting up. “May I go now?”

He put a supporting arm about her. “We will go together, dear. But you really must not upset yourself like this over nothing at all. It’s unreasonable. It’s wrong.”

The rebuke, gentle as it was, recalled her very fully to the state of subservience upon which she had that day entered. She bent her head. “I’m very sorry. I don’t mean to be silly. It’s only that—that——” Somehow she found that she could say no more. The mother-hunger within seemed to deprive her of the power to explain. Moreover, she was quite certain that no words could make him understand.

She stood up rather unsteadily, and he kept his arm about her. “I’m coming with you,” he said. “And then you will come straight back here and go to bed. I have ordered dinner to be brought up. You are not fit to go down again.”

If she had not been so possessed by the longing for Rollo she would have been grateful for this act of consideration on his part. As it was, she

hardly noticed it.

“Shall we go?” she suggested nervously.

He led her across the palatial room which in her preoccupation she scarcely saw, and out into a long corridor.

“He’s very far away,” she murmured as they passed down it. “I shall never hear if he cries.”

Ivor made no rejoinder, but somehow she knew that this was a circumstance which he would regard as an advantage rather than a drawback. She would have hastened her steps, but his arm and his leisurely tread restrained her. When they arrived at the nursery at length she was in a state of quivering impatience, but he was imperturbably calm.

And Rollo was asleep, with a glaze of tears on his face and his chubby hands still clenched as if in some desperate bout with Fate.

“He’s been crying—my precious!” whispered Molly, hanging over him.

“Yes’m—my lady, I mean. I couldn’t quiet him for ever so long,” whispered back Rose whom they had found on guard. “But he’s as happy as anything now, and I’ll be here when he wakes.”

“It’s me he’ll want,” said Molly in low, wrung tones. “And he always wakes early.” Suddenly her own tears were running down her cheeks.

The restraining arm drew her gently back. Ivor’s voice spoke in her ear. “We won’t wake him. It would be a pity. Come, dear, he’s quite all right now. You can see him in the morning as soon as you get up. He’ll be as merry as a lark then.”

“I must kiss him,” she said, and almost wrenched herself from the possessive hold. “It won’t wake him. He’s much too tired, poor little darling.”

But the quiet hand closed upon her again the moment she had accomplished her desire. “Now we will leave him,” said Ivor. “And you must go to bed yourself. Yes, dear, I insist. Come! Can you walk? Or shall I carry you again?”

She was compelled to resign herself; they returned as they had come.

All her humble belongings had been transferred to the palatial bedroom, and he left her there to undress, refusing her plea to be allowed to sit up for dinner.

She was too tired and dispirited to protest very strongly. She felt as one caught in the Wheel of Life and compelled. There was no turning back, no postponement or extrication possible. Meekly she submitted, and it was something of a physical relief to sink into the sumptuous comfort of the great bed that had been prepared for her.

Ivor reappeared when her dinner-tray arrived, and he opened a half-bottle of champagne which he shared with her in honour of the occasion. Molly would gladly have foregone this, for she was quite unused to stimulant; but as it seemed to be part of the programme she accepted it without demur. And it did her good. It sent a glow through her weary body, reviving her, banishing the coldness which had taken such a firm hold of her.

She found herself able to smile at Ivor in spite of an unfamiliar dizziness, and she found that dinner was after all not so depressing a matter. He watched her with satisfaction, and when she had finished prepared to go to his own.

“I shan’t be long,” he said. “You lie quiet, dear, and forget all your troubles! Perhaps you’ll get a little sleep.”

He bent to kiss her, and she laid a hesitating hand on his arm. “Need anybody else come to see me to-night?” she asked wistfully.

“Good heavens, no!” he answered. “Not a soul will come near you but me. I’ll put the tray outside. Now—you’ve got everything you want?”

She lay back on the pillows, still feeling rather dazed. “Oh, everything, thank you,” she said.

“That’s right.” He picked up the tray and turned to depart. “You’re looking heaps better. Just shut your eyes and lie still!”

She did not watch him go. Her eyes were closing of their own accord. The glow that spread through all her limbs was imparting an exquisite sense of repose and well-being that was infinitely comforting. She remembered with thankfulness that Rollo was already asleep, and she resolved to get up as early as possible and go to him. Then she tried to say her prayers, but her brain felt like rippling water with the sun on it and the sparkles baffled her. She gave up the effort with a long sigh that was more of contentment than regret. She was very, very tired; but there was one thing which even then she did not omit—a thing she had never once omitted for three years.

She groped for a little flat gold miniature-case which she wore on a slender chain about her neck, opened it with fingers that felt strangely unsteady, and tried to look at the pictured face within.

It was the face of a young man with eager eyes and an impetuous, ardent mouth. But to-night it danced before her eyes, and she could only blindly kiss it.

“Good night, Roy—my darling!” she whispered, and closed the case again.

Almost immediately she fell asleep with it clasped in her hand.



Hours later she stirred and awoke, conscious of a movement beside her.

Instinctively she started up. “Rollo, darling, are you awake?” she said.

There was moonlight, and by it she saw and recognized her unfamiliar surroundings. In a flash she was fully conscious.

And then a hand came out to her, an arm encircled her, drawing her gently down again.

“It’s all right, dearest,” said Ivor’s quiet voice. “Go to sleep again! I’m here.”

Something beat up inside her throat that was like a wild bird clamouring at the bars of a cage. She made a sharp involuntary movement of resistance.

But the strong arm still held her, steadily drew her. Her resistance failed, and her heart seemed to fail with it. She burst into an agony of tears.

“Ah, now—now!” he said, and gathered her without further words to his breast.

She lay there for a long time, crying bitterly, fruitlessly, until at last her sobs grew feeble and far apart, finally ceased. She was exhausted—conquered.

And then after a pause of infinite patience Ivor passed a caressing hand over her head and turned her face up to his own. The moonlight revealed the anguish through which she had come; but she was still now, only faintly pulsating to his touch.

“Poor child!” he said tenderly. “Has it been so hard? Ah well, it’s over now, and you’ll be happier presently.”

She did not answer him, nor did he expect or desire an answer.

Gravely, he bent his face to hers and kissed her with the lips of a conqueror.

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE HEIR

THE coming of winter—that last bitter winter of the War—was like the falling of a blight at Aubreystone Castle. Fuel was rationed, and the great rooms were sharply cold. Old Lady Aubreystone braved all hardship without a tremor, and her daughter, Caroline, laughed at it. But the new Lady Aubreystone shivered and sought the warmth of the little fire in the nursery where her baby boy played with more noise than concentration. He had never been difficult to amuse, and he had a humble servitor in the form of Rose, the village girl, who adored him. He no longer looked to his mother for the necessaries of life, but he worshipped her none the less. Though she sat huddled over the fire and took no active part in his jolly games, he loved to have her there. She was umpire and sole referee in all that he did. He was beginning to talk quite easily, and his name for her was “Molly.” It had developed out of his first effort at “Mother” and she had laughed and adapted it for him. It was easier to say, and he always chuckled over it as though he knew there were a joke somewhere. And that chuckle of his was so precious; it reminded her—oh, so vividly!—of someone who would have loved him as she did.

There was very little else in her life to remind her of that someone now. Married to Lord Aubreystone, living in an atmosphere to which she was alien, kept firmly under the authority of her redoubtable mother-in-law and Caroline, who, to give her her due, seldom noticed her, it was strange, she sometimes reflected, that she retained anything at all of her own personality. But for that corner where little Rollo laughed and played, she believed it would have faded away long since, so wholly different was this from the life to which she had been bred.

She was thankful that she was allowed to spend so much of her time in her merry boy’s company, and she suspected that this was by her husband’s especial contrivance. He wanted her to be happy, particularly now when her health greatly depended upon it. He wished her to have a cheery outlook and no repinings. Possibly the doctor who had informed him of the event that

was to happen in the spring had warned him on this subject. She must be kept as free from care as possible, free from trouble of any sort. There must be nothing on her mind. Of course it was an anxious time for everyone, but she ought not to be allowed to dwell upon it. In the midst of all the suffering, she who had suffered so much must now be at peace.

She was fortunate—so her mother-in-law said—in having her husband in England, though he was in town most of the time and could spend only the week-ends with her—very limited week-ends at that, for he always left again on the Sunday night. But he never failed to run down and assure himself of her welfare. Perhaps he thought that his visits cheered her up. Molly bleakly wondered.

For nothing seemed to touch her in those days—save Rollo's cheery prattle. She was far from well and immeasurably depressed. She looked forward to the birth of her second child with a dull foreboding, very different from the subdued eagerness with which she had anticipated the advent of Rollo. He had come as it were out of the depths of sorrow and bereavement, lighting a tiny torch to guide her up from her vale of misery. He had been her firstborn—Roy's very own. But this newcomer was wholly different. She felt almost as if it did not belong to her, and she was morbidly aware that she did not want it. She only wanted Rollo.

This second marriage of hers was like a dark blot in her life, severing her from those clinging thoughts of Ronald which had been so unutterably dear to her, almost blurring the clear outline of his memory. It was as if she had desecrated the temple in which once she had loved to wander, and now the entrance to it was closed to her. She had indeed begun definitely to turn away from the hidden shrine, for the pain which any reminder of it caused her was so intolerable. She had hidden away the beloved miniature because she could no longer bear to look upon it. But still hungrily she marked in Rollo little ways and gestures which recalled the lover of her girlhood. She wanted him to be like his father—free and splendid and vital, made for greatness.

Often during that dreadful winter she would sit and watch the child with wistful eyes, wondering what the future held for him but thinking not at all of her own. He had been entered for one of the best public schools, and she felt that he would romp through everything practically without effort. He would be brilliant, full of fire, everybody's favourite. He would have genius, and by the time it developed the world would be quiet again. Whither would it lead him? How often she wondered! And sometimes with a cold shiver she would ask herself if she would be there to see.

Her own vitality had sunk to a low ebb, and she had a horrible presentiment that she was going to be very ill. Perhaps she would not get over it. Perhaps—for marrying a man she did not love—her life was to be the forfeit. A sense of wrongdoing haunted her persistently, rendering her miserably unhappy, but she did not want to die because of Rollo. It would be so unfair to leave him in the hands of strangers who cared nothing for him, even though she knew that Ivor would keep his promise to the very last letter. She respected Ivor. He was honourable and just and unvaryingly kind to her. In his quiet, undemonstrative fashion he made much of her—too much at times. He was delighted at the prospect of an heir, and she felt that her value was greatly enhanced on that account. He gave her presents in which she dutifully professed to take pleasure, and he did his utmost to make life easy for her during the tedious months of waiting. He never expressed any anxiety about her, but he treated her with the most scrupulous care. She was never allowed to take any risks, and he always sought to encourage her and urge her to look forward to the happiness in store.

She tried to respond, though to have feigned any deep affection for him would have been beyond her power. It was as much as she could do to disguise the fact that his presence gave her not the faintest pleasure—that his departure gave her actual relief.

The slow passage of that winter with all its mental forebodings and physical miseries was like the gradual enactment of a curse. And then at last in the piercing cold of the early spring, unexpectedly and prematurely her trouble came upon her, and she was wrenched from her dim desert of sorrow and flung into an active inferno of suffering that awoke her very effectually to a wild and terrible struggle for life.

It seemed to go on indefinitely—that fearful battle—lengthening out through a delirium of days and nights of torture. It had not been so with her when Rollo had come into the world, but that had been before long-drawn-out sorrow and privation had worn her down. That had been a natural, almost an inevitable happening, and had brought her ultimate comfort; but this was a thing of terror—a thing from which her whole being shrank and strove instinctively to escape. And very often during those dreadful hours she cried out to Ronald in anguish of spirit, beseeching him to forgive her. But no answer ever came back out of the void. The gates were closed behind her.

She could but go forward on that agonizing adventure until at last a merciful darkness came upon her, and she entered a zone of strange forgetfulness in which her racked body found the peace of oblivion.

Out of this eventually she came, as one floating upwards out of a vast silence, and stared with a vague wonder at the cold daylight that surrounded her. The anguish had gone, but everything else seemed to have gone with it. She felt too numbed for exhaustion, almost non-existent.

Someone bent over her with a certain familiar stiffness of gesture which sent swift recognition to her brain. It was Ivor, patting the bedclothes and smiling at her. She frowned back at him in puzzled enquiry. It was as if she had returned from a long journey and were quite out of touch. Why was he smiling? So far as she could remember, he was not in the habit of smiling without reason. He actually seemed pleased with her, while she was conscious only of desperate weakness. Though he was touching her, he seemed to be a very great distance away, and there was a surging in her ears which prevented her hearing anything he said. She wished vaguely that he would go away.

And then, as her consciousness gradually spread and increased, she perceived another stiff figure at her bedside, and her trembling faculties awoke one by one to a full understanding.

Her mother-in-law's hard voice came down to her. "Ah, that's better. She's come to herself. You needn't be anxious. It's all perfectly normal. My dear, I congratulate you upon the birth of your son."

Her son! Molly's weak lips moved. She tried to speak. Old Lady Aubreystone was smiling also—a smile of grim approval. She repeated her words, overbearing Molly's quivering effort.

"Your son, my dear! Yes, you have succeeded at last, I am glad to say. You will soon be all right again. Nurse, bring the baby!"

There was a movement in the background, and the old woman stooped over Molly, holding a swathed bundle down to her.

"Just a peep—that's all, and then you must be quiet. Dear me though! I never made all this fuss—but women are so soft nowadays. No grit whatever! There he is! Very small, but healthy! Once more—I congratulate you. May he be the first of many!"

Molly gazed with a kind of horrified realization. Her son! Hers and Ivor's! She turned her eyes from the wrinkled object displayed for her gratification up to the somewhat hag-like features of Ivor's mother, and, gasping, spoke:

"Oh, no—no—never again! I couldn't—I couldn't! Take it away! Let me have—my little Rollo!"

“Well—really!” declaimed Lady Aubreystone in outraged astonishment.

But that was the last that Molly heard for a very long time. For even as the words reached her she sank again into great depths of infinite darkness from which neither her new-born son nor even her precious Rollo could call her back. And in that outer darkness she lay for a long, long time.

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND EVENT

THAT cry of Molly's—"Never, never again!" was on her lips many times before full understanding returned to her.

But when at length her youth asserted itself and she returned to life, she stilled it of her own accord. Of what avail to resist the cruel Fate that bound her? As well strive against the inevitable Death that had taken from her her beloved one! As well pit herself against the laws of the universe!

She came back from the closed gates in silence—an old, old woman with the body of a girl. The battle was over, and she was vanquished—broken. When they congratulated her, she smiled. When she held the tiny heir of Aubreystone against her breast, she was passive. When Ivor came to her, clasped her closely and spoke of the happy future before them, she was dumbly submissive.

Slowly life returned to her, but the baby whom she lacked the vitality to nourish gained strength faster than she did. He was nearly three months old before she began to find her feet and walk slowly in the June sunshine.

Her mother-in-law openly lost patience with her, took her to task.

"You're not doing your duty. You don't even try," was the burden of her reproach. "If you had made any effort at all, you'd have been well long ago. A girl of your age!"

Of her age! Her twenty-first birthday came, and Ivor gave her pearls such as she had never dreamed of possessing. She smiled and thanked him, but in her heart she shrank. For they seemed to her as the price of herself. A stiffly-starched nurse had the charge of Ivor's heir, and the faithful Rose still lumbered after her little Rollo in all his escapades. There was nothing left for her to do—except the duty of which Ivor's mother so sternly spoke.

Physical health returned to her when she would fain have delayed it. She had given an heir to the house of Aubreystone—and he was treated as a thing so sacred that she scarcely dared to regard him as her own. But one

was not enough. Every day—as old Lady Aubreystone inexorably pointed out—Englishmen were dying on the battlefield. Babies died too—even the healthiest and most tenderly cared for. This child—Vivian as they had called him after the late Lord Aubreystone—might not survive to succeed to the title. She herself had borne four sons, and only one yet lived. So, continually, her argument persisted, till it was driven home to Molly that sheer selfishness alone was her motive in sheltering behind her own weakness—unless cowardice also played a part.

Ivor did not argue. He had long since made her realize that his will was paramount. He loved her, but he would not give way to any foolish fancies on her part. When her strength had returned sufficiently for her to take her place in the family circle, he very practically decided that the time had come for him to resume undisputed possession. He took it for granted that even if her desires did not wholly coincide with his, it was better that she should conform to his own very precise ideas of what was not only fitting but necessary. He did not profess to understand her, but a certain reticence on her part seemed to him not unnatural and in a degree becoming. He overcame it without discussion, not unkindly but with an obvious determination against which there was no appeal. He considered her eminently suitable to be the mother of his children, and the dread possibility of risking her life a second time was one with which he did not parley. It was unfortunate that the birth of the heir had cost her so much, but now that she had grown more accustomed to her surroundings and had gained more experience he was satisfied that youth would tell in her favour and refused to allow himself to be morbidly influenced by any doubts upon the subject.

He agreed substantially with his mother's often reiterated creed. There should be at least three sons to make the succession safe; and he was too sensible to permit any vague feminine whims to stand in his way. There was a good deal of complacency also in his attitude towards his young wife which rendered it practically impossible for him to appreciate any other point of view besides his own. She owed him so much that it seemed preposterous that she should not wish to make all the return in her power. He believed, moreover, that she entertained a sincere regard for him, and he attributed the fact that she never made any outward demonstration of it to a timidity inherent in her nature which his mother was more inclined to describe as a secret rebelliousness.

He never found her other than completely submissive, and her mental reserve was a matter that he never attempted to probe. He was fond of her, and he was satisfied that their marriage was the success that he had intended

it to be. He was happy in his own way, and he believed that she was happy in hers. He looked forward to an uninterrupted period of bliss when the War should be over, and until then he was content to make the best of things.

The summer waxed and waned, and the last throes of the Titanic struggle drew near. The gold of September melted into the deeper glow of October, and the Aubreystone woodlands became a vivid glory of colour.

Molly never wandered in the woods now, but Rollo revelled in them. He and the Honourable Vivian with their respective escorts spent many sunlit hours under the great beech-trees on the parkland slopes. Rollo had no great opinion of his small half-brother, but since he had become a part of his daily existence he tolerated him accordingly. He did not like Vivian's nurse, who was inclined to treat him with some disdain and strongly discouraged any sort of comradeship between the two little boys. In her opinion Rollo ought to be brought up to treat the heir with becoming deference, and this was a point of view which held no sort of appeal for the independent Rollo, and he was backed in this respect by the sturdy Rose who maintained that being the elder entitled him to some rights of his own.

Curiously enough, this girl, Rose Masters, had a shrewder conception than anyone else regarding the sorrowful workings of the younger Lady Aubreystone's mind. Though Molly had bestowed no confidence upon her, Rose was well acquainted with all the circumstances that had led up to her second marriage, and she had the wit to put two and two together. She had known and admired from afar the fiery young lover of Molly's girlhood, and she had the insight to realize the heartbreak that had followed his loss. She knew perfectly well that Rollo was far dearer to his mother than any other child could ever be, and because of this knowledge she was more jealous on his behalf than he was on his own.

For jealousy was no part of Rollo's nature. He was sunny and generous, quick-tempered perhaps, but never sullen. To efface himself was quite contrary to every instinct, but, as Rose said, he knew the meaning of fair play; and in her opinion it was rather a wonder that he did not actually dislike his younger brother. The attitude of Kennedy, Vivian's nurse, was well calculated to encourage enmity between them, but somehow Rollo managed to evade the baleful effects of her influence. He disliked her heartily from the day that she first slapped him for waking her slumbering charge, but he bore no grudge against Vivian. In fact, but for the woman's rigid insistence upon the baby heir's priority in all things, the two children might have been good friends. But Kennedy's slappings were frequent and severe when Rose was not on guard, and they kept Rollo at a distance. Even

at that early age he felt correction keenly, and from a person of Kennedy's stamp it was too humiliating to be incurred lightly.

There was no one else that he disliked in the same way though he knew himself to be more or less of an outsider at Aubreystone Castle. He avoided his stepfather on all occasions, but his feeling for him was more of awe for an almost complete stranger than actual aversion. Old Lady Aubreystone he found it easy to ignore since she invariably ignored him; and for Caroline he entertained a secret admiration because she sat a horse like a man, and he had a passion for horses. In fact, on one occasion when she dismounted in the drive, and, seeing him near, snatched him up with a grim laugh and set him on her tall hunter, instead of shrieking with fright as she half-expected, he turned rather white for a second or two, and then gathered the bridle into his baby fists and chuckled encouragement to the horse. Even Caroline was fain to admit after that episode that the stepson of the family was a sportsman. Had she been of a less morose temperament, she might have won young Rollo's warm allegiance on the strength of it, but, as she openly said, she had no use for brats and never time to waste on superfluous people. There was far too much to be done, with her mother growing feeble and her sister-in-law always ailing.

For by the day on which a thousand maroons trumpeted the news of the coming of peace to a world dazed and wounded almost beyond all hope of healing, Molly knew that another cruel ordeal lay before her, and that peace—whatever it might mean for the rest of creation—was not for her.

She too was dazed, as though an irretrievable calamity had come upon her. Somehow, after the birth of the heir whom she could scarcely be said to own, she had not thought it possible that she could ever bear another child. But the unexpected had happened, and there was no escape for her from the stark realities of life. She had given herself to a man she did not love while her heart was far away where the guns were thundering over battlefields that she would never see, and now she paid the penalty in anguish of body and bitterness of soul.

Old Lady Aubreystone, grown a little deaf and slightly infirm, made loud and repeated assertions of satisfaction over this fresh happy event, scolded her for giving way to morbid feelings of *malaise*, and predicted a large family of sons to carry on the ancient name. Molly shuddered at the thought. Rollo was all she wanted or ever could want now. But she endured in silence, hoping pathetically that one more son would be enough for Ivor, whatever his mother's aspirations might be.

There were more comforts available during the winter that succeeded the end of the War, and her health improved in consequence. With the coming of spring she viewed her situation with more resignation. She was still young, and her physical vitality renewed itself almost without her knowledge.

But there was a shattering disappointment in store. In the early days of April the period of waiting ended in the birth of a daughter. Molly was not so ill this time, but mentally she felt as if she had received a staggering blow. Her mother-in-law was furious and would not come near her or take the faintest interest in the unlucky dispeller of her high hopes.

“It’s just what would happen!” she declared wrathfully. “And once she begins having girls she’ll probably make a habit of it!”

Caroline’s ironical laughter did not allay her indignation. She was getting too old for disappointment. By the time Molly was about again, it had developed into a deep-seated grievance against her. The fact that Molly also was bitterly disappointed carried no weight at all. In some obscure fashion old Lady Aubreystone felt that the disaster was all due to perversity on the part of her daughter-in-law.

The general atmosphere indeed became so highly charged with electricity that Ivor at length deemed it advisable to intervene.

“It is really absurd,” he said, “to take things to heart in this fashion. Molly is not yet twenty-two. There is ample time before us. I am only forty myself.”

“Oh, you!” said his mother.

And the tone in which she said it decided him. That night he very quietly informed Molly that as soon as she was able to leave home he intended to take her for a prolonged honeymoon. And Molly, with a sword through her heart whenever she thought of Rollo, knew by the very precision of his announcement that meek acquiescence was her only course.

CHAPTER III

TRAVELLERS

THE second child was christened Aldyth after her unwilling grandmother, to whom she bore a striking resemblance. She seemed to be of an assertive disposition almost from her birth, and Molly regarded her almost with a feeling of awe. She could hardly realize herself as the mother of this determined and uncontradictable atom that clawed and screeched its way into existence, blind to all persuasion and furiously resentful of any coercion. It was almost as if she held a tiger-cub to her breast.

“My word, she’ll be a handful presently!” was the nurse’s dictum, and in her secret heart Molly was compelled sorrowfully to agree.

But the thought of leaving Rollo was her chief preoccupation, and but for the ever-faithful Rose she could scarcely have brought herself to face it. But Rose was reassuring. She knew Rollo and all his ways, and she assured her mistress staunchly that she would never let him be put upon. So with this for her comfort and the added consolation that she would miss her adored firstborn more than he could possibly miss her, Molly surrendered herself to the inevitable and bade farewell to Aubreystone Castle for the first time since she had entered it.

Ivor was, as ever, very kind to her in his own peculiarly insistent fashion. His first idea was to have her entirely to himself. Without conscious selfishness he maintained that her husband’s devotion and full attention was all that any wife could desire. He loved her, and somehow he had failed to fathom the fact that she had never, despite her punctilious submission to his will, managed to love him in return. That he had branded her with the ineffaceable mark of his own egotism was a point of view that he was essentially incapable of comprehending. He had given her everything that lay in his power and he believed that he had filled the gap in her life with complete success.

And now, having done his duty to his country, he prepared to enjoy his reward in the shape of a well-earned rest. He was also of the opinion that it

would be good for Molly to travel. Her education had not been a very extensive one, and he proposed to augment it at his leisure. It was just as well, too, that she should be broken in to the realization that she could not always have Rollo with her. He considered that he had been very forbearing on this point, but he wished her to understand that even in this respect his will was paramount. While not actually jealous of Rollo, he could not close his eyes to the fact that he was something of an incubus and inclined to claim more than his fair share of his mother's heart. If Molly imagined that daily contact with him were essential to her happiness, the time had come to disprove the notion. No one but her husband should be thus essential, and Ivor was determined to bend her to his will in this direction also. He had ruled supreme over her for so long that he had come to believe that there was no dictum of his that she could not accept with meekness.

Certainly she made no fuss or protest over the parting. Her farewell to Rollo was no more than a close embrace accompanied by a trembling smile, and Rollo luckily was still too young to comprehend the meaning of either. He hugged her warmly and let her go, in order to throw a brick at the sour-faced Kennedy who could not slap him before a grown-up audience.

But later Ivor found her even quieter than usual though she made an effort to be cheerful when he took her to task about it. Surely she was pleased with the prospect of travelling and seeing something of the world in his company? She assured him that she was going to enjoy it thoroughly, and though for once not wholly satisfied he had to be content.

He was taking her round the world by the westward route, planning to spend the winter in the East and to return home in the spring—a programme to rejoice the heart of any girl. And, after the first, Molly did succeed in shaking off her depression and feeling the spur of adventure. She blamed herself for her base ingratitude to one who was so anxious to give her pleasure; but the fact remained that his continual presence was an almost overwhelming weight upon her spirit, and nothing could alter it. She had schooled herself to endure his proximity without any sign of shrinking, but there were times when it was a literal torture to her. The total lack of solitude, upon which to a certain extent she had been able to count at Aubreystone Castle, fretted her nerves almost unbearably, and his calm assumption that he was all-sufficing to her drove her upon occasion to the verge of wild rebellion. But yet she did not rebel. Dumbly she forced herself to bear her burden, and if now and then she became aware of something deep down within her that was terribly near to active aversion she smothered it swiftly even from herself and would not for sheer horror look upon it.

There were many other things to think about, and she sought to fill her mind with them.

She had never before seen the interior of a liner and the palatial luxury in which she found herself amazed and sometimes bewildered her. The crowds of strangers that surrounded her were bewildering also. She had not met many people in her short life, the state of her health having precluded the presentation at Court and entrance into London society which old Lady Aubreystone loudly proclaimed to be essential. Ivor, on the contrary, had decided that there was plenty of time for these things, and he meant to have his long-deferred honeymoon first. He was not personally of a very social turn of mind, and had he been travelling alone would probably have accomplished the whole voyage without the interchange of more than the briefest and most ordinary commonplaces with his fellow-passengers. As a matter of fact there were very few with whom he cared to associate even to that limited degree. In his own fashion he rated the family honour quite as highly as did his mother, and the consciousness that he had married out of his station tended to make him even more fastidious. He was as it were perpetually on the defensive, more on his own account than on that of his wife. He had to justify that somewhat unusual step of his, and in his own opinion he had already justified it. Molly—or Mary, as he persisted in calling her—was a wife of high principle who fulfilled all his requirements. She had a certain quiet style of her own which would, he believed, serve her as passport in any society.

As a matter of fact it had served her already with what Ivor termed “the somewhat mixed bag” in the company of which they were obliged to travel. People took notice of her and invented excuses to make her acquaintance. Had she been sufficiently responsive, she might have been the centre of a considerable circle. But she was shy and hung back from anything approaching intimacy with anyone. Though the life on board interested her, she preferred to watch it from a distance, and Ivor signified his quiet approval of this attitude. In his opinion she could not afford to cheapen herself by being too friendly with the motley crowd around them.

There was, however, one man in this crowd who seemed to possess as much determination as Ivor himself. He had a place at a small table next to theirs, and almost from the first moment of seeing young Lady Aubreystone his attention was firmly, though quite unobtrusively, fixed upon her. He was an Englishman of American upbringing a doctor by profession, young, rather colourless, wholly unimportant of appearance, yet possessing a certain virility which was so purely of the spirit that it was not always

noticeable. He had served with the British Army in the War, and he had emerged with a limp which only the very few knew to be due to an artificial leg.

Molly's first impression of him was negligible; she scarcely even glanced his way. But it was not long before she was aware of a subtle something about him that affected her inexplicably. It was as if he were waiting for her to speak to him, and a curious conviction dawned upon her that he meant to be on speaking terms before long. She felt no urgent desire to make an opening for him, yet the consciousness that an opening would be made sooner or later if she failed to do so gave a spice of interest to the situation, and finally on the second day out, as she and Ivor took their places at dinner, she threw a fleeting glance that carried with it the ghost of a smile in the young doctor's direction.

He caught it as he might have caught a lightly-flung rose; she knew without a second look that he smiled in return, and from that moment it was as if a bond had been forged between them. It was only a matter of an hour or two before he was actually talking to them in the saloon.

His conversation was mainly with Ivor and strictly commonplace, but it was the beginning of an acquaintanceship which thereafter could not reasonably be ignored, and of which in her heart Molly was convinced that no further preliminaries were required. He knew already who they were, and would probably greet her by name the next time they met.

In this she was not mistaken. Emerging on deck the next morning for a breath of sea-air before going to breakfast, she came upon him at the top of the companion, leaning on his stick and surveying the world in general with a slightly puckered smile.

The sun was brilliant, the ocean one great expanse of sparkling blue.

"What a lovely day!" she said.

And he answered, slightly drawling: "That's true, Lady Aubreystone. I'm glad of it—for your sake."

"For mine?" she questioned, puzzled.

He shifted his position, and she realized abruptly that he was in pain, though he continued to smile. "I don't imagine you've had too many of them," he said. "Am I wrong?"

She flushed a little at the question, but she could not take exception to it. Somehow this man was already a friend.

“I don’t suppose any of us have had that,” she said. “At least we should never think so.”

“Some people,” said Geoffrey Asterby deliberately, “never get any at all.” His grey-blue eyes dwelt upon her musingly. “I often think,” he said, “how deceptive circumstance can be.”

She met his look with quiet directness. “It isn’t everyone who can adapt oneself, is it? Circumstance can be rather overwhelming.”

He nodded. “Yes, it can. But it can be conquered—up to a point.”

“Can it? I wonder,” said Molly. And then suddenly it came to her that she was expanding to a complete stranger, and her habitual reserve arose and drove back her confidence. She gave him a brief smile that dismissed the subject. “Well, it’s a lovely morning anyway, and we shall all enjoy it. Have you had breakfast?”

“No, just coming down,” he said. “Like you, I came up for a breather beforehand.”

“You’ve had a bad night,” she said with quick intuition.

“No, not too bad,” said Geoffrey Asterby. “Everything’s relative, isn’t it? I’ve had worse.”

Something stirred her; she did not at the moment know what. “That’s how you look at things!” she said.

“Isn’t it the only way?” said Asterby.

She nodded. “I expect you’re right. It’s something anyhow to know that the worst can never happen twice.”

“It can never happen once,” he said emphatically. “Even in this poor old smashed-up world the final cataclysm has never materialized. It couldn’t.”

“Why couldn’t it?” asked Molly, interested and a little awed by his steady assurance.

“Why?” said Asterby, his quiet eyes meeting hers. “Because the Master Builder takes too much pride in His work, that’s why. Whatever may crash, you’ll always find there are some foundations left behind for other workmen to build on.”

“Oh!” said Molly, struck. “I’d never thought of that.”

“Some of us never get any thinking-time,” said Asterby. “One has to be on the shelf for that. Yes,” in reply to her look, “I’ve spent quite a

considerable length of time there. But I'm off it now—thank God—and back among the workmen.”

He interested her in spite of herself, for there was nothing tangibly interesting about him. She had a feeling that in this man were forces of which humanity stood in dire need. Hidden below his colourless exterior and matter-of-fact speech was something of value—something which everybody wanted, at least, everybody who knew the meaning of suffering. And how many were there in this poor smashed-up world of which he spoke who did not?

Acting upon impulse, shy but imperative, she laid her hand upon his arm. “Let's talk of this again!” she said. “That is, if you don't mind.”

He smiled at her again, and she realized that his smile had a beauty that was wholly spiritual. “By all means, let us!” he said. “The workmen should always be ready to help each other.”

“I'm not a workman,” she said swiftly. “I'm only—a traveller.”

He touched her hand for a moment with his own. “We are all that too,” he said; “but we work as we travel. It makes the way easier.”

As Molly went down to breakfast with Ivor, she was conscious of a strange uplift at her heart.

CHAPTER IV

THE MASK-MAKER

THEY met again, she and Geoffrey Asterby, not once but many times during the short voyage, generally in Ivor's presence, but occasionally, at odd moments, alone. This last was never by appointment, but there seemed to be a certain magnetism between them which drew them to each other. It was as if they had been friends all their lives.

And in these odd moments Molly came to learn something of the rugged road which this man had travelled. He had trained for the medical profession in America, and at the outbreak of the War, while still only partially qualified, he had come to England and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. Of the War itself he would never speak except by the briefest allusions. He had been incapacitated towards the end of his second year in France and had returned to America where, eventually, overcoming his disablement, he had taken up surgery with all the keenness of the man who knows exactly how his talent can be used to the best advantage. But it was only rarely that he gave any expression to his enthusiasm. Molly was aware of it rather by intuition than spoken confidence. His profession meant practically everything to him, as she very soon realized, but even so, he did not let her know immediately in what particular direction his genius lay.

She was certain that genius existed behind his quiet exterior, but upon what it was specially concentrated she found it impossible to guess. She could not picture that somewhat meagre and crippled body adapting itself to the performance of any but the most delicate operations. Despite his virility of purpose, it seemed to her that the physical strength for anything on a large scale was bound to be lacking. Though he faced the world as an average man, his limitations were too obvious to be ignored.

One day with a smile he enlightened her. "I'm not only a mechanic," he said; "I aspire to be a bit of an artist too. I am very interested in restoration work." And then, as he saw she had not caught his meaning: "When a limb is gone, it's gone," he explained, "and can never be replaced. But there are other things besides limbs—smaller things, that are much more important. I

am a specialist in small parts—the bits that no one can face the world without. You might call me a mask-maker.”

She understood him then, and much that she had puzzled over was swept aside. “Oh!” she said. “Faces!”

He laughed a little. “How nice of you not to call it plastic surgery! Yes—faces. Some of them possibly quite passable reversions to the original. Others—mere caricatures. But even those——” he paused momentarily —“are better than—nothing. After all, don’t we all wear masks—sometimes?”

“Very often, I’m afraid,” Molly said, feeling as though he had challenged her honesty.

He regarded her whimsically for a second and then turned his eyes to the sea. They were standing together at the deck-rail one evening before dinner. “I know yours by heart,” he said. “It isn’t a very deceptive one. I could make one like it without much difficulty. Only—you would have to wear it always if I did.”

She flushed a little. The sun was sinking far ahead of them into a sea of molten gold. “I expect,” she said in a low voice, “that you would find it easier to make than the real thing.”

“Infinitely easier,” he agreed. “In fact, shall I confess?—the real thing is utterly beyond me. What I achieve is only a semblance at the best of times—most often, not even that. Good enough for the world at large—the casual observer. But for the friend—and the lover—quite recognizable.”

A little shiver went through Molly. She asked one of her rare questions. “Have you had many cases?”

“Yes, many,” he answered, “many. Most of them war-wreckage. That was where my wound served me in good stead. I was disabled for the big cases. I took up the little—and found them—infinately greater.”

“That was wonderful of you,” Molly said.

He shook his head. “It was inevitable. When I was in hospital—over there,” he made a gesture eastwards—“there were several cases of appalling disfigurement. They didn’t always realize—mercifully. But one or two—cursed with imagination—raved that they could never go back to their homes. Their wives would shudder and their children would scream at them. It was a nightmare to me. My own affair was paltry in comparison. It proved a pointer, and I followed it. It was—exactly what I needed.”

Molly turned round to him. Her eyes were glowing. "How—lucky you were!" she said.

He bent his head. "Yes, I've realized that—often. It made everything else worth while. I'd never thought I could enjoy life again. Now I know that real enjoyment had never come my way before."

Molly's little brown hand came out to him along the rail. "That is—the big stuff, isn't it?" she said. "D'you know—I envy you?"

Their fingers touched and parted. "That's silly," said Geoffrey Asterby. "You've got your job—just as I've got mine."

"Have I?" she said. And then, quite suddenly, and scarcely realizing it, she opened her heart to him. "My job isn't so clear as yours. I'm—a war-widow myself. I married again—for the sake of my little boy. But—one can never love twice in the same way, can one?"

Her voice was pleading. The man was tapping a cigarette thoughtfully on the back of his case; he did not look at her. "Of course not!" he said. "Could anybody expect it—the obviously impossible?"

"I don't know." Her voice was quivering. "I think I've expected it of myself."

"Have you?" he said. "Then stop! It's no use. Full stop, my dear, and begin again! There's no other way."

She did not know what prompted her to confide in him. He had not asked for her confidence. Yet it came from her almost involuntarily. "I love my little Rollo—and his father—as I could never love anyone else on earth. I have had two children since. There will have to be more. But they are not the same to me—and never can be. I can't help it. It's the way I'm made. Am I—very wicked?"

"You are not wicked at all," he said quietly. "You are just intensely sincere and natural. So long as you keep your heart wide open, all will be well with you. Your trouble is a spiritual—not a physical—maiming. You won't get over it. No one does. But that isn't what life was meant for. Life is—making the best of what we've got, and not fretting about anything else. You probably got your pointer too. Anyway, you can only go ahead now. That's service. That counts." He suddenly caught himself up with a smile. "Say, I'm moralizing. Stop me!"

"You're not! You're helping me," Molly said. "I seem to have lived in such a turmoil for so long, and it's all been desperately difficult. I only hope

—I haven't been too selfish.”

“Don't be absurd!” he said. “It's being the other thing that's your trouble. But that's the way you're made, and quite incurable.” He gave her his sudden pleasant smile. “It's good of you to have told me all this. Don't ever regret it—because there's no need, never will be. You'll be happier presently.”

“That is what—Ivor says,” she said rather wistfully.

Asterby took a pull at his cigarette. “I don't mean—in that way,” he said bluntly. “It'll be the happiness that comes from filling other people's cups and not your own. It's a queer thing—life. We're all made to want what would probably be the very worst thing possible for us if we had it.”

“I'm sure you don't,” Molly said.

He shook his head. “Not so sure! But I'm not fighting for it anyway. I'm too busy for that.”

“Your cases!” she said.

He gave her a steady look. “My cases—yes! They mean everything. Shall I let you into a secret, Lady Aubreystone?”

“Oh, don't call me that!” she said impulsively. “My name is Molly.”

“Mine is Geoffrey,” he responded instantly. “And the secret is that I am in charge of a case at the present moment—a case I came across not three weeks ago—in France.”

“A case!” echoed Molly.

His eyes still looked straight at her. “I'm telling only you,” he said, “because I know you'll be unselfish enough to keep it to yourself. I had a bad spell and they sent me off for a change. I went prowling round the old haunts, and I had a find.”

“Oh, go on!” she urged. “Please tell me! I'm quite safe.”

“I know,” he said. “It's a long story—probably. I myself only know the outlines. A smashed-up Englishman, kept for years by an old Frenchwoman. Broken mentally as well as physically. But not past repair. I'm taking him back to mend him, poor devil. He'll live again—when the missing parts have been replaced.”

“That is—astounding!” breathed Molly.

“Not really! He’s one of many—stranded hulks—presumed dead—forgotten long ago. But, as I say, he’ll live again.” Geoffrey Asterby’s eyes went back to the sea and the distant glory that lit the ripples. “He belongs—to an exceeding great army,” he said. “But—unlike the many—he will come back.”

“He is here—on board this ship?” Molly questioned in a whisper.

He nodded. “Yes—Molly—in my cabin—hiding. He has hidden for years, poor devil, and doesn’t yet realize that the need is past. I had to do some wangling without a passport. I swore to some consul chap—on oath—that he was my brother.”

“And they let him through?” Molly said.

“They let him through—yes. I must have been pretty convincing.” He spoke with a half-smile. “Being a cripple myself helped. People are awfully decent to cripples.”

“Of course!” said Molly. “And has he no name then?”

“None. They called him Jean. I have called him—John Asterby—for official purposes.”

She looked at him with something of the far-off glory in her eyes. “Oh, you are good,” she said.

“I’m not!” he returned flatly. “I’m doing it for myself, don’t you see? This world mess has got to be cleaned up somehow. And I’m doing this in a selfish way—because I want to keep him in my own hands until I can turn him out—a new man.”

“And you’ll succeed!” she said.

“I shall succeed—yes.” He spoke briefly, with conviction. “I shall go on mending and mending until I do.”

“That’s splendid of you,” she said. “Is he—very bad?”

He looked intently away over the sea. “Yes, terrible,” he said. “Half-blind too, but that, I am convinced, can be remedied in a single operation. It’s all the rest that’s going to take the time. If he has the patience—that’s the point.”

“You’re quite sure of your own,” she said.

He smiled into the sunset. “Sure—Molly!” he said. “You can put your bottom dollar on that.”

“How I wish I could help!” she said.

He nodded, his eyes still fixed far, far ahead. “So do I. You’re just the sort. But it’s not your job. You’re wanted elsewhere. I’m glad I’ve been able to tell you about it. It’s a sort of exchange for what you’ve told me.”

“I know,” Molly said. “I shall want—awfully—to know how you get on.”

He spoke again, still not looking at her. “May I write to you, now and again, and tell you?”

“Of course!” she said warmly. “I should love it.”

“Thank you.” He turned round to her. “And you’ll write to me—p’raps—sometimes?”

“Indeed I will!” she said.

He paused an instant; then: “Your name is already written in my book of thoughts,” he said. “I’ve enjoyed meeting you.” He paused again, as though he had more to say; finally rather abruptly, “Here comes Lord Aubreystone to look for you!” he said. “I suppose it’s time to dress.”

It was. Ivor was already in evening clothes, well-dressed, immaculate, a hint of severity about him.

Molly wheeled swiftly. “Am I late? I’m so sorry. I shan’t be long.”

“It’s not of the smallest consequence,” he assured her in a tone that was somehow unconvincing. “I daresay you are not the only one who will be late for dinner.”

“No, I’m another,” said Geoffrey Asterby, preparing to move away in his halting fashion. “It’s been far too fine a sunset to think about the time. But it’s true we can’t feed on it. No, you go first, please, Lady Aubreystone! And don’t wait! You’re in a hurry.”

Molly was. She hastened from the scene without a backward glance.

And Lord Aubreystone took their place at the rail with a decided frown between his eyes. The sunset evidently held no appeal for him.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW MOTTO

THAT night Ivor took his young wife to task, but not until the privacy of their state-room gave him unlimited opportunity. It was not that he had a great deal to say, but it had to be said deliberately.

“I think, my dear, that that young doctor is scarcely the type of person whom it is advisable to admit to any degree of intimacy. He has no sort of social status, and you on the other hand occupy a fairly exalted position—which is a fact I think you ought to bear in mind.”

Molly listened with a sense of chill. It seemed outrageous to imagine that anyone so superior as Ivor could suffer from the petty pangs of jealousy, yet to her direct mind the evidence seemed to point in that direction.

“Well, I like him,” she said simply. “He is honest and straightforward and I can’t help it.” She added with a slightly appealing smile, “I haven’t many friends, you know.”

“Friends!” said Ivor. “Friends! You don’t—I hope—wish to include this person in the list! Anyone less suitable I could scarcely imagine.”

“I’m sorry,” Molly said. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“No.” Somewhat weightily he corroborated the statement. “That is just it. You don’t. And for that reason, my dear, I must ask you to defer to my judgment in the matter. I am the one to choose the people best fitted for you to know.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Molly said again, rather quickly this time, “but I really couldn’t agree to that, Ivor. If I have friends at all, they must be of my own choosing.”

“In that case,” he rejoined with the dignity of dawning displeasure, “I think you will do better to go without, and I must beg that you will not make any further promiscuous acquaintances without first consulting me.”

She felt herself flush with a sudden hot anger. It was absurd, outrageous, that he should treat her thus. Her habitual submission seemed to have turned her into a slave without any rights of her own. An indignant refusal sprang to her lips, but she checked it, realizing that silence was strength. To oppose him would mean a battle in which she was almost bound to be a loser. And because of the friendship that had been founded only that evening she could not afford to lose.

She proceeded to undress without further words, and Ivor, after a glance at her, decided that as usual his will was law and, with conscious generosity, forbore to press the matter further.

Only when at length she sat on the edge of her bed for a moment before settling into it for the night, he turned and put his arm about her light frame with a kindly, "Poor little girl! She has such a lot to learn."

And then Molly stiffened, making as if she would push him from her. "I am learning," she said in rather a muffled voice, "every day."

That half-instinctive resistance of hers roused his own instinct of mastery in a moment. He deliberately stooped and lifted her, holding her pressed to him. "Yes, you are learning," he said, "you are learning." And he kissed her unwilling lips with intentional dominance. "But I have quite a lot to teach you still."

"Oh, let me go, please!" she said. "I'm tired."

He sat down with her in his arms, gently but very firmly conquering her reluctance. "My dear little wife," he said, "I can't have you behaving like a spoiled child. You are not in the least tired, only put out because I found it necessary to speak a word in season. As you know, I am not going to be set at nought, either in this respect or any other. So I advise you to be reasonable."

Reasonable! Lying there in his hold when every fibre of her yearned to be free! She could not speak. She dared not give utterance to the clamour of rebellion within. Dumbly she submitted, and he lowered her head to the pillow, smiling down into her eyes and kissing her.

The victory was as completely his as though he had defeated her in a pitched battle. If indeed he had been stung by jealousy he took his compensation, fondly exulting in her helplessness.

"Silly child," he said, "to think of setting yourself up against me! But there! We'll say no more about it. Do you know you are more to me every day that we are together? And I believe you are getting lovelier. I suppose

it's the sea-air. I congratulate you, my dearest, and myself too. You are all mine—all mine!"

He kissed her again and again in a sort of crescendo of possession, and Molly closed her eyes in mute endurance. Her brief resistance was over, and he had barely recognized it as such.

But that night she saw him as it were from a different angle and in a wholly different perspective. And the twenty years that separated them did not tend to make the sight an attractive one. She saw him not only as he was, but as he would be when time had taken further toll—a domineering, self-centred egoist, inflexible and unprogressive, developing into the tyrant whose will must be for ever paramount.

Not by love would he seek to hold her. Even already the tenderness had gone out of it, and where once he had ruled by kindness he now inexorably compelled. He spoke no more of her happiness and ultimate welfare. She was his property and was to become more and more the slave of a will that nothing might thwart. There was no withholding any portion since he arrogantly possessed and claimed the whole. And it came to her that open defiance would scarcely have moved him now. He was so sure of her, so supremely the master of her destiny. Had she offered any sort of opposition he would have quelled it without scruple. He thought he loved her, but it was self-love at the root, and it spread like a blight over his soul. He was incapable of sacrifice. She stood for him for no higher ideal than the fulfilling of worldly ambitions and desires. She was merely the channel through which he satisfied these, and her own individuality, her tastes and her repugnances, had no weight in the balance. So, in the cold inevitable dawn of utter disillusion, did Molly find herself regarding the man who held her in the thralldom of his embrace when she wanted to be free.

She saw him that night with a clarity of vision that had never been hers before, and her soul shrank at the sight while her body lay quiescent in his arms. This long-postponed honeymoon had been a tragic mistake—though probably he would never know it. All that was petty and exacting in his nature was working up to the surface while he availed himself to the full of the undiluted enjoyment of this particular possession of his. Circumstances so far had denied him the exclusive companionship which he regarded as his right, but now that these had been swept from his path he naturally considered that nothing else at the moment counted. He was still in love with her after his own fashion, and he was so constituted that he would never weary of demanding the equivalent from her in return. His love was like a devouring monster, always craving and never satisfied. But—

pathetically she reflected—it did not ask for more than the outer husk. And in this she considered herself fortunate; for it was all she had to give.

Long after he had released her that night she lay awake thinking, sometimes of Rollo, sometimes of Geoffrey Asterby, sometimes—with a pang—of that lost lover who had gone away into the unknown and who could never return.

Geoffrey's stout and go-ahead doctrine had comforted her inexplicably and eased her bewilderment. His idea of happiness—the filling of other people's cups—held a tremendous appeal for her. It was an aspect of life which had never definitely occurred to her before. Perhaps she had been too young to think of it. But now—while Ivor slept the sleep of supreme physical contentment—she lay and pondered over it. It was the Christian aspect, though it had not been presented as such. She was certain inwardly that young Asterby had hewn his own faith out of the rock, perhaps through bitter suffering, and it came to her that she might do the same. She was passing through a martyrdom that was as much of the spirit as of the body—martyrdom which motherhood had somehow failed to alleviate, though it was clear as far as she could see into the future that motherhood was to be the chief aim and end of her existence. But she had met a man who had made Service his motto—a man of deep sincerity who lived the religion he did not preach. And there was that within her which responded almost passionately to the brief pronouncement of his guiding principle. It was as if a light had suddenly shone down upon her, transfiguring earthly things, flooding her soul with a strange and heavenly beauty. And it seemed to give her a courage she had not known before, so that even the growing tyranny she had begun to dread faded into insignificance as she realized that Ivor with all his selfish absorption of her could not deprive her of this.

When she slept at last, an unaccustomed peace had fallen upon her. But she dreamed not of Rollo, nor of the dear lost lover of her youth, but only of the poor nameless wreck, broken mentally and physically, whom Geoffrey Asterby meant to go on mending and mending until he had turned him out—a new man.

CHAPTER VI

THE HUMAN WRECK

IN a humbler cabin in another part of the ship Geoffrey Asterby lay in his berth sleeping the light slumber of one accustomed to be on the alert. In another berth parallel with his own another figure lay huddled. Only the back of the head was visible to Asterby in his waking moments and that was curiously misshapen, as though in some fashion foreshortened. A hand that was beautifully formed, sensitive, artistic, lay outside the coverlet in strange contrast, and the fingers worked now and then, opening and shutting as if in search of something.

The breathing of this huddled figure was unnatural—a sort of semi-snore—resembling the breathing of a bulldog. Occasionally there came a harsh sound like a choke, which always brought Asterby back to full consciousness. Whenever this happened his eyes opened and steadily regarded the hunched mass on the other berth. He had so arranged his own that his head was on a level with the other's feet and he could maintain his vigil without raising himself. While the coughing sound persisted, he remained watchful and alert. Only when it subsided did he allow himself to relax.

Sometimes it would last for some time and then would die down into an inarticulate murmuring that was like the complaining of a dumb animal, finally fading away into the snoring sound from which it had arisen.

The distant drumming of the ship's engines was the only accompaniment, for the sea was calm and the lapping of the water through which her keel drove a pathway was barely audible. The night-air drifting in at the port-hole had the salt chill of the ocean, but it carried no spray. It was the quietest voyage that Asterby had ever known.

It was fortunate for him that it was so, for he had undertaken a task which under stormy conditions might well have proved beyond his strength. In his crippled state it was never easy for him to get up quickly. He took two

sticks to bed with him invariably, but even so he was heavily handicapped. Quite a mild swell might have sent him sprawling.

It was drawing towards the dawn when the restlessness of his companion began to make itself apparent in other ways. The choking sounds developed into a fitful moaning, and vague stirrings bore evidence to a conscious uneasiness. The first pale light of morning was mingling with the illumination shed by the shaded electric lamp in the ceiling.

Geoffrey lay for a space watching, till the quiet of the passing night was abruptly dispelled by the prolonged hoot of the ship's siren, causing a sudden violent upheaval in the opposite berth.

Then he sat up and spoke across the intervening space. "Hullo, old chap! That's only the siren. Bit of a fog, I expect. You all right?"

A muffled sound answered him—a sort of groaning protest at things in general—followed by a tossing back of coverings and the rising from the pillow of a very dishevelled head.

"All right?" questioned Geoffrey again, feeling for his sticks.

The face of his companion turned sharply towards him. It was a sight upon which Geoffrey was trained to look without shrinking, because for him it held potentialities; but there were not many who could have done so.

Grey, withered, almost featureless, it was like the crude remains of some fossil existence impressed upon granite; but out of the wrinkled, incredible mass there gleamed a human eye. It seemed to be the only remnant of humanity left. The mouth was distorted and torn. It spoke with difficult, uncertain words—as if an animal were speaking.

"All—right?" it said, and paused as if seeking the faculty of speech. "No—no—damn' bad!"

"Keep still!" commanded Geoffrey. "I'm coming."

He grabbed his sticks and set them to the floor to haul himself up. He was wonderfully agile even without his artificial leg. As soon as he was in a standing position, he put the sticks aside and supported himself by the framework of the other berth.

"Had a bad night?" he questioned gently, and laid a soothing hand upon the humped shoulder nearest to him.

It jerked under his hold, and the strange misshapen head was bowed upon the drawn-up knees. There came a sound of sobbing.

A deep compassion shone in Geoffrey's eyes. "Say, this won't do," he said. "I thought you were sleeping. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—did—sleep." The laboured words were barely distinguishable. "And I—dreamt."

"What about?" said Geoffrey.

The answer did not come at once, but the sobbing lessened and grew fitful, finally ceased. Then slowly, "It was about—a woman," came in muffled tones from the quivering heap under his hand. "Someone—who once—loved me. Someone—I've lost. I can't remember—any more." The long thin fingers gripped each other with a tensivity that seemed almost to approach the breaking-point.

Geoffrey's hand beat gently on his shoulder. "Don't try, old chap, don't try!" he said. "You're bogged, and it's no good straining. I'll get you out—somehow. But don't you pull until I tell you to!"

Again the mournful, piercing sound of the siren filled the cabin, excluding all besides, like the gigantic protest of some monster in torment.

It died away, and the pathetic creature on the mattress raised its head. "That's—me!" he said. "A thing—that shrieks—in the dark!"

"It's not all dark though," Geoffrey assured him. "It's getting lighter all the time. And there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm here to take care of you."

The mutilated face turned towards him again. The mouth was quivering. "I know—I know." The words came huskily, uncertainly. "You're so—damn' good to me."

"I'm interested in you," Geoffrey said, smiling a little. "You're going to be one of my show cases. Don't you make any mistake about that! In a year from now you won't know yourself."

"I don't—know myself—now," came the halting answer. "It's only sometimes—in dreams—that—things—come back."

"That'll be all right," Geoffrey said in his quiet confident fashion. "It's no good trying to force it. It'll all come back presently—probably not all at once, but by degrees—when you're not thinking about it. I know your trouble exactly, and I'm as certain it can be cured as I am that I can give you back your sight."

The steady conviction with which he spoke carried weight. The strain began to lessen. The humped figure relaxed.

Words came with less effort. "Ah! If I could only see clearly—I might remember then. But I'm always groping in the dark."

"You won't always," Geoffrey said. "It's just a matter of patience for a little longer. There now! Lie down again! The night isn't over yet. We must wait for the morning."

Again the long blast of the siren went out over the wide grey spaces of ocean, and the silence that followed seemed to quiver with a sort of dread.

One of those nervous, artistic hands came upwards and fastened upon Geoffrey's arm, and a stealthy voice spoke that was totally different from the voice that had spoken before.

"You won't let them—find me?" it pleaded earnestly. "I can't go back—to be shot. Oh, it's hell—it's hell out there! Don't let me be found!"

Geoffrey's arm went protectingly round the quivering shoulders. He spoke with strong insistence.

"You're safe, old chap. I tell you—you're safe. All that's over—over long ago. There's no shooting now. There! Lie down again! Lie down and rest!"

"Yes, but you don't—understand!" The pathetic voice raised itself in a crescendo of supplication. "I'm a deserter! Don't let them get me! I can't be shot—in cold blood. They shoot deserters! They always shoot deserters!"

"They won't shoot you," Geoffrey said. "They won't get you. You're safe as houses here with me. Don't you worry, son! I'm here to take care of you. It's my job and I shall do it."

Under his persuasive touch his charge slowly relaxed again, sinking back like an exhausted animal that is nevertheless ready to start up again in panic at the slightest alarm. Every blast of the siren was followed by a convulsive movement, and for the greater part of an hour Geoffrey remained standing there, sometimes talking in his quiet, unhurried voice, sometimes merely stroking the piteous object under his hand into quiescence.

His methods were completely gentle, his patience unbounded; and at long last he reaped his reward. When the grey of the morning had brightened to broad daylight, his patient lay sleeping and the strain was over.

The siren had ceased, and a sparkle of sunshine reflected from water came in at the port-hole, and danced upon the wall. Staggering on his sticks, he dragged himself up and looked out over a limitless expanse of sunlit

ocean. The new day was spread like a benediction before his eyes. He rested his head against the woodwork for a space and was still.



Two hours later he came face to face with Molly on deck, and was greeted by a somewhat wistful little smile.

She was alone, and she put out her hand to him quickly, as one who had something confidential to tell him.

He took it into a steady grasp. "What is it? You've had a bad night."

She shook her head, still smiling at him; there was something rather arresting in her smile. "That doesn't matter," she said. "I can see you have too. How is your patient?" She whispered the last words.

"Not too good," he said. "Thanks for asking. I don't expect very much at present."

"You're wonderful," said Molly. "I just want to tell you that I can't be very friendly when my husband is looking on. He doesn't want me to have friends. But—you are wonderful all the same. You do—far more good than you realize."

He looked at her. "Thank you, Molly. So do you," he said. "I'm very sorry about your husband, but I understand. We're nearly in now. If you'll trust me with your address before we part, I won't write too often."

She laughed, but her eyes held tears. "Of course I will. He may get more reasonable as time goes on. But in any case—whatever happens—we're friends. And you've given me something I never had before."

"What's that?" said Geoffrey.

She met his eyes fully, without embarrassment. "The shining of your light," she said, "which has given me courage to go on."

"Oh, say!" he protested. "I'm not much of a lighthouse-keeper. I guess the light is mostly in yourself."

She turned away from him; he saw that her time was limited. "No," she said. "Mine was nearly out. But you've lighted it again. I can go on now."

He detained her for a moment, his pale eyes full of kindness. "God bless you, my dear!" he said.

Her hand pressed his and slipped away. “And you too, friend Geoffrey!” she said. “But you are—already blessed.”

CHAPTER VII

THE SUMMONS

THEIR arrival at New York was an experience so novel that it was to remain stamped upon Molly's memory for all time. The rush and hubbub bewildered her, and her impression was of a maelstrom of human energy which neither day nor night could affect. Everything seemed to be done upon an enormous scale at colossal velocity, and she felt herself reduced to an insignificance that almost appalled her. But for her title, which seemed to carry some mysterious weight, she believed that she would have been annihilated altogether.

Her farewell to the only friend that she had made on the voyage was of the most abbreviated description. He had scarcely a moment to spare from his charge, and Ivor was ready to resent any delay on her part.

But one thing happened to her which was to haunt her for long after, and that was a fleeting vision of Geoffrey's companion, seen for an instant—a muffled, cringing figure—in the background of one of the cabin-corridors while Geoffrey stood with her for those few brief seconds of leave-taking.

“I suppose I mayn't speak to your friend?” she hazarded, as she caught sight of this huddled form in the dimly-lighted distance.

“No,” Geoffrey said at once, and she was not certain if his refusal disappointed or relieved her the more. “He can't be spoken to by strangers, poor chap. He gets scared. But I'll let you know what happens—if I succeed—or fail.”

By his tone she knew that failure was a possibility which he merely mentioned for form's sake and never seriously contemplated.

“Yes, let me know!” she said.

“You'll keep the secret?” said Geoffrey, smiling.

To which she answered, “Of course!” and knew that he was satisfied.

After that came the confusion and uproar of landing, and she had no further time so much as to think of Geoffrey any more until she found herself with Ivor in a magnificent suite in the largest hotel she had ever entered, still half-stupefied by the turmoil of noise and changing scenes through which she had passed.

Ivor smiled at her bewilderment. He quite enjoyed showing her the world, and he was not sorry to have parted company with Geoffrey Asterby and the rest of their fellow-passengers. In his opinion a ship was not a very satisfactory place for a honeymoon. There were too many interruptions. And Molly was inclined to be a little too sociable. She had not yet learned to discriminate.

But now that they were safely ashore he was determined to keep the monopoly of her. Whatever she saw would be seen in his company, and he did not mean to encourage any intruders.

This at first, in all the newness of her surroundings, did not greatly affect Molly; but when two or three days had passed she felt a dawning desire to try her own wings. And then quite suddenly it came upon her that her freedom was restricted. Ivor would not hear of her stirring out without him. If he did not wish to go himself, she was expected to remain with him. It was a state of affairs of which she had scarcely been aware on board ship. There at least, though in a confined space, she had been able to wander about as the fancy took her. But here on shore she seemed to be literally under escort, and she soon discovered that there could be no escape without incurring her husband's very definite displeasure. Her independent spirit chafed at the perpetual restraint, but argument was useless. Moreover, Ivor never argued. He merely indicated his wishes and expected them to be obeyed. He was always quite unanswerable, supremely self-assured in all his dictums. It was a form of coercion against which she had no weapon. He took it for granted that his company was on all occasions a necessity to her. It was the Aubreystone way, and there was no gainsaying it.

Very soon Molly realized that her freedom under these conditions was even more curtailed than when she was at home, and her heart turned wistfully back to England and her little Rollo. In all that she had endured hitherto, she had at least had him for consolation. But now it seemed she was cut off from everything which made the world attractive. Her friendship with Geoffrey had given her a transient pleasure, but that had faded into a deep depression. She began to lose interest in her surroundings, to become mechanical and dispirited. Ivor's constant companionship was like a weight upon her. She was compelled to bear it, but it sapped away her strength. The

strange new world became like a picture on a screen at which she barely troubled to look.

Ivor did not propose to remain long in New York. He had mapped out their programme with the precision of a schoolmaster, and Molly was fully aware that whatever he took her to see had been decided upon from an educational standpoint. He was determined that she should miss nothing of an improving or informative nature.

Their one big expedition was to the Falls of Niagara, and this world marvel was practically the only item that was to remain as a permanent impression in her mind. Gazing upon that Thunder of Waters on a glistening day of translucent lights and shades, she felt as though all the treasures of the earth had been laid open to her view. It was like a casket of jewels such as she had never dreamed of, and the roar and turmoil and drifting spray filled her with a strange and palpitating awe. She stood fascinated and half-afraid.

They returned to New York that evening. It was Ivor's intention to leave in the following week for the long trip across Canada that was to carry them where West meets East; but that journey was never to be undertaken.

In the vestibule of their hotel an assiduous, coloured porter ran up to Ivor and claimed his attention with a cablegram, handing Molly a moment later a letter which brought a quick flush of interest to her cheeks.

Ivor, preoccupied, did not notice the missive in her hand. He opened his own with a murmured expression of surprise.

Molly did not open hers; she slipped it into a side-pocket of her bag.

A moment later a sound from Ivor made her start. He looked up from his message with a shocked face.

"What is it?" she questioned. "Ivor! Is there anything wrong?"

"It's my mother," he said, and paused to swallow his momentary agitation. "A stroke—and dangerously ill. We must return at once."

"Oh!" gasped Molly, and put out a quick hand of sympathy. "I'm so sorry."

He did not see her hand; he looked beyond it. "There is no time to be lost," he said. "I must book a passage on the next boat. Go up at once and put your things together! I will find out when it sails."

She obeyed him implicitly, in too great a whirl to analyse her emotions. Her mother-in-law—that strong, well-seasoned veteran—it seemed impossible. She was one of those people whom no one could picture as dying. She seemed to have been created a bulwark to continue for all time. Through all the rush and hurry of preparation she could never once bring herself to imagine that old Lady Aubreystone was dying. It was simply beyond the bounds of credulity. Her domineering personality, her virility, must be unquenchable. It was hard to believe that Aubreystone Castle had ever existed without her.

Nevertheless, through all the tumult of her whirling thoughts she kept her outer mind fixed upon the business in hand. Ivor had said they must return, and had told her to make ready, and she proceeded swiftly to carry out his instructions. For nearly an hour she toiled at the packing of his belongings and her own. It was like a violent dream that was drawing towards a sudden and unnatural awakening. But a little portrait of Rollo, which she kept tucked in among her handkerchiefs, sent a quivering smile to her lips. Whether it were right or wrong, she could not check the throb of sheer joy that went through her at the thought of reunion with him.

When Ivor joined her at length, she had made good progress with her preparations. He looked pale and perturbed, but waved away all attempt at sympathy.

“There is not a moment to lose, my dear. Please concentrate upon what you have to do!” he said. “We shall just catch the *Marathon*. I have been fortunate enough to secure berths. We will postpone all discussions until we are on board.”

In face of this attitude there was nothing to be said. She could only obey to the best of her ability. It was evident that he had neither the time nor the inclination to discuss this sudden disaster which had caused the reversal of all their plans, and she made no further effort to approach him on the subject. Notwithstanding the years of married life that they had spent together, she did not feel that she knew him well enough to press her solicitude upon him. She had no idea as to the depth of his personal affection for his mother. There was so much about him that had the appearance of being merely conventional, though probably, being of a conventional type, this was inevitable.

Whatever the barrier, she found it quite impassable; and even when they were once more on board and had actually started on the return journey she

could discover no means of making him understand that his anxiety was hers.

From the outset she was defeated and compelled to abandon the effort. He either would not or could not understand the warmth of sympathy at her heart. And so in silence it burned for a space and then flickered out.

The weather had turned cold and squally, a fact which in no way affected Ivor, but which very soon reduced poor Molly to a state of acute physical discomfort.

There were not a great many people travelling, and she was fortunate in being able to command the services of a stewardess who seemed to have something of the experience of a trained nurse. This woman was especially kind to her, and Molly needed kindness in those days. It was not that Ivor neglected her, but she herself shrank from troubling him further, regarding her own indisposition rather in the light of a disgrace. In a fashion his absorption in home affairs was a relief to her, for it reduced his demands upon her and she could afford to take the rest she so greatly needed. He did not even realize how ill she was, and she did her best to conceal it from him.

But the stewardess knew, and ere long she bluntly delivered herself of the result of her observations.

“It’s another little one on the way, my lady. That’s what’s the matter with you,” she said.

And with a sinking heart Molly had to admit that she was probably right.

She did not tell Ivor, for somehow it would have felt like an intrusion. Also, for some reason she felt that she could not have borne any jubilation from him just now on the subject. It would be time enough when they reached home. But meantime her wretched condition continued practically throughout the voyage, and when they arrived in England she felt as though years had passed since their departure.

The journey to Aubreystone Castle was a melancholy one. The grey mists of autumn hung on the woods, and all distances were merged in cloud. It did not seem like home-coming to Molly, but the thought of her little Rollo filled her with a subdued sort of pleasure. She wanted him as she wanted nothing else on earth.

Ivor had telephoned immediately upon their arrival, but the news received from Caroline was not very cheering. Their mother was conscious, but quite helpless and practically speechless. They knew exactly what to expect, so there was no suspense on that account during the last stage of

their return. Ivor betrayed neither relief nor anxiety, merely an implacable calm which in Molly's eyes rendered him quite unapproachable.

She herself was feeling unutterably tired long before the dim outlines of the Castle appeared through the dripping dusk. But she made no complaint, for her own discomfort was of small account in comparison with the joy of being reunited to her little son. She could not make herself feel that anything else was of any real importance beside that.

They reached the Castle at length, to be welcomed by the lugubrious Bridges, who informed them that there was no improvement in her ladyship's condition, and from his manner Molly gathered that he had small hope that there ever would be.

Ivor received the news with unalterable composure, she herself with a fleeting compassion that was quickly swallowed up in the longing to clasp her little Rollo once more in her arms.

She could hardly wait for Ivor's stately permission before, weary as she was, she turned her steps in the direction of the nurseries.

Her feet flew along the passages. She heard the sound of voices in the children's wing. The door of the day-nursery was half-open. She pushed it wide and entered.

"Rollo!" she called. "Rollo!"

Eagerly she looked around. Tea was in progress. She saw Kennedy, the prim and starched, rise in her place at the end of the table. In a high chair beside her sat Vivian—a fair-haired, somewhat stolid child of a year and a half who looked at his mother over a wedge of bread and butter as though she were a complete stranger. A nursemaid whom Molly had never seen before was administering milk to the baby who was too absorbed to look at her at all.

"Good evening, my lady," said Kennedy ceremoniously.

Molly stared at her. "Where is my little boy? Where is Rollo?" she demanded, ignoring the greeting.

Kennedy pursed her sour lips. "I've been obliged to send him down to the servants' hall, my lady. I really couldn't have anyone so rough in my nursery. He hit poor little Master Vivian on the head with a brick the other day."

"You—sent him down to the servants' hall!" There was a searing quality in Molly's voice that was somehow like a flame. She wheeled back to the

door, not even seeing the other children. “Where is Rose?” she demanded, pausing.

Kennedy replied with great dignity. “I regret to say, my lady, that we were compelled to discharge Rose—at short notice—for impertinence.”

Molly waited for no more. Like a sudden breeze she had entered; like a whirlwind she departed, flying down the corridor with her white face strangely drawn, her eyes most amazingly alight.

And Kennedy drew in her breath and sat down as if she had received a shock that had temporarily incapacitated her.

“Well—really!” she said in a tone that made the two words sound like extremely strong language.

To which her new satellite replied dutifully, with the dropped jaw of subservience: “Did you ever?”

CHAPTER VIII

THE STABLES

THE appearance of young Lady Aubreystone in the servants' quarters, pale-faced and quivering—almost dishevelled in her haste—caused a sensation not soon to be forgotten.

Most of the staff were at tea, and there was a general movement of surprise and confusion at her unexpected entrance which made not the faintest impression upon Molly.

She stood looking round her, panting audibly as if she had outrun her strength. "Rollo!" she said. "Where is my boy? Where is Rollo?" And then, fiercely into the startled silence: "Oh, can none of you answer? What have you done with him? Where is he?"

A young footman named Jelf found his voice, somewhat sheepishly. "He was round by the stables a little while ago, my lady. He gets everywhere."

"The stables!" Molly was across the room and running towards the back premises on the instant. "How does one get to them? Bring a light—quickly—and show me the way!"

Jelf hurried after her, followed by Mrs. Briggs the cook, who also by this time had recovered her power of speech.

"There, my lady, there! Don't you worry! He's all right," she declared stoutly. "Why, he lives in them stables nowadays—the young pickle! But Awkins is there, and he wouldn't let no harm come to 'im."

Molly did not wait to enquire into the abilities of Awkins. She was already out in the murky drizzle that shrouded the stable-yard, and it was as much as Jelf's long legs could accomplish to keep up with her.

She sent a ringing call before her which was not without its note of anguish. "Rollo—Rollo—where are you, Rollo?"

Such was her state of mind by that time that she scarcely expected an answer, and when a shrill voice came back to her in ecstatic reply she

paused for an instant as though electrified. Then—with a deep sob—she ran on.

Out of the misty lamplight that illuminated one of the stable-buildings a minute figure rushed to greet her, colliding with her with a force that nearly knocked her down. But in the next moment, recovering herself, she had her little Rollo tight in her arms.

“Darling!” she cried. “Darling! My darling!”

And—“Molly! Molly!” he squeaked in rapturous reply, hugging her fast. “We was putting the horses to bed—me and Awkins. Come and see the horses! They do look so funny when they’re having their tea.”

Somehow, though her knees were shaking beyond control, Molly managed to stagger through the open doorway under the lamp. She still clasped her little boy to her breast, but his weight was almost more than she could bear. Luckily the young footman was just behind and caught her as she tottered. Mrs. Briggs had given up the unequal contest and retreated again to the shelter of her own quarters, having a rooted objection to crossing them nasty wet paving-stones.

Jelf guided her down on to a truss of hay while Rollo wriggled out of her arms with many chuckles of delight and ran to find his friend Awkins. Everything was swimming before Molly’s eyes, but she heard the stamping and munching of horses and smelt the smell of the stables; and with a supreme effort she kept her weakness from overwhelming her utterly.

Jelf stood by her side, stiffly ill at ease. “I’m very sorry, my lady, very sorry,” he kept repeating until in Molly’s confused hearing his reiterated regrets sounded monotonous and meaningless. “It couldn’t be helped, my lady, but I’m very sorry. Of course the young gentleman’s quite safe with Awkins. Still, I’m very sorry.”

And then, somewhat after the style of Henry the Eighth descending unexpectedly from one of his many gilt frames, Awkins himself appeared—stout of figure and tight of leg—his round red countenance adorned by a large blue shadow where the royal beard ought to have been in evidence, and a certain courtly swagger in his bearing that was not devoid of arrogance.

“Good hevening, my lady!” said Awkins in the deep voice of a pirate.

And a small jumping figure by his side broke in with, “Molly, this is Awkins what runs the stables. And he’ll show you all the horses if you ask him. And isn’t it fun, Molly? Isn’t it fun? I do love horses.”

He was hopping from one leg to the other, still chuckling his glee; and Molly, gradually recovering her wavering balance managed to muster a trembling smile which was in its way propitiatory to this monarch of the stables.

“Have you been taking care of my little boy?” she said. “How kind!”

Awkins smiled in a fashion that somehow conveyed a wink though his eyelids remained stationary. “Not at all!” he said with condescension. “Anybody is welcome in my department, so long as they has brains. If they hasn’t, I fires ’em.” He turned suddenly and bawled over his shoulder. “Jim! Fetch something for her ladyship to sit on and be sharp about it, blast yer!”

Molly shrank a little. Rollo hopped a little higher. “Isn’t he funny, Molly? He always talks like that. I like Awkins, I does. When I’m growed up we’re going to be partners, ‘cos, you see, I’m little and I can ride. And he’s too big, he is.”

“Darling,” Molly said rather weakly, “I think we ought to be going in.”

“Oh, but I haven’t had my tea yet,” protested Rollo. “I always has my tea with Awkins—don’t I, Awkins?”

Awkins smiled again, the smile that subtly expressed a wink. “Well,” he said, “there’s no knowing. P’raps you’ll be having it with her ladyship to-day.”

A stable-lad appeared from nowhere at this juncture with a wooden chair of which Awkins possessed himself to place it firmly in front of Molly.

“Now, my lady,” he said, “if *you* please!” And bending, he hoisted her up from her lowly seat on the hay.

She yielded as to a master-mind. Jelf had disappeared, and Awkins was indubitably sovereign here. She had but a vague memory of the man, for their paths had scarcely crossed before; but she knew that after this she would remember him for the rest of her life. His was a type of personality not lightly forgotten.

She sat for a few seconds recovering herself while Rollo hopped and prattled around her, and Awkins stood squarely in front with legs wide apart and one side of his mouth screwed up as though it sucked a straw. Then, summoning her strength, she got up.

“Come, Rollo darling, we must go, or someone will be wondering where we are. Thank you very much, Mr.—” She held out her hand rather

timorously to the dominant personage in front of her who jumped as though a pistol had been levelled at him.

“Awkins!” he proclaimed resonantly. “That’s me. Just—Awkins! And the *honour* is mine.” He did not touch her hand, but made a jerky obeisance to it, and wheeled away. “Now, you young sprig! Jest you take your ma’s hand and get out of it, see? Oh yes,” in a tone of relenting, “you can come and see Awkins again in the morning. I’ll see to that. Now—jeer what I say? You be hoff!”

Molly felt as though they had both received their marching orders, but Rollo merely chuckled as he fell into line and pushed his grimy little hand into hers.

“Awkins was a sarmajor once,” he observed. “He’s got a wee see though he doesn’t want anybody to know. What is a wee see, Molly? Is it naughty to have one?”

Molly paused a moment, but the sonorous voice of Awkins in the rear impelled her irresistibly on the return journey.

“You take your ma back and no nonsense!” he commanded. “If you don’t do as you’re told I won’t have you back in my stables to-morrow.”

And Rollo, still prancing and chattering, led her from the scene.

Jelf met them with a torch and an umbrella half-way across the yard. It was beginning to rain in earnest.

“I’m very sorry, my lady, very sorry,” he said. “Of course, as you’ll understand, the Castle’s in some dishorder, what with her ladyship’s illness. But you can trust Awkins. He wouldn’t let no harm come to the young gentleman.”

It dawned upon Molly that these profuse apologies must have a deeper significance than she had attached to them; but Rollo was safe, and so for the moment she was content to pursue the matter no further.

They returned to the Castle through Jelf’s manœuvring by a more genteel route than that by which Molly had left it. It entailed pushing through a narrow shrubbery to reach a side-door, but Molly recognized that Jelf’s sense of what was fitting was at stake, and raised no protest.

They finally emerged, somewhat damp and mud-splashed, into a narrow passage that ran past the door of the library into the main entrance-hall. And here they discovered Ivor and his sister Caroline standing talking together before the fire.

A tea-table stood near them, and at sight of the dishes of cakes that it bore Rollo gave a guffaw of sheer delight. Jelf melted discreetly away.

Ivor turned with a frown. “Really, my dear, I thought you were never coming. And why have you brought that child down? Send him up to the nursery at once!”

Molly advanced, holding Rollo firmly by the hand. Her face was still pale, but her bearing was completely self-controlled.

“How do you do, Caroline?” she said. “Ivor, I did not bring Rollo down. He was sent out to the stables by the servants, where I have just been to fetch him.”

Caroline made a brief sound of annoyance. “Oh, really!” she said. “We cannot discuss these trifles now. I think you forget, Mary, that you are back here in very tragic circumstances.”

“I forget nothing,” Molly made steady reply. “And there is nothing to discuss. Rollo is in my care now, and I mean to keep him. I am going up to my room, Ivor. Perhaps you would be very kind and send up enough tea for us both.”

With the words she turned, bending for a second over the child. “We will go upstairs, darling,” she said. “No, never mind about the cakes! We will have some up in my room.”

Something in her tone quelled even Rollo’s bubbling excitement. He yielded without demur.

But as they went up the grand staircase hand in hand his shrill young voice floated down to the brother and sister who stood grimly silent before the great log-fire. “Isn’t Aunt Caroline cross, Molly? I don’t like her, do you? And that man—he’s cross too, isn’t he? Why did he frown at us like that? I wish I was as big as Awkins, and I’d hit him, I would.”

Molly’s answer, if she made any, was muted by the closing of a door.

CHAPTER IX

THE MESSAGE

IVOR did not take his young wife to task for her extraordinary behaviour, for he found the tables most inexplicably turned upon him that night. For the first time in his life he discovered her awaiting him in a state of quivering indignation which even he was compelled to recognize could hardly be treated as of no account.

She had put Rollo to bed on a couch in the sumptuous room they shared and the child was fast asleep, his rosy face upturned to the light and the suggestion of a smile on his eager lips which looked as if they had but just ceased to laugh and chatter.

Molly had been sitting by him, but she rose at her husband's entrance, her fair hair pushed carelessly back, her eyes wide and so deeply blue that they seemed like flaming spirit. She stood and waited for him, and he saw that she was trembling.

He came up to her and caught sight of the sleeping child. His eyebrows went up, but she spoke before he had time to remonstrate, her voice low and vehement.

"Yes, I have brought him here because there is no one in the nursery to look after him. The girl we engaged has been dismissed and the woman Kennedy illtreats him or else sends him down to the servants' hall or the stables. No, Ivor, wait! I am speaking." Her voice vibrated on a deep note he scarcely knew. "This has got to stop. Rollo is my child—mine alone now. He has a greater claim upon me than either of the others because of that. And I will not have him neglected in this way."

She paused, her look a direct challenge. In that moment he saw her as he had never seen her before—no longer a mere girl to be petted or kept in order, but a woman of astounding warmth and beauty whose very proximity sent a tingle through his veins.

The protest he had meant to utter died on his lips. He took her by the shoulders and kissed her white, passionate face. “My dear,” he said, “what a wonderful picture you would make! I must really have you painted.”

She broke from him with an almost fierce strength. “Ivor! I am speaking of Rollo. Please attend—for I am in earnest!”

Something of arrogance came into his face, but it was mixed with an irresistible admiration. He captured her again and held her, half-laughing, half-determined.

“You look at me with eyes like that,” he said, “and ask me to attend to something else!”

He sought to draw her to him, but she resisted him hotly. “You must—Ivor, you shall attend! Listen!”

“I will not listen,” he said. “I refuse to discuss anything further to-night. Rollo’s future can take care of itself.”

Her resistance increased. She turned her face aside so that his kisses fell upon her neck as she strained away from him. “I warn you,” she panted, “I warn you—I will not have Rollo treated as of no account.”

He mastered her as was inevitable, not violently, but in a fashion that made her feel the full weight of his strength and resolution. And abruptly her own strength gave way. She collapsed against him in a storm of tears.

“Ivor, it isn’t fair—it isn’t right. I’ve given you two children, and there’s going to be another. You might be generous about—my little Rollo.”

The news coupled with the urgency of her appeal moved him. His attitude changed. He lifted her with great tenderness and laid her on the bed.

“My dear Mary,” he said, “why didn’t you tell me before? I had no idea.”

“I thought you had enough to worry you,” she whispered, struggling with herself, and wondering why his kindness should be even harder to bear than his tyranny.

“Worry!” Ivor said. “But, my dear, I am delighted. It is the one thing that can brighten this unhappy home-coming. Of course I am delighted. I am longing for another son. It will be a son this time, eh, Mary?”

“I don’t know,” Molly said, closing her eyes. “I wish I could have got stronger first, but it can’t be helped.”

“What nonsense, dear!” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and fondling her bare arm. “You are just at the best time of your life—in your heyday. We must take care of you, and things will be all right. I am longing for another three or four yet, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Molly with a weary sob. “There seems no end to it.”

“You’re not pleased?” he asked reproachfully.

She shook her head vaguely. “I’m so tired, Ivor. If it weren’t for——” She opened her eyes suddenly and looked at him through tears—“you will let me have my way about Rollo, won’t you?” she said. “I shall never rest till you do.”

He met her look with an odd sense of uneasiness; for it was as though a shadow had fallen upon her. “But naturally you’re tired, dear. It’s been a long and trying journey for you,” he said.

“The longest journey is ended—at last,” Molly told him, her eyes still fixed upon him. “But—about Rollo, Ivor!”

He stirred rather restlessly. “My dear, you are free to make any arrangements you like. I am not to blame if things have gone wrong.”

“No.” Molly spoke with slow conviction. “Caroline is to blame. Will you tell her then that I am taking over—everything to do with the nursery now? Make it quite—quite clear! Will you, Ivor?”

He hesitated; but the depth and earnestness of those eyes could not be ignored. He yielded the point. “Of course I will tell her. But, Mary, you must go to bed. I can see you are worn out, and you really must be careful. I can’t have you getting ill.”

She smiled faintly. It was strange how utterly the fire was quenched in her. Yet she stuck to her point. “I will do—whatever you like,” she said, “give you a dozen heirs if I can—so long as I may have a free hand with my own child. You promised—long ago—that he should have every advantage. And I—claim that promise.”

“Of course, dear, of course!” he said. “I understand. There is no need to be tragic about it. I want him to be brought up properly as much as you do. But you mustn’t be morbid over him. No doubt Kennedy has done her best.”

“Kennedy,” said Molly, “will have to go. Perhaps you will tell Caroline for me. I shall have time to attend to it myself now.”

A shade of sternness gathered on Ivor's brow. "I can't have any disagreements," he said. "Caroline also has done her best—under exceptionally difficult circumstances. You realize, I suppose, that my poor mother will probably never recover?"

"Yes, I know," Molly said. "I am very sorry for her. But she is old, Ivor. The old don't suffer so much. Caroline will take her place and manage the estate for you. But I must have the care of—the children." She uttered the last words as if they were substituted for something else.

Ivor's frown deepened slightly. He was beginning to recover from the first shock of her opposition. But the beauty of her lying there still bound a spell about him. "Certainly," he said with dignity, "I am quite willing that you should have a voice in the matter. It is right and proper that you should. But at the same time, my dear, you must clearly understand that I myself expect to be consulted. So far as I am concerned, Rollo is a perfectly welcome inmate of our nursery, and it is my wish that he should receive equal treatment with my own children. But if he misbehaves himself, he must be punished. I will not countenance an unruly child at any time."

"I am not asking it," Molly said. "I only want fair play for him. And that is what he has not had."

"Very well," Ivor said. "Then we must consult as to what had better be done. Of course," he paused, "he might be sent away to some home-school for little ones."

Molly sat suddenly upright. "If so, I go with him," she said.

Ivor put a restraining hand upon her and pressed her back. "My dear, you must be reasonable. You will do yourself harm. I can't allow it. I am only making suggestions. He may stay here for the present if you wish it, but he must be kept in hand."

It was at this point that Rollo himself abruptly interrupted the discussion by springing up in his improvised bed and looking around him with eyes as bright and as amazingly blue as Molly's own.

"Awkins!" he cried. "Awkins! Give me a little bit of sugar too, Awkins! I aren't a hunter, but I does like sugar."

Molly had eluded the restraining hold and was by his side in a moment. She knelt, throwing her arms about the little figure.

"Darling, you shall have some in the morning—not now—not now!" she said softly. "Sleep now, my precious! I promise you shall have it in the

morning.”

He looked round at her half-doubtfully, the glaze of sleep creeping back almost imperceptibly over those bright eyes. “That you, Molly?” he said in a different tone—the tone of a little drowsy boy. “So glad it’s you—and not Kendy. Don’t like Kendy. She smacks me.”

He cuddled down again into her arms and was asleep again.

She pressed him against her heart, and over his tousled head her eyes met Ivor’s—met and firmly held.

Then, very tenderly, she laid the child down upon the cushions, covered him up, and rose.

“So Kennedy must go,” she said quietly. “I shall try to get Rose Masters back again. Will you please explain to Caroline that I am taking over my own duties now? They are my duties, Ivor, and no one else’s.”

He smiled a trifle grimly. “Don’t forget that you owe a duty to me also!” he said.

Her look still met his unvaryingly. “I shall not forget it,” she said. “And—I shall not neglect it. That I promise you. Shall we go to bed now? I am very tired.”

The suggestion held finality rather than appeal. Ivor found himself obliged to fall in with it. Though it was entirely contrary to habit and principle he was compelled for once to leave her in possession of the field.

He turned with dignity. “I shall sleep in my dressing-room to-night,” he said. “To-morrow Rollo will go back to the nursery.”

“Yes,” Molly agreed gravely. “He shall.”

But when she was alone, she hung over the child in a sort of abandonment of love—as if the mother-hunger so long denied could never be satisfied. And presently the tears gathered and rolled down her face on to the rug in which she had wrapped him. She had made her stand, and on the morrow she would continue to make it. But her heart was very weary, and the single-handed struggle which lay before her seemed unutterably long.

She knelt down at length beside the couch and tried to whisper some broken prayers. But for awhile the despairing tears flowed too fast.

Then at length something of peace came to her. She crouched for a space exhausted, her head against the cushion on which little Rollo rested, while a sort of coma stole over her that was nearer to trance than sleep.

And once again—across a space immeasurable that might have been time or distance—she knew not which—there came to her a voice, low, eager, intensely vital, speaking to her soul.

“Molly—my Molly—I’m not dead. I’m coming back.”

She stirred and tried to answer. But it was as if a numbing hand had been laid upon her. She sank powerless into a deep sleep. . . .

In the early hours of the morning she awoke and, trembling, raised herself. Rollo had not moved; he was wrapped in healthy slumber. The soft glow on his face was like the bloom on a flower. She longed to kiss him but did not dare.

Very softly she arose and slipped across to the bed. If Ivor should hear her! But mercifully no sound came from the adjoining room.

She drew back the bedclothes, and discovered her handbag lying where she had dropped it on the quilt.

She picked it up to lay it aside, and then like a lighted torch a sudden memory flared in her brain. From a pocket she seldom used she drew out an unopened letter—the letter that had been handed to her, æons ago it seemed, in the vestibule of a hotel in New York. Vividly it all flashed back upon her—the receiving of that letter which she had been at first too flurried and later too ill to remember.

She crept into bed, and by the light of the shaded lamp at her side she at last opened and read it.

“DEAR MOLLY (you said I might call you that),

This may not interest you as much as it did, now that you are in the thick of things ashore. But I must let you know—just in case.

The first operation has been most successful, and I think the wreck will ultimately be quite a smart craft again. But there is a great deal to be done yet, so I won’t say too much. The spirit must rise again—as well as the body. Will you spare it a prayer now and then? It would be like you, and I know you wanted to help.

Yours ever,
GEOFFREY ASTERBY.”

INTERLUDE

THE IVORY MASK

“THERE must be a change soon,” said Geoffrey Asterby, frowning at a chart held out for his inspection by a trimly uniformed nurse. “You’re sure this is absolutely accurate?”

“Sure, doctor,” said the nurse, allowing herself a demure little smile at the question. It was amusing to see a man of Asterby’s reputation betraying anxiety over a case, even though he had been at work upon this particular one for the best part of eighteen months. But she was careful not to let him see the smile.

“Well, I guess I’d better look at him,” said Geoffrey, turning to pass the light screen that separated him from the patient’s bed.

The nurse dutifully followed in his halting footsteps. Her admiration for this crippled miracle-worker was unbounded. He was a magician in her eyes, not only for the wonders that he achieved but also for the fashion in which he mastered his own infirmity. It was never allowed to stand in his way for a moment. Whatever the matter in hand might be, he was always ready for it, his handicap thrust in the background, undaunted, keen, unself-conscious. No one had ever seen him falter over his work. It seemed to bear him along at all times upon an irresistible flood-tide of energy.

Reaching the bedside of his patient who lay motionless on the bed under the window, he stood leaning on his sticks, closely watching.

What he looked upon was not a sight which many would have regarded as likely to give rise to any serious misgivings. The face upon which his eyes rested was that of a young man in complete repose. He lay stretched at full length, breathing deeply and evenly. His head was bandaged, but his features were fully exposed, and they were such as might have been modelled by the hand of a sculptor—clean-cut, classically regular. But though they were very pale, the whole attitude of the sleeping figure was so natural and free from strain that it was almost impossible to associate any sense of uneasiness therewith.

Geoffrey’s own face as he looked became gradually reassured; but a long time elapsed before he relaxed his scrutiny. When he stood up at length he

was smiling.

“Everything’s O.K., nurse. We mustn’t try to hustle over this. You can’t hustle an infant, and this man’s been born again, remember.”

She smiled back at him. “He’ll be a credit to you, doctor.”

Geoffrey nodded. “Yes, I think he’ll do us both credit. But we mustn’t start shouting yet. Wait till he speaks!”

“Oh, if he only would!” said the nurse. “You know how Dr. Sherman said he’d never speak again.”

“Yes, I know,” Geoffrey said. “And it’s quite possible he was right. In which case I sacrifice my share of the credit. But I still stick to my guns. I think he will.”

“You’ve done such wonders,” the nurse said, with her eyes on the patient’s serene face. “I’m sure you must be right.”

“We’ll hope so anyway,” said Geoffrey. “I’ve almost staked my reputation on it.”

The nurse smiled at him again. “That’s only because you’ve never had a real failure yet,” she said. “Ah, look! Something’s happening. You said a change would come.”

Geoffrey bent again over the man in the bed. It was true. Something was happening, but of so subtle a nature as to be almost impossible to define. It was as if a light were slowly rising to the surface from the unplumbed depths of a dark pool. It might have been either death or life upon which they gazed during those first few moments of a dawning transformation.

The nurse watched with bated breath. Geoffrey lowered himself until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. His steady eyes had the intentness of one who waits upon the threshold of discovery. He did not speak or remove his scrutiny for a single instant from the strangely beautiful face before him.

Slowly the light seemed to grow. There came a long deep sigh. The bandaged head moved on the pillow; but the eyes remained closed.

“He’s going to wake,” whispered the nurse.

Geoffrey raised a hand which not only enjoined silence but also appointed her to a place at the head of the bed where she would be out of sight if the still sealed eyes should open.

He himself remained in the same position, closely attentive of every sign.

The first vague restlessness was growing. There could be no doubt of it. Another sigh welled up and broke from lips that were now half-parted, and the bedclothes stirred vaguely as though a hand were seeking to free itself. Very gently Geoffrey reached up and drew them slightly downwards.

Slowly the hand came forth—a long, delicately-formed hand that groped towards him. The parted lips began to murmur inarticulate sounds.

Geoffrey spoke aloud. “Yes?” he said. “Yes? Tell me what you want!”

The eyelids lifted at the sound of his voice, and out of that calm unlined face two eyes that were darkly grey stared straight into his. The mumbling lips found utterance.

“I want—my wife.”

“Ah!” said Geoffrey, and made a slight involuntary movement almost as though he had been taken unawares. But he met the steady regard with absolute directness, and in a moment replied to it. “I am afraid she’s not here, old chap. Later on—when you’re fit—maybe you’ll find her.”

No expression whatever stirred the features of the man in the bed. They remained like carved marble. But in those darkly searching eyes there shone a glint of distress.

He accepted the information however without question—as if he had half-expected it. He spoke again slowly and carefully, seeming to consider his words. “I have met you before—somewhere. You—know me.”

“I have known you for some time now,” Geoffrey told him gently. “I am taking care of you till you are well.”

There was something deeply pathetic in the eyes that gazed into his—a fixed urgency that had in it an element of despair.

Geoffrey went on in the same quiet vein. “You have come through a very bad time, but it is right behind you now, and all you have got to do is to rebuild. Heaps of others have had to do the same. They haven’t all won out, but you will. I want you to leave yourself in my hands and not to worry. If you will only do that, I think I can guarantee that you will find yourself quicker than if you try to do it alone.”

He paused to make sure that his words were taking effect. But there could be small doubt of that. A measure of relief had crept into the watching

eyes, overspreading the despair. The thin hand he held closed tightly upon his own.

Again in his soothing voice Geoffrey took up the tale. "I am a surgeon. My name is Geoffrey Asterby, but you needn't worry to remember that. Just think of me as a friend. You went through the War and got left behind. I found you in Europe and brought you here to the States. You were pretty ill, and we've had to work fairly hard to get you back. But I guess it's been worth it, for you're well on the road now. Presently—when you're a sound man—you'll pick up the threads again and rebuild your life. But that won't be yet. For the present I want you not to worry a thing, but just to trust me. And when you're stronger, we'll map out something between us. Will you try to do that?"

His tone was gently persuasive, but his eyes held insistence—a sort of mystic power to which the eyes of the man he had brought back seemed to cling as though magnetically compelled.

Geoffrey waited for an answer, and after a few seconds it came, slowly, with effort. "I will do—whatever you wish—so long as you don't—let go."

"I shall never do that," Geoffrey said. "I've got hold of you, and I shall keep hold. Don't you worry, son! Every day now you'll find things straightening out—getting clearer. If anything worries you and I'm not here, just save it up till I come! I shall never be away for long. Understand?"

Again the parted lips made answer, but it was the eyes that spoke with the greater emphasis. "Yes—yes! But stay near me! I can only remember—when you are here."

Geoffrey leaned towards him. "Yes, that's so, old chap. But it will get less so as time goes on. I'm only at the helm till you can take it on for yourself. Now I'm going to ask you one thing, and if you can't answer, don't worry—just shut down! What is your name?"

He asked the question with slow emphasis, and as he asked it the whole of his being was stretched out, as it were, to the other's aid, ready to grasp and uphold.

There followed a silence during which the nurse at the head of the bed stood like a statue, perfectly rigid, the only audible thing about her the ticking of the watch that was strapped half-way up her plump bare arm.

Geoffrey waited for a space also in total immobility; then, as the eyes into which he gazed so intently began to cloud with a piteous uncertainty, he put up a very gentle hand and softly closed them.

“Never mind!” he said. “It’s all right. Don’t try any more!”

But even as he did it, the long fingers that held his gripped convulsively, and a voice spoke as if from a great distance.

“She called me—Roy,” it said. “But that—was long ago—before I ran away—before I deserted her—before—I—died.”

The voice faded, and the silence fell again.

Geoffrey sat for many seconds with his hand still over the closed eyes which never stirred under that steady control. When he finally lifted it, the face on the pillow was once more like a mask, perfectly chiselled, in absolute repose—as though it had been carved out of ivory.

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF AUBREYSTONE

“THERE is nothing,” said the Honourable Caroline with austerity, “nothing on earth that I dislike so much as humbug.”

“Not even earwigs?” suggested Rollo from his perch on the arm of his mother’s chair.

She gave him a withering glance and passed him over. “I am a good deal older than you are, Mary, and I am bound to say that there are occasions on which your attitude is so mawkishly punctilious that I find it hard to believe that it can be altogether genuine.”

Molly uttered a funny little sigh. She was accustomed to this species of disparagement from her sister-in-law, and she had long ceased to attempt to justify herself in face of it. There were only one or two outstanding matters upon which she starkly held her own.

But Rollo, who loved skirmishing even though it sometimes embroiled him in unpleasant consequences, could never endure this type of raid in silence.

“Are you any older than she is now than you used to be?” he wanted to know. “You can’t have more than one birthday in a year, can you?”

The Honourable Caroline’s scathing look swept him once more, this time without passing on. “Are you being impertinent or merely idiotic?” she enquired frostily.

Rollo jiggled up and down on the chair-arm, delighted to have drawn her fire. “Wouldn’t you like me to be an idiot just?” he said. “Then you could get me locked up and never see me again.”

His mother spoke with a restraining hand on his knee. “Rollo, that isn’t polite. You must apologize.”

Caroline interrupted her sardonically. “There is no necessity to make a humbug of him also. Punishment is far more effective than apology. I think I

am quite capable of holding my own with a child of ten.”

“Eleven,” said Rollo, turning to choke all further protest on his mother’s part with an ardent embrace. “And that’s a good deal older than any of the others. And Molly isn’t a humbug just because she doesn’t lose her temper. It’s a sign of good breeding, Awkins says.”

“You’re a very ignorant little boy,” commented Caroline. “No one would ever imagine for a moment that you had been sent to a decent school. It really is sheer waste of money.”

Rollo grinned in wide approval of this opinion. “I don’t want to go to school,” he said. “I’d just as soon stay here—with Awkins.”

“Darling,” Molly said, speaking very gently but with decision, “I want you to run away now. You can go and see him if you like. But don’t be late going to bed!”

He jumped up with the joyousness of movement characteristic of him. His eyes held a gleam of puppyish mischief. He stuck his hands into his pockets and hopped from one leg to the other. “You’ll come and sit on my bed before I go to sleep?” he bargained, deliberately turning his back upon the older woman.

“What a baby!” scoffed Caroline.

He kicked out with one heel in her direction—an eloquent gesture, keeping his saucy eyes on his mother’s face the while.

She smiled at him, though she tried to convey reproof by a small shake of the head at the same time. “Just for five minutes,” she said. “Now run along and be good!”

“I’m always good with Awkins,” averred Rollo, bringing out the name with purposeful emphasis. “Good-bye, Molly dear! I’m glad you’re younger than Aunt Caroline. And you’re heaps and heaps and heaps prettier, and always will be.”

He made his exit somewhat abruptly upon the last sentence, possibly anticipating the likelihood of being called back to apologize.

The banging of the door upon his retreating heels left a silence which in earlier days Molly would have found intolerable. But now, after nearly nine years, if intimidated she did not show it. Rollo was one of the points upon which long ago she had determined to hold her own with Caroline.

“Quite a credit to you!” was the acid remark with which the latter broke the pause that ensued upon the dying away of the scampering footsteps. “You and—Awkins between you are turning out quite a polished gentleman.”

Molly smiled a little. “I should say that Awkins at least is quite a good influence. I’m sorry that Rollo is rude. I always hoped that you would perhaps—in time—let him grow fond of you.”

“Fond of me!” Caroline raised her strongly-marked brows in astonishment. “Of me!” she repeated as if wondering if such a presumptuous remark could possibly have been actually uttered.

“He used to admire you when he was tiny,” Molly explained, “because you ride so well. And he’s so fond of horses himself that I thought it might possibly be a sort of bridge. But of course I see now——” She left the rest of the sentence unuttered.

“Oh, I’m glad that you see now,” commented Caroline in the tone of one who views the enemy in full flight. “Let me tell you, my dear Mary, that, except for being an insufferable nuisance, that son of yours means less to me than the stable-cat. His manners are atrocious, and you secretly encourage him—which, as you may have grasped, was the reason for my remark a few minutes ago regarding the genuineness—or otherwise—of your behaviour. To tell that boy to apologize to me when you know perfectly well that it is you yourself who have incited him to be offensive is to my mind the most outrageous humbug of which anyone could be capable.”

Molly sighed again—her faint, weary sigh of resignation. She had realized long ago that it was impossible to placate this strong-minded sister-in-law of hers when she was in the mood for aggression. “Ah well,” she said, “don’t let’s quarrel about it!”

“Quarrel!” echoed Caroline, with a sound which in anyone less well-bred would have been a snort of contempt. “I sincerely hope that I have something better to do. If ever I do quarrel with you, I can assure you it will not be a mere matter for sighs.”

Molly looked across at her with very steadfast eyes, but she said nothing.

The years that had elapsed since the day she had first entered Aubreystone Castle had changed her indeed, but in a subtle fashion with which outward appearance had very little to do. If she still felt the shrinking timorousness in face of the almost ferocious strength of character displayed by the redoubtable Caroline which had oppressed her in those earlier days,

she had learned to keep it out of sight. She was always intensely quiet in Caroline's presence and she never replied to her taunts.

The death of old Lady Aubreystone after a long period of helplessness had not served very materially to alter her life. It had in effect strengthened Caroline's position, for the passing of her mother left her as it were the main tyrant of the establishment, and there was no longer anyone to dispute her authority. It was true that Ivor also was a tyrant, but in a minor and less aggressive fashion. He confined himself mainly to the management of his wife and family, leaving Caroline in practically undisputed possession of everything else. There was perhaps some measure of protection for Molly in this arrangement, but she was always fully aware that he would never come to grips with Caroline on her behalf. Merely, by tacit understanding, Caroline's authority did not extend to the nursery, and with regard to that Molly found that her husband was willing that she should have a certain limited amount of freedom.

It was a large nursery; for it now contained six children besides Rollo, who could scarcely be regarded as an official inmate since he had become a schoolboy. Four sons and two daughters had Molly borne to Lord Aubreystone before her thirtieth year, and even yet she wondered wistfully if her task in that respect were ended.

Each one of those children had been to her as the breaking down of a further fence around that sacred inner domain in which there still dwelt the cherished memory of the man she loved. The advent of each had filled her with a nameless dismay—and yet they were dear to her, though not in any degree as Rollo was dear. If it had not been for Ivor and his constant demands upon her, they might have come to mean more to her. But Ivor was always in the foreground, gravely exacting, formally kind but wholly inconsiderate, compelling her attention and her service at all times; and his children were all so surrounded by professional care from their birth that her mother-love was scarcely noticed, far less regarded as a necessity. They seemed to inherit something of their father's condescending attitude towards her. She was a pleasant pastime, no more. Not one of them clamoured for her society, as Rollo clamoured. Not one of them from the final moment of its weaning experienced any urgent desire to see her face again.

She had no time, it was true, to devote to them; very little at all to call her own. There was no fixed hour in the day that she could definitely devote to this young brood of hers, though she was the overseer of all their comforts and, at least nominally, directed the affairs of the nursery. So much Ivor had conceded to her. It was her right and her duty to conduct all vital

matters connected with the children in their infancy, but he encouraged her to consult him to an extent which often ended in his making the necessary decisions in her stead. She never resisted his authority when he thus asserted himself. She still felt that they somehow belonged more to him than to her and that he had the greater right. Only with regard to Rollo was she as adamant, and here even Ivor found it best to allow her a free hand. Just as he submitted to Caroline's ruling in many matters connected with the estate, so he deemed it advisable to leave the upbringing of his young stepson almost entirely to Molly. Not that he allowed himself to be ignored! Rollo was brought up in full consciousness of the fact that his stepfather was the head of the house of Aubreystone and that he himself occupied a position that was more or less on sufferance therein. Almost instinctively, because Molly had carefully instilled into him a very deep respect for the man who had extended to them both the shelter of his home in an hour of dire need, he trod warily in Ivor's presence. But no persuasion on Molly's part could induce him to extend this respect to Caroline. Her own harsh manner was the reason for this. Caroline gibed at him, and he simply did not possess one grain of the persistent forbearance which Molly had so patiently cultivated. Perhaps he did not consider Caroline worth it. But Ivor was different. He was quiet and not unreasonable in Rollo's eyes. In fact, had he cared to make himself beloved by Rollo, he could once have done so. But that chance was already past. Rollo looked upon him as one to whom a certain respect was due, but he did not like him. It had become a case of mutual toleration for Molly's sake. And behind the toleration there lurked an unacknowledged jealousy on the part of both. Full well had Rollo grasped his position in that household, but curiously he did not resent it on his own account. It was for his mother who was the idol of his existence that he harboured a sense of injustice. Yet, at that period of his life, he could not have said wherefore. It was to dawn upon him by degrees that she was the despised but necessary adjunct of the house of Aubreystone.

CHAPTER II

BEDTIME

IT was Molly's custom to pay a visit to the nursery if possible some time during the evening. The younger portion of it had been under the command of Rose Masters for several years, but there was also a nursery governess now who watched over the elder members of the family.

The son and heir, Vivian, who had reached the age of eight was to go to school with Rollo at the end of the summer holidays. He and his three brothers were destined for Eton later on. But Molly had not accepted Ivor's offer of a similar career for Rollo. Something had made her feel that when he was old enough a separate education would be preferable. She wanted Rollo to grow up his father's son, entirely unhampered by any association which could have a belittling effect upon him. He was her firstborn and her dearest, and she had an almost fierce determination that he should have his own independent chance in every respect. Perhaps it was a childish impulse that influenced her, but she was resolved that he should be known as Rollo Fordringham rather than merely the half-brother of the Honourable Vivian Aubreystone. If she herself had sacrificed her freedom and a certain measure of her personality with it, it should not be so with Rollo. He should have the full benefit of that bitter sacrifice that had been made for him.

Life was not all bitter to her now, but it would always be to a certain extent distorted. She had married a man who could never under any circumstances have won her heart, but the passing of the years had accustomed, if never wholly reconciled, her to the fact. The children she had borne to him were healthy, and she took a detached sort of pride in them. Not one of them resembled her, and each one, growing older, seemed to develop according to the Aubreystone tradition.

Vivian, the eldest, was like his father, decorous, rather reserved, inclined to be clever. Aldyth, the second, had the hard and decidedly assertive characteristics of her late grandmother, at whose departing nobody—so far as Molly could discover—had felt the faintest qualm of grief. The third child was another boy—Oswald—cut very much after the same pattern as the

first, only rather colder and more original. The fourth was a girl who had been named Winefride after a long-past ancestress. This child was a clamorous edition of her elder sister, extremely difficult to manage and as indifferent as any young animal of the wild to the rights of others. She did not possess any of the calculating qualities of her elders, but fought openly with a grim tenacity for anything she wanted.

The two youngest children—Cedric and Hugo—were more of a pleasure to their mother, inasmuch as they were still too young to display to any marked degree the formidable characteristics of the ancient family to which they belonged. Cedric was fat and inclined to be lazy. Caroline called him a mollycoddle, a term intended to convey no compliment to his mother. And Hugo the baby was a thing with bristles yet ungrown, to play with, though not to love overmuch. He too liked his own way, and preferred kicking on the floor to being cuddled at any time—a cold-blooded little scrap, according to Rose Masters whose opinion of each of her charges was quite shrewd and impartial. To her mind Rollo was the only one of the whole bunch who was really worthy of devotion. The others might expect, but were incapable of appreciating, it.

Miss Marvin, the governess to the three elder children, was also fonder of Rollo than of the rest; and he returned her affection in his casual, childish way, though—except for his mother whom he adored above and beyond all else—Awkins of the stables was far more to his boyish heart—Awkins being a sort of demigod with whom one did not quibble.

As a matter of fact Awkins was a factor of considerable importance in his life, and he had learned more of courage and the decency of the thoroughbred from him than from anyone else. Rollo was always completely happy in the society of this distinguished member of the Aubreystone establishment. Awkins was a person without any frills whatsoever, and yet everyone “minded” him. Rollo himself cherished an unbounded admiration for him, having long since discovered the meaning of the mysterious “Wee See” regarding which Awkins himself was always so sternly reticent. He had earned the reward for valour in a superlatively brave but fruitless attempt to save the life of Lord Aubreystone’s brother. It had been one of many acts of heroism in the performance of which his square and portly person ought to have found its way into a soldier’s grave. For he literally knew neither fear nor caution. And yet among the multitudes of slain and wounded he had passed through the awful shambles unscathed.

Death apparently had no use for this curt-of-speech Henry the Eighth personality whose eyes looked full and straight before him and never

flinched. It was as if his staunch vitality were of too forcible a nature to be overthrown. As Master of the Horse in the Aubreystone stables he had shown himself to be a man of unerring decision and well fitted for the post. Even Caroline found it impossible to impress her tyranny upon him. He had the strength to leave her undefied yet not supreme. She never guessed that he regarded her as a being too contemptible for serious consideration. Nor was she aware that in all matters of any importance her judgment was guided by his. She had an impression that he valued her opinion and acted upon it.

His partiality for Rollo was a growth of long standing. It had originated in compassion for the child whom no one at Aubreystone Castle had wanted, but it had ripened into something far deeper, and like Rose Masters, he now regarded him with a devotion which he did not feel for any of the family he served. Molly herself was included in this devotion, and on account of it this man of horses had taken a chauffeur's training in order to be at her service at any time. He might in fact have been regarded as Minister of Transport to the Aubreystone household, for in garage as well as stables he had come to reign supreme.

Lord Aubreystone liked him, knowing his trustworthiness and shrewd common sense. He regarded him as a valuable servant, no more. It would have surprised him somewhat to know that to Molly and her child this man was a friend who helped very materially to make life bearable under his ancestral roof.

When Molly went to her little son's room that night for the promised five minutes of bedtime talk, she found him full of a project which had had its inception during that happy hour in the stables.

"We're going to get up early, Molly—very, very early, Awkins and I, and we're going riding miles and miles over the hills before breakfast. And Awkins is going to learn me to jump."

"Darling, not 'learn'!" protested Molly. "And must you call him Awkins?"

"Well, teach then," submitted Rollo with a disarming smile into her eyes. "But I *must* call him Awkins, Molly, because he'd be very hurt if I didn't. He says he never has gone in for etceteras and never will. You must call a friend by the name he likes best, mustn't you? It's the same as me calling you Molly."

Molly was obliged to concede the point. It was impossible to do otherwise with Rollo's arms wound winningly about her neck.

But she deemed it her duty to administer a gentle admonishment on another matter. "I don't want to be always finding fault, darling," she said, "especially as I only have you in the holidays now. But there is one thing I do want very particularly, and that is that you would try very hard to be more polite to your Aunt Caroline."

Rollo made a grimace and turned his face over her shoulder to hide it. "She's always rude first," he objected, "rude to you, I mean. I'd—I'd like to kick her sometimes."

"Darling!" remonstrated Molly, for there was something tense about the small body pressed to hers that warned her that this was no idle fancy.

"I would," said Rollo resentfully. "She's a cad, Molly. Someone ought to tell her."

"Rollo dear," Molly said, "I know you always say what you like to me; but, please, darling, you mustn't say things like that. You mustn't even think them. There is so much that at your age you can't understand, and so you must just try to be good because I ask you to."

"She's so beastly to you," protested Rollo, still mutinous. "I know I'm only a kid, Molly, but I belong to you, and I hate people who are beastly to you. I can't help it."

"My precious one!" Molly said softly, feeling upwards to stroke the brown head. "It's so dear of you. But you mustn't, all the same. You see, Rollo, it makes it much harder for me really."

"Why?" said Rollo.

Molly explained, wondering a little whether she were wise in so doing. "You see, it all comes back to me, darling. It makes more bitterness for me. You are too young at present to count very much. But I do. It's I who have to pay."

"Molly!" He suddenly sat back on his heels to survey her with eyes of fiery blue. "You don't mean she takes it out of you when I'm not there!"

Molly's conscience smote her. She realized that she had been indiscreet. She laid a finger on the boy's lips to check the vehement flood that threatened to loose itself upon her.

“No, darling,” she said in a tone so definite that she herself was slightly startled by the false note it struck. “I only mean that it makes me very uncomfortable and—just a wee bit ashamed—when you are rude to your Aunt Caroline; as if I hadn’t brought you up properly. You must understand, dear. Surely you do!”

Rollo was still regarding her, but his eyes were a little less ferocious and a good deal more attentive. He seemed to be weighing her words. In the end, rather disconcertingly, he gave her a flashing smile of sheer *camaraderie*. “Oh, all right, Molly darling. She’s a nasty bit of work, but p’raps she can’t help it. But don’t you be bullied! Just you stand up to her and give her one back, that’s all!”

It was turning the tables with a vengeance. Molly tried not to smile at this piece of schoolboy advice, but with Rollo’s expectant gaze upon her found it difficult. “We’ve got to be good—both of us,” she said at length. “You know what you say in your prayers about forgiving. It’s no good saying it if you don’t mean it.”

“Not a bit,” agreed Rollo recklessly. “I left that part out ages ago.”

“Oh, Rollo!” Molly was genuinely shocked. “But you can’t alter the Lord’s Prayer.”

“Why not?” demanded Rollo. “He never met Aunt Caroline. He wouldn’t have made it if He had.”

“Oh, darling,” Molly said, “but it was just because He knew that there were such people that He put in those words.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s fair,” maintained Rollo, “and I shan’t say them if I don’t feel like it. Don’t fret!” he added at the sight of her distressed face. “It won’t make any difference to her.”

“It’s you I’m thinking of,” Molly said with a disapproving shake of the head.

But he only caught her round the neck again and hugged her. “And I’m thinking of you, Molly. And if people go on being beastly to you, I’ll never forgive them, never—never—never!”

There was more of devotion than defiance in the assertion, and somehow Molly felt the contest to be beyond her. She realized that Rollo’s love for her was the strongest influence in his life, and though it meant so much to her there were times when it made her feel apprehensive. There was no one else in the Aubreystone household who knew love as she and Rollo knew it.

“Well, darling, you must be good,” she said, “or you’ll hurt me very much. Now I must go and say good night to the others.”

“Oh, never mind the others!” said Rollo autocratically. “It isn’t five minutes yet; and you are so lovely, Molly, I want to keep you all to myself.”

Molly’s arms encompassed him tightly. She could not hide from him that he was her closest and dearest though never by words had she expressed it.

“We mustn’t be selfish,” she murmured into his ear. “It spoils things so.”

He drew back again to gaze at her with adoring eyes. “But you couldn’t be selfish! You’re too lovely,” he said. “Your face is lovely, and everything you do and everything you say.”

He was trying to utter that which could not be uttered, but he spoke the truth none the less. Molly was very lovely. All that she had passed through had but graven a more spiritual beauty upon her, and otherwise the years had left little trace. She might have been a girl still but for the depth and understanding in her eyes. She had been lovely in her girlhood, but in her womanhood she was lovelier yet. And that loveliness was to go with her all through her life. Ivor knew it, as did Rollo; and Caroline knew it also and was harshly resentful of it. For the years were not so kind to her.

Molly’s arms drew her small son back to her breast for a few seconds. “Rollo—my Rollo!” she said fondly. “I think you are lovely too. But we must try to be lovely to other people as well as each other.”

“That’s not the same thing at all,” said Rollo.

She laughed a little. He was so delightfully honest. “No, it isn’t. It’s a much harder thing,” she admitted. “But we’ve got to do it all the same.”

“All right. P’raps we’ll try—up to a point,” conceded Rollo.

But though she felt that she could not press the matter any further, she did not flatter herself that she had succeeded in making a very deep impression.

CHAPTER III

THE LESSON

THERE was a nip in the early morning air when Rollo and his friend Awkins rode out over the uplands of the park. The boy was in the highest spirits, eager to prove himself and ardent to learn. Awkins, seated squarely on his big brown horse, was a strict teacher. There was never a trace of nonsense about him when bent upon a task such as this. And Rollo needed a firm hand. He was keen for any type of adventure.

“Wish I didn’t have to go to school, Awkins,” he said. “I’d like to learn everything from you.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Awkins. “You’ll go a lot farther than what I could take you.”

They were mounting a steep ascent which was full of rabbit-burrows, and the little creatures were scampering away almost from under their horses’ hoofs.

Rollo viewed them with delight. “I’d hate to shoot a rabbit,” he said suddenly. “They’re such jolly little beggars.”

“Mischievous little varmints!” pronounced Awkins. “Bad as wood-pigeons and worse’n rats!”

“I don’t care,” said Rollo stubbornly. “I like them. And I like wood-pigeons too. I shan’t bother to learn to shoot, Awkins.”

Awkins smiled with a certain grimness. “You’ll say different some day,” he said.

The boy flashed round on him with a hint of indignation. “I shan’t, then! You’re quite wrong. I love birds—same as my mother does. There’s going to be a big shoot next week, but I shan’t go out and watch. I hate to see them come flopping down.”

“A bit young, aren’t you?” suggested Awkins without heat.

Rollo took his lower lip between his teeth. "All right, then. I'll stay young," he said. "I don't care. You can call me a girl if you like. It won't make any odds to me."

"We wasn't talkin' odds," said Awkins with unexpected sympathy. "And you aren't such a duffer as you think."

Rollo's face cleared magically. "I say, you are a brick!" he declared.

Awkins ignored the compliment and continued. "But it's no good being soft about vermin and the like. Somebody's got to do the killing, same as in a war. There's some chaps as likes fightin' and some as don't. But it's no good saying you're never goin' to fight; because you might 'ave to."

"Oh fighting! That's quite different. I like fighting," Rollo assured him. "There's some fun in that."

"Your kind of fightin'!" said Awkins scathingly. "Might as well say you like football."

"Well, I do," said Rollo quickly. "I'm no good at it of course, but I like it. And I'm learning to box, and I like that too. It's heaps more fun than any shooting, isn't it?"

"I should say so," said Awkins. "But you've got to shoot if you're going to be any good when it comes to real fightin'. You can't pick and choose in life, Master Rollo. You've just got to take what comes, and learn how to do everything whenever you've a chance. Be a man in fact!"

Rollo's eyes gleamed. There was always something inspiring about Awkins notwithstanding his lack of eloquence. He made one want to learn.

They had reached the top of the rise, and below them lay spread in the silvery mist of the morning a green valley with little strips of hedges and a narrow running brook.

"Come on!" cried Rollo. "Let's get down there, Awkins! There's heaps of jumps down there, and you promised I might."

The grey cob on which he was mounted caught his excitement and chafed to be off, but his rider held him in check until Awkins gave permission. Then they went like the wind down the gentle slope, thudding over the short turf at a speed which provoked shrill cries of delight from Rollo.

He rode well and absolutely fearlessly. It was that eager courage of his which had first procured him favour in the eyes of Awkins. He always went

so straight for his goal.

On the present occasion, with the new-risen September sun shining on the mist and the silver gossamer of the dawn spread under his feet, he was like a young Greek god storming the gates of the world. Awkins, on his own much heavier steed, was hard put to it to keep up with him.

The valley with the running stream stretched in a succession of pasture-fields to where the ground rose sharply to the church and village of Little Bradholt. The hedges intersecting these fields were not of a very formidable height, and Awkins was quick to perceive an easy spot for the promised lesson in jumping.

He had a most enthusiastic pupil who was keen to the point of recklessness, but he would not take advantage of that fact. Rather was he the more careful that the boy's initiation should be an easy one. In fact, to Rollo with his square chin set and his whole frame vibrant for the surmounting of obstacles the experience was somewhat lacking in the high sense of adventure with which his lively anticipation had invested it. Though he sought to obey his teacher's instructions implicitly and won a brief word of praise for his performance, he did not feel that he and the grey cob, Bobby, were altogether doing themselves justice. It was fun of course, but it was not quite the thrill he had expected.

"I want to put him at a gate, Awkins," he said. "This brushwood stuff is much too easy."

"He wouldn't look at a gate," said Awkins. "He'd refuse and you'd take a header, that's all."

But Rollo, flushed with excitement, found this hard to believe. To please Awkins, he continued to execute a series of small jumps at the spots selected, following the brown horse, and rising in the saddle and leaning back and bumping down again with a certain amount of enjoyment, but secretly he could not help reflecting that something slightly more ambitious would have been more in his line. He was somewhat disappointed when Awkins decided that they had done enough for one day and that it was time to turn homewards, but he knew by experience the futility of attempting to gainsay him. Awkins had not been a sergeant-major for nothing.

They trotted along the bottom of the valley therefore towards the rise on which the church with its ancient churchyard was visible. The sun was fairly high in the sky behind them, and the early mists had drifted away into the blue. It was a still September day that would turn to gold before its close.

Rollo chattered cheerily to his companion as they went, his young voice rising clearly through the crystal air of the morning.

“I suppose I’ll be going blackberrying with the kids this afternoon,” he remarked. “There’s heaps of them in the Brayford Woods over there. Ever been there, Awkins?”

“I don’t get much time for going blackberrying, Master Rollo,” said Awkins.

“I’m not awfully keen on it myself,” Rollo hastened to assure him. “I’d always rather go somewhere with Molly. And she doesn’t like the Brayford Woods. She’ll never go that way. Rose says she thinks they’re spooky. But I don’t believe in spooks, do you, Awkins?”

“Not that sort,” said Awkins, non-committally.

Rollo’s bright eyes sought his on the instant with a lively curiosity. “What sort do you believe in, Awkins?” he asked.

Awkins paused a moment before making considered reply. “Well, I believe in the kind one makes oneself,” he said. “Memories and such like. Them’s the kind that do you in.”

Rollo was deeply interested. “Why do they, Awkins?” he wanted to know.

“You’re too young to have any, Master Rollo,” said Awkins. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“I would understand,” Rollo asserted confidently, “if you told me.”

Awkins smiled a little. “But you don’t need to,” he said. “There’s time enough for that. There’s some things that it’s a pity to know too soon.”

His tone was final, and Rollo was slightly injured. It seemed that Awkins was bent upon underrating his capabilities that morning. He began to feel bored with the situation and to look about him for some means of justifying himself.

“Come on!” he said. “Let’s canter!”

“You go careful!” said Awkins; but he spoke to the wind. The boy was off, streaking along the valley at a hand-gallop.

The field through which they were riding was bounded by horizontal wooden railings where patches of hedge had failed. A five-barred gate which was usually open gave access to the field beyond. It was closed to-

day, but a man's figure was loitering on the other side; and to that figure, Awkins—with a sudden premonition of Rollo's intention—sent a hoarse shout of appeal, clapping his heels to his own horse's flanks as he did so.

Rollo, yelling wild war-cries as was his custom when galloping, set his mount straight for the gate. The grey cob was a game little animal and, just possibly, might have risen to the occasion, spurred on by his rider's eagerness and the thundering hoofs in his wake.

But the man on the further side of the gate had turned at Awkins' great cry, and in a moment, grasping the situation, he sprang to open it.

Even then all might have been well if Rollo had kept his head. But the grey cob swerved sharply at the unexpected apparition of the man at the gate, and Rollo, still shouting and by no means disconcerted, promptly put him at the railings.

The gate swung open too late, and the grey cob confronted by a further unforeseen obstacle, stopped dead. Rollo's yells ended in one shrill whoop as he pitched straight forward over the animal's head and turned a somersault on to the ground on the other side of the railings.

The grey cob wheeled snorting and galloped riderless away, while Rollo lay huddled and quivering where he had fallen.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER

AWKINS was on the spot nearly as soon as the stranger by the gate. He almost threw himself out of the saddle and flung his bridle over the gate-post.

Rollo lay on the wet earth looking piteously small and crumpled. It was the most violent stroke of Fate that he had ever received.

Awkins would have lifted him up, but the stranger intervened.

“Better not! You may do harm. Wait a minute!”

He himself began to feel along the childish limbs with cautious, sensitive fingers, while Rollo lay dazed and gasping where he had fallen.

“It was a nasty toss,” said Awkins, kneeling on the other side. “Think he’s broke anything, sir?”

“Hope not,” the stranger said. “Probably just knocked out. He’ll come round in a minute. Give him time!”

Rollo came round, feeling giddy and not a little sick. The first thing his eyes lighted upon was an unknown face—that of the man whose hands were still moving about him in search of possible injury. It was a curiously immobile face, the colour of ivory, with well-formed features of so regular a stamp that but for the eyes they might have lacked character. But the eyes were such as would have held their own in any face. They were dark and intensely alive—eyes that seemed to see everything at a glance, but yet that revealed nothing whatever.

Rollo lay and gazed up into them with a dawning wonder. “What—ever—happened?” he said.

Awkins answered him promptly. “You was a naughty boy, Master Rollo. You ran away and took a toss. It wasn’t Bobby’s fault neither.”

Rollo's eyes still stared into the unknown face. His lower lip quivered a little and he bit it smartly. "May I turn over? I want—to be sick," he said.

"Keep still a minute!" the stranger said. "You'll soon feel better."

Rollo obeyed. All desire to assert himself had completely fled. But he made a firm effort to suppress his sense of nausea under those watching eyes. If he had been alone with Awkins it would not have mattered so much, but there was something about this man with the pale still face that made him feel that appearances must be kept up at all costs.

He choked a little and was aware of a supporting arm behind his shoulders. "Thanks! I'll be—all right," he said manfully. "You go and catch Bobby, won't you—please, Awkins?"

"Here he is—comin' back again! Maybe I'd better," said Awkins, getting to his feet.

The thudding hoofs of the runaway were returning. Obviously it had dawned upon Bobby that his behaviour had not been quite in order, and being a well-meaning animal he now trotted up to the big brown with a startled whinny at his own audacity.

He surrendered to Awkins without delay and allowed himself to be tethered beside his stable companion with evident relief notwithstanding the uncomplimentary remarks which the Master of the Horse muttered into his twitching ears as he secured him.

"Is he all right?" asked Rollo. "It really wasn't his fault. Don't let Awkins pitch into him!"

"Yes, he's all right," said the stranger. "And he doesn't care a hang, so you needn't worry. You feeling better now?"

"Yes, I'll get up now," said Rollo. "My aunt! I'm muddy, aren't I? Wouldn't do to let Molly see me like this."

"Molly?" questioned the stranger.

Rollo explained, flushing slightly. "Molly's my mother. She's married to Lord Aubreystone, but he's only my stepfather. There's a crowd of kids too. But no one matters—except Molly."

"I see." The stranger's voice was quiet; it sounded intentionally deliberate. "You belong to her first. Is that it?"

Rollo's eyes gave him a quick look. "And most," he asserted somewhat masterfully. "She belongs to me too. Can't I get right up now?"

But he was glad of the supporting arm in spite of the bravery of his tone. He went rather white when he found himself on his feet, but in a moment or two he managed to grin. "I think I've got a few bruises, but I don't mind. Thank you very much, sir. I say, you might tell me your name."

"You haven't told me yours yet," said the stranger, a faint smile in his eyes.

"Oh, sorry!" said Rollo. "My name's Ronald Fordringham, and I'm always called Rollo for short." He paused expectantly.

"My name," said the stranger, "is Craven Ferrars, and nobody knows me well enough to call me anything for short." He stood looking down at Rollo. "Now, are you all right?"

"O.K.," declared Rollo. "Just a little shaky on my pins, but that's nothing. I'm not hurt a bit. I say, are you staying here?"

Ferrars hesitated. Into his eyes there came a watchful look; the rest of his face remained expressionless, and yet it seemed to hold—and to conceal—something unfathomable. He spoke again in that oddly deliberate fashion. He might have been choosing words in a foreign language. "I stayed at The Plough last night, but—I shall be moving on—probably to-day."

Rollo's blue eyes opened wide. "At The Plough! Fancy staying there! Did you see the funny little cottage next door to it? I was born there. Molly and I often think what fun we'd have if we lived there still."

For the first time it seemed that Ferrars's features were impelled to move. They twisted into a slow stiff smile. "I don't suppose it was—fun—for her," he said. "She's better off—now."

"Oh yes, but she isn't a bit grand," Rollo protested. "Not like Aunt Caroline who always has her nose in the air. She's only my step-aunt really. She doesn't count."

"Only—Molly—counts?" suggested Ferrars.

Rollo nodded. He was fascinated by his new friend, but it was a queer sort of fascination that made him feel rather creepy. It was somehow like talking to a man from another world, and that smile of his was in a fashion ghastly. It was as though the eyes and the rest of the face were utterly at variance.

Awkins came stoutly forward at this point and intervened. "If you can ride your horse, Master Rollo," he said, "I'm thinkin' we'd best be getting

back.” He turned towards Ferrars. “We’re very much obliged to you, sir. It might have been a much more serious haccident but for you.”

“If you ask me,” Ferrars rejoined, “I should say I did more harm than good. I don’t think you’d have cleared the gate,” he added to Rollo, “but you might have managed to stick on. How are you feeling now? Think you can ride?”

“Think I can ride!” said Rollo, puffing out his chest. “Course I can ride! We don’t take any notice of a little spill like that, do we Awkins?”

“Yes, we do,” said Awkins grimly. “We do as we’re told next time. Say good-bye, Master Rollo, and get up!”

Rollo flushed. The reprimand was well-merited, but he had not expected it just then. Nevertheless, after a moment he accepted it in the right spirit.

“All right, Awkins. I’m sorry. Yes, I’m coming.” He turned back to Ferrars. “I say, shan’t I see you again? Are you really going away to-day? Couldn’t you come along and see my mother?”

Ferrars was looking at him attentively, and there was something rather strange in his look, something that made Rollo feel curiously as if he wanted to comfort him. But when he spoke at length the feeling passed.

“No,” he said, “I couldn’t do that, thanks very much. You’d better get back to her before she begins to wonder where you are. Good-bye, sonny!” He held out his hand to Rollo. “I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself.” He glanced over the boy’s head at Awkins. “It’s a good thing you’ve got somebody solid to look after you.”

“Oh yes,” said Rollo eagerly. “Awkins is very solid, aren’t you, Awkins? He’s a V.C., you know. He used to be a sergeant-major in the War.”

“Ah!” said Ferrars. “You did your bit, did you?”

Awkins replied with dignity. “I prefer not to talk about it, sir. I come through the ‘ole show without a scratch, and there was many a better man than me what didn’t.”

“He always talks like that,” explained Rollo. “Were you in the War too, sir? Did you get a V.C.?”

“I!” said Ferrars, and though he did not raise his voice it sounded almost like a cry. “No, boy, no! There’s nothing like that about me.”

Rollo’s hand lay confidingly in his. “I bet you didn’t run away,” he said consolingly. “I expect you were a major or a colonel, weren’t you?”

“No. I was nothing. I was less than nothing.” The words came grimly, through set teeth. “We can’t all of us be heroes, you know.”

Awkins intervened. “Master Rollo, will you get into the saddle? It’s time we got back. You’ll be late in and her ladyship will be worried.”

“All right. I’m coming.” Rollo gave his new friend’s hand a tremendous squeeze. “I hope I’ll see you again, sir. I shan’t—ever—forget you.”

Ferrars looked down at him, and suddenly he stooped and held the stirrup for him to mount. “If you ever do see me again,” he said, “you may remind me of that.”

And then Rollo was in the saddle and the grey cob moving away. The boy looked back to touch his cap with his whip.

“Thank you, sir. Good-bye!” he called in his shrill treble.

But though Ferrars raised a hand in answer he did not speak again. He stood like an automaton and saw him go.

Rollo turned once to wave his hand. “A jolly good sort, Awkins!” he remarked, straightening himself again. “But something a bit—queer about him, don’t you think?”

Awkins himself was wearing a rather queer expression at the moment as if he were chasing some fugitive memory through his brain. He did not speak for some seconds, and Rollo was beginning to wonder whether he were contemplating a further reprimand when somewhat abruptly he gave voice to his thoughts.

“Yes,” he said. “He looks to me—somehow—as though he’s been broke and put together again. Maybe he has, Master Rollo. There was chaps like that in the War—well, I could tell you of dozens, but there was one in particular what I saw one night up near the front line, and he was running—running like mad—as we went up to the attack. There was no stoppin’ ‘im. He was blind crazy, but one of our officers pulled a revolver. But the chap turned his ‘ead as he sprinted by, and—well, p’raps you’re too young for these sort of stories, Master Rollo. I won’t tell you what he looked like—except that his face was shot away. And there wasn’t anyone among us as could kill a man like that—though maybe it would ‘ave been kinder in the end.”

“Go on!” said Rollo, deeply interested. “What happened to him?”

Awkins heaved his square shoulders. “That’s just what we never knew. You only see life half at a time. He may have got down to a dressing-station,

though I don't expect it. Still, they was mended up something wonderful, some of 'em—so as their own mothers wouldn't have known 'em. And this gentleman—well, he looks to me rather like one of them sort."

"He's quite decent to look at," Rollo remarked. "It's only that he looked a bit queer when he smiled. I shouldn't think he could have been—all smashed up like that, Awkins."

"You never know," said Awkins. "There's a lot of jiggery in this graftin' business. To my mind he was just a bit too good-lookin'—and a bit strained-like—as if 'e 'adn't 'ad time to get used to hisself."

Rollo stared with the incomprehension of the generation to whom war is but a common noun. "But if I'd fallen on my face and smashed it in, it wouldn't have taken me years to get right again," he objected.

"That's different," said Awkins, "though it was no thanks to you that you didn't. It's the mental part that takes the time when a man's gone blind crazy from fear. You can't understand. You're too young."

"What's blind crazy mean?" questioned Rollo. "Is it being so frightened that you can't see?"

"Something of that sort," said Awkins.

"Well, I'm sure Mr. Ferrars hasn't ever been like that," the boy declared. "He was jolly decent to me, and I hope I'll see him again. He couldn't be a coward, Awkins."

Awkins smiled pityingly at the assertion, but he did not contradict it. He merely rejoined somewhat enigmatically, "There's precious few as could take it on 'em to say that of theirselves, Master Rollo."

And Rollo realized that there was no more to be said.

CHAPTER V

THE GAUNTLET

IT was unfortunate for Rollo that his *contretemps* in the valley and the subsequent quiet pace at which Awkins insisted upon going should combine to time his arrival at his home with that of his step-aunt, returning from an early cubbing expedition in which she had not had good sport.

Having taken a short cut across the Park, they came face to face with her in the drive in front of the Castle just as Molly, in a ferment of anxiety, came running down the steps of the main entrance at the sound of the horses' hoofs.

Rollo's cheery yell of greeting set the latter's mind at rest in a moment with regard to his welfare, but it was not soothing to the Honourable Caroline, who regarded him with the expression of one who suddenly discovers a peculiarly objectionable insect at close quarters.

"Where on earth have you been, you dirty little Hottentot?" she demanded, as Rollo somewhat rudely pushed Bobby in front of her tall mount to reach his mother.

Awkins with a word of apology rode forward to take the cob's bridle as the child dismounted. "Now, Master Rollo, just you behave!" he said in a stertorous aside.

Molly clasped the muddy little figure in her arms. "Darling, what has happened to you? Have you had a fall?"

Rollo hugged her with all his usual warmth. "I'm all right, Molly, and awful hungry. Let's have breakfast!" he said.

Caroline dismounted heavily close to them, surrendering her animal also to Awkins. "Oh, send him up to the nursery to be washed!" she said in curt tones of disgust. "Look at the state he's in! Don't—mollycoddle him!"

She poked him derisively with the end of her whip with the words—a contemptuous action which somehow seemed to be directed as much at

Molly as at her boy. It was a match to tinder. Rollo turned in a flash like a young tiger, snatched it from her, and, tearing himself from his mother's hold, flung it on the ground and stamped upon it in a sudden hurricane of rage.

"There!" he shouted. "And there! And there! If it comes to that, where've *you* been to, you ugly old cat? Not that it matters! I shouldn't think there's anybody on earth'd care if you went and never came back!"

It was the gauntlet with a vengeance and flung in a fashion that could not be ignored. Molly was horrified. Caroline laughed harshly, momentarily at a loss, while Rollo stood with her whip under his feet—a young Achilles defying the world.

Then stridently Awkins's voice broke in. "Master Rollo, you pick that up this minute and give it to me, and apologize! Jeer me?"

It was the voice of the sergeant-major, dominant and awe-inspiring. Rollo quivered and stepped off the whip.

Left to himself, he would probably have obeyed; but Caroline, whose pride had received a severe jolt, lacked the patience to await submission.

She laughed again, loudly and tauntingly. "Leave him alone!" she said to Awkins. "There's only one treatment for a yapping cur, and I'll see that he gets it. He's been spoiling for it for a long time."

She flung round on her heel with the words without another glance at Molly, and clanked up the steps with ringing spurs and into the house.

"Oh, Rollo!" Molly said.

"I don't care," he declared defiantly. "She asked for it and she's got it. You know you think the same as I do, only you don't say it."

"You're very naughty," Molly said in tones of despair. "Pick up that whip and come in!"

"Give it to me, Master Rollo!" said Awkins inflexibly.

Rollo glanced at him irresolutely, with eyes that did not quite reach his face.

"For the last time!" said Awkins with sternness.

Rollo stooped abruptly, picked the trampled thing out of the mud, and handed it up.

“Thank you,” said Awkins. “Now jest you go and take your punishment like a man, and say you’re sorry afterwards!”

Molly threw him a quick look of appreciation which Awkins, not having a hand to spare, received with a solemn bow ere he turned the three animals in his charge and clattered away to the stables.

Molly looked at Rollo, and Rollo looked at Molly, and there was an uneasy silence between them. They were both pale, but the boy made a gallant effort to keep up his defiant air. The fact that it was an effort made it rather pathetic.

He spoke after a few moments with a touch of sullenness. “Well, I suppose there’s some breakfast left. I haven’t had any yet.”

Molly put her arm round his shoulders. “We’ll go in,” she said; “but, Rollo—before you think of anything else, you must find your Aunt Caroline and apologize.”

“I can’t do that,” said Rollo. “She’ll think I’m afraid.”

“You must do it,” Molly said earnestly. “Rollo, don’t make me—ashamed of you!”

He winced a little, but the next instant pursed his lips in a whistle which he uttered below his breath as they went up the steps.

At the top he turned suddenly and thrust his arms round her. “Molly darling, you’re not really cross!” he said, lifting a pleading face.

It took her whole strength of will to resist him. “I’m very disappointed,” she said, “and hurt.”

“I wouldn’t be cross with you—if you was to hurt me,” Rollo said, with a quick reddening of the eyelids.

She held him steadily from her, her hands on his shoulders. “You know what I want you to do,” she said.

“Yes, but I can’t,” said Rollo, striving to press closer.

Molly stood firm. “You can, Rollo,” she said, “and if you’re a gentleman—like your father”—her voice sank unexpectedly—“you will.”

Rollo stared at her, startled. The quick colour rose to his face. He threw back his head with a proud gesture. “Like my father!” he said.

“Yes,” said Molly steadfastly. “He never did anything ungentlemanly, and he never shirked. He was always brave and splendid, whatever other

people were.”

They had entered the great hall. Rollo pulled his arms suddenly away. With his head held high he turned from her. “All right!” he said. “All right!”

She saw him start towards the wide staircase, not generally used by the children, which led in the direction of Caroline’s room; and she held her breath and watched him, wondering if his resolution would carry him through. But he did not reach his goal. He was only half-way across the hall when one of the high doors opened—the door of Lord Aubreystone’s study—and Ivor’s tall figure appeared with Caroline standing behind him.

Molly’s heart quivered and sank, for the faces of both brother and sister wore the implacable look which she had learned to know so well and which always filled her with dread—a look which boded ill for the luckless transgressor.

But Rollo turned manfully, betraying no discomfiture. Without a moment’s hesitation he diverted his course and went straight towards the formidable couple in the doorway.

“I’ve come to apologize, Aunt Caroline,” he said. “I beg your pardon for what I did just now.”

It was bravely spoken. To Molly’s ears there was even something heroic in the utterance. But the effort that it cost him imparted to it a note of challenge that was not propitiatory.

Caroline gave an audible sneer. “Out to save your own skin now, are you, my young cock-sparrow? I’m afraid you’re a little too late for that.”

Ivor raised an authoritative hand. “Yes, too late,” he said. “I am going to punish you for this. Come in here!”

Rollo went very white, but he showed no sign of flinching. Caroline came out into the hall, and he passed her without a glance.

But Molly pressed swiftly forward. “Ivor—Ivor! I must speak to you for a moment,” she said.

Ivor’s eyes swept her relentlessly. “Not now,” he rejoined with stern decision. “I will come to you presently. Caroline, take her away!”

He took Rollo by the shoulder and marched him into the study, shutting the door sharply and turning the key.

Caroline made a movement towards Molly. “Come along!” she said. “Leave him to take his medicine! He’ll be all the better for it afterwards.”

But the sudden fire that flamed in Molly's eyes gave her pause. In a second Molly had sprung to the closed door; her hand wrested at the handle.

"Ivor! Ivor!" she called aloud. "Let me in! Before you do anything to Rollo—listen! He's had a fall out riding. Don't hurt him! Don't—hurt him!" Her voice broke in a sort of agony. She rattled fiercely at the door. "Ivor!" she cried hoarsely. "Ivor!"

No reply to her anguished appeal came from her husband. It was Rollo's voice that answered her, shrill but resolute. "Don't you worry, Molly darling! I'll be—all right."

And then there fell a silence while she hung there in a torture of dumb waiting.

Caroline shrugged her shoulders and sauntered away upstairs. She had full faith in Ivor's ability to carry out his task with satisfactory thoroughness. If Molly chose to make a fool of herself about it—well, it was her affair.

Within the locked room after some terrible seconds of suspense there were sundry vague movements, and then to Molly's strained ears there came a sound that sent a shudder throughout her whole slender frame, convulsing her from head to foot. It was the sharp crack of a descending riding-switch, and she knew that it was Rollo's defenceless body upon which it had fallen. No cry followed the blow, but in a moment or two it fell again with a grim unerring precision which nothing might deter. And to Molly, hanging there in impotence, it might have been her own flesh that shrank and quivered under the infliction.

Within the room stroke followed stroke with absolute and unsparing deliberation, and at the first Rollo's fortitude wavered. He uttered a low whimpering sound like a hurt dog.

But his punishment did not cease at that. Ivor had no intention of letting him off lightly. The boy's courage seemed to him merely another form of rebellion. Abject submission was what he meant to have, and to that end calmly and judicially, without any display of brutality, he proceeded to administer a chastisement which was considerably more severe than he had originally intended.

He did not achieve his purpose. Rollo's endurance was of a finer order than he anticipated; and, shaken though it was, the boy made desperate efforts to keep himself in check, because Molly was within earshot and must not hear him cry. It was a sudden and quite unexpected interruption which brought his punishment to an end, causing his stepfather to swing round

towards the window in utter astonishment. For from that direction there came a loud crack and a splintering of glass, and as he strode forward he came face to face with Molly; but not the Molly whom he knew.

This was someone quite different—a girl distraught, with wild eyes and deathly features, her mouth wide open, gasping incoherent things. Gripped in both hands was a stout ash stick which she must have snatched from the hall. As he came towards her, she raised it above her head and bashed it again with all her strength upon the broken pane, not heeding his approach.

Ivor was shocked beyond words. Her look was terrible. She had passed the bounds of sanity. It was almost as if she did not recognize him.

“Mary! Mary!” he said, and reaching the smashed window, he unfastened and opened it.

She stood staring up at him, still gasping and moaning inarticulately. She was ankle-deep in the mould of a flower-bed. The strain in her eyes was frightful—as though her brain had reached the breaking-point.

It was fortunate for them both that Ivor recognized it and did not pause to parley. Without an instant’s hesitation he got quietly through the window and joined her.

“Come, this won’t do,” he said, and put his arm about her. “You mustn’t, my dear, you really mustn’t. Come, we will go indoors.”

She tried to resist him, but his arm compelled. He drew her gently on to the grass. The thorns from a climbing rose had torn her wrist, and he mopped the flowing blood with his handkerchief.

“Look, you have hurt yourself,” he said. “I can’t have that.”

Her face crumpled suddenly. She leaned against him. Speech came, and with it a rush of tears. “My—Rollo!” she said brokenly.

He held her with a sustaining power. “He won’t be any the worse,” he said with reassuring kindness. “You shall see him directly. Let him pull himself together first! It’s better for him.”

Her strength was gone. He supported, almost carried, her from the scene.

And then back in the house he took her in his arms and kissed her.

“You must never do that again, dear,” he said. “Surely you have more trust in me than this!”

She laid her white face against his shoulder. “Ivor, neither—must you,” she whispered. “It would be different if—you loved him.”

He did not answer her, but he held her very closely and reassuringly, and after a moment he kissed her again—which was the nearest he had ever been to owning himself in the wrong. Perhaps that one wild outbreak of hers had opened his eyes to something that he had never seen before.

CHAPTER VI

THE OFF-CHANCE

TO ROLLO the sight of his mother being led away and supported in her distress by his stepfather while he himself was left behind and entirely ignored was almost the hardest part of his punishment. While realizing that her agony of mind had been entirely on his account, he could not understand how she could be so swayed by the stronger will as to consent to leave him at such a moment. He failed to grasp that the reaction from that supreme effort of hers had almost prostrated her, though he was swift to conclude that even if she had the desire to come to him she would not be allowed to do so.

But her going hurt him in a fashion that he could not have explained. His own need of support was greater than he knew. He had come through a bitter ordeal, if not heroically, at least with a certain amount of restraint, and it had exhausted him mentally and physically. He had no reserves left, and yet his pride remained. He was desperately ashamed of the whole episode, and the certainty that he had no strength left upon which to depend acted like a goad upon him.

He was alone. No one cared whether he went or stayed. He would go immediately and swiftly before any further humiliation could be laid upon him.

Neither to the nursery nor the stables could he turn for refuge. He did not feel that he could face even Awkins in this extreme. He could not have borne any further admonition, and he would certainly have been conducted back to the house in the interests of discipline had he gone to him for sympathy. And there also remained the possibility of encountering Caroline again, a prospect which gave him a strangled feeling as if he had been caught by the throat.

The wild impulse to escape seized upon him. The way was clear, and no one was within sight. He sprang for the open window. His feet crackled on the broken glass, and then in a trice he had gained the sill, and with the

strength of desperation was leaping forth like a little animal suddenly released from a cage.

He landed upon the trampled flower-bed, and the rose that had torn Molly gave him a passing scratch on the cheek as he went. He did not even feel it. One idea alone was in his mind at the moment. Though his limbs were shaking and his heart felt like bursting, he ran like a bolting rabbit across the lawn, reached the shelter of a mass of rhododendron bushes and plunged in amongst them, panting, quivering, but free.

Here for a few seconds he paused to get his breath, but the bulk of the Castle seemed to loom so grimly behind him that he felt pursued and soon squirmed his way through and ran on again. The thought of an ignominious capture filled him with a sense of outrage which drove him irresistibly. The woods of the parkland beyond the garden offered him welcome cover, but the exertion of reaching them tried him severely. He felt sick and sore and horribly weak.

His pride alone kept him going. He wanted to get away, away, somewhere far from peering eyes and inquisitive ears, where he could hide himself and cry his heart out until the hurt was past. Molly loved him, but she had been swept away from him. A barrier of indomitable will separated them. She had not failed him, but she lacked the strength to help. He could not count on Molly any more.

And so at last, stumbling and spent, falling sometimes and dragging himself up again, he came to the spinney on the hill above the Castle towards which instinctively his feet had turned, and, scrambling into its shelter, he crept in amongst some tall bracken and laid himself down to cry out his misery in solitude.

Both physically and mentally he was more miserable than he had ever been before. A fall and then a flogging with no breakfast inside him had reduced him to the lowest depths of despair, and there was no one left on earth to help him since Molly had been overwhelmed, and Awkins had expressed his disapproval. The September sun no longer shone. The day had turned grey and chilly. He burrowed deeper into the bracken, sobbing passionately, the whole of his small tormented being writhing in anguish.

“Oh, I do wish I was dead!” he cried to the earth that held him. “Why aren’t I dead?”

He did not anticipate any answer. In times like these how seldom an answer comes! Worn out with rebellion, the children of earth cry out in their

pain, but it is only when rebellion ceases that help comes. And Rollo was full of rebellion, goaded almost to a frenzy. The endurance to which he had clung so manfully had snapped under his weight, and he felt that life had not been fair to him. Lying there prone, he hammered the ground with his brown fists in a fury of resentment. Too weak to flee any farther, he yet wanted to turn and fight, to hurt something—anything—to vindicate his fallen honour. The lesson had been too sudden and too bitter, following upon that brave effort at an apology which he had made for Molly's sake. He hated everyone—he hated the world—he hated life!

But even so, he could not keep it up. His wild rebellion began to ebb away from him. He became more and more conscious of the dreadful void around and within. His crying grew less convulsive and more piteous—like the crying of a lost child. And it was then that help came.

Someone, moving quietly, with a certain stealth, along the narrow path that ran through the spinney came within a few feet of the little prostrate figure and heard its impotent sobbing. Someone paused to listen, then turned to investigate.

At a touch upon his shoulder Rollo started, winced, and lifted a scarlet face.

He expected to see Awkins, and gasped out, "Go away!" But the next moment he caught his breath and stared as one in a dream.

"I'll go if you like," said Craven Ferrars. "But I'd rather stay and help."

Rollo let out his breath in a long "Oh!" of surprise. But the eyes that met his were so gravely sympathetic that he found it impossible to turn away from them.

He began to raise himself, and Craven Ferrars helped him. "You're tired, old chap," he said. "That tumble of yours was more of a knock-out than you thought."

Rollo's lip quivered. There was something so human in the words, as though the speaker knew exactly what a knock-out meant. He sat back on his heels and stared at him, gulping back his distress with slow and persistent effort while Ferrars waited in silent understanding.

He spoke at length rather huskily. "It wasn't just—the knock-out. I—I've been thrashed since then. And—and I haven't had any breakfast."

Ferrars' hand went swiftly to a side-pocket. He regarded the forlorn little figure before him with the eyes of a comrade. "What rotten luck!" he said.

“Here! I’ve got some sandwiches—just in case I got hungry, which I’m not. You have ’em!”

Rollo’s red-rimmed eyes grew large and round. He glanced at the packet produced by Ferrars somewhat wolfishly, and sharply averted his look. “No, I can’t—I mustn’t. You’ll want ’em yourself,” he said.

“Not I!” said Ferrars reassuringly. “I’ve had my breakfast. This is lunch—in case I didn’t get back for it. You have it, old chap! It’ll buck you up.” He thrust the parcel at Rollo in a fashion which compelled acceptance. “I’m going to have a pipe,” he added. “You take your time! It’s all right.”

Rollo’s grubby little hands received the gift with eagerness. Yet for an instant he hesitated. “Sure you don’t want it yourself, sir?” he said.

“Of course!” Ferrars stood up. “I’m going to smoke, I tell you. You get on with it!”

He turned aside with the words, and moved away a few paces to a spot whence he could look across the intervening space to the grey towers of the Castle. And here he propped himself against a tree and filled his pipe. His face as he leaned there was quite expressionless—save for the eyes which had a lonely, searching look, like the eyes of a captive gazing forth from behind his prison-bars into the freedom which might never be his.

Rollo did not wait for any further bidding. He had begun to realize that he was desperately hungry, and that a rational state of mind depended upon his satisfying his pressing need without delay. For a brief interval he sat like a rabbit among the bracken munching fast and feverishly while Craven Ferrars leaned a yard or two away from him and smoked his pipe as if he were alone.

Finally, when there was nothing but the paper left, Rollo got up, straightening himself with a certain air of determination. He looked at Craven Ferrars and paused. There was something about the man, his stillness, his intentness, that struck a curious note of awe in the boy. On the brink of approaching him, he stood irresolute.

Several seconds passed thus in complete immobility. Then, as if the consciousness of Rollo’s watching eyes had been somehow borne in upon him, Craven Ferrars turned his head and looked at him.

“Better?” he asked.

Rollo nodded and drew nearer. “I say, thanks awfully for the sandwiches,” he said. “They were jolly good.”

Ferrars did not smile, but his look was kindly. "Saved your life, did they? Well, I'm glad I chanced to have them."

"It's the second time you've helped me," said Rollo, trying to arrange a further expression of gratitude in as graceful a form as possible. "I'm awfully obliged to you. I wish I could ask you to come in and see my mother, but——"

He paused for an excuse, and Ferrars immediately broke in. "Thanks very much, but I couldn't possibly do that in any case. I'm going away directly. I know I'm trespassing, but I just wanted to have a look round first."

"Why don't you stay for a bit?" suggested Rollo. "It's not a bad place. At least—well, I suppose The Plough isn't very comfortable, but——"

He stopped; for Ferrars had laughed in a way which seemed to him rather odd, arousing again in him that sense of awe. It was not a type of laugh that he understood.

Ferrars spoke by way of explanation. "I assure you it is in no way the fault of The Plough," he said, "that I'm going away. I'm only passing through. I've done it for years. I never stay anywhere for long."

Rollo was looking up at him curiously. Child though he was, he had the intuition to catch the note of homelessness in the wanderer's voice.

He spoke with sudden impulse. "But that's just what I'd love to do—never to stay anywhere—always to go on to somewhere fresh."

The young ardent voice rang with confidence. The spirit of adventure shone in his eyes. But there was no answering gleam in the eyes of his companion. They remained dark and remote, though still kindly.

He shook his head. "You might like it for a year or two—not for always. You'd want a home. You'd want—your mother."

"I'd come back to her sometimes," said Rollo. "I don't have her always now—only in the holidays. And even then I can't really count on her. You see," he spoke confidentially, "there are such an awful lot of the others. She's hardly ever free."

"I see." Ferrars nodded. "She's pretty heavily burdened with responsibilities. D'you think she's happy?"

He asked the question casually, but his look no longer dwelt upon the boy at his side as he awaited the answer. It went out once more to the open

space beyond the trees and the grey walls within which Molly had found a shelter for herself and her son.

“Happy!” said Rollo. “She never says she isn’t. But I don’t see how she could be, do you, having to live in the same house with anybody like Aunt Caroline?”

Ferrars pulled at his pipe. “What about your stepfather?” he said.

Rollo made a grimace. “Oh, he’s rather a beast, but one has to put up with him. He’s always trying to get Molly to himself, and she gives in to him every time—at least,” correcting himself sharply, “nearly every time, and always in the end.”

“Perhaps she’s fond of him,” suggested Ferrars.

“Suppose she must be,” admitted Rollo reluctantly. “Goodness knows why. He’s so beastly starched and dignified. I hate dignified people, don’t you? They’re such asses, and never talk about anything interesting.”

“I see your point,” conceded Ferrars. “And what is your aunt like?”

“Oh, a she-dragon,” said Rollo without hesitation. “She hates me and I hate her.”

“I’d gathered that,” said Ferrars.

“You’d hate her too,” Rollo assured him. “She’s the worst female cad I’ve ever seen. Molly can’t stand her either, though she’s always had to live with her. It was her that the row was about.”

“How many brothers and sisters have you got?” asked Ferrars abruptly.

“Six.” Rollo’s reply held no enthusiasm; he spoke with dispassionate criticism. “Nasty little blighters, most of ’em. They don’t belong to me, you know.”

“I presume they belong to—Molly,” said Ferrars, drawing deeply at his pipe.

“Oh well, yes, in a way,” conceded Rollo. “At least, they seem to think she belongs to them. But she doesn’t—not in the same way that she belongs to me.”

He spoke with his chin up. His independent spirit had revived.

The man’s eyes came down to him again and regarded him with grave consideration. “How do you make that out?” he asked.

Rollo looked straight back, holding himself with pride. “Because of my father,” he said. “He fell in the War. He died for his country. He was fine and brave. Molly says there was never anybody like him—though she thinks I could be if I tried very hard.”

Ferrars’s eyes never stirred from the upturned boyish face. “So,” he said, “your father was a fine man, was he?”

“Yes,” asserted Rollo stoutly. “Molly says so, and she knows. She says he was a very clever man too, and could have done almost anything. Oh, I wish he hadn’t been killed,” he broke off with sudden feeling. “I’d love to have had a father like that.”

Ferrars pulled a hand from his pocket and laid it on his shoulder. “P’raps you’re better off as you are,” he said.

“I’m not,” protested Rollo indignantly. “And Molly isn’t either. It’s all very well for her to be Lady Aubreystone, but it would have been far nicer if she could have stayed just my mother and nobody else’s.”

“Jealous, are you?” queried Ferrars.

Rollo shook his head. “No. I’m not. The brats don’t really count. But—I’d like to have had my own father to show me how to do things.” He cast a sudden comprehensive glance over the tall lean figure beside him. “Someone like you,” he said. “You’d have done.”

“Me!” said Ferrars, and for a moment his features twitched a little as though some spasm of misplaced emotion drew them. “No, I don’t think I should do,” he said, returning to his former steady control. “And I don’t think Molly would think so either. She’s better off as she is.”

“She’s not, sir,” affirmed Rollo. “She simply worshipped my father. You see, he was a genius. She always says so. She says he’d have been a great man if he’d lived—a really great man, not just a lord, but the sort that everybody would know of and admire. And I’m sure she’s right,” he ended with deep conviction. “Molly never says anything that isn’t true.”

Ferrars was drawing at his pipe again and the smoke partially obscured his face. He spoke after a considerable pause, his hand still resting on the boy’s shoulder. “It’s a very different world now from what it was when your father died.”

“Is it?” said Rollo. “Why?”

Ferrars paused again as if too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice the question. Then slowly he continued almost in the tone of one who reasons

with himself. “Ideals have altered. Everything has altered—life itself. All the goodness has gone out of things. There’s only rottenness left.”

Rollo stirred under his hand. “Life can be jolly good,” he said.

The man paid no attention; he was as one speaking into space. “The War took everybody worth having. Only the derelicts are left—only the derelicts—and a few hare-brained fools who never went through it and who think they can create a new world out of the ruins of the old.” His hand suddenly gripped Rollo hard. “They won’t do it,” he said. “It can’t be done. It’s a burnt-out desert, and nothing can be made out of it now. It’s too late. It’s senseless to try.”

Rollo looked up at him manfully, sensing something of desperation in that grip. Almost instinctively he sought to impart the species of moral support which he himself was accustomed to receive.

“It’s never too late to try, sir. The harder the job the better worth tackling.” And he added on his own account, “Besides, there’s quite a lot of us left to keep things going. We aren’t all nitwits.”

Ferrars’s grip relaxed. A faint glimmer of humour shone in his eyes. “I apologize, Tommy,” he said. “I’m sure you’re right there. But you chaps have got to grow up before you can do anything. Who is going to fill the gaps meanwhile?”

“Why, you are,” said Rollo boldly. “It’ll only be a few years before we come along. I’ll bet there’s lots that you can do if you don’t throw up the sponge.”

Ferrars took out his pipe and looked at it. “That’s interesting,” he said. “And what particular line do you advise me to take up?”

Rollo turned very red. “I aren’t advising,” he said, pushing his hands into his pockets. “I’m just saying what’s true, that’s all.”

“My dear lad!” Ferrars said and abruptly put his arm around Rollo’s shoulders. “I’m speaking the truth too. I shouldn’t ask your advice if I didn’t want it.”

“Oh, sorry!” said Rollo, relaxing. “I thought you were pulling my leg.”

“Well?” said Ferrars, “I’m not; so go ahead!”

Rollo surveyed him with appraising eyes. “You’d really like me to tell you what I think?” he said.

“It’s what I’m asking for,” said Ferrars gravely.

“Well,” Rollo spoke somewhat portentously, “it’s up to you, of course, but I should say you ought to be—what my father was going to be if he hadn’t been killed—an actor—a big actor—not one of the little ones. You look like an actor somehow, and you’re so awfully handsome.”

“Am I?” said Ferrars. “Do I? Well, that’s even more interesting, Tommy. I’d no idea I was handsome enough for the stage.”

“You’re handsome enough for anything,” the boy assured him. “If you don’t believe me, come and ask Molly!”

Ferrars’s mouth twitched again faintly, almost, it seemed, derisively, as he shook his head. “No, I don’t think we’ll ask—Molly,” he said. “Your opinion is enough. I wonder if I should be any good at it.”

“Of course you would!” said Rollo. “I’d love to go on the stage too. Wouldn’t it be fun? We—why, we might act together!”

“So we might!” said Ferrars, and ruffled the child’s hair abruptly with a gesture that was a caress. “But—you’ve got to grow older before that happens; and I—I’ve got to grow younger.”

Both words and action puzzled Rollo somewhat, but he was quick to respond to the tenderness that underlay them. He pressed himself suddenly hard against the man’s side. “Wouldn’t it be fun?” he said. “Let’s try, shall we?”

Ferrars looked straight down into the eager blue eyes. “Would you like me to, Tommy?” he said.

Rollo reached up and clasped his arm enthusiastically. “Why, rather! I should just think I should!” he said.

Ferrars smiled, and though his smile held pathos it was a genuine one this time. “All right,” he said. “I’ll make a pact with you—a secret one, mind! I’ll have a shot at this business. I’ll work for it. And you—you’ve got to work too—work hard. And if by any off-chance I should manage to make any sort of success of it, I’ll give you a leg up. See?”

“Oh, I say!” said Rollo, enchanted. “I—I’ll work like billy-o for that. D’you really mean it?”

Ferrars’s hand gently smoothed back the tousled hair that it had ruffled. “Yes, I mean it,” he said. “We may not get there—either of us; but we’ll try, you at your end—and I at mine! And now you’d better be off, old chap, before they start a hue and cry for you. This is a secret, remember. Can you keep a secret?”

“You bet I can!” said Rollo fervently.

“All right then! Good-bye!” said Ferrars.

“Wish I could go with you now,” said Rollo impulsively, still hugging his arm.

“That’s not possible,” said Ferrars. “But I shan’t forget you—or you me. Good-bye, boy! Don’t get into hot water again—for Molly’s sake!”

“Can’t I tell Molly about you?” asked Rollo, lingering.

“No. It’s only an off-chance.” Ferrars spoke impressively. “Don’t tell a soul! I may fail—and so may you. I’ve been several kinds of a failure already.”

“Have you? Well, you won’t be again.” Rollo spoke with confidence. “I’m sure you’ll win. You’re the sort that does. And so’ll I. At least I’ll try—awfully hard.”

“Well, I’m going now,” said Ferrars. Yet he too lingered, as though reluctant to terminate the odd friendship that had sprung up between them. “You’ll go back,” he said, “and behave yourself?”

“Suppose I’ve got to,” said Rollo.

“Yes, it’s a case of that with both of us.” Ferrars bent suddenly with both hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Don’t qualify for any more lickings!” he said, with more of persuasion than authority in his voice. “You’ll get hurt often enough without that. Life hurts. But tackle it! Keep on top! Play the man!”

He paused. Through the still September air a sound had arisen. A voice was calling.

“Rollo—Rollo! Come back, Rollo! Where are you?”

Ferrars straightened up and Rollo stiffened sharply.

The mist had drifted up through the valley again. No form was visible below them. They only heard the voice that called.

“Rollo—Rollo darling! It’s all right now. Come back! Come back!”

They looked at each other, and, strangely, in the eyes of both there was a hint of guilt.

Ferrars spoke, briefly, with decision. “Go to her! Go! I’m going—the other way.”

He swung round with the words. His pipe was out. He began to walk away.

Rollo stared after him, curiously irresolute. Suddenly he sent his shrill young voice after the tall, retreating figure.

“Good-bye, sir! Good-bye! Good luck!”

Ferrars turned. He waved his hand with a very definite gesture of leave-taking. Then he pulled his hat down over his eyes and wheeled in the track in a fashion that implied that he would not turn again.

As Rollo ran down the hill to Molly he was conscious of an odd pang at his childish heart, as though he had found—and lost again—something in life that mattered.

PART III

CHAPTER I

HIS FATHER'S SON

BOOM! A huge wave shattered itself upon the great Mammoth Rock and seemed to melt into smoke—a dense obscuring smoke that hid even the rock from view. Outside, beyond the narrow cove, the sea was pouring in madly in a mighty confusion of sound and rushing movement. It was only now and then that a full-sized wave escaped as it were from the *mêlée* and succeeded in hurling itself intact upon the enormous jutting prominence of the Mammoth Rock. When this happened the vibration on the shore was very noticeable. It was as if Titans were struggling together in an arena too small for them. The churning spray boiled like a cauldron, and the dark cliffs echoed and re-echoed to the noise of the battle. The storm that raged outside made a vast accompaniment which at closer quarters might have been pandemonium. But as it was, the interior of the cove was comparatively quiet. Gulls flew in and out of the deep recesses of the cliffs and scattered in flocks about the Mammoth Rock. Because of its sheltered position it was a favoured nesting-place.

So narrow was the cove that even in the height of summer its hours of sunshine were limited. Its towering cliffs seemed to lean inwards, and the rocky ground was dark and shadowy at low tide. When the water was high, it was a deep green that looked unfathomable; and it rocked with a curious singing that held an indescribable melancholy. Even when the noonday sun did penetrate into the depths of the place it remained an awesome spot. The sheer height of its granite walls gave it something of the air of a prison. No one had ever scaled those walls. They were as impregnable as any fortress.

And yet at low tide the place was worthy of a visit, if it were merely for its solitary grandeur alone. In wet weather a spate of spring water ran out of a hole three-quarters of the way up the cliff-face and fell with a swift rushing—a miniature waterfall—into a basin of rock which had the appearance of having been hollowed to receive it. Thence it flowed through a little groove of stones to the sea. And throughout the whole of its course down the cliff there grew ferns which never failed in their rich greenness.

These ferns and the tinkling water robbed the cove of much of its grimness. It gave a touch of tenderness to what had otherwise been sheer rugged strength.

There was one other thing that gave to the spot a less sinister aspect than its general appearance conveyed at first sight. And this was another feature which might have been deliberately fashioned by human effort and ingenuity, but which in actual fact was purely the work of Nature. It consisted of a low curving archway through the mass of cliff that connected the Mammoth Rock to the mainland—an archway through which in primæval times great waves must have washed continually till it shone with the smoothness of agate. It could almost have been called a tunnel, for it was fully eight feet thick, but though at high tide the water still ran through it to a depth of a foot or so, the process by which it had been made had long since ceased to exist. It formed an outlet to the wider shore beyond, obviating all danger of being trapped by the tide. For it was only at full ebb that the cove could be reached by the more circuitous route outside the cliffs that bounded it, unless it were by boat, which involved a dangerous passage among submerged rocks.

It was not a greatly frequented place, for it held little to attract the ordinary tourist. There were no caves, and it was as a rule too chilly to be regarded favourably as a spot for picnicking. The Mammoth Rock, the twisted archway, and the trickling spring with its damp green ferns running down into dark sand, were its main characteristics, and these held but slight appeal for the average holiday-maker. It was, moreover, out of the beaten track, and its spectacular effects had never been exploited or advertised. Deprived of its remoteness, it would have lost all romance. It was small enough to have been turned into a mere den for litter, but fortunately it had so far escaped this distinction. Rugged, aloof, and gloomy—a place of height and depth without breadth—it was in no sense fitted for a playground. But it held that which a hermit would have prized—the austere calm of undisturbed Nature. The roar of a battering wave, the cry of a sea-gull, the fountain-like murmur of the spring! These things cast a spell of enchantment which could only appeal to the solitary mind. The cove held a strange and haunting peace that no storm could shatter.

Though well removed from the path of the sightseer and not regarded as of sufficient importance to be called a beauty-spot, it was within an easy walk of a wider space of beach upon which a few scattered houses looked forth.

They stood upon various small prominences where the cliffs had given place to wooded slopes that stretched down to the shore. On higher ground there was a small village and inn which had existed before the more important dwellings had been erected. They had been built one by one without any suggestion of formal development. A few acres of land had come into the market and been sold privately to people of means, and so the little colony overlooking the bay had sprung up.

The newest and most artistic of these houses was a low gabled building with a thatched roof, called Aubreys. It had a small garden bowered in trees which ran down to the beach. And it had been planned and built by Lord Aubreystone for the holiday accommodation of his wife and children; perhaps for the latter rather than the former, but the former had made it peculiarly her own.

Molly had a deep love for the place such as she had never felt for the infinitely grander abode of Aubreystone Castle, and there was no time of the year that she would not gladly turn to that refuge on the Western coast for rest and recreation.

Even now, with her children all grown beyond infancy, it was not often that she could spare the time for more than a very flying visit, but if an opportunity for one occurred she never failed to take it.

Once or twice, after Rollo had been ill with some childish malady, they had spent a few perfect days alone there, days which they had both treasured afterwards as memories too precious to be spoken of lightly. For with the passing of the years the tie between them had grown still closer.

Rollo was nineteen now and verging upon manhood. He had developed wonderfully, and was the pride and joy—as well as the deep anxiety—of her existence. She herself had changed but little outwardly during the years that had made so great a change in him. She had the same girlish face and soft colouring, and perhaps an added charm in the wistful stillness of her eyes. Time had touched her very tenderly, perhaps because of that beauty of the spirit which was hers. Her gentleness was possibly more marked than of yore, but it held no weakness of decision. She had learned to go forward without faltering along her allotted path.

Only where Rollo was concerned did she ever give any sign of irresolution. He was so very much her own, so totally apart from all the others. She had asserted her right over him in the long ago—a right which had been conceded and which was still recognized. But there were occasions on which grave misgivings assailed her as to whether she had taken the best

means of shaping his course. He was so close to her heart that he had always had the ability to make her see things with his eyes. And yet at times she was thoroughly aware of the urgent need of advice from someone better versed than herself in the ways of the new and difficult world that had arisen from the ruins of the War. She scarcely dared to seek it, for Ivor had relinquished his authority years before. He took but small interest in the boy's welfare, merely making the stern condition that somehow and in some orthodox fashion he should justify his education and the general advantages which had been bestowed upon him.

It was on this account that Molly sometimes trembled. She, too, ardently desired that Rollo should win success and distinction in whatever career he might choose. But so far he had not chosen very definitely.

He had flashed through his school-days with a fitful brilliance that had not gained very much for him except undoubted popularity. He was intensely interested in a great many things, but he concentrated upon none. Perhaps in some ways he was too successful, for he could generally accomplish anything to which he gave his serious attention, and he was usually much in demand during the holidays on account of this ability. Any kind of entertainment, from children's parties upwards, appealed to him. He organized concerts, played in village football and cricket matches, worked with a boundless energy at any and every scheme that came his way. But, notwithstanding these good qualities, it seemed as if his very versatility were developing into a stumbling-block to progress. At school he had never risen above what he gaily termed "the minor prophets," and now, after a year at Cambridge, Molly was beginning to wonder if the same fate awaited him there.

It was the end of August, and he had just returned from a holiday in Switzerland. It had been called a reading-party, but from the cheery description of his doings which he had given her she was inclined to think that he had not taken a very enthusiastic share in the sedentary part of the expedition. He had apparently spent most of his time climbing mountains and crossing glaciers and was not a little proud of his achievements in these respects.

"Wish you'd been there, Molly," he said, with a warm arm thrust about her as they stood together and watched the water surging white and green around the foot of the Mammoth Rock. "I'd have lifted you over all the difficult places."

She smiled at him with tender comprehension. The protective instinct had always been very strong in him, and she loved him for it.

“I’m very glad you enjoyed it, darling,” she said. “You know, I thought you were going to stay longer.”

“Oh, I know,” he said. “So I was. But young Barrett—my particular pal—went and sprained his ankle, and after that there was nothing for him to do but study.”

“And weren’t you studying at all?” she asked him point-blank.

He moved restlessly at the question. With all her tenderness Molly could be disconcerting at times.

“I thought that was mainly what you went for,” she said as he did not immediately reply.

“Oh, not mainly!” he said in quick protest. “You don’t go to a glorious country like that just to keep your nose dug into a book all the time. I went to see things and do things and enjoy myself as well.”

“Then you weren’t really doing any reading at all?” asked Molly.

“Well”—he hesitated, then with great honesty—“as a matter of fact, I finished before I began,” he said, smiling rather deprecatingly. “Don’t think me an awful rotter, Molly dear! I had my reasons for coming away before the end.”

Molly braced herself, foreseeing a struggle. “Rollo,” she said gently, “you said just now that if I had been with you you’d have lifted me over all the difficult places.”

“And so I would!” declared Rollo, holding her closer. “I wouldn’t even have let you know they were there. Oh, Molly, do get away some day and let’s go together!”

She ignored the impulsive proposal and stood firm against the embracing arm. “I’ve got to tell you, Rollo,” she said. “I’m in a difficult place now.”

He stared down at her with swift compunction. “Oh, Molly, you’re not worrying about me! You mustn’t. I always fall on my feet.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to fall on them. I want you to find them,” she said. “You may be very clever at leaping from rock to rock, but I want—more than anything, dear—to see you planted on solid ground.”

He still stared at her questioningly, with a dawning doubt. "But surely—there's plenty of time," he said. "I shan't be twenty-one for two years. I mean to be independent by that time."

"Oh, my dear, I wonder!" Molly said.

He turned suddenly and kissed her. "Darling, don't be distressful!" he begged. "I know who's been at you, but don't you worry! I've got a career well in sight. You think I'm just playing about all the time. Well, I'm not, and you can tell his lordship so from me. I'm laying the foundations all right, and I shall start building before long. But it won't be on degrees and certificates and things like that. I'll leave those for all my honourable half-brothers and sisters."

There was a sneer in his voice which she had never heard before and which surprised her. It revealed a wholly unexpected bitterness of which she had never dreamed.

"Rollo," she said, "surely you're too big to feel like that!"

He faced her steadily and she saw that his look had changed. The sunny merriment had gone out of his eyes. They were sombre and deeply insistent.

"Have you never felt—like that?" he said. "You, the necessary slave—the second-rate! Me, the encumbrance—the outsider! Oh, damn!" he broke off abruptly, boyishly. "Why do I say it? Forget it, darling! Let's be—as we were!"

She was puzzled, gravely disturbed. "Rollo—dearest! Who has been putting these horrible ideas into your mind? You can't have thought of them for yourself!"

He laughed, his head thrown back, his chin to the sky. "Of course not! It takes brains to grasp anything so gruesome. Well, darling, there's one thing I'd like you to know. I'd rather be outside—a thousand million times rather. No, I haven't been imbibing socialism. I loathe it. But there are lots of things I loathe as well—such as humbug, snobbery, and general bounderdom, which are to be found in every walk of life. Now," he looked at her suddenly, "what you've got to do is to stop worrying and smooth out your precious forehead." He kissed it lightly. "I on my side will undertake to relieve my estimable stepfather of a detestable burden within the next two years, if not sooner." He smiled abruptly, showing his teeth. "Actually, I'm not quite such a useless nincompoop as I may seem. At least—I've got potentialities, possibly more than his own flesh and blood can boast of. Only possibly, Molly dear! I'm not bragging. I know I haven't done anything yet.

But——” he suddenly freed himself from her and stretched his arms upwards—“I’ve got it in me. I swear I’ve got it in me.”

Molly looked at him and stifled a sigh. “Your father had it in him too,” she said. “He would have made good.”

“Darling!” He turned sharply and wrapped his wide-flung arms around her. “Will you think me mad if I tell you that I sometimes feel as if his spirit is urging me? I’m like him—much more like him than like you. Because you’re submissive and he wasn’t. You were the sport of fate and had to go under. Oh, don’t think I don’t know! But I’m not. I can strike out for myself, and I shan’t sink, whatever happens. Molly, you’ve got to have faith in me—as you had in him. Promise me you will!”

He was looking down into her eyes very urgently, very persuasively. There was even a kind of awe in his brown face, as though he were registering a vow. And Molly was touched, almost too deeply touched for speech.

She had to swallow once or twice before she found her voice. “I know it’s in you,” she said then. “I’ve always known. Only——”

“Only what?” he demanded imperiously as she paused.

She smiled with lips that quivered a little. “Potentialities are not always actualities,” she said. “The iron may be there, but you’ve got to heat it and beat it before you can make anything of it.”

His look softened magically. “Oh, Molly, thank you for that,” he said impetuously. “I’ll never forget it. I’ll get the fire going, and the hammer and anvil too, I promise you. I’m not really a rotter, you know.”

“My dear, I know you’re not!” she said warmly. “Your father’s son couldn’t be. Only remember—the morning is the best time for work. Don’t let the morning go by!”

“I won’t,” said Rollo. “I’m going to work like the very devil presently. You’ll see—and so will his lordship. Anyhow, I’ll not be dependent on him after I’m twenty-one. If I don’t succeed with my brain, I’ll work with my hands.”

Molly looked at him with pride in spite of herself. “Won’t you tell me what you’re thinking of doing?” she asked after a moment.

He shook his head. “No, dear. It’s a secret. But it’s something I’ve had in my mind for ages and ages—even when you thought I was running after all sorts of different things. It’s true I’ve sometimes wandered a bit in my

intentions, but I've always come back to the same idea in the end. And I'm not wasting my time as much as you think. By Jove! Look at that! Magnificent!"

A great billowing wave had just rushed through the narrow opening, and they watched it gather and crash itself upon the Mammoth Rock, sending up showers of spray that felt like a fine driving rain in their faces.

"Gorgeous!" said Rollo. "Makes one feel about the size of a threepenny bit. How did you manage to get down here, Molly? It was lovely of you to suggest our being here together."

She was still watching the swirling water, but her look was absent and rather troubled. "It's only for two days," she said. "I've promised to go back on Friday. The children all returned last week with Miss Marvin. They got tired of being here."

"Silly little blighters!" said Rollo. "How poor old Marvin manages to put up with them for the whole of the holidays beats me. Still, it's a mercy she does. Anyhow, we've got our two days, which is splendid. By the way, I've got to get a move on myself on Friday. Mustn't forget."

"What, dear? An engagement?" She turned her eyes towards him, but they still looked preoccupied.

He nodded. "Yes, darling. I'm meeting someone I know at Southampton. That's what I've come home for." He smiled at her abruptly. "Don't look so bothered! Did she think her precious boy was keeping a naughty secret from her then? Well, he isn't. If you'll take another day off, you can come too and see for yourself."

"I mustn't do that," Molly said. "Your stepfather is expecting me. But won't you tell me all about it, Rollo dear? I wish you would." Her voice was very earnest.

He squeezed her to him. "Dear little Molly! And if I did, his lordship would put on his horn-rimmed eye-assistants and say, 'Now, my dear Mary, regarding that son of yours! I take it that you are in his confidence and are prepared to make some sort of foolish suggestion for his future.'" Rollo's imitation of his stepfather was strictly accurate and free from exaggeration. He had evidently closely studied his subject.

Molly's face twitched for a second and then, to his huge delight, she broke into a laugh. "Rollo, you're too absurd! I wish you wouldn't. Of course he won't say anything of the sort!"

“Of course not!” said Rollo. “Then what will he say?”

She hesitated and finally evaded the question. “And if I come with you to Southampton as you suggest, I shall know everything in any case, so why not tell me straight away?”

Rollo smiled kindly upon her. “No, you won’t, darling. You will only know whom I am going to meet. You will be kept wondering until the time is ripe for you to be put out of your misery. There is actually no need for me to go to Southampton. It is merely a graceful gesture on my part. The person concerned is not expecting me. That at least ought to set your mind at rest.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “I wish you wouldn’t be deep,” she said. “It can’t be necessary.”

Rollo continued to smile. “But I am deep, dearest. It’s my nature. I’m terribly, unfathomably deep—also strong and inclined to be silent, as you may have noticed—chiefly for the reason that whatever I say may be used against me.”

She reflected his smile rather unwillingly. “You can’t say that of me, dear. I have never been against you yet.”

He kissed her. “Molly darling, you are priceless. I like the ‘yet.’ It’s a good touch. When you’re trying to be stern, you’re the sweetest thing I know. But, if you’d only realize it, it’s for your own sake that I’m being so strong and silent. Then you can plead complete ignorance with a clear conscience when questioned by the potentate.”

“He does so want you to decide upon a career,” said Molly rather weakly. “You see, Vivian and Oswald are both already destined for the Army.”

“And I’m not,” said Rollo, flashing his teeth at her again. “Sad but true! What a loathsome officer Vivian will make! Can’t you see him? I can. And he’ll get there too—brass hat and everything. He’s the kind that does. And when the next war comes, he won’t be in the fighting line. No fear of that! He’ll be—Oh, I’m sorry, darling! There isn’t going to be a next war. I forgot that. Well, all the better for my little half-brothers! They’ll enjoy the Army all the more.”

“Rollo, you’re incorrigible!” Molly said. “You know, I really shall get angry if you go on trifling like this.”

“Angry! You!” said Rollo, and completely disarmed her by dropping on his knees at her feet. “Go on! Be angry! Be furious! Stamp on me! Stamp!”

He abased his neck for the purpose. "Please stamp!" he urged pathetically.

It was impossible to be serious with him. Molly uttered a half-muffled laugh. "Get up!" she said. "Don't be absurd! Get up and be sensible! If you'd only tell me what you are going to do, I should be much happier."

Rollo sprang up with the action of a gambolling lamb. "I don't know what I'd have done if you really had stamped," he said. "What I'm going to do is another matter. Look here, Molly, let's enjoy ourselves while we're here! Let's not talk about careers and things! Let's pretend I'm too little for all that!"

There was a hint of earnestness in his request. His eyes, notwithstanding their merriment, besought her. And, though she knew she would take herself to task later, Molly found that she could not resist him.

But she did for a moment lay her hands upon his shoulders. "Promise me," she said, "promise me that you're going to be good—that you'll really do something worth while!"

A flash of surprise went over his boyish face. "Molly—dear!" he protested. "But of course it's going to be worth while! I can't promise that the house of Aubreystone is going to approve—because it never does, does it? But you will—because you understand, and that's all that matters. You've never been afraid that I should let you down before."

"No," she said, "no!" And she leaned forward, smiling wistfully, and kissed his forehead. "I know you won't let me down, Rollo. You simply couldn't—being your father's son. You grow more like him every time I see you."

"Good!" said Rollo. "And I'm going to be like him—and like my baby-mother too. So don't you worry, Molly dear! Everything's going to be all right. I'm a born climber."

And Molly, surveying his ardent young face with loving eyes, was fain to believe him.

CHAPTER II

THE KNOTTY POINT

THOSE two days flashed by like a dream to Molly and Rollo, though they did their utmost to make them last. When they came to an end, they went their separate ways, and the Cove of the Mammoth Rock was left deserted.

Rollo's secret remained intact, for by mutual consent they avoided all reference to it. They parted on a busy station platform many miles from the scene of their brief holiday, and Rollo saw his mother into the London train before setting forth upon his own more circuitous route.

"You'll be coming to the Castle soon?" she said, as he stood below her waiting for the train to move.

"I expect so. I'll let you know," he said. "It's a pity you're not coming with me, isn't it?"

"I wish I were," said Molly, but the next moment she smiled down at him reassuringly. "No, it's just as well I'm not. You'll do better without me probably."

"How dare you say such a thing?" said Rollo.

"Perhaps because I think it," said Molly. "My apron-strings aren't long enough to hold you, so it's no use trying."

"You precious little brick!" he said. "I wish I'd told you everything now. Only—I couldn't altogether. Besides—I may buy a pup after all."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Molly fervently. "Don't be rash, will you? Come straight and tell me if things don't go right!"

"You bet I shall!" laughed Rollo, carrying her hand to his lips as a piercing whistle sounded from the guard. "You're off, darling! Have a good lunch! Good-bye!"

The last she saw of him was a bareheaded figure that stood on the platform and continued to wave until the long curve of the train hid him

from view. She settled down in her corner with a sigh. It had been a wonderful holiday, but she had not done what she had set out to do, and she knew that Ivor would be displeased and consider that she had shown a lamentable weakness in her dealings with her son. Ivor was intensely practical in his outlook on life, and he had no intention of permitting young Rollo to become a permanent burden upon him. He had never been upon really friendly terms with the boy. He had always regarded him as spoilt and wayward, merely tolerating him for Molly's sake and for the sake of the promise he had long ago made to her. He meant to carry out his purpose of giving him a fair start in life, and had Rollo been of the same type as his half-brothers he would probably have received equal advantages. But he was totally different, almost aggressively so, and the only sentiment which he had in common with his stepfather was his love for Molly. And even this was more of a bone of contention between them than anything else. For if Ivor's affection had cooled with advancing years, his claim upon her had never slackened. His wife was his slave, and he regarded her as a being completely at his disposal at all times. It had been a distinct concession to allow her to spend those two days with Rollo, and the obvious pleasure with which she had availed herself of it had been the cause of some annoyance.

He had not, however, deemed it advisable to withhold his permission, for he fully realized that he himself possessed no sort of influence over Rollo, and he deemed that the time had arrived for some definite measures to be taken with regard to the choice of a career. He had enjoined Molly to be very firm in the matter, and now she was compelled to face the fact that she had not been firm.

Rollo had cajoled her into leaving the knotty point unsettled and almost undiscussed, and in spite of her earnest desire to trust him, she felt dissatisfied. What wild idea was he pursuing? Had she been right to let him go his own way?

Her thoughts went winging back over the years to his father, in whose genius she had always had the most implicit faith. Rollo had grown so like his father of late. His every tone and gesture recalled him, all the more vividly when they had been for some little time apart. But had he his father's stability of purpose? she asked herself. And, even possessing it, was this latter-day world of many difficulties and adversities a fitting place for the development of genius? It seemed to hold so little that was solid, so little that could last. Every day out of the seething turmoil some new wonder emerged—some new conqueror—only to be supplanted on the morrow, swirled under the rushing waters of progress, and forgotten.

Looking back on the old dear pre-War world, she realized how different life had been. There had been time in those days—time to breathe, to live, to be happy. People had not developed the fighting instinct. Games had been games, not fierce contests for the supremacy. And work had been a peaceful thing that brought its own reward, not a mad competition for the highest gain, the shortest hours, and the greatest amount of leisure.

It seemed to her that life had become rather a feverish litter of unwanted things. No one stopped to think. They merely threw aside what seemed superfluous and tore on. Whither? Ah, whither indeed! And the litter was so pathetic too—sometimes really good stuff that might have been turned to fair account, sometimes piteous broken objects to which only the owner could have given a name, sometimes actual treasure discarded in sheer caprice.

Lying back in her corner of the racing train, she thought of these things, and wondered a little at herself for being still herself in the midst of the confusion. Perhaps life had not dealt so hardly with her after all when once the agony of renunciation had been past! She had made her choice, and she had not shrunk from the consequences. She had secured a fair chance for Rollo, and if he failed to take it, suffer as she would, she yet was not blameworthy where he was concerned. And she had given as freely as in her lay in payment for that chance. What she had been unable to give had been veiled in a reticence so delicate that even Ivor had long ago ceased to suspect its very existence. He believed he had bestowed upon her a full life of complete happiness. Her submission had in a fashion misled him. He had never looked upon her in the light of a partner, and he did not know that the power of comradeship in its deepest and closest sense was latent within her. That the torch of a passionate love had ever burned within her he never imagined. His love for her was of a wholly practical character. Passion was no longer a part of it, but the pride of possession would never be extinguished. He was a man who gloried in ownership, and the fact that after their seventeen years of married life she still retained the beauty and sweetness of her girlish days, was a matter of considerable self-congratulation in his eyes. There was no doubt about it that she had done well for herself, and he on his part felt that his judgment had been vindicated. His sister Caroline might still think otherwise, but even she was obliged to admit that their family of six children, all handsome and moulded strictly upon the Aubreystone lines, was a fair return for his somewhat rash speculation. Certainly Molly had never shirked her duty in that respect, but it had taken its toll of her. Though in appearance she might have been Rollo's sister rather than his mother, the zest and gaiety of youth were gone.

She was no longer physically strong. Caroline—not to mention Aldyth and Winefride—jeered at her because even a two-mile walk taxed her strength. Her sister-in-law deemed her puny and self-indulgent if she ever pleaded fatigue and rested during the day. She herself, though many years Molly's senior, was never tired; she regarded weariness as a moral weakness to be combated and routed by force of will. But to Molly she merely ranked among those who could not understand.

Ivor, soundly practical, was nearer to comprehending her than anyone save Rollo, her beloved. Ivor, guided by medical advice, had decided to be satisfied with his four sons and two daughters, and in his own unimaginative way he took care of her, made her rest in the face of his sister's gibes, and generally did his best to maintain her in good health.

He was very kind to her in a superior fashion, and for that reason she was not sorry to be returning to him. Though they had but little in common, his kindness touched her, and she strove continually, without much success, to kindle a warmer glow in her heart for him. He was a difficult person to love. His activities and interests had become centred in politics. Entirely without inspiration, his soundness and straightness of purpose kept him in demand. He could be depended upon in any emergency to support his party in the House of Lords, and neither bitterness nor intrigue had any weight with him. He never lost his temper. He was never guilty of enthusiasm in any direction. He never worried over a doubtful issue. Staunch, British, undeviatingly honest, he stood like the Mammoth Rock against all onslaughts. Nothing moved, nothing deterred him. He was as a king by divine right—above all discords and untouched by strife.

And Molly admired him. She could not do otherwise. He had not changed in all the fevered years that she had known him. He stood for the old order, and he still held his own, incapable of change; and though the old order had already passed, she knew that he would remain outstanding as long as he lived. As Rollo had once irreverently observed, there was something monumental about his stepfather which it would take several high-powered engines to budge.

But it was that very solidarity that bound Molly to him. In a world of perpetual motion and change she was glad of something firm against which to lean. If it had not been for Rollo, the old hallowed memory of her girlhood might by then have grown misty and dream-like. Dearly as she had cherished it, her marriage to Ivor had inevitably forced it into the background. It was not in her to forget, but the thousand duties and calls upon her had so filled her life, as Ivor had predicted, that her tired spirit had

eventually lost touch to a great extent with that which she yet regarded as the most precious thing in her life.

But in Rollo, memory revived perpetually. He was a continual reminder of that which otherwise might have slowly passed into obscurity. In Rollo she saw again with an ever-increasing vividness that early lover of her youth, and through Rollo the lamp still burned in her shrine of memory. She was thankful to have it so, for without it her ideal had faded and she would have lost the greatest treasure that she had ever known. Her grief had ceased now. It had been crowded out of her life. The yearning and the suffering were past. But the sacred fire had never gone out. She thought of Ronald in these days as of one still loved above all—the only one who could be loved more deeply than Rollo—who waited somewhere in the dim future towards which her weary feet were travelling, and who when the time came would clasp her hand again and draw her out of the fevered world of clamour and progress into the perfect peace beyond. She loved to think of him thus and to dream now and then of the bliss of that reunion.

But there was still Rollo to think of—Rollo, so loving and so greatly loved, who yet had to find his feet and learn to walk alone on the slippery paths of life! Until he was firmly established, there could be no real rest for her. She had always known that she was the only person who really cared for his own sake what the future might hold for him. Her happiness was so closely bound up in his that only the certainty of his welfare could ever make it complete. When once she could be satisfied that his career was assured, she felt that she could relax and let the world go by. Ivor might be exacting, but he was considerate also. She came first with him in all family affairs, and she was very grateful to him in consequence; for without his support life would have been a very difficult matter. Caroline's tyranny had not lessened with the years, and quarrels between her and the growing children were not infrequent. Molly strove to keep the peace, but there was no doubt that they were a fighting family, and her efforts were generally regarded by all parties with contempt. They very seldom met with success. But Molly could endure that, because they were all very well capable of holding their own. With Rollo it was different. He had grown up apart from the rest. He was outside the family circle, and it was her love alone that bound him to it. He adored her as none of the others adored her. He deemed her perfect, and was ready to thrash any of his half-brothers at any time who dared to disagree upon that point.

It was a curious situation, she reflected, as she sat in the train with her eyes on the shifting landscape. It was as if between the child of love and the

children of duty a great gulf had been fixed. And she sighed again at the thought that it was probably her own doing. Inadvertently and inevitably, the unwilling surrender of herself had borne fruit. Yet, in the making of that sacrifice long ago, had she done wrong? Very often she wondered, but could find no answer to the problem. There had seemed but one road to follow and she had felt compelled to take it. But it had not led to peace. Perhaps even for Rollo's sake—it might have been better if she had held back!

The journey to London was one long reverie. She forgot her lunch until urged by a conscientious attendant, and when it was over they were already slackening pace through the stations of the outer suburbs.

It was a dull afternoon, with a hint of thunder in the heavy atmosphere. The buildings along the line had a leaden, unnatural look, and when the train ran at length into the terminus between the long lines of platforms, there hung a gloom upon all things that might have belonged to a November day.

But it was not deep enough to prevent her discerning Awkins—somewhat broader and more like Henry the Eighth than of yore—waiting punctiliously to receive her.

He made a bee-line for her carriage-door with the stride of a man whom nothing in the shape of hustling porters or scrambling passengers could deter, and had opened it with a stiff salute before she had time to do so.

“Good afternoon, my lady! I hope you are well,” he said, but she saw that he looked beyond her for Rollo.

“Quite well, thank you. No, he isn't here,” she said. “He is coming in a day or two, I hope.”

“Very good, my lady,” said Awkins. “And his lordship is in town and will be obliged if you will take tea with him at the Bullivant before leaving for home.”

“Why, of course!” said Molly, slightly surprised. “He will be coming home with me then?”

“I think not, my lady, but I don't know,” said Awkins. “The car is waiting.”

He was very much to the point as ever, but Molly fully realized that he was disappointed that Rollo had not arrived with her. She smiled a little to herself as she made her way to the car. Awkins had always maintained something of a proprietary attitude towards Rollo.

The Bullivant Hotel was situated in a quiet side-street off one of the great thoroughfares of Western London. Ivor made it his headquarters when he was in town, and Molly had often stayed with him there. But she had not expected to be summoned thither this afternoon. As they drove out into the overcast and oppressive atmosphere of the London streets she wished that she could have gone straight forth into the country again. For the air of the town felt ominous, and Aubreystone Castle on its hill forty miles away seemed a desirable haven in comparison. But, unlike Awkins, she was rather glad that Rollo was not with her after all. She felt easier in Ivor's company when Rollo was not there, and infinitely happier in Rollo's without Ivor—a situation which she realized to be quite wrong, but for which there appeared to be no remedy. She sometimes took herself to task over it, but in her heart she knew that she was not to blame. The two were poles asunder in disposition and in practically every thought and motive, and nothing could ever alter that. It was only because with infinite pains she had learned at last to know Ivor that it was otherwise with her, and it was possible for her to sympathize with them both. Well, she would have to fight Rollo's battle for him now, and she hoped that it would not be a hard one. Fighting was by no means her strong point, and a disagreement with Ivor usually ended almost before it had begun in acquiescence on her part. But on Rollo's behalf she could not acquiesce, so she began to marshal all her forces for the discussion. Whatever happened, there must be no clash of arms between the two. Upon that at least she was firmly determined. And once again she was glad that Rollo was not by her side.

CHAPTER III

IVOR

SHE entered the lounge of the Bullivant Hotel and looked around her.

There were only two or three people in the place, and she caught sight of Ivor at a far-off writing-table. Quietly she moved up the long room to join him.

He did not hear her approach, but he became aware of her when she was within a few paces of him, and turned sharply round, then swiftly rose to greet her.

Their hands clasped; Ivor never kissed in public. "My dear," he said, "you are in good time. Has all gone well?"

She smiled up at him, detecting more warmth in the words than they seemed to convey. "It's been lovely," she said. "We've enjoyed every minute."

He looked beyond her, but not with the same expression as Awkins had worn. "Rollo is not with you?" he questioned.

"No. He has gone to Southampton to meet a friend. I expect he will join us at the Castle in a day or two," said Molly.

The suspicion of a frown crossed his face, then he smiled and drew her to a chair. "We'll have tea. A very unpleasant afternoon! You had a good journey, I hope?"

"Oh, very good," said Molly. She had caught the frown and her heart sank a little. "But tea will certainly be welcome. What has brought you up here?"

"I came up on business," he said, and crossed the room to ring the bell.

She watched him with a vague uneasiness, sensing the fact that he was not too well pleased. With advancing years Ivor was growing less and less easy to please. At fifty-six, he looked considerably over sixty. Handsome

still, immaculate as he had ever been, his broad shoulders had begun to stoop a little and the hair had receded from his forehead into the region of baldness. His aristocratic demeanour would never leave him, and he still bore the ineradicable stamp of a proud and indomitable spirit. It was that which she admired in him—often though in the past she had suffered from it—that and his immutable integrity. He was a man to whom during the whole of his career shame had been a thing unknown.

He gave his order, and then came back and sat beside her. “You are looking very well,” he said in the indulgent tone which he customarily used to her.

“Am I?” she said. “Well, we have done nothing but scramble about among the rocks for the past two days. Is everything all right at home?”

“Perfectly,” said Ivor. “I came up this morning and I should have met you at the station, but I had an appointment which delayed me. Also, I found some letters at the Club which required to be answered.”

“And are you staying up here?” asked Molly.

“I am,” he replied. “And I think perhaps it might be advisable for you to do the same for to-night. But you may please yourself in the matter.”

Molly looked at him. “I will do whatever you like, of course,” she said. “But, Ivor, is everything all right—with you, I mean?”

He raised a hand as if to check a too impetuous questioning. “There is not,” he said, “so far as I know, any immediate occasion for anxiety in any direction. I have to attend a board of directors at the Croxton Hall in the morning, and possibly interview my lawyers in the afternoon. After that, we can return home together; but if it will bore you to spend the night up here, you can return in the car to-day and send it back for me.”

“It won’t bore me in the least,” Molly said. “I would rather wait for you.”

His face relaxed somewhat at her words, but he did not smile. “I always try,” he said rather formally, “to allow people to please themselves in matters of no actual importance. I am aware that there are not many attractions in town at this time of the year. But perhaps, as you say, it will not hurt you to stay up one night with me.”

“I’ve already said that I would rather,” Molly answered gently.

“Then,” said Ivor, “we will consider that settled. And what about your boy? Have you ascertained what has brought him back or anything of his

intentions?”

Molly shook her head with a slightly deprecating smile. “He has some scheme afoot, but I don’t yet know what it is. He has gone to Southampton to meet some friends.”

“Oh, indeed!” Ivor sounded sarcastic. “He seems to think that there is plenty of time to spare.”

“He is very young still,” Molly urged in extenuation.

He raised his brows. “I hope that all our sons will have set their hands to the plough before they come to his age. I am compelled to say that I have little patience with the philandering ways of the present generation. He ought to have had some definite aim before him long ago.”

“Some boys develop more quickly than others,” pleaded Molly. “I think when he has quite made up his mind he will probably leap ahead and soon make up for lost time.”

“Let us hope so!” said Ivor with obvious scepticism. “He has had full advantages in the way of education and so on, but I cannot see that so far he has made much effort to avail himself of them.”

The scepticism stung her; she spoke in a quick, low voice. “He will make good. I know he will. After all, he is only nineteen, and he assures me that his year at the University has not been misspent. Do please give him time, Ivor! Be fair to him!”

“My dear Mary, I have every intention of being fair.” A faintly querulous note sounded in Ivor’s voice. “But there are limits even to time. If, for instance, I were to die unexpectedly, it might very well be that he would find himself totally unprovided for. Have either of you considered that contingency at all?”

“Of course not!” Molly said, momentarily startled. “Why do you talk in that strain? I hope they will all be well settled in life before either of us dies.”

“There is no harm in being optimistic,” Ivor conceded with a somewhat wry smile. “But it is as well to be practical also. As you must realize, the days of careless prosperity are long past. We have a large family, and death duties take a very heavy toll. Vivian must be thought of first. The title and the estate will be his, and he must have sufficient to maintain the family traditions. There may not be a great deal over for the others. You yourself

will have enough in trust to live on, but not enough to provide for a spendthrift son as well.”

“Ivor!” Molly’s voice had a quiver of indignation. “Please! You have no right to call him that. And why need you talk in this strain at all? In a very few years all the boys will be growing up and beginning to make their own way, I hope. Surely—so long as we try to make reasonable provision—we need not anticipate trouble. Why, I sometimes think,” she smiled with some effort, “that I may go before you do. That would make one less, wouldn’t it?”

Ivor frowned in very definite displeasure. “I don’t think that is very likely to happen,” he said. “And it is not a matter for light treatment. I wish you and more especially the boy—Rollo—to be fully prepared for any eventuality. Ah!” He broke off. “Here is tea! Help yourself, my dear! I am sure you will be glad of some.”

Molly poured out the tea with the inward hope that it might improve Ivor’s mood also. She had not expected quite so uncompromising an attitude. He was generally more temperate in the expression of his opinion and more considerate of her feelings. She wondered if Caroline had been at work during her absence, knowing to her cost that though he would not be ruled by his sister her opinion had never ceased to carry a good deal of weight with him. It was impossible to live with Caroline and not be impressed by her very emphatic views. She was always so aggressively in the right.

But at least she had not Caroline also to combat at this juncture, and she began to feel rather glad that Ivor had intercepted her in town. Alone with him, she might possibly manage to soften his mood somewhat where Rollo was concerned.

She talked of unimportant things during tea, and Ivor, abstracted, made but slight response. Perhaps it was the gloom of the gathering storm that made his face look so sombre, but it seemed to her that he wore rather a harassed expression, and presently, feeling the lack of encouragement, she dropped into silence.

Ivor finished his tea and lighted a cigarette. She observed him with a vague and growing uneasiness. Was it solely the matter of Rollo that was affecting him? He had never taken any vital interest in his stepson’s doings before.

She hesitated to revert to the subject on her own initiative though feeling that in justice to Rollo she could scarcely leave it as it was. But she felt for the moment that the discussion was closed, and intuition warned her against reopening it. Ivor was sitting very still in his chair, and yet she had an odd suspicion that he was not as reposeful as he wished her to believe. It might be that the stormy atmosphere was affecting her also, but she could not rid herself of a curious conviction that something had happened or was about to happen which was alien to her entire experience of him. Actually it seemed to her that Ivor, the calm,—the monumental—was striving to keep his nerves from getting the mastery of him.

She began to grow nervous herself with the sense of strain. There was certainly electricity in the air. Her whole being tingled with the consciousness of it. With a sudden sense of suffocation she got up and moved to the open window.

“It’s stifling, isn’t it?” she said.

A few great drops were falling with a sudden fitfulness out of the blackness overhead. The storm was drawing near.

Ivor turned his head. “We had better go upstairs,” he said. “It will be cooler there.”

She glanced backward at the sound of his voice, and in that instant the lightning ripped the gloom like the flash of a sword. She saw his face in the blinding tremor of brightness, and as the thunder crashed she covered her own with a horrified shrinking that was more of the soul than the body. For it was as though she had looked upon something that shocked her beyond all power of description—something she had never connected with Ivor, that made his face in that one terrific glimpse seem livid and strangely drawn.

The next thing she knew as the reverberations died away was his arm about her, quietly impelling her. She realized that he was intensely averse to a scene.

“Come!” he said. “You were startled. We will go upstairs. You will like to rest.”

She went with him without a word, astonished at herself and already half-ashamed.

In the lift she threw a swift glance at him and wondered why she had been so shocked, for the deliberate composure of his features held nothing unusual. Somewhat pale, inclined to be gaunt with advancing years, there

was yet nothing tangible in his appearance to give her any cause for uneasiness. His eyes met hers with absolute steadiness.

“You mustn’t be nervous,” he said.

They stepped out of the lift and walked along the corridor to their room. “I am sorry,” she said. “D’you know—just for a moment—I had rather a shock? It must have been the effect of the lightning on your face. You looked—ill.”

“Did I?” said Ivor. He unlocked and opened the door and quietly followed her into the room. “Well, perhaps there was nothing very strange in that, after all.”

Molly stopped short and turned to face him. “Ivor, why do you say that? Please tell me! I have a right to know. Something has happened.”

He smiled at her—a shadowy smile. “Yes, I am going to tell you,” he said. “I meant to do so as soon as we were alone. I have not been feeling quite up to the mark lately and I came up—among other things—to see a doctor.”

“Oh, Ivor!” she breathed.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “My dear, there is no occasion for agitation. But I am taking the opportunity to set my house in order as far as possible because I may have to undergo an operation—not a very serious one, I hope. I shall see him again and get his final advice to-morrow.”

“Ivor!” she said again. “But what is the matter? Why haven’t you told me?”

He frowned again slightly, as if her questions tried his patience. “I always,” he said, “like to do things in my own way and in my own time. I am telling you now, Mary, and that is enough. The trouble, such as it is, is internal, but I cannot tell you its exact nature because I don’t yet know myself. We will not have any unnecessary fuss. If there has to be an operation, I shall go into a nursing-home up here and get it over as soon as possible. I have an excellent constitution, and I have no doubt that everything will be all right.”

He switched on the light with the words, almost as if he would challenge her scrutiny, and then walked across to the window and closed it against the rain which had begun to fall heavily.

Molly stood dumbfounded. The thing had come upon her like a thunderbolt. The storm that raged outside had faded from her consciousness.

She felt curiously isolated, almost as if the world had fallen away under her feet and left her in the air. There seemed to be nothing left to say or do, scarcely even to feel.

Ivor came quietly back to her. She no longer thought that he looked ill; in fact, he appeared quite normal. He even smiled at her.

“Well, I’m glad I’ve told you,” he said. “I knew you would be sensible. We will talk things over presently, but not till you are rested. There is plenty of time. Take off your hat and lie down! There is a paper here if you would like to look at it.”

The words were a direct command to her. She saw that no questioning would elicit anything further from him for the moment. No power on earth could drag any information from Ivor if he did not choose to be communicative. He handed her the paper with an air of finality and stood waiting for her to comply with his wishes.

And, almost against her will, Molly was reassured. She became aware once more of the world around her, of the roaring tempest, and the flickering lightning outside the streaming windows. And she drew a strange breath of relief. Ivor was as indomitable as ever. There could be nothing seriously wrong.

At his behest she sank down upon the sofa and leaned back among the cushions. The weakness that follows shock had come upon her. She felt bound to submit.

Silently she lay back with the paper on her lap, her eyes downcast, her thoughts still centred upon what he had told her, instinctively seeking a practical viewpoint. He had never been ill in all the years that she had known him. She could not picture him helpless and dependent upon others. It was simply a state of affairs that could not come to pass.

Perhaps—as he had said—it was not a serious matter. Or had he said it to reassure her? Impossible to tell! He belonged to the old-fashioned school. He might be one of those who still believed in the terrible method called “breaking the news”—the long-drawn-out agony so infinitely more cruel than the direct blow. But it was useless to conjecture. He would tell her the whole truth in his own time and certainly not before.

Time passed, and at length her eyes began to wander over the paper on her lap. The storm was lessening. Only the sound of heavy rain filled the room. That too would soon be past, for the daylight was strengthening and the artificial beginning to fade.

Almost mechanically, with that docility to Ivor's wishes which had become a habit with her in all things not connected with Rollo, she began to scan the print in front of her. There was a paragraph giving the latest intelligence of the most recent Continental upheaval, and she read it through without gathering a single vestige of information. Then came a short statement regarding road accidents which she also read automatically, without the faintest stirring of interest.

And then suddenly, wholly unexpectedly, her attention was arrested, as if an electric message had been flashed to her brain. There was a paragraph headed: "World-Famed Plastic Surgeon with Well-Known Actor Visits England." And below it in smaller type: "Craven Ferrars, the English idol of America, returns to his mother-country with Geoffrey Asterby the Miracle-Worker of the United States."

In ordinary type below these sensational headings was the following concise statement: "Craven Ferrars, whose spectacular career in New York is well known to all theatre-goers, has secured a contract in London at the Belle Isle Theatre where he is to appear shortly in a straight play called *Five Aces in One*. We understand that it is a war-play of very vivid and compelling interest, but we are not yet in a position to divulge any details. Craven Ferrars himself fell a victim to the world-wide conflagration of 1914-18, and he was at one time too painfully disfigured to be seen in public. But the genius of the great plastic surgeon Geoffrey Asterby—who was severely crippled in one of the great battles—has not only restored him to the everyday world but has bestowed upon it a man of brilliant gifts whose magnificent physical appearance has earned for him the title of "The Adonis of the West." We feel sure that it is safe to predict that a great success awaits him in this, the country of his birth. And we are pleased to learn that Mr. Asterby, his close friend, has accompanied him to witness the venture. The two are arriving to-day on the steamship *Eureka*."

A queer little thrill went through Molly, ruffling the surface, as it were, above her deep disquiet. Geoffrey Asterby—her friend of long ago. It was years since she had heard from him—though the cessation of their correspondence had been on her side originally. Life had been too full for her to maintain so far-off an interest, and her health had compelled her to reduce her obligations. But she had heard that his "case" had not been a failure—at least from the physical standpoint. He had at length, with infinite patience, achieved renewal in the place of destruction, but more than that she had never known.

Memory winged back in a flash to their parting all those years ago, and the huddled figure that had waited half-hidden in the background. Was this then what those wonderful hands had wrought—transforming utter wreckage into a being whom all the world now welcomed with adulation and delight? Had the spirit indeed risen again as well as the body, as she had prayed that it might? Some inner voice seemed to tell her that it was so; and the torch which Geoffrey had once kindled within her glowed again.

Looking up, she saw that the storm was passing, and a long ray of sunshine was slanting into the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARRIVAL

THE dockside was buzzing with expectancy as the great ship *Eureka* came to her moorings. Rollo, pacing up and down, watched with a feverish impatience. He had always hated waiting. It chafed his impulsive spirit almost unbearably. But, since this was a venture upon which he had set his heart, he had no one else to blame if his time were wasted.

He had already told himself several times over that he was various kinds of a fool to have raced back to England simply because he had chanced to see in a paper that the *Eureka* with a certain celebrated passenger on board was due to arrive that day. It was, moreover, growing late and he was getting hungry. A few sandwiches swallowed in haste at a station *buffet* had not proved very satisfying; but he looked forward to getting tea on board the train to London. However disappointing his errand might prove in other respects, he could at least count upon that. And he would spend the night in town, ring up Molly at Aubreystone Castle and make sure of her safe arrival; and then, if her report upon things in general were encouraging, he would go down the next day and play the good boy for a week or two. All this if this present gamble ended in failure!

His long wait was beginning to make him pessimistic. Why had he come? What possible good could come of it? He would probably be taken for a parasite—one of the many who seek to cling to the skirts of celebrities either for social or for material uplift. A hateful thought which made him throw up his head and glare like an angry bull! What an infernal noise they were making! Couldn't a ship be allowed to float comfortably into her berth without all that din? It was a perfectly filthy afternoon too—heavy as lead, with a sort of brown mist hanging over the water. Why on earth had he come?

The people on deck looked like a stage-crowd specially assembled for the purpose—a stupid-looking lot! As soon as the gangways were down, they would all come crowding forth like animals at a circus. There was a man waiting near him with a hand-camera, obviously waiting to snap

someone. Rollo felt unreasonably indignant with him. It seemed such a cheap thing to do.

Perhaps they were both after the same person! If so, he—Rollo—might also be taken for a journalist seeking an interview. Another thought which filled him with irrational disgust! Of course it was his own fault for coming! Why the dickens had he come?

What a hideous row that siren was kicking up! Couldn't a tug withdraw decently without blazoning its damned efficiency to the whole world? He detested unnecessary noise. It made him feel prickly all over. He was sure Molly felt the same, and he hoped that that grumbling storm in the distance was not following her. He began to wish he had accompanied her to town after all. This was evidently going to turn out a fool's errand. Why, in all the crowd that assembled against the deck-rails there could be no chance of recognizing anyone—especially a person one had not seen for eight years. Ah! Now they were actually tying her up! And there seemed to be some activity on board to get out the gangways. Now there would be a general scramble, he supposed, and the quay would rapidly become so crammed with people that it would be practically impossible to find the man he had come to meet, or to get near him when found. And to introduce himself—how was he going to do that? To explain that a brief kindness to a child of eleven had brought him—a young man in his twentieth year—to meet one who otherwise was a complete stranger to him? The idea was preposterous. Why had he not considered it more fully before taking this absurd step? A few minutes' quiet reflection would have been enough. Why did he never stop to think? What a fool he was—a mad, impetuous idiot! How could anything possibly evolve from this wild goose chase? He would be turned down with polite disdain, or perhaps with ignominy. And he would deserve it. Oh, why the devil had he come?

Things were moving now. The planks were sliding downwards. The expectant crowd on the quay had passed the patient stage and were growing excited. The buzz of talk around him was surging almost to tumult. People were waving from the decks. Greetings were being shouted in shrill or stentorian voices. The man with the hand-camera was preparing for action. Rollo had developed an intense antipathy towards him. Somehow the blighter seemed to minimize his own chances. He was sure he would be taken for a journalist, and groaned aloud at the prospect. Still, he had come, and he was not going to back out at this stage. If he got snubbed for his pains—well, no one but himself would ever know, and he would take jolly good care never to come within snubbing distance again.

So, somewhat hectically, his thoughts ran, while the gangways slipped down and were made secure, and the stage-crowd on board the liner pressed forward to descend.

Some official gave the order to “Stand back, please!” and he retired an inch or two, but retrieved the lost ground immediately since no one had the leisure to notice what he did. His heart was beating curiously fast in spite of his self-contempt. He had an odd feeling that he was nearing one of the great moments of his life. And he was afraid, yet not afraid—excited, yet icily calm—strained, yet firmly and deliberately at his ease. His own master? Perhaps! Who can say, when a crisis is at hand? If the heart be out of control, can the brain be described as completely subservient? And Rollo knew that his heart was beating—like blazes!

As he watched the crowd of people streaming downwards, he cursed himself once more for a fool. Why had he not applied for a permit to go on board? It was hardly probable that the man he had come to meet would step ashore amidst this rabble. There was nothing whatever to be gained by being amongst the foremost. The London train would not leave until all the luggage was on board; and there were the Customs to be passed first. There was no need—there could be no need—for anyone to hurry. And yet people were cramming and crowding forward; and down on the quay, close to him, greetings—genuinely rapturous or sentimentally inane—were being exchanged.

He glanced around him with distaste. Was it too late to get a permit? When the throng had dispersed somewhat, it might be worth his while—— And then, glancing upwards, a thrill that was like an electric shock went through him. Two men were standing at the top of the gangway near the foot of which he stood squarely planted. One of them—pale, meagre, undistinguished—seemed to be supported by the other. And the other was a tall man of majestic bearing who looked outwards and downwards with a very strange smile on his clean-shaven lips.

Rollo caught back a gasp in his throat. He knew that man. Out of a thousand he would have known him. And yet he had changed. Self-reliance, mobility and conscious strength had taken the place of hesitancy, passivity and uncertainty of purpose. But the man was the same: perfect of feature, oddly youthful, yet bearing an indefinable stamp of age. It did not occur to Rollo as he gazed upwards that the same contradictions were beginning to be manifest in himself.

Quivering with excitement he waited, and the man with the camera stood at his elbow ready. But Rollo had forgotten his very existence. He was throbbing with eagerness. He no longer had any fear of making himself known.

With caught breath he watched the two move slowly downwards, the bigger man supporting the lesser from behind. The latter helped himself with a stick, and his progress was slow and difficult. But he wore a plucky smile as he came, and he called back cheerily over his shoulder to his friend behind him.

Nearer they drew and nearer, till at length Rollo, unable to restrain himself, made a swift spring upwards to lend his help to the crippled man.

“Won’t you lean on me, sir?” he said.

The object of his solicitude gave him a ready smile of gratitude. There was something extraordinarily sweet about Geoffrey Asterby’s smile, even when he was in pain.

“Say, that’s very kind of you,” he said, transferring his hand from the rail to Rollo’s shoulder without an instant’s hesitation.

Rollo, stepping backwards, helped him to the ground, while the man behind straightened himself, and the camera clicked.

“Here’s your other stick, Geoff!” said his companion.

“Thanks, John!” The other smiled up at him. “Now I’m all right. Nothing like *terra firma* when you’ve only got one leg of your own.” He looked at Rollo again. “I almost feel as if you came to meet us.”

“So I did,” rejoined Rollo impetuously.

But in a moment the camera-man cut him out. “Mr. Craven Ferrars, I believe?” His elbow gently indicated that Rollo’s place was in the background. “I am delighted to meet you, sir, and you also, Mr. Asterby. I am a representative of the *London Byeword*, and I hope you will not consider it very intrusive of me to claim the privilege of being the first to welcome you to the Old Country. I can assure you that we are all greatly honoured by your visit.”

Rollo took the intervening elbow and firmly removed it from his path. “Dash it all!” he said. “You’re not the first. We’ll have fair play anyway.” He faced the tall actor with a resolute air. “No, I’m not a newspaper man. I’m just an old friend—though I’ll lay a fiver you won’t know me from Adam.”

Ferrars gave him a piercing look with eyes that were strangely alight, eyes that searched deeply for a second or two and then softened to a smile.

He held out his hand. "Done!" he said coolly. "I should have known you anywhere. It's Tommy, isn't it?"

"By Jove!" said Rollo with a start. "I'd forgotten you called me that!"

"D'you think I forget my old friends?" asked Ferrars. "Especially when they come offering me fivers!"

Rollo's hand gripped his. "Yes, you win, sir," he said. "I'll pay up too. But I never thought you'd remember me. Hope you don't think it awful cheek of me to come and meet you like this."

"My dear boy," Craven Ferrars said, "it's the best compliment I've had for twenty years. But of course I remember you! We were both of us down and out that day, weren't we?" He drew him forward. "Geoffrey, meet an old friend of mine—Tommy!"

He had a very charming smile which bewildered Rollo at first even while it delighted him. The man who had stood by him in his childish trouble all those years ago had not seemed able to smile. In fact his very personality appeared somehow to have changed. Or was the change in himself now that his childhood's days were past?

He grinned at Geoffrey Asterby with a species of gay apology. "I say, I am butting in, but I'm nothing to do with the Press, though I did come on purpose to meet Mr. Ferrars."

Geoffrey's grey eyes looked at him with kindly appreciation. "I guess it's a pleasure to have anyone to meet us," he said. "Anyway, Mr. Ferrars is fair prey for the Press, so he can't complain. Is this other gentleman a friend of yours?"

"No, he isn't," said Rollo, with a glance in the journalist's direction which was wholly lacking in enthusiasm. "I came entirely on my own—because I saw in a paper that Craven Ferrars would be on this boat."

"Ah well, we owe something to the Press then," said Geoffrey good-humouredly. "Now I suppose we make for the Customs, do we? And then hope to get a seat on the train?"

"You leave that to me!" said Rollo. "I'll work that anyhow. I'll go and engage some seats before the scrum get there."

He was in fact glad to avail himself of the opportunity of being useful, for an odd embarrassment had come upon him again. He had not expected Craven Ferrars to be quite such an imposing person. His quiet self-assurance rather dwarfed Rollo's own, making him feel young and inadequate.

"Shall you mind if I travel up with you?" he questioned almost diffidently ere he departed on his errand.

Ferrars, in the act of bestowing his attention upon the journalist, turned and clapped him on the back.

"There's nothing I should like better," he said. "Don't you go and get lost now! I want you to come along with us."

Rollo went off on his mission tingling with pleasure. All his misgivings were laid to rest. He felt that the venture was going to turn out a success, and he whistled shrilly like a schoolboy as he went about his task.

CHAPTER V

CRAVEN FERRARS

“Now!” said Craven Ferrars as he climbed into the train. “I think I’ve given that newspaper chap enough to go on with. Well, Tommy, this is great!” He stretched his hand again to Rollo. “You all right, Geoff?”

“Yes, thanks, O.K. Tommy’s seen to that,” said Geoffrey Asterby with that smile on his thin face which made all men love him. “What do we do now? Just sit until we get there?”

“You do,” said Ferrars. “I’m going to see about some tea for you.”

“I’ve done that,” said Rollo. “It’s coming as soon as we get started. I suppose the baggage is all right? Like me to have an eye to it?”

Ferrars’s smile was quizzical. “You seem a useful sort of person to know,” he observed. “But you needn’t worry about that. Sit down and let’s have a look at you! You’ve grown a bit.”

Rollo laughed. There was something about this man which appealed to him more strongly than anything he had ever encountered in anyone else. He felt immediately and quite inexplicably at home with him. “Glad you think so, sir,” he said. “You’ve changed a bit too. But you’ve got younger.”

“Artificial aids!” said the actor, with a nod towards Asterby. “He’s an arch-deceiver, that chap. He digs up fragments out of the mud, sticks them together, waves a wand, and—if they’re lucky—they turn out into what our Press friend has just described as ‘popular idols—like myself.’ ”

“Damned impertinence!” said Rollo indignantly.

Ferrars raised a hand. “The Press are never impertinent,” he said. “If you dislike publicity, that’s your own idiosyncrasy;—not the fault of the Press. I personally court it—with the pleasing result that nobody ever knows anything about me except what I choose them to know.”

“I expect there’s something in that,” said Rollo.

“There’s a good deal in it,” said Ferrars. “It’s only reticence that attracts curiosity. Take everybody into your confidence and you’re lucky if they’ll stop and listen. On the other hand, try to evade attention and people are after you like a pack of hounds.” He stopped with a smile. “Well, what about you, my boy? You’ve been busy growing up. Done anything else?”

“Oh, just a bit,” said Rollo. “At least, I’ve tried. I’m no good, of course. Not like you, sir,” he added disarmingly. “You’ve made the world hum all right. Somehow I knew you would.”

“The world,” said Ferrars, “is a largish place. I haven’t got beyond America yet. Oh yes, I’ve got a contract here all right, but it doesn’t follow I shall make good in this country.”

“Bet you it does!” said Rollo with shining eyes. “You’ll do it. I know you’ll do it. I knew—years ago.”

“Yes, you were very encouraging,” said Ferrars. “But you’re a bit reckless with your bets, young feller. Are you a millionaire by any chance?”

Rollo made a cheery grimace. “Heavens no! Poor as a church-mouse and most unpopular. Regarded by my family as a waster.”

“Not by—Molly?” questioned Ferrars with a keen look.

Rollo met it with his ready smile. “Oh no, not entirely. But even she has misgivings. I haven’t told her my plans. I wasn’t free to, was I?”

He spoke exactly as if he were continuing their conversation of eight years before up in the larch-wood above Aubreystone Castle; and Ferrars understood and replied in the same vein.

“Well, no. I should say not. But what are you doing now? Would it be offensive to ask if you’ve left school?”

Rollo grinned his appreciation of the question. “I’ve been at Cambridge a year,” he said. “Nobody thinks I do any work, but I do. Of course I play games as well,” he added ingenuously. “One’s got to keep fit.”

“Quite so,” said Ferrars. “And you’re still thinking of the stage? It’s a gruelling job, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” Rollo said in his eager way. “But I don’t mind how gruelling a thing is. I like something I can get my teeth into. I’m not a waster—really I’m not.”

Ferrars’s eyes held a very kindly look. “No,” he said. “I know that. You’re honest, and I like honesty. So you came to meet me because you read

in a paper that I was expected? Were there any other details about me?”

“Oh, lots,” said Rollo. “A regular pæan about all you’d done in America and how you were bound to put it over in London, and all that sort of thing. But of course”—he reddened a little—“that wasn’t why I came. I should have come anyhow.”

“Thank you, Tommy.” Ferrars spoke with a quiet warmth that made the boy glow still further. “Was there anything else they said—anything about my shady past?”

“Oh, yes. That was where Dr. Asterby came in.” Rollo glanced across at the meagre, insignificant figure in the other corner. “They were full of all the wonders he’d performed. Rather tripe, of course, but interesting in a way. I thought half of it was probably fiction.”

“More probably, the half of what wasn’t was not told you,” remarked the actor with an enigmatical smile. “But never mind that now! It’s back history. And though Asterby has come as near to creating a man out of a bundle of junk as any mortal could, he doesn’t want it talked about. He’s not like me. He doesn’t court publicity. So your people don’t believe in you, eh, Tommy? Why don’t they?”

“Because they never have,” said Rollo. “But don’t call them my people, please! They’re not. Only Molly belongs to me.”

He spoke with a certain pride, and Ferrars nodded. “I remember. You said that before. Never changed in all these years? What a thankless lot!”

Rollo swelled a little. “It’s hardly a question of gratitude,” he said. “I take it my stepfather wanted Molly when I was a nipper, and I had to be thrown in. She admitted to me once that she couldn’t have afforded to educate me if she hadn’t married again.”

Ferrars nodded a second time. “It was probably the best thing she could have done for both of you. If you’d been brought up to till the land there wouldn’t have been much of a future for you. Well, you and I must get busy—according to contract.” He smiled at Rollo. “I wonder if I could squeeze you in as a super in this play I’m on to.”

“My stars!” said Rollo. “If you could!”

“You keep cool!” advised Ferrars. “I can’t promise anything before I’ve seen my manager. But I don’t see why it shouldn’t be done. Might give you a little experience without making or marring anybody. You’d have to chuck the Varsity. Would that matter?”

“Matter! My hat, no!” Rollo spoke with breathless eagerness. “I’d chuck everything—gladly—for such a chance.”

“It may lead to nothing whatever,” Ferrars warned him. “I’m not infallible myself. I may go down. No one can tell.”

“Not you, sir!” declared Rollo. “London’ll rave about you. And I shall be there to see. I say, this is going to be great!” He slapped his knees delightedly, and looked round at Asterby with dancing eyes.

The train was just starting upon its journey—the most momentous that Rollo had ever travelled. He felt almost giddy with the prospect that had opened so suddenly before him. He wanted to sing and shout like a child in sheer excitement.

Asterby smiled at him sympathetically. “Yes, we’ll both be there to see,” he said. “I say that Craven Ferrars is going to be a big noise in this country. I’ve said so for years, and I guess it’ll soon come true now.”

“Rather!” said Rollo. “And you’ll feel you’ve had a hand in it. How damn’ proud you’ll be, sir!”

Asterby’s grey eyes surveyed him with a very friendly interest. “So far as that goes,” he said. “I’d say that you’d had a bigger hand in it than I.”

“I!” echoed Rollo, bewildered. “How on earth——”

“You ask him!” said Geoffrey. “He’ll tell you the same.”

Rollo turned back impetuously to Ferrars. “How? Why? I don’t understand.”

Ferrars was laughing a little, but there was a glint of something deeper than amusement in his look. “Wasn’t it you who gave me the first push?” he said. “I seem to remember the very words you used that day we were both down and out.”

“The day I ate your sandwiches!” said Rollo.

“Yes. They were a good investment.” Into the actor’s face there came a very strange expression—as though he viewed himself and Rollo from a great distance. “‘The harder the job, the better worth tackling.’ That was what you said to me. Well, it was hard. It was stupendous. But it’s been worth it. I should never have done it but for you.”

“Me!” ejaculated Rollo in amazement. “But of course you would, sir! What had I to do with it?”

Ferrars's eyes came back from their far survey and regarded him whimsically. "We were both of us pretty desperate that day, weren't we?" he said. "You'd have come with me then and there if I'd have taken you."

"Rather!" said Rollo. "Of course I never forgot you. But it's wonderful your remembering. Honestly, I never really expected you to. I only came down on spec. I was afraid you'd think it infernal cheek."

Ferrars shook his head. "My dear lad, I owe you more than you think. This is the second time you've turned up just at the right moment. Now see here! You're going to be my guest for a day or two. My friend Asterby here is going to be busy in his own line, and I've got to get things in train on my own account. I should like to have you with me, if you'll come."

"If!" repeated Rollo with a gasp. "D'you mean that? But I say, I'm not going to sponge on you. I'm not that sort of cad. I can——"

Ferrars interrupted him, firmly, very decidedly. "If I'm to do anything for you, I must have a free hand. All or nothing, Tommy! You ate my lunch last time, and you must do it again."

Rollo laughed. "You make me feel almost as if I belonged to you. It's frightfully good of you, sir. You sure it's all right? What do you think?" He appealed to the other man who was quietly listening.

"I?" said Geoffrey. "I should say, very much all right. You'd better give in to him. He's a difficult fellow to thwart. Besides, you'll enjoy it."

"Enjoy it! I should rather think so!" declared Rollo. "It seems too good to be true, that's all. I'm not the sort that strikes lucky as a rule."

"That," said Ferrars, grimly humorous, "is probably because you haven't yet learnt to recognize luck when you come across it. But you needn't be afraid. I shall make you work for it all right. I'm going to put you through your paces, young feller, and teach you a few things you've never learnt before."

"Right ho!" said Rollo eagerly. "I'll work for you—like blazes. In fact, I'd work for anybody almost, to get out of being dependent on my stepfather. I can't stand him—never could."

"What! Does he beat you too much?" questioned Ferrars.

"No. He's never licked me from that day to this. I suppose Molly settled that. But that didn't make me like him any better," said Rollo candidly. "It's my own fault probably. I simply don't belong."

“Does—Molly—belong?” asked Ferrars.

“Oh yes, after a fashion. She has to dance attendance on him. It’s not often we get away together, but we spent the last two days down at Tregant Cove—by special permission.” Rollo’s lips took a downward curve. “I think she was deputed to try and make me see reason. But we ended by enjoying ourselves, after all.”

“What were you being unreasonable about?” asked Ferrars.

The boy’s teeth flashed in a smile. “Well, you, sir, mainly,” he said. “I was supposed to be studying with a reading-party in Switzerland. It was a mouldy show, and I chucked it to come home and meet you.”

“For my sake or your own?” asked Ferrars.

“Both,” said Rollo promptly. “But—even if I’d been enjoying it—I should have come.”

“Ah!” Ferrars said. “And you told her that?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Rollo. “That was part of our secret. But I told her she could come with me if she liked and see the person I was going to meet. She couldn’t because she had to get back to the family. But you really must meet her some time. She’s well worth knowing, is Molly.”

Ferrars took out an aged pocket-book and opened it with an absent air. “I’m sure she must be,” he said, “if only for the fact that she is your mother.”

“Oh no. That’s a handicap!” declared Rollo. “Always has been! At least, that’s what her husband thinks, and he’s probably right.”

Ferrars seemed to be looking intently at the leather lining of his wallet. He spoke as though his thoughts had suddenly wandered far away from the subject under discussion. “I wonder,” he said, “if he does.”

“I know he does,” averred Rollo with conviction.

The actor’s eyes came slowly to his face and regarded him with a look that might have expressed a certain derision if it had not been so completely kind. He closed his pocket-book again and returned it to his pocket, taking out his cigarette-case instead, as though that had been his original intention.

“Tommy,” he said deliberately, “I’ve got an idea—somehow—that you don’t know everything. But never mind that now! It was a smart idea of yours to meet me on the quay. Have a fag, boy, and enjoy yourself! By-and-

bye—when we've had time to breathe—we'll get down to real business together.”

CHAPTER VI

THE TEST

IT was at Ivor's suggestion that they retired early to their room that night; but Molly was not sorry to do so. She was very weary, and anxiety for the future pressed upon her. She had a strong suspicion that he had not taken her fully into his confidence, or else he feared more than he would admit. But beyond eliciting the fact that he was going to the doctor again at ten on the following morning, she had discovered nothing further. With his usual methodical efficiency he had made arrangements for interviewing his lawyer and stockbroker later in the day, and he proposed to return home in the evening.

But Molly had a haunting doubt at the back of her mind as to whether this final plan would be feasible. Brace herself as she might, she could not drive away a scared feeling of foreboding which Ivor's very composure served in some fashion to foster. She was certain that he was putting great restraint upon himself, possibly for her sake, and she longed for the relief, which he would not grant, of a candid talk regarding his malady.

She looked with distaste upon the sumptuous bed that awaited her. It represented long hours of sleeplessness which she was in no hurry to begin. But she was glad to be free from all prying eyes, and since Ivor had decreed that she should rest longer than usual after her journey she submitted to the fiat with her customary docility.

She was in fact beginning to undress when the tinkle of the telephone at the bedside startled her. Ivor was seated at the open window with a cigarette. He looked round at the sound, but she had already taken up the instrument.

"Hullo! Yes? Who is it?"

There was a brief pause, then the sound of a chuckle—and a voice she knew. "Hullo, Molly darling! That you?"

It was Rollo's voice. It always had a special thrill for her on the telephone because it was so exactly like another voice which once had called

her by the same loving epithet.

She shut her eyes as she answered. It was almost as if she called into the past. “Yes, dear. Here I am. Where are you?”

The gay voice came laughing back to her. “I’m having the time of my life—at Fricker’s Hotel—with a friend. I rang up the Castle, and they told me you’d stayed up in town for the night. Is all well with you, Molly? How’s the Opposition?”

This was a frivolous reference to his stepfather. It brought her back in a flash to the present, as though Rollo’s personality had projected itself through the space that divided them.

“Oh, my dear!” she said. “You’re in London, are you? I should love to see you, but you had better not come round to-night.”

“No fear, Molly!” came the cheery rejoinder. “I wouldn’t intrude for anything. I just thought you might like to know my whereabouts. I shall be writing a letter to his lordship in a day or two, informing him of my intentions.”

Molly was startled. “Oh, Rollo!” she said. “What are you planning to do?”

His merry chuckle came to her again. He was obviously in the highest spirits. “I can’t tell you over the phone, darling. You’ll hear soon enough. And don’t you worry! I’ve got the chance of my life, and I’m jolly well going to make the most of it. It’s come sooner than I expected, and I’m longing to tell you all about it. But I can’t yet.”

“Rollo!” she said again with something like dismay in her voice. “Do—do be careful! When shall I see you again? Can’t you come round to-morrow—early?”

“No, dear, quite impossible.” Jauntily came the answer. “I’m up to the neck. P’raps I’ll see you on Sunday. I don’t know. I suppose you’re going down to-morrow?”

“I don’t know,” began Molly, and then was suddenly brought to a halt by Ivor quietly taking the receiver out of her hand.

A moment later, as she stood back in surprise, he spoke curtly, rather sternly, into the telephone. “Hullo, Rollo! It’s your stepfather speaking. Your mother is tired and going to bed. If you want to be of use to her, come round here to the Bullivant to-morrow morning at nine-thirty! Eh? What? Too

busy? That's absurd. Come round as I say, and be a help to her for once! What? When I tell you she wants you?"

There followed a pause during which Molly caught vague murmurings of protest, and she saw a very grim look come into Ivor's face.

He listened with firmly closed lips for a few seconds, then spoke again, with finality. "You can do as you like. But if you won't come to your mother to-morrow morning—to help her over a rather difficult time—you need never bother yourself to come near her again. I can assure you I have not made the suggestion for my own sake. I advise you to think it over carefully. That's all I have to say—all I ever shall have to say to you again unless you can so arrange your pressing business affairs as to be at your mother's disposal for an hour or two to-morrow morning. Good-bye!"

He put down the receiver and turned round, his face set in uncompromising lines.

"Ivor!" Molly said in distress. "Why did you ring off? I hadn't finished speaking. I would have explained."

He sat down upon the bed and drew her down beside him. "It will be a test," he said, "and I shall be interested to find out how he takes it. No; I forbid you to ring up again. He knows quite enough. He ought to be ready to sacrifice everything he's got after all you have done for him."

His arm encircled her, and she leaned against him, feeling the need of support. "Ivor," she whispered after a moment, "tell me a little more about yourself! I've heard so little."

He stiffened on the instant. "You will know soon enough, my dear," he said, but though repressive his tone was not unkind. "There is no need to disturb your night's rest with unpleasant possibilities which may never materialize. But all the same, I think it will be a good idea if Rollo can bring himself to be with you."

She saw that it was useless to question him further and gave up the idea with a sigh. He had always treated her as a child, and he would doubtless continue to do so, whatever protest she might make. She had never been more than his chattel, she reflected wearily. He had never wanted a partner.

But he was unusually kind to her that night, making her take a sedative, and arranging for her comfort in a way that touched her inexplicably. She felt that it was she who should have been caring for him, and a tenderness which she had scarcely known before sprang up within her, bringing the

tears to her eyes. Had she ever loved him enough? Had she ever understood him?

Yet, when sleep stole upon her at length, her last thought was not of him, but of the gay young voice that had called down the telephone: "Hullo, Molly darling! That you? I'm having the time of my life."

Would Rollo come to her on the morrow? She wondered, tried to pray that he might—finally sank into slumber. . . .

They breakfasted in their room, Ivor still gravely reticent and rather distant. Yes, he had had some sleep. She was not to worry herself. But in the misty morning sunshine that followed a night of rain, she saw that he looked haggard, as if the night had aged him.

She could not eat much. Every moment she expected the telephone-bell to ring, and then to hear Rollo's voice in light excuse. Poor Rollo! It was not a fair test. Like herself, he had been told too little.

Presently, almost in desperation, she took up a paper—an illustrated daily that Ivor had thoughtfully provided for her. He himself was studying *The Times* with absorption. Words floated before her eyes, and in a moment her thoughts flashed back to Geoffrey Asterby—her friend of long ago—and the human wreck upon whose restoration he had expended so much.

"We learn with interest"—so the paragraph ran—"of the arrival of the popular American actor, Craven Ferrars, a photograph of whose landing from the *Eureka* is reproduced on another page, accompanied by his friend, Dr. Asterby, whose fame in the world of plastic surgery needs no advertisement. Mr. Ferrars, we understand, was once a derelict of the Great War; but, thanks to the marvellous skill and ingenuity of this well-known surgeon, he has not only been restored to the everyday world, but has been transformed into one of the most handsome and popular idols in the world of drama. His genius is beyond dispute, but genius without an attractive physique would be in his profession about as useful as a rudder without a ship!"

Molly read the paragraph. It did not interest her very greatly, but—since her breakfast interested her still less—she turned the page in search of the illustration to which it referred. And there in startled recognition she saw the eager, upward-looking profile of her son! Before everything else that struck her. He had pushed forward in front of the camera. There was no mistaking him. Swift impetuosity was in every line. And he was gazing up at a crippled man descending the gangway whose face was also familiar to her.

The man behind him—presumably Geoffrey Asterby's restored derelict—was the centre of the picture, and, seen even thus, she realized him as a striking personality. It was not so much the faultless features as the straight, distinguished bearing that she noted. Was this the cringing, half-demented creature that she had dimly discerned lurking in the shadowed corner of a ship's corridor all those years ago? And Rollo! What was Rollo doing there?

Ivor's voice broke in upon her. "You are not eating any breakfast. Is there anything else you would prefer?"

She looked up with a start. It was no moment for telling him of her discoveries. Besides, would he have been interested?

In some confusion she answered him. "Oh no, thank you. I am not very hungry. Let me give you some more coffee!"

He declined and glanced at his watch. "We shall have to be moving directly. I don't want to be late."

It was evident that he had no intention of retarding their departure on the chance of Rollo appearing. Her heart sank, but she made no protest. She would have to fight Rollo's battle later. All that she could do now was to submit.

There came a knock at the door, and Awkins presented himself. He expressed the formal hope that his lordship had had a good night and that her ladyship was rested, and went on to explain that the car was in readiness and he had just stepped up to see if there was anything he could do.

Ivor said, "Nothing—nothing," rather testily, and went into his dressing-room.

Molly rose from the table, and Awkins took a single stride forward and spoke under his breath, with a perfectly immovable countenance.

"Mr. Rollo is downstairs in the vestibule, my lady, and would like a word alone with you if possible."

A great throb of relief went through her, but she checked any exclamation of surprise. Or perhaps Awkins checked it with that completely expressionless gaze of his which veiled so much that was confidential.

"Certainly," she said, "oh, certainly! I will go down at once. Tell his lordship I shall be back in a few moments!"

Awkins held the door for her, and she slipped out almost stealthily, before Ivor could emerge again and stop her.

Swiftly she ran down the corridor to the stairs, not waiting for the lift. Rollo had come, and time was short. She must see him alone as he wished. She must tell him about his stepfather, prepare him for what lay before them, make him understand why Ivor wanted him to be with her.

She reached the vestibule and saw him standing at the farther end by the door. He was gazing out rather moodily at the passing vehicles, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched, just as he used to stand when he was a little boy expecting a reprimand.

She went quickly towards him, and, becoming aware of her, he turned sharply to meet her. The cloud on his face was in keeping with his attitude, though he could not refrain from a smile of welcome at the sight of her.

“Molly!” he said, and impulsively embraced her in a fashion that would have earned Ivor’s severe disapproval. “What have you dragged me here for—just as I’m getting busy on my own? Is it a plant?”

She held him to her, since Ivor was not there to censure. “No, dear, of course not! He is not well, and we are just going to see a doctor. He wants you to be with me—just in case we have to make arrangements for an operation, which I do hope won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, is that it?” said Rollo, a sort of grudging relief in his voice as though he were still half-suspicious. “I don’t suppose there’s much the matter with him, is there? There never has been.”

“I hope not—I hope not,” Molly said. “But of course I am anxious. He hasn’t told me very much at present.”

“Don’t you worry!” said Rollo. “I’ll bet it’s nothing serious, or he wouldn’t have been so devilish unpleasant on the phone last night. I say, do you really want me to come? I’m frightfully busy.”

Molly drew away and looked at him. “I can’t picture you not coming, Rollo,” she said.

He gave in with a fair grace. “Oh, all right, tyrant! But I must be back at Fricker’s this evening, whatever happens. I’m on to something really big. I want to tell you about it as soon as we can get a minute. I—oh, bother!” He broke off with his eyes on the lift which had just descended.

Molly turned round. “Oh, Ivor!” she said.

He came forward stiffly, looking pale and gaunt in the morning light.

“So you decided to come!” he said to Rollo, without extending his hand.

Rollo turned a faint grimace into a difficult smile. “Yes, I’ve come, sir. Sorry to hear you’re below par. Jolly bad luck!”

“I must run back and dress,” said Molly nervously.

Ivor waved her to the lift. “Do, my dear! There is not much time to spare. No, Rollo,” as the boy made a move to follow her, “you may stay with me. I should like to speak to you.”

Molly went, having no choice, but with the determination to leave them alone together for as brief a time as possible. They had never understood one another, and there was not the faintest possibility that they ever could or would.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

IVOR regarded his young stepson with a very chilly scrutiny as Molly disappeared. This last-minute compliance with his wishes left a good deal to be desired in his opinion. He broke the silence by expressing a hope that it had not put him to any grave inconvenience.

Rollo received the remark with very wide-open eyes which held something of challenge in their look. "I'm quite willing to be of use, sir," he said. "I'm only sorry I wasn't told the circumstances sooner. It would have made a difference."

"There was no need," Ivor rejoined with coolness. "You were told all that it was necessary for you to know. But I will now tell you something further of which your mother is not yet aware. It is practically certain that I shall have to undergo a serious operation, and if this comes to pass, I look to you to do your utmost to support and help her—not to add to her anxiety in any way." He uttered the last words with emphasis.

A deep resentment had begun to burn in Rollo's eyes. He made reply with an effort. "Naturally, sir, I shall do my best. I think you forget that she means as much to me as she does to you."

"I do not forget anything," Ivor said with extreme quietness. "I am glad to know that you are prepared to do your best. In my opinion it is the very least that you can do."

Rollo's shoulders gave a jerk of anger. A sharp protest sprang to his lips, but he suppressed it. "I agree with you, sir," he said briefly.

Ivor continued to survey him with icy criticism. "And what may this pressing business be upon which you are engaged?" he enquired.

Rollo was quivering with wrath, but he made a desperate attempt to cling to his dignity. "That is a matter I would rather not discuss with you at the moment, sir," he said.

“Indeed!” said Ivor. “Then I am to conclude that it is something of which you are already aware that I shall not approve.”

Rollo’s hands clenched themselves; he forced them into his pockets. “This is not the time, sir,” he said. “If I do act without your approval, I am quite prepared to take the consequences.”

“I am glad to hear that,” said Ivor very evenly. “They may be somewhat serious from your point of view. For I may as well tell you at once that I can make no permanent provision for your future. And therefore I should advise you to postpone any hare-brained scheme you may have in mind until you have carefully considered the advisability of sacrificing your present advantages for the sake of committing yourself to it.”

Rollo’s eyes had a smouldering flame which was growing ominously brighter. “I assure you,” he said, “that whatever I do, sir, will be with the definite object of relieving you of any further responsibility so far as I am concerned at the earliest possible moment. You don’t think—you can’t think——” his voice suddenly trembled passionately—“that I’ve enjoyed being dependent upon you all my life? If you do—well, you’re enormously mistaken. I’ve loathed it—always!”

He swung round with the words, not trusting himself to speak further, aware, beneath the fiery tumult of his anger, that he had already said too much.

Behind him came his stepfather’s very audible sneer. “I deeply appreciate your—gratitude.”

And, though he gripped himself hard, he could not refrain from the retort: “You’ve always had it your own way.”

“And I always shall,” said Ivor very deliberately.

It was their first passage-at-arms in many years, and Rollo for one was hotly ashamed in consideration of the occasion. But at least he had not provoked it, though he lacked the strength of will to attempt any retraction.

A most uncomfortable silence ensued during which Ivor lighted a cigarette with true Aubreystone superiority while Rollo, with his back turned, battled desperately with the unhappy conviction that he had placed himself in the wrong. It was Fate of course. They never could or would hit it off; but it was dashed unlucky that a definite split should come at such a moment. Why on earth had he been summoned? Why had he chanced to be within reach? In short, why had he ever been born? A lasting embarrassment to his mother, a perpetual object of resentment to his stepfather! Damned

unfair of course! But there it was. Life was crammed with this sort of thing, and he hadn't the vaguest idea how to cope with it. He was too young to realize that the choice of destiny is seldom, if ever, unreservedly in the power of the individual.

When Molly rejoined them a few moments later she found an atmosphere so frigid that it was almost impossible to ignore it. Almost for the first time in her life she was genuinely vexed with Rollo, and during the drive to Harley Street she devoted her whole attention to Ivor who accepted it with a somewhat condescending air.

Rollo, seated beside Awkins, maintained a stern silence which was not a very adequate shield to his discomfort. He felt very strongly that Molly would have managed better without him.

This impression persisted when they entered the physician's house, and he would have been inclined to hang back, but for a stentorian whisper from Awkins: "Go on, Master Rollo! Your mother wants you."

He went on, though fully convinced that Molly did not want him; but a little later he was glad, for when Ivor went into the great man's presence he refused to take Molly with him, and they two were left alone together to wait.

It was then that Rollo's better self rose to the surface, and he went and knelt down beside her, very humbly, like a child.

"I've been a beast, darling. I'm so sorry," he said.

She shook her head at him, but she could not resist him. Her eyes were full of tears as she bent forward and kissed his forehead. Perhaps she realized that the fault had not been entirely his, though she would not say so.

"Sit down, darling, and tell me all you have been doing!" she said.

He began to tell her, hardly expecting her to be interested; but to his surprise she followed closely.

"You see, I know Geoffrey Asterby," she said, and she was interested to hear of Craven Ferrars also, though more from the point of view that he had been Geoffrey's patient than any other.

When Rollo spoke with enthusiasm of his stage-career and of the possibilities which this had opened up on his own account, she looked rather dubious.

“I don’t want you to throw in your lot with a man you scarcely know,” she said. “It’s such a risk, Rollo. You’re too young.”

“Oh, stuff, Molly!” he answered lightly. “You must just meet him, that’s all. He’ll convince you all right. He’s the goods. You’ll see. He’ll carry everything before him. Besides, I’ve always wanted to go on the stage. You must have known it. I must have inherited it from my father.”

Her eyes were very tender as she said, “I hope and believe that you have inherited much more than that from him, darling. But—just because he isn’t here to advise you—I want you to be extra careful. If you give up Cambridge, it will be a very serious sacrifice for a very doubtful reward. You don’t realize how precarious it all is. Not one person in a thousand who sets out on the road to success ever gets there.”

“But you can say that of everything,” Rollo pointed out. “And no one certainly will ever get there without setting out.”

She smiled a little at that—it was irrefutable. “Well, I want you not to be in a hurry,” she said. “I don’t want you to throw away any advantages. Do stay on at Cambridge for a while and really work!”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Molly darling, I’m going to work—like the devil. I promise you that. You must leave the rest to me. If I don’t make good, I won’t come whining to you—or anyone else—for help.”

“That wouldn’t comfort me,” Molly said. “I shouldn’t be able to help you in any case, and it would break my heart.”

He got up and sat on the arm of her chair. “You’re not to talk like that, you poor little bearer of burdens. Don’t you see I’m not really risking anything? Giving up College is nothing, but to throw up a chance like this that has come to me would be sheer madness. It’s the sort that doesn’t come twice. You must be fair, Molly. Craven Ferrars is a sort of prince in his own line. He’s not a beginner. People rave about him. They’re literally fighting to get him on the films. He’s a made man.”

“Yes, dear, yes.” Patiently Molly accepted the assurance. “But it doesn’t follow that he can make you, does it? These stars that rise so suddenly often set just as quickly. And what is the secret of his interest in you? What does he know about you?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Rollo was bound to admit. “I met him once when I was a schoolboy, and I told him I was keen on the stage, and he promised then that if he ever arrived himself he’d give me a hand. That was what

made me go to meet him. I wasn't at all sure that he'd remember me, or even want to. But he did."

"Is that all?" Molly asked with something like dismay. "He knows nothing whatever about your abilities?"

Rollo shifted his position. "He knows all he wants to know, and he's willing to help me along. You must see him yourself, Molly! Or see your friend Dr. Asterby if you prefer it! He'll tell you it's not all bunkum. Anyway, it's the chance of a lifetime and I've got to take it. After all, it is my own life, isn't it, and nobody else's?"

There was more of pleading than challenge in his tone. She put her arm round him. "Don't think me unsympathetic, darling! I do understand so well. But you're very young still, and it's just because it is such a big decision that I want you to take time over it. Perhaps you don't even yet realize"—she lowered her voice instinctively—"that your happiness is more to me than anything else on earth."

"Molly!" he said, and crushed her in a large embrace. "You—you—by Jove, it is wonderful of you to tell me that!"

He spoke with more feeling than he had shown for long, and she knew instinctively that he was deeply moved. But she personally was almost too tired for emotion, and after a few seconds very gently she disengaged herself. "We must talk about it all later," she said. "We are bound to consider your stepfather first now. We owe it to him, Rollo. Do try to remember that! We owe him everything."

"You don't," said Rollo swiftly. "Your debt was paid—and overpaid—long ago. Still, I know what you mean, and I'll do my best. You're not really worrying about him, are you Molly? I'm sure you needn't."

She hesitated. "You see, dear, I know so very little about what is the matter with him. He hasn't told me. That is why——"

"How like him!" said Rollo. "Too damn' superior to take even you into his confidence! They're a queer crowd, the whole lot of 'em. But don't worry, darling! I'll see you through."

She leaned her head against him and closed her eyes for a moment. It was as if another voice had spoken in those last words—a voice which once—long ago—had called swift rapture to her soul.

"I know you will—I know you will," she said. "He—never let me down. Neither will you."

“I’d die first,” said Rollo passionately.

“I know,” Molly said again, and faintly smiled. “He said that too.”

CHAPTER VIII

AN OLD FRIEND

THE nature of Ivor's malady remained a mystery to Molly even after she had seen and heard the consulting physician. It was veiled in language too technical and obscure for her understanding, and she was left wondering whether this were intentional or if her intelligence were really at fault. All that she actually grasped was that an immediate operation must be performed, of the success of which the doctor seemed most hopeful and Ivor apparently entertained no doubt whatever. Preparations resultant upon this decision occupied her thenceforth to the exclusion of everything else.

Rollo kept his word and proved himself invaluable, so that even Ivor was compelled to admit that the boy could make himself useful when he liked. By his especial desire the rest of the family were not to be informed of his state until the operation should be safely over. Molly thought the arrangement a somewhat unfair one, but it relieved her of a good deal of worry and she agreed to it with her usual docility. The children were safe in the care of Caroline and Miss Marvin, and Caroline was the only person who was likely to feel aggrieved by the absence of information. In accordance with Ivor's instructions the family were told that they were detained in town on business, and Molly knew that none of them would regard this as other than a satisfactory explanation. For since his mother's death Ivor had always been too autocratic for any question to be raised as to his movements. He came and went as he pleased, and even she did not always know his intentions unless they directly concerned herself.

Later, it was as if a fevered dream had taken possession of her. The only thing of which she retained vivid consciousness was the fact that there was no time to be lost. The doctor had been very emphatic upon that point, and though to the last Ivor kept up the appearance of refusing to be hurried she knew that he also recognized the urgency of the matter.

The wild rush in which the dream involved her kept her nerves stretched to the utmost limit, but she was numbed to all feeling. There was no parting with Ivor. He simply went from her to all outward seeming a sound man,

and then—after a space during which she seemed to be waiting for an event which in no way concerned either him or herself—a nurse (or was it a matron?) came and told her that the operation had been a very severe one but that so far all had gone well. She might see him for two minutes perhaps on the following day, but it all depended.

When she did actually see Ivor again she was shocked beyond measure; for he had the look of a man who had been ravaged by suffering. But he assured her in a hollow voice that all was well with him, and gradually she became accustomed to the fact of his illness, and the sense of unreality began to pass. Everyone at the nursing-home seemed to be very pleased with him and she concluded that all must be well. There was no reason, she was told, that he should not make a complete recovery. He was an excellent patient, and everything was apparently going according to plan.

A few days after the operation Caroline came up to see him and administered a sharp reprimand to Molly for having kept her in ignorance until the danger was over. Rollo at once took up the cudgels hotly in her defence, and there followed a fierce duel which rang in Molly's brain for long after. She herself put an end to it to the discomfiture of both combatants by going into a fit of laughter which, though subdued, was quite uncontrollable—and all the more so because she was wholly incapable of explaining the reason for her mirth.

Caroline was furious with her, but Rollo was frankly worried. Only once had he ever seen Molly lose her self-command before, and that once had left an ineradicable impression upon him. He took her from the scene at once, leaving Caroline in possession of the field, and persuaded her to lie down in her room.

“You're worn out, darling,” he said. “All this beastly fuss is enough to turn anybody's head. That old she-dragon shan't come near you again. I'm damned if she shall.”

Molly had not the heart to tell him that his championship had been as great a strain upon her as Caroline's indignation. She only lay and quivered, still possessed by the horrible impulse to laugh when she greatly wanted to cry.

He stayed with her until she seemed calmer and then went softly away; but she heard him return again later, though by that time she felt too completely exhausted to take much note of his movements. She knew that Caroline at least would have no desire to come near her. Caroline had in fact arranged to return home that evening, since she detested town at all times

and she regarded herself as her brother's representative at Aubreystone Castle. So far as the children were concerned there was not much to be done, since they were all going back to school, and Miss Marvin was still in charge to attend to their various wants.

Perhaps the sudden cessation of anxiety had upset her balance, or was it the long accumulation of many years of self-suppression and overstrain? She did not ask herself the question. She was too weary even to think. She could only lie with closed eyes in a kind of vacuum of weakness and wonder at herself.

About half an hour passed, and then there came a quiet movement in the room. Rollo of course! She did not look up. He knew how tired she was. She hoped he would not attempt to rouse her.

And then the next moment he was bending over her and speaking. "Don't move, Molly darling! Here's someone come to see you—an old friend."

She opened her eyes reluctantly, and found herself looking into the pale, steadfast face of Geoffrey Asterby.

"You!" she said.

He smiled at her, kindly, reassuringly. "You haven't forgotten me? Please don't disturb yourself! I've come to see if I can help."

She put out her hand to him. Rollo was on her other side, but she was aware of his swift withdrawal as Geoffrey's quiet fingers closed upon hers. She knew a moment or two later that they were alone.

Some vital strength seemed to flow out of that steady hold. It was as if she were lifted up out of the sea of trouble that had threatened to overwhelm her, and a wonderful sense of peace came upon her, stilling all turmoil.

"You always help," she said. "I remember how you helped me long ago."

"Did I?" said Geoffrey. "I thought it was you who helped me. I never forgot you. You were so different from everyone else."

He spoke with the simple sincerity which she remembered of old, and she smiled in response, feeling that the lapse of years was as a mere fraction of time in relation to their friendship.

"I am sorry," she said, "that I gave up writing. I was so busy having babies. I have six children now besides Rollo."

“I understood,” said Geoffrey. “It was a whole-time job, wasn’t it? Bringing them all up must have been no joke. And now your husband is ill. I am sorry for that.”

“But he is doing well,” Molly said. “They say I needn’t worry, and I suppose it’s true. I’m not really worrying,” she added; “I am only rather tired.”

“I know,” Geoffrey said. “You must rest so as to get fit to look after him when he begins to convalesce.”

“Yes, I must try,” she agreed. “Now do sit down and have a cigarette! I can’t possibly lie here unless you do.”

He lowered himself into a chair by her couch, and she saw that his infirmity had not lessened with the passage of time. She thought that the stamp of pain was more deeply impressed upon his thin features than when she had seen them last. But he did not seem to have grown older, only more kindly and more full of understanding, if that were possible. He was one of the very few able to substitute comradeship for convention without offence, and that not by tact but by sheer goodness of soul.

“I don’t think I’ll smoke,” he said. “I don’t do a lot of it. And please don’t feel you’ve got to talk to me! It’s nice to be quiet, isn’t it?”

“Talking to you isn’t tiring,” Molly said. “I enjoy it. And I want to hear all that’s happened in all these years.”

“Oh, I’m like you,” he said. “I’ve just been going on from one thing to another—working at my own particular job.”

“And making a success of it,” said Molly. “I know. I’ve heard. That poor man you brought back from France—you did revive the spirit, after all.”

“That was not my doing,” Geoffrey said. “I am not a spirit-healer, you know. The healing came by degrees—straight from God.”

“You were His instrument,” Molly said.

“We are all His instruments,” he rejoined, “whether we realize it or not, but it’s the voluntary workers who get the best jobs. I loved that job more than I can tell you. Craven Ferrars is one of the finest men I have ever known.”

“Ah!” Molly said with slightly quickened breath. “That interests me. For Rollo—my boy—is simply dazzled by him. I have not met him myself, but

it has made me rather anxious. For Rollo is so impulsive, and I am so afraid of his making mistakes.”

“I quite understand,” said Geoffrey. “But I don’t think you need be afraid in this case. Ferrars has taken a great fancy to him, and he wants to give him a helping hand. Whether your son will be a success or not it is, of course, impossible to say; but it seems a pity to deny him his chance.”

“Yes, I have thought of that.” Molly spoke rather wistfully. “He has had every educational advantage, but nobody has ever stretched out a friendly hand to him before. I daresay people think his future is assured, but that is not the case. Of course he has no actual claim upon my husband.”

“There I do not agree with you,” said Geoffrey emphatically. “But at the same time, if he has any aptitude for the stage it seems a pity not to let him have a shot at it. He will never have a more favourable opportunity than this.”

“I see,” Molly said. “You advise me not to oppose it. But I am quite certain his stepfather will.”

“If he disclaims all responsibility concerning him, he is scarcely in a position to do so,” Geoffrey pointed out. “Anyway, I don’t think it would be fair. We all expected to be allowed our chance when we were young.”

“But it means giving up his college career——” she objected.

He smiled at that. “Somehow, with all due respect, I don’t believe that will make a vast difference—to Rollo. He needs work, and if Ferrars can make him, then Ferrars is the best tonic that he can take. Don’t you think you’re rather inclined to worry overmuch? Even if he fails, he’s young enough to start again at something else. He’d be just as likely—more so—to fail at college.”

“Yes, I see that,” Molly admitted. “There’s always a risk somewhere.”

“And always the hope that he may make good,” Geoffrey assured her. “I think he’s a fine youngster myself and more likely to win than lose. You may be sure Ferrars thinks so too; and he is a winner already.”

“I am very thankful you think so,” Molly said. “But—I know nothing about this Mr. Ferrars. Was he ever able to recall his past?”

“Oh yes, his memory returned,” Geoffrey said. “But he doesn’t dwell much on his past life. The gap between was too great. His people were all scattered, and he preferred to begin again. He has simply remade his whole

existence, which to my mind is a marvellous thing. He seems to carry all before him without effort.”

“I am sure he’s very wonderful,” Molly said. “How proud you must be of him! And you are not afraid that he might—one day—collapse again and lose hold?”

“I am not in the least afraid.” Geoffrey spoke with confidence. “I know that the whole fabric has been renewed, and he is as strong now as he ever was. He has learnt to look forward, and that is the whole secret of life. The far future holds such a fascination for those who have eyes to see.”

“Eternal youth,” murmured Molly. “I knew you had it.”

He smiled at that. “No. But I see the value of it. Ferrars is as a strong man armed just because he knows his own weak points. He has shed his handicap. If we could only start life like that there would be fewer failures.”

“I see what you mean,” Molly said, and lay for a space pondering the matter. Finally she looked up again. “It’s done me a lot of good seeing you. I suppose it was Rollo who got you here. He was rather upset about me, poor boy. He thought I was light-headed because I laughed in the wrong place.”

Geoffrey laughed himself. “It’s a sign of sanity sometimes. I’m glad you were able to laugh. I expect it was the turning-point. Don’t worry about him anyway! Ferrars and I are friends. We shall both do our best to keep him from making a mess of things.”

Molly put out her hand. “Geoffrey, I think you are one of the best men I know. It comforts me very much to feel that you too are interested in my boy’s future. It’s now, more than ever, that I miss his father. Of course, Rollo inherits his love of the stage from him. He was just taking up acting as a serious profession when the War broke out. His big chance was to have come that autumn, and I know—I *know*—he would have been a success.”

Geoffrey’s hand closed upon hers with a certain reverence, “In that case,” he said gently, “you have all the less reason to worry. Don’t be afraid! Let the boy have his way! If he works hard he will probably win out. Ferrars certainly won’t let him down.”

Molly sighed. “I suppose you are right. It is I who have changed since those old days. I was disappointed when Rollo wouldn’t go into one of the Services. His stepfather would have thought so much more of him. And yet—if his father had been here—I should never have hesitated.”

“One can’t help being biased by other people sometimes,” Geoffrey admitted. “But still, it’s better to look at things with an open mind if one can. If Rollo makes good, so much the better. And if he fails—well, he won’t be the first to do that, and he can but try again.”

“Thank you,” she said. “You’re such a philosopher. I must remember that. Anyhow, he must never say that his mother stood between him and success.”

Geoffrey smiled whimsically. “Somehow I don’t think the present generation could ever accuse their parents of that. It’s more the other way round nowadays—the children who cramp the style of the parents. But I can’t complain—luckily for me perhaps. Well, I must be getting back. But before I go, I’ve brought you something to take to-night which has always helped me in times of stress. Will you try it—to please an old friend?”

“I would take anything from you,” Molly said, “most gratefully.”

He got up in his difficult fashion. “And in so doing,” he said, “you bestow far more than you ever receive. The gift is at all times your own. Do you realize that, I wonder?”

“What gift?” she asked him wonderingly.

He smiled down at her. “I think the Bible calls it the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit,” he said. “And it’s a very rare thing in these days. When one meets it once, one never forgets.”

“Oh, you don’t really know me!” protested Molly.

He checked her with a very courteous gesture. “My dear, I know a beautiful woman when I see one, and you will never be anything but beautiful as long as you live. Please forgive me for putting it so crudely! But sincerity is usually crude. That’s why it is often unpalatable. Now, you will take this medicine of mine, and rest, won’t you?”

“I will do whatever you tell me,” Molly said.

“Thank you.” He paused beside her. “I’ll come and see you again some evening if I may. I hope you will be less tired next time. Don’t worry about Rollo, and if there’s ever anything I can do—let me know!”

“I would turn to you before anyone else,” Molly told him simply. “You have eased my mind enormously. Thank you!”

“Don’t do that before you’ve had a good night!” said Geoffrey humorously. “You’re needing that more than anything. Good-bye!”

CHAPTER IX

A MEMORY

IVOR's recovery from his operation was a slow one. He had never done anything in a hurry, so perhaps a more rapid progress would have been out of place. But there were no serious set-backs, and Molly still had the feeling so far as he was concerned that everything was going according to plan.

She snatched two days at the end of the holidays, as soon as he was able to dispense with her presence, to go down to Aubreystone Castle and see the children before they all dispersed for school.

They did not receive her with any overwhelming enthusiasm, but they all gave her to understand that her absence had caused a good deal of discomfort and annoyance. Aldyth, a tall, aristocratic-looking child of fifteen, told her plainly that if this sort of thing were to go on during the winter holidays she should make arrangements to spend them with a school-friend in Switzerland. Vivian and Oswald had less to complain of as they had been enjoying the opening of the cubbing season. But the three youngest children—Winefride, Cedric, and Hugo—were vociferous in their accusations of neglect and would hardly let her out of their sight. They were rather like a trio of young starlings pursuing the parent-bird for food, and Molly had nothing wherewith to satisfy them. She knew that she was not essential to their happiness, but they expected her services none the less.

Caroline's sarcastic comment that her popularity with her offspring seemed to thrive best during her separation from them struck a melancholy note of agreement in Molly's heart. She listened patiently to all the grievances poured out to her, but at the back of her mind was the consciousness that not one of the children really cared about her. And it was not very strange that this should be so, for somehow she had never been able to regard them as truly her own. Though her body had borne and nourished them, her spirit had never yearned or exulted over them as it had over Rollo. She had not desired the motherhood that had been thrust upon her, and now it seemed that in their own unconscious way they were retaliating. She was a receptacle for all their complaints, that was all.

They had been spared all anxiety regarding their father, but she could not suppress the wonder if they would have troubled very much had they known of his impending operation. They were not in the least interested in his progress, seeming to take it for granted that he would make a satisfactory recovery. Though they all resembled him far more nearly in character than they resembled herself they had scant sympathy to spare for him. It was his job to pull through and resume his duties as head of the family, and they were all too busy with their own affairs to worry as to whether he possessed the strength to do so. In justice to them she had to admit that Ivor had never attempted to win the affection of any of his children. He, too, was self-centred, and ambition engrossed most of his energies. At fifty-six perhaps he could hardly be expected to take an absorbing interest in his young family. Success for his four sons seemed to be all that he desired. He had never been the type of person of whom anybody could be fond. She herself liked and respected him, but he had never sounded the depths of devotion of which she was capable. She had never been able to teach his children to love him. He had not desired it. So perhaps it was hardly fair to condemn them for their lack of solicitude now that he was ill.

Even Caroline, with her grim reticence, was not apparently suffering any great anxiety on his behalf. She derided Molly for looking harassed, and gave her to understand that it was almost a slight upon the family fortitude to doubt Ivor's ability to make a complete recovery. Of course everything would be all right. Molly could go back to town and enjoy herself while other people did the work at home; but there was no need to pull a long face about it. Ivor would certainly hold his own.

Aldyth took the same line. "I can't think why you worry so, Mother. He'll be perfectly all right in a few weeks. There's never been anything the matter with him before."

And when Molly pointed out that her father was no longer young, she laughed the scoffing laugh of extreme youth.

"Well, we all know that. You're thirty-eight yourself, aren't you? And he is quite eighteen years older. It must be ghastly to be over thirty. I suppose it's enough to make anybody worry."

Was it her fault, Molly wondered rather desperately? Or Ivor's? Or merely the age in which they lived?

"Cheer up, old thing!" said Aldyth with a spurt of most unusual kindness. "He'll get over it. You won't be queen-mother for a long time yet."

Molly was not often moved to wrath, but she almost hated her elder daughter at that moment.

And then came Vivian, sixteen years old, calm and mildly sarcastic. "I suppose Rollo is making himself quite indispensable. Rather hard on my father, I must say. I'm afraid I really ought to go up myself before I return to Eton."

"You can do so if you wish," Molly said, beginning to feel a little more charitable. "I am sure your father would be pleased to see you, and Rollo is not standing in anybody's way."

"It would make very little difference to me if he were," commented Vivian. "It is not a question of wishing, my dear Mother. Nobody could wish to waste a day going up to town when there is so little time left. However, ——" he paused.

"If you feel it your duty——" suggested Molly.

He smiled with down-turned lips. "Oh scarcely that," he protested, "with you in charge! I am sure you more than fit the case. Perhaps it was an unnecessary suggestion on my part. After all, if my presence is required you have only to send for me."

"I quite understand," Molly said. "If your father should wish to see you, I would certainly let you know."

"Do!" said Vivian with more cordiality. "But he will probably be quite fit again before the end of next term. I for one shall be very surprised if he isn't."

And then Oswald and Winefride burst into the room loudly quarrelling over a tennis racquet, and all thoughts of Ivor were dispersed to the four winds.

"I'm like the old woman who lived in the shoe," Molly said to herself without much humour. "Half of them fight each other and the other half fight me, but the old-fashioned remedy is out of my reach."

She disengaged herself as soon as possible, and went in search of Rose Masters to discuss the various school-kits with her.

Rose at least was always full of sympathy. "You do look tired, my lady," was her comment. "I'm sure you've been through a very trying time."

"I am rather tired," she admitted. "But his lordship is better; that's the great thing. I must get back to him to-morrow."

“You’ll want a rest yourself,” said Rose. “Can’t I come and take care of you, my lady, when the young ladies and gentlemen have gone back to school?”

Molly gave her an appreciative smile. “Yes, you can, Rose, and I shall be very pleased to have you. I always feel that you understand.”

Rose’s homely face glowed. Perhaps she had always understood more than most people realized. “I’m always glad to do what I can, my lady,” she said, “specially for you and Master Rollo.”

“I know,” said Molly gently. “And thank you.”

Returning to London in the car on the following day, she reviewed her visit in somewhat sad retrospection. Rose was the only person who had given her any real sympathy. But then Rose had known her from the very outset of her life at the Castle, and her early devotion to Rollo had always been a bond between them. She had devoted herself to the other children also, each in turn, but Molly knew that she had never regarded them in the same light, and they had passed beyond her care now. It was only in the holidays that they needed her. During term-time she became Molly’s own personal maid, and this had given rise to a close friendship to which neither ever made any reference in words. But it was of the type which neither station nor circumstance could influence.

Awkins was another stout supporter, as Molly well knew, and with her eyes on his broad back during the drive up to town she reflected that if she could only persuade Ivor to go down to his house at Tregant with herself and those two faithful servants for his convalescence, he would probably make a much quicker recovery there than amid all the pomp and responsibility of his ancestral home.

The idea attracted her, and she hoped that it might attract Ivor also. The house—Aubreys—was in the care of an old gardener and his wife. She had never before stayed there with Ivor, but she was sure that it could be made comfortable for an invalid, and with Awkins and the car, and Rose to help her, she felt confident that she could make a success of the scheme if only it appealed to him. Her heart quickened at the thought of spending a few more weeks in that dearly-loved spot. It was there more than anywhere else that she was able to throw off the trammels of social rank and be her own natural self.

She wondered what Awkins would think of the notion, and after slight hesitation she broke into his well-bred silence to ask him.

His reply was most reassuring. "My lady, I think that's a hexcellent idea. There's no peace, as you may say, when his lordship's at Haubreystone—neither for him nor for your ladyship. He's had a nasty turn and he wants looking after. Anyhow, if you want anyone to lend a hand, you can count on Awkins."

"Thank you," she responded gratefully. "I knew that before I asked you."

Awkins continued, in snatches, over his shoulder. "Then there's Master Rollo. 'Tisn't good for him to be in town on his own. You take him with you, my lady,—if I may suggest it! He ain't got no vice—but he's young. Don't you give him too much head at present!"

"I'm not sure," Molly said, "whether that arrangement might not worry his lordship. I must think of him first."

"To be sure!" said Awkins. "But Master Rollo ought to be a help to your ladyship. He wants a good talkin' to."

"Oh, I don't think so," Molly said hastily. "He has been—he is—a help. But of course it wouldn't be fair to ask too much of him. He has his own future to think of."

"And it's to be hoped he won't make a mess of it," rejoined Awkins in the tone of one who had grave doubts on the subject.

Molly said no more. She had her own doubts in the matter, but she could not tell him so. If it had not been for Geoffrey Asterby she would have felt far more uneasy, but Geoffrey's opinion weighed with her. He did not consider that Rollo was making a serious mistake, and for that reason she tried to silence her own misgivings.

In any case there was no holding Rollo back. He was determined to embark upon his venture. She could only hope that Ivor would become reconciled to it ere long, but so far he had rigidly refused to discuss Rollo's affairs at all.

The two had scarcely met since the unfortunate occasion of their clash immediately before Ivor's operation, and Molly had an uneasy foreboding that there was trouble ahead. But Ivor's health was her main concern just then, and she tried to keep all other anxieties in the background. If there had to be a definite split, Rollo must take his chance. She had begun to think that the loss of his college career might not after all affect him adversely in the long run. He was determined to be independent, and she had sufficient faith in him to believe that in one way or another he would achieve his end. It was only now and then that the mother's heart in her yearned to have him safely

provided for as were her other sons—though she knew that she would be far prouder of him when he had hewn his own path to success.

She wondered what sort of man the actor was to whom Rollo had so strangely attached himself, and as if in answer to her thought, Awkins spoke with a jerk of the shoulder.

“That Mr. Craven Ferrars what Master Rollo’s took up with—and everybody’s talkin’ about—seems a wonderful sort of man now, my lady. But he hasn’t always been. I seen him myself long ago in France. I’m sure it were the same man—running away from the trenches like mad, he was—after they’d shot his face off him.”

“Good gracious!” Molly said with a start of horror. “You actually saw him! Are you really sure?”

“Well, maybe not quite,” Awkins had to admit. “But it’s true he’s got a new face on him, isn’t it? If he was in the Cambrian Light Infantry—why, then I am sure.”

“Ah!” Molly said, and her heart gave a queer twist with the word. “I wonder—if he was. But there must have been—so many. My first husband—Rollo’s father—was in that regiment.”

“Oh, my lady! Sorry, my lady!” said Awkins, and relapsed into silence.

He did not speak again as he drove through the London streets, and Molly sat in the turmoil of traffic as one in a trance. It was strange how those few random words had brought back to her a memory that had almost faded from her mind—the long, threatening rumble of far-distant guns that once had filled her soul with anguish.

CHAPTER X

THE BARGAIN

MOLLY drove straight to the nursing-home on her arrival in London without waiting to go to the hotel where she hoped she might find Rollo awaiting her.

Ivor was better. She discovered him propped up in bed and reading, and he greeted her with a smile of welcome which seemed to her much warmer than she was accustomed to receive.

She had brought him flowers, but he pushed them aside as she reached him and drew her down to him with a quietly uttered, "Welcome, my dearest! I have missed you more than I can say."

"Have you really?" Molly said, curiously divided between surprise, pleasure, and compunction. For she had not missed him. She could not pretend that she had. There had been too much to think of, to settle, to arbitrate about.

But she was touched, deeply touched, and she pressed the iron-grey head very tenderly to her as she softly kissed him. "They tell me you are really better," she said. "I am so glad, dear."

"I believe I am—much better," he said, still holding her. "Almost ready for a tonic. Shall I tell you what kind I should like it to be?"

"Of course!" she said, sitting down on the bed. "You shall have it, whatever it is, if the doctor agrees."

He looked at her, and she thought his eyes were rather misty as he said, "My dear, you are the only tonic I want—to go away with you somewhere—to be alone with you."

Again, even while it responded to the unaccustomed tenderness, her heart smote her. She felt oddly young and diffident, uncertain of herself. How strange that he should have come to want her again thus! And it was the desire of the spirit, not of the flesh. She recognized it for the first time,

and her own spirit stirred in answer. It was not in her to remain unmoved by such a request as that.

She smiled at him with lips that slightly trembled. Her hands held his. "Well, that shouldn't be very difficult to arrange," she said. "D'you know I was going to suggest very much the same thing myself? If you—as soon as you are fit for the journey—and I, with Rose and Awkins"—she uttered the last name with a tremor of laughter, for she and Rollo had never succeeded in tacking an H on to that illustrious servitor's name—"were to go down to Aubreys for a few weeks, what a happy time we might have! There are plenty of lovely days left yet, and it won't matter about their being short because we shall have to put you to bed early. We could take a nurse down at first if you liked, until you got a little stronger. Would you enjoy that, do you think?"

"I don't want any nurse," said Ivor. "I only want you. You are so lovely, my dear—so peaceful, so unquarrelsome."

"Oh, Ivor!" she said, with a quick glow. "How very nice of you to say that!"

"I say what I think—always," he said, with a slight return to his old complacency. "Very well. We will consider that settled, and I see no reason for delay—if the doctor agrees, as you say. As a matter of fact, he was suggesting the possibility of a change to the sea only this morning."

"That will be splendid," Molly said. "How we shall enjoy it! You have never been down at Tregant long enough before to know how perfect it is. And the house is such a sun-trap."

"Let us hope the sun will shine for us!" said Ivor in a tone that made her feel that further rhapsodies might have a prejudicial effect. "I shall insist upon your taking plenty of cream in any event. You are really painfully thin."

"What nonsense!" she laughed, baring a blue-veined arm for his inspection. "But we'll both take lots of it and have a real good time. You will be fit for anything when we come back."

He patted her arm gently. "I have no desire to look too far ahead," he said. "I shall have you all to myself for the next few weeks, and that is enough. By the way,"—a slight frown appeared on his rather drawn face—"what about—Rollo? I take it he returns to Cambridge shortly."

Molly made an involuntary movement as if in self-defence. "I haven't been able to talk to you about that," she said, with pleading in her voice;

“but I want to. He has set his heart on something else, Ivor—something which you may not approve of, but to which I do beg you will give your consent, as he is so anxious to get to work. I haven’t been able to refuse him myself.”

“Have you ever been able to refuse him anything?” asked Ivor, the frown deepening.

“Oh, please!” she begged, taking his hand between her own. “Don’t turn things down without knowing! We must be fair to him.”

“Well?” he said, with a touch of harshness. “Am I usually hasty in my judgments?”

“I want you to be much less than hasty,” she said winningly, bending towards him. “I’m counting on your love for me—because Rollo’s future means so much to me. Please, dear, will you be very patient?”

His face softened involuntarily. “Go on, my dear!” he said. “You’ve found the chink in the armour. But I can’t let myself be fooled—even for you. What is this mad-hatter scheme he’s after? Does he want to go on the music-halls—or do the fashionable thing and join a travelling circus?”

“No, Ivor, no!” She was still holding his hand, caressing it between her own. “It’s more solid than that, thank goodness. It’s just that this actor who has just come over from America—Craven Ferrars—you’ve probably heard of him—has taken a great fancy to Rollo and thinks he can make something of him.”

“What! The genius with the new face!” scoffed Ivor. “His popularity rests upon that more than anything else, or I am much mistaken. Public curiosity is a very powerful factor, but I doubt if it would benefit Rollo very much. Well? Rollo wishes to throw in his lot with this mountebank, does he? And expects to make a brilliant success of it. And what—may I ask—is going to happen if he fails?”

Molly looked at him with deep appeal. “We may all of us fail,” she said, “whatever we set our hands to. I’m not asking you to support him if he does—only not to be hard on him now. I know quite well that giving up his college course is a big step, and from your point of view not a fair one. But then, from his standpoint this is a chance that won’t come again and that is more valuable because of what it may lead to. He wasn’t doing very well at college, I’m afraid. His heart was not in it. But this——”

Ivor made a contemptuous sound that choked any further words from her. She saw his face hardening again. “My dear,” he said, “I’m sorry, but I

really can't listen to this nonsense. Your heart is running away with your head as it always has."

"Not always!" breached Molly almost involuntarily.

He gave her a sharp glance. "No, not always! I admit that. And now tell me—have you ever regretted the sole occasion on which you followed the dictates of common sense?"

She heard his wounded pride in his voice, and turned in swift contrition. "Oh, Ivor, forgive me! I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

He regarded her grimly. "You think I have not yet fulfilled my part of the contract?" he questioned. "And in what way have I failed? I have given your son equal advantages with my own—as I promised. Am I to blame because he refuses to follow the career of a gentleman and chooses to tear off on a wild-goose chase that can only lead to ruin? Am I responsible any longer?"

"We are neither of us responsible," Molly said. "But we can be kind to him. I know how you feel about it. Very often I feel the same. But it's no use, Ivor. The young will go their own way, just as we did. Don't be angry about it! I can't bear it. Please don't be angry!"

Her eyes were full of tears as she besought him, and again he began to soften. "You're such a child still, Mary," he said; "scarcely a day older than when I married you. How you hated giving in to me! Do you remember? And yet—wasn't it far better for you? Didn't I know best?"

She quivered a little with the memory of a bitterness long past, but she yielded the point. "Yes. I'm sure you were right. At least, our marriage hasn't been a failure, has it?"

"A failure!" he said, and drew her to him unresisting until he could kiss her wistful lips. "A thousand times no! You have made a slave of me, my dear. I can't hold out against you. By and by, we will have another honeymoon—perhaps another baby! Wouldn't that make you happy?"

He pillowed her head on his shoulder, feeling the tremor that went through her at his words and smiling at the impulse that prompted her to hide her face.

"It would be rather amusing, wouldn't it," he said, "after ten years? Would you like to begin again, Mary?"

"Oh no," she said, "no! We have cares enough, Ivor. I couldn't face any more, could you?"

“I don’t anticipate any serious trouble with any of our children,” Ivor remarked. “They all seem to me to promise very well.”

“They are still young,” Molly said. “But we won’t worry before we need. Only, Ivor, you will try to bear with Rollo, won’t you, for my sake? I’m not asking you to help him—only not to be angry with him. He doesn’t really mean to be ungrateful, but he is so anxious to be independent.”

“I’ve grasped that,” commented Ivor. “Well, if he insists upon going against my wishes, I can do no more for him. I’ve already told him so.”

“I know,” she said. “But don’t—don’t break with him, will you? Please, Ivor, please!”

She had never before so urgently entreated him. Her whole soul was in her plea. And to the man in whose arms she lay it seemed that the power of resistance was gone from him. He marvelled at his own weakness, for he had been quite decided upon this vexed subject ever since his last interview with Rollo. But the clinging softness of her was more than he could withstand. Possibly his enforced separation from her had awakened in him something of which he had never been fully conscious. Hitherto he had always regarded her as indisputably his own property. Now, inexplicably, he suddenly saw her as infinitely desirable and yet to be won. All their past life together faded into insignificance. He had been near to the gates of death, and he had returned to realize that life was sweeter than he had ever deemed it. Passion awoke in him—a strange, consuming flame which somehow had never before fully dominated him. He had possessed Molly beyond all question and as a matter of course, but he had never been possessed.

Suddenly his hold tightened. He turned her downcast face upwards and kissed her again closely, lingeringly, on brow and lips.

“My darling girl!” he said rather huskily. “My little wife! How can I refuse you anything—you who give—and always will give—all?”

Molly was trembling still, but she did not shrink. “You won’t refuse me then?” she managed to whisper, yielding herself, as she had always yielded, to his embrace.

“No,” he said, and kissed her again repeatedly while he was speaking. “You shall have—whatever you ask—just because you are—and ever will be—my very own. Will that make the honeymoon any sweeter to you, I wonder? I hope it will, my dearest. I should like—another honeymoon—with you.”

Her heart was beating hard and fast. How could she let him know that she was dismayed by his words and longed to withdraw herself? It would have been sheer cruelty. Besides, had he not granted her request? And she knew he would keep his word. It was like the ratification of a bargain to her. She was bound to comply.

In silence she slipped her arms about his neck and gave him the kiss he mutely craved. The sacrifice she made in that mute offering was not wholly for Rollo. It was partly in payment of the debt of love.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

THE JOURNEY

WHEN MOLLY went to the hotel that evening she and Ivor had already made plans for the move down to Tregant. If his progress continued satisfactory, his doctor was confident that he would be fit to undertake the journey in another week. There would be no need for a trained nurse to accompany them. Molly herself and Rose Masters would suffice to wait upon the patient who was to take things very quietly for a time. And Awkins would be with them if extra help were needed.

Ivor personally was not in favour of a large *entourage*. He wanted, as of yore, to have Molly to himself. But there was a difference in his attitude. He seemed determined to indulge rather than to dominate her, and Molly was touched by his tenderness. She too resolved to give him the utmost devotion of which she was capable. His kindness in ceding the matter of Rollo had touched her deeply. Never in the whole of her experience had he allowed his love for her to carry him away so completely, and she felt in her gratitude that she could never make adequate return.

She half-expected to find Rollo awaiting her, but she looked in vain for him as she entered. She had had no word from him since they had parted. No doubt he had been far too busy with his new project to spare the time to write, but he had known that she was returning on that day, and she was surprised and somewhat disappointed as the evening passed without his making an appearance. She concluded that he was still staying at Fricker's with his new friend, Craven Ferrars, and she contemplated ringing up to ask for him, but in the end was too tired to make the effort.

She went to bed feeling rather lonely and depressed, and trying to cheer herself with the reflection that she would be quite indispensable when Ivor was out of the nursing-home. He would probably want her every minute of the time that they spent at Tregant, and it would be her part to see that he was as happy as he anticipated. As for Rollo, she could no longer hope to be indispensable to him. His need of her was nearly past—while Ivor's was increasing. She determined that Ivor should not look to her in vain.

In the morning there was still no news of Rollo, and she rang up Fricker's Hotel to ask for him. The reply was disappointing. He had left town, so also had Craven Ferrars and Dr. Asterby. Letters were being forwarded through a bank, as Mr. Ferrars desired a rest from publicity for a short time before the production in London of the play in which he was taking a leading part. He would be returning probably in a week or so, but it was uncertain if he would resume his residence at the hotel, as he seemed to think a flat or rooms would be more private.

Molly put down the receiver baffled. Rollo's patron had evidently been driven away by publicity, but she felt convinced that Rollo was still with him, and probably Geoffrey Asterby also. There was nothing to do but wait. Rollo never kept her for long uninformed of his whereabouts, and even if he failed to write she would hear from Geoffrey.

She was disappointed, for she had counted upon meeting Craven Ferrars some time during the ensuing few days. She was deeply interested in the actor both as Rollo's friend and Geoffrey's surgical masterpiece; but the opportunity had gone and might not recur until she herself returned from the sojourn at Tregant.

She had decided to go down there on the following day with Awkins, and herself inaugurate the preparations for Ivor's reception, returning the day after, since he would not be parted from her for longer. It would not give her much time, but she could convey a brief idea of her wishes to the old couple in charge and leave the faithful Awkins to see that they were carried out. Then, the following week, Rose Masters would join her, and they would take Ivor down by train to the junction where Awkins could meet them with the car.

It involved a very early start on the morrow, but she would not entrust the arrangements for Ivor's comfort to any but herself. He grudged even sparing her for a day, but since her mind was set upon it he let her go, on the strict condition that she would not fail to return to him the evening after. She saw that he was growing very tired of his imprisonment, but he expressed no desire to see any of his children. His interest in them seemed to be purely a family matter. He took it for granted that they would be a credit to him, but beyond that his paternal feelings did not go. He had immersed himself in politics for so long that he had lost touch with them all, and only his natural pride remained. He was glad to hear good news of them, but Molly herself was the only person he really wanted. His illness had apparently awakened him to the fact that he needed her, and his strange new fondness remained unabated. Did he realize, perchance, that the years were beginning to take

their toll of him, and that the opportunities of earlier days might never come again? Or with the compulsory relinquishment of the work in which he had been so completely engrossed, did he feel the emptiness of the world in which he lived and stretch out instinctively for the human companionship and sympathy which till then he had never needed?

Molly wondered rather pityingly as she took leave of him and felt his hand cling to hers. He was making a good recovery, the doctors said; but she could not fail to see that his illness had aged him. She loved him far more in weakness than she had ever loved him in strength. There was something pathetic in his attitude towards herself, as if he were trying to make up to her for the years of domination that were past. She could scarcely restrain her tears as she thought of it.

“I believe,” she said to herself, as she went to bed that night, “I believe I shall end by loving him very much.”

But she did not forget to open the little gold locket which contained the portrait of the man with the laughing eyes—so like Rollo’s—the lover of her girlhood. She had put it away once, but now she could bear to look upon it again.

“I could never love anyone like you, my darling,” she whispered; “never while the breath is in my body. God bless you—God bless you always—wherever you may be!”

It was her nightly prayer now, as it had been all those years ago in the little low-roofed cottage where Rollo had been born. The memory of that strong young lover had never left her. Life had never been the same again. She had filled it up with comparatively casual things, but still deep down in her the great essential remained, and Rollo had been her living reminder. As long as the breath was in her body, she would remember.

With the morning came preparations for the journey, and she was up almost with the dawn, making ready. It was a long way to Tregant, but she could take her leisure in the car. Perhaps she would sleep!

Awkins was waiting at the appointed hour. She had never known him late. And after a hasty breakfast she joined him, and they started on their way.

It was a pearly morning towards the end of September, and as they left the town behind and drew out upon the Great West Road wreaths of mist were rising up from the fields at the warm touch of the sun.

Molly lay back in the car and revelled in the peace and beauty of the English countryside. Awkins, when once he had got into his stride, lost no time; but he was a past-master in the art of driving. He took no risks and was always royally and serenely in the right. He controlled a car as he controlled his horses—with absolute confidence and unswerving decision. If other people made mistakes or showed ill-temper on the road, Awkins gave no sign. His own unfailing rectitude was his sole justification.

Molly rather envied him. He was unique, of course; but how exhilarating to be always beyond reproach! She had never driven a car herself, but she knew that his driving was practically faultless. It gave her the keenest pleasure to be driven by him.

Swiftly, mile after mile of leaden road slid behind them. The mists rose higher and disappeared into fleecy clouds high up in the exquisite blue. There was no hint of autumn as yet in the trees, only in the gleaming orchards where the fruit hung thick.

The sun shone genially down upon them. She would have liked to pause by the wayside and bask. There had been no letter for her from Rollo, but she was determined not to worry. There was always the comforting thought of Geoffrey. She was sure that he would keep an eye upon the boy for her sake. How often had she worried fruitlessly in the past! And now, with Ivor's new-born kindness warming her heart, she would not let herself be perturbed. She would be happy—she would be happy—and so show her gratitude.

They passed through a forest where great oak-trees spread their boughs almost as though they stretched out arms of welcome. The whole country seemed transformed into a fairyland that day. There were a thousand places where she longed to stop and let the beauty sink into her soul. But time was short and they could not linger. And so the car sped on. Later, she was to look back upon those hours of rapid travel as a swift journey to meet her fate.

They made a brief halt at an ancient market-town for luncheon. The whole place was alive with farmers, and buzzing with the fine old West-country dialect. She had her meal in a corner apart, listening to their gruff, cheery talk with an enjoyment which she wished Rollo could have been with her to share.

Then they were on the road again, sweeping on to the western seaboard where great Atlantic rollers would be rushing in to burst in clouds of spray upon the Mammoth Rock.

Awkins had made good time. He knew all the short cuts that were worth knowing. They had expected to reach Tregant by four, but they had half an hour in hand when they entered the narrow, winding lane that led between high banks, crowned by bramble and clematis, to the village and the cove.

Here and there the way was steep, even precipitous; but Awkins knew every inch of it, and no difficulties perturbed him.

The first glimpse of the sea came quite suddenly between distant trees, and Molly's heart leapt, as it always did, at the sight. It was a pearly blue, too far away as yet for any white-capped waves to be visible, but the salt wind that blew in at the open windows told her of the tossing waters upon which later she would gaze. And she wondered if she could ever persuade Ivor to love it all as she did.

The road in front of the inn was by no means easy to negotiate, having a steep drop down to a stream on one side and what small space there remained on the other blocked by a line of benches and tables.

Awkins crawled past these *impedimenta* at a snail's pace, taking no risks. He himself usually remarked when he arrived safely at the bottom of the hill that it was just the place for a fatal haccident, its only safeguard being that no one could come up it in a hurry.

Molly was just beginning to hear the long low roar of the sea. The inn held no interest for her, and she did not even glance at it, but they had passed it by barely half a dozen yards when a sudden yelling and commotion rose behind them, and looking back, she saw a flying figure pursuing them.

“Good gracious!” she exclaimed. “It isn't—it can't be—Rollo!”

Awkins was too good a driver to turn his head in such a spot. “Can't stop here, my lady,” he said firmly, and crept on.

But the shouting figure in their wake followed at a headlong gallop, reached the car, wrenched at the door, leaped upon the running-board and fell upon Molly's feet.

“You!” cried Rollo, banging the door upon himself. “How on earth—and why——”

And, “You!” cried Molly, clasping him. “I'd no idea you were down here! Why didn't you wait for me?”

He gathered her into his great bear-like hug, laughing and talking with enormous gusto. “*Chérie*, I couldn't! I'm only down here till the end of the week. I thought I'd be back in time. Now what are you up to? You can't

have run away, or you wouldn't be with Awkins, V.C. Hullo, Awkins! What a surprise for us all, eh?"

Awkins drove on down to safer ground without looking round. "I'm pleased to see you, Master Rollo," he said, "but should have been more so a little earlier."

"Well, I can't be everywhere at once," protested Rollo to this ambiguous remark. "And I ought not to be here if the truth be told. I'm supposed to be working. I actually was till you came along and interrupted. How lovely you're looking, Molly! Just as if you'd stepped out of a picture by one of those old-fashioned johnnies who knew how to appreciate beauty! Are you bound for Aubreys? And why all alone with the sergeant-major?"

Molly began to explain. "Your stepfather is coming down here for a change. I've come to get things in order for him. I shall go back to-morrow by train."

"Oh, I've got you till to-morrow, have I?" said Rollo. "That's something—though I shan't be allowed to spend long with you on account of my lessons. My word! I'm having my nose held to the grindstone all right, I can tell you. Craven Ferrars is an absolute devil for making one work."

"Is he with you?" Molly asked, keenly interested.

Rollo grimaced. "Is he not? I brought him here for a rest, as I thought. But it's not being a rest for me. I'm working like a black, Molly, positively. He's turning me into a sort of drudge. I've got to learn his part as well as my own—and a host of other things. It's great fun all the same, and I'm enjoying it. He's the sort of chap worth working for. Still, I'm coming down with you to Aubreys now for tea. I can go back and explain afterwards. Can't tell you what a surprise I had seeing the car go by with you in it. Jolly nice surprise, Molly darling! And you didn't even know I was here."

"How could I know?" Molly said. "You never told me. I was rather worried about you as a matter of fact."

"Oh, don't you ever worry about me!" said Rollo. "Sheer waste of time—as I'm sure his lordship would agree. Besides, there's no need. For I tell you, Molly—I tell you straight"—his eager young eyes looked into hers with the words—"I'm on to something really good at last, and you can tell everyone so with my love. They'll probably all think I've fallen from the top-notch of respectability into the bottomless abyss reserved for gamblers, card-sharpers, and what-nots. But they can all damn well think—and say—"

what they please. I've fallen just where I want to fall—and I've landed—on my feet.”

CHAPTER II

THE VISION

THEY had tea together on the veranda at Aubreys, overlooking the sea.

Rollo was full of the wonderful chances which the future held for him, of all that Craven Ferrars was going to do for him, and his gratitude over the fact—gently conveyed by Molly—that his stepfather would not stand in his way was of a decidedly perfunctory order.

She herself was too greatly relieved by the knowledge that he was in the hands of a man who at least possessed the power to direct his energies into a definite channel, to reprove him on that score. His ardent enthusiasm kindled a responsive enthusiasm in herself. She knew that Craven Ferrars was considered a great man, that he had made a name in America which had already paved the way to success for him in England. Until she met him she could not fully understand his attitude towards her son, but it was evident that he had taken a sufficiently keen fancy to Rollo to desire to bind up the boy's fortunes with his own. All that Rollo told her regarding him met with her approval, though she made an honest attempt not to allow herself to be biassed in his favour by too keen a partisanship. And she also struggled against entertaining too high an optimism with regard to Rollo's theatrical future. He was utterly untried, and, however confident he might feel, she knew that public opinion was completely incalculable. It was personal magnetism that counted before all else. Obviously Craven Ferrars possessed it, but it was a gift which he could not hope to impart to anyone else. If Rollo lacked it—but did he? Something within her rose up in swift denial. All her other children might be wholly unendowed with charm. They were of a totally different breed. But Rollo—the spirit of his father breathed in every line. He had inherited the fire of genius which had burned in Ronald. Perhaps it was this which Craven Ferrars had detected and which had drawn the actor to him!

“I must meet him, Rollo,” she said when tea was ended. “But I am so busy this evening. There is so much to see to, and I have to start off again

early to-morrow. Do you think he would come down after dinner? Geoffrey is with you too, you say.”

“Yes, but Geoffrey couldn’t manage the hill. We should have to turn out the car. You’d better come to us,” said Rollo ingenuously. “Come and have dinner at the pub! It’s quite wholesome, but you needn’t dress.”

Molly considered. “D’you know, darling,” she said finally, “I believe I would rather like to see him alone? You mustn’t mind my saying that. You see, being your mother——”

“Or my precious little twin-sister!” he interposed.

She smiled and passed on. “There are things I should rather like to discuss with him which I couldn’t with you and Geoffrey there. And then, too, I really shan’t have time to come and dine with you all. I have such loads to see to between now and dinner. You must go, dear, and leave me to it. But ask Mr. Ferrars to come down if he can manage it about nine! I shall be ready for him then. And I’ll call in and see you and Geoffrey for a minute in the morning on my way to the train. Will that be all right?”

He grinned at her. “Darling, everything you do is always all right. I quite see your point. But don’t do too much of the mother-love business, will you? I’m on my own now, and Ferrars and I understand each other.”

He rose to take leave of her, and as he wrapped his arms about her she saw the reflection of his father’s adoration shining in his eyes.

“Oh, my dear!” she said. “How like you are! I never saw it until you began to grow up. You are his living image.”

“I should say I’m much more like you,” said Rollo. “But have it your own way!”

“It’s the spirit I mean,” she said, holding him closely. “The brave, true spirit that never flinched or faltered—till death came!”

He gave her a sudden, rather strange look. “Molly darling,” he said, “I’ll tell you something. I’m a coward at heart. The thought of death appals me. It may have appalled him too. You can’t possibly know.”

She clasped him closer. “That’s only because you are young and full of life,” she said. “It will pass.”

“He was young too,” said Rollo. “If he was like me, he must have hated death.”

She uttered a little stabbing sigh. How often she had pondered over that—and yearned to know the truth! “Anyway,” she said, “I am sure he went through it bravely. It wasn’t in him to be anything but brave.”

“Perhaps he was lucky enough to be dead before he knew,” said Rollo. “That’s what I’m hoping for. I should squeal like a rat if I knew beforehand.”

“Hush—oh, hush!” Molly said. “What is death but the opening of a door?”

He kissed her with less of his usual effervescence. “You’re such a saint,” he said. “But I can’t help loving life. It’s such a wonderful thing. Why, I even grudge going to sleep nowadays.”

She held his head between her hands. “Oh, my little Rollo!” she said with a very tender smile. “You always did!”

When he had left her, she stood for a few seconds looking far out over the pearly sea. Yes, he was like Ronald. He spoke the very words that Ronald might have uttered. He had the same quick manner of speech, the same ardour, the same vital warmth. But Ronald had never spoken to her of death. Had he had the same dread in his soul? Had he shrunk—as Rollo shrank—from the thought of that opening door? Had he known terror as he passed through it? Had he wanted to turn back? Only God knew.

She felt the old pain rising in her heart, and she turned away to stifle it. Twenty years ago now! Twenty long years ago! But those swift poignant words of Rollo’s had brought it all back—as though it had been yesterday. As she went about her self-appointed task, her eyes were wet with tears. And in those years she seemed to see a great gulf of separation which nothing could ever bridge.

She gave her mind to the work in hand, and slowly the cloud passed from her spirit. There was very much to be done—a downstairs bedroom to be prepared for Ivor, and every comfort that she could devise to be installed in it. He would be able to walk straight out on to the veranda as soon as walking was permissible, and thence to a little look-out arbour at the end of the garden which she wanted renovated for his use.

It was eight o’clock before she allowed herself any breathing-space in her labours, and then she went hurriedly to her room and changed before sitting down to a simple meal.

The evening had the lingering warmth of summer, and bats were flying about in the dimness beyond the French windows. There was a soft shine of

stars over the sea, but no moon. As she sat at the table she could hear the occasional roar of a wave breaking upon the Mammoth Rock in the distance, and she thought that the tide must be rising.

It did not take her long to dispose of the homely fare placed before her, and when she had finished she went and sat in a low basket-chair on the veranda to rest. It had been a long day, and she was tired. If she had not been expecting a visitor she would have gone straight to bed. But the necessity to keep her mind alert urged her almost mechanically. And presently, feeling a certain drowsiness stealing upon her, she got up and moved out into the dewy gloom of the garden.

There would be time to go down to the beach before he came, she knew, and she thought the breath of the ocean would revive her. Perhaps she had worked too hard, for her brain felt stultified, and she had not the faintest desire to encounter this stranger upon whom Rollo depended for so much. Rather a curious frame of mind had come upon her. Past and present and future seemed to be strangely jumbled together in her consciousness. Doubtless the result of a weary brain, too bewildered for coherent thought! As she went down through the whispering trees to the little swing-gate that led out on to the shore, she had a queer sensation as of one who, journeying along the main thoroughfare of life, draws near to a place where three roads meet.

She reached the gate and passed through it as if in a dream. It was not really dark, for the stars were wonderful and in the east behind her there was the glow of a rising moon. Very soon the sea would be a flood of silver glory. It was beautiful to stand thus and feel the wonder of God's earth. Gazing forth over that limitless expanse of rippling water, she seemed to see eternity itself opening out before her, and half-involuntarily she murmured, "Oh no, I should never be afraid." Life and death and the life beyond were all merged into one for her at that moment. And so standing, there came again to her that waking vision of long ago—a revelation to her spirit of a figure, withdrawn yet present, that stretched out its arms to her, but this time without words. It was she who spoke into the murmurous stillness, not knowing that she spoke. "Oh, Roy,—my darling—I'll come to you—whenever God wills. Perhaps it won't be so very long, after all!"

A breath of orange-scented roses reached her—the little white roses that grew on the sandy bank on which she stood—roses that generally bloomed in June. She thought of the Resurrection, and a thrill went through her whole being, sending a wild throbbing to her heart. The roses had bloomed a second time this year, and it was somehow like an omen. But she told herself

that if Roy had come to her then in spirit-form, the joy of it would have been more than flesh and blood could bear. She would have gone to him gladly, triumphantly—like a bride; but her dead body would have been left behind on the shores of Time. And she knew—to the very soul of her she knew—that she would not have been afraid.

CHAPTER III

THE MEETING

THE scent of roses went with her as slowly she returned—mingling with the scent of the sea—and the memory of the vision still hung about her. She wished that she could have taken it straight into her dreams that night. She did not want to be detached from it by an interview with a stranger.

But she had herself made the appointment, and she could not draw back. She made her way up the garden path where the first silver radiance of the rising moon had begun to trace delicate leaf-shadows, and so towards the veranda and the softly-lighted room she had left.

She could not be late, she knew, but she was aware of someone on the veranda ere she reached it. She heard a movement and the creaking of a chair. And then she saw a figure awaiting her which made her pause, half-startled.

“Rollo, is that you?”

A voice that was deeper than Rollo’s answered her—a voice that sounded intentionally cold and formal. “No, it is Craven Ferrars. You—are Lady Aubreystone?”

She came forward with extended hand. “Forgive me! This half-light is rather deceptive. Yes, I am—Rollo’s mother.”

Their hands met, but the man’s grasp was purely ceremonious, and Molly felt oddly chilled.

“I am very pleased to meet you,” he said, and she could not help wondering why he took the trouble to make such a banal and obviously insincere remark.

For Rollo’s sake she had wanted to like him, but for Rollo’s sake she found herself assuming a critical attitude which was quite uncharacteristic of her. She gave a slight shiver which she could not suppress.

“Let us sit down inside! It’s colder than I thought. There’s a dew falling.”

She led the way into the room, and then turned and steadily regarded him. So this was Geoffrey Asterby’s masterpiece! Her first impression was that of a person viewing a piece of sculpture—a magnificent work of art which had neither soul nor sentiment behind it—an ideal—a male Sphinx! And then, meeting his eyes, her judgment suddenly faltered. For he looked at her as though he saw straight through to the very heart of her. Yet his gaze was as a steel door barring out all intruders. She was baffled, deeply stirred, oddly humiliated.

“You have been very good to my boy,” she said with an effort. “I want—first of all—to thank you for that.”

“You have nothing to thank me for,” he said. “I am following my own inclination entirely. The boy has genius, and he will make good.”

“Are you so sure of that?” she said, surprised to hear from the mouth of a stranger an assurance to which she would scarcely have dared to give utterance herself.

He smiled very faintly, wholly without humour. “Of course I am sure! He needs careful shaping, but I am only thankful that no one has ever tried to shape him before.”

Again she was struck by his confidence, which almost seemed to amount to a proprietary interest. A sudden suspicion darted through her mind. Was this man a theatrical speculator? Did he propose to exploit Rollo’s gifts for his own profit? Was he doubtful whether the reputation he had made for himself were firmly enough rooted to carry him through? Did he possibly think that Rollo’s chances of success exceeded his own and were therefore worthy of cultivation? She began to feel a little breathless. Why had none of these possibilities occurred to her before? Now, suddenly confronted, she felt unable to deal with them. And this man with the face like an ivory mask disconcerted her, placed her at a hopeless disadvantage.

She looked at him with unconscious appeal. “There is so much that I want to talk to you about. Do sit down! Have a cigarette! I’ll ring for drinks.” She pushed a box towards him, and rang the bell, trying to cover her nervousness with trivial actions, though feeling the situation to be somehow beyond her.

He took a cigarette with a brief word of thanks, but he remained on his feet; curiously—so it seemed to her—on the defensive, as though he had

fathomed her agitation without fully grasping its cause.

“Don’t you smoke?” he said.

She shook her head. “Very seldom. Not to-night, anyhow. Won’t you sit down?”

He mutely signed her to a chair by the window, and she sank into it with an unaccountable feeling of exhaustion. She wished earnestly that she had not asked for this *tête-à-tête* interview. Rollo’s hilarity would have been an enormous relief to this inexplicable tension—even though it might conceivably have defeated the whole reason of their meeting.

In the silence she felt that he was closely watching her, though he did not seem to be looking her way, and she searched her mind desperately for some careless remark that might ease the situation. Was he in the same predicament of overwhelming embarrassment, she wondered? It seemed strange that he should be—a man of world-wide fame such as he was. And then, remembering that his fame was founded upon another man’s genius as well as his own, she realized that perhaps he had more cause for shyness than she, and she made a definite effort to conquer her own.

“It is good of you to come round and see me,” she said. “I know—from Rollo—that you are very hard at work.”

He stood by the open window, his faultless profile turned towards her. She was certain that the fingers that held the cigarette were trembling a little.

“My work at the moment,” he said in his deep, aloof voice, “consists of making him work—along the right lines. He has got to be word-perfect by the end of the week—in time for rehearsal on Monday.”

Molly leaned back in her chair, watching that slightly unsteady hand. It was a delicate hand, sensitively formed, with long intelligent fingers, like Rollo’s—like Roy’s. The face behind the cigarette-smoke baffled her completely, its cold perfection was almost contemptuous. In a vague fashion she recognized that this was the cause of her uneasiness. It was artificial. It expressed nothing of what was passing in his mind. Those thin fingers expressed far more. In some curious fashion they appealed to her.

“I am glad you are making him work,” she said. “It is just what he needs. He is so full of energy—often, I’m afraid, misplaced.”

The man by the window nodded, but not in disparagement, merely to indicate that he understood.

Before he could speak, if he contemplated speech, the door of the room swung open with military precision to admit Awkins, looking somewhat squarer than usual, most immaculately attired in navy blue and carrying a tray with decanters and glasses.

This he deposited on the corner of the table close to Molly with the remark, "The old people have gone up to bed, my lady, but I shall be here if you require anything else."

It was as if he were making a public announcement of his guardianship over her. Craven Ferrars stirred very slightly as though in response, and then with great deliberation turned his head and looked at the self-appointed bodyguard.

Awkins stiffened as if he had been called to attention.

Ferrars spoke in his quiet, rather disdainful accents. "You and I have met before—some years ago—the day the lad took a toss."

"That's right, sir," said Awkins, "It was me what learnt him to ride."

"So I understand," said Ferrars. "Well, he took the toss all right."

"And you'll excuse me, sir," said Awkins. "But I've a sort of an idea that that wasn't the first time as I've seen you. Of course it's putting two and two together, as you might say. But I've heard as you was messed up pretty bad in the War. Now you weren't ever a sergeant in the Cambrian Light Infantry by any chance, were you? You'll correct me if I'm wrong. There's something about you reminds me very strongly of that chap, but I can't speak for certain because he'd lost his face."

"Good heavens, man!" Ferrars, who had listened immovably to this somewhat elaborate enquiry, leaned his head back against the door-post and laughed—a curt derisive laugh. "Don't ask me anything about the War! I was made butcher's meat of in the first round. I can't tell you what I belonged to. I was knocked out too completely to remember. If any historians depended upon my reminiscences, they wouldn't get very far. Die and let die was my motto."

"I see, sir," said Awkins with obvious but perfectly courteous disbelief. "It's much as I thought. I hope you'll excuse my mentioning it."

Something that seemed to Molly like stark necessity induced her to intervene. "Why don't you mention that you won the V.C., Awkins?" she said. "I'm sure Mr. Ferrars will be interested to hear about that."

This had the desired effect, as she had foreseen. Awkins turned with a jerk and gave her a look that expressed outraged respectability. “We don’t talk about them things, my lady,” he said with a touch of reproach. “Is there anything more I can do for your ladyship?”

“Nothing, thank you,” Molly said, “if you won’t stay and tell us all about it.”

Awkins shook his head in grim refusal. “I must ask your ladyship to excuse me,” he said in accents which clearly indicated that he was astonished by her want of tact. “I’ll see to the locking-up. I wish your ladyship good night.”

“Good night,” responded Molly as he made his dignified exit. “Now, Mr. Ferrars, please come and help yourself! Do you like lemon?”

Ferrars did not stir from his position by the window. He had turned his face to the night. “I’ll finish my cigarette first, if I may,” he said.

She left him to his own devices, half-afraid that the diversion created by Awkins had renewed the barrier of shyness which she had already found such difficulty in surmounting. She lacked the power to put him at his ease. She could only wait in silence for him to set his own pace.

At the end of a long pause he moved, pitched his cigarette-end into the garden and turned to look down at her. Again there seemed to her to be something steely in his regard—a cold penetration that repelled all answering scrutiny.

He spoke in his slow deep voice, as if he were making some sort of calculation. “I wonder what you are thinking of me.”

The words were unexpected, but she gathered that they had reference to the Awkins episode for which she suddenly felt that some apology was due.

“I’m afraid,” she said, “that the sergeant-major, as Rollo calls him, took rather a liberty just now. I hope it didn’t vex you. Being an old soldier, I suppose he thought he had the right.”

She saw his faint, sneering smile. “That was not what I was referring to. I was only wondering what species of adventurer you took me for.”

She flushed a little. “Oh, I see. You think I am distrustful of you—on Rollo’s account. Well, I certainly have no reason to be, and I really am very grateful.”

“I think you have some reason,” he said. “All you know of me is that I was taken from the shambles by Geoffrey Asterby and turned into something utterly different from what I was before. Is that any cause for confidence?”

She faced him steadily. “I think you are very brave,” she said, “to have built up your life again so amazingly. No, it is not Geoffrey’s doing. It is your own—in the main. Will you let me congratulate you?”

“Thanks!” he said. “But I don’t take first-hand credit for that. I am a walking advertisement, remember.”

“I believe you are a great actor,” she rejoined. “And that is not achieved by plastic surgery.”

His lips twisted again. “I have had to assert myself considerably to get beyond the advertisement stage. I am hoping it may be easier in this country, but the Press are not exactly helpful in that respect.”

“I am sure it is a great handicap,” she said. “But you have the personality to rise above it.”

“How do you know?” he said.

She hesitated a second; then: “You have already proved it,” she said. “Nothing short of genius could have placed you where you now stand. It isn’t just—a flash-in-the-pan—if all I read is true.”

“All one reads seldom is,” he remarked cynically. “I have yet to prove myself in England. But I think I can assure you that whether I sink or swim, your son will not go down. He has—what I shall never have again—youth, and the blessed ardour of inexperience.”

“Ah!” Molly said, relieved to have regained more familiar ground. “But has he the staying-power? That is what matters so much. You must know better than anyone that genius alone is no good. There must be solid strength to back it.”

He bent his head. “Yes, I do know that. A genius without push is flame without fuel. It consumes itself. But that is where I come in. I can supply the ground-work. He won’t go off like a rocket with me behind him.”

Molly smiled gratefully. Her doubts were subsiding. He had somehow managed to reassure her. “How well you understand him!” she said. “You know, I have never yet heard the full history of your friendship with him—how it originated. Rollo is so sketchy over past details. Would it bore you to tell me?”

He made a brief gesture of protest. "Nothing bores me, but I agree with him with regard to past history. The sergeant-major was present at our first meeting some years ago now on an occasion when the youngster was thrown from his pony."

"Oh, I remember that day!" Molly said quickly. "He was only a small boy. But you—I didn't know you were there."

"Yes, I was there." Craven Ferrars's look went beyond her. "I was more or less playing the tramp in not very opulent circumstances. We had a talk together afterwards, and it was at your son's suggestion that I went back to America to try to fit myself for the stage."

"Oh!" Molly said. "I'm beginning to understand. Rollo was always so keen on the stage. It was born in him. His father——" she broke off suddenly.

Ferrars had not moved, yet she had a strange feeling of incapacity to continue. Whether it emanated from him or from herself she could not have said. She ended rather lamely, "So it was Rollo—who induced you to take up a stage profession."

He made a motion of assent. He was looking at her no longer. "To a great extent, yes. Perhaps I had better admit to you—I was practically down and out. Asterby was my only friend. He had built up my body, but I was still—morally—a wreck. The boy brought me to my senses. He was gallant—a sportsman. He persuaded me to go ahead, and—I went ahead. So—you see—I owe him something in return."

"I see," Molly said. She was deeply touched, but she dared not show it. There was something here beyond her grasp, something which she feared to approach too nearly. She felt as if a veil had been partially lifted for her, but she was half-afraid to look.

Instinctively and generously she turned aside. "That explains everything," she said gently. "What strange happenings the War has been responsible for! It altered the whole of my life. Would you care to hear how?"

"I think I know," Ferrars said. "Geoff Asterby—and the boy—between them——" he paused. "Don't tell me yourself, anyway!" he said. "It could only give you pain. May I have that drink you promised me?"

She signed assent, and he moved to the tray close to her.

"You will have something with me?" he questioned. "You're very tired."

The words moved her. She was aware of a hot sensation as of tears at her throat. Mutely she watched as he poured her out a glass of wine, and again she noticed the fineness of his hands, the artistic delicacy of his wrists.

Suddenly she found her voice. “You call yourself a wreck,” she said. “But you have come back—and your life is still your own. It isn’t so—with all of us.”

Her words broke on a wrung note of passion. She put a quick hand over her eyes. Why was she thus moved? What was it about this man that compelled her to suffer anew as she had not suffered for many years?

There fell a silence between them—a silence pregnant with many emotions.

Then he spoke. “Here is your wine! Drink with me to those thrice-lucky ones who never came back! We who are left may strive for peace, but we shall never know it.”

He put the glass into her groping hand, and she took it and stood up with her face averted while he poured out his own.

Then in silence they drank together, and it was as if a spell had fallen in the quiet room through which only the solemn singing of the sea drifted like the music of eternity.

Afterwards, she knew that he set down his glass and moved away from her. But she could not bring herself to turn or to utter a word of farewell as he went soundlessly out of her presence. She knew in some hidden fashion that he understood and that he willed to leave her so.

CHAPTER IV

DISCOVERY

THAT night a strange dream came to Molly which haunted her persistently. Over and over again she was in the company of a personality but dimly perceived but overwhelmingly real—a being not veiled but partially obscured, yet who turned now and then to look at her with eyes that knew her—eyes that sometimes implored and sometimes seemed afraid, as though some secret power were at work which called aloud to her at one moment and then in terror fled. What was it—what was it about those eyes? What hidden enigma did they hold? Why did they entreat her so earnestly? Why did they hold that shrinking, as though they feared even more intensely than they desired?

All through her troubled sleep she pursued the phantom, striving to understand, occasionally as it were on the edge of discovery, but invariably frustrated in the end. All through the night something—someone—called to her, and she tried desperately to answer, but always awoke before she could succeed.

In the early hours of the morning, between sleeping and waking, the memory of her vision came back to her, clear and sharp-cut like a figure against the dawn, and she wrestled with sobbing breath to reach it ere the inevitable barrier should intervene. She failed, as from the first she knew she must fail. Her consciousness returned too swiftly. The mists of sleep were drawn away and the vision with them. But as the merciless daylight blotted all out, she heard a voice across the widening gulf calling to her—calling to her—ah, how well she knew that voice! “Not dead—only gone away—and loving you still—God only knows how much.”

Then she awoke fully and knew that she had been clinging to a dream. . . .

It was impossible to rest any longer. She arose and went to the window. The new day had begun, and a golden flood of sunshine lay over land and sea. There was no one stirring. The whole world seemed emptied of human

life, but she heard the cries of countless gulls down by the cove, and from the garden close at hand there came to her the soft fluting of a young thrush. The chill breath of the dawning was like an invitation. She turned back into the room to make a hasty toilet. She would go out into the morning glory, and down there where the waves were breaking with their rhythmic roar she would find peace.

Already the turmoil of the night was sinking into the background. The very thought of that lovely shore brought quietness to her soul. She knew that it would be balm to her weariness.

There was something almost furtive about her when she finally pulled her coat around her and crept down through the sleeping house. She had no desire to be escorted by Awkins who obviously regarded her as his especial charge in his master's absence. Solitude and the sea were all that she needed to chase away the misery that had haunted her through the night. How often in the past she had longed for solitude—and longed in vain!

Out into the dew-laden garden she passed, and the call of the sea sounded in her ears—a vast, hushing murmur that drew her like a magnet. She went down to the little swing-gate as if her feet were carrying her without her knowledge, and so on to the beach where the waves broke in long, long ribbons of foam, washing up sea-weed that shone rose and cream and emerald in the early sunshine.

Instinctively she turned to the right towards the cove. She had never been to Tregant without one visit to that mystic spot. The tide would be coming in and buffeting the great rock, but the magic archway would be clear for another hour yet. As she approached it, she felt as if she were drawing near to a temple. There was something sacred in the atmosphere, something that affected her spirit very strangely, as though the vision of the night still hovered not far away.

Almost mechanically she turned and climbed over the intervening rocks, moving stealthily, half-afraid, though in her heart she expected the utter solitude she desired. No one but Rollo would dream of visiting the place, and Rollo she was convinced would not be up so early.

Nevertheless a sense of awe and of quivering anticipation was upon her. The rocky way she followed was like the path of Fate. She went as one compelled.

Very soon she was within sight of the rugged archway. It shone in the early morning sunshine like the mediæval entrance to a shrine. She thought

of herself as a pilgrim travelling towards a goal long desired. There was something about that journey which she had never known before—an ardour—and a curious dread. . . .

She reached the archway and heard the rush of a wave that had raced in to fling itself upon the Mammoth Rock. The roar of the breakers beyond the cove was continuous. The white wings of innumerable gulls flashed overhead. A primitive place—almost a terrible place! So apart from the world—so utterly the domain of Nature! And yet within she would find the bubbling stream and the trail of ferns softening the stark face of the cliff, turning the wilderness into a garden. There might even be lingering here and there one or two of the little orange-scented roses that grew in the sand.

She stepped over the wet stones that paved the archway and passed into the deep shadow beyond. So deep was it that it almost seemed as if the night still lingered here, and there came to her a half-whimsical, dream-like wonder whether she were actually there in the flesh or if she would awake very soon in her room at Aubreys to see the light of morning slanting across her bed.

Then above the uproar of the breakers on the rocks outside she heard the tinkle of the stream and in the dimness she saw the cascade of ferns that sprayed about its course. She had reached her goal at last, and the peace of it encompassed her like a benediction. She moved over the damp sand towards the Mammoth Rock to rest on a ledge at its foot where she might watch the waves rush in.

It was just out of sight round a jutting corner, that favourite vantage-point of hers. She had to step over the stones that bounded the trickling stream to reach it. And then the sharp salt air of the ocean was on her face, and she drew in a breath of sheer delight. For the moment she could think of nothing else. It was exactly what she needed—what she had come to seek. She stood spellbound, drawing in deep breaths.

Finally, feeling as if the last of her dream had disappeared in that wonderful draught of the morning, she turned aside towards her habitual resting-place. The next instant she was standing as if transfixed.

She had deemed herself alone. It had not occurred to her to imagine otherwise since her entrance into the cove. But there before her, almost at her feet, was a figure, crouched upon the ledge of rock, with head bowed upon clenched hands in an attitude of the most tragic despair.

“Rollo!” she said, and stooped swiftly to take him in her arms.

But a moment later she drew back, caught again in that strange rigour that held her irresistibly. It was not Rollo; and she dared not touch that huddled form, dared not even attempt to move again while wave after wave of doubt, of dread, of dawning conviction swept over her trembling soul.

It was he who moved first, becoming in some unseen fashion aware of her, for her voice had been too low to reach him. Dumbly he lifted to her a face so tortured that she scarcely recognized it as the face of the man who had visited her the night before. But the eyes were the eyes of her dream—eyes that knew her yet shrank from her knowledge—eyes that seemed as if they would fain implore her clemency and yet feared to meet her own.

In the end sharply he rose and turned away from her, murmuring something inarticulate that might have been an apology. But it was too late. Her eyes had seen—her spirit knew the truth.

Too late to try to build again the fallen barrier! Too late to hide from her sight the dry bones from which the desert sand had been blown away! Too late to seek to re-bury that which Death had refused!

He stood before her—a man returned from the grave! But not as she had pictured him—triumphant, eager, claiming her as his own! But a stranger wrapt in a nameless distress, aloof and anguished, seeking to avoid her look.

His back was towards her. She knew instinctively that if a way of escape had offered he would have gone without a word. But she stood in his path, and he was hemmed in. He could not escape without facing her, and that he would not do.

He stood as though chained to the great Mammoth Rock, rigid as she was herself, yet vibrating from head to foot, his face averted, his hands still clenched.

Was it hours or was it only a short time that passed thus while the blinding revelation went flooding through her being? And was it gladness she felt or the shock of overwhelming disaster? For years she had told herself that to see him again was more than her mortal frame could possibly endure. For years she had thought of their reunion in the spirit, had pictured him waiting at her death-bed to draw her gladly away from the tired body which had been the prison-door that separated them. And now—this! O God, now—this!

And still she lived her earthly life, though her heart seemed to be turning over and over, as though it had sustained some frightful injury, and a sense of sickness possessed her, depriving her of all strength. She could not speak

to him. Her voice was gone. She was not even breathing. She knew that if she tried to move she would fall. Perhaps she was dying after all, but it was not of joy! It was a sort of horror that bound her, as though she had been forced to gaze upon some terrible travesty of the truth.

In the end it was the man who moved; and, commanding himself with an almost superhuman strength, turned towards her.

As it were in response she made a sharp jerk backwards, and then as if she had received a crashing blow she fell. His face—that unfamiliar face with the eyes that knew her—was the last thing she saw as a great blackness rushed over her and sight went out like an extinguished light.

CHAPTER V

THE IMPOSSIBLE

SOMEONE was calling to her—calling her tenderly by name across an immense space that was filled with trivial things of no account. It was the voice that mattered—that dearly-loved, caressing voice—like Rollo's, but softer, infinitely more precious.

“Molly—Molly mavourneen—it's all right, darling! Don't open your eyes, but just speak to me! Tell me you know it's all right!”

She did not open her eyes. A hand that had been dipped in water prevented. She was lying in his arms like a child, and overhead the gulls were still crying plaintively, so that she knew that she had not died after all, but was still in the cove with the man into whose eyes she dared not look.

“Speak to me!” he said again. “Don't be frightened! I shall not hurt a hair of your head. I'll leave you this very moment if you wish.”

She struggled and found words. “Ah! Don't go!” she said, and she tried feebly to cling to him—because of that well-known, well-beloved voice—but could not. “Don't—leave me!”

“It's all right,” he said again, and he spoke insistently as if he would force the words down into the very depths of her consciousness. “I'll do nothing to hurt you, I swear by God. Don't be afraid!”

She was afraid, in spite of him; but strength was returning. She came slowly back feeling shattered, helpless, and yet urged to some sort of action.

“Ah! Let me—see you!” she said.

He held her head still pressed against his shoulder. “So long as you're not afraid of me!” he said. “So long as it doesn't upset you! So long as—you will trust me!”

There was a sound of heartbreak in his words. She remembered suddenly the agony she had looked upon, and her previous impulse of pity moved her. She put up a quivering hand and slowly, blindly, stroked his face. She felt

his chest heave suddenly, as if that touch of hers released all the emotions which he was fighting to keep under. And something within her responded swiftly before she could begin to check it. She drew his head down to her. Surely it was she who ought to be comforting him! She held him nearer and nearer yet. Her lips were on his hair. But she found no further words of any sort. For what was there to be said?

He had come back to her—out of the very grave, and her longing heart could not bid him welcome. For there was no place left for him.

He knew it. She felt the knowledge throbbing through him. When presently he controlled himself to speak, almost she knew already what he would say.

“This—should never have happened,” he said. “I thought I was safe here. I shall never come again.”

She drew him closer still, pressing his face against her heart.

He went on deeply, as though he were speaking into her soul. “There’s no need to tell me anything. I know it all. You had to go on living. And I—ought to have stayed dead. You must go on thinking of me as dead—the man who died like a hero—not the man who ran away, deserted, skulked in the hovel of an old peasant woman because he was terrified of the guns; and then—like a mutilated worm—came crawling back—when it was all over—to be chiselled and shaped into a popular idol.”

She whispered something, she knew not what, and again she laid her lips against his hair. No wonder he had spoken enviously of those thrice-lucky ones who had never returned!

“D’you see how it all happened?” he said rather brokenly. “Shall I tell you any more? Do you want to hear—of the degradation—the defilement of soul and body—the frenzy of cowardice in the very marrow of one’s bones—the loss of all decency—the deliberate stamping out of identity—the horror of one’s self—distorted, revolting, featureless—and with it all the damned, insensate, animal clinging to life! Why did I hold on? God only knows—God Who created and then utterly destroyed.” He drew in his breath in a great suppressed sob that went through his whole frame. He was on his knees beside her, and his hold was convulsive—like the hold of a drowning man.

It was as though he cried to her for help, and Molly answered the cry still clasping him against her heart. “Oh no!” she said. “God remakes. He never destroys. He always meant you—to come back.”

She breathed the words over his bowed head. They came from her instinctively, but even while she uttered them her spirit was shaken with an awful tremor of doubt. What next could happen after this? She dreaded the moment when he should lift his face and look at her again with those eyes that saw so deeply.

But he did not move. He seemed paralysed, but for the clinging of his arms. They were like two children, she thought to herself piteously, thrown up from a stormy sea, holding to each other in abject terror while the tempest swirled by. It came to her very gradually that what he said was true. She had nothing whatever to fear from him in the ordinary sense of the word. He was like a maimed animal creeping at her feet, pressing against her for refuge. It was the thought of inflicting pain that hurt so horribly that she could hardly bring herself to contemplate it.

But something had to be done, and she realized that at the moment it rested with her. With her two hands still pressing his head against her heart, she spoke.

“Listen—listen! There is a purpose in all this. We have got to find out what it is. We can’t say that a thing shouldn’t have happened—when it was meant to happen. We can’t act for ourselves and think that God isn’t looking. It wasn’t chance that brought me here this morning. I was meant to come—and find you—as you were.”

“I’ve been here—nearly all night,” he said. “I couldn’t rest.”

“Oh, poor——” she checked herself almost involuntarily, forced herself into considered speech. “You’ve been through so much,” she said, speaking softly over the bowed head. “You knew me from the start.”

“You haven’t changed one iota,” he said with suppressed vehemence. “Every line of you—just the same! But—I never thought you could by any chance know me. Geoffrey didn’t either.”

“If I hadn’t seen you—with your face hidden”—she breathed—“I don’t believe I ever should. But I was meant to see you—like that. I was meant to come down here and find you.” She clung to that as to the one support that nothing could wrest from her. “It wasn’t a matter of choice. It was—an act of God. And now—now——” she paused.

“Now I must go,” he said. “And the moment you see my face, you will be able to think of me as someone else. There’s only one thing I want to ask of you—a big thing—but you’d practically given it already. It’s—Rollo!”

“Ah! Rollo!” she said. Had she forgotten her boy’s very existence in that strange hour?

“Yes. Rollo!” He spoke with a kind of smothered eagerness. “When I came back—eight—nine years ago—I was looking for you. Then—I found out—and it was all over. But I saw—the boy. That too—must have been meant. We talked. He gave me something to work for. I’ve worked—like hell—to find my own feet and be able to help him. I’ve done the one. I believe I can do the other. Will you trust him to me? It’ll be a kind of—expiation. He shall never be the worse for knowing me. And I swear to you—I swear—he shall never know the truth.”

There was something pathetically reminiscent of Rollo himself in that strange outpouring. It touched her to the very core. Till then she had not wept, but now the tears were running down her face as she made whispering answer: “He is—your own.”

“No—no!” Almost roughly he contradicted her. “I’ve forfeited all that. D’you realize I’m a deserter—that I deliberately abandoned—everything—destroyed all trace of identity—just to escape—to escape from those infernal guns?” His voice sank. “No—for pity’s sake! The boy is yours. Let him go on being proud of the father he never knew! Only let me be a friend to him—just Craven Ferrars the actor! D’you know what the name stands for? You can probably guess. Craven Fears—the man who lost his soul when he lost his face! I meant to have called myself just that—but Geoffrey stopped me.”

He lifted his head suddenly, before she could prevent him, and in the ivory mask that challenged her she saw something of his marred manhood. The smile it wore was such a smile as she could never have pictured on the face of Rollo’s father. Only the haunting eyes remained the same. Out of deep hollows they looked at her, they besought her; and then, seeing her tears they turned aside.

“You’ve nothing to cry for,” he said in a voice half-strangled. “You’ve lost nothing that was ever worth having. It must all seem like a dream to you now—your early marriage. If it hadn’t been for Rollo, you’d have forgotten all about it years ago.”

Like a dream! Had that long-past romance of hers become a dream? Was not this returning a far stranger one?

She could not answer him. Her hands had fallen from his shoulders. She also turned away.

He got up and stood looking out to the waves tumbling over the rocky barrier at the mouth of the cove. There fell a silence between them, as if each had drawn aside to contemplate the havoc which the storm had left behind.

Molly dried her tears and sat motionless. The impossible had happened to her, and she still scarcely believed in it, was still stunned as it were below the surface, and incapable of coherent thought. Somehow she did not feel that any decision rested with her. She was no more than a twig tossed hither and thither on the torrent of Life. For the moment she had reached some crevice beyond the tumult, but very soon she would be swept back again. The impossible had happened. She could not be expected to cope with that.

A high wave broke away from the turmoil and sent a sheet of foam spreading almost to the man's feet. He stirred as one coming out of a deep reverie. Very slowly he turned and looked down upon the slight figure. Very slowly he came back to her and spoke. "I want to thank you—for all your goodness to me," he said, "and just to let you know that I shall never expect anything whatever more from you. This thing is buried now—buried for all time. There's only one other person who knows, and that's Geoffrey. He's the safest man in the world. You'll give me my way with Rollo, and the rest is dead."

She made a small movement of acquiescence. Again she felt that the decision was not with her—and perhaps it was not wholly with this man who called himself Craven Ferrars either. He said that the rest was dead. That meant the past. That meant her most precious memories—her cherished ideal—gone into oblivion. But was it possible to sweep it all away like this? Could she live entirely without the past? Could he? Something within her seemed to give an emphatic denial. Yet she spoke no word of protest. It was the impossible that they had to deal with, and it did not rest with her.

"I know," she said slowly, "that Rollo will have—every chance—with you."

"He will be—as my own son," said Ferrars in a low voice. "Thank you for that. You shall never regret it."

Regret! It seemed a paltry word. Perhaps all words had become paltry in face of the immensity of the situation. In any case there was no more to be said. The storm was over, and they had composed themselves to face the inevitable. It was not Rollo's future that was really at stake. If it had been, it

might have been easier. Surely anything would have been easier than this numbed sense of calamity and irreparable loss!

But what had she lost? She had scarcely had time to realize. If she had not held him in her arms with his head against her heart, perhaps she would not have felt so utterly bereft. Was it that that hurt her so? He had said that when she saw his face she would feel that he was someone else. But she had not felt it; she could not feel it. As long as she lived those eyes would haunt her, and the piteous broken voice that had made confession. There was only one person in the world to whom those could belong.

It was all over now—buried, he said. He had resumed his *rôle*, was ready to go back as though nothing had happened. Perhaps that was the cause of the heavy pain within her. It was the second time that he was going empty away. Would she ever forget that he had come back—looking for her—to find that she had not waited? Would she ever forget that he believed that her early marriage had become a dream to her—that she would have forgotten all about it years ago if it had not been for Rollo? If it had not been for Rollo! The words tortured her. They were almost like a taunt. If it had not been for Rollo, she knew that she would have waited all her life—all her life.

But she could not tell him that, though Geoffrey knew it. There were many things she could never tell him now. It was as though he had taken her life and torn it across. All that she cared for—all that mattered—was gone. Even Rollo had been rent from her, for she knew inwardly that their close companionship could never be quite the same again. The dead past would be like a skeleton between them. She realized with a sudden cruel wrench at her heart that she could never again speak to him of his father.

And there were other countless things to be considered, things which she hardly dared to think of, which she had scarcely begun to face. She visualized a surging sea of trouble, seething towards her, breaking over her. She seemed to feel the pull of the under-current, to hear the rushing of great waters above her head, to see the swirling depth below. And her own words: "There is a purpose in all this," sounded in her ears now like a mockery. What purpose—what possible purpose—could lie before her now? What destiny yet awaited her fulfilment? To what far-off goal could she lift her eyes and force her failing heart to struggle? Faith and loyalty and courage seemed of no avail any longer. The sacred shrine had been violated, all her tender offerings scattered. The glad reunion to which she had taught herself to look forward, the thought of which had helped her to bear so much with patience, was not for her. She had leaned upon a reed that had broken and

pierced her hand. But yet there was no bitterness in her feeling, only bewilderment and utter despair. She could not possibly have felt any bitterness against anyone who had clung to her in such anguish of spirit. Though it was all over now, though the past was dead, she knew that she would never forget those brief moments when his head had been pressed to her breast and he had told her brokenly some small measure of the truth that had been too dreadful for further utterance. Because of that memory she could never feel anything but the purest compassion for him. Her own pain was a thing apart. She would never think of him as the cause of it—only as one who with herself had suffered shipwreck.

The turbulent waters had already claimed her again and were bearing her away; but perhaps he might yet climb to a place of safety and peace. Perhaps—Rollo—would help him. That thought came to her like a gleam of sunshine out of a black horizon, sending a faint warmth through the coldness of her heart.

And then she heard the boom of a great breaker rushing through the narrow entrance of the cove and knew that the tide was rising and they could stay no longer. She rose rather shakily.

“We must go,” she said.

Her words went into emptiness. She turned and saw that she was alone. A quick pang went through her. He had left her again without farewell, but she knew that it was better so, and she would not have called him back.

The impossible had happened, and they could not treat it as a casual thing. It was like a tempest, like an avalanche, and they could only try to adapt their lives to whatever was to follow. She gathered her quivering strength to face the world once more.

CHAPTER VI

THE ORDEAL

Two hours later she had left Tregant behind. Just a hurried word with Rollo outside the inn, and the briefest glimpse of Geoffrey, were all that she had time for before Awkins whirled her away to the junction.

Geoffrey was travelling up to town on the following day and asked if he might call upon her and perhaps take her out to dine. Rollo and Ferrars were staying on till the end of the week and would only arrive in London just as she had arranged to leave again with Ivor. She gave the required permission to Geoffrey after an instant's hesitation. She was not sure that she wanted to give it, but his smile persuaded her. In any case there was no time for consideration since Awkins was of the opinion that her train would "take some catching." So they sped away, and Molly did not look back even to wave to Rollo. She felt almost as if she were fleeing from the place, returning to Ivor as one seeking refuge.

That was the strange part of it—the sense of safety which the thought of that return imparted. Ivor had always been so firmly rooted, so basically and immutably established. He had been her shelter and the dominating factor of her life for so long that she seemed bound to find some sort of haven in his vicinity. She had never been aware of any actual need of him before, but now it was as if he alone could give her security, steady her, restore her balance, give her back the solid ground beneath her feet which had been swept away. She was like a long-captive bird returning eagerly to its cage after flying appalled through the illimitable spaces which were its heritage.

She had one moment of sheer unreasoning terror when Awkins, driving along a stretch of level road, turned a perfectly expressionless profile towards her and said, "Beg pardon, my lady, I don't know what *you* think, but to *my* mind there's something very fishy about that actor gentleman."

She pulled herself together swiftly to answer. "I really can't say, Awkins. He went through a ghastly time during the War."

“And he must have deserted,” said the V.C. scathingly, “or he wouldn’t be ashamed to talk about it.”

Molly was silent, so conspicuously silent that Awkins took the hint and pursued the subject no further. And she was left with a fluttering heart wondering if by any means he could ever blunder upon the truth.

She was glad that the journey up to town did not involve his company. Awkins had a quality of directness which could be disconcerting at times.

During all the hours of travel she felt as if she were escaping from a strange dream that spread out long tendrils after her that clung and could scarcely be brushed away. The shock that she had undergone had bruised her spirit. She knew that the full effect was yet to be felt, and what that would be she could not contemplate. It might take even days to develop fully, but by that time she would be calmer, the first sharpness would be past.

She tried to fix her thoughts upon Ivor who would be watching for her arrival. Back in that safe, sane atmosphere, the amazing thing that had happened to her might begin to fade into the background. Surely it was already fading, for when she reached London in the early afternoon she could hardly believe that it was only that morning that the unbelievable had been unveiled before her gazing, incredulous eyes.

She went straight to the nursing-home in accordance with what she knew to be Ivor’s own desire. He would probably be having his afternoon rest, but he would want her the moment he awoke, and he must not be disappointed.

London was not so empty as it had been. The first suggestion of autumn was in the air. She stood by the open window of the waiting-room and saw that there was a yellow tinge on the leaves of the plane-trees that bordered the square upon which it faced. They had a dry and shrivelled look as if they were beginning to grow old.

The door opened, and she turned to see the sister in charge—a quiet, grave woman whom she had grown to like.

She moved to meet her with outstretched hand. “How do you do, sister? Here I am again as I promised. How has he been?”

The sister looked at her with kind, discerning eyes. “He is still doing very well, Lady Aubreystone,” she said; “but I think he has missed you very much. It’s quite a relief to see you back. I hope you have done all you wanted to do.”

“Yes,” Molly said. “Everything will be ready for him by the end of the week. And you think he will be fit for the journey?”

“I don’t see why not,” the sister said. “In fact, I think he looks stronger now than you do. Have you had a very tiring time?”

“A little tiring,” Molly admitted, and felt herself flush unaccountably under the professional scrutiny. “There was a good deal to arrange.”

“You look,” the sister said in her quiet way, “as if you had not been to bed since we saw you last. Forgive me for saying that I do hope you will take care of yourself, Lady Aubreystone!”

“Oh, I shall be all right,” Molly assured her. “It will be a rest to me too to get back there. I shall have my maid with me to see to things.”

“You need somebody to take care of you,” said the sister with a smile of gentle censure. “I am sure Lord Aubreystone will think so when he sees you. Will you have anything before you go to him? Or shall I send you in some tea in his room?”

“That will do splendidly, thank you,” Molly answered. “I’m only a little tired after the journey. Can I go up now?”

“There is just one thing the doctor warns us against,” the sister said, detaining her. “It seems almost unnecessary to say it to you, for you are always so full of consideration for him. Still, perhaps I’d better. It is just that when he begins to lead a normal life again, he will have to be humoured a little, given his own way. He mustn’t be allowed to worry himself over anything or to have any kind of shock. That is all that you need to remember, except that of course he must never overtire himself. The more completely normal he is, the better it will be. I am sure down by the sea with you”—she smiled again this time with approval—“he will have all that he could possibly want. If you won’t think me very presumptuous, I always regard you as an ideal wife.”

“Oh, do you?” Molly said, and suddenly her breath came faster, for there was that in the words which struck some hidden emotion within her. “I shouldn’t have said so.”

“So few of us know ourselves as we really are,” said the sister, opening the door for her. “But I don’t think Lord Aubreystone needs to be told anything whatever about you.”

Molly passed out. Her senses seemed to be reeling a little, and she was glad to turn her face aside. Those simple words of admiration had somehow

pierced her. Up to that moment it had never occurred to her to think of herself as an impostor. She felt choked. Almost she gasped for air.

But the next instant she grasped the stair-rail and desperately commanded herself to ascend. After all, what did other people's ideals matter if they had not been of her contriving? She went up the stairs with trembling limbs. She had thought of Ivor as a refuge, but now she felt as if she were being literally hunted into his presence. Sister Beverley had shown her to herself as a hypocrite.

She entered Ivor's room and found him sitting up and dressed by the window. In her agitation she scarcely remembered the warning which had just been given her. But he was too pleased to see her to be startled by the suddenness of her coming.

He stretched out his hand to her. "My wife!" he said. "My very dear wife!"

It was she who received the shock. It went straight through her like a current of electricity. His wife!

A kind of horror came upon her, but she moved forward as if driven. She bent to receive his kiss.

"Why, my dearest," he said, "what has happened to you? You look ill."

She answered him automatically. "There is nothing the matter with me. I expect I am just tired."

"You look fagged out," he said, surveying her with some anxiety. "Sit down, dear! I shouldn't have let you go."

She sat down thankfully, for it was true that she could scarcely stand. How many hours ago was it—how many hours ago?—since she had sat on a ledge of the Mammoth Rock, holding another man's head against her breast?

Ivor turned and peremptorily rang a hand-bell at his side. "We will have tea at once," he said.

"They are bringing it," she tried to answer, but the words would not come. Her lips trembled piteously, and suddenly she covered her face with her hands and wept. It was too much for her. She felt trapped and broken. Whichever way she turned, the way seemed closed.

Ivor got up. "Hush, my dear, hush!" he said. "You have been overdoing it, but they mustn't see you like this."

Somehow that gave her her cue. Appearances must be maintained at all costs. She realized that they had always played a major part in his life. No outsider must ever witness any display of weakness. It was all part of the family honour which came before everything else. The family honour! Again she felt as if she had been stabbed.

But his attitude moved her, and she made a sharp effort to recover herself. To fail like this at the very outset was despicable. Besides, what would he think?

She looked up at him with a quivering smile. "I'm quite all right, Ivor. Really there is nothing the matter. Do forgive me! And you mustn't get up like this. What am I thinking of?"

She struggled to her feet and took his arm to lead him back to his chair.

He paused, looking down at her. "You are sure there is nothing wrong—nothing connected with Rollo, for instance, that you are afraid to tell me?"

"Nothing," she assured him emphatically. "Nothing whatever. But I found him—strangely enough—down at Tregant. They are leaving on Saturday."

"They?" questioned Ivor.

She had mastered herself, and her answer came almost without difficulty. "Yes, he and Dr. Asterby and Mr. Ferrars. They were all there. Rollo is hard at work. He is being coached for the play which is to be produced in about a month's time. They are starting rehearsals next week."

It was growing easier with every word she spoke. She was back in the cage again and becoming used to the old surroundings, resolutely shutting out all thought of that wild flight in the open.

And Ivor believed her. She saw the relief in his face as he sat down again. "I'm glad the boy is being made to work for a change," he said, "and glad that everything is all right. But you shouldn't have tired yourself out like this. It was quite unnecessary."

"Oh, never mind me!" she said quickly. "I want to hear all about you. I can see you are better, but let me hear everything!"

He complied not unwillingly. It was evident that he had missed her affectionate attention and meant to avail himself of it to the full for the future.

But, even while talking of himself, he was very kind to her, and the old overweening self-assurance was almost entirely absent from his manner.

He would not ask her any further questions until tea had revived her, and even then he insisted upon her lying quietly back in her chair without exerting herself in any way.

“I shall be glad when Rose is with you again,” he said. “She knows how to take care of you.”

“Yes, she will be coming up on Friday,” Molly said. “The children will have all gone back to school by then.”

“Ah! That reminds me,” said Ivor. “Vivian came up to town unexpectedly yesterday to meet a school friend, and he dropped in to see me. I consider he has very greatly improved in the past few months. In fact, he is quite a striking-looking lad, and I think he shows great promise.”

“I am glad he came in,” Molly said, and refrained from adding that the news surprised her.

Ivor smiled. “I was glad too. You have good cause to be very proud of him, my dear. He is developing into the exact type I should have chosen for my heir. He will be a credit to the old house.”

“Ah!” Molly said rather breathlessly. “I—I hope so.”

She felt as if the awful happenings that she was trying to lock out of her consciousness were being forced upon her again. Vivian—Aldyth—all of them—she had scarcely begun to think of them, and now she dared not allow herself to think.

“I am glad he came,” she repeated weakly.

“I was very pleased with him,” Ivor said impressively. “He will carry on the old traditions in the fine old way. I must get Caroline to initiate him into the management of the estate next holidays. He is willing to learn, and will, I think, learn quickly.”

Molly murmured something, she knew not what; but he did not look for any energetic response. It was his wish that she should rest after her journey.

He continued to talk about the family in a quiet way for some time, and she gathered that he had spent more thought upon them all during his illness than he had had leisure for during a good many years.

But when finally the time arrived for her to go, he reverted unexpectedly to Rollo’s concerns, as if he feared she might deem him unsympathetic in

that direction.

“I am glad for your sake that you saw him,” he said. “I hope it has set your mind at rest regarding his future.”

“Oh, I hope and believe he will be all right,” she said. “Thank you very much, Ivor.”

She bent to kiss him in farewell, but he detained her for a moment. “And this actor fellow—what of him?” he asked. “Did you find out anything about him?”

Again she felt as if she had been stabbed, but she did not shrink. There was too much at stake. “He is a gentleman,” she said. “And I am sure he will look after Rollo and bring out the best in him.”

“You saw him?” questioned Ivor.

“Yes. I saw him.”

“What is he like?”

She smiled with the dagger in her heart. “Exactly like the pictures in the papers,” she said.

Ivor looked supercilious. “I doubt very much if he will succeed in holding an English audience,” he observed. “However, time will prove. Well, my dear, I hope you will have a good night. I should go to bed early if I were you.”

She promised that she would, and left him, to go back to her hotel.

She had never desired solitude so urgently before. The events of that day had tried her beyond her strength, especially this last ordeal for which she had not been prepared. How was it that she had not realized that the meeting with Ivor would be so difficult?

Back in her own room at the hotel, a kind of reaction came upon her. She paced up and down in a fever, feeling as if her whole world had turned upside down. What was she going to do? How was she to face this frightful problem? Was her future life to be one unbroken tissue of lies? Was she to leap, as one in a quagmire, from one danger-point to another, before her feet were irremediably caught and she herself engulfed?

The thing was impossible. She could not face it, and yet face it she must. She was in the grip of a Destiny with which she alone must deal. How to act she knew not. She could not even pray. No words would come to her, no conscious petition rise in her heart. She could only struggle forward,

vaguely hoping that help might come. Her faith was dimmed, her courage sinking. Life was terrible to her, and her only comfort lay in the fact that she believed Rollo to be safe. Whatever the evil that surrounded her, she knew that he was in firm hands that would not lightly loose their hold. She had given him up to the one man in the whole world to whom his welfare meant as much as it did to herself. That burden at least—and it had been a heavy one—was off her shoulders. But—and this was a thing she had always known—it was Rollo alone who had made life worth living; that life which she had chosen for his sake! He had ever been at the back of it all, the living cause of every sacrifice. Now that cause had been swept away, but the sacrifice must continue—a sacrifice that involved the violation of her very soul.

How to meet it, how to endure it, how to keep faith with her inner self through it all, she knew not. She was caught indeed in bonds which Death alone could loosen, and had prayer been possible to her it was death for which she would have prayed.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHOICE

SHE had meant to keep her word to Ivor and retire early, but the fever of unrest that possessed her would not suffer her to do so. An attentive chambermaid brought her a meal in her room, but she could not look at it. It remained untouched in a corner.

Bodily weariness stopped her futile pacing at length, but when she dropped on to a couch it was only to sit with hands hard gripped in front of her while the turmoil in her brain continued in an unending delirious circle.

She was exhausted without knowing it. Her mind—her very soul—seemed to be on fire. And still the agony went on, torturing her, devastating her. If she had only been too old to bear it! If she could only have died! But the lingering glow of youth still ran in her veins. She knew with a terrible discernment that for years yet that glow would remain, denying her release.

It was nine o'clock when a sudden sound startled her—the tinkle of the telephone beside her bed. She went to it with a quivering foreboding, although it seemed to her that nothing more could possibly come upon her. She lifted the receiver and heard a voice she knew—the voice of a friend.

“Molly, is that you? It's Geoffrey speaking. I came up to-day after all. May I come round and see you? Or are you too tired?”

A wild revulsion of feeling went through her. For a moment she could not speak. Geoffrey! She had forgotten Geoffrey! He knew everything—or nearly everything. He might—conceivably—be able to help her. And in the morning she had not been sure that she wanted him.

She commanded her voice with an effort. “Oh, Geoffrey—yes! Come quickly—as quickly as you can!”

“Right!” he said, and rang off without further parley.

There followed what seemed to her an interminable time of waiting, yet it could not have been long before a sharp knock came upon her door, and

the lift-boy's shrill squeak announced, "Dr. Asterby to see you, my lady!"

She was sitting on the bed. She got up with knees that shook uncontrollably, and went to open. Geoffrey was there on his two sticks. His pale face with its steady smile gave her greeting. She put out her hand to him instinctively. Somehow she always forgot his infirmity.

It touched his shoulder, and the very contact gave her comfort. "Come in!" she said. "There's some food somewhere. Have you dined?"

"On the train," said Geoffrey. "But you haven't. This won't do, you know. It's a good thing I've turned up."

She agreed with him silently. His understanding and sympathy were like a warm cloak flung about her. But she knew that if she tried to speak, she would break down. She motioned him forward and closed the door.

"Thank you for letting me come," he said. "Ah! There's the food! Molly, you must eat something. Let me see you begin!"

She tried to refuse, but he was not a man to accept refusal. To satisfy him she took a little of the ample provision on the tray.

"That's better," he said, as she gulped down some water. "You'll have some more later perhaps. Yes, thanks, I'll sit here. Say, Molly, you must take better care of yourself than this."

She felt a lump rise in her throat, and swallowed it with difficulty. The relief of having someone to lean upon—someone who knew everything—was incalculable. She sat down near him. "How good of you to come!" she said.

"Well, I just had to come," he said simply. "I nearly jumped into the car with you this morning, but didn't dare because of the sergeant-major."

Molly smiled faintly. "You knew even then?"

He reached out and took her hand. "Yes, I knew," he said. "Molly, you trust me, don't you? Like a brother, I mean? Like a pal?"

Her lips trembled a little. "I'm thankful to have you," she said. "This morning—somehow—I think I was too dazed. I only wanted to get away. But since then, I've been with—Ivor. Geoffrey—Geoffrey—I don't know how to bear it."

"You will know presently," he said with his quiet confidence. "Don't get scared! Nobody is left alone in the dark for long. How is—Ivor?"

It was a relief to answer his practical questioning. “Oh, he is much better,” she said. “But I was warned against agitating or contradicting him in any way. I don’t think I often do.”

“I guess not,” said Geoffrey. “And so you were just as usual to him? He didn’t notice anything?”

“I wasn’t quite as usual,” she confessed. “He thought I had been doing too much, and sent me away early in consequence.”

“So that you could rest,” Geoffrey said.

She nodded. “But I couldn’t—I couldn’t possibly. I don’t believe I shall ever—really rest again.”

“Oh yes, you will,” he said, “when you’ve talked it all out with yourself—or me—and have decided what you’re going to do.”

She made a helpless gesture. “Geoffrey, what can I do? There’s Ivor—and the children! He was talking about our eldest son only this evening—his son and heir. And he’s getting so proud of him.”

“Yes, I know,” said Geoffrey. “That was in the main what he married you for, wasn’t it?”

A shiver went through her. “And I married him—because of Rollo,” she said. “He knew it.”

“Yes.” Geoffrey’s voice had an unaccustomed note of sternness. “The whole business was out of truth—wrong. He took advantage of your youth and helplessness. I always realized that.”

“It isn’t fair to say that,” Molly said. “We could neither of us see into the future.”

“No, that’s true.” He accepted her amendment in his usual reasonable fashion. “And this life—at the best—is a very transient thing. It’s just because it’s impossible to foresee things that we’re not expected to take big steps for ourselves.”

“I’m glad you think that,” she said. “It’s what I feel myself. Simply—one can’t move without guidance, and oh, Geoffrey—it is very dark.”

“I know,” he said. “I know. You were very splendid this morning. He told me about it. You realize, don’t you, that he never intended—far less desired—to come back into your life? Years ago he said to me, ‘She is as much out of my reach as if she had died.’ You understand that, don’t you? It was only the boy—only Rollo—that brought him back.”

“Yes, I know,” Molly said. “He told me.”

“He wants to be sure that you understand that,” pursued Geoffrey. “It was never his intention to break in upon you in any way. But—poor chap—he was horribly alone. The thought of helping Rollo gave him something to live for.”

“Don’t!” whispered Molly.

He turned aside instantly. “So long as you realize that you have an entirely free hand—that things have not actually altered in any way from what they have been all along. He understands your responsibilities—has no wish to interfere with them.”

“Don’t!” she said again almost inaudibly.

He pressed her hand reassuringly. “Molly, I haven’t come here to hurt you—only to help—if I possibly can. You have had a terrible shock, but you will find your feet again. And so will he. He is willing to bury the past completely—to forfeit everything, and meet you as a complete stranger, or never to meet you at all. The only thing he can’t sacrifice—and that is for Rollo’s sake and not his own—is this theatrical venture in London. That is the simplest course of all, and it may be the right one.”

“That means,” Molly said very wearily, “that I am to go on being an impostor for the rest of my life.”

“Yes.” Geoffrey admitted the word without remonstrance. “It means the sacrifice of your real self. But there are two other courses. You have come to a place where three roads meet.”

She started a little. “How strange that you should say that!”

“Why?” he asked.

She explained rather tremulously. “Because I felt it myself—last night—on the shore—a sort of presentiment. And what are the alternatives? No doubt I’m very stupid, but I’m so tired.”

“You are not in the least stupid,” he said. “You must be utterly bewildered. If there were any chance of your resting, I’d go.”

“No, no, don’t!” she said quickly. “It helps me to talk to you. Please go on!”

“Well,” he said, “don’t be upset by anything I may say, because—remember—I am not urging any particular action on you. I’m only trying to show you all the possibilities.”

She smiled faintly. "I seem to have come up against nothing but impossibilities so far. I quite understand. You are just helping me to think, and that's what I need."

"That's real nice of you," he said. "Well, let's go on! Another road you might take is a pretty rough one, but it would at least have one recommendation. No one—not you yourself—could ever call you an impostor again if you told the plain truth."

"The truth!" She stiffened. "Geoffrey! But—what of Ivor? What of the children? What of his honour?"

"Yes, I know," Geoffrey said. "What of everybody and everything except yourself? I see you're prepared to rule that out almost without consideration. But just wait a moment! The truth is usually the right thing. This may be the exception that proves the rule. I don't know. I'm not suggesting that you tell everybody. But suppose for a second that you went to Ivor and told him—let him take his share of the burden—let him decide what ought to be done! Might it not—just conceivably—be the best thing in the end? It's not a guilty secret, remember. You have both been the victims of a mistake. He couldn't with justice blame you any more than himself. There is no dishonour in such a case as this. No reasonable person could possibly think so."

Molly was staring straight before her with wide intent eyes. She spoke almost mechanically, as though she were reading something written on the wall in front of her. "I could never under any circumstances tell Ivor. He would never hold up his head again. And the children's future would be ruined. He would lose everything in the world that he cares for. And he would lose me."

"That doesn't follow," Geoffrey said very slowly. "He would have only two courses to choose between—either to hush the matter up entirely, or to make it public. But if he did the latter, though it would affect the children's position in a legal sense, it would not of necessity follow that he would lose you. There is such a thing as divorce."

"Divorce!" She turned and stared at him. "How do you mean?"

"I mean," Geoffrey said, speaking as if reluctantly, "that you could be set free—that Ivor could ultimately marry you—if he chose to do so."

"Oh!" Something in her look, her voice, made him think of a hurt child—a child who had trusted him, whom he had inadvertently hurt. "I could be set free—to marry—Ivor! *He*—would do that? Is that what you mean?"

“He would do anything that would help you,” Geoffrey said.

“That means——” she still stared at him with that pathetic, suffering look——“that he wants to be free himself. Isn’t that what it means?”

“No,” Geoffrey said. “You are the only woman who has ever counted—or ever will count—in his world. But he would do that for you.”

“He has told you so?” she questioned.

“Yes, he told me so—to-day. I don’t think you realize——” he spoke very gently because of that hurt look which went to his heart——“how anxious he is to help you, and to atone in some way for what—poor fellow—he persists in thinking was his own fault. I, of course, know better with regard to that, but I can’t convince him. I know that there is a point beyond which highly-strung nerves are bound to be shattered. Men without sensibility may say that he failed, but I say that he was a magnificent piece of refined mechanism which was bludgeoned almost out of all recognition by that accursed War. You don’t know—no one will ever know—what torment he has lived through, and still does at times even now. But self-reproach is his worst enemy, mainly on account of the trouble he has brought upon you. If it weren’t for Rollo, he would almost be prepared to do away with himself.”

“Geoffrey!” She sprang to her feet; her voice was a cry—an anguished cry straight from her soul. It was as if the breaking-point had been reached with her also. She stood tense, her clasped hands flung out before her. “Oh, stop!” she said. “Stop! I can’t bear it!”

He tried to rise also, but movement was difficult. She turned swiftly and stopped him.

“Forgive me! I know you are trying to help me, but I’m beginning to think that I’m past help. Oh, Geoffrey, he couldn’t—he would never do that! Promise me he wouldn’t! If he did—if he did—God help me!—I’d go too!”

“My dear!” Geoffrey said with deep compassion, and took her two trembling hands into his own. “No—no! You needn’t be afraid of that. He is too sane; and he has the boy to live for. Don’t be so distressed! I believe he will live to make a great name for himself. Really I don’t think you have any need to be anxious on his account.”

“You are sure?” she said. “You are sure?”

“Yes, I am sure,” he said, “or I shouldn’t be here now. But it is true that your happiness and peace of mind count very much with him, and he is

ready to make any sacrifice on his own account for them. Whatever you decide upon will be done.”

“Ah!” she said, and uttered a great sigh as she slowly relaxed. “And you say there is one other alternative still? What is it? Let me hear! I’m too tired to think for myself any longer.”

“Sit down again!” he said gently. “Yes, there is one other, but I am not sure that you are fit to hear it now.”

“Oh yes, I am. It’ll help me to hear it.” She dropped down upon the couch and sat facing him, very pale and still. “Go on, please, Geoffrey! Where does the third road lead?”

Again she seemed to him like a child, lost and piteous, bereft of all guidance. He hesitated for a few seconds, but finally he spoke. “I don’t think you will take it, my dear, but—I will tell you. There is one way left, not a very easy one, by which the children’s position anyway would not be affected, though Ivor’s would. If you were to go back where you belong, and get him to set you free. He doubtless would, and that in the end might solve the problem with the least possible damage.”

“Go back where I belong!” Molly said the words as if their meaning somehow eluded her. “But—I have belonged to Ivor for seventeen years.”

“I don’t think you have ever truly belonged to him,” Geoffrey said. “But you alone can tell. I didn’t think you would consider it. I told Ferrars so, but at the same time——”

She interrupted almost in a whisper. “You are suggesting that—I should leave Ivor—and go—to him?”

“Yes,” Geoffrey said.

She put her hand over her eyes. “Or did—he—suggest it?”

Geoffrey hesitated again. At length, “He didn’t wish me to persuade you,” he said, “but—yes—it was his thought—if by any possibility such a thing could serve you. He is utterly humble about it, poor chap. He would never suggest it to you himself.”

She made a convulsive movement; her face remained hidden. For a space she sat in utter silence. Then slowly she raised her head, but she did not look at him. Her gaze was fixed straight before her. Her agitation had gone.

“Will you give him a message from me?” she said.

“Of course,” said Geoffrey gently.

“Will you thank him,” she said in a hushed voice, “for his great generosity? That’s all. I’m going to take time now to think. But—I feel that Ivor needs me more—anyhow at present.” She looked towards him, but her eyes were remote as if they saw him from a very long distance. “Tell him that!” she said. “And, Geoffrey, thank you more than I can say for all your goodness to me. It sounds so feeble, but you know what I mean. You belong to those who know.”

“I wish I could do more,” Geoffrey said. “Count on me if I can! I’ll be going now—I see you want to be alone—if you’re sure you’ll be all right.”

She put out her hand and held his for a moment with a shadowy smile. “I shall be quite all right. And down at Tregant with Ivor, I shall have time to think—to choose my road. Won’t you have something? I wish you would.”

He refused. There was that about her which made him realize that solitude had suddenly become an urgent need to her. He had played his part and it was finished. He had lifted a torch in the darkness to guide her, and there was nothing more he could do. He got up to go.

She went with him to the door without demur. Her hand pressed his arm at parting. She was absolutely composed, and he thought there was something saint-like in her calm.

“Don’t be afraid!” he said. “You won’t be left alone in the dark.”

“I know,” she said. “I know. Good night, dear Geoffrey!”

She watched him to the lift, and waved her hand as he entered it.

Then when he was gone, she went back into her room and shut the door. . . .

For a space she stood quite motionless, leaning against it with closed eyes, white and spent; but her composure did not leave her. She had regained possession of herself. The wild panic and restlessness had passed. Only her face was infinitely sad.

She stirred at length as if coming out of a trance, and a long, long sigh broke from her. She crossed the room slowly and bent over her open dressing-case, searching for something—something which she found in its accustomed corner and gently withdrew.

Under the light she opened the little gold case which her lover had once given her, and she gazed and gazed upon the pictured face within—the face

of the man she had loved so dearly all those weary years ago.

The eyes laughed up at her with their merry daring—it was only the eyes she saw. All the rest was blotted out, meaningless. Those eyes had looked at her to-day with a very different expression, but they were the same—the same—the same!

A mist rose up in her own at last and she could see no more. She closed the case and slipped it back into its hiding-place.

“My darling——” she whispered, and again more softly through her falling tears—“my darling! I can never come to you—but I shall never—never cease to love you—while the breath is in my body.”

CHAPTER VIII

AN ACT OF GRACE

“I SHALL never be any good,” said Rollo in a tone of deep despondency. “I seem to go further off the rails at every rehearsal. Did you hear the way that fellow slated me this afternoon?”

“I heard,” said Craven Ferrars. “But he only slates the people that are worth the trouble, don’t forget that! He’s a clever producer, and you’ll do him credit yet.”

“Glad you think so,” growled Rollo. “Can’t say I see any signs of it at present.”

“You’d be the last person to do that,” Ferrars pointed out. “Besides, it’s not a particularly easy part. Mine would really suit you better.”

“Yours!” said Rollo. “Oh, yours is a top-notch part. But no one on earth could play it as you do.”

“Yes. You could,” said Ferrars. “That’s why I made you learn it. Some day I shall go sick, and then you’ll be able to make your hit.”

Rollo glowed at the thought. “But I’d be no good,” he decided after a moment. “It’d be rank presumption of me to try. For you’re simply superb. There’s no other word for it.”

Ferrars smiled rather grimly. “If I were twenty years younger I should be nearer the mark,” he said.

“But you look it,” Rollo assured him. “I don’t know how old you are, sir, but you don’t look it anyway.”

Ferrars’s smile softened. “You’re a nice boy, Tommy,” he said. “I can assure you that I actually am at least a hundred years older than I look. And that’s why the part is not specially well suited to me, while it would fit you like a glove. You stick to it, my son, and one of these days you shall have your opportunity.”

“You’re damn’ good to me,” Rollo said; “too damn good. Here am I, eating your salt and sponging on you generally—giving you nothing in return, nor ever likely to be able to—while you—are always dangling something better in front of me.”

They were lounging for an hour of rare leisure in the sitting-room of Ferrars’s flat in which for the past fortnight Rollo had been a guest. The production of the play was a bare week ahead of them, and the usual hectic rush was just beginning. Only Craven Ferrars refused to be hectic. He seemed to be assured of success, and his confidence went far towards steadying Rollo.

He was smoking a cigarette with the calm detachment habitual to him as he made quiet response to the boy’s impulsive speech. “You’re quite wrong, my dear chap,” he said. “If there’s a sponge anywhere, it’s in my possession, not yours. Don’t you yet realize that I have taken advantage of your youth and inexperience to annex you—because in my opinion you chance to be worth having?”

“Annex me!” repeated Rollo, rather bewildered. “Afraid I don’t quite understand.”

Ferrars was still smiling behind the smoke-screen of his cigarette. “I’ve adopted you, Tommy,” he said. “Your energy and vitality are just what I need. You say I’m superb in that part. Well, perhaps I am—as an actor—just an actor, my boy. But I maintain that you would be infinitely better, because you would actually *be* the part. You only need to put on a few years. But I have had to die and come to life again. That’s a tall order, you know, Tommy. It’s been an immense help to me to have you to look at while I was doing it.”

Rollo was staring at him rather blankly. “You’re always rather wonderful,” he remarked. “But I don’t see where I come in. You’d be just as good if you’d never set eyes on me.”

“There,” said Ferrars with quiet decision, “you are wrong. I’ll tell you something which you’ll hardly believe, but which is true none the less. In acting that part in *The Five Aces* I am literally modelling myself upon you. I made you learn it. I coached you in it, just because I saw what you were capable of. You have put into it things which I should only have arrived at after long hard study. It’s natural to you. It isn’t to me. That’s why I say it fits you like a glove. And some day you shall have it, but not yet. The public aren’t quite ready for you yet. They want me—as a spectacle. But—once

they've got you in proper perspective—they will never want me in that kind of part again."

"By Jove!" Rollo said ingenuously. "What an extraordinary idea!"

"Isn't it?" Ferrars pitched his cigarette into the fireplace. "But it's absolutely true. That's life, you know—youth succeeding age, all the world over. Only—in this case—age doesn't resent it. Go on and prosper, boy! You'll be better at this job than I can ever hope to be; because you've begun at the right age—while I—I am only an old man imposing myself upon people's minds, making them see what in reality doesn't exist."

"What rot!" exclaimed Rollo. "You know everybody's mad about you."

Ferrars shook his head whimsically. "Mad indeed! All they really see is a mask painted to appeal to their imaginations. There's nothing behind it but make-believe—nothing whatever."

"Sorry!" interjected Rollo. "I disagree. There's genius, and that's what the whole world worships before everything."

"Genius!" echoed Ferrars, in a tone that held up the whole world to mockery. "My dear lad, you're talking of something you possess but can't explain. In me, it is simply the almost unlimited ability to impose upon my audience. I have told you, behind the mask there is nothing—nothing but ashes. Oh yes, possibly once there might have been something more, but that possibility was snuffed out long ago." He leaned slowly forward and looked at Rollo with eyes concentrated and intent. "I'll tell you something," he said, "which you have no idea of—could never by sheer imagination grasp. I am a past master at imposture and deceit. The thing you see here is not really a man, as you suppose, but a despicable image of manhood—a thing that has crawled through slime and filth and dishonour, merely to keep the blood still throbbing in its veins—a thing that has been too horrible to look upon, and still carries its vileness like a clogging weight whichever way it turns. You may think—as others do—that you are looking at a man who has come through the fires of adversity and has made good. You are quite wrong. You are looking at something that never ought to have escaped those fires—a coward—a deserter—a heap of ashes!"

He got up with the words. His magnificent figure and flawless features expressed a tragic contrast to his speech—a contrast that was little short of colossal; but there was nothing theatrical about him in that moment. He was almost terribly sincere.

And Rollo was awed. He got up also instinctively, but for the moment he was at a loss. There was something here which he had never encountered before. Then a curious inspiration came to him. He reached the elder man in a stride and clapped him on the back.

“You shut up!” he said. “You’ve got a bee in your bonnet about yourself, and it’s time you got rid of it. We all have our bad patches sometimes. I do myself. But it’s time you forgot that old War stunt. It’s out of date. I know one thing jolly well. If I’d had to face half what you have, I’d have been scared stiff. But there’s no sense in thinking about it. My own father went under, but he’d have been just like you if he’d come through. Only I think he’d have stuffed the whole thing into the background somehow or other and managed to forget.”

He stopped. Ferrars had turned, was looking at him oddly, speculatively, with a curious kind of pity.

“So you think your father would have been like me, do you?” he said.

“Rather!” said Rollo.

“And if he’d funked the whole show in the end—chucked everything—deserted—what would you have said to him, I wonder, if he’d come back? Remember, he may have done all these things! You don’t know. What would you have said to him, Tommy—if he’d lived to come back—after that?”

“What would I have said?” said Rollo, and suddenly his arm went round Ferrars’s shoulders in a quick impetuous hug. “Why, I’d have said, ‘Come on, old sport! You’ve had a hell of a time. Put it all behind you—and start again.’”

Ferrars turned his face aside. He was moved, and showed it. “I wonder,” he said.

“You needn’t wonder.” Rollo’s reply was energetic and very definite. “I am like that. So’s Molly. You know Molly. ‘Get up again and go on!’ is our motto—always has been. She used to be always saying it to me when I was a kid.”

“I see,” Ferrars said. He gently put Rollo’s arm away. “Well, it’s a good one. I shall never speak of this again. If I do manage to put it all behind me, it’ll be thanks to you. You’ve got a big heart, Tommy—like your mother.”

“Stuff!” said Rollo, in a tone that conveyed much.

Ferrars laughed rather unsteadily, his face still turned aside. “Well, call it what you like! But—if you care to adopt me—in place of the father you

never saw—you can do it, and it would be an act of grace on your part, my boy—more so than you realize.”

“Me—adopt you!” said Rollo. “It sounds like pretty good cheek on my part. But here goes then! The thing’s done. Shake!”

Ferrars turned round to him. He gave his hand into Rollo’s enormous grip in complete silence.

“It’s all right for me,” said Rollo, “but I’m damned if I see where you come in. Still, I’ll try to be a good son to you.”

Ferrars spoke very quietly but in a tone that there was no gainsaying. “You’re the only one in the world that I shall ever want,” he said, “and I’ll see to it that you never have any cause to repent of your bargain.”

“More likely to be the other way round,” suggested Rollo with a grin.

Ferrars looked him straight in the eyes. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I know you, Tommy, better than you think—probably better than you know yourself.”

“Now that’s odd,” said Rollo. “I was just thinking the same of you. I feel as if I’d always known you somehow. You’re like a dream that’s come true.”

Ferrars smiled and took another cigarette. “I’ll be better to you than any of your dreams, boy,” he said. “I’m going to boost you up the ladder till you’re at the very top of the tree.”

“Well that’ll be a bit of a lark, won’t it?” said Rollo. “Hope I shan’t be giddy till I get there.”

“And once there,” added Ferrars, “I hope you’ll have the sense to stay. But of course you won’t. Some pretty woman will smile at you, and you’ll come toppling down.”

“The only woman I ever want to look at is Molly,” said Rollo; “but I can never see enough of her.”

At which remark Ferrars blew forth another smoke-screen and said no more.

CHAPTER IX

THE GUEST NIGHT

IT was on that same evening that Molly walked along the shore with the south-west wind blowing in her face and the salt spray wet on her lips. For nearly three weeks she had devoted herself to Ivor down at Tregant, and now within a few days they were returning.

He had certainly grown stronger during their sojourn there, but his progress had been slow, almost imperceptible, and she had begun to wonder if perhaps it was getting too late in the year for him to derive the benefit that she had hoped. There had been a succession of sunless, chilly days during which he had been confined entirely to the house, and he himself had expressed a wish to return home.

“I think the sea is rather depressing,” he had said, and she had found herself compelled to agree.

Never before had Tregant failed to appeal to her, but on that dark October evening she reflected rather wistfully that for the first time she would be glad to go.

Not once during their stay had she visited the cove, though often in the night, lying sleepless, she would hear the waves rushing in to dash themselves in a thunder of spray upon the Mammoth Rock. Always now she walked in the other direction, avoiding the place as though it had been haunted. And in truth for her it was. The memory of that sunlit September morning was perpetually with her—a silent phantom that walked beside her, unobtrusive but inescapable. She had thought to rest during the interval at Tregant, but rest was denied her. It had been a breathing-space, no more. She was still as one who halted where three roads met.

There had been a time in which she had prayed with feverish earnestness for help, but of late her prayers had been stilled. It had been borne in upon her that her only course was to wait. Ivor was not strong enough to be told the truth, even had the strength been given her to tell it. Her obvious duty was to care for him, and she had faithfully fulfilled it. Every whim of his

had been satisfied. She had waited upon him with unceasing vigilance, with the result that he had come to depend upon her in a fashion that left her very little time for brooding over the problem that perpetually vexed her spirit. It was only during those nights when he was asleep in the room adjoining hers and she was lying in distressed wakefulness listening to the long waves breaking on the shore that she could give herself up to it uninterruptedly.

Those nights had begun to tell upon her. They almost frightened her. For it was then that sometimes a wild and desperate longing came upon her which she knew not how to quell—the longing which had never ceased to gnaw at her heart since the bowed head of a man in agony of soul had rested there—and her lips had pressed his hair though he had not known it. . . .

Every evening she went out for that walk along the shore, trying through physical weariness to secure some sort of peace for the coming night. But every evening she failed; for the longing was not of the body, though the yearning embraced touch and sound and sight in that ache of the spirit which nought could satisfy. It was like a consuming fire deep in her being, and it ravaged her ceaselessly. If she held it at bay by sheer strength of will one night, it swept upon her in overwhelming force the next. The bitterness of bereavement she had borne with steadfast courage, but this was a different matter—a grief with which she could not cope. It held her, it possessed her through the dark hours with a power that overwhelmed her. It seemed to increase instead of lessen as the days went by, and a terrible fear that it would conquer her in the end had begun to haunt her. She was like a swimmer in a dark sea, feeling the pull of a current which was drawing her gradually, irresistibly, beyond her depth. There were times on which she dared not dwell when she did not even want to resist.

Such a night had been the previous one, and as she turned her face homewards on that dark October evening she was dreading the night to come with an intensity that was none the less real because she told herself that it was morbid. Yes, she would be glad to go, though whether life would seem any easier at Aubreystone Castle it was impossible to say.

She had promised Rollo that she would be present at the first-night performance of the play in less than a week's time, and Ivor had said he would accompany her, but the bare thought of the occasion filled her with a strange emotion which she was afraid to analyse. Impossible under the circumstances that they should not meet! And perhaps when that next meeting was over she would be more firmly fortified against the chances of life. After all, they need never be alone again. She had sent her message through Geoffrey, and no answer had come back. That meant that he was

acquiescent, that he was ready to accept without question whatever she might decide. Was it that dumb acquiescence of his that so dragged at her heartstrings? Was it his utter self-effacement that so fed the flame of longing within her?

She reached the little gate and turned away from the shore with a sigh of relief, glad to turn her back on the buffeting wind and the poor little torn rose-bushes that grew in the sand and had scattered their white petals long since. It was here that her vision had come to her, and she always moved swiftly as one who passes through a haunted place.

She came to the house and saw the light of the room in which Ivor sat. They generally played chess together after an early dinner. He said it helped him to sleep. She was a poor player, and he always beat her with ease; but as she did not mind and he would not have enjoyed it otherwise, it was better so.

She looked in to tell him that she had returned, before going up to change. Even at Tregant he liked to see her in evening dress.

He greeted her over the top of his book with a smile. "I am glad you are back, my dear. It is going to be a boisterous night."

"You're all right?" she said.

"Perfectly," he assured her. "And I have had my medicine, so you have nothing to worry about. Go and make yourself as pretty as you can, Mary! And be quick! We are going to have a guest night."

"A guest night!" she echoed. "Where is the guest?"

"I'll tell you later," he said, still smiling at her.

She went away, wondering, but glad to see him in good spirits. It had so often been her task to try to raise him out of the depression attendant upon convalescence.

She changed quickly, and to please him she put on a dress of cloudy blue which she knew he liked and a single string of pearls which had been his gift at the birth of their eldest son. At no time of her life had finery held any great appeal for her, but she had what old Lady Aubreystone had been wont to call the dress talent. Beautiful things were more beautiful when she wore them.

Rose Masters gave her an admiring look when she turned from the dressing-table. "Your ladyship looks lovely to-night," she said. "And young enough to be your own daughter."

Molly laughed. "Rose! How can you?"

"I am sure his lordship will think so," Rose protested.

"What nonsense!" said Molly. "Well, I shan't be wanting you any more to-night, Rose, thank you. I don't suppose I shall be late, but don't sit up! I will put myself to bed."

"His lordship told Awkins the same thing," said Rose. "He's much better, isn't he, my lady?"

"Yes, he's gaining ground," Molly said. "But I think he will get better still at home. The weather seems to have broken for good now."

She gave Rose a kindly nod and went out. Yes, Ivor was certainly better, and that thought at least cheered her as she went downstairs.

She found him awaiting her in the same rather mysterious mood of festivity. The wind was howling round the house, and it was evident that a gale was rising; but Ivor's benevolent spirit was undisturbed by it.

He was on his feet in front of the fire and he welcomed her with the assurance which Rose had just made. "You are very lovely to-night, my darling. Come here and let me look at you!"

"The wind must have caught my face," Molly said, involuntarily seeking to provide some excuse.

He put his hands on her bare arms and held her in front of him. "And it has blown away at least twenty years from you," he said. "You look younger now than on the day I married you!"

"Really, Ivor!" she said, vaguely embarrassed.

"Yes, really, my dear!" He bent and kissed her forehead with a courteous gesture. "It feels to me like our bridal night. We are going to drink to the honeymoon in champagne."

His mood puzzled her a little. He had been very affectionate throughout his convalescence, but there was something about him to-night which she did not fully understand.

She smiled without attempting to return his kiss. "I'm so glad that you are better," she said.

"Yes, I have taken a great step forward," he answered. "Come! We will have our love-feast together."

He put his hand through her arm and led her into the dining-room. Surveying him in the light of the hanging lamp, she thought that he looked younger, more vital, than he had looked for many years.

They dined together, waited upon by Awkins who had proved himself indispensable in many directions during their stay. But it was not until they were left alone at the end of the meal that Ivor raised his glass for the toast of which he had spoken.

“Shall we drink to the future, my dear, and all that it may hold?”

She looked across at him, a sudden quick throbbing at her heart. She did not want to drink that toast with him, but she raised her glass to her lips silently notwithstanding.

He stretched a hand to her and held hers while he drank. His eyes were kindled to a glow which she had not seen for years.

“We have had a wonderful life together,” he said. “I am not blind to all that you have done for me, Mary. Your devotion to duty has been quite out of the ordinary. And you have also given me a great deal of happiness which I shall always remember. My dear, I thank you for that.”

He stooped and kissed her hand as he set down his glass.

A quiver went through Molly. She tried to smile at him, but speech was beyond her.

A great gust of wind went roaring round the house like a giant seeking admittance, and she started a little and shrank.

“Don’t be alarmed!” he said. “It’s a wild night, but we are well sheltered. Drink your wine, my dear, and we will go.”

She drank obediently and rose from the table. He opened the door that led into the sitting-room, and she passed through to the cheery fireside. But here the storm was even more audible. The rain lashed the window-panes, and the tumult of the waves racing along the shore was tremendous and incessant.

Molly stood on the hearth-rug with her face to the crackling flames and shivered involuntarily.

Ivor had followed her in. He put his arm about her.

“You are not nervous, my dearest?” he said.

She shook her head. "No, oh no! But I don't like tempests, do you? Shall we have our game of chess and forget it?"

"Whatever you wish, dear," he said, and drew forward the table which the efficient Awkins had already placed in readiness.

They played with the customary results, save that Ivor achieved his victory rather more quickly than usual.

"I'm afraid I am rather stupid to-night," Molly said.

He gave her the smile with which he generally hailed his success, but his eyes dwelt upon her approvingly.

"It is quite enough for you to be your lovely self," he said. "You were asking me a little while ago where the guest was. My dear, I will tell you. The guest is here in my heart, and the name of the guest is love."

Molly made a small gesture of remonstrance, but he did not notice. She was putting away the chess-men, and her head was bent.

He went on gently. "It may have seemed to you during the past few years that I have been growing careless and indifferent, but—if I have—it is all over now. My illness seems to have opened my eyes. I have never loved you before as I love you now. Your goodness to me has been quite wonderful, and because of it I want to hold you in my arms again, my own dearest wife. I want to have our early life together all over again—only it will be a better one this time, because I am going to be a lover to you more than a husband. Do you understand?"

Molly's fingers suddenly jerked, and two of the chess-men rolled on the floor. She groped for them. When she raised herself again, her face was very pale. She shut the box and folded the board.

Then very steadily she raised her eyes to his. "Please don't think I don't value your love!" she said. "You have always loved me far too much. But—Ivor—we won't go into this now, if you don't mind. I am very tired, and I want to rest."

"Don't you think you could rest by my side?" he said.

Her hands were folded before her. They gripped each other rather convulsively. "I have been through a very anxious time," she said, her voice very low. "You have been very good to me too, Ivor. I want you to go on being good—and patient—for a long time. It will be—so much better."

His look changed a little. Something of the old indomitable spirit showed itself. "I thought," he said, "that we made a bargain before we came here. Is this treating me—quite fairly?"

She got up suddenly, as though she could not bear to sit there facing him any longer. She turned from him to the fire.

"Oh, have pity!" she said. "You don't understand."

Ivor sat motionless for a space, watching her; then, as her slight figure shook in a suppressed sob, he got up.

"My dear," he said, "what is the matter?"

"I can't tell you," she said, her voice almost inaudible.

He stood beside her, without touching her. "How can I possibly understand," he said, "if you won't explain?"

She did not attempt to answer. She only bowed her head against the mantelpiece and strangled another sob.

Ivor put his arm around her shoulders and drew her gently to him, his momentary hardness gone. "My own dearest wife!" he said. "Perhaps I can understand. You shall do exactly as you like—always. Only—be happy! I want your happiness so much."

She accepted his support in silence, not lifting her head. For a space there was no sound but the howling of the tempest and the battering of the rain against the windows.

At length after many seconds Ivor stooped and gravely kissed her temple. "You must always remember that, Mary," he said, and there was a note of sadness as well as deep tenderness in his voice. "I am not so selfish as I used to be. It may be that in the past I have asked too much, but loving you has by degrees made a better man of me. I want you to try to realize that, dear. My love for you is no longer a thing that takes. It only wants to give. You may rest upon that, for nothing will ever make it any different. And now—good night!"

He released her very quietly and turned to go. But Molly turned also very quickly and caught his hand. Before he could prevent her, she had carried it to her lips, but the next instant she was bending to take the coals off the fire, and she did not look round again.

Ivor went from the room with the slow step of the man who knows that neither spring nor summer can ever be his again.

CHAPTER X

THE OPEN GRAVE

“I’M SCARED stiff,” said Rollo.

“Of course you are!” rejoined Ferrars coolly. “You wouldn’t be worth much if you weren’t.”

He glanced round with a faint smile on his lips. He was putting the finishing touches to his own make-up—the make-up of an officer in the Royal Air Force, which suited him astoundingly well.

“You’re simply amazing,” Rollo said. “I really don’t know how I have the cheek to be your understudy.”

“As I’ve told you before,” Ferrars said, “with a little more technique, you’ll play the part much better than I ever shall. But you’ve nothing to get jumpy about to-night,” he added kindly. “They’ll take to you all right. You’ve just got that touch of public-school swank about you that everybody loves. Your unappreciative family ought to value you after this.”

“Not they!” said Rollo. “Besides, they aren’t coming. My stepfather was to have turned up with Molly, but she phoned me to-night that he wasn’t up to it. So she’s coming along with Geoffrey.”

“Oh, she’s coming, is she?” said Ferrars, resuming his touching-up with his face to the glass.

“Oh, rather! She wouldn’t miss it for anything,” said Rollo, with pardonable complacency. “Besides, Geoffrey’s promised to look after her, so she’ll be all right. I’ve told her that she’s got to come round and see me when it’s over.”

“And is she coming?” Ferrars sounded abstracted, as if the task in hand engrossed his full attention.

“You bet!” said Rollo. “Molly would never let me down. I made her promise.”

“You’re very lucky,” was Ferrars’s comment, but it was uttered in the tone of a man not keenly interested.

The great moment was rapidly approaching, and the hubbub of a crowded auditorium reached them above the rush of final preparation behind the scenes. People were thronging to see this newcomer—the Englishman who had won his way to an almost unprecedented popularity in America. His tragic past as much as his triumphant present attracted them. His reputed talent, though widely famed, was not the primary attraction that had packed the theatre to capacity. The firmly-chiselled face with its grim, challenging eyes which had been posted on hoardings all over London and portrayed in every paper of note was what the majority had come to see. Romance and horror blended pleasantly in the knowledge that this was a man who had been cast up, a featureless hulk, out of the whirlpool of the War—a man who had been remodelled and sent out afresh on the stream of life.

They said he was unique, a living miracle, and they had come in their crowds to see him, while the man himself sat apart in his dressing-room, preparing himself with cynical self-restraint for the ordeal which had already stirred young Rollo’s blood to fever.

The boy’s part was not an important one, but it had scope. An ingenious actor could infuse into it more than it actually contained. It was the type of *rôle* which could be expanded or contracted at will—a part chosen by Ferrars himself for Rollo’s initiation. He had taken endless and untiring pains to train Rollo, but he had not deprived him of all individuality in the process. He had been allowed to a certain extent to develop the part on his own lines. It was by no means a cut-and-dried affair. Very much depended upon the way in which it was played.

Rollo knew this, and he was proud and alarmed by turns. But as the fateful moment approached, the stage-fright predominated.

“If I had to play your part, I believe I should faint,” he said.

“Oh, don’t be a damn’ fool, Tommy!” said Ferrars with his sudden reassuring smile. “You’re a winner all right. I’d put my shirt on that. You’ve got—form.”

Rollo accepted the assurance dubiously, but it comforted him none the less. Ferrars was a winner himself, and he certainly ought to know.

And then there was Molly waiting in a box with Geoffrey to see him make his *début*. Whatever happened, she must not be disappointed. He was rather relieved that his stepfather had not been able to accompany her. At

least she would hear no adverse criticism while he was on the stage. She would be sure to think him wonderful, whether he made his mark or not.

And it probably would not be so bad as he imagined. After all, a London stage was not vastly different from any other, if he could only forget the people beyond it. To concentrate as he had never concentrated before was what was required of him, and this bogey of nervousness would find no place.

He was convinced that Ferrars would have a big success, and that too was a soothing reflection. No one would pay any attention to him while this man played his part. If he forgot his lines and merely gibbered, no one would notice. He really did not count.

But he meant to count. He was not just background. He had worked hard to fit himself to be a worthy accompaniment to Craven Ferrars, and he was not going to be scared out of achieving some result. Ferrars had said he was a winner, and a winner he meant to be.

The play began, and very soon Ferrars was on the stage. A ripple of applause greeted him—not nearly enough to satisfy Rollo’s ardent desires on his behalf. Standing waiting for his own cue, he marvelled at the complete unconcern with which the actor took his reception. But he very soon realized that the fire he had seen in glimpses at rehearsals was glowing like a watch-light that night. Ferrars acted as Rollo had never seen him act before. He was electric; and from the first moment he held his audience.

And he held Rollo also. When the boy’s cue came, he took it without effort, conscious only of the man who had chosen him for the part. All sense of nervousness left him. He was curiously aware that he had become electric also. It was like a sort of mesmerism. The watching crowds—the stage itself—were forgotten. He was no longer acting; he was being his part. The words he uttered were spontaneous, as if they sprang from his soul.

At the end of the first act there was a storm of applause, and he found himself with Ferrars behind the curtain, feeling oddly dazed, but almost deliriously elated.

“A damn’ good show, what?” he said.

And Ferrars’ quiet laugh told him that there was good reason for triumph. The actor was satisfied.

On the other side of the curtain there was undivided enthusiasm. Craven Ferrars was no longer an object of morbid curiosity. He was being hailed as a genius. And to Molly, sitting with Geoffrey in a box near the stage, it

seemed as if an extraordinary spectacle were being enacted before her eyes. Life itself was unfolding like a long, amazing scroll. It was as though she looked upon something which ought to have happened—perhaps had happened long ago.

She had been nervously anxious on Rollo's behalf at the outset, but now she had forgotten Rollo. In any case she realized that his success was assured. He was making his own small mark quite indelibly. But the man who occupied the centre of the stage was in a sense colossal. He had outrun the renown which had preceded him. He was like a king taking royal possession of a throne that had long been awaiting him. And she saw in him that which in the old, old happy days she had always known that she would see. She saw the fire which long ago had lighted in her heart a flame unquenchable.

Geoffrey did not speak to her. He was with her at her request, because at the last moment Ivor had not felt equal to braving the cold of the November night. And he knew that it was his escort rather than his companionship that she had desired. It was because she had counted upon his silence that she had asked him to be with her. Not for worlds would he have intruded within the magic circle that surrounded her. He was the one friend who was capable of understanding something of the strange emotion which this experience had awakened within her—the one friend who knew how to stand by in silence.

When the second act began, Molly was tense with expectation. She was as one who stood and watched the opening of a grave. But instead of mouldering bones within it, she beheld a being with youth renewed—the selfsame being to whom she had clung so passionately in the far-off days and whom she had mourned so bitterly, and remembered so faithfully. It was she—not he—over whom the years had passed. He was unchanged save in details which to her were negligible. She saw in him the same ardour, the same fire, the same splendour, untouched by time, untarnished by age. The change—if change there were—was in herself, a change wrought by servitude and continual repression. Though there were moments in which her heart leapt to the sound of his voice, she sat for the most part wrapped in a kind of throbbing despair. He was unchanged, while she had been caught and broken on the wheel of Destiny.

His acting was such that during the whole of the play she almost forgot that he had ever been other than the brilliant and fearless man who now carried all before him. His magnificence gripped her as it gripped everyone else, like a blazing jewel from which the eye cannot turn away. But for her it

meant much more. It meant something overwhelming that she could not contemplate. It meant the rending asunder of ideals, of resolutions, possibly of life itself. It meant the throwing open of the gates of time to That Which was eternal.

When the play ended at last amid thunderous acclamation and applause, she sat as one stunned, hearing the great volume of sound rolling around her, yet so far removed from it as to be barely capable of comprehending its meaning. She realized in a vague fashion that Geoffrey's hand was grasping hers, but it might almost have been the hand of a stranger.

With wide and straining eyes she saw Ferrars appear repeatedly in acknowledgment of the ovation which was poured out to him unstintedly from all quarters. She saw him bow and laugh and go away, only to be recalled again and yet again.

The noise was deafening. It rose and fell like the surging of great waters. It seemed to beat upon her senses. But when after several minutes Ferrars raised his hand for silence, the pause that ensued was more terrific still. She shrank into a corner of the box, almost cowering.

Ferrars spoke briefly, without embarrassment: "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you all very much for the tremendous compliment you have paid me. I only wish I were more worthy of it, though I shall hope to be as time goes on. I realize that at the moment I can scarcely claim to be more than a freak." He turned his smiling face towards Geoffrey with the words; and did he also see Molly, withdrawn, yet still gazing full at him with eyes that could not turn aside? The laughing protest that rippled through the theatre died away as he resumed. "But even freaks can make themselves amusing if they try, and I shall always give of my best in that direction, however poor that best may be. Thank you once again with all my heart."

He bowed again and withdrew. The orchestra played the National Anthem, and Molly came to her senses like one awaking from a drugged sleep.

Someone had entered the box, and a warm arm was suddenly thrust around her. She turned and saw Rollo—Rollo whom she had forgotten.

He was in evening dress, but the make-up was still on his merry, boyish face. "Darling, wasn't it a joust?" he said. "I've never had such a time in my life. They swallowed it down all right, didn't they? Come along now and see Craven! You must—you simply must!"

Geoffrey bent towards her on her other side. "I think you're rather tired," he said. "Would you rather go home?"

To her surprise she heard herself answer firmly. "No. I will go and see Craven Ferrars first and tell him what I think of it all."

It was as if someone else had spoken for her, someone else had taken possession of her and was guiding her in a direction which she hardly recognized. All she knew was a need, pressing and irresistible, to force a way through all barriers and be once more face to face with the man who had been the rapture and the tragedy of her life.

CHAPTER XI

THE OASIS

WITH ROLLO'S eager arm through hers she went through passages thronged with people such as she never seemed to meet in her daily life. It was like a journey through the underworld, and but for Rollo's animated presence she would have felt as if she herself were invisible—a floating spirit of no account.

“He'll be awfully pleased to see you,” said the boy's laughing voice in her ear. “I'll take you straight to his dressing-room. I believe he's still on the stage at the moment, but you don't want to see him with all that scrum. How did you like the show, Molly? Was I all right?”

“You were wonderful,” she said, but it was as if an automaton were speaking; she hardly knew that she uttered the words.

“Good!” he said enthusiastically. “I felt it wasn't too bad myself, though I thought I should fall down flat to begin with. Craven really is a marvellous chap, you know. He holds everybody, both sides of the curtain. They're mad to get him on the films. I believe the place is full of producers all fighting over his body now.”

He went on talking until he had brought her to a strange little sanctuary beyond the turmoil—a place such as she had never seen before, littered with all manner of masculine apparel, and a great many cigarette-ends which had been cast in all directions.

“You sit here, darling!” he said, clearing a chair in a corner before a table with a mirror at the back of it. “He'll be in directly. Geoffrey and I will go and find him.”

She sat down, feeling strangely weak, and she looked into the glass and was conscious of a shock. The white face, the startled eyes, did not seem to be her own. A kind of terror came upon her. What was she doing here? What new and terrible thing was about to happen to her?

She could still hear the turmoil outside—the hurrying feet and chattering voices, but she was alone. She could have risen and fled, but she did not; for she lacked both courage and physical strength to face the pandemonium that surged beyond her refuge.

Besides, whither could she go—how hope to escape the inevitable? Perhaps two or three hours before the power to turn the other way had been hers, but now it was gone for ever. Something infinitely stronger than herself had drawn her to this place, and she was a prisoner as surely as though she had been bound by chains.

And now she heard him coming. Or was it a dream? How could she distinguish anything in such a confusion of sound? Yet in some inexplicable fashion she knew that his step was drawing near.

There came to her again that breathless quivering consciousness of a vision close at hand. But this time it was not a vision of the spirit alone. It was the definite and physical presence of the man whose going from her had been such a crushing sorrow and whose return such an agonizing joy.

The door opened. He entered, and he closed it definitely behind him. She heard the key turn in the lock, and, raising her eyes, she saw his face behind her in the glass in which she had just seen her own.

For a second—perhaps longer—she sat spellbound. Then, as though vitalized by an electric current, she rose up stiffly, and stiffly turned.

He stood absolutely motionless, looking at her. There was a kind of awful questioning in his eyes, and suddenly it seemed to her that he—not she—was the prisoner in that strange oasis in the midst of the desert in which they had met after so many weary years of travel.

It came upon her in a flash that he was waiting for something from her—a verdict which she could not utter.

And then, swift upon this realization came another. She had not come hither of her own accord; neither had he. Unseen hands which neither had the power to resist had drawn them. They were face to face again and alone—possibly for the last time in their lives.

Something went through her—a fiery thrill that urged her into action. She could not have held back then; for the years were suddenly swept away, and she saw him as she had seen him last before the cruel tempest had washed them asunder.

She flung out her arms with a low cry, and in a moment they were together again, as though there had been no separation, no bitter sorrow of parting, no anguish of farewell. She felt the hard beating of his heart as her lips met his in that long, long kiss of reunion.

Her head fell back upon his arm. She was gasping, shaken to the soul.

“Oh, Roy!” she said. “Roy—Roy—my darling!”

Her eyes were wet, but she did not know it until he kissed away the tears.

“My love!” he whispered. “My one and only love—heart of my heart—soul of my soul!”

So had he spoken to her before that nightmare of suffering had come upon them—in the days of their early youth together—the dear springtime of life.

And having spoken, he went on, his voice deep and earnest, as though he held back forces which he dared not set free. “I know it’s only for a moment—one moment of Paradise. It can’t last. I understand. Sweetheart, I understand. We’ve got to part again, but you are mine—and I am yours—for ever and ever and ever.”

To part again! It was he who had said it, not she. She clung to him with a passionate closeness. “Roy!” she whispered again. “Roy! Oh, God help us! Can we bear it?”

His lips stopped her, driving back the agony before it had power to overcome her. He gathered her to him, lifting her, holding her to his breast. There fell a silence between them not spaced by time. Life itself seemed to hang as it were suspended. They stood on the bounds of eternity.

Out of it her own voice came at length, crying piteously. “What shall I do? What can I do?”

And he answered her quietly, steadily, firmly. “You must go back, sweetheart. There is no other solution—yet. We must just wait—till God points the way!”

“But you——” she said; “you!”

“I can wait too——” he said, “now that I know.”

Her arms entwined his neck. “Roy,” she whispered, “do you really understand? It was only for Rollo’s sake. I was left alone. Father died in an air-raid. There was nothing left.”

Again he kissed her—and again the rising pain was driven back. “Don’t tell me—heart of my heart!” he said. “Of course—I understand.” And he added in a whisper that pierced her heart, “The fault was mine—not yours.”

Again the silence fell—that silence which seemed to be the edge of eternity.

Then at last, slowly, with a great sigh, his arms relaxed. “You must go back, darling,” he said.

She admitted it, her face hidden. “Yes. Ivor—and the children! He’s been good to me. It would break his heart. And—they—I couldn’t sacrifice them, could I, Roy—could I?”

“You must go back,” he said more firmly still. “We’ve got—our son. Perhaps—if we can bear it—we’ll meet—sometimes—as friends.”

“Oh, Roy,” she said, “how—wonderful you are!”

He kissed her again on brow and lips, and then he put her from him. “My love,” he said, “I’ve learnt—at last—that there is no room for self in love.”

He bent and gathered her hands and kissed them also with a kind of fiery hunger that told her something of that which he was holding back.

“That’s all, darling,” he whispered at length. “Just turn round and leave me now! Don’t let me—see you—go!”

As she moved trembling to the door, she knew that he was sunk down by the chair that she had occupied, with his head bowed deeply on his arms.

And she went—back into the world—back to the desert, leaving in that tiny room all that life could ever mean to her again.

CHAPTER XII

MIDNIGHT

OUT in the passage Geoffrey was waiting for her—the only friend whom she could have borne to see.

“Somebody’s got hold of young Rollo,” he said. “A film-producer—or possibly a stage-manager—I don’t know which. He’s made his mark, you know. They’re after him too.”

She smiled, feeling dazed and but vaguely grasping his words. “Will you see me back?” she said.

“Of course!” said Geoffrey very kindly.

And the next thing she knew was driving with him in the car through the wet, shining streets.

Before the end of the drive she had collected herself sufficiently to banish the sense of stupor.

“Geoffrey,” she said, “we have—parted—for Ivor’s sake—and the children’s. You’ll take care of him for me, won’t you?”

He took her hand and held it. “My dear, yes,” he said.

Something rose in her throat. She swallowed it with an effort. “We may meet sometimes—just as friends—but I don’t know. That’s all. Will you give my love to Rollo?”

“Yes,” he said again.

“I’ll see him perhaps some time to-morrow—before we go,” she said. “Thank you, dear Geoffrey. Will you come in with me?”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

But when she got out she swayed a little, and he accompanied her.

“I’ll see you up to your room, anyhow,” he said.

They went up in the lift, and when it stopped she turned to say good-bye; but he shook his head and prepared to follow her out.

“No, I’ll see you right in. You ought to have something. I’m going to see that you do.”

She smiled and thanked him.

They went along the corridor together, he leaning on his sticks.

When they reached the suite that Ivor always occupied she opened the door with her key, and Geoffrey followed her in.

“We’re not going to talk,” he said, “but I just want to see you drink some hot milk.”

“I’m not sure that there is any,” she said.

“Then we’ll ring,” said Geoffrey firmly.

“There may be a little to spare in Ivor’s room,” she said. “There’s an electric heater there. I’ll go and see.”

She turned to leave him, but suddenly, as if some piercing memory had arisen before her, she stopped and faced round, white and desperate.

“Geoffrey,” she said, “I don’t believe I can do it—go on with it, I mean. I shall *have* to tell Ivor.” Her eyes met his imploringly. “I thought I could bear it,” she said, “and I still think I could—if it were only just myself. But it isn’t. Geoffrey, didn’t you say yourself that the truth was the right thing?”

“I believe it is,” he said slowly, “if it isn’t—too cruel.”

She made a tortured gesture. “It’s bound to be cruel to someone. I’ve got to choose. I have chosen. If Ivor is awake, I shall tell him now.”

He did not attempt to dissuade her. Perhaps he had always known that this was inevitable, when endurance had reached the breaking-point. He could only hold himself in readiness to support her.

“I shall wait here till you come back,” he said.

Her white strained face held a look of doom, but she hesitated no more. Without further words she turned to a closed door that led out of the sitting-room, opened it, and slipped silently through.

Geoffrey was left standing in a stillness that was pregnant with unseen tragedy. She had not fully closed the door behind her, but no sound reached him from within.

“God help her!” he said under his breath. But he did not stir in the direction of that half-closed door. He stood immovably waiting.

A clock on the mantelpiece ticked unevenly and persistently—the little seconds of life running away one by one like grains of sand into the imperturbable spaces of eternity. How fruitless it all seemed—the suffering and the struggling of this earthly existence! He himself who had achieved so fine a miracle—what had he done in bringing back to life a man as good as dead? Could he honestly say that he had done well? Or had he merely fulfilled the bitter jest of some cynical demon of ambition that had bid him set at nought the laws of outraged nature and substitute his own? Of what profit to restore the dead to life after the ranks had been closed and the gap filled up? Was not the trumpet of Death sounding throughout the world, and was it for him to say when and where that call should be obeyed? What had he done? What irreparable mischief had he wrought in this great experiment of his which had been so supremely successful? How many lives had he wrecked? How much of the Divine machinery had he thrown out of gear by his superfluous presumption? Would not the very object of all his skill and devotion have been infinitely happier if he had been allowed to die in utter forgetfulness of the past?

The clock on the mantelpiece uttered a kind of cough as a discreet reminder that in three minutes’ time it would strike the hour. Geoffrey’s eyes went to it. Midnight! He had not realized how late it was. No wonder the place was still!

No sound of voices came from beyond the door. Ivor must be asleep. And Molly—what was she doing? Why did she not return?

And then suddenly—like a wraith—she appeared in the aperture, looking at him strangely, strangely, with eyes that had looked upon—and still seemed to be seeing—something else.

He moved a pace or two towards her instinctively, as if he would shield her.

“What is it?” he said, forcing his voice across the stillness. “Is he awake? Have you told him?”

She lifted one hand, as if to check him. “No, I haven’t told him,” she said in a whisper. “I couldn’t tell him. Thank God, I couldn’t! It would have broken his heart.”

Geoffrey stood still. In the silence of that inner room there seemed to be a presence he could not see.

“My dear, tell me what you mean!” he said. “He is asleep—and you didn’t wake him!”

Her eyes still gazed upon something in which he had no part. “I didn’t wake him—no!” she said. “No one will wake him again. He is dead, Geoffrey. He must have died—in his sleep.”

“Molly!” Geoffrey began to make his way towards the half-open door. “Are you sure?”

She stood aside for him to pass, but she made no movement to accompany him.

He entered alone. And in the dim light of a lamp beside the bed he saw that what she said was true.

Ivor was lying pale and cold and majestic—like the effigy of a knight upon a tomb. He had died, without a struggle, in his sleep.

As Geoffrey stood looking upon that calm, impersonal image, the clock on the mantelpiece in the outer room began to strike the hour.

It was as though it tolled for the passing of one who had been great—while the little seconds slipped away between the strokes into the vast spaces of eternity.

As the sounds died away he heard a woman sobbing broken words into the silence that was left: “Thank God, I never told him! He loved me so! Oh, thank God—thank God—I didn’t break his heart!”

And Geoffrey, standing beside the dead, whispered a low “Amen!”

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

DAWN

THE funeral of Lord Aubreystone took place on a day of almost unbelievable sunshine. The leaves were still upon the trees, and the whole world was robed in red and gold—a somewhat piteous contrast to the black line of mourners that followed the flower-covered coffin to the open vault in Little Bradholt churchyard.

It was a strange procession to Molly's tired spirit. She walked with her young son Vivian—the new Lord Aubreystone—whose dignified composure excited the admiring comment of all who looked on. Caroline with Aldyth and Oswald came behind them, and then Winefride and Rollo. The two youngest children had been left at school.

No one wept. It would have been against the iron principles of the Aubreystone family in any case. And Molly felt herself to be more than ever a stranger as they laid to rest the only one of that austere race who had wanted her for herself alone. Ivor's love for her at the last had touched her heart. It seemed to her that he had come to realize too late that love was the only thing worth having—that it is offering and not taking that is the joy of love. She sorrowed for him in a fashion that was scarcely explainable even to herself; for she reflected sadly that he had never really attained his heart's desire. It was only the breaking down of the physical that had revealed to him the unknown treasures of the spiritual.

It did not occur to her that it might have been her own truth and simplicity of soul that had finally opened his eyes.

The churchyard was crowded with sympathizers and spectators. The church had been filled to overflowing. The Honourable Caroline bore herself like a duchess—to Rollo's grim resentment. Looking beyond her, he considered his mother's slight figure and youthful air, and realized that nothing now would ever dislodge Caroline from her position of authority. She would hold the sceptre with true Aubreystone tenacity until she died—unless young Vivian developed sufficient strength of mind to dethrone her.

He entertained no actual affection for his half-brothers and sisters, but he had hopes of young Vivian. The fact that he himself was self-supporting inclined him much more favourably towards them. It was solely on Molly's account that he felt any anxiety. With Ivor gone, she would have no one to uphold her. Rollo ground his teeth upon that thought. It was unendurable. Molly must come to him. He must make a home for her somehow. She could not be left to the mercy of this mob.

So ran his thoughts while Molly stood with his young half-brother beside his father's grave. It was only when she turned away at length that he dimly sensed the fact that she was stronger than he knew.

For from that moment she took quiet direction of affairs, and when he saw her again at the Castle she was filling her position as head of the household with the steady confidence of one who had set herself to carry out a task which she regarded as sacred.

Rollo would fain have stayed to support her, but he was obliged to leave almost immediately to fulfil his evening engagement at the theatre. Moreover, his presence would have carried no weight. He had always been regarded as an outsider by all but Molly herself.

He managed to call her aside for a few moments before taking his departure. "Good-bye, Molly darling!" he said, holding her in his arms. "You'll take great care of yourself, won't you? Don't let anyone bully you! Sure you'll be all right?"

"I shall be quite all right, dear," she assured him.

He held her more closely. "I'd come down again on Sunday, but I'm not sure there isn't going to be an extra rehearsal over some revision they've been making. You're sure you can manage, are you? I'll come down the week after for certain; p'raps sooner."

"My dear," she said, "you are much better sticking to your work. There's nothing whatever you can do."

He had to admit the truth of this and he did so with a slight grimace. His theatrical success had not endeared him to his Aubreystone relatives. Caroline seemed to regard it almost in the light of a disgrace.

"You're quite right," he said. "I should only quarrel with them all. But I will come down again soon. And by the way, I'd almost forgotten. I've got a note here for you from Craven. Just sympathy, I suppose! He said there was no answer."

“Oh, thank you!” Molly said.

She took the envelope from him with quickened breath, but she did not change colour.

“Good-bye, dear!” She kissed him once again. “Give my love to Geoffrey! And thank him for all he has done!”

“Right ho!” said Rollo. “Keep your end up, darling, whatever happens! Don’t let ’em get you down!”

She smiled a sad little smile and kissed him. “I’ll be very brave,” she said.



Hours later, in her own room, she opened the letter that Rollo had given to her. Locked away in a box there were other letters in the same handwriting written twenty years before. She never looked at them now, and her thought as she opened this one was that they must be destroyed.

It contained but the briefest message:

“I will wait for you at the old tryst in the Brayford Woods at dawn to-morrow until noon. Don’t answer this, but meet me if you can. R.”

A flood of emotion went through her. The hand that held the paper shook. She hardly knew what she had expected, but certainly not this.

She found that she was trembling so much that she could no longer stand, but as she sank down on the edge of her bed she suddenly felt as if a calming touch had been laid upon her, and her agitation was stilled.

His words came back to her—brave words spoken in the moment of sacrifice: “We must just wait—till God points the way.”

And she knew as she sat there that the way would be made clear for them both.

At dawn! Then he would be travelling through the night to come to her. At dawn! And it was already late at night. She got up and went to the window. It was a mild night full of rain-clear stars. The wet trees were scattering their drops in the soft south wind. The whole world seemed to be asleep except herself.

And yet she knew that he was already preparing for his journey, if he had not actually started upon it. The night stretched far and wide around her, but beyond it was the dawn.

The dawn! What would it bring to her? What could she say to him? A tremor rose within her, but it sank again. Surely she had nothing to fear!

She turned to her bed at last, and lay down with her face to the stars, wrapped in the strange peace which had come to her with the memory of his words.



She slept fitfully, waking at intervals to watch those changing stars and sinking to sleep again. In the very early morning she arose, hearing the patter of rain upon the leaves. But nothing could have deterred her then. She dressed, wrapped herself in a thick tweed coat, and went forth alone to meet the new day.

There was no one astir in the great house. She let herself out stealthily at a side-door. The rain was ceasing. The first grey of the dawn had begun to appear.

The shortest way lay along a path beyond the stables, which led across the park to the village and so to the woods—those woods where once she had listened shuddering to the rumble of the far-off guns.

She took it without a thought. There would be no one about at that hour. Swiftly she went by the stables, and paused to open a gate. And then, as she passed through it, there came a step, and a square, stocky figure appeared round a sharp corner of the building, swinging a lighted lamp.

Molly stopped abruptly. She was face to face with Awkins.

He stopped also in momentary astonishment, which he instantly covered with a smart salute.

But she could not pass him so without explanation. “Good morning, Awkins!” she said, and marvelled at her own composure. “I’m just going out to get some air. It will soon be light.”

“Better take this ‘urricane-lamp, my lady,” said Awkins, equally composed. “There’s puddles all the way.”

He tendered it, and she accepted it with a word of thanks. Then she went on through the creeping mists of the morning without looking back. She did

not know what Awkins thought, and she could not stop to find out.

The light was growing as she reached the village and turned up past The Plough and the tiny cottage next to it where Rollo had been born. No one lived in it now, and it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. She looked at it with wistful eyes as she drew near, feeling like a ghost moving through the greyness of the dawn.

The whole place was asleep. No one stirred. But in the open yard of The Plough she caught a glimpse of a car that seemed oddly out of keeping with the ancient inn. She went by with quickened breath.

She came to the gate leading into the fields to the woods whither she had been wont to take Rollo in his babyhood. As she opened it, and passed through, she seemed to hear once more his piping infant voice. He had stood between her and sorrow then, just as ever since he had stood between her and forgetfulness. She knew now that she had never been meant to forget.

Along the little winding path that she had traversed so seldom since those early days she went now with feet that did not linger. The wet grass brushed her ankles, but she felt no chill. She was as one drawn by the spirit of a dream.

The dawn was coming up behind her, but it was in the dark woods ahead that her vision lay. There was a stile at the entrance to those woods, and as she reached and mounted it, she remembered vividly her twentieth birthday and all that it had brought her.

Then she was in the woods, and the breath of them encircled her like an enchantment. She was very near the trysting-place. She paused among the rustling leaves and extinguished the lamp that Awkins had given her. Then quietly and steadily she went forward.

Through the trees, mist-entwined and mysterious, she moved on noiseless feet. Dimly she could see the gold of the wood, there was a fallen trunk on which as lovers they had sat together. Instinctively she made her way towards it, and the undergrowth stirred with a vague whispering as though some spirit of the past moved with her. There was a dankness everywhere, a smell of mould, and the chill of dying foliage. That chill seemed to pierce her. She stood suddenly still.

And in that moment a shaft of light—the first ray of the sun—shot through the gloom, and she saw him as in a world transformed. He was waiting for her as he had waited in the long ago—and the crimson and the gold and the flame of those autumn woods all seemed to kindle and glow

together in a single glory at her heart. She went straight into his arms and felt their throbbing as they closed about her.



“But I really came to say good-bye,” she whispered later. “Dear heart, it will have to be good-bye.”

He still held her close. They walked together up the leaf-strewn aisle. “Only a short good-bye, Molly,” he said with the conviction of one who knew. “You will come back to me again.”

“But—the children?” she murmured, as if half-afraid to speak of the future in that golden hour that had linked them to the past.

“They will be your care—and mine,” he said. “Listen, darling! I’m willing to wait—but not for long. The way is open, and there is no need.”

She uttered a sigh, her face against his shoulder. “I don’t quite see how it’s to be done. I’ve belonged to them for so many years—all their lives. What will they all think? What will the world say?”

His arm tightened around her. “The world,” he said, “will say—what it is intended to say for once—that, after a decent interval, you have married again. And they will all think the same.”

She looked at him. “Oh, Roy, could we do that? Would it be possible?”

“It is what we are going to do,” he said, still in that tone of conviction which in some fashion seemed to sweep away all difficulties.

She stood still in a shaft of sunlight, leaning against him. “Roy! You’re sure it isn’t wrong? Ivor—wouldn’t have thought it wrong—to keep back the truth?”

He laid his face against her forehead. “My darling,” he said, “I even believe that some day—Ivor himself will thank you.”

They went on to the edge of the wood where the full glory of the risen sun met them like a blessing.

They stood for a space in the glow of it, silently, as lovers stand.

And behind them in the wood a robin sang its fearless ecstasy into the autumn morning.

Molly lifted her face at last. “Darling, I must be going. We’ll meet again—soon. Let—Rollo arrange it!”

He kissed her on the lips, closely, very earnestly, and let her go. “Yes,” he said. “Rollo shall be our go-between.”

She made a move to leave him, but turned impulsively back and clasped him afresh. “Heart of my heart!” she whispered, clinging to him. “Tell me it’s true!”

And, “Soul of my soul!” he answered softly, as he received her last kiss of farewell. “Thank God it is!”



Awkins was watching for her in the stable-yard when she returned.

She gave him the lantern with her faint smile. “I didn’t need it for long, Awkins,” she said.

“I didn’t think you would, my lady,” said Awkins.

Something in his manner struck her; she stood and faced him with the courage of desperation. “Do you know where I have been?” she said.

Awkins also stood quite squarely before her, but his look held loyalty and a comprehension which stilled all misgiving.

“My lady,” he said with the true chivalry that befitted a V.C., “a good servant neither knows—nor doesn’t know—anything that he ought not to.”

And Molly held out her hand as to a comrade. She knew from the moment that he grasped it that the road that she had taken would lead to safety.

“Thank you, Awkins,” she said.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Where Three Roads Meet* by Ethel M. Dell]