

SIX DAYS
OF ELIOT'S

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Six Days

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Elinor Glyn (1864-1943)

Date first posted: Apr. 24, 2021

Date last updated: Apr. 24, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210462

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

SIX DAYS

BY
ELINOR GLYN
AUTHOR OF "MAN AND MAID", "THREE WEEKS", ETC.

PHILADELPHIA & LONDON
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
1924

COPYRIGHT, 1923, BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
COPYRIGHT, 1924, BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
AT THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS
PHILADELPHIA, U. S. A.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I. [THE MISSION](#)
- II. [THE INTRODUCTION](#)
- III. [THE HUNTRESS](#)
- IV. [FASCINATION](#)
- V. [INSOLENCE!](#)
- VI. [“I LOVE HIM, THAT’S ALL!”](#)
- VII. [SIX DAYS’ LEAVE](#)
- VIII. [AT THE EMBASSY BALL](#)
- IX. [“YOU’RE MINE FOR TO-DAY”](#)
- X. [ON THE BATTLEFIELDS](#)
- XI. [THE DUG-OUTS](#)
- XII. [BURIED ALIVE](#)
- XIII. [THE BRIDE OF DEATH](#)
- XIV. [DEATH BY INCHES](#)
- XV. [THE HUE AND CRY](#)
- XVI. [TWO MORE DAYS, AND THEN—?](#)
- XVII. [THE LAST DAY OF FOOD](#)
- XVIII. [ANOTHER CHANCE](#)
- XIX. [THE FIGHT WITH DEATH](#)
- XX. [DAYLIGHT](#)
- XXI. [A TERRIBLE ORDEAL](#)
- XXII. [ON THE TRACK](#)
- XXIII. [SAVED](#)
- XXIV. [THE PARTING](#)
- XXV. [FATE](#)
- XXVI. [THE OTHER WOMAN](#)
- XXVII. [LALINE’S ANGUISH](#)
- XXVIII. [CONFESSION](#)
- XXIX. [THE RETURN](#)
- XXX. [THE WEDDING DAY](#)

- XXXI. [AT THE ALTAR](#)
- XXXII. [AGAINST TIME](#)
- XXXIII. [“I FORBID THIS MARRIAGE”](#)

Six Days

CHAPTER I

THE MISSION

David Lamont left the Ministers' Cabinet with his spirit highly exalted.

What he had received instructions to do was going to be difficult, and the inference that he had been chosen out of the number that the Ministers could have selected from gave him satisfaction.

The President had been in the room for part of the time, and they had spoken softly and gravely, and one sentence will stay in David's memory to the day of his death.

"You have read the 'Message to Garcia,' of course, Major Lamont? Let it be your guide upon this difficult mission."

His mother had given him the little booklet when it first appeared in America after the Cuban war, and his young life had been deeply influenced by the appeal in it.

He must make himself strong enough, and true enough, to be able to "carry the message to Garcia." So it was curious that the President should have spoken of this.

As he crossed the square he reviewed his instructions.

The first thing was that he was to leave for Europe on the Olympic the following week, accompanied by his faithful servant Fergusson—Fergusson who, after a generation in America, remained as Scotch as when his father left Aberdeen. Fergusson had been with Major Lamont all through the War, though neither of them had been soldiers before it.

David's war record was of the finest, just as his business record in New York had been of the finest before that. And now, at thirty-three years old, he had this one more task to accomplish before he could retire into private life, and give his time and his talents to his country's Government, which was his aim.

The Lamonts had always been well-to-do people, living down by Washington Square, and quite indifferent to the rush of events or the urge to accumulate wealth. However, real estate in a populous neighborhood is a solid heritage.

David had the modern spirit. He must *be* and *do*. And he had done a great many things already, and meant to do more!

“You will have to disappear completely for two months, Major Lamont,” the Minister had said. “You can give no account of your movements to anyone, and avoid meeting old friends, by the way, or entering into any new acquaintanceships. You will receive full instructions at the Embassy in Paris, where you will arrive in twelve days’ time—and then you will proceed to carry them out.”

His destination lay “somewhere in the near East”—and that is quite enough for us to know!

Fergusson would have everything ready to start. He was accustomed to sudden movements on the part of his master. David was going to stay in Washington until the night train to New York left. He had an hour now to spare, and would go and see an old friend of his family who lived on Massachusetts avenue.

He was an agreeable sight to look upon as he crossed the square, with his upright, lithe, well drilled figure, and his nice clothes. Some people thought that he was too stern of countenance for his age—but no one disputed his charm.

David’s hair was as black as jet, and immensely thick, and he wore it brushed back from his broad brow; it gleamed like a silk hat. His skin was olive, but not very dark, and you could see the bluish shade where he shaved a strong beard. His eyes were the blackest things imaginable—so intensely black that the pupil seemed to merge in the iris. They were full of magnetic, compelling force, under his thick level brows and heavy inky eyelashes. His features were classic in their clear cutting, and his mouth shut like a vice. It was the firmest thing in mouths.

Every gesture, every look of him, suggested one used to command. “An ugly customer to run up against, and a good friend,” those who knew him well said of him. He was accustomed to mind his own business, too, and never vouchsafed gratuitous information.

Women adored him. He was quite uninterested in them, except as pastimes on the rarest occasions. He had none of the American male’s

tolerance for all their failings. He saw them as they were, without glamour, and utterly despised most of them. The memory of an adored mother who had died in the first year of the War kept his ideal very different to the fluffy, bobbed-haired flappers whom he met whenever he dragged himself into society.

David Lamont knew Europe as well as America, and was no raw novice, but a polished man of the world.

He was ruthless and often hard, but he amounted to something, and no one ever talked with him for five minutes without being aware of it, although he had not one touch of egotism, and never spoke of himself or his doings.

“He will go far,” some of the Supreme War Council had said, when he was with them in France.

But fate seems to send human beings into backwaters sometimes, in spite of all their wills, and when David left France in 1920 he had been swamped in the bog of private business, on his father’s death, and it was only now, a year afterwards, that he was able to emerge and take an active part in the game he had set himself to play.

As he ran up the steps of Mrs. Longton’s house he met a friend of his coming out, one Captain Jack Lumley, an Englishman, who had been over on Government business. They had fought together when David was attached to an English Guards Battalion in 1918, and were glad to meet again.

“Hullo, Jack!”

“Hullo, David, old boy!” And they grasped hands and talked for a few moments gladly.

“I’m going back on the Olympic. I was just going to wire you in New York.”

“I’m crossing on her, too,” David said; and at that moment the door was opened, and, calling out “So long!” he disappeared inside the house, and Captain Lumley went on down the street with set face.

An hour ago he—Jack Lumley—had gone to Mrs. Longton’s on purpose to see Laline Lester, with whom he was deeply in love. She had come in with her aunt, Mrs. Greening, to say farewell before starting for Europe—her first visit abroad.

Laline Lester was all that a really lovely American heiress should be. Highly educated, with wonderful complexion and eyes and hair, fair as a lily, and with feet and hands and a taste for dress which could not be surpassed. She had been thoroughly spoiled and indulged all her life, but kept rather away from the ultramodern set, so that she lent prestige to parties when she attended them. Her temperament was speculative. She tried things to find if there was any good in them, and when they disappointed her she threw them away.

Her rubbish heap was growing, and her critical faculties were becoming more acute. She had had the usual number of flirtations that every beautiful American heiress of twenty-two has experienced, and she had found them all Dead Sea fruit and of no meaning. She had never cared for anyone in her life, except her cat, Mumps, and her mother's old maid, Celestine, with whom she had spoken French since she was born. Celestine really meant something to her.

The War had prevented her going to Europe during those years and then had come her mother's death, which had caused no one any grief, since she had been a selfish, hypochondriacal, nervous wreck as long as her daughter could remember anything.

Laline was looking for something in life—she did not know what. All the men she had met she could rule. She danced with them, listened to their love declarations, realized that they were all the same and then troubled herself no more about them. She was accustomed to their devotion, which contained no thrill.

Jack Lumley had been different. First, because he was of another nation, so that his methods of trying to gain her favour were not the same. Secondly, because he had a fine and dear character; and Laline knew it.

But when the pleasure of possessing a new kind of slave was dulled a little all interest went, and he, too, joined the throng of those who could not hold her. Only, perhaps, he was the thing she loved—next to Mumps and Celestine!

That afternoon, as they had sat on the sofa in Mrs. Longton's smaller drawing-room, Jack had once more asked her to marry him. He had plenty of money of his own, and was heir to an old cousin's earldom—and Laline rather wanted to become someone in England, as her friend Molly Beaton had become. She thought that she was very foolish to refuse him, but she just couldn't bring herself to promise anything.

“You know that I don’t love you really a little bit, you dear old Jack,” she had said, letting him hold her hand, since no one could see them from the larger drawing-room beyond. “If you ask me again when I am twenty-five, and I haven’t found a thing which can make me feel by then, I’ll probably say ‘Yes.’ But it is three years to wait. Oh, Jack, I do want *to feel!*”

His kind blue eyes gazed at her. How he loved her!—every bewitching curl of the golden hair, every soft curve of the pink velvet cheek, every flash of the grey eyes that seemed to look out resentfully from their brown, curly lashes. Laline’s lashes always filled men with a desire to kiss them, they were such babyish things. Not the least black—indeed, not even very dark—goldy near the skin, getting to brown at the tips; but they were so very luxuriant, and turned right up against the white lids. Her great grey eyes always seemed to be looking out through a shadow that was soft and a little dusky, but not dark at all. “Dawn eyes” one poetic lover had called them. Only, often they were unsatisfied, and even discontented.

Why could not *one* of these would-be husbands make her *feel*?

Molly Beaton had said that Englishmen were very masterful, not a bit good and biddable like American men, and that her own husband was a selfish brute, whom she adored! So Laline had hoped much when Jack Lumley had been presented to her. But he went down under her spell in the first half-hour, and showed as much eagerness to please her as Potter Grey, or Willemon Dodge, or any of the rest of them. He never got the least drunk, though—that was something.

When she had said “No” again, for the third time, as she sat upon Mrs. Longton’s sofa, Jack Lumley had kissed her very beautiful hands.

“Laline, I love you—you can never know how much. Some people think of love in one way, some in another. For me it means devotion. I would rather you were happy than have my own heart’s desire.”

“Jack, you dear!”

“I’ll wait, then, darling. But you’ll let me take care of you on the Olympic next Wednesday, won’t you?”

“Why, certainly.”

Then she let him kiss her two hands again, and when he went she rose and looked out of the window to watch him as he left the house, and she sighed. But then her eyes caught sight of David Lamont talking to him, and some slight feeling of interest permeated her. Here was a new type! Someone she had never seen before. No native of Washington. Dressed in

English clothes; very well set up; all there; American, assuredly—but of the world. Who could he be? A friend of Jack's? How warm their greeting was! She could see everything from behind the net curtain. What black hair! "I hate black hair, and that blue mark where he shaves. Just like an Italian waiter!"

Then she knew that he had entered the house, and in an instant would be passing through the room, probably. She was quite alone there. The considerate hostess had imagined she was still talking to Captain Lumley, and had left her in peace in this outer small drawing-room.

She certainly felt interested as the butler opened the door and the tall, upright, lithe figure strode in, and past her with the utmost indifference. His goal was the further room, where Daisy Longton could be seen beyond teacups and cocktail glasses. No man in any room had ever passed Laline Lester with indifference in her whole life!

A little feeling of resentment rose in her. She would stay there, and not return to the others as she had meant to.

Mrs. Longton was meanwhile greeting Major Lamont effusively—he was so difficult to secure—and she felt so delighted that he had spared the time to look her up.

She introduced him to everyone—numbers of pretty girls and their admirers.

"What a frightful bore this custom of introductions is," David thought. "Why in the world can't they do as they do in Europe, and leave people alone?"

How could he ever remember all their tiresome names and their tiresome faces? All exactly the same, with the last Paris hat and the last shaped Cupid's bow of a mouth made with lip-grease—fluffy bits of sugar cake! He had come there to talk to Daisy Longton about old times and their mutual interests—they had been children together—he had not come to be launched into a bunch of *débutantes*, the very sight of whom irritated him.

They said all the bright things they always say, and smoked and sipped their cocktails, and only one or two even dimly perceived the hardly even amused contempt which lay in Major Lamont's fathomless eyes.

"He is just too darling!" one beauty whispered to her friend, who snapped her head off. "I think he's a brute. He makes me feel uncomfortable."

Laline, alone in the outer room, was becoming more and more disturbed. Was *no one* remembering her absence? The colour deepened in her cheeks. She got out her lapis and diamond vanity box and examined herself in the little mirror. Then she dabbed her white velvet nose and her pink velvet cheeks with powder. Her lips were so red they never really did need grease. And then she straightened herself. It would look odd if he passed out again and she was still there alone. So she controlled her resentment at the turn things had taken, and walked through the archway into the inner drawing-room.

CHAPTER II

THE INTRODUCTION

Major Lamont looked up as the slender figure came forward to the tea table by which he sat with the hostess. Here was a new flapper was his first thought. He had not remarked her in the smaller drawing-room. Some girl was sitting on a sofa, that was all he had taken in.

No; she was not a flapper. There was not that jaunty air of knowing childishness which the rest affected. She was dressed with greater dignity also, and her skirts were not quite up to her knees. (All this happened in the May of 1921, when those who wanted to be dressed as twelve-year-old kiddies had ample opportunity to indulge their fancy, even if they had seen forty years.)

She was not painted, either—only a little powder—and her lips were innocent of crimson grease. David Lamont was not an out-of-date person. He had no objection to lip-grease, or rouge, or eye black, when they were an improvement, but in a young girl it seemed a treat to see nature again, as nature in this case was beautiful enough to be left alone.

Yes; this was really a lovely creature, whoever she might be, he decided, and he did not feel so bored when the inevitable introduction took place.

Laline, for her part, was full of resentment, and did not analyze that she was resenting the very thing which she had longed for—to meet someone who could make her feel.

For she was thrilling with interest in the newcomer, only that her tactics with men were always to appear indifferent, which had been easy hitherto because it was what she had felt. But now she was not indifferent, and so she had to act, but the unusualness of it all made her nervous, and she said something that was the banal ordinary thing; and Major Lamont answered in like tone, but he watched her.

His black eyes saw through people. He knew she was nervous, and not stupid, and he wondered what had caused this state of mind.

Someone said something about the journey across the Atlantic, and Laline turned to him:

“I am going with my aunt to Europe on the Olympic next Wednesday,” she told him. “It is my first visit over there. I am terribly excited about it.”

So they would be crossing together. But he did not inform her of his plans.

“You are going to Paris, of course?” He said.

“Yes; but why of course?”

“All good Americans—if they are lovely ladies, especially—go to Paris while they live, now, not when they die. It is the Mecca for clothes.”

Laline pouted. There was something faintly contemptuous—or was it only mocking?—in his tones.

“I am crazy to see the art galleries.”

“You are?”

“Why not?”

He smiled. He knew she was becoming annoyed.

“I’ll bet you any amount of money that you will do the Louvre in half an hour, spend one afternoon picnicking at Versailles without going near the palace, and that the rest of the time you’ll be at the races, or the polo, or trying on at the dressmaker’s; and you’ll dance all night in the Bois or at Montmartre.”

Laline’s eyes flashed between the soft lashes.

“If that is what people do in Paris, I shall, of course, follow their lead; it is awful to be a back number. Is that how you spend your time?”

“It depends upon who I am with.”

He looked round at all the pretty, silly faces, and he laughed softly to himself.

Laline had never felt so insulted in her life. He had said nothing impertinent, but it was the light and amused tone and the inference. Here was the first man who plainly was not dazzled by her, and plainly classed her with all the other girls—just one of a foolish bevy of thistledowns.

“Have a cigarette?” she suggested, to hide her annoyance. And she opened her case, a companion one to her vanity box in lapis, with her initials in diamonds.

“I hardly ever smoke,” he answered. “Sometimes a cigar now and then.”

“Don’t you approve of it?”

He did not reply to this, but asked:

“What do you smoke for?”

Laline was nonplussed. She was not quite sure what were her reasons.

“Because it makes you feel good. I can’t do anything until I have had my cigarette,” she blurted out.

“Poor slave!”

Rage was rising in Laline.

“I’m not a slave. I only smoke about ten a day.”

“Yes; you have just admitted it. You can’t do anything until you have had one, therefore the cigarette is the master, not you.”

“I could stop smoking to-morrow if I liked.”

“I should, then; it will be a new experience for you to be a ruler.”

This was more than could be borne. A new experience for her to be a ruler—she, who had ruled everybody all her life!

She told him so, and grew more and more furious at the laugh in his eyes.

“There is obviously one person I am sure you have never succeeded in bringing under your dominion.” He was not looking at her as he said this, but absently at a splendid paradise plume in her aunt’s hat. She followed the direction of his eyes, and laughed.

“Aunty! Oh, you have made a mistake there. I can do just what I please with her.”

David turned now, and his black eyes seemed to see right through her golden head.

“‘Aunty’? Oh, the lady with the paradise plume—I wasn’t thinking of her.”

“Who did you mean, then?” defiantly.

“Since you ask, I meant yourself.”

Laline bristled all over.

“I think you are very rude.”

“I am sorry, but you asked me, you know.”

Then he turned away to Mrs. Longton again, and Laline felt as if she should burst into tears. She had never hated anyone so much before, she told herself.

Major Lamont was rising to go. She had gathered he was returning immediately to New York. She would never see him again, most probably, and a good thing. And yet——

“We are going to be at the Ritz-Carlton until we sail. If you want to be rude to me again, you can come, or telephone, and——”

He bowed, and there was an amused smile in his eye, but he did not say if he would come or not.

Mrs. Greening had been conversing with him before Laline entered the room, and she was now effusive in her adieux.

“Why, I’m just crazy about that boy, Laline,” she said as they were motoring back to their mansion. “Ar’n’t you?”

“No, I am not!” snapped her niece. “I think he is just as rude as he can be.”

Major Lamont arrived at the dock early on the Wednesday and went on board the Olympic before the rush began, and he was smoking a quiet cigar on the top deck, where no one noticed him, when, with all the paraphernalia of rich Americans leaving for Europe, Laline and her aunt and Jack Lumley came across the gangway.

“So old Jack’s in tow,” David thought as he watched them. “She probably plays with every man.” And he wondered why the thought irritated him.

Laline had grown more and more annoyed as the days passed at the Ritz-Carlton and no Major Lamont appeared. Perhaps he had not returned after all. Perhaps he was very occupied. Perhaps he did not want to come. But this was too unflattering a thought, and she instantly dismissed it. No man had ever not wanted to come to see her.

David kept out of everyone’s way all that first afternoon, and he was eating his dinner at a secluded corner in the restaurant when the Greening party came in, rather late.

Laline saw him at once with the corner of her eye. Neither Jack nor her aunt had remarked him.

He must have *known* that he would be crossing with them, and yet he had never said one word in Washington. What a horrid man! It was plain to be seen now that he was deliberately avoiding them. Her cheeks burned with annoyance.

From where she sat—the others had their backs to him—she could look at his profile, all the time unobserved by him. It was a very handsome profile, she was obliged to own, and there was something so very distinguished about him, too. None of that look like so many of her “boys” that she danced with had, as though he stayed up too late and had too many cocktails. His olive skin was eminently outdoor and bronzed and fresh and healthy, and there was no superfluous fat upon him. What on earth could he be thinking of so deeply that he never turned round or looked about him? What was he eating?

Some chicken and salad.

What was he drinking? A pint of champagne.

Of course, he would be finished long before they would. Why had her aunt taken so long to dress?

“Laline, dear, you have not heard a word that I have been saying,” Mrs. Greening remarked plaintively.

“Yes, I have, auntie, but I am interested in this new scene.”

Jack Lumley had been wondering, too, at her silence, though he was accustomed to her moods, and knew it was wiser not to remark upon them.

Yes; Major Lamont was getting up now, and they had not reached their ices yet. He was going through that door into—was it a verandah place where people had coffee, perhaps? He would have his coffee there; so should they. She had better talk now, since she need not watch any longer.

“By the way, Jack, I had always meant to ask you what is the history of the man I saw you speaking to out of Daisy Longton’s window. He came in afterwards, and his name is Major Lamont?”

“Old David! Oh! so you met him. He’s a great pal of mine. We were together in the trenches for a bit.”

“Is he really a soldier, or only a War-time one?”

“No; he wasn’t a soldier before, and afterwards I think he had something to do with the Intelligence; but he is one of the bravest chaps I’ve ever come across. I looked him up in New York, but he was busy all the time. He ought

to have been on this ship, but I expect he has been delayed. I have not seen him on board at all.”

Laline could hardly prevent herself saying: “Yes, he is here, and over there in the verandah.”

But she smiled blankly, and changed the conversation.

Why did her aunt want all those strawberries for dessert? It was quite a quarter of an hour since Major Lamont had finished his dinner. It was simply ridiculous to take up so much time in eating.

At last, however, they did move, but when they got into the verandah no David was there. He must have gone on out of the other door.

Laline felt a queer sensation of rage, and soon made an excuse, and led her party through all the saloons, but Major Lamont was not seen again that night.

CHAPTER III

THE HUNTRESS

David Lamont at this stage was not really interested in Laline Lester. In him there was a Pan-like spirit of teasing, and it had given him a sort of schoolboy pleasure to be able to get a rise out of her in Washington, that was all. She appeared a product of the present day's lovely, spoilt, over-indulged young womanhood, who could be of no interest to any thinking man, except in one aspect, and he was much too busy to bother with such things at the moment.

He had not even remembered her invitation during the few days he had been in New York, and, knowing he would see Jack Lumley on the Olympic, he had not concerned himself about him either.

Therefore, as he sat in the verandah drinking his coffee that first evening out, he was asking his inner consciousness why the sight of his old friend and the two ladies had given him some sense of vague irritation.

“What animals we are, after all,” he said to himself. “I suppose it is because the girl is so darned good to look at, the hunting instinct gets up in me, to wrest her from old Jack!” Then he frowned. He was to avoid new acquaintances, and not even consort much with old ones.

They would be coming in certainly in a few minutes, and the verandah of the restaurant was not large enough for him to keep aloof from such a friend as Jack Lumley. So, reluctantly, he finished his coffee and escaped to the smoking lounge, and that night the interest and irritation went off soon, and he became immersed in the book on the history of the country which was to be his destination, which he had brought with him, and so forgot that there were such things as exquisite girls and old friends until after the two ladies had retired to their state-rooms much later. Jack came in alone, and found him.

“David! So you are here, after all?”

“Why, yes. I was waiting until you weren't a squire of dames, old man. I am fed up with the ubiquitous females of my own country!” And he laughed irritably.

A cloud came into Jack's mild blue eyes. He did not like to hear his goddess included in this category.

“Miss Lester and her aunt are two of the most delightful people one could meet,” he announced a trifle stiffly.

“Granted.”

“Mrs. Greening has taken my cousin’s place in Kent, near Dover—you know Channings Priory—and they are going there for the summer, after they have done Paris and London.”

“They will fill the house with inappropriate guests, and drive the servants all wild, but I suppose they’ll pay about double the rent they are even asked for!”

Jack laughed now, as he sat down and lit a cigarette.

“You are in the devil of a bad temper, David! What’s up?—and what are you over for this time?”

“Oh, just for a whiff of Paris. And I’ve got to see my tailor in London. Curious how the very best of them lose their cut when they migrate.”

Then they talked of sport for half an hour. David had hunted for a season in Leicestershire before the War.

“So you won’t make a fourth at our little table of three for meals, David?” Jack laughed as they were turning in.

“No, I *won’t*! I am on board to work—and rest! Good night!”

Laline Lester woke rather late the next day, with a fixed determination in her mind—the conquest of Major Lamont. Not, she told herself, that he attracted her in the very least, but just to show him that he could not put over any of that indifference stunt on her. Men were her natural servants, and she did not mean to stand insubordination from one of them.

She was so glad that she had had this lovely trousseau of steamer clothes. A change for every day of the six days, and each tweed or woolly costume and great, enveloping fur-trimmed wrap more becoming than the last! This morning she would wear the mauve wool shot with grey, and she would tuck in a bunch of Parma violets. (Countless boxes of flowers reposed in the chilled chamber waiting to be brought out fresh for each day of the whole voyage.)

What a mercy it was not rough, because, after all, since she had never been on the ocean before, she could not be sure what effect it might have upon her.

Jack had assured her that their chairs were in the very best position, out of draughts and on the lee side.

She would not wait for her aunt, who had the state-room next door, with the bathroom between. She would send for Celestine at once and get up directly she had eaten her breakfast. Major Lamont must certainly take exercise, and Jack would, in consequence, find him during the morning. And then they would meet whether he liked it or not.

Jack's note came at that moment.

"A divine sun! I will wait for you at the top of the stairs by the lift.—Jack."

And in less than an hour she stood beside him, an entirely bewitching picture in the mauve and grey suit, her adorable feet in the neatest of grey suede shoes and immaculate silk stockings. She seemed as fresh as the violets tucked into her belt, and full of joyous anticipation.

Fond love suffused Captain Lumley's eyes. Everything was arranged for her when they reached the chairs—rugs and cushions—and the deck stewards were just bringing round the chicken broth.

"Why, it is eleven o'clock," Laline said.

"I think we ought to walk," Jack remarked. "You can sleep all the afternoon."

There was no Major Lamont in sight! A walk and a thorough investigation of the geography of the ship would be an excellent thing.

Many eyes followed the pair with interest and admiration as the usual tramp began. Laline was so radiant a being, with that apple blossom skin and golden hair. The pink in her cheeks was clear as a wild rose and deepened in the soft wind. But they had been round and round the deck four times, and not a sight of any very tall, black-haired American gentleman did they see.

He could not surely be sleeping still. He was not sleeping; he was striding the boat above them. And when at last Laline suggested that she wanted to be taken up there and David caught sight of them advancing in his direction, it seemed that a meeting was inevitable.

He quickened his pace as though upon some special errand, and when they did come face to face he bowed and would have passed, but Laline stopped and held out her hand.

“Why, what a surprise, Major Lamont! You going to Europe, too?”

“Yes. The call of the cafés in the Bois has lured me.”

His annoyance at having been caught, when to avoid them he had deliberately abandoned his usual ocean habit of putting in some good miles on A deck before lunch, to mount to the boat deck where the space was more cramped made his voice rather acid.

The girl was damnably pretty here in the morning light, and her eyes were full of a challenge; and the blood ran faster in David Lamont’s veins than is usual with his compatriots obsessed with business.

“Come and trot with us, you old bear,” Jack said. “Miss Lester does not know any ocean liner, and I have never been on a White Star before. But you know the ropes—show us round.”

David gave his old friend’s arm a nasty tweak, but he had to turn with them and talk lightly, as travellers do.

Laline showed herself intelligent, and did not ask too many feminine and foolish questions. She was gay as a young lark, and endeavored to draw Major Lamont into a controversy, but he remained taciturn, and when they had explored the whole of the boat deck he stopped near the companion ladder.

“You can’t get lost now,” he rather growled. “I am going to see how the run is,” and without more ado he left them.

“What a difficult man!” Miss Lester pouted. “He’s as sure of himself and as disagreeable and gruff as an Englishman!”

Jack laughed, “Thanks!”

“Oh! well, I don’t mean you; you’re different.”

Down in her heart she was exceedingly annoyed, and for the first time not quite sure of herself.

David Lamont, as he gained the smoking-room, was annoyed, too, for he also did not feel quite on firm ground. Salt air, May sunshine, blue sea, grey eyes, and pink velvet cheeks, to say nothing of a cupid’s bow cherry mouth that was not painted, were upsetting factors!

He said the word “Garcia” to himself. He was carrying a message to Garcia! Confound the girl! He had not felt so attracted since the hot flirtation he had had with Lady Cristobel Agincourt in the spring of 1919, when he was with the Peace Conference. He had emerged from that

successfully, and she had married a rich shipowner from Hull, called Dobbs! Both girls, he felt, were the product of their separate countries' ultracivilization—and did not really amount to a row of pins. Again, confound the hunting instinct!

At an idle moment he would not have resisted the frivolous pleasure of an affair with Laline Lester. He allowed himself outings about once in three years. But now anything which could draw ten minutes of his thoughts away from the work in hand must be refused, and it was sheer hard luck that this strong temptation had been thrown across his path!

He did not emerge until luncheon, and then he came into the restaurant so late that the other party were almost leaving. They nodded, and then David began ordering his food in his casual way of indifference, which Laline so resented.

Lots of Englishmen that she had met in Washington were washouts, but some nice and some stupid; they mostly had that air, though, and even if it was insubordinate it could be excused, and even admired, in foreigners; but for one of her own nation to dare to get by with it was more than she could stand! Major Lamont should be annihilated and rendered the merest slave to her whims!

Now, she must use her 'cute business sense, inherited from that successful father of hers and devise a plan for this man's subjection. So she passed David's table as they went out without ever looking at him, and went and allowed herself to be tucked up in her chair by Jack, and then pretended to go to sleep, and finally really fell asleep, before Major Lamont came out to pace with Judge Whitmore whom he had chanced upon.

And as he passed and re-passed, the most insane desire flooded him to go over and kiss those curly golden-brown eyelashes and crush the little fragile body in his strong arms.

So a scowl settled upon his stern face, and even Jack, who joined him in his tramp, did not dare to chaff him.

That night at dinner he felt it prudent to ask a companion to share his meal, and the old Judge and he discussed international politics, and he succeeded in banishing all thought of the other party from his mind.

Laline was burning with fury. It could not *possibly* be that he was really unattracted by her? He must be only acting. Whose will would prove the strongest?

CHAPTER IV

FASCINATION

Three days passed——

The fight went on. Outwardly David Lamont was the complete victor. Nothing which Laline Lester could do—and her arts were great in the way of allurements—could provoke any response from him.

He talked when he was absolutely dragged into talking with her. He seldom looked at her. He never gave her the satisfaction of knowing that he appreciated her marvellous changes of costume. He made her always have the sensation that she was of no account, a pretty butterfly hardly even important enough to tease! That was the strength of his character. But underneath he was growing to be profoundly affected by her; and, as for the girl, by the last evening before they would get into Cherbourg, she had fallen deeply in love with him.

She had asked Fate to let her feel—and now it seemed her request had been granted.

Jack, with the sixth sense of men who love, felt this, and his brave heart sank. David, he knew, was not the sort of chap to make any woman happy. He was the best of fellows, but action was his motto—not devotion. No woman would ever rule him, and no woman would ever come before his duty or his career. There would be no humouring of caprices with him, no shutting the eye to silly little unbalanced ways and foolish want of logic. Either a woman might display those, and he would treat her with the amount of respect he would give to a mistress, or she would have to curb them all and come up to the scratch as a reasonable being. Even then, would he ever really love her?

Jack looked at him, and was able to see where his charm lay. Strength of character is always magnetic, especially when accompanied by such looks. He was utterly ruthless, and had that distressingly clear sight, uninfluenced by glamour, which precluded the possibility of his ever being merely overcome by the intoxication of passion, to the oblivion of all else, as Jack felt that he himself might be.

And as Jack saw—or, rather, sensed—that Laline was falling in love with his friend, he began to watch and analyze him more and more. He did

not feel bitter; his jealousy took a different form. He felt that he must protect his love from something which could not be for her happiness.

On the fourth night out, the two men talked long after the ladies had retired to bed. A sharp wind had arisen, and the giant ship was not entirely without movement.

David Lamont had been probing some characteristics of a mutual friend rather profoundly.

“You size up everything exactly, don’t you, old man?” Jack said.

David stretched himself. He looked so strong as he sat there in the big comfortable armchair.

“Probably. It is a habit I acquired early, and it has been of great use in my work. It is better to relegate things into the places they belong. Men are fools as a rule. They mix up their emotions, and can’t see clearly whence they spring.”

“Yes; especially love emotions,” and Jack sighed.

David laughed shortly.

“About those, the thing is to ask yourself clearly is it that part of you—your will or spirit, or whatever you like to call the thing which means the divine—or your physical needs a woman is appealing to. When you have decided that, then you can let rip and only concentrate upon defending the one aspect. It is because most of us won’t face any truth that we allow the insidious call of sex to obstruct our judgment about the spirit, and get enmeshed in the enervating net of women’s physical wiles.”

“The two are so intermixed.”

“No, they are not. The one appeals to the senses alone, and the other is outside that. Take a case of physical disfigurement. No man could stay in love with a woman who had had her nose blown off, for instance. That shows it is all physical. If she had got a soul and a character he might go on loving her even more, but that would be because the physical was not counting with him. All the glamour would be gone, though. If he found he just felt kindly and sympathetic and pitiful—however much he had believed he was in love with her before—then he could be sure he had only cared for the body business. For my part, I dissect the creatures so mercilessly all the time that they can only hold me when every sense is pleased, and if they shock one of these all their charm flies.”

“You’ve never met anyone who could hold you with the other thing?”

“Not yet. I thought I adored a woman in 1919, but the day one of her false curls came off when I was kissing it quenched all desire. If their noses get pink in an east wind, or they show an unbecoming gesture or habit, if their voices squeak, if they smoke so that their breath smells of tobacco, or drink cocktails, or do one single physically disillusioning thing, I am just revolted. Nothing gets by with me. It is awful. I can only see the truth, and am unable to make any allowance. My reason tells me I ought to, as we are probably more revolting to them than they are to us, but I can’t. I see every blemish, and then I don’t register any sensation.”

“Arguing by that, then, you can see as plainly the qualities of the soul—we’ll call it—and would be attracted by them in an ugly physical body?” Jack was very much interested as he asked this.

“I might see them, but love has to begin with the physical, and then become merged into the spiritual. If you see only the spiritual things, you stay platonic. You’ve got to feel passion while knowing that there is gold beneath, really to love.”

“And you have never found such a one, David?”

“Never in my life. In my country the bringing up, and the freedom and want of tradition, turn even the best into selfish ‘cuties’; and in yours the chase after the too rare males cuts their charm. Guess I’ll not find a real mate this side of old age.”

This was comforting. Whatever Laline’s feelings for him might be, they would apparently receive no encouragement, Jack felt.

Next day it was very rough. Laline woke convinced that she was a perfect sailor by now, and rose before her usual time. Some feeling that she could not be hidden in her cabin this last day, when there was no knowing if she would ever see Major Lamont again, once they landed, urged her to get up. She had not been able to extract from him if he were coming to Paris really or going on to Southampton.

Celestine was entirely *hors de combat*, and Laline was obliged to dress alone. She rammed her gold curls into a soft cap, and put on a big cloak. She was conquering as well as she could a very unusual and unpleasant feeling. The air was all she craved. Where was Jack? Why had he not been to see how she was? She grew peevish, and then she found that it was half an hour earlier than Jack would be naturally waiting for her. He was quite blameless, but she felt just as cross with him as though it had been his fault.

She staggered dreadfully as she got into the corridor. Their state-rooms were on B deck, but she managed to get up the stairs safely. If she could only reach her chair all would be well.

Dimly she perceived Major Lamont coming out of his cabin, which was just at the corner of the square hall on A deck.

What was going to happen?—what awful thing? She felt as though she were dying. He must not see her. Oh! Heavens, not that! She made one wild rush for the open lee-side door—and then subsided into the arms of a friendly steward, who caught her as she fell. But it is best to draw a veil over this experience, which numbers of miserable creatures have passed through on their first voyages across the Atlantic!

David had an idea what was likely to have happened, and, with great discretion, went out on the deck by the opposite side, where the wind was strong, and the sky blue and pitiless. He felt he could not face disillusion.

But presently his walk took him to the lee side. She would have gone below by this time. But, no! There was a huddled little figure all alone, without a scrap of colour in the soft cheeks, and the air of an altogether unhappy child.

Politeness obliged him to stop and say something cheery.

“Oh! do come and take care of me,” Laline almost whimpered. “Jack has never appeared—and I hate it.”

David took the empty chair at her side. He knew Jack was not a bad sailor, and would be with them very shortly. And there was no use in arguing with himself about it—he *wanted to sit beside her*.

“Keep your eye on the horizon,” he told her. “That makes you feel all right at once.”

“I had no idea the sea could be such a yellow dog.” And a little colour came back into Laline’s cheeks with the joy of having David near her. She was praying now that Jack was ill—bad enough to keep him in his cabin all the morning.

“The sea is as capricious as a woman,” David said.

“I don’t think women are the least capricious. They always know what they want, and generally get it.”

“And then, when their vanity is appeased, they throw the thing away.”

“That is not caprice. That is method and having a sense of values.”

“A thing becomes valueless, then, when you have secured it?” He was amused.

“Yes, often. I hardly even want what I have got, and I long for the unattainable.”

“What an uncomfortable instinct in the home!” And he laughed rather cynically.

“I suppose it would be, but I haven’t a home yet. Auntie and I have given instructions to sell the house in Washington, and if I find I like Paris we’ll settle there.”

“Jack tells me you have taken his cousin’s place—Channings Priory—for the summer. I wonder what the English life will say to you?”

“I shall be crazy about it, most probably.”

“Until something new turns up.”

“Yes.”

“What is that book you are reading there?”

“It is called ‘This Side of Paradise.’ It is awfully like us all, isn’t it? Have you read it?”

He had. He looked at her just a trifle savagely. Was she like those in the book? He hated it somehow.

“Do you let all your partners kiss you like that?” he asked boldly.

Laline forgot that she had felt ill—triumph came to her. “He’s jealous,” she thought. “In spite of himself!”

“No; only the nicest.” And her grey eyes grew enticing.

And a rush of passion came to him. He knew that he wanted to kiss her there and then—and if they had been alone he would certainly have done so—but courageous people were walking up and down, even though two or three chairs beyond them on either side were untenanted, so that no one could hear their conversation.

He bent over her, and for the first time she saw a look in his eye!

Her cheeks were wild roses once more, and it is impossible to know what he would have said, only that at that moment Fergusson came out on the deck and up to them, a Marconigram in his hand.

His manner was one of icy respect—it pulled up his master with a jerk as he took the envelope. He seemed to see the word “Garcia” floating before his eyes!

Fergusson knew the gravity of this mission and his taciturn character would certainly, and rightly, disapprove of any amorous interludes! David felt angry with himself, and rebuked. And very angry with the bewitching little temptress!

He got up rather abruptly after reading the message:

“I must go and attend to this, I’ll beat up Jack and send him to you. Au revoir!” And he strode away into the saloon.

Laline could have cried. She hated Fergusson, she hated Marconigrams! She hated even Jack, who appeared at that moment full of contrition.

“Darling Baby, why did not you tell me you were coming up so early on this beastly morning?”

Tears of disappointment, augmented by unpleasant bodily sensations, were in Laline’s eyes.

David had gone—and what if fate were going to overcome her again—oh! the sea——!

Nothing could exceed Jack’s tenderness and care—*he* did not run the other way! A mother could not have been more concerned and soothing—and in the back of his mind what David had said about disillusion returned to his memory and he knew more than ever that he loved Laline with everything in him, mind and body and soul—whatever that was that people spoke so lightly of nowadays, and which in his youth had been a sacred thing!

He took her down to her state-room—and helped the stewardess to put her to bed—and then sat there and held her hand until she went to sleep. And by luncheon time the wind dropped and there was every prospect of a beautiful last evening ahead.

David and Jack ate together in the restaurant, neither of the ladies being present. And in his heart each man was thinking of the same thing. How he should spend the time with a certain golden-haired spoilt girl! Jack had made the usual plan. She would come up to tea, and then they would take a walk, and then sit in their chairs and watch the sunset.

David was being deliberate with himself, he meant to allow himself one whole hour’s pleasure. It should be no more than an hour, and then he would

cut out the whole thing. He had no intention of being weak, an hour could not hurt any man. He did not make a plan, because he knew he could just take her when he wanted her. Action was his motto.

And the conversation turned upon this.

“You’ll make a perfect husband, Jack. Why haven’t you married?” David said.

“I hope to—someday. I’m devoted to someone!”

“You are a devoted creature altogether, they don’t deserve it. I’m not.”

“No, old son, you represent the cave man—they’ll love you far better than they will ever love me!”

David laughed, he closed his strong hand.

“I suppose I am a brute—I am some kind of dynamic force and I can’t help it.”

Laline determined to make herself look exquisite for tea—in her last steamer outfit. It was a misty grey blue this time, rather dark. She felt quite well again. Celestine had recovered too and could do her hair. Her aunt meant to rest. Therefore she could dress in peace, after a lovely hot bath, and send for Jack to take her to her chair. And if she could not get Major Lamont to make love to her—well—she was not worth a ten cent piece!

CHAPTER V

INSOLENCE!

It was unlikely that—Laline determining to subjugate Major Lamont, and David having allowed himself the prospect of one hour to amuse himself in—Fate should not smile upon them! Indeed if the jade can spin more complicated threads by granting human beings' wishes, she often is complacent! Anyway she was so on this last afternoon on board the Olympic!

The three had tea together in the saloon—and then Laline sent Jack down to implore Mrs. Greening to join them at their chairs, to watch the sunset! And the moment that the kind fellow's back was turned, she raised soft eyes to Major Lamont, and suggested that they should go up on the boat deck for a few minutes first and see how the great orange disk looked from there. She was not at all sure that he would consent—and indeed had he not arranged his plan, he would have been quite capable of refusing point blank!

Her hesitation gave a new charm to her sparkling face.

“It's a great idea!” David answered, however. “Let's!”

So they stole away, and up the stairway, and on to the farthest point of the boat deck and there leaned over the rail and gazed to the west. The soft wind which had sunk to a mere zephyr by now, played with the golden tendrils of Laline's hair, and never had she appeared more delectable.

David allowed himself to bend quite close to her.

“Oh! isn't it gorgeous!” and she stretched out her little hands to the waves of light: “I am a sun worshipper!”

He did not answer, he just looked at her, and his strongly magnetic eyes seemed to enter her very being, and cause some strange fluttering near her heart.

Then he took out his watch, and glanced at it. It was ten minutes to six. He was saying to himself: “The clever puss! now she intends to excite me—well, she must take the consequences—it is up to her and for an hour she shall!”

“Why do you look at your watch?” Laline asked.

“To see how much time I have to look at you.”

“Do you want to look at me?”

“Of course—aren’t you extremely good to look at?”

She pouted.

“Yes—but I did not make myself—so that does not amount to anything in the way of a compliment!”

“You only like to be flattered about that over which you have will, then?”

“Why, certainly!”

He remained silent.

This exasperated her—she made the deduction that he did not find so much to praise on this point. There was a question and a challenge in her eyes.

“Well, why don’t you say something?”

He laughed.

“I’m a bear and I can only tell the truth!”

“And you think that I would not like it?” She was getting angry.

“Probably not.”

“Try!”

“No, I won’t.”

“I order you to!”

“Order as much as you like!”

“You won’t obey?”

“No.”

“Brute!”

“Honey!”

“I’m not ‘honey’ to you—you are always rude and hateful to me!”

“Why did you suggest coming up on this deck then?”

“On the principle that one takes bitters before dinner, an aperitive!” and she laughed. There was no use in growing mad with him—she knew that she would get the worst of it.

“Well it is better to be that than a chocolate ice cream!”

“Do you mean Jack?”

“No—Jack is the best fellow in the world—far too good for modern flappers to worry between their teeth!”

“Am I to understand that you are insinuating that I am a modern flapper, Major Lamont?” The grey eyes were flashing.

“Not exactly—you have escaped the worst form of their expression—but the flapper epidemic has gone so deep in our country, it seems that hardly a woman under fifty escapes entirely from its influence.”

“What do you just mean by the ‘flapper epidemic’?”

She was trying to be reasonable, and not show her growing irritation.

“Well putting over every impossible bad taste and unattractive ‘sassiness’ under the excuse of infantile years.”

“And you think it has caught me?” Her voice almost trembled.

“Partly.”

“How dare you say such things!”

“You asked me a deliberate question.”

“Then you have just got to explain yourself.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“You are absolutely insulting, Major Lamont! The inference of everything you have said is that I am an empty headed, posing girl—with not enough horse sense to comprehend plain English!”

He laughed good humouredly.

“When the head is as pretty as yours it does not matter what is inside it!”

“It matters a whole lot! You have made a great mistake, I am neither a flapper, nor empty headed! but why I stand for your insolence I don’t know.”

“I do.”

“You do?”

“Yes—it is because you know that I would not attempt to hold you if you bolted away!”

To use her own expression, when she thought of this scene, Laline was so near ‘passing out’ with surprise at his temerity, that she could not find adequate words to annihilate him with. But if she was furious with him, she was more furious with herself for being so horribly attracted that she had not the courage to turn and leave him. So she laughed, instead of becoming really angry—and turned the tables, asking him boldly:

“Well, why did you come up on this deck then? It could not have been only to insult me—you had some other reason?”

“Yes, I had. I wanted to enjoy the pleasure of looking at you in the very few moments that I mean to spare.”

“You only want to look at and not to talk to girls, then?”

“Generally—they have not much that it is interesting to discuss in their heads, which are only filled with themselves, and their own vanity.”

“You are frightfully unjust. We are, as a rule, ten times better educated and more intelligent than you men.”

“Then it is all the more a shame that you make so little use of it. If you are rich enough not to have to work, the whole force goes to drawing incense for your vanity—and learning new tricks to kill time.”

Then he laughed softly—he had not meant to have any serious conversation with her. He did not think her brain was worth it—she was merely a pleasure—but such a very great pleasure that he would have to be careful about it all. The hunting instinct, he knew, was terribly strong in him!

Laline, however, having got her resentment well in hand, only longed to draw him into a discussion—so she answered meekly instead of firing up:

“What would you have us do, then?”

“For the moment I would have you let me hold your arm and walk briskly up and down this deck!”

“But we were talking in the abstract, and you bring it down to the particular.”

She was, however, not displeased!

“Much the best thing to do—the minutes are passing—and I have only allowed myself an hour for enjoyment!”

“I am enjoyment, then?”

“Certainly.”

“And a temptation—to stray from work?”

“Tremendous!”

“My brain counts nothing at all—you just want to hold my arm!”

“I neither know nor care if you have a brain—if you have it is hidden away too deeply under the crust of our rotten education and bringing up of women—for any man without heaps of time to find. Some great shock, or some exceptional circumstance, may drag out the possible golden you from beneath all the false values—but we have only”—and he looked at his watch again—“thirty five more minutes. Let’s get the tangible joy out of a jolly walk—and propinquity!”

Laline was in love with David Lamont. She knew it—although she had never been in love before in her life. She just felt that it did not really matter then if he had been very insulting, and did think her of no account, mentally, the temptation for him to be quite close to her, holding her arm, was greater than her pride—and she knew men very well too, and that the shortest way to their brains and hearts, lies most surely through the door of their senses!

So she smiled up a divine smile, and made a caressing movement nearer to him—and he took her arm, and they began their walk. And if he felt just the agreeable physical excitement of the way of a man with a maid—Laline experienced much more exalted emotions!

Everything in her was thrilling at his touch. His hold was firm. She suddenly felt her rebellion was silly. Of what matter anything, if such a man loved her! She would not be able to put up any fight. He might just be complete master and make her do as he pleased!

The oval exquisite flower of a face glowed with youth and—love! An ambience of sweetness seemed to flow from her. David Lamont felt his pulses bounding. The darling little girl! The little honey—the little sweetheart! He said to himself—he had not felt so much for over two years!

They talked of foolish things, as light as the evening wind—but at each turn his arm seemed to hold her more tightly and more joy and gladness permeated them both.

And David Lamont in his cynical way was analyzing to himself:

“It is the springtime, and all the recreative forces are in the air, and, after all, if they could only stay young and lovely and provide this stimulus to man, what on earth was the use of their having any mind? This was what

women were for—only the darndest part was if you took one for this, you might be saddled with a bore when the essential faded.”

Laline glanced at her wrist watch. It now wanted five minutes until the hour should be up. She determined to make him stay with her over the time, if it were only for a few seconds. She would win on some point. The surrender was too ignominious otherwise.

He looked at his watch also.

“I have four and three-quarter minutes more,” he said. “Come,” and he drew her rapidly to the end where they would be quite alone by a boat. The waves were rosy pink there to the west, and all the sky was as an opal.

When they reached the spot where no one could possibly see them David let go her arm and seized both her little hands.

“I want to kiss you,” he said.

The coquette in her fenced.

“Of course! Well, perhaps you shall if you stay and chuck your old work.”

“No; I am going in four minutes. Let me kiss you now.”

“No! The price is for you to wait.”

“I will pay no price. Do you mean to struggle? The seconds are going by.”

The magnetism of his eyes, blazing now with passion, held her. Here was emotion for her! Here was feeling! But she must try to rule once more.

So she tossed her golden head and pouted.

“If I am not worth waiting for, I am not worth kissing.”

“You are probably not. But I am a man and for the moment you seem so to me. I suppose there are only about three minutes now. Why waste them?”

Laline felt everything in her melting as his black eyes held her, and his firm mouth, smiling a little, showed just a white gleam of his perfect teeth.

“Ah!——” she gasped, overcome, and he folded her in his arms.

She had never dreamed of such a kiss! She had had others, but they had not meant a thing to her, rather nuisances which she had experimented with. But this kiss! Ah! It seemed to draw her whole being to him. Time and place vanished in one divine thrill.

That anything so passionate, so long, so utterly tender, too, could come from that stern, fierce brute, David Lamont, was too glorious! She only knew that she loved him wildly, adoringly, completely.

He picked her up in his arms when at last his lips left hers, and deposited her in a vacant chair.

“Thank you, honey,” he whispered, and then turned and left her, striding on and down the companion stair to A deck.

And when the intoxication quieted a little in Laline, she glanced at her watch, it was within a minute of ten minutes to seven o’clock. He had done as he said—the hour was not yet up!

She felt exhausted—deliriously, divinely exhausted! Her cheeks kept paling and glowing alternately—her lovely, lithe figure just stayed limp in the chair.

No, of course, there was nothing like love in the whole world. Shelley’s lines came back to her:

Nothing in the world is single,
All things by a law divine
In one another’s being mingle—
Why not I with thine?

See the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother:
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What are all these kissings worth,
If thou kiss not me?

Yes—indeed! “What were all these kissings worth, if thou kiss not me?” Presently a reaction began to set in. He had won, and she was beaten. He had kissed her, and gone off to work. What was this imperative work? Of course, men must work, but Jack would never have done that! Just a few minutes more or less could not have mattered to the horrid old task, whatever it was, and the “more” would have been so perfectly glorious for them! But there was to-night! and there would be a half-moon—and—Oh! she must go down and make herself just as beautiful as she and Celestine, between them, knew how to make her. She would wear the soft pervenche

georgette which was not so very short, and which seemed to turn her grey eyes into dewy hyacinths, she had been told.

She got up from the chair and leaned for a few moments over the rail to look at the sunset. The great disc had disappeared and all the heavens were a crimson glow. The waves were clasping one another. Ah!

Then with a recrudescence of emotion she walked on and down the stairs. But as she came nearer the lee-side door, near where their chairs were, what incredible sight met her eyes in the middle distance!

David Lamont, pacing the deck between Judge Whitmore and his tiresome wife, who had only emerged from her cabin that afternoon. Pacing the deck from the other end, showing that he had been round already once, and must have joined them deliberately on his leaving her. He was not working, then! he could never have intended to work.

The shock was perfectly horrible to her. She went cold all over, and walked forward to the chairs, her head in the air, and her grey eyes like icicles—and before she reached them, the three people came face to face with her.

“Perfect evening for a stroll, Miss Lester,” David Lamont called cheerily—“Where’s Jack?—you should not be so lazy, but tramp as we do!”

And then he went on.

Laline got to her chair, and fell into it, her knees almost giving way under her.

CHAPTER VI

“I LOVE HIM, THAT’S ALL!”

Celestine could not think what could be the matter with her much-loved mistress and baby. Celestine knew her every thought almost, and, with her mixture of natural French intelligence and acquired American shrewdness, she divined that something had occurred concerning “ce Major Lamont,” who she was well aware occupied most of her lamb’s thoughts.

She had taken pains to acquaint herself with Fergusson—no easy matter!—and she had endeavoured to find out from him something of his master’s character. But beyond gaining a general impression, the result of deductive methods, that David Lamont was someone to respect, she had been able to glean no concrete information as to his status in life or his plans—even the port he intended to land at. They might be getting off at Cherbourg or, again, they might not, Fergusson told her.

For her dear little mistress to be really in love with such an unknown quantity, such a drop of quicksilver, was unfortunate, to say the least of it. Only the thought that those of her nation were not so likely to feel to the extent that Europeans would under the circumstances comforted her. She had seen too many cases of “crazy for” and in and out of love occurring among the friends of the Lester family to be gravely apprehensive of serious consequence now; only, to start a first visit to Europe extremely in love with a difficult and recalcitrant member of her own nation about whom they knew nothing, might spoil Mademoiselle’s pleasure and prevent her gaining the full benefit of the trip.

Celestine hoped her young mistress would marry a European. American husbands were the perfection if you wanted kindness and generosity, with no mental emotion. But from a watch of the characteristics of her beloved baby she knew that she needed more than that, and, with a Frenchwoman’s belief in the one and essential thing—love—and with her knowledge of American habits and customs, she felt it would be better to try and find them in a husband than in the inevitable lover, who was always fortunately forthcoming after mariages de convenances in France.

Laline had been her darling—her golden-haired *fée*—from the moment she had taken service with her tiresome, nervous, drugtaking mother, when

Laline was but five years old. And to see her happy and well established was her one desire.

She had carefully observed Major Lamont on two occasions when chance had placed her near him, in arranging the cushions and rugs at the chairs, and he had been talking to Captain Lumley before the ladies actually came up on deck.

He was really not very like the usual American, she decided, in his methods and in his complete absence of self-consciousness. “Il est plutôt comme un grand seigneur Européen,” she admitted, as arrogant and sure of himself as one of those not-altogether-very-much-loved English.

But then, it was that assurance, that indifference which, alas! women adored. He was terribly handsome, too—bel homme—and probably would make a passionate lover, just as though he were French.

Thus it was obvious that he was dangerous, and that she must détourner her Mademoiselle as much as possible from interest in him.

He was evidently not the kind to make for the happiness of women.

If eventually nothing more suitable turned up, after a year in Europe, Captain Lumley would do as a husband for her mistress, because by then, if no emotion had passed her way, it would be wiser to settle down. To be an English Countess, in the future, was no bad thing. Quelque chose solide—something to be depended upon. In these days when nations were being unsettled and aristocracies were being overturned, one had better grasp what one could of reality!

But as she did her sweet little lady’s hair for dinner some vague feeling of trouble oppressed her.

Laline was indeed in no amiable mood. What a beast! What did he imagine that she was? She thought over every word that David had used, and then she was obliged to own that he had not once said he was going to work—only that he only meant to allow himself an hour for amusement. The insolence of it—the impossible impertinence!

Then justice made her realise that he had not really pursued her at all on board, and that every move in the game had been entirely of her contriving. It was she who had asked him to go up on the boat deck, not he who had implored her to walk there.

Her cheeks suddenly burned then, and her eyes flashed fire, and Celestine exclaimed “Mais comment donc, Mademoiselle, ma chérie!”

“Nannie,” Laline said, “I am in the hell of a temper and I want to murder Major Lamont.”

Celestine nodded comprehensively.

“Il est difficile,” she said.

“Difficult! Mon Dieu! He is impossible—of an insolence which no woman could put up with. I shall never speak to him again.”

“That is well.”

“Why is that well?” a little antagonistically.

“Because he is not of a docility like the usual members of Mademoiselle’s entourage. He can be made to wear no bridle, and so for happiness it were wiser for Mademoiselle to let him go by.”

Laline clenched her hands.

“But the worst of it is, Nannie, honey, the ones who won’t be bridled are the only ones worth bothering about. I am sick of moche, and the Willemon Dodges, and the Jack Lumleys, and the Potter Greys. He is horribly fascinating.”

Celestine shrugged her shoulders. The movement said everything. Women were unreasonable—they wanted midday at fourteen hours. They found men insolent when they were what they desired, and “moche” when they were not insolent, and not what they desired. There was nothing for it but a shrug.

“Yes, I know—” said Laline.

“What does Mademoiselle mean then to do?”

Laline lay back with her golden head supported on her beloved Nannie’s ample bosom, and said slowly, tears coming into her eyes:

“I love him. That’s all!”

“Tiens! tiens!” protested Celestine. “All love passes. Let it pass soon.”

“But I want him.”

“Quel malheur!”

“You think I should be unhappy with him?”

“A slave—but merely a slave. Mademoiselle has perhaps not observed the mouth of the Major?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Not for kisses.”

“Not—for kisses!” And Laline gasped. Suddenly a wave of strong emotion swept her. Not for kisses, when, not three-quarters of an hour ago, he had held her lips in the most divine kiss that could be dreamed of in Paradise!

“That is the perfectly terrible part of it, Celli. He is just for the only kisses worth having on earth.”

Celestine’s eyes said quite plainly, “Has Mademoiselle, then, experienced one of these convincing things?” But she was too well mannered to ask a question in words.

Laline covered her face with her hands. Then she jumped up, finished her dressing rapidly, and went into her aunt’s cabin.

“I’ve sent up to ask the Whitmores to join us on our last night,” that lady announced, “and they have accepted. Although they had thought of inviting Major Lamont themselves, we must ask him, too.”

“Not a bit of it!” exclaimed Laline. “Let the bear alone. He’d probably refuse anyway.”

“I thought you liked him, Laline?”

“He bores me now. I walked on the top deck with him after tea.”

“That is why Jack couldn’t find you, then. He was so upset, poor boy.”

“Oh, it does men good to hurt them!” Laline responded savagely, and went back to her own state-room.

That was a mercy the Whitmores were coming. And she would just flirt with the old Judge for all she was worth.

Meanwhile, David Lamont, in his cabin was smoking one of his rare cigars.

The hour—especially the end of it—had been perfectly delicious. What a little sweetheart the girl was! And not cold either! Oh, no—not the least cold. What a skin! What eyes! And what lips!

What an awful pity she had been brought up in that fluffy modern way—perhaps if a darling, wonderful woman, like his own beloved mother, had had the training and disciplining of her, and taken her backwards and forwards to Europe, as he himself had been taken and disciplined, and taught

in his youth, she might have grown into a real woman with a sense of responsibility and of the fitness of things. She might even, as it was, at some future period, when he was not so busy, be worth studying to see if there was gold beneath.

“But it is their darned attitude of mind, these modern girls, which gets me,” he concluded to himself, “imagining they are the superiors of all men, and that we are just to obey any of their whims. Poor Jack is a warning to one!”

He did not feel the least contrition for his action. He knew Laline was no timid, trusting country flower whom he must carefully not lead astray. He believed that she was as equally well-equipped as an opponent in the game of flirtation as he was himself.

But now, until he should have returned to Paris after the two months' duty was over, and he could, perhaps, look Mrs. Greening and her niece up in England, he must have no further intercourse with them; he must put his whole mind upon his work ahead. He had mastered a very difficult code he had been given at Washington, but there remained one or two aspects of the nation with which he would have to deal which it would be advisable to study more deeply.

He read for half an hour, stretched upon his sofa, but he was unable to prevent his pulses bounding every now and then, when the remembrance of Laline's soft lips would obtrude itself between the pages.

“I'll have to take a hold on myself,” he said.

The Greening-Lumley-Whitmore party were seated at their table and at a second course when he sauntered into the restaurant.

Laline's place faced him if he chose to turn his head—if not, she could always see his profile—and not a line or expression of it was unknown to her, after a watch of five days! And to-night she had that uncomfortable hot sense of pins and needles at the tips of her fingers when she caught sight of him coming in and every time she permitted herself to look at him.

There was such easy grace in all his attitudes; his olive skin was so clean and refined. She had grown even rather to like the bluish mark where he shaved his black beard! But what impudent indifference he was showing to-night! He had a book with him! She grew more and more nervous—and more and more attracted!

Judge Whitmore felt it was a pity she was so stupid, for such a pretty girl! She had not had the wits to carry out her intended plan of flirting with

him.

Mrs. Greening seldom observed what was going on around her, and was never uninterested in her food. So the dinner passed as a usual one to her.

Jack Lumley, being fine of perception, was painfully aware that his beloved lady was hopelessly distraite and the fact that she had been somewhere for an hour with his friend David alone, must have something to do with it.

What had they said—or done?

David was probably abominably casual and irritating and had wounded her feelings in some way—so all that he himself could do would be to show extra devotion, and be as soothing as possible, even though she showed signs of treating him pettishly almost whenever he spoke.

Love, for Jack, always meant devotion.

David finished his meal before the larger party, and retired at once with his book to a comfortable chair in the saloon, and there they could see him ensconced and absorbed in the pages, when, quite late, they came down there from the restaurant verandah where they had had coffee.

Would he not speak to them *at all* before going to bed?

Laline felt so unhappy by now, she had lost all resentment. Her heart was as heavy as lead. They would get in to Cherbourg quite early in the morning and would probably catch the first train after all. Everyone was speculating about it, as usual, on the last night.

Was he going to get off, or was he going on to Southampton?

It was a perfectly awful thought that a man who had held her in his arms, and given and taken from her the fondest, longest kiss, should be sitting there perfectly indifferently, and that she should not know if they would ever meet again—and she was not even certain if he would say good-night.

She became so nervous at last that she had to hold her little hands together. They were not white as usual, but purplish pale with icy cold.

Jack *sensed* that she wanted to speak to David.

“I wonder what that old bear is reading so deeply,” he said. “I think I’ll go and stir him up.”

Laline watched, and saw, when Jack reached his friend, that he had to be literally shaken from his book. He was not acting, then; he was really

interested in it.

The pain seemed to grow round her heart. But there was rage, too.

If she had known, David had had a hard fight with himself more than once to keep his attention. Visions of the upper deck and the half moon, and the possibilities would come to him. But this is where discipline came in. He had no intention of succumbing to desire, and he *had* the intention to show no further interest in Miss Lester.

“Come and have a farewell drink, David, old boy. The ladies want to say good-bye to you. You are going on to Southampton to see your tailor in London, I think you said?”

David made no reply to this, but, in a kind of reluctant way—almost as though he were being dragged—he got up and followed Jack back to the group in one of the little alcoves.

He was perfectly polite and ordinary to everyone. He talked to Mrs. Whitmore most, perhaps, and then listened attentively when she returned it with nineteen to the dozen—a long story of where she had left her keys.

“What a frightful bore she is!” thought poor Laline. “How does she dare to think Major Lamont is interested in her horrid old keys!”

She could hardly keep back tears. She had become so temperamental that if it had been any one else but David there, she would just have had a breakdown, and rushed off to her state-room. But she would not have dared to show any foolish emotion before him. That, indeed, would be the end of things!

They drank champagne, and she deliberately lit a cigarette, which she had hardly ever done in the last days, when David was near. He must see that she, too, was indifferent! But he did not appear to see anything. He was just aloof.

“If I stay another minute I shall snatch her up and carry her out on to the deck and kiss her to death!” he was thinking, so he rose and, wishing them all a casual good-night, went on to his cabin.

Laline had a sensation that she was going to faint. Jack came to her rescue, and said some cheery thing, and then suggested that she must be packed off to bed, to be up in time in the morning.

And, because her aunt did not appear to be wanting to stir, he led her off by herself.

But when he said good-night to her at the state-room door his kind eyes were full of fondest concern:

“Baby—darling!”

She burst into tears.

“Oh! Jack! you are the greatest dear in this world!” And then she went in and shut the door.

CHAPTER VII

SIX DAYS' LEAVE

As Laline and her aunt and the Whitmores, and Jack, waited in line for their passports to be examined next morning, the girl thought that she caught sight of Major Lamont quietly going out of the opening which would lead to the tug's gangway. Perhaps he was going just to look at things, because of course, if he were really landing he would need to have a passport examination like everyone else. Laline did not know anything of diplomatic passports.

Then she was very annoyed with Jack, who diverted her attention for a few moments—for it must have been then that David must have returned, and gone up the stairs—because she saw no more of him, either on the ship or in the tender.

So he had gone—out of her life for ever. She had not known one could suffer so much. She hated France—of what interest could all these new things be?

She did not really take in anything which was said to her.

Finally, they got into the train and she sank into her seat. They would not be starting for another hour.

She gazed idly out of the window. She could see a road—and what was that?—A motor car! A very smart Rolls Royce. And Major Lamont in it!—Surely it was he? She could not have been mistaken. How had he got there? How had he possibly landed without their knowing it, and not bothered with the Custom House, and just sailed off in that nice car? She was full of mixed feelings, but chief among them was the fact that France suddenly became of more interest to her—and especially the thought of Paris. Perhaps he would be in Paris. Perhaps she would see him again after all.

She did not breathe a word of her discovery to Jack or her aunt, who believed that Major Lamont had gone quietly on to Southampton. But presently she asked Jack, casually, how long it would take to get to Paris by motor, and why had they not thought of going that way?

The whole journey now became one longing to reach their destination, for Laline. Jack tried to point out to her the quaint French architecture, which he had believed would have greatly interested her, and which would

have done so had her whole undisciplined mind not been set upon David Lamont.

As the long day drew to a close, and Paris was reached, she was tired and quiet. They were going to the Ritz, of course. Jack had arranged everything.

By the next morning, refreshed and blooming, and lovely, Laline came down with her aunt to luncheon in the garden. It was full May, and a sudden rush of warmth had made everyone believe real warm summer had come.

The chestnuts were fully green and blossoming, the air was soft and fresh, and the intoxication of Paris seized the girl, and, in spite of being in love with an indifferent bear, whom she might never see again, she felt her spirits rising.

But what a nuisance that she had not realized that the outlines of the heads in Paris would be quite small, not a mass of curly hair like hers, and that the skirts would not be quite so short. Celestine must have up the coiffeur before dinner, and must learn exactly the geste. She rather pulled in her tiny feet, too, because she saw instantly her shoes were too long and pointy.

Laline was one of those people who immediately appreciate every nuance of dress, and who, in twenty-four hours, would acquire the exact look of the last fashion, even if she had lived in Timbuctoo all her life. She was one of the most beautifully turned out *soignée créatures* the modern world could produce.

The afternoon should be spent in the Rue de la Paix shops and wherever were the other great establishments. She would never be a minute behind the times.

Until this period of her existence the care and beautification of her body and its adornment had meant the chief thing in her life, but as her soul was not really banal, its rebellion had shown in her unrestful discontent.

They were at one of the tables just beyond the restaurant windows, in the Ritz garden, and all the new atmosphere and the aspect of the people around was filling Laline with interest and food for thought.

“By Jove, there is David!” cried Jack, surprised. “He really is a corker! How the deuce did he get here? I thought he was in England.”

The most brilliant rose pink flooded Laline’s cheeks. Where—where was he? She could not see him.

She tried to control her excitement and follow the direction of Jack's eyes, and, yes, at last she saw him, rather at the other end standing by an entrance door, looking down the garden towards them.

How smart he was in town clothes! What a gentleman! How distinguished! How adorable! Alas!

He caught sight of the party and bowed calmly, but did not attempt to join them.

Laline's excitement increased. It was this element of uncertainty which caused the powerful effect upon her.

Never had she the satisfaction of feeling secure in one single particular in regard to Major Lamont.

If he had been merely an insolent and indifferent society person he could not have thus concerned her. It was that strange thing—the magnetic force of a dominant personality—which, being the real thing and not a pose, made itself felt by everyone approaching it.

She *knew* instinctively that David was in reality everything which she could respect, however his outward indifference annoyed her.

As he had been smoothly rolling onwards in the Ambassador's Rolls Royce, which had been sent to meet him at Cherbourg—they were old acquaintances—he had been dispassionately reviewing the situation which had arisen. It seemed as though Fate had deliberately thrown him into the arms of temptation as he had left the Ministry at Washington. From the very moment that the trust had been confided to him, a new element had come into his life as though to try him and distract his attention.

He *must* carry the message to Garcia. He *must not* allow any new interest to hold him until that was completed.

He knew as he sped through France's green country, the air laden with the scents of springtime, that he was more attracted by Laline Lester than he had been by any woman but Cristobel Agincourt in his life. And what a failure she had turned out to be!

This little honey of his own nation might not eventually prove a failure, he mused. He had seen once or twice flashes of a spirit in her, aiming at something beyond the trivial social round—that ridiculous treadmill where false points of view seemed for ever revolving in a circle—everything that was fine or serious or of true cultivation just rushed at as a fad and then

dropped for a still newer craze. No purpose, no real aim, no constructive policy.

“Half her force gone on how she can beautify herself, cut out her friends, and be up to date. The other half, stultified by the craving for love and truth and nature, utterly unsatisfied.”

If he had only time he could find extreme pleasure in endeavouring to discover if there was real gold of character underneath—but he must *carry the message to Garcia*. He would try not to see her again before he was through with that.

His appointment with the Ambassador was for eleven o'clock the next day.

He went up to his usual rooms at the Ritz, but not at the hour that the Greening party arrived—so there had been no meeting.

And the evening he had spent in a careful arranging and classifying of his papers.

He arrived at the Embassy exactly on time on the Wednesday. And the Ambassador saw him immediately, and they had an hour's talk of deeply satisfactory nature to both men—and at the end of it his Excellency had said:

“So you have six whole days' leave from to-morrow, Major Lamont. Do exactly what you please in them, have a good time, and forget all about your work, only report here to me next Tuesday at twelve o'clock, ready to start at a moment's notice—and from Rome onwards you become an unknown unit!”

David expressed his thanks.

“I wanted to go and have a look at the battlefields.”

“In that case let me lend you a very fast two-seater which is lying idle in my garage. I have always meant to make some record spins when I had time.”

David found this entirely to his taste.

“I want you to dine with us to-night, Lamont. We have a state function for a certain royalty and his wife, who still may be of some use to you in the Near East—8.30 o'clock sharp, and afterwards dance in the opening quadrille with my niece, Mrs. Hamilton. We are going to have the first after-

War ceremonial show. Most of us have forgotten quadrilles. It is her Royal Highness's wish that one is danced, and you, I expect, know the ropes."

And as David turned away from the door of the Ritz garden he half wondered to himself if Laline would be at the Embassy, and if so—if——

He had six days in which he had been given permission to *forget* duty!

Six days held a good many possibilities. If she was at the Embassy he would take that as an omen that he might amuse himself. If she was not, then he would not bother with any women during the time.

Laline's heart had sunk down into her ten little toes when she saw David bow calmly and not attempt to come to them. She felt small and of no account, here in a strange land, unexalted by one of the things which lent her poise in her own country, the knowledge that she was in every way perfection. On the contrary, she was conscious that her hair stuck out in too many curls, and her shoes were wrong, and that probably she had just a touch of the provincial in her aspect. Just as her friend Mollie Beaton had told her everyone feels when first they reach Paris, no matter from what hubs of the universe they have come.

"There *is* a difference, of course," she admitted, "but it sha'n't show on me long."

However, these two things together depressed her.

Before they had finished luncheon a note was brought to them from the Embassy. Mrs. Randolph, the Ambassadors, was an old friend of Mrs. Greening, and was aware of what would be the date of their arrival.

It was to greet aunt and niece and invite them to the ball that same night for the foreign royalty; they were to telephone to her directly on receipt of the letter.

Mrs. Greening was enchanted to obey the request, and in a conversation with her old friend secured Jack an invitation.

"So very much nicer to have a man of our own with us, Laline," she said.

And Laline agreed. But she was not thinking of Jack or anyone—only wondering if David would be there?

The American Embassy! It was quite possible, although perhaps, as the party was for royalty, they might not ask just a simple major over here on a holiday.

Still, the hope would give an extra reason for making her appearance simply stunning.

She would immediately consult Celestine as to what frock to wear, and have the coiffeur to come and practise, all the late afternoon if necessary, to get her head with the very last most distingué look. No more bunches of curls for her. And Paris should be searched for some of the right-shaped silver sandals to adorn her feet.

Then, if David Lamont was there, he would not think she could not do credit to America!

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE EMBASSY BALL

The American Embassy of that year was in a very fine house in Paris, and the Ambassador and Mrs. Randolph knew exactly how to entertain the great ones of the earth. It had a splendid staircase coming up to a magnificent gallery, from which the great salons branched off on one side, and the dining-room and all the private apartments upon the other, while at the end the windows looked upon the garden.

Orders would be worn, and everything would be done with great state, for the first time since peace was declared.

There was to be a dinner party of thirty-six covers first, before the reception and ball would begin, and only the *crème de la crème* of Parisian Society were invited to meet their Royal Highnesses, who were to be the guests of the evening; an elderly couple with an old-world distinction, whose country as yet had made no European *bêtises*, and still stood for something.

Major Lamont's partner for the feast, the Ambassador's niece—a young widow, Mrs. Hamilton, in Paris for a week or so, before going on to Rome—was a very pretty, graceful creature, with big brown eyes, and during the banquet David passed an agreeable time with her, even though underneath there was some suppressed excitement in the speculation as to whether or no Laline Lester would arrive afterwards.

Laline had dressed with extreme care. She was never snappy to Celestine when she was excited, which was one of the dear points about her, and the fond old maid beamed with joy upon her beauty.

They had shopped and bought shoes, and a wonderful ostrich-feather fan of Laline's favourite pale *pervenche* blue, to match her shot blue and silver frock. The *coiffeur* at the Ritz had reduced her head to a chic size, while keeping the waves of golden hair soft about her little face.

Jack and her aunt both felt that she was the loveliest bit of young womanhood that they had ever laid eyes upon as she came into the sitting-room ready to start. She had refused to dine with them down in the restaurant; she wanted the whole time until they were to leave to rest in and

dress in, she had said. So Jack and Mrs. Greening had eaten alone, and now she had burst upon them, this vision of spring beauty.

Passionate love was in Jack's mild blue eyes as he put her cloak around her.

"Laline, I love you. I love you," he whispered. "Are you never going to promise me anything at all?"

"Only what I've always said, Jack—perhaps, some day."

And then Mrs. Greening interrupted them coming from her room.

"If there are royalties there we ought to be on time, Laline, and we are asked for eleven o'clock. Let's start."

And so they went. And it happened that they were among the very first to arrive, by this zeal. They were just coming up the great staircase as the procession came out of the dining-room into the great open space of the hall.

The Royal Prince and the Ambassadors, and the Ambassador and the Princess, and then the rest, according to rank.

Mrs. Greening stopped on the top step, and Laline stood beside her, and watched until they should be all passed, and suddenly the girl's heart gave a great bound. For there was Major Lamont among the great ones of the earth! He had been asked to dinner, and they only to the ball with the crowd!

And he was with a very pretty woman—very pretty, and perfectly dressed—and he would see that they had been so countrified as to arrive so terribly early. Excitement, humiliation, jealousy, and the usual anguish of uncertainty shook Laline. Always, always was she at a disadvantage with him!

As the procession passed and broke up just beyond them, towards the great salon's door, David caught sight of the lovely little face, with the eyes shining with emotion, and the pink velvet cheeks glowing. He was conscious of a flood of joy, but he never allowed his feelings to show. So he passed with a polite bow, and Laline's teeth almost chattered with nervous excitement.

The poor child was passionately in love for the first time in her twenty-two years of life. She had never been taught to control any emotion or not allow herself every indulgence. She had been undisputed queen of her set since she could remember, and now suddenly she was plunged into an atmosphere which she did not know, among people who had never heard of

her queenship, and to whom she represented nothing but a lovely American girl, of whom there were numbers in Paris, and at the Embassy, every year.

She felt all this, and it crushed her for the first few moments, and then her natural pride asserted itself. If she was a stranger and unused to Paris, she could act utter unconcern, anyway.

So she pulled herself together, and stood proudly with her aunt and Jack until the moment should come when it would be discreet to move forward and greet their friend, Mrs. Randolph, by the great salon door, when the procession had broken up.

She saw that the Royal Prince had indicated that David should come and speak to him, and she watched with what perfect ease and self-confidence he obeyed the command. The Ambassador joined the group, and they seemed to be treating the “simple major” with every interested respect. “How well he must know the world,” thought Laline.

Then the Ambassador drew the lady with the brown eyes forward, and they all seemed to be having a gay conversation, at ease with one another.

A forlorn sense came over the poor child; she felt of no account.

The Prince moved on then, and Major Lamont remained with the fascinating lady.

Laline burned with jealousy. This woman had one advantage over her. She evidently knew Europe; but she—Laline—would learn that soon, and no woman should eventually put one up on her on that score!

Looking at David, there in perspective, as he stood talking deferentially to “this creature,” Laline felt that he was the most attractive thing she had ever seen. And he was interested in the woman—plainly interested—as well as deferential.

His head was bent towards her. He did not look indifferent as usual.

(He was not. She was telling him unknowingly something which threw a light on the country of his mission.)

Who was this person? Laline must find out. She hated her already.

More people were coming up the stairs behind them now, so the position was not so invidious, and the girl’s self-confidence began to be restored.

“If she weren’t an American I could bear it better,” she told herself. “But I’m just as good as she is, and why should she have him treat her that way?”

The moment had arrived to go forward. Soon their greetings were made, and the Ambassador was most cordial. Anything as lovely as Laline must grace her quadrille. The lady who was to have danced with the second secretary had been ill, and had not come.

Here was the very thing. And immediately she made the arrangement and introduced the secretary to her.

“I have never danced a quadrille,” Laline laughed; “but I suppose unimportant people like us will be at the side, so I’ll watch and follow.”

She was so glad that David should see that she was not just one of the general crowd. Would he come and speak to her? If only she had the pluck to be up stage with him should he do so! But she knew she would never succeed in that.

If the thing you desire most in the world is an insecure quantity, and you never know if you are going to gain it or not, you can’t chance acting in a manner that might drive it away altogether.

When the people began to take their places, and the musicians were playing a prelude, David and Mrs. Hamilton took up their vis-à-vis to the second secretary and Laline. This added to Laline’s excitement and to David’s pleasure.

How lovely the little honey looked. And what an improvement the distinguished way her hair was done now made in her. And how clever of her to have picked up the Paris look so soon. Yes, Fate had answered—and he should follow the indication—and to-morrow, when his six days should begin, he would arrange to spend some of them with her if possible.

He would keep himself well in hand, but no doubt the affair would develop into a promising flirtation—and perhaps when he came back—!

To-night he would go and talk to her directly the dance should be over, and take her out, and sit in one of the smaller rooms. Poor dear old Jack! but then, she was not bound to Jack, and a woman was fair game, and if Jack could not secure her it was up to him.

And then the quadrille began.

“He’s doing it properly,” Laline thought. “I suppose he knows courts. I do hope I’ll be all right.”

She put all her intelligence to watch, before the sides began, and got through the whole stately business in fairly creditable style. And each time the vis-à-vis crossed and bowed and took hands, a wild thrill ran through

them both. Mrs. Hamilton had already become attracted by her partner, and was graciousness itself, and Laline's jealousy was burning before the end.

Would David come and talk to her? As he was close to her in the last turn he whispered very low, "Make your partner take you out into the hall."

If anyone else in the world had said such a thing, in the tone of a command, to Laline, she would have resented it strongly and would have gone in the opposite direction. But now her heart beat, joy rushed over her. She would see him, she would speak to him—nothing else mattered at all. Fortunately, she was no novice in manipulating situations, and the obedient second secretary found himself leading his lovely partner into the hall, when he had intended to take her into the musicroom beyond the ballroom.

She would have to keep him with her until David appeared.

David had not found it so easy to get rid of his companion, who had no intention of letting him go, only his natural ruthlessness and perfect sangfroid aided him. He deliberately led her past the Royal Prince, so close that he would be obliged to address her, knowing her to be the Ambassador's niece—and in that second David bowed, as if dismissed, and bolted in the crowd.

Laline's foot was tapping the carpet when he did come up, and her irritation had begun to rise again.

"Ah, here you are, Miss Lester," David exclaimed. "Your aunt has sent me to fetch you to be introduced to one of her old friends." And the polite young secretary moved aside.

David ceremoniously gave Laline his arm and, instead of leading her back into the salon where both knew her aunt was, he drew her across the hall into a little room, which only contained a big sofa and cases of miniatures and bibelots. It led to the private apartments. There they would probably be alone. Laline was enchanted.

He moved one of the cushions for her, and indicated that she was to sit down. She did and leaned back against the soft yellow satin and opened her giant fan.

David sat down beside her.

"Now tell me all about it," he commanded, and he took her little left hand and deliberately began to pull the glove off of it.

Laline made as though she would resist him, but his firm grasp tightened on her wrist.

“I don’t want the glove—I want to kiss the palm!”

“Major Lamont, you are really too impertinent!” she gasped, but her voice was not as indignant as it ought to have been. His touch was magnetizing her, destroying her power to resist him.

He understood everything that she was feeling, and delighted in it.

“Now, begin.”

“Begin what?” She was still pulling her hand.

“Begin to tell me all about it—everything you have done and said and thought of since I left those adorable lips on the Olympic’s top deck. But it is perfectly useless for you to struggle about your hand. I mean to hold it, and kiss it, as I want.”

“Flabbergasted” is the only word which can describe Laline’s state of mind. Here, with supreme disregarding of the indifference shown in between times, he was going right back to the evening of the kiss, as though they had not since met.

“I should not have thought anything about me interested you,” and she pouted, but her resistance grew less, and now, beyond making her fingers stiff and uncompromising, she did not struggle to remove her hand from his grasp.

“How silly of you.” And he began to kiss each little pink-nailed finger up and down. “You ought to have known that I was thinking of you all the time.” And he pressed his lips to the palm. A sensation of intoxication was stealing over Laline—the curious thrill of love when it is holding the senses. She *could not* take her hand away. Her red mouth smiled softly, her eyes were dewy.

David had the profoundest temptation to clasp her in his arms, and kiss her lips once more, but his fastidiousness would not let him. Not here—at an Embassy—with the chance of someone coming in.

He had awakened her, which is what he had intended to do, so now he put her hand back in her lap.

“You are utterly sweet, honey,” he said.

“And—you are a perfect brute.”

“Yes, I know, but don’t let us quarrel in our short time of grace. Forgive everything, and let us start fair. Tell me what you are going to do in Paris, and especially to-morrow.”

She did try to be dignified, but it was impossible to feel angry any more. She was just throbbing with love—that was all.

“We have not settled anything.”

“Then I suggest a plan. I have had a two-seater lent me for six days and I am going to see the battlefields. Why won’t you come with me and make old Jack and your aunt and anyone else they want, join us at Amiens by train in the evening, and then we can make that our headquarters and penetrate further from there?”

“I should love that, but could we arrange it in the time?”

“Of course. Only get your aunt to consent to-night, and my servant will make all the arrangements. He is a corker at obeying orders.”

“Aunty was only saying this afternoon that we must see the battlefields, but it was Château-Thierry which interested her.”

“There is nothing to see there. All the traces have gone. I want to show you where the real devastations are. They say the flowers now have grown up and covered everything with a mantle, but there are some grim reminders left sticking through.”

“I’m crazy to see a trench and a dug-out. You were at the War?”

“All the time. Well, we must find you one if there are any safe to go down left. Now, let’s make all our plans.”

He was gay and friendly, and not once mocking or insulting. They settled everything of how they would proceed. Laline should start with him in the morning, and the others should go by train to Amiens, and they would all meet by dinner-time that night and start a regular exploration the following day in motors from there.

The Whitmores, who were at the Crillon, would be sure to want to come with them. They should be telephoned to early in the morning, in time to get the whole lot off by the twelve o’clock train. And however much Jack might resent Laline going alone with David in the two-seater, she knew she could smooth him down. He was so accustomed to stand any amount of her caprices; he would help her to make her aunt fall in with their plans.

So, thoroughly satisfied with the prospect ahead, David at last took Laline back into the ballroom to find Mrs. Greening.

While they had been arranging he had not digressed into the realm of flirtation again. There would be ample time on the morrow, and he had other

business on hand to-night, but as they crossed the hall he whispered:

“Good night, honey! Remember, you are never going to be cross with me again, and are going to belong to me to-morrow for the entire day.”

Laline did not answer, but her eyes shone.

Mrs. Greening was all smiles when the proposition was put before her, and agreed to everything. Jack’s face was rather thunderous, but his was always “Hobson’s choice.”

Then Major Lamont left them, and for the rest of the evening Laline saw him deep in conversation with the Royal party, and the French Minister—and, yes, Mrs. Hamilton, whom she had now heard the name of. And even though she had the thought ahead of her of “belonging to him for an entire day,” she could not keep back her jealousy.

Why was he so important, anyway? Why did everyone make this fuss of him? But the realization of a man’s wordly prestige never yet left women unaffected. So Laline got into her bed that night more in love and more impressed with David’s value than ever before.

CHAPTER IX

“YOU’RE MINE FOR TO-DAY”

At eight o’clock the next morning Laline was awakened by the telephone. Celestine had just entered her room, and answered it.

“Monsieur le Major,” she said, and handed the instrument to her mistress, who seized it eagerly.

“Are you awake?” The voice was deep and rather masterful.

“Yes.”

“Say—can you be ready by nine-thirty? The morning’s too glorious to let it waste.”

“Y—es.”

“That means that you aren’t up!”

“I know it!”

“Do you want me to come and hustle you?”

“What’s the matter that you are in such a hurry!”

“The morning—and you.”

“Well—say—I’ll be ready if you really want to start so soon. But we’ll get there long before Aunty and Jack—and the Whitmores ar’n’t telephoned to yet.”

“Tell your maid to fix all that, and you come with me. Fergusson—my man—is making all the arrangements at Amiens—he can tell them after we have left.”

“All right.”

“Honey?”

“Well?”

“At nine-thirty at the Vendôme door, and then don’t forget you’re mine for to-day.”

Laline lay back in her bed quivering all over. His for to-day! And yet last night he had been most of the time with Mrs. Hamilton.

“Celli—vite! vite! I must be prettier than you’ve ever made me.”

The maid beamed, even if disapproval was in her heart. It was difficult to resist her loved lamb’s joyousness.

Then Laline got up and went to the window. Their suite was one looking on to the garden and the green tree tops. The soft spring air and the twittering of birds and the feeling of life and delight exalted her.

“Oh! the divine morning!” she laughed, and then went to her bath.

David meanwhile was dressed and down examining the motor.

It was a Voison of the very newest make, and he knew they would spin along at sixty miles an hour.

He had planned that they should make straight for Amiens, lunch there at the Hôtel du Rhin, and then go on afterwards to Albert and the surrounding country, where he thought he might still find some interesting things to see, although he had heard that most of the trenches had been levelled and the dug-outs filled in. But quite apart from all this, his strong young blood was bounding in his veins at the prospect of a day with certainly the most attractive girl he had met for years, and, his mind free from the obsession of duty, he could let himself go! The Ambassador had said to him just before they had bidden each other good-night:

“You’ll have a stiff enough two months, Lamont, so have a good time in your six days. You’ve got about a 60-40 chance of getting out without a scratch, boy, or even with your life.”

Well, whatever was coming, there should be six days of joy!

He would hold himself as well as he could without spoiling pleasure. And, after all, Laline Lester was no débutante from a convent, but most certainly knew every card of the game of flirtation.

She had selected the most ravishing costume of her favorite blue, and no Dresden china figure ever looked more dainty and appetizing than she did, when, only about ten minutes late, she came down into the Ritz hall.

Her aunt, Mrs. Greening, had been cajoled into agreeing to everything. They could all meet at the Hôtel du Rhin at Amiens for dinner at eight o’clock, and now it looked as though some perfectly divine hours lay ahead of them.

David Lamont came forward to meet her, and held her hand. He was gay and not sentimental at this stage.

“You do look stunning!!” he said.

“You like me?”

“I just want to eat you up!”

Then they got into the car—and Laline was settled, and the windscreen arranged, and off they went.

Everyone knows the road out of Paris to Pontoise—not particularly interesting for quite a little way—and the difficulty of the traffic keeps the attention of drivers pretty well occupied. Besides, neither of these two wanted to talk much until they should be undisturbed. So they were spinning along over the last bridge by the quaint town before either said anything that was not merely banal.

“Isn’t everything different?” Laline remarked at last. “Did it all strike you as awfully old and dirty the first time you saw it?”

“I’ve been here so much ever since I was a two-year-old that I have no clear impression. I seem to have always known France—and loved it! Look ahead now. Isn’t the springtime wonderful?”

They were in the open country, not particularly beautiful but green, and tilled fields and the gorgeous sun and blue sky made loveliness.

“Tell me what you did in the War?”

“I was attached to the English, you know, until we came in.”

“And—you fought—and killed people?”

“I expect so!”

“That must feel odd!”

“There is something in all of us which makes a fight, when it comes really to close quarters, jolly exciting; you can think it as brutal as you will. I remember one scrap we had in a place I’ll try to find after lunch and show you. It is down in the Gommecourt direction, to the north of Albert. There were the finest dug-outs there you can imagine. The Boche had made regular palaces! We thought ourselves darned lucky when we got in them. Jack and I took that particular little trench—with a handful of boys. I’d come up from H.Q. and had no business there—it was not my job—and when we penetrated down, some Fritz had made a regular boudoir. There was an old blue chair, I remember, taken from some château. It was a jolly old girl with buttons and fringe round it, and there was a carved cupboard, and lots of things. I remember it distinctly, though we were only there that one night.

There was the devil of a fight next day—hand to hand with bayonets—and I guess I did indulge in the lust to kill.”

Laline was deeply interested. She looked up at David’s strong face. Of course, men were made to fight. And how much more interesting they were when they did things, and were fierce and masterful. Oh! the bores, the Willemon Dodges and everyone else she had ever known, appeared in her eyes now!

“The thing I can’t understand,” she said presently, “is that Jack ever fought. He seems the mildest, gentlest thing alive! He never talks about it.”

“Don’t you know what a D.S.O. and M.C. mean, then?”

“Yes, I suppose they are medals—and that you’ve been at a war—and perhaps did something!”

David laughed!

“Yes, it means that. You rather did do something, you weren’t at a picnic,” and he laughed again. “Old Jack was a corker and never turned a hair. He took everything just as a sport. All the muck and the mud, and the beastly cold and discomfort, he was always just as he is now—and a tiger over the top!”

“Don’t you think English people are awfully funny? Jack got fearfully uncomfortable when I asked him what those orders were—and why he had them—and he said. ‘Oh! they were just what any fellow had.’ I had no idea it meant he was specially brave!”

“Yes, they are remarkable people, but you’ve got to know them well. They hate swank, and seem quite ashamed of anything they have done that is decent!”

“And Jack killed men, too?”

“Why, certainly.” And David’s eyes grew reflective. He remembered one occasion when Jack used a bayonet with remarkable success!

“Isn’t it a mercy it is all over?” Laline remarked; “and, of course, there can never be another war.”

“I am not so sure of that. There will always be wars until we have a new religion.”

“It does seem so childish, doesn’t it—grown-up people employing every kind of invention to kill each other, for such stupid reasons, too? Why can’t they settle it without all that, just as things are tried in court and settled?”

“Yes, but there is no Supreme Court Judge—for war, and so when arguments fail we use brute force.”

Thus they talked for some time longer.

Any other man that Laline had ever met by now would have been deep in a flirtatious conversation with her, but here they had been driving for what seemed hours, and Major Lamont was still abstract. What did he mean by saying that she should belong to him for that day, if he was only going to talk about things she could just as well have discussed with Judge Whitmore? Underneath she had the unrestful sense of insecurity. She thought of Mrs. Hamilton, and at last she blurted out:

“I thought the lady with whom you danced the quadrille was very pretty.”

David turned and looked at her. He understood perfectly, and the flicker of a smile came into his eyes. He was immensely attracted. So much so that he had been deliberately ordinary on purpose not to go ahead too fast. For he had no illusions, and knew that once they began to talk of each other and their feelings it would be difficult to make the even terms of flirtation last for the trip. And after flirtation—What? He did not want to flounder into an abyss.

“Yes—she is,” he said, answering Laline’s remark—“and awfully charming. She’s a widow—attractive things, widows!”

Laline’s cheeks burnt. She felt ruffled, and very jealous.

“She is an old friend, I suppose?”

He had no intention of gratifying curiosity.

“Not so very old.”

“There are some people one gets to know very well in a short time. I thought you were infantile playmates probably!”

David laughed outright.

“I wish we had been!”

“Are you as fresh with her as you are with me?”

“I am never ‘fresh’ with any lady.”

“Then I can’t be a lady, because never in my life has anyone ever been so fresh with me as you are always.”

Some zest was coming into the conversation.

“You are a darling little girl; and now you are getting mad with me. What for? I’ve been good as a schoolmaster and meek as a lamb ever since we started.”

There was a laugh in his bold eyes, and Laline’s grey ones flashed at him.

“You never could be a lamb; you’re always a fierce wolf, and the woolly skin doesn’t disguise you in the slightest.”

“Do you like lambs best, then?”

“No.”

“Then what is there to it? If you are starting out to quarrel with me there is only one way of stopping it.”

“And that is?”

“I’ll park the car when we get to this wood and kiss you back to being kind to me!”

Even though Laline resented the tone of authority, a sense of joy filled her—a quiver—a—oh, well, something delicious!

They had got back on to her own ground again—one of fencing over personal emotions—so she was quite at home.

“I never heard of such conceit! You imagine that that would make me kind to you. Why, it would only make me hate you the more!”

“You hate me already then?” The tone was full of mock anxiety. He knew very well hate was not what was holding her.

“You don’t believe I do,” and she pouted a little angrily. “Well, I’ll show you!”

They had come to a delicious wood not a great distance from Beauvais. He slowed down the car and finally stopped.

“Now you’re going to show me how you hate me!”

“How?”

“Why, you will want to get out and be left behind. No one likes to travel in a two-seater with a person they hate!”

Laline did not stir.

“I am waiting for you to get out—but, of course, how rude of me! You want me to help you!” And he sprang down at his side and came round to her door.

She rose in a rage, and as she stepped forward he took her in his arms.

“Stupid, naughty little honey!” he murmured, as he fondly kissed her red lips!

Laline was incensed—incensed and yet wildly emotioned. That same feeling of powerlessness came over her. She was insulted, and yet she could not fight—the kiss intoxicated her.

“Oh! please,” she said, gasping—and then she burst into tears!

He held her to him tenderly, and the triumph and the daring went out of his eyes, and they softened like night sky when it is beginning to herald dawn.

“Sweetheart, don’t cry. I am a brute—I always was—and I should not have teased you. Forgive me, and let’s be friends, and I’ll promise I won’t kiss you again—unless you ask me to! There!”

Laline sobbed for a minute, held close to his heart, and then she pulled herself together.

“It’s your insolence. One minute as if you hardly knew me, and the next _____”

“_____ where I want you to want to be!”

And he rubbed his cheek against hers—but he did not kiss her again.

She gave little shuddering sobs like a child.

“The rudest man—I’ve—ever met.”

“And you are quite sure you hate me?”

She had mastered herself sufficiently now to realize it was better to answer lightly.

“I sha’n’t tell you, because I don’t want to be left behind, even in a green wood! There might be many bears there, and it is better to go on with one!”

And she smiled, but there were two big teardrops upon her bewitching brown curly eyelashes and her sweet young mouth still quivered.

David Lamont felt the strongest emotion he had perhaps ever felt in his life. Was he going to fall really in love with this beautiful, spoilt heiress—

after all? His eyes blazed—and Laline saw them and rejoiced.

“Honey!” he said a little hoarsely. Then he picked her up and put her in the car again.

“Say—you’ve forgiven me—and that we are friends,” he pleaded before starting. “I’ll talk nothing but the sagest sense until we get to Amiens!”

“I’ve got to say whatever you like—I’m under duress.”

“Say—‘I’ve forgiven you—I don’t hate you at all—David.’ ”

A dimple showed in her left cheek, and she cast her eyes down. Then she repeated the words rather babyishly. She knew she was attracting him now and she lingered with a little gasp over his name—“Dav—id.”

“Darling!” he whispered—and started the car.

Then with the greatest intelligence he laid himself out to amuse and interest her. He told her the history of all this country, and how she was to notice the beauty of the Beauvais Hôtel de Ville, and how they would stop at the cathedral on their way back, because he wanted to get to Amiens about one and have luncheon and get well away into the wilds by the early afternoon.

He was gentle and quite chivalrous. Laline had nothing to complain of, but when they stopped for a moment in front of the Beauvais Town Hall her heart sunk again. She knew that she would rather that he were insolent than that he should be so respectful and—cold!

CHAPTER X

ON THE BATTLEFIELDS

“Notice the immense dignity and sense of proportion in this architecture,” David said, as they looked up at the noble façade of the Beauvais Town Hall, standing there like a great aristocrat among its humbler neighbours in the square.

“They never put too much decoration or anything which does not mean something.”

“Yes, it is nice.”

“That is what we lack as a nation—a sense of values. We don’t get half what we ought to out of the things which we’ve got which are splendid, better than anywhere else in the world, and we run round to pay fabulous prices for bunk.”

“You think the French have a sense of proportion then?”

“Do you mean in art?”

“Yes—everything.”

“In art they had in the dix-huitième century as exquisite as the Greeks, but no nation has that sort of sense now. We are too commercial. It is the same with everything—commercialism has spoilt the sense of proportion in the whole of civilised humanity.”

Laline was not accustomed to talking upon such subjects. Her conversations with men had been more or less entirely upon a flirtatious plane. It had been the fashion of her set to take up this or that poet’s works, or that author’s, for a day or two, and then drop them again, but no real interest had ever been encouraged in anything but new ways to kill time.

She looked up at David Lamont now, and wondered what it would be like to live with a man like that always? How her whole point of view about life and its meaning would alter.

Her father had died a year or so ago, and before that she had been brought up in a very narrow circle, in absolute luxury, but with no intellectual atmosphere. Then since she had gone to live with her aunt in Washington things had changed, but they went to New York and Palm Beach most of the time, and had never really been in the Diplomatic swim.

There are all sorts of sets in Washington, and the one that Laline knew only cared for killing time.

Now she suddenly saw a man of her own nation who was certainly above her in cultivation and mentality. Her self-confidence received a shock. But with that marvellous quality of adaptiveness which all American women possess she resolved to turn herself into the kind of person he would evidently like.

“I suppose that woman he danced with knew how to talk upon every subject!” she reflected. “Well, so shall I—soon!”

When they got into the car again she was very silent—they had gone a couple of miles before either spoke.

“I’ve a feeling I want to stay over here a long time,” she announced at last. “It’s got atmosphere.”

“Of course it has. Just think of the hundreds of years of tradition that are hanging around everything. Why, you’re bound to feel different. But just think of the wonderful chance we have in our country to create our atmosphere as we like. We need not have any of their old prejudices to hamper us.”

“I suppose we are too much in a hurry to think about it, and so we leave no mark.”

“That’s it! Everyone is in a hurry; but it is because we have so much energy; we want to get on—get somewhere.”

“What do you do in life?” Her voice had a note of timidity in it. She had a sort of feeling that Major Lamont would not answer anything that he did not want to.

“I do what I *must* part of the time, but soon I hope I shall be free to do what I *can*.”

He was abstract again, when she wanted concrete information.

“Are you going to stay long on this side?” She was determined now to find out.

He turned and looked down at her. The quaint tenaciousness of women amused him.

“Just as long as I want,” he said; and she saw the whimsical smile in his eye, and it angered her. She had that feeling that she was losing ground and not attracting him as much as she felt that she had been doing some while

back. And with every fresh uncertainty about him she fell more and more in love with him.

She thought of this. She was “falling in love.” And then she wondered why it was called “falling,” and she said aloud:

“You seem to know everything, Major Lamont. Tell me why when people rather like one another is it called ‘falling in love,’ just as though they had tripped up over an obstacle and tumbled into a morass.”

“I should say for once the verbal description is the correct ticket. It’s a headlong kind of thing, and often a descent. People in love have lost their balance and sense of perspective, so they ‘fall’ into the wretched state. They don’t walk in, that would imply volition, but ‘falling’ indicates that they can’t help themselves!” He did not look at her.

“Why do you say ‘wretched state?’ I’ve always been told it is the only real bliss on earth.” And she raised soft grey eyes upon him, and a thrill went through him, and he turned to her:

“It is an intoxication of the senses—love—just something a little higher than the animal’s mating, because we put glamour into it, but otherwise it is much the same.”

“How horrible! I am sure there must be some other kind.”

“I’m not sure. Not in these days. You’ve often thought yourself in love, I expect?”

“No, I have not!” indignantly. “Lots of men have loved me—but I don’t feel a bit attracted.”

A look came into David’s eyes.

“There has never been an occasion when you have—when a man has kissed you?—Never?”

Her cheeks became a bright pink and her eyes flashed between the curly lashes.

“Yes—I’ve felt curious.”

“Well, that is better than nothing.” Then he went on reflectively: “There have been cases of real love, of course. There was a certain French scientist and his wife—they married when quite young. She was about twenty, but, of course, no other man had ever kissed her. He was older and they were poor. So they had all the disillusioning uglies to face. They had a number of children in struggle and poverty, they attained success and fame, and they

loved passionately all through and to the end, so that he died of grief an hour after she passed away, when they were old. One of their sons was a Minister in France during the War. But, of course, love was sacred to them. Not a thing to sip at and sample from many lips. No modern much-caressed girl could give that devotion.” There was an unconscious tone of contempt in his voice. It scalded Laline. She fired up:

“Because no modern man is worth it.”

“That may be so, but in things of the spirit it is the woman who should lead. Most of them make you think that they are pretty cheap.”

Laline burned with resentment and confusion and humiliation—all emotions she was unaccustomed to, and had never had to suffer through any man before.

“You are saying that because you think me——”

He interrupted.

“I was talking in the abstract, but your charming sex always applies a man’s abstract remarks personally.”

“Because if he had good taste he would not make abstract remarks that could have a reflective bearing upon some circumstance which he knew of concerning the girl he was talking to!”

David was startled! This was the truth, the logical truth, uttered by this adorable baby whom he had not considered to have any reasoning power! The little darling! The smile grew all over his cynical face.

“You are quite right. I am corrected, and I apologise for my bad taste. But not to be obscure any more, I don’t think you are cheap. I only think you are the result of our social system, and you are an ‘American beauty,’ not a red Provence rose which grows in a sheltered garden.”

“Perhaps we are all the same underneath.”

“Perhaps you are.”

After this they were more amicable. Laline’s intelligence, which was awakening, told her that it would be much wiser not to go on quarrelling all the time or having sparring matches, because it was difficult for her to come off best, and she preferred to stick to a type of conversation where she knew that she could be attractive.

Thus, by the time that they had reached Amiens, David was saying to himself that he was sorry he had told her he would not kiss her again until

she asked him, because he was beginning to have an insane desire to kiss her all the time.

It must be his business to *make* her ask him. So he became gentle and tender and considerate, and, as they drew up at the door of the Hôtel du Rhin, Laline was throbbing with delicious emotion.

They found that the rooms had been telegraphed for by Fergusson, and they were expected.

Laline discovered hers on the first floor. It looked out on to the garden and the monster plane tree—the usual ugly French provincial hotel room, with a buff and mustard-striped paper on the wall.

When she glanced at herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece she saw her own shining eyes and her glowing cheeks, and she wondered what was the difference in them, for there was a difference in her whole expression!

Every woman who has been, or is, very much in love knows exactly how Laline was feeling!—the peculiar waves of emotion that seem to chase one another over the whole being.

Meanwhile, Major Lamont, below in the restaurant, was ordering the luncheon. He was a past master at this sort of thing. He instinctively guessed what Laline might like, and everything was ready for her, the Sauterne was on ice and the hors d'œuvres were waiting. He sauntered into the hall where the staircase was and met her coming down the steps.

“The waiters will think we are a honeymoon couple, and so they’ll be awfully sympathetic,” he laughed. “But so we are—for to-day!”

They were so gay! Laline, now that he was kind and nice to her, blossomed forth into wonderful sweetness, and David began to look forward to the afternoon when they should be alone again in the open country.

Suddenly her eye caught sight of the shabby door filled with bullet holes near them, and she jumped up and read the brass plate where is inscribed in French and English:

“This door remains as a souvenir from the bombardment in April, 1918.”

“It does seem wonderful,” she exclaimed, “to think that only three years ago people sitting here like us could have been killed by those shots!”

“Of course, it is awfully difficult for anyone who has not seen France to realise the War.”

Her face became reflective. She was thinking, if she had known him then and loved him as she did now, how agonising her anxiety would have been to realise he was in this constant danger.

Each was thinking of the other. He was saying to himself that in his whole life, in no country, had he ever seen so pretty a girl as Laline—one more delectable, more adorable. Yes; when he came back he must teach her to love—really to love.

And she was musing that no man she had met before had this something which David had. Magnetism, was it? And how perfectly he was dressed in those grey English flannels—and what nice hands he had—and she even rather liked the strong blue mark where he shaved! He did not look namby-pamby—and, oh! there was nothing brotherly about him! Then she thought of all the young men who were “crazy” over her. Why, in comparison to Major Lamont they did not amount to thirty cents! Would she ever really be able to make him love her and want to marry her? Would he go on playing all the time?

The element of uncertainty in this speculation added to the zest of her determination that he should feel as she felt.

Their lunch was so gay.

David made her hurry over it. Supposing Mrs. Greening and the rest of the party had caught the twelve o'clock train instead of the 3.50. They might be arriving upon them and in some way spoil their afternoon. So he was anxious for them to be safely off again before this could possibly occur.

It was one of the most glorious days of the whole year, not a cloud, and the air fresh and warm and balmy.

Laline was soon tucked in again, and they were rolling along out of the town, past the descent to the station, and so on to the road which would bring them to Albert.

“Everything is so green now,” David said. “It is hard for you to realise what this looked like when we were here, but soon we shall come to parts where you can still see the wretched burnt stumps of trees.”

He told her stories of fights and adventure, and when they passed the first cemetery and saw all the crosses a look of soft tenderness came into Laline's eyes.

“It is all perfectly awful,” she said; and presently, “Why, there is an English name—‘Oxford Street’! How funny that sounds!”

“The English Tommies loved putting up their pet names on things. You’ll see ‘Downing Street’ further on. There used to be heaps of dug-outs on this road after we pass Pont Noyelle, but I am awfully afraid everything has been filled in, and we shall have to go right off the main track if we want to see anything.”

Laline did not care where they went so long as she was with him.

Then gradually they came into signs of destruction and the poor, miserable little shelters which had been erected among the battered homes.

And as they came to one heap of barbed wire and old iron:

“Why, there is a bedstead,” Laline cried. “Look! You know, that makes me feel the reality of all the horror more than anything else!”

David’s face was grave now. Every step contained memories for him. And so through ruined villages and pathetic stumps of trees, half hidden in the young, fresh green, they came at last to Albert, and saw the ruin of the church where the Virgin and Child had hung out for so long until finally destroyed by the advance in 1918.

“Oh! And to think that I laughed and danced through it all, and only played at War work! Of course, of course, we never understood.”

“That’s it!” said David, and there was a mist in his eyes. “Dear France!”

CHAPTER XI

THE DUG-OUTS

They did not get out of the car, and soon they were on the main road again.

“We must come back here with the rest to-morrow, but I just wish to get you to my own little corner, in case Jack might want to show it to you also. I must be the first.”

Laline glanced up at him slyly.

“In everything?”

“Yes, in everything that’s good. First with the person I love and first in my work.”

“How I wonder who is the person you love?”

David’s voice was thoughtful.

“Do you know, I have been wondering that lately, too?”

“She would have to be a meek, spiritless thing.”

“Oh, no, she would not; but she’d have to be worth while in character, and not just pretty trash.”

“Do you often meet people who are not just pretty trash?” Laline pouted. Her sense of insecurity was coming uppermost again.

“No, frankly I don’t, and if I do they are generally married to another fellow.”

“I suppose you’ve seen a great deal of the world?”

“Probably.”

“That must be nice.”

“When you travel, honey, you’ve got to learn things. Lots of us are so darned contented with ourselves we won’t take hints from what we see, and just come back with a mass of facts and not what the French call ‘nuances.’ We have not learned the meaning of things, so to speak. Our country did not start in with the others, so had an immense advantage, as it needed only to acquire what is the best of all the old ones. We have a lot of horse sense to

teach them, but they have a lot of the sense of the fitness of things to teach us, and it's our attitude which prevents our learning fast enough. We get a chip on our shoulder the minute the faintest imputation of criticism comes into any remark foreigners make, whereas they are quite indifferent to anything we say of them."

Laline rather tossed her head. She personally was still provincial enough to hate criticism.

"I never come to Europe without thinking of the magnificent chance America has in the world scheme of things. And that is what I want to do presently—help to make us all see that we have got to do our utmost to raise the flag, and make all other nations respect our characters, because they are convinced they deserve respect, not because we tell them we'll knock them on the nose if they don't give it to us."

Laline looked at him—his jet black eyes flashing with enthusiasm, his finely-cut face like some old Roman coin. A feeling of adoration swept her. Oh, how wonderful to have such a man to love her—and, yes, teach her to be vast and not paltry by his side!

Suddenly she felt how mean and small her aims had been with him. Just to attract him so that he should be bound in the usual chains men were in regard to her. A conquest for her own vanity!

But love was clearing her vision. David appealed to something in her soul.

He filled her now with the desire to raise herself to be noble—to be worthy of him.

And this, when you remember that she was a beautiful American heiress, whose subconscious mind had been always saturated with belief in her own omnipotence and perfection. Does it not show plainly what miracles true love can accomplish!

To be worthy of a man—one of her own nation, too, whom she had been brought up to believe were only born into the world to minister to women's needs and work for their welfare.

If anyone had told her a year before that there was a male on earth whom she would not feel the superior of she would have laughed scornfully.

David was quite unconcerned about what anyone thought of him. His whole force was concentrated upon earning his own self-respect.

He was brought back to a consciousness of her by her little hand, which touched his arm, and, looking down, he saw a small flower of a face, and two soft grey eyes peeping up at him with a new expression in them.

A wave of emotion swept through him. He clasped the hand, and drew it to his lips, and kissed it.

“Dear little honey,” he said. “This is in homage, not what you call my ‘usual insolence.’ ”

“No, but it is possessive, all the same.”

“Well, don’t you belong to me—for to-day?”

“I suppose—so——.” Thrills were running through Laline. “Belonging” implied so many divine things.

As soon as contact with the loved one, as they held hands, set all the marvellous electric currents in motion, the mental began to decrease in importance, swamped by the strong desire to be in his arms. She was but a woman, after all!

It was too early in the day, so David held himself and resisted temptation, and they swung on out of the town, and on into the terribly gaunt country to the north.

Here, village after village was passed in more or less miserable condition, but with greater distances between them, as the country grew more destroyed. The evidences of mending the few stones that remained of existing houses showed, and there were numbers of new shelters, huts of wood or cement, pathetic touches everywhere of the spirit to re-conquer fortune.

A mile or two after they had crossed the iron girder bridge, where the old one was blown up, David stopped. They had come to a tiny group of houses rather off the main road, with the usual café of boards, cheek by jowl with complete destruction. Far away to the left, but in front of them, a vast country of devastation met their view. In 1921 it had not been all tilled, and deep shell-holes and skeleton trees could still be seen in many places.

“In case we are hungry, do let us buy some chocolate at that little café. I meant to bring some, and I want to see the inside of one of these queer sheds,” Laline said.

So they got out of the car and entered the door. A dear old French peasant kept it, who welcomed them with the usual graciousness of his class.

“Chocolate? Mais, oui, certainement.” A comely daughter made her appearance, a girl of fifteen or sixteen, whose souvenir of the War was not so tragic as that of her elders. She admired Laline greatly.

“Belle comme un ange,” she said afterwards.

Were there any dug-outs left, to his knowledge? David asked of the old man.

Not just here, but some miles further on towards Gommecourt, if you struck north, it might be. They were stay-at-home people, and did not wander far. Contentment and cheerfulness was in this wretched place. Laline was deeply struck by it.

“They are just as satisfied as if it were all as it was,” she said, as they got into the car and went on, with their packet of chocolate safely in David’s coat pocket.

“That is the immortal spirit of France. They were like that all through; they never grumbled. ‘C’est la guerre,’ they said. Great philosophers.”

The road now led through miserable country, the young, fresh green making the contrast of the desolation more pronounced.

“I feel we are getting near where I want,” David announced gladly, and they struck into a side track and went on. Black sticks, which had been woods, cutting sharply against the skyline, everywhere, told their tale.

“You can’t think what this was with not a living thing left,” he said. “The ground too full of chemicals from the exploded shells even to produce weeds, as it was beaten up by fresh explosions every day.”

“It must have been terrible.”

When the road became a mere track and then ceased altogether, and the broken corner of what might have been a church wall met their view, they had to halt. They were now miles from any human habitation, even the merest board hut.

A battered iron crucifix hung obliquely from a bent iron pole—all that was left of what had been a shrine. And before it, when they could see behind the corner, there knelt an old priest in shabby cassock, with his hands uplifted to the sun, which shone down upon the just and the unjust of the earth.

David took off his cap, and spoke in French:

“Reverend father,” he said. “Can you inform me are we near a village, which was afterwards wiped out, called ‘Etticourt’?”

The old man turned to them and looked at them rather dazedly for a moment.

“You are standing upon part of the outlying ruins of it now,” he answered. “This was my church—that heap of stones over by that trench.”

His mild and saintly eyes gazed at them benevolently, and he pointed to the north. They talked to him for a while.

Yes; the famous German dug-outs were but a quarter of a mile from here across the fields. No; they had not all fallen in. The salvage had passed long ago—so long—but they had left some undisturbed because he sheltered there.

“One is my hermitage, where I go to pray,” he quavered. The rest were in bad condition, and he had heard the last time someone had passed this way, about a week ago, that soon all were going to be filled in, and the steam tractors were coming by August.

They could see his poor old mind was wandering. His emaciated frame was feeble to a degree. The worn black cassock hung upon it, but he was clean and shaven.

Laline’s tender heart was deeply touched. Could not she do anything to help him? she wondered.

“I have no flock—they are scattered; and Etticourt was so small it will be the last to be remembered,” he said resignedly.

Could he lead them to the dug-outs? David asked courteously. It would be so very kind, as, otherwise, they might wander aimlessly when once they left the car.

The old priest pointed to the north, across a comparatively smooth bit of ground.

“You could drive over that bit, Monsieur, and then we must walk. I will show you.”

They thanked him heartily, but could they give all that trouble, if it was far?

“I will drive Mademoiselle to the line of stumps, and come back and fetch you, reverend father,” David said.

The ancient priest bowed with old-world politeness, and they went on.

When Laline was left alone for the few minutes when they crossed the smooth ground she looked around her. What an awful place—so lonely, so isolated. Nothing could be more melancholy even in the brilliant sun. There were deep shell-holes all around, and a few hundred yards further on she could see the beginning of a trench facing the stumps of what had been a wood.

The exquisite May sunshine seemed to mock the cruel souvenirs. An ammunition wagon still lay on its side—and what was that horrible-looking monster? Why, it was a tank! A tank that she had read about. They must go close and see that. And then David arrived with the priest.

“Yes; this is the place,” he cried delightedly. “What astonishing luck to find it after all this time!”

He backed the car on to more firm ground, by a hummock, and they left it there and came on.

The old priest seemed to have forgotten them. He was talking to himself in Latin. Perhaps he was saying a prayer. But he was advancing as one who knows the road and does not hesitate.

They followed him respectfully as he led the way towards the trench.

“We took it in a hand-to-hand fight through the wood,” David told Laline, “and then we had a regular picnic in their dug-outs that night—and the hell of a tussle in the counter-attack next morning. Then my boss got track of me, and I was hauled back to my work at H.Q., just when we had retaken it. It was a glorious adventure.”

“You were not supposed to be fighting, then. What were you doing?”

“Well, I had rather important work, but just at the moment I had no business there.”

They had reached the tank by then, Laline was full of interest.

“May we stop for a moment, reverend father?” David asked. “Miss Lester wants to make the acquaintance of this prehistoric monster,” and he smiled.

The priest hardly seemed to understand. He looked vaguely over their heads.

“There is a spring by that stone,” he said. “If you are wanting water, I bring it from there.”

Laline was enchanted with the tank. She must climb up and get into it, she said, but David would not let her.

“It is full of rust and filth. It will spoil that lovely suit. Besides, our charming old host looks as if he wanted us to come on.”

So reluctantly, she let herself be drawn forward.

“I love its dear old face,” she laughed. “It reminds me somehow of my cat, Mumps, when he is sleepy and putting his head down. Oh, some day, Major Lamont, you must be introduced to Mumps! He’s the thing I love best on earth!”

“I’d be proud to compete with him! Why here we are.”

The priest was striding ahead again, and it was wonderful to see the way his feeble limbs seemed to support him. He climbed down into the trench apparently without difficulty.

He lodged now in the village of Oieul, about two miles to the east, he told them; but often he came and spent a day and a night in this dug-out, because it contained something of his church which the Germans had stolen—the little side altar they had used as a buffet, and there was one of the candlesticks with the seven branches, too. So these things made it sacred to him. It would be very tragic for him in August, when the authorities would send people to dig it all in. The salvage men who had passed in 1919 had been very considerate, and had not disturbed him there, nor in the adjoining one. Both were in good preservation still.

Laline thrilled. She would see a dug-out at last. She had read so much about them.

They walked down the trench, its banks all covered with green grasses and spring flowers. It would be red with poppies later in the year.

And then they came to openings in the highly-banked earth, and they could see staircases very steep, going down into what seemed the bowels of the earth. One or two were only half choked up with mud, but the rest looked thoroughly dilapidated. At last one appeared clear, and David paused.

“What if it should be the very hole old Jack and I got into,” he exclaimed enthusiastically, but the priest went on.

That led to one he was not quite so sure about—he had not been in it lately—but his own shrine he could vouch for the safety of. It was the very next.

David paused.

“After all, I don’t think I shall let you go down, honey,” he said. “I’ll go and see and tell you about it. It will be awfully dark, and now, when we have all forgotten the War and those sort of things, it seems odd to be burrowing into the earth.”

“If you are afraid, I shall go with the reverend father alone, then.” And Laline tripped forward to follow the priest. “Why, it has been the ambition of my life to see a dug-out, and especially now I know there are almost none left, and all my friends who are coming over in the fall won’t have the chance to get into one.”

“Well, let me go first and see if it is fit for you.”

“You are a cautious creature. Look, the priest has disappeared; and if he can spend nights and days there, I am sure it won’t injure us any.”

“Why, of course not. But, still, I don’t want you to go down.”

“Then you’d better learn, once for all, that I shall do as I please.” And, laughing, she stepped forward.

“So be it. You had better be prepared, though. The laws of the dark are not the same as the day, and—”

His eyes were full of passionate admiration. Laline interrupted him gaily.

“You think I am going to ask you to kiss me, then?”

“No; but I may follow dark laws and do so in any case.”

“I am not timid. Besides, the priest will chaperone me.”

So he gave her his hand, both laughing gaily, and they began to go down the steep steps.

Before they got very far Laline turned and looked back over her shoulder at the picture framed by the opening they were leaving. A divine peep of blue sky, above the waving flowers at the top of the trench.

“Oh how lovely the light looks! The dear sky!” she cried, and there was a slight catch in her breath.

Then together they descended into the darkness.

CHAPTER XII

BURIED ALIVE

David held Laline's little hand as they descended the steep steps. Below them they could see a faint light which came obliquely from the excavation into which the priest had already disappeared.

At the bottom of the stairs, a pace or two to the right, there was an opening which was blocked up with boards and earth, and, after about six feet of passage to the left, they came into the actual dug-out.

The old father had lighted a little taper, which flickered unevenly; the large branch altar candlestick still contained the seven tall wax candles, which were unlighted. It stood upon a high oaken table that had once been the skeleton of a side altar, and behind it, on the wall, was hung a crucifix, and beneath it there was a vase of spring flowers and a prayer-book. An old Normandy cupboard met their view at the opposite end.

Laline gazed about her, at the earthen roof and the large bits of board supporting it, at the uneven floor.

There was a strange, damp smell that seemed to remind her of a root-house in her grandfather's garden, where the potatoes were kept in the winter.

And to think David had called this "a regular palace"—this terrible place of mud and darkness!

Certainly things were relative. And men had lived here—and died here, her thoughts added with a shudder; and she had been safe in America, and not really very worried about it at all.

She crept closer to David's side. Somehow she felt that she wanted to be near to him. He was by now at the other end of the room—by courtesy we will call it a room!

Excavated in the side of the wall, along which the short passage to the staircase opened, so that those sleeping there could get the most air, there were two tiers of bunks, as in a ship, four in all. They had board supports up to the earthen roof.

Beyond the altar, a doorway could be seen with a piece of sacking as a kind of curtain.

Besides all this, there was an old armchair with one broken leg mended by a bit of wood nailed on. It was a relic of the Empress Eugénie's time, and had originally been covered with bright blue satin damask and edged with a deep fringe. A sofa of the same period was beyond the altar. They had been stolen from the neighboring château, not a stone of which exists to-day.

In the centre of the floor a rude wooden table made of boards still stood on its three legs.

The bunks were full of rotten straw, except one nearest to the opening, in which it was clean and new, and over that an old rug had been placed by the priest, and above it a coarse linen-covered pillow.

It seemed strangely cold after the May sunshine of the upper world.

But nothing daunted Laline's spirit now that the first weirdness had worn off. Never had she been more gay. She peered about everywhere and wanted to try on a German helmet which the priest had collected, with some bayonets, and one or two old trench spades.

The dim light from the entrance was making things clearer after a time.

The old man stood back and watched her. He had handed her his taper. David had lit his torch. He had put in a new fitment that very morning, and it was the strongest one of its kind. He flashed it about everywhere.

"You really sleep here sometimes, father?" Laline asked unbelievably, and she was almost aghast when the priest assured her he did so. They spoke always in French.

"I spent Réveillon and the last day of the old year in meditation, and Good Friday, and the Festival of Easter. This is my church."

He went now to the cupboard and opened the door:

"See, here is my store of candles, my daughter, and my other little necessary things—a jar of water fetched from the spring, and a cup and platter."

"Why, it's quite a home!" And Laline laughed.

"All that is left to some of us, alas! All in this trench were like this—the best dug-outs you could find. I had often sat on that chair when I went to visit Monsieur le Marquis. The Château of Etticourt was famous for its splendor and its hospitality."

David interrupted here:

“I believe that’s the very chair I remember, but”—and he put his hand to his forehead as if trying to recollect—“this is certainly not the dug-out my friend and I were in.”

“No, monsieur, probably not. I brought that chair from the one through the opening. I did not venture further than just by the door because, one never can tell, Monsieur, as Monsieur knows, and there was a biscuit-box on the floor.”

There seemed to be some mystery here, and Laline’s feminine brain was instantly intrigued. What could be peculiar about a biscuit-box?

“You should have let the salvage corps clean it all up, father,” David said. “I can’t think why they let you alone.”

Then the priest explained how he had pleaded and implored that they would touch nothing just in this one spot, and how he had been able to influence the commandant not to disturb him in these dug-outs—but two there were—which led from this staircase.

He told how he had said to them that no one would enter here, and when the time came for the tractors to redeem the land, then he would give up the last relic of his holy church, and would say no more.

“And so they passed on, Monsieur.”

The old man’s mind seemed to be wandering after this; he kept repeating prayers in Latin, while he turned and gazed at the crucifix.

David flashed the torch on the chair. Yes, it certainly was his old friend.

“I don’t know why it made us laugh so much,” he told Laline. “Perhaps we were so dog tired we were silly, but to see her there in the mud and filth, after we had been wading in blood and carnage, with her blue satin and fringe seemed so comic. I remember old Jack and I guffawed for five minutes over her, and then we had a free fight as to which should sit on her for our supper. God, it was sport in those old days!”

“The sofa looks awfully grand, too,” Laline laughed. “Was ‘she’ in your palace also?”

“No, she must always have been here, but somehow I feel that the one we were in was through that opening. I know it was at the right of the stairs as we came down—and the father said he took the chair from there.”

“The door we saw filled in,” Laline suggested. “Oh, do let’s go through the curtain and see it!”

At this moment the priest spoke again, and David went back to him out of courtesy; so Laline, beyond the ray of the torch, and carrying her own taper, went forward alone, and lifted the sacking portière.

She was so interested to explore the actual place where Major Lamont had been. Nothing dangerous or unknown had ever touched her sheltered life. The War had been a nightmare to read about in the papers. But it had had no more real effect upon her than a stage play. That it was unwise to take a step here unguided never entered her golden head.

David's torch was so powerful that it obscured everything beyond its ray, and he did not see where Laline was going until he swung the disc round that way, and then, with a note of alarm, when he saw that she had gone beyond the curtain, he called out:

“Don't stir a step, Miss Lester. You must not go there alone.”

“Do you think I am afraid of the laws of the dark?” she laughed back at him. “You ought to come and see. This one is not half so grand.”

He strode towards the opening, some strange feeling of fear in his heart, but before he could cover the three paces which separated him from the doorway, a deafening explosion occurred, and a human body was flung against him with violence, and both fell to the floor, stunned.

After some confused moments sense came back to him in the choking air. His torch flamed on the floor some distance from him, and by its light he saw that it was Laline who lay there.

Was she dead? Oh, God! His mind came back more fully now, and he went and picked up the torch and flashed it upon the slender body there on the ground.

No, she was not dead. She sat up and looked at him, with dazed, astonished eyes, and then she shrieked aloud:

“I stumbled against the biscuit-box. Oh! what happened: are we buried alive?”

The altar and the crucifix had fallen with the bursting of the wall, and lay there under loose earth, and the poor old priest's head could be seen obtruding from the heap of débris when the smoke cleared a little. He was moaning and his eyes stared wide.

David's numbed senses took in with a ghastly shudder that the passage to the staircase had gone. Laline was right—they were buried alive.

Buried alive down in a dug-out, in a lonely place far from the habitations of men, where if help should ever come from outside, it might not come in time.

The whole horror of the situation made the strong man's heart stop beating for a second, but he did not lose his nerve. He put the torch on the table, which he set on its legs again. Then he bent and lifted Laline in his arms. She gazed at him in frozen terror, then she gave a great cry.

He carried her to the sofa, and laid her down. It was uninjured, and stood still against the opposite wall.

“Oh! tell me what has happened,” she shrieked wildly. “I am suffocating. Shall we all die? Don't leave me!” And she screamed again.

“I must help the old priest,” David said, tenderly. “Lie here, honey. Do not be frightened, dear little girl.”

But she clung to him, crazy with fear.

Then, when she saw the priest, her frenzied grip upon his arms relaxed, and she fell back on the couch.

The earth was only loosely heaped over the old man, and David was soon able to uncover him, and help him to his feet. He was unhurt, he said, though he moaned unconsciously between the words.

David led him to the blue satin-covered chair, into which he subsided for a second. Then he started up.

His crucifix and his candlestick? Where were they? Alas!

The crucifix was still among the débris, but the candlestick was at the other side of the room, apparently unhurt, although the candles were strewn about on the earthen floor.

David found his matchbox, and, picking two candles up, he lighted them, and now they could see a little more.

Half of the wall leading into the adjoining compartment was down, so that the space was now twice as large.

And, yes; the smoke was clearing away mysteriously. Where to? That he must discover, for, perhaps, in that direction lay deliverance.

The suffocating smell made them all sick and giddy, but, even so, David knew instantly that it must have been but a very small bomb or they would have been blown to pieces. The earthen wall between the compartments had

saved them from the greater part of the shock, and by some miracle Laline had been flung back through the door.

The sacking which had served for a curtain lay close to the sofa now.

An agony of terror was in the poor child's eyes when David came back to her. Her face was grey, and there was a smear of blood on one cheek where some little scratch had come. He wiped it off very gently with his handkerchief.

She clung to him piteously, and began to scream again as she pointed to the heap of earth where the passage to the staircase had been.

“Oh! save me, save me! I don't want to die! We are buried alive. We shall suffocate and starve!”

He held her to him with infinite tenderness, as though she had been a child.

“Laline, try not to be so frightened. Honey! There is sure to be another way out. Don't tremble so, little girl.”

And the firmness in his tones reassured her and brought her more to herself.

David held her close in his arms and smoothed her hair. Her hat had gone. Then he tried to brush the earth from her clothes—it was, fortunately, very dry. She fell to sobbing now more quietly, and then the priest spoke:

“It is the will of God, my children.” And his voice was far away.

This terrified Laline. The will of God that they were to die! Oh! why had she gone through the sacking curtain and laughed at David when he had told her to come back? She had stumbled against something, and then had come that crash—that horrible crash.

She tried hard to collect her senses and to control herself, but panic was seizing her, and she bounded from the sofa and rushed up and down again, shrieking wildly:

“Save me, save me! I won't, I won't die!”

“Courage, my child,” the priest murmured again. “Control this unseemly terror and let us go into God's presence with peace and calm.”

Laline halted in her wild rushing. He had touched some part of her pride. She flung herself upon her knees before the old man and buried her face in her hands.

“Oh, father!” she whispered brokenly. “Help me to be brave. But life is so beautiful, I do not want to die!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE BRIDE OF DEATH

The sight of Laline, as she knelt by the priest, wrung David's heart. How could he save her? He lit one of the candles, and took it with him to explore the other compartment.

The full awfulness of the situation was growing upon him now that the first shock was subsiding. But the iron nerves of the man were controlled by his iron will. And now a rage with himself was holding him. How had he been such a fool as to risk going down any dug-out which was three years old? He who had to carry a message to Garcia at the end of his six days' leave! This was a sorry finish to the first of them. And all because he had been led away by his desire to please a girl. Here they were, trapped in the earth like weasels, with only the slenderest chance of life, and not only he, but she—and he held his breath with the pain of the thought—Laline, too, might have to die.

The force of the explosion had been at right angles, and had blown in the whole of the wall which he knew divided the dug-out from the staircase passage. It might be that it was only that which had blown down, and the staircase might possibly be clear, if he could dig through to it. He remembered the old trench spades which the priest had shown them.

Then he began to hold the lighted candle in different places, to see where the air was coming from, for the smoke was nearly gone, so, obviously, there must be some outlet to the upper world. He would find it.

Yes, the draught came from the floor of the northern corner, and if this was the dug-out that he had been in with Jack, he remembered that there was a second excavation below, and he fancied its opening had been in that very place.

Yes, there was the hole now, half closed in by a board on top of it, and, sprinkled with the earth from the explosion, it could easily escape view.

It only took him a moment to dislodge the board, and he could see below. The grim steep ladder was rotten and broken. But the rush of air gave him hope.

He paused a moment and thought. If he attempted to climb down there now, he might fall, and become disabled, and then the chance for life of the

whole three would be gone. It might be better first to try to dig through to the place where the staircase ought to be.

Had he been alone he would not have hesitated for a moment; he would have tried to go down the broken ladder at all costs, there and then. But the thought of the priest and Laline held him, and made him decide first to try the other plan, or, at all events, get either of the other two to hold the light while he tried to go down.

What were the chances of being saved from outside? They were not great, for there could be absolutely no trace of where they had gone. They had not met any one except the priest after they had bought the chocolate, and they had gone right off the main road. There was the car. Yes; but that might take days to find, having no clue, and then it might be too late.

Had the explosion made a show in the trench? Probably none at all, since the ceiling of neither compartment was blown up. All that anyone would be likely to see would be one more filled-in staircase looking like many of the rest. No; it would be a miracle if help came from outside in time. He must not count on that, but must use his wits and his hands.

He went back into the first dug-out to fetch the spade.

Laline was still kneeling by the old priest's side; her hair was all deranged, and some curls of it were hanging down.

The priest was talking in French now, and telling her of the life to come, and with the whole of her will the poor little girl was trying to listen and suppress her agony of terror.

And to David there came a new spirit of love for her. There was something so pathetic about her slender outline in the dim light of the one candle, her little hands up-raised.

And she would die of starvation and thirst, unless he could save her.

They would all three die.

A sudden passionate longing for life convulsed him—life and love—and that he might accomplish his duty. The agony of that—that he should fail to carry the message to Garcia!

As his eyes rested on Laline, tenderness grew in his heart. He must save her—*his love!* And suddenly he knew that she was *his love!* All the camouflage with which he had been enveloping his emotions fell from him and he knew that she mattered to him more than his life. He loved her really, at last.

He asked her to come and hold the light for him, while he looked down the hole once more. And she followed with alacrity. But when she saw the horribly deep chasm, with the broken ladder evidently going down into the bowels of the earth in darkness, a panic seized her. All reserve left her. She could not let him go, perhaps to immediate death—alone!

“David!” she gasped brokenly. “I—I—can’t bear it. You may be killed. I love you! I want you! Oh! let us stay together here till we die, or, if you go there, I must go with you.”

“Laline!”—his voice vibrated with emotion—“my little golden girl!” And he lifted her in his arms.

Then their lips met in that divine kiss which means the union of two souls when the dross of material things has fallen from them.

“Heart of me!” David whispered, when at last he held her from him. But then they were startled by a moan from the other room, and they returned there quickly, to find the old priest lying back in the chair, with closed lids, his face ghastly white.

Laline took his thin hands, and rubbed them gently. And at last he opened his eyes.

“I am soon going to leave you, my children,” he quavered. “My work is done; and if it is the will of God that you follow me, we shall meet again. Peace be with you.”

His voice seemed to grow a little stronger and his eyes burned. It was as though he saw the distant heaven.

David took a sudden resolve. If it was all hopeless, and they must die, there were still some hours, long hours, before they would begin to feel the frightful pangs of hunger and thirst—hours in which love might gild the ghastly prison into paradise!

His heart began to beat violently. Laline was there, his little love, and if the old priest married them she would be his indeed, his while life lasted.

And the glory of the thought exalted him and filled him with courage and purpose.

The priest was surely going to die. No time must be lost in indecisions.

He took Laline’s hand, and, when she saw the look in his eyes, a soft colour flooded her white cheeks.

“Darling,” David said to her, his voice deep with wild passion, “I love you with my whole being. I know it at last. Will you marry me now, and then if death comes, he will claim us together—as one.”

What mattered more to Laline? Ordinary affairs of life had gone into nothingness. A wild exaltation filled her, and all her suppressed desires for love and romance burst their inhibitions. The price of death seemed nothing to her for such mad joy—to be David’s wife! If but for a single day!

“David, I am yours,” she breathed softly. “Let us be married now.”

Then they went over to the priest, and David whispered low.

“Father, I love this lady, and she loves me. Will you give us to each other in the sight of God before you die?”

The old man sat up erect and looked at them, his eyes then turning with a helpless stare to the place where the altar had been, and he made a faint gesture with his transparent hands.

David understood what he meant, and gave reassuring words. For to the priest there could be no true wedding without the sacred accessories.

“We will set the altar again, father, and then if you give us your blessing, nothing which comes after can matter so much.”

“So be it, my son.”

Laline then took care of him, while David prepared their church.

The altar was soon detached from the loose earth, and the crucifix also, and, scraping about, David found the book of prayers.

Then he collected the scattered candles and set them in the seven branches upon the altar and lit them all, taking the one he had already lit and fastened with its grease to the table, and the one he had held in his hand to complete the number. Then he turned to the priest. But as he came towards him his eye caught the yellow and white of the sprays of spring flowers which had been flung beyond the heap of earth. He paused and picked them up and laid them down upon the altar on the vellum-bound book of prayer.

Then he came to the two by the blue satin chair. Laline was holding the dying priest’s hand.

When the old man saw that all was ready a new spurt of life seemed to enter into him. He started to his feet, without assistance, and, David supporting him to where the altar stood, he opened the big old book.

Then the bridal pair knelt down on the bare earthen floor, and David took Laline's little right hand in his, and drew off a small hoop of diamonds she wore to keep the huge sapphire her father had given her on her seventeenth birthday in place, as it was too large for her now.

And so the ceremony began, and it seemed to them as they knelt there that a choir of angels were chanting their wedding hymn.

And when the ring was on and all the vows were made, this beautiful bride of death turned two shining starry eyes upon her husband, and in all the days of her sheltered, luxurious life she had never been so happy as she was now, with starvation, and thirst, and perhaps suffocation, staring her in the face. For Love is a god, and when he comes into his kingdom there is no room for fear.

"Mine for ever!" David whispered in ecstasy, as he bent to give the first fond nuptial kiss.

But as he spoke the last words of blessing the old priest had swayed a little, and now he staggered and fell forward. And when David caught him in his arms he knew that he was dead.

He carried the emaciated form into the other compartment and there laid it down, placing his ear to the heart.

Yes: life had fled. The spirit had fulfilled its mission and so passed on.

David folded the thin hands reverently upon the breast, and then returned to his bride.

She was still kneeling before the altar, her golden head bowed.

"Laline," he said, and his voice trembled with intense feeling, "the reverend father has gone to prepare a way for us—if we must die. But nothing matters to us now—only each other. Tell me that you are content!"

Then the radiance of heaven filled Laline's grey eyes.

"David," she whispered, with wild passion, "I would rather die here with you than have life up there with any other man. I love you, and I am yours!"

"Soul of me!" was all he answered, and folded her in his arms.

Thus a great love takes the spirit beyond all the paltry littlenesses of this modern world, on to what the angels know in paradise.

CHAPTER XIV

DEATH BY INCHES

For a few moments of ecstasy David held Laline close, and then he made her lie down and rest while he went to bury the priest in the other compartment. He felt no sorrow for the poor old man, his mission was ended, and he deserved his rest. His beloved crucifix should be placed above him.

The grimness of the whole situation left no room for smaller impressions.

When after the last spadeful of earth had been thrown over the deeply-buried corpse, and the crucifix was laid reverently upon it, David went back to Laline, and found her sleeping.

So he cleared the place of the fallen earth, and began reviewing their resources.

Three dozen candles in a box in the cupboard, as well as the seven in the altar candlestick, all but one of which he had carefully extinguished, the packet of chocolate they had bought in the café—eight squares in all—and a large earthen pitcher of water! He remembered with a pang that his flask of old brandy was in the car, in his overcoat pocket.

If they ate one square each a day, each square as big as a gold twenty-dollar piece, the chocolate would last them for four days, and there were certainly four glasses of water apiece in the pitcher, if not more. Of candles, there would be enough to keep the light continuously for that period, and there was his torch. His box was also full of matches.

Then he put his hand in his pocket and felt for his revolver—a small six-shooter. Yes, it was loaded.

At the fifth day, if he had not found the way out and no help had come from outside, he would shoot Laline and then himself. Until then there was joy—and work.

When all is darkness, neither night nor day makes any difference.

But when, still clasped in each other's arms, the two awoke next morning it was seven o'clock by David's watch. And the second of the six days' leave had begun.

But, though each knew that probable death lay in front of them, their waking thoughts were full of peace and bliss. Something wild was in both their natures, and they had taken mad joy from the anguish of the situation. For when death threatens full young lives, the spirit of re-creation burns in them more fiercely.

No sheltered bride and groom upon their wedding night in downy silken nest, by the Mediterranean sea, were ever happier than were these two in the chilly, wretched dug-out.

And now, after divine hours, they awoke in their couch of straw, with the poor rug over it, and the one coarse pillow, full of thoughts of tenderness and love, but horribly hungry.

For their supper had been the one square each of the chocolate, and their wedding wine a tiny glass of water.

David had found some other things besides the candles and the pitcher—a folder blanket and a clean pillow-case. These had seemed as precious wedding gifts, and they had laughed together as they arranged their bed. And Laline was sweet and joyous, and said that they were “playing house” like children.

The first day of their marriage must be spent in work—hard digging.

Their dressing could not take much time for they had neither bath nor hair brushes, though David had his pocket comb, and insisted upon being Laline's maid and combing out her golden curls. This caused him immense pleasure.

“Fairy gold” he called the glistening tresses, and he buried his face in them and kissed them.

“My honey wife, you are so beautiful! How mad and blind I was on that tiresome ship that I did not know you were mine, and claim you at once.”

She pouted adorably.

“Arrogance—I knew you belonged to me, though, from the very first moment.”

“You were determined to scalp me, little Indian!”

“Yes—in the beginning just that—but soon—Oh, soon David, I had begun to love you—and—well—how much I do now I can’t say.”

He clasped her to him.

“Feel,” he said, putting her soft palms against his dark face. “It will require some love for me to be able to get by with that, I’m thinking! Sweetheart, how can you care for such a black unshaven brute—you dainty bit of loveliness?”

“I like it like that”—and she rubbed an exquisite finger on the rough surface. “It looks strong.”

“Much too strong,” he laughed. “By to-morrow I shall be a regular ruffian.”

“I don’t care how you look. I don’t care if you grow even a horrid beard before we are rescued. You are my David—and that is all that matters.”

It is wonderful when people are put to it, and their instincts are refined, how tidy they can make themselves on nothing!

When David and Laline were quite ready, they pretended to go to breakfast, and with great ceremony David divided their portion for the day in two halves for each.

“Breakfast and supper,” he said merrily. “We will have to pretend we are on a diet, and don’t eat lunch—or use self-hypnotism to say we are not hungry!”

Laline looked a little wistful, so he slipped his arm round her. They had drawn the sofa up to the table:

“You are the bravest, sweetest baby wife a man ever had!” And he kissed her. “My own, we will just have to try not to think about it. If I see you suffering it will weaken my nerve”—and his attractive voice broke a little—“and I sha’n’t be able to work. As soon as you have finished that last scrap of chocolate you must come and help me.”

Laline pulled herself together. Tears had risen in her eyes in spite of herself.

“Of course I will.”

So they went to this task with a mighty determination, in the direction where David knew that the staircase must be. He was to dig, and Laline was to shovel the loose earth up over the priest’s grave at the side.

But after an hour, David guessed by her silence that she was growing very tired, all unaccustomed to any labour, as she was. And his heart was sinking, too, for, as fast as he dug, more loose earth from the explosion fell in from the top, and he seemed to be making no headway.

“I want you to go and rest now, darling,” he said tenderly. “I’ll take some measurements and wake you up again later.”

Laline tried to persuade him to let her stay with him, but he was firm. No; she must go to sleep for an hour, and he picked her up in his arms, and carried her into the other compartment, and laid her down in their bunk. Then he brought the candle over, and looked at her. She was very pale, and the rough spade handle had rubbed the skin off her little delicate fingers.

A passionate wave of tenderness swept through David as he kissed them. He must stay with her and pet and soothe her until she sank into forgetfulness. Poor little darling child!

So he pulled up the chair, and sat down beside her, and told her stories, and kissed each eyelid and each curl, and put life into her with his firm courage and cheerfulness.

And at last, intoxicated by his love words and his caresses, she felt that it did not very much matter if they were going to die. She was absolutely happy.

But when she was sleeping peacefully, and David went back to his work, his brave heart sank and a sickening weight grew under it.

What if he should not be able to dig through? What if he would have to shoot her? For to watch her dying by inches was more than he could bear. That much chocolate, and that much water, would be enough to keep them alive for four days. And then—? But he must succeed! And he went on with his task with fresh vigour.

Exhaustion made Laline sleep for several hours. The air was cold and fairly fresh. David could feel it coming up from the hole in the north corner. He had gone about three feet now, clearing the loose earth right up to the top, when it was solid, and he judged that by two feet more he ought to reach the frame of the blocked-up doorway that they had seen when they came down the staircase. Then, if the logs which supported the side and top of the passage had not fallen in—surely before four days he could dig up the staircase.

If the logs had not fallen in!

That was a disturbing thought.

Not that, given time, he could not dig even round them, but alone, and without much food, could he accomplish it in four days? Was it possible?

His thoughts went back to Laline.

He loved her now as he had never believed he could possibly love a woman.

Her soul had indeed come through the dross of her education. He thrilled when he thought of her lovely little face, all lit with passion, when she had said she would rather die with him here than have life up there with any other man.

But there were days—ghastly, toilsome days—in front of them when hunger would weaken wills. He must never fail to comfort her, to keep a firm upper lip, and never show his despair.

Then he remembered La Rochefoucauld's maxim—"Perfect valour is to do without witness that which one is capable of doing before all the world."

That would be his motto.

He had been in nasty, tight places in the War—plenty of carnage and excitement, when he had not given a thought to his life. But the slow torture of hunger and thirst and hopelessness was different. And to see the thing you love best on earth sinking under your eyes—that would require nerve indeed!

His strong will conquered all thoughts of depression. She would wake refreshed presently, and there was their supper—and the night! And here the young, strong blood ran in his veins, and he began to whistle softly as he plied his spade.

It was five o'clock when Laline awoke, and, as she opened her eyes, fear gripped her as in the first moments after the explosion had taken place. She did not hear David. He had paused a moment in his work to mop his head. And the darkness—the one candle was with him—and the silence filled Laline with panic. A scream of terror rent the air and brought him headlong to her side.

"My honey! What is it? Are you hurt?" he cried, with blanching face.

Then shame overcame her. He would despise her for having screamed.

"No, no, dearest," and she smiled constrainedly. "I was dreaming. No; there is nothing. I'm all right."

David understood just what had happened. Dear, brave little girl. It was finer of her to control herself and put on a good face than if she had felt no fear, he reasoned.

“See, I’ve done a lot now, darling. I am going to rest beside you for a while. Will you hold my hand, honey, and I’ll have a little sleep?”

She was quite happy again to be near him, and all the tenderness of a mother came uppermost in her when she saw how tired he looked. The strong growth of beard was black all over his chin and upper lip now, and his usually immaculately brushed hair was deranged. He wore no collar, nor tie, nor coat, and his brow was wet with sweat. But his splendid black eyes were as dauntless as ever, and passionate adoration filled Laline. This glorious, strong man. What need she fear? Certainly not death, because they would face it together.

She must be worthy of him—must be brave and calm.

He lay down beside her in the narrow bed and she covered him with the blanket. He held and kissed her little hand. It was now her turn to lull him to sleep. No long matter, for he was worn out.

And then she watched over him for two solid hours. And as the minutes passed her soul rose higher and higher out of all the little paltry influences which had kept it submerged.

She prayed intently to God to save them, to keep her courage firm, to bring them into the light once more, that she might give her life to noble things and be her loved David’s helpmate and his true wife.

And perhaps angels were listening to her, for presently she, too, fell off again into the sweetest sleep.

CHAPTER XV

THE HUE AND CRY

Laline's aunt, Mrs. Greening, and the Whitmores and Jack Lumley arrived at Amiens by a late afternoon train on the Thursday, getting to the Hôtel du Rhin just in time for dinner.

They were much surprised to hear that Major Lamont and Miss Lester had gone off in the two-seater immediately after lunch, and had not returned!

Jack was horribly jealous, and felt that he hated his old friend.

Mrs. Greening was apprehensive. Was this Major Lamont going to be a nuisance, and entangle her niece in a flirtation which might so anger Jack that he would retire from the field?

Mrs. Greening was most anxious for that match. She desired her niece to be a Countess some day—a solid English Countess! Not one of those ridiculous foreign ones whose titles you could never be sure amounted to anything.

She had taken Channings Priory, one of the family places that the old miserly Earl, Jack's cousin, never went to, on purpose, so that Laline might have a glimpse of what her future grandeur would be. And here all her machinations had been upset, just when they were going nicely, by a simple Major of their own nation! It was really too bad.

She had never seen her niece so interested in any man before. In fact, she had a shrewd suspicion that the "crush" she had was turning into a case of downright love.

She had spoken to Celestine about it after the pair had started in the morning. What did the faithful maid think? Was there danger ahead?

Celestine's shrug spoke volumes. It said that she did not want to discuss her lamb's affairs with anyone, but if Mrs. Greening wanted to know her opinion, *mon Dieu!* It was a case, a very bad case of "béguin"—a headlong passion capable of any madness which the mind of man could suggest.

"You really think it is serious, then, Celestine?"

"My only hope is, madame, that Monsieur le Major, not being so attracted as Mademoiselle, it may hurt her pride, and she throw him away."

“You don’t say he has the impertinence not to be as much in love with my niece as she is with him?” Mrs. Greening was horrified at such unheard of negligence. All men had fallen at the feet of Laline!

Celestine shrugged her shoulders again.

“Well, we just can’t sit down under it,” Mrs. Greening announced. “I am sorry I ever consented to go on this trip!”

Thus, when they reached Amiens and Laline and Major Lamont were absent, the usually complacent aunt’s wrath rose.

And when she was ready to go down to dinner at eight o’clock, and still there were no signs of them, a dull anger began to burn in her.

Jack was pale with chagrin and jealousy when the party met in the garden outside the large dining-room. “What can have become of them?” Mrs. Whitmore said.

The Judge was of opinion that they had stopped somewhere to dine on the road, and that they could not mend matters by making their own dinner late by waiting for them. So they went into the restaurant and began their meal.

Nine o’clock came, and then ten—everyone trying to avoid the subject and act as usual.

But in Mrs. Greening’s heart there grew the conviction that they had eloped!

“What do you think can have happened, Jack,” she asked at last. “I am becoming very anxious. What is to be done?”

“They must have had some awful accident,” Mrs. Whitmore interposed tactfully. But the Judge snubbed her.

“Why, there’s no sense in that, mother. Young folks like a moonlight drive. You did yourself, my dear, when you were their age.”

“Jack, what are we to do?” And Mrs. Greening almost began to cry.

Jack thought they ought to get a motor at once, and start out along the road to Albert and make inquiries at the villages, to see if anyone had seen them pass.

But it took more than an hour before a car could be procured at that time of the night, and it was nearly twelve o’clock when Jack started off alone.

He, too, now began to feel that they had eloped. David was a magnificent driver, and if there had been a bad accident on any road leading out of Amiens the people of the hotel would have heard of it by now.

He returned after a fruitless search at half-past six the next morning. Mrs. Greening was pacing her room. He had not chanced upon the little café where Laline and David had bought the chocolate—it was far off the main road. One or two drowsy peasants in different villages, angry at being awakened from their sleep, said they made no record of cars that passed. Tourists came pretty often. But one man and his wife did say they believed they did see a two-seater about four o'clock that day, with a young man in it, and a young lady in blue. They were going toward Albert. No one had heard of any accident.

Mrs. Greening rushed out into the passage to Jack as he came to her door.

One look at his face confirmed her fears. "You think that they have eloped?" Jack was very pale, and his jaw was set firm. "I am afraid I do?"

"Where? Where can they possibly have decided to go?"

"Perhaps on into Belgium."

"Had you any suspicions before, Jack?"

"I have been very uneasy since one night on the ship. But it is awfully unlike old David to do that sort of thing."

"It is not unlike Laline," Mrs. Greening snapped. "It is just what she would do to avoid all fuss and all possible scenes with you."

"I should never make scenes." His face was full of pain.

"I have been in and out of my bed all night with anxiety."

"Go and lie down now, Mrs. Greening. I am going to have a bath and change, and later, at breakfast, we will have another consultation. The Judge will tell us what he has been able to do with the hotel proprietor and the police. I'll go now to his room. But if there was any news he would have come and told you."

So at the moment when Laline awoke that first morning in her husband's arms in the dug-out her aunt had just closed her eyes at Amiens in a restless sleep.

Judge Whitmore and the proprietor had had long interviews with the police. There had been no accidents anywhere on any of the roads for forty

miles round that they knew of, and they certainly would have heard if any had occurred. The only people who had seen the two-seater pass, to their recollection, were the peasant and his wife, who had already spoken to Jack, and they had then been going towards Albert. At Albert, later on that Friday, it was discovered one or two persons had noticed the pair and the car when they stopped to look at the ruins of the church. They had then taken the road toward Lille, it was believed. Oh, yes! They were going along the main road. Then Saturday came, and the distracted party still had had no news.

Celestine and Mrs. Greening together were nearly crazy, but both in their hearts believed that elopement was the only solution of the mystery. But why by now had they not heard?

Fergusson had been left in Paris to complete his master's arrangements about equipment for their mission, which was to take them into the unknown at the end of six days, so that he knew nothing about all these happenings. And it was not until Sunday, when every available clue had been followed fruitlessly, that Jack thought of telegraphing to him.

He would know, if anyone did, what his master would be likely to do, Celestine assured him.

The two women were now quite hysterical, and Mrs. Whitmore had a very wearing time with them both.

They would weep and wring their hands, and suggest impossibilities.

Jack was sick at heart.

On the Sunday—the fourth day—the police got news of the café. The old couple and the girl had gone on a visit to a married daughter at Calais since the evening of the day they sold the chocolate, but they returned on the Sunday at lunch time, and, hearing of the hue and cry, they offered their evidence to the police.

The girl told how the young lady was “*belle comme un ange*,” and how the Monsieur was so handsome; and they were evidently fiancés—they had no eyes but for each other.

They had asked if there were any dug-outs left, the old man said, and he had told them, maybe, towards Gommecourt district. That was all he knew.

By the time Fergusson arrived at Amiens Jack and the police had searched Gommecourt. No; no one there had seen a trace of any two-seater. No dark young man or beautiful young lady had entered that village, where

just a few shelters had been run up within the last year. The desolate country round held no habitations.

When Jack reached the Hôtel du Rhin on the Sunday night late Fergusson was waiting for him.

They had a long consultation together in Jack's room. Fergusson would hear of no theory of elopement. His master, he told Jack, had an important appointment with the Ambassador on the Tuesday, and for nothing in the world, even the most beautiful lady, would he fail to keep it.

“He held no store by lassies,” and it was an accident which had happened, Fergusson would bet his soul.

“You think so?” Jack said hoarsely, agony in his heart. “Then as it all must have occurred four days ago, and it had poured with rain all last night and the night before, by now they must be dead.”

“Dead or alive, I'll find my master!”

And, dead or alive, Jack would find Laline!

CHAPTER XVI

TWO MORE DAYS, AND THEN—?

On the morning of the third day's leave the married lovers woke very late. The exhaustion and hunger had made them drowsy. They were clasped in each other's arms when David's lids at last unclosed. It was thus Laline would lie always. She could not rest or sleep an inch away from him, she told him, and it seemed some comfort to them both to be so near.

David raised himself and moved her gently on to the coarse, linen-covered pillow. She did not wake. He leaned over and looked at her in the light of the one candle, now guttering on the table, which was pulled up close to the bunk.

Her oval face had grown smaller and seemed very pale. The babyish brown lashes appeared to be resting upon violet shadows. There was a pathetic droop of the lips, and the golden curls were dank. The veins upon her beautiful young, white bosom looked startlingly blue.

David uncovered her, and put his ear to her heart. It was beating a little unevenly, and with no great strength. Her little hands seemed transparent and felt damp; the diamond hoop wedding ring hung loose. The big sapphire on the right hand was gone. It had slipped off in the night from the little finger which had grown too small to hold it. David had found it in the worn old rug, and put it on the table, and the ray of the candle now hit a facet, and a blue radiance seemed to be coming from it.

There was something infinitely solemn in this awakening. It was not joyous like the first morning of their marriage.

But if he had thought he had loved Laline then, he knew now that adoration had entered into his feeling for her.

He had awakened after his two hours' sleep the evening before, and found her in a cramped position beside him. She had not stirred in her long vigil for fear of waking him, and the eyes which looked down into his were as an angel's. All trace of the coquettish challenge, which was so habitual to them in the old days, had gone.

"My sweetest heart!" he had murmured, a little brokenly, and clasped her to him.

Then they had supped upon the half-square of chocolate each, and, refreshed with the rest and scant food, David had begun work again. He made her come and sit in the inner compartment with him, bringing the blue satin chair for her, which they called “Mammy Muff,” as Laline had assured him laughingly it was the image of the mother bear “Mammy Muff’s” chair in her nursery book of the story of “The Three Bears and Goldy Locks.”

David would not let her do any work. Her hands were blistered from the little she had done the day before. She must just sit there and amuse him, he said.

And the two kept up the comedy for several hours. Laline knowing that it was difficult for him to speak, digging so hard, tried to tell him entertaining things about some of their mutual friends in Washington, and at last she began to sing to him softly.

She had not much voice, but it was nicely trained, and very sweet.

“Yes, that is heavenly, darling little honey. Sing to me, it makes work easy.”

And he threw a great spade full of earth aside with vigour.

She sang all the silly sentimental jazz songs she had danced to all the winter, and kept time with her little feet and a clapping of the hands. It kept her warm, and the gaiety of the tunes raised her spirits.

“I do believe, if I keep on, I shall be through by morning, honey. It takes so long because the earth keeps falling in from the top,” David said after a while. “And then won’t we just bolt for the car!”

“Don’t you wonder what the others are doing?” And Laline laughed, in spite of the gravity of the situation. “Auntie and Celestine will be sure we’ve bolted to Brussels, because I’ve always said I would love a run-away wedding. Willemon Dodge often used to implore me to elope with him. Fancy if I had gone!”

David stopped digging for a moment.

“Willemon Dodge!” And then he thought for a moment. If she had gone she would be safe now. Would he rather that? He looked at her hard, at her dainty slender figure, still so neat in the blue frock, at her bewitching little face, and the golden curls, combed out and hanging down her back like a child’s now to please him. And then fierce, primitive passion swept him. No. He wanted her; she was his in death and in life, and should never be any other man’s!

His black eyes flashed. Indeed, he looked a ruffian standing there with the spade in his hand, and his dark, unshaven face bristling with nearly a three days' beard.

“David!” exclaimed Laline, surprised. “What on earth is the matter with you?”

“I’m damned jealous, that’s all!”

Some of her old flirtatious mood came back to her. This was simply delicious—David jealous! It was she who had been jealous before, never he.

“Willemon Dodge is a very nice boy.”

“Just a tango partner. You know, when we get back, I shall not stand for any of these fools hanging around.”

“Indeed! I am to be shut up and not allowed to dance, then? I wonder you go on digging to get out. I’d be safer here.”

Her whole face was sparkling; she was once more back in her element of teasing a man.

He put down the spade and seized her rather roughly in his arms.

“Look here, young woman,” he said, “you’re not dealing with one of those mut heads, remember. Your husband knows jolly well how to look after what belongs to him!” And he kissed her with passionate fierceness, his lips almost bruising her soft lips and the bristles of his moustache scratching her fine skin!

A wild quiver of passion flowed through Laline. How she loved him! How she worshipped his strength! She, of course, could never want any silly Willemon Dodge worshippers—never any more.

“Oh! D—a—vid!” she gasped, when he released her a little. “What a dreadful, adorable brute you are!”

“I am glad you said ‘adorable’!” And he sat down on the blue satin chair with her still in his arms, everything forgotten in the passion he was feeling.

“I want to make you adore me always. I shall be enough for you, I promise you. I am a brute, I know, and I would kill any other man who attempted to take you from me!”

Laline felt intoxicated with emotion.

“Have you ever loved a girl before, David?” she asked. “And did you kill her? Or how did it end?”

“No. I threw her away because she was a cheap weakling, and lied to me.”

“How was she—weak?” It might be better to know this.

“She could not prevent her vanity from making her fool with another man when I was away.”

“She did not love you, then,” eagerly.

“Yes, I believe she did, and that was the cheap part. If she had not loved, it would have been natural, since she was always surrounded by men—just as you were, you little coquette!”

“Poor girl; of course she had to have consolation when you were not there!”

“Is that how you look at it! Well, you just try it on when we get back.”

Laline pouted. “And you? How about Mrs. Hamilton?”

David now determined that he, too, would tease.

“Oh, well a man must have a little outing sometimes. She’s a charming woman.”

Anger filled Laline. Her latent jealousy about the Ambassador’s niece flamed up.

“David, if you dare to look at anyone else I’ll go right off with Jack. He’d take me away in a minute if I were only to give him the tenth part of a chance.”

“No, he wouldn’t. Jack is a friend of mine.”

“Yes; but you have taken me from him, and he’d take me from you. Men don’t mind about friendship when there is a woman in the case. You never thought of it!”

David’s eyes clouded.

“You were not bound to Jack, were you?”

“No, not really. I said I would marry him in three or four years’ time if no one meanwhile made me feel.”

“And someone has!” triumphantly.

“Yes,” she gasped. He was holding her so tight.

“And Jack stood for that?”

“Why, he had to—that or nothing!”

“Then a thousand times I’d rather have nothing!”

“Jack says love is devotion.”

“And I say love is—action!”

And once more he clasped her fiercely in his arms, and work was forgotten for a time.

David thought of all this as he looked down at Laline that next morning—asleep there on the coarse pillow!

Yes, he would rather die, both of them together, than that any man should ever take her from him! He knew that she loved him utterly—that he was complete lord of her, body and soul. But his peculiar and masterful temperament did not value her the less for this knowledge. That was his way. Unlike most men, he only loved when he could rule, and, however much physical charm could have held him for a spell, he never would really have given his faith or his tenderness without respect for character.

When Laline had told him that she would rather die with him than live with any other man, then it was that the whole force of his emotion went out to her. And now each hour had made her more dear, as he discovered fresh sweetness hidden away under the crust of her stupid upbringing.

And the last night, after their pretended altercation, she had been divinely loving and yielding, and he had been for her divinely masterful and possessive, and they had murmured fondly passionate love sentences until towards morning they had fallen asleep.

And now she lay there, pale and fragile, and in two more days, if no help came from outside and he could not dig through to safety, he must shoot her and shoot himself. For even now cruel pangs of hunger were beginning to torture him. And what would happen when it came to the last piece of chocolate, the last sip of water?

Would their minds become unbalanced? Would they sink to the level of cannibals and want to eat each other?

Frightful tales he had read when a boy flashed into his memory of men shipwrecked and alone in an open boat, and of how they ate the cabin boy.

He was quite aware that his mind was not so under his control as it was generally, and that ideas that were weird and abnormal would come to him

in dreams.

And what was she suffering—this delicate, exquisite girl? She had shown no signs of her pains of hunger to him, if she felt them. They must have begun to gnaw her, as they had begun to gnaw him. After that one burst of coquetterie she had been only sweet and submissive, no more teasing or showing the ways of her old world. David knew a great deal about the working of the subconscious mind. Laline's subconscious mind was evidently saturated with love for him. If they ever emerged into chance of life once more, with what passionate devotion and care he would repay her for her tenderness!

Then a thought came. She might have a child—his child! This was too glorious, and sent the blood coursing through his veins once more, and he bent down and kissed her mouth.

Her eyes unclosed, and before she knew where she was they filled with languorous passion for him.

“D—a—vid—I was dreaming that we were on the ship again, but under the stars, the last night, when I did not see you. The stars held us in the light. Oh! how much I love you—dear!”

The sentence came brokenly, as though some pent-up emotion were escaping.

Then she turned to him and put her arms round his neck, pulling him close.

“David, I love thee. Near thee I have no more fear. Thy lips on my lips. Thy heart on my heart. I belong to thee—I am for thee—thine.”

Unconsciously, half dreaming, she was translating Phædre's love words to Andreas, which once she had heard a great French actress recite when she came to New York.

And so they remained clasped, without a movement, fused in some ecstasy, for a long space. The gold of their love was refining in the fire of anguish.

That day there was something queer about them. They told each other fairy tales, weird gnome stories which each had read somewhere in childhood.

David worked like a beaver, and when their lunch hour came hope had begun to spring in his heart. He really believed that in an hour or two he would reach the staircase. Laline had put on an extra spirit of cheerfulness.

She made speculations as to what the others were doing and how soon they would find them.

“If Fergusson were only with them he’d be sure to think of some plan,” David remarked. “Old Jack’s a sweet fellow, but he’s not brilliant.”

“And darling auntie is a fool! But there is Celestine. And, David, don’t you think perhaps the peasants may come to search for the priest and see the car? Surely the police will have been put on to look for us?”

“If the car has not been blown up—and, of course, it hasn’t—they will be bound to find us if we only can hang on. You are so awfully plucky, darling, that I don’t guess how hungry you are.”

“I’m not a bit hungry, David. It would be much better for you to take my half of the chocolate, because you have to work. Don’t you see that’s sense, dear?”

David saw it was sense.

“I will if it comes to it hindering my digging—being so hungry.”

“What a strange thing love is, isn’t it?” she said presently. “If you had told me I could simply violently adore someone who had not washed for three days, and who was all stubbly, I would have laughed; and yet every minute I get to love you more!”

“And I you honey, although you are as exquisite as when we started—you wonderful being.”

“My nails aren’t so polished, but I have powder on my nose—that keeps my self-respect.” And she picked up her lapis and diamond vanity case and laughed softly. She was feeling very weak and nervous. Just hunger she did not yet experience. There was no craving, rather a sick emptiness which loathed the thought of food, but such stupid fancies seemed to be coming into her head. If she had to be alone for a moment in their “living-room,” as they now called the original dug-out, she seemed to see strange faces peering at her from the corners.

“David,” she asked, when she went back to him at his digging, “could we not have a little more light all the time? There are enough candles to last as long as we could possibly live, even if we burnt four a day—er—it would be nice if it was lighter, wouldn’t it, dear?”

He guessed of what she was thinking. He had imagined he saw a sardonic face laughing at him when a huge shower of earth fell, nullifying his last half-hour’s efforts. Perhaps she had silly fancies, too.

“Darling, by all means light three candles in there. And do rest now. Sleep passes the time, and then I will come to you with good news presently.”

“I hate to leave you working. . . . David, do you think we might have a cigarette?” He stopped the plying of the spade.

“I have four in my case. I meant to fill it at Amiens—and I was so in love with you I forgot!”

“And I have six in mine,” and she held it up—the companion to the lapis box. “Shall we?”

“Let’s!”

So he sat on the blue chair, and she sat on his knee. Hope was in their hearts. Even with the constant falls of earth from above he must be through to the staircase in another half-hour.

The cigarette seemed like whiffs from paradise. How soothing! How satisfying! David’s brain seemed clear as crystal.

A ray of light struck the diamond monogram of Laline’s case.

“Is it not incredible that men go down willingly into the earth to find those? And gold! I don’t think that I shall ever want to see anything which comes out of a mine again, shall you?”

Laline shuddered.

“Never again. It seems that God can only live in the sun and the blue sky.”

“We must be ordinary, honey. Kiss me. We mustn’t let our minds get wild.”

“David,” she whispered, a strange passion seizing her, and a memory of some former life dwelt in her eyes.

“What does death, or life, or anything else matter? I want to be close to you. I do not want anything between us.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE LAST DAY OF FOOD

Late at night on that Saturday David made Laline go to rest without him. He knew he must work on now while his strength would hold out. So, when he had lighted three fresh candles and set them on the table, and had tucked her up and kissed her, he returned into the further compartment.

Laline had pretended she was sleepy, not to disturb his mind, and had obediently shut her grey eyes before he left her.

She found it often so difficult to keep back tears; she could have cried for the slightest thing; but as her little body weakened so her spirit grew stronger. Never in all the days of her safe, sheltered past had she been so sweet and outwardly balanced as she was now, half starved and cold and with a horrible death threatening close in front of her. Her one thought was not concentrated on *life*, but what would be the best for David.

She had begun to feel dreadfully hungry at last—the sick feeling was developing into a gnawing. She found as she lay with her eyes closed that she was experiencing a strong temptation to get up and go and steal the last square of chocolate, which was proportioned for the morrow (Sunday). It seemed as though some force stronger than anything she had known was drawing her—drawing her to the cupboard.

She fought it. A pain began to come in her head and she fancied she heard bells ringing. She started up into a sitting position and listened and listened, but it was only the noise of David's spade. She could not see him from there, because he was several feet deep in the tunnel he had made.

She peered into the shadows. What was that queer thing which seemed to be crouching there beyond the sofa? A veritable goblin creature! Her mind went to her favourite childhood's book, George McDonald's "Princess and the Goblin." Every chapter, even long sentences of the actual words, came back to her. Curdie, the hero, had worked in the mines. He almost lived half his time in dark places like these. And Irene, the princess, had followed a fairy-thread into the mountain to release him, when the goblins caught him and imprisoned him, and were going to let him starve to death. The thread of the wonderful grandmother, who was half a fairy, had guided the princess. And this old queen had a marvellous lamp also up in her tower

the light of which could be projected anywhere, and which shone on to people's paths and brought them courage and strength.

Laline began to think. What if she pretended that she could see this lamp? She had read in a casual way many books upon mind ruling matter. All sorts of new semi-religious ideas were picked up and dropped in the set which she used to adorn. Nobody ever practised the rules explained, nor really absorbed any teaching. But a general notion that one could force imagination to seem reality if one visualised the desired thing strongly enough had stayed in her mind. She would lie still and pretend she saw the fairy lamp shining into the corner, where one of the goblin creatures appeared to be crouching, for she was shivering now with some hideous apprehension. She forced herself to picture a big automobile flare, and for a few moments calmness and serenity came back to her. But her mind was not trained to concentrate, and wandered immediately, and then, when she no longer imagined she saw the light, terror returned, and the thing seemed to be moving spidery legs ready to spring at her.

Lutie, Princess Irene's silly nurse, had seen just such a creature coming to them when she and the princess were out too late on the mountain one evening, and fear gave it power over them. She, Laline, *must* have no fear. How did Curdie chase goblin creatures and goblins themselves? He sang rhymes to them? She could do that—repeat some poetry—for if the terror went on she might not be able to prevent herself from calling David to ask him to chase whatever it was away from beyond the sofa.

She thought of the light again, and again it quieted her. If only she could keep on thinking of it!

But a dreadful possibility flashed into her mind and brought fresh disturbance. There was that hole in the other compartment going down into the bowels of the earth. What if awful animals really *did* live there, and this was one of them which had somehow come up and was crouching, waiting to spring upon her!

Her teeth chattered and the sweat dripped from her forehead on to her hand as she clutched the blanket.

She could not bear it.

She must repeat a poem. She tried and tried to remember one, but nothing would come.

She must, must, get up and see and meet the creature. Better that than this agony—this agony which was killing her.

The strongest thing in her nature was still holding the base of all her thoughts—love for David. She must in no way disturb him, even if she should have to die fighting with the beast.

Her poor little, trembling feet touched the ground clad only in their cobweb silk stockings; a hole in the big toe of the left foot made the pink, shiny nail gleam. She was wrapped in David's coat to keep out the damp cold which numbed all her being.

The candles were stuck to the table by their grease. She did not stop to detach them, but, gathering up all her courage, she staggered forward to within two yards of the sofa. Another much longer creature now seemed to rise up at her. It was moving! How could she go on?

A madness of terror convulsed her, but her will held. She took another step, and then she perceived with almost an agony of relief that it was only her shadow and the shadow of the blue satin chair falling in that place, because of the position of the three candles which had created goblin creatures and made them appear real. No living beast was there to hurt her.

For a second her self-control broke, and she laughed a sharp, sudden laugh.

David caught the echo of it in his eight-foot tunnel, and it seemed the most awful sound his ears had ever heard.

What was it? Where did it come from? He threw down his spade and rushed back into the living-room again; but Laline had reached the bunk when he came, and was pulling up the blanket over herself.

“Oh, David!” she cried, when she saw his blanched face. “I—I have had the most ridiculous dream! Don't bother about me. It just made me laugh so. I'll tell you about it and make you laugh, too, darling, when you come to bed. Go on with your work now. What time is it?”

She made herself gurgle softly again to disabuse his mind of any anxiety for her, and she snuggled down beneath the blanket. Some part of David's mind knew that she was doing a wonderful thing of courage for him, even though her words sounded a perfectly natural explanation. Tears started to his eyes and his voice was hoarse.

He came over to her and knelt by the bunk.

“My love, my little white soul,” he murmured brokenly; and then he pulled himself together instantly. He must not give way to any emotion to unhinge them both.

He looked at his watch lying on the table.

“It is a quarter past three,” he said rather abruptly, for the thought came that the fourth and last day of food had begun.

Laline smiled gently at him, and, leaning forward, kissed his rough, black, unshaven face.

He felt that her hair was all wet when she was close to him, and he knew that she had been going through agonies of fear. Something under his heart seemed to grow tight and then heave, and the tears started to his eyes again. He controlled himself. He must not give way now, when hope was with him. He must be nearly through, for even if he had miscalculated the actual spot of the staircase, he was still digging in loose earth and not an old, solid mass, so if he struck upwards he would be bound to come out.

He bent and tucked Laline up again and kissed her tenderly.

“My darling! My brave, darling wife!” he whispered.

Then he left her.

Laline thought of the light, the grandmother’s silver moon of radiance when she was alone, and whenever she could keep her mind on it peace held her; but that was the difficulty. She could not keep her thoughts fixed. Concentration upon one mental picture is one of the most difficult things at any time, but, with the body weakened by hunger and the thoughts unbalanced by anæmia of the brain, it becomes almost an impossibility. And weird fancies would make themselves listened to.

Why had they put three candles? Three candles meant—death. Celestine was superstitious about them. Did these portend that death was certain for her and David?

And what was DEATH?

Suddenly she began to ask herself what she really believed in. Was it the episcopalian orthodox religion which it had been so much more chic to belong to in her childhood? Had it really meant anything to her as a guide for conduct and had its promises of life after death carried conviction? She knew, vaguely, that it had all been just a form, and that she had never considered any of it as a reality.

But she certainly believed in a God, and angels. She had dreamed of angels only last night. And she certainly believed in forces of good and evil.

But what would become of the personalities of herself and David, after, perhaps, to-morrow or the next day?

When death claimed their bodies, would their spirits be able to see and feel and take joy in nearness? Would they be together? Or would David, who was so much cleverer than she was, have to go to some other grade in heaven, and would they be parted?

Here she trembled, and the sweat broke out on her forehead again.

No; cleverness could not matter then. God would not judge by that. There was something else much mightier.

She remembered a verse from the Bible she had read in one of the books on the new religions she had often picked up.

“Wherefore, I say unto thee: Her sins, which were many, are forgiven; for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

Well, she loved much, so she would be forgiven. Love was the thing. Love was of God. And so she and her lover could never be separated when Death struck them. Somehow, even if their hands could not feel tangible substance, and their lips could not quiver with the intoxication of the sense of union, their souls would be fused together in some mystic way which would be an even greater joy.

Yes, of course, love was religion. No; she was not afraid to die—with David.

She must conquer all fear and nervousness and the temptation which was growing stronger and stronger to find the chocolate and eat it. And, oh! for a drink of water—a great, big drink!

All that must not be allowed to affect her. She must go on thinking of the silver moon, or the sun, and of the time when she and her beloved would be spirits up in a glorious place untrammelled by anguished bodies. She must keep her whole thoughts fixed on love, which was God.

And gradually sleep came to her, and dreams of angels, more vivid than any before. Down the shaft of the silver moonlight, which yet held the radiance of the sun as well, great trains of Shining Ones seemed coming to her and holding out their arms, and in her ears there was the sound of sweet music and the soft fluttering of golden wings.

David at his digging tried not to think of anything at all. The hard work made the blood run in his veins and chased away the nervous unbalance he had experienced, and unconsciously his mind began to conjure up pictures

of food. In some strange way he was haunted by the memory of one feast of Lucullus which some Harvard friends and he had celebrated at Voisin's when they all chanced to meet in Paris the year before the War. The way that the sole was cooked was perfectly wonderful! and the selle d'agneau au lait! Whew! And the champagne! And the petits pois à la française! Without knowing what he was doing, he wiped his mouth on his shirt-sleeve, and it was running wet.

The action brought him to himself, and he began to analyse. How material to think of food! He would keep his mind on his mission.

If they got out in a few hours he could still "carry the message to Garcia," and come up to time. And what should he say to Laline? How much could he tell her? Not one word, according to his instructions. He could only ask her to trust him blindly, and he would return after two months. It would be better for no one to know of the wedding until he could come and claim her. Would she trust him?

But of course she would.

And then they would have to be married over again, for there was no proof they could produce of any ceremony.

The priest was dead. There would be only their word.

David wore no rings. He could not even give his wife that token. Her wedding ring was her own.

Two months was not very long, fortunately. He would be back at the end of July. He might go as far as telling her to write to the Grand Hotel at Rome, so that he could receive it on his return journey. The idea of the mission seemed to help to bring into his imagination a certainty of getting out.

He just felt sure that a few more shovelfuls would produce some peep of daylight.

He began to whistle in his eagerness, and the strain of the work seemed light. His thoughts wandered again.

Poor old Jack! It had been quite true what Laline had said. Friendship went to the wall when the question of a desired woman cropped up.

Once he would have been quite sure that such a temperament as Jack's would have made any girl ten times happier than he should ever be able to. But now things were changed. No one could take care of his little honey, or worship her, or guard her and give her the joy he could.

He had found a rare thing at last, and his whole being was satisfied.

How brave, how devoted, how unselfish she had shown herself to be!

And a wave of adoration swept him as he remembered her little face, wet with the anguish of fear, and yet smiling at him as he had settled her to rest just now. Oh! the glorious moment when presently he could go in and wake her and tell her to hurry up!

And then he would carry her out to the car and give her a sip of his old brandy. Ah!

But what was this? His spade struck against the end of a log.

The end of a log. Not the side of one. He dug obliquely with frantic energy, his heart beating in his throat. Then he came to the end of another.

This meant that the explosion had forced the supports of the blocked door outwards. By their angle he knew that they must now block not the passage but the narrow entrance to the staircase itself.

And no human being, alone and weak, could dig round them through the solid wall of stones and gravel and hardened earth of the untouched natural wall—in time.

He fell forward on to the heap of mould with a strangled, agonised cry; “Oh! my God!”

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER CHANCE

When David recovered from his despair a little he stood on his feet and told himself that he must be a man.

There was one other chance—the lower excavation from which the air came through.

Some means must be discovered for him to get down there and get back.

That was the difficulty—to get back!

Perhaps it would have been wiser to have tried this plan to begin with, but such speculations and possible regrets availed nothing now. His motto for all things had always been “action.” He had better put it into practice; so he went over to the hole and pulled the short boards away from it, and peered down into the depth, but the candle was no use, so he went into the other compartment to fetch his torch, which he kept carefully in the cupboard. When he had flashed it into the hole he saw the gleam of water, perhaps well over twenty feet beneath. The rotten ladder did not nearly reach it.

Had the water always been there, or had it come since the time before when he had looked? He did not remember seeing any, and the air seemed fresher and damper and colder. All this proved that there must be some opening up into the next dug-out, and so to the outer world.

He must know how deep the water was. He threw a stone, and by the splash and the bubbles he gathered that there could only be about six inches of it.

Perhaps it had rained outside, and this had run in from above?

The water did not matter. It was welcome, indeed. He had often stood in slime and slush and mud up to his knees in the War. Six inches of water was a trifle.

The question was, how was he to get back from there? That was the whole point. Anyone could climb down, with a rope of the blanket and rug, but if they would not be long enough, how was he to reach them for his return journey to fetch Laline, which he must do should he discover that there was a way out from the adjoining excavation beyond, from where the

air came? And, in any case, even if he found things hopeless, he must return to her; he could not leave her to die all alone; he must be with her to the end, whether it was death from starvation or shooting.

He calculated how long he could make a rope of the blanket and the rug—both wretched old things which it would be unsafe to split, as they then would not bear his and Laline's combined weight, when he should have to swing down with her, if such a feat could be accomplished in her weakened state and his own.

By taking up the stuff with the knots to join them he calculated the two pieces tied on the bias might make ten feet. Eighteen inches of this would be required to attach it firmly to the board across the hole. That left eight foot six. He was over six foot one himself; he could easily drop the rest of the distance whatever it was. But supposing it was greater than he calculated, there would then be no certainty of his being able to return.

The only certainty would be for the improvised rope to be so long that he could jump and catch it again and pull himself up by it. He could not chance the length of only the two pieces. He must add his coat as well. This would mean that he must rob Laline of all covering from the cold.

The chance of any good coming of the plan lay in whether or no the ladder up to the other dug-out was in any possible condition for him to climb it, otherwise he might get down and find salvation above him out of his reach.

Then he would have to return, and when the last piece of chocolate was gone he would have to reconsider matters.

The longer they could hang out the more chance for Jack to find them, only, when all seemed hopeless, he must not hesitate, he must accept the horror of shooting them both as the lesser evil to face.

He paused for a moment and thought and thought, but his brain was numb, though at last a further idea came. Were the uprights of the ladder in any condition, even if the rungs had crumbled? If so, he could easily swarm down them.

He tugged, and one came away from the side in his hand. It was matchwood, and fell to pieces as he touched it. No part of the ladder would be of any use. He let it slip down into the water. It would not have held a cat.

The opening to the lower dug-out was about three feet square. He would have to go down by the improvised rope.

But what if after all there should be a firm enough ladder in the other compartment!

The thought sent the blood rushing along in his veins again. Hope was not quite dead.

He crept softly back to the table by the bunk to look at his watch. It was past five o'clock. Then he bent over Laline and started back in horrible fear.

Her transparent white hands were folded on her breast, and for a frightful moment he thought she must be dead, she was so pale.

Her lips wore a tender smile. She seemed in the midst of an ambience not of earth.

He bent nearer and touched her forehead. No, she was not dead; it was damp and warm, and now he could feel the faint breath coming from her parted lips.

He drew back. She was sleeping peacefully. Must he wake her? Or might it not be better for him to take a few hours' sleep himself, before beginning the new venture?

He went to the cupboard, and looked at the resources still left to them. There were, first of all, not too many candles. They were of a guttery kind, and Laline had been rather lavish with them in the last night and day. There were only ten left out of the three dozen, besides those in the altar candlestick. The pooled cigarettes amounted to six. They had smoked two each since the time they had remembered they had them. Then there were the two squares of chocolate, the portion for the morrow—Sunday. And there was about one tumblerful more of water in the pitcher. They had, perhaps, been reckless with it, too, and yet he had suffered greatly from thirst when at his work.

The situation was this.

It had two possibilities. When he had made the ropes, with the addition of his coat, long enough for him to go down and back—and he might find a way out for them both through the other dug-out—then all would be well. Or, failing that, he might come back and lower Laline down with him when he went again, on chance that their combined shouts up whatever passage the air was coming from might attract some attention, if, somehow, the car was found, and Jack might be looking for any trace of them.

He would have to make a decision soon, but an unaccountable drowsiness was overtaking him. He shivered a little; he had been so very hot

from his work, and now the chill, damp air from below struck him.

He felt overcome. He must sleep for an hour or so. Sleep restored like food.

So he crept back to Laline in the bunk and lay down beside her, after extinguishing two of the candles.

She awakened when she felt that he was near, and, with a sigh of fondest love, slipped into his tired arms.

“David,” she whispered, “the angels will come for us whether it is to take us to them or back to the earth again. I have no more fear.”

He clasped her close to him. He would tell her nothing now of what had happened. For a few more hours they might sleep in peace.

But before oblivion claimed him he thought a little more. They could eat the candles, if they must. The longer they could hold out, the greater the chance for the car to be found, because no country could be so entirely desolate as that no one would pass that way for weeks, and surely the peasants of Oieul would get anxious and come to search for the priest.

Yes, it might be wiser to postpone the thought of ending misery with his revolver until every chance was gone and he should actually see Laline dying by inches before his eyes.

And now she was in his arms, held to him, and the warmth of their two bodies and the human magnetism in them brought a sense of well-being which presently would dull anxiety and let them sink into dreamland.

Oh, blessed sleep!

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHT WITH DEATH

Laline woke first this Sunday. It was nearly midnight of the fourth day of their incarceration. They had been oblivious to all things for many hours, in the heavy sleep of exhaustion. She lifted her golden head from David's breast, and very gently, with her small forefinger, she felt the black bristles of his chin and cheeks.

For some reason this had power to bring life into her. They seemed so real! So very much as though David and she were living beings. A man with a strong growth of black beard couldn't be a spirit, and if she could feel with her finger, and the sensation could produce a thrill in her, she could not be a spirit either. Spirits could not have physical thrills.

On her first moment of awakening in the sick agony of her body's emptiness and giddiness, she had wondered if they were dead, and this was Purgatory they were perhaps passing through?

But no, they were alive, David was there, and he was her husband.

He was so exhausted that he never woke with all her gentle touching, so she could gaze and gaze at him, in the light of the one candle, now only half an inch high; he had put a fresh one about eleven that morning, when he had chanced to wake, and it had burnt thus low.

Her head was light. It seemed to be very large, stretched out as big as one of the heads at a carnival, and full of air. Was it a balloon?

She felt it suddenly. No, it was her own—just the same shape as usual. Then she reasoned with herself.

“You are becoming silly, Laline Lamont, because you have not had enough to eat.” She began to kiss David's eyelids and caress his black face with her soft cheek. The scratchy feeling was delicious—so real—so real!

She touched his hair, and his eyebrows, and the lobes of his ears, all as though she were counting marvellous possessions.

“And all that is mine, Molly,” she said aloud, addressing her school friend whom she thought she saw beside her. “Your Marquis can't compare with my David!” “Fancy anyone wanting to be a nun,” she went on, still talking to Molly. “I would not be good at all, or anything, if David wanted

something else. There are no people in the world, or in heaven or in earth, only David.”

She was quivering now from head to foot. Some fire seemed to be in her brain. Her grey eyes were dark with passion—or was it fever? She felt as if her body was on a rack, and her head spinning, but that all was merged in one passionate desire to wake her darling, to feel his kisses, to know that she and he were living still—and loved—and loved.

The magnetism of her thoughts woke David at last, and he started up fiercely. He had been dreaming, in that instant near to waking, that he had gone down the blanket rope to the lower dug-out, and could not get back again, and he had heard her voice calling him, and he knew he could not reach her because an unknown beast was strangling him. The sweat started to his forehead, and he struggled, and threw Laline from him roughly, so that her head hit the side of the mud wall.

Then he awakened quite and saw her lying there looking at him, tears gathering in her lashes. And in anguish he bent over her.

“My honey, my sweetheart, I was dreaming a terrible dream. Did I hurt you, my own?”

Laline was crying now. Passionate sobs shook her, and the tears poured from her eyes. He had thrown her away; he did not love her any more!

He clasped her to him and kissed, and kissed the place where her head had struck the wall. She was not hurt, or even bruised, but the tears were relieving some strain. The sobs grew automatic at last, and a sense of alleviation was suffusing her, but she did not speak. David was distracted. A thousand times he would rather have died than have hurt her.

“My wee baby honey,” he murmured in a broken voice, fondly caressing her and clasping her limp, fragile body to him. “Won’t you forgive your brute?”

His voice brought her to herself. Molly seemed to have gone. They were alone, and she was happy.

“Everything,” she cooed. “I forgive my David everything! I like him to beat me, then I know that I am his!”

The primitive atavistic instinct emerging through the tutored modern American belief in the superiority of woman over man struck David and interested him, even though his wits were dulled by hunger and exhaustion. He realised that all the camouflage of a lifetime was falling from Laline and

the precious little body he was holding to his heart contained a spirit freed from shams. Whatever she should express now gave proof of the real personality. And it seemed to be one of all golden sweetness and tender trust and worship.

How was he going to tell her that he had failed, and that the hope of digging through to the staircase must be abandoned!

How was he going to have the courage to ask her to give up his coat, and the blanket, and the rug?

Would the pillow-case and his shirt, tied together, be strong enough to use instead of his coat? Otherwise she might die of cold, before he could take her out, should he find the way.

There was no use in delay now. Strength would be ebbing, and it were better to know the best or the worst which awaited them at once, but he would give her a little breakfast to begin with.

It might be wiser to divide the last daily portion of one square of chocolate each into three portions now, because when that was gone, there would be nothing but the candles left for them to eat, and they were not pure wax, and would be very unsuitable food. The six cigarettes were also there—only this much to smoke, to keep life in them—if he should decide, after he had been down to the lower dug-out, that it would be any use for them to wait longer.

He had never let Laline see his revolver. She must have no extra anguish to bear. She seemed so satisfied now, there in his arms, as if she wanted nothing more on earth—as, indeed, she did not for the moment, her tears having brought her such relief. To lie clasped close to David was always heaven!

But there was no time to be wasted.

“Darling,” he whispered, making his voice sound as buoyant and cheerful as he could, “I’ve thought of another splendid plan—I can’t think why it did not come to me before—and that is, if you will let me take the blanket and the rug and the pillow-case and tie them together”—he said nothing about his coat, so as not agitate her and make her want to give it up—“I can then easily swing down to the excavation below, where the air comes from, and find the way out.”

She gave a short cry and clung to him.

“You’ll take me, too, then, David. I won’t be left alone. If you do not, I will jump down after you.”

“No, honey, you will not,” he answered, a little sternly. “You must obey me, and show me that you are just the bravest darling a man ever had to rely upon. You will come now when you are dressed and help me, and you will see for yourself it is quite safe, and I can return to you when I have investigated.”

The firmness of his tones quieted her fears. She was almost past using the deliberate control of herself which she had exercised when terrified by the imaginary goblin creatures. It was the primitive Laline answering to her master, and she was sweet and gentle enough, surely. Perhaps those angels which had been such vivid realities to her last night were truly there and were guiding her. She did not protest further, but let David lift her from the bed and find her shoes for her. This was his daily and nightly task of joy—to put on and take off her tiny grey suede slippers and kiss the cold little feet.

He teased her about her big toe showing through the hole in the stocking to hearten her up, and kissed it especially, and it tickled her and made her laugh, so that they became quite gay.

Then he fetched the chocolate and divided it carefully with his knife.

“Only a very small breakfast this morning, sweetheart,” he said, smiling. “But think of the feast we will have. We’ll eat the whole lot when I come back!”

Even this minute piece of the sweetstuff and the sip of water brought some comfort. Both their minds became more normal, and, while Laline finished her toilet, David went on to the opening in the floor, carrying his clothes with him, and then he began to make his plans for descending. His torch showed that the water had risen perhaps an inch or two. He threw a stone. No; it was nothing still to speak of. He would tie the available stuffs together and let them down, and judge the distance so that they might be long enough for him to catch them again for the return. He had brought the rug and blanket and pillow-case with him. The rug seemed very rotten. He pulled it hard and it tore in halves. He tried to join it, and it came to pieces in his hands. At least four feet of hope had now been taken from him!

He would have to give his grey flannel trousers as well as his shirt, and would be reduced to working in his underthings; and if these additions would not make the length right, then he would have to ask for Laline’s silk jersey frock—that would surely hold and be springy. His coat she must keep

at all costs or she might collapse from exposure. He took the trousers and fastened all together and put the improvised rope through the hole. Allowing the eighteen inches, which would be required to make a firm enough knot to tie it to the board from which it would swing, it was not long enough. He would have to jump five feet straight in the air to catch the end again from below, and he doubted if by now his strength was sufficient for that.

He must have Laline's frock; there was nothing else for it.

"David!" she cried a little wildly, when she caught sight of him coming towards her in his underclothing. "Dearest, what is it?"

He laughed boyishly. He did, indeed, look quaint with his unshaven face, well-combed hair, and just his cobwebby underthings.

"I've had to turn the rest of my garments into a rope, darling, and now I have come to ask for your frock. It seems a darned shame to take that lovely blue silk thing from you, though!"

Laline had got it on by now, and was standing there in it. Her little face, as ethereal as an angel's, her slender figure shrunk from emaciation, and all her gold curls hanging down her back, she might have been a child of twelve years.

David was laughing, so she must laugh too!

"What fun!" she cried with pathetic gaiety—and began at once to pull the woven garment over her head again.

They measured it. Dragged to its full length, it would make five feet from the ends of the long sleeves to the bottom of the skirt.

This was splendid!

Then David made her put on his coat over her little crêpe de Chine scanty undergarments, and she looked like some lovely little figure in a comic opera, as she stood there waiting for him to tell her what to do next. He took her into the further compartment, and when she saw the tunnel, seemingly going in so far, a suspicious look came into her face.

"David—did you find—it—it—was an impossibility." And she pointed to the entrance, where the big mound of earth was. "And is that why you are going to try this other plan now? And if it fails?"

He did not speak. He could not. He just folded her in his arms.

She seemed to become deadly cold, and her breath came quickly.

“I’m—I’m—not afraid, David—we’ll go to sleep together.”

He could not keep back the tears from his splendid black eyes. She had touched something high up in his soul.

“God’s going to help us not to fail,” he whispered hoarsely.

Then he set her down and began to work. The arms of the jersey made a fine strong knot round the board over the hole, and the rope dangled in space. He fastened his torch and his revolver round his neck with Laline’s silken belt. He saw her glance strainedly at the weapon, but she said nothing, and then he turned to her, and his face was solemn.

“Heart of mine”—his voice was deep—“now you must show me the strongest side of yourself. I believe everything will be all right, but if by any off-chance the rope should break—and I can’t get back—then you must collect the candles and everything we’ve left and throw them down to me, and you must lower yourself as far as the rope goes, and drop, and I will catch you—because, however it goes, we must be together.”

“Yes, David.”

“Honey, you must not be frightened at being alone while I go on and into the other compartment, where the opening must be. You see—it’s our last chance.”

Her face was white as death now, and her grey eyes were filled with an agony.

“No David—I won’t—be frightened.” She staggered a little. He thought she was going to fall, and held out his arms to her. His touch unnerved her, and with short gasps she whispered: “Take me down now—let us face it together. Let’s take the things—and if it isn’t—and there’s—nothing—then—shoot us!”

They clung together shivering.

But David was firm. If he could get back, and there was something to be done which would require waiting, for her—it was better for her to wait in the dry top storey than down below in the water. He must go alone first, then if he could not get back, or anything happened to him, she must come after him.

“Hold the candle down the opening while I go, darling, and if anything breaks come straight after me. You’ve climbed ropes in the gymnasium, haven’t you?”

She controlled herself.

“Yes; when I was a kiddie.”

He kissed her reverently, her cold lips clung to his, but neither spoke.

Then David began to descend, and the little brave heart up above watched him, holding the candle as low as she could because the solid floor between the excavations was a good four feet thick and the hole went through it. It only took him a moment or two, and he dropped into the water safely, and gave a shout of gladness.

“It’s fine, honey! It is not above my ankles. I’ll whistle as I go on, so you’ll know I’m all right,” and, splashing and whistling “The Love Nest,” David turned on his torch, and cautiously made his way, step by step, in the direction of what must be the adjoining dug-out.

Left alone, Laline had a terrible fight with herself. The blood seemed surging in her head so strongly that she could not be sure if she really heard David whistling.

He had lighted two candles and stuck them on the floor near her, so that she was not in darkness. But the horror of everything—the hideous terror!

She peeped through the hole again, and swayed the candle she held in her hand. She caught sight of the gleam on the water.

It seemed to her now distorted imagination to be a lake in the infernal regions. What lake?—or was it a river in Greek mythology—the Styx—and did not a boatman row the souls across—to Hades—or was its name Erebus? And was it a lake after all?

Her heart beat to suffocation. Something must be done or she would jump through the hole. She rose to her feet and staggered into the inner living-room, and there she went over to the altar, which was just as the priest had left it after their marriage. Only the crucifix was gone; it lay over his grave. She lighted all the seven candles in the branch, and then she knelt down.

She could remember nothing, for a while, but at last a shuddering sigh came, with the words:

“Oh! Christ—hear us!”

Then she fainted.

CHAPTER XX

DAYLIGHT

It took David only a few moments to splash through the water, still whistling, to an opening in the further wall. It was about four feet higher than the level of where he was, and the edge of it was lowered at one side, where the rain had run out for three years. He pulled himself up by the support of the doorway. It was not until afterwards that he remembered how the impulse to leap had not come to him, and what a strain it had been to climb even with the aid of the wood to pull against. His whole consciousness was set upon the chance of finding some outlet in the room beyond, and, when he could peer into it, he became aware that a faint light was coming through from a hole in the roof, and he could see the beginning rungs of a ladder.

A mad joy filled him. Daylight, blessed daylight! Were they saved, after all? Could he go back to his darling, and again climb down the rope, this time with her, to safety.

“Thank God! thank God!” he cried, ecstatically, and rushed forward.

The ladder looked quite all right. Oh! if it should bear him—bear them both!

The rain which had trickled in from time to time during the three years had made a little gully for itself, so that its stream drained off by the door to the other level; thus the rest of the floor was dry.

He flashed the torch about. There was a heap of old tins and one or two rusty bayonets in one corner and a broken wooden case, which had been used as a table. Otherwise the space was empty. No; on the floor there were scattered some dingy playing cards, and three lay face downwards on the box.

Thought is so instantaneous that these details struck David during the time it took him to cross the floor to the ladder. He put his torch at the edge of the case, its light turned floorwards, and, standing under the opening, the daylight from above seemed to come in more strongly.

He could see that the ladder appeared to be firmly fastened to the top with iron hooks.

His heart was beating so fast by now, and the blood was surging so in his head that for a moment he trembled too greatly to do anything, then he felt the first rung of the ladder with his foot; it broke off. He tried the next, with the same result. Then he shook the whole thing, and, with a rattle, the remaining rungs fell from it to the floor.

In despair, he pulled at the uprights, and they, too, gave way and came down with a crash, almost on his head.

In his agony of disappointment and despair he gave a strangled cry that might have come from some animal at bay, and then he staggered towards the case and sat on it, trying to think.

Nothing would come to his starved brain but the realisation that three playing cards showing their backs lay there beside him, and that the ace of spades and the very dirty face of the knave of clubs were staring at him from the floor, the light of the torch shining full on them.

“Cursed black things!” he mumbled inarticulately; and he shook his fist at them.

But he must think—think.

What possible plan could he invent to reach the opening above, where salvation lay?

Why could he not get his brain to act? He pressed his hand to his head.

If he had only come down on the first day he would have been strong enough to have dug a staircase out of the side wall and pierced a hole to what he could calculate with certainty was the floor above. But now that task would be a sheer physical impossibility. What—what could be done?

He sat for what seemed a long time thinking—devising. Gradually, the great excitement that he had been in subsided, and his mind became clear, and the plan he formulated was this:

He must go back, and pull himself up the improvised rope to Laline. Then he must collect all their household goods at the edge of the hole—candles, spades, chair, pitcher, and the rest of the few things. Then he must throw all the bigger ones down, and load up the pockets of his coat, which Laline wore, with the lighter articles. And when all was ready he must lower himself again, and then Laline must untie the rope below her dress, and let it fall, and then she must come through the hole, and hang on to the end of the few feet of silken jersey, and drop, and he would catch her. It was a

desperate chance in their terribly weakened state, and both would probably roll in the water. But it was the only one.

He would have to give up his undergarments, and with them make up the loss in length of the jersey frock. Then when they were tied he would have to splice two, or even three, of the spades and bayonets together, with strips of Laline's chemise, and finally he would have to stand on the case and endeavour to throw this bar, with the rope tied to it, up through the opening to the daylight. And if he were only strong enough to get it through it might fall across the hole and there would be the possibility again of climbing to safety.

He started to his feet joyously. Surely God would in some way help them now and give him force to carry out this plan. He went over to the heap of bayonets and old tins, and counted them; there were four—very rusty, but glorious riches! There was also an iron bar quite five feet long lying under the tins. So he need do no splicing. The floor, too, was four feet higher than the one in the next compartment, so his vest would make the rope long enough, and they could stand on the wooden case to start from. Yes, it all seemed possible and too splendid. He must not delay a moment more; he must go and let Laline know about things.

So he turned to splash back to the rope, but the temptation to stop and drink overwhelmed him, and he bent and scooped up handfuls of the muddy water and drank as though it were the finest champagne! Then he strode forward joyously, and gave a mighty shout with upturned face to the opening.

But silence greeted him.

It was at that very moment that Laline had fainted. For all these cogitations of David's had not taken very long in reality. He shouted and shouted again, frightful fear in his heart.

Why did she not answer?

What had happened in these few minutes? He could not have been gone a quarter of an hour. Was she dead? God! What agony!

"Laline, Laline!" he shrieked in despair, and then, with frantic energy, he began to climb up the rope. He got to the first knot of the join to the next garment, and then all strength left his arms, and he slipped back into the water.

Once more the strangled cry of a wild animal at bay rent the air, and then a sob.

“Oh, God! Oh, God, help me.”

Not a sound came from above.

If only he could manage to get beyond the first knot and rest, hanging to it, before trying the second one. He must make a fresh effort. The cold shock of the water had revived him. He controlled himself and made his nerves grow quiet. Then once more he essayed the difficult task of mounting.

He was, fortunately, a wonderful athlete, and all his training served in helping to bolster up his waning strength. He had never imagined such an easy thing to him as climbing a rope would present any difficulty. He started again, got to the first knot this time, and held to it. But the second one was a greater distance off; and how would it be when he came to the long blanket and the jersey frock?

He panted terribly, but he clung on, and so he reached the blanket beyond his trousers. Here his knees seemed to lose grip, and the strain on his arms and his heart was awful, but he thought he heard a moan from above, the faint sound of his name:

“D—avid—”

Laline was calling him. She was in pain—in danger. The agony of it spurred his failing strength to one fresh spurt, and so at length he pulled himself through the opening, and, rolling over, fell unconscious on the earthen floor.

Laline stirred in the inner compartment as she lay there before the altar. Her senses were slowly returning to her in some sick, uncertain way.

She sat up feebly. Had she heard someone shouting? Where was she? And then the blood ran in her veins again, and her memory came back. Had help come? And was that what the noise had meant?

She staggered to her feet and tried to collect her senses.

David had climbed down below and he had whistled—she remembered that. But all was silence now. She tottered into the other compartment, and there, in the light of the two candles, she saw her darling’s long form lying prone at the edge of the gaping hole, one arm hanging down into it.

She shrieked in agony and threw herself beside him.

“David, David! My beloved!” And she kissed him and kissed him despairingly and tried to hold him to her. But the head fell a lead weight on her breast. It could not be that he was dead. Oh, God! In her anguish for her

loved one all feebleness was forgotten; her spirit had risen beyond the flesh. She laid his dark head down upon the ground again. His eyes were closed, and the heavy, inky lashes rested upon blue shadows, and the part of his face uncovered by a growth of black beard looked a greenish olive in the flickering light.

Laline got somehow to her feet and went back into the living-room. She was controlling herself now. She searched and found the remaining chocolate and the cigarettes and the last glass of water, and she brought them to where David lay. Then she returned and fetched the altar candlestick, with its seven flaming lights, and put it on the floor near him.

She took his wrist and felt his pulse. There was an almost imperceptible beat.

He was not dead, thank God!

She put the glass of water to his lips, and a little stream ran into his mouth.

Then she lit a cigarette and puffed the smoke in his face. His eyelids quivered.

With frantic eagerness she now broke off a corner of the chocolate and forced it between his teeth. He was reviving, and, not conscious of what he was doing, he swallowed the chocolate eagerly.

Then Laline fed him with it all—both their portions for the remaining time they could possibly live. Not one thought of self held her. She was ruled by the one passionate urge—to save him, her adored one.

David was recovering rapidly. He had unknowingly devoured the sweet stuff ravenously, and now he raised himself, and consciousness came back to him, and with it some terrible prehension of what he had done.

He saw the little figure kneeling beside him, with ethereal face and burning eyes looking at him through the smoke and the mist of her hanging golden hair, and he tasted the chocolate in his mouth. Then he cried aloud in anguish, full realization coming to him.

“Laline, Laline, what have you done?” And, with a great sob, he covered his face with his hands. Knowledge of her sacrifice broke his self-control, and he shed bitter tears.

She soothed and comforted him like a mother with a child.

“My darling, my David, you mustn’t—you mustn’t cry.”

“Oh, my God, Laline! You angel—you divine little honey—and I have taken your last chance of food.” And he rocked himself to and fro. “Oh, the brute beast that I am!”

Laline felt exalted. It seemed as though nothing mattered now that she saw David sitting up and strong again. A faint color came into her waxen cheeks.

“It is much better like this, darling,” she told him, “because now you will be stronger and able to save us both. I—I’m not a bit hungry, and this cigarette was so good.” Then she laughed softly and kissed him again and again.

David pulled himself together. There was truth in her words, and no time must be lost in remorse or useless grieving. Action was the thing while the new strength was in him.

“Darling child, you are too noble and good.” His voice broke again in a sob. “And now we have the hardest task in front of us. But there is daylight at the end of it.” Laline’s eyes glowed.

“The other dug-out leads to the upper air, but, like this one, the ladder is all rotten and has fallen away. I have devised a plan, though, which, if we can carry it out, will certainly save us. So we must have courage, my sweetheart. You will need all yours.”

Then he explained all the details to her—of how she would have to drop into his arms, he standing in the water below, after she had untied the rope from the end of her blue silk jersey dress.

He saw the pupils of her grey eyes dilate as he said this, and for a second she shuddered and nervously clasped her hands.

He knew that he must not unnerve her by showing that he noticed anything. There was not a moment to be lost.

Together they went back into the living-room and collected the few things. Alas! No food now, and only the five cigarettes.

They stowed the lapis boxes and the matches in the pockets of David’s coat. Then they took the pitcher and the bed pillow and deposited them next the hole, and then David moved the chair.

“Mammy Muff” should take her chance through the opening.

David remembered everything, even the book of prayers.

Then they blew out the seven candles and threw the candlestick down—and they heard it splash in the water. They only kept alight one burning end, which David had scraped off the table. The table itself was too big to get through, and it must be left behind, the sofa also. Then it was “Mammy Muff’s” turn to disappear. As David pushed her through, Laline ran back into the dark and left him. He cried to her, and, seizing the candle-end, ran after her.

She had gone to the bunk and flung herself on her knees and was kissing passionately the wooden side.

“Good-bye,” she cried a little hysterically. “We can never be happier in Heaven than we have been here!”

Then, with rapt face, she let David lead her back to the hole.

CHAPTER XXI

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL

Before David began to swing himself below he turned to Laline and explained exactly what she would have to do. He saw that she was controlling herself with all her might and main.

He tied the bundle of candles round his waist with the silken belt, as well as his torch and revolver. She should have light at least to go down into. Then, seeing that the pockets of his coat which she still wore were filled with all the little things, he clasped her in his arms.

“I am sure it is going to come out all right, darling,” he said, making his voice sound cheerful. “And even if we can’t get out the other side, we have a chance by shouting up for help to where the daylight comes from.”

He was feeling so intensely that he feared to give way to any emotion.

Laline was praying silently, and did not speak—praying for nerve not to falter when she was left alone—praying for strength of fingers to untie the knot which fastened the silk jersey to the blankets—praying for courage to drop into the space which seemed so terribly vast before David could catch her.

He thought about the knot.

“Honey, the only thing which troubles me is that my weight will have pulled the fastenings awfully tight between the two things. You must use my pocket knife if you can’t get it undone. The jersey comes well through the hole. You, hanging, will be quite five foot eight or ten. I am six foot one, so your jump will not be so very long; but, all the same, I can’t bear to leave you alone up here, even for these minutes.”

They embraced fondly, and David went down through the opening and arrived safely at the bottom, where he set up the candlestick, which was, fortunately, only bent, not broken by its fall and he put two of the candles into it and lighted them. Then he placed the candlestick some feet away. It stuck up there, the water only up to its branches, and the light made a queer, quivering reflection. Then he went on and deposited the other things in safety in the dry compartment beyond, so that he should be unencumbered when he must catch Laline as she let go the rope.

The blue satin chair had fallen on its side and was unhurt; it seemed a heavy burden to lift.

He called up to Laline.

“Now throw me the pillow, darling, and then the pitcher, and the book of prayers.”

She leant over and dropped each thing as he had said. He caught them all and carried them to safety. And then he came back and stretched out his arms.

But panic was suddenly seizing Laline. She could not face the descent.

She kept herself from screaming, that was all she could do, but the mad beating of her heart seemed to produce suffocation. Her poor little body shook like a leaf in the wind.

She ran up and down, up and down the compartment. She went quite mad for some moments. Then she heard David’s voice calling.

“Laline, Laline, aren’t you coming, honey?”

She stood still.

“David!” and there was a sharp gasp of fear in the tone.

He understood, and his voice grew calm and quiet.

“Courage, brave heart.”

It steadied her.

She must think of the angels and that wonderful grandmother’s moon which had so comforted her before.

She made herself approach the hole; she was almost exhausted, but she forced her thoughts to visualise the glorious light which she had made a picture of in her imagination since her early childhood—Irene’s grandmother’s lamp.

“I am coming, David.”

He answered cheering words now, and began to whistle gaily one of the jazz tunes she loved.

She drew up the rope and tried to untie the knot. It was very difficult, as there was no force in her enfeebled little fingers, but with the aid of the knife she got it undone at last, it seemed after endless moments. Then she bent

over the aperture and peered into what seemed the gaping abyss, and she threw the severed portion to David; he caught it, and called:

“Make a knot at the end of the dress, darling, and if your hands slip they will come to it.” And he carried the rope into safety throwing it through the dry compartment’s door.

Laline’s very arms trembled, but she obeyed him, and then called to him, “David are you ready?”

“Yes, honey!” She grasped the silken rope and plucked all her courage together and slipped over the side of the hole.

The jerk was such that in her weakness she let go at once, when she hung dangling.

It was a moment of frightful anxiety to David, watching her, but he caught her in his arms, though the impact caused just what he had feared it would do with his strength gone—they both fell flat in the muddy water.

He struggled up and lifted her tenderly. She was shaken and probably bruised, but no grave hurt had resulted. Only she was all wet and shivering.

He carried her through the remaining space and deposited her on the floor of the opening. The strain of her light weight seemed immense; he was panting for breath.

“Go in, honey,” he gasped, “and I’ll fetch the candlestick.”

She got to her feet with difficulty; she was dazed with the fall and shock of the cold water. And in a minute or two they were both safely in the dry compartment.

It seemed like a haven of rest after their adventurous passage to it. And Laline sank into poor old, damp “Mammy Muff” with a sigh of relief.

David pointed upward to the opening.

“You can’t see the daylight with the candles alight, honey, but it is there all the same. And now, when I have got my breath again, I must begin to try and throw the bar through the hole and make us a new staircase.”

The tumult of emotion which Laline had been through was beginning to have its reaction. She felt very faint and inert. David’s voice sounded far away. The two candles appeared like flaming eyes in the darkness. One of her arms hurt awfully. How could they possibly climb up the rope again? She never could, certainly. Would it not be better to give up trying to escape and just slip off into shadowland? She was too far gone to feel any more

acutely. She had but one desire—to be near David, to feel his arms holding her while life lasted.

He took the coat off her tenderly and wrung it out. He could see that her strength had greatly lessened in the last hours. What if she should die before he could climb the rope to find salvation for them? For he knew that he could never pull her up with him. He must go alone and leave her again. What would it mean, even if he got out? He might be an hour finding help, and would she be alive when he returned?

Yes; because he would first reach the car and his flask of brandy, and return and throw it down to her. That would give her courage and strength. But meanwhile she seemed faint again. He clasped her in his arms and murmured love words, and, as ever, this revived her, so that she opened her eyes.

Then she caught sight of the cards scattered on the floor and the three with their faces turned downwards on the box.

“Fancy cards being down here!” she cried feebly.

“The boys played a game when they could; it passed the time.” And he went towards the improvised table, and was just about to pick one up.

Laline gave a sharp exclamation.

“Don’t touch those, David. I’ve a feeling that if one was the nine of spades it would mean death. Let us not know until it comes.”

“You must not talk like that, honey, with this good chance in front of us, and the worst half over.” Then he remembered that he had eaten their two portions of chocolate and was feeling stronger, whereas she—

“My little angel love,” he cried passionately, and drew her to him.

In Laline’s weakening mind there was the thought that they would now die, and that nothing would be any good trying; it was all an impossibility. So let them die together held close.

“David,” she pleaded, “may we not lie down and rest just for a few moments? And then you can be strong and throw the rope up. I am so tired, darling.”

The situation was very desperate, because they were both wet and shivering, and there was nothing left dry but the garments in the rope. David’s vest and his coat tied together would make it as long once more as the blanket now made it. He must untie that and take it to wrap Laline in.

She would die of cold if she remained in the dripping crêpe de Chine undergarments.

“Honey, I must undress you first,” he whispered tenderly. “Slip off those wet things and I’ll wrap you in this dry, warm blanket.”

She obeyed him mechanically, and he folded the coarse coverlet around her slender form, and, lifting her, carried her to the corner by the tins, and laid her down, turning over “Mammy Muff’s” dry side to make a support for her head with the bed pillow.

She lay inert. Only her eyes followed David’s movements, unutterable love in their hollow depths. Then the comfort of the dry woolen stuff enveloped her and her lids closed—the unconsciousness of exhaustion had come. He bent over her in fear.

There was not a moment to be lost. He must make his preparations to reach the opening. The knotting of the substitutes for the blanket took no time, nor the fixing them to the bar of iron. It was strange how heavy the thing felt. A thinnish bar of iron with a nut on the end of it to seem to be weighing a ton!

He dragged the big wooden case over almost beneath the hole in the roof, having carefully removed the three cards to the other corner, in deference to Laline’s wishes, keeping their faces downwards.

Then, carrying the bar, he climbed upon the box and looked upward.

The aperture seemed very far off, and if the bar did not reach it and fell back on his head it might kill him before he could get out of the way, unless he jumped immediately aside.

Fortunately, he had been a very fine exponent of the art of throwing the javelin. It would stand him in good stead now.

He calculated the distance and saw that his foothold was firm, and that he could be sure of keeping perfect balance. The top of the case was smooth enough, and quite a good size; only part of the sides were broken, but not the supports at the corners, which were quite firm.

It was a bit of luck the nut being still on the end of the bar; he could be more sure of attaining his object and making it fall across the hole.

He gave one last look at Laline. She was either asleep or unconscious. The uncertainty seemed to give him desperate determination. He got off the case and went over to her. How he loved her! Every atom of her frail body, every aspect of her pure devoted soul, which had emerged beyond the dross

of earthly things. Nothing he could ever do in after life, if it was going to be given to them, could be enough to show his utter worship of her. His thoughts went back to the evening walk on the deck of the Olympic—how he had teased her and kissed her just for his pleasure, not knowing. He knelt reverently beside her and raised and kissed her transparent hand—the little left hand which wore the wedding ring.

A twinge came to him—her ring, not his. Some wild jealousy of it filled him. If only he had had something of his own to have placed upon her! He had not even a tie-pin, only a gold safety beneath to keep the tie steady; and pins were not pleasant as omens anyway.

How simple she had been, how obedient; no silly, prudish fuss at the critical moment when he had told her she must take off her wet clothes; just simple, child-like faith in him, and obedience to his wishes.

“My honey, my little honey!” he cried softly. Then he rose and sprang on to the case once more, some fresh spurt of life and strength animating him.

He picked up the javelin—for such, indeed, the bar of iron must appear to him—and he stood poised like a Greek bronze of an athlete, and then, with one mighty effort, he hurled the thing up through the hole into the space beyond, and for one tense second he watched, and then he pulled the rope, and it fell across the opening as he had hoped it would.

“Thank God!” he cried aloud. “Thank God!” But the strain had been terrible, and now he half fell from the case and staggered to where Laline lay, unheeding. The rope was fast, and when he had rested a minute he must climb up it. Rested! Yes; that is what he craved, to rest just for a few moments beside his darling.

He lay down panting, pulling a corner of the blanket over himself, and almost instantly sleep or some trance overcame him.

His hand fell beside him and touched one of the rusty bayonets, and this, perhaps, inspired his dream.

For he thought he was in the dug-out with Jack and the others again, and the enemy had attacked the trench above. He could hear the tramp of feet as the men moved out. He could feel the blood lust, the passion to kill surging through him. The German soldiers were swarming in now, but they had turned into devils, black creatures with horns and hoofs and tails, and they were pointing to Laline and saying, “Kill her—kill her, and get out yourself.” His loss of consciousness could only have lasted a few moments, such is the rapidity with which dreams happen. For in the next instant he

found himself sitting up and bending over Laline, the old, rusty bayonet raised to plunge it into her heart.

He gave a short cry of agony when he realized what he was doing, and flung the weapon from him with violence. It whirled in the air and alighted point downwards, pinning one of the cards to the earth.

Then he bent over the unconscious girl. Her face was white as death. Had her spirit fled? Was all too late, all a mockery?

In frantic anxiety he moved the blanket and put his ear to her heart. He could not be certain that he heard it beat.

And there was hope—nay, certainty, of life in front of them, for the distance was much less than the height he had climbed before, and the knots were nearer. What could he do? What could he do to keep life in her until he could reach the car? She had given up the last bit of food to save him—what sacrifice could he make for her in return?

In a lightning flash an idea came to him, and without a moment's hesitation he put it into effect.

Laline's little wet chemise lay stretched out on the tins—he took it and tore it into strips—then he made a tourniquet with one bit round his left arm by the wrist, using his pocket comb for the purpose, and with another part he made a slip knot round his arm higher, near the elbow, that he could pull tight with his teeth.

Then he opened the little second sharp blade of his pocket knife, and cut a vein—not an artery—on the outside of his arm.

The blood spurted out and he let it drip into Laline's mouth.

The effect was marvellous—she opened her eyes—those grey eyes which had but lately gazed at him with the soft glance of an angel—and a wild fierceness came into them while she eagerly sucked the blood.

Clarimonde—the Vampire—must have looked thus when she drank from the veins of Rumauld.

Then consciousness returned, and just as David had done earlier, she realized what she was doing, and with one wild shriek of horror she rolled over on her face.

Now David had miscalculated the effect this loss of blood would have upon him—and just sensible enough to pull the slip knot tight with his teeth and stop the bleeding, he then fell forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE TRACK

Fergusson wasted no time in more surmises, as he stood there in Jack Lumley's room at Amiens on the Sunday night.

"We could send an aeroplane up to see if it would locate the car," he suggested. "I could go now and arrange for one and have it start at daybreak."

Jack found this a good idea. Why had they not thought of it before?

Then a shrewd look came into the Scotsman's sandy face.

"You would not be knowing of any particular part that Major Lamont might be wanting to show a lady?" he asked. "I believe, Sir, you were with him when he got away from Headquarters to enjoy a scrap that time?"

"By Jove, yes!" and Jack bounded to his feet. "There were some dug-outs at a place called Etticourt—he might certainly make for these. They were splendid ones, but the police have been round all those roads, and there is no trace of a car. However, we'll try that again. We must start now." Jack's voice trembled with eagerness.

"It is a black, dark night, sir. It would not be no use till dawn. Get some sleep, sir, and I'll see the police at once and make arrangements for the aeroplane to go up, and at three o'clock I'll call you and we will start."

"The car must have upset and fallen into a ditch," Jack said. Then both were silent for a minute thinking.

"Nobody heard an explosion, sir?" Fergusson asked at last. Jack was startled.

"Why, no! What do you mean? There couldn't be dud shells about now, the salvage passed in 1919."

"They might have gone down a dug-out, sir, and the roof fell in."

This awful suggestion turned the faces of both men pale.

Jack saw how his jealous conviction that David and Laline had eloped had obscured his imagination. If he had not felt certain that this was the case he surely would have considered the possibility Fergusson now put before him.

But if it should be true! The agony of it! Laline buried alive!

“I cannot wait until the morning. I must start for Etticourt now.”

“Very good, sir. I suppose I can get another car, and join you when I’ve seen about the aeroplane. But you won’t do no good until dawn.”

They settled their plans. Then it was about midnight, and by two o’clock both Jack Lumley and Fergusson were speeding along towards Albert with spades and ropes and brandy in the car, and with orders left for ladders and all other necessaries to follow to Gommecourt with the gendarmes and Judge Whitmore, as soon as it was daylight, to have everything in readiness for what they might find.

It was raining and miserably chilly. Jack had waited for Fergusson, after all, and both had gone to the police about the aeroplane. One should certainly be sent in the morning, and should fly low over all that part of the country.

When they reached Albert the sky was still inky, but dawn would be there in less than an hour, and Jack’s passionate eagerness had to be crushed for that time. As well try to find the traditional needle in a bundle of hay as a certain dilapidated line of old trenches in a devastated country, without landmarks, in the dark! And when the first streaks of grey did show in the sky they had still a very difficult task in front of them.

They made for the Gommecourt direction. Etticourt, Jack knew, had been wiped out and would be difficult to find without some guide. At half-past four, when it had become quite light, they came upon some peasants who could give them some information. The site of Etticourt was over there to the right; and, yes, there were some dug-outs left along by the stumps, which had been a wood.

As they turned into the very side track which David and Laline had taken on the Thursday before, they saw that an aeroplane was circling far in the distance. This comforted them a little.

Jack, who was driving, put on all speed, but they came to the end of the track and to the iron, dilapidated crucifix. No road went on. The rain of the last days would have obliterated any marks of the car across the open space, had there been any, which was very unlikely, as the ground was dry at the time David and Laline had crossed it.

“We’d better go on,” said Fergusson, “as far as we can.”

The aeroplane was now coming nearer, and was flying very low.

The airman must discover the car if it were about anywhere at all.

The rain had made the open space impossible to drive over, so the two men got out and walked. They could see the derelict tank in the distance, and made for that, but before they could reach it the aeroplane was above them, and swooped so low that they could hear the observer's voice shouting in French. "The car's there—beyond the mound."

They raced the last hundred yards, and then they came in sight of it and were soon beside it, and could see David's overcoat and Laline's wrap still in it.

"Oh! God, Fergusson! You must be right!"

They hastened to the trench and climbed down.

There was no sign of anything to guide them. They passed all the dug-outs with the staircase half fallen in, and at last they came to one where the earth appeared as though it might have crumbled more recently than in the others, but the soaking rain made everything look very much the same.

"This is the trench Major Lamont and I took," Jack said, his voice hoarse with the agony he was suffering, "and one of these dug-outs must be the one we were in. The Tommies called them Grosvenor Square. Ours was the seventh staircase from that end, I remember quite well. I was there for days."

"That'll be the one my master took the lady to," Fergusson announced a little breathlessly, and then he began to shout very loud.

"Are you there, anybody?"

"See," Jack exclaimed, as he went very close to examine the earth of number seven. "There must have been an explosion, after all. Look at this biscuit-tin lid; it is all recently blackened!"

The staircase was filled up to the top step, and a log support of a door could be seen sticking out.

He rushed back to number six. This was still quite clear, though the steps were broken away.

"If they are in there, we can get to them through here," he shouted to Fergusson. "There were double excavations, and the ladders went down from each and they joined below."

Then Jack made Fergusson tie the rope they had brought with them firmly round his waist—and, taking one of the spades, he began to go down

the stairs. And then he shouted—with might and main:

“David. Are you down there? David! Laline!”

But he had little hope that any voice would answer him. This was Monday, the beginning of the fifth day since the two were missing—without food and water. They surely must be dead!

CHAPTER XXIII

SAVED

After a moment or two's mad misery Laline started up into a sitting position, the blanket falling from her so that she shivered in her nakedness, and then her eyes caught sight of the bayonet which had pinned the card to the floor. She did not see the other ones which were beyond the tins, behind her head. She only registered the fact that here was some kind of dagger.

She had drunk David's blood—he was dead and she would kill herself. But with some subconscious modesty, not knowing what she did, she pulled the blanket round her first, and then staggered to her feet and tottered across the floor.

The weapon was through a card. How had it got there? And the card would surely be the nine of spades, since all was horror and death around her. She bent and pulled out the thing, which she now knew was a bayonet, the card stuck to the point and came away with it.

She looked at it in some kind of fierce fury. And lo! the smiling face of the Queen of Hearts met her wild eyes—No sinister nine of spades that she had expected.

Was it an omen?

Was David not dead, after all? Might they still be saved?

She flung down the cold, rusty steel with a gasp of revulsion, and staggered back to her love. She rubbed his brow and his hands, while she murmured tender entreaties to him to hear her. Then she somehow got to her feet again, and gazed around frantically, and she saw the pitcher standing by the book of prayers. She went to it. They had come through water—that is why she was naked—they had been wet—where was the water?—she could not remember—

She thought and thought, and something took her to the door. Yes, there it gleamed, but far beneath. The four feet appeared to her an immense distance. She could never reach it! Slowly, slowly her mind worked, and she looked around once more as if asking for counsel of some invisible presence. Then an idea occurred to her. Taking the rest of her chemise, she tore it into strips, tied the strips to the handle of the pitcher and let it down.

It took an absurdly long time to do this simple thing, but at last it was accomplished, and the jug was in her hands more than a quarter full of the dirty water.

She drank some eagerly, and then took it over to David, and sprinkled it on his face, and poured it into his mouth, but he never stirred or wakened.

Ah, God! he was dead after all. There was nothing that human aid could do any more. She would lie down and die beside him—unless—yes—there was the book of prayers—prayers could work miracles.

It was a terrible exertion to get across the floor again to where the book lay, but she succeeded in bringing it close at last, and there under the candles she opened it.

Alas! it was all in Latin.

But, never mind, God would understand even if she did not. He would know she was praying for her beloved to recover, praying for herself that, if it were death, their souls might go up together into Paradise and never be parted.

She would read the prayers over and over until she should fall on her darling's body. And that would mean death. And then would come the awakening.

And so she began, but in less than a quarter of an hour the book dropped from her nerveless fingers, and she fell forward and lay with her head on her loved one's breast while her eyes closed in merciful unconsciousness.

Perhaps it was the sense of her nearness which called the spirit of David to life, or perhaps the prayers had been answered, for, after half an hour, he came back to remembrance of things, and opened his black eyes and blinked in the light of the candles. Then he started up to a sitting position, and Laline's head slipped to his knees. What was that? Was it a call? A call of his name—and her name?

“David! Laline!”

“David, are you down there?” Then a glad shout.

Yes; it was old Jack's voice!

Help was coming. They were going to be saved!

“Cheerio!” he yelled, with all his feeble strength, and then he became faint and giddy once more.

Jack had come on down the staircase into the first floor dug-out, and turned on his torch, while he still shouted. The roof had almost all fallen in, except in one part just above the opening to the lower storey.

He went over there, and then saw the iron bar across the hole, with the arms of the coat tied to it, but the torch was so bright that he could not see the faint light coming up through the aperture.

He shouted to Fergusson to follow him with the brandy and other restoratives which were in the bag he carried, and then he knelt down and again shouted.

“David—Laline—David, are you down there?” and to his wildly anxious ears there came a quivering, “Cheerio” in answer.

But by this time he was descending by the rope with feverish rapidity.

What could those two poor creatures that he now caught sight of have suffered?

David, with greenish-olive face and black stubbly beard, unclothed all but his gauze nether garment, lay unconscious on the ground, and Laline, naked except for the blanket, was close beside him.

Now all that we need know for the continuance of this tale of two young people and their love is that they were brought to earth by devoted, untiring hands, and eventually restored sufficiently to be taken back to Amiens.

And there, wrapped in rugs and overcoats, they arrived later in the morning, David still very dazed and half-conscious and Laline vague and wandering.

Mrs. Greening went wild with relief and excitement, and had to be removed from the scene in hysterics. But Celestine kept her head, and put her beloved lamb to bed, and hung over her with the doctor.

Jack had been too deeply emotioned to show any outward signs of his feelings, as was his nature. But his heart was numb with anguish.

What had happened between his friend and his love in those five days underground? But it was not the moment for speculation. All he must think

of was how he could help to restore them to health again.

Fergusson, in his canny Scotch way, had been busy calculating.

He knew that to keep his word and be at the Embassy in time on the morrow—the end of the Six Days would matter to his master, when once he should be fully conscious, more than anything else in the world. Therefore it was his duty to prepare everything in readiness for their instantaneous departure as soon as Major Lamont should be strong enough to realise things.

If he watched over him and carried out the doctor's orders all that day, and that night, they could probably leave next morning, and reach Paris in time to keep the appointment. Fergusson was to accompany Major Lamont as far as the first place, where he would disappear from the eyes of men.

Fergusson knew the importance of the Mission. So all that day he nursed his master as a mother would a sick child, ministering to him with a tenderness and solicitude which no one could have guessed his taciturn nature was capable of.

“We don't want no one fussing around,” he decided, and kept even Jack from entering the room more than once or twice, to ask if anything was wanted.

It would be better that none of the party knew of their flitting until after they had gone in case they should try to prevent them starting.

“He might give way on account of the lassie, he being so weak now,” Fergusson mused. “And then he'd be fit to kill me afterwards for not getting him off, dead or alive.”

So he kept his own counsel as to his plans, and got the two-seater filled up with petrol in readiness.

David had a naturally splendid constitution and recovered with great rapidity under the wisely-administered stimulants and sips of milk and chicken broth, and towards night he fell into a profound natural slumber, deep and dreamless.

Jack understood that rest was best for him and left him alone with Fergusson, but he himself stayed up all that night, and only retired to bed at eight in the morning.

Laline's case was different to David's.

She was suffering from cold as well as exhaustion, and lay in a semi-conscious kind of torpor all day long, seemingly indifferent to everything.

But the doctors assured the distracted Jack and her aunt and the devoted maid that she would probably be much better on the morrow, and rest and warmth and the proper sort of food were the only things she wanted.

And so at last the morning of the sixth day came, and at nine o'clock Fergusson awakened his master. He had left him to the very last minute he dared, to get what rest he could.

It seemed as though David's spirit came back from a long, long way, but at length he rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"I expect I'm all right now, Fergusson," he said. "I seem to have slept for ever. What day is it?" Fergusson's face was like a mask.

"It's Tuesday—the end of your leave sir. I've been thinking that you'd be wanting to be at the Embassy on time sir, and so I've everything ready."

David got out of bed. So he could "take the message to Garcia" after all.

"That's fine," he answered, his voice glad. "You are a trump Fergusson."

"Your bath is prepared, sir, in the bathroom. A mighty way off. These French hotels are pretty poor places. I'll see you safely through it, in case you were to feel faint, sir, and then I'll go and pay the bill, and have the car outside ready to leave the minute you're ready."

And all this was carried out, but while David lay in the warm water, his whole mind was set upon what he must say to Laline. His first words to Fergusson after the arrangements were made had been to ask about her.

Fergusson had seen Celestine at five o'clock bringing up more hot milk, and she had said her lady was all right and sleeping peacefully, but that the doctor had said she was on no account to be disturbed until she wakened naturally later.

It was obvious to David that he could not speak to her. This was terrible, but he must do his duty. Where was Jack? he now asked, and Fergusson informed him that Captain Lumley had but now retired to get a bit of sleep.

"We oughtn't to delay a moment, sir; I did leave you as late as I dared," Fergusson added, a firm note in his voice. David knew he must dress as quickly as he possibly could, and while Fergusson was paying the bill he would write to Laline. Two months were not so very long to wait. He had not the least doubt that she would trust him and understand everything.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PARTING

Now there come turns in all our lives when fate seems to tangle the threads with deliberate devilish maliciousness. At the time we cannot understand the reason, and curse luck or fortune. Then, when the years go by and we can look back and see things in true perspective, we perceive the mighty purpose either of education for the soul or automatic punishment for some action or eventual reward for achievement in the strengthening of character, which lay underneath.

A great, great love cannot come into fulfilment and peace before it has passed through the heights and the depths of proof, and, indeed, endured the acid test. It is the little loves which go by merrily and smoothly.

Now, such a turn came quickly to Laline and David, just when everything seemed fair, when they had escaped a dreadful death, and appeared to have earned the right to happiness.

It was a wonderful letter which he wrote rapidly to his beloved that May morning at Amiens. It told her in as few words as possible of his undying love and worship of her, and of how she must trust him, and tell no one but Jack of their wedding until he returned.

“I am on something great for our country, darling,” he wrote, “and so there must be no talk and interest about me,” and he explained how he must be absent for two months, and that she must send a letter to the Grand Hotel at Rome, to await his arrival, on his return journey. “It will be wisest for you to tell Jack everything, my honey,” he wrote, “and give him my real, heartfelt thanks, because he’s the whitest man I’ve ever met, and he’ll protect and take care of you, no matter what pain it is to him. I’ve only been sensible enough to think this morning, and now there is no time for me to see him myself, and, perhaps, you would prefer to tell him in your own way, anyhow.” Then, with fondest expressions of worship and love, he signed himself:

“Your own loving husband, DAVID.”

Fergusson was still below arranging things, so his master rang the bell for the chambermaid. He had always felt that Mrs. Greening was against her niece's friendship with him, and he imagined that the maid might be antagonistic, too. But if he tipped the chambermaid well there would be no reason for her not to deliver the note immediately on Laline's awakening. Either of the others might put it by until later.

The buxom French woman answered the bell and received her instructions: How she was to put the letter into Mademoiselle Lester's own hands as soon as she should be awake. The whole hotel was, of course, highly interested in the hero and heroine of so exciting an adventure, so he had no need to explain who Mademoiselle Lester was.

Marie was all smiling sympathy, not altogether inspired by David's magnificent *pourboire*, either. She liked romance, which she scented here. Monsieur could count upon her, the beautiful Mademoiselle should have it.

And the missive was safely stowed in her capacious apron pocket.

She was to go in at eleven with fresh hot water bottles, she said, and would place it in the hand of Mademoiselle herself!

Fergusson then appeared on the scene to say that the car was at the door, and all was paid, and they could start immediately, and off they went, in the sunshine of the beautiful spring morning, and soon were whirling to Paris, the servant driving, and David trying to steady his nerves and collect his senses. And at noon a pale and gaunt, but determined young man was ushered into the American Ambassador's private sitting room.

"Well, how splendid of you to turn up after all, Lamont"—and Mr. Randolph wrung David's hand in sympathy and appreciation—"exactly on time! I never expected to see you after what I understand you've been through. A nice adventure, surely! You are looking a pretty wilted youngster. Are you certain you are fit to go on to-day, boy?" And there was concern as well as anxiety in the tone.

"I am quite ready, sir."

The Ambassador sighed in relief.

"I have kept everything that was possible from the Press, and your name has never appeared in print at all; only the most guarded accounts of the accident were allowed to go to the editors last night. How's Miss Lester?"

David had not seen her before he left, he told His Excellency, but he believed she was progressing.

“I came straight on the moment I awakened, sir.”

The Ambassador was a man of business, and stuck always to essentials.

Major Lamont was not dead. The very important matter, the carrying out of which he alone was quite suitable to be entrusted with, could go ahead after all, and there was no time to be lost. The thing was too grave to be able to afford too much sympathy. Because of the strike on the Italian railways everything was out of gear, and the express would start for Rome at 1.15 instead of later in the day, as usual.

“I have ventured to take a liberty with you, Major Lamont,” Mr. Randolph went on, when all the official orders had been thoroughly gone into and David was about to leave. “I have just had a man go to the Ritz to take all your belongings to the station with my niece’s luggage—Mrs. Hamilton’s—you remember her?—because I feared, even if you did turn up, there would be no time to collect anything on account of the alteration of the time of the Roman express. So everything will be waiting for you at the Gare de Lyon, and you can sort it in Rome; and I’d be awfully obliged if you would look after Daisy on the journey and deliver her safe to her sister, the Princess Pinoli, because, with this strike, there possibly may be unforeseen contingencies. My car’s waiting below and will whirl you to the Ritz to pick up Mrs. Hamilton and get you to the station in time.”

David’s whole mind was fixed upon the feat of registering intricate verbal instructions. He hardly took in these last words the Ambassador said, and never for one moment dreamed of the sinister turn they heralded in his fate.

“Of course, sir,” he murmured, absently, “I shall be delighted to do anything. My servant went straight on to the Ritz, and will have met your man and got everything fixed.”

And then they shook hands. But as David reached the door Mr. Randolph called him, and his voice was significant. “Major Lamont, I am sure I need not reiterate that you are trusted not to communicate with a living human being until I see you again. You are aware of the reason for this, I know, and I hope we are not asking a terribly hard thing of a free young man”—and his voice lightened and he smiled. “But you were warned, weren’t you, about this before you started from Washington.”

“You have my word, sir.”

And so they parted cordially.

All the way to the Ritz every force of David's brain, which he knew must probably be weakened by the hardship he had passed through, was concentrated upon his instructions. If he made one mistake or forgot one point it might cost him his life, and what was much worse to him, cause the mission he was on to fail.

He must hold himself together with an iron hand.

He still felt very weak and shaky, but he knew this was only a temporary state of things and that each hour he was recovering.

He had not had an instant to think of Laline since he had reached Paris, but while he was not dosing on the journey up, his mind had never left her.

How fondly he loved her!

What would she feel when she read his letter? He had meant, when he had climbed the rope and got out to bring help to her, to have told her then, when she was safe with him, that he must go for this time, but his fainting fit and unconsciousness had intervened, and this morning to see her was impossible. Another and less disciplined character would have allowed emotion to master him and would have made him insist upon seeing Laline at the risk of creating a scene and making complications which might have retarded his departure. But, above everything, David was balanced and made of stern stuff. His honour was engaged in this trust which had been placed in him by the highest powers in his country, and, having given every tender assurance in his letter to Laline, he knew no further perturbations. His golden girl, who had proved herself to have the noblest and most trusting soul, would fully understand him, and would wait in loving faith and security for his return, and Jack would care for and protect her. He could always count on Jack.

Then for an instant his thoughts rushed on to that return—— . Ah!

Meanwhile he must not let a single thing detract from the concentration he must give to his mission.

What a frightful bore having to look after this woman, Mrs. Hamilton! Fortunately, as soon as he had greeted her he could plead important business to read up, and the night would soon come, and he could retire to his sleeper. Women—except, of course, his darling honey—were a confounded nuisance most of the time!

He reached the Ritz, and, entering the door, found Mrs. Hamilton already fuming in the hall, awaiting him, and afraid they would be late!

“Why, I thought you’d never come,” she greeted him with. “Do let us start at once!” and then, as they went to the car, she became voluble in her thanks to him for his consenting to take care of her. And so they went off together to the Gare de Lyon, and finally arrived in Rome and parted; and from then onward for two months David disappeared from the knowledge of men.

Mrs. Greening was sufficiently calm by that morning to go into her niece’s room. Celestine had never left her loved mistress all night, untiring in her devotion since the moment Laline had been brought to Amiens, and Mrs. Whitmore also had kept her head.

Laline was now sleeping peacefully, and, although still very weak, was certainly on the road to recovery.

Celestine put her finger on her lips when Mrs. Greening appeared and drew her into her own room next door.

Here she gave an account of the night and what nourishment Mademoiselle had taken, and how she had been.

“When I think of that Major Lamont!” Mrs. Greening exclaimed—“the cause of all this trouble, I wish to goodness I could wring his neck! You must not let him come near Miss Lester, Celestine. I am through with this nonsense.”

Celestine informed her that, for the time, there would be no need for them to bother, because, as she went down the stairs at ten o’clock, she chanced to see into the yard where the cars started from, through the staircase window, and there was Major Lamont and his servant leaving with their suitcases!

“You don’t say,” said Mrs. Greening, relieved.

Their voices had disturbed the patient, however, and a feeble voice called:

“Celestine!”

The two women rushed back into the room and Laline was fully awake and looked better.

Mrs. Greening fussed as much as she dared, for Celestine’s eye was sternly upon her. Then she was wise enough to leave as soon as she could on the plea of meeting the doctor.

The moment Laline was alone with her maid she whispered:

“Celi—How is Major Lamont? And when can he come to see me?”

“Monsieur le Major has departed for Paris, Mademoiselle. I see him go at ten o’clock.”

Laline’s face blanched.

“He’s—gone to—Paris!”

“It would seem so,” and Celestine shrugged her shoulders. She now knew she was giving her lamb great pain, and hated to have to do it.

“But doubtless le Major had duties, and will communicate with Mademoiselle presently.”

“He’s left no letter for me, then?”

Laline’s still languid voice sharpened with anxiety, and she started up in bed. “Are you sure, Celestine, chère? Go down to the concierge at once and ask—and ask Captain Lumley.”

But Celestine was full of fear when she saw her little mistress’s face. She must be soothed and quieted first before she could leave her. This, however, only enraged Laline.

“Go—go at once—I cannot bear it,” she cried, brokenly.

So Celestine went, but returned in a few minutes with the news that Captain Lumley was in bed still sleeping after having been up all night—and Major Lamont had left at ten with his servant—who had given no information as to their destination. The servant had paid the bill, and le monsieur had come rapidly through the hall and got into the car. That is all the concierge knew about it!

Laline trembled as she lay. What could this mean? She was too weak to reason.

“Ask the chambermaid and the waiter; perhaps he left some note with them——”

Celestine departed again on this mission, but returned, no one had received any message. She did not know that it was a different chambermaid on the floor where David had slept who was now on duty.

Laline could not believe her ears—and in her weak state she burst into a passion of tears.

“Oh! you are all wrong—you are all deceiving me—Aunty hates Major Lamont—and you are a cruel, wicked woman, Celi——”

The devoted maid was now beside herself with sorrow and commiseration. She felt that she could tell any lie to quiet her lamb—but what? What could she say? The Major had gone—and that seemed the end of it.

The doctor was now coming into the next room. She heard him.

“I will go once more,” she assured Laline, “and question again, only my Mademoiselle Chérie must quiet herself.” Laline sobbed less violently, and Celestine escaped into the adjoining apartment. Here she confided in the doctor, Mrs. Greening fortunately being absent.

Her mademoiselle had received disquieting news and was in a state of great agitation. Might not a good piqûre be a fine thing to quiet the nerves until she was stronger? Monsieur le Docteur would know.

The doctor agreed as soon as he saw his patient’s poor little face. Laline held herself as well as she could while he was talking to her, but her eyes stared in an agonised way.

They kept her dozing all that day—and night—and when the Wednesday came she woke, stronger in health, but with that awful sense of crushing calamity upon her.

CHAPTER XXV

FATE

Now all this trouble came about because Fate used as an instrument the unmended hole in the apron pocket of a chambermaid in a provincial French hotel. Marie, the woman in question, was not at all a bad creature, and had every intention of delivering the letter of so generous a gentleman to so beautiful a lady. But what will you? She had meant to mend the hole yesterday and forgotten, and the wretched thing grew larger and larger, so that, without her being aware of it, the letter at last slipped through it on to the floor, and fell among the torn-up papers of a commercial traveller in one of the other rooms which she had been cleaning, and was duly carried away and burnt with the rest of the débris by Antoine, the valet de chambre. And so that was that!

When the time came for her to go to Miss Lester's room to replenish the hot bottles she was just about to knock at the door, and felt for the envelope, when she perceived the hole and her pocket's emptiness.

Aghast for a moment, she paused, undecided what to do, so first she went back into the room she had come from, but found Antoine had already departed with the rubbish.

Then in anxiety she dived into her dress pocket for her purse—and gave a great sigh of relief—Monsieur's fifty-franc note was fortunately safe! So the gravest part of her preoccupation was quieted.

And, again, what will you? Accidents will happen, and, after all, the letters of young gentlemen to young ladies were never serious affairs, and these two would doubtless meet in Paris in a day or two—and, mon Dieu! the thing was gone, and that was an end of it! Her pourboire was, fortunately, not lost, so better to say nothing and know nothing—since her intentions had been good, and just ill-luck had stepped in and frustrated them.

Her shoulders shrugged eloquently, and presently, the bottles filled, she went off her work happily, and later ate an excellent déjeuner!

Jack Lumley came down by luncheon time refreshed with his short rest, and Celestine told him that her mistress was sleeping.

At this stage of events she did not think it wise to put unnecessary thoughts into Captain Lumley's head. She would discover for herself first how great a matter it could be to her lamb that Major Lamont had gone off without any word. Indignation was rising in her own breast. After being for five days buried under ground with as lovely and fascinating a young lady as her mistress, how could a man be so rude, so mal élevé, as to do such a thing?

And, to say the least of it, they must have grown very very well acquainted, and, knowing Mademoiselle's passion for le Major, how far the affair had gone she did not care to speculate.

In all cases Major Lamont had once more proved himself an insolent.

Mrs. Greening was in a very disturbed state of mind also. It appeared, when all could be thought over quietly after her hysterics had subsided, that Laline must have been almost entirely without clothing when they had been found! And even when people were near death that was not at all nice, she felt, and conjured up a picture that could not be pleasant to Jack, as she herself found it horrible.

Major Lamont, too, had had to give up his garments to make the rope ladder. As to what had actually happened no one knew, for Major Lamont had gone off as soon as he was fit to talk, and Laline was still sleeping; but enough had been gathered from Judge Whitmore, who was at the actual rescue, and from Mrs. Whitmore, who had had the good luck not to be overcome by a nervous attack on their arrival, to clearly prove that they must have been for days quite alone underground, and for the last one at least almost naked!

Certainly the whole thing was perfectly disastrous, and the sooner she could get her niece back to Paris, and then over to England to meet Jack's relations, the better it would be. And, although it was ill-mannered of Major Lamont to go off like that, it was a good thing in every way.

Laline was in no state to think clearly for another twenty-four hours. It was late on the Wednesday afternoon when she awoke to full consciousness.

She was alone in the room for the moment. At first her eyes took in the buffish striped paper and the heavy garniture de cheminée and the stiff furniture.

The window was wide open and the soft spring air came in to her.

Why did she feel this frightful sense of depression? Where was she?

Yes, she was in the hotel at Amiens, and they were saved, but had not David gone? She must think deeply. Yes, that was it, David had left her.

When this thought came she started up in bed and called shrilly:

“Celestine.” But it was Mrs. Whitmore who entered the room, not her faithful Celi.

“Oh, Laline, we’re so glad you are awake and all right, dearie. I’m just sitting here while Celestine rests a little bit. Why, you don’t look too fine, child. Do you want some milk or anything?”

Laline wanted only one thing—news of David—and that she feared Mrs. Whitmore could not give her; but she was a proud girl, and not accustomed to let her secrets out. So, even in her feeble state, she had sense enough to manœuvre.

“How’s everybody?” she asked as lightly as she could. “You all must have been crazy with anxiety about us.”

“Indeed we were. We are longing to hear just what happened——”

“Major Lamont can tell you better than I.”

“But he’s gone—he went yesterday morning while you were still unconscious, dear. Very strange of him I do think.”

Laline fired up. No one should speak slightly of her David.

“He had business in Paris, of course, and, please, I don’t want to talk of that horrible time for ages and ages. You can’t think what it is to be starved to death and in darkness. We just went into the dug-out for fun to see the place Jack and Major Lamont fought in. An old priest showed us the way. He was killed in the explosion.” Then she shivered and shut her eyes. “I think I’ll try and sleep again now, Mrs. Whitmore. Don’t, please, wait; I am all right. Just send Celestine to me when she comes up.”

And Laline turned over on her side.

As soon as she was alone in the room again a fearful restlessness overcame her. What possibly could be the meaning of things? David always had been mysterious about his movements, she remembered. What was his business? He had said once that he had to do what he must sometimes, but was hoping some day to do what he could. Had he received some order? But even so—to leave her without a word. Her David—her very own husband!

She was trembling all over now.

She did not doubt him. She loved him utterly, but there surely must be some explanation. Perhaps he had left it with Jack, and Celestine did not know about it. She would send for Jack the very moment she could.

How was she to bear this uncertainty? Much worse a pain than any she had gone through in the dug-out.

But above everything she must not mistrust David. She felt her wedding ring. Where was her great sapphire that her father had given her? She did not care very much. How could a ring matter now? How could anything matter. David was the beginning and ending of her horizon. Would Celestine never come? Must she lie there inert and helpless?

They would leave immediately for the Ritz. There, of course, there would be a letter for her, or probably David himself. So her thought wandered in incessant speculations. He had hated all the fuss of her aunt and the Whitmores—that was probably it, and he had gone off thinking she would recover quickly, and, of course, return to Paris.

Perhaps he was making all the arrangements with the Ambassador for their civil wedding? Things were so strange, and she must not let evil possibilities come into her mind, only good ones. She would not tell her aunt or Jack anything about her marriage to David—they would tell it together when she was with him in Paris. Here her heart beat—with him in Paris! Oh, how glorious! She must not let a single thing trouble her now, since it was obvious to anyone with any horse sense that no man who had been her lover and husband for five days, and with whom she had faced a horrible death, could go off directly they were saved, with the deliberate intention of deserting her!

And so some comfort came at length, and she lay still.

Then her thoughts went back to the beginning of their married hours—and so on through them all—and she thrilled at her remembrances. But when she came to the last incidents, and the recollection of having sucked the blood from David's arm flashed into her mind, she gave a short, strangled scream. Could that be the reason? He was utterly disgusted with her. Where had the blood come from? Had he scratched his arm; or had she bitten him in her mad hunger?

She could not remember—only the picture of that blood she had drunk was clear in her mental vision.

This thought was such agony that she could not bear it any longer all alone. She could not be patient and wait for Celestine; she must call

someone and send for Jack. Uncertainty was too great suffering. So she pressed the electric bell above her head, and in a moment Mrs. Whitmore returned to her.

“I would so much like to see Captain Lumley,” Laline said as calmly as she could. “Would you please ask him to come up, if he is in the hotel? I am quite all right now.”

“Surely, dear”—and with a good deal more talking Mrs. Whitmore left her at length, and presently Jack came to her.

“Laline! My darling!” he cried brokenly. “Oh! how thankful I am that you are better.”

“I’m all right, Jack,” she replied cheerily, her statement in contrast to her lily-white face and blue-shadowed eyes.

He came over close to the bed and sat down beside her.

“Laline, you can never know the frightful pain these days have been—I just can’t talk about it—but you can guess,” and he kissed her transparent hand.

“Yes; dear Jack, you are so good and kind. Did—Major Lamont leave any message with you before he went?”

“No; wasn’t it odd of him? It is the strangest thing I’ve ever known—old David to hop off like that. I suppose he had some important appointment.”

Laline could feel that sensation as of an ice-hand pressing her heart—that feeling of sick emptiness which is so hard to endure. She longed to tell everything to this kind friend, but she could not. Where could she begin? Where break off? It would all pain him horribly, and it might be better to wait until they reached Paris, and David was with them again—with them again?—but would he be with them again? And once more the agonising feeling of mystery and uncertainty and misery came over her.

Jack was much too sympathetic a person to allude to the horror of the five days in the dug-out. He contented himself by telling her in as commonplace a string of sentences as he could of how they at last found them, and about the rescue, as Laline had been unconscious until they had reached the car. It had taken longer to bring David round.

“His arm was cut, and he had a tourniquet on it, and a bandage above to stop the bleeding. We did wonder how that had happened. You were knocked out and did not know anything about it, I expect, dear little girl. The poor old boy must have lost a lot of blood.”

Laline shut her eyes for a moment. She was controlling herself with difficulty, and trying, trying to remember clearly.

David was holding his arm over her mouth—she could reconstruct that picture—and now she realised that he must have made preparations for the bleeding beforehand, since the tourniquet and the slip knot were on his arm.

Was it—could it be—that he had cut a vein deliberately to pour the blood into her mouth to try and save her if she was fainting. Yes, that must have been it. Dear, noble David—her love—her darling—her husband! But where was he?

Jack saw that something had moved her exceedingly, and that she had lain back trembling with tears coming from her quivering closed eyelids.

“We won’t speak about anything to do with that frightful time, dearest child,” Jack said, tender solicitude in his tone. “We’ll only talk of joining old David quickly in Paris.”

Laline opened her eyes, and gratitude was in their depths.

Then Jack soothed her, and suggested that he should come and sit with her while she had her dinner—some chicken and green peas and champagne, and other good things!

And Laline was glad to have him. Anything was better than being alone with her thoughts, and nothing possibly could be done until they reached Paris next morning.

Then the doctor arrived and felt her agitated pulse, and decided that for this one more night a sleeping draught would not hurt her.

Mrs. Greening was delighted when she heard that Jack proposed to attend the invalid for her dinner. After all it might be that this shock they had had would bring them still closer together. Major Lamont should not appear upon the scene again if she could help it.

Nearly everyone who reads this tale has received some terrible piece of news some time in his or her life, and has gone through the agony of speculation which was convulsing Laline. All thoughts reasonable for a little while, and then back to the shock again, and the ceaseless questioning: “What does it mean? What does it all mean?”

Jack knew she was frightfully anxious to know what had made David go so suddenly, and as he could not help her he did his utmost to keep her mind engaged with other things.

They spoke of Channings Priory. How he hoped she would like it. It was a dear old place, with cloisters going to the chapel, and it would be looking its best now with all the fresh green.

Laline tried to answer interestedly—tried to talk—tried to control herself. But all the time some inward voice was saying “Where is he? Oh! where can he be?”

But presently the old doctor returned and gave her the draught, and so at last she slept soundly, and in the morning, although the poor child could hardly stand on her feet, the party went back by train to Paris and arrived at the Ritz Hotel about luncheon time.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OTHER WOMAN

It was with perfectly feverish anxiety that Laline asked for her mail when they arrived in the Ritz Hall. It was a large one, but all from America, except one from her friend Molly, who had married the English Marquis. Molly was enchanted to hear that Laline had arrived in Europe, and sent a cordial invitation for her to stay with her in London.

All this once would have been a delight, but now Laline could hardly take in the sense of the words, so great had been the blow of finding no word from David.

She would ask the concierge; perhaps there was some message for her at his desk, not with the mail clerk? Messages and letters sometimes did go wrong in hotels.

There were some cards and notes which had already gone up to the sitting-room, she was informed, and then it seemed as if no lift ever went so slowly! But at last she was there in the sunny room, which looked upon the garden. Mrs. Greening was fussing all the time, but Laline paid no attention to her.

Her fingers trembled so that she could not hold the American letters which she carried, and Jack took them from her hands. Then she hastily scanned the few cards and two notes, which lay on the table. None was from David. She felt very faint, and sank into an armchair.

“Why, my dear, you’ll just pass out if you don’t take care of yourself,” her aunt exclaimed. “Go and lie down this minute.”

Jack supported her into the bedroom, and Celestine laid her on the sofa and motioned them all to leave her mistress alone with her. Laline’s eyes had told her much.

When the door was closed the poor girl raised herself up and clung to the maid’s arm.

“Celi, I’m going crazy. I must know where Major Lamont is. You must go down as if on your own and question the concierge if he came here, and where he is.”

Celestine went to the telephone and asked if Major Lamont was in the hotel.

Laline watched her face anxiously. She could see that nothing she wished to know was being told.

“Go down and find out everything. I can’t bear it any longer.”

Celestine covered her mistress with the eiderdown, she was shivering so.

“Please go!”

Celestine went. And then there was a knock at the door, and in came Laline’s lunch, with the usual waiters and table. This was perhaps a good thing, for it forced her to control herself.

Mrs. Greening had meanwhile read her correspondence in the sitting-room, and when she peeped in to see if her niece had everything she wanted before she herself should go down to the restaurant, she brandished a note from Mrs. Randolph.

It was to express all commiseration for the horrible accident, and to hope she should see them soon.

“The Ambassador’s niece—you remember her at the ball, Laline, don’t you?—she danced opposite you—has just left for Rome on Tuesday afternoon, and Mrs. Randolph says she’s so lonely without her. She wants to have parties of young people now, so there will be gaiety for you, dear. You must get well at once!”

At that moment Celestine returned.

Laline was nearly at breaking point. How could she go on hearing the chatter of her aunt?

“I am sure Jack’s waiting for his lunch, dear. Do go, I’m all right,” she pleaded, “and I want to be quiet and eat this lovely omelette.”

Mrs. Greening assured her she was in no hurry, and in desperation Laline cried out:

“Well, I’m just so nervous I can’t eat with anyone here.”

This had its effect, and when her aunt had gone, Celestine came up close to her. She had questioned everyone, she told her mistress, pretending it was Fergusson she particularly wanted to hear news of, and she had gathered that Monsieur le Major—and here she paused awkwardly—it was so terrible to her to be the bringer of such bad news.

“Go on, for mercy’s sake, Celi.”

“Eh, bien. Well, Monsieur le Major arrived on Tuesday about half an hour after his servant, who had packed, and with the lady’s maid started for the Gare de Lyon.”

“What lady’s maid?” Laline’s voice was icy, and her face had grown deadly white, while her grey eyes flashed fiercely.

“Ze lady with whom le Major went to Rome.”

“Celi, for God’s sake speak out, tell me everything!”

So the maid began again in detail. How Fergusson arrived and another servant, and with Mrs. Hamilton’s maid——

“Mrs. Hamilton!” almost hissed Laline, interrupting. And that then that lady waited in the hall most impatiently, asking constantly had Major Lamont arrived, for they would be late, and finally he drove up in a car, rushed in to meet her, and they both went off in the same car to the Gare de Lyon.

“They were en route for Rome, Mademoiselle, because the chasseur who helped to take the luggage from the Ritz saw them together in the carriage as the train left the station.”

But Laline heard no more for a few moments. She had fainted.

When she came to herself she was still alone with Celestine, who, with a frightened face, knelt on the floor beside her.

The poor, distracted child gazed at her maid pitifully. When she became sensible of things:

“Celi, Celi, let me die. I can’t bear it.”

“My lamb—my dove.”

“You are quite, quite certain—there can’t be any mistake? Oh! he could never have done such a thing. No one could be so cruel.”

Celestine could only shake her head sadly. These people below had no motive to make mischief. The facts were just what she had said.

“Then there is no truth in earth or heaven.” Laline’s voice was terrible, and no one would have recognised her haggard face with drawn mouth and stony eyes.

What agony she suffered in the next hour no one could gauge. She sobbed and cried, and then lay still trembling. She got up from the sofa and went to the window.

Should she throw herself out and have done with the hideous anguish?

Celestine filled a tumbler of champagne from the pint which the Amiens doctor had ordered Miss Lester to take at her meals, until she should be quite recovered, and she went over and made her drink it—drink it straight down. And then she sat by her and stroked her hair, and coaxed her to eat some tender chicken, and finally she appealed to her pride. Mrs. Greening and Captain Lumley would be coming up in a minute, and they surely must not see Mademoiselle like this!

Laline straightened herself.

“Don’t let them come in—say I am asleep,” and she flung herself down on the bed.

Celestine locked the door.

And so that dreadful day passed, and a still more dreadful night. And in the morning Laline was exhausted, and lay still and quiet. Her magnificent young constitution was regaining its usual strength, though, in spite of the grief and shock she was enduring. The effect of the incarceration and the starvation were passing, and her body was not ill now, it was only her spirit which was in torture.

Would she be well enough to go to the Embassy to dine that night? Mrs. Greening sent her maid in to ask, and there was going to be a dance. Mrs. Randolph had just telephoned to invite them.

A thought came to Laline, Mrs. Hamilton was the Ambassador’s niece, perhaps she could hear news of some sort. Yes, she would be well enough, certainly.

Her face was set hard as adamant. Celestine felt very nervous. It—the affair with the Major—was more than a *béguin* then, she feared. But to go out and have amusement was the best thing to do in any case.

Nothing could exceed Jack’s kindness. His dear sympathy seemed to lap Laline round with warmth and comfort when they met.

Laline had fought with herself in the dawn when she woke. Even with all these proofs of David’s defection, ought she to condemn him until she could

see him face to face?

No, she ought not. A man would not open a vein in his arm to save her life if he were such a false deceiver. There still must be some explanation, and she would calm herself and say her prayers, those prayers she had so often repeated in the dug-out. Ah! how happy she had been there! And how much better if they had just died together and never come back to this cruel outside world, where all was false and devilish.

After she heard of the invitation to the Embassy she cheered up a little. Underneath there was still this awful sinking, but hope is a strange thing, and even this faint hope that she might have news gave her courage.

She went down to luncheon, a pale lily girl, immensely interesting.

She had implored her aunt, as soon as they had arrived, to avoid the subject of the accident as much as possible, and to make light of it to their friends—she so feared to have to speak of David, and Mrs. Greening had her own reasons for desiring to fall in with this idea. The less said about the whole hateful and scandalous contretemps the better!

The hall was full of the usual crowd of Americans and other foreigners, and they were greeted by compatriots.

“Why, Laline,” Mrs. Greening said when they were seated, “all our things are back numbers. I do hope, dear, you’ll soon be well enough to come round and attend to your toilet and get a new outfit.”

Once Laline’s first thought would have been to do this, now after her aunt spoke she did perceive that there was a different look on everyone. She would force herself to take up interest in clothes and shops. Anything to pass the time until the evening.

Jack was extremely worried in his mind. He knew Laline so very well. He guessed that something terrible was troubling her. Had she quarrelled with David in some final way that he had gone off like this? Or had David fallen violently in love with her, and not being able to make her love him, had thought flight the wisest course?

But what was the common-sense view to take of what could have happened between such a girl as Laline and such a man as David, during five days alone together, with an almost certain death in front of them?

He felt that he would rather not face this. And since David had gone, that proved that some grave break had occurred, and whatever the affair had

been between them, it was obviously over now, and his best course would be to soothe and comfort his love and try to make her forget.

David was an honourable man, and above all things a gentleman. So his going in silence was positive proof that he knew everything—whatever it had been—was finished between them.

But why, then, Laline's obvious and passionate anxiety.

Had she been playing at dismissal with David, and had he taken it seriously? But people do not play with death staring them in the face and when they are almost dead with hunger.

No; great emotion on David's part and a dismissal on Laline's was the only possible solution.

But even with everything settled and reasoned like this, poor Jack's gallant heart was full of unrest and anxiety.

Laline was like a white orchid in a pure white dress that night at the Embassy. She had never looked more lovely nor been more attractive. Her face had character now stamped upon it; her beautiful eyes were no longer meaningless, but contained some story.

She had no chance of speaking to the Ambassador until after dinner, when the dance was going on, and then with art which was truly female she turned the conversation in the way she wanted it to go, when he came up to talk to her.

She made herself speak of the accident so as to get in David's name.

Major Lamont had been so wonderful, did His Excellency happen to know his address in Rome? as she wanted to write and thank him. He had had to go off from Amiens before she was awake.

The Ambassador looked at her keenly. Had David betrayed a trust? But she gave herself away. "We heard at the Ritz that he had left for Rome, and as your niece, Mrs. Hamilton, must have gone by the same train I wondered if you would know where to find him?"

Mr. Randolph's clever eyes were as innocent as a child.

He had no knowledge of Major Lamont whatever, and his manner gave the impression that he was greatly surprised to hear he had gone to Rome with his niece! Surprised, and not altogether pleased!

Laline was no fool, but she was unaccustomed to clever diplomats, and had never had to cross swords with one before.

“He did not know she meant to meet David,” were the poor child’s despairing thoughts. “They must have arranged it all at that ball, and so he had only just time to rush off to keep the appointment.”

It seemed as though her knees were giving way under her, and she sank into a chair near.

“I’m sorry to be so feeble still,” she said with a nervous laugh. “I suppose it takes some little while to recover quite from almost starvation!”

Then she called all her pride to her rescue. She, Laline Lester—alas! she could no longer think of herself as “Lamont”—would not let the world know that a man had betrayed and made a fool of her. She would come up to the scratch even if it killed her.

So she forced herself to be gay, and go off and dance, though she could hardly stand, and presently a brilliant pink flush came into her white rose cheeks, and Jack thought he had never seen her look so beautiful.

But when she was alone again at the Ritz, all pretence fell from her, and she paced her room in agony.

There could be no doubt now. The going off had been an arranged thing, and must have been all settled before they ever went to Amiens. And as soon as David became conscious he remembered it, and felt the easiest way was to go right off without making any excuse, to avoid her reproaches. He knew, as she did, that there was no proof of their wedding—the priest was dead, and there had not been even a ring. Here her trembling little hands felt her own diamond hoop, which was still on her left third finger, and with a gesture of passionate resentment she began to draw it off. But something stopped her. No, not yet, not yet.

How could a man be such a false brute? David had teased her and made her jealous about Mrs. Hamilton; she remembered now, one time when she was watching him digging. Could it have been that he was feeling awkward, remembering about this appointment? Had his whole love for her been false? Were his kisses Judas’s kisses?

No, no! Impossible. Whatever hold Mrs. Hamilton had over her beloved—one evidently strong enough to make him betray every trust and break her, Laline’s, heart—while they had been together below the earth he had passionately loved her.

She would wait yet a week—two weeks—before she removed the ring.

And never should a word about their relations to each other pass her lips. It was merciful she had not given this secret away to her aunt or Jack, or even Celestine, on her first awakening! And at last she went to bed, utterly worn out, and slept heavily.

And so the days passed in alternate anguish and hope and fear until they left for England in the second week in June.

CHAPTER XXVII

LALINE'S ANGUISH

They motored from Dover to Channings Priory, only about a twenty-mile drive, through the divinest green country, which seemed to Laline's eyes as a cultivated garden, with its velvety small fields and flowering hedges. There was a stillness in the air and great peace, and her troubled heart experienced a sense of relief she knew not why.

The place itself was most picturesque. Not enormously large, but so very old and rambling, the cloisters and the chapel of the fifteenth-century workmanship. The house came near to the village on one side of the park, but on the other, beyond the haw-haw which divided the garden from it, the huge oaks and elms stretched a quarter of a mile, and then joined the paddocks where Jack's old cousin's thoroughbreds grazed. To breed these beautiful creatures was his hobby.

A June summer evening in England, when it happens to be fine and warm, is one of the most complete and beautifully fresh things in the world.

Laline felt this, and when she reached her panelled, spacious bedroom, with its quaint old needlework hangings and carved oaken bed, and smelled the roses and honeysuckle, and saw the perfect stateliness and order in everything, a sudden passionate anguish came over her again.

What would it have been like to have come to such a dear old place with David! How they could have wandered in that beautiful garden after dinner, in the moonlight, and how happy they could have been in this exquisitely-appointed room! What could have happened? Where could he be?

Before they had left Paris she had used all further means in her power to try to discover where he had gone. But Rome seemed to have swallowed him up. She knew no one personally to write to there, and could gain no information whatsoever.

As she sat by the latticed window at Channings, when she was supposed to be resting before dinner, a sense of stupefaction came over her. It was all too incredible, but she was not the kind of character to chase after any man. If David was so base as to have deserted her for another woman he would be base enough to deny that there ever was any ceremony of marriage between

them. Her aunt was not of a nature it would be wise to confide in. If the romance of her life was over, better that it should be her own secret.

She was an utterly changed Laline from the beautiful, self-confident, spoiled heiress of Washington days. She was very pale, and much thinner, and her eyes never seemed to have lost those blue hunger shadows.

Mrs. Greening placed everything to the account of the five days underground, and Jack's devotion never flagged. He said nothing to agitate Laline about his own desires towards her. He just waited and worshipped.

Mrs. Greening made the resolve when she saw her niece in these new surroundings, not the bustling rush of Paris, that she would consult some specialist about her. The days of privation and shock had left some mental strain still. That was evident. She was losing her looks, and for Laline Lester to lose her looks just when she was going to see Europe and make a fine marriage was just too impossible!

The party wandered out of the open drawing-room windows into the rose garden, after they had had their coffee. The drawing-rooms were in a newer eighteenth-century wing of the house, and Jack and Laline strolled to the low balustrade, which in this part bordered the haw-haw.

"It is all so strange to me," Laline said—"this funny deep ditch dividing the garden from the park. You English people are so very exclusive!"

"You mean the haw-haw? Well, you see, you have to have some barrier to keep back the deer," Jack told her. "There was a moat once, but it was filled up when the place ceased to be a priory in Henry VIII's time."

"Four hundred years ago. You speak as though it were yesterday!"

"We're an island, and so things last, I suppose."

But Laline's thoughts were ever upon the one subject underneath.

"Jack, isn't life a queer thing?" she said presently. "I am just beginning to understand it means that we can't trust anyone, not even ourselves."

"Don't say that, Laline. You can always trust me."

"Yes, I know." And she sighed. "Jack will you do something for me? Use every means you know of to find out for me where Major Lamont is. We have heard nothing of him since the 22nd of May. He's got my sapphire ring—it came off in the dug-out when my hand got thin—and I want it back," she added nervously.

Jack looked at her in the dusk; it was nearly ten o'clock—summertime. He could see her face was anxious. It pained him.

"I have done so dear. I've asked everyone who knew him that I know, even a chap in the Embassy in Rome. No news of him anywhere."

"He had a friend there, a Mrs. Hamilton. Perhaps we could hear through her?" Laline whispered anxiously.

Jack had obtained the same information that Celestine had, and knew of David's departure with the young widow from the Ritz. He had asked about her in his letter to his friend in Rome, and the reply, he feared, would further hurt Laline. That is why, as the subject had been dropped between them now for ten days, he had not mentioned it to her.

"You know something, Jack?"

"Well—er—my friend said Mrs. Hamilton and her sister, Princess Pinoli, had gone yachting, and there were two young Americans on board. So I suppose one is David. They had gone on a cruise to the Greek Islands."

Rage filled Laline now. Here was she suffering anguish, and he—her husband—was amusing himself "among the Greek Islands"!

She recalled every look she had observed on Mrs. Hamilton's face. Of course she was frightfully in love with David—and how he had avoided giving any satisfactory answer when they had spoken of her in the dug-out! Laline's pride was stung deeply at last, and the bitterest jealousy and anger held her.

After this she seemed to pull herself together and became quite gay with the American friends when they went back into the house later on, but Jack did not like the look in her eyes. It was so bitter and hard.

What had her relations been with his friend in the dug-out?

It is so easy to sit down and chronicle that time past or to write a sentence describing an agitated state of mind, but no one who has not experienced the agony that uncertainty and suspense brings, and doubts and fears about the faith of a loved one, can really appreciate what Laline was now going through. The acid test indeed.

A kind of outside numbness falls upon the jarred spirit at last, but the never-ceasing ache goes on.

The days and nights now were one long torture, requiring all the will and nerve the poor girl possessed.

Mrs. Greening rushed her up to London after a week at Channings, where her friend Molly greeted her with effusiveness, and introduced her to many new acquaintances, but nothing registered in Laline's brain, and by the end of June a hideous terror had begun to haunt her dreams. They had been in England for a fortnight, and everything which could make life fair for her had been showered upon her.

"She appears wilted that way because of the dreadful starvation picnic the poor darling has been through," Mrs. Greening told Molly, who she could see was disappointed about her old school friend's appearance.

"It's affected her mind. She looks to me as though she had seen a ghost," Lady Fordbrooke averred, unconvinced. "You should consult Sir James Hunter."

Laline felt that everyone was anxious about her, but when Mrs. Greening suggested that this specialist should be called in, she scoffed at the idea, laughed, and put on a fresh spurt of gaiety, but insisted upon returning to Paris.

Celestine had been sent upon a long-promised holiday to see her French relations when her mistress went to England. The faithful maid had been very loth to leave her lamb, but Laline was firm about it. She wanted to be alone, with no one who knew her anguish near to her. Now, however, Celestine would be waiting for her at the Ritz, and this thought brought a little comfort.

It was a very hot night that first evening when they arrived, attended by Jack as usual, and everyone was dining in the garden. Their table was just outside the restaurant, and they had intended to go on to the theatre, so were dining early, when it was still quite light. Everyone was gay, and the whole scene was animated as usual, the Grand Prix over, but many strangers lingering on.

Suddenly by the entrance, further along in the garden, a tall man could be seen standing with his back to them.

Laline had been acting her part to the best of her ability, she had been so bright that she had almost deceived Celestine when she dressed her. Almost, not quite. And now she had said something with a laugh, which, however, broke into a shuddering gasp when she caught sight of the tall figure and black hair:

"David," she whispered with whitening lips.

Jack glanced around.

“By Jove, yes! I do believe it’s the old fox,” he exclaimed excitedly, and got up from his chair to go to him.

Then the man turned round, and they saw that he was a stranger.

The shock was too much for Laline. She could control herself no longer. She started from her seat holding her hand to her heart, and rapidly entered the open doors into the corridor, and rushed wildly up the staircase by the restaurant entrance. Their rooms were on the second floor above.

Jack and Mrs. Greening looked at one another, at a loss what to do, and then they left the table and followed the fugitive up to the sitting-room.

But when they reached it they found that the door was locked into Laline’s room beyond, and they could hear Celestine’s voice soothing her.

“I believe we had better leave her alone,” Jack said, great pain in his tones. “The sight of that man has evidently brought all the horror of the dug-out back to her, poor, darling child.”

“Celestine knows how to manage her; you are surely right, Jack. I’ll come back presently; we had best return to our dinner.”

So they went down again, but both were too preoccupied to keep up more than a pretence at a conversation.

That her niece was evidently still interested in this hateful, unimportant, home-grown major, Mrs. Greening was now convinced! Where had her pride gone? Since he had run away from her the moment he could after being rescued he must have been showing the indifference to her down there underground that he had shown on the ship! Mrs. Greening made up her mind that she would have a serious talk with her niece about the whole matter presently, and get at the truth of things. This sort of scene must never be repeated. She was angry as well as disturbed. For she knew Laline was a difficult subject to handle—and that she would be very unlikely to be influenced by her in any way.

Jack was full of pain and foreboding. He had been very uneasy ever since the rescue, but had bravely put the subject from his mind, and concentrated only upon devising how he could best soothe and divert Laline. He, too, felt that some kind of explanation might be the best thing to have now.

And upstairs in the rose and white bedroom Laline was lying with her head buried in Celestine’s ample breast, sobbing.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CONFESSION

“Hush, hush! My lamb, my chérie!” Celestine said distractedly. “What has happened? Tell your Celi.”

“I thought—I saw Major Lamont in the garden, but it was not he,” Laline sobbed, brokenly.

“Few mans is worth a tear—and not le Major, who has behaved as no gentleman.”

Celestine was indignant. This wretch to be able to make her darling mistress suffer so!

Laline was shivering now, and lay back on the pillow with closed eyes for a second, and then she opened them and looked and looked at the maid, and there was something significant in the agony which showed in their depths which almost caused Celestine’s heart to stop beating.

“—— It surely—cannot be?” she whispered breathlessly. “Oh, quelle horreur! Oh! is Mademoiselle sure? Oh! ma chère!”

Then she held the trembling girl to her passionately, and they talked rapidly for some time; and at last she said:

“The brute, the murderer—the assassin! Now we must think—we must think.”

Soon her clever French brain whispered ideas of consolation to her mistress, and finally she put her to bed and administered a sleeping draught, and in an hour Laline slept.

Then Celestine folded her clothes while she pondered deeply, and made short exclamations in her own language, with incipient shrugs of the shoulders.

“Five days alone—mon Dieu, que voulez-vous? So young, so handsome, both.”

There were many alternatives, she decided, but to marry the Captain Lumley at once would be the most suitable and convenient one. Only Laline’s welfare concerned her. Jack, or a saint come to earth, would only

have been considered as a means for her to use for her end. Neither's feelings upon the matter would have weighed at all with Celestine.

She did not go to bed herself, but laid beside her lamb all that night on the sofa, and would not let Mrs. Greening, who came up later, disturb them.

Mademoiselle was sleeping quietly, and would be perfectly well on the morrow, she said. No, no doctor was necessary.

She had made up her mind—she would wait one week—and then she would act. Meanwhile, her adorée must be made to realise Captain Lumley's goodness and the value of his protection. Laline had told her everything—with the priest dead, and no wedding ring, and the bridegroom absconded, who was to prove that a marriage had taken place? No one. And even if le Major could be found and forced to come back, it would obviously be against his will, since he had gone off with another lady—and think then what misery and humiliation to her lamb; and if he refused—the scandal, the unpleasantness; and by that the door closed to the other and good plan.

No, there was but one way out of all difficulties, and that was a speedy marriage with le Capitaine!

After this decision Celestine slept. She was a practical person.

Once more Laline's waking was a nightmare. She felt too ill to get up, she said, but Celestine coaxed her to let her make her beautiful, and allow Captain Lumley to come and see her in the sitting-room. She knew Mrs. Greening intended to go to Fontainebleau with friends for the day. She felt it wiser not to disclose her plan to her lamb yet—let her appreciate the lovely roses which Jack had just sent up to her, and be with him alone first.

So when the aunt had safely departed, about twelve, Jack was telephoned for, and came up, to find a golden-haired, lily-white girl lying wrapped in a snow crêpe negligé and covered by an ermine rug, his roses in a great vase beside her.

Celestine had attended to every detail to make a beautiful picture, Laline herself being numb and indifferent. All desire for life was over for her, and nothing more mattered, for, if all her faithful Celi had whispered to her should prove unavailing, she meant to end things in her own way and slip into shadowland.

And what would this knowledge, which was so cruel now, have meant to her and David? if only——

She remembered that during one of their tender whisperings they had spoken of such hopes. Oh! the cruel, cruel agony of everything!

Jack's kind, quiet face paled when he entered the room and looked at her. There was a pathetic hopelessness about her expression, even though she smiled faintly, as he took and kissed her hand. She thanked him softly for the flowers.

"You are so kind and dear, Jack," she whispered. Then the contrast of his love and David's brutal desertion made the tears well up in her eyes.

Jack was greatly moved.

"Baby, darling baby, what is it? Oh! if you would only let me love and take care of you always," he pleaded. "Darling, once more will you not marry me, and let me try and comfort you and make you happy again?"

The tears were trickling slowly down Laline's white cheeks now; she buried her face in her hands.

"Jack, there is something—I—cannot——"

Love seems to intensify intuition, as Jack gazed at her—in a flash he knew.

For a moment he started to his feet, and then sat down again, and bent and kissed her hair. His voice was hoarse.

"Laline—my darling little love—I understand—everything now." Then he bent closer and spoke in her ear. "I love you more than anything on earth, and I've always said love meant devotion. Now's the time I can show it. Laline, say you will marry me—immediately."

She was utterly overcome at his goodness. What did it mean? Did he understand really, or was it only because he thought her so unhappy about David's going? She dropped her hands and gazed at him with mournful, despairing eyes, and she saw that his distinguished, gentle face was working with controlled emotion, and that his blue eyes were full of tears; but there was comprehension in them.

"Jack?"

"I tell you I understand," he said quickly. "David—" and then he broke off, and took both her hands and drew her to him.

"You need not tell me anything—I know. Just marry me at once, and I'll make you forget everything."

Laline was overcome. Here was love, indeed, the noblest love she could conceive of.

“Oh, Jack, you glorious friend,” she cried brokenly. “If it’s really true that you understand and want me still to be your wife—because even so, that would make you happy, I—I—” but she could not finish the sentence.

“You will marry me, darling?”

She made a faint gesture of assent, and fell into passionate weeping. Her mind, torn with the question, should she tell Jack about the priest and the wedding?

He was kissing her little left hand now, only gladness in his spirit.

What did he care for anything more, since he would have her always to protect and worship?

“Jack, leave me now, dear—I want to think out something.”

He rose, always obedient to her wishes.

“I will go as long as it is nothing which can cause you to change your mind. Remember, darling, I never want to hear a single thing about that awful time. I want to obliterate it entirely from both our memories. Never at any future hour will I allude to it or take the situation as anything but an absolutely normal one. You can count upon me for that, darling girl. David shall be a dead memory between us, and your child shall be my child. All I ask is that you don’t tell me a thing. You are all that matters to me. What has passed does not concern us.”

“I promise Jack,” she said, faintly, and he kissed her hair again, and went from the room. And when he had gone some strange peace fell upon Laline. Here was strength and love indeed, and, above all, understanding.

David had broken his sacred vow, and deserted and betrayed her—the priest and the ceremony meant nothing to him. No law could prove that there ever had been a marriage.

Jack had come to her rescue, and would give her back honour and protection, and she could make him happy. She would give her life in gratitude.

No, she would not tell him anything further. The die was cast, and with a firm movement she removed her little diamond hoop ring back to the right hand again. Celestine came in just then, and Laline turned and looked at her.

“I am going to marry Captain Lumley, Celi,” she said quietly, “quite soon—perhaps in a fortnight.”

Celestine almost cried in her relief and satisfaction.

“He knows everything,” Laline went on. “I am not deceiving him, and I will try to make up to him for his goodness.”

“*Quel Gentilhomme!*” was all Celestine could blurt out, “*Quel Gentilhomme!*”

At that moment, far away to the South-East, David was sitting in a waiting attitude by a crag, looking over a blue sea. His black eyes gleamed from under a Turkish fez, and he stroked his short, black beard. The mission was nearly finished, and had been very successful. He had had some near shaves and some moments of great danger and excitement, but some luck always protected him. He would be able to get back to Paris about the 22nd of July, if all went well this time—exactly two months since he had quitted it.

How passionately and tenderly he had thought of Laline in all these weeks! His honey! Where was she, what was she doing? Could it be possible that—Oh, how glorious! Jack, of course, would be taking the greatest care of her. He could trust old Jack. And then a sudden realization of the altruistic nobleness of his friend’s character came to him. Well, he was splendid, far better than himself. David could never have borne to see his love given to another man. But each one must express his own nature, and his expressed action—not devotion.

What would her first love-letter to him be like, that he would find in Rome? How he longed for it!

He would be free now to dispose of his time as he pleased. His service would be over.

They would have to be married again civilly, and then where would she want him to take her? Somewhere in the country in England, perhaps. They would motor, and he would show her all sorts of old places that he knew about.

How would she be looking? Perfectly beautiful, of course, and she would have got quite over the effects of hunger by now, just as he had done; he had never felt better in his life. What was that noise? A stealthy movement beyond the crag behind him. He got into a defensive position,

and took out his revolver. Two villainous-looking Greeks peered over the top; then they came at him, their knives brandished.

Flash—flash!—and one fell, tripping over the crag into the sea far below; the other closed with him, pinning his arms. They struggled and struggled, the Greek trying to push his adversary to the edge of the precipice. He was a powerful man, a giant almost, but just when he seemed to be succeeding, David got his arm free, and fired his revolver straight at the brute's head.

Then he bent over the dead body, a look of disgust mingled with satisfaction on his face, and with care he searched the inner pockets of the jacket the bandit had worn, and discovered a thin leather case.

So this was the culmination of all his toil—he had secured the evidence.

Now he would but have to get back to civilisation with his life—and then for Paris, and Love!

And, later that day, when Laline had received the congratulations of her aunt and the Whitmores, and was out in the Bois de Boulogne, driving in a peaceful green allée with her devoted fiancé—David, her husband and lover, was fleeing before a crowd of horsemen for his life, over uneven ground of rough grass and crags and pines.

But Laline's eyes, full of love and trust and tenderness, seemed to call him forward into safety, and he rode like the wind.

When Laline was alone that night she went out on to the balcony. A moon was rising. The night was warm and still. She could hear the band from the restaurant, which had not finished yet, playing "The Love Nest." What memories it brought back to her! David had whistled that as he splashed through the water to discover the way to the upper world. He had often whistled it at his work, too.

A quiver of passionate love for him swept over her. How was it possible that he could have altered so? He had been hers—her very own—every thought only for her and what he could do for her.

And now, perhaps, he was whistling "The Love Nest" to Mrs. Hamilton—among the Greek Islands on a yacht! And the same moon was looking down upon them all.

Did he ever reflect upon what awful suffering he must be bringing upon her—she who had been his wife and his love?

She seemed to hear his voice saying “Honey,” his favourite term of endearment for her. Was he now calling Mrs. Hamilton “Honey”?

Then burning, passionate anger and hate filled her heart, which had so often swelled with tenderest love for him; and she swung back into her room, clenching her hands, for jealousy is more bitter than death, and crueller than the grave.

Jack had made it appear to Mrs. Greening that he must have an immediate wedding. Why should they wait? Had he not been asking Laline to marry him for more than half a year? And many of their friends had looked upon the engagement as an imminent certainty. There, with all the shops in Paris to choose from, a trousseau was quite possible to get in a fortnight or three weeks—and could they not be married about the twentieth of July in the old chapel at Channings Priory?

Mrs. Greening was delighted at this suggestion. The old place would make a wonderful background for a wedding. It would be all so chic, and make such interesting reading for all their friends at home. They must have a real English wedding, too, with the train of bridesmaids and little pages, and she would delight to entertain as large a party as the house would hold!

Laline and Jack would have preferred to have had everything as quiet as possible, but Mrs. Greening was determined to have her way. And the sooner the ceremony could take place the better she would be pleased, as in her secret heart she feared that Laline might change her mind!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RETURN

The days of warm July went by very rapidly. Laline had asked Jack to go back to England and arrange all his affairs, so as to be quite ready to take her away after the wedding to some quiet place in Switzerland, where they would spend the rest of the summer and autumn. She felt that she would want to be far from scenes which could remind her of anything she had ever known before.

She resolutely shut her eyes now to the future, which she felt vaguely must eventually be happy, since Jack was so good and kind and devoted to her—and she sternly banished thoughts of the past when they presented themselves. She was in all ways growing into a stronger character. David's influence was insidious—unconsciously she was putting into practice that self-restraint and discipline which he had often talked to her about in their long hours, and which she knew were what he thought essential to the making of a personality which he could respect. Celestine was the only creature now who saw any signs of her grieving.

“She is but twenty-two years, and le Capitaine is so considerate, sorrow will pass,” this wise philosopher reflected!

The trousseau was chosen, and the days were full of feverish trying on of clothes and hats, and the evenings passed in feasting with American friends, of whom shoals appeared to be in Paris. So that by the time bed came each night, Laline was too tired to think, and fell into dreamless slumbers. But underneath her subconsciousness was uneasy, haunted always by a doubt. Could there possibly be any mistake? Could it possibly be that she was being unjust to David?

But nothing happened to influence her one way or another about this, and the sixteenth of the month came, and they went over to England to prepare for the wedding on the twenty-second.

Whenever thoughts of the little life in the future came to her they caused her fresh anguish, and she thrust them aside fiercely. She would not let herself admit them at all as the days went on. She stamped out weakness and made herself practical.

Her face was changing, it had become hard, and while there was sorrow there was also a cynical look in her eyes.

Jack's relations had welcomed her warmly, even the crusty old cousin from whom he would inherit the title some day. As far as her life as Jack's wife went there seemed to be no clouds ahead.

Mrs. Greening had had the great pleasure of collecting the bridesmaids—all children, they had decided, because Molly had two small daughters of five and six—and “The Ladies Margaret and Ursula Brooklyn” would sound so well in the descriptions in the papers, beside the minute Earl of three, Molly's son and heir, as one of the pages. Jack's titled relatives provided the other four girls and little boy, and thus six aristocratic little maidens under seven and two pages under five would follow Laline from the great hall at Channings through the cloisters to the chapel, the boys carrying her cloth of silver train. The bridesmaids were to wear petal frocks, the pale colours of sweet peas, and the pages would be in satin suits to match.

All these details had been of the greatest happiness to arrange for Mrs. Greening. Laline had assented to everything with a wan smile which had a sardonic curb in it, though, and once or twice she had laughed aloud bitterly, alone in her room, at the grim mockery of it all.

“I need not wear orange blossoms, auntie, need I?” she said. “I hate them—silly emblems of bygone days—I am going to have no wreath and no flowers, just the diamond bandeau the old Earl has given me—to keep the veil on—and the string of Jack's pearls.”

“Why, you'll set a new fashion, Laline,” her aunt exclaimed. “Modern girls have no sentiment like they used to have.”

“Perhaps they have had the romance burnt out of them,” her niece sighed. “And what is it, anyway? Just a false glamour thrown over cruel facts.”

Mrs. Greening was horrified.

Jack had arrived at Channings to spend the Sunday. He would leave again before the wedding on the Tuesday, and stay at Dover in the most orthodox way, but this Sabbath evening he and Laline were out in the rose garden once more, looking on to the park.

Both were very silent. Jack sensed that his beloved was in a strange mood.

“Jack!” she burst out at last, “it is perfectly ghastly, how can we go through with it all?”

“Laline!”

“I mean the fuss of the wedding, and the bridesmaids, and the dress, and the veil, and the whole fraud of it. I feel a terrible hypocrite, dear.” Her voice was trembling with pent-up emotion. Jack was deeply pained.

“You must not think of things like that, darling,” he said. “We owe certain obligations to our station in life, and I thought you promised me that the past was completely dead, and that we should never allude to it again. I’m the person who has to say whether things are a fraud or no—and I say they are not. How can I convince you that my love for you is greater than any considerations of what conventional symbols may mean? It is you Laline, I want to cherish and protect, and if your aunt and my people want to dress up the ceremony that gives you legally to me, why should you and I mind?”

“Jack, you are the most wonderful person in the world. How can I ever be good enough to you?”

He talked then so gently. He understood much that she was feeling, not all, though, for he knew nothing of the marriage she had gone through with David. That fact Laline still thought it better to keep to herself. But her mind was growing to be greatly troubled about it. What if there was something very spiritually wrong in the breaking of her vows, even if David had broken his?

Did it really mean something more than the law?

She was a Protestant, and the priest had used the Catholic formula. Therefore it could not have been a marriage ceremony really. Then she tried to reason with herself, using sophistry, because she was so very unhappy, and fate seemed to have chased her into a corner.

Now, out in the rose garden with Jack, who was soothing and quieting her, things did not seem so desperate; but later, when she looked from her open window on to the peaceful scene and heard a nightingale sing, a great cry went up from her heart.

“God knows I only belong to David, and it will be a sin to swear new vows to Jack.”

She did not sleep all night, tormented by her remorseful terrors, but in the morning she had not the courage to face the scenes and the scandal

which would happen if she were to break off the engagement. Custom and convention seemed to be sapping her will, and she could not face the horror of the future all alone.

But this last day before the wedding was a torture of uncertainty and spiritual heart-burnings, blotting out for the time the anguish of her broken love.

David reached a vantage point after his frantic gallop and, turning quickly, wheeled to the left and disappeared behind a jutting angle of rock, and his pursuers thundered past him and were soon out of sight. Then he encouraged his tired Arab gently and cantered on, taking a path at right angles, and was soon in safety in the friendly chief's stronghold.

That had been a near shave! Nearer than when he had disposed of the two Greeks! But fighting, and adventure were a delight to him really, and he rolled himself in his blanket and fell asleep in the young moonlight with a sense of exaltation in his heart. And in a few days more he would be in civilisation again, and then for Rome—and Laline's letter!

How glorious!

When he did reach the Grand Hotel in the Eternal City his pulses were bounding with expectations and joy. What would she say—his honey! Ah! something divine, of course, since he knew that every throb of her heart beat love for him, and every thought of her spirit was filled, with tenderness.

And, then, when they did meet! How they would rush into each other's arms! How they would talk and tell each other everything that had happened since they parted, and then they would never, never part again.

Above all things David was a practical person, not given to nervous questionings. He had made his decision that morning in Amiens knowing his duty was to "carry the message to Garcia," he had taken all precautions to ensure Laline's understanding of his motives, and not a disturbing doubt had ever entered his head since. When he had thought of her—which had been in every moment when his whole attention was not claimed by his work—it had always been with the fondest worship and trust, and he had made plans for their future and devised ways in which he could show her his devotion.

He almost bounded into the hall of the Grand Hotel—such was his eagerness.

There were no letters for Major Lamont!

The shock was great.

No letters at all! He had hardly expected any except from Laline, unless Mr. Randolph should have sent him fresh orders, since no one else knew that he would be in Rome.

Fergusson, of course, was waiting for him, but he had somehow missed him at the station, presuming he had gone to meet him.

He would go on up to his room, which he found had been engaged for him, and see if there was anything there, and if not he would telephone to the Embassy.

But he had told Laline the Grand Hotel in his letter, not the Embassy at all.

His heart had sunk now, he felt extremely disturbed, all the buoyant joyousness had fled.

No, there was nothing in his room. He went to the telephone.

It took some time to get on, as usual, and he waited the few minutes in growing anxiety and distress.

At last he got the communication: No letters for Major Lamont at the Embassy.

He could easily catch the express for Paris that night, it was only five o'clock, and he would be at the Gare de Lyon at six o'clock on the morning of the twenty-second of July—and when he had rushed to the Embassy to deliver the precious documents into Mr. Randolph's hands, he would then be free to find Laline and discover what was the reason of her silence.

Should he telegraph to her at the Ritz? There would be no time for him to receive an answer before he started. No, that would be useless, better to get to her as fast as he could.

If she had not written there was some reason for her silence. What reason? Had the exposure to cold and hunger caused her to be too ill to write?

This thought was a perfect agony. But it could not be that, because he had received assurances from Fergusson before he left Amiens that she was going on all right. Starvation was not a disease, and the effects of it wore off quickly with care and proper food, and Laline would have everything possible done for her. Was she dead? Had some awful complication

occurred? Oh, God! he could not face this. His anxiety now became almost unbearable. Had she never received his letter?

But of course she had. Lost letters only occurred in melodramas, not in real life. The chambermaid would have no earthly reason not to deliver it, and even aunts and faithful maids would not deliberately suppress correspondence in these days, although they might not have handed the letter to Laline immediately if it had fallen into their hands, Laline being asleep when the chambermaid went in.

Fergusson entered the room just then, and they greeted one another. The servant was nettled at not meeting his master at the train.

David demanded eagerly if anything had come for him.

“Nothing,” Fergusson said.

Then he asked what news had been in the papers lately. Had he heard anything of the party they had left at Amiens?

But Fergusson had been away “getting a bit of sport” with an American-Italian friend of his and had not seen any papers for a matter of three weeks. There was nothing about them before that, except the “New York Herald” had said that Miss Lester and her aunt had gone to England from the Ritz Hotel.

So Laline was not dead, or even ill, then. What could it be?

Had she ceased to love him?

But this was perfectly ridiculous; of course, she had not. She loved him as he loved her, utterly and for eternity.

No. The probable thing, considering the strike that had been on and the disorganization of traffic in Italy, was that her letter to him had been lost. But she would know he would return to her on the instant he could; so he must not let himself speculate further, he must just wait patiently until he reached Paris and could make all investigations.

And so at last he got into the train.

CHAPTER XXX

THE WEDDING DAY

It was raining on the morning of the twenty-second of July when Laline awoke. But the sun came out afterwards before her breakfast was brought up. She was feeling ill and unutterably depressed. Celestine had been so troubled about her on the night before that she had given her a sleeping draught. So the poor child had slept soundly. That made the awakening none the less heavy.

How was she going to get through the day—her wedding day?

She could not prevent her thoughts from going to that other wedding of hers—there in the dug-out. With what different feelings she had contemplated making the vows then, with death staring them in the face, and the probability of only a few hours, or days at best, with her beloved one.

She seemed to experience all the thrills of exaltation over again, and to see David's face, filled with passionate love, bending over her.

Surely the present was some horrible dream, and she would awake and find that he had returned to save her!

And what would the future be, if she went through with the ghastly mockery? Jack would go on being devoted—she could be sure of that—and she would have an honourable name and a place in the world. And there would be no scandal.

She was not deceiving Jack or trying to thrust a cheat upon him. He was marrying her with his eyes open to everything but the ceremony of the marriage, and was that really a ceremony? Here the everlasting question assailed her again—was she doing something very wrong?

If David had simply disappeared, and there had been no trace of him after she had left Amiens, she would have waited and hoped, and even trusted him. But it was the going off with Mrs. Hamilton which made the thing so terrible—so impossible to make excuses for—so heartless—so brutal.

He had deliberately deserted her, evidently to fulfil a plan he must have made before he ever went to the battlefields. This proved that his whole conduct to her and had been false and a lie. Now she began to reason that he

could never have loved her. Only—she reflected bitterly—men could love two women at the same time.

He had always treated her with want of respect from the very beginning. From the kiss on the Olympic to the kiss in the car—always insolent until they were married. Here she clenched her hands in anger and pain. No—she had a right to consider the ceremony as naught, since he had shown her the way. But what if she met him some day in the future when she was Jack's wife?

Celestine came in then with her breakfast, and understood by the look she saw on her mistress's face that it would be unwise to leave her alone again until she was ready to go to the chapel.

Molly, Lady Fordbrooke, and her children had arrived the evening before. The house was crammed with guests, filled to its full capacity. There was an air of bustle and gaiety. Through the open window Laline could hear the birds singing and the sound of the gardeners as they went in and out of the chapel to put the finishing touches to the flowers.

Celestine said something joyous and cheerful. A final present from Jack lay upon the breakfast tray.

Everyone seemed to be rejoicing, except the bride.

“Celi—the whole thing is impossible!” Laline gasped. “I can't go through with it!”

Then the maid became furious.

This was quite too bad, and not like her own Mademoiselle, or even a lady—to make a scandal and cause unhappiness to so great a gentilhomme as le Capitaine Lumley; one who had loved her always and was now ready to give her the greatest honour in the world. How could Mademoiselle even contemplate being so selfish as to break his heart? If he, knowing everything, was yet willing, and even more than eager, to make Mademoiselle his wife, whose business was it to create difficulties?

“That is just it, Celi. He does not know everything. He does not know about the priest having performed a ceremony,” and Laline's voice was despairing again.

This made Celestine uncomfortable. She could not bear to remember that about the priest, but, whether or no, there was no use in bringing it up now. One must be practical, and as le Major would certainly deny any wedding, what would be the good of Mademoiselle remembering it?

It was the Bon Dieu who sent le Capitaine Jack to relieve Mademoiselle from all her difficulties and fears, and instead of having all these useless thoughts now Mademoiselle should be grateful.

Then Molly, in a dressing gown, knocked at the door and came in, seating herself on the bed.

“You do look woe-begone, Laline,” she exclaimed. “What is the matter, dearest? You ought to be the happiest girl in the world.”

“Of course I am.”

“Then cheer up for goodness sake, or you will not look well in that perfect gown. Silver and gold; how right you were not to have plain white, or just silver, as everyone has now.”

“Yes, I thought gold would be more suitable to me,” Laline answered, and wondered if any of the ironical emotion she was feeling had crept into her voice.

Somehow, Molly there, talking about clothes, seemed to make things more everyday and human and not so awful to contemplate.

She was four years older than Laline, and had always mothered her. She had married when she was eighteen, on her first visit to Europe, but she had come back to her old home every two years since, so the friendship had never been broken. She was secretly thinking now that it was a good thing her chum was marrying so well, because really she was going off in looks too sadly.

“Do open your present honey,” she said, catching sight of the box on the tray; and as she said the word “honey” she saw Laline wince suddenly, as if in pain.

Again she asked wonderingly:

“What is it, dear?”

“I’ve got neuralgia,” Laline answered.

Molly loved giving remedies, and was off at once to her room to get some perfectly wonderful stuff which cured everything; and while she was away Celestine whispered firmly to her mistress:

“Mademoiselle must pull herself together. Such weakness is unworthy,” and this stung Laline’s pride and made the pink come into her cheeks.

She opened the parcel.

It had just "With Jack's fond love" on a card, and there she found a heart made of one large ruby, a quaint, unusual jewel of great price.

Dear Jack! She would wear it presently. The children came back with their mother and brought her their little gifts; and then Mrs. Greening arrived, and the chatter was incessant until past twelve o'clock.

There was no time for any more thinking or grieving. Laline must get up and dress and eat her luncheon and have her hair done and her veil put on.

The ceremony was to be at half-past two exactly. And a Bishop uncle of Jack's would give the blessing.

David arrived at the Gare de Lyon about half-past six o'clock in the morning. It was raining in Paris, too. He had slept very little both nights in the train, and as he neared the station his anxiety and impatience seemed to have reached an unbearable pitch. He got into a taxi as quickly as he could and drove straight to the American Embassy, half an hour's drive away. Even in this disturbed moment of his life his duty came first with him.

The Ambassador was not up yet, but would put on a dressing gown and come to him immediately, he was told, and he waited in the well-remembered sitting-room for ten or fifteen minutes. Then Mr. Randolph came in.

"Welcome back, Lamont," he cried, gladly, shaking hands warmly. "You really have come up to time splendidly. Now tell me all about it, boy."

So David gave up the precious documents, and the two sat down, and for more than an hour and a half he made his report, and gave a detailed account of things, while the Ambassador listened attentively, asking many questions and taking down some notes.

"You had some narrow escapes," he said at last. "Well, it is a glorious thing to be young and to be able to see life, and you have earned the respect and grateful thanks of the Ministers who entrusted you with this important matter. You will not go unrewarded, Lamont, I can tell you."

"I was not thinking about reward, sir. I am proud to serve my country," and David lifted his head. Then he thought he might now, perhaps, speak of his own affairs. So he turned the conversation to Mrs. Randolph, and asked how she was, and from that remarked:

"You remember Mrs. Greening and her niece, Miss Lester, don't you, sir? Have you heard anything of them lately? I seem to have been away for

an eternity, and, of course, have no news of any of my friends.”

His Excellency was looking down at the notes and not paying much attention for the moment. He answered a little absently.

“Oh! The girl who was buried in the dug-out with you. Let me see. Yes; isn’t she going to be married soon to an Englishman? I think Mrs. Randolph said something about it only yesterday. If I remember rightly, Lumley was the name. By the way, where did you say you believed the troop went on to, after you doubled back and gave them the slip?”

David caught his breath for a second, and then instantly controlled himself, telling the Ambassador of the place and the rest of the information he required. Then, when he had completely mastered all show of emotion, he asked:

“Do you happen to know where Mrs. Greening and her niece are now, sir. Captain Lumley is a great friend of mine.”

“I know that they went to England, but I do not know where. They were here dining about three weeks ago.”

David’s one desire now was to get away to be able to think. The frightful shock he had received had made him very pale. The Ambassador noticed it.

“I expect you are pretty tired, Lamont, after all your exertions, and are wanting a bath and breakfast. Well, I will not keep you any longer now. I can’t tell you how I appreciate your splendid service. I’ll telephone you in a day or two when I have heard from Washington. You’ll be at the Ritz as usual, I suppose?”

David said he would be, and so they shook hands again cordially, and he made his way down the stairs, and as he passed the large buhl clock in the hall it chimed a quarter past nine.

He felt almost as though he were staggering when he got outside; the taxi was still waiting.

“To the Ritz,” he said to the driver quite fiercely.

What could this mean? Laline going to marry Jack Lumley—his friend Jack?

But how could she marry anyone? She was married already to him; she was his wife, his very own.

He pressed his hands to his head. Was he mad or dreaming?

Then he remembered that the priest was dead, and that there was no proof whatsoever of their wedding.

If Laline had forgotten him and their love sufficiently to be willing to marry Jack, it must mean that she intended to deny the ceremony. There would be only his word against hers.

What frightful thing had happened in the two months to change his honey? Whose influence had accomplished this? There would be a letter for him at the Ritz most probably. Certainly from Jack, if not from Laline. People's characters could not completely alter from one month to another, and Jack's character was above proof. He would never marry Laline or in any way betray a trust to him, if he knew the circumstances. Thus it followed that Laline must have utterly deceived him.

Of course there was no letter for him at the Ritz.

He went to his room stunned. Then he plunged into a bath and tried to think.

When he came out of the bathroom his breakfast had arrived, and with it the papers.

He had come to the conclusion that he would telegraph to Jack at his club.

He opened the Continental "Daily Mail," and there saw a paragraph which sent the blood coursing furiously in his veins.

It was to the effect that the marriage of Captain Jack Lumley, cousin of the Earl of Channings, and Miss Laline Lester, the beautiful niece of Mrs. Greening, of Washington, would take place in the chapel at Channings Priory, Dover, at half-past two o'clock to-day—the 22nd of July! Then followed the description of the bridesmaids and the guests who would be there.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT THE ALTAR

For one moment David's hands seemed nerveless, and he almost dropped the paper. Then his strength of purpose reasserted itself. He was not of a character to accept fate resignedly. He would fight for what he considered to be truly his own to the last breath of life.

He pulled himself together and used all his wits.

The wedding was to be at half-past two o'clock. It was now ten. He had four hours and a half; and he was in Paris, and the ceremony would be twenty miles inland from Dover.

Telegrams would be of no use. If they had gone as far as this, what attention would they pay to telegrams?—even if he could be certain one would reach them. Things were not yet at pre-War efficiency, and a wire was quite capable of taking four hours, and people did not open wires on wedding days. They would receive dozens of congratulations. It was no use chancing that. He would send one, anyway, but the imperative necessity was that he should get there himself in time.

He controlled all his nerves, and wrote out the telegram to Jack, addressing it "Channings Priory, Dover." Then he called Fergusson, who had gone into the bathroom when his master came out, and was arranging his things.

"I have to be in England, Fergusson, before a quarter past two—telegraph to the Lord Warden Hotel at Dover for a car to meet me on the cliffs at the landing place for aeroplanes, while I telephone to the Military Attaché at the Embassy to find out the quickest way I can get a machine."

His voice was so quiet Fergusson realised there was something very grave on foot. He knew his master well. He also was a person who could "carry a message to Garcia." He did not stop to say, "Would not some other conveyance do?" or make any other suggestions; he merely remarked: "Very good, sir," and immediately proceeded to carry out his master's orders, going into the hall to execute them.

David felt just as when he had seen the two Greeks peering at him over the crag, all his forces on tension, only with an added hideous coldness

round his heart as well. But his voice was firm when he talked to the Military Attaché, and received all the information he required.

And after nearly half an hour's telephoning he had arranged that he should start from Buc at half-past eleven.

Fergusson returned now, having dispatched his wire, which he had worded so that the urgency of the order for a car might be understood.

Then David, who had been hastily shaving and dressing between his telephone calls, was ready to start.

The only relic of Laline he possessed was her great sapphire ring, which had got caught in the lining of his coat pocket, and had only been found when Fergusson had been drying the coat late that first night at Amiens, and which he had handed to his master on their journey to Paris.

"If there is a ring used to-day, it shall be this ring," David said, with clenched teeth. Then he went round to the office in the Rue des Petite Champs and sent his telegram himself to Jack, and a few minutes after eleven he was tearing out to Buc in a Ritz car, with Fergusson beside him.

Laline finished the first part of her dressing, and waited in a rose silk peignoir for the coiffeur to come and do her hair.

Molly had returned to the room, and was keeping up her spirits. The astute creature guessed that her school friend, for some perfectly incomprehensible reason, was not looking forward to her wedding with the joy she certainly should be experiencing.

Molly guessed the reason must be sentimental. What perfect nonsense! Here was Laline going to marry into what she now termed her rank in life, and her bridegroom was one of the nicest, dearest, most perfect gentlemen anyone could find, who adored her, and would let her do exactly what she pleased afterwards. And yet the tiresome girl was looking as glum as an owl, and she could see was almost on the edge of tears!

Molly wished she knew *who* it was, because of course there was *somebody*—a married man probably—they were really growing so appalling with girls since the War. No honour anywhere!

She discoursed upon the delights of Laline's future position while they waited for the coiffeur. Then she said:

“There is one thing, Laline—of course you must try to have a son at once. It does give you much greater prestige with the family when you are the mother of the heir.”

Laline fortunately at that moment was looking down at her nails, which she was polishing, so her quick-witted friend did not see the look in her eyes. The pupils suddenly dilated—and she bit her lip sharply. But, “Of course,” was all she said.

“You will find you have to know these English people, dear. They are awfully simple when you do, and reliable, but there are just a few things we have to learn, I may tell you privately. For one thing, say less than you mean, never more.”

“You are happy here, Molly?”

“Happier than I could possibly tell you, Laline—and so will you be.”

Celestine announced the coiffeur now, and Molly left to finish her own dressing.

Jack, at the Lord Warden Hotel in Dover, with his best man, was dressing, too.

He was in a quiet state of mind. There was no anxiety in his heart. He knew everything he felt, and so could start his life with Laline as his wife unshadowed by possible surprises. Love for him meant more than family, or name, or race.

Laline’s child would be very dear to him, and perhaps some day he would have one of his own.

The family of Lumley had endured for such hundreds of years, and in these modern days none of those things mattered. There would perhaps not be any peerage or titles existing when he came into it all. And in any case Laline and her happiness and welfare were all which really mattered to him.

They were going to motor to Folkestone after the reception, and catch the evening boat to Boulogne, and gradually get on down to Switzerland to a secluded spot he knew of.

He tied his light grey tie firmly, his old Eton hand had not lost its cunning, and his valet handed him his immaculate morning coat and indicated that his tall hat was in its case and his overcoat ready with the fresh gloves in the pocket.

Then Jack went down and ate a simple luncheon with his best man in the restaurant.

The little bridesmaids, some with their hair in silk rags still, to keep the curls perfect, ate their luncheon up in what had been the old schoolroom at Channings. The second minute page was crying, because the Lady Betty Hurstmanseau had put her finger in his eye. And she was a year older than his lordship and ought to have known better! It was a very unmannerly thing to do, the haughty nannie of his lordship told her ladyship's nursery governess. But his tears were soon dried, and, amidst much talking and excitement among the governesses, maids, and nurses, the eight children were taken back to their respective rooms to put on the lovely little petal frocks which would make the little girls look like a bunch of sweet peas.

Mrs. Greening had never been so happy in her life! She was entertaining numbers of people of importance, and her niece Laline was making a really brilliant marriage. For, if Jack would only be an Earl some day—the title was a much, much older one than that of Molly's Marquis—a mere mushroom growth of not more than a hundred years!

Mrs. Greening was behaving with the most perfect and serene dignity, even if she was just a trifle patronising to Mrs. Whitmore, who, with the Judge, had come over to England on purpose, and motored up from Folkestone, where they were staying.

Celestine was beginning to feel terrible twinges. Long ago, before she had gone to America, she had been a Catholic, and even if religion had lapsed a good deal in the last ten years, somewhere in the back of her mind she was superstitious about it.

What if she had been influencing her lamb to commit a great sin? But, then, what will you? The situation must be saved. It was extremely ill-bred, and *pas bon ton*, to make scandals.

There was nothing for it—nothing for it—but she wished it could have been otherwise.

Judge Whitmore was to give the bride away, being so old a friend and no male relation being present, and Mrs. Whitmore delighted in Laline's good fortune. She was a kindly, homely soul. She had always known from the very moment she got on to the Olympic and saw them together—Laline and Jack—that they were made for one another. As for Louise Greening, she was just being up stage and foolish giving herself such airs. Had they not climbed each other's backyard fences and played together in Oklahoma

when they were children, before Louise married that rich Mrs. Lester's brother?

And Laline, as the time went on and she was left alone with the coiffeur gone, and her hair finished to eat her chicken and drink a glass of milk, could do nothing but repeat a prayer, a prayer to ask for forgiveness, if she was going to commit a sin, and for strength to be able to make Jack happy.

For herself life was over. Henceforth her years must be devoted to trying to repay Jack's noble devotion.

Perhaps her soul would rise out of the slough of despond it was now in, and to do her duty properly, and to fulfil to the highest what her new position would require of her, might bring her some peace. It was too late now, she could not go back or change her mind.

They had left her alone for the half-hour to eat her simple lunch, but now Molly burst in. She was going to help Celestine to clothe her in the marvellous gold and silver brocade bridal dress and fix her veil to flow beneath the old Earl's diamond bandeau.

Celestine was unusually quiet, and seemed once or twice to be brushing tears from her eyes, but Laline now was quite calm. And so at last she was dressed, and a more beautiful bride never would walk up to an altar.

The entirely plain mediæval-looking robe showed off her slender figure to perfection—its long sleeves coming over her transparent little hands. Round her bare neck, on a long, slender diamond chain, hung Jack's ruby heart. And her plain tulle veil fell from the diamond bandeau over the cloth of silver train lined with gold which hung from her shoulders.

Laline herself was pale as a white rose, and her eyes were cast down, the curly, golden-brown lashes resting on blue shadows.

A mystic bride from some fifteenth-century glass church-window come to life, she appeared, not a real modern young woman.

"You are just too divine!" Molly said.

The little bridesmaids and pages were all collected now in the great hall, with anxious attendants giving them last instructions.

Mrs. Greening was waiting, bouquet in hand, and the guests who had come by train and motor were beginning to drift into the chapel where the clergyman had already gone.

The villagers, a selected number of whom, old tenants of the family, had been invited to see the procession come through the cloisters, were collected in excited groups outside.

The sun shone, the birds sang, and the great clock had already several minutes ago chimed quarter past two.

Laline was to carry an ivory-bound Prayer-book, not the usual bouquet, and at the last moment it could not be found.

Molly had unwrapped it from its packing and laid it down somewhere—but where? She and Celestine began to lose their heads about it. The bride stood in her oak-panelled bedroom like a statue, perfectly still.

Was she frozen to stone? This was not Laline—the Laline who had married her love in the face of death in an underground excavation, clothed in a blue silk jersey frock, just over two months before—this white-faced, stately, golden-robed bride.

She clasped her hands together for a second to feel if she was real—the same impulse which used to make her touch the bristles on David's chin when hunger and privation were beginning to make things shadowy to her.

Yes; she was real—just as he had been. But why did she seem to be seeing his eyes all the time looking at her out of the dark panelling—eyes so full of reproach and sorrow; not fierce and passionate as David's eyes so often were?

Oh! Would Molly and Celestine never find the Prayer-book? Better to start and get the frightful sacrilege over. She could not bear this waiting. She would begin to scream.

The distracted maid discovered it at last, hidden under a black lace scarf which Mrs. Greening had dropped on a table the last time she had bustled into the room.

Celestine took this for an omen, and nearly let the book fall as she handed it to her mistress.

Hidden under a black cloud, the blessing of God! But what was to be done?

“Run on to the minstrels' gallery and peep and see if they've all gone on but the bridesmaids, and pages—and Judge Whitmore,” Molly said, and Celestine went.

Jack arrived at the side-door of the chapel with his best man, a brother officer in the Guards battalion in which they had both served.

The ring was all safe. George knew his duties.

It was five minutes to the half-hour; it was always well for the bridegroom to be in time.

They stayed by the vestry door beyond the huge banks of flowers.

The clergymen had moved into place. The organ was playing soft music, the guests were seated, and now the bride's aunt and the house-party and all Jack's relations came in and took their seats, and there was that air of expectancy and that feeling of excitement which there always is at weddings.

Jack's heart began to beat, and the best man coughed and muttered:

“Buck up, old chap.”

Then half-past two chimed from the clock tower.

CHAPTER XXXII

AGAINST TIME

David arrived in plenty of time at Buc, but there was nearly half an hour's delay before the aeroplane could start. He fumed inwardly, but the wind seemed all right, and it could not take two hours to get over the Channel surely and land on the cliffs at Dover, and if the motor was there waiting they could do the twenty miles in twenty minutes and he would be able to prevent the ceremony.

Each time his thoughts reached this point a wild anger shook him. How had they dared to contemplate committing such an action as to get married? And supposing he did not reach there before half-past two o'clock and the ceremony was finished. In the eyes of the law Laline would be Jack's wife, not his, since the priest was dead and there were no witnesses.

The time he had to wait for the aeroplane to start was the worst he had yet gone through in his life.

But at last he was high up in the sky, among the clouds, which were clearing away, and an hour later he could see the blue sea beneath him.

His thoughts now began to speculate more reasonably as to what could have happened.

It was unlikely that Laline had utterly ceased to love him because he had gone away. His letter to her had explained everything quite satisfactorily, and surely she could trust him. Could she somehow have heard that Mrs. Hamilton had been in the train, and she had been confoundedly jealous? Laline had always shown signs of being jealous of the Ambassador's niece, but that would be too ridiculous since she knew perfectly well that he adored her, and the other woman was a mere acquaintance. He had, perhaps, been stupid ever to tease her. He remembered now he had not given her any satisfactory answer on the subject in the dug-out when they both were in playful mood. But even so, his having chanced to be in the train with the woman could not be enough cause to make Laline want to ruin all their future happiness in this awful manner.

Could family pressure have been put upon her? He did not know Mrs. Greening well, and perhaps she had more authority over his darling girl than she appeared to have.

But Jack's part! That was the most incomprehensible of all, since he had told Laline to tell Jack everything as the one safe person to confide in.

David sifted each possible aspect of the affair as he crossed the Channel, and before they reached the cliffs he had come to the conclusion which was near the truth.

If by some diabolical turn of fate Laline had never received his letter, and imagined he had deserted her, and someone had seen him leave the Ritz with Mrs. Hamilton and gossiped to her about it, jealousy and believing that he was a scoundrel might have driven her to take Jack out of pique.

Pique? No, that was not a sufficiently strong motive after a love like theirs. Laline had shown that her character was of pure gold. No matter how piqued she might have felt she would have allowed some time to pass and given him a chance to come back and explain.

Could it be—was it that she had to marry someone, and believing she was deliberately abandoned by him she had accepted Jack? “Oh, good God!” David gasped aloud, and quite startled Fergusson.

Yes—this must be the explanation; it was the only one which could account for things. Jack, of course, would have come up to the scratch like the splendid friend he always was unless Laline had deceived him, which was unlikely.

From now onwards David's thoughts became a nightmare of anxiety.

He must reach Channings Priory before half-past two o'clock.

A rather ramshackle-looking old car was waiting when at last they landed safely, and giving Fergusson instructions to make his way to the Lord Warden in Dover and stay there until he received further instructions David got into it and started. The driver explained that there was a tremendous rush of tourists just now, and that on such short notice this was the only car available.

“But she'll get you to the wedding in time, Sir, all right. I suppose it's the wedding at the Priory you're going to?”

David nodded, but remained silent. His heart was beating in his throat, for his watch said that it was quarter to two o'clock, and this rotten car could never make more than twenty miles an hour. He felt that he would like to get out and push it as they went on.

It would appear sometimes that anxious thoughts delay events, for just as they came at last to the paddocks, and could see the chimneys of the house

in the distance, with groans and creakings the old motor came to a standstill.

A wild passion of rage and despair shook David.

What was to be done? How could he reach the chapel; it was now five minutes to the half-hour.

He gazed around frantically. If he ran with all his strength he could not cover the distance, and climb the probable fences, in the time. Then a gentle whinny caught his ear, and he saw the beautiful eyes of a thoroughbred gazing at him over the top of a tall iron gate, which he could see was padlocked.

There were other horses grazing further in. Here was the desperate last chance. He did not hesitate an instant. Fortunately he knew all about horses and their ways. He climbed the gate very quietly, not to frighten the creature, and then, luck aiding him, he caught its stable halter and leaped on to its bare back, and was off like a nomad.

“Steady, girl, steady,” he kept murmuring, and guided the animal towards where the house seemed to be.

The hedge which divided the paddocks from the park was not a very high one. The clock in the tower at that moment chimed half-past two. This maddened David, and with a wild cry, he put the mare at the hedge, while he bent and clung to its mane. The beautiful creature answered to his knee movements, and took the hedge at a flying leap, but stumbled a little a few paces afterwards, and David nearly lost his seat, but, righting himself, galloped forward. He must be, must be, in time. From that distance he could not see it, but there was still the sunken haw-haw to bar his passage ahead.

Celestine returned from the minstrels’ gallery to say that everyone had gone on but Judge Whitmore and the bridesmaids and pages. So Laline and Molly left the room, and, followed by the maid carrying the train, they went down the great stairs, and to the hall.

Molly kissed Laline, who was now as white as death.

“Why, you are too beautiful, darling. You must keep up your courage,” she whispered.

Then there was all the arranging of the procession while the clock struck half-past two. Molly had the quality of organisation, and soon marshalled everyone into place—the little girls, so much more full of confidence and self-importance than the two tiny boys.

“I’ve been bridesmaid twice this winter, so I know.” said the Lady Betty Hurstmanseau with an air of command.

“Now you must remember what’s expected of your lordship,” firmly admonished the nurse of Molly’s minute son and heir. “You’ve got to hold the train nicely, dearie—there, like that.”

The procession started then, Laline leaning on Judge Whitmore’s arm.

There was a murmur of admiration from the onlookers as it swept the cloisters; and, indeed, a more lovely bride had never been seen.

“Silver and gold and white,” as one of the farmers’ wives whispered romantically. “For her face is as white as her veil, and her hair is as gold as her dress. Isn’t she perfect?”

“Won’t Captain Jack be happy?” another sighed, ecstatically.

The chapel door was reached, and the train disappeared within, while the organ played sympathetically. Jack moved forward to meet his bride, and Molly, passing the bridesmaids, reached her place beside Mrs. Greening in the front pew.

The music ceased, and after an instant’s silence the clergyman began the opening words of the service.

Laline now was hardly conscious of anything. She heard vaguely the sound of the solemn words, but did not take in the full meaning, only they seemed something terrible and menacing. She knew that she must stand up straight presently and repeat what she was told. But, oh, if only the beam of blue light which was coming from a southern stained glass window high up could enter her heart and take away her life, how much better that would be.

God was angry with her; she would be cursed, not blessed.

Wild thoughts came. Should she scream, and say she could not go through with it.

David—David? Her darling real husband where was he?

But what was that noise of galloping horse’s hoofs on the stones of the cloisters, and a confused murmur of voices outside, heard above the quiet tones of the officiating priest?

This was unseemly, so he spake more loudly.

“Therefore, if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold

his peace.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

“I FORBID THIS MARRIAGE”

David galloped forward at breakneck pace, straight for the chapel, which he could now see was in the garden. And as he came nearer he could see the bridal procession leave the house.

The mare refused the haw-haw, and, wheeling, very nearly threw her rider; but despair lends strength and skill, and David put her at it again in another place, just opposite where he could perceive the opening to the cloisters from the rose garden. And this time the gallant beast landed him safely.

The sound of the horse's hoofs was not heard on the soft turf, nor did anyone realise a wild horseman was advancing. The tenants' backs were turned from the park, and all eyes were fixed on the bride. It was only when the barebacked rider, without hat now, and clad in a grey flannel suit, entered the cloisters and clattered along the flagstones at the side of the red carpet, that the crowd was startled violently and some of the women shrieked.

David was like young Lochinvar—nothing stopped him, and he flung himself off the mare so rapidly that no one could hinder him at the very door of the chapel, which he entered with great strides.

The animal when left alone reared, and a gardener caught the halter and led it, all covered with foam, away to the stable yard.

Then the onlookers surged forward to get as near the door as possible, to witness what all felt would be a drama taking place.

It was when the words:

“Or else hereafter for ever hold his peace” were being said, that David dashed up the aisle, passing the frightened little bridesmaids, his eyes flashing and his face pale.

“I forbid this marriage to go on,” he said in a firm, strong voice, as he reached the chancel steps. “I know cause and just impediment why it should not take place.”

The guests in the seats were craning their heads with excitement, and the smallest page began to cry. All became confusion. But Laline knew nothing

of it, for when she heard David's voice, which seemed to come to her through space, she had given a cry and fallen forward unconscious, and been clasped in Jack's fond arms.

A scene like this is almost impossible to describe, because everything seems to be happening at once.

The nurses and governesses, in the back pews, had the good sense at once to go to each of their charges, and the little children were rapidly led away back to the house.

Mrs. Greening and Molly rushed to Laline's side, and while Molly rubbed the nerveless white hand which hung limp Mrs. Greening turned on David, who stood there towering above her, like a bronze statue, so still he was.

"How dare you make this disturbance, Major Lamont?" the infuriated aunt almost screamed.

The Bishop who was to have delivered the blessing now stepped forward.

"Let all the congregation leave this house of God," he said, raising his old thin hand, "and let this man who has broken in upon us say his say."

The guests made way for Jack now to carry Laline down the aisle, and so on through the cloisters to the hall.

The head gardener, with the good taste of an old servant, had marshalled the tenants to a distance off, and they were dispersing; so the way was clear, and Jack never stopped until he had laid the unconscious girl on the bed in her own room, Molly following him.

Celestine had gone back there from the hall; at the last moment her courage had failed her, she could not witness the ceremony, which she now felt to be a crime.

She had heard the disturbance and noise of the horse's hoofs, and was holding her hand to her heart when Jack, carrying his precious burden, entered the room.

"Mon adorée—my lamb!" she cried despairingly. "What has happened?" and went at once to her loved mistress's side.

"Get the salts," Molly commanded firmly. She did not lose her head.

"Is she dead?" asked Jack in a frozen voice. It was the first word he had spoken.

They cared for the poor child tenderly and in a few minutes she opened her eyes. Then Jack left them and went back to the chapel.

David and the clergyman were just coming out of the door when Jack met them, and the two who had been friends glared at one another face to face.

“You must answer to me now, you scoundrel,” Jack said sternly.

But the Bishop intervened. “Let there be no angry words before you have heard each other,” he implored.

So Jack and David walked back again into the house, and to the library, and when they had entered Jack shut the door.

“Laline is my wife,” David said, in a grave, quiet voice. “The priest married us in the dug-out before he died.”

“You are lying,” Jack hurled at him. “If it had been so, she would have told me.”

David stepped back a pace, and put his hand to his head.

“There was no proof of our marriage—only our two words—and Laline may have thought I would deny it on my side.”

“Oh, my God!” cried Jack, in anguish, light breaking in upon him. “Go on.”

“I wrote her a letter at Amiens that morning, explaining that I had to go immediately for two months on service for our country, and could give no account of myself until the end of that time, and I asked her to trust me, and to tell no one but you of the wedding, because it was of the utmost importance that no talk should centre round my name, until my mission was accomplished. You surely understand, knowing my work in the War. I conclude she never received that letter. I gave it to the chambermaid to hand to her personally as soon as she should be awake. I had not one minute to lose. I had to be at the Embassy at twelve o’clock at the end of my six days’ leave. It was pretty ghastly having to go, but there was nothing for it, and I knew she’d trust me when she understood—Jack. Is it that she did not get the letter at all?—”

All the life seemed to die out of Jack’s face as he listened. He looked up, though, now, with his honest blue eyes.

“No, she never received it. She thought you had deliberately deserted her, and gone to Rome with another woman. The evidence we heard at the

Ritz was absolutely uncontroversial. How do you account for that?" And his tone hardened, and again he glared fiercely at his old friend.

David did not become angry. The whole thing was growing clear to him now, and great sorrow for the pain his comrade would have to suffer was in his heart.

"I did not know anything about the confounded woman's going until the Ambassador asked me to take care of her. She being his niece, because the Italian railway strike was on. I had only seen her once before in my life, and, of course, left her as soon as we reached Rome."

Jack sank into a chair and supported his head in his hands.

"It is all too awful," he said. "If you knew the cruel unhappiness Laline has been through—and then—at last—it seemed that you had deliberately betrayed and abandoned her, and so I—"

David held out his hand.

"Jack, you splendid chap," he cried brokenly, "you asked her to marry you to save the situation—was not that it? I understand."

David was so deeply moved his voice was hoarse with emotion. Jack looked up now.

"I asked her to marry me because I love and honour her more than anyone on earth. I have been asking her continually ever since we first met—and now, above all, when I knew that she needed protection and care."

A reverence filled David. This was love, indeed. He could not have done that.

"You always said love was devotion, Jack, old man, and I said it was action. I could not have made such a sacrifice—and, because of love for a woman, given my name to another man's child. You are far beyond me. I—I—" but his voice broke, and he could not go on. Jack straightened himself.

"The only thing we have to consider now is Laline's happiness," he said.

David walked to the window and spoke with his back turned.

"Jack you are far more worthy of her than I am. Has she grown to know it and love you? Because if so, I'll go away now. There is no proof of our wedding. She knew that, and of course, I can see; thinking I would deny it, she never even told you. We can say this fuss has all been a mistake. I did not tell the parsons anything—only that I must speak to you alone." Here he paused. Jack did not answer, so he went on.

“Jack, old man, tell me the truth, and if it is that she loves you, I’ll crush everything out of my heart and go at once.”

For one awful moment Jack was tempted. He knew David would accept his word, and not even ask for further proof. But the temptation passed, and he rose to his feet and came over to his old friend.

“I could not lie like that, David, even if I thought that now, having seen you again, Laline would go through with it, I could not be such a mean sneak. I know she only cares for you, and never has cared for me.”

They wrung each other’s hands silently, and then Jack said:

“Come.”

Up in the oak-panelled bedroom Laline was lying on the sofa. Celestine had taken off her wedding robe, and wrapped her in a white dressing gown.

When she had recovered consciousness her one thought was to get Molly to leave her alone with her maid. Celestine guessed this and had tactfully manœuvred Lady Fordbrooke from the room.

Then Laline held out her arms to her Celi.

“Tell me, tell me, it was really he?” she whispered wildly. “Oh, why does he not come to me now?” At that moment the door opened and Jack came first, and David followed him up to the sofa.

Laline sprang to her feet.

“Laline,” Jack said, his brave voice very deep, “It’s all a mistake about David’s going on purpose. He’ll tell you everything, dear.”

And then as the lovers, with glad cries rushed into each other’s arms, Jack beckoned Celestine, and they both turned and left them alone in the room.

Joy is the greatest reviver there is in the world, and Laline’s pale face was glowing and radiant as she nestled in David’s fond embrace half an hour later, when the whole thing was explained.

“But I shall always hate Mrs. Hamilton,” she whispered, with true female rancour. “It is she and not you, David, who made me suffer so.”

Every little point was gone into, and then they had their perfectly divine knowledge to talk over in whispers, and make plans for the future. But that is too sacred to be put into words.

To avoid all scandal and chattering they would say nothing of the ceremony in the dug-out, because it might cast a reflection upon Laline having consented to become Jack's wife. They would just be married over again, as soon as a licence could be procured and all the civil rites attended to, and then they would go right away in blessed joy together never to part again.

"Aunty will be perfectly furious that I am not some day going to be a countess, and everyone will talk their heads off. But do we care?" Laline laughed.

"I care for nothing but you, honey," David said, passionately.

"And you understand and have forgiven me for deciding to marry Jack?" and she rubbed her soft cheek against his dark face in her old way.

"I understand everything," and he held her to him. "The only shadow upon our happiness, my darling, is the thought of that dear old chap."

"Isn't he the most splendid true gentleman on earth, David? When I think of him I could cry."

"Honey, I'll try to love you with the same marvellous devotion that old Jack does, but my nature is different. I am always rather wild."

"I should think you are!" and Laline laughed softly in pride. "Imagine coming in an aeroplane, and riding one of the old Earl's thoroughbreds barebacked just to stop me from becoming someone else's! Oh! David, I just adore you! That's all!"

And so presently they were married properly in London, and Judge Whitmore again gave the bride away. It was the quietest possible wedding, from Molly's house in Grosvenor Square. Mrs. Greening was too incensed to be present. If her niece liked to make such a fool of herself she washed her hands of the whole affair.

But the lovers recked not, they went off down to a Devonshire Manor House to stay for the summer, in delicious, happy peace.

"Honey—my own honey!" David whispered that night as they stood on the terrace in the moonlight, overlooking the sea. "I never believed that I could ever really love any woman, and now you are just the heart and soul and body of me!"

And away upon the deck of a yacht that was steaming down Channel, Jack was gazing at the swirling green waters which curled away from the bows. The girl he worshipped was happy now. That was the glorious thing, and some day, when the stupid outside pain had lessened a bit, he would come back and see her again, and perhaps in the future the child which he had been going to call his would give him its little affection and they would be pals.

And because of this thought, which was always with him, his sad heart grew comforted.

But the lovers in the Devonshire garden were beyond thinking of anything but their own two selves, and their unutterable bliss. Everything else for them had melted into nothingness.

For they had found the only thing which is really worth finding in this old world: True Love.

FINIS

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Six Days* by Elinor Glyn]