

THESE WORLDLY GOODS

By GILBERT FRANKAU

ILLUSTRATED BY C. J. McCARTHY

*There was her husband, gay, irresponsible, away on another reckless gamble
—and there was that other, with his dark, alien face, his world of wealth at her
feet—There was her sudden loss, the crying
need for money to save all these worldly
goods that were so dear to her. That was her
great temptation, and that is the story.*

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It's a quarter to eight, your ladyship."

Dering, who would no more have dreamed of calling an Earl's daughter "my lady" than of taking service at a rectory, deposited her mistress's early morning tea on the little Jacobean table at the bedside; moved silent-footed across the Turkey rugs towards the broad mullioned windows; drew back the chintz curtains to reveal a winter's daybreak softened by that gray mist which is presage of good hunting in the English grass-counties; and departed for the bathroom. Whereupon, the Lady Lilian Broadbent, propping the pillows behind her shapely back, sat up . . .

She was all shapely, was Lady Lilian. Birth had moulded those slim fine hands, those delicate wrists, those arms that outstretched pale as alabaster from the filmy night-gown-sleeves for the porcelain tea-things; moulded to a nicety those long limbs whose outline showed straight and delicate under the lace bed-cover. Birth, too, had moulded that red resolute mouth, those dainty nostrils; tinted that casque of lint-white hair with gleams of gold, those gray-pupilled eyes with iris-flecks of amber.



Misery waned. She even began to feel a trifle reckless. After all, if this were to be one's last, positively one's last appearance in any hunting field, one might as well go one's best.

Yet more than birth—money, education, exercise of the wits and exercise of the body—had gone to the shaping of this woman who, some five years since, when she was “rising twenty-seven and old enough to know better,” had petrified all that was left of the “old aristocracy” by marrying “a chap in the Navy,” “a chap no-one had ever even heard of,” “a chap,” moreover, “without a penny except his pay.”

“That chap’s” photograph, taken in his “number one rig,” stood oak-framed on the little Jacobean table; and Lady Lilian’s gray eyes kept scrutinizing it—as a woman’s eyes scrutinize a man who has failed her love—all the while she sipped her early tea. “Dear old Jackie,” she thought, weighing each remembered feature of that clean-shaven face in the balance of memory; “if only you weren’t such a fool about money; if only I’d known how to refuse when you asked me for that twenty thousand; if only, if only you’d have answered—a wire would have done—my last letter.”

She finished her tea and averted her eyes from the photograph. Except for this not having answered her last despairing letter—and, perhaps, with things as they were in Ireland, he had never even got the letter?—one couldn’t, all said and done, blame Jack. One could only blame oneself. “I *have* been an ass,” thought the Lady Lilian Broadbent, and this time she

spoke her thoughts aloud; “I *have* been an ass. Fancy trusting that outsider, Jeremy C.”

For, of course, “Jeremy C.” *was* an outsider, a rank outsider. Everybody realized that—the moment he bolted to Czecho-Slovakia, leaving his duped partners to face the Receiver in Bankruptcy and his duped clients to settle the uncalled liability on the shares which had been “the safest ten per cent free of Income Tax” in the financial universe. Yet before the bolt, everybody—even Lulu Fraser—had spoken well of “Jeremy C.” “He was at Eton with me”—Lulu’s very words came back to Lilian as she slipped from bed and drew a purple silk kimono over the filmy nightgown—“one of the best chaps who ever rowed in a boat. You take my advice and put your shirt on anything he tells you to.” Well—she had “put her shirt” on “Trans-Caucasian Petrol”; and now “Trans-Caucasian Petrol” had taken her stockings also!

“Your ladyship’s bath is ready,” interrupted the returning maid.

“Thank you, Dering.” Lady Lilian’s answer was mere automatic courtesy; as automatic as her walk across the steam-heated landing to the bathroom; as her bolting of the white-painted door; her hanging up of her kimono; and her stepping into the perfumed water. Her mind, concentrated on the twenty thousand trusted to Jack and the twenty-five thousand (a twenty-five thousand which that uncalled liability had turned somehow or other into seventy) trusted to “Jeremy C.”, refused to take any interest in the morning commonplaces of soap and sponge.

Idon’t know what I’m going to do,” she muttered, plying the towel about her rosy shoulders. “It’s a crash, I suppose. A real crash! I wish I understood more about money. The thing doesn’t seem credible. Damn it,” the swear was vicious as the towelling, “one can’t have five thousand-a-year to-day and not a bean to-morrow.”

“Five thousand-a-year to-day and not a bean to-morrow,” however, expressed—as Jack Broadbent’s wife was gradually realizing with more or less exactitude—her precise financial position. Except for the twenty thousand given to Jack for the pursuit of a fantastic salvage-scheme off the west coast of the Unhappy Island—the money entrusted to Jack could only be labelled “blued in a good cause”—never a stiver of the fortune left to her by her maternal grandmother remained. To pay up her calls on “Trans-Caucasian Petrol” had meant the charging of every security, even Saxerham Manor, to the Joint Stock Bank whose Kilton Parbury branch-manager had

written less than a week ago to say that “owing to the very uncertain condition of the gilt-edged market” (and “what the dickens *that* means,” thought Lilian, returning pensive from the bathroom, “I’m bothered if I know”) his instructions were, “to ask her to take steps for a reduction of the loan account, by at least three thousand pounds, not later than the twenty-fifth inst.”



"He shan't ride with me," she muttered. "He shan't ride with me to-day." Then once again thought went from her; and, tapping Slippers with her whip, she raced him across the grass.

It was now, the little gilt clock and the hunting almanac on the carved oak bedroom mantelpiece informed their possessor, eight-thirty a.m. on the morning of the twenty-fourth; and so far, barring that letter to Jack asking him to let her have “anything there was left,” and a second letter, despatched forty-eight hours ago to her London solicitors, she had taken no steps whatsoever.

Instead of trying to find some way out of her tangle, she had entertained her house-party and hunted every day.

Chiding herself for her folly, she speculated, while Dering equipped her for yet another day of the chase, why the non-hunting nations never succeeded in realizing the fascination of the finest sport in the world; why, to them, the horse was just an animal to be ridden, the fox just vermin to be . . . shot; whereas to her and to thousands in England, fox-hunting stood for the one thing supremely worth while in life. “Pity it’s so dear, though,” she decided, her thoughts returning once more boomerang-like to their financial problems.

Next season, of course—next week, perhaps!—thanks to Jack and Jeremy C., she, whom her own father had “blooded” on both cheeks when she could scarcely straddle a Shetland, would have to give up fox-hunting for good, give up Saxenham Manor, give up Dering . . . Next season, this dark-blue habit, this white stock, these black riding-boots would be relegated—with all her other habits and her other stocks and all her other pairs of riding-boots—to the attic of some horrible little house in that horrible place, London. While as for the gee-gees . . .

But the mere idea of losing her gee-gees was unbearable. Dash it all, there must be some way of avoiding the crash. One had friends, relatives. One could borrow—surely one could borrow enough to save the Manor!

“I beg your ladyship’s pardon”—Dering hooked up the apron-skirt of the habit and held out a newly-ironed top-hat—“but would it be possible for me to have my wages a little in advance this month? Mother’s ill, and I do feel I ought to send some money home.”

“Of course, Dering. How much do you want?”

“If I could have three pounds, your ladyship.”

Dering’s mistress, pulling down the wide hat over her pale netted hair, nodded a casual, “Right—I’ll give it to you after breakfast”; remembered suddenly that she had lost all her ready money to Aunt Emily at last night’s

bridge; altered the “after breakfast” to “after I’ve been to the Bank”; and—the hat finally adjusted to her liking—stretched both arms backward for the maid to help her on with her loose blue coat. Then, giving herself a final pat before the long mirror, she proceeded downstairs.

So far, apparently, none of her house-party had condescended to leave their apartments. Except for a vague clatter of plate arranging beyond the closed door of the morning-room, the house seemed ominously uninhabited. “I suppose it’ll let,” thought Lilian . . .

The idea of letting the Manor was even less bearable than the idea of selling the horses. The horses might find possessors worthy of them. But the Manor. No! She *couldn’t* part with the Manor. Every picture on those lemon-tinted walls, every twist and every carving of that balustered staircase, every filled flower-bowl, every cushion in that square comfortable hall, represented some little intimate thought transmuted into the material. “It shan’t happen—it just shan’t,” thought the Lady Lilian.

Masters, that most excellent of men-servants, had arranged the morning’s papers in the rack by the open fireplace. Idly, hoping for a moment’s distraction, she picked up the Daily Graphic; but that morning the front page of the Daily Graphic was all Jeremy C.—photographs of the “Missing Financier,” of his town house, his country house, his shooting-lodge. She replaced the paper, quietly, in its rack; and went out into the fresh air.

The gray mist of early morning had given way to a mild winter sunshine. No breeze swayed the leafless branches of the laburnums whose Spring-time would make three canopies of drooping gold beneath her mullioned windows. The mould was dark under the ancubas by the West Wall, the lawn-turf soft to her questing foot. She looked beyond the lawn to where red-roofed Saxenham huddled like a village abashed between a fold and a fold of that austere soul-compelling beauty which is the English Shires. And, “I can’t have chucked it away,” thought the Lady Lilian. “I can’t have chucked all that away.”

Sick at heart, she turned from that austere beauty of landscape and went sensive towards the stables. Almost, as she went, the tears welled to her gray eyes. It couldn’t be true! It just couldn’t be true! Something—some miracle—would happen to save her home.

She came to the stables. The blue-faced, gold-lettered clock with the motionless metal hound for wind-vane pointed the quarter-past nine. From the row of gray-stone loose boxes came the whistle of men grooming, the stamp of hoofs on tiles, the occasional clink of a bucket-handle. Familiar, foolish sounds—but to-day they wrenched at her very heart-strings! Somehow she could not enter those loose boxes; could not face their four-legged inmates—the dumb, trustful, trusty creatures her recklessness had betrayed.

By the big oblong trough in the centre of the courtyard stood a breeched and shirt-sleeved man who drew himself to attention at sight of her and gave her good morning. She said to him, vaguely:—

“You’re Sir Albert Bandon’s stud-groom, aren’t you? I hope you found everything you wanted when you got in last night.”

“Thank you, your ladyship.” The man touched at his hat.

“How many horses did you bring?”

“Only four, your ladyship. That was Sir Albert’s orders.”

A footfall on the gravel interrupted them; and turning, Lilian saw the man’s master—latest arrived of her guests.

She greeted him, still vaguely: “Morning, Ally.”

Ally Bandon, hatless in his white-and-scarlet, plucked the half-smoked cigarette from between his thickish black-moustached lips; proffered an elegant hand with a signet ring on its little finger; and retorted: “Hallo, Lil. I didn’t know you were up. What time ought the gee-gees to start?”

“About ten. It’s only eight miles to Chetwynd Hall; and they’re sure to throw off half-an-hour late.”

“Good.” Ally turned to his stud-groom and passed on the instructions. “Pretty useful sort of a day, isn’t it?”

“Rather!”

For a minute or so they stood chatting. Horse-chat. Hunting-chat. Easy enough talk—but Lilian could hardly carry it on. For the first time in all the years they had more or less known one another, she had the consciousness, the acutest most personal consciousness of Ally’s enormous wealth. This short, sleek, well-fed, black-eyed, foreign-looking boy (she had always thought of him as foreign; and always as a boy, though he was her

senior by half-a-decade and already more than a wee bit bald of forehead) controlled millions! He was a bachelor, too—with no encumbrances, not even one entailed estate. Gossip, moreover, laid his bachelorhood at her door. That, of course, was nonsense. Once—in the hectic days before August, 1914—Ally had been in love, rather passionately in love, with her. But the passion had passed with her refusal of him. War had cooled, her marriage put out the fire. Now they were just friends—good enough friends for him to telegraph, as he had telegraphed forty-eight hours since: “Can you put self and horses up for a few days?”

Answering that wire, not a thought of Ally’s wealth had crossed Lilian’s mind. Yet now, now the mere sight of him seemed to make the Bandon millions actually visible. Notes and gold, gold and notes in the Bandon bank-coffers! What was seventy thou., or double seventy thou., to Ally? He had given that for a brace of pictures, for a race-horse, for a charity subscription. One couldn’t beg, though! One couldn’t say: “Look here, I’m in a hole. Will you lend me . . .”

She realized, suddenly, that Ally’s chatter had changed its note; that his eyes, too, had changed. Something in his voice, in his look, struck a remembered chord—a chord out of the past.

“Do you know, Lil,” he was saying, “that I felt quite nervous about sending that wire? It struck me, just as I was telephoning it, that perhaps you’d refuse to have me.”

“Why?” Controlling herself, she managed a laugh. “There’s plenty of room.”

“Oh, I wasn’t afraid of that.”

“Then what were you afraid of?”

“Oh,” hesitantly, “various things. When one’s women-friends get married, one—er—never knows how the friendship’ll go on. By the way, where is the husband?”

“He’s yachting.” Jack’s whereabouts were necessarily secret.

“Yachting! In mid-winter.”

“Yes. The Mediterranean.” She resented having to lie just as much as, with slightly more reason, she resented Ally’s veiled suggestion that her marriage could in any way affect his footing at the Manor. “I say, look at the time. Come on in, if you want any breakfast.”

Bandon, however, stood his ground with a half-serious, half-chaffing: “If I had the luck to be your husband, wild horses couldn’t drag me to the Mediterranean.”

“You can pay me compliments *after* breakfast.” Again she had realized the old note in his voice, the old look in his eyes. Again, stifling resentment, she had parried his attempt at flirtatiousness with laughter. Yet behind her laughter, burgeoned a new thought. Supposing that, instead of falling in love with Jack, she had happened to fall in love with Ally. Married to the Bandon millions, one would have had no money troubles.

“I wasn’t paying you a compliment,” he went on, fidgeting with his boot-heels at the gravel. “I was just stating a fact. Lil—”

“It’s five minutes past the half-hour, Ally.”

This time, parrying something more than mere flirtatiousness, there was no laughter in Lilian’s voice. Her cheeks flushed, ever so faintly, with the annoyance of self-condemnation. Never before, in thought or deed, had she been disloyal to her husband. That money-troubles—sheer sordid money-troubles—should have made her consider, even for a moment, the possibilities of another man, outraged all the aristocrat in her.

Bandon, as though conscious that he had fretted her sensitiveness, dropped the flirtatious pose, and, accompanying her breakfastwards, re-assumed the friendly. Somehow, though, she felt she must be on her guard against him. Unreasonably, she remembered that he was not quite an Englishman.

All the same, she knew herself tempted—abruptly, yet definitely tempted—to ask Ally’s advice about her financial tangle. Some way out there must be. And who could show her that way better than the man at her side?

Almost, as they came round the carriage-sweep within view of the pleasant stone-fronted house, she decided to take him—partly, at any rate—into her confidence; almost, she began: “I say, Ally, what’s the gilt-edged market?”

But Ally had grown newly talkative; and his talk, curiously enough, was of Trans-Caucasian Petrol. “Rotten business,” he said. “You didn’t have any, did you?”

“I?” Once more, instinct warned her against confidence. “Oh, I had a little flutter—like most of us in this part of the world. Jeremy took Rorkton Grange last winter, you know.”

“And let you all in!” Ally’s black eyes glanced at her, sideways, as he spoke; and observing them for the tiniest fraction of a second, it seemed to her that he must have an inkling of the truth. But before her momentary suspicion could crystallize to certainty, they were through porch and hall into the morning-room.

Aunt Emily—the complete mid-Victorian in her stiff dark-gray habit, her bowler-hat on her head and an air of determination on her handsome, high-nosed, weather-beaten face—had already attacked the eggs-and-bacon. Jane, Aunt Emily’s eldest daughter—a bold-eyed bold-shouldered young woman who rode like an Amazon and danced like a hippopotamus—was still at the porridge-stage of her repast; Beaver Mullins, reputedly her fiancé, busy with his kedgerree; Peggy, her slim, fair-haired younger sister, at the coffee-pot; and the Etonian still invisible.

“Morning, me dear,” said Aunt Emily. “Can’t say I think much of your punctuality.”

“Sorry, Aunt,” apologized Lilian. “Ally and I went round to the stables.”

Emily, Lady Swinnerton, accepted the apology; greeted Bandon, of whom she did not approve, with some frigidness; and continued to feed. Beaver Mullins, having wiped a vast moustache with a vast bandana, passed his hostess her coffee. “Shuggy,” Jack’s Etonian nephew, in tight-fitting black coat and canary-coloured vest, lounged, hands at breeches pockets, through the doorway; drawled a nonchalant, “Morning, everybody”; and completed the seven at the breakfast-table.

The presence of these familiar people comforted Lilian. Watching Aunt Emily’s assault on the marmalade, listening to Peggy’s inconsequent chatter and the Beaver’s heavy-cavalry laugh, ruin seemed an almost impossible contingency. The momentary suspicion that Ally knew of her deal in Trans-Caucasian Petrol passed altogether from her mind. Yet her resentment at his attempt to lure her into a flirtation, however casual, remained. “Whatever happens,” she thought, “I won’t go to him for help.” All the same, somebody would have to help; somebody would have to give her, if not money, at least advice!

Breakfast came to an end. They wandered back into the hall. Beaver and Shuggy lit cigarettes; Bandon, to the obvious annoyance of Aunt Emily who promptly plunged her offended nose deep into the *Morning Post*, a

cigar. Talk turned on their transport to the meet. Aunt Emily owned a primeval Ford; Lilian a more or less modern Clement-Talbot; and Sir Albert, of course, a Rolls.

“Supposing I take you and Shuggy,” said he to his hostess.

“You’ll have to take more than two,” grunted Aunt Emily from behind her newspaper. “My cheap abomination has broken down.”

Hoofs on the gravel outside interrupted their conversation; and a moment afterwards, Lulu Fraser, in a hunting rig which would not have discredited “Old Scarlet” himself, trod ponderously across the hall.

“I thought so!” declaimed the new-comer, tapping his rose-topped boots with an enormous whip. “I thought I’d find you all waiting for your cars instead of riding to the meet like fox-hunters.”

“You ought to be President of the Petrol Suppression Society, if there is such a thing,” retorted Emily, Lady Swinnerton.

Half-sister and half-brother spatted amiably for several sentences; but all the time, Lulu’s keen eyes—blue eyes they were, set deep under bushy eyebrows in a plump be-whiskered countenance—kept turning to Lilian, till finally, knowing him, it seemed to her that his apparently aimless visit must have been made of some set and special purpose. Lulu perhaps—she thought—had some news, some good news, about Jeremy C.

“Well,” he said suddenly to the company at large, pulling a great gold turnip of a watch from the pocket of his long white waistcoat, “I must be off.” And to her: “Oh, Lil, I’ve got that new gray out to-day. Come and have a look at her.”

Hopefully, she followed the big man out to his horses! Hopefully, she said to him: “I was right, wasn’t I? You did want to speak to me alone?”

“Yes.” Lulu’s deep voice was rather grave. “It’s about these infernal Trans-Caucasian Petrols. My brokers wrote to me last night. Things seem about as bad as they can possibly be. As far as I can make out, I’ve dropped something like ten thousand. Rotten, ain’t it?”

“Too rotten for words.” The hope had gone out of Lilian’s mind, and her heart was in her hunting-boots as Lulu went on:—

“But that ain’t what’s worrying me. What’s worrying me is that I may have let other people in by introducing them to that damned fellow, Jeremy. You, for instance. D’you remember my telling you that you could put your shirt on the scoundrel?” He looked at her inquiringly, and for a moment

impulse urged her to tell him the entire truth. In a way, he was to blame, responsible. Then she remembered that Lulu, comparatively speaking, was a poor man, and that his honour was the honour of the old school. “D’you remember my telling you that?” he persisted.

“I can’t say I do,” she prevaricated.

“But you bought some of those confounded shares!”

“Not very many.”

“How many?”

“Oh, a thousand, I think.”

“And what did you lose on them? A pound a share? Two pounds a share?”

She recognized from the increasing gravity in Lulu’s voice that her first intuition had been accurate, that something more than curiosity underlay the question, that the old-fashioned code was driving him to offer reparation. The aristocrat in her rejoiced at the aristocracy of him. One couldn’t, of course, accept such an offer. Still, it did one good in such a crisis to know that there were still men of Lulu’s stamp, men in whose estimation money counted less than their personal honor.

“As a matter of fact, Lulu,” the lie came fluently enough, for she, too, had her code, “I hardly lost anything at all.”

“By Jove!” The whiskered face lit pleasurably. “That is good news. The best I’ve heard since that blighter bolted. You know,” confidentially, “I’ve been worrying more about you than anybody, Lil. After all, a man ought to be able to ride his own line in money-affairs. But a woman—a woman’s different. A woman ought to have someone to pilot her. That’s why I’d never have forgiven myself if any lead I’d given you had let you down.”

Lulu, like a man who has put all his troubles behind him, sprang lightly to the saddle of the cobby gray mare which his groom had been holding; and, with a final wave of his hat, trotted off. Watching his red back disappear down the drive, Lilian began to chide herself for her scrupulosity. Sooner or late, (very soon, probably) Lulu would know the truth. Why not, then, have been frank with him? Why not have said: “I’m in the deuce of a mess—help me out!” Incongruously answering herself, “Oh, well, I couldn’t have spoilt his day,” she turned and re-entered the hall.

Bandon, Shuggy and the girls had disappeared. Aunt Emily, already fully accoutred—a sealskin over her habit and a thick veil over her face—was fidgeting, despite the Beaver’s assurance, “There’s oceans of time, Lady Swinnerton,” to be off. On the half-landing stood Dering with whip, coat, veil, gloves—and a cheque-book which reminded Lilian of her promise to go to the Bank.

By now, the two cars were at the door, the hands of the green-lacquered Grandfather’s clock at ten-thirty, and Aunt Emily positively pawing the carpet. “Jane!” shouted that mid-Victorian parent up the Tudor staircase. “Jane! Peggy! What on earth are you both doing?” whereupon the two Misses Swinnerton, chorusing, “All right, mother, you needn’t get the wind up,” came tripping down; and Lilian, seizing the opportunity with a tactful, “I’ve got to go into Kilton, Aunt, so you four had better go on,” bundled the Beaver and his three females into the Clement-Talbot.

Five minutes later, muffled to the eyes in a tweed overcoat, his whip-handle in his pocket and his cigar still between his teeth, Bandon appeared; and shortly after Bandon, Shuggy.

“No hurry, is there, Aunt Lil?” asked that fair-haired and moustacheless youngster.

“No. But we’d better be off. I want to go round by Kilton.”

“Kilton?” put in Ally. “What d’you want to stop at Kilton for?”

“Only to cash a cheque.”

“Much?”

“Only a tenner.”

“Time’s getting on, you know. I’ve got some ready if you want it.”

“I’d rather go to the Bank, if you don’t mind.”

“Just as you like, of course.”

They climbed, all three of them, into the big back seat of the Rolls saloon; and purred away, Ally’s chauffeur at the wheel, down the gravel down, past the Lodge-gates, and along the grass-bordered highroad for Kilton Parbury.

“Runs well, doesn’t she?” said the complacent owner.

“Rather!” agreed Shuggy.

The two men continued to talk, but Lilian, seated between them, took scarcely any part in the conversation. There had been nothing alarming in her last few words with Ally. Yet somehow she felt alarmed; somehow, for the second time that day, it was borne in on her mentality that Ally might have an inkling of the truth. She tried to argue with herself that he couldn't know anything, that even if he did know something it couldn't matter. But the argument failed to still her alarms. She remembered the pre-war Ally, the passion of his voice, the passionate hunger of his eyes. "Alien blood," she thought again. "One can't trust 'em—one can't trust 'em a yard."

The car spun on, faster, faster. They were going in the opposite direction to the meet, and never a horse shewed along the straight gray undulations of the tarmac.

"Some engine!" pronounced Shuggy. "We'll be at Kilton in five minutes."

"Less than that," retorted Bandon.

Their nearness to the town reminded Lilian of the bank-manager's unanswered letter; but, a Bank in her estimation being only a kind of a shop, its manager a sort of superior grocer and its cashier a mere assistant who handed over money as other shop-assistants hand over food or clothes, it did not strike her—even when the Rolls swung down Kilton Hill, past the new hospital, over the railway bridge, beyond the church, and, veering right-handed through the sparse traffic of Market Street, pulled up with scarcely a jar of brakes before the modest plate-glass building of the London, Manchester & Midland Joint Stock Bank, Limited—that she need anticipate any difficulty in obtaining her requirements.



Her hands thrilled as they tore at the curtains; tore them apart.

Shuggy, jumping down, helped her out of the car. Stepping by him across the narrow pavement, she called to the chauffeur: "Don't stop your engine. I shan't be more than a minute or two," and passing through the swing-doors to the mahogany counter, said to the affable young man behind the brass bars:—

"I want a cheque cashed."

"Certainly, my lady." The affable young man behind the brass bars smiled. "May I ask how much it's for?"

"Oh," vaguely, "five or ten pounds."

The young man continued to smile. The Lady Lilian drew her cheque-book from the pocket of her fur-coat, laid it on the counter, took up the inadequate pen, and began to write. Writing, she recollected that various other small items—the stable-wages, her shoeing-bill and Masters' petty-cash book—would be due within the week; and, making out the cheque for thirty pounds, pushed it under the bars.

“I may as well have a bit more while I'm about it,” smiled the Lady Lilian.

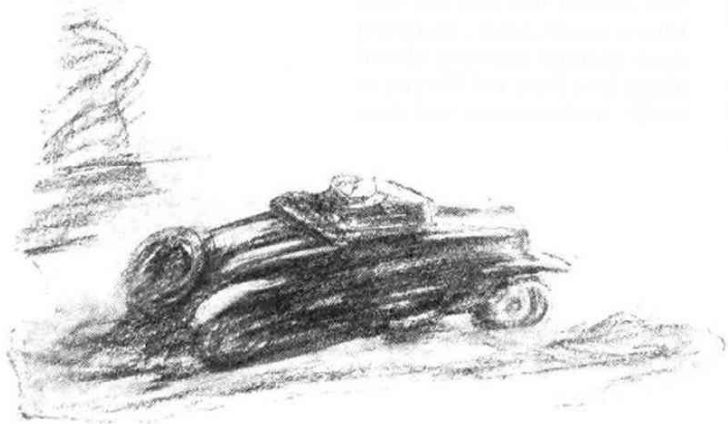
But the affable young man, at sight of the figure on the stamped paper, smiled no longer. Instead, he spluttered a diffident, “If you'll excuse me just for a moment, my lady,” and disappeared—to return with the gray-bearded manager. . .

Noon

It was a very silent Lady Lilian Broadbent who, some ten minutes after she had entered the glass doors of the Bank, came slowly out of them and re-mounted to her seat in Sir Albert Bandon's luxurious car. Her face showed almost dead-white under the hunting-veil. On her lower lip, four angry little marks told where her fine teeth had bitten hard for self-control.

The gray-bearded manager, ushering her into his bare Bank-parlour, had been courtesy itself. Yet the very thought of his courtesy was still unbearable. To be refused, as she had been refused, the trifling amount of thirty pounds on the pretext that, “I'm sorry, Lady Lilian, but my instructions from Head Office are definite,” insulted her every instinct. To be allowed, as she had ultimately been allowed, “ten pounds, and I assure you that's really more than I ought to do on my own responsibility,” climaxed humiliation.

Taking those ten pounds, Lilian had known rage—the rage of impotence against power. And rage continued to predominate among her varying emotions as the Rolls gathered way out of Kilton Parbury.



Gradually, however, rage passed, and the full meaning of her interview with the Bank-manager came down with the stunning force of a cudgel-blow on Lady Lilian's reeling mind. Ten paltry pieces of flimsy paper in her morocco-leather note-case represented the end, the absolute end, of her monetary tether. She was "broke," "broke to the wide." All morning, she had been deluding herself—striving with false hopes to stave off financial reality. Now, financial reality had her in its grip. All her securities, her few acres of land, the house, the pictures—everything of real value she possessed—were pledged and over-pledged to that courteously—insulting imperturbable man in the Bank-parlour. Remained only her car, her horses, her jewellery. Sold, these would barely provide enough cash to pay off her staff and settle with her dress-maker. That done, unless—one gleam of hope in a black sky—Jack's recklessness had spared a few thousands out of that twenty—"He can't have had time to do it *all* in," she thought wearily—there wouldn't be a bean . . .

But the little gleam of hope soon petered out. To rely on Jack—on Jack who hadn't even troubled to answer her despairing letter—seemed madness. All his life, Jack had been a gambler—an honest unsuccessful gambler. That was why he had had to leave the Service. That was one reason why, perhaps—thought Jack's wife in a sudden flash of self-perception—she, also gambler, also unsuccessful, loved him. Did she love him still? Could the unsuccessful love the unsuccessful?

For three rushing miles, Lilian sat wordless. Shuggy's inconsequent chatter rattled like hail-stones on her taut ear-drums. Ally hardly spoke at

all. It seemed to her that her very silence must be betraying her secret to him. Staring straight ahead over the chauffeur's right shoulder at the swirling hedgerows, she could feel his dark eyes exploring her every feature. "Ally knows," she thought. Yet surely, if Ally knew, Ally would offer to help. Only—only what price, what personal price would he demand? Seven hundred years of inherited distrust of alien blood nagged at Lilian's unhappy soul as her little hand clenched on the limp morocco note-case in her pocket.

The car purred on. Soon, they were off the Kilton road and switch-backing for Little Overdine. Soon, they were through Little Overdine and on the last stretch to Chetwynd Hall. Soon, perforce, they checked pace.

Everything portended a big meet. Cars hooted on the macadam ahead of them; cars hooted on the macadam behind. Either side of them, horsemen and horsewomen crowded along the grass. Here, half-a-dozen grooms, whips thonged over shoulders, rode and led at an ambling walk. There, a brace of bowler-hatted farmers cantered fast, pauging as they leaped the narrow drains. Here, a scarlet coat stopped and stooped to light a cigarette. There, a blue-habited girl gentled an arched neck as her chestnut played up to the petrol-traffic. A mild sun shone on bits and boots, on hats and saddlery, on the whole thrilling prologue to the chase.

But to-day, the wayside scene held no thrill for Lilian. Her thoughts anticipated no pleasure. The heart was dead-weight lead under her hunting-stays. She felt cold, miserable, lonely. She wanted to turn back, to hide herself.

But the car purred on—past the young velvet-capped Master, who flung it a salute as he curbed his prancing gray—past the anxious Secretary, black-coated on his sober roan—past the foot-folk and the cycle-folk at the pine-shaded crossroads by Spaxton's Covert—past a long lean man in "ratcatcher" with a black patch over his right eye, to whom Ally called a jestful "Hullo, Devil"—past the lodge-gates—round the long carriage sweep, and so into the stable courtyard of Chetwynd Hall.

Wordless still, Lilian let Shuggy help her from the car. All about her, mounted and mounting, she saw friends. Horse-friends and human-friends! Here stood Panton, her trusted stud-groom, his crab-apple face set as he drew the last hole of the side-saddle girthing; while Slippers, first favourite of her six horses, pawing the ground with one white-stockinged fore, tossed his handsome bay head at the martingale-strap, and

Silky, oldest and trustiest of brown mares, whinnied acknowledgment of her mistress's presence.

Silky's whinnying troubled her anew. Silky—poor Silky!—would have to go to the hammer. In a week, all this—greeting friends, greeting horses, shining boots and shining saddlery, white-stocked necks and white pigeons strutting the lichened stable-roof—would be but a dream. A dream of past pleasures which her recklessness had forfeited!

Panton, touching his hat, stood to the bay's white-starred head, and Ally helped her to mount.

“All right?” he asked, slipping the habit-elastics over either heel.

“Quite, thanks,” she answered, thrusting her left foot home in the iron and gathering up whip and reins. But the words—first she had spoken since leaving Kilton—sounded strange in her ears. “I'm ruined,” she thought. “Ruined!” And then, startingly, “Unless Ally saves me. Unless this foreign-boy saves me.”

Slippers, his head free, hogged his back and pranced out of the stable-yard, nearly knocking over Shuggy, whose Rorkton hireling—a clumsy-hocked black—had just arrived in charge of a check-breeched stable-lad.

“Easy on, old thing,” called Shuggy. “You nearly had me over that time.”

The boy's words steadied her. She pulled Slippers to behaviour and walked him across the gravel onto the lawn-front of Chetwynd Hall.

The Hall fields are always big; but to-day, in her misery, it seemed to Lilian as though every acquaintance who made life worth the living had foregathered on that great stretch of grass which slopes equable to the silver of Chetwynd Lake and the dark patch of Home Plantation beyond. Vic Lomondham was out on his big yellow freak-horse yclept The Mustard Pot; and Naomi, Vic's wife, still a little shaky from her last toss, on her gray Silver Glory. Van Rensalder, the American who had taken Little Parbury Grange for the season, was out—and Van Rensalder's two daughters—and Alette Cavendish with her clean-shaven barrister husband—and Pickie, the Earl of Knossington's hard-riding second son—and Pickie's fiancée, Marigold Somerby—and Tommy Raydon. All these, laughing and chaffing, gave her “Good morning.” Huntsman Rogers, too, his pack waiting at his chestnut's heels, raised his cap.

erfunctorily, she answered Rogers' greeting, the greetings of her friends.

Then, more miserable than ever, she kicked Slippers out of the crowd to **P**where Aunt Emily and her two daughters were watching the Beaver's efforts to control a vast liver-coloured steed who, as his rider, in the intervals of perilous horsemanship, kept on informing all and sundry, had "never seen a hound before."

Seeing her niece, Emily, Lady Swinnerton, who had been mounted a good half-hour, began to abuse, with even more than her usual fluency, the unpunctuality of the new Master.

"Why don't he throw off?" rumbled she with a furious glance at the table by the terrace-wall from which Sir Thomas Chetwynd's liveried third-best footman was distributing Sir Thomas Chetwynd's third-best Port. "A meet's a meet, and half-past-eleven's half-past-eleven, not a quarter-to-twelve. And what have you been doing all this time? Flirting with that wretched man, I suppose. It's a pity you didn't marry him, *I* think. What with income-tax and super-tax and land-tax, we ought to have at least one banker in the family."

At which precise moment, Bandon appearing with Shuggy, Lilian, fearful for Aunt Emily's tongue, let Slippers, already sufficiently excited by the antics of the Beaver's steed, have his head over a hundred yards of turf.

The little gallop warmed her. Misery waned. She even began to feel a trifle reckless. After all, if this were to be one's last, positively one's last appearance in any hunting field, one might as well go one's best.

She pulled up and returned to her party. A camera-man had appeared, and Ally, whose chestnut looked every penny of the five hundred paid for him at Tat's., was posing for him. The camera-man was Irish, and after a little persuasion, she, too, let herself be taken.

"It'll be a souvenir," she thought, as she gave the man her name and her address. "A souvenir of my last day in the hunting field." Then seeing that Huntsman Rogers was already throwing off, she let Slippers have his head, and cantered away for Home Plantation.

As he raced down the slope to be level with his hostess, all the hot foreign blood in Sir Albert Bandon fired to her cantering beauty. More than a hundred women—all splendidly mounted, splendidly turned-out Leicestershire women—were racing that slope; but Lilian in his eager, covetous eyes, eclipsed them all. She sat long-stirruped, square to her saddle, and steady as a rock on the rocking saddle. Her head was up; her

hands were down, her elbows close to either shapely side. The long blue habit-coat scarcely hid the glory of her figure. The tiniest fringe of hair showed white-gold between white stock and black hat-brim. Drawing level, he saw that her lips were half parted. A little of the colour had come back to her cheeks. "She's forgetting," he thought; and instinct, stronger than reason, warned him not to disrupt that forgetfulness by speech.

They cantered on, round the lake, till they made the wooden foot-bridge into Home Plantation. Here, the press was thick. Behind, were a hundred thrusters. Ahead, one woman spread-eagled a white-gloved hand behind her waist. They pulled up just in time to avoid lashing heels.

The woman on the kicker crossed the bridge and they clattered over after her. Already hounds were in, the horn twanging, every ride in Home Plantation packed like a horse-fair. All about them, eager men, crying it a find, jostled for position. Almost before they realized it, hounds burst to full cry, and Huntsman Rogers' horn, twanging once, twice, and again, had signalled "Gone away."

To Lilian, that horn-twang pealed a trumpet-blast. All her troubles vanished. Her one desire was to get out of covert—to get away—to get away and gallop like blazes. But for a moment—for several moments—she could *not* get away. The press in the rides might have been the press of a cavalry-charge. Caught among the group, men cursed, women fumed, horses reared against the restraining curb. Making up her mind that the fox must have broken straight out of Home Plantation and over Station Road for Little Overdine, she wrenched Slippers round on his haunches and began making for the bridge. But the bridge was still cluttered with late-comers. She heard Beaver Mullins' deep voice damning them, and Aunt Emily's breathless, "We'll never get out of this. We'll never get out of this."

Then the press began to break up; and in a moment, she was over the bridge and away.

Now, the turf of the park under his heels and fifty horses ahead (for Lilian had not been alone in her decision to avoid the gates out of covert) Slippers sprang to full gallop. The wind of his going whistled through her netted hair as he took a sunk fence in his stride, whistled against her eye-balls as he tore uphill for the fence onto the highroad.

Faintly, from beyond that road, Lilian caught the music of the pack. The music maddened her, driving all thoughts save hunting-thoughts from her

mind. Nearing her fence, she saw Shuggy on his hireling ahead. "Shuggy won't get over," she thought.

The hireling, however, breasted the blackthorn valiantly enough; and as Slippers checked to balance himself for the leap, Lilian realized that Shuggy had pulled up sharp on the road and was now riding hell-for-leather toward's Spaxton's. "The fox must have turned," she thought.

But there was no time to turn Slippers. Slippers was up in the air, over the fence, over the road and over the other fence before she could do anything. It look her a good hundred yards to pull him from gallop to canter, to circle for a known gate on the Little Overdine Road. Circling, she caught a glimpse of the pack as they disappeared through the high palings which edge Spaxton's Covert. "Dash it," she muttered, knocking the gate open with her whip-handle and pulling up to hold it for the horsemen behind, "it isn't going to be a run, after all."

But even as the next horseman caught the swinging gate, Rogers' horn twanged furiously from the other side of Spaxton's and Lilian knew the fox must have gone on.

She realized in a flash that she must take her own line or be out of it . . . Down the hill, fifty yards to her right, half-a-dozen wise ones were already through the gate at the crossroads and racing left-handed along the side of the covert. Within thirty seconds, that gate would be jammed, as the gate behind her was already jamming.

Instantly, knowing every yard of the ground, she made her decision; and kicked Slippers across the road; over the fence; and into the long field parallel with the high palings through which hounds had disappeared. Someone came over behind her. Turning, she saw it was Bandon. The idea that Bandon must be pursuing her entered into her head. Somehow, the idea infuriated her. "He shan't ride with me," she muttered. "He shan't ride with me to-day." Then once again, thought went from her; and, tapping Slippers once with her whip, she raced him across the grass.

Ahead of her rose a fence of fences, thick timber laced with blackthorn, a guard-rail and a guard-rail on its either side. Bandon, his heart in his mouth, saw her shove Slippers full-tilt at the thickest of it; saw her clear it and disappear.

Leaning back for her life as her horse's hind shoes just cleared the far guard-rail, Lilian knew herself first of the field. The going was down-hill

now—a quarter-mile of grass-going—straight and straight for Little Overdine Brook.

Five hundred yards to her right and already across that silver-gleaming water, the pack were running a breast-high scent. Clearly, she heard the music of them; clearly, she saw Whip and Huntsman's scarlet, as, picking her place, she rode for the silver of the water. Nearer they came to it, and nearer. Slippers, his blood up, was galloping like a steed possessed. She could steer, but she might not check him. The silver of the water disappeared, hidden between bank and bank. The silver of the water reappeared again. She felt Slippers shorten stride for a pace, balance himself, and fly . . .

They were over, over with a yard to spare. But now Lilian knew herself no longer first of the field. On her right, the six wise ones were more than level. Behind horse after horse raced hurtling at the Brook. Turning, she saw the fountain of a terrific toss; saw Bandon's chestnut leap the water like a deer . . .

She pulled to her right, easing pace up the furrowed hill.

Came bullfinches—ditched and desperate bullfinches whose thorns knocked her hat sideways and splattered her cheeks with blood. Hounds were still running—running that breast-high scent. She followed the music of them—followed it blind through the blinding blackthorn, and on up the slope, careless of everything. Behind her, mad for her, galloped Bandon.

Came rough going—ant-heaped untended pasture that slowed the wise ones to a trot. She cut them down; reckless; the blood in her eyes. Once more, the pace grew slapping. Once more, she led the field.

Came timber—a double post-and-rails which Slippers rapped in the clearing. To her right, a woman somersaulted headlong. Ahead, rose uglier fencing.

Came, with a thudding of hoofs and a spatter of turf-clods, Victor Lomondham, his curb hard on the yellow freak-horse's jaw-bone. He shouted as he passed, "'Ware wire, 'ware wire. Lil,"; and headed Mustard-Pot for a gap. She followed him through, and saw hounds again. Hounds and Whip and Huntsman were still going—going like mad—going as though the devil himself were behind them. They flashed across three fields, across the Kilton Parbury Road; flashed on for Middleton.

The gate onto the Kilton Parbury road stood open. Victor, on Mustard-Pot, disdained it, holding his line. She went after Victor—went after him over hedge, over roadway, over hedge, onto grass again.

But there were other lines, easier lines, than Victor's. Through the gate, through yet another gate, raced Bandon and Beaver Mullins; raced, miracle of miracles, Shuggy on his hireling, Jane Swinnerton, the sweat pouring down her face, Aliette Cavendish and her husband, van Rensalder, Tommy Raydon, the man in "ratcatcher" with a patch over his eye, and a dozen more. Hounds swerved to their right—almost levelling the field.

Now, it was steeplechase—a steeplechase of first-flighters. Shuggy's hireling had shot its bolt. The cursing Beaver fell out and vanished. But still hounds ran—ran without a check—ran like a railway-train for Middleton-on-the-Hill. No horse could catch them, hardly a horse could hold. Swishing the first rasper beyond the road, Lilian saw Whip and Huntsman a field and field behind their flashing pack.

She began to think again. "What a burst," she thought. "What a burst it's been." She began to tire a little, to hope for a check. But no check came; and Slippers, still unwearied, galloped on. The turf flew under him. The turf-clods flying from his flying shoes spattered Bandon's scarlet. "God!" muttered Bandon. "God! What a woman!" He had no thoughts for any other, hardly any thoughts for himself. He only wanted to be level—level with Lilian.



"Lil"—he was on his knees now, his hands feeling for hers—"Lil, I love you so."

But always, like the unseizable pleasure of a dream, Lilian fled from him—fled galloping over the perfect grassland—fled leaping over the cut-and-laid—fled cantering over the plough beyond. Him, too, the plough-land slowed to a canter; and he cursed it, cursed himself, cursed his five-hundred-pound horse. "Come along," cursed Bandon. "Come along, blast you." Yet the sportsman in him forbade more than cursing. Only by saving horseflesh could one hope to live out such a run . . .

Beyond the plough, hounds slackened speed. Lilian pulled to a fast trot. He imitated her. They trotted half-a-mile—a mile uphill. For fear of foundering his horse, he dared not overtake her. He could only pursue her, pursue and pursue, his teeth clenched on the bullet of his desire. Thoughts trotted through his trotting brain. "She ought to have been mine," he thought. "She shall be mine. She's broke. Broke. And that husband of

hers can't save her." It was in him to admire her courage. "I couldn't have ridden," he thought. "I couldn't have ridden a yard with that load on me."

He remembered her as she had come out of the Bank, white-faced, biting her lip. He remembered himself a Director of that Bank. "I could have stopped 'em," he thought. "I could have stopped 'em writing that letter."

Then, the hill-top reached, pace mended once more and he began to be afraid for her. The fencing was easy enough—but one might break one's neck at the easiest fence. If she were his—*when* she was his—for of course she must be his—he couldn't let her hunt. Not he! He'd keep her at home—keep her out of this breakneck leap-and-canter lunacy. Why didn't hounds check? Why the devil didn't they check?

But hounds, once down the dip and into the long race-course of timbered ridge-and-furrow that ends in the steep Roman-ramparted up-slope of Middleton Hill, checked scarcely a minute. For there, less than three furlongs ahead beyond a post-and-rails which might scare even the boldest, dark and draggled against the green of the ground, Rogers half-saw, half-guessed his fox sinking; and with a hoarse, "Lu, lu, lu, then, little bitches," capped his pack forward from scent to view . . .

Looking round in that one breathless moment of a breather, Lilian had been aware only of Bandon. So Bandon was still up—up, for all his weight, in the hardest thing of the season. Almost, not realizing the inspiration behind his horsemanship, she had it in her to admire him. Foreigner or British millionaire or pauper, no man who wasn't a man could have come such a pace across such a country.

Then, while the thought was still in her brain, she saw Rogers and the first Whip top that appalling timber; saw hounds streaming to the cap; heard Ronald Cavendish shout to his wife, "Follow me. Don't ride the line;" heard Victor Lomondham mutter between clenched teeth, "All right, damn you, have it your own way;" saw Mustard-Pot shoot up and by; heard van Rensalder's big black smash a rail to flinders, and wondered, for the merest fraction of a second, if Bandon would dare to follow, as Slippers sprang sudden to the gallop, gathering hocks under belly to catapult her skywards.

Somehow, they cleared that leap. Somehow, Bandon and three others—Tommy Raydon among others—cleared it, too.

And the leap paid for the clearing. For three ecstatic minutes, they had the race-course to themselves—five of them—hounds, Whip and Huntsman

barely a hundred yards ahead. The fox was in view. He sank as he ran. "We've got him," shouted Tommy, drawing alongside. "We've got him for a million." The pack was crying—crying the blood-cry. Their sterns were straight as ramrods, their hackles lifted . . .

The blood-cry sent Lilian crazy. She thrust for the last of the timber, thrust over it, level with Tommy, a yard and a yard behind Victor. She wanted to be first. First at the kill! She tapped with her whip, and Slippers, summoning the last of his strength, shot past Tommy's gray. She leaned forward, dropping her hands. The foam-flecks, back-blown from the bay's bridle, splattered her like whitewash. She drew beyond Victor Lomondham, level with Rogers and the first Whip.

Rogers, fearful for his hounds, gave her one glance; pricked both spurs home; beat her up the slope. Hounds, fifty dwindling yards ahead, burst to terrific music. She saw Rogers rise up in his stirrups; heard his "Who-hoop, who-hoop, holla, holla, holla;" saw the beaten fox turn, teeth bared, for his last stand; saw him go down in a snapping torrent of black-white-and-tan; and pulled Slippers wide just as Rogers flung himself to ground, flung his reins to the first Whip, and dived, lash cracking, into the worry of the pack . . .

Afternoon

There is nothing so absolutely certain as re-action. The dismounted Lady Lilian, taking her flask and luncheon case from Panton some half-hour after the kill, was the most miserable woman in the Shires. No longer did it even interest her to remember that she had practically led the field over eight miles of the stiffest country outside High Liecestershire. Vic Lomondham's congratulations left her cold as the open-mouthed envy of Jane Swinnerton, or Lulu Fraser's, "Run of the season, Lil! Wish I'd been up," or Tommy Raydon's "By gad, that was a stinger and no mistake. It's a wonder we didn't all break our necks."

She wished that she *had* broken her neck; wished that she had finished with life while the blood was yet hot in her veins. Now, the blood in her veins had turned to ice—the ice of depression. What would life be without money? Wasn't she a coward not to have killed herself? One could have killed oneself so easily—so damned easily. Just a touch of the reins would have done it. Just a touch of the reins over any of those big fences. Wasn't she a coward, worse than a coward, a fool, to think of suicide when life could be so good, so gorgeous?

But life couldn't be either good or gorgeous if one were a pauper. Rather than be a pauper, one must do . . . anything. Anything—however disloyal—however hateful!

She looked about her at the gallant picture on Middleton Hill—at the tongue-lolling hounds and the self-satisfied Huntsman; at Aunt Emily, puffing and blowing like a grampus while she related her artful passage by lane and gate; at Shuggy, pleased as Punch with his gallant hireling; at the unpumped but still perspiring Beaver; at Ronnie Cavendish, whose concertinaed hat and grass-stained breeches shewed that he might just as well have ridden the line and chanced it; at the giggling Peggy and the scornful eye-patched gentleman in “ratcatcher.” But most of all, she looked at Bandon.

How hateful it would be, how disloyal to ask help of Bandon! Even if he did not have that something, that taint in his blood, even if he had never been in love with one, one couldn't—one just couldn't—put oneself under such an obligation to him. Already, to the acutening sensibilities of her mind, there was something of the over-intimate, something almost of the proprietorial in his attitude. She remembered that he had helped her to dismount; remembered the passion, the old passion, in his eyes. “He still loves me,” she thought; and again, “Hateful!”

The sun, which had been bright all the way from Spaxton's, no longer shone. As if to match Lilian's mood, gray clouds veiled its blurred disc. A chill moist wind fluttered the habits on the hill-side. Slippers, the sweat caking in white irregular contour lines on his clipped coat, shivered as he grazed riderless. She handed her empty flask to Panton; let him put her up on Silky; told him to take the tired horse home. “And mind you dry his ears,” she ordered.

Watching the old man adjust his pad and double stirrup-leather across her side-saddle, mount, and ride slowly away down the hill, it came to her that she would have to find him a new place. For all the servants—for Masters, for Dering, for Mrs. Ramsbotham the cook, for the kitchenmaid and the two housemaids—she would have to find new places. For herself, too!

Yes! She, Lilian Broadbent, who had been born and bred in the Shires, would have to find some new place. She would have to sell her house, sell Silky, sell up and say goodbye to the only county where life was worth the living. Whither should she go? London, probably! In London, poverty

would be more or less bearable. In London, one needn't keep horses, a car, a crowd of trained servants. In London, one could isolate oneself, more or less, from one's own kind. Unless . . .

"Tired, Lil?" Ally's voice, still vaguely proprietorial, completed the subconscious thought-sequence.

"No. Not a bit." Resentfully, her gray eyes scrutinized his up-turned face, the big roan whose bridle dangled over his scarlet forearm. That roan eclipsed old Silky altogether! She who had never before envied other men or other woman their cattle fell to coveting that second horse of Ally's.

Till suddenly Ally's trained weight-carrying hunter—bought, she knew, at a price which only the fewest of the few could afford—seemed symbolical of all that Ally stood for, of all that she might have possessed if she had married him. Till, suddenly, subconsciously, enviously, she began to measure Ally against Jack.

Jack, for all his reckless feckless devil-may-care sportsmanship, couldn't help his own wife out of a hole, didn't even care for her enough to answer her letter. Whereas this other, the finished product of a different race, poised, self-certain, never openly arrogant though inwardly—instinct told her—arrogance itself, both cared for and would help her. Not that *she* cared or could ever care for him. Still . . .

Watching Ally as he mounted, her covetousness and her enviousness turned to fear. Never before, never until that interview in the Bank-parlour—that interview which, strive as she might to forget it, kept recurring and recurring to her mind—had she realized the sheer unconquerable dominance of money. Money such as Ally's was the Power—the one absolute Power in this world. Without it, birth, sportsmanship, daredevilry went for nothing. Not the Jacks of England, not the Beaver Mullinses and the Lulu Frasers, not even the Aunt Emilys, were its real dominators. Its dominators were men like Ally, men with plump, well-manicured hands and black beady eyes and black hair thinning over the dome of high foreheads. In a little while, land-aristocracy, birth-aristocracy, sword-aristocracy would have shot their last bolts—and men such as Ally, with their uncanny sixth sense of wealth-acquirement, would be masters of England, masters of the world . . .

Supposing, then, that one were land-aristocrat born, that one loved all the prerogatives of landed aristocracy, that one's very soul revolted at the mere idea of giving up those prerogatives? Supposing that one were

unsuccessful gambler and wife of unsuccessful gambler? Supposing that one saw no hope of saving anything, even the old mare one rode, out of the wreck one's own folly had made? Wouldn't one, under such circumstances, be wise, to . . . make friends with the Master-folk? Wouldn't one, perhaps, be justified in dipping one's hands a little way into that inexhaustible pool of their accumulating millions? All said and done, one hadn't only oneself to think of. There was the Manor, one's old retainers, one's gee-gees.

Shuggy's, "I say, Lil, they're just off again. D'you think I ought to take this animal home?" wrenched Lilian back to the present. The vortex of her mind stayed its whirl. Answering, "Oh, I shouldn't think another hour'd do him any harm," she realized how far down that vortex had sucked her loyalty to her husband. A line out of a forgotten novel came to her: "My dear man, at heart all women are prostitutes." Was that line true? Could she who, marrying Jack, had prided herself on being above all material considerations, actually have been contemplating . . .

That last thought was like a whiplash stinging her to repentance. As—Ally beside her—she moved off after the moving hounds, the platinum seemed to burn on her wedding-finger. Even if Jack had failed, her heart, her love, all her fastidious body were his—and his only. To him, she had vowed obedience, fealty through all difficulties. The material fact that his recklessness and her recklessness had combined to pauperize her must not sap that fealty . . .

And yet—and yet, how could one face the material fact of poverty? Poverty would make one an outsider. One was an outsider—already. One couldn't feel, jig-jogging, jig-jogging down Middleton Hill on the long three-mile hound-trot to Friars Copse, that one had any right to one's place in the column. The chatter, chatter, chatter of one's friends, the clatter, clatter, clatter of one's horse's hoofs, dinned bitterness, the bitterness of lost material things into one's hopeless ears.

"Lilian!"—this time, Aunt Emily's voice stayed the vortex of her niece's mind—"We're in for a fog, and I'm going home. If I know this country, you won't be able to see your hand in front of your face by half-past-three."

Coming to earth again, Lilian realized her Aunt's weather-wiseness. The wind had died; the sun's disc disappeared. The desperate cloud-grays were one linked slather over-head.

Already looking forward over Silky's ears between the red jig-jogging backs of the four in front, she could see the first advance-wraiths of those curious sea-mists which certain weathers send adrift across the eighty landward miles of Lincolnshire into the Midlands, shewing dun on the high grass-lands beyond Friar's Copse. Already, as the big field, leaving the highroad, fan-tailed out across the little vale below the copse, those dun wraiths drifted closer and closer till almost one could smell the tang of the sea. And, "Blast it!" grumbled Lulu Fraser, watching the pack disappear into the best covert in Rutland. "Blast it! Even if they find, we'll get no run."

Hounds' music began in the covert; but it was faint music, puzzled, intermittent. Soon, it died away.

Half-an-hour passed. The fog thickened. Gradually, gradually as the shadow of a photographic plate blur to the developer, the far faces of the fan-tailed field blurred from each other's sight. Beads of moisture gathered on women's veils and horses' coats. Rogers and his pack issued shadowy out of the shadowy wood. The terrier yelped in its leather carrying-satchel. Twilight settled down like a great gray bird . . .

In that peculiar mist-twilight of afternoon, Lilian found herself still riding with Ally. Glancing at the watch on her wrist, she saw that it was ten past three. "It'll clear in a minute," he said.

But the mist did not clear. It thickened, dwindling the field, limiting the immediate circle of their vision to twenty yards. Beyond that circle were shapes—blurred, fantastic centaur-shapes. Sounds came from those shapes—the jingle of a bit-chain, the snorting whinny of an excited colt, a girl's high-pitched laugh. But within the circle, they were isolated—practically cut off from their kind. He edged his roan to her near side.

"Lil," he began, "I've got to speak to you alone. This looks like lasting. Can't we get away—by ourselves? Lil—" He leaned forward from his saddle; and his whip-hand touched her right knee.

Instinctively outraged at the contact, she drove her left heel into Silky's flank. Silky whipped round. The roan, startled, began to rear. She could see Ally's face, dominant as he mastered him to manners. Once more, she knew herself afraid—desperately afraid of the Power behind Ally.

"Sorry, Lil." He apologized as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "This brute's rather a handful when he's fresh." Then, persistently, "This doesn't seem much use. What about knocking off?"

“All right.” Purposefully, she misunderstood him. “If you can find the others.”

“Lady Swinnerton,” his voice was stubborn, “went back when hounds came out of covert. Shuggy was with her. Besides—”

“If Aunt Emily’s commandeered my car, you’ll have to give Beaver and the girls a lift in yours.”

She would have been less afraid if the snub had angered him; if he had retorted, “Oh, damn Beaver and the girls.” That was what any ordinary man, any ordinary flirtatious man, would have done. But Ally bore with her just as though she had been a fractious child. “Have it your own way.” he said, riding off through the mist in search of the others.

While she waited for him, the fog lifted a little. Lulu Fraser loomed up. “They might have given it a chance,” grumbled Lulu, as he pointed his whip at the homing pack. “It’s not half-past three yet.”

Then Ally re-appeared with Jane and Peggy either side of him and the Beaver fuming behind. “The car’s at Lornham,” said Ally. “I presume your grooms are there, too. We’d better be toddling.”

Following her four guests through the gate onto the misty highroad, Lilian whispered down at Silky’s ears: “Sorry, old thing, but I couldn’t—I simply couldn’t. This has got to be the finish—our last little trot together. Pity it couldn’t have been a gallop.”

The brown ears twitched as though the old mare understood. Moisture, not of the fog, dimmed the gray eyes under her rider’s veil. This was the finish, the finish of fox-hunting!

Evening

It seemed impossible, sitting there in one’s own particular armchair by the glowing hall-fire, to realize that one’s last day’s hunting was over, that one had galloped one’s last gallop, cleared one’s last fence, finished for ever and ever with the finest sport in the world. She kept on saying to herself, “But it isn’t true. It can’t be true. I’m Lilian Broadbent, the Lady Lilian Broadbent of Saxenham Manor. This sort of thing doesn’t happen to us.”

Aunt Emily, in a desperately mid-Victorian tea-gown, was toasting her toes on the cut-steel fender. Shuggy, just back from delivering his hireling at

Rorkton, had flown to the cooling tea-pot. Peggy and Jane were quarreling as to which of them should have “next bath.” On the settee by the staircase, empty glasses in front of them, lounged the Beaver and Ally.

Lilian, wondering how much he knew, looked at Ally. He looked back at her—and instinctively, she perceived that he knew everything; that he must have known everything before he wired inviting himself to her house; that otherwise he would never have dared that personal contact at Friar’s Copse. Since then, all the way to Lornham and all the way home in the car, he had hardly spoken to her. Why? Could it be that he felt certain of her; certain his millions must prevail?

Masters entered, grizzled, apologetic, proffering a silver salver. “The post, your ladyship,” said Masters. “It’s an hour behind time. The boy was delayed by the fog.”

Her hand trembled a little as she took her one envelope. Had Jack at last answered? But the typewritten address dispelled the hope; and idly balancing the envelope between her fingers, she watched the old manservant as he handed the other letters on the salver to her guests. “Poor old Masters!” she thought. “He’s been at the Manor all his life. Born at the Lodge! It’ll be beastly, perfectly beastly, having to dismiss him.”

Masters went out; and, still idly, she took a knife from the table to slit the flap of the typewritten envelope. “It’s only another bill,” she thought . . .

But the document within the envelope was worse than any bill. “Dear Lady Lilian Broadbent,” began her solicitor, “I can’t tell you how much both my partner and myself regret to hear that you have invested so heavily in Trans-Caucasian Petrol. Without breaking any confidences, I may tell you that a great many of our clients in the Midlands have written us on the same subject. We have answered them all, as I am answering you, that in our opinion the Company is hopelessly insolvent—”

The letter went on for two pages; but the purple typescript blurred before Lilian’s eyes. What was the use of reading on? The incredible had come true, utterly true! Between them, Jack and Jeremy C. and Trans-Caucasian Petrol had brought her to irremediable disaster.

Sitting rigid, she tried to see the immediate outcome of that disaster. She had only ten pounds of ready money in the world; and of those ten pounds, three were mortgaged to Dering. That left only seven! With seven pounds,

she could just get up to London. In London, she could sell her furs, her jewellery. Yes, but if she went to London, she would have to break up her house-party. How could she break up her house-party—except by telling them the truth? She tried to imagine that truth exploding like a bombshell in the comfortable hall; tried to imagine Aunt Emily's face, Shuggy's, the Beaver's, when they heard the crash of it. She knew an impulse to tell them—now—at once . . .

But the impulse passed; and, biting her lip, Lilian went upstairs to bathe and dress for dinner.

In her bedroom, waited Dering. Automatically, she said to Dering, "You'll find some money in my note-case. Take your three pounds out of it." Dering thanked her. She fell to speculating, as the maid drew off her riding-boots, what the household would say when they knew. Once again, the incredibility of the whole occurrence overwhelmed her mind. Yet the incredible had occurred; and its occurrence had to be faced!

She bathed; and, her bath over, told Dering—on the pretext that she couldn't make up her mind whether pearls or diamonds were best to wear with her new silver tissue—to bring the jewel-box. She had never been a jewel-woman, and the contents of the box, examined by candlelight, seemed paltry. The pearl necklace might fetch five hundred pounds, the diamond ear-rings and the bracelets two. None of the rings except the black pearl Jack had given her on her engagement would sell for more than twenty-five. Donning the pearls and closing the jewel-box, she pondered whether in order to clear all debts, it would be necessary to sell Jack's ring. For that all debts must be paid in full and at once, she was already resolute.

She was resolute, too, as, her silver train just brushing the stair-carpet, she went down to dinner, that the house-party must be told the truth. "After all," she thought, "It'll be no disgrace. I shan't have let anybody in."

But the mere sight of Ally, standing at the foot of the staircase, the inevitable cigarette between his lips, weakened that resolution. Subconsciously, her thoughts still obsessed with jewel-values, she noticed the pearls in his shirt-front, his malachite waist-coat-buttons. Ally was so rich, so damnably and marvellously rich.

He began to talk with her, quietly, impersonally. "What a run they'd had that morning." "What a pity it was that the fog should have spoilt their afternoon." She answered him easily enough. "*Noblesse oblige*," she thought. "I've got to shew him how *we* can behave."

Nevertheless, temptation—that temptation which had been vague all day—now formulated itself definitely in her mind. Why should she give up everything—everything that made life worth living—when this man was anxious to save her? Obviously anxious! His eyes told her that—even if his talk was all of commonplaces. She began to wish that he would abandon commonplaces; that he would be open with her, name his price for salvation. Perhaps, after all, the price might not be so hard to pay. Even if it were, she wouldn't be the first woman of her class to pay it . . .

Bandon, watching her covertly, saw the blood flame to his hostess' pale cheeks as Aunt Emily, treading majestic down the staircase, interrupted their conversation.

One by one, the rest of the party foregathered in the hall. Presently, eight o'clock chimed, and, with its chiming, Masters came in to announce dinner.

Taking the head of her flower-decorated table, Ally on her right side and the Beaver on her left, Lilian realized that the only possible way of breaking up the house-party would be to take Aunt Emily into her confidence. Once Aunt Emily had been induced to depart, the men, perforce, would have to follow her example.

To tell Aunt Emily, however, would be to tell her whole family. She foresaw, with a sharp pang of prescience, how *kind*, how horribly and patronizingly kind, the family would be to her in her trouble. The family wouldn't even say, "We told you so." They would just invite her to stay with them, one after the other, as people performing an unpleasant duty. They would give her their old clothes, their unprized furniture—a small allowance, perhaps. "Poor Lil—one had to do something for her." How unbearable, how utterly unbearable!

"Champagne, your ladyship?" said Masters' voice at her elbow. She took a glass of champagne. Two glasses. But the wine might have been gingerale. She sat silent, a ghost at her own feast, while the talk quickened around her.

Peggy and Shuggy had started a boy-and-girl flirtation; the Beaver and Jane were continuing their grown-up one; Aunt Emily, her dislike of Bandon in abeyance, was fishing for advice about her investments. "Stick to the gilt-edged stuff, Lady Swinnerton," Lilian overheard. "That's my advice. There's bound to be a big rise in Government securities when all these wild-cat booms are over."

Ally continued to talk finance, and Lilian, the food on her plate untouched, listened to him. What a power Ally had, what a knowledge! His talk ranged the investments, the speculations of the whole world. If only she had asked Ally before taking Lulu Fraser's advice! Subtly her temptation changed its shape. One needn't ask Ally for ready money. One need only ask him to put one in for some spec., some certainty of a spec. which would retrieve all one's losses. He was talking of such a spec. now. "A lock-up! But if you can only afford to put them away for ten years, there's a fortune in 'em."

Dinner ended. Masters brought the Port, the coffee. The smoke of Jane's cigarette and the men's cigars curled blue to the groined ceiling. Still Aunt Emily refused to leave the table; still, Ally talked on. Presently they were all listening to him—as middle-aged women listen to fortune-tellers. "High finance is a game," he said, "the best game in the world. It takes more nerve than fox-hunting, more brains than chess. That's if you play it straight. Unfortunately, though, it isn't always played straight. Men like Jeremy, for instance—"

"Oh, never mind Jeremy C.," interrupted Aunt Emily. "What about this lock-up investment? It's a railway, you said. As a general rule, I don't like railway-shares."

Bandon, however, held to his line; till gradually, following him as best she could, it seemed to Lilian as though his talk, outwardly general, bore some inward meaning, some message purported only for her private ear.

"One can't help being sorry for Jeremy," he said. "He was a wrong-'un; but he had brains of a sort. Mark my words, we haven't heard the last of Trans-Caucasian Petrol. If only the ordinary shareholders had the nerve to hang on! But of course they haven't. Their committee's useless; and they'll be squeezed out by the debenture-holders without a struggle. Unless some big firm comes to rescue them—"

Ally paused, underlining the last sentence. Then, apologizing for having talked so long, he ceased his harangue; and, rising, opened the door for the ladies to leave. As she rustled past him, his eyes caught Lilian's; and there was no mistaking the message in them. "Don't lose hope," those eyes seemed to say. "You're not pounded yet. You've only to give the word and *I'll* come to the rescue of Trans-Caucasians."

Now, alone with Aunt Emily and the two girls in the long parqueted drawing-room, temptation came full-force to Lilian Broadbent. She would

be a fool and more than a fool to tell Aunt Emily, to tell anyone about her troubles. Telling would only burn her boats. And she needn't burn her boats. Ally—had he not practically admitted as much?—could save Trans-Caucasian Petrol. Yes, but at what price would he consent to save it? Wrestling with temptation, she knew definitely and absolutely that Ally's price for saving Trans-Caucasian Petrol would be . . . herself.

She looked at the wedding-ring, at the engagement-ring on her finger. Must she face ruin for the sake of those jewelled symbols? Must she sacrifice her home, her servants, her horses to them? If Jack loved her, the sacrifice would be worth while. But did Jack love her? If only some miracle would bring Jack home to answer that question!

The men came up to the drawing-room and Jane started the gramophone. They began to dance—the Beaver with Jane, Shuggy with Peggy, she with Bandon.

Dancing, he said no word. Yet all the while they danced she could feel emotion issuing like electricity from every fibre of his body. It came to her that there was more than desire in his emotion; that he loved her desperately; that he must have loved her ever since she gave him his congé. It came to her that Jack loved her no longer; that if Jack still loved her, her letter would have brought him home. It came to her that she was in danger—in danger of yielding herself . . .

The gramophone, a repeater, restarted its record. Incongruously, she remembered that the instrument was a new one, that it had cost sixty pounds, that it was still unpaid for. So many things were still unpaid for—the frock on her back, the shoes on her feet! How much did she owe? Five hundred—seven hundred—eight—hundred—a thousand, perhaps. What was a thousand to the man whose arm supported her so firmly? Not even pocket-money!

The instrument ran down. Jane re-set the record. They went on dancing. Dancing and dancing. Subconsciously, her mind visualized another dance—the dance at which she had refused Ally. Consciously, she recollected herself saying: "It isn't that a bit, Ally. It isn't that I don't like you. I do. I like you very much. You're one of the best pals I've got. But I don't love you—not that way."

She remembered the look in Ally's eyes, a hurt look, all the hope gone out of it. Catching a glimpse of his face in a wall-mirror, as his arms swung her deftly round the far corner of the room, she saw that those eyes had

changed. They were hopeful again, hopeful and resolute and certain of victory. How strong he was! She felt herself trapped—trapped in the taut muscles of his circling arm.

At last, the music stopped again, and his arms released her. Masters appeared with the whisky, with lemonade and barley-water. “You girls have danced quite enough,” decided Aunt Emily, from her seat by the fire. “It’s long after ten.”

Jane, obedient, closed the gramophone. Ally began pouring the drinks. “Have some whisky, Lil,” he said. “It’ll do you good.”

Her hand quivered as she took the proffered tumbler and lifted it to her lips. Imaginatively, her eyes saw Ally already usurping Jack’s place as host at the Manor. All the time she played with her whisky, he watched her—watched her like a man obsessed. There was desire in his watching; but there was more than desire—love, and the certainty of love’s accomplishment. Instinct urged her to shun him, to escape . . .

Aunt Emily, her barley-water finished, rose to her feet. “Bedfordshire!” said the jocose Aunt Emily; and Lilian, seizing her opportunity: “I’m tired, too. Why don’t you three men play billiards?”

Ally, to her surprise, welcomed the suggestion, and within five minutes she found herself in her own room.

“I’m safe here,” she thought. “Safe!”

Night

Dering had been gone a good half-hour, but Dering’s mistress was not yet a-bed. Tall and lovely, the pale silk of her hair falling loose over the pale silk of her dressing-gown, her white feet fidgeting in their white swansdown slippers, she stood looking out through the drawn-back curtains over Saxenham.

The fog had cleared. A full-moon burned cold and high over the vale. Under it, the trees were etched ebony against the silver of the sleeping fields. “All that beauty,” she thought, “gone. Thrown away.”

Wearily, she let the curtains fall back and turned from the window. Thought harassed her, pencilling little lines across her forehead, graving little puckers at the corners of her eyes. Wearily, those puckered eyes roamed the familiar room. How she had loved this room. How she had loved

the night when she and Jack first came home to it! What was the use of loving rooms, people? The room was no longer hers. It belonged, as all her possessions belonged, to that gray-bearded man in Kilton. And Jack—Jack had abandoned her in her trouble.

Wearily, she sat down on the divan by the fire. Ally must be still at his billiards. Every now and then she could hear the faint click of the ivory balls, the faint jar of a cue-butt on the floor-boards.

A long time passed. She heard the rattle of cues replaced in their racks; voices; the feet of the men coming upstairs to bed; their doors closing.

More time passed. The house grew utterly silent; and in that silence misery submerged her like a flood of darkness. She felt herself drowning, drowning blind under a sea of trouble. On that sea, floated no least lifebuoy of courage. It had swept away hope, love, honour, every treasure of her prizing.

The flood receded, taking the last of her strength on its ebb. Staring into the fire, she knew herself as good as broken. The fire painted her pictures—pictures of poverty. She could not face poverty. Why should she? There was always Ally. Ally Bandon!

In her anguish, her eyes turned to Jack's photograph. But the photograph by the bedside gave her no comfort. Jack had failed her. Knowing the crisis, he had left her to battle with it alone. Who could blame her, then, if she turned for help to another, to a stronger man?

“What's love?” she thought. “A delusion. What's marriage? A shibboleth. Does marriage matter? Does anything matter—except money?”

A sound, a faint and a cautious sound, startled her in mid-thought. Someone had opened a door. Someone was moving—moving cat-like along the corridor.

Tense, upright on the divan, she listened. The sound came near. Near and nearer.

Now, rigid, expectant and hating herself for the expectancy, she was on her feet. Now, the sound moved no longer. Now, she heard it again. Now, it was just outside the door. Now, she heard breathing, the faint controlled breathing of a man . . .

And suddenly, she knew the breathing for Ally's, knew that he was waiting, waiting to come in. In a moment, he would knock . . .

She had an impulse to spring across the room, to turn the key in the lock. But already, before she could make the doorway, he had rapped. Already, the door-handle was turning. Already he was into her room.

For a moment, wordless, they faced one another. Then he closed the door behind him and came resolutely across to her. He still wore his evening clothes, and his voice fitted them. It was suave, controlled, respectful.

“Forgive me, Lil,” he said. “I oughtn’t to have done this. But it’s your own fault, for not letting me talk to you this afternoon. Why have you been avoiding me all the evening? Why did you go to bed so early? I told you that I wanted to talk to you—”

His very suavity terrified her. “I didn’t avoid you,” she stammered. “What do you want to speak to me about? You can’t speak to me here.”

“Why not?”

“Because”—a little of her self-control, a little of her dignity came back—“this is my bedroom and I don’t choose to receive you in it.”

But he only laughed at her attempted dignity. “Here or downstairs,” laughed Ally, “it’s no matter to me.”

He backed to the door and opened it for her. “The fire’s still going in the billiard-room,” he said. “We’d talk there, if you like.” Then, as though utterly certain she would follow, he passed out of her room.

She wanted not to follow. Once more she had the impulse to spring for the door, to lock it between them. But the impulse passed; and, knowing herself mastered, she drew the dressing-gown about her; and tip-toed towards the doorway. Looking back for a moment ere he closed the door behind her, she saw Jack’s photograph.

Softly, side-by-side, they made their way downstairs. Softly, side-by-side, they tip-toed across the hall, along the steam-heated corridor, into the billiard-room.

The big wall-clock above the marking-board, pointed ten minutes to midnight. The fire still burned brightly under the groined chimney-piece. She said, hating herself: “Don’t turn on the lights.”

He closed the door, softly; and motioned her to the long-leather-covered settee. The room, heavy with stale smoke fumes, nauseated her. She

shivered as she sat down.

“You’re not cold?” he asked, still on his feet.

“No. But I’d like a cigarette.”

He proffered his case, a match.

“Don’t you want to smoke, Ally?”

“No. *I* want to talk to you.”

She could see his eyes in the firelight. Their resolution sapped her strength. Dumbly, the cigarette quivering in her nerveless fingers, she prepared herself to listen.

“I’ve always cared for you, Lil,” he began. “And I’ve never cared for any other woman. I want you to realize that before I say anything else. You do realize that, don’t you?”

Hopeless, a bird caught in the toils, she nodded her acquiescence, and he went on:

“And the other thing I want you to realize is that I know everything, that I knew everything before I invited myself to stay here. So we won’t discuss details. We’ll just say that you’re broke—broke to the wide; that to-morrow, unless you can find three thousand pounds, the Bank will foreclose on this house; and that you can’t find the three thousand because you’ve pledged or sold all your investments to pay up your calls on Trans-Caucasian Petrol. That’s the position, isn’t it?”

Again, hopelessly, she nodded.

“I may as well tell you,” he continued, “that I’ve been waiting—waiting for years for something like this to happen. You see, I knew you and I knew Broadbent. It was instinct, I suppose, that told me to wait. ‘One day,’ I used to say to myself, ‘they’ll get into trouble. That’ll be my opportunity.’ Beastly of me, wasn’t it? But remember—I’ve always wanted you, wanted you so much that it didn’t seem to matter how I got you. When I read you were going to be married I thought I’d go mad—”

He broke off; and she saw the Adam’s apple rising and falling in his plump throat. She wanted to say something—anything to stop him from going on. But he went on:

“We won’t talk about that. That’s finished. We’ll talk about the future. *Our* future. I love you, Lil. I’ve always loved you. When I went to the War, it was only because I wanted you to think well of me. I want you to think well of me now. I don’t want you to imagine, not for a single moment, that I’m trying to take advantage of the position. I’m not. But the position’s got to be dealt with. At once. To-night. Lil,” his voice crisped—“you’ll have to let me lend you that three thousand.”

“I won’t. I can’t.” The cigarette had gone out between her nerveless fingers; her tone was the tone of one already lost.

“Why not?”

“You know that as well as I do.”

“You can pay me back.”

“I can’t—and you know I can’t.”

“Then I’ll give it you.”

“I won’t take it.”

“Why not?”

Every fibre in her yearned to cry out in answer to him, “Because that’d only be the beginning—the beginning of the end. Because if I take three thousand to-day, I’ll want ten thousand—twenty thousand, seventy thousand to-morrow.”

“I love you,” he said again. “I love you better than anything in the world. You think I’m trying to—to make conditions about this money. I’m not. I swear I’m not. If you asked me for a million, I’d give it to you to-morrow. If you asked me to save Trans-Caucasian Petrol—I’d do it if it cost me every penny I had in the world.”

Now, there was tenderness in his voice; and the tenderness moved her. She forgot her fears, her distrust of him. She could only listen—listen dumb to the words which came pouring from his lips.

“Money,” he kept on saying. “What’s money between you and me? Nothing. Less than nothing. Don’t refuse it, Lil. I can’t bear to think of you in want—without luxuries.”

Almost, it was in her to smile. His love-making and his money-talk seemed too incongruous—incongruous as the scene of them, as the smell of stale cigar-smoke, and the racked cues, and ivories in their glass case and the

big Holland-covered billiard-table. Yet the love, she knew, was real—real as the man himself. He wanted her—he had always wanted her—always hoped that one day his money would give him this opportunity. Only now—now that this money had almost won her—love made him repentant of that hope.

“I was a beast,” he repeated. “A beast to think I could get you that way. But that was how I saw it. Even this morning, even this afternoon, even a moment ago, I thought that I could force you to . . . to do what I’m going to ask . . . But I can’t—I can’t. I want you”—he took a pace towards her and his eyes kindled—“willingly. Take the money—take anything you need—and forget it. Money’s nothing to me. But you—you’re everything. I can’t bear to think of you as Broadbent’s wife. He’s not worthy of you. No more am I. But I can make you happier than he can. That’s why I want you to leave him. To leave him and come to me. Lil”—he was on his knees now, his hands feeling for hers—“Lil, I love you so.”

Words failed him; he could only cling to her, passionate, incoherent.

She looked over his bowed head—looked into the future. The future would hold nothing—not even Jack’s love. Why shouldn’t she take Ally . . . and Ally’s money? She said to herself: “I’d be a fool—a fool not to take both.”

But then, suddenly, strangely, startlingly, the words of the novel recurred to her mind. “At heart—a prostitute.” That was the truth—the bitter truth. She didn’t love Ally. Even though he had failed her—her heart, her soul, every fastidious fibre of her were Jack’s! Taking advantage of Ally’s passion, she, with seven hundred years of aristocracy behind her, she who so prided herself on birth and birth’s prerogatives, would be just—a street-walker. A common street-walker! Worse than a street-walker—since those women sinned hungry; sinned, if sin they did, for a mere pittance. Whereas she . . . Shame, self-disgust, repentance tortured her to the last nobility.

“I’m sorry, Ally.” She freed herself from his hands; and rose. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take either the money—or you.”

Despite the inadequacy of the words, there was a dignity about them, a queenliness that dumbed his incoherent passion. He, too, rose to his feet; and they faced one another—their eyes clashing. But now the resolution in her eyes beat down the strength in his.

“Don’t be angry with me,” she went on. “Believe me, I’m grateful—grateful to you for loving me and grateful to you for offering to save the

Manor. But it can't be done, Ally. Firstly, because I'm not," she hesitated, "that sort of woman. And secondly, because I'm not a cheat. Either way I'd have to cheat someone, wouldn't I?—you if I took your money as a gift; and my husband if," she hesitated again, fumbling for the words, "I paid you back in the only way I can. That's the truth, Ally. The truth as I see it. So don't let's talk about it any more."

Then she held out her hand; and, releasing her fingers before he could raise them to his lips, was gone.

Dawn

Miserable, the Lady Lilian crawled between the sheets; miserable, hour after tossing hour, she waited on sleep . . .

But at last—at last she knew herself going to sleep—going down—down and down into a warm and a blissful unconsciousness. How good it would be to sleep and forget—forget, if only for a little while, the miseries of the past four-and-twenty hours . . .

She had gone to sleep. Yet even in her sleep, she knew herself miserable. Dreams—dreams of the to-morrow—haunted her half-conscious mind. To-morrow—was she not seeing him?—would come that gray man from Kilton. There would be nobody—nobody to save her treasures from that gray man. He would take her house, her pictures, all the little things of her prizing. Silky, too, he would take. And Slippers. In her dreams, she could see their head-ropes already clutched in his courteous fingers. And, "Don't," she moaned, dreaming, "don't take *them* away."

She was awake again—awake and fully conscious. Through a chink in the curtains, came light—the first gray light of a hopeless daybreak. She shut the light away with her eyelids. But the daybreak grew, bringing to her unwilling ears the sounds of the stable-clock chiming seven, the sounds of her servants moving soft-footed about the house. Her poor servants! So sedulous, so efficient!

She drowsed again; but now, faint upon her drowsiness, beat a drone as of some giant-bee. She tried to drowse away that drone; to sleep once more. But the drone persisted. Now it became noise—the high far-away noise of a car racing down the Vale . . .

"Phut," drummed the car, "phut, phut, phut." Then, louder still. "Bom, bom, bom, bom." It reached Saxenham.

Some driver, some lunatic of a driver must be doing sixty miles an hour through Saxenham Village. The drumming grew to gun-fire. She heard the hoarse shriek of a Klaxon. Jack's Klaxon! It must be Jack's Klaxon. Nobody but Jack—her reckless, feckless lunatic of a Jack—would take the hair-pin stone-walled turn beyond Saxenham Village at sixty . . .

Wide-eyed, the Lady Lilian Broadbent started up from her bed. Wide-eyed, she flew to the window. Her hands thrilled as they tore at the curtains; tore them apart. She could not see the car. Jack's car! But she could still hear the gun-fire drumming of it. Loud it drummed and louder. Now she could hear his Klaxon shrieking at the Lodge-gates; now he was through the Lodge-gates—racing, still racing, down the half-mile of drive. Now she could see him—her Jack—her husband—bare-headed, his fingers brown on the steering-wheel.

Then the brakes jarred home, the gravel spurted from his tyres, and, looking up, he waved her greeting . . .

She knew, as she heard Masters open to him, as his feet pounded three at a time up the staircase, that her letter had brought him back, that he still loved her, that she was glad—utterly and immeasurably glad she had not taken Ally's money, had not yielded herself to Ally. But when the door opened and he took her—all dust-caked as he was—in his arms, her mouth shrank, shrank pitiful away from the tenderness and the passion of his kisses.

"Jack," she stammered, "Jack. I've got to tell you—to tell you at once. Things are worse—ever so much worse than I said in my letter."

"Worse, darling?" Jack Broadbent smiled above her bowed head.

"Yes. They're—they're just as bad as they can be. We're ruined, absolutely ruined. And it's not your fault, it's mine. Trans-Caucasians have gone phut. Absolutely phut. Even if you had kept five thousand out of that twenty—"

"I've kept a bit more than that."

"It wouldn't matter if you'd kept it all. The whole twenty thousand couldn't save us."

"Couldn't it?"

"No. It'd take the best part of seventy," said the Lady Lilian miserably.

But the Lady Lilian's husband only smiled the more; till at last, breaking herself loose from his arms, she put her incredulous question.

“Jack. You—you're not trying to tell me that *your* gamble came off, are you?”

“Well,” perceptibly he hesitated, “it depends which gamble you mean. The salvage business is a bit of a wash-out. But my bear-account in Trans-Caucasian Petrol—”

“Your *what?*”

“My bear-account in Trans-Caucasians. I sold 'em short, you know. Twelve thousand of 'em—at eight-pounds-ten a share—just before I went to Ireland—and bought 'em back yesterday at sixpence each. Made a hundred thou. clear. Here's my broker-wallah's cheque if you don't believe me. The fellow was so bucked over the deal that he insisted on making a night of it. That's why I've only just got here. He says I'd better put it all into gilt-edged stuff. But I'm not sure. Seems to me one might have a little flutter on ___”

“Flutter!”—for the first and last time in her history, aristocracy clean deserted the Lady Lilian Broadbent—“If either you or I ever flutter again, we ought to be smacked.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *These Worldly Goods* by Gilbert Frankau]