LIVE BAIT

Ethel M. Dell

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Shorter Romances

By ETHEL M. DELL

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Live Bait

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I

"So you are not dancing to-night!"

The voice had that faint inflection of superiority which clings to the Englishman abroad though there was nothing very distinguished about the speaker beyond the air of assurance that went with the voice.

The girl he addressed started slightly, sending a swift look upwards from eyes so heavily shaded by their lashes as to look almost black. Her face was pale, and her fingers played continually with her fan. Having sent that brief glance towards the man who had accosted her, she raised one shoulder very slightly and made measured reply.

"As you see."

With the words she resumed her occupation of watching the gay crowd that made merry on the faultless dancing-floor of the *Palais de Joie*, paying no more attention to the Englishman, in fact behaving exactly as if he were not there.

This treatment, however, did not seem to have any discouraging effect upon him. He remained standing beside her, watching the scene himself with somewhat furrowed brows.

Eventually, with a gesture which seemed to indicate a certain amount of boredom, he dropped down into a seat by her side.

She did not stir at his action, but continued to gaze steadily at the throng of dancers, though the nervous movement of her fingers on the carved sticks of her fan became more accentuated. By no other sign did she betray the fact that she was aware of his proximity.

The Englishman also sat in silence, and to a casual observer he too would have appeared to be watching the dancers, but his face was quite expressionless. He might equally have been completely lost to his

surroundings and immersed in thought. No casual observer would have looked at him twice. His personality had nothing at all arresting about it at first sight. He had always been the same in that respect. As a schoolfellow had once remarked of him after a brief but decisive encounter: “He looks such a sheep that no one would ever believe what a devil he really is till they came up against him.”

It was perhaps somewhat uncharitable to say that he looked like a sheep, seeing that he had the broad brow and deep-set eyes that make for concentrated thought, but he certainly did not look like a fighter, and the faintly ironical lines about his mouth seemed to suggest that his strength lay rather in brain than muscle. It was a somewhat merciless mouth when in repose, giving the impression that the weaknesses of others would not meet with much toleration from him. Yet as he sat there beside the girl who so openly ignored him there was a species of patience in his attitude that was by no means assertive. He did not look as if he expected to gain anything by it.

When several minutes had passed, however, and the dance had been vociferously encored and repeated and had finally come to an end, the girl spoke without turning her head.

“Why don’t you go and find a partner?”

“I don’t want one, thanks,” he replied in a voice as completely impersonal as her own.

She made a small but vigorous movement of protest. “I shall not be here much longer,” she said.

“No?” said the Englishman with polite indifference.

The crowd was dispersing to the little tables that were placed between the pillars and the walls of the ballroom. He reached out as he sat and deliberately drew one of these tables towards him with a proprietary air.

“May I order any refreshment for you, *mademoiselle*?” he enquired courteously.

Again she made that rather desperate movement, then she shook her head. “No, thank you.”

He took out a gold cigarette-case and handed it to her. She did not turn.

“Won’t you smoke?” he said.

“No, thank you,” she said again.

He lighted a cigarette himself still with that air of being totally unconcerned with his surroundings, and for several moments he smoked with placid enjoyment. Then, very quietly, he spoke.

"Miss Despard!"

She started, was silent for a second or two; then: "What do you want?" she asked rather breathlessly.

He smiled a little behind the cigarette-smoke. "I only want to know when I may have another game of poker with your father."

She turned abruptly towards him, almost as if at bay. Her small pale face with its regular features had an odd trapped look.

"Why don't you ask him?" she said.

"Because I am asking you, *mademoiselle*," he replied, with the air of one supplying an unanswerable rejoinder.

Her shadowed eyes went swiftly over him. It was somehow the sort of look that a prisoner might cast over the iron-bound door of his dungeon.

She spoke after a few brief moments of rapid thought. "He is engaged to-morrow—the day after, perhaps. But the day after that—if you would care——"

"Thank you," he said, and took a note-book from his pocket.

She watched him make an entry with drawn brows. As he looked up she spoke again, not spontaneously, but as one impelled.

"I can't think why you should want to play—with old men—like that. I —detest old men myself."

"Perhaps," said the Englishman, and the faint, ironical smile made its appearance with the words,—"perhaps, *mademoiselle*, I am older than I look!"

Her glance fell away from him almost with contempt. She wrapped herself once more in silence while he finished his cigarette.

Then the music began again, and the dancers came thronging back.

Among them was a stout, middle-aged Frenchman, so broad for his height as to be nearly deformed, who came straight to the girl and bowed obsequiously before her.

She made a motion as if she would rise, but, oddly, checked herself and looked towards the Englishman. He leaned slowly forward, encountering the new-comer's eyes for an instant ere he turned his own upon the girl.

"You are dancing this with me, *mademoiselle*," he said, in the tone of one making a statement rather than proffering a request.

She bent her head.

He rose with the unstudied assurance that characterized all his movements. For a moment he looked down upon his rival, not triumphantly, but with a species of half-cynical amusement as though the victory held little that was worth having; then he also bowed and offered his arm ceremoniously to the girl. She murmured something to the Frenchman as she accepted it, and the latter shrugged his shoulders with a smile that fitted his somewhat sensual countenance very badly. Then he was left alone, and the man and girl had joined the crowd of dancers on the shining floor.

II

THEY had danced for several seconds before the girl spoke again, as before rather breathlessly.

"Why did you do that?"

He countered the question with another, the smile of self-mockery still about his lips. "Have I done anything remarkable?"

"For you—very." Her tone was an odd mixture of respect and disdain.

"In persuading you to dance with me?" he said. "Surely there was nothing very remarkable in that!"

She was silent for a space; then, with an odd vehemence: "You didn't persuade me," she said. "It was—a choice of evils."

He laughed a little, without malice. "I am flattered," he said, "that you regard me as the lesser of the two."

"I don't!" she declared swiftly. "I don't!" And then in a different tone that had in it a vein of entreaty: "Oh, why don't you go away?"

"I have only just begun to enjoy myself," he said. "Why should I?"

Her fingers made a convulsive movement in his. She spoke almost fiercely into his ear.

"You have nothing to gain by stopping,—nothing whatever! You are simply wasting your time."

"And why not," he said, "if I have time to waste?"

She breathed a sharp sigh and turned her face away. "You are hopeless," she said.

"By no means," said the Englishman with quiet humour. "While I live I hope."

"For what?" The question was barely audible, but it reached him.

"That is my secret, *mademoiselle*," he answered. "But my aspirations are not those of Monsieur du Vallons who is still watching us with baleful eyes from the corner where we left him. I assure you of that."

She shivered. "I don't understand you," she murmured.

"Perhaps you haven't yet tried very hard," he suggested.

She made no response. Her face remained turned from him. As a dancer she was exquisite. Every line of her moved in complete unison with the movements of her partner. But in every other respect she was utterly unresponsive. Her still white features were a mask of silent endurance. She looked tired of life.

When the music stopped, she stood passive while everyone else on the floor clamoured for an encore.

The man beside her spoke abruptly through the din. "How you hate it all!" he said.

She made her slight non-committal gesture, seeming to indicate that the whole of her environment was incapable of exciting aught within her but the deadliest apathy.

The music began again. His hand was on her waist, but he paused.

"Du Vallons has given it up. We will go outside," he said.

She accompanied him, unprotesting. They passed through a side-door and came out into a cold flood of moonlight. His hand had found her arm and held it lightly, but with a certain authority. They went down some stone steps and found a tinkling fountain that bubbled from the fantastic figure of a faun.

The music died away behind them, and in its place came the soft wash of the sleeping Mediterranean. He guided her to the very edge of the fountain, and here in the grotesque shadow of a great palm she sat down on its raised rim and waited.

The tinkle of the fountain and the deeper rush of the sea filled in the silence.

The man lighted another cigarette, standing with one foot on the marble. He looked down deliberately upon the girl's smooth head, but her face, as before, remained averted.

He spoke at length very quietly, with a remote kindliness. "Miss Despard, why don't you give it up?"

She stirred, but she did not lift her head. "Give what up?" she said half-sullenly.

"This life you lead," he made unmoved reply. "This life you hate so much."

Her head remained bent; she seemed to be gazing into the crystal depths of the moonlit water. "I don't understand you," she said. "What other life could I lead?"

He did not answer her directly. "You are an English girl," he said. "This foreign atmosphere does not suit you."

"My father is French," she said with a certain obstinacy.

"I am not talking of your father," he said.

"I know." She spoke with a sort of dull resentment. "There is so little that can be said of him, except that he encourages you to gamble beyond your means."

"And permits us to console ourselves with his daughter's company when the game is over," he pointed out. "That, I take it, is Monsieur du Vallons' high-souled object at the present moment, is it not?"

"And what is yours?" she flung at him, dashing her hand into the water with a force that sent up a shower of spray that splashed him as he stood.

He did not move or betray any surprise at her action. "I have already told you," he said, "that du Vallons' aims and my own are not identical. His record is well-known and not of a particularly savoury description."

"You are—old-fashioned, Mr. Wroxted!" She uttered his name for the first time with bitter contempt. "I wonder you stoop to frequent any place so cosmopolitan—so Bohemian—as my father's villa."

"I think it is you who stoop in receiving me," he said, with a wry hint of humour.

She thrust her fingers again into the water. "I can't imagine why you come," she said, her voice low and resentful. "You have no money, and you are not like the rest—a born gambler."

"Thank you, *mademoiselle*!" he said lightly. "I think that is the first compliment you have paid me. But may not a man be attracted by that which is above money—or gambling?"

She uttered a hollow laugh. "Those are the kind that come but do not stay," she said.

"I am staying," said Wroxted simply.

She looked up at him suddenly, and her dark eyes glowed with a curious fire. "You are a fool!" she said.

He smiled a little. "A matter of opinion!" he said.

"It's everyone's opinion, anyway." She flung the words like a challenge. "You have no money, yet you come to be fleeced. Can't you see that it isn't you that we want? Can't you leave this game to the old men who don't matter—who don't even care? What is the good of your coming? You will only lose the little you have got!"

He shifted his position slightly, the better to look into her face. "Plain speaking, *mademoiselle*!" he observed. "I thought we should get down to it sooner or later. But—if I am a fool, and I am quite willing to admit the possibility—what does it matter to you? If I elect to come and be—fleeced, why should you care? Surely every little helps!"

She got to her feet abruptly and stood before him. Her hands were clenched, almost as if she were on the verge of violence.

"Oh, can't you see?" she said again, and her voice was shaking. "Can't you see? You are a man who has fought for his country. You are a man who counts. Do you think I can stand and see you—fool as you are—make a second sacrifice of yourself? Do you think I will be the bait for such as you? Oh, go away! Go back to your people, and play your harmless tennis and your golf, and keep the little you have left for the home you'll be wanting

some day! Don't get drawn into this net! It's only meant for the old men—like du Vallons—who have lived their lives and don't matter to anyone."

"I see," said Wroxted. "They are fair prey, being old and senile. You are willing to be the bait for them, knowing full well that the hook will strike before they are able to close their jaws. I congratulate you, *mademoiselle*, on your high principles. They do you credit."

Her hands were still clenched, her nostrils dilated. "Will you go?" she breathed.

He continued to smile, as though he would provoke her to desperation. "Certainly, if you desire it, *mademoiselle*!" he said. "But, equally certainly, I shall return. Who knows? I may yet succeed in swallowing the bait without being caught by the hook!"

He swung round with the words. He could have devised no insult more cutting. For a few seconds he remained so, with his back to her, almost as if he waited for her to strike. Then, as she stood, speechless, quivering, but passive, very calmly he walked away without turning his head.

As for the girl, she watched him out of sight ere she sank down again upon the stone edge of the pool into which the fountain fell, and beat her clenched fists in impotent agony upon her bowed head.

III

On a sharp slope of the coast not far from the gay Mediterranean town of Monte Garda was a little shining villa with climbing pink roses and bright green shutters, set in a garden of flowers so dazzling and abundant as to be almost beyond belief. It had its own steep flight of steps down to the beach, whereon the tideless sea made its endless music in and out of the rocks with a slumbrous monotony, and bright-eyed rats peeped and scurried among the crevices.

It was a very beautiful scene, with the type of beauty depicted on the back-cloth of a theatre, and there had been a time when it had seemed to Stephanie Despard the acme of all that could be desired. She looked upon it now as one regards the gaudy blossoms of a poisonous plant. Its very richness seemed to add to its deadliness. When she sat in the little shelter smothered with purple flowers which stood at the top of the steps, her eyes

always looked out to the sky-line with inexpressible longing. She did not see the splendours near at hand.

It was so on the morning following the dance at the *Palais de Joie*. With lagging feet she came to the shelter, shielding herself from the blinding noonday sun with a white umbrella which she furled as she entered. Then, sinking down upon a *chaise longue* that was covered with cushions, she turned her tragic eyes upon the sea. It was so brilliant that it made them ache, but still she gazed in a kind of dull despair, almost as if physical pain were a welcome vent to mental stress. Her face was perfectly colourless. In her simple morning garb she looked younger than she had looked in the glare of the ballroom, scarcely more than a child indeed, save for the utter tragedy of her eyes, the unchanging stillness of her pose.

The sea murmured among the rocks below her, the only sound in all the world. All about her was the flamboyant riot of flowers, but they were motionless as a picture; and she sat motionless among them—a thing without life, a pale statue of girlhood with eyes that saw not.

There came another sound at last through the magic garden—a halting footfall and the tap of a stick on the path. She moved, and her eyes came back from the horizon. She turned her head, but stiffly, as if with effort.

An elderly man, grey and gaunt, but dressed with scrupulous nicety, came slowly round the side of the shelter and entered. He moved with dignity despite the fact that he was crippled, one leg being considerably shorter than the other. As the girl rose, he stretched out his free hand and laid it on her shoulder.

"Well, Stephanie," he said, "and how many fat fish did you sweep into the net for me last night?"

He spoke English with a slight accent but with absolute ease. His eyes, grey and shrewd, looked upon her with a species of chilly kindness. It was plain from his attitude that he regarded her as immensely his inferior.

She did not shrink from his touch, neither did she respond to it. She merely stood passive as she answered him.

"I met very few people at the *Palais*. M. du Vallons was there—of course. I did not dance with him. He will probably come to-night to learn the reason."

"Ah!" He laughed a little, softly, somehow with the effect of a *gourmand* smacking his lips. "That was quite a clever move, my child. You did not insult him, I hope?"

"No. I didn't speak to him." She spoke indifferently. "I didn't dance very much. I was tired."

"You are not well?" His look became suddenly very keen as it dwelt upon her.

She made a slight movement of withdrawal. "Yes, I am quite well. But I never care much for the heat."

"Was Dudley Wroxted there?" he asked abruptly.

A tinge of colour warmed the waxen pallor of her face. "Yes," she said briefly.

"Ah!" He spoke as one enlightened. "And is he also coming to-night?"

"No." She turned from him and gazed again over the almost unbearably blue expanse of sea. "I didn't think you would want him. So I told him not till the day after to-morrow. I doubt if he comes again at all."

Her voice did not carry much conviction; it only sounded inexpressibly dreary. Her companion sat down in a patch of shadow and took off his hat. His grey face, aquiline, aristocratic as it was, had a curiously furtive, calculating look.

"Yes," he said, after a moment, "I think he will come again, *ma chère*. He is attracted by you—as they all are. When he comes—if he comes—you will be a little gracious to him. Is that understood?"

She did not look at him. "Why?" she said.

"Because I think it advisable." He raised a delicate hand and stroked his imperial with a meditative air. "He has no money; of that I am aware. But he has influence. He is a cousin of Lord Bramstead. He may prove of value to us."

"He will do nothing of the kind." Her voice sounded automatic, but it grated a little as though the machinery that produced it did not run quite smoothly. "He is an Englishman and he has fought for his country. He is not lawful prey—like these others."

"My dear Stephanie! What absurdity is this?" A species of dignified reproof was in the question. "I only desire to make him welcome in my house. Surely there is no harm in that!"

"None. But I will not be a party to it." She spoke with cold resolution, her eyes unswervingly upon the horizon. "He is not like the others. He is not to be treated in the same way."

“Stephanie, you forget yourself!” The words had a sudden cutting quality that was like the flick of a whip. “Since when have you taken it upon yourself to decide whom I am to entertain?”

She rested her chin on her hand, still staring before her with a kind of dull obstinacy. “I am not deciding for you; I am deciding for myself,” she said. “I am not going to be a party to it, that’s all.”

Silence followed her words, a heavy, intense silence like the brooding stillness before a storm. Then, with an incredibly swift movement, a claw-like hand shot out and fastened upon the girl’s bare arm.

“Do you dare to defy me?” said Gustave Despard.

His grip was cruel and she made a sharp, instinctive movement to free herself. Then with an odd, fatalistic gesture she submitted. Her eyes came to his, eyes of deepest, darkest blue whose shadowed depths held something unfathomable, something unassailable.

“I’d be a fool to do it, wouldn’t I?” she said.

His hold tightened with brutal intention till the long nails actually pierced her flesh. “You would not do it—twice,” he said, with great distinctness.

She did not flinch, but her lips parted a little, showing her white teeth clenched. Her face went slowly scarlet.

He spoke again sharply, in those whip-like tones. “Is it enough? Or do you need any more?”

She did not answer though the blood had begun to ooze between his fingers. The colour faded from her face more quickly than it had come. But still she did not flinch.

For a space he held her so, then with a snarling laugh he let her go. “If you want more, you shall have it,” he said. “I have never endured rebellion from you, and I never will. If Dudley Wroxted comes——”

She turned her head suddenly, like an alert animal who hears some sound inaudible to others. “He is here,” she said, and rose with the words, throwing a light scarf she carried over her wounded arm as she did so.

The Frenchman swore under his breath, but he did not question her statement. His attitude became expectant as he waited for the visitor to appear.

Someone was coming through the garden with a light, decided tread that seemed curiously out of keeping with such semi-tropical surroundings, someone who moved as if he had a purpose to fulfil. Silently the two in the arbour awaited him.

He came into sight, the medium-sized, undistinguished Englishman who had danced with Stephanie the night before. He was dressed in flannels and wore coloured glasses to protect his eyes from the glare of the sun.

Entering the shelter, he bowed briefly, first to the girl and then to the elderly Frenchman, who returned the salute more ceremoniously, but without rising.

"Your man told me I should find you here," he remarked. "I was passing and thought I would give myself the pleasure of a look-in."

"The pleasure is mine," declared Monsieur Despard. "Pray sit down! May I offer you any refreshment?"

"No, nothing, thanks." Wroxted remained on his feet. He was smiling a little as he looked at Stephanie. "I never take anything—except exercise—in the morning. I am really on my way to the *Palais* tennis-courts, and I thought that possibly your daughter might be in the mood for a game."

Stephanie spoke at once. "Not in this heat, thank you. I am afraid I have not energy enough for that."

Monsieur Despard waved his hand. "My daughter is a little fatigued after the dance, Mr. Wroxted. No doubt she will be delighted to play with you another time."

"I quite understand," said Dudley Wroxted, and still his look dwelt on the girl. "Perhaps this evening—if you are not engaged, *mademoiselle*! Or I will take you for a motor-run if you prefer it."

She faced him with statuesque unresponsiveness, but before she could speak, M. Despard spoke for her.

"I am sure that will give her great pleasure," he said. "It is most kind of you to suggest it. And afterwards, *monsieur*, you will join us for dinner, I hope, and a little game of poker."

"Thank you," said Wroxted. "If I might come in after dinner? I am staying with some cousins at the Bourbon. They usually go to the Casino afterwards."

M. Despard's eyes shone with a crafty gleam. "Perhaps your cousins—some of them—all of them—might care to accompany you," he suggested. "It is a change from the Casino—a quiet game of cards in a private house."

Wroxted's smile had a faintly satirical twist as he made reply. "You are very good, sir, but I imagine they are too keen on the Casino at present to be tempted elsewhere. Still, if I may come——"

"With pleasure!" declared M. Despard. "M. du Vallons is expected. I believe you have met him here before. And a M. de Brissac whom you have not met. And my daughter will play her guitar to us in the garden. It is a very romantic instrument—the guitar."

"I will certainly come," said Wroxted, and he addressed the silent figure in the background. "But first, *mademoiselle*, I shall hope to call for you this evening at five and take you for a run."

She made a sudden movement as though she suppressed a shudder, and the scarf slipped from her arm.

In a moment swiftly he had picked it up and returned it to her. And then very sharply he wheeled.

"I will be going now," he said to the Frenchman. "Thanks for your invitation!"

And with that he went away as he had come, with the quick, decided tread of one who knows exactly where he is going and wherefore.

IV

When Dudley Wroxted presented himself at the door of the Villa Belle Vue that evening in the two-seater he had hired for the occasion, he found Stephanie already waiting for him on the steps.

She came down to him with little more than a gesture and took her place beside him with barely a word.

He on his part spoke little beyond a brief greeting, turning his car towards the road that ran along the coast without pausing to consult her. It was a very bad road, and a single railway line occupied one side of it in the casual fashion of the South. Trains were infrequent, and signals were wholly absent.

The sun was still shining brilliantly though with somewhat abated force. The sea had lost its fierce blue and now lay, a quivering sheet of palest aquamarine. The sky above it was of a slightly deeper hue, quite flawless, like the unbroken waters of a pool. Beyond the bay rose the blue mountains with their snow-capped summits, remote, mysterious, dim as the vision of another world. The air was still and heavy with the scent of flowers.

The girl sat in the car, withdrawn and silent. Her grave, aloof eyes gazed straight before her. She had the look of one steeled for endurance.

They had travelled two or three miles before Wroxted spoke, deliberately, as one choosing his words. “I must apologize for bringing you out here against your will, Miss Despard. But since I failed to find you alone this morning, I could think of no other way.”

She turned towards him very slightly. “Why did you want to find me alone?” she said.

They were drawing near to a blue inlet around which the road curved sharply. The rocky beach was barely twelve feet below its level. Wroxted brought the car to a standstill.

“Shall we get out here?” he suggested.

She seemed to hesitate for an instant, and then complied without protest.

He left the car at the side of the road and crossing the line led the way to the shore.

“We’re alone here anyway,” he remarked.

The sea was washing softly round the rocks with a faint murmuring sound, and very far away was the vague throbbing of a train. The way was steep, and he held out a hand to help her; but she did not avail herself of it.

They reached the beach together, and Wroxted stood still. He seemed to be contemplating something almost at his feet, for his look was very intent.

Eventually he turned to her quietly, but with resolution. “Now, Miss Despard, I will tell you exactly why I have brought you here. As you know, I have been to your father’s house several times, and it is through no fault of yours that I have done so. I saw from the first that from your point of view I was unwelcome. I don’t think you quite trusted me. Anyhow, you made it very obvious that, however it might be with others, you had no use for me.”

He paused. She heard him with averted face, but he saw by the nervous working of her fingers that she was listening. He continued with growing

determination.

"That fact did not deter me from continuing my visits, because somehow I could not feel that the mere fact that I was not a rich man was the cause of your antipathy. What you said to me last night has in a measure opened my eyes. You are troubled with scruples on my account. And now I am coming to the point. Miss Despard, I am troubled with scruples on yours."

There was a hint of kindness in his voice despite its firmness. His eyes, very shrewd and piercing, were upon her; but she refused persistently to meet them. Her silence was stubborn, almost hostile.

"Yes," he said after a moment, "I expected that. You think that by silence you can make your position impregnable. But——"

He laid his hand unexpectedly upon her arm, and she recoiled with a cry that escaped her unawares.

"I am sorry," he said. "I want to see that injury, please."

She faced him with eyes of fierce rebellion. "Mr. Wroxted, you—you ——"

His hand held her wrist. "Miss Despard, no doubt I am everything you say; but—I am going to see that arm of yours. I know a little about these things. Please, you will be sensible on this point if on no other."

With his other hand he was gently putting back her sleeve. She made as if she would resist him, and then very suddenly she yielded.

"It's nothing—nothing at all," she said, with quivering lips.

She had tied a handkerchief over the wound. He removed it very carefully, with skilled fingers.

At the end of a considerable pause he spoke briefly. "I expected this. I have brought a dressing in the car. Sit down on that rock while I fetch it!"

She obeyed him without demur. For the moment there seemed to be no other course. He left her, and she sat staring before her as if dazed. When he came back, she suffered him to do exactly as he would, her eyes fixed and unflinching.

As he bound up her arm again, for the first time she addressed him voluntarily. "You are a doctor, then?"

He raised his eyebrows slightly. "A surgeon of sorts. I had some practice during the War. Anyhow, I think I may claim to be qualified to treat an

injury of this sort. It may simplify matters if I tell you that I know exactly how it was caused."

She shivered, and drew her cloak of silence about her once more.

He stood looking down at her. "Now, Miss Despard," he said very quietly after a few moments, "I know what your position is. You are a tool—a cat's paw. You have got drawn into this game against your will. You are not going to deny that, are you?"

She neither denied nor affirmed. She only sat mute before him, waiting, it seemed, for the ordeal to be over.

He went on steadily. "I can't expect you to trust me offhand. I've done nothing to make you. But I want you—if you can—to try and believe that my motives are straight. I've never made love to you—like du Vallons for instance."

Her lips parted, and she drew a hard breath; but she said nothing.

He continued, undeterred. "Last night you were decent enough to warn me against your father, and I behaved like a cad, mainly because you associated yourself with his schemes. I wonder if you can bring yourself to forgive me for that."

She spoke at last, not looking at him. "Oh, if you would only go away!" she said.

"I'm sorry," said Wroxted. "I can't. I've found out too much about you to leave you at the mercy of this man. I'm going to get you out of this—if you'll let me."

She shook her head. "No."

He went on, as if she had not spoken. "I can offer you a home and an honest living if you'll take it. You'll have to trust me, but it's a choice of evils. I think I mentioned that I was staying with cousins at the Bourbon. You have possibly heard of Lord Bramstead?"

She threw him a sudden glance. "My father told me you were related to him," she said.

Wroxted's cynical smile appeared for an instant. "No doubt he would like to meet him," he said. "I gathered that. But, between you and me, I don't think it would be a very profitable encounter—from your father's point of view. Bramstead has a reputation for being fairly astute."

"He would need to be," she said.

“I am aware of that.” The grimness returned to Wroxted’s face. “But I think he might possibly rise to the occasion. However, that is not the point at the moment. I only mentioned the relationship to try to convince you that I belong to a respectable family. I may seem eccentric to you, but at any rate I am honest in the ordinary sense of the word.”

“Yes, you are eccentric.” She spoke with abrupt weariness. “I can’t imagine why you are taking this trouble. It isn’t an atom of good.”

“Why not?” he said.

She made a gesture of hopelessness. “It is impossible to explain. I have not confided in you. I never confide in anyone. I only tried to warn you, because you were rather different from the rest.”

“I appreciate the ‘rather’,” said Wroxted. “And I also appreciated the warning. You don’t make a very good accomplice, Miss Despard. That is why I——”

She interrupted him. “No, I am not good at anything, neither loyal to my father nor loyal to myself. You are trying to befriend someone of whom you know nothing whatever, and who is utterly unworthy of your friendship. And you are making a very great mistake.” She got up with the words. “I think we have discussed this matter enough. Let us go back!”

He put out a hand to stay her. “We have only just begun to discuss it. Miss Despard, stop! I have no intention of letting the matter drop here. I am out to help you, and if you won’t accept my help I shall find a means of compelling you. Be sure of that! I am not going to leave you alone—knowing what I know.”

She stiffened at his words. “You will find it rather difficult to help me against my will,” she said.

“Difficult perhaps; but not impossible.” His resolution met her own with indomitable force. “You won’t shake me off as easily as that. You haven’t confided in me, true. But I know without that that you have been tricked into this business, and now you don’t know which way to turn to escape. Isn’t that the truth?”

“I won’t answer you!” she said, her white face quivering. “You have no right—no right whatever—to question me!”

“None,” said Dudley Wroxted. “But, believe me, that is not going to make any difference. I told you last night that I might succeed in swallowing the bait without being hooked. To-night you shall see me do it.”

She made a scornful gesture. “Perhaps—after to-night—you will realize that nothing that you can do or say will make the smallest difference to me.”

He looked at her, and though his eyes were hard with determination, they held a certain admiration as well. “I am realizing a good many things about you already, Miss Despard,” he said. “But that is not one of them.”

She turned from him in silence and began to walk back to the car.

V

THE soft notes of a guitar fell with a fantastic sweetness upon the night air like drops of liquid melody, mingling subtly with the low washing sound of the sea. The moon shone dazzlingly upon the little white villa and its surrounding wilderness of flowers. There seemed to be magic abroad, for there was something almost unearthly in the breathless beauty of the garden —something which those wild notes seemed to express as though a spirit had uttered them. It was as if the whole world paused to listen.

There was a room in the little villa which shone, rose-lighted, like a framed picture above the steps of the garden. Its casement-windows were thrown wide to the night and within four men were visible, seated around a card-table. They played earnestly, speaking only when necessary and then in low tones. None appeared to pay any attention to the soft-dropping music outside. The two who sat sideways to the window were stout and middle-aged, and the one who faced it was old and bore himself with dignity. Gustave Despard’s dignity was his strong point; his armour, as it were, against all attack. He commanded respect wherever he went.

The man with his back to the window was a good deal younger than any of his companions. His black head was in vivid contrast to the bald ones on each side of him and the silvery grey one of M. Despard. He played with grave concentration; and whereas the other two guests partook freely of refreshment from a table near by he drank nothing, seeming to resent any interruption to the game.

An accumulation of notes at M. Despard’s left hand testified to the direction in which fortune was setting, but his refined features betrayed no satisfaction thereat. They were perfectly controlled and emotionless. Du Vallons and de Brissac on the other hand displayed a certain restlessness as though some excitement seethed below the surface.

They had been playing for over two hours and it was drawing towards midnight when the youngest of the party suddenly leaned back in his chair.

M. Despard's eyes were upon him in a moment. "You are not tired yet, I hope, Mr. Wroxted?" he said courteously.

Wroxted was smiling a little, his baffling, ironical smile. "With your permission I will look on for a little," he said.

The tinkling notes of the guitar came through the luscious moonlight behind him like fairy music. He glanced over his shoulder with a hint of irresolution.

In a moment du Vallons was on his feet, his small black beard quivering with nervous excitement. "Myself, I go to walk in the garden," he said, with a certain aggressiveness.

Wroxted moved to one side to let him pass without comment.

"But this will break up the party," protested M. Despard. "Will you not play another hand, Mr. Wroxted?"

De Brissac watched du Vallons' clumsy exit with glowering eyes, then he also pushed back his chair. "I will return," he said to his host. "But I also —I also—require some air."

Wroxted remained on his feet while the two middle-aged Frenchman disappeared. Then he turned, still smiling.

"Exeunt Romeos!" he remarked. "Yes, *monsieur*, I will play another hand with you with pleasure. But I have a fancy for a new pack of cards. Do you mind?"

He pulled an unopened pack from his pocket with the words and laid it upon the table in front of M. Despard, with a shade—the merest shade—of arrogance.

M. Despard's eyes were upon his face in a moment. He drew himself up with his own inimitable dignity.

"I do not understand you," he said. "The cards with which we have been playing were new only to-night. I do not expect my guests to bring their own."

Wroxted continued to smile. "A mere fancy!" he said easily, and with the words he began to gather up the cards that littered the table. "Call it caprice if you will! I am something of a sceptic about most things, but I am a believer in caprice."

He swept a cluster of cards from M. Despard's very hand with the words. The Frenchman leaned sharply forward, his pale features twitching.

"I do not call it caprice, Mr. Wroxted," he said, and suddenly his voice was trembling. "I have—quite another name for it. Give those cards back to me at once!"

Wroxted had collected the entire pack. He stood holding it as he met his host's glittering eyes across the table. "But why should I do that, *monsieur*?" he asked lightly. "Exchange is no robbery. Surely you are no loser if I offer you another pack instead!"

M. Despard raised himself in his chair and leaned his shaking hands upon the table. "Give those cards back to me!" he said again.

Wroxted began to laugh a little. "But, *monsieur*, why? Surely this particular pack can be of no especial value to you! New cards are always pleasanter to handle than old, and there is a new pack waiting for you."

"Give those cards back to me!" M. Despard said again, and with the words ferocity shone in his eyes. "I will not have your new pack! I will not suffer your insult! Give those cards back to me, or—take the consequences!"

"That is what I propose to do," said Dudley Wroxted very quietly, his face suddenly hardened to sternness. He put the cards into an inner pocket with the words, but his eyes never stirred from those of the man who leaned upon the table facing him. They were cold as steel in their regard.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "that is exactly what has brought me here to-night. I have a use for these cards of yours, M. Despard, though you may have no use for mine. I will return them to you later—in the presence of your friends—when I have finished with them."

An awful change came over M. Despard's face at the words. His mouth dropped open and his lower jaw began to gibber. He made several efforts to speak, but utterance failed him. Finally he slid downwards into his chair, still staring up at the younger man with eyes of flaming hatred.

Wroxted's face remained stern, but it showed no anger, only unswerving determination. He waited grimly for M. Despard to find his voice.

It came at last with a hoarse, croaking sound. He was sunk in his seat and his hands moved along the edge of the table with uncertain, groping movements.

"You dare—to insult me!" he said.

"I have not done so at present," said Wroxted curtly, "but I certainly dare. Ah!" Suddenly he leaned further forward, and for the first time his attitude was threatening. "Keep your hands on the table!" he ordered. "Do you hear me? Your hands—on the table!"

He did not raise his voice, but there was that in it which compelled. The old Frenchman suddenly collapsed, falling forwards upon the table, his silvery head bowed.

"Give me back—my cards!" he moaned piteously. "Give me back—my cards!"

Wroxted laid a firm hand upon his shoulder. "M. Despard," he said, and his voice was clear and urgent, "listen to me! The game is up, once and for all. But I have no wish to expose you. I will give you back those cards—on one condition."

"Ah! A price! You will take—a price?" M. Despard freed himself violently from the other's hand and in a moment was upright again, feeling feverishly among the littered notes by his side. His fingers lingered over them with monkey-like tenacity.

Wroxted watched him for a moment or two with a kind of pitying repugnance. Then he spoke. "Yes, I will take a price, *monsieur*. But not in money. You have nothing there that I would touch."

"What then? What then? Quick, they are returning!" Abject terror gleamed up at him as the sound of voices came to them from the quiet garden.

"Yes," Wroxted said. "They are returning."

He paused, listening.

"Quick! Quick!" gibbered M. Despard. "The price!"

Wroxted's brows suddenly drew together in a hard, uncompromising line. "The price," he said, "is something that means less to you than money, but to me—very much more. The price, M. Despard, is your daughter. You will give her to me—in exchange for these cards."

"My daughter!" Astonishment and dismay gaped at him from a face that had become senile. There was no longer any dignity in M. Despard's demeanour; he was as a man floundering for his life in deep waters.

"Your daughter, yes!" Wroxted drove home the words as though they had been a sword. "You will tell her that she has been offered the post of

secretary to Lord Bramstead, and that it is your wish that she should take it up at once. That is my condition—and the only price I will take. Otherwise ——" He glanced towards the window.

The Frenchman grovelled in his chair. "She will not leave me!" he protested. "Nothing will persuade her."

"Yes." Swift and crushing came Wroxted's reply. "You will persuade her. Otherwise, these cards remain in my possession. Otherwise,—your honour, your reputation, everything else in life you value, will go. Now, quickly,—which is it to be?"

"Not—my honour!" gasped M. Despard, as one who clutches at a straw.

"Quite so," said Wroxted. "Then listen! You will tell her of your wish, and compel her—as you know how to compel—to comply with it. You will then accompany her to the Bourbon with me to interview Lord Bramstead, who is one of those eccentric people who make their own terms in their own time. And when that is done, you will leave her—in my care. Is that clear?"

He spoke with insistence, for M. Despard's agitation seemed to be developing into bewilderment. His hands still felt along the edge of the table.

Suddenly they dropped beneath it, and in the same instant in a croaking voice he spoke. "Yes, yes! You shall have her. You shall have everything. Go out and fetch her, *monsieur*, and tell her of Lord Bramstead's offer!"

There came the sound of an opening drawer, a sharp click, and then in a flash Wroxted was upon him.

"You devil!" he said.

M. Despard writhed in his grip like a serpent, and there followed a desperate hard-breathing struggle that ended as suddenly as it had begun in Wroxted drawing away with a revolver in his hand while the older man dropped back exhausted in his chair.

"So much for that!" Wroxted said, and he spoke between his teeth. "And now to business! I will give you back your cards, and you will give me—your daughter."

M. Despard cursed under his breath and began to gather together the disordered notes that littered the table.

"That is understood, is it?" said Wroxted peremptorily. "You had better decide. They are coming."

M. Despard ceased to curse and lifted a panic-stricken face. “Yes, they are coming!” he said. “They are coming! Quick, *monsieur*! The cards!”

Wroxted’s lips twisted a little. He slipped the revolver into his pocket.

“I will give you both this and the cards when we reach the Hôtel Bourbon,” he said.

VI

STEPHANIE came up the steps, carrying her guitar. Behind her came the two stout Frenchmen, each eyeing the other askance like dogs awaiting provocation for a fight.

The girl moved with a certain weariness, but at the sight of Wroxted awaiting her she stiffened a little. She addressed her father, ignoring him.

“It is getting late. I thought I would come in.”

M. Despard sat back in his chair, recovering his scattered dignity with a supreme effort.

“My child,” he said, “I have something to tell you.”

“Yes?” said Stephanie.

She moved to the refreshment table and poured out a glass of soda-water. Her pale face betrayed no curiosity of any sort.

Her father turned in his chair slightly, watching her. “I have been having a talk with Mr. Wroxted about you,” he said.

“Yes?” said Stephanie again, lifting the glass to her lips.

M. Despard’s countenance wore the pathetic look of a child compelled to swallow a revolting dose. “I have received an offer from him,” he said, “which in your interests I feel bound to accept. On his recommendation his cousin Lord Bramstead—a very able man of whom you have heard me speak—desires to employ you as his secretary. An interview has been arranged for you to-night, and if—as I hope will be the case—he is favourably impressed with you, you will enter his service at once.”

“At once!” said Stephanie. Her look came like the flash of a meteor to Wroxted’s face, and there it stayed. For he was looking full at her with a mastery that compelled.

He spoke. “It is not quite such a sudden idea as it sounds, Miss Despard. The fact is, I have been acting as Lord Bramstead’s secretary during his stay, but I am leaving for England shortly and he has empowered me to find someone to take my place. I have put the offer before your father, and he thinks it is one that should not be refused. Lord Bramstead is waiting to see you and clinch the matter now at the Hôtel Bourbon.”

He uttered his speech with business-like brevity while the girl stood gazing at him as if fascinated, her wide eyes shining almost black in the lamplight.

As he ended, both du Vallons and de Brissac gave expression to their astonishment and regret with some vehemence, but none of the three chiefly concerned paid any attention to them. The girl was still staring at Wroxted as though she saw something in which she scarcely believed.

After a few seconds she spoke, addressing him as if they were alone. “Is it true? Does my father really wish me to go?”

Wroxted made a gesture towards M. Despard, who replied at once with some exasperation. “Should I say it if it were not true? Come! We are wasting time. Go and put on a cloak, Stephanie! We must not keep Lord Bramstead waiting.”

“Is he waiting?” asked Stephanie of Wroxted.

He looked at his watch. “No doubt he will be by the time we arrive.”

She turned from him with a curious movement of fatalism. “And you are coming too?” she said to her father.

“But of course!” protested M. Despard. “Do you think I would let you go alone?”

Again the two Frenchmen intervened loudly, protesting their grief and consternation at this sudden blow. She heard them as she might have heard the buzzing of flies, and when they paused she merely shook hands with them both in unmoved farewell. She went from the room as one who moves in a trance under the influence of a mastermind.

“She is dazed,” said M. Despard plaintively. “She does not realize that she is about to leave me.”

His fingers moved again claw-like among the notes on the table, and Wroxted turned his back and looked out of the window.

Du Vallons and de Brissac exchanged glances and began with one accord to bid their host farewell. There was that in the atmosphere which they did not comprehend, but the warder-like attitude of Wroxted gave him a formidable quality with which it seemed unnecessary to tamper. They did not address him at parting; they merely bowed to his unresponsive back.

As the door closed upon them, M. Despard heaved a sigh of immense relief and wiped his forehead. “And now,” he said courteously, “if you will kindly hand over the cards, Mr. Wroxted, I shall not need to accompany my daughter to the Hôtel Bourbon. I will leave her—to your care.”

Wroxted turned round. For one moment his eyes held something that flamed with a scorching intensity. Then, without a word, he took the cards from his pocket and laid them upon the table just beyond his reach.

“And the revolver?” said M. Despard.

Wroxted spoke, sternly. “That remains,” he said.

He was still standing, grimly waiting, when the door re-opened and Stephanie appeared on the threshold.

“I am ready,” she said.

M. Despard turned to her. “I have placed you in Mr. Wroxted’s care,” he said. “He will conduct you to the Hôtel Bourbon. Go, both of you! Go now!”

She stood for a second or two motionless; then she came slowly forward while again her eyes sought Wroxted’s.

“I understood that my father was to come too,” she said, “and now I am to come with you alone!”

He moved to meet her. The fire had died out of his eyes; they looked at her with a species of aloof kindliness.

“You need not be afraid,” he said, “to come with me alone.”

There was a sudden sound, and he glanced over his shoulder to see M. Despard fling himself forward in a violent effort to grab the cards over which he had been mounting guard. It was glaringly obvious that he had thought at that moment for nothing else.

The girl also saw, shivered, and turned away. She did not utter another word as she went out again.

Wroxted firmly followed her, and shut the door behind him.

VII

"WELL?" she said. "You have won."

She spoke without bitterness, almost without any feeling at all. They had left the Villa Belle Vue behind them, and Wroxted was guiding his car in and out of the ruts that made the shore-road so little beloved of motorists. The lights of Monte Garda twinkled in the distance. The hills beyond were vague and shadowy in the moonlight.

"Yes," said Wroxted quietly. "I think I have."

"How did you do it?" she asked, with a kind of impersonal curiosity.

"By sheer luck," he said, adding with a touch of irony: "Have you never heard that Fortune favours the brave?"

"You are—very brave," she said.

"Thank you," said Wroxted.

There fell a brief silence. Then: "It was all a lie about Lord Bramstead of course," she said.

"Not—all—a lie," said Wroxted. "In fact, on the whole, very little of it."

She turned her face towards him. "The secretaryship?"

"That was true," he said.

"You mean he will take me?" There was a hint of some emotion other than curiosity in her voice as she spoke.

"He will certainly take you," said Wroxted, "if you will go."

"Does he know that I am the daughter of a swindler?" she asked abruptly.

"He knows everything about you," said Wroxted; "that is, as much as I know myself."

"And how much is that?" she said.

He brought the car to a standstill. "I will tell you," he said.

The scent of a thousand roses was in the air. They hung down from the stone wall of a villa-garden on their left in luscious festoons of fragrance. On their right the sea murmured its eternal song in the moonlight.

"I will tell you," he said again. "I know that you had an English mother and an English education. I know that when you left school your father brought you here and made you—in your innocence—the live bait on his hook. You found him out at last and you loathed it; but you had no money and no friends at hand to help you, and you were powerless. Also, you so loathed the old men that your father gathered round him that you didn't care what happened to them. But you weren't prepared to let a man of your own breed be sacrificed, and when he came on the scene—it made a difference. Am I right?"

She bent her head. Her hands were working nervously against each other. "And have you told Lord Bramstead all this?" she said in a low voice.

"I have told him more," Wroxted said quietly. "I have told him that you are honest to the core, that you have been victimized into this thing by a man who is utterly without scruple. I have told him that I honour you from the very bottom of my soul, and that I am prepared to vouch for you wherever you go. There is another thing also which he knows, but I don't know whether I had better tell you that at present."

She made a little shrinking movement and spoke rather hurriedly. "What is he like?"

"He is rather like me," Wroxted said, a faintly quizzical note in his voice. "I hope that won't prejudice you too much. I am not good at describing people. But he is straight, and he appreciates straightness. He has one peculiarity about which I have got to warn you. He came into the title quite unexpectedly, and, being a plain man, he has a way when he goes for a holiday of leaving it at home sometimes. In his opinion he gets a better time that way. It's rather eccentric of him, I suppose, but he prefers it. The limelight of the society columns does not attract him very strongly. He likes to play about without being noticed."

"I see," she said. "And—I suppose that is why he did not bring a secretary."

"Exactly," said Wroxted. "And then he found after all that he couldn't do without one. So now you understand how I managed to offer you the job."

"I am not sure that I do understand," she said. "Anyhow, you haven't yet told me what made you want to get me into it. I—should rather like to know that."

"Oh, haven't I?" he said. "I thought I'd made that quite clear. Just because you've been so decent to me of course. You see, I couldn't help

wanting to help you after that."

"Decent to you!" She held the words up to ridicule in a moment, but her voice was trembling. "Oh yes, I have been very decent to you, haven't I? I have made myself as offensive as I knew how on every possible occasion. I have avoided you, ignored you, even insulted you. And you—and you——" She broke off, quivering.

"I," he said, still on a note of irony, "have always and persistently come back for more. My dear girl, your offensiveness was the most decent part of the whole show! Don't you know I loved you for it? And last night, when you goaded me into losing my temper, was the climax. Do you know what would have happened if I hadn't allowed myself that little vent? Would you like to know?"

She became suddenly still by his side, her agitation curiously subdued. "Tell me!" she said.

"I can't tell you," he said. "I can only show you."

A tremor went through her. "What do you mean?" she said.

He made an odd gesture as of one bound. "My hands are tied," he said. "I had better take you to Lord Bramstead before I say or do any more."

She spoke with sudden passion. "Oh, stop playing with me! You have done what you intended! You have swallowed the bait without getting caught on the hook. I am yours now, and I suppose—I suppose——"

"What do you suppose?" said Wroxted.

"That you will treat me as—as my father expected you to treat me when he made me the price of his honour," she answered very bitterly. "There is no one to prevent you!"

"Oh, forgive me!" Wroxted said, and suddenly his voice was very gentle. "There is—someone—to prevent me behaving like a blackguard to you,—even if I wanted to."

She faced him stormily. "Who?"

"There is Lord Bramstead," he said.

"Lord Bramstead!" She uttered a brief laugh. "And what is he? Is he likely to befriend me when he knows that I left my father's house at midnight alone with you to place myself under his protection?"

“Since you ask me,” said Wroxted, “I think he is. You know,”—he still spoke very gently—“it is not quite fair to judge everyone by your father’s standard. There are other—more normal—ways of looking at things. Had he accompanied us, he would have realized that my intentions were entirely honourable, even though my method of achieving their fulfilment may have been a little circuitous. Can’t you take me for a friend, Stephanie? Can’t you believe in me?” He stretched his hand to her unexpectedly and laid a small glittering object in her lap. “If you can’t,—take this from me for your protection!”

She drew back sharply. “Oh no, no! I don’t want it! Take it away! Take it away!”

“You have a right to it,” said Wroxted. “I took it from your father only to-night.”

“You took it from him!” She stared at him for a second or two as if bewildered, then suddenly something seemed to give way within her; she turned herself from him and bowed her head down upon the side of the car in a passion of tears.

“Oh, child!” Wroxted said.

He took back the weapon into his own keeping, and leaned over her.

“What is it?” he said. “What is it? Why are you crying? Don’t you know you are safe?”

She gasped out some words between her sobs. “He might—have killed you!”

“Oh, that!” said Wroxted. “And if he had—you don’t mean to say you’d have cared?”

His hand found hers with the words; her fingers, very cold and trembling, closed upon it.

“I should have died!” she whispered tensely.

“Thank heaven for that!” said Wroxted. His arm went round her, but he did not try to draw her towards him. He seemed bent only upon comforting her. “Well, as it didn’t happen,” he said, “you needn’t cry about it, need you? Marriages are better than funerals, Stephanie. Shall we get married instead?”

“Married!” She raised herself slowly; slowly turned to him. “Are you really thinking of—marrying me?” she said.

The tears were still on her white cheeks as she faced him. Her eyes shone with a strange brightness, intensely blue.

"I have never thought of anything else since I met you," said Wroxted very simply. "But——" he paused as if in momentary confusion—"there's one thing I've got to tell you first, and it's a thing which—quite possibly—may put you off."

"Are you sure it's a thing I don't know?" she said.

He looked at her. "No, you don't know it. I ought to have told you sooner. But somehow—you see, I wasn't sure of you. And even now——"

"Yes, even now!" Was there mockery in her voice? A queer little smile had struggled through her tears. "No, you are not sure of me—even now," she said. "But why don't you take me to Lord Bramstead, as you said you would? I want to see him. I've—got something—very important to say to him."

"What is it?" said Wroxted.

Her smile deepened and took possession. A dimple he had never seen before appeared near the corner of her mouth. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she said.

His eyes were upon her. She had changed in those few seconds as though a magic wand had touched her. Was it the scent of the roses that had bewitched her? Their fragrance filled the air.

"Tell me!" he begged softly. "What is it you want to say to Lord Bramstead?"

She moved abruptly. The roses hung within her reach. She pulled them to her, lingered over them for a moment, gathered one and pressed it closely to her lips.

Then she gave it to him.

"Just that!" she said.

THE CHÂTELAINE

I

"We hate each other on paper," said the Châtelaine, "but actually we have never met. I know his agent of course—a gentleman by the way and quite reasonable in his views. He often deprecates his employer's cussedness, but, as he points out, jobs are difficult to find in these hard days and he is obliged to stick to what he can get.—He is quite a nice young fellow," mused the Châtelaine. "I often think it's a great pity that the place does not belong to him. He takes a far keener interest in it than his master does, and would, I am sure, be infinitely easier to deal with."

The Châtelaine was thirty,—a tall, fair woman who had, as she put it, survived a dozen London seasons without any symptoms of heart trouble. She was very handsome, possessed an amazing constitution and almost a man's endurance; she was also completely independent and accepted advice from none. There was something of the Elizabethan type about her—a queen-in-her-own-right sort of atmosphere—that procured for her respect rather than love, but her court was by no means a small one on that account. There was a legend concerning her, which everyone repeated and no one really quite believed, that in all those twelve seasons not one of her admirers —and there had been several—had ever dared to propose. Up to a certain point any might come and all were welcome, but beyond that point an invisible line was drawn which no man—so ran the legend—had ever crossed. She had a large and generous nature, but through it there ran a vein of tenacity that was almost feudal in its strength. She gave away much in sheer, expansive kindness, but she never gave away herself. She remained queen of her own domain, jealous of family traditions and unconquerable in her castle stronghold, equal to most men and amazingly superior to practically all women among whom she numbered very few genuine friends. They had dubbed her the "Châtelaine" years before, so ardent a landowner and householder was she. From her early girlhood it had always been the same. She adored her far-reaching property in the North with an adoration

that was almost idolatry. She came of an ancient lineage and it had descended to her through many generations. She herself had inherited Beauclere from her grandfather, her parents having died in her babyhood; and with him also—left alone in the world by all but his cherished grandchild—it had been a complete obsession. His main regret had ever been that he had no male heir to succeed him, and perhaps this had in some degree helped to mould the girl's character upon masculine lines. She cultivated no womanly graces, though, oddly, these were not naturally lacking in her. More at home in the hunting-field than the ballroom she might be, but she could drop as stately a curtsey in the Royal presence as could any of her contemporaries, and the fact that she remained unconquered contributed to rather than detracted from her own peculiar charm. Her name was Frances Mottram and she bore it like a diadem. No title had descended to her, though it was said that she could claim proud descent from a knight of the Round Table, and the very fact that this was so seemed in some fashion to enhance its value in her eyes. Frances Mottram of Beauclere was patrician born. Wherever she went, the fact was recognized, even by those to whom it appealed the least. She herself did not insist upon it; it was simply beyond dispute.

At the death of her grandfather three years previously she had gathered the reins into her own capable hands, since the agent was an old man whose powers were beginning to fail, and though she retained him in her employ, his authority was strictly limited. Knowing him to be trustworthy, she was in the habit of leaving him in command when she was absent, but of late her absences had become less and less frequent. She had the true countrywoman's love of the land, and the more time she gave to it the more her enthusiasm grew.

At the present time a cloud had arisen—the most serious cloud which yet had threatened to darken her horizon. Adjoining her own kingdom of Beauclere—which included the happy little village of Thorn, known in ancient annals as Thorn-in-Beauclere—was a property of minor consideration which yet had some pretensions to importance. Its antiquity was almost negligible, since it dated merely from the Tudor period, but it had a certain prestige, insomuch as it was an encroachment upon Beauclere of some centuries' standing and always had been the fly in the Mottram ointment ever since it had been signed away on a night of unpardonable revelry by one Francis Mottram, a frequenter of the Elizabethan court, who had lost his head on that occasion as well as on a later date when all chance to retrieve it was definitely placed beyond his reach. This property, known as Fairacres, had originally been designed for a Dower House, but the

reckless Francis having gambled it away at the card-table, it was thenceforth forfeit by the Mottram family and no subsequent efforts had been of any avail for its recovery. Thenceforth there were two properties instead of one, and the holders of Fairacres established themselves from one generation to another against the Beauclere boundary in a kind of feudal rivalry which was fruitful of much bitterness. An old prophecy circulated soon after the fatal night on which Fairacres had been lost to the Mottrams declared that money would never be of any avail to restore it to the parent estate, and as Fairacres was literally a far fairer demesne than was that on which stood the castle of Beauclere, the saying had never been popular with the Mottrams. Tradition, which was doubtless sprung from the prophecy, had it that no Mottram would ever again own Fairacres; but Frances Mottram scoffed at it, and it was openly said among her friends that she had set her heart upon refuting it. Certainly her love of the land was a characteristic which none could ignore in her. She took the trouble to acquaint herself with all that a landowner should know, and the village of Thorn had no reason to complain of her rule. She was open-handed in all her dealings, and she took her responsibilities very seriously. Recently she had been appointed to the local Bench, and here also she discharged her duties with an efficiency and shrewdness which none could gainsay. In fact old Admiral Lancey, one of her colleagues and a contemporary of her late grandfather, was wont to say that he believed all the younger generation were afraid of her, and that there was not a man living under eighty—his own ripe age—who would dare to contradict her.

Whether this were the case or not, she undeniably commanded respect wherever she went, and but for that natural, quite indescribable charm of hers, she might have been labelled autocratic. Though unfailingly generous in her treatment of her tenants, she could never be persuaded to part outright with a single rod, pole, or perch of land to any, and, wealthy as she was, it was known that she was husbanding her resources with determined personal economy for the gratification of her great wish. Indeed she made no secret of the fact that Fairacres was her objective.

“I shall get it eventually,” she told the Admiral, as they smoked together on the terrace one hot evening in July. “The present owner is never there. He takes no interest in it. So there is really no reason why he should not come to terms.”

“My dear Châtelaine,” said the Admiral, “your logic has certain weak points to which it is probably unnecessary for me to draw your attention. I think you have already mentioned that you hate each other on paper.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” declared the Châtelaine sweepingly. “That is only a matter of boundaries, fences, and rights of way. We have often quarrelled over them. But young Cuthbert—the agent—is a good lad and knows how to tackle him. I generally get my own way in the end.”

“Point Number Two!” chuckled the Admiral. “If the good lad aforementioned values his berth, he is not very likely to forward your cause with his employer.”

“Oh, I’ve thought of that,” said Frances with her eyes on the roselit evening sky. “I should probably offer him a berth myself if the deal went through.”

“What! Two agents on one estate!” exclaimed the Admiral.

She nodded thoughtfully. “Old Rackham is getting very old, Admiral,” she said. “I sometimes think he won’t carry on much longer. In any case, I can’t count on it. And when Fairacres is ours again, I shall probably need help—more help than he could give me.”

“Oh, I see!” The Admiral chuckled again. “Your deep-laid plans extend to the annexing of both house and agent in one fell swoop. Châtelaine, I congratulate you. Only a woman would have thought of that.”

A slight frown appeared between Frances’ brows. “If by that you mean that you think I am contemplating playing a shabby trick,” she said, “I assure you that nothing was farther from my thoughts or intentions. In fact, I imagined that I should be doing something rather generous. For Captain Cuthbert is devoted to the place, and his employer never comes near it.”

“They say poor Inglewood is a hopeless crock,” observed the Admiral. “But I beg you won’t impute any offensive insinuations to my harmless remarks which are always as innocent as they sound.”

Frances’ brows relaxed again, and she smiled. “Yes, of course,” she said. “I know that as well as I know you. But—quite honestly—that point of view had not occurred to me before, and there may be something in it. Would it be unfair to Mr. Inglewood, I wonder, to offer the post to Captain Cuthbert? After all, he has only employed him for a few months, and when he has consented to sell Fairacres, he will not need him any more.”

“If he does consent!” said the Admiral.

Frances’ frown reappeared. “I think he is very unreasonable about it myself,” she said. “He lives in town. The place means nothing to him. He

has no heir. There is literally nothing to be gained by refusing to sell. Whereas I——" she paused.

"Whereas you, my dear Châtelaine?" queried the Admiral.

She took the cigarette from between her lips and looked at it. "Life is very difficult," she remarked irrelevantly. "But anyhow I love the place enough to live on it and care for it."

"Perhaps he is hoping some day to be in a position to do the same," suggested the Admiral.

"That's just it," said Frances. "Just what I'm afraid of. But it can't really matter to an invalid—a helpless invalid—where he lives. At least one would imagine not."

"I wonder if you are right," said the Admiral.

"I daresay not," said Frances. "But I can't pretend any interest in a man I have never seen. And it seems such an opportunity to secure Fairacres now—an opportunity which may never occur again, at least in my lifetime."

"And once secured, you would die happy!" smiled the Admiral.

She flushed a little, but she smiled in answer. "I don't say that. Life is too complex for anyone to state definitely that any particular thing would be enough to secure permanent happiness. But I do say this. If I succeeded in restoring Fairacres to Beauclere, I should feel somehow that I had not lived in vain. I don't suppose you will understand," she added, her smile faintly wistful. "So very few people do."

"I could understand," said the Admiral, "if you had anyone to leave it to."

"Ah!" Frances said, and there stopped, still gazing at her cigarette, her smile still faintly wistful.

"But you haven't," said the Admiral on a note of challenge that brought her eyes to his.

"That's true," she said quietly.

He threw out an impatient hand. He was an old and tried friend with her. "Well, why don't you remedy that?" he demanded. "You've got looks, fascination, wealth,—everything a woman wants. Why don't you get married, Châtelaine?"

She was looking at him over her cigarette. She laughed a little as she replaced it between her lips. Her blue eyes had a baffling, mocking glint.

"One thing at a time, my dear Admiral!" she said lightly, and added a moment later, half to herself: "I'm glad anyhow that you put wealth last."

"Why do you say that?" he asked gruffly.

She answered in the same hushed, rather remote voice: "Because it is last."

The sound of feet on the gravel below the terrace caught the Admirals attention and he sat up. "Here's someone! Who is it?"

"Probably Captain Cuthbert," said the Châtelaine, without altering her position. "You know him, don't you? I asked him to dine, but he couldn't. Ah yes, I thought so," as the feet began to mount the steps that led up to the terrace and a man's head and shoulders appeared, ascending. "Well, Captain Cuthbert! So you managed to look in, after all?"

She extended her hand to the new-comer with a queenly gesture, and he took it with the grace of a courtier.

The Admiral, looking at him, reflected: "This young man has made a study of the gentle art of chivalry."

But though his manners were punctilious, there was nothing artificial in his demeanour. He had a pleasant boyish face which generally seemed to belie the fact that he was in the early thirties, and though he walked with a decided limp his carriage had all the elasticity of youth.

"I really looked in on business," he was saying to the Châtelaine, "but I will go again if I'm not wanted."

"Stay by all means!" was her reply, and she bestowed her most gracious smile upon him with the words. "You have met Admiral Lancey before, I think?"

"Yes, yes, we've met before," said the Admiral, shaking hands. "I see you've started draining the Fairacres Wood, and a great improvement you're making."

"Well, sir, there's a right of way through it and I thought it wasn't fair to the villagers to leave it practically impassable in wet weather," explained Cuthbert, seating himself at Frances' invitation on the low parapet that bounded the castle terrace.

“You’re laying the seeds of popularity,” commented the Admiral. “Are you contemplating going into Parliament by any chance?”

The young man laughed and made a gesture of turning his pockets inside out. “Besides, I can’t take any credit for it,” he declared modestly. “I chance to be responsible for the estate, that’s all.”

“Well, you’re going the right way to work,” said the Admiral. “That track has been in a positively disgraceful condition for the past twenty years or more,—long before this last man came into the property.”

“I know,” said Cuthbert. “It’s been neglected in many ways. But we’re trying to get it into order by degrees. Mr. Inglewood is such a cripple, you know. We can’t always get on as fast as we should like.”

“Almost a pity he doesn’t sell the place, isn’t it?” suggested the Admiral, offering the young man his cigarette-case.

“Thank you, sir,” said Cuthbert, accepting a cigarette. “As a matter of fact, I have sometimes wondered what makes him hang on to the place. But he hasn’t much else to hang on to, you know. And after all, it is his own heritage. One can understand his not wanting to part with that.”

“Not if he never sees it,” said Frances.

He turned towards her. “He is hoping to take up his abode at Fairacres one of these days. The surgeons say they can’t do much more for him, and he prefers the country to town.”

“What would happen if he were to die?” asked the Admiral bluntly.

Cuthbert looked momentarily surprised. “I suppose he’d be interred in the family vault at Thorn,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” said the Admiral. “He’s welcome to his share of that, I take it. But what would become of the Fairacres estate then? I hear he has no heir.”

“Oh, I really don’t know what would happen.” Cuthbert sounded vague. “I suppose he’d leave it to somebody.”

“Possibly to you!” said the Admiral in his downright fashion. “I gather he’s fairly friendly with you.”

Cuthbert laughed a little. “I don’t think he’d do that, sir,” he said. “He’d be almost as likely to leave it to Miss Mottram as to me.”

“Don’t be absurd!” said the Châtelaine briefly.

“Is he likely to live long?” asked the Admiral.

Cuthbert made a slight movement of restlessness, as though the inquisition were beginning to offend his good taste. “I really don’t know,” he said. “I’m sure I hope so.”

“Fond of him, are you?” said the Admiral, quite undeterred.

“In a way, yes,” admitted Cuthbert.

“Well, he means your bread and butter, of course,” said the Admiral. “He’s well off, I suppose?”

“I’m not his banker, sir,” said Cuthbert.

The Admiral chuckled. “My dear Châtelaine,” he said, “I will make you the present of a very bright idea. If the fellow persists in his refusal to sell, why don’t you try for a mortgage on the property? He might consider that. The bird in the hand, you know!”

Frances flicked the ash from her cigarette. “He’d probably live for ever if I did that,” she said.

“On the other hand, he might die the very next day,” pointed out the Admiral.

Cuthbert spoke rather curtly. “I shouldn’t count on that,” he said.

Frances smiled somewhat ruefully. “It isn’t wise to count on anything in this uncertain world,” she said.

“Quite so. Chancey, I admit. But some chances are worth taking,” said the Admiral. “Is he hard up, I wonder? The Inglewoods generally are.”

“Either hard up or mean,” said Frances. “It is proverbial that they will neither sell nor spend. He is probably a miser.”

“I don’t think so,” said Cuthbert quietly.

She looked at him. “What do you think, I wonder?” she said, faint irony in her voice.

“I think,” said Cuthbert, “that he is quite an ordinary human being who has been cursed with rather extraordinary bad luck.”

“Came a cropper in the Grand National, didn’t he?” asked the Admiral.

Cuthbert nodded. “Some years ago now. He was very badly smashed up. He inherited Fairacres from his uncle six months after, when he was still on his back.”

“Oh, I remember that old uncle,” said Frances. “He really was an impossible old man. There was no treating with him.”

“No. So I’ve heard,” said Cuthbert.

“Apparently there is no treating with this fellow either,” commented the Admiral, making a stiff effort to rise. “Well, well, I’ve done my best for you, Châtelaine, in the way of bright suggestions, and now I’ll leave you to work ’em out.”

“Oh, don’t go!” she said, putting out a detaining hand. “If you’re afraid of the dew, we’ll go inside.”

He took her hand and patted it, but he would not be persuaded. “No, no! I’m getting too old to sit up late. And I can see you two are just ripe for hatching a plot. Let me know if you want any help, that’s all!”

He got up with the words. Frances rose with him. “I don’t think Captain Cuthbert is very great at plotting,” she remarked.

“He’s probably a dark horse,” chuckled the Admiral. “Give him his head and he’ll romp home!”

Cuthbert laughed a little. “I would certainly do my best,” he said.

He was waiting for her on the terrace when she returned from speeding the departed guest, and she thought to herself, not for the first time, how pleasingly gallant a figure he made standing there. The fact of his lameness was perceptible only when he moved; it did not in any way affect his general bearing.

“A gentleman to the finger-tips!” was the thought that crossed her mind as she joined him in the now swiftly fading light.

The after-glow was nearly over, and the sky had turned a deep violet pierced here and there by stars of a dazzling brightness. Down below the old moat an owl hooted now and again, but otherwise the silence was almost like a spell. The Castle of Beauclere was far removed from the bustle and noise of the high-roads.

Frances came to the stone balustrade and halted. Her face had a still, aloof look, almost as if she were in a dream. She stood without speaking, her face to the oncoming night.

Cuthbert did nothing to disturb her. His cigarette was finished and he did not light another, merely waited with characteristic courtesy upon her mood.

She spoke at last in a low voice, as it were half to him and half to some other presence of which they were both aware.

"I realize," she said, "that no great good can ever be attained without sacrifice; but it is not always easy to know how far one ought to go."

He looked at her delicate profile outlined against the dusk, and paused before he said: "The good to be attained should at least equal the sacrifice."

She made a vague movement of dissent. "It should very far exceed it," she said. "But that is just the difficulty. Values change as one grows older. Even the desire of a lifetime may turn out hollow and worthless when obtained."

"If it is purely material, yes," said Cuthbert. "Not otherwise."

She turned slightly towards him. "It is not—purely—material," she said; "this longing to see my—inheritance once more as it used to be long ago—intact."

"I think I understand," he said gently.

"Do you understand, I wonder?" She addressed him directly for the first time. "There are very few who do. Most people—even the old Admiral—look upon it as a mild form of mania—the acquisitive instinct running riot."

"I do not," said Cuthbert.

She looked at him. "No," she said. "I don't think you do. You realize that to me Fairacres is all one with Beauclere, and to have the undisputed right to call it so means more to me than anything else in the world—except one thing," she added under her breath.

"Yes, I know," said Cuthbert.

"It isn't—really—a selfish instinct," she said, "any more than it was selfishness that made you go up in that aeroplane that crashed with you and crippled you. There is a driving power that makes us do things—sometimes in spite of ourselves. I, for instance——"—she lowered her voice again as if she feared to be overheard—"what a happy, carefree life I might have led if it hadn't been for Beauclere!"

"I can't picture it," he said simply.

"Can't you?" She spoke with surprise. "Am I so much a part of the place as that?"

"You would be a queen in exile away from it," he said.

She sighed rather wearily. “I have given up a good deal for it,” she said. “And I sometimes fear it will be all in vain.”

“You know that you can count on me to do all in my power to help, don’t you?” said Cuthbert.

Her fingers just brushed his sleeve. “Yes, I know,” she said. “It has made a great difference to me. But I am beginning to see that even the most earnest effort is not bound to be crowned with success. I used to think it was, but it doesn’t really follow, does it?”

“You are disheartened to-night,” said Cuthbert.

She sat down on the wide stone balustrade with a friendly, even confidential, gesture. “Just a little,” she admitted. “I think I am tired. Listening to the dear old Admiral makes one wonder if after all the path of sacrifice is worth while. He is so extremely practical. It makes one almost ashamed of one’s visions.”

“What do you mean by the path of sacrifice?” said Cuthbert.

It was the most intimate question he had ever asked her, but there was something about her that seemed to invite intimacy at that moment. She looked lonely, forlorn.

She answered him with her head bent; her white fingers plucked absently at the tendrils of ivy that clung to the stone. In the dim light she had the look of some mediæval picture of long-past romance. “I mean,” she said, “the holding back from all the things that are dearest to a woman’s heart. Do you think it has been nature with me to keep aloof? Do you think I have never been dazzled by the spring sunshine—never felt the spring in my blood—never wanted the wild flowers that other women go mad after? How many of my friends do you think I have followed to the altar in all these twelve years that I have been in society? Do you know I was bridesmaid for the sixteenth time a month ago? But—you remember the funny old song?—‘never the lucky bride’! Not that they always have been lucky!” She paused, smiling sadly, cynically. “Only at least they each had their heart’s desire—once. I have never had mine.”

“I wonder how often you have been the heart’s desire of others,” said Cuthbert.

She raised her shoulders slightly, not lifting her eyes. “I can safely say that I have never broken any hearts,” she said.

“So sure of that?” said Cuthbert.

She nodded slowly twice. “Quite, quite sure. Even the butterfly must actually go through the flame to singe its wings, and—so far as I know—none have ever been near it. It has been too closely guarded for that.” Her voice had a dreary note though she was still smiling. “That is what I mean by the path of sacrifice, Captain Cuthbert,” she said.

“And you have followed it for the sake of Beauclere?” he said.

She bent her head. “For the sake of Beauclere—yes.”

“For no other reason?” he said.

She made a small gesture as of protest. “For no other reason—of course!” she said. “Why should I have denied myself otherwise the ordinary chances of happiness?”

“Some women do it from choice,” he said. “It’s the fashion, isn’t it, to scoff at love and marriage?”

“Among a certain set of fools, yes,” said the Châtelaine very bitterly. “And there isn’t one of them—not one—who would hold her own against the real thing if it came her way. Not that it often does! They are usually the sort who don’t know what it means.”

“You are evidently not one of them,” said Cuthbert.

She uttered a curious sound that tried to be a laugh. “I,” she said, “am an abstainer not so much from choice as from circumstance. All the men I have ever met for whom it has been even possible for me to have the faintest spark of feeling have been the kind to whom Beauclere would mean nothing—except perhaps a source of wealth and an occasional lodging-place; otherwise merely a responsibility—a mill-stone. Do you think I could have borne that?”

“Probably not,” said Cuthbert.

“Most certainly not,” she said in a voice that trembled. “Beauclere is too much a part of myself for that. You may call it an obsession if you like, but there is no getting away from it. Sooner or later Beauclere would have triumphed, and everything else—whatever the cost—would have had to go under. That is why I have held aloof. I wanted someone who I was sure would love Beauclere too.”

“And is there no one who would love it for your sake?” he said.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I have wondered lately if I have been making a mistake, if perhaps I ought to risk something for the sake of the

future. It may be——"—she spoke with a certain whimsical sadness—"that in my zeal I have been selfish after all. The Admiral has been reminding me to-night that Mr. Inglewood and I are in the same position in one respect. If we were to die to-morrow, neither of us would leave an heir."

"Do you know I have often thought of that?" said Cuthbert.

Her fingers still pulled restlessly at the ivy. "He will of course never have an heir now," she said. "That is one of the factors I am counting on which might induce him to sell Fairacres. But I am different. I have put off marrying all these years that I have been working up the estate, hoping—hoping against hope—that some day I might meet a man to whom Beauclere might mean what it means to me, and who would not have conflicting interests perpetually dragging him in the opposite direction. I am quite sure," she spoke with emphasis, "that unless there were this bond of sympathy between us we could not possibly hope for happiness together. You see, it means so much to me. My very life is bound up in it. Every stone is precious to me."

"I understand," said Cuthbert.

She made an odd movement as though the quiet assurance penetrated some hidden depth, and then abruptly ceased to pluck at the ivy and sat very still.

"I don't know," she said in a very low voice, "that I should make a specially good wife. I am past the adaptable age, even if I ever was very adaptable, which I doubt. I have never been deeply in love, because I have never indulged my fancies. But I am not incapable of love, and I sometimes think——" She stopped.

"Yes?" said Cuthbert, his voice as low as her own.

She lifted her face at last and looked up at him. There were tears in her eyes. "I sometimes think a late blooming lasts the longest," she said. "Would you—would you be afraid to risk it?"

He stooped very low and taking both her hands he put them to his lips. "The risk is yours, not mine," he said, deeply moved, "—lest you should find me unworthy of you—as I am. But this I swear to you. On the day that you weigh me in the balance and find me wanting—I will accept whatever sentence you may be pleased to pass."

There was a moment's silence, then Frances rose and stood before him, her hands still clasped in his. "I do not think," she said, "that you will be the

one to be found wanting. I have had complete faith in you ever since the day that we first met—do you remember?—and talked of Fairacres."

He smiled a little. "Do I not remember? What an awful show that was. You were like a bright star in a very dark night."

"What nonsense!" she said. "It was just the usual type of parochial effort. I had to go, to open the affair. But why were you there?"

"Must I confess?" he said. "I went—because I wanted to see that formidable personage, the Châtelaine of Beauclere."

She coloured suddenly and unexpectedly. "Was that your real reason?"

"My real and only reason," he said. "You see, I had heard a good deal about you, and I wanted to see if it could by any chance be all true."

"Well," she said, "and was it?"

He gathered her hands up very closely to his breast. "Hardly one word of it," he said.

She suffered his action, but her attitude was scarcely one of yielding. "What had you heard about me?" she said.

"I had heard that you were beautiful," he said, "which was true; but quite unapproachable, which was not. I heard that you were very proud and icy, unloved and unlovable by all but the very few;—all absolute nonsense!"

"How do you know?" she said.

"I know you," he answered simply. "I met you, was presented to you—and found you the most gracious woman on earth."

"Perhaps I had some reason to be that—to you!" she said.

He laughed abruptly, boyishly. "Yes, I thought of that. It was both my privilege and my handicap. But don't tell me that that is your reason for being good to me now! For I couldn't believe it if I tried."

She smiled in answer, smiled and sighed. "It is difficult to be absolutely honest," she said, "even with oneself with regard to motives. If I thought that Beauclere meant nothing to you—and the possibility of re-uniting Fairacres to it—I might draw back even now."

"But since you know that it is not so," he said, "since you know that every effort I am capable of making will be used in the interest of them both ——"

For the first time his hold began to draw her, and for the first time definitely she refused to be drawn.

"No," she said, with quiet decision. "I think we will keep this matter on a business footing for the present. There is a good deal to be considered, and I want to keep all the issues clear. You may upon reflection decide that I am not so desirable after all. If you do, you too will be able to draw back without feeling that you have behaved in any way like a cad."

"Oh, don't say that to me!" he broke in. "You know I've loved you from that very first moment. Or at least you ought to know."

She continued to smile a little, but her eyes were sad. "It may be that I'm getting old," she said, "but I am not—quite—sure that I believe in love."

"You don't think I want you for your money, do you?" he said.

Her hands slipped from his; she turned slowly away. "No, I don't think that," she said. "But I am not pretending to you that on my side personal preference is the only influence at work. It would be foolish, wouldn't it? You know it is not so."

"You need never pretend with me," said Cuthbert quietly. "I want nothing but you yourself."

She stretched out her hand to him again, not looking at him. "But you mustn't tell me that Beauclere means nothing to you!" she said, half-laughing. "Remember, that is one of your qualifications."

"Oh yes, I love Beauclere," he said, and stooping set his lips again to the extended hand. "But I love you most,—Châtelaine."

She started slightly at the title, but she suffered it without rebuke.

"Will you leave me now, please?" she said, after a moment and drew her hand away. "It is getting late. I will see you in the morning."

"How early?" said Cuthbert.

"At ten o'clock," she told him firmly. "But—I want you to realize that there must be no foolishness between us, and I shall not announce our engagement until I can give a definite date for our marriage. One sensation will be enough."

"And when will you be in a position to do that?" asked Cuthbert.

"I don't know yet. As I said before, there is a good deal to be considered." Her voice came rather vaguely through the darkness. "You

have got to consider too. There is Mr. Inglewood. He may object."

"He can do as he likes," said Cuthbert.

She laughed rather faintly. "Yes, I know. But if you quarrel with him, it will defeat everything. Don't you understand?"

It dawned upon him that she was trying to convey something without expressing it in words. He still stood near her, but she was slightly turned from him, and her remoteness was like the chill evening air, quenching all ardour.

"Do you mean," he asked slowly, "that the possession of Fairacres is to be a condition of our marriage?"

"It would certainly facilitate matters," she made answer, and though the laugh still lingered in her voice it had a wistful sound. "The title-deeds of Fairacres would be—a very acceptable wedding-gift."

"And if—by a miracle—I could get you those?" Cuthbert's voice also had a remote sound, as though he were weighing possibilities.

She made a slight gesture that hinted at dismissal. "You would then be my man of business—as well as my husband," she said.

"I see," said Cuthbert. He stood yet a moment longer as though irresolute; then he turned. "Good night, Châtelaine!" he said, and went away down the terrace-steps, as he had come.

II

He did not visit her in the morning. Instead, she received a note over which she bent a faint frown.

> "*Beloved Châtelaine*," it said, "*I am called up to town and may be away for some days. I will let you know the date of my return, when I hope that I may be able to tell you something which will convince you that as a man of business at least I am not quite despicable. Your faithful and devoted servant,*
>
> "Charles Cuthbert."

Added in very minute writing were the words:

"*Je t'adore! Comme je t'adore!*"

Naturally she read these first, and a faint smile succeeded her frown, which ended in a sigh.

"I wonder!" she murmured half-aloud. "I wonder!"

Then she read the earlier part, and practical common sense at once asserted itself over mere sentiment.

She drank her coffee with a species of serious enjoyment. "No," she said, "I don't think—I don't *think*—I have made a mistake."

Later, when she went to the cottage of old Rackham, who was laid up with rheumatism, to discuss some small matter in connection with the estate, her brow was unruffled and her manner quite serene. After all, the step she had taken was not irrevocable if he failed in his task; and if he succeeded—almost any sacrifice would be worth while if he succeeded.

She was going to pay a visit to Scotland the following month, and there was a good deal to be considered and arranged before her departure. She was never absent for long at a time, for she never felt that she could be spared. Old Rackham was certainly getting past his work. He saw it himself and fretted over it.

"If you'd only got someone like Captain Cuthbert," he said to her only that morning, "I'd feel there'd be no need to worry. He's a fine gentleman, he is,—one of the best. But Fairacres has got him, and Fairacres never lets go."

The tenacity of the owner of Fairacres had become a bitter family tradition, and the old bailiff was, if anything, even more fiercely jealous on behalf of Beauclere than was the Châtelaine herself. He hated the rival estate-owner with a deep and feudal hatred which might have been comic but for its intensity. His prejudice had once extended to Captain Cuthbert, but—by some means of which the Châtelaine had never heard—this had been completely overthrown. Cuthbert was now an eagerly-welcomed visitor at the bailiff's house, and he spent a good many of his evenings there, playing chess with the old man when he was laid up. They discussed the respective estates under their charge also, to their mutual advantage. But for Mr. Inglewood, the invalid owner of Fairacres, Rackham had no use whatever. The man was an interloper and usurper—it mattered not of how many generations' standing—and the bare fact of his existence was an offence never to be condoned.

“They say he’s ill,” he said petulantly to Frances as she sat beside him, prolonging her visit in order to divert his thoughts from his infirmities. “Why can’t he die? Then p’raps there’d be a chance of our buying back Fairacres, and young Cuthbert could take on from me and manage the two.”

He was still under the firm impression that Frances was dependent upon him, and she always encouraged the idea with that gracious and generous kindness of hers for which Cuthbert loved her.

But she deemed it her duty to administer a rebuke on the present occasion. “You mustn’t talk like that, Mr. Rackham,” she said. “It may be true that no one is indispensable, but to wish anyone dead is not the way to be happy ourselves.”

“Well, if he was to die, you wouldn’t be the one to wish him back, now would you?” countered old Rackham shrewdly. “But it’s no good talking about it. It doesn’t make things happen, so we may as well hold our tongues. He’s coming down, I hear. And about time too! I don’t see the use of an owner who never lives on his estate. Might just as well sell and be done with it!”

In this the Châtelaine heartily agreed with him, though reminding him and herself also that the unfortunate man under discussion was said to be a helpless invalid, so possibly the choice had not rested with him.

“He’ll probably come and upset us all,” was Rackham’s last illogical comment, as she rose to go. “They generally do, these people who know nothing and never bother to learn.”

“Oh, I expect Captain Cuthbert knows how to handle him,” she said cheerily. “I have great faith in him.”

“Oh yes, he’s all right,” agreed the old bailiff. “But then—he’s only an agent—like myself. ‘Tisn’t as if he bossed the show.”

Only an agent! Those words had somehow an unpleasant ring to Frances, and they haunted her with some persistence through the days that followed. During those days, despite the energy with which she pursued her tasks, she had ample time in the quiet evenings to review the situation and consider it from every standpoint. But though old Rackham’s words were hard to forget, she felt no regrets for what she had done,—perhaps because she still told herself that it was not irrevocable.

More than a week passed without news of Cuthbert, while she went busily about her work, making full arrangements for her absence, so that nothing at Beauclere should remain undone. Every morning she sent a swift

glance through her letters in search of his handwriting, and failing to find it, settled down to read her correspondence with no sign of disappointment. She had schooled herself to patience for so long, and whatever happened now she would not be perturbed. She knew that Cuthbert had taken the matter in hand, and there was within her a strong suspicion that she was nearer to the attainment of her heart's desire than she had ever been before. So she went on from day to day with a cheery courage that refused to entertain the thought of failure.

"All in good time!" was her motto.

Even when the day for her departure drew near and still no word had reached her, she did not despair. She was sure that Cuthbert meant to accomplish the task she had set him, and though it might take him longer than he had anticipated he would not come back to her empty-handed.

She did not propose to postpone her visit to Scotland on his account since she knew that he was aware of the date and so could shape his plans accordingly: but a faint feeling of surprise that was not untinged with disappointment did creep upon her unawares when her last day at Beauclere arrived and she saw her maid packing for the journey on the morrow. But if the temptation to check these preparations assailed her, she put it firmly away. If there had been any sound reason for doing so, Cuthbert would certainly have let her know. Besides, she did not intend to be absent for more than a month at a time.

She went to take leave of Admiral Lancey in the afternoon, and wandered with him round his beloved garden after tea. He was full of a rumour to which she gave no credence that the owner of Fairacres was at last about to make his long-deferred appearance at his home.

She assured him that there was no truth in it, as she must certainly have heard if any preparations had been in progress, and when she finally left him she had dismissed the matter from his mind and her own. But she remembered it again as she returned to Beauclere, and stifled a faint sigh of disappointment as she entered her lonely castle. She was leaving early in the morning, and there was small chance now of hearing anything from Cuthbert before she went.

It was a stormy evening, and for the first time in her life the place smote her with a sense of dreariness. Accustomed as she was to spells of solitude within its walls, a breath of sadness seemed to reach her with which she was not familiar, a feeling of emptiness that she had never known before.

“Perhaps I have been here too long,” she said to herself, yet in her heart she wished that she were not leaving on the morrow. If only she could have seen Cuthbert first, and have had her hopes renewed before she went!

She dined alone, and went immediately after to the library where some accounts and reports still remained unfinished on her desk. Here she sought to immerse herself in business, but something came between her and her work. She sat gazing before her, seeing nothing. Why was the old place so empty and so dark to-night?

There was a sound of rain outside the French window, and the wind sighed fitfully. A loosened twig made a faint tapping on the glass. It was like something very small and weak trying to enter. It made her think—she knew not wherefore—of baby hands striving with a persistence that would not be denied to open a door that was closed and barred.

She got up at last with a gesture that was oddly passionate, and going to the window she opened it wide to the night. The papers fluttered on the table behind her, but she did not turn her head. There was a curious feeling at her heart that made everything else seem paltry and of no account. Her eyes were wet with tears.

The rain blew in upon her, but she was hardly aware of it. She knew only a deep and unutterable longing within her to which she had never before given place. All her womanhood was alive and throbbing like a prisoner newly escaped, reaching out to liberty, the broken fetters cast away.

With the opening of the window, the tapping ceased, and she was thankful, for somehow it had hurt her intolerably. Though it seemed utterly absurd, it was that that had brought the tears. Now that it was past, the pain was gone. She stood, breathing deeply of the night air, her work neglected, forgotten, behind her.

And standing there, she became aware, subtly, unaccountably, that she was no longer alone. Somewhere out in the darkness before her there was a presence, and the certainty of it pierced her like an electric thrill.

She spoke, almost involuntarily. “Is that you?”

He stepped into the light thrown by the lamp behind her. She saw the rain shining upon his uncovered head. “Will you forgive me for coming like this?” he said. “It was so late, I hardly liked to intrude.”

She stood back for him to enter, conscious of an inner tumult which she was powerless to control.

He came in and closed the window softly behind him.

"Don't do that!" she said, and again she spoke half against her will. "There's something tapping."

"I think you've let it in," he said with a smile. "I was afraid you might have gone to bed early, but I had to come. I was much more afraid of missing you in the morning, or that you wouldn't have time to speak to me."

She faced him, feeling strangely powerless and unlike herself. "You are only just back then?" she managed to say.

"Only just back—yes," he said, and his eyes dwelt upon her with something of the expression of a man who after hard travel sees his goal at last almost within reach.

At a mute sign from her he stripped off his mackintosh and threw it over a chair.

She stood watching him. What was there about him that gave the impression of one making a last desperate bid for success? Though his manner was perfectly calm and controlled, she was strongly convinced that he was keyed up for some special effort in which everything he had was at stake.

Her own agitation made it difficult for her to know how to deal with him. But in a moment he surprised her by taking the initiative.

"I'd better tell you at once," he said, "that I haven't succeeded in doing what you wanted me to do."

"Ah!" she said. She could not control that one exclamation of disappointment, but she toned it down immediately with the words: "Well, I hardly expected you would. But you have done something?"

"Yes, I've done something," he said. "I've done as much as I—singlehanded—can do. The rest depends on you."

"Tell me what you mean!" she said, striving to suppress the eagerness in her voice.

He faced her squarely, and again she was conscious of a nervous force within him with which she could not cope—a force that seemed to be already at grips with her before she had realized its nature.

"Look here, Châtelaine!" he said, and his voice, though quiet, had an unfamiliar ring of hardness. "You gave me to understand when I last saw you that if I on my part could manage to obtain on your behalf the title-

deeds of Fairacres at any reasonable figure—I don't think you minded much what it was within a thousand or two—you on yours would be—not unwilling—to contemplate matrimony with me. Am I right?"

He was challenging her to go back on her word. She saw that swiftly, and stiffened, though she knew that a great flame of colour wrapped her from head to foot. "Yes, you are quite right," she said. "But you have omitted the fact that we were both left in a position to withdraw. There was no obligation upon either of us."

"Oh, I realize that," he said. "But I don't think you are the sort of woman to make a suggestion of that kind one day and withdraw the next. At least, if you are—I have backed a loser and there is no more to be said."

It was turning the tables upon her with a vengeance; but, though she was a woman, she could not take offence. She could not help admiring a strength of purpose which seemed to equal her own.

"Well," she said, smiling a little, "you needn't take it for granted that you have backed a loser before the race is finished, need you? That is hardly a sporting spirit."

He smiled in answer, and she saw with an odd relief that the tension was momentarily relaxed.

"No, that's true," he said. "And I'll back my luck against any man's. But, as I said before, I've done as much as I can singlehanded. And now I want to know if you are prepared to risk something too—that is, if you really think the stake is worth it."

"Meaning Fairacres as the stake?" she asked.

His eyes met hers with a directness that compelled. "Yes, Fairacres," he said. "We needn't go over all the old ground again. You know it—better than I do even. Mr. Inglewood is not an easy man to deal with, being the last of his line and yet too prejudiced in favour of sticking to his own inheritance to part with it lightly. Just recently, however, he has changed a little. That is to say, he is no longer quite impossible in his views. But that isn't going very far. He isn't exactly amenable."

"Go on!" she said, as he paused.

He went on rapidly. "That's where your part comes in. If you were married, I think he could be persuaded to treat with you, because—in spite of the feud between you—he would prefer that Fairacres should go eventually to a descendant of its former owner, since he has none of his own,

than to a complete stranger. It's a sort of kink in the brain no doubt, but there it is. You must make allowances in dealing with it. Otherwise——" again he paused.

"You mean that he refuses to deal with me as a single woman?" said Frances.

Cuthbert nodded. "He simply won't think of it."

"Then what have you been doing all this time?" she asked.

He hesitated for a second; then: "I've been doing quite a lot of thinking," he said ingenuously. "And—Châtelaine—I don't know what you'll say to me, probably summon all your minions and hang me from the keep! But even so, I shall have gone a step further with you than any other man ever has. I've bought a marriage-license."

"You have——" Words failed her; she went back a step. She was no longer burning, but icy-cold, as though her heart had stopped beating.

He nodded again, daringly, recklessly, his eyes on hers. "Yes, I have. It's no good playing at it, is it? You either meant what you said to me, or you didn't. I took it that you did—and acted accordingly. I can get you Fairacres, or at least I can get it for your heirs, but in no other way. Have I done wrong?"

He almost flung the question, and suddenly she saw that he was trembling, and realized that he was putting strong force upon himself. It had a strange effect upon her. The feeling of icy dismay passed, and she felt her heart begin to beat again, albeit somewhat unevenly.

She managed to muster a smile. "You have certainly gone rather far," she said, "but I don't say that you have acted without any justification. I think you have been a little precipitate, that's all. Suppose you come again in the morning and we will talk it over!"

She spoke kindly, but with intentional coolness, for it seemed to her that he needed a steadying hand at that moment. But if he did, he was unaware of it; for he thrust it impetuously aside.

"You're arranging to leave in the morning," he said.

"I will go by a later train," said Frances.

He made a slight but urgent gesture. "That won't do, I'm afraid. We've got to act at once or he will change his mind. I've done the best I can for you, Châtelaine. Aren't you going to back me up?"

There was an appeal in his voice which she found it impossible to ignore. She would fain have turned from him, but found that she could not.

"What do you want me to do?" she said.

He told her with simplicity, but with a rapidity of utterance that betrayed something of that hidden agitation which she had already detected. "I want you to clinch the matter straight away," he said, "and marry me. After all, it's what you had made up your mind to do, isn't it? Once married, everything will come right. In fact, everything depends upon it. Whereas, if we let the matter hang fire, the chances are that everything will fall through. Châtelaine,"—he appealed to her now openly and very earnestly—"you did mean what you said, didn't you? You weren't—playing with me?"

Somehow that moved her. She put out her hand to him, scarcely knowing that she did so. "But I didn't expect you to rush me—like this," she said.

He held her hand tightly clasped. "But what is there to wait for?" he urged. "Are you afraid I shan't make you happy? Afraid to trust yourself to me? If so—well, just send me away, that's all!"

She stood irresolute, looking at him. There was something about him in that moment that she had never seen before—a depth and a fire that half-startled even while it drew her. She had not suspected that the always courteous and often deferential agent could display so keen an ardour. But of his genuine feeling—his sincerity—she had no doubt. He was not a man to sacrifice his self-respect for worldly advantage. This she had always known; it was possibly because of this that she had chosen him.

"Are you afraid?" he reiterated, as she stood in silence before him. "Shall I go?"

She saw the shadow of a great disappointment begin to darken his eyes, and for some reason the sight stirred her more strongly than any persuasion. She laid her other hand on his shoulder, but her touch was one of restraint even while she yielded.

"Don't look like that!" she said, faintly smiling. "It isn't fair. And—yes, of course you must go. It's getting very late. But you may come again in the morning—as early as you like. I shall cancel my visit to Scotland. Will that do?"

She saw his face change, and, curiously, for the moment that was all that seemed to matter.

“Then you’ll come up to town with me to-morrow,” he said, “and marry me? Will you, Châtelaine? Will you?”

“Perhaps I will,” she said.

He looked at her with a man’s worship in his eyes. “Oh, if you would only kiss me once,” he said, “I should feel sure of you.”

She did not draw back from him. “Will you go if I do?” she said.

“At once,” he answered swiftly.

She bent towards him. Perhaps never before had the gracious womanhood of her been so apparent.

“Good night then!” she said, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

A great quiver went through him. He bowed his head and held her hand hard pressed against his lips. When he straightened himself again, he did not look at her, but turned and picked up his mackintosh and opened the window.

“Good night!” she said again softly.

“Good night, Châtelaine!” he said, and passed out.

The window closed noiselessly behind him, and she was alone once more.

III

She breakfasted in her room the following morning, and she told her maid that she had altered her plans and would probably be going to town on business, leaving her behind. She also wrote out a telegram for her friends in Scotland, explaining that an urgent business matter compelled her to postpone her visit. They would not be greatly surprised. Everyone understood that Beauclere came first with her. Then she dressed, receiving a message while she did so that Captain Cuthbert was waiting to see her.

When she joined him eventually, she found him very pale, but perfectly normal and collected. He took instant note that she was dressed for a journey. She saw it in his smile as he greeted her.

“Everything is fixed up,” he said. “We can catch the ten-thirty-five if we start at once. It will get us to King’s Cross at two-ten. I have arranged for the

ceremony to take place at two-forty-five."

She did not question his arrangements, and not till she was actually in the train with him did she find time to wonder at her own passivity. It was as though a whirlwind had caught her and lifted her off her feet. She could not feel the ground at all, but strangely she was not afraid.

They did not talk very much during the journey, but as they were lunching together in the saloon she suddenly remembered to ask him a question which the rush of circumstances had driven from her mind.

"Is it true that Mr. Inglewood has gone to Fairacres?"

"He arrived there yesterday," said Cuthbert.

"Oh!" She looked at him in surprise. "You didn't tell me that!"

"I had more important things to think about," he said, smiling a little.

She regarded him attentively. "Have you told him about this—escapade?" she asked.

"He knows—yes," said Cuthbert. "But he won't mention it without your permission."

She was conscious of a momentary sense of resentment which she tried to repress. "There was no need to tell him beforehand, was there?" she said.

"Well, yes, he had to know," said Cuthbert. He added, smiling: "The scheme has his full approval, and I have undertaken to present him to you when we are married."

She felt herself colour. "How grotesque!" she said. "What made you do that?"

"He wished it," said Cuthbert simply.

"You are very fond of him," she remarked.

"I am rather," said Cuthbert.

"And you expect me to be?" Her tone was a challenge.

"Oh no!" said Cuthbert soothingly. "I shall never ask you to do or be anything against your will, Châtelaine."

His answer appeased her. It was so readily and courteously spoken. She turned from the subject. "Then we are returning immediately, are we?" she said.

"That is for you to say," he said.

“Have you no wishes of your own?” she asked him unexpectedly.

He hesitated for a second. Then: “My only wish is to please you,” he said, “but I do not see how we can either of us be away for long.”

Again he had struck the right note, and she smiled at him. “I am glad to hear you say that,” she said. “Yes, we will go straight back, and stay at Beauclere until the nine-days’-wonder is over.”

“So be it!” said Cuthbert.

The swift events that succeeded their arrival in London partook of something of the nature of a dream to Frances. There persisted through everything the feeling as of being caught by some irresistible power which she was quite unable to define or even to locate, but against the driving of which there was no possibility of standing, much less of turning back. What happened that day was ordained to happen, just as the earth was ordained to fulfil its course around the sun. The decision was hers no longer, if it ever had been hers. She could only play the part assigned to her, leaving everything else to her companion.

She thought to herself that he was a very able director of affairs. Nothing seemed to be left undone, no contingency unprovided for. She was whirled from one scene to another without hitch or hindrance, and almost before she realized it she was standing beside Cuthbert before an altar in a dimly-lighted city church, listening with a strange detachment to the words of the marriage-service recited by an old, old man with a beard who must surely have risen from the vaults below them for the purpose. She found herself responding also, vaguely, as one in a dream. It was all so utterly different from the gay weddings she had attended, so different as to be hardly like a wedding at all. And when she signed her name in the allotted space on the register below a bewildering piece of blotting-paper with which Cuthbert with his unfailing efficiency had covered his own signature, she had a curious sense of loss, as though something had gone from her that could never be hers again.

“Not even a real wedding!” was the thought in her mind. And yet, knowing Cuthbert, she was fully aware that the last detail of legality had been observed, and that no possibility of turning back could ever exist for her again.

A slight shudder assailed her as she finally turned to leave the dreary vestry. What if—in her love for Beauclere—she had made a hideous

mistake? But the feeling left her when they were out in the sunshine again, and she found herself able to smile.

"What an awful experience!" she said. "Do let us get away as quickly as possible!"

He seemed to share her desire, for again his zeal proved indefatigable, and she was forthwith transported without any effort of her own upon the first stage of the return journey.

As the train started, she drew a deep breath. "So it is really over!" she said.

"And we shall be home by nine o'clock," said Cuthbert practically.

IV

SHE had not given any definite instructions at Beauclere regarding her return, so accustomed was she to come and go at her own convenience. Beauclere was always held in readiness for her, and she had taken it for granted in the morning that it would be their destination now; but it came to her as they drew towards the end of the journey that the hour was late, and that she had faced enough for one day. She turned to Cuthbert who had been sitting in silence behind a paper for a long time.

"I wonder," she said, "whether, as it is so late, you will mind postponing the starting of the nine-days'-wonder until to-morrow. I can walk up from Thorn and no one at Beauclere will be surprised. I have often done it before."

He turned to her at once in his courteous way. "There is no need," he said. "My little car is at the station. I will drive you."

It was just what she had desired to avoid, but she could not tell him so. As she paused, considering the matter, he spoke again.

"Châtelaine, I want you to do something for me."

"What is it?" she said, wondering a little.

He was very pale, but he spoke without agitation. "I want you," he said, "to spend just to-night in my home—not yours."

There swept over her again that feeling of cold dismay to which she could not give a name. She faced him in a species of desperation. "But

why?" she said.

He answered her very steadily, his eyes on hers. "Because you are my wife," he said.

The train drummed on through the fading evening light, drawing near to Thorn. She sat in silence trying to subdue the wild tumult that had arisen within her. He did not urge his plea, and that seemed to her significant. He treated it already as a foregone conclusion that she would yield. She did not want to yield. She wanted to stop these whirlwind happenings. She wanted urgently a little breathing-space, a little time to herself, a pause for thought.

But it seemed that this was to be denied her. Not yet was she to feel the ground beneath her feet. Return was already impossible, but she must be borne further before she would be allowed to rest. Those last words of his had made her realize something of which till then she had been ignorant. This man had strength, and by strength he would win.

They reached Thorn, and he got up and collected her belongings. His small car was in a shed near by. They went together to find it.

She did not again suggest walking up to Beauclere. Her pride revolted at even seeming to withdraw that which she had given. But as she got into the car, and felt the engine begin to throb, she was conscious of something that was almost panic at her heart.

The cottage that Cuthbert occupied was on the Fairacres estate, and he turned the car in that direction without words of any kind. It was growing dark, and she reflected that it was more than likely that no one would recognize them as they drove through the village. As a matter of fact there were very few people about, and no one gave them a greeting.

They reached the open gates of Fairacres and turned up the drive. The agent's cottage stood among trees midway to the house. But Cuthbert did not take the track that led to it. To her surprise he drove straight on.

"We are not going to see Mr. Inglewood to-night surely!" she said, with a gasp.

"Yes, to-night," said Cuthbert, and he spoke with a certain grimness.

She made a swift restraining movement. The feeling of being borne forward by a force she could not stay had become unbearable.

"Oh, not to-night!" she said, and there was more of entreaty in her voice than she knew. "I can't face any more to-night."

He turned towards her, and in the dusk she saw that his face was stern. “It has got to be to-night,” he said.

She saw that there was no hope of changing his decision. It was strange how her conception of him had altered during that day, and yet she had always known that there was in him a latent strength. Otherwise, she had never given herself to him.

They reached the massive pile of Fairacres with its fine old Tudor front. It was a place she had seldom seen at close quarters. She regarded it now almost with horror. He stopped the car, and she got out; but she kept her hand upon the door, for she was trembling.

“Come!” Cuthbert said. “I will take you straight to his room.”

He took a key from his pocket, and opened the heavy door. They entered a high hall panelled and furnished in ancient oak. Their feet rang on the stone floor, but otherwise there was no sound.

She turned to him, shivering, a protest on her lips which remained unuttered; for his hand closed upon her arm as the great door clanged behind them.

“This way!” he said, and impelled her steadily forward.

She went up a long flight of wide oak stairs, and then down a dim corridor till he stopped and opened a door that led into a room that faced the western glow. They entered together and again she heard the door shut behind her.

She looked around her and saw that it was a bedroom, sumptuously furnished in every detail, but untenanted, save for themselves. In amazement she stared at the great four-poster bed with its rich hangings, then turned for explanation to the man beside her.

“What does this mean?” she said.

He answered her with his usual quietness but with a primitive simplicity that made her gasp again.

“It means that I have got you at last in my stronghold. And Fairacres is not for you alone any more than Beauclere is for me. But they will both belong in the end to your heir—and mine.”

“Ah!” she said, and freed herself from his touch, going backwards from him as though a gulf had opened between them. “It means that! It means—that! But why—why?”

Again he answered with the kind of steady insistence of a prisoner giving evidence on his own behalf. “There was no other way. At least I could think of none. I saw you first in London, and wanted you beyond words. But you would never have considered me for a moment under my own name. So I had to think of some other means of winning you. I came down here under my mother’s name and got to know you—and to worship you. The rest you know. Am I so much to blame?”

She did not answer him. She could not. She turned instead and went to the open window that looked towards the sunset. In the distance a grey turret of Beauclere stood up flushed faintly pink in the dying light.

She spoke at last with an odd breathlessness. “How am I to know—that this—this trick—was not played solely for the sake of—uniting the two estates?”

“How indeed?” he said. “But was not that your real motive in marrying me?”

A tremor went through her. She leaned slightly forward, still gazing at that far turret, her hands upon the sill.

He spoke again behind her. “When you have found me wanting, Châtelaine, I will accept sentence from you. But——” a shade of feeling crept into his voice—“I protest—you have not found me wanting yet.”

She turned swiftly and faced him, her bosom heaving.

“I have found you wanting in honesty,” she said. “And I have always been honest with you.”

He made an odd gesture as if accepting the thrust. “At least I am playing the game to-night,” he said.

Something in his voice struck her, checking her indignation. “What do you mean?” she said.

He stretched his hand towards the distant turret of Beauclere. “I mean,” he said very deliberately, “that if you desire to go back to your castle now I have told you the truth, and to leave me in mine—you may.”

“If I do,” she told him, quivering, “I shall never come back.”

He bent a little, again accepting her point. “You are a queen in your own right,” he said. “You will do as you think best.”

Strangely that pierced her, she could not have said wherefore. She stood still facing him, still burning with resentment, but she could not thrust again.

Somehow he had disarmed her. She felt her anger begin to die down, and blindly she turned towards the door.

He turned also without a moment's hesitation and opened it for her.

She passed out, not looking at him.

She went down the long empty passage. She reached the stairs and stopped, staring down into the darkness.

Yes, she was free to go. It was less than a mile to her own castle—her beloved Beauclere. There she could rest and be safe. But oddly there came to her the memory of the little tapping sound outside her window the night before, as of something small and helpless seeking in vain to enter.

The stairs seemed to yawn before her like a gulf waiting to entomb her. Very suddenly she turned from them, and in a moment she was running swiftly back, as one pursued.

She came to the door which he had not closed behind her. She entered and looked wildly around.

He was standing at the window where she had stood, waiting—she knew it instinctively—to watch her go from him into the night.

He turned sharply at her coming, and in a moment her outstretched hands were clasped in his.

"I can't do it!" she cried to him. "I can't go!"

"Why not?" he said.

She answered him between tears and laughter. "I don't know. I don't know. I think—it's because—though you're such a brute—I love you!"

"My darling!" he said, and in that instant she was in his arms, held—fast held—beyond all hope of escape, while he kissed her closely, passionately, as no man had ever kissed her before.

When he curbed himself at length he saw that her eyes were wet. "I've hurt you," he said with compunction. "Oh, Châtelaine, forgive me! I'm a brute!"

She laughed in answer,—the soft, mocking laughter with which many a woman hides her soul.

"Yes—yes; you are a brute," she said. "But never mind! Do it again!"

THE QUEST

PART I

I

"CONFOUND that boy! Why can't he hurry?"

The stamping pedestrian on the stones of the river-edge cast an anxious glance at the threatening sky. A twenty minutes' delay at the ferry might make all the difference. Besides, he was not the type of man to wait patiently, and to be kept waiting—deliberately kept waiting—by an insolent slip of a boy who actually left his oars adrift in the row-locks in mid-stream while he nonchalantly lit a cigarette was almost beyond the bounds of endurance.

However, there was no help for it, no means of inducing the youth to hurry, and the only thing to do was to contain his exasperation as best he could. It was growing dark, and the tide was flowing in from an almost invisible sea with a freshening breeze. It promised to be a fairly rough passage, and though to Godfrey Tressider this fact in itself meant little, he had no urgent desire to place himself at the mercy of a lad whose physical strength might prove wholly unequal to battling against a heavy swell. His anger increased while he waited, driven back from his first vantage-point by the invading water.

The boat was drawing towards him now, propelled by long, steady strokes; but then the tide was behind it. When it came to re-crossing, it would be a different matter. The figure of the young rower became distinct, attired in a shiny sou'-wester, oilskins, and thigh-waders. He was plainly prepared for any caprice of the sea or weather. The boat grated at length on the shingly beach and in a moment there came the clatter of the oars as he shipped them. Then he was over the side and knee-deep in the flowing water as he dragged his craft up to a mooring-post and made it fast.

He did not seem to see the prospective passenger on the bank, but tramped up on to the rough quay in his great boots and turned to a hut a few yards away which the impatient traveller had already negotiated in vain. He removed the cigarette from between his lips as he went and broke into a whistle—a clear, piping sound like the call of a wild bird.

Reaching the hut, he opened the door and disappeared for a moment or two. Tressider stamped again on the stones, and wondered why he had suffered him to pass unaccosted. Then he saw him emerge, carrying an armful of parcels. He came again to the boat rocking lightly in the deepening water and disposed of his burden in a locker in the bows. Then, having accomplished this to his satisfaction, he turned towards the stranger.

"Want to get across?" he said.

No salute accompanied the enquiry. His voice had a husky depth that was not unpleasing, but it was wholly devoid of any suggestion of deference. A straw-coloured strand of hair hung across his eyes, through which he surveyed the man he addressed with calm intelligence. His mode of address was such that Tressider almost felt for the moment that his indignation must have been misplaced; then, with a hasty grab, he recovered it.

"Considering I have been waiting to get across for the last half-hour," he said, "while you have been dawdling along as though to-morrow would do ____"

"And won't it?" said the youth with a sudden grin that displayed teeth as white and regular as a puppy's.

Tressider exploded. "Damn it! Do you think I'm here to await your pleasure? The tide's coming in—there's going to be a devil of a storm—and you waste the precious minutes lighting a confounded cigarette which I'll wager you're not old enough to smoke!"

His outburst ended as it were from sheer lack of result. For the object of his wrath merely continued to smile largely. He had tucked the cigarette in question behind his ear.

As Tressider ceased to speak he gave a careless side-nod towards the rocking boat. "Get in, then!" he said.

Tressider got in, feeling unaccountably futile. This boy—this urchin—had a personality, knew how to master the situation. He sat down in the stern, still nursing his grievance, wondering by what means he could make an impression.

The young boatman meanwhile proceeded with the utmost leisureliness to unmoor the boat and push off. He climbed in and then took his seat on the middle thwart facing his passenger, resumed his cigarette, and—still with the utmost deliberation—unshipped his oars.

"Going to be a rough passage!" he remarked.

Tressider was angry, very angry, but a further expression of his feelings would have been undignified, so he held his peace. It was impossible to bring the youngster to book at this stage. As they drew out towards mid-stream he realized that the lad's remark was well-founded. The passage was going to be very rough indeed. He adjusted the knapsack on his shoulders and prepared himself doggedly for the ordeal.

The boy on his part showed no signs of perturbation. With absolute assurance he rowed into the choppy waves, his muscular brown arms tightening to the strain. The sunset was behind him—just a streak of gold almost overwhelmed in dense banks of cloud—and against the fading light he looked absurdly small and inadequate. But yet he ploughed his way along with unchanging serenity, finally shooting his cigarette from between his lips into the dark water as he neared the fighting currents in the middle of the river.

Tressider viewed this point with misgiving. The boat, though a stout craft, was not as wide and stable as the usual ferry-boat, and he had very grave doubts of the rower's strength. The latter's face, however, with its utter absence of anxiety gave him some reassurance. He had had no experience of these waters. Possibly the passage was not so perilous as it looked.

They reached the swirl where river and tide fought for the supremacy, and the boat, caught broadside, began to spin. The young boatman, his square chin set, righted her and forced her onwards. The wind was roaring across the bay, and a great wave riding in smote them with a shivering blow that sent a shower of spray over Tressider. The boat pitched violently and he was nearly flung from his seat. But still the young boatman maintained his air of calm aloofness, merely pausing to await his opportunity in the seething waste of waters around them. With skill and judgment he drove his small craft on again, and an unwilling admiration began to stir in Tressider's soul. His handling of the boat was masterly, but it was an unerring adroitness rather than strength that made it so. A dozen times they were in danger of being swamped, and a dozen times he avoided the danger as an experienced rider avoids being thrown by a jibbing horse. Tressider came to the

conclusion that the perils of the crossing had been a lifelong study of this urchin who was not yet legally old enough to smoke a cigarette.

Darkness came down upon them as they gradually drew out of the dangerous currents and began to near the farther side,—darkness and a driving, pitiless rain. A long shaft of light gleamed forth from the lighthouse high on its cliff, travelled across the turmoil of tossing water, and vanished. They were nearing the shore and out of reach of the wind.

The youngster spoke. “Hardly thought we were going to make it,” he said.

“Yes, you let the tide get ahead of you,” said Tressider, returning to his original grievance. “And kept me waiting half an hour into the bargain.”

The white teeth flashed again. The stranger’s indignation seemed to cause him considerable amusement.

“Well, I’ve got you across anyway,” he said, in a voice in which laughter struggled against suppression. “Not many chaps would have done that.”

With a few long sweeps of the oars he ran the boat up on to the little beach alongside a wooden landing-stage, and jumping into the shallows he held her steady while Tressider climbed out.

That accomplished, he proceeded to pull her up the shingle in the gathering gloom without paying any further attention to his passenger.

Tressider stood for some seconds, waiting; then: “Come along, boy! Come along!” he said impatiently. “What do I owe you for this?”

The lithe young figure paused in its task, facing the stranger with easy effrontery. He fished out another cigarette from an inner pocket and stuck it between his lips.

“What do you think I deserve for it?” he said.

Tressider at once rose to the bait. “You deserve a good punch on the head, you cheeky young rascal,” he said, “and you’ll be getting it one of these days if you’re not careful. Come, out with it! What do I owe you?”

A laugh of careless amusement greeted his words. Plainly the situation had its humorous side. Then: “Only an apology,” coolly replied the egregious youngster with the cigarette. “You see, this is a private ferry, and the boat is mine.”

“Yours!” said Tressider, astounded. “Then where’s the ferry—the ordinary ferry?”

"Oh, that's higher up the river," with a jerk of the head. "You missed it in any case. But that didn't matter. You'd get anywhere with manners like yours. Where do you want to get to now?"

The deep voice was perfectly good-tempered and held no derision. Tressider stood undecided as to whether to laugh or be stern. Eventually since he also was by no means devoid of humour, he decided upon the former course.

"I like your impertinence," he said: "As to manners, if I didn't bring any with me, I'm not likely to pick up any in this part of the world. But I'm grateful to you for the lift across all the same. I'm looking for a lodging for the night. I was told there was an inn of sorts on this side of the river."

The youngster nodded. "At Cherry Morton. Ten miles farther on," he said briefly.

"What?" said Tressider. "Ten miles!"

The lad turned back to his boat without further words and proceeded to make her fast for the night. Then he opened the locker in which he had stowed his parcels.

It was quite obvious that he had no further attention to spare for Tressider, and the latter hitched up his knapsack once more and began to trudge up the shingle to a road that showed dimly above the river. The rain was falling heavily, and as he mounted the bank the wind caught him again. Ten miles farther on! He set his teeth. It would be a hurricane in another half-hour, and already it was nearly dark. It would have been better to have remained on the other side. He had passed an inn an hour previously, and had decided against it. Well, he had only himself to thank for that. But he had not anticipated a tramp of ten more miles when he had got across. There was no return, however. He could only make the best of it. Doggedly he tramped away into the storm.

II

THE road took a zigzag course above the river winding up the precipitous face of the hill on which the lighthouse stood. The light was fast failing, but there was no apparent choice as to route. Tressider fared forth upon it at a swinging pace. The rain had begun to descend in torrents, driving in from the sea. The force of the wind increased as he ascended, but he set his teeth

and pressed on. He would in time reach that inn at Cherry Morton if it took him all night to get there.

The curves of the road sharpened as he drew nearer to the top, and the ascent became more steep. Here and there the wind met him in full blast and nearly swept him off his feet. He was compelled after a prolonged struggle on an exposed stretch to pause for breath in the lee of a bank. It was obvious that the road he was on would lead out upon the open desolation of the moor, and for the first time he began to question with himself if the task he had undertaken could possibly end in success. If his path lay anywhere near the edge of the cliff it would be highly dangerous, for though the gale was beating in from the sea the coast was very uneven, and he knew that there were deep fissures along the cliffs into which he might be swept like a feather if a sudden gust of that rising tempest caught him at a critical moment.

"I wonder if I'm a damn' fool to go on," he said.

But yet there seemed no alternative; for he could not spend the night in his present position, and the only other shelter that he knew of was the lighthouse on the top of the headland. His thoughts turned to the lad who had ferried him over. He must have an abode of some description in this inhospitable wilderness, but he dismissed this idea with a semi-humorous grimace. Not even to avoid the whole howling night in the open could he bring himself to solicit any further favours in that direction. No, he must take his chance. He must follow the road on which he was now set whithersoever it might lead him. He had taken chances before without regretting it. He must try his luck again.

He turned to resume his journey. But as he did so, down from the slope above him through the darkness and the swirling rain there came a running figure. It almost collided with him before he saw it, pulling up sharply just in time.

Breathlessly through the tumult a voice accosted him.

"Hullo! Look here! You can't go on!"

Something in the gasping utterance made Tressider aware that the speaker was on the verge of exhaustion. He recognized him in a moment. There seemed to be no other inhabitant of this wild corner, save the lighthouse-keeper on the summit of the hill.

Instinctively he thrust out a steadying hand, and pulled the slight panting form into the comparative shelter of the bank which he had been about to

quit, interposing his own body between it and the driving blast.

"What's the matter?" he said.

The youngster made several gasping incoherent efforts and found words. "You can't—get to Cherry Morton—to-night. You'll have to come back with me."

"Why?" said Tressider.

"Because you'll be blown over the cliff," came the breathless reply. "It's blowing—great guns up there."

"Have you been up to see?" said Tressider.

"No. I haven't. I know without. You'd better come along to my cottage. I'll put you up."

"You!" said Tressider. "Have you got a cottage of your own?"

"Yes. I live here. And there's nowhere else for you to go to, so you'd better come."

"It's very decent of you," said Tressider. "I don't suppose you want me very much. Isn't there any other road to Cherry Morton?"

"No, only this. You'll never get there to-night. Better come along with me." There was obvious anxiety in the words.

Tressider considered the matter, the while the wind howled around them.

"Well," he said at length, "if that's the way of it I'll come. But only on condition that I'm allowed to pay for my night's board and lodging. That's understood, is it?"

"Anything you like," said the lad ingenuously. "Only don't go and get killed on the cliffs! Come along! I'll show you the way."

He pushed past Tressider and turned to the downward path. The power of the wind lessened as they descended, but the downpour of rain continued unabated.

They came to another bend in the road, and here Tressider caught up with his guide; but no further words passed between them. They tramped side by side till they were almost at the bottom of the hill. And then suddenly the youngster stopped and turned inwards.

Tressider saw what in the murky twilight he had previously overlooked —a narrow flight of steps winding up between stone walls. There was barely

room to mount them abreast, and he dropped behind again.

They were completely sheltered here from the fury of the storm, and he realized how it was that his companion had managed to get ahead of him and approach him from above. The steps were evidently a short cut to the top.

They seemed to wind on interminably between the rocky walls, and the darkness as they ascended was almost complete. Old legends of smugglers occurred to Tressider during the climb. He wondered to what manner of stronghold he was being conducted, and marvelled somewhat at the confidence he had reposed in his extremely reticent guide.

Then abruptly he found himself faced by a wall and realized that the climb was over. The steps continued at an angle on his right, but on his left there was evidently a passage. A hand grasped and pulled him, and he went submissively.

At the end of some seconds of blind walking his conductor stopped, and he heard the sound of a key in a lock. A door opened in front of him and the hand on his arm relaxed its grip.

“Stand still a minute!” said his host. “I’ll get a light.”

There came the rasp of a match, and a flame shone in the darkness. By it he saw the figure of his guide stooping at a bare wooden table to kindle a lamp. He broke into a cheery whistle the moment he had done so; then at the end of a bar stood up and faced the man on the threshold.

“Well, come in!” he said. “Don’t knock your head! Shut the door after you! I’ll light the fire.”

Tressider obeyed instructions. He also turned up the wick of the lamp and looked about him.

The utter poverty of his surroundings was the first thing that struck him. There were a few cooking utensils on a shelf and a solitary wooden chair in a corner, but of comfort there was no suggestion. The place looked as if it were on the verge of collapse.

“Sit down!” said his host. “I’ll soon get the fire going, and then you shall have something to eat.”

His voice was as cheery as his whistle had been. The fire had begun to smoke, but he handled it with dexterity, and in a few moments it promised well and he turned round.

“You won’t think much of this,” he remarked. “But it’s a shelter anyway.”

“I should think so,” said Tressider. “And a most welcome one. Look here! Can’t I help?”

“Like to peel some potatoes?” suggested the youngster with a grin.

“Of course. I’ll do anything,” said Tressider. “It’s very decent of you to take me in like this. Where are the potatoes?”

“Wait! I’ll get them. You’re rather a large size for this place.” His host was rummaging in a sack in a corner as he spoke. “Stocks are a bit low, but I brought back some bread, and there are some eggs in the cupboard. Here are the potatoes! I’ll get you a knife.”

He placed a tin bowl of potatoes on the table at Tressider’s elbow and produced a knife which he whetted on the hearthstone.

As he handed it to Tressider, he found the latter’s eyes upon him.

“Well, what’s the matter?” he said.

“You’re a handy sort of lad,” said Tressider. “Do you live here alone and do all these things for yourself?”

The calm eyes under the level brows returned his look half-derisively. “There are not many things I can’t do,” said the youngster, “or that most people can’t do, if it comes to that. Why shouldn’t I live here alone and do for myself?”

“Don’t you find it a bit lonely?” suggested Tressider, setting to work on the potatoes.

“There are worse things than loneliness,” said the lad enigmatically.

Tressider laughed a little. “Obviously. No doubt the hermit’s life has its attractions. I could fancy it myself sometimes. By the way, since you are so good as to take me in in this way, we had better know each other’s names. Mine is Godfrey Tressider.”

His host, who was setting the table, dropped an enamel cup and dived after it.

Coming up again, he remarked: “I believe I’ve seen that name in the papers somewhere. Aren’t you a K.C. or something?”

“Yes,” said Tressider.

The other nodded. “I know. I read a good bit. You’ll be a judge some day.”

“I won’t answer for that,” said Tressider.

“Oh yes, you will. You’re the sort that never stops till he gets there. No wonder you didn’t like being hung up on the other side of the river!” Faint derision was once more apparent in his host’s manner. “I don’t suppose anyone ever keeps you waiting up in London.”

Tressider smiled. “I have to put up with it sometimes, but I’m afraid I’m not very good at it. But I’ll pay you what I owe you now, and that is an apology for my rudeness and impatience a little while ago. I realize that they were quite unjustified.”

His host’s white teeth gleamed again in an open, ingenuous smile. “Oh, don’t worry yourself!” he said. “I rather enjoyed it.”

“Yes, I noticed that,” said Tressider. “It wasn’t quite a fair catch, you know. You had me at a disadvantage.”

“All right. We’ll call quits,” said the lad, and turned to the now crackling fire to place a kettle on the hob.

“You haven’t told me your name,” Tressider reminded him, as he returned to his task of setting out the evening meal from the corner cupboard.

“My name! Oh, I’m Peter Friar.” He flung another grin over his shoulder. “And old enough to smoke a cigarette in spite of appearances! Have one yourself!” He tossed a box on to the table. “And take off your wet things! We’ll dry them by degrees.”

He himself began to strip off his oilskin coat with the words, disclosing a rough fisherman’s jersey underneath.

“Do you do much fishing in these parts?” asked Tressider.

“I live by it,” said Peter Friar simply.

“And you run your own show entirely?” Tressider looked at him incredulously.

“Oh no!” said Peter. “I’ve got a pal—an old chap, Tim Faraday. We go out together. We’re off at dawn to-morrow if the wind goes down.”

He placed a bit of bacon on the table and began to cut some bread.

Tressider applied himself to the potatoes. “Old Faraday taught you the trade, I suppose?” he said.

“Oh, I love the sea,” said Peter. “It didn’t take me long to learn.”

“It’s a hard life,” suggested Tressider.

“It’s freedom anyway,” said Peter with a curious vehemence that made his guest regard him shrewdly for a moment.

A gust of wind came suddenly roaring down the chimney sending the smoke pouring into the room. Peter turned sharply to attend to the fire, and the thread of their conversation was lost in a racket of fire-irons. When peace was restored, Tressider realized that it was, at least temporarily, at an end.

III

THEY had their meal a little later in the tiny kitchen, Tressider still occupying the only chair, while Peter balanced himself on the side of a box, his attitude one of supreme independence. It was quite a satisfying, if primitive, repast, and when it was over he collected everything and washed up in a pail, Tressider assisting.

“I suppose you don’t mind sleeping on my bed,” he said then. “It’s all I’ve got for you.”

“Of course I’m not going to sleep on your bed!” said Tressider. “What do you take me for?”

“Mr. Godfrey Tressider, K.C.,” said Peter with a grin. “When I said I’d put you up for the night, I meant I’d do it properly. It isn’t much of a shakedown, but it’s yours—for to-night. I shall sleep in here.”

Tressider looked around him. “No,” he said with decision. “I shall sleep in here. You’ve taken me in, given me a good meal and shelter, but you’re not going to give me your bed into the bargain. Or if you are, I’m not going to take it. It doesn’t matter to you who or what I am. So far as you are concerned, I am just a traveller who rather badly needed the helping hand which you were good enough to give.”

“But you’re not used to roughing it. I am,” said Peter, pushing the cigarettes across the table.

“That doesn’t come into it,” said Tressider. “You need your night’s rest and I am not going to deprive you of it. Thanks all the same, I’ve got some cigarettes of my own. Will you have one?”

“Thanks,” said Peter, cheerily accepting. “But I shall get my night’s rest all right in here. Don’t you worry! I rather enjoy making shift.”

“You’re not going to do it on my account,” said Tressider.

“We shall see,” said Peter handing across a lighted match.

Tressider regarded the nervous fingers that held it as he kindled his cigarette.

“You don’t look specially well fitted for this sort of thing,” he said.

Peter made a contemptuous sound as he lit his own cigarette. “Anyone can do anything if they try hard enough,” he said.

“Oh, is that your creed? It’s quite a good one,” commented Tressider. “Given a certain amount of brains, it may carry you a long way.”

Peter’s eyes surveyed him across the table with level directness. “You live by your brains,” he remarked. “But you have to remember to keep your body fit to do it. In my trade, I combine the two.”

“Then you ought to be the greater success,” said Tressider.

“There’s no doubt of that,” said Peter.

“And you probably are,” said Tressider, following his own line of thought.

The young fisherman lodged his elbows on the table, still steadily watching him. “Do you get many failures in your trade?” he asked.

Tressider met his look, faintly smiling. “In my trade, Peter,” he said, “it’s sometimes difficult to tell which are failures and which successes. You may succeed where you ought to have failed, and *vice versa*.”

“I don’t follow you,” said Peter.

Tressider was silent for a few moments, considering, but the sheer honesty of the eyes that watched him drew him at length into explanation.

“I mean,” he said, “that there are certain cases which at first sight may appear quite desirable but which upon investigation turn out to be a mass of corruption which one may hate to touch.”

“Yes?” said Peter. “And then?”

“And then,” said Tressider, “one must choose between letting down one’s client and letting down oneself.”

A gleam of appreciation shone in Peter’s eyes. “Does that often happen?” he asked.

“Not very often,” said Tressider.

“And when it does,” questioned Peter, “what do you do?”

Again Tressider gave a considered reply. “I generally let down myself.”

It was Peter’s turn to consider. He did so with drawn brows. “That doesn’t sound very fair to me,” he observed finally.

“I daresay not,” said Tressider.

“You mean to say,” pursued Peter, “that if you had taken up a case, say, to defend a man from a charge of fraud, and if, while you were defending him you found out that he was really guilty,—you mean to say that then—even then—you’d go on?”

“I probably should,” said Tressider.

“And you think it would be right?” There was accusation in the clear eyes now, even a hint of contempt.

“Certainly not from your point of view,” said the barrister with his faint smile.

“But from your own?” persisted Peter. “Could you rest easy after doing a thing like that?”

Tressider flicked the ash from his cigarette. “I am going to tell you a story,” he said. “There was once a man who found himself at the head of a business which was on the verge of crashing. It was a big business and it involved a good many people. The man’s father was dying of an incurable disease, and he found that to save the show certain measures had been adopted which were not, strictly speaking, within the letter of the law. He had to choose between letting the whole thing collapse and so exposing his own father on his death-bed, and continuing to carry on the business on the lines which had already been started. Not a very pleasant decision to have to make!”

Peter said nothing. His eyes were fixed with unvarying directness upon his guest’s face. All around the cottage the wind howled like a furious monster seeking entrance. The roar of the sea came through it with awful

monotony—a devouring element more terrible because more sure than any wind that blew.

Tressider seemed for a space to be listening to the great forces of Nature, his story half-forgotten. But after a time the utter stillness and attention of his companion seemed to recall him. He continued with quiet detachment.

"He made his decision; and that was to follow as his father had begun—at least until his father should be dead. It seemed to him that it was almost incumbent upon him to do this. Let those stone him who feel qualified to do so! He made his choice and he stuck to it. The business continued as it was before."

Again the shrieking blast tore above the roof of the cottage and the smoke once more swirled into the room. Peter did not turn his head. He remained leaning upon the table, a certain tenseness in his attitude.

Tressider threw the end of his cigarette into the fire, and as the noise died down he went on.

"The old man lingered on very much longer than was anticipated. During that time affairs grew worse. The business became more and more involved. At last the old man died, and by that time the son was so deeply committed that there was no turning back. There was a possibility—a rather remote possibility—that by keeping on the chance might come of making a big *coup* and righting everything. With that hope he hung on, knowing that failure meant utter ruin and the Criminal Court for him—utter ruin also for a good many others."

Peter spoke slowly, somewhat grimly. "That didn't make it right."

"It was a choice of evils by that time," said Tressider. "I haven't mentioned yet that he had family obligations also. He was not married, but his mother was then living—an invalid—and there was a young sister—scarcely more than a child—to whom he was greatly devoted—who inherited a share of the business. Mind, I am not defending him—not now—but I do say that the temptation to go on was colossal, the need almost imperative. And he went on—went right on like a car that has lost all braking power, and crashed at last."

Tressider turned to the box of cigarettes at his elbow and took one, thoughtfully tapping it on the table. Peter, tilted forward on his box, remained motionless, watching him.

"Well?" he said at length. "And what happened?"

Tressider lit his cigarette before he spoke again. “He was arrested, charged, and committed for trial. I undertook his defence. Rightly or wrongly, I did my level best to prove him innocent. I failed. He was found guilty.”

“You knew all the facts?” put in Peter briefly.

“Absolutely all.” Tressider’s reply came with deliberation. “He told me the whole thing as though I had been his father confessor, and I was left to make the best show I could.”

“To trump up as many lies as were likely to be believed!” suggested Peter with contempt in his voice.

Tressider quietly corrected him. “To save him from being punished more heavily than he deserved. He was in effect the scapegoat for another man’s crime. Someone had to pay the penalty, and it fell upon him. He paid in full.”

“And did no one else pay anything?” The ring of scorn in the question was almost a challenge. “What about his mother—and the sister? Did they get off scot-free?”

“No. They paid too.” Tressider followed the smoke from his cigarette with thoughtful eyes. “The mother died six weeks after he was sent to penal servitude. The sister—disappeared. I never saw either of them. They were far away in Scotland, and I had another case immediately following to which I had to give my full attention.”

“Well?” said Peter.

Tressider’s eyes came to his. “That was four years ago,” he said. “That man has now been discharged from prison. He has not served his sentence, but—like his father—he is suffering from an incurable disease. He wrote to me from hospital, and I went to see him. He was in the common ward and very ill. He has only one desire left in life, and that is to find his sister. His fears for her seem to haunt him, sleeping and waking. The dread of what may have happened to her is a constant torment to him. Even in his sleep, he is always calling to her—‘Betty! Betty! Where are you?’ It has become an absolute obsession with him. And so at last—to quiet him—I have promised to do my best to find her, and I have come here on the quest. Whether I shall succeed or not——”

He left the sentence unfinished. Peter’s brows were drawn. He seemed to be in deep thought, and still the storm raged on above them with ever-

increasing tumult, filling the place with sound. Peter's voice came through it with a deep insistence, making itself heard.

"How can you expect to find her—after four years? And why look for her here?"

Tressider returned to his cigarette. "Yes, it seems a forlorn hope, I grant. But in her childhood and early girlhood she loved this part of the world. They had a sailing-yacht and spent a good deal of their time here. She was passionately fond of the sea, and her brother thought it possible that she might have taken refuge here. It is on that very slender chance that I have come."

"You will never find her," said Peter with conviction.

"I am going to try," said Tressider. "From here to Garland Cove was their favourite holiday ground. I am going over every inch of it in the hope of finding some trace."

"You will never find her," Peter said again. "It's full twelve miles to Garland Cove from here. Besides," his tone was combative, "is she likely to have come to a part where she would be known?"

"That I can't say," said Tressider.

"Besides," said Peter again, as one following out a line of argument, "even supposing you found her, would it be fair to drag her back again when she had got away from it all? She has probably changed her name, changed everything—I know I would—and for you to come and drag her back against her will, just for a whim——"

"You call it a whim?" said Tressider.

"I do." Peter's reply came slowly but with vigour. "The past is past. The man you are befriending is a criminal who deserves no consideration. More than enough people have been sacrificed to him already. It isn't fair to go on."

"You are overlooking one thing," said Tressider quietly. "It is not my intention when I find her—if I find her—to drag her back against her will. I only want to get some news of her so as to be able to satisfy her brother that all is well with her. I am not attempting more than that."

Peter's eyes were hard with contempt. "I should have thought a man of your profession and ability could manage that," he said, "without taking this journey into the wilds."

Tressider's eyes gleamed in answer with an icy keenness. "Then you are wrong," he said briefly. "I do not manufacture evidence. If I fail, I fail, and he will die unsatisfied. But I shall not accept failure before I have done my best."

"I wish you luck," said Peter with irony. "You deserve to get on."

Tressider smiled with a hint of grimness. "I think—for once—I do," he said.

IV

THE conversation ended there, for Peter suddenly tilted back the box on which he had been sitting and got up, letting it fall over with a clatter behind him. His young face expressed some sternness as though he had been discussing a matter distasteful to him, but as he turned towards the inner room of the cottage his clear whistle broke forth again. He was evidently accustomed to accomplish all jobs to its accompaniment.

The door closed behind him. Tressider sat still, deep in thought. Perhaps he also had not wholly enjoyed their talk, for his brows were drawn and the shrewd eyes beneath had the look of concentration which his colleagues at the Law Courts well knew when he was debating a knotty point.

He had ceased to take any note of the storm without, though this had increased in violence during the past half-hour. But when there came a sudden heavy thumping upon the door behind him, he started and turned in his chair.

Almost in the same instant the door through which Peter had vanished re-opened, and in a moment the youngster was at his side. He pointed urgently to the room beyond.

"You get in there!" he said.

Tressider looked at him. "What for?"

Peter's grip on his shoulder was urgent. "I'll tell you afterwards. But for goodness' sake do as I say now!"

Tressider stood up. "Is that a bargain?" he said.

Peter nodded, his face deeply flushed.

The knocking at the outer door continued, became almost an incessant tattoo. Tressider turned with some reluctance in response to the lad's urging.

He suffered himself to be pushed through the narrow doorway and blundered down an unexpected step. Then the door shut upon him, and he was alone.

He found himself in a room somewhat larger than the kitchen containing a narrow little camp-bed furnished with a couple of blankets and a pillow, a large wooden box in one corner and a tin basin upon it. A candle stuck in a bottle stood beside the basin and flickered its forlorn light upon the miserable apartment. A broken fragment of looking-glass was attached to one of the walls which were streaming with moisture. A tiny window beside the bed was covered by an old sack. The boards on which he stood were rotting away in all directions.

He looked around him and took in every wretched detail. “Poor little beggar!” he said compassionately.

The turmoil of wind and rain outside almost drowned the sound of voices in the outer room, but the gruff tones of a man reached him from time to time, and he gathered that one of the fishermen had come for a word with Peter.

Then very suddenly the door opened upon him, and Peter appeared upon the threshold. The step on which he stood raised him to Tressider’s level. He looked straight into his guest’s eyes, his own alert and shining. He had donned his oilskins again and had rammed the sou’-wester hard down on his head.

“Look here!” he said abruptly. “There’s a boat out there near the reef. They think she’s in trouble. The lifeboat at Spear Head is damaged and can’t put out. It’s up to us to do what we can. I’m going down to help.”

“You!” said Tressider.

The shining eyes challenged him. “Yes, me! I can row, can’t I? I’m not one of the helpless ones that can’t do a hand’s turn. I’ve wanted a chance like this for ages and I’m going to it. Good-bye!”

He turned about, but Tressider seized and held him. “Here! You wait a minute—wait a minute! I can pull an oar and I have more weight than you. You stay and I’ll go!”

The eyes that met his flashed furious disdain. Peter wrenched himself free. “You—why, you’ve got nothing but brains! What do you know of stormy seas? Let me go!”

He was practically gone with the words, but he did not succeed in leaving Tressider behind. His guest accompanied him, snatching his own mackintosh from a nail in the kitchen as he went through. He caught the door that Peter would have closed upon him, and dragged it shut behind him as he went out, pursuing him at full speed down the sheltered passage in the cliff-face that led to the wretched little abode.

A strong blast struck them as they emerged onto the steps, but Peter never paused. He knew the way by heart, and ran on, nothing daunted. And Tressider came close behind him, fired by a determination that there was no gainsaying.

They reached the road that wound downwards to the river and here the force of the gale caught them. It almost stopped their progress. The rain had nearly ceased, and above them a great drift of cloud raced over a full moon which hung over the waste of tossing waters. The light it shed was fitful and eerie as though a giant swung a lantern over the troubled world.

Peter made straight for the shore at the mouth of the river, and as they rounded a jutting corner of the cliff they came upon a handful of fishermen's cottages above a tiny quay. He turned along it, running with his head down in the teeth of the wind. The roar of the surf was tremendous, almost annihilating thought. Yet Tressider clung to his main idea of keeping the lad in sight, and as he followed him he noted with that detachment which sometimes comes in moments of great stress that he was barefooted, a fact which largely accounted for his speed.

Towards the end of the quay he took a flying leap on to the sand. A little crowd of fisher-folk had congregated there in the shelter of the stone wall, and as Tressider came up with them he saw that they were standing round a boat which was drawn up out of reach of the dashing surf.

Peter ran into the middle of them and in a moment or two Tressider saw him standing on a thwart of the boat waving his arms and shouting. He could barely catch his voice in the tumult, but he saw that his presence and action took instant effect. They closed around him in the boat and began to push it down to the foaming sea-edge.

He himself pressed forward, but there was no place for him. The boat was already manned ere she touched the water, and as they floated her he had a glimpse of Peter in the quivering moonlight seated in the stern.

An old woman at his side turned and shouted in his ear: "They wouldn't have gone without Peter with 'em, for they calls him the luck of the fleet.

He'll bring 'em back safe. He'll bring 'em back."

Tressider, left on the howling shore, could only watch the tossing boat starting off on the perilous journey and hope that her faith was justified.

The travelling beam from the lighthouse away on his right diverted his thoughts to the men they were seeking to rescue, but from where he stood he could see nothing more, save the mountainous waves that broke and spread in gleaming foam far up the beach. He turned and climbed back on to the stone quay. But a spell of darkness baffled him for some time though he thought he saw a shifting light now and then in the direction in which the boat had vanished.

A long time passed, and at length the wind drove him down again into the comparative shelter below. Heavy masses of cloud had gathered again, and the rain beat down upon the little party as they crouched waiting in the lee of the stone wall.

The watchers consisted mainly of women and a few old men who strained their eyes into the darkness in pessimistic silence. It seemed to Tressider that hours went by while they kept vigil. It was such an experience as had never before come into his crowded life, and it made an irrevocable impression upon him. There was something simple yet something very superb about young Peter's action. As the old woman had hinted, his influence with the men who were his comrades in the daily fight for existence was somehow uncanny. Despite his utter poverty he was clearly regarded as one impervious to disaster. His high courage and free contempt of obstacles had evidently won him this ascendancy, carrying all before him as though he had been a prince. He was not surprised that they called him the luck of the little fishing-fleet, but he wondered—it was impossible not to wonder—if his luck would outlive the venture.

With the thought in his mind he turned and found an old hoary man standing huddled by his side. The moonlight shone again through a rift in the clouds, and he had a glimpse of two red-rimmed eyes that gazed and gazed out to sea.

"Aye!" said the old man as one who addressed the world in general. "They shouldn't have taken the child! They shouldn't have taken the child!"

Tressider was on the point of agreeing with him and securing what satisfaction he might therefrom when there arose a sudden shout from the little shivering group.

"The boat! The boat! She's back!"

And on the crest of a great wave he saw her poised in the moonlight—an unforgettable picture ere the great clouds blotted it from his sight.

V

A SCORE of eager hands helped in the beaching of the boat, while a few swung lanterns illuminated the wild scene. There were four more men in the boat than she had carried on the outward journey—men from Garland Cove who had been caught in the gale and whose smack had drifted disabled on to the rocks. But though Tressider was of those who helped to drag the boat up out of the foam on the sheltered side of the little jetty, it was some time ere in the confusion he perceived Peter, the leader of the expedition.

He caught sight of him at last in another burst of moonlight and saw that he was leaning on the shoulder of the old man who had deplored his going, as though exhausted. He made his way round just as they had turned towards the row of hovels above the quay, and followed close behind.

The boy was dripping from head to foot and seemed scarcely able to walk, but when Tressider appeared on his other side and thrust a strong arm round him, he started away slightly as if he would fain free himself.

"You come along to my place!" said the old fisherman. "Old Tim'll fix ye up. It's a drop o' rum ye want to warm your vitals."

They reached old Tim's cottage, and Tressider entered with them, realizing that Peter was incapable of standing alone. He supported him while the old man stumped round his kitchen, lighting a candle and searching for the rum of which he spoke. Peter was shivering violently. His face was ashen, his lips blue with cold.

"You 'ave a drink!" said old Tim, returning. "Set down and 'ave a drink!"

He dragged a chair out of a corner, and Tressider put Peter down into it, then turned and took the cup from the old man's hand.

"Let me do it! You get the fire going!"

Tim eyed him questioningly, but he yielded without comment. It was evident that the stranger knew what he was about. Peter seemed to be aware of the same thing, for he made no further attempt to repel his assistance. He drank from the cup Tressider held, and submitted in silence while he chafed his numbed hands.

The fire glowed, and Tressider dragged the chair to it with Peter in it. In the spreading warmth he began to revive a little, but very gradually, with spasms of uncontrollable shivering most painful to watch.

"Can't we get off some of these wet clothes?" Tressider said, and began to suit the action to the words.

He found the shiny oilskins were as wet inside as they were out. The rough jersey underneath was soaked.

"We'll get this off too," he said.

Peter's teeth were chattering. He murmured something unintelligible.

Old Tim, on his knees on the hearth, looked up through his red-rimmed eyes. "Shouldn't do that, sir, shouldn't do that! Give 'im a drop more rum! That'll do it quicker'n anything."

"You go and get some blankets!" said Tressider. "And be quick about it! There's no time to lose."

He spoke with authority, and old Tim Faraday stumbled to his feet, alarmed. "Sure 'e do look bad!" he said. "Give un some more rum, sir! Do'ee give un some more rum!"

"You go and get the blankets!" said Tressider. "He's perished with cold."

Tim grabbed the candle and blundered away in clumsy haste, and Tressider bent over the huddled figure.

"Come!" he said. "There's no help for it. You're drenched to the skin. I'll wrap you up in my coat. You'll be all right."

"I shan't—hurt," whispered Peter faintly.

"I won't take the risk," said Tressider.

The light of the fire was all that remained to him. By it he went to work with an expedition which disarmed such resistance as Peter might have made. He pulled off the wet jersey and the shirt beneath it and covered the thin young body in his own coat.

When old Faraday returned with the ragged blankets he had dragged from his own bed, the whole of Peter's outfit lay in a wet heap under the table. His lower limbs were wrapped in Tressider's mackintosh, but the latter deftly substituted one of Tim's blankets for this, and then, stooping, took the frozen feet on to his knee and began to rub them to a glow.

"Yes, you can give him a little more rum now," he said to the old man, "but don't overdo it!"

Slowly the awful rigour of cold that had bound Peter began to pass, and he lay back in the chair exhausted, submissive in spite of himself to Tressider's ministrations. Tim hovered over him with useless solicitude till Tressider set him to work to boil the kettle and spread out the soaked clothing to dry.

When he had finished, Peter was sunk in slumber, lying propped against Tressider's shoulder. The old man came and peered at him again and wiped his rheumy eyes. "They didn't ought to a-taken the child," he mumbled. " 'Twasn't fit for un. What'd I a-done if they'd a-killed un?"

Tressider looked up at him. "Your partner, I understand?"

Tim nodded. "Aye, we're partners. Son and daughter and all I've got in the world is young Peter. And a proper fisherman too. I taught un how. But not fit for a life-savin' job like them hefty fellers along shore. They shouldn't a-taken the child, the durn fools,—says as 'e brings 'em luck. Devil of a lot o' luck there'd a-been if they'd a-killed un! Look at un now—a-sleepin' like a babby! Don't you move, sir! Don't you move or you'll wake un up!"

He wiped his old eyes again and pulled out a quid of tobacco.

It was true that if Tressider stirred from his position, Peter would inevitably fall sideways out of the very rickety chair in which he lay. There was no other means of propping him, and upon very brief consideration Tressider decided to remain as he was while that sleep of exhaustion lasted.

"You had better go and get some sleep," he said to the old man. "I'll look after him for the present and call you if I want you. Leave the kettle on! I may need it. And spread those clothes as near to the fire as you can! That'll do. Now you can leave me to it. I'll take care of him."

Tim flavoured his quid with a nip of rum and surveyed him with a speculative eye.

"Who might you be, sir?" he said.

"I'm a friend of Peter's," said Tressider. "You won't know my name. It's Tressider."

"A friend of Peter's!" Tim Faraday repeated the words. "Do you know anything about un?"

Tressider's faint smile appeared as he glanced down at the rough head pillowed against his shoulder.

"Yes, I know a good deal about him," he said. "I'll look after him. Don't you worry! He'll be all right."

But old Tim's face showed some anxiety. He stood for a few moments in silence.

Then: "Don't you go and take un away, sir!" he said pleadingly. " 'E's all an old man's got."

Tressider's eyes came up to Tim's face. They noted its troubled look and grew kindly.

"You go and get some rest!" he said. "I am not very likely to take him away from you. From what I know of Peter, I think he will stick to you."

"Aye, there's no knowing," said old Tim as he stumped away.

VI

THE wind dropped as the night wore on. The moonlight shone in unveiled splendour into the room, and Tressider extinguished the guttering candle without shifting his position. He could not replenish the fire which was burning low, but he wrapped the blankets more closely about the sleeping form he supported, and Peter nestled down into them like a child, inarticulately murmuring.

It was in the very early hours that he awoke and stretched out his bare arms with a yawn.

Tressider moved then with some stiffness and got up, still supporting him. "That's better," he said.

Peter stared up at him in blank amazement. Then his arms fell and he pulled up the coat that covered his chest.

"It's all right," said Tressider kindly. "You will remember me directly. I'm the man you ferried across the river last night and afterwards took into your own cottage."

Remembrance dawned on Peter. His look changed and he turned his face away without speaking.

“It’s all right,” Tressider said again. “You needn’t worry yourself about anything. How are you feeling?”

“I’m better,” said Peter in a low voice. “I’ll dress.”

“There’s no hurry,” said Tressider, turning to revive the fire. “Your clothes are not dry yet, though we have done our best.”

“I can put them on,” said Peter with a certain doggedness.

Tressider replenished the fire and stood up. “All right,” he said. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He moved to the door and opened it. Peter turned slightly in his chair. “Are you going? Shall I see you again?”

“I’ll wait for you,” said Tressider, and stepped out into the moonlight, shutting the door behind him.

The wind had greatly diminished, but it still blew with some freshness over the sea. The waves broke with a sullen roaring. It wanted more than an hour yet to the dawn.

Tressider paced the deserted quay, waiting. He walked slowly, with his head bent. Once or twice he stopped to gaze out over the turbulent waters as though he sought some species of inspiration therefrom, but each time he went on again rather heavily, as if uninspired.

He had his back to Tim Faraday’s cottage when at length the door opened and Peter emerged. The young fisherman stood barefooted on the step watching him with a furrowed brow. He too looked as if he had some problem to solve. Finally, as Tressider turned, he stepped down and went to meet him.

“Well?” he said.

His voice held an odd defiance. Tressider stopped and regarded him. Then, unexpectedly, as they stood facing each other in the moonlight, he held out his hand.

“Well, Peter,” he said quietly, “I congratulate you.”

“What for?” said Peter.

He did not take the proffered hand, and Tressider laid it on his shoulder. “Because you play the game,” he said. “I am glad to have met you, and I shan’t forget you. If there is ever anything I can do for you——”

“How could there be?” broke in Peter almost fiercely. “And why shouldn’t you forget me? What do I matter to you?”

Tressider’s hand still pressed his shoulder, and he suffered it though he stood half turned away.

Tressider’s answer came with strange gentleness, as though he were speaking to a child. “I quite realize that you are nobody’s business but your own. But when I see anyone doing a plucky thing, I like to help—if I can.”

“You can’t,” said Peter almost inaudibly, “except by leaving me alone.”

“Very well,” Tressider said. “Then I’ll do that.”

“Do you mean that?” questioned Peter in the same muffled voice.

“Yes, I do mean it,” said Tressider. “I have neither the wish nor the intention to intrude upon you. I am only sorry to have done so. I’ll walk with you to your cottage if I may to get my knapsack, and then I will go.”

“You are going?” said Peter quickly.

“Yes, I am going.” Tressider corroborated the words calmly. “I shall return to town to-morrow.”

“Then you are giving up—giving up—the quest that you told me of last night?” Peter’s tone had a tinge of anxiety.

“Yes, I have given it up,” Tressider said.

Peter turned and began to walk along the quay towards the cliff-path. Tressider walked beside him in silence, his regular footfall in odd contrast to the almost noiseless patter of his companion’s bare feet.

They left the fishermen’s cottages behind and turned inland. When they reached the steps Peter took the lead. He went up them swiftly, Tressider following, till they stood once more on the threshold of the wretched hovel that was his home.

Then very suddenly Peter turned. The moonlight revealed his face, pale and resolute.

“You’ve been jolly decent to me,” he said, “and I’m grateful. I said I’d tell you why I didn’t want anyone to know you were in my cottage. It’s because I promised old Faraday long ago that I’d never let anyone in. But you were different, and you’d have gone and killed yourself if I had let you go on. Old Tim is getting senile now, but he knows all about me. But there’s no one else that does, or that is ever going to. As you say, I’m nobody’s

business but my own, and they all understand that. That's all I've got to say."

"I see," said Tressider.

There was still a lingering defiance in Peter's attitude. "That's all," he said again, "all there is to be said, I mean."

"If you are satisfied," said Tressider.

"If I am satisfied? What do you mean by that?" Peter's chin took an aggressive angle. "I've a right—you've said it—to live my own life."

"I say it again," Tressider said. "You have a right."

"Then what do you mean? Tell me what you mean!" Again the latent anxiety was perceptible in Peter's voice.

"I mean," Tressider said, "that though it is useless to go on fighting for a lost cause, I have seen you save men from shipwreck, and because of that I recognize that your own rights are not always what you consider first. If you had not gone to help those men, they would have died out there on the rocks, and you would have remembered it—rightly or wrongly you would have remembered it always afterwards—with regret."

"I wouldn't! I wouldn't!" protested Peter with vehemence. "I never let myself remember—or regret—anything."

Tressider's shrewd eyes softened. "You are very young still, Peter," he said.

"I'm not! I'm old!" Passionately came the contradiction. "Old enough to have been right down to the very bottom and come up again. But I have come up again, and—and—I don't see myself being dragged down again just for the sake of—of sentiment."

"No one is going to drag you down," Tressider said. "The fact that someone else knows your secret——"

Peter flashed round upon him. "Be careful what you say!"

"I am careful," Tressider said. "One learns to be careful in my profession. That is why I say that no one is going to drag you down. Your life is your own, but you have been ready to risk it for the sake of men who were nothing to you. Is it harder for you to give comfort to a man who is dying and who desperately wants you, when there is no risk and when you can be quite certain of coming back to the life you have chosen exactly as you have left it?"

Peter turned from him abruptly and opened the cottage door. “You had better come in,” he said over his shoulder, “and have something to eat before you go.”

His voice rang hard and defiant. His action was aggressive. But Tressider betrayed no disappointment. He entered quietly.

“I don’t want anything to eat,” he said, “but according to our agreement I am going to pay for what I have had.”

“I won’t take anything,” said Peter.

“Oh yes, you will.” Tressider’s voice held no anger; only complete conviction. “I don’t accept charity from anyone. The hospitality of a friend is different, but——”

Peter swung round again upon him. “Well, you can call it that then; and how are you going to get across the river?”

His voice was boyishly uncompromising, but his brief anger had vanished. He looked at Tressider with bright, steady eyes.

Tressider picked up his knapsack. “I shall walk to the ferry,” he said. “Good-bye! And many thanks for your—hospitality.”

“Wait!” said Peter.

His tone was imperative. Tressider paused.

“I’ll take you across,” said Peter.

“No, thanks.” It was Tressider’s turn to be uncompromising. “I’ll go by the ferry.”

“It won’t be crossing for a long while yet,” said Peter.

“I can wait,” said Tressider.

“Why not go in my boat?” There was actually a note of gruff persuasion in the deep voice. “Think I’m not to be trusted with a boat?”

“No. I don’t think that. Only I’m not coming, that’s all. Good-bye!”

Tressider turned to go. But before he had taken two paces Peter’s hand was on his arm, detaining him.

“Why won’t you come?” said Peter.

Tressider stopped and looked at him. “Because I don’t think you are playing the game,” he said.

“How dare you say that to me?” said Peter.

Tressider prepared to go. “Because you’re a sportsman, that’s why. You’re capable of fine things; I’ve seen it. But you’re shirking now.”

“Shirking!” flashed Peter.

Tressider stood for a moment; then: “You know what I’ve come for, and that unless you play the game, I have failed. Donald Prior is dying, and there is only one person who can make death easy for him. If you won’t send that person along—I’ve done.”

“How can I?” said Peter, breathing quickly through parted lips. “You must know it’s impossible now.”

“No,” Tressider said deliberately. “I haven’t asked you to do the impossible. If you choose to call it so, that is another matter. Well, as I said, I am going. But on second thoughts I shall not be crossing the river yet. I shall go to Cherry Morton and put up at the inn there for another night.”

“What for?” said Peter quickly.

“Just to be quite sure.” Tressider spoke as he sometimes spoke in a tense moment at the Law Courts with a suavity, a certain half-veiled strength of purpose.

“Sure of what?” demanded Peter.

“That I have acted for the best,” said Tressider, with his quiet smile. “That’s all. Good-bye! And for goodness’ sake put something on your feet!”

It was his final word. In another second he was swinging away back to the steps on his way to Cherry Morton. And Peter was left standing at the door of the cottage as one confounded, until the sounds of that steady tread had completely died away.

PART II

I

A SHAFT of sunlight shot through a chink at the side of the drawn blind and fell across the foot of the bed on which Donald Prior lay dying—spring sunlight, clear, golden, warm with the coming strength of summer. There

had been several days of wild, stormy weather, and now had come this quiet evening in which the sun shone again as though in pity and the world was once more bathed in warmth.

Why had they shut it out, he wondered, as he lay and stared at it? There was so little light left for him. Already there were intervals in which his spirit wandered in great darknesses. They might let him have the sunshine while it lasted.

He was alone in the room, but he was glad of the solitude. In it his tired brain found rest. But he wanted the sunshine. In a dull fashion he craved for it. In the old days—the old happy days of his youth—he had been a great swimmer. To swim through depths of crystal water made golden by the sun had been the chief joy of his existence. That glorious buoyant sense of cleaving his way through waves and currents which overwhelmed the weaklings had appealed to him as nothing else on earth appealed. Even yet in his dreams, stricken as he was, that sense of splendid freedom would come to him, and he would dive again deep into the tumbling water which had never conquered him and rise again into the sunlight and strike out whithersoever his unfettered desire led him.

In the years that were past those dreams had been his chief torture. To a man of his temperament captivity was a thing worse than death—a thing of horror with clutching tentacles that dragged him down, absorbing his vitality. There were times when it actually appalled him, and his prison-walls became a stark terror that he could not face. The resignation of despair came to others, but never to him. There was in him an element that could not be subdued—a streak of wildness ineradicable. Though he ceased to rebel outwardly, the fretting misery ate into his very heart. He sometimes thought that one swim in the open sea might have saved him, that even the illusion of freedom would have eased the awful galling of his chain. But even so brief a deliverance was not for him, and so at last the anguish had broken him. He had not served his sentence, for Death had stepped in and substituted another. No longer for him the prison-walls! They had taken all there was of him that was worth having, and now they had cast him out. He had been given freedom that he might go forth and die.

And now he lay dying in such comfort as a pitying friend had been able to secure for him, and dreaming again those dreams of the dancing sunlit water that had lured him long ago—long ago—when he was young and strong and free. They had haunted him very persistently of late, now that the nightmare of prison life had sunk into the past. The years of captivity seemed to be rolled up and apart from the rest of his life. He could look back

now more clearly and see the golden days when he and Betty had swum together in the sparkling water. Such a ripping little companion she had always been, so fearless, and loyal to the core! More of a boy than a girl he had always thought her, and though five years younger than himself, save for his greater strength of endurance, her attainments had been very little short of his. In fortitude and firmness of character he knew her to be his superior. Though he had been her teacher in all forms of sport, especially that of swimming in which he excelled, she had never been dominated by him. There was about her a resolution, a firmness of purpose, an almost uncompromising directness, which he lacked. Betty was sincere and unflinchingly honest, boyishly simple in her tastes, and intolerant of all subterfuge. She made but few friends, frankly placing him far before all others. They had always been pals, but as she grew out of childhood they had become more than that. The bond between them had strengthened into a sympathy so intimate that, though girt about with a certain reserve, there was no corner of Betty's soul which he might not freely enter. He knew her as he knew himself, perhaps even better, as he had miserably reflected later when he had taken that fatal step on the downward grade which later had seemed well nigh as incredible to him as to her. That Betty would never have taken such a step, whatever the motive, he was well aware. Her unfaltering sense of honour would have held her back. Such a course would have been utterly impossible to her, beyond even a second's contemplation. In her young judgment the slightest deviation from integrity was as heinous as murder itself. There was something superb and at the same time rather terrible about Betty's uprightness, and because she was wholly without fear, she was inclined to condemn cowardice as a crime. In the course of years, her views were almost bound to be modified, but at seventeen she had been a merciless critic of all evil, though warm-hearted and ready enough to forgive any open wrong done to herself. Insincerity was a thing beyond her comprehension. She could not tolerate it for a moment, regarding it with an almost passionate abhorrence. Life without truth was to her not worth living. And she had believed Donald to be the same as herself. Her childish veneration for the elder brother had deepened into an idealism that occupied a very sacred place in her heart. Donald was to her the perfect knight, without fear and without reproach.

All of this he had realized in the hour of his temptation, and trebly realized since. To save Betty from shame had been almost his first thought, and all that he had endured while the sword still hung above him, not even Betty would ever know. He had tried to express it once to the man who had

fought so hard to save him, but it was too painful a subject to lay bare. He could only utter a few broken words.

And now—now when his whole soul was crying out for Betty—he could scarcely in his conscious moments bring himself to speak of her. He had told Tressider—that was all; and the telling had been agony. But Godfrey Tressider was a man of vast sympathies, and he understood. Under happier circumstances he and Donald Prior might have been close friends, but life had not happened so, and now the time was short. The one man lay dying in a London nursing-home, while the other had gone forth to seek the little sister who was lost.

He would never find her—of course he would never find her. That was the incessant burden of Donald's thoughts as he lay gazing at the sunshine which could not reach him. Betty had gone—had disappeared utterly after her mother's death, leaving no trace. There had been no near relatives to trouble about her, nor would her independent spirit have suffered interference. From the moment that she had grasped the fact of her brother's guilt, she had as it were withdrawn herself. After that awful moment when Betty had looked at him with eyes of stony horror and then turned and fled, he had never seen her again or held any communication with her. He had written to her once, but his letter had come back to him enclosed in another envelope, unopened, and he had never made another attempt.

Afterwards, when all was over, the news of his mother's death had reached him, but no news of Betty. She had gone, and not until his discharge four years later, a dying man, had he turned in desperation to Godfrey Tressider and told him his anxiety on her account.

Tressider's kindness had been almost unbelievable. He had had the dying man moved into the home where he now lay, and had set out himself to follow up the only possible clue to the missing girl's whereabouts that Donald could suggest. But he would never find her—of course he would never find her. The child had set out with her high courage to steer her own little craft through the stormy waters, but she had probably been sucked down long since into the treacherous undercurrents of which she knew so little. What chance had a girl of seventeen to keep herself afloat?

He moved his head on the pillow with a weary sigh. He had almost begun to hope that Tressider would not find her. A different Betty—a conquered Betty—would be the last drop in his cup of bitterness. There were some things it were better not to know. But Betty—his Betty! Great tears that he had not strength to check—tears which through all the years of

his agony he had never shed—welled up from his tired heart and blinded him. The sunlight shimmered and went out. He went again into the darkness. . . .

II

Out of the darkness at last there came a dream. He was out in an open boat, rowing in a grey tempestuous sea, still in the eternal quest for Betty. There was a strong wind blowing, but he knew that Betty could weather that. Her utter fearlessness was her safeguard. He had never seen her flurried in a squall. If only her boat were seaworthy! That was the point that troubled him. He had an idea that the child was taking risks for which she was unprepared. She would put to sea in a cockleshell if there were nothing else available.

The tempest was growing and night was drawing on. The great waves seized upon his own craft, as if making sport of his puny efforts to steer a straight course. He speedily realized that he was helpless, and with the certainty came that cruelly familiar sense of despair. He was doomed. Had he not been doomed from the outset? But where was Betty? Where was Betty? If he might but see her safe before he perished himself!

He began to row desperately, blindly, in the gathering darkness, and as he rowed, gaspingly he called to her.

"Betty! Betty! Where are you?"

There was no answer to his cry, but something told him that she was not far away. He redoubled his efforts, his tortured heart feeling as if it would burst within him. He could not call again, the agony was too great. He could only spend his whole being in the struggle to get near her. Somewhere vaguely ahead of him there was a light, and he knew that it was a warning against rocks. But he was past heeding it because of Betty. He was so sure that Betty was somewhere near.

And then, as he fought his way, two things happened almost simultaneously. He heard Betty's voice—that deep, sincere voice of hers uttering his name; and in the same instant he caught a glimpse of a black, shining rock standing up out of the turmoil in which he wrestled. One glimpse only, and then a grinding shock! He felt his heart split open as he went down into the awful depths and there followed such an anguish of suffering as he had not imagined any human frame could be made to endure.

When the light dawned again for him he thought that he was dead. He was cold, icy cold, and numb from head to foot,—like an effigy on a tomb, it seemed to him. The pain was gone, all feeling was gone, all power was gone. He was lying straight and flat, as he had probably lain for many centuries after that awful cleavage that had ended his life. An odd thought came to him. If he were an effigy on a tomb, people might come and carve their names on him. He had seen this gross thing done even in a church. He was utterly defenceless. He wondered if it would hurt. Then he remembered that he was made of stone, and the thing that had been his body,—that had agonized and died in the storm—must have crumbled to dust long since.

He was terribly cold. Perhaps that was to be his punishment, to lie there petrified—an image of stone—through all the years that were to come. Never to feel again, never to see the sun, never to know a touch of warmth, never to move—O God, never to move again!

He heard a step. Ah, they were coming now, coming to carve their names on the insensate stone that was him. He would not feel it! But yet he lay in terror waiting for the sharp point of a knife on cheek-bone or breast-bone or thigh.

There came a low voice: “How still he is! Are you sure——”

The sentence ended there, but he knew the speaker. It was Betty—Betty after all these years! He would have known her voice in a thousand. Its deep sincerities were music to him. Even as a little child its depth had been remarkable.

He could not see her, for he could not turn his head. He wondered if the centuries had greatly changed him, if she would know him or if she would pass him by. If she did that, then his fate was sealed. He knew that he would never move again.

But if she stopped and touched the lifeless stone, if she called to him by name, then surely even the stone would melt and the prisoner be set free! So he told himself as he lay waiting, waiting for that touch.

Then as it did not come, he began to remember that the silence that stretched between them was agelong. This Betty, if indeed she existed outside his dreams, must be another incarnation of the Betty he had known. She had suffered shipwreck and died long ago, but no stone could ever confine that free spirit of hers. He was sure of that. This eternal imprisonment could not be for her.

He began to picture another Betty—a Betty who would not remember him, or who, if indeed she remembered, would quickly pass him by. He recalled that letter which she had never opened. Of course she would pass him by! Why should he think otherwise? Was it likely that the years of bitterness which he had made her suffer would have softened her towards him? How could he expect her to want to free him? Surely she would pass him by!—probably had already passed! The darkness began to descend again. The cold increased—that awful paralysis that was worse than pain. Numbly he faced his doom.

And then suddenly—very suddenly—it came. A choked sound like a sob caught back—a movement—warm lips against his stone-cold face! . . . Betty!

His blood stirred. A thrill went through him. He felt the rigour slacken. Betty—his Betty of the deep voice and honest eyes—was holding him, calling to him, weeping over him.

Her warmth reached him, giving him renewed life. He moved weakly, uncertainly. His arms felt their way around her. His hands met and feebly clasped upon her.

"Betty—Betty—Betty!" he whispered.

And he could not say any more than that. For the stone had melted at her touch, and he was speechless with tears.

III

"A WONDERFUL improvement!" said Nurse Withers, who was optimistic always, even in the face of death. "I've never seen such a change. Magic, I call it."

She spoke to her night-colleague who was just coming on duty. Nurse Brown, who was fat and kindly and always looked on the dark side, shook her head sceptically.

"An improvement in a case like this is always the beginning of the end," she said. "It wouldn't surprise me if he went to-night."

"I don't mind betting you he doesn't," said Nurse Withers cheerily, "though it's against my own interests in a way. He's looking quite bright to-night. His sister's coming seems to have given him a new lease."

"What's she like?" said Nurse Brown.

“Oh, she’s pretty, rather like a boy, hair short, not shingled exactly, just short. A broad forehead and blue eyes—very blue eyes. Looks very straight at you, and talks down in her boots. Rather odd-looking,” was Nurse Withers’ final pronouncement. “But I think she’s a good sort.”

“And he was pleased to see her?” said Nurse Brown.

“He nearly ate her,” said Nurse Withers graphically. “He’d been lying for hours like dead after one of those attacks. And then she came. Mr. Tressider brought her. She stood by his side and watched him for ever so long. And then—well, really I was beginning to think it was the end, when she suddenly bent right over him and gathered him up in her arms and kissed him. That brought him back. He came to life like magic. I’ve never seen such a change. I felt as if I’d seen a miracle.”

“It won’t last,” said Nurse Brown.

“Well, it’s up to you,” said Nurse Withers gaily. “I expect you’ll pull him through the night anyway with your usual luck. She’s to stay with him, by the way. Doctor’s orders!”

“If that’s the case,” said Nurse Brown, “he evidently hasn’t much chance.”

“Oh, I never said he’d get well, mind you,” said Nurse Withers. “But there’s no doubt he’s taken a turn. You won’t see him out to-night.”

“There’s no knowing,” said Nurse Brown. “I don’t trust these sudden improvements.”

“Well, cheerio, Brown!” said Nurse Withers. “Do your best for him! You’ll find a wonderful change anyhow.”

She was right. When Nurse Brown entered the room of the patient they had been discussing she was surprised at the amazing improvement she saw in him.

He was propped up with pillows, and though looking terribly ill, there was more of animation about him than she had seen since he had been brought to the home. By his side sat a girl at whom Nurse Brown glanced first with casual interest, and then again with something more. She was very plainly dressed in blue serge. Her hair was fair, thick and short like a boy’s, with no pretence of artificiality. Her face was deeply tanned to a warmth of colour seldom seen by Nurse Brown. Her eyes looked straight forth under level brows with an uncompromising directness. They were of a deep sapphire blue, like the blue of the ocean on a day of mid-summer.

“Not a bit like a girl’s eyes,” commented Nurse Brown inwardly.

She came to the side of the bed and looked at her patient. The visitor gravely inclined her head.

“I am staying the night,” she said.

“My—sister, nurse!” said Donald Prior, in a halting whisper.

Nurse Brown smiled in her kindly way. “I’m very glad she’s come to see you,” she said. “But don’t you talk! You’re better to-night, I can see, but you must keep very quiet.”

She saw that the brother’s hand was warmly clasped in the sister’s and if professionally she disapproved, she was human enough not to interfere. It could not make any material difference, after all.

She gave the patient some medicine and retired again. When she looked in for the second time she saw that he was becoming drowsy, but the girl was still alert and watchful by his side. He had not hitherto had any natural sleep, and there was no denying that this was a good sign.

“But of course it’s only a flicker,” said Nurse Brown to herself as she went away.

An hour later, treading softly, she came to the bedside. He was sleeping as a child might sleep, his hand still clasped in that of the silent watcher who sat beside him. Across the bed Nurse Brown signalled her silent approval, and the steady blue eyes returned an answering gleam. No word was spoken, but they held a definite command.

A little later a doctor came. He crept in with the nurse behind him, looked at the sleeping man, sent a nod of encouragement to the girl beyond, and crept out again.

Slowly the night wore away. In the early morning Donald Prior stirred and spoke.

“Betty! Betty, where are you?”

At once the answer came in that clear contralto voice. “I am here, Don, —here beside you.”

He opened his eyes and saw her. “Is it really you, Betty, or am I dreaming again?”

“It is really me,” she answered steadily.

His hand moved in hers. “What made you come?” he said.

“I heard you wanted me,” said Betty.

“Oh, my dear,” he said, “how I have wanted you!”

She clasped his hand more closely. “And I am here,” she said.

“It’s too good,” whispered Donald, “too good to be true.”

“But it is true,” she answered quietly.

There came a pause. His eyes began to droop again. “I am—very tired,” he said.

“Try to sleep, dear!” said Betty.

He opened his eyes again. “Did you call me ‘dear’?”

“Yes,” said Betty.

“What made you do that?” he said.

“Because you are dear to me,” said Betty.

The tears rose again overwhelmingly. He turned his head away. “Oh, Betty!” he said. “Oh, Betty!”

“Don’t cry!” murmured Betty, as if he had been a child. “It’s all right now, Don; all over now.”

“Do you mean—you have—forgiven me?” he whispered.

She stooped forward and softly dried the falling tears. “Don, I couldn’t say it was all right if I hadn’t.”

He made an effort for self-control. “Betty, you—you are different somehow. What has happened to you in all these dreadful years?”

“I have just—gone on,” said Betty vaguely.

He pressed her hand as hard as his strength would permit. “Betty, when a woman is left alone—a child-woman like you—she either swims—or she sinks. Betty—Betty, tell me—you didn’t—sink?”

“I swam,” said Betty, with a certain triumph.

“Yet—you are altered,” he said.

“One is bound to alter with time,” said Betty.

“You used to be so impulsive—so loving,” he said.

Betty was silent.

He seemed to doze, then awoke again with a start. “Betty! You won’t leave me?”

“No, dear,” said Betty simply.

He made an appealing gesture towards her. “Betty, say that hymn to me —you know—the hymn they played when that ship was sinking—the ‘Titanic,’ wasn’t it? We’ve always said we’d remember it—when we went down ourselves.”

“I—don’t know—if I can,” said Betty, faltering for the first time.

“Oh, try, darling!” he said. “There’s comfort in it—for us both.”

A hard quiver went through Betty. Her teeth closed upon her lower lip for a moment or two. Then, her voice pitched very low, she began:

“Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee,
E’en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.”

She heard him sigh, but there were no more tears. His eyes began to droop again. With more assurance she went on:

“Though like the wanderer,
The sun gone down,
Darkness comes over me,
My rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I’d be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.”

She paused. His eyes were closed. He murmured something inarticulate.

She began the next verse, paused again. There was no sound save the quiet breathing of a man at rest. She sat and watched him for a while, till at length her own head drooped forward and rested against his pillow. The strain was relaxed, and she knew that peace had come. It wrapped her also in a fashion that she could not have explained. Perhaps Donald had been right,

and in those old, familiar words which it had cost her so much to utter there was comfort for them both.

IV

"THEY say you have done wonders," said Tressider.

"I haven't done anything," said Betty bluntly.

He looked at her, standing up straight and agile by his side, a figure instinct with life, a personality that was somehow arresting.

"Are you very tired?" he said.

She gave him a glance of surprise. "No! Why should I be?"

"Will you come out with me for a ride?" he said.

Her blue eyes challenged him again. "What sort of a ride?"

"In an open car—just to get a blow," said Tressider.

"Oh!" Her look flashed to the sunshine without and back to him. "What about Don?"

"He can spare you for an hour," Tressider said. "I won't keep you longer. But you must have some fresh air. You can't live without it."

He saw her hands clench half-involuntarily. "Yes, I should like it," she said.

"Good!" said Tressider, with his quiet smile. "Well, the car is waiting. Put on a hat and coat and come along!"

She turned round from the window without further hesitation.

He had come to the home in the two-seater car which he drove himself, and he went straight down to await her. She did not keep him long, but as she rejoined him he realized that the inducement he had proffered was literally the only one that attracted her. She scarcely seemed to see him as she took her place by his side.

He did not talk to her as he made his way through the least crowded thoroughfares towards open country. Though she had disclaimed fatigue, there was something in her attitude which suggested a certain relaxation, and this was exactly what he had hoped for. He knew that the strain of the preceding night had been great.

But as they at length reached more rural surroundings he slackened a little to offer her a cigarette.

She shook her head half-impatiently. “No, thanks. I am quite all right.”

He lighted one himself and drove on.

She spoke after a few moments abruptly, as though he had awakened her.

“What are you going to do with me?”

He showed no surprise at the question. “We have got to decide that,” he said.

“I suppose you think I shan’t mind what I do,” she said.

“I have no grounds for thinking that,” said Tressider.

She stirred as though dissatisfied. “I’ve no money. You know that.”

“Yes, I know,” he made quiet answer. “But in spite of that, it is I who am in your debt, not you in mine.”

She glanced towards him. “That is only your way of putting it. My brother is destitute, and so, in effect, am I. We are both living on your charity.”

“Must you put it like that?” he said.

“How else could I put it?” demanded Betty.

He did not answer her. Instead he passed on. “I have realized that you must have somewhere to go to, and I have made provision. Whether you will accept it or not is another matter.”

“What is it, please?” said Betty.

There was less of challenge in her tone, but she spoke with resolution, as one determined not to be persuaded beyond a certain limit.

The man beside her paused a moment before replying. Then: “I want you to realize,” he said, “that this is a matter for which I hold myself entirely responsible. It was I who brought you here, and it is for me to see that you are safe and comfortable.”

“Yes. I know,” said Betty in her uncompromising fashion. “I faced that before I came.”

“I have an old housekeeper,” he said, and oddly his words came with a touch of embarrassment. “I have sent for her from the country to come and take care of you as long as you will honour me by accepting my hospitality.”

“Where?” said Betty.

“At my flat,” he said.

“Oh!” said Betty. She also paused for a second or two before she said anything further. “Have you told her about me?” she asked then.

“She merely knows that you have business in the country and have come to me to be nearer your brother as long as he lives,” said Tressider.

“She thinks we are old friends?” said Betty.

“Can’t you look on me as an old friend, Betty?” he said.

She flushed. “I don’t know. It’s very difficult. Donald might.”

“Then let me be Donald’s friend to you!” he said.

She made a sound of dissent and asked a sudden question. “Do you often do things like this?”

“No, not often,” said Tressider.

She turned towards him. “Neither do I. And I don’t believe anyone else could persuade me to do it now. I would sooner die than be under an obligation to anyone. I suppose I’m made that way. But—while Donald lives—I am not free to choose.”

“I hoped you would say that,” Tressider said.

“And if—if he lives for some time?” said Betty.

Tressider’s eyes met hers with steady sympathy. “Can’t we make it a partnership,” he said, “to help him as long as he is here?”

She was silent.

“There will be no obligation afterwards,” he said. “And the fact that you are now giving your help in the task to which I have set my hand does not constitute one now in my opinion.”

“You see, you are a lawyer,” said Betty. “You make it your business to—to——”

“To what?” he said.

“To look at things the wrong way round,” she said in her downright way.

He laughed. “Thank you. It’s a good definition. I must remember it.”

Betty’s face was crimson with swift remorse. “I was a beast to put it like that,” she said.

"No, no! I like it," he declared. "I can assure you I can appreciate honesty such as yours, in spite of my profession, possibly because of it."

She smiled with some reluctance. "I've got no manners left," she said.

"That's the best part of you," said Tressider.

She shook her head. "No. I'm rough and rude. There's nothing good about me."

"You are the only person who thinks so," he said.

She looked at him with frank scepticism. "More likely you are the only person who doesn't," she said, "if you are in earnest, that is, which I doubt."

"Oh, I can be honest too," said Tressider.

"I hope you always will be with me," she rejoined seriously.

"I'll make a bargain with you to that effect," he said. "A mutual honesty compact. Is it done?"

"I shall always be honest," she said. "Honesty is the only safeguard that I can see."

"I have a sneaking liking for it myself," said Tressider.

She gave him another sharp look, as though she suspected him of insincerity, and said no more.

V

THAT ride in the early morning was the first of many; for Donald Prior rallied, in accordance with Nurse Withers' cheery prediction. The coming of Betty had given him new life. She was very constantly with him, and he looked for her day after day with increasing pleasure. She spent no more nights at the home, for immediate danger was over for the time, but she gave herself up to him very completely by day; and but for Tressider, who took her every morning for that invigorating run in the open air, she would have found the unwonted restraint hard to bear.

She uttered no word of complaint, being of those who would never shirk a task once undertaken, but the warm colour began to fade from her face notwithstanding, and her self-conscious guardian marked the fact with anxiety. The Law Courts were in session again, and he was busy, but, whatever the weather, he never missed that early run with her, and though

she spoke but little, he had reason to believe that she enjoyed it as much as he did.

The case upon which he was engaged was one which required his utmost skill and attention, and almost his only relaxation while it lasted was that daily hour with her. In consequence of this several days passed during which he did not see her brother. Betty's reports were uniformly good. There could be no doubt about it. Her coming had made all the difference to Donald. Even Nurse Brown had ceased to prophesy his speedy demise, while Nurse Withers cheerily anticipated complete recovery, even laying odds upon it which Nurse Brown was too cautious to take.

Then there came a day when Godfrey Tressider visited the home, and found his *protégé* sitting by the window.

"Why, this is splendid!" he said, as he shook hands.

"I'm afraid I'm defeating all expectations," said the sick man, with an apologetic smile. "It's your fault—and Betty's."

Tressider turned to her. "I congratulate you partner," he said.

Betty was at the door. "We are not supposed to be here two at a time," she said, and departed with the words.

Tressider sat down beside the invalid-chair. "And you're not supposed to talk very much, so I'm told," he said. "So you must be content to listen."

"I am content," said Donald.

"Good!" said Tressider. "Because I chance to have something to say, and not a great deal of time to say it in. I've been talking to the doctor about you. He is very well pleased with you and says that we may take you away. He suggests the sea before the heat of summer sets in in town. Do you agree to that?"

A great wave of colour rose in Prior's worn face and as swiftly died away. "I would give my soul for the sea," he said, under his breath.

"Good!" said Tressider again. "And where would you like to go?"

"There's only one place in the world," whispered Prior.

"Not too far away," warned Tressider.

Prior did not hear him. His eyes were fixed upon a vision very far beyond the severe walls that surrounded them. His breath came quickly.

"It's on the Cornish coast," he said, bringing out the words with difficulty. "A little place—hardly a place at all—called Garland Cove."

"Ah!" said Tressider. "That's a long way off."

Prior's eyes came to him; they held entreaty. "Betty knows it—well. I told you, didn't I? It used to be—our holiday ground. I'm sure I could stand the journey. I would stand anything—just to see it again."

"I think we had better ask the doctor," said Tressider.

"No, no!" The words came with a queer vehemence. "I am sure I can do it. I know I can do it. Don't ask anyone! Just—take me there!"

His voice sank. He looked as if he would faint. Tressider got up to give him the restorative which was always kept at hand.

He took it submissively, and lay still for a space. Then: "Thank you," he said. "You are always much too good. I am much stronger than you would think. It is only now and then—and it never lasts so long. I wanted just to ask you. Betty will never talk of the past. But you found her—you found her. Was it there?"

Tressider shook his head. "I have never been to Garland Cove in my life."

"Ah!" A gleam of disappointment crossed Prior's face. "So you are keeping the secret too! By her wish?"

"I never part with other people's secrets," said Tressider.

"No—no, I thought you wouldn't. It doesn't matter. She told me—she told me that—she swam. And Betty always tells the truth."

"Betty is a very wonderful girl," said Tressider enigmatically.

"She is wonderful—wonderful. And you have found that out for yourself. You think highly of her." Again his breath began to quicken.

Tressider laid a restraining hand upon him. "Old chap, you're talking too much," he said. "Yes, I do think very highly of her. And now I am going. I think she is better for you than I am."

"Oh, don't go for a minute!" urged Donald huskily. "Is Garland Cove quite impossible? Must I give it up?"

"Don't set your heart on it too much anyway!" said Tressider.

"No. I quite see. And I'll do my best. But, oh, man,"—he spoke with a quivering smile—"if there's life anywhere, it's there. And if one has got to die,—well, it's the best place to die in that I know."

"We won't talk of that," said Tressider gently.

VI

"It rests with you," said Betty.

"No, it rests with you," said Tressider.

She looked at him with her clear, direct gaze. "Nothing rests with me," she said.

"Yes, this does," he insisted. "I think only you can decide."

"What does the doctor say?" said Betty.

"He does not absolutely forbid it."

"Then he thinks it would be a risk?"

"There is bound to be risk," Tressider said. "But your brother seems to desire it more than anything else on earth."

Betty's steady eyes were still upon him. "I don't feel," she said slowly, "that I have any right to deny him anything."

"Very good," Tressider said. "Then we will carry on with it. Will you leave the arrangements to me?"

"I always do," said Betty simply.

"And you haven't regretted it so far?" he said.

She held out her hand to him with frank confidence. "No, I haven't regretted it, though why you do it—no one knows but yourself."

He grasped her hand firmly in his own. "I regard it as my job, Betty," he said. "Your brother is one of my failures."

She opened her eyes wide. "Is that why? But you couldn't have got him off. He was guilty."

"Legally guilty, yes. Morally guilty,—well, that is a point upon which we do not agree."

"I suppose we don't," said Betty slowly.

“No,” Tressider released her hand. “And you will never approve of me for that reason.”

“You are wrong then,” she said, and flushed a deep red. “I do approve of you.”

“You do!” said Tressider. It was his turn to look astonished.

She met the look almost defiantly. “Yes, I do. I think you are great, and if I were a man I would try and be like you.”

“You are not in earnest,” said Tressider.

“I am no humbug!” flashed Betty. “I know a big thing when I see it. And you are that;—just—big.” She stopped herself suddenly and turned away; her lip was trembling.

“My dear child,” he said, “you amaze me.”

She gave an odd laugh. “I’m rather amazed myself. I never thought it was in you—to be big—like that.”

“But what have I done?” he said.

She shook her head, refusing to answer. “Well, I’m under your orders,” she said. “Whatever you do for Don, I’ll agree to. That’s a promise.”

“Thank you, Betty,” said Tressider.

She mystified him, but he would not probe for enlightenment, reflecting that circumstances had made of her a being he was not likely to understand. But as he went his way, he wondered. There was something rather baulking about that frank acknowledgment of hers. She had not wanted to tell him of it. Only her almost fierce honesty had compelled her. Betty was a fanatic where honesty was concerned. He remembered that she had called it her safeguard.

The fact of her whole-hearted co-operation in his scheme for taking her brother to the haven he so ardently desired served to establish a greater intimacy between them than had yet existed and Betty’s half-veiled antagonism gave way before it. He knew that she would keep her word.

He made arrangements to effect the move during a week-end. There was a farm-house at Garland Cove at which he secured accommodation, and he made every provision for the journey, the last ten miles of which would have to be accomplished by car.

The improvement in Donald Prior's condition had continued. He no longer needed the ministrations of a nurse, and though he looked so old and shrunken that he might have been Betty's father, he was able to walk, leaning upon her, from car to train.

Betty showed no agitation. She never allowed herself to be flustered in Donald's presence. Moreover, Tressider was with them to make every preparation for the invalid's comfort. He established them in a reserved carriage a full quarter of an hour before the train was due to start, and then disappeared on some pretext which neither of the travellers caught.

"He'll come back and say good-bye, won't he?" said Donald.

"Sure to," said Betty.

But he did not return until the moment of departure was actually at hand when he surprised them by quietly entering the compartment with a suit-case and shutting himself in.

"You're not coming too!" said Betty.

He smiled with quiet amusement. "Yes, I am. I thought I would like to settle you in if you don't mind."

"Mind!" said Betty.

Her brother was almost past speech. He muttered something inarticulate.

"It isn't for your sake, dear chap. It's for my own," said Tressider. "I don't like to leave a job half-finished. Just to settle you in, that's all. I shall come straight back. Now don't talk! You lie still and rest! I'm going to read the paper."

He immersed himself in it, and the brother and sister said no more, since the moving train rendered protest an obvious waste of time.

The day was bright with the promise of coming summer, and Betty sat and gazed from the window as they drew out into the open country with eyes that held a certain wistfulness. The escape from the smoky town had been eagerly desired by her. The bare thought of the sea made all her pulses leap. Yet there had been something in the past few weeks which very strangely appealed to her. The orderly flat in which she had been housed, the prim neatness of the nursing-home, the half-forgotten atmosphere of a life she had cast behind her; was she going to miss these things? And that motor-run in the early morning which had never been omitted. What of that? She looked across at the paper behind which Godfrey Tressider sat. Would he continue to go without her? Somehow she did not think he would.

She picked up a magazine from the bundle that he had provided, and tried to absorb herself in it. But her brain did not take in what she read. The old problem was reasserting itself—the problem upon which she had been forced to turn her back during the past weeks of her brother's illness. But now—now—she could not continue to turn her back. Something would have to be done very soon. They were living on the charity of this man, but so far as she was concerned it could not possibly continue. For Donald's sake she had submitted, but then she had been told he was dying. It had seemed her duty, and she had yielded. Tressider had asked her help, and she had responded with all her strength to the call. But now—Donald was getting better, and they were destitute. It was true that she could keep herself afloat, but there was nothing over. She could never hope to keep Donald.

She got up abruptly, and went out into the corridor. They had brought him back between them. All that skill and loving care could do had been done for him. But to what end? He could never be really strong again. His life was broken. He had no means of supporting himself, no prospects of any sort. If he lived, he could but continue to be a burden upon the generosity of a man upon whom they had no claim and whom they could never hope to repay. Something like a shiver went through Betty. Her whole soul recoiled at the idea.

Some time passed while she stood there gazing forth at the fields and hedges in their spring freshness, her straight brows drawn into a despondent frown, her eyes fixed.

Suddenly a voice spoke at her shoulder. "I thought you were enjoying yourself, and, behold, you're grousing!"

She looked up sharply, meeting the slightly quizzical humour of Godfrey Tressider's eyes.

"Is Don asleep?" she said.

"Very nearly. I left him dozing."

She moved a little, so that he might stand with her at the open window. The clear air blew in upon them, and for a space they breathed it in silence.

Then, briefly: "I wasn't grousing," said Betty.

He nodded. "I know. I've put you into an intolerable situation. You're not angry with me, I hope? It wasn't entirely my fault."

"It wasn't mine," said Betty, her voice quick and low, her look averted.

"Well, yes," he said. "The part that wasn't mine was yours."

“I think it was all yours,” she said, “though I suppose you will find some extraordinary way of proving that it wasn’t.”

He laughed a little. “Oh, Betty, Betty!” he said.

She flushed. He had always called her Betty; it had seemed the natural thing to do. She had never resented it, but now, for the first time, it embarrassed her.

He went on in his quiet, easy fashion. “No, believe me, I am not to blame for everything. It is you who have complicated matters which otherwise would have been quite simple.”

That fired her. She turned upon him. “How have I complicated matters? I don’t know what you mean.”

“By being yourself,” said Tressider. “No, don’t be angry! Why should you? Perhaps you are not altogether to blame for that either. But it has made things more difficult.”

“What has?” demanded Betty.

“Your pride for one thing,” he said. “I hoped it might get more pliable as we went on. But it hasn’t. You hate accepting things from me, though you’ve agreed to do it.”

“But of course I do!” said Betty. “I should be contemptible if I didn’t.”

“That is where we disagree,” he said. “I think you would be merely—gracious.”

She stared at him for a moment or two. Then: “You can’t be serious,” she said.

“I am serious,” said Tressider, and took out his cigarette-case. “I have made a bid for your friendship, and—I have lost.”

He held the case to her, and she took out a cigarette half-absently. The old, rather grim frown of perplexity was between her eyes.

“I don’t see what friendship has to do with it,” she said.

“I daresay not,” said Tressider. “But as I haven’t got it, it isn’t worth discussing. It wouldn’t satisfy me in any case now.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she said. “Your arguments always are too—complex for me.”

“This one isn’t,” said Tressider, lighting a match and sheltering it with his hand to kindle his cigarette.

She raised her eyes suddenly to his, looking him full in the face. “What do you want my friendship for?” she said.

“Because I thought it would be worth having,” he answered.

“Well, such as it is, you’ve got it,” said Betty bluntly.

He shook his head. “Oh no, not what I mean by friendship.”

She stiffened somewhat. “Your meanings and mine are never the same,” she said.

“Tell me what yours is!” he said.

She hesitated a little. “Well, I suppose, just—liking,” she said half-reluctantly.

“Only that?” he said.

She turned her eyes back to the rushing landscape. “I’ve never gone in much for friends,” she said.

“Is it too late in life to begin?” asked Tressider. Then, as she did not reply: “You know, that idea isn’t like you somehow. It’s too anæmic. I should have thought you were the kind of person who wouldn’t be afraid of friendship. It isn’t everyone that is capable of it in its highest form, but I should have thought you were. It’s an infinitely bigger thing than pride, you know. It’s like a sort of lane, leading——”

“I know what you are driving at,” put in Betty uncompromisingly. “You needn’t go on.”

He went on, notwithstanding. “Leading to illimitable possibilities. It seems to me that the people who refuse friendship never get anywhere. They stay in exactly one spot the whole of their lives, fenced in by solitude and prejudice.”

“Some people like solitude best,” said Betty.

“You don’t,” he said with conviction.

She did not challenge the assertion.

He continued rather ruthlessly. “You know the meaning of solitude and prejudice. They always go together—the twin goalers. You may in course of time manage to elude the first, but never the second. Prejudice hangs on for

ever when once it gets a hold. It narrows one down, makes friendship impossible, makes everything impossible to my mind."

Betty was silent. What was the good of arguing? He had never convinced her yet.

"Won't you speak to me?" he said.

"There's nothing to say," she made answer rather wearily. "Nothing you can say will alter the fact that I am under an obligation to you, and every day that passes makes it greater. I admit that there's no help for it—at least so far as Don is concerned—but——" She made a gesture of despair.

"But that was just what I was trying to point out," he said. "There is help."

"I can't see it," she said.

"You won't see it," he returned. "That's the prejudice I told you of. You wrap yourself up in it, worship it almost, and you won't see that it's a man-made law that was never invented for a case like this. I have convinced your brother. He sees my point of view."

"I am not like Don," said Betty.

"No, you are not so broad-minded as Don. I only wish you were. Adversity has softened him, but I think it has had the opposite effect on you." He spoke with a certain bitterness.

She nodded. "Yes, I know. I am hard. All I ask in life is independence. I can bear anything except the loss of that."

"And you won't forgive me for depriving you of it," he said.

She held up her head. "No one can deprive me of it permanently."

"Except the man you marry," he said.

The colour flamed in her cheeks. "I shall never marry," she said.

"Why not?" said Tressider.

She made a movement of protest. "No honourable man could ever want to marry me," she said, her voice very low.

"Quite sure of that?" he said.

She nodded.

"What do you mean by an honourable man?" he said.

“You know what I mean,” said Betty.

“I am not sure,” said Tressider deliberately. “Would you call me one for instance?”

“Yes,” said Betty.

“You would?” He dropped his voice also, standing close to her at the open window. “But if I were to suggest that you should marry me, you’d be furious,” he said.

She drew back swiftly. “Yes, I should!” she said. “I should!”

He made a half-comic gesture of resignation. “There you are! It isn’t really being honourable—or even big—that counts with you.”

Her cheeks were no longer crimson; they had gone suddenly white. She stood with one hand clenched hard on the door. Her blue eyes were ablaze. “You think—you think—I will take anything from you!” she said.

“On the contrary,” he made steady answer, “I was asking for something in return for once.”

“Ah!” It was almost a cry. She had an odd, stricken look, as though she had received a blow. “You—you—you think—I can’t—refuse!” she said.

“No,” he said, in the same quiet tone, “I am quite sure you are going to refuse. It was a foregone conclusion with me.”

“Ah!” she said again, and drew a hard breath as though she were suffocating. “You are not in earnest.”

“Yes, I am in earnest,” he said, “though I realize that that fact hardly weighs in my favour. My offer is quite as serious as your refusal. Moreover, if you were to marry me, it would solve a good many difficulties, besides removing all possibility of your ever being under any obligation to me again.”

“I think you must be mad,” said Betty, beginning to breathe more normally. “What—what could you possibly gain by such an arrangement?”

He looked at her. “I should gain a wife,” he said.

The colour leaped back into her face. “Not the sort of wife you want,” she said.

“I am the best judge of that,” said Tressider.

“You must be mad,” she said again.

"Mad—to know what I want?" said Tressider.

"No!" she said vehemently. "No! But mad—to dream—of wanting me!"

He threw his cigarette out of the window. "I do want you, Betty," he said. "I have a great admiration for you, and I venture to think that I could make you happy."

She turned from him abruptly. "Don't say any more, please!" she said. "I am going back to Don."

He made no attempt to detain her. He did not even watch her go. But when she was gone, he leaned his arms upon the door-frame and gazed out over the green stretches of country with a faint smile in his eyes.

VII

THEY came to the end of the railway journey when evening was far advanced, an evening of soft lights and shadows that lay mistily upon the far-reaching Cornish landscape. Tressider's arrangements worked without a hitch, and the invalid was transported safely to the waiting car. He had borne the day well and showed no signs of undue fatigue. It was Betty who, upright and watchful by his side, carried unmistakable lines of weariness on her young face. She had scarcely exchanged a word with Tressider since their talk in the corridor, and not once had she looked at him. Her whole attention had been centered upon her brother, and it so remained during the fifteen miles' run to Garland Cove.

They were going to rooms in an old farm that had been a favourite holiday haunt of their childish days. The old folks who had kept it had given place to strangers, but the place remained the same, and at first sight of its white-washed walls Donald Prior uttered a sound that was almost a groan.

"All right?" whispered Betty, regarding him anxiously.

He compelled a smile. "Yes, quite, dear. It was just the memory of old times. Betty, do you remember?"

She squeezed his hand in silence. The present was almost more than she could bear.

Tressider took quiet command as they entered, went with Donald to his room and helped him to prepare for bed. Betty had a room adjoining, and here she unpacked their few belongings while the murmur of the sea came in at the lattice-window, seeming to call her.

Later, the farmer's wife brought up a supper-tray for the sick man, and later still Betty went down to the old panelled parlour to eat her own meal in Tressider's company.

She would have given a good deal to have foregone the ordeal, but after all there was nothing very difficult about it. Tressider was his normal quiet self, and he made no reference whatever to what had passed between them.

He spoke but little, as though he realized that she was too tired for much talk, and that little was entirely concerned with her brother.

"I am hoping that this place may do great things for him," he said, "now that he has stood the journey so well."

Betty could but echo the hope. "I don't think I will leave him for long to-night," she said.

He agreed. "Yes, don't let me keep you!"

She finished and got up to go without further ceremony. "Good night—and thank you," she said.

He also rose, moved to open the door for her, then paused and held out his hand. "I am leaving to-night," he said. "Good-bye!"

"To-night!" said Betty in surprise.

"Yes, I am putting up at Cherry Morton. You won't want me again, I think. If you do, send for me!"

She stood, hesitating.

"Won't you even shake hands with me?" he said.

She gave her hand; her eyes were lowered. "Good-bye!" she said; and then, with a great effort, "I'm sorry to have been—ungracious."

"But that is what you never have been," he said. "I knew you would turn me down."

"But why then—why on earth—did you ask me?" she said, the colour rising again in her downcast face.

"I just wanted to put it into your head," he said gently. "It's only the first time of asking, you know."

She removed her hand swiftly. "Oh, don't,—don't ever do it again!" she said.

“I shall do it again,” he answered quietly. “I am not prepared to add you to my failures.”

“But—but——” Betty gasped a little, “it’s no use going on. I do assure you it’s no use. I couldn’t—I couldn’t possibly—marry you.”

“Could you marry anyone else?” he said.

“No!” said Betty emphatically. “No!”

The faint smile showed again in his eyes. “For that reason—among others,” he said, “I shall do it again.”

“But that is absurd!” she protested.

He opened the door with quiet precision, closing the discussion. “*Au revoir*, Betty!” he said.

She went. She almost fled, though the soft shutting of the door behind her had a finality which certainly did not suggest pursuit.

She found her brother sleeping, and passed on to her own room where she sank down by the low lattice-window with her hot face lodged upon her hands, and listened to the turbulent beating of her heart and the soft murmur of the waves in the little cove below, calling her, calling her.

In the morning her brother regarded her with critical eyes. “Yes, I’ve slept all right,” he said. “But you haven’t.”

She made light of it. “What does it matter whether I sleep or not? I have been doing Nurse Brown’s duty.”

“There was no need for that,” he said. “I am well enough to be left alone. I could have called you at any time if I had needed you.”

“Ah well, I will make up for it to-night,” she said.

He did not cease to look critical, but he said no more.

His own health was marvellously improved, and he was more like the Donald of old days than she had ever thought to see him again. The atmosphere of his beloved shore seemed to put new life into him, and within a week he was actually able to walk down to it with the aid of a stick and leaning upon her. A spell of beautiful summer weather followed their arrival, and very soon he began to look wistfully at the sea.

“If we could only hire a boat!” he said.

But there were no boats at Garland Cove. It was not a fishing-place. There was no spot nearer than Spur Head with its little hamlet down by the river-mouth, where they would be likely to obtain a boat, and that was several miles away by land though considerably less by sea.

Betty knitted her brows over the problem, and then one day she made a suggestion. If he could do without her for some hours she would go over to Spur Head and see if she could hire a boat. If she were successful, she would return in it from there. The distance by sea was not great.

Her brother demurred about letting her go, but she was insistent. It would do her good to go, and as to handling a boat, she did not fancy that she had forgotten much in that respect since the old days. She was evidently set upon carrying out her plan, and her will prevailed. The farmer's wife described a short cut which would considerably curtail the distance, and Betty, being a good walker, started off after breakfast with her luncheon in a satchel over her shoulder. There was a brisk breeze, but she would have it behind her for the return journey, and there were no indications of a storm.

Donald spent the morning in a sheltered corner. It was the second week-end after their arrival, and though he had not heard from Tressider he had a half-hope that he might make his appearance before the day was over. He rested indoors during the afternoon as was his custom, but after tea, feeling stronger than usual, he set out for the shore for the first time alone.

The wind had died down, but the sky was misty, with a hint of storm-clouds on the horizon. The sun, declining now over the cliffs, was veiled. He felt no serious anxiety, however, for there did not appear to be any sudden change at hand, and as he took the winding, narrow path that led to the shore he told himself that the weather might not break even yet for some days. His progress was slow, but it pleased him. The solitude was so novel as to be welcome. He had not been thus alone since the days of his imprisonment. It sent a strange exhilaration through him. For the first time he tasted freedom.

And the sea was there, waiting for him;—no illusion this time, but a blessed, shining reality, calling him, drawing him. He went down to it as a child escaped from a kindly but severe guardianship. There was no one to hold him back. The sense of liberty regained thrilled through his veins like wine.

"My God!" he said. "I am free! I am free!" His pace quickened as he reached the shore. He had a curious feeling as if iron shackles had been struck from him. He was no longer conscious of weakness. The awful years had been lifted like a burden from him. His strength had come back to him.

Surely all that he had endured—the agony of captivity, the torturing shame, the suffering—all, all was a myth! He was young again, marvellously, overwhelmingly young. He felt his youth flow through him once more with a quickening force. He looked upon the leaden blue of the quiet water and laughed. It was like a lake to-night. No tumbling waves, but a still, receding tide!

He could scarcely hear the waves upon the beach. The water almost lapped his feet. How still it was! No effort to keep afloat on such a sea as this! He stooped and dabbled his hand. Ye gods, how warm!

There were rocks in the little cove, and he sat down on one of them and began to pull off his shoes. Betty would disapprove of course. He laughed again at the thought. He might have some difficulty in convincing her that his strength—the free, splendid strength of his youth—had indeed returned, but she would have to admit it in the end. But—thank heaven!—he was alone for the moment, to make his test unhindered!

He got up, barefooted, and stepped to the water's edge, actually forgetting his supporting stick. Yes, the water was warm. Just a faint chill from lack of custom went through him and was gone. Again he laughed. What a muff he had been to let them coddle him for so long! Why, there was time for a complete dip before the sun went down. Betty came down morning after morning for hers. He would show her—he would show her to-morrow morning that he too could hold his own in the still, lapping water of the cove.

He turned back to the beach and began to throw off his clothes, kicking aside with contempt the stick which he had forgotten. He would never need it again, so he told himself. His strength had returned, and one plunge into that quiet blue water would give him back all that he had lost during the dreadful years. He would come back from it delivered for ever from the yoke—a free man once more—a man in whom the zest of life ran high.

The oppressive heat of the evening made him hasten. The longing within him had become a surging, urgent desire. Not until he was out from the shore and cleaving his way through those still waters would the full glory of freedom regained be his. He flung away the last of his clothes with feverish haste. He turned to the calling sea.

It struck cold as he entered it, but the craving was too strong to be denied. Overhead sailed a gull, supremely free, with level wings cleaving the air. He caught the gleam of its feathers as it wheeled, and somehow the sight goaded him. The water was splashing round his knees. He urged

himself in thigh-deep. Yes, it was cold, colder than he had thought, but still it drew him. It was only the beginning. He would soon be used to it. A few minutes of hard swimming would warm his chilled blood. It was the one thing he needed—the cure for which he had pined.

Waist-deep, he let himself go, and struck out. Yes, it was cold, it was cold! He splashed and gasped. But the salt taste in his mouth was better than any wine. He was free at last—at last!

He made a few breast-strokes, then turned upon his side.

Perhaps it was better after all not to try his strength too far. He would float and get his breath. He wished the sun would come out, for the cold was beginning to get hold of him. He clenched his teeth so that they should not chatter, for he would not be conquered by it. In another minute or so he would be rested and able to go on.

He was on his back now, breathing in short, labouring gasps. Weakness of course! Just lingering weakness to which he would not be a slave! How often he had lain breathing like this while Nurse Brown and Nurse Withers had exchanged their whispered prognostications in the background!

Surely that was cheery Nurse Withers just going off for the night!

"Oh yes, he's had another attack, but he's come through it very well considering. He might take a turn even now."

And Nurse Brown: "It'll be a turn for the worse if he does."

"Oh, very likely!" Withers again. "I never said he'd get well, mind you. He's too far gone for that, poor dear. But it's wonderful how he goes on. Why, he might carry on for quite a long while with care and no exertion or sudden shock or anything of that kind. You never know, Brown. These heart cases play you up sometimes. Well, I'm off to bed." He could hear her yawn and knew that she was stretching. "I bet you'll keep him going till I come on again anyway. You always do, so cheerio!"

Cheerio! He began to laugh. Yes, she was very cheery. He had always liked Nurse Withers, though he was sure that when the time came she would lay him out as cheerily as she had nursed him. He was just one of the passing show to her. So cheerio—cheerio!

It was getting dark, and the old feeling of numbness was coming upon him. Was this the turn for the worse that Nurse Brown had predicted? Or was it merely the falling night and the eternal weariness that had become a part of his very existence?

He seemed to be sinking, and they were dashing water on his face. That was to bring him back of course. But they had never done it before. A spasm of pain went through him. The cold was gripping his heart. Sudden panic caught him. He stretched out his arms for a human touch.

"Betty!" he cried. "Betty! Betty!"

The ice-cold water closed upon him as though a hand were drawing him down; but he broke free and came up again, his heart nearly bursting.

"Betty!" he cried again.

And through the falling darkness her answer reached him, clear and strong. "Coming, Don! Coming! Keep up!"

He began to swim towards her, striking out blindly, with failing senses. But the effort was too great, the way too long. He suddenly thought of the sinking "Titanic"—and the hymn that Betty and he had always said they would remember when they went down themselves.

"Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee:
E'en though it be a Cross
That raiseth me. . . ."

Something raised him. He did not know what. Not Betty's—or any other mortal hand—as his lifeless body went down into the deep waters. . . .

VIII

"I COULDN'T reach him," said Betty. "I left the boat and swam. But he was gone. I think he died before he went down."

"You poor child!" Tressider said.

She made a small movement as though to shake off all sympathy. "It was what he would have chosen for himself, but—but——" Something rose in her throat and she put up her hand and held it for a moment, then went on firmly. "Well, it's over; and no doubt it's best. I can't thank you for all you've done. But I hope to repay—some day—all you have spent on me."

"We won't talk of that," said Tressider.

She nodded. "Very well. Another time. Is there anything we ought to do? I suppose we must tell the police."

“Leave all that to me!” he said. “You will probably have to make a statement. But—unless he is washed ashore——”

“That won’t happen,” Betty said with conviction. “Garland Cove is a mass of rock and weed and very deep.” She caught back a shudder. “I hope it won’t happen,” she said. “I—don’t want it to happen.”

“I understand,” he said gently.

Her throat worked again as though there were some obstruction there, but in a moment she spoke with the same steadiness. “I can’t stay on here of course. The things he left are yours. There is very little, but if I might have his pocket-book——”

“Oh, Betty, stop!” he said.

She looked at him as though something in his tone surprised her.

“Everything he possessed is yours,” he said. “Don’t treat me like an utter stranger!”

“I am sorry,” said Betty. “But—I can’t take anything more from you. That is how it is.”

She spoke quietly, rather wearily. Her face was very pale, but save for that occasional spasm in her throat she showed no signs of agitation. It was three hours ago that she had come stumbling up the cliff-path in her drenched clothes to tell the frightened farmer’s wife that her brother was dead. And now that Tressider had come and she had repeated the tale to him, there seemed nothing more to be said.

“I suppose we can settle everything in the morning,” she said.

“Whatever is easiest for you,” he made answer. “But I wish you would tell me what you are thinking of doing.”

“I am going back to work,” she said.

He looked at her. “Betty—child, you can’t! You’re not fit for it.”

She smiled wanly. “There are worse things in the world than work,” she said.

“You won’t go with my consent,” he said.

“Perhaps not,” said Betty.

She left him then, and he heard her go to her brother’s room.

Night had fallen with wind and lashing rain. He sat and listened to it, his thoughts divided between the girl upstairs and the man who was dead. He had meant to return to Cherry Morton for the night, had engaged a room there, but this tragedy seemed to make it impossible for him to leave the place. Little though Betty might want him, he could not desert her. She would surely need him in the morning.

He fell asleep towards dawn, still sitting musing in his chair; but though he slept his thoughts yet dwelt upon her—Betty, the honest and intrepid, who faced life with so brave a front. He dreamed of her at last, dreamed that she came to him with all the hardness gone from her blue eyes and a shining tenderness left in its place. She came to him as he sat there, fast held in the bonds of sleep, and stood beside him, looking down upon him in a long farewell. Her presence reached his consciousness though he could not break away. He was aware of her while she lingered, and he knew when she softly went away. Thereafter he slept deeply and dreamlessly until the morning sun shone brightly in and awoke him.

He found a rain-washed world, and a laughing sea had been evolved as though by the wave of a magic wand out of the storm of the previous night. He arose, stretching himself, scarcely believing in the tragedy of the day before, and then in a moment was arrested by the sight of an envelope on the table at his side.

It had not been there when he had fallen asleep, he was certain. He picked it up, and as if an electric current had passed between his fingers and the paper, the memory of his dream flashed back upon him. Then she had indeed been here, had indeed stood beside him with that long farewell in her eyes! His spiritual vision had served him while the merely physical had been dormant.

His hands were trembling a little as he opened the envelope. It contained two enclosures. One was a half-sheet of paper with a single sentence written across it in a firm, upright hand.

> "*I found this in my brother's pocket-book, and as it is intended for you, I am leaving it; but please do not think it can make any difference.*
>
> "BETTY."

There was something of stark, almost fanatical honesty in the brief message. He realized that she had not taken the easy course in passing on that slip of paper which Donald had left behind.

He opened it and found the reason.

> "*Most people make a will*," so the message went, "*but I, having nothing to leave, can only express a wish. And that is that the friendship which has been given to me so generously by Godfrey Tressider—surely one of the best men whom God ever created—may be given after me to my precious Betty who is far more worthy of it than I ever was. And I hereby beg her, if the gift is offered, to accept it for my sake.*
>
> "Donald Prior."

He read it to the end and laid it down. "Poor Betty!" he said aloud.

He went out into the little garden, her note clasped in his hand. It was a morning of crystal purity with a buffeting wind blowing over the sea. So she had gone—had fled in the night—whither?

He suddenly remembered the boat that she had fetched from Spur Head the previous day, and his heart gave a jerk of dismay. Had she started back in that choppy sea after leaving that message for him?

He opened the garden-gate and went out upon the winding path that led down to the cove. Almost before he knew it, he was running with his head bent to the wind down the steep incline. It was still early. Perhaps she had not started! Or perhaps she had realized the madness of such a scheme and gone by land, leaving the boat in the cove!

But in his heart he knew that this was not so. In his heart he knew before he started that he would find the cove empty. Yet when he came within sight of it, the fact of its emptiness struck him with a sense of shock. He stopped short and searched the great expanse of tumbling blue water. The waves were breaking with a great roaring below him. There were white breakers as far as the eye could reach. But nothing besides in all the world except the gulls, swooping and calling in the sunlight.

IX

When Tressider turned from Garland Cove that morning, he was changed. He had gone down eager-footed, with desperate speed. He returned as a man with dragging chains upon his feet.

He went to the farm and left money and instructions regarding the safe keeping of the few belongings of the brother and sister. Then he drank a cup of coffee pressed upon him by the farmer's wife and departed.

There was no conveyance obtainable, and he set out to walk to Cherry Morton. The police there must be informed of the death of Donald Prior, and he would get a telephone message through to the coast-guard on Spur Head to keep a strict look-out for the wandering craft. There was no more than that to be done; and probably it was much too late for the message to be of any avail. It was hours now since Betty had put out to sea—hours possibly since those white-capped waves had swamped her little boat and quelled her gallant fight for life. Ah, Betty, Betty,—the fearless and honest, offering up her very existence to save her pride! Betty—Betty! He groaned and clenched his hands. There was nothing he could do for her now.

He reached Cherry Morton towards noon and after a long search eventually discovered the village constable who listened to his story, wrote it down at some length, and then suggested that he should go on to the nearest town as he had no telephone. Tressider refused and wasted a further hour trying to find the post-mistress and get his message through. But it was Sunday and his search was in vain. He left at last in despair to tramp to Spur Head, since the car at the inn had broken down.

The morning glory had faded, and a mist was blowing up from the sea, but he set doggedly forward, taking the track across the open down. It was a long tramp, but he would not delay any longer for a meal, hardly remembering that he had eaten nothing all day. He scarcely noticed the mist at first, and he had traversed some four miles before its increasing density attracted his attention. Whether it came upon him at last very suddenly, or whether it had been gradually surrounding him from the outset, he never afterwards knew. But there came a time when he awoke with a sense of horror to the fact that the sun had ceased to shine and the world was grey around him, while the path that he had followed had disappeared.

After that came hours of blind wandering through clammy fog that chilled his bones, culminating at last in a nightmare sense of insecurity as the deadened splash of the sea reached him from a region unknown and he heard the voices of gulls somewhere below him as they flew in and out of their nests in the cliffs. Finally there came a realization of sheer depth at his very feet, and he reeled back from it appalled.

Afterwards, he moved as a blind man feeling his way, sounding each step before he dared to make it, visualizing the awful spaces through which

the gulls perpetually called, seeing only the everlasting fog as a bandage before his eyes.

When darkness came down at length he was still feeling his way, still straining his ears to catch any guiding sound, still struggling in a species of dogged despair against the odds arrayed against him.

There was a sound in the baffling darkness, and at first he welcomed it with an almost feverish thankfulness, but soon its persistent booming only served to bewilder him the more. That sound was the syren of the Spur Head lighthouse which reached him at half-minute intervals; but each time he heard it, it seemed to come from a different direction, and he altered his course each time in vain.

With the falling of darkness came also a small drizzling rain that eventually drenched him to the skin. But still he pressed on, holding exhaustion at bay, determined by some means to reach his destination though aware, subconsciously, that the fulfillment of his mission would not serve Betty now.

The thought of her went continually with him, drawing him on—Betty as he had seen her with his inner vision with that new softness in her eyes—Betty bidding him a mute farewell! Where was she now? Was the light in those blue eyes for ever quenched? Was that straight lithe young form tossing now to and fro, to and fro, on the muffled billows—a lifeless thing from which the gallant spirit had passed?

His strength was beginning definitely to fail him at length. He heard the syren with a vague monotony, not seeking further to guide his steps by it. The awful fear of the cliff-edge no longer possessed him. Nothing mattered any more. He had lost Betty. All hope of helping her was gone. The Eternal Door had for ever shut between them. He could only wander on now until deliverance came to him also. Some instinct told him that the end was not far distant. He had done his best; in all these past weeks he had done his best, at first from sheer philanthropy, later with a dawning realization of something finer than even his wide experience had yet visualized, and finally with a dazzled perception that the greatest thing of all had come within his ken—only to vanish—to vanish—and leave him to perish in this black darkness that now encompassed his soul.

For a space not calculable by time his feet seemed to tread on nothing, so utter was his sense of loss; and then strangely it came to him that he had reached a place in some fashion familiar to him. How it had come about he knew no more than how the vision of Betty had come to him in the early

morning when she had paused by his side in that mute leave-taking. But after a little while he became aware once more of the ground beneath him, and stumbled once or twice from sheer weariness, though in a strange and trance-like manner he knew the way.

And so at last, weak and spent, he came to the haven for which he seemed to have been searching for the whole of his life, and sank down upon his knees before a closed door upon which he feebly beat ere the last of his strength failed him.

X

THE door opened to him; that much he knew, though in his exhaustion he had not expected it to open.

The door opened, and there came a voice that uttered a sound of deep and almost tragic compassion. A moment later, hands that were small and sinewy, like a boy's, were dragging at him, seeking to lift him over the threshold.

Mechanically almost, his stiff limbs responded. He stumbled up and forward.

As in a dream he saw the tiny kitchen-place of the hovel to which he had once been conducted by a none too willing guide, the wretched, flickering lamp upon the bare table—and the face of Peter Friar with its keen blue eyes under level brows looking down into his.

He tried to speak but could not. Of course it was a dream! And as he sat there wondering, the firm young hands began to minister to him, dragging off his wet shoes, chafing his numbed feet, reviving the smouldering fire, and finally bringing him a cup of steaming tea.

That revived him somewhat. He began to awake. With an effort he found his voice.

"So—you got back!"

"Yes, I got back," said Peter.

Tressider sat for a while and gazed at the blue-jerseyed figure, still scarcely believing.

"I've been looking for you," he said at length, "searching the world for you."

“A waste of time!” said Peter cynically.

Tressider scarcely heard. “And you were here—all the time,” he said. “You had come back to the old life—and the old partner.”

“Not the old partner,” said Peter. “He has got too old. He gave it up—while I was away.”

The words were brief, but there was something in their very brevity that reached Tressider. He turned his head.

“And so you are alone now,” he said.

“Yes, I am alone,” said Peter.

Again for a space Tressider sat silent, gradually coming back to life.

He spoke at last. “I am alone too,” he said. “I want a partner—more than I can say. And there is only one person on this earth who can fill the need. Shall I go on? Or are you going to turn me out?”

“Why should I turn you out?” said Peter.

“Because I shan’t go unless you do,” said Tressider with the grey shadow of a smile.

Peter nodded gravely. “I see.”

The long boom of the lighthouse syren sounded through the night with an eerie persistence as though some monster prowled without seeking admittance.

Tressider spoke again. “I promised you that you should come back—take up your life again—as you left it. But some promises are impossible of fulfillment.”

“Made to be broken?” suggested Peter.

“I have broken no promises,” Tressider said. “But there is a destiny in every life which none can gainsay. Some call it the Hand of God. We seem to be free agents, but none of us is actually free. I thought I was following a mere whim when first I came here. I know now that the quest was a greater one than I imagined and I was fulfilling my own intended destiny in seeking it.”

“And have you found it?” said Peter.

“Yes, I have found it.” Tressider spoke with weariness. “But it is out of my reach, and so I must go empty for the rest of my life.”

“Your life won’t stay empty,” said Peter.

“It has never been anything else,” Tressider answered, “except for the past six weeks.”

Peter almost jeered. “You with your profession, your prospects—and all the world at your feet!”

“I—and my dust and ashes!” said Tressider. “You—and your pride!”

He stooped forward with the words and pulled his wet shoes towards him.

“Well, I’ll be going,” he said.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t go,” said Peter, watching him.

“Unless you turned me out,” said Tressider.

“Then hadn’t you better wait till I do?” said Peter.

Tressider was dragging on his wet shoes. “I think I’ve waited long enough,” he said. “Anyhow—I’m going.”

But at that Peter moved abruptly as though prodded into action by some unseen agency, stepped swiftly to the door, opened it, looked out into the dripping night, then closed and locked it with finality.

Tressider had nearly accomplished his task when suddenly two warm young arms were thrust round his shoulders, and the boyish figure in the rough fisherman’s jersey was kneeling by his side.

“You can’t go now,” said Peter, with a sob. “I’ve got the key.”

“What?” Tressider moved sharply, straightening himself. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve got the key.” The words were reiterated with a certain doggedness, the warm hold tightened; the face was hidden. “But how on earth—was I to know—that you wanted me—like that?”

“Like what?” said Tressider. “More than you wanted me?”

“No, no! You never did that!” There was something almost fierce in the affirmation, muffled though it was. “I—I have always wanted you—ever since the day you cursed me at the ferry for keeping you waiting. And I have been so afraid—you might find out.” The words ended on another sob.

Tressider clasped the slight, vibrant form close. “Betty—Betty! If only I had known!”

“You never would have known at all,”—quiveringly came the response—“if you hadn’t been such—such an idiot—as to come after me all this way in the fog. I suppose you’ll say that was destiny too.”

“Yes,” said Tressider quietly. “I do say so.”

She lifted her face very suddenly and looked at him with the eyes of his dream. “It was about the maddest thing you could possibly have done,” she said. “Promise me—promise me—that you will never do anything so mad again!”

He laughed a little, very softly, as he caught and held the upturned face, wet with the tears that she no longer sought to hide.

“That depends upon you, Betty,” he said. “I shall certainly never do it for anyone else. But I would a dozen times over for you.”

“How hopeless men are!” she sighed, but she did not seek to resist him.

And as he bent his face to hers, there came again the long, booming call of the syren, warning all who heard it of the desolation which Betty had locked outside.

QUITS

"She is playing with fire," said Mrs. Deane, with a shake of her wise old head. "They all do it, my dear, these ultra-pretty young girls. They always have. Life hasn't changed since we were young. But that doesn't make it any the safer. Whatever the philosophers may say, it's a dangerous game."

"I don't think we did it after we were married," said Mrs. Marlow, her younger sister by a year. "We did draw the line at that, Martha. I don't remember ever looking at a man after I married poor George."

Mrs. Deane's delicate lips pursed themselves a little. She was too polite, even to her sister, to suggest that possibly no other man had desired such attention on her part.

"Cynthia is singularly attractive," she remarked, after a moment. "There were at least half a dozen devoted young men whom she could have transformed into adoring husbands when she married. What made her decide in favour of Bevan Storr I never quite made out, though I can but conclude that it was a case of extremes meeting—as they so often do."

"Well, I can hardly imagine anyone describing him as an adoring husband," said Mrs. Marlow. "He certainly never appeared to worship her like the others."

"Which may have been the secret of her preference," said Mrs. Deane. "But, be that as it may, I do not think there could be any doubt as to his feeling for her. He certainly has no thoughts for anyone else."

"A remark which, equally certainly, does not apply to her!" observed Mrs. Marlow, not without a hint of acidity.

"She is very young," said Mrs. Deane tolerantly.

Mrs. Marlow faintly sniffed. "And not very wise," she supplemented.

"They never are," said Mrs. Deane. "Nor would she be half as attractive if she were. But rash as she is, I am sure she does not mean any harm."

"Let us hope that Major Storr is equally sure!" said Mrs. Marlow. She leaned forward in her chair with the words to look over the balcony railing

on to the tennis-court below. “Oh, there they are again! I thought I could not be mistaken. Another singles with young Cockran! Really, my dear, I think it is getting a little too marked to be quite nice.”

Mrs. Deane shook her head again without speaking. It was plain that she thought so too.

A girl’s merry laugh came up to them through the languorous stillness.

“Oh, Guy, do take off that hideous skull-cap! It makes you look such a villain.”

“It does indeed!” commented Mrs. Marlow severely. “But I am by no means sure that it is inappropriate on that account.”

“They say his mother was French,” said Mrs. Deane in extenuation.

“I can well believe it,” returned her sister crushingly. “It would account for much. But what is Cynthia’s husband thinking of?”

“Probably nothing but bathing at the present moment,” said Mrs. Deane.

“And last night, pray, what was he thinking of then?” insisted Mrs. Marlow. “She had eyes only for young Cockran. She danced with him the whole night through, while Major Storr simply sat and played bridge.”

“I think it is really more a case of young Cockran having eyes only for her,” said Mrs. Deane. “He is an incorrigible flirt and naturally gravitates to the prettiest girl within reach.”

“But Cynthia is not within reach! Cynthia is married!” protested Mrs. Marlow.

“Yes,” admitted Mrs. Deane. “But marriage nowadays does not place a girl within baulk. It increases rather than restricts her freedom.”

“Within limits!” maintained Mrs. Marlow.

“Within limits—certainly. But those limits are very much wider than they used to be. Major Storr is wise to realize this.”

“I think Major Storr is asleep, and it is high time he woke up,” snapped Mrs. Marlow. “He does not know Cynthia as we do. She is a born trifler.”

“Perhaps he knows her better!” suggested Mrs. Deane thoughtfully.

Her sister made a derisive sound.

From the garden below them came a voice, soft, intimate, lightly caressing. “There you are, Flower of the moon! First game to you!

Irresistible as usual!"

The girlish voice made answer. "What a rotter you are, Guy! I wish you'd play up."

"Playing against you is too great a handicap," pleaded Guy Cockran the courtier. "I walk with you, I swim with you, I dance with you. How can I play against you?"

"No English boy would have said that," sniffed Mrs. Marlow.

She leaned forward again to peer over the balustrade. The man and the girl were standing together at the net. The lithe, active figure in white flannels with shirt open at the throat and handsome olive face laughing above it was good to look upon, but the consciously free grace of it was certainly not wholly British. His dark eyes were deeply shadowed by strong black brows. Mrs. Marlow did not like his eyes. They were too fiery.

The girl in her short white tennis-frock looked a mere child. She was as fair as her companion was dark, so fair that her hair was almost silvery in its brightness. Her face had the exquisite delicacy of a cameo and the purity of a flower. Her eyes behind gold-tipped lashes were deeply blue, jewel-like in their intensity. There could be no two opinions regarding Cynthia's beauty. She had been called the Moon-Daisy in her schooldays, and the name had clung. Some said that she was lovelier by night than by day, but it was hard to imagine it as she stood there in the sunlight, looking dauntlessly up at the open worship in the man's eyes.

"If you're not going to play the game," she said, "it's too silly to go on."

He laughed, equally audacious, equally undaunted. "Let's go on by all means! I may get used to it if I try long enough."

She uttered her careless laugh in unison with his. "Well, one set then! Just to let all the old fogies in the hotel know where we are and what we are doing!"

"And after that?" he said.

"After that we will retire to a quiet corner and enjoy ourselves. It's too broiling to play for long in any case."

She turned with a dainty grace of movement and walked to the back-line of the court, tossing a ball on her racquet as she went.

Mrs. Marlow leaned back again in her chair behind the screen of climbing roses and took up her knitting with a severe countenance.

"You are quite right, my dear," she said. "Cynthia is playing a dangerous game. And I am interested—greatly interested—to know how long it will last."

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It was a full hour after the demonstration set had ended that a big, lounging figure of manhood came sauntering up from the bathing-steps with a bath-towel hanging round his neck. He also seemed to be feeling the heat, for he walked with lagging feet, almost slouching, looking neither to right nor to left. His somewhat heavy face wore the suspicion of a scowl. People were wont to say of Bevan Storr that he scowled to keep the world at bay while his wits were wool-gathering. He was a man of some reputation in military circles, but in spite of this, society in general did not credit him with the possession of many brains. He was regarded as possibly all right in his own sphere, but wholly without ideas outside it. That he had been caught by the flower-like beauty of little Cynthia Ash was not perhaps surprising, since practically everybody was caught by it sooner or later; but that he, out of all the rest, should have proved the successful aspirant for her hand was a fact which gave food for much conjecture. What did she see in him? By all the laws of psychology and mutual attraction, what *did* she see in him?

He was a man of good physique certainly, but so were many of the rest. As to general looks and amiability of disposition, practically all of her adorers could have given him points. Yet it had been her pleasure—or whim—to bestow her favour upon him. After three years of merry trifling she had surrendered her liberty to this new-comer who had never knelt at her feet, but merely, so it seemed, reached out his hand and taken her.

The news of her engagement had sent something like an electric shock through the busy little country town of which she had been the chosen *belle* for so long. Mrs. Deane and Mrs. Marlow, both members of the community, had joined in the general amazement. That Cynthia who dangled so many scalps at her girdle should have yielded as it were without a struggle to this man who had not even the appearance of a hunter was beyond their comprehension. Of the two widowed sisters, Mrs. Deane hoped for the best and Mrs. Marlow feared the worst.

They had gone with the rest of the population to the wedding and seen her, a radiant bride, united to a grave and somewhat sullen bridegroom, had followed her in imagination to the Italian lakes among which they had spent their honeymoon, had encountered her again upon her return for a few days

to her home, still, rather to their surprise, the same laughing, irresponsible Cynthia with her husband, heavy and bored, in the background.

"She will sober down," was the opinion that Mrs. Deane had expressed, for it seemed impossible that anyone could remain light and airy and inconsequent while attached to such a heavyweight as Bevan Storr.

But some months had passed since then, and here she was again, playing like a butterfly on the Mediterranean shore while her stolid companion amused himself with bathing and bridge. It was a mere chance that had brought the two elderly ladies to the same hotel—a chance that they would not have missed for a king's ransom. Mrs. Deane was fond of the girl and genuinely anxious that her path through life should be a happy one. She had suffered some misgivings regarding her choice and she wanted to be assured that these were groundless. Mrs. Marlow, if less kindly, was none the less keen to see how Cynthia was conducting herself, and if the sobering process had begun. But it took a very short time to convince both ladies that in surrendering herself to Bevan Storr, Cynthia had by no means relinquished her empire. She still ruled supreme wherever she went. She played tennis, danced and flirted as of yore. Caught in the whirl of gaiety, she pursued her merry way while he went his, detached, very often alone.

"He is an extraordinary man," murmured Mrs. Deane, watching him pass. "Can he really enjoy the situation, I wonder?"

"He hasn't the brains to see it," said Mrs. Marlow, outspokenly.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Deane again.

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It was three hours later that Cynthia literally scampered into her room to dress for dinner. There was to be a dance after it, and time was short.

So engrossed was she with the need for haste that she actually overlooked her husband whose bulky form was stretched on the sofa at the foot of the bed. He was reading a paper, but as she threw herself into a chair to pull off her shoes, he lowered it and looked at her. Her delicate face was flushed, and she was breathing quickly as though she had been running. Obviously she was unaware of his presence, and he lay and watched her without moving. She tossed her shoes aside and pulled off her white stockings. This done, she began to search for evening wear.

It was almost inevitable that so volatile a personality should have a somewhat nebulous idea of method and neatness. She opened and shut

several drawers in succession, then suddenly whizzed round as though something had struck her, and saw her husband.

"Bevan!" she ejaculated. "How on earth did you get there? You weren't there when I came in."

"I have been here for two hours," he said.

"How lazy!" she said lightly. "Well, I don't want you any longer. I'm going to dress."

"So I noticed," he said, without moving. "Don't let me interrupt you!"

She turned from him with the hint of a shrug. "It's time you dressed yourself. You'll be late."

"That's my pigeon," he observed.

Cynthia resumed her hunt through the drawers, finally pouncing upon a pair of stockings and sitting down with her back to him to draw them on.

"You've had a good flight lately," remarked Bevan after a pause.

"What do you mean?" She tossed the words over her shoulder.

"Out of the cage," he explained, unmoved. "It was about that that I have been waiting to speak to you. I am glad you are enjoying it, and quite willing that you should stretch your wings now and then. But—don't fly too far!"

His voice was quiet and monotonous, almost devoid of expression, but the effect of his words was to send a great flood of colour to the girl's averted face. Her neck too was crimson, and he lay and watched it with eyes as emotionless as his voice had been.

"Don't forget that!" he said, as she did not speak.

She made a jerky movement. "Are you varying things by being jealous?" she said.

"Hardly," said Bevan without altering his position.

"Then don't be absurd, please!" said Cynthia in a voice that shook a little.

"I am never absurd," said Bevan in a tone of quiet conviction. "And that is why I have no intention of being made an object of ridicule by anyone. What have you been doing all the evening?"

"Doing? Motoring," said Cynthia.

She snapped the words with a certain vehemence. He received them in silence.

Someone was playing a giddy jazz tune on a piano in the room below them and its jay jangling had a derisive sound, as though the spirit of the place, that *insouciant* French spirit, were mocking at something. Cynthia, catching at the refrain and lightly humming it, produced the same effect.

The man stretched on the couch behind her did not seem aware of either circumstance. His eyes were fixed upon a point at the other end of the room. They had an abstracted look, as though he debated some problem in his mind.

When he spoke again it was with decision. “I presume you are going to dance to-night.”

She had just slipped her feet into a pair of sparkling silvery slippers. She threw him a sudden smile over her bare shoulder.

“What a clever conclusion!”

She was standing before the dressing-table, half-clad, exquisite of outline. He moved abruptly, reached out an arm and caught the filmy garment that covered her.

“Come here!” he said.

She made a quick movement of resistance. “Bevan! What do you want? Bevan, don’t! You’ll tear it to rags!”

He paid no attention to her protest, merely continued to pull her till she yielded. Then he drew her down on to the sofa by his side.

“How rough you are!” she said.

“How pretty you are!” he returned, but not in a tone of great enthusiasm. “Sit still and let me look at you!”

She wriggled like an impatient child. “Bevan! It’s so late. Do let me go!”

“Time was made for slaves,” said Bevan. “What does it matter if you are late?”

He shifted his hold to her arm which he held with one hand and deliberately stroked with the other.

“Don’t!” said Cynthia.

He looked at her with raised brows. “I was merely admiring you. I thought you liked admiration.”

She fidgeted again uneasily. “What’s the matter? What do you want?”

“I want you,” he said.

She looked back at him with a touch of apprehension. “Well, you’ve got me. You’ve always got me. What more do you want? Surely you don’t mind me having a little fun sometimes?”

“Have I said I minded that?” said Bevan.

“Well, what’s all the fuss about?” said Cynthia.

He lay silent for a space, still looking at her with a baffling intentness, still firmly holding her.

At length: “Cynthia,” he said quietly, “you may dance with as many as you like to-night, but I forbid you to dance more than three times with the same man.”

She started in his hold. The warm colour rushed again over her cameo-like face. “Bevan!” she exclaimed. “How ridiculous!”

“No,” he said. “I am not ridiculous. And I mean what I say.”

Her blue eyes suddenly deepened and grew dark. “I don’t understand you,” she said. “Husbands don’t ‘forbid’ their wives to do things nowadays. It’s absurd, antediluvian, outrageous. Whatever I do or do not do to-night I shall please myself.”

“No,” he said. “You will please me—for once.”

She stiffened at his tone, and straightening her slender neck she looked down upon him with disdain. “We have gone our separate ways too long for that sort of nonsense,” she said. “You know that I am quite incapable of pleasing you.”

“I know that you have never tried,” he said, unmoved.

She made an airy gesture with her finger and thumb in the air. “I have never sat at home and darned stockings, if that is what you mean.”

A smile crossed his face, but it was a very grim one. “I have never seen you do anything at home yet,” he said. “It is always dances and parties and tennis with you.”

“And why shouldn’t it be?” she demanded, turning upon him suddenly. “Is there any earthly reason why I shouldn’t dance and play tennis and enjoy myself? I don’t grudge you any amusement or ask you to give up any of your time for my pleasure.”

“For whose pleasure did we come here?” said Bevan.

She bit her lip. “That is unfair. You are enjoying the bathing just as much as I am enjoying all the rest. You could dance if you wanted to. And you get bridge every night.”

“Our honeymoon over again!” remarked Bevan cynically.

She shrank unexpectedly. “Oh, don’t talk of that horrible time! We have left that behind us anyway.”

“I don’t see a very vast difference,” said Bevan. “I often wonder why you married me.”

She dropped her eyes from his and was silent.

“Don’t know?” he suggested.

She answered with hesitation, as though compelled, not looking at him. “Yes, I do know. I thought you were—different.”

“Well, what did you think I was?” said Bevan, the faint, bitter smile reappearing. “You knew I had money—and no brains worth mentioning. What more did you expect?”

She winced again. Her face was burning. “That’s just it. I thought you had—brains.”

“What on earth led you to think that?” he said.

She threw him a swift glance from under quivering lids. “I really don’t know. Just because you were quiet, I suppose, and never bucked like the rest.”

“Realizing—perhaps—that I had nothing to buck about,” he suggested dryly. “So you labelled me strong and silent, did you? And now you are disappointed.”

“I haven’t complained,” she said quickly.

“No, I’m doing the complaining this passage.” He spoke deliberately, almost lazily. “I’m getting tired of my pigeonhole. It’s no use pushing me in again with all the other rubbish, for I’m coming out. I am going to be as absurd and antediluvian and outrageous as I like. I am even going to keep

my wife in order if I feel so inclined. As for my wife's many admirers, they will have to come into line."

"I think you've gone mad," said Cynthia, beginning to pant a little. "I haven't got any—admirers. We don't talk like that nowadays. I've got pals, and I'm not going to give them up."

"You've also got a husband," remarked Bevan, "though one might not think it. And you had better keep your pals in order, or it will be the worse for them."

She looked at him again with a flash of fire in her blue eyes. "You actually are—jealous," she said with scorn.

He looked straight back at her. "No. Just asserting my rights, that's all."

"Your—rights!" Her voice vibrated; she was really angry for once.

"Exactly!" He sat up abruptly, and his arm went around her as he did so. He held her compellingly. "I've had the worst of it so far, and I've had enough of it. I shall make you call quits before I've done."

He pressed her suddenly to him with the words and before she could prevent him his lips were on her own, and forcing her head back upon his arm he kept them there until her instinctive resistance had become submission. Then he released her. "Now you can go," he said.

She sprang up and turned from him, her face scarlet.

"So you think you will—bully me!" she said in a choked voice.

He also rose, but with a more leisurely movement.

"No," he said. "I just think I will get even with you, that's all—in spite of my lack of brain."

• • • • • • •

Mrs. Marlow noticed that husband and wife did not enter the dining-room together that night. Cynthia came first with a lovely flush on her face and her eyes shining like stars. She was beautifully dressed in palest green, and she flitted through the throng to their own table with a butterfly grace of movement that caused more than one head to turn and watch her. She smiled and nodded to two or three as she passed, but when she sat down she seemed to dismiss the whole gathering from her mind and sat with a somewhat pensive air, toying with the various dishes placed before her.

“What mischief is the little monkey contemplating now, I wonder?” murmured Mrs. Deane with her indulgent smile.

“I can’t say, I’m sure,” returned Mrs. Marlow rather tartly. “All I know is that I am very glad that I am not responsible for her.”

Cynthia had reached the sweet course before her husband appeared. He sauntered in with his usual deliberation, looking neither to right nor left, and seated himself opposite to the loveliest girl in the room without greeting of any sort. Save for a slight flickering of her gold-tipped lashes she also made no sign.

“They don’t waste many amenities upon each other,” observed Mrs. Marlow.

“And yet how happy the child looked on her wedding-day!” whispered Mrs. Deane with another shake of the head.

From a table near them came a shout of laughter led by Guy Cockran in response to some murmured jest. He was one of the party which formed the noisiest set in the hotel. His handsome face and flashing eyes were always full of merriment—a merriment not unmixed with wickedness in the opinion of some. There was about him a boldness that set all convention at nought. He was by no means averse to securing his own enjoyment at the expense of others. Mrs. Deane with astuteness had designated him “the buccaneer”. He was certainty in the forefront of every daring escapade, if not the prime mover thereof, though nothing in the form of retribution ever seemed to descend upon him. He was considered a shocking flirt by all the elderly ladies, but then, as Mrs. Deane enquired in her quizzical way, what man could help being a flirt with eyes like that?

But her attention that evening was more occupied with the exquisite vision at the further end of the *salle-à-manger*, eating a peach no lovelier than herself, than with the bold bad man nearer at hand. Somehow she did not feel quite easy about Cynthia. To her kindly perception the child did not look happy. “I wonder if he understands her,” was her anxious thought.

Dinner was nearly over and people were beginning to drift out when Cynthia rose, refusing coffee and cigarettes, and flitted away, leaving Bevan still steadily eating.

A dozen young people seemed to be lying in wait for her in the lounge and would have surrounded her but she lightly evaded them all. Oh yes, she was coming back later to dance, but she could not wait for the moment. There was something she had promised to see to, and she was gone.

Guy Cockran, the centre of a noisy knot of men, glanced up as she ran by. “Hullo, moonbeam!” he said.

She threw him an airy kiss which he made a gesture of catching as she fled away. The atmosphere was one of laughter and trifling, and there was nothing in either action that was not completely tuned to it. Probably they both forgot that it took place in full view of the *salle-à-manger* now rapidly emptying, but had they remembered, it would equally probably have made no difference. Everyone behaved in that absurd way nowadays, and where was the harm?

People were fast congregating in the lounge in preparation for the coming dance, and half a dozen or more French officers had drifted in from the Military School near by. Bevan Storr, eventually emerging with a cigarette in his mouth, joined one of these and stood talking with him in a corner. He and Captain Vernier were old friends and had been billeted together during the War. The Frenchman was an instructor at the School and older than the rest. He welcomed Storr with obvious pleasure. They had met by accident several days before, and Storr had been given the freedom of the School. He spoke French very passably well, and since Captain Vernier’s stock of English was extremely limited it was not surprising that he was inclined to keep close to one he knew in that English atmosphere. Storr, moreover, displayed no inclination to talk to anyone else. He was always a man of few words in society. And on that particular evening he showed himself less inclined than usual for social amenities, refusing old Colonel Rover’s invitation to play bridge without excuse and with a firmness that resisted all persuasion.

“I’m sorry, sir. I can’t to-night,” was his uncompromising reply, and he maintained it without variation until the old man lost his temper and went away.

The crowd in the lounge was a noisy one, and it became more so as time went on. The bridge-players waited in impatient knots for the dancing to begin and so clear the ground for the card-tables. More and more visitors came in from outside. The hotel was a popular one, and it boasted also a spacious roof-garden for the use of the dancers during the intervals. Orange and lemon trees and palms in enormous pots flourished here, and at one end an immense blood-red bougainvillea climbed over a stone balustrade. Quite a romantic spot indeed when lighted by coloured paper lanterns bobbing to and fro in the light breeze that came up from the softly murmuring sea! The dancing-room was an *annexe* to the hotel and immediately beneath. It was said to have the best dancing-floor in that part of the Riviera.

The orchestra struck up at last, and the bridge-players breathed sighs of relief as a general move was made by the thronging merrymakers. It was to be a gala night, and coloured balls, feathers, and paper streamers, with masses of *confetti*, were to be features of the entertainment.

"These modern girls and boys are more irresponsible than we were as babes in the nursery," was Mrs. Marlow's sweeping verdict.

She was feeling a little sour, as her sister had been chosen by Colonel Rover to fill the place of the obstinate Bevan Storr. She would not have minded in the least, for she was not a keen bridge-player, had she not strongly suspected that Mrs. Deane had been selected because she was considered the better player of the two. Also it left her without anyone to listen to her criticisms of the younger generation, and as she always had a good deal to say upon the subject, this was a real deprivation.

She had no excuse for following them to the ballroom to watch their undignified antics there, so established herself rather discontentedly in the corridor that led thither from the lounge where she could at least find food for future dissertions in making mental notes of all who passed to and fro.

She was already occupied thus in the intervals of her knitting, which was obviously for charitable purposes, when Cynthia, light as a scrap of thistledown, came tripping through.

She was alone, and seeing Mrs. Marlow she paused a moment as in duty bound.

"Not playing bridge to-night?" she said.

It was an unfortunate remark. Mrs. Marlow drew down the corners of her lips. "Not to-night, my dear," she said.

Her tone was not a friendly one, and Cynthia passed lightly on to the region of music and laughter. Had it been Mrs. Deane she might have stayed longer, but, in the language of modernity, she had no use for mouldy old frumps like Mrs. Marlow. Like a butterfly entering a *parterre* of flowers, she was instantly absorbed in the gay crowd of dancers, and made no attempt to disentangle herself therefrom until she came forth half an hour later with Guy Cockran in search of refreshment.

It was their first appearance together that night. Mrs. Marlow made a note of it.

They passed back again a few minutes later, actually brushing her where she sat, too preoccupied with each other to notice her presence. A sort of

snatching game was going on between them. Guy had stolen a scrap of a flower from the rosette on her shoulder, and she was trying to recover it. It ended in a somewhat boisterous struggle a yard or two from her, and Mrs. Marlow, covertly watching, was genuinely shocked at the sudden fire that leapt in the young man's eyes as the girl threw herself against him in her laughing zeal. Then Cynthia fell back triumphant, the coloured trifle in her hand.

There followed more laughter, a low coaxing whisper from Guy, and the flower changed hands again, the girl bestowing it with a careless graciousness which even Mrs. Marlow had to admit was not unbecoming. They disappeared into the ballroom, and she resumed her knitting.

It was some time later that a sauntering footstep drew near and she looked up to see Bevan Storr coming in his leisurely fashion in her direction. He did not see her at first. In fact, it seemed to her that he looked oblivious of everything around him, but then he always looked like that, was her reflection.

He would probably have passed her by without perceiving her if something had not prompted him to pause close to her retreat to light a cigarette. Then, glancing downwards, he saw her.

He smiled formally and would have passed on, but Mrs. Marlow, who was becoming frankly bored with her own society, accosted him.

"Are you looking for someone, Major Storr?"

He stopped conventionally. "I am looking for my wife," he said. "I believe she is dancing."

"I saw her about half an hour ago," Mrs. Marlow informed him with some severity, "with Mr. Cockran."

"In the *salon*?" he questioned.

"They were going that way," said Mrs. Marlow, and added with a hint of malice: "They seemed to be having a very good time together."

He received the information without the faintest change of countenance —just as she had known he would receive it. He had not the brains to do otherwise.

The little devil of boredom that had been irking her ever since Colonel Rover's most unfair selection of Mrs. Deane had left her solitary, jogged her elbow. The man had no brains. To mix him a small brew of mischief could do no earthly harm in such a case as this. She took up her tale again.

"Mr. Cockran is such an amusing young fellow. I really don't wonder that he turns all the girls' heads. Of course I am very old-fashioned, but I personally should not care for any girl in my charge to have much to do with him."

"No?" said Storr idly. He leaned up against a pillar beside her, obviously in no hurry to continue his quest.

Mrs. Marlow began to season her mixture to taste. "No, indeed I should not! I think he is a dangerously attractive man. I have not yet seen the girl who could resist him. No fruit seems to grow too high for him."

"No?" said Storr again.

She looked up at him. Was he really as cold-blooded as he sounded?

No; it was just stolidity, nothing else. If she could once get past that ——! A thrill of eagerness went through her. She began to feel that she was doing something worth while. She took a larger pinch of seasoning.

"Of course, Cynthia has always been accustomed to admiration, but even she is not impervious to the wiles of such a man, and he is very obviously doing his utmost to attract her. Major Storr, do you consider it altogether advisable to permit so much freedom between them?"

She saw him stiffen, and realized that he no longer depended upon the pillar for support. His eyes came down to hers with something of the inevitability of a stone dropped into a well. She did not quite like the feeling and lowered her own discreetly, making a show of counting her stitches.

After a distinct pause he spoke. "It is very kind of you to take so much interest in Cynthia, and I fully appreciate the motive that prompts it."

"It is shared by a good many," murmured Mrs. Marlow, trying to calm her fluttering heart with the repeated mental assurance that the man had not the brains to be indignant.

"That also I appreciate," he said, and she wondered how his calm, rather slow utterance could make her think of a sword unsheathed. "I can only assure you that I shall do my utmost to protect my wife from the unpleasant circumstance to which you have drawn my attention. Perhaps you will be kind enough to mention this to your friends. It may help them to bestow their interest elsewhere."

It was bared steel with a vengeance. Mrs. Marlow shrivelled before it. So he was not quite, quite so brainless after all! The horrid discovery held her spellbound. And in the silence which she dared not break he turned with

unchanged deliberation and left her, walking back by the way he had come, leaving the gay hubbub of the ballroom behind him. To Mrs. Marlow's newly-awakened susceptibilities it was as though a sword clanged at his heels as he went.

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It was past the hour of midnight when two people up in the roof-garden came to the high stone balustrade where twined the bougainvillea and stood in the white glare of an incredibly immense full moon.

"It's just a world of make-believe. I'm sure it isn't real," said Cynthia.

"Are you real?" said the man beside her. "Am I real?"

She uttered a silvery, inconsequent laugh and touched one of the deep red blossoms that drooped towards her. "I don't feel qualified to say. There are going to be some fireworks presently. I think it is just a world of fireworks, don't you? Everything ends in smoke."

"I don't feel like ending in smoke," maintained Guy Cockran, with a flash of his deep-set eyes. "While as for you, you are not fire at all, but just a pale cold moonbeam."

She laughed again. "Perhaps it's safer to be that. I think I would rather be a moonbeam than a firework. I don't like explosive things."

"You don't like anything real," he retorted half-resentfully.

"How do you know?" she said, and there was provocation not untinged with sadness in her voice.

He leaned towards her. "Cynthia, would you like to come to life—just for one night?"

She looked at him, as one who looks across a swift-flowing river to one on the other side. "What's the use?" she said.

His dark face was full of ardour; it seemed to beckon her. "Cynthia, why not?" he said. "Surely you are not afraid?"

She shook her head. "What of? But it's got to be worth while. Everything has got to be that."

"And isn't it?" he said.

She toyed with the flower, her eyes remote. "I suppose it's being married," she said. "I used to think it would be such an exciting thing—the acme of everything. But it isn't. It has just turned everything dull, that's all."

“Rot!” said Guy vigorously. “You mustn’t let it. You’re too lovely to be bored. Look here, Cynthia! Let’s be young for to-night! Let’s enjoy life while we can! You threw me a kiss a little while ago, but you haven’t done anything since to show me you meant it.”

“Perhaps I didn’t!” said Cynthia, but she laughed with the words, her light, girlish laugh.

He leaned nearer. “Are you sure you didn’t?” he said.

“Oh, I’m never sure of anything,” said Cynthia. “And I don’t like being taken to task for any action, however trifling.”

“I wasn’t taking you to task,” said Guy. “I was only wondering—just wondering——”

It was impossible to withdraw herself from him, for the corner of the balustrade hemmed her in. Perhaps she would not have done so in any case, for, as Mrs. Marlow had remarked, he was practically irresistible. She uttered a faint gasp as his arms enclosed her, that was all. And then his lips were on her own; not as those other lips that had compelled hers by cold force, only releasing them when she had nothing left to withhold, but winning her by sheer ardour until, almost in spite of her, she responded to their fiery demand and gave herself with a throbbing reluctance to his embrace.

For a brief space of madness she was actually almost content, and then, feeling the fire leap higher, a reaction she could scarcely explain came upon her.

“Let me go now!” she whispered. “Let me go now!”

He pressed her closer. “Why should I let you go? You little cold moonbeam, this is only the beginning. I am going to show you something you have never even dreamt of. I am going to bring you to life.”

She quivered in his hold. She tried to turn her face away. “Guy,—don’t —don’t! It isn’t safe.”

He laughed softly, defeating her efforts. “Not safe! What are you afraid of, flower of the moon? Why, if I were to run away with you across the sea into the African desert no one would follow.”

She still sought to hold him from her. “Yes—yes,” she whispered rather painfully. “You don’t understand. Someone—would follow.”

His arms enclosed her more surely. “Who has been frightening you, little girl? Not that brainless ass who calls himself your husband! You can have your fling so far as he is concerned. He would never trouble himself to raise a finger.”

A sharp shudder went through Cynthia. “You don’t know,” she said.

He kissed her again with fiery intensity. “Don’t know and don’t care!” he declared. “I’ve got you—and I mean to keep you,—sweetheart—Cynthia!”

“For how long?” said a voice.

They started apart as though a thunderbolt had fallen between them. A tall, loosely-knit figure had detached itself from the dense shadow of one of the palms, and stood not five yards from them in the full moonlight. There was a faint smile on his square face, albeit the brows were drawn. Calm as was his demeanour, there was something that gave him the aspect of a knight with his hand upon his sword.

“I’m afraid I am interrupting,” he remarked into the hard-breathing silence that followed his appearance. “But it occurred to me that if I didn’t, I might be found guilty of unjustifiable eavesdropping.”

Guy spoke with the sound of a snarl. “You damn’ cad!” he said.

Cynthia said nothing. She stood with her hands tightly clasped upon her heaving breast, her eyes widely fixed upon her husband’s face.

Bevan’s voice resumed, stone-cold as his expression. “Your opinion does not hold the faintest interest for me. I did not take the trouble to come up here to hear it, but for quite another reason. I may mention that I have taken the precaution to see that we shall not be interrupted for the next ten minutes, which will be more than enough for my purpose.”

“And what is—your purpose?” said Guy. “What do you want?”

He was breathing heavily, and his hands were clenched. Considering the humiliating disadvantage under which he laboured, he did not bear himself amiss; but the difference of physique between himself and the man who stood so calmly demanding a reckoning was poignantly obvious to the white-faced girl who watched the scene. All her life she was to remember it. And all her life the sound of jazz music with its laughing defiance of all set rules was to bring back to her mind the speechless horror of that hour.

Bevan’s reply came slowly, with a certain grim relish. “I want—and I intend—to teach you a lesson. And that is that there is nothing to be had in

this world without paying for it. You thought you could take what you liked without paying, didn't you? You were wrong. And I am going to make you pay."

A slight change passed over Guy's face. He gave no sign of flinching, but the ice-bound intention of the other man's speech and bearing had its effect. The disadvantage of his position pressed upon him. He knew he was no match for his opponent.

"What do you want?" he said again, with lips drawn back. "If it's a fight ____"

"It is!" said Bevan briefly and sternly. "But not a fisticuff. I could thrash you with one hand, as you probably realize. But I have no intention of doing so. What I do intend to do——" He turned suddenly to the palm that had hidden him from them and pulled forward a light table that stood beneath it. Two objects that lay upon it glinted in the moonlight, and Cynthia uttered an agonized cry. Bevan turned back to Guy with an absolutely immovable countenance. "What I do intend to do," he repeated with the same curt determination, "is to exact satisfaction from you after the French method. Those revolvers are not both loaded. You can choose your weapon. If you manage to kill me, you will have cleared the field of all obstacles and be in a position to keep—what you have snatched. If, on the other hand, by some mischance, I should kill you, I then retain—what is my own. Whichever of us is the survivor will be in a position to plead justifiable homicide as his excuse, and I believe the laws of this country are fairly elastic in such cases. Now then—will you choose?"

"You are mad," said Guy Cockran hoarsely.

He stepped back from the table as though a writhing snake had lain upon it. His eyes were glassy, desperate. Cynthia had covered her face with her hands and was sunk trembling against the trellis that carried the bougainvillea. The red blossoms drooped against her gleaming hair. She looked like a white flower shrinking amongst them.

Bevan stood beside the table, absolutely inflexible, grim as death. "There is not much time," he remarked, after a moment, "and I don't want to fire them both."

A low moan from the girl brought his eyes sharply to her. He turned suddenly.

"Cynthia! Come here!"

She looked up at him, terror-stricken, with gasping breath.

“Come here!” he repeated. “You needn’t be afraid. You shall do the choosing, that’s all. You hear me, Cynthia? Come here!”

“You devil!” said Guy in a voice that was choked with anger; but he made no movement to intervene. In spite of himself he seemed to recognize the other man’s right to command.

Cynthia came with hesitating steps, as one compelled. She reached her husband and stood before him, white and shaking.

He stretched out a hand to her, took her by the shoulder without violence and turned her to the table.

“Choose one of those revolvers,” he ordered in a voice of the most deadly, the most unswerving, insistence, “and give it to—your friend!”

She shrank and quivered. “Bevan—Bevan!” Her white lips would hardly utter the name; she looked up at him imploringly. “Bevan, you’re mad—you’re mad—to think——”

“I think nothing,” he interrupted, “and I know only what I have seen and heard. You will either do as I say, or I shall use them both.”

“You wouldn’t—wouldn’t—murder him!” she gasped.

“It isn’t murder if a man refuses to defend himself,” sternly rejoined Bevan. “I suppose you are not fool enough for that!”

He flung the words contemptuously in Guy’s direction, not looking at him.

Guy spoke with sudden resolution, as though goaded thereto. “Give him his way, Cynthia! I’ve got some faith in my own luck. If he wants to die, let him! It’s his own doing. Give me one of those!”

But still she shrank with convulsive sobbing beneath her husband’s compelling hand.

“Cynthia!” It was Bevan’s voice, and he spoke with a deep command. “If you want fair play, do as I say—now!”

Something in his tone dominated her. She stiffened and made a blind movement towards the table.

Bevan spoke to Guy. “Take it from her!”

Somehow one of those shining weapons found its way into Guy’s hand, and Bevan picked up the other.

“You can choose your position,” he said curtly. “Cynthia, go back to that corner over there!”

In some fashion he had obtained complete control of her. She stumbled from him, groping her way, still sobbing with anguished violence, but submissive.

“Are you ready?” said Bevan, and raised his revolver, standing as he was in the full moonlight.

There followed an agonizing pause, then Guy lifted his with a fierce movement and pointed it full at him. “Ready!” he said.

There was a click—and silence.

Guy’s hand dropped. “Your turn!” he said with an ashen face.

Bevan had not fired. He stood with the revolver pointing at Guy, and at his lips the faint smile with which he had first declared himself.

“My turn—yes,” he said. “I thought it would be, sooner or later. Your luck is not infallible, it seems.”

Guy’s forehead was wet. He stood as a condemned man might stand, desperately still, holding back the wild jerking of his heart.

“Damn you, can’t you fire—and have done with it?” he burst out.

It was then that the power of independent action seemed to return to Cynthia. With a choking cry she sprang forward and flung herself upon Bevan.

“Ah, don’t—don’t—don’t!” she implored him. “Be merciful—just this once! You’ll never be sorry. Bevan—Bevan, I’ve never loved anyone but you. It was only play—because I was bored—and you never seemed to care. Bevan, listen to me! I’m telling you the truth. I’m not in love with Guy. It was only make-believe—only play.”

“Only—play!” said Bevan. He held her back from his right arm, still keeping the other man covered. “How am I to know that?”

“Oh, you must know it—you must know it!” she answered wildly. “If I loved him—I should want to die with him.”

“You didn’t propose to die with me,” pointed out Bevan.

“Ah, that was different!” she sobbed. “You were so angry, and you were making me do things. Besides, I never thought it could be you. But now—

now—oh, Bevan, don't kill him! It was all a mistake. And we shall never, never be happy together if you do."

"He deserves to be shot," said Bevan.

"Oh, what does that matter?" she cried frantically. "It was all my fault, I tell you. But it wasn't because I cared. Oh, can't you understand? What shall I do to make you understand?"

Her agony was terrible to witness, impossible to ignore. Something of his rigidity began to desert Bevan. The arm that surrounded her became her support. He stood in silence, and through her strangled sobbing and barely audible prayers there rose again that maddening jazz music—as though an invisible spirit mocked and capered in the fantastic moonlight.

He had not looked at Cynthia. His eyes had never left Guy's face. Nor did they leave it as at last he lowered the revolver.

"Yes," he said. "I think you have had your lesson. And I have no more use for your dead carcass than for your living one. You can go."

Guy moved. It was like the releasing of a spring. He took a furious step forward.

"Damn you!" he said again. "Do you think I'll take that from any man? Damn you! Shoot—if you're not afraid!"

Bevan's face changed. A momentary surprise gleamed in his eyes, banishing the contempt. He stood for a second as if at a loss, still with his wife clinging to his breast.

Then he lifted his hand again. "All right," he curtly said. "Perhaps you deserve it after all. Then—take it!"

There followed a click—and silence.

And with that silence Cynthia's agonized sobbing suddenly ceased. Her hold relaxed; she went downwards. Bevan flung his revolver down upon the table and gathered her up into his arms.

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Mrs. Marlow, still engaged upon her charitable knitting in her sheltered corner, wondered a little to see young Guy Cockran racing past her to the ballroom as though speed were all that mattered. She had been on the verge of packing up her work and going to bed, for good Mrs. Deane had gone

long since. But this spectacle decided her to remain a few minutes longer. She began another row.

In a very short space of time she was amply rewarded. Guy Cockran came back with another man whom she knew by sight—a Dr. Burnet who was staying in the hotel. They passed her quickly, without seeing her, and she caught a low-toned sentence from Guy.

"I've never seen such a faint as that before; it looks like——"

She did not catch what it looked like, but the few words were more than enough to arouse her keenest curiosity. Someone had fainted then, and Guy had come racing through the corridor to fetch the doctor. It was Cynthia, of course; it must be Cynthia. But she could not imagine that lively young person doing anything so old-fashioned as to faint. Girls never fainted nowadays. It simply wasn't done. Yet Guy's face of concern was a revelation not to be ignored, and she had his own word for it that someone had fainted. Then it must be Cynthia.

She had ceased to ply her knitting-needles. It spoke eloquently of the agitation of her mind that she did not stop to finish her row, but bundled everything promiscuously into her bag without so much as glancing at her stitches first. Cynthia had fainted—Cynthia of all people! Then something unforeseen had happened, and the matter must be looked into. She left her secluded corner and went into the lounge.

The bridge-players had dispersed, and the place was deserted except for Captain Vernier who was standing near a door that led into the garden as though waiting for someone. It seemed to Mrs. Marlow that he had a somewhat furtive air. She stopped by a table and picked up a paper. There was a pause in the dancing, and the sound of clapping hands came to her while she waited, and then the music started again and she thought Captain Vernier looked relieved.

It was some three minutes later and she was beginning to feel that the pretext of scanning the pages of a very crumpled newspaper would not serve her much longer when the French officer made a sudden move forward and opened the door by which he had been waiting. He spoke rapidly to someone outside, and then stood back, holding the door.

Bevan Storr entered, bearing his wife in his arms. She was unconscious; her exquisite face was white as the petal of a flower. Behind him came the English doctor and Guy Cockran.

Mrs. Marlow dropped her paper and pressed forward, feeling that her moment had arrived at last. “Poor child! What has happened to her?” she said. “Can I be of any assistance?”

Bevan’s eyes swept her and looked beyond. “I want no one but you, Dr. Burnet,” he said, and passed on to the stairs, carrying his limp, pathetic burden.

Guy and Captain Vernier remained, but Mrs. Marlow lacked the spirit to question them. She could only beat a speedy and unobtrusive retreat to her room.

“But I will find out in the morning,” she vowed vindictively. “Something must have happened up in the roof-garden and they brought her in that way to avoid carrying her through the *salon*. No doubt he caught them up there.”

A perfectly correct assumption which tantalized more than it satisfied! She would have given much to have known what had happened in the roof-garden.

Still more would she have given to have been a witness of what at that moment was taking place behind the closed door of the Storrs’ bedroom, for no surmise could tell her that.

There was only one witness of Bevan Storr’s anguish of soul as he knelt beside his young wife, holding her nerveless hand against his face, and dumbly watched the doctor’s efforts to bring her back.

It was a long struggle and a difficult, for life itself seemed to be suspended, and no hint of colour remained in the lips which usually laughed so gaily. Save for the doctor’s assurance, he would have believed her dead, and there were moments during that terrible interval of waiting when he could scarcely bring himself to credit that assurance.

“It’s my own doing,” he said hoarsely to Burnet at last. “If she dies, it’s by my hand. I terrified her.”

“She isn’t going to die,” said Burnet. “Look!”

A faint, faint tinge had begun to spread almost imperceptibly over the marble features, and as he gazed with passionate intensity he saw a slight quiver pass over them.

“Be very careful!” warned Burnet. “Don’t frighten her now!”

Bevan made a movement to withdraw himself, but even as he did so the gold-tipped lashes stirred, and the doctor swiftly signed to him to remain.

The deep blue eyes opened slowly and rested upon him.

There was an odd little sound as though the locked breath were suddenly released, and in a feeble whisper she spoke.

"Bevan—Bevan! I've had—such a dreadful dream!"

He could not speak in answer. He could only press her hand—that precious little white hand—more closely to his face.

She regarded him with a growing wonder. "Bevan, what is it? Why—are you kneeling there? I thought you were angry——"—a faint sob rose in her throat—"so angry."

He struggled for speech and produced a half-strangled murmur.

Her eyes opened wider. "Bevan, what is it? You're not angry, are you? Why,—you—you're crying!"

He kissed the little hand he held passionately, almost fiercely, saying no word. The doctor had withdrawn into the background.

"Why do you do that?" whispered Cynthia. "Bevan, is it still—a dream?"

Words came to him at last. "No, darling, no!" he said. "I've had a bad fright, that's all."

She drew her delicate brows together. "I've been frightened too," she said; and on the next breath: "How nice to hear you call me 'darling' again!"

He said it again, repeating it with a sort of defiance. "Darling! My own darling!"

"Then you're not angry!" said Cynthia, with a sigh of relief. "It was just a bad dream!" And then, a moment later, uneasily: "But it wasn't really a dream, was it? Guy was there, wasn't he? Where is Guy?"

"Do you want him?" said Bevan.

Her hand stirred in his, stirred and stroked his cheek. "No, I don't want him," she said. "Why should I? I just wondered—just wondered——" Her eyes grew wider still; she was beginning to remember. "Bevan!" she cried out suddenly. "Bevan! You didn't—didn't—oh, Bevan!"

He was on his feet, bending over her. He gathered her shuddering body to his heart. "I didn't, darling. I didn't. He's safe and sound. I'll fetch him if you like. Shall I fetch him?"

She turned her face into his breast, sobbing a little, laughing a little. “No —no! I don’t want him—if he’s safe and sound. I don’t think I like him very much. He doesn’t play the game. But I don’t want you to shoot him. You didn’t, did you, Bevan? You’re sure you didn’t?”

“I did not,” declared Bevan with emphasis.

She shuddered again. “I thought you meant to. What happened? Did you miss? Or did he run away?”

“Neither,” said Bevan. “The damn’ thing wasn’t loaded.”

“Not loaded!” She tried to look into his face, but he would not suffer it. “Not loaded, Bevan! But—but—his wasn’t loaded either!”

“I know.” His voice came sullen and ashamed. “They were both empty. I was an infernal scoundrel. I did it to frighten you.”

“Oh, Bevan!” she said. “And I thought—I thought you were a murderer!” Her hand crept up, shyly clasping him. “You did frighten me too!”

“Not more than you frightened me,” he whispered back. “Cynthia—my darling—I thought I’d killed you!”

She uttered that faint, sobbing laugh again. “I do believe I nearly died,” she said. “Would you have minded—very badly?”

“Don’t!” he said huskily.

She clasped him closer. “I won’t—I won’t. Bevan,—I’m sorry I frightened you.”

“I deserved it all,” he said, “for frightening you.”

“Oh!” murmured Cynthia. “Then perhaps—I deserved it too.” The door closed softly at this juncture, and she started a little. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” said Bevan.

“There’s no one here?”

“No one,” said Bevan.

“Then—come and lie by my side, darling,” she whispered into his ear, “—and hold me tight in your arms—while I tell you something!”

“Are you sure you want me?” he said.

She drew him down to her. “Of course I want you—much more than I ever did before. There, like that! Bevan darling—Bevan—why were you so

cross to me this afternoon?"

"Because I'm a bad-tempered brute," he muttered, his lips against her hair.

"No," she said. "No. It wasn't that. You thought I didn't love you. And I —I thought you didn't love me. You were quite wrong. I did love you all the time."

"You were quite wrong too," he said.

She clung to him. "I know. That's the delicious part of it. I was—quite wrong. But I only realized it just now—when I opened my eyes and saw your face—saw how you'd be looking if I were dead. Oh, Bevan darling, I wish I'd known before."

There was a sound of tears in her voice. He crushed her to him.

"You know now," he said.

"Yes, I know now. And so do you. Oh, say you do!"

He felt for her face to turn it upwards, but she resisted him, keeping it hidden.

"No, not yet! I've got to tell you something first. Bevan, I'm a little beast. I flirted with Guy, and I let him kiss me, and—I kissed him back. I thought it was fun at first, but afterwards—I hated it. And I'd never have done it—never—never—if only—you—had kissed me a little oftener!"

The pathetic little confession ended in tears. She still sought to hide her face from him, but he would not be resisted longer. He turned it up to his own and kissed and kissed it till the tears were gone.

"You're not to cry—not to cry!" he told her. "It's been all my damn' fault."

"No, mine!" she said. "All mine! And you're crying too! I can see it. Darling, what shall we do?"

He laid his head down on the pillow beside hers, pressing her to him and smiling with a certain amount of resolution.

"I think we shall have to call quits," he said, "and begin again."

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"AND would you believe it?" said Mrs. Marlow, plying her needles with furious zeal. "I saw them go out together this morning, and the young

monkey was ogling him—actually ogling her own husband, my dear—as if he had been one of her admirers! Such bare-faced deceit!"

Mrs. Deane spoke deliberately with her kindly eyes upon the paper: "I saw them too, Harriet, and I was very glad to see them. I think the game is over and they will settle down now and be happy."

"In my opinion that is rather too much to expect," said Mrs. Marlow. "I am convinced something very serious happened last night—something that that disreputable young Cockran brought about. Let us hope that he and Cynthia also have had their lesson!"

Mrs. Deane looked up, her eyes still kindly with a farseeing charity. "It may be, my dear," she said, "it may be that Bevan Storr also has found that he had a lesson to learn. If that is so, I think he has learnt it, for I saw them too as they went out. She was looking rather pale, but happy, and as they passed me they were having a little joke together. 'Will you give me doubles or quits?' she said. And he answered: 'It's all right, dear. We are quits already.' So I think that all is well."

Mrs. Marlow sniffed a little. She did not approve of what she termed "racy language." She was, moreover, for some reason, slightly aggrieved that morning. She gave her attention somewhat grimly to turning the heel of her stocking.

PAGEANT OF YOUTH

"I can't stand these never-grow-olds!" grumbled Sir Rodney Banister to the man next to him. "Look at that woman over there! Did you ever see such spindle-shanks?"

"Not a bad performer though," commented the man addressed, watching the crowd on the rink with a less censorious eye. "Don't see why she shouldn't enjoy herself if she wants to."

"Should have thought a woman of that age could have done that without making a spectacle of herself," rejoined Sir Rodney with irritation. "Must be sixty if she's a day."

"That's nothing!" laughed the man beside him. He was a Harley Street physician and knew a little of human nature. "And in any case it isn't the years that count."

"Don't know what does then," growled Sir Rodney. He was a retired Indian judge nearing seventy, and his years did not sit lightly upon him. The East had left its mark. "D'you mean to tell me that there's no such thing as old age? Because, if so, I'm afraid the next time I need medical advice I shall not apply to Dr. Eric Vaughan."

Eric Vaughan glanced at him with a faint smile. "Of course I daren't tell you that," he said. "Old age is a relative term which it would be difficult to define. But I don't call that woman over there old. I should say she is gloriously young."

"Oh, ye gods!" exclaimed Sir Rodney fretfully. "She's probably as old as I am if the truth were known."

"Well! Are you old?" asked the doctor.

"Should be—if I were a woman," retorted Sir Rodney. "Hullo, scaramouch! What are you up to?"

He addressed a merry, black-haired girl of about seventeen who suddenly detached herself from the skating crowd and shooting up to him

with a velocity there was no evading threw her arms around him with a graceful twirl of the feet that brought her to a standstill.

"Oh, we're having such a time!" she laughed. "What a pity you don't skate, Uncle Roddy! You do miss a lot!"

"I have no doubt," said Sir Rodney with a certain grimness. "You'd better make the most of it. You'll only be young once."

"Oh, I'm going to be young always!" she declared, still lightly hanging to his shoulder. "It's quite easy, you know. You've only got to keep on enjoying things—like dear Madame de Beauville—and I shall always do that. Not that I shall ever be like her though," she added regretfully, turning to watch the object of her admiration who was the self-same lady upon whom Sir Rodney's disapproval had so witheringly descended. "Isn't she lovely?"

"Lovely!" exploded Sir Rodney. "An old harridan like that! My dear child, talk sense—or not at all!"

His niece laughed at him without resentment. "Aren't you a funny old dear? She's quite the smartest woman on the rink, and I admire her for not trying to conceal her age. She could if she wanted to."

"Ho! Could she?" sniffed Sir Rodney.

The girl laughed again mischievously, squeezing his arm. "All the men are at her feet—except you, dear. But you're so old-fashioned. I believe it's because you've never married. Married men have to go with the times—whether they like it or not."

"Something in that!" said the physician with a smile.

"Miss Isobel, I envy the man whose lot it will one day be to be swept along on the flood-tide of youth by you. He will certainly never have time to grow old."

Isobel turned to him in her eager way. "I'm sure nobody need let themselves get stale," she said with all the sweeping assurance of the very young. "Now do you know what's going to happen? Dick Perry told me. There's going to be a pageant of youth on Saturday night. Such fun! And all the guests—not the men of course—but all the women—are to dress as nearly as possible in their original coming-out costumes. Won't that be fun? We really shall see some oddities."

Sir Rodney broke into a laugh of scepticism. "How many of the women in this place will date back further than five years, I wonder? Not your

exquisite Madame de Beauville with her grey tresses for one!"

"Oh, don't be absurd!" protested Isobel, shaking him. "I know she will play the game anyhow—just because she lets her hair be grey. I believe in fact that it was she who originated the idea. I don't know why you've got your knife into her. She's quite the most charming woman in the hotel. And she does enjoy things so."

"She doesn't enslave me," said Sir Rodney obstinately. "Look at her now!"

The object of his malevolent remarks was swooping like a swift and very graceful bird on the ice but a few yards distant. She was a woman of slight and upright build, beautifully dressed in deep blue with a fair Saxon skin and blue eyes that smiled unwaveringly upon all the world. Her hair was soft and curly and shone like silver where it caught the bright sunshine. Her features were well-moulded and free from lines, but they were not the features of youth. Perhaps they lacked something of its vitality, and the eyes that smiled lacked something also—something of expectancy, something of eagerness, that had once been there. No one could have called her young. She made no pretence of being so, but she had that species of attraction which some women carry all through their lives, the quality which neither youth can enhance nor age mar, called charm.

Possibly it was this very attribute that had awakened old Sir Rodney Banister's animosity. There were some who called him a woman-hater, but perhaps it would have been more accurate to accept his own assertion that there had been no time for women in his life. At least they had never occupied any position of importance in it, and, as his little grand-niece said, he was in consequence old-fashioned in his views regarding them and inclined to regard any athletic pursuits on the part of those who had left their youth behind as grotesque attempts to cling to fascinations long departed. He had certainly never mastered the spirit of the age and, in his opinion, any exhibition of independence was tolerable only in the very young.

Isobel, for instance, was at liberty to cut as many capers and enjoy as many spills as she liked. But in older women he regarded such behaviour with abhorrence. Youth had its privileges upon which age had no right to encroach.

He watched therefore without appreciation as Madame de Beauville executed various intricate figures with an ease and finish which many of the younger generation paused to admire. She was accompanied by a young Swiss who followed her performance with actual reverence, calling for a

repetition of some of her more elaborate movements with all the enthusiasm of an expert.

"She's really wonderful," said Isobel. "I'd give anything to be able to skate like that."

"And then show off!" gibed Sir Rodney.

She shook his arm again with some impatience. "You're very cross to-day, dear. What's the matter? Haven't you got over the crossing? Dr. Vaughan, couldn't you give him something to cheer up his liver? I'm sure he wants it."

With which impudent enquiry she sailed off, laughing, to join the ring that had formed around the best woman-skater on the rink.

Sir Rodney growled inarticulately and turned his back. "They're all alike—these women! What on earth do you look at her for, Vaughan? It's all she wants."

The doctor turned also and walked away beside him. "Do you really think women are all alike?" he said.

Sir Rodney said nothing for several paces, until in fact it would have been reasonable to suppose that he meant to ignore the question altogether. Then abruptly and explosively he replied to it.

"No, I don't. I think some are a great deal worse than others. And this elderly charmer—this Madame de Beauté, or whatever she calls herself—is just about the worst that you'd find anywhere. An adventuress probably—of the lowest type."

"I wonder why you should think so," said Vaughan. "I can't see that she behaves like one—except that she has had the good sense not to let herself grow old."

Sir Rodney brandished his stick with an impotent gesture of protest. "Oh, it isn't just that. I'm getting old myself, I suppose, and—I daresay you're right though you're too polite to say it—prejudiced too. You see, this is my first visit to the European playground. I came to please Isobel there—and to please you too in a way, though why you should recommend it to me Heaven alone knows."

"Perhaps I hoped to see you rejuvenated," said the doctor with his faint kindly smile.

“Oh, fiddles!” said Sir Rodney. “Well, it won’t do that anyway, so think again! I’ve never seen such a collection of people all bent on making fools of themselves in all my life before.”

“We live and learn,” said Vaughan without discouragement.

Sir Rodney quickened his stride. “We do indeed. I suppose you are now hoping within the next week or so to see me turning head over heels down the side of a mountain in company with all the other fools?”

“Oh, not so bad as that!” said the doctor. “But I think the atmosphere will get hold of you sooner or later. You’re not quite so—oxydized shall we say?—as to remain quite impervious.”

“No fool like an old fool, what?” said Sir Rodney. “Well, we shall see—we shall see. Meantime——” He stopped suddenly on the steep track as a great shout of applause came up from the rink below. “D’you hear that?” he said, peering downwards. “That’s that woman again, you may be sure. Wonder what she’s doing now!”

“Shall we go back and see?” suggested Vaughan.

But the man who had let himself grow old turned resolutely and stumped on towards the hotel. “I wouldn’t go one inch out of my way,” he declared, “to watch a woman of my own generation making an exhibition of herself.”

Vaughan accompanied him, but he registered his disagreement. “I’ll watch any woman, whatever her age, who’s worth watching,” he said quietly.

“Well, it’s your job after all,” said Sir Rodney. “It’s your specialty, studying the human species. But I must say they make me tired, most of ’em.”

“Ah!” said Vaughan. “You’re not a family man.”

Sir Rodney made a sharp gesture of repudiation. “No, thank heaven. I’ve been preserved from that—though I was precious near it once.”

“Only once?” said the doctor.

They were nearing the hotel and he slackened his pace, for the gradient was steep, and Sir Rodney was inclined to be asthmatic and short of breath.

Sir Rodney’s answer when it came sounded all the more vehement on account of this circumstance. “Yes,—only once—and that was once too often! Think of it! Me—a married man! She was only three years younger. If she’s alive now—she’s about the age—of that woman down there.” He

paused a moment. “Not altogether unlike her either. Just that fair, fluffy type! Don’t know what I saw in her. What does one see—or think one sees?”

“That depends,” said Vaughan.

“I don’t know,” asserted Sir Rodney with a certain aggressive recklessness of condemnation. “It’s just a madness that belongs to youth. But it can’t attack age, thank the gods.”

“Shouldn’t be too sure of that,” said Vaughan.

But Sir Rodney laughed in cynical derision. “My good man, what of your own theory of inoculation. I was inoculated long ago—and am now immune.”

“Oh!” said Vaughan. “But it sometimes takes more than one dose.”

“Not such a dose as I had!” said Sir Rodney. “Why, man, I was engaged—actually engaged—once.”

“And by this time you’ve forgotten what it felt like,” said Vaughan.

“No, I haven’t. I’ll tell you what it felt like—exactly—if you care to hear.”

They had reached the hotel now, and Sir Rodney stopped and faced his companion with a curious mixture of self-ridicule and defiance. The sun was just dipping behind the mountains, and the snow had that indescribable tint of fiery rose which is like nothing else on earth except the flaming glow of an opal. Immediately above them the sky was as a deep sapphire, but away to the east the glow was repeated, and against it the peaks shone with a gold upon which the eye could scarcely bear to look.

Almost against his will Sir Rodney’s glance was drawn towards those peaks which for those few amazing moments seemed to have caught an almost celestial glory.

Suddenly, as it were against his will, he lifted an arm and stiffly pointed. “It was like—that,” he said, in a voice that was oddly different from his usual gruff accents. “Don’t know why—but it was. I adored her. Fancy—me—adoring any woman! And then—I don’t know why—we quarrelled—some stupid trifle. I believe it was my fault. She didn’t really mean it at the time. But I had the pride of the devil in those days—have still. I cleared out. I was sorry afterwards and went back. But it was too late. She’d gone. I heard later that she married—and I’ve never been sorry since.” He thumped his stick vindictively upon the frost-bound earth and turned his back upon the glory. “Come along! Let’s go indoors! It’s getting devilish cold.”

To persuade Sir Rodney Banister to visit the European playground had certainly been no light achievement, and without the urgent coaxing of his young niece Isobel it had scarcely been accomplished. But she was the one person in the world who had any influence with him, and it did not require much exertion on her part to succeed where others failed. Being one of a fairly numerous family, she could usually be spared without much difficulty, and to keep a maternal eye upon her uncle in the holidays had somehow come to be regarded as her especial mission. It was not of course expressed quite so baldly to Sir Rodney himself whose partiality for his merry little relation was by no means undervalued by her father in whose welfare Sir Rodney had never professed the faintest interest.

It was an odd friendship that had sprung up between the two, but there was no doubt that it deserved the name, and to Eric Vaughan, the doctor, who had seen so much of life, there was about it a pathos that sometimes made him sad. He knew, and Isobel's father knew, that the asthma which so sorely tried Sir Rodney every winter was gradually weakening even his stout heart, and when the old man had finally announced that if he went to Switzerland at all it would be in his favourite niece's sole company, he had decided forthwith to take a holiday himself in the same place in order to be at hand should any emergency arise.

Isobel was not in the secret. There was no need to frighten her. Not that she would have been easily scared! She possessed a full share of commonsense, and she was accustomed to regard her uncle as an object requiring her particular care. But it seemed unnecessary to mar her eager anticipation with any ominous warnings. Moreover, there was ample reason for believing that this Swiss experiment would have very beneficial results. Already, after barely a week, Sir Rodney's health showed signs of a very material improvement, and Dr. Vaughan had begun to anticipate greater strides than he had dared to hope for.

Isobel was enjoying every minute of her time with a thoroughness that left nothing to be desired. Every morning saw her on the rink, vigorously improving her style, and every evening she danced to her heart's content, generally with her pal, Dick Perry—a young subaltern in the Guards—between whom and herself there was much in common.

"Don't you get too fond of that young man!" Sir Rodney cautioned her one day after *déjeuner* when she sat beside him on his balcony in the full blaze of the midday sun.

She received the warning with a sweet bright smile. “Oh, darling, how old-fashioned you are! That sort of thing doesn’t happen nowadays.”

“Oh, doesn’t it?” said Sir Rodney. “I haven’t observed that people are getting any less self-indulgent than they were forty years ago.”

She pondered this with the air of one seeking to be impartial. “No, p’raps not,” she admitted at length. “But you must admit they’re not so rottenly sentimental as they used to be.”

“Shouldn’t even go so far as that,” said Sir Rodney. “Depends what you call sentiment.”

“Falling in love,” explained Isobel readily. “And all that sort of tripe. We’ve learnt how to be pals without that.”

“How clever of you!” commented her uncle.

She did not hear him, for she was suddenly hanging forward over the rail to call a greeting to the young man who had given rise to the discussion, who was just passing below.

“Hullo, Dick, you slacker! Where’ve you been all the morning?”

Dick Perry looked up and struck an adoring attitude. His sunburnt face and the white teeth revealed by his smile were a pleasant sight, even to the strictly judicial eye of Sir Rodney.

“Hullo, baby! I’m wanting you. Hurry up and come down!” To Sir Rodney he addressed himself with the admirable decorum of youth to age. “Good morning, sir! Gorgeous weather! Hope you feel the benefit of it.”

Sir Rodney made suitable reply while his young niece darted into the room behind to make swift preparations for joining the lad below. Dick waited, amiably making appropriate conversation for the older generation above him. It languished somewhat, but he maintained it with valiant effort until Isobel abruptly shot out on to the balcony again to bestow a hurried kiss upon her uncle’s brow.

“Good-bye for the present, sweetheart! I’ve put your medicine ready for you. Mind you have a nice little shut-eye! You’ve got to keep fresh for the pageant of youth to-night, you know. Oh, there goes Madame de Beauville! Doesn’t she look topping? She wears such heavenly blues. Yes, coming, Dick, coming! Don’t be so impatient! I never asked you to wait for me.”

She was gone in a flurry of laughter and flying feet. The balcony was suddenly very quiet.

Sir Rodney sat still in his chair and heard the flood of talk and merriment renewed as she joined her playmate below. They waved to him and Isobel kissed her hand as one taking leave of a child as they went away, but he did not take much notice of their attentions, which in strict truth did not greatly merit it. They were quite obviously engrossed with each other, and Sir Rodney, very curiously, was engrossed with something entirely different. His eyes were upon a lithe blue figure walking down to the rink with a grace that belonged neither to age nor youth. For some reason he had lately fallen into the habit of watching her. There was no denying that she possessed a power of attraction which seemed to extend to all who saw her. It presented different aspects to different people,—like a jewel of many facets. To some it was her ready graciousness, her *savoir faire*, her wit, to some her achievements on the rink, to some the sheer beauty of her outline, the perfect serenity of her face. But to most it was the unvarying sweetness of her presence that marked her as a being apart. It was by this that Elizabeth de Beauville made her delicate mark wherever she went. And even the silent watcher who never spoke to her was aware of it. He railed at her no longer, and when Isobel spoke of her with enthusiasm he uttered no word of disparagement.

But to himself that afternoon he made one brief remark as he turned within for the rest that was to fit him for the evening's festivity.

"I wonder what her game is!"

As if in answer, a shout of distant laughter came up to him from the rink where all the merrymakers were gathered around the woman who had never let herself grow old.

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He did not see Isobel again until tea-time when she raced in very late and joined him and Dr. Vaughan at their table with airy apologies.

"Been skating all the time?" asked Sir Rodney. Her bright eyes met his. "Oh no, dear. We left off early, and walked up to the *châlet* to see the sun set. Wasn't that sentimental of us?"

"Depends how many of you there were," said Sir Rodney.

She laughed, but she did not enlighten him. "What measly little bits of roll! And I'm so hungry. Madame de Beauville was simply priceless this afternoon. Perfectly dazzling style! But she left off early too—said she had got a lot to do to get really beautiful for to-night. As if she could ever be

anything else! But I do wonder what she'll look like. I'm simply dying to see her. You know there's going to be a beauty prize, don't you?"

"And no handicaps of age?" asked the doctor with an appreciative glance at the sparkling face before him.

"Oh no, it's the same for everybody, of course," she assured him. "And so it ought to be really, because older people have had more time to learn how to be beautiful, haven't they?"

"There's something in that," said Vaughan.

Isobel finished her tea and danced away. She too had some preparations to make.

"Silly damn' nonsense!" commented Sir Rodney. "We shall see a good many women making fools of themselves to-night."

Yet he also went up rather earlier than usual in order to dress with especial care.

His niece looked in just as he was ready to go down. "I hope I don't look an awful rabbit," she said, "but I couldn't pretend to wear anything prehistoric, could I? I feel so beastly young and new. Hope Dick won't notice it."

"My dear," said Sir Rodney, "however long you may live you will never look more charming than you look to-night. And if Dick does not notice it, he'll be a bigger fool even than most of the young men of his generation."

She turned from her own reflection in the glass to look at him with sharp incredulity. Her white attire had the supreme simplicity essential to her youth, and she was astonished to read unfeigned admiration in her uncle's eyes.

"You old darling!" she said. "And you actually mean it! It's a good thing the men haven't got to wear anything antiquated, for you're looking positively juvenile to-night."

Something of the festive atmosphere certainly seemed to have found its way into Sir Rodney's veins as they went down together. In the *salle-à-manger* he talked and laughed as though indeed the burden of years had fallen from him.

As he had predicted, there were not many costumes that dated further back than the youngest of those present could remember, though a few

ambitious ladies aspired to the Georgian, Stuart, and even the Elizabethan era.

"That's not playing the game," declared Isobel with contempt. "I call that feeble, don't you?"

"Most unworthy of the enlightened age in which we live," said Sir Rodney.

"Madame de Beauville won't let us down," declared his niece. "You wait till she comes!"

"I am waiting," said Sir Rodney.

It was at that very moment that there was a general stir in the room, betokening the arrival of someone of note. Isobel glanced round, then turned in her chair and sat staring in complete amazement.

Through the glass doors there entered a vision of loveliness so exquisite that there was not one person present who did not give a gasp of sheer admiration. She was dressed as they dressed in the nineties, in a flowing robe of palest translucent blue with silvery draperies that seemed to float all around her as she moved. Her hair of purest gold was softly wound about her head and adorned with a wreath of flowers. Her face had the tender curves of girlhood and the faint sweet flush of youth. Her blue eyes shone like deep sapphires.

They travelled over the crowd of watching faces as she advanced with a swift, questing look until they rested upon one in particular. And it was in answer to that look that Sir Rodney rose unexpectedly from his chair and moved to meet her. But his own face was that of a man in a dream.

"Why, Betty!" he said. "You here?"

She gave him her hand, both her hands, dropping her fan to do so and leaving it dangling from the silver girdle at her waist.

"My dear boy," she said, "do let me come and sit at your table! May I?"

"Whatever you wish," he said, and conducted her thither.

Isobel got up and pushed forward her chair. "It is—isn't it?" she said rather incoherently, still staring.

The new-comer looked at her with an impersonal smile in which was no hint of recognition. "Is this a little friend of yours, Roddy?" she said in her soft voice.

"Certainly." Sir Rodney seemed to produce his with an effort. "My niece!"

"How do you do?" said the stranger, holding out her hand. "Please forgive me for intruding like this! I couldn't help it."

Playful as was her speech, it had in it a touch of wistfulness. A waiter brought forward another chair and they sat down at the little table, ignoring the rest of the company, who after a pause returned to their meal, murmuring among themselves.

"I'm afraid I'm late," said the stranger, "but I don't want much to eat. I am like Cinderella at the ball to-night. I only want one waltz with the prince, and then I shall vanish."

Again her smiling eyes sought Sir Rodney's and met them for one shining instant. He drew a deep hard breath in answer.

"Not if I can prevent it," he said.

The buzz of conversation became normal again and dinner proceeded as before.

Vaughan was watching from his table. He had never joined Sir Rodney and his niece at meals in the *salle-à-manger*, feeling that it was bad for a patient to be perpetually under his doctor's observation, but he was seated at no great distance. He was as totally unprepared for what had happened as were the rest of the assembled company, but one fact stood out very clearly. Sir Rodney had neither the desire nor the intention to be disturbed. He had called for champagne and was filling his guest's glass with so fine an air of youth renewed, so eager and sparkling a courtesy, that any interruption must obviously have been an intrusion.

Even Isobel seemed to realize this, for she had relinquished her usual ardent attitude and was sitting back in her chair, looking somewhat like a very sweet doll that had been overlooked by its owner.

For they had eyes only for each other, those two, in their strange re-union, the man with his white hair and almost boyish smile, the woman—or was she a girl?—with her vivid beauty and siren-like allurement. No one else in the vast room counted at all with either of them, and presently people began to drift away to the *grand salon* where dancing was about to begin, discussing the sensation of the evening as they went. There were no doubts left as to who would be crowned queen of the ball. It was a foregone conclusion, as some declared it had been from the outset. But no one had expected so wonderful a queen as this.

It was not long before Isobel slipped away unnoticed and joined Dick Perry in the vestibule.

"It's the rummiest go I've ever seen," she declared. "He's always hated her till now. Can they really be old friends?"

"You watch 'em!" said Dick. "They'll be eloping next."

"I suppose he really does know who she is!" said Isobel. "I didn't myself —at first."

Dick laughed at the idea. "Oh, he's not so green as that! I tell you he's deep, that old uncle of yours—as sly an old dog as ever trod. You watch him, that's all!"

"I don't quite like it," said Isobel. "He looks so—different somehow, as if—as if he'd gone back half a century."

"P'raps he has!" laughed Dick. "And why shouldn't he if he wants to? Come along! We're wasting time. We mayn't be young ourselves always."

His arm went round her, urging her forward. She looked up into his face and laughed. "What a dreadful thought, Dick! I couldn't endure to get old, could you?"

"Cheer up!" counseled Dick as he whisked her away. "We've got a good many years to do it in."

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THEY were alone. The buzz of voices around them had ceased. The last diner had gone.

The woman lifted her radiant eyes to the man's face and sat gazing at him with smiling inscrutability. "Well," she said at last in her low musical voice, "I have done it."

He stretched his hand to her across the table. "What—have you done?" he said.

She continued to smile—her strange, unfathomable smile. "I have done —what I always meant to do," she said. "I have—come back to you."

His hand held hers closely, closely; but he slowly shook his head at her words.

"Why do you do that?" she said. "Have you—forgotten me?"

“I never could forget you, Betty,” he said, and as he spoke his eyes kindled upon her—as they had kindled forty years ago. “I never even tried.”

She caught her breath with a faint sound that might have been a laugh or a sigh. “What a tangle we made of it!” she said. “And we were given such beautiful threads to work with.”

“We can’t undo it—now,” he said.

She bent her head. “I know—but—might there not be enough left—even now—to weave a little pattern?”

He leaned nearer to her. “Is that what you always meant to do, Betty?”

She answered him under her breath. “Yes, dear, always; that is, ever since I realized the emptiness of life without you. You know,”—her strange smile came again—“I often think that I really ceased to live when you went.”

“My dear—my dear!” he protested. “But you married afterwards!”

She lifted her eyes to his again. “Dear heart,” she said, “there was no afterwards.”

There fell a silence between them—an interval that was filled with a communion more intimate than words. From the distant *salon* came the gay jangle of the band, but if it reached their outer senses, it penetrated no farther. They were together in a world where jazz music was a sound unknown.

It was Sir Rodney who roused himself at length from that trance-like stillness and proposed a move.

“Let’s find a quiet corner to talk in!” he said. “We must have lots of things to tell each other.”

She went with him, her hand on his arm, and they drifted together towards the ballroom; but they did not enter. He found a seat in a shadowed recess outside, beyond the clamour, where they could sit together in comparative seclusion.

“Now tell me,” he said, “tell me everything that has happened to you since I saw you last!”

She made a wide gesture with her hands as though to show their emptiness, and then laughed softly, tragically. “But we only parted—yesterday!” she said.

He leaned his head on his hand, watching her attentively. “Yes,” he said, “I believe that is true. You are exactly the same. There is that about you—I always knew it—that never could grow old.”

“But it would take longer than this little life of ours to make one that,” she said. “You, Roddy, you yourself are not really any older. You are the same. Your heart is the same.”

“My—heart!” he said, and again slowly he shook his head. “No—no, darling! My heart is a very tired one now.”

“And yet—it hasn’t forgotten me,” she said, with a certain sad insistence.

“No, never forgotten you, Betty,” he answered. “And never will—as long as it still beats. But—how long will that be, I wonder?”

She gave him both her hands again sweetly, impulsively. “Dearest, we musn’t ask too much of it. I will do—all the loving.”

He smiled as he held them, his eyes kindling anew at their touch, and lifted them to his lips in mute devotion.

Again the silence came upon them—the silence that bridged the years of which they could not speak.

People came and went past their retreat, but none accosted them. It was as though an invisible barrier intervened between them and all the world. Perhaps the passers-by realized that the man and woman sitting there were actually far away, wandering through an enchanted garden to which they alone possessed the key.

But there came a change at last. For music familiar to all lovers drifted suddenly through their paradise, and they started and looked at one another, as if awaking.

“Oh, do you remember?” she whispered. “We danced to ‘The Blue Danube’ that night—that last night we were so happy?”

He rose with a gallant gesture, smiling at the tremble in her voice. “And we will dance to it to-night,” he said. “We couldn’t sit out for this.”

She smiled in answer, and they entered the ballroom together.

They danced to those haunting strains, slowly and peacefully, oblivious of all but each other—the man and the girl of forty years ago. And sometimes during that immortal waltz they looked at one another and smiled. But they did not speak at all.

As it drew to an end, he led her back to their quiet corner, and there, sheltered by flowers, he took her in his arms and kissed her, ardently, passionately, as he had kissed her long ago.

"My love!" he said. "My precious only love! Our souls will remember—when our bodies have ceased to be."

She clung to him without speaking, giving her lips to his, her hands about his white head as if they blessed him.

And then, by mutual consent, but with no word of farewell they parted. With a slow, dragging step the man went away, and she was left alone.

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THERE presently arose a clamorous call for Madame de Beauville, and she came forth from her hiding-place, a smiling and radiant vision, to be declared by universal acclamation the queen of beauty in that pageant of youth.

People flocked around her, marvelling at her loveliness, scarcely believing in what they saw, and she received the unanimous homage poured out to her with that graciousness which was her greatest charm.

When it was over and her thanks had been modestly given, she withdrew, girlish to the last, yet with that about her in look and bearing which no girl in the room possessed. And there were some who felt as if they had been witnesses of something which they did not understand.

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ERIC VAUGHAN was hastily summoned from his room early on the following morning by Sir Rodney's valet.

His call was agitated, incoherent, and when the doctor reached his friend's bedside he knew why.

Quietly he addressed the man. "Where is Miss Isobel?"

"She's gone out, sir, got up early and went out—with Mr. Perry—to see the sun rise."

"I see," said Vaughan.

He turned towards the window. The sun had already topped the snow-crests and was flooding the world with glory. He looked again at the face on the pillow. It was perfectly peaceful and still, and it wore such a smile as it might have worn forty years before.

“You’d think he was asleep, sir,” whispered the man, “if he didn’t look so young.”

“Yes, so you might,” said Vaughan abstractedly. “Perhaps he was younger than any of us thought.”

MISUNDERSTANDING

"My dear, what an exhausting afternoon! I've never worked so hard in my life."

The jaded hostess sank on to a settee beside the coolest-looking of her guests and fanned herself with a paper.

The guest, who was softly smoothing the fur of a large and luxurious tabby cat curled up on her lap, looked at the exhausted lady with a faint smile in her green-grey eyes. She had pale, delicate features of rather unusual beauty, but her smile did not affect them. It was only in her look.

"It's so amusing of you to do it," she said.

"But, my dear Sally, one must do these things!" protested the exhausted one, still vigorously fanning herself. "It's better than everlastingly playing bridge anyhow. Besides, people quarrel over that."

"Quarrel!" said Sally. "Of course they do! It's the breath of life to most people."

"I'm sure it isn't to you," returned her friend. "I've never yet seen you sufficiently interested to quarrel over anything."

Sally's white fingers still caressed the cat's soft fur with a lingering, appreciative touch. She made no answer to the remark.

"Well, have you decided yet who's to play the vamp?" she asked.

The weary hostess shook her head. "No. They're still fighting for it. I think we'd better have tea. That may help us."

"To return to the fray with renewed vigour afterwards," murmured Sally. "Why don't you play it yourself, Vera?"

"Me!" Her companion looked at her keenly as though she suspected some hidden sarcasm.

Sally met the look from under slightly drooping eyelids. "Yes, I know you look virtuous. But after all, that's really the essence of it, isn't it? I mean ——"—her voice trailed a little—"the strong and silent hero would never

feel drawn to the obviously immoral type, would he? Your husband for instance——"

"Sally!" Her friend interrupted her with a touch of sharpness. "You'd better leave Phil out of it. He is not strong and silent, and nothing would induce him to play the part."

"Or you to allow him?" suggested Sally with a sudden twinkle of real merriment in her half-veiled eyes.

Vera laughed almost in spite of herself. "You can put it that way if you like. Anyhow, I'm glad to say he's not in the least attracted by it. He always prefers to look on."

"So much safer!" commented Sally. "That's why I prefer it too."

"Well, you simply won't be allowed to, my dear," said her hostess with decision. "There's no reason why you should either. There's nothing really indecent about it."

"P'raps that is the reason!" said Sally, gently pulling the cat's ear till he awoke with a muffled protest.

"We'll have tea," said Vera Meredyth, rising. "That'll bring people to their senses. The men'll be in directly."

Sally tenderly transferred her burden to the cushion beside her and also rose. She was not tall, but she had the slim straightness of a young sapling. She moved with the natural grace of the perfect dancer.

She followed her friend to the tea-table in an alcove of the old oak-panelled hall and took up her stand beside her. The rest of the company, consisting of some eight or ten women of various ages and degrees of fascination, gathered round, still discussing with animation and occasional heat the prime subject upon which the general attention had been focussed throughout that wet afternoon.

A stormy sunset had succeeded the earlier deluge, and a shaft of flaming red penetrated a high western window throwing a weird light across the place that gave it almost a mediæval air. A keen observer might almost have expected to hear the hum of spinning-wheels allied to the chattering voices, or the clank of armed feet upon the stones.

But there could have been nothing more modern than the little group of women assembled in the neighborhood of the tea-table, nearly all talking at once and shouting each other down when occasion arose.

There was a slight lull in the general hubbub of talk when the tea was finally dispensed, however, and of this Vera Meredyth hastened to take advantage.

"I'm very much obliged to everyone," she began diplomatically, "for all the help they have given. It's something to have decided upon our charade, and I must say it's the one I should have chosen myself. But do let us remember that we must keep the word a secret whatever happens! I shall get Lady Holmby to bring her house-party to it, and if it were to leak out beforehand of course there would be no more fun. Now I'm going to make a proposal. We've cast practically everybody so far except the vamp, and no one seems able to quite agree upon that point. What did you say, Mrs. Weston?"

A tall and angular woman with a very penetrating voice repeated the remark which had nearly drowned her hostess's quieter accents. "I said she was the only one that mattered."

"And *I* said we hadn't cast anyone for the hero yet," piped up another voice belonging to a round-cheeked girl whom everyone called Molly.

Vera dismissed her remark without ceremony. "The hero can wait. But I agree with you, Mrs. Weston, the vamp is all important. In fact, the success of the whole charade hangs upon her, and the difficulty is to decide who is the most eligible for the part."

"My dear Mrs. Meredyth, it is merely a matter of make-up," asserted Mrs. Weston. "I speak from experience, for I have often played that sort of *rôle*, and I'm sure no one here will accuse me of looking the part in ordinary life."

No one did. There was a distinct and eloquent pause to testify to the fact.

Then Mrs. Weston's most energetic opponent—a dark-haired, very voluble lady—broke eagerly in. "Oh, but indeed make-up is not everything. We must have subtlety, grace, charm, for such a part. Otherwise," she confronted Mrs. Weston with lips that smiled and a look that defied, "the whole thing is spoilt. Of course there are not enough parts to go round, so some of us must stand out. But do let us make the best of the material we've got and get as near to the real thing as possible!"

"That is just what I was going to say myself," said Vera, seeking to placate Mrs. Weston with a glance of rare sweetness. "I don't think we are going the right way to work. Of course, as Mrs. Weston says, experience counts before everything. Indeed, experience *is* everything. It seems that all

of us—except myself—have had a certain amount. But the question is, who has had the most? I would like to ask everyone here in turn how often she has played a vamp's part and in what plays. That should help us to decide, and if it doesn't we will cast lots."

"I call that a very silly idea," said Mrs. Weston sweepingly. "The question at once arises, What constitutes a vamp? I'm sure *I* don't know for one."

Again there was an alarming pause, and into it like a sudden shower of merriment released there fell a rippling laugh that startled everyone out of her tension and brought every eye to the slim, pale woman by Vera's side.

Vera turned to her immediately with a hint of resentment. "Sally! Why are you laughing?" And then, suddenly perceiving something hitherto hidden from her: "But you've acted in this charade before! Didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, years ago," said Sally; "many years ago."

"There! I knew it!" exclaimed Vera. "Tell us all about it! Was it properly done?"

"Oh, not too badly, I think," said Sally, pouring out a saucerful of milk for the cat who had followed her to the table.

"Who played the vamp's part?" demanded Mrs. Weston suspiciously.

Sally sent her a swift side-glance that had in it an impish quality. "Before I tell anyone," she said, "I should like to know who is going to stage-manage?"

Mrs. Weston looked all around her with what Vera's husband was wont irreverently to call her "drill sergeant" expression. "Well," she said, "I believe I may at least claim to have had considerable experience in that respect."

"Then it wasn't me," said Sally.

But Vera was too quick for her. She saw a way of escape and sprang for it. "Sally, it was! I'm sure it was! You're fibbing!"

Sally stooped to satisfy the clamouring cat. Except that she never betrayed embarrassment under any circumstances, it would have seemed as if the moment's emergency found her unprepared. Then, as with supple grace she raised herself to meet Vera's accusation, they saw that she was faintly smiling.

"All right," she said meekly. "It was."

"That settles it!" declared Vera in triumph.

And, "Nobody more suitable I should imagine!" coldly said Mrs. Weston.

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VERA MEREDYTH followed her friend Sally to her room that night and seated herself comfortably on the fender-stool for a chat.

"You know I always feel as if we are old friends," she said, "though I'm sure I can't tell you why."

"Some very good psychological reason no doubt," murmured Sally who, attired in the most feminine of pyjamas, was lying in an easy-chair, smoking a cigarette, the cat once more curled up on her knees.

"Why on earth have you brought that creature up to bed with you?" said Vera.

Sally smiled with a downward glance. "Company, I suppose. He reminds me of my husband—so satisfied—so sensible—so selfish."

"Oh, but they're always that," said Vera, as though she spoke on behalf of some defenceless species. "At least, I'm not so sure about the sensible, but——" She broke off with slight embarrassment. "The thing is not to let oneself expect too much," she wound up somewhat lamely.

"I shouldn't have expected that from you," said Sally.

Vera coloured a little. "No? Perhaps it is rather beastly of me. Phil is such a darling."

"Of course he is—absolute perfection," said Sally. "And you couldn't be beastly if you tried, my dear. It's refreshing to hear even a superlatively happy person like you admit the uselessness of crying for the moon."

"Well, it's a pity to do that anyhow," said Vera with sound commonsense. "I can't see you doing it either."

Sally lightly flicked some ash from the cat's fur. "You certainly wouldn't see me if I did," she remarked.

Vera looked at her. "Yes, I think you are rather secretive," she said.

Sally nodded once or twice. "Which makes it all the sweeter of you to take me on trust. Now tell me—honestly—what exactly do you know about

me?"

In the half-startled silence that followed, her eyes that had the mysterious shining of an Egyptian jewel came quietly to her friend's face and remained steadily fixed upon it.

Vera made a slight uneasy movement. "Of course I pretend—I know a lot," she said.

"I know you do," said Sally. "But so far as your actual knowledge goes, I might be a Russian communist of the reddest dye. You met me in a casino, and you had the decency to try and stop me making a damfool of myself. That's practically all you know about me—except that once in the long past I married a man I found I couldn't live with."

She paused. Vera leaned towards her, a very friendly look in her honest eyes. "Yes, but, my dear, I *wanted* to help you, don't you see? The decency was on your side, in letting me. There's no other woman I know who wouldn't have resented it. Besides, you were so young."

She laid her hand on the arm of Sally's chair, and in a moment Sally's slim fingers closed upon it. "About a dozen centuries older than you, that's all," she said. "And that was only six months ago. How much have you learnt about me since?"

Vera pondered. "Quite a lot, really," she said slowly, "though—perhaps—not much in actual fact. I know that you are often very lonely——"—Sally's fingers gave a restraining pressure and she passed on—"and I know you are full of courage and always laugh when you're hurt."

"Is that courage?" said Sally whimsically.

"What else?" said Vera.

"Some people might call it bravado, darling. Not you and I of course. We belong to the Intelligentsia—whatever that may mean. Like vamp, it's rather an obscure term." Sally uttered her tinkling laugh, and released her hand to caress the cat. "Well then, you asked me to come and stay with you, and we didn't quarrel, and I didn't make love to your husband. So then—after a decent interval—you asked me to come again and join your house-party here. Do you remember telling me all about this place last Easter when we were grilling on the *Promenade des Anglais*?"

"Indeed I do!" Vera said. "And you told me that you used to stay in a house near by before you married. And I used to think——"

"What?" said Sally.

“That some sort of a romance must have happened to you there because you never would tell me where it was,” said Vera, with slight hesitation.

“Ah!” Sally said. “Mallowby didn’t belong to you in those days.”

“No. An old man called Threlkeld had it. The executors sold it as it stood after he died.”

“Yes. And you’ve had the wisdom not to change it much,” said Sally.

“Oh, you knew it then!” Vera spoke with surprise.

Sally was leaning back in her chair with her eyes on the fire. “I knew it well,” she said.

“And you knew the old man too?” Vera spoke with frank curiosity.

Sally remained motionless. “Yes. I knew the old man too. I was—his granddaughter.”

“Oh, my dear! I never guessed that!” Vera’s curiosity leaped like a flame to tinder. “What an odd chance, to be sure!”

“It wasn’t chance my coming here,” said Sally. “I meant to come.” Her eyes still brooded on the fire. “It was very—secretive of me, wasn’t it, not to tell you sooner? You’re beginning to know—how little you know.”

“You have actually lived here!” said Vera.

Her guest bent her head. “Until I married—the bailiff.”

“Oh, but, Sally——” Vera exclaimed.

Sally raised one finger to restrain her. “He was turned out—neck and crop—and went straight to Lord Holmby whose life he had been lucky enough to save during the War. I believe he is there still. He is quite a presentable person—my husband, but not exactly ambitious. I had some money from my mother, and I wanted him to emigrate. He refused, because he had none of his own. He said work was scarce everywhere and he must hang on to what he’d got. I couldn’t get him to see that the situation was impossible—at least so long as my grandfather lived. So—eventually—as he refused to budge—I slipped my moorings one dark night and sailed away.”

She ceased to speak. Her gaze was abstracted and remote. The loud purring of the cat lying across her knees was the only sound.

Vera spoke after a considerable pause, with unusual vehemence. “He certainly was—very selfish.”

Sally's finger went up again. "He acted—according to his lights," she said. "He wouldn't risk being dependent upon me."

"And so he preferred to sacrifice you to his pride," said Vera.

"Oh, he didn't sacrifice me," said Sally. "I needn't have gone. But—my pride couldn't stand the strain either." She continued to gaze inscrutably into the fire till Vera stirred impulsively. Then she turned towards her. "Yes? What were you going to say?"

Vera coloured a little. "I was going to ask a rather impertinent question, I'm afraid."

Sally smiled. "I don't seem to mind it from you somehow. But you won't be banal, will you?"

"I'm afraid I was going to be," admitted Vera, "but I'll do my best. Have you begun to wish that you hadn't come here?"

"Not yet," said Sally. "I probably shall very soon."

"What is he like?" said Vera.

Sally heaved a sigh that ended in a yawn. "I've almost forgotten. It's five years ago—more." She looked down at the cat for inspiration. "He's rather like this creature—strong and silent,—only he doesn't even purr when he's pleased."

"And he never even tried to get you back?" said Vera.

Sally shook her head. "He probably thinks I shall fritter away my money and go of my own accord if he waits long enough. Or he may have forgotten me completely. Who knows?"

"I do," said Vera. "No one possibly could forget you, Sally."

"Oh, mushrooms!" said Sally lightly. "David Johnson could forget anyone who didn't belong to his own particular groove."

"Is that his name? And you don't even bear it!" There was a tinge of reproach in Vera's voice.

Sally laughed for the first time. "I don't like it, that's why. I prefer to be just Sally Gray—after my mother. As your dear friend Mrs. Weston would say, nothing could be more suitable. Not a black sheep—nor a white one—only a little grey!"

"Who's being banal now?" said Vera. "Is that all you're going to tell me about him?"

Sally made an expressive gesture. “What more is there to tell? Where and when did I earliest meet him? Oh yes, that may interest you! I’ll tell you that. It was in this self-same charade with the mysterious name that may only be spoken in a whisper to our nearest friends—at a house-party in this very house. They chose me to play the vamp on account of my wicked eyes.”

“Yes?” said Vera. “Yes?” She was keenly interested. “And he—what part did he play?”

Sally looked at her, and for a moment the green-grey eyes shone with a strange lambent fire. “He was the strong silent hero of course,” she said, “who guided her back to the path of virtue by making her his wife.”

“Oh, I see,” said Vera. She rose rather suddenly, as if something in those eyes disconcerted her. “Well, I’ll be going now, darling. I’ve kept you out of bed long enough. Don’t sit dreaming over the fire with Crusoe! P’raps you’d like me to take him away.”

But Sally shook her head, her eyes upon her sleeping companion. “No—no! Let him stay with me! He’s—company.”

Looking back from the door, Vera saw that in spite of her injunction her friend had lighted another cigarette and evidently had every intention of sitting dreaming for some time longer in front of the fire.

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Preparations for the charade went on apace when at length the parts were finally allotted. Somewhat to the surprise of everyone, Vera changed her mind and introduced her husband into the cast to play the part of hero, but since every other man made no secret of his unwillingness to be pressed into the service it was perhaps more a matter of necessity than choice. The whole company were agreed that Phil Meredyth was entirely unsuitable, but as the male portion of Vera’s house-party was composed mainly of stout sportsmen and not heroes of romance, it was generally conceded that he filled the gap as well as anyone else might have done.

Mrs. Weston thought it somewhat risky on Vera’s part to throw him so much in the society of her decidedly magnetic friend Sally, but Mrs. Weston’s thoughts were seldom of much value to any but herself and her veiled hints on the subject wholly failed to upset Vera’s equilibrium. By universal vote she had been elected stage-manager, and her hands were full.

As a matter of fact she did not spend very much time over the coaching of her husband, arguing that it would be unwise to sicken him with the thing beforehand. Moreover, he had his guests to attend to, and so at rehearsals she not infrequently read his part herself.

"You needn't be anxious," she said to Sally. "He won't let you down when the time comes."

But Sally betrayed no anxiety on the point. In her enigmatical way she seemed quite content to leave everything to Vera. For after all, if the show did fall flat, the failure would not rest upon her shoulders.

No one knew if she were enjoying herself or not, and Vera alone really cared; but no further confidences passed between them. Sally was not of an expansive disposition at any time. Neither was she quarrelsome, and it was in a large measure due to her that the reefs and shoals of rehearsal were navigated with success. She had an adroitness for avoiding discussion which was little short of genius.

The charade was to be performed on a Saturday evening, and as practically the entire party were following the hounds on horseback, on foot, or in cars that day, there was no time for a full rehearsal after tea. Vera did her best to whip in her tired followers, but she only managed to get a few of the chief players together, all the supers pleading for a rest before dinner and the event of the evening which was to take place immediately after. She was obliged to concede the point, comforting herself with the reflection that it was only the principals that really mattered. Sally was at hand as usual, and to her she turned for support.

"I know you don't need any rehearsing. You're perfect," she said. "But I shall never get the others to do anything without you."

"Well, of course!" said Sally. "That's what I thought."

They assembled in the music-room in which a stage had been improvised and where the curtain was in process of being tested by the village carpenter.

Vera, after looking on for a few minutes, pronounced everything to be satisfactory.

"It doesn't look as if there can be any serious hitch now," she said. "Sally, do go and find Phil! I didn't see him in the smoking-room just now. I expect he's in the library. Dig him out, wherever he is!"

Sally went as requested.

The library was generally reserved for the exclusive use of the master of the house, but as she paused at the door to knock the sound of men's voices within told her that he was not alone.

Her host answered her knock in person, and she was at once struck by the extreme dishevelment of his appearance. He was bespattered with mud from head to foot, and his greeting betrayed a degree of nervous excitement that seemed to indicate some disquieting occurrence.

"Oh, it's you!" he said, as if both relieved and dismayed by her presence. "I say, look here! You're the very person I want. I haven't told my wife yet. I've taken a toss and it's shaken me up rather badly. I can't possibly act in this damn' charade to-night. I hate backing out at the last minute. But I've got hold of a substitute. Hope you don't mind?"

Sally looked at him. He was standing in the doorway, blocking her entrance. He met her look with something of the expression of a schoolboy brought to book for playing truant.

"I'm most awfully sorry," he said, as she did not immediately reply. "But you see how it is!" He held up a quivering hand. "I'm as shaky as a new-born kitten. I should certainly let you down if I attempted it."

"Who is the substitute?" said Sally.

He still blocked the way. "I say, don't be hard-hearted! You're not savage, are you?"

"Of course not!" said Sally. "I'm sorry about your fall. But there isn't much time to lose, is there? There are only four hours left to learn up the part."

"Oh, I know. That's the devil of it. But he's quite a sensible sort of chap, and he's acted in private theatricals before. He'll do it all right if you'll just lend a hand and put him through his paces." Phil suddenly became aware that he was keeping her on the threshold and abruptly stood aside. "Come in and I'll introduce him!"

Sally entered.

A man was standing before the fire facing her, having evidently just risen to meet her. He was tall and broad and stiffly upright. He looked at her with eyes at first casual that swiftly widened to a stare of amazement, but he made no further movement of any sort.

"Here he is!" said Phil's uneasy voice in the background. "Mr. Johnson —Mrs. Gray! That's all, I think. Now you two get down to it and see what

you can do!”

He was gone with a precipitation that made no pretence at dignity. Phil Meredyth had never been a strategist; he did not even shut the door quietly, and the subsequent sounds of his footsteps told of a retreat so headlong that it might almost have been described as a scamper.

Sally stood still, a couple of paces within the room, looking at the man on the hearth. She also was very erect. Her face was quite colourless; nevertheless she was the first to speak.

“A very clumsy device!” she said, and her voice was cold and remote with a faint ring of disdain.

He started at the sound as if it pierced him. His eyes, grey and steady beneath thick dark brows, surveyed her with a keen, unswerving regard. “Very clumsy indeed!” he agreed with a certain grimness. “Who is responsible for it?”

She shrugged her shoulders slightly and moved forward. “Ask yourself that question!” she said, but though her eyes challenged his they held no scorn.

He made an abrupt gesture of repudiation. “D’you think I’d do a thing like that? I’d no idea you were within a hundred miles.”

She was close to him now, her chin uplifted with a queer defiance. “Oh no!” she said, a quiver as of mockery in her voice. “You would never—stoop—to do a thing like that,—David!”

He flinched as if something had stung him, and drew a hard deep breath. “You’d better not—drive me too hard,” he said, “or I might stoop—a good deal lower.”

She laughed in answer—a deliberately heartless laugh. “Do you really flatter yourself that this drama is of my staging?” she said. “Even if I were really tired of my independence, should I go to all this trouble to let you know it?”

His teeth showed suddenly, gripped on his lower lip. He drew back a little from her proximity. “You’re playing a dangerous game,” he said. “I warn you—I’m not such a tame cat now as I was five years ago.”

She stood motionless, as it were daring him, her grey-green eyes curiously alight. “Odd you should mention that!” she mocked. “There is quite a fine tabby specimen here which reminds me perpetually of you. He

purrs like a well-oiled engine all day long—and he never does anything else worth while. What else could one really expect of a tame cat?"

He made a sharp movement of restraint. "You'd better go," he said, speaking almost under his breath, "before you find out."

She laughed again—a tinkling laugh of sheer provocation. "Surely no woman in her sober senses would follow such advice as that! Must I go away for another five years and torment myself with wondering? Oh, David, you poor misguided fool, think again!"

She threw back her head and showed him the gleaming derision in her eyes. But for a moment only! The next he had caught her in a grip that had neither mercy nor reasoning, forcing her backwards till her whole weight hung in his arms, and pressing his lips to her upturned throat as though he would devour it. She struggled against him until she was powerless, and when her strength was spent she lay in his hold palpitating while he kissed her panting mouth with a terrible compulsion, giving her no pause even to breathe.

She was near to collapse when his hold relaxed at last and his lips broke away from hers. He set her on her feet, but she tottered helplessly and he put her down into a chair, turning himself from her abruptly, as though he could not trust himself to look upon her. She leaned forward, covering her face, while he moved away to the other end of the room and stood in a tense hard-breathing silence for many seconds.

He turned at last very slowly and looked across at her. His face was deadly pale.

"Well?" he said, and his voice came with a harsh effort. "I suppose you'll leave me now—for another five years!"

She made a slight gesture with one hand, not lifting her head.

He moved again very slowly, and crossed the room as though she had summoned him.

"Well?" he repeated, standing before her. "I've hurt you, have I—made you cry? By heaven,——"—he spoke with savage, half-strangled passion—"I wish I'd done it long ago."

"You like—hurting me—do you?" she said, her face still hidden.

"It's the only way—with some women," he said, a faint suggestion of extenuation in his voice.

“What a lot you know about women!” said Sally under her breath.

“I know one thing.” He spoke half-grudgingly, as though urged thereto against his will. “Now I’ve got you back—I’m damned if I’ll let you go again.”

“You haven’t got me,” said Sally.

“Yes, I have.” He laid a firm hand upon her as she sat. “Yes, I have, Sally. You thought you’d just look me up and bolt again, did you? Well—you thought wrong. I’m not going to stand another five years like the last.”

She sat bent and motionless under his hand, but there was tension in her attitude. “If you wanted me—why didn’t you come and look for me?” she said.

“Because I was a damn’ fool,” he returned with grimness.

She uttered a shaky laugh. “Sure you’re not being one now?” she suggested.

He bent slowly, took her by the chin and turned her face up to his own.

She shrank involuntarily and then closed her eyes with a slight gesture of appeal. “Don’t be a brute, David!” she said.

“Look at me!” he said.

She shivered. “I don’t want to. I don’t know you.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t know me, Sally. You’ve spread a net, and you’ve caught—something more than you bargained for. You ask me why I didn’t come and look for you. I’ll tell you. I’ve been waiting for you to come to me.”

“And if I hadn’t?” said Sally.

She was breathing quickly, for the mastery of those strong hands was something she had never experienced before, but there was that within her—a vital and burning curiosity—which would not suffer her to submit in silence.

“If you hadn’t—I should have let you go,” he said. “And I shouldn’t have lost anything worth having.”

Sally nerved herself and opened her eyes, looking straight up into his. “That’s very nice of you,” she said. “But—I haven’t come to you, David. I haven’t spread any net for you. I’m a guest in this house simply because Vera Meredyth is my friend.”

“Then it was her doing,” he said.

“That I can’t tell you,” said Sally. “I only know it was not mine. So now you can let me go again with the comforting reflection that I am not worth keeping.”

He looked at her with eyes that seemed to beat down her own, but she met them unflinching, strung to supreme resistance. In the end, slowly he released her.

“All right,” he said. “You can go.”

He turned from her again and went to the fire, standing before it with his back to her.

Sally remained in her chair. There was a shadowy smile in her eyes, but her face was sad. At length with a faint sigh she glanced towards the table on which Phil had considerately left his copy of the play.

“Well,” she said in the tone of one dismissing more serious things, “I suppose we’d better get to work. We can’t let them down. Shall we go through with it?”

“Through with what?” He stirred and looked round as though half surprised to see her still there.

She pointed to the book. “It’s the old show. Didn’t Phil tell you? You used to be rather good in it. You haven’t forgotten quite everything, have you?”

“Oh, that!” he said, and seemed to pause on the verge of refusal; but she gave him no time.

“You’ll soon pick it up again. I did myself. But we shall have to stick to it. There’s no time to lose.”

Her practical tone took effect. He came slowly back.

“Pull up a chair!” said Sally.

He did so like a man in a dream. She had already opened the book. She sent him an odd little flickering smile.

“You must remember,” she said, “you are the strong and silent hero who reforms the vamp by sheer force of virtue. Meantime you have—quite unreasonably—fallen in love with her, but you do your heroic best to hide it. She on her side is straining every nerve to get you, but believes her attraction to be only temporary. In the end——”

"Yes. What happens in the end?" he said.

"In the end——"—she gave him the book with a dramatic gesture —"Love triumphs; in other words, makes fools of them both. It doesn't happen in real life, but never mind that! We must make it as convincing as we can."

"I see," said David.

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VERA looked for her friend in some trepidation at the dinner-table that night, and looked in vain. A message presently reached her to the effect that Mrs. Gray was dining in the library with Mr. Johnson as they were very busy, and curiosity began to take the place of anxiety though she kept it in check.

She did not see Sally until a few minutes before the curtain was to go up, and then was disappointed to find her in a state of complete composure.

"Oh yes, I've coached Mr. Johnson pretty thoroughly. I think he'll do quite well," she said, in reply to Vera's enquiries. "A pity it was such short notice, but I am always on the stage when he is. I can prompt him."

Vera retreated, baffled.

She was a more interested spectator than any when the play began. Her husband's description of Lord Holmby's agent as "a young Samson with the jawbone of an ass" had put a keen edge to her curiosity, and when at length he appeared she followed his every movement with rapt attention.

He certainly bore himself well and sustained his part with commendable assurance. But Sally was the hit of the evening. She acted throughout as one inspired, with a sparkling vitality and charm that held its own in every scene, culminating at length in a passionate climax that gripped her audience as with a spell. No one had expected a thrill, and when at the close her polished defense broke and she gave herself to the hero with the tears streaming down her face, even the hard-eyed Mrs. Weston was fain to take refuge behind her handkerchief.

The applause was tremendous. Sally and her partner were called before the curtain again and again, and finally Sally alone came with her own enigmatical smile and curtseyed her acknowledgments.

Then she paused and spoke. "Has anybody guessed the word?" she asked.

The word! They gazed at one another blankly. The word had been wholly lost sight of in the tense interest which Sally had managed to impart to the play. In fact, everyone had completely forgotten that it was a charade at all.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you," said Sally. "For you'll never guess it now. It was—Misunderstanding." And with that she disappeared.

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At the other side of the curtain someone gripped her hand. "May I speak to you," said David Johnson, "before I go?"

She nodded. "If you like. My room is close by."

He followed her down the passage that led thither, but when she entered, he stopped at the open door. "Can I come in?"

She looked back from the hearth. Crusoe sprawled on a cushion. She stooped and picked him up.

"Come in!" she said.

He entered and came up to her. "Sally, I want to ask you something."

"Yes?" Her eyes questioned him. They were also faintly defiant.

"Why did you cry just now?" he said.

Sally bent her head suddenly, burying her face in the cat's soft fur.

He watched her uncertainly. "Won't you tell me? Sally, I forgot myself a little while back. I was nearly crazy for you. But don't you know I'll give up everything—for your sake? Tell me—why did you cry just now?"

Her voice came muffled, curiously unsteady. "Dear old Crusoe!" she said. "Isn't he a darling? So strong and silent! I take him to bed with me every night."

"Sally!" He spoke very gently, but urgently. "Can't you tell me why? Do try to tell me!"

She buried her face a little lower in the luxurious depths. "Oh, just because—only because—he reminds me of you," she said.

THE HAIRPIN BEND

Certainly the drive that led from Scarpe Castle down to the sea-shore by many devious windings cut and blasted in the face of the cliff had not been planned for the benefit of motorists. Indeed, had it been made in present days it might with some reason have been suspected of having been designed expressly for their discomfiture. Fortunately it was private property, or it might have been acclaimed as the most eligible stretch of road for test-climbing in the kingdom. For it abounded in difficulties from start to finish. Each turn—and there were many—was blind on account of the luxuriant growth of trees that overhung it, while one hairpin bend in particular was literally a snare for the unwary. No, emphatically it was not a road that could be described as anything but dangerous to motorists, and the driver of the little touring-car who had set herself to master it closed her lips very firmly ere she had achieved more than a third of the ascent. The hairpin bend was about half-way up, a formidable cutting on the verge of the precipice too narrow to allow a car to turn in one sweep and at an angle so acute as to compel the intrepid motorist to back almost on to the last inch of solid ground to compass it. The view of the bay at this point was superb, but only a pedestrian would linger to enjoy it; for here the wall of rock fell away practically sheer to the shore, towering above it also with a rugged magnificence that seemed to disdain all the mechanical devices of man.

The little car required a good deal of humouring, but, as its driver assured herself as she negotiated each gradient, it only needed nerve and judgment to accomplish the ascent, for there was no danger of meeting any traffic. Scarpe Castle was still empty, and it followed that the whole of its wonderful winding drive would be deserted also. It was not a road that anyone in their sober senses would choose to tackle in a car. She had only chosen it herself because someone had described it as impossible. Also, each turn and bend had been familiar to her from childhood, so she was not afraid of any surprise. She knew the best and the worst.

As for the car, it was her dearest treasure, bought from the careful savings of years, and she believed she had already learned all its vagaries, though it had been in her possession but a few months. Little Ruth Carey

was very thorough and practical in all her ways, and she seldom set her hand to any undertaking that she was not fairly convinced she could carry out. For six years she had to all intents and purposes filled the post of agent to the Scarpe estate under the guidance of her father whom ill-health had rendered unfit to play a very active part, and during those six years she had learned a good many things besides the capable management of an estate. Endurance coupled with self-reliance were some of the lessons that experience had taught her, and she had an almost boyish love of adventure; but this was usually kept under firm restraint.

To-day, however, being her twenty-fourth birthday, she was allowing it a little license. The ascent to Scarpe Castle by way of the cliff-drive had never before been accomplished by a car, and she was determined that hers should be the first to achieve this distinction.

Long before she reached the narrow hairpin bend she knew that she had set herself a task which would put every inch of her ingenuity as a driver as well as her courage to the test, but she braced herself to the effort, steadily refusing to be disheartened by the increasing difficulties of the way.

Up and up she zigzagged, tenderly nursing the car's strength, feeling her way at every angle as she ascended. When once round the hairpin bend, she knew that the worst would be over. The road grew wider and less steep, and its curves ceased to be formidable. Also, the edge of the precipice was protected by boulders, so that no stranger descending would have any suspicion of the grim dangers that waited below.

Steadily she mounted between the grey rocks and overarching trees. The little car was beginning to labour and she realized that she would have to pause ere long to cool down, but she wanted to get round the bend on to the easier stretch of road first.

Already it was within sight. She could see the black escarpment of cliff shining in the sun. This was the scene of the supreme test. Firmly she urged the little car forward.

Emerging from the trees on to the open cliff-face the full blaze of noonday heat beat upon her. The sea swam in a pearly haze, and she seemed to hang between the heaven and the earth. She was crawling now at a snail's pace, the car reduced to the last ounce of effort. The loose stones crackled under the wheels. The heat and glare were almost intolerable. But the end was within sight. With unfaltering resolution she approached the terrible bend.

Now she was upon it and the real difficulty began. To get round that gleaming wall of rock without actually hanging over the precipice was impossible, but her brakes were reliable and her nerve superb. With tightened lips she set herself to the task.

Forward a few inches, then back; forward and then back, worming her way round, her blue eyes firmly fixed upon the road! Forward and back, forward and back, while the little car panted and struggled as if *in extremis*! Forward again, then back with a sudden jerk that made her grip the wheel and snatch at the brake. Then cautiously forward again, but this time without result. The back wheels seemed to be wedged fast and they refused to move. The engine fought for a space and then heaved a loud sigh of despair and ceased. She started it again. It ran for a few seconds more with a sort of fierce protest and jerked back into silence. She tried yet again with the same result. The car was on the extreme edge of the road with not an inch to spare. She glanced behind her into sheer space. Then she looked to her brakes, and finally descended to discover the trouble.

She opened the bonnet to cool the engine, then turned her attention to the back wheels. She saw at once that one of them had passed over a huge stone imbedded in the edge of the road, and that further progress would be impossible until this was removed. She dragged at it with her hands, but found it immovable. With all her care she had gone just too far.

She looked up at the burning sky and down at the dreaming sea, staring failure in the face.

Then in a moment she threw back her head and laughed. “I’ll get a spade!” she said, and swung round to accomplish the rest of the ascent on foot.

It was then that a sudden sound reached her which made her spring to the rocks at the edge of the bend like a startled chamois. It was the grinding rush of wheels on the stony road above.

Her shout of warning came too late. There was no time for anything but that one wild spring for safety, ere a long racing-car swooped suddenly down the slope towards her.

There came a dragging of brakes, the horrible sliding of wheels that could not be stayed, a crash—and then a succession of crashes that shook even her nerve. She cowered on her refuge and covered her eyes. . . .

When she looked up again the long racing-car was still there, stationary now and spitting like an infuriated tigress, but her own had vanished!

As she gazed, a spare, active figure leaped into view, rising like a jack-in-the-box from the depths of the arrested car, and she heard a peal of laughter that echoed along the cliffs with a ringing mirth that seemed to her bewildered senses scarcely sane.

A second later, while she still stared from her vantage-point, she saw the figure extricate itself with a sort of loose-limbed dexterity from the driver's seat and turn round, as if searching for something. Apparently she was the object of the search, for immediately it moved towards her, and a voice, careless and good-humoured, made itself heard.

"I say, I'm afraid that car of yours has gone west."

The remark seemed to Ruth the coolest she had ever heard. It was uttered with a confidential disarming air, and a broad smile that would have been attractive on a more propitious occasion. He held up his hand to her to help her down.

"Sorry I made you jump!" he said lightly. "By Jove, you didn't lose any time, did you?"

Ruth descended to his level without assistance, though the whole amazing happening had shaken her more than she would have cared to own. Her car was her first consideration. She went to the edge of the road and peered over.

It lay on the rocks a hundred feet below, all its wheels in air, looking pathetically like a broken toy. She stood and gazed down upon it as though it had been a dead friend.

Then she turned slowly and looked at the driver of the racing-car. He was standing close behind her, looking at her with a sort of comic concern.

"I say, it doesn't matter, does it?" he said persuasively, obviously trying to restrain the smile that still twitched at his cheery sunburnt face. "We got off with our lives and I take it we're both insured."

She stared at him rather blankly. His attitude astounded her almost as much as the accident, but his frank *camaraderie* was such as no woman could resent.

She found her voice at last. "How did you come to be on this road?"

"I don't know," he said easily. "How did you?"

She tried to summon her dignity. "I have a right to be here," she said. "But you—you were trespassing."

His smile broke forth again. “I say, what a foul accusation! How do you know?”

“Because it’s a private road leading to Scarpe Castle,” she said.

“Is it though?” he commented. “Well, I expect I’ve as much right on it as you have. Anyhow, it doesn’t matter. The thing was an accident. They’ll have to pay up.”

“Yes, but whose fault?” said Ruth, striving to be practical.

He threw back his head and laughed again till the echoes rang. “Why, nobody’s of course!” he declared. “It never is. Look here! I’ll fill in your form and make a sketch of the accident and everything. You leave it all to me! I’ll see you get a new car all right.”

“A new car!” said Ruth, and suddenly her chin quivered; she turned sharply away.

“Wouldn’t that meet the case?” he said. “You’re rather hard to please, aren’t you? Just think what might have happened!” He looked about him. “And you must have been stuck anyhow. You’d never have got round this bend. It’s a damn’ sticky corner this. We shall have to do something to it.”

“Oh!” Ruth turned back again with enlightenment in her eyes. “You’re Mr. George—the new agent!”

He smiled at her. “My name is George—yes! Clever of you to guess. And you?”

“I am the daughter of the old one,” she said. “My father is giving it up.”

“Oh, I’m taking over from you, am I?” he said. “I say, what a ghastly beginning! We might easily have gone spinning to perdition together without so much as an introduction. I don’t know your name even now.”

“My name is Ruth Carey,” she said.

He made her a ceremonious bow. “A pity your father is chucking his hand in! Is he fed up with the job or what?”

She explained with an odd wonder at the fact that this young man had wholly ceased to be a stranger from the first moment of addressing her. “You see, the old Lord Scarpe never lived here. He was a helpless invalid for about twenty years—as long as I have known the place. It was just left in my father’s hands, and I helped him. But now that the old man is dead, it has gone to an obscure relation, and my father always said that he wouldn’t go

on with it afterwards. So——"—she smiled at him faintly for the first time —"that's how you come to be here."

"Oh, that's how, is it?" he said. "Well, I hope you're going to stay on and help me, or I shall make an awful mess of things. What's this new chap like, by the way?"

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him. I thought you had."

"Oh no! It was all done by letter—through his solicitors. He comes from Australia, doesn't he? I expect he's an awful barbarian." He smiled upon her again in his most winning fashion. "I say, you'll simply have to stay and help me. I can't face this situation alone."

Ruth found herself actually trying not to smile in return. She had recovered her mental balance now, but she had a vagrant suspicion that her judgment had somehow gone astray. "I think the first thing to be done," she said, "is to decide about my car."

"Of course," he agreed obligingly. "Well, I suggest that you get into my car and let me back her up the hill. Then I can take you home and we'll fill in the forms together. You naturally will say it was my fault, and I shall say it was yours. That's always done. Our respective insurances will then go fifty-fifty on the deal, and we shall be—as we were."

"It'll never be the same," said Ruth with a sigh.

He rallied her cheerily. "I say, don't be sentimental! You wait till a new car comes round to your door, and then——"

"But I shan't get a new car," she interrupted. "They'll only give me the value of a second-hand—if that."

"Oh, nonsense! You leave 'em to me! I'll bully them for you," he promised serenely. "Now you hop into my old bus and I'll take you up the hill. We shall certainly have to do something to this hairpin to make it navigable."

"You can never make it possible for us to pass each other anyway," said Ruth.

"Oh, but I don't want to do that," he declared gallantly. "Only to meet and exchange the time of day without either pushing the other over the cliff."

"I'm afraid I don't think it's at all a good meeting-place," she said.

"You wait and see!" he laughed back.

His gaiety was of a type impossible to resist. As they backed up the steep ascent she found herself laughing with him at the difficulties of the way notwithstanding the soreness of her heart. The sunny assurance of his outlook was infectious, and her sporting instinct moved her to respond. It would have been churlish to have done otherwise. Besides, his own car had not escaped entirely unscathed though the damage did not exceed a smashed headlight and crumpled wing. But when she commented upon them, he only laughed.

"Oh, don't let's go into details! Life's too short. If we could only insure against all troubles as easily as against car smashes! Hearts for instance! I've often wished I could insure against a broken heart."

"Has it been broken often?" she asked with interest. "I shouldn't have thought so."

He uttered his merry laugh. "Yes, you've got me there. No, not often! Only once or twice and never beyond repair! But one always feels a time might come—you know—like that hairpin bend—when one might turn a sharp corner and find oneself wrecked before one could pull up."

"I should think it would take a good deal to wreck you," said Ruth.

He was driving warily up the winding road with his head over his shoulder, but he flashed her a sudden glance at that. "Well, yes," he said with abrupt gravity. "It would. But I've often thought there's a hairpin bend in most people's lives. Some get around it, and some don't."

They reached the top at length and ran on to the smooth road that led up to the grim old Castle that frowned like a fortress on the top of the cliff.

"Jove!" he said lightly. "It's like a prison, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed seriously. "Daddy and I often think what fun it would be to lay out a lot of money and make it really beautiful. It's such a lovely position."

He surveyed the place with a reflective eye. "We shall have to get the new lord to put his hand in his pocket," was his verdict. "But you'll have to give me your advice, you and your father. I can't tackle this job alone."

"I don't even know whether we shall stay on here," said Ruth.

He turned towards her keenly. "Oh, you must—for a time anyhow! It would be mean of you not to give me the benefit of your experience, and

I'm sure you couldn't refuse to do that——"—he began to laugh again —"after all I've done for you!"

Again she found it impossible not to laugh with him. "You'll have to talk to Daddy," she said.

He fell in with the idea at once. "Oh, rather! Where do you live? Let's go and find him!"

"We live down in the village," she said. "But wouldn't you like to look round the place now we are here,—or perhaps you have?"

"Only a glance," he assured her. "I didn't get inside. It wasn't inviting enough. But I'd love to go all round it with you. May I?"

"If you like," she said.

He was so entirely different from her pre-conceived idea of her father's successor that curiosity as well as courtesy moved her to consent. They left the car, and she led him round the old grey walls till they came to an arched doorway by which they entered a paved courtyard.

"Are you taking me to the dungeons?" he asked.

She stopped at a narrow side-door and produced a key. "No, these are the kitchens and grooms' quarters. It's all very old-fashioned. They say the furniture hasn't been touched since William IV's reign. There are all sorts of funny little cupboards everywhere—and staircases where you would never expect them. I hope the new lord won't spoil everything."

"I won't let him," he said.

She led him by devious winding passages to the great oak-beamed entrance-hall where suits of armour and ancient weapons gleamed against the sombre walls.

"Who looks after all this?" he said.

"We do," said Ruth.

"Not you personally." He looked at her keenly. "You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do. Why not? I've loved doing it," she said simply. "Daddy has paid me fifty pounds a year for the last six years for being his general factotum as he calls it."

"Fifty pounds a year! Great Scott!" He continued to gaze at her. "What a princely salary!"

She coloured a little. “It was as much as he could afford, and I’d have done the work in any case.”

“Are you sorry to be giving it up?” he asked unexpectedly.

She met his look with plain directness. “Yes, very sorry. But Daddy isn’t strong enough, and he has a sister who wants him to go and live with her, so I suppose he’ll have to go.”

“And what will you do?” he asked.

She raised her head with a delicate movement of independence. “I don’t know yet, but I shall find work somewhere. I’m not afraid of work.”

“What sort of work?” he said; then as she hesitated: “Forgive me for asking! Don’t tell me if you don’t want to, but I’d awfully like to know.”

“I don’t mind telling you,” said Ruth. “I expect I could get work on a farm. I’m fond of animals, and I’m very strong.”

“What! Labourer’s work?” he said.

She smiled. “Or milkmaid’s work! I learnt to milk a long while ago, and I can make butter too.”

He made an abrupt gesture as of one come to a sudden decision. “Oh, I say!” he said impulsively. “I’d give you half my screw if you’d stay and help me here.”

It was Ruth’s turn to open her eyes, and she did so widely. “What an extraordinary idea!” she said slowly.

“Yes, isn’t it?” he said, wholly unabashed. “But not a bad one for all that. It means that you’ll do most of the work, and I shall get all the credit. Quite a reasonable proposition from my point of view. Come! You’re not going to turn it down?”

She stood facing him by a tall narrow window that looked straight out over the sea all shimmering in the heat-haze. “This feels like another hairpin bend,” she said with a half-smile.

“Oh, but there’s no danger round the corner,” he assured her swiftly. “No one’s going to hurl you on to the rocks this time. Think what an immense advantage it would be for me to have someone at hand who knows all the ropes—anyhow till the new Lord Scarpe comes along. I can see you’re a mass of efficiency.” He laughed his winning boyish laugh. “And I’m such an ass if you only knew.”

Ruth surveyed him with serious appraising eyes. “I’m beginning to think you must be,” she said.

He held out his hand to her. “Well, you wouldn’t leave me in the lurch, would you? You wouldn’t like to see me come to grief. You couldn’t be so vindictive as that.”

“No, I’m not vindictive,” she said. “But you took on the job singlehanded, didn’t you? You weren’t thinking of engaging an assistant before you met me.”

“Oh, don’t be so horribly logical!” he said. His hand remained extended, and after a decided pause she laid hers within it. “You know quite well we should make a success of it, now don’t you? Don’t you always know at first sight who you’re going to get on with? I do.”

“I’m not sure,” said Ruth guardedly, removing her hand again.

“Oh, you’re only saying that to tease me,” he said. “You are sure. There now! It’s a bargain, isn’t it?”

She looked at him straight in the eyes. “I’m not going to take half your screw,” she said.

“All right. A third!” he said equably.

“No, nor a third either.” She tried not to smile. “Nor a sixth, nor a twelfth, nor even a penny.”

He put his hand to his head with a dramatic gesture. “I say, don’t make me giddy! You’re going to do it for love!”

She turned from him, still hotly fighting the smile which should not have assailed her at such a moment. “Shall we be sensible now?” she suggested. “I’ll show you the rest of the house another time, but we’d better go home now and tell my father.”

“Oh yes, let’s go and tell him by all means!” he said with alacrity.

“I mean about the accident,” said Ruth.

“All right,” he said cheerily. “No need to rush things! We’ll tell him the rest by degrees.”

“I don’t think,” said Ruth very quietly, “that there is anything else to tell.”

“Not till it happens,” he agreed. “No sense in being premature, of course! Personally, I love drifting, don’t you?”

"I'm not sure," Ruth said again.

He smiled upon her with a confidence too disarming to be resented. "All right. I'll ask you again in a week's time," he said.

• • • • • • •

THEY went out again into the summer sunshine and presently, by way of the main road which wound inland, down to the little white village on the edge of which, close to the Castle gates, Ruth Carey and her father had lived for so long. The bailiff's house was no more than a cottage set in a green orchard, trimly picturesque, but the visitor surveyed it with keen appreciation.

"I say, what a jolly little home! And you've lived here all your life! That's exactly what it looks like."

"Come and see my father!" said Ruth. "Ah, there he is! Daddy!" She called across the grass to a figure in shirt-sleeves engrossed over a flower-bed. "Daddy! Here is Mr. George—just come!"

The figure straightened itself, looked, and came slowly to meet them.

Duncan Carey was a man well on in the sixties, grey-haired and thin, with a somewhat weary bearing, as though he had worked too hard all his life. There was an air of resignation about him, as if he had given up expecting anything really pleasant. His smile, though kindly, was too tired to be genial.

"You are Mr. George?" he said. "I only had your letter this morning. I didn't expect you before next week."

Young George's smile lacked nothing in cheery good-will. "I changed my plans," he said. "Thought I'd like to have a good look at the place while you were still in command, sir. I hope you don't mind?"

"Why should I mind?" said Carey. "You are very welcome. My daughter latterly has done more than I have. My heart is not so strong as it was once, and I have some difficulty in getting about as I used. But she will give you all the information you need outside, and if you care to look at the books at any time——" he made a gesture towards the cottage—"they are all there ready for inspection. I think you will find everything in order."

"I'm sure of that," said the new agent. "Only hope I shall do half as well. Afraid you won't like me much when Miss Carey tells you what I've done already."

“Oh, but you didn’t!” said Ruth quickly. “I mean—it wasn’t all your fault.”

He threw her a laughing glance. “Remember, no blame is attached to either of us! That’s important. In fact, it was almost a case of suicide on the part of your car. Temporary insanity, I should call it.”

“Combined with the hairpin bend,” said Ruth, “which neither of us would have attempted in our sober senses. Daddy,” she turned to her father with a hint of appeal, “there’s been an accident, and I’ve lost the car.”

“Lost it!” Carey gazed at her with a mild wonder. “What on earth do you mean, child? How—lost it?”

She explained. “I met Mr. George—unexpectedly—at the hairpin bend. I was stuck, and——”

“And I ran into her car and pushed it over the cliff,” said George. “It was all my fault of course really; but we’re pretending it wasn’t—to please the insurance companies.”

Carey turned from one to the other with a bewildered expression. “I don’t understand,” he said to his daughter. “You don’t mean you took the cliff road to Scarpe?”

“I’m afraid I did, Daddy. It was very—foolish. But—I knew I shouldn’t have many more chances, and I did so want to get round.” She ended with her eyes downcast, avoiding his look.

George came swiftly to her assistance. “It was a jolly sporting effort,” he declared. “I never admired anyone so much before. You see, sir, it really doesn’t matter. We’re both insured, and——”

Carey interrupted him. “Is the car wrecked?” he asked.

“Completely, I’m afraid. She’s lying on the beach upside down. But it really wasn’t Miss Carey’s fault,” the young man declared. “She might have got round if I hadn’t pushed her over.”

“Oh, but you know I couldn’t!” Ruth exclaimed. “I was badly stuck.”

“How did you escape?” said Carey.

“She jumped,” said George ardently. “Finest leap I ever saw! It’s all right, sir, I tell you. We’re insured. We shall get it out of them all right.”

Carey looked at him with subsiding agitation. “You’ll be very clever if you do,” he said.

"Oh, it's quite easy," smiled the other. "It all depends on how you handle them. They'll pay up all right. Not a doubt of it."

Carey made a tragic gesture and seemed to relapse into his former attitude of weary resignation. "Yours may—perhaps," he said. "Ours won't."

"Oh, but, Daddy, why not?" said Ruth. "It was an accident. No one could say it wasn't."

Carey sighed. "I daresay it was, my dear. But, you see, I've always looked on you as a fairly safe driver, and as I knew you would have to dispose of the car when we leave here, I let the policy lapse—six months ago."

"Oh, my stars!" said George. Then he turned round to the girl and smiled into her face of consternation. "Laugh!" he said urgently. "Laugh! It doesn't matter a tinker's curse. I'll get it out of mine."

There was that in his tone that moved her, she knew not wherefore. The situation was very far from being of a sort to call forth mirth. Yet she laughed with him, and as she did so she saw the comic side.

"Why, of course!" she said. "I was going to try and sell her—to you!"

"I'll buy her," cried George, "as she lies!"

• • • • • • •

PERHAPS it was excusable that Carey's sense of humour should fail to rise to the occasion. He had never been a humorous man. But since his daughter and his successor seemed determined to treat the matter as a joke he made no objection to their doing so. They were young, and young people often laughed at things which caused no amusement to the more mature minds of their elders. He himself had long ceased either to hope or despair over anything. He had learned with his waning strength to take life as it came, and most of its decisions were left to Ruth.

When she told him that Mr. George wanted them to help him in the taking over of the management of the estate he agreed that it might be a kind thing to do until Lord Scarpe returned, but left the doing of it entirely to her, according to habit.

Young George took up his abode at the village inn forthwith, but became almost an inmate of the Careys' humble *ménage* in his zeal to master all the Scarpe affairs. They spent a good deal of time up at the Castle and about the estate, and to Ruth, who till then had regarded her father in something of the light of a sleeping partner, his energetic co-operation was a keen delight. She

had always loved Scarpe Castle, and the enthusiasm which the new agent brought to his work aroused her own to its fullest extent.

"If we only had money to spend on it!" she would say sometimes.

To which he would cheerily reply: "I'll get it out of this new fellow when he comes along."

They were full of schemes for improvements, but, perhaps naturally, the first thing upon which George wished to concentrate was the hairpin bend, and after several discussions they evolved a plan for its betterment which would make it possible for one car to get round without serious risk.

"It won't be mine, of course," Ruth said with a tinge of wistfulness. "But Lord Scarpe will probably want to use the road, and so will you."

"You wait!" he rejoined cheerily. "You'll find yourself climbing round it in a brand new car one of these days."

She did not believe him, but she left the kindly prophecy uncontradicted. The wreckage of her own car had gone from the rocks below, and he told her that he had the matter in hand and would let her know as soon as there was anything to report. In the meantime they went to and fro in his racing-car, superintending the work that had been started and making plans to submit to the new Lord Scarpe as soon as he should make his appearance.

"I only wish he'd come," Ruth said one evening. "And then we could really begin on things."

"Yes. I'm getting a bit tired of waiting too," he agreed. "But I suppose he's a right to do as he likes, and we're very happy as we are."

"Yes, of course. And Daddy and I will have to go when he comes. I was forgetting that," said Ruth.

They were walking down the cliff-drive to view the progress of the operations. He turned to her somewhat suddenly. "Why?" he said.

She glanced at him in surprise. "Well, he won't want two agents, will he?" she said.

"P'raps not," he said. "But—there's a way round that—as there is round most things. You don't want to go, do you?"

"Not 'specially," said Ruth. "But——"

He paused abruptly in his walk to light a cigarette. "I don't want you to go either," he said then, with an odd vehemence. "I've never met anybody to

work with like you. I wonder how you feel about it."

"I!" said Ruth, pausing also because she could not well go on. "Well, of course—I feel rather like that too. Only—it's not much good, is it? He wouldn't keep us both."

"He might," said George. He stood with his face to the sea, gazing out through the trees to the far horizon. "I mean,"—his voice came rather jerkily; he was smoking also in jerks—"he couldn't object—to a married agent,—could he?"

"Oh!" said Ruth. His meaning burst upon her with a suddenness that was rather overwhelming. She stood in blank silence by his side, as it were awaiting developments.

He continued with the same jerky tenseness. "I don't know if there's anyone else with you. There isn't with me, and never will be. You bowled me clean over that day—at the hairpin bend."

"A week ago!" she said in a low voice.

He turned towards her, and she saw that his face was strangely moved. "Yes, I know it's only that," he said, "but I've been wanting you the whole of my life. I've always known I should meet you some day—round a corner." He smiled, but his lips were quivering. "It's not like that with you of course. It couldn't be. Only—you'll admit—we do pull well together, don't we? That ought to count for something."

He stopped. She had held out her hand to him, but it was at arm's length. He took it with reverence.

"May I think about it, please?" said Ruth. "No, there isn't anyone else—but—but——"

"You're not sure that I could qualify?" he suggested. "Won't you give me a chance to try? I'm not a bad sort—as men go."

She smiled at that, also not very steadily. "I know you're not. I like you very much. But—you are a little sudden, aren't you?"

He released her hand and looked depressed for the first time in their acquaintance. "I suppose I am as God made me," he said. "But I'm not offering you half my screw this time. I'm offering you—all I have in the world."

"Oh, I know," said Ruth. She drew nearer to him almost in spite of herself. "Please don't be miserable! I haven't said No."

"Not yet," he said. "But you will."

His eyes again looked out to sea, and her heart reproached her. There was dejection in his attitude.

"I don't know why you say that," she said. "I've only asked for time."

He did not stir. "Look here!" he said. "Suppose I were rich—suppose I were Lord Scarpe for instance, and owned all this—would it make any difference?"

"But of course not!" she said with emphasis. "I'm not—that sort."

He turned upon her, and she saw the gay smile that so appealed to her flash back into his face. "All right,—Ruth!" he said daringly. "You can take as long as you like. Come on! Let's go and look at the hairpin bend!"

His spirits from that moment had quite regained their usual high level, and she found it difficult to believe that their brief conversation at the top of the cliff had not been a dream. For his attitude was once more frank and friendly and wholly free from strain.

When they finally parted at the gate of her father's cottage-garden he drove away with an airy wave of his hat that expressed the very essence of careless comradeship.

"He couldn't have been in earnest," she said to herself, but deep in her heart she knew that he had been. And, looking a little deeper still, she knew that she wanted him to be.

In the morning a surprise awaited her in the form of a sealed letter which she opened with considerable curiosity.

"Good gracious, Daddy!" she said, after a hasty glance at the signature. "It's from Lord Scarpe. Listen!"

"Dear Madam,

"*I have learned from an authoritative source that owing to the dangerous condition of the cliff-drive on my estate you have been put to considerable personal risk as well as the inconvenience of losing your car, which, I understand, was not insured. Under these circumstances and taking into consideration the fact that you and your father have in past years been of most valuable service to my predecessor, I desire to accept full responsibility for your loss. I shall be obliged therefore if you can make it convenient to meet me on the spot on which the accident occurred at 10 a.m. to-morrow*

when I shall have much pleasure in making such reparation as lies in my power.

"*Your obedient servant*,
"SCARPE."

Ruth raised her eyes with a dazed expression. "Mr. George must have told him," she said. "Oh, Daddy, he shouldn't have done it! What am I to do?"

"My dear, I don't see that you can do other than as he suggests," said Carey quietly. "I presume he writes from the Castle?"

"Yes—yes, it was posted last night." Ruth began to look hunted. "Oh, but how wrong of Mr. George to make him think he was responsible! And how strange that he should have arrived without our hearing of it! Daddy, you must come too."

But for once Duncan Carey refused to accept his daughter's decision. "No, dear," he said. "I doubt if I could get there in time, and in any case I think it would be better for you to go without me. I am no longer in his employ, remember, and any sense of obligation which he may entertain is due to you alone."

She found she could not move him from this, and the time indicated in the letter was already drawing near. The idea of going in search of George to compel him to accompany her had also to be discarded. She might fail to find him, and in any case her feelings towards him were now so mixed that it seemed advisable to sort them before confronting him.

But undoubtedly annoyance was uppermost with her as she set forth in the hot June sunshine. He had gone too far. He ought not to have done this thing.

She came to the beach-road whence she had set forth upon the adventure up the cliff a week before. Men had been at work on the bend half way up clearing and widening, but to-day as she started the ascent on foot she heard no sound but the lazy wash of the sea. She wondered a little, knowing that the work was not completed; then reflected that perhaps Lord Scarpe had put a stop to it. His unexpected return might complicate matters. Certainly her share at least was over. She realized with a pang that the pleasant partnership of the last few days was at an end, and her annoyance flickered and died.

It was a hot climb, and her feet as she urged them upwards felt heavy and reluctant. Though she was too business-like to be late, she had no wish

to reach the corner, no desire whatever to make the acquaintance of the man who had summoned her thither. Why had he chosen the hairpin bend? It would surely have been far more gracious to have received her at the Castle.

Wearily she toiled upwards, and at last she neared the spot. Still no sound reached her. The place seemed deserted. Almost instinctively she regarded the work with a practical eye as she came to it. It had been carefully planned and was in process of being well executed. What fault had he found with it? A quiver of indignation assailed her. It was hard to see the work which she and the new agent had so energetically undertaken thus summarily arrested. She began to wish heartily that George were with her, after all.

And then she reached the bend, turned it, and found him.

He was sitting on the step of a car awaiting her. It was not his usual car, but one so wholly the replica of her own lost property that she stared at it, almost believing it to be the same.

He rose to meet her, but though his face wore a smile it was of a somewhat doubtful quality.

She was the first to speak. “You can’t have got her repaired!” she exclaimed incredulously.

“Oh no!” he said, and his smile broadened. “She’s brand new as I said she would be—ready for you to hop into and drive straight up the hill and home. I’ve got her round all ready—as you see.”

But Ruth still stood staring. “Where is—Lord Scarpe?” she asked slowly.

He made an airy gesture. “You’ll find him at the Castle.”

She continued to stare at the new car. “So—that’s what he meant!” she said. Then she looked at her companion. “I knew you would never get it out of your insurance.”

He met her look with cheery effrontery. “Well, I got it anyway. That’s all that matters.”

“It isn’t!” said Ruth. “And I can’t take it—possibly. You ought never to have done it! It wasn’t Lord Scarpe’s fault.”

“But it was,” he said.

“It wasn’t!” she repeated in growing agitation. “He had nothing whatever to do with it, and I’m ashamed that he should have been bothered

about it in any way. You'd better take the thing straight back to him and tell him so." She turned from him with a sweeping gesture of repudiation.

"Oh, I say!" he said. "Are *you* going to give me the sack too?"

She kept her back to him, strangely possessed by an emotion which she hardly understood. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "But—it was very wrong of you."

He waited patiently behind her. "It's a bit hard," he said after a moment, "to be given the sack all round. And anyhow—I meant well."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Just that," he returned. "Lord Scarpe has given me the sack, and he's going to offer the job—to you."

She turned swiftly. "Don't be absurd! What are you talking about? I'm sure that isn't true!"

"It is true," he asserted. "He thinks you know more about it than I do—which is also true. That's really what he wants to see you about. The car is only a sort of make-weight."

"And what are you going to do?" she demanded rather breathlessly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I'm scrap! I don't count."

"You're not!" she declared indignantly. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

"I should if I were you," he said.

She gave him a scathing look. "I know what you would do if you were me," she said.

"Well, what?" he said.

She paused an instant; then: "You'd say 'Let's marry!' " she said with an odd little choking laugh.

He held out both hands to her. "And go into partnership! Well, is that what *you* are going to say?"

But she hung back, still half-laughing. "What would you say if I did?"

He took her gently by the shoulders. "I should say—'Why don't you marry Lord Scarpe?' "

She retreated a little from his hold, then as he checked her she stood and faced him, trembling slightly but with growing assurance. "I don't know

why you say that," she said. "I'm not in the least attracted by riches or position. Nor is he in the least likely to ask me."

He drew a long deep breath, then very quietly he set her free. "My dear," he said, "it's a great shame, I know, and you can call me—anything you like. He asked you—last night."

"What?" she said, dumbfounded.

He stood a moment, looking at her, his face oddly expressive of embarrassment and an easy sort of triumph. Then suddenly he began to laugh as he had laughed that day when her car had plunged to destruction and his had halted on the very verge.

"Oh, I say!" he protested. "Don't look so lost! It wasn't my fault. You did it all. You said I was George—the new agent."

"Yes, I know," she said, still gazing at him.

"Well,"—with an effort he checked his laughter—"I hadn't the heart to contradict you. Besides, I rather liked the idea. It was so much jollier. But I was straight with your father. He knows. I say,—do laugh if you can!"

"Oh!" Ruth said. "Daddy knows!"

He nodded, drawing a little nearer to her. "Yes. I told him the very day after. Are you very angry? Does it make any real difference? You said last night it wouldn't."

She looked up at him, and somehow her face caught a gleam of humour from his. She smiled; and then slowly her hands came out to him.

"It would have made—an enormous difference," she said, "if——"

"If what?" he said, gathering them up closely to his heart. "If I hadn't told your father?"

She lifted her face a little higher. Her smile had deepened; it said more than her words.

"No—no! Daddy doesn't matter. If I hadn't loved you," she said.

THE LOSERS

"It's great fun climbing trees," said Mavis the tomboy, sitting on her heels and munching an apple with supreme enjoyment. "I'd like to be a steeple-jack, Uncle Rupert, wouldn't you?"

Rupert Armitage considered the matter with suitable gravity. He was seated in a bath-chair, and a voluminous rug, skillfully draped, generously concealed the fact that he had no legs below the knees.

"Well, no," he said after some thought. "I don't think chimney-stacks appeal to me very much."

"But you like mountaineering," pointed out Mavis to whom his infirmity was no more than an incident of the most negligible kind.

"Oh, that's rather different," said Rupert. "Yes, I was keen on mountaineering once."

"And only fancy! I've never done any," she said.

He smiled at her. "There's still time! I hadn't when I was your age."

She tossed back her fair hair with an impatient gesture. "I wish I was older. I wish I'd finished with school."

"Oh, rot!" he said. "You know you love it."

She shook her head. "No. I want to get on and see things. You wouldn't like to be thirteen again. You know you wouldn't."

"Not so sure!" said Rupert. He still smiled, but his eyes had a gleam of wistfulness. "Rather fun—being able to climb trees," he said.

"But you wouldn't now," objected Mavis. "Not at your age! Why, look at Pitman! He always uses a ladder."

"I'm younger than Pitman anyhow," said Rupert.

She nodded. "I know exactly how old you are. You're forty. I looked you up in the old Bible last week."

"Well, I'll bet Pitman's older than that," said Rupert.

“Yes! Pitman’s been fifty-two as long as I can remember,” said Mavis. “He never seems to have a birthday.”

“Lucky Pitman!” commented Rupert.

“Oh, I’d hate not to have a birthday,” she protested. “Fancy being always thirteen!”

He laughed. “Or always forty for the matter of that! But I’m going to be thirty-nine next birthday if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, but you can’t!” objected Mavis, round-eyed.

“Oh, yes, I can,” he assured her. “Then in thirteen years’ time we shall be exactly the same age—twenty-seven, isn’t it?”

“Fancy being twenty-seven!” said Mavis. “But thirteen years is a very long time, isn’t it?”

“Fairly long,” said Rupert.

“I was only just born thirteen years ago,” she remarked. “I couldn’t even walk.”

“No,” said Rupert. “I’d just given up walking too.”

She looked at him with a flash of sympathy. “You’d like to be twenty-seven again, Uncle Rupert,” she said. “I mean—before it happened.”

“Yes—before it happened,” said Rupert. He looked at the rug that covered him, and then at the child. “It must seem odd to you,” he said, “to see us going about like lopped trees, and you can’t even remember the storm that did us in.”

“No, it isn’t odd,” said Mavis shrewdly. “We’ve learnt all about the War at school. I can show you all the places on the map. It’s much more interesting than the Wars of the Roses, and,” with glistening eyes, “I should think it was much more fun.”

“Oh, great fun!” said Rupert. “So amusing to wake up in the morning and wonder if you’ll be blown to Kingdom Come before night!”

Mavis was looking at him attentively, chewing her apple the while. “I’m sure you weren’t ever afraid,” she observed.

He laughed. “Of course we were afraid—every one of us! Some showed it more than others, that’s all.”

Mavis shook her head. “I don’t believe *you* were afraid,” she said. “You’re like poor old Bête Noire. You don’t know what it means.”

“Who is Bête Noire?” he asked.

“Oh just our French mistress. She isn’t at all interesting,” said Mavis with the sweeping assurance of youth. “But she never turns a hair at anything. She’s old—quite thirty-five, and her hair is white. They say it turned white in the War. But she’s very dull. She never talks about it.”

“Is that a sign of dullness?” said Rupert.

“Of course!” said Mavis. “You talk about it, don’t you?”

“Bits of it,” said Rupert. “The bits that you call funny, not the others.”

“Well, she never talks at all,” said Mavis. “Her face is horribly scarred. Somebody said it was burnt by a shell or something at the bombardment of Abbécourt. It’s made her very ugly. That’s why we call her Bête Noire.”

“I call that brutal of you,” said Rupert with unexpected warmth.

Mavis looked indignant. “It isn’t really, Uncle Rupert! After all, her name is Bénoit, so there isn’t much difference. And we never say it to her face of course.”

“I’ll bet she knows,” said Rupert. But the unwonted gleam of anger died out of his eyes as they rested on the child. “After all, how can you understand,” he said, “if you never hear anything of the real horrors of that hell?”

Mavis looked somewhat awed, but she continued to chew her apple. “That’s what I always say,” she remarked. “I think she might tell us all about it, don’t you? But she’s one of those people who never tell you a thing or take any notice of anything. One day when there was a dreadful thunderstorm and all the other classes were allowed to stop and watch it, she made us go on just as if nothing were happening.”

“Very good for you!” commented Rupert.

“I thought it was silly,” said Mavis. “One couldn’t possibly attend properly, and then she gave us bad marks, which wasn’t fair.”

“Jolly good discipline!” declared Rupert unsympathetically.

Mavis screwed her round face into a grimace. “P’raps it was, but it didn’t make one love her. She’s much too cold to love. I’m sure you wouldn’t like her, Uncle Rupert.”

Rupert's face wore a curious, speculative look. "I probably should," he said. "And you probably would too if they left off camouflaging and told you the naked truth now and then."

"Well, why don't you?" said Mavis invitingly. "I'd love to hear all about it—the poison gas and the liquid fire and the dug-outs—oh, and the shells ——"—her voice became ecstatic—"wouldn't I love to have been there just!"

"And dead men hurled about in fragments—and others choking in their own blood—sound ones driven to frenzy with the horror of it and turning into brute beasts such as God never created!" Rupert spoke with a species of half-strangled passion that made the child gaze at him with startled eyes. "And in the midst of it all, women—women like your Bête Noire at Abbécourt whom you despise and call dull, probably because she broke her heart over some poor devil who went down in that hell—women waiting to bind up the wounded and soothe the maniacs and comfort the dying, with shells bursting and spreading more and more destruction all the time—blowing them to pieces along with the men they tried to save! Would you have liked to have gone through that, I wonder? Would any woman have gone through it for choice? Could any woman ever be the same again?"

Mavis made no reply. She was still staring at him half-scared by the vehemence he suppressed. But he did not want an answer. He had almost forgotten her. He went on more quietly, as if speaking to himself.

"And it was a woman who saved me from that inferno—probably gave her life for mine. I'll never forget her face as long as I live. It was—the face of an angel. I sometimes wonder even now—was she an angel? She carried me out of that blazing deathtrap as if I'd been a child, though how she found the strength God only knows. But a man without any legs doesn't weigh so heavy, and there's a saying that special strength is given for special need."

He paused with his face lifted to the peaceful blue of the summer sky above him, and over it there crept a very spiritual and at the same time a very human look.

"I never saw her again," he said. "She wasn't a Red Cross nurse. She was probably killed that night. I know she ran back into the flames when I was safe—just before the roof crashed. I never think of her without remembering those words: 'He shall give his angels charge concerning thee.' Was she an angel, I wonder? Perhaps—perhaps the fire had no power over her! I often wonder."

He ceased to speak, and as the strange look slowly died out of his face, Mavis resumed the apple with renewed vigour.

"She couldn't have been a bit like Bête Noire," she observed.

They were close pals, these two, though the round-faced child was of too placid a temperament to rise to any great heights of imagination. The shattered youth of the man called to the youth within herself, and they were seldom out of sympathy. He was a frequent guest in her father's household, and recently the latter's acceptance of a Devon living had brought them to this quiet corner of the world which in the eyes of Mavis at least was the acme of all that could be desired. For the first time she was sent to school as a weekly boarder to the town ten miles away, and being an only child she revelled in the companionship thus afforded. Now that the summer holidays were come, she would indeed have felt a little solitary but for the society of the beloved uncle who, according to her description, always walked in a bath-chair.

He had become quite an adept at this means of self-transport and never required any assistance unless there were steps to be negotiated, and even these difficulties had to a large extent been reduced at Wood Regis Rectory by a system of boards placed at so gradual a slant that the cripple could propel himself up them and into the house without too much exertion.

He was a wonderful playfellow in Mavis's eyes, for no game was too childish for him. He could even play "Tip and Run" with her on the lawn with a dexterity and enthusiasm which her utmost activity was required to beat. He had once been a keen cricketer, and often in the evenings he would wheel himself down to watch the village team at practice.

Mavis used to accompany him on these expeditions, but more for the pleasure of being with him than for the interest of the game. There was always a seat for her on the foot-rest of his chair, and so they would sit for hours with the swallows circling overhead, talking and watching intermittently and always in complete accord.

Rupert's keen eyes missed very little of the play, and he had imbued her with certain sportsmanlike instincts which enabled her to distinguish with outspoken simplicity between good play and bad.

On the evening after their talk together they went down to the village-ground, but Mavis was quieter than usual as though she were pondering some problem. Rupert, with the quickened perception which comes to those condemned only to watch, soon realized that her mind was not upon the

game. She answered his remarks with wandering attention, and when he finally ceased to make any, his silence passed unnoticed.

When at length they turned homewards, a single question from him elicited the fact that she had seen little or nothing of the play.

"Where have you been all the time?" he asked with some curiosity.

Mavis hesitated and coloured. "I was only—thinking," she said.

Rupert smiled into her face of embarrassment. "Bless the child!" he said kindly.

The lane that led to the Rectory sloped upwards, and she came behind his chair to help him on the ascent.

"No. Don't push!" he said. "I can manage." But Mavis was already pushing and refused to desist.

When they reached the top she came to his side again. "Uncle Rupert," she said, "do you really think we've been brutal to Mademoiselle Bénoit?"

"Oh, that's where you've been, is it?" said Rupert.

Mavis's round face was flushed. She avoided his look. "We didn't think it mattered," she said. "I'm sure she doesn't know."

"Let's hope she doesn't!" said Rupert.

Mavis moved close to him, so that he checked his progress to hear what she had to say. "She's spending the holidays at the school," she told him rather awkwardly. "Shall I get Mother to ask her here for the day? Would that be kind?"

Rupert's keen eyes softened to a look of tenderness. He put out a hand and grasped one of hers.

"I say, you are a little brick!" he said. "Mean to say you've been thinking of that all this time?"

Mavis nodded, her downcast eyelids suddenly red. She spoke, with some difficulty. "When you said that about—the woman who carried you out of the fire—and then went back—though I'm sure she wasn't a bit like Bête—I mean Mademoiselle Bénoit—I wondered if p'raps—just because you remembered her so—you might like——" Her voice trailed off, and she sought to swallow her unwonted emotion with a huge gulp.

Rupert pulled her down to him and kissed her. "Thanks, darling!" he said with feeling. "That's jolly decent of you. I'm sorry if I spoke too strongly.

We're apt to forget that what means so much to us isn't much more than a legend to you."

Mavis clung to him for a moment "It won't—any more," she said somewhat incoherently. "I didn't know it was like that."

"Well, of course I can only speak of my own particular bit of it," he said. "I was lucky in a way as I did less than two years. But I'll never forget that last night—lying in the *château*—with my legs off—waiting to be roasted!" He stopped himself. "Look here! We've talked enough about this. Yes, I like your idea very much. See if you can get the poor thing here! P'raps we can cheer her up!"

• • • • • • •

A LETTER, laboriously composed in French by uncle and niece, was the outcome of this discussion though it purported to be written by Mavis alone. Her mother had no objection to the invitation being issued provided that the two playfellows were prepared to entertain their visitor unassisted. She herself was fully occupied with mothers' meetings and district visiting and had little time to spare for social amenities. But Mavis, backed by Rupert, promised to undertake the full responsibility of Mademoiselle Bénoit, and so the invitation went forth.

"Of course she may not come," said Mavis hopefully as she and Rupert returned from the post. "I shouldn't think she'll want to. She doesn't like me, and she doesn't know about you, you see."

"It would be more than enough to keep her away if she did!" laughed Rupert.

But two days later at breakfast-time Mademoiselle Bénoit's answer came, written in perfect English, accepting the invitation.

"So much for our French!" laughed Rupert. "She evidently thinks we shouldn't understand the language in its native form."

"She's coming!" said Mavis despondently. "What ever shall we do with her?"

"We'll make her play 'Tip and Run'," he suggested.

But Mavis shook her head. "You don't know Mademoiselle Bête Noire."

"Well, I shall, as soon as you've introduced me," he said. "You leave her to me! I'll see she enjoys herself."

Mavis looked at the optimist with doubting eyes. “I expect she’ll squash you flat,” she said.

“Nothing like looking on the bright side,” said Rupert.

He maintained this cheery attitude in spite of his niece’s very obvious misgivings, and when the day fixed for the visit arrived, his spirits were still unimpaired.

“We’ll do the thing in style,” he said. “We’ll go and meet her.”

So in excellent time they set off side by side for the village-station which was little more than half-a-mile away. It was a sunny morning, and they arrived well before the train was due.

Mavis, despite her placid temperament, displayed decided signs of nervousness. “She’s dreadfully ugly,” she warned him. “I do hope you won’t mind.”

“P’raps I shan’t think so,” joked Rupert.

“Oh yes, you will!” she said. “You’ll want to run away when you see her. But she may wear a veil.”

“Well, there is one advantage of having no legs,” said Rupert. “You can’t turn tail at the supreme moment. Here comes the train! Now we shall see.”

Mavis scanned the carriages as they ran past. “Don’t believe she’s come,” she said. “Can’t see her anywhere.” Then as the train stopped: “Oh, yes, there she is! And she has got a veil on.”

A slim and very graceful figure dressed in black had alighted some distance up the platform and now came quietly towards them.

“Go and meet her!” said Rupert.

Mavis went, not very willingly. From his post near the barrier Rupert saw the exchange of civilities between governess and pupil. They were of the most perfunctory kind though he fancied that this was due rather to awkwardness on the part of the child than lack of graciousness on that of the visitor. The black veil she was wearing almost completely concealed her features, but there was a queenliness about her bearing which sent a gleam of appreciation into the eyes of the man who watched her.

He greeted her with a smile before she reached him: “How do you do? I am Mavis’s playfellow. I don’t suppose you have ever heard of me though I have of you.”

She bowed with a murmured acknowledgment of his self-introduction.

"He's my uncle," said Mavis, standing by.

Rupert's hand was extended expectantly, and after a moment Mademoiselle Bénoit laid her own within it. She seemed unaccountably embarrassed, in spite of the complete lack of formality that characterized her reception.

"So pleased to meet you," he said. "This is such a ripping place we want you to see it. Yes, help me to turn round like a good child! That's the way," as Mavis sprang to obey. "Now I can manage all right. Afraid I must walk in the road, Mademoiselle Bénoit. Hope you don't mind. There's not much traffic in these parts."

She answered him in a low quiet voice. "I mind nothing. It was kind of you to come and meet me."

Her English was perfect if a trifle precise. She took up her position on one side of him while Mavis walked on the other.

"I assure you I was very keen on meeting you," Rupert said. "I'll tell you why presently. I hope you won't be bored with us. We can't offer anything more exciting than a day in the country."

"But I love the country," she said.

"So do I," said Rupert warmly, and began forthwith to talk of country things, pointing out on the short journey the various beauties of the way.

"They're just beginning to cut the harvest," he said, as they neared the Rectory gate. "Did you notice the cornfields as you came along the line? They are glorious this year."

She had been answering him with a certain grave sympathy, but at this question she hesitated and finally made reluctant reply. "I am afraid I do not like cornfields, *monsieur*."

Rupert turned in his chair and gave her a swift look. "I know," he said. "But the corn—and the poppies—are still beautiful, *mademoiselle*."

She made a slight gesture of agreement, but she did not pursue the subject.

"Let's come in!" said Mavis.

They entered, and Mavis's mother received them, but her kindly hospitality failed to penetrate the chill aloofness of the French governess

whose courtesy was so strictly conventional as to be almost repellent.

She did not remove her hat for luncheon and only raised her veil sufficiently to allow her to partake thereof. But notwithstanding these drawbacks Rupert refused to be discouraged. He talked cheerily throughout the meal, allowing no difficult pauses, and when it was over he took possession of her as though she were in his especial charge.

"Let's go out to the harvest-field at the back!" he said. "You won't mind for once, *mademoiselle*, as we are—old comrades." He spoke with a disarming smile as though he half-expected her to dispute the latter assertion, but she only looked at him gravely through her veil, saying nothing. "And I know of such a ripping corner where we can sun ourselves and talk."

"Let us go then!" said Mademoiselle Bénoit quietly.

"Am I to come?" asked Mavis with the bluntness of thirteen.

"Yes, you can come," Rupert said, "if you don't talk."

So the trio set forth once more by way of the orchard with its gleaming red fruit to the gold of the harvest-field beyond.

The reaping-machine was at work, and half of the corn was still standing. Rupert called a halt just inside the field, for progress over the rough stubble was difficult. The fragrance of the ripened grain filled the air. The dreamy peace of the summer day lay like a filmy veil upon the earth.

He looked up after a few seconds at the sombrely-clad unresponsive woman by his side, then he turned to the child. "Mavis, run back to the house for a cushion and a rug!"

Mavis went like the wind, and in a moment he addressed his silent companion in a different tone, with a queer urgency.

"*Mademoiselle*, I want to ask you something. I hope you will forgive me because it means so much to me. You have been through—what I have been through—what these children will never know. I never meet—old comrades now. As you see, I am on the shelf. May I go on?"

She turned towards him without haste or any sign of surprise. "Yes?" she said. "What is it?"

"I only wanted to ask you," he said, "I just wondered—I believe you were at Abbécourt, during the bombardment in '16. Were you anywhere near when they shelled the church and the *Château des Fontaines* before they could get the wounded away?"

She looked at him through her veil, and a tremor, scarcely perceptible, passed through her slight figure. "What makes you ask me—that?" she said.

His face was raised with an earnestness unusual in him. His grey eyes seemed to be trying desperately to pierce the veil.

"Because I was one of that crowd," he said. "It was all such a ghastly shambles—the sort of thing we never tell the children. But when I heard that you had been through it, I couldn't help wondering if it could have been anywhere near that particular corner of hell. You see," he halted a little, "there was a girl there—in the *château*—who saved my life. I think she was looking for some other fellow. She only helped me as it were *en passant*, and then ran back into the burning *château*. But—though I never saw her again, I have never forgotten her. And—I wondered—if perhaps——"

"She was probably killed," said Mademoiselle Bénoit with chilly logic.

"She may have been," he said. "I'd give all I have—to know."

"Can you tell me her name?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I knew nothing about her. But she had the most beautiful face I have ever seen—fair—with wonderful eyes—dark—strong, courageous, I see them——"—he spoke half-deprecatingly—"every night when I shut my own."

"You are—romantic, *monsieur*," she said, a faint tremor that might have been derision in her voice.

"There can never be any other woman for me," he made quiet response. "If she is dead—I shall still be true to her."

The reaping-machine was coming towards them; the ripe corn and the poppies fell together. The man and the woman watched in silence while it passed, seeing far different things.

The whirring of it was dying away in the distance before Rupert spoke again. "And you can't help me, *mademoiselle*? Your part was played elsewhere?"

His voice held a sound of wistfulness: he did not look at her as he spoke, but straight before him with eyes that seemed too weary to take any further

note of what they saw.

She turned very slowly, the sunshine glinting through the veil upon her silvery hair. She spoke in tones that were deep and strangely still. "*Monsieur*," she said, "it is true I was at Abbécourt during the bombardment, but I can tell you nothing of the girl of whom you speak. The *Château des Fontaines* was my home, and my heart lies buried in its ashes. It was there that I lost the lover of my youth. The *château* was burned to the ground. No sign—no trace of him was left."

"Ah!" Rupert said: it was more a deep breath than a sound. Something seemed to hold him back from lifting his eyes to her again. "And you ——"—he spoke almost in a whisper—"will always be true to him?"

"I loved him," she said simply.

In the silence that followed, they watched the distant reaper and the falling swathes of corn while a small breeze wandered over the field, seeming to whisper here and there.

When it reached them, Mademoiselle Bénoit shivered in the sunshine as though a chilly hand had touched her. She spoke again, with a curious cold passion. "So long ago!" she said. "And the world goes on its wicked way. The world is very cruel, *monsieur*. It has no place for the losers. And it ridicules those whom Fate has tortured."

He looked up at her then, and the trouble in his eyes was mingled with a large understanding. "I know," he said. "I know. But—shouldn't the losers comfort each other?"

"There is no comfort for some," she said almost stubbornly.

"Yes," he persisted gently. "In comforting others—one comforts oneself."

She made a sharp gesture of dissent. "Ah no!" she said. "The ones we desired to comfort are all gone—all gone."

"Not all, *mademoiselle*!" he said.

"Yes, all—all!" she repeated with a dull insistence. "Father—mother—brothers—and"—her voice sank—"and *fiancé*—all gone—all gone! So many years ago, *monsieur*!" She spoke again in her ordinary tone which was quite lifeless. "They say that time heals all things, but it cannot restore light to the blinded, beauty to the marred, joy to the broken-hearted."

“Or legs to the legless!” said Rupert with a whimsical sadness. “Yet it can teach us to do without, which is something.”

“Yes—yes,” she agreed drearily. “One learns to do without. But one cannot hide the scars.”

“Perhaps we are not meant to try,” he said.

She looked at him with a certain closeness as if something in his words struck her. “But scars are ugly—horrible!” she said.

“Not all scars,” he said with steady conviction. “Shall I tell you something, *mademoiselle*? If I were to see again the woman who carried me out of that hell, I should not look for her beauty. That probably faded long ago. I should only want to see once more the splendid courage of her soul—which was immortal. She could not be ugly in my eyes if she tried.”

She made a quick movement as if the quiet assertion pierced her. “Would it please you to see her scarred—disfigured—ruined for life?” she said.

“I could not see her—like that,” he answered quietly. “The beauty I saw in her was of the soul.”

“And the soul?” she answered swiftly. “The soul cannot be scarred—maimed for life—no?”

He was looking straight up at her, in his eyes a shining faith that was more eloquent than words. “Maimed for life—no!” he said. “And, *mademoiselle*, what you call scars may be but the chiselling of the Sculptor Who shapes us for His use.”

“Ah!” she said and sharply stopped herself: for it was then that the child Mavis came running back with the cushion and rug, dragging also a deck-chair in her zeal.

“Now we can all sit down!” she said. “You have the chair, *mademoiselle*! And the cushion behind you. I’ll lie on the rug at your feet.”

She made herself responsible for the comfort of the entire party, and they settled down in the shade of the hedge to enjoy the luscious calm of the summer afternoon. For a time Mavis, mindful of her *rôle* of hostess, tried to make conversation for her elders, but eventually their poor response discouraged her and she also drifted into silence.

Mademoiselle Bénoit lay back in her chair aloof and still, her face inscrutable behind her veil. Rupert sat gazing straight before him over the golden field with eyes that dreamed. It was a dull afternoon for Mavis, but

she accepted it philosophically as she accepted her lessons, as she would doubtless in the future accept all the ups and downs of life. Mademoiselle Bénoit could not stay for ever, and when she was gone she knew that Rupert would be ready to play with her again.

Slowly the hours passed: the time for tea drew near. Mavis sat up on her rug and began to look expectant.

Rupert smiled at her. "Yes, it's time to make a move," he said. "Shall we go in for tea, *mademoiselle*?"

She gave a great start as one suddenly recalled from very distant realms of thought. "But certainly!" she said. "And I shall have to go."

"Have you been asleep?" asked Mavis bluntly.

Mademoiselle Bénoit rose with her quiet grace. "No, not asleep!" she said. "Just—dreaming, that is all."

Mavis stared a little, but she did not ask for an explanation. One could not be expected to understand French people. She collected their belongings in silence while Mademoiselle Bénoit laid her hand upon Rupert's chair.

"Will you permit me?" she said.

He accepted her offer of help, once more to Mavis's surprise, knowing as she did that he was fully capable of managing without assistance and usually preferred to do so.

They went slowly back to the Rectory where tea awaited them.

"Afraid I shall have to pour out," said Mavis. "Mummy's out."

"All right, my child. Do your worst!" said Rupert.

Mavis looked at her governess. "You do it!" she said abruptly.

But Mademoiselle Bénoit shook her head. "No, no! I am the guest. It is not for me to do the honours."

"Do!" urged Mavis, suddenly persuasive. "You'll do it heaps better than I shall. I always spill things, don't I, Uncle Rupert?"

"Nearly always," said Rupert.

"Oh, well, if you wish it——" said Mademoiselle Bénoit, and sat down before the table that had been set by the open window of the drawing-room.

"We generally have our meals here," said Rupert, with his eyes on the darting swallows overhead. "Jolly, isn't it?"

“It is very peaceful,” she said. “But time is getting short, *monsieur*, and I must soon be going.”

“Oh, not yet!” said Rupert. “We’ll find you a train some time this evening. When are you coming again?”

“Again?” she said, repeating the word with some surprise. “I do not know, *monsieur*, if I shall ever come again.”

“Come to-morrow!” said Mavis.

She shook her head again as she began to pour out the tea. “Oh, no! That is impossible. But—you are very kind to ask me.”

“We like you,” said Mavis impulsively.

“That also is very kind,” said Mademoiselle Bénoit in a curiously guarded tone.

“It isn’t—meant to be,” said Rupert quietly.

“Thank you,” she said.

The silence of the cornfield descended upon them again for a space. Mavis ate a hearty tea, but it was solely owing to her solicitude that the others partook of anything solid.

At the end of it the restlessness of youth would no longer be kept in check and she slipped out into the garden with a ball.

It was then that Rupert moved in his chair as if come to a sudden decision and addressed the quiet figure opposite.

“Before you go, *mademoiselle*, I am going to ask a favour which you may be most unwilling to grant. Will you try to do it—for the sake of an old comrade?”

“What is it?” she said.

He leaned towards her. “Don’t hate me for asking! I want it so much. Will you—please—take off your veil?”

She made a quick gesture of protest. “*Monsieur*, I do not think I can do that!”

“Yes, you can,” he said, and for the first time he spoke with a certain dominance. “You can—and you will—because I ask it.”

She sat looking at him, her fingers nervously interlocked. “Oh, please, do not ask it!” she said, and her voice was oddly piteous as though she

realized that the power to refuse was not hers. “It will only shock you. I am terribly disfigured, *monsieur*. It could give you no pleasure to see my face.”

“I must see it,” he said.

“I cannot show it to you!” she declared in rising distress. “You do not know what you are asking. You will regret it always if I yield to your desire.”

“I must see it,” he said again. “And I shall not regret it, *mademoiselle*, any more than I shall regret showing you this.” With a quiet movement he turned back the rug that covered him and showed her the void beneath. “You see, I am so maimed that I can’t even wear artificial legs. But I’m not trying to hide it. My friends all know the worst, and I haven’t found—so far—that it has frightened them away. Now *mademoiselle*,” he smiled at her, but he spoke with determination, “please—you will let me see your face.”

“Oh, why do you ask?” she said.

“I will tell you why—afterwards,” he said.

She sat for a second or two in a sort of strenuous silence, battling against his will: then again desperately she sought to plead with him. “*Monsieur*, I never show my face to strangers. I wear a veil always—but always. It is only the children who ever see me without it. And they—even they——“—she caught her breath in a sob—“call me—Bête Noire—me—who was once beautiful!”

“My dear—oh my dear!” Rupert’s hands were suddenly stretched out to her, and she put her own within them blindly, as though impelled. “What do the children matter?” he said. “They don’t know. It is only you and I—you and I—who understand.”

She bowed her head, struggling for self-control. “Oh, why do I care?” she said. “There is no one left that counts. I have walked—like a withered hag—all alone in the desert—all these years.”

Rupert’s hold was strong and sustaining. “Someone was wanting you all the time,” he said. “You are right. There is no need to care. We are not ashamed of our scars. Come, won’t you lift that veil for me—and let me see your brave eyes—again?”

She started a little and looked at him. “*Monsieur?*” she questioned.

He gently set her free. “In your own time,” he said. “I know you won’t refuse me now.”

She sat back slowly, still meeting his steady eyes. Slowly her hands moved upwards. Her white fingers fumbled nervously for a space, and then the black veil began to unwind from about her hat. She drew it very slowly away, then lifted off her hat also.

"Now!" she said in a wrung voice. "Now, *monsieur*, your desire is accomplished. You see—my face—again."

He sat absolutely still in his chair, watching her. He looked full upon a countenance from which all beauty of colouring and even of contour had been cruelly burned away. It might have been almost a grotesque mask upon which he gazed. Yet in his eyes there was no sign of horror, no suspicion of compassion—only the deepest, most reverent homage that a man's eyes might hold in the contemplation of one beloved.

She bore his scrutiny in silence, but in the end her poor lips began to quiver, and she made a faint gesture of entreaty.

And in that instant he spoke, his voice full and earnest with a deep vibration as though it were his soul that found utterance.

"Yes," he said. "And now—as then—it is the face of an angel!" He leaned towards her. "I can never tell you what you are to me. Perhaps—it would not interest you to know. It may be that in saving my wretched life you sacrificed the one you would have died rather than not have saved. If that is so, I can never ask you to forgive me for living while he died. Only—my dear—let me tell you once more that I worship you, as I worshipped you then—that I shall never cease to worship you or to thank God for letting me see your beautiful sad eyes again."

He stopped as though words failed him but his look still dwelt upon her, and in the amazing silence that followed his speech it was as though an electric current flowed between them, linking each to each.

Before that silence ended, she was on her knees beside him, her ravaged face lifted with a strange and sacred confidence to his. His arms went around her shoulders. His eyes still gazed upon her as upon a treasure newly found, to be for ever cherished.

"I shall never cease to worship you," he said again, "you who gave—all you had—for me. Can you accept—nothing from me—in return?"

She did not answer him for a space. Her throat was working spasmodically. But her eyes gazed up to his as though they beheld some Vision Splendid that blotted out all besides in the whole callous, uncomprehending world.

Her voice came at last, unsteady—oddly passionate—strangely sweet. “But you have said it!” she said. “We are comrades—since that hour. *Monsieur*, you are right. We live—to comfort each other.”

He smiled down at her, drawing her closer. “It is only you and I who can do that,” he said, “and find happiness together.”

She answered him very softly in a tone in which joy and sadness met together. “But it is only you and I—the losers—who understand what happiness really is.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Live Bait, Shorter Romances* by Ethel M. Dell]