

ETHEL M. DELL'S

magnificent love story

Honeyball Farm



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Honeyball Farm

Honeyball Farm was not the outcome of pure imagination, but its sinister atmosphere may have been suggested by the grimness of the sea perpetually roaring at its very doors. The evil deeds which took place within it were such as might have been enacted in any habitation where love is not at home. But when love comes to stay, a happier era is within sight; and in the end even *Honeyball Farm*, wrapped in its sea-mists and forgetful of past storms, might perhaps be rediscovered as a paradise on earth.

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THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE

THE LAMP IN THE DESERT

TETHERSTONES

CHARLES REX

THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY

THE PASSER-BY AND OTHER STORIES

THE ALTAR OF HONOUR

STORM DRIFT

THE SILVER WEDDING

ETC.

Honeyball Farm

ETHEL M. DELL

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PART I

CHAPTER I

GOSSIP

OLD COLUMBUS sat on the edge of his ferry-boat and basked sulkily in the sunshine. A blue jersey covered his shellback, and he wore a ragged beard to keep his chest warm. His face was dark red and lined like the trunk of a pine. His eyes were no more than a rusty glimmer between their wrinkled lids. They were very watery and screwed up as though perpetually striving to see through fog. His mouth sagged inwards over gums long since toothless. He wore a cap always—indoors and out, and even in bed—so it was reasonable to suppose that his scalp was less fertile than his chin in the matter of hair-growth. An ancient scarf which had once been yellow met the cap at the back, concealing all deficiencies in that quarter. In front, a single tuft of grey hair pushed itself forward with aggressive insistence, as if determined to refute any suspicion of barrenness under the cap, though his grand-daughter, Belinda Quale, had been heard to express the opinion that that was “all part and parcel” with the cap. But Belinda, though young and—in the eyes of many of the inhabitants of the little fishing-port of Beam—quite attractive, had no particular reason for venerating her ageing forebear. He had merely tolerated her in his home as the undesired offspring of his dead daughter until such time as she had been in a position to provide for herself. Neither had ever entertained the most elementary affection for the other, and whenever the old man appeared at the bar of *The Black Swan* for his pint—or so—of beer, he invariably asserted his irrefutable conviction that Belinda was “going to the bad, same as her mother afore her”.

He had never recovered from her mother’s downfall. He had been fond of her, and her shame and subsequent death had changed Old Columbus from a jolly old hearty to a confirmed misanthropist. He had made grudging provision for the child, but he had never professed the slightest interest in her. Her father was still a matter of conjecture at Beam. Luckily for him, she had “taken after” the Quale family in looks, and the finger of suspicion pointed impartially in so many directions that, as Belinda said, it had come to be a case of “least said, soonest mended”. She herself, at any rate, had

more important things to see about. There was a good deal of Old Columbus in her composition, and—as she had also been heard to remark—it would need to be a clever man that would ever catch her napping.

As a matter of fact, she never “napped”, which was the reason for her indisputable success as barmaid of *The Black Swan*. She had the whole establishment neatly docketed and pigeon-holed, from Joe Muster, the impossibly stout landlord, and Sophy, his rather dilapidated wife, to “that young scum” Micky Stark, who was half-witted and only fit to clean boots and run errands at five shillings a week, though some years older than herself. She had a decidedly soft spot in her heart for Micky, in spite of the fact that she kept him under such firm control, and no one was ever permitted to make fun of him in her presence.

“Fair’s fair,” said Belinda to the fun-makers. “You go and look in the glass, and if you don’t see anything funny there, well, for goodness’ sake, stop your cackling!”

Needless to say, Micky adored Belinda.

She had not much time for him, however, her life being as full as that of any Mayfair hostess. Though domiciled at *The Black Swan*, she still kept a managing eye on the little fisher-hut near the ferry-quay where she had first seen the light. Habit or sense of duty forbade her to leave its ancient occupant entirely to his own devices. Possibly some inherited instinct of ownership also actuated her, for she “couldn’t abide to see the place left all of a muck”.

Without payment and conspicuously without thanks, she kept the dwelling of Old Columbus in a state of comparative cleanliness. It was at least on a level with a decently maintained pigsty, and with that she was obliged to be content. Her visits had to be timed in the owner’s absence, for he cursed her for her interference if ever he found her there. Her employment at *The Black Swan* was a standing grievance with him in spite of the fact that he had no use for her in his own home.

“You get back to your devil’s kitchen!” he would growl, if he ever came upon her, and Belinda would retire with a saucy laugh and toss of her head. She knew her own worth, and the old man’s prejudice made no shadow of difference to her.

She also knew that when he sat on the edge of his ferry-boat in the sunshine he deliberately kept his head turned away from the hut to avoid the exasperation of seeing her come and go. It was only now and then that he

could not resist the temptation to assert himself. After all, he was cock of his own roost, such as it was.

The demand for the ferry-boat was not what it had been. A toll-bridge, to which Old Columbus could never refer in polite language, had been built recently half a mile up the river, and the cracked bell on the far side only rang occasionally now to summon the ferry-boat to fetch a passenger across the channel. Perhaps it was as well, for his arms were growing stiff and they did not pull as strongly as of yore. He would have had to consider taking a partner if he had been called upon as often as in earlier days, and that would have been a hard matter, for he was convinced that no one knew the currents and vagaries of tide and river as he did.

Of course there were others who made the perilous passage and had not so far come to grief—Reuben Stark for one, uncle of Belinda's *protégé*, who lived in a curious little house somewhat higher up the quay which he had bought on his retirement from the skippership of a small coastal cargo-steamer which had been named *The Honeyball*. It had always been Captain Stark's firm intention to purchase a farm in the country when his seafaring days should be over, but when the time actually came his dream resolved itself into this whitewashed cottage on the shore, and fancy would carry him no further. So he firmly dubbed it "Honeyball Farm", and kept a few chickens in a shed with a wire run at one end to support the illusion.

Honeyball Farm was practically built upon the shingle and possessed no garden whatsoever. It abutted on to the road close to *The Black Swan*, but every one of its windows looked out to sea. It had once been used as a coastguard-station, though its origin dated back many years beyond that, and there was a semi-circular glass observatory at the sea-most end which was the joy of Reuben Stark's existence. From it he could observe practically all the doings of the neighbourhood, both on sea and shore, with cynical accuracy. He spent a good deal of time in this spy-hole.

He was also the fortunate possessor of a boat with an outboard motor which Old Columbus viewed with the deepest disdain, and in this cheery little craft he—or Peter Prawle, his erstwhile mate, who now with his wife kept house for him—would often buzz across the river to exchange civilities with better-class friends on the other side.

For Captain Stark very naturally held himself to be somewhat above the fisher-folk of the district. He was quite willing to consort with them with a certain amount of reserve, but his real interests lay among the master-mariners whose craft came and went in the little harbour just beyond the

river-mouth. These were many of them old friends and equals, and he was in his element with them.

Yet even in their society he was a stern and forthright man, announcing his opinions with dogmatic precision and maintaining his own beliefs with a resolution that never swerved.

In his own sphere he brooked opposition from none, ruling his home as he had once ruled his cargo-boat, with uncompromising autocracy. Peter Prawle, his bluff henchman, was the channel by which his curt orders or complaints were conveyed to the mainspring of the establishment—Peter's wife, Emily, a boneless shadow of a woman who moved with stealth and whose uncertain eyes had a strained look as though they perpetually peered round corners. There was something distinctly uncanny about Emily. Her capacity for work was almost supernatural. She cooked, cleaned, set in order, washed and mended for the two men and Micky without cessation. Peter did the shopping, and looked after the chickens and the boat.

The "skipper" did everything else, as he would have phrased it, though none but himself could have said of what that consisted. The household was run upon lines of the strictest economy. Only two meals a day were officially recognized, served at eight in the morning and seven at night, and certainly Emily Prawle did not look as if she partook of either. Her husband was different. He occasionally had "a bite of something" in between times, and Micky fortunately fed at *The Black Swan*; but the skipper rigidly adhered to his own rule, so far as solids were concerned, and the housekeeping budget was kept at a consistently low level in consequence. What he spent at *The Black Swan* or at the more pretentious hostelry known as *The Crown and Sceptre* on the other side of the river was no one's business but his own.

Old Columbus had his own ideas upon the subject, but nobody bothered to listen to him. He was regarded as being almost as obsolete as the old boat on which he was wont to sit basking in the sunshine, listening with a grumbling sort of admiration to the whistling of Rolfe Britton—the young man from nowhere who lived in the dainty white motor-boat that had her moorings at the very end of the quay.

Old Columbus did not like him naturally, because anything in the shape of motors was accursed in his estimation, and it was against his principles to like anybody in any case. But the flute-like whistle was undeniably a pleasant sound, and he generally turned his better ear towards it.

Rolfe Britton was a musician who knew how to make the most of his art; but like a good many artists he had spells during which his talent held no appeal for him, and he never whistled in gloomy weather. At such times he smoked a pipe perpetually which he fed with coarse black tobacco, his brown face hard and sombre.

They called him the Dane in the fishing-village of Beam, in spite of his name, for he was obviously no native of that district. His short-cropped hair was a deep red-gold, and he had thick brows and lashes of the same colour. His eyes were startlingly blue and curiously intent—true sailor's eyes, with something of the pirate in them also. He was not tall, but he had a breadth of chest and strength of arm that placed him above the average for power. His mouth and nose were brief and rather relentless, but he had a smile as sudden and as startling as his eyes. It would appear in moments when it was least expected, and the fishermen would often never know what had provoked it.

He had literally, it seemed, come from nowhere some six months back, and his white motor-boat—the *Circe*—had had a sheltered berth just round the corner of the fishing-quay ever since. During the summer holidays he had done good business with her, for Beam had its tourist side, and the *Circe* with her trim little dinghy was an attractive craft and much in demand for cruises along the shore.

Rolfe Britton with his white yachting-cap and dare-devil eyes was attractive also, and even on rough days he was seldom left idle. His charges were on the high side, but his popularity outweighed that fact. He was so sure of himself and his boat that people took both at his own valuation and considered themselves lucky to secure an hour on board. In the busy season he had been booked up for days ahead, and he had often received more than he had asked for when he had brought his passengers back to the quay.

Reuben Stark from the observatory of Honeyball Farm watched the young man's comings and goings with a curious mixture of admiration and suspicion. He was bound to confess that Rolfe Britton possessed the gift of good seamanship, but the Viking side of the young man did not appeal to him. He regarded him as something of a freebooter and was inclined to consider that Britton took more than his fair share from the visitors.

Rolfe on his side cared nought for what anybody thought. While friendly to all who seemed disposed to be friendly with him, he maintained a reserve with regard to his own affairs which no one ever penetrated, and any curiosity on the part of Captain Stark he treated with supreme indifference.

He had been the subject of a certain amount of speculation at one time, but the inhabitants of Beam were used to him now. The lads of the district had learnt that he could hold his own with a good deal to spare in a scuffle, and as a swimmer he could beat them all.

Belinda called him a “tough”, but she liked him notwithstanding. In fact, her feeling might have ripened into something warmer had he taken the slightest trouble to cultivate it. But he did not. He was not a very frequent visitor at *The Black Swan*, and when they did meet he was bluntly impervious to any feminine attractions which she might display.

At the same time he was capable of admiring the spirit which prompted her to keep her old grandfather’s shack in some sort of order, and, chancing to pass on the present occasion when Old Columbus, tired of his basking, had come in unexpectedly to wreak a very bad temper upon her because she had spent a little longer than usual over her job, he deliberately stopped and waited for her till she emerged carrying a promiscuous bundle destined for the wash-tub at *The Black Swan*.

Her defiant laughter died down at sight of the champion awaiting her near the doorstep. She gave vent to the speech which in the presence of her aged relative would have been sheer waste of time.

“Dirty old hog!” she said, with a toss of her dust-coloured head. “He’d wallow in the mire year in year out if it wasn’t for me.”

“Why d’you bother about him?” said Rolfe, eyeing the unsavoury bundle under her arm as if debating with himself as to whether he ought to relieve her of it.

She gave him a look out of her rather shallow light eyes. “Well, wouldn’t you—if he was your grandfather?” she retorted.

Rolfe decided to leave the bundle where it belonged and took a good pull at his pipe before he said, “Relations aren’t much in my line. If they wanted to wallow, I suppose I’d let ’em.”

“Not if you lived almost next door to ’em, you wouldn’t,” the girl maintained, still somewhat heated after her encounter. “Why, if I was to leave him alone, he’d be having the insanitary man after him. And that’d mean the asylum—if it wasn’t the workhouse.”

“And why not?” said Rolfe, exhaling a long trail of smoke. “It’d be good enough for him, wouldn’t it?”

“And what of me?” demanded Belinda, affronted. “Think I’m the sort of girl to be dragged in the gutter at the heels of a dirty old beast like that just because he chances to be my grandfather?”

“I should disown him,” said Rolfe bluntly. “Tell everybody you’ve finished with him and cut him out.”

“Couldn’t do that,” rejoined Belinda, brief and decisive. “I was born in that cottage. It’ll be mine some day, and the boat too—such as they are.”

“But you’ll never live there,” said Rolfe.

“Can’t say,” said Belinda shrewdly. “If I was to marry and anything was to happen to him, I might.”

“Not you!” said Rolfe. “Old Joe Muster would see to that. He’s no fool.”

“Hope I’m not either,” snapped Belinda, still somewhat ruffled, though her natural good humour was beginning to return. “Joe Muster and Sophy don’t mean anything to me—except a living.”

“Which is mainly what you mean to them,” said Rolfe. “*The Black Swan* wouldn’t be much of a draw if you chucked it.”

Belinda tossed her head again, but this time with a hint of coquetry. “Ho! Thank you, Mr. Britton! Not that it often draws you, I must say!”

“It takes a good deal to draw me,” said Rolfe, smiling with the unoccupied corner of his mouth. “Besides, I’ve got other fish to fry. The old tub wants a lot of painting.”

“Oh, is that what you’re doing?” Belinda was interested. “But your—*Circe*—is the smartest boat anywhere round here as it is. Even Captain Stark says that.”

“Does he? Kind of him!” commented Rolfe.

“Not he!” said Belinda. “He’s never been kind to anyone yet—a stingy old curmudgeon! They say he’s got a fortune wrapped up somewhere in that ramshackle old place of his.”

Rolfe’s cynicism deepened. “I wouldn’t give a tanner for the lot. Where’d it come from, anyway?”

“That I can’t say,” said Belinda. “But I know this much. He’s mighty particular about keeping all his dust-holes locked up, and that Emily Prawl with her prying squint don’t get very far. Why, she didn’t even know about the daughter till old Stark sprung it on ’em.”

“Whose daughter?” enquired Rolfe idly.

“Whose daughter! Why, his, to be sure—Captain Stark’s! Didn’t you know he’d got a daughter?” questioned Belinda in high disdain at his ignorance. “I thought everybody knew that much. His wife left him, you see, and small blame to her! And then she died, and the child was brought up in an orphanage or something. Anyhow, she’s finished now, and he’s got to look after her. Funny sort of father he’ll make. I’d sooner have Old Columbus myself, that I would.”

Rolfe’s flagging interest had revived a little. He glanced in the direction of Honeyball Farm, whose whitewashed walls had a misleading air of cheeriness from that distance. “Oh! So he’s got a kid, has he?” he said.

Belinda nodded vigorously, and tossed back her short hair again with a scornful gesture. “And if she takes after him, she’s no beauty,” she remarked. “She’ll lead a dog’s life with old Stark and the Prawles. It’s to be hoped for her own sake that she’s got a will of her own, or they’ll roll her out flat among ’em. Reuben Stark’s a tyrant all right, if ever I’ve seen one. That young Micky is terrified of him. Why, he lays about the boy if he so much as opens his mouth.”

“Not surprised,” observed Rolfe. “He’s a mischievous young devil, ready to play monkey tricks with any machinery he comes near.”

“Well, any boy’ll do that,” maintained Belinda, swift to defend her *protégé*. “He’s no worse than any of the rest—a deal better in some respects. He just wants to be treated decently, that’s all.”

“Oh, we all want that,” commented Rolfe drily. “Let’s hope Stark’s girl will get it!”

“If hoping’s any good,” amended Belinda. “There’s more devil than man about *him*, if you ask me. I wouldn’t be beholden to Captain Stark—not for five minutes, I wouldn’t. He’s a bad man—that.”

Rolfe turned disconcertingly and grinned at her. “So you’re a judge of bad men, are you?” he said.

She gave him a withering look in reply and hitched her bundle more firmly under her arm. “I know the good from the bad, Mr. Britton,” she retorted smartly. “And now, if you’ve no objection, I’ll step along, for I’ve no time for loafing.”

Rolfe raised no objection whatever, nor did he appear to resent the implication. Scarcely indeed did he seem to notice the fact that she had left

him. With the utmost indifference he pursued his lounging course alone, while Belinda “stepped along” briskly towards *The Black Swan*, her energetic gait proclaiming the fact that she had scant leisure to spend in gossiping even with so presentable a companion as Rolfe Britton the Dane.

CHAPTER II

THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

CAPTAIN REUBEN STARK sat in his observatory at Honeyball Farm and peered out to sea through a small telescope. His iron-grey hair and iron-grey brows had a bristling, formidable appearance. He had a habit of writhing his lips when in any sort of perplexity or doubt, or if he were anticipating a difficult situation, which did not add to the general attractiveness of his appearance. His eyes were almost black and so deep-set that they were only visible as glinting possibilities, like pebbles at the bottom of a pool. Their expression was quite enigmatical at all times, as if they deliberately and of set intent held all the world at bay.

It was a misty day in the middle of October, and the sea was very calm. He always began his observations by searching the horizon, but finding nothing of interest there he transferred his attention from his telescope to things nearer at hand. He saw and watched the two figures of Belinda and Rolfe until they parted. He also saw Old Columbus emerge grumpily from his newly-set-in-order abode and plunge back over the shingle to resume his contemplative position on the edge of his boat. Then he searched the foreshore without discovering anything of interest, and, with a final glance through his telescope, he leaned back in his ancient basket-chair and blinked up at the soft blue of the sky above him.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon and his leisure was drawing to an end. He had a job in front of him for which, to judge by the sour twitching of his lips, he had small relish. The tide was nearly full, but so calm was the sea that its wash was scarcely audible. His boat with the outboard motor—the *Skylark*—was on the shingle just above the reach of the water, ready to be pushed off at practically a moment's notice. Turning his head on the greasy, threadbare cushion, he could see her from where he sat.

In fact, she was seldom out of his sight. He watched over her somewhat like an old yard-dog waiting to spring up and challenge any who should

approach too near. Peter Prawle was the only person who was ever allowed to handle her besides himself.

Even while he leaned there with his narrow eyes upon her, Peter made his lounging appearance from a side-door, and went rolling down with his sailor's gait to ensure that she was all in order to make the voyage across the channel to the harbour-quay.

It was a mere formality. She always was in order, and there were yet ten minutes before she need take the water; but Peter served a grim master, and he liked to be on the safe side. Besides, he enjoyed fussing about the *Skylark*. He was fond of her. And the sight of Old Christopher and his ancient boat in the distance always added zest to his enjoyment. Though the *Skylark* could not hope to compete with the *Circe*, she was at least a good many points up on the antiquated ferry-tub.

He did not expect Captain Stark to make his appearance until the exact moment for departure arrived, but in this anticipation he was for once mistaken. Scarcely two minutes had passed before the banging of a door and the crunch of feet on the shingle warned him of the ex-master-mariner's approach.

He glanced up from applying an oily rag to the motor, and he saw that Reuben's face was drawn in a heavy scowl.

"Here! Leave that!" ordered Reuben. "I'm going to start."

"Full early, captain," remarked Peter, preparing to stand by.

"'Snot early," retorted Reuben. "I'll go when I think I will. Come on! Shove her in!"

They shoved in concert, and the boat scraped down the brief space of shingle into the glassy ripples.

The scowl remained upon the captain's face as he boarded her, and he spat truculently at a wasp that seemed bent upon securing a free passage.

Peter stood in the water in his sea-boots until the boat was fairly afloat and the motor started, then he splashed ashore and turned to watch his charge go hammering out into the eddying currents of the estuary with her stern-faced master guiding her. There was a touch of wistfulness in his regard. Up to the last moment he had hoped to be allowed to go too, but he knew that the boat would probably be laden on the return journey so he had scarcely counted upon it.

His job was to hang about in readiness to unload and pull her up when she came back, but that would not be for some time—half an hour or more; so he pulled an ancient tobacco-pouch from his pocket, dug out a lump of tobacco and pushed it into his mouth. It was somehow more soothing than a pipe, and a luxury which Emily never permitted indoors. She tolerated the pipe, but tobacco-sucking was a low-class habit.

Over the glassy waters of the river-mouth the little vessel chugged her way. She needed careful navigation against the pull of the tide, but Reuben Stark knew his course from start to finish under all conditions, and he steered her with mechanical efficiency.

His expression as he neared the harbour-quay did not brighten in any degree. He looked like a man engaged upon a repellent task. His fixed eyes had the ferocious stare of a hard-driven animal, and his mouth twisted perpetually—almost as if it were holding an argument with itself.

He reached the quay, found a berth by some steps, and moored his boat. Then, heavy-footed, he went ashore, every stride like a definite curse flung in the face of Fate. The mist that hung in the still autumn air had begun to descend upon the distant waters, and the sky-line was growing vague. There would be patches of fog about when the sun went down, but there yet remained another hour or so of daylight, and no anxiety on that score could have contributed to Reuben's ill-humour.

No one accosted him as he tramped towards the town, though practically every man along the harbour-side knew him. There were times when even his chosen associates decided with one accord that he was better left to himself. He was capable of expressing a dumb ferocity beside which the lurid oaths of Old Christopher were mere infant's prattle. Reuben seldom swore when his mood was at its blackest. His leathery countenance was more virulent than any language invented by man.

Throughout the whole length of the quay men glanced at him and then at each other with winks and hitches, after which they continued their various occupations of lading, unloading, or loafing without further comment. But he left an atmosphere of expectancy behind him, for they knew that he would have to return that way.

Reuben Stark arrived upon the open front, and tramped doggedly on into the high street of Beam. It was not a town of any great importance. It had never been a first-class seaside resort. Its shops were shoddy, and the miscellaneous stream of vehicles that flowed past them partook of the same quality. There were several roads of cheap villas leading out of the main

thoroughfare and at its further end there was the sprawling beginning of a bungalow quarter. The old fishing-village on the other side of the river was much the most picturesque portion of the place, and the connecting toll-bridge near the station had not so far succeeded in spoiling it. There was private property in that direction which protected it from development.

Straight towards the station, still looking neither to right nor left, but wrapped, as it were, in an evil dream, Reuben directed his steps. As Peter Prawle had told him, he was early; but that made no difference. He neither hastened nor loitered on his way. If the train he had come to meet kept him waiting, well, it would be so much the worse for all concerned, that was all. His face remained set in its bitter, forbidding lines. It was obvious that he hated this business which he had set himself to accomplish.

There were not many people about in the station vicinity. He pushed through on to the down platform and flung himself upon a bench, his attitude one of complete disgust. His hands were in his pockets, his legs stretched straight before him, while his eyes stared into mid-space with hostile intentness.

Only a brave man or one very much his superior would have ventured to address him. But it so chanced that one who might with some reason have claimed to be the latter, at least in a social sense, had followed him on to the platform—a tall, lean person in clerical black who, after a brief glance around, moved forward at once and greeted him.

“Hullo, Captain Stark! I thought it must be you. How are you? I haven’t seen you for a long time.”

Stark lifted his unshifting gaze to the face of the man in front of him, then without undue haste pulled in his feet and got on to them.

“Good evening, Sir Philip,” he said, compulsory courtesy struggling with resentment in his gruff voice.

The newcomer, whose aristocratic, clean-shaven face was not without a considerable leaven of cynicism, held out a hand.

“It isn’t often that I have the pleasure of meeting you,” he remarked.

Stark shook hands with a cough that seemed to indicate that had his companion been one degree less of a gentleman he would have spat also. But the Reverend Sir Philip Tredville, unpopular though he might be, could at least claim the privileges of good breeding, and ex-master-mariners did not spit in his presence.

“You all right?” enquired Sir Philip, not genially, but with a certain colloquial friendliness.

“Quite, thank you,” rejoined Stark stiffly.

He held himself in a fashion that indicated quite clearly that he desired to be left alone. But Sir Philip, seeing no one else to divert his attention, refused to take the hint. He could be supremely impervious to the obvious when he chose.

“I’ve come to meet my daughter,” he announced conversationally. “She’s been having a bit of a beano with some relations in town. You’re waiting for someone too, I suppose? Or are you off on a beano yourself?”

It was an absurd suggestion in view of the man’s lowering countenance, but it amused Sir Philip to make it, and there was nothing else to amuse him at the moment. Had there been any other diversion, he would not have taken the faintest interest in the doings of Reuben Stark.

Stark’s answer bordered upon rudeness, but only just. People were seldom openly rude to Sir Philip Tredville. He was somehow impregnable in that respect.

“Beano be blowed!” he said. “I’m on the same errand as you are.”

“What? Meeting someone?” said Sir Philip, his thin brows slightly uplifted.

“Ay,” said Reuben. “My daughter. She’s coming home to live.”

He growled out the information in grudging tones, but as if he felt himself impelled to give it. After all, Sir Philip had imparted his own business first, and people had got to know sooner or later.

Sir Philip’s eyebrows went half an inch higher. His steel-blue eyes expressed surprise.

“So you’re a family man too!” he said. “Really! I had no idea.”

It was the “too” that made the comment tolerable. But for that one little word Stark’s evil temper might have flamed into sheer insolence. As it was, it retained merely the smouldering fire of a long-cherished grievance which he, still grudgingly, invited Sir Philip to share. The man was a parson, wasn’t he? Parsons were supposed to understand everything.

“She’s been a blasted nuisance all her life,” he said, little dreaming that the parson was collecting and hoarding these ripe sentiments for the delectation of his own family later. “I’ve had to keep her, pay for her

upbringing, be responsible for her, ever since her mother died. And now she's grown up and is coming to live on me. You know what it is. You've got one yourself. If she'd been a boy, it wouldn't have mattered. He could have gone to sea. But women"—again he nearly spat, but just managed to swallow instead—"they overrun us like cats, and they ought to be kept under. That's what I say."

"Drowned at birth?" suggested Sir Philip with a vagrant smile. "Is that what you mean?"

"If not before," said Reuben Stark sourly, beginning to repent of his confidence. "I've no use for 'em except as servants—which was all they were ever intended for."

"That," observed Sir Philip, "is a truism which I admit they are rather apt to forget."

"There you are!" said Stark, glaring at him. "Even you've noticed it!"

"In my capacity of spiritual inspector, it's my job to notice things," Sir Philip pointed out mildly.

Stark made a sound which was an agreeable mixture of complacency and disdain. Though he would not have admitted it, it was gratifying to find the parson on his side. He had never seen enough of Sir Philip to quarrel with him, but he had hardly expected to find anything in common with such a man. His surliness began to abate in spite of him.

"I'll lay you see a good deal, Sir Philip," he said, "and I'm not surprised that you've come to the conclusion—same as I have—that women's the root of all evil."

Sir Philip was still smiling absent-mindedly. "Afraid we can't quite manage without them at present, notwithstanding," he remarked. "As you say, they have their uses. You ought not to find much difficulty in getting a billet for this daughter of yours if you don't want to keep her at home."

"Billet!" said Reuben sardonically. "Oh, I'll billet her all right. She'll work for her keep or I'll know the reason why."

"You probably will," agreed Sir Philip, turning his head at the sound of a signal-bell. "They're a wonderful set, this generation, boys and girls alike. Our place is in the background, and there we've got to stay."

"Oh, have we?" said Reuben, with a very sinister drag at one corner of his mouth. "Well, I'm master in my own house, and master I'll be. If that

girl tries to cross me—she won't do it more than once. And she won't get round me neither."

Sir Philip laughed a little in an airy fashion. "Oh no, that's out of date. But she'll get her own way all the same. They all do. It's as easy as falling off a log. They're born to it—or they pick it up at school. There's no such thing as parental authority nowadays."

"Oh, isn't there?" said Reuben Stark in the tone of one gleaning information against his own convictions.

Sir Philip made a careless gesture. The old sea-dog caused him some amusement. "You'll soon see for yourself," he said. "You can't hold them in. They're gone before you begin."

Reuben coughed aggressively, his better mood rapidly fading. "All right," he assented ominously. "I shall see for myself. And so will someone else. If it's a fight to the death—I'll win."

Something in his tone caught Sir Philip's attention, giving him pause. "Don't be so crude, man!" he said, with the easy familiarity that he could always assume at will. "What's it matter if they do kick up their heels a bit? It's not going to make any vast difference to anyone. The old world will still carry on."

"The world can go to hell for all I care," said Reuben Stark forcibly. "But I won't be set at nought on my own deck by anybody. I can hold my own and a bit over, and nobody's going to stop me."

Sir Philip laughed a little—his easy well-bred laugh, dismissing all unpleasant possibilities. "Well, well! I wish you luck. I must come round one of these days and look you up. I haven't been over your side of the river just lately. How's Old Columbus?"

Reuben glared as if he had been offered an insult. "What should I know about him?" he demanded aggressively. "He's not dead yet, but it's about time he was, to my way of thinking. Him and his old boat—they're antediluvian, both of 'em."

"I should have said they were worth preserving as relics," remarked Sir Philip. "I must bring my daughter along with her camera one of these days. Well, here comes our train, so I'll wish you good night."

"Good night to you, Sir Philip," said Stark without geniality, and he coughed again as they parted as if something in the interview with the baronet parson had stuck in his gullet.

Certainly the encounter had done nothing to improve his temper, though he had no personal quarrel with Sir Philip himself. It was the man's philosophical acceptance of a rapidly deteriorating world that grated upon him. His semi-humorous submission to the inevitable infuriated Reuben, and the errand that had brought him thither became even more unpalatable in consequence. As he viewed the steam of the approaching train in the distance he swore a deep and bitter oath to the inner darkness that was his soul which boded no good thing for the child of his dead wife who was being swiftly borne towards him in the wake of that smoky trail.

CHAPTER III

SYBIL

THE train steamed in. There was a general stampede among the two or three porters on duty who knew how to make the most of themselves in the way of shouting and running up and down.

A cheery whoop from a carriage-window greeted Sir Philip, and the carriage stopped only a few yards from where he stood. He moved forward.

A slight fair girl came springing out, dragging a suitcase after her.

“Hullo, Dad! How’s the family? There’s a hat-box and another case to come out. What are those porters charging about for? See if you can get hold of one of them!”

Sir Philip had already raised a beckoning hand, and a young porter ran up and flung himself into the compartment.

The fair girl paused to see her belongings safely landed, then turned again to her father. “Brought the old rattle-trap along, Dad? That’s right. Mother quite flourishing?”

“Much as usual,” said Sir Philip.

She nodded. “Good. No, porter”—turning back, “that belongs to—the other lady. Stick it on the platform and bring my things along!” She looked into the carriage as the porter finally extricated himself. “This is Beam, you know,” she remarked. “You’ve got to the end of your journey. I expect your father or someone will have come to meet you.”

The other occupant of the compartment descended, clutching two bags and a parcel. She also was a girl, a year or two younger than Sir Philip’s daughter—very slim, oddly graceful, dressed with an almost Puritanical severity in dark blue with a plain black hat which looked as if it had been designed to carry a badge.

Sir Philip, surveying her questioningly, had an impression of a strangely haunting face with a flush like the glow of a ripe nectarine, and eyes so

deeply dark behind their black lashes that they might have been black themselves.

His daughter did not give him time for more than the briefest scrutiny. “We travelled down together from the junction,” she said, in her slightly supercilious fashion. “She tells me she is bound for Honeyball Farm. Reuben Stark is her father. He isn’t anywhere about, I suppose?”

Sir Philip suppressed any surprise he may have felt regarding the appearance of Reuben’s daughter, and raised a courteous hand in salute. “Yes, Captain Stark is here, looking for you,” he said. “See! There he is! He is just coming this way.”

Reuben had indeed turned in his tracks and was advancing upon them with a purposeful stride.

He reached the little group as the girl began to utter some hesitating words of thanks, and at once took command of the situation.

“Hullo!” he said gruffly. “You’re Julie, are you? Afternoon, miss!”—to Sir Philip’s daughter, with a perfunctory salute. “Where’s your baggage?”—turning again to his own with an almost threatening air. “Left it all behind? Or haven’t you got any?”

The girl he addressed regarded him with a startled expression as if he were a being totally outside her experience, and then recovered herself to lay claim to the modest hold-all on the platform which her fellow-traveller had disowned.

“That’s mine, and there’s a small trunk in the van. I’ll go and see about it,” she said, and turning, fled along the length of the train, leaving Captain Stark to follow or to await her return according to preference.

He took a medium course and sauntered in her wake with a certain stolid dignity which sent a sparkle of laughter into the eyes of the parson’s daughter.

“What a funny old stick!” she commented. “Well, Dad, without being complimentary, I shouldn’t care to change places with that girl, anyway.”

“Without being complimentary, my dear Sybil,” rejoined Sir Philip drily, “I might in that case have been blessed with a ripe peach for a daughter in place of a very hard-boiled egg.”

Sybil’s laugh was entirely without malice. “It’s a cruel world, isn’t it?” she said. “But actually I should imagine that eggs—even the hard-boiled variety—go further in the long run than peaches. Anyway, the father of this

particular one is more like a bullet than anything else. He's the old chap who owns Honeyball Farm, isn't he? A regular old curio! This unlucky girl hasn't seen him for as long as she can remember, so they'll both have something to learn. Now what the hell did I do with my ticket? Oh, here it is!"

With a careless gesture she moved away towards the barrier, and Sir Philip accompanied her with something of the air of a man who is not responsible for the society in which he finds himself. To remonstrate with Sybil upon any shortcoming was rather like trying to pick up quick-silver. She merely slipped aside in another direction.

The car to which she had referred so slightly was awaiting them outside the station. He had driven it down himself. It was an aged vehicle, but fairly trustworthy, and as they only employed one male factotum at the Rectory it usually fell to Sir Philip's lot to act as chauffeur in his daughter's absence. When Sybil was at home she was generally at the wheel, and she took her place there now, as a matter of course.

"Had rather a giddy time at Aunt Serena's," she remarked, as she pressed the self-starter. "Went out a good deal with Jack Bellamy. His dancing has improved a lot. In fact, he's quite a presentable member of society now."

"Does that mean he has designs on you?" asked Sir Philip, taking out his pipe.

She laughed. "He pretends he has, of course, but I prefer a dancing-partner to any other sort at present. If I ever bolt, dear Papa, it will not be in the direction of matrimony. I think I may safely promise you that my progress to the altar will be a very slow march indeed."

Sir Philip proceeded to fill his pipe as the car slid down the station-yard. He said nothing, but he looked extremely cynical.

Sybil sounded the hooter aggressively as they reached the street and rounded the corner with a smart disregard of consequences which fortunately failed to land her in any difficulties. Another car, however, travelling in the opposite direction, hooted a sharp reprimand, at which Sybil glanced over her shoulder and grimaced derisively.

"That's young Oliver Keston—like his impertinence! I suppose he's still running the old man's practice and curing all his most valuable patients?"

"Well," said Sir Philip rather sourly, "he hasn't managed to cure your mother yet. I should be much obliged to him if he would."

“Oh, Mother!” said Sybil, with airy unconcern. “She’d die of sheer boredom if anyone went and cured her. You couldn’t in common humanity allow such a thing. How are all the hen curates, by the way? Still cackling comfortably?”

“I think the parish as a whole,” rejoined Sir Philip, “is showing no immediate signs of collapse, but naturally your vigorous and sympathetic help has been considerably missed.”

“Doubtless!” scoffed Sybil. “I’m sure I shall be received back into the fold with open arms. But my activities—if any—will be on the other side of the river in the old fishing-village that you never have time for. There’s decent raw material to work on there.”

“Raw perhaps,” conceded Sir Philip. “I won’t vouch for its decency, but that, I am aware, is a quality with which you would gladly dispense. I shall be interested to see the result of your crusade in that direction. They are scarcely a hospitable crowd, I may tell you.”

“I know,” said Sybil briefly. “Old Reuben Stark is a case in point. But the girl—his girl—is a different breed. She’ll have the dickens of a time if I’m any judge of character.”

“I don’t know why you should be,” returned her father dispassionately. “You have never made a study of anyone outside your own sphere hitherto. I personally should imagine that a man like Stark could scarcely have a daughter without imprinting his own personality pretty strongly upon her, and if that is the case she will not go under very easily.”

Sybil closed her red lips firmly. There were times when her own father’s personality was extremely repugnant to her, and she would not argue with him lest her feelings should get the better of her. She knew that in some respects she resembled him. They were even in sympathy upon certain points, but they were incapable of entertaining any sense of friendship for one another. Perhaps they were both of too dominating a nature for that.

“I see you don’t agree with me,” remarked Sir Philip. “You are not at an age to understand very much about heredity. But if it amuses you to take an interest in Stark’s daughter and her environment, it may serve to widen your views.”

Sybil was hooting her way through the main street and made no rejoinder. It would not have interested her father to know that she had already shown some kindness towards the lonely girl who had been her fellow-traveller. He would merely have regarded her as precipitate and

impulsive, and she saw no reason for informing him that she meant to follow the matter up. She preferred to do things in her own way, and had always firmly refused to accept any subordinate post in the parish. She had a ready brain and was capable of brisk decisions, and she had no intention of placing her abilities at the disposal of what she herself contemptuously described as “a parcel of old women”. If she did anything at all, it would be entirely on her own initiative.

Possibly her father did not condemn her on that score as much as she imagined. Certainly he made no attempt to influence her, though that may have been because he fully realized the futility of so doing. He was not the type of man to waste his energies over any project which did not present a very sound prospect of success. Which may have been one of the reasons that his sermons in the old parish church of Beam made so slight an impression upon their preoccupied hearers, in whose estimation their brevity was their main recommendation. It was easier to talk sardonically to a man like Stark than to preach a straightforward discourse to a conventional congregation in whose welfare he was not sufficiently interested to feel that the irksome duty justified itself. He often remarked openly that no one wanted to hear him preach, and his daughter was the last person to contradict him. She invariably escaped the infliction whenever practicable. Her mother’s ill-health was a convenient pretext for avoiding a good many unpleasant tasks, and she did not hesitate to avail herself of it when occasion arose.

Lady Tredville was a chronic invalid, and seldom appeared in public. No one ever expected anything of her. Sybil’s attitude towards her was one of toleration rather than sympathy. It was quite impossible to be other than kind to her, for in her gentle, egotistical way she was invariably kind herself. Most people described her as sweet—an adjective which Sybil warmly detested, but which she recognized as being quite applicable to her mother.

As they drove past the old grey church at the end of the town, and turned in between the stone pillars that flanked the Rectory drive, she switched back to the subject with her customary airy disregard of sequence.

“And Mother is going on all right, is she? Well, I’m glad of that. Pearce going strong too?”

Pearce was Lady Tredville’s maid and one of the main bulwarks of the household.

Sir Philip answered with his usual cynical deliberation. “I am glad to be able to report that the whole establishment, from your mother downwards,

have successfully weathered your absence.”

Sybil executed a cheery fanfare on the hooter in response to this sarcasm, which brought the car with a well-executed sweep to the steps of her father’s house.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER'S BOAT

“WE shall have to get hold of an outside-porter for this lump of rubbish,” said Reuben Stark, in tones of deep disgust.

“Wouldn't a carrier bring it?” suggested his daughter.

He turned on her as he might have turned upon a cur that had yapped at his heels. “Think I'm going to pay to have your belongings carted over that blasted toll-bridge when I've got a boat of my own at the quay? I'd sooner heave 'em into the sea.”

The girl coloured deeply, but she stood her ground. “I was given some money for the journey,” she said. “I will pay for it.”

Reuben stared at her with gathering fury. The train had departed and they were standing at the end of the platform with the debatable bit of luggage which consisted of an old-fashioned tin trunk between them.

“You'll pay! You'll pay!” stormed Reuben. “And who the devil d'you think you are, I'd like to know?”

She held herself very erect and faced him with flaming cheeks. “I am Julie Stark,” she said, her voice low and almost desperately steady. “You, I know, are my father. But we are not talking about that now. I was only saying that I would pay for my box to be delivered. Here is a porter who will see to it!”

She spoke with a very slight foreign accent which somehow accorded with her general appearance. She was unusual; slightly foreign.

Reuben Stark, on the verge of another outburst, checked himself, peered at her somewhat as if a ghost had spoken to him out of the past, and then with a smothered, inarticulate sound kicked the offending box with some violence.

“Here!” he said to the approaching porter. “Get this on to your trolley, and look sharp about it! It's to go along to the quay and wait till called for.”

The girl stepped forward and intervened. “No,” she said, in her quiet, distinct voice. “I wish it, please, to go by railway carrier to Honeyball Farm.” She addressed the porter. “Will you please arrange that for me? I will pay for it now.”

“Pay on delivery,” said the porter, looking at her with a stare of hearty enjoyment. “That’ll be all right, miss. You’ll get it to-night.”

“Thank you,” said Julie, extending twopence with a fleeting smile. “I’ll carry the hold-all myself.”

“Better send that along too, miss,” said the porter. “I’ll tie ’em together. They won’t cost you any more that way.”

“Thank you,” she said again. She was still holding the two bags and the parcel. “That will be a help. Thank you very much.”

“That’ll be all right, miss,” reiterated the dazzled porter, hoisting the trunk on to his barrow and ostentatiously ignoring the glowering Stark. “I’ll see to ’em myself, miss. ’Twon’t cost you more than eightpence, and you’ll get ’em in under an hour.”

Julie turned to her parent with quiet dignity. “So that is settled,” she said. “Shall we go?”

Reuben Stark looked at her with eyes that shone with so baleful a glare that words seemed superfluous, and after a tense moment swung round upon his heel and strode towards the station entrance.

She followed him, carrying her various packages—a slight figure enough, but possessing a poise to which perhaps few of her years could have attained.

Julie Stark was barely eighteen, but her girlhood had the bloom and the maturity that might have belonged to twenty-five. If the first sight of this man had startled her, she had put all panic into the background. Any misgivings that assailed her were thrust resolutely away.

She made no attempt to overtake him as they passed through the barrier, but there was nothing in the least servile about her. There was a curious refinement in her carriage, a grace of movement, which seemed to place her in an entirely different category. Her general bearing had something of the quality of fine steel, while the man who tramped before her might have been fashioned in cast iron. There was not the faintest sign of resemblance between them.

Reaching the station-yard he gave a brief glance over his shoulder to see if she were following, and then marched on without further ceremony.

Julie walked behind, still not attempting to catch him up, disposing her burdens as best she could, and still in some indefinable way managing to look like a princess in disguise. The elasticity of youth was in her step. She had no difficulty in keeping pace with the lurching gait of the man in front.

They came to the street, and Reuben turned, this time without a glance, in the direction of the quay. It was drawing towards the sunset hour, and one or two of the shops were already putting up their shutters. There was not much traffic about. Most of the business of the day was over.

Down the street went Captain Stark without a pause until he came to *The Crown and Sceptre*, which was on the corner of the turn which led out of the harbour-quay. Here sharply he wheeled, almost flung himself against the door of the public bar, and entered, leaving it swinging.

The girl in his wake came to a sudden stop. Men from the harbour were jostling to and fro. One or two of them paused to stare as she stood irresolute, but no one accosted her. There was too much dignity about her for that.

The air blew fresh and salt from the quay, and after a moment or two she turned towards it, and began to move slowly on, picking her way amongst crates and bollards and coils of rope. Here along the harbour-side also work was slowing down. Men stood about in groups, talking in rough sailor speech. The sun was very low in the sky, and a creeping mist already veiled some of the mastheads of the ships moored alongside.

Julie did not look at either men or ships. She merely kept quietly moving, her eyes fixed straight ahead, until she was within a few yards of the end of the quay where, at the foot of some iron steps, the *Skylark* danced on the gently heaving swell. And here, as if reluctantly, she paused.

An old man in a blue jersey with a pipe in his mouth was lounging near. She turned to him and spoke.

“Can you tell me if Captain Stark’s boat is here?”

The man pointed downwards instantly. “There you are, miss! He’ll be along directly, I reckon. Shall I help you in?”

She looked down upon the dark water at the bottom of the steps and slightly shivered. Viewed from above, the boat looked a mere cockle-shell.

The man—a harbour-loafer of long standing—was watching her with some interest. He saw her eyes pass from the *Skylark* to a motor-boat of considerably more reassuring dimensions that had been moored alongside her, so that the same flight of steps could serve them both.

The engine of the latter was running, and there was a figure on board engaged in disposing some paint pots and various other goods in the stern. The man above suddenly gave a piercing whistle which caused the one below to look up sharply.

“’Ere!” yelled the loafer on the quay. “Give this lady a hand into Stark’s boat, will yer?”

The man below remained looking up. The sunset light fell on his face—the face of a Viking, fair, burnt brown, with blue keen eyes that comprehended what they saw at a single glance. His shirt was open at the neck, and his chest was brown also—the golden brown of a fair skin.

In a moment he shouted a brief “All right!” and, pulling on the rope by which his boat was moored, brought her against the steps.

“Go on, miss!” encouraged the man beside Julie. “He’ll look after yer. That’s Rolfe Britton. He lives ’tother side. ’Ere! Give me your bits and ends! I’ll see to them.”

He took her encumbrances from her and urged her to the thin rail provided for timorous seafarers.

Julie went, perhaps preferring the deep blue sea before to the devil who lingered behind. Step by step she descended, her friend of the quay following with the sort of reassuring phrases which might have been addressed to a child of six.

“There y’are now! Don’t you be afeared! Sea’s as quiet as a lamb to-night. Step careful and keep a holt of the rail! That’s the way. You’ll be all right. Now, Rolfe, you give her your hand and keep her steady! Step right over, miss! He’s got yer.”

So, by dint of kindly persuasion and assistance, Julie at length found her hand in the firm grasp of the young man in the boat and set her right foot on the seat at the stern. The craft was throbbing from end to end with the vibration from the engine, like a living thing straining to be gone.

Julie stepped down off the seat and stood, still steadying herself by the hand that had helped her in.

“I’ve got to get—into Captain Stark’s boat,” she said rather breathlessly.

He smiled with a flash of white teeth. "What's become of the old badger? I thought he went to meet you."

"He did. He is just coming," she explained in some confusion. "Oh, my bag and things! Thank you so much," as her friend of the quay dumped them into the boat. "I mustn't stay here, yet . . ." Her look went to the green water alongside and she stopped.

"That's all right," said Rolfe easily. "I'll take you across. He can follow on. It'll save the trouble of shifting your things, and I'm just off in any case."

This was obviously true since he turned from her to cast adrift with the words. It was also true that the boat in which she found herself seemed to offer a far more comfortable and easy means of transport than the little rocking *Skylark*. Besides these considerations there was no sign along the quay of the *Skylark's* master, of whose company Julie had already had more than enough for the moment.

She pursued her remonstrance no further, but with a slight shrug sat down in the stern to await developments.

She did not have to wait long. Rolfe was an adept at handling his boat, and in a few seconds he had released her and stepped forward to his place at the wheel. She watched him through the glass of the cabin-roof, and saw with relief that she was in safe custody. He had not invited her to enter the cabin, and she remained where she was among her own belongings and the paint pots. But from her seat she could look down into the little saloon, and she realized that it was an actual dwelling-place with a bunk on one side and lockers on the other, and there seemed to be a tiny galley beyond it.

She was too deeply interested in her immediate surroundings to take any note of the stretch of water that was widening in their wake between themselves and the quay. The boat was skimming along at a fair pace, and she enjoyed the keen sea air that blew in her face. It was all a new experience to her, and if it had not been for the very confident person who was manipulating the engine she might have had some qualms of anxiety. But as it was, everything seemed to be in order and when the salt spray caught her it gave her a thrill of sheer delight.

They had been going about two or three minutes when a sudden bawling shout came over the water from the quay they had left behind.

Julie started and glanced back with a sudden sense of guilt. The man who drove the boat threw a brief glance over his shoulder and laughed. The

sun had sunk very low and the mist was creeping over the estuary. The quay was already half veiled in it. But Julie managed to discern a figure at the head of the iron steps which she had descended to enter this stranger's boat, and as it appeared to be shaking its fist at her, she had not much doubt as to who it was.

A wicked impulse seized her which she did not attempt to resist. With a light gesture she kissed her hand to the *Skylark's* master, and at once turned her back upon him.

They went on without a pause into the grey creeping shadows of the coming night, and a chill silence wrapped them round, seeming to cut them off from the noisy normal world of everyday. There was only the quick beat of the engine to mingle with the white racing rush of the water on either side. It seemed to Julie like the beating of a heart that belonged to something unseen that was bearing her very swiftly through a sea uncharted to a haven quite unknown.

CHAPTER V

ON BOARD THE *CIRCE*

WHEN the motor-boat finally reached her accustomed berth at the end of the fishing-quay, the girl in the stern had a curious feeling as of one awakening from a dream. She watched the capable master of the *Circe* tie up, making no attempt to move. The soft lop of the grey water had a kind of dreary charm. It did not worry her that there were no steps here, only an iron ladder fixed to the side of the quay by which to land. She knew that Rolfe Britton would attend to the safety of his passenger.

And she was not mistaken. Having made fast, he came aft to her, his pipe at the corner of his mouth, his sunburnt face rather contemptuously serene.

She looked up at him, her hands clasped round her knees. "Thank you for bringing me. I like your boat."

"Not a bad little craft," admitted Rolfe. "Like a cup of tea before you go ashore?"

His look swept her, but did not dwell upon her. Somehow she liked him for that.

But she refused the invitation notwithstanding. "I don't think so, thank you. My—father will be along soon. I have got to be ready for him."

"You won't get any tea out of him," remarked Rolfe; "at least, it'll be supper before you do. Better have a cup with me! He's probably gone back for another drink. It's not tea he goes in for."

"Oh! He's like that, is he?" said Julie, not quite able to keep the sinking of her heart out of her voice.

"Just like that," said Rolfe. "Come inside—if you can get there without tumbling over the paint pots! There's plenty of time, and I'll bring your things along to Honeyball Farm afterwards."

She stood up a trifle unsteadily. He put his hand under her elbow. The boat was lurching on the lap of the tide.

“D’you really think——” said Julie.

“Quite sure,” said Rolfe. “Don’t you worry! You come along!”

By some means inexplicable her scruples were mastered. She yielded to the scarcely perceptible urge of the supporting hand. “If you’re having some yourself . . .” she murmured.

“Of course I am,” said Rolfe. “Soon get the kettle boiling. That’s right. Step easy! You’ll be all right inside.”

He guided her down the half-dozen steps that led into the cabin. Almost before she realized it she was sitting on the lockers, which had a narrow strip of red carpet along their entire length and a red cushion at each end.

“Make yourself at home!” said Rolfe, and stepped past her into the tiny recess beyond which held a minute tin wash-stand and a few cooking utensils.

The light was failing, and she could not see with any certainty what he was doing, but there came the striking of a match and she saw the blue flame of a spirit-kettle spring into being. Immediately afterwards she heard a flute-like whistling that was like the first notes of a bird at dawn. It almost startled her, so clear was it, yet so softly tuned that for the moment she could scarcely have told whence it came. Then she knew that it proceeded from the man who, with his back towards her, was bending over the flame that had just been kindled.

She listened fascinated, a curious feeling of unreality upon her, waiting for the music to unfold itself. Somehow she knew that it would not be one of the modern crooner-ditties of the day, and when, after a tentative bar or two, it developed into the world-famed *aria* of *Cavalleria Rusticana* she was not surprised, only strangely thrilled. For there was something of a wild sweetness about it which she had never heard before—something to which an unknown impulse within herself made glad and eager response. She scarcely breathed as she sat there listening while the soft lop of the rising tide rocked the boat in which she sat.

It was almost a species of mesmerism that came over her in that twilight hour. Perhaps it was not destined to hold her very long, but she would remember it as long as she lived.

The misty afterglow lay like a spell across the darkening estuary, and somewhere in the distance there was the subdued roaring of swelling water where tide and river met together in the eternal strife in which neither could ever be proclaimed conqueror or vanquished. Along the quay and the shore little lights were beginning to gleam, popping up like human hopes and ideals—to endure for a space and then to fade again into the Great Unknown. She was attracted and repelled all in the same breath. But the music that rose and fell close to her held a warmth and glow which seemed almost to create an aura around her. While it lasted she felt neither a stranger nor a guest. She was as one who had reached the end of a journey and felt no need to travel further.

It ceased at last, very softly as it had begun. The figure in the galley had straightened up and was making various business-like movements. She heard the faint clatter of tin cups, and by the fitful light of the blue flame she saw the steam of a boiling kettle. She was conscious of a pang of regret. It was as if a mantle of magic had been drawn away.

In a moment or two her host came towards her carrying a cup and saucer. She noted the squareness of his frame in the dimness, but he trod with the balanced lightness of an athlete.

“You take this,” he said; “and I’ll light the lamp.”

“It’s quite light enough,” protested Julie. “Aren’t you going to have some?”

“In a minute,” he said, and turned back.

She heard him rummaging in his little cooking-hole, and then he came to her again with two tins, one containing some lump sugar and the other biscuits. He placed them on the seat beside her and returned to his tea-kettle.

A few seconds later he emerged again with a pewter mug in his hand containing his own tea. He sat down at the end of the row of lockers.

“Help yourself!” he said. “Have some biscuits! Did I give you enough milk?”

Julie had not tasted her tea. She raised the cup to her lips and lowered it again.

“I’m sure it’s very nice,” she said, “only a little hot. Please don’t bother!”

But he was already on his feet again. He came back with a bottle of milk which he placed between them.

“There’s lots to spare,” he remarked. “Take plenty!”

Julie poured a little into her cup. “Thank you. I don’t want any sugar,” she said.

Rolfe rattled the tin of biscuits until she took one. “That’s better,” he said. “Now we can get down to it. I should think you’re pretty hungry, aren’t you?”

“I think I am rather,” Julie admitted, “though I did have some sandwiches on the journey.”

She bit the biscuit and found that she was very hungry indeed.

Rolfe Britton munched in concert, and drank some tea from his mug.

“So you’ve come home to live, have you?” he asked, after a pause.

Julie nodded rather dubiously. “It’s nice here, isn’t it?” she ventured.

“Depends,” said Rolfe. “I like the place, but, then, I’m my own master. I live on the sea. I can push off somewhere else if I ever get tired of it.”

“That sounds rather jolly,” said Julie. “But I’d rather live on shore in the winter. D’you know Honeyball Farm at all?”

“I’m not exactly a frequent visitor,” said Rolfe, with a slightly wry smile. “I don’t know anyone that is. Stark is not what you’d call a very sociable man.”

“And who else lives there?” questioned Julie, a hint of anxiety in her voice.

Rolfe enlightened her with a certain cynicism. “There’s Peter Prawle, the skipper’s mate, and his wife Emily—a very unattractive female with a squint. Then there’s a nephew of the skipper called Micky, whose brains are a bit haphazard. He works at *The Black Swan*, and when he isn’t at work he’s generally up to some sort of devilment. That’s the whole household. And now—there’ll be you.”

“I—see,” said Julie thoughtfully. She drank some tea with grave preoccupation. “And does the woman—Emily—do the work of the house?”

“I presume so,” said Rolfe.

Julie drew her black brows together. “I wonder how she’ll like me,” she said.

“Wonder how you’ll like her,” rejoined Rolfe. “You’re the daughter of the house, I take it, anyway.”

She looked at him, and in the half-light her eyes were wonderful, deeply gleaming like the eyes of some nocturnal creature. “It’s funny,” she said, “but I don’t feel like that. I suppose I really do belong.”

“Stark thinks so apparently,” said Rolfe. “I expect you’ll soon get used to things.”

Her look still fixed him, as if she were not wholly sure of his sincerity. “I shan’t stay if I don’t,” she said. “I’ll go somewhere else and make my own living.”

“I shouldn’t be in a hurry,” said Rolfe. “It’s sometimes easier said than done.”

She raised her head with a touch of pride. “Not for a woman,” she said. “A woman can always fit in somewhere if she tries.”

“Yes, and possibly into a tight corner,” said Rolfe, “where she may not be able to get out again even if she wants to.”

Julie’s eyes seemed to grow larger and darker. “I don’t understand you,” she said.

He raised his mug to his lips again. “You soon will,” he said, and drank deliberately while she watched him.

“I can always get out of anything I don’t like,” asserted Julie, in a tone that was not quite as confident as the words.

Rolfe set down his mug and met her eyes. “You’ve got a good bit to learn,” he remarked.

“P’raps I know more than you think,” she retorted, taking refuge in indignation. “I’m not a child, anyhow.”

“That’s just it,” said Rolfe. “It would simplify matters if you were.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said Julie.

He raised his brows; they were light and bushy. And then abruptly he smiled. “All right. It’s up to you to get on with it. But don’t say I didn’t warn you! Have some more tea!”

“In a minute,” said Julie. “And I don’t know what you’re warning me about.”

He did not explain. He was a man to whom silence came easily, and he seldom explained anything. If people failed to understand, it was not his job to find a solution. Having been called ridiculous, he had nothing further to say. There are few men who can answer that charge from a woman. It places reasoning out of court.

He merely waited for her to finish her cup, and when she had done so, he took it and retreated to his spirit-lamp for a refill.

When he brought it back to her she had turned in her seat and was gazing out through the little porthole over the sweeping waters of the estuary. Her attitude held a wholly unconscious and nymph-like grace, and the curve of her neck and half-averted face was exquisite.

Rolfe Britton stood with the cup in his hand and regarded her with a look in his sea-blue eyes that had not been there before.

There must have been something about it which penetrated her consciousness for she turned sharply round as if challenging him, and he stooped on the instant and set down the cup beside her.

“Oh, thank you,” she said rather stiffly. “I am not sure that I ought to stop for any more. I think I ought to be going.”

“Drink that first!” said Rolfe. “And I’ll come along with you and bring your baggage.”

“It’s getting rather dark, isn’t it?” she said, a veiled uneasiness in her tone.

“I’ll light the lamp,” he said.

A bracket was fixed in the corner almost immediately above her head. He struck a match and proceeded to kindle the lamp it held while Julie poured some milk into her tea and drank it.

Somehow the spontaneity had gone out of their intercourse. There was a sense of strain in the atmosphere. The llop and gurgle of the water about the boat was like the derisive laughter of a mischievous sea-sprite. From the mist-folded distance there came the chugging sound of a motor, as yet remote, but drawing gradually nearer.

Julie looked up at the man beside her. “I really must go now, thank you.”

“No hurry,” said Rolfe. “I’ll put your things ashore first. You wait here till I come back!”

He spoke so much with the air of one expecting to be obeyed that she found herself complying almost instinctively. Moreover, the removal of his close presence renewed her confidence. She ate another biscuit while he stepped up on deck and proceeded to transport her belongings with the help of the iron ladder from the boat to the quay.

Meanwhile, the whirring of the motor out on the waters of the estuary was growing into a definite and rather aggressive hum—like some persistent insect that will not be ignored. Very suddenly a most unwelcome thought flashed into Julie's mind.

She sat for a second, then stood up. In the same moment Rolfe's square figure reappeared in the cabin doorway.

"Sounds like old Reuben coming back," he remarked.

She met him in some agitation. "Yes. I'm sure it is. I must go. Will you help me up?"

"There's no hurry," he said again. "He'll make for the shore. Prawle'll be there. It'll take them a minute or two to beach her."

But he was wrong. The boat was not making for the shore, but coming straight towards them. As they emerged upon the deck they saw it rushing through the greyness like an angry bird.

"Damn it, he'll ram us if he isn't careful!" said Rolfe, and thrust a swift arm about the girl, to which without an instant's hesitation she clung.

But the oncoming boat did not ram them. Very suddenly the engine was cut off. She shot forward a little way and sent a swell of water to the *Circe* which rocked her from stem to stern, while she herself swung round and remained swaying broadside on.

A furious voice came bellowing across the intervening space of a few yards, but the owner of the voice was practically invisible.

"You blasted Dane!" it yelled. "What the hell d'you think you're doing? Got my girl aboard, have you? Curse your damn' impudence!"

Further remarks of an even less complimentary nature followed, to which Britton the Dane, with the girl gripped in the curve of his arm, listened with a dry and practically soundless chuckling.

It was she who awoke to the urgency and extreme unconventionality of the situation as the *Circe* gradually ceased to roll and the full significance of the skipper's fury was forced home upon her.

“For goodness’ sake, help me to get away!” she whispered urgently to the man who held her. “I never ought to have come.”

“Don’t you believe it!” he whispered back. “You’re all right. The old man’s three sheets in the wind, that’s all. Give him time to go home and get sleepy! I should.”

But she would not hear of this. In growing desperation she insisted upon immediate departure, and in face of her obvious distress he did not oppose it.

With his help she scrambled up the steps in the gloom and, reaching the quay in safety, grabbed her belongings. But in a trice he had swung himself up beside her.

“No. You’re not going alone. You can’t carry all those things. Besides, you might lose your way or tumble into the water. Don’t you worry! He’ll be all right.”

But she could not feel reassured, despite the amusement in his voice. Though no further curses arose from below them, she was in a fever to be gone. Rolfe’s easy stride beside her hurrying steps was almost more than she could bear.

As they moved away towards the shore she heard the engine of the now invisible outboard motor start up again, and knew that its infuriated owner was making for the same goal.

“Oh, this is awful! This is awful!” she said.

But Rolfe’s cynical chuckle was the sole comfort that Fate had to offer in her hour of need.

CHAPTER VI

THE WELCOME HOME

THAT walk along the quay seemed interminable to Julie, the memory of that cursing voice pursuing her. That her companion could find anything amusing in it seemed to her almost terrible. She felt as if she were wandering in a nightmare, and she had a sickening fear of what might be in store for her.

Life till then had been a long and scarcely varying routine. She had been one of a crowd and seldom singled out either for praise or blame. But now she walked alone, a most unwilling object of interest and censure, and she realized that she had already made a fatal mistake.

Rolfe's easy exhortation to her not to worry imparted no comfort whatever, while the rattling motor dashed alongside them in its swift passage to the shore.

"Silly old fool! He'll crash himself one of these days," prophesied Rolfe.

But that did not comfort her either. The whole experience was novel and extremely discomfiting.

When they reached the sandy road at length she felt as if she had walked miles.

"That's Honeyball Farm," said Rolfe, pointing to a dark bulk in front of them in which a single light glimmered uncertainly. "It's only a few yards on now."

It seemed he had discerned something of her feelings, for his tone was encouraging. The sound of the motor had ceased, and they could hear only the wash of the waves on the shore.

Julie stopped. "Please don't you come any further!" she said. "I can find my own way very easily, and I'm sure it would be better if I went alone."

"I'll come to the gate with you," said Rolfe. "There's nothing to be nervous about. Just you stand up to him, that's all!"

“But—you!” protested Julie.

“Oh, never mind me!” he rejoined easily. “He knows better than to interfere with me. Besides, we’ll probably get there first.”

He was right. They had reached the little iron gate in front of the shingle path that bordered Honeyball Farm before Reuben Stark came round the corner; but he was upon them ere Rolfe had time to hand over the parcels he carried. He advanced in a kind of lurching charge.

“So you thought it was time you hove to!” he blared. “After playing me up and leaving me to follow on like an old barge! You and your blasted *Circe!*” He addressed Rolfe. “Thought you’d play a joke on me, did you? I’ll teach you how to play jokes! The next time you run off with my daughter, you can damn’ well keep her, for I won’t take her back.”

Julie flinched as if he had struck her, but Rolfe received the threat with square immobility. “Thanks, Captain Stark! I’ll bear that in mind,” he said. “Hurry up and open that door, will you, please? I’ve got her baggage here.”

Julie stretched out hands that shook a little. “I’ll take everything,” she said. “Thank you very much. Please don’t wait any longer!”

“No. You’d better not wait!” thundered Reuben Stark. “I’ll not have any trespassers here. You get inside!”—savagely, to the girl. “There’s been trouble enough over you.”

He gave her a push which sent her stumbling over the stones, and turned himself to take Rolfe’s burden from him.

Rolfe, however, offered firm though suave resistance. “No, I’ll deliver the goods myself. You open the door! Ah, it is open!”—suddenly perceiving Emily Prawle’s pale face peering forth from the threshold. “Let the lady in, Mrs. Prawle! Here are her belongings!”

And in cool defiance of the outraged Stark, he strode forward, somehow managing to herd Julie in front of him so as to interpose his sturdy frame between her and her irate parent while he placed her parcels in the housekeeper’s skinny arms.

Then, “Good night,” he said courteously, and withdrew in good order, leaving the skipper for the moment too confounded for speech.

The clanging of the iron gate in response to a kick from Stark made his exit final, and Julie passed the unknown woman on the mat and entered the dingy hall with the sensation of a prisoner stepping into a cell.

Emily Prawle gave her no greeting. She merely turned and dumped her packages upon a wooden chair. And then in some fashion best known to herself she faded from the picture. When Julie looked round at the banging of the front door she was alone with Reuben Stark.

He stood and glared at her, his cap still on his head and intense malignancy in his narrow eyes. He had certainly been drinking, but he was not intoxicated. The dim rays of an oil-lamp, turned very low and smelling as only an oil-lamp can, which stood on a wooden slab attached to the wall, gave his face a most saturnine expression, but there was nothing sodden or stupid about it.

She confronted him with the courage that fights in sheer self-defence. His look was horrible, but she met it with defiance.

“Well?” he said at length. “What have you got to say for yourself, you little bouncing judy?”

She did not answer, for she could think of no appropriate response.

He came towards her with his rolling sea gait—a man of average build and strength, but imbued with the power of a great malevolence. She stood, straight and quivering, waiting for she knew not what. And the next moment he struck her two hard resounding smacks, first on one cheek and then on the other.

She started back with a cry, covering her smarting face, while he stood over her, grim and threatening.

“There!” he said. “Now you know what to expect if you don’t behave yourself. At least, you don’t know, for I’ll do much worse than that if I’m put to it. I’ll give you such a strapping on your bare body as’ll make you eat your meals standing for a week. So now you know. And you’ll only get bread and water at that if you dare to defy me.”

So now she knew! It was an enlightenment such as she had never dreamed of. Horror and a wild resentment seized upon her. She raised her face from her hands, gasping, goaded almost to hysteria.

“You brute!” she said. “You bully!” And, snatching his cap from his head, she flung it full in his face.

Then, before he had time to recover, she fled. There was a flight of stairs in a corner. She went up it with feet that seemed to touch nothing—up and up through a nightmare darkness, till she came upon a landing and tore along it to a room through which the grey light of the sea glimmered eerily.

Into this room she threw herself and, turning, flung the door shut, groping wildly till she found a bolt which she fought with and finally shot home. Then, terrified to the soul of her, with wildly beating pulses, she sank upon the uncarpeted floor and lay panting and breathless, feeling as if her heart had risen in her throat to choke her.

Her cheeks burned as if they had been scorched. Fright and fury strove together within her. If he followed her, she would let him burst open the door sooner than open to him, and then she would fight to the last inch of her strength or throw herself from the window, she knew not which. The violence that had been done her was like a scourge to her spirit. How had he dared to lay hands upon her? And what had she done to deserve it? Merely availed herself of a neighbourly offer to cross the river instead of awaiting the old tyrant's pleasure while he refreshed himself at the public-house.

And his threats of further violence! The mad blood clamoured within her. She would have him up. She would make him pay. At least—at least—would she? Would her pride ever suffer such an exposure? She shuddered and huddled lower on the floor. No, that would be to make a laughing-stock of herself. Almost any humiliation was preferable to that. There was in her a fineness of feeling which surely she had never inherited from Reuben that revolted at the thought. If he followed her now, overwhelmed her resistance, punished her as he had said, no one should ever know of it.

But she would go, escape at the very earliest opportunity, leave him for ever and make her own way in the world unassisted, as she had boasted. So ran her wild and agitated thoughts while she crouched there waiting in the deepening gloom.

Absolute silence reigned, however. She had fled, but none pursued her. The only sound in the stillness was the splash of the waves beyond the open window, which had become a pale square in complete darkness. She might have been alone in the house, so intense was its quiet.

He had not troubled to follow her. Then he did not contemplate any further punitive measures apparently. He was leaving her to cool down in the solitude of her self-appointed captivity.

Gradually, as composure returned to her, she began to wonder what sort of apartment it was in which she had taken refuge. It had somewhat of a musty smell in spite of the open window. She raised herself first to her knees and then to her feet to investigate.

It was a good-sized room with an uneven floor. Feeling along the wall, she came to the iron rail of a bed around which she made her way till she found the wall again. Then she ran into a chair which gave forth a rickety protest, and from that she came upon a solid chest of drawers.

At the top of this her nervous fingers encountered something cold which proved to be a glass shade, evidently guarding some treasure. She passed on, shivering a little, to the window.

It looked straight out to sea, and a faint glimmer of comfort went through her as she spied odd lights bobbing here and there and the steady glare of the beacon at the end of the harbour pier. She tried to decide which of the smaller illuminations belonged to Rolfe Britton's boat, but she could not be certain of its position from that angle. Still, the lights reassured her and made her feel less like a prisoner in a fortress. She remembered with satisfaction the tea and biscuits which she had consumed on board the *Circe*, and decided that this meal would easily sustain her until the light of morning imparted a new and saner outlook upon life. After all, she was safe in her fortress. There was nothing to frighten her here. She might just as well make up her mind to spend the night where she was and retrieve her belongings the next day. The horrible old tyrant downstairs would be in a more normal frame of mind by that time, and she herself might, after a sleep, succeed in developing some plan of action.

So she sought to comfort herself, standing at the window with the salt air blowing in upon her, and striving to forget the unpleasant possibilities that still existed in the unexplored gloom of the house behind her.

A long time passed while she stood there, fortifying her senses against the panic and suspicion that crowded in upon them, struggling by every means in her power to banish the turmoil and the dread that pressed upon her.

In the end she thought she had succeeded. The harbour lights in the distance and the lights along the quay all helped to restore her confidence, and when, further away, the sudden glare of a revolving light caught her she felt as if the gloom no longer existed. The night had been turned into day.

With that thought in her mind, she moved at last with the vague impulse to find rest for her weary body on the bed, guided by the beacon from that distant light-ship. Her movement was almost mechanical. She was weary, as a lost child is weary, and instinctively she sought the nearest means for repose. The future had grown dim, like a blurred vision in her brain. She would deal with that when the time came. The need of the moment occupied

her before all else. She turned her back to the window and faced the inner darkness.

In that instant the far-off beacon flashed, and its long ray penetrated the dimness and shone upon something pale and glassy.

It sent such a thrill of horror through her that she stood as one electrified, quite motionless, gazing. The light was gone again, but she stood there without breathing, without stirring, until after the lapse of five or six seconds it pierced the gloom once more. Then again she saw the awful thing before her, and every nerve recoiled in shrinking revulsion. It was a man's head, yellow, shrivelled, more like a dried fruit than any human resemblance, set in a glass shade that gleamed as the light shifted and vanished.

A wild shriek rose in her throat, but somehow, with both hands, she stifled it. This thing, this ghastly apparition, must have some concrete explanation. She knew that the shade was real. She remembered with a shudder that she had actually touched it. With a supreme effort she mastered herself. Perhaps it was just a model, something in ivory, a heathen image!

Again the light flashed inwards, revealing the silent horror. It was a nightmare vision with closed eyes and wide-drawn lips. But at that moment she saw it as it was—the smoke-dried trophy of some far-off cannibal *tepee*, and though it revolted her beyond all words, her panic died.

“It’s—a mummy!” she gasped to herself. “Just—a mummy!”

But the thought of spending the night with it was too gruesome to contemplate. Her nerves were badly shaken. She began to wonder what further terrible discoveries might be in store, and with trembling limbs she left the window and felt her way back to the door.

She found it with some difficulty and pulled back the bolt with fingers that were stiff and cold.

The dark passage stretched before her. She slipped out and drew the door shut in her wake, making no sound.

There seemed to be a very evil atmosphere in the house, but she breathed more freely since she had quitted that chamber of horror. What was she going to do now? Whither should she turn?

There was nothing whatever to guide her. She stood alone in what seemed to be an empty desert of darkness, and listened and waited for she knew not what.

And then, as she stood there waiting, alert and straining for every sound, she heard a slithering movement at the other end of the passage and became aware of someone advancing towards her.

CHAPTER VII

THE DAUGHTER OF THE HOUSE

HER first instinct was to beat an immediate retreat into the room behind her, but the memory of what it contained checked her. Whoever it might be who was approaching was doing so with extreme caution, and there was certainly no bluster or bullying about the stealthy advance. It was like the creeping of some small, rather frightened animal, and Julie stood her ground.

Nearer it came and nearer, till, peering into the darkness, she thought she saw a form, slight, stunted, meagre, not so tall as herself.

On an impulse she spoke, briefly and uncompromisingly. "What do you want?"

Instantly there was a sound in front of her—the sharp scrape of feet, an indrawn breath—and as swiftly, like the shutting of a lid, silence, immobility, suspense.

But Julie's courage had returned. Here at least was someone smaller, less assured, more easily frightened, than herself. In a sudden flash she remembered Rolfe's words regarding the inhabitants of Honeyball Farm. There was a nephew—Micky—with brains a bit haphazard, who was generally up to some devilment when not at work.

She determined to assume the upper hand at once. "Is that Micky?" she demanded of the hard-stretched silence.

A faint hissing sound answered. "Sh—sh!"

It conveyed a definite warning which it seemed advisable not to ignore. Julie paused for a moment, then spoke in a whisper. "Can't you get a light? I want to find my room."

The hissing was repeated, but in a second or two there came another movement, and she heard the rattle of a match-box. But in the same instant, before a match could be lighted, a bellowing shout came up from the lower regions.

“Hi, you young devil! What the hell are you up to? Come downstairs and get the boots cleaned, blast yer!”

The scarcely discerned figure leaped like a startled rabbit. Julie heard the match-box clatter on the floor almost at her feet. The owner thereof did not stop to retrieve it, but turned and ran from her without further pretence at concealment, clattering down the stairs while she stooped and groped for the matches.

She found them still in their box, and after a little fumbling struck one. The flame flickered in the draught of the passage, but by its aid she managed to descry another open door a few feet away. Treading cautiously, she moved towards it, reaching the threshold just as the light went out.

She paused in uncertainty. Was it wise to risk another venture? The darkness in front seemed packed with unholy things, and the moaning of the sea encompassed the place like a perpetually murmured malediction. She stood and listened to it, shivering in the draught, miserably irresolute.

And then, whilst she waited, striving to re-establish her wavering courage, a glimmer of light appeared at the end of the passage, and she heard another step upon the stair. Desperately, like a cornered animal, she turned to face the newcomer.

Several seconds elapsed before the faint gleam of a candle-flame shone at the corner, and behind it, wraith-like, hatchet-faced, the woman she had seen momentarily upon entering the house. Again she made a swift effort of memory. Of course—this was Mrs. Prawle!

She tried to smile, but her attitude remained defensive in spite of her. “Good evening!” she said. “I’m trying to find my room.”

“So I see,” said Emily Prawle.

She spoke in a hushed, sepulchral voice. The light she carried cast fantastic shadows over her features, giving them a ghoulish look. She advanced with a sliding gait, not lifting her feet from the floor. Julie saw that she was wearing an ancient pair of carpet-slippers.

“Come in here!” she said, and shuffled past Julie into the room with the half-open door.

Julie followed her with a certain caution. The candlelight glanced upon bare walls. The window was closed and a forbidding-looking brown curtain with an elusive pattern was pulled across it. In front, was a high, very sombre chest of drawers with a small swing looking-glass upon it which

leaned forwards, reflecting the ragged rug on the floor, and seeming to hint that under no circumstances would it be persuaded to take an upright view of things.

Emily Prawle set down the candle upon the chest and turned round to her mute companion. "This here's your room," she said. "It's got everything you can want. If the bed's not to your liking, you can just tell yourself that it's the best in the house. It's not a palace of luxury, so it's no use expecting what you can't have. The room at the end of the passage, that's the captain's, and I don't advise you to go meddling in there."

Julie shivered a little. She had been swiftly cured of any possible desire to do that. She looked at the bed—a castorless iron affair pushed up against the drab wall. It had no coverlet, only a dark-grey blanket that had a hard-worn appearance which was most uninviting. A wooden chair stood beside it, and at the foot against the wall was a washing-stand designed for two basins, but possessing one only, with a large round hole where its fellow should have been. A dingy towel was draped over the jug, and there was a piece of yellow soap in a saucer by the side.

Julie took in all these details with a slow-gathering sense of nausea. She had not been accustomed to luxury, but the utter meanness of this cell-like apartment revolted her. It was squalid and inexpressibly repellent.

Emily Prawle watched her with a sidelong, unpleasant scrutiny.

"Well," she said at last, as Julie remained silent, "I don't suppose as you've been used to anything near as good, so we'll take it you're satisfied. I'll get Prawle to bring up your things when he's had his supper."

It was a curious fact that while most people called her husband Peter, Emily invariably referred to him as Prawle. There seemed to be a secret, innate contrariness in all that she did.

She began to slip towards the door as she finished her last sentence, but she had barely reached the threshold when Julie spoke, her voice clear-cut and very cold.

"I suppose I can have some supper too? Or is that too much to ask?"

Emily paused, leering back in a fashion which displayed a most unprepossessing cast in her cavernous eyes.

"Oh yes," she said, "there's some pea-soup and some bread and cheese if you like to come down for it. You needn't starve, but you'll have to look after yourself. And you'd better not leave the candle alight, either."

She was gone with this last sinister piece of advice, slopping along the uncarpeted passage as she had come, and leaving the girl alone in her box-like apartment—the unwanted visitor beginning to wonder already by what means she could escape.

She was still standing there motionless, staring before her, when a sudden yell from the lower regions startled her. It was followed by a series of yells each more hideously distraught than the last, accompanied by a stamping and scuffling and the horrible sounds of blows which made her wildly beating heart shrink within her.

Then, quite as suddenly as it had begun, the worst of the uproar was over, leaving someone crying noisily while someone else appeared to be setting the furniture to rights. The crying by degrees died down to a wretched snivelling, and Stark's voice, thick and threatening, made itself heard.

“That'll learn you, you young scrimshanker! Think you can do as you like in this place, do you? Well, you're darn' well mistaken. And the sooner you know it—and that Judy upstairs who calls herself my daughter knows it too—the better. I'll stand no hell nonsense from either of you. Just you get that into your idiot brain!”

There was no response to this. The snivelling ceased. The affray was over. But Julie, feeling sick to the very soul, then and there renounced all further ideas of going down to secure either her belongings or some food. Noiselessly she closed the door, only to find to her dismay that it possessed neither lock nor bolt.

That frightened her, literally frightened her, but she forced her fears back. She must keep her senses about her to deal with the situation or most assuredly she would be worsted. It did not appear as if the master of the house had any immediate intention of enforcing his authority upon her. And there remained the window. She crept to it stealthily, and softly pulled at the disreputable curtain. It refused to act in the ordinary way, but, rotten with dust and age, it tore in her hand. She pulled it down and disclosed the window, massed with cobwebs, behind.

Her heart misgave her. That window had not been opened for years. The rusty fastening withstood her utmost effort. But as she wrestled with it fruitlessly she heard a sound from somewhere in the darkness below her—a clear, fluting whistle.

Calm and confident and exceedingly beautiful, the *aria* of *Cavalleria Rusticana* floated up above the dumb moaning of the sea.

She stood still, the candlelight behind her, and listened. And as she stood, it came to her in a very curious and convincing fashion that the whistling was intended for her alone. The spell wound itself about her, and she made no attempt to break it. She forgot her panic, and when she remembered it again it was to tell herself that it had been ridiculous. What could a drunken old man do to her in this modern world of liberty? There was nothing whatever to be afraid of. It seemed to her that that was exactly what the unseen whistler was trying to convey.

When the music came to an end she waved her hand in acknowledgment and drew back into the room. Presently, when Peter Prawle came up, she would make him open the window.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHALLENGE

IT was the arrival of the delivery-van from the station some twenty minutes later that caused the next commotion at Honeyball Farm.

Julie, seated on the wooden chair in a sort of despairing patience, heard it and got up to listen. But she did not go downstairs. She waited with a queenly composure that she had been practising for some time for someone to come to her.

There was a considerable pause first while some sort of discussion was carried on at the door. In the end she heard the skipper's voice raised in definite command, and there followed the sound of scurrying feet upon the stairs. In another moment a thump came upon her door, and almost instantly it was opened from without.

Julie moved forward and came face to face with a stunted lad who looked about sixteen, except for his eyes, which were red-rimmed and had all the aged wisdom of a monkey. She realized in an instant that this was the victim upon whom Reuben's wrath had been visited.

He did not, however, give her much time for observation. "There's eightpence to pay," he announced in a cracked voice. "You'd better look sharp about it or the skipper'll be after you. He won't stand any bally nonsense."

Then he stopped and stared at her with an unfathomable expression in his monkey-eyes which made her wonder if they were the eyes of a child or of a very old man.

Julie had her purse in her hand. She extracted the required amount and gave it to him. "Will you please see that all my things are brought up?" she said with dignity. "And I shall be obliged if someone—Mr. Prawle—will come and open the window for me."

The boy stood, still gazing at her, as he took the money. "That window? Why, it don't open—never," he said. "But you can have my room if you

like, and I'll come here."

"Where is your room?" said Julie.

He pointed vaguely with his thumb. "You wait!" he said. "I'll show you."

And with that he removed his gaze as if by some sheer physical effort, and, turning, clattered away.

Nothing further happened for some time except the tread of heavy feet below, the banging of the front door, and the departure of the railway van. But after about a quarter of an hour Julie heard someone ascending. She guessed that it was Peter this time, and he was obviously laden. There seemed to be a species of dull resentment about his approach even before he came into sight. Her small trunk was bumped against every possible corner and obstacle, ending up with a bang against the doorpost of the room in which she stood.

"Where d'you want it humped to?" demanded Peter sourly.

"Oh, just put it on the floor, please!" she said, trying to speak normally. "Thank you for bringing it. There are some other things downstairs, aren't there?"

Peter removed the burden from his stocky shoulder and let it drop with a bang at her feet. "Got a pair of legs, haven't yer?" he said.

Julie started, so unexpected was the question. Meeting the man's unfriendly stare, she realized that here was yet another member of the household to whom her coming was unwelcome. A wave of bitterness surged through her.

She spoke scarcely above her breath but with a venom of which she had never before believed herself capable. "Yes," she said. "And if I were only a man I'd kick you downstairs with them."

He laughed at that with gruff derision as he turned to go. "A chip of the old block, seemingly!" he commented. "But I shouldn't make too much of it if I was you. There is such a thing as pride going before a fall. So they say."

He departed with this maxim, and Julie was kept fuming for having so far parted with her self-control. But it was useless to take herself to task. There was hot blood within her, and it was bound to have its way. The fact that her life had run in a groove hitherto was making it all the harder for her now. It was as if all law and order had been ruled out of it at a stroke, and

she was left bewildered. There did not seem to be even common sense in this new atmosphere in which she found herself.

She looked down at the luggage at her feet and wondered what she would do next. Since things had simmered down somewhat, it began to seem that it might be reasonable to go down and collect her remaining belongings herself. Reuben had apparently retired into some den of his own, for she heard no sound of him. And she was certainly not going to allow herself to be browbeaten by the Prawles.

She was still debating the point when she heard the stairs creak again, and in a few seconds Micky's white face peered round the door at her. He looked more than ever like a monkey as he stood there, stooping forward, his lower jaw gibbering a little, his general attitude one of acute vigilance.

"Come on!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "I've got to go to *The Black Swan* and help Belinda wash up. D'you want my room?"

She could not decide whether his rapidly blinking eyes held friendliness or merely suspicion, but she saw no harm in investigating his offer, although she hesitated.

"I shouldn't mind so much if only I could get the window to open," she said.

"You can't. It's stuck," said Micky.

"Then it isn't fit for anyone to sleep here," said Julie with indignation.

The boy's features twisted in an abrupt grin. She noticed that there was a large lump on his forehead which looked like the result of a recent blow.

"That man knocks you about, does he?" she said.

Micky's grin vanished. "He bashes everybody when he's tight," he said sullenly. "Not me more'n anybody else. You coming?"

He withdrew himself suddenly from the room, and Julie realized that her question had given offence.

She followed him out into the passage. "Well, where's your room?" she said.

He pointed to the door at the end with a crooked forefinger. "In there," he said. "You can have it if you like."

"That's not your room," said Julie sharply. "That's Captain Stark's—and you know it."

He turned with a writhing, cat-like movement, and this time there was no mistaking the nature of his look. She caught the gleam of malignancy in his eyes.

“They’re all Captain Stark’s,” he said. “Everything belongs to him—me and you and everything.”

Julie recoiled. Quite clearly she saw that he had meant to entrap her—probably with the idea of embroiling her in further trouble with the skipper. The loutish cunning with which he regarded her filled her with disgust.

“You may,” she said curtly. “I certainly don’t. You’d better get along to *The Black Swan*, and I’ll manage my own affairs.”

She spoke with such a definite command that Micky was routed. He stood for a second or two blinking as if he were going to cry. Then, with a sort of squirm, he pulled himself together and moved away.

Julie walked after him majestically. Her mind was made up. She followed him firmly down the stairs into the ill-lit hall.

“And the next time you want to play a practical joke,” she said, “you’d better choose someone else to play it on, or you may regret it.”

Micky made no reply. The door was close at hand. He dashed at it and let himself out as one flying before a whirlwind.

It banged upon him, and Julie smiled at her easy victory. Obviously Micky at least was not a very formidable person. She began to think that perhaps she had exaggerated the unfriendly tendencies of the entire household. She had already flung the gauntlet back at the skipper without any dire results. Possibly only a small amount of courage was needed to hold her own with them all! Though she was not quite certain that she desired to transform herself from an unwelcome guest into an acknowledged inmate of the establishment. Any dreams she might once have entertained of becoming the prop of her father’s old age had faded quite away. She had no intention of remaining at Honeyball Farm a moment longer than circumstances compelled.

Her parcels were still lying where Emily Prawle had dumped them. She decided to leave them there a little longer while she made further investigations. Tired as she was, she could not see any reason for going supperless to bed in the cheerless room upstairs with the door that would not lock and the window that would not open.

The dim lamp in the hall showed her a closed door and a passage beyond, and she approached the former with a boldness born of her easy victory over Micky.

She rapped upon it, paused a moment or two, then opened it. Blank darkness yawned in front of her. The room was obviously empty. But on the point of drawing back, something checked her. It was the smell of a spread meal, and it appealed to her.

Swiftly she turned back into the hall, picked up the lamp all slippery with oil, and shone its meagre light into the room. A shabby parlour presented itself to her gaze with drab walls and horsehair furniture. But in the centre was a round table upon which a few dishes had been placed. She saw some meagre slices of ham, the rather grim carcass of a chicken, a small hunk of bread and a minute piece of stale cheese.

It was not a sumptuous repast, but she was hungry enough to be attracted to it. She stood for a few seconds regarding it, then she advanced into the room, set down the lamp upon the table, and wiped the paraffin from her hand on a corner of the cloth.

There was a single plate set in front of an arm-chair, in which she seated herself, facing the door. Then without further preliminary she picked up a knife and fork and began to scrape what remnants of meat remained from the chicken. She also selected the best of the ham and the least crusty portion of the bread. There was no butter and the bread was very dry, but a brown jug of water and a cracked tumbler sufficed to enable her to swallow the dry fare, and though she ate and drank somewhat feverishly, it did her good. At the end of ten minutes she felt decidedly better.

The rough provisions on the table had been considerably reduced, and she felt rather like Goldilocks in the bears' den. But that, after all, was no fault of hers. If people had children it was their job to look after them—though at this point she reiterated to herself her resolution that Reuben Stark would not be long in a position to fulfil this duty.

She had turned the smouldering lamp up a little, but its uneven flame failed to reveal anything in the room which was not mean or shabby, with the sole exception of two gleaming, curved elephant tusks on the mantelpiece above the fireless hearth. These would have been beautiful if they had not somehow seemed ominous, as if something monstrous lurked in the shadows waiting to devour. Julie averted her eyes from these tusks. They gave her a gruesome feeling. She decided that it would be a good idea to gather up her belongings and return to her room for the night. She would

certainly barricade the door, though it did not appear that anyone in the house was taking the faintest interest in her.

She rose and stretched herself. Even that uninviting bed upstairs was a welcome thought at the moment. She was thoroughly tired. Then she remembered the lamp and regarded it distastefully. It was an unpleasant thing to handle. She glanced about for paper or rag, but there was only the tablecloth. She whipped up a corner of it and wiped the superfluous oil away.

Scarcely had she done so when she heard a sound behind her and smelt a whiff of strong tobacco. In a flash she turned and found Reuben Stark standing in the doorway.

But he was not as he had been when she had seen him last. His face had a greyish-purple hue, and his eyes, slightly glazed, seemed to see her best by looking at a point just below her chin. He stood with a hand on each doorpost, drawing deeply at a blackened pipe which he gripped between his teeth with lips drawn back.

“Ah!” he said. “Hullo! I was looking for you.”

His words were slightly slurred but quite distinguishable. Their tone had a kind of grisly affability that made Julie quake in spite of herself with another vagrant thought of the bears’ den.

Her exit was completely barred. He stood squarely before her, his feet clad in slippers as ancient as those worn by Emily Prawle. And he smiled at her in a fashion that filled her with foreboding. Almost instinctively she glanced around her for some weapon of defence.

“There’s a poker in the fender,” said Stark, still genially. “But I don’t advise you to take hold of it because it may turn in your hand and hurt you. Had a good supper, I hope?”

Julie’s look fell swiftly to the table. There, close to her hand, lay the knife she had used, black-handled and ugly. She picked it up.

“I suppose I may take this,” she said, “to cut some string with?”

He uttered a growling sound. “You’ll take nothing in this house, you little hell-cat!” he said. “You’re just like your mother. But I’ll stand no damn’ nonsense from you—no more than I would from her. Put that thing down!”

He suddenly roared the last words at her, and lunged forward. But Julie, slim and active, sprang away, behind the table, round it, and out at the door

before he could recover his balance to turn on her.

The knife was still in her hand, and she did not this time flee in terror, but stopped on the threshold and waited while the man steadied himself against an old oak chest in a corner into which his lurching charge had precipitated him.

Then, as he faced her again, she spoke clearly and contemptuously across the dim-lit space that divided them.

“And I’ll stand no nonsense from you, either. I’ve not come to this place of my own accord, and I don’t mean to stay. But so long as I’m here, I’ll be treated decently. Understand that!”

She held her head high and confronted him fearlessly, for something told her that, in his present fuddled state at least, she held the mastery. He was almost cowering before her. What the effect of her victory might be when he recovered his normal frame of mind she did not pause to consider. She was young, and the fact that she had already achieved two successes in a hostile country within so short a time made her somewhat over-triumphant. She felt in that moment as if she could have faced a score of bullying and semi-drunken skippers.

“And you’ll be good enough to leave my mother out of it,” she flung at him. “The worst mistake she ever made was marrying you. And I’m not surprised that she cleared out and left you to it. No woman with any self-respect could have done anything else.” Her ringing voice expressed the utmost disdain.

Stark growled again on a deeper note, writhing his lips like an angry dog, but he made no further attempt to assert himself. The liquor had taken hold of him, and he recognized that the girl had won the first round in consequence. Like a half-stunned animal he crouched facing her, and Julie uttered a short laugh of scorn and turned away.

In her opinion the whole household was at her feet. But the hot blood was cooling within her. She had had enough fighting for one night, and she needed rest. She collected her packages in the hall, and felt her way back up the stairs to her room.

And Reuben Stark remained motionless for a long time, glaring heavily at the doorway from which she had defied him.

CHAPTER IX

SYBIL'S MOTHER

“It’s a funny old hole,” said Sybil Tredville, leaning back in her chair with her hands clasped behind her head. “I often think—when I’m away—that it’s rather attractive. But when I come back . . .”

She left the sentence unfinished. There was little point in enlarging upon the subject, especially as the person she addressed was obviously not paying the faintest attention. This was her mother—a fragile woman with very delicate features, like an ultra-expensive piece of porcelain.

She lay propped up in bed with her head resting against an enormous rose-tinted pillow, her thin white hands clasped rather pathetically in front of her on a pink silk quilt. She was exquisitely cared for in every detail, but she always had a plaintive air.

“I do wish,” she said, “that Pearce would come and manicure me. I told her that the doctor would probably be coming early.”

Sybil cocked an eye at her. “Darling, your hands are lovely,” she said rather perfunctorily. “Not that Oliver Keston would notice if they weren’t. What part of you is he coming to look at to-day?”

“You’re very unkind,” said Lady Tredville, regarding her hands with complacent disparagement. “You know perfectly well that I’m not fit to be seen. And one does like to be presentable, even though the doctor may be unobservant. A very curious young man, Sybil—blunt almost to *brusquerie*! I am not at all sure that I altogether like him.”

“Well, that’s better than adoring him, isn’t it?” said Sybil. “Don’t you loathe the type of woman who worships her doctor? I do. And I should think the unfortunate doctor does too.”

“Really, Sybil dear!” her mother protested. “Is it necessary to be quite so downright? I know it arises from a very laudable wish to be sincere. But we should never be crude. I neither adore—nor loathe—anyone, I am glad to say.”

Sybil yawned. "Oh, neither do I. But that's only because I've never met anyone worth the trouble. If you only knew how asinine young Bellamy has been lately! And Aunt Serena has been trying to make me say I'll marry him."

"I shouldn't, dear," said Lady Tredville, relapsing into placidity. "You'd only be sorry afterwards. You're quite right. He isn't worth the trouble."

"I'm inclined to think that marriage isn't—under any circumstances," observed Sybil. "No married woman I've yet talked to ever admits that she got out half as much as she put in—although she's never a failure."

"Well, of course, it's a lottery to a certain extent," conceded Lady Tredville. "One needs to be very careful before deciding. But then, everything is a lottery, isn't it? Life, for instance!"

Sybil laughed suddenly and spontaneously, in a fashion that made her look years younger. "Darling, what a priceless jewel you are! Do go on! I'm loving it!"

Lady Tredville looked at her rather wistfully. "I could tell you such a lot," she said. "But I suppose I ought not to, and you wouldn't want to listen."

"But I am listening!" declared Sybil. "And I can quite grasp that being married to a man like Father could often be damnably unpleasant. But, you see—perhaps luckily—there aren't any men like him among the younger set. They probably haven't developed yet, or something of that kind. So your experiences wouldn't do much good to me, I'm afraid."

"Nobody's experiences ever are of use to anyone else," observed Lady Tredville with a sigh. "Oh dear, I wish Pearce would come. And why did your Aunt Serena want you to marry Jack Bellamy of all people? Has he got any money?"

"Only expectations," replied Sybil carelessly. "And I should probably have divorced him before they materialized. He's not a very bad boy at present, but he's developing."

"They all do," murmured Lady Tredville. "Oh, here comes Pearce at last! Pearce, you know I'm expecting the doctor. Do please make me presentable as quickly as you can!"

Pearce was a tall, sallow woman with a dowdiness of garb and figure that was somehow rather grand. She was not dressed as a lady's maid, but

wore plain black; yet no one would have taken her for anything else—of the type that is always termed superior.

She advanced to the bedside with complete imperturbability. “Hi am sorry, my lady,” she said. “Hi thought perhaps you were having a talk with Miss Sybil.”

Lady Tredville extended a fragile hand. “But I can talk to Miss Sybil while you polish my nails,” she said. “Not that there is anything to talk about. I hope to get up for a little while presently, Sybil, if Dr. Keston will allow me. Of course it would be wrong to take any risks, but it doesn’t seem so cold to-day.”

“It isn’t in the least cold,” said Sybil. “I don’t suppose you’ll have to persuade him very hard. D’you mind if I smoke?”

“Oh, must you, dear?” murmured Lady Tredville. “It’s very early in the day to begin, isn’t it?”

Sybil laughed. “I don’t call it early, and I don’t suppose Pearce does, either.”

Pearce glanced up from the manicure-case for a moment. “Hi call it a sin and a shame, Miss Sybil,” she said. “Just think of all the good you might do with the money you spend on them cigarettes!”

“Just think of all the good I do do, Pearce!” retorted Sybil, with a swift poke of her tongue in the direction of the prim black figure. “And, anyhow, I travelled down third-class yesterday. So you can put that down to my credit.”

Pearce bent herself to her task without comment. She and Sybil were always very direct with one another, but they were by no means antagonistic. Pearce had been a family prop for as long as Sybil could remember.

Lady Tredville, now that attention was being bestowed upon her, managed to distract her own. “How times change, to be sure!” she remarked. “Now that’s a thing I never did at your age, Sybil. One never knows what one’s fellow-travellers may be. There are such extraordinary people about nowadays.”

“My dear, all the extraordinaries travel first-class,” her daughter assured her. “All the jewel-thieves, tipsters, and such which! Anyone with any pretence at respectability goes third. That’s why I thought Pearce would approve.”

Pearce did not raise her eyes. “Hi like to see you where you belong, Miss Sybil,” she said, “and Hi hope you were in good company.”

“As a matter of fact, I travelled down with Reuben Stark’s daughter,” said Sybil. “You know old Stark, Mother—Captain Stark of Honeyball Farm?”

“Oh, that dreadful old man!” said Lady Tredville. “They say he’s a miser, don’t they? With pots of money! But I never knew he had a daughter.”

“No. She’s never lived with him—never even seen him so far as she could remember. She told me that much,” said Sybil. “But she wasn’t very communicative, shy or something. She’s a very good-looker. Papa quite fell for her when we arrived.”

“So like him!” murmured Lady Tredville. “He always liked the shy ones best. Fancy old Stark being a parent! What’s become of his wife?”

“Oh, she died—ages ago; so the girl gave me to understand.” Sybil yawned. “She was foreign, I fancy. The girl was put to a sort of orphanage school. She’s only just left. A fine time she’ll have at Honeyball Farm!”

Pearce spoke unexpectedly. “Hi should say, a very unhappy time, Miss Sybil, if all I hear is true. A nasty drunken lot they are that side of the river and no mistake!”

Sybil turned a lazy smile upon her. “So that’s the sort of company you keep! Pearce, I’m ashamed of you!”

“It’s not me,” said Pearce with dignity. “It’s that young Harriet down in the kitchen. She’s friends with Belinda Quale who works at *The Black Swan*. Comes back with the most awful stories sometimes. Hi wouldn’t go over there in broad daylight. Wild horses wouldn’t drag me.”

“They sound more like wild asses,” commented Sybil. “Well, I’m going over there one of these days. It’s rough luck on a girl who has obviously had a decent upbringing to be pitchforked into that sort of crowd. So if I suddenly find I want a maid of my own, Mamma dear, you’ll have to stand the racket.”

“Oh, really!” protested Lady Tredville, waving her free hand. “For pity’s sake, Sybil, don’t start being quixotic! I can’t bear it. And I won’t have the house filled with coarse fisher-girls. Think of the language!”

“I’m good at languages,” smiled Sybil. “I’ve no doubt I could pick it up quite easily. But I don’t think the little orphan girl knows much at present,

and she certainly isn't coarse. I'll fetch her to see you one day."

"Oh, well, if I may see her first!" said Lady Tredville, mollified. "But we really don't want another girl in the house, do we, Pearce?"

"It depends how much waiting upon Miss Sybil is going to require," said Pearce, non-committally. "Hi haven't much time to spare, as your ladyship is aware."

"Meantime, may I smoke a cigarette," said Sybil, "if I promise not to spill the ash?"

She pulled a man's gold cigarette-case from the pocket of her coat with the words, and took a cigarette therefrom. Lady Tredville watching her with a semi-humorous frown.

"It's a very bad example, my dear," she remarked. "But I suppose girls will be girls."

"Which might also be said of old women," retorted Sybil, "or even matrons—which are really the same thing nowadays. The great advantage of remaining single is that one never grows old."

"I entirely disagree with you," said Lady Tredville.

Sybil chuckled. "Pearce doesn't, anyway. We know what we're worth, don't we, Pearce?"

"Hi never was one to have any truck with men," said Pearce.

"Hear! Hear!" said Sybil. "Why should we? I mean, why shouldn't we—if we don't want to? Pearce dear, is there such a thing as a match-box left in this otherwise perfect world?"

"Behind you, Miss Sybil, on her ladyship's escritoire," said Pearce without a pause in her labours. "Shall I do the other hand now, my lady, in case the doctor comes early? We can always go on titivating afterwards."

Sybil glanced out of the window as she lighted her cigarette. "If I mistake not, he's here already," she observed. "You'll have to keep the other hand out of sight, *ma mie*. Perhaps he won't notice! Men don't always, you know."

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" said Lady Tredville despairingly.

"Hush, darling! You mustn't swear," said Sybil. "It's such a bad example, you know. But matrons will be matrons."

“Miss Sybil,” said Pearce in her brief, unexpected fashion, “Hi’m ashamed of you.”

Sybil waved her cigarette airily. “My respects to thee, Mistress Pearce!” she said.

CHAPTER X

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT

THE doctor entered. He was a young man, barely thirty, dark-faced, thin, athletic. He had the appearance and the reputation of being somewhat a man of the people. He had come to Beam in the first place as a *locum*, then, owing to the advancing age and infirmity of his principal, Dr. Warren, he had become a junior assistant, and now virtually the whole of the practice was in his hands.

Lady Tredville had deeply resented his advent in the first place, but her own necessity and the young man's astute handling of her case had reconciled her to his ministrations. She now complained bitterly if he allowed two days to elapse between his visits.

Sybil's acquaintance with him did not extend very far. She had never required his services, and for some reason she would have endured much rather than have availed herself of them. Unlike her mother, she never attempted to look her best in his presence, and his entrance was merely a signal for her to sprawl more negligently in her chair, her cigarette tipped at a provocative angle between her lips, her eyelids barely raised in his direction.

Yet the man's eyes came to her immediately, as though drawn by a magnet. He did not greet her, however, in any way, but went straight to the bedside. Save for that one swift glance he might not have been aware of her presence.

Pearce stood severely at attention while he went through the usual examination of his patient, whose plaintive report of her symptoms was like the unobtrusive accompaniment of an orchestra to the feats of a Chinese juggler.

"I don't feel in the least bit better," was her *finale*. "I think I shall have to get you to change my medicine again, for those tablets don't do me an atom of good."

Oliver Keston smiled briefly as he ceased to juggle. "The tablets, Lady Tredville! Yes, of course! I've got something better than those for you. In fact, I've had rather a brain-wave. I believe the new stuff I have in mind will work wonders for you."

A faint, insolent sound of amusement came from behind the cigarette-smoke, and the young doctor's shoulders gave a slight jerk though he kept his eyes upon his patient.

It was Lady Tredville who made response to the inarticulate scoffer. "I do wish you wouldn't snigger in the background, Sybil. It's too undignified. Come and speak to Dr. Keston! You do know each other, I think?"

"I shouldn't like to say that," said Sybil, emerging with the utmost deliberation. "But we have met. How d'you do?"

She flicked a finger in his direction, not with any intention of his taking it, and Oliver Keston made her a grave bow.

"I believe we have," he said evenly. "In fact, we nearly ran into each other only last night."

Sybil laughed. "So we did. I believe you paid me the compliment of the road by making what the Minister of Transport would with some justice deem an unnecessary noise about it. Fortunately, that is not yet a punishable offence. So perhaps we can cry quits."

Oliver Keston's dark face was inscrutable. "I accept the apology," he remarked. "But until we learn to take our corners with reasonable caution, a certain amount of noise is indispensable. Let us hope the Minister of Transport will take this into consideration!"

"Amen!" said Sybil. "The reasonable touch appeals to me very much, particularly when the noise occurs after the event. I am sure the Minister of Transport would be the first to see the joke."

Keston laughed; obviously contrary to intention; but having laughed, he was compelled to give a certain amount of quarter. "What a peaceful world it would be if everyone knew how to handle a car!" he said. "We surgeons would have hardly anything to do."

"A state of affairs which would certainly give rise to discontent!" retorted Sybil. "You don't know when you're well off. Either perpetual war or uncontrolled motor traffic is essential to your existence. Chronic invalids"—she sent a kindly, humorous glance in her mother's direction—"would never fill the gap, however gallantly they might try."

“Really, Sybil!” protested Lady Tredville. “You are being very rude to everybody this morning. I can’t think why. I should go out, if I were you, and try to walk it off.”

Sybil rose obediently, the taunting smile still about her lips. “Never deaf to a hint!” she remarked to Keston. “And sick people must be humoured. *Au revoir*, dear Mamma! When I return I hope you will see some improvement.”

She turned to the door, still smoking her cigarette, and waved an airy farewell as she reached it.

“Young folks are very trying,” commented Lady Tredville, scarcely waiting till she was out of sight. “Do sit down, Dr. Keston, and talk things over quietly!”

But Keston was not to be detained that day. He looked at his watch and spoke of an appointment already overdue. Then, rapidly and concisely, he outlined to Pearce the treatment which he desired his patient to receive, and finally pressed Lady Tredville’s delicate hand without the faintest appreciation of its beauty.

Pearce stiffly opened the door for him and as stiffly closed it again. He passed swiftly down the passage to the head of the stairs.

And there a mocking echo of laughter made him pause. The house was old, the upper landing being built in the form of a gallery. Just above him, immediately facing him and looking down, was Sybil.

Her hands rested upon the banister-rail. She leaned lightly towards him. “D’you dismiss all your cases as quickly as that?” she said.

He turned his dark face upwards. “It depends,” he said.

“On what?” she asked.

“Upon how serious they are,” said the doctor.

“Or how much they interest you?” she suggested.

He replied with sudden depth of tone. “I wish you were one of them.”

She invoked an imaginary blessing upon him in pantomime. “Perhaps—if you were to take me for a drive in your car—I might become one!” she said.

He made an abrupt movement. “Come on, then!” he said.

She leaned towards him again. “Rash young man! Have you forgotten all the hen-curates of Beam?”

He smiled grimly. “I’ll take them all on, singly or collectively. I’ve got to go over to the fishing-village to see an old man with lumbago. Will you come?”

She gave him a hard look, and rather unexpectedly capitulated. “All right. I want to go there too. You can lift me there and I’ll walk back or take the ferry.”

“It’s the old ferry-chap who wants me,” said Keston. “I had a message from the grand-daughter this morning—a girl who works at *The Black Swan*.”

“I know her,” said Sybil. “And poor old Columbus too. You’ll find him a tough proposition. Wait while I get my coat!”

She turned sharply into a room behind her, and then in a few seconds was back again and moving to join him on the wide staircase.

He waited for her, and they descended side by side. At the bottom he stopped suddenly and looked at her.

“So you think I’m a rash young man!” he said.

“When I think at all about you,” she rejoined, feeling for her cigarette-case.

He waited for a second or two, and then without haste but with great decision he put his arms around her, pinning hers to her sides.

“You’re going to think,” he said, “and think well,” and he kissed her full on the mouth.

She made not the faintest attempt to avoid him. She merely laughed, her eyes unflinching, supremely cynical. “I thought you were going to do something of that kind. You’re just the type. It won’t get you very far. I am what is popularly known as—a hard-boiled egg.”

“I don’t care what you are,” he said recklessly. “You’ve never been mastered before; that’s your trouble. But—by all the gods—you shall be this time.”

She still stood passive, indifferent. “You’ve chosen rather a public place for your operating-theatre, haven’t you?” she suggested, slightly drawling. “If it weren’t for that, I should think you were somewhat old-fashioned.”

“Oh, would you?” he said, and kissed her again, roughly, possessively. “You’ll change your mind about that presently. I’m as modern as you are. When I want a thing I take it.”

“And you never get indigestion afterwards?” she murmured. “How lucky! Hard-boiled eggs, you know, do sometimes create a little discomfort if devoured too quickly—especially when they’re cold.”

He looked at her. “Are you trying to pretend you’re cold? Because you needn’t—with me. I know exactly what you are.”

“Really?” said Sybil. “Again—how lucky!”

“It is,” he agreed. “Because you and I will go a long way together. It won’t be all jam for either of us. But I promise you at least that it won’t be boredom.”

“And when do we start?” asked Sybil with her daunting smile.

He wheeled her round and walked towards the door with her, holding her arm. “We have started,” he told her with deliberate confidence. “Make no mistake about that! And we’re not turning back. If you wanted to give me one in the eye, you ought to have done it before. It’s too late now.”

She laughed again at that. “But—as I keep telling you—I am modern, not mediaeval! And two kisses don’t make either a marriage or a misunderstanding. Even a dozen could scarcely do that.”

“Is that an invitation?” he said, pausing.

She shook her head. “Not even a challenge. Wait till I throb in your arms and thrill to the touch of your lips! Till then—we are not amused.”

His look gave her no quarter. If she baffled him, he would not show it. “When that time comes—by heaven, you’ll not find it amusing,” he said.

She made a feint of patting the hand that held her arm. “Shall we go outside and cool our fevered brows?” she suggested. “I really had no idea you were so temperamental—in spite of the motor-horn last night. Or shall we call it the horn of the hunter?”

She opened the door with the words. He made no further attempt to detain her. They passed down the steps together to his car, the man tense and withdrawn, the girl as cool and unperturbed as though they had but just casually met.

She got into the car and took out her cigarette-case. As he took his seat beside her, she offered it to him, amiably, without effrontery.

“Have one? Nice case, isn’t it? It was given me by a great pal of mine—Jack Bellamy.”

He gave her a hard look and took one. “Thanks! Yes, your friend shows a neat taste for a man. But—if you think this is where I get off, you’re mistaken.”

Sybil chuckled as she took a cigarette. “My dear man, so far as I’m concerned you can stay put. Be careful you don’t fall off, that’s all.”

“I shall be very careful of that,” he rejoined.

He lighted her cigarette for her, and still his eyes were upon her, though she betrayed not the faintest sign that she was aware of them.

“And when we get to the end of the journey,” she said, lightly puffing forth clouds of smoke, “don’t say it’s my fault if it turns out a rainy day!”

“Nothing is your fault,” said Oliver Keston quietly. “You didn’t make yourself.”

She turned on him with laughter that was openly scornful. “Oh, don’t you believe that old fairy-tale! We are all self-made, my conquering hero, in this cultivated age. And we have quite a considerable control of our own destinies into the bargain.”

He pressed the self-starter. “I agree with you there,” he said. “The element of chance—like the rainy day—has to be seized and made use of.”

“Go on!” she urged. “Tell me you’d sooner hike in the wet with me than drive alone in the dry!”

“On the contrary,” he said, “you won’t be allowed to hike in the wet, so that proposition does not arise.”

He set the car in motion and they glided away under the trees of the avenue. Sybil leaned back at her ease and smoked, the mocking smile still lingering in her eyes. But she made no attempt to contradict him. She merely gazed straight before her and mused.

CHAPTER XI

THE SUBLIME CONTRAST

OLD COLUMBUS was in bed in his hovel, for the simple reason that he lacked the physical strength to drag himself out of it. He was extremely indignant over his helpless state, and he told the doctor several times with great emphasis that it was all along of that durned wind veering round in the night to the nor'-east, which was enough to give anybody stiff joints. He spoke as if he considered that if only some responsible person had kept an eye on the wind in the dark hours it might not have happened, and assured Keston while he performed some of his juggling tricks that it didn't use to be so cold at that time of year when he was a lad.

"Of course not," agreed Keston, unsmiling. "Things always change for the worse. I'll send the parish nurse to put you on a plaster, and your granddaughter will have to look after you and keep you warm."

"Don't want her messing round, damn her!" said the old man.

"Afraid there's no help for it," said Keston woodenly. "Someone's got to wait on you. You won't be about for two or three days, and not then if you aren't careful."

"And who's going to look after the ferry-boat?" demanded Old Columbus in a kind of dull fury.

Keston shrugged his shoulders. "They must go by the toll-bridge. You won't be fit for rowing for some time to come."

Old Columbus swore a deep-sea oath of earlier days. He was suffering a good deal of bodily pain, but the prospect of the stoppage of the ferry-boat hurt him far more.

"You'll have to get someone else to take it on," said Keston. "What about that fellow with the motor-boat at the end of the jetty?"

"A durned young upstart!" growled Old Columbus. "Him and Belinda was cracking jokes together only yesterday."

“You ought to get him on the job,” said Keston. “Give him something to do. Anyway, you’ll have to stay where you are for a bit. I suppose Belinda’s busy at *The Black Swan* just now, is she?”

“Bar opens at eleven,” said Old Columbus laconically.

Keston glanced round the wretched dwelling-place. “Well, I’ll look in and see her and tell her what’s to be done. And I’ll send the village nurse along presently to make you comfortable. Keep yourself warm now! All right for blankets?”

“I’ve got what I’ve got on me,” said Old Columbus. “And there’s my oilskin coat behind the door.”

“Oh, you can’t use that,” said the doctor. “We’ll see what we can fix you up with. Meantime, here’s a bottle of medicine I’ve brought along.”

“Don’t want no physic,” said Old Columbus.

“Yes, you do.” Keston’s rejoinder was prompt and firm. “You’re going to take a dose right away, before I go. And another in two hours’ time. It’ll do the pain in if you stick to it.”

“Blast it!” said Old Columbus vindictively. “Give me a tot of rum and I’ll be all right.”

Keston had already found a handleless cup, into which he was pouring a measure of liquid out of a bottle he had taken from his bag.

“No, you can’t have rum,” he said. “Here, drink this! It’ll ease things down. Steady now! That’s the way.”

He precipitated the medicine with some adroitness down the old man’s throat before he could make more than a gurgling protest, and then pulled the bed-coverings round him and turned to go.

The door opened as he put his hand on the latch, and Belinda, flushed and somewhat dishevelled, made her appearance.

“Sorry I’m late, doctor. Couldn’t get away before. How is he?”

Old Columbus, having swallowed his medicine perforce, found his voice. “What the devil d’you want? You get out! The nurse is a-coming to see to me.”

Keston went out, pushing Belinda before him. “You’ve got a bit of a handful there,” he remarked, as he closed the door upon a further less articulate flow of abuse.

Belinda shrugged her plump shoulders. "Oh, I don't mind him. I'm used to it. But he won't let me touch him, he's that cantankerous."

They stood in a little black cavern of a place which Old Columbus called his kitchen. The door of this stood open to the quay, and an icy draught blew in.

Keston shivered. "This is a death-trap. For goodness' sake, keep him warm, or he'll be getting bronchitis next."

Belinda looked a little scornful. The cold had no effect upon her. "He'll be all right," she said. "If the nurse'll just come and clap a poultice on him now and then, I'll do the rest."

Keston's face expressed doubt, but he raised no audible question. He moved towards the door. "His main trouble seems to be the ferry-boat," he remarked. "I suppose he's afraid the business'll go while he's laid up. Wouldn't that chap with the motor-boat take it on *pro tem*?"

"Rolfe Britton?" said Belinda. "He might. But it'd spoil the business, anyway, for nobody'd want to go in a row-boat after the *Circe*."

"See what you can do!" said Keston. "Set the old chap's mind at rest if you can, or we shall never keep him quiet."

"You're right there," said Belinda. "I'll give him his old pipe and bacca and hope there's enough opium there to quiet him down. They're awful to manage, these old salties. Reuben Stark's another, and I wish his daughter joy of him if ever he gets took ill."

Keston was already on the threshold. A brisk wind rushing over a sparkling tumble of waves greeted him. He paused almost instinctively to breathe in the splendour of the morning.

Then, "Shut that door!" he said sharply. "He hasn't got enough blankets. Think they'd lend you a couple from *The Black Swan*?"

"Lor', no!" said Belinda. "I might pinch a pair and wash 'em and put 'em back afterwards without their finding out. But I couldn't hope for anything better than that."

Keston gave a short laugh and turned his face to the sea. "Better not do that," he said. "You'll be getting yourself into trouble."

Belinda tossed her hair back. "Not me! I wasn't born yesterday. Besides, I don't go doing other folk's washing for nothing."

“One way of looking at it,” said Keston. “Well, I must be off. I’ll send the nurse along as soon as possible.”

He left her and strode back along the quay to where he had left his car, passing several whitewashed cottages and groups of gossiping fishwives on the way.

He did not expect to see Sybil again. She had gone in the direction of Honeyball Farm, but as he reached the car in the roadway and scattered a crowd of small boys that had collected round it, he saw her emerge from Captain Stark’s dwelling and walk along the little stony path to the gate with a girl whom he had never seen before.

The two were talking together and did not notice him, so that Oliver Keston, getting into his car and driving slowly towards them, obtained his first impression of Stark’s daughter when she was unaware of him.

She wore no hat, and the wind blew her black hair in soft ringlets about her temples. Her cheeks were the colour of a red rose. There was something vivid and arresting in her beauty in the cold morning light. She was like a being from another land. Her setting should have been one of ardent sunshine and dark blue sea. Not even the most casual artist would have placed her among the chattering fisher-folk of Beam with their background of grey-green, dashing waves.

Oliver Keston saw her and stared. “The ice-maiden and the fire-maiden!” he said, half aloud. “Ye gods! What a sublime contrast!”

He was right. The contrast between the two girls was amazing. Sir Philip had observed it in a milder sense the previous day, but to the younger man it was almost staggering.

Sybil Tredville in her rough tweed coat, with her small, well-groomed head and general appearance of sophistication, looked somehow strangely cold and unattractive beside the warm vitality of Julie Stark. It was the difference between a well-trained garden-flower and a magnificent tropical plant that had never known the meaning of culture.

“Ye gods!” said Keston again as he drew nearer. “Beauty unadorned with a vengeance! Where on earth has she come from?”

Sybil glanced up at his approach, and gave him an airy wave of the hand. Julie, whose face wore a troubled and uncertain look, barely raised her eyes. But yet, though the one was animated and the other passive, the contrast between them remained the same—the hardy, well-developed product of the garden and the glowing, unconsidered splendour of the wilderness.

Sybil came forward. "All right. I'll come back with you," she said. "I can't do anything here at present. How's the old boy?"

She opened the car door as she spoke, and stepped in beside him, self-assured, well-bred, almost aggressively indifferent.

"He's badly in need of a couple of blankets," said Keston, still with his eyes upon the girl at the gate.

She had looked up. Just for a second her eyes met his.

Then Sybil's careless voice seemed to intervene. "Drive on, charioteer! I suppose the hen-curates who preside over the parish blankets will have to be approached with circumspection. Or perhaps it would be simpler to get Pearce to dig out a couple of spares! Good-bye, Julie!" She waved her hand again with jaunty kindness. "Mind you keep the lions at bay!"

Oliver Keston abruptly shot the car forward. The girl at the gate of Honeyball Farm was left behind.

"Little donkey!" said Sybil. "I've offered her a job she ought to jump at, but she can't make up her mind. False pride or something! What exactly is the status of the skipper of a little cargo-boat? Does anybody know?"

"I'm sure I don't," said Keston in the even tone of one not greatly interested. "But if you'll let me have those blankets I'll run back with them when I've finished my morning round."

"Wonderful person!" said Sybil lightly. "Always ready to rush to the rescue! Perhaps I had better make a sacrifice also and bring them round to the surgery—to save you calling again."

"Very decent of you," said Keston. "I shan't be there, of course."

She opened her shrewd blue eyes and smiled ahead of her. "But of course!" she agreed with shocked acquiescence. "Should I have suggested it otherwise?"

Oliver Keston was suddenly and rather forcibly brought to the conclusion that the female mind was capable upon occasion of eluding his comprehension.

He gave himself a few minutes to consider before he replied. "It's very decent of you, all the same. And I certainly would be there if I could."

"Oh, thanks—very much!" rejoined Sybil, feeling for her cigarette-case. "It wouldn't do to let people think I was running after you, would it? Not

here, anyway. Naturally, in London it's different. The women do all the running there—both married and single.”

“And the men run away, I suppose?” said Keston, smiling cynically.

Sybil took out a cigarette and looked at it. “Poor darlings, yes! At least they try to. But they're rather new to the game at present. Like Lot's wife, they have a stupid habit of looking behind them which is usually their undoing. Now, a woman”—she tapped her cigarette very deliberately on the lid of its case—“never looks behind when she flees.”

“And why not?” asked Keston with his eyes fixed firmly upon the road.

She lighted the cigarette deftly, with a gurgle of laughter. “That's her secret, my dear,” she said. “When you've found that out, you'll know—everything that's worth knowing.”

“Then,” he rejoined, “evidently—in time—I shall learn wisdom.”

“I very much doubt it,” said Sybil.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHAMPION

JULIE stood at the little gate with the dubious look on her face for some seconds after the car had passed.

Perhaps in her heart she realized that she ought to have jumped at the coolly proffered suggestion that had just been made to her. Yet something—possibly the easy, practically unconscious effrontery with which it had been made—had held her back. On the day before, she had spoken of finding work with complete confidence, but now, though there was nothing to hold her to Honeyball Farm, oddly enough, she hesitated. Her feelings in that matter were of too complicated a nature to be fully understood even by herself. She had passed an extremely uncomfortable night, and, though her father had given no sign that morning that he was so much as aware of her existence, she felt her position to be decidedly precarious. It was like living in a corner of a lion's den and waiting for the moment when the savage animal might pounce. But there was something within Julie that made her want to stay and hold her own. She had been badly scared the previous night, but her panic had died down. She realized that she had succeeded in mastering the situation, and perhaps she was slightly uplifted in consequence. In any case, she did not want to yield the ground so hardily won. Resentment mingling with her sense of conquest made her inclined to stay and conquer them all.

Had Sybil's offer come the evening before, it would probably have met with eager acceptance. But to-day she felt different. The lion was lurking in his inner den, and she was beginning to persuade herself that there was no real cause to be afraid of him. He would never dare to put his threats into execution. She had gained the upper hand and she meant to keep it.

She had not felt attracted to Sybil Tredville. The hard, stone-bright eyes somewhat chilled her. Though her offer had been a kind one, it had made no appeal. It came to Julie as she stood there that life at the Rectory in Miss Tredville's service would doubtless bring its own difficulties in its train, and

if she failed in that direction she would be entirely without refuge. For she knew enough of the skipper already to be quite certain that he would regard the proposition with strong disapproval, whereas, under present conditions, she might battle her way to some sort of status in the establishment, might even one day—she lifted her head at the thought—come to dominate it. It had not, after all, taken her twenty-four hours to make some sort of headway.

The open admiration of Oliver Keston's stare had been also something of a stimulus. She had seen very little of men, and this sense of power was new and strangely exhilarating. The air too, and the lovely, tossing sea all combined to give her a feeling of being poised upon a somewhat dizzy height which was infinitely more alluring to her girlish spirit than a situation of more lowly security. Who wants to feel secure and beyond the reach of adventure at the careless age of eighteen?

The racing wind brought a sudden lilt of music to her ears. Someone was whistling along the jetty. She looked round and saw Rolfe Britton approaching.

He walked with an easy stride, clad in the orthodox blue jersey, and his head and feet were bare. She stood for a second watching; then, obeying an unconsidered impulse, she pushed the little gate behind her and went to meet him.

He greeted her with a half-raised hand. He was smiling as he approached—smiling with eyes and eyebrows while his lips still emitted that clear, far-reaching whistle.

They met, and it ceased. "Well, Mamzelle Julie!" he said. "Had a good night?"

Something in his bantering tone made her determine swiftly not to tell him what sort of night she had had. He did not look at her as Dr. Keston had looked at her, and for some undefined reason she resented the fact. She was also suddenly and quite unreasonably vexed with herself for going to meet him, and she decided to pass on immediately.

He turned at once and walked beside her. "Come and look at the old *Circe!*" he said. "I've been splashing paint ever since seven o'clock."

She gave him a brief glance. "I'm really going for a walk," she said.

"Oh, don't be sniffy!" said Rolfe. "It doesn't suit you. I see you've had a visitor this morning."

She glanced at him again. His imperturbability seemed to veil a certain amusement, but it was not of an offensive nature. She felt a prick of self-reproach. After all, she had accepted his hospitality.

“That was Miss Tredville,” she said. “I was in the same carriage with her yesterday coming down. She—means to be nice, I think.”

“What does she want?” said Rolfe.

Julie hesitated. Then, impelled by she knew not what, she told him. “She had an idea that I might be wanting a job, and, if so, she thought she could make use of me as a sewing-maid or a lady’s maid or a general factotum. That was how she put it. I think she meant to be kind.” An unconsciously wistful note sounded in her voice. She could not maintain her new-found dignity for long.

Rolfe listened with his keen eyes set on the horizon. “And what were you to get out of it all?” he asked.

“We didn’t really go into that. She said I should get paid all right and that I should have a good time. I think she thought I should jump at it, but I said I’d think it over.” Julie spoke in the same doubtful vein. “Of course, I haven’t had time to yet,” she added.

“You’re quite right not to jump at it,” said Rolfe. “And how’s the old man behaving?”

“I haven’t seen him to-day.” An urgent longing arose in Julie to tell him everything, but she repressed it lest he should imagine that she was asking for help.

Rolfe apparently drew his own conclusions, for he pursued the matter no further. “Hope they give you enough to eat,” he said next. “If not, come along to the *Circe*! There’s always eggs and bacon.”

She uttered a little laugh. Here was one person at least who did not treat her as a stranger and an interloper!

“Mrs. Prawle says they only have breakfast and supper,” she said. “One isn’t supposed to get hungry in the middle of the day.”

“A damn’ shame!” said Rolfe Britton. “You’re not going to be starved like that. I know that old skinflint. He lives on drink.”

“I shall have to take to drink too, then,” she rejoined, “if I stay with him. Or else rob the larder, like the cats.”

He stopped abruptly. They had reached a point where the breakers swirled in against the out-jutting quay. A cloud of sea-gulls swept and eddied all around them with wild cries. The sun had gone in, and the sea looked green and threatening.

Through the tumult of sound, Rolfe's voice came with a depth that almost startled her. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he said. "You'll come right along to me and eat your fill."

She looked at him, and found his eyes fixed indomitably upon her. For an instant a queer sense of doubt assailed her; it was as if in this man she had met something more formidable than the brutal hostility of Reuben Stark. Though that straight gaze of his was wholly without the insolent assurance that had been in Keston's look, it was primitive and compelling, and it made her turn her own away.

"I can't do that," she said rather breathlessly. "It's kind of you to suggest it. But—I couldn't."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," he returned. "People are not so proper nowadays. I realize the *Circe* is not a palace, but at least there's enough to eat and to spare. You won't go short if I can prevent it."

"I shan't go short—of course," she protested. "I know how to hold my own. Anyhow, there's always the Rectory idea to fall back on."

"You're not going there," said Rolfe.

She was watching the flight of a gull with those glorious dark eyes of hers. She still seemed a little breathless, but there was the hint of a smile about her lips. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "I may try it. I'm going to think it over, anyway."

"You're not going," Rolfe repeated doggedly. "It's not in your line."

"How do you know?" said Julie.

"Never mind! I do know." He spoke with conviction. "You're not cut out for it."

"I don't know why you should say that," said Julie. "I can do most things that I turn my hand to."

"I dare say," said Rolfe, still watching her. "But you've got a pretty heavy handicap. You needn't ask me what it is, because if you don't know I wouldn't dream of telling you. Come along with me now and have a spot of lunch!"

She turned her head sharply and met his look. "I've told you I can't, thanks all the same," she said. "I shall get it all right. I was only joking."

"Or were you?" said Rolfe. "I wonder."

She flung round with a quick, passionate gesture and squarely faced him. "You don't think I'm going to live on anybody's charity, do you?" she said.

Her eyes flashed resentment at the thought, and as if in answer to it the man laughed suddenly, disconcertingly.

"You can give me anything you like in payment," he said. "Come and cook the victuals! Or sit and let me paint you! I'm not given to charity myself. I neither take it nor give it."

Her expression changed; the dubious look returned. "Paint me!" she said half incredulously. "Are you a painter?"

He made an airy motion towards the white motor-boat at the end of the quay. "Come and see for yourself! A decorator, anyway."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're absurd. How could you paint me?"

Rolfe was still chuckling rather ironically. "Dash' badly, no doubt," he said. "I don't flatter myself I'm a great artist. But there's some fun in trying. Old Columbus, for instance—by the way, I believe he's ill. The doctor was in there just now."

"Yes. Miss Tredville told me. He's in bed with rheumatism. I don't know him yet," said Julie.

"You soon will," Rolfe assured her. "He's the most picturesque piece of lumber that ever littered an otherwise tidy beach. Ah, that's Belinda, his grand-daughter, just coming along now! You'd better let me introduce you. She's a good sort in her way—hard-working, anyhow."

"D'you think I shall like her?" said Julie.

"Of course not!" he returned cheerily. "You won't like anybody on this side of the water. We're all scum, more or less. But Belinda's got character. I'll say that for her. She runs *The Black Swan* with Joe Muster and Sophia his wife."

Julie looked slightly disdainful. The buxom young woman who had just emerged from the hovel of Old Columbus was not of a type to hold any strong appeal for her. She had not so far met anyone who did in this strange world into which she had strayed. Nevertheless, she waited for the

introduction, since she was bound to know her neighbours of the fishing-village sooner or later.

Rolfe Britton greeted Belinda with the easy familiarity of the dwellers on the shore. "Hullo! Doing sick-nurse now, are you?"

"Not me!" said Belinda with a toss of the head that sent her rough hair flying in a dust-coloured cloud all round her face. "He won't let me come near him, and a good thing too. For I've no time to waste mollicoddling anybody. Doctor's going to send the nurse along. He'll have to behave himself with her. She's not the sort to stand any nonsense."

"That'll be good for him," said Rolfe. "Now let me introduce Miss Stark—of Honeyball Farm! She only came yesterday, and doesn't know anyone—except me—at present."

"Ho!" said Belinda. She gave Julie one swift comprehensive glance in which awe and disdain were curiously mingled. "Come to take care of the skipper, have you?" she said. "I should say you've got a handful."

Julie returned her look half-defensively. "I don't know about taking care of anybody," she said. "But I've got to live somewhere."

"It won't be at Honeyball Farm," said Belinda, "not if you value your health, that is. The old man feeds on drink, and the rest of 'em starve for all he cares."

"I don't think I shall starve," said Julie quietly.

"Never know your luck," rejoined Belinda airily. "There's lots that do, if they don't learn to fend for themselves. It's no joke being a woman these days."

"Or a man, either, for that matter," put in Rolfe with dry humour. "But we've all got to be something, I suppose. Miss Stark, I forgot to mention that this is Miss Quale—the busiest person in Beam."

"Barmaid at *The Black Swan*," announced Belinda briefly. "And not ashamed of it neither." She turned definitely to Rolfe as though that ended her conversation with Julie. "Somebody's wanted to take over the ferry job while the old boy's laid up. I don't suppose you feel inclined for it, Mr. Britton?"

"No, I don't think so," said Rolfe. "There's the toll-bridge, isn't there? I'll give you or Miss Stark a lift across free if you want one any time—if you don't mind a little wet paint."

Belinda laughed. “You’ll get yourself into trouble with the skipper if you don’t look out. I heard all about you last night. Everybody was talking about it. Quite a laughing-stock it was.”

“Pity they haven’t got something more interesting to talk about,” commented Rolfe. “I don’t see much to laugh at myself.”

“You wouldn’t,” retorted Belinda with her independent toss. “It’s only the lookers-on that see the fun.”

At this point Julie detached herself from the others and began to walk away in the direction of Honeyball Farm. And Rolfe Britton turned upon the girl beside him with something in his blue eyes that made her own blink involuntarily.

He spoke in a tone she had never heard from him before. “You’d better stop laughing,” he said, “you and your friends in the bar. They don’t dare to laugh at me in the open because they know I can break their teeth for ’em if they do. And I *will* break their teeth if they laugh at her. So you might mention that next time.”

With the words he also swung round and went, treading stubbornly with his bare feet, over the smooth stones of the jetty.

Belinda looked after him for a moment or two with her mouth slightly open. But she did not laugh again as she turned and flounced away.

CHAPTER XIII

TRAPPED

JULIE re-entered the minute domain of Honeyball Farm with the firm air of one who had come to a decision. She went straight to the kitchen, where she found Emily Prawle on her knees scrubbing the floor.

Firmly Julie addressed her. "Is Captain Stark about yet? I want to speak to him."

Emily sat back on her heels and pushed a dank wisp of hair behind her ear. Her expression was not encouraging.

"I dare say you'll find him in the observatory, though I don't advise you to go poking in," she said. "He's none too sweet this morning."

Julie ignored the sullenly proffered counsel. If she felt any misgiving she did not betray it.

"You mean that glass place at the other end of the passage?" she said. "Thank you."

She withdrew without further words and returned to the dingy hall. The passage leading to the observatory was narrow and very dark. She felt her way along it until she came to a door at the end. On this somewhat sharply she knocked.

A low growl answered her. She found the handle and turned it.

The light that flooded through all the windows of the observatory somewhat dazzled her, but in a moment she discerned the figure of Reuben Stark seated in his ragged old basket-chair, the telescope to his eye.

He growled again inarticulately at the interruption, but it was several seconds before he turned round, pushing the instrument aside, to see who it was who had thus dared to intrude upon his privacy.

Directly his eyes reached her, they seemed to narrow and grow malignant. She stood in the doorway, facing him, very slight, quivering a

little, but full of determination.

“Well?” he flung at her. “What do *you* want?”

“I want,” said Julie very quietly and distinctly, “to have a little talk with you, please.”

“What the devil for?” said Reuben.

She came forward a step. “I want to know,” she said, “just what I am supposed to be doing here. Am I to be treated as your daughter or not?”

He looked at her from under lowering brows. “Oh yes,” he said, “I’ll treat you as my daughter all right. I’ll turn you over and spank you if you don’t behave yourself.”

A slight spasm crossed Julie’s face, but she stood firm. “If you wish me to behave as your daughter,” she said, “I suppose I am to look after the house and servants, do the housekeeping in fact. Is that what you wish me to do?”

Reuben swung round in his chair with an oath. “Think you’re going to bully me, do you, you damned little hussy?” he said.

“I’m not bullying anyone,” said Julie. “And I’m not going to be bullied either. But I’ve got to know where I am. If I’m not wanted here, I’ll go and make my living elsewhere.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” said Reuben. “You’re under age. You’ll stay and do as you’re told.”

“I’ll stay if I’m treated decently,” rejoined Julie. “Not otherwise. And I’m not going to be the slave of that woman in the kitchen either. I’m not taking any orders from her. If I take over the management of the house, it’ll be the other way round.”

Stark drew in an explosive breath. “You’ve got a lift, I must say!” he ejaculated. “You’ll do this, and you’ll do that! And haven’t been in the place twenty-four hours!”

“Well, you don’t expect me to do nothing, do you?” retorted Julie, stung in spite of herself. “There’s heaps to be done in a place like this. It’s in a disgraceful state. Everything’s shabby and dingy. Look at that chair you’re sitting in! The stuffing’s all coming out. And that room I’ve got upstairs—why, the window won’t open even. And all the furniture is coming to bits.”

“Well, what of it?” broke in Reuben furiously. “It’s good enough for you, so you’d better make the best of it. As to giving over the management of this

house to you, I can see myself doing it. No, you'll work under Emily—whether you like it or not. And if you don't work—you can starve.”

“It looks as if I shall do that in any case,” said Julie. “But I'm not going to put up with it. If you keep me here, you've got to feed me properly. And I mean to have a midday meal like everyone else—if I have to go to *The Black Swan* for it and tell them to send in the bill to you.”

She turned about with the words and abruptly left him. To stand and argue was undignified, and it did no good. If he refused her the ordinary comforts of life, there still remained the alternative of accepting Miss Sybil Tredville's offer. But she would not give in without a struggle. So far she had not been worsted. She would go farther still and investigate.

With her head held high she returned to the kitchen. Emily had just finished her scrubbing and was spilling the dirty water down a drain at the back door. Julie looked about her and spied another door ajar. She pushed it open and found herself confronted with the depth of a dark stone staircase. She drew back from it as Emily returned with a sloppy tread and clattered her pail under the sink.

“Well?” she said sourly. “Seen the captain?”

“Yes, I have,” said Julie. “And I have come to arrange for a meal.”

“You can't have one now,” said Emily. “You'll have to wait till evening.”

“I'm not going to wait,” said Julie. She spoke in a perfectly smooth tone, but with unswerving determination. “I am going to have a midday meal, and I should think you'd be the better for one too. Will you fetch it up, please?”

“Me?” said Emily, as if she doubted whether she had heard aright.

“Of course,” said Julie. “You're in charge of the larder, I suppose? I'll have it in the sitting-room, please. If you're busy, I'll lay the cloth.”

“You?” said Emily, staring at her with widely divergent eyes.

“Why not?” said Julie. “I've no wish to make extra work for you, and I'm quite willing to take my share. What have you got down there?”

“Nothing,” said Emily tersely.

“I'm afraid I don't believe that,” said Julie, still speaking smoothly. “We had porridge for breakfast. There must be eggs and bacon, or something of that sort.”

“There isn’t, then,” said Emily, planting her hands on her hips with truculence. “You can see for yourself.”

Julie looked at her. The moment had come for battle. “Now listen, Mrs. Prawle!” she said. “I am the skipper’s daughter, and I’m not going to be treated like something of no account. I am not going hungry till to-night either. I’m willing to work. I’ll do my share. But I won’t starve—to please anybody. Will you fetch up something to eat? Or shall I go myself?”

Emily Prawle continued to stare with those ill-matching eyes of hers which gave her a crooked and calculating look. She spoke after a moment, as though something in Julie’s tone or words had carried weight in spite of her.

“I’ll not do it unless the captain says so.”

It was not quite open defiance, but the effect upon Julie was the same. The woman was ranged against her. It remained for her to assert herself or to be defeated.

She turned to the half-opened door that gave access to the stone steps. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll get it myself.”

With the words she pushed the door wide and set her foot upon the stairs.

She could not see the bottom as they had a twist half-way down, and there was no light discernible beyond that which came from the open door. Three steps down she turned.

“Give me a candle, please!” she said.

In that moment the door above her was suddenly clapped shut and she stood in darkness, while the scraping of a key told her that she was a prisoner.

She sprang to the door and threw herself against it, but she was too late. Only an evil chuckle on the other side replied to her efforts, and from below her there rose a damp coldness like the chill of a stone vault.

It was as if a clammy hand had reached up to grasp her, and in that instant she felt as if she herself had been turned to stone. Her very heart seemed to quiver and become rigid.

She stood quite motionless and faced defeat.

She could have continued her wild battering for freedom, but she did not. Something warned her to reserve her strength. To fight the inevitable

was to lose ground. She had placed herself at this disadvantage, but even yet, if she kept her head, there might be some means of recovery. To behave like a thwarted child could help her neither now nor later.

So she stood motionless in a kind of ice-bound anger, reckoning up her chances.

Eventually, with a hand that trembled notwithstanding her utmost effort, she knocked upon the door.

“Let me out!” she said authoritatively. “Open this door at once!”

There was no immediate reply, and she began to think that the old woman had left the kitchen when suddenly a raucous whisper came through the key-hole.

“You go downstairs, my pretty, and have a meal! There’s only one person in this house as’ll let you out, and that’s the captain.”

“Go and fetch him then!” commanded Julie, undaunted. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“Oh no! But you will be—you will be!” the raucous whisper assured her soothingly. “We don’t disturb him at this time of day, because he don’t like it. But a little later on—in three hours, p’r’aps—we’ll get him to come and let you out.”

That was all. The whisper ceased, and she heard the sound of Emily’s ill-shod feet slopping away.

She was to be a prisoner, then, in that horrible cold darkness for three hours, she who had begun to think herself mistress of the situation! Caught by an evil trick such as she would never have anticipated, it was impossible to forecast what might lie before her. But it was the cold that gripped her most, and the prospect of spending three hours in that unknown, vault-like place. She had come through a good deal without flinching, but this daunted her.

For a space she stood motionless and listening, but she heard nothing. Emily had gone into the kitchen and shut the door. It was useless to batter and call for help. No one would hear her. The back yard was enclosed by a brick wall, and the door leading to it was obviously shut also, for no chink of light was visible. She could only faintly hear the roar of the sea.

Her desire for food had quite gone, but the idea came to her that if she could find some she would be better equipped to withstand the cold. And so

at last very cautiously she began to feel her way down the narrow winding stairs into the dungeon-like region below.

CHAPTER XIV

PUNISHMENT

THE steps wound like a corkscrew, and the musty smell increased as she descended. She reached the bottom in safety at length and found an uneven stone surface beneath her feet, but the darkness was so utter that it frightened her. It seemed to stretch into vast spaces which she dared not explore for fear of losing her way back to the steps—her sole connecting-link with the world above.

There was no sound down here except a slight dripping noise. The wall by which she had guided herself was slimy with damp. She could scarcely bear the touch of it, but when she took her hand away the darkness felt like ungauged depth before her and she was scared still further. The vague trickling of water awoke in her a wonder as to whether there were a well somewhere close into which she might stumble—a horrifying thought that made her flesh creep. In the end she moved up two or three steps and sat down to recover herself.

It was a hideous situation, but it could not last. They could not keep her here for hours. Even the crooked-eyed Emily could not be so vile as that. She would have to go up again and batter on the door. The cold was beginning to get hold of her. Her feet were numbed already, and an icy draught circled all around her, penetrating to her very bones. She reflected that if she sat here for long she would get too stiff to move.

So, at length, after about half an hour of acute discomfort, she pulled herself together for action. She felt her way up the stairs again, reached the door and beat upon it.

“Let me out!” she called. “Let me out!”

No answer came. Everything was still, save for the long deep roaring of the sea.

She caught at the handle, rattled and dragged at it, but without result. Then—the full realization of her helplessness coming upon her—her self-

control began to totter and she shouted wildly and repeatedly for help, banging her fists upon the unyielding wood until sheer physical exhaustion overcame her and she could beat no more.

But still no answer came. The darkness seemed to surge around her and mock her puny efforts. She sank down again and waited, baffled and incapable of further effort.

A long time passed. The dampness and the cold made her feel stupid, almost drowsy. Her head was pillowed on her arms to shut out the dark. Now and then she started as if she had been asleep and stared around her. But each time the blackness pressed upon her, and she hid her face again.

She reckoned vaguely that the afternoon must be drawing to a close, but until some sound reached her from without she would not spend herself in vain a second time. They would have to let her out eventually. They could not mean to leave her there all night.

She tried to be philosophical, though she felt too wretched to be even angry any longer. It was a long and a cruel imprisonment, and it would be a lesson to her. She would never again place herself in Emily's power.

And then at last she heard the opening of the kitchen door and the tread of heavy feet above her. She tried to raise herself, but she was too stiff to move quickly. The door against which she crouched opened suddenly on to her, and she received a knock which sent her sliding down the steps into the curve of the wall. The light from a swinging-lamp completely dazzled her. She remained half-stunned, with her hands over face.

"Ah!" said Reuben's voice. "There you are, my fine lady, are you? Hope you've had a pleasant time. Come on, Emily! Bring that light!"

He came blundering down the steps to her, and a sudden wild horror caught Julie. She dragged herself up and faced him, still partially blinded after the long hours of darkness.

"I want to get out," she said through stiff numbed lips. "I'm so cold. You can't keep me here any longer."

"We can do—lots of things," said the skipper brutally. "Shut that door, woman, d'you hear? Now, my pretty madam, we'll deal with you—and p'raps you won't be so cold afterwards!"

He gripped her arm as he spoke, and suddenly he flung her forward, forcing her downwards in the angle of the steps. She made a fierce struggle

for freedom, but he had her powerless under his knee almost before it began; for her limbs and her heart seemed to fail together.

“Oh, you’re going to get a drubbing all right,” he said, “and you may think yourself lucky it’s not the rope-end this time. Bring that light down, Emily, can’t you? Stick it on the ledge there! Now then! Get hold of her hands!”

In the desperate and unseemly battle that followed, the girl found herself completely overwhelmed by superior strength. Somehow, between them, they tore her garments away, and her wrists were clamped in Emily’s wiry grasp while the man held her down and beat her mercilessly with his iron hand.

It was horrible and revolting. She writhed in their hold, and she heard herself madly screaming though she knew that no help would come. It was a vicious and prolonged chastisement, and it seared her like a scorching fire. The humiliation of it would torture her long after the physical pain had ceased, and that in itself was considerable. The stone steps on which she was crushed bruised her cruelly, and the pitiless blows that the skipper inflicted were such as would have wrung cries from an animal. To the overwrought girl they were literal agony.

Only when her resistance was spent and she sank limp and sobbing at their mercy did he at length stay his hand.

“That’s done it,” he said. “She won’t give us any more of her airs after this. I’ve beaten her up good and hard, and now she knows what to expect. D’you hear?” He bent over her and spoke into her ear. “I’ve given you the spanking you ought to have had years ago, and I’ll give you another tomorrow if you don’t behave yourself. After that, it’ll be the rope-end—same as young Micky gets. I’ve only let you off so far because you’re a girl. Now stop that noise! I’m not taking any more nonsense from you. Stop it! D’you hear me?”

She heard him, but to stop her anguished crying then was beyond her. They had forced her over the border-line of ordinary endurance. She was almost choking with the urgency of her distress. Her pride was dead, and a terrible hysteria had taken possession of her. Her prone body still jerked spasmodically, entirely beyond her control. In those awful moments she was on the verge of idiocy.

Reuben Stark drew away a little and looked at her.

“Let go her hands!” he ordered the grim-faced woman kneeling on the stair above. “Fetch a bucket of cold water! That’ll bring her to her senses.”

Julie heard the order, and, released from Emily’s claw-like grasp, sank huddled and gasping against the wall, fighting to suppress the convulsive shudders that ran through her.

Between Emily’s exit and return, she managed to frame a shivering supplication to the gaunt man watching her.

“Don’t! Oh, don’t! I’ll be—all right. Don’t—throw water! Don’t—don’t!”

The skipper grunted. There was little sign of relenting in the sound. “We’ll see,” he said. “Cold water’s the only thing for hysterics, so you’d better stop ’em right now if you don’t want it.”

“I will—oh, I will!” panted Julie, desperately clasping her arms round her shaking knees to still them. “I’ll die—if you throw water on me. Don’t! Oh, don’t!”

“All right,” said the skipper. “It’s coming, so you’d better pull yourself together. I’m not standing for any more of it. You deserved what you got, and it’s just as well you’ve had your lesson at the beginning. As I say, you were darned lucky not to get the rope-end. Now stop it! Stop it! Here’s Emily with the water!”

Julie raised a deathly face out of which her great eyes stared like blazing lamps. “Don’t let her!” she gasped. “Don’t let her! Oh, I can’t bear any more. I can’t—I can’t!”

A wild tempest of crying seized her again and she hid her face upon her knees, huddling herself together in a torment of anticipation.

But for some reason the icy shower she feared did not descend upon her. There was a moment’s pause, and then the skipper stooped unexpectedly and plucked her to her feet.

“Here! Put yourself to rights and go up to bed!” he said. “There’s been enough of this. What? You can’t stand? Stuff and rubbish! All right! I’ll carry you and see how you like that!”

And carry her he did under his arm like a bale of goods, with head hanging and feet dragging behind on the steps, and thus through the kitchen and up the stairs to her room, where he cast her down upon the bed with a curt laugh.

“Thought I couldn’t do that, I dare say! Thought you’d give me a little extra trouble, did you? Well, you’d better not do it again. Now you can cry to your heart’s content, but I won’t have any more screaming—unless you want to go back to the cellar. Mark that! I’m master in this house, and I’ll have everyone to know it.”

He tramped out, banging the door after him, and Julie was left—a disordered, moaning bundle—in the twilight, powerless and broken and alone. She had just enough strength to creep into bed, and that was all. . . .

Long hours afterwards—or so it seemed to her—she awoke from a sort of stupor of exhaustion to see a dim light shine in and to hear someone enter.

She turned her head stiffly, feeling battered in every muscle, and looked through her swollen eyelids at the intruder.

It was Micky who entered with stealthy, monkeyish movements. He bore a tray on which was a candle and a large cup of something that—from the thick layer of grease on the top—she took to be soup.

“You’re to have this,” he said in a whisper. “And you’re lucky, for I never get anything after a bumping.”

“I don’t want it,” said Julie. “Go away!”

He set the tray upon the chair by the bed and remained standing beside her, throwing a grotesque, almost monstrous shadow upon the wall beyond.

“You’ve got to have it,” he said. “Cap’en’s orders! He said I was to see you did.”

Julie looked up into his wizen face with a vague repulsion. “It’ll make me sick—that stuff,” she said.

“Chance it!” said Micky.

He did not speak with any special solicitude, but he was evidently resolved to carry out his instructions to the letter.

Julie dragged herself up on one elbow and regarded the mess beside her with disgust.

“Go on!” said Micky. “There’s a bit of bread in the saucer. Dip it in!”

Somehow, her throbbing head notwithstanding, she found the need for nourishment respond within her. She picked up the spoon and stirred the glutinous concoction. Finally, between loathing and necessity, she tasted it.

“That’s better,” breathed Micky hoarsely. “Stick to it!”

She shook off a shudder that assailed her and swallowed. It was a most unpleasant mixture, but it sent a slight glow through her wretched and weary frame. Her lips were sore and her face felt bruised, but nevertheless she persevered, and gradually she realized that her exhaustion had been largely due to hunger. When she had crumbled the bread into the cup and finished it, the awful sense of weakness had considerably lessened.

She looked at Micky's white, ugly countenance, and beheld a grin, half-cunning, half-exultant.

"It must have been a pretty good drubbing," he remarked in an undertone that did not disguise the familiarity of one who recognizes a fellow-sufferer. "He knows how to lay it on all right. My word, he does. You'd better keep out of his way now for a bit."

Julie abruptly turned her back upon him and lay with her face to the wall. The whole horrible episode and her sordid surroundings filled her soul to the brim with repulsion. She was beaten, and bitter tears were burning at the back of her eyes. But she would not shed them in the presence of this doltish boy. Some small remnant of pride yet remained to restrain her.

She hoped earnestly that he would go, but he lingered in sheer curiosity.

"I suppose you'll have to do as Emily tells you now," he said. "And she's a Tartar, she is. If it wasn't for Belinda, I'd never get nothing to eat."

"Oh, go to Belinda!" said Julie desperately. "It's the best thing you can do."

"P'raps you'll go too," he suggested, still slyly hanging on one foot. "They'll work you like a nigger if you stay here."

"Go away!" said Julie with closed eyes.

"D'you think you will stay?" said Micky, unable to drag himself away from the contemplation of her obvious misery. "He's drinking now, but he'll beat you up again when he feels like it."

Julie made a convulsive, involuntary movement. "Will you go away?" she said.

Micky stooped and picked up the tray. "I wouldn't stay if I was you," he said. "I've had the rope-end twice, and that's awful. You never forget it. And it shows afterwards. It always shows."

Julie suddenly sprang upright on the bed. She was shaking from head to foot. Her eyes were ablaze. In her clenched right hand she held a knife

which she had pulled from under her pillow—the knife which she had snatched from the supper-table the night before.

“I’m going to stay here,” she said, “till I’ve killed him! There! Now you know. But if you dare to tell anyone, I’ll kill you too!”

Micky hopped back with an alacrity that nearly sent the cup and saucer spinning across the floor.

The girl’s death-white face staring at him with those flaming eyes from under its black cloud of hair frankly scared him. And the sight of the knife completed his discomfiture.

He made a bolt for the door.

“Leave the candle!” commanded Julie.

He stopped in mid-flight, thrust it down at arm’s length on the chair and resumed his precipitate course.

And Julie leaned back and flashed the knife in the light, gazing at it with a fixity that was not wholly sane. She knew that what Micky had said was true. She would never forget the punishment that had been meted out to her. Though no scar remained, it had somehow marked her for life.

“Yes—yes,” she said softly to herself after a while. “I’ll stay here till I’ve killed him. It’ll be worth staying for—that will.”

And then presently she thrust the knife back out of sight and lay down again. Though her eyes were burning like hot coals, she wept no more that night.

PART II

CHAPTER I

COMPETITORS

“YOUNG JACK BELLAMY wants to come down for the week-end,” announced Sybil, glancing up from a letter three days after her return home. “No objection, I suppose?”

Sir Philip was also studying a letter and did not immediately answer. He was always intentionally deliberate in his dealings with his daughter, as if he deemed it advisable to curb her youthful ardour—an attitude which Sybil found intensely irritating.

He looked up at length and surveyed her through his glasses, then removed them and surveyed her again. “I have no actual objection to the young man, certainly,” he said. “But neither have I any urgent desire to entertain him for the week-end.”

“Oh, you won’t be asked to entertain him,” said Sybil. “It’s me he wants to see. I’m not at all sure that I want to entertain him either, but I think he’d better come, unless you can think out any adequate reason for refusing to let him.”

Such were her customary tactics where her father was concerned. She never urged him on any point, or gave him the slightest excuse for imagining that his decisions were of any real importance to her. Sir Philip, on his side, found this equally exasperating. Yet it was very seldom that there was any actual friction between them.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “I have here a letter from old Lord Telford who is just back from Australia, and he also suggests coming over for the week-end.”

“Oh, that man!” Sybil made a grimace. “Common old bore! I suppose he wants a dose of ’Igh Society to improve his mind. Is that it?”

“I scarcely flatter myself to that extent,” returned Sir Philip. “Nor should I call him a bore. He is at least a man of brains.”

“Oh yes, plenty of brains of the ‘go-getter’ description,” agreed Sybil. “What Pearce would call ‘a self-made, multi-coloured millionaire!’ Apt description! Must we be nice to him?”

“In consideration of the fact that I owe my position here entirely to him——” remarked Sir Philip with arched brows.

“To be sure!” agreed Sybil carelessly. “Horrible, isn’t it? I suppose he is coming home to build a castle or something, is he?”

“I understand,” said Sir Philip, “that he has already bought Brooksand Place.”

“Good heavens!” Sybil sat up in amazement. “That old ruin! What an extraordinary person! He’ll have to completely re-build it.”

“Must we split our infinitives?” remonstrated Sir Philip mildly. “Especially when discussing the affairs of this contemptibly common person! Your lack of grammar almost exceeds your lack of taste, my dear Sybil.”

Sybil made a face again—a different kind of face. “Tush, dear Papa!” she said pleasantly. “You must allow youth its split infinitives as well as its jazzed oats. It isn’t much to throw in. Pardon the intrusion of the preposition at the end of the sentence!” She leaned back again carelessly in her chair. “Well, if you’re going to have old Telford, I think I might be permitted young Jack as an antidote. He can always if necessary enliven the proceedings with a song, as the parish magazine says—possibly a dance as well.”

Sir Philip drank his coffee thoughtfully. He knew—none better—that it was always advisable to give his daughter a certain amount of rein. She had an inborn sense of fair play which invariably impelled her to give in return.

“Very well,” he said at length. “You can have this young man of yours down if you want him—though why you should passes my comprehension.”

Sybil had turned back to her letter and was laughing under her breath at something it contained. She glanced up again after a moment. “Thank you, Papa. In that case I will do my best to relieve your boredom with the multi-coloured peer if it becomes too acute. Actually, I don’t think he’s such a bad sort when he isn’t trying too hard. I’d better go and break the news to Mother.”

She got up with the words and strolled towards the door, but just as she reached it Sir Philip spoke.

“Sybil!”

She paused. “My father!”

He turned in his chair. “I think you told me, you have no intention of marrying young Bellamy?” he said, a faint hint of embarrassment in his voice.

She sent him a dazzling smile. “About as much as I have of marrying Lord Telford,” she said, and struck a dramatic attitude. “Give me—the man—I love!”

“If he exists—or ever could exist,” rejoined Sir Philip drily. “Well, I wish you joy of your jazzed oats. If you find them uncommonly husky when they run out, don’t blame me!”

“As if I should!” said Sybil with deep reproach. “A model of parental devotion like you! That is where you all score nowadays. The sins of the children can never be visited on the fathers.”

She slipped suddenly through the door before he could find a retort, and laughed on the other side of it with a slight suggestion of malice. It was amusing to be taken for an *ingénue* at her time of life.

She went up the stairs still smiling. Oliver Keston would be coming that day. She toyed with the idea of not seeing him, assuring herself that she had no special desire to do so; but she dismissed it notwithstanding. The young man’s dominant personality attracted her, and there was no fun in keeping him at a distance if she could not see the result.

She had intended going to her mother’s room to indulge in a little teasing in that quarter, but another impulse diverted her before she reached it. Through a staircase-window she caught a glimpse of autumn sunshine on the fir-trees that skirted the winding drive, and in a very few seconds she was out on a grassy path that ran behind them, out of sight of the house, carrying a large basket and diligently collecting fir-cones.

It was an innocent enough occupation, even a virtuous one, since the cones were intended for the brightening of the invalid’s fire. It took time and it led her by devious ways in and out of the trees towards the gates. But she had reached them and turned back again before the whirring of wheels turning into the drive warned her of the approach of a car.

She looked up from her task with very natural curiosity to see who the early arrival could be, and the next moment waved a careless greeting to Oliver Keston who was at the wheel.

He pulled up sharply close to her and returned her airy salute. "You're out in good time," he remarked.

"You also," she returned, bringing her basket into evidence. "I wonder if you would like to take those up to the house for me and save me going back."

"Where are you going?" he said, frowning.

She gave him a laughing glance. "That's my affair, isn't it? I might ask—why the scowl? And you might make the same reply."

Keston smiled, not very heartily. "I've been up all night," he said. "A fool of a woman with twins! She does it every year—like kittens."

"What do you do with them? Drown them?" asked Sybil.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No. They usually die when teething starts. No stamina whatever. Really better dead, only I can't tell her so. Besides, she enjoys the funerals."

"What a brute you are!" remarked Sybil dispassionately.

"Merely practical," he rejoined with equal imperturbability.

Sybil spoke with sudden feeling. "And yet if you were married, I'll bet you'd never be satisfied till you'd made your unlucky wife bear you children!"

He raised his eyes to her—calm, appraising eyes that seemed to take deliberate stock of her. "If she had a healthy constitution, it would be good for her," he said. "But everything in reason, of course. I don't believe in piling up huge families. I prefer quality to quantity."

Sybil uttered a hard little laugh. "You may be interested to hear that the donor of the cigarette-case is coming down for the week-end," she said inconsequently.

"I am not in the least interested," returned Oliver Keston without the smallest change of countenance. "I have far too much to occupy me for that. I am going on now to see your mother, and then I have to arrange to take Old Columbus to the infirmary."

"Oh, is he worse?" Sybil's mockery passed for the moment. "He had the blankets, I suppose?"

"Yes, he had the blankets," returned Oliver drily. "But he is worse in spite of them, and we can't leave him in that draughty shack any longer. I

shall probably have to dope him to get him away, but he'll die if I don't."

"Shall I come and help?" said Sybil abruptly.

"No, thanks. I've got his grand-daughter and the nurse. That ought to be enough." Keston's eyes were still upon her with their peculiarly compelling look. "The man with the motor-boat—Rolfe Britton—is standing by too," he added. "Probably the whole hamlet will be there."

"Have you seen anything more of Stark's daughter?" asked Sybil.

He shook his head. "No. Have you?"

"Well, scarcely!" She laughed. "I gave her her chance and apparently she has decided to turn me down. I don't go running after people after that."

"I do," said Keston. "I catch them too—eventually. You know I'm going to marry you, don't you?"

"I most certainly don't," said Sybil.

He nodded quietly and convincingly. "Well, I am. I'm not quite ready for you yet, but you may as well know that you're marked down. It may simplify matters where others are concerned."

"Oh, may it?" Sybil was still laughing, but rather as one who did not know whether to be scornful or amused. "Meaning Jack Bellamy, I suppose? By the way, I forgot to mention that there is another guest coming for the week-end—Lord Telford, the magnate of the district. Have you come across him yet?"

"Not yet," said Keston. "Is he another competitor?"

She screwed up her blue eyes in a mischievous grimace. "He is a widower of fifty-six, enormously wealthy, terribly assertive. If he casts his eyes in my direction, you haven't an earthly."

"I'll chance that," said Keston, unmoved. "Meantime, if you're coming my way, get in!"

"I'm not," said Sybil, but she got in beside him nevertheless.

"Bravo!" said Oliver Keston cynically, and thrust an arm about her and kissed her.

"Yes, you are a brute," said Sybil, without attempting to release herself. "But I shall get my own back in the end."

“On the contrary,” said Keston with his lips to hers, “you will get what I give you—and nothing else.”

As he kissed her again she leaned against him with eyes half-closed. But she did not return his kiss.

CHAPTER II

THE SLAVE

“CAN I come in?” said Belinda.

She had preceded the request with a sharp rap on the backyard door of Captain Stark’s abode, and, lifting the latch and finding it open, she walked in without further ceremony.

Discovering the door into the passage also open, she followed up her intrusion, past the cellar door, until she arrived upon the threshold of the kitchen.

Here again she paused. “Can I come in?” she said again.

The door was half-open. She pushed it wide. A slight figure was seated on a wooden chair at the high table, peeling potatoes.

“Hullo!” said Belinda.

The figure turned. A pair of marvellous dark eyes looked up at her—eyes of a most amazing beauty, veiled by heavy black lashes—set in a face that might have been carved in marble, utterly expressionless, utterly white, except for the faint pinkness of the lips.

“You here alone?” said Belinda; and then, with a start: “Why, whatever’s happened to you?”

For on one of the lips—the lower one—there was a half-healed wound. It was bruised and cut and had a violet hue below its pallor. Belinda stared with a curiosity that was quite unconsciously cruel.

A low and very steady voice answered her. “Nothing’s happened. Are you wanting Mrs. Prawle? I’ll fetch her.”

“Don’t you!” said Belinda. “There’s no one I hate worse than that old cat. You’ll do just as well—and better. You’re Jooly, aren’t you? The skipper’s daughter!”

“My name is Julie,” said the owner thereof in a tone of strict reserve. “Why?”

“No reason,” said Belinda airily. “You look queer, somehow—not like you looked that first day. Hope they’re being decent to you; are they?”

If it had not been for her continued stare, her enquiry might have elicited some sort of response. But, unfortunately, her curiosity defeated her. Julie turned her face aside with a slight movement of avoidance.

“Is there anything I can do?” she said.

Belinda’s light eyes still dwelt upon her speculatively, but not unkindly. “Look here!” she said abruptly. “You’re such a slip of a thing. It can’t be easy to hold your own in a house like this. If you’re ever short of a meal, you come to me at *The Black Swan* and I’ll see you get one.”

Something swelled in the delicate column of Julie’s throat; she kept her face averted. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t mention it!” said Belinda heartily. “I know that old scrag Emily. Looks as if she lived on the smell of a herring herself, and a stale one at that. It’s all right for an old witch like her. But a girl like you—well, you’re young. You want feeding.”

“I’m not hungry, thank you,” said Julie in her cold, detached voice.

“All right,” said Belinda. “You know best. Where’s the skipper? Peter said I should find him somewhere here.”

Julie resumed her potato-peeling, her eyes downcast. “I expect he’s in the observatory. Do you want to see him?”

“You might take me along,” said Belinda. “I expect it’s a fool’s errand I’ve come on. But I might as well have a shot at it now I’m here.”

Julie remained seated. “You can go through and find him,” she said. “It’s straight along the passage when you come to the hall.”

“Oh, I know the way all right,” said Belinda. “I’ve been in with young Micky when the skipper’s been out. I thought, being his daughter, you’d come along too, that’s all.”

“I’m afraid I’m busy,” said Julie.

The other girl’s eyes were still upon her. She suddenly came close. “I say,” she said, “there’s been a row, hasn’t there? No, Micky didn’t split. He wouldn’t dare. The skipper’d half-murder him if he did. I just guessed, and

it's a damned shame, my dear, and don't you put up with it, see? You run him for assault and battery and make him pay."

She paused, for Julie had risen to her feet with a quick, goaded movement and faced her, wiping her trembling fingers on a cloth.

"You needn't go on," she said, her bruised lip quivering in spite of her. "I can look after myself. I can't run anybody because I slipped on the stairs and cut my face, can I?"

"Oh, all right, all right!" said Belinda, withdrawing again in good order. "Sorry if I backed the wrong horse. Thought you looked a bit down on your luck, that's all. Oh, here comes old Emily! She'll know whether the skipper's fit to be seen or not."

She turned towards the door as the sound of shuffling feet along the passage proclaimed Emily's approach, and Julie subsided again in her chair as suddenly as she had risen and returned to her task.

Emily entered, her crooked eyes peering round suspiciously. They did not express any pleasure when they lighted upon Belinda.

"You, is it?" she said ungraciously.

"Me it is," said Belinda. "I've dropped in for a chat with the skipper. It's about the ferry. Think he'd see me for a minute?"

"No, I don't," said Emily, dumping the dustpan and brush she carried on the floor. "He don't like folks prying round in here. If you want to see him, you'd better go and hang about outside till he goes out in the boat with Prawle."

Belinda tossed her head. "Thank you very much," she said tartly, "I've no time to waste hanging about for anyone. I've got work to do."

"Please yourself!" said Emily. She turned suddenly upon Julie. "Aren't you finished with them potatoes yet? Sakes alive, what a time you take! Talk about work! You girls don't know what work means."

"Ho!" said Belinda. "We're very bossy all of a sudden. Has Miss Stark turned herself into your kitchenmaid by any chance?"

Julie's head was bent. A deep colour suffused her face.

Emily Prawle looked down at her with a very crafty smile. "She's wise enough to train under one as knows," she snapped at Belinda. "And she's got to make her living same as the rest of us."

“Ho!” said Belinda again. “Then I suppose she’s paid, is she? Or does she work for nothing?”

“She’s not trained yet,” said Emily defensively. “She’s not worth more’n her keep, if that.”

Belinda made a scoffing sound. “I’ll bet you didn’t work for nothing when you were a girl,” she said. “And you wouldn’t find anyone else that would either. Miss Stark ought to be housekeeper here and giving you orders, not you her.”

Emily straightened herself with a furious movement. “I’ll thank you to mind your own business, Miss Quale,” she said, “and to get out of my kitchen. Jooly’s been put in my charge and I’m to train her—and train her I will.”

Julie looked up suddenly. Her back was to the light, and her dark eyes had a curious red gleam like the eyes of an animal at night. She spoke exclusively to Belinda.

“It’s my own choice,” she said. “I’m like you. I like plenty to do.”

“I wouldn’t do what you’re doing,” said Belinda, defying Emily with her look, “not for a thousand pounds a minute. But that’s your affair. All right, you dirty old hag, I’m going. There’s the skipper just gone out!” as the reverberating clang of a door sounded through the house. “I don’t suppose he’ll do any ferry work, but if somebody doesn’t while the old boy’s in the infirmary, there won’t be any left to do when he comes out. I’ll go and ask him.”

She marched out at the back without further leave-taking, and Emily, her witch’s face grey with rage, turned and dashed her hand into the dirty potato-water and flung it in Julie’s face.

“Take that, you idle little slut!” she shouted. “I’ll teach you to go talking behind my back!”

Julie sprang to her feet, seizing the bowl. But Emily was too quick for her. She also caught the bowl, holding it down on the table with wiry strength.

“You do!” she said, peering up into the girl’s face with her most evil smile. “Just you dare to raise your hand to me, that’s all! I’m under the skipper’s orders to break you in, and if you rebel—you know what you’ll get.”

Julie drew back from her with loathing in her look and slowly wiped the muddy drops from her face and hair.

The old woman chuckled. "That's better, my dear. We don't have no rebels here. Just you remember that! It'll hurt a lot more next time, and there won't be any nice soup afterwards. It'll be just bread and water in the cellar. Now you get to your work! There's the stove in the sitting-room to black. You'd better go and get busy on that before he comes back."

And Julie obeyed her, her momentary rebellion gone. During the few days that had elapsed since her punishment, her spirit had sunk very low. The food dispensed under Emily's *régime* was of the poorest and scantiest. What was sufficient for a bloodless old woman was far from satisfying to a young and intensely vital girl. But she had breathed no fresh air since that first day, and she was never hungry. She merely felt too tired and depressed for resistance. She had allowed herself to become Emily's slave when she had been weakened by exhaustion, and for the moment there was no alternative. Belinda's well-meant interference made no difference to her. She did not care for Belinda. Her air of cheery independence was not a soothing factor. As to going to her for a meal—like Micky—Julie would have preferred starvation.

Drearily she went about her work in the frowsty little sitting-room. The day was foggy and raw, and the lighthouse was exchanging warnings at regular intervals with the light-ship out on the Shoal. Occasionally the sirens of passing craft interrupted the monotonous duet. She felt miserably attuned to her dismal surroundings. The shock of all that she had undergone still hung like a weight upon her. She wondered dully whether she had succeeded in deceiving Belinda as to the cause of her injured lip. Quite possibly not! Belinda was extremely shrewd, and this also did not count in her favour. No, she did not like Belinda. In utter weariness of soul she pursued her task.

The grate was full of grey embers. She had to pick them out with her fingers since the long-handled shovel was quite inadequate for the purpose. A sheet of newspaper and a few rough sticks were all that had been allowed her for building a fresh fire. The lamp with a badly blackened chimney was also awaiting attention. That would be her next job she knew, and she made no haste to reach it. Slowly she cleared the grate. Slowly she applied a well-worn polishing brush of great dinginess to the bars. Then, fatigue surging uppermost, she sat back on her heels to rest.

A minute or so later she heard Emily's slippers outside and straightened herself sharply. She was still on her knees tearing the newspaper across when the old woman came in, moving more rapidly than usual.

"Not done yet!" she exclaimed. "I'll learn you to idle away the whole morning just because I'm not looking! You lazy little drotchel, you! What are you tearing that paper for?"

"I was going to lay the fire," said Julie.

"Lay the fire with the grate in that state! Why, you haven't even blacked it!" ejaculated Emily. "You'll drive me crazy before you've done. Here! Come out!"

She gripped Julie's shoulder with a skeleton-claw, dragging her backwards; and, in that moment, looking down at the girl's dark beauty, something that was literally crazy sprang to being in her crooked eyes. She stooped and, snatching up a strip of jagged wood, ripped it smartly across Julie's cheek, inflicting a deep scratch.

Julie uttered a cry and struggled free. The next moment she was on her feet with Emily's scraggy arms fast pinioned. "You dare!" she cried. "You dare!"

The old woman stared up at the fiery eyes with fear and hatred gleaming in her own. "You let me go," she said, "or there'll be trouble! I'll tell the skipper, and you'll get the rope-end!"

The blood was oozing on Julie's cheek, but she maintained her grip. "You'll get something much worse," she said, her voice sunk to a dreadful undertone. "I'll kill you if either of you ever touch me again."

Fear surged uppermost in Emily's eyes, for the look that held her was terrible. For a second or two she withstood it; then she began to whimper.

"I'm only doing it for your good—to keep you out of trouble," she sniffed. "You let me go! I shan't interfere if you behave yourself."

"You'd better not," Julie said with very convincing emphasis. "I'm not Micky to be bullied and kicked like a dog. Just you remember that!"

She set her free with the words and wheeled instinctively to the window. The encounter had cost her an immense effort, and her strength was gone. She knew that she had turned the old woman into an even deadlier enemy than before, and the very touch of her had filled her with loathing.

Emily literally scuttled back to her kitchen, and banged the door. She had received a defeat which it would take a good deal to wipe out, and she had no desire to remain in the presence of her conqueror. She would be revenged in time, but momentarily her forces were scattered. She had had a fright moreover which pursued her like a bird of ill omen. There had been something in Julie's look and tone that had struck a warning note in her soul, and the vibrations of it continued to sound with unpleasant insistence. She recognized that to establish her authority beyond all dispute would entail a conflict which even the skipper himself might hesitate to wage—at least on her behalf. Craft was her only weapon—a stealthy undermining until she should judge that she could with safety secure her victim by guile. It would not be long before that rebellious spirit should be made to clash with the iron ruler of the house once more, and the next time that that happened Emily would see to it that it should be crushed to atoms. She would have Julie grovelling at her feet. Young Micky had been brought into complete subjection, and she intended that Julie should share his servitude.

It would need but a little patient scheming to accomplish her end. The girl thought herself victorious now. She would be quite unsuspecting, and Emily would foster that attitude until such time as she might be induced to overstep the mark and embroil herself with the skipper once more.

That would be Emily's opportunity, and she would know how to avail herself of it. From what she had already seen she realized that even a comparatively light punishment had had an enormous effect upon Julie and had shaken her to the depths, and she was confident that the more severe form of correction threatened by the skipper would reduce her to abject submission for all time.

“Yes, my pretty lady, you wait!” she muttered to herself as she stooped over the kitchen fire. “A bit of rope-end with a knot in it will put you in your place quick enough and mark your nice white skin for you too. Yes, we'll make a spoilt beauty of you before you're much older—that we will. And after that, you'll do as Emily Prawle tells you and take what you're given.”

She continued to mumble in this strain for some time—an old witch stirring an evil-smelling stock-pot instead of a cauldron; but she plainly felt no inclination to return to the sitting-room and try any further conclusions with the skipper's daughter. It was easier just then and more satisfying to gloat over her coming downfall in solitude.

CHAPTER III

THE OFFER

JULIE leaned her head against the window with closed eyes, feeling dizzy and rather sick. She had frightened her oppressor and had for the moment gained the upper hand, but the effect upon herself had been infinitely more devastating than upon Emily. The humiliating conflict had used up every ounce of her strength. She even lacked the spirit to wipe the trickle of blood from her cheek. Had Reuben come upon her then, he would have found an unresisting victim upon which to wreak his mood.

But—fortunately for her—the skipper was on the beach at the other side of the house engaged in surly conversation with Belinda. Julie believed herself alone as she leaned there incapable of further effort, and the sullen wash of the fog-wrapped sea was like a dirge in her ears through which the syrens wailed like lost souls.

Some minutes passed, and a faint sense of urgency had begun to stir within her, warning her that it would be dangerous to linger on with her work unfinished, when a slight sound as of a wind-driven twig at the window startled her, for there was no wind.

She opened her eyes sharply, and saw a face close to her own, looking in.

A pair of blue eyes, intensely keen, almost commanding in their scrutiny, met hers. Only the blurred glass of the window intervened between them. Julie stood up with a slight gasp and drew back.

Instantly the man outside made a gesture, the briefest indication of his intention to proceed to the hall-door and enter.

And Julie, feeling as if she acted under compulsion, moved out of the room and into the hall to meet him.

His sturdy figure was already inside and the door closed behind him when she emerged. She came forward with some hesitation, her hand over her cheek.

“Were you wanting my father?” she said.

“No,” said Rolfe with unswerving candour. “I’m wanting you. Why haven’t I seen you lately? Where’ve you been?”

She turned herself sideways to the light, eying him half-defiantly. “I’ve been busy,” she said.

“Busy!” he echoed, his look sweeping over her with a completeness that left her defenceless. “I should think you have been! What’s happened? Have they turned you into a maid-of-all-work?”

His voice had a proprietary note which she knew she must resent at once if at all. She summoned her strength. “I told you—I’ve been busy. I can’t lead an idle life. If you want the skipper, he’s just round the other side of the house on the beach.”

“But—dash it—I don’t want the skipper!” Rolfe reaffirmed. He was looking at her more closely now, and his expression was critical. “Can’t I talk to you for a minute? You’re not so busy as all that, surely!”

“Yes, I am busy,” asserted Julie almost desperately. “I’ve got to finish laying the fire in the sitting-room. That’s why I’m not fit to be seen,” she added rather lamely. “It’s best to get the dirty jobs over in the morning. Besides . . .”

“Besides,” Rolfe repeated with sudden sternness, “you’ll get into hot water if you don’t. Isn’t that about the size of it?”

She coloured vividly and painfully. This ruthless unveiling of facts was hard to endure. “I don’t see what it has to do with you,” she said.

“P’raps not,” said Rolfe, quite undeterred. “You might say the same of a good many things that I’m interested in. Why are you doing all the dirty jobs, I want to know? The last time I saw you you weren’t going to be put upon.”

She made a movement of exasperation, but she kept her hand over her cheek. “There’s plenty to be done,” she said half-sullenly. “The Prawle woman is getting old. She’s only fit to mess about in the kitchen.”

“When she isn’t baiting you,” said Rolfe. “I know the old rat.” He suddenly bent forward and looked full into her averted face. “What have they done to you?” he demanded. “Tell me!”

He took her by the elbow and turned her towards the light. She did not resist him. He was too firm for that. But a quick flare of anger shot up in her

smouldering eyes. She dropped her hand from her face.

“You leave me alone!” she said. “I know my own business best.”

He still held her by the elbow as he surveyed the cruel scratch that marred her cheek and the purple scar on her lip. He drew a very deep breath before he spoke.

“So that’s how that damned old gipsy treats you! It is her doing, I suppose? Not Stark’s?”

Julie’s mouth closed resolutely. She stood before him in tense silence.

“You won’t tell me?” he said. “You think I’m not to be trusted. Well, live and learn! Why do you stay here?”

Again she would not answer him, but her chin had begun to tremble. He saw it and relaxed his hold. He laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Listen, Julie!” he said. “I dare say I’m rough, but I’m straight. Come to me, and I’ll take better care of you than this!”

She started and stepped back. “You!” she said, the word scarcely more than a gasp.

His deep-sea eyes smiled at her, half-coaxing, half-imperative. “Give me a trial! I’ll not harm you—not touch you even.” He removed his hand with the words. “And I won’t give you any dirty work to do either. You shall please yourself all the time.”

“I—don’t understand,” said Julie in a low voice, gazing at him.

“Why not?” He made a careless gesture. “Perfectly simple, isn’t it? We’ll pull out a bit and anchor—live on the water. There’s heaps of room on the *Circe*, and I want a mate. Might as well be you as anyone else. I’ll teach you everything you need to know. And I’ll give you decent food to eat.” He spoke the last words almost savagely, but the next moment disarmingly he smiled upon her. “Come! Why not give it a trial?”

“I think you must be mad,” said Julie slowly.

“No, I’m not; merely practical,” said Rolfe. “This isn’t a fit place for you to stay in. You may say the *Circe* isn’t either, but you can’t be sure till you’ve tried. If you don’t like her, you can always give it up.”

“But,” said Julie, still as if half-dazed by the idea, “no one would ever take me in after doing a thing like that.”

“Rats!” said Rolfe. “We’re not living in the Middle Ages. What about the unattached couples who go off across the world together beating records in aeroplanes? Does anyone ever dream of extending the frozen mitt to them when they get there?”

“I don’t know,” said Julie.

She spoke with a certain obstinacy, for she had been brought up in that strange school in which the laws of convention are still firmly established though practically never strictly observed.

“You can’t afford to be strait-laced in these days,” said Rolfe. “Besides, who cares for scandal? It never lasts more than a couple of days. There are too many of ’em for that.”

“It’s a queer idea,” said Julie.

“Not a bit of it.” Rolfe spoke with emphasis. “I’m a free lance. Why shouldn’t you be a free lance too? You can’t really want to stay in a place where they bully you all day long.”

Julie made a swift protesting movement. She lowered her eyes, and a veiled, withdrawn look came over her face. “I may not stay—very long,” she said after a moment. “But—there’s one thing I’m going to do before I go. After that—well, I really haven’t thought about what I shall do afterwards.”

“Come for a cruise on the *Circe* then!” he said. “We’ll clear out of the place entirely if you like. She’s perfectly seaworthy; I’ll look after you, never fear!”

She stood pale and still, like a statue, before him. “I don’t know,” she said again. “You might not want me then. And it isn’t the time of year for cruising. We might get wrecked.”

He scoffed aloud. “Wrecked! You don’t know the *Circe* yet. She’d ride out any gale with proper seamanship. You wouldn’t be afraid, would you?”

“No,” Julie said. “I don’t think I should be afraid. But I shouldn’t like it, all the same. You’ll have to find another mate.”

“Oh, shall I?” said Rolfe, and again he smiled upon her. “Somehow, I don’t think I shall. I’m not taking No for an answer. We’ll leave it open.”

She raised her great eyes to his. “I think you will have to take No for an answer,” she said. “I’m not coming.”

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets. There was a careless but conscious strength about him at that moment that was more compelling than

any bluster. "All right," he said. "You carry on with your dirty jobs then, and see what thanks you get! But if you ever get a leathering from that drunken old sea-dog, don't blame me!"

Her teeth caught at her injured lip and she winced involuntarily. For an instant her eyes blazed at him. Then immediately the white lids fell and the fire was obscured.

"D'you imagine I'm afraid of him?" she said with a kind of icy passion.

"I don't imagine you've any special love for him, anyhow," returned Rolfe. "You look as if you've felt the weight of his hand already."

A hard spasm went through her. "And you think I'd run away!" she said, her voice sunk to a tense whisper.

"I can't see any inducement to stay," said Rolfe, "especially if it's true."

She lifted a clenched hand with a ferocious gesture, almost as if she would strike him. And in that moment he knew that it was true.

Yet when she dropped it and spoke, her voice was perfectly steady and unemotional, as if her interest in the matter had waned.

"As you say," she said very deliberately, "live and learn! Anyhow I'm going to stay on for the present. I'm not the sort that turns tail."

Rolfe grunted. "That's an admission, anyhow. Well, p'raps the time may come when you'll be more amenable to reason. You'll find the *Circe* waiting for you if it does. She's not just a fair-weather craft, remember. Come along and see her one day now she's got a new coat of paint!"

Julie looked at him, and though a certain hostility still shone in her eyes the anger had died down. Her outraged pride was no longer uppermost. He had expressed no compassion for her, and this in itself was a salve to her wounded spirit. He did not seem to doubt her ability to take care of herself if she elected to do so. And the offer he had made was such as might have been made to another man.

"P'raps I will," she said after a moment, "when I've more time. I'm busy now. Good-bye!"

She was on the verge of turning away when heavy steps sounded outside and a rough hand threw open the door behind Rolfe.

The skipper stood glaring on the threshold. "Hullo!" he said.

Rolfe turned with the utmost composure. “Hullo, captain! Fixed up about the ferry yet, or do you want any help from me?”

Reuben’s glowering look went to the girl beyond Rolfe. He spoke in the sort of threatening snarl that some men reserve for dogs. “What are you doing here? Get back to your work, you little hussy! I’ll teach you to start gossiping the moment my back’s turned!”

He made a lunge forward, but Rolfe squarely intercepted him. “That’s all right,” he said smoothly. “Someone’s got to answer the door, I suppose? Can I have a word with you?”

Reuben stopped, foiled and furious. “You——” he began.

“Yes, me,” said Rolfe, and in that instant there was something quick and quiet and dangerous about him that carried the day. “We’re neighbours, aren’t we? Take me along to the observatory, and we’ll talk there.”

The skipper swallowed a bawling rejoinder and pointed along the passage.

Rolfe stepped aside, his back to Julie, his face to the skipper. “After you, captain!” he said with a courtesy that somehow had a razor-edge.

And Reuben strode before him without a word.

CHAPTER IV

THE WARNING

“Now!” said Rolfe.

He closed the door of the observatory behind him and stood with his back to it. The glass that surrounded three sides of the small apartment was thick with fog, and their privacy was complete.

The skipper had seized a tobacco-jar from the table and was pulling a dark mass out of it with fingers that were savagely unsteady.

“Well?” he demanded.

Rolfe watched him very intently, with eyes that missed nothing.

Reuben pulled an old pouch from his pocket and began to ram the tobacco into it. “Well?” he said again on a rising note, like the growl of an animal on the verge of swelling into a roar.

“To come to the point,” said Rolfe, his voice extremely even, “you needn’t think I’ve been told any tales. I’m only judging by appearances which are fairly obvious. And if you ever lay a finger on that girl again—old man as you are—I’ll thrash you till you’re nearly dead. Got that?”

He spoke so quietly that the words were fairly uttered before Reuben grasped their import.

A frightful silence followed, during which the skipper’s horny hands continued to tear and drag at the tobacco. Then suddenly they ceased, and the right one closed upon the jar, which was of heavy earthenware.

In that moment Rolfe swooped forward with the unerring precision of a trained athlete, and gripped the skipper’s wrist. “A pity to break any windows,” he said, “or the jar either, for that matter! It won’t make the slightest difference, I assure you.”

“You damned young swine!” said Reuben between his yellow teeth.

“You damned old one!” said Rolfe, forcing him backwards and down into his chair. “Sit still or I’ll tie you down, and you won’t get anyone to undo you in a hurry! You heard what I said just now? You’ll leave the girl alone, or I’ll flay you!”

He stood over Reuben in the ancient tattered chair, a glancing lightning in his eyes that made the older man turn his own away. After a second or two of fruitless straining he checked his resistance.

“What d’you want to butt in for?” he growled. “What’s the girl to you?”

Rolfe straightened himself warily. He had not expected so sudden a cessation of hostilities. “I’d stand up for any girl who was being ill-treated,” he said.

The skipper uttered a snarling laugh. “Don’t tell me! You wouldn’t fight Joe Muster if he played the fool with Belinda.”

“That’s different,” said Rolfe.

Reuben Stark gave him a very cunning look. “Different, eh? Yes, different! You don’t want Belinda, but you do want Jooly. That’s about all the difference, isn’t it?”

He reached out for his tobacco-pouch, and Rolfe pushed it towards him with a curious sense of reaction. He had a feeling that he had been outmanœuvred.

“Well?” said Reuben. “Am I right? Or am I wrong?”

Rolfe regarded him with a watchful eye. The skipper’s lined and swarthy countenance was not a very sure indication of the thoughts behind it. His scowl was habitual and ineradicable. Even when he laughed, his lips writhed in their own peculiarly sinister fashion, discounting all idea of mirth.

Rolfe’s mouth was hard with a granite firmness as he finally made reply, “You may take it that you’re right, if she’s willing to come.”

“Willing!” said the skipper, the fighting glare returning to his reddened eyes. “It’s not a question of *her* being willing—a little rat of a girl like that! It’s whether *I’m* willing. That’s what counts.”

“It doesn’t with me,” said Rolfe.

“Oh, doesn’t it?” Reuben’s look hardened to a belligerent stare. “You think you could take her without my consent, do you? Not in this country, young man! There’s a price to pay for that sort of thing. She’s got three years to go before she’s free to follow her own sweet will.”

“All right,” said Rolfe. “Then you’ve got to keep her in decent comfort, or you’ll pay—another kind of price.”

Reuben took out his pipe to fill. If he felt any resentment at this rejoinder he suppressed it.

“There’s plenty of ways of looking at a thing,” he said, “and no cause for being hasty that I can see.” He lowered his eyes to his task, and again Rolfe was aware of a slackened tension which he did not trust. “The girl belongs to me at the present, and she knows who’s master. I’ve not done anything to her so far that I wouldn’t have done to a child of ten, but I don’t believe in punishing anyone without you make ’em feel. I made her feel all right. She didn’t like it, but it’s done her good. She’ll do as I say now without arguing about it. And that’s what I wanted, and what I always mean to have. There can’t be more than one captain on a ship. The rest obeys orders. That girl obeys mine.”

“If you ever touch her again . . .” said Rolfe deeply, and left the sentence unfinished.

“I’ll do as I darn well please with her,” asserted Reuben without any show of temper. “She’s my girl and she’s got to learn discipline—which is something they don’t teach in schools nowadays. I’ll put her across my knee every night of her life if I think fit. She’s got to learn, and learn she shall.” His restless lips began to smile. “Or maybe I’ll let Emily lay it on for a change. If you want to punish a woman so as she’ll remember, get another woman to do it! They know how to make it smart. Yes, old Emily shall have the job next time. She’ll make her screech all right.” He chuckled with his head bent over his pipe.

Rolfe stood stiffly watching. His hands were clenched, but he did not raise them. “Well,” he said briefly, “I’ve warned you. If any of you touch her again, I’ll half murder you. She’s got among a set of brutes only fit for a pigsty, and if no one else will protect her, I will.”

“Will you?” said Reuben. He lifted his head slowly, and his red-lit eyes looked up to the flaming blue ones above him. “You feel like that about her, do you? P’raps you’d like my consent to—marry her? You could do your own beating up then—and you’d find she needed it.”

“Marry her!” said Rolfe. “She’s only seen me three times. She’s not likely to agree to that.”

Reuben’s leathery lips worked hideously around his tobacco-stained fangs. “I only suggested marriage,” he said, “because I didn’t want to give

offence. But—if I was to give my consent—you might have her without. If you like to pay my price, I shan't bring any charges for abduction.”

“You—devil!” said Rolfe.

The skipper suddenly grinned at him. “And what about you? Aren't you working to get her away from me and into your own power? Pretending it's for her good, of course, all the time! Well, suppose—for argument—that it is for her good! You can pay, see? You can damn' well pay! Bring the money along right here!” He tapped on the arm of his chair. “If she's worth having, she's worth paying for. I'll let her go for five hundred quid, and that's cheap, for she's got the sort of face that any man'd run after. I don't ask you to marry her. Just pay and take her out of my evil clutches!” His voice rose to a note of fury though the grin remained. “If you don't want her, leave her where she is and stop your blasted talk about protection! I'll do as I like with my own daughter as long as she's in my care. I'll make a gibbering idiot of her if I choose. It wouldn't be very difficult. Her mother was one before her.”

Rolfe's hands suddenly descended and gripped the skipper's shoulder. He spoke between his teeth. “Stop it! D'you hear? Stop it! Or I'll break every tooth in your head!”

He shook Reuben to and fro like an angry dog and finally flung him back panting in the chair.

“P'raps that'll teach you!” he said, breathing quickly himself. “If it doesn't, it's nothing to what you'll get later. If you do any more harm to Julie, I'll kill you! Now you know!”

He flung round as the door suddenly opened, and found himself face to face with Peter Prawle. The man gave him a sidelong look and turned at once to his master.

“Boat all ready for the ferry trip, captain,” he announced. “Will you take her or shall I?”

Reuben gathered himself together in the battered old chair. His gnarled hands were trembling. For a moment or two he seemed incapable of speech. Then: “Curse you!” he said to Peter. “Why the devil can't you knock? Get out of the way! I'll take her myself.”

He stumbled to his feet, stood swaying a little, finally with twitching lips made for the door, ignoring Rolfe who remained grimly planted, awaiting developments.

In the passage the skipper paused. “Peter!”

“Captain!” said Peter.

“Show that man out!” commanded Reuben, and if he had said, “Throw him overboard!” the words could scarcely have conveyed more venom.

“Very good, captain!” said Peter.

He flung another brief glance at Rolfe, and stood holding the door for his exit.

Rolfe, very square and self-assured, walked down the passage in the skipper’s wake.

But there was no further encounter when they reached the hall, for Reuben Stark went straight on to the kitchen, merely snatching his old cap from a peg as he passed.

Rolfe found Peter almost treading on his heels and faced round upon him. “You can go too,” he said peremptorily. “I can let myself out.”

“Captain’s orders!” said Peter laconically.

Rolfe looked him up and down in a single lightning survey. “Then you’d better go and get help,” he said. “For I mean to speak to Miss Stark before I go.”

“Well? I’m here,” said Julie.

Both men turned. She stood framed in the doorway of the sitting-room, very straight, rather scornful. Her eyes ignored Peter and looked full at Rolfe.

The latter transferred his attention to the sturdy seaman. “You hook it!” he said. “You’ve done all you can, and hanging around won’t help you.”

Peter seemed inclined to demur, but the banging of the door in the distance apparently induced him to change his tactics. Muttering to himself, he slouched away to the kitchen.

Then swiftly Rolfe bent towards the girl, who had waited silently, and spoke.

“You must get out of this place. Go to the Rectory—anywhere rather than here! That old devil means mischief.”

She looked up at him, and he thought he saw a shadow of fear in her eyes, but it was gone in a moment. “I’ve told you—I mean to stay,” she said.

“You’ll be mad if you do,” said Rolfe.

“I can take care of myself,” she said.

“You can’t,” said Rolfe forcibly. “Get out of it! Go and tell the parson that your father gets mad drunk and ill-treats you! Oh, you needn’t try to fool me”—as she made as if to protest—“I know. Promise me you’ll go and tell the parson! Come, say you will!”

“I won’t,” said Julie. A kind of white anger had come over her. She stood stiffened to resistance. “I won’t run away. I’ve told you so already. The man isn’t living who’ll get the better of me in the end.”

“Oh yes, he is,” said Rolfe, and suddenly, despite his anxiety, he smiled. “But you can go on thinking otherwise if it’s any comfort to you. Well, I’m doing no good. I’ll go. Will you come along and see me? I’ll have a better spread next time.”

His tone was persuasive; she softened. “Thank you. Perhaps I will—some day,” she said.

He held out his hand abruptly, rather imperiously. “Come soon!” he said.

She drew back instinctively. “I’m too black to shake hands,” she said. “Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” said Rolfe.

And he turned and left her without another glance.

CHAPTER V

THE VICTORY OF OLD COLUMBUS

THE news that Captain Stark had taken over the ferry service during Old Christopher's absence in the infirmary was received with some surprise by the fisher-folk of Beam.

The ladies of the community wondered that he did not consider it beneath his dignity, but were of the opinion that he was not doing it for nothing, an assumption which Belinda made no attempt to refute.

"Of course he'll make what he can out of it," she said, "but it won't be much this time of year. The old man doesn't get many fares these foggy days."

With Micky's help she proceeded to overhaul her grandfather's boat which, like its master, was showing signs of age; and during the slack hours at *The Black Swan* Joe Muster came down to the beach and stood about with his hands in his pockets, watching. His wife Sophy was always ailing, and Belinda was better company at all times, however busy she might be. There was a sort of winking intimacy between them which Joe regarded as rather waggish.

Micky resented the landlord's presence, but Belinda's word was his law and she kept him well in hand. There were sometimes enchanted intervals when he worked with her alone, and these were the happiest times of poor Micky's stunted life. He was still interested in Julie, but he was afraid of her. She had scared him badly on the night that he had carried up her supper after her punishment, and though she had taken no further notice of him he had never forgotten her passionate threat. As regarded himself, he had no intention of giving her the smallest opportunity of carrying it out, but he was waiting with a kind of awed anticipation to see if she would fulfil it in the case of the skipper. Somehow her dark intent eyes gave her the expression of being a woman of her word, and to Micky the idea of a world that might not contain his oppressor was of almost too Utopian a character for rational contemplation. Not to be hurled out of bed every morning with blows and

soul-quaking curses, not to be kicked on his return in the evening by the heavy boots which it was his lot to clean; in short, to live a life of complete drabness without any bullying note was to Micky a possibility of future bliss upon which he dared not dwell. But this girl with the strangely alluring face had avowed her determination to accomplish such a deliverance, and he lived from day to day awaiting it.

The atmosphere of violence in which his lot had been cast had bred in him the conviction that only by violence could he ever hope to escape from it, and he looked to Julie to open the prison-door for them both. But he never breathed a word of this even to Belinda. Julie had implanted in his puny brain too deep a fear for that. He could only await developments with the sort of patient cunning which years of adversity had taught him, blindly trusting that the devil which the skipper's brutality had awakened in the girl would be his final undoing.

Meantime, the joy of "mucking about", as he called it, with Belinda and the old boat gave an added zest to life. He was unusually handy at tarring and painting, and with Belinda's sharp eye upon him it was scarcely possible for him to get into mischief.

With the lifting of the fog a spell of milder weather had set in, and the work went on apace. Belinda was also taking the opportunity of turning out Old Christopher's hovel, a task which filled her with mingled disgust and elation. The accumulated rubbish of years was dragged forth into the light of day, and sorted into convenient bundles for ultimate destruction in the event of "anything happening to the old man".

"He'll never come back," said Joe Muster. "Why don't you burn it right away?"

"I don't believe in taking chances," said Belinda. "You never know what's going to happen in this world."

So, whenever the exigencies of *The Black Swan* permitted, she pursued her work, washing and white-washing with occasional help from Joe, until the interior of Old Christopher's ancient dwelling was scarcely recognizable.

It was on the Sunday afternoon after her grandfather's removal to the infirmary that the ramshackle conveyance from the Rectory rattled down into the fishing-village with Sybil at the wheel and two yards or more of thin and aristocratic-looking young manhood coiled in the seat by her side.

She pulled up on the stones close to the step of Old Christopher's cottage and peered in upon Belinda who was just putting up a clean muslin curtain

at one of the tiny windows.

“Hullo!” she called. “How’s the old man?”

Belinda smiled over her shoulder. “Good afternoon, Miss Tredville! Step in and take a look round! I think he’s going on all right, but we don’t want him back at present. We’ve been putting the place in order.”

Joe Muster made a hasty exit by the back door. He was shy in the presence of strangers when not on his own premises.

Sybil got out of the car and entered, followed by the long, loosely jointed young man.

“I say, you have been busy!” she remarked. “Mind your head, Jack! This place wasn’t built for maypoles. I congratulate you, Miss Quale. I should think the old boy ought to be jolly pleased.”

Belinda came forward, tossing the hair back from her florid face. “Oh, I’m not doing it for him,” she said. “He’ll hate it. Only I can’t abide a place that’s all of a muck. He’ll soon mess it up again. Men don’t know how to keep a place decent.”

“I know. Foul animals!” said Sybil, with an upward glance at the towering specimen behind her who chuckled amiably in response. “But what I really came for . . .”

“Of course! Your blankets,” said Belinda. “I’ve got ’em here all nicely washed, but not properly aired yet. You’d like to take ’em back with you. I’ll put ’em in a piece of clean paper. And I’m very much obliged to you, I’m sure.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Sybil. “I’d forgotten all about them. You can keep them for the rest of the winter if you like. He may be glad of a little extra warmth when he comes back. What I really came for . . .”

“Oh, you’d better take ’em,” said Belinda. “I was never one for borrowing. He won’t be coming back yet a while. ’Tleast I hope not. There’s some folks whose room is preferable to their company.”

The young man behind Sybil guffawed unexpectedly, and, blushing deeply, developed a severe cough.

Belinda gave him a look, Sybil merely a shrug. “Oh, don’t be an ass, Jack! Give me a cigarette!” she said, by way of easing the situation. “Sure you don’t mind, Miss Quale? What I really came for . . .”

“I know,” said Belinda. “Smoke and welcome, Miss Tredville! I’m not above enjoying a cigarette myself now and then. I always say it’s not looks that really count. It’s what you like.”

Jack Bellamy coughed again violently and pulled out his cigarette-case which he offered first to Belinda, who waved it aside, and then to Sybil, who accepted a cigarette with a slightly disdainful air. There was a brief pause while her escort lighted it for her and Belinda pushed forward a chair with a somewhat rickety tendency.

“No, thanks,” said Sybil, emerging from a cloud of smoke. “I haven’t come to stay. What I really came . . .”

“No extra charge!” said Belinda rather flippantly. “Sit down while you talk! Doesn’t cost anything and saves wear and tear.”

Sybil uttered a deep sigh and leaned upon the back of the chair. “Have you seen your grandfather since he was taken away?” she said.

“Why, no!” said Belinda glibly. “I’ve got other things to do than go gallivanting off twelve miles in the bus. He’s in good hands, and that’s as much as I can hope or expect. Dr. Keston—he had the matter in hand, and he told me everything would be all right.”

“Quite,” said Sybil, and inhaled her cigarette with the air of one requiring strength. “And so of course it will be. But it occurred to me you might like to have a look at the old boy. And that’s what I’ve come for—to take you over.”

“Good—gracious!” said Belinda, astounded.

“I’m not asking you to go,” explained Sybil. “It’s only if you care to. I thought it might be a decent thing to do—if you’re fond of him. But you know best.”

“Fond of him!” said Belinda, her light eyes round with amazement. “Why, we hate the sight of each other—always have. I’m the last person he’d want to see.”

Jack Bellamy suppressed his cough this time with some difficulty, and took out a cigarette for himself.

There fell a brief silence during which Sybil inhaled another deep breath from her cigarette and expelled it very slowly through her nostrils. “Oh, well,” she said then, “that’s that. D’you really want me to take those blankets? If so, we’ll stuff them in the car as they are.”

“I’ve got some newspaper,” said Belinda. “Just wait a minute, if you don’t mind!”

She went into the adjoining apartment—Old Christopher’s bedroom—and there followed a rustling and tearing of paper, while Sybil slowly straightened herself and turned upon her companion with upraised finger. “Jack, if you dare to laugh—or cough—once more before we’re out of this, I’ll never speak to you again.”

He caught the admonitory finger and carried its tip to his lips, broadly grinning. He was a pleasant-faced young man with an expression that had never developed beyond the stamp of the public school. “You needn’t, darling,” he whispered fervently. “I can always understand you without.”

“Fool!” said Sybil tersely, and released her finger with a jerk.

There was a sound of wheels outside as she did so, and the grinding of a brake. She glanced through the window. A car had pulled up immediately behind the one in which she and Jack Bellamy had arrived.

“What on earth . . .” she said. “Oh, it’s Oliver Keston! But why . . .”

Keston himself appeared in the doorway before she had time to formulate the question. “Hullo,” he said, and added, his glance including Jack, “everybody! Where’s Belinda? I called at *The Black Swan* and was told she was here.”

“She is,” said Sybil, indicating the inner apartment with a nod. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Nothing much,” said Oliver with his customary *sang-froid*. “I’ve got some news for her, that’s all. Perhaps you’ve heard?”

“I’ve heard nothing,” said Sybil. “I only came to offer to take her over to see Old Christopher. But . . .”

“Well, there’s no need for that now,” said Oliver briefly. “He’s dead.”

“Dead?” echoed Sybil.

And, “Dead!” cried Belinda’s voice from the further room. She appeared in the doorway, looking extraordinarily dishevelled, her arms full of blankets and torn newspapers. “Dead!” she cried again. “My old grandpa—dead!”

Oliver moved to meet her and took her burden from her. “Yes—went off rather suddenly about an hour ago. They rang me up, and I came along to tell you. No suffering. Just heart failure.”

Belinda stared around rather wildly. “My God!” she said in a voice of appeal. “I never thought he’d go—like that.”

“We shall all come to it,” said Oliver practically. “And he was pretty old, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” said Belinda. “But I—but I . . .” She put her hands suddenly over her face and burst into noisy tears.

Sybil handed her cigarette to Jack and went to her. “It’s a bit of a shock, isn’t it? But, after all, he wasn’t enjoying himself. He’s probably better off.” She put her hand on Belinda’s shoulder. “And it isn’t as if you were so very fond of him, is it?”

“I know I wasn’t,” sobbed Belinda. “But he was all I’d got. And I didn’t want him to go and die.” She sniffed back her tears and looked miserably round. “And now he’ll never see how clean and nice I’d got everything. Such a lot of trouble as I’ve took!”

“But he wouldn’t have liked it,” pointed out Sybil. “You said so yourself, you know.”

“As if that would have mattered!” cried Belinda, with another rush of tears. “And now he’ll never even know I’ve done it!”

At this point Jack Bellamy made a swift dive for the door to wrestle with a violent fit of coughing outside.

And Oliver Keston came up behind Sybil and put his arm secretly around her.

But Belinda wept on, oblivious to everything but the sudden bereavement that had befallen her. In some fashion it seemed as if Old Columbus had got the better of her at last.

CHAPTER VI

THE OTHER GUEST

WHEN SYBIL came out of the cottage she had somewhat of an abstracted air. She did not speak to Keston, though he was following her closely; merely got straight into the car, and Jack Bellamy, who was awaiting her, at once took his place beside her.

Keston came to the window and spoke through it. "You needn't worry about her. She'll be all right. They're always better when they've let off steam."

Sybil nodded. "I shall have to go up the road to turn," she observed.

"Afraid my car's in the way," said Oliver. "I'll back, if you like."

"There's no need," said Sybil. "Thank you. Good-bye!"

She drove off without further parley up the road to a space where there was turning-room, and here she brought the car round and drove slowly back, coming to a standstill close to Honeyball Farm, on the edge of the shingle.

"It's a queer world, Jack," she said.

"My dear girl, it's a different world," said Jack sagaciously. "Values—everything—different. You can't take it seriously."

"The Quale girl does," remarked Sybil.

"Or thinks she does," said Jack.

Sybil frowned a little. "Or thinks she does! I suppose we should none of us suffer at all unless we thought we did. I wonder"—her frown deepened somewhat—"if I should make all that fuss if I lost any of my people?"

"Of course you wouldn't," said Jack. "You'd really feel—which is quite a different matter."

“I don’t know,” said Sybil slowly. “I’m not a very feeling person, or, if I am, I’ve never realized it. I could never cry like that for anybody.”

“But it wasn’t genuine,” protested Jack. “She hated the sight of the old man. You heard her say so. And she wouldn’t even go and see him.”

“I suppose death makes a difference,” said Sybil. “I wonder if I should like you any better if you were to die.”

Jack received this as permission to chuckle again. “I dare say you’d enjoy being my widow,” he said, “but you’d have to marry me first, wouldn’t you?”

Sybil smiled faintly, almost in spite of herself. “That’s a grim idea,” she said. “No, we’ll wash that out. But she was genuine all the same. He was all she’d got. I wish I could have helped her, but I never know what to say.”

“I thought you were angelic,” said Jack.

Sybil looked ironical. “Poor fish! Did you really?” Her gaze wandered seawards, but paused half way. “Hullo! There’s that girl again—another of my failures!”

“What girl?” said Jack, and then, his look following hers: “By Jove!”

“Yes. By Jove!” said Sybil, mocking him. “A rose growing in the desert!”

“A pomegranate, more like!” said Jack. “Who is she? Does she belong here?”

Julie was standing in the little yard, throwing corn to the chickens. Her face was half-averted, as if she did not wish to be noticed—a fact which Sybil was swift to perceive.

Impulsively she restarted the engine.

“I say, don’t go on yet!” said Jack. “That girl looks too good to be true.”

“Well, I’m going,” said Sybil. “You can get out and talk to her if you think she’ll stop to listen.”

“Hard-hearted!” returned Jack, leaning back with resignation. “Who is she? And why do you describe her as a failure?”

Sybil drove on without a glance in Julie’s direction. “She is the daughter of an old ruffian called Stark, and my sole reason for calling her a failure is that she doesn’t want to be befriended by me. Not altogether unnatural, perhaps! I dare say I shouldn’t either, in her place.”

“You’re coming over all philanthropical,” commented Jack. “Hope it isn’t catching, because it’s a disease I can’t afford.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d be in the least susceptible,” remarked Sybil, “from what I’ve seen of you.”

Jack grinned. “Well, you’ll admit I am as putty in your hands. But if you really want a suitable subject, you’d better try and pass on the disease to old Telford. He’s full of lucre.”

“And practically owns the whole of the fishing-village,” said Sybil. “But they’re an independent lot, after all. They haven’t much use for philanthropy.”

“Oh, haven’t they?” scoffed Jack. “You try scattering a little, and then see! You ought to get your Aunt Serena on the job. She’d pick out the deserving ones with unerring judgment.”

“You flatter yourself,” said Sybil. “I’ve no faith in her judgment whatever. And now I’ve gone and left the blankets behind! I really can’t turn back for them.”

“Leave them to your medical friend!” said Jack easily. “He’ll be glad of an excuse to look you up. He’s got designs on you, all right. Did you see the way he eyed me when he came in? But I don’t see you doing the village doctor’s helpmeet—philanthropy or otherwise.”

“You haven’t much imagination, have you?” said Sybil with the utmost coolness. “However, I still reserve the right to please myself. You may be interested to know that my mother has the greatest faith in Dr. Keston.”

“Sorry! I’m afraid I’ve not,” said Jack. “He’s not your type, whatever Lady Tredville’s feelings may be. There’s too much *ego* about him.”

“Better than too little,” rejoined Sybil. “Will you give me a cigarette? I’m getting bored. I always did detest colourless men.”

“Hence your partiality for Lord Telford, I suppose,” commented Jack, his fair face flushing a little.

Sybil laughed her scorn. “What a jealous infant to be sure! Certainly, our multi-coloured millionaire has nothing anæmic about him. It’s a pity he’s never learnt to be a gentleman.”

“Probably he found money-making a whole-time job,” said Jack.

“He’s a queer fish.” Sybil spoke reminiscently. “I don’t believe anybody could get on with him for long. He has a son who never comes near him. He

was telling me about him last night.”

“Oh, that was what it was all about, was it?” Jack began to smile. “I must say the son has my sympathy. Fancy being saddled with a sort of coal-heaver father like that!”

“Probably the son’s worse,” said Sybil. “He’s been educated, so he probably is—much worse. Anyhow, they don’t seem able to meet without striking sparks. As a matter of fact, the old boy was rather pathetic about it. But I don’t suppose the son finds him so.”

“Parents are awful nowadays,” remarked Jack sweepingly. “Never content to take a back seat. If you go to a dance, you’re expected to fox-trot with somebody’s grandmother.”

Sybil laughed. “Poor lamb! And poor grandmother! But I agree with you. Parents have not improved. The old self-sacrificing type is quite extinct. It’s impossible to respect them.”

“Oh, quite!” agreed Jack. “Hopelessly under-developed, most of them. Can’t realize that they’ve had their innings. Old Telford, for instance—he’s so proud of his business abilities. It would never occur to him to clear out and give his son a chance.”

“He has some reason to be proud,” Sybil observed. “I believe he started life as a cabin-boy on an old tramp, and now what he doesn’t know about shipping isn’t worth knowing.”

“I don’t like these self-made people,” said Jack. “Too damn’ superior. I say, we’re not going home, are we? Can’t we go somewhere for tea? They’re not expecting us back so soon.”

Sybil continued on her homeward course. “We’d better get back,” she said. “I’m supposed to be helping to entertain his lordship. We’ll pick him up if you like, and go on somewhere.”

“What a burning shame!” said Jack. “Just when I thought you were going to entertain me! You’re very hardhearted, aren’t you, Sybil?”

“Very,” said Sybil, with a lightning smile in his direction. “Naturally, I didn’t expect to be credited with a sense of duty. I don’t suppose you even know what it means. But I agree that tea at home is preferable under the circumstances. And perhaps we might take our distinguished guest to the evening service afterwards.”

Jack groaned, but raised no further protest. He knew the girl beside him well enough to realize what it would be worth. Sybil was in one of her

enigmatical moods, and his week-end visit did not promise to be a very profitable one. He had not reckoned upon a fellow-guest, and he almost wished that he had not come down.

Being of a fairly philosophical frame of mind, however, he resigned himself to the inevitable with a good grace. Sybil was an odd girl—the sort that might flout a man for years and then capitulate wholly unexpectedly in the end. To press his attentions upon her at this stage was to court repulse, and he was sufficiently level-headed to refrain. He did not consider the middle-aged millionaire as a serious rival, his title notwithstanding; while as for this doctor fellow—well, Sybil was no fool. She would never tie herself to a man of that type and be condemned to live in a village for the rest of her days. It might amuse her to toy with the idea, but she would never carry it out. She had her Aunt Serena's love of the world and all that it contained; and Jack, who was too modern to believe in love for love's sake, was convinced that she would never allow herself to regard Oliver Keston as more than a temporary plaything.

She must need distraction badly enough in this hole, he reflected, as they whizzed in through the Rectory gates. Who could blame her for extracting the utmost from the very poor material at hand? She might not be in love with himself—that sort of thing was a paltry sentiment at the best of times!—but she would probably accept him in the end. At all events, he had no intention of worrying. Nothing was ever gained by that.

They entered the Rectory, and were at once enwrapped in a sort of dingy atmosphere that seemed to emanate from its very walls.

“Yes, isn't it?” said Sybil, with a slight shiver. “But I don't believe the most up-to-date heating would make the faintest difference. You can't defeat the mould of centuries—unless you set fire to it.”

Jack hung up his coat with a chuckle. It took more than a mouldy atmosphere to depress him.

“What do we do now?” he enquired.

“We search the library,” said Sybil, “for your fellow-guest.”

She crossed the hall with the words and opened a door that led into a lofty room that was literally lined with books.

A large log-fire burned here, and before it, stretched, in supreme ease, there lounged a man and a dog; the former stout and squarely built, white-haired with a red and virile face, the latter an extremely bony red setter with flopping ears and a most guileless and unassuming expression.

The man turned at the opening door and prepared to rise, but was checked by the girl as she advanced. “Don’t—please! We’ve come to join you, not to disturb you. Our errand of mercy was in vain. The old ferryman is dead.”

“What! Old Columbus!” Lord Telford took his pipe from his mouth. He spoke in a deep, resounding voice. “I never saw him, you know. But I suppose he was pretty well known hereabouts.”

“Oh, quite a feature of Beam!” said Sybil. She dropped down carelessly on the arm of a chair. “One of the old relics! I don’t suppose there’ll be a ferry much longer now. Most people prefer the bridge. It’s a safer way of getting across if not so picturesque.”

“Much, I should think,” said Lord Telford. “But I’m sorry you had your journey for nothing.”

“Oh, it wasn’t entirely for nothing,” observed Jack easily. “Sybil’s pet doctor turned up to break the news, and I saw one of the prettiest girls I’ve ever set eyes on.”

“Oh!” said Lord Telford, looking up at Sybil from under his sandy-white eyebrows with rather formidable directness. “So this part of the world has its attractions, has it?”

Sybil bestowed her most dazzling smile upon him. “It depends upon the point of view,” she said. “Jack, of course, is still rather young and impressionable.”

Jack chuckled comfortably.

“And what about you?” said Lord Telford rather aggressively.

“I?” said Sybil sweetly. “Well, I have barely reached the impressionable age yet, you know. I believe it occurs rather later in the female species.”

“Ho! Does it?” said Lord Telford. “Then when, I wonder, may we begin to hope to make an impression?”

Jack chuckled again, and Sybil’s smile broadened to a charming grimace. “So far as I know,” she said, “there is never any harm in hoping. I suppose we all do it, don’t we?”

“And what do you hope for, may I ask?” demanded the shipping magnate gruffly.

She shrugged her shoulders carelessly, and took a cigarette from a box on the table. “Well, not a fairy prince—naturally. Perhaps not a prince of any

sort!” Her eyes challenged Jack for a moment and passed him by. “Shall we say someone who has already done things, and will do—still more? That allows for all sorts of possibilities, doesn’t it?”

Lord Telford’s rugged face smiled a little. He also glanced momentarily at Jack, and then looked straight back at the girl, balanced, rather precariously as it seemed, on the edge of the chair.

“All except one,” he said with decision. “I’m glad we agree there, anyway.”

“But how clever of you!” said Sybil, smiling entrancingly once more.

Jack chuckled again into a silence in which somehow he had no part.

CHAPTER VII

THE FAIRY SHIP

SYBIL and her escort were not the only people to take note of the girlish figure in the chicken-run of Honeyball Farm that Sunday afternoon.

Oliver Keston, backing and turning his car after Sybil's departure, glanced instinctively in that direction and at once caught sight of the slim form with its unconscious dignity of bearing, and having seen it he drove straight to the gate of Honeyball Farm and got out.

His feet crunched upon the shingle, and the girl, with the empty bowl in her hand, looked round.

Perhaps she was expecting to see someone else, for a curiously restrained expression came over her face like a veil, and her eyes were immediately lowered.

But Oliver Keston was not a man to be lightly turned from his purpose, and he had every intention of making the acquaintance of Reuben Stark's daughter.

He advanced to the wire netting, and with a somewhat perfunctory salute he addressed her.

“You are Miss Stark, I think?”

Her eyes were raised again instantly in half-protesting interrogation.

Keston smiled at her, his lean face cordially insistent.

“I thought so. I've seen you before—with Miss Tredville. I am Dr. Keston, as I dare say you know already, and I am very pleased to meet you. I hope you like Honeyball Farm.”

He paused. Those eyes of hers—marvellous eyes, tragic eyes—seemed to cast a spell upon him. He was abruptly aware that his last words had not been well chosen.

She made no reply to them. She only shivered and turned to open the little gate of the run.

He leaned swiftly over the low wall and opened it for her.

“Thank you,” she said.

They were face to face as she emerged, with only the wall between them.

“I expect you find plenty to do here,” said Oliver pleasantly.

“Oh yes, plenty,” said Julie.

A cold wind was blowing over the sea, and she shivered again. But she paused as the gate clicked behind her. It would have been difficult under the circumstances to have passed on and left him there.

“I’m afraid Captain Stark is out,” she said after a moment’s hesitation.

“Oh, that’s all right.” Oliver’s tone held kindly reassurance. “I couldn’t come in now in any case. But I know him of course, and I shall hope to meet you again before long. You’re not thinking of taking up any post at the Rectory by any chance?”

Julie’s face flushed. “No,” she said. “Not yet, at any rate.”

“Quite right,” said Keston. “You’re probably better where you are. But you mustn’t work too hard, you know, even at home. You must have some time for recreation.”

“Yes,” said Julie non-committally.

“You might come in the car on one of my rounds one day, if you cared to,” suggested Oliver, his tone half patronizing, half persuasive. “Would you like to do that?”

She looked too surprised to answer.

“You’re something of a stranger,” he explained. “You might like to see something of the neighbourhood.”

“I see,” said Julie. “That would be very kind. But—I haven’t much time—anyhow at present.”

“Don’t take on too much!” said Oliver, still with that air of friendly condescension which somehow made it impossible to keep him at a distance. “Naturally you want to help your father, especially now that he’s running the ferry. But you must look after yourself too. That’s really important. I shall have to tell him so if you don’t.”

“Oh, please!” said Julie in a tone of sharp anxiety. “Don’t ever say anything to him about me! It would make it—much more difficult.”

“In-deed!” said Oliver in a tone of enlightenment. He gave her a shrewd look. “I hope he is treating you properly.”

Julie checked her agitation with a swift effort. “I didn’t mean that,” she said. “Only—of course I want to manage in my own way. We all do, don’t we?” She smiled faintly, with a hint of apology. “I’m afraid I must go in now. Thank you very much. I should like to go out in your car some day—when I’ve quite settled down. But not quite yet.”

“Some evening perhaps,” suggested Oliver, preparing to depart. “I often have to come over here. I could pick you up at the end of the toll-bridge and take you for a spin. It would make a nice change. I’ll look out for you then. Good-bye for the present!”

He saluted her again in the same breezy style and turned on his heel.

Perhaps he had heard the sound of approaching footsteps along the jetty, for his departure was quite definite, and he re-entered his car without looking back. He was a dexterous driver, and he had shot past Honeyball Farm and was already well on his way to the bridge when the steadily advancing feet of Rolfe Britton reached the spot where he had stood.

Julie, it seemed, was not so dexterous in retreat; but she still had duties to perform, and when Rolfe halted close to the chicken-run she was pumping water from an old hand-pump close by into a battered can.

He stood and watched her until she turned round.

Then he too saluted, but with a very different air. “Can I lend a hand?” he asked.

She threw a rapid glance towards the house. No one was visible.

Rolfe promptly vaulted over the wall. He took the can from her and entered the chicken-run.

“Be quick!” murmured Julie.

He was quick. The emptying and filling of a couple of old bowls took him about as many seconds while the hens scattered in clucking disapproval of the invasion of a stranger.

Rolfe turned round to the girl with a confident smile. “There! Now come and have tea with me on the *Circe*! I’ve got everything ready.”

Julie looked irresolute. "I'm not sure that I'd better. The old man's away, but there's Emily. She may wake up and find me gone."

"Let her!" said Rolfe. "The skipper won't be back for hours. The pubs don't open till seven."

"There might be passengers," said Julie.

"He'll send Peter across if there are, but I don't suppose there will be. In any case, what's it matter?" Rolfe closed the gate upon the disapproving hens. "You're not a prisoner."

She stiffened at the idea. "No. I'm not. I'll come. But I can't stay long. There's Micky too. He generally turns up in the evening. I don't altogether trust him."

"Oh, damn Micky!" said Rolfe without ceremony. "I'll scrag him if necessary. Come along! You needn't stay any longer than you want."

He held open the gate for her, but she hung back. "I haven't even got a hat on," she objected.

Rolfe laughed under his breath. "You don't want one. Come as you are! It's not a party, and you look much nicer without."

Julie relaxed at the frivolous assertion; it was impossible not to respond to his smile. She passed through the gate without sound. They turned along the quay together. His face wore its Viking expression of conquest.

"It's a free country," he remarked. "No one can expect you to stay inside four walls all the time."

"I don't know," said Julie sombrely. "One can't do exactly as one likes till one's of age."

Rolfe gave her a curious glance. "And so you just do as you're told?" he said.

"For the present," said Julie still sombrely.

He made no comment. There was something rather fatalistic about her that did not encourage criticism.

"What was that doctor-fellow doing just now?" he asked abruptly.

She shrugged her shoulders. "He only came up to talk."

"Do you know him?" questioned Rolfe.

"I suppose I do—now," said Julie.

He frowned. "Mean to say you'd never met him before?"

She nodded. "Doctors can do anything, can't they?"

"No, they can't," said Rolfe. "Why should they, anyway?"

Julie looked amused for the first time. "They think they can for one thing. That counts, doesn't it?"

"I don't know," said Rolfe rather stubbornly. "They've no right to scrape acquaintance on the strength of it. I should keep him at a distance if I were you."

"Thank you," said Julie sedately.

He gave her another somewhat searching glance. "I suppose you think it's like my damn' cheek to give advice," he said. "But there's no one else to do it, is there? And I've a better right than some."

"Have you?" said Julie.

"Yes, I have." There was something of challenge in his voice. "Because I understand, and I mean well. It isn't everyone that does."

"I see," said Julie.

"No, you don't," he returned. "But you will some day. Hullo! There's that young varmint Micky. What's he up to?"

Away in the distance an impish figure was darting towards the hovel recently occupied by Old Columbus. It reached the ramshackle dwelling and bolted within like a rabbit into a burrow.

"Looking for Belinda, I suppose," said Rolfe.

"I wonder if he saw us," said Julie uneasily.

"And if he did," said Rolfe, "what of it? Is the world going to come to an end?"

She uttered a queer laugh. "It wouldn't please Belinda specially. I can tell you that much."

"What wouldn't?" demanded Rolfe.

They were half-way along the jetty now and facing the oncoming tide. He walked with the free swing of a man in his own element.

Julie had to quicken her steps to keep pace with him. "Belinda wouldn't think much of a tea-party that she wasn't invited to," she said.

Rolfe broke into a laugh. "I've never thought of inviting Belinda to go anywhere," he said emphatically. "I think she's a good sort. But not that sort, so far as I'm concerned."

"I don't think she'd agree," said Julie shrewdly. "She's everybody's sort."

"Not mine," said Rolfe with finality.

Julie gave him a side-glance. "I suppose you can pick and choose," she said.

His smiling eyes met hers. "I do—yes. It's a hobby of mine. There's some advantage in knowing what one wants, even if one can't always get it."

Julie looked out to sea. "I think it's almost worse to want a thing and not have it," she said.

"What is it you want?" he asked unexpectedly.

She made a wide gesture with her arms. "Heaps of things! Heaps and heaps of things!" She reiterated the words almost passionately. "Doesn't everybody? It's awful to be young and all closed in. When one's old—like Emily—I suppose one doesn't care."

"You'll never be like Emily," observed Rolfe. "As to being closed in—well, most people can get free if they try—and if they dare."

"Dare!" She flashed round on him. "D'you think I haven't the courage to get away?"

"No," said Rolfe. "I think—with you—it takes more courage to stay. But what's the point of it?"

Her eyes were burning. "Because—if I went now—they'd be pleased," she said. "And I'm not going. I'm going to stay till I'm mistress in that house—and they're all afraid of me. I'll make that man go in fear of his life. I'll punish him as he's never been punished before. I'm young and he's old. I shall get the better of him—some day. As for old Emily"—she laughed with clenched teeth—"she's afraid of me already, when we're alone. I'll have them all like that presently."

"I see," said Rolfe. "You're going to intimidate them, are you? Well, I wish you luck."

He broke suddenly into his clear, flute-like whistling, as if the subject had abruptly ceased to interest him. They were close to the end of the jetty

where the *Circe* rocked lightly on the swell. She looked like a fairy ship in the falling dusk; and with that fairy music close to her, Julie's spasm of anger passed as though it had been charmed away.

The bitterness went out of her soul, lost in the sheer pleasure of sight and sound. Little lights had begun to shine out of the expanse of grey, lopping water, and a strange sense of enchantment seemed to wrap her round.

She stood still, her breast heaving a little. It was almost as if she were waiting for someone to take her by the hand and lead her forward. The darkness and the misery that lay behind her were forgotten.

What was it that Rolfe was whistling? Something that she had heard before—something that seemed to call to her through the dim mists of memory. A waltz? A love-song? No! It was a hymn—the evening hymn that they had been taught to sing at school!

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide.

Her eyes were wet, she could not have said wherefore. She stood motionless until the exquisite verse was ended.

And then, with an unaccustomed meekness, she yielded to the touch of Rolfe's hand upon her arm, and was guided by him down the steps on to the deck of the waiting boat.

CHAPTER VIII

ASPIRATIONS

SHE came to herself in the little cabin, sitting on the locker in the light of the flickering oil-lamp.

Rolfe had gone forward to make the tea. He was no longer whistling. Evidently the task in hand occupied his full attention.

But something of the spell still hung about her. She sat and wondered at him and at herself.

A few minutes passed, and then he appeared, bearing a tray. The shadows striking upwards gave a curious effect to his features. They had a look of primitive, almost immeasurable strength, and an odd thrill went through Julie. It was as though she had stepped into a new world of which this man and herself were the sole inhabitants.

He set down the tray on the locker and seated himself on the other side of it.

"I've managed to produce a tea-pot this time," he remarked. "Will you pour out or shall I?"

She looked at his broad, powerful form and felt absurdly weak and inadequate by contrast. "You do it!" she said.

"All right!" said Rolfe. "Then the tea goes in first."

"So does mine," said Julie, "always."

He flashed her his sudden smile, and proceeded to divide the contents of the tea-pot between two large mugs. The liquid he distributed was nearly black.

"Hope it's strong enough," he observed.

"Is there any water?" suggested Julie.

"Heaps. Wait and I'll fetch the kettle!" he said.

He fetched it, and stood it on an old newspaper on the floor.

“Fill up the pot, won’t you?” said Julie. “And could I have some as well as milk?”

“Of course,” he said. “You take whatever you like! I’ve got a tin of sweet biscuits for you here.”

“How kind of you!” said Julie.

“It’s not in the least,” he returned abruptly. “Look here! I’ve got some sardines and a tongue in the galley. Would you like some? You look hungry somehow.”

“Do I?” she said. “I don’t feel it. At least, I don’t think I do.”

“You wait!” he said.

He was gone again, moving with the lightness of perfectly balanced strength. He returned with a sardine-tin under one arm and a tongue in a glass under the other. In his hands he carried a loaf of bread and a packet of butter.

“Now!” he said. “I’ll get these open in no time. You cut the bread! Here’s a knife! We’ll have a decent picnic.”

Julie felt that she ought to protest, but somehow she could not. The half-stifled pangs of a hunger never fully satisfied conquered all effort at remonstrance. She suffered him to extract his tempting viands while she swiftly obeyed his orders. Eventually they had a substantial meal spread between them to which Julie’s healthy young appetite did full justice.

They laughed and joked together while they ate. It was the sort of *impromptu* meal at which it was impossible to be serious and at which no trace of ceremony could intrude itself. When it was over they had advanced along the road to intimacy to a point whence any return to formality was out of the question.

And Julie was happy. That was the strange part of it. For happiness had not hitherto come her way to any appreciable extent. There had been very few treats in her life, and her brief sojourn at Honeyball Farm had taught her more of bitterness than she had ever known before.

She had almost begun to regard the whole world with hostility, but this man with his fair tanned skin and determined eyes made her feel different. She forgot to be on her guard with him.

“I have enjoyed it,” she said finally. “It’s the best meal I’ve ever had.”

“Have a cigarette!” said Rolfe.

She shook her head. “No. Let me wash up before I go!”

“Let you what?” he said.

“Wash up,” she repeated, preparing to pick up the tray.

He stopped her authoritatively, picked it up himself, walked with it to the galley and almost flung it down there.

“No,” he said, returning. “That’s my job—until I’ve got a mate.”

She smiled with a hint of mischief. “You ought to get someone like Belinda to come in and do for you.”

“No, thanks,” said Rolfe.

He lighted a cigarette and propped himself against the cabin doorway.

For a space he said nothing further; then very abruptly he turned and looked down upon her. “The job’s still waiting for you,” he said.

She shook her head instantly, with great decision. “Oh no, I couldn’t. You mustn’t pester me. I’ve other things to do.”

Rolfe remained still looking down at her. “You know, Julie,” he said, “I shouldn’t ask you if I didn’t want you. You might just as well come.”

She was leaning back against a red cushion, and her brilliant beauty seemed to shine out from it with the lustre of a jewel. “It’s no good asking,” she said. “I told you before I wasn’t going to run away.”

“What are you waiting for?” said Rolfe.

“I’ve told you that too,” she said, her eyes downcast, a trifle stubborn.

Rolfe took out his cigarette. “Suppose some fellow wanted to marry you,” he said, “would you still stick to that old ruffian?”

She made a slight movement of surprise, but she did not look up. “I shan’t think of getting married for a long time,” she said. “Not till I’m of age, anyhow. My mother married much too young, and she was miserable.”

“Only because she married Stark,” said Rolfe. “You might marry a man who would look after you and treat you decently.”

She shook her head again vigorously. “I wouldn’t risk it. I’d sooner make my own living than that.”

“If Stark would let you,” he pointed out. “He might object.”

“And he might object to my marrying,” said Julie, a faint ring of defiance in her voice.

“Would you care if he did?” asked Rolfe.

She raised her eyes abruptly. “Not if I wanted to—of course,” she said. “But I don’t.”

“Never thought about it, I suppose?” said Rolfe.

She laughed a little, leaning her head back upon the crimson cushion. “I expect most people think about it sometimes,” she said. “But I’ve never met anybody yet except you.”

“Yes, there’s me,” agreed Rolfe.

Her great eyes regarded him with an instant’s surprised interrogation, and then fell again. “You’re not the sort that marries,” she said in a tone of conviction. “You’ll go on painting the *Circe* and cruising around in her all your life.”

“There,” said Rolfe with great deliberation, “you are quite wrong. I am the sort that marries, and I have every intention of marrying.”

Julie sank further into her cushion. “I suppose it’s all right for a man,” she said. “He can always get away. But it might mean prison for life for a woman.”

Rolfe moved suddenly, straightening himself. “You’re too young to talk like that, Julie,” he said.

She laughed rather callously. “I’m not as young as you think, and I know what I know. I’d sooner work on my own than marry a working-man, anyway.”

“Waiting for a prince, are you?” suggested Rolfe.

She raised her eyes again half-mockingly. “I might consider the son of a lord,” she said.

“Oh, would you?” said Rolfe, looking directly back upon her with a faintly cynical smile. “You think that would be the road to freedom, do you?”

“I think it would be lovely to be rich,” she said with more simplicity. “Don’t you?”

“Not as the price of freedom,” he said.

“Of course not! Freedom is everything,” said Julie, and closed her eyes as if that ended the subject.

But Rolfe did not take that hint. His look still dwelt upon her, speculatively, but kindly, as though she were a child.

“I wonder,” he said slowly at length, “what you would say to me if I were the son of a lord and I wanted to marry you.”

Julie did not open her eyes. “Things like that don’t happen, do they?” she said.

“Can’t you picture it?” he asked.

“No.” She spoke rather dreamily. “If you were anyone of that sort, you’d want to marry a girl in your own class—like Miss Tredville.”

“Should I?” said Rolfe. “Well, you’re quite wrong again. It seems to me you’ve got a good deal to learn.”

Julie smiled to herself, as if secretly amused. “It’s you who can’t picture things,” she said. “Why, you’d look down on me like a bit of seaweed—if you so much as saw me.”

“Wrong again!” said Rolfe. “I should fall in love with you—at first sight—and ask you to marry me.”

She opened her eyes slowly. “That’s not at all likely,” she said.

“And what would you say if I did?” persisted Rolfe.

Her look travelled upwards and met his. She was still slightly smiling. “I should say,” she said with a little baffling tremor of merriment in her voice, “what I am going to say now. Thank you very much for everything, and it’s time I went home.”

“It isn’t time,” he returned. “You’ve only just got here. You can’t possibly want to go yet.”

She sat up, the red cushion slipping down behind her. “I told you I couldn’t stay long,” she said. “And there’s no sense in talking impossibilities, is there? I couldn’t marry anybody—even if I wanted to—yet, because I’m not of age. Now I’m going.”

“Don’t go yet!” he said. Nevertheless he moved to one side, leaving the door-space open. “Plenty of girls marry at your age, and I’m pretty certain I could get your father to give his consent. He’s not an insuperable obstacle, so far as I’m concerned.”

“But, you see, I don’t want to,” said Julie. She spoke quite naturally and unaffectedly. “I’m not in love. I don’t know in the least what it feels like, and I’m not sure that I want to. I’ve got other things to think about.”

Rolfe put his cigarette between his lips. “Such as getting your household in order?” he suggested cynically. “How long do you imagine that is going to take?”

Julie stood up. Something had gone wrong between them. The atmosphere was suddenly chill and she resented it. She faced him with her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

“I don’t care how long it takes,” she told him with feverish emphasis. “My mother is dead, but I know now what she went through. And I’m going to avenge her somehow—and myself too—even if I kill someone to do it. I’m not afraid of them. They’re only brutes that sodden themselves with drink. I’ve got a clear brain, and that counts. I shall get the better of them in the end.”

“And you think you yourself will be any the better for it?” said Rolfe.

He looked down at her with a dominance that was not without compassion.

“What good is it going to do?” he questioned. “I could duck the skipper for you any day you liked. But how’s that going to help anybody? What you want is peace and happiness for yourself, and you can’t get it by fighting that crowd singlehanded. You’ll hurt yourself much more than you’ll hurt any of them.”

Her breath came quickly. Her eyes were ablaze. “I don’t care about that. That doesn’t count,” she said. “But they shan’t go on treating me like a dog. I’m going to show them—I will show them—him specially—that I won’t endure it. I’ll tame them like wild beasts in a cage. That’s what I’ll do.”

“You won’t,” said Rolfe. “It’s too dangerous a game. If you won’t listen to reason, p’raps I shall take a hand and do a little taming on my own account.”

“What do you mean?” breathed Julie.

“Never mind what I mean!” His tone was quiet but completely confident. “Just you remember I’m standing by, that’s all! And I’ll help you if I can—anyhow, save you, somehow. But don’t put your head too far into the noose if you can help it! It’s a dangerous game for a girl like you.”

“I’m not afraid,” she told him again with pride.

“Which doesn’t make it any safer,” said Rolfe. “You’re really going now? All right, I’ll come with you and see you back.”

“I can go alone quite well,” declared Julie with independence.

“No. It’s dark, and I’m coming,” said Rolfe. “Wait—and I’ll give you a hand up the steps.”

She obeyed him, though she had no great desire to do so. The brief conversation had made her impatient of restraint; but Rolfe was not a person to be ignored. She might not recognize his authority, but she could not set him entirely at naught. Nor was she altogether sorry to feel his strong grip on her arm as she stepped from the swaying boat and clambered up to the jetty.

The sea was moaning under a cloudy sky, and the wind was rising. It was a desolate night, and straight from the homely cabin of the *Circe* the world seemed to her lonely and sad. She felt more friendly towards him again when they stood together on the quay.

“Thank you very much,” she said again. “Don’t bother to come any further! I shall be quite all right.”

But he elected to accompany her, strolling by her side towards the shore in silence.

They passed the fisher-hut in which Old Columbus had dwelt. It was closed and forlorn. One of a knot of men standing under a dim lamp spoke to Rolfe as he went by.

“Heard the latest?” he said. “The old boy’s dead.”

Rolfe barely paused. Perhaps he realized that he and his companion were the objects of a good deal of staring attention. “Dead!” he repeated laconically. “Well, we can’t any of us live for ever.”

“Did he mean Old Columbus?” asked Julie.

Rolfe nodded. “I suppose that was what that Keston fellow came about this afternoon.”

“I wonder if Belinda will mind,” she said.

He made a scoffing sound. “Not seriously. He didn’t bring her up that way. I must say, she did her best for him, though.”

They turned towards Honeyball Farm. It loomed darkly on the edge of the beach. The deep thunder of the sea beyond it had an ominous sound.

“I wonder sometimes if it’ll wash right over us,” said Julie with a sudden shiver.

“It would take a tidal wave to do that,” said Rolfe.

She nodded. “But they happen, don’t they?”

“I don’t think there’s much danger of that,” he said. “It’s stood for a good many years. And there’s the harbour wall to break the seas.”

“Yes.” Julie spoke with reassurance. “I’d forgotten that. I hear the waves dashing to pieces against it in the distance on rough nights. But I can never hear it properly because I can’t get my window open.”

“What? Your bedroom window?” asked Rolfe in astonishment.

“Yes, it’s stuck. I’ve struggled ever so many times to open it, but I can’t. I’ve sometimes thought I’d smash it. But I haven’t done it yet.” She laughed a little. “You see, I’m not quite mistress of the house, at present.”

“I’ll come and open it for you,” said Rolfe promptly.

They had reached the little gate. He stretched a hand to open it, but Julie turned and faced him.

“I don’t think you’d better. There’ll be a fuss if anyone sees you.”

“Nonsense!” he said. “Stark and Peter are over the other side of the river. And old Emily will be asleep in the kitchen. I suppose you can get in?”

“Yes. I left the latch up. But—I don’t think . . .” said Julie haltingly.

“I do,” said Rolfe with decision. “No wonder you’re looking thin and miserable, if you never get any fresh air at night! That lout Peter might have done it for you, I’d have thought. But I’ll do it now. It won’t take a minute.”

She gave way. Somehow, it never seemed feasible to oppose Rolfe when his mind was made up.

With a small shrug she turned and entered the little strip of garden, and led the way to the front door.

CHAPTER IX

THE UNKNOWN FORCE

“DON’T make a noise!” said Julie.

She opened the front door without sound, and they stood in the dark hall. The lamp had not been lighted. It appeared that Emily was asleep in the kitchen quarters.

“Come inside and shut the door! I’ll get a candle out of the sitting-room,” whispered Julie.

She glided forward, feeling her way, while Rolfe softly shut the door. As he heard her returning, he struck a match. She had found the candle and he lighted it for her, and threw a grim glance around at the dingy place.

“I’ll show you the way,” murmured Julie, turning to the stairs.

He followed her with his light tread. They went up stealthily, as if they were conspirators.

Julie moved like a swift shadow. It was not an adventure that she would have chosen had the choice been hers, but its object was innocent enough, and she had always hated her pent-up, airless room.

She breathed more easily when they reached it. At least, there was small danger of encountering anyone here.

Rolfe once more closed the door behind him and took a lightning survey of his surroundings.

“Not much of a room, is it?” said Julie, setting her candle on the chest of drawers.

“I wouldn’t put a dog to sleep in a place like this,” he rejoined.

“It’ll seem very different if you can only get the window to open,” she said.

He turned to it at once. "It's been painted down," he said. "I shall have to do a bit of scraping." He felt in his pockets. "And I'm dashed if I haven't left my knife behind!" he added, looking round at her.

"I've got a knife," said Julie.

She turned to the bed and took from beneath her pillow the large black-handled table-knife that she had snatched from the skipper's table on the night of her arrival.

Rolfe watched her curiously. "D'you always keep that there?" he asked.

She smiled in a fashion that was not good to see. "Always," she returned briefly.

He asked no more, but took it from her and scraped the paint down the cracks of the window. Finally, he put it aside and exerted his full strength.

For several seconds he strove in vain, then suddenly the frame yielded a few inches. He pushed and dragged it up. It made a screeching noise that sent Julie's eyes in swift apprehension to the door. But nothing happened, and she turned back and picked up the knife and replaced it under the pillow of her bed.

"That ought to be all right," said Rolfe at length, after a good deal of working up and down. "It's a bit stiff still, but it'll get easier with use. Come and see if you can work it!"

She came and stood beside him and bent her lithe young body to the task. She succeeded with difficulty in forcing the window open and shut.

"I shall keep it open," she decided finally. "It doesn't matter if it does rain. There's nothing to spoil."

And then suddenly—she could not have said wherefore—she became aware of Rolfe very close to her, a massive, curiously pervading personality, and with a half-startled movement she drew back.

He followed her quietly into the middle of the little room. They stood face to face.

"I suppose," Rolfe said slowly, "you wouldn't consider allowing me the kiss of friendship?"

She stared at him with a quivering sense of outrage. So far as she could remember, she had received no kiss from any man. The next moment, unaccountably, she was furiously angry.

“No, of course not—of course not!” she cried out indignantly. “Go away! Please go right away!”

He wheeled to the door at once; and then, in a flash, her heart smote her. Her anger turned against herself.

“Oh, stop!” she said. “You’ve been dreadfully kind, and I’m very ungrateful. But do—please—understand! It’s only because——”

“Because there’s no one else to lend a hand,” he said. “Yes, I understand. Little girl, I understand. Just remember I’m always standing by, that’s all.”

The absolute kindness of his tone sent the quick tears to her eyes. She held out her hand to him.

He took it, held it, drew her very gently towards him. Those keen blue eyes of his looked deeply into hers.

She gave a short gasp. Almost before she knew it, she had lifted her face.

And Rolfe kissed her, where the beautiful black waves of her hair clustered above her forehead. She scarcely felt the touch of his lips, but she was strongly conscious of the tremor that ran through him in that moment, communicating itself to her, seeming to set her veins on fire.

He could have taken her into his arms in that instant, and she would not have resisted. She was utterly powerless, and she almost waited to be so taken.

But he refrained. “You’ll come and have tea with me again before long?” he asked her softly.

She nodded, wordlessly.

He released her, and she was unutterably thankful, and yet in some astounding fashion disappointed also, when he did so.

“Well, I’ll be going,” he said. “It needn’t be tea-time, you know. Just any time—the old *Circe* and I will be glad to have you.”

She turned aside, gulping a little, her eyes still smarting with the tears she had not shed. She picked up the candle and followed him from the room.

He went to the head of the stairs and looked back. “Don’t come any farther! I can find my way. Don’t forget—any time of the day or night—I’m standing by.”

She caught the gleam of those intensely blue eyes, and her heart beat oddly, convulsively. Something seemed to be drawing her to follow him. She held herself back from doing so with a conscious and desperate effort.

He turned from her. She heard his feet descending with that rhythmic lightness characteristic of him.

The cold night wind blew in from the window behind her that he had opened, and she heard the long far call of the sea.

Her pulses throbbed in answer, and still she wanted to follow him.

Then came the quiet shutting of the door below, and in the sudden draught her candle went out, and she stood in darkness.

She was trembling as she groped her way back, and as she went she heard a small noise—such as a rat might make scrambling among rafters—that seemed to come from the direction of the skipper's room at the end of the passage.

She had never entered that room since that first night when she had blindly fled thither. The memory of the glass case and its contents still filled her with a shuddering loathing. She could not bring herself to enter it now, but groped her way back to her own room and shut herself in.

Then, with her back to the door, she went over every detail of the happening of the past quarter of an hour, while her heart beat as though it were springing up and down within the prison of her tense body. Thus had he spoken, thus had he looked, while she had been completely submerged and dominated by his will. It was true that he had yielded quarter at her cry for mercy. But in the depth of her she knew that had he not yielded he might have done with her exactly as he would, and she would have surrendered without further protest. He had been generous, had contented himself with a very little. Perhaps he had not realized his power. And yet, somehow, she believed that he had, but would not avail himself of it.

That meant that he was waiting for something further. But for what? The turmoil within her prevented any coherent answer. She was afraid, yet strangely exultant. The memory of that kiss which she had hardly felt, gave her a sense almost of intoxication. That quiver within him as of something under strong restraint thrilled her anew. He had controlled himself in that moment, and in doing so he had controlled her also. Was she glad? Was she sorry? It was impossible to say. She only knew that a fire was running riot through the whole of her being, that filled her with mingled ecstasy and dismay. Her own impulses baffled her. In one instant she was immensely

relieved that he had been content with so little, and in the next it seemed as if he had possessed himself of everything that mattered.

Of one thing alone was she completely certain, and that was that in those few minutes which they had spent together in her room, a vast change had come upon her from which she could never fully free herself. Life itself was suddenly different. She viewed it from a closer standpoint, as it were, and she was dazzled by its very nearness. In time she might attain a calmer outlook, but she could not yet adjust her focus with any confidence. Rolfe had called to something within her, of the very existence of which, up till then, she had been barely conscious. And the strange part of it was that now it filled her whole horizon. And all that before had occupied her—Reuben and his brutalities—Emily and her mean and squalid attributes—Peter Prawle and his insolent familiarity—Micky and his sottishness—all these had become of no account.

It was as if some enormous unknown force had swept her on to a totally different course, and she was frightened and exhilarated in the same breath.

But later—very much later, when the fever had cooled somewhat, she told herself that no man—neither Rolfe the Dane, nor any other—should have the ordering of her life. She would hold her own, and be a slave to none. She had beauty, and she had brains. She would rule, and never suffer herself to be ruled.

She remembered Oliver Keston, and she smiled over the memory. She was beginning to realize her power.

CHAPTER X

A BUSINESS PROPOSITION

It was on that same evening a little later that Belinda, dressed in a very shiny black satin dress with short sleeves, her face a trifle paler than usual, but her lips extremely scarlet, stood behind the bar of *The Black Swan* serving drinks to the fisher-folk of Beam. She looked much more repressive than was her wont, and it was abundantly evident to her customers that on that occasion, at least, she was not “standing for any larks”. There was a sort of pinched propriety in every inch of her. In short, with the sole exception of her lips, she had gone into mourning.

The customers observed the signs, and trod warily, drinking their beer and talking together in gruff undertones. No one ventured to address her beyond what was absolutely necessary, and no one produced a smile, or even a wink of good-fellowship. The memory of Old Columbus sulkily sunning himself on the edge of his boat, was with each one of them, and if it failed to inspire any poignant regret, the sense of decorum, at least, was strong. In death he had secured a reverence which had never been his in life.

At the back of the bar hovered Joe Muster. It was usually young Micky’s business to assist Belinda in the more menial duties of washing up, but Micky was late to-night, and Joe was not loth to take his place, the puling Sophy having gone away on a visit to her sister who kept a lodging-house at the neighbouring port.

To Joe Muster, the girl in the shiny black dress was the sweetest thing he had ever seen. He thought her “line” was wonderful, and her fair blowsy hair was to him a mass of glittering gold. He saw that she had been crying, and he deeply honoured her for it. He also believed that it would do her good, though, under the circumstances, it would have been hard to say wherefore. He had a project at the back of his mind which he intended to broach to her later, which he hoped would create a considerable impression in his favour.

The absence of Sophy simplified matters considerably, as otherwise he might have felt compelled to argue the matter out with her first, and Sophy,

with all her inane ness, was something of a nagger and not always easy to convince. It would be better to have everything cut and dried before her return.

So he washed and helped her dry the glasses, biding his time.

He even forgot to reprove Micky when he at length made his appearance, slithering in from the back premises with a nervous hang-dog expression which spoke very clearly as to its owner's sense of shortcoming.

Belinda, however, had a sterner notion of duty, and turned upon the youth with some sharpness.

"Reelly, Micky, you might almost as well not come at all as show up at this time of night."

Micky murmured something unintelligible and glanced at the landlord, who merely threw him the cloth he was using with a brief, "Get on with it, then!"

Belinda's attention was diverted by the demands of two or three customers, but when these had been satisfied she turned again to Micky.

"What have you been up to?" she said. "Has the captain been leathering you, or what?"

Micky made a sign as if soliciting some sort of secrecy. She went close to him in swift curiosity.

"Well?" she said.

He pulled at her arm and drew her into a corner screened from the open bar by a frosted glass partition. His monkey-like face was full of mystery, but he seemed to experience some difficulty in finding words.

"Go on!" said Belinda. "What is it?"

Joe Muster was leaning on the counter to talk to one of his cronies, but he broke off and looked round at the two with interest.

Belinda was plainly impatient, but she was obliged to control herself, for when Micky mouthed at her in that fashion she knew that it was impossible to hasten his utterance.

It came at length with a startling distinctness that made it audible to every one of the silent loungers in the bar.

"That girl—Joolie—had Rolfe Britton up into her bedroom just now, after she'd been aboard the *Circe* with him. They come back and went

straight up together.”

“Good gracious!” said Belinda. She stared at Micky for a moment, and a very bitter look came into her face. “So that’s her game, is it?” she commented. “Well, I’m not surprised. I knew she was a deep one when I first set eyes on her.”

A sympathetic mutter went round the audience.

Joe Muster chuckled. “Hot stuff!” he remarked. “And the skipper away over the river, I suppose! Wasn’t Emily anywhere about?”

Micky shook his head, advancing a step into the open as he realized the importance of his position. “There wasn’t no one anywhere, except me,” he said. “I heard ’em come in. I were upstairs, watching. They went into her room and they shut the door, and she made a bit of a noise, but he soon got her quiet. And then they talked a bit, and then he come out and sneaked off.”

“Well, I never!” said Joe Muster. “She’s a nice little bit of work, she is.”

“What can you expect of a girl with a face like that?” burst forth Belinda. “Not respectability—or even common decency! She’s foreign, that’s what she is! I only hope the skipper’ll find her out.”

“He’ll soon know all about it, my dear,” said Joe, soothingly. “Things like that can’t be kept dark for long.”

“They shan’t be kept dark!” said Belinda with a tightening of the lips. “Here, Micky! You get going with these glasses, and look sharp about it! All right, Mr. Muster! I can manage now. Don’t you bother!”

Joe leaned towards her and spoke in an undertone. “You give me a word in private after closing-time,” he said. “I’ve got something I’d like to talk over with you.”

She gave him a rapid glance that was so business-like as to be almost sinister. “All right,” she said again, curtly. “I’ll come along to the office. I must attend to business now. There’s plenty to be done.”

She returned forthwith to her former prudish demeanour with a something of sternness added thereto which increased her unapproachability.

Micky crept about the bar like a frightened dog, taking no chances. A rebuke from Belinda was infinitely worse in his estimation than a blow from the skipper. He was by no means sure that he had done the right thing in her opinion, and the uncertainty bothered him.

Some vague intuition told him that the news he had imparted was such as would deeply vex her, but the wherefore had not yet fully dawned upon him. Only, at intervals, he was aware of being hotly resentful on her behalf, and he watched her surreptitiously to see if she were resentful on her own. There was so much about Belinda that he could never hope to understand.

Slowly the hours wore away, and closing-time came. With shuffling feet the fisher-folk in their blue jerseys went lounging through the swing-doors, their tacit homage to Old Columbus in death still maintained in their gruff, lowered voices, though not one of them had dared to say a word of commiseration to Belinda.

The landlord came out of his office and locked the door upon the last departure, and pulled a dark blind over the lighted window.

Then he turned round and looked at Micky, still drying glasses with his eyes fixed rather idiotically upon Belinda, who was mopping the counter.

“You can cut off home,” he said. “I’ll finish up in here. And don’t you be late in the morning, mind, or I’ll have something to say to you that maybe you won’t care for.”

Micky gave him a scared glance and pushed his glass away on a shelf. Then his gaze returned to Belinda.

She was polishing the shiny surface with minute care. She did not look up, and her face betrayed no change of expression whatever, but as she polished two bright drops fell from her eyes like storm-heralds from a clouded sky, leaving two shining wet circles in front of her polishing-cloth.

She rubbed them over swiftly, but in a moment, before the dismayed onlookers, there were two more, and two after that, falling faster than they could be wiped away.

Joe Muster left his tidying up of the bar and strode round to her side. “Gracious goodness, my dear, don’t take on!” he said. “We’ve all got to die some time.”

This trite piece of consolation did not have quite the desired effect. Belinda subsided on her elbows on the counter and cried into her cloth.

“It’s not the old man so much,” she sobbed. “I’ll get over him. But I didn’t think—I never thought—Rolfe—’d ever look at that girl. Why—she’s not even—full-grown yet.”

“Oh, come—come!” said Joe, patting her shoulder. “This isn’t like you—fretting yourself over a trifle like that! There! You put your head against

me till you feel better! There's none of these young chaps worth worrying about. You take my word for it! A sensible girl like you ought to know that without any telling."

Belinda accepted the proffered support with a good deal of sniffing. It had been a trying day for her.

"Of course, I don't care—reelly," she said after a moment or two. "It's only—he's too fine a man to be taken in by an artful monkey like that. I'd have thought he'd have had more sense."

"Sense!" said Joe witheringly. "It never grew under a straw thatch like his. You leave 'em to their own undoing, my dear, and come along to the office with me and have a little something to buck you up."

The suggestion was a comforting one. Belinda went with a feeling that some sort of consolation was owing to her after the adversities that she had undergone.

Joe Muster set her down in an easy-chair by the fire, and brought her a fizzing mixture in a tumbler which she received with a faint sparkle in her own eyes.

"That's reelly kind of you, Mr. Muster," she said. "You're going to join me, I hope?"

"You bet!" said Joe, proceeding to help himself from a bottle which never made its appearance in the bar. "Now, my dear, are we all set? Here's your very good health!"

Belinda made suitable response over the rim of her glass. Her tears were gone. "I'm sure I wish you the very best," she said. "That's good stuff, that is."

"You down it, and have some more!" said Joe generously. "It'll do you more good than any moralizing. And when you've done that, I've got a proposal to make as I hope you won't consider premature."

"What's that?" said Belinda, looking suddenly shrewd.

"There's plenty of time for you to think it over," said Joe. "But I thought I'd just put it to you while it was still simmering, so to speak. You know, you're very useful to us, Belinda, and I think a lot of you."

Belinda nodded, and though she smiled as well, it was a distinct indication to him to come to the point.

“You see,” said Joe, labouring a little, “now that your poor old grandpa’s gone, it’s left you free, so to speak. And I take it that all as he died possessed of—such as it were—comes to you in the ordinary course of things.”

“Well, that, of course,” said Belinda with melancholy relish. “He couldn’t do no other than that—if he’s done anything at all.”

“Quite—quite!” said Joe, pulling at the ends of his moustache, which were rather like the wisps of wheat-ears. “In that case, naturally, the cottage comes into your possession—with all that it contains.”

“Which don’t amount to much,” said Belinda.

“Quite—quite!” agreed Joe again. “But every little helps, as you might say. Now, what I have to suggest is this. Me and Sophy quite appreciate that you’ve done a good deal towards pulling the old place together, and we’d be very sorry to part with you—under any circumstances.”

“Who’s talking of parting?” said Belinda, with her well-known toss, though slightly modified for the occasion.

“No one,” said Joe. “In fact, what I have in mind is going to put it out of the question for all time. Hold on a minute, while I just see if that young devil’s cleared off!”

He went to the door and glanced up and down the passage to satisfy himself on this point. Then he returned to Belinda, sitting upright and alert, awaiting the unfolding of his plans.

She looked indeed so interested, and her face, flushed with recent tears, wore so eager an expression that Joe paused on his way back to admire her.

“You know, you always ought to wear black,” he said. “It suits you prime. Even Sophy says what a lovely skin you’ve got.”

“We weren’t discussing her,” said Belinda in a tone that sounded half-wary and half-prim.

“That’s true,” said Joe. “Let’s come to the point! She’s a poor thing, is Sophy, and I’d never be surprised if anything was to happen to her.” He stopped to help himself to another drink from the office bottle with the words. “If it did, you know who I’d turn to for comfort, don’t you?”

“Haven’t a notion,” said Belinda, flinging back her undisciplined hair defiantly.

“Oh, don’t you tell me!” said Joe. “Not after the way I’ve been trying to comfort you! I’ve had a crush on you for a long time, so don’t you go

throwing yourself away for nothing! Of course, I'm not saying anything at present. It's early days, and it wouldn't be fair to poor Sophy. But as I say, she's weakly, and you never know. Now for my big idea!"

"Yes, it's about time we came to that," rejoined Belinda somewhat scornfully. "I'm not by any means sure that Sophy's shoes would fit me. Anyhow, we won't discuss that now. Thank you, Mr. Muster! Just up to the pretty—no more! It's good stuff, but I don't want too much of it."

"You please yourself!" said Joe amiably. "That's my first word *and* my last—to you—always. Well, what I've been thinking, is this. That little cottage what's going to be yours is what those chattering magpies of trippers as come over in the summer would call a picture. They like anything that's old and poky." He spoke with a large contempt. "Now if you and I and *The Black Swan* was to get together and think things out, we might make quite a decent little tea-place of that. People'd go there for a meal as wouldn't come near a hotel, and if you had a girl to help as well as Micky, and with me to back it, I believe we might make a real slap-up success of things. Now what d'you think of that for a notion?"

Belinda considered it with lips slightly pursed. Joe's careless reference to her heritage would have been offensive from anyone else, but she was too good a business woman to allow such a matter to interfere with her prospects. The proposition held instant appeal for her, but she was too wary to let him know it.

"It would be hard work," she observed after a definite pause.

"I'd help," said Joe. "I like working with you. You're so game."

That pleased her also, though she allowed herself a brief regret that the words had not been uttered by Rolfe. What might they not have accomplished together under such circumstances?

However, the devotion of Joe Muster was quite a substantial offering, and she would not despise it. Lesser things sometimes led to greater. Who could tell?

"There's one thing," she said after another reflective silence, "which sticks out beyond everything else."

"What's that?" said Joe.

She regarded him with extreme directness. The refreshment he had given her had served, if anything, to sharpen her wits.

“This,” she said: “I can’t be boss in a tea-shop and barmaid at a pub at one and the same time.”

“Yes, but don’t you see, the hours would be different?” urged Joe. “If you had help, they wouldn’t interfere with each other.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Belinda. She spoke with great firmness. Her eyes were very bright and determined. “I mean that if I’m manageress of my own show, I’m not going to be anything less in yours. Fair’s fair, Mr. Muster, as I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“Why, of course!” said Joe, perplexed. “But I couldn’t do without you in the bar, now could I?”

“Maybe not,” conceded Belinda. “But I’ll be manageress all the same. You’ll have to explain that to Mrs. Muster. You want a manageress badly enough, and I’ve been one in all but name for a long while. We’ll discuss terms to-morrow. It’ll have to be on a profit-sharing basis, but we’ll have it cut and dried, and no nonsense.” She spoke with great decision.

“That we will,” agreed Joe, wisely refraining from argument. “It’s what I want myself. We’ll be good partners, I can see. Why, I shouldn’t wonder if we made quite a nice little pile over this between us.”

“We may,” said Belinda cautiously. “But we’ll have to think it out carefully. I’m not one for taking long odds. Still, if you’re willing to put a little money into the show, I’ll be willing to run it when the time comes. Now I’m going to bed. You’ll have to make sure that Mrs. Muster agrees to everything first.”

“You leave that to me!” said Joe. “Anyhow, don’t you fret! You’re a fine girl, Belinda, and I’m very fond of you. Good night, my dear! P’raps it’ll fall to my lot to make you happy one of these days. Who knows?” He bent and kissed her bare arm.

Belinda was on her feet. She uttered a hard little laugh. It was as well for him that he had aspired no further.

“We’ll see about that when the time comes,” she said. “There’s no sense in taking too much in a stride, and there’s plenty of other things to think about first.”

“You’re right,” said Joe, adding with extraordinary aptitude, “‘Live and let live!’ says I.”

“Amen!” said Belinda briefly, and departed with a flourish.

CHAPTER XI

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

JACK BELLAMY was driven to the station by Sybil on the following morning without any show of regret on either side.

“I shall think of you,” Sybil said, “this afternoon when I take Lord Telford to survey his latest acquisition—Brooksand Place.”

“That’s very nice of you,” said Jack. “I will endeavour to think of you at the same time, and to wish you the luck of a safe deliverance when the psychological moment arrives.”

Sybil looked supremely uninterested. “Somehow, the thought of you as a guardian angel fails to impress me,” she said. “I’m glad you’ve been down, anyway.”

“Why?” asked Jack curiously.

She replied with rather pitiless simplicity. “Because I know now exactly what you look like in a country parsonage.”

Jack was momentarily daunted. “Oh! A test, was it?” he said. “Hope I managed to secure a few good marks.”

She smiled with her eyes fixed straight ahead. “On the contrary, my dear lad, you are quite at the bottom of the class. You may tell Aunt Serena from me, that her judgment is hopelessly at fault—except as regards dancing partners.”

Jack laughed. “That’s a bigger concession than I expected. Poor old Telford will have to take some dancing lessons, apparently—unless the hornpipe will satisfy you.”

“I wonder if I could learn the hornpipe,” said Sybil.

“Don’t!” said Jack paternally. “It wouldn’t suit you. Come up to town and learn the rhumba with me! Much more fun!”

“I wonder,” said Sybil without enthusiasm.

At this point a motor-horn hooted with some asperity behind them, and Sybil, who liked the middle of the road, hooted back as she drew to one side.

A small car shot past, and the hand of the driver went up in semi-ironical salute.

“I thought so,” said Sybil.

“The medical admirer!” commented Jack. “Poor devil! He has my sympathy.”

“And why?” Sybil turned upon him with eyes that were suddenly bright.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I doubt if he can surmount the multi-coloured gold mine any better than I can, though—to be sure—one never knows. While there’s life, there’s hope.”

Sybil turned sharply, with complete recklessness, into the station yard. “And while there’s a train to catch, we won’t miss it,” she said with curt finality.

After Jack’s departure she loitered a little, smoking a cigarette and browsing at the book-stall. Eventually, she bought a paper or two and sauntered out to the car. The sun was out, and the day had a haunting fragrance as of summer flowers that had died.

Another car was drawn up behind hers, and as she emerged a figure stepped forward.

“Well?” said Oliver Keston.

She looked into his sallow, thin-lipped face and laughed. “Well?” she returned pleasantly. “So you weren’t in such a terrible hurry, after all?”

“I was—and I am,” he said. “But you may as well hold me up here as in the street. So you’ve parted with your young man!”

Sybil blew forth a leisurely puff of smoke. “He’s faded away—yes. But I’ve got an old one left—a gem of the first magnitude—distinctly more interesting than poor Jack.”

“Or poor Oliver, either?” suggested Keston, frowning upon her.

“Well, no one could describe him as poor, anyway,” she rejoined. “You’ve nothing to look savage about, my dear. I am not engaged to any of you yet.”

Oliver was standing close to her. His eyes had a threatening expression, though he faintly smiled. “When you talk like that,” he said, “I want to take

hold of you and beat you. But I suppose I should end by kissing you, you little gadfly.”

“You’d get stung on the nose if you did,” she rejoined lightly. “But kissing means nothing in these enlightened days. We do it for pastime—when we’re in the mood—and we sting for the same reason. That’s the prerogative of a gadfly, isn’t it?” She laughed in his face again carelessly, irresponsibly.

Oliver did not laugh back. His look was still ominous. “I wonder what you would say if I followed your lead,” he said. “A one-sided bargain isn’t much of a catch, is it?”

“But it never is one-sided,” said Sybil. “Men always load the dice. They think they can afford to—or, rather, they take damn’ good care that they shan’t be the losers, whatever happens. They think they weren’t meant to be, and perhaps they are right. Now—are we going our separate ways?”

Her gay eyes challenged him. There was something provocative, even captivating, in her cynicism. But Oliver stood stiffly obdurate.

“Wherever you go,” he said, “I shall follow you—eventually—and bring you back.”

Her laugh rang out. She tossed away her cigarette and turned to her car. “Follow me this afternoon,” she called mockingly, “to Brooksand Place—where you may overhear something to your disadvantage!”

He bent forward and opened the door for her. “No,” he said, and he spoke tensely into the car as she slipped into it. “I shall not be there. I shall probably travel in the opposite direction. But, whichever way we go, we shall meet again. Be sure of that!”

The whir of the self-starter was her only response. The engine caught up the refrain. She shot forward. But she waved an airy hand to him as she went. There was something elusive and quite unconquerable about her that day.

Lord Telford was to encounter it when she drove him out to the lonely, half-ruined mansion hidden among its trees on the heights behind Beam. But he had sensed it before, and his reaction to it was of a nature that Oliver would have despised.

During the week-end that he had spent at the Rectory, he had watched her with a sympathetic interest in which exasperation had no part. He

watched her still very quietly, as an experienced fisherman may watch a turbulent reach of river before casting his line.

Once, during that drive out to Brooksand, she turned towards him with a defiant questioning on her lips, but it was not uttered. For she found he was not even looking at her. His massive forehead betrayed no hint of curiosity. He was probably deep in thought regarding the property which he had recently made his own. But still, at the back of her mind, Sybil was aware of something more personal—immeasurable and, in its way, irresistible—with which she could not grapple. Where Oliver went straight to the point, this man seemed determined to ignore the fact that there was any point at issue.

And yet she knew that the expedition had not been planned merely for the pleasure of displaying to her his new possession. He had made her realize that her opinion carried weight with him. The place was more or less derelict now. He wanted to know exactly how she would like to see it restored. He had told her so in the presence of Sir Philip, who had forthwith sent her a look of supercilious congratulation that there could be no mistaking. It was obvious that Lord Telford had no intention of living the rest of his life in a state of isolated grandeur. It had not taken Jack Bellamy long to realize that.

But he did not, apparently, regard the matter as one of great urgency. He was content that Sybil should indulge her runaway mood to the utmost. For the moment he was not even attempting to pursue.

And yet she was conscious of his watchful attitude throughout the drive, resenting it the more for its very unobtrusiveness. She would have welcomed an opportunity to be rude to him, but he gave her none.

They drove through an avenue of beech-trees to the old stone mansion. Dead leaves lay in an endless carpet of copper-red all before and around them. The trees sighed a little now and then as if the burden of coming winter weighed upon them. They would be torn presently by the great gales that swept up from the coast, but they were not yet quite stripped of their finery. It needed a few more frosts to do that.

The place stood empty, grey and desolate, while a few sea-gulls wailed overhead. Sybil drew up on the mossy gravel before the massive portal and looked about her without any great enthusiasm.

“Like it?” said Lord Telford.

She made a slight grimace. “Not much.”

“All right,” he said. “We’ll pull it down.”

“I should burn it down,” said Sybil. “That’s what I often want to do with the Rectory. It’s cheaper than adapting, and would be much more fun.”

“There’s no need to be cheap,” said Lord Telford with a touch of sarcasm.

She opened the door and got out. He did the same, and they stood with the car between them, surveying the ruined grandeur in uncompromising silence.

Finally, Sybil sauntered round to the crumbling steps. “It’s rather like a mausoleum,” she said. “It can’t have been lived in for aeons.”

“Fifteen years, I believe,” said the new owner with calm precision.

“What a ghastly thought! It must be full of bats and things. Let’s go in!” She halted on the lowest step, looking back at him.

“Sure you can bear it?” said Lord Telford.

She shrugged her shoulders. “We may meet a ghost or two, who knows? I’m not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“I might be—if I met one,” he said, ascending to the front door with an enormous key in his hand.

She watched him insert it in the lock. It took some effort to turn. He bent his great bull-frame to the task, and suddenly Sybil saw something rather fine in the might of those heavy shoulders.

“You’ve got some strength,” she remarked.

The key shrieked in the lock and the door was open, but even then he had to use his weight to push it back on its rusted hinges.

“Would you like me to go first?” he said.

“By all means,” she agreed.

The pale sunshine slanted in before them. Lord Telford stepped on to the stone flooring with a massive tread. Sybil followed, half-disdainful and half-awed.

They found themselves in an immense oak-panelled entrance-hall, from which high doors hung open in various directions, giving glimpses of dim, shuttered rooms like lofty caverns of mystery.

“It’s like the Cave of the Forty Thieves,” said Sybil.

Her voice went into the void with a hollow ring.

Lord Telford said nothing, but strode across the floor of the nearest room to where some chinks of light proclaimed the existence of windows. Sybil stood still while a further struggle and the banging of iron bars told of his determination to banish the all-pervading gloom.

In a minute or so a shutter clanged back, and the daylight streamed into the apartment. Again she saw those massive shoulders outlined against the dust-dimmed sunshine and felt an unexpected thrill of admiration. It was impossible not to admire the bull-like strength of the man. There was about it something that was superb.

She entered the great room and looked out upon a vista of neglected lawns and almost obliterated flower-beds. There were two magnificent cedars at some distance that stood undaunted amid the chaos.

“Those are beautiful,” she said.

His look followed hers. “Yes. They’ve weathered the ruin all right. Like faith and hope!”

He spoke with absolute simplicity, and Sybil was oddly startled. She glanced round into his rugged face.

“I don’t see any symbol of charity,” she said.

“We bring that with us,” said Lord Telford, and abruptly he smiled at her. “At least, I hope we do. There’s charity in friendship, isn’t there?”

She did not answer. The cynical rejoinder she would have flung instantly to anyone else did not rise to her lips. She merely turned slowly from him and looked forth into the garden again.

“Yes, I expected that,” he said in his deep but not unkindly voice. “I’m not in the habit of asking for charity, you know. It doesn’t come exactly easily to me.”

Sybil spoke with an effort. “Don’t ask!” she said.

There fell a silence during which she kept her face resolutely averted. It was not often that she was embarrassed, but she had developed a strange dread of hurting this primitive, self-made man. There was that about him that appealed to the more generous side of her nature. She wanted to spare him humiliation. If age and position had ever counted with her she would have considered them then.

But Lord Telford himself put them aside. He spoke with a roughness that made her flinch a little. “Don’t tell me you’re in love with that young

nincompoop you've been flirting with for the last two days!"

That restored her quite effectually. She responded without an instant's hesitation. "I don't propose to tell you that I'm in love with anyone. Girls can exist nowadays without making fools of themselves over men."

"Ho! Can they?" said Lord Telford. "In that case—why turn me down with such promptitude? I haven't suggested that you should fall in love with me, have I?"

She turned from the window and faced him. "What are you suggesting?" she said.

He gave her a very direct look from under his thick brows. "I suppose wealth appeals to you," he said. "It does to most women—and a title and precedence, and all that sort of thing."

"To a very limited extent," she answered coolly. "Things that are easily come by very soon lose their attraction, don't you think?"

"You think they could be easily come by?" he said.

"No," answered Sybil. "I don't. Perhaps—on closer inspection—they don't appeal to me enough. Anyhow, liberty counts for more. No gilded prisons for me!"

"I see," he said, his eyes still searching her perfectly calm face. "That means you would prefer a different kind of gaoler—someone at the beginning, not at the end, of his career."

"Why must I have a gaoler at all?" asked Sybil with a faint smile. "I really hardly feel as if I deserve one."

"Maybe not," he said, his own features relaxing slightly. "Yet, I've a feeling that you won't have your cherished liberty for very long. If you're thinking of parting with it, there's just one thing I should like to say."

"Well?" said Sybil with resignation, seeing that he would not be put off.

"It's nothing very much," he said. "I'm too old a card not to know when I'm not wanted. But on the other hand I'm not specially anxious to be wanted after the fashion of a lover. I've come through all that, and I know what it's worth. Also, I've got a son—such as he is—and I don't suppose I could improve on him if I tried." His tone was an odd mixture of pride and contempt. "He's a healthy young hound, anyway, and he'll inherit my business and title—probably throw 'em both into the gutter after the way of moderns. See what I'm driving at?"

He broke off abruptly, and pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his brow.

“Well, not entirely,” said Sybil, but she spoke with more consideration than it was her wont to display. Almost in spite of herself, she felt impelled to pay this man a certain deference—possibly because he was so essentially straightforward and unequivocal in his dealings with her.

He smiled at her rather ruefully as he emerged from his polishing.

“You mean to have your pound of flesh, and who could blame you? Perhaps I might mention that you are a young woman for whom I have the very highest regard. You’re business-like and efficient, and those are qualities that I can appreciate. Well, what I’m after is this. I’d like you to know that whatever this place becomes, it’ll never be a prison. You can make of it anything you like, if you’ll take me along with it. You won’t find me exacting. I’m a lot older than you are, and I know a little about women—enough to give ’em plenty of rein and a few extras thrown in. If the right gaoler doesn’t come along, you might do worse than fill in the gap with me here. I’ll give you a good time and plenty of money, and I won’t pester you like a younger man would. Also, I’ll undertake to leave you suitably provided for when I die. I can’t say anything fairer than that.”

He stopped, and turned slightly from her as if he did not wish her to see that he was masking some emotion.

And curiously, Sybil was moved. There was something pathetic to her in the brief, not easily uttered sentences with which he had expressed the idea in his mind. But it was difficult to reply to that which he had left unspoken. She stood in some uncertainty.

He turned back to her almost immediately, and she was relieved to see a glint of humour in his eyes.

“P’raps I haven’t made myself quite clear,” he said. “I know I’m a clumsy sort of chap, but I’m straight. I’m asking you to marry me because I’m fond of you, and I’d like to have you about the place. But there’s no fool romance left in my constitution, and I’ve got the idea that you’re not the sort of girl that wants it. That’s why I couldn’t bear to see you with that young lap-dog from town hanging round you. Correct me if I’m wrong!”

Sybil found her voice, her brief embarrassment gone. She looked him full in the face. “Well, you are wrong,” she said. “But I’m glad to know that you don’t feel any worse than that about it. I should think a companion-secretary would meet your requirements without any difficulty. But, when I marry, I want—a husband. Oh no!” She laughed suddenly. “Not Jack

Bellamy! I agree with you there. Someone more exciting than that, someone who knows how to get what he wants, and who can fight his way to the front! That's the sort of husband I want." She glowed as she said it, and there was no cynicism in her declaration. Her eyes shone with an unaccustomed warmth.

Lord Telford looked at her for a second and held out his hand. "I see," he said, and again she felt the pathos of something restrained which he would not suffer to escape. "I was born too soon." His fingers closed upon hers. "I've done my fighting, and I want to settle down. Well, I must do it alone, it seems. Anyway, you'll let me congratulate you on knowing what you want, and I hope from my soul you'll get it."

"Thank you," Sybil said. "You've been very kind." She returned his grip. "I haven't treated you badly, have I? I didn't mean to."

"Of course you haven't, child!" He laughed rather harshly. "I'm not such a dog-in-the-manger as to grudge you the lucky man you care for. I only hope he's worthy of you and you'll be happy."

"Thank you," Sybil said again. "And you? Must you live alone? Can't you get on friendly terms with your son? I expect it's easier said than done," she added half apologetically. "I don't hit it off too well with my father, either. But a woman's different."

"You certainly are," said Lord Telford. "That's what made me take a fancy to you. No, I'm not worrying about my son. He'll turn up one day. I haven't seen him for over a year. He's an independent sort of cuss, and swore he'd make his own living without any help from me. Not specially dutiful, eh?"

"I should think," said Sybil, smiling at him, "that your main trouble is that you are exactly alike. You'd have done the same. You know you would."

He smiled somewhat grimly in return. "Ah, well! P'raps we none of us know ourselves properly. Come along and see the rest of the house! If you won't live in it with me, you can at least show me how to make it comfortable."

"Oh yes, I'll do that," said Sybil with alacrity. "I shall enjoy doing that."

"And you'll do it well," he said. "I shall always feel that there's something of you about it that'll make it worth living in."

She turned away from him, for though he spoke lightly, there was something in his words that pierced her. “I shouldn’t value it on that account,” she said, as she walked over the oak flooring towards the door. “I’m going to regard it from your son’s point of view—and perhaps your grandchildren’s.”

“Ah, that is an inspiration!” he agreed with a laugh. “We must provide for posterity, whatever happens.”

“In the vain hope that they may rise up and call us blessed!” Sybil laughed back.

CHAPTER XII

POISON

IT was not until nearly a week had passed that the story of Julie's indiscretion reached the skipper.

Micky was devious in all his ways, and, in spite of direct orders from Belinda, it took him some time to convey with sundry noddings and whisperings in a corner of the kitchen to Emily any idea of the enormity of the happening on the previous Sunday evening. By that time the affair had assumed preposterous proportions in his own mind, and without actual intention he succeeded in inducing the by no means reluctant Emily to leap to the conclusion that Rolfe's visit had extended throughout the night—Rolfe having effected his exit the following morning through the now wide-open window by climbing down a pipe.

Emily was scandalized, though, as she averred, by no means surprised, and Micky was too delighted by the impression he had made to bother about the correction of any inaccuracies that had crept into his tale. He hopped about like a monkey, and spilt his porridge over the fender, for which she smartly boxed his ears. But even that did not damp his ardour, for he was used to much harder blows, and Emily's wrath was too frequent to be of much account.

Emily, on her part, now provided with a valuable weapon of offence, decided to proceed with caution in order to obtain the most far-reaching results. A state of armed neutrality now existed between herself and Julie. They went their separate ways, and there was no giving or receiving of orders on either side. Various duties had somehow devolved upon Julie, and she performed them without any prompting. Of her own accord she relieved Emily of the household shopping, and the old woman found it hard to discover any cause for complaint in the way she carried it out. She had a good head for figures, and she accounted for every penny in a fashion that stirred Emily's secret admiration, for mental arithmetic was not her own strong point. But her jealous hatred of the girl did not diminish on that

account. She resented the obvious superiority which refused to bow to her authority, and she lived for the day when she might once more grip those slender wrists in her vicious talons while the skipper should mete out such punishment as would place Julie under her heel for all time.

Micky's revelation was exactly what she had been wanting. For Reuben had apparently taken it for granted that his correction had had the desired effect, and he took not the faintest interest in Julie's actions now that she no longer crossed his path. Possibly Rolfe's drastic warning also lingered in his mind, restraining him from any act of direct aggression. The ferry service provided him with a good excuse for spending a considerable amount of time on the other side of the river, and his condition when he finally arrived at his home in the evening was usually such as to make it advisable to leave him entirely to himself. Julie had her meals in a corner of the kitchen, apart from the Prawles and Micky. She never entered the captain's sitting-room when he was there, and it had begun almost to seem as if he had forgotten her very existence.

But the crafty Emily had no intention of allowing him to forget. She bided her time. Her fear of Julie did not diminish with the passing days, and her dislike throve upon it. She dared not bully her, though she yearned to do so. But now she had the means to her hand, and Julie would very soon be at her mercy.

The bare thought of it put her into such a good temper that Peter at length noticed it and enquired the cause. He had come in on a dark afternoon before starting off in the boat with Reuben, and asked for a cup of tea, and she had actually set about preparing it for him without demur.

"You seem uncommon pleased with yourself to-day," he remarked. "What's come to you? Found a fortune somewheres?"

She gave him a crooked look and smiled. "I know what I know, Peter Prawle," was her answer. "And them as don't ask no questions won't have no stories told 'em."

"Oh, keep your own counsel!" rejoined Peter. "It's all one to me. Where's the girl?"

Julie, who had been out shopping, came in with her basket at that moment. She heard the query and gave Peter a withering glance which he met with an impudent grin.

"Shan't have time to feed the chickens," he observed. "I'm off with the captain."

“I’ll see to them,” she said briefly, and placing basket and purse on the table turned to the stove on which stood a bucket of hot mixture awaiting distribution in the run.

The two Prawles stood and watched her as she picked it up, entirely ignoring their existence, opened a drawer for a wooden spoon, and went straight out again into the falling dusk.

“A nice bit of goods, that,” observed Peter. “Got the airs of a duchess!”

Emily uttered a sound so supremely scornful that it nearly choked her. “A nice bit of goods indeed!” she agreed. “I’ve got her measure all right, and the skipper’ll have it too before he’s much older—a cunning little whippersnapper! I’ve found her out, Peter Prawle. She’s deep, she is, but not too deep for old Emily. There’ll be some doings here before long, you’ll see. And she’ll be a’crawling on the floor like a cockroach afore she’s much older. Airs and graces indeed! You won’t see much more of them from now on.”

“What’s she been up to?” Peter’s curiosity was aroused. He shared his wife’s antipathy, but only to a minor degree, for, being masculine, this was to a certain extent modified by the fact of Julie’s undoubted beauty. It was of too vivid a nature to fail to impress the least sensitive of men. “She can’t have gone wrong yet,” he surmised, in the tone of one debating the possibility of curdled milk.

Emily’s shrill screech of laughter almost startled him, so unusual was the sound. “Wrong, you great dunderhead! Was she ever right, I wonder?” was her cackling response. “I tell you she’s deep. What d’you think that bedroom window of hers, as has been shut up all these years, was opened for? And who d’you think opened it? Not you and not me, and not her either—nor yet that young varmint Micky! No, that was opened by Rolfe Britton if you want to know—as long ago as last Sunday—and he’s climbed up by the old water-butt and pipe every night since. Oh, there’ve been fine goings on in this house, I can tell you. And that girl’s the talk of the place by now. But just you wait till the skipper hears of it, that’s all! If he don’t give her the hiding of her life—well, it’s time respectable folks like you and me took ourselves off.”

She paused for breath, and Peter took the opportunity to let forth a long-drawn-out: “Well—I’m—jiggered!”

“And well you may be!” said Emily. “If it had been that Belinda now, I wouldn’t have been surprised. But Jooly—that little baggage—and holding

her head so high all the time! The skipper's going to hear of this to-night. Who'll tell him—you or I?"

"Reckon you'd better," said Peter. "He'd tip me overboard like as not if I was to say anything."

"Not he!" said Emily. "He'd not waste his time over the likes of you. Where is he now? In the observatory? You come along with me and we'll break it to him between us."

"No, but wait!" said Peter, picking up the tea-pot. "Where'd you get the tale from, woman? 'Spose he doesn't believe you?"

Emily's witch-like laughter ridiculed the question before it was well uttered. "O' course he'll believe it! It's true, I tell you. It was Micky as found out, and he's too big a fool to make up. It's true as ever I stand here. And if you're afraid to tell the skipper—you can leave it to me. I'll go and tell 'im now, you poor chicken-livered numskull!"

Peter poured out his tea, turning a deaf ear to this compliment. It was wiser not to take Emily too seriously in such moments as these. She generally simmered down if left alone.

But on this occasion she failed to respond to this philosophic treatment. Peter's passive refusal to be drawn into the matter savoured of scepticism, and it exasperated her into indignant action.

With a very evil look out of her ill-matching eyes; she turned to the door; and while Peter drank his tea and Julie fed the chickens, Emily's slipshod feet travelled fatefully along the dark passage that led to the observatory on their errand of malice.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAPTURE

THE skipper was seated in his dilapidated basket-chair with his shoulders against the worn upholstery which oozed out behind him in an uneven lump of dust-laden horsehair and flock. He was not in a pleasant mood when Emily's punctilious knock sounded on the door, having arrived at that stage when one whose sole enjoyment in life lies in drink reaches the point where the fever of desire has not yet been overcome by the torpor of satisfaction. He was still several drinks away from that halcyon state, and in a mood when even a minor irritation might induce a state of inflammation bordering upon insanity. Even the knock at the door stung him to a mild form of fury.

"Come in! What the devil d'you want?" was his truculent response.

Emily came in, slopping across the floor in her ancient slippers in a fashion that annoyed him still further.

He turned in his chair with a movement of savage impatience. "Oh, it's you! What is it? 'Tisn't time to start yet. Why can't you leave me alone?"

"I'd like a word with you, if you please, captain," said Emily, with sour demureness.

He stared at her from under lowering brows. "What the mischief's the matter now? Prawle gone and drowned himself, or what?"

"Prawle's quite all right, thank you, captain," said Emily. "It's something quite different I've come to talk about. You said as I was to report to you if everything wasn't as it should be with regard to Miss Jooly. Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you that we've been living in a fool's paradise, and things are not by no means what they should be—in so far as she's concerned. You're a-nursing a viper in your bosom, captain, and that's the truth."

She shot out her information with grim relish and then stood—her bare skinny arms folded on her bosom—awaiting results.

The skipper continued to scowl at her with his red-lidded eyes, unblinking, extremely unsympathetic. But she defied his silent scrutiny for so long that at length he was impelled to speak.

“Now what the hell are you driving at? The girl been saucing you, or what? You ought to be able to hold your own—a woman of your age!” He flung the last words like a deliberate insult.

Emily did not flinch. Her crooked eyes glared a little—like the eyes of a crouching animal—that was all. “It’s nothing to do with me, sir,” she said grimly, “if you’re willing for your daughter to go to the bad without let or hindrance. It’s not my responsibility to see that she spends her nights by herself—as I now happen to know as she doesn’t. She may be the talk of the place and have every finger pointed at her for shame—but it’s not for me to interfere. All I have to say is that I never have lived in a house of bad repute before, and it’s a bit hard—at my age”—she uttered the words with righteous defiance—“to have to begin. She’s your daughter—not mine, I’m glad to say. If she was mine, I’d just flay her! That’s what I’d do!”

“Would you?” said Reuben with sarcasm. “Well, there’s none so chaste as them who’ve never had the chance to be anything else. Now, just you tell me, plain and simple, what you’re driving at, and I’ll decide as to the flaying—or otherwise—of my own daughter.”

Emily’s skeleton fingers began to writhe about her skinny elbows. She was not a pleasant sight to look upon in the failing light of the winter day.

“Well, since you ask,” she said sourly, “I’ll tell you. That girl of yours is carrying on with Rolfe Britton. He got her bedroom-window open for her, and he’s been climbing in and out like a cat every night since. It’s nothing to do with me, and her virtue must have gone long ago. But it’s right that you should know it—as I suppose everyone else does by this time. So, there you are, captain! You’ve asked, and I’ve told you.”

She ended in a silence so explosive that any woman less absorbed by sheer malignancy might with reason have fled appalled. But Emily stood her ground. The skipper’s wrath was but a very secondary consideration to her. She was obsessed by the thought of Julie and her approaching punishment, and her narrow brain could not concentrate upon anything else. The lust of cruelty shone in her crossed eyes, and she watched the skipper craftily to see it awaken in his.

In that respect she was not disappointed. Reuben’s eyes gleamed more and more red as he stared before him, and his lips worked over his tobacco-

stained teeth for a few seconds before, with a deliberation which made it all the more awful, he uttered a long-drawn-out oath which caused even the hardened Emily to shiver.

Then he turned upon her with a spring that made her jump. “What the devil d’you mean by bringing me old woman’s gossip like this? Who’s to say it’s true? Where’d you hear it?”

Emily retreated a step. If he had risen from his chair she would have made good her escape. But, since he remained seated, she considered that a start in case of emergency was all that was needed.

“It was Micky as told me,” she said. “He heard it in the bar of *The Black Swan*. And it’s quite true about the window being open. I seen that myself. And she certainly couldn’t have done that. That I’ll vouch for. It’d take a young, sturdy man——”

“Shut up!” interjected the skipper. “So Micky heard it, did he? And they’re all jawing about it at *The Black Swan*! I’ll learn ’em to jaw about my affairs!”

“It’s no use complaining when it’s true,” said Emily sulkily. “People’ll talk wherever they are. It’s those as gives ’em the stuff to talk about as ought to be punished.”

“You shut up!” he said again with more force. “I’ll deal with this in my own way and be damned to you. If it’s true, I’ll give that girl something worse than she’s ever dreamed of. And if it’s not true, I’ll thrash that young cur Micky so’s he can’t crawl. Whichever of ’em gets it, you’ll have to mend their damaged skins for ’em, so that’ll be your share.”

Emily’s sulkiness lifted somewhat. “I don’t think Micky’s the one this time,” she said.

“It don’t matter what you think,” retorted the skipper. “You get out! Tell the mate I want him!”

Emily retired. She was very angry, yet elated at the same time. Vengeance was undoubtedly on its way.

She went back to the kitchen and curtly informed Peter of the captain’s order.

“What’s in the wind?” demanded Peter.

But she waved him away with a furious urgency. “Never you mind! Do as you’re bid! He’s in no mood for trifling.”

Peter waited for no more. He knew those moods.

He went, and Emily set about kindling the lamp and sorting the purchases which Julie had left on the table, creeping across now and then to listen intently at the door that led into the passage.

For some minutes she could hear nothing; then there came the slamming of the observatory door and the sound of Peter's feet returning.

He re-entered the kitchen and looked at her with a simulated awe that was not quite as comic as he intended.

"Well, you've roused the devil all right this time," he commented. "I'm to take the ferry alone. And mind—when the girl comes in, you're to get her up to the skipper's bedroom on some excuse or other and lock her in. She won't climb out of that in a hurry. She'll go through the roof of the observatory if she does."

"The skipper's bedroom!" cried Emily. "Why, what's the good of telling me to do that? She won't go near it—not for anything."

"Captain's orders!" said Peter laconically. "And I must be going."

He turned to the back door, but Emily was before him.

"Oh no, you don't!" she declared, lifting her sallow face with all its countless wrinkles set in grim resistance. "You'll stop and help me—ferry or no ferry. Here!" She snatched up an old piece of sacking that lay across a chair. "She'll be in any minute. You throw this over her head and I'll hold her heels! We'll carry her up between us."

"Hold on! It's not my job," began Peter, but she silenced him with a furious stab in the ribs with her elbow.

"She's coming now!" she hissed. "There goes the run door! You be ready, Prawle, or I'll have your life! Quick—quick! Here she is! Pull it tight—so's she can't squeal!"

The breathless words were hardly uttered before the door against which she stood was pushed open by the bucket which Julie carried, and the girl herself appeared, pale and tired, on the threshold.

The next instant the incredible had happened to her. The rough cloth—still damp from mopping the kitchen-floor—was flung over her head and shoulders, wrapping her round, smothering all outcry, while Peter's unerring sailor's grip pinioned her arms, and Emily's merciless fingers clipped her ankles like a steel trap.

So sudden was the assault and so stifling the folds of the sacking that all chance of resistance was gone before she could think of it. The bucket clattered on the floor, and two broken eggs spilt themselves on the stones, as she was whirled forward powerless and horrified in the clutch of her captors.

“She shall pay for them eggs,” said Emily viciously. “Now, Prawle, we’d better tie her up proper before she comes to her senses. She’ll fight like a pickpocket when she does.”

There was a length of clothes-line on the dresser. Peter reached for it, and they proceeded to bind it round and round Julie’s helpless form from the shoulders downwards, securing the sacking in its coils.

“That’ll defeat her all right,” chuckled Peter. “Now then, my dearie, up you go to the chamber of horrors, and the skipper can deal with you just when and how he likes.”

Julie heard the words, but she barely understood them. A terrible singing was in her ears. She was very near to suffocation, and her heart felt swollen to so enormous a size that its beating sounded in her ears like the beating of a drum.

Luckily for her, Emily heard it also, and plucked at the smothering folds, partially releasing her from their compression.

“You damn’ fool!” she said to her husband. “You don’t want to kill her outright, do you? Leave that for the skipper to do! Now—just you carry her upstairs, and I’ll see to the rest!”

“Yes, I must get along to the ferry,” said Peter; but he obeyed her behest.

A few seconds later, Julie was lying, trussed and helpless, on the captain’s bed, her face still enveloped in the sacking, with old Emily left alone with her for guardian.

“And I’m not a-going to stay,” said Emily. “Only just to make you comfortable, my pretty. You won’t be again for a very long while to come, for it’ll be the rope-end for you this time, unless I’m very much mistook. Now I’m a-going to pull out a corner of this sacking so’s you’ll be able to see out. I shouldn’t squall if I was you, because the window’s shut and the waves are making too much noise for even Rolfe to hear. That’s it—that’s it!” She dragged a muffling portion of the cloth free from the cords with the words and turned it back so that Julie’s deathly face was visible once more. “Now you can get your breath while I light a candle, and you’ll be able to see the poor old head as you’re so fond of.”

She stood up chuckling and groped in the twilight till she found candle and matches, and, having kindled a light, placed it immediately beside the glass shade with its gruesome trophy on the chest of drawers.

Julie's eyes gave one quivering glance and closed. She spoke in a hoarse whisper. "What's it for? I've done nothing. Are you all mad?"

"Oh, of course!" gibed Emily, "we're all mad—except you—poor innocent lamb! But you wait—you wait till the skipper's done with you! Maybe you'll be a bit crazy yourself by that time. But, as I tell you, you can make as much noise as ever you like, for nobody's going to hear."

Julie's eyes opened again and looked straight into Emily's malignant face. They held horror, but they also held something else—a nameless something from which, instinctively, the old woman drew back. There was in Julie an unknown quantity which always made Emily feel at a disadvantage when they were alone.

It challenged her now, and she turned from it like a skulking animal, discomfited.

"All right! You wait—you wait!" was all she found to say, and she repeated the words with all the fiendish malevolence of which she was capable.

But she did not wait herself any longer. Somehow that dumb gaze made her victory seem hollow and scarcely worth having.

She went out of the room mumbling darkly to herself, and locked the door.

CHAPTER XIV

ESCAPE

JULIE was alone. The fact came home to her with a feeling of intense relief. Her nerves had been nearer to breaking-point than she knew. She lay, breathing quickly, her eyes resolutely avoiding the grisly object on the chest of drawers beside the candle, while gradually the power to think and consider the situation returned to her.

She was in a trap. It was not difficult to realize that. Some evil charge had been trumped up against her, and it was quite possible that she might have an outrageous punishment inflicted upon her without even learning what it was. She was very frightened after the brutal treatment she had already received; but she made a strong effort to collect her wits, recognizing that she had only herself to depend upon for escape.

After a few seconds of absolute stillness she mustered sufficient strength to begin to negotiate her bonds. The cord had been wound very roughly around her, Peter evidently entertaining but a poor opinion of feminine ingenuity. After all, his object had been merely to get her up to the captain's room with the least possible delay, and that purpose having been served it did not matter from his point of view whether her bonds became loosened or not. It needed but a very little steady striving to convince her that in time she could manage to free herself.

The dragging up of the sack by Emily had freed her shoulders to a certain extent, and her limbs, young and supple as they were, strained hither and thither, gradually increasing that freedom. But the task was not an easy one, and even after many minutes she was still a prisoner and nearing exhaustion.

The awful fear of the possible fate in store for her, however, spurred her on. She dared not stop to rest. Very slowly, but with persistence, she worked on, dragging hither and thither, until she had succeeded in forcing the coils downwards almost to her elbows. At this point she found that she could sit

up, and a moment or two later she was on her feet, still fighting her bonds inch by inch till every muscle ached with the prolonged effort.

Peter had knotted the rope in a sailorly fashion behind her ankles, but she had no fear of being unable to deal with that when once her arms were free. With a sort of desperate patience she worked on, her wrists chafed almost to rawness, her strength waning yet continually spurred on by the frantic need for haste.

Eventually her perseverance was rewarded, and one elbow was freed. She dragged her arm out with a gasp, and for a moment she felt so weak that she sank upon the bed. But the next she was up again, literally fighting all that remained, as though she had been in the grip of a serpent. It was curious that when her object was practically achieved she should feel almost too faint to attain it. Panting, even sobbing, she tore the loosened cords from her, but when she came to her ankles she found that the sailor's ingenuity had exceeded her expectations. Peter had done his job more thoroughly than she had deemed possible in so short a time. He had knotted the cord behind her knees as well as her ankles, and the freeing of the rest of her body made no difference whatever to her legs, save that the loose coils hung down and hampered her.

Something like despair entered into her soul when she realized this. She sat upon the bed, trembling and sweating like a terrified animal. It seemed impossible to untie those cruel knots which she could not even see. A dark mist began to swim before her eyes. She clutched at the bed-rail to steady herself. If Reuben should come up and find her thus!

Minutes began to slip away. She felt dazed, incapable of further effort. Then, suddenly, from the lower part of the house she heard a wild yelling that sent the blood with a rush to her heart. Micky's voice beyond a doubt—inarticulate, agonized, shrieking for mercy!

For a second or two she sat spell-bound, then, as the dreadful sounds, continued, she sprang back to activity like a hunted creature. Wildly she tore at the invisible knots, unheeding the pain, unreasoning, distraught. And by some miracle her frantic struggles met with success. Fumbling and desperate, her fingers worked for deliverance—those ghastly screams still ringing through and through her brain, goading her on.

Somehow the tension was loosened, how she never knew. She found an end of cord, and now twisting, now untying, she released herself at last.

The noise below was sickening. It made her think of some poor beast in the extremity of torture. But she knew—at the heart of her she knew—that it was Micky and no other; Micky being mercilessly thrashed, probably with the knotted rope-end with which she herself was threatened.

She was free, but she had no thought of the door. That, she knew, was locked. The window was her only chance, though she realized that below it was the glass roof of the observatory.

Her knees were doubling under her, but she forced them into action. She rushed across the room and flung up the squeaking sash. Instantly the roar of the sea filled the room. The candle flickered and went out.

It was almost dark, but dimly she discerned the jetty and its few and feeble lights. And at the end of it she saw a gleam that rose and fell, and rose again—the lamp at the masthead of the *Circe*.

She gave a short gasp, and in a moment she was on the window-sill. There must be a ledge somewhere beneath, and if she felt her way carefully she ought to be able to avoid the glass. Whatever the risk she must take it. She could not stay in this horrible place for a single instant longer. She was as one pursued by devils.

Half in and half out, another fearful cry reached her, fainter because of the sound of the sea, yet in a fashion more terrible than any that had gone before. It drove her to the last pitch of desperation. She swung her feet out into space, then, groping downwards with her hands, she found a gnarled stem of ivy and gripped it.

There was no turning back now. She clutched into the crackling leaves and slipped from the ledge. Her heart was in her mouth. She expected every instant to be precipitated bodily on to the glass of the observatory. But the ivy held, as it had held for many years. Her slipping, scrambling feet came upon a length of guttering surrounding the observatory, and that held also. Still clinging to the ivy, all wet with rain and flying spray and blackened with the soot of many ages, she slithered sideways and downwards, escaping the glass by inches.

It was like going down into an abyss. It seemed that the descent must end in destruction. And when it did not—when her feet—straining and breaking through every hold, crunched suddenly upon the shingle and sank deep into it, she could scarcely believe that the danger was past. She fell down in a heap on the wet stones and sobbed in mingled terror and relief.

But even there she dared not pause for more than a few seconds—just long enough to get breath and strength for further effort. For though the surging of the sea at high tide only fifty yards below her drowned all other sounds, the horror behind her remained, urging her on.

She uncovered her face and, gazing outwards, she saw again the masthead light of the *Circe* riding at her moorings at the end of the jetty. The impulse born of desperation seemed literally to lift her up. It was raining heavily as she leaped to that last effort of hers, and pounded through the loose shingle to the jetty-steps. The wind swooped down upon her as she gained the wall, in a sudden gust, blowing hard off-shore. Had it been against her, her strength must have failed, but as it was it lent her wings in that last frantic flight.

There was no one about on that wild night. She ran over the slippery stones, scarcely feeling them under her feet.

And now the sea was dashing in thunderous breakers on both sides of her. She was aware of the fierce tumult, but she looked neither to right nor left.

Straight through the roaring turmoil she ran, straight towards the end of the jetty. The lamps flashed past her. She seemed to be rushing into a great darkness, but it was escape.

And then she had come to the end, where the *Circe* swung and creaked on her restraining rope.

The masthead lantern gleamed again, and below there shone another light up through the glass of the cabin.

She needed no more than that. Almost by instinct she found the iron ladder that led downwards close to the side of the boat. The *Circe* heaved towards her as she went over the edge of the jetty, and she had a glimpse of her fenders all wet from the surging water. Then, somehow, she grasped the edge of the boat, and again somehow—she never knew quite how—she flung herself over and went hurtling downwards on to the deck. She fell again in a heap, and as she fell she uttered a shrill, desperate cry—a cry for help which burst from her very soul. And with it all the agony that she had undergone seemed to culminate in a monstrous black cloud that closed in upon her, blotting out even the racing water and the driving, soaking rain.

She lay as she had fallen—a piteous, huddled thing, that Rolfe Britton, striding up from his cabin a moment later, found, inert and senseless, at his feet.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE HAVEN

THERE was a drumming in Julie's ears that made her wonder if she were at the bottom of the sea. It frightened her, but in a way it reassured her also; for she knew that Reuben Stark could not follow her here. So far as he was concerned, she was safe.

She began to remember, at first vaguely, the awful struggle she had had to achieve that safety. It was like a recurring nightmare, slowly forcing itself upon her. She did not want to return to it, but that insistent drumming would not let her rest. Little by little it pulled her back to consciousness. She opened her eyes and lay, dazed and giddy, staring out before her.

It took her some minutes to realize where she was. The light of an oil-lamp fixed her gaze, and by degrees, as understanding returned to her, she grasped the fact that she was in a bunk and closely wrapped in a grey blanket. Then the recollection of all that had happened came upon her, and she knew that she was on board the *Circe*.

The drumming was the sound of the engine, and with it she heard the swishing of water and felt the heave of the sea beneath her—the throb of the speeding boat. The *Circe* was moving quickly; there could be no doubt of that. She was churning her way at high pressure through the dashing waves, and Rolfe Britton was guiding her to an unknown destination.

How long it took her to discover this she did not know, but she must have lain for nearly half an hour thereafter, feeling too weak to move, lazily wondering as to what the future had in store, and sometimes, when the force of the sea seemed to lift and hurl the creaking boat into ungauged depths, quaking a little in nervous dread.

But she had gone through too much to be actively afraid. Anything was preferable to lying bound in the captain's bedroom at Honeyball Farm, awaiting chastisement. She had followed the only course which had seemed possible in her extremity, and now she was too spent to do anything but submit to the inevitable in complete inertia.

The sudden cessation of the engine and the slackening of the *Circe's* speed roused her somewhat; but even then she made no attempt to move. She was like a piece of driftwood on the water that washed past their bows, powerless and almost as insensate. The last ounce of her strength had been expended in that wild dash for freedom.

She was still lying so, conscious, but in a curious maze of weakness, when there came the grating sound of a sliding door somewhere near her, and in another moment or two Rolfe was by her side.

He stooped over her. She saw the light shining on his hair.

The boat was pitching much less, and the sound of the sea had died down.

Julie lay and stared at him, making no movement.

He spoke to her—a kind of soft urge in his voice, as though he were addressing a child.

“Poor little thing! You’re awake, are you? How d’you feel?”

She tried to speak, but her voice would not come. Her lips were quivering and very cold.

“Wait!” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute! You just lie still!”

He disappeared from her view, and she knew that he went into the galley. But everything was swaying before her. She felt chill and paralysed.

There followed a pause that felt strangely void—as if time itself were suspended.

Then he was back again at her side with a mug in his hand containing something that steamed.

“You drink this!” he said, and, bending, raised her before she could protest. “No, it’s not too hot. Just drink it down! It’s milk, and it’ll warm you.”

She tasted it in response to his urgency, and was aware of something in her mouth like liquid fire, but she swallowed it without demur, and was thankful for the faint glow that ran through her body with the draught.

“Go on!” said Rolfe. “Finish it!”

She looked at him hazily. “What—is it?” she began to ask.

But he pressed the rim of the mug to her lips and checked all questioning. She drank the whole of its contents in response to his compulsion.

Then he laid her back and pulled the blanket up to her chin. “Don’t talk any more! Just go to sleep!” he said. “You’re quite safe, and there’s nothing to worry about.”

She obeyed him, lacking the strength to do anything else. The glow spread through her, overwhelming every other sensation, till thought itself seemed to recede into a distance so remote as to be beyond her reach. It did not trouble her. Her overwrought mind accepted the respite with relief. A soft and comforting oblivion stole over her like a lightly thrown veil. Rolfe, the swaying boat, the flopping water, all faded from her consciousness. She sank into a deep and dreamless sleep that was almost like a trance. And for many hours she knew nothing whatever of her surroundings or of aught that happened to her.

When she awoke at last, it was to see the dancing gleam of fitful sunshine reflected from sparkling water upon the low white-painted ceiling of the cabin. She came to her full senses rather suddenly with an aching head and a feeling of nausea that was almost insupportable. That dancing gleam both intrigued and frustrated her. She watched it for a space and then closed her eyes against it, too giddy to look any longer.

She was still wrapped in the blanket, and a rug had been laid over her as well. But as she stirred uneasily in the bunk, she found that her limbs were unusually free, and discovered that all but her under-clothing had been taken away. She realized that she must have been soaked nearly to the skin during her adventure of the night before, but the discovery that her wet things had been removed while she slept was a disconcerting one. She felt hot and desperately uncomfortable. Also, her feeling of *malaise* was growing. The boat was rising and falling to the swell of the tide. She had a growing suspicion that she could not lie there much longer.

But before this could develop into action, a hand touched her, and she opened her eyes and saw Rolfe. He was in his blue jersey, looking very seaman-like. His keen eyes smiled encouragement upon her. He seemed to breathe out vitality.

“All right?” he questioned cheerily, and then he saw her extremity, and in a moment his expression changed. “Oh, poor kid! I’ll help you,” he said, and lifted her bodily from the bunk.

He made swift provision for the paroxysm that followed, supporting her through it as though she had been a child, and attending to her needs with all a woman's consideration and tenderness.

Julie in fact forgot for a space to maintain any sort of reserve, so deep was her distress, and when it subsided at last she was too weak to refuse his ministrations. It was no time for standing upon ceremony. She could only yield herself to his care and suffer him to help her in his own way.

He was exceedingly practical and reassuring. There had been quite a choppy sea during the night, he told her, and even now, with the tide on the turn, there was a decided swell. Anyone not used to the water was bound to feel it. She would be all right in an hour or two. The wind was going down and it would soon be quite calm. She was not to worry herself about anything. He was looking after her now.

She found his assurances comforting, though she was feeling too ill to reply to them. And when at length he returned her to the bunk she lay with closed eyes not daring to move and feebly wondering if she would ever have the strength to take command of her own actions again.

Throughout that day she was completely incapacitated, unable to stir, entirely dependent upon his care. The sea grew gradually calmer as he had predicted, but the terrible lassitude following upon exhaustion and sickness kept her helpless. Her head ached violently, and she could neither eat nor drink, except for an occasional spoonful of water which Rolfe solicitously inserted from time to time between her parched lips.

He also bathed her face and hands, and muttered something very deep and unintelligible when he saw the chafed bruises on her wrists. She did not attempt to explain them. She scarcely uttered a word all through the day.

Slowly it crept away, and by degrees the dreadful sense of nausea began to subside, but her head still ached so that she could scarcely bear to move it on the pillow. The bitter days at Honeyball Farm had taken their toll of her, and her vitality seemed gone. She slept very little; sometimes she wept, but she tried to keep that secret because she had a vague fear as to the effect that her tears might have upon Rolfe. Though he was so utterly gentle with her, she was a little afraid of him, and at the back of her numbed mind there lurked a very great though shadowy dread regarding the result of her action in taking refuge with him. At the time it had seemed the only feasible thing to do, but now, whenever her thoughts turned that way, she was frightened. It had been a wild leap in the dark, and something told her that it had been a very final one, cutting her off from all that had gone before.

Whenever she saw the sunburnt face with its free pirate eyes bent above her, she was conscious of a shrinking sense of doubt which his absolute gentleness and consideration could not remove. With the coming of evening she was restlessly aware of their aloneness, and of the fact that he had done more for her in her physical necessity than anyone had done since she had been an infant.

As night approached and he lighted the lamps, the feeling intensified until it was almost intolerable. She had a child's longing to run away and hide. Yet she could only lie there helpless in his bunk and suffer him to wait upon her.

He approached her presently with a cup of tea and a biscuit. She refused the latter with a shudder, but he stood over her with the tea like a kindly but determined nurse.

"I want you to have this," he said. "It's time you had something, or you won't sleep."

"It'll make me sick," she pleaded. "And I don't really want to sleep."

"Oh yes, you do," he said firmly. "It won't make you sick just to drink this, and when you wake up you'll be hungry."

She smiled wanly at the idea, but his persistence carried the day. She drank the tea and sank back, feeling comforted.

"I told you so," said Rolfe. "Now shut your eyes and stop thinking, and you'll be all right."

"I've got to think," said Julie. The tea had revived her, and her perplexities were beginning to crowd in upon her again. "I must be getting up. I can't go on like this."

"You're not getting up to-night," Rolfe told her very firmly. "You won't have your clothes before morning—and not then if you're not fit."

That renewed her embarrassment. She drew her coverings more closely about her, and lay for a space in silence.

Rolfe busied himself with various jobs about the cabin, and presently his soft, melodious whistle reached her. Almost involuntarily she turned on her side to listen.

There was no other sound but the lopping of the water against the boat. They seemed to be at anchor in a great space that contained no other craft but the *Circe*.

It was a strange feeling, that complete isolation, with only those liquid notes of an old waltz refrain that were like the voice of a blackbird trilling in the dusk.

She had tried to brace herself to discuss the situation, but that music stopped her, binding her as by a spell. She could not break in upon it. It was too beautiful a thing to shatter. She could only lie and listen with a curious rapture that was almost pain at her heart. She sank into sleep at last with the haunting notes so running in her brain that her lips were actually forming the words: "And love will find a way."

Later—very much later—in her dreams someone stooped over her—smoothed back her tumbled hair and kissed her.

Her heart leaped in answer to that kiss, and the rapture came again, but she was too weary to awaken fully. She smiled and sank back into blissful repose.

CHAPTER II

DAWN

SHE awoke before the winter dawn had begun to spread over the sea. The cabin was faintly lit by the lamp, which had been deftly shaded by a green handkerchief, and the place was dim and shadowy. She had no knowledge of the time, but she had a feeling that the morning was at hand, and, curiously, as Rolfe had predicted, she was very hungry.

After a few seconds, during which her faculties returned to her in their normal state and she found that the weakness of the previous day had completely passed, she raised herself on one elbow and peered over the edge of the bunk.

And there, on the lockers just across the cabin, lying flung in careless ease and fast asleep, she saw Rolfe. He was still dressed, but he had pulled a piece of tarpaulin partially over him. His fair head rested on the red cushion, and his face in repose gave her a curious sense of awe. It had a carven look of ruthlessness which it did not wear in his waking moments—the Viking look which kept all trespassers at a distance.

She did not feel like a trespasser, but an odd dismay came upon her. It was as if he had caught her and made her his prisoner while she slept. And now, though he was sleeping—there was no chance of escape. For they were not moored to a quay. They were riding at anchor. She realized that by the motion of the boat. He had made quite sure of her before he had suffered himself to relax into that free slumber.

Still gripped by awe, she remained lodged upon her elbow, watching him.

He was sleeping deeply, and the careless strength of the man was somehow more impressive thus than when he was braced to action. One muscular arm was flung upwards, the hand half-closed, and its massive power had an arresting quality that made Julie feel strangely small and insignificant. She knew now why Rolfe Britton the Dane was looked upon with respect by the rough fisher-lads of Beam.

For a considerable time she watched him, and while she watched there gradually grew up within her a resolution which was almost like a part of herself fighting for air. She must by some means recover her independence. She must insist upon being taken ashore.

She had no idea as to their whereabouts, but the reflection that she had spent two nights aboard the *Circe* gave her a chill sense of doubt. She had done that which she had declared she would not do, and she was more than uneasy as to the result. But it was impossible that she had gone too far for retreat. Surely everyone would understand that she had been cruelly driven! But whither? Was she about to crash upon the rock of Rolfe Britton's determination?

He wanted her. She had no doubt of that. He had practically told her so. And now that she was in his power, could he—would he—hold her against her will? Her heart sank as she reluctantly remembered that she had come to him of her own accord.

And then, while her thoughts were rapidly turning into a bewildered turmoil of conjecture, Rolfe's upward-flung hand came suddenly outwards and dropped upon the floor. He opened eyes and mouth together and yawned stupendously. The next moment he was on his feet.

"Hullo! You're awake!" he said. "All right now?"

He stepped across to her, dropping his covering aside, and before she knew what he was about to do, he had pushed his arm around her and kissed her.

In the confined space of the bunk it was impossible to escape, and she scarcely had any chance even to resist. He held her closely, smiling down into her eyes with a sort of exultant possession that filled her with consternation.

"That's better, isn't it?" he said. "D'you know I've been dreaming of you? And when I woke up and saw you, it seemed almost too good to be true."

"May I get up, please?" said Julie rather faintly. "And I want my clothes."

She turned her face aside with the words and tried to draw the blanket up over her bare shoulders.

"What! Shy?" whispered Rolfe, still holding her to him. "You needn't be—with me. I'm going to take care of you now for the rest of your life. You

came to me, didn't you? And it's my job from now on."

"Please give me my clothes!" urged Julie. "I want to get dressed."

Her voice was tremulous. There was something about him—a confident mastery—that scared her. Somehow open resistance was out of the question. She was so terribly at his mercy.

He bent his face down to her neck. She felt his lips touch her again. "Why are you afraid of me, Julie?" he said.

She shrank a little. "I don't know. I want to get up. Please let me!"

"You're so much nicer as you are," maintained Rolfe. "And really you've nothing to be shy about. You're mine, and we're going to be married just as soon as I can possibly fix it."

That startled her into swift protest. It was as if something within her awoke and struggled upwards through suffocating waves of doubt and bewilderment. "Oh no!" she said. "No! You don't understand. Please let me go! I've got to get ashore. I can't stay here with you any longer."

Her hands were clenched convulsively upon the blanket. She strained away from him, trying to hide her face, dreading to feel his lips a second time upon her neck.

But he did not kiss her again, though he still held her with a steady insistence that would not be frustrated.

When he spoke, his voice was low and very quiet. "I think," he said, "it's you who don't understand. You didn't come to me—through all that storm—for nothing."

She could not look up at him. "I only came—because there was nowhere else to run to," she told him rather incoherently. "I was tied up in the captain's room. And I climbed out of the window. And then I saw your light—and ran along the jetty."

"But you meant to come," he said. "You gave yourself to me."

She gasped in answer. It was difficult to find words. "I didn't come—to stay," she said.

Rolfe was silent. He still held her, but his clasp was less compelling. She waited in a quiver of suspense for him to speak. Was he angry? Would he release her? At the back of her mind she knew once more that if he chose to take and keep her she would not be able to resist. And yet the desire to escape was urgent within her. She had been entrapped too often.

In the end when he drew a hard breath and set her free, she was almost startled.

“Well,” he said, “p’raps we’d better both get into our clothes and have some breakfast.”

His tone was as matter-of-fact as his words. He turned from her immediately, gathered up a few things from the locker on which he had slept, and disappeared forward.

Julie sank back, still feeling bewildered and rather weak. The whole situation was beyond her. She had anticipated a certain amount of difficulty, but nothing quite so headlong and so paralyzing as what had actually happened. And, added to it, was that staggering sense within as of some hidden impulse that seemed ready to spring up at a moment’s notice and aid in her defeat.

In those few moments it was not so much Rolfe she feared as herself. Her fighting powers were not yet fully restored, and behind everything there lay a frightening misgiving as to the strength of her own resolution.

But after a brief space she rallied. Rolfe was a rational being, and there was no cause for panic. He had already shown his good sense, and she would be sensible too. If only she could find her clothes!

She raised herself again, and began to peer about the cabin. And suddenly she spied a small heap of some dark blue material lying under the cushion on which Rolfe’s head had rested.

She was out of the bunk in an instant, and feverishly investigating. Yes, it was her coat, and her other belongings were folded inside it. She pulled them out, and began a hasty toilet. She had never dressed at greater speed in her life.

It was a chilly morning, and she put on the coat also. The garments were quite dry, but they bore marks here and there of her wild scramble down the ivy-clad wall of Honeyball Farm. When she was fully dressed, she had time to examine these more closely, and she discovered that efforts had been made to remove them. She also found that a long rent in her skirt had been repaired, somewhat roughly but quite effectively with thread.

Somehow that fact struck a still more reassuring note in her heart. He was so practical. He was bound to see reason when she was calm enough to expound it to him.

A faint greyness spreading over the skylight told her of the breaking of a reluctant dawn, and she realized with thankfulness that the night was past. Before the coming of another night she would be ashore and free.

From the direction of the galley there came a cheery clatter of pots and pans which the physical part of her hailed with enthusiasm. She was conscious again of extreme hunger which for the moment dwarfed every other sensation. Breakfast would make all the difference to everything. And it would not be the grudging and meagre fare of Honeyball Farm. It would be a comforting and satisfactory meal which would put real strength into her.

She looked at herself in a tiny mirror that hung over the locker and tidied her hair as best she could. The sight of her own face with its peach-like beauty helped her also. Her gruesome experiences had not altered her, and this in itself was a great relief; for had the face of a complete stranger looked back at her she would have been scarcely surprised. But she was still herself, and something seemed to bubble over within her, sending a sudden smile to her red lips. She remembered again the power of her budding womanhood which sheer brutality had almost made her forget.

It was at this point that Rolfe abruptly burst out of his cubby-hole with his hands full of plates and mugs, whistling a sailor's chanty that was refreshingly free from all sentiment.

“What ho!” he said, breaking off. “You’re up and dressed! That’s great! You might arrange these things for me while I attend to the eggs and bacon.”

He dropped everything promiscuously on to the lockers and was gone again, resuming his chanty on the way.

Julie began to set out the utensils he had brought on the little flap-table that hung in a corner. And as she did so, she smiled again. Evidently the crisis was past. Rolfe had realized his mistake, and she was in command of the situation. A little firmness was all that she needed, and she was determined that she would not allow herself to falter again.

Meanwhile, the sizzling of the bacon was almost more than she could bear.

CHAPTER III

CONQUEST

THE morning was grey and murky when they sat down to breakfast, but they took no heed of that. They were both too hungry. The fumes from the stove and the smell of frying filled the cabin, but these also were of no account. Rolfe's breakfast was served with the best sauce, and it was a success. They ate and drank with wholesome enjoyment, ignoring all but the commonplace while the meal was in progress.

It was towards the end of it that Julie, now quite restored, suddenly asked, "Where are we, by the way?"

It was casually spoken, perhaps too casually, and the smile that flashed across Rolfe's face showed his appreciation of the fact. It was almost a grin.

"Have some more jam!" he said. "We are anchored in the middle of Crabstone Bay."

"Crabstone Bay!" her eyes came up to his in swift astonishment. "But—that's miles away!"

"It chances to be actually here," he rejoined. "I say, do have some more to eat!"

She refused with an impatient gesture. "I'd no idea we'd come so far." She spoke dubiously; the uneasiness was returning upon her. "Will it take long to get back?"

Rolfe was feeling for his pipe. He pulled it out, and opening the locker between his legs pulled out a tobacco-jar. "Yes," he said finally, with his head bent. "It'll take longer than either you or I will live."

Julie got up sharply. The fatalistic words seemed to take her by the throat. "I'll clear away," she said, to gain time.

He looked up at her, his eyes intensely, vitally blue. "Don't!" he said. "I'll see to it. I know where everything goes."

She paused, facing him, meeting those eyes until something that was like a flame swept over her and she could meet them no longer.

She spoke in an undertone. "I've got to get back."

"You can't get back," said Rolfe. He stretched up a steady hand and took her by the wrist. "Sit down, Julie!" he said in a tone that was a curious blend of coaxing and insistence. "We've got to have a good talk, you and I. Don't get excited! Just sit down again and be quiet!"

His hand compelled her, gentle though it was. Also, she was trembling, and not for worlds would she have had him know it. She sat down on the edge of the lockers, and the bleak December morning, misty and grim, shrouded them like the grey walls of a prison.

"You see," said Rolfe, his hand still closed upon her wrist, "you've been trying to do the impossible. You were in a hornets' nest, and you thought you could come out on top. Well, you couldn't. They meant to sting you pretty badly, and would have if you hadn't got away and come to me. Isn't that the truth?"

She still avoided his eyes, but his tone was so quiet that her agitation subsided somewhat, though she remained conscious of a power that would dominate her on the smallest sign of weakness.

"Come! Answer me!" said Rolfe.

She replied unwillingly. "Well, yes. I suppose so. But they've had time to cool down since then. They'll not dare to do anything if I go back now."

"D'you think I'll take you back?" said Rolfe.

She clenched her hand under his hold. "Of course! You've no choice. You—had no right to bring me away."

"No right?" said Rolfe.

She suppressed a tremor. Her agitation was rising again in spite of her. The measured calm with which he spoke seemed to make things worse.

"Yes, I mean that—no right," she repeated, her voice quick with defiance. "I know I came to you. I had no choice. But—though you've been good to me and I'm grateful—you'd no right to take me away miles and miles without asking. It wasn't fair."

"Then what ought I to have done?" asked Rolfe, still with that ultra-composure which she found so disquieting.

She gathered all her forces to reply. "You ought to have waited till I was fit to explain—instead of giving me rum and milk to make me sleep like a log. It was taking an unfair advantage. It was—it was——"

"Common sense," suggested Rolfe imperturbably. "Just sheer common sense—nothing else. I suppose you will admit that rum and milk is preferable to pneumonia. And as to taking you away, how was I to know you wouldn't be followed? I didn't want a free fight on board, did I? There's not much room for that sort of thing here."

He paused, and she sat still, silenced for the moment but by no means prepared to lower her flag.

"Of course," continued Rolfe, "I might have pushed you back on to the jetty and left you there; but that would have been hardly what you wanted, would it?"

She hammered her free fist on her knee. "If you had only waited!" she said.

"Shall we be sensible?" said Rolfe.

The quiet question had the quality of a command. She was silent with eyes downcast.

He went on with absolute assurance. "It's no good looking at this from the old angle, because things are no longer as they were. I offered once to take you as mate on board this boat, and you refused because it wouldn't be proper. I've come to see that in that respect you were right. There's got to be something more definite than that. You think that you can go back to that old scoundrel at Honeyball Farm as if you'd never left and patch things up. But in that you're wrong. He knows that you've come to me for protection, and he isn't going to forgive you for that in a hurry—if ever. Now, looking at this thing sensibly, there's only one way out that I can see. As matters now stand, he could run me in for abduction, and you could run him for ill-treating you. But there's not much point in either of those. What we can do—and what I suggest we shall do—is to go straight back to him together and tell him we've decided to get married."

He paused. Julie had stiffened. Her face was very pale, but still she did not look at him. "I'd rather not," she said, her voice slightly husky as if she did not find it too easy to speak. "Besides, he'd never agree."

"He would agree," said Rolfe. "And—you must agree too."

Her hand stirred in his grasp, but he would not set it free. She spoke in a still lower tone. "I've done no wrong. Why should I marry—if I don't want to?"

"You can't go back to Honeyball Farm to live," said Rolfe.

Her breath came quickly. "All right. I'll go to Miss Tredville. She'll help me—give me work. She said she would."

"Things have altered since then," said Rolfe.

She shivered suddenly and uncontrollably. A gust of anger swept through her. She looked up at last. "Because of you," she said, "bringing me here."

He met her accusing eyes indomitably, relentlessly. "I have given you—sanctuary," he said.

She shrank. There was something in that last word that pierced unbearably. Yet, though her freedom seemed to be slipping from her, she made a desperate effort to retain it. "I won't be married," she cried out, "against my will!"

"Is it against your will?" Rolfe asked her slowly. "Is it?"

His eyes held hers. There was no escape. The mastery and the compulsion in them overcame her inch by inch, as it were, until her defences crumbled and finally crashed.

She saw herself beaten, and, lowering her head, she broke into a wild agony of tears. "Ah, don't—don't—don't!" she sobbed.

His arms encompassed her. He took her shaking body into his embrace and pillowed her head upon his shoulder, while the storm of pent-up emotion possessed her like a raging torrent.

She cried bitterly and very painfully for a space, unable to restrain herself any longer. The accumulated misery of many days was in that anguished breakdown, and even when the first violence was over, she wept and wept, as a hurt child weeps, in a misery of despair that could not be uttered.

And through it all, Rolfe held her against his broad breast, not speaking, only rocking her a little from time to time, and sometimes stroking her hair.

In the end, when, from absolute exhaustion, her sobbing ceased, he reached out and poured some cold milk into a mug and gave it to her, holding her like an infant while tremblingly she drank.

“There’s no rum in it this time,” he said gently.

Her eyes were nearly closed with crying. Her defeat had left her very weak.

He set the mug down and gathered her close again. “Keep quite still,” he said, “till you feel better! Don’t be afraid!”

But she was afraid. The strong, steady beat of his heart filled her with a deep unrest—a misgiving that she could not still. It was as if something within her were crying out—crying out—in answer, something to which she would not listen. Her freedom had meant so much to her, and this man who was master rather than lover had wrested it from her. His conquest hurt her pride cruelly. She might conceivably have yielded to him if he had pleaded with her. But his high-handed methods bruised her self-esteem. She had wanted to set her foot upon his neck, and she resented his ascendancy over her all the more because she had given herself into his power.

The old eternal antagonism was working within her. She hated herself for her surrender, and in a curious fashion she hated him also for having achieved it. He had not troubled to give her the honours of war. Probably he did not realize how much they would have meant to her.

When he spoke to her again, she would not answer. And so, without waiting for permission, he tipped her face upwards to his own and set his lips to hers. She tried to protest, but he gave her no opportunity. His kiss was close and passionate, and it lasted until the opposing spirit within her broke, and her own lips moved mutely in return.

Then, with a curious, unsteady laugh, he put her back upon the cushions and got up. While she lay there panting, he busied himself with the breakfast-things; and when the tempest of emotions that he had raised had begun to subside within her he had already withdrawn from the cabin.

She got up, feeling choked, and turned to let herself out into the little space in the stern where first she had stepped aboard the *Circe*. But ere she did so, something impelled her to look back.

And there on the table, lying alone, she saw a knife! Her heart gave a hard throb. She stood staring. Had he dropped it by accident? Or had he left it there of set design? A sudden coldness spread over her, and she shuddered, remembering that he had seen that other knife which she had kept for self-defence under her pillow in the room at Honeyball Farm. Somehow she could not convince herself that this was the result of an

oversight. But the motive that had induced him to place it there she could not fathom.

A swift impulse swooped upon her, overmastering everything else. She turned and picked up the knife and went with it to the galley where Rolfe was already washing up.

“You dropped this,” she said curtly.

He wheeled with a lightning movement; she saw the quick gleam of his eyes.

“I meant to,” he returned with equal brevity.

She held the knife out to him with a rather unsteady hand. “I don’t know why,” she said.

He did not take it. “I thought,” he said, “that it might help you to feel—safer.”

The blood rushed up from her heart, as if some valve had given way. She felt her face suffuse. With a supreme effort she flung the knife into the bowl of water in front of him.

“If I’m not safe with you,” she told him passionately, “I’ll drown myself!”

“I see,” said Rolfe. “Well, you needn’t do that—yet.”

He spoke with the resolute coolness that she was beginning to know. There was conscious strength behind it against which she knew that she was powerless to battle.

She turned from him, feeling that she could bear no more. And as she went, she heard him break into a whistle that sounded like a paean of triumph. Yet the melody went through her, setting all her pulses athrob. He might be master rather than lover, but in spite of all, those exquisite cadences of *Cavalleria Rusticana* renewed in her that rapture that was like a running fire in her veins—pain and ecstasy strangely mingled.

She fled from it out into the stern unbroken greyness of the silent winter day.

CHAPTER IV

THE ONLY WAY OUT

THEY did not leave their anchorage that day. The mist of early morning thickened with the advancing hours to an impenetrable fog. Crabstone Bay was a small inlet unfrequented by steamers, and Rolfe made swift decision to remain at anchor.

“We’re safe here,” he said, “and here we shall have to stay till it clears.”

Julie was dismayed at first, but there was no disputing the wisdom of his pronouncement. Beyond their haven there sounded the perpetual calls of syrens and lightships, and to venture forth would have been sheer madness.

“We’re well provisioned,” said Rolfe comfortably. “We could last out a week if necessary, and it’ll do you good to live on full rations for a bit.”

He kissed the inside of her arm as he said this, and when she drew it away, he laughed. “Oh, mustn’t I do even that? Julie, why didn’t you keep that knife?”

She turned her shoulder upon him. “I’ve told you what I shall do if . . .” she said.

“D’you think I’d let you?” said Rolfe. “You’d only get very wet and be put to bed in a blanket, that’s all. Come and sit down, and stop talking nonsense!”

He was unlike anyone she had ever met, quite implacable, yet wholly unperturbed. If only she could have made him angry she felt the situation would have been more tolerable. As it was, she had a most discomfiting consciousness of being at a perpetual disadvantage. She could not consider him with any sort of calmness, for he upset all her calculations.

His attitude frightened her at times, but yet she was aware of an iron-bound limit within the man himself which he would not pass.

“We’re engaged now,” he said, as they sat together on the cushioned lockers with his arm around her. “That—in case you don’t know—means

that I can kiss you without asking just as often as I like. I warn you it's going to be pretty often while this fog lasts. D'you really hate being kissed, Julie? Or are you just pretending?"

"I'm not pretending!" she said indignantly. "Only—I think you ought to wait."

"Afraid I don't," said Rolfe. "After all, we're engaged, aren't we?"

She did not answer. Her wounded pride was still uppermost. It had been hurting her all the morning.

"Aren't we?" said Rolfe, holding her closer.

There was no help for it. She had to concede the point in muffled tones. "I suppose so."

"And when we're married," said Rolfe, "we'll have no end of a good time. You've no idea what's ahead of you. It'll be the surprise of your life."

"I shall hate always living on a boat," said Julie.

"All right. You shan't do it," he rejoined unexpectedly. "We'll have one of those funny little blue cottages on the quay, shall we? And we'll put a barrier inside the door to keep the babies from tumbling into the sea. But we'll teach 'em to swim as soon as they can walk, if not sooner. I don't believe in running unnecessary risks."

She stared at him, astonished, half-incredulous. "Babies! What babies?"

"Why, ours, of course, silly!" said Rolfe, and kissed her hair to soften the epithet. "There are sure to be two or three, but you shan't have more than you can manage. I'll take great care of you—just as much as if you were married to the son of a lord." He smiled his sudden smile at her. "We'll have no end of a time together."

Julie spoke abruptly, with an emphasis that surprised herself. "I hate the way you take everything for granted—just as if . . ."

"Go on!" said Rolfe encouragingly. "As if . . ."

"As if you were so sure of everything," she finished with a rush. "As if no one else counted!"

"But I am sure," said Rolfe, and kissed her again on the cheek as her lips swiftly avoided his. "You weren't given those eyes for nothing, my Julie. You make me think of a ripe cherry waiting to be plucked every time I look at you."

“That’s absurd,” breathed Julie.

“But true,” he supplemented. “I know what you’re afraid of—quite well. And it isn’t me, it’s yourself. You’re trying to be stubborn, to set yourself against me; but all the time you know that you’re fighting your inner self that wants to come over to my side.”

“It’s not true!” Julie protested, with her head down.

“It is true,” he returned. “But never mind! It won’t be much longer. When we’re married, there’ll be an end to this silly nonsense. We’ll come back and anchor here for our honeymoon. Think of it, Cherry-Ripe! We shall belong to each other body and soul. And you won’t be afraid to kiss me then.”

“I don’t want to be married,” said Julie perversely.

He drew her to him within the circle of his arm. “Then you’re a very immoral little girl,” he said. “I’m going to make you kiss me for that—just to show you how bad you are.”

She tried to resist him, but he had his way. He had fathomed that appalling impulse within her which set her resolution at naught. She was again furious with herself for yielding and with him for making her yield, but the moment those firm lips pressed hers her opposition was dead. She hung limp in his clasp, and for the second time, instinctively, irresistibly, her lips responded to his.

“That’s better,” he said. “You’re coming on, my Julie. D’you hate me so very badly still?”

“I don’t know,” she said faintly.

“Why not try loving me for a change?” he whispered with his cheek against her forehead. “It’d save us both a lot of trouble.”

She did not answer. Despite her weakness there was yet very deep in her soul an inner citadel which as yet he had not stormed—the sacred shrine which can be won by love alone.

“You see,” resumed Rolfe, “it’s got to come in the end. I’m a rough sort of chap, and I’ve got to have my way with my own woman. But it won’t be a bad way if you don’t fight against me. If you do—heaven help you, that’s all! For you’ll have to come into line, my dear, and it’ll hurt you if you don’t come willingly. It’s not my fault I’m that sort of man, and you wouldn’t like me any better if I wasn’t. You’d despise me, wouldn’t you?”

Again she did not answer. Silence was her only refuge. Her heart was beating thickly, spasmodically. She was almost as one under the influence of a drug.

“I see,” he said. “You don’t want to give in before you need. But you’ll have to in the end, Julie. Mark that! There’s no going back with you and me. If I thought there was—well,” he spoke suddenly between his teeth, “I’d make quite sure of you here and now. But I know there isn’t. You’re mine and you can never belong to anyone else again while I live. I’d even commit murder for you, Julie. Just you remember that! After we’re married, it’ll be another matter. I can look after my own property.”

He paused. And Julie spoke almost in a whisper. “I’m very tired. I wish I could rest somewhere.”

It was like a cry for mercy. She felt battered, curiously chastened. His sombre mood had borne her down, and she was on the verge of tears.

But his response was instant and comforting. He picked her up like a child and carried her to the bunk. “Poor little soul!” he said as he laid her down. “Have I been bullying you? Well, it’s over now, and, anyhow, it’s all for your good. You’re worn out. Shut your eyes and sleep! I’m going on deck for a bit.”

He went, and she drew a long breath of relief. For a space she lay in a sort of quivering suspense, while his words ran through and through her brain, and wave after wave of fear, of humiliation, and of a strange, inexplicable longing, passed over her, making her hot and cold by turns.

She wondered vaguely if she were going to be ill, for she could not remember that she had ever felt so fevered and yet so helpless. Her own docility was a marvel to her. She seemed to have lost her spirit—even her personality—under the domination of this man. And it was not by brute force, like Reuben, that he had conquered her, though there was an element of brutality in his treatment. But it was something stronger than any physical power that compelled her, and she could not understand it. She had never encountered magnetism before—that inexplicable and inevitable quality; and she regarded her own weakness with consternation. She knew within herself that the strength to resist him was gone. She was obliged to accept whatever decisions he might be moved to make. She had placed herself in his power, and he had taken command of her in such a fashion as left her no choice of her own. It seemed to her that she was completely and irretrievably at his disposal.

She remained in the bunk for the rest of the day, for she was very weary still after her long ordeal, and Rolfe did not disturb her except to bring her food. He seemed rather preoccupied, and spent a good deal of the time on deck, clad in oilskins and smoking his pipe almost incessantly.

When the daylight died, he came in and busied himself with the evening meal. She got up later to partake of it, but her keen hunger of the morning had passed. He did not notice what she ate, and she was glad of his abstraction though secretly she somewhat resented it.

While he was washing up in the galley, she slipped off her dress and crept into the bunk again.

When Rolfe returned he took a chart out of one of the lockers and spread it out in the lamplight. He did not glance towards her, but sat studying it with slightly drawn brows. She lay watching his bent head that had the sheen of burnished copper in the unshaded glare.

For a long time he remained motionless, and her eyes dwelt upon him as though fascinated. It was very quiet, and the boat scarcely rocked. Occasionally a small wave splashed against her side with a soft gurgle, but all sounds of shipping outside their haven had ceased. The absolute silence had not occurred to Julie before. She noticed it now with surprise and an inexplicable sense of apprehension.

Suddenly, without raising his eyes, Rolfe spoke. "The fog has lifted, but it's infernally dark. There's not much point in trying to get back to-night."

Julie was startled. It had not occurred to her that they could possibly get back. She did not know how to respond, or even if he expected any response.

Abruptly he looked up at her. "I'll take you back in the morning," he said. "But listen! I'm dealing with Reuben Stark, not you. I shall take you to him and tell him straight that we're going to get married at once. You agree to that?"

Across the little cabin she met his eyes, fierily blue, under inflexible brows.

"He'll be very angry," she said wearily.

"That's my job," said Rolfe. "Do you agree?"

She hesitated. Something was fluttering within her like a bird beating its wings against a cage. She knew herself a captive, but the final bolting of the door was almost more than she could bear.

Rolfe spoke, his voice absolutely level and emotionless. “If you don’t agree, I shall not take you back. I am not going to give you up into that man’s hands again to do as he likes with. He’s got to understand that you are under my protection until we can be married, which will be immediately. If I can’t give him to understand that—well, you stay with me till I can, that’s all.”

Julie had raised herself on her elbow. She was looking at him with a wide, scared gaze. She spoke suddenly, in a desperate whisper. “Why d’you drive me so hard? Why can’t you wait—and let me marry you of my own accord?”

He threw back his head with a half-savage gesture. “It’s you who are doing the driving,” he said. “It isn’t every man would be as patient as I’ve been. I tell you, Julie, it’s got to be a straight deal between us. There’s no point in waiting. No one is going to give you the benefit of the doubt as it is.”

She flinched as if he had struck her. “That’s not fair!” she said quickly.

“Everything’s fair,” he asserted. “I’ve been square with you. I’ve given you no choice simply because there is no choice. It’s true I’ve wanted to marry you from the beginning, but I shouldn’t have taken you if you hadn’t given yourself to me. You can’t blame me for that. And now I’m offering you the only possible way out, and you’re trying not to take it. On my soul,” he spoke with sudden blunt force, “I wonder why I’m such a fool as to stand for it. I’ve got you here and I can do what I like with you. D’you realize that? Yes, I see you do. And not against your will either, whatever you may say. I’ve proved that, too. And yet when I pander to you and talk of matrimony—you think yourself in a position to raise obstacles. I tell you, Julie, you’re not! I’ve said I’ll marry you, and marry you I will. But—unless you cave in and agree to my terms—the honeymoon will start to-night!”

He almost flung the words at her. She could see that he was deeply moved. A red flush had risen to his temples and there was a lightning in his eyes which she could not face. The whole atmosphere was tense with a passion scarcely subdued that seemed to burn her. She sank down and pulled the blanket over her head to shield herself, lying very still, scarcely breathing, till the storm should pass.

The next thing she knew was Rolfe’s hand patting her shoulder, lightly, soothingly, even coaxingly.

“Don’t cry again for the love of Mike!” he said in a gruff undertone. “I’m doing my damndest to be decent to you. Tell me you agree and we’ll leave it at that!”

She stirred a little under the blanket. “Very well,” she murmured.

“A bargain?” said Rolfe.

“Very well,” she said again.

He felt beneath the covering for her hand, drew it forth and kissed it. “How long will it take to love me, Julie?” he whispered.

She did not answer him. Something seemed to be choking her—a mixture of emotions to which she could give no name.

He put her hand gently down again and moved away. She heard him pull back the door and go up on deck. But though she lay awake for a long time thereafter she did not hear him return.

When she dropped asleep at last, she was still alone. He had given her—sanctuary.

CHAPTER V

THE PARENTAL BLESSING

WHEN ROLFE tied up the *Circe* at her customary mooring at the end of the jetty at about noon on the following day, all the fishing-village of Beam witnessed the fact and was agog with curiosity.

Reuben was in his observatory at the time, and he also watched the return of the motor-boat with close attention from his vantage-point.

A glint of deep malice came into his bloodshot eyes as he did so, and his lips moved continuously though he uttered not a word. His brown face had a greyish hue and his hands were restless and unsteady. He looked as if he had been drinking even more heavily than usual and were not enjoying the results.

As a matter of fact he had only just descended from his bedroom and spurned the breakfast awaiting him in the sitting-room. He took most of his nourishment in liquid form nowadays. His general appearance was unkempt and neglected, and as he sat humped and vigilant in his easy-chair he had something of the semblance of an old dog waiting to snarl at an intruder.

For a full quarter of an hour he remained there with his malignant eyes fixed and watching. Then there came the sound of shuffling feet outside and the tap of bony knuckles on the door.

Reuben did not turn in his chair. "Blast you! What d'you want?" was his response.

Emily entered, wizen and witch-like as usual, but full of importance. "They're back!" she announced.

"The *Circe* is," said Reuben.

"And Rolfe and the girl too," said Emily. "They've been seen."

Reuben growled inarticulately.

Emily's crooked eyes looked seawards and blinked at a vagrant shaft of sunshine on the water that dazzled them.

"They're both there," she said triumphantly.

"What d'you want?" said Reuben again.

She turned back to him. "Well, I thought as how you'd like to know, that's all," she said. "Oh, and the boy's gone back to work. He was moving easier this morning, so I thought he'd better."

Again Reuben growled.

Emily continued. "Belinda was round again yesterday. I didn't let her see him. I told her it was his stommick. But she's a sharp one, and we don't want her nosing round. So I made him get up and go. I told him you'd kill him if he didn't keep his mouth shut. He was fair scared, so there's not much danger of him blabbing."

"What do I care?" said Reuben, "But he'd better not blab all the same. S'long as he lives here, he'll get the rope-end when he deserves it. I'm a man of discipline, I am. He'd no business to go gassing to outsiders about what happens in this house."

"He'll not do it again," said old Emily, licking her lips. "You've given him a lesson as he'll not forget in a hurry. I only wish that daughter of yours had had it too."

Reuben blazed into sudden fury. "Don't call her my daughter! She's more like an offshoot of her cursed mother as I had nought to do with. I hate the very sight of her, and now she's gone to the dogs she can stay there."

Emily was still peering out towards the end of the jetty. "My sakes!" she suddenly exclaimed. "They've come ashore—the two of 'em. Well, of all the—— Just you look!" Her voice rose to a screech in her excitement.

Reuben bent forward in his chair and stared. Two figures had appeared upon the jetty, and were walking towards them side by side. There was no mistaking their identity even at that distance—the careless, free stride of the man with his bare golden head gleaming in the sunshine, and the light, airy tread of the girl with him.

They approached at an easy pace in the full view of the village, neither pausing nor hastening, and with no sign of embarrassment.

"D'jou ever see the like?" cried Emily.

The skipper turned on her. “Hold your noise, woman, and get out! Where’s that fool—Peter? Go and find him and tell him to stand by!”

Emily went. There was thunder in Reuben’s voice, and she realized swiftly that it would be safer to watch the coming drama from a distance. Her cruel old heart was still filled with bitter regret at the escape of her prey, and she hoped with savage fervour that the skipper would manage to inflict some sort of punishment even yet.

She departed on her errand and called in Peter from the shore. Then she crept along the passage from the kitchen to listen.

Peter strode along to the observatory and presented himself. “You sent for me, captain?”

“Yes. Come in!” commanded Stark. He pointed with a shaking hand towards the jetty. “See that?”

Peter looked and grinned. “Coming back for the parental blessing,” he observed.

Stark swore deeply. “You’ll stay here till I’ve done with ’em,” he said.

“Boat’ll be late going over,” remarked Peter.

“Boat be damned!” said Stark. “I’ll come over with you when I’ve done.”

Rolfe and Julie had reached the foreshore and had turned their faces towards Honeyball Farm. The man was absolutely at his ease, almost arrogantly so; but the girl was plainly nervous. She kept her gaze straight before her.

“Let ’em come! Let ’em come!” growled Reuben. “I’m ready for ’em.”

They came. The squeak of the garden-gate announced their approach, followed by a resounding knock on the front door from Rolfe’s knuckles.

Emily replied to this, glad of an excuse to be in the picture. She stood in the middle of the doorway, her crossed eyes seeming to bestow special attention upon them both diagonally at the same moment.

Rolfe spoke, briefly and without ceremony. “Captain Stark in?”

“He is,” said Emily, thin-lipped and malicious. “But I don’t know as he’ll see you.”

“Go and ask him!” ordered Rolfe.

His tone was peremptory. Emily started a little, still staring; but, meeting his stare in return, she abruptly changed her tactics, wheeled in her tracks and shuffled away.

Rolfe began to whistle, softly and casually, to himself, Julie, very pale, her eyes downcast, waited rigidly by his side.

In a few seconds a voice came roaring down the passage that led from the observatory. "Tell 'em to come in and be damned!"

Rolfe ceased to whistle. "We won't stay long enough for that," he said reassuringly to the girl beside him.

She sent him a swift glance, but made no reply.

Old Emily's slipshod feet were heard returning. She appeared in the dingy little hall.

"You're to come in," she said sourly. "And shut the door after you!"

They entered, Rolfe closing the door with firm precision.

Emily pointed up the passage. "Go along there and you'll find him!"

Rolfe took the lead. He paid no more attention to Emily than he would have paid to a dog snuffing at his heels. Julie followed him closely.

The observatory door stood open. Rolfe walked straight in, and turning, took Julie quietly by the arm, leading her forward. Then he faced the skipper with Peter standing behind his chair.

"Good morning!" he said.

Reuben growled in answer. His face was suffused, and there was an aroma of whisky all around him though none to be seen. He had primed himself for the interview.

"Got a bodyguard, I see," said Rolfe. He glanced beyond the thick-set Peter. "An audience too! We seem to have excited the public interest."

It was true. A little mob of idlers had collected on the quay-side to watch the doings in the observatory.

Reuben cast a contemptuous glance over his shoulder. "Let 'em look! I've nothing to be ashamed of," he said.

"A matter of opinion!" retorted Rolfe. "But we needn't waste any time over that. I've just called in to tell you that Julie and I have decided to get

married, and”—he paused momentarily—“we hope it will meet with your approval.”

“My what?” shouted the skipper in one of his sudden gusts of fury.

Rolfe held up his hand. “Wait! I’ve got to add that we’re going to be married in any case.”

Reuben sprang to his feet, staggering a little. “I should think you damn’ well will be married!” he ejaculated. “But you’ll pay me first, or I’ll have you for abduction!”

Rolfe met the onslaught without the faintest hint of agitation. He merely pushed Julie slightly behind him. “You’d better not go on those lines,” he said. “I’ve got too strong a case against you. You’ve ill-treated her, and you’ve ill-treated the boy Micky. You’ll have to answer for that before we talk about abduction. I took her away for safety. I gave her shelter—from you—as anyone calling himself a man was bound to do. If you think any court would uphold that as an abduction case, you’re wrong. She fled to me of her own accord while you were thrashing the boy.”

“And who has a greater right?” demanded the skipper, steadying himself against the table and glaring like an angry bull. “Think I’ll be thwarted by that kind of trash? I told you afore as I’d punish my own daughter in my own way. And so I will when I’ve a mind to. You aren’t going to stop me, nor anyone else.”

“Oh yes, I am,” said Rolfe. “She’s under my protection now. And you”—he met the glaring eyes unwaveringly—“had better go carefully or you’ll find yourself doing time—with more hard labour than drink on board for a change. You can make your own choice as to which it’s to be. I’m going to marry Julie, and I’m going to see her every day until I marry her. So—if she stays here—I shall know exactly what’s happening to her. And I shall know about the boy too. So—as I say—you’d better be—damn’ careful.”

Reuben received the warning with a sudden lowering of his brows which gave him an expression of terrific malevolence, but which also somehow testified to the fact that it had gone home. He shifted his ground with a muttered imprecation and deliberately addressed himself to the girl.

“Oh, you’re coming back to me now, are you?” he snarled. “You’ve had your fun, and now you think you’d like to come home for the wedding. I’m to have the privilege of paying for it and giving you away, I suppose? After you’ve made a thorough disgrace of yourself—and me.”

“She’d find it difficult to do that,” said Rolfe curtly. “So far as she’s concerned, there’s no disgrace whatever. She’s come back as she went.”

An evil chuckle came from the passage, and Peter guffawed behind his hand.

Julie turned crimson. “How dare you?” she said. “And how dare you too?” She faced the skipper with the courage born of overwhelming anger. “You know that what he says is true, and I was driven away by your vile brutalities. It’s because of that I’m going to be married straight away—nothing else. You’ve forced me into it, and I hate you. You’re just a drunken brute beast. I only came back because I wanted to do things decently. But you’re incapable of anything decent. You’d drive anyone to the bad if you could!”

The words rushed out in a torrent. She stood with clenched hands, fiercely accusatory, her dark eyes flaming. She was trembling from head to foot.

The sudden tempest took them all by surprise. Rolfe, who had been so ready to protect her, was for the moment thrown off his guard. Peter stared with goggling eyes.

The skipper stared too, but only for a moment. The next he raised his hand and struck her a resounding smack across the face.

She went backwards with a cry, and Rolfe caught her.

He held her in his arms while over her head he cursed Reuben Stark as one man only curses another when stirred by the hatred that is murder.

Then, as Julie clung to him, gasping, he bent over her, clasping her closely, his face against her hair.

“We’ll get out of this,” he whispered to her. “I’ll deal with him later. You come to the parson with me now! What?” in response to a barely articulate murmur. “You want to get your things together first? All right! You go up and do it! I’ll wait for you.” He lifted his head again and addressed Reuben. “As for you, you drunken swine, you’ve given yourself away all right with plenty of witnesses. The next time we meet there won’t be any at all, and you’ll be lucky yourself if you live to tell the tale.”

Reuben said nothing. Even in his inflamed condition he realized that he had gone too far. He stood with his lips twitching, one trembling hand fumbling at his chin.

Rolfe turned back to Julie and began to lead her from the room. “Come! You go up and pack up your things! I’ll wait and give you a hand down with them. Don’t get rattled! It’ll be all right.”

Reuben spoke suddenly, shamefacedly. “Wait! There’s been enough scandal in this house. She can stay, and be married properly.”

Rolfe scoffed aloud. “After this! D’you think I’d agree to that?”

Reuben pulled himself together. “Yes, I do. She’s not of age. She can’t go without I let her. I’ll give my consent on that condition.”

Rolfe paused. Furious as he was, he saw that the offer was genuine. Reuben was trying to save his face, but in so doing he would save Julie’s also.

And Julie was swift to catch the same impression. She stopped in the doorway and spoke breathlessly. “Let me do that, Rolfe! I’d rather do that. He’ll not touch me again—not even see me if I can help it. Anyhow, it wouldn’t be for long.”

Rolfe still paused, reviewing the situation.

“I shan’t touch her,” growled Reuben, “not if she behaves herself. I shouldn’t have meant to last time if it hadn’t been for your carryings-on.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” sharply retorted Rolfe. “If you choose to believe lies about us, that’s your own affair. I’ve done nothing.”

“Never been in her bedroom, eh?” suggested Reuben, with curling lip.

Rolfe’s eyes blazed at him. “Yes. The other Sunday—to open the window. I was there about five minutes.”

“And didn’t even kiss her?” suggested Reuben.

“Damn you! And if I did?” countered Rolfe.

Reuben stroked his chin again. “That’s how things get about,” he remarked.

“D’you mean to say——” began Rolfe.

Reuben shook his head. He was now the calmer of the two. “Oh no, I’m not saying. It’s what other folks say. Not the only visit! So I was told.”

“That,” said Rolfe, “is one of the devil’s own lies. I’ve never been before or since. If you dare to suggest anything else——”

“I’m not suggesting,” said Reuben, a cunning glint in his eyes. “But—it’ll look better for everyone concerned, maybe, to let the wedding be from here. Then there’ll be no more talk about bad young men and cruel fathers. Eh, Jooly?”

Julie suppressed a shiver of disgust. “He’s right,” she said briefly to Rolfe. “There’s no choice that I can see. After all, I’ve nowhere to go, have I?”

Reuben made a sound that was almost a chuckle. “A very sensible remark!” he observed. “And he’s not got much to offer you, when all’s said and done. But that’s your own affair. I’ve said all I’ve got to say. I’ll give you a wedding—for everyone to see—and that’s all I *will* give.”

“All right.” Rolfe spoke as if half against his will. “We’ll agree to that. I’ll go and see the parson straight away. You can come with me, Julie.”

But Julie shrank back. “I’d rather not,” she said in a low voice.

“All right,” he said again. “Then I’ll come back as soon as I’ve seen him. And mind”—he addressed Reuben with stern insistence—“I come in and out of this house exactly as I like until we’re married. That’s understood, is it?”

“I shan’t stand in your way,” growled Reuben, “not if you behave decent and proper.”

Rolfe’s look quelled any further conditions. He prolonged it until Reuben’s own eyes blinked and shifted, then he turned on his heel.

“Very well, that’s settled. I’m coming back, Julie, the moment I’ve fixed things up. You can come and have tea with me on the *Circe* afterwards.”

He put his arm around her as they went down the passage, but she held herself stiffly within it, and when they reached the hall he let her go.

“Feeling all right?” he said. “The old brute didn’t hurt you badly?” He touched her scarlet cheek with his fingers. “Damn him! I’ll pay him out when once you’re safe. You go up to your room and stay quiet till I come back!”

She did not answer him. She was quivering with a nameless agitation, and the consciousness of Emily’s peering eyes in the dark kitchen passage did not tend to ease the situation.

Rolfe bent with a certain grimness and kissed the hot cheek. Then he turned to the door. “I’ll be back very soon,” he said.

Julie did not watch him go. She whizzed round and fled like a bolting rabbit up the stairs.

And old Emily's sardonic laughter pursued her like a malediction.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOND

“So the scandal has ended almost before it had begun!” remarked Sybil, perching her shapely feet upon the fender-stool in her mother’s room and regarding them with her head on one side. “I must say I think it’s terribly virtuous of Rolfe Britton. But I’m rather sorry for the girl myself.”

Lady Tredville sighed. “Your ideas are always so unorthodox,” she said. “I wish you weren’t so fond of airing them, dear Sybil.”

Sybil turned a smiling face towards her. “But, my dear, extreme virtue is rather boring. I’m sure you think so. And so does Pearce in her secret soul.”

“Indeed you’re quite wrong, Miss Sybil,” rejoined that thin-lipped factotum with some severity. “And I often think to myself that it’ll be a good thing when you’re safely married yourself. The marriage bond might make you see different.”

Sybil chuckled. “How delightful you are, Pearce! You know, a talk with you does me more good than any cocktail ever invented. The marriage bond! Could anything prejudice one more in favour of single blessedness than that? It’s a good thing it’s a little more elastic than it used to be, or we should all be living in sin.”

“Really, Sybil!” protested her mother.

Sybil waved an airy hand. “Darling, don’t blame me! It was Pearce who made me say it. Besides, can either of you picture anything more deadly than being bound—bound, mark you!—to a really virtuous man for the rest of your days? I’m sure you can’t, so you needn’t pretend.”

Pearce shook her head over her ladyship’s nails. “You’ll say different some day, Miss Sybil.”

“I shall never say different,” declared Sybil, producing her cigarette-case. “And to think that that unlucky girl has got to be hustled into marriage just because of a solitary week-end spent on the loose—well, I call it a

damn' shame, that's all. Why, she hardly knows the man. She's only just out of school. She can't know anything."

"If you ask me," said Pearce with pursed lips. "Hi should say she's a bad little lot and very lucky to have found a good honest man as'll do the right thing by her."

Sybil crowed with laughter as she lighted her cigarette. "That's what you'll say of me, I'll be bound, if I'm ever rash enough to enter the married state—quite irrespective of the fact that a good honest man would probably be the very last person to satisfy my highly unorthodox requirements! Who is this Rolfe Britton, by the way? Does anybody know him?"

"Hi have heard," said Pearce, pronouncing her aspirates with care, "that folks in Beam take him for a Dane. But nobody seems to know for certain what he is. He doesn't mix very much."

Sybil puffed forth a cloud of smoke. "Well, he knows a pretty girl when he sees one. She's beautiful—quite out of the ordinary."

Pearce looked as if she thoroughly disapproved of beauty.

Lady Tredville broke in languidly. "Yes. Your father told me that. He saw her once—I forget when. It's rather thrown away on a girl of that class, don't you think? They always go wrong."

"Oh, one can be quite wicked without being beautiful," rejoined Sybil. "But I should have thought she might have done better for herself, that's all. Ah, here comes your medical adviser! If you're going to talk improprieties, perhaps I'd better go."

"My dear Sybil!" remonstrated Lady Tredville. "What will you say next? As if we should! Besides, I'm much better. Do come in, Dr. Keston! We were just talking about the romance down in the fishing-village. I expect you've heard all about it? Captain Stark's daughter, I mean, and—and—what was the man's name, Pearce?"

"Rolfe Britton," supplied Pearce, rising, stiffly punctilious, and falling back a step.

Oliver Keston came forward. His eyes encountered Sybil's for a moment and were immediately directed to his patient. He took her extended hand.

"I heard something of it," he said, as if not greatly interested.

"It's been the talk of the place," Lady Tredville assured him. "They went off together in the man's motor-boat—were missing for three whole days.

He said it was because of the fog.” A low laugh sounded from Sybil. “He did, dear,” her mother insisted. “Your father said so. But, anyway, Captain Stark must have brought pressure to bear, for the young man came to see my husband directly after they got back, and they are arranging to get married by licence in a fortnight. Most extraordinary—the whole affair! But young folks all are extraordinary nowadays. Don’t you think so?”

“A great many of them,” agreed Keston, taking Pearce’s chair and turning it so that both mother and daughter came within his range of vision. “So Stark’s girl is marrying already, is she? She hasn’t lost much time.”

“Well, after such an escapade!” said Lady Tredville, with eyebrows delicately arched. “She was so badly compromised.”

“That dear old word!” chuckled Sybil, tilting back her head. “I knew it was coming sooner or later. I love that ‘once aboard the lugger’ outlook, don’t you? It has such a kick in it.”

“Sybil!” reproved her mother. “You’re very naughty. She’s doing it on purpose, Dr. Keston. Just sheer mischief!”

“I know,” said Keston, and again for a longer second his glance fell upon the girl swinging lightly to and fro in an old-fashioned rocking-chair.

She made a gay grimace at him and continued to rock. “We were saying just before you came in what a shame it was that a kid like that should be pushed into marrying a man she’s only known for two or three weeks just because she has committed the indiscretion of going off with him in his boat for a week-end.”

“*You* were saying, my dear,” said Lady Tredville.

“All right. *I* was saying,” admitted Sybil defiantly. “If it’s old Stark’s doing, I think it’s absolutely brutal of him.”

“Have you any reason for thinking that the girl is marrying against her will?” asked Keston.

Sybil regarded the end of her cigarette, wilfully refusing to look in his direction. “I don’t know that she is,” she said. “But I think it’s a shame all the same. She’s too young to know her own mind, and if she only waited a little she’d probably make a much better match for herself.”

“Or the reverse,” suggested Keston drily. “If it really is a *mariage de convenance* I should say she’s lucky to bring it off.”

Sybil broke into a peal of laughter. "That's just what Pearce says! Really, it's extraordinary how extremes meet. I take it that you wouldn't dream of marrying under such circumstances."

"I?" said Keston. "Certainly not. When I marry"—he looked across at her quite deliberately this time—"it will not be in payment for favours received, but for those I mean to have. In other words, I invariably look to the future and leave the past to adjust itself."

Sybil sprang suddenly to her feet. Her face was flushed, curiously resentful.

"Oh, you're cold-blooded!" she said, and there was more of derision than banter in her voice. "You'll never be married at that rate. A good thing too, perhaps! I don't think what Pearce calls the marriage bond would be at all in your line."

"There," said Keston, rising courteously, "you are quite mistaken. I have every intention of marrying."

"Really!" she laughed scornfully. "But it takes two, you know!"

"Sybil, my dear!" protested Lady Tredville.

Sybil turned to the door. She was still laughing, but there was an almost angry fling in her movement. "You don't understand the joke, dear," she threw back. "People were all for decency in your time; but now, decency doesn't count. I'm not sure that anything counts beyond personal greed. The world is just a pigsty where everyone tries to gorge without paying. I'm going out to get some air."

"Do! It'll do you good," said Keston, opening the door with a smile. "Go and see the Don Quixote of Beam and find out if he is really as virtuous as he sounds! They say that old Stark is a miser and has a fortune hidden away somewhere. Perhaps that may be one of the deciding factors in the case! A beautiful girl plus a golden ship on the horizon would be an alluring combination to anyone."

"You beast!" breathed Sybil as she passed him.

But when the door had softly closed behind her, she stood still in the passage and stared at it as if reasoning with herself.

Eventually she turned away and went to her own room which she entered, locking herself in. And here she sat down and smoked furiously for a space in frowning thought.

Coming to the end of her cigarette, she threw it aside and spoke to the four walls that girt her round.

“What on earth do I see in him? Why do I care? I loathe his self-assurance. I’d give anything to see him brought down. And yet—in spite of it—idiot and fool that I am—I care! Married or not, I’m bound!”

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF FREEDOM

JULIE leaned against the sea-wall in an alcove just beyond *The Black Swan* and stared moodily out to sea.

The excitement was over. Everything had been put in order; arrangements were in train, and in a week she was to be the wife of Rolfe Britton. She was still rather dazed with the happenings that had led to this, and a most depressing reaction had set in. Though Rolfe had treated her with the utmost generosity, though he now forbore to press himself upon her, she still felt bitterly humiliated, and her state of mind towards Stark was one of intense hostility. Entrapped by circumstances, she regarded him as the origin of all that had befallen her—as in fact he was. And, though aware that this was unreasonable, she could not help including Rolfe within the circle of her resentment. Rolfe had been high-handed. He had taken rather than offered. And she felt somewhat like a cowed animal that is passed from one master to another.

There was, moreover, something fiery within herself which had not yet found an outlet, something which at times would startle her to wakefulness in the night, almost frightening her. Though she knew herself to be safe, knew also that Reuben would lay no hand upon her, the trapped sensation still tormented her, and her soul cried out against it. She could not see Rolfe as lover, and she seemed but to be exchanging one slavery for another.

The look of contempt which Belinda bestowed upon her whenever they chanced to encounter one another added fuel to that smouldering fire within. She knew that Belinda had never liked her, and she had a very strong suspicion that Rolfe's preference for herself was the cause of her antipathy; but she was too miserable to feel elated on that account. She was afraid of Rolfe. He was too possessive, and there were times when she even believed that she would have gladly handed him on to Belinda had that been possible.

Everyone in Beam seemed to regard her askance or so she imagined, and she would not go out in broad daylight if she could avoid it, spending much

of her time brooding in her room, and then faring forth after dusk to gaze at the sea with a heavy misgiving that at times made her feel physically ill.

Emily never spoke to her now. The boy Micky looked at her furtively and always strove to squeeze into the background when she passed. She was aware that he was one of the elements of the general unfriendliness around her, but he was of such minor importance in her estimation that she never considered this as worthy of notice, though otherwise she might have been sorry for him. He too looked ill, and his weedy frame had an emaciated appearance. His eyes held the fear and the cunning of a monkey's. The thought that they two could be in any sense classed as companions in misfortune revolted her, and she avoided him as rigorously as he avoided her.

She made no preparation for her coming marriage. The whole affair seemed so unreal, even fantastic, that she could not bring herself to treat it as a definite event that was rapidly approaching. It was all so totally different from the vague dreams of her girlhood that to her it had a sordid aspect which made any idea of festivity almost grotesque. She shrank from everyone in those days, and she had a feeling that everyone shrank from her.

The only pleasure she had was in leaning on the low stone wall alone in the chill December dusk watching the tide come rolling in to dash its waves in foam along the jetty. That was a sight that somehow soothed her, dwarfing her own unrest. She loved the voice of the sea and its grey immensity. The formless grandeur of it blotted out all lesser things. She liked to gaze and gaze until she was lost in it, and then—and then only—could the ache at her heart, the apprehension and the misery, fade into insignificance.

The corner that she had found for herself was little frequented. It was close to the wall of *The Black Swan*, one or two blank windows of which overlooked it, but though rough voices in the bar sometimes reached her if she stayed too long, she was not afraid that her isolation would be disturbed. It was on the toll-bridge side of the public-house, and practically all its patrons came from the fishing-village on the other side. An occasional vehicle might pass from the toll-gate, but even this was unusual after sunset. She could generally count upon a quiet hour here, or even longer, and it was sheltered from the cold quarter by the angle of the wall.

Rolfe sometimes visited her in the evening, but only occasionally, for he was busy preparing for her reception on board the *Circe*, and she did not stay in for him. If he did not find her at Honeyball Farm, he would come on

to look for her here. But she did not expect him, and in her sombre state of mind she much preferred to be alone. He only embarrassed her nowadays, awaking in her that passionate and futile striving against destiny which only the sea could still. She hoped he would not come to her to-night, for the restlessness that drove her was like a scourge. There was no standing against it. Her spirit was in a turmoil of doubt and misery, and she turned instinctively to the rushing of great waters for relief.

The weather had become mild, but a south-west wind had been blowing all day, and there were white crests to the waves that came tumbling in past the jetty. Now and then a gust of rain passed over, but this was intermittent, and Julie paid no attention to the weather. She leaned there watching the revolving light of a distant light-ship and drinking in the splendour before her as though it had been a drug to numb her pain.

She believed herself to be alone and unobserved, as for a space she was, and she did not even hear the wheels of a car on the rough road behind her or take any note of approaching footsteps. Had she been aware of them, she would have thought it was Rolfe and would not have turned her head.

But it was not Rolfe who drew near with a certain stealthiness of tread, and when she presently became aware of someone leaning on the wall barely a yard from her, her first swift glance told her that. Even in the vague light shed by the side-lights of a car on the road she could see that this man was of a totally different stamp. He was slim and straight and active, but he had none of the rolling strength that characterized the broad frame of Rolfe the Dane. She regarded him with a momentary disparagement, for somehow she had formed a habit of measuring all men by Rolfe's standard.

But the next moment he spoke, and her attitude altered as she recognized him. For his voice was suave and cultured—the voice of a man who holds his own with ease among his fellows.

“I've been looking for you,” he said.

She started a little. The words were unexpected, and yet they were free from presumption. Rather they held a tinge of amused reproach.

Almost before she knew it, she was making confused and semi-apologetic reply. “So many things have happened. There's been so little time. Besides, I wasn't sure you really meant——”

“Of course I meant,” said Keston, still amused and slightly superior. “My dear Miss Stark, I'm full of meaning. I've nearly been round to congratulate you several times.”

She found herself flushing hotly in the darkness. "Thank you—very much," she stammered. "But—I'm glad you didn't."

"Really?" said Keston. "Isn't it a matter for congratulation, then?"

She faced him, strangely quivering. Against her will, words which she had never contemplated uttering rushed out. "It would be—I suppose—if I wanted to get married. But, you see, I don't!"

"I—see," said Keston slowly. He stood looking at her, and she felt that his gaze penetrated the gloom, noting all her humiliation, her indecision, and her despair. It was as if in those few seconds her very soul were laid bare before him and she had nothing left to hide.

Suddenly he spoke, and in his voice there was a subtle difference, a caressing quality as if he addressed a hurt child. "What about coming back with me in the car to the surgery for some tea? We shall be quite alone, and you can tell me all about it if you care to."

There was nothing startling in the suggestion. It inspired confidence in a fashion for which it would have been difficult to account. Keston knew how to handle women, and Julie, being merely a frightened girl, yielded to his practised touch without a thought.

"Oh, may I?" she said. "How kind!"

He took her lightly by the arm, and she went with him with a curious reflection that seemed to stab her that this man's treatment was very different from Rolfe's primitive methods. He gave her a sense of security and self-respect which she had not felt for very many days. If he knew of her recent escapade, and she strongly suspected that he did, he obviously was not shocked by it. A wave of intense gratitude surged through her. Here was someone at last who would understand and—possibly—even at the eleventh hour give her counsel! He was a man of the world, a man who knew many secrets, and he would know how to deal with her trouble. And she was flattered also to think that he had remembered her, had actually been looking for her.

Any misgiving that she might have entertained in the past was completely swamped by the more sinister events that had intervened. When he put her into his car and closed the door upon her, she sank back in the dark with a sigh of relief.

He got into the driver's seat in front of her, and in a moment they were slipping away towards the toll-bridge. The lights along the pavements flashed in her eyes, and she closed them in order to feel to the full the

unaccustomed luxuriousness of her surroundings. The sea air blew in upon her, and its keenness, as their progress quickened, stirred her blood. It was as if her troubles and perplexities were slipping away behind her, and she let them go with thankfulness.

Keston drove across the bridge and out into the town on the further side. Here he turned away from the main street, and very soon they were running up a quiet by-road with little traffic and few lights.

After a time he slowed down and spoke to her over his shoulder. "I'm taking you in at the back where I always leave the car. There's no surgery to-night, so we shan't be disturbed unless I get a call."

They reached a gate in a garden-wall which Julie discerned but dimly, and he stopped the car and leaned back to open the door for her.

"Better run in quickly. It's raining," he said.

She obeyed him, and pushing the gate found it open. He followed immediately behind.

They stood in a dark walled garden. "This way!" said Keston, and took her arm again.

He impelled her up a path to a building that loomed in front of them. The rain was coming down heavily, and in response to his insistence, Julie broke into a run. They brushed past some bushes and found a door.

Keston opened it. "Go straight in! It's all right. I'll turn on the light."

She heard him press a switch and found herself standing in a passage leading to a flight of stairs.

"That goes up to the surgery," Keston said. "We'll have tea in the consulting-room—first door on the right. Go in while I take off my coat!"

Julie obeyed him. She went up the stairs and entered the room on the right in which a gas-fire was burning. She switched on the light for herself, and found a comfortable apartment furnished with a writing-table, a couch, and some deep easy-chairs.

She went forward to the fire with another sigh. The contrast between this and the bare necessities of life to which she was accustomed was so marked that she felt almost as if she were in a dream.

She spread her hands to the warmth and stood there, waiting.

In a few seconds, Keston came lightly in with a tray which he set down on the table. His sleek, well-groomed appearance was all in keeping with the place. There was nothing rough or makeshift about him.

He pushed one of the arm-chairs nearer to the fire. "Sit down," he said, "while I make the tea!"

He set a copper kettle on a gas-ring beside the fire, and very soon its cheery hiss filled the room.

Julie sat and watched him, fascinated, half-awed. His hands had the deft capability of a woman's. He seemed too intent upon his task to pay much attention to her.

But when the kettle boiled, he looked across at her with a smile. "Now we'll soon have something to cheer us up. I hope you didn't get very wet."

"Oh no," she said. "I'm used to all sorts of weather."

His eyes comprehended her, and she saw in them that undisguised admiration with which he had first regarded her. But in a moment he had returned to the matter in hand.

"You'll need to be," he remarked, as he poured the boiling water into the tea-pot, "if you're going to live on board that little motor-tub of Britton's."

It was lightly spoken, but it cut her like a whip-lash. She flinched sharply.

"I'm dreading it," she said almost in a whisper.

He glanced across again with a faint smile. "It's a case of 'Needs must', is it?" he said.

The quick blood rose in her face. She made a gesture of protest. "There didn't seem to be—much choice," she said in the same half-strangled voice. "And, anyhow, it's too late—now."

"Nothing's too late beforehand," observed Keston, placing a cup of tea and a plate on a chair beside her. "What was the deciding factor—too much Stark—or too much Britton? Don't tell me if you don't want to! I shall know without."

The fiery colour died slowly out of her face. "I loathe—Reuben Stark," she said with a terrible simplicity. "And he loathes me."

"Drink some tea!" said Keston encouragingly.

She picked up the cup and began to sip its contents while he stood on the hearthrug and drank his own with his eyes upon her.

“What about Britton?” he asked, after a pause. “Rather a sudden affair with him, wasn’t it? Were you in love?”

She did not look up. Her long, black lashes made two exquisite drooping curves against the soft pallor of her skin. “I haven’t been given time to fall in love with anyone,” she said. “I’ve just been—driven all the way.”

“What an infernal shame!” said Keston.

He spoke gently, as if he feared to startle her; and her eyelids quivered in response and slowly raised themselves.

She looked up into his sallow, purposeful face. “But, you see, I can’t stop,” she said.

He looked deeply into her eyes—those amazing, velvet-dark eyes of hers—without speaking.

Several seconds passed, and then with a slight motion that was almost of apology, she dropped her gaze from his.

“I’ve got to go on with it,” she said. “It’s like being pushed over the edge of a cliff. I can’t turn back.”

“It isn’t altogether like that,” said Keston. “Surely there’s an alternative!”

“I don’t know of any.” She spoke on a dreary note of fatalism. “Besides, I’ve promised—or Rolfe thinks I have. I seem to belong to him more than I do to myself.”

“That,” said Keston very deliberately, “is nonsense. He has no power whatever over you unless you choose to allow it. No one has. We are all free agents if we choose to be.”

She shook her head. “I thought that once. I don’t now. I was born to be a slave.”

Keston made an abrupt movement that had in it something of suppressed violence. “You!” he said. “Why, with a face like yours you could get anywhere—do anything!”

She looked up at him in surprised enquiry. “What ever makes you think that?” she said. “Why?”

He laughed a little as if half-embarrassed by his own emotion. "Because," he made answer, "you're about the loveliest thing that any man could hope to meet once in a lifetime. Good heavens, child! Don't you know you're lovely?"

"Am I?" said Julie, considerably shaken. "I'd no idea. At least—I didn't think I was more than—well, just pretty."

"Good heavens!" he said again. "Just—pretty! My dear, it simply doesn't apply to you. You are the type to send men raving mad. If you had your chance you could be a queen in your own right. You are simply amazing—ravishing—if you want to know. And you're going to throw yourself away on a yokel who plies a motor-boat for hire!"

"Oh!" said Julie.

Her hand went to her heart. He had astounded her, and yet something deep within her leaped in answer, recognizing truth in his words. She gazed up at him again, trembling, yet with awakening in her eyes.

He bent towards her, half-laughing, half-impatient. "You little innocent! Don't you know it?" he said. "How on earth have you lived with yourself all this time without knowing?"

She could not tell him. The look in his eyes disconcerted her—though it fully corroborated all he had said.

"I must have been—very silly," she said tremulously.

He held out his hand to her abruptly. "Call it simple!" he suggested, as she laid hers within it. "But now you do know—what about it? Is there any special need to marry and settle down at present? Can't you get a little fun out of life first?"

"Fun!" she repeated. "I've never had any fun the whole of my life."

He squeezed her fingers. "Well, now's the time to begin," he told her. "I'll help you—if you want help. You can be my *protégée* for a while. Would you like that?"

"What do you mean?" asked Julie, slightly bewildered, but drawn almost in spite of herself by the vista of adventure that seemed to be about to unfold before her.

He answered her with the utmost lightness. "Well, I mean that I would find somewhere for you to live, and I'd come and see you and give you a

good time generally. No one could bully you to get married because no one would know where you were. Wouldn't that appeal to you?"

She drew a long, hard breath. "But—shouldn't I have to work? You couldn't—keep me for nothing."

Keston laughed. "Child, you are simple! I should keep you for love of course. That's all I should want in return,—just—love."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Love! But you don't love me!" she said. "You've only spoken to me once before."

"I've seen you," he returned. "And I'm looking at you now. I can't look at you without loving you, Julie."

The colour began to mount in her face, but she did not smile in answer. A vague distress was stirring at the back of her mind.

"But you wouldn't want to marry me," she said. "You don't mean that?"

"Good gracious, no!" laughed Keston. "I shouldn't dream of it. It's not that sort of love at all. It's something much less exacting—in its way much sweeter. A companionship for a little while—like a summer day—or perhaps a little longer. I shouldn't leave you in the lurch, my dear. And you'd be very happy while it lasted."

"I don't see how it's possible," said Julie.

"You can leave that part to me," he returned. "You've never had a good time in your life, have you? Well, I'll give you one. I'll show you lots of things you've never even dreamt of. You'll be able to put all your miseries behind you and be happy."

"And not—marry—Rolfe?" said Julie incredulously.

He laughed again. "Well, of course not! Why should you? There's no need for you to make a slave of yourself to anyone. You let me take care of you for a little while, and you'll find life a very different affair! Come, Julie, I'm offering you freedom in the place of bondage. You can't refuse it."

She was still looking at him with doubtful, questioning eyes. "But I should have to do something in return," she said. "I couldn't take everything and give nothing."

He sat down on the arm of her chair, still holding her hand. "I've told you," he said. "I'm going to find a home for you somewhere out of Beam. I know a place—a little village inn twenty miles away—where you'll be perfectly safe and no one will think of looking for you. And I can run out

and see you whenever I want a rest. Later on, I'll take you for a real holiday and we'll see life. You'll be my recreation, Julie." He put his hand upon her head and pressed it gently to him. "You won't find that very difficult, will you? Just to cheer up a weary man now and then?"

"I don't know," Julie said. She spoke as if communing with herself rather than with him. "I'm not sure—what it would mean."

"Oh, come!" he said. "You're not really such a simpleton, are you, Julie? Or a prude? It means companionship without bondage. Don't you understand?"

"Companionship?" questioned Julie with bent head, her fingers stirring restlessly in his. "D'you mean—just ordinary friendship, then?"

"Shall I tell you what I really do mean?" he said.

"Yes," said Julie.

He bent over her, and suddenly her head was back against his arm and his lips were pressing hers. "I mean this," he said—"and this—and this! If ever woman was made for man, you are that woman!"

He would have taken her in his arms as she sat; but swiftly, with a kind of wild-animal strength, she wrenched herself from him.

She stumbled to her feet, tearing his hands away from her. She faced him in a quivering fury, almost choking with wrath. "So that's what you mean, is it?" she gasped forth, swaying before him with clenched fists as though she would strike him. "You beast!—You—you devil!"

Keston was astounded. He sat for a second or two staring at her. Then abruptly he pulled himself together and got up with a laugh.

"Here endeth!" he observed, and turned from her to the desk to find a cigarette. "So that's your game, is it, my girl? You just lead men on till they fall for you, and then—in righteous indignation—you turn!"

"How dare you?" cried Julie, almost in a frenzy. "It wasn't me! It was you—it was you!"

She was literally beside herself for the moment, so violent was the revulsion of feeling within her. His coolness, his cynical accusation, above all—his laugh, maddened her. As he turned towards her, the unlighted cigarette between his sneering lips, a seething fire suddenly ran through her brain. She snatched up the cup from which she had been drinking, and hurled it full at him.

It struck him on the temple with a force that caught him unawares and made him reel with a sharp exclamation against a chair. The chair slid with his weight, and he lost his balance and went crashing down on the floor.

At the same instant there sounded in the hall outside the imperative peal of an electric bell.

Julie heard it, but it scarcely penetrated her senses. She knew only a blind desire to escape, and like a fleeing antelope she leapt for the door, flung it open, and rushed into the passage.

In her wild haste she turned away from the flight of stairs by which she had entered, found herself confronted by a hall door, fumbled desperately at the fastenings, and somehow succeeded in opening it.

A figure stood outside in the rain, but Julie scarcely saw that either. She plunged forth, neither seeing nor hearing, and was gone like a mad creature into the darkness, leaving the door open behind her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ERRAND

THE figure on the doorstep stood for a few moments watching that unconsidered flight, then with a jerk of resolution turned and entered.

At the same instant Oliver Keston, holding a handkerchief to one side of his face, came out into the passage. His face was set and grim, his brows sternly drawn. The handkerchief was stained with blood.

He stopped abruptly at sight of the visitor. "Hullo!" he said. "How on earth did you get here?"

"Just arrived," rejoined Sybil curtly. "I rang."

Keston stood, staring at her. He had been on his way to the surgery, but this new development checked him.

Sybil, pale but self-possessed, met his look with the utmost directness.

They spoke simultaneously. She said, "What have you done to yourself?" and he, "I suppose that little wild-cat must have run into you."

Then Sybil took command. She had never been more sure of herself than at that moment. "You'd better let me wash that," she said. "Yes, I saw Julie. Never mind her now! Come along!"

She opened the surgery door, turned on the light, and threw off her coat.

Strangely, Oliver Keston submitted to her brief behests. She pulled a chair up to the basin, and he sat down in it while she ran off some water.

"It's a beastly gash," she commented. "Any lysol about? Oh, I see," opening a cupboard. "Keep still! I know what to do."

She was most business-like and efficient, and he made no attempt to direct her, yielding himself to her ministrations as though still a little dazed by the turn of events.

She bathed and anointed and finally applied lint and bandage with a dexterity which might have been professional, while Keston sat in unbroken silence somewhat like a man with a drawn sword awaiting attack.

But when Sybil had finished, she gave no sign of aggression. She simply took out her cigarette-case and placed a cigarette between his lips, took one herself, and proceeded to light them both.

“Let’s go back to the other room,” she said then, “and be comfortable!”

He got up, still without speaking. There was something imperious yet strangely gracious about her which held if it did not compel him.

They returned to the consulting-room, and Sybil directed him to the chair before the fire in which Julie had so lately been seated.

He spoke then, rather harshly. “What about you?”

She waved her cigarette at him. “I’m coming to that. I’ll sit down in a minute. Feeling all right?”

“Perfectly all right.” His voice had a surly, shamed note. He leaned back in the chair, looking up at her.

“Good!” said Sybil, and drew in a deep breath of smoke which she exhaled as slowly, her eyes on the ceiling. “You’re wondering what brought me here. I’ll tell you. I’ve been thinking things over quite a lot lately, and they all seem to point to one conclusion.”

“And what’s that?” said Keston as she paused.

She looked down at him suddenly and he wondered for a moment if the smoke had affected her, for her eyelids were red. “Well, if you want to know,” she said. “I came in to ask you to marry me.”

“What?” said Keston.

He was on his feet in a second, but she had turned away. She stood with her back to him, her head bent.

“You’d better take time to answer,” she said in a voice that did not sound quite like her own. “Don’t do anything in a hurry!”

“Sybil!” he said. He came close to her without touching her. He spoke almost in a whisper over her shoulder. “Oh, if you’d only said it before!”

“Why?” she said, without turning.

“Because it’s too late now,” he answered in the same strained undertone.

“Why?” she said again.

“Because I’m a cur,” he said in a sudden passion of self-loathing. “I’ve just made a foul suggestion to that girl, and she had the decency to throw something at me and go.”

“Well?” said Sybil half-defiantly, her head still bent.

“You could never marry me after that,” he said.

“Ass!” said Sybil. She moved abruptly, turned and gripped him by the arms. “Oliver! I drove you to it—and I’m sorry. If we’d been engaged—it wouldn’t have happened.”

She had dropped her cigarette, and—there was no doubt about it—her eyes, those cold light eyes, were full of tears. There was even a sharp sob in her throat as she continued.

“I’ve been a damn’ fool—and so have you. But we love each other. So let’s wash it out!”

“Sybil!” he said again, and braced himself as if to resist her.

But she broke into a choking laugh and thrust her arms round his neck. “Don’t stand there like an idiot! I’ve told you I love you. What more do you want? Don’t you dare to turn me down!”

He clasped her to him; there was no alternative. But: “I’m a swine, Sybil,” he whispered over her upturned face. “I’m not fit to lick the blacking off your shoes.”

“Darling, of course not!” she whispered back. “That’s what I never could get you to understand. But thank goodness it’s dawned on you at last. So you can kiss me instead. Or must I kiss you first?”

He laughed at that, holding her fast against his heart. But before he kissed her lips, he kissed the tears away from her eyes.

“You’re a bit of an angel, Sybil,” he said after an interval.

“Only just found it out?” she asked. “Well, I’ve given up the multi-coloured millionaire for your sake, so perhaps I am. Or a fool! I wonder which. D’you know I’ve lost my cigarette? And you’ve thrown yours away. Let’s start again and be rational, shall we?”

He held her a moment longer rather urgently. “Are you sure you want to marry me?” he said. “Quite sure?”

She leaned her face against his shoulder. “Would you be he-man enough to marry me if I said I didn’t?” she countered.

“Yes,” he said with sudden force. “Yes, a thousand times! Sybil, I always meant to marry you. You know that. I’ve made a beast of myself, but—”

“Stop!” Her hand was on his lips. She smiled straight into his eyes. “I meant to marry you too. And now—well, now I mean to more than ever. So that’s settled—definitely. Do let’s find our cigarettes and get down to details! Oh, and I’ve one suggestion to make. If we ever want to fight, let’s always sit down and smoke a cigarette first! Will you agree to that?”

“I’ll agree to anything,” he said with almost fierce docility.

She laughed and drew herself away. “You won’t for long. It isn’t in you—or me either. But never mind! I dare say we shan’t hurt each other much. We’ll try not to, anyway. D’you know, I shouldn’t be awfully surprised if we managed to knock a little happiness out of life between us?”

“I’ll make you happy or die for it,” said Oliver.

She was kneeling on the hearth. She sat back on her heels with a smouldering cigarette in each hand.

“Now which is which, I wonder? That must be yours because it’s bitten. You must never do that again, Oliver. I can’t have a husband who bites.”

He stooped over her, his hands on her wrists. “Give me yours, darling, and throw the other one away—and all that’s bad in me with it!”

She gave him the unbitten cigarette, but she kept the other, and after a moment she put it between her lips. “There’s nothing bad left,” she said. “It tastes quite good. In fact, I’ve never felt so good in my life, and I don’t believe you have either. Oliver,” suddenly and very rapidly, “let’s hang on to it!”

He stooped lower and kissed her forehead. “For ever and ever, Sybil,” he said, and in his voice there was something that made the words sound like the utterance of a vow. “Your love has made it worth while.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Yes, I suppose love does do that. But we won’t be sloppy about it. I’m going to be terribly sensible.”

He laughed a little as he stood up, but his face looked less cynical than she had ever seen it as he said: “That’s just the part of you that I love the best.”

CHAPTER IX

THE GIFT

JULIE went down the road like a whirlwind. She saw the lights of the town in front of her and headed for them with the instinctive idea of seeking safety among her fellow-beings. The adventure had filled her with horror, the more so because she had, as it were, stepped into the trap of her own accord. It seemed to her that the whole world was at enmity with her, and a kind of fury mixed with her despair. She was in a mood to do desperate things.

She reached the main street of Beam, and here perforce she was compelled to slacken her pace. For it was Saturday and the shopping hour. It was impossible to push through the loitering crowds at any speed.

Moreover, the lighted shops gave her some sort of comfort. She realized that the privacy of her dreary little room at Honeyball Farm would only tend to push her further into the depths of despair. And she did not want to run the risk of meeting Rolfe. Above all, she did not want to meet him. For she knew that he would fathom her distress in a second, and he would never rest until he had ascertained the cause.

These considerations induced her to check her hastening feet. After all, there was no danger of pursuit. She was absolutely safe, and there was no incentive whatever to hurry back. She began to linger among the sauntering, gossiping throng.

She had no money with her. Emily did her own shopping now. Had she had anything to spend, the lighted windows would have attracted her more. But even as it was, she found herself drawn with a feminine interest towards one shop in particular—the largest in Beam—which was decorated especially for Christmas, now barely three weeks away. It displayed a good many of the objects most dear to a woman's heart, and she paused long before it, fascinated by the brightness and colour spread out to her gaze, and forgetting in the spectacle something of the distress of mind which had brought her thither.

So far as she knew she was completely alone and unrecognized; her time was her own, and there was no reason for hurry. The people who passed or stopped to gossip and gaze near her were of no account in her estimation. She had made no friends in Beam. Reuben Stark's associates were not of the type that she would have cared to know, and in fact she had never met any of them.

Consequently when, after a period of grave contemplation, she was preparing to move onward, a light touch on her shoulder made her start violently. She looked round to find a tall man in black whom she had only met once before confronting her.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken," said Sir Philip Tredville in his well-bred, slightly condescending voice. "Good evening. Miss Stark!" He raised his hat. "Are you choosing your trousseau by any chance? I wonder if I might be allowed to congratulate you on your coming marriage, since I believe I am to have the privilege of performing the ceremony."

Julie was caught in a swift embarrassment which was all the greater when she realized that he was not alone. A big, square-shouldered man accompanied him—a formidable-looking person with bushy brows set in a somewhat belligerent face that reminded her vaguely of someone though she could not have said whom.

She began to murmur incoherent thanks to Sir Philip whose cynical smile had an immensely disconcerting effect upon her.

"Time's getting short now, isn't it?" he said. "Is it going to be a hat or a veil, I wonder? The less adornment the better in your case, I should say."

The elderly man beside him spoke, and the gentleness of his voice came as a surprise to Julie in her confusion. "Let it be a veil!" he said. "There is no lovelier setting for a lovely face."

She turned to him almost with relief, for there was a reassuring quality about him which Sir Philip lacked.

"It's very kind of you to say so," she said. "But it can't be a veil, anyhow. It's going to be very quiet. I haven't bought anything so far."

"What—nothing?" he said. "I thought all brides had to have their fling for the great occasion." His eyes smiled at her with a shrewd kindness. "I hope you have a long life of happiness before you, anyway," he said.

A faint glow went through Julie. She thanked him with less shyness, feeling that this was a man to be trusted.

“And when is the wedding-day?” he asked.

“It’s a week to-day,” she told him. “We are going away in the boat directly after. I don’t think anybody will be there. I hope not.”

“May I come?” he asked unexpectedly.

She coloured in her quick, ingenuous way, and Sir Philip laughed.

“I assure you you are very highly honoured,” he said. “He only means to the church, of course. Your father couldn’t object to that.”

Julie captured her dignity with an effort. “You would be very welcome,” she said to the stranger. “But there won’t be anything to see.”

“A matter of opinion!” he said. “Don’t wait for me, Sir Philip! You have an appointment, I know. I will follow in a few minutes.”

It was courteously if abruptly uttered, and Sir Philip smiled and went his way up the crowded street, leaving Julie a little bewildered but not ill at ease in the presence of this man with the fighting face and the friendly eyes who still somehow stirred her memory though she was convinced that she had never seen him before.

He drew her into a passage between the shining shop-windows that led to one of the entrances. “If I am coming to your wedding,” he said, “I should like to give you a present. May I? Sir Philip will vouch for my respectability.”

She did not know how to answer him. The situation was entirely beyond her. “You’re very kind,” she stammered. “But—you don’t even know me.”

“That’s true,” he said. “But I have taken a fancy to you. And I have some slight acquaintance with the lad you are going to marry. I should like you to buy something for your trousseau, child, if only to satisfy an old man’s whim.”

He had taken out his pocket-book, and to her amazement he drew forth a handful of notes, rolled them up, and offered them to her. It seemed to Julie the most astounding thing that had ever happened in the whole of her life.

She gazed at him, not attempting to take his gift.

“Please accept it!” he said. “I assure you I am quite in earnest and in full possession of my senses. No doubt you think me eccentric. Perhaps I am. But I have heard something of your history—through Sir Philip Tredville. And as I like every love-story to have a happy ending, I should like to be allowed to contribute towards its attainment.”

“But”—gasped Julie with her hands behind her—“I don’t—even know you. And Rolfe—does Rolfe?”

She put the question incredulously, and he shook his head. “Not very well, no. But perhaps—in the future—I may come to know you both better than I do now. In any case, please take this and buy some of the things that every girl needs when she gets married! I shall be very disappointed if you refuse.”

His tone held insistence as well as persuasion. Almost against her will Julie abandoned her attitude of aloofness.

“But I ought not to take it,” she said half-beseechingly. “Really I ought not.”

He pressed his gift upon her with a sudden peremptoriness that overbore all further opposition. “You take it!” he said. “And spend it, mind! Don’t put it by! Buy something really festive and enjoy yourself! I shall hope to see the result on your wedding-day, and you mustn’t disappoint me. I’m getting an old man, and I like to see my whims satisfied.” He closed her hand upon the notes with his own. “Don’t go and lose them!” he said, smiling at her. “Buy a bag first to put them in! You needn’t tell anybody where it comes from. Good-bye and good luck!”

He was gone with the words, leaving Julie too astonished for any thanks; and when she came to herself and would have run after him, he was already out of sight. She thought he must have turned into a men’s club a few yards distant, and she would certainly have lacked the courage to have followed him there.

Half-dazed, she grasped the roll of paper he had thrust into her hands and with her back to the crowd of shoppers she made a hasty effort to count the notes. The result made her gasp again. There were twenty-three pounds and at the back of them a five-pound note. He had presented her with the whole contents of his pocket-book.

She looked up, feeling as Cinderella must have felt when the fairy-coach stopped at her door. It seemed impossible that so much money could be all her own—and the gift of a complete stranger. She would have deemed him mad had it not been for the fact of Sir Philip’s presence, which somehow served to place the whole affair on a solid foundation.

But there was the money, and time was short. She had the means to buy a wedding outfit such as even the stylish Belinda could not despise. What

matter if it had come to her almost miraculously? It was there, and she had been commanded to use it.

A sudden wild impulse possessed her that was akin to intoxication. She would do it. She would have her fling. She would spend the money. For once—just for once in her life—she would enjoy herself. And if her benefactor did come to her wedding, he should see that his gift had been laid out to the best advantage.

With a sensation as of treading on air, she turned with the notes fast gripped in her hand, and entered the shop.

CHAPTER X

GOSSIP

BELINDA was singing blithely to herself in the doorway of the hovel which once had belonged to Old Columbus. She was cheery by nature, and, as she had remarked to Joe Muster that morning when he had received a poor report of his ailing wife, she was always one to look on the bright side. The cottage was beginning to have quite a habitable appearance and was sure to prove an attraction to seaside visitors, who could be expected quite early in the year, since Beam was a sheltered spot.

It was a pleasant afternoon after the rain. Winter seemed to be in abeyance, and Belinda had taken advantage of such light as the sinking sun afforded to hang some bright blue curtains which she had just finished making in the windows. Young Micky was in the background looking as usual half-scared and wholly furtive. She had given him a packet of toffee and told him to keep out of her way.

There were not many loiterers about on the jetty, for the wind was fresh, and between the closing and reopening of the bar on Sundays the fishermen of Beam usually went home for a meal and a sleep. But Belinda was keeping one eye on the few passers-by while she stitched at a cushion-cover, and now and then she almost had the appearance of watching for someone.

The *Circe* rocked gently at her moorings at the end of the jetty, but there was no sign of Rolfe. He too was probably occupied in some sort of domestic task in preparation for his bride in a few days' time, and Belinda's mouth hardened whenever she glanced in the direction of the yacht. But if she expected to see him, she looked in vain. Possibly he also was making the most of the daylight, and would not sally forth to seek Julie's company until it had gone.

Belinda pulled at her cotton with a somewhat vicious precision. To station herself directly in his path should he emerge was a perfectly legitimate proceeding, but to run after him was beneath her dignity.

However, her natural cheerfulness soon reasserted itself, and she sang again with a certain shrill defiance. There were more ways than the obvious of achieving her end.

In fact, it seemed as if Fate were playing into her hands that day, for, before she came to the end of her stitchery, Micky suddenly made his appearance behind her with bolting eyes.

“Skipper’s coming!” he said, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of a little corner-window that looked towards the shore.

Belinda stopped singing and glanced over her shoulder. It was true. The lurching figure of Reuben Stark had just left the gate of Honeyball Farm and was moving with a heavy roll towards them.

“He’s coming!” said Micky with a gasp of terror.

Belinda transferred her attention to him. “Oh, go and boil yourself, you great looney!” she said indulgently. “What are you afraid of? He won’t eat you.”

Micky made no reply, but promptly effaced himself in the inner apartment while Belinda took up the thread of her song with a smile at the corners of her mouth.

Reuben’s progress was somewhat spasmodic. He paused every few steps to scan the sea under scowling brows, and when he reached the old boat which once had plied on the ferry service he stopped to survey that also.

Finally he came alongside Belinda’s cottage, and scraped his feet by way of salute.

Belinda lifted amused eyes. “Good afternoon, Captain Stark!” she said.

“Afternoon!” said Stark. “You’ve made some changes here.”

Belinda tossed her mop of fair hair. “And for the better, I hope,” she rejoined. “There was plenty of room for improvement.”

Stark advanced to the step and looked in. “All new-fangled!” was his comment, not uttered with any great enthusiasm.

“Well, of course!” said Belinda calmly. “What would you expect? It was nothing but a pigsty before.”

He grunted in reply, and there was a pause. Then he suddenly burst out. “Girls nowadays—always spending money! There’s no holding ’em in.”

“So long as they’ve got any to spend,” said Belinda, “you can’t complain.”

Reuben stamped on the threshold like an angry bull. “*If* they’ve got it—p’raps not! But if they expect someone else to pay——”

“Ah, that’s different,” said Belinda. “I don’t believe in running up bills either, myself.”

“If she’s dared to do that,” said Reuben deeply, “I’ll scrag her.”

Belinda laughed. “Oh, it’s Julie you’re talking about! You saw her come home with all those parcels last night.”

“I didn’t,” said Reuben. “But Emily did. Who’s paying for it? That’s what I want to know. Not that prize fool Britton, is he? I’m just on my way to ask.”

“Ho!” said Belinda. “I’d not do that if I were you. Have you asked Julie herself?”

“I’ve not,” said Reuben, his red eyes glowering. “For why? Because I don’t trust her to tell me the truth. But I mean to find out—because if she’s got ’em on tick they’ll go back, every single one of ’em. I’m not going to give her a rig-out for her wedding—not after the shameful way she’s behaved—damned if I am!”

Belinda hummed a little tune as if to demonstrate that his intentions were of small importance to her. But after a few moments she broke off to say, “Well, I don’t mind telling you that you’ll be making a mistake if you go to Rolfe Britton about it. If you want the wedding to come off, you’ll keep your own counsel.”

“What d’you mean by that?” demanded Reuben, regarding her with a certain unwilling respect for her shrewdness. “If he’s not given her the money, then she’s running up bills for me to pay after she’s married. And I’ll not have it. I’ll put a stop to it before it happens.”

Belinda shrugged her shoulders. “Men are all alike,” she said. “They always jump to conclusions.”

“Well, what else is there?” said Reuben, sensing in spite of himself that she might possibly see further than he did.

Belinda’s faint smile had more than a tinge of superiority. “I should be more inclined to ask who else if I were you, Captain Stark.”

“What?” said Stark. His lips suddenly began to work as if he were devouring something. “What the hell are you driving at?”

Belinda raised her chin. “Is that the way to speak to a lady?”

“Oh, go on!” he said with fierce impatience. “You’ll drive me balmy among you. Who else? Who else? Why, she doesn’t know anybody besides that gorilla Britton.”

“Ho! Doesn’t she?” said Belinda softly. “That means you don’t see very far beyond your nose, doesn’t it?”

Reuben growled in savage response. For some reason Belinda was one of those people with whom an open rupture did not seem worth while.

She continued with a flicker of her light eyelashes. “I suppose it’s never occurred to you that—other people besides Rolfe Britton might take an interest in Julie?”

Reuben’s own eyes widened. “What?” he said again. “You mean to tell me——”

“I’ll tell you what I know if you like,” said Belinda; “that is, if you keep a civil tongue in your head. I’m not a mischief-maker—never was, but there’s some things as p’raps you ought to know. One of them is”—she paused to give full effect to her words—“well, that young locum doctor—you know—Dr. Keston. He’s had his eye on Miss Julie for some time past.”

“Him?” ejaculated Reuben, literally staggered by sheer astonishment. “You don’t mean that! He’d never——”

Belinda broke in with prim precision. “I’m not making any accusations, Captain Stark. But—situated as I am—I hear and see a good deal more than some folks. For instance, that Sunday as poor Grandfather passed away, I saw him stop and speak to her then. That was probably the beginning of it. I don’t know how often they may have met since, but I do know that only yesterday evening he was over this side with his car, and he picked her up by the sea-wall there and took her off with him. That I do know. So maybe the shopping afterwards had something to do with that.”

She paused, and Reuben uttered an oath of so lurid a nature that she gave a start as if at a clap of thunder.

“You sure of this?” he demanded before she could attempt to exact an apology.

“Sure?” said Belinda. “Of course I’m sure. I’m not one to make statements that I’m not sure of. She’s been hanging round there a good many evenings lately. It’s a wonder you haven’t seen her for yourself.”

“How am I to see to things when I’ve got that blasted ferrying to do?” said Reuben. “And you—how did you manage to see her? You’ve got your job to attend to too.”

“I’m not aware,” said Belinda haughtily, “that I mentioned that I did see her, although it was close to the old *Swan* and I very well might have.”

“Yes, but the bar don’t look out that way,” exploded Reuben. “That means you didn’t see her. And how am I to know that’s not just a piece of gossip like all the rest?”

“All the rest was true—and proved true,” pointed out Belinda. “As to gossip, well, you know what Beam is. This fresh thing is probably all over the place by now. I’m not responsible for it if it is.”

“Then who is?” shouted Reuben. “Ah!” with a jerk that nearly overbalanced him, “I know who’s at the back of this! It’s that young Micky again! I’ll cut his tongue out for him if it is. I’ll—I’ll——”

“Now be quiet!” commanded Belinda with sudden authority. “You’ve no right to put everything on to Micky. There’s no harm in the boy, and he’s not to be bullied. It wasn’t Micky, as a matter of fact. It was someone quite different, but I’m not going to tell you who. We’ll leave him out of it. After all, it’s Julie you ought to go for—if you want to know the truth—no one else. And if she’s been taking presents from Dr. Keston, I’d find out what for, or go and tell Rolfe. I’d not stand any nonsense from her, and I’d not let Rolfe marry her in ignorance either.” Her voice rose a little, and for a moment or two the woman who would be Belinda in years to come was unpleasantly apparent. “It’s a crying shame,” she said. “Men make fools of themselves for the sake of a pretty face when all the rest is gone bad like seaweed that’s rotted in the sun. And if they only knew the truth beforehand, they wouldn’t do it. They’d turn to girls as kept themselves respectable and knew how to make decent homes for them. It’s a sheer disgrace, that’s what it is. You know what Julie is. And there’s Rolfe thinking her all that’s lovely and desirable. And she isn’t! She’s just—well, you know what she is.”

She seemed to come to herself abruptly, for she stopped and passed her hand over her mouth as if to check an outburst for which she was scarcely responsible. Then in a second, rather tremulously, she laughed.

“Well, she’s your daughter, anyway, Captain Stark, and it’s for you to deal with her. You can take it from me that what I’ve told you is the truth, though, mind, I’m not saying that it was Dr. Keston that gave her money to go shopping with. That’s for you—not me—to find out. And I shouldn’t let the grass grow till I knew—not if I was you, I shouldn’t.”

Reuben had listened to her with a heavy brow and twitching lips. The shrillness of Belinda’s denunciation seemed to have had a sobering effect upon him, for his own anger had died down. He looked at her with an attention that he had not before bestowed upon her.

“Oh, I see,” he said finally, “it’s all a game—all a game. But I’d sooner play your game than Jooly’s—for a reason I’m not prepared to give. I’m going to find out the whole truth of this now—if I die for it. So you just wait a bit, Belinda! And those as lives longest’ll see most.”

He swung round with the words, stood swaying a little with his back to her, and then went lurching away as he had come, but without any pausing, his sinister face turned resolutely towards Honeyball Farm.

Belinda remained motionless in her doorway watching him till Micky crept forth from his hiding-place and came and pressed against her like a frightened dog.

“He won’t get me, will he, Belinda? He didn’t know it was me that told you?”

Belinda gave an impatient shrug which seemed to restore her completely to herself.

“Oh, get along, do, you great silly!” she said, and dug at him with her elbow. “He’s not even thinking of you. He’s got something much more important than that on his mind. And so’ll Rolfe have before long.”

There was triumph in her voice, but Micky did not heed it. He slunk back again into a dark corner and crouched there like a trapped animal seeking the most direct means of escape, while Belinda finished her tasks.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST STAND

REUBEN'S return to Honeyball Farm was made known to all within its walls by the thunderous banging of the door.

"Here's the skipper in one of his tantrums!" said Emily to Peter in the kitchen.

And Julie overhead paused suddenly in the act of adjusting a cream felt hat on her dark head and listened intently.

A moment later she heard a bellowing up the stairs that set her heart beating wildly. "Here, Jooly—you—Jooly! Come down! I want to speak to you."

She summoned her courage swiftly. It was no moment for weakness. With hasty decision she pulled the hat on more firmly and walked to her door and opened it.

"Are you calling me?" she said. "I'm just going out."

It had not been her intention until that instant, for she had been merely trying on her new garments; but she was fully dressed, and she looked as Reuben had never seen her look as she appeared at the head of the stairs.

He gazed up at her, scowling. Her attire was very simple, but she had chosen a frock and coat of cloudy blue that made her vivid colouring positively arresting. She stood there looking down upon him with something in her bearing which made her surroundings seem even more dingy and sordid than usual.

It incensed Reuben, and yet for the moment it held him tongue-tied. Then, with an inarticulate sound, he broke through the spell.

"Don't stand there staring! Come down!" he ordered. "I've got something to say to you, and not much time to say it in."

She came half-way down the stairs, and stopped. "What's the matter?" she said.

He had found his voice and he made the most of it. "Matter!" he roared. "You may well ask that—dressed up in your ill-gotten finery and daring to stand there as though you'd a right to it!"

"I have a right to it," said Julie, and she spoke calmly in spite of the longing of her heart. "It's nothing to you in any case."

"Nothing to me!" The skipper almost choked. "Nothing to me!" he reiterated. "You think I'm going to be put off like that, do you? Nothing to me—when it's thanks to me you're getting married at all! Where'd you get the money to buy those clothes with? You tell me that!"

"I'm not going to tell you," said Julie, and her voice was still resolute though the colour went out of her face. "That's my affair, and no one else's."

"Oh, is it your affair?" said Reuben. He regarded her ferociously, realizing that if he did not carry the position by storm he would fail to carry it at all. "Well, you're still under my roof and under my legal authority. And I can still spank you if you give me any of your lip. I know very well why you don't want to tell me where you got those clothes from. I know what you were up to last night, and where you went, and all about it. And I'll tell you this, my girl." He was working himself up into a fury because the delicate figure above him somehow imposed upon him an illusion of superior strength—of inaccessibility—which seemed to place him at a disadvantage. "Unless you take off them things and pack 'em up straight away to go back to-morrow, Rolfe Britton is going to know all about it too. And if you think he's going to marry you after that, well, you take him for a bigger fool than I do."

He stopped, for Julie had suddenly lifted a quivering hand for silence. Her voice came down to him with a ring of passionate bitterness. "So they've been telling wicked lies about me again, have they?" she said. "And you think you're going to make Rolfe believe them!"

Reuben seized upon the challenge and flung it fiercely back. "Oh, you call it a lie, do you? You're going to deny that you went off in the doctor's car, and came back hours after laden with presents? You'd better be careful what you say, for you won't improve your case that way."

"I didn't deny it!" declared Julie, and suddenly she was raging, goaded beyond all endurance. "I don't deny what's true, only what's false. But it's a lie to say he gave me any presents. He didn't. I wouldn't have taken them

from him. They came from someone quite different, and I'm not going to tell you who."

"Maybe you'll tell Rolfe!" snarled the skipper.

"I won't tell anyone," she threw back. "It's my secret, and I'm going to keep it."

"All right then," rejoined Reuben. "Then Rolfe will be told the whole story—all about your joy-ride with the doctor, which you can't deny, and all about your coming back late all loaded up with parcels. And if he's going to believe any cock-and-bull yarn about the last—then my name's not Reuben Stark. We men are not so simple as all that. When we see a girl as is willing to sell herself—it's pay and take."

"How dare you?" cried Julie. "How dare you?" She was as white as death; perhaps never in her life had she been nearer to the wild insanity of anger which is the first impulse of murder than in that moment. She even glanced round instinctively for some missile to throw, but there was none to her hand. She stamped furiously upon the stair. "You're wicked!" she cried. "You're wicked—every one of you! I—I'd kill you if I could!"

And then she turned, for something seemed to break within her, and she could bear no more. With a terrible burst of weeping that was wholly beyond her control, she fled back to her room and banged the door, flung herself across the bed, and then in a panic rummaged under the pillow for the knife which she always kept for self-protection.

If he should follow her—if he should attack her—he had threatened her again—he might seize this last opportunity to chastise and humble her. If he did—if he did! She choked back her agony of crying. She must not let herself go like this. He would have her at a disadvantage. She must be ready for him. If he came, she must be the first to strike. She must have a firm hand—sure aim. . . .

With a supreme effort she restrained her anguish. With the knife in her grasp she stood up and faced the door. If he dared to come to her now, she was ready—she was ready!

But she heard no blundering footsteps on the stairs—no sound whatever for the space of many seconds; till suddenly through the tense silence there came again the clanging of the front door, and she knew that he had gone.

After that she did not know what happened. One thought only crashed across her brain—Rolfe! He was probably going to Rolfe with his vile

slander. And with it a blinding light that seemed to pierce her shone through her soul and was gone.

“Rolfe!” she gasped. “Rolfe!”—and fell sideways across the bed.

The knife dropped from her senseless fingers and tinkled on the floor.

CHAPTER XII

THE PRESENTIMENT

WAS she awake? Or was she dreaming? Someone was holding her, whispering her name. There was a warm and comforting touch on her forehead.

She opened her eyes. The winter dusk was falling. "Rolfe!" she said again weakly.

She scarcely expected an answer, but Rolfe's voice came, hushed and kind, yet matter-of-fact as ever.

"Why, what's happened to you, Julie?" he said. "You don't often throw a faint."

She gasped a little and came to herself. She was lying on her bed and resting against his shoulder while he chafed her chilled hands. The warmth of him went through her like the generous glow of a fire.

"That's better," he said. "You'll be all right in a minute. I came along to see you, but you were nowhere about, so I came straight up. What's happened? No one's hurt you?"

"No," she said, "no," and lay for a space longer in his hold, gradually gathering her strength. "Did you—see the skipper?" she asked at length.

"Yes," said Rolfe. "But he was a bit inarticulate. I gathered he'd been having a refresher. He's gone off now in the ferry."

"Didn't he tell you—anything?" asked Julie, with a dull wonder as to how much longer that comforting warmth would pervade her numbed being.

"I think he tried to," said Rolfe. "But I wasn't listening. I was in too great a hurry to get to you. What's come to you, Julie? You don't suppose anything he said could cut any ice with me, do you?"

"I don't know," she said. "Wouldn't it?"

His cheek brushed her forehead. “When will you begin to know me?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Julie, and her voice quivered a little. “I don’t think I ever have. But he’s not the only person who’ll be saying vile things about me now.”

“They won’t say them to me,” said Rolfe.

“Oh, you’ll hear—sooner or later,” Julie spoke with a weary fatefulness. “Besides—it’s partly true.”

“What’s true?” said Rolfe.

She shook her head against his shoulder. “I can’t tell you about it. I dare say you wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

“Not believe *you!*” he said.

She caught her breath in a faint sob. “People always believe the worst.”

“And you think I would—of you?” said Rolfe.

She was silent.

“I don’t know,” she said again. “But I haven’t done anything wrong—whatever they say.”

“Of course you haven’t,” said Rolfe.

She sat up, slowly withdrawing herself from him. “But you might think it wrong, all the same,” she said.

He looked at her in the fading light. “That means you don’t trust me,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t,” she answered. “It only means that we don’t look at things in the same way.”

“Well, you’re not putting me in the same boat as the skipper, I hope?” said Rolfe.

“No,” she said, “I’m not. Because you’re a gentleman and he isn’t. But when they tell you that I went out in Dr. Keston’s car last night, and when I tell you that I went to the surgery and had some tea—I expect you’ll be pretty mad.”

She got up with the words and stood before him, her hand on the iron rail of the bedstead, awaiting his wrath.

But Rolfe remained seated, and his expression did not alter. His blue eyes continued to regard her with absolute steadiness as he said, "It's nice of you to tell me, Julie."

She uttered a short sigh. "No, it isn't, because you're sure to hear. And I think I'd rather tell you myself first. But that isn't all."

"I don't know that I want to hear any more," said Rolfe.

"There isn't—much more," she said, "and I dare say you won't believe it when you do. After I left the surgery I went and bought some things—the things I've got on now—with some money that was given me by another man for a wedding present. That's the truth and it's all I can tell you. It was given me out of kindness—nothing else—which is what people like the skipper can't understand."

"I am like the skipper, then!" remarked Rolfe briefly.

She laughed a little; her fingers were working rather nervously along the bed-rail. "No, I don't mean that. But I admit it doesn't sound a likely tale. But I don't care"—she raised her chin defiantly—"it's the truth."

"Of course it's the truth!" said Rolfe.

She started, and her dark eyes opened wide. "Why, of course?" she said.

"Because you say so," he rejoined somewhat curtly. "That's good enough for me. You couldn't lie if you tried."

"Oh!" Julie gave a gasp. "Don't be silly!" she said.

Rolfe made a quiet movement and laid his hand over her restless one, holding it still. "You could never lie to me, Julie," he said. "And I don't believe you would ever try. Thank you for telling me these things. There was really no need." He stood up with the words. "Shall we go now? I thought you would come and have tea with me and see the latest improvements."

She looked up at him. Her lip was quivering. "D'you really trust me—like that?" she said.

His hand pressed hers gently, with a certain restraint. "I'd trust you to the world's end," he said. "And—my dear—if it isn't too much to ask—I'd like you to trust me too."

She made a small, shy movement and stood mute.

He went on. "P'raps I haven't given you much reason to in the past, but—after this—Julie, I swear to you that I'll put your happiness and peace of

mind before my own—always. I'll never push you into giving me anything you want to keep back. That's a solemn promise, and I'll stand by it."

His voice had a deep note of sincerity, and it affected Julie very strangely. She put up her free hand and laid it softly against his breast.

"Thank you," she said, in a tremulous whisper. "Rolfe, thank you. I never thought you'd really believe me, or be satisfied not to know any more. It's—it's lovely to be trusted—like that." Her voice wavered and broke. "I shan't forget it—ever," she added, in a whisper; "or what you've just said—either."

He drew her gently to him. "My little Julie!" he said. "I mean it—every word. I'll be awfully good to you. Only believe in me—as I believe in you!"

She lifted her face like a child and their lips met. There was something very solemn in that moment, as though they had climbed together to a higher level than either had ever attained before.

The wild crying of a wheeling gull close to the window seemed to recall Julie. She turned her head towards it with a shiver.

"It's getting dark already," she said. "You go on ahead! I won't be long. But I must change first."

"I haven't admired the wedding clothes," he said. "Can't you keep them on?"

She laughed and disengaged herself. "No, of course not. They are much too fine. And you're not supposed to see them yet. You go and boil the kettle! Oh, what am I treading on? It's that horrible knife!"

She stooped to pick it up.

"I'll take it," he said.

But she held it back, eventually tossing it on the bed. "No. I may want it. He'll probably come back drunker than ever."

"I hate to think of you relying on a thing like that," he said.

She laughed. "I'm not really afraid. And it isn't for much longer. It's getting late. Please go—or I shall never be dressed."

"Can't I wait?" said Rolfe.

She shook her head. "No. You go and get the tea! And perhaps—if you're good—I'll get it for you this time next week."

He yielded somewhat reluctantly, and went down the stairs. Down in the hall he paused for a few moments to fill and light his pipe. The place was dreary and half-dark. He wished that Julie had not sent him on ahead, but he wanted very much to please her that evening.

Moreover, the skipper would be safely on the other side of the river by that time, and when he returned he would in all likelihood be too fuddled to give any further thought to Julie. Still, Rolfe wanted to linger. The whole atmosphere seemed to him inexpressibly evil, as though some hostile influence were lurking in the shadows. A feeling that was almost in the nature of a presentiment came upon him as he stood there—a feeling that he could not have explained as of something waiting to entrap her. He wished fervently that he could have taken her away then and there, but he knew that she would not have consented, and his own common sense told him that it was better to wait for the few days that remained. They could not—they dared not—do anything to Julie with him so close at hand.

He resolved to keep a strict watch and to be near her as often as possible. But even so, as at length he opened the front door and passed out, the sense of some hovering disaster hung upon him, and he felt as if some evil spirit were jeering behind his back. Yet if he had turned to confront it, the thing would have melted into space.

CHAPTER XIII

RETRIBUTION

IT was late that night when Reuben Stark came back in his ferry-boat with one or two fares who had waited for the closing of *The Crown and Sceptre* on the town side of the river-mouth.

Peter Prawle steered the boat and brought her round to the jetty where the passengers lurched ashore. He then proceeded to beach her at a run, the skipper remaining hunched in the stern.

It was not until she ground upon the shingle that Reuben stirred. He got out of the boat with the heavy roll of a man who can only just guide himself, lifted his face to the dark and drizzling heavens and swore deeply. Then, without a word to his mate, he turned towards Honeyball Farm.

Reaching the gate he looked along the jetty to where the light of the *Circe* shone through the gloom and swore again. Finally he let himself in and banged the door, as was his custom.

But though it was late he did not go up to his room, but turned along the passage that led to the observatory. The lamp in the hall lighted it dimly, and he felt along the walls with both hands until he reached the open doorway. Then he blundered in and almost fell against the old battered chair which stood before the table.

He dragged this back with an oath. There was usually a candle kept within reach, and he felt for it, but without finding it. The sparse lights along the jetty shone vaguely in, and, abandoning the search for the candle, he groped for a locker under one of the wide windows. This he succeeded in finding and wrenching open. His trembling fingers closed upon the neck of a bottle which he dragged forth. The next moment he had pulled out the cork and was pouring raw spirit down his throat.

Finally, with a deep breath, he set the bottle on the table. His eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness. He pulled the dilapidated arm-chair forward again and sat down with his elbows on his knees. Many a night he

had sat thus before smoking a last pipe, finishing the dregs of the whisky, and going up to bed in the room where the cannibal's trophy grinned under its glass case.

There was no premonition of impending fate in his mind to-night—nothing to warn him that he had come to a halting-place beyond which these things would cease to exist. His evil mood had passed. The fiery spirit had lighted up his brain, and he was surrounded by a glow that seemed more brilliant than a thousand candles. He would curse old Emily in the morning for having moved the thing from its accustomed place. But for the moment its absence was of small account. She had not tampered with the whisky. That, at least, she would never dare to do.

His mind was extraordinarily active though his body felt cumbersome and difficult to control. That was of no account. He had often sat thus until the early hours of the morning before dragging himself up to bed—until, in fact, the dazzle of his over-stimulated brain had died down sufficiently for sleep to be possible. He never attempted to run the early ferry. That was Peter's job, and he had to keep himself sober for it. As a matter of fact, Peter was not a heavy drinker—save on very rare occasions. His footsteps were audible in the distance as he tramped through the kitchen and locked up. Reuben sat and listened to them with an unreasoning irritation. Why on earth couldn't the fellow stop walking about and go up to his room? He wanted the house quiet so that he could think while this amazing clarity of vision lasted.

There was Julie. What was he going to do about her? Beat her until she confessed? She certainly deserved a beating, but he knew by experience that he was not master of his own muscles at that stage. He would either go too far and kill her, or not far enough, which would be almost worse. She had eluded him before, made a laughing-stock of him. And—save in one particular which could not take effect during his lifetime—he had failed to get even with her. No, he was beginning to think that beating her might lead to complications which he did not want to face.

Of course there was old Emily. He could get her on the job, and she would make the girl feel all right. Her venomous hatred of Julie almost exceeded his own. She would wring a confession out of her if anyone could—such a confession as would turn Rolfe against her for good and all. It would be a thorough humiliation for the two of them. Reuben dwelt upon the thought with growing relish. Rolfe's refusal to hear him that afternoon rankled deep within him. He might have passed the business on to Belinda, but, then, would Rolfe listen to Belinda either?

Damn that fellow—Peter! Would he never stop his tramping and go up to bed?

No, on the whole, perhaps it was better to leave Belinda out of it. Rolfe would only think it was a hatched-up plot. The girl must be made to speak herself. He would take action in the morning, spring a surprise on her before she was up, tie her down to the bedstead if need be, and leave her for Emily to deal with. Emily would know what to do, and could be trusted to do it thoroughly. There must be no bruises or signs of ill-treatment; but Emily would see to that. She had all a woman's ingenuity for inflicting pain without leaving any trace. Those skinny hands of hers! Reuben began to chuckle. Yes, Emily should have the run of her teeth for once. He would entrust the breaking of Julie's spirit entirely to her. She would certainly not be guilty of any fumbling, and she was wholly unscrupulous. She would know how to wear her victim down without overstepping bounds. She would make Julie pour out all her secrets in half an hour or less—old hag that she was!

Ah! Peter was mounting the stairs at last. Now for a little peace!

But there was not much more thinking to be done. His plans were already practically settled. He would have to be up early for once, that was all, to catch Julie unawares. When once he had made a captive of her, he would hand her over unreservedly to Emily, and in the dark of the winter morning she could do with her as she would.

A door upstairs shut, and all sounds ceased. Peter had gone to bed, in the room where Emily was doubtless already sleeping the sleep of the just.

Well, he would have a pleasant surprise for her in the morning. Perhaps, after all, he had better be getting to bed himself. The light was dying out in his brain, and he felt as if sleep might not be far away. He would finish the bottle and go.

It was almost a rite with him—that finishing of the bottle. He always followed the same procedure. First he sniffed at it, then he sat up in his chair and held it high; then he threw himself back and uptilted it into his mouth to drain it.

To-night—because his body still felt weighted and out of control—he went back in the chair harder than usual and with a jerk.

And in that instant something happened—what, he was never to know. All that he was aware of was a piercing, bewildering pain under the shoulder-blade that rent him from back to front. He emitted a sound that

would have been a bellow had not something indescribably agonizing stopped all utterance. The bottle crashed to the ground while he made a convulsive sideways movement, and there burst from him a great gasp that became a terrible gurgling. It was as if invisible bonds were holding him while he struggled fruitlessly, with failing strength, this way and that for freedom.

In the end there came a dreadful welling in his throat; his body sagged downwards. His hands clawed feebly at nothingness for a space, and then they, too, dropped powerless.

A great silence fell, broken only by the long, deep moaning of the sea which was like a dirge.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

THE ENGAGEMENT

“Do I understand,” said Sir Philip, “that you have definitely made up your mind to marry this man?”

Sybil flicked her cigarette-ash into the study fender with her customary nonchalance. “That is my intention,” she said. “Can you suggest any cause or just impediment why I shouldn’t?”

“I do not suppose,” remarked Sir Philip, “that it would make a vast deal of difference if I did. I think you are being very rash, and I think you may live to regret it. Beyond that, it would be quite futile for me to go. I can only hope that he will be able to provide you with all the luxuries which you have enjoyed hitherto.”

The corners of Sybil’s mouth went down. “Oh, Papa!” she protested. “But what do you call luxury?”

Sir Philip frowned. He objected very strongly to this form of flippancy, but he was well aware that it would not be discarded on that account.

“I mean,” he said, after reflection, “that there is something of a gulf between the position of a girl of your standing, who has been presented at Court and enjoyed all the privileges of decent society, and that of the wife of a struggling provincial doctor. It has never struck me that you have been endowed with a very adaptable nature, though, of course, in this respect I may be quite mistaken.”

Sybil laughed a little, her foot on the fender, her eyes on the toe of her shoe. “How nice of you to admit such a possibility!” she said. “Don’t you think force of contrast might sometimes have its attractions? The contrast, shall we say, between a yodelling blockhead like Jack Bellamy and the aforesaid struggling doctor?”

Sir Philip shrugged his shoulders. “I make no pretence,” he said, “of understanding the ideals of the present generation. I take it that young Bellamy does not constitute your only other possibility of married bliss?”

Sybil's laugh turned into a giggle of open affectation. "In that assumption, dear Papa, you are quite correct," she said. "I might even have been a lady of title"—she gave him a sidelong glance—"even a multi-coloured millionairess—but I cast the temptation from me. Can you imagine why? All for love of a struggling provincial doctor! If that doesn't merit a good mark for unworldliness from you, show me what does!"

"It is a pity," said Sir Philip, "that it should be presented in so unattractive a guise. However, as you are of an age to direct your own life it is not for me to interfere, and I fully realize that my advice is superfluous. Have you yet informed your mother of your intentions?"

"I have," said Sybil. "And you will be pleased to hear that she disapproves as thoroughly as you do, though not, I am afraid, from the same high motives. She is jealous, as a matter of fact, being somewhat infatuated with the young man herself. But—as I pointed out—as she couldn't possibly marry him unless you would oblige with grounds for divorce, she could hardly expect me to stand aside on that account."

"Sybil," said Sir Philip, "you would oblige me by being a little less coarse in your thoughts and expressions. You may desire to appear modern, but it is a very unbecoming pose. If you wish to marry this man, you must do so, and neither I nor your mother will place any hindrance in your way. I have nothing personal against Dr. Keston. He may make a good husband. I sincerely hope so."

"So do I," said Sybil. "And I think if he struggles hard enough he may make a successful doctor too. Whether I shall make a successful doctor's wife is another matter, but, anyway, he is determined to give me the chance. I have broken the news to you thus early as he will probably be here before long, but I refrained from telling you yesterday as I feared it might have an adverse effect upon your sermons. I did tell Lord Telford in confidence, however, and he was most congratulatory."

"That," observed Sir Philip, "was most generous of him."

"Yes, it was." Sybil lifted her chin a little. "He promised to back me up against any opposition, which was even more so. Strange to say, he actually thinks that my happiness is of some slight importance."

"And you think you will be happy?" asked Sir Philip.

She faced round upon him with a sudden impetuous movement. "I am," she said with a faint quiver in her voice, "already far happier than I ever thought I could be. You won't understand, of course. I'm not asking you to

understand. Parents never do. I suppose they never have since time began. But——”

Sir Philip interrupted her very quietly. “Do you think you will understand,” he said, “when your daughter chooses a man of whose capacity to give her happiness you are very doubtful?”

“I?” Sybil stared a moment. “Well, of course,” she said, “if he’s anything like Oliver.”

Sir Philip smiled and shook his head, but oddly his cynicism was less apparent than usual as he said: “He won’t be, Sybil. You can take my word for that. He will be totally different from all your ideals. She will insist on having her own way, and you will wonder what on earth she sees in him and hate to let her go.”

“Shall I?” Sybil said. She looked at the end of her cigarette. “I don’t believe I shall. I believe I shall understand.”

“Not unless you are an entirely new specimen in parents,” Sir Philip told her, still faintly smiling. “You will, I think, be just as hard to satisfy as your own.”

Sybil looked up abruptly. “Anyway, it’s not because you hate to let me go,” she challenged. “You can’t say that.”

His grey eyes met hers. “I don’t often say that sort of thing, I admit,” he said. “Perhaps it would be a mistake to begin at this juncture. Allow me to wish you happiness instead!”

He held out his hand to her, and she dropped her cigarette with a jerk. “D’you really mean that?” she said.

“Is it so surprising that I should desire your happiness?” he countered.

She shook his hand, held it doubtfully as if she did not know what to do with it, and then impulsively flung it aside, went close to him and kissed him.

“That’s the stoutest thing you’ve ever done,” she said. “Thanks most awfully! I’ll make good. You needn’t be afraid.”

He patted her shoulder as he returned her kiss. “I hope you will,” he said. “It may not be easy, but then nothing worth doing ever is. Am I to be allowed to interview this young man and make any enquiries as to his prospects?”

Sybil laughed. "Of course! Do anything you like! But—you'll remember we're frightfully fond of each other, won't you?"

Sir Philip's eyes looked at her in a way that she could not remember that they had ever regarded her before. "Yes, I shall remember that," he said. "I'm glad you turned down poor Telford, even though I believe he might have made you happy. It takes grit to prefer the rough to the smooth."

"My dearly beloved parent, I'm nothing but grit," said Sybil. "That's what makes me so hard to live with. Ah, here comes a car! That must be Oliver. Shall I fetch him in?" She sprang to the door, but stopped there, looking back, still laughing. "He thinks he isn't good enough for me. Perhaps you'll be able to disillusion him," she said.

"I think on the whole I had better not try," rejoined Sir Philip.

She whisked out of the room, and he turned to extinguish with his foot the cigarette which she had left lying in the fender. He objected to smouldering ash.

It was some minutes before the door re-opened to admit Sybil and her *fiancé*, and then, somewhat to Sir Philip's surprise, the festive atmosphere which he had expected to encounter was absent.

He extended his hand to Keston, who looked unusually grave though he made an effort to smile as he came forward and grasped it.

"This is very kind of you, Sir Philip. Sybil has been telling me," he said. "I needn't say how grateful I am. I'm sure you know how a man feels at such a time."

"Well, not too cheery by the look of you," said Sir Philip. "What's happened? Have you quarrelled already?"

"No—no!" Oliver's smile became more genuine. "I'm awfully happy really, and I'll do my level best to make her so. You can trust me for that, sir."

"I dare say too much happiness wouldn't be specially good for her," rejoined Sir Philip drily. "But what is the trouble? Something's happened."

"Yes, something has happened," said Oliver. "Perhaps I ought not to speak about it at such a moment, but it's rather bad. I've just got back from the fishing-village, or I should have been here earlier."

Sybil broke in. "It's Reuben Stark, Father—you know—of Honeyball Farm—the man with the lovely foreign-looking daughter they call Julie.

He's been murdered."

"Murdered!" repeated Sir Philip.

Oliver nodded. "Yes. And in a particularly deliberate and cold-blooded way. He'd been dead for some hours when they found him. A knife had been pushed through the back of his chair and fastened most ingeniously with cord, so that if he sat down without noticing it and leant back it would run straight through him."

"Good heavens!" said Sir Philip.

"They sent for me," Oliver continued, "and I sent for the police. It's a ghastly business. I believe the man was a horrible tyrant, but all the same"—he paused—"well, I'm afraid someone will have to pay for it."

"But who could have done a foul thing like that?" said Sir Philip.

"Well," Oliver said, "I'm sorry to have to say it, but it looks to me uncommonly like a woman's work."

"Oh, not—Julie!" exclaimed Sybil. "You don't—seriously—suspect her?"

Oliver lifted his shoulders slightly. "There's Southern blood in her," he observed. "And—I know she loathed him, for she told me so. I dare say he gave her good reason."

"But how appalling!" Sybil was too shocked to disguise her feelings. "What on earth will happen?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I really can't imagine. If she did it, they'll get her. It's a terrible show—the worst that's ever come my way."

"It's unthinkable!" exclaimed Sybil. "I shall go down and see if I can do anything. She's such a child, and a stranger among them all."

"There's Rolfe Britton," he reminded her.

She swept that aside. "The man she was to marry. He's a Dane, isn't he? I don't know anything about him. No, I shall go myself. It's a terrible position. I can bring her here, can't I?" She turned to her father.

"If she isn't under arrest," said Sir Philip. "I'd better come with you, I think. Don't be too impetuous, my dear! It might do harm."

She made a face. "You're always so prudent. I'll go and tell Lord Telford. I'm sure he'll agree with me. He's got a head on his shoulders, too,

which is a help. You're going up to see Mother, I suppose, Oliver? Expect a mixed reception! I'll see you later."

"I don't think I'll tell her about this," said Oliver.

"Good gracious, no!" She threw him a brief smile. "You'll have to concentrate on our engagement. There won't be room for anything else. Don't you worry!" she added to her father. "I promise to go by what Lord Telford says. What a mercy he's here again! And you can't say he isn't level-headed. I'll take him with me if he'll come. You've got lots to do, I know."

She was gone again, and the two men looked at each other with a fleeting gleam of amusement.

Then, with an unwonted depth of feeling Oliver Keston spoke. "She is like that," he said: "generous-hearted. I can't tell you how good she's been to me. I'm not good enough for her, but I swear I'll try to be."

"Let us hope it will be a mutual effort!" said Sir Philip, and though his words were dry, his eyes were kinder than usual. "I can't get on with her myself for long, but I am getting old and probably difficult. You will—perhaps—find it easier. Anyway, if you marry her you must keep on trying."

"I promise you I will, sir," said Oliver firmly, "so long as there's breath in my body. You see, I love her."

"That ought to be a help," said Sir Philip with a smile.

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF DEATH

THERE was a crowd round Honeyball Farm. The news had spread like wildfire, and people from both sides of the river had hastened to the spot.

When Sybil and Lord Telford arrived, the place was thronged with a somewhat silent and awe-stricken, but intensely interested, multitude. Sybil drew up on the outskirts, and she and her escort edged their way through.

The door of the house was closed, but not fastened. Sybil opened it without hesitation.

“I’m going in,” she said. “I must.”

He raised no remonstrance. He was her stout ally in all things, and she knew it.

But inside the hall they paused; for there was an indescribable atmosphere of hushed horror that was almost like a barrier, holding them back. Reuben Stark’s cap hung on its peg above his shabby oilskins, and Sybil regarded it with a shrinking fascination.

Then a low murmur of voices reached them from the sitting-room beyond, and with a glance at her companion she pressed forward.

The door was not latched. She knocked and pushed it open. The room, which was not a large one, seemed to be crowded with people.

A police-sergeant and a constable were at the table facing the door, and around them were grouped the two Prawles, Belinda with her fair hair very tousled as if with much tossing, Joe Muster, who was apparently in attendance upon her, and Julie—pale as death and very upright, standing as if under examination.

Micky hovered like an uneasy monkey in the background, watching the proceedings with bolting eyes.

Lord Telford cast a searching glance around as if looking for someone, and a gleam of relief crossed his face as he turned and addressed the sergeant.

“My name is Lord Telford. You have no objection to our coming in, I hope? This lady is the Rector’s daughter, and she thought she might be of some use to Miss Stark.”

The sergeant saluted with grim deference. “Your lordship is quite welcome,” he said, “and the lady too. I’m just making some preliminary enquiries about this business. If you wish to inspect the body, my lord, it is in the kitchen till an ambulance arrives. The chair in which deceased met his death must be left exactly as it is, of course, until the matter has been fully investigated.”

“Quite,” agreed Lord Telford. “I’ve no wish to see the body, thanks. May I know how far the proceedings have gone?”

“I’m trying to find out,” said the sergeant, “how the knife came to be stuck through the back of the chair. It’s an ordinary table-knife, but it had been well-sharpened, and it didn’t get there by accident. Mrs. Prawle tells me she’s been a knife short for some time, but she can’t state exactly when she first missed it. Miss Stark has just told me that it was in her possession, and I’m just trying to get her to tell me what she took it for.”

“I see,” said Lord Telford gravely. “Good morning, Miss Stark!”

Julie’s eyes came to his in startled recognition. She whispered a barely audible greeting in reply.

He moved round to her side, while Emily’s shrill tones took up the tale. “That’s jest what I want to know. What did she take it for? And why’s she kept it all this time—a wicked hussy!”

“Will you please be quiet?” said the sergeant. “Miss Stark, you’re the only one that knows the answer to this question. You say you had the knife?”

“I did,” Julie answered in a very low voice. “I kept it in my room.”

“What for?” said the sergeant.

She gave her answer after an instant’s hesitation. “I thought I might be—attacked.”

“By whom?” said the sergeant, making a rapid note.

“By—the skipper,” she said.

“Your father?” said the sergeant.

She nodded. “Yes—my father.”

“He was apt to be hasty, was he?” suggested the sergeant.

She pressed her hands together very tightly. “He was violent—when he was drunk,” she said.

Micky suddenly piped up from his corner in a voice almost as shrill as Emily’s: “He gave her an awful trouncing once, sergeant. That’s when she took the knife. She showed it to me afterwards—said she’d kill him with it—and kill me too if I told. But she can’t do that now—’cos she hasn’t got it to do it with.”

“You be quiet!” ordered the sergeant. He looked hard at Julie, who had turned a shade paler at the boy’s wild chatter. “Now, Miss Stark, you attend to me, please! And be careful what you say! This knife—where did you keep it?”

“Under my pillow,” said Julie through white lips that had begun to quiver in spite of herself.

He scribbled again in his book. “You never used it for anything?”

“Never,” said Julie.

“Just kept it in case of accident like?” said the sergeant, a suspicion of irony in his voice.

“In case of attack,” said Julie, bracing herself to firmness.

There was a slight sound at the door at this juncture, and the sergeant frowned, but it remained half-closed, and no one entered.

He bestowed his full attention upon Julie again. “Now be very careful how you answer this question I am about to put to you!” he said. “This knife that you kept under your pillow—did you take it out yesterday for any purpose whatever?”

A tremor went through Julie, and Lord Telford put a quiet hand on her shoulder. She made a slight movement towards him as if seeking protection as she made reply. “I took it out—yes—in the afternoon before I went out. When I came back, it was gone.”

“Ah!” said the sergeant. “And what did you take it out for?”

“Yes, what?” breathed Emily malignantly.

Julie's great eyes glanced round with a hunted expression. "Because I thought he was after me," she said almost in a whisper.

"Did you have words with him, then?" asked the sergeant.

She nodded, and, swallowing hard, produced her voice. "Yes, he was angry with me. I had bought some clothes, and I wouldn't tell him who had paid for them."

"My gift?" said Lord Telford.

She nodded again. "Yes. He thought it was—from someone else."

"I'm not surprised at that," observed Belinda briefly and scornfully.

The sergeant gave her a thoughtful look. He knew and rather admired Belinda. After a moment, however, he decided to keep to the main point.

"He was angry. Well? What did he do? Did he follow you up to your room?"

"No." Julie was panting a little. "I thought he was going to, but he didn't."

"And that was when you took out the knife?" said the sergeant.

"Yes," murmured Julie.

"What did I tell you?" said Emily.

"I am addressing Miss Stark," said the sergeant. "Can you tell me what happened after that?"

"I think I fainted," said Julie.

The sergeant looked incredulous. "Then you can't say what happened?"

She hesitated. "Yes," she said finally. "I came to, and he had gone by then. And I went out."

"Did you take the knife with you?" said the sergeant.

"No," she answered faintly.

"You left it on the bed," he pursued.

"I must have done," she said.

"Pah!" said Emily aloud and very vindictively.

The sergeant overlooked the interruption. He was gazing at Julie with great insistence. "And when you came back, it was gone?" he said.

“Yes,” said Julie.

“Had you put it back under the pillow?” he asked

She shook her head. “I can’t remember. I was in a hurry. I may have left it on the bed.”

“And where did you go?” asked the sergeant.

Again she hesitated, but at a slight pressure from Lord Telford’s hand she answered: “I went to tea on the *Circe*—with Mr. Britton.”

“He is the man she is engaged to marry,” put in Lord Telford.

“I see,” said the sergeant. “And did he walk back with you afterwards?”

“Yes.” Julie spoke with more assurance. “But he didn’t come beyond the door. I said ‘good night’ to him and went straight up to my room.”

“What time was that?” asked the sergeant, making further notes.

“It must have been about nine,” said Julie.

“Before Captain Stark returned?” he said.

“Long before!” snapped Emily. “I heard the skipper come in myself about eleven. Peter can testify to that too.”

The sergeant looked steadfastly at Julie. “You got back before Captain Stark returned?” he questioned with great distinctness.

“Yes,” said Julie.

“You went straight up to your room,” he pursued. “Was it then that you missed the knife?”

“No. I wasn’t thinking about it. I never noticed until I heard him come in.” Her voice was sunk very low again. “Then—I felt for it—because I was afraid he might come up—and the door wouldn’t lock. But—it wasn’t there.”

“And did he come up?” asked the sergeant.

“No. He must have gone straight to the observatory.” A shudder shook Julie; her dark eyes looked out of her white face with a kind of horrified appeal.

The sergeant returned to his notes. The constable had been similarly occupied throughout the proceedings.

An awe-stricken silence fell in the room. Emily was staring malevolently at Julie while Peter shifted from one foot to the other and cleared his throat.

Sybil, finding herself close to Belinda, spoke in an undertone. “Nothing very conclusive so far. Who can prove it’s the same knife even?”

Belinda made a flouncing gesture of disagreement. “There’s more here than you know of, Miss Tredville,” she said.

“Where’s the *Circe* man—Rolfe Britton?” said Sybil.

Belinda tossed her head. “If he’s wise he’ll keep out of this,” she returned.

Sybil turned from her. She looked across at Julie with a sense of impotence. There was nothing to be done apparently. The net of the law was already closing around her. The shrinking dread on the girl’s face told her that she knew it. An awful doubt was growing in Sybil’s own mind. She had come prepared to take Julie’s part, to defend her with all her strength. But there was something in Julie’s attitude that made defence impossible. She saw that Lord Telford realized this also. His face was sternly compassionate, but he too seemed to be awaiting the inevitable. He made no attempt to interfere.

The silence lengthened, measured by the persistent noisy ticking of a cheap clock on the mantelpiece. The dingy room was gradually turning into a chamber of horrors. The two policemen scribbled rapidly and scanned their notes. Micky was crouching in a corner behind Emily, sometimes peering round her with a grimace and then swiftly effacing himself again.

The sergeant ceased to consult his pocket-book and looked up. There was doom in that quiet room. Joe Muster gave a nervous hiccough and coughed to cover it.

The sergeant cleared his throat on a still louder note as if to silence him. Then he spoke, curtly, very officially:

“Miss Stark, I’m afraid I must ask you to come with me to the station for further examination. Will you be good enough to go and get ready while I get a car? You had better bring some things for the night, as you may be detained.”

It was as if a bomb had fallen. Everyone collected round the table, with the exception of the two policemen, made some sort of involuntary sound expressive of shock, dismay, or malevolence.

Julie herself uttered a short gasp and went back for a second against the protecting figure by her side, her eyes half-closed.

But in that moment the door swung wide open, and a square figure in a blue jersey entered with a free and almost insolently fearless swing.

Rolfe Britton came straight to the table, looking neither to right nor left, and addressed the sergeant in level, emotionless tones.

“You won’t need to take Miss Stark to the police-station,” he said. “I’m the person you want. It’s me she’s shielding. I took the knife out of her room yesterday afternoon when she wasn’t looking.”

A gasp went round the assembled company. Lord Telford made as if he would speak, but checked himself.

Julie looked up with a low cry. But Rolfe stood like a rock, facing the sergeant, his head back, his blue eyes half-contemptuous.

“She’s told you the truth,” he said. “But not all the truth. She kept back part. When she fainted yesterday afternoon, I found her and revived her. I realized Stark had been bullying her again. The knife was on the floor. I picked it up. She thought I left in on the bed, but I didn’t.”

“Stop!” It was Julie’s voice, and it rang through the room with so agonized a sound that everyone turned towards her instinctively. She pressed forward, her hand upon the table, her whole body shaken with an agitation that was terrible to see. “Oh, stop!” she cried again. “Rolfe! Not you—not you!”

And then her strength broke like the snapping of a string. She fell on her knees with her arms extended, racked with a wild sobbing she could not check.

Lord Telford bent and lifted her, and there followed a certain confusion in the room, Sybil pushing her way round to help, while the Prawles and Micky sought to withdraw themselves.

Belinda for once was deeply disturbed. “It’s a lie, sergeant!” she declared impetuously. “I’m sure he’s lying. Don’t listen to him!”

“You be quiet, Belinda!” ordered Rolfe, flashing upon her a look which imposed obedience. “I’m not here for the fun of the thing. All right, sergeant! Take me along out of this! There are too many women here. Miss Stark didn’t know where the knife went. She only suspected.”

The sergeant recovered himself sharply from the embarrassment of a situation which had been momentarily beyond him. "Yes, you must come with me," he said. "And I warn you to be very careful what you say. We may want Miss Stark later, but we'll take you first."

"Good!" said Rolfe tersely.

He swung round towards the door, but Lord Telford turned in the same moment from depositing Julie upon a sofa and intercepted him, literally holding him back.

"Rolfe!" he said.

The younger man faced him indomitably, his head up. "My name is Rolfe Britton, sir," he said.

They stood confronting one another, and for a few strange seconds they seemed to be alone in the crowded room, but that which passed between them was not expressed in words.

Then, as Julie's anguished crying broke through the silence, Rolfe pulled himself free and spoke.

"Take care of her!" he said briefly, and turned away to join the two policemen who were already at the door.

He went away with them as he had entered, walking fearlessly out of the house and through the staring crowd, with head erect, like a king. Though wearing the ordinary garb of the seashore, there was about him a sort of splendour which those who looked on never forgot.

CHAPTER III

THE MURDERER

WITH the exit of Rolfe, it seemed to Julie as though a great blank descended. She scarcely knew what happened around her. All sensation appeared to be gone. Life was emptied of all that mattered. The strain was over. She had been broken and cast aside—a poor jest for which even Fate had no further use. Her convulsive weeping ceased and she lay motionless with closed eyes, too numb for thought.

People came and went, and old Emily's cackling voice was audible raised in angry expostulation or condemnation, she neither knew nor cared which. The tide of sound and movement ebbed and flowed, but she was beyond it all, flung up on a rock of desolation that was out of reach of normal things. She had suffered beyond the limit of endurance, and she was too stunned to suffer any more.

But she was not alone, though a long while passed before anything happened to her. She was dimly aware from time to time of someone watching her, and presently out of the darkness in which her spirit lay crushed a hand came and gently touched her. She remembered the hand that had lain upon her shoulder during that terrible inquisition, and she stirred and opened her eyes.

But it was a woman who bent over her, and a woman's voice, deeply compassionate, that spoke.

"You poor soul! You must be half dead. Look! I've managed to get a cup of milk for you. Try and drink it!"

Julie's soul revolted at the bare idea, but the kindness of the words stirred her. She made a weak attempt to raise herself on the old worn sofa on which she had been laid.

A steady young arm helped her. "That's good. Keep on trying!" said Sybil. "We're going to take you away from this horrible place. I've sent the old catamaran upstairs to fetch your things."

Julie could not speak. She was powerless to act for herself, but the consciousness of firm support from one who was by no means lacking in purpose and the strength of will to carry it out nerved her. She sipped the milk shuddering. She was cold from head to foot.

“Carry on!” urged Sybil gently. “You’ll be better for it. You’re coming back with me to the Rectory, and I’ll look after you. Don’t you worry! Drink it up!”

Dumbly Julie struggled to comply, though she could not check her trembling.

Sybil went on talking with steady cheeriness while she drank. “I shall put you straight to bed, and there you’ll stay till you feel better. Now take it easily! There’s no hurry. When you’ve finished, I’ll go and see if that old woman has got all your things together. Lord Telford is close by, and that Belinda girl is just outside. But you don’t like her, do you?”

Julie faintly shook her head. She was still beyond speech.

Sybil passed on. “I quite agree with you, but I fancy she’s fairly straight—better than those awful Prawles, anyway. There! You’re getting better. Just lie back again while I go and see to things. You’ll be all right.”

She patted Julie’s shoulder again and left her. But she was hardly out of the room before Lord Telford entered and took her place.

He did not speak to Julie at all, merely stood squarely by her side; and she had a hazy, inexplicable feeling that it might have been Rolfe standing there. Slowly it grew upon her, though almost insensibly she shrank from it, for it was as if her heart were bleeding from a wound that was past all healing.

But her mind drifted back notwithstanding from the numbness that had been almost oblivion, and after a space she found herself staring, as it were, straight into the horror that had overwhelmed her.

She stirred at length, looked up piteously at the man beside her. Her voice came weakly, jerkily.

“What will they do to him? What can they do? I didn’t know—he took the knife.”

Lord Telford looked down at her with a gaze that was very straight but that yet seemed to have something that was rather stricken about it.

“You were trying to shield him,” he said.

His voice held no harshness; his look inspired her to confidence. She answered him with simplicity.

“Yes. I didn’t want them to know he came upstairs. There was no need for them to know.”

“I’m afraid they’ve got to know everything,” said Lord Telford.

“But they’ll think he did it!” she whispered in distress. “They’re bound to think he did it.”

“I’m afraid,” said Lord Telford with a certain grimness, “that’s what he means them to think.”

She put her hand to her head. “But—it was me they were after. There’s no proof that he did it. I’ll go and—and make them think it was me.”

She sat up, but in a moment turned dizzy and had to steady herself by the back of the sofa.

Lord Telford stooped towards her. He looked very closely into her face. “You did not do it,” he said with conviction.

She stared up at him, caught anew by something in look or bearing that seemed familiar to her.

“You did not do it,” he said again. “I can see your innocence in your face.”

She made a slight, pathetic gesture. “I’m not at all innocent. I’ve often had murder in my heart. I’m very wicked.”

“You did not do this thing,” he said slowly, “and Rolfe did not do it either. Neither of you could have thought of anything so foul. They’re on a wrong track altogether.”

“Oh!” gasped Julie. “Then Rolfe really didn’t do it either? Are you sure?”

“Sure?” he questioned. “Aren’t you sure? Don’t you know him better than that?”

“But—but,” she faltered, and then with a rush—“oh, do you mean that he’s pretending—for my sake?”

“I can’t say.” Again his voice was grim. “But I imagine so. Anyway, he meant to create a diversion, and he succeeded. Now tell me! Do you really think he had that knife?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t see him take it. I thought it was left on the bed. I don’t know. I can’t think.”

“He thinks you did it,” Lord Telford said. “And you think he did. But you’re both wrong. No, it’s no use your trying to take his place. It would probably mean two instead of one, and it wouldn’t help at all. There must be some other way, and we’ve got to find it. Who else lives in this house?”

“Only the Prawles—and Micky.” Julie spoke hopelessly; she was bewildered, almost too overwhelmed to think. That Rolfe should do this thing—for her! It was incredible. Yet somehow she had a feeling that this new friend of hers was right in his conclusions. He spoke with such unerring conviction.

“Micky! Who’s Micky?” he said.

Before she could answer, the door swung open, and Belinda showed herself on the threshold—Belinda, oddly shaken and lacking her customary self-assertion. She looked as if she were on the verge of a violent outburst of weeping.

“Micky’d never dare do a thing like that!” she declared. “He’s nothing but a child. He’d never think of a thing like that.”

“Who is Micky?” asked Lord Telford.

“He’s the skipper’s nephew,” said Belinda. “And there’s no more vice in him than a puppy. He’s—here, Micky!”

She raised her voice, and Micky himself sidled in, half-scared and half-ingratiating, looking more baboon-like than ever.

Lord Telford regarded him with a very direct scrutiny. “So you live here too, do you?” he said.

Micky nodded, divided between pride at being noticed and fear of the consequences. “I expect I’ll live at *The Black Swan* with Belinda now,” he said, with a propitiatory glance in the direction of his protectress.

“Don’t be too sure of that!” said Belinda with her familiar toss. “I’m not going to make any promises. I may not even stay myself for ever.”

“Micky!” said Lord Telford, in the tone of a man addressing a young child. “Tell me! Aren’t you sorry the skipper’s dead?”

Micky eyed him somewhat doubtfully. Lord Telford seemed to him a rather formidable person, but the quiet tone in which he spoke checked panic.

After brief consideration he turned the question with a certain cunning. “Would you be sorry if you was me?”

“If he’d been a good friend to me, I should,” said Lord Telford.

“Friend!” sniffed Belinda. “He treated him worsen a dog.”

The corners of Micky’s mouth went down. “Don’t tell, Belinda!” he whispered. “P’raps he’ll hear!”

“Don’t be silly!” sharply retorted Belinda. “He couldn’t do anything if he did. He’ll never beat you again.”

“Did he beat you often?” asked Lord Telford.

Again the air of cunning was apparent in Micky. He nodded towards Julie, who was crouched on the sofa with her head on her hands. “He beat her too,” he volunteered. “She always said she’d kill him for it. That’s why she kept the knife upstairs in her room.”

“Oh, you knew about that, did you?” said Lord Telford, still in the tone of one who seeks to draw out a child.

Micky nodded again. “Yes, I knew. She showed it me. She said she’d kill me too if I told, but she can’t now, can she?”

Julie made a convulsive movement, but she did not raise her head.

Micky drew a little closer to Belinda, but Lord Telford reassured him. “Nobody will kill you,” he said a trifle grimly. “So you needn’t mind telling us anything you know. You never borrowed that knife for any purpose, I suppose, when she wasn’t there?”

Micky looked vacant.

“Of course he never did!” said Belinda tartly. “What should he want it for?”

“It might have occurred to him to take it away,” explained Lord Telford, “so that no mischief could be done with it.”

“He’d never do that,” said Belinda. “He hasn’t the sense. Besides, you couldn’t expect it—not after the way he was treated. The skipper was always at him for one thing or another. He never gave him any peace.”

Micky looked inclined to whimper. Lord Telford continued to survey him with quiet interest. “No, you couldn’t expect it,” he agreed.

“They’ve nothing really to go upon,” pursued Belinda, talking by way of easing the tension at her heart. “It mightn’t even be the same knife. I’m sure Rolfe never did it. He couldn’t.”

“No,” Lord Telford agreed again. “He wouldn’t have done it in that way. He wouldn’t have been clever enough.”

“Clever!” snorted Belinda. “D’you call it clever to stab a man in the back?”

“I call it very clever,” said Lord Telford, “to fix a knife in such a position as to make a man stab himself. It’s the sort of thing that Micky here would never have dreamed of.”

“Of course he wouldn’t!” said Belinda contemptuously. “He’s too balmy for that.”

Micky’s colourless eyes gleamed with sudden resentment. “I’m not balmy,” he said to Belinda. “I could a-done it easy if I’d tried. You’ve only got to fix the handle at the back so’s it doesn’t slip.”

“Don’t be such a great silly!” said Belinda.

“She doesn’t believe you,” said Lord Telford. “I’m not sure that I do either. There’s nothing to fix it to.”

“Yes, there is!” Micky glanced around him, all agog to vindicate himself from the charge of imbecility brought by Belinda. “You wait while I get a knife and I’ll soon show you!”

“You can’t,” said Belinda sharply. “There’s a policeman in the passage with Joe Muster and Peter Prawle.”

Micky looked scared for a moment, but Lord Telford merely smiled. “What does that matter? He’s only taking care of us. You go and ask him to get you a knife out of the kitchen and some string! Tell him what it’s for! He won’t mind.”

There came a gasp from the sofa. Julie was sitting up, staring out before her with an intensity that seemed to carry her gaze through every obstacle into a strange infinity.

No one noticed her.

“Get along!” said Lord Telford. “We’re not going to believe it till we see it. Here’s a chair that’ll do! You only want a knife and some string.”

Micky sprang for the door. Belinda made a half-hearted and abortive attempt to stop him. Then she turned, white and quivering, upon Lord Telford.

“What are you doing?” she breathed.

He held up his hand for silence.

Out in the hall they heard Micky’s voice addressing the policeman. “I want a knife—a good kitchen knife—and some string, mister, quick! I’m going to show ’em how I did it—’cos they say I’m a fool and won’t believe me. But I’ll show ’em—I’ll soon show ’em!”

There was an instant’s pause, then a man’s voice. “What—you!” it said in astonishment. “How many more of you are going to confess to this ’ere murder?”

Micky’s shrill-pitched tones came back in triumphant asseveration. “I did it, I tell you! I did it! Jest you give me a knife and I’ll show you how! They think I’m a fool, but I’m not. When I knew Jooly wasn’t going to, I said to myself I would. He was a bad man—and he treated me worsen a dog. So I thought it all out—and I crept into Jooly’s room and found the knife—and I sharpened it and fastened it into the back of the chair all proper—so’s it went through him like a skewer. And now”—the high voice fell with a snivelling sound—“they won’t believe as I did it! They say I’m too big a fool. But I’m not, mister, I’m not! You give me a knife and I’ll show you!”

In the skipper’s parlour Lord Telford stooped just in time to catch Julie as she fell.

CHAPTER IV

THE WANDERING SPIRIT

“SHE’LL get better,” said Oliver.

“She must get better,” said Sybil almost fiercely. “We’ve got to pull her through. Oliver, is there nothing more we can do? Are you sure?”

He shook his head. “Get a specialist if you like! But I believe anyone will say it’s a matter of time and absolute quiet. She’s had too much to bear, that’s all. The brain can’t carry on indefinitely.”

“But she’s so young!” protested Sybil.

“I know. That’s partly the trouble. Older people have more endurance. They hold on to their reserves. Besides, she’s been starved, poor kid. It’s bound to take time. But cheer up!” His arm was round her. “She’ll get better.”

She leaned her cheek against his shoulder and uttered an unexpected sob. “It’s so—utterly pathetic. Those great eyes of hers just stare and stare and see nobody. If they’d only cry sometimes, I should feel better. But they’re so dry and burning—as if an inner fire was gradually scorching up her soul. If I could only tell her—but it’s as if all means of communication were cut off.”

“They are—for the present,” said Oliver. “It’s like being stunned. That’s why quiet is so essential. The brain has got to recover by itself.”

“You’re sure—it will recover?” whispered Sybil.

“Am I sure of anything?” he said; then turned abruptly and kissed her. “Have a cigarette, my dear; and if you’re going to wear yourself to a thread over her, I shall have to put someone else on the job.”

“Don’t be absurd!” said Sybil. “I’m as strong as a horse—always was. Papa thinks I’m greatly improved. Did you know? Less selfish and domineering!”

He made a grimace. “Well, I prefer you that way. It’s more robust. It’ll be a good thing when this beastly trial is over and that unfortunate looney has been found guilty but insane.”

“I wonder if Belinda will feel it much. She seemed rather fond of him,” said Sybil.

“I was just coming to Belinda.” Oliver spoke somewhat sardonically. “Prepare for another shock! Belinda is an heiress—which ought to compensate for much.”

“What on earth do you mean?” Sybil stared over the cigarette which he was lighting for her.

Oliver laughed a little. “Well, of course you’re not so much behind the scenes in the fishing-village as I am. Belinda, it seems, was a child of nature. Old Columbus, though acknowledging her as his grand-daughter, never had any use for her in consequence. Reuben Stark on the contrary showed his fair spirit in his will by disowning his legal daughter and leaving everything to his natural child—Belinda. As the old miser had managed to collect six thousand pounds, Belinda may now be described as a spinster in very comfortable circumstances.”

“But what an infernal shame!” burst from Sybil, as she blew out an indignant cloud of smoke. “And this is the first anybody knew of his being her father?”

“Absolutely the first. He gave himself away to no one—certainly not to Belinda. It’s a most unexpected windfall for her. Let’s hope she’ll make the most of it!”

“Well,” said Sybil, “I may be very immoral, but I’m dashed glad to know that old Stark was not the father of Julie.”

“Yes, I can’t enlighten you there. I don’t believe anyone knows. But I agree.” Oliver spoke with decision. “Of course it accounts for a good deal too. He always hated her, and she was like a fish out of water at Honeyball Farm.”

“And Belinda has got the Farm too? She hasn’t done too badly,” commented Sybil. “But what of Julie? Does she get nothing at all?”

“Nothing but an emphatic repudiation of parentage—for which I should imagine she will be deeply grateful. The old brute got his deserts, and I can’t say I’m sorry. I met Hopton, the police surgeon, yesterday. He’d been examining the boy and said he’d been shockingly manhandled. But I think

Belinda can be trusted to look after him if he's ever allowed to be at large again."

"I don't feel as if any of them matter except Julie," said Sybil restlessly. "She—hurts me somehow. There seems to be nothing to hold her by. If she were only in love with Rolfe!"

"She's never had a chance," said Oliver. "She told me so that night. But she may fall for him yet. There's no knowing."

"He adores her, anyway," said Sybil with conviction. "She ought to care for him—she must care for him—when she comes back."

"You'll have to give her time," Oliver said, "lots and lots of time. It's the only remedy that's going to do her any good—that and rest. I'm sorry to have to preach patience so often, but there it is. Nothing else is going to help."

"I know," said Sybil. "Isn't it awful? But—so long as she does come back—really back, I mean, no half-measures—I shan't mind."

"P'raps you'll even consider getting married yourself then?" suggested Oliver, pulling her towards him as one who had the right.

She made a face at him as she yielded. "You must give me time," she quoted. "Lots and lots of time. I can't marry anybody till this tangle is straightened out. There's poor old Lord Telford too. He can't get on without me yet. And I'd have Rolfe under my wing as well, only he's so infernally independent he won't come."

Oliver's kiss had in it a hint of grimness. "You'll wait for the third and fourth generation if I'll let you," he said. "But I shan't. As soon as I can get a decent roof over our heads, I shall take you—whether you like it or not."

"Oh, shall you?" said Sybil. "You wait and see!"

"I'll see, but I won't wait," he returned. "You may be making a bad bargain, but you shan't have the chance to think better of it."

"Oh, I like bad bargains," said Sybil with a smile that expressed more than her words.

But when he was gone, she returned to her patient with a troubled frown between her eyes. She had grown fond of Julie. The dumb pathos of her went straight to her heart. And the long waiting was becoming hard to bear.

It was the last day of the year, and for nearly a fortnight Julie had lain in that stunned and acquiescent state, not wholly unconscious, yet incapable of

thought. She was like a person in a trance, too weak for speech, too far away for the comprehension of anything that passed around her.

Her mind was hanging in the balance, and Sybil realized it. She and Pearce nursed her between them, though there was little actual nursing to be done. Sybil slept in the room with her, but though she often waked and watched, the silent figure in the bed beside hers seldom moved and never required any attention. They gave her nourishment from time to time, but she could take very little, and it seemed to Sybil all through that anxious Christmas-time that she was wasting day by day.

By Keston's orders she was kept in complete quietness, and none but Sybil, Pearce, and himself ever entered the room. Though Rolfe came every day to ask for her, he was rigidly excluded from her presence. Oliver had not forgotten the girl's bitter cry that she had been driven all the way, and he was determined that no suggestion of that cruel strain should be imposed upon her now. He was trusting that nature left to itself would eventually find its own remedy.

But to Sybil's impetuous desire to be up and doing, this seemed at times a negative sort of treatment that was leading to nothing. Julie was not growing perceptibly weaker, but the terrible inertia was like a spell that steadily gained influence upon her. It had continued for so long that she was beginning to lose heart. She had great faith in Oliver, and she knew that he had a good reason for imagining that Rolfe was the last person who would be likely to have a beneficial effect upon poor Julie's crushed nerves. Yet, at the back of her mind, there was growing a deep longing to take some definite action. She sometimes told herself that it would be almost better to plunge Julie into active insanity than to see her die inch by inch of sheer inanition. With all her own youth and abounding vitality, it was hard to control her impatience. It was impossible to restrain the wonder if some drastic change might not disperse that terrible lethargy and reawaken the soul that slept behind those great gazing eyes that always seemed to be looking for something far out of sight without knowing what that something was.

"She'll never be anything again," was Pearce's daily cheering verdict, and in spite of herself Sybil was beginning to agree.

The impossibility of reaching Julie's understanding save in the most commonplace matters was one of the things that daunted her most. No gleam of comprehension ever lighted those wide dark eyes, though she would stir mechanically in answer to any material suggestion made by

Pearce or herself. She was absolutely docile at all times—too docile for Sybil’s energetic spirit; but, save for this, it was as if a high wall separated her from all mundane things. She never slept naturally, but she was never—so it seemed to Sybil—really awake. Nothing made any impression upon her. Her will—her very personality—appeared to be utterly in abeyance. And Sybil was becoming nonplussed and disheartened. She had come to the verge of thinking that even suffering would be preferable to this. Suffering might be dealt with and ultimately assuaged; but this—this was a thing beyond her reach. She could not cope with nothingness. Was Oliver right? Would she ever come back out of the void of her own accord? Or would she merely sink deeper and deeper until the final oblivion took her?

Whenever she reached this point in her cogitations, Sybil invariably shook herself and set her teeth with all her old unconquerable determination to get her own way. “She shan’t do that!” she vowed. “She shan’t! She shan’t!”

But there were times, more frequent of late, when she had an uneasy suspicion that all the determination in the world might not serve to hold Julie back. She was so like a wandering spirit stranded on an alien shore, waiting only for the next tide to bear her away.

CHAPTER V

THE CHILD OF NATURE

IT was on the afternoon of that same day—New Year's Eve—that Belinda, dressed in deep black yet bearing herself with a certain jauntiness, stepped out of *The Black Swan* and turned her bright face towards the jetty.

She had to pass her two properties—Honeyball Farm and Old Columbus's recent abode—to reach it, and she tossed her head with a good deal of importance on the way. Both places were uninhabited, the former all shuttered and forbidding standing up like a spectre in the gloom of the failing day. She had already sent Peter and Emily Prawle about their business without the faintest compunction.

The weather was cold, and the moaning of the almost invisible sea sounded inexpressibly dreary. But the glass of prosperity was set fair for Belinda, and nothing daunted her.

She reached the jetty and walked along it with brisk purpose. At the end rocked the *Circe*, her light shining dimly through a drift of mist.

Belinda arrived at her moorings and sent a shrill call downwards. "Hullo! You there, Mr. Britton? It's me—Belinda Quale."

There was a pause, then a sound from below. The cabin door of the *Circe* was opened, and a man's figure showed vaguely in the entrance.

"Can I come aboard?" cried Belinda in tones of cheery good-fellowship. "All by yourself, I suppose?"

Rolfe lounged into the open. His movements did not betray a vast enthusiasm.

"Anything the matter?" he demanded gruffly.

"Nothing," said Belinda. "I've come to see you, that's all, and wish you a happy New Year." Her tone held the pleasing conviction that in so doing she was conferring a favour. "How do I get on board?"

“Hold on a minute!” said Rolfe.

He went back for a moment, and reappeared with an electric torch which he shone on to the iron steps which gave access to his domain.

“Mind how you come!” he said.

His accents held resignation rather than pleasure, but he advanced to give her a helping hand.

Belinda stepped lightly on board by its aid and glanced around. “A very nice little craft!” she observed. “And to think I’ve never been on her before!”

Rolfe said nothing, but she did not find his silence disconcerting. Men were like that, and she was no stranger to their ways.

“Well?” she said. “And where do we go now?”

“There’s the cabin,” said Rolfe.

She turned towards it at once and moved down into it with complete self-possession. “How very nice!” she said. “I had no idea it was so charming in here. Everything freshly done up! You’re very clever, Mr. Britton.”

“Donkey-work!” remarked Rolfe laconically.

“I shouldn’t have called it so,” said Belinda with a little laugh. “What beautiful cushions! Really—most habitable! May I sit down?”

“Of course!” said Rolfe.

She sat where the lamplight played tantalizingly upon her fair hair under its saucily tilted black cap.

“One sees so little of you nowadays,” she said. “And—after all the upheavals of the past few weeks—it’s really nice to meet an old friend again.”

Rolfe said nothing. He stood at the door, filling his pipe.

Belinda uttered a faint sigh as if to bring herself into tune with his distinctly gloomy aspect. “It’s been a very sad world lately,” she remarked. “Have you heard the latest?”

Rolfe did not look up. “I’m going round again presently to enquire,” he said. “There was no change this morning.”

Belinda tossed her cloud of hair. “Oh—Julie!” she said with a touch of scorn. “There never will be any change there; you may take it from me. Her reason’s gone. Not that there ever was very much of it to go, from what I can gather.”

“Are you qualified to judge?” asked Rolfe in a very low voice.

She shrugged her shoulders. “No, but seriously! You can’t be so silly as to waste your time over a girl who has gone out of her mind. A pretty girl, I grant you, but quite, quite senseless. She always was. Even that old witch Emily knew that.”

“Really?” said Rolfe.

Belinda began to pull off her gloves with slight signs of exasperation. “But of course! I think everybody did,” she said. “She had no more brains than poor Micky. That was why I thought at first she was the guilty one. I must say she looked it that day.”

“That,” said Rolfe very deliberately, “was because she was trying to shield me from suspicion.”

Belinda uttered a short disdainful laugh. “I know. It was all too absurd—though of course she was morally guilty. It was she who had the knife and put it into Micky’s head to use it.”

“If we’re going to talk about moral guilt,” said Rolfe, “I should think Stark himself might come in for a little blame. He deserved all he got, anyway.”

“Really!” protested Belinda, and then abruptly paused. She had not come thus unconventionally in order to participate in this sort of discussion. “Well,” she conceded after a moment, “there may be something in what you say. But it isn’t for me to say anything against poor Captain Stark. Naturally, his will was a very great surprise to me, but I feel that he did try to do the right thing in the end.”

Rolfe grunted and lighted his pipe. His eyes refused to dwell upon the brilliantly fair spectacle of Belinda in her sombre garb.

“You see,” said Belinda after a further slight pause, “I have led a very hard life. I always tried to do my duty by my poor old grandfather, but he never had any real affection for me. I have always been—I still am—very much alone.”

“Yes. I think you treated Old Columbus quite decently,” said Rolfe in the tone of one who takes not the faintest interest in his subject.

Belinda, however, turned upon him with a swift gesture of gratitude. "That's truly nice of you," she declared. "So few people appreciate that one tries to do one's best. And do you know what is happening now? Joe Muster's wife has been taken with some bad internal complaint that is quite incurable, and I shall have to look after her."

She looked up at him dramatically, as if expectant of further praise. But Rolfe had nothing more to add to his eulogy.

He merely said: "Really? That's bad luck," in a tone that failed to indicate whether the remark applied to Belinda or to Joe Muster's wife.

Belinda sighed again. "Yes, it's a sad world. But one must do one's best. It's rather terrible to stand quite alone in the midst of so much trouble. There's Honeyball Farm," she dashed off rather suddenly. "I wonder what you would do about that if you were me."

"I expect I should put it in the market," said Rolfe.

"Would you? Would you indeed?" She spoke eagerly. "You wouldn't think of living there—trying to make a home for yourself—if you were me?"

"I can't say," said Rolfe.

"Oh, but you must say—please!" she said, still eager and faintly wistful. "It's just that that I want to know. How do you feel about the place yourself? Would you like it—as a home, I mean?"

"Like it!" said Rolfe. "Well, hardly, under present conditions. I dare say it may have possibilities."

"Well, that's just it," said Belinda. "Suppose you were to marry and settle down on shore, isn't that something like the sort of place that would appeal to you?"

"I can't say," said Rolfe again, and he smoked his pipe gloomily, with a preoccupied air, as if the discussion held no further interest.

But Belinda had not yet reached her mark, though she was creeping towards it by devious paths. "You think the place has possibilities," she said. "Well, I'm sure it has. If I had anyone—like you, for instance—to help me, I'm positive I could turn it into a very cosy little home. So close to the sea it would be too. And so handy for the *Circe*. Peter's keeping on the ferry service with the skipper's boat for the moment, but I've no doubt that could be turned over to you if you cared to take it. I've got rid of Emily. I couldn't

keep those two on the premises. They've got a room somewhere down the quay. So, you see, there's nothing to prevent you if you feel inclined."

"Afraid I don't quite follow," said Rolfe. "Are you talking about the ferry or Honeyball Farm?"

"Both," cried Belinda with a broad gesture. "Think what a decent thing you could make of them! And keep Peter on as odd man if you like! I won't have old Emily, though. I'd get a girl for the rough work. We'd have the place done up so as you'd scarcely know it. I'd give you first choice in everything. I know you've got taste. You'd be happy there. I'm sure you would. And when the summer comes, you can take people for trips on the *Circe*, like you did last season, and then bring them back to my tea-house at Old Christopher's. Come now! Isn't that a sound proposition?"

She turned her flushed and laughing face invitingly up to him. The light fell on her full white throat which already verged upon the plump side. Her rough hair was flung back in shining disarray. Her eyes sparkled with vivacious anticipation.

But Rolfe remained at his post, still smoking phlegmatically, unmoved, uninterested.

"I don't think I've quite got the hang of things," he said after a decided pause. "Sounds a bit complicated to me."

"Not a bit!" Belinda assured him. "You see, I've got money now, and between us we could make a lot more. If you agreed, we might let apartments at Honeyball Farm as well as live there ourselves. Then we could start bathing-huts on this side too and get the thing really going. There's no end to what we mightn't do between us. Can't you see what a chance it is?"

"I don't quite see how or why I should come into it," said Rolfe with perverse deliberation.

Belinda clicked her tongue at his stupidity. "You're not trying!" she declared. "But I can tell you there isn't another man in Beam that wouldn't jump at the idea if I so much as held up my little finger. But I don't want any of them—a lot of oafs they are. I know them all too well—from the other side of the bar."

Rolfe received this in silence, smoking with a kind of heavy absorption that imparted no inkling of his thoughts.

"Well?" said Belinda briskly. "You'd better not go to sleep over it. You won't get another chance like this."

Rolfe turned his head very slowly and looked down upon her. “Thank you very much for thinking of it,” he said, slightly dragging his words as if they cost him something of an effort. “But—I’m afraid there’s nothing doing so far as I’m concerned.”

Belinda’s bright eyes flickered under his direct look, but she maintained her free attitude, “I don’t think you really quite grasp what I’m offering,” she said. “We’re such old friends that I haven’t stood on ceremony. Perhaps,” she uttered a small titter, “you weren’t quite prepared to be taken by the horns in this way. But I’m modern enough to think that if the girl is better off than the man, it’s up to her to speak. So—there you are!” She made her broad gesture again, and sat with an indescribable air of expectancy, as if she anticipated that his next move would be to take her in his arms.

But Rolfe did not stir. His pipe remained between his teeth, his blue eyes—very keen and rather pitiless—fixed upon her.

He spoke after a moment somewhat curtly, almost as if ashamed. “I’m sorry, Belinda. I can’t accept anything from you. You’re trying to put your eggs in the wrong basket.”

“Oh, what nonsense!” cried Belinda. “Don’t be so modest! I’d liefer be married to you than anyone I know. There’s no nonsense about either of us. We should get on first-class.”

He took his pipe from his mouth, and she made a slight upward movement towards him, for his face had a smile that seemed to her to need encouragement.

But in a second she was arrested, for he shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “But nothing doing! Thanks for suggesting it all the same.”

“What?” gasped Belinda, astounded, her confidence slowly wilting. “You don’t want to?”

He shook his head again, but he looked at her no longer; he surveyed his pipe with a close scrutiny. “I’m not what you think I am,” he said. “But I couldn’t accept in any case. I’m not free.”

“Not free!” She echoed the words on a note of high-pitched scorn, for the smart edifice of her self-esteem was crumbling about her. “You mean to say you hold yourself bound to a demented girl like Julie? You can’t! It’s impossible. Why—she’s almost a murderess!”

“She is nothing of the kind!” said Rolfe, and suddenly his eyes flashed down upon her, causing her to catch her breath as though she had been stabbed. “Even if she were, she’d still be the only girl on God’s earth for me. If you want to call yourself an old friend, you’ll bear that in mind and never forget it again.”

“Really!” said Belinda.

Her breast began to heave. She would not lower her head, but her eyes fell before that sword-like glance.

“It’s a pity—you didn’t say that—before,” she jerked out through lips that were not wholly steady.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Rolfe grimly. “But I’ve said it now—so that you may fully understand. Julie is everything to me, and if I don’t marry her, I shall never marry at all. That’s certain.”

“Indeed!” said Belinda. She gathered herself together sharply. The situation had abruptly become untenable, but she would withdraw her forces in good order. “Well, if you ask me,” she said, preparing to rise, “I should say that poor Micky had been turned into everybody’s cat’s-paw. He’d never have thought of killing the skipper if it hadn’t been put into his head. You and Julie between you did that.”

Rolfe straightened himself. He made no reply whatever to the thrust. He merely made way for her to go.

She got up and paused, facing him. “After all, he was my father,” she said, with defiance. “So I’ve a right to say what I think.”

“No one can stop you,” said Rolfe, with deadly calm. “Only—it’s not always advisable. Good night, Belinda!”

She passed him haughtily by, then swiftly turned back. “You needn’t think you’ve got the better of me,” she said viciously. “I wouldn’t marry you now if I was paid to.”

“I am quite sure of that,” he returned. “And I have not the faintest wish to get the better of you. Good night again! I’ll light you up the steps.”

He was quite unanswerable. She had a feeling that if she had offered him personal violence in that moment he would have rigidly refused to defend himself.

Quivering with wrath, she flung away from him and mounted the steps to the quay.

There for a second she paused, looking down. He was standing on the deck of the *Circe*, the torch in his hand still lighting her. But he was not watching her. There was dejection in his attitude, but she knew it was not for her.

“You fool!” she muttered half aloud. “You fool!”

But whether she spoke to herself or to him was not apparent. The next moment she whirled away in a tempest of anger that carried her nearly the whole length of the jetty.

Then the sight of her newly acquired property diverted her thoughts. After all, there were other things in the world besides Rolfe Britton. And she really did not know how she had ever come to imagine that she cared for him. She hated him now whole-heartedly—and Julie, too! Julie, who had even less to boast about in the way of parentage than she herself! And as to Rolfe, who was he? A mere nobody, without antecedents of any description; and not even endowed with ambition!

Well, she had no further use for him. There remained the ultimate vision of Joe Muster, and she told herself with sudden ardour that it would be a shame to let him down.

No; she would stick to poor Joe now, whatever happened, and doubtless her devotion would bring its own reward.

Honeyball Farm could go into the market, and she would turn her full attention to the elevation of *The Black Swan*. A far more feasible proposition really, and one which she would enjoy far more!

The angry discomfiture died out of her heart as the future began to glow. When she took her place behind the bar a little later, Joe Muster told her facetiously that she was the prettiest thing in rosebuds that he had seen that winter, and she must drink to the New Year with him after everybody had cleared off.

CHAPTER VI

NEW YEAR'S EVE

IT was not very long after Belinda had left the *Circe* that Rolfe turned in at the Rectory gates.

He was not in the habit of presenting himself in the evening, but to-night a great restlessness possessed him, and it was almost as if some unseen force were drawing him to Julie's side.

Not that he expected to see her! He almost knew beforehand that that would be denied him. He had not looked upon her since that morning at Honeyball Farm, when he had deliberately stepped into the breach and diverted the horrible shadow of suspicion from her to himself. The subsequent happening of Micky's detention, which had resulted in his own release, had faded since into the background of things that scarcely mattered. The vast relief of knowing her to be innocent had ceased to count. It was she alone that mattered, she who now seemed so far away. He had begun to think that he would never see her again. And yet this urge was upon him, drawing him.

When the door was opened to him he did not ask for news of her. Instead, he requested without preamble to be allowed to speak to Miss Tredville.

He was left in the hall to await her, and ere long she came down to him, moving quickly, with none of her customary nonchalance.

"I'm glad you've come," she said. "I was wondering if I'd send for you."

"She's worse," said Rolfe.

Sybil gave him a troubled glance. "Frankly, I have a feeling that she is," she admitted. "But I have no real reason for saying so. That's why I didn't send."

"Has she spoken?" Rolfe asked.

“No, she hasn’t said one word. Only—once or twice—I’ve thought that she was praying, or trying to.” Sybil bit her lip suddenly, as if something hurt her. “I don’t seem able to help her at all,” she said. “I’d give anything if I only could.”

“And you won’t let me see her?” said Rolfe.

She regarded him doubtfully. “Dr. Keston doesn’t advise it. He thinks it would upset her. I’m not quite sure that I agree with him. But then . . .” she stopped. “Oh, it’s damnable—this standing by!” she broke out, in a fierce whisper. “She’s like someone hanging over a precipice. The least thing might mean disaster. But she can’t go on for ever. I’ve a feeling that we’re getting near the end.”

“Let me see her!” said Rolfe. He spoke steadily, but his voice held a deep urgency that spoke of a strain far greater than that which Sybil herself was undergoing. “I agree with you. She can’t go on for ever like this. There are times when one has got to take a risk.”

Sybil stood hesitant. “Shall I send for the doctor first?”

“No,” said Rolfe. “Trust to your own judgment—and to me! I’ll take the responsibility.”

She still looked at him irresolutely. “It may be a great shock,” she said. “Or—she may not even know you.”

“I think she will know me,” Rolfe said. And he added with a curt conviction that took her unawares, “She’s been calling to me for the last two hours.”

“Oh!” Sybil said. “Do you really believe that?”

“That’s why I’m here,” he said. “I’ve come because I had to. Miss Tredville, I think you’ll take a bigger risk in keeping me away than you will in letting me go to her. I should have been here sooner, only I was interrupted. And then—I got her message again, and I came.”

Sybil still stood in indecision. “Don’t think me a brute!” she said. “But—if only I were quite sure that she really wanted you. . . .”

“You would let me in?” he said.

“I would,” she declared emphatically.

“Even against the doctor’s orders?” he said.

“Yes,” said Sybil.

He made a quiet but very positive movement forward. "I think you will have to take me to her without being quite sure," he said. "If she is going, I must see her before she goes. But—I may be able to hold her back."

Sybil moved with him. They mounted the stairs together. She was trembling, but he was as steady as a rock. His face was set with an iron determination that made her realize that, whatever the hazard, there could be no turning back now.

Yet, at the top of the stairs, she put out a detaining hand and stopped him. "You're not to come beyond the door until I give you leave," she said. "I'll go in first and see, and then—if there's no change——"

"All right," he said, and he gave her a brief smile of reassurance which comforted her a little though it did not lift the weight of anxiety from her heart.

She moved along the passage without further words, and he followed her noiselessly. He had the silent tread of most squarely built men.

Sybil slipped into the room in which Julie lay, leaving the door ajar. She felt on edge with suspense. Until that moment she had scarcely realized how great was the risk she was taking. It hung upon her now like an overwhelming burden. She was about to act in direct opposition to Oliver's orders, and the result might be fatal. Or it might mean something even worse to the delicate organism that was at stake. She was afraid to think of what the total unbalancing of that semi-dormant mind might mean.

And yet that feeling of an impending change still pressed upon her. To a close observer there was a distinct difference in Julie, hard to define, but none the less perceptible. Her white face on the pillow looked in a sense younger, more transparent, more spiritual. Her eyes were no longer gazing into infinity, but half closed under slightly drawn brows, giving that expression of concentration, almost of prayer, which had troubled Sybil. She seemed withdrawn to a great distance, wrapt in an unknown atmosphere, deeply contemplative—a soul already almost beyond the confines of the flesh.

Sybil came softly to the bedside, and bent over her. "Julie!" she breathed.

There was no answer, no suggestion of response. Her hands were crossed upon her breast as though they had fallen so in an attempt to clasp each other in supplication. Her breathing was barely perceptible. She lay in a

trance-like stillness. And the beauty and the pathos of her touched Sybil as nothing on earth had ever touched her before.

The only light in the room was a shaded bedside lamp. Its golden radiance might have been shining upon an effigy on a tomb, ineffably calm and aloof.

Sybil watched her for a few seconds with fear slowly gathering in her heart. Then at length, almost in desperation, she turned.

The door had been pushed half open; she saw a dark shadow beyond it. She moved soundlessly across the room. Her decision was made.

“Come in!” she said.

And Rolfe entered.

He stood for a moment or two, then with his noiseless stride he approached the bed and halted at the foot.

Sybil remained in the background. She felt as if from that instant the matter had been taken out of her hands.

There followed what seemed to her a pause of interminable length during which Rolfe stood as motionless as the figure on the bed, watching, waiting, silent. It was as if a spell had fallen in the quiet room, and she wondered if possibly it were the presence of Death—that mystery which she had never seen. She had a sudden, earnest longing for Oliver; but it was too late now. She had acted without him, and already the situation was beyond her control.

For there was no moving Rolfe. He stood with that rock-like strength of his, and she saw that his hands were gripped upon the brass bed-rail as though he grappled with some terrific obstacle that yet held him back.

And then—just as the tension was becoming unbearable—strangely, amazingly, there came a movement.

But it was not Rolfe who moved. It was the girl who had lain till then upon the narrow bed as one dead. As if a voice had called to her she stirred, and her great eyes opened, wide and questioning, searching as it were first the infinite and then slowly contracting to something closer. She moved her head, and her black hair rippled on the pillow. Her crossed hands lifted themselves with a fumbling gesture as if they tried to clasp each other, and—failing—were suddenly flung straight outwards. And a low cry in which ecstasy and anguish were very poignantly mingled broke from her.

Rolfe moved at last. In a flashing second he was beside her, had dropped upon his knees beside the bed and gathered her against his breast.

“Julie! My Julie!” he said, and his voice broke into a sudden hard sobbing that choked all further utterance.

Sybil, still trembling in the background, saw the white shaking hands clasp themselves and come to rest about his neck and—in another moment—Julie’s gasping whisper: “Rolfe! My Rolfe! I thought you were never coming back!”

It came to her then, with a conviction that almost staggered her, that she had nothing further to fear. Julie had turned back from the Valley of the Shadow to meet the man she loved.

She slipped unostentatiously from the room and sat down on an ottoman in the passage and wept in sympathy.

So Julie had loved him after all—and no one had ever known it!

It must have been nearly an hour later that the front door opened again, and there fell a step upon the stair.

Sybil did not move. She was feeling oddly shaken and uncertain of herself. And so, as Oliver drew near, he found her, still slightly bowed and on the verge of tears.

He stopped short by her side. “What on earth has happened? Julie? Julie’s not . . .”

She turned her face up to him, not attempting to conceal her emotion. “Oh no!” she said. “I think she’s safe, thank God! Don’t go in! Rolfe’s there.”

“Rolfe!” He put his hand on her shoulder. “You sent for him?”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t. But—somehow—Julie did. Anyhow he came. And I let him go to her. I had to. She came to herself while he was standing looking at her. And—Oliver”—she choked a little—“d’you know—she cares for him—almost as much—as I care for you?”

Oliver stooped abruptly and kissed her. “I’m very angry,” he remarked unconvincingly. “Anyway, I’d better just look in and make sure all’s well.”

“Don’t disturb them!” she whispered.

He turned from her to the door which she had closed, opened it a few inches and pushed his head in.

Then he came back to her. “She’s asleep on his shoulder,” he said. “You’ll have to let him stay now till she wakes. Yes, I think you’ve saved her, and I congratulate you. But it wasn’t my fault I was mistaken about Rolfe. You women are all alike.”

She laughed faintly and quizzically. “Yes, it’s always our fault, I know. Never mind! Let’s cast it all on to the annual scrap-heap and begin again! I always did love New Year’s Day. There’s something so delightfully childish about it.”

“There’s something childishly delightful about you,” he returned, “that I’ve never seen before. What has happened to you, Sybil?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and twined her arm softly in his. “It’s just the joy of things, I suppose. I feel as if Julie—and I—have just come alive. And I don’t know how to thank God enough.”

CHAPTER VII

NECESSARY ARRANGEMENTS

“I MUST say she went through it very well,” said Lord Telford. “But the case was plain from start to finish. I could see that the Prawles would have liked to have fixed the onus on her, but she had the courage to blame herself while in the witness-box, and that took the wind out of their sails.”

“And the verdict?” said Sir Philip.

“What we knew it would be—guilty but insane. I think the wretched boy would have been absolutely indignant if he had been found not guilty. He’s still proud of his feat.”

“Poor little beggar!” was Sir Philip’s comment.

“Oh, it’s better for him to be out of the way. He’s clearly not responsible. Stark himself sent him over the border-line obviously. A dreadful fellow—that Stark! Not a friend in the world! He deserved all he got.” Lord Telford spoke with emphasis.

“We haven’t all of us the gift for making friendships,” observed Sir Philip rather drily. “Neither you nor I, Telford, have found the younger generation exactly easy to get on with.”

Lord Telford laughed with a touch of ruefulness. “I know. I used to say no son of mine should ride over me roughshod. But I’m getting old—and senile, I suppose. We’ve got to accept their terms in the end. They’ll never stoop to ours.”

Sir Philip looked supremely cynical. “I have not quite reached that stage of senility at present,” he commented. “But if it pleases you to play the fairy godfather, don’t let me be any hindrance! I expect you would like to see Julie.”

“No, I won’t worry her to-day. She looked worn out when she left the court.” Lord Telford spoke compassionately. “We must get her young again somehow now that this business is over. Tell Sybil to give her my love and

say there's a honeymoon palace waiting for her and her mate which I think she, at least, will prefer to a rough sea in February. Everything's in readiness, so they can fix the day as soon as they like."

"I'm expecting the bridegroom elect at any moment to make the necessary arrangements," said Sir Philip.

"Oh, are you? Then I'll go. He'll want to manage his own affairs." Lord Telford held out his hand. "Thanks for all you've done, Tredville. You hide your light all right, but it shines out now and then in spite of you. By the way, I'm going to give away the bride."

"It looks as if you're going to give away everything," remarked Sir Philip. "But I don't suppose she'll object."

"She may possibly give me something in return. Who knows?" said Lord Telford.

And he took his leave, and went out into the winter night with a kindly smile about his lips.

Sir Philip settled down to his week-end sermons, but not for long. The coming of Rolfe was his next interruption—Rolfe with his head up and blue eyes full of resolution—to make immediate arrangements for his wedding.

"We neither of us want to put it off any longer," he said. "It's been postponed too long. Besides, Julie's upset, and though you've been so awfully good to her, I think it would be better if I could get her away from Beam for a bit."

"You are going to Brooksand, I hear?" said Sir Philip.

Rolfe nodded. "Yes. It's terribly kind of him. I couldn't refuse—and for her sake, too. . . ." His feelings seemed to become a little complicated at this point, and he said no more.

"Well," said Sir Philip, "I think you are doing the right thing, though I do not expect you to be in the least gratified to hear it. Under the circumstances, as you already have a licence and the conditions have been complied with, I see no reason why you shouldn't be married to-morrow, if you like."

"By Jove, sir, that's decent of you!" said Rolfe, his face lighting up. "I didn't think it would be as easy as all that. May I go and tell her?"

"Wait a bit!" protested Sir Philip. "We'd better have everything cut and dried first—that is, if you're sure she won't back out at the last minute."

"I am—quite sure of that," said Rolfe.

“Good! Then we’ll get to business. But—if I were you—I shouldn’t see her to-night. She’s worn out. Let her rest!” said Sir Philip.

Rolfe ceded the point with unusual docility. “Very well, Sir Philip. I’ll do as you think best. P’raps you’ll put me through my paces, will you? I’ve never studied the wedding service.”

Sir Philip smiled at the naïve admission. “You’ll have to learn more than the wedding service, my friend, if you want to make a good husband,” he remarked. “But that’s a job that no one can teach you.”

Rolfe gave him a straight look. “I’m going to be awfully good to her,” he said. “She’s such a kid, and she’s never had a chance to be happy yet.”

“Yes. I dare say a little judicious spoiling won’t do her any harm,” conceded Sir Philip.

The same thought was in Sybil’s mind that night as she went to bed in the room in which Julie already lay asleep. She had maintained her guardianship over the girl during the six weeks that had elapsed since she had turned back from the Gates of Death. There was something in Julie that appealed to her more strongly than anything she had ever known, and she would yield her place to none. But on that night she knew—what Julie did not know—that it was the last time that she would watch over her.

She grimaced to herself once or twice as she lay in the darkness, awaiting sleep. Julie would have another protector now, and she another charge. That was life. There was no standing still, even when one seemed to have reached a satisfactory halting-place. They were bound to go forward on their separate ways. She would be the wife of a doctor who would probably rise high in his profession; and Julie—she could not visualize the future for Julie. But Rolfe would hew his own way, and he would get somewhere. She was certain of that. As the mists of sleep drifted over her there came a memory of old Lord Telford looking at her wistfully across the barren room at Brooksand on the day that he had suggested marriage to her.

“Yes, they’ll be all right,” she decided, as she gave herself up to slumber. “He’ll see to that.”

And in the morning came the task of telling Julie of what lay before her.

Sybil was no adept at the breaking of news. She detested the process when applied to herself, and her method was consequently by no means circuitous.

She carried a cup of tea to Julie's bedside with a careless "Had a good night? I knew you would. You were so utterly fagged out. Here you are, and drink it quick! For I've got something immense to tell you."

Julie, with a lovely glow on her cheeks and eyes that shone with a starry splendour, looked up swiftly and shyly, with a murmured, "Is it Rolfe?"

"Very much Rolfe," Sybil assured her energetically. "Drink your tea, my child! And I'll tell you all about it."

Julie drank obediently. She was always submissive to Sybil's behests. There was a very close understanding between them.

"Now please tell me!" she said. "He wasn't vexed, was he, at not seeing me last night?"

"Oh, infuriated of course!" laughed Sybil, and bent to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "So much so in fact that he has decided it shall never occur again. I hope that's preparation enough. It ought to be. Julie, this is your wedding-day!"

"Oh!" said Julie.

She uttered a small gasp, and Sybil patted her shoulder, laughing.

"Don't faint or anything! I'll see you through. I gave you Lord Telford's message last night, didn't I? You're not going to sea for your honeymoon."

"He's much too kind," said Julie. "But—to-day! I shall never be ready."

"You've got nothing whatever to do," Sybil pointed out. "Anyway, it's not till twelve o'clock, so you needn't get rattled. You'll find me a very efficient bridesmaid."

"I can't think what I shall do without you," Julie said, very earnestly.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Sybil airily. "You'll have Rolfe to take care of you. And I shan't be very far away—though I don't flatter myself I shall be wanted. Now I'm going to dress, and you lie still for a bit and get used to things. I shan't be long."

She departed to her own room whistling, having determined that cheeriness was to be the keynote of that day's proceedings. Since she was obliged to part with her charge she would do the thing in style. And she was firmly resolved that for Julie at least it should be a red-letter day.

So philosophical was she in her attitude that Julie was compelled to accept it as her own. Everything seemed unreal to her with the exception of

Sybil's composure. The strain of the previous day had left its mark upon her, for she was still far from strong, but Sybil's reassuring presence smoothed the way, and though the prospect of an immediate marriage sent a nervous tremor through her, she stilled it with all the strength at her command. It was not fair to Rolfe to let herself be afraid.

With some wisdom Sybil ordained that Rolfe should not be admitted before the ceremony. "It'll only wear you out to see him," she said.

And, since the direction of affairs was entirely in her hands, Julie meekly agreed.

Sybil kept her in her room until the last minute. "You can see my mother afterwards," she said. "We shall be back for lunch. And here comes the sun to cheer us up! You'll be able to walk to the church. It's only a step."

The pale warmth of the February sun glinted down upon Julie as she went forth to her wedding, with Sybil on one side of her and Lord Telford on the other. She was absolutely calm to all outward appearance. Dressed with absolute simplicity, there was about her a loveliness that was more rare than physical beauty.

Lord Telford's eyes regarded her with paternal approval. "And now," he said, "for the happy ending to the love story!"

"Don't be silly!" challenged Sybil over the bride's bent head. "It's only the beginning."

To Julie, as she entered the shadowy porch of the church, there came a strange feeling of rest—as though she had crossed the threshold into another world.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HAPPY ENDING

IT was already dark when Rolfe and his bride reached the honeymoon palace at Brooksand that had been prepared for them. Sybil had ordained a rest for Julie during the afternoon, and it had undoubtedly refreshed her. But the strangeness and grandeur of the place sent an access of shyness through her which rendered her almost mute.

Rolfe, however, somewhat to her surprise, seemed quite at his ease. He led her to a settee before a blazing log fire and made her rest while he poured out the tea.

“Better than the old *Circe*, is it?” he asked her, smiling.

She looked at him rather dubiously. He was wearing clothes which she had never seen him wear before—the ordinary clothes of a gentleman—and somehow he seemed as much at home in them as in his old blue jersey and slacks.

“Well?” said Rolfe. “Isn’t it?”

She shook her head slowly. “It isn’t so homely, is it?” she said.

Rolfe looked delighted. “That’s just what I wanted you to say. But you’re not fit for punching about in her at present. When you are, we’ll go back.”

She smiled with her eyes on the fire. “Not to Beam,” she said.

“Why not?” said Rolfe.

“Nobody likes us there,” she told him sadly.

“They’ll get over that,” he said. “Listen! I’ve got a plan. Suppose I had money enough to buy Honeyball Farm and turn it into a little home on shore for us two. Would you like that?”

She started. “Honeyball Farm!” she said incredulously.

He nodded. “Yes. Wash out all the past miseries and turn it into something decent! You and I could do that, Julie. We’d go cruising in the *Circe*, but we’d have something solid to come back to. We’d make a quite different place of it—a real home by the sea. Wouldn’t that be nice, dear?”

She looked up at him, the first instinctive horror gone from her eyes. “I should love anything with you,” she said.

He smiled down at her. “You wait till we’ve gone into it! You’ll love it better then. It’s standing derelict now, but we could have it for the asking.”

“I thought Lord Telford bought it,” she said.

Rolfe nodded. “He did. He owns practically everything. I’ve a great fancy for that place, Julie—to make you happy where you’ve been so miserable. Will you let me try?”

She considered the matter, drawn by his enthusiasm almost in spite of herself. “You see, I haven’t got any money,” she said, at length.

“Neither have I,” said Rolfe.

“Then how——” she began.

He cut her short. “He’d give it to us for a wedding present. He wants us somewhere near. This place,” he glanced around him—“I couldn’t endure it without you. But with you—well, everything’s different.”

He sat down beside her and slipped his arm around her.

Julie sighed and leaned against him. “I feel like that too. It’s not the place that really matters. Even Honeyball Farm—with you to do for. . . .”

He turned her face upwards and kissed her on the lips. “With me to do for—I like that!” he whispered. “Thank you for that, darling.”

She clung to him for a little in silence. Then: “What makes Lord Telford so very good to us?” she asked.

“He wants to adopt us,” said Rolfe.

“Adopt us!” she echoed. “Hasn’t he got anyone of his own?”

“Yes, a son,” said Rolfe.

She lifted her head to look at him. “A son! Then, Rolfe, surely—where is he?”

Rolfe laughed—a rather rueful laugh. “That’s just it,” he said.

“Just what?” She was staring at him now with wide, half-startled eyes. “I don’t understand.”

He caught her suddenly close. “Yes, look at me—look at me!” he said. “We’re so horribly like each other, and yet you’ve never seen!”

“Rolfe!” she gasped.

He pressed his face to hers. “You understand now!” he said, “I’ve fought him, more or less, all my life. But now—he’s got me—through you. I wanted to make my own life, as he did himself. I wanted to be independent. But I’ve had to give in. I can’t thwart him any longer. He’s been too decent to us both. I’m caught like a beetle on a pin. There’s no getting away again.”

“But, Rolfe,” she protested in distress, “oh, Rolfe! I’d no idea. I thought you were just a nobody like myself. Rolfe! I’d never have married you if I’d known.”

He laughed at that, holding her closer. “Too late now! You’re my wife. You’ve married the son of a lord without knowing it. But don’t let that worry you! There’s no blue blood in our family that I’ve ever heard of. Your job will be to keep the peace between us. He’s taken a fancy to you, so that ought not to be difficult.”

“Oh, I ought to have been told!” she said. “I knew I wasn’t good enough, but I never guessed—this.”

“You’re a thousand times too good,” he told her, with sudden emphasis. “And you’re just all I want in the world. What’s money? What’s rank? What’s anything beside love? You don’t care for these things any more than I do. You only care for me. Isn’t that true?”

His voice was quick and passionate. It appealed to her in a fashion that she could not refuse. “Of course it’s true!” she said. “Rolfe—darling—of course it’s true! How could I help it when you were willing to give up your life for mine?”

“That’s not the reason,” he said. “You loved me before that—long before that.”

She nodded, softly flushing. “Yes. I did. But—I tried not to.”

“You didn’t try hard enough,” he said. “Now tell me—when did you love me first?”

She hesitated. “It’s difficult to be quite sure. I—was rather afraid of you, Rolfe.”

“I know,” he said. “I was a rough brute. Don’t remind me!”

“Oh, but not always!” she said, and a very tender light came into her eyes with the words. “D’you remember that night when I first went to tea with you on the *Circe*? And she looked like a fairy ship on the water. And you whistled—oh, Rolfe, do you remember? I’ve thought of it so often since.”

“What did I whistle?” he said.

She told him in a hushed voice: “It was ‘Abide with Me’. I’d been feeling so wicked, and it made me feel—better. Often and often I wondered afterwards if it could have been really you whistling that, and if you would ever do it again. But you never did.” Her eyes fell. She could not look at him any longer. “And then—that night that you trusted me and promised to be good to me, I felt that some day—you would.”

She stopped, and a silence fell.

It lasted for several seconds. Then Rolfe did a strange thing. He slipped to his knees by her side, and with her hands pressed against his heart he broke into a low and flute-like whistling of the hymn she loved.

When he ended she leaned towards him, all fear and all hesitation gone, and laid her lips upon his hair.

“God bless you for that, Rolfe!” she said simply. “You’ve made me feel—quite—safe—at last. And I want to put away all the hate and the badness now, and try to be—good.”

“Right!” said Rolfe, holding her very closely. “We’ll have a jolly good shot at it—together.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Honeyball Farm* by Ethel M. Dell]