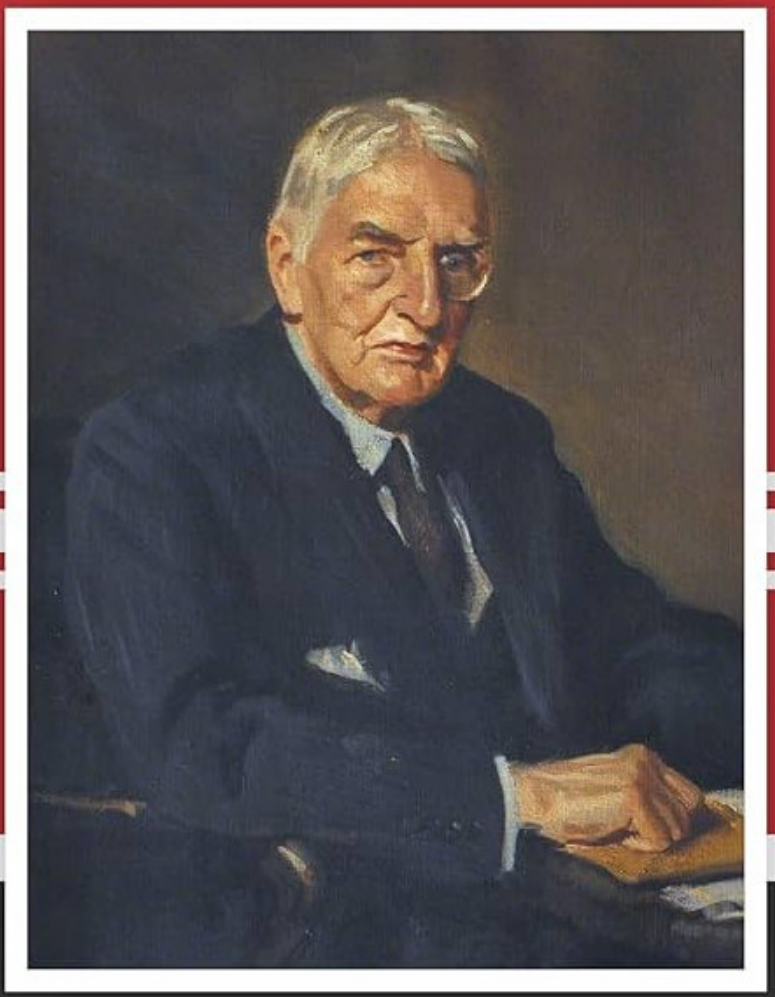
THE DEAN'S ELBOW



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THE DEAN'S ELBOW

A. E. W. MASON

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON  MCMXXX

TO THE MEMORY OF MURIEL STEPHENS,
June 27, 1902-October 30, 1929.

Longa est vita si plena est.

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The Dean's Elbow

CHAPTER I WHERE ENGLAND BEGINS

The miracle of yesterday! Incredible—yet proved true now by every sound and sight and physical sensation. Mona Lightfoot uttered a little crow of delight; took her hands from the tiller to clap them together, and the small cutter slipped up into the wind and hung, her great sail flapping and all the life gone out of her.

The young man in the bows, who was fishing his spinnaker out of the sail-locker, hooted his derision and, running over the crown of the cabin roof, sprang down into the cockpit.

"Have I done wrong?" Mona asked with a penitence which was more than half mockery.

"So much wrong that if this ship carried a yardarm we should be making at once for the three-mile limit."

He brought the cutter on her course again with the sails full and bye.

"Keep her so with the leach of the sail just quivering and between the buoys and the beacon." The young man was very nautical in his talk on this first morning of his holiday, and Mona Lightfoot laughed with pleasure. He had the boyishness of other young men; and for every sign that he was really like other young men her mind was eagerly alert.

The cutter slid down the long channel of Poole Harbour; the dingy little yellow tavern, "The Margate Hoy," was no longer distinguishable upon the quay, and the cluster of deserted buildings which in those far-off days of the early nineties was Poole, dwindled over the counter into a blur. It was seven o'clock on a cool, silver morning in the first week of September, England's month. In a gap of land on the western side Corfe Castle black upon its

pyramid stood out from the wall of the Purbeck Hills; on the east the pine trees and white sand of Canford Cliffs struck a milder and more modern note of history. The smooth lagoon of the harbour had the soft gleam of a mirror and split before the stern of the cutter with the tinkle of breaking glass. The sky spread dappled overhead, and the earth still very silent below it; and the air, fresh and lively, held the sure promise of a mellow sunlit day.

The fairway curved in the midst of a little fleet of fishing boats and pleasure yachts towards the narrows between the big hotel upon the point and Brownsea Island. It seemed to Mona Lightfoot that she was passing through a gateway into a new and magical world. The kick of the tiller in her unpractised hands was a sheer delight.

"I have the loveliest feeling that I am playing truant," she cried to the young man, who was now polishing the shining brass of his little ship with the care of a good groom for his horse. He looked at her with a quick smile of appreciation, which lit up a face of quite commonplace looks with a surprising grace.

"I, too," he answered, and gazed about him, smelling the sea. The yellow sand cliffs of Bournemouth, and a steamer smoking alongside the pier, dropped away upon their left. Studland's prettiness, the chalk arches and Old Harry, the chalk pillar, were deployed upon their right. And, white calling to white, in a diagonal line with Old Harry, the towering chalk down of the Isle of Wight caught the first of the sunlight, spilt some of it upon the jagged Needles at its feet and tossed the rest across the bay to warm Old Harry.

"Keep her straight, Mona, now between the striped buoys and the black cones," he cried. "I'll have finished in a minute or two. Then I'll relieve you at the tiller and you can cook our breakfasts."

The *Sea Flower* was at once treasure and romance to young Mark Thewliss. Each increase in a steadily rising salary had been set aside for years against her building; the enthralling library of small boats and their adventures and their equipment had been studied as though each one of them was a classic, so that the exquisite creature might have no tiny omission or faulty taste to reproach him with; and when she at last took the sea from a slip at Salcombe in Devonshire, Thewliss passed his examination as master-mariner rather that she might be fitly commanded than to gratify any aspiration of his own. *Sea Flower* was now in her second year, a cutter of nine tons by Thames measurement, built of oak, coppered below the waterline, with a teak deck, a lead keel—nothing but lead would satisfy Mark Thewliss, though the expense of it cramped him for a whole year of

his working life—and a set of sails dainty enough for any racer in the Solent. He had had her built with a spoon bow, a broad beam and a long counter so that she might be safe in a heavy sea with a strong following wind; and since she was meant for single-handed cruising, every sheet was brought aft to the cockpit. She was painted black with a gold line, and she answered to her tiller as a polo pony to a touch of the snaffle.

Sea Flower had this great merit too. Being built for single-handed work, she had no forecastle. She could afford an unexpectedly spacious saloon with a cambered roof and two little doors at the forward end of it, that on the left opening into a tiny kitchen and pantry, that on the right into a lavatory. There was even a bath under the floor. Two steps led down from the cockpit, giving thus six feet of headroom in the saloon; and the mahogany doors were edged with rubber and watertight. She had a small tank of drinking water at the back of one side of the cockpit, and she carried a couple of beakers besides in rockers on her deck. Her larder for fresh meat was arranged after the fashion of the North Sea fishing trawlers—a cask with a lid, screwed to the deck behind the main-mast and ventilated with holes made by a large auger. But on the *Sea Flower*, the cask was a super-cask—a barrel of ripe oak bound with hoops of brass.

Thewliss stowed his spinnaker sail ready to his hand before he came aft to the cockpit. He was still, indeed, on the camber of the cabin roof when he stopped suddenly with a look of surprise upon his face.

"Have I done wrong again?" Mona Lightfoot asked.

"No," he answered, and again his smile gave life and illumination to his face. "I was remembering that last year I sailed to Cherbourg and Guernsey and the Scilly Isles. And I never realised to this moment what a lonely business it must have been."

He sprang down into the cockpit as he spoke, and so did not see the colour spread over the girl's face and the sudden blossom of tenderness in her eyes.

"That's Durlstone Head," he said with the broad accent of all the longshoremen who had ever lived. He pointed to the great promontory beyond Swanage Bay where a huge stone ball hung poised upon a green shoulder. He told her the legend of that stone ball as it is known to all hands in coasting craft; how the owner of the house upon the head had spent his life having the map of the world and its oceans carved in an exact proportion upon it, and how he had blown out his brains in despair when the work was done, because a tiny islet in the Red Sea was half an inch out of its proper

place. “Now cook the breakfast, Mona, or we shall find ourselves in the Race before it’s ready. Crisp bacon and coffee hot enough to scald the mouth. You’ll find fresh rolls and butter in the cupboard by the settee.” He took the tiller from her and added with a laugh:

“We have got the best wind we could wish for. I put it all down to your yachting cap. Run along!”

Mona Lightfoot took a look at herself in the mirror of the saloon before she set about preparing breakfast. She was a tall girl with copper coloured hair and big dark eyes clear as the morning set wide apart under a low broad forehead. She had a straight delicately chiselled nose, a mouth rather large, a short upper lip and a rounded chin. There was too much of character in her face for prettiness; but there were moments when it was lovely; and always it had a curiously appealing look as of one destined somehow for great unhappiness. Even now, as her eyes danced and she set the yachting cap still more jauntily to the thick waves of hair, it was there for those who had eyes to see. A moment later and the blind could almost have seen it. For she caught her breath and stood with her lips parted and a hand upon her heart, like someone on the edge of a perilous dive into dark and unknown waters.

She had planned to sit quietly down somewhere apart—forward for choice, above the hiss and sparkle of the water at the bows—and fix each instant of the miraculous yesterday, with its burnish still upon it, for ever in her memories. A golden pattern which must throw some glimmer of light ahead of her even if the thread of her life led her deep into the catacombs. But there was too much to do. Breakfast had to be cooked—and such a breakfast as would make one sorry for the angels. It had to be eaten and cleared away, and the plates washed and stored safely in their racks—all before some mysterious and hostile thing called “The Race” enveloped them.

Sea Flower was full of gadgets. A small folding table could be set into slots in the floor of the cockpit, and upon this, covered with a fine white cloth, breakfast was laid. Coffee of a fragrance unknown within the four walls of a room; bacon in thin crisp slices fried in its fat with eggs, just tinged with brown, lolling on the top of them; hot rolls and fresh butter in a big wedge instead of mean little meagre pats; marmalade with thick cubes of brown peel; and honey in the comb, with Ribston Pippins from Hereford and Cape plums for dessert.

Mona Lightfoot was to see in use now another contrivance of which Mark Thewliss was inordinately vain. From the combing of the cockpit

underneath the tiller a long curved steel bar hung down with a hinge at each end. Thewliss lifted the bar until it stood out horizontally, a segment of a circle where springs at the hinges caught it and held it firm. On the inside of this segment there was a steel plate, shaped and fixed to the curve of the bar and notched like the parapet of a castle wall. Thewliss raised this plate until it stood perpendicularly on the bar and clamped it in that position with a couple of strong screws.

"There!" he said proudly when he had finished. He was contemplating an arc of steel with grooves like the rowlocks of a boat reaching side by side across the radius of the tiller's movements. He now dropped the long wooden arm into one of these grooves. "You see, she'll sail herself now. Unless the wind changes, she'll keep her course. It's handier than lashing your helm if you are alone and want to go to bed."

He moved to a seat opposite to Mona Lightfoot, and they breakfasted in comfort as the little ship ran past Swanage with the wind fair on her quarter. Mona lifted her eyes to the curve of the parade, where already the visitors were astir. She snuggled her shoulders against the cushions:

"Poor people! I am sorry for them."

"Better than Bexhill, eh?" Thewliss asked with a laugh.

"Oh! A million times!"

Yet but for the wonder of yesterday, Bexhill it would have been for her. The parade and the band, the boarding house and its chance acquaintances, the pier and the cinema—she shut her eyes, as the mere thought of these seaside joys brought upon her a sense of listlessness and fatigue; and opened them with an anxious start to make sure that meanwhile the bay and Durlstone Point, the little ship and its captain had not vanished into space.

"Dreaming?"

"Yes," she answered.

"No time for that! Look!"

He pointed forward; and Mona, gazing out beneath the boom of the big sail, saw a towering and stately promontory slide out beyond Durlstone Point and a jumble of dark water stream in a line from it seawards.

"St. Alban's Head," he cried.

Mona could clap her hands together now, and with a laugh of merriment she did.

"Where England begins," she answered mockingly.

"You'll see. Meanwhile—I hate to mention it, my dear—but if we get into the Race like this, there won't be much of our crockery left when we get out of it."

Mona Lightfoot jumped up in remorse, and carried the breakfast table and its equipment into the cabin. By the time the plates were stowed in their racks, the cups hung up upon their hooks, and she herself out again in the cockpit, the great cliff overhung them, the waves were breaking viciously ahead of them and the roar of tumbling waters was in their ears.

"It won't be so bad," Thewliss shouted. "We're well in shore for one thing. For another the wind must be off shore for the Race to be really up."

But even as he spoke, *Sea Flower* drove in among the breakers; and Mona had to clutch the combing of the cockpit and set the rubber soles of her shoes firmly upon the floor to keep herself from being thrown across the boat. Thewliss, with the tiller in his hand, did his best. He guided his cutter so far as he could without risking a gybe to the little valleys and passes in the crests of those changing ridges. But from every side they attacked the cutter, slapping it as though it were a wayward urchin, rolling it as though it were a barrel. One moment Mona Lightfoot had an impression of a puppy fighting with a slipper; the next, as the stern dipped into the sea and flung back a sparkling cloud of spray which spattered on the deck, of a horse that drops its head and then tosses a silver mane. Every now and then the big main sail swung inboard and out again with a rattle of its blocks and a jerk upon the sheets which shook the ship; and then in a second the roar and jostle fell away behind them and the cutter was running over a smoothly rippling sea.

Thewliss set the spinnaker now and resumed his seat at the tiller. Far away to the south-west the black mass of Portland lay brooding high over the sunlit passage to the oceans. To the north of it the little wooded pinnacle of the Nothe rose from the smooth mirror of Weymouth Bay with the curious effect of a mirage in the desert. And beside them flitted the Dorset Coast: white cliffs like a chain of pyramids, backed by high slopes of downland, with here and there a mustard field yellow amongst the green, and here and there little villages gleaming like children's toys. And in every small upland dell between the pyramids, thick coppices of trees clustered to the very edge of the cliffs like animals going down to water at a river. To Mona Lightfoot it seemed that she breathed a different air. There was a difference in the very quality of the country's beauty. She sat in an ecstasy,

her hands clasped upon her knees, her eyes wide with delight, and a feeling of pity stealing over her now and then for all those poor people to whom the coast line of western England was no more than a succession of names upon a map.

That marvellous yesterday was, after all, only the blossom of which today was the opening flower.

CHAPTER II AT THE LILY POND

Mona Lightfoot had left Liverpool at eight o'clock in the morning of the first day of her month's holiday. She was twenty-three years old and her position was that of typist, secretary and sole clerk to Mr. Henry Perriton, an accountant of that city in a small way of business. Mr. Perriton, indeed, even at this early hour was on the platform to see his secretary off—an attention which she received with some inward irritation. He was a sandy, insignificant man, ten years older than Mona; and when he raised his hat she noticed for the hundredth time how thin the hair was growing upon his scalp. He raised his hat awkwardly, not really because he wore it in his office and was unaccustomed to take it off, but because he held in one hand a packet of chocolate, in the other a bunch of flowers.

"For me?" cried Mona without achieving any high expression of enthusiasm.

"For you, my dear."

He laid them on the seat of the third class carriage in front of her.

"I shall miss you terribly," he continued. "I never thought when you came to me in January that—well—it would be like this. If only you could have chosen New Brighton for your holiday, or Morecambe, I could have run out week-ends and seen a little of you."

"Yes, but of course it had to be Bexhill."

She was gently indulgent, forgiving him for his ignorance that it must be Bexhill, and not explaining to him that it had to be Bexhill, because since Bexhill was on the south coast, it was necessary to pass through London to reach it.

"I suppose it had," Mr. Perriton answered despondently, and the train moved out of the station.

Mona Lightfoot tried honestly to feel remorse as she contemplated Mr. Perriton's offerings on the seat opposite, but she could not. She was gripped by an excitement of her own. She too knew despondency as the train swept through the Black Country, but she swung out of it into the high spheres of hope. She asked for half an hour, an hour at the most to pay for the last bleak

eight months. It wasn't much. She wasn't presumptuous in praying for it. Surely so tiny a prayer would be granted to her.

She had certainly made her plans. As soon as the train stopped at Euston she was out of the carriage with a suit-case in each hand. She climbed into a hansom cab and gave an address in Bloomsbury.

"Miss Tipper wrote to me that I might use her room," she explained to the landlady.

"Yes, miss."

Mary Tipper had been Mona's friend and senior on the staff of the firm of Mardyke and Campion until last December, when William Mardyke, now the entire firm, had in a panic reduced his expenditure by twenty-five per cent.

In Mary Tipper's bedroom Mona washed off the dust of her journey, arrayed herself in her best summer frock, a cunningly simple affair of dark blue silk, with a blue hat to match, put on her tan shoes and stockings, and took into her hand a pair of long tan gloves. She left a note for Mary Tipper saying that she would come back for tea and, stepping up into an omnibus, travelled eastwards to High Holborn.

Where the vast Prudential House now glows in all its assurance over High Holborn, in those days stood Furnival's Inn. A red house, too, but comely and modest and mellowed to a sober russet on which the eyes rested with pleasure. It was built about a quadrangle, with a wall and iron gates upon the street. The traveller could put up there for the night, the resident take chambers by the year. Opposite Furnival's Inn Mona Lightfoot descended and, crossing the road through the crowded traffic of drays, omnibuses, growlers and jingling hansoms, she reached the point where under a long façade of projecting eaves a gateway opened into a court paved with stone and planted with trees. Staple Inn. She walked beneath a second arch and so came, one half of her mind eager with expectation, the other half assured of disappointment, into a lovely corner of Tudor London, hidden away in a wilderness of yellow brick. A little square of oblong windows through which one had glimpses of panelled walls; a pavement of stone flags; a round lily pond where the great flowers floated, their golden hearts like fruit upon their delicate platters which here were white as the breast of a swan, there took on about their edges tender colours of pink and mauve; a tiny garden; a fountain cooling the air; on one side a little hall with stained glass windows, like the hall of a college reduced to a toy; a cupola with a bell above the hall roof and a great clock in the miniature of a tower; on the

other side a stone arbour with a couple of steps down to the lily pond; and everywhere peace, everywhere quiet, as though the lilies had dreamed there in an enchanted sleep ever since Queen Elizabeth had ridden by with her halberdiers and her torch-bearers to St. Paul's Church or Gresham's Exchange. The inner court of Staple Inn; and it was empty as Mona Lightfoot entered it.

She looked at the clock. Well, it was barely one. She would wait five, ten minutes. She sat down upon the round stone coping of the pond; and as the hands of the clock crept forward, a sense of desolation crept over her.

"He will have left the office. . . . Perhaps he doesn't come here any more. . . . Five more minutes. . . . I came to London for this . . . an experiment may be detaining him. . . ." Thus her thoughts ran, and she heard his footsteps on the stone flags behind her, almost before they sounded there at all. She bent forward towards her own reflection in the pond with the colour rosy in her cheeks. She heard him approach, she knew that he stood beside her, almost touching her, quite unaware of her. A little pang of disappointment—she acknowledged it to be quite unreasonable after all these months—mingled with her pleasure. She raised her eyes at last.

"Mark!"

His eyes came slowly down to meet hers.

"Mona!"

There was surprise, there was friendliness in his voice. Mona Lightfoot had been bred in a world where it was wisdom to face facts at once. There was no leap of the heart in Mark's pronunciation of her name.

"I should have known you," he said. "But I was wondering for the thousandth time. . . ."

"I know. Whether you would ever reproduce those delicate colours," she took him up with a laugh, as she pointed to the outspread petals of the lilies.

Mark Thewliss nodded, and laughed in unison. A sudden exhilaration lifted his spirits.

"You are back in London, then?" he cried.

There would be someone once more to whom he could relate his difficulties and ambitions, who by the mere act of listening with all her sympathies in her eyes would smooth out the one and help forward the other, and sometimes by some swift stroke of insight give there and then first-aid.

But Mona shook her head.

"I am only passing through London on my holiday."

"Where to?"

There was a distinct note of disappointment in his voice.

"Bexhill."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"It sounds—dullish."

Mona shrugged her shoulders.

"It will do as well as anywhere else."

She leaned forward again, looking at her reflection in the pond, and for a few moments Mark Thewliss did not speak or move. The girl's heart began to beat with a suffocating violence, though she could give no reason for its action. She had a premonition that in the silence and sunlight of the court, beside the lovely lily pond, something tremendous was being born into the world; so that Mark Thewliss' next words fairly startled her by their imbecility.

"What a stroke of luck that you should come to see this old place again just at this hour!"

Mona swung round and stared at him. What absolute idiots even men of genius could be! She turned away again hurriedly; but Mark Thewliss had some powers of perception in human affairs if they were sufficiently emphasised and underlined.

"Oh, I see," he murmured awkwardly.

"Yes—colours," she added resentfully. "Colours by daylight, colours by lamplight——" and he broke in upon her joyously:

"That's where you're wrong, Mona. I'll tell you about it."

Yes, he would tell her about it; and she would listen, and he would go away appeased and confident, and she would go away with her heart drooping and with a feeling that he had annexed all her strength and taken it from her into himself.

"Very well! Tell me!"

"Not here!"

He looked down at her, and again she was conscious that something big had come into being during these few minutes.

"Let's lunch together!" he added.

Mona nodded her head.

"Where shall we go?"

"To the old place."

"Frascati's?"

"Yes."

To both of them Frascati's Restaurant in Oxford Street, with its plush curtains, its gilded hall and its orchestra, was the very symbol of luxury and opulence. Thither the pair of them, both rather lonely people, had gone on rare occasions to celebrate some great public event or some small triumph which touched their own lives. They frankly admired it. They liked its rattle and clatter. They were flattered by being there, a couple out of the throng of Londoners, enjoying themselves in a rather lofty way selecting dishes from a *carte du jour* and having music played for them whilst they ate.

"But you won't have time," Mona exclaimed regretfully, looking at the clock. "It's half-past one now."

"Time means nothing to me," said Mark Thewliss. "My holiday, too, began at one. Will you come up to my rooms whilst I change?"

Mona rose and followed him through the two courts into Holborn. The unceremonious dress of a later day was not looked upon with favour by the heads of important firms in the city of London; Mark Thewliss wore the high silk hat, the black tail coat and the striped trousers of his period. They crossed the street, entered the quadrangle of Furnival's Inn and climbed the uncarpeted stairway to the top floor.

"You hate my quarters, I know," said Thewliss, as he opened the door into the sitting-room.

Mona stopped upon the threshold and looked around her with disapproval.

"Yes," she declared emphatically.

It was not that the room was slovenly; nor was the furniture broken, nor the carpet threadbare. What offended her was that it was absolutely without character and embellishment. Men no less than women gather trifles about

them, the photographs of their friends and first loves, little ornaments picked up in by-ways, favourite books, engravings. Here there was nothing but an inexpensive and drab formality. Not a picture decorated the grey wash upon the walls; and Mark Thewliss had a fastidious and almost feminine appreciation of colour. For the casual visitor there was nothing to be learnt from the aspect of the room about its inhabitant.

But for Mona Lightfoot the mere absence of indications was the surest indication of all. He had used a true word to describe his chambers in Furnival's Inn. They were quarters—the quarters of a man on the march, billeted here for an unimportant night or two during the great advance. She tried and always had tried honestly to be glad of the unsleeping purpose which she divined in him. She was fond of him because of it; the very beginning of her love for him was to be found in it. But she made no pretence to consistency or logic. She wanted him none the less to remain in reach of her—and for young men on the march, women like herself were too heavy a load. The Colonel can do as he will. His baggage goes along in the wagon; but the young soldier carries it on his back.

"I won't keep you five minutes," said Thewliss with a laugh. "You must put up with the place for that time," and he went by a communicating door into his bedroom.

Mona Lightfoot crossed the room to one of the two windows and looked down upon the few yards of gravel which she had seen often enough hundreds of miles away in her little ante-room of an office in Liverpool. She was amazed to find how vividly the scene, dreary enough in all conscience, had been stamped upon her memory. On the right the narrow thoroughfare of Leather Lane. At her feet the scrubby oblong of dusty earth known as Brooke's Market, with its two rows of stunted sycamores set out as if to assure you that the market was a true geometrical figure. And on the other side of the market the long building of grey brick where she had served for two years under Mary Tipper; and whence from time to time she had emerged to dine at Frascati's with Mark Thewliss who was to be afterwards known as the first Baron Thewliss of Kyrle House, Grosvenor Square and Upper Theign in the county of Berkshire.

* * * * *

The house of Mardyke and Campion now covers many thousands of square feet along the by-pass road from London to Slough; but it has lost something of the national significance which it had when it straggled in obscurity at the back of Brooke's Market. For it was the first of all the

houses in the world to devote itself to the composition of synthetic dyes. It was already forcing the indigo planters of Assam to ponder for what other industry their land was suitable. It was beginning to put beautiful fabrics within the reach of meagre purses. And since the priceless result of a new industry is often a quite unexpected product, like coal tar from gas, so it was with the makers of synthetic dyes. For by filling the bazaars of the East, from Bagdad to Marrakesch, with the gay colours which give a lively pleasure and enhance good humour, they promoted peace, more surely than treaties could amongst the fanatical children of the sun.

This first firm owed its origin to the insight and adventurous spirit of a Manchester broker, Stuart Campion. Two almost simultaneous discoveries seized upon his imagination, one by Professor Perkins that by oxidation a dye which he called "mauve" could be obtained from crude aniline, the other by Professor Mansfield that benzine could be so separated from coal tar as to give the crude aniline necessary to Perkins. Stuart Campion was inspired to dream of a day not distant when new and as yet nameless shades of colour would add a delicate and joyous amenity to the world—whilst bringing in a handsome profit to the benefactors. He sought and obtained the cooperation of Philip Mardyke, a wealthy cloth manufacturer of Bradford, who, by backing one or two unsuccessful musical comedies in the Strand, had shown that he, too, hankered after more colour in his life than the Yorkshire fells afforded him.

The land was bought at the back of Brooke's Market, the laboratories equipped; and Mardyke and Campion set out upon their adventure in the spirit of Queen Elizabeth's sailors. But Queen Elizabeth left her adventurers free. Mardyke and Campion were entangled at once amongst the traps which our modern governments set for nascent industries. Antiquated patent laws and restrictions on the use of alcohol hampered England, but did not hamper a Germany already equipped for commerce based upon chemical science. By the year 1884 Germany had snatched the lead; the sole owner of Mardyke and Campion was William Mardyke the son of Philip, middle-aged and timorous; and its chief chemist was Mark Thewliss, a man with a brilliant record from Dulwich College and the London University, who caused his employer many hours of agitation.

"A buccaneer, sir," said Mr. William Mardyke across the dinner table to his cronies, banging his fist with the flighty exasperation which he dared not show to his chemist. "A man without reverence. A gambler too! Gad, what he has cost me this year!"

The natural question was asked.

"Why don't you get rid of him, then?"

Mr. William Mardyke had no answer ready. He took refuge in vaguenesses.

"Not so easy—no—not so easy as you think. But some day—yes—some day," he said darkly.

* * * * *

At all events, to-day the buccaneer was going upon his holiday and not quite sure that he was ever going to return to Brooke's Market. He said as much to Mona Lightfoot when he came out from his bedroom attired in a light grey suit and carrying in his hand the kind of straw hat which is known as a gent's boater. It cannot be said that the change improved his appearance. In later years he acquired a curious delicacy and refinement of feature which, joined with the mark of authority, made of him a figure at which all men looked twice. Now he was not merely commonplace, he was common—a common young man with his thick brown hair growing too low upon his forehead, a fair moustache, and a long face. He had certainly a good strong pair of grey eyes, but they were too little alert to be noticeable. Indeed the only quality he had noticeable at all by the general run of his acquaintances had nothing to do with his looks. It was a curious aloofness peculiar to young people of vast ambitions, indefinable, yet immediately felt. It allowed him to be one of but never one with a group of his equals and associates. It was an aura which all the world could see. It made his friends consider what they had to say before they spoke to him. It led a few, a very few, to prophesy "That young man will go far."

He stood by Mona's side, following the direction of her eyes.

"Very likely I shall never go into that building again," he said with a laugh.

Mona turned to him with consternation upon her face.

"You? Mr. Mardyke can't be getting rid of you!"

"I don't know. He's a funkstick. And I did make a bad break this spring." Thewliss answered with a laugh which had not one note of remorse in it.

"But he couldn't do without you," cried Mona indignantly.

"Well, he has got three weeks to make up his mind about that," said Thewliss. "Let's go to Frascati's. I'll tell you about it there."

But the three weeks had passed before he told her.

CHAPTER III AT FRASCATI'S

They walked westward along Oxford Street. It was a day of exotic heat. The sky overhead was quite cloudless and quite colourless, as though the fire of the summer had bleached it. The air was lifeless and stale with the breath of millions of people; no wind blew; there was a smell of tar; and the pavement scorched the feet. At the corner of Tottenham Court Road Mark Thewliss slipped his hand under his companion's arm and held her anxiously.

"You must look to the right here."

"There is a horse and cart in Liverpool," she replied.

They crossed the road, and at the entrance to Frascati's he stopped and drew in his breath. Mona felt his hand tighten on her arm.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Thewliss awoke with a laugh.

"I was anticipating the first delicious shock of cool green water closing over my parched, tired-out body, as I dived."

"Then you, too, are going to the sea?"

"Yes."

He looked away from her as he answered, and led the way out of the blinding sunlight into the restaurant.

"Our old table," she pleaded.

"No other will do for us to-day."

It stood ranged against the wall without an occupant, and Thewliss laughed with pleasure as he saw her take her old place and hitch up her chair. He hung his hat on a branch of the nearest stand and asked:

"You are hungry?"

"Ferocious. I left Liverpool at eight."

"Then we'll have an ambassador's luncheon. First of all——"

"A blue trout," she interrupted.

"Then a grouse."

She looked at him with awe.

"Does it run to that?"

"To-day my name's money."

"Then we'll have a rasher of bacon on the top and a slice of toast underneath, and all frightfully rich."

"And new peas and potatoes, an apple flan to follow, and hock-cup to drink."

"With lots and lots of ice. Adorable!" and Mona closed her eyes in an ecstasy.

Through the first half of that luncheon Mark Thewliss plied her with questions: in the beginning as to why she had chosen Bexhill for her holiday though he clearly didn't want to hear about Bexhill; and then about her life in Liverpool, though he equally clearly did not want to hear about Liverpool. But he wanted the sound of her voice, which was low and full and charming, the play of her features, the smile of her eyes and lips, the little gift of mimicry she had; and he could not have enough of them.

"Seven months," he cried in a low voice. "That's a long time without a friend to talk to!"

Mona had never quite known him in this mood before. He was requiring her companionship as though he drew confidence, even a sense of security, from her neighbourhood. She put that new grace in him together with the doubt he had uttered in Furnival's Inn that he might never return to the laboratory of Mardyke and Campion. And while she answered his questions and rattled on as he wished her to do, her thoughts ran:

"He has risked everything . . . I am sure of it. . . . He is at some junction of his life whence the unknown roads branch out. . . . He has staked everything on his choice—as all men who without birth or inherited fortune rise to great places must do a hundred times. But between the moment when he stakes and the moment when he knows whether he has won or lost, there's a time of waiting—anxiety that won't sleep—suspense that won't relax its tension. . . . And that time's now . . . and he wants *me*."

Her heart beat exultantly. Hopes were loosed from it and fluttered about her, doves from a trap, hopes winged with gold colours and burnished by the sun. She was inspired to gamble, too, to set all upon a single throw, to snatch all or to lose everything. There was her employer in Liverpool and his

courtship of her. Should she tell him of it? She had but to lean across the table and say: "Henry Perriton pleads continually for me to marry him. Shall I?" and she put her life to the test of that moment. If he looked at her as he never yet had looked, if he uttered a clamorous "You can't! Mona, you can't!" why, then she trod light-footed, winged, harnessed against all the strokes of fate.

But suppose he just thought the proposition over without the least little movement of revolt and said in the end: "Well—in a way, of course, I shall be sorry. I shall lose something, I recognise that. But on the whole—yes, it's fine! Good luck to you!"

She hesitated, dreading that sort of answer worse than death. But before she could take the risk of the gamble, Mark Thewliss raised the pool—and so high that every stiver of her tiny capital would be garnisheed if she matched herself against him.

"We are both from choice and from temper rather lonely people, Mona, aren't we?" he began in a low voice, looking here and there upon the tablecloth—anywhere but at her. "We have neither of us anyone very near us in the way of relations. No one who cares a threepenny bit what becomes of us."

"No one," Mona agreed.

"And we are both quite unrecognised people—just two out of the thousands of holiday-makers scattered about England. There's not a soul, for instance, in this restaurant who has ever heard of either of us. We are free—that's the point, Mona—we are free now."

He took a drink of his hock-cup, as though his throat was parched. She felt his foot pressing against hers under the table.

"What we choose to do now no one will ever know except from ourselves, and we shan't talk," he continued. "But we shall have had a wonderful month to look back upon."

The colour fled from Mona Lightfoot's cheeks. If he never looked at her, she on the other hand never took her eyes from his troubled face. She noticed the little note of shame, of remorse in his voice in that he was not offering all that he could offer, in that he was asking for the supreme sacrifice in return for just four weeks of romantic adventure. But Mona continued to listen, nor did she withdraw her foot from contact with his.

"You," he resumed, "will, after all, have a pretty sad time alone there at Bexhill. The acquaintances of the beach—girls linked arm in arm having the

time of their lives—the boys from the offices giving the girls a chance—the pierrot's sentiment and last year's music-hall songs"—he smiled as he sketched the holiday which awaited her, and went on with an accent of tenderness which moved her to tenderness too. "My dear, all that's not for you. A day of it and you'ld be ready to commit suicide. Whilst I"—and he suddenly raised to her a most eager face and desperately pleading eyes—"I have never in my life dreamed that I could want the companionship of anyone as I shall want yours during the next month."

That was it! Companionship—oh, needed without a doubt! The whole aspect of the man clamoured for her. But there it was to end. A month's companionship.

"Only," she asked herself, "need it end there?"

At the end of that month, might he not want it prolonged to a lifetime? Wasn't it for her so to manage that he did want it? Wasn't that just her business in life? A month was an enormous time. After all, this very morning he had not had one thought of this great need which had sprung up hungry within him, as she sat at his side on the stone coping of the lily pond. The queer sense of something imminent which she had felt in that inner court of Staple Inn was all clear to her now. Well, if a couple of hours could wake such hunger for her comradeship, what might not the slow waxing and waning of a moon beside the sea beget?

"You want to go with me to Bexhill?" she asked.

"No"; and he poured out to her the story of his little cutter.

It was at Poole, waiting, fitted out to the last rope. He fired her with his descriptions of it, of the new world which would open to her the land from the sea, instead of the sea from the land. Something of his own enthusiasm passed into her.

"Where should we go?" she asked, kindling, half persuaded. "Cowes?"

And she saw him draw back in disappointment. For a moment she had a throb of fear that in her excitement she had said "Keowes." There had been a time, no doubt, when such pronunciations had been heard from her lips; but she had long since schooled herself out of them. And in a moment she was reassured. It was her ignorance, not her enunciation, which troubled Mark Thewliss.

"Cowes!" He repeated the name with a pitying disdain. He was at an age when smooth waters meant nothing to him whatever. "We shall go west.

England begins west of St. Alban's Head," he cried, with a superb arrogance which suddenly made a boy of him.

Mona clapped her hands together. She did not know St. Alban's Head from Margate Jetty; she had never even heard the name before. But she adored the boyish insolence with which he spoke. It made him one with other young men of spirit. It brought him down to normal. It fed the hope—a mean little hope, a disloyal hope she frankly acknowledged it to be, but she could never quite drive it out of her breast—a hope that after all he was not the great man, made for a higher world than hers, which in her most secret thoughts she believed him to be.

"Perhaps after all he may have aimed too high," she said to herself; and Thewliss swept her away upon the cruise. He carried her past Lulworth Cove and its entrance like some high lock when the gates are open; past Osmington Mills, the little creek with the long pitch-black coastguard station on a low shoulder of hill.

"I spent a month there once."

"Alone?" she interrupted.

"Yes."

"And you didn't mind?"

"You were going to spend a month alone at Bexhill."

"For me, it would have been different."

"Why?"

Mona had no answer to that question. She was simply putting herself out of her thoughts and imagining, with a maternal solicitude and pity, twenty-eight solitary days unlightened by any of those foolish little jokes which are the very salt of companionship.

Thewliss brought the cutter towards sunset into Weymouth Harbour by the side of the wooded Nothe.

"I should get you a room there and one at Poole to-night, whilst I slept on the boat to have it ready for an early start in the morning"—he had the tact thus to make consent easier to her; and he carried her over the West Bay to the red cliffs of Devonshire and to Penzance beyond the Lizard. Suddenly she laughed:

"I shall wear a yachting cap."

"We'll buy it this afternoon," said he. "I have an oilskin and a sou'-wester and rubber boots to spare. You have some woollen things, of course, and some rubber-soled shoes. You'll do."

Mona had slid into assenting rather than had actually assented. But she did not take back her word. They bought the yachting cap and a couple of white covers for it. Then she sent Thewliss about his business and went secretly to a shop by herself. She returned to Mary Tipper's lodging for tea.

"I shall give you my address," she said. "I may have a letter or two. Perhaps you will forward them. I'll let you know where I shall be."

Mary Tipper was cast in a commoner mould than Mona Lightfoot. But they had been thrown much together in the office, and a friendship had grown up between them. Mona had not planned to tell her friend of the adventure on which she was entering, but she let slip enough to leave her in no doubt.

"My!" said Mary Tipper when Mona had departed with her suit-cases. "I never did! Mr. Thewliss, too! Such a poker-back! My dear, here's fortune to you! You're too good to be spoilt."

Thewliss and Mona Lightfoot travelled down to Poole by the evening train. Thewliss found her a lodging for the night, and at half-past six the next morning was at her door to carry her baggage to the Quay.

CHAPTER IV THE RACE

At six o'clock of the morning the *Sea Flower* passed the central entrance to Portland Harbour on the last of the flow. Overhead stretched a cool milky sky, split here and there by bars of a tender unfathomable blue. She had the wind on her port quarter, and her little punt bobbing behind in her wash at the end of a rope. Thewliss himself held the tiller; and, keeping well inshore under the white mark, he sailed his cutter along the flank of the tremendous rock to the Bill. Low on the point stood a small white round lighthouse, with a broad chocolate band round its middle; and from the foot of it streamed out to sea a line of tumbled water, black and straight like a line drawn by a lead pencil.

"It's going to be a bit more troublesome than St. Alban's Head," said Thewliss with a laugh of rather fierce enjoyment. "When the wind's on shore, Portland Race is up." He was more than ever nautical in his talk. "However, the tide's slackening off against us; and once we're through, we shall have it for three good hours with us to help us across the Bay."

"Three?" asked Mona Lightfoot in surprise. She had always understood that, counting in the slack water, the tide ran for six hours in and six hours out.

"It's in the perversity of things," Mark explained, "that along this coast, at this time of the year, the tide runs westward for three hours and eastward for nine."

"Oh!"

Mona Lightfoot uttered an involuntary cry, and pointed. "Look! Look!"

For once, it seemed, the captain was careless of his ship. The *Sea Flower's* bowsprit was thrusting towards the lighthouse like a lance, and already Mona could have tossed her yachting cap on shore. But Thewliss smiled and raised his voice above the roar of breaking water.

"You can't run ashore on the Bill in a little sailing boat, you'll see"; and the next moment, with a great lift of her bows and a shudder of all her sails, the cutter took the first waves of the Race as a horse takes a fence. For a few moments the air about them was opaque with spray. It whipped their faces and left a taste of salt in their mouths, and blew landward off the crests of

the waves, low and swift and silvery-white like snow. The bows dipped into the breakers and the water ran hissing along the deck to the combing of the cockpit. Behind them the punt splashed and jumped and yawed at the end of its hawser; and then with an unexpected abruptness they were out of the smother of sea-spume and the welter of breaking waves.

The roar and clatter was all behind them; they were no longer battered and cuffed; they were enclosed in the silence of a lagoon. But they were not out of the Race. The surf through which they had struggled was but its edge and rich embroidery. The sea swept at them now in flat sheets, marked out from each other in accidental patterns of arcs and straight lines. It gave Mona Lightfoot the impression of a crazy pavement moving forward under the cutter with an irresistible velocity. The sheets were of a pale green in colour and glimmered with a viscous sheen. They hissed and rustled like silk against silk in a lady's dress; and as they raced by, bubbles like little bright beads continually formed and burst upon their surface and tiny whirlpools span and disappeared, so that Mona no longer thought of crazy pavements in a vast garden, but in a more homely fashion of water on the boil in some fabulous cauldron.

She climbed out of the cockpit, and holding on to a stay stretched herself out upon the deck, so that she could see far down into the depths of this green water at once violent and smooth. There was something curiously relentless in its onsweep; it ran so fast that she grew dizzy watching it. It seemed to her that the *Sea Flower* must be travelling with the speed of some magical ship like the *Flying Dutchman*. She glanced towards the shore to take her bearings for the first time since the *Sea Flower* had plunged into the Race, and cried out in her amazement. The round white lighthouse with the chocolate band was still ahead of them, almost as far ahead as when she had last looked at it. But it was a tiny thing now, a coloured toy set up on a distant coast; so far had the Race pushed the small cutter out to sea.

"I told you we couldn't hit the Bill even if we tried," Thewliss shouted at her. "But the tide's beginning to ebb. We shall make headway in a minute."

He was sitting crouched up by the tiller, holding the long arm with a grip of iron, keeping the cutter to her course against eddy and current, and measuring by the shore-marks each foot gained with an enjoyment which Mona had never seen in his face before.

Gradually the lighthouse dropped behind them; the great bluff of cliff at the far edge of the Race moved forward into view; the roar of water became audible again. For a few moments the *Sea Flower* tossed again in a jumble

of surf and then slipped out into the shining freedom of the Bay. Over the high yellow wall of the Chesil Beach a town came into view on their right hand.

"What's that place?" Mona asked.

"Weymouth."

She could hardly believe her eyes. That was the town—just there, just across that high barrier of pebbles—from which they had sailed so long ago in the cool of the grey morning. Then she saw the lofty down open out far back between Portland and the cliffs of the Bay; a long straight road run like a chalk line to a solitary tree on the down's crest; the slender pillar set up to Nelson's captain; and the famous White Horseman riding away eternally and covering even less distance than a little cutter in the Race.

"Breakfast," cried Thewliss.

By the time when it was eaten and cleared away, there was nothing visible but sky and sea and the dark brow of England's Gibraltar astern of them. Mona took the tiller whilst Thewliss set himself to the never completed task of burnishing and polishing; and when she looked astern again the last of Portland had vanished into the September haze.

"I have waited for this all the morning," she whispered, gazing about her with eyes shining as though she looked upon some miraculous vision. "Do you know that I have never been out of sight of land before?"

"We should see Bury Head if we were a little higher out of the water," said Mark Thewliss, still the practical sailor with a chart of the coastline in his head.

But Mona took no notice of his words, for she did not hear them. She was absorbed heart and brain in this new and entrancing experience; the great bowl of blue sky, the wide expanse of shining sea and the little exquisite ship alone in this glorious immensity.

"I may never see this again in all my life," she said in a low voice which had, even to the man who heard her, an appealing sadness. A wondrous holiday—yes. A holiday to be noted and stored up, so that every moment might at some later day be unwrapped from its overlay of time and minister as a solace like a jewel of soft deep fire. But ever present also was the recognition that in all her years to come not one moment of it, not even a moment to match it might once recur. Thewliss was constrained to an uneasy silence. In the girl's frank, ungrudging acceptance of the limitations which were likely to subdue the whole of her life to something little, he discovered

a bravery quite foreign to himself, he suspected a nobility in which he had no share. He was conscious of discomfort. He was a little ashamed.

Throughout that morning and the earlier hours of the afternoon the wind blew steadily from the south-east. They took their spells at the tiller. Now far out some big steamer would trail a ribbon of black smoke across the sky. Now close at hand for Mona's enchantment a school of porpoises would rise from the depths and escort the *Sea Flower* on her way, crossing and recrossing in the clear water beneath her keel, leaping up to shake the spray from a black glistening fin, then cart-wheeling with a splash of water like urchins let loose from a class. But towards four o'clock the wind fell light—at five the great boom of the mainsail swung inboard and swung out with a great rattle of blocks, and the little ship shivered. As far as the eye could reach there was not a flaw upon the water.

"A—little—check," said Thewliss with a curious intonation half mincing, half guttural. "We shall get the wind again before nightfall. Meanwhile it's—a little check."

He was misquoting the catch-phrase from a popular comedy of those days. Mona, sitting upon the roof of the cabin and swinging her legs in the cockpit, laughed and took up his allusion.

"Digby Grant in the 'Two Roses,'" she cried. "When he pays back the sums he has borrowed from his humble friends"; and she too tried to imitate the great protagonist who had made Digby Grant his own. "A—little—cheque."

"Do you know I once—once? twenty times—had more than half a mind to kick chemistry out of the door and take a header on to the stage?"

"You? You, Mark?" and with a joyousness he did not understand, she pressed for a reason.

"Why? Why?"

But Mark Thewliss was in full flight. He had only an audience of one, it was true, but that one was very fit and satisfying. Her eyes so shone with so starry a pleasure, her laughter hit full-throated the exact moment when laughter should round off the phrase.

Speech after speech from the "Two Roses." Then followed extracts from "The Corsican Brothers," noble sentiments from "Charles I" and all the ironical humilities of Shylock. And each delivery was uttered with the same curious intonation, and was accompanied with the strange gurgling growls one might expect to hear from a wounded panther. Nor did gestures fail to

point the words; but they were unusual gestures, tossings of the head, pawing of feet upon the floor of the cockpit, sudden outreachings of the arms and hands with the long sensitive fingers quivering like springs. And all the time Mona, swinging her legs over the cockpit, applauded enraptured, and cried:

"Why? Why, Mark, did you want to go on to the stage?"

Mark was flattered by her eagerness, he did not bother to seek a reason for it. He recited. The failure of the wind, the sea, even the little boat—all were forgotten. "Why, Mark, why?" Oh, there was a reason for her question. It sprang from a heart made over subtle by a passionate and almost despairing love.

* * * * *

Those were the great days of Henry Irving. He had triumphed alike over his deficiencies and the swarm of his belittlers. He had made attributes of his weak voice and his grotesque gestures. He had decorated his plays with splendour and with artistry. He lit them at will to the glare of noonday or the tender atmosphere of night. And over all lay the dominant magic of his own personality. He made of the Lyceum Theatre a temple, with himself its arch, unquestioned priest. He held a place in the social scheme unoccupied since Garrick died. He was the great interpreter. The reticence of his life and the delicate authority of his face crowned him with an aura of romance. Stories ran the town of his generous heart and caustic tongue. He was of a Florentine magnificence. He was almost inevitably the idol of middle-class youth. Admiring parents gathered their friends into suburban drawing-rooms to hear their sons recite Shakespeare in the Irving manner. Every normal youth in office or factory wanted to go on the stage and dignify a theatre with a replica of Irving—and Mark Thewliss like the rest.

That was the hidden thought which so charmed her, which drove her on, as she sat dangling her slim legs over the cockpit, to ask for scenes from "The Cup," for speeches of Cardinal Wolsey and for the arguments of tortured Hamlet. Mark Thewliss was on the same plane as the others of his years and class, none of whom would add another Irving to decorate the age, all of whom would in due course mate with their like, share with them their due assignment of joys and sorrows and ambitions and move on arm in arm with them to such achievement as that Santa Claus, the future, kept hidden away for them in his sack.

"More! More!" she cried, clasping her hands together between her knees and leaning forward with eyes so eager. "'Richard III' now! Please! 'Now is the winter of our discontent'"—she remembered a Saturday evening when she had stood for three hours under the low roof of the pit entrance of the Lyceum—"Oh, Mark, you do it divinely!"

Mona followed the sound old rule. If you are going in for flattery, lay it on with a trowel. Mona had her reward, since reward she considered it. Mark Thewliss expanded, glowed, hunched his shoulders, projected into his not very malleable features such a medley of venom and cunning as would justify his being hanged on sight—and recited. He gave Mona "Now is the winter of our discontent"—oh, and much more. He wooed Anne, plotted with Tyrrel the murder of the Princes in the Tower, started up from the vision of his assassinated victims and met his death on Bosworth Field.

Meanwhile the sun went down. Far away in the north-west the long bluff of Bury Head, now visible, ran out like a fortress wall into the Bay. Above it the sky had the tender colour of an amethyst. A flaw of wind crept from the south, ruffling and blackening the water.

"Let it hold and we can anchor at Torquay to-night," said Mark, and as the breeze reached the cutter he paid out his mainsail sheet and bore away to the north.

"But we shan't reach the harbour in time for dinner," he added. "And I'm glad, Mona. You're a cook to match my appetite, and that's no small praise, I can tell you."

Mona jumped down from her perch and stood for a moment looking forward. The rose of the sunset was fading from Bury Head. It looked to her a thousand miles away, a rock reef somehow wedged in the sky. Her eyes swept the horizon. Here and there a gull floated on outstretched wings or swooped to the sea. The slight breeze was dying away. The cutter with its tenants was alone.

Mona fried a couple of dabs; grilled a couple of lamb chops with tomatoes; baked some potatoes in their jackets; set out on the table a Cheshire cheese, some fruit and a bottle of Moselle; opened a tin of sardines as a *hors d'œuvre*, and cried out:

"All ready!"

Mark Thewliss fixed the tiller in its appropriate clutch and stepped down into the cabin, whilst Mona lighted the candles in the sockets on the walls and enclosed them in their round glass funnels. They dined gaily; Mona still

possessed by the enchanting notion that she had sitting next to her on the settee no great man in obscurity, no chrysalis soon to spread gorgeous wings, but just a grub like herself, an adorable grub but a permanent grub—her man; Mark, for his part, aware of a well-being hitherto unknown to him. It was produced by the whiteness of the tablecloth, the shining metal of the cutlery, the good cooking, all the daintiness that a woman contributes to a meal, and by the presence of this attentive, lively and lovely companion at his side.

"I used to spread a napkin on the green baize last year and take a cut from a cold ham with a loaf of bread and some pickles. Mona, this is the most wonderful holiday. May it be like this to the end!"

He lifted his glass and drank to her. She waited. She wanted to hear him add:

"And next year may we repeat it!"

But he did not. The wish, so easy of fulfilment, never indeed occurred to him. Mona set down her glass.

"I'll make some coffee."

Whilst she cleared the table, Mark uncovered a locker in the bows, brought up his port and starboard lamps, lit them and mounted them on their wooden stands in the rigging. When Mona came back from the kitchen into the cabin she saw him wrapped in a long thick rough blue overcoat.

"We shan't get to any harbour to-night, Mona," he said in a serious voice. "The wind has fallen altogether. We have the tide with us. I have set our course for the Start Point. We ought to get into Dartmouth to-morrow morning."

Mona nodded her head, whilst the blood mounted into her neck and face. Her eyes looked straight at him, charged with a mystery which quite baffled him. She did not speak.

He drank his coffee in an embarrassment.

"I didn't mean . . ." he said. "With the wind as it was this morning we looked like crossing the West Bay in good time."

"I want you to tell me something," she asked.

"Yes?"

"Why did you want to go on the stage?"

Mona had come back to her first urgent question. Mark Thewliss gazed at her in surprise. The question seemed trivial, even childish, at this hour and in this place.

The cabin doors stood open, held back upon their hooks. Mark glanced through the opening. The last of the daylight had long since gone. A moon three days old was spreading a silver radiance across the world. Though Mark's eyes saw only the cockpit yellow in the streaming candlelight, the butt of the tiller held fast in a notch of its gleaming rack, and the sheets of the mainsail sloping upwards from the traveller towards the boom, he had a picture in his mind of the quiet floor of the sea empty from rim to rim except for this little ship, where a young man and a young woman stood face to face in a tiny lighted cabin. The question was trivial—yes. But he looked back to Mona. She was not trivial. She was not childish. A smile made her mouth tender, her big dark eyes watched him steadily; and both the smile and the grave eyes were a riddle to him and a mystery.

"I'll tell you."

Mark Thewliss sat down upon the settee and filled his pipe.

"It hadn't anything to do with art. Oh, no!" He spoke exculpating himself hastily and vigorously from any suspicion that he was concerned with any leaning so open to derision. "But when I noticed the extraordinary hush in a theatre full of people, when I saw those people of all degrees, from the man with the muffler round his throat in the gallery, to the fine disdainful lady in the stalls, leaning forward so that their eyes might not miss a movement, nor their ears an intonation—people lost to the world, helpless under a spell—I used to wonder whether anything else could give to any man such a sensation of sheer power as that spellbound house must give to the actor on the stage."

He laughed a little brokenly and moistened his lips with his tongue. He betrayed himself at that moment. He laid naked the violence of his ambition and its weakness. Power, not as a lever, but as a sensation. Power not as a means to some greatly-planned achievement but as achievement itself, self-sufficient, an emperor's diadem. He savoured it now. The look of his face was voluptuous.

Gradually, however, his mood changed. Delight was succeeded by uneasiness. It took him a minute or two before he realised that his uneasiness was due to an extraordinary stillness in the cabin. Mona stood as if turned to stone. Did she find something to censure in his confession of faith, he wondered—and wondered rather resentfully. But he did not look at

her. If he had he would have seen that the smile had passed from her lips, but that her eyes still watched him with their tremendous mystery and quietude. But he did not; and suddenly, to his amazement and discomfort, he was absurdly conscious of a suspicion that of the two of them, the girl, in spite of—nay, perhaps because of—her clear recognition of what could be and could not be, and the uncomplaining submission which sprang from it, had the higher pride, even the nobler spirit.

He could not endure so wounding an idea. He flushed red and broke out fretfully,

"Did you ever read Disraeli, Mona?"

"No."

"I'ld have him taught in schools, if I had my way. A long chalk more useful than Xenophon. He's the guide for young men. There's a novel called 'Endymion.' Listen to this, Mona. It's an extract from it—a text to be printed in big black letters on a white background and hung up in one's bedroom where one's eyes must see it, the moment they opened in the morning. Listen!"

And he recited, no longer with any mimicry of Henry Irving, but in the voice of one weighing out slowly the final words of human wisdom:

"'Power and power alone should be your absorbing object, and all the accidents and incidents of life should only be considered with reference to that main result.'"

And now he did lift his eyes to Mona's face, and lo! once more she was smiling. Mark's first surprising answer to her question had struck her down, a blow from an iron mace. It was the formulation by him of all the fears, the heart-sinkings, the sudden forebodings which had robbed her of her peace and kept her aching—more than the formulation of them. It set upon them the seals of truth. Even at that moment she was clear-eyed and clove to the very heart of his meaning with a superb instinct.

"For real power," she said to herself. "For the power to do some great long-planned thing, a mate like me, one with him, might help—yes, in the end might be of service. But for the sensation of power, the luxury of continual evidences of power—a great house, famous men at your table, deference and the doffing of caps—not one man in a million would look to me for help there."

But Mark had not left the matter so. He had gone on to quote Disraeli with a curiously naïve and boastful petulance—just like a schoolboy

captured by some splashy, grandiloquent sentence to be found somewhere in any notable book. She loved his plea that Disraeli should supersede Xenophon. She felt that it was absolutely right, not because she knew anything of the respective merits or suitabilities of those two authors, but because it revealed in him once more to her the adorable boy for whom every woman looks in the man she loves, but no woman more ardently than this lovely gambler on the *Sea Flower*.

"If you come out," said Mark, opening a long cupboard by the door and taking out a second overcoat, "you'll put this on, won't you? There's a heavy dew falling."

He was reassured by her returning gaiety, as she by his boyishness; and he thanked her by a tenderness in his voice which she took for the music of the spheres. He went up the steps into the cockpit. He had hauled the boom of the mainsail in amidships whilst they dined, and he now loosened the sheet and paid it out. But there was still no wind, and only the weight of the sail kept it outstretched over the sea. Between the open doors of the cabin he saw Mona busily clearing away the plates and the dishes, the cutlery and the glasses, into the little cuddy beyond; washing them; setting the crockery on its rims in the racks, the glasses in their stands, the knives and forks and spoons in their drawers; returning to the cabin; folding up the tablecloth, putting it away; taking sheets and blankets from lockers at the back of the settees and making up the beds. He noticed that though she moved without haste the work was very quickly done. He sat admiring the deftness of her movements. Viewed from where he sat with the tiller in the crook of his arm, even at that short distance Mona and the ulterior of the cabin were seen in miniature. Thewliss had the impression that he was looking on at some pleasantly homely scene in a little play.

"Yes," he reflected, "I like that. I must marry one of these days." His eyes went to Mona Lightfoot, as she now stood tall and slim with her back towards him, whilst with her arm gracefully lifted she raised a glass globe from a candle to blow the light out. "Yes, and before it's too late. . . ."

Thus he admonished himself to make his way in the world quickly, so that before age put a tarnish on his dazzling qualities he might pluck from some helpfully great family a wife with the low, broad white forehead and mysterious dark eyes of Mona there—yes, rather like Mona—very like Mona—in fact Mona born in a castle, aired in her perambulator under pergolas, and pruned and trimmed in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair.

Mona put out the candles, slipped on the capacious overcoat and joined Mark Thewliss in the cockpit. The sickle of new moon had set and the stars had taken the sky by storm. All about the ship, infinite darkness and a hush which the girl thought it would have been sacrilege to break. Thewliss buttoned the coat close at her throat and, setting an arm about her, caught her against his breast. The air was warm. The red and green side-lights shone comfortably from the side rigging, and here and there a pathway of pale gold ran out across the sea to meet a planet. The magical holiday! Mona played with the fancy that the little ship itself was a star in space with Mark and herself for its only inhabitants, and two colours of light, green and red, to baffle and astound all the astronomers at their telescopes.

Thewliss looked steadily southwards and Mona, following the direction of his eyes, breathed a sigh. Out there the mirrored stars were trembling in the water. In a few moments a faint wind stirred the curls of her hair. The sail towering into the night flapped like a great bird's white wing and the sea tinkled against the cutter's planks.

Mona waited in suspense, but with the acquiescence which was the mark of her. Here was one of the fatalities which neither will nor effort could alter or direct. Either the breeze strengthened and turn by turn they sailed their ship to the Start, or this one enchanted night was given to her. She sat very still. The sound of water splashing into a glass died away; the great sail, its white shading upwards into black, towered spectral and shadowy against the sky. Darkness and silence once more embosomed the little cutter and its tenantry. They fell to talking in low voices, both of them with a fancy that a malevolent spirit might strike at them in jealousy if it discovered them floating upon the bespangled mirror of the sea in the perfection of the summer night.

"I should like to be sailing in the Pacific on a night like this," said Mark.

"Could it be more wonderful out there than it is here?" Mona Lightfoot asked.

"So many big bright stars, they say," he whispered, "we should never find our way amongst them."

Then his voice changed.

"Look!"

A golden fragment slid down the sky, curving with a lightning swiftness, and vanished.

"There goes a world."

"Not ours!" Mona cried in a low voice; and she breathed a prayer from her heart. "Not for a month!"

All the wonders that were marching out to greet her at each hour of her expedition—she could not spare one of them. They were to make the prelude to a fine, exacting, fruitful life at the best—at the worst they were to be woven into a deathless memory, so that she could lie at night in her darkened bedroom and in an instant sail out of Poole Harbour to the west. She must see the sickle of new moon round to a red disc and wane again and be blotted out. The last lightship on the edge of England must ring its bell within her hearing.

"Not till this month be passed!" she prayed, and her voice broke. Thewliss drew her close within his arm.

"Mona!"

She rubbed her cheek against the rough cloth of his coat, cool and damp with the dew.

"Mark!" and the name was whispered so low that only the movement of her lips told him that she had spoken his name. The new yachting cap tumbled off on to the floor of the cockpit.

"There goes more than a world," said Mark.

She felt his lips upon her forehead. His arm slid up to her shoulders, his hand tilted her chin. Her upturned face in the darkness was wan and grave and very tender. Mark kissed her on the lips.

"It is time," he whispered.

There was an orison in the clasp of his arm, an answer in the quietude of her body. She let a few moments pass. Then she disengaged herself, rose and went down into the cabin, closing the doors behind her. Mark saw the light of the candles stream out through the side windows above the level of the deck for a little while. Then the candles were put out again and the doors opened from within.

The tide was running to the west. The green light of a ship steaming up Channel moved across in the distance. In that hush he could hear the pulsation of her screw with an extraordinary clearness. He made fast his tiller and, hooking back the doors, went into the cabin.

"Mona!"

He stooped over her bed. She was awake; her eyes shone in the darkness. Her arms closed about his neck. He felt her breath warm upon his cheek; and in the whisper of her voice he heard the loud cry of her young heart.

“Mark! My Mark!”

CHAPTER V THE RING

"The buoy's straight ahead."

"I see it, Mark."

It was nine o'clock in the morning, the breeze from the north-east and the sea ripples of gold. The breeze, fresh and steady, had blown from that new quarter since six o'clock in the morning; and with the tide making under her keel, *Sea Flower* had raised Bury Head and left it behind and was now abreast of the Mewstone. That great rock, draped in the vivid emerald of its moss, shone like a jewel; and about its fin, serrated as any aiguille of Mont Blanc, the sea-birds swooped and clustered and filled the air with their wailing and melancholy cries. Somewhere at hand, Mona understood, the Dart emptied its water into the sea, but she had to take the information on trust. For the *Sea Flower* was sailing past a curve of high cliffs, which to the eye ran in an unbroken sweep to the bold promontory of the Start.

But as the Mewstone dropped away behind the little ship's quarter, the cliffs broke suddenly in the most unexpected and entrancing fashion. Mona had learnt by now not to let go the tiller and clap her hands. She contented herself with a gasp of delight. The door of the robbers' cavern had rolled aside. She was a second Ali Baba who achieved her miracle without an Open Sesame. A narrow entrance of shining water appeared by magic between high, steep, darkly-wooded cliffs. An old castle on the western side guarded it. Within she saw white villas clinging amongst the trees and, far down, ships at their anchors and a little town.

"You must round the buoy," Thewliss cried energetically from the bows. He had just taken down the foresail and was stowing it in the sail locker. "The channel is west of the buoy," and as Mona bore away he dropped his nautical airs and began to laugh. "As a matter of fact, with our light draught we could go in on either side of the buoy, but there's nothing like being shipshape, is there?"

And now it was his turn to gasp—and hold his tongue. Mona was sitting on the upper side of the helm; and since the *Sea Flower* was on the starboard tack, it was her left hand which held the tiller. Upon the third finger of her left hand there was a plain wedding-ring. For a moment Mark Thewliss was really moved. It was by gratitude, he asserted, by Mona's prevision. She had

used a portion of her afternoon in London after the yachting cap had been bought to purchase this accessory to their expedition. She had thought of it, whereas he who should have thought of it had not.

"After all, I know the gossip of the little harbours. There never was a tea-party to match them," he reflected. "Every little thing is noticed and passes from longshoreman to longshoreman and from yacht's crew to yacht's crew. The absence of a wedding-ring on Mona's finger would be a wounding inconvenience, not to be exaggerated, of course. It would be forgotten very quickly since the pair of us is unknown. But in each harbour we should feel it—a mosquito bite. I should have thought of it." He consoled himself with the sudden thought that even if he had thought of this device he would never have suggested it. No, it had to come from Mona herself, without prompting from him. And it had so come. Mark Thewliss was grateful.

"Yes, that's all right," he argued, meaning that he knew now why he had been so moved by the gleam of it on Mona's hand, and recognised that there was justification for this trifle of emotion. But—but—in the secret heart of him he was not satisfied. He was once more, and again rather resentfully, conscious of a discomfort—a tiny sense of shame which he was very careful not to follow back to its cause and origin. He had an excuse. For the *Sea Flower* had just rounded the buoy and was making for the entrance.

"Keep her head on the two white beacons!" he cried, and he slipped the cover over the sail-locker and went aft. With the wind blowing from the north-east, more than one short tack had to be made before the long river front of Dartmouth was reached. They dropped their anchor above the ferry opposite to a deeply recessed bay; and it seemed to Mona that night that all the owls in the world were calling to her from those high, thickly wooded slopes.

The summer favoured them. They ran the next day to Plymouth, idled through a long Sunday in Fowey, slept for a night under the over-arching trees of Helford River, beat through one long day round the Lizard to Penzance, and starting thence at daybreak with what is called a soldier's breeze, reached out past Land's End into the Atlantic and towards nightfall dropped anchor opposite St. Mary's in the islands of Scilly.

In that enchanted archipelago, with its semi-tropical gardens and its touch of the exotic in the mere aspect of its inhabitants, they took their ease. They hired rooms of which the windows overlooked the Sound, and with a local boatman to pilot them amongst the intricacy of its rocks and shoals

they explored the lonely waterways; bathing from beaches of dazzlingly white hour-glass sand crowned with thickets of yellow gorse, fishing for pollock, picnicking on the roofs of old ruined forts which had once been the last strongholds of King Charles.

They ate the lotus, Mona throwing behind her even the knowledge of all that hung for her upon her enterprise, Mark Thewliss expanding into a boyhood which grew more and more nautical with every morning. Every rope was a hawser, every anchor a kedge, soldiers were "grabbies," landsmen did not count enough to have a generic name at all. Food, of course, was duff; and bells, not clocks, gave the time of day. The small intimate jokes which Mona had reckoned as the very salt of companionship were tossed back and forth between them. It became a creed that if Mona's yachting cap were lost they were doomed. There were words which Thewliss pronounced with too great a nicety for Mona's ears, for instance, the "p" in "psychic" and "pneumonia"; and elaborate conversations were invented by her leading up to a point when he, unaware of the trap into which he was being led, pronounced the ridiculed word. Mona had phrases too which led at once to a Socratic dialogue of the severest precision. If she could only be made to say "That just shows——" she was subjected at once to an examination of the most searching kind as to what it showed until the beach rang with their laughter. And amidst all their foolishness and sanity the golden wedding-ring shone upon Mona's finger.

It was she who unwittingly broke the spell. They were taking their luncheon on the convex roof of an old fort on the outermost edge of Tresco. At their feet the punt was drawn up on the sand, and their pilot ate his sandwiches by the side of it. Out in the fairway of the creek the *Sea Flower* swung at its kedge with its mainsail scandalised. Over all spread a sky without a cloud. Mona Lightfoot turned her face towards the west where on the quietest day the Atlantic rolled and broke with a flash of sunlit surf.

"Here we are, actually at the end of England," she said.

"No."

Mark Thewliss lit his pipe and turned to her with a smile.

"Since you have seen where England begins, you ought to see where it ends, oughtn't you?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow, then. If there's a wind. We oughtn't to wait. We're in September and half-way through the month. Some time in September the

weather'll break. We ought to have got back to the mainland before it does."

Mona caught her breath, and for a little while the earth was emptied of its joy, the day grew dark.

"Yes," she agreed in a dull and reticent voice. The moon had rounded to the full. It hung over those islands on these warm nights, a huge disc of a colour golden-brown, drowning the stars, drenching the seas with light; and even in the morning, white as a wraith, it sought to hold the sky against the sun. The holiday was half over. From now on a shutter would close, hiding each night a little more of the night's radiance. Would it close over her heart, too, obliterating, not for a month, but for the rest of her life, the wondrous new world of joy and beauty and flowers into which a lily pond at the back of High Holborn had been the gateway?

"Yes."

And the next day, beyond Roseveare and Rosevean, those flat, outer islands where in the coarse salt grass the sea-birds make their nests, she saw over the bowsprit of the *Sea Flower* a tall, slim pillar standing alone amidst mist and spray. The Bishop Lighthouse. They anchored at the foot of it. But the Atlantic always thunders and frets against that rock. From the set-off forty feet above their heads, a cable attached to a windlass was flung out, caught by Thewliss and his pilot and passed through a block. A rough stirrup had been fashioned in the rope. Into this Mona set her foot; and whilst she clung to the cable with her hands at the level of her breast, she was swung outwards and upwards above the leap of the waves.

Just for a moment the question flashed through her mind: "Shall I let go? Shall I end all now when life is at its best—before I know whether the shutter will close on me or not?" It would be easy. Nothing could save her if she fell into that surging mass of water between the cutter and the precipitous rock. It would be quick. But the temptation passed. That particular form of cowardice was not in her nature to commit. But when she stood at last on the narrow stone set-off, there was the look in her face which those who have survived great illnesses so long retain.

Thewliss followed. They climbed to the great lantern and were told how on winter days green seas had smashed the glass and made the tower vibrate like a spring. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when, with a wind astern, they started back.

"That's the end of England," said Mark, and both of them fell to silence. They were inward bound now. Mona looked backwards to the high column

and forwards to the low mass of the islands. She must fix their aspect in her mind, lest never in her life again she should come this way.

On Mark Thewliss, too, the influence of the eastward voyage was strong, but in a different way. He, the merest lodger in the fields of asphodel, was returning to the true activities of his life, invigorated, eager, his brain rich with new plans of advancement. He said:

"I never told you, Mona, of the mess I made last winter at Mardyke and Campion's, did I?"

"No."

"I promised to."

"Yes."

She was standing up in the cockpit, her arms upon the cabin roof, looking out with a concentrated gaze over the waste of sea. A little more than a fortnight back she had known nothing of it. Its currents and races, the set of its tides, its splendours by day, its mystical refulgence by night, its myriad voices from the angry thunder at the Bishop's Rock to the liquid tinkle at a wooded anchorage, above all, its friendly solitudes—all these exquisite marvels of the created world had been hidden away from her. She had known a parade, a bathing machine, pierrots in a booth, and a beach cluttered with noise and people. No wonder she answered with an absent voice and turned away reluctantly. The sea was calling to her troubled, anxious heart as a mother calls to her child.

"Yes," she said. "Tell me!"

"You had better go into the cabin and slip on an oilskin before you come aft. We are certain to get some of these waves hopping over the edge of the counter."

Mona came aft a few minutes later with the oilskin buttoned about her throat and a sou'-wester on her head. She seated herself by the side of Mark Thewliss and whilst he steered the *Sea Flower* so that she presented her stern square to each threatening wave, he told his story.

"I discovered how to produce synthetically the old Tyrrhian purple. In Roman days the dye was got from shell-fish—I suppose a sort of mussel. They called it 'Murex.' But the secret was lost, absolutely lost for two thousand years, until I got it a second time—oh, after hundreds of experiments. Look out!" He shouted as a breaking wave slapped the windward quarter of the ship and hopped over on to the deck with a splash,

whipping both their faces with its spray. Mona laughed and wiped the water from cheeks wearing roses nowadays which they had never known before.

"It's all right. I like it," she said, and Mark Thewliss resumed:

"I persuaded Mardyke that I had at last got something which even the Germans, with their freedom from restriction and their better organisation, hadn't got. And that was a tough proposition, I can tell you. For he's a timorous soul, a great respecter of Governments—damn them!—and never for adventuring. A fine figure he'ld have cut in Elizabeth's time, wouldn't he?" and he spoke with a curious violence, as though he envisaged in the hesitating William Mardyke his own antagonist and obstacle. "Well, anyway, he was persuaded and put my fine new dye upon the market. There it was, the only genuine, A1 Imperial purple. We started off with the big drum beating. Even William rubbed his hands together and smiled graciously at his chemist. Fine! Yes, but complaints began to come in. Made in pretty frank language too. 'I don't like receiving rebukes of this kind,' William said to me, pulling a long upper lip. No, and I didn't like reading them either. But they were justified."

"They were?" cried Mona, as much amazed that Mark Thewliss should confess to a failure as that he should have failed at all.

"Yes. Guess what had happened?"

"I can't."

"My Imperial purple wouldn't stand the electric light, and of course the electric light has come to stay. By daylight—gorgeous, the exact Phœnician shade. But switch on the light and it became a flaring, vivid scarlet. It wouldn't do, and I couldn't devise any way of altering it. William Mardyke made the only joke of his life over it, though he didn't mean to make any joke at all. He was furious in his timid way. He had lost some money and a certain amount of prestige amongst his clients. He said: 'People won't submit to looking a Roman Emperor one moment and a Scarlet Woman the next. They find the transformation abrupt and offensive,'" and Mark Thewliss laughed. "Not so bad for William Mardyke, eh?"

He was gaiety itself as he recalled the history of his expensive error. Mona stared at him.

"And you don't mind?" she cried incredulously.

But if Mark's point of view was dark to her, hers was no less dark to him.

"The mistake?" he returned with a shrug of his shoulders. "Mistakes and failures are in the day's work unless you're a born genius with a fairy godmother, which I am not. Failures are the condition of success—that is, of any success worth having. You only reach the one through the experience you gain in committing the others. That's my belief."

Yes, that was his belief; and the cost and the loss of prestige to Mardyke and Campion did not trouble him one whit. Set as he was upon his own personal advancement and ultimate triumph, he could even drag a value out of this rebuff. For it cost him nothing. It only damaged the firm he served. Mona Lightfoot compared him for a moment to some glittering—perhaps soulless—stone which showed you now one, now another facet, and all equally hard, equally impenetrable. She had a sudden terror of him. She had hopefully entrusted to him everything that she had—and he had taken it. Did he value it? Was it just another one of those mistakes which were helpful to him but might be sheer ruin to the people he used?

She drew back from him, but he did not notice her movement.

"Of course I mind in a way," he continued, and a note of anxiety was audible in his voice. "I mind, you see, because that error might jeopardise my position with Mardyke—and just at this moment I want him."

He suddenly reached out his hand, caught her arm and held it tight.

"I want him terribly, Mona."

His voice, his grasp were suddenly a prayer for her sympathy, for the solace of her companionship during the time of suspense and expectation. And as she had yielded to it in the saloon of the Frascati restaurant, so she weakened to it out here in the Atlantic. He was diamond-hard to the rest, for her he had supplications. Could there be flattery more insidious? Her heart leapt and the blood rushed into her face. He clasped her closer to him.

"Yes, I need him terribly," he repeated nervously. It seemed that he was sure of her. He turned and, shaking off his anxieties, cried gaily:

"Good-bye to the Bishop!"

The lighthouse was a long way out of sight, for by now the *Sea Flower* was reaching up the Sound between Tresco and St. Mary's.

CHAPTER VI THE SHUTTER CLOSES

The month had still six days to run when the *Sea Flower* on her eastward passage sailed past the red cliffs of Bigbury Bay.

"Salcombe!" said Mark Thewliss with a little catch in his breath. For there letters were to be received.

They crossed the bar on the flood, guided by the white splash of paint on the rock under the Head and the beacon on the hill behind the Moult.

"That's all right now," said Mark as Mona steered the ship past the sub-tropical garden on the point; and though the *Sea Flower* had fathoms of water to spare at this moment, he spoke in a tone which Drake might have used when at last, after his three years' voyage, he got the *Golden Hind* safely moored by Deptford Quay.

It was growing dark on a Saturday evening, and the lights were already blazing in the Marine Hotel and the houses on the water-front before they rounded the point at the head of the channel and anchored in the haven for small boats on the broad water below Kingsbridge.

"The punt's leaking and the post office will be open to-morrow morning for an hour," said Thewliss. "There's a boat-builder I know here who might perhaps forget that to-morrow is Sunday. So I'll row round early and collect our letters."

"I'll come with you," said Mona.

Thewliss put her ashore at the narrow steps and rowed on to his boat-builder in the angle at the top of the town. He met her an hour afterwards outside the post office and gave her the oddest glance. She answered it directly.

"I suppose that I had not the right to go with this lie upon my finger," she said, and it was the first and last time that either of them had alluded to her wedding-ring. "But—but—I wanted to go."

She would probably have been herself at some pains to describe exactly the motives which had taken her, on this last Sunday of their holiday, to the early service at the church. It was impious and she recognised its impiety, but her overcharged and anxious heart compelled her. At the back of her

mind was the prayer that whatever news the expected letter might bring to Mark Thewliss, it might not mean for her what she had come to call "the end of everything."

But besides the prayer she had been driven on by the acquiescence which was the very strength of her, the clear recognition of the things possible and the things impossible; and perhaps above all by the craving to get rid for a while of all the passionate hopes and aching fears which for so long had made their secret home with her, to kneel quietly and to receive. But Mark Thewliss had at his command an invaluable tact when matters awkward for his comfort were concerned. He was content with the one odd and puzzled glance—he would have avoided that if he had given thought to it—and handed her a couple of letters.

"For you."

One of the letters was written by Mary Tipper. It was full of heart and romantics and vulgarities.

"I forward a letter from Liverpool"—Mona had given Mary Tipper's address at her lodging in Liverpool—"written by a gentleman, too, I do declare, unless my knowledge of handwriting misleads me. My dear girl, I am dying to hear from you. Is Poker-back on his knees to you? If so, keep him there. Marrow-bones for men! That's my motto." There was more to the same effect.

The second letter was from Mr. Perriton, her employer, very woebegone and lachrymose and altogether composed in too supine a spirit to provoke any feeling except disdain. Mr. Perriton complained that he had received not a line from her, that he didn't even know her address at Bexhill. For himself, he couldn't settle to anything—he was very lonely—he had been to New Brighton in vain—work was accumulating in the office—prospects were opening up—only he didn't seem to have the heart to cope with them. Mona read the letters as she walked up the long street, and crushed them into the side pocket of her coat.

"And you?" she asked.

"Yes."

He showed her an unbroken envelope.

"Let us have breakfast first at the hotel. I'll read it on board the *Sea Flower*. Heaven knows what it says. . . . I want privacy when I read it—just you and me."

He, too, crammed his letter into the side pocket of his coat, but without any of Mona's indifference.

"And the punt?" she asked.

"It will be ready by midday. Meanwhile they have lent me one."

An hour later in the cabin of the cutter he was still twisting the unopened letter over and over between his fingers.

"Let me tell you about it, Mona."

"Yes," she answered eagerly, and she sat at the cabin table opposite to him, her eyes fixed upon his face, her chin propped in the crutch of her joined hands. He wanted, then, to beat out with her the problem of his life and plans. How much of good augury for her hung upon his want? "Yes! Oh, yes."

"I shall get the whole sequence clear in my own mind, shan't I, if I go through it step by step aloud," he explained, and he did not notice the light fade from her face. She was put in her place. She was to be the blackboard on which he chalked his sum to make sure that it was correct; and blackboards don't discuss.

"We start with the plain fact that we have not yet by synthetic production competed successfully with the vegetable production of indigo. The plant is grown in Java and Bengal. Each leaf contains on an average 0.5 of colouring matter, and there is a great industry in Yorkshire living on the extraction of the dye. The plant is put into vats and fermented. A good deal of marsh gas and hydrogen are thrown off, and the liquid is run into other vats where the air acts as the oxidising agent and precipitates it. One of the drawbacks of natural production is that the plant contains so many other substances besides what we call indigotin that you can't depend upon getting one unvarying shade even from one vat. Of course the shade produced by synthetic indigo is always the same. It can only be carelessness if there's any variation. There are no other substances in the dye than what are known and wanted. Of course, too, synthetic indigo is cheaper. So that in two respects, economy and invariability of shade, we have the advantage over the Yorkshiremen. Do you follow?"

"Yes," said Mona.

"But what we haven't synthetically got and they with their vat dyes naturally have is that delicate violet bloom, such as you see on fruit and on mountains too, which makes, say, velvet the most lovely of all the fabrics.

The firm which can put a synthetic dye upon the market answering to that condition is going to sweep the field. Now look!"

He turned round on the settee and took from a dispatch-case a flat parcel. He opened it, and from an inner wrapping of tissue-paper he spread out upon the table beneath Mona Lightfoot's eyes two squares of black silk-velvet, each measuring a foot square.

"Now—you are the purchaser. Which do you choose?"

Mona Lightfoot took them to the door of the cabin and compared them, holding them close to examine their texture and then at arm's length to judge their effect. Both pieces were delightful to the touch and charming to the eye; and both had the bloom of which Thewliss spoke, a tint of dark blue, softly shimmering, that came and went as the velvet was turned, evanescent, delicately sensuous, if such a term can be applied to a fabric. It was difficult for Mona to choose between them. But it seemed to her in the end that there was a depth, an effect of luxury and perfection in one which the other lacked.

"This is lovely," she said, holding out the piece which she had selected.

Mark Thewliss blew her a kiss.

"Mine!" he said triumphantly.

He took the piece in his hands, and his long slim fingers caressed it ever so daintily. Mona could never quite reconcile the slenderness of his fingers and his lightness of touch with the wiry strength of his lean body; just as she could never fit his almost feminine appreciation of delicate colours and exquisite fabrics into a harmony with the granite in his character and his practical earthbound ambitions.

"Yes, this is my doing," he continued, and was silent for a moment. Then:

"Isn't it curious? They say romance is dead. But here are you and I in a little cabin of a little cutter in Salcombe estuary with two little square pieces of black velvet between us, and one of them means the end of an industry in Yorkshire and of plantations in the Far East, and makes a great avenue out of this cabin to all that a man could desire."

"Yes," Mona replied. "Mardyke and Campion's will jump at it."

"They'll jump at my price for it, too," Mark Thewliss returned grimly, "but in quite another way."

He folded up the pieces of velvet and put them back into the case.

"You see, Mona, it's like this. This is my discovery, my secret. I have tested it in every way. Electric light can't play one trick on it. It's sure. I look at myself in the glass in the morning, and I say 'Your name's Brainy Boy.'"

Mona laughed, though she had little heart for laughter at that moment.

"You say that to yourself, do you?"

"Yes, and I argue a little, too. I ask why should Mardyke and Campion get all the cash and the glory, while poor Pillicoddy Thewliss gets at the most a beggarly rise of his salary. No, missy. So I go for the big figures." He nodded his head with confidence and then gasped a little at his own audacity.

"What did you do?"

"I wrote a letter saying what I had succeeded in doing and enclosing a sample like that which I showed you; and I stated that if Mardyke and Campion's wished to retain my services and have the benefit of my discovery, they must pay me a salary—well, I get eight hundred a year now—a salary of—what do you think?"

"I can't guess."

"Ten thousand a year."

"Oh!"

Mona Lightfoot sat back in her chair and stared at Thewliss. She thought of William Mardyke and his timidities.

"He'll never do that. What did you call him?"

"A funkstick. Yes, I know. But look at it this way. He won't pay me more than one year's salary. The secret will be known in a year. Very likely a patent will have to be taken out. I can't afford to do that. He'll have to do it, and he'll know the process. He won't want me any more. He'll just give me the sack. Right! But I shall have ten thousand pounds in my pocket, and with ten thousand pounds I can set up a laboratory of my own."

"And if he doesn't agree?" asked Mona.

"Yes. If he doesn't agree! There it is!" and Thewliss returned to his unopened letter. "There's the risk. I've got that little mistake about the Tyrrhian purple against me. I'm out of a job with a bad mark against my name. Yes, it's a risk," and then his face flushed and with a sudden violence he beat his tremors down. "But I've thought it out. No man coming from

nothing without a penny to back him has ever reached the great position, the high power, without taking such risks, not once but twenty times, as I am prepared to do. Let's see what Mr. Stay-as-we-are has got to say."

He tore open the envelope and read the letter. All the writing was upon one page, but it seemed to Mona that Mark took an eternity to read it. He laid it down in the end, folded it with an almost finical precision and put it back into the torn envelope. His face had grown pale beneath its tan, but Mona could draw no inference from that pallor. She was indeed too deeply wounded to give much thought to anything.

"If he had wanted me to share his joys and his disappointments, he would have shown me that letter. He would have tossed it across the table the moment he had read it, eagerly, and watched my face whilst in turn I read," she argued. He looked on her as an Oriental might. She was the unconsidered solace.

"You ask me no questions," he said at length, a little fretfully. He wanted the flattery of her questions.

"None."

"Mardyke offers me a partnership."

For a moment there was complete silence in the cabin. A rowing boat occupied by some children went splashing past the cutter amidst cries and young laughter.

"I never thought of that solution," Mark Thewliss resumed, speaking aloud, but to himself rather than to her. "Yet I might have thought of it. Yes. You remember Gregory, the head clerk? He was prepared for it. When I passed through the office on my way out the day I met you, he climbed down from his high stool and hurried across the room to open the door for me. Pretty significant that, from old Gregory. He had theories, hadn't he? Some men are born servants and others born masters. He managed to possess a queer sort of dignity from recognising that he was a born servant. When he hurried across the room to open the door for me, it wasn't mere servility. No! He understood that I belonged to the others. . . ." He looked up to find that the cabin held no occupant but himself.

Mona had slipped out, leaving him absorbed in his triumph. She stood now upon the deck with her hand about a stay, striving to rejoice too. He had staked high and won. She was glad—yes, she was determined to be glad. She herself had staked higher still and lost. Well, she had done it with her eyes open. She must not show any sorrow that she had lost, lest she should

appear to reproach or to appeal. Luckily there was little time left during which she must keep a guard on her every word, her every look. For the sorrow was there welling up in her heart like blood in a wound.

She looked about her. At the end of the creek, the little town of Kingsbridge ran up in a line into an angle of dark trees. A small boat was tacking across the estuary to the mark of the old lime-kiln. Opposite to her the tranquil creek to Southbourne narrowed between high curving fields, where the hay still lay, and coppices of thick trees. She wanted to engrave that quiet scene upon her memory, since she was never likely to look on it again. But there was a mist of tears before her eyes and her lips shook.

"Mona! Mona!"

She stooped watching with great concentration a small round tin spinning down on the tide.

"Yes," she answered.

Mark Thewliss was at her side before she looked up. Even then she dared not look as high as his face.

"I was wondering. . . . The punt will be finished this morning."

Mona nodded.

"You'll want to get back at once. You ought to, I think."

"We lose a few days of our holiday."

"What does that matter?"

The magical holiday had lost all its magic. The sooner it came to an end now, the better.

"I ought to write and post a letter to William Mardyke. Then we might pick up the punt and sail round the Start this afternoon, ready to take the West Bay in the morning."

On a slope of stone at the boat-builder's yard, an old whiskered man was finishing his work upon the punt.

"It's all ready now," he said, and he slid it down into the water and replaced its cushions and sculls and fitted on the rudder. "I don't think as she'll give you any trouble. But if any of them nails start, you'll just have to hammer them in again. I'll give you my mallet as a wedding-present," and with a friendly chuckle he put the mallet in the boat and shoved her off. Mona never saw the man again, never knew more of his name than the

initial "M" burnt into the wood, and within five minutes the trifling incident had passed for many years from her memory.

They anchored that night in the Dart, but nearer the entrance than before so that they might make an early start in the morning. Mark Thewliss was uneasy. There was very little of the moon left to see, the shutter had moved so far across the face of it, and that little was seen through a vapour like thin smoke. The wind, too, was shifting. "When it goes round against the sun at this time of the year," he said, "you have got to watch it."

He went down into the cabin and got out his Norrie.

"Dartmouth's a curious place. Going west from it you ought to start four hours after high tide; going east, two hours before."

He looked up his tide tables.

"High tide's at nine. So we'll start at seven."

Mona slept restlessly through the early part of the night and heavily towards morning. She was only awakened by the clatter of preparation upon deck. She slipped on an overcoat and ran out to find Mark taking a couple of reefs in his main sail.

"We shall have bad weather coming up behind us," he said. "We ought, however, to blow across the bay before the worst of it reaches us." He paused in his work to look about him. "There's always the train, of course. What do you say? I shouldn't be surprised to see the west cone hoisted at any moment."

"What would you do if you were alone?" Mona asked.

"I should go out at seven o'clock," he replied with a laugh, which had in it a thrill of deep enjoyment. "The *Sea Flower* wasn't built for a tea-party in the Solent. If the seas get too heavy we can heave to, and she'll ride out the gale like a duck."

"I'll get breakfast ready," said Mona.

It was in her mind that she did not care what happened on the passage across the West Bay. For now there was not left even as much of her holiday moon as that slender sickle which had shone down when, ages and ages ago, they had first sailed from Poole. The shutter had moved across it until not one gilded edge was left. Even after the *Sea Flower* was reaching to the entrance of the river, the smooth water and the high hills holding off the squalls, misled her; so that she made light of the wrack of clouds tearing

across the sky, the leaden menace of the day, and the seas which far away humped themselves against the horizon in ever melting mountain chains.

It was not until they were outside the Mewstone—its emerald green all sobered to a livid grey and not a sea-bird's wail audible above the storm—that the wind smote them. The *Sea Flower* leapt like a stag surprised, lurched and was flung forward, her bows crashing upon the waves. Mona, hurled across the cockpit, sank on to its floor. There was such a roar of sea and wind as made her dizzy. She had thought that she hadn't cared what was going to happen; but in the presence of this elemental fury she crouched sick with fear. Mark reached down a hand and patted her shoulder. He shouted some words. She could not hear what they were, but the expression of his face told her that they were words of encouragement. It couldn't be that any ship could live in such a welter; it couldn't be that the planks would hold together against the massive blows of the succeeding waves. But the ship did live; rolling and creaking and groaning it fled across the open bay.

Mona watched Mark Thewliss' face. It was never still. Now his head was turned astern watching the great waves as they rushed forwards; now he stared at the sail lest the wind should get behind it; and the tiller in his hand was never still either, as now he eased it to take the thrust of a billow, now he held the cutter to her course. After a while Mona climbed on to the seat and clung to the combing. The air was thick with spume, the wind tore across the sea in black squalls, the water itself was blistered and gleamed with points of steel. In a moment of relaxation Thewliss bent and bawled in her ear:

"We should think nothing of this on a liner."

But they were not on a liner; and for the life of her Mona could not understand why each big green wave, racing up with so much bluster and menace, slipped away under the long counter and only flung a lump or two of heavy water over them into the cockpit. There was no question and indeed no thought of meals that day. Before two o'clock Mona saw in a break of the storm the great bluff of Portland ahead of them in the north-east. Here was a new terror.

"The Race!" she cried, making a trumpet of her hands.

Mark reassured her with a smile.

"I am keeping outside it."

The wind veered round to the north after midday, and the seas diminished in violence, coming off the land and taking the cutter on its port

side so that it could be steered with less danger of a gybe and a broach to. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon and Weymouth Bay was opening up beyond the Bill. All through those hours Mark Thewliss had sat at the tiller, never for a moment relaxing his attention, soaked to the skin and blue with cold.

"The worst of it's over," he said, stretching his cramped limbs. "We'll make across the bay to Lulworth Cove. We can lie quiet there to-night."

Wind and sea plagued the *Sea Flower* less and less as she felt the shelter of the downs. Mona saw again the white road running up the hill to the solitary tree, and the uncomplimentary horseman turning his tail to the town; and in an incredibly short time the steep escarpment of the Lulworth cliffs and the ochre-coloured coastguard station were close at hand. The *Sea Flower* passed through the narrow portals, her cockpit swimming with water and the stain of the sea darkening her sail to the peak. In that quiet haven she came to rest.

"What I want is a whisky and soda," said Mark with a grin.

The cabin was a scene of wreckage and disorder. Everything which should be on a shelf was on the floor, and everything that could be broken was broken. Thewliss replaced the cushions on the settee and Mona got the whisky and the soda-water bottles and the glasses from their racks.

"Good, eh?" said Mark as he emptied his glass in a single draught. Mona took hers in a more leisurely way.

Thewliss opened his oilskin coat, replenished his glass, and lit a pipe.

"A ship the *Sea Flower*," and he patted the ledge of the settee in commendation. Mona watched him with shining eyes.

"This morning—before we started out of Dartmouth—you knew what we were in for?"

"Pretty well."

"And it was dangerous—really dangerous—all the way?"

"All the way to Weymouth Bay. If a following sea had broken upon us or if we had broached to—we were done."

"Yet you took the risk?"

"I offered to send you on by train, didn't I?" he urged.

"I wasn't thinking of myself. You had that partnership in your pocket."

Thewliss nodded his head.

"I was mad, I suppose." Then he broke into a hearty laugh. "But I couldn't have borne to turn tail like the horseman in the chalk. Not for a thousand partnerships! I enjoyed it, too. I was frightened out of my life, but I enjoyed it."

That day had set him high again on a throne in Mona's heart. There had been moments when the feet of clay had obtruded upon her vision. But here was the man she had dreamed of, putting gallantly everything—herself of course, but even life that he so clung to—in the scales. To her he was made of the fibre of the gods . . . and he was not for her.

The storm blew itself out in the night, and starting early with a fair wind on their beam they made the Isle of Wight by midday, struggled against the tide for three hours opposite to Hurst Castle and towards evening beat up Southampton Water. Mark was forward, stowing away the foresail in the hatch, when they approached a buoy with its name staring in white letters from the black paint.

"Keep clear of the Dean's Elbow," he cried.

Mona put the cutter about.

"We have kept clear of the Dean's Elbow, and the Bishop too, my dear," she answered with a little smile; and, leaning over to one side, she slipped the wedding-ring off her finger and let it fall into the water.

Mark Thewliss left for London by the breakfast train on the next morning. Mona, who had two hours before her cross-country journey to the north, saw him off. Mark showed the grace of a great embarrassment.

"You have been wonderful to me, Mona. I have never had such a splendid month in my life." He shifted from one foot to the other. "You'll let me hear from you?"

Mona nodded her head. She could not trust her lips to speak. And the whistle blew. Mona walked out of the station when the train had disappeared, and stood at the rails of the sea-wall looking down Southampton Water. She could see quite clearly the *Sea Flower* at its anchor. There were two men upon her deck, who had been summoned by telegraph the night before to take her round to a yard on the Hamble River. Mona saw the mainsail hoisted and the jib broken out. She watched the cutter move down the channel until her tears blinded her. She had never dreamed that anyone could feel so desolate.

CHAPTER VII GETTING ON

"The Honourable Member for the Amworth Division."

"Mr. Speaker, Question forty-eight of the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"In answer to the Honourable Member . . ."

"Arising out of that answer, Mr. Speaker, I should like to ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer . . ."

Question and answer, supplementary question and supplementary answer, were being exchanged across the floor of the great Chamber up the stairs, sometimes with a genuine desire for knowledge, sometimes to gratify a valuable constituent, sometimes just to get one on. Mark Thewliss, walking the Terrace alone on a February afternoon at three o'clock, wished that the question time could be extended until the House rose at eleven o'clock of the evening. He might be a coward—he was perfectly willing to admit that he was—but he did wish it extremely. He walked up and down. He had on neither overcoat nor hat. It was cold but he did not feel cold, for his physical sensations were in a very complete abeyance.

He had the sequence of his argument in order, so long of course as he did not lose one of the main links—an occurrence which was indeed very possible, if not unavoidable. On the whole he was inclined to consider it unavoidable. He was sure, however, of his facts and figures. For they had not been worked up from pamphlets and textbooks, they were the commonplaces of his daily life. Yes, he was sure of his ground there, if only his mind didn't suddenly go blank. Minds often did, even the best minds, much better minds than his. Darkness descended upon them, inextricable, swathing them in thick folds. He himself had never yet been reduced to an ashamed and tingling cipher by one of these seizures, but they always chose ruinous moments. There was a slang phrase which described them—horribly graphic, too, like most slang phrases. To go blah. Well, there it was! He, Mark Thewliss, would go blah this afternoon.

"Let me repeat it," he reflected, shaking himself back into his wits. "The Right Honourable gentleman's line of thought must always—and I say it with sincerity and deference—command the sympathetic attention of the House, but in this instance . . ."

All very good, but supposing the Right Honourable gentleman didn't deploy that line of thought at all—where was he, Mark Thewliss? On his legs—and with nothing to say.

"But he must use that line of thought," Mark argued with a little more of his native confidence. "I have watched him, listened to him, examined the works—yes, he'll think like that, speak like that. . . . Of course I'll have to get the best opening I can out of what he says. I couldn't prepare that . . . I must appear to be debating even if I am not."

He noticed a lot of small yachts moored on the other side of the Thames under St. Thomas' Hospital. They had always been moored there, but he had never realised before what singularly sensible people their proprietors were. Now if he had only got the *Sea Flower* moored over there, he could nip across Westminster Bridge, cast off and, with this wind blowing, be abreast of the Savoy Hotel before the Right Honourable gentleman had begun to think aloud with that mixture of languid grace, halting speech and intellectual clarity which made him at once so attractive and so formidable a figure.

But the *Sea Flower* wasn't moored there. She was in a yard on the Hamble river and had been for a good many years, waiting—after all what for? For a summer when he would have her sold. He was always quick to make that assertion whenever the question forced itself into his mind, as it would at awkward moments when he was not upon his guard. Such a moment was dangerously near to him now. Ambition was all folly. There were sprigs of the great families already in the House of Commons at the age of twenty-two. They had by twenty good years the advantage over their competitors. They could afford to sit mum for five years and then rise up in an arena no more alarming to them than the side walks in front of their houses. What was he doing here, a new member at the age of forty-four?

"Mr. Speaker, it would need an audacity greater than mine to follow the Right Honourable gentleman, but for——"

How utterly, damnably, trivial and silly it sounded.

"Thinking it out, eh?"

A friendly hand fell upon his arm. Mark Thewliss turned with a jerk to see Lord Catherstone, a Junior Lord of the Treasury, smiling at him out of a friendly rubicund round face.

"Are questions over?" he asked in alarm.

"Not a bit of it. Five more minutes, then the division over the suspension of the eleven o'clock rule. There'll be half an hour before your man's up."

Suddenly Mark Thewliss felt that he couldn't wait for half an hour. Rules or no rules, his man must get up at once. Mark took a step towards the door, but the friendly hand restrained him.

"Take your time! Don't even hurry when R. T. sits down. The Speaker will call on you all right. That's been arranged." Yes, that had been arranged. He had always thought that he would sink through the floor with humiliation if he had to rise eight or nine times and never be called upon. Now he would adore it.

"You'll make a success all right," said the Junior Whip, with the experience of seven years at his back.

"If nerves can do it!"

"Nerves do do it."

"Not always."

Mark Thewliss recalled to Lord Catherstone the brilliant young Marcellus of the Law, who had sprung out of a northern city and swept the political world off its feet.

"I asked him if he was nervous, and he said—you know how his supercilious look breaks up into the friendliest human sort of grin. 'No. From my earliest childhood I lisped in numbers and the numbers came. They weren't very good numbers, but they came.'"

Catherstone laughed.

"I can cap that. You weren't in the House with that hardened old sinner Miramond. He once asked me to arrange that he should speak in a debate which was proceeding. It was an Imperial question and I was astonished. I said, 'Why? It isn't your subject.' He answered: 'I know that. But I'm wearing a new set of teeth and I want to try 'em out.' What do you say to that?"

"That I should be half inclined to give my teeth for a cynicism so sublime," Thewliss returned.

The Junior Whip, having done his friendly office, went upon his busy way. Members began to stroll out upon the Terrace. Questions were at an end. The Division bells started ringing. It was at once a comfort, a spur, and an added terror to Thewliss to realise, as he could not but do, that the

Government was nursing him. He recorded his vote and took his seat behind the Treasury Bench; he was in for it now, and as "R. T." rose from the Opposition Front Bench, the turbulence of his emotions went down like a sea in a falling wind. He was just as nervous, but he was no longer aware of his nervousness. He listened for words which would give him the opportunity of a natural, effective, debating introduction.

* * * * *

There are on an average six maiden speeches made in every new Parliament, each of which in turn is declared the day after its delivery to be the best maiden speech ever made. Mark Thewliss' was one of the six in that Parliament. He was helped by circumstances. For on a subject which was creating uneasiness throughout the country he had something genuinely reassuring to contribute out of his own particular knowledge and experience. Only an unfortunate manner could have spoilt him, but he had sat watching for too many weeks, with too shrewd an eye for a lapse of tact or an exhibition of bumptiousness, to make an error in that direction.

At Grillion's, the famous dining-club of the elder statesmen, the speech received attention that evening. Said R. T., with that generosity of his which was due as much to his philosophic detachment as to a warmth of heart:

"It was the speech of a man bred in the modern tradition. It wasn't sing-song, it wasn't a lecture, it wasn't oratory and, thank Heaven, it wasn't rhetoric. It was conversation on a plane above conversation—conversation sharpened to a point by just phrases and a progression of ideas."

The veteran statesman had done a really generous action that afternoon. The subject of the debate was the Naval Estimates, which at that time, owing to the rapid development of the German navy and the bellicose drum-beating which played it in, were being watched with profound interest in England. "R. T.," as he was affectionately known, moved a reduction of a hundred pounds in the First Lord's salary in order to call attention to the dangerous parsimony of the Admiralty in the matter of high explosive ammunition. It was understood that the First Lord himself would reply at eleven o'clock to the whole debate, and a good many members were leaving their places when Mark Thewliss was called upon. But the traditional courtesy of the place prevailed over the attractions of the lobby and the smoking-room.

"Who is this fellow?" asked Colonel Westram, a dapper, genial politician with the safest seat in England and a fresh carnation every day resplendent

in his button-hole.

"Thewliss. He's head of one of the big dye industries," replied the Colonel's neighbour, fixing a critical eyeglass in his eye. "Looks all right. But he doesn't give me the impression that he's going to cut much of a figure here."

"Wait a bit," said the Colonel.

Thewliss had begun his speech in a voice which sounded intolerably thin to his own ears, and indeed was discouragingly weak to his audience. There flashed into that disobedient secondary consciousness which will begin its aggravating functions at the most unaccommodating moments, a long procession of people who had failed when they first sought the attention of the House of Commons, from Phineas Finn in fiction to the young Disraeli in reality.

Then he took a hold upon himself. He had, after all, an argument of his own based upon facts of his own. That the surplus of high explosives should be small was wisdom and not parsimony. The ingredients such as picric acid, of which as a chemist concerned with synthetic dyes he knew something, could not be mixed and stored for long periods without losing their effectiveness. He gave shortly and in a formula which could be understood the ratio of loss. To keep a huge accumulation of such ammunition would only encourage a confidence which in the day of trial would be disastrous. . . . And suddenly he was aware that his voice had volume, and was reaching without one high forced note, to every corner of the Chamber. Here and there a member, fetched out of the smoking-room or the lobby or the reading-room, by the word that something real was being said, slipped quietly into a seat near to the door by which he had entered. And no one went away. Thewliss' secondary consciousness got to work again with an even subtler malevolence, determined to thwart him, insistent that he should fail. It began to whisper to him:

"This is power. This is what you have lived for. The sensation of power. The hour on the Alpine peak. You're a novice and all these members, experts in speeches, many of them sated with thirty years of speeches, are listening to yours. Isn't it good? ISN'T IT GOOD?"

The secondary consciousness grew clamorous. Thewliss could not but respond. An intoxication of pleasure which was nothing less than voluptuous ran through his veins—and suddenly his mind went blank. There was even a darkness before his eyes. He babbled a word or two, he saw here and there a curious glance directed at him, and the sight gave back to him his wits.

The remedy for the deficiency in high explosives was not to be found in an accumulation of old shells. It was to be sought for in the capacity for rapid mobilisation of all the factories which could be adapted to the manufacture of new ones. Pre-eminent amongst them were those which in peace-time were devoted to the production of dyes. His speech was marching again now—measured, resonant, convincing. He could promise—he had the authority to promise on behalf of his fellow manufacturers and chemists—that at the first hint of need their men, their knowledge, their stocks, their laboratories and machines would be ungrudgingly placed at the disposal of the crown, whatever government ruled the country. The pity was there were so few of them. If the Government could only see its way so far to reform the patent laws that foreigners should be prevented from taking out patents and then leaving them unworked, so that without fear of rivalry they could produce at their ease in their own country, the opportunities upon which the Government could in an emergency rely would be enormously increased.

Thewliss sat down amidst a generous goodwill. He had spoken for twenty minutes—the right length. He had made a contribution. Even the little plea at the end of his speech which should help his own particular interests, did him no harm. It had been so deftly introduced that it seemed a necessary part of his argument; and just for that reason it provoked an admiring amusement in an assembly never without its cynics. The Prime Minister turned round and shook him by the hand, and crowning generosity and crowning triumph, the great leader with whom he had contended sauntered round behind the Speaker's chair and sat by his side for a few minutes with words of praise.

"I told you so," said the young Whip, sidling along the bench to him half an hour later. "Now you must sit through the rest of this debate. The House of Commons doesn't give twopence for men who shoot in, fire off their bit, and go galumphing away. Dine here and don't take more than three-quarters of an hour. I'll get three or four fellows and we'll go round to the club and have supper afterwards."

At supper the conversation turned, as on such occasions it will, to the making of careers.

"Hard work doesn't do it," said one of them, a shrewd and wealthy landowner, who hunted his own hounds, ran his own county, and carried a great name as great names should be carried. "Hard work leaves you a clerk. You've got to have luck and a guiding principle, learnt early in life and clung to. Now you!" he turned to Thewliss. "You are over forty. You are a

rich man, you're in the House, you've made a success there, and you tell me you come out of nowhere. What's your guiding principle?"

"I have two," Thewliss answered instantly. "One, to know what I know. The other just as simple, and I think just as rare. To want what I want."

CHAPTER VIII ACCORDING TO PLAN

"Well, what is it to be?" Catherstone asked of Mark Thewliss a few days afterwards. It was seven o'clock in the evening and Catherstone was on the door. His business was to make sure that of the members hurrying out of the Lobby cloister to Palace Yard and their dinners, enough would return to protect the Government from a snap-vote. His conversation, therefore, was a little disjointed. It ran: "You will be back by ten o'clock, won't you, Mr. Doby? . . . Well, what is it to be, Thewliss? . . . Have you got your pair, Freddie? . . . All right. What is it to be?" and he pulled Thewliss down on to the cushioned seat beside the door. "The rough and tumble? Or the occasional set speech with the red carpet down?"

"The rough and tumble," Thewliss answered.

"I am glad to hear it. Debate's the life-blood of the House, set speeches only its jewellery," Catherstone agreed cordially. But one of his duties was to persuade the new members that loquacity was the privilege of the Front Bench and silent admiration the fitting decoration of those who sat behind. So he added: "But not too often, of course."

The warning was unnecessary. Mark Thewliss was too shrewd and too busy to waste the small prestige he had acquired by incursions into controversies where he had nothing to contribute. But he sat assiduously in the Chamber, speaking now and then briefly in the committee stages of a Bill to an argument which he could demolish or reinforce, and twice only, during the rest of the long session, for some twenty minutes on the broader questions of principles of policy. By the time when the House had risen in August, Mark Thewliss had risen too into the small company of the coming men.

It followed that a good many houses of which he only knew the exterior opened their doors to him. To make room for them he closed a good many doors himself. He had no compunction. It was all according to plan and therefore satisfactory. He was on the march. Old friends meant nothing to a man who had no friends at all. He moved down from Highgate to Mayfair, and at the first turn of the road Highgate ceased to be. A small house in Grosvenor Street received him; furniture chosen with a fastidious care ministered to his pride of ownership; the best *chef* whom money could hire cooked for him; and during such spare time as he could snatch, he proceeded

to put into practice a number of little schemes excogitated against just this occasion during the years of bivouac at Highgate.

Soon after Parliament resumed he began to give a series of small dinner parties at which wines, food and guests were so choicely matched that in a very short time to receive an invitation to one of them became a tiny mark of distinction. And he was most careful not to advertise them.

"Advertisement is necessary," he had been heard to say amongst those acquaintances whose reminiscences could not trouble him now, "but the best way to advertise is by not advertising, by declaring from every roof-top at the full pressure of your lungs that you stand aloof from such vulgarity."

Thus he never granted an interview, but he would explain to the would-be interviewer why. His busy life amongst his beloved chemicals and his public duties left him leisure so scant that he was jealous of every instant of it. And such explanations appeared of course in print, attesting a rare modesty and widely resounding to his credit. But he cultivated with care the high dignitaries of the press; and whenever he made some small success of value to a man on the march, a flattering little letter would be written in his own hand to one of them; and the dignitaries being friendly and human, saw through the flattery and printed the useful occurrence amongst the items of public news. He had a remarkable *flair* for the men who were going to succeed, and the swiftest forgetfulness of the old Caspars who had served their turn.

"Never neglect the little things," he warned himself; and so he had a blue door to his house. It was the only blue door in the street.

"I am afraid my little blue door won't open itself to interviewers, however winningly they knock," he would write, and the interviewers would in default of their interview make up the cleverest fables about that little blue door, until in a very short time it became quite a famous object in Grosvenor Street.

"There it is! That's the door. Mark Thewliss' house, isn't it? A remarkable character according to all accounts. And he never advertises. Unusual in these days, eh? But it's a fact. I read in the *Daily Telescope* only yesterday that he didn't and wouldn't. A type one respects."

And even those who could never walk along Grosvenor Street, the inhabitants of Aberdeen and Glasgow, dwellers in far Cornwall and the great noisy cities of Northern England, got gradually to know of a personage of a most resounding reticence who was hidden behind a blue door in Mayfair.

All was going according to plan. With the opening of the second session of Parliament the little dinner parties were resumed. One or two of the familiar figures were dropped out—they were disappointing people who had lost their hold upon the public—and one or two new ones were set up in their places, fine talkative fellows on the very froth of success. Certainly Mark Thewliss was on the march all through this year under summer skies. He looked up at them often enough. For though his class-room had been a laboratory, and he knew nothing of the Greek dramatists but their names, he had an instinctive fear of the insolence which brings disaster in its train. He was wary of the great fist with the mallet which had dashed so many of his kind bleeding to the earth. He felt sure that he would notice the mere shadow of it in time to dodge, though it struck never so swiftly. But what if the shadow were at first but an extra depth of blue in the summer sky, and recognisable only as a marvellous new decoration to the splendour of his world?

At any rate, the month of June in the following year was memorable in Mark's career. He made a speech of some consequence upon English policy in the Near East, and walked home afterwards with Catherstone.

"That should settle the question of office, I think," said the young Whip. The under-secretaryship for the Colonies had just become vacant. "I have seldom heard a better speech. How is it you know so much about the Near East?"

Mark Thewliss waked from the consideration of what was apparently some heavy matter of a different kind.

"My business," he replied. "The Near East is a great market for me." He stopped at his door. "I wish you would come in for a moment. I would like to ask you a question or two which you could answer off-hand. But the answers would be of great value to me."

Catherstone was a little alarmed. He had a fear that he might be asked to reveal Cabinet secrets, and since he did not know any he would be put to it to maintain his importance.

"Very well," he said reluctantly.

Thewliss led his companion to a small and pleasant book-lined room at the back of the house, sat him down in a deep arm-chair with a whisky and soda at his elbow and himself took his stand upon the hearthrug.

"Now," he said, without the least embarrassment. "For the first time in my life I am going to spend a week-end at a country house."

Young Lord Catherstone sat up and stared.

"For the first time!" he exclaimed. "But you are joking!"

"Not a bit of it. I have been asked several times, but I have always refused the invitation. For one thing, I got Saturday and Sunday, two clear days, for my business affairs and my laboratory. For another, I knew nothing about the routine and did not wish to make a whole heap of mistakes."

"Where are you going?" asked Catherstone.

"To Colonel Westram's."

"Tony's? Oh, you can't make mistakes there. There isn't any routine."

"I am glad to hear it," Mark observed. "Nevertheless, I should like some information. I want you to take me hour by hour through the normal life of a visitor in a country house, beginning with his arrival on Friday afternoon and ending with his departure on Monday morning."

Week-end visits were so customary a feature of Catherstone's existence that he was put to it to formulate the passage of the hours and their occupations.

"Let me think," he said. "You play golf, of course?"

"I don't know an iron from a brassy, or a niblick from a putter."

"Good Lord!"

Catherstone stared at Mark Thewliss in amazement. The man looked hard enough certainly.

"What in the world do you do with yourself on your holidays?"

"On a real holiday I sail a topsail schooner. For other occasions I have a racing dinghy on the Broads."

"Well, neither of them is going to help you in Berkshire, my friend. It's a pity you don't play golf. You can get away from the mob, and you're no bother to your host." He looked at Mark and pointed a threatening finger. "If you don't watch it, you'll find yourself seeing the neighbourhood in a wagonette with the ladies."

"Heaven forbid!"

Catherstone had a sudden hope.

"Do you fish?"

"I've caught some mackerel."

"There aren't any mackerel in the Test," cried Catherstone in despair. "Well, here goes! You arrive at half-past six on Friday evening in your own motor-car"—and he described hour by hour, as he was bidden, the life that Thewliss might be expected to lead, and with a sigh of relief dispatched him back along the Bath Road at half-past nine on the Monday morning.

"Your host will sigh with relief, too," Catherstone said grimly. "Luckily, it's Tony Westram." He laughed as he lifted himself out of the arm-chair. "As a matter of fact, you'll enjoy yourself thoroughly. Everyone does at Gissens. Good night."

Young Catherstone, as befitted his age and the month, went off to change his clothes and betake himself to half a dozen parties. Mark Thewliss, now that the programme of his movements was clear, dismissed the visit from his mind. Country house visits would no doubt be rather a bore, but a few of them would be necessary and according to plan. That the plan, during two fateful days, was amazingly to expand and embrace as definite purposes mere dreams which had been toyed with, he would not have believed. But, as we have seen, his education had not taught him that Achilles had a heel. Frankenstein's monster astonished his creator; and when the robot comes at last there will be some alloy in his metal which will turn him human in the end. Love of woman is the usual factor. But it was a very complicated form of it which was to interfere with the works of Mark Thewliss.

CHAPTER IX ANGELA IS NOT DISAPPOINTED

According to plan, then, on the Friday afternoon Mark turned his car to the left, off the wide thoroughfare ten miles beyond Newbury. For three miles more he twisted amongst lanes deep in the greenery of trees and hedgerows and came to a great rectangle of a house set in a park trim with white five-barred gates. The flat, oblong windows looked across a wide space of lawn to the famous river. Big elms spread their shade over rich pastures; in a field hay-makers were turning the swathes, and between the hayfield and the house a rose garden tossed its scent and colour in the air. Tony Westram came from the field in his shirt sleeves with his hay-fork in his hand.

"I don't suppose you'll find a soul in the house," he cried. He was aglow like his own rose garden, and he conducted his conversation, as was his wont, at the top of his voice.

"We're hardly more than the family. My little girl Angela, a nephew Derek Crayle, a good boy who has just joined my old regiment. He's over there." Colonel Westram pointed across the lawn to a youth who was standing back behind a bush and casting a line very carefully over a pool of the river.

"Then there's Julian Wilford—he has a strip of river beyond me—a man on the Stock Exchange." Tony Westram ran through the brief list of his guests with a short description of each of them.

"Besides them, there's a niece who makes her home with me. Lady Olivia Stanton. She's coming across the lawn to us now."

Mark saw a young woman, in a white dress with a big hat shading her face, approaching them.

"I had better tell you a little about her, so don't look, or she'll guess," continued Westram, lowering his voice. "She has had pretty bad luck all round. Old Porlock was her father. He threw away every bean he had over the gee-gees and died a year after her mother. Then she lost the only man she ever cared about in the Boer War, and I am afraid nothing matters very much to her now—or ever will." He raised his voice. "Olivia, I want to introduce Mark Thewliss to you."

Olivia Stanton had no claim to be considered beautiful, but she had a pleasant, delicate face, with fine grey eyes, and however heavy her woes had been, she carried no sign of them. She greeted Mark Thewliss with a friendly smile and a firm clasp of the hand.

"I am glad that you found time to come," she said. "A little intellect is always badly needed at Gissens at this time of the year."

"You haven't seen Angela, I suppose?" Tony Westram interposed.

"I have, but she's not fit to be seen. She's with the keeper at the hatchery." Olivia Stanton turned to Mark with a whimsical pity. "Everybody here is mad about the trout for the moment, and it's my duty to warn you that something pretty bad is being planned for you. The outlook's gloomy. So you had better let me give you some tea whilst you are a free man."

For that afternoon, however, he remained a free man. He took his tea in a long, cool drawing-room and was taken for a walk by Olivia Stanton afterwards. He found himself, to his surprise—for he was still naïve in many ways—talking to her about his dyes and his difficulties with the German patents, giving her a glimpse of his early struggles, and sketching with some humour William Mardyke and his associates.

"All this," he cried, looking round upon the park and the house in its orderly and complete beauty, "all this is absolutely new to me"—he drew in a breath—"and wonderful. I didn't know what I had missed."

It was the season of the mayfly, the dusk long lingering into darkness, the river softly glimmering, the air sweet with the smell of hay and flowers. Dinner was a go-as-you-please affair.

Angela Westram came late to it, a lovely tall slip of a girl with brown hair and blue eyes and all the joy of her seventeen years brimming over. She was clothed in a frock of pale blue crêpe-de-Chine with light-coloured stockings and blue shoes, and a necklace of old amber and silver encircled her young throat. Mark Thewliss was presented to her, and she looked at him very gravely and sedately, and nodded her head as though some serious doubt she had was set at rest.

"I am pleased to meet you," she said with a rather pretty touch of conferring a great favour upon him.

Derek Crayle appeared later and had not even changed into a dinner-jacket. He made his apology. There would still be the last of the light after dinner was finished, and there was a pool of which he had great hopes. The talk was all of the river, of Dusty Millers and Brown Devons, of fat old pike

which wanted a rifle taken to them, and of big trout which lay in full view under the banks, motionless as *yoghis* on an Indian hill-side and like them, liberated from temptation.

"This must be all jargon to Thewliss," Tony Westram at last expostulated.

"All education is jargon to the beginner," said Derek sententiously.

"Alas! I am not even a beginner," Thewliss returned.

"You will be to-morrow," Angela declared firmly. "I am going to spend the morning teaching Mr. Thewliss to cast a line on the lawn."

She smiled with a charming tyranny across the table at the guest.

"I warned you, Mr. Thewliss," said Olivia. "You had still time to turn your car round and flee to the Bath Road."

"Never!" Thewliss returned, and he bowed with humility to Angela. "You will have an extremely willing duffer for your pupil."

Angela frowned.

"But you must take it very seriously, Mr. Thewliss," she said, rebuking him for his levity. "It is intensely important that you should catch a trout in this river with a dry fly by to-morrow night."

"Why?" asked Tony in surprise.

"That, my father, is for the moment your daughter's secret. When it is disclosed, you will all marvel at my wisdom. But the trout must be caught first, Mr. Thewliss."

"Miss Angela, I answer you with an Eastern saying," Mark replied. "If it can be done, it is done. If it can't be done, it shall be done." And upon that the little company rose from the table.

Mark Thewliss kept himself awake as long as he could that night after he had gone to bed. He was in a world which was quite strange to him and very lovely; and he was hedonist enough to wish to prolong the first sweet savour of it. He knew the magic of a summer night at sea in the loneliness of great waters. But that of the country-side had a beauty of its own. The quiet rustle of birds in the leaves of the tree, as though they feared to invite an enemy, the hoot of owls, the sudden gush of clear melody from a nightingale, the regular tiny swish of cattle cropping the grass, and every now and then the gurgle of the river running by at the edge of the lawn—all these sounds floated in at his open window and enchanted him. The scent of hay and

flowers made the room sweet. He had a sensation that the whole wide earth was consciously refreshing itself in the cool of the night against the coming day; and he felt very near to it, and had a sympathy with it, as though the earth were his brother. He lay folded in peace and clean, the dust of a long tramp brushed from his tired body.

And it was not lonely like the sea. He realised for the first time the four walls of loneliness within which he, Mark Thewliss, had lived for so long and with so ignorant a contentment. He had missed the grace of life. This one evening at Gissens had already taught him that. There had been no straining after wit, not an attempt at an epigram, not a saying to be remembered. But there had been friendliness, a natural give-and-take of conversation, and, above all, an ease, an admirable, inimitable, unhampered ease. In the society which he had frequented people watched their manners; they were a little over-careful of their propriety, they looked upon stiffness as—horrible phrase, but so completely appropriate—as *comme il faut*.

"I must certainly have a country house of my own"—he came to that conclusion rather drowsily as the clock upon the stables struck the hour of midnight. "Yes, and young people to make it, with their gaiety and high spirits, a house alive"; and upon this unprobed resolve he fell asleep.

But it was awake with him next morning; and Mark was well aware that when the intentions of the night were also the intentions of the morning he must take them into serious account. He had no time, however, for reflection that forenoon. He spent it under Angela's supervision. She was indeed waiting for him upon the lawn, with a trout-rod in her hand.

"We must get to work," she said with a touch of severity in her voice. "We are not so early as we might have been."

"I believe the proper phrase is that I overslept myself," Thewliss answered meekly.

She taught him first of all to get his line out by example and instruction, very gently but very firmly; so that he felt like a clumsy little boy on his first day at school. Then she marked out a circle in white and the more arduous course began. How to drop his fly upon that circle so that it should seem of its own accord to flutter down; how to make the cast so that the line should uncoil in the most delicate of spirals, and not so much fall as lay itself imperceptibly upon the grass, and only that after the fly at the end of it had settled—these were problems which provoked much disappointment in Angela, much sympathy in Olivia Stanton and much humility in Mark Thewliss.

“I shall never do it,” he cried.

The intricacies of the fly-fisherman’s craft were not to be mastered in one assiduous morning.

“You are getting on very well,” said Olivia.

“And you’ll certainly catch a fish before the day’s out,” declared Angela.

They were talking thus at luncheon when a letter was brought in to Mark Thewliss. It was addressed to his house in London.

“Your servants thought it might be important, sir,” said Tony Westram’s butler, “and sent it on by special messenger.”

“Thank you,” said Mark, turning the letter over and then laying it beside his plate on the table.

“You had better open it,” said Tony. “I’ld lay a thousand pounds to a penny I could tell you the contents.”

Mark opened the envelope and read the letter, and a smile crept over his face.

“Oh, you’re not going away this afternoon!” cried Angela in the greatest anxiety. “You really can’t.”

“If he does, you needn’t cry about it, Angela,” Derek Crayle remarked dryly. “For I think he has caught his fish already.”

Thewliss looked up and laughed.

“Yes, but there are some kinds of fishes one puts back. This is one of them.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Tony Westram broke in incredulously:

“Too small?”

“For a younger man, no. For me, yes.”

“By gad!”

Tony Westram hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his heels.

“It’s the Under-Secretaryship, of course.”

“For the Colonies. Yes.”

"And you are refusing it. Office in your first Parliament! Aren't you taking a big risk?"

"Yes," Mark answered.

One thing was clear to all of that company, however surprised they might be. Thewliss was not speaking on the spur of the moment out of a wild vanity. His voice was too quiet, his manner too dispassionate and tranquil. He had reviewed the question of refusal or acceptance of just this offer very carefully from all its angles.

"Yes, I am taking a big risk. Of course I am nowhere at all yet," he explained with a sudden smile, "but I shouldn't be even there if I hadn't breakfasted and lunched and dined on big risks for the greater part of my life."

He suddenly saw Olivia Stanton watching him steadily with her quiet eyes. She was the only one of the party who had uttered no word of surprise or doubt. She had sat quite silent, and Mark read in her face both comprehension and approval. She smiled at him when their eyes met, to assure him of her agreement; and unexpectedly another thought, born of his night-time fancies and quite foreign to the discussion of the propriety of his action, sprang into his mind. He glanced quickly from her to Angela, who was sitting at her side, taking them both into a single picture and making of the picture a pattern or image of which he yearned for a copy. Here, too, it seemed that Olivia Stanton understood him. For the blood rushed into her face, and she lowered her eyes. It was the matter of a moment, but an unforgettable moment for both of them; and Angela, who was so impressed by the enormity of Mark's conduct that she had forgotten the paramount need that he should land a trout, covered altogether Olivia's confusion.

"Do you know that my father has been twenty years in the House of Commons, and no one has ever offered him anything?" she cried.

"It's a scandal," cried Thewliss.

"And that he would jump out of his skin for an Under-Secretaryship?" Angela continued.

"Oh, shame, shame! Go into the corner, Angela," Derek Crayle ordered, amidst a splutter of laughter.

"But she's right," exclaimed Tony, joining in the laugh. "I would. I have got the House of Commons in my bones, worse luck!"

"And you're refusing one." Angela went on staring at Mark with round, incredulous eyes. "If I knew you better, and my manners weren't so terribly refined, I should ask you a very pointed question."

"Ask it!" said Thewliss nobly. "I am strong."

"Very well, then," said Angela. "It is a mere suggestion. I may be entirely wrong. But—aren't you—a little dippy?"

Cries of protest broke from Tony, from Derek Crayle, from the fellow on the Stock Exchange, even from Olivia.

"Let us have no noise!" Mark replied, holding up his hand for silence. "I must consider that question very carefully. No . . . no . . . Miss Angela, I may be rash—but dippy? No! I beg you to follow my argument closely. I am nominally the junior partner, but actually the bright guiding spirit, of one of the most eminent firms devoted to the production of synthetic dyes. I have all the chemistry and organisation of Germany to fight. It must have escaped your memory that in this very year of grace the Bayer Farbenfabrik has discovered that benzoylated oxyanthraquinones have all the properties of vat dyes? Arising out of that answer I ask you what will become of Mardyke and Campion, to say nothing of England, if I take my hand from the steering wheel and melt into a departmental underling? *Phut* is the only reply. Excuse me if I say to you *tush*! Also, I can't afford it."

"Ah!" said Angela with a start. "That alters the whole position," and once more she wrapt herself in mysteries.

Later on that afternoon, when Thewliss had written and dispatched his letter of refusal and the shadows were lengthening on the garden, he was fetched out to the real business of the day. He was given a split-cane rod, a Dusty Miller was carefully attached to the gut at the end of the line; he was brought as cautiously as any conspirator to the river bank and shown an old fat big trout lying so motionless in a pool of the clear brown water that Thewliss could hardly believe it to be anything but a shadow, too. Then he was led back well out of sight, and encouraged by whispered advices and excitements, he at last made the great anticipated cast. Alas, a thin line cut the still river like a seam with a little splash just over the fat trout's nose, and the fly, self-confessed a fly with a hook, dropped last of all upon the water, heavy as an obese man from a diving-board.

"Draw it in across his nose," whispered Angela. "He might. . . . One never knows."

She was wringing her hands now. Mark wound in his line never so cautiously.

"Bite, you fat dawdler, bite," she whispered, but the old trout was thinking very selfishly that this was no genuine supper which was offered to him and was indifferent to Angela's exhortations.

"Try him once more," she said. "Oh, that's ever so much better. Now he must. . . . No, he won't," and she gave voice to the last unforgivable treachery. "I should like to try the old beast with a nice smelly shrimp."

Thewliss was moved along to another pool, and once more he failed lamentably. For everybody at Gissens, except Olivia Stanton, who looked on with a detached smile of amusement, life now became serious and intense. Thewliss had got to catch a fish. Tony Westram gave his advice; Derek Crayle put the novice through one or two extra rehearsals on the lawn; Mr. Wilford, who had noticed from afar a fatal jerk of the wrist, came running up with the useful suggestion that Thewliss mustn't think he was bowling off-breaks at the nets. Thewliss received exhortations enough to make his reason totter on its throne, and each cast was watched with an anxious holding of the breath and followed by a gasp of despair.

No one really cared a threepenny bit whether Mark Thewliss caught a fish or whether he didn't, so far as his enjoyment or success was concerned. But Angela's heart for some mysterious reason was set upon this achievement, and it was not endurable that she should be disappointed. Mark Thewliss realised the dreadful position in which he stood as clearly as any of the party. If he did not catch a trout—and he was in the heretical mood to wish that the pike had eaten all the trout in the world—Angela would be disappointed, her day would be spoilt, and humiliation and well-merited disdain would be his lot.

At half-past seven in the evening, when Mark's right arm was aching as no arms ache except the rheumatical, and a small gloomy procession followed him along the bank, the miracle happened.

"I'm against trout," Thewliss cried in a rage, "I challenge them all here and now," and at random, with a violence and savagery which made the devotees shudder, he whirled the line above his head and cast. And lo! It shot out far and farther and still farther, so that Angela gasped and Tony cried, "By Gad!" And the fly settled upon the water, daintily as a fly should do, and an ingenuous and confiding youngster on the very edge of Westram's water snapped, and snapped once too often. The end of the rod bent and shook.

"You've got him! Oh!" cried Angela, stamping with relief.

"Hook him well," cried Tony. "Just a little jerk of the wrist. That'll do"; and in the air there was a flash of silver, and in the same breath, a gurgle of water and a tiny whirlpool as the trout leaped and plunged.

"Let him run now," said Derek. "And for heaven's sake, don't lose him. We can't have Angela crying over the roast beef and choking herself with a mixture of sobs and Yorkshire pudding."

No one paid any attention to his ribaldry. The fish ran upstream like an express train, sulked and ran down again.

"Look out!" cried Tony anxiously. "He's close to a big stone. If he gets your line round it, you're done."

"Oh, he can't be as malevolent as that." Mark was almost whimpering now that he really had a fish on his line.

"Oh, can't he?" said Angela. "Bring in your line a little, please! Good!"

For the fish had dashed upstream again. Then followed a minute or two of concentrated anxiety, of violent jerks and plunges and most deceitful inactivities.

"I've just *got* to land him." Thewliss said, in a voice of which the very accent declared that life would never be the same again if he failed.

"But you shall, you shall," Angela promised soothingly. "He's tiring. Yes—yes—he's coming now. . . . No! Pay out! Pay out!" and her voice rose in despair.

But that was the final rush. Thewliss wound in his line slowly and steadily. Angela knelt upon the bank with her net in her hand.

"Oh, he's a whopper," she cried enthusiastically; but a much greater whopper was Angela's remark. He may have weighed half a pound. On the other hand, he may not. But no one was courageous enough to enter upon such dangerous ground as the detail of his weight. He was a whopper. All were agreed upon that. Even Thewliss, who had suffered rather a shock when he saw its insignificance laid out upon the grass, came to the conclusion that as a trout he was a very fine fellow.

"Bravo!" cried Angela with shining eyes. "Now, Mr. Thewliss, what do you say?"

And Thewliss, bethinking himself that Saturday night had come, answered:

“I say that there’s a good deal to be said for a Continental Sunday.”

CHAPTER X THE COUNTRY HOUSE

"And now, Angela," said Derek Crayle that night when dinner was at an end and the coffee cups on the table, "I must beg you to resolve our anxieties. We are poor, weak men, unfitted for the stern business of unravelling riddles. You, too, are unfitted to be a Sphinx. For all Sphinxes have enormous feet. It is the only thing known about them. You could not be one if you would. Explain then why, oh why the heavens would fall and the earth crash in ruin, if Mark Thewliss had not caught a trout to-day!"

Angela emitted a little gurgle of laughter. She looked at Thewliss and looked away. She was almost embarrassed.

"I hope that I did not take too much upon myself," she said with a sedateness which another gurgle belied. "I should hate to be thought a forward girl."

"Angela," said Derek severely, "you have an idea in your head of which you are ashamed."

"I have not," she returned, stung to indignation. "I simply thought that if Mr. Thewliss caught one fish, he would want to catch more."

Derek Crayle agreed.

"And from a very regrettable allusion which he made to our wise Sabbatarian restrictions, I gather that you were right."

"Quite right," said Mark.

"Proceed, Angela," said Derek Crayle, and Angela broke out in a bubble of wrath.

"Oh, go and put your head in a bag. I hate pedants. I shall talk to my father," and she turned her back on Derek Crayle. "I thought that if Mr. Thewliss once found out that fishing was good fun, he might buy Upper Theign."

There was a moment of silence. Then:

"By Gad!" said Tony Westram. "Well, why not?"

"The idea, certainly," Crayle observed, "is more profound than one would associate with the immaturity of Angela's shoulders."

Angela flung round towards her tormentor, battle in her eyes, storm upon her brow. But Mark intervened.

"Might I inquire what Upper Theign is?" he asked meekly.

"It's a house," Tony explained, "with five hundred acres of land. It marches with Gissens and—this is what Angela's after—it has half a mile of river next to my water— —"

"Yes!" Angela interposed, leaning eagerly across the table. "Don't you see, Mr. Thewliss, we could fish your water and you could fish ours. The house is for sale and the estate just as it stands, furniture, livestock, farm, tools, everything. If you don't buy it, it'll go up for auction, and heaven knows whom we shall get as a neighbour."

"You might get a better one than me," said Mark, and Derek Crayle tittered sardonically.

"He didn't want any teaching to fish," he declared, and Angela, with a gesture of her arm, swept him out of existence.

"Please pay no attention whatever to that rude little boy, Mr. Thewliss," she said. "I have been considering you very carefully from every angle. We shall be delighted to have you as a neighbour. I am seldom wrong in my judgments, and I hope you will let me show you the house to-morrow afternoon."

So, after all, Mark Thewliss did see the neighbourhood in a wagonette with the ladies. They came to Upper Theign at four in the afternoon, Tony Westram, Derek Crayle, Olivia Stanton, Angela and Mark Thewliss. It was the twin of Gissens, a spacious house of oblong rooms and big windows, wide lawns and old trees, rose gardens and fruit gardens, tennis courts and paddocks and the river running clear and brown between low, green banks. Mark walked from room to room, was shown the great kitchen and the modern bath-rooms. He was conscious of an odd exaltation.

"All this can be mine," he said to himself. "Here it is, a house one might invent in a dream. I have only to put my name to a piece of paper and it's mine."

"You do like it, don't you?" Angela asked earnestly.

Thewliss was standing at one of the windows of the great drawing-room, looking back over his years to his small beginning. He had foreseen a big house in the country; but he had only vaguely visualised it, and he recognised now with shame that so far as it had taken shape and colour in

his thoughts it had all the appearance of an enormous red-brick villa with bay windows, a tower and a huddle of tiled roof.

"What's wonderful to me," he said in a voice which betrayed to his friends that he was surprisingly moved, "is that it's all made—all complete and settled and rich with the care and thought of half a dozen generations, and now for good and all made. I don't suppose that means so much to you. But I have spent my life with things making."

Tony Westram glanced at his guest and said with an unusual shrewdness:

"And yet that has been just your advantage too. You came into notice all made. Nobody had seen you grow. The first we heard of you—there you were established, with a fortune at your back, in the House of Commons, making a speech and a damned good speech too. People had to sit up and ask questions. They became curious. They asked: 'Why have I never heard of that fellow before?' To jump at once from the dark, already complete and made! It gives you romance, what?" and he laughed with friendliness, and clapped Thewliss on the shoulder.

But it was not only the little touch of mystery which had given to Mark this most inappropriate aura of romance. The thirteen years of untiring endeavour, perhaps, too, the delicacy of the experiments he was engaged upon, had given to his aspect something more than authority. They seemed in some subtle way to have refined his features to the point of remodelling them. There had been a look of commonness before; now there was a look of the thoroughbred. The hard thirteen years had done the work of the fairy godmother. They had waved a wand and the herd stood forth freed from his clay, vibrant, sensitive, the artist as he is fondly imagined by such as have never seen one.

"It wasn't astonishing that no one of you had ever heard of me," he replied to Tony. "I lived amongst a set of City people who believe that public affairs are for some vague governing class and should be left to that class. There are many more of them left over from the mid-Victorian days than you would imagine, families living stiffly and ceremoniously in big houses in select suburbs, entertaining each other from time to time with great preparations and formalities, occasionally visiting a theatre, occasionally taking stalls for the Opera, people in buckram. . . . I think I'll have to buy Upper Theign."

Angela clapped her hands.

"That's to-day's good deed."

"I said 'I think.'"

"I am sure, Mr. Thewliss, you are one of those rare men with whom to think is to do," said Angela solemnly. "Let us now go and look at your river!"

She led her father and Derek Crayle out of the room, but Mark's attention had been seized by the curtain at the window.

"That's pretty badly gone," he said.

It was a brown curtain of brocaded silk, but the brown had faded and unevenly.

"These windows get all the afternoon sun," Olivia explained. "It's bound to wither and bleach the curtains. You can't help it."

Thewliss frowned and shook his head.

"We have got to help it," he answered stubbornly. "That's one of the problems. But it's a teaser. Some dyes are faster on wool than on cotton, and on both than on silk, so you'll want three processes. A good many of the azo dyes can be made sunproof with a chrome treatment, but then the shade is changed. The same is true of my own synthetic indigo. It's quite fast if you steam the stuffs after you have dyed them, but then the bloom becomes just a trifle too violet."

Mark seemed to have lost sight of Olivia Stanton except as an audience. He ran his long fingers up and down the curtain, caressing the fabric with a curiously delicate touch.

"It was a handsome curtain too. A bath of copper sulphate might have preserved the colour more or less. But it's always more or less, and the method's always different. That's what exasperates me." He dropped the curtain and turned swiftly to Olivia with an eager look upon his face, demanding her sympathy.

"I have been working out the answer for years. One method for all the dyes, acid, basic, mordant, salt dyes, vat dyes and the rest of them, and for all the dyed materials from cotton to leather and wood. Just one process and foolproof—perfectly sure and certain! One universal formula! It would be splendid, wouldn't it?"

The blood mounted into Olivia's face as she looked at him, so earnestly his tense attitude, every fibre of him, asked for the help of her belief that he would succeed. Nevertheless, she was greatly puzzled. It seemed to her not very important in the history of the world that window-curtains should no

longer fade in the sunlight. There was wealth, no doubt, and very likely enormous wealth to be plucked from the discovery of the process which would make them fadeless. But she could not count the ambition to make that discovery a great ambition, as Mark did, as undoubtedly Mark did. She could not understand the enthusiasm which shone from him and suddenly made a boy of him.

Yet he was so clamorous for her approval—"After all, I mean nothing," she said to herself—that she felt grateful, and was in the mood to make, if she could, a discovery herself. A discovery that somehow, in some way it was a great ambition, worth, for instance, the sacrifice of an Under-Secretaryship of State and the possible collapse of a promising political career.

"No doubt it would be a wonderful thing," she said, trying to mean her words. "I am sure, too, that you will make the discovery."

"I must! I have got to," cried Mark, in much the same tense, abrupt tone which he had used when he was playing his half-a-pound weight trout; and for the life of her she could not but think that both achievements were on a par, and the cry of real longing as little justified in the one case as in the other.

But Mark, though he was quite unconscious of the doubts of him which disquieted her, did now go far to dispel them.

"You see, colours mean such a tremendous lot to the world, don't they?" he explained eagerly. "People never reckon up the terrific contribution they make to good order. They look upon them merely as decorations. But they mean hope and good-humour and gaiety. They bring the Spring with them. Put them within the reach of poor people—less drink, less crime, less brooding, less gloom. And not only in this country. All over the world. You see, once I got my universal formula, colour would be ever so much cheaper everywhere"—and since he could never keep far away from this one aspect of his case—"from the bazaars of Fez and Damascus and Delhi right across the East to the outer edge of Asia. And here's another thing, Lady Olivia, or rather, it's all that I have said gathered up into one sentence. Bright colours don't go with sharp swords. Colour's a peacemaker. When soldiers go to war, they change their scarlet for khaki! That's an allegory," he broke off suddenly. "But I oughtn't to have bored you with my theories. You must forgive me."

"On the other hand, I thank you," said Olivia Stanton with a smile. She did not tell him that she was glad that her misgivings had been dispersed;

nor that she was a little moved by his frank exhibition of how deeply he was moved himself by his as yet unfulfilled ambition. She preferred to end the conversation with a platitude. "A woman is always flattered when a man confides to her his secrets."

Mark Thewliss drove away the next morning at half-past nine. Tony Westram waved a hand to him from the door and Angela, standing outside with the sun shining upon her hair, cried:

"Don't forget Upper Theign!"

And Mark did not forget it as he travelled through the lovely country in the freshness of the summer day. He thought of it as a seat of just the right degree of importance; as a place of peace and rest; as a delight to the eye, with its wide green lawns and coloured gardens; but, above all, as a house peopled. Peopled by young and joyous persons—a daughter, say, like Angela, and her friends. . . . A wife, too, of course. But, above all, by a daughter, all a-bubble with the beauty of her youth, a pattern of grace, tall, slender.

"I am forty-five," he reflected, and the reflection shocked him. He had always meant to have a home. Yes, right back in far off, almost fabulous, days the aspect of a little cabin with its white napery laid daintily for a meal under the soft light of the candles, had set that longing astir in him. But under the stress of the fourteen years between now and then, he had forgotten it. The years had brought their triumphs to be sure, but they seemed somehow smaller than he had thought them . . . there had been too little grace in his life. Well, he had still the time to repair that omission.

What should he call that daughter of his to be? Phyllis? . . . Sylvia? . . . Angela? . . . No, that wouldn't do, since Angela was to be his neighbour. Besides, his wife, yes of course there would be his wife. . . . She would want a word in that momentous decision. Sylvia, perhaps . . .

The car was entering Reading. Mark stopped it at a newsagent's shop and bought a copy of the day's *Times*. A study of the business columns of that journal would be a more decorous occupation for a Member of Parliament and the active partner of Mardyke and Campion than blowing bubbles out of day-dreams, even on a morning of young June. Yet he never read a word of the columns.

Forty-five . . . Forty-five . . . Forty-five . . . If he married to-morrow he would still be sixty-three before the daughter-to-be reached Angela's age . . . Forty-five . . . Forty-five . . . And he couldn't marry to-morrow. There were

preliminaries to marriage, such as selection and a certain amount of courtship . . . Forty-five . . . Forty-five.

There was a funny story about belated attempts to marry. . . . What were the words. "Every year you become more particular and less desirable." Yet not such a very funny story after all. There was a sharper tang to it than Mark Thewliss cared for. . . . And then fear smote him. Suppose that no woman wanted him now! . . .

"But that's ridiculous," he declared. "Besides——"

Yes, there had been a moment on Saturday, at the luncheon table—an encouraging moment. He had been looking at Olivia Stanton. She had understood his refusal of office, was with him in that refusal, had nodded to him her sympathy. And he had suddenly glanced at Angela who was at her side, had embraced them both, the girl and the young woman in the one look. "Just such a wife! Just such a daughter," he had said to himself, and he had seen the colour rise into Olivia's face and her eyes fall from his.

"She understood," he reflected, "and she wasn't angry. In the afternoon of the next day, at Upper Theign, she was interested, sympathetic. Perhaps . . . in a little time . . . why not?" he asked himself.

True, there was the lover killed in the Boer War. But he was forty-five. Though the hot raptures of youth were for neither of them, there was much each could give to the other.

"She is poor. She would be mistress of her own home, freed from all the embarrassments which attend upon a meagre income, safe. And I? I want my daughter."

The second of the two rules which guided his life wrote itself out in front of him. "Want what you want." And he had never, so far as he could remember, wanted anything so desperately as the fulfilment of the need which his visit had awakened in him. A house noisy with young laughter, a house with a daughter—and a wife too—yes, of course, a wife too!

After all, such things were the corollary of his ambition. Power, the sensation of power, could never be quite complete to the solitary man. He must see the evidences of it about him. Assuring himself thus that this unaccustomed yearning was all according to plan, he yielded to the luxury of it. He dreamed of some starry-eyed, splendid girl with delightful peremptory ways, a sort of protective regard for her unfortunate elders, and a joyous tenderness, whose name might be Phyllis or Sylvia or whatever you liked, so long as she was there, making a house into a home such as he had

never had. And once again the little cabin of the *Sea Flower*, with its candles shining through their globes and its table spread with a fine white cloth set in the loneliness of the sea, passed before his eyes.

The motor-car came to a halt in the traffic. Looking out of the window Mark realised that he was already in High Holborn. Upon an impulse he took the speaking-tube from its rest and spoke to his chauffeur.

"I want to go to my solicitors."

He added the address and the car in a little while turned into Ely Place.

CHAPTER XI MARK VISITS HIS LAWYER

Two steps led from the pavement into a narrow panelled hall. Doors upon either side only shut to open. A staircase in front was a Jacob's ladder encumbered with the angels of the law. It was the rush-hour in the great legal factory of Messrs. Hawker, Hawker & Lyndhurst.

A clerk recognised Mark Thewliss.

"Is Sir William expecting you, sir?"

Mark shook his head.

"I have hardly given myself five minutes' warning of my visit."

Mark, however, was a client of value, and within a quarter of an hour found himself in the comfortable room occupied by the head of the firm.

Sir William, a spare, middle-aged man with a pair of very sharp eyes twinkling behind spectacles, pulled forward an arm-chair.

"What can I do for you?"

"Two things. First I want to buy Upper Theign. It's a house and an estate in Berkshire, for sale just as it stands. Will you please negotiate for it?"

Sir William took down upon a block such particulars as Mark could give him.

"I'll put it in hand at once," he said. "Now for the second affair——"

"Yes."

Mark, however, found it a little difficult to approach that second affair. He twisted in his chair.

"Yes," he said, and again "Yes."

Sir William offered him a cigarette, which he lit absently and allowed to go out. Such agitations were the daily food of Hawker, Hawker & Lyndhurst. Sir William waited patiently.

"You are no doubt accustomed to make discreet inquiries," Thewliss asked at last.

"Discretion is our long suit, Mr. Thewliss."

“The information I want might be difficult to obtain. The affair is altogether delicate. My last data are fourteen years old.”

Sir William smiled cheerfully.

“I thought for a moment that you were going to give me something really difficult to do. Tell me all about it.”

Sir William had the soothing manner of a fashionable physician. Nothing could seriously go wrong with you once you had handed yourself over to Hawker, Hawker & Lyndhurst. Mark Thewliss was encouraged.

“It’s about a woman,” he blurted out.

“It usually is,” said Sir William.

“I haven’t seen her for fourteen years.”

“That, too, I gathered.”

Sir William’s estimate of his fellow-men was not very high. Women who looked like angels behaved like sluts, and hard-headed men were no better than fools. He looked at Mark and correctly appraised his age. When he was thirty-one Mark had run up his little bill at Cupid & Co., and no doubt it was now being presented with a considerable addition for compound interest.

“And the lady’s charms being now upon the wane, she is relying for support upon blackmail,” he said easily; and he had hardly come to the end of his cynicism before he realised that he had made as ugly a blunder as a shrewd lawyer could make.

For Mark was really shocked.

“Oh no!” he cried, “I am not asking you to dig up a woman’s history and find something which will keep her mouth closed. In this case there is nothing you could find.”

The girl with the big dark eyes and the copper-coloured hair who, during one month of suspense and anxiety, had given him all she had to give and had asked for nothing in return, was vividly invoked by the lawyer’s sneer.

“I have never even heard from her during these years. But I want to make sure that the world has gone well with her, and if it hasn’t, to know that it hasn’t, so that I may do what I can to put things right.”

Sir William glanced at his client curiously, and Mark flushed under the glance.

"You mustn't think that I am a sentimentalist, because I'm not," he exclaimed hotly.

"I should require a deal more evidence before I brought you into the dock on that charge," Hawker answered dryly. "After all, let us not forget that I have already transacted business for you."

Mark Thewliss was mollified. It was true, to be sure, that he had acted upon an impulse when he ordered his chauffeur to drive to Ely Place instead of to Brooke's Market. But sentimentality had nothing to do with it. Sentimental impulses have a way of dying the moment after they are acted upon. But Mark was conscious that were he driving along Oxford Street again, he would nevertheless be sitting again in this office in a few minutes' time. For he was quite clear in his mind as to whence the impulse had sprung and why it had mastered him.

The life at Gissens was the cause—its friendliness and good-humour and freedom from anything common or mean. A man pushing ruthlessly through the world had stopped in front of a mirror, and had seen himself for the first time and was surprised to discover that there were points in his appearance which he disliked.

"I did a mean and graceless thing," he confessed to himself, "when I left Mona Lightfoot at Southampton and never bothered my head so much as to send her a post card afterwards. What would those people say—Angela, Olivia Stanton, Tony Westram, yes, and Derek Crayle too—if they knew? Hairy-heeled, eh?"

Mark winced in the lawyer's room as he saw the horrible words framed contemptuously by those four pairs of lips. Upper Theign would never have been mentioned to him. Much less would he have been pressed to buy it. He had a conviction that he could never meet any of that family again on equal terms until he had repaid so far as he could repay. He had even a feeling that he would have no ease in any marriage unless he knew that Mona Lightfoot was in no straits or distress.

"I have imagined myself as a man of magnificence," he reflected, taking himself to task. "But magnificent men make sure that those who have helped them shall not know misery."

He saw Mona Lightfoot kicking her long legs over the cockpit and plying him for recitations according to Henry Irving. He showed her the great stone ball on Durlstone Head; he swung seawards from the little lighthouse with the chocolate band whilst she watched the bubbles on the oily slabs of Portland Race; he picnicked with her again on the top of King

Charles' bomb-proof fort at the edge of an outer island of the Scillies. But whatever picture rose before his mind, was painted in the colours of reproach.

He gave Sir William the particulars.

Mona Lightfoot—clerk and stenographer at Mardyke and Campion's just fifteen years ago—the staff reduced in the late autumn because Mardyke had no courage—Mona Lightfoot's efficiency secured her other employment at once.

"In London?" asked Sir William.

"No. In Liverpool."

"Her age at that date?"

"Twenty-three."

"Who employed her at Liverpool?"

"I don't know."

Sir William lifted his shoulders.

"Mona Lightfoot may be dead or married, and Liverpool isn't a village. She may have left Liverpool. She may be in the United States or anywhere. The problem isn't after all so easy of solution as I thought," said Sir William. "For such inquiries we generally go to the specialists."

"Meaning——?" Mark Thewliss asked.

"A good firm of inquiry agents."

Mark received the suggestion with such evident distaste that Sir William hastened to elaborate it.

"The firm I had in mind was Dickson's. They have done a good deal of work for us, and I think I can say always with success."

"A great deal of discretion would be required," Mark Thewliss objected.

A brave submission to inevitable things had been the fine and lovable mark of Mona Lightfoot—a noble humility. But there had been pride in that humility. He had never written once to her, and therefore she had never written once to him. It would be very difficult, after these long years of silence, to persuade her into the acceptance of the smallest quittance. He owed a debt. Yes! But what if the creditor refused to acknowledge that a debt was owed? He would have to walk very daintily.

"The condition of the search is secrecy—absolute secrecy," Mark insisted. "If you find Mona Lightfoot, Mona Lightfoot mustn't know that she has been found, mustn't know that anyone has been searching for her, above all that I have been searching for her. Is that clear?"

"Quite," said Sir William.

"Very well, then! Let Dickson's put their very best man on to this inquiry. If he's clumsy he spoils everything. Then when he has found out the facts—where she is, whether life is kindly to her—then, without one suspicion occurring to her, let him come back to me!"

He rose from his chair and picked up his hat and his stick.

"I'll send for the head of Dickson's to come and see me this afternoon," said Sir William, as he shook hands with his client. He was thinking: "What queer birds men are when you get to know them!"

* * * * *

During the next seven weeks Mark had little leisure for either reproaches or speculations upon the outcome of his search. For the second time he was enlarging the firm's laboratories at the back of Brooke's Market. He sat in his place in the House of Commons; he conducted his business; he stayed again with Tony Westram and strengthened his friendship with that pleasant family; and he completed the purchase of Upper Theign, drawing a cheque for forty-seven thousand pounds in the office of Sir William Hawker on an afternoon at the end of July.

Three days later Sir William rang him up on the telephone.

"Dickson's man has returned," he said. "He has the information you want. His name's Joseph Wyatt. When shall I send him to you?"

"This evening at nine-thirty. I shall be at Grosvenor Street," replied Mark; and for the rest of that day he paid very little attention to his business.

CHAPTER XII MR. WYATT APPEARS

Thewliss suffered a little shock when Mr. Joseph Wyatt was introduced into his library. He expected someone with the stamp of his vocation, a being saturnine and hawklike with the tread of a cat. He saw instead a squat, squarish man with a heavy red moustache, commonplace and vulgarian to the broad toes of his boots.

"It is you whom Dickson's sent on this rather delicate errand!" Mark cried.

Mr. Joseph Wyatt was at all events quick enough to recognise an accent of discontent.

"It was I, Mr. Thewliss," he replied. "I have the advantage of looking like a very ordinary commercial traveller. Nobody ever turns round to wonder who I am."

Mark was relieved by the rebuke. Mr. Wyatt, it seemed, was not such a dunce as he appeared to be.

"Besides, you have the information, I understand," Mark continued. "Won't you sit down and give it to me?"

Mr. Wyatt sat down, put his hat on the floor and drew from his pocket a paper written over in a shorthand of his own.

"The investigation has occupied a long time, Mr. Thewliss," he began by way of a preface. "But Liverpool is a city of a million people and I had no starting-point provided for me. It was a matter of routine. I made inquiries of the police, the employment agencies, the registers of churches and chapels, the newspaper files, the various political lists of convassers and helpers, and what I may call the social album. Everywhere I drew a blank. There remained the laundries."

"Ingenious," said Mark Thewliss.

"Excuse me," Mr. Wyatt answered. "Laundries are of the routine of my profession. But searching amongst them for a name which may or may not have been borne upon the books fourteen years ago is a slow process, especially for a man who has no authority behind him and must be careful to provoke as little curiosity as possible."

Mark nodded his head.

"What excuse did you use?"

"A possible inheritance."

"Wouldn't that be likely to reach the ears of the person concerned?"

"I think not, Mr. Thewliss. I urged that hopes should not be raised prematurely. I understand that not a word has been breathed."

"Good!" said Mark Thewliss.

Mr. Wyatt cast his eyes upon his paper, and translated.

"Mona Lightfoot married her employer, Henry Perriton, an accountant, on the 26th of November, 1895, at St. Mark's Church, New Brighton."

"Eighteen ninety-five?" Thewliss exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure?"

"I myself saw the entry in the parish register."

A wry sort of smile twisted Mark's lips. Ninety-five was the year in which Mona Lightfoot had gone cruising on the *Sea Flower*. It had not taken her long to forget that intimate month. He had said good-bye to her at Southampton and she had just skipped back to Liverpool and in eight weeks she was married. The knowledge was a sharp little stab to his pride. No wonder that he winced and grimaced for a second or two. It seemed that he was not wanted to play the part of Father Christmas.

"Mr. Perriton is in easy circumstances, I suppose?" he said.

Mr. Wyatt shrugged his shoulders.

"So, so. He's in a small way of business. A little pinched, I should think."

Mark sat forward in his chair. The little throb of resentment was felt by him no more. Pinched was a horrible word. He remembered his beautiful toy, the *Sea Flower*, and how Mona Lightfoot had adored it, and how for a month her lovely face and young supple body had graced it. And now as she grew to middle-age she was pinched.

"Where do the Perritons live?" he asked.

"At Glebe Villa, Acacia Grove."

Mark almost shuddered. Such an address! Genteel poverty was expressed in every syllable of it. He saw Mona Lightfoot clapping her hands together half-way across the West Bay and crying: "I have never been out of sight of land before," in an ecstasy of delight.

Had she ever been out of sight of it since? She had had a sort of prescience, too, that the glowing wonders of that summer voyage were never to be repeated in her lifetime; so thoughtfully had she stored up each detail in the lavender of her memories. And now—Glebe Villa, Acacia Grove, with perhaps a week at Southport in August, if some little windfall of business had come in Mr. Perriton's way!

"They have lived there since their marriage?" Mark asked discontentedly.

The name of the house and the street worried him ridiculously. Dreary respectability, comfortless decorum, clothes which were threadbare—he found connotations for them by the dozen.

"Oh no, sir," Mr. Wyatt replied. "For the first ten years Mr. and Mrs. Perriton lived a few miles out of the city in the direction of Hoylake. Four years ago, however, they moved nearer in to Glebe Villa."

"Nearer to Perriton's work?"

"No, sir. Nearer to a High School," said Mr. Wyatt; and Mark sat staring at his visitor and very still.

"What's that?" he asked at length in a curiously toneless and quiet voice.

"Nearer to a High School, sir," Mr. Wyatt repeated, raising his voice a little. He was under the impression that his explanation had not been heard.

"Why?" Thewliss asked.

"The Perritons have a daughter. She was born in the year after their marriage. She's growing up now. She goes to school."

The news was a shock to Mark Thewliss. He felt suddenly very small. Whilst he had been playing with the idea of a daughter, Mona Lightfoot had got one. All his grandeur oozed out of him. He was the wastrel who fritters away the day planning and dreaming about the great poem he is going to write, whilst some other fellow in a garret is writing it. The girl was growing up too. She would be soon at the adorable age—Angela's age. Mona had outdistanced him by years, and since he had only one life he could never catch her up.

"A daughter!" he murmured in a wondering voice, as though a miracle had been revealed to him instead of a perfectly simple, likely, and natural process of nature. "What's her name?"

"Lois," said Mr. Wyatt.

"Fanciful!" Mark Thewliss exclaimed petulantly. He had never thought of "Lois" as a name. Phyllises and Sylvias, yes, but not Loises. And it was an attractive name too. The more attractive it looked and sounded, the more he was at that moment inclined to resent it. Then he laughed at himself. He had that wholesome gift.

"After all, why shouldn't they call their daughter Lois, if they like the name?" he inquired. "Does she match it? Is she pretty?"

"Takes after the mother, Mr. Thewliss."

"Then she is."

Mr. Wyatt pulled at his dragoon's moustache and reflected deeply.

"I am not much of a judge of female beauty, sir. I take to the ruddy and plump myself. But I understand that Miss Lois is considered in Acacia Grove rather a crasher. Same big dark eyes and coppery hair as her mother. Tall and slim too, and distant like an aristocrat. Yes, sir, that's the general view, a crasher. Not what I should call homey, but a crasher."

Mark laughed cordially. He had got used to the knowledge that Mona had outdistanced him. And since she had a daughter, he was delighted that she should be a crasher.

"I must look after them a bit," he said to himself. "I must see if I can't put some work in Perriton's way." And the thought that he might protect from afar the fortunes of that small family in Liverpool quite restored his heart.

"They are all happy together?" he asked.

"I should say so," Mr. Wyatt returned. "You will remember, of course, that your instructions were very precise, Mr. Thewliss. It was essential that the Perritons should never have a suspicion that any inquiry about them was being made. My investigations, therefore, into so delicate a matter as the domestic relationship of the parties were circumscribed."

"Yes, I understand that," Thewliss agreed.

"So I never came into actual contact with the Perritons. But from all the indications I could gather, there's nothing amiss at all. Mr. Perriton comes

home regularly to Glebe Villa when his work is done, Mrs. Perriton runs the house as well as their straitened means allow, and if there is any need, gives at times some help in the office. There is one general servant who has been with them for a long while, and so far as I could discover she tells no stories of squabbles and rows. There's really no gossip about them at all. They make up just the ordinary unnoticeable household of people who are a little ——" and Mark Thewliss intervened in a hurry.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he said rising from his chair. He had no wish to hear that grim word "pinched" applied again to his joyous companion of the *Sea Flower*. "Now I want you to keep me discreetly in touch with that family. I want you to go up to Liverpool once every three months, see how things are going, without of course in any way revealing your mission, and report to me on your return. Can you do that for me?"

"Quite," said Mr. Wyatt.

Mark Thewliss held out his hand.

"And for what you have done, I am very grateful," Thewliss continued. "I shall tell Messrs. Hawker, Hawker, and Lyndhurst that I am more than satisfied."

"I thank you, sir," said Mr. Wyatt, and he picked up his hat. "I am glad to have been of service, but the work really only needed care. It was routine."

It was unfortunate that Mark Thewliss did not pay a little more attention to the limitations of routine. Routine was at once Mr. Wyatt's strength and his weakness. Indefatigable in the tracing of facts, he failed in his estimate of people. Mark, impressed by his painstaking research, was misled into accepting comfortably his judgment of the Perriton household. He could no doubt put some work in Henry Perriton's way, and that apparently was all that was needed. Upper Theign, marriage, a daughter—his way was clear in front of him and unclouded with reproach. He went to bed that night with a light heart.

CHAPTER XIII THE PERRITON HOUSEHOLD

Eighteen months later a noticeable event occurred one morning at Glebe Villa. Mr. Henry Perriton at the breakfast table lifted his head above the edge of his newspaper and addressed his wife. As a rule the meal was eaten in a grim silence, Mr. Perriton at one end of the table bending forward over his plate to read the news, Mona at the other behind the coffee pot, Lois in the middle between them and animosity brooding overhead like a thundercloud. But to-day Henry Perriton showed his face and spoke.

It was not an engaging face. The sandy hair, which had always been thin, had for the most part gone with the snows of yesteryear. Only a few sedulously cultivated wisps were drawn up from a very low side parting just above the left ear and plastered down across the scalp. The pale eyes were watery and their dog-like wistfulness of fourteen years ago had vanished with his locks. Mr. Joseph Wyatt would certainly have described his features as pinched except for the nose which, to keep in a conformity with the watering eyes, had grown a little bulbous and in hue inclined to the purple. It was on the whole rather an unpleasant insignificance than a face. Nor were his words and intonation any more agreeable.

"So he has got off at last," he said with a sneer. "With a fine lady too! Well, well, see what money can do! Give Mr. Long-in-the-tooth a million, and, bless my soul, we'ld all swear he hadn't cut his grinders yet. What's a crow's-foot in you and me, my dear, is just character in a millionaire. Such an affair as it was. Pages and bridesmaids all polished up to their toe-tips and a real live balloon-sleeved Bishop—none of your synthetic suffragans—to give the right apostolic touch to the show. You must read the account of it, my dear. Very glowing and sycophantic. But you mustn't forget your housework, will you? There's the neck of mutton to be heated up for dinner and the dirty linen to be listed."

Mona never replied. To Lois the acquiescence of her adored mother was always a quite unintelligible fact. She wanted Mona to be up and doing even in advance of provocation, returning thrust for thrust until her little wizened father was pinned to the wall, his limbs jerking helplessly like a marionette's. But Lois never enjoyed that engaging spectacle. Her mother submitted . . . and submitted . . . and submitted.

This morning perhaps? Lois looked at her mother hopefully. For just for a moment husband and wife confronted one another—frankly enemies. Lois saw the blood begin to rise, creeping upwards from the throat over her mother's fine worn face, until it stained her forehead. Now at last the fur would fly; there would be plain speaking and a battle royal, and her father would come out of the fray thoroughly limp and quite cured of his pedantic sarcasms. But these desirable events did not happen. Mona, for the thousandth time, submitted. But none the less there was a change in that room. The dull brooding thundercloud became active. Lois was aware of wave upon wave of repugnance and actual detestation passing from each end of the table and clashing in mid-air, just where she herself sat; but not above her head. Each wave caught her into the swirl, tossed her, buffeted her, drowned her, until she sat dizzy with her wits all scattered. Her mother brought her back to her senses with a warning look at the clock upon the mantelshelf.

"Lois darling, if you don't hurry you'll be late for school."

Mr. Perriton, having broken through his habit of silence, now turned his sarcasms upon Lois.

"Yes, that would never do," he said. "If my daughter couldn't pass her examinations in Hindustani and the higher trigonometry at the end of the term, the family would be disgraced and all the money I have paid in school-fees wasted."

Lois rose quickly from her chair. Perriton, when he took any notice of her at all, used a form of raillery hateful above all to children and soldiers, which consists of a mocking tone and long words; and she detested her father accordingly. Her mother followed her into the hall, and found her red in the face with rage and her eyes full of tears.

"You mustn't mind, Lois. Your father is in one of his moods," said Mona consolingly.

"He's in his only mood," cried Lois, stamping her foot. "I hate him! I hate him."

"Lois, that's very wicked," said her mother.

"I know. I am wicked." Indeed she was fairly certain at this time that she was a lost soul. For on a Sunday two years before she had been greatly impressed by a verse in the Second Lesson from the fifth chapter of St. Matthew. And being baited by her father on her return home at the Sunday dinner, she had, with a quite fearful audacity, said to him under her breath,

"Raca," and having said it again was driven on by a sort of pride in her inconceivable wickedness to say it again, "Raca!" Now, to say that to your brother put you in danger of the council, whatever dreadful torment that meant. But for the little girl who said it twice on a Sunday, too, to her father, there couldn't be much hope. But she wouldn't take it back. Her father had driven her to it. And when after they were all dead and he saw her in danger of the council, he might be sorry for what he had done. Oh, yes, she was wicked. "How could I help being wicked, with a father who drinks himself muzzy every night?"

Her mother was horrified.

"Hush!" she said sternly. "How dare you say a thing like that!"

"It's true, Mummy," Lois insisted stubbornly; and indeed it was the truth. It was the explanation of the fact which had given to Mr. Wyatt so favourable an impression of the domesticity of the Perriton household. Henry Perriton came straight home from his office after the day's work was done. Yes, no doubt that he did. He even hurried home. But it was the bottle which drew him. He drank silently, sullenly, by himself, a creature of disappointment, convinced that the world was in a conspiracy to ignore his merits.

It was true that within the last two years more work had come his way than ever before. But even that was now an offence to him. His habits were formed. The work came too late, and a good deal of it he actually declined. He preferred to grumble over the wrongs the world had done to him. That was a good deal more tempting than buckling to and throwing them off.

Lois took up her attaché case—the attaché case was just at this time beginning to supersede the satchel amongst all self-respecting schoolgirls—and went off to her class. She was puzzled by her father's outburst at the breakfast table, and wondered what a fashionable wedding in London could have to do with her beloved mother.

"But that mystery can wait till I get home," she told herself firmly.

For she, too, had her own carefully-guarded secret. From her love for her mother there had sprung a fine and courageous plan, and for nothing in the world would she have missed ten minutes of her schooling.

Whilst she then toiled at her lessons, later on that morning after the orders were given and the household work done, Mona Perriton read word by word in the newspaper an account of the marriage at St. Margaret's, Westminster, of Mark Thewliss, Esq., of Grosvenor Street and Upper Theign

in the County of Berkshire, Member of Parliament for the Amworth Division, to the Lady Olivia Stanton, daughter of the late Earl of Porlock. The account was written by a lady and glowed with enthusiasm. For though Porlock and his gee-gees had eaten up the Porlock estates, there were branches of the family of wealth and high importance, and these had dutifully rallied now that the foolishly obstinate Olivia had forgotten her dead soldier and consented to marry a millionaire.

The affair was altogether very dashing and brilliant. The Duchess of Gryborough lent her mansion in Berkeley Square for the reception; Laura Viscountess Harmere provided the trousseau; one of the Royal Blood was present in the Church; a Bishop joined the happy pair, and after the ceremony all London flocked to Berkeley Square, from the Prime Minister to the actor of the moment. The dresses were described with the requisite wealth of technicalities, the bride in ivory satin and priceless lace which had come over with William of Orange, the bridesmaids in pale gold chiffon with amber shoes, and two little pages in white velvet court suits carried the bridal train. Scotland Yard watched over the presents, and at the close of the resounding event, the bride and bridegroom left in a Rolls-Royce car to join Mr. Thewliss' auxiliary topsail schooner which was waiting for them in Southampton Water.

"Well, he can sail past the Dean's Elbow this time, and no wedding-ring need be dropped into the water," she said to herself, but without any bitterness, rather indeed with a tender little smile for that foolish wondrous month west of where England began. She had gambled with her eyes open and she had lost. She had no reproaches to make.

"This is the end," she said, looking again at the account of the marriage. Had she nursed a hope unacknowledged to herself during all these years, that at some time, somehow, a miracle would transform her world? That the enormous distance between Glebe Villa, Acacia Grove, and Upper Theign in the County of Berkshire could be bridged? Or had she some quite other and deeper thought hidden away at the back of her mind, some purpose held in reserve against a final hammer-stroke of misery?

"This is the end," she repeated. "This is really the end." Yet at that moment, on the opposite side of the street, an unnoticeable man with a dragoon's moustache was strolling past her windows, and Lois was hurrying home from her school so that she might read the account of that wedding which had set the blood flaming in her mother's face.

Mr. Perriton took his luncheon in a café near to his office, so that this one hour of the day at Glebe Villa was a treasure to both mother and daughter. It was an hour of confidences and gaiety and refreshment; and both prepared for it with a pretty foppery as though for some long-anticipated festival. No slovenliness must mar it. If a new ribbon had been bought, it was at this hour it would make its first appearance. Thus Lois hurrying home some ten minutes before her usual time, had the dining-room to herself whilst her mother was in her room upstairs.

"Mark Thewliss," she said to herself in perplexity. She had no doubt that this was the man who had got off at last because he was a millionaire. For one thing he had married a fine lady, the Lady Olivia Stanton. For another, a Bishop had tied the knot, and no Bishop had tied any other knot on that particular day. But . . . Mark Thewliss? Lois had never heard of him. She was still a child. She imagined a romance. But she could not bring it into any reasonable relationship with fact.

That her father and Mark Thewliss had both been suitors for her lovely mother's hand—yes, that was all that was intelligible. But that her father had won! No! Strange couples, no doubt, she admitted in her youthful wisdom, did pass through the gateway of roses into that unknown wilderness which was married life. Her mother was a living proof of it. But that Henry Perriton had actually triumphed over a rival, like an armoured knight in the lists—no, reason refused the contention.

For once in a way there was a restraint upon both mother and daughter, and the meal went to a sigh instead of to a laugh.

CHAPTER XIV LOIS GROWS UP

Lois finished her schooling soon after her sixteenth birthday and at the end of the summer term. She saw that morning dawn with delight, for she had tossed during the last six months in a fever of impatience to begin upon the purpose which she had nursed in secrecy. She used the very first day of her freedom in its furtherance. For at eleven o'clock she set out from Glebe Villa and walked to her father's office at the back of the big square in the middle of the city.

It was not an easy walk for her, however, for her knees shook a little, and every now and then she drew in a breath with a great lift of the heart; and what had seemed in Acacia Grove a sensible request swelled into an enormity as she reached the busy thoroughfares. Not that the stress and apprehension were visible to any stranger. Those who turned to watch her as she passed saw only a tall slim girl, with an eager, lovely face, the radiance of whose youth awakened some tiny sense of pain that it must pass so soon, some moment of wonder what the world had in store for her. But the anxiety was there, troubling her so deeply that the sequence and the words of the little dutiful speeches she had rehearsed began to seem ridiculous, and as ineffective as copybook rhetoric.

She climbed to the second floor and entered the small outer office in which Mona had worked when she had taken employment with Henry Perriton. Another stenographer now sat in Mona's place. But that was the only change. The same cheap and scanty office furniture stood against dingy walls on the same worn drugget, and there was the same lack of busy clients.

"Can I see my father?" Lois asked.

"I'll see."

The stenographer went into the inner room and came out again.

"Will you go in, please, Miss Perriton?"

Lois, with her heart beating violently against her ribs, stepped into the small room and closed the door. Henry Perriton was standing with his back to her at the one window, and he spoke without turning.

"And to what do I owe the singular honour of a visit from you to these unromantic purlieus?" he asked.

There was no lightness in his tone. He uttered his pedantics automatically, his eyes and his attention fixed upon the pavement two floors below.

"Father," Lois blurted out. She had prepared explanations, arguments, all justifying diplomatically the final culminating request. They went overboard now. She would have floundered over them, would probably have been dismissed to get her little speech by heart with a few phrases meant to be cutting. She rushed straight upon the aim of her visit.

"Father, I want thirty pounds."

And in a second she was no longer nervous, she was terribly frightened. Perriton swung round from the window with a strangled cry of sheer ungovernable rage. His face had gone white, his eyes glared at her. She had never seen hatred before except in the mimicry of stage and screen. She saw the real thing now—naked, appalling, devouring her from head to foot. The simple daintiness of her dress was an offence, her look of distinction an outrage.

"Come here!" he said in a whisper from a dry throat.

Lois shrank away.

"I'll pay it back," she answered, her voice shaking. "I meant to promise that before I asked for the money. But I was nervous and . . ."

Mr. Perriton interrupted her savagely.

"Pay it back! You! Dolls cost money, but they don't pay. Come here!"

He advanced towards her, and Lois' fear sharpened into a panic. She fumbled for the door-handle behind her, not daring to take her eyes from his face.

"Father!" she stammered. She clasped her hands over her throat, thinking in the extremity of her terror that he meant to kill her.

"Father!" And the name set him laughing mirthlessly, hideously, for whilst his mouth grinned and his teeth chattered with laughter his eyes were the eyes of a creature spitting venom.

"Father! That's a good one," he cried. "Come here—before it's too late."

If he had taken a step nearer to her she would have screamed. But he turned back to the window and again peered out of it.

"Quick!" he whispered urgently, making room for her at his side—so urgently that Lois left the protection of the door and crossed the room. Then he seized her wrist and pressed her closer to the pane.

"Look down! Do you see that man on the opposite side of the street? The small man with the moustache as big as himself? Watch how carelessly he strolls by—the rotten idiot! He'll turn in a second and have a look at our windows. Doesn't he do it well, the ass? Ah, he has seen you! Yes! He's crossing the road. He'll stroll back to the door of this building. You'll see him when you go out. Sure to! For he has got to see you."

Lois wondered whether her father's anger had not upset his reason.

"Why has he got to see me?"

"To make his report, of course."

"Report!"

Lois was losing her fear now. Henry Perriton was dwindling before her eyes. From being grand in the terror which he had inspired he was becoming little again, the purveyor of unpolished sarcasms which missed their mark, which simply rubbed on an old wound rather than pierced with an arrow-pang.

"Yes, my dear, it's surely obvious. You are growing up. Mr. Wyatt there is in duty bound to make his report. He must say how pretty you are and how smart you look and what little trouble you are likely to give, and how everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Of course he must report."

"To whom?"

For a moment Mr. Perriton hesitated, jerking his head backwards in a kind of spasm as though dumbness took him at the very moment of speech. But the temptation was too strong. He was boiling with his wrongs and his failures, not one of which he attributed to himself.

"To your father, of course."

The words were out now. Mr. Perriton was very glad that he had spoken them. He was getting a bit of his own back, what? He seemed to hear some imaginary man of the world winking at him over a glass of beer and using just those words. "Getting a bit of your own back, what? Stout fellow!"

"Your father, Mark Thewliss, the millionaire. Ah, he's the wise man," Perriton continued. "None of your early marriages for him. He knows better.

He's going to run, so he strips for the race. Millionaire at forty and caterwauling in the House of Commons a couple of years later. Marriage? To be sure. But marriage with Her Ladyship of the County Families, and a bishop to do the trick. Whilst up there in Liverpool—by God, he must laugh when he thinks of it—a little overworked accountant carries on his shoulders his mistress and his bastard."

The ugly, abominable word was spoken. Perriton heard a stifled moan, but he was still on the flood tide of his rancours. There was no stopping him now. He could not have stopped himself. Mona Lightfoot had told him the truth before she consented to marry him. Her month upon the *Sea Flower* with Mark Thewliss, her knowledge that a child would be born—everything. But in his desire for her he had accepted the position. He had married with his eyes open and no longer a young man. But his passion had withered. The dreams of a future broadening out into the ease of a successful professional man in a huge business community had not been realised. There was a fatal obstacle somewhere, and he found it not at all in himself, but in the burden of a wife and a daughter who was another man's child. He was not of the fibre which endures. Success must come to him quickly if at all. He could not build.

"Had I been a free man. . . . What a fool I was. . . ."

These were the constant useless enfeebling fancies at the back of all his thoughts. He began to look upon Mona as a crafty woman who had ensnared him to his ruin. He was next door to hate of her, but he actually hated Lois. He hated her beauty, the queer look of distinction she had from her mother; he grudged every farthing which was spent upon her food, her schooling, her clothes. And on the top of it all she had the nerve to march down to his office on a busy day—yes, his delusions carried him even to that extravagance—in her neat brown coat and skirt, a white crêpe-de-Chine blouse, her Sunday silk stockings and her bright patent leather shoes, and ask him for thirty pounds. Just that! Thirty pounds, as if it was tuppence! Such a string of virulent complaints broke from him and frothed and tumbled, it seemed that all the failures of all the generations were shaking their fists at the cloudy power which kept them under.

"Do you want proof?" he cried. "There it is, below the window, on the pavement. Mr. Joseph Wyatt. Mark Thewliss' secret agent. Every year up he bobs, stroking his stupid Viking's moustache and thinking himself invisible. Three or four times a year. Making little inquiries. All so that he may go back and tell Thewliss that we are getting on just the same, and not likely to cause him any trouble in his fine new married life."

"How do you know that?"

The young voice at his shoulder was now ominously quiet and level, but Henry Perriton was not aware of the change. He did not look at her, did not think of her, as a being to whom he had dealt out shame and disillusionment and a too-swift maturity with the strokes of an axe. Lois was nothing more to him than a pair of ears. He crowed.

"People don't make inquiries about me for long without it coming to my ears. Once a Mr. Wyatt may come along and do his spying—twice perhaps. But a third time—no! I begin to notice him. Mr. Wyatt talks to my tradesmen, does he? And he talks to my servant. Then we set a little trap for him. Who's at the back of inquiries? Just between friends, you know, over a final whisky and soda in the bar. The disclosure to stop there, of course. Not a word to be breathed, my hand on my heart? And out pops the name—Mark Thewliss—and nods and winks to underline it."

The nods and winks had been due to Joseph Wyatt's complete ignorance of why Mark Thewliss wanted his reports and to his reluctance to admit his ignorance. Wyatt was a slave of routine, carrying out instructions which needed a better man in a matter, the very core of which was unknown to his employer. For that Lois Perriton was Mark's daughter, the secret cause of all the overwhelming troubles which were to follow, may have been known to the man in the moon, but was unimagined by either Mark himself or Mr. Joseph Wyatt. Hence the nods and winks in the bar following the sound old rule, "If you don't know, affect a mystery."

Mr. Perriton, however, had and could have no doubt that Mark knew it. Nor any longer could Lois.

"So now you know," said Mr. Perriton, but not quite so easily. "I am not the man from whom you have the right to ask for thirty pounds."

He received no confirmation of that statement.

"Well, have you?"

And again he had no answer.

In such men as Henry Perriton the violent passions reach their climax soon. Rejoinders may prolong their fury for a little while, but collapse is imminent and certain. Mr. Perriton recollected with discomfort that he had promised and sworn over and over again that never should the child that was to be born know the truth about its birth, if only Mona would marry him; that even so Mona had with difficulty been persuaded. It was hard for him to

realise so long after his desire had withered that this compact had been made. But it had been, and he had broken it. He began to feel an uneasiness.

"Well, have you the right, Lois?" There was a note almost of pleading in his voice. "You can understand how you must have exasperated me."

For the third time there was no reply. Mr. Perriton's fingers beat a tattoo upon the window-pane. Suppose that Lois, at whom he hesitated to look, were to run home and tell her mother in a flood of tears of the scene which had occurred, what was going to happen?

"If she leaves me there'll be a scandal," he said to himself. "The truth will come out. And the truth isn't respectable."

Respectability meant a good deal to Mr. Perriton. That's why he drank alone. It meant a good deal, too, to his business. It lay not amongst the great houses which wanted their work done by the men most competent but amongst smaller people, tradesmen and the like, who looked for respectability as much as for competence. It would not do for Mona to leave him—and she would leave him. She was proficient as a secretary and clerk. She could make a living for herself and for Lois, too, worse luck! Mr. Perriton felt that he stood upon quaking sands.

"I am sorry that I said what I did, Lois," he said meekly. "You must forget it, my dear," and Lois laughed.

The laugh was a shock to Henry Perriton. Tears he would have welcomed. He could have got round tears. Tears would have been his opportunity. But hard, rude, contemptuous laughter made his position very difficult. He looked at Lois now for the first time since he had dragged her to the window, and he tingled with alarm. She was standing erect at the side of the window, her hands clenched at her side, her eyes shining pebbles. He had not one clue to the thoughts which moved behind them, except this: they were not gentle thoughts. Her face was the colour of parchment. Lois had neither beauty nor youth at that moment. Nor, on the other hand, had she any look of age. He seemed to himself to be face to face with someone eternal.

"Lois, I was carried away. I have business worries, and your request on the top of them. . . . Yes, it was deplorable," he pleaded, and his voice trailed lamentably to silence.

Lois waited until he had finished, and then turned and walked towards the door. Her movement shook Mr. Perriton into action. He was at the door before Lois, with his back to the panels, gesticulating, stuttering.

"You won't tell Mona. . . . Promise me! You won't breathe a word to her. It would upset everything. . . ."

"But everything is upset," Lois answered.

"Not everything," babbled Mr. Perriton. "We are both sensible people. We can make the best of things, can't we? I've had a hard life, Lois. You'll agree when you come to think of it quietly. Don't act in a hurry. We'll talk it over together."

"We'll never talk it over," said Lois.

Of the shame and distress which overwhelmed her she would not betray a sign. She stood implacably erect, conscious for the first time of a strength which even then thrilled and uplifted her. After the first stunning blow she had very quickly recovered. She meant to have her way now with the little man who gibbered out his prayers to her. He didn't matter.

The enemy was not Henry Perriton, but the man at Upper Theign, who had robbed her adored mother of the wide life for which nature had meant her, and had made her herself—well, what she was. Him she would hate by night and by day to the last conscious minute of life. She had no reproaches for her mother. Her heart, indeed, was even tenderer towards her. She understood now the reason of Mona's submission, and, with a flash of insight, her constant grief that she could not open up for her daughter the dazzling avenues which marriage with Mark Thewliss would have secured.

"You'll promise me! You'll promise me!" Henry Perriton was reduced to a monotonous repetition. "You'll promise me your silence, Lois."

"On one condition," Lois replied at length.

"Yes? Yes?"

"You must lend me the thirty pounds I came for."

"I'll give it to you, Lois."

"No."

"I will. With pleasure."

Lois, with a shrug of her shoulders, ceased to argue. She was going to pay it back. Repayment would be the first charge. That for her was the end of the matter.

"I'll bring the money home for you this evening."

Lois shook her head.

"No."

Mr. Perriton was a little taken aback.

"You want it now—this minute?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I'll write a cheque and send my clerk out to cash it."

Mr. Perriton sat down at his desk and wrote with a jibe in his mind which he dared not utter.

"She's the daughter of her father, not a doubt of it. That's the way men become millionaires. Ask for an hour's credit and you are looking down the barrel of a pistol." He sent his secretary with the cheque to the bank, and Lois sat down in a chair.

"I'll tell you now why I want the money," she said. "It's the cost of a full course of tuition in shorthand, typewriting and the simpler secretarial duties. I always meant to be free of you at the first possible moment, even when I believed myself to be your daughter."

"My dear," Mr. Perriton expostulated with an attempt at a smile, "that wasn't very nice of you."

"I am not nice," said Lois coldly.

The clerk brought the bank-notes into the private office and retired. Mr. Perriton counted them out to Lois, who tucked them away into her bag.

"So that's your plan! To be free and independent," said Mr. Perriton with a rueful attempt at jocularity.

"Half of it," Lois returned shortly. The other half was not for his nor for anyone's ears yet. It was much too great a secret even to be whispered aloud to herself. She meant to make a little home, somewhere a long way from Liverpool, for her mother and herself, where there should be no cheap sarcasms, no silent submissions; quite a little home, but so warm with happiness and gay with laughter that a kingdom could not match it. For the moment, however, she could not dwell upon it. She did not notice Mr. Wyatt when she came out again into the street, although he was close to her, unconcernedly fondling his dragoon's moustache. She walked along the pavement seeing no one, with a heart full of bitterness and humiliation.

CHAPTER XV THE HOLIDAY

Amidst the crowd which gathered outside Buckingham Palace on the night of July 31st, 1914, like a family in some momentous crisis about its chief, stood Lois Perriton. She was then a little over eighteen years old; and during the last twelve months she had been employed at a salary of three pounds a week in the London office of a society for the protection of wild animals. The grim history of a great war was accurately foreseen only by the few; and Lois was wondering with a thrill of pleasurable excitement, as were so many in that throng, what vast upheavals the cataclysm of to-morrow was to bring about, and how they were to affect the tiny section of the world in which she moved. Of two things she was sure. One, that she was alive in that year of that century; two, that other work than the protection of wild animals must be sought for and obtained.

Efficiency combined with an overmastering purpose—in Lois' case the half of her plan which she had not disclosed to Henry Perriton—have a way of forcing circumstances into their service; and before Christmas had come Lois was a clerk in the Intelligence Division of the Admiralty. She had long since learnt that of matters of importance it was wise to speak to one only. In looks we know that she was a "crasher," and looks in this unfair world always help; she had, too, as a basic quality of her being the appealing aloofness of her mother. It was inevitable that as the great department expanded, she should rise to positions of ever increasing confidence.

She made a few real friends amongst the other girls. She lost the sense of humiliation which Perriton's disclosure had caused her, and she, in many respects still a child, had exaggerated into a visible brand. She realised that whatever her natal stigma, she was herself, and that in this new day of stress and endeavour it was only persons themselves that counted. She put some of her salary by each week. She saw the fulfilment of her purpose drawing nearer and nearer. Though she did not consciously say, "Let the war go on," she knew greater happiness during those years than she had known, and anticipated the end of them with anxiety.

In one respect, however, the greater amenities of her life brought with them no softening. The man she hated was still the man she hated. He was the great blot upon this new fair register of her account with the world. She would never see his face if she could help it. If she had to see him, she

would never speak to him. She would rather go away by herself and say "Raca" again, and endure all the terror of the flames which consumed but never ended consuming, as she had once done in her childhood. She hated him with bone and with muscle.

Yet on a morning of December, 1917, at twelve o'clock precisely, as she was returning to her room with a file of papers in her hand, she came upon a long, lean man whose appearance suggested that he was midway in the fifties. He was wandering rather helplessly in that network of corridors which housed the Intelligence Division. Lois Perriton turned about and, with the pleasantly maternal solicitude for the decrepit which the young people of the day displayed towards the middle-aged, asked:

"Can I help you in any way?"

"I have no doubt you can," the stranger replied, "I am looking for the D.N.I."

"The Director himself?"

"Yes," returned the visitor. "The great Panjandrum himself with the little button on the top. He expects me."

Lois smiled tolerantly.

"I'll take you there."

"It is perhaps out of your way," the unknown hinted.

"Not a bit," Lois answered with not a little pride. "I work in the Director's office."

And suddenly she saw that he was a little puzzled and that he looked at her keenly.

"Of course none of these old people can get it into their heads that the really responsible positions ought to be in the hands of young people. That's why the war came," she said to herself. Aloud she merely remarked:

"It is here," and she opened the door of a large light room with a couple of big windows looking out upon the Horse Guards' Parade. The Director, who looked more like the abbé he certainly was not than the admiral he certainly was, swung round from the tall desk in the middle of the room at which he was standing.

"My dear fellow," he cried. "You are the very man I was wanting. Will you come in with me?"

He opened the door of an inner room and ushering in his visitor, called to his secretary who had been standing at the desk with him: “John, we’ll settle that matter as soon as I am free.”

For half an hour the two men remained confabulating in the inner room, whilst Lois worked at her big table under one of the windows, and officers and civilians drifted in and out and talked with the secretary. Then the inner door was thrown open again and the admiral stood in the doorway.

“I want the figures of the high explosives used at the Battle of Jutland. Miss Perriton, you know where they are.”

Lois extracted a sheet of paper from a file and carried it into the private room. The Director looked at the paper and handed it across the table.

“There you are!”

The visitor took it and read it slowly.

“Might I have a copy?” he asked.

“By all means,” the admiral agreed. “Miss Perriton, will you make one?”

“He can have this one,” she answered; and as she handed the sheet of paper to the visitor he made the most ridiculous remark.

“She certainly is a crasher.”

He made it with conviction and aloud, as though truth forced the words from him. Then he coloured and giggled foolishly, explaining: “Though ‘she’ is a very disrespectful word to apply to the Battle of Jutland. Well, I’ll be going on my way.”

“Dippy,” said Lois to herself.

It was the second time that the famous head of Mardyke and Campion had had that epithet applied to him by a girl.

Lois returned to her table, the Director resumed at the high desk his discussion with his secretary, the visitor retired from the Admiralty. Thus father and daughter met for the first time.

Mark Thewliss, though he had failed to impress Lois Perriton, was at this time a very important person. At the outbreak of war his maiden speech had been remembered. He had been put in charge of an amalgamation of factories for the manufacture of high explosives. Within two years he was a Cabinet Minister and a member of the inner War Cabinet. And no man was looking forward more eagerly to the defeat of the enemy, or with more

definite plans for the era of peace. Indeed, the pens were hardly dry in the Gallery of Mirrors at Versailles when he resigned from office and was raised to the peerage as Baron Thewliss of Upper Theign.

He was in a hurry. He was too shrewd a man not to understand that so many unproductive millions could not be blown into the air without a dreadful consequence to the nation's economic life. But he was equally certain that through a few years of busy reconstruction, the dreadful consequence would not be felt. Meanwhile the hamper of the German patents had gone. Mark Thewliss hurried back to Brooke's Market; the bazaars of Fez and Mequinez, Marrakesch and Casablanca, the Indies, the countries of Europe hung out fresh and entrancing colours for their customers. In the boom years Mardyke and Campion boomed mightily.

But the axe fell upon the Division of Naval Intelligence, and at the end of July, 1919, when she had entered upon her twenty-third year, Lois found herself out of a job, with a gratuity and two hundred pounds saved besides. She had need of a holiday—how great a need she only knew when the holiday was forced on her—and for once in a way she locked cares, purpose, hatred, away in a dark cupboard and gave herself to the natural spirits of her youth.

She was invited to spend a month in Venice by a young woman who, whilst her husband was in France, had worked with her in the Admiralty. It was a young and joyous party. The yellow bathing sands with their long, lazy days and colourful company; the dinners suddenly organised in the open air outside some little inn in a tiny square of the town; the silent gliding in a gondola at night along black and narrow canals between precipices of lofty and decaying palaces, where the gentle splash of the oar was the only sound; the new friends; an occasional dash out to the islands in a motor-boat; the life and beauty of the Piazza—all made up a glamorous month which repeated for Lois her mother's cruise on the *Sea Flower*.

The same revelation, the same novelty, the same magic. But mother and daughter took their hours of loveliness and made of them very different things. By one they were set apart as a treasure of good memories, by the other as a nursery of resentments.

On the morning before Lois was to return to England, there appeared on the beach of the Lido a French nobleman with a resounding name, whose claim to reputation depended upon the circumstance that he had run through three immense fortunes of three successive American wives and written a

book about it afterwards. He was declaiming to a young English Lieutenant-Colonel there recovering from wounds, on the vulgarity of the scene.

"It is all disgusting," he cried. "There is no taste. There is no nobility. I go from here to Aix. I shall find the same disheartening medley there."

"Why do you go there?" the Lieutenant-Colonel asked bluntly. "And why do you come here?"

The great nobleman waved his stick.

"It is the ruin of an era. As a philosopher I like to see"—and he broke off suddenly with a most unphilosophical gleam in his eyes. A girl slim and tall, a goddess in a blue bathing suit and green shoes, sauntered past them. "*Quelle jolie démarche!*" he exclaimed, with all the enthusiasm of a connoisseur in such matters.

The goddess in the bathing suit and the green shoes was Lois Perriton; and that night the young Lieutenant-Colonel, whose name was Derek Crayle, sat next to her at a dinner party at the Grand Hotel. He told her of the great nobleman's change of humour when he had seen her stroll past him, and having thus broken the ice they began to discover how interesting they were compared to the rest of the party. Then they both fell upon a gentle melancholy.

"I don't know what I shall do now," said Derek Crayle. "Of course I can't keep my present command. With all the brigadiers about, we've got to tumble down the ladder as fast as we went up it. My uncle Tony Westram would like me to go on. I should get a company, no doubt."

"Your trouble's only an eclipse. Mine's an axe," Lois replied ruefully, and she told him of her four years and how she had risen from a cellar in the basement to the fine room overlooking the Horse Guards Parade.

"And you mean to say the Admiralty is going to do without you!" cried Derek in a stupefaction.

Lois nodded.

"It's going to try to."

"It's mad," said Derek Crayle emphatically.

This was only one of the points on which the couple found themselves in agreement. The old men were coming back again. The world apparently had learnt nothing—absolutely nothing. The moment the danger was over it was once more "Make way for the aged." Fine young brilliant tacticians must go

back to the barrack-square and, still worse, wonderful girls must leave the Admiralty. Lois' neighbour on the other side had a continuous view during that dinner party of a charming young white shoulder draped in a pale green frock, whilst the lady next to Derek Crayle was offered the contemplation of the back of his dinner-jacket. They slipped away together when the company rose.

"I have a gondola at the Luna Steps," Derek Crayle suggested. "What do you say? Less stuffy than dancing—what?"

Lois nodded and, fetching a gay cloak of lamé, she draped it about her shoulders. They returned to the Piazza towards midnight and found it thronged. A great singer, Venetian-born, had announced that on that night he would sing to Venice, and Lois and Derek Crayle had hardly taken their places at one of the little tables before the triumphant voice rose, carried aloft upon the music of the violins, as a conqueror upon the shields of his warriors. Lois drew in her breath with a gasp. The spellbound silent throng, the balm of the air, the moon sailing lustrously white above the domes of St. Mark's, and the lovely voice rising and falling and beating against the walls of a square itself so beautiful that it seemed made of the texture of a dream, swept Lois away into a silent and unearthly ecstasy. Yet all the while there was a whisper at her heart.

"This is the perfect night. You will never know such another. You are only vouchsafed this night so that the memory of it may embitter all your days to come. You will never come here again."

As the singer's voice mingled with a woman's in the final duet of "Aïda," the whisper grew louder and louder in Lois' hearing. Derek Crayle saw her lean back in her chair, her face upturned, her slim white throat bared; and for a moment he believed her to have been seized by some intolerable distress. She shook her head, however, when he moved towards her, and when the song was over and the throng moving from the square she seemed to have recovered her high spirits.

"I was thinking that . . ." she began, and broke off. "But it was nonsense. I shall come back here. I shall bring my mother here." The voice dropped, she gazed about her, drawing a deep breath. Then she bade him good night and good-bye with an admirable composure.

Lois left for London on the next morning by the Simplon Express. She allowed herself the costliness of that train in the confidence that she would find work to her hand. But to her surprise and indignation she found herself answering advertisements and tramping round the agencies in vain. There

were no domestic servants, but the world was full of accomplished young secretaries with nothing to do, whilst well-meaning ladies of title were busy collecting money to train yet more young women to crowd the already over-crowded.

Lois was here and there offered work at a starvation wage. She obtained one engagement at a salary of four pounds a week from an employer who required for that remuneration a secretary plus a mistress. Lois departed. She then became accountant and book-keeper to an over-hopeful film company. After the liquidation of that concern she sold dresses for a few months, or rather tried to sell dresses, in one of the little wooden huts which stood in the Strand on the site of what is now Bush House; and since she worked chiefly upon a commission, both her savings and with them her cherished dream faded and grew thin.

And after that unlucky venture the blank days followed. The crasher, in fact, had crashed. She was living in a bed-sitting-room at the back of Fitzroy Square, eating meagrely, nursing what was left of her savings, and conscious that both her courage and her vitality were dwindling in the heat of an exotic summer. There came upon her an overwhelming desire to see again her adored mother and herself learn, if by any means she could, something of that mother's proud acquiescence. Long ago she had said to herself, when she had turned her back on Glebe Villa:

"I will never go into that house again."

But in the ruin of her plans the resolve weakened and died. She wrote to her mother:

"I am coming to see you, darling," and, though she strove to hide it, the bitterness of her disappointment pierced through the careful phrases and wrung her mother's heart.

Mona sat with the letter upon her knee, looking out upon Acacia Grove, her eyes quite blinded with tears. She too had resolved that Lois should never return. She was more than ever resolved now. For life in Glebe Villa had gone from worse to worse. Quarrels were more frequent, if that could be called a quarrel which was a long upbraiding upon one side and a persistent silence upon the other; the morose drinker drank deeper; expenses were higher and less money was earned.

"My dear, my dear, I can't let you come here," Mona cried aloud. She gave way for a moment to a despairing impression that they were a doomed family. Then she argued:

"It's only because I am stubborn. . . . If I could force myself to be willing never to see Lois again, except for some rare moments, surely I could force myself, too, to extinguish this last little spark of pride. . . . After all, I don't matter now . . . my darling does."

She rose up in a bitter spirit. A possibility often pondered, as often rejected, and yet always resurgent, was now accepted and to be made definite fact. A long debate was at an end; a long and doubtful struggle closed. Mona was actually relieved. She put on her hat and sent a telegram to Lois:

Don't come. I shall join you for a few days to-morrow.

She sent this telegram on a morning of the first week of July.

CHAPTER XVI THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

In June of that year Derek Crayle crossed over from Gissens and lodged at Upper Theign. A Mr. Arthur Hoyle, a sharp-visaged, alert little cloth manufacturer from Bradford, was also a visitor, and an atmosphere of subdued excitement pervaded the house. The most impervious of persons could not pass along the corridors without feeling a curious tingle of expectation. Some great affair was in the balance. The time was weighty; and Derek, in spite of the pellucid air and the cool cradle-song of running water, slept no less fitfully than Lois in the parching heat of Fitzroy Square.

In the early hours of one of these mornings he rose from his bed and looked eastwards out of his window. It was still dark. Nightingales and sweet perfumes had the wide park to themselves except at one point. Three hundred yards away, at the edge of a cluster of elms, a bright light struck upwards from a big window in a roof and gave to the leaves which over-canopied it the burnished luxuriance of the foliage of Ceylon. Derek Crayle watched that lonely illumination with anxiety.

"It won't do!" he said to himself. "It's high time that I mounted the bridge and put a stop to the nonsense."

He slipped a pair of flannel trousers and a thick jacket over his pyjamas, twisted a long scarf round his throat, drew on his high rubber boots and, passing along a passage, knocked upon a door.

"Olivia!" he called in a low voice. "Olivia!"

The answer was returned at once.

"Come in, Derek."

He went into the big bedroom. All the windows were open, all the blinds raised. Olivia was wide awake with a lamp burning by her bedside and an open book upon the coverlet. She was leaning upon her elbow, her eyes watching her visitor with apprehension.

"What is it, Derek? . . . Has anything happened?"

"No, no," Derek Crayle reassured her. "But something's going to happen. I want your consent for it to happen. I want to fetch out Hoyle with his key."

Olivia Thewliss turned her head from the two windows in the front of the room to the one big window on her left-hand side. From her bed she could see the bright glare from the skylight gilding the green boughs above it. She did not answer.

"This is the third night, Olivia. Three nights and days. And he's not a young man. . . ."

"Just for that reason, you see, Derek . . ." she argued doubtfully. "He won't want this ordeal a second time. And besides, he wants the results in his own time. . . . Oh, I don't mean the money—but seeing it done everywhere—his work. He insisted that he shouldn't be interrupted. He foresaw that we might want to interrupt him."

For a few moments both of them stared in silence at the steady light across the park.

"He's putting a heavy strain upon himself," Derek continued stubbornly. "It's up to you, Olivia, of course, to say yes or no. But three nights and days! It's too long."

"He had food for that length of time and for longer," Olivia contended. "He was prepared to spend that time."

"Yes," Derek admitted. "But suppose that something happened which he wasn't prepared for. He's alone over there. He may have fallen and hurt himself. He may have fainted. . . ."

"He switched on the light yesterday when the dusk came. I don't see any reason to fear." She was silent again, staring through the open window across the darkness to the square of bright light under the coppice. "Of course, it's a long time . . . a long strain."

Derek Crayle's anxiety was increasing her own. Olivia had married Mark Thewliss without bringing to the marriage, as she had warned him, any passion of love. He had wanted her help in the making of his life's completeness, her companionship, and she had given him both. Certainly little diffidences had disappeared, he had become at home in his new incarnation as a country gentleman. He sought her advice, too, on matters of bigger moment, and very often took it. There had grown up between the two a strong and solid affection, a little stronger perhaps on Olivia's side, because she had not given him that child for which as she knew he had poignantly longed.

There was an element of remorse in her affection, of gratitude too. For he had not allowed any complaint of his to wound her. He had given her

much, a pleasant house, the opportunities of kindness and hospitality, a constant consideration, a share in his plans. She was no longer pinched, as Mr. Wyatt a few years back would have described her; she was no longer a dependent on her rich relatives. Great advantages all of them, and making for a comely life. And the one return he had wanted—she had never forgotten his revealing glance from herself to Angela at the luncheon table at Gissens—she had not made. She was all the more anxious to-night that Mark should find this other hope of his fulfilled.

"There's a better way," she said. "We must wait till the morning, and it will be here very soon now. We've no reason to think that anything has happened to Mark. But for your fears I shouldn't be worried at all."

"Oh! And the lamp burning by your bed? And the open book?" Crayle rejoined. "You're as nervous as I am. You know as well as I do that the experiment has taken too long."

Olivia shook her head. She remembered the strict orders Mark Thewliss had given.

"We'll wait until morning. If when the daylight comes the light in the laboratory is turned out, then we'll go on waiting. For we shall know that Mark has not finished and wishes to be undisturbed. But if the light still burns in the broad day, then we shall——" she would not say "know." She caught the word back, "we shall have a right to fear that some accident may have happened. We shall be justified for sending for Hoyle and his key."

Derek Crayle could get no other answer, though he argued a little more, giving her instances from the War of how a man's endurance may snap.

"I won't listen to you, Derek!" she cried. "Go away and let me sleep."

Derek grumbled himself out of the room.

"Women! My word! Gentle, did you say? Compared with 'em, a tank's a sponge-cake."

But Olivia sat up in her bed anxiously looking out. The black cap of the night was lifted a little, as though the earth-goddess wanted air and wind to blow through her curls. Light seeped in under the tilted rim, the pale invader, hung a drapery of mist to the branches of the trees, and mocked the dew-drenched meadows with a mimicry of winter frosts. Suddenly the grey was shot with lilac, and the lilac hemmed with gold, and to a great noise of blackbirds and thrushes and cawing rooks, a burning arc of the sun cut the sky. The long, low laboratory which Mark Thewliss had built for himself at the edge of the elms was visible now with its shuttered windows and its

barred door. And as Olivia looked, the yellow glare in the skylight died away.

"That just shows," she said contentedly, "I was right," and she slipped down into her bed and went to sleep.

Meanwhile Derek Crayle had crept quietly down the stairs and let himself out of the house. He crossed the park towards the laboratory and saw the spurt of a match and then the waxing and waning of tobacco in the bowl of a pipe. On the edge of the small gravel clearing in front of the laboratory a man wrapped in a weather-beaten British warm was smoking, seated on a length of tree-trunk.

"Good morning, Brent," said Derek.

"Mornin', sir," replied Brent.

"Nothing happened, I suppose."

"Not a thing."

"You'll be relieved in half an hour."

"That's all right, sir. I have done sentry-go under worse conditions," said Brent with a laugh.

He smoked for a little while in silence. Then he resumed: "They do say that if this yer experimentation works out O.K. it'll mean a lot o' difference."

"I should think so," returned Crayle. "It'll cheapen production—put pleasant things within easier reach of the public." He was remembering the homilies of Mark Thewliss.

Brent knocked the ashes of his pipe into the palm of his hand and filled the bowl again.

"The public. Yes," he said. "You gentlemen dandles the public and gives it plenty o' pap. But the public ain't the sort o' defenceless baby you thinks it. You just go on strike for a bit and inconvenience it. It'll learn you. What I was thinkin' of was us. It'll mean new machinery, very like, new installations."

"Yes, I suppose it will," said Crayle.

"Well, there's some firms that can't afford it, see? They'll go under. There's Mr. Hoyle, my boss. He's a rich man but he ain't looking forward to the moment when Lord Thewliss throws open that door there and says,

‘Make a statue of me. I’ve done it!’ There’s two sides to these questions, Colonel Crayle. And I’m incomplete there. For there’s a third. I never saw a piece of new machinery which didn’t make the workman’s job just a tiny bit more soulless than it was before. You watch, watch, watch, watch, watch and then you touch a little lever. Then you watch, watch, watch, watch, watch and touch the little lever again. And you do it twice a minute for eight hours a day for forty-five years. Foolproof, no doubt, sir, but foolproof and soulless are two words for the same thing.”

Derek Crayle was disinclined to enter upon a discussion of economics at so unsuitably pristine an hour. He said lightly:

“Brent, you are the last of the Tories.”

“And that leaves us just where we were before,” Brent replied unconcernedly. “All these Utopias now, Colonel Crayle! I read about them. They clear your slums away, and they wash you, and they dress you in health-clothes, and they feed you, and they arrange your marriage and your children—but where’s your soul? It’s gone—like that!”

The morning had come. Brent was pointing towards the yellow glow above the sunlight which just at that moment had vanished.

“And there’s my relief.”

Brent tapped the bowl of his pipe against the log, stood up and stretched his arms above his head. Along a narrow path from the direction of the house a third man was approaching. But before he reached the semicircle of gravel, from within the laboratory was heard a loud knocking upon the door.

Derek Crayle turned back to it with a catch of his breath. Though it was just for this sound that he had been hoping, now that it was audible it startled him like a clap of thunder.

“At last!” he cried, and he sent Brent off at a run to the house. He stepped forward to the door and shouted cheerfully through the panels:

“All right, sir! A moment or two! I have sent for Hoyle and the key.”

* * * * *

The strange imprisonment of Mark Thewliss in his own laboratory was the outcome of that dramatic instinct in him which secured the advertisement and made others shoulder the advertising. He had dined six months before in the company of half a dozen manufacturers of cloth and silk from the North of England, and had there quietly announced that it

needed only the perfection of a detail or two before he could produce the universal formula for fadeless dyes for all materials. One or two of the company had scoffed at the pretension of the man, one or two who knew him better plied him with questions, one or two, with their feet cemented in old routine and fearful of change, were silent and uneasy.

"You'll patent your discovery, of course," said Hoyle, who was one of the company, thrusting his keen face forward.

"I haven't got as far as thinking about that yet," Mark Thewliss replied.

The two uneasy men, Mr. Benfield and Sir James Copeland, shrugged their shoulders and grimaced at one another sourly. The old fox was going to keep his discovery to himself until he had made up his mind by which way he could squeeze the last penny out of it. But Hoyle kept his sharp eyes for a moment or two upon Mark Thewliss' face and then leaned back in his chair, apparently not dissatisfied.

"Of course we should like to know when you are satisfied that you have the whole process complete," he said.

"Yes. That's fair enough," Thewliss replied.

"And I should like to be satisfied at the same time that the process isn't —well, it's better to use blunt words even at the risk of offence—isn't, to put it plainly, a fake," said one of the scoffers.

He was a Mr. Wisberry from the cluster of cloth-mills in Somersetshire, and he was known for his pride in plain language as much as for the excellence of his cloth. Mark Thewliss took the affront with a smile.

"I can meet you there, too. When I am ready I'll let you all know. You shall provide me, each of you, with a strip of material to be dyed. You shall choose the material. You shall choose the kind of dye. I shall have everything removed from my laboratory except what I want for the one process. You shall appoint one of you to make sure that there is nothing else there, that there are no pieces already dyed, and I will not know what pieces you are going to hand over to me to be dyed. Then, when you are satisfied I'll go into the laboratory with enough food and drink to last me for a day or two. You shall lock me in. You shall set a guard upon the building night and day, and when I knock on the door I shall have finished. I'll hand you over your strips of materials dyed as you wanted them, and you can submit them to what tests you like. I'll guarantee they won't fade."

The challenge had been accepted, Hoyle had been selected to supervise the conditions under which the experiment was to be made; and now in this

first week of June, six months afterwards, it had been made.

Hoyle had a very vivid recollection of that dinner party in a private room of the hotel at Leeds, as he slipped into his clothes and hurried across the park. His face wore a grave look of concern. Had Mark Thewliss failed? Had he succeeded? If the latter there would be a vast upset in this particular industry. One universal formula! Applicable to all fabrics and all dyes! It was gigantic in its conception—still more gigantic in its consequence. It would lead to mass production first of all—mass production on a scale quite unknown. There would have to be immense amalgamations. The little special divisions of the industry would be brought together under one roof. They would lose their identity. The men who ran them would go under. He himself, for all he knew, might be in danger. And sprawling over the top of them all, the black Genie from the bottle, Mark Thewliss—damn him!—yes, Mark Thewliss unless—yes, by the way, unless. . . . Hoyle had had a glimmering notion of a counter-stroke so far back as that dinner party.

"I mustn't forget that," he said to himself, and thereupon ceased to hurry.

There was no need to hurry. He had the key of the laboratory in his pocket. The door couldn't be opened until he reached it. He must be on the alert with all his wits about him when it was opened. Thewliss was a queer card in some ways. A good deal might be learnt by a man who had eyes wherewith to see—a good deal which might be very useful. Mr. Hoyle brought a genial and unruffled countenance to the small group before the door.

"So the great experiment is completed," he said. "Now for the demonstration," and setting the key in the lock he turned it.

The door swung inwards on its hinges and the four men looked into a small dark vestibule. For a moment their eyes, accustomed to the daylight, could distinguish nothing in the gloom of the little shuttered hall. Then they saw that it was empty. But an inner door opened at the side upon the big laboratory, and as they stood upon the threshold they heard a slow and dragging step begin and grow louder.

"What an actor the fellow is!" was Hoyle's first admiring thought.

But he dismissed it as Thewliss came into view. For there was no affectation of fatigue in Thewliss' bearing. He was white and drawn and utterly dispirited. He came forward with the merest ghost of a smile which suited well his ghostly face, and he leaned against the pillar of the door with the indifference men show when reaction from some great strain has turned the whole living world into a fantasy.

"By God! . . . he has failed," said Derek Crayle under his breath.

In a silence so complete he was heard by everyone, even by Mark Thewliss, who turned his eyes towards him. But there was no reproach in them and no denial. They were the eyes of a man coming out of a coma, mystifying, expressionless. In a moment or two he spoke:

"I am very tired," and as though the sound of his own voice had roused him to consciousness, he nodded to Hoyle. "You'll find everything in there," he said, with a jerk of his head towards the laboratory behind him.

"You are satisfied then?" Hoyle asked quietly, and his lips set in a straight, rather grim line.

"Quite! You can take away all the exhibits and test them as you like. We are at the beginning of June. You have four months of sunlight. In October I'll ask you to agree with me."

Thewliss moved away from the door. The movement was stiff and heavy. There was no spring in his step. He plodded disconsolately towards the house. On the other hand Hoyle sprang forward the instant the doorway was clear, and vanished into the laboratory.

"Quick, eh?" said Brent appreciatively. If any clue to Mark's process had been left intelligible to a shrewd mind, the secret would assuredly not remain a secret long. Derek Crayle followed close upon Hoyle; and drew a breath of relief. Hoyle was standing in the centre of the great room, darting his eyes now into this corner now into that, and murmuring to himself:

"Ah! The old fox! Might ha' been spring-cleaned! The old foxy one."

Indeed, the great room looked ready for use rather than quitted after use. But for some utterly charred fragments of paper in the grate and a row of dyed strips of material pegged against a wall, there was no indication of the three nights and days during which Thewliss had worked there. The retorts, the Savalle columns, the dephlegmators stood in their accustomed places. Here was an iron vessel with its stirring gear; there another with a leaden cooling worm. A furnace and boiler, a reflux condenser, an earthenware apparatus for chlorination—all the paraphernalia of a perfectly equipped laboratory stood clean and orderly. In a corner by one of the shuttered windows a writing-table was placed with ink and writing-pad, pens and blotting-paper upon it and a comfortable chair with arms in front of it. Hoyle ran to it and, flinging open the shutters of the window, held the pad to the light. There might have been the indentations of a pen or pencil writing figures and calculations on an upper sheet now removed. There was not a

mark. If Thewliss had written upon one sheet, he had taken the precaution to tear off a good many others with it. Hoyle looked up and saw Derek Crayle watching his every movement.

"Good work, what?" he said with a laugh which had neither joy nor sincerity in it. "Tired, too, wasn't he? But not too tired to do the housemaid's work before he went home to bed."

Derek left Mr. Hoyle to pack up the exhibits and went back to the house. He was considerably puzzled by Mark's demeanour. That was not the way triumphant men behaved, however tired they might be; and certainly Mark had no doubt that he had triumphed. Derek felt that he must really look into this. The old boy might be sickening of a disease. When Derek reached the house, however, Mark had retired to his bath-room; and from his bath-room he retired to his bed and made no further appearance until dinner-time.

Even then he was more than ordinarily quiet and silent, though Olivia somehow seemed to understand him and to be sympathetic rather than disturbed. Hoyle had gone off to Bradford with his foremen and his samples, and there were only the three of them left. Derek waited until the port was set upon the table and then his curiosity broke through.

"I didn't understand you this morning, sir," he said, "You seemed to be sorry that you had brought it off."

Mark Thewliss smiled.

"Well, in a way . . . to a degree, I was. I'm not quite sure that I'm not sorry now. You see, Derek, I have lived with this particular dream for the best part of thirty years. Whenever I've had a free moment, I've given it to it. I've been like a dog with a bone too big for him to crack. He buries it and the next day scratches it up and has another try and then buries it again; and he finds life very interesting. Well, do you see, I've cracked my bone, and for the moment I'm finding life pretty empty."

Olivia dropped her eyes and then reaching out her hand took her husband's, shook it affectionately and dropped it again.

"But you've got all the fun of marketing the thing to come," Derek expostulated. "You've got all the fun of seeing it at work, of——"

"I know," Mark interrupted, and he turned with a smile to his wife. "I delivered a long lecture to you on that very subject, didn't I, Olivia, the day we first came over to look at this house? The invention was to do this and that. Make people happier, establish peace more surely by putting colour more easily within everybody's reach, and the rest of it." He spoke quizzing

himself and his earlier ambitions. “Yes, I ought to be blown out like a balloon over it. But as a matter of fact I feel that I have lost more than I have gained. I’ve come to the end of a big, perhaps a foolishly big dream, and”—he suddenly stretched out his arms on either side of him in a gesture very near to despair—“I’ve got nothing in the world to take its place.”

The poignant desolation, suddenly revealed in a man publicly so unemotional and publicly a very emblem of success, shocked Derek Crayle. He sat in an uncomfortable silence. With an almost violent movement, Mark tore from the breast-pocket of his dinner-jacket six small sheets of a strong, greyish-blue note-paper and tossed them across the table.

“There’s the formula, Derek, every stage of it. Not quite the half-sheet of note-paper, but not so far from it.”

Derek took up the pages. They were covered on both sides with hieroglyphics and diamond-shaped figures and capital letters with tiny numbers against them and little sums in multiplication and addition; so that Derek’s head began to turn.

“I can’t make head nor tail of it,” he said.

“You aren’t meant to, Derek.”

Crayle turned the sheets over and over.

“Do you carry all this in your head?” he asked.

“A good deal of it. Some of it I expect I should have to work out again if I lost those papers.”

“Of course this is what Hoyle was looking for,” Derek continued, “or some part of it.” He looked suddenly at Mark Thewliss. “Could Hoyle understand all this?”

“No, but he employs a chemist. The chemist could.”

“Then you want to put this away in a very safe place,” said Derek Crayle emphatically.

Mark Thewliss laughed, and this time really laughed. “You misjudge Hoyle. He’s not really a bad fellow.”

“Oh,” said Derek dryly. “Well, some day I shall have to tell you the story of the curate’s egg.”

“Yes, but I’ll choose the day,” Mark rejoined in alarm.

He stretched out his hand across the table and took the six sheets again into his keeping.

"I am not disposed to let Hoyle and the rest of them down over this," he said. "It'll mean scrapping a bit of machinery no doubt, and installing something new. But we might work an amalgamation on the big scale." He sat and fingered the papers for a little while, conning them over and again over. "However, there's no hurry. We have four months to think our plans over."

"And meanwhile you'll keep that formula safe and secret," Derek urged earnestly.

Mark turned towards his wife.

"My dear, I think Derek takes me for a damnder fool than I am. Shall we move?"

Olivia Thewliss took Derek Crayle with her into the drawing-room. Mark Thewliss went away into his library and remained there. After an hour had passed Olivia began to look disturbed.

"What in the world can he be doing?" she said.

"I'll go and see," replied Derek, jumping up.

But Olivia held him back.

"No! Give him a little more time!"

At the end of another half-hour she gave in.

"Yes, I would like you to see."

Derek Crayle hurried across the hall and tried a door. It was locked on the inside. He stood for a moment or two gravely troubled. Mark Thewliss had shown himself that evening possessed by a curiously disturbing and unfamiliar mood. Had the reaction following upon so violent a demand on his vigour thrown him off his balance? Derek turned back into the hall and, opening the front door, crept round to the library windows. The blinds were lowered, but the room behind the blinds blazed with light. Crayle examined the windows. He could not see an inch of the room, so completely the blinds covered the panes. He went back into the drawing-room.

"Well?" said Olivia.

There was actually fear in her eyes and in the upward intonation of her voice.

"The door's locked. The blinds are drawn down. I could see nothing. I could hear nothing."

"Listen!"

The command came sharply. They stood straining their ears to hear, both of them upon the very edge of panic. And then a key grated in a lock, and with a little sob of relief Olivia dropped back into her chair as though her knees had given under her.

They heard Mark's step in the hall. Mark pushed open the door and stood smiling. The moment heavy with tragedy had passed.

"I've put the formula away where not even Hoyle could find it," he said.

"Yes! I know!" Derek Crayle grumbled. "In the secret drawer in your bureau."

Mark lit a cigar and sat down, now quite at his ease.

"So you knew about that secret drawer, did you?"

"Yes, I and everybody else in the house. You keep your postage stamps in it, don't you?"

Mark Thewliss laughed aloud.

"I did. But I'm keeping the formula there now. And if anyone in the house opens it for Hoyle's benefit, why Hoyle is welcome to all that he can make out of it."

Derek, however, was not satisfied.

"Sometimes the best of servants can be bribed. You never know. I don't trust Hoyle. If he could get hold of that formula and destroy it, he would."

Mark did not answer for a moment. But he was quite unmoved by any fear of what Hoyle might or might not do in any contingency.

"Derek," he said, "you must ask Olivia about me. She'll tell you that however much of a fool I may seem to be, I generally have something up my sleeve."

Olivia rose from her chair.

"We will renew this discussion to-morrow as we are going down Southampton Water," she said.

"What in the world do you mean?" cried Mark; and suddenly something of his alert youth shone again in his eyes.

“I mean that while you have been fussing about your experiments and your formulas, and wearing yourself to skin and bones,” she said, “I have taken it upon myself to have the schooner put into commission. It’s at its mooring now.”

CHAPTER XVII STARTLING NEWS

For six weeks the schooner cruised. She sailed westwards to the Scillies; her white sails gleamed like silver amongst the Hebrides. She turned south and anchored in the harbours of Brittany. It was a pleasant unadventurous voyage over smooth seas in sunlit weather, and a brown and reinvigorated Mark Thewliss returned to Upper Theign. On the morning after his arrival, he read through a letter and with a grimace tossed it across the breakfast table to his wife.

"A lecture from Gregory, my dear. The old man's coming down this morning full of reproaches. We must send the Rolls to the station for him, give him the best lunch we can with a glass of the '96 port, and moderate the thunderbolts."

It was the same Mr. Gregory who had jumped off his stool in the office many years ago to open the door for the future partner of Mardyke and Campion. But the stooping mind was now matched by the stooping body, and what was left of his hair was white. He brought with him documents to be signed and letters to be considered.

"The ordinary correspondence I have dealt with myself, my lord, as general manager. But you will find that there are a good many matters here which really needed a decision a few weeks ago."

"Quite so, Gregory."

For an hour the two men worked busily in the great library overlooking the lawn and the river.

"You'll stay for luncheon, Gregory," said Mark, rising quickly. "Meanwhile——"

"Your lordship is very kind, and meanwhile perhaps for a few minutes I may speak my mind," said Mr. Gregory.

"Certainly," said Mark with resignation. He knew the sort of wigging he was going to get from the old servant of the firm. He had vainly hoped to stave it off until after luncheon.

"Fire away, Gregory."

It was an old story, said Mr. Gregory, but with the recent expansion of their industry it had even greater force. Since old Mr. Mardyke had gone the work was too much for one man, and after all his lordship was no longer so young as he had been.

"Well, I have offered you a partnership half a dozen times, Gregory. Why don't you take it and stop bullying me?" Mark asked testily.

Gregory shook his head stubbornly.

"I am a born servant, my lord. I can manage a machine, I can't create one. I can develop a policy, I can't originate one. I have neither the courage nor the imagination. There are only a few things, my lord, in which all men can be equal; and one of them is the dignity which comes from knowing clearly to what one can't aspire."

No doctrine could be imagined with which a man of Mark Thewliss' temper was less in sympathy. He never heard it without a distaste which it needed all his knowledge of Gregory's long and devoted service to overpower.

"Very well," he said. "We must go on as we are."

"That's not necessary, my lord," Gregory urged. "For you have a born master at your elbow."

Mark looked up and stared.

"Who?"

"Colonel Crayle."

Mark's first thought was to cry out "He? Why I have known him all my life. Nonsense!" quite in the spirit of an old fogy.

But he caught himself up. Derek Crayle? Under thirty—well, all the better for that. And he had commanded four thousand men, had risen to the command of them. As it was, Derek half the time made his home with himself and Olivia. He already knew a good deal of Mark's affairs.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Gregory. I don't know what Colonel Crayle's point of view may be. There won't be much opportunity for him in the army for a long time, if ever. I should certainly like him as a partner."

"I was thinking of him less as a partner," Gregory suggested, "than as a director of the Board."

Mark Thewliss looked at Gregory with interest.

"You, too, think that we ought to become a company? I have been turning that question over in my mind for some time past. We are reaching out pretty far as it is, and next year I think we shall reach out a great deal farther still. Too much perhaps for one man. Yes! A limited liability company with myself as chairman and Derek on the Board, getting ready to follow me? Yes! Colonel Crayle may be at Gissens. I'll get him over and have a talk to him."

Derek Crayle was amusing himself amongst the pretty people at Deauville, but he turned his back on them when he received a letter from Mark and came straight to Upper Theign.

"I should like to join you," he said. "I have been hoping ever since the war ended that you would find room for me."

"Then if you can manage it, we'll go up to London to-morrow and push the business through."

Three busy weeks followed. There were meetings at the offices of Hawker, Hawker and Lyndhurst, arrangements were made with the heirs of Campion and the heirs of Mardyke. The staff at Brooke's Market was assembled. Derek Crayle was introduced formally, the proposal for the formation of a company in which all the employees should be shareholders was explained and accepted. There was for the moment to be no offer of shares to the public, but it was more than probable that the expansion of their business would in the autumn render that course advisable. Early in August the new company was registered, and Mark and Derek Crayle returned to Upper Theign. A family dinner party took place that night. Angela, who had been married then five years to young Lord Ilsenham of the Foreign Office, came over from Gissens with her husband and Tony Westram. Mark sat at the head of his table, the genial hero and benefactor. Everyone was in the highest spirits. Tony Westram was outspoken.

"Here's your health, Mark. I wish I had some of this port in my cellar. By Gad, I did a good stroke of work for my decadent old family when I asked the rising M.P. to Gissens."

"All very well for you to say that, my father," said Angela. "My recollections are a sheer humiliation to me. I did all that a properly brought up maiden could do, and he just looked at Olivia. I taught him to fish—yes, I gave up a whole day to it, and he looked upon me as a daughter."

Perhaps Olivia flinched for a second at this point. But to her, too, the evening was one of pride. There was a scar no doubt still upon her heart. There was a graveyard at Pietermaritzburg which she had never seen, never

would see, and had now learnt not to imagine. On the whole, she had more than the happiness which fell to most of the women she knew in the daily run of their lives. They missed one thing of course, both of them, Mark and herself, the dream-daughter with the starry eyes. But to-night in the warmth of this intimate gathering that aching want was, except for the moment of Angela's untimely sally, lulled into oblivion. The party broke up at midnight in a boisterous good-humour.

"By Gad, Mark, this is the best evening I've ever had," cried Tony from the motor-car, and, "Don't cry, Uncle," said Derek. "There's still some of the port left."

And so the evening ended. But on the next morning a visitor came to Upper Theign who thrust so vital a disturbance into the lives of the people of this history that the dinner party was never followed by one like to it, and even the remodelling of the firm of Mardyke and Campion to suit the conditions of to-day, became to them a matter of no significance.

It was twelve o'clock. Mark Thewliss was in his library, taking his ease over a copy of the day's *Times*, with a Cabanas Corona cigar to assist him; and a card was brought in to him.

"I can see no one. I am busy," said Mark to his butler.

Renson the butler stopped. He had a salver in his hand and the card upon the salver.

"It is a lady, my lord."

"She is collecting money for an orphanage."

"I think not, my lord," said Renson. He appeared to be firm and Mark testily gave way.

"Oh, very well! Let me see the card!"

It was Renson the butler, therefore, who was the immediate cause of all that was to happen. Had he not been moved by some obscure perception that this visitor deserved to be seen, he would have retired with his salver and announced that his lordship was too immersed in his affairs to see anyone. And had he acted thus, certainly the visitor would have gone away with a head held high and death itself at her heart; and never would she have returned. But as it was Renson advanced with the salver and Mark Thewliss read the card, and was so startled that he sat for a moment or two like a man paralysed. Then he said:

"Of course, I'll see the lady. Thank you, Renson."

He gave his butler a nod of acknowledgment for his insistence.

"Very well, my lord."

But before Renson had reached the door, Mark stopped him.

"I want five minutes, Renson. Will you show the lady into the morning-room, and be careful to tell her that I am asking her to wait so that I may hold myself completely at her disposal. When I ring, you'll show her in."

"Very well, my lord."

Had Renson been a butler of another calibre, he would have said to himself cunningly, "Hallo-o-o!" lengthening out the last syllable on a rising inflection into an innuendo of illimitable suggestion. But he did not belong to that school. He had induced his lordship to be reasonable and he was satisfied.

Mark, left to himself, did not quite understand why his instinct had clamoured for those five minutes delay. Some strong need certainly had brought Mona Perriton, after twenty-five years of silence, to his door. Mona was in a difficulty and a difficulty of very recent date. For Mr. Wyatt's latest report was only two months old and it contained nothing which was either new or alarming. But Mark was under no apprehension. It was a difficulty, obviously, which he could help to dissolve and he was very glad that Mona had turned to him. It was just some vague nervousness which had made him claim this interval of a few minutes, a medley of half a hundred unformulated questions in his mind.

What was Mona like after these twenty-five years? Was there anything left of the nimble high-spirited girl with the moments of real loveliness who had decorated the *Sea Flower* on that cutter's memorable cruise? With what a countenance and with what words would he greet her? Ghosts were always disconcerting. He crushed the end of his cigar in his ash tray as though he were receiving a stranger instead of one in whose company for a month he had smoked a pipe. Then he rang the bell and waited, his heart beating unreasonably fast. But as the door opened his nervousness left him.

"How do you do, Mona?"

"Very well. And you, Mark?"

"Fine"; and they shook hands.

It had not been so difficult a business after all. Mona had changed of course, as no doubt he himself had done. Twenty-five years must leave their fingermarks on forehead and cheek and round the eyes and the mouth. The

bloom, too, flits to younger faces. And fatigue comes—yes, perhaps more than a due share of it. But the thick copper-coloured hair had not thinned nor faded, the eyes had lost none of their mystery, the voice none of its melody.

"Come and sit down here!"

He pulled up a chair for her.

"I was afraid that you wouldn't know who I was," Mona said as she sat down.

"I knew very well," Thewliss returned. "At least I guessed it without any difficulty."

It would never do, he realised, to let Mona suspect that he had kept a watch upon her. Her pride would be up in arms in a second, demanding that the watch should cease.

"You had mentioned to me that a man called Perriton was your employer, so when your card was brought in I hadn't much doubt," he explained.

"No," she answered.

She could not remember that she had ever mentioned Henry Perriton's name to Mark, but she might have certainly, she reflected. At the lily pond in Staple Inn, or on any of a hundred occasions between Poole and the final anchorage in Southampton Water.

"I know something else about you, too, Mona," he said laughing, and yet with a note of envy in his voice.

Mona was too disturbed by his words to apprehend the accent which informed them.

"What do you know, Mark?" she asked, sitting up very straight.

"That you have what I'ld give the world to have, my dear. A perfectly crashing daughter."

The blood rushed into Mona's face, and her eyes shone and her mouth laughed. She had dreaded some allusion to her poverty and the unhappiness of her home, and she was sitting ready to deny every word of it. But the one thing of which he knew was the one glory of her life.

"Isn't she a darling?" she cried, and stopped in surprise. "How do you know anything about Lois, Mark?"

"When I once went to see the Director of Naval Intelligence at the Admiralty during the war, Lois guided my failing limbs to his room, clearly under the impression that I was a nonagenerian who might decay before her eyes unless she was very quick and helpful. I recognised her by her likeness to you, before I heard her name."

"Thank you!" said Mona. "For she is lovely, isn't she?"

It wasn't a compliment to herself that she was asking for, but admiration for the adorable daughter, from a man who must have seen all the flower of young beauty decked out in its most exquisite attire.

"There's only one word for her," said Mark firmly. "She's a crasher."

"And very good at her work," the mother insisted.

"She couldn't have held the position in which I found her for five minutes, if she hadn't been," Thewliss agreed.

"Thank you," said Mona gratefully. "You have made it very easy for me. If I had had to describe Lois to you and persuade you how clever she is, you would have thought 'That's the mother talking. I'll have to write off half of what she says.' As it is you know that I have been speaking the truth. And it's because of Lois that I have come to see you."

"Yes?"

Mona had come now to the point where she must choose her words.

"You must know," she began, making the little speech which she had during the last two days so often rehearsed, "that although we"—she could not bring herself even at this moment to say Henry and I—"have a great deal to be thankful for and contented with, we aren't terribly well-off. We get along all right, but we can't save very much and Lois has to work. Even if there were no actual need for her to do so, I am sure that her independence would make her insist upon working. Besides, she enjoys it."

"Yes," said Mark.

"Well, I want her to have her opportunity," and that word broke the barrier of Mona's reticence.

She became eloquent as one charged with a mission. She pleaded with the passion which brings the right word to the lips and the compelling magic to the voice.

"I can't endure to think that she shall have to live out a whole long, dull, insignificant life in some drab town, her youth ebbing away in a mean

struggle to make a halfpenny go as far as a penny. And she's a glorious girl, Mark. For her to lose the spring out of her walk, the light out of her eyes, all her radiance—to become toneless before her youth has half gone! No, it would be a shame, a waste—really a waste of something precious. I want her while she works—and she won't spare herself—to enjoy a wider life than we can help her to, to feel a little more of the grace of it, to know a little more of the exquisite dainty side of it than we can show to her. And she'll be at home too on that side. She found her own way there without our help during the war. She made charming friends for herself. She had a salary which enabled her to live daintily—for she's an excellent manager—but when the war ended, her good days ended too. Does it sound brutal and heartless to say that? But it's true of thousands of people, my girl amongst them. Since then she's been getting a precarious job every now and then and breaking her heart between whiles. So I have come to you, Mark. Can you do something?"

"Of course," said Mark.

"You are sure? It'll have to be something real—with responsibility."

Mark nodded his head.

"I understand that."

He rose and, opening a silver cedar-lined box, offered a cigarette to Mona.

"Smoke one and I'll smoke another," he said and as he lit the two cigarettes: "I am grateful that you came to me, Mona. And you came just at the right moment. We are expanding tremendously. I want help. Just give me a moment. There's so much choice that selection's actually difficult."

He exaggerated the truth no doubt, but he understood that Mona could not have brought herself to the point of asking help from him without a heavy pain of humiliation. And if she could be persuaded that she was actually doing a service the humiliation would be forgotten. He took a turn across the room, he stood by the big glass door opening on to the garden, he was apparently selecting. In fact he was considering how much time ought reasonably to elapse before he could turn round and say with a cry, "I have it!" For he had made his selection even while Mona was speaking. He swung the glass door backwards and forwards. "I think that'll do," he said to himself, and without considering what he was doing he shut the glass door and turned the handle.

"I know," he said, turning back into the room. "Listen to me, Mona! I have always been in trouble about a private secretary. I can't bear men, because I always think that a man ought to be busy doing something on his own. I have tried men and I can't get over a feeling of disdain for them, and with that inevitably, of course, a want of confidence. For women, however, it seems to me almost ideal work. They identify themselves with your interests as men don't do and oughtn't to do; they take your affairs over in a general way. When you're likely to go off at the deep end they manage somehow to stop you on the very edge of the spring board, and they like responsibility. I once had a really good one, but she got married of course, which was all in order. Well, I think the best thing your daughter could do is to come to me in that capacity. She'll have her own rooms in my house in London, where she can do her work and have her friends. She'll have her room here. She'll be one of the family and yet quite independent of it when she chooses. What do you say?"

"Mark!" Mona returned. "Do you mean that? It sounds to me wonderful! But you are taking her on trust."

"Not a bit of it, Mona. She's your daughter—that's one thing. And I know her history at the Admiralty—that's another."

He mentioned the salary he was prepared to pay. He made it definitely high, but not too high.

"It will be three hundred and fifty pounds a year besides the living and travelling expenses. And I promise you, Mona," he added with a smile, "that she shall see that pleasanter side of life you want for her. Now when can I see her?"

"She's here."

"Here?"

"Yes. We came together from London. I left her in the taxi whilst I came in to see you. She said that she would wander about the park if I was long."

"We'll send for her," said Mark, getting up and going towards the bell.

"No," Mona answered. "I'll find her myself and tell her the good news."

She rose from her chair. The dreaded interview was over. Her Lois was set free from the squalors of Glebe Villa and from the dreary soul-murdering tramp for work. She would have her chance now. She would move in a more delicate world amongst gardens and flowers. She would have companions and games and good health, and the pride of her independence. That Mona

herself would lose her daughter she was well aware, but the sense of loss was all swallowed up in her joy in Lois' prosperity.

"I hadn't expected anything half so wonderful, Mark," she said with a warm gratitude.

"It's I who am going to benefit," he returned. "Look at my table!"

A great mahogany writing-table stood in the centre of the big room. It was made for use by two people. There was a knee-hole and two pedestals of drawers on either side. Two arm-chairs and two writing-pads faced one another across the leather top. But the table to-day was in a sad litter with papers and letters, prospectuses and envelopes.

"Gregory—that's my manager in London—hasn't the high opinion of me that I have of myself," he said ruefully, "and when I look at my table I wonder whether he's right. Miss Perriton will have to put it right."

"Oh, she'll soon do that"—Mona began and suddenly broke off.

Mark Thewliss had made two mistakes that morning. The first, when he had unwittingly closed and turned the knob of the French window in his study; the second, when to demonstrate his acute need of a secretary he pointed to the litter of papers on his table. Had he been content not to embroider an arrangement already made, Mona Perriton would have hurried off into the park, and the duologue would then and there have ended. As it was Mona's eyes were attracted to the table and she saw it, holding down some papers as a weight and half hidden by others—the mallet. Mona recognised it by the big capital M burnt into the flat side, and being herself a little overstrung by the immediate success of her plan, she blurted out:

"So you have kept it, Mark," and the recollection of her one dream-like holiday came back to her on a golden tide; so that the blood rushed into her face, her eyes grew soft, for a moment her youth was hers again.

"Kept what?" Mark asked in a perplexity.

"The mallet."

She reached forward and picked it up.

"That?" Mark said, still wondering what the pother was about. "I suppose I have used it for a paper weight, off and on, for a very long time. Now I come to think of it, it must have lain on this big table ever since I came to Upper Theign. I have used it—yes, but I haven't noticed it. I must have found it somewhere one day when the wind from the garden was

blowing my letters all over the room. But where it came from, I can't imagine."

"I can tell you," said Mona, with an odd smile. She was amused like one playing a game.

Mark fell in with her mood.

"Let me think! . . . No! . . ." He took the mallet out of her hand and turned it over. "M for Mark? . . . No, I can't remember doing that!"

"You didn't do it."

Mark's mind was a blank.

"Who did?"

"An old boat-builder at Salcombe." And Mark Thewliss dropped the mallet. It fell with a heavy thud upon the leather-covered table, turned over twice, knocking loudly—knocking upon the closed doors of memory—and lay still.

"I had forgotten it altogether," said Mark quietly; and at another time Mona would have heard in his voice an urgent appeal that she should forget it too. But she heard only the words. She was carried away by a sudden passion, born of the recollections which surged up in her at the sight of that mallet, strengthened too by Mark's own kindness. He should have his reward for that kindness. Lois too would get her profit from it, wouldn't she? Mona persisted.

"The old boat-builder tossed it into the punt. You had your letter offering you the partnership. We were racing back to Southampton Water. It was a Sunday morning. He threw it into the punt, as he pushed us off from the steps—with a word or two, Mark . . ."

"Mona!" he cried sharply, loudly, and she stopped.

He remembered the little incident now, and the words the old man had used; and he did not wish them repeated. Women looked backwards—men looked forwards—wasn't that the rule of the world? No doubt that old mallet had come along with the rest of the *Sea Flower's* furniture when she was dismantled years ago. It had lain here and lain there, in this house and that, under his nose, but never recognised, never even really perceived. It was bad luck that her eyes should notice it.

"Mona, I want you to understand," he said gravely; and to stop a resurrection which he felt somehow to be dangerous he went beyond the

truth. “That old mallet has no history for me at all. It would not be lying on my table in this house if it had. It has no meaning, no associations. The M! As you say, I didn’t burn it into the wood. It has nothing to do with me. Shall I tell you what it is? It is the initial upon a coffin which has lain forgotten, deep in the earth for five-and-twenty years.”

So he spoke and turned away. But the answer came nevertheless, very low and gently uttered but very distinct.

“Yes, Mark, but dead things which have lain coffined deep in the earth for five-and-twenty years still have living children.”

And she waited with just a tiny sense of triumph whilst the truth so long concealed broke like the dawn upon Mark’s brain and heart.

CHAPTER XVIII DIFFICULTIES—AND NATURE'S WAY OUT

Lois!

She was his, then—actually his. Mark began to move about the room, almost stumbling like a blind man, putting out a hand and feeling the back of a chair here, the edge of a table there. There was a light upon his face which none of his success had ever kindled. He was troubled, but divinely troubled. The dream of many years, now for many years foregone, was fulfilled, the ache to be lulled only by an obsession of work was smoothed away. An overcast day had broken up and the rose had bloomed. Lois! And he had called the name fantastic! Why, it was an adorable name. Mark laughed—a quiet gurgle of delight. He was thinking:

"A crasher! Not Mr. Wyatt's style, which was plump and ruddy. And not homey! But definitely a crasher! Well, I must see if I can't produce some hominess without damaging the crashery."

He was standing in the window looking out on to the park; and he recalled the afternoon when he had first been brought to this house, with his new need beginning to clamour for fulfilment. How long ago was that? Twelve years. Yes, twelve years. A sense of injustice and resentment all at once soured his high pleasure. For twelve years he had been robbed.

"You ought to have told me of this before, Mona," he said sullenly, without turning about to her.

"When—before?" she asked in a reasonable cool voice. "Before Lois was born perhaps? That was the only time. But you wouldn't have thanked me if I had. You didn't want a child in those days, Mark. You didn't even want a wife." A faint colour tinged her pale face and her voice now sank to a whisper full with confidence. "I'ld have starved rather than tell you." She caught herself up, disdaining her own words.

"It's curious how easily that sort of phrase gets itself spoken. Of course I shouldn't have starved—neither I nor Lois. I was quite capable of looking after both of us."

"Yes," Mark agreed, turning now towards her.

He remembered her pride and her efficiency. She stood with her head erect, her form still unbent. No doubt to this day she retained them both. Yet —yet—he put his perplexity into words.

"Yet you married Perriton."

"Yes. I wanted a name for Lois. I wanted her not to be ashamed. Henry was very good to me." Mona Perriton began to pick her way through a drift of dangerous words. "I didn't cheat him, of course. I told him the truth—that a child was coming, that you were its father. I made him take a little time to think it over—not too long. If we were going to marry we couldn't afford too long. He agreed that the child should be his. He was very good to me. We were little people as we are now, and we could live unnoticed. No one was going to worry about the date of our marriage. We used to live in a suburb where nobody knew us and there Lois was born."

"And Lois herself knows nothing?"

"Nothing. That was the bargain," and she repeated: "Henry has been very good to me."

The phrase stung Mark Thewliss to three separate kinds of anger. Anger with himself first of all. Other men had reached higher place and greater power than his who had married young and far humbler wives. He stole a glance at Mona. The stress of her life had worn her beauty thin before its time, but had she been set in the easy places amongst the exquisite things, as he could so soon have set her, she would have graced his house as long ago she had graced the *Sea Flower*; and she would have brought Lois with her. Anger with Mona in the second place, in that she put him to the humiliation of this self-reproach; and most unjust of all a spurt of anger with Olivia, a disparagement of her because she had married him and failed where Mona had triumphed. If she had triumphed!

The suspicion slipped into his mind, more because he needed to find a fault in some other as well as in himself than for any other reason. Suppose that Mona Perriton—"pinched," that was the word—had looked about her for some warm satin-lined nest in which she could plant her darling and had chosen his house! He did not utter the suspicion, but it was in his eyes as he looked at her and Mona answered it. He had forgotten that uncomfortable gift she had of seeing the mechanism of his thoughts, when most he wanted a smoke-cloud to hide it behind.

"You can easily find out the date of my marriage and the date of Lois' birth," she said, and she gave him on the spot the names of the church in

which she wedded and the suburban parish of Liverpool in which Lois was born.

"Besides," she added, "you mustn't forget that you had already promised all and more than I asked for Lois, before I told you she was your daughter. There was no reason why I should tell you at all. I didn't mean to when I came into this room. I was probably unwise. But I saw the mallet, and it brought back dim things too vividly, and—and—I suddenly wanted you to know." A smile gave back for a moment its beauty to her tired face. "I wanted you to be as proud of Lois as I am."

Mark's indignation died away altogether.

"I don't suppose that I shall find that so very difficult," he replied with a laugh. "I never really doubted that you were telling me the truth," and indeed if he had so doubted, her story chimed so exactly with the discoveries of Joseph Wyatt that the doubt could not have endured. "I was trying not very successfully to find someone besides myself whom I could blame. Sit down again for a moment, Mona."

He needed a few moments for reflection. The glittering avenues were now seen to be paved with flints. There would be delicate walking for all of them concerned in this ironic entanglement—for himself especially. He could not acknowledge Lois publicly, as he would have loved to have done, for her sake, and for Mona's and for his wife's Olivia's. That way out was closed, the door slammed and bolted and barred. There was another way to be sure, but it needed time and a good deal of sacrifice on Mona's part and a good deal of charity on Olivia's, and even then Lois herself might say "No"—yes, might very well say "No." He had met her but the once in the corridor of the Admiralty; but she had given him nevertheless a vivid impression of something more than a high independence and a consciousness of strong youth, of—armour. Yes, that was the word he wanted. Armour damascened and gilded and daintily adorned, but armour none the less. Not homey, in a word, but a crasher.

"Still, if I go to work very carefully," he reflected, "we might all in the end agree and I could adopt her."

Since he and Olivia were growing old in a big and empty house, which itself, as he sometimes imagined it, was aching for the ripple and clamour of young voices, the adoption of a girl who had made her home there would be the most natural and reasonable thing. Only there was Olivia's point of view to be considered. He had an awkward little story to tell her—full of humiliation for her. How would she take it? She was a brick, yes, but she

was the corner stone of this palace of dreams which he was so busily erecting, and would she fit into her important place?

Mark rose with an uneasy jerk from his chair. He was not of the men who go to a doctor and hope that the truth will be concealed from them. He wanted to know, and at once.

"I tell you what, Mona. You go and find Lois and bring her here, whilst I break the news to my wife."

Mona drew in her breath with a gasp.

"The news that you've engaged a secretary," she said insistently.

Mark shook his head.

"The news that I've found my daughter."

And a cry of fear broke with a startling sharpness from Mona's lips.

"Mark, you can't do that! You mustn't!"

"Mona, I must."

Supplications and entreaties were as unnatural in Mona Perriton's mouth as a foreign accent, but they streamed from her now. The bridle of acquiescence was lifted from her tongue.

"Mark, you don't understand! If you tell your wife everything she'll hate Lois. She will! She'll forgive you, she won't give a thought to me, but she'll hate Lois night and day. She'll make her life intolerable."

"You don't know my wife."

"I don't have to know her to be sure of that. Here's Lois, tall and slim and lovely, in your house, your child and not hers. An ever present reproach to her because she has never borne a child to you—a constant galling humiliation. She'll be horrible to Lois! Any woman would—the best in the world. We can all be as venomous as rattlesnakes if we get provocation enough, and you're giving her all the provocation in the world."

She looked eagerly into Mark's face for some sign of acquiescence, but though he stood moodily frowning as though he half believed her, he would not keep her secret from Olivia.

"What a fool I was ever to tell it you," she exclaimed. "I have kept it myself for twenty-five years and now I must blurt it out like a lunatic. Mark, listen!" She took his arm and clung to it:

"I am warning you. This pleasant life of yours will all be spoilt," and Mark gently freed himself from her grasp.

"I can't help it," he said quietly. "It's the risk we must run. But to bring my daughter into my house and not tell my wife? No! I am going to use your own words, Mona. I don't cheat, either."

Mona wrung her hands in a little gesture of despair and was silent. Mark crossed to the door. His hand was on the knob when she spoke again but this time in a gentle, almost toneless, voice.

"Wait a moment, will you?"

As he had asked her for a space for reflection, so she made the same plea now. She stood with her eyes upon the carpet at her feet and asking herself:

"Shall I take Lois away? Shall I find her and say that I have failed? Wouldn't that be the best way? But what if I do?"

In time, no doubt, Lois would get a job of work. She might even find one immediately, and a good one. But it was all a matter of chance. And here was this startling opportunity waiting to be seized. She couldn't refuse it. She couldn't go in search of Lois and see the distress cloud her face, and her lips perhaps quiver and the tears gather in her eyes. Lois must run the risk of the wife's hostility. Mark at all events would be there to protect her.

"I'll go and find Lois," she said. "But remember you hold her in trust from me."

"My dear, I'll not fail you."

Both of them were grave, both conscious that a vital change had taken place in the direction of their lives. As a rule one lustrum melts into the next by a gradual development, so that changes of disposition and views and obligations which may surprise and even shock the onlooker cause not so much as a start to those to whom they happen. Habit unawares smooths out a life. But twice these two had stood conscious of a revolution in their lives —once in Salcombe Harbour on board the *Sea Flower*, a second time here at Upper Theign—with a definite choice to make of which they could not foresee the consequences but knew they must be tremendous.

"You'll do what you can, Mark, I know," she said as he held open the door for her. She laid a hand for a second upon his sleeve and passed out into the sunlight of the garden.

Mark closed the library door. On the other side of the room a second door opened into Olivia's sitting-room. He took a step or two towards it and

suddenly drew back, his heart leaping unexpectedly. Through the window he saw two young people side by side on the river bank—Derek Crayle and his own daughter Lois.

He hid behind a window-curtain and watched. Derek was doing all the talking, pointing out some feature of interest, then again narrating some terrific reminiscence, some great fish played with infinite patience upon a pack-thread and—with a glance towards the laboratory under the trees—some proud word about his partnership. He was talking about himself with a complete concentration in the time-honoured way; and she, with a smile here and a look of admiration there and a timid little question to show at once her ignorance and her interest, was just jollying him along in the time-honoured way too. Mark Thewliss chuckled as he watched them. There were the glass panes of the french window between him and them, but he had no need to hear what they said, so evidently was the age-old story of the young man and the maid beginning to be retold.

Of course here was the solution of his troubles! Whilst he was considering clumsy processes like adoption, Nature was taking the matter into her own capable hands, flattening down that flinty road for him, telling him to stand on one side and see good work well done. Mark laughed aloud in the silent room. What a couple they would make! Both of them young and erect and sane and sweet with health. They had fallen into a thoughtful mood now, walking pensively, exchanging thoughts of an unparalleled profundity. It was all according to plan—but Nature's plan, not his. He turned away from the window and sought Olivia in her sitting-room.

CHAPTER XIX THE COMPLICATION OF OLIVIA

He told her the story from the beginning. Olivia interrupted him with a smile of dry good-humour when he described the month's cruise of the *Sea Flower*.

"I hope you had good weather, Mark," she said.

"Gorgeous," he replied with a chuckle of relief at the spirit in which she took the disclosure of the gay adventure of his youth. But it was all over and done with long before he had ever set eyes on her at Gissens, and there was nothing in so hoary an affair to cause her a second of inquietude.

But her face changed as the story was continued; and when she understood the purpose on which he had set his heart, such a look of revolt and consternation came into her eyes and convulsed her features as Mark had never seen in her before.

"Your daughter?" she said in a low incredulous voice. "You are going to bring her into our house between you and me? She's to have her room in your offices in London, she's to live with us here. She's to share your confidence, to know all your secrets? To push me out?"

"No," Mark exclaimed. "She couldn't do that!"

"Couldn't she? You'll see, my dear. She has youth, ability you say, and I don't doubt it. Good looks and good manners?"

"Yes."

"Yes, indeed. You would have been quick to mention it, if she had been plain. And your daughter, besides. What you have longed for until even in your sleep you have prayed aloud for her coming. What arms have I against her?"

Already it was a war, and the terms of war came naturally to Olivia's lips.

"You need no arms," cried Mark in a quick protest but she took him up.

"Oh, the fine words! She'll dance about this house, she'll work, and she'll laugh, she'll manage you and hector you prettily and you'll love every minute of it. You are looking forward to every minute of it. And the fresh

young face and the fresh young voice will just mean a perpetual shame for me."

The words dropped to a whisper; she made a little despairing gesture with her hands and sat silent. She spread about her an aura of desolation. She saw the peace and the pleasant security of the lovely house broken up, the house itself toppling about her ears. She was exaggerating, thought Mark, she was prophesying woes, the Cassandra of a tea-party; but none the less the woes, imaginary though he believed them to be, were real enough to her.

He turned away and stood disconsolately staring out of the window. The view it commanded was different from that of his study. He overlooked an empty space of grassland and trees. There was no river bank, no gracious couple strolling absorbed in the momentous affairs of youth. He missed them and must continue to miss them.

"Of course, Olivia, I shall take back my promise," he said gently and then his voice shook. "And I had so built upon it—even within these few minutes since I have known! But it can't be helped. I must find some other way of giving a start to that poor little girl."

The misery of his voice melted Olivia.

"Poor little girl," she repeated, and added with a poignant sadness: "But poor Mark too! And poor Olivia! And poor all of us! She must come, my dear. You'ld grieve too much if she didn't. You'ld blame me—you couldn't help blaming me."

"No."

"And you'ld be just in blaming me. God knows, it mightn't be very long before you came to loathe the sight of me. It's I who would be the interloper."

Mark began some sort of protest but she would not hear him. She gave him her hand with a smile and a sigh:

"It's settled, Mark. I'll join you in the library. Just give me a minute or two"; and she could not forbear from a little stinging phrase to end the debate. "It needs a little study to take in a moment gracefully the second place."

"That's all nonsense, Olivia," said Mark, and he drifted uncomfortably out of the room, with a regret in his mind that women should build such enormous mountains out of such small molehills. They would talk in

superlatives. First Mona must start the exaggeration with her talk about rattlesnakes and venom. Now Olivia must tread upon her heels with lamentations that she was dethroned.

Certainly Olivia was right in this. A revolution had taken place in the small society of Upper Theign and its economy was quite upset. Olivia rose from her chair and planted herself in front of a long mirror, and shook her head dolefully over the image of herself which she saw reflected there. The charm of delicate colours was lost from her face. Perhaps Mark had never noticed the loss, so gradually they had faded. But he would now that she was to stand side by side with youth in all its fine bravery. He would realise it incredulously, so startling must be the contrast. Olivia was a handsome woman in the early forties who had not been troubled by jealousies and had watched the passing of the years with equanimity. But she took the blackest view of herself this morning, finding merit neither in her appearance nor her record.

"A barren, middle-aged good-for-nothing," she said, with many nods of the head, reprimanding her reflection in the mirror. And catching a trick of speech from her husband: "Your name's Mrs. Fiddle-Faddle."

She tore herself away from her mirror. The glass door of her room stood open. She stepped out into the garden. A few minutes in the fresh air and she would subdue herself to meeting the interloper with a smiling welcome and a frank clasp of the hand. But she shrank from the meeting the more she rehearsed it, and the minutes heaped themselves up. She thought that she might be the better composed if she approached the library from the garden. She would thus have the opportunity of seeing the interloper a little while before the actual moment of speaking to her. She walked therefore round the angle of the house and stopped in front of the library windows. She had a clear view of the room and no one within the room noticed her at all.

Yet there were three people within the room. Mark, Derek Crayle and Lois herself. Derek was a new complication in the tangle of the affair. Olivia had not thought of Derek in her confusion, but she made up for it now. She had views for Derek—a marriage suitable to his fine record and his high future. Derek was to her a younger brother. No, she wouldn't allow any foxiness of Mark's to make a sacrifice of Derek. Certainly not! She was quite convinced that it was no wounded feeling of her own which made her so determined that Derek should not be entrapped to make glories for Mark's daughter. Certainly not.

"I am thinking coolly and impartially of Derek's happiness," she assured herself; and she repeated her assertion several times upon the principle of Doctor Coué.

She watched them. It increased her indignation—for she was indignant now—that she could not find fault with Lois. She was rather lovely with her big dark eyes, her clear oval of a face, and her long, slim legs. Also she was well dressed. At the bottom of her heart Olivia had wished for a distressing incurable flashiness. But from the girl's plain brown court shoes to her little hat she was as trim and spruce as if she had just been unpacked from a band-box. Not a bunch of ribbons fluttered, nothing flopped. And she was making the men look silly. She certainly was. They were arranging her end of the big writing-table, both of them, laughing, setting her blotting-pad straight and her chair in position, courting her—"gambolling," said Olivia disdainfully.

Inside the room, indeed, Mark was saying:

"Yes, that'll be your place, Miss Perriton, when you're at work, straight opposite to me."

"Not when I use a typewriter," said Lois.

"Oh, I don't mind a typewriter," Mark explained airily. "It never distracts my attention."

"Indeed, it helps me to concentrate," said Derek. "I shall sit here."

He drew up a chair at the side of the table midway between the two ends.

"Nothing of the kind, Derek," Mark exclaimed. "This isn't your room. Besides, the table's solid. There's no place for your legs."

Olivia could not hear the ridiculous conversation, but she had no need to. It was all very evident through the glass of the windows. And the girl stood aloof, pleasantly grave and well-mannered and attentive.

"Making my men look silly," said Lady Thewliss. "I'm not going to have it."

Her indignation was now unendurable. She advanced towards the window, no longer shy of the meeting, on the contrary eager for it. She pushed the long panel of the window which should have opened inwards. But on this occasion it did not open at all. There was a knob on the outside, but it was only a knob. The bolt worked within the room, and, as it has been recorded, Mark had shot it. Olivia found herself shut out.

“This is what I said would happen,” she reflected. “It’s a sign! I am pushed out,” and she rapped upon the glass.

But so engrossed were the two men in the new secretary, and so attentively was the new secretary watching them, weighing them, that the rapping was unheard. She knocked a second time, more loudly, with exasperation tingling in her finger-tips. This second time Mark Thewliss heard. He looked up and saw Olivia’s face beyond the window-pane. He barely suppressed a cry of dismay as he hurried forward and flung it open.

“I bolted it by accident,” he said, excusing himself.

“No doubt, my dear.”

“A long time ago, Olivia. I wasn’t thinking. It was before I came to see you in your room.”

“That’s all right, Mark,” Olivia answered. “It’s what you would call according to plan, isn’t it?” She stepped forward. “And this young lady is your new secretary, Mark?”

“Yes. This is Miss Perriton. Lady Thewliss.”

The shrewd young eyes rested quietly on the agitated face of her elder. Lois bowed respectfully.

“You will make yourself at home here,” said Olivia. “It is quiet, but, of course, we are often in London, too, and no doubt your presence will bring about a change even here.”

The words might have been cordially meant, but they were tipped with irony.

“You’ll stay for lunch, Miss Perriton, won’t you?” Olivia added.

“Thank you very much, but my mother is waiting for me. We kept our taxi, and have a train to catch.”

“Miss Perriton will be taking up her duties in a week’s time,” said Mark, and as Lois, with another inclination of the head, moved to the door, Derek followed her. There was an awkward moment of silence when Mark and Olivia were left alone. Then she said:

“She is very pretty. I congratulate you, Mark. I am sure that she will be a great help. Luncheon will be ready in five minutes.”

She went into her own room, whilst Mark plumped himself down in a chair.

“The scientists say that sometime or another the glacial period will return to England,” he reflected. “By George, they’re right, and it’s already begun.”

He raised his head when Derek returned into the room and said:

“Derek, I was warned that I was going to do a damned silly thing. But I wouldn’t listen. I went ‘wow-wow’ and did it. And after I had done it I knew it was a damned silly thing. Does that ever happen to you?”

“It’s normal,” said Derek Crayle.

The gong was sounded in the hall. Derek went out of the room to wash for luncheon. Mark Thewliss sat on, very disheartened. He heard Olivia saying again: “Poor Mark! Poor Olivia! Poor all of us!”

He wondered uneasily.

CHAPTER XX MR. HOYLE TALKS A GOOD DEAL

Half-way through the month of October of that year four men dined together in a private room of a great railway hotel in Manchester. Arthur Hoyle, who had kept the keys of the laboratory at Upper Theign whilst Thewliss was demonstrating his new formula, had convoked the other three to this city as to a convenient centre. They were all engaged in the manufacture of fabrics: Sir James Copeland, of Bradford, Wisberry of Somersetshire, and Benfield, who was striving desperately to maintain a small industry of pure silk on the border of Cheshire. During the service of dinner they talked flat racing and golf and musical comedy; and it was not until the coffee and the liqueurs were on the table and the door shut upon the waiter that the business of the evening was approached.

Benfield, an old, thin, tall man with a bald head and an untidy beard, leaned forward, anxiously rolling between his lips, with long, tobacco-stained fingers, a small cigarette.

"Well, Hoyle! Let us hear!"

"There's no doubt about it," Hoyle answered.

He got up from his chair and took from an attaché case, which was laid upon a plush couch against the wall, a parcel wrapped in tissue-paper. He carried the parcel back to the table and, unfolding it, displayed the dyed strips of different materials which he had carried away with him from Upper Theign.

"It has been a hot summer, as you know," he said. "During the last four months these samples have all been exposed continually to the fiercest sunlight. Now look at them! The colours are as fresh as they were on the day when I took them away from Thewliss' laboratory."

The strips were passed from hand to hand and examined with a meticulous scrutiny.

"So, you see! Thewliss has brought it off."

The samples reached the mournful Benfield last of all, and as he laid them again upon the table Copeland, of Bradford, a small, round,

comfortable man, looked up faintly hopeful and asked:

"There was no trickery, I suppose?"

"Yes. What about that?" exclaimed Wisberry. "I put it up to Thewliss myself that I shouldn't be easily satisfied."

"Not a bit."

Hoyle was the only man of the party who was not sunk fathoms deep in gloom. By contrast with the others his voice sounded brisk and even cheerful.

"Apart from the fact that Thewliss isn't a trickster—we've all got to allow that his record puts that idea outside practical politics—I held the key of the laboratory all the time he was at work, and I had men besides doing sentinel and regularly relieved. The windows were all shuttered and barred from the outside. Thewliss got his daylight and air through a skylight in the roof. He was *incommunicado*, believe me! No, his universal formula is O.K."

Copeland lit a cigar and compressed the sentiments of the small company into a brief oath.

"Damn the fellow!"

Then Mr. Benfield ran his long fingers through his beard and combed out some of his tangles.

"It means a new plant, I take it, even if Thewliss patents his formula and let us into his secret."

Hoyle shrugged his shoulders.

"New processes mean new installations."

"Then I'm through," said Mr. Benfield. "Down and out."

"Thewliss is thinking of the public," Hoyle replied.

"The public won't think of me when I'm being grilled in the Bankruptcy Court," said Benfield; and the man from Somersetshire beat impotently upon the table with his fist.

"The public!" he cried. "My eye to the public! I wish I had gone into the wine trade." And as his companions curiously wondered at this new twist in his thoughts, he continued: "By the Lord, I do. I sit in my house and drink the same sort of wine from the same sort of bottles, stopped with the same sort of corks, as my great-great-grandfather did in his square-skirted coat

and his buckled shoes. There's security for you in the wine trade. But with us it's all improvements and developments until your brain reels. And nobody asks for 'em, mind you! Not a soul!"

"The public?" asked Mr. Hoyle dryly.

"The public doesn't, because it doesn't know a thing about 'em until it's told. And it needn't be told. But there's always some damned restless, uncomfortable fellow like Thewliss who can't leave things alone."

"You're talking like my foreman Brent," said Hoyle, with a grin. He appeared to take some pleasure in sharpening still more the anger of his friends against Thewliss.

"Then your foreman Brent's a damned sensible fellow," Wisberry hotly retorted. "Just see how I stand. The Wisberrys have always been small, independent men, working their own factory, putting a little bit aside each year, taking a little bit of a part in their local affairs, small, independent, valuable men and proud of their position. They were never taken into big partnerships, they never stood for Parliament or married into society or got hoisted up into the peerage. They were small, dignified people with hundreds of years of traditions behind them, and contented. Now they've got to go. Washed out, amalgamated, one of a string of mills working Thewliss' universal formula. Sounds like a quack medicine, don't it? It's a rotten day for England when the small masters get sucked into the mangle and flattened out into employees."

Mr. Wisberry leaned back with an indignant snort, very red in the face, and puffed at his tobacco-pipe.

Hoyle turned towards Copeland.

"Beyond summing up very correctly our opinion of Thewliss, you haven't contributed to the discussion," he said, and Copeland agreed.

"No, I haven't. And I'll tell you why. I don't want to be bothered any more. I'm not a young man. I've worked devilish hard in my time, and I've now got a bit of money usefully invested. I'd like to go on as I'm going. A morning in the office, a round of golf three or four times a week, a good glass of port after my dinner and a long night's rest on the top of it. That's what I want, but if I can't have it I'm not going to put up with anything else! See? I'll be sorry to see a business I've built up go, but I've no children to worry about. I shall sell what I can sell—goodwill, mills, plant and the rest of it for what I can get and slip out."

Hoyle looked round the table with a grin.

"Not much fight in any of your fellows," he said unpleasantly. "Defeatists—that's the new word, isn't it?"

"You only break your nails when you fight a steamroller," said the melancholy man of the silkworms.

"Better lie down, and take the knock, eh?" answered Hoyle. "Well, personally, I'm against lying down."

His strong face, with its blunt features, flushed to a dark red, and was very masterful.

"It's all very well for you," Wisberry grumbled. "You can stand the racket."

"Perhaps! I'm not so sure that I can stand it—alone." He leaned towards Wisberry across the rim of the table. He wanted all these men with him, and he turned his voice to the notes of sympathy. "I'm all for your point of view. You have said many true things. The little independent men have built up England. The foreman who has the courage and brains and character to become a master, and when he's a master to work till one o'clock in the morning, when his comrade stops virtuously at six in the evening. Yes, those are the fellows. They're the heart and the strength of England. But they're done for. We've got to recognise that a lot of good things are passing away. There's not a politician in any party who'll cast a vote or make a speech to keep the little independent man alive and kicking. Conservatives, Liberals, Labour—give 'em any sort of fancy name you like—the little independent man means nothing to 'em. What they are going to replace him with, as the stay and prop of England, they don't know, they don't care, they don't give a thought to.

"We are governed not by men, but by phrases and gestures and slogans. 'Big business' is one of them. Big business means that no man shall work later or harder or better than his neighbour. So the little man can't get through. Conservatives say it, Liberals say it, Labour men say it. What's the phrase? The door is slammed and bolted and barred—against the little man. He must stop work at six and remain a man on a wage, somebody's servant always and never his own master. He has got his recreation ground to make up for his servitude. We've got to face it. Amalgamations, mass production, each unit of production fed with enormous capital and no more little independent men. Yes, but listen to me! The little men who've got through, who are in being—they're in a different case. It isn't a question of stopping them getting through. It's a question of pushing them back amongst the servants;" and he stopped and looked about him, nodding his head

encouragingly—the man who knew something, the man with a scheme. "Not quite such an easy job, that! No, sir!"

Of Hoyle's small audience, Copeland, who had severed himself from ambition and looked for nothing more than the ease to which his years of work had entitled him, was perhaps alone unimpressed by the tirade.

"What's the great idea?" he scoffed. "Shall we burgle Thewliss' house and destroy his formula?"

"Destroy it, no," Hoyle returned quickly; and even Copeland raised his eyebrows in a flash of interest. It was only the destruction of the formula which Hoyle accepted as ridiculous. The other half of his joke, the theft of it, was left unmentioned—as too foolish for words? Or as worth so many words that it could only be most delicately approached. Copeland felt himself pleasantly stimulated, as he might be by a detective novel.

"Carry on!" he said in quite a different voice.

Suddenly all the lassitude and the despair had vanished. A new spirit had awaked in that room. Three pairs of eyes were fixed upon Hoyle, eyes still anxious but no longer hopeless, three chairs were drawn close to the tables, three bodies became vibrant and alert. Hoyle had the magnetism of a leader. To borrow an expressive phrase from another art, he came over the footlights at them—and held them.

"To destroy the formula," he declared, and brushed the notion away with a wave of the hand, "no good! One thing, I think it's not so complicated but that Thewliss can carry the main processes in his head and work out the rest again. He has been twenty-five years at it, remember! But even if he couldn't, someone else will. I'm a fatalist in these things. Once a thing's discovered, it's discovered. Drag a secret out of Nature, she can't hide it away again. It'll be whispered somehow, it'll fill the air, and some crafty fellow will condense it and get it tangible and solid again. No! Leave that out!"

"What then?" asked the manufacturer from Somerset.

"Yes, what then?" Hoyle repeated. "Now listen to me and don't for Heaven's sake shy at a word I'm going to use," and he leaned forward shaking a forefinger. "The important thing for us gathered here is not the formula but the psychology—yes, that's the word you're not to shy at—of its discoverer, Mark Thewliss."

Mr. Hoyle was perhaps a little too disdainful of his companions. They were all, even the downhearted Benfield, shrewd enough business men who

knew very well the importance of the individual factor in a deal and found nothing over-cryptic in Hoyle's fine word.

"Very like," said Copeland. "Let's hear!"

"I've known Thewliss for donkey's years," Hoyle continued, "did business with him when poor old William Mardyke used to wring his hands over his piratical young partner. Thewliss was going through the scrum then with his head down"—he turned to Wisberry—"your independent little man working till one o'clock in the morning and up again at six. Scientist first of all, mind, but wanting money, high position, the delicacies of life, power—or rather the sensation of power. Not so much doing things—which means power—as the pleasurable knowledge that you can do things if you choose. You can see that difference in the fact that though a Cabinet Minister young enough to be able to look forward to the highest office, he chucked it, took a peerage and went back to his own work. After all, governing is power, real power. But Thewliss had got what he wanted, the sensation of it, the tang and savour of it. He's a stag who eats only the top of the turnip, wants the fine taste not the meal, and so he went off to make real this old dream of his, the formula which is to put colour within the reach of the poorest coolie in Seringapatam and make the whole world good-humoured."

"Well, that's the man! Granted," Benfield agreed. "But how are we saved?"

"Yes," Wisberry concurred explosively. "It's all high-class, up-to-date exposition, old man, and thank you very much for it. But where do we come in?"

"I didn't say 'that's the man,'" Hoyle returned. "I didn't even say it was ever all the man, though it was the part of him which stood out. But other sides of him are standing out now. He married, he wanted children, and there he's failed, you see, and it has broken his spirit a bit. Take that from me! He, the great man with all the coolies in lilac robes bowing to him as a second Mahomet, and an adoring family saying: 'That's papa, that big swell of a fellow!' Not to be! So Thewliss loses his edge. Then there's another curious little illuminating scene I was present at. Wait a bit! My throat's dry."

Mr. Hoyle rose from his chair and rang the bell. He certainly was thirsty, for not only was he talking a great deal more than was his habit, but he was talking with his thoughts concentrated on making such a choice of words as would best persuade his audience. But he desired even more than the satisfaction of his thirst a little space of time during which his three guests might memorise the substance of his speech.

When the waiter appeared he ordered:

"Four double whiskies and four small sodas."

Mr. Benfield set up a mild bleat that if he took anything at this hour it was a glass of dry sherry, but Copeland, crying: "My word, that accounts for a lot," would not allow it. It was only when the four tumblers were pleasantly bubbling on the table that Hoyle resumed his argument.

"That curious little circumstance—yes," he continued. "I let Thewliss out of his laboratory four months ago at the end of his demonstration. He rapped on the door and I let him out. It was about four o'clock in the morning. Well, I never saw a man more dejected."

"Tired," Copeland corrected.

"Tired, of course, but dejected, too. Queer that, eh? He had demonstrated under the strictest conditions the absolute success of twenty-five years of research and experiment and thought. He was the master of all the dyeing industries in the world—and he was dejected. So dejected that one other who was present, a young Colonel Crayle, gasped out that he had failed. But I knew better. Thewliss stood in the doorway spreading about him an extraordinarily penetrating sense of loneliness. He was lonely. Do you follow me, Copeland? You, too, Wisberry? See how it fits exactly in what I told you before. He had longed for a child, to crown all his hard work and wealth and make it worth while. And the child had been denied him. All right! He had still the undiscovered formula to occupy him. But that's done with now. The rest of his life was looking a little blank just then. Not very much fun to be got out of it. See! Not very much inducement to get busy with marketing his discovery."

Copeland pursed up his lips and nodded his head.

"Yes, I see that. He'll take his time."

"And more time still," said Hoyle. "For here's another side of him. He's an artist, a craftsman, the old sort of craftsman with a real love of the thing he has done, a real reluctance to let it go because it mayn't just fulfil the artist's craving for exactness. I've seen him myself touch and fondle with his long fingers some fabric or another which has just taken some new shade of colour of his creation. The same sort of thing'll happen to him now, and more forcibly than before. He's going to put that formula away and pull it out again after a bit, to see if he can't simplify it a little more, and put it away again and play with it, like one of those Johnnies who paints your

portrait for the Town Hall and begins by making it like you and then takes out and puts in until at the end you're a stranger with a knobbly nose."

Mr. Wisberry chuckled.

"Yes, but the portrait's hung up sooner or later," he said.

"That's true," Hoyle agreed. "Let me put it this way. He'll be like a poet who writes a sonnet and can't let it out of his hands for fear that he might want to alter a rhyme or call her Diana instead of Lalage."

"Yes, but the poem gets published in the end." The man of gloom and melancholy repeated Wisberry's objection. "What's the use of a few months' reprieve to any of us?"

"Why, just this!" Hoyle looked carefully behind him to make sure that the door was shut. "Suppose that I could get hold of a copy of this formula, whilst Thewliss is still playing about with it. I don't say that I can, but suppose that I could. We could make a little trust. I could raise what money was required. I have got people who believe in me. We could quietly and quickly install the new plant required, each in his own factory, and we could scoop the pool. We should be first in the field—a long way first. We shouldn't be paying royalties in patents; we should be right there underselling everybody and turning out our stuff with double or treble shifts at an enormous profit."

The man from Somersetshire brought his fist into play again.

"By gum, that sounds good to me."

Mr. Benfield shook his head, smoothed his long beard and twisted the tip of it. Gloom and cold water were his contributions to the gathering.

"But can you get a copy of the formula?" he asked. "Not you!"

And very slowly Hoyle produced a little case from the breast of his dinner-jacket. He opened it and laid it on the table. From one of the pockets he took five sheets of thin paper and unfolded them. They were covered with short lines of sentences in a clear microscopic hand, interspersed with hieroglyphics and curious lozenge-shaped diagrams.

"Here it is," he said quietly.

It was significant of the mastery which Hoyle had established over his companions that not one of them doubted the accuracy of the copy. It was significant of their own prudence that not one of them asked him how he had got hold of it. They accepted the five sheets of exquisite penmanship as the

devout accept a miracle, and they gazed at the magician who had produced them with a reverential awe. They passed the papers from hand to hand, holding them gingerly by the edges lest the mark of a thumb should blur a necessary figure.

"By gum!" the man from Somersetshire whispered. "Get in first, eh? Just the four of us! It'ld be a treat to see Thewliss' face."

"Oh, come!" Copeland protested.

He hated the introduction of personal rancours into the battles of business. A man went down—yes, and very likely you would try to make sure that he didn't get up again in a hurry. But not because you hated him. It was a jungle fight for life and lordship and food, not a tournament between enemies. Wisberry, with his creed of the small man, was introducing a foolish and a rather dangerous factor. They had Thewliss' formula. Very well! They would exploit it, but not out of animosity to Thewliss. There was neither time nor room for nonsense of that kind in the modern commercial life.

"Leave Thewliss alone now!"

Mr. Benfield, after a flicker of hope, relapsed into despondency as his old eyes wandered from diagram to capital letter and from capital letter to minute number on the top of it.

"No use to me this! I can't make head or tail of it."

"Nor I," Hoyle agreed heartily. "But I've got a laboratory of my own and a chemist—the best in the world and devoted to me. He'll read this off as if it was a leader in *The Times*." He folded up the sheets and put them away.

"It's getting late. Here's what I propose. First my chemist gets to work. Then we worry out what's wanted in the way of plant, new and converted, and estimate the cost. Then we get the money. I charge myself with that. I know where I can get it. Then we quietly get the plant made and installed. And within twelve months we shall be working with treble shifts and orders years ahead. Is that agreed?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable came heartily from the three men, for even Benfield had a glimpse of salvation.

"Good!"

Hoyle rose from his chair, and the others followed his example and began to pick up their coats and hats from the chairs and sofas about the room.

"Meanwhile," Hoyle adjured them earnestly, "not a word, not a chuckle even to your wives. And in a fortnight or so I'll fix up another meeting in some other busy centre where we shan't be noticeable, and come to it with the plans."

The three men separated at the door, Benfield to catch a late train to Chesterfield, Wisberry to seek a less costly hotel, Copeland to take a whisky and soda in the bar. Hoyle remained alone. He released the spring of the blind and looked down from the window upon the lights of the station square.

Big business? Amalgamations? Very well, since they must come, he would be at the head of the first of them in his industry. He no more encouraged personal animosities than did Copeland. He was simply outwitting Thewliss in the way of business. He had no regret either for the means by which he had obtained his copy of the formula—not a thought of the punishment and miseries which might befall those from whom he had obtained it. Such considerations never entered his mind. He was satisfied.

Yet he had made two fatal mistakes. His analysis of the man Mark Thewliss had been both subtle and true, and but for his ignorance of two vital facts his heinous plan might successfully have been based upon it. But if the keen edge of life had been blunted for Mark, because he had no child with whom to enjoy it, it had grown sharp again. For he had recovered, suddenly and unexpectedly, a daughter. And if he had been inclined for lack of a goad rather to play with his invention than to exploit it, the goad was now supplied. For Mark was taking into partnership his wife's cousin, Derek Crayle, who had left the barrack square so that he might not mark time, and was not at all disposed to do it in the establishment of Mardyke and Campion.

Mr. Hoyle was pleased with his night's work as he looked down upon the station lights. But he had not profited himself, and he had done such harm upon others as nothing in the world could ever repair.

CHAPTER XXI OLIVIA MAKES AN OFFER

"Poor Olivia! Poor all of us!" Olivia had exclaimed.

But during the autumn months of that year no one could have truthfully quoted more than the first two words of that pitiful cry. It was only Olivia who suffered. The other three, Mark, and Derek Crayle and Lois, walked in a misty golden dream, watching their plans take substance and shaping them, as every little occasion offered, more and more to their will. It is true that Mark was at pains not to parade his joy and pride in this new big daughter who had tumbled out of the skies. But he could not conceal them from Olivia, who knew his secret.

Some years before Thewliss had moved from the small house, with the blue door which would not open itself to interviewers, into the great square round the corner. In this mansion Lois had a little suite of rooms. She was of the family; not an entertainment was given but she must grace it. The companionable evenings of other years when Mark and Olivia made their plans and debated the little incidents of their lives were at an end. There were no plans, indeed, in Mark's thoughts at all except plans for Lois, and talk of them was taboo. The only occasions on which the pair sat down to dinner alone were those on which Lois was taken out to some dinner at a restaurant with a dance or a theatre to follow, and since Derek Crayle was as a rule her escort, Olivia's pleasure was altogether spoilt. She had welcomed with her whole heart Derek's entrance into Thewliss' great undertakings, dreaming of a fine marriage for him and a resplendent future. Now she felt that she would give anything if only she could return him safe and celibate to the army.

"She means to marry him. She's an adventuress, that's what she is for all her reticence. And Mark's encouraging her. They're going to ruin Derek between them!"

With such unuttered arguments Olivia fed her resentment and jealousy; and an estrangement grew up between her and Mark, all the more bitter to her because Mark was unaware of it. From the world Mark's secret was well kept. Lois was his personal secretary and obviously an efficient one. And if her position in the household seemed to some few people unduly privileged, it was explained by a conjecture set on foot by Mark himself that she was the daughter of an old business associate who had fallen upon evil times.

"Anyway it won't be long, I think, before Lois is very definitely established. Derek's just waiting until the company's a fact and he's positively on the Board," Mark said to himself with a chuckle.

The preparations, indeed, for the reorganisation of the firm of Mardyke and Campion did much to make Olivia's woeful forecast true. There were conferences at Upper Theign during the week-ends, in Brooke's Market and sometimes in Grosvenor Square. Sometimes Sir William Hawker from Ely Place, sometimes Gregory the old manager, would be present, but always Mark and Derek Crayle and always, too, Lois Perriton, since always a note must be taken of the discussions and a confidential summary made.

Between the three houses the shuttle raced and rattled, weaving the new woof, an iridescent fabric for Mark, drab as fustian for Olivia. Once, when the conference took place at Upper Theign, she forced herself to enter the library and took a seat by the fire. A complete silence overtook the small council. She had heard voices eager, argumentative, cheery, when she was on the farther side of the door. Now the voices were mute and the speakers at a loss. The parable of the locked window was repeated for her at that moment. Lois sat at her end of the great table, her burnished head bent studiously over her notes, Mark sat at his, and Derek where he had threatened to be, between them with no room for his long legs at all. Sir William by the fire. They all rose when she came in and that formality seemed to underline their silence. She was the intruder, the outcast.

But she persevered, and with a melancholy counterfeit of a smile she asked:

"Well, at what stage are we now, Mark?"

Mark was aghast at the thought of the intricate explanations which an answer would involve.

"Oh, my dear," he said, closing with a decisive bang a fat volume on company law in which Hawker had been pointing out a passage, "we have come to the end for to-day, thank goodness! We have been drafting out some very technical clauses for our prospectus, and my head's in a whirl."

Mark's head was never in a whirl, and he could have proffered no excuse more unfortunate. But he was aware that he had blundered, and in a haste to repair it he must make his blunder elephantine. He had had a project in his thoughts for a little while and, needing a diversion, he must needs suggest it now at a moment the most unpropitious.

"I've been thinking, Olivia. We ought to have a dance here this Christmas. Fill up the house with all the young people we know, and hope for snow and the appropriate conditions. Lois"—he had long since called her Lois—"can collect some of the girls who worked with her at the Admiralty, and Derek must round up the young men."

"And I must send out the invitations," Olivia added in a not too pleasant voice, as though that function made clear her true position in the house.

But Lois was quick to add:

"Oh, Lady Thewliss, of course I'll do that if you'll supply me with a list of names, and as for my friends at the Admiralty, they're scattered anywhere now."

Olivia never again repeated her disastrous incursion. All that she had got out of it was a knowledge that a ball was to be given at Upper Theign for Lois' glorification and enjoyment, and a fresh confirmation that she herself was nothing but a pariah in her own house. She was pleased with the vile word. She repeated it to herself in front of her mirror.

"A pariah! That's what you are! Not a nice thing to be, Olivia! But you are one!" She sniffed a little and then, as the best of women may do, she suddenly saw red. "And we know who has made you one, don't we?" she cried in a low tone of fury. She would have liked at that moment to have taken the slim young spruce beauty from the library, humiliated her, punished her and thrust her out to grovel her way through the world as best she could.

But Olivia did not dwell long upon these futilities. A more practical way of release flashed one day into her mind. Lois was the Adventuress—that was fixed and settled—the real genuine Vamp of which the picture palaces were then showing some examples which were assuredly very pale and second-rate compared with Lois. The real, true Vamp wasn't white and Spanish and fluttering with black draperies. Not a bit of it! She was healthy and modish and trim and bafflingly open. Anyway, Lois was an Adventuress and Adventuresses had their price. That was the crude thought at the centre of Olivia's reasonings.

She might never have acted upon it, however, had she not gone to a supper party at a famous club and seen Derek Crayle and Lois committing the solecism of talking joyously whilst they danced. The rest of the throng revolved gloomily with dull, set faces and compressed mouths, thinking of their steps, slow-moving dervishes, the passionless fanatics of an unending rite. These two were openly enjoying themselves. To Olivia it was as though

they laughed aloud in church, and there was no doubt who was to blame for the unseemliness. Olivia, one must see, had reached in her antipathy a point where Lois could do nothing but, by the mere fact of her doing it, it became an outrage and offence.

The next morning Lois remained at the house in Grosvenor Square and Olivia, passing the library door at eleven o'clock, heard the busy clicking of the typewriter. Spurred by her memory of the unseemly dance, she opened the door and went in. She stood for a few moments behind the girl, watching the nimble movements of her fingers and the words forming in purple upon the paper. Then she said:

"You are very clever at your work, Lois."

Lois expected bricks, not honey, and was quite taken by surprise.

"It is very kind of you to say so," she answered and went on with her work, wondering what was to come next. "There's a catch somewhere," she said to herself.

"I've thought sometimes that a girl with your ability—and manners—and looks——"

"I shall get such a kick on the pants in a minute," thought Lois.

"Has probably a fortune waiting for her in a country like the United States."

"So that's it," reflected Lois. Aloud she said: "But I don't know a soul in the United States."

"Oh, that wouldn't be a difficulty," said Olivia. "You would go with the very best introductions."

"And I couldn't afford the journey, or the risk of not getting an engagement or of not being able to keep it if I did secure it."

Olivia sat down in a chair at the side of the table.

"But that needn't trouble you, Lois," she said eagerly. "I'll make an arrangement with you, on your own terms. You shan't suffer. Just think it over and let me know what you'ld consider fair. You'll be a tremendous success in the United States."

Lois stopped her work and turned upon Olivia a pair of candid, grateful eyes.

"You are very generous to me, Lady Thewliss. I appreciate it very much because I had an idea that you didn't like me at all. And if I say no to your kind thought to advance me——"

"You refuse——?" Olivia broke in with a sharp disappointment.

"I like my work here," Lois returned. "For a year after the War ended I had a very unhappy, anxious time, and I don't want it again."

"But I've told you——"

"I know. But when poor girls like myself find a tiny safe corner where they won't be trampled underfoot, they've got to stay in it, Lady Thewliss, while they can," Lois said gently.

Olivia was aware that she was not appearing to any advantage, whilst the girl, on the other hand, was a pattern of tact and respect. The knowledge exasperated her beyond endurance.

"You won't go, then?" she cried.

"Not unless I am dismissed," said Lois; and Olivia's patience snapped like a dry twig. Her dignity failed her, she made herself small; she hated herself for her abasement and Lois, who was the cause of it, more than herself.

"But I want you to go," she cried helplessly. It was a wail more than a cry. "If you understood the difference between this house as it is and as it was before you came! I want you out of it. It began the day you came to Upper Theign. There were you three, Mark and Derek and you sitting at that table laughing, talking, absorbed, and there was I locked out."

"Oh, Lady Thewliss, the window was locked by accident."

"Then, yes. But it has been locked deliberately ever since. Oh, don't think I'm blind, please! And I must be blind and deaf too if I hadn't noticed, when I have broken unexpectedly into your discussions, the sudden dead stop, the embarrassment which comes when a stranger interrupts friends chatting about familiar things, and the flutter of conversation to hide from the stranger that he's in the way. A stranger—that's what you have made of me—a stranger in my own house. And I won't bear it! You must go. You have taken my place. You must give it back to me!"

"I've not tried to take anyone's place," Lois returned with spirit. "I've tried to make a little one for myself—that's all."

"Lois, you must go."

Olivia's passion had died down. The words were no longer an order but a prayer spoken in a whisper from parched lips and made moving by the petition of her eyes. "I can't go on like this."

She felt huddled in the chair, that in spite of her wealth, her authority, her position in the world, she was no match at all for the girl who stood in front of her, nameless, poor, inconsiderable but gorgeously armoured by her youth.

Lois, however, was deeply troubled by this outburst. Somehow she should have temporised and managed to avoid it. But it had caught her unawares. And it had to be reckoned with. Let this scene be repeated, and a little more publicly, say before her father, Mark Thewliss, or before Mark Thewliss and Derek—and there could be no guarantee that with a woman in Olivia's state of nervous exasperation it wouldn't be repeated—and she would have to go, she would have to insist on going, and she would go before she was ready to go. She meant to go in the end, but not before she was ready.

"You must give me a little time, Lady Thewliss," she said softly. "It wouldn't be possible, after everyone has been so kind to me, for me to throw up a position like this without a good reason to offer. I couldn't say straight off without a hint that I had been thinking of it, that I was going to try my luck in the United States, could I? I should have to lead up to it. Besides, I don't think I want to go there. No! But I will leave, if you'll give me time. That I can promise you."

Olivia had to be content with that promise. She had carried off something, at all events, as the price of her abasement. Lois, within a measurable time, would go, and go for good. That the old, pleasant, comfortably unemotional life of other days, here and at Upper Theign, could ever quite be re-established, she was not foolish enough to dream. Mark would be wounded by the defection of Lois, Derek, too, and both no doubt would blame her. There would be estrangement in place of comradeship for a time—perhaps for a long time. But Lois would have gone, would have taken her youth and her distinction and her appeal altogether away to some region where, whatever harm they worked would not matter to her. Olivia went out of the library, leaving Lois to her work. But the work went slowly now, though Lois did not waste her time in upbraiding Olivia. Olivia Thewliss had detested her from the outset of their acquaintance. It was no more than natural that she should wish to be rid of her.

"But I shall go in my own time," said Lois. "When I am ready."

There would have to be a reason given—a sound, acceptable reason—for her going and for something else besides. Yes, Lois had a good deal besides her work to occupy her thoughts that morning.

CHAPTER XXII THE NEW CLERK

She spent the next morning at Brooke's Market, and at one o'clock Derek Crayle knocked upon her door.

"I have made a discovery," he said with so much pride that he might just have dug some pillared gallery of the Second Dynasty out of the sands of Egypt. "This is a convenient moment to show it to you. Then perhaps we might go and lunch somewhere, don't you think?"

Lois shook a forefinger at him.

"I won't be bullied," said Derek. "Put that finger down!"

"I wasn't thinking of bullying you," replied Lois as she got up and slipped on her coat. "I was going to point out to you very respectfully, as becomes me, that you are developing with unimaginable speed all the worst qualities of the City man. Good directors don't take their girl clerks out to luncheon."

"I am not yet a director, and a glance at your work, Miss Perriton, shows me that you'll never be a clerk," said Derek.

Lois made a most unclerkly grimace at him and pulled a hat down over her hair. They went out into Leather Lane and, passing along the side of the great Prudential house which now towered where Furnival's Inn had stood, they came out into High Holborn. Across the road the oak beams and old windows of Staple Inn wavered above the pavement. Derek took his companion by the arm and choosing a moment when the traffic opened, guided her across the street. Through the gateway of Staple Inn he led her into the second court.

"There!" he cried, inviting her admiration, "I don't suppose a single person from Mardyke and Campion's has ever before taken the trouble to walk into Staple Inn and discover this!"

Lois was silent. She had no enthusiasm with which to answer him.

"It must be wonderful in summer," he urged, very definitely disappointed; and again she looked about her and made no answer.

It was, to be sure, winter now. There were no lilies dreaming on the still water of the pond; no mantle of green leaves decked out the smoky, dark

brick wall of the old hall, no sunshine warmed the stones. But even on this grey day it was a place of beauty and historic peace, where an older England preached its wise and silent homily on the little fever of the passions, and the great continuous heritage of a God-protected race. "Surely," Derek Crayle thought as he gazed ruefully into Lois's still impassive face, "she must respond."

And in a way, an unexpected way, she did. At the first, passionate and purposeful as she was to the finger-tips under her tranquil mien, she was vaguely moved by the ancient quiet of the court. But she was moved to discomfort and doubt. So few years back she was not. So few years yet and she would not be. Was it worth while—the bitter wrath which rankled in her breast, the dangerous stratagem, the chill of anxiety? Derek saw her face waver and then harden. She had this short, insignificant life to live. Very well! But she had to live it. She belonged to that rolling world outside the two courts, whose thunders reached her ears. She threw off the spell which the place threatened to lay upon her with a gesture of anger.

"You don't like this court?" Derek asked.

"It has no message for me," she answered with defiance audible in her voice. "I hate it. I shall not come here again."

Derek Crayle was quite baffled. He was never very secure with her. He had always an uneasy impression that her easy good-humoured reticence concealed smouldering fires and alien thoughts. But she had never seemed so abstruse as she did at this disappointing hour.

Once past the gateway, however, and back in the jostle of the crowd, she turned to him with a look of remorse.

"I am sorry, Derek. I behaved like a perfect idiot," and to make yet more amends, "Didn't I hear something about luncheon?"

"You did." Derek's face resumed its cheerfulness. "We oughtn't to go too far. We can go down to the Waldorf. There's another place, too, I have never been to along Oxford Street—Frascati's."

Lois, for her part, had never been to either of those restaurants, but Frascati's lay in the direction she meant to take after luncheon.

"I am going to choose a frock," she said.

"For the dance at Upper Theign?"

"Yes."

Crayle stopped a taxi and they drove accordingly to Frascati's. That restaurant had no message for Lois any more than the second court of Staple Inn. At those two places on a day of summer twenty-five years before her birth had been decreed, but no vague sense of association wakened her curiosity. She simply hated the one and lunched in the other. The most which she owed to this unrealised pilgrimage in her mother's footsteps was a change in her plans for that afternoon. For Derek at one moment looked at his watch—a proceeding sufficiently rare when he was in Lois's company to provoke a question. As they sat down, however, he had no thought of time.

"We don't lunch together as often as is good for us," he said, "so we'll have a real luncheon," and he summoned the waiter.

"A couple of sidecars first," he said.

"Very good, sir."

"And afterwards, Lois?"

"Water for me."

"And half a bottle of Montrachet for me."

The waiter wrote on his order form and handed two copies of the bill of fare to them.

"Never mind that!" said Derek. "We're to have a good luncheon. So we'll have grapefruit, a lobster Newburg, a minute steak with sauté potatoes, a soufflé surprise and coffee."

Lois gasped.

"We'll have nothing of the kind," she cried. "We'll have the grapefruit, yes, then cutlets and sauté potatoes and then coffee. If you think I am going to increase my circumference when I'm on my way to my dressmaker, you've guessed wrong, Derek."

It was toward the conclusion of this simple meal that Derek remembered his duties and looked at his watch.

"You are full of business this afternoon?" said Lois.

"It isn't that," Crayle answered. "But Mark's got a new clerk coming."

"A new clerk!" Lois exclaimed, as she lit a cigarette. "But must you be there to receive him?"

"No. But Mark wants him to have a desk in my room for a bit. It seems he's important, eh? I don't know why. Mark's rather mysterious about him."

"Oh!"

It was an exclamation of indifference, a dismissal of the subject as a matter which did not concern her. But when they rose to go away, Lois said as she crushed the end of her cigarette in the saucer of her coffee cup:

"I think I'll drive back with you. I left a strip of stuff of the colour I want for my dress."

As they drove back they passed a clock, and Lois asked quickly, "What time is your new clerk expected?"

"A quarter to three."

Lois leaned back in the corner of the cab.

"If we are not held up, you ought to be in comfortable time," she remarked, and she, at all events, was comfortable.

"Oh, I don't suppose he's so important that I must stand on the mat with my hat off," said Derek with a laugh.

It happened that there was no traffic block and they arrived at the door a minute or so before the time. The new clerk, however, as became a new clerk, was punctual to his appointment. For as Lois and Crayle, after crossing the big outer office, entered the corridor along which the private offices were ranged, he entered the outer office from the street. They heard his voice as he asked for Lord Thewliss and the commissionaire's reply.

"You're expected, sir. Will you come this way?"

Lois turned and caught a glimpse of a shortish, squarely-built man with a red moustache, heavy as a dragoon's. She dropped her handbag, picked it up quickly and without a word to Derek slipped into her own room, keeping her back to the corridor. Once there, she shut the door and stood with a face suddenly grown very white.

"He couldn't have known me," she reassured herself. "It's dark in the corridor and he saw no more than my back."

But she stood quite still and listened. She heard the solid tread of his feet as he passed, and then the door of Mark Thewliss' room at the end of the corridor shut.

So Mr. Joseph Wyatt had come masquerading as a clerk to Mardyke and Campion's. No doubt Derek's attendance had been required, so that someone with especial authority might introduce Mr. Joseph Wyatt to the staff and give him the freedom of the big building. It was not in the nature of

Lois to run away. She had all that confidence in her ability to meet a difficulty which marks the girl of her time. In any case, she must run into Mr. Joseph Wyatt very soon. She would meet him then this afternoon, in her own domain, and she sat down at her table with a curious little smile upon her face.

Mr. Joseph Wyatt knew who she was. Had he not made regular pilgrimages to Liverpool to make sure that the Perriton family was living its own life without plotting to cause trouble to Mark Thewliss? And she knew who he was. But she had this tremendous advantage. Mr. Wyatt wasn't aware that she knew who he was. It would amuse her to see that self-satisfied little man twirling his ridiculous moustache upon the threshold of her room, perhaps asking her for her assistance in learning his new duties. He would without doubt be not a little surprised to discover her established there. Very likely he might be not a little suspicious. But since she knew who and what he was, there were a few simple precautions which prudence suggested she should take. For instance. She dusted the keys of her typewriting machine, and then locked the cover over it and then dusted the cover. She tidied her writing-table and carefully wiped it clean. She tore the top sheet from her blotting-pad, held it for a moment in doubt as to how she should dispose of it, looked for one second at the matchbox, for another at the grate, and finally folded it and hid it away in her handbag. Then she wiped the arms of her chair and the rail at the top. She had now finished her preparations, and hearing the door at the end of the corridor shut again, she drew on her gloves and set her own door a trifle ajar.

She heard Derek speaking:

"I'll show you round the building now, Mr. Wyatt, and introduce you to the staff."

Lois slipped on her coat and hat. She must not be found in any attitude of expectation; she would be going away.

In the corridor Derek's voice was saying:

"This is my room which you are to share with me for the moment, and here is the office of Mr. Gregory, our manager." A door-handle rattled. "Mr. Gregory, may we come in?" and the voice ceased as Mr. Gregory's door closed upon him and the new clerk. Lois locked the drawers of her table, after making sure that she had left in them no letters which she had handled. Before she had finished the guide and his tourist were out in the corridor again.

"This is Miss Perriton's room."

"This one with the door open?"

Lois stood with her bunch of keys in her hand stooping at the table, her face towards the door, in an attitude of easy curiosity perfectly assumed. But her little piece of miming was wasted.

"And Miss Perriton, I understand, has nothing to do with the staff?"

"Nothing," she heard Derek reply. "She is Lord Thewliss' personal secretary."

"Quite."

And the two men passed on. Lois stood up with an odd little smile upon her face. She could not deny a sensation of relief. She was to be left outside the reach of Mr. Wyatt's investigations. She finished locking up the drawers of her table, however, and then having given time for the new clerk and his cicerone to branch off towards the laboratory, she walked through the outer office to the street and turned into High Holborn.

Even then, however, she did not visit her dressmaker. It was growing dark. She stopped a taxi and was driven to the Church of St. James in Piccadilly. In a footpath by the side of this church stands a very busy post office. From this post office Lois dispatched a telegram, and then walked home to Grosvenor Square.

Lady Thewliss gave a small dinner party that night at which Derek Crayle was present and after which a new violinist was to play. Derek made his way to the couch on which Lois was sitting, and in an interval of the music he asked how the dress was progressing.

"I didn't go to the dressmaker's at all," Lois answered. "I want a frock of a particular pale shade of green and I mean to see by daylight that the colour is exactly right. So I shall go to-morrow morning instead. And how do you like your new room-mate?"

Derek Crayle shrugged his shoulders.

"He's only temporarily with me," he answered, and he smiled. "He paid you a great compliment."

Lois sat up in her chair.

"But I haven't met him. You didn't bring him to my room."

"There wasn't any reason to," Derek answered. "But after I had shown him round and left him to go back by himself, he forgot which was my door."

"And went into my room, I suppose," said Lois with a curious smile.

"Yes, I found him there. He was tremendously impressed by its tidiness."

Lois nodded her head.

"He would be," she remarked. "What time did he leave the office?" she asked unconcernedly, and Derek gave her the hour. It was within ten minutes or so of the time when she herself had reached Grosvenor Square. She had not been followed, then, to the post office off Piccadilly. But she could not say as much the next morning. She went to her dressmaker in Curzon Street at ten in the morning and spent the best part of an hour there. On leaving she walked up South Audley Street towards Oxford Street, meaning to cross the road to a famous store to buy some silk stockings. But she had not taken a great many steps before she had an odd impression that she was being followed. She looked about her. An errand boy was trundling along a delivery tricycle; a taxicab was patrolling in search of a fare. A woman was gazing into a shop. There was certainly no one with a dragoon's moustache anywhere within view.

"I am ready to imagine these things," she said, chiding herself. "I shall develop the vapours next and go into swoons."

None the less the impression persisted. She loitered, stopping here and there at a window. But if she was being followed it was by an adept. She saw no one to confirm her in her alarm. However, Lois was no half-wit herself. She so timed her walk that she arrived at the edge of the crossing in Oxford Street just as the constable was changing his position to hold up the cross traffic and release that going east and west. Lois had just time to sprint across the road before the vans and the omnibuses, the cars and the taxis which throng Oxford Street and mask one pavement from the other, hurled themselves forward like so many deadly missiles released from so many gigantic catapults. A glance assured her that she had been the last across the road.

"Safety first," she said gaily to herself. "That's a very good joke," and she disappeared into the huge store. All the red moustaches in the world might bristle and twirl as much as they pleased, not one of them would glow brightly enough to pick her out among the customers who thronged those innumerable aisles.

"Business first, pleasure afterwards," she said, being in an excellent good-humour. "In the way of maxims, the copybooks have nothing on me."

She dived accordingly to the basement, and only after ten minutes sought pleasure in the buying of the diaphanous pale-hued silk stockings which were to intervene between the green of her shoes and the green of her frock when Mark Thewliss gave his ball at Upper Theign.

But the pleasure had evaporated. She thrust her hands into the stockings and spread them out without either criticism or satisfaction. She was inattentive. She took, in the end, what the saleswoman recommended. She came out by the door into Orchard Street, certainly with a little parcel dangling from a finger, and certainly too with the bitterest disappointment which had ever marred her lovely face.

"There was a hiatus," she repeated to herself. Yes, indeed. There was a hiatus wide enough and deep enough to engulf for ever all her projects and ambitions. The tears glistened in her eyes—a rare event with Lois. Had she still been in the copybook mood, she might have said, "Nature abhors a vacuum."

CHAPTER XXIII THE HIATUS

Mark Thewliss explained the hiatus ten days later. It was the morning of the first Thursday in December. On Friday his household was to move along to Upper Theign and stay there until the New Year was in. Thursday, therefore, was the day for winding up all business which could be wound up this side of Christmas. By twelve o'clock Mark had cleared away the most pressing of his problems and sent a messenger for Derek Crayle. Derek, upon answering the summons, found Mark leaning against the mantelshelf with his back to the fire, and seated on a chair facing Mark, very correct and prim with his feet together and a perfectly impassive face, the partner of his room Mr. Joseph Wyatt.

"Shut the door, Derek, and take a pew," said Mark. "It is high time that I explained to you who Mr. Wyatt is and what his particular duties have been in my firm."

"Yes, I have been a little perplexed about them myself," said Derek, as he dropped into an arm-chair by the side of the fire-place. "But then I've learnt in the last month or two that you can keep secrets up your sleeve with less appearance of mystery than any conjurer I've ever met."

Mark sat down at his table, which stood endwise against the wall on the other side of the grate. He had a window behind his left shoulder so that the light fell conveniently upon his papers, and he had the fire behind him on his right hand.

"It's gratifying to me to hear those kind words from you, Derek," he said agreeably, "for every now and then I've had a suspicion that you thought me a damned old fool."

Derek looked firmly at the head of Mardyke and Campion.

"A truce to this badinage, sir, if you please."

Meanwhile Mr. Wyatt stared, neither amused nor surprised nor interested, into the fire. Occasionally he twisted one of the antlers of his moustache. But the gesture was meaningless. He had the look of a wax figure with an automatic movement.

"Mr. Wyatt is not a clerk at all," Mark continued easily. "Nor was he engaged because he was an organiser with new methods. That was merely

an excuse to give him a right of investigation. Mr. Wyatt is a private inquiry agent."

"What?" Derek jumped in his chair. "A private inquiry agent?"

"Quite," said Mr. Wyatt, and he gave both the red horns an upward twist.

"He is in the service of Dickson's, a highly reputable firm recommended to me by my lawyers."

"The best firm in London," Mr. Wyatt said complacently.

Derek broke in impatiently upon these testimonials. There was a time for bouquets, but the time was not now. Derek indeed was more than a little scared. A private inquiry agent meant more than a mistake, more than something honestly lost. There was a secret of immense value, written down on paper, hidden away somewhere—even he was not quite sure where—a secret which he had vainly implored Mark Thewliss to protect. What if that had been stolen!

"I'm not doubting the status of your firm, Mr. Wyatt," he cried. "But I should like to know what has happened."

"Something uncommonly unpleasant," replied Mark. But he was more uncomfortable than distressed. The injury, it seemed, was to his feelings. He was hurt rather than damaged. And Derek was a little reassured.

Mark Thewliss rose and turned to a safe with a combination lock which stood in a recess behind his desk.

"You don't know the combination which opens this, Derek?"

"No."

"Nor anyone except myself. And I change it once a month. Even Mr. Wyatt failed to open it."

"That is so," Mr. Wyatt agreed. "But those safes have been opened without the help of stethoscopes or experience."

"How?" asked Derek.

"By chance," answered Mr. Wyatt. "The probabilities against success are enormous, calculated mathematically. Yet it has happened, and more often than you would imagine. A lucky twist to the right, another to the left, a third to the right again, and the tumblers have fallen into their proper places and the safe door has swung open. Novices have opened such doors."

Derek's fear was once more whipped to activity. He watched Mark plant himself between the safe door and Wyatt and himself. Both of them could be sure by the bend at the elbow that Mark's hand was raised to the lock. But his shoulders hid from them his movements. Mark stood back and with a pull at the knob opened the thick steel door. He thrust his arm into the safe and brought out a long sealed envelope. Then he closed the safe again and carried the envelope back to the table. He showed his audience that there was no writing upon it at all.

"This isn't the original envelope," he said. "The one which may have something to tell is in Mr. Wyatt's possession. This is of no importance. So I open it;" and tearing it open as he spoke, he removed the contents and tossed it on to the fire. The contents consisted of five sheets of ivory-white note-paper, and once more Derek's alarm was quenched. For he remembered that the formula which Mark had brought out with him from his laboratory after his experiment at Upper Theign had been written out upon greyish-blue sheets, and that there had been six of them. But his relief was not to last.

"You'll remember, Derek," Mark explained, "that on the evening after I finished my demonstration I locked myself up for an hour and a half in the library."

"Yes."

"During that hour and a half I copied the various processes out in their order, and burnt up into minute ashes the six sheets on which they were originally jotted down. These five sheets are the copy," and he showed them to Derek. They were covered with minute handwriting and diagrams. "They are more compact, you see, and I enclosed them in one of these envelopes, which are specially made to hold just these sheets of paper flat."

He took from a rack in front of him a strong squarish envelope and held it out.

"Do you see?"

"Yes."

"Then I sealed the envelope, put it away and——"

"And went off in your yacht for a month," Derek interrupted hotly, bethinking him of the ridiculous secret drawer in the library table at Upper Theign which stood open as often as not for all the staff and any visitor to see. He had himself protested on that very evening against the use of that drawer as a receptacle for this treasure of a formula.

"And went off in my yacht for a month," Mark retorted equably, "taking with me the seal which I used."

"There is no copy of it?"

"None."

"You are sure?"

"Quite."

Derek stared in perplexity at Mark Thewliss. The formula, the work of thirty years,

> "Those hopes and fears, surprises and delays,
> That long endeavour, earnest, patient, slow,
> Trembling at last to its assured result"—

at dawn of a summer morning in the Berkshire hills, had been tampered with. Here was Mr. Joseph Wyatt to prove it.

Yet Mark spoke with a level voice. There was in him none of that violent anger which theft even of some trivial thing arouses. There was no sign that he had suffered a loss. Philosophic calm was no doubt an excellent quality, but he, Derek, had no use for it. Derek Crayle had set his heart utterly on the successful exploitation of the universal formula—and not on account of the profit in money which would come from it. It was to be a resounding triumph for Mark Thewliss. Derek's liking for Mark had grown into a form of hero-worship, mingled with a curious form of patronage. Mark was in his view a great man who wanted a young man to look after him. The formula would spread Mark's name, give him such power in his industry as no man had ever held, and perhaps fulfil his ideas. Derek was not so sure that they were not rather fanciful. Universal peace, through universal good-humour, through cheap dyes, through the universal formula, was perhaps a fantastic way of breeding the world's great winner. But then Mark might be right. Dreamers often were right. Derek was set on Mark's getting his opportunity of proving that he was right, if he was right. And here was Mark himself only uncomfortable, whilst he, Derek, was boiling with exasperation!

Mark continued:

"About a month after I returned to Upper Theign, I brought the envelope up to my office here and locked it in the safe."

"You ought to have sent it to the bank," said Derek reproachfully.

"I know. I kept saying that myself. I said: 'Mark, your name's Ask-for-Trouble William.' But I just couldn't send it to the bank. There! I couldn't,"

and he smiled very pleasantly across the room at his young partner, asking for his indulgence. "I wasn't quite sure, you see, that there wasn't some little improvement, some little simplification in the process which I could make—something which would reduce the cost of production. So I wanted the formula at hand, near to me, so that if an idea occurred to me I could get it out in a second and see if the idea worked before I forgot it."

"And you did get it out, no doubt?" Derek asked.

"More than once."

"And each time of course you destroyed the envelope, to make sure that if anyone had handled it we should none of us have a chance of finding it out," said Derek, with what seemed to him the most penetrating irony.

But it was lost apparently on Mark Thewliss, who replied earnestly:

"No, Derek, no, I can't allow you to do me that injustice. I know that men in the sixties must by the nature of things be very, very foolish and incompetent. But I never destroyed the envelope, though I am bound to say it was mere indolence which made me preserve it. I broke the seal each time. But I opened the envelope by slipping my round pencil-case under the flap and carefully rolling down to the point until the flap came away. It's a perfectly simple process which doesn't take a minute, and it saved me the bother of writing out a note about the contents on a new envelope. When I wanted to replace it safely——"

"Yes, I should like to hear how you did that," Derek interposed meekly.

"I did it this way. I put the formula back into the envelope, smeared a lick of gum on the inside of the flap with the gum-brush"—he pointed to a camel's hair brush which stood in a bottle of gum upon his table—"gummed the flap down and stamped a seal on it again somewhere else."

"I should like to see that envelope," Derek remarked grimly, and Mr. Wyatt's left hand rose automatically to his right-hand breast-pocket.

"All in good time, Mr. Wyatt," said Lord Thewliss. "Let us be business-like above all, and do things in their proper order."

Derek gasped. There are forms of effrontery which would paralyse the most adventurous and strike even an orator dumb. In Derek's opinion, Mark Thewliss had been guilty of one of them. Derek said not a word.

"Let us take the written formula first," continued Mark. "Come over here, Derek!"

He laid the sheets flat upon the table with their edges even. Then he covered them with a sheet of blotting-paper. Derek crossed the room and stood behind his chair, looking down over his shoulder.

"Now watch!"

Thewliss moved the blotting-paper a little to the right, disclosing the left-hand edges of the five sheets of note-paper and a little of the edges at the top and bottom.

"You see? Just five sheets of the note-paper I use, one above the other, all aligned and as they came from the stationer's shop. My handwriting, too, practically in a straight line from top to bottom and with each lateral line at practically the same distance from the edge of the paper. Is that agreed?"

"Yes," said Derek.

"No doubt about it," Mr. Joseph Wyatt added. But he had not moved from his chair in front of the fire. These details were long since familiar to him. But his right hand stroked and stroked his upper lip, so that while the left horn of his moustache pointed upwards, martial as a Kaiser's, the other drooped like a Chinaman's.

"Good! Now let us look at the other side," said Mark, and he moved the blotting-paper from right to left until the right-hand edges of the sheets were exposed.

"Do you see, Derek?"

For a moment Derek didn't see. For a moment he thought: "Mark began his writing a little farther from the left-hand edge of the paper and ended it a little nearer to the right-hand edge."

Then he uttered an exclamation. Mr. Wisberry, of Somersetshire, would have cried "By gum!" Colonel Crayle merely stuttered out a feebleness not worth recording. He did see now. The edge of the five sheets slanted a little from the top, straightened again, and towards the bottom slanted a trifle once more, but this time slanted inwards.

"The sheets have not been cut evenly," exclaimed Derek.

"And how can that be?" asked Thewliss. "They are cut by a machine, a quire at a time at the least. I haven't one other sheet which has the fault these five have. No, these right-hand edges have been pared away." And as Derek stooped down over his shoulder to examine them, Mark added: "And by a very sharp razor held in a very steady hand."

"But where's the sense of it?" cried Derek. "And how was it done if the papers were in the envelope and the seal not broken?"

"I'll show you," said Mark, and he turned to Joseph Wyatt. "Now will you produce the envelope, please?"

Wyatt took from his pocket a small parcel. It consisted of two oblong pieces of stiff cardboard held together by india-rubber bands, and between them a wrapper of white linen. He carried the packet to Thewliss' table, and removing the oblongs of cardboard, laid the wrapper on the table. He opened it and disclosed the ivory-white envelope matching in tint and in size the sheets of paper on which the formula had been written. The envelope was lying with its back upwards, the flap open and the edges of the flap rather thin where the pencil-case in loosening it had worn some of the paper away. There were three broken seals, each with Thewliss' initials intertwined to make an anchor and a cable. Mr. Wyatt had been careful not to touch the envelope with his bare hands.

"I opened the envelope twice, you see," Mark explained. "And each time I sealed it afresh."

"Here or at Upper Theign?" Derek asked.

"Both times here. The last time a couple of days before Mr. Wyatt was called in. That last time I noticed that the edges of the note-paper had been shaved on the right-hand side. It was a mere chance that I noticed it. I was standing at this table looking down upon the sheets, rather lost in picturing in my mind the sequence of the processes, and my eyes must have spotted that tiny mutilation for some time before they telegraphed the news to my brain. I made sure first of all that the fault occurred only in these sheets, and in none of the paper bought at the same time. Then I turned my attention to the envelope, and I found by measuring it—I was careful to put on a pair of gloves first—that the envelope was a tiny bit longer between the point of the flap in the middle and the edge on the left-hand side than it was on the right-hand side. I made an experiment. The note-paper, as I told you, is made to fit exactly into the envelope. Well, a new sheet of paper wouldn't just go in flat into that envelope. It would need a tiny fold before it could be inserted. And here's the explanation."

Thewliss put on a glove and lifted the envelope, holding it so that the left-hand edge was uppermost.

"You see! Here's a normal envelope. There's no join or cut. It's just a fold of paper pressed. Now look at the right-hand edge."

He turned the envelope round, and it was just discernible that there were two edges, not one, but joined so finely together and smeared so carefully with a white, thin, smooth paste which had been allowed to dry and soiled so neatly to shade it to the tint of the rest of the envelope that a man who had no reason to examine it could hardly have discovered the trick at all.

"What has happened is clear," said Mark. "Someone with a very sharp razor has sliced off the edge of the envelope, extracted the sheets of paper without breaking the seal, and when his business with them was finished, replaced them in this ingenious way. Mr. Wyatt tells me that it was a method practised during the War."

"During the earlier part of the War," Mr. Wyatt corrected. "It was detected, as, indeed, it was bound to be, fairly soon, and other means had to be discovered."

Mark Thewliss folded up the envelope again and returned it to Mr. Wyatt. Mark resumed his seat.

"Now we have got as far as this, Derek: there are no fingerprints on the sheets of paper except mine. Whoever extracted them did so probably with a pair of tweezers and put on gloves to handle them. Mine, of course, are all over them. As they are on that envelope. But there are some others on that envelope, too."

"Whose?" cried Derek, and he turned to Joseph Wyatt. "You have found out?"

Mr. Wyatt shook his head.

"No. By various ruses I have been able to get fair examples from the whole staff, but none of them fit."

"Then we're up against it," said Derek. "At any moment we may find a patent taken out which will rob you of your own discovery."

Mark reflected and shook his head.

"The thief wouldn't dare to do that. It'ld be fraud."

"You couldn't prove it."

"Well, we are not at the end of our efforts," Mark resumed. "Although I only noticed that intelligent piece of roguery a fortnight ago, it doesn't follow that it wasn't there for me to notice it the first time I opened the envelope."

Derek agreed.

"No, it doesn't. I shouldn't have noticed it myself. It's known, of course, that you have invented something which is going to revolutionise the dye industry. It's been known ever since July. Very likely someone was on the look-out. Very likely that envelope was taken from your safe and put back again the day after you brought it up to town."

"Why not before, Derek?" Mark asked quietly.

The eyes of the two men met and interchanged a suspicion. There was the same thought in the mind of each. Mark a fortnight ago, Derek during these last ten minutes—each of them had instantly selected the most possible culprit. And both were rather aghast.

"At Upper Theign?" said Derek.

"The formula was there for a couple of months," answered Mark.

Again both men were silent.

"There were heaps of opportunities, of course," Derek exclaimed, and there was a world of reproach in the cry.

"Yes."

Mark accepted the censure ruefully.

"Yes. You were quite right. I was a damned fool about that secret drawer. I am sorry. I trusted everybody."

"I didn't," said Derek.

"That's so. I remember." Then Mark Thewliss glanced at Mr. Wyatt. "There's no reason why we shouldn't use names quite plainly. Wyatt's our man."

"Quite," said Mr. Wyatt.

"Very well, then! Here it is!" Mark declared. "Hoyle came to see me twice at Upper Theign after I returned from my cruise. Once at the beginning of September and once towards the end of that month. On both those occasions the formula was in my library there. On either one of them he might have bribed one of my servants to get it for him. I hate to think that any of them would have consented. But, honestly, I can't see any other possible explanation."

"Hoyle would only have needed the formula for a few hours," Derek Crayle suggested.

"That's all."

"And it would have been just as easy to replace it afterwards as to take it away before."

"Quite as easy."

"What are you going to do, then?" asked Crayle.

"I am going to ask Wyatt to come down to Upper Theign. He mustn't follow us at once. But with the pressure of reorganisation it'll be quite natural that in a few days' time he should come, bringing some important papers for our consideration. Then he'll stay and do what he has done here, get the fingerprints of the staff, discover if any of them has been spending money, and generally investigate the case. I think it's pretty horrible, but it's a necessity."

"Yes, my lord, it's a necessity," said Mr. Wyatt, and he got up from his chair. "I shall come to Upper Theign, then, next week."

They fixed upon Thursday as the day, and with a formal salute Mr. Wyatt marched out of the office.

Derek, however, was not satisfied that the discussion should end in this inconclusive way. He had a question still to put and he put it.

"But suppose the marks on that envelope in Wyatt's pocket were made by Hoyle! What then?"

"There we are done to the wide," said Mark with a grin and a lift of his eyebrows. And suddenly in the midst of all his doubts and fears and speculations, Derek Crayle was turned off to a quite different consideration. How Mark Thewliss had changed in his appearance, in his mind, too, since that distant day when Tony Westram had first fetched him down to Gissens! It was just that grin, and that lift of the eyebrows, which had swept away the glaze of habit from Derek's eyes and enabled him to see acutely, poignantly. Compared with that good-humoured elephant trampling his way through the world's jungle, Mark was now a different being. His face had taken on the spiritual look which comes from great sorrows quietly endured. His face had grown thinner, longer. Derek had the impression of a clear flame burning behind it, illuminating it. There was something familiar in his aspect, familiar but quite out of keeping with this office, with the war of High Holborn outside its walls. One had to remember those queer ambitions of Mark's—the spirit of peace spread abroad through colour within the reach of everyone—before one could reconcile the man with the house in which he did his work. He looked more and more like—and Derek Crayle seized upon

the image of which he was in search—more and more like some old engraving of Don Quixote.

"Yes, then we are done to the wide," Mark repeated. "For we can't go about to get Hoyle's fingerprints," and he brought his fist down with a thump upon his table and jumped up from his chair. "But I'ld give a great deal if that were so and we could be sure of it. I would! You can't imagine the relief it would be to me to know that not one of the people who have served me, whom I have tried to look after according to my lights, had become traitors and turned on me. Hoyle—yes, he's against me. He doesn't want new processes. He wants to go on in the old way. I can understand his going to any lengths—even to stealing my formula for half a dozen hours—if by that means he can beat me. But the people who are about me, my people—no! That makes me miserable. Yes, ridiculous as it may sound, actually miserable. I've got to know. Yes! It's a bad business bringing Wyatt down to Upper Theign to spy upon my household. It's humiliating. But I've got to know!"

He was speaking like a man greatly troubled, greatly ashamed. The discomfort which the possible treachery of his servants caused him seemed to have obliterated altogether from his mind the enormous loss in prestige and fortune which the appropriation of his discovery by someone else would certainly entail.

"And you don't mind that?" Derek cried in amazement.

Mark's grin expanded. It took in all his face. It became very human and rather pleasantly sly. He went to the door, opened it a trifle and shut it again. Then he returned, a mimic conspirator, on tiptoe!

"Hush!" he whispered, and he really looked like a sleuth in a melodrama. "I didn't say a word of this before Wyatt, because I don't want him to slack off and take it easy. I want to know the truth. But between you, me and the bedpost, Derek, I am not such a damned old fool as you take me for. There were six sheets of the blue paper which I brought out from the laboratory and showed you after dinner at Upper Theign."

"Yes, six sheets. I remember."

"Well, this note-paper is the same size and there are only five sheets."

"Yes," Derek agreed. "And the handwriting couldn't well be smaller than it was on the blue paper."

"So?"

"So the thief has lost or kept one of the sheets."

"No," said Mark. "Those five sheets of formula are absolutely useless not only to Hoyle, but to any chemist he might set to work on them. For when I wrote the process out in the library at Upper Theign behind the locked door, I omitted the important stages—the real *me*. They are written somewhere else, and where nobody except myself will ever find them."

Derek Crayle sprang up and burst into laughter. He laughed with relief and admiration.

"Who was it said that you had always something up your sleeve? So there's a hiatus in the formula. I might have guessed from the absence of real distress in you."

"A hiatus!" Mark repeated. "There's a trinity of hiatuses, and I am sorry for the man who tries to make a coherent process out of those sheets of note-paper—all the wet towels between the Minch and the Solent won't appease his headache."

And sitting down once more at his table, Mark Thewliss sealed up his ivory-white note-paper once more in an ivory-white envelope and locked it away in his safe.

CHAPTER XXIV EXIT MR. WYATT

"My dear, I must have a clerk down here to-morrow," Mark announced casually at luncheon on the Wednesday.

"Mark!" Olivia exclaimed in dismay. "Not to stay?"

"Just for a few days—that's all. It's really necessary."

"But you are shooting on Saturday and Monday and you have a dance here on Monday evening."

"I know, my dear. But you can put him up anywhere."

Olivia raised her hands.

"Isn't that like a man?" she cried to the world at large. "First of all he wants a ball, and a shooting party at the same time. But he must have a ball, and there's an end of it. So his whole house is upset, except, of course, the rooms he uses. Then, when every arrangement is made and every bedroom labelled, he announces the arrival of a clerk, as if the house were one of those new expanding portmanteaux. We shall have to send the footman out to sleep in one of the cottages."

"That'll do splendidly," said Mark. "You see, it's all easy. Mr. Wyatt won't give the least bit of trouble."

And, indeed, Mr. Wyatt did not. On the contrary, he was the life and soul of the housekeeper's room; he made himself welcome in the butler's pantry, and in five minutes knew all the maids by their favourite names.

"Such a one!"

"A regular comic."

"Fierce, I call him."

Such were the admiring terms in which he was described. And Olivia herself was forced to admit that the household ran none the less smoothly because of this amiable soul with the red moustache who was always ready, when the office work was done, to lend a hand or crack a joke. He told the fortunes of the whole staff, making each one select a card and put the card in an envelope and hand it back to him. Then he put the card in its envelope against his heart next to the skin, and sat in a trance until that particular

destiny was made clear to him. At another time he devised a most gigglesome game for the girls. He made them lay their hands flat on a sheet of paper and took the contours of their fingers with a pencil, saying, "Now if I catch any of you girls asleep, I shall know the size of the gloves I've got to buy you."

Oh, Mr. Wyatt was a wag during these days, and quite the gentleman too. And in addition he got as fine a set of fingerprints of the staff at Upper Theign as man could wish for. But he was not content.

There was a corner in the library at Upper Theign which Lois had annexed. It had a window and a radiator under the window; and a high double bookcase set at a right angle to the wall helped to shut it off from the rest of the long room. With an arm-chair, a writing-table and a chair adapted to it, Lois had pitched a little encampment here and set it out with her own treasures; a photograph of her mother, an ebony elephant with ivory toes, a travelling clock, a doll and such other paraphernalia as are necessary to a young lady of to-day. So that even when the house was full she was secure in the privacy of this little recess.

Upper Theign was very full on the Sunday between the first day's shoot and the ball; and after tea upon that day Lois, having helped to set the guests who wished to play bridge at their bridge-tables, sought this corner of the library. There was a letter to be written to Mona at Liverpool, before dinner. The library was empty and only dimly lit. Lois went straight to her corner and, switching on the light above the table, took some sheets of paper from the rack. She was standing at the time, one hand extended towards the rack, the other resting upon her blotting-pad as she leaned forward; and under the fingers of the hand upon the blotting pad she felt some particles of grit. It was as if the chimney of a power-station in London had somehow transferred itself to the neighbourhood of Upper Theign. She drew her hand sharply away, and looking down saw that the whole surface of her white blotting-pad was thickly sprinkled with a yellow dust. And nowhere else, neither on the table itself, nor upon any book on the table nor upon the chair was there a trace of any dust at all.

Lois shivered suddenly, and an odd little moan burst from her throat. Her heart seemed to drop dizzily from its place. Her knees shook under her so that for a second or two she clung to the table, swaying backwards and forwards over it. That little man was persistent. His persistence frightened her terribly. The absence of any passion in him, of any animosity towards her, made him in an odd way more dangerous. He was just conscientiously and thoroughly carrying on his trade, and it was part of his trade to run her

down. Lois had a feeling of nausea. She trembled in a sombre ice-cold shadow of defeat.

But she had none of her mother's acquiescence. She was a rebel. It was in her nature to march out forthwith against perils which had to be met. And in a little while she was standing upright with her mind clear. That little man must be swept up out of her way. After all, thorough he might be, but he was only a commonplace little piece of insignificance with a ridiculous big moustache, who knew the rules of his trade. It ought not to be very difficult. But whatever she did must be final. She sat down now and took her time. In five minutes she had come to her decision. She tore off the top page of her blotting sheets, carried it with its layer of yellow powder to the fire-place and burnt it. Mr. Wyatt was a cunning little man, too, she reflected. In that dimly-lit room she might very easily have done just what he wanted her to do, if she had not noticed the dust when she turned up the lamp over her table, and tipped it all into the waste-paper basket. Yes, the sooner he was out of her way the better—even if she had to take a big risk to get him out.

As soon as the last of the blotting sheet was nothing but a black rag, she rang the bell. To the servant who answered it she said:

"Robert, do you know where his lordship is?"

"No, miss. I thought he was here."

The door opened, however, as he spoke and Mark came into the room.

"I was asking where I could find you, Lord Thewliss," Lois remarked to him with a smile.

"That's good news," said Mark. "What can I do?"

"May we have the lights up?"

"Of course."

He turned towards the servant, who turned on the lights by the switch at the door and went out.

"That better?"

"Much."

A note of gravity in her voice alarmed Mark instantly. Somewhere there was a rose-leaf crumpled. That must be smoothed out at once.

"What's the matter, Lois?" he asked solicitously.

"I wonder——" Lois hesitated whilst an uneasy smile parted her lips. "Would you think me very impertinent if I asked you to let me say something to Mr. Wyatt in your presence?" she asked.

Mark was startled. He stood and looked at her, and his face grew dark with anger. But no one knew better than Lois that the anger was not directed against her. He turned and rang the bell.

"Thank you," said Lois in a voice of quiet gratitude.

Mr. Wyatt was summoned peremptorily, and when he came he was asked to step forward. There was an ominous note in his employer's voice which Wyatt did not like at all. Nor was he at all taken by the aspect of Lois who stood very cold and aloof, watching his nervous approach with a pair of big implacable mysterious eyes. She was certainly not homey at this moment. She had never within his knowledge looked less homey, but she was more amazingly than ever a crasher.

"Only," Mr. Wyatt reflected apprehensively, "I am, I fear, the one who is going to be crashed."

And though he twirled his moustache to a most debonair angle, it was in the spirit of a French noble of 1790 concerned to make a comely ending in the collar of the guillotine.

"Miss Perriton has asked me to send for you, Mr. Wyatt," said Mark coldly. "She has something which she wishes to say to you."

"Quite," replied Mr. Wyatt unhappily.

"A little petition to make, that's all," Lois explained with an appealing meekness.

"Petition!" cried Mark, up in the air in a moment. "My dear Lois, you will make no petitions to Mr. Wyatt, I beg of you."

"No, no, of course not," said Mr. Wyatt.

"This little one—yes," Lois entreated. "You'll see how necessary it is."

She turned back to Mr. Wyatt, and though her face smiled her eyes scorched him. "I am going to beg you when next you want my fingerprints to come and ask me for them openly. I can assure you that you are just as likely to get them that way as by setting traps."

The attack was abrupt and more fatal because of its abruptness. Mr. Wyatt had expected a few carefully graduated questions. Did he suspect Miss Perriton? If so, of what did he suspect her? But she took his breath

away and apparently Lord Thewliss', too. For Lord Thewliss gasped and with an accent of incredulity cried:

"Fingerprints? Wyatt has been after yours, Lois?"

"I may be wrong," Lois answered sweetly, and she described the condition of her blotting-pad and its complete contrast with the rest of her little corner. "I ascribed it to Mr. Wyatt, because I could not think of anyone else who was likely to treat me in that—perhaps furtive—way. All the more I ascribed it to him, because I knew that he had been giving some attention to my room at Brooke's Market."

"What?" cried Mark in a menacing shout. "You did that too, Mr. Wyatt?"

"Of course I may be wrong," Lois went on very meekly. "I don't want to do an injustice to anyone. And if I am wrong, I apologise humbly to Mr. Wyatt."

Mr. Wyatt said to himself:

"That's my finish," and he contemplated Lois with a reluctant admiration.

He knew now that no words could put so fine an edge to Lord Thewliss' exasperation, as words suggesting that she should make a humble apology to the private inquiry agent. But she had known it from the first and had used it at the last. He had made a bad mistake in not appreciating the authority this girl had with Lord Thewliss.

"I might have known, too," he reflected ruefully, now that all reflection was too late. "Those journeys to Liverpool—my reports. I forgot the human element."

That was the truth. He was a man of measurements and collated facts and records searched. He was without inspiration and curiosity. He could follow a trail like a dog, but the why and the object were for the dog's master.

"Well, Mr. Wyatt?"

"Yes, my lord, yes."

"You accept Miss Perriton's statements?"

"Quite, my lord, quite."

"Yet I gave you, as I very clearly remember, some altogether categorical instructions. My staff—yes, but Miss Perriton was definitely excepted from

my staff."

"Yes, my lord. That is so."

"Well, Mr. Wyatt?"

Lord Thewliss, who had sat down in an arm-chair, stared blackly at the unhappy man and waited for an answer. Mr. Wyatt shifted from one foot to the other. The crasher had done for him. He was rolled, bowled and pitched. There was a sort of defence, no doubt. He had disobeyed his categorical instructions. Why? Because he was certain that the fingerprints upon that envelope with the many seals were the fingerprints of a woman. He had kept that item to himself. Because of his knowledge he had suspected Lois Perriton from the first; and his chief object in transferring his investigations to Upper Theign was to secure the irrefutable proof. But he had failed to secure it, and he would only make his case the worse now if he told what he knew. No one would believe him. It would be an aspersion, a slander, a mere beastly act of malevolence and revenge. He said:

"My lord, I find myself in a very difficult position."

"That I quite understand," interposed Mark.

"And the best thing which, under the circumstances, I can do is to thank your lordship for your kindness to me over many years and to accept what I know must come—my dismissal from your service."

He achieved a simple dignity in uttering these words which was quite lost upon his audience. Mark was outraged by Mr. Wyatt's impudence. Lois had cleared him out of her way, and he no longer existed for her at all. The only answer he got was a cold bow from Mark Thewliss and the words:

"A car shall be ready to take you to the station as soon as you have packed your luggage."

Mr. Wyatt departed without as much as one consoling twist to his moustache. The door closed upon him, and Lois, who had been standing lifeless as an image of wax, shook her head and moved a step or two away from the fire-place.

"Well, that's that," she said.

But she was wrong. "That" was not packed in brown paper, tied up with string and dispatched in quite that simple and complete finality. That was not by any means that. It would have been happier for everybody in that house if it had been. But Mark must smooth out the rose leaves.

"I meant to keep you out of this sordid little horror," he said remorsefully, and he told her of the theft of his formula and its replacement. "I really did give Wyatt the strictest instructions. I meant you to know nothing about it at all."

"Why did you want to keep me out of it?" Lois asked. She was standing erect upon the hearthrug with her hands behind her, looking straight in front of her, not at all at him.

"Why?"

To Mark it was very obvious.

"It wasn't because I am made of sugar, I hope, and might run away to nothing if I was handled."

There was a note faintly hostile in her voice which distressed Mark enormously. She was offended; and that feeling of hers must instantly be exorcised.

"No, of course not," he said, and was at a loss. What he wanted to say was that he had an intense distaste that anything ignoble should come near within her vision. But it was impossible that he should even begin to say it. He was not yet used to her. She was still the wonderful revelation. His pride in her still retained the fresh gloss of its novelty, and she herself was glossy and exquisite with the reflected sheen of it. All the more reason, therefore, that he must stand guard over his phrases lest some little word of tenderness should slip out and betray their relationship. As he watched her now, erect, her head thrown back, a trifle mutinous, he longed desperately to tell her all the truth—the truth that never must be told.

He gave her what explanation he could of his orders to Mr. Wyatt.

"I wanted the theft kept as secret as possible. No harm has actually been done. The formula was quite useless without the processes I had omitted. If I could discover the culprit I should be glad—yes. For one thing, I object strongly to anyone taking me for a simpleton," he exclaimed with a laugh. "But if it got known that I was looking for a thief with the help of a private detective, everybody in my service would have gone about imagining that I suspected him."

There Lois might have abandoned the subject. She was safe. But she had none of her mother's submission to calamities which could not be remedied, and all her mother's courage when some great advantage was to be gained. As Mona had gambled years ago in Frascati's restaurant, so Lois did now in the library of Upper Theign.

"Of course I am the one person it's most natural to suspect."

"You're the last," Mark cried vehemently.

But Lois would not be persuaded by his vehemence. She shook her head.

"There's a great fortune in this process. I am a girl without means, a dependent," and then she turned her eyes upon him, and with the most natural assumption of anxiety searched his face.

"Do you suspect me?" she asked very quietly.

For a second or two after she had put her question, Lois really quailed. For Mark did not answer. He sat and looked at her with the strangest expression. He kept things up his sleeve, didn't he? She recalled Derek Crayle's saying about him. And there he sat looking at her intently and speaking never a word. Was he going to say suddenly, "I don't suspect. I know?"

Lois was frightened, and her fear grew—until he laughed; laughed roundly, like a man who has found a brief and excellent way out of some tangle where words are of no avail. He sprang up and slipped his hand beneath her arm.

"I'll convince you that I don't suspect you, Lois."

He led her across the room to a bookcase. He lifted his hand to a shelf on which were ranged the volumes of Robert Browning. He took down one of them.

"Have you ever read this?"

Lois recited the title aloud.

"*How Pacchiaroto worked in Distemper?* No."

"No, nor Hoyle either. It's one of a great man's distressingly light moments. Turn to page 34."

Lois turned over the leaves, and on the broad margin of the page she saw some minute handwriting with algebraical figures dotted in and out amidst the writing.

"Hiatus number one," said Mark.

He took her arm again and marched her to another bookcase. From a shelf he removed a volume and handed it to her.

"*The Plays of Mrs. Aphra Behn*," Lois quoted.

"Nobody but an incipient dramatist would read them willingly, and he wouldn't get to page 87."

Lois turned the leaves and found page 87. Along the top and the bottom of the print the minute handwriting was repeated.

"Hiatus number two," said Mark.

He replaced the book and—

"The other exhibit I have to show you," he announced, "is in the particular corner annexed, squatted upon and thereby owned by my secretary."

He guided her towards her corner and suddenly she stopped. It was only for a moment—but let it be held in her extenuation, that without the third omitted process the formula was still of no use, still had no value. Mark Thewliss felt the drag upon his arm as she drew back. But he was in the mind to make the proof of his confidence complete. He led her into her alcove, and from the bookcase projecting at the side he took down a battered old school book.

"Xenophon's *Anabasis*," Lois read.

"Xenophon's a household name, of course, but only students read him, and any student would pass away in disgust if he saw that edition. Page 123. The third hiatus."

"Yes," said Lois.

He lifted the book again on to its high shelf and brought her back to the fire-place.

"Now, Lois! You and I are the only two people in the world who know where the missing stages of my universal process are to be found. Not even Derek knows."

"Yes," returned Lois thoughtfully. It seemed that some anxiety still troubled her. "But with the help of the rest which we know to have been stolen, couldn't those three stages be discovered? I mean by some accomplished chemist?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly, no doubt. But, after all, I am not the only man who has been experimenting, and no one else has succeeded."

"But it *is* possible," Lois insisted. That it should be possible was a very important point for her now that she had been let into the whole secret.

"No doubt," and Mark laughed again. "Derek dins that possibility into my ears twenty times a day. But that's not the important thing. This is. I have proved to you that I don't suspect you."

Again some passing shade of trouble darkened the girl's eyes and fleeted across her face. Then she smiled.

"You have," she said.

"Good! You've got to run away and dress and so have I, or we shall be late for dinner. We nowadays take a little more time than you."

He hurried out of the room with a nod and a smile. Lois sank down into a chair and stared into the fire. Her mother had gambled at Frascati's and had lost. Lois had gambled at Upper Theign and had won.

CHAPTER XXV THE BALL AT UPPER THEIGN

Or so it seemed. But even the cleverest of young people may make a mistake under the stress of a sudden panic, as Lois did on the night of the ball when she snapped off the electric light. The Monday was a very busy day at Upper Theign. There were the men to be got off to the coverts, luncheon to be supervised at one of the farm-houses, and the final preparations to be made for the ball. Neither Olivia nor Lois had any leisure, and by the time when a card inscribed "Lord Thewliss" had been fixed upon the outside of the library door to secure him a sanctuary from the hubble-bubble of the night, it was time for them to dress for dinner.

Very soon after dinner the guests began to arrive, and it was not really much before midnight when Olivia felt that her duties were fulfilled. With her mind and her eyes now free she saw that Derek was dancing with Lois Perriton; and she recognised with an angry reluctance that in her dress of pale green chiffon, with her white skin and coppery hair, her slim, tall figure and her lovely face, the girl did make an entrancing picture. All the more eagerly therefore she stopped the pair of them as they came round to her.

"Derek," she said, "I want you to find Mark and see that he takes one of the dowagers in to supper. I'm sure that he'll get hold of a pretty girl if we don't watch him."

Derek agreed with a sigh.

"All right, Olivia." He turned to Lois. "We'll go in a little later, please! The third dance after this one, what?"

Lois saw Olivia's face harden.

"Unless you ought to take in one of the guests," she suggested.

"I've done my duty," he replied. "This is the first dance I've had with you."

Lois was silent for a moment.

"Make it the fourth from now," she said.

Olivia was at that moment claimed for a dance. But as she danced she kept her eyes open. She saw Mark lead into the supper-room a matron of the county.

"That's all right," she said to herself.

She saw Derek dancing with the matron's daughter.

"That's all right too," she said. "Now whom has Lois picked up?"

But she could not see Lois anywhere.

"And that's all right," she concluded, and began to dance with enjoyment.

But Olivia managed her house. Mark, after supper, would clamour for a hefty cigar, and would seek the privacy of his library in which contentedly to smoke it. And Heaven knew whether in the general upset of the evening the fire in that unused room had been tended. So after the next dance she hurried across the hall to the library. The better to ensure the room's exclusion, no lights were to be burning in it beyond the firelight. Yet when Olivia opened the door, a light was burning at the very end of the room in a bay made by the projecting bookcases. Olivia no doubt made a trifle of noise as she opened and shut the door behind her. And she had just time to see a flicker of pale green—a dress and a satin slipper pushed back with the instep bent, as though someone seated in a chair was bending laboriously forward over some work at the table. Just for a second she saw ripples of pale green like sea-water in a shallow, and then suddenly there was a tiny click. The light in the alcove vanished. The library was in darkness but for the ripe glow of the fire upon carpet and rug.

Olivia stood stock-still. What in the world was the meaning of that, she asked herself? There was no doubt who was in the alcove at the end of the room. But why should Lois switch off the light in a hurry—in a panic because she had heard the door open and shut? Olivia waited just inside the door, seized by an odd kind of excitement. She was expectant of she knew not what; and the longer she stood in the darkness and waited, the more tense her expectation grew. Olivia actually held her breath that she might listen the better. But she heard nothing; the girl in the alcove was modulating her breathing too, no doubt was listening to make sure whether someone had looked into the library and gone away—or had looked into the library and remained. But why? Was it possible—the question flashed into Olivia's mind—that Lois was not alone in that hidden corner of the house? Olivia had not seen Derek during the last dance. Was he there with Lois? Were they together, huddled in the darkness in doubt whether they were alone again—in a panic lest they had been caught?

A cruel little smile distorted Olivia's face. For nothing in the world would she move now. This was her house. Youth had more of freedom in

these days, but there were still standards of conduct. And the breach of them was still visited upon the woman—happily, thought Olivia. She had the right to send any girl packing, whoever she might secretly be—if she caught her amongst the vulgarities of an intrigue. The moment must come when they would move. Olivia stood with her fingers on the switch ready to flood the room with light at just the right moment. She stood with her senses so concentrated that the crash of a lump of coal falling from the grate upon the hearth startled her like an explosion.

Did it startle the guilty couple in the alcove too, so that they must clap hands to their mouths to cover a cry? Olivia had persuaded herself that there were two of them now. The greater therefore was her disappointment, when one alone moved slowly forward into the mouth of the alcove, and looked about the room—Lois. Her eyes travelled to the door by which Olivia stood, her dress of flame-coloured taffeta relieved against the dark bindings of the books; and suddenly Lois stiffened. She stepped forward in a flurry into the firelight, and was suddenly aware that she had made a mistake which was fatal. For nothing in the world should she have moved and left her table as it was. Olivia switched on the light; and the girl and the woman stood watching one another like antagonists in an arena.

Olivia moved towards the bay, stopped suddenly, and turned with a little cry of amazement at the impertinence of this girl. For Lois had started swiftly back as if she meant to stop her by force. Lois checked herself, however, and turned back to the fire.

"I am alone," she said.

From the spot which she had reached Olivia could see that the corner by the window was empty. Yes, certainly Lois was alone. Why then had Lois had that first quick impulse to hinder her? What secret did that corner hide?

Olivia walked back to the fire-place. Now that she stood side by side with Lois, she could see that the girl was trembling from head to foot.

"It's very curious, isn't it, Lois?" she asked.

But Lois would not help her by asking in return what was curious. She stood with her eyes upon the red coals and suddenly she shuddered violently.

"I'm afraid that I have a chill," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, no! It's not a chill. People don't tremble like that from a chill," Olivia answered coldly.

Again Lois did not help her by any argument. She stretched out her hands and took hold of the mantelshelf; Olivia noticed that she clutched it. She noted a foot upon the fender. Olivia saw that it still shook.

"It's curious that a young lady so popular and so very charmingly dressed should hide herself away in a corner of an empty room during a dance."

There was no answer.

"It's still more curious," Olivia continued, "that the moment anyone else opened the door, she should turn off her light in a panic."

Lois lifted her head.

"I am afraid that I can do nothing which is right," she said, and Olivia laughed.

"I really shouldn't take that tragic tone," she answered disdainfully.

She was conscious that she had the mastery of the girl who had upset the pleasant order of her life and made her a stranger in her own house. Lois was actually trembling before her; she was afraid. Olivia looked her over in her dainty equipment and savoured a sharp new pleasure. She was repaid for these months of humiliation. There she stood, decked out in her pretty clothes, and abjectly afraid, like a child who is going to be punished. Olivia's eyes narrowed and she smiled.

"You can certainly do one thing which is extremely right," she said. "You can go back at once to the ball-room."

It was a command, not a request, and it was precisely the command which Lois dreaded at that moment more than anything else in the world. She hadn't a doubt that if she obeyed and went out of the room, if the door closed upon her, very few seconds would pass before the light above her table in the corner would be burning again. Yet how could she refuse? She had a desperate thought of saying: "Yes, but I'll put my table straight first." It would take a moment only to place a book on a shelf. If the book did not belong to that shelf, had a definite place upon another shelf in another part of the room—that might easily escape notice.

"But if I do act like this, I shall call Lady Olivia Thewliss' attention to what I am doing. She won't understand. But she'll be puzzled and she'll set herself to find out."

Lois could see no escape, unless chance served her. She blamed herself for one unnecessary blunder. She had chosen the best time, she had not a

doubt of that. There had been a moment when she had considered waiting until the house was asleep and the lights out. But the danger was greater that way. Someone might be still awake, however late the hour. A light seen flashing from a window, her step heard upon the stair, the bark of a dog—and she would have been caught without an excuse. These minutes when Mark Thewliss was at supper and the room reserved for him—that had been the likelier way. But she had switched the light off in a panic—that was the stupid blunder, and she must pay for it or chance must serve her.

"Well?" said Olivia. She was at her ease now, more than at her ease. Some little strain of cruelty, hidden even from herself until this moment, made her contemplate the girl's distress with a delicious enjoyment. "Are you going to do what I wish? I am asking nothing more from you than I have a right to ask."

"Yes," Lois answered. "I am going."

She walked slowly and reluctantly towards the door; and before she reached it chance played her its worst turn of all. For it was opened from the outside and Mark Thewliss stood upon the threshold. His face broke into a smile.

"Why, the whole family's here, neglecting its duties," he cried, and it is difficult to conceive any more inopportune remark. "Ouf!" he added, dropping with relief into a big chair. "I'm going to smoke a very large cigar. Lois, will you give me one?"

Lois fetched the box from a sideboard and placed an ash-tray and a stand of matches on an occasional table at his elbow. She hardly knew what she was doing, her head so span and such a fever of anxiety burned in her. Olivia had already moved across the room to the corner, and whilst Mark was selecting a cigar from the box which she held for him, she heard the snap of the light switch. The light was shining now down upon her writing-table. Lois replaced the cigar box, and returning to Mark's side, struck a match, stooped and held it to his cigar. And still no word was spoken in that corner of the room. But Lois heard the pages of a book rustle, and her heart leapt and stopped.

Mark inhaled the tobacco and settled back in his chair, surveying this big daughter of his with delight. He had never felt so much pride in her, so much tenderness for her as at this last moment, before pride and delight and tenderness all crashed down in misery.

"Do you know that Derek's searching the whole house for you, Lois?" he asked. "I don't wonder one little bit. There's not a girl here who can hold

a candle to you."

"Gibe, gibe, gibe," Lois returned, counterfeiting, not very successfully, a playful mockery. "You're jeering at me."

"Not a bit of it. In that green frock you're a nymph fresh from the seas," he answered, and then at last Olivia's voice broke in.

She was coming across the room, holding in her hands a book from which a sheet of white note-paper protruded.

"All the more odd, therefore," she said, "that Lois should choose this particular time to study the plays of Mrs. Aphra Behn."

Olivia had drawn a bow at random, and she had pierced a heart. She should have been happy. She was appalled. For the heart which she had pierced was Mark's. She saw him staring at the book she held like a man who knows that some irremediable calamity has befallen him, and yet will not accept it. He stretched out a shaking hand and after failing twice to speak, whispered in a broken voice she had never heard before:

"Give it to me! Give it to me!"

Olivia put the book in his hand. He did not look at her. He looked at no one. There was stealth in the eager avoidance of his eyes. A stranger would have thought that if anyone were guilty of treachery, it was he himself. His fingers fumbled at the pages as though they were numbed with cold, and the sheet of paper fluttered down upon the floor. There it remained. There it might have remained for God knows how long. For Mark did not dare to touch it and Olivia was still held fast in a dreadful spell by the spectacle of the misery her words had caused. But suddenly Lois moved very swiftly. She stooped on a knee and picked the paper up and laid it on the open pages of the book before his eyes. She stood up again, very quiet, and her face like a white mask with a pair of burning eyes. All her agitation had gone from her. In the anticipation of peril she could feel her heart flutter and sink, her legs give beneath her as though her bones melted into water. Now that the peril had become actual disaster she was cold and firm as ice itself.

"Of course it was a joke you were playing on me. . . . You wanted to frighten me . . . and for a moment, upon my word, you did."

The words came falteringly from Mark Thewliss' mouth, whilst his gaze wandered from this to that figure in the carpet's pattern. No one heard the door open or was aware that Derek Crayle now stood within the room. No one heard the door close again, for, aware at once that some grave business was in debate, he shut it behind him ever so noiselessly.

"That's just what it was, of course—a laugh at my precautions," Mark continued.

"No."

"But I'm sure of it. Nothing else would be endurable."

It was a prayer he was uttering, a prayer winged on a tremulous weak laugh. Olivia was mortified by it horribly. Here was her giant of a man changed into a craven. She felt that she would never get the odious scene out of her memories.

"No," Lois repeated; and Mark lifted his eyes to her with so sharp a look of pain in them that it must surely bring her to her knees.

But Lois would not see. The truth was out, and nothing could bury it again. Her life at Upper Theign was broken off to-night. She threw her thoughts forward and imagined them, Olivia, Mark, Derek Crayle and herself, sitting together at meals with the spectre of her crime a fifth at the table, keeping them company as they walked, making all their talk a formality and an effort. The pretence could not last for a week.

"No. I was in dead earnest," she said.

"This is your handwriting, Lois?"

Mark's voice was growing stronger at last.

"Yes."

Now a note of anger was heard.

"You were going to sell it?"

"To Hoyle."

It seemed that the name uttered in so matter-of-fact a tone restored Mark Thewliss. He rose up from his chair and stood erect.

"Face me, if you can," he cried, and catching Lois by the elbow he swung her round.

His face was terrible in its wrath. Olivia feared that he would strike the girl to the ground. But Lois did not shrink from him. She turned and looked him in the face.

"A fine return you make to me," Mark began—and broke off.

He would not charge her with ingratitude, would not heap up the items of his kindness. He would spare himself that want of dignity. Moreover, just

at that moment Derek Crayle thought it time to intervene. He moved forward and joined the little group.

"Derek!" cried Mark. "You here? It's as well," and the blood rushed into Lois' face, and for the first time she bent her head, so that her eyes might not meet Derek's gaze.

"Look," continued Mark, and he held out the sheet of paper to his partner.

"Lois robbed me," he cried in a gust of anger and grief. "My stolen formula."

And Lois in her turn struck, capping his accusation.

"Yes, and my mother's stolen happiness. And my stolen birthright. And you, my father, robbed us."

To the other three in the room the words were little less than appalling. They stood dismayed, confounded. Yet the young, hard voice had uttered its challenge without a trace of Mark's violence. Not a tremor of passion shook it. The words dropped one after the other icy-cold, icy-clear, and for a while no other word was spoken. Then with a gasp Mark Thewliss asked in a whisper—and how foolish and trivial the question sounded:

"Then you know——?"

"I have known for eight years. I was just sixteen when Henry Perriton told me that I was your bastard. It's true," she added with a wintry smile, "that Henry Perriton was in a bad humour that morning."

Again silence followed upon her words, but this time it did not last. There came suddenly a noise of voices. The door was opened, and the music of a dance lilted through the opening and filled the room.

"It's all right! The room's lit up," a young man exclaimed as, followed by another youth and a girl, he entered the room. But even the most impervious man that ever breathed could not but have realised that something here was gravely amiss.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said to Mark Thewliss. "We oughtn't to have barged in here."

For a second or two Thewliss gazed at him blankly, and then recognised him for the son of a neighbouring squire.

"That's all right, Hammond," he said, and managed to produce a smile. "Come straight in!"

Young Hammond's eyes fell upon Lois.

"Oh!" he exclaimed reproachfully, "I have been looking for you everywhere."

But Derek took a step and hid Lois from him.

"I'm sorry, old man. But Miss Perriton promised to have supper with me during this dance. I came here to fetch her." He had a suspicion that Lois, calmly though she spoke, was nearing the limits of her strength. She was very white. "Let us go!" he said.

For a moment she stood undecided. Then he felt her hand tremble on his arm and cling as though she feared that she would fall. There was a look of wonder in her eyes, as he led her straight from the room.

"That was kind," she said gratefully when they stood together in the corridor.

"Kind!" Derek dismissed the word contemptuously. "Kindness is a word for acquaintances."

Lois stood and gazed at him whilst the wonder grew in her eyes and the hardness died out of them. Her hand tightened on his sleeve and at last her voice broke.

"Oh, thank you, Derek," she whispered, and snatching her hand away she hurried to the foot of the stairs and thence ran up to her room.

Derek Crayle was taken by surprise. She was gone before he could stop her. He drove his hands ruefully into his pockets.

"They've made a fine mess of it between them, old Mark, Lois and Olivia, too," he reflected, and he followed Lois up the staircase and knocked on her door.

"Lois!" he called in a low voice. But he got no answer. "Lois!" he repeated. "You'd better come down and have some supper."

But Lois was deaf to that invitation too. Derek Crayle turned the handle of the door, but the key was turned in the lock. He listened with his ear against the panel but he could not hear a sound.

CHAPTER XXVI DEREK MAKES A GESTURE

"We must go back to our guests," said Mark; and it seemed to Olivia that he had aged by ten years. He walked with a heavy tread quite out of his character, and his shoulders stooped. Though he looked about the ball-room with a smiling face, he had death at his heart. This ball had been arranged merely to give pleasure to Lois and enhance the prestige of her beauty; all the tedium of preparation and disturbance had been well worth while on that account. And now, though the dancing went on in gaiety and laughter, she was hidden away somewhere, a detected thief. Mark tortured himself with the repetition of that word.

"You must be going? So soon? It has been a wonderful evening! So glad you've enjoyed it. My little girl's a thief." He was afraid lest the words should slip out of his mouth before he could catch them back; and once or twice, when some departing guests looked at him curiously, finding something a little distracted in his manner, he almost believed that he had spoken them.

Olivia was in hardly a better case. She knew very well that Mark was stricken to the dust and she took herself to task for her jealousy.

"I was a beast to that girl," she reflected remorsefully. "If I could hurt her a little, I was happy. I should have made a friend of her."

But what was the use of these reproaches? The dreadful thing had happened. Oh, would the night never end?

It ended, of course. The last carriage drove away, the last visitor retired to his room. Mark, Olivia, and Derek Crayle were left standing together in the empty ball-room.

"I am very tired," said Mark. "We will talk to-morrow. To-night I must sleep if I can."

He went wearily out of the room. Olivia followed him with her eyes until he had disappeared.

"Derek," she said, "this is the end of Upper Theign," meaning the end of their pleasant, wholesome, equable life in that big manor house which had been built for comfort rather than for display. Mark had built for himself a dream-palace upon its foundations, and they had not borne its weight.

"Don't you believe that, Olivia!" Derek returned.

He had the confidence of his years and his epoch. Those kindly old ones had made a mess-up, the dear things. He would have to jump in and put them wise in the morning.

"You go to bed, Olivia," he said. "Let us never forget that things are not what they seem and that the darkest hour comes before the dawn. Off you go!"

He bustled her up to her room and went to his own. He drew up the blind and saw a great oblong of yellow light thrown out upon the snow of the lawn. Lois was still awake then, for the light came from the window of her room.

"She has had no supper either," he said to himself. "That won't do."

He sat for a moment or two upon the edge of his bed, troubled by a very disturbing conjecture. Then he went out into the corridor. The whole house was in darkness, and silent as a church. He went down into the hall, switching the lights on as he went. He saw that the front door was locked and the door of every room upon the ground floor which had a window opening on the park, and he took the keys away with him upstairs.

"If anyone wants to catch an early train in the morning," he said, "they must first ask my permission—and I shan't give it"; and with that he tumbled into bed and went to sleep.

There were, however, no very early departures planned. On the other hand, no one overstayed the reasonable hour, and by ten o'clock Olivia had said good-bye to the last of her visitors. She asked her butler, then, where his lordship was to be found, and on receiving his reply hurried in a panic into the dining-room where Derek was eating a late breakfast.

"Oh, you can sit there—munching!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands over the callousness of the world.

"I never munch," Derek uttered with dignity, as he helped himself to another plateful of kidneys and bacon. "I eat."

"Do you know what Mark's doing?" she cried.

"Perfectly. I let him out of the house this morning, since he was up earlier than the servants. He's out with a keeper and a dog."

"And a gun;" Olivia shot the word at him with a tragedienne's intensity.

Derek shook a forefinger at her.

"Now don't go off at the deep end, Olivia! I know what you're thinking and it's absurd. Keep tight hold of your wits, my dear. Mark's not that kind of man. Have some coffee and I'll instruct you in the ways of life."

Olivia allowed herself to be placed at the table. She drank some coffee. She was a little comforted. If Derek was easy in his mind, perhaps she was a little fanciful. But she looked out upon a sheet of bright white snow studded with black trees, and she imagined a scarlet patch on the snow and a body amongst the trees.

"Instruct me then!" she cried; and Derek expounded his thesis.

"When a woman's seriously distressed, and wishes to take her mind off her troubles, she goes out and buys a new hat, doesn't she?"

"Well—it's one of the ways," Olivia conceded.

"It's the usual way," Derek asserted.

"Very well."

"Men, on the other hand, like old hats. They fit their heads better. They buy new ones with reluctance."

Derek helped himself stodgily to marmalade.

"Oh, Derek, go on!"

"When a man's seriously distressed and wishes to take his mind off his troubles, he gets a gun and kills a bird. And that's what Mark's doing now. It shows a curious divergence in the points of view of the two sexes to which philosophers might well devote some of their attention."

"You think Mark has really gone out shooting this morning?" cried Olivia. Her fears were assuaged, even if her scorn of an utterly pachydermatous and insensible world was increased.

Derek nodded.

"You didn't think that he would just sit at home grousing, did you, Olivia?"

"I didn't anyway think that he would just go out pheasanting," said Olivia, and Derek smiled with a smile of patronage.

"A play upon words! A conceit! Capital, Olivia—" and——

"Don't be such an ass, Derek!" Olivia broke in.

Derek pointed to the window. Across the snow from the wood at the edge of which the laboratory stood, Mark, with his gun in the crook of his arm and his Labrador at his heels, was approaching the house, and behind him walked the keeper with a couple of pheasants dangling from his hand.

"Bad man!" said Derek.

"Why?"

"Two hens."

"They're his, anyway."

Derek groaned aloud.

"And the Greeks made a woman the deity of sport!" he cried. He was incredulous. He was amazed.

There was amazement, too, in the look Olivia stole at him across the table. His flippancy actually disturbed her.

"I thought——" she began, and stopped.

"Tell me your thought, Olivia?"

Derek retained the mock pomposity of manner, but his voice was suddenly wary.

"I thought you were rather fond of that wicked girl." She had dropped in the epithet in order to stir him into some revelation, but she failed completely of her object.

"When the proper time comes, Olivia," he said easily, "I shall leave you in no doubt as to whether I am or whether I am not. Hallo!"

He looked towards the window. For he heard the whirr of an engine and a moment later, a motor-car passed the window and drew up at the door. It was precisely at that moment that Mark Thewliss entered the room and poured himself out a cup of coffee.

"I thought they had all gone," said Derek.

"So they have," Olivia returned, and Mark explained.

"That car has come for Lois. She telephoned to Newbury for it early this morning," he said.

"She is going?" Derek asked.

An intense relief suddenly possessed Olivia. Lois was going of her own accord, and these men of Olivia's were taking her departure very sensibly

with their quiet voices and placid words. She had probably troubled herself needlessly. Upper Theign might again become the comfortable, smooth place it once had been.

But Mark did not answer Derek's question.

"I have asked her to see me," he said, and Olivia interrupted quickly:

"Is that worth while?"

"It's necessary if I am to have one untormented hour from now on until the day I die," Mark returned with a quiet simplicity of manner which stamped his unusual words with the very seal of truth. "I haven't slept at all. I have been going over and over again all the words which were spoken in the library last night, and all the looks which went with them."

"Her words! Her looks!" cried Olivia on the edge of despair. Mark was still then under the spell!

"Yes, of course," he replied. "Her words, her looks," and Olivia was spurred to a sudden burst of violence.

"She stole, Mark. That's the simple truth. There was some high-flown talk about her birthright——" The word "rubbish!" was on Olivia's lips as her comment, but she substituted a milder one. "Excuses! She stole, and for money."

Mark winced visibly, but his sleepless night had not been wasted in cozening himself.

"No doubt," he said, "but from an enemy. It was an act of war. And I have got to know why. I am the enemy. Ever since I have known that I had a daughter, Lois, I have tried to make her what amends I could. She had no reason to think she wasn't safe. Of course Perriton's disclosure—it's clear that he broke his word in a fit of anger—must have been a shock, may well have made her feel—what shall I say? A little—to put it at the worst—a little tainted compared with her friends. But she's not the weak kind which would let that prey on her for long. She hasn't got what we call nowadays an inferiority complex. Not a bit of it," and even in that hour of his distress there was the shadow of a smile of pride upon his face. "The knowledge that she was really my daughter, and that I was doing my best after I had found it out, to make what reparation was possible wouldn't turn me into the enemy I am, the enemy against whom all tactics are justified, the enemy outside the pale. No, there's something more which I don't know, and I've got to know it."

He reached out his hand to the bell-button upon the table as Derek, having finished his breakfast, lit a cigarette.

"I'll see her now, I think."

"In the library?" Derek asked.

"Yes."

But before he could ring the bell the door was opened. Both Olivia and Mark were sitting with their backs to it. But Derek across the table laid his cigarette down and the odd look of suspense which showed in his face made the other two turn round. Lois had not waited for the summons. She was there in the room, now. She was dressed in a warm brown jacket and skirt with a jumper, but she had left her coat and hat in the hall. She had put a little colour on her cheeks and lips and she was trying to carry off her humiliation with a rather pitiful bravado.

"My judges!" she said, and she made a foolish little mock obeisance and sought to produce a jaunty smile. But as a performance it was lamentably a failure.

"Judges," Derek repeated. "Speaking for myself, I'll show you about that."

No one in the room had a notion of what he meant to do, not even Lois. Indeed, she braced herself against an attack. He rose from his chair very deliberately, walked round the corner of the table straight to her, and taking her face between his hands, kissed her upon the mouth. It made an end of Lois' jauntiness and bravado. She uttered a sharp cry of pain and dropping on to a chair beside the door as though her knees gave under her, she covered her face with her hands. There she sat for a little while. Then she stood up and, turning to Mark, said, and now very quietly:

"You wanted to see me before I went away."

"We'll go into the library," said Mark, as he got up from his chair; and Lois opened the door again.

"I, too," said Derek.

The girl paused. She did not look at Derek. She looked anywhere except at him. But she stood quite still. In the end, however, she uttered no objection, and she followed Mark into the hall. Olivia was left alone with her dream that the old life would be resumed at Upper Theign and this nightmare interval forgotten, splintered to fragments.

CHAPTER XXVII FATHER AND DAUGHTER

Derek Crayle was well aware that both Mark and Olivia would have liked to have brained him with an iron mace, if any such weapon had been handy at the moment. He had sought to lighten the tension by a display of humour, but he had been too facetious for the occasion; and had he been concerned to analyse himself, he would have been quick enough to understand that he himself was labouring under that very stress which he was seeking to alleviate.

But he was not concerned with himself. Lois' statement of her relationship to Mark had explained to Derek the secret of Mark's devotion to the girl, and he understood that unless the tangle was unravelled, Mark would really be crippled for the rest of his life. He would be hampered like a soldier in the early days of surgery by a wound which would not heal. Lois herself too was in no better case. He was certain that hers was not an ordinary crime of theft which could be settled out of hand by a magistrate's court. She had been warped by Henry Perriton's disclosure; it had preyed upon her, distorting her vision, impairing her standards. Possibly there was something more which he did not yet know, as he intended to. He was undoubtedly very unpopular, but he followed Mark and Lois into the library with an undaunted step.

For if Lois had her luggage hoisted upon the hired car and drove off into mists and emptiness, he too was crippled. It was odd and rather hatefully odd that a slip of a girl one had never heard of should just be about the house for a month or two and leave two quite valuable people crippled if she went away again. But since the fact was so he must put a stop to it. He was confident that he could. He was of his day, not over-much hampered by tradition, and certainly not the spineless idler supposed to be typical of his generation. But he lived on a very mountain of self-confidence. He would encourage Mark to have his say and Lois to have hers and then he would step in and sort all out in its due proportions.

He took a seat apart therefore by one of the bays of the library, whilst Mark stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece and his eyes looking into the fire, and Lois a few steps away from him upon the hearthrug.

"I want you to sit down, Lois," said Mark gently. "I don't want you to go away like this to somewhere where I shall never know what's happening to

you."

"Will that matter?" Lois asked.

"Very much."

Mark spoke almost in a whisper, for he feared that if he raised his voice, it would break upon his words.

"I have no plans beyond going," Lois replied and she looked over to the window eager to end this ordeal, to sever herself altogether from this house and its associations and disappear across the white carpet of snow into the frosty mist of December.

"Still stay for a moment," Mark urged and he raised his face towards her. It was so ravaged by pain and distress, it deepened his request into so urgent a prayer that Lois could not but yield to it. But she yielded very reluctantly and with a great perplexity in her eyes.

"I don't see why you should wish to say one word more to me as long as you live," she returned quietly, and she sat down in one of the great chairs by the fire. But she balanced herself upon the edge of it, leaning a little forward, like one who has no right to be seated there at all.

"I believe there's some terrible misunderstanding, which, unless we unravel it now, will never be unravelled at all," said Mark, "and I shall be tortured by it for the rest of my life."

Though he spoke with a sincerity so unforced and simple that only one out of a thousand could have doubted it, that one was there opposite to him. Lois disbelieved and her face hardened.

"Torture is a big word," she answered.

"A true one," said Mark.

"But there can't be a misunderstanding," Lois cried. "It's all as clear as daylight. I tried to steal from you and you caught me. You can send me to prison, or you can let me go."

A little cry broke from Mark Thewliss as the hard young voice spoke of prison and Derek moved suddenly in his chair. He was sitting behind Lois, and though she could not see him she heard the movement, and lifting up a hand she said in a low voice,

"Oh! Don't, don't!"

She must keep Derek altogether out of her thoughts, until she was free of the house, and no one could see the tears fall from her eyes. Otherwise her endurance would break. He must be very silent, very still. But she had betrayed herself. For both the men the hard crust of her manner was shown to be nothing more than the film with which nature covers a wound. Mark took a little comfort from the cry.

"You tried to steal from me?" he said.

"Yes."

"For yourself?"

"Partly. I mean—of course." Lois threw up her hands as she caught her first word back. "What's the use? We just hurt one another more and more."

"We've got to do that, Lois," said Mark. He seated himself in a chair on the other side of the hearth. "It will make it easier for you to tell me about yourself, if I set you the example. We are neither of us of course free from blame. Neither of us perhaps quite so blamable as we should appear to people who don't know anything about us."

And Derek in his corner thought that Mark showed a very pretty dignity in thus putting himself at once on the same level as Lois.

"That you reproach me," Mark continued, "was last night, to use your own words, clear as daylight. That you have reason to reproach me I don't deny. You used some words last night. Your stolen birthright. I must plead guilty," and there was heard a little protest from the girl, as though she regretted in the face of this confession the unclothed words which she had used. "Yes, but since I am in the dock," Mark resumed with the ghost of a smile, "I plead one thing in extenuation. I have tried to make amends ever since I knew you were my daughter."

But those words, so obviously intended to melt his daughter to a like frankness, did nothing but harm. There had been a pleasant touch of grace in the discomfort with which Lois had been listening to the apology of a man so much older than herself. For it was in that light only that she regarded him. He had acquired in her thoughts none of the tender associations of a father. But even that sign of grace vanished from her now. The very hardness of the frozen ground outside the window had its counterpart in her aspect and her voice.

"Indeed?" she asked.

"Yes. For I had not one suspicion that I had a daughter at all until your mother told me of you in this room."

He saw her body stiffen and her eyes widen in amazement—amazement at his effrontery.

"You don't believe that," he said.

"No."

"It is most important that you should."

"How can I?"

What could he plead? His tenderness to her, his care for her enjoyments and comfort, his pride in her during these last months? But if resentment had blinded her to them, if the little which she may have noticed were set down by her to the account of a forced repayment, of what avail were they at all? The plea would mean just one more profitless humiliation for him.

"How can I prove it?" he cried, tossing up his hands in a gesture of despair. "I can't. But"—and he hesitated. But they had come to such a pass that the most sacred reticences must go down in their imperious need. "But I think your mother would tell you that what I am saying is true."

Lois flinched as though he had struck her. How she should meet her beloved mother was one of the questions she wanted to reserve until she was alone, and Upper Theign a thing of the past behind her. She had meant to hear no word about her mother from the man who had spoilt her mother's life.

"She might—yes," Lois agreed. "She would take the kind view. But, you see, my mother doesn't know what I know."

Suddenly Mark leaned forward. He was looking for the key to her conduct. He would not believe that a mere passion for money, even a mere resentment against him, had persuaded her so far as theft. There was a secret she was holding back. Any word of hers might let it slip.

"What do you know, Lois? Tell me! Tell me!"

For a moment Lois seemed a little less positive. What she knew was shameful to Mark Thewliss. Yet he urged her to tell it. He was all eagerness that she should tell it. There was not a hint of apprehension in his manner. He might have been innocent of what to her was the worst part of the whole business.

"I had just left school when Henry Perriton told me that I was your daughter," she explained. "I wanted thirty pounds for a course of shorthand and typewriting, and I went to his office to borrow the money from him. We were poor and I meant to pay it back. But he was in a bad mood that morning and he blurted out who I was. But that wasn't all. He dragged me to the window and pointed out to me on the pavement opposite your agent Joseph Wyatt."

Mark Thewliss started, but it was only with surprise.

"Perriton had identified him?"

"He told me that Wyatt came up to Liverpool four times a year to keep an eye on us."

"That's true."

"True? You admit it?"

Lois stared at Mark in amazement.

"Yes."

"Well then. . . . You see."

"No."

Mark Thewliss was apparently as perplexed as she. Certainly he betrayed none of the discomfort which a man detected in some ignoble precaution might be expected to feel. He was either the perfect actor or—but no, she couldn't be wrong.

"I see nothing except some dreadful mistake which has preyed on you, Lois, and warped your life."

Lois shook her head.

"There could be only one reason why Joseph Wyatt was spying upon us in Liverpool. Henry Perriton gave it to me that morning."

"Perriton indeed!" cried Mark in a swift burst of anger. "What more harm did he do that day?"

"There could be only one reason," Lois repeated steadily. "You were thinking of marrying when you sent Wyatt first of all, weren't you?"

"Yes. That was why I sent him."

"Exactly. You knew who I was, you knew about us, that we were poor people. You wanted to be sure that we weren't going to trouble you after you

were married."

"What?"

Mark sprang up from his chair. His mouth dropped. He gazed at the girl below him in her chair, as though he could not believe his ears.

"I sent Joseph Wyatt on his journeys to the North to make sure that you weren't between you planning to blackmail me? You thought that?"

"Yes."

"And——" Mark's voice changed. It lost its high note of protest. It sank to gentleness.

"And you think that, Lois?"

As once before, during that interview, her self-control broke up.

"I don't know," she cried aloud in a wail of distress. "I did think it when we came into this room. Now I don't know."

For a moment he laid his hand gently upon her shoulder. "I shall tell you why I sent Joseph Wyatt."

Lois nodded her head and Mark resumed his seat. He began to tell her of his visit to Tony Westram at Gissens, of his drive back to London, with the thoughts of marriage and a country seat in his mind, of the sudden impulse which had made him drive to Ely Place and make sure first that all was well with Mona Lightfoot. It was a difficult story to tell to Mona's daughter, and in the telling of it Mark was even more uneasy than he needed to be. He was unconsciously missing something which would have helped him and made more smooth the flow of his words. But Lois knew what it was that he missed.

"Wait!" she said, and she stood up.

Her movement was hardly deliberate. She wanted to hear his story in all its details, and the habit of months asserted itself—the habit of looking after the little things which made for his comfort and helped him through the puzzles of his work. She went to a side-table, chose a cigar for him from a box of big Cabanas, snicked the end with a silver cutter which lay beside the box, and carried it over to Mark.

"I'll light it for you," she said, and she struck a wooden match and held it to the cigar whilst Mark drew at the tobacco until it was evenly alight. Then she returned to her chair. The tiny incident struck Derek in his corner as oddly significant, because it was so natural, so unpremeditated. Even in

the midst of this crisis, when father and daughter were pitted against each other, the customary routine of life had had its way. Lois had done this little service a hundred times. Neither she nor Mark found anything strange in its repetition despite the utter change in their relationship. Neither indeed seemed to notice it at all. It was not a concession on her part. It was hardly an interruption for him.

"Now," said Lois, and Mark with a greater ease found the words he needed.

"When Wyatt brought me word that Mona was married and had a daughter," and the ghost of a smile flickered over his face, "a crasher, he called you, not homey, not his type, but a crasher, I understood that there was nothing for me to do but to stand aloof and help if I could. There wasn't much I could do. I put a little business in Perriton's way. I could and would have put more, but he didn't welcome it, and since every time Wyatt returned he was confident that your mother was contented and happy——"

He broke off as he saw the look of pain which gave suddenly to Lois' face the very aspect of a tragic mask.

"He told you that!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Yes."

"That my mummie was happy!"

"Yes."

"And you believed it!"

The amazement in her voice grew louder upon every word.

"Yes, I did. Wasn't I right? Oh!" and his question ended in a moan of anxiety.

"Right!" cried Lois. "If twenty years of patient misery mean happiness, then my mother was happy."

Mark Thewliss was aghast. He had been accustomed to preen himself a little over his supervision of Mona Lightfoot's life. Not many men, he would say to himself, would have taken so much trouble. But it was well worth while since it brought to him once a quarter the comfortable assurance that all was well with her. Now his complacency was shattered. He had been feeding on Wyatt's lies.

In his distress he caught at another's evidence.

"But your mother herself told me in this room, when she brought you here, that her life had been wonderful."

A tender smile softened Lois' face and restored to it its beauty. "I bet she did," she answered, and the warmth of her heart and all her pride was in the cry. "You knew my mother. She would have died rather than admit to you that she had suffered because you——" She stopped to find a phrase which would not bite too savagely, "because you let her go," and try as she would she could not keep the bitterness out of her voice.

There was silence for a little while in the room and then Mark in a voice of compunction and abasement whispered:

"Tell me, Lois."

"I will."

It was right that he should know. People couldn't utterly spoil her mother's life and get away with it, untroubled and self-satisfied. No, indeed! Lois lifted the blinds of Glebe Villa in Acacia Grove, and revealed a mean, drunken little man with a cheap gift of sarcasm, and a silent woman held to perpetual penance by the threat that the daughter would be told of the stigma on her birth. Lois made a good showman that morning. The sordid wretchedness of that household in a back street of Liverpool lost none of its asperity in the telling.

"I wanted to be free of it, because I wanted my mother to be free of it," Lois exclaimed. "Oh, how she had put up with it all those years, I couldn't imagine! Her courage, her patience! And it was all for my sake! I wanted to make a little home for her, to take her away very far from Acacia Grove, where we could live together—oh, like people in a fairy-book."

Lois had quite forgotten herself. She kindled to that old sweet dream of hers as though it were still untried and fresh.

"And I was seeing my way," she went on, "all through the War I was saving money. In a very little while I should be able to say 'Come to me!' But with the end of the War, the crash came for me," and the light died out of her eyes, and the tender smile turned to bitterness. "I had a year of disappointments. My savings were going and——"

Mark finished the sentence for her.

"And Hoyle came to you with his inducements."

"Yes."

"So that was it."

Mark had got the secret now, and so vast a load was taken from his heart that only then did he understand how deep it had thrust him down.

"It was for your mother, then," he cried, and he shook himself like a man set free. But the very relief in his voice was a warning to the girl. She must be wise now for him, for herself. He must make no more pretty images of a dream daughter. He should have the whole truth of her so far as her self-knowledge enabled her to give it.

"Not altogether for my mother's sake," she corrected. "No! I was thinking of myself too. I used a foolish phrase last night about my birthright. You remember! Well, that had been in my thoughts for a long time—ever since I took a holiday a year and a half ago. I hadn't troubled about it before. But I went to Venice. It was my first real holiday. The first time I had been abroad, and I was taken by some friends to that magical city. For me it was day upon day of wonder and—yes, I'm not frightened by the word—of rapture. But after a while a shabby little thought began to spoil my enjoyment. Everyone I met seemed to come there each year as they chose. For me it was once and perhaps never again or only after an interval of years. Do you understand? I began to blame you, not on my mother's account as I had done, but on my own."

Lois was putting her case crudely, cruelly, as she could not but see from the distress upon Mark Thewliss' face.

"You see, it would have been my birthright to have gone there and to the other joyous marvellous places, had—well, had you married my mother instead of leaving her to be wasted with Henry Perriton. There was one day in particular. We went in a large party down the lagoon to Chioggia, and on the way back picnicked under the stars on another little island whilst some Italian sailors sang to us. The warmth of that night, the trembling little lanes of starlight on the dark sea, the music, the joyous friendliness of everyone—it was a revelation of loveliness, but of loveliness embittered by the thought that such loveliness was really a right of mine, of which I had been cheated."

She saw Mark wince as she uttered the word.

"Yes! It sounds horribly ignoble to me now," she went on. "But there it was. I had that envy of my friends, that resentment against"—and she dropped her voice to a whisper—"against my father. There was another night, my last night. A great singer sang to Venice in the Piazza late at night. It was—unimaginable. The big exquisite square filled with people all silent and spellbound, a moonlit sky overhead, St. Mark's cupolas at the end and

the singer's voice soaring above the moan of the violins—oh, I can remember it now as sheer beauty. But then I thought that I was going home to-morrow to tramp from office to office in the search for work. I, Mark Thewliss' daughter."

Behind her Derek Crayle had suddenly a vision of that square and of a girl's face that grew wistful and utterly sad, and of a pair of eyes which filled with tears, as the last notes of Aïda died upon the air. He had often wondered what bitter recollections had brought that unforgettable look into Lois' face. As for Mark, he could only repeat:

"I didn't know you were my daughter. I didn't know!"

But he could have known, if only twenty-five years ago he had not been so careful to give a wide berth to the Dean's Elbow. And the knowledge that he could have known was staring at both of them. But there was a truth still harder for Mark to listen to; and though it was spoken reluctantly and in a voice which had now grown gentle and without a note of resentment, the words struck the more sharply on that account.

"You see," she continued, and broke off, "I don't think I can tell you. It's all done with now. Let it lie, please."

But Mark would not.

"I must know," he said obstinately.

"I never meant to say a word of this."

"Better to say it than to let it rankle unsaid."

"Very well. But it's difficult."

She paused, seeking words which would express her meaning and yet wrap it round with the seemliness which befitted a girl speaking to her father. For in this half-hour her heart had softened to him. But they were both in such dire straits that there were no words of the kind she wanted, no minimising twists of phrase, no suggestions but were liable to be misunderstood. She had to lay bare her thought as simply as she could.

"I thought that we had both, my mother and I, been deprived of our places in the world because you were in a hurry. You must have everything yourself, and as quickly as possible. You wouldn't marry my mother, wonderful though she was, because you must marry in the world of greater opportunity. You couldn't be content to leave that to the second generation. For that's the way the great families are built up, isn't it? Gradually, generation by generation, each one like people on a snow-slope, treading

down the snow and making it firmer for those who followed. The way of nature. But no, you wouldn't have that. It must all be done within your single lifetime, and so my mother and I must go to the wall."

The indictment was not to be denied. Mark Thewliss bent his head before it. He had no answer, and silence descended upon the room. For a little while he stared into the fire. Suppose that he had shut his eyes and his ears and his heart to his consuming passion for the sensation of power! Suppose that he had repaid Mona Lightfoot for the sacrifice of herself with what he had to give! He speculated upon the different life which would have been his with Lois his acknowledged child and woke to wonder whether the speculation was a treachery to Olivia or no. He woke, too, to see that Lois was standing up.

"So I tried to steal from you," she said, and she took a step towards the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII AND THE TERTIUM QUID

But Derek Crayle rose up in his corner at the same moment. This was his appointed moment. Before Lois could reach the door he was in her path.

"You can't go, my dear, like that. It's not so simple."

Lois drew back.

"Oh, Derek," she pleaded, and he shook his head stubbornly.

"But I must go. After what I've done, even if you and I and my father were alone, I shouldn't find it possible to stay. I think that I'm somehow horrid in myself. I should see in every kindness a charity, and I can't bear charity. But we three are not alone, and it's doubly impossible."

There was no need for Lois to cross her t's. Even if Olivia buried her hatchet and Lois could subdue her nature to meekness, there would be such a tension upon all, such a need of circumspection and delicate treading that life in that household would be intolerable.

"I don't say that you mustn't go, Lois," he replied. "But you mustn't just go off. You see, you and Mark have said to each other what you had to say. No doubt it had to be said. But it's done with. I'm not done with."

"Oh, Derek!"

She spoke his name in a whisper, and very tenderly. The last hard tone had gone from her voice, her great dark eyes were dewy, her face unutterably wistful.

"I'm beginning, Lois. Or rather, I began when you came into the dining-room. I love you very dearly."

Again Lois raised her hands and buried her face in them. A sob broke from her, and in a moment the tears ran out between her fingers.

"Lois!"

Derek took a quick step towards her, but she held him off.

"No!"

She turned away to a window and stood with her back to the room, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I haven't done that since I was a child," she said between a laugh and a sob. "I'm so sorry."

She came forward again into the room and stood a little apart from her lover.

"Dearest," she said, "I thank you and thank you. You've been a darling to me. You took me by surprise this morning. I knew, of course, that we were great friends. I thought that you were perhaps a little fond of me. But that this morning . . . after what happened last night . . . you would still take my face between your hands and kiss me—oh, I couldn't believe it! You showed me a world I didn't know, which I didn't believe existed. My dear, if I could just creep to you and say, 'Yes, we begin, we both begin,' I shouldn't be standing here and you there. But I can't say that, Derek."

Derek began to plead. He used the phrases all lovers use, eternally old and eternally new, the everyday words transmuted into gold by the alchemy of a passionate heart. All his fine self-confidence had gone. He was going to take the tangled skein after Mark had made a bungle of it and unravel it out of hand, was he? He found himself desperately crying:

"I love you, Lois . . . I love you. . . . There never will be anyone else in the world for me but you. . . . I adore you. . . . It was planned ages ago that we should meet and love. . . . Together we could do such fine things. It'll be wonderful."

And Lois, all her yearning heart in her eyes, answered with quivering lips:

"It might have been wonderful, Derek."

"Without you I am lame."

Slowly she shook her head.

"With me you would be crippled."

Years ago, when Henry Perriton had first told Lois that she was Mark Thewliss' bastard daughter, she had nursed a morbid fancy that she carried a taint upon her like a leper, that she must keep aloof from the other girls of her age, that she ought to carry a bell so that its tinkling might warn others of her approach. She had grown out of that foolishness, but she had the conviction back in her mind now. She remembered how she had fallen at the first suggestion of Hoyle, nay, how she had run forward to welcome it, how continuously she had planned to bring it to success and the bitterness of her disappointment when, answering her telegram, Hoyle had met her in the

basement of the great Oxford Street store only to tell her of the hiatus which made the formula of no worth. She was horribly ashamed. There was a taint upon her. She was set apart.

"Marriage with you, dear one, cannot be," she said. Gently though they were spoken, never were words more firm, and never did they expose more clearly a breaking heart. "I would not do you so much harm. Oh, yes, it would be harm. Again I say I know now a little about myself. Between us there would always be the knowledge of this that I had done. You wouldn't hold it over my head, as Henry Perriton did with my mother; I know that very well. But I haven't my mother's"—and she sought for a word —"acquiescence, and the dignity of her acquiescence in the things which can't be altered. This secret would be there between us. I should feel—a horrible word, but it just says what I mean—I should feel inferior, and I shouldn't be patient, I shouldn't accept. I should visit it on you—yes, until in time you would begin to hate the sight of me and the very sound of my voice upon the stairs."

"I'll take the risk of that, Lois," cried Derek, brushing away her argument.

"I know you would, my dear," she answered. "But I won't. So you must let me go."

She turned hesitatingly towards Mark, who was standing apart by the fire.

"I am very sorry," she said in a low voice, and she added in a voice which was lower still: "Father, I beg your pardon."

Mark reached out his arms to her.

"Oh, my dear!" he whispered.

But she did not come into them, and he dropped them to his side.

"So you really are going?"

There was so deep a yearning in his eyes that she dared not look at them.

"I must. I must be alone. I am like a child in the dark."

She moved again towards the door, and now Derek stood away from it. It was so clear that no power could stop her. In a few moments the car was heard to drive away. The two men were left standing in the library, and upon Mark's face was the look of one who would welcome death.

CHAPTER XXIX THE ANTHEM

"Sunset and evening star
And one clear call for me,
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea."

The voice of one boy soared, pure and wistful as the music of a flute above the others, and seemed to beat with the pinions of an angel about the high wood roof. Mark Thewliss, two and a half years older by the measurement of days and ten by that of sorrow, sat in the very front of the church, his face a pale mask, his eyes drawing unconsciously a little solace and rest from the glorious blue of the great painted window above the altar.

He had planned that a wedding should be held here with its fact of reparation and its promise of a long line of men and women who should serve the commonwealth, make a new family old, and keep its name sweet and of good repute. He peopled the church with rejoicing friends. He saw the bridesmaids a delicious cluster of fresh flowers grouped at the foot of the aisle, he walked himself up the length of it with a hand upon his arm which clung just a trifle more tightly than it ever had clung, so that he might feel the dear touch of it through all the rest of his hours. He heard the bells clash joyously, rocking the walls. Dreams and vanities! Nothing had gone according to plan. For he had been in a hurry. Lois had not stepped an inch beyond the truth when she had said that. Success, the sensation of power, the great name, the gratitude of unknown people for the great gift of colour which he was to put within their reach—he had been in a hurry to secure these fine things, so the church was full of mourners instead of wedding guests.

"But such a tide as moving seems asleep
Too full for sound and foam
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home."

The lovely anthem winged by the young pure voice rose and fell like a smooth wave of the sea. Derek had turned again home after that fateful hour in the library at Upper Theign. Oh, he had tried to carry on, working at the flotation of the company, overdoing his jests, filling with a laborious vivacity the emptiness which never could be filled. But he had no heart for it. A year

and he had come to the end of his acting. He turned again home. Mark recalled the evening. It was a Sunday, and they were in the country together, Olivia, and Derek and he. Derek had rattled away through dinner rather boisterously, and coming into the library had dropped into a chair by the fire —the chair in which Lois had once sat in the formal, still attitude of one who was there on probation.

"I'm through, Mark," he had said, with such a look of weariness upon his face that he was not to be gainsaid. "I have tried, you know. I thought that I could worry it out, until last week. But last week I began to doubt. And once I had begun to doubt, it rushed upon me as a certainty that I couldn't. I must go, Mark. I feel like a dog, leaving you. But I can't help it."

Mark had just nodded his head.

"No, you can't help it. Derek. Thank you for staying with me so long. What are you going to do?"

He could go out on the staff of the new Commander-in-Chief in India. It was the work to which he was bred. He had turned again home.

Behind Mark Thewliss in the church old Gregory was sitting, and his thoughts were wandering. The back of Mark's neck had grown too thin during these last months. How long would he go on? He was one of the wiry men. He had never put on fat. He was born for a very long life. But when the back of the neck goes thin—there's a bad sign. Happily the company was launched, the patents assured, the universal process for making dyes fast a triumphant advance, and good men on the directorate. Mardyke and Campion's would go on, even though the giant who had built it up fell.

"Twilight and evening bell
And after that the dark,
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark."

Thus the choir. It had been broad daylight and Derek in the fullness of his strength when he had embarked. Riding down the Khyber Pass from Landi Khotal after a tour of inspection on the Afghan border, his escort had been bombed by an air-squadron on manœuvres. A terrible mistake, but mistakes must happen, and men on service who die because of them die serving like soldiers in battle. Derek was buried out there amongst those far hills. "I'm through." Yes, he was through now. There was but the memory of his joyous, gallant spirit alive in the church.

"For though from out our bourn of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar."

Mark himself had asked that that anthem should be sung. It was written at sea. He had seemed to hear in its rhythm the long-drawn low thunder of a calm sea breaking upon a beach. The sea had always been one of the two great emotional influences in his life, as though it had a message for him which it was always hinting, which one day it would clearly deliver. The sea and Lois, his daughter. He wondered whether she was here, hidden amongst the mourners, whether when all was over their eyes would meet. Surely if they did, the barrier would be down. The great, hoped-for harvest—that, with Derek gone, was lost, but he and she might perhaps glean a few ears from the stubble. Surely she would be here, for Love had spoken with its authentic voice when she had bidden Derek good-bye on that morning of snow at Upper Theign.

Mark, employing a wiser head than Joseph Wyatt's, had kept touch with his daughter's movements. She had disappeared, it is true, but he had held his eyes upon Glebe Villa. He had not a doubt that Mona would be written to and through Mona he meant by hook or by crook to discover Lois' whereabouts. Mona, indeed, made just the move which he expected. On learning the treachery of Henry Perriton, she left him. She joined Lois in London and the pair of them, at once courageous, independent and efficient, had established themselves upon what was left of Lois' savings at Southampton. There they had opened a small secretarial office, taking the name of Lightfoot, and almost from the first they made it pay. There was no slovenliness in their work, and they had no grudge against overtime. Mark, himself, was able in that pleasant city of great ships to put secretly a good deal of opportunity in their way. He would have made that opportunity had it been necessary. But it was not, and it was an immense consolation to Mark and a high cause of pride that even without his help their little business made by themselves was prospering. For the rest, he did not for a second time seek for any facile assurance that their domestic life met with a like success. But so far as he could learn they had attained some measure of contentment; they enjoyed at all events the loving company of each other and knew perhaps from time to time some moments of vivid happiness.

None the less there had been great love between Lois and Derek, and the loss of him must be a heavy cloud upon her now. Surely she was somewhere in this church. He waked from his thoughts of her to see the tall Rector

standing with uplifted hand, and to hear the Benediction. Then two buglers of Derek's regiment stepped forward, and the Last Post with its long-drawn farewell blown, it sounded, to the loneliest traveller already lost beyond infinite spaces, crashed with a heart-shattering volume amongst the pillars of the church and was flung back from the walls and high arches in echoes of intolerable sadness. The bugle call took Mark Thewliss by storm, and broke through his vigilance. Despite the difference in their years, Derek Crayle had been the greatest friend he had ever had. Now he was gone. Mark dropped his face upon his hands, and so remained, whilst the Funeral March thundered and the mourners went from the church.

Amongst the last to leave was Lois. She had been kneeling in a side aisle almost in a line with Mark Thewliss. She stood up and gazed at him a little while through the curtain of her tears. She took, indeed, a step across the aisle, her heart yearning towards him. Had he lifted his head at that moment, their eyes must have met, and nothing thereafter could have held them apart. But he did not, and Lois, seeing Olivia at his side, turned away blindly down the aisle.

A few seconds later Mark whispered to his wife:

"Olivia! I want you to leave me here alone"; and when he was alone, by some odd chance, unless it was by some thread of sympathy too fine for mind and brain to apprehend, his gaze wandered to the bench where Lois so lately knelt. Above the bench, there was a coloured window in memory of Admiral Blake, who had once been buried in the Abbey and thence ejected. There were tall ships sailing stately across the blue glass, and they held Mark Thewliss' eyes. He wondered again whether the sea had not some undelivered message for him such as mountaineers listen to on their high pinnacles. His thoughts leapt over the years of his big topsail schooner and homed on the little *Sea Flower*, which, still tended and cherished, had lain this many a year in a yard on the Hamble River. A message had been delivered to him on that trim and dainty cutter, but clamorous for the sensation of power, he had given to it no heed.

During the evening, after a long silence, he told Olivia suddenly that for a little while he must go away. Olivia nodded her head. During the last two years a constraint had grown up between them, setting a check upon their tongues and a formality upon their manners. There were subjects to be avoided, so vast a difference separated their angles of view. Questions were dangerous, for no one could tell whither they might lead. The pair had drifted apart. Olivia returned very gently:

“Yes. This has been a troublesome time for you. Go, Mark!” and for a week he was very busy.

CHAPTER XXX THE LAST CRUISE

At six o'clock on a Tuesday morning, *Sea Flower*, trim and spruce as a girl at the dance of the season, slipped down Southampton Water with a fair wind upon her beam. It was the month of August, the sky already bleached by the sun, seemed to have lent its blue to the sea, and the little waves of the Sound, embroidered with gold, sang under the forefoot of the cutter. Mark sat alone at the tiller, was the only inhabitant of his ship; and already his troubled soul was smoothing out. There was an exhilaration in his blood, and a world-old vanity stirred within him.

"I am just as useful as I ever was. I can cook as good a breakfast as my *chef* and set my sails properly into the bargain." He felt his years dropping one by one from his shoulders. He bore to the left of the Dean's Elbow where once, unseen by him, Mona Lightfoot had slipped a wedding-ring from her finger and watched it waver and sink into green darkness. Now the tall spire of Ryde Church stood high above the ridge of the island. Mark shook out his mainsheet and bore away between Calshot and the Brambles past Gurnard's Bay, and the long pier of Yarmouth and the high slope of purple heather above the Needles. The wind dropped when he was opposite to the sand cliffs of Bournemouth, but freshened again towards sunset, blowing from the east as it had done throughout the day. Mark bore up between the striped buoys and the black cones to the white landing gates of Brownsea, tacked round the elbow of the channel and sailed free northwards to Poole. He had never once put into those shallow waters since he and Mona Lightfoot had made their cruise to the west; and but for the "Margate Hoy," the little tavern of dingy yellow upon the quay, he would hardly have known the place again. Then it had been a decrepit little town dying, as it were, upon its feet. Now colliers for the new electric light works crowded the wharves, the streets were ajostle with tourists driven out by the high prices of Bournemouth, and motor-boats ran them to Studland Bay on moonlight trips.

Mark dropped his anchor and went ashore in his punt to do his marketing. He was more tired than he would admit, and the exhilaration of the morning had gone from him. There were too many memories awakened by the stones of that small town, and he hurried back to his cutter, cooked his dinner, and sat in his cabin, very lonely and very old. But though the

glamour of this fantastic expedition had vanished, Mark was obstinate. Farther to the west, west of St. Alban's head—"where England begins," as he remembered with a smile—perhaps in the West Bay beyond the Bill, a cool silent night would restore it and, chasing the years away, make him brother with the stars.

But the wind held light all the next day, and died away before the evening. The cutter was becalmed opposite to the ochre-coloured coastguard station on the cliff at the narrow entrance to Lulworth Cove. There she hung and a mist came up from the south thick as wool, so that not even a star was visible. The *Sea Flower* drifted in with the tide, and Mark, seated in the cockpit by the tiller, could hear the voices of people talking upon the beach. Then as the tide ebbed, the voices diminished and soon there was no sound at all but an occasional creak of the gaff or the boom. There settled upon Mark a profound discouragement. This last emancipation was denied to him. He would never go west now and see the Bishop Lighthouse rising from the spume of the Atlantic. The gates were closing on him. He would leave the *Sea Flower* at Weymouth in the morning, and take the train back to his home. Some odd questions, with which he had never troubled before, presented themselves suddenly. What had he got out of his life? He remembered a story told of the great actor whose manner and voice he had once so proudly copied. He was asked just that question: "What had he got out of it?" and he had answered, so the story ran, "A good cigar, a good glass of wine, a good friend."

Mark could say as much. Could he say more? That idea of his that bright colours made for the peace of the world? He had been so sure of it. With the success of his formula he had done something real towards proving his faith in it. But wasn't the whole idea rather romantic, the dream of a man with his head in the clouds? The fog wrapped him about, cold and heavy, numbing body and brain. He couldn't tell. He gave up trying to tell, and fell to speculating whether he would live his life over again if the chance were given to him. After all, what had he lived for. The sensation of power? Yes, everything had been sacrificed to that. Yet—he knew it now—he had never enjoyed that sensation half so completely as on a day of storm nearly thirty years ago when he had sailed the *Sea Flower*, with a gale behind him, across the West Bay to Lulworth Cove. That day rolled itself out upon the thick fog like a brilliant film in a dark theatre. He and Mona and the gale piling up the water behind him and roaring against his shred of sail. Would he go through all his life again? He thought with terror of the mistakes which he had just not made, and with bitter regret of those which he had. He thought of Mona . . . and of Lois . . . and in the end he threw all these questions from him.

"I am very tired," he spoke aloud those last words of so many people, and he dropped his head upon his arm.

The next morning the fog had cleared away, and boatmen early upon the beach of the cove saw a small cutter drift with the tide, and a faint wind of dawn within the ring of cliffs. Coming up into the wind and falling off it crossed the great well of sea and grounded gently on the pebbles, as though it carried a sacred burden. It carried an old dead man whose hand was still clasped about the tiller.

* * * * *

A few days later, Sir William Hawker presented himself at the office of "Lightfoot's," in Southampton, and handed to Mona a letter.

"It has been in my safe these last two years," he said, and Mona broke the seal and read. It was very short and with the tears in her eyes, Mona passed it to Lois.

Hawker will bring you this himself, it ran. *I have made a provision for you both in my will, and with all my heart I beg you to accept it. Lois is young. She has her life ahead of her. For her sake then! Did I recite to you, Mona, in the West Bay these words?*

"*Hereafter, in a better world than this,*
I shall desire more love and knowledge of you."

Mark.

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.

Some advertising by the publisher was omitted from this ebook.

[The end of *The Dean's Elbow* by A. E. W. Mason]