WARWICK DEEPING

The HOUSE of SPIES

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THE NOVELS OF

WARWICK DEEPING

UTHER AND IGRAINE
MAD BARBARA
BESS OF THE WOODS
A WOMAN'S WAR
SEVEN STREAMS
BERTRAND OF BRITTANY
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS
THE LAME ENGLISHMAN
THE RUST OF ROME
THE RED SAINT
JOAN OF THE TOWER
FOX FARM
THE STRONG HAND
THE HOUSE OF SPIES

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THE HOUSE OF SPIES

BY

WARWICK DEEPING

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A. C. MICHAEL

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The House of Spies

I

Jasper Benham tumbled out of bed, with the crack of a pistol-shot splitting the silence of the night. Before him ran the long casement window, each diamond pane a silver lozenge set in a frame of jet. Moonlight came through and lay patterned upon the floor.

"Master Jasper—Master Jasper——!"

It was a plaintive howl from under the window, the voice of a man who was afraid.

"Master Jasper—horse-thieves in t' yard!"

The lattice opened, and a pair of broad shoulders caught the moonlight.

"What's this—Jack——?"

John Bumpstead, the groom, was squeezing himself against the wall.

"Dear Lord—sir—they've bruk into t' stable. Me and Jim Burgess tumbled up to see what was wrong. We couldn't face pistols, sir. They be there still, sir——"

"What! The infernal rogues! Here, take the blunderbuss, Jack, and have a blaze——"

"Master Jasper—I dursn't——"

"You're not man enough to scare rooks!"

The figure disappeared from the window, and from the moonlit room came the sounds of an active young man plunging furiously for his clothes. Anything served; a frilled shirt, the red-coat of a lieutenant of volunteers thrown over a chair, a pair of riding-breeches and rough boots. A hanger

hung from the bed-post, and there was the blunderbuss in the corner. Jasper Benham went down the oak stairs with the clattering impetuosity of a boy playing hide-and-seek. He drew back the bolts of the heavy porch door, and ran the oak bar out of its socket.

Jack Bumpstead waited in the porch, with little coquettish flirts of something white swaying in the draught. He had been valorously quick in dressing, but his teeth chattered behind his thin beard.

"Take the oak bar, Jack; it's a good cudgel. How many of them?"

"May be a dozen."

"Fudge! Where's Jim Jenner?"

"I shouldn't like t' say, sir."

"No doubt back in bed and under the sheets by this time! Shout—if you can't fight, Jack; make a noise—anything. Come along."

They skirted along the terrace, turned down by the yew hedge, and so by the stone-paved passage between the bake-house and the great brick barn. The passage was in deep shadow, and Jasper had no notion that a man was lurking there till the yellow spurt of the powder in the priming-pan of a pistol made him throw himself against the wall. The piece missed fire, and the clatter of heavy boots over the stones betrayed what had become of the man who had pulled the trigger. There was some shouting in the stable yard, and the stamping of horses. One deep voice sent oaths flying, the savage and impatient oaths of a man in a fluster.

Jack Bumpstead had thrown himself flat on his face. He caught young Benham by the ankle.

"You shan't go for to be shot, master; they be some of Dan Stunt's gang."

"Let go—you fool!"

"They don't mind God or devil, sir. Better for 'em to have the nags——"

"Let go, Jack, or by Jove——"

He twisted free and ran on into the yard in time to see a hustle of horses crowding through the gateway into the moonlight. One fellow was still lying across his horse's back with his legs dangling. Another sat gaunt and erect, pistol raised, ready, like a big forefinger.

Jasper's blunderbuss came up. He fired high, because of the horses, and the belching mouth of the blunderbuss stabbed the night with flame. Smoke hung for a moment, drifting away in wisps. The gateway had emptied as though by magic, and in the place of the black knot of men and horses, a strip of moonlit road was guarded by the two black, brick pillars with their two stone balls.

Jasper ran for the gate, shouting to Jack Bumpstead as he ran.

"Get a lantern—get a lantern."

Nothing lay in the roadway beyond the gate, no dark thing that squirmed with leaden slugs burning in its body. A dark blur that moved broke the white road across the paddock. Jasper watched it a moment with jaws set, and then turned back into the yard. He was in an ugly temper, and even the toil of Jack Bumpstead's shirt, flickering in doleful whiteness by the stable door, flapped no laughter from him. A tinder-box was kept on a window-ledge close to where the cord that held the great stable lantern sloped down to a hook in the wall. The groom had groped for the tinder-box and was trying to get a light, though his hands were shaking so that he struck the flint with his knuckles more often than he struck it with the steel.

"The deuce, Jack! Here, give me the things!"

From the loose-box at the far end of the stable came the whimpering of a horse and the clatter of hoofs on the brick floor.

"Why, they've left Devil Dick!"

"Sure, Master Jasper, sure!"

"That's luck, indeed!"

John Bumpstead managed to get one of the sulphur-tipped matches alight. Benham had lowered the great lantern and it dangled close by. The groom put the match to the candle, and the yellow rays shooting between the black bars showed four empty stalls littered with trampled straw.

Benham pulled a wry face.

"Confound the blackguards! Two cart-horses, and Peggy, and Brown Bob gone. And they have left Devil Dick, the best of the whole bunch!"

He went to the loose-box, and a warm nose was thrust over the door. The horse's lips nibbled affectionately at his hand.

"Jack, light that other lantern there. Run into the house and get me a brace of pistols. You'll find them in the case on the oak chest in my room.

Run, man, run. I'll saddle Dick."

"Sir——?"

"Don't stand and stare, you fool! Do you think I'm going to let these gentry go without a gallop! I may follow them up if I can't bring them to action."

In ten minutes Devil Dick was prancing sideways through the gateway, carrying a bareheaded, bare-legged man with a pistol in each pocket. A good square jaw, blue eyes, and a firm mouth are the points of a youngster who does not fawn upon fate. Jasper Benham had been an impudent young cub, a little laughing, keen-eyed imp who had been whacked and cuffed into a sturdy, determined, brown-faced man.

Jasper drew Devil Dick on to the grass and listened. The night was still, with a gibbous moon sailing away up yonder, and a vague, inconstant breeze murmuring occasionally in the trees and hedgerows. Rush Heath House stood black and huge at Jasper's back. He listened to a faint galloping rhythm coming like the noise of a stream running in the distance. The moonlight shone on the deep-set eyes under the square brows.

"Tsst—Dick—on—lad."

They started away through the paddock, and over the furze-covered slopes of Rush Heath, the big black horse swinging smoothly between Jasper's knees. Stones clinked in the road. The stunted thorns rushed by, stretching out warning hands. In the damp places the rush tufts splintered the moonlight like silver wires. The further woods were very black upon the hillsides, and the fresh smell of the spring night was tinged with the scent of the sea.

Jasper galloped through Polecat Wood, on over Stubb's Common, and past Flanders Farm into Lavender's Hole. At the top of the further hill he drew in to listen, and heard something that heartened him and set his blood a-spinning. There was good turf along the track over Stonehanger Heath, and by the light of the moon he could see the fresh marks left by the horses ahead. A lively imagination is needed for the making of a coward, and Jasper Benham's shoulders were too sturdy to form a squatting-place for fear. Devil Dick at a gallop was made for audacity, pistol-shots, and the clashing of swords.

"Scurvy thieves——!"

The land was very wild here, rough wood and heathland rising toward uplands that overlooked the sea. Stunted oaks and firs hung in black tangles

against the moon. Desolate furze-covered knolls heaved this way and that, and the track plunged, twisted, and burrowed through thickets. Even higher ground lay up yonder under the moon, a bluff ridge where the trees had been blown all one way by the wind, and the furze rolled like green breakers.

Jasper saw the roof and chimneys of a house rising black against the sky. He lost sight of it for a moment as the track curved under a rocky bank where dwarf-trees and brushwood broke the moonlight. Then the house reappeared again upon the hilltop, a bleak house, parapeted, square-windowed, with massive chimneys built for the roar of the wind. Tattered thorns, oaks, and firs sheltered it on the north and the south-west, and held out their arms to it as though it had tormented them for years with some strange secret. The furze broke upon the very walls of its terrace and garden.

Jasper drew in, like a man challenged in the darkness.

"Stonehanger! I had forgotten the old place!"

He looked up at it, frowningly, as though it roused grim thoughts, ghostly drifts of gossip that made folk draw nearer to the fire.

"Who's there now? Bless me if I know! These horse-thieves——!"

He took a pistol from his pocket and let Devil Dick advance at a walk. The black house up yonder oppressed him. Such things had happened there. It was as though it threw a shadow across his heart.

What was that? Horses galloping! By George—what a fool he was to be shying at a dark house like a nervous horse, while the gentry yonder were going over the hill. Jasper urged Devil Dick to a trot. The track was steep here, and littered with loose stones.

But in chasing blackguards a man may forget to be on his guard against the blackguards' tricks. At the spot where the grey stone wall of the Stonehanger garden began a great yew threw its shadow across the road. And a man leaning round the trunk of the tree, flashed a pistol at Jasper, and then jumped into the road.

"Take that—for being obstinate, and be darned to you!"

Jasper was down in the road as quickly as the man, simply because Devil Dick had swerved and thrown him, and left him lying on his back. The horse-thief bent over Jasper with the butt-end of his pistol ready. A superfluous precaution. Benham of Rush Heath lay as still as a stone, and his horse had bolted down the road.

The man spat, and nodded.

“You lie nice and quiet there, lad. I should have liked your nag, but the beast’s bolted. Good night to ye——”

And he went off with a wave of the hat.

II

There was a light in Stonehanger House. It had flashed out suddenly in one of the side windows, as though the black house had raised an eyelid and looked out on the world with a sinister, yellow eye.

The light disappeared from the window, and left the eastern side of the house a mere dark surface. At the same moment a gust of wind came over the hill from the sea. The stunted trees shook their fists at the house, cursing it and bidding it beware.

Then a door opened, and the light came out into the paved yard at the back of Stonehanger. It flickered across toward the stable whose stone roof was brushed by the boughs of a clump of firs. There was the sound of some one hammering at a door, a hollow sound like blows struck with the hilt of a sword upon the panelling covering some secret hiding-place.

The light approached the road, shooting yellow rays among the overgrown laurels and hollies of the shrubbery inside the stone wall. There was a gate here, with an arched stone bridge leading over the ditch to the road. The gate was thrust open and the lantern held out at the end of a white forearm. Ten yards away Jasper Benham lay flat on his back, one arm flung out, the other twisted as though it were broken. The lantern swayed uncertainly at the gate and then came down into the road. It showed the white face and the slight figure of a girl, a red cloak flung over her shoulders, her dress open at the throat.

She stood and looked at the figure in the road as though she were shrewdly afraid, and ready to reason with herself for being so.

"Don't be a coward, Nance. You won't help any one by being afraid."

She spoke the words aloud, in a mood to be reassured by the sound of her own voice.

"Can't you see that the man has a soldier's coat? The French may have landed at last. You heard horses go by, and the sound of a pistol-shot."

She moved forward and, holding the lantern shoulder-high, bent over the man in the road. It was a pure coincidence that Benham opened his eyes at the same moment, and blinked at the light that was within two feet of his face.

"Hallo!—O—my head!"

He stirred, turned on one elbow, and fell back with a savage start of pain.

"Damnation, what's this? What have they done to my arm? Who—? I say—I beg your pardon——!"

Sudden sanity came into his eyes, and he lay and stared at the girl's face. It seemed that these two were fascinated momentarily by each other's eyes. Benham moistened his lips, and made an effort to explain himself.

"I must have had a crack on the head. Of course, what am I thinking of! The scoundrel shot at me from behind a tree. Where's Dick? Can you see anything of a horse?"

She looked up and down the lane, and her eyes returned slowly to his face. They were very solemn eyes, big and dark, like the eyes of a southern woman.

"I can't see any horse. Have the French landed——?"

"The French?"

"Yes."

"Nothing so respectable. I was chasing horse-thieves, and one of them shot me from behind that yew-tree. I'm Benham of Rush Heath."

Her solemnity took the colour of compassion.

"I'm sorry. And your poor arm there! No, don't move. I'm Nance Durrell, and this is Stonehanger Lane."

"Durrell! H'm. That fellow's bullet must have broken my right arm."

"I heard horses galloping, and the sound of a pistol-shot. You see, I was watching for father. And I couldn't wake David; he's stone deaf."

"You live here then?"

"Yes, at Stonehanger. Don't you know?"

Jasper looked discomfited by his ignorance.

"It's my head; this tumble has knocked my wits to pieces. I wonder if I can get up."

She put the lantern down, and they regarded each other with great seriousness.

"I don't know. There's your arm! And it has been bleeding."

"Has it?"

"Sssh—it must hurt!"

"Well, I can't lie here in the road, can I?"

"No."

"I must get up—and home—somehow."

She looked at him as though considering what was best to do.

"I know. You ought to have your arm fastened to your side. I had my arm broken once. I'll go in and get a scarf."

She picked up the lantern and disappeared through the gate with beams of light swinging about her in the darkness. As for Jasper Benham, his head had cleared sufficiently to admit some measure of astonished curiosity. Who were the Durrells, and how had they come to Stonehanger House, and how was it he could not remember ever having heard the name?

"Nance Durrell—Nance Durrell."

He repeated it to himself as he lay under the shadow of the yew-tree, as though the uttering of the name might help him to realise that he was not dreaming in his bed at Rush Heath. No; the ground was solid, the yew bough above him was solid, the pain in his arm was very real. And the girl who called herself Nance Durrell? He found himself waiting impatiently for her return, and watching the foliage of the shrubs for the shine of her lantern.

She was back again in the road, carrying a red scarf in one hand.

"I had to hunt for it, or I should not have been so long."

She put the lantern down, and knelt beside him, her lips parted, her eyes full of her purpose. It struck Benham of a sudden that she must have led a free and rather lonely life. She seemed ready to rely upon herself, to meet responsibilities with the frank self-reliance of a girl who has had to trust to her own hands.

"Do you think you can sit up?"

"Of course I can."

"Wait; I'll help you. Hold your arm with your other hand."

She drew herself behind him, and put her hands under his shoulders.

"Now."

He was up, with her hands still holding him, and her breath touching his cheek.

"Can you bear it?"

"Yes."

"Draw the arm across—so."

"Phew—confound it! I'm sorry; it's nothing."

"I know how it must hurt."

The frank impulse toward sympathy in her voice sent a start of emotion through him. He set his teeth as she bound the broken arm to his side with the red scarf. There was a kind of pleasure in the pain.

"What gentle hands you have."

"Have I? There! How does that feel?"

"Splendid."

"Now I'll help you up."

Whatever a man's pluck may be it cannot raise him above nature, or make him independent of the ills of the flesh. Jasper Benham scrambled to his feet to be smothered by a sudden fog of faintness that blotted out the moonlight and set him groping with his hands.

"I can't help it—but——"

She understood what ailed him, and was practical in her compassion.

"You're faint."

Her hands steadied him.

"Put your head down—just for a moment."

He felt the grip of her strong young hands, and the thrill of it may have helped his heart.

"That's better."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She picked up the lantern and, holding it high, looked at him with frank concern.

"You can't get back to Rush Heath to-night."

"I am afraid that's the truth."

"You must come in here. I'll wake David somehow. He can go over to Rush Heath as soon as it is light, and tell them to send a cart."

"What a friend you are."

She stood there in sudden forceful contrast to all the things feminine that he had ever known. There was a sweet and brave directness about her that challenged his manhood. Simple, chivalrous homage; some women win such service with a word or a look. He bowed to her, and his heart bowed with his body.

"You are very good to me."

"Good! What else could one do!"

Everything about the grey, upland house seemed fashioned out of stone. The paths and yard were paved with rough stones from the quarry; the hall and passages floored with flagstones. Jasper Benham found himself lying on a long couch under the window in a room that might have been part of an old religious house. It was walled and vaulted with stone, and the fireplace was a great yawning recess with carved pillars on each side of it.

Nance Durrell had gone to wake David Barfoot, the servant, who slept in a room by the stable. Benham lay back with his head on the round squab, and looked about him with the consenting curiosity of a man who dreams. Who were the Durrells, and how had they come to Stonehanger, this grey house, that for thirty years had been spoken of as a house of horror? Benham was not an imaginative man, but this grey room with the huge yawn of its fireplace filled him with a vague sense of eeriness and mystery.

He heard footsteps crossing the paved hall. Nance reappeared with an armful of wood. Her big, brown eyes ran over with laughter, the mischievous and sparkling laughter of perfect health.

"I have managed to wake David. We make him leave his window open, because there is only one way of waking him."

"Throwing stones——?"

"I could only find the stable bucket—and I'm afraid I dropped it on David's head."

She put her wood down and, kneeling, stirred the heap of grey ash in the fireplace. Her breath roused it to redness, and the twigs that she threw on crackled with flame. Benham watched her as though the kindling of that fire

was one of the most wonderful things that he had ever seen. The burning wood threw a warmth upon her, and made her black hair gleam.

"Don't you love making a fire?"

"Yes, when it is not at six o'clock on a winter morning."

"Oh, I love that, too. It is so glorious to get warm."

To Benham the whole adventure had been incredibly delightful. Only by degrees did he become conscious of himself, of his bare legs, and the general precipitation of his dress. But somehow these things did not seem to matter. The girl had picked up the incidents of the night as naturally as she would have gathered wind-blown apples out of the grass.

"There's David."

Sounds came from some far-off corner of the house. Nance disappeared, to return with a skillet full of milk, a cup, and some bread and cheese on a plate.

"I am going to heat this milk for you."

"You are taking too much trouble."

"I should have to sit up—anyway. Father may return to-night. He was coming by the night coach, and meant to walk from Battle."

Jasper was seized with a desire to ask questions, but his finer instincts smothered the desire. And in another minute she was holding out the cup of milk to him with that solemn and intent look in her eyes.

"You must get some sleep now. I shall have to keep awake by the fire, and listen."

"For Mr. Durrell? He will have a long tramp from Battle."

"Yes. David never hears anything."

"A useful man on occasions."

"Does the arm hurt you much?"

"No, nothing to speak of."

She brought a rug from somewhere and threw it over him, and took the cup when he had finished the milk.

"I will put out the lantern. The firelight will do for me."

She drew an arm-chair before the hearth, took some logs from the oak log-box and piled them against the fire-back. Benham lay and watched her out of the corners of his eyes. She sat herself down with the firelight playing upon her black dress, and touching her throat and face. Perhaps she had outwatched her own wakefulness, for presently she fell asleep, her head resting against the chair-back, her face turned toward the window.

Jasper Benham could not sleep. The aching of his broken arm, and a feeling of restlessness kept him awake. Moreover, he was very conscious of the nearness of the girl sleeping in the chair; and the alluring strangeness of her white face seemed sharpened by his own pain. He became feverish and nervously alert, unable to master the thoughts and conjectures that made a whirligig of his brain. He began to question the history of Stonehanger as a sick man busies himself with patterns on a wall. Was it true that Inchbold had killed his wife here fifty years ago? Was it true that two men had fought a duel to the death in this very room? What of the tales told of the haunting horror of the house, a horror that had emptied it and kept it empty for twenty years? Nance Durrell, sleeping before the fire, seemed to contradict all this. The ebbing and flowing of her breath between the red lips of youth might exorcise such ghost tales.

But Benham was very restless. The flicker of the firelight through the vaulted room made a grim, fantastic shadow-play. There was a listening silence about the house that made wakeful ears tingle with imaginary sounds. Sometimes a log settled, and sent up a scattering of sparks. More than once a gust of wind rattled the windows.

Suddenly Benham turned his head. He had heard, or thought he had heard, the ring of a horse's hoofs upon the stones of the court-yard. He wondered for the moment whether he ought to wake Nance Durrell.

Benham's eyes were turned toward the fire. He did not see something white glide up toward the window. A face seemed to flatten itself against the panes, and to be distorted by the crinkles in the glass. It remained there for a few seconds, and then melted back into the night.

III

Two men were waiting in the stone porch that sheltered the yard-door at Stonehanger. A third man crossed the yard with long, silent strides, and joined the two who were waiting. He took one of them by the arm.

"Over here—among the shrubs."

They moved away into the moonlight, and along under the shadow of a stone wall toward the wild tangle of the neglected garden. The man who had spoken carried himself with a grand air that was spoilt by a suggestion of swagger. He had restless eyes that threw rapid glances from side to side. The man whom he held by the elbow had white hair and a thin, sharp, eager face. The third fellow was a little tub of a Frenchman, frog-faced, blue-chinned, and very fat.

"Here, this path will do. Anthony Durrell, what shall you say if we are trapped?"

"What do you mean?"

"For God's sake, sir, keep that squeaky voice of yours down in your shoes! Pardon me, I am somewhat excited. There is a red-coat officer lying at his ease upon your couch. He had covered himself with a rug, but I got a glimpse of his red jacket. And Mademoiselle Nance is asleep before the fire."

The three men stood close together under the laurels and hollies, whispering with their heads close, and speaking sometimes in French and sometimes in English. The tall man seemed to take the lead.

"Pest on it, Durrell; I have a mind to go back and shoot the man through the window."

"No—no—I will not countenance——"

"There, there, am I a fool! The house may be full of red-coats. We have got to find that out. Your daughter expects you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you must go and knock as boldly as any corporal. Jerome and I can stay in the shadow by the porch. If the red-coat is alone, and

means mischief, we can deal with him. If he has men with him, they will catch nothing but a respectable scholar returning after a journey to London. It is lucky I left the horses in the quarry."

Anthony Durrell fingered a prominent and bony chin.

"I think you are right, Chevalier."

"Tut, tut, it is plain as the moon. Jerome and I know where to bolt to in case of trouble. Go and embrace your most charming daughter."

Nance Durrell woke with a start, and her eyes met the eyes of Jasper Benham.

"I've been asleep!"

"There is some one knocking."

She was up instantly, and kindling a piece of stick at the fire she lit the lantern.

"It must be father."

Nance went out, and Benham heard her shooting back the bolts of the door. A man's cheery and exclamatory voice told of a home-coming.

"Why, child, here we are—at last."

"I am so glad you have come."

"All well, all well?"

"Yes. But we have had an adventure."

"What—what!"

"Let me take your cloak. Yes; a gentleman was shot at and wounded by horse-thieves—in the lane. I had to help him in here. He is in the parlour."

"Bless my soul!"

"Come in and see him."

Benham sat up, the rug falling from him, as Nance Durrell and her father entered the room. He saw a thin, narrow-shouldered man in black regarding him with weak and red-lidded eyes. Anthony Durrell had one of those narrow, hungry, aspiring faces, the face of a man whose desires would never be satisfied. He might have been a bookman, a fanatic, or a dreamer of dreams.

He came in smiling, and the smile spoilt the dignity of his face. It lifted the angles of the mouth too markedly, showed the gaps between the teeth, and was too reminiscent of a snarl.

"Good evening to you, sir."

Benham had risen. He had the watchful look one sees in the eyes of a young man who is brought into sudden contact with a personality that is new and strange.

"Miss Durrell has told you? Yes. I must say, sir, that I am vastly grateful — —"

"Common courtesy, common kindness, Mr.— —"

"Benham of Rush Heath."

"Mr. Benham. I hope you are not badly hurt."

He rubbed his hands, and smiled with a sympathy that seemed ill at ease.

"A broken arm, sir."

"Indeed! That's bad."

He looked fixedly at Benham, and then turned to Nance.

"I commend you, my dear child. I am glad that we have been able to be of service to Mr. Benham. What does the clock say? What, gone two! It seems to me that it will be kinder to leave Mr. Benham undisturbed. You can get me some supper in the kitchen, Nance. And then I think bed will be very welcome."

He stood a moment staring at the fire. The smile had died from his face and left it cold and preoccupied. When he turned once more toward Benham, the smile spread again over his face, unspontaneously, forced up from within.

"Mr. Benham, sir, I will not disturb you further. Make what use you please of this room. Shall we decide to meet again in the morning?"

He gave Jasper a stiff and constrained bow, and walked slowly from the room. Nance followed him, but turned at the door.

"Good night. Is there anything else you would like?"

"No; only to thank you again."

Her brown eyes smiled kindly at him as she closed the door.

"Nance, dear."

"Yes, father. David is in the kitchen."

"Ah, send him to bed, and get me some supper. I have left my bag in the porch. I had almost forgotten it."

"I'll fetch it for you."

"No, no; get me some milk heated. I feel rather chilled."

And he left her with irritable precipitation.

Durrell had no more than a few hurried words with the two men who waited in the yard. He had closed the door behind him, and spoke in a half-whisper.

"No danger—I hope. It's a young man who was shot in the arm while chasing horse-thieves. I will send the girl to bed, and then come back for you."

"Who is the man?"

"A young Benham of Rush Heath."

"Psst—damnably awkward——!"

"I mustn't stay now."

"Yes, get back."

Half an hour passed before Nance took one of the brass candlesticks from the mantelpiece and went up to bed, yawning behind her hand. David Barfoot had been sent back to his room, and Anthony Durrell had Stonehanger House to himself.

The first thing he did was to take off his shoes, and go very cautiously along the passage leading from the kitchen to the hall. A faint line of light showed under the door of the room where Jasper Benham of Rush Heath sat on the couch, swinging his heels. Durrell went softly to the door and listened. The key was on the outside. He felt for it, and turned it with the utmost caution. Yet the lock gave a faint click as the catch shot home, and Durrell stood for three minutes, listening for any sound in the room within.

Durrell's ears satisfied him that all was quiet, though he would have felt far from satisfied had he been able to see through the panels of the door. Jasper had heard the click of the lock. He was sitting on the couch, and staring intently at the door. Presently he crossed the room, sliding his feet silently over the stones, and tried the door, only to find it locked.

"That's funny!" he said to himself; "it seems that the old fellow doesn't trust me. What has he to be anxious about?"

He turned and sat down in the chair in which Nance had fallen asleep.

Anthony Durrell had opened the porch door, and was whispering to the men in the porch.

"Go round to the kitchen entry. Don't make a noise. Nance has only just gone to her room."

They disappeared into the darkness, and Durrell felt his way back toward the kitchen, shutting the door that closed the passage from the hall. Entering the kitchen, he drew the heavy stuff curtains across the windows, and then let the two men in.

"Don't talk too loud. The old house is solid—but I don't want Nance to hear."

Jerome the Frenchman glanced greedily at the bread and cheese on the table, and drawing up a chair he pulled out a bottle of schnapps, and began to eat and drink. The taller man smiled, and laid his cloak and hat on a dresser. He stood six feet, held himself arrogantly, and looked down at Durrell out of a pair of hard, brown, closely set eyes. He was clean-shaven, and the skin of his face was harsh and red. His long, straight nose had a curiously drooping tip, and two deep, vertical furrows where it joined his forehead. The man had the air of an aristocrat, and the easy and contemptuous manner of one who has seen too much of life.

"Durrell, I don't like this interlude. What's the fellow's tale?"

"He says that he was chasing horse-thieves, and that one of them shot him down yonder in the lane. Nance found him and brought him in."

"A plague on the women! Pity is the devil! Where was he hit?"

"In the arm."

"Sure?"

"It was bound up with a scarf, De Rothan."

The Chevalier straightened himself, and gave a toss of the head.

"I tell you what I think, Durrell—the man's a spy. I know young Benham. He is just the man they would choose to play a bluff, downright part. They may have suspicions. Who tied up the arm?"

"Nance."

“The devil! There you are! What do you mean by having a pretty daughter! Even if this is no spying trick, the booby may give us trouble. David should have had the job. You never know what a pair of soft eyes and hands will do.”

Durrell looked troubled.

“But, Chevalier— —”

“Yes, yes; it is accursedly awkward whichever way we look.”

Jerome, his mouth full of bread, threw a suggestion into the air.

“Shoot the dog.”

De Rothan laughed, sat on the edge of the table, and reached for Jerome’s bottle of schnapps.

“You are a wise fellow, Jerome, always loading up against emergencies. But you are a little too rough in your methods. Strategy does it. I shall have my eyes on Mr. Benham.”

“A snap of the fingers for him, then,” said the Frenchman with a grin.

Durrell brooded, staring at the fire.

“The boat will not come ashore till to-morrow after dark, and then only if we give the signal.”

“Yes; you will have to pack us in the attics, and get that fellow out of the house.”

“Early.”

“And take a ramble to the quarry.”

“Yes, yes; no doubt.”

Durrell answered irritably, like a man oppressed by a crowd of cares.

“The girl must be asleep by now.”

“Very well. Away to the rookery. Bring that bread and cheese along with you, Jerome. I have only talked as yet.”

Durrell took the lantern and went out into the passage. He was away for about five minutes. Then they saw him standing m the doorway, beckoning.

The two men drew off their boots and gathered their belongings. They followed Anthony Durrell up the oak stairs to the attic story of Stonehanger House.

IV

Jasper Benham lay on the couch under the window and watched the dawn come up over the sea.

It was a stealthy creeping of tawny light into the sky, a rising of blue hills and headlands, dim, huge, and distant against the broadening East. The vague grey sea became a sheet of amethyst crossed by a band of gold. Birds were piping in the ragged thorn-trees upon Stonehanger Hill. A sense of wonder seemed to sweep across the land, touching the hills with splendour, and leaving the valleys full of a shadowy awe.

The breaking of the day was a relief to Jasper after a restless and pain-haunted night. He had come by odd snatches of sleep, but the starting of the broken arm had always awakened him, and left him at the mercy of his thoughts. The great, grey room, lit by the faint glow of the dying fire, had filled him with restless and unreasoning distrust.

He raised himself slowly on the couch, and his head swam with the fall of the previous night when Devil Dick had thrown him in the lane. Yet faint and dizzy as he was, the view from the window astonished him. From the Stonehanger uplands, wild, furze-clad slopes melted into the green-tinged browns of the April woods. Nearly the whole coast from Hastings to Beachy Head was visible. Pevensey Bay was a great half-moon of silver cutting into the green flats of the Level. The dim blue sky met the dim blue sea. Along the rim of Pevensey Bay were dotted little round pillars, the distant martello towers with the black mouths of their twenty-four-pounders waiting for Napoleon and the French.

Benham knelt on the couch and gazed. He had heard vague movements about the house. A door had opened somewhere, and footsteps descended the stairs.

Then a girl's voice sounded out yonder amid the furze.

"Coop—coop—come along."

Jasper saw her drifting against the dawn, her black hair doubly black, her forearms bare to the elbow, her short skirt showing her feet and ankles. A kind of rough terrace garden, half grass, half paved path, ran along the front of the house. There were rose-beds in the grass, and the two old yews rose

blackly above the parapet of the terrace wall. Nance was on the furze-land beyond, where the ground fell away toward the south.

A brown cow came into view. It passed Nance, and, like a creature of habit, followed a path that led to the yard. The girl had turned, and was looking at the windows of Stonehanger. A flight of rough steps went up to the terrace. She mounted them, and crossed the grass toward the windows of the parlour.

Benham, kneeling there, unfastened the lattice and thrust it open. Nance Durrell was quite close, and a kind of warmth went over her face. Her eyes had the dewiness of the dawn.

"You are awake."

"The morning is worth it."

She rested her hands on the window-ledge, and looked in at him with frank intentness.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry!"

"You have had a bad night of it. I can see that. The arm has been hurting you."

"A little."

"More than a little. Perhaps I did not bind it up tightly enough."

To Jasper Benham her compassion seemed very wonderful. What did it matter to her that he had suffered.

"You could not have done more for me. To tell the truth, I am glad that fellow shot me under the yew."

"How do you manage to be glad?"

"Well—otherwise, I should not have spent a night at Stonehanger, and come by such a friend."

Her red mouth smiled at him, and her eyes were the eyes of a tease.

"If you set out to make all your friends by being shot at—or getting hurt——!"

"I should not go as far as that—for most people."

He laughed, to carry off his rush of earnestness.

"You see, some things are worth bearing. I am not a fool. I say what I mean."

Nance looked at him as though she were puzzled. She dropped her hands from the window-ledge, but her eyes did not avoid Benham's.

"We have sent David off to Rush Heath. I must go and milk Jenny."

He was about to ask her to let him join her when he remembered the locked door. The memory jarred the impulsive delight of the moment. Nance had turned, and he saw her clear profile against the sky. He could find nothing to say to her, and that short silence seemed the fatal break between an enchanted dawn and the prosaic day.

Overhead the lattice of an attic window had been opened noiselessly, and a man's head thrust out. He had been listening to Nance Durrell and Jasper talking at the window below. Nor had the incident pleased him, to judge by the stiff and cynical smile upon his face.

Jasper Benham was still kneeling on the couch when he heard footsteps in the hall, and the sound of the key being turned cautiously in the lock. The door opened, and Anthony Durrell's white head and thin, visionary face appeared in the opening.

"Good morning, Mr. Benham."

Jasper had turned with a queer feeling of distaste.

"Good morning, sir."

Durrell moved in, glancing about the room, and rubbing his hands together.

"I hope that you have had a passable night?"

"I am obliged by all your kindness."

"Do not speak of it, Mr. Benham. In half an hour we will bring you some breakfast. My man has gone off to Rush Heath. If you will excuse me, I will light the fire."

He disappeared, and returned with a bundle of wood, a lighted candle, and some paper. Benham sat on the edge of the couch and watched him. He had grown intensely curious about Mr. Anthony Durrell. The man seemed part and parcel of Stonehanger, with his restless reserve and his sidelong glances.

Durrell knelt down by the hearth.

"A scholar, Mr. Benham, has to do many things with his hands. We who are wedded to knowledge have to serve as menials, not only as priests."

Jasper eyed him reflectively.

"You find Stonehanger a quiet place?"

Durrell glanced over his shoulder, and his pointed chin looked sharp and forbidding.

"Exquisitely quiet, sir, for me and my books. And the rent is low, a matter of consideration to a scholar. I have tried many places in my time—towns, villages, watering-places. Pah! Distractions everywhere. One of the most difficult things in the world, sir, is to get away from noise and from fools."

He had lit the fire when Nance came in carrying a tray full of breakfast things. Anthony Durrell looked at her with a morose hardening of the face.

"Nance, I will set the table. Go and look after the milk and eggs."

He wanted Nance and Jasper Benham apart. The Chevalier de Rothan's hint had been sufficient.

It was nine o'clock when Jack Bumpstead brought the light wagon into Stonehanger yard, with two of Farmer Crowhurst's horses borrowed for the morning. David Barfoot climbed out. The bottom of the wagon was littered with straw.

When Jasper appeared in the yard, with Durrell walking beside him, Jack Bumpstead joggled his hat, and grinned like a man who had had the best of a bargain.

"Mornin', master; glad I be to see ye alive!"

They had helped Benham into the wagon when Nance came into the yard, carrying a faded, chintz-covered cushion. Jack Bumpstead's blue eyes fixed her with the true Sussex stare.

"You must take this cushion. You can put it under your head when you are lying down."

She tossed it into the wagon, and Jasper caught a glimpse of her father's sulky face.

"I'll take the cushion, and return it."

"It's not very new."

"A piece of rubbish, sir. Never waste a man's time sending it back to Stonehanger."

"I may bring it back myself, some day; and this scarf, too."

Durrell looked at him with a grim twinkle.

"I am a bit of a character, Mr. Benham. When I am among my books I sometimes stay among them for days. I have a prejudice against being interrupted, nor can I promise you my company if you call."

It was a blunt hint, bluntly given. Durrell was not fool enough to pretend that a young man would ride five miles to chop logic with a scholar. Nor was Benham fool enough to miss the elder man's meaning.

Jack Bumpstead turned the horses, and the wagon jolted over the stones of the yard. Benham leaned forward as he sat in the straw, and looked at Nance over the lowered tail-board of the wagon. Her eyes seemed to follow his, and she was smiling.

"Good-bye. I shall always be grateful."

He could say no more, because of the sour face of her father.

A dormer-window projected from the northern slope of the roof of Stonehanger, and at the window, whose dusty gloss rendered anything inside it invisible from without, stood the Chevalier de Rothan. He had cleansed one diamond pane with the tip of a long forefinger, and was looking down with cynical amusement at the scene in the yard. He watched Nance Durrell and he watched Benham, and the ends of his mouth lifted contemptuously.

"Good day, Mr. Jasper Benham. It may be an unlucky chance that brought you to Stonehanger. Well, we shall see!"

He took a silver snuff-box from his pocket, lifted the lid, and took snuff with elaborate unction, flickering his fingers under his nose.

"If young fools get in a great man's way, they must suffer. Stuck like a lark on a spit, eh! Be damned to you, my Sussex squireling! My pretty Nance, too! I had my eyes on her long before you, my friend. You know me, and yet you do not know me. You may know me better some day, not far hence!"

The man Jerome rose from the edge of a truckle-bed, and came yawning to the window.

"I wonder when the old philosopher will be able to smuggle us up some breakfast. What's all the talk about, monsieur?"

“Jerome, you are a greedy animal. One seldom has a chance to talk to a genius in this world. That is why I so often talk to myself.”

“What’s that? A wagon going out of the gate.”

The Frenchman had spat upon the window, and was cleaning a peep-hole with his thumb.

“Yes; taking a calf home. Do you like veal, Jerome? I have an idea that the calf yonder will never make good beef!”

V

Parson Goffin and old Christopher Benham had dined together, and sat facing each other on either side of the fire.

Kit Benham was past sixty, and had drunk himself into premature dotage. A pursy, ponderous, florid man, he could do little more than sit in his padded chair, smoke interminable pipes, and drink perpetual beer. He was a gross man, who could hardly speak without uttering all manner of quaint and ingenious oaths. Already his legs were swollen with dropsy, and they were propped on a joint stool as he fumed and pulled at his pipe.

"Four horses, Parson; four blazing, burning, heaven-forsaken beasts pinched by eternally accursed, skunk-livered, black-mouthed thieves! My lad shot in the arm, too, and abed, with old Blister of Battle running up a bill! Tell me to be an addle-brained, pond-waterweed of a Christian! Grrrh!"

The great thing about Parson Goffin was his gout. He was a knobbly man, the colour of leather, and he always sat with his knees drawn up and his bumpy feet tucked away under his chair as though he dreaded having them trodden on. Goffin might have been in the habit of using Cayenne pepper in place of snuff, for his nose looked so angry. Gout had made him explosive, yet this explosiveness suited the neighbourhood. It threw him into sympathy with his surroundings, and made him popular with the hot-tongued squires and farmers. Goffin was the very man for a grievance. He took it as a dog takes a rat, crunched it, shook it to and fro, not indeed to kill, but out of sympathy for the aggrieved friend.

"They will catch the rogues, sir; catch them and hang them."

Kit Benham flourished his pipe.

"By old Nick's bones, Parson, that's just what they won't do. We are driven clear crazy by these infernal French. All the oafs in the county are standing and gaping all day at the sea. And all the flea-bitten scoundrels in the county rob and do just as they please."

"Yes, sir; perhaps in this world, sir. But think how they will burn in the next!"

"I should like to see it, Goffin, by all the lies of Ananias—I should like to see it!"

"They'll all sizzle, sir—just like apples."

Christopher Benham expanded his nostrils.

"To smell 'm singeing! Dear heart—I'd be ready to go there myself, sure-ly! Thank God, sir, there is a hell."

"Thank God, sir, indeed. Think of all the thieves there ever were going up in glorious black smoke."

"Don't, sir—don't—Goffin! The thought of it makes me too infernally excited."

"Happy, you mean, sir. Hallo now, I hear wheels on the drive."

A green curricle had swept up past the cedars on the lawn, and drawn up outside the house. Jack Bumpstead came running from somewhere, pulling an eager forelock. A young woman with a rather sallow face, and a short, upturned nose, threw Jack the reins. She had blue eyes that stared, and a quick, masterful manner. A prim little bonnet caressed the neat plaits of her reddish hair.

"Lucky there are any springs left to the carriage, Jack! These by-roads!"

"Ah, miss, you oughtn't to take her off t' main road, surely!"

"Squire Christopher in? And Master Jasper? Yes, I have heard all about it, Jack—all, thank you."

"Parson Goffin be with the squire in the oak parlour."

"Oh, is he! I thought I saw flames coming out of the chimney!"

Into the oak parlour marched this brisk and urgent young woman with her queer blending of piety and worldliness. Parson Goffin rose stiffly and made her a formal bow. Mr. Christopher Benham pointed with his pipe stem at the legs reposing on the stool.

"Laid up, see. Can't move. Goffin can do the bowing. Well, young woman, you look too fat."

"Mr. Goffin, do you agree with my uncle?"

"I never interfere between relatives, Miss Benham."

"Oh, don't you! So Jasper has been getting into the wars. Four horses, was it? Lucky that Devil Dick came back. I hear some people at Stonehanger took pity on Jasper. Durrell or Darrell or Barrell or something. Who are they?"

Christopher Benham looked at her irritably.

"Just like her mother; talks like a water-wheel. Don't ask me, girl, how should I know? Ask the parson, he knows everybody's business."

Mr. Goffin grinned, and showed his tobacco-blackened teeth.

"Durrell is the name, Miss Benham. They are queer folk, I hear. The man is a bookworm, deist, encyclopædist, atheist, anything you like. I don't know much about them. No one does. This Durrell put it about that he wanted to be left alone. He is."

Mr. Goffin took snuff and sneezed, turning his angry nose toward the fire.

"Then it was the girl who picked Jasper out of the road?"

"The girl! Thunder and cabbages, the lad never told us that."

Kit Benham heaved with laughter.

"A girl, was there? Oh, the rogue! I know nothing about it. You had better ask Jasper. May old Nick boil my marrow-bones——"

Rose Benham had her Methodist face—for the moment.

"Uncle Christopher, when will you learn to be clean in your speech?"

"What!"

"It is contemptible, at your age."

"Thunder and lightning, can't I swear in my own house? Here's Goffin, too; he's a good judge of language. You go and see Jasper. He's in bed."

"I will."

She left Parson Goffin and her uncle staring at each other. Then Squire Kit spluttered:

"If that girl hadn't got a thousand a year of her own, hang, draw, and quarter me if I'd——"

"Ssh, sir; ssh! She is your brother's daughter."

"Bah, she's not! She's his cat-faced wife's cat-clawed daughter! They killed poor Nat between 'em with their little goody books and their snuffle."

Rose Benham had climbed the broad stairs, noticing a number of trivial things, such as dust on the bannister rail, and cobwebs in some of the

corners. Jasper was lying asleep in the oak four-poster when his cousin knocked at the door.

He woke out of the thick of a dream, to hear Rose's metallic voice calling:

"Jasper, can I come in?"

They had been children together, but no such thing as false modesty would have kept Rose Benham out of her cousin's room. She entered breezily, without a fleck of colour on her cheeks, her blue eyes full of a frank, intimate interest. Three years older than Jasper, she still treated him as a boy.

"This is a nice affair! Getting shot when you are wanted to drill your volunteers on the green of a Sunday. Not that I can call them anything but a lot of waddling ducks. And you have had old Blister Doddington, have you? I hope he was sober. And you are sure he has set your arm properly?"

Her pale-blue eyes and her reddish hair seemed to tone with her brisk self-confidence. Rose Benham knew what she expected of life, and she meant life to satisfy her expectations. Whisking a rush-bottomed chair from a corner, she sat down beside the bed, talking the whole time. She was one of those women who overwhelm the world with words.

"Well, what an adventure! And how does it feel to be picked up out of the road by a young woman? Yes, I have heard all about it."

She laughed her quick, harsh laugh.

"Don't look at me as if such things happened every day! You men, you take everything for granted. And here am I dying to hear all about it. Cousin Rose has a right to know, hasn't she?"

There was a subtle suggestion of ownership in the way she put out a hand and smoothed the pillow. Jasper was not wholly the boy cousin to her. He was the man she had determined to marry.

Jasper looked bothered. Rose had such a way of driving people into a corner.

"There is nothing to tell. One of the rogues waited for me in the dark, and shot me in Stonehanger Lane. They just helped me into the house, and I spent the night there. Jack fetched me in the wagon yesterday morning."

She grew caressing, and a caressing mood never suited her. She was too thin, too hard about the eyes.

"Now, Jasper, you know——"

"What do you want me to tell you, Rose?"

"Why, everything. Dear lad, do you think it is nothing?"

"I'm not dead, or likely to be."

Their eyes met. There was something in Jasper's that repulsed the girl. She stiffened, and withdrew her hand.

"You know, Jasper, these things sometimes come to us from above. They are messages, divine warnings."

It was her doctrinal phase, and she had inherited it from her mother. Jasper glanced at her uneasily, and then stared at the window. He had never realised it so vividly before that Rose talked to him as though he belonged to her.

"It pulls a man up, and makes him think."

"Yes; only men will put off the thinking. Though I don't believe you are that sort of man, Jasper. You are steady, and sensible, and I know you read your Bible."

Jasper turned restlessly on the pillow. Her cool way of discussing him to himself, of approving and disapproving as though she had a kind of authority, had always rather amused him. Whether some new intelligence had come to him in the course of two days, he could not tell. One thing he did know. He had discovered a sudden new significance in his cousin's attitude toward himself.

"I'm afraid I'm a stupid fool, Rose. I still have a head from that bump in the road."

"Poor Jasper!"

Her hand came out, and for the moment there was something very like repulsion in Jasper's eyes.

"Now, I won't chatter any longer. Go to sleep. I will draw the curtains. There, lad. And now I will go and have a talk with Uncle Christopher."

Said Squire Christopher to the parson when the green curricle had driven off along the road across the paddock: "There's a hell-cat for you, Goffin; preach at you or scratch your face—whichever you please. The image of her dear mother. She means to marry lad Jasper."

The parson refilled his pipe.

"What have you to say to that, sir?"

"If Jasper cares to be caught, I shan't meddle. What's more, one woman's very like another. I don't believe in a man marrying the woman he's in love with."

"But, Mr. Benham—sir!"

"What! You don't see how it works? Why, sir, marry a woman you dislike and you will always be in love with some charmer who won't nag your head off. A man ought to go out loving as he goes out hunting; it's a sour, dull sport in your own yard. Poor Nat was ruled by his wife. But Jasper's got grit. Maybe he'd tame Miss Rose. And don't you see, Goffin, there's something in a thousand a year and more to come! You don't expect good looks and a sweet temper when you get so much cash."

As for the two people under discussion, Rose had driven off with a tightly shut mouth and three lines of thought across her forehead, while Jasper lay abed with a chafed and uneasy conscience. Generous men are always inclined to be severe upon themselves, when some unforeseen clash of the emotions makes them look at life very seriously. Jasper was puzzled with regard to Rose, and angry with himself. Had he been blind, and missed seeing things that had been very visible to others?

One thing he did know. He was haunted perpetually by the face and voice of Nance Durrell.

As for Nance herself, the sun shone on her as she sat on the stone parapet of the terrace garden at Stonehanger, and looked toward the sea. Nance had developed a passion for gardening, and had adventurously set herself to grow flowers in that wind-swept upland garden. She had made old David dig her a broad border at the edge of the stone path, and she had searched the overrun garden at the back of the house for stray plants that had managed to survive the weeds. Old David had bought her a few roots from some of the cottages at Rookhurst, and Nance had pansies, sweetwilliams, pinks, foxgloves, lavender, and a few roses ready to bloom in the coming summer. Several clumps of daffodils waved their golden heads in the wind. A rake, a trowel, and a wooden trug lay on the grass beside her. Her hands were brown with soil, and she sat and forgot for a moment that such things as flowers existed.

She was thinking of Jasper Benham, and wondering how he did with his broken arm. His brown face, square jaw, and steady blue eyes had seemed very pleasant to her. Something in him had called to her own youth.

Her father's voice startled her from her reverie. He was looking out of an upper window, the window of his study, the wind blowing his white hair over his forehead.

"Nance."

"Yes, father."

"What are you idling there for, child?"

"I wasn't idling—I was thinking."

"Oh, and what may these most serious thoughts be?"

His morose and peering curiosity puzzled her, but she was quite frank in her answering.

"I was wondering how Mr. Benham is?"

"Tssh—do you call that thinking! Go in and brew me some tea."

VI

Jasper Benham grew very restless those April days, though he moved in a cool, green world, and saw the primroses starring the banks of the paddock, and Squire Kit's Dutch tulips opening their cups of crimson and gold. The "cuckoo's mate" had come, and called plaintively in the oak-trees. The grass in the orchard was the colour of emeralds, and the fruit-buds were opening against the blue.

Jasper was restless, adventurous, obstinate, and Surgeon Doddington protested. He was a little, purplish man with a huge, bald head, who talked very fast and spluttered as he talked. A wag had once watched Surgeon Doddington with extreme attention for fully five minutes, and then explained that he had been waiting to see him blow up.

"Stuff and nonsense, Mr. Benham, I'll not be responsible, not for a moment, not for a moment. Ride that beast of a horse of yours, indeed! Captain Curtiss can drill the men. Your arm's more important than the way twenty bumpkins turn their toes out."

"You are not a patriot, Mr. Doddington!"

"Yes I am, sir—yes I am, sir; but I'm a surgeon, too, sir," and he ended with a sizzle.

It was of no avail. Possibly Jasper needed an excuse, and meant to have one at all costs. Sunday saw him on Devil Dick's back, his arm slung in a red sash, bound for Battle town and the Sabbath parade.

There was quite a gay gathering on the green close to the Abbey gate. The gentry were there, fresh from their pews in church; the "regulars" quartered in the town were there; Captain Curtiss was there on his big white horse. For with Napoleon's great army of invasion camped ready at Boulogne, all Sussex was dotted with red-coats. Each town and townlet had its gallant fellows ready with pikes and firelocks. There were the camps at Brighton and at Eastbourne, and guns gaping everywhere, black muzzles toward the sea. Red-coats were quartered at Hastings, Battle, Pevensey, Hailsham, Lewes, Seaford, Worthing, Arundel, Chichester, and at many places more. Hanoverians had held Bexhill. There were the Yeomanry, the Sea Fencibles, the Fencible Cavalry, the Volunteer corps, and in the west the

Duke of Richmond's Volunteer Horse Artillery. All eyes were on the Channel, and many people's hearts were in their mouths.

That April Sunday the volunteers of Battle town and the neighbouring villages were drawn up on the green facing the Abbey gate. An old sergeant of regulars with a lame leg and a peppery red face was limping to and fro. Captain Curtiss sat silently superb upon his big white horse. The gentry chatted and looked important. The lesser folk bunched together in groups and enjoyed themselves in a stolid, staring way.

Near the old-timbered guest-house Rose Benham sat in her green curricle. Dick Mumfit had drawn up his nag beside the curricle, and was showing his teeth, which meant that he was making idiotic puns, and marching out all the stale jokes that had lived a vagrant life for years in the county of Sussex.

" 'Tention. Shoulder arms."

Up went the muskets, one of them topped by a disreputable beaver hat.

"Damn 'ee, Sam Mepham, this be t' second time yuv scraped m' noddle wid yer musket. Sergeant! He'll be for shootin' me, sure-ly!"

"Silence in the ranks!"

"He fetched her under m' jaw time afore."

"Silence! Lower that hat. Private Mepham, you're a dashed, flat-footed, camel-backed clod, sir. D'yer hear? Now. Satan help me—did I say 'ground arms'? Of all the——! Now, what are ye all staring at? Lieutenant Benham wid his arm in a sash? Hi, some one bring me a rattle, to keep the poor babies to attention. Just look at the 'reg'lars.' They're laughin' their belts undone."

Patriotism or no patriotism, every one appeared to be laughing save the much-tried sergeant and the stately Curtiss on his white horse. Jasper caught Rose Benham's eyes. She beckoned him to come to her.

"You wicked lad, how dare you be so rash——!"

"Well, I was sick of Rush Heath."

She challenged him with her shallow eyes.

"Now—I know why you came."

"Do you?"

"Yes; but I shall not confess. Me—oh, no. Wouldn't you like to let one of the men hold your horse, and come and rest in the carriage. You won't have to drill the boobies. Look at Jeremy Curtiss. All he has to do is to look grand. Poor old cock-a-doodle-do, there, with the lame foot, does everything."

Jasper was posed. He had no desire to place himself conspicuously beside Cousin Rose.

"I can see better here. I want to see how the men handle their muskets."

"Oh you wicked deceiver. You want all the women to say: 'There's Jasper Benham with his broken arm. Doesn't he look handsome?' I caught Kitty Lavender—you know, the pretty, dark one—simply languishing at you just now."

Jasper said: "Confound Kitty Lavender!"

Then some one intervened. A big bay horse drew up on the other side of the curricle, and a man in black saluted Cousin Rose.

"All the sunshine to you, Mees Benham."

"Why, Chevalier, is it you? What a man for being here, there, and everywhere. Jasper, you know the Chevalier de Rothan."

The two men stared at each other. They had met before in a casual way.

"Mr. Benham—a broken arm, I hear."

His hard, handsome, insolent face had a look of amused tolerance.

"I come to see your brave men drill. And to think that it is against my France! Poor France. Some day I shall return to her. But picture my château; a black shell in mourning. Yes; rightly in black."

He looked grave and melancholy. Rose's eyes wandered over him.

"Still in black, Chevalier?"

"Ah, mam'selle, did I not put on black the day our King was butchered? I wear it still. I shall wear it till the white flag of the Bourbons returns to France. No bastard, upstart emperor for me. I know that even now I might return to France. Honour and pride keep me here, an exile, among charming Englishwomen."

Jasper watched the man, and disliked him in the vague yet vigorous way that one man may dislike another. De Rothan had the casual soaring air that puts other men under his feet. He could be courteous, but there was a taint

about his courtesy. You could see the lines about mouth and nostrils that muttered: “These boors of English!”

Rose became even more animated.

“I think you are a wonderful man, Chevalier. And do you really wish us to conquer France?”

“Mam’selle, not to conquer, but to free her.”

“There is a difference.”

“I pray each day of my life that I may see King Louis at Versailles, before I grow too old.”

“Too old?”

“Ah, one is not the same at Court.”

The sergeant’s voice became the dominating sound for the moment.

“You tail-wagging lot of ducks! Stand up! Hup! Bay’nets? Dash me, I wouldn’t trust ye with a set of skewers. It ’ud be a bloody business. Wanton damaging o’ uniforms. Now we’ll charge our pieces. Put some pipe-clay into it.”

And so it went on, Captain Curtiss sitting his white horse like a great soldier in a battle-picture, looking whole campaigns, and uttering never a word.

When Jasper took leave of Rose, the Chevalier de Rothan was still in attendance.

“Jasper—now—be careful. Do send us a word. Or come yourself in a few days. I’ll give Devil Dick lots of sugar.”

“It is very good of you, Rose.”

“Silly boy!”

Her eyes flashed at him as he turned his horse.

The Chevalier woke from a studied reverie.

“Mr. Benham, sir, I ride a little your way.”

“You do?”

“I will take the charm of your company. Mees Benham, your most devoted servant.”

They had ridden no further than Battle church, grey in the midst of its green grass and great elms, when De Rothan glanced significantly at Jasper.

"Mr. Benham, sir, you are a most fortunate young man. A most exquisite lady, your cousin. I offer you my felicitations."

"Sir?"

"Ah, you think me too forward. We French, sir, are less difficult, less reticent. Now in France, Mr. Benham——"

"I don't know what you mean, Chevalier."

"Ah—my good young man!"

He shrugged, and smiled like a grandee.

"These Sussex villages delight me, Mr. Benham. Such red brick, such maturity. They live in the landscape. I assure you I never tire of riding everywhere, and seeing your sweet villages."

Jasper grunted, which was bad manners.

Before long they parted company. And to part company with the Chevalier de Rothan was a considerable event. It justified, even glorified, a whole day's existence.

"Mr. Benham, your very good friend. Au revoir, au revoir."

There was a queer glint in his eyes. It puzzled Jasper like the subtle flash of a clever enemy's sword.

No sooner was he alone than De Rothan allowed himself to seem desperately amused.

"What a world of fools it is! They have swallowed me as the whale swallowed Jonah. 'Ah, Chevalier, sweet Chevalier!' How the tradesmen run after a title."

There was as much Irish blood in him as there was French. In fact, his great grandfather had been as boastful and swaggering a rogue as had ever sailed from Ireland to use his wits and his tongue in France. The Sussex folk knew him as the Chevalier de Rothan, aristocrat and *emigré*, a wild partisan of the Bourbons, and a wearer of the white cockade. He had taken the Brick House between the villages of Westfield and Sedlescombe, ridden to hounds, entertained the notables, and served them off plate marked with the De Rothan arms. The man seemed to have money.

"Ah, gentlemen," he would say, "I was more fortunate than many of my friends. I not only saved my head, but my plate and my jewels. It is also something to have money in English companies. But I am poor. I make what show I can."

And De Rothan was popular. He could be gay, quaint, and witty. He rode here, there, and everywhere, a man who should have been mistrusted, and yet was not. His French-Irish cleverness carried him along. He could speak English perfectly when he chose, but for effect he played picturesquely with the language, and out-Frenchified the vulgar notion of a Frenchman when he was dealing with half-educated people. A little quixotry was useful. He made much of his ostentation of wearing black, and of his passionate devotion to the Royalist cause. Once he had been seen to weep. He was ready to fight any man who had a good word for Napoleon.

On the outbreak of the war, and especially when the scare of an invasion gripped the country, the French exiles had been compelled to live a certain distance from the sea-coast. But the Chevalier de Rothan had planted himself boldly within four miles of the sea, and no one had interfered with him. He was on excellent terms with the gentlemen who wore the King's uniform, dined with them, betted with them, abused Bonaparte with them, and was allowed to ride in and out of camps and barracks very much as he pleased.

The Brick House lay in a lonely hollow where a stream wound through oak woods, and narrow, secret meadows. A lane led to the house from a by-road. It was a solid, Jacobean house with a brick-walled garden, a big porch, and a stone horse-block at the gate. Two yews, clipped in the shape of peacocks, grew on each side of the main path. De Rothan had settled here with three French servants. He kept two horses, and devoted himself to gardening. He was always ready to talk of his great garden and his orangery in France.

When he returned that Sunday, he left his horse in the stable-yard, and entered the house by the back door.

"Gaston—Gaston——!"

A short, square man appeared in the passage. He had a solid, thundery face, the nose flattened, a black patch over one eye. A red handkerchief tied round his head, and a belt with pistols stuck in it, would have made him an admirable buccaneer.

"Monsieur?"

"I shall sleep lightly to-night, Gaston. Be ready if I should want you."

"I shall be ready."

"Good. I will dine immediately."

When he had dined De Rothan climbed the Jacobean staircase and passed along a gallery to a room at the southern end of the house. It was a big room with an undulating, oak-planked floor, great beams and struts showing in the walls. There were books upon shelves, a reading-lamp and writing-materials on an oak table, and a black wainscot chair with a red cushion to soften the seat.

De Rothan locked the door, and then went to the fireplace where the bricked chimney stood out in the room like a great oven. He took off his coat and laid it on the chair, rolled up the right sleeve of his shirt, and, stooping, thrust his arm well up into the chimney. He took out a brick, laid it on the hearth, wiped the soot from his hand, and groped again. This time he brought out a little metal case. He opened it, and drew out a roll of papers.

Here, in cipher, were the results of his popularity, his wanderings to and fro from village to village. The Chevalier was interested in farming and in the breeding of cattle! Listed here were most of the larger farms in the rapes of Pevensey and Hastings, with a rough estimate of the stock, and of the corn that might be found in the barns. Here were maps, elaborate in detail, showing every road and lane, and points that might have military importance. The number of troops stationed in each town was recorded, and the number of guns in the various forts and batteries along the coast.

De Rothan glanced through these papers, making an alteration or an addition here and there. He sat back in the chair, and smiled.

"Nelson fooled, and a day's fog in the Channel! So little—and yet so much!"

VII

It was stormy weather. The golden-budded oaks shook their branches against a hurrying grey sky. Primroses shivered on the banks, and cold glimmers of wind swept over the bent grass. A few early swallows skimmed against the stiff south-wester. Everywhere the woods looked gloomy and black.

Up at Stonehanger the furze rolled like a sea as Jasper and Devil Dick climbed out of the valley. Jasper came slantwise up the hill, so that he had a raking view of the terrace and the grey house with its bluff, stern chimneys. The casements shook and glittered. One thin stream of smoke was blown like a pennon from the nearest chimney.

Jasper saw a figure on the terrace, outlined against the sky. It stood there visible between two clumps of thorn-trees, and tossed its arms as though they were blown about by the wind. Its gestures were so wild and passionate that Jasper drew in under the shelter of a furze-covered bank, and watched the distant figure over the tops of the bushes.

It was Anthony Durrell. Benham could tell that by his thin, black figure and white hair. The old man was like a mad poet in a frenzy, or a prophet drunk with the spirit of prophecy. He strode up and down between the thorn-trees, waving his arms, shaking his fists, pointing toward the sea. The fragments of a voice were carried down to Jasper against the blustering of the wind.

"The man's mad!"

He reconsidered the exclamation, out of respect to Nance.

"A bit queer in the head, perhaps! Too much hanging over books. I wonder what he is shouting about? Just like Mad George, the Methodist!"

He rode on, drawing a little toward the left, so that the thorn-trees were between him and Anthony Durrell. For Jasper had not ridden to Stonehanger to waste time on a dry-as-dust scholar. He wanted to make sure of seeing somebody before Anthony Durrell could interfere.

Jasper found a five-barred gate closing the stable-yard from the common. The gate was padlocked, but Jasper put Devil Dick at it, and was

over in style. In fact, the horse nearly trampled on old David Barfoot, who bobbed out suddenly from the door of an outbuilding.

"Where be ye a-coming to?"

"Hallo! Good day to you, Mr. Barfoot. Is your mistress at home?"

David stared, and Benham remembered the old man's deafness. He felt in a pocket, produced the red scarf, and also a silver crown.

He spoke slowly, showed David the scarf, and pointed to the house. David displayed utter stupidity. He held out a brown paw for the scarf.

"No, you old fool! Do you think I have ridden five miles to hand this over to you!"

He pointed toward the house, and then gave David the silver crown.

The man stared at it, scratched his chin, and then pocketed the money. He threw up his hairy face suddenly, and shouted:

"It's Miss Nance you be wanting?"

"All right, all right, don't tell the whole county!" and he nodded.

"She be'unt in."

"Oh?"

"She be gone over yonder, down to the oak wood for primroses."

David was not such a cross-grained old fool, after all.

"You'd better go round by t' lane. It'll take ye out on t' common."

Jasper smiled at him, leapt Devil Dick over the gate again, struck round by the grey wall of the garden at the back of the house, and found a gap in the hedge leading through into the lane.

"I am in David's debt," thought he. "Mr. Durrell can play the windmill yonder so long as he pleases."

The lane brought Jasper out on to the common where he could see the oak wood as a brown and purplish mass beyond the tumbling green of the wind-swept furze. Something red was moving along the edge of the wood like a spark creeping along tinder. It was the red hood that covered Nance's black curls.

Jasper thrilled on the edge of an adventure. He rode down the hill, and met Nance in a winding grass-way between the furze bushes. She was

carrying a rush basket full of primroses, with a bunch of purple orchids thrust into one corner.

"Mr. Benham!"

The exclamation was as obvious as Jasper's satisfaction at seeing her.

"David told me you were down in the wood."

"David! How did you make him understand."

"Oh, somehow. I have brought you back your scarf."

He dismounted, looped Devil Dick's bridle over his sound arm, and set himself beside Nance. Her eyes sent a hovering glance over his face. An immense seriousness seemed to possess him. His square jaw, firm mouth, and blue eyes might have belonged to a man who was about to lead a forlorn hope. Yet the whole truth of it was that he had been attacked by violent and absurd shyness.

"How is the arm?"

"Mending. Surgeon Doddington admired the way you had bound it up."

"Did he?"

"Yes. By the way, I have forgotten that cushion. I must bring it back some other time."

He glanced at Nance, and the frank flash of laughter in her eyes helped him to climb out of the slough of his own shy seriousness.

"It sounds very simple, doesn't it?"

"What?"

"To make a cushion an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

They looked at each other again, and laughed, with the incipient mystery of the thing creeping into their blood. The wind blew the golden-flowered furze against the grey sky. Even this stormy day seemed glorious.

"I wanted to come to Stonehanger."

"Did you! Well, why not?"

"Yes, why not! And just for the same reason I'm going to call you—Nance."

She looked straight before her with a sudden self-conscious stiffening of the face. It was as though some strange new thought had touched her, and startled her into introspective silence.

"Is this your horse—Devil Dick?"

"Yes."

"And the other horses? Were the thieves caught?"

"No. They got clean away. It is a rogue's country."

"What a shame!"

She looked past Benham toward the sea where faint white smudges showed up against the greyness of the horizon. They were the sails of ships in the Channel. The boom of a distant gun came to them on the wind.

Nance stood at gaze.

"Is anything happening out there?"

"Only a signal-gun from somewhere."

"I wonder if the French will ever come?"

"I wonder!"

They moved on again toward Stonehanger, Nance looking at Jasper a little shyly.

"You are a soldier, are you not?"

"A lieutenant of volunteers. Nearly all the gentry are serving in one way or another."

"You wore a soldier's red-coat that night. If the French land it will be a terrible thing for us all."

"It may be more terrible for the French."

"But Napoleon! Who have we to put against him? And they say the French are such ruffians; think of having them quartered on us, and doing just as they please. I sometimes start awake at night and think I hear the sound of guns."

"Do you?"

"Stonehanger is such a windy old place. It is the sound of the wind in the chimneys."

Jasper looked at her gravely.

"I can promise you and your father an early warning should the French land. All the country folk will be hurried away inland with the cattle and the corn."

"I don't think I should be afraid when the danger actually came."

"No, I know you wouldn't."

"But it is the waiting, a tense feeling in the air like there is before a thunderstorm."

They came in sight of the terrace of Stonehanger. Anthony Durrell was still there, pacing up and down, and waving his arms. Nance watched him a moment, and then glanced at Jasper.

"Father has his restless moods."

"The times worry him?"

"No, I don't think it is that. He just stares when I speak of Napoleon and the French, as though I were telling him some absurd tale. He often walks up and down the terrace and makes long speeches in Greek or in Latin. I think the words are to him what music is to other people."

Jasper's presence did not seem to trouble her. She took the path that ran along the foot of the terrace, and Benham had no choice but to follow her. He was too honest a man to think of shirking Anthony Durrell. The scholar was standing by one of the yew-trees, one arm raised, head thrown back, when he caught sight of Nance and Benham. He remained thus for a moment, mouth open, eyes set in a stare. Then his arm fell abruptly, and an irritable frown wiped the finer fervour from his face.

Jasper raised his hat to the old man.

"Good day to you, Mr. Durrell."

"Good day to you, sir."

His face seemed to narrow with sharp severity, and with scorn. He stared at Jasper as an eagle might eye a jay.

"I rode over to return the scarf Miss Durrell lent me."

"You might as well have kept the rubbish, Mr. Benham. Nance, I have been waiting for you. There are several papers of notes to be copied into the manuscript book."

Nance looked at him questioningly.

"Perhaps—Mr. Benham— —"

"Mr. Benham is waiting to be off. We must not keep him. It will rain in half an hour; the wind is dropping."

Nance went up the steps to the terrace, and turned to glance, half-humourously, at Jasper.

"It is one of father's whims," her eyes said to him.

Jasper mounted his horse. He was angry, and a little puzzled.

"Mr. Durrell, sir, I need hardly speak to you of the danger that threatens all of us. As a friend I can promise you an early warning, and a place in our wagons if the French should land."

The elder man stared, and seemed to breathe through scornful nostrils.

"Mr. Benham, I am obliged to you. But I have always managed my own affairs. I wish you good day."

He turned and followed Nance who was walking toward the house. Jasper watched him, and saw his narrow, black figure disappear round the grey angle of the house. Nor was he in the sweetest of tempers as he rode on through the waving furze.

The wind dropped somewhat toward nightfall, and howled less in the Stonehanger chimneys. Nance went to bed early, her face troubled and a little sad. Her father had been morose, reticent, and strange, and she had caught him watching her from his chair beside the fire.

It was near midnight when Anthony Durrell put down the book he was reading, listened a moment, and then went to the porch door. He rapped on it gently with his knuckles. The rap was answered from without.

Durrell opened the door, and the Chevalier de Rothan stepped into the hall.

"Well, sir, any news?"

"Only that young Benham has been here."

"The devil! There will be trouble between me and that young man."

VIII

Anthony Durrell had brought the candle from the parlour. That stately person De Rothan lowered his dignity to the cautious level of drawing off his boots before following Durrell up the stairs.

Nance's room was at the western end of the long upper gallery. De Rothan and the scholar had to pass the door of the girl's room, for the stairhead lay close to it. They were within three steps of the landing when Durrell heard the lifting of a latch.

Instantly he blew out the candle, and, reaching back in the darkness, thrust De Rothan gently backward.

"Is that you, father?"

Nance had opened her door an inch or two, but no light showed.

"Yes, child. Some one must have left the window open at the end of the gallery. The draught has blown out my candle."

"I thought I heard voices, and the sound of some one moving."

"Rubbish! You ought to be asleep. I was reciting Virgil to myself. Go to bed, child."

"Shall I get you a light?"

"No, no—go to bed. I know the house as well in the dark as I do in the daylight. I can go downstairs if necessary, and get a light at the fire."

"Good night, father."

"Good night, child."

Nance's door closed, and the two men passed along the gallery, Durrell holding De Rothan by the arm. The scholar's study was at the eastern end of the house. There were three rooms between it and Nance's, all of them empty and unfurnished, the keys rusting in the locks.

Durrell opened the door of his study, and led De Rothan in.

"What possessed the girl——?"

"Lucky you blew out the light. It would have been uncommonly awkward. Explanations—to women—always are awkward."

They spoke in whispers, and Durrell closed the door.

"I have a tinder-box on my table."

"Good."

There was the sound of some one moving cautiously about the room, and the thud of books falling to the floor. The flint and steel rang against each other, and sparks dropped on to the scorched linen in the tinder-box. A minute passed before Durrell got one of the sulphur matches alight. He shaded it with his hand, and carried the flame to the candle.

"That's better, Durrell. What a howling, wind-swept hell this house of yours is! I suppose Miss Nance will play us no tricks? She suspects nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Wakefulness! Shall we put it down to Mr. Benham?"

Anthony Durrell's room was crowded with books. A truckle-bed stood in one corner, looking meagre, thin, and austere. A mahogany washstand and a Dutch high-boy were squeezed in between the bookcases. The brown volumes possessed the place. They were laid like stepping-stones upon the carpetless floor, massed like buttresses against the walls, even stacked beneath the bed and table. Black curtains were drawn across the window, and hung by two straps from the narrow sill was a seaman's telescope.

The Chevalier caught his toe against a huge brown rock of a book.

"Pardon, fat fellow!—Have you read them all, Durrell? Books, books, books! Heaven help us! What did a man ever get out of a book? Has any book ever helped me to swagger, handle a sword, spend money, live gallantly, love a woman? Books, sir, are for the poltroons. They are the broken meats thrown to the wretches who stand outside the gate of life and beg."

Durrell gave one of his grim looks.

"It is strange that such a chatterbox should be trusted with such secrets."

"Good—good for you.—What's the time?"

He pulled out a watch and scanned it by the light of the candle.

"Psst, Durrell; we are due to show our first flash in five minutes. Where's the lamp? Hurry, hurry!"

Durrell went to a cupboard in the wall, and brought out a brass lamp fitted with an Argand burner. He set it on the table, lit it, and turned the wick up cautiously.

"Will they be out to-night? It's rough."

"So much the better. Jerome is no fair-weather smuggler. You had better put two or three of your precious books under the lamp. I will work the curtain."

Durrell busied himself with the lamp, and De Rothan walked to the window. He kept his watch in one hand, and held the bottom of one of the black curtains with the other.

There was a short silence. Then De Rothan glanced sharply at the scholar.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

De Rothan drew the curtain aside, and left the window uncovered for about twenty seconds.

"Jerome will have been on the lookout for that. We must wait half an hour for the next. No one is likely to pick up our signals when a window happens to be lighted for twenty seconds at intervals of half an hour."

"A mere casual flash of light. I have let people know that I work late into the night."

De Rothan looked round for a chair, and found a rush-bottomed stool by one of the bookcases.

"So Master Benham has been here? Dissolute young dog."

Anthony Durrell lifted a scornful head.

"Dissolute?"

"One of the most profligate young rogues in the county. I hear all the gossip. There's hardly a pretty wench—well, you know, Durrell. Engaged to marry his cousin, too!"

"Poor young woman."

"She is no fool. Has a thousand a year of her own, and a mouth like a man-trap. She will lead Mr. Benham a godly, straight-up-and-down life. Meanwhile the youngster must not be allowed to hang round here."

Durrell picked up a book, glanced at it, and then threw it back upon the table. His austere face had a kind of hard pride.

"A scholar need not be an owl, De Rothan."

"My good sir, did I suggest it? But sweet Nance has a lonely life here. Not much youth comes her way. And these young rakes, Durrell, have an honest, stage-hero way with them."

"I shall see to Mr. Benham."

"You may need me, sir. Faith, it seems strange that I should be here in this house once a week, and Miss Nance know nothing of it. Look you, Durrell, I'm an old friend of yours; I might pay a few open and friendly calls. I have a fatherly way with young women."

Durrell looked at him ironically. De Rothan met his eyes, and laughed.

"You think I might be as bad as young Benham? Tssh! Nance is a girl for a man to marry, and to think himself a lucky dog. I tell you, Durrell, I will pay a state call next week. Come now; we must keep an eye on the time. Jerome should have news for us. I have a packet of cipher to give him."

Anthony Durrell appeared restless and preoccupied. He began sorting and arranging some of the books that were piled against the wall. De Rothan watched him with just the faintest glimmer of contempt. This fanatic, filled with visions of a regenerated world state, was something of an enigma to the Frenchman. Durrell was a man of Miltonic dreams, austere, fervid, morose. In Bonaparte he saw a foredestined Angel of Wrath who should smite the crowns from the heads of tyrants. His work done, the man Napoleon would disappear. Liberty would stand among the peoples, holding her fiery sword aloft, her mouth full of prophetic and noble words. The world would become a new world. Kings and princelings would cease to strut and bully. The golden age of brotherhood and equality was at hand.

Anthony Durrell believed all this, and yearned so fervently for its consummation that he was ready to whisper with spies in a corner. For himself he desired nothing but the right to live, and speak and write as he pleased. This disinterestedness of his made De Rothan despise him a little. The Chevalier saw visions, but they were the visions of a man who valued such material things as titles, and orders, palaces, estates, the pride and pomp of power. Durrell's fanaticism was useful to him. As for these broad English lands, he might find himself choosing which he should own and enjoy. The earth for the people—indeed! De Rothan knew better. He had no intention of sitting down on the same bench with half a score born fools.

De Rothan glanced at his watch, and returned to the window.

"It is time for the second signal."

The black curtain did its work once more.

"Cover up the lamp—now, Durrell. I will see if I can catch Jerome's answer."

Durrell carried the lamp to the cupboard, turned the wick low, and shut the door. De Rothan had opened the lattice, and was looking out into the night, the wind blowing in and tossing the black curtains behind him.

He spoke in a whisper.

"He's yonder."

"At sea?"

"I caught the two flashes. Jerome will land when we show him a third light. This smuggling game is accursedly useful."

"A means to an end."

"It makes half the county our dupes. Think of it, sir, all these greedy, spirit-swindling fools helping us to bring in the French bayonets."

Both men stood at the window and stared out into the windy darkness. Intent upon watching the black horizon they had not heard the soft, gliding tread of bare feet along the gallery. Nance had been standing for some minutes outside her father's door, a dim, white figure that faltered on the edge of a discovery.

Once she had raised her hand to knock, but the sound of that other voice had paralysed her. Who was the man who talked to her father? Why was he there? How had he come into the house? The voice seemed vaguely familiar. She had heard it before, but she could not remember where.

Perplexed, and a little afraid, she crept back to her room, closed the door gently, and, slipping back into bed, drew the clothes up over her knees. For a while she sat there in the darkness, listening. The wind blustered in the chimneys, and to Nance the grey house had become eerie and cold. Questions that she could not answer importuned her in the darkness. Her father was concealing something from her, and the thought hurt her and filled her with vague unrest.

Presently she lay down, and drew the clothes over, for she was beginning to shiver with cold. As for sleep, it eluded her. She lay there in the darkness,

listening, till the old house became full of a hundred imaginary sounds.

At Rush Heath Mr. Christopher Benham snored in his great Dutch chair before the fire. Parson Goffin had talked the squire to sleep, and was still cocking his long clay pipe alertly and holding forth to Jasper Benham. His nose seemed to glow more angrily when he was in the heat of an argument, or venting a grievance. He would sit forward with his feet tucked under his chair, and emphasise each point with prodding movements of the stem of his pipe.

"I tell you, sir, the hangman is not kept busy enough in England. Freethinkers, atheists,—what! I'd string up the whole lot! They should have begun with Tom Paine, sir, and all scoundrels of that colour."

Jasper was stifling yawns, and glancing at the clock.

"Liberty indeed! Faugh, license, that's what liberty means. Right of Man! Bosh, sir,—bosh. The right of the pig to be swinish! There are men within ten miles of us who need hanging. Traitors, blasphemous scoundrels. Take that man Durrell, now, of Stonehanger."

Jasper straightened in his chair.

"Durrell——?"

"A Jacobin, sir, or I'm no parson. Tainted with all the sins of the Revolution. The justices ought to order the house to be surprised and searched. I warrant they would find seditious stuff enough at Stonehanger."

"What makes you think that, Parson?"

Goffin looked shrewdly along the stem of his pipe.

"Have I nose for a fox, sir! Not a few seditious pamphlets have come out of Stonehanger House. I'd have that man in gaol, and his daughter too."

"Nonsense, Goffin. Why, what harm can a girl do?"

"Harm, sir, harm! Have you read your Bible,—or your history?"

"You mean to say that Durrell may be a spy in the French service?"

"I do, sir, I do. And the girl is as bad as her father."

"It's a lie, Goffin, a damned lie."

"Sir, you are the son of your father."

The parson chuckled.

“A hard head, and a soft heart. No offence, Master Jasper. But facts are facts.”

The clock struck eleven, and Jasper proceeded to send Mr. Goffin home with his lantern, and to get his father to bed. Squire Kit had to be carried by the servants to his room on the ground floor. He would groan and curse all the while Jack Bumpstead was undressing him, for Jack acted as valet as well as groom. He would blow all the time while his master was swearing, much to Squire Christopher’s indignation.

“Jack, you mud-faced, cockle-headed calf, do ye think you’re rubbing down a horse? Don’t blow, I say! You make enough draught to give a man a chill.”

These matters attended to, Jasper went to his own room, a frown on his face and anger within him.

“Nance Durrell a spy’s daughter!”

He refused to believe such a thing. Parson Goffin had been in his cups.

IX

Jasper woke very early, just as the day was breaking. A thrush was singing on the topmost spires of one of the cedars. The woods beyond the paddock thrilled with the orisons of the birds.

Jasper left his bed, opened the lattice wide, and took in the dawn. A mysterious ecstasy was in the air. A hundred bird voices were calling, and, with the dew upon the grass, the world was still half asleep. There were little golden rifts in the eastern sky. Here and there a cloud nearer the zenith would burst suddenly into flame.

Jasper's heart was stirred in him. The mystery of the dawn seemed for him alone. Not a soul was stirring. The earth belonged to him and to the birds.

He could use his arm now a little, and he dressed with the haste of a boy eager for a plunge in some still pool. The old house itself seemed full of secrecy, and quiet charm. He went out noiselessly, though the hinges of the stable door filled the court-yard with their creakings. Devil Dick was alert as a dog. Jasper saddled and bridled him, and rode out.

"Which way shall I go?"

The hypocrite. His heart laughed joyously at its own guile.

"She will not be up at this hour. Yes, but they are early folk. Even a glimpse of her! Why, Jasper, my man, you have seen her only twice."

Parson Goffin's bibulous scepticism staggered like a dreary toper across the stealthy joy of the morning. Jasper touched Devil Dick with his switch.

"Out—old crow!"

He put his hand on the place where Nance's red scarf lay folded. And immediately some perverse suggestion gave him the picture of Rose Benham.

"Faith! I never knew the woman was so plain. Jasper Benham, you are a beast, sir. But her eyes, and that tart talkative mouth. Dick, my lad, gallop; for God's sake, let's gallop."

They swung through a green world, with the gold of the dawn above the soft blues and greys of the horizon. Rabbits scuttled here and there. Blackbirds sung deep-throated, and skimmed along the hedgerows. The golden buds of the oaks were turning to green spray. Ash-trees, black-tipped, stood straight and stiff in the thickets. The bloom was waiting on the may-trees, and blue-bells coloured the woods.

Jasper saw Stonehanger Common dark against the dawn. His heart beat to the rhythm of Devil Dick's hoofs. Nance might be standing and looking in her mirror, and Jasper envied the mirror the reflection of her eyes.

He came to the furze lands and had a glimpse of the sea. The yellow-flowered furze was very still with grey gossamer upon it. Here and there brown earth showed where rabbits had been scratching.

Two hundred yards away a plover rose, crying plaintively, and circling on heavy wings. Some one was down yonder among the furze. Jasper drew in and stood in the stirrups. A black shape seemed to dodge down suddenly behind a bank.

"Some gipsy."

He loitered a moment, and then rode on, not troubling to look behind him. The furze swayed slightly as though something were pushing through it. A man's head appeared for an instant, like the head of a swimmer seen above the crest of a wave. The muzzle of a pistol was raised, pointed, and held meaningly. But the man thought better of it.

"Too great a risk. Some fool of a labourer may be about. And I might have missed him."

He dropped back amid the furze.

Jasper rode on, ignorant of the fact that death had threatened him. The sunlight struck the windows of Stonehanger. One of the lattices opened, and a white arm showed for a moment.

Jasper turned into the lane, passed the yew-tree where the horse-thief had shot at him, pulled up at the gate, and left Devil Dick there with the bridle over a post. Jasper went in through the gate, and was given a choice of paths in the dark wilderness of the shrubbery. The path that he chose brought him into the stable-yard and face to face with a red-brown cow that was steering for the stable door.

The cow stopped to stare, and then walked on. Jasper took off his hat to her.

"Good morning, madam."

And it was Nance who caught the salutation.

She had appeared in a side passage between two grass-grown walls, a hazel stick in her hand, her hair tied up with ribbons, a red petticoat showing her ankles. Frank astonishment was the mood of the moment. A girl, surprised at such an hour, may look a sloven, but Nance seemed part of the fresh life of the morning.

For an instant she looked anxious.

"You! Have you brought bad news?"

"No. An early ride, nothing more."

"I thought the French must have landed."

"I have not heard of it. The other day, you know, I forgot to give you that scarf."

Her face and eyes lit up with amusement.

"Oh, that scarf! It seems to lie heavily upon your conscience!"

"It does."

"Leave it—or keep it."

"Then I'll keep it."

"As you like."

They stood and looked at each other, trembling upon the edge of laughter that was part of the exquisite joy of the morning. Nance's eyes looked dewy, her mouth alluring. She was the figure of May.

"Do you often visit your friends so early?"

"Sometimes."

"You must often catch them before they are up."

"I saw your window open as I came up the hill."

"Did you?"

"The end one toward the west. I woke early. Do you know how a spring morning gets into one's blood? Devil Dick wanted a gallop and so did I."

The horse's, and his own, impulses had carried him up to Stonehanger. That was where youth, and the joy of it, led. The knowledge of it came to

Nance like wind from over the hills. It seemed to beat about her with sudden emotion, making a strange, mysterious stir in all the ways of her lonely life.

"I have to milk Jenny."

"Jenny and I said good morning to each other."

"One has to do so many things in the country. I made David teach me."

"May I come and watch?"

"If you like."

"Jenny won't object?"

"You had better ask her."

"It would be more polite!"

Ironically serious he walked into the stable and took off his hat to the cow.

"Madam, may I be present at the ceremony?"

Jenny turned a slow head and stared with solemn, violet eyes. Then she gave a flick of the tail.

"Jenny is agreeable. We shall be friends."

Stool and milk-pail stood in the stall where the early sunlight streamed through the doorway and fell upon the yellow straw. Nance set her stool and sat down with one cheek against Jenny's flank. The white milk frothed into the pail, the cow standing placid and trustful under the girl's hands.

Jasper Benham leant against the door-post, content to look at Nance as a man may look at a girl.

"Do you find it lonely here?"

"Lonely? Well—sometimes. Father and I have always had a lonely life. I'm used to it. Though I don't say that I might not be discontented—if——"

She glanced up and smiled.

"If——"

"If—I—had ever known gayer people. A girl likes to enjoy things just as much as a man does. I love a new dress."

"I don't know that I'm not proud of a new coat! Do you ever go to Hastings, or Eastbourne, or Brighton?"

"Hardly ever. We lived at Hastings for a while, in rooms under the cliff. I used to like the sea and the fishing-boats, and the people. But the house—! It was detestable. One long squabble with the woman, who was always cheating us."

"Yes, they are beasts. I had a season at Tunbridge Wells with the squire. It made me quarrelsome. Are you fond of the country?"

"I love it. I love finding the birds in their nests and watching everything. There is so much to watch. But then—the winter——!"

"The dull days. That is why we hunt and shoot and play cards, and why some of us drink too much. Can you ride?"

"A very little."

"I should like to teach you to ride."

"Should you! But I have no horse."

"I think of buying a quiet nag. I could come over and give you lessons. I know you could ride like a witch."

Her eyes looked up at him.

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I just know it. You do things—so cleanly—with your hands. One can always tell a bungler."

The milking was at an end, and Nance lifted the pail aside, and set the stool in a corner.

"Let me carry the pail for you?"

"It is quite light. Would you like to see my new garden?"

"I should."

"I must carry this in, and see to the fire. You must stay and take breakfast with us."

"That's good of you."

"Go round to the terrace. I'll join you there soon."

Nance ran up to her room, slipped into a simple white gown flowered with pink roses, and did her hair, drawing it back in two black waves from her forehead. Then she went to her father's room, and knocked, the gay mood of the moment overshadowed suddenly by the memory of the night when she had heard the voice of the stranger in that room. The incident

might have proved utterly trivial, and Nance had waited for something to explain it. She had held her tongue, and asked no questions, but Anthony Durrell had offered her no confidences. His silence troubled Nance. It seemed that there might be something in his life that he did not desire her to know.

"Father— —"

"Yes, child."

"Mr. Benham has ridden over."

"What?"

"Mr. Benham has ridden over. May I ask him to stay to breakfast?"

There was the sound of a chair being moved. Then Anthony Durrell's voice asked, "Where is Mr. Benham?"

"On the terrace."

"Keep him till I come. I have something to say to Mr. Benham."

"You're not cross with him, father?"

"Only fools and little people are cross, child. I shall not be ten minutes."

Nance went down, trying to reassure herself, and feeling that it was a very innocent thing that she should be glad of this young man's coming. She found Jasper standing by one of the yew-trees, looking out toward the sea. She saw by his eyes how the flowered gown became her.

"What a view you have here."

"Isn't it splendid. I have told father you are here. He says that he will be down in ten minutes."

"I am glad you have told him. I want to get to know your father."

"Yes, but that's so difficult."

Her face fell, and she looked grave. It was sufficient for Jasper to realise that Mr. Anthony Durrell had a perplexing personality. His austerity was the austerity of a fanatic. As for courtesy, it seemed to be absent. Nor did he appear to have any sympathy for this lonely, dark-eyed child.

"Your father leads a hard life."

"Yes. Often he is up half the night, reading. You should see his books. Sometimes I hate books. It has been like that since mother died."

Jasper looked at her with secret compassion.

"When was that?"

"Twelve years ago. Father has never been the same since then."

"No——"

"I can remember him laughing and making jokes and tossing me up in his arms. He grew so much older, as though something had died in him. He became more taken up with his books."

Throat, mouth, and eyes were tragic for an instant, and Jasper felt a yearning to be very tender and gentle with this girl. He would have liked to put his hands upon her shoulders, look in her eyes, and say "Nance, I know you are lonely—very often."

She smiled suddenly, and looked up at him with a flash of courage.

"We always think our own troubles so important.—I must go and get the breakfast ready. Father will be here in a minute."

Jasper watched her go, and then turned again toward the sea. The spring morning was no longer filled with the sheer joy of living. It had a sadness, an afterwards, a thinking voice beneath all the rhapsodies of its awakened birds.

"Mr. Benham——"

Jasper turned with a sharp throw-back of the head. He saw Anthony Durrell crossing the terrace toward him. The man's face was set like a hard and narrow stone. The lips looked tucked away, the nose pinched and thin.

"Good morning, sir."

"Mr. Benham, I have something of interest to show you. It is a thing that is often met with, but it is not always treated with due respect. Will you be so good as to follow me."

He stalked round the house into the shrubbery. Jasper puzzled, wondering whether Durrell had some rare herb, beetle, or bird to show him. Eccentricity challenges all manner of conjectures. A man may be as rude and sinister as he pleases if his force of character justifies these peculiarities.

Jasper found himself standing in the lane with Anthony Durrell. Devil Dick eyed them restlessly and scraped the ground with a forefoot. Durrell raised a hand, touched Jasper's shoulder, and pointed to the gate,

"You see that, sir?"

"Yes."

"It is a gate, is it not? I am not aware that I have asked you to see the inside of it. You understand me, I hope. Sometimes one has to speak plainly. Good morning."

He gave Jasper one look, re-entered the gate, closed it, and walked off under the hollies. Jasper stood like a rebuked schoolboy. He was too astonished at first by Durrell's incomprehensible rudeness to feel the anger that was rising in him. It rose none the less, with a fine head of indignation.

"What the devil—! Am I not gentleman enough——?"

He mounted Devil Dick in a rage.

"I have a mind to flout the old fool. There would be a scene. And Nance? Confound it, these things need thinking out coolly. I'm too hot in the head. I don't want to give Nance pain."

X

So often a man believes what he wishes to believe, and Anthony Durrell was no less prejudiced in this respect than the most ignorant of his neighbours. Jasper Benham's coming to Stonehanger threatened all manner of complications, and was a menace to Durrell's schemings. De Rothan's lies were exceedingly opportune and suggestive. They had worked upon Durrell's austere and Puritanical nature, and his severity never doubted its devotion. This young man was a danger, not only to Nance, but to all his secret understanding with the French.

Durrell returned to the house and found Nance busy in the parlour. She had spread a new cloth and brought out the best china. Her father, alive to these details now that they were of some significance, noticed her rose-flowered gown and an old pearl necklace she was wearing.

"That is not stuff for the day's work, Nance."

"What, father?"

"That dress. Go and change it."

"But, father, breakfast is ready, and Mr. Benham——"

"Mr. Benham has gone, child."

"Gone?"

"Yes. There will be no setting of caps this morning."

Nance flushed with surprise and resentment, for to youth sarcasm is the most hateful of all the methods of coercion, especially when it is petty and unjust.

"You should not speak to me like that, father."

"What? Am I to choose my own words to please a foolish child? I shall have more to say to you on this matter presently."

Nance was humiliated, hurt, and angry. To generous and sensitive natures cynicism seems a vulgar, shallow thing, like a coarse lout mocking at what he does not understand. Nance went to her room and changed her flowered gown for an old stuff dress. Her father had begun breakfast when

she returned. He had a book open beside his plate, and he seemed absorbed in it, and disinclined to notice the girl.

Nance watched him, and her pride rose in revolt. Her father had spoken vulgar words, and thrown a contemptible accusation in her face. What shame was there in her discovering pleasure in the pleasure with which she inspired a man? She liked Jasper Benham, trusted him, and felt that her instincts were not at fault. Was her life so full of sympathy that she should be forbidden to make friends?

Yet for the while she said nothing to Anthony Durrell. His face was the colour of the pages of his book. And for once Nance noticed how narrow, thin, and harsh he looked.

She could not help remembering the night when he had brought some strange man secretly to the house, and the thought of his secretiveness and his dry reserve made her impatient. If he was to be tyrannical and unsympathetic, had she not a right to be trusted? She was living this lonely life for his sake, and yet when youth came to share with her the glamour of a spring morning, he raised forbidding hands.

Nance looked at her father, and felt compelled to speak to him.

"Why did you send Mr. Benham away?"

Durrell pushed the book aside.

"Do not catch at conclusions, child."

Nance was not to be put aside so easily.

"Then, why did he go?"

"Possibly because of something I said to him."

"What did you say to him?"

"Nance, I am not minded to be cross-questioned by my child."

She flushed, and showed a frank impatience.

"Am I to have no friends? What harm is there? You know, father, it is dangerous, sometimes, to try and smother all that is in us."

Durrell glanced at her sharply. He was man enough to be struck by the undeniable truth that challenged him out of the mouth of this young girl.

"Nance, what I do I do because it is right."

"But, have I no right to know?"

His face hardened.

"Very well, you shall know. I sent Mr. Benham away because he is not the man I would admit into my house."

"But why?"

"Nance, you have seen very little of the world of men. This young man is of bad repute. He is without honour, without morality."

Nance sat very straight in her chair, her hands moving restlessly in her lap.

"You mean to say, father——?"

"This Jasper Benham is a young man who lives a bad life. He is engaged to marry his cousin, a Miss Benham. That has not prevented him from dishonouring——"

Nance had gone very white. Her eyes were the eyes of one who recoils from something with sudden disgust.

"Father!"

"I tell you this for your own good, child. What do you know of Mr. Jasper Benham? Nothing save that he seemed grateful to you—because you were good to him, that he has a plausible tongue and an assumption of honesty."

She sat rigid, staring at the opposite wall.

"Who told you this?"

"Does that alter the truth? I will not have this young man in my house. He shall work no treachery here."

Nance was dumb. Something seemed to have been taken from life. The breath of the morning was tainted.

Durrell looked at her, not unkindly.

"Now you can understand me, child. I have seen something of the world. I do not want you to suffer pain."

Nance tried to finish her meal, but she had no heart for it, and soon left the table. She wanted to be alone, to set her little world in order. Something had jarred it into momentary confusion. Yet surely it was foolish that she should care at all.

Nance went to her room and saw the flowered gown lying across a chair. The sight of it woke a rush of anger in her. Was he that kind of man? Had he thought her a vain fool who would dance to his piping?

A voice within her cried out in denial:

"An hour ago you trusted him! Are these things true?"

A second voice replied:

"Even if they are true, what does it matter to you? You have seen the man only three times."

She put the dress away, and looked at herself haughtily in the mirror. What manner of woman was she to be so moved by a breath of scandal? If true—well—there was an end of it. She would neither bend her head to listen, nor open her mouth to speak. She had enough pride to carry her past such an incident that had been enlarged by her own loneliness, and touched with the delight of youth and of spring.

Nance had work to keep her busy, though old David Barfoot took the heavy jobs, and washed the crockery, and scrubbed the floors. At the midday meal Nance and her father hardly spoke. She meant to spend the afternoon in her piece of garden upon the terrace, planting out a few seedlings and plucking up assertive weeds. David had promised to come round with his scythe and cut the grass that was growing rank and long.

But though her hands were busy, Nance could not win her thoughts away from the revelation of the morning. She felt sore, mistrustful, incredulous. What did she know of Jasper Benham? Was it true that he was pledged to marry his cousin? She, Nance, had spoken of friendliness. Perhaps he had thought of nothing but friendliness? Her heart told her that it was not so.

Anthony Durrell came out with a book in his hand, and began to pace up and down the terrace. Sometimes he would break out into declamation, waving the book, and throwing his head back like an orator sending words to a distance.

Nance planted her seedlings one by one, kneeling on an old sack, her head bowed over the brown soil.

"Salve, Domine. How go the elegiacs?"

Nance looked up with a start. It was another voice, not her father's, that had spoken, and the voice was the voice she had heard that night in her father's room.

XI

Nance glanced over her shoulder as she knelt. A man had appeared round the corner of the house and was walking toward her along the stone-paved path. He was a tall man, dressed in black, with roguish, sinister eyes, an arrogant mouth, and a haughty way of carrying his head and shoulders.

Anthony Durrell turned and seemed nonplussed for the moment.

"It is you, Chevalier——"

De Rothan was a magnificent fool when a pretty woman held the stage. He gave Nance one of his French-Irish bows, hat over his heart, the heels of his shoes together. De Rothan had the reddish, raddled skin, and the angry blue eyes of the Irishman. The refinements were French, the cleverness, the subtlety, the love of intrigue.

"Mr. Durrell, present a poor exile to your daughter."

Nance had risen from her piece of sacking. Her hands were stained with soil, and stooping had flushed her face. The stranger's magnificent manners seemed out of place. She believed that the man was quizzing her.

Durrell closed his book with a snap, courteous under compulsion.

"Nance, this is the Chevalier de Rothan; an old friend of mine. I knew him in France many years ago."

De Rothan laughed, with his eyes on Nance.

"Mees Durrell, your father would make me out an old man! But it is not so. I can run and leap against any lad of twenty."

There are some men whose vanity cannot be controlled when they are brought into the presence of women. De Rothan was such a man. He was the peacock on the instant, strutting, swaggering, not content unless he outshone all other men.

"Though an exile, the English women have almost made me forget my France. Why is it, Mees Durrell, that the English women have such beautiful skins? Roses and milk, roses and milk."

Nance said nothing. The man's voice had driven her into a confusion of conjectures. If he were an old friend of her father's, how was it she had

never heard of him before? And why all this midnight mystery, the stealthy coming by night?

She realised that both De Rothan and her father were watching her. It was imperative that she should speak to him, or seem like a *gauche* child.

"I am glad to see an old friend of my father's."

"Mees Durrell, will you make me old!"

"I don't think you are very young!"

He laughed and bowed.

"Mam'selle, your father is the cleverest of men. But to have such a daughter! That was a stroke of genius."

Nance smiled, but there was no pleasure in her smile. She supposed these were French manners, but they made her feel foolish and ill at ease.

"I am afraid father has never spoken to me of you."

She noticed that the men exchanged glances. Durrell intervened.

"Nance, child, the Chevalier will take tea with us."

"Yes, father."

She understood the hint and was glad to go. There was something puzzling and unwholesome about the man.

De Rothan followed her with his eyes.

"Faith, sir, the child is charming, and so innocent."

Durrell was not pleased.

"Do not try your airs and graces here, my friend."

"Psst—I am perfectly sincere. I pay homage to beauty——"

"Curtail it. Shall we walk a little way over the common?"

He glanced at the windows of the house, crossed the terrace and descended the steps. De Rothan followed him, staring with a certain whimsical contempt at Durrell's back.

"Has the young squire been here again?"

"This very morning—at six o'clock."

"Youth is in a hurry!"

"I have put a bridle upon his eagerness. I sent him packing. And Nance knows."

"Knows what?"

"That young Benham is a reprobate, and a loose liver."

"The devil she does! You told her?"

"Certainly. I did not mean the friendship to develop."

De Rothan looked half grave and half amused.

"Well, you have given me your news without miserliness. I return you news of my own. Villeneuve has got out of Toulon."

"What!"

"And has given Nelson the slip."

Durrell's face shone with sudden exultation.

"Man, is it true?"

"True as news can be. But listen to this. He has picked up some of the Spaniards, driven Orde's squadron out of the way, and is at sea. All England is in a sweat, and cursing. They know nothing. They quake in the dark."

"Yes—but Nelson?"

"Listen. This would be worth money in England. Villeneuve sails for the West Indies. Don't breathe it. He cuts himself loose, see—disappears. The English are left at blindman's-buff. Then the West Indies are harried. Nelson is lured thither. Back bolts Villeneuve, drives the blockading fleet from Brest, joins our ships there, and sails up the Channel with close on forty sail of the line. The straits are ours. Napoleon rushes his grenadiers across. After that—the deluge!"

Durrell stood and stared towards the sea with a look of exultation.

"And we shall help to bring in liberty."

De Rothan sneered behind the visionary's back.

"We shall show them where and how to strike. This house and hill of yours, Durrell, will be the first point they will make safe. There will be trenches and batteries here. The Emperor will stand upon your terrace, sir, with all the gorgeous gentlemen of his staff. As for me, I shall be the light-heeled Mercury. I know where the cattle and corn are to be found. I know

the powder-mills, the best wells, every road and by-road. I shall be with the cavalry. God—these raw, red-coated bumpkins! How we shall sabre them!"

Durrell was like a man who had heard that his great enemy was to be overwhelmed with ruin and shame. England had made him suffer, and, fanatic and dreamer that he was, his enthusiasm did not lack a spice of vengeance. He wanted to see England suffer in turn, to see her purged of the poison of privilege, of the aristocrats, the lordlings, and the rich commoners whom he hated.

His mood came near to gaiety, if an austere and fanatical excitement can be called gay. He forgave De Rothan his vanity, and went in holding the arch-spy's arm as a man holds the arm of his dearest friend. De Rothan had twinkles of cynical amusement in his eyes. What did a bookworm and a dreamer expect from Napoleon and the French? He would be left to chant rhapsodies in a corner, and to shout "Liberty! Liberty!" provided that he did not turn round and shout it to the English.

De Rothan took advantage of Durrell's good humour, and prepared to enjoy himself with Nance. The girl's silence and reserve piqued him. He loved conquests, and would boast that no woman could withstand him.

His gallantry and his oglings worried Nance. She disliked the expression of his quarrelsome blue eyes. He was too free, too familiar to please her, nor was she in a mood for coquetry. Her opinion of De Rothan was suggested by the fact that she had not changed her old stuff dress.

"Ah, Mees Nance, your hands play with the cups and the sugar and the milk as though you played the harpsichord. Have you music here? No? Your father should buy you a harpsichord. It would show off your pretty fingers."

"I should not be able to play it."

"No? Why, by the honour of Louis, I would teach you myself. So many of us exiles have become music-masters. Durrell, my good friend, buy your daughter a harpsichord, and I will teach her to play and to sing."

Durrell gave them one of his austere smiles. He was happy, exultant, and saw nothing sinister in De Rothan's playfulness.

"All in good time—all in good time. Nance has not had all that she might have had."

"What, sir! And she has so much already! Most of the women would think she had too much."

He bowed to Nance.

"One may not drink to beauty—in tea. The sparkling wine of France! I imagine that I drink it to you, Mees Nance."

The girl was silent and irresponsive. Perhaps De Rothan felt challenged; perhaps she pleased him more than he had expected. Before the meal was over some of the froth had been blown from his fooling. The man was more than half in earnest. The expression of his eyes changed. They betrayed a subtle, gloating, admiration that is seen at times in the eyes of men.

De Rothan's leave-taking was half insolent, half tender. It had always been his way to treat women with audacity. He attacked them with the bold ferocity of his self-confidence.

"Mees Nance, this is the first day of spring. I kiss your hands. I felicitate your father. Never will he produce another such poem."

His bold eyes thrust his admiration into her face. Durrell was still living in dreams.

"Must you go, my friend? Well, well, now that you are in these parts, we shall see you more often."

"Sir, could I help it? The sun shines at Stonehanger."

Nance was silent and thoughtful when De Rothan had gone. She cleared the tea things away, while Anthony Durrell sat on the couch by the window and filled the bowl of a long clay pipe.

"Who is that man, father?"

"De Rothan? An exile, a French aristocrat. He waits for the return of King Louis."

Durrell showed the Jesuitical spirit in his belief that the end justified the means.

"Has he been long in Sussex?"

"No, not very long. Otherwise you would have seen him before."

"Where does he live?"

"He has rented an old house away yonder over the ridge?"

It was on Nance's tongue to speak of that night when she had heard De Rothan's voice in her father's room. But some impulse drove the words back. She went out with the tray, leaving her father to dream impossible dreams of an impossible future.

She was thinking of Jasper Benham, nor was it very marvellous that Jasper could keep her in countenance in the matter of thinking. He had ridden home in no pleasant temper, puzzled and challenged by Anthony Durrell's blunt prejudice against him. Nor could Jasper help remembering Parson Goffin's insinuations. Durrell might not want strangers at Stonehanger. And yet it seemed bad policy to be so frankly churlish.

At Rush Heath Jasper found half-a-score red-coats drinking beer in the stable-yard. Jack Bumpstead was watering their horses, and joining in the gossip that flitted about the pewter pots.

"Capt'n Jennison be in t' parlour, Master Jasper."

And Jasper found Captain Jennison comfortably seated at breakfast, making himself wholly at home in Squire Kit's chair.

He was a grim-mouthed, swarthy little man, with massive limbs and a big chest. His temper was abrupt and dangerous.

"Morning to you, Benham. Time's precious, sir. Excuse me if I open my mouth to eat and to talk. I have important orders, sir, but Captain Curtiss was not to be found. God knows what the man has done with himself!"

Jasper drew a chair to the table, and helped himself to cold meat-pie.

"I am at your service, captain."

"The fact is, sir, that Villeneuve has got out of Toulon. Where Nelson is, only the devil knows. Mischief is brewing, and we are most damnably in the dark. They say that in London men have faces as long as lamp-posts. We are to be on the alert, sir. I have been sent out to warn all the volunteer officers to have their men ready for any emergency."

"Then there is a chance of the French getting across?"

"A confoundedly good chance, sir, and I can't say I have much faith in our row of dove-cots and their pop-guns. We must have every man ready who can carry a musket. Whip up all your men, billet 'em in Battle, somewhere handy—here, if you like. Have your wagons ready. We are waiting in the dark. Villeneuve may be coming up the Channel for all we know."

Jasper had the grave face of a man who took his duties very seriously.

"It shall be done, Captain Jennison. I am to act for Captain Curtiss?"

"Good Lord, sir, yes. That gentleman will be shaving himself when the French cavalry are galloping past Tunbridge."

Captain Jennison gathered his men and rode on, while Jasper sent Jack Bumpstead to re-saddle Devil Dick, and went to spend five minutes with his father. He was fond of the fiery, blasphemous old curmudgeon, and Squire Kit was proud of Jasper, and very generous in his way. He was the sort of man who cursed because it had become a habit with him, and ill health had not sweetened his temper.

"Well, Jasper, well, lad——?"

"Captain Jennison has been here, father. It is likely that the French may get across."

"The French! Rot their teeth! Let 'em come, sir. What are we in such a pest of a fear of the French for? We'll give 'em something to remember. Let 'em come, I say."

Jasper was at the door and ready to mount when a green curricle came swinging up the road, with Rose Benham's plain face looking out from a big straw bonnet.

Jasper smothered a gust of impatience. Rose threw the reins to the groom, and descended with an air of eager concern.

"Jasper, what is the news? I have heard all sorts of rumours."

"It seems likely that the French will get across."

"The wretches!"

"We have orders to bring our men together. I am off to whip them in."

A gloved hand came out, and touched Jasper's sleeve.

"O, Jasper, what will happen? I can't help being afraid."

Rose was not at her best when she was sentimental.

"Every one will be warned. You will have to go inland."

"I was not thinking of myself, Jasper. I shall be praying to God for you and our friends. But why should I be sent away? Women may be of use."

"It may not come to that, Rose."

Her hand still touched his sleeve, and her display of tenderness irritated him. He could not return it, and his mouth felt stiff.

"How grave you look. Does Uncle Kit know?"

"Yes."

“Poor, dear old man. I might go and comfort him.”

“I shouldn’t, Rose.”

For Squire Kit was deep in one long, blasphemous soliloquy.

There was a short, constrained silence, Jasper avoiding his cousin’s eyes.

“Now, I know I am keeping you. Duty calls. But, O Jasper, it is hard ——”

“The French are not here yet.”

“How brave and calm you look.”

She had tried very hard to make the man kiss her, but Jasper’s face was obstinate and cold.

XII

A labourer came running up to Rush Heath House about eleven o'clock that night. He hammered at the yard-door, and bawled at the servants' windows.

"The beacon be burning, the beacon be burning."

The men of Jasper's volunteer company were quartered at Rush Heath, and red-coats came tumbling out of barns, stable, and kitchen. The maids could be heard screaming in their attics, till Jack Bumpstead went up to reassure them and to tell them to dress. The men had crowded to the high field above the orchard, and were looking toward the sea.

"Beachy Head—that's her."

"Where's Captain Jasper?"

"It be the French, sure."

Jasper had been roused. He came up to the high field, and saw the burning beacon like a huge star, low down upon the black horizon. The flames were flinging their message through the night. It meant that the French had landed, or were preparing to land.

The whole household, save Squire Kit, were in the high field above the orchard. The women were there, awed and frightened, and huddling close for comfort.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! They'll be cutting our throats."

"Ye'll fight, lads, won't 'e? Don't let 'em terrify ye."

"O, Bob, lad, I be sure you'll get a bullet in your heart."

Jasper told the women to be quiet, and called his sergeant to him. Captain Curtiss was still an absentee. Gossip said that he had a love affair in London.

"That's Beachy Head, Cochrane."

"It is, sir."

"Fairlight should be lighting up. The signal will go in to Flimwell and Crowborough. Have the men had a meal?"

"They have, sir."

Jasper reflected a moment, with confused figures and a confused murmur of voices about him in the darkness. Some one had brought a lantern, but it was lost in the crowd.

Squire Christopher had utterly refused to desert the house.

"What! run away from a lot of beggarly French! Damn 'em, I'm a gentleman; I don't put my King on a chopping-block. I stay here, Jasper. If they come into my bedroom, sir, they'll hear how an English gentleman can swear."

Jasper had decided that Jack Bumpstead should be left to look after his father. The maids, the cottagers, and their children were to be packed into wagons and driven away inland.

"Jack, saddle Devil Dick. Farmer Lavender promised to come up and see after the wagons. Let the bullocks take the red wagon. The blue wagon and the horses must not leave here before dawn. Remember that—not before dawn. If any one comes bringing my gold ring, they are to have places in the blue wagon."

"Sure, Master Jasper."

"Sergeant Cochrane!"

"Sir?"

"In an hour, you will march your men off on the Hastings road. I shall rejoin you here, or else pick you up on the road. That's clear?"

The sergeant saluted.

"Clear, sir."

Jasper rode out toward Stonehanger.

"Durrell be hanged," he said to himself, "some one ought to warn them."

It was a darkish night, and the woods made the night darker. The beacon at Beachy Head showed its ominous yellow eye whenever Jasper was on high ground, and looked back over his right shoulder. Fairlight Down was invisible, but he believed that he could detect a faint glow in the eastern sky. Fairlight beacon should be well ablaze. Far hills would catch the signal, and blaze it on into the darkness.

Stonehanger Hill appeared as a dim outline looming up against an overcast sky. Jasper could see no light in the house. He had to follow the

lane, since the path over the common was too uncertain by night. The familiar yew-tree saluted him with its shadow. He left Devil Dick fastened to the gate that Anthony Durrell had slammed so unceremoniously in his face.

Jasper made his way round to the front of the house. From the terrace he seemed to look right away to the distant headland where the yellow beacon blazed between sea and sky. A light breeze played through the straggling thorns, and a lattice that was open creaked and rattled against its hook.

There was not a light to be seen in the house. Jasper looked for Nance's window, and found that it was the one with the open lattice. He stood looking up at it a moment, and then groped in one of the flower beds for a few small stones. Stepping back across the grass he took aim at the window, lobbing the stones up softly so as not to break the glass.

Pebble after pebble rattled against the panes. Jasper stood and listened. Nothing happened. He picked up more stones, and tossed them up harder, more than one entering the window and rattling on the floor within.

Something white flickered behind the glass, and a face appeared at the window.

"Nance—Nance."

"Who is it?"

"Jasper Benham. The beacon has been fired on Beachy Head. You can see it from your window."

She stood at gaze, holding her hair back with one hand.

"I thought you might be asleep and I rode over to warn you. It means that the French are coming."

Nance remained silent. Roused out of sleep to stare at that great yellow eye out yonder, her consciousness was confused for the moment, nor did the man's presence below her window help her toward tranquillity. The things that her father had told her concerning him were as vivid as the burning beacon. She felt numb and inarticulate, constrained to speak yet knowing not what to say.

"It was good of you to think of us."

Her voice seemed to come from a distance.

"I could not help coming."

"Oh."

“I have to join my men. There is room in one of our wagons for you and your father. I have an hour to spare. I can take you to Rush Heath.”

A strange and obstinate contrariness seized her. She had a sense of a dull and undeserved pain at the heart.

“Father will not trouble——”

“He must.”

“He is not afraid.”

“Is he asleep?”

“I don’t know.”

“For God’s sake, go and wake him. You must not be left here.”

“It is quite useless, Mr. Benham. I know that father will not leave the house.”

Her voice fell coldly on Jasper out of the darkness. It was not the voice he knew.

“Nance——”

“Please don’t call me Nance.”

It was as though she emptied her displeasure upon him. The rebuff was too real to be ignored.

“I shall have ridden ten miles when I ought to be with my men.”

“I did not ask you to come.”

Jasper was human, nor was he one of those soft fools who grovel.

“Nance, I did not come for this. What has turned you against me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Confound it, didn’t your father slam the gate in my face! I’m a man—not a dog to be hallooed off down the road!”

The passion in his voice moved her more than he imagined.

“Please don’t talk like this. Father——”

“Well, what has your father against me?”

“Why will you make it so difficult?”

"Difficult! It is a new thing for a Benham to have a door slammed in his face. Confound it. This is sheer nonsense. You must come to Rush Heath. Every one is being sent inland. These devils of French——"

He saw her arm come out. The hook of the lattice grated. She was closing the window.

"Nance——"

The lattice clattered to, and he was left to his own emotions.

Jasper's astonishment struck tragic attitudes. These people had been kind to him that night when he had been shot in the arm. What had made them change toward him? What had old Durrell told the girl that she should treat him so unreasonably?

Parson Goffin's accusation recurred to him.

"Impossible. The parson's a gossiping toper!"

Jasper stared up at the closed window, frowning and trying to put these detestable thoughts away.

"Either some one has been telling lies, or——"

He stood stiffly alert, like a sentinel who has heard a suspicious sound in the darkness. Some one was moving below the terrace. Footsteps shuffled on the rough stone steps. Jasper turned very slowly, but could see nothing.

"Libertas—libertas!"

Jasper's muscles quivered and hardened like the muscles of a horse that is struck with a whip. It was Anthony Durrell's voice, but Jasper could not see him.

Away yonder shone the beacon on Beachy Head. For the moment it was a clear and brilliantly yellow mass, the stone wall of the terrace showing under it as a black line. Suddenly it was obscured. A black figure interposed itself, a figure that stretched out its arms as a great bird expands its wings.

"Libertas—libertas! The destroyer comes. He shall winnow out the chaff to the four winds. Hail, Napoleon, man of destiny!"

Jasper stood stiff as a stone post. Durrell's black figure loomed across his consciousness. And suddenly Jasper understood. The man was a traitor, a spy!

He had a sense of smothering at the heart. Anger, shame, bewilderment had hold of him. He was thinking of Nance, and all that the closing of that

window signified.

An impulse of anger drove him toward the figure outlined against the beacon. Some other influence drove him back. He turned and began to move away, sliding his feet cautiously over the grass.

He threw one glance at Nance's window.

"A spy, and the child of a spy!"

Then he remembered the little wicket gate that led into the passage opening into the stable-yard. Jasper turned to look at Durrell, and once more stood tied to the spot.

A second figure had joined the first. It was pointing with outstretched arm toward the sea.

A rush of anger and bitterness carried Jasper away. He fled from Stonehanger, cursing it and himself.

In two minutes he was galloping Devil Dick down the lane.

"In the pay of the French! But Nance— —? I'll not believe it!"

XIII

Strong language prevailed next day, and the eloquence of disgust. Mounted men had gone galloping along the roads and lanes, overtaking farm wagons laden with people and household gear, and stopping at inns to drink and spread the news.

"A false alarm. The French never showed their noses out of Boulogne."

"Then who fired the beacon?"

Angry-faced farmers asked each other this question outside the village inns after they had returned their teams and rumbled back the way they had come. Only fools and red-coats saw the humour of the thing. Respectable citizens were angry. Shopkeepers who had sat up all night behind locked doors were ironical and grieved. Women embraced their children and scolded their husbands in the exuberance of their relief. The whole community, like a man who has been scared out of his dignity by boys playing "ghost" at night, flew into a rage, and tried to cover the unseemliness of its panic by a display of valiant indignation.

A big dragoon mounted on a bay horse was emptying a pewter pot outside the principal inn at Hurstmonceux. The dragoon's face looked fat and round and lazy under his heavy helmet. A fair crowd had gathered about him. Beer and admiration are equally cheap.

"How did that thur bonfire get alight?"

"Go along with you trying to tap a King's trooper."

The dragoon winked at a group of women. He was a fat, lusty, cheerful dog, and the women giggled and were flattered.

"The sergeant knows."

"Just look at his wicked eye."

"I like a chap to be red and healthy. They do say the French be the colour o' tallow."

"Now, sergeant, we were that terrified!"

"Sure—you'll be for telling——"

"Well, ladies, if old men will nip a little to keep out the cold! It all came of old Daddy Tonks having a bottle of smuggled rum on him."

"What, he set her alight while he was merry?"

"That's it. Half Eastbourne went panting up to the Head when the beacon started burning. What d'ye think they found? Old Daddy Tonks dancing round the fire like mad and shouting that he was burning them as was damned. The language! Some one knocked the old man's pins from under him with the butt-end of a musket. And here were we sent galloping after all the poor sheep as had stampeded, and all the death and glory boys holding each other up for fear o' fainting with joy."

The people grew confidential, crowding close about the dragoon's horse.

"Do ye think t' French ull cross, sergeant?"

"They do say as Nelson 'as lost hisself."

"My ol' sow's just had a fine fam'ly. 'Taint no sense. What be a body to do!"

"It terrifies ye from sowing seeds. I ain't going to grow peas for Johnny Crappo to pick!"

The dragoon gazed profoundly at the bottom of the pot.

"Bone manure may be cheap—French bones, hee-hee!"

"Give me m'own mixen."

"Who wants the Bonypart!"

"Some of our fellows, too, thrown in."

The dragoon looked round scornfully.

"If there was a man here," he said, "he'd stand a King's soldier another mug of beer."

The trooper trotted eastward toward Ashburnham, and encountered a green curricle at the meeting of four ways. The occupant hailed him, and the dragoon was urbane and gallant.

"A false alarm, miss. The beacon-keeper got in liquor and set the beacon-light. We are cantering round to quiet the poor things."

Rose thought by his fat smile that his officers had chosen wisely. There was nothing savouring of famine and sudden death about the trooper.

"Can you tell me if the Eastbourne road is clear?"

"You may overtake some of the wagons, miss, but they'll pull aside for such as you."

And the green curricle whirled on.

Meanwhile Jasper Benham was at Hastings in the battery at the east end of the parade. He had left his men bivouacked in a field by Halton barracks, and had spent the night with a number of roaring, wine-drinking officers who had waited for the crisis in the large room of an inn in High Street. The morning was still and sunny, and to judge by the number of people who had gathered on the sea-front, the Hastingers had not deserted the town at the first flash of the alarm. There was a goodly gathering on the Castle Hill, staring out to sea. Younger women, who had not forgotten to put on gay prints and muslins, kept to the parade by the east battery, in order to be reassured by the red-coated gentlemen who were laughing and joking among the guns. Green hills, red-coats, blue sea, brown roofs were spread before the people who climbed the east and west hills. There were more red-coats to be seen about the three-gun battery at White Rock. Signals were being passed along the coast, from Fairlight Down to Galley Hill, Wall End Pevensey, Beachy Head, and so on westward.

Jasper, leaning against a gun, stared hard at nothing in particular with the savage intentness of a man plagued with doubts. He was sick of the sound of the voice of his own conscience that talked so obviously about duty and honour, and loyalty to one's King. He ought to be reporting his suspicions to the officer commanding the troops in the neighbourhood. A dozen troopers ought to be riding up to Stonehanger, and old Durrell laid by the heels and his house searched.

But Jasper's decision faltered, and he fell to temporising and to making excuses. Was he sure of his facts? Had he trusted to mere sinister coincidences and to suspicions? He realised that if he denounced Anthony Durrell as a French spy, the burden of proof would rest on his own shoulders. He would have to hurt Nance; that was what bothered him. He could not forget the touch of her hands that night. She had fired all the mysteries of sense and spirit. How could he throw shame and ignominy in her face?

A corporal of volunteers was leading Devil Dick up and down the parade. Jasper roused himself, and marched out of the battery with a casual nod to his brother officers. The volunteer companies had been ordered back to their country quarters. The presence of the men near their own homes would restore confidence, and help to smother panic.

"Corporal Jenner."

"Sir?"

"Go up to Halton and tell Sergeant Cochrane to march the men back to Battle."

"Yes, sir."

"The men will parade on the green at seven o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall be there."

Jasper mounted Devil Dick and rode westward toward Bexhill. He was in a restless mood, driven to keep step with his own urgent thoughts. The happenings of the night were like so many thorns spread in the path of his pilgrimage. The gloom of an inevitable choice lay over him.

He rode across the great green Level of Pevensey where kingcups were all golden along the waterways, and the larks hovered and sang. Countryfolk and men on horseback were gathered at Castle End, but Jasper did not turn aside. The grey, shimmering downs swelled before him against the blue of the sky. Yonder rose Beachy Head, its beacon a heap of ashes. An insane hatred of the headland leapt into Jasper's heart. It was as though love had been martyred there, and the ashes scattered over the seas.

Devil Dick carried Jasper into Eastbourne, urged thither by a vague restlessness rather than by any desire to get anywhere in particular. The town had soon recovered from the night's scare, and being a gay place it laughed and made fun of the whole affair. Eastbourne had a certain fashionable reputation, and by the Sea Houses where the London coach started, and where the great circular redoubt had been thrown up, idlers enjoyed the sunshine and aired their little genteel vanities as though there were no such thing as war.

Jasper rode Devil Dick to the edge of this little world of valetudinarianism, gossip, and dissipation. Blue sea and sky and the grey gloom of Beachy Head formed the background, while the space between the houses and the redoubt was stippled over with the little coloured figures that idled to and fro. Here were leering old men, foppishly dressed, yet unable to hide their tainted bodies behind the craft of valet and tailor. There were women to keep these old men in countenance, mature, sly, scandalous old women who still triumphed, and rouged, and tattled. It was a quick-witted,

gay, cynical crowd, vicious according to the conceptions of the moralists, but having the laugh of the moralists in the matter of enjoyment.

Jasper drew rein, the serious gloom of youthful romanticism refusing to mingle with this mature frivolity. He had turned Devil Dick, and was walking the horse away from the Sea Houses and the redoubt when he heard some one calling him by name.

"Meester Benham, Meester Benham."

Jasper became aware of a group close on his left, one tall and stately cypress in the midst of a smother of flowering shrubs. The cypress bowed and swept a hat. The flowering shrubs exhaled perfumes, and delighted the eyes with colour.

It was the Chevalier de Rothan, and with him four or five gay ladies in Empire gowns and bonnets, very seductive, very merry, very frail. They were classic in more than the mere incidents of dress. One had black hair, huge dark "orbs," and a melancholy mouth. Another was a little, red-haired woman, wonderfully dainty, with china-blue eyes, and every feminine impertinence for the provoking of men. They were looking at Jasper with the eyes of connoisseurs. A somewhat elderly charmer had levelled an ebony-handled lorgnette.

De Rothan had a way of enveloping people and entangling their activities in the net of his magnificent manners.

"Meester Benham, our friends were in ecstasy over your horse. I thought I knew both the horse and the rider. It is a splendid animal, ladies, and splendidly ridden, eh?"

He included them all in one sweeping gesture.

"Mr. Benham, let me present you to my friends. Mrs. Juno, Mrs. Venus, Mrs. Impertinence, Mrs. Pallas. We are very young, sir, although so ancient. I myself am Mr. Paris of Troy."

They laughed, and looked with friendly interest at Jasper, who had responded with a rather perfunctory bow.

"Mr. Benham looks disappointed about something," said the little red-haired woman with a provocative glance.

"Mars cheated of a battle, eh! Meester Benham, pardon me, but I have been delighted by your droll people."

"Oh!"

"A little, old man drinks too much—goddesses, forgive me—and a whole county is in consternation. You call the French excitable, sir, but, by St. Louis, you run us close. I was disappointed in the stolidity of the English."

Jasper suspected the presence of malicious raillery. De Rothan's figure filled his consciousness. He felt ready to quarrel with the man and quite ready to forget the ladies.

"What did you expect, sir?"

"Less scuffling into clothes, and the pulling on of stockings inside out. Little things—but significant."

"We were prompt in getting the people away."

"Prompt! Excellent word! Dear goddesses, your good countrymen were prompt at running away."

He gave Jasper an exasperatingly roguish look.

"I have heard of no running away. There seem plenty of people in Eastbourne."

"The panic was soon put out here, Meester Benham. But I rode fifteen miles before I came to Eastbourne this morning. You should have seen the roads, sir. People running away with their pans and kettles and cash-boxes on their backs. It was like the rout of an army."

"They had been ordered to go inland. The French would have found the stern stuff ready for them, even if they had survived the *mal de mer*."

"You are facetious, Meester Benham."

"I echo you, Chevalier."

"It is my privilege to amuse the ladies."

"We have often amused ourselves at the expense of the French."

De Rothan drew himself up dramatically.

"Meester Benham, I do not permit myself or others to pass beyond mere jesting words."

"Very good, sir, then keep clear of the facts. You have thrashed us, and we have thrashed you. Though I think we can count three Blenheims to one Fontenoy."

De Rothan made a gesture as though he would lay a hand on a sword.

“I do not quarrel, Meester Benham, when ladies are present. Insult me some other day.”

“With pleasure,” said Jasper, and rode on in a black rage.

He had not gone more than a hundred yards when two smart horses drawing a green curricle came into view. A whip was held slantingly at a professional angle. The sea breeze played with the reddish curls under the big bonnet.

Jasper blasphemed under his breath. Cousin Rose was the very last creature he desired to meet that morning.

She drew up, with a heightened colour and a shallow glitter of the eyes. The woman had dash, and a certain audacity in her methods of attack.

“You see, Jasper, I had not run away. What a reprieve for us all. We should thank God from our hearts.”

She eyed him steadily, noticing his morose, inward look.

“The responsibility has been heavy on you, lad. Do you know I prayed for you last night. I felt that you were not alone. I was with you—in the spirit.”

“You are always very good, Rose.”

“Am I? I think we always understood each other, Jasper, even when we were children.”

XIV

Rose Benham's sentimentality was part of the guile of the huntress. Ordinarily she was a hard and very shrewd young woman, capable of managing most men and horses, and sincere enough when her egotistical piety was on the prowl. She knew that there were other women who desired to marry Jasper Benham. Her determination to marry him herself was made up of the lust to possess, and the desire to defeat rivals.

"Jasper, you will see me back to Beech Hill."

She was on the edge of an appealing simper, and detestable as most plain and hard young women are when they ape passions that they do not possess. Rose went about such matters as though she were selling pots and pans in a shop. Cleverness cannot take the place of instinct. That is why clever people are often such wearisome fools.

"Do you want to go back at once?"

They had driven and ridden a little way along the Sea Road, and Miss Benham was looking with some of her provincial scorn at the gay folk who idled there. To a certain type of woman all fashionable people are profligates. Most women have a secret desire to dazzle and to devastate. It is the utter inability of the majority to do anything of the kind that gives such a feline viciousness to their morality.

"I do not think that there is much to see in Eastbourne, Jasper. What absurd creatures there are here. Look at that thing yonder, like a lettuce tied up at the top with bass."

"Shall we turn back?"

"Such women always make me cross. As if men were worth all the trouble!"

Courtesy, not necessity, put Jasper in the position of outrider. Rose was perfectly capable of driving alone across England, but when a thin-natured woman tries to be melting, she muddles the mingling of the wine and honey.

"I have a little basket under the seat, Jasper. Cold chicken and a bottle of wine. We can put up the horses at some farm, and make a meal under a tree."

Such feasting in Arcady was wholly outside Jasper's mood.

"Oh, yes, we could do that."

The tiredness of his voice piqued her.

"I believe you are sorry that the French did not come. I know; you have uncorked your courage and it has gone flat."

Jasper left her to think what she pleased.

They found a farm-house set back in a little meadow, and a big chestnut-tree made them a green pavilion. The horses were left in the care of a lad who bit his thumb-nail and stared.

Jasper's attitude was one of impatient reserve. Every thought that came into his mind unrolled itself from the one word "if." If another face had been inside that bonnet. If other hands— —! He had to sit there and listen to Rose Benham's thin suggestions, when love had become almost a ferocity, a tormented thing that was ready to break out into violence.

"There is only one glass, Jasper."

Her playful coyness made him feel evil.

"It doesn't matter."

When he drank he was careful to avoid the place that Rose's lips had touched. She noticed it, and her eyes registered the impression.

Her sentimental gaiety was like the buzzing of gnats in the sunshine. It intensified that other richer reality, that passion that had become akin to pain. Rose, too, had a way of asking direct questions, as exasperating a trick as pretending to tread on the toes of a gouty old man.

"You don't look very gay, Jasper. Are you sorry the French did not land?"

"Yes, I am."

"What a desperate mood! You ought to be in love."

This did not make matters flow any more pleasantly. Rose's face began to assume its set, Sabbath expression.

"I think you are very dull. I know men like to talk about themselves. You don't seem to find even yourself interesting."

"I'm not in a mood to talk. The fact is, I was up all night, and drank rather too much sherry."

"How silly you men are. You never seem to think of the to-morrow."

They packed up the basket, left the shade of the chestnut-tree, and travelled on. Rose looked somewhat grim, and Jasper was struck by a sudden amazing likeness to her mother. She appeared to have grown thinner, and her plainness cried out at him. Yet Rose, without knowing it, was to have a very subtle and delicate revenge. She was to be the cause of pain and secret reproaches and a little world of misunderstanding, for half the troubles of life come from people being at cross-purposes and refusing to speak out.

Though the road ran within two miles of Stonehanger, Jasper had no thought of a possible meeting with Nance Durrell. But meet her they did where the road ran through the oak woods in Buckhurst Hollow.

An oak wood in May is one of the most splendid of sights, with the golds and greens of the young foliage giving the effect of reflected sunlight. The lush freshness of the woods enters into the soul of a young man's dreams. Birds sing and the cuckoo calls from mysterious distances. The blue of the wild hyacinths brings visions of chaplets of flowers woven about the dark hair of some young girl.

A stream ran through Buckhurst Wood, crossing the road where a big beech-tree stood on a knoll that was covered with blue-bells. The moist murmur of the running water seemed part of the dewiness of the green and secret thickets.

Under the shade of the beech-tree sat Nance Durrell, a rush basket thrown beside her, her chin resting in the palms of her two hands. She looked intense, passionately preoccupied, her brown eyes staring into the mysterious distances of the wood. Her mouth was grave, and a little sad.

She glanced round with a certain impatient shyness when the green curricle appeared upon the road. For the moment she looked at Rose Benham and did not notice Jasper. Her thoughts had been disturbed, and waited for the disturbers to pass.

Then she recognised Jasper. Her self-consciousness became a thing of the vivid and inevitable present. It was not possible for her to shirk the clamour of her emotions.

Jasper reddened like a boy. He faltered, and then let the two horses and the curricle splash through the shallow water.

Nance had gone very white, with the whiteness of pride that resists. Why did the man thrust himself into her life? She hardened herself against him,

and tried to find the impress of the repulsive things she had heard of him upon his face.

"Have you heard the news——?"

Her eyes were two shadowy circles of reticent distrust.

"What news?"

"It was a false alarm last night. The beacon was fired by mistake."

She looked at him and was silent, and her very silence was resistant. Benham had a whole flood of fierce doubts and yearnings urging him forward against her reserve.

"Nance, why did you shut your window on me last night?"

"What right had you to come?"

She soared into haughtiness, and the knoll under the beech-tree became inaccessible.

"I had a man's right."

"And what is that?"

The curricle had drawn up some fifty yards beyond the ford, and a face in a yellow bonnet looked back at them with surprised intentness.

Nance rose. There was something tantalising and repressive about her movements. Few things can surpass the bleak and uncompromising pride of a young girl.

"Your friend is waiting for you."

"It is my cousin, Rose Benham. She——"

"I do not wish to keep her waiting."

Jasper's manhood raged within him. Primitive emotions and the more complex things of the heart made a confused turmoil. He rebelled against her tacit and unexplained antagonism.

"Nance, I must know what has made you change so suddenly."

She had half turned, and she looked back at him from beyond the finality of a dismissal.

"Your cousin is waiting."

"Heaven confound my cousin! What has she to do——"

The silent, backward look of her eyes rebuffed him.

"Nance—listen. I must know why you have changed. You have changed ——"

"It is courteous of you to claim it."

She was ready to show that she resented his assumption of a past sympathy.

"Damnation! You must have reasons. Is it your father?"

"It may be. I am not here to be cross-questioned."

"After you shut your window, I saw him on the terrace last night."

His passion drove him toward aggression. The girl remained stone-cold.

"Was he?"

"Yes."

"Well, what of that?"

"He had another man with him."

"Most likely it was old David."

Jasper had come to the very citadel of her reserve. To press further would mean the giving of a final and forlorn assault. Her whole attitude seemed to him to be a beating back of inopportune and dangerous curiosity.

"Shall I say that there are things that you do not wish me to know?"

"What do you mean?"

She stood to attack in turn, alert, and a little haughty.

"Mr. Durrell may have reason for not wishing me to come to Stonehanger."

"You suspect that?"

"You drive me to it."

Her face flushed under her dark hair.

"You are bold to press so far. Are you so sure of yourself? My father has reasons. You might not thank me for telling you them."

"I should thank you—from my heart."

"Not if you have any sense of—pride. Miss Benham must think this conduct of yours as curious as it appears to me."

She turned her back on him, and walked away into the thick of the wood. Jasper could not follow her there without leaving his horse, and Nance knew it. He did not attempt to follow her, but sat staring half vacantly into the green depths, a man staggered in the full stride of his impetuous sincerity.

It cost Jasper something of an effort to ride on and overtake the green curricle. Rose Benham's sharp profile had a very exasperating effect on him. There was something dangerously watchful about her eyes.

They made an elaborate show of ignoring the events of the last five minutes. Jasper might have hung behind to talk to a farm bailiff, to judge by the way they treated the matter.

But Rose's shrewd brain was busy enough behind the forced facility of her chattering. She felt that it was not only absurd, but impolitic to ignore the incident. It had to be touched on lightly and without prejudice.

"You haven't yet told me the name of your friend, Jasper."

"What friend?"

"Why, the damsel among the blue-bells, stupid. You know—I felt horribly guilty. It occurred to me that I had put myself in the way of being an awkward third."

"That was Miss Nance Durrell."

Cousin Rose appeared immensely excited.

"Jasper—the heroine of your night adventure! Think of that now! I thought she would have been prettier. You ought to have made us known to each other. I might have driven her home in the curricle."

Jasper glanced at Rose mistrustfully. Nance had driven him into a world of cross-purposes and suspicions.

"Miss Durrell goes very much her own way."

"Proud, is she?"

"Call it that if you like."

"O, Jasper, Jasper, if only you would let me teach you a little about women."

The cynical yet motherly touch was excellent. Rose could be masterly, directly a little malice gave her practical shrewdness an opportunity. She

could preach to a man, if she could not make love to him.

"What do you know about women, Rose?"

"La, now, listen to the lad! Jasper, half you men are nothing but great big boys. You think we are so much finer, and purer, and sweeter than you are, until we poor women show the true human stuff in us, and then you make a frightful to-do, and turn into cynics. Don't we want the men sometimes, just as much as the men want the women? And don't we plan and scheme to get them, playing all sorts of tricks with pride and coldness and smiles and relentings. Don't start away, Jasper, with thinking each girl a sweet fool of an angel."

He was caught by her words, and was angry with himself for being influenced.

"Sometimes people are what we wish them to be."

"Yes, especially if they are clever. The girl realises that. She puts on the clothes and the airs that please the man."

"You are a little cynic, Rose."

"Not a bit of it. I'm honest. I don't cover things up."

They said no more on the matter, but Rose had learnt something that made the lips of her soul curl maliciously.

"Always the pretty face!" she thought. "Fools! And we plain women have to look on, while a man squanders himself on a thing with soft eyes and an artful mouth. I'm plain, but am I going to be ousted by some treacle-and-honey chit with eyes like blackberries? This nonsense——!"

Rose had a sense of her limitations. That is what made her bitter.

XV

Nance made her way through Buckhurst Wood, pushing aside the fresh green hazel boughs till she reached a ride that ran eastward under the overhanging branches of the oaks. It was a woodland gallery hung with arras of green and gold, the sunlight streaming in through innumerable windows. The rank grass about the hazel stubs was threaded with wild flowers. Patches of blue sky showed between the golden branches of the oaks.

Nance was both angry and perplexed, an astonishment to herself in the contradictory discontent that mocked her pride. She had not pitied Jasper Benham when they had been face to face. She had resented his pertinacity. It had been easier to believe that he was playing the part that he had played with other women.

Yet something within her spoke up for Jasper now that he could not defend himself in person. Nance had had but a glimpse of Rose Benham, but it had been enough to challenge her dislike. She was sorry for the man, having an instinctive foreknowledge of how such a woman would shape in the middle ways of life. Yet Nance caught herself up in the thick of these thoughts, and refused to be lured into possible justifications. Nance was a little hard, as girls are apt to be. She liked her beliefs and convictions carved in ivory, immutable and flawless. There were so many things she did not know, so many things she did not understand. She believed in a kind of superhuman honour that could never change, never be bent into the making of crooked excuses.

But she did feel bitter and lonely, in spite of her pride. Something had been awakened in her that spring, a richness of thought and of feeling, a going-out of her spirit toward mystery and joy. She remembered days when she had thought of this man with a swift, shy thrill of tenderness. There had seemed a strength about him, a brave, brown-faced kindness that had compelled her to muse and to remember. That was why she felt bitter and resentful. She would smile peevishly over the thought of the red scarf and the cunning use he had made of it. Now and again she had found herself doubting the truth of her father's words, but she could find no reason for his wishing to mislead her. The smart of the thing remained, the raw consciousness that this man had been treating her as one adventure in a

succession of adventures. She resented this bitterly. It was the one emotion that had made her determine to thrust the whole affair out of her life.

Nance made her way homeward by a number of familiar lanes and field-paths, for she had wandered extensively since Anthony Durrell had taken Stonehanger. It was when she was following the path that led from the direction of Rookhurst over Stonehanger Common, that De Rothan overtook her and dismounted to walk at her side. He had seen the girl's figure moving along the field-paths as he had ridden along the road.

"My homage to you, Mees Nance. It may be that I shall find your father at Stonehanger. I hope the beacon-fire did not keep you awake last night."

He walked along beside her with an air of fascinating frankness. He had found it serve with women. As for Nance, she was so near home that it did not seem worth while to question De Rothan's company.

"We saw the beacon burning."

"And you were very frightened, eh?"

"No, not very."

"You should have seen the country people! Frightened sheep! I fear that if the French had landed the English red-coats would have followed the women."

Nance had none of her father's political discontent. She had her British beliefs and convictions, and wore her patriotism in her bosom.

"English soldiers do not run away, Chevalier."

"Eh! Assuredly—I ask your pardon. One's own soldiers never run away; they are forced to retreat in the face of overwhelming numbers. We all know that."

The man puzzled her. Usually she could get clear impressions of people, but De Rothan's was a figure that flickered and changed. His vanity and his grand air were definite details, yet they seemed to her like clothes worn at a masked ball. De Rothan was a cynic and an adventurer, a mature and very flexible man of the world. Nothing was absolutely right or absolutely wrong to him. A certain intenseness made Nance incapable of understanding the multifarious selfishnesses that go to the making of such a man.

Anthony Durrell was walking the terrace when these two reached Stonehanger. De Rothan had said, "I give myself the pleasure of seeing your

father." He was out of the saddle, and making a great business of offering to hand Nance up the steps.

She was not a gallant's woman, nor did she desire to be touched by De Rothan. Her instincts were fastidious in such matters.

He smiled at her roguishly.

"What a proud young gentlewoman. But you have the right. Beauty is privileged. Pride in a plain woman is like fine wine in a pewter pot."

Her aloofness pleased him. He followed her up the steps, scanning her figure, and noticing the comely way her neck curved where it rose from between her shoulders.

"Mr. Durrell, your daughter is a very great lady. She is too proud to touch my fingers."

He laughed and swaggered, and it was in his swagger that the vulgar blood of the Irish adventurer showed itself. Durrell had a sullen, preoccupied look. He had been disappointed of great events.

"Where have you been, Nance?"

"For a ramble."

"Ah."

His eyes searched her face, and Nance caught a questioning distrust. Youth resents suspiciousness. That momentary glance was seized on and remembered.

"You will stay and drink tea with us, Chevalier."

"I am to be persuaded, sir, I assure you."

"Nance, get the things ready, child."

She answered perfunctorily and passed on toward the house.

De Rothan returned to his horse that was standing quietly at the bottom of the terrace steps.

"Show me the way to your stable, Durrell."

"You know it."

"I don't, sir, so long as there are eyes about. Besides——"

Durrell joined him, and they walked round by the field gate into the yard. David Barfoot met them, and Durrell signed him to take De Rothan's

horse.

They turned into the shrubbery, and took to pacing one of the wild, overgrown paths. Laurels and hollies hedged them in, and arched out the sunlight. The thick canopy of leaves had smothered the grass and weeds. The soil was black and bare under the dark stems of the laurels.

De Rothan appeared cynically merry. He talked to Durrell about the happenings of the previous night.

"The whole countryside broke away like sheep. What? You are disappointed? No, no, the scare was of value. It showed how jumpy and unsteady these stolid folk are. They tell me that the troops were out of hand in several places. Whole companies made off and had to be chased and brought back by cavalry. It's a fact, sir, a fact."

Durrell showed a morose surface.

"It may have done them good."

"Steadied them, eh, helped them to get used to it? Bah! I should like to see a beacon fired by mistake every other night. The country's courage would be in tatters. Troops—raw troops—are not improved by being worried and fretted."

"I was too happy last night. I thought the time had come."

De Rothan looked at him intently.

"You are on edge, sir, too much on edge."

"No, no; I long for the great change."

A hand-bell rang, and the two men returned to the house. Nance had set tea in the Gothic parlour. De Rothan was floridly officious in arranging a chair for her.

"You should have been at Eastbourne this morning, Mees Nance. A crowd of gay people, all in the best of tempers from being saved from invasion. They had all got ready to run away in their best clothes. Do you ever take your daughter to the watering-places, Mr. Anthony?"

Durrell grunted, and gloomed over his tea.

"I don't."

"You dislike gay people."

"I detest them."

"Ah—ah, and they are always saying that my poor France is so gay. Why should not one be gay, sir, why should we pull long faces? The good God did not mean us to be miserable. What do you think, Mees Nance?"

His deference bowed her into the conversation.

"Sometimes one can not be gay, Chevalier."

"Not always, not always. But then, when a woman is young and adorable! Cloudy days; beauty all silver and grey, charm, subtlety. Now, come—do you not love fine clothes?"

She smiled.

"As much as women always love them."

"There, that is honest. I would not give a fig for a woman who hadn't a little vanity."

Durrell struck in, jerking his shoulders irritably.

"There is enough nonsense in a girl's head, De Rothan, without stuffing any more into it."

"My dear friend, I disagree with you. There are gentlewomen and gentlewomen. Parents, too, are often the blindest of wiseacres. Now if I were in your place, Mr. Anthony——"

"But you are not, sir. Let us keep to impersonal matters."

De Rothan threw a whimsical and conspiring look at Nance.

"Impersonal matters! As if life could go on with all our desires carefully tied up in silk handkerchiefs and put away in cupboards. Mr. Durrell, you are one of the most learned of men, but——"

He shrugged his shoulders expressively and looked sympathetically at Nance.

"Well, to be impersonal. I saw all kinds of your good English people strutting to and fro on the parade. You look so good, you English, that a well-dressed woman seems scandalous. You are such barbarians. Some one wears a new sort of hat, and all your raw louts and lasses are giggling and nudging with elbows. Some of you try to be fashionable and also pious. I am thinking of Mees Rose Benham, who was there in her curricle. Doubtless, Mees Nance, you have made the lady's acquaintance?"

"No."

"A character—a character. She had Mr. Benham, her cousin, hanging on her eyebrows. They are to be married soon, they say. A case of when Greek meets Greek. Mees Benham is a plain young woman, but she is one who provokes. Impudence, eh, is that what you call it? A turned-up button of a nose, sharp mouth, naughty eyes. Such women sting some of us into passion. Mr. Benham is in the toils."

He talked lightly, easily, observing Nance without betraying his curiosity. Durrell moved uneasily in his chair, and looked irritably austere.

"You need not talk of Mr. Benham here, Chevalier."

De Rothan glanced at him with pretended surprise.

"A young man with a bad reputation."

"Sir, I beg your pardon. I know the man is a little riotous; it is an impersonal matter, surely? Madam, his cousin, will take care of his morals."

For the rest of his stay De Rothan was very gallant to Nance, talking to her and at her with an air of admiring deference. No man could be more picturesquely charming than De Rothan. He had the mellowness of long experience, and could ape the chivalrous and dignified tenderness of an old beau.

"Turn the young thing's head, eh! She's confoundedly alluring. Durrell's a fool."

Nance longed to be away. She escaped when her father went to the mantel-shelf for his pipe, and fled away to her room.

It had been flashed upon her mind that De Rothan was the friend who had told her father these things concerning Jasper Benham. Anthony Durrell saw so few people, and there appeared to be a curious intimacy between these two.

She stood and looked at herself in the glass as though she were questioning her own reflection.

Why were De Rothan and her father friends? Had De Rothan brought these vile tales to Stonehanger? If he was responsible for them, did that alter her impressions?

Yes, but she herself had seen Jasper with his cousin. That part of it seemed true.

And yet she distrusted De Rothan greatly.

XVI

Meanwhile Jasper Benham was at the end of his patience, and a creature of moods and savage bewilderment. Nance's strange hostility had not helped him toward decision. He was too much in love with the girl to seek to be revenged upon her because there was something that he could not understand. Even supposing that Anthony Durrell was a French spy, and that Nance knew it and wished to safeguard her father, what had she to fear from him; what reason had she for treating him with suspicion?

Well, what was to be done?

Jasper had spent two morose, vacillating days, and the moral quandary seemed all the deeper. What a scolding shrew was this thing called Duty! He was to denounce Durrell, was he—send red-coats to turn Stonehanger upside down, and lose, perhaps forever, his chance of Nance! No, Duty be cursed; he would do no such thing. If this clumsy meddling were the only means that Duty could suggest, he would throw Duty aside and stand by his own more magnanimous instincts.

Jasper was riding Devil Dick over Rush Heath farm when he came cheek-by-jowl with this decision. Restlessness had set him in the saddle, and it was still early in the afternoon when he found himself looking over a thorn hedge into a big turnip field that sloped southward toward the edge of a wood. A solitary, lean, brown figure showed up against the green of the young growth, a figure that moved its arms with the monotonous action of a man hoeing.

Jasper rode through the gateway into the turnip field and remained watching the man with the hoe. The labourer drew near with his back turned, chopping away sedulously at the young weeds. Jasper knew him for Tom Stook of Bramble End, an odd hand who was taken on by the Benhams' bailiff when there was a press of work, or hay and com to be gathered in.

Tom Stook was a very tall man with great bony limbs that seemed loosely slung at the joint sockets. He had a hawk's beak of a nose, a little tufted beard at the chin, and deep-set, cautious eyes. He kept on hoeing, as though he had not so much as glimpsed Jasper out of the corner of an eye.

"Well, Tom, Webster has found you a job, has he?"

Stook straightened his back, drew in his hoe, leant upon it, and regarded Jasper with a sort of cautious respect.

"Mornin', Master Jasper."

"Weeds bad?"

"Pretty tarrifyin'. Be'unt so bad down yon end."

Now Tom Stook was one of the most garrulous of rogues when gossip did not press too tenderly upon such personal matters as poaching and smuggling. He was a bit of a ruffian, sly, shrewd, and immensely strong. Folk had tales to tell about him and his lonely hovel of a cottage down by Bramble End.

Tom Stook hoed and talked, wagging his tuft of a beard, and throwing queer, spying glances at Jasper.

"No more beacons afire, sir?"

"Not yet, Tom."

"That did tarrify the folk. I seed ut begin a'glimmering just afore midnight."

"You keep late hours, Tom."

"I doan't knows as I do."

He hoed on in silence for some moments.

"T' rabbits be tarrible thick down our way. They'd be for eatin' all the green stuff, if I didn't snare 'em. Maybe I keeps late hours now and agen. A man sees some funny things of a night, surely."

"What sort of things, Tom?"

"Lights, and men wid dark lanterns. Smugglers and Frenchies."

"Oh, come, Tom!"

"Sure, I be tellin' the truth."

"Where do you see the lights?"

"Up yonder, at Stonehanger. It be'unt no sort of a light, but a sort of a glare fur the while you count ten. I doan't say nothing to nobody. We be'unt none of us so tarrible honest, Master Jasper, as we can pull other folks' clothes off their beds. But I've seed strange men go over Stonehanger Common at midnight."

Jasper kept a grave and rather sceptical face.

"When you go out rabbiting, Tom?"

Stook grunted.

"I doan't know nothing 'bout that."

"Nor do I, Tom. If the men didn't have a few rabbits, we shouldn't have any crops."

"Sure, Master Jasper, I always said you be a young man o' sense."

"The squire likes his punch, Tom. We don't ask too many questions in Sussex. I'll wager we have stuff in our cellar that never paid duty."

Stook went on hoeing methodically.

"Do y' know that thur furriner, sir? That black chap as rides about on a black horse?"

"Who do you mean, Tom?"

"Frenchy gentleman."

"Do you mean the Chevalier de Rothan?"

"It may be him, Master Jasper. I've seed the man I mean up at Stonehanger."

"The devil you have!"

"I've seed him come over t' common just afore daylight. You know t' old quarry 'twixt Bramble End and Stonehanger?"

"Yes."

"I've knowed him leave his nag thur all night. I've seed him, too, with Durrell's girl."

"What d' you mean, Tom?"

"No harm, master. Why, I seed 'em two days ago going over t' common. I was down under yonder cutting a bit o' furze to thatch m' wood lodge with."

"What day was it—Tuesday?"

"It ud be Tuesday."

Jasper sat and stared across the turnip field with the level stare of grim preoccupation. Tom Stook's lean figure had faced about, and was receding,

with rhythmical strokes of the hoe.

"Have you told any one about this, Tom?"

"Sure, no, I ain't, Master Jasper. I be'unt one for tongue-wagging 'bout other folks's business. Guess, though, I've been puzzled. I be'unt no baby."

"No."

"I knows t' lads, and t' rabbit runs, and t' warrens."

"I reckon you do, Tom. But Stonehanger? Mr. Durrell's not hiding the stuff, is he?"

"That be what mizzles me."

"He isn't one of the gang?"

Tom grew reticent of a sudden.

"Don't you be for askin' me, Master Jasper."

"Well, about the foreigner. Are you sure you know him?"

"Maybe I be wrong, master."

"He and Durrell are something of a size."

"That be true."

"I'm glad you've told me this, Tom. You'll find half a side of bacon waiting to be given away up at the Hall."

Tom jogged his hat.

"Thank ye, Master Jasper. I doan't drop no words into t' old women's laps. I keep t' spigot in, sir, 'cept when a gentleman o' sense be about."

Jasper turned Devil Dick and rode out of the field in a very different temper from that in which he had entered it.

Hot blood is jealous blood, and Jasper was no bloodless saint. Tom Stook had sprung a surprise on him, and let fly with a blunderbuss into the thick of Jasper's perplexities. He had owned to a healthy if casual hatred of De Rothan, but personal, prejudiced hatred is a very different thing from vague antagonism. Good lovers are good haters, and Jasper was hating De Rothan at full gallop.

"Seems to me Stonehanger is a nest of spies! Deuce take it, how did we miss knowing De Rothan for a rogue! He and the girl are friends, are they?

Oh, my innocent, sweet child! Oh, you besotted fool, Jasper Benham. Have it out with them, have it out."

Jasper rode straight for Stonehanger in about as black a temper as a man can boast. He had no very definite ideas as to what he meant to do. Feeling violent, savage, and very much befooled, he just rode toward Stonehanger, letting the impulse of his jealousy urge him thither.

The track he chose came from the south over the common, leaving Bramble End lying half a mile to the south-east. Jasper passed the quarry where Tom Stook said that De Rothan had sometimes left his horse. Jasper peered into it, and found the quarry a mere pit full of broom and brambles, its entrance half choked by a big elder-tree. But there were trampled places here and there, and a rough path that led out on to the common.

Any one approaching Stonehanger from the south had all but the roof and chimneys of the house hidden from him by a heave of the ground. Then one came into full and sudden view of the place with its grey terrace and wind-blown trees. Such a passion as jealousy often provokes the opposites of a man's normal nature, and Benham developed a spirit of wariness and cunning. He dismounted as soon as he saw the chimneys of the house, found a spot amid the furze where he could fasten Devil Dick to the tough stem of a furze bush, and went on on foot.

The windows and terrace rose into view, with the wind-blown yews and thorns, and then the stretch of grassland immediately below the terrace. It was here that Jasper dodged down behind the furze like a stalker sighting a stag. The lines of his face grew hard and keen. He took off his hat, and, thrusting it into the furze, made a sort of loophole between the boughs through which he could watch Stonehanger unobserved.

A man was walking to and fro on the grassland below the terrace, flourishing a stick as though he were trying the suppleness of his wrist for sword-play. Sometimes he would pause and draw imaginary patterns on the ground with the point of the stick. Or he would stride as if measuring the ground, look about him critically, and scan the surrounding country. There appeared to be some purpose in this pacing to and fro. The man might have been an engineer surveying the ground for the throwing up of earthworks and the placing of guns.

The man was De Rothan. Jasper knew him by his height, by his black clothes, and his haughty, swaggering walk. Only De Rothan could have flourished a stick with such gusto.

Jasper looked grim.

“Hallo, so it’s you, is it! Tom Stook was right. What the devil do you think you are doing marching about up there?”

He watched De Rothan jealously, thoughtfully.

“Measuring the ground? Trenches and redoubts? By George, that’s it! Why did I never think of that before? Stonehanger would make one of the strongest positions for ten miles round. A landing party might seize it and hold on——. Hallo!”

He was all eyes for the moment, for another figure had appeared upon the terrace. Jasper could see only the head and shoulders behind the low wall. It was Nance Durrell, a white sun-bonnet covering her black hair.

He saw her come to the edge of the terrace and look over. The white strings of her sun-bonnet were over her shoulders. She rested her hands on the parapet and watched De Rothan pacing to and fro below.

Jasper became for the moment the most violent of cynics. A sense of his own ineptitude tormented him. He believed that he understood all that was happening up yonder.

De Rothan turned and caught sight of Nance. He gave her a magnificent bow, sweeping hat and stick with splendid expressiveness. As for Benham, the toe of his boot alone could have expressed his emotions.

“Coxcomb—dog of a spy!”

They were talking together up yonder, and Jasper could hear the faint sound of their voices. Nance appeared to lean forward over the parapet with an intimate friendliness that did not ease Jasper’s jealousy.

De Rothan approached the steps. He mounted them, turned to the right and sat himself down on the parapet within a yard of Nance. He laid his hat beside him and tapped one of the coping stones with his stick. Nance did not edge away. She perched herself facing him. It was evident that they were talking together.

Jasper imagined all manner of intimate confidences passing between them. Confound De Rothan, he seemed on excellent terms with the girl! No doubt that was why the Frenchman had looked him over with such amused insolence when they had met.

Jasper knelt awhile behind the furze, gripping his coat collar with one hand, and staring hard at the green gorse. He was ready to believe that De Rothan was Nance’s lover, and a passion of repulsion held him for the

moment. The anger in his blood was a cold and ugly anger. A man feels the more bitter when he has reason to despise himself.

Then a thought struck him.

"Yes, by George! That's it! I'll make sure of the man. Tom Stook shall have a look at him."

He started up, and, keeping his body bent, made his way back toward his horse.

"I'll make sure that Monsieur de Rothan is Tom Stook's man. Then, by George! I'll call him to account."

XVII

In half an hour Jasper Benham was back in the turnip field on the Rush Heath land where Tom Stook was still wielding his hoe.

"Tom, can you trot four miles at a stretch?"

"Lord, sur, what for?"

Jasper told him as much as he could tell such a man as Tom Stook.

"I'd take you up behind me, but you're such a big fellow, Tom. Leave your hoe in the hedge, and hold on to my stirrup. I'll tell you more as we go along."

And so they set out for Stonehanger.

They went by way of Bramble End, Jasper leaving Devil Dick tethered in Stook's little cow-lodge. Rogue Tom had come by a pretty shrewd notion of what Jasper Benham expected of him. He took the lead as they made their way over the common.

"No nag in t' old quarry, sir?"

"No."

"T' crossways at Dudden's Oak, that be the spot, then, Master Jasper."

"Sure?"

"Mounseer has to cross t' ridge. Let him take what track he will, he'll come to t' crossways at Dudden's Oak, unless he goes by t' woods and ditches."

Jasper agreed. Stook was a fox who knew the country.

They skirted the upper part of the common, and took a farm track that led to the crossways at Dudden's Oak. The old tree, a huge shell with its boughs half dead, stood in the centre of a triangular piece of grass. There was a wood between two of the converging roads, and Jasper laid Tom Stook in ambush in this wood.

"You'll get your glimpse of the gentleman, Tom, if he comes this way."

"I'd be glad to get a sound o' t' furriner's voice."

"You'd know him by the voice?"

"I've heard him speak in t' dark. If I see him and sound him I'll know 'em all for t' same man."

Jasper leaned against the trunk of the old oak with his face toward the two ways that led south-east and south-west. De Rothan might come by either road. Nor had Jasper been there fifteen minutes before he saw a mounted man appear far down under the oak boughs on the Rookhurst track. It was De Rothan himself, jogging along at a comfortable trot, yet sitting very straight and stiff in the saddle, like some grand seigneur riding over his estate. Jasper waited for him on the green point of grass between the two roads. He had seen Tom Stook's brown face thrust itself momentarily between the hazel boughs like the face of a satyr. He was on the alert.

De Rothan recognised Jasper when he was within thirty yards of Dudden's Oak. A slight knitting of the brows betrayed his impatience. But he came on with all the fine and unembarrassed confidence of a grandee.

Jasper stood forward with a sweep of the hat.

"I must ask you to stop, sir."

De Rothan pulled up, and gave Jasper a stiff bow. He was high in the stirrups of his dignity, and ready to play the grand monarch.

"Good day to you, Meester Benham."

"Good day to you, Chevalier. Will you be so good as to tell me whence you come, and where you are going?"

De Rothan looked haughty.

"Indeed, sir, by what right do you ask these questions?"

"By a right that it is not yours to question. I am a King's officer and we have our orders. You will be so good as to answer me."

"I take it as a reflection on my honour."

"Take it as you please. We have to supervise the comings and goings, even of our guests."

"Meester Benham, do you suggest——?"

"I ask you to answer my question."

"Your way of asking it is insolent."

"I stand by my orders. We are neither of us here to question them."

De Rothan appeared to do some rapid thinking. Then he gave an irritable shrug of the shoulders.

"I suppose an exile has to suffer suspicion. If you would know it, sir, I have been riding to exercise myself and my horse. I rode from my house to Stonehanger Common; I ride back again to my house. Is that what you require?"

"I take your answer at its value, sir. You may pass on."

De Rothan looked at Jasper as though he were half-minded to ride him down. He appeared to swallow something. He was a man who preferred to make very sure of success before he struck.

"I am deeply beholden to you, Meester Benham, for your serene patronage. There are things that we do not forget."

"Remember them when you please, Chevalier."

"I choose my own time, Meester Benham. I do not chastise insolence until the occasion suits me."

Jasper gave him a vicious smile.

"Do not postpone it too long, sir. We do not live so very far apart. Good day to you."

De Rothan rode on.

Then Tom Stook's brown face appeared. It was one broad grin.

"T' same furriner—all over. I've seen him meet t' smuggling Frenchy—Jerome. That be him, Master Jasper."

"Well, he's a liar, Tom."

"Liar! All Frenchies be liars. Good for you, Master Jasper."

Jasper sent Tom Stook home with a silver crown in his pocket, and rode back alone to Rush Heath. He wanted to worry this matter out, to think out his plans for dealing with Durrell and De Rothan. Jasper had no desire to drag the whole neighbourhood into the adventure. In a way it was his own affair, and he meant to carry it on his own shoulders. His motives and emotions were jumbled together. The one outstanding fact was his determination to break De Rothan. He would outwit the man, corner him, fight him, if need be, and get up early one morning to see him hanged. It was a question of duty; and it was not. Jasper loved and hated. These things are sufficient without a man dragging in duty and religion, and trying to cover

up the essential and elemental passions with sentimental affectations, and platitudes about patriotism.

Jasper had been away from Rush Heath since the morning. Jack Bumpstead was not to be found, and Jasper, going in to stable Devil Dick, found a strange nag in one of the stalls. Old Mrs. Ditch, the housekeeper, met him in the passage, her grey curls very much in order, and a ribbon in her cap.

"La, Master Jasper, Mr. Winter came two hours ago. I had dinner kept back awhile. There be some cold victuals laid out for you."

"What—Mr. Jeremy?"

Mrs. Ditch looked coy. Mr. Jeremy was a gentleman who forever caused a tender fluttering among all sorts and conditions of women.

Jasper made for the dining-room. In the Chippendale arm-chair by the window sat a shortish, thickset, hard-headed man in black, smoking a long pipe, and looking out on life with steel-black, whimsical eyes. He had one of those Roman heads, with harsh strong features, power in every line, and a cynical kindliness about the mouth.

"Why, Jeremy——!"

"Jeremy it is, lad. Come over and kiss me."

They laughed, and came together to grip hands with the impulsiveness of two men who have learned to love each other as men can.

"What are you doing down here?"

"Filling a chair and a bed."

"Good, by George! It's a year since we've seen you. Where's Squire Kit? Have you seen him?"

Jeremy settled the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe with the end of his little finger.

"Having a nap upstairs, Jasper. Curse me, lad, it's good to see you. Brown and lusty, eh, though you had a broken arm in the spring. What, Jack Bumpstead's no gossip. And how's that old blackguard, Goffin? I've brought him down a pound of snuff."

Jeremy Winter had been a gentleman of many adventures, and his picturesque career had culminated in the founding of a fencing school in a quiet street near St. James's. Jeremy and Jasper's mother had been cousins,

and for twenty years Mr. Winter had descended at spasmodic intervals upon Rush Heath, never with much money in his pocket, but with plenty of audacity and cheerfulness in his eyes. He would have tales to tell of Canada, or the East Indies, or of service in the Austrian army, or of bronzed and ragged adventures in Spain. There was something lovable about the man. He was tough, capable, humorous, warm-hearted, a master of the small sword and the sabre, imperturbable and smiling in the face of odds.

Jasper sat himself down at the table with a resentful and freshly remembered hunger. Jeremy Winter's coming struck him as the most welcome of coincidences. One could tell things to Jeremy that a man would not tell to any other living creature.

They talked hard, touching on a dozen familiar memories, and filling in the gaps between the now and the then. Jeremy had made a success of his fencing school, but as he put it—"London's a sort of howling wilderness just now. Every blessed soul seems to have gone off somewhere into the country to help to drill bumpkins, and stand ready for the French. I shut up the school for a month. There were only a few raw youngsters to teach."

When Jasper had dined they strolled out into the garden with the elbow-to-elbow air of men well pleased to be together. Jeremy had taught Jasper to fence as a boy. He had taken some pride in the lad, for their temperaments were much alike. Jasper had much of the elder man's nerve and courage and imperturbable toughness.

"Well, lad, how's the sword-arm?"

"Out of practice. I have an idea, Jeremy, that you are the very man I want."

"What, getting ready for a quarrel—woman—and all that?"

"More than that. I'll tell you."

In the long walk Bob the gardener had thrown down half a dozen hazel fagots, for sticking the rows of sweet peas. Jeremy brought out a knife, chose two hazel boughs, sliced off the twigs and shaped them to the length of two foils.

"Let's try you, Jasper."

They stood in the grass walk and fenced together, the sunlight shining on the brown hazel stocks and on their intent faces. Jeremy Winter was extraordinarily quick and supple for a man of fifty. He had the wrist of a

blacksmith and the cunning of a player on the spinet. Jasper was slow and out of practice. Jeremy touched him five times in as many minutes.

"Stiff. Is the business serious?"

They began to pace up and down the grass walk while Jasper told Jeremy Winter the truth about Stonehanger. Jeremy was a good listener, shrewd, attentive, and ready to compare new facts with the gleanings of a very varied experience. He was an easy man to confide in, because he was so full of a sage understanding. Jeremy had led a picturesque and rather dissipated life between the twenties and forties, and it is the man who has been a man who is of most use to his brother men.

"So you fell in love with the girl, lad. What! I'm old dog enough to know that! Heaven help me, it happened to me every month when I was a youngster. But I was only in love—once—you know; the great splash; and she left me to drown."

"That's all done with, Jeremy."

"Twenty years ago, sir."

"No, I mean my small incident. It was just an inclination; no more than that."

Jeremy regarded him with an affectionate twinkle.

"Just so—just so."

"I have got to pull this nest of spies to pieces. The girl mustn't blame me. I've got to do my duty."

"Duty! You be very careful of that word, Jasper. It's a fool's word. I don't trust men who talk about their duty. Why not send a file of soldiers in?"

Jasper stared at the chimneys of the house that rose against the stately gloom of the cedars.

"I have a mind to carry the thing through myself."

"Out of consideration for the lady!"

"No. This Frenchman and I have a score to settle."

Jeremy stroked a firm and shiny chin.

"Who is he? An *emigré*?"

"Pretends to be. He calls himself the Chevalier de Rothan."

"What?"

"De Rothan."

Jeremy said something under his breath.

"Tall, dark rogue, is he, with the airs of a grandee, drooping tip to his nose, wears black, and talks about St. Louis?"

"That's the man! Do you know him, Jeremy?"

Winter looked thoughtful.

"I've met him in London."

"Where?"

"At my school. He came in to fence; Jack Sidebotham brought him. He was all over my best men."

They paused, and looked each other in the eyes.

"Jasper, the fellow is one of the best swordsmen in the country. I had a turn with him."

He smiled a grim little smile.

"Vanity, that's his weak point, too much flourish. I had him pinked, but ——"

Jasper threw up his chin.

"All right, Jeremy. I'd tackle him—curse him!—even if he were a better man than you."

"You wait a bit, my lad."

"You had better call me a coward!"

Jeremy laid a hand on Jasper's shoulder.

"Stop that. Do you think I don't love you, lad? Do you think I want to have you run through by a swaggering blackguard like De Rothan? He's a good shot, too, mind you. You wait a bit, till we have had a week with the foils."

As men they knew each other, and Jasper was touched.

"I'm a hot-headed fool, Jeremy. I'll do what you wish."

XVIII

Had Jasper Benham been able to see into Nance's heart he would have felt a man's pity for her, that richer tenderness that dissolves away the pettier and more selfish thoughts.

For Nance was very lonely, and perplexed amid her loneliness. Things had happened that had troubled her beyond measure. In the first place, she had overheard some talk that had passed between De Rothan and her father, a few, disjointed sentences, nothing more, and yet the words had caught her ear and set her musing upon their meaning. Moreover, De Rothan himself had become suddenly and ominously real. He had swaggered out of a vague and questionable past into an urgent and audacious present. He had kissed her hand, and he had tried to touch her with the touch of a lover.

A woman can judge a man by his eyes, and his way of looking. The Frenchman was infinitely courteous, but he had no reverence. His admiration was a complacent and self-confident emotion. It bent, half patronisingly, and touched what it admired, as though a woman's charm was a mere flower to be plucked and held to the nostrils.

De Rothan had made Nance's spirit creep. She had become suddenly afraid of him, and shy of being alone.

Queerly enough her loneliness and her craving for comradeship and sympathy found her thoughts turning toward Jasper Benham. It was a pure impulse and it surprised her new self-consciousness. There seemed something inevitable about it, something that claimed spontaneous justification. Nance found herself questioning the meaning of this impulse. If she distrusted one man and felt drawn toward the other, did not this spiritual phenomenon suggest some deep and instinctive truth? It contradicted the things that she had been told about Jasper. If he was a bad man why should she think of him now that she needed help?

It was in a mood of doubt and unrest that she idled round her terrace garden, looking at the faces of the pansies, pulling up weeds, and putting a stick here and there to a head-heavy flower. The sound of footsteps made her start self-consciously. A figure of Time came striding over the grass—old David Barfoot—scythe on shoulder, a brown straw hat shading his lean, tanned face.

Nance smiled at the old man, a smile of relief. There had been rain in the night, and the moist grass was ripe for scything. It would cling to the edge of the blade and make the work easier.

"I like the grass short, David."

He had a way of hearing Nance's words as he heard no one else's.

"I'll shave it close; trust me."

He carried the stone in a queer little leather case fastened to his belt at the back. Getting an edge was a great business. The stone rang along the blade of the scythe. Presently he began to mow with steady, purring strokes, and the swinging movement of his arms and shoulders was not without a kind of grace.

Nance sat herself on the terrace and watched him. There was something restful in the level, swinging rhythm.

David was not a talkative man, but he had his moments of illumined loquacity.

"Fine weather for the crops. They'll be making hay afore the end o' June. Maybe the French won't tarrify us at all."

Nance had the look of a contented listener. It was pure coincidence that sent David drifting toward matters that were vital to her needs. He began to talk about his relatives and their affairs, which were mostly of a sordid, poverty-stricken, and child-bearing order.

"Maybe you've heard speak of my sister, Sue Barton. Thirteen brats, and her man down with t' ague. Bad times, too. I don't say as the gentry can't be kind."

"Thirteen children, David!"

He stopped to sharpen his scythe.

"Pig's meal, they be glad to get it! Jim sick, and Sue expectin' as usual. It was lucky for Jim Barton as he had worked on and off for t' Benhams. They be good gentlefolk, t' Benhams, though t' old squire has the mouth of hell on him."

Nance said "Oh!"—a non-committal exclamation.

"Master Jasper, he be a good young gentleman."

"The Mr. Benham who was shot in the lane?"

"Sure. There be gentry and gentry. Some of 'em doan't care; some of 'em gives for what they gets. Master Jasper's a soft heart, but he be'unt no fool, neither. A tough gentleman when a man be a rogue and a beggar."

Nance had a moment's perplexity. Then she said:

"I have heard bad things about Mr. Benham, David."

She spoke softly, but David was watching her mouth. He picked up the words and answered them.

"Have ye now! Well, I've heard different. Be man, woman, or child sick down Rush Heath way, the young squire he be for knowing about it. Better than the parson, he be. Not pious-like; can do his cussing. Clean about t' wenches, too. Though I shouldn't be saying such a thing afore you, Miss Nance."

Nance reddened, not wholly because of David's words.

"You appear to know a great deal about Mr. Benham, David."

"Sure—we knows this and that in t' country. I likes a fine, upstanding gentleman. I wishes him good luck in the shoes of his father."

"Is it true that Mr. Benham is to marry his cousin, David?"

"She? You be meaning Miss Benham o' Beech Hill?"

"I don't know."

"Sure, Mr. Benham be'unt no fool! Marry she! 'Tain't no sense."

"Well, it isn't our business, is it, David?"

The old man grunted. He was thinking of things that it was not his business to utter.

But his words had had their effect on Nance. For days she had been striving against a growing sense of resentment. Doubt and mental suffering have some kinship to physical pain; they torment the mind until it breaks out into passionate rebellion. Nance left David to his scything and went straight into the house. She knew that her father was in his study, and her very doubts drove her to demand some answer to the questions that were troubling her heart. Durrell's secretiveness, De Rothan's mysterious presence about the place, the slandering of Jasper Benham, all these things combined to form a distorting glass that threw the reflections of life back at her with perplexing vagueness.

Nance climbed the stairs slowly, stiffening her courage against this colloquy with her father. The house seemed very still as she passed down the long brown gallery and knocked at her father's door.

"Yes?"

"May I come in, father?"

"Yes, come in."

He was wrapped in an old dressing-gown, and sitting at his table, books open before him, a quill in his hand. It might have been some austere Milton inditing polemics against the Church of Rome.

Durrell had the look of a preoccupied man who suffered interruption grudgingly.

"Well, what is it?"

She closed the door.

"I want to speak to you, father."

He frowned, and laid his pen in the trough of an open book.

"What is it? About the food—or the pots and pans?"

"No. It is about things that have been worrying me."

"Things—things! How loosely you express yourself!"

His impatience stiffened her courage.

"This Chevalier De Rothan—why does he come to the house?"

Durrell leaned back in his chair, pushing his feet out under the table.

"What has that to do with you, Nance?"

"I want to know why you have him to the house."

"Indeed!"

"I don't like him. I don't trust him. I have a kind of feeling that we are in his power."

Durrell looked at her with frowning intentness.

"Little fool!"

She flushed, sensitively.

"Father, I feel that things are happening here about which you have suffered me to know nothing. It is wrong to me, unfair——"

"Tssh! Don't let us have this nonsense, this tragedy queening."

"Can you swear that——"

"Nance, you are a fool. Am I to be catechised by a silly girl! Stuff and nonsense!"

"Then why does this man come here in the middle of the night? Why does he spend hours with you, here, in this room? Oh, I may know more than you think, father. One cannot help having ears and eyes."

"Girl—what do you mean?"

"I have a right to know——"

"Right? You talk to me about your rights!"

Durrell was a quick-tempered and a scornful man, but Nance had never seen him look so evil.

"Let me tell you, Nance, that I am not a man who thinks it necessary to explain things to a child."

"But you explained away Jasper Benham's character—to me."

He pushed his chair back violently, and rose.

"I told you some truths for your own good."

"Did the man De Rothan tell you these things?"

"Silence!"

"I have a right——"

"Silence, I say!"

Durrell's face had lost all scholarly repose and refinement. It was harsh, flushed, and threatening.

"Go to your room, girl. Never let me have more of this interference."

"I am not a child any longer. If you drive me to it, father, I shall rebel ——"

He broke out in a way that amazed her, with a scolding fury that threw aside all self-control. Durrell was not capable of the blind, physical violence of the ordinary male, and his unreasoning wrath ran into a torrent of

outrageous taunts and sarcasms. We are the creatures of savage littlenesses in our rages, those nerve-storms that rise out of nothing, and end in nothing.

Durrell's fury of words had a numbing effect upon the girl. She stood mute, staring, astonished by the unreasoning violence of the man who had given his life to accumulating wisdom out of books. Then she drew back toward the door, opened it, and escaped.

She went to her own room, realising in a numb way that her father had spoken words to her that could never be forgotten. The very violence of his anger had been an outrage, its arbitrariness an answer to her suspicions.

Then she heard De Rothan's voice on the terrace below. He was talking to David Barfoot, but David would never consent to understand him.

The voice sent a shiver of repulsion through Nance. She turned and locked the door.

"Mees Nance, Mees Nance, where is the sunlight?"

He was calling up at her window, and she hated him for not being another man.

Durrell's footsteps came down the gallery, and he joined De Rothan on the terrace. The Frenchman could have done with other company, but he was drawn sharply toward sterner issues.

Durrell took him into one of the dark paths through the shrubbery.

"The girl has begun to suspect us."

"What, sweet Nance?"

"She challenged me to a confession, as though I owe any confession to a child!"

"And you scolded her! You men of letters lose your tempers as badly as tipplers at an inn. Poor Nance; you scorched her with that infernal tongue of yours."

Durrell gave him a sneering look.

"You need not pity the girl. She seems to hate the very sound of your name."

"Come, come, that is promising."

"You had better hold away from her."

De Rothan laughed.

“Mr. Benham, too, suspects us. I have decided how to deal with that gentleman. But sweet Nance hates me! That is good news.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Do you see your daughter, Durrell, as one of the beauties of Napoleon’s court? It is not impossible, sir, not impossible. Where hate is, there love shall be gathered in.”

XIX

Bob, the gardener, scything grass in the Rush Heath garden, saw Jasper and Mr. Jeremy Winter come out of the house while the dew still lay upon the grass. Jasper had a pair of foils under his arm. The two gentlemen stripped off their coats in the long walk, rolled up their shirt-sleeves and began to fence. They were at it for an hour or more in short, sharp bursts, Jeremy pulling the younger man up from time to time, and making him repeat some series of parries and passes. The clinking of the foils made a thin and constant tingle of sound, broken now and again by Jeremy's deep and imperturbable voice. There was no blood in the battle, but the great poppies in the borders were the colour of blood.

Jeremy was not ill-pleased with these practise bouts.

"You will soon have a quick point again. The man behind the sword's the thing. Nerve, and a devilish sharp eye."

"You will warrant me sound in a week, Jeremy?"

"Not far off, not far off. Don't forget the pistols, though. And look you, lad, the game is to play up to the vanity of a man like De Rothan. Fencing's a subtle art. 'Tain't all wrist and sinew. There's mind in it, personality, soul. It's a picking to bits of human nature. You don't fight a man's sword alone, but his grit, or his conceit, and his damned flourishes."

"You are a cunning master, Jeremy."

"Why, confound me, half life is acting. Act when you fight, lad. I could play a man like De Rothan the veriest clown's game, make him think me a bungler, and run him through before he had the sense to take me seriously. That's what fighting should be, brain as well as beef."

They went in to breakfast, a silent meal so far as Jasper was concerned. Jeremy Winter watched him with affectionate amusement. A man of fifty renews his youth in seeing a young man in love.

"I have it, Jeremy!"

"What, lad?"

"An idea."

It did not unfold itself, for there was a sudden violent hammering on the floor of the room above. Mr. Christopher Benham was using the heel of his shoe to attract attention.

"Hallo, the squire's awake."

"I'll go up and see what he wants. I say, Jeremy, not a word about this."

"Not a word. He'd curse me out of the country for egging you on to take risks."

"Besides, there's Rose. You remember Rose?"

Jeremy drew in his lips.

"Remember her, by gad! We always quarrelled, Rose and I. So he wants you to marry her?"

"I don't know. Rose can twist him round her finger. I don't want her meddling in my affairs."

"The less a woman knows the better."

Jasper spent the morning practising with his pistols in the little meadow by Ten Acre Wood. He chose the meadow because it was a mile or more from the house, and the oaks of the wood smothered the reports of the pistol. He did not wish the sound to come to Mr. Christopher's ears, for he was in an intensely irritable state, and very feeble. The most trivial thing would send him into a gouty rage, and his rages left him breathless and inarticulate.

After dinner Jasper ordered Jack Bumpstead to saddle Devil Dick. Jeremy Winter stood smoking a pipe in the porch, and watched him mount and ride out.

Jasper headed straight toward Stonehanger. His face had a set and very determined look. He was out on a grave business, and on his guard against sentiment and romance.

It was still and sultry, and there was a fog at sea. Grey haze covered the hills, and the long grass in the fields hardly so much as stirred. Stonehanger Common lay in the full, thundery glare of the afternoon sunlight. Warm, dry perfumes rose from it, and the gorse looked a dusty green. Jasper followed the lane, and, pushing Devil Dick through a gap in the hedge, approached Stonehanger from the western side. His plan of campaign promised to adapt itself to the identity of the person who chanced to meet the first attack.

As it happened, he came upon David Barfoot by the gate that led into the rough meadow where Jenny the cow was turned out to grass. The

coincidence faced Jasper with two alternatives. He made a sign to David, and the old man came and stood by Devil Dick's right shoulder.

"Is Miss Nance at home?"

David watched Jasper's lips.

"She be out, Master Benham."

"And Mr. Durrell?"

"Would you be wanting to see him?"

David's sceptical sincerity stirred Jasper's inclinations. He discovered a very human desire to set eyes on Nance. Durrell! Barfoot was right. Anthony Durrell could go to the devil.

He was surprised to find David Barfoot so ready to help him.

"Do you know where she is?"

"She be gone down t' sea lane."

"Straight on?"

"Sure."

"I might meet her if I rode on down the lane."

Barfoot grinned approvingly.

"I'm telling ye," he said.

The lane went winding down between furze-clad banks, a green way powdered with wild flowers. About half a mile from Stonehanger House the lane broadened out into a kind of grassy stream that meandered as it pleased. Jasper reined in on a piece of rising ground, and scanned the land ahead of him. Two furlongs to the south stood a group of may-trees. They were smothered in blossom, and their massed floweriness made them look like a great heap of white wool or of snow.

Jasper caught sight of a figure moving on the outskirts of these trees, a figure that loitered, and reached up to break off the flowering sprays. He had ridden to Stonehanger convinced that he could hold himself well in hand and that he could talk to Nance as dispassionately as he would have talked to his cowman's grandmother. But when he saw that figure down by the may-trees, Jasper knew why he hated De Rothan, and why he was trying to compromise with Nance.

He rode on, rather slowly, stiffening his upper lip as though he were in for a life-and-death tussle and not for a scene with a mere girl. Jasper had planned out what he would say, and how he would say it. He had stalked up and down the Rush Heath rose-walk, putting his emotions in order, and choosing his texts.

Something spoiled all that. It was his own sincerity, and the face and figure of the girl leaning through the foliage of a may-tree, and looking at him with widely opened eyes. This particular tree grew hollowed out on the inside, its lower branches lying like so many ledges with bands of shadow in between them. The long grass was all white and gold with buttercups and moon-faced daisies.

Jasper lifted his hat.

"David Barfoot told me I might find you down the lane."

His sudden appearing had thrown Nance's thoughts into confusion. She had been thinking about him, and he had startled the intimate inwardness of her thoughts. She was too conscious of their last meeting and the way she had rebuffed him.

She came out from amid the may boughs with a troubled shadowiness of the eyes. A sheaf of the white blossom lay in the hollow of her left arm. Perplexity is apt to simulate coldness and pride. She looked cold and white and upon the defensive.

The silence irked them both. They took refuge in vague superficialities.

"Fine trees, these. They looked like a pile of snow in the distance."

"Yes. I love the smell of may blossom."

"Scents carry one back to all sorts of memories."

"I know. I always like a bowl of wild flowers in my room."

"Are you going back to Stonehanger?"

She threw a quick and watchful look at him.

"Yes."

"Then I will turn back with you."

She seemed uneasy and perplexed. The half-scared look in her dark eyes touched him. What was she afraid of, and why did she glance at him in that queer, disturbing way? He began to relent, to lose himself in the world of her presence.

"You know that—my father——"

"I know that he does not want me at Stonehanger."

He dismounted, and set himself at her side.

"Then, if you know that——"

"Yes, but if you forbid a thing, it drives a man to do it. Besides——"

He found himself looking into her eyes, searching them with sudden impetuous passion. She glanced away, reddening, the bunch of may blossom crushed against her bosom. A thorn pricked her arm, but it was part of the pain of her perplexity.

She seemed to cast about for words.

"We lead such a lonely life, and father does not like strangers."

"Is that why you were so hard on me?"

"When?"

"Oh, you remember."

He was driving her into a corner, and it was impossible for him not to see her too palpable distress. It both troubled and angered him, pointing toward two possible explanations.

"You remember the night you rescued me out of the lane?"

"Yes."

"Well, you were very good to me—then. What made all this difference?"

"Father does not like strangers."

"But is that enough to make you treat a man as though——"

She broke in upon him, white and hurried.

"Mr. Benham, don't——"

"Nance, why won't you tell me the reason?"

"I can't."

"I'll take it well. It might help something pretty serious that I have to say to you."

She gave him a startled look, as though suspecting some other method of attack.

“You are so masterful!”

“No, no. You won’t help me—whereas I have ridden over to help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me what made you treat me as you did.”

She lifted her chin, and showed him a clear and obstinate profile.

“No, I will not.”

“You won’t help me!”

“If you have come to strike bargains——”

“Nance, you drive a man into being angry.”

“What right have you to be angry?”

“My own right.”

“Who gave it you?”

“A man seizes it. Do you think I don’t hold myself as good as that French fellow De Rothan?”

She paused, and looked at him half-warningly.

“You try to seize too much. The Chevalier de Rothan is my father’s friend. I——”

“You——”

“I have nothing more to say.”

“I have. It is what I came for. And it concerns your good friend De Rothan.”

She flashed her eyes at him, mistaking his grim sarcasm. They were on the edge of a quarrel, and very near to those bitter words that rise to the lips of passion.

"*I think that you and I are better apart*."

"I think that you and I are better apart."

"As you please. But I have not had my say—yet."

"Oh, you are unbearable!"

"One is not thanked for telling the truth. I came here to warn you that the whole business is discovered."

She swung round and faced him, holding up an impatient and restive head.

"Do all men talk behind each other's backs? What are you hinting at?"

Jasper looked at her stubbornly.

"How much do you know, Nance? By George, you look innocent enough!"

"What do you mean?"

"The Chevalier de Rothan is a French spy."

"Mr. Benham!"

"You have said that your father is his friend."

"Oh!"

"I will not use the word 'spy' when speaking of your father."

XX

Nothing could have more clearly proved Nance Durrell's innocence than the indignation that leapt up in her like a white flame out of a fire. It was the anger of youth, swift, generous, and impulsive.

"You call Anthony Durrell a spy!"

"I called De Rothan a spy."

"How do you know? How do you know?"

He was more busy with her face and gestures than with her words. It was a wonderful love-play to him, with its quick kindlings, its red, passionate lips, its eyes that flashed out melodramatic scorn. The very way she breathed, and held her head, was sheer revelation.

The sincerity of her anger challenged him.

"How dared you come to me with this tale?"

"Because it is true."

"How do you know?"

"I have seen and heard things."

"Well, then, you, too, are something of a spy."

"I could not help seeing and hearing what I did. I am not the only man who has suspected your father of French sympathies. As for De Rothan, we ought to have known him for a rogue. We English are such easy-going fools."

She walked on, head in air, eyes looking into the distance.

"I will not believe it."

"I am sorry."

"Oh, don't talk of sorrow!"

"Nance, do you think I came here to taunt and bully you?"

"Perhaps——"

"What the devil do you think I came for?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"To be rough—and quarrelsome?"

She was falling a little from the serenity of her indignation. Her anger had been a thing of the moment, and now that it was passing she knew that she had suspected her father, and her own suspicions went out to clasp hands with Jasper's accusations.

She looked slantwise at him, and a glimpse of his clean-cut mouth and steady eyes made her think of a strength and courage that waited. Of a sudden she felt desperately helpless, and desperately lonely. Why were they at cross-purposes, and quarrelling like boy and girl? It would be better if she spoke out.

"Well, what are you going to do? You seem so sure about it all. I suppose you will denounce us?"

"You knew nothing about it, Nance."

"You think that?"

His eyes studied hers.

"You are not made to tell lies. Are you going to let me help you?"

"Am I to accept all this on your authority?"

He nodded with an air of grave and imperturbable magnanimity.

"I believe, Nance, that you knew nothing. But have you never been brought to wonder what your father's life was, and what the Frenchman De Rothan meant to him?"

She looked at the ground before her, intent and thoughtful.

"Things have happened that have troubled me."

"Your father is not a man to talk."

"No. There have been things that I could not understand. Oh, it is hard!"

"I know."

Jasper's eyes softened. He stroked Devil Dick's neck as the horse walked quietly beside him.

"Nance?"

"Well, what now?"

Her voice was forlorn, and a little impatient.

“I understand why your father did not want me at Stonehanger.”

“Oh, but then——”

She caught herself up, and reddened.

“Go on.”

“He gave me a reason.”

“Tell it me.”

“Won’t you let me keep it to myself? I don’t know that I believe it any longer.”

Jasper had a flare of understanding.

“Oh—that! It was about my cousin, Rose Benham?”

“Yes and no.”

“What, more than that?”

“Don’t ask me any more.”

She glanced at him half pleadingly, and his square jaw and strong, confident head showed up convincingly against a cloud of slander.

“I don’t think I believe it. Don’t ask me to say more.”

He gave her a full, frank look.

“Have it so, Nance. I’m here in my own shoes, a free man, with nothing to hide under my coat. But I’ll tell you one thing: I have a good, fierce grudge against De Rothan.”

Her face expressed the searching of her thoughts.

“Because he is a spy? Or has he offended you?”

“Because I hate the man.”

“Then you are not—not disinterested?”

He smiled grimly.

“Nance, I’m not.”

She hid her eyes under black lashes, and her lips trembled perceptibly.

“But I must trust some one.”

“Trust me.”

“Yes, but——”

He bent toward her with intense earnestness.

"Nance—listen. I believe in my heart that your father is in very great danger. Spy he may not be; it is a low word and should not live near you. But he is a Revolutionist, a Jacobin, a sympathiser with the French. God knows what he hopes to get out of Napoleon! This fellow De Rothan is the danger. The country's mad and scared; they'd show no pity."

She was white and serious and a little frightened.

"Oh, I know—I know! But father——!"

"I know the kind of man he is, an enthusiast, ready to be martyred. There are people who suspect him, but I don't think a living soul knows as much of the affair as I do."

Nance's eyes were supplicating and eager.

"Yes—but can you help me?"

"We must rid Stonehanger of this fellow De Rothan."

"But how?"

"That will be my business."

"But it may be dangerous for you."

"Confound it, who cares! You've got to trust me, Nance, and by Heaven, I'll not fail you."

Her face and eyes warmed to him. His strength and confidence were giving her comfort.

"What strange creatures we are! A few minutes ago, I almost hated you, because you forced things on me; but now I feel that I must have your help."

"That is what I came to offer you. I have nothing to complain of."

They had been following the lane back to Stonehanger, when Nance, who seemed more restlessly alert than Jasper, saw a man on horseback appear between the furze-clad banks. He was a hundred yards away, but Nance knew him for De Rothan. She touched Jasper's arm.

"Look!"

"De Rothan?"

Her eyes met his with a new meaning. She was putting her trust in him, waiting to be guided by what he would say and do.

"Nance, pretend to be angry with me."

"Must I?"

"It was not so very difficult a little while ago."

She gave him a glimmering of the eyes.

"Must I be very proud?"

"Yes, freeze me for being too forward, or scorch me with scorn!"

A woman loves humour and some degree of subtlety in a man. Nance looked at De Rothan, and then turned to her dissembling.

"I wish you would not vex me with your attentions—I mean presence"—she blushed into a moment's laughter—"I very much resent it."

"If my company is displeasing to you——"

"It is—most displeasing."

"Well, then, why did you lead me on?"

"How dare you suggest such a thing."

"Do you mean to say that you have not encouraged me?"

"Your insolence is unbearable."

Jasper had raised his voice, and she echoed him with fine spirit. They made quite a pretty quarrel of it, Nance playing the part of beauty affronted, Jasper very much the rude and aggressive male. They hushed the affair, and smothered an intense desire to laugh. De Rothan was within a few yards of them. His saluting of Nance was a royal function; his glance at Benham a kingly threat.

"Mees Durrell, may I have the felicity to think that I am at your service?"

"O, Chevalier——"

"You go to the deuce," said Jasper under his breath.

De Rothan looked him over with cool scorn.

"Meester Benham, I think your presence here is unnecessary. I will conduct Mees Durrell back to Stonehanger."

"Please, if you will, Chevalier. This gentleman——"

"Mees Nance, I am full of understanding."

He bowed in the saddle to Jasper, and blessed him with a serene sneer.

"Meester Benham, I must ask you to relieve us of your presence."

Even though he was fooling the man, Jasper felt savage.

"What business is it of yours, sir?"

"I stand for courtesy—and chivalry, Meester Benham."

"Puss in Boots! I shall want a word with you, sir."

"I shall be at your service, when I have escorted Mees Durrell home."

"Good. In the lane?"

"Wherever you please."

Jasper caught Nance's eyes. She gave him a quick and secret smile as De Rothan dismounted to put himself at her side. They went off together up the lane, leaving Jasper standing beside Devil Dick. He watched them with curious and contradictory emotions, and a hatred of De Rothan that was not to be appeased by the thought that he had the man in a tight corner.

His eyes fixed themselves finally upon Nance, and he discovered infinite delight in watching her slim figure moving between the green banks of the lane. Everything about her was adorable, her anger, her perplexity, her slow drifting toward trust in him. That glint of mischief in her eyes! And how she had taken up the game with De Rothan! What a change in the course of an hour! He had ridden out in a puritanical mood and here he was ready to go down and kiss those two small feet.

Jasper smiled to himself and moved on up the lane. The gateway of Stonehanger appeared under the dark shade of the hollies and laurels. Nance was just passing through it, De Rothan standing hat in hand and holding the gate open. There was something infinitely offensive to Jasper in the bending of the man's figure toward Nance. He remembered how he had felt when he had seen them together on the terrace. Things had changed in a sense since then, but his grudge remained against the Frenchman.

De Rothan waited for him, a supercilious and flaunting figure that looked very tall in the shadow of the shrubs. He resembled a victorious captain waiting with arrogance for a beaten enemy to deliver up his sword. Jasper felt a stinging lust to smite burning in his right arm.

They met with frank enmity.

"You wish to speak to me, Meester Benham. I, too, have words to say. Let us lead our horses down the lane."

They walked on side by side, leading their horses by the bridles. De Rothan's nostrils were dilated, his eyes full of an angry glare. Jasper looked dogged.

"I must advise you to mend your manners, Meester Benham. I am a gentleman of France."

"Thanks, sir, thanks."

"In the future you will not thrust yourself upon Mees Durrell."

"Why not?"

"Because she does not desire it."

"Did she tell you so?"

"And because I forbid it."

"That hardly convinces me."

A common instinct made both men leave their horses standing and face each other in the lane. The days of the wearing of the small sword had passed. But men who are angry can quarrel without swords.

"So you have my orders, Meester Benham."

"I return them. On second thoughts I feel inclined to throw you and them into the nearest ditch."

"Sir!"

"Frenchmen can fight only with their cooking-spits."

In a flash De Rothan struck at Jasper's face with his open hand. The blow was caught, and the wrist seized with the grip of a man who was savagely angry. Jasper twisted De Rothan's arm, a schoolboy's trick, and De Rothan, with a snarl of pain, was driven to twist about so that his back was toward Jasper. The sinews cracked about the shoulder-joint, while Jasper tilted the Frenchman's hat over his nose.

"How does it please you, monsieur?"

"Dog!"

Jasper flung De Rothan's arm aside. The Frenchman swung round, and they were at each other like a couple of dogs. De Rothan was the taller man, but Benham was thickly built and very powerful about the loins and

shoulders. Moreover, he had been the rough-and-tumble champion at a country school. He had De Rothan round the middle, and crumpled him backward as though he were a sheaf of corn.

The Frenchman beat a fist in Jasper's face, and for the moment Jasper crushed him in his arms for the grim joy of feeling the cracking of De Rothan's ribs. Then he half lifted and half hustled him to the side of the lane.

The ditch was not a deep one and it was dry, but that was no saving of De Rothan's dignity. He emerged, dusty and speckled with spittle-blight, a man furious with physical shame.

"I do not fight like a ploughboy. You shall hear from me."

He felt his wrenched shoulder, and recovered some of his haughtiness.

"You have strained my shoulder-joint."

"Rest it for a few days, or months."

"Your insolence may cost you dear."

"I shall be at your service whenever you choose to fight."

He gave De Rothan a steady stare, and then climbed into the saddle.

"The fat's in the fire," he thought, as he rode off down the lane, "but—God! it was good crushing that fellow's ribs."

De Rothan's face was a study in malignant cynicism as he brushed his clothes and picked up his hat.

"Very well, very well, Mr. Benham; to-morrow, or the next day, I shall kill you. There shall be no mistake about that."

XXI

Grimly elated, Jasper rode back to Rush Heath. The day had given him far more than he had dared to desire. He had thrashed his man and made a second conquest of Nance Durrell's confidence. His jealousy had dispersed like a thunder-cloud, leaving a clear and adventurous sky.

At Rush Heath he found Jeremy Winter and Cousin Rose in the thick of a quarrel. Rose had driven over from Beech Hill, ostensibly to sit at Squire Kit's bedside, and treat him to some of her frank and pious opinions.

"Uncle Christopher, you shall listen to good words. It fills me with pity, to hear an old man curse and blaspheme."

Mr. Benham had leaned against his pillows and glared at her with a man's disgust. She had talked on and on, and though he had shut his eyes and pretended to snore, she had not been turned from thrusting her piety upon him. It had ended in Squire Kit hammering the floor with the stick he kept on the bed, and Jeremy had arrived to rescue him.

"Jeremy, I say,—Jeremy——"

Winter had understood things at a glance. He had hooked up her arm, and walked her off by main force, and that was why they were quarrelling in the oak parlour.

"I wonder you don't keep away from here, Mr. Winter. You never do any good to Uncle Christopher and Jasper."

Jeremy was the imperturbable fencer whose laughing eyes and sage, sardonic mouth always filled Rose with anger. Her attacks amused him, and Rose Benham insisted upon being taken very seriously.

"So you think I have debased the whole household; Jasper, too, eh?"

"You have always been an irreligious man. You would have led poor father into all sorts of foolishness if we had not prevented it."

"Poor man!"

"I hate your flippancy."

"What a world it is! I have seen my share of it, and upon my soul there is nothing to touch English piety. And there is no one who knows so much

about everything as a good back-country English gentlewoman. I suppose she has it all straight from the Almighty."

Rose sat very straight and stiff in her chair.

"That's right, Mr. Jeremy Winter, be blasphemous. At your age— —"

"At my age, Miss Benham, you will be a very old woman. As it is, the women still fall in love with me."

"Oh, you wretched old reprobate."

Jeremy went off into huge yet quiet laughter, and it was in the midst of it that Jasper entered with the steady, gleaming eyes of a man who had desires to satisfy and enemies to grapple.

"Hallo!"

He had one glimpse of Rose's stiff and implacable face.

"What have you been doing, Jerry?"

"I? Nothing, sir, nothing. But Miss Benham will have it that I am a disgusting old reprobate and not fit to be in this house."

His smile exasperated Rose. It was so good-tempered, so sly, so unanswerable.

"You ought to know Jeremy Winter by this time, Rose."

"Thank you. I know a little, and that has always been too much."

"Oh, come now!"

She felt that he was on Winter's side, the man's side, and it angered her.

"You men are all alike. You love old ruffians who tipple and tell bad stories."

"Now, how on earth do you come at that, Miss Benham? Keyholes, eh?"

"Mr. Winter, should I listen to your voice through a keyhole!"

Both men laughed, and Rose stood up. She looked thinner and sharper-featured when she was angry.

"Jasper, tell your man to bring my horses round."

And she whirled away from Rush Heath in a dust cloud of indignation. The cat in her knew and feared the dog in Jeremy.

Jasper rejoined Winter in the parlour. Jeremy was fighting his pipe, and looking humorously down his nose.

"Are you going to marry your cousin?"

"What, marry Rose!"

"You be careful, young man; she'll ask you the question and have your immortal soul in her reticule before you can say 'gammon'."

"I don't think she will, Jerry."

"That's good. You seem most deucedly pleased with yourself. What is it?"

Jasper went to the wine-cupboard and brought out a decanter and two long-stemmed glasses.

"Drink her health, Jerry."

"Miss Benham's?"

"Don't be a tease. *Her* health, and God bless her. By George, I have had my money out of De Rothan."

"How?"

"I landed him in a ditch. Do you know what it feels like to crush a man's ribs in, Jerry? It's a gorgeous feeling. I gather there will be a fight."

Winter looked serious.

"You may have thrown him all right, lad, but——"

"I have looked him in the eyes, Jeremy, and I can match him. Besides, I am going through with it—for the sake of Nance Durrell."

"O you youngsters! I've done it myself, too. Run your chest up against a sword-point because a girl glimmers her eyes. Tell me about it."

And Jasper told him.

Jeremy sat for a while in thought.

"Why don't you pounce on the man? Have him arrested. It would save a lot of trouble."

"I want to keep Durrell out of it. You see, Jerry, if I work this through quietly, it will save no end of a mess."

"Will it?"

"Yes."

"You seem cocksure."

"Haven't I got my devil back these few days with the foils? And look you, Jerry, do you remember fighting when you were in love?"

"I do."

"Were you beaten?"

"No."

"It makes you grim, quick as lightning, cool as cold steel. That's how it works with me."

Jeremy nodded his head sagely.

"Well," said he, "we'll spend the next two days fighting each other. And you bang away with your pistols. How do they carry?"

"I can hit a card five times out of six at twenty paces."

"Could you do it now?"

"I've got twice the nerve since I've seen her to-day."

"Confound you, I used to be just the same."

In the cool of the evening these two spent an hour in fencing together on the lawn by the cedars. The great black shadows of the trees lay in dark capes and promontories upon the green sea of the grass. The standard roses were in bloom, and the scent of the clover pinks in the borders filled the air. Swallows glided in and out, threading their way among the cedars, and circling round the tall chimneys of the house.

Parson Goffin hobbled up the drive, and sat down on a bench to watch Jeremy Winter and Jasper fencing. He had watched them at sword-play years ago, and there was nothing new in it to awaken curiosity.

Goffin was in one of his growling moods. He had a sore tongue from too much smoking, and England was going to the dogs.

"They say that we may have Villeneuve in the Channel any day during the next month. They don't know where he is; they expect him to swoop out of the blue. Boney will get across, and we shall be licking his shoes."

"A pretty angel of hope you are, Goffin!"

"Sir, we have been drinking too much these fifty years. The Almighty may be sending something to sober us."

"He gave us the Hanoverians to help us to drink! You are down at the heel, parson. If you could prove to me that Nelson is at the bottom of the sea, I might be ready to howl with you."

"So he may be, sir, so he may be, for all we know."

"Jasper, send for a good stiff glass of rum; Mr. Goffin is feeling a little faint and vapourish this evening. Yes, that was the best tussle we've had. It took me all I knew to keep your point out."

Parson Goffin's gloom was in sympathy with the gloom that overshadowed England during those months of May, June, and July. At Boulogne Napoleon waited for the chance that should give him control of the narrow sea—even for three days. Off Rochefort, Ferrol, and Brest the ships of Calder and Cornwallis kept up their grim blockade, while out yonder upon the Atlantic, Fate, Villeneuve, and Nelson faltered on the edge of the unknown. Nelson and his fleet had sailed away into the west, and men asked themselves what news the Atlantic would disgorge. Would it be the thunder of the French guns in the Channel, the breaking out of the ships blockaded in Brest and Rochefort, the sweeping of the Dover Straits, the red horror of invasion?

At Stonehanger Nance sat on the terrace wall and looked out toward the sea. The sunlight played upon her face and in her eyes, and gave them a brown radiance. There was a warmth and graciousness about her, a sadness that found its recompense in the richness of her thoughts and musings.

Her spiritual attitude toward her father was one of astonishment and compassion. She could pity him, even though she could not understand his motives. De Rothan was the scapegoat upon whom she laid the guilt and the burden of her resentment, though how Anthony Durrell had been inveigled into such schemes she could not imagine. What quarrel had he with England? He was a morose man, a silent man, and perhaps in a vague way she felt that he had been disappointed. Nance's nature was the very opposite of her father's. She was direct, generous, less ready to feel aggrieved. The flaming discontent of the fanatic is incomprehensible to healthy, humour-loving, sanguine people. There are men who will backbite their own country out of sheer hereditary cussedness. They are against everything that is—and Anthony Durrell was such a man.

He came out upon the terrace while Nance was there, and walked up and down under the house with his hands behind his back. There was a restless uncouthness even in the way he moved, for Durrell was one of those men who had been a sop at school, and a greenhorn at college. He had thrown a

ball like a girl, and his legs and arms were not made to work like the limbs of a virile male. Books, philosophy, and theorising had filled his circle of consciousness. His liver had grown sluggish with a sedentary life, and now he was nothing but a lean and embittered figure of denunciation and discontent, impatient, ineffectual, passionate, yet weak.

Nance felt a kind of pity for him as she watched him go to and fro. She could not help contrasting him with Jasper Benham. As for De Rothan, he was a sinister figure dogging the footsteps of this lean, white-haired, narrow-shouldered man.

She crossed over to her father.

"Would you like a walk on the common? It is cooler now."

He glanced at her as though he had only just discovered her presence.

"No, no; I'm busy, thinking."

"You can think while you walk, and I'll keep quiet."

"Thank you. I wish to be alone."

His strung forehead and irritable eyes repulsed her. Intuition warned Nance that it would be useless to attack him openly, even with the power of compassion. Some men are mad, even when they are sane. It is useless to argue with them. They have to be strait-jacketed by the common sense of the community and kept from doing themselves and other people harm.

XXII

Parson Goffin was still grumbling on the bench under one of the cedars when Jack Bumpstead appeared from the direction of the stables.

"Here be a man for to see you, Master Jasper."

"Who is it, Jack?"

"Thomas Stook o' Bramble End."

"Send him round. Wait, though, I'll come myself. Where did you leave him, Jack?"

"In the yard."

Jasper found Tom Stook sitting on the horse-block and tickling himself pensively with a straw. His brown face remained shy and stolid when he saw Jasper. He stood up, slouching his shoulders, the straw tucked away in one corner of his mouth.

"Well, Tom, what is it?"

Stook surveyed the yard, and scrutinised the kitchen windows with sneering suspiciousness.

"Them turmit-flies o' wenches; always poppin' about. Maybe, sir, you might like to see them signal lights at Stonehanger. I wouldn't be for promising, but I have my sense o' smell. They say that Mounseer Jerome be comin' ashore to-night."

"The smuggling rogue! How do you know, Tom?"

Stook grinned, and looked expressively at Jasper.

"Maybe a little bird dropped ut down t' chimney. Maybe there'll be kegs on t' beach. It be'unt no business o' mine, but you can see Stonehanger from my cottage."

"So these devils of smugglers play two games. They ought to sink Jerome and his boat. Tom, you've got some sense."

"Thank 'ee, sir."

"Get into the stable and saddle the new brown cob, not Devil Dick. And keep your mouth shut, see."

"I will—sure, Master Jasper."

Jasper went in by the back entry and made his way noiselessly upstairs. He took his pistols and a hanger, and rejoined Tom Stook in the stable. Jeremy and Parson Goffin were arguing together under the cedars, and Jasper left them at it, wishing to get away without being questioned. Coming out with Tom Stook and the cob he took the field path that turned aside under the orchard hedge.

The western horizon was a level band of yellow light, with blue-black hills below and a sky of lapis-lazuli above. The full moon was a great silver buckler on a field of blue. Big stars were beginning to glitter as Jasper and Tom Stook turned down by one of the high hedges with the long grass and weeds brushing their knees. The hedge hid them from Rush Heath, a hedge that smelt of honeysuckle, and trailed the pink sprays of the wild rose over the green of the hazel, thorn, and holly.

Twilight fell as they made their way toward Bramble End, and the world became a world of amethyst and of silver. The Stonehanger uplands were dim and vague in the distance. The colour had melted out of the western sky when they reached the rough track that led to Bramble End. Jasper had mounted the cob, and Tom Stook swung along ahead on his long and lumbering legs, a length of straw still dangling from one corner of his mouth.

Stook's cottage had the shape of a hay-rick. It was built of stone and thatched with heather. A tumble-down shed or lodge stood half hidden by three elder trees that grew close together in the hedge. All about the place lay a tangle of brambles, furze, blackthorn, and bracken.

"I'll put t' nag in t' lodge, Master Jasper."

"Right, Tom."

Jasper made his way to the back of the cottage. There was a piece of vegetable ground here shut in by a low hedge. A yew-tree grew close to the cottage, and a seat made of the rotting tail-board of a cart had been laid upon two logs. Away to the north rose Stonehanger Common, and in the twilight Jasper could distinguish the grey mass of Durrell's house.

He sat down under the yew-tree, and Tom Stook came round from the lodge.

"A good lookout, Master Jasper."

"No wonder you could see the lights, Tom. What time do they show them up yonder?"

"Must have been nigh on midnight when I've seen 'em afore."

"That means three hours' sentry work. Have you had your supper?"

"No, I ain't."

"You go in and get it. I'll keep a watch here. If it should come to a scuffle, Tom, are you ready to see it through?"

Stook scratched a meditative chin.

"Sure, Master Jasper, so long as it be'unt with Sussex folk."

"You don't mind beating a Frenchman?"

"They be nasty beasts with their knives and pistols."

"You can leave that part of it to me, Tom."

"Oh—I doan't say as I be afraid."

Jasper kept watch there in the dusk, with the light of the moon becoming more brilliant as night gave her the darkness that she needed. "Pee-weet, pee-weet" wailed a plover somewhere over the furze. From an oak wood in the valley came the "burring" of a night-jar. With steady patience Jasper kept his eyes on the place where Stonehanger house cut the sky-line. Once he saw the distant twinkle of a candle, coming from Nance's window, so far as he could judge. The furzelands were vague, black, and desolate under the moon, strange eerie wastes where anything might happen.

Jasper's thoughts dwelt upon Nance, though the reverie of a man in love is rather a visualising of the woman beloved than a meditation upon her mystery. The white face of the moon and the dusky elf-locks of the night were wholly feminine. Jasper imagined himself walking with Nance in the dark old shrubbery behind Stonehanger, looking into the dim dearness of her face, touching her hand, and uttering her name.

Tom Stook's clumsy figure drifted across these passionate imaginings. He was wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and looking toward Stonehanger.

"What may you be after, sir?"

"I am out hunting, Tom, to catch a fox of a Frenchman. And look you here, I want you to keep your mouth shut about all this, the lights up yonder, and the comings and goings. It will be worth your while."

"Sure, Master Jasper, you be a gen'leman o' sense. It be'unt no business o' mine."

"There is some one who has to be protected. I want to lay a rogue by the heels without harming innocent people."

Stook brought out a short clay pipe, and a little leather bag in which he kept tobacco. He had to go indoors to get a light from the wood fire that he had lit to cook his supper. When he emerged, the bowl of his pipe glowing, he had one very characteristic remark to make.

"It be powerful cold f' June."

Jasper felt for his pocket flask. He knew that it was inward warmth that the man needed.

"One pull, Tom, and no more. We must keep our heads clear to-night."

Two hours passed, and the vague, moonlit slopes of the common began to suggest all manner of mysterious movements to Jasper's tired eyes. Stonehanger was a dim outline against the sky. He had begun to doubt whether anything was going to happen when a bright, yellow point flashed out suddenly in the north. It remained there for some ten seconds, and then disappeared as though a curtain had been jerked forward to cover it.

"You seed ut, sir!"

"Was that from Stonehanger, Tom?"

"Sure."

They waited awhile, and in due course the light flashed out a second time and died back into the night with equal suddenness.

"What do they mean by that?"

"Mounseer Jerome be about somewhere."

Jasper meditated.

"I tell you what, Tom, we will make our way up to Stonehanger."

"Better try t' owld quarry, sir."

"They meet there?"

"I reckon they do."

"Have you got a lantern?"

"Sure."

"Fetch it, and bring a thick stick with you."

They left the cottage, Jasper with his hanger and pistols, Tom Stook carrying a lantern, and a stout hollywood cudgel. Tom took the lead, pushing his way along a narrow, winding path half overgrown by straggling furze, their figures melting away into the blackness of the moor.

After twenty minutes of this rough going, Tom Stook stopped abruptly, and stood listening. Jasper paused close to him. There was no wind, and no stirring of the furze in the clear sheen of the moonlight.

"T' quarry be yonder, sir."

"Where?"

"Just down over t' bank."

They spoke in whispers, bending forward and looking across the moor.

"Can you hear anything, Tom?"

"Not me."

He put the lantern down, and scratched his chin.

"I reckon I'll go on, Master Jasper, and take a look into t' quarry."

He went down on all-fours, and Jasper saw his long, loosely knit body go crawling along the path like some big beast of prey. He disappeared with nothing more than a faint rustling of the furze, and Stonehanger Common seemed as still and as empty as a becalmed sea at midnight. Tom Stook was away twenty minutes. He came back, walking, his holly-stick over his shoulder.

"There be'unt no one—yet."

"Well, then, we had better take cover in the quarry."

They went on and clambered down through the furze into the mouth of the quarry. A rough trackway led into it, and Tom Stook seemed to know the place as well as he knew his own garden. There was some open ground in the centre, though dwarf-trees, brambles, and furze made a tangled mass along the walls. Stook chose a place near the entry, a kind of nest shut in by the wild undergrowth, and under the black shadow of the quarry wall. A gap between two furze bushes gave them a view of the open space, and of the trackway leading into the quarry.

"I'll have t' lantern ready, Master Jasper."

He took off his coat, produced a tinder-box, and, going down on his knees, proceeded to get a light.

"She's got a shade, sir, and I'll put her on under t' bush with m' coat to make it safe."

The lantern was lit and hidden away, and they were both growing stiff and rather tired of waiting when Tom Stook touched Jasper's shoulder.

"Did ye hear that?"

Through the stillness of the moonlit night a faint sound reached them, a sound as of some one brushing through the furze. It might have been a strayed sheep, or even a rabbit scuttling among the dry stems of the furze, but for the distinctive scraping of feet over the rough ground. Jasper crept forward, and stood waiting in the gap between the two furze bushes. He had borrowed Stook's holly-cudgel, and was in the deep shadow, and not likely to be seen.

The footsteps come nearer and nearer, and paused outside the quarry. A deep and grumbling voice growled sulkily as though its owner were tired and out of temper. Then the man entered the quarry, passing close by the place where Jasper stood.

Benham saw him as a shortish, thickset man with a great round head, and a slouching walk. It was just a glimpse, for Jasper made his leap, springing out from the black shadow into the moonlight. The man swung round with a quick snarl of surprise.

"Tonnerre!"

The holly-stick swung just before a pistol flashed, and the bullet thudded against the wall of the quarry. Jasper knocked the pistol out of the man's hand, gave him a tap on the skull, and then closed. So far as the tussle went, it was not a very serious affair. Youth was well served in handling this little round cask of a man. He was rolled over, and pinned flat on his back, while Jasper wrenched a second pistol and a knife out of his belt and threw them away into the undergrowth.

"Tom, bring your lantern. Quick, man, quick!"

XXIII

Tom Stook came running out with the lantern.

"Have ye got him, Master Jasper?"

"It looks rather like it, Tom—eh!"

The light fell upon a fat, swarthy, and sullen face that blinked its eyes at the lantern.

"Mounseer Jerome—sure!"

The man heaved, and swore savagely.

"Sacre bleu,—give off my chest!"

"Lie still."

Jasper was in no mood for wasting time, since he desired the business over and done with before De Rothan or Durrell should appear.

"Tom, take him by the wrists and hold his hands above his head. Quiet, will you, or I'll give you a crack with the stick."

Jerome glared and lay still, his arms extended above his head like the arms of a man upon the rack. Jasper unbuttoned the Frenchman's coat, and went through all his pockets. He found nothing there save a pipe, and a tobacco-box. Something lying under the man's shirt betrayed itself as Jasper passed his hand over Jerome's broad chest. As Jasper tore the shirt open the Frenchman's body squirmed like the body of a man who stiffens his muscles to resist.

"Hold on, Tom."

"Help, there,—help!"

"Lie quiet, or by George, I'll put a bullet through your head."

Jasper drew out a flat, leather pocket-book or case that was fastened by a string round Jerome's neck. Jasper snapped the string, and turned aside toward the lantern to examine the plunder. It contained several sheets of paper neatly folded and covered with what appeared to be a jumble of dots, lines, and letters. Jasper's brown face showed grim and intent by the light of the lantern.

"Cipher, to be sure! This is what I expected to find."

He put the sheets back into the leather case, and thrust it into the inner pocket of his coat. The sea-captain's eyes were watching him with evil interest, and he had the air of one who listened.

Jasper understood. Captain Jerome expected a rescue.

"Tom, I want to be rid of this gentleman, and I don't want the red-coats to get hold of him, either."

"Sir?"

"March him down to within a mile of the sea, and send him off with a blessing."

"I'll do't, Master Jasper."

"Monsieur Jerome, it is lucky for you that I am giving you this chance. Clear out, and let us hear no more of you. If ever I hear of you showing your face on this side of the Channel, I'll have you taken and shot as a spy. You understand?"

"I speak no English."

"Nonsense. You get off back to France, and pray to God to keep you from playing at carrying secret signals. Up with him, Tom. Here, put one of my pistols in your belt."

Tom Stook grinned, and swung the Frenchman to his feet. Jasper gave him a pistol and the hollywood cudgel.

"Bundle him off, Tom. I want him out of the way. I am staying on here to see what happens."

Stook took the sea-captain by the collar.

"Come along, you barrel o' sour beer. No shouting, mind ye, and no tricks. Come along."

Jasper heard them go blundering along down the path, Stook helping the Frenchman along with vigorous bumps of the bent knee. Jasper smiled to himself and picked up the lantern, and, returning to his lurking-place, he put out the light and sat down to wait.

It was De Rothan whom he expected, this insolent and sneering *emigré*, who dabbled his hands in midnight treacheries. Jasper did not doubt that the packet of cipher he had taken from the smuggling sea-captain Jerome would compromise not only De Rothan but Anthony Durrell and his daughter.

Jasper's attitude was one of shrewd and patient restraint. A scheme that was defeated might be considered to be non-existent, and there would be no need to swoop upon the lesser dupes when the dominant spirit had been dealt with.

Something crackled into a clump of briers close to where Jasper lay in ambush. It was a stone flung from above as a signal to Jerome, who should have been waiting in the quarry. Jasper kept very still. He heard some one pushing through the furze and brushwood round the rough lip of the quarry. Footsteps came down toward the entrance. Then there was silence.

Jasper leaned forward and peered round one of the furze bushes. A man was standing in the trackway leading into the quarry, his face turned toward the sea. By his height and build, and by the arrogant throw-back of the head, Jasper knew him for De Rothan. He stood there like a figure carved in black basalt, motionless, watchful, full of a fine yet sinister suggestiveness.

Jasper watched him. How easy it would be to bring the man down, wing him, put an end to all his weavings of treachery. He did not doubt but that De Rothan was armed. They might make a fight of it there, but Jasper was not given to shooting in the dark. He wanted to prove the whole case against De Rothan, to convince himself and Nance of the man's double dealing.

Minutes passed, and De Rothan showed a growing impatience. He began to walk to and fro along the trackway, stopping from time to time to listen or stare out over the stretch of moonlit furze. It was evident that he had not heard the report of Jerome's pistol, and that he suspected nothing in the way of intervention. The smuggler had failed to appear; that was what made De Rothan restless.

For an hour the Frenchman walked up and down while Jasper lay behind the furze bushes and kept watch. Once De Rothan paused within three yards of him and stood listening, muttering angrily over the absence of Jerome.

His patience gave out at last. Jasper saw him walk to the entrance of the quarry, stare into the distance, and then turn, and clamber up the bank. Jasper held back till the sound of De Rothan's footsteps had died down into the night. Then he pushed Tom Stook's lantern under a bush, climbed out of the quarry, and, striking the path that led toward Stonehanger, followed it with some of the caution of an Indian working a trail.

Jasper neither heard nor saw anything of De Rothan till he came in sight of the chimneys of Stonehanger rising above the ridge of ground that hid the lower part of the house from view. Jasper paused here instinctively, and it

was well that he did so. A black figure rose into view on the rising ground above and stood with the grey oval of its face turned toward the sea.

Then De Rothan disappeared. Jasper pushed on, topped the rising ground, and over the furze saw Stonehanger grey and glaring in the light of the full moon. Chimneys, parapet, window frames, even the individual stones in the walls were clear and distinct. The thorns and yews were bunches of black foliage rising above the grey line of the terrace wall.

Jasper could not help asking himself why Jerome had chosen such a night for landing, and how he had been able to avoid the patrols.

"Money and rum work wonders. These smugglers squeeze in everywhere."

He saw De Rothan mount the steps to the terrace and stand there looking at the windows of the house. Jasper seized his chance to slip forward and gain the shelter of some furze bushes that straggled close to the terrace wall.

He heard voices on the terrace. Anthony Durrell had been waiting for De Rothan, and but for his short sight he would have seen Jasper make his dash across the open grounds for the shelter of the furze bushes under the wall.

"Jerome has failed us. I waited more than an hour."

De Rothan glanced at Nance's window.

"Is madam asleep?"

"Yes. Speak softly, she mustn't know that you are here. Perhaps we mistook Jerome's light."

"No, I'm sure of that. Hallo—!"

The voices broke off abruptly like the voices of two plotters who hear the sound of stealthy footsteps coming toward them. Jasper had made his way to the terrace wall. He flattened himself against it, expecting to see a head appear over the edge of the parapet.

Then he heard some one calling, "Who's there?"

It was Nance's voice, and the moonlight seemed to quiver with it. She had thrown her lattice open and was leaning out, and scanning the terrace. Durrell had drawn De Rothan under the dense shadow cast by one of the yews.

They remained there motionless, till Nance disappeared for a moment from the window.

"Quick, round to the back of the house."

"This game of hide-and-seek is all nonsense, Durrell. You had much better let the girl know the truth."

"No, no, she's not to be trusted."

"My dear sir, I'll make her trustworthy. You do not know how to manage women."

They had crossed the terrace and passed down the passage that led to the offices and stables. Durrell was agitated and impatient, De Rothan a little scornful. He was tiring of Durrell's moods and eccentricities. If everything went well, the fanatic would have served his purpose in the course of the next few weeks. He would be thrown aside like a broken tool.

"Jerome won't come to-night. I'll be off; I left my nag round under the wall."

Durrell was full of vague fears.

"I hope nothing has happened."

"Bah! Jerome found the moon too bright. Besides, the news we expect is too important to be risked with a shrug of the shoulders. If Villeneuve can only get into the Channel and hold it for three days! Fate will spin the coin for us before long."

Meanwhile Jasper had crept cautiously along the front of the wall and reached the steps. He climbed them slowly, pausing when his head came on a level with the terrace. It was deserted. Grass, flower beds, and stone-paved walk lay white in the light of the moon.

Jasper climbed the last steps, and stood looking up at Nance's window. A passionate exultation possessed him, and for the moment he was ready to take the maddest of risks. He wanted to see Nance, to speak with her, to feel that they were conspiring together against De Rothan and the French.

The chance was nearer to him than he imagined. There was the click of a key turning in a lock, and the garden door opened, showing an oblong shadow in the moonlit wall. Some one was standing there in the shadow, and Jasper, caught in the full moonlight, laid a hand upon the pistol in his belt.

The figure in the doorway moved out into the moonlight. It was Nance. She had slipped on an old gown, and a pair of shoes, and come down, shivering, to brave the truth.

"Nance!"

She hung back a moment, and then came gliding out across the grass, the moonlight making a silver mist of her loosened hair. Mouth and eyes were round shadows.

"You! Is it you?"

She was so close now that Jasper could see the moonlight in her eyes. The pupils were large and black, and swimming with a kind of fear.

"Was it you I heard?"

"No. De Rothan and your father."

"Where are they?"

"They have gone round to the back. I have something that I must tell you. And we may be seen here."

They stood looking into each other's eyes. The clatter of a horse's hoofs came from the lane, followed by the slamming of a door.

Nance started, and a shiver of excitement went through her.

"It is so light here, and we shall be heard—"

Jasper reached out, and caught her hand. She did not flinch or resist him.

"Quick! Down the steps."

They fled away, hand in hand, like a couple of children.

XXIV

They were on Stonehanger Common among the furze bushes with the moonlight shining down on them, and the silence of night over the land. The horizon was an horizon of silvery distances, woodland, sea, and hill. There was no wind moving, and the air was fresh and fragrant with dew.

Jasper still held Nance's hand. They had taken one of the grass paths that wound down over the common to the fields and woods. The moonlight was on their faces, and they said but little for the moment. They had passed suddenly into a new world, and were somewhat awed by its strangeness and its beauty.

There was an audacity, too, about the thing that thrilled them both. Youth called to youth. They looked at each other as though there were wonderful things to be discovered in each other's eyes.

"What have you to tell me?"

Jasper had taken off his hat, and was walking bareheaded beside her. At such a season every gesture has an exquisite significance. There is homage, passionate utterance, in every movement of the head and body.

"I have many things to tell you."

She caught the man's meaning and turned it back with a shy smile.

"I mean—about this man De Rothan."

"I am afraid that I have been playing the spy."

"You?"

"It was for good ends, and to help you and yours."

She looked at him anxiously.

"Have you found out anything more?"

"A little. Look at this."

He dropped her hand gently, and pulled out the leather case that he had taken from the sea-captain, Jerome.

"I robbed some one of this to-night—yes, fairly and squarely—down in the quarry. It was their go-between, their secret letter-carrier from France—a

smuggling captain. These dispatches should be in De Rothan's hands. He came down to the quarry, but we had packed his man off with the fear of God in him."

Nance's head was very close to Jasper's shoulder as she bent to look at the papers.

"What are they?"

"Messages in cipher. One has to find out the code. But you see what all this means."

She did see it, and her face was white and serious in the moonlight.

"It means danger for us."

"Unless we smother it."

"But what will you do?"

He replaced the case in his pocket.

"It seems to me that I have two causes to serve, to put an end to this system of spying, and to save your father from ruining himself. There is only one thing to be done; deal with De Rothan."

"But how? If you have him arrested——"

"No, nothing so clumsy as that. I began the attack by quarrelling with him yesterday."

"After you left me?"

"Yes. I pitched him into the ditch."

Her eyes looked frightened, and there was a tremor about her mouth.

"What have you done! It means an affair of honour."

"Just so, Nance. That was why I did it. I expect to hear from him in a few hours."

She was distressed and perplexed.

"But how can I let you do this—risking your life for us!"

"I am doing it because I like it."

"No, it is for us. I can't let you. I'll go to father and make him give it up."

The sincerity of her distress touched him very deeply. He reached out and caught her hands.

"Nance, I'm no boy. I'm as good a man as De Rothan. I can't go back; my honour's in it. I've got to fight this man and beat him. Don't you see how it will mend everything?"

She would not meet his eyes.

"But you are sacrificing yourself——"

"No—no—no. Look at it in this way. I fight De Rothan; perhaps I kill him—perhaps I only wound him. If he comes out of it alive, I take him by the collar, tell him what I know, and give him twelve hours in which to leave the country. Go he shall. Then will come the time to appeal to your father's common sense."

His blunt confidence almost persuaded her.

"Oh, you are brave enough. But as to my father's common sense——"

Jasper laughed at her quaint despair.

"Well, I shall come to him and say, 'Mr. Durrell, I happen to have discovered about this French affair. I have some of your secret papers in my possession. Our friend the Chevalier de Rothan is dead, or has fled the country. The game is up. Swear to try no more plotting, and I will not breathe a word of what I know. Otherwise I shall have to hand you over to the authorities.'"

Her eyes flashed with approval.

"Ah, yes—that would be great. It might settle everything."

He drew her a little nearer to him.

"Not everything, Nance. But I am not here to ask for what I have not earned."

She did not look at him, but hung her head a little.

"You are being too good to us."

"That's no credit to me. I can't help it."

His frankness brought her eyes glimmering up amusedly to meet his, and it was then that she noticed that they had come within a hundred yards of the big oak wood that bounded the common on the south-east. The domes of the trees gleamed in the moonlight.

“Look! Do you see where we are?”

“By George, yes. I suppose we had better turn back.”

“Please.”

“But supposing they have locked us out?”

“I shall have to throw stones at father’s window.”

“Yes, but then— —”

Her mouth wavered into mischievous curves.

“He will be told that I have been out in the moonlight looking for voices.”

“That’s it—that’s it.”

He looked at her with fine approval.

“Yes, show spirit, that’s the thing. But supposing, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Anthony is asleep and won’t be wakened?”

“There is the stable. I should not mind a bed of hay.”

“And scold—before you are scolded in the morning. It is like getting in the first blow.”

Nance fell into a more serious mood as they saw Stonehanger standing bleak and grey in the moonlight. She knew that she was to be left alone with her own thoughts and fears, nor could she escape from some dread of the crisis that Jasper was provoking for her sake. She was afraid of De Rothan, and knew him for a dangerous and a masterful man.

They came to the place where the furze thinned out toward the rough grassland below the terrace. Nance faltered and paused. Her face looked shadowy and troubled.

“We must say good-bye here.”

He looked at her very dearly.

“Good night, Nance.”

Her hands seemed to wait to be taken in his, and her face was turned to his with sudden wistfulness.

“I don’t like to think of what may happen.”

“Don’t think of it, then.”

"How can I help it?"

They looked straight into each other's eyes.

"Nance, I'm not afraid of anything—for your sake. Take heart, dear, take heart."

Her lips quivered. Her white face and dark hair seemed to swim nearer to him in the moonlight.

"Nance——"

Their lips met. Her upturned face dreamed for a moment with shadowy mouth and closed eyes. Then she drew her hands away, and fled in a shy panic across the grass.

Jasper watched her with exultant tenderness. She paused, and turned at the steps, waved to him and disappeared. He was hidden from the house by the furze bushes, and he kept cover there lest Anthony Durrell should be watching from one of the windows.

Jasper made his way back toward Bramble End and Tom Stook's cottage. The night seemed very wonderful. The black summer woods reminded him of Nance's hair.

Three miles away De Rothan was riding slowly along lanes and field paths, moody-eyed and savage, a man possessed by ugly emotions. Jerome's failure to appear at the quarry had not troubled him very greatly. It was a dull anger against the man who had toppled him into a ditch that filled De Rothan's consciousness. He hated Jasper Benham with all the hatred of which a strong and passionate man is capable. He meant to be revenged, to salve his own smarting self-conceit. But even the easing of this blood lust was an inopportune necessity thrust upon him in the thick of many dangers. The affair had come to a head at the moment when De Rothan least desired it, for there were the larger issues to be remembered. In ten days—twenty days—a month, Napoleon might be in England. De Rothan wanted those days free and untrammelled. If he could only fight this man in some secret corner, and leave him lying hidden in a ditch! Yes, but would Jasper Benham consent to such conditions? Would it be possible for them to fight without a living soul knowing of the quarrel? De Rothan felt sore and savage over the problem. It threatened confusion to his plans, promised to interfere with the delicate balancing of possible events.

He reached the Brick House about three in the morning, stabled his horse, and was let in by the man Gaston. Supper had been laid in the long parlour, and De Rothan sat down and ate with the morose deliberation of a

man who is vexed by his own thoughts. He was tired, too, and thirsty, and wine was a welcome sustainer. The long night spent in the open made itself felt. De Rothan fell asleep in his chair, while the two candles on the table burned steadily toward the sockets.

The light of the dawn was just touching the windows when a man came up the brick path to the porch and hammered at the oak door. The sound woke De Rothan, who sat up in his chair and stared at the candles. The knocking at the door was loud and persistent. De Rothan took a hanger down from over the fireplace, picked up one of the candles, and went out into the hall. There was a grill in the door, closed by a little wooden shutter. De Rothan set the candlestick on the floor, pushed back the shutter, and, looking through, saw a piece of greyish sky, and a man's right shoulder.

"Hallo—who's there?"

"Jerome."

"The devil! You are late, and at the wrong place."

"You'll thank me for being here at all."

De Rothan unbolted the door and let Monsieur Jerome in. He looked tired and sulky, with a shock-haired head that resembled the head of a wild beast. His forehead showed a big, purpling bruise.

He was a bearer of bad news, and he looked it. De Rothan guessed that at the first glance.

"What has gone wrong?"

"I'm thirsty. I'll drink first."

"Good, my child. Is it Dutch courage you want?"

"Look you here, Monsieur de Rothan, if I have come here to save your neck, keep your accursed tongue out of your cheek. I'll have none of it."

He looked savage and dangerous. They passed into the parlour. There were glasses on the table, and De Rothan took a spirit bottle from an oak cupboard, and mixed Jerome a stiff glass of grog.

"Sit down, man. What has happened? Why didn't you come to the quarry?"

"I came there right enough."

"So——!"

"Yes, to be knocked on the head and have the cipher stolen."

De Rothan's figure stiffened like a sword that has been bent against the floor, and is allowed to spring back into shape.

"You have lost the dispatches!"

"I say they were taken from me."

"By whom?"

"That fellow whom Mees Nance was kind to at Stonehanger, that Jasper Benham."

De Rothan's face grew dusky.

"God—you great fool—how did it happen?"

"Keep your big words to yourself. He and a man of his were in hiding. They knocked me on the head and had me on my back before I could take aim with a pistol. Then I was marched down to the sea by a lanky devil of a peasant, and left there to find the boat. They promised to have me hanged if I said a word, and didn't jump the Channel. I put out, and managed to sneak in and land again in the marshes—to save your neck—see! A lot of gratitude you seem to show me."

De Rothan stood resting his hands on the back of a chair. He did not speak for some seconds.

"Jerome, you have done me a service. I shall not forget it."

The sea-captain finished his grog, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He glanced at the windows that were going grey with the dawn.

"Time to make a run for it. The game is up."

De Rothan's forehead was one fierce frown.

"No, by heaven, it is not! I have these dispatches to recover—and to cut out Mr. Jasper Benham's tongue."

XXV

Jerome had gone, and De Rothan walked up and down the brick-paved path between the porch and the gate, with the two yew-trees cut in the shape of peacocks spreading their tails on either side. There were climbing roses flowering over the rust-red front of the house. The stone pillar of the sun-dial had an edging of rank, green grass.

De Rothan stood by the sun-dial and stared at it reflectively. What a thing was Time, how trivial and yet how urgent with its little droppings of sand or the slow stealing of a shadow! And time, delay, was everything to De Rothan for the moment. It was as though a marvellous clock had been constructed; that he had set it going and was waiting to hear it chime all manner of tunes at the hour of noon, when chance, in the shape of a Sussex squire, threatened to send a pistol bullet into the works, and to ruin the whole mechanism.

How was the thing to be prevented?

De Rothan's consciousness of the imminent peril of a betrayal was like the barking of dogs about a man who was trying to puzzle out some problem. The need for immediate action importuned him. He must have silence, for a week, two weeks, a month, silence till Napoleon's schemes matured, till Villeneuve made his dash for the Channel, and the French bayonets glittered in English meadows.

Supposing he killed this man?

So far as he could see, this grim attempt at a solution would only plunge him into further difficulties. There would be a huge outcry, for it would be next to impossible for him to hope to keep it secret. Even if he pleaded that it had been an affair of honour, the gentry here would not be in a mood to show much pity.

Moreover, Jasper Benham might have handed on his information, though it had been in his possession only a few hours.

It took De Rothan some time to strike the one possible line of attack. The idea came to him as an inspiration. He seized it, and turned it over and over in his mind with the exultant audacity of a man recovering his self-confidence.

De Rothan returned to the parlour, and sat down before the oak bureau by the window. The scratching of a quill pen ran on through the silence. He frowned, and moved restlessly in his chair as he wrote, his whole mind-force concentrating itself upon the wording of that letter. When he had finished it and sealed it, he sat awhile, reflecting. Some one was moving now in the house. Gaston and the other two servants were stirring.

De Rothan went out into the hall and waited. A door opened. Heavy footsteps came down the stairs.

"Gaston."

"Monsieur?"

"Quick, man, come in here."

He took the slow, surly fellow into the parlour, poured him out a glass of wine, and began to talk decisively and quickly. Gaston listened, sipping his wine, and staring at De Rothan with the intelligence of a shrewd and ugly dog.

"You can trust me, monsieur."

"It will not be for nothing."

"No, no, one does not risk one's neck for nothing."

"You know Rush Heath Hall; we have often ridden that way. Saddle a horse at once, and take this letter to Mr. Jasper Benham. Give it to none but him. Answer no questions. Wait for him if he is not at home."

"Yes, monsieur."

"I will look to things here. François and Jean will obey you, if needs be?"

"They fear me, monsieur."

"Good. There is the south attic. We can knock staples into one of the oak posts, and fasten rings to the floor. Off with you, Gaston. By the Emperor, there is no time to lose."

It happened that De Rothan's man did not have to ride all the way to Rush Heath that morning. As he was coming down Hog Lane into the road from the direction of Bexhill, he sighted a gentleman on a brown cob trotting toward him. Gaston was none too sure of the way, and he hailed the man on the brown cob.

"To Rush Heath, sir?"

Jasper reined in with a stare at this queer-looking rogue in livery on a smart-looking horse. He was riding home from Tom Stook's cottage after two hours' sleep on a bundle of bracken, the bracken being cleaner than Tom's bed.

"Yes. What do you want at Rush Heath?"

"I carry a letter."

"From the Chevalier de Rothan, perhaps?"

"From the Chevalier de Rothan to Meester Jasper Benham."

Gaston chewed at his broken English, for he was a man who talked as though he were munching a crust.

"I can save you two miles. I am Mr. Jasper Benham."

Gaston eyed him critically.

"All right, monsieur, you need not doubt me being myself. I was expecting to hear from your master."

Gaston handed the letter over.

"It is urgent, monsieur."

"No doubt."

"Good day to you, monsieur."

"Good day to you."

And they parted company, Jasper riding on toward Rush Heath.

Curiosity pinched him, and he stopped his horse under the shade of one of the big chestnut-trees by Lavender's Forge, and opened De Rothan's letter. It was written in a fine hand upon fine paper, and the heads and tails of the letters ran into curls and flourishes, making it quite a courtly document where each word kept up a kind of royal progress.

> MR. JASPER BENHAM.
>
> SIR—
>
> I send this in haste by the hands of my servant. Seeing that I have had news that calls me to London, and seeing that I must chastise you before I go, I ask you to meet me in the clearing in Darvel's Wood. You will know the place. They tell me charcoal-burners used to burn charcoal there.

I have no time to attend to formalities and to send you my friends. I desire to fight you as man to man, and I shall go alone to Darvel's Wood.

Bring a sword and pistols. We will take our choice.

I shall be in the wood by seven o'clock this evening, and I shall wait there for an hour. If you do not come to me I shall be constrained to scorn you as a coward, and shall go my way, promising to deal with you on my return.

De Rothan.

The audacity and the informality of the challenge were all to Jasper's liking. De Rothan was giving him the opportunity that he desired, and its very nearness made him realise the utter seriousness of the adventure. De Rothan would show him little consideration when their swords crossed or their pistols pointed in the middle of Darvel's Wood. It was a question of nerve, steadiness, and determination. Men pull themselves together to meet such hazards, more easily perhaps when they have learned to take big risks in some such school as the hunting field. Moreover, Jasper Benham had pledged himself, and he was in love.

He would ride to Darvel's Wood and fight De Rothan. His confidence steadied itself on a quiet belief in his own strength and skill. There was just that simmer of exhilaration in his mood that makes a man a little better than his normal self. It was his day. He felt on the top of the game, with all the confidence of a man who attacks.

He rode on toward Rush Heath, putting his plans in order.

There was Jeremy Winter to be considered, and he had to decide that he would tell Jeremy nothing. Winter would never consent to let him fight upon such terms, and would insist on going with him to Darvel's Wood. Jasper knew what Jeremy could be when he was obstinate, and that it was hard to beat him from a position when he had once chosen it. He would have to keep Jeremy Winter out of the adventure.

At Rush Heath Jasper found that Jeremy had ridden into Hastings, and might not be back till supper time. This was useful in its way, and Jasper showed his sound sense by making a light meal and going straight to bed. He wanted steady nerves and a fresh body, and though few men could have slept on the edge of such an adventure, Jasper accomplished it, a point to his credit. He had told Jack Bumpstead to call him at four o'clock, and at that hour he arose, dressed himself, went below, and made a meal.

To get from Rush Heath to Darvel's Wood one could go by way of Stonehanger Common, and Jasper rode that way, meaning to see Nance. A glimpse of her would be as a cup of red wine to him, though the melancholy of fatalism was not part of his nature. His own imagination was not strong enough to force upon him a vision of his own body lying dead in Darvel's Wood. He neither felt like dying nor being beaten, but he had the sense to realise that in a couple of hours he might be dead. The thought did not frighten him, but roused a sense of cheerful incredulity.

Anthony Durrell had become nothing more than De Rothan's dupe, the man of the arm-chair being the servant of the man of the sword, and Jasper did not trouble his head about Durrell's prejudices. He rode into the yard at Stonehanger, fastened Devil Dick to the ring by the stable door, and, leaving his sword and pistols there, walked round the house to Nance's garden on the terrace.

He found her there, cutting the dead blooms from the rose-bushes, and the sight of her gave his mood the touch of deeper solemnity that it had lacked. He felt of a sudden that life was a very serious and passionate affair, and that no one was justified in risking it lightly. The girlish figure bending over the rose-bushes made him bend more reverently over her fate and his own.

"Nance——"

She had not heard his footsteps on the grass, and it was a coy, flushed face that she turned to him. Her eyes might have shown him that she did not regret anything. The kiss upon her mouth had enriched life for her, and made it more dear and desirable.

"You! It is rash of you to be here!"

"I don't think so. Is your father at home?"

"No; he went out for a walk over the common."

"Either way, it does not matter."

They moved to a seat under one of the yews, Jasper's hand holding Nance's arm just above the elbow. She looked round and up at him with shy and shining eyes.

"How did things happen last night after I left you?"

"Quite happily. Father was waiting. He said nothing."

"What do you make of that?"

“Perhaps he does not know whether to tell me everything or nothing.”

“Why not make him trust you?”

“Against his will?”

Jasper held both her hands in his.

“Nance, I shall have news for you to-morrow, news that should sweep all these deceits aside. I shall come and talk to your father—as I promised. And you will help me to make him see the uselessness of further plotting with the French.”

Nance’s hands tightened on his. She understood what his words portended.

“You mean——”

“Nothing as yet. I may have good news.”

“Then there is danger.”

“Don’t let the thought of that trouble you.”

She looked him steadily in the eyes, compelling them to acknowledge the truth.

“Jasper?”

“Well, dear—”

“You know you are trying to hide this from me. You are going to fight this man.”

“Well, do I look like a dead man, or one who is not sure of pulling through? I never meant you to know this, but things will out.”

“When is it?”

“In an hour or so.”

“Oh, Jasper!”

He showed a fine and tender cheerfulness.

“I have been longing to fight him, Nance, and here is my chance. What’s the hour? By George, I must be going.”

She caught his hands and would not let him go for the moment. Her eyes were afraid.

“It’s wrong of me to let you do this.”

"No, no."

"If the wrong thing should happen!"

"Nance, it has to be; it's an affair of honour. Do you think I would let a man like De Rothan call me a coward? No, by God, I am going to take him by the shoulders and thrust him out of your life."

He rose, and his arm went round her as they crossed the terrace, and passed round to where Devil Dick waited in the stone-paved yard. The pistol butts sticking out of the holsters, and the sword leaning against the stable wall made Nance's mouth quiver.

"Who is going with you?"

"No one."

"Where is it to be?"

"In Darvel's Wood. I shall ride back here."

He talked so as to hearten her as they passed through the wild shrubbery to the gate. Her tense, white face hurt him. It was so near to tears and yet so very far from them.

"God bless you, Nance. In two hours I shall be back again."

He kissed her, and felt her lips answer his with quick and passionate abandonment.

XXVI

Long slants of sunlight came through the trees as Jasper rode into Darvel's Wood. The place was a smother of leaves, for the underwood had not been cut for five years or more, and the hazel tops were up among the lower boughs of the oaks. A broad ride ran through the wood from north to south like a gallery tunnelling through the green gloom.

A jay screamed raucously in the distance, but save for the bird's cry the silence was complete. The very sunlight stealing through shone upon leaves that did not quiver. There was an eeriness about the stillness that suggested treachery and secret threats.

For the first time Jasper felt something that was akin to fear. It was a vast uneasiness; a primitive, physical distrust of his surroundings. The wood threw deep shadows, and the shadows lay across his confidence. Was he trusting De Rothan too much by meeting him alone in the middle of this wood? The man might have been warned, and be tempted by his own danger. Their meeting was avowedly for polite and gentlemanly murder, but it was possible that De Rothan might put his honour in his pocket and pull the trigger of his pistol ten seconds too soon. Jasper shivered with a kind of chilly alertness. He found himself favouring swords rather than pistols. There was less chance of trickery with cold steel.

He was not sorry when he came to the clearing in the centre of Darvel's Wood. A horse tied to a tree, and a tall figure walking up and down in the sunlight gave him something real to look at. De Rothan was waiting for him, and he was alone.

The clearing had been used by charcoal-burners years ago, and it was marked in the centre by a circle of sleek and vivid grass that did not look unlike a great fairy-ring. Half of the clearing lay in shadow, the other half in sunlight. The boles of the oak-trees rose like grey-green pillars round it, curtained in between by the foliage of the hazels.

De Rothan swept off his hat and bowed. His grandiose courtesy made Jasper keep a keener eye on him, for he would not have trusted this child of St. Patrick and St. Louis behind his back. A case of pistols and a sword lay on a black cloak at the foot of a tree.

"The very best health to you, Mr. Benham."

His politeness was ironical. The man appeared to be his conceited and condescending self, cynically amused, and not in the least flurried.

Jasper rolled out of the saddle and fastened Devil Dick to a tree. The vague sense of apprehension had left him. He felt hard, and grim, and steady now that he and De Rothan were face to face.

"I am at your service, Chevalier."

"I am charmed, sir. Please choose your weapon. It is immaterial to me whether we fight with sword or pistol."

He swaggered finely, throwing off an air of aristocratic nonchalance.

"I prefer cold steel."

"Excellent, Mr. Benham, excellent. You have given me my own desire. Let it be cold steel. I would rather kill my man with a sword than with a pistol."

He went to the oak-tree, picked up his sword, and came back to Jasper with the most condescending of smiles.

"I see no reason why we should delay, Mr. Benham."

"None at all."

"Very good. We had better fight here in the shade."

They went apart, stripped off coats and waistcoats, and rolled up the sleeves of their sword-arms. De Rothan posed, and made a series of rapid passes and parries, ending the display with a whirl of the sword. He felt the muscles of his right shoulder, and smiled. His forearm was thin and white, and shaded with black hairs.

"More supple than most young men's! You have a fine arm, sir, the arm of a ploughboy. Come—I am at your service."

They took ground, saluted, and crossed swords, De Rothan resting his weight on his left foot, and holding his head with a kind of high fierceness. His eyes looked dangerous yet amused.

Jasper called to mind Jeremy's advice. De Rothan was a man whose vanity might be played with, and who might be lured into despising his opponent. It takes a subtle swordsman to ape clumsiness, and yet to keep a clever adversary out. Jasper tried it, and was nearly run through the shoulder for his pains. The Frenchman's point tore his shirt.

De Rothan's face with its fierce and arrogant eyes was like a foul word flung in Jasper's mouth. His hatred aimed for a body thrust. His swordsmanship caught a sudden flash of brilliance. He had his chance and took it, and saw blood on the Frenchman's shirt.

It was a skin wound, but De Rothan leapt back with a cry of savage surprise. His eyes looked beyond Jasper for the moment to where the head and shoulders of a man showed from behind a tree trunk.

Jasper caught the look, but had to keep face foremost and meet the return rush of De Rothan's sword. The man Gaston had come out from behind the tree, and had his fist raised, whirling a stone. It did no more than strike Jasper between the shoulders, but it staggered him sufficiently to let in De Rothan's sword.

Run through the sword-arm, he was seized from behind, thrown down, with De Rothan, Gaston, and another man on top of him. Grim, silent, yet violent figures, they wasted no words. Jasper's sword was kicked away. He was rolled over on his face, his arms tied behind his back, and his ankles lashed together. Then they lifted him between them, carried him into the thick of the underwood, and threw him down at the foot of a clump of hazels.

De Rothan spoke to Gaston.

"Get the horses. Don't let Benham's beast break away."

He went out into the clearing, put on his coat and waistcoat, and, returning, stood by Jasper, looking down at him with amused contempt.

"Well, Mr. Benham—well, you are no fool with a sword."

Jasper lay in a dumb rage. The lust to resist was still strong in him, and he was savage over the roughness the men had used. The dastardly nature of the whole thing maddened him; also the knowledge that he had been tricked.

"You damned cur!"

Their brevity was expressive, but the words did not appear to hurt De Rothan.

"Mr. Benham, we are playing a critical hand in a great game—that is all. If there is any gratitude in you, you should be grateful to me for not having killed you. Meddlers must not complain if they are treated without ceremony."

His complacency scourged Jasper's sense of savage humiliation.

"This comes of trusting the word of a scoundrel. I was a fool not to have you arrested and shot."

De Rothan took out his snuff-box, and helped himself with finger and thumb.

"So you confess to that, Mr. Benham. It is a relief to me to know that you have been a fool. Now, if you will pardon me, we will have that packet of cipher you stole from my friend last night."

So De Rothan had been warned! Jasper cursed his own self-confidence that had persuaded him to try and carry the adventure through alone. No wonder De Rothan had laid a trap. The bitterest thing of all was that the packet of cipher lay in the breast pocket of his coat.

"Give me the gentleman's coat, François."

A wonderful smile spread over his face as he felt in the pocket and drew out Jerome's packet.

"Mr. Benham, I am obliged to you for being so simple. This may save a great deal of trouble. At all events, you will be spared the vexation of deciphering it."

He put it in his pocket, looking down at Jasper with whimsical self-satisfaction.

"You will have to be my guest for a time, Mr. Benham, and we will have that arm of yours seen to. It may inconvenience you, but that cannot be helped. I must keep you from meddling in my affairs."

Jasper said nothing. He was thinking quickly and angrily, and not greatly to his own content.

"Gaston, I think you have a silk handkerchief there. We had better tie up Mr. Benham's mouth, or he may be too talkative."

They gagged Jasper and bandaged his eyes. Dusk was falling, and De Rothan went back to the clearing to see that the man François had taken up Jasper's sword and pistols.

The wood grew darker each minute. De Rothan, returning, sat down at the foot of a tree with his sword across his knees. He had sent Gaston ahead along the ride to see that no one was loitering there.

It was nearly dark when Gaston returned. De Rothan and he spoke together in undertones. Jasper heard them coming back through the undergrowth. They came close, and he felt himself lifted and carried some

yards further into the wood. They placed him on the back of a horse, passed a strap and ropes round him, and lashed him firmly to the beast's back.

Then they started out through the darkness, passed northward along the ride, and halted awhile on the edge of Darvel's Wood. Jasper felt half smothered by the gag, and saliva clogged his throat. The long silence seemed threatening. He wondered what they were going to do.

Then he heard De Rothan's voice.

"Forward. François, go ahead, and keep your eyes and ears open."

They set out along a dark lane, Gaston hanging back awhile with Devil Dick. He gave the horse a stab with a knife, and started him galloping back into the wood. Then he hurried on, and rejoined De Rothan.

Meanwhile, at Stonehanger, Nance sat at her window, listening. Suspense hung in the silent hush of the June night. She was waiting for Jasper to ride back and to tell her that all was well.

XXVII

Jeremy Winter grew anxious when Jasper did not return. Squire Kit was not in a state to be worried with alarms, and Jeremy, who knew the inwardness of Jasper's plans, felt the responsibility to lie upon his shoulders. He cross-questioned Jack Bumpstead, but the groom could tell him no more than that Jasper had ridden out on Devil Dick with pistols in his holsters.

Jeremy's anxiety seemed justified when a labourer arrived at Rush Heath, leading Devil Dick by the bridle. He said that he had found the horse grazing in the corner of a field not far from Rookhurst.

" 'If that be'unt Master Benham's horse, may I be struck blind,' says I. And look 'ee, sir, he's bin stuck in t' shoulder wid a knife."

Jeremy examined the horse, and made light of it.

"The squire has had a spill, and lost his nag."

Jack Bumpstead and the labourer shook their heads at each other with dolorous pessimism.

"He's bin stuck wid a knife, or t' point of a hanger."

"Hedge stake, more likely."

"No, sir, it be'unt, sir. 'Tain't the sort o' mark a stake leaves."

Jeremy was vastly disturbed, but his main desire was to keep the affair from Squire Christopher and to put the gag upon these two garrulous men. Gossip always runs on ahead to make trouble, and Jeremy, man of the world that he was, had learned the value of a subtle unobtrusiveness in dealing with all happenings that touched even the edge of passion. He took the labourer aside and dealt with him wonderfully after the manner of a soldier and a philosopher. The fellow had to be persuaded into taking a pride in his own discretion.

"I be'unt for sayin' a word, sir."

"That's it; you are the right sort of fellow. We may want a man of your sense over here in a day or two. Jesse Saunders, is it? I'll keep you in mind."

With Jack Bumpstead he played the bully.

"Saddle my nag, Jack. And look you here,—not a word about this—not one word—see."

Nothing could be more ferocious than Jeremy when fierceness was a necessity. Jack Bumpstead wilted before him.

"Sure, Mister Winter, sir. I'll do as ye please."

"By George, you will, Jack; I'll take care of that. Wash the horse's wound, and plaster a little hair over it, and not a word to a living soul."

Jeremy rode out, with pistols in his pockets, and a certain significant tightness about the mouth. He knew the country well, and his conjectures pointed him toward Stonehanger. Jeremy was something of a cynic. Experience had taught him that there was truth in the saying, "Look for the woman." He had his mind's eye on Nance, and his thoughts were none of the kindest.

Riding up the steep lane at the back of Stonehanger, he found himself reining in before the gate at the very moment that a girl appeared between the two stone pillars. The hollies and laurels made a deep shade there. The white anxiousness of the girl's face struck Jeremy at the first glance. The startled way she looked at him provoked his suspicions.

He raised his hat to her.

"Miss Durrell, I believe?"

The eyes that met his were big, and most honestly troubled.

"Yes, I am Miss Durrell."

"I am trying to hear something of Mr. Jasper Benham. His horse came home this morning without him. I had an idea that he might have been at Stonehanger."

Jeremy believed in being blunt with women. He wanted to try Nance and to judge her by the way she reacted to his words. And react she did, in a way that made Jeremy rearrange his notions.

"Are you a friend of Jasper's?"

She came across the stone bridge over the ditch, the white eagerness of her face driving the cynicism out of Jeremy's mood.

"I may say so. I am his adopted uncle, and almost taught him to walk."

He eyed Nance with keen sympathy. She was all pale and intent passion. There had been none of those self-conscious changes of colour, those vain

little manœuvres that so few women can forget. The girl was white steel, fine-tempered, and a little fierce.

"Did Jasper tell you where he was going last night?"

"I had been away from Rush Heath all day."

"Had he told you nothing? I have been awake all night—waiting."

Jeremy's face grew grim, but his voice was gentle.

"Miss Durrell, I know a good deal. I can guess still more."

"This Chevalier de Rothan, this so-called *emigré*——"

"Ah, now we have it."

"They were to fight a duel in Darvel's Wood."

The forward thrust of Jeremy's jaw became more pronounced.

"What! And the lad never told me! He went out alone against that Irish blackguard! Good God——!"

A quivering upper lip and a pair of brown eyes brought him back to Nance's outlook upon life.

"Miss Durrell, you'll forgive me——"

Her hands were gripping the folds of her dress.

"You know, it was for us. Perhaps he told you? He came to Stonehanger last night before he went to Darvel's Wood. He was so confident. He would go. He promised to ride back and tell me how it all happened."

Jeremy—that man of many experiences—slipped out of the saddle and held out a comrade's hand.

"I don't blame Jasper for this, but I do blame him for going alone. The fellow De Rothan would have stabbed him in the back for the price of a pewter pot."

Nance shivered.

"Oh, don't talk like this!"

"My dear, I ask your pardon. Winter, Jeremy Winter is my name. Where the devil is Darvel's Wood? I'll ride there at once."

"I'll come—I'll show you."

"But——"

"I must come—I must. I was going when you rode up."

Jeremy knew when a wish was not to be gainsaid. Here was a girl who leapt into the experiences of life with her whole heart. She was strong, rich, and convincing.

"My dear, can you borrow such a thing as a horse?"

"No, and I can't ride."

"Well, we must take what Nature gives us. How far is it?"

"Two miles."

"I'll walk—for the sake of sympathy."

They seemed to have known each other years by the time the oaks of Darvel's Wood rose against the white clouds of the summer sky. Their instinctive liking for each other met and kindled in these moments of suspense. Both of them were thinking of Jasper, but Jeremy coupled his thoughts with the tense, white face of this young girl.

"She's true metal; she has edge and temper," he kept saying to himself. "Confound the lad, why was he in such a damnable hurry!"

When they came to the gate that led into Darvel's Wood, Jeremy paused and looked questioningly at Nance.

"Will you stay here?"

"No, I will come with you."

He was afraid for her sake and of what he might find. But her courage persuaded him.

"Come, then. I'll fasten my horse to the gate-post."

And they entered Darvel's Wood.

It was close and oppressive in among the trees, and the summer foliage shut in the ride with massive walls of green. Flies, too, were in evidence, swarming down out of the foliage as though these two humans had entered Darvel's Wood with the particular intention of offering themselves as food. Jeremy, less imperturbable than usual, cursed the black pests and smote the air with his hat.

"The insolence of the brutes! As though we mortals walked abroad for the benefit of flies! Some day we shall wipe all these things out—and then have the earth as clean as a Dutch kitchen."

They were anxious and under strain, and showed it by their silence. Jeremy's face looked fierce. He was thinking how he would hunt De Rothan into a corner, drive his sword through the man's body, and see him double up like a doll.

Nance knew of the clearing, and Jeremy could tell that they were nearing the place—by the sound of her breathing. He had his eyes on the tracks left by Jasper's horse.

"Not far now?"

"We are there."

The clearing opened out before them with the horse tracks turning aside into it. Half the place was in sunlight, the rest smothered in umbrage, and very silent.

"Stay here, child."

He left Nance under an oak, and began to explore the place, his sharp eyes soon discovering many suggestive facts. Another horse had been ridden into the clearing, and there was a trampled place where men had fought. What was more, Jeremy found the track through the underwood that De Rothan and his men had made. Twigs were bent and broken, dead leaves kicked up. More than one man had been responsible for this.

He returned to Nance. Her eyes questioned him—like the eyes of one in pain.

"Yes, there are traces. Foul play, probably."

"Do you think that Jasper——?"

"My dear, I don't know. I have found nothing but trampled grass and broken underwood. De Rothan was not alone. He had men with him."

"The coward! He laid a trap?"

"That's what I gather."

Jeremy stood smoothing his chin and staring at the ground.

"This fellow lives over beyond the ridge—Winchelsea way?"

"No, nearer than that, off a lane between Sedlescombe and Westfield. It is called the Brick House."

"Brick House. I know the place. I shall ride there at once."

"Will you?"

“Something may be found out. I know how to deal with a man like De Rothan.”

They returned through the wood to the gate, Jeremy thinking hard and saying nothing to his companion.

As he unfastened his horse, Nance spoke out, standing and looking over the hills toward the sea. Her face was set, and her eyes hard.

“If the worst has happened, we must be revenged.”

Jeremy was struck by the passion in her voice.

“We will not believe the worst yet. It is possible that they may have kidnapped Jasper for those dispatches he seized.”

“Whatever has happened, my father is nearly as guilty as De Rothan.”

“He may not have known.”

“I have no pity. I shall make him confess everything.”

Jeremy reflected a moment.

“It might be as well to let him understand that the whole business has been discovered.”

They parted at the gate, Nance pointing out to Jeremy the way he should take. He lifted his hat to her devoutly.

“Keep your heart up, child. I will ride back and tell you what I have discovered.”

Nance walked back slowly to Stonehanger, her mouth set in a determined line, her eyes steady with thought. She felt very bitter against her father, and in no mood to spare him in his conspiracy with De Rothan.

Anthony Durrell was reading on the bench under the yew-tree when she returned. He glanced up sharply as Nance crossed the grass, and she was struck by the narrowness of his face, and ill-balanced bigotry of the man’s whole nature. But Nance had risen above fear of her father. She had youth on her side, and the strength that youth gives.

“I want to speak to you.”

He put his book aside, an irritable crease appearing between his eyebrows.

“Well, what is it?”

“It is known that you are a French spy.”

"Child——!"

"I know it, as others know it. You may be grateful that those who know it are my friends."

Durrell sat staring, his face vacant, mouth slightly open. Nance had expected a violent outburst, recriminations, arguments, denials.

Presently he spoke to her, making a great effort to regain his self-control.

"What do you mean, child?"

"What I have said, father. Nor is that all. This man De Rothan may be accused of murder."

Durrell's hands moved restlessly to and fro along the edge of the seat.

"Murder! I know nothing of that."

She stood looking down at him with her uncompromising eyes.

"God grant that you do know nothing. We must wait—and be patient. Remember, now, that you are at the mercy of these friends of mine—who know. It would have been better if you had trusted me a little."

XXVIII

Jeremy stopped at the "Queen's Head" Inn at Sedlescombe for some bread and cheese and a mug of ale. He was an old campaigner and remembered the needs of the inner man.

The landlord of the "Queen's Head" appeared to be a person of sense. He had a shrewd, well-shaved face, and a mouth that spoke pleasantly, but was always able to keep something back. Jeremy chatted with him for twenty minutes. He had a queer way of getting hold of men, of making them feel the grip of his character.

Jeremy asked for the Brick House.

"You mean Mounseer de Rotten's place, sir?"

"That name's good enough."

"Go straight down the village, over yon hill, and take a lane to the right. You'll see the house in a hollow."

The landlord and Jeremy looked at each other as though neither took the other for a fool.

"Does mounseer keep a big staff of servants?"

"Three, sir, so far as I know."

"Men?"

"Men, sir, yes."

"I met the Chevalier in London. I might look in on him now that I am down in these parts."

Jeremy strolled down the brick path to the white fence where a boy was holding his horse. The landlord followed at his heels, staring reflectively at the sturdy breadth of Mr. Winter's back. This was a gentleman who walked very much on his own legs.

"Roads nice and dry, sir. You might be wanting a bed for the night?"

Jeremy paused with a toe in the stirrup.

"I'll keep you in mind, landlord. How far do you call it to Mr. de Rothan's?"

"A matter of two miles, sir."

"If he hasn't a bed to spare, you may see me again. I like a quiet place, and quiet people."

"We're quiet, sir, very quiet."

"I'll remember it. Good day to you."

The landlord watched him ride off down the village.

"Hum—what's he after? A gentleman of parts. He had an eye on me for something, friendliwise. No small beer, I reckon."

Jeremy found the lane leading off the main road. It was a mere grass track with high hedges on either side of it. The red chimneys of the house showed above the thorns and hazels, and a plume of blue smoke went up against the green background of a wooded hill. A gate closed the end of the lane which opened into a meadow.

Jeremy dismounted and leaned his arms on the top bar of the gate and looked across the meadow at the Brick House with its red walls, clipped yews, and diamond-paned casements. The place looked peaceful enough in the green dip of its valley, but Jeremy was not in quest of beauty. He scrutinised every window of the house like a man staring at an ancient tablet whose writing refuses to be deciphered.

Jeremy fastened his horse to the gate-post, and looked to the priming of his pistols. He was playing a bold game, and in such case a man needs something more dangerous to rely on than his tongue. He climbed the gate and walked slowly across the meadow, slapping his right leg with a little riding switch that he carried.

When he came within twenty yards of the brick wall of the garden, he halted and stood staring at the house as though he were an antiquary studying types of English domestic architecture. Jeremy was not going to put himself within safe pistol-shot of the windows. To provoke a parley a man must not give away all his advantages.

Jeremy began to walk up and down in the line of the garden wall, keeping a sharp eye on all the windows. It was not long before he saw a face appear at one of the upper lattices. It remained there a moment, and then melted back into the shadow of the room.

Presently a servant in black livery came out from the porch, and down the path into the meadow. He approached Jeremy, and spoke in broken English.

"What will monsieur desire here?"

Jeremy stood with feet apart, hands behind his back, staring at the house.

"Good mullions, and excellent brickwork. There is a solidity about these Jacobean houses. My good fellow, is your master at home?"

"What will monsieur desire here?"

"Nothing, Pierre, nothing, but a word with your master. Tell him there is a gentleman here who is interested in old houses."

The man looked contemptuously at Winter and returned to the house. De Rothan was waiting in the hall.

"Well, François?"

"A gentleman who loves old houses."

"Thunder, what, a dry-as-dust! Go and tell him the house is not to be viewed."

François went back to Jeremy.

"Monsieur, my master the Chevalier de Rothan cannot be agreeable to your curiosity."

Jeremy's eyes twinkled.

"Go and tell him I have ridden sixty miles to see this house. If he will give me a few minutes I can explain."

This time the man was exchanged for the master. De Rothan appeared at the porch, came slowly down the path and out into the meadow. Stateliness was the pose of the moment. An aristocrat of France came to speak with some antiquarian huckster who would force himself upon an exile's privacy.

"Sir, I wish you good day."

Jeremy took off his hat and bowed. He could be damnably urbane when he was most dangerous. De Rothan had not recognised him. Who would expect to see a fencing-master from St. James's in an out-of-the-world Sussex meadow?

"Sir, I take liberties in being here. I am one of those inquisitive persons who are interested in everything."

De Rothan looked him over with supercilious politeness.

"A very admirable state of mind, but a little embarrassing at times—to others."

"You cannot be so kind as to let me see your house, Chevalier?"

De Rothan's eyelids seemed to close a little.

"My house, monsieur, is not a museum."

"But I am told there is a unique curio to be seen in it, a thing of particular, local interest— —"

"Indeed! You surprise me."

"Not at all, sir, not at all. It is a gentleman who was stolen yesterday out of Darvel's Wood. I am sure you will oblige me in the matter."

De Rothan's figure seemed to lengthen. His nostrils dilated, and his eyes became very bright and staring.

"Sir, I fail to understand you. Nor do I love impertinence."

"Nor I, Monsieur de Rothan. I expect Mr. Jasper Benham to dine with me to-night. It will be courteous of you to produce the gentleman, and to deliver him over to me."

"You are talking nonsense."

"I'll wager that I am not."

They stood eyeing each other, challenging each other, gauging each other's strength and grimness.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Jeremy's eyes twinkled. He had been standing with hands clasped behind him. One hand had slipped itself into the tail pocket of his coat and was gripping the butt of a pistol.

He began to speak slowly, and very distinctly, looking at De Rothan from under frowning eyebrows.

"Mr. Frenchman, let us understand each other. I have two men over yonder behind the hedge; neither you nor yours can play any tricks with me. Now, I ask you, what is there to prevent me putting a bullet in your body?"

Jeremy had a pistol out, and, holding it at his hip, covered De Rothan with the muzzle.

"My good sir, this is like a stage play!"

De Rothan had nerve, and showed it in the casual way he glanced at the pistol, and then looked Jeremy in the eyes. Quick wit and audacity were divided pretty equally between them.

"Well, Chevalier, what do you say?"

"Of course, sir, if you wish to blow Mr. Benham's brains out——"

"Thanks. So I was on the mark—there."

"Do not congratulate yourself. I can tell you at once that Mr. Jasper Benham is in my house, alive and well, save for a sword thrust through the arm."

Jeremy nodded.

"You laid a trap for him and cheated him on a point of honour."

"My good sir, I outwitted him, if you call that cheating."

They were silent for a few seconds like men who break away and take breath between two bouts of boxing. Jeremy's mouth looked ugly, but he was as debonair as ever.

"Listen to me, Chevalier. This spy business of yours is over and done with. What I have to do is to call one of my men, send him galloping for half a score red-coats, and hold you here at the pistol point till they come."

"Very good, sir, very good. But I take it that you have some respect for Mr. Benham's life."

Jeremy felt the cunning of the thrust.

"No doubt."

"Very well, do what you suggest. But I warn you that I have a man in the house whom I can trust. He has had his orders. It is a nasty business blowing out a young man's brains. Faugh—you will not drive us to that!"

"You are not without daring, Chevalier."

"I am one of the eagles of adventure, sir. I play my game and I play it boldly. Mr. Benham is my hostage. I demand to be left alone, to be allowed to give my plans a fighting chance. In three weeks or so French cavalry may be sabring your red-coats in these lanes."

Jeremy reflected.

"I see your point, sir."

"Regard it in this way. I play my game—I put down my stake. This Mr. Benham blunders in and tries to upset my table. I seize him and tie him up in a corner, and, to defend myself from his friends, I have to keep a pistol levelled at this good young man's head. You see, I hold him in front of me,

so to speak. Shoot, or stab at me—and Mr. Benham's body takes the first blow. What you have to decide is whether you are willing to sacrifice your friend."

"By George! Do you mean to tell me you would shoot the lad?"

"Mr. Englishman, I am the devil when I am in earnest. My man is watching you, even now. If you were to fire that pistol at me—he would do the same to Mr. Jasper Benham. You see how things stand. The decision is with you."

Very rarely had Jeremy found himself fenced with so cleverly. De Rothan held him at a disadvantage.

"Let me put things plainly. You, Chevalier, are a French spy. The truth has been discovered. You expect the French fleet in the Channel, and Napoleon to invade us. Good! To gain breathing space you tie up this lad, hold a pistol at his head, and dare us to interfere."

De Rothan bowed and smiled.

"You have summed up the situation. It is very simple."

Jeremy lowered his pistol. He was baffled, and very furious behind that imperturbable face of his.

"Very well, Chevalier. It seems that we are not in a position to quarrel."

"Mr. ——?"

"Winter, sir, Jeremy Winter."

"Mr. Winter, you show good sense."

Jeremy could have twisted De Rothan's neck. The man's complacent audacity rubbed him raw.

"One thing, Chevalier. Have you any personal spite against the lad?"

He watched De Rothan narrowly.

"No more than the natural contempt of a grown man for a big fool of a boy who tries to kick him."

Jeremy's mouth betrayed sarcasm.

"I believed he kicked—with success."

But he regretted the gibe when he saw the glint in De Rothan's eyes.

"Mr. Winter, I am too big a man to bear malice."

“Thank heaven for that!”

“I hold Mr. Benham as a hostage.”

“And if the French come, sir?”

De Rothan shrugged his shoulders.

“A country squireling will not matter. He will be one of a mob of sheep.”

“And if the French do not come?”

“I shall still hold Mr. Benham at my mercy. He will be my shield, Mr. Winter; you will shoot or stab at me through him.”

“A very convenient arrangement for you, sir. I suppose it is useless to suggest that we might come to terms and give you a safe passage out of the country?”

De Rothan smiled.

“One does not count one’s winnings, Mr. Winter, till the cards are played. Especially when one holds a winning hand.”

Jeremy bowed to him, and they drew apart, keeping their faces toward each other.

“Good day to you, Chevalier.”

“Good day, Mr. Winter. You will be careful how you meddle in any affair of mine.”

XXIX

When Jeremy was in a rage his imperturbable face had a smooth, tight look, the lips pressed a little more closely together, the jaw well set. His wrath was always a quiet wrath, deep, purposeful, not wasting itself in words.

De Rothan had made him more furious than he had been for years, and even the knowledge that Jasper was very little the worse for his adventure in Darvel's Wood did not modify Jeremy's anger. De Rothan was the kind of man who filled him with a scornful disgust, and to be baffled and dictated to by such a man left Jeremy quarrelling with his own self-respect. He damned De Rothan as a coward, and was equally indignant over the contradictory conviction that the adventurer had audacity and courage. De Rothan had seized a desperate chance. It had been a clever move, too confoundedly clever to please Mr. Winter.

"Curse it, what shall I tell the girl?"

He laughed at his own impatience.

"Why, Jerry, my boy, you want to appear infallible, do you, dallying with a snuff-box, and proudly overwhelming all ruffians with one look. The lad's alive. Tell her that. She'll be ready to kiss you, though you have brought nothing but news."

It did not astonish Jeremy when he found Nance watching for him where the lane topped the high ground to the east of Stonehanger. She was sitting on a turf bank under a thorn-tree, out of sight of Stonehanger House.

Jeremy gave her the best news he could, while he was still some yards away.

"The lad's alive, and they tell me not much the worse."

The way her face changed stirred Jeremy, man of fifty that he was. It was good to be young, to desire, and to be desired.

"Where is he?"

"Ah, that's a long story. You and I have got to hold a council of war."

He dismounted, fastened his horse to the thorn-tree, and seated himself beside Nance on the bank. Her face still retained much of the radiance that had poured into it with the first rush of relief.

"What has happened, then?"

"They kidnapped Jasper in Darvel's Wood. I guessed it. De Rothan has him shut up safely in that house of his beyond Sedlescombe."

"As a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"But how absurd, in these days! Then we shall soon have him out."

Jeremy wagged his head.

"My dear, you don't know Monsieur de Rothan."

"What do you mean?"

"He has the audacity of the devil. He has snapped up Jasper as a hostage, and dares us to interfere."

"He told you that?"

"Why, to be sure, we had a parley in the meadow. I covered him with a pistol and asked him to tell me why I shouldn't shoot him. His argument was that one of his own men would promptly shoot Jasper. You see, they are holding him against us as a kind of shield."

Nance's face lost some of its radiance.

"But De Rothan dare not do this."

"Unfortunately he does dare, in fact, he is obliged to dare. It is the one chance left him of forcing his game through. We are on the edge of a crisis. The next month may decide whether we are to be invaded or not. De Rothan is standing out for a fighting chance."

She looked very gravely into Jeremy's eyes.

"Do you think he would be brute enough to murder Jasper?"

"My dear, I do."

"Then if we threaten or inform against him, Jasper will be sacrificed?"

"Exactly. That's what makes me feel like a caged tiger."

It seemed to take Nance some minutes to realise the vindictive grimness of the thing.

“But what a villain!”

“Call him that if you like, child. He is a clever gambler and has to use a gambler’s tricks. The end justifies the means. That is what he tells himself.”

She smoothed her dress with her hands, and looked into the distance.

“It makes me ashamed and furious that we are so helpless. And yet we have to be polite and swallow our anger. Can anything be done?”

“And take the risk of having the lad shot?”

“No, no, you know I don’t mean that! But to think that we should have to truckle to this man!”

“I see no other course at present. I am not a lamb myself. I would run a sword through the man to-morrow if I thought that it would help us. But it won’t. We have got to be careful.”

“I see—yes, I see.”

“We must hold our tongues, not let the truth out, and yet try to find some way out of this blind alley. If we were to let our neighbours know the truth, they might come blundering in and lose Jasper his life.”

She held her breath at the thought of such a chance.

“Then there is father. I spoke to him this morning.”

“You did?”

“He is a strange man. I thought he would storm, but he looked stunned. I don’t see that he could help us. He might even be dangerous.”

“Yes, set everything in a blaze. I had thought of that. I think that I had better see Mr. Anthony Durrell.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“But——”

“I have dealt with all sorts of men in my time.”

“Do you mean to frighten him into silence?”

“I shall try to treat him as a reasonable creature. It is no time for soft phrases.”

She thought awhile, knitting up her forehead, and clasping her hands.

“Perhaps it will be best.”

"Shall we go on? I may find Mr. Durrell at Stonehanger."

The essential weakness of a man of Anthony Durrell's character showed itself in the parley that followed between him and Jeremy Winter. The man of action and the man of the bookshelf were pitted against each other, though Jeremy, unlike most Englishmen, had subtlety and a very quick sense of humour. Nance had left them alone together in the stone-room, feeling vaguely sorry for the thin, white-headed figure that looked so ineffectual.

Jeremy went straight to the point with a merciless directness, much as he would have attacked with a sword. Durrell's hysterical verbosity was like the clumsy and excitable fencing of a greenhorn who has never learned to use his hands. He chose the high, ethical, magniloquent attitude, being sincere enough in his wild, foolish, visionary way. Jeremy thrust the egregious fanatic through and through with the brutal logic of his common sense.

"You need not stand and orate, Mr. Durrell. Take the facts and leave your theories. Here are you, a traitor to your country, with a noose dangling invitingly over your head."

Durrell flapped his arms.

"I stand for liberty—for a great idea——"

"Bosh, man, bosh! We don't win things in this world in that way. Answer a straight question. Do you want your daughter to see you hanged?"

Durrell was disjointed, wild, hysterical. Jeremy kept up his body blows, driving home truth after truth till he had this poor, exclamatory piece of scholarly discontent battered into impotence. Durrell was a weak man. He was not built for pounding, for fighting toe to toe. He might have quarrelled and stormed with women. In the presence of a man like Jeremy he collapsed.

Winter softened a little when the enthusiast crumpled up into a chair.

"Mr. Durrell, sir, try to realise that we are your best friends. Have nothing more to do with this scoundrel De Rothan. You've got something valuable to live for in the shape of a daughter."

Durrell mumbled, and twisted this way and that. Jeremy had cowed him, and seized the dominating influence that De Rothan had held.

"I will think over what you have said, Mr. Winter. Heaven knows I would not countenance any violence to this young man."

Jeremy left him a beaten man, and went out into the garden to speak with Nance. She looked steady and sure of herself, and Jeremy respected the strength in her. It struck him that she would be able to dominate her father now that Durrell had been shocked into a kind of panic.

"Well?"

"You must forgive me if I have been a little rough with your father. Soft words are of no use at such a time."

"What does he say?"

"I think he has surrendered to us. I had to 'tarrify' him, as they say in these parts."

"If only he would keep to his books."

"That's it. Some men are made to live with books."

They walked through the shrubbery to the gate where David Barfoot was holding Mr. Winter's horse. Jeremy spoke what was in his mind.

"Go and play the daughter to him, my dear. I think he is in a mood to be managed. Some oldish men have to be treated like children."

"I will try."

"There must be plenty of good stuff in your father."

"Yes."

"I take you as my proof."

Cynicism, tinged with benevolence, such was Jeremy's attitude toward life. It was not very reasonable to expect a girl of spirit to hold a man of Anthony Durrell's nature in great love and reverence. Durrell needed hurdling in like an old sheep, and left to browse contentedly among his books.

Jeremy had already quarrelled twice that day, but he was yet to have a third quarrel laid upon his shoulders. This time it was with a woman, and the woman—Miss Rose Benham.

He found her at Rush Heath, energetic, inquisitive, and voluble, driving the inarticulate Jack Bumpstead into corners, and insisting upon examining Devil Dick in his stall. She had scolded the groom till he had involved himself in a maze of muddled contradictions, hunting him round and round with her cross-questions and her curiosity.

Jeremy's mouth went grim. His patience had borne up bravely, and he was in no mood to be teased by a managing and meddlesome young woman.

"Mr. Winter, what does all this mean?"

He handed his horse over to Jack Bumpstead, gave the groom one terrifying look, and bowed Miss Benham out of the stable.

"My dear young lady, I think you are a little excited."

He was deluged, but managed to divert the stream into a quiet corner of the garden.

"Miss Rose, you are inclined to call this affair your own. I warn you that it is nothing of the kind. I even forbid you to meddle with it."

"Forbid, indeed! I shall——"

"Excuse me, you will not."

"What right have you——?"

"Expediency justifies me—and a man's honour."

"Jasper's? You mean to say——"

Then Jeremy told what was very like an audacious lie.

"Miss Benham—Cousin Jasper will very shortly be married. And I am glad—because of the woman he will marry. Honour is concerned in it, even his very life. He is in great danger. One careless word may wreck everything."

Rose was white, furious, and astonished.

"To be married! And all this wild talk——?"

"My dear Miss Benham, sometimes two men desire to marry the same woman. It is not unusual. And one of the men may be desperate and unprincipled. The unprincipled man may take advantage of the other's sense of honour."

"But Jasper—is he in danger?"

"Very grave danger."

"Then why on earth don't you do something?"

Jeremy gave her one of his shrewd smiles.

"That is just what must not be done, for the moment. It will spoil my masterly inactivity if fools go cackling about the country. We are in a very

delicate dilemma. I shall not explain it, as the less that is known about it—the better. You have it in your power to lose Jasper his life."

She flinched, as people had so often flinched in Jeremy's presence.

"If he is in danger, I——"

"Yes, you will be kind and cautious. You will say nothing. And for God's sake leave Jack Bumpstead alone, and not a word to Squire Christopher."

Rose tossed her head.

"I do not need to be lectured like a schoolgirl, Mr. Winter. I am a woman of sense. I will not interfere in a man's love affairs—even if he is my cousin."

And Jeremy saw that he had piqued her into a proper pride.

XXX

The men who had built the Brick House had framed the attic story of huge baulks of oak, posts and beams that looked like the halves of great trees, with struts and cross-pieces worked in quaintly at all angles. There was a long gallery connecting the attics, and the whole place looked like the interior of a ship, the little windows high up no larger than portholes. The plaster had not been whitewashed for years, and beams, rafters, and posts were a deep rich brown. Even the floor-boards were of oak, and riddled with worm-holes.

Jasper Benham's prison room was the attic at the far end of the gallery. Its dormer-window was squeezed in between the slopes of two gables. There was no furniture in the attic save a rough box-bed in one corner.

Nor did the bed belong to Jasper. The man Gaston slept there with a pistol under his pillow.

Jasper had been given a truss of straw to lie on. They could not have managed otherwise, for the simple reason that they had put him in irons. His ankles were chained and bolted to the floor-boards, and his wrists handcuffed. He might have been a negro in the hold of a slave ship, or a refractory seaman undergoing discipline.

Both De Rothan and Jeremy Winter were cynics, with the difference that one possessed far more natural kindliness than the other. Their materialism kept its eyes fixed upon the sensuous aspects of life. They knew good wine, and a woman who was worth following, and were ready to be amused by the ingenuous wraths and enthusiasms of youth.

As for De Rothan, he found Jasper a most companionable young person, a man who took his own honourable indignation with vast seriousness, and could be pricked into all manner of odd exasperations. Jasper had not learned to wink at life, or to sneer upon occasions. De Rothan baited his youthful sincerity. He would take his glass of wine and smoke his cheroot in Jasper's attic, sitting on the edge of Gaston's bed, and prodding the Englishman with his cynicism as he would have prodded a pig with a stick. He made a daily habit of this parley, spending an hour or two with his prisoner while Gaston had a change of air in the garden or meadow.

It was the fifth day of his imprisonment, and Jasper heard Gaston's descending footsteps meet those of De Rothan, who ascended to take his place. The Frenchman came in with his glass of wine and his cheroot, bowed ironically to Jasper, and took up his usual position on the bed.

"Well, Mr. Benham, how is the forlorn lover to-day?"

De Rothan's sleekness, his white linen and smoothly shaved face filled Jasper with a kind of fury. He felt himself unclean on his bundle of straw, with a five days' beard on his chin, and his face and hands unwashed. The wound in his right arm was giving him no trouble, but they had not offered to dress it for him, and Nature was responsible for any process of healing.

"Your consideration, Chevalier, does not run to a crock of water and a piece of soap."

"Why, my good sir, what should you want with such things? I might find an old clay pipe and let you blow soap bubbles!"

"It is something to feel clean, especially in the presence of people whose honour happens to be foul."

"We have been taught that it is the heart that matters. Inward cleanliness, eh? You have heard, Mr. Benham, of the old saints and hermits. Dirt and vermin were held to be honourable."

"You would talk in a different way if I were out of these irons."

"Pardon me, my dear young man, I think I should not. Besides, why should you trouble about your beard? The sweet charmer is not likely to see you—though there is pathos about an unshaven chin. Do you think that she troubles——"

He sipped his wine, and watched Jasper over the rim of his glass.

"I drink Miss Nance's health. She is a clever girl, Mr. Benham. How we laughed, she and I! It was funny, although so damnably serious."

"Curse you, what do you mean?"

De Rothan regarded him with infinite relish.

"What an honest soul! You really believe that Miss Durrell wanted me at the end of a rope, and you kneeling romantically at her feet?"

Jasper had nothing adequate to say.

"Nance led you on so cleverly. She sent you off with her blessing to Darvel's Wood. Dear, honest fool!"

"You need not tell me lies about Miss Durrell."

"I don't, sir, I don't. She was kind to you, was she not? When did the kindness begin? Ask yourself that. Was it not when you had blundered like a bumble-bee into our web and seemed likely to give us trouble? Of course Miss Nance was circumspect. She handled you very cunningly, Mr. Benham."

"You need not try to make me believe that."

"It would be impossible? Your vanity is too serene and confident? No woman would have the audacity to treat you like a fool, would she? No, of course not. It would be impossible. Mr. Jasper Benham is too dignified and important a person to be played with."

"Make the most of your tongue, sir."

"Really, you refresh me. When our Emperor is in London, I must present you to him as a unique young man without any sense of humour. You would amuse the Court. You will continue to amuse my dear Nance when she is a great lady of the Empire."

"Don't boast too soon."

"I may as well tell you some news. You will not gossip and spread it abroad. The noble Nelson has been chasing a wild goose instead of your Lady Hamilton. Villeneuve has tricked him. And in a week or two Villeneuve will be blowing your Brest ships out of the water. Then we shall come up Channel, and the Emperor will land in England. It will be a fine spectacle. I shall enjoy it."

"It may prove a very fine spectacle."

"Ah, you dear English—you think yourselves invincible. Are you better men than the Germans, the Austrians, or the Russians? Are your country bumpkins so valiant? Why, our Grand Army will devour you. Think of the American colonists, think of Burgoyne at Saratoga, and Cornwallis at Yorktown. We French have had two years of war. We have fought all Europe. We are veterans, and a nation of soldiers. We shall gallop over you, hunt you hither and thither with the bayonet."

Jasper lay down on his straw.

"It must be a pleasure to you to talk, Chevalier," he said.

Jasper Benham was reliable, and he believed in the reliability of those in whom he trusted. De Rothan's clever mockery might exasperate him, but it

did not shake his faith in Nance.

Meanwhile at Stonehanger Nance was strengthening her hold upon her father. The economics of life would seem to be very delicately balanced so far as old men were concerned. They may retain their faculties in a state of fair efficiency so long as no abnormal event interferes with that sanity that is begotten of old habits. But this equilibrium may easily be disturbed, and an illness or a great sorrow may age an old man more in one month than in the ten previous years.

So it seemed to be with Anthony Durrell. The shock of the discovery of his schemes, and the violent ethical attack made upon him by Nance and Jeremy appeared to overthrow his normal self. There was a sudden slackening of all his fibres, both physical and mental. The emotional part of him, so long smothered and overlaid, broke to the surface as the intellect lost some of its ascendancy. Then—he appeared to become conscious of the existence of his daughter.

Now Nance had one of those large natures that bears no malice, and is ready to give of its best when an estranged friend stretches out an appealing hand. Her father had become to her a weak and pathetic old man whom the rough virility of younger men shouldered into a corner. She could not be very sorry for Anthony Durrell without being very tender toward him.

For some days her father appeared puzzled by a new atmosphere that enveloped him. Like a man who had been very ill, he was content to sit and muse and stare at nothing in particular. He had led a very lonely life, and a selfish one, since the life of a fanatic and a dreamer is often very selfish. It was now that he felt defeated and feeble that Nance's nature flooded in upon his consciousness.

She would take his chair into the garden under the shade of one of the yews, fetch him the books he loved, read to him, talk to him, try to enter into his thoughts and prejudices. Durrell felt old emotions stirring in his heart. Some of the old gentleness came back. The harsh, thin lines melted out of his face.

The change in him was betrayed by the very way he looked at Nance, and by what he said to her one evening as they sat on the terrace and watched the sun go down. The sea seemed no longer a strip of ominous silver across which the immortal dragon of war should swim to scorch up this green island rich with its yellowing wheat and rolling woods. Durrell had drifted suddenly into the softer evening lights of life.

He realised that the girl had had a hard and a lonely life.

"Nance, you must often have been very lonely here."

She looked at him in surprise, but with a kind of compassionate radiance.

"I have been less lonely these few days, father."

He seemed to reflect upon these words. And perhaps the warm beauty of the July evening helped the quiet drifting of his thoughts.

"In this life—we make many mistakes."

She nodded as though she understood.

"I used to believe in the efficacy of violence and fear. Curious, in a man of my habits. I have come to doubt whether the quieter forces are not more powerful."

She smiled at him.

"People do hate to be driven."

"To be sure."

"It is easier to persuade them, to play the Pied Piper to the world."

He glanced at her with eyes that asked, "Where did you learn this wisdom?"

And presently he began to speak of De Rothan. It was the first time that he had mentioned the Chevalier's name since his meeting with Jeremy Winter. The adventurer had come to rouse in Durrell a feeling of repulsion. He had allowed himself to realise what manner of man this was whom he had pretended to call friend.

Nance let him talk, even encouraging him to speak of Jasper Benham. Jeremy Winter's anxiety had been unable to convince her that this monstrous piece of kidnapping could be very serious. It was an insolent attempt to extort terms. That was what Nance believed, not knowing the abominable and wanton things of which a revengeful man is capable. De Rothan had not yet taken his change for that rolling in the ditch.

She tried to suggest to Durrell what he should do.

"If the Chevalier de Rothan comes here, father, try and show him how absurd this is. Jasper and Mr. Winter will let him leave the country. They will keep silent—for our sakes."

Durrell looked troubled. Since the change in him he distrusted De Rothan even more than Nance distrusted him.

"This is a difficult man to argue with."

"But what sense is there? Who really believes that the French will land?"

"My dear, I believed it a week ago."

"But not now——"

"It is possible. De Rothan believes it, or he would have been across the water many days ago."

She glanced at her father, and realised once more how weak he was. The one great motive that had inspired him had crumbled away. Even her own sympathy had helped to sap and to undermine his strength.

Every day Jeremy rode over. He was blunt, laconic, but very courteous to Anthony Durrell. There were things that troubled him at Rush Heath, namely, the soothing of Squire Christopher's violent and choleric curiosity. The old man was bedridden, but he fumed for Jasper. Jeremy had told lies, that Jasper was away on duty. The whole household had to be deceived, and Jack Bumpstead kept from gossiping.

But Jeremy had not been able to stand wholly alone. He had been compelled to take Parson Goffin into his confidence, and by that peppery gentleman's advice he had enlarged the circle of trust still further. Certain of Jasper's friends were told the truth. They met at Goffin's, and held a council of war. The situation seemed absurd, even in its gravity. A Sussex gentleman kidnapped and held as a hostage in his own county by a French spy.

Jeremy told Nance all that he had to tell.

"We are having De Rothan's place watched, night and day. They are burning charcoal in a wood half a mile from the house, and one or two fellows have joined the charcoal-burners. If we could only collar De Rothan and his rogues, but they are cunning. They go out singly, and the fellow Gaston is always in the house."

He smiled grimly over the affair.

"Of course—a night attack would be the thing, after we had laid De Rothan by the heels. But there's the risk; I don't like taking it. The scoundrel still rides about as though he were in France. That makes me feel that he means business, and means to let us know it. He dares us to interfere."

"But can nothing be done?"

"I have an idea. I will tell it to you in a day or two."

XXXI

Jeremy had not exaggerated when he had said that De Rothan rode about the country as though he had nothing whatever to fear. His audacity carried him even into some of the country houses round about, and Jeremy himself met him in Hastings, riding along the High Street with a groom at his heels. He bowed to Jeremy and took off his hat.

"Good day to you, sir. I can assure you, in passing, that our mutual friend is very well."

"Damn your cheek," said Jeremy.

And De Rothan laughed in his face.

Some days elapsed before the Chevalier appeared again at Stonehanger. He had more desire to see Nance than to warn her father, for Durrell was becoming a negligible quantity now that the crisis was at hand. De Rothan was not the man to waste time upon a thing that was no longer of any use. He had made many shrewd guesses, but he had yet to learn that Nance herself was arrayed against him.

He found Durrell alone under one of the yews on the terrace. He had been reading and had fallen asleep with the book open across his knees. He woke with a start when De Rothan touched him, dropped the book, and looked up at the Frenchman with a narrowing and mistrustful stare.

"I had no notion you were here, sir. I have not been asleep more than five minutes."

He was confused, flurried, and De Rothan had quick eyes. He caught the restless antagonism in the other's manner. Durrell was a little afraid.

De Rothan sat down on the terrace wall, studying Durrell with cynical and amused eyes.

"So they have been frightening you, have they? Poor friend—poor comrade!"

Durrell moved restlessly in his chair. He had foreseen this meeting and had prepared himself for it, yet De Rothan's flippant scorn held him at a disadvantage.

"I have decided to abandon this enterprise— —"

"Did they dangle a rope under your nose? Alas, we have not the blood of the martyrs in us! That little black-chinned bully has been here with his tongue and his pistols. He tried his bombast with me, but I had the adder's head under my heel."

Durrell's face twitched irritably.

"I have not been frightened from my purpose. But I see certain things as I did not see them before."

"A convenient conscience, eh!"

"I cannot share your methods."

"Indeed! That overwhelms me."

He looked at Durrell with amused contempt.

"So you know that I have compelled Mr. Jasper Benham to be my guest? And yet you cannot appreciate what a desperate piece of cleverness it was. A little man comes and storms at you, and instead of holding loyal to me, you throw up your arms and surrender."

"I have refused to accept your methods."

"Because of a wonderful new affection for this cub of a Sussex squire? Thunder! I wish you had your girl's courage, and not the heart of a sheep."

Durrell's eyes began to glitter in his white face.

"It is because of Nance that I have seen fit to renounce you and your cleverness."

"You overwhelm me! How much does your daughter know?"

"Everything."

"Oh, come, now, come!"

"I said everything."

"And she does not despise you for playing the coward—calling out when the shoe begins to pinch?"

De Rothan's insolence roused Durrell to a thin and austere dignity.

"Sir, do you think that my daughter admires your idea of honour any more than I do? Her sympathies are with this young man, concerning whom you saw fit to tell me many lies."

"Ah—is that so!"

"I have said it. I do not ask your leave to tell the truth."

De Rothan's face seemed to sharpen and to harden its outlines. He looked at Durrell out of half-closed eyes.

"Let us be frank. Am I to understand that this calf that I have tied up in a stall is particularly precious to your daughter?"

"I refuse to deal in such terms."

"The devil take all our little nicenesses! Do you mean to tell me that Nance cares one farthing whether that round-headed young oaf——"

"My daughter is not for your discussion."

De Rothan laughed, but it was the laughter of a man whose self-love felt savage.

"What a pretty little romance I have been feeding! That I should have rubbed this young fool on the raw, while sweet Nance pitied him."

Durrell's fingers kept up an agitated rapping on the arms of the chair.

"If you have any sense of honour, De Rothan——"

"Honour! I am packed full of honour. My marrow tingles with it. But you, Sir Pantaloon, do not understand."

"You are right. I do not understand."

"No, who could expect it. You desert me to play the fond father. It is very laughable. As if you could not have played the fond father and kept all your ambitions! Well, Mr. Anthony Durrell, I think there is nothing left for you but to sit here and wait to see the Emperor land."

"I believe less, sir, in the Emperor than I did."

"A pity! Yet we shall recover from your sudden scepticism. No doubt you will be happier with your books."

De Rothan rose, and stood looking over Stonehanger Common. His long mouth curled, and his nostrils were contemptuous. Durrell watched him uneasily, resentfully, still tapping the chair-rails with his fingers.

"You will release Mr. Benham."

De Rothan turned on him sharply.

"Pardon me—am I so soft a fool! I am not a man who turns back, or who shirks the holding of an advantage. I have some respect for my own neck, though I no longer look to you to respect it."

Durrell nodded solemnly.

"No good can come of it. As for this house——"

"Shut the door on me quickly. Lock me out in a great hurry, Mr. Durrell. I will wish you good morning."

He marched off across the grass, swaggering with stiff shoulders, and smiling a queer, sidelong smile up at Nance's window. David Barfoot was holding his horse in the yard. De Rothan glanced at him as though there were some sudden significance in the thought that the man was deaf.

"Do you sleep well in summer, Mr. David?"

Barfoot stared back at him and said nothing.

In the lane, close to the yew-tree where Jasper had been shot, De Rothan came right upon Nance and Jeremy Winter. They were climbing the hill side by side, Jeremy leading his horse by the bridle. The meeting roused a quick crackle of complex enmities. De Rothan stiffened in the saddle, and raised his hat to Nance.

She did not look at him, but beyond him, and her face was white frost. Jeremy bit his lip. There were so many things that he desired to say and do.

De Rothan smiled in his face as he passed him.

"Good day to you, sir; I may tell our friend that he has a kind relative who sees that his shoes are kept warm."

"Tell him what you please. It won't matter. Liars are easily known."

"How you would like to argue with me! But I am content with my present advantages. Good day."

De Rothan rode on, savagely amused. The varied experiences of life had not made him magnanimous, or tolerant, and cynic that he was he loved himself like a spoiled and passionate boy. He could not forgive the snatching away of a thing that he himself desired, his overweening egotism ruffling itself over the insult.

The most cynical of men are often the worst sensualists, and anything that balks their appetite rouses the wrath of the animal in them. De Rothan's hatred of Jasper Benham was natural enough in itself. He had been meddled

with and humiliated by this young man, and De Rothan had no sentimentality when the stiff-haired anger of a dog was on him. Man of the world that he was, his cynicism could not save his vanity from being exasperated by the affair between Nance and Jasper Benham. He might call it a pinafore romance, and sneer at the crude preferences of a young girl. His self-love became an angry, snarling, dangerous thing, the more dangerous because it was clever and could sneer.

"Why not?"

His sullen face gleamed under the light of sudden suggestive thought. Why not, indeed? There were many ways of humiliating and hurting a man besides slashing him with a whip.

He roused his horse to a canter, brisked up by the delightful maliciousness of this new inspiration. He swaggered in the saddle and assumed a flamboyant jauntiness in passing a coach full of women on the Hastings road. The preposterous simplicity of the idea made him laugh, the sly noiseless laughter of a *bon viveur* enjoying a suggestive story.

"Bravo for the villain! What a queer mix-up of characters we mortals be! The philosopher crushing the wasp that has stung him. It is the nature of wasps to sting, therefore a philosopher should not be angry. But there is a joy in the crushing. And to see the sick black mug of that little fencing-master! It would be worth it even for that."

De Rothan rode home in great good humour. He left his horse with François, and went straight to the attic where Jasper was imprisoned. Gaston opened the door.

Jasper was lying on his straw in the corner, his face turned to the wall. He sat up when De Rothan entered, his hair over his eyes, a fine stubble on his upper lip and chin. A man's dignity is apt to go to pieces under such conditions, showing how greatly he is the slave of his comb and his razor.

De Rothan eyed him whimsically.

"Very good, Mr. Benham, very good indeed. Work just a little more straw into your hair. It would be sacrilege to have you washed and barbered."

He gloated, opening his chest, and forcing back his shoulders. Jasper looked at him stubbornly.

"If it is a question which dog is the dirtier— —"

“My good young man, I am a Pharisee of the Pharisees. I make clean the outside of the cup. Women prefer it. Gaston, come down with me. Presently you may show Mr. Benham himself in a mirror.”

Gaston followed De Rothan to the panelled dining-room. Master and man were in a good humour with one another.

“Bring the sherry and glasses, Gaston. If you can manage to make our friend up yonder look a little dirtier and more like an unclean lunatic I shall be gratified.”

He poured out two glasses of wine.

“I expect more visitors, Gaston, my friend. Have two bedrooms got ready, and see that the locks of the doors are in order.”

“More visitors, sir!”

“We are to fetch them to-night, Gaston. I shall want you and François with me. Jean can stay with the gentleman. He is a surly lad, is Jean. Tell him to cuff Mr. Benham on the mouth if he tries to talk to him. And have the horses ready at ten.”

XXXII

Nance was awakened that night by the sound of some one walking on the stone-paved path below her window. She sat up in bed with a fluttering of the heart, wondering whether the footsteps were the footsteps of her father, or whether Jeremy had ridden over late with news.

She was about to slip out of bed when she heard voices on the terrace. There appeared to be several men talking together in undertones. Then came the crash of glass being broken, as though they were battering in one of the lower windows.

Nance went cold, her heart drumming, her ears straining to catch the slightest sound. The smashing of glass had ceased. She heard the voices again, and then a thud as of a man leaping from a window-sill into one of the lower rooms.

She told herself that these must be thieves. There was little to steal in Stonehanger, but even this thought was not altogether comforting. She knew that some of the country folk were little better than savages, and that acts of brutal and even wanton violence were by no means uncommon. Some of the wild tales she had heard flashed vividly across her consciousness.

What should she do? Try and join her father? Or would it be better to lie still and wait, and even pretend to be asleep? She was still shivering with indecision when she heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

They came up slowly, steadily, with no attempt at concealment. Nance could see streaks of light showing under her door. The man, whoever he was, carried a lantern or a candle.

She held her breath when the footsteps turned aside at the landing and came toward her door. They paused there, and she knew that the man would be standing within four feet of her bed. With the door open he could reach in and almost touch her.

Her heart leapt at the sound of a knock, and she had to moisten her lips before she could speak.

"Who's there?"

"Have nothing to fear. It is the Chevalier de Rothan."

For the moment she felt an irrational rush of gratitude and relief. She could have embraced the man; he seemed so much less terrible than some low gipsy or rough footpad. The mere physical fear was appeased for the moment, but it was to be followed by a dread that was more spiritual and refined.

"The Chevalier de Rothan?"

"Your very good friend—in spite of many prejudices. Miss Nance, I am here to secure you and your father. Will you wake him, or shall I?"

She swung her feet out of the bed, and sat with her arms wrapped round her.

"But what does this mean? Breaking into the house?"

"It means that I am shrewder than you think. I insist upon befriending you, on placing you somewhere where you will be safe. I must beg you to rise and dress."

"But still—I do not understand. What right——?"

"It is not necessary that you should understand. I hold myself responsible. You and Mr. Durrell are coming back with me to my house. I mistrust your friends. That is sufficient."

There was a confident irony about his masterfulness. She could picture him standing there with those hard Irish eyes of his smiling at the door. Her wits groped hither and thither in the darkness, searching for motives. One thing she realised very vividly, that De Rothan was in a temper that would not wait to argue.

"But this is ridiculous! You cannot compel us in this way——"

He brushed her words aside.

"I do not explain. In half an hour we leave Stonehanger. You will go with me, if I have to break down your door and wrap you up in blankets. I do not desire to use force, so spare me the necessity."

Nance was still groping for his motives, but a fresh drift of thought obscured the main issue. Out of it emerged a clear spark, shining in the thick of her bewilderment, the thought that she would be under the same roof as Jasper Benham, and that she might be able to help Jeremy in his plans for a release.

"Since you are ready to use force, I do not see how we are to resist you."

“Sweet Nance, roughness is very far from my desire.”

“I will be ready.”

She might have seen him smiling at her surrender. He could keep step with her motives, and visualise her girl’s plans even before she had conceived them.

“Then I will leave you to wake your father.”

“Yes.”

“I shall wait for you in the hall.”

Nance dressed, and went to her father’s room. She had to wake him and to tell him what had happened. Durrell, in the thick of his contemptuous amazement at De Rothan’s audacity, absolutely refused to leave Stonehanger.

“But, father, what are we to do? We are in the man’s power.”

“Refuse to do anything.”

He persisted in remaining in bed, and Nance had to leave him, and go down alone into the hall. A lantern stood on the oak chair by the door, and De Rothan was standing with his back to it. He came forward gallantly when he saw Nance upon the stairs.

“Nance, you will forgive these highwayman’s methods. I cannot help myself. It is for the best.”

He would have taken her hand, but she held aloof, pausing upon one of the lower steps. His elaborate courtesy repelled her. It was artificial. The half-amused and half-triumphant glint in his eyes betrayed the real man.

“Father refuses to leave the house.”

“I am sorry. I shall have to persuade him. You will pardon me.”

She barred the way.

“No—no roughness; he is an old man.”

“You misjudge me; I am not a cut-throat. A few gentle words will serve.”

He turned, picked up the lantern, and came back toward the stairs. His eyes were fixed upon Nance’s eyes, and he smiled as he passed her.

“Why will you not do me justice?”

His voice caressed her, and she shrank aside, as though from physical contact. For the moment a great dread of the man made her wild to escape, but she steadied herself and remained true to her purpose.

De Rothan walked into Anthony Durrell's room and held the lantern over the bed.

"Get up, sir, get up. When I offer you my hospitality are you childish enough to refuse it?"

"I refuse to leave this house."

"Is that so? Then I shall have to take your daughter and leave you behind."

Durrell started up in bed, vehement and scornful.

"You are an abominable rogue, De Rothan."

"No, sir, I play to make my point. Are you coming with us, or must Nance and I go alone?"

Durrell rose and began to dress.

Nance was sitting in the half-lit hall. She could see a man standing in the stone parlour with a lantern in his hand. He was watching her through the open doorway as though he had been left on guard. Nance was wondering whether it was possible for her to get at David Barfoot and leave some message with him for Jeremy Winter. She racked her brains for some ruse, some excuse.

Why should she not try being boldly frank, and challenge interference? She rose and walked toward the passage leading into the kitchen, only to become conscious of some live thing filling the darkness. She recoiled. Another man was on guard there. She had almost felt his breath upon her face.

"Pardon, madame, there ees no way heer."

She returned to the hall in time to see the light of De Rothan's lantern coming down the stairs. He radiated a triumphant tranquillity, and smiled at her with whimsical satisfaction.

"Mr. Durrell accepts my hospitality."

"You were able to persuade him?"

"With ease."

In twenty minutes they were in the yard, and De Rothan's men unfastening the horses. De Rothan had suffered Nance to go up and pack a small valise. He waited for her and for Anthony Durrell, and bowed them out into the yard. They had brought two spare mounts, a quiet old nag for Anthony Durrell, and De Rothan's favourite mare Étoile for Nance.

He hung near to Nance, overshadowing her with his presence.

"We have improvised a saddle for you. Étoile is very quiet. Let me help you up."

"Thank you—I can——"

"Pardon me, you cannot."

His confident courtesy dominated her, and she did not care to bicker with him.

"Step into my hand. So."

He lifted her up into the seat that was half pannier, half saddle. Gaston and François had hoisted Durrell on to the old horse. De Rothan mounted his own, drew up beside Nance, and took Étoile's bridle. They rode out under the hollies and laurels and across the little stone bridge into the lane.

It was a fine night, splendid with stars. The world was black and silent and breathing in its sleep to the faint drift of a light sea breeze. The air was fresh and dewy. On Stonehanger Common a wood of birch trees with their delicate fingers caressed the stars.

De Rothan drew deep breaths.

"A southern night, and full of the smell of adventure. Has the desire to wander at will over the world ever come to you?"

She mistrusted the intimacy of his mood, and his nearness to her. Moreover, her thoughts were working against him, planning and scheming perpetually.

"I am so very sleepy."

She felt that he was looking at her.

"Poor Nance, poor girl. You shall go to bed, and not be worried."

He was silent a moment, and she hated him because he seemed so confident.

"Mr. Benham will be asleep. But to-morrow we shall have a stupendous surprise for him. Yes, you shall see him. He will be overwhelmed."

She kept a white and stark reserve.

"You do not thank me! Am I not the kindest of friends? You will find me even more sympathetic than the little fencing-master with the black jowl. Besides, I have the fly in amber, and he has not."

Nance yawned behind her hand.

"You have a wonderful imagination, Chevalier."

He leaned over and stroked the mare's neck.

"Étoile, you are carrying the Queen of Hearts to-night. She is very proud, my child. She twists her mouth at your master."

It was two in the morning when they reached the Brick House. There were candles burning and supper set out in the oak dining-room. De Rothan was grandiloquent and gracious. He bowed them in as though he put the whole house at their service.

Durrell was morose and bitter, and Nance tired. Neither wine nor food was welcome. Distraught and restless, they avoided each other's eyes.

De Rothan called for candles.

"Mr. Durrell, I will show you and your daughter to your rooms."

Their rooms were on the first floor, but not next to one another. De Rothan gave Nance her candle and threw open the door for her.

"Good night, Miss Nance. There is a little bell within. Ring it if you should desire anything."

He turned back to show Anthony Durrell to his room.

Nance was standing looking about her at the mahogany furniture, the gay chintzes, the carved low-post bed. She put the candle down, opened the window, and looked out. Garden ground seemed to lie some fifteen feet below; it was all black, but she saw something that glimmered like water. She was still standing there when she heard the key turned in the lock of her door. Footsteps died away down the passage. She realised that she was a prisoner.

It was still early when Tom Stook came lumbering on his long shanks to Rush Heath Hall. He asked for Mr. Jeremy, and Jeremy came out to him on the grass before the house.

"He have gone and stole the young leddy and her father."

"What, man, what?"

“They be at t’ Brick House. De Rothan brought ’en back from Stonehanger two hours after midnight.”

Jeremy swore a big oath.

“Caught napping—by God!”

XXXIII

Jeremy sent Tom Stook back to lie in Yew-Tree Wood and watch De Rothan's house. He himself snapped up a brisk breakfast, mounted his horse, and rode straight to Stonehanger.

Here he found David Barfoot in mighty perplexity and distress, and looking like an old man who had been robbed of all his savings in the night. The whole matter was a mystery to him, especially the smashed window in the parlour. He nearly danced before Jeremy, and began to shout the news at him.

"Kidnapped or murdered, sir, and me asleep like a pig!"

Winter had learned to speak so that David could understand him. It was a question of very distinct lip movements, deliberation, and the use of simple and familiar words.

"Kidnapped they have been, David, but not murdered. The Chevalier de Rothan is guilty of this."

"The tarrifying villain! He be'unt fur doing Miss Nance any wrong?"

"He had better not, David. We have got to see to that."

"God bless me—sure."

"I want you to help."

"I'll take my holly-cudgel, and crack t' Frenchman's head."

Jeremy smiled grimly. He liked that kind of wrath.

"Hold up, David, that would not do at all. We have got a rotten plank to walk on and if we are too heavy it may break and let us down. Listen to me now. I have got something to trust you with."

Winter told him the truth about Stonehanger, and also how De Rothan held Jasper Benham a prisoner. David's eyes grew more and more astonished as he picked up these amazing facts from Jeremy's lips.

"Mr. Durrell in wid t' French! Bother my bones—I'm fair beat!"

"He's in with them no longer, David. We have got to outwit this rogue of a Frenchman. I want you to help us."

"Sure."

"I want you to go to the Brick House. Be as innocent as a lamb, and try to get a few words with your mistress. Tell her I know what has happened, that De Rothan's house is being watched, and that if she can help us from the inside, so much the better. Ask her to tell you which is the window of her room, and that three blinks of a candle or a lantern at night will stand for a signal."

David scratched his beard.

"Maybe they'll not be fur letting me see her."

"That's certain. You have got to fox them if you can."

"Sure."

"You'll find me at the Queen's Head, Sedlescombe."

"I'll lock up t' house and go this very hour."

David, like many a quiet and rather dour old man, had had his adventures as a youngster. Orchard-raiding, smuggling, poaching, had all come easily, and he had retained that primitive rustic cunning that is never wholly lost despite a bent back and the Bible. Jeremy had told him of the charcoal-burners in Yew-Tree Wood and of Tom Stook lying in ambush like a great lean hound. David knew Tom Stook, and Tom Stook knew David. They were dogs who had poached and ratted together.

David made for Yew-Tree Wood that morning, and found Tom Stook lying along the limb of an oak with a bottle under his chin, for it was July and hot weather. They gave and received explanations, grinning solemnly at each other under the shade of the trees.

"De Rothan be gone Guestling way."

"Sure?"

"I saw him go out on his nag. To get a word wid t' lady—be that it?"

"Ay."

"It be'unt safe to whack in and fight 'em. Mr. Winter he be sly. I've seed her at her window."

"Have ye?"

"At t' back o' t' house. Sure, Dave, ain't Farmer Cross's bull bruk out o' t' meadow, gored Will Gray, and come rampin' down yonder?"

David looked at Tom Stook and grinned. It was amazing how well he could hear the vernacular on occasions.

"Sure—and t' beast be blood mad!"

"We be after him."

"Runnin' five mile!"

"And t' brute be tarrifyin' t' whole country——"

"Sure."

"We seed him go down into t' Brick House meadows."

They cut hazel-sticks and started off on this yokel's game, running heavily and clumsily after the fashion of hobnailed countrymen. They made straight toward the Brick House, scrambling through hedges, flourishing their sticks, and shouting to imaginary comrades.

"He be down yonder, Dave."

"Sure."

"I saw him break into t' garden."

They pounded on, sweating, shouting, flourishing their sticks. A head appeared at an upper window, and then disappeared. David and Tom Stook blundered through into the Brick House garden. A man came running round the corner of the house, a pistol in his pocket, and his hand on the butt thereof.

Stook bawled at him.

"T' mad bull, man, have ye seen him?"

The Frenchman stared, watchful and suspicious.

"I see no bull."

Stook carried it through. He looked broiled and boisterous, the heated hero of a five-mile run.

"He bruk through t' hedge here. He be blood mad."

He blundered on, and the Frenchman seemed caught by his hairy and vigorous enthusiasm. They ran round the house together, David remaining behind. He had seen someone come to an upper window.

"Miss Nance, we be after ye——"

Nance was looking down at him.

"David! Oh, be careful!"

"I know, miss. Mr. Winter has his eyes open. Be that your window?"

She nodded.

"There is a great cistern full of water under it, David. I thought I might have let myself down."

He stole up, and glimpsed a big brick tank into which all the rain-water was guttered from the roof. Trying it with his hazel stick he found he could not reach the bottom. And it was directly under Nance's window.

"Drat 'em. Don't ye fear, Miss Nance, we be on the watch. Three glints of a lantern on t' hillside or three glints o' t' candle in your window will serve as a signal."

"Yes, David."

"I'd better be after that there bull!"

He ran on and overtook Tom Stook and the Frenchman who were on the edge of the paddock. Stook was scratching a hot head and looking puzzled.

"Damn t' beast, Dave. He be gone along t' bottom. I could have swore he bruk into t' garden."

"Get on then, man——"

"I be that dry——"

"God badger t' drink. He'll be goring some other body. Run, Tom, run."

They ran, breathing hard, and pounding the grass with their heavy boots. The Frenchman stood and stared. They were just lumbering, red-faced yokels so far as he was concerned, and he believed contemptuously in the existence of the bull. The bovine seriousness, and especially Tom Stook's thirst, had convinced him of their stolid, sweating sincerity.

No more was heard of the mad bull, though Jasper had heard the shouts of the two men as they ran down through the fields. The window had been jammed by Gaston's broad figure. Then Gaston had hurried away, locking the door after him.

De Rothan had been to Rye, and since there were folk of French extraction in Rye town, and money was as useful there as anywhere, De Rothan had long ago been able to assure himself of a friend or two among the smuggling, seafaring folk. De Rothan had discovered a man who would have sold King George and both Houses of Parliament for a bag of guineas.

The man who served him was the working owner of a fishing boat, and one of the most noisy of the Rye patriots. His boat had even been used as one of the coast patrols between Rye and Hastings, so that the fellow was in a position to be very useful to De Rothan.

De Rothan and the Rye man had met as though by chance on the flats between Rye and Winchelsea. They had stopped and gossiped under a thorn-tree by one of the dikes, De Rothan on his horse, concealed by no attempt at concealment. The Rye man had gone home with gold pieces tied up in a red handkerchief, and De Rothan had ridden back by way of Guestling and Westfield to the Brick House.

He was told of the incident of the mad bull, and smiled over it. None of De Rothan's French servants knew that David Barfoot had seized a chance of speaking to Nance Durrell.

Dinner was laid for three, and De Rothan, with the keys of the two bedrooms in his pocket, went up to release his two guests and to bring them down to dine. He opened Durrell's door and found the scholar reading by the window.

"Mr. Anthony, I consider your safety to be so important that I have taken the liberty of keeping your door locked. We will conduct your daughter down to dinner."

Durrell said nothing. He put his book aside, and joined De Rothan in the gallery outside Nance's door.

"Miss Nance, your father and I wait for you to dine with us."

They descended to the panelled room. The man François waited at table, Nance and her father sitting opposite each other, De Rothan taking the head. The conversation was largely a monologue on his part, a pretence at making an ambiguous situation seem natural and honest.

"I cannot help wishing that Mr. Benham were with us; the party would be complete. But Mr. Benham is disinclined to leave his room. He even seemed angry when I told him that you were here."

Nance stared at the bowl of roses in front of her. Anthony Durrell glanced slantwise at De Rothan. His enmity was austere and solemn.

"I may eat your food, Chevalier, but I do not touch your hypocrisy."

"That is a fanatical and rather illogical temper. You do not like my wine, sir, and yet you drink it!"

"I eat to live, but I do not live to lie."

His angry sententiousness amused De Rothan.

"Leave the little moral problems at the bottom of your glass, Mr. Anthony. Why, a month ago you were not so particular. Besides, François here understands English. We need not hang our prejudices out to dry before our servants."

The rest of the meal dragged through in silence. Nance, sitting with downcast eyes, heard De Rothan proposing a walk in the garden.

"I must find you some sweet corner, Miss Nance, where you can dabble your hands among flowers. I am not forgetting that you may like to take a posy up to Mr. Benham."

His ironical good humour troubled her. The garden was a garden of clipped yews, brick paths, and rank green grass, but Nance and her father were distraught and restless, moving and speaking as though under compulsion. Nance had a vague hope that Jeremy might leap up from somewhere, and that De Rothan's cunningly balanced house of cards might come tumbling about his head. But he seemed gay and debonair, inspired by a mischievous and cynical courtesy that bubbled over into playfulness.

"Will you not gather some flowers for Mr. Benham?"

Nance was too much in earnest to be able to match his flippant irony.

"No? You will not? And yet in half an hour or so we are going to pay this youngster a visit. It was a promise, was it not? I always keep my promises."

His voice made Nance afraid, it was so callous and so confident.

"When shall I see Mr. Benham?"

"Now, if you like."

She gave De Rothan a puzzled and mistrustful look. What was he trying to bring about? What were his motives?

"As you please."

"Come, then. Mr. Durrell, we will leave you for a few minutes."

Durrell looked fixedly at De Rothan.

"Chevalier——"

De Rothan guessed what his thoughts were and what he wished to say. He bowed to the father, and then to Nance.

“Sir, your whole attitude is one of unjustified distrust. I love my friends—if I hate my enemies. Miss Nance is far safer in my house than if she were at Stonehanger.”

Durrell blinked self-consciously under frowning eyebrows.

“I wish to take you at your word, De Rothan.”

“Follow your inclinations, my good friend. Miss Nance, are you afraid to follow me into my own house?”

She looked at him steadily, feeling that it was necessary that she should show no fear.

“No.”

“That is good. Come.”

She was struck by the intent, shrewd, but half-mocking look he gave her.

XXXIV

De Rothan led Nance to the attic story of the Brick House, talking all the while with a gay and railing vivacity that sharpened the edge of her feeling of suspense.

"Mr. Benham is so valuable to me that I have to lodge him high up near the gods. You may find him a little moody. It seems, too, that a certain display of dirt and disorder helps him to maintain an attitude of resentment and independence. Have you ever heard of pride refusing soap and water?"

She felt that there was an abominable cleverness about this man that might succeed in turning her finer instincts into ridicule. It was the old trick of throwing some evil-smelling stuff over a man's coat just as he was about to meet the woman of his desire. It might be contemptible and sordid, but the taint lingered and offended the senses.

They passed along the gallery and stopped before a stout oak door. De Rothan knocked gently.

The man Gaston was within, and he appeared to fling the door open with studied suddenness, showing Jasper Benham sprawling on his bed of straw. He was asleep and snoring, head hanging back over a rough bolster stuffed with straw, his face flaccid and vacant, his shirt open at the throat. That one glimpse of him was a shock to Nance. De Rothan had come near persuading her to be disgusted.

Gaston went out, closing the door, while De Rothan walked across to Jasper and stood looking down at him with pleased vindictiveness.

"Mr. Benham—sir, wake up; here is a lady to see you. You see how he sleeps, Miss Nance, this fat young Sussex ox. Wake up, sir, wake up."

He touched Jasper with his foot, and Jasper woke up, snarling.

"Curse you! Let me alone!"

"Mr. Benham, here is a friend to see you."

Jasper sat up and caught sight of Nance. His face showed utter astonishment, nor was it lovely to look upon with its sprouting beard, uncombed hair, and streakings of dirt. His irons made a ridiculous jangling. There was much in the picture to provoke laughter and pity.

"Mr. Benham, do you not recognise the lady?"

Jasper did not look at De Rothan. The sudden heat of his angry humiliation was too bitter and too fierce in him. His eyes fixed themselves on Nance's shoes; nor had he a word to say.

"Come, Mr. Benham, come—are you not pleased?"

There was a sneer in De Rothan's voice, and it stung Nance to the quick. A sudden great pity carried her away. Jasper was humbled before her and before his enemy, and this shame of his transfigured all that was uncouth and ridiculous. It was she who felt humiliated and sneered at.

She turned on De Rothan.

"I understand now. I did not understand before."

He shrugged his shoulders, but the scorn and anger in her eyes stung him.

"My child, this is what we call romance. You do not seem to appreciate the opportunities I am giving you. No mere humdrum, thread-and-needle experiences——"

She regarded him steadily, thoughtfully, and then turned to Jasper.

"It sounds so empty to say that I am sorry."

Her voice made him look up. It seemed to uplift his courage and his pride, and to rescue him from the foolish squalor of his surroundings.

"Don't worry about me, Nance. It comes of my own conceit. But why are you here?"

Her eyes shone angrily.

"Because, like you, I have been kidnapped."

"You, too!"

"Yes, and I know everything."

Jasper met De Rothan's eyes, and De Rothan smiled at him.

"If circumstances admitted it, my dear young people, I would leave you alone together. But——"

Nance ignored him.

"Jasper, it makes me burn with anger——"

His eyes no longer shirked hers, and even his grime and his uncouthness heightened the tragic note that she persisted in hearing.

"I treated our friend here as a gentleman. It was foolish of me. Chevalier, I never ought to have let you out of that ditch."

De Rothan jerked a laugh, and Nance's eyes flashed to Jasper's. They said, "Well done, throw your scorn in his face."

He showed her his chained wrists.

"Pretty things, these, as the result of an affair of honour. Do you know, Nance, he had his men hidden in Darvel's Wood to pelt me with stones so that I should not hurt him."

She gave a dry little laugh, and glanced at De Rothan.

"That was very brave and honourable."

His sudden arrogance showed that he was growing out of patience with their scorn.

"Miss Nance, you have not the sense yet to know men, and the ways of men. If you were only five years older, and if you had been married to Mr. Benham here for five years, I should have had more hope of you. Still, it may be good for you both to remember that I am the man in power."

Jasper eyed him meaningly.

"You can be as insolent to me as you please, but——"

"Mr. Benham, let us have no fool's bellowing. I say what I please, even to a woman. I have brought you two together to see how weak in the head my poor Nance here might be. It is a bad case, but I shall cure her. Gaston, you can come in."

The man entered, smothering a grin.

"Now, my most sweet lady——"

He shepherded Nance out with a sweep of the arm, but she went slowly, holding her pride aloof, and giving Jasper a look that he could treasure.

Nance went to her room, De Rothan following her to the door, and bowing as she entered. She heard the key turned in the lock, and then De Rothan's footsteps dying away down the stairs.

Nance went to the window, and, leaning her elbows on the sill, looked across toward the oak wood on the hill to the west of the house. What was De Rothan's ultimate desire with regard to her, and did he believe in the

crushing of England by Napoleon's army of invasion? Supposing this should happen, what would become of them all? She saw not only herself, but Jasper and her father at the mercy of a man who would be in a position to satisfy any vindictive whim or passion.

Nance had travelled beyond mere amazement. Incredible things had happened, and were happening. Even the seemingly quiet life that her father had led all these years had been but the fitting-out of the ship of adventure. Monotony indeed! The prudish stolidity of English life! And yet there were people who lived as though all the world was a comfortable breakfast-table, little people who dabbled with their teaspoons, and for whom time was spaced out by a change of underclothing and the donning of a Sunday hat.

Nance kept asking herself, "What is Jeremy Winter doing?" For Jeremy seemed their one hope, the one man capable of dealing with this devil of a Frenchman. She knew that Jeremy had to be sly and cautious, yet this very cautiousness had begun to try her patience. She wanted things to happen, quickly and even violently. She wanted Jasper freed, and De Rothan confounded. The suspense would be intolerable, with this man holding her at his mercy.

Meanwhile De Rothan had rejoined Durrell in the garden—Durrell, whose face carried an expression of resentful bewilderment. He was so little of a man of action that he was still gaping at the events of the previous night. The whole adventure would be over and done with before he had decided what part he ought to play.

De Rothan twitted him maliciously.

"Come, come, friend Durrell, put away that grieved look. I have all these people in the hollow of my hand, and for the glory of La Belle France, and Liberty. A month ago you would have been patting me on the shoulder."

Durrell looked at him with an old man's thin distrust.

"Yes, but what are your plans?"

"Why, to pick up some of these fine English estates, to live as one of the grandees of the Empire, to marry and found a family!"

"That is all very magnificent, but——"

"Men of courage are ready to meet the 'buts' of life. A general has his line of retreat as well as his line of advance. You will not object to joining me if I have to return to France!"

"What do you mean?"

"If we are foiled I shall not leave you behind to be hanged. I am too good a comrade. I shall take you and Nance back with me to France."

Durrell stood open-mouthed, staring, and De Rothan smiled at his amazed face.

"The idea surprises you! You are struck by it, eh?"

"De Rothan, I have had enough of this monstrous fooling."

"Will it be fooling if I marry your daughter?"

"Sir?"

"Save your emotions."

"You think you can marry Nance!"

"There are three reasons why I should marry her. Because I desire to, because she does not desire me to, and because Mr. Jasper Benham will be struck across the face. Motives indeed! Our motives in life are curiously complex. I love complexities, entanglements, quarrels. Am I a man for a tame hare? Psst! Durrell, if a woman provokes me I like her all the better."

Durrell stared at him in impotent indignation.

"You are beyond me, De Rothan, and yet not beyond me."

"Indeed, I should not have to go far! What time is it? I think I shall have to request you to be locked up in your room."

That night Nance watched at her window, sitting there in the darkness with a cloak over her shoulders. She had heard De Rothan pass along the gallery, pause outside her door, and then walk on toward his room. When the dusk fell she had managed to push an oak chest against the door so that no one could force their way in without waking her if she were asleep.

The house seemed very silent, and the summer night was a noiseless glitter of stars. Now and again she heard the faint splashing of water as frogs leapt in the great rain-water cistern below her window.

It was past midnight when Nance saw a glimmer out in the woods on the opposite hillside. It moved to and fro three times, and then disappeared. Nance had brought a tinder-box with her, and a candle stood on the little table at her elbow. It took her some time to get a light, but she managed it and moved the candle to and fro three times across the window. Then she blew it out and sat down to wait.

A quarter of an hour passed before she heard a faint splash in the water below. She leaned out of the window and stared down into the darkness, to see nothing but vague outlines and an uncertain glimmering of water. Then something moved, close to the wall. A whisper came up to her out of the darkness.

"Nance——"

She leaned out and curved her hands about her mouth as though to confine her voice and throw it down to the man below.

"Who is it?"

"Jeremy."

She shivered with excitement.

"Oh, I'm glad, so glad."

"Not too fast, child. Where is Jasper? Do you know anything?"

"They have him in irons in one of the attics."

"Irons! Damn them!"

"I am locked into my room and father into his. A man seems to sleep in the same attic as Jasper."

Jeremy was silent a moment.

"Cunning rogues. Ssh! Nance, could you let down a cord or anything, a couple of sheets tied together?"

"Are you coming in?"

"No, no, not this time. Listen. Do you know what opium is?"

"Yes."

"Then let down a line. Here's a packet of poppy-powder."

Nance went to the bed, stripped the sheets off, tied them together, and let the rope out of the window. The lower end dangled itself in the water of the cistern.

"Jerk it to one side——"

She tried several times before Jeremy managed to catch the wet sheet on the end of a stick. He fastened the packet to the dry part of the sheet.

"Right, Nance. Do you think you can manage to get this stuff into the wine—De Rothan's wine?"

“I’ll try. Would it kill him?”

“No, there’s not enough for that. If we could get him drugged, we could deal with the others. Try the trick to-morrow evening. We shall be on the watch in the wood. If you succeed, signal with your candle.”

Nance had pulled up the sheets, and had the packet in her hands.

“Is there no other way, Jeremy?”

“We will try this. Are you afraid?”

“Yes—and no. No—not for Jasper’s sake.”

“Good. No more risks to-night. And, Nance?”

“Yes.”

“If anything bad should happen, call, shout, someone will be within hearing. We should break in and chance the rest. See?”

“Yes.”

“Good night, child.”

“Good night, Jeremy, good night.”

XXXV

Parson Goffin came cantering up to Rush Heath House, his face radiant, his nag's coat shining with sweat. The parson's face glowed, and he was in magnificent good humour. Bumpers of exultation, and of far stronger drink, had been tossed down the throats of many Sussex worthies that morning. The powder on his coat and waistcoat showed that Mr. Goffin had been taking snuff with feverish exhilaration.

He pulled up in front of the house, waving his hat, and shouting.

"Hallo, there, Squire—Jeremy—three cheers for old England."

Squire Kit was asleep, but Jeremy came out like a boy out of school.

"Hallo, hallo, what news?"

"Villeneuve has been caught and plucked. Hoorah, sir, hoorah, no damned French fleet in the Channel."

"By George, Goffin!"

"The news had just come into Rye. I was in Hastings early, but, good Lord, one never hears anything but old women's gossip in Hastings! Calder fell in with Villeneuve off Ferrol. He had fifteen ships to twenty, but he went in and hammered at him. No great victory, sir, but he has kept Villeneuve from Brest and from the Channel."

Jeremy snapped his fingers.

"Sing old Rose, and burn the bellows! Good, by George—for England."

"Villeneuve got away into Ferrol, but he's there, sir, and not off Boulogne. And some of them are cursing Calder for not doing better. Why, damn 'em, he has stopped the Frenchman's rush. It's all up with him for a dash on the Straits of Dover. And I'll wager that Nelson is not very far from the coast of Spain."

He blew, perspired, and exulted.

"A drink, Jeremy, my man, my pulpit for a drink. Here's to old England!"

"Pots will have a busy day. Hi, Jack, Sue, Marjorie, here—all of you—run, now, fill up the brown jugs. The French have had one on the nose, and

are stopping to think it over! Run, you beggars, kisses all round for the wenches. Toss the brown ale down and be merry."

Jeremy took the news and a jug of ale to Squire Christopher.

"Villeneuve has been headed out of the Channel, sir."

"Murder my soul, Jerry, news—that's news. Let all the apothecaries go to blazes. Give me a drink, man; the jug will do. Here's to the roast beef. We'll soon have lad Jasper home, eh?"

Jeremy kept a stolid face.

"Count on that, Kit; we'll soon have the lad home."

But he went down to join Goffin, with a grim mouth and thoughtful eyes.

"This is good for the country, Goffin, but over yonder it may mean something dangerous. And here is Kit calling out for the lad——"

Goffin emptied his mug for the third time.

"The game is up for the scoundrel. He knows it by now."

"Yes. He hears things quickly enough, but you don't know this sort of man, Goffin. You have never come across the breed. I have. A bit of Irish and a bit of French, and a kind of pleasant cynical villainy thrown in. He is the stage rogue off the stage—to the last insolent cock of the rapier. Yet he's no mere actor man in a black doublet and a plumed hat. He'd pistol you before you could say pat, if it were worth his while to do it."

"The linen sounds too dirty, Jeremy! He will make off across the water."

"Yes, and take the girl with him. And perhaps stick a knife into Jasper before he goes."

"Poof, sir, you make the man a monster. I'll not believe it. Your adventures in Spain——"

Jeremy smiled a rather hard smile.

"Good sir, tell me, I have seen the savage, and the passionate side of life—I have. Blood and steel! Good Lord, Goffin; these things are real; they aren't bits of wood and cups of cheap wine. Men lust, and stab, and shoot. They do; I assure you. I suppose it has been so peaceful over the water——"

Goffin grunted.

"Well, what are we wasting precious time for, sir?"

"Ask the impossible monster! I am not going to waste time. I am going to get our men together and draw a leaguer about De Rothan's place. We shall use craft if we can. It will be safer for the girl and for Jasper."

Jeremy was in the saddle before the day was half an hour older. He knew that the news of Villeneuve's defeat would be serious news to De Rothan, and that it would go far toward making him a desperate man. The climax that he had schemed and waited for had vanished. There might still be a vague chance of Villeneuve sailing out of Ferrol and trying to fight his way into the Channel, but Jeremy, unlike the scaremongers, was well content with things as they were. Villeneuve had not shown himself to be the man for a great enterprise. The haunting and inexorable genius of Nelson dogged him, casting a premonition of disaster over the Frenchman's mind.

Jeremy rode out to gather in Jasper's friends. He called up John Steyning, of Catsfield, and young Parsloe, of the "Black Horse," and told each of them to bring two or three sturdy men. The meeting-place was to be the "Queen's Head" Inn at Sedlescombe. They were to gather there unostentatiously, as though it were a matter of chance. Jeremy himself rode on to Hastings. He had an old friend quartered there as surgeon to the troops, Surgeon Stott, a one-eyed, bronze-headed vulture of a man, fierce of beak and skinny of neck, and with language enough to satisfy Satan. But Stott was a shrewd and steady surgeon with a quick hand and a cool head. He could keep his mouth shut, and bring down a partridge with a pistol bullet.

Stott was an oddity, and Jeremy found him in a little back room of one of the Hastings inns, brewing a bowl of punch. He was tasting the stuff, with the ladle under his hooked nose, when Jeremy entered.

"What, Jeremy—you devil!"

"Punch at this time of day! Empty it out of the window, sir. I am taking you out on an adventure."

"A fight, eh? I'm game. Instruments or pistols, or both? By George, sir, I feel in a mood to cut off ten legs in as many minutes."

Jeremy sat down and told him the whole tale.

"So it is not a matter of leg-cutting, Stott."

"No, a quick shot with a pistol, and no pomposity, eh! Shoot the rogue first, and explain afterward."

"We've got to be careful, Stott. He is as touchy on the trigger as you are. Have you got a horse of your own?"

"Yes."

"Then come along. We can talk on the road."

By four o'clock Jeremy's party had gathered at the Sedlescombe inn. Jeremy's opinion of the landlord proved sage and astute. The man did not even look inquisitive. He had a private room at the gentlemen's service, and never blinked an eyelid when seven or eight sturdy yokels who were strangers in the village came scraping their hobnails in his brick-paved parlour. Parson Goffin turned up with pistols in his coat-tail pockets, and ready to drink and hobnob with Steyning, young Parsloe, Jeremy, and Surgeon Stott. Tom Stook and David Barfoot with three or four steady men were lying in the woods and ditches about the Brick House, keeping watch.

Jeremy and his friends played bowls on the "Queen's Head" green, and dined together in the private room, the landlord waiting on them in person. Over their long pipes Jeremy elaborated his plan of campaign. They were to surround De Rothan's house that night on the chance that Nance Durrell might be able to set the spell working within. This scheme failing them, Jeremy proposed that they should break into De Rothan's stables, make off with his horse-flesh, and see whether some such argument could not bring him to reason.

Jeremy had pictured De Rothan as a desperate man, and if there is anything in the saying that a man's temper can give him a black face, then De Rothan was in some such desperate temper. He had ridden out very early in the direction of Guestling and the sea, and Tom Stook, lying in a dry ditch and peering through the hedge-bottom, saw him return. His horse shied where the grass lane turned in from the by-road, and something ominous about the incident seemed to set a spark to De Rothan's black anger. He beat the horse about the head with his fist, and then sawed at the bit till the beast's mouth bled.

Stook was no lamb, but De Rothan's savagery angered him.

"You tarrifyin' devil! Someone may be giving you a bloody mouth before long."

The first person whom De Rothan spoke with at the Brick House was the man Gaston. François had taken Gaston's place for an hour, and the elder man was stretching his legs in the garden. He knew the various expressions of De Rothan's face as well as a shepherd knows the face of the sky. There was thunder about, and the horizon looked ominous.

De Rothan's horse was still quivering with fright. Gaston took the bridle, and waited stolidly for orders.

"Thunder, don't stare at me, man, like that! This morning I have heard the name of a coward. Villeneuve has wrecked us, if he has been careful of his fleet."

"Villeneuve, monsieur!"

"The heart of a chicken! That the Emperor should have trusted such a man! I heard the news at Rye. Maybe you have heard bells ringing. One night more here, and then for France."

Gaston was about to lead the horse round to the stable, but De Rothan stopped him.

"No, no, I know these yokels are on the watch. If they were to break into the stable and snap up our horses we should be badly placed. The hall can serve as a stable to-night. Have a few staples knocked into the wainscoting and bring all the beasts in. Men and horses all under one roof."

Gaston nodded.

"What of the young man, monsieur?"

"We will use him till the last moment, and he will be useful, even then. Come here, Gaston. Some things must be spoken quietly."

They stood close together, Gaston intent and swarthy, stolidly ready to follow the adventure through. Once or twice he blinked his eyes at De Rothan as though astonished.

"Madame goes with us, monsieur?"

"I have said as much."

"And the young man, monsieur! Are we to leave him chained up like an ox in a stall?"

"Growing soft at heart, Gaston? I have no pity for people who get in my way. Besides, the trick will keep his good friends busy, and we shall have to snatch our time. I agreed with Martin this very morning. It will be high water at midnight to-morrow. He will run close in at Pett Level and take us off."

"Then I will see to the horses, monsieur."

"Yes, now, at once. Then we will dine. I will go and warn Miss Durrell and her father."

Nance was sitting at her window when she heard De Rothan's footsteps in the gallery. The sound stirred the secret purpose of her suspense. All day she had been thinking over Jeremy's plan, and it seemed so impossible, so much like a trick out of an old play.

De Rothan knocked at her door.

"Nance, we dine in an hour."

"Yes."

"I will be here at your door to give you an arm."

She heard him go on to her father's room and knock. Their voices sounded harsh and quarrelsome. For comfort she gazed out toward the oak wood on the slope of the hill where Jeremy's watchers were hidden. She was almost angry with Jeremy for putting such a weapon into her hands. What chance had she to use it, and why did they thrust the responsibility upon a woman?

She heard De Rothan repass her door. He was humming that song that the royalists had sung so gallantly and so fatefully at Versailles: "*O, Richard, O mon roi, si l'univers t'abandon—*"

A feeling of helplessness possessed her. She rested her forehead on her crossed wrists and tried to think of something she could do.

XXXVI

Nance heard the sound of hammering below, and it connected itself in her mind with some vague idea that the house was being barricaded against attack. She was still leaning her crossed arms on the window-sill when she heard De Rothan's knock.

She went out to him with Jeremy's packet hidden under her bodice. She had torn off the sealed end and just folded the paper over so that the powder could be emptied out quickly.

There was a gaiety about De Rothan that baffled her. It was not unlike the insolent sprightliness of an aristocrat passing to the guillotine.

"Your father refuses to dine with us to-night."

"He is not ill?"

"Only in temper. You will not grudge me a little kindness."

"No. Besides, I am hungry."

He laughed, and offered her his arm.

"Let us be honest. Even heroines have to eat and drink and wash their faces. It is monstrous nonsense, all this romance and all this glorifying of women. A boy adores indiscriminately, a man chooses the least offensive necessity. That is the difference between a boy's love and a man's."

As they descended the oak stairway, François came in from the porch with a horse following at the end of a halter. The beast followed him quietly enough, though its hoofs made a rare racket on the oak floor-boards of the hall. The unexpectedness of it made Nance falter.

"Nothing but a horse, *ma chère*."

"It startled me."

"You tremble. You are not made to be an adventurous heroine, to do wonderful and absurd things, climb down ropes, and hold villains at the point of a pistol. We are asking our horses to dine with us, that is all. Now, tell me frankly, how do you like adventure?"

"I don't like it at all."

"No, of course not. It is abominably uncomfortable, but people will have it that it is fine and exciting—to read about."

The man Jean waited on them at table, while François went in and out of the big hall bringing the horses in from the stable and fastening them to the staples that had been driven into the wainscoting. Nance's place was at the lower end of the oak table, where the light from the window fell upon her face. De Rothan sat well back in his chair, watching her and keeping up a whimsical monologue.

"Why the old chivalry folk glorified you women, Nance, I do not know. I have had experience, and I have never come across a woman who was not a fool. Wonderful creatures, eh—all cream and roses and starry eyes and tenderness and purity! Just because of something that is called a petticoat. And Mr. Benham thinks you the most wonderful young woman in the whole world! Now, I do not. And since a man cannot get on without a woman, he makes the best of a bad bargain."

She felt that he was laughing at her, and yet there was something vindictive and passionate behind it.

"You are too clever for me, Chevalier."

"No doubt I am. We have nothing to do with a woman's brains—God help them. But we are not all brain. That is the tragedy."

She met his eyes and hated them for their sudden animal frankness. It was probable that for the moment this rather sentimental girl understood De Rothan and the type of manhood that he represented, a manhood that could be passionate and unscrupulous, and yet could despise itself for being passionate. "To fret oneself about this schoolgirl!"—that was what he was saying to himself.

Nance shrank into herself, and thought of Jasper, without realising that De Rothan was in many ways the finer man. He was a well-polished rogue and had done many clever things in his time. Jasper Benham would be remarkable mainly as the father of a family. But Nance's thoughts did not run in this direction.

Jean had been dismissed by De Rothan. He reappeared at the door and said something in French. De Rothan pushed his chair back and rose.

"Miss Nance, you will pardon me?"

She felt her face crimsoning as she saw her opportunity rushing upon her.

"Yes."

He went out, closing the door after him. Nance was up and unfolding the packet with shaking and ineffectual fingers. De Rothan's silver tankard was half full. She slipped round the table and emptied the powder into it, and, crumpling up the paper, thrust it back into the bosom of her dress.

She was shaking like an old lady with the palsy, and trying desperately to hide it, when De Rothan returned. He came in with a casual air, humming the same song as he had hummed in the gallery. He gave one sharp sidelong glance at Nance, and smiled.

"You will pardon my turning the hall into a stable, but circumstances are urgent. François needed orders. I trust the opportunity was of use."

His ironical air chilled her. She saw him resume his seat, take the tankard, look into it, sip a little of the drink, and then lean back in the chair and laugh.

"Nance, *ma chère*, you have not pledged me yet. Let me pass you a loving cup."

She sat and stared at him helplessly, feeling herself a fool.

"What, you will not drink to me? Supposing we send the cup to Mr. Benham? I will put more liquor in it, for no doubt he is thirsty. Jean, man, Jean. Here."

Jean came in and stood beside Nance's chair. But De Rothan did not look at him. His eyes were fixed upon Nance.

"Jean, I thought I wanted you, but I find I do not. Go and help François with the horses."

The man vanished, and De Rothan sat with one hand holding the handle of the tankard, his eyes still fixed on Nance. She felt humiliated, outwitted, stripped naked before him. It was so palpable that he knew and that the knowledge amused him.

"Nance, you cannot play the part, my child. We are too clever for the sweet Tragedy Queen who tilts little packets of poison into a gentleman's cup. Did that shiny-faced bully of a fencing-master take me for such a fool!"

She had nothing to say to him.

"Whisperings at midnight under a lady's window! Some houses carry sounds very queerly, child, and men who value their necks do not run too

many risks. Oh, I do not blame you. Husbands are poisoned more often than lovers, and yet I am inclined to tempt the peril."

He rose and emptied the tankard out of the window.

"No doubt you would like to think over the possibilities of this little affair? Sleep well to-night. You may need it. Do not waste the precious hours making little signals with candles."

He moved across and opened the door for her. Nance had risen. Resentment, and half-childish anger had taken the place of her sense of blundering helplessness.

"I hate you," her eyes told him.

And he laughed.

"François, see that the horses behave properly. Miss Durrell goes to her room."

Nance felt bitterly befooled, and not so much in love with Jeremy's cleverness. De Rothan's sneering complacency made her horribly afraid. Supposing he should win through, outwit Jeremy, and get away to France? And supposing, too, that he intended taking her with him? The whole thing was preposterous and yet abominably real. She watched the dusk falling, brooding at her window, while the woods blackened against the summer sunset. She supposed that Jeremy and his friends were hidden yonder in the woods. They would be watching the house for her signal, a signal that she could not give.

Nance did not sleep that night, which was hardly to be wondered at. The house was full of noises, the stamping of the horses on the oak floor of the hall, the passing to and fro of men, the noise of hammering in some distant room. De Rothan was preparing his baggage for a sudden retreat, packing such valuables as he possessed, and ordering his men to break everything that had to be left behind. Jean was sent round with a hatchet, and was smashing chairs to pieces, hammering in the cases of the clocks, and splitting the panels of chests and cupboards.

Then, some time after midnight, Nance heard someone talking in the orchard beyond the stables. There was a sound as of men running, a scuffling of feet on the stones of the yard, a shattering of glass, and the splitting of wood. Then someone exclaimed angrily, and shadows shuffled away disappointedly into the darkness. Nance heard De Rothan speaking from one of the upper windows.

"There is nothing to be stolen there, gentlemen. I disposed of my horses this morning. We happen to be awake here, so I should advise you to go away quietly."

Under an apple-tree in the orchard Jeremy was swearing into the sympathetic ears of Surgeon Stott.

"Confound the fellow, it is like grabbing an eel. He has taken his horses inside the house. I know what that means. He is going to make a bolt for the sea."

Parson Goffin appeared, a long black shadow among the apple-trees. He was taking snuff, and was ripe for a luxurious and irrepressible explosion.

"Ha—tissho—ha—t——"

"Damn you, Goffin, you are a nice man for a night surprise!"

"It was not much of a surprise, sir. I can sneeze with impunity. Ha tisshoo—ha tissho."

Jeremy swore. It was getting ridiculous.

"Look here, Stott, we shall have to bivouac here—blockade the place."

"That's the game, sir."

"I'll send Parsloe back for provisions, and then on to the coast to try and warn the sailor people to look out for suspicious visitors. We will sit down here, and trumpet with our noses, parson, and hope for the walls of Jericho to fall."

When daylight came those in the Brick House saw Jeremy's people bivouacking in the orchard and in the meadow in front of the house. Jeremy had divided his party into two bodies so as to command both sides of the place. Nance, standing at her window, saw Jeremy walking up and down the orchard, his hat cocked at a militant angle, and a short clay pipe between his teeth. He stopped and waved his hat to her, when she appeared at the window, and Nance waved back. There was something comforting about Jeremy's activity and about the men whom she could see sitting with their backs against the trunks of the apple-trees with muskets or old shot-guns ready across their knees. Hardly one of the yokels could shoot, but still they looked impressive.

The Brick House itself seemed very quiet and undisturbed. About eight o'clock Nance heard footsteps on the stairs, and a tray was set down outside her door. She opened the door when she thought the man had gone, only to

find De Rothan standing close by in the gallery, and looking through a window at Jeremy's men in the meadow. Surgeon Stott had command there. They had lit a fire, and the blue-grey smoke went up into the sunlight.

De Rothan turned and smiled at Nance.

"These good people are very attentive. Yes, take your tray, *ma chère*, we still have some teacups left us."

He appeared audaciously cheerful, as though enjoying this essay in strategy.

"Mr. Benham has been asking for you, but I thought that it would not be kind to leave his wounds too raw. The end of his imprisonment is very near. I hope to return him soon to his friends."

Nance faltered in the doorway, yearning to know what De Rothan was hiding behind this mask of composure.

"Then you will let us go back to our friends?"

He eyed her curiously.

"Mr. Benham will return home. Your father can please himself. As for you, *ma chère*, in your case you will please the Chevalier de Rothan."

"You cannot mean— —"

"I desire you to go with me to France. It is a fair country and will please you."

She made as though to close the door on him, run to the window, and shout to Jeremy. A gesture of De Rothan's restrained her.

"No, child, do not run and call to your friends. I assure you that it would be fatal to Mr. Benham; nor would it help you in the least."

"But, it is impossible! You cannot take me against my will!"

He made a soothing movement with his hands.

"Tsst, child, do not excite yourself. I am doing you a great honour. In France you will no longer be the daughter of an old schoolmaster. There, take up your tray and get your breakfast. One should not go into action hungry."

XXXVII

Most of that day Nance sat at her window overlooking the orchard. Once or twice she waved to Jeremy and he waved back to her, but Nance had conceived such a deadly dread of De Rothan that she was afraid to bestir herself in her own cause. It seemed to be Jasper's life against her own honour, for there was something about De Rothan's sneering cheerfulness that made her believe that he would not hesitate to carry out his threats.

But Nance did not go untempted, seeing that Jeremy and his men were within hail, and that one appealing cry from her would bring the whole crisis to an end. They would storm the house, and overwhelm De Rothan and his Frenchmen. But then, in the meantime, what would have befallen Jasper, with that sullen beast of a Gaston on guard over him in the attic?

Nance understood what Jeremy's tactics were. He was showing De Rothan with ostentation—that he was surrounded, and was waiting for the Frenchman to come to terms. And Jeremy's strategy reacted upon Nance. She had worn herself into a fever of emotional anguish, but her own helplessness made itself felt. She would leave things to these men, let herself drift. All, all—was it not impossible for De Rothan to break away and reach the sea?

As for De Rothan, he was not the proper villain who stalked the passages, biting his nails, and muttering love and vengeance. He looked plump, sprightly, dressed to perfection, and very much unflurried. These wasps buzzing in the orchard seemed to amuse him. He even went into the garden and walked magnificently up and down the brick path, stopping at the gate to lift his hat to Surgeon Stott who was busy with a glass and bottle.

The surgeon approached the gate, thinking De Rothan had come out to parley.

"Is it the white flag, sir?"

"Good morning, sir. I hope you like my meadow? No, I am taking the air—that is all."

"Impudent blackguard!" said the surgeon.

But De Rothan did not seem to hear.

About eleven o'clock that morning he went up to see Jasper Benham, who had been growing more and more exasperated each day over his own squalid helplessness. Bad food and an abundance of physical discomfort soon take the romance out of life, especially when there is no one to applaud a man's fortitude. But Jasper had an abnormal amount of obstinacy. He hung on to his ideals, when many men would have wished De Rothan, old Durrell, and his daughter at Jericho.

"Good morning to you, Mr. Benham. It may please you to know that you will be free to-morrow."

Jasper eyed him with grim hostility. De Rothan's good humour and his shining self-satisfaction were not soothing.

"Thanks. But on what terms?"

"Terms, Mr. Benham?"

"You are not the man to surrender something for nothing."

"Eh! But I have all that I desire. You see, I leave you here, looking your best and feeling proud of all that you have accomplished. I make my departure with such valuables as I have by me. I take Miss Durrell with me into France to be my mistress."

If Jasper's manhood needed reinspiring it found its inspiration in these words of De Rothan's. A moment ago he had felt glad that the adventure was at an end, that he would be able to stretch his legs, wash, drink a glass of good wine, and eat a well-cooked dinner. The smell of liberty had entered his nostrils. But here De Rothan had roused a deeper and more powerful instinct, stronger physically even than thirst, hunger, and the desire to be clean.

"You scoundrel!"

De Rothan looked at him quizzically.

"Mr. Benham, you have a good opinion of yourself. Does it not occur to you that a woman may change her mind?"

"No."

"That is strange! How little you must know of women. Consider for a moment. I am a very passable man, taller by half a hand than you are, better built, not so thick in the skull. I am an aristocrat, a wit, and a man who has travelled. Women love a man with a little of the devil in him; it is human

nature. I could kill you in half a minute if we were put up to fight with swords. Nance knows that. And it counts with a woman."

"What a liar you are!"

"No; I am telling the truth because—my little man—it will sting you far more than if I laid my hand across your face. I depart for France. Nance has chosen to come with me. It is not very wonderful that she should prefer a French aristocrat and a man of the world to a little red-faced Sussex squireling who has lived his life in three parishes. Why should I laugh at you? It is not worth it."

"Still, you are a liar."

"Wait till to-morrow and judge by the facts. You will have that charming old gentleman Mr. Durrell to comfort you. Embrace him, and try to imagine that he is his daughter."

Jasper had gathered himself for a great effort. Every muscle and sinew raged in him. He drew in his breath, and gave one wrench at the irons that held him. But even if he had been fit and strong he could not have broken them. The iron wristlets bit into the flesh.

He lay back against the wall, balked and humiliated, weighed down by his own impotent wrath.

"This is not the end."

De Rothan moved backward toward the door.

"Do not excite yourself. You will be free in a few hours."

Jasper watched him as a chained dog watches a man who has struck him brutally with a stick. He knew that his own fury was pleasant to De Rothan.

"You accursed coward!"

"Ah, Mr. Benham; you may need your own courage presently."

Little did Jasper guess that Jeremy and Surgeon Stott were walking up and down the meadow within a hundred paces of the house. The surgeon kept a shrewd eye cocked on the windows. He moistened his lips with a dry tongue, and leered knowingly at his own thoughts.

"He will either have to bolt, Jerry, or we shall starve him out. The fellow is trying what insolence will do. I'll wager that he'll come out hat in hand before long."

Jeremy was not so sanguine.

"It is not all wind, Stott. There's pith in the chap. I wish I knew his game."

"Sit tight—that's ours. Rummy affair, Jeremy, some twenty Englishmen blockading Frenchmen in an English house! We must keep two men on the watch all night, with one of us to go the rounds."

And Jeremy agreed.

There was a full moon that night, and Nance, sitting at her window, knew that the moon had risen by the huge black shadow of the house that covered the yard and stables and spread across the orchard. She was vividly awake, alert, overstrung, ready for anything to happen. As the moon climbed higher the shadow of the house shortened, and she could see the orchard and the figure of a man going to and fro among the trees. The moonlight glinted on a musket barrel, and made his face look a grey patch when he turned at each end of his beat.

Brick House had been restless. There had been a stamping of feet in the attics overhead, and a rending sound as though men were splitting the woodwork with hatchets. But for an hour absolute silence had held, and the sentry out yonder might have thought the place asleep.

Nance was wondering whether she would have to watch all night. Her eyes ached with weariness rather than with the desire for sleep. The black boughs and foliage of the orchard trees swam into strange fantastic shapes under the moon.

It was then that she heard a vague stirring in the rooms below. Someone ran upstairs with a light patter of bare feet. In the hall voices spoke in undertones, making a vague murmuring.

Nance heard footsteps in the gallery. They stopped outside her door. Intuition warned her that it was De Rothan.

"Nance, I have good news for you."

She faltered by the window, keeping silence out of a feeling of mistrust.

"Nance, are you asleep? Come, I have good news."

She rose and crossed the room.

"What is it—what do you want?"

"Nance, I see that the game is up. They will starve us into surrender. I am going to send you out to make terms for me."

She thrilled.

"Me? To Jeremy?"

"Yes. We cannot get away from here, but still—I have my prisoner up above. I want you to be magnanimous—to try to get me terms."

The little oak chest stood against the door. Nance pushed it aside, trembling with the rush of her belief in the loosening of the net about her. When she opened the door she saw De Rothan standing in the gallery. The windows threw moonlit patches upon the floor.

"You see how hopeless it is for me."

He sighed.

"There are too many of them, and they have hemmed me in. I can leave the country to-night if your friends yonder will come to terms."

He spoke dejectedly as though utterly discouraged.

"You will do this for me, go out as my friend?"

"Yes."

"Come, then, let us waste no time."

He had been standing with his head bent and his hands behind him, a melancholy shadow in the long, moon-streaked gallery. Nance came out from her room, believing what she desired to believe, and that De Rothan had been driven to surrender. But before she could throw her hands up, a blanket was tossed over her head, and she felt herself smothered in it and wrapped round by De Rothan's arms. He carried her along the gallery and down the stairs, holding her so tightly that she felt like a child crushed in a crowd.

Confused movements were going on in the darkness about her. She heard harness jingling, and smelt the smell of horses.

"Quick, François! The scarf—tie it so."

Something soft was passed about her body and knotted so that she could not move her arms. She felt herself lifted on to the back of a horse and held there by two strong hands. Someone mounted behind her, and she guessed that it was De Rothan.

"Bide quiet, *ma chère*, and no harm will come. Gaston, are you there?"

A man came running down the stairs.

“It is done, monsieur, it is done.”

Nance heard the words, and their vague, suggestive horror numbed her heart. She was like a cataleptic, unable to move or to cry out. Strange, wild things were happening, and she could not help herself. She was aware of a dull red wound in the midst of her consciousness, the thought that Jasper had been given his death.

“Open the door, man. Softly—ready? Follow me and keep close.”

De Rothan’s arm tightened about her. He spoke sharply as the horse moved.

“Bend low, bend low.”

He forced her down, bending over her as the horse passed through the doorway into the porch. There was a clatter of hoofs, the breath of the night breeze sweeping in. Then Nance felt De Rothan straighten himself in the saddle. They were going at a walk down the brick path to the gate in the garden wall.

Then, suddenly, the horse broke into wild, cantering life. They seemed to sweep forward with a rush of wind, and a clattering of hoofs behind them. A man shouted somewhere, and was still shouting as they galloped over the meadow. A pistol cracked. Nance heard a queer sighing sound go by her and die away into the distance.

De Rothan gave a sharp, exultant cry. The horse slowed up. Nance felt De Rothan bend and swing something aside. It was the gate leading out of the meadow into the lane. Shuffling, snorting horses came crowding up behind. Then there was the burst of a fresh gallop between high black hedges that banked out the moonlight.

XXXVIII

Smoke curled from the muzzle of Surgeon Stott's empty pistol, and his mouth emptied itself of sundry emphatic curses. He shouted at Tom Stook, who was standing and staring across the meadow.

"Run, man, run! Rouse Mr. Winter."

But Jeremy had been roused a minute ago by the sentinel in the orchard, who had bent over him where he lay asleep under an apple-tree and pulled him by the arm.

"Mr. Winter, sir, Mr. Winter, the house be a' fire."

Jeremy had sprung up, to find the man pointing at the attic story of the Brick House.

The place was black under the moon, but at one gable end an attic window showed the red glow of fire. The casement frames were clearly outlined; from the open lattice came little swirls of smoke, and for a moment a black shape showed within like a man tossing his arms in despair.

Jeremy's heart leapt in him.

"Good God!"

He ran round rousing his men, calling in particular for John Jenner the Rookhurst blacksmith. They began their rush toward the house just after Stott's pistol-shot barked out a grim warning. Stott, Jeremy, and their men met in the front garden, holding back for the moment as though not knowing whether they were facing enemies or friends.

"Stott?"

"It is Stott, sir. They have broken through, curse 'em."

"And the house is on fire. The devil has left Jasper to burn in his attic ——"

"By George! And they have got the girl."

"We'll catch and butcher the lot of them. Jenner, Jack Jenner, have you got your tools?"

"Sure, Mr. Winter, sure."

Then things happened as De Rothan had counted on their happening. Jeremy, Stott, Steyning, and young Parsloe stormed into the house, Jeremy carrying a lantern that one of the men had brought lit from the orchard. They made no tarrying in the hall, but rushed for the stairs, Jeremy carrying visions of Jasper tied up in a burning room.

Half way up the stairs a figure came blundering down on them. It was Anthony Durrell, half dressed, and bewildered.

Jeremy held his hand.

"George, sir—I had nearly fired into you. Which is Benham's room? Do you know?"

Durrell was inarticulate.

"Mr. Winter, sir! I—I have not——"

Jeremy swore, thrust him aside, and rushed on, the rest following, leaving Durrell flattened against the wall.

The smell of the fire guided them, the pungent scent of burning wood. The stairs leading to the attic story were narrow and tortuous like the stairs in an old tower. Jeremy was the first to get a glimpse of the yellow light streaming under an attic door. The crackle of burning wood could be heard. Little puffs of smoke were drifting into the passage.

Jeremy rushed to the door of the burning room and found it locked. He charged at it with his shoulder, but it did not budge.

"Jack Jenner—at this door, man. Jasper, lad—Jasper——"

Suddenly those who were in the gallery stood listening, and looking into each other's eyes. The smith was caught in the act of raising a heavy hammer. Stott had his hand on Jeremy's shoulder.

"Hallo, Jeremy, hallo——"

It was like a ghost voice coming, not from the burning room, but down the long gallery with its dormer-windows and its sloping eaves. Some of the men on the stairs looked scared, and waited to see what Jeremy would do.

"Jasper—hallo——"

"Hallo—hallo."

Jeremy gave a shout and went running down the gallery. This devil's trick of De Rothan's was not so brutal as it had seemed. It had been a ruse to

trick them and to gain time, but it was a ruse that touched more than the edge of murder.

"Jasper, lad, where are you?"

"In here; the end room."

The door was locked, and Jeremy made way for Jenner the smith. The man took a run, lifted one leg, and set the sole of a heavy boot over the place where the lock should be. The door flew in as though it had been unfastened and had been caught by a gust of wind.

Jeremy's lantern showed Jasper on his straw.

Winter was on his knees, one arm over Jasper's shoulders, and shouting to the smith to get to work.

"We thought the scoundrel had roasted you, lad, for the house is on fire. Knock these bolts out of the floor, Jenner, knock 'em out—by glory. We have half our night's work to do yet."

The smith was hammering at the bolts that held the rings in the floor boards. Surgeon Stott had shut the door and was standing with his back to it. A man in Jasper Benham's condition does not yearn to be gaped at by grooms and ploughmen. In the gallery young Parsloe stood watching the door of the burning attic. He had a coil of rope over his arm so that they should have a means of escape if the fire broke through into the gallery before Jasper could be released.

"What has happened, Jeremy? Where's De Rothan?"

"Got away, lad; broken through our lines. We have been blockading the place."

"Nance——"

Jeremy's mouth hardened for action.

"That's it, lad, we have got to catch him and the girl before he gets afloat."

"She didn't go willingly, Jerry?"

"Tied up in a blanket, sir," said Stott from the door.

Jasper's impatience flared up like a fire.

"Jack Jenner, man, smash those infernal bolts out, can't you? Never mind me; I'm not afraid of a bruise or two."

"Sure, Master Benham, sure, it be t' oak as holds."

"Hit at 'em, man, hit at 'em. We can deal with the darbies afterward."

The smith managed to smash the bolts out of the oak, and Jasper was free. He tried to stand, but found himself lurching against Jeremy, weak in the knees and giddy. Jenner the smith was a man of tact. He stooped, and made "a broad back" to carry Jasper below.

"Climb up, Mr. Benham, sir."

Stott went out to clear the men down the stairs, and Jeremy hoisted Jasper on to Jack Jenner's back.

They were none too soon. The door of the attic was gaping and falling apart, and yellow flames were licking the charred wood. The gallery was full of smoke that turned to silver where the moonlight touched it. Jack Jenner, blinking his eyes, swung along like a stolid elephant, with Jasper on his back.

So they made their way out of the house and came out into the garden where Anthony Durrell was pacing up and down with long, jerky strides. He ran at Jeremy, waving his arms, and crying out like a man who had been wounded.

"Nance—my daughter. Mr. Winter, sir, I implore you——"

Jeremy soothed him.

"That's just our business, Mr. Durrell; don't waste time, sir, by shouting at the moon."

He turned to the men.

"Run, you beggars; bring the horses round from the orchard. And Tom, my man, bring my sword. It stands against the apple-tree where I was dozing. It's tally-ho, and a moonlit gallop."

Jasper was sitting on the grass with the smith at work upon the leg irons and handcuffs.

"There is a horse for me, Jeremy?"

"Do you think you are fit to ride?"

"Do you think I am going to stay behind?"

"You can't sit a horse after three weeks in irons."

"I can ride Devil Dick."

"He's with us."

"Then I go on Devil Dick's back."

"We shall have to tie you on."

"Tie me on! Be dashed to you!"

The smith had broken the catches of the handcuffs, and Jasper's arms were free. The leg irons were a stiffer proposition.

"Leave the anklets on, Jack, and get the bar away."

"It be easier to knock off t' anklets, sir."

"Get along, then, for God's sake."

Jeremy stood and watched.

"You had better let us get along, lad," he said, gently, "time is precious."

"But, Jeremy, I've been waiting for this chance——"

"It'll be away over the water if we don't hurry. Besides, lad, you are not fit to fight it out with De Rothan."

"Look here, Jerry. I must have a shot or a thrust at him."

"And does somebody want to weep over a corpse? Be reasonable, lad. Leave the Frenchman to me."

Jasper looked savage and dejected.

"Oh, call me a baby, Jeremy, and have done with it."

"Now, lad, now, do you think the old devil don't love you? Why, I'd put a pistol into Squire Kit's fist and tell him to shoot me if I were to let you run yourself to-night on that scoundrel's sword. The spirit is willing, sir, but the flesh is weak. Hallo—here come the horses."

Jack Jenner sat back on his heels with a grunt of satisfaction.

"That be one of t' quickest jobs, Mr. Benham, sir——"

Jasper was up on the instant.

"God bless you, Jack Jenner. Jeremy, I say, Jeremy——"

"Well, lad?"

"I say, my confounded head's like a churn, going round and round. Have you got a flask on you?"

"Here, Stott, you're the man. Give the lad a dose of schnapps."

The horses were ready in the meadow, and the men ready to mount. Stott had brought out a flask from his tail pocket, and also a thick sandwich of bread and beef.

"I'm an old campaigner, Mr. Benham; set your teeth into that, man, as we go along."

In another minute they were in the saddle and riding across the meadow. Several of the men had to be left behind, but counting Steyning and young Parsloe they mustered nine riders. Each man had a brace of pistols and a hanger, while Jeremy had his long sword. He meant it to be of use that night in dealing with De Rothan.

As they paused at the gate leading to the lane, a sudden glare of light made them look back toward the house. The flames had broken through the roof, and one long tongue was waving high in the air like a great wavering sword.

The light lit up grim faces and eager eyes.

"Which way, Jeremy?"

"Pett Level. We happen to have got the other side of De Rothan's game, and bought his own man over his head."

"There'll be a boat waiting."

"There'll be no boat, or I'm a blockhead."

Jeremy gave a queer, hard laugh.

"Now, then, put 'em at it, boys. Tally-ho, tally-ho. I'm for the brush of the French fox."

And they went galloping through the moonlight.

XXXIX

De Rothan seemed to know all the lanes, paths, and by-roads as though he had been born in those parts and had played the smuggler on many a night. He cast a half circle round Westfield village, and took the road that led toward Icklesham and Guestling, riding a little ahead of his men, his right arm supporting Nance. She was still smothered up in the blanket, and unable to move her arms.

The country was fairly open, with the road climbing low hills and dropping down into valleys. The moon painted everything in a broad effect of black and greys, and showed the road as a white thread before them. De Rothan was not playing for concealment. It was a question of speed, and of a dash for the shore along Pett Level where the Rye boat would be waiting to take them on board.

When they had covered a mile or more De Rothan pulled up on the top of a hill, looked back, and listened. His men drew in and waited in silence. The night seemed still and empty of all sound, and there was no rattle of hoofs to tell of pursuit.

De Rothan turned his horse and rode on.

"How is it with you, sweet Nance?"

She would not answer him.

"Frightened and outraged, eh? Come, come, you must make allowances for the spirit of adventure. If I have to cover your beauty with a blanket, it is to keep you from making the moon jealous. I thought all the world loved a pirate, a highwayman, and a gentlemanly villain! Once on board the lugger, eh! You shall see me in a red cap and big sea boots, and with a belt full of cutlasses and pistols. Ha—ha! That is the stage cry, eh? Ha—ha! Your friends are finding some little affairs to keep them about my house."

Nance shivered, and felt a wild desire to cry out. She had come by a blind horror of the man, a horror that was quickened by her own physical helplessness. Already her heart had accused him of Jasper Benham's death, for those words of Gaston's still haunted her.

De Rothan appeared to divine her emotions.

"You are longing to ask questions, my Nance, and you feel like a fly in a web? What has become of Mr. Benham and of your good father? Well, I will try to put your mind at rest. Mr. Benham is having his irons knocked off, and is drinking a pot of beer. Your father may be scolding the moon. And Brick House is burning."

He felt her body quiver. She was overstrung with suspense, incredulity, and fear.

"Why did we set the house alight? Well, you see, sweet one, it was an excellent trick for distracting the bull. They could not leave Mr. Benham there to be burned. When they have finished yonder, we may have them after us. But then, you see, they may not know where to find us."

She wondered whether he was speaking the truth, or merely talking to reassure her. His triumphant playfulness had all the glittering hardness of a well-cut stone. It was useless to appeal to him, and there was nothing that she could do to help herself.

The minutes seemed to gallop and to keep pace with the horses. They appeared to be mounting some rising ground, and to be moving over grassland by the dull thudding of the horses' hoofs. Presently De Rothan drew in, and his men came round him, making a black blur upon the summit of a hill.

To the right rose the long black ridge that climbed up to Fairlight Down, and before them lay the sea; a tranquil, summer sea under the moon. The shore was like a dark fringe to a silver robe.

De Rothan and his men were at gaze, looking for something that should have been visible out yonder. For some moments there was silence, and Nance felt the thread of hope breaking beneath the weight of her suspense.

"Hum—we are a little early. Let us go down to the shore."

The horses were turned into a narrow, high-banked lane that descended steeply toward the flats between the high ground and the sea. Loose stones rolled and scattered under the horses' hoofs. Nance had a feeling that De Rothan's mood had changed. His arm seemed to hold her more tightly. He was grimmer, less pleased with the chances of the night.

In another minute they had reached the bottom of the hill, and loose stones gave place again to grass. They moved on for another two hundred yards or more before De Rothan reined in.

Nance felt herself lifted down from De Rothan's horse. The scarf that fastened her arms was untied, and the blanket taken away. She found herself standing on rough grassland that ended in the shingle of the beach. The place was very lonely, with masses of furze and of bramble screening the shore and covering much of the ground between the sea and the hills. The tide was making a faint splashing along the shingle banks, the broken water catching the moonlight and turning it into a thousand glimmering scales.

De Rothan was standing on a little hillock and looking out to sea. His profile was visible to Nance, hard, intent, and a little scornful. The man was anxious, but not afraid.

He turned to her with an air of cynical courtesy.

"Will it please you to walk a little way along the shore with me? I have certain things to say to you."

She was afraid of being alone with him, and De Rothan saw it.

"Come, come, I am not going to cut your throat, or be violent. Gaston, keep yourselves and your horses under cover of that furze. We shall not have long to wait. Now, Nance, I am ready."

The stretch of coarse grass divided the furze banks and the shingle, and De Rothan set off eastward along it with Nance at his side. The girl was white and on the alert. The splashing of the sea upon the shingle was full of a sinister and shivering suggestiveness.

"My Nance, you are still very young. Why are you so afraid of me and of the future that I offer you?"

The triumphant tenderness in his voice made her shudder.

"Need you ask me such questions?"

"It is all bold adventure, is it not, and am I not a man to gallop off with a girl's heart?"

"Adventure! I hate the word!"

He laughed.

"Poor Nance, after all, it does not suit the click of knitting needles. It is only pleasant in books, eh? Well, well, why not some pretty château across the water, with swans on the moat, and a fine old-time garden? You would not quarrel with such quiet, homely things."

Her very dread of him made her passionately impatient. She turned to one side and sat down on a low bank in the full light of the moon.

"I'll not answer you."

"Mr. Benham is a homely young man, eh? He smells more of the fireside and the kitchen? Whereas I am a gallant, and one of the best swordsmen in France."

She rested her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her two hands.

"What kind of man are you to treat me like this? If you had one shred of honour in you——"

"Honour? I have as much honour in me as Mr. Benham, and much more in the way of brains."

"At least I have my pride left me and my scorn for you."

"Dear Nance, do you think you will speak to me like this when we are over the water? I think not—I think not."

There was something of menace in his eyes, the exultation of fierce desire. He watched her a moment, and then began to pace up and down, throwing sharp glances at the moonlit hills and toward the sea. It was plain that a savage impatience was growing in him, and that even his insolent complacency could not save him from suspense. Now again he paused to listen, fancying he heard the sound of galloping upon the hills.

"Devil take the man! Why is he not here with the boat?"

Nance watched him narrowly as his long shadow went to and fro over the grass. A glimpse of hope had risen in her, a determination to try some last desperate trick. She strained her ears, trying to catch some sound above the moist playing of the water on the shingle. If Jeremy only knew the road they had taken. If he and Jasper could only arrive in time.

Her heart would have leapt in her could she have seen a long, lithe figure squirming away amid the furze bushes. It was the figure of a man who had crept down to reconnoitre, and who was making his way back toward the higher ground above.

Half way up the hillside there was a thicket of dwarf, wind-twisted oaks. The man made for this, keeping in the shadow of the furze bushes. He gained the thicket and disappeared into it, to be surrounded almost instantly by a crowd of eager men.

"What news, Tom?"

"They be down yonder; t' three chaps wid the horses, and Miss Durrell and the French blackguard a little way along t' shore."

There was a murmuring of voices, and the clicking of pistol locks.

"Look to your priming, men. Now, listen to me."

They had left their horses on the other side of the hill, crept over the brow under the shadow of a hedge, and taken cover in the oak thicket. Tom Stook had been sent out to reconnoitre.

Jeremy told off Steyning and Parsloe with the four men to creep down and overpower De Rothan's three French servants. He himself with Jasper, Stott, and Tom Stook took a line a little more to the east so as to strike the shore where De Rothan and Nance were waiting. Jeremy ordered Stott to lead, but took second place himself. He had to hold Jasper by the arm, and plead with him fiercely.

"Am I going to let you spoil all my plans by getting hurt at the last moment? You have the pluck, but a man who has been in irons for three weeks is not fit to face a swordsman like De Rothan. Moreover, I want the surgeon at my elbow. He is a devil with a pistol, and will keep De Rothan marked."

Jasper knew that Jeremy talked sound sense.

"It goes against the grain, Jeremy."

"I know, lad, I know. I shall love you the more for giving in to me."

They started down through the furze, Steyning, Parsloe, and their men giving them a short start, since Jeremy's party had farther to go. Tom Stook led, winding in and out among the furze bushes. Jeremy and Stott followed close on him, with Jasper in the rear. Jeremy had given him his sword to carry, having unbuckled it before their advance upon the beach.

Stook paused from time to time. The noise of the sea washing along the shingle smothered any slight sound they made in brushing through the grass or against the bushes. In five minutes they were close to the shore, and could hear De Rothan speaking.

"My Nance, it is no use your putting up your pretty hands against fate. Come now and kiss me, and let us forgive."

"Only let me be!"

They heard De Rothan's laugh, and then Nance's voice in sudden alarm.

"Look, there is a boat!"

"Where?"

"Away yonder. I can see the sail."

Jeremy had risen from behind the furze, and Stott followed him. They saw that De Rothan had turned and was looking out to sea. Nance had played her poor little trick on him, and it had answered. She picked up her skirts and made a dash toward the furze.

Jeremy leapt out on to the grass, shouting,

"Run, Nance, run, into the bushes for your life."

She was still in the moonlight, though nearing the banks of shadow. De Rothan had twisted about, raised an arm, and taken aim. Jeremy's voice rang out, fiercely, warningly.

"Not at the girl, not at the girl, De Rothan!"

Then Stott's pistol cracked, and De Rothan's hat went whirling, but left him unhurt. Whether the shot startled him, or whether he drew the trigger purposely, his pistol belched flame. Nance was some thirty yards from him. She gave a curious cry, staggered on a few steps, and then fell face forward into the furze.

A man's cry echoed Nance's. Jeremy swung round and caught Jasper round the middle.

"No, no, lad! Leave him to us."

"Let go, Jeremy, damn you, let go."

"Tom Stook—quick! Take hold here."

They held Jasper between them, mastering him with some ease, for he was weak despite his wild anger against De Rothan. Stott had marched forward several paces, and was calmly covering De Rothan with his second pistol.

"I've missed ye once, ye damned coward. Stand fast, or I'll put a bullet through you."

Jeremy had left Jasper to Tom Stook after wrenching his sword out of Jasper's hand. He joined Stott, sword and pistol ready, his eyes looking grimly at De Rothan.

"See to the girl, Stott. I'll deal with this gentleman."

Stott threw his pistol down and ran toward Nance, who lay half hidden in the furze. De Rothan was standing stiff and erect like a black pillar outlined by the moon. His one pistol was empty, and he had nothing left him but his sword.

He threw his head back suddenly and shouted to his men.

"Gaston, *à moi*—Gaston— —"

His cry came too late. Steyning, Parsloe, and their men had crept down and overpowered the three Frenchmen without their firing a shot. Their exultant shouts came with the swish of the water on the shingle.

XL

Jasper had broken away from Tom Stook, whose huge fists had sympathetically relaxed their hold. Jasper's eyes were turned, not toward Jeremy Winter and De Rothan, but toward Surgeon Stott, who was bending over Nance.

Stott, glancing round to see how matters stood, saw Jasper's white face and shining eyes.

"Keep back, Mr. Benham, keep back. I don't want any one meddling with me in my business."

He rose and made as though to force Jasper back.

"Look you, sir, you are a man of sense, and I don't want folk hanging round when I have work to do. If I want you I'll call you."

But Stott's professional whims were not to be humoured on this particular occasion. Something stirred and moved close to them. Both men turned to find Nance on her knees, putting her hair back from her forehead and looking at them questioningly.

"Nance!"

"Jasper!"

Stott felt for his snuff-box and stood aside. Here were these two young people kneeling face to face—Jasper holding Nance's hands, and looking at her as a man looks at a love that has been snatched from death.

"Nance, are you hurt?"

"No, no. The bullet only grazed my arm."

"Thank God."

"I think I threw myself down when he fired. It was just instinct. And I lay here—to be safe—till friends came up."

Jasper was kissing her hands with a man's devoutness, and Stott took snuff with energy and walked on to where Jeremy and De Rothan were standing like two statues, staring into each other's eyes. Neither of them had spoken, neither of them had moved.

"What news, Stott? I haven't eyes in the back of my head."

"Two young people seem very taken with each other."

"She's not hurt, then?"

"A mere scratch."

"God be praised!"

There were deep furrows between Jeremy's eyebrows, and his mouth was a grim, hard line. He moved three steps nearer to De Rothan, pistol on hip, sword ready.

"Have you any more cheating cards to play, sir, before we come to the last hand?"

De Rothan's face looked stormy. The light, insolent humour had left him. He was up against grim weapons and grim men.

"Shoot away, my little fellow; my own pistol is empty."

As he spoke, he tossed the empty pistol aside upon the grass. Jeremy's eyes glittered maliciously.

"I do not shoot women and unarmed men, sir. Even a cur may be given a chance to fight. You have your sword there."

De Rothan bowed to him.

"It is at your service, sir, if you are not afraid."

"Psst, I know that sort of lingo. I am not a raw boy, my friend. I don't deal in words."

Meanwhile Jasper had lifted Nance to her feet, and was standing with his arm about her, and looking down into her face. Her eyes glimmered in the moonlight, soft, dusky eyes that were full of infinite and mysterious things.

"Dear heart, what you have suffered!"

"And you!"

"I would go through it all again—for this."

She drew in her breath quickly.

"Oh, no, no. You were so near death. And even now I feel that all is not finished."

She glanced toward the three dark figures of Jeremy, Stott, and De Rothan. Jasper understood. His arm tightened about her, and he led her

further away along the shore.

"Stay here, Nance. There is nothing to fear."

"No."

"I must be with Jeremy."

She looked at him a little anxiously and saw the steady purpose in his eyes.

"Jasper, promise me——"

"What, dear heart?"

"You will not risk yourself."

"I promise. I have already promised Jeremy, though it makes me ready to call myself a coward."

"You—a coward! And that wretched man?"

"He has Jeremy to deal with. He had better have faced the Devil himself."

There was the noise of men running, and Steyning and young Parsloe appeared in the moonlight, having left their men to guard De Rothan's servants. Jasper hailed them as they came up.

"All's well here. Jack Parsloe, man, will you bide with Miss Durrell while I join Jeremy?"

The youngster raised his hat and bowed to Nance. Jasper and Steyning hastened on to where Winter and Surgeon Stott faced De Rothan.

It was a grim group, imperturbable and pitiless. Jeremy was speaking to Stott with the cool and matter-of-fact air of a man arranging a dinner party. De Rothan's was the only restless figure. He fidgeted with his sword, and kept moving his head as though his cravat were too tight for him. His mouth was dry; his eyes shadowy in a sullen and bloodless face.

He looked hard at Jasper with a sudden malicious shrewdness.

"Mr. Benham, you have often uttered big words to me. There was that little bout of ours in Darvel's Wood. I am ready to renew it."

Jeremy's chin went up. He passed his sword to Stott, and stripped off his coat.

"That will not serve you, sir. I am your man."

Even in the moonlight they could see De Rothan's sneer.

"No doubt Mr. Benham is nervous——"

Jasper was standing by with white face and set jaw. But Jeremy had seen through De Rothan's cunning, nor did he mean to let the Frenchman sneer Jasper into fighting him.

"Enough of that. Off with your coat."

He caught his sword from Stott, and sprang forward toward De Rothan. There was to be no prevarication, no escape. De Rothan looked into Jeremy's eyes, threw his coat aside, and drew his sword.

"Come, my little fellow!"

Their swords touched, and they were at it.

De Rothan was one of those long-armed, florid fighters, passionate and skilful, whose very fierceness had flustered many a weaker man. He began swaggeringly, to discover in the course of the first few passes with what a grim master of sword craft he had to deal. This little, hard-mouthed man was steady as a rock. He put De Rothan's savage and murderous thrusts aside with an imperturbable confidence that was pleasant to behold. Those who watched seemed to have no fear for Jeremy. Stott took snuff with placid satisfaction. There were no sounds but the tingling of the sword blades and the shuffling of the men's feet.

De Rothan became cautious of a sudden, and his forehead showed lines of strain. Jeremy's eyes were not pleasant eyes to watch. The man was untouchable and most damnably cool.

"Tsst—one for you——"

"No—but for you."

With one quick thrust Jeremy pricked De Rothan's forehead, and a red mark showed between the brows. The savage egotism of the man seemed to flare up in fury. He leapt back, brushed the blood aside, and then sprang at Jeremy with a passionate desire to kill.

These fierce, passionate thrusts were his last. There was a flickering of the blades in the moonlight, and then Jeremy's point went home. The thrust had all the weight of his body behind it. De Rothan threw up his arms, seemed to break at the middle, and fell forward on his face.

For a moment there was silence. No one moved, no one spoke. Then Jeremy pulled up a tuft of grass and calmly wiped his sword.

"What's your verdict, Stott?"

The surgeon and Steyning turned De Rothan over. His eyelids twitched, but that was all. They saw that he was dead.

"Right through the heart, sir."

"The price he played for. Jasper, lad, shake hands."

All four drew together, talking in undertones. Then Steyning marched off along the beach in the direction of his men. He passed Parsloe and Nance with a nod, but he did not speak to them.

There were pieces of driftwood lying along the shingle. Steyning told two of the men to pick up pieces, and to follow him back along the shore. Here, close to where De Rothan lay, they began to scrape a shallow grave in the shingle above high-water mark. When the grave was ready they lifted De Rothan into it, covered him with shingle, and set up a piece of driftwood to mark the place.

There was a short silence. The men loitered, saying nothing, and looking at Winter and Jasper Benham. Surgeon Stott was the first to speak.

"What about the three fellows yonder?"

"Poor devils! Lewes gaol or Rye Harbour? What do you say, Jasper?"

"Let them go."

"Good. That's what was in my heart."

They moved away from the place where De Rothan lay buried and Jasper found himself alone with Nance. The moonlight was on the sea, and the waves washed the shingle. The man and the girl held together, as though they desired to be very close to one another after what had passed.

"It is finished, Nance."

She shivered slightly.

"How lonely it must be—there!"

"Dear heart, I cannot quarrel with the end."

She clung close to him, and her brown eyes filled with tears.

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.

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

[The end of *The House of Spies* by Warwick Deeping]