PEGGY BY REQUEST

ETHEL M. DELL

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PEGGY BY REQUEST

THE LOVE STORY OF NOEL AND PEGGY

from

"THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR"

Written By Request of Some of My Readers

By ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR *of*

"The Bars of Iron," "The Keeper of the Door," "The Knave of Diamonds," "Tetherstones," "The Rocks of Valpré," "Unknown Quantity," "The Way of an Eagle," etc.



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PEGGY BY REQUEST

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by
Ethel Mary Savage

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Made in the United States of America

I dedicate this book
to the Public who will read it,
and especially to those among them
by whose request it was written,
as a very humble token
of my deep gratitude
for their kind and sympathetic appreciation
of my work,
of the real worth of which
none holds fewer illusions than I,
who would make it worthier if I could
both for their sakes and my own
E. M. D.

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PEGGY BY REQUEST

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE END OF THE TERM

"PEGGY MUSGRAVE! PEGGY MUSGRAVE! MARGUERITA! Where are you?"

The ringing voice sent its clear call across the playing-fields in advance of its owner who was scudding over the ground as fast as her active young legs could carry her. The July sun was sinking behind the elm trees where the rooks were cawing to each other with immense zeal. It was the last official school-day of the term, and there was to be a great gathering of parents on the morrow for the prize-giving and concert of the year. And after that, Peggy Musgrave—Marguerita, as they had dubbed her—was going to leave for good. She was the head of the school, and no one knew quite what was going to happen without her, least of all the little flying sprite of a girl with her vivid red-brown hair and laughing eyes who was to succeed her in the place of authority. "For," as she had been heard to remark, "no one would be such an ass as to do what I told them."

Yet little Joan Mordaunt who was seventeen in spite of her extremely youthful appearance was not without influence, as the Head had realized long since. There was pent in her small frame an energy which asserted itself perpetually, and close association with Peggy Musgrave had done much to train it in the right direction. For Peggy Musgrave at eighteen was a prize-pupil of whom any school might be proud.

She was of a far more feminine type than her tomboy friend, Joan; a very fair girl with deep blue eyes and a most bewitching mouth and chin. That everyone loved her was not surprising, but she commanded more than love. There was in her strength as well as sweetness, and it was to this strength that little Joan owed a great deal of her own development. Their friendship was of long standing, dating from a certain night, when Peggy, a small mother of eleven, had clasped Joan, a sobbing bundle of homesick babyhood barely a year her junior, to her breast and comforted her with long, weird tales of India narrated in a sibilant whisper until sleep had succeeded the tears. Peggy was never homesick, for the simple reason that she had been parted from her parents for years. Peggy had not even wept when the news of her mother's death had been very tenderly broken to her by that funny little man, Uncle Nick, who was no relation at all really, only a sort of self-constituted guardian. Her eyes had grown big and dark, and she had tried very hard to grasp the meaning of it all, but she had not cried. In fact, it was she who, maternal again, had tried to dry Nick's tears, holding him very tightly to her child's heart and entreating him to "Never mind!"

That mother was no more than a dream to Peggy now, but Uncle Nick was a very living reality, and dear Aunt Muriel also who had always been her ideal of loving, gracious womanhood. To become like Aunt Muriel had been her aspiration for as long as she had known her, and for years she had nursed a secret regret that she was not the daughter of those two who meant so much to her. For she had not seen her own father since those far-off days when her mother had been there too. They had gone back to India and left her with Nick and Muriel, and then her mother had died and her father had never returned. Nick had often urged him to do so, had even threatened to go out and fetch him, but no threats had availed. His little girl must come to him when she was old enough, Will Musgrave said, but he could not leave his work in India to go to her. Work was all he had left in life. And so Nick had ceased his persuasions at last, realizing their futility.

"Peggy will have to fetch him home," he said. "He'll come for her."

And thus, while Peggy was growing up in England, her father had pursued his work in the Civil Service till he had made for himself a name that stood practically at the head of the engineering world in India. He was Sir William Musgrave now and had a great many letters after his name, but worldly success was dust and ashes to him. He worked for work's sake alone, to still, or at least in a measure to forget, the emptiness of his heart. There was no other palliative for his soul's hunger.

"If I don't keep on working I shall go mad," he had written to Nick once. "I have got to fill in time somehow now that she is gone. I can only sleep by tiring myself out. If I don't sleep, God help me, for it will mean a bullet in my brain sooner or later, and I am still man enough to know that I can't take short cuts of that kind. No, I've got to stick to work, old chap, as long as there's breath in my body. As for my poor little girl, I know too well that she is better off in your care than she would be in mine."

It was this letter which had made Nick relinquish his efforts to bring Will home.

And now his little girl was eighteen and ready to go to him. Her last day of school life had arrived. To-morrow she would be a sort of vice-hostess at Elm Mead where she had been for so long a pupil, and the next day she would be gone.

She was standing under the elm trees when Joan arrived, hot and breathless after her exertions, and pushed through the cluster of girls surrounding her.

"I've been hunting for you everywhere," she said "You said you'd be in the big music-room."

"Oh, sorry!" said Peggy. "Am I late?" She put her arm around the younger girl's shoulders and gave her a propitiatory hug. "I was just getting addresses from everybody I'm going to write to when I get to India. But I've done now. Come along!"

"Oh, aren't you going to write to me, Peggy?" cried a voice from the group of girls she was about to leave.

Peggy paused, holding out her hand, and a pale-faced, golden-haired child of eleven sprang to her and fastened upon her like a limpet.

"Oh, don't be silly, Violet!" said Joan with some impatience. "I can give her that."

"You'll forget! I know you'll forget!" maintained Violet. "Please, Peggy, let me write my new address in your book!"

Peggy smiled, pressing the little girl to her side. "Yes, of course! Come along! Let's all go together!"

"Oh, but, Peggy,—" began Joan.

Peggy stopped the protest with a quick look. "You and I can enjoy ourselves afterwards," she said.

And Joan, rightly interpreting this to mean a stolen hour in Peggy's bedroom when everyone else was asleep, yielded the point without further demur. It was the last day of the term, and school-shackles had already ceased to exist. She had, besides, an elder-sisterly affection for little Violet Wyndham who was her cousin and quite a jolly companion for a kid. Joan at seventeen was still too youthful herself to despise the younger ones. She lived all their pursuits and had not the faintest desire to develop into a young lady.

"Let's enjoy life while we can!" was her maxim. "I don't want—ever—to grow up."

She accepted Violet's presence therefore with a good grace, and the proceedings in the music-room ended in an *impromptu* dance, with Peggy at the piano, and the two cousins careering round and round, presently joined by a score or more of girls attracted by the spirited sounds of Peggy's fox-trot. One of the mistresses presently looked in and smiled and went away again, and not until the great school-bell at length interrupted them with the summons to prepare for supper did the revellers realize that an extra half-hour had been meted out to them for their enjoyment.

They were dismissed to bed very soon after supper, for, as the Head remarked, there would be plenty to do on the morrow, what with packing and entertaining, and they must keep themselves fresh for the early start on the day after.

They dispersed to their various rooms with a good deal of chatter and merriment, and soon the old grey house among the elms had sunk into quietness while the last glow of the summer sun died away in the west.

"I don't believe that after to-morrow you'll never be here any more," said Joan, perched on the side of her friend's bed and swinging a bare leg contemplatively. "It's not possible. I don't believe it's true."

"I feel like that too," said Peggy.

"You don't want to leave, do you?" said Joan.

Peggy shook her head. "Not very much."

Joan made an impatient movement. "If you could only have stayed another year, and then, instead of going to India, if you could have come up to London and been presented with me as we planned! Peggy, wouldn't it have been much nicer?"

"Miles!" said Peggy.

Joan became a little mutinous. “I think when people get as old as you they ought to be allowed to do as they like.”

“Yes,” said Peggy. “I know. I said that to Uncle Nick. But he said—he’s very clever, you know, and you can’t help believing what he says,—”

Joan nodded. “I know! Go on! What did he say?”

“He said that to follow our own inclination blindly was not always to do as we liked, at least it didn’t end that way. He said that it wasn’t just duty that called me out to India, but he believed it would be inclination too when I had considered everything. And he put it to me,—Joan, he said, ‘Supposing you went in for a London season and got—married—as of course you will sooner or later,’” Peggy’s face was very hot as she said the words, “‘you would probably never see your father again. Would that be following your real inclination?’ And of course I couldn’t help seeing his point. It would be pretty mouldy to—risk making other ties that might quite cut off the one I’ve already got.”

“Oh yes, if you’re going to marry,” said Joan. “But I shan’t dream of marrying for years and years and years,—not till I’m at least thirty. One needn’t, you know. Why, my own mummy is thirty-nine, and she’s as lovely as any girl of eighteen.”

“But then she couldn’t be anything else,” said Peggy. “She’ll be just the same when she’s ninety, and so will you.”

“Then I shan’t marry till I’m ninety,” said Joan, scoring her point triumphantly. “I’m sure I shan’t want to. One can do everything one likes without.”

Peggy’s eyes were dreamy. “You’ll probably marry in your very first season,” she said. “It will be somebody big and important like your father, and you will be everybody’s favourite like your mother. I can see your future much more easily than I can see my own.”

Joan laughed with a touch of derision. “Well, I’ll tell you yours, then. You will go out to India, and you’ll meet Uncle Noel again and you’ll marry him and be my aunt! I know you will, so you needn’t get red and pretend.”

Peggy’s face was scarlet. “I think you’d better go to bed, Joan,” she said somewhat briefly. “I’m tired of this silly discussion.”

Joan turned in swift contrition. “Oh, darling, I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean it. Of course you wouldn’t do anything so dull! I think it would be very stupid to get married at all, and I’m sure I’m not going to. I hope you

won't either, but going to India makes it more difficult. I wish with all my heart you were going to stay here."

"It's no use wishing," said Peggy. "I've got to go."

"But you'll come back if you don't like it," urged Joan. "I'm sure Uncle Nick wouldn't want you to stay if you didn't. Suppose, for instance, that your father didn't want you!"

"Why should we suppose horrid things?" said Peggy. "I know he wants me. He has written to say so."

Yet she did not speak with any great conviction, for the same doubt had visited her own mind frequently of late. Had he really wanted her, could he not have come over to see her long since? Would any man who cared have suffered her to drop completely out of his life as had this dimly-remembered father of hers?

"I wish he were not so far away," she said with a sigh.

"Never mind!" consoled Joan. "You're not going yet, and we'll have some ripping times these holidays first. And all the Olympians are arriving to-morrow! Just think of it! Your Uncle Nick, my daddy and mummy and Violet's. By the way, did you hear that Aunt Olga and the children are going down to Weir for part of the holidays to be with Dr. Jim, and perhaps Uncle Max too? And if I am down at Brethaven with you at the same time it will be ever so jolly, won't it? I do so love being at Redlands in the summer, don't you?"

"It's my home," said Peggy, but she said it rather wistfully, for it would not be her home much longer.

Joan divined her thought and turned swiftly to embrace her. "I never want to go there unless you are there," she said. "You'll come back, Peggy? Promise you'll come back!"

"I will if I can," Peggy said, but there was no conviction in her voice.

"You don't mean to," said Joan.

"If I can," Peggy said again almost under her breath. "But—I think it is rather like being caught in a trap, Joan. One may get away—and one may not."

"You ought not to go!" cried Joan. "It isn't right—if you feel like that."

Peggy laughed a little and kissed her. "Yes, it is right," she said. "And I'm not afraid—not really afraid—just because I know it's right."

“I suppose that’s what Nick says,” said Joan, jealously clasping her.

“Yes,” said Peggy with simplicity. “That’s what Nick says. And he is always right.”

CHAPTER II

THE OLYMPIANS

THE gathering on the lawns of Elm Mead on the following day was a record in the school annals. The weather was ideal and everyone in the best of spirits. This summer celebration was looked upon as the great day of the year at which nearly every girl could boast of a relative to represent Home.

That Peggy Musgrave, the beloved head-girl, could not do so was a matter for commiseration with some though others declared that to have a substitute in the form of Nick Ratcliffe was more than compensation for the fact. He arrived early with his dark graceful wife who spoke so little but whom Peggy loved so devotedly. They were received in the drawing-room, but here Nick refused to remain for long, and very soon he was pacing the school-terrace with Peggy, his one arm linked in hers.

"That is Captain Ratcliffe of the Frontier," girls murmured to each other, and watched him from afar with veneration.

Nick Ratcliffe at forty-five was quite as unimposing of appearance as he had ever been. His meagre frame was as straight and full of energy as in his Indian days, his face rather more like old parchment than of yore. His eyes had their old trick of snatching such information as they required with as brief a glance as possible, missing nothing, but seldom dwelling upon anything. His hair was so nearly non-existent as to be past praying for, as he himself modestly remarked, and his eyebrows, also according to his own description once written on a passport, were but an imaginary line.

Of Nick Ratcliffe's services to his country none knew the sum and very few the nature, but somehow he was always busy. He had relinquished his seat in Parliament and he occupied no definite high place, yet he came and went among those in authority as one privileged and even revered. In many Indian affairs his advice was regarded as practically infallible, and rumour had it that a post of very great importance had more than once been offered to him and had been refused. Many still thought that Nick might be persuaded to take the field once more in which he had already won high honours, though others shook their heads remarking that Mrs. Nick was the

one who needed most persuasion. But as a matter of fact this was not so. Muriel was not the woman to hamper him in his career, and though it was true that life in India attracted her but little she would not have suffered that consideration to influence his decision. Their only son, moreover, had just passed out of Sandhurst into the Gunners and she could not feel that his need of her was so imperative now that he was launched in his chosen profession. But Nick's need was greater than ever, and her devotion to him had never waned. For Nick's sake she would have faced exile without a murmur, and he knew it. Nor was it for her sake that he held back, realizing that she would not accept such a sacrifice.

To Peggy who had just presented a rather piteous and by no means hopeful suggestion that he and Muriel might feel tempted to accompany her to India for a cold weather season, he explained the situation as they walked up and down in the sunshine.

"You see, dear, it isn't that I won't or Muriel won't. We've talked it over dozens of times, and I'd take up this governorship to-morrow, if it weren't for dear old Brother Jim. But he's getting on in life; and he isn't the man he was, never has been since young Jim was killed. If the other two lads hadn't gone in for this South African farming business, it would have been a different matter. Of course they don't see why he can't go out to them, but I do, and I can't leave the poor old chap as things are. Olga does what she can, but with three kids to look after at home as well as Max, she naturally can't do much."

"So that's the reason!" said Peggy.

"That's the reason," said Nick. "And don't breathe it to a soul, for I wouldn't have it get round to him for all I've got. He sticks to his practice like the fine old sportsman he is, and I hope it'll keep him going for many years to come. But one never knows, and I owe him more than I can ever repay in any case. Your father would say the same. He owes him a good deal too."

"Oh, why won't he come home?" said Peggy despairingly.

"That'll be your job," said Nick cheerily. "You've got to make him. And by the way I think I've got hold of someone who will take care of you on the way out. But we'll discuss that later. It won't be before October anyhow, and we've got two whole months to enjoy ourselves in before then. Hullo, there's Violet! Jove! What long legs! Hullo, kiddie, hullo!" He raised his voice. "Come and talk to your old great-uncle!"

He left Peggy and went to meet her, Violet tearing along the terrace as fast as the aforesaid legs would carry her and flinging herself precipitately upon him.

"Oh, Uncle Nick, I didn't know you'd come! Mummy isn't here yet, and I never thought you'd be so early. Oh, it is good to see you again! How perfectly sweet you look!"

"I'm sure of it," said Nick. "It's the mellow hand of Time, my child. All ugly people become beautiful in old age; the law of compensation. Why, even you are less hideous than you once were. I was privileged to behold you when you were two hours old, so I speak as one who knows."

"Darling pig!" said the child, hugging him. "And we're all coming down to stay with Grandpa! Isn't it ripping? And you'll teach me to drive a car these holidays, won't you? Promise you will!"

"I promise I won't," said Nick. "I'll teach you how to change a tyre, if you like. That's much more fun, as everybody knows."

"I don't believe it is," said Violet distrustfully. "People changing a tyre always look so cross, and generally call it a 'damn' thing' before they begin."

"That doesn't mean anything," Nick assured her. "At least it's only the name of the tyre. The Damn factories turn out quite a lot of useful things. As to looking cross, it's the fashion to do that nowadays when you are most enjoying yourself; e.g. the fox-trot, well-named, and the waltz, so called."

"I think you're being funny," said Violet.

"But I'm always funny," protested Nick. "That's why everybody loves me. I am an ardent admirer of the lady who when she smiled made the world smile with her and when she wept, she wept alone."

"I'm sure you never weep," said Violet.

"Never unless I'm obliged," said Nick. "It puffs the eyes if you go on too long, and then uncharitable people put it down to something quite different. At least, they do in my case."

"Now you're being funny again!" accused Violet.

Nick's laugh, cracked and cheery, answered her. "Come and defend me, Peggy! I'm being bullied," he said. And then, a moment later, "Hullo! There's Max getting out of that car! And who is the lady with him? That isn't Olga."

"Oh!" cried Olga's daughter. "That's Aunt Chris! Mummy can't have come!"

She left, as she had arrived, like a miniature whirlwind, and Nick and Peggy followed at a quieter pace to greet the new arrivals.

"It'll be your turn next, my child," said Nick, as he marked the girl's grave face. "You'll have a daddy after your very own heart to welcome before long."

She tried to smile. "It—it'll be great fun, no doubt," she said rather tremulously.

"You wait till you see old Will!" said Nick. "He's the finest chap in creation. Your mother knew that, my dear."

"Yes, I know," said Peggy soberly.

But the dream-mother who had left her twelve years before was no longer one upon whose authority she could lean with any certainty. She needed some more substantial proof to still her misgivings, and notwithstanding his almost uncanny intelligence Nick was after all only a man.

When they joined the two new-comers she dismissed the matter from her mind with a little sigh. Violet was clinging to her father, while Joan had pounced out from some post of vantage upon her mother who had arrived with him. Chris Mordaunt and Max Wyndham were twins, and it was well known that they never lost an opportunity to meet though their various ties and interests did not permit them to do so very often.

Nick drew near and peered into the car that had brought them. "Have you dared to show your face in my presence without Olga?" he demanded of Max.

Max Wyndham turned from his small daughter's embrace and gave him a hand-grip that silenced all complaint.

"She couldn't manage it. The little 'un wanted her. But you'll see her before long at Dr. Jim's."

"What's the matter with the little 'un?" said Nick.

The "little un" was his godson and the youngest of the family.

"Only teeth," said Max. "Poor little beggar! He'll be all right. Let's see! You know my sister?"

"Rather!" said Nick, turning to greet her. "We are the greatest friends. Mrs. Mordaunt, you and your daughter get more like sisters every time we meet."

Chris Mordaunt was one of those people upon whom the years sit lightly. A casual observer, noting her bright face and happy laugh, would have taken her for twenty-five. So essentially was she one of "those whom the gods love" that it seemed with her as if age stood still. She looked many years younger than her twin; but then the life that Max Wyndham led was a strenuous one. He was already one of the ablest men in the medical profession and, together with his partner, Sir Kersley Whitton, was consulted by people of practically every nationality. He was known as a man who never spared himself or those who worked under him, and the results he achieved were regarded by some as almost miraculous.

That he had found time to come to this breaking-up festivity was in his young daughter's eyes the highest compliment that she had ever received, and she could hardly bear to let him out of her clasp.

"Children are so lucky nowadays," laughed Mrs. Mordaunt, as she shook hands with Nick. "Parents always seem to be buzzing round them, either for half-term or for breaking-up. They, didn't when we were at school—or in the holidays either. I remember being bored to tears in the holidays."

"Not when I was anywhere about," said Max.

She accepted the amendment. "No; only when you were off the road with mumps and things. I never caught them, so I used to get left to my own devices."

"And pretty kettles of fish you used to fry!" commented Max.

"Oh, not really!" she protested. "At least, not often!"

"Don't you be offensive!" said Nick. "I'm sure Mrs. Mordaunt is an excellent cook."

"She's a topping mother, anyhow," said Joan, hugging her anew.

"Hadn't we better go indoors and present ourselves?" suggested Peggy, mindful of her responsibilities.

"Before we start scrapping!" grinned Nick. "My nephew Max was always an aggressive animal and never showed any respect for my grey hairs."

"My dearest of uncles, you haven't got any!" said Max's daughter.

“Don’t be impertinent!” said Nick.

CHAPTER III

THE APPOINTED WAY

PEGGY MUSGRAVE'S last breaking-up was in the eyes of her school-friends the best that they had ever known. The stodgy atmosphere to which parents usually seem peculiarly susceptible on such occasions was wholly absent on this one. As Violet remarked appreciatively, there really was some fun going for once. Peggy, whose generally happy spirits had been somewhat depressed of late, threw off her anxieties regarding the future and gave herself with zest to the present task of entertaining the guests, and people who had never seen her before remembered her afterwards as "that bewitching girl with the very sweet smile," and hoped that their own girls would turn out as well.

Certainly there was something of the born hostess about Peggy. She had inherited her mother's charm of manner as well as of feature. She had no shyness, but was equally lacking in self-assertion.

"Simply Daisy over again," Nick whispered once to his wife.

And Muriel, watching her with motherly eyes, assented with a touch of anxiety. "I hope she has inherited some of Will's strength as well," she said.

The proceedings came to an end at length, and the great day was over. The Olympians prepared to depart. Peggy and Joan, looking very childish in their white frocks, came up to say good night.

"And we all meet again to-morrow," said Muriel, with Peggy's hand close held in hers. "When are you coming down to Brethaven, Joan?"

"When Mummy goes to Scotland, please," said Joan promptly. "We've fixed it all up, thank you ever so much, dear Aunt Muriel, so that Peggy and I can see as much of each other as we possibly can these holidays. My brother Bertie is going to Scotland too, so he won't miss me, and he'll see lots of me at Christmas anyway. I shan't have anything else to do then."

"So you're not coming near us any more when once Peggy has gone!" said Nick.

She shook her head in silence, her hand in Peggy's arm.

"Oh, Joan, darling!" said her mother reproachfully.

Peggy turned swiftly. "It isn't Joan's fault, Aunt Chris. You'd—you'd feel the same. I know you would."

Joan's eyes were full of tears, and her throat was working. Nick flung himself after Peggy into the breach. "Well, I hope Aunt Chris will ask me instead then, for I can't afford to lose all my nieces at once. And as for my boy Reggie, of course he'll be heart-broken. In fact, I don't know how I shall break it to him."

"You must all come," said Chris. "We'll have a jolly party. I am hoping that Noel may be home for Christmas. He hasn't taken home leave for about ten years. Wouldn't it be nice if we could get everybody together—you, Max, and Olga, and everyone?"

"All but my Peggy!" murmured Muriel, squeezing the girl's hand more tightly.

Peggy looked at her with a quick, brave smile. "Daddy and I may be coming home by then," she said.

Muriel smiled also while she stifled a sigh. "I shall have to set out myself and fetch you both if you are not," she said.

Joan recovered her speech with a great effort. "It's a horrid shame if Uncle Noel does come home just as you are going out," she said. "He's the only person in India that you know. Someone ought to write and tell him he is to stay out there and take care of you."

"Oh, don't be silly, Joan!" said Peggy with some impatience. "I shan't want anyone to take care of me besides my father."

"I won't believe there is such a person till I see him," said Joan.

And Peggy's sharp sigh came as an involuntary expression of her agreement.

"It is better than expecting too much," was Muriel's reflection, for she also had been grievously disappointed on the girl's behalf.

"Oh well," she said aloud, "I suppose those who live longest will see most. What time shall you be ready in the morning, Peggy dear?"

"The very first thing," said Peggy, with shining eyes.

"Right-ho!" said Nick. "And I shall be round even earlier to collect you. Good-bye, chickens! Don't be awake all night and don't oversleep yourselves! Come on, Max! We're last!"

They departed, pursued by Violet with some confetti which had been saved up for the occasion, an action which brought down upon her as severe a reprimand as the Head could administer on the spur of the moment.

Peggy and Joan went up the stairs arm in arm for the last time and parted at Peggy's door.

"We won't stay up and gossip to-night, dear," she said, when Joan would have entered. "We shall see lots more of each other at Redlands. We'll wait till then."

Joan clasped her close. "I don't know how I shall come back to this place without you," she said, with tears in her voice. "Mummy would take me away, I know, but Daddy won't. I've done my best to persuade him, but he simply won't listen."

"I expect he's right," Peggy said. "It would be shirking, wouldn't it?"

"I think fathers are a great nuisance sometimes," said Joan. "They just spoil everything."

"Your father doesn't," said Peggy. "Next to Uncle Nick, he is the nicest man I have ever met."

"Of course he is!" said Joan with spirit. "And he isn't next to anybody, and never will be."

Peggy laughed a little and turned from the subject. "Besides, there's Violet," she said. "She really is your job, Joan."

"Oh, I know," said Joan. "I'll be a mother to them all next term. I won't shirk, I promise you. And perhaps you'll be home again next summer and we'll get presented together after all. Do try and get home, Marguerita!"

"I will try," Peggy promised.

Joan hugged her again and turned to depart. "Where there's a will, there's a way," she said.

Peggy entered her room alone, and softly closed the door.

It was full of moonlight and she did not turn on the light, but went to the window and stood there, looking forth upon the old elms, grey and still in the quiet night.

"I shall never see you again," she whispered to them, but she could not convince herself that it was true. After eight years spent under their shadow it was hard to believe that she looked upon them thus for the last time. Departing girls always declared that they would come back, but they never did. Other ties, other interests,—life,—claimed them as soon as the busy school existence was left behind. There was never any time to retrace their steps over the path once travelled. They had to go forward and leave it all behind.

Her mind wandered back over the years that were past, happy years, careless years, that could never come again. Very sheltered had her life been during those years, so sheltered that sometimes she had chafed to get beyond them, to see and act for herself. Well, they were over now. The *régime* of school life was past. Henceforth she would order her own actions, make her own discipline. If she transgressed, there would be no punishment save only the reproach of her own conscience, no confiscation of privileges or shortening of play-hours, no learning of lines or like mortifications. A free road lay before her, and she was still too young to realize that only the mode of transit and not the choice of route was hers, too young to know that her feet were already set upon the appointed way which by one means or another must be travelled.

Yet some mysterious sense of destiny was upon her that night, checking all presumptuous aspirations. She recognized that a definite call of duty had come to her, and she was ready to answer it; ready, like the young knight of old, to don her armour with prayer and go forth into the world of action. But she had no dreams regarding the outcome. A veil was hung before her eyes which she was powerless to penetrate.

Dim memories of the land to which she was returning hovered cloud-like in her brain. A verandah with hanging rush screens which had been her playground was her most vivid recollection. Here her mother had sat—a white figure with patient eyes and strangely silvered hair; while other figures had come and gone, chief among them a young man whom she at six years old had always regarded as a boy of about her own age. This was Noel Wyndham—Noel the Wonderful, as she had since in strict privacy come to call him—closely related to the Olympians. Joan's uncle, in fact. Curiously, though her mother had figured in later days than had Noel, her vision of him was far clearer, infinitely more alive. Noel had been her playmate in a land where playmates were scarce. Noel had taught her to ride, earning her undying gratitude thereby. Noel had not been superior to attending nursery ablutions, had chased her dripping round the nursery on more than one

merry occasion, finally catching her, drying her, tickling her, and tucking her into bed after going through the solemn function of hearing her say her prayers. All this Peggy remembered as though it had been yesterday. There was nothing wraith-like about Noel. She remembered every minute spent in his society, how he had returned with them to England, temporarily blinded through some accident, how they had danced together at the wedding of Aunt Olga and Uncle Max. ("Good gracious," she always said to herself at this point, thinking of Violet, "how old I am getting!") And after that, the alliance had come to an end. Noel must have gone back to India without saying good-bye, for she had no recollection of any farewell, and she had settled down to life at Redlands. She had never missed him. The new life had been too entrancing. If she had ever asked for him, the kindly assurance that she would see him again some day had sufficed her. She had always been adaptable, and because during all her early years she had lived such a life of change, no happening had struck her as unusual. But she had never forgotten her cavalier. Even yet the tones of his voice, his laugh, rang sometimes through her dreams, and she could always call up without effort his handsome face and merry eyes. Nor had she been able to delete his name from her prayers. The dream-mother had taught her long ago to pray for those she loved, and Noel's name had ever held a prominent and favoured place. She was a little ashamed of it now, but she had not the heart to cut it out. She supposed she would continue to pray for him as long as she lived, though the chances that she would ever meet him again were very remote.

At the back of her mind there had been a hope, scarcely acknowledged, that in fulfilling the obvious duty that called her to her father she might by some lucky chance renew the happy friendship of her baby days, but now this was dashed to the ground. Noel was coming home just as she was going out. They might actually pass each other on the way and neither would know.

She had woven no romance about him and had keenly resented Joan's doing so on her behalf. She had never been a hero-worshipper, and in any case he had been too much of the comrade for that. But her loving regard for him had never changed. It would have given her immense pleasure to have seen him again. That the passage of years could in any way have altered him was a possibility that scarcely occurred to her. Noel at twenty-two had been the chosen playfellow on equal terms with the baby of six. Noel at thirty-four would probably be at least as young as herself at eighteen. She had sometimes had a troubled wonder if he would recognize her, but this also she had always dismissed as absurd. She was sure she had not changed to that extent.

It seemed to her that night as she stood gazing forth into the moonlight as one who fain would read the future, that only now, when the chance of their meeting again had become so remote, had it really begun to matter whether they did or not. Not for years had she consciously counted upon it. Her life at school had been supremely happy and full of friendships. She had never really missed him. She had been more than content without him. But now she was going out into the unknown, and for the first time she wanted him. He was more to her that any visionary father in that land of dim memories for which she was bound. All the abounding childish confidence that she had placed in him returned upon her with a force that had in it something elementary and compelling.

"Oh, I wish you were going to be there, dear Noel," she whispered to the stars. "I wish—I wish you were!"

To have been sure of at least one friend in that veiled future that lay so blankly before her would have made such a difference.

CHAPTER IV

PLAYFELLOWS

"HULLO, PEGGY! COMING for a bathe?"

Reggie Ratcliffe, attired in a loose coat to hide the shortcomings of a bathing-costume, and dangling a bath-towel round his neck, stopped under Peggy's window to dance a bare-footed jig for her edification.

Peggy, more elegantly arrayed in a blue silk mackintosh and a pale blue rubber cap, stood and watched him with humorous tolerance. Being practically the same age, she naturally regarded him with the eye of a mother. They were playfellows of many years' standing, and the fact that he had succeeded a playfellow of more advanced age had probably fostered this attitude on her part.

"Yes, I'll come," she said, as he paused for breath in a nymph-like pose. "Go and put on your sand-shoes! You left them in the summer house last night."

He held up his arms to her. "Jump! I'll catch you."

His sunburnt face and merry smile had all the fascination of reckless youth, but though she smiled in answer they excited no answering recklessness.

"Run along! I'm coming," she said, and disappeared from the window.

Reggie did not run along. He waited for her on the precise spot on which she had seen him last, and when she came he sprang to meet her and enfolded her in a large hug before she could prevent him.

She emerged from it without coquetry, still smiling maternally. "What a great baby you are, Reggie! When are you going to grow up?"

"Is one obliged to grow up?" said Reggie. "I don't see the necessity myself."

"You will when you get your commission," she said.

He laughed. “Yes, that’ll be a thrill, won’t it? You’ll have to buckle on my sword, Peggy, and give me a favour to stick in my helmet.”

“Oh, you can ask someone else to do that,” said Peggy. “Someone young and romantic—like Joan!”

He made a face. “I wish to goodness Joan wasn’t coming,” he said. “It’s much more fun without her.”

Peggy opened her eyes. “Reggie! How can you say such a thing? Why, Joan is a darling—a darling!”

“Oh yes, I know,” agreed Reggie impatiently. “But she’s a nuisance all the same. She gets in the way.”

“She doesn’t!” said Peggy.

“Yes, she does. And after all, you and I were pals long before she came along. I don’t know what you want with her when you’ve got me.”

There was such obvious sincerity in the remark that Peggy did not smile at it. She treated it with the respect it merited.

“But, you see, dear,” she said, “I shan’t have you all the holidays in any case. You are sure to be gazetted in a few days, and then in another week or two I suppose you’ll be gone.”

“Don’t call me ‘dear’!” said Reggie unexpectedly. “And I wouldn’t mind you having her after I’m gone in the least, but I do think, all things considered, you needn’t have her before.”

Peggy turned her clear blue eyes upon him and surveyed him with serious interest.

“It never occurred to me,” she said, “that you could get jealous of Joan.”

“I’m not!” declared Reggie with some indignation. “But when girls get together they’re so silly. It’s always ‘darling’ this and ‘dearest’ that, and nothing but hats and dresses at the core. A fellow wouldn’t be human if it didn’t feed him up.”

“I wonder you will ever have anything to do with us at all,” remarked Peggy with slightly heightened colour.

“That’s just it,” said Reggie ingenuously. “I like you all separately, but I can’t digest you in herds. I love you by yourself, Peggy; always have.”

“That’s very nice of you,” said Peggy. They had reached the summer house, and she paused. “Hadn’t you better go in and get your shoes?”

"Now you're cross!" said Reggie, sighing deeply. "It's dashed unreasonable of you, because I haven't said one word that you could possibly object to if you weren't prejudiced."

Peggy's eyes began to smile. "I'm not a bit cross," she said. "Do get your shoes and hurry up!"

He dived in and snatched them from the seat. "Well, then why aren't you?" he said, rejoining her. "I'm sure you don't agree."

"Oh no, I don't agree," she said. "But I'm not cross because—well, because you don't have that effect on me, that's all."

"You don't choose to take me seriously," growled Reggie.

"Not quite so seriously as you take yourself," she admitted. "But as you have just said that you didn't see any necessity for growing up, that isn't very surprising, is it?"

He turned a somewhat grudging smile upon her. "I believe you are just having a rag with me," he said. "You think you're just a girl and can do as you like."

She smiled back. "Oh, not with such an important person as yourself, Reggie! It simply isn't done!"

"No, it isn't!" he vowed, making a spring at her. "And I'll teach you that it isn't too!"

But Peggy was too nimble to be caught thus easily. She fled before him down the garden-path, skimming like a bird down the glen that led to the shore, cutting off every corner of the path with a swift daring that baffled her pursuer who would have overtaken her with ease on the straight.

He drew nearer to her, however, notwithstanding all her adroitness and there was but a very little between them when she finally reached the little gate at the bottom and, neatly flinging aside her mackintosh, vaulted it and ran out on to the sunny beach.

Even then he would have caught her had not his own coat given him a moment's pause, and when he had freed himself from it she was already leaping from rock to rock to plunge at length into the sparkling water whence she waved a triumphant arm to him ere she struck out for greater depths.

Reggie sat down on a rock and put on his shoes with the philosophical reflection that there was small point in going any further without them as he

would catch her in the end.

"And when I do, I'll—teach her!" he promised himself with some emphasis though he made no rash commitments as to the species of the lesson he meant to administer.

Fully equipped, he arose with dignity and began to make his own way seawards, proceeding with more caution than had Peggy who had accomplished a considerable feat in traversing those slippery rocks at the top of her speed without mishap.

He recognized the fact as he went. "She's like an eel herself," he commented, "but I'll catch her!"

A great splashing and a view-holloa from the water nearer at hand diverted his fell intentions for the moment. He turned and perceived a meagre, familiar figure kicking up fountains to attract his attention.

"Hullo, Dad!" he said.

"Stop chasing the unattainable," shouted Nick, "and come over here!"

He went with cheery alacrity, diving in with judgment and coming up almost alongside him.

"I say, what a ripping morning!" he laughed. "Have you been out here long?"

"Yes, rather!" said Nick. "I expected you ages ago."

"I was waiting for Peggy," explained Reggie.

"What do you want to waste your time over her for?" said Nick. "You're a silly ass, my boy, that's what you are." He splashed a shower of water at him with the words. "But you're not a conceited one, thank heaven. If I'd been handed out one of the tired youths of the present generation for a son —"

"I'm not listening," interrupted Reggie, splashing back with interest. "It isn't many of 'em that would own you for a father either. It's only because I'm patient and longsuffering and—and—Hullo! Where are you? Are you drowned?"

The complete disappearance of Nick gave rise to this enquiry, and a second later he was jerked under himself by a single wiry tentacle that gripped him like a spring, holding him down.

Reggie spluttered and struggled, but he did not rise to the surface again until the tentacle had released him. Then he came up, blinded and choked with water, to find Nick serenely floating on his back a yard or two away.

"By Jove," he gasped, with genuine admiration, "you've got a grip like a boa-constrictor! How on earth do you do it?"

"One strong arm is better than a dozen weak ones," remarked Nick, blinking at the sky above him. "And I still have power to drown a puppy, thanks be. Look here, Reggie! I don't mind you making an ass of yourself if you want to, but you're not to catch the girl if she doesn't want to be caught. See? It isn't cricket."

Reggie, still coughing and ejecting sea-water, mumbled something not very coherent to the effect that he supposed everyone was at liberty to do as they liked and anyhow all girls did, and struck out vigorously with the words with the obvious intention of leaving the subject behind.

Nick made no effort to detain him, but remained in his rocky pool, swimming about with one-armed dexterity in complete content. There was a very satisfactory understanding between himself and Reggie at all times, and he had no fear of its being lightly disturbed. Reggie was too good a fellow for that.

CHAPTER V

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

WHEN PEGGY judged it safe to return from her dip and skipped up the rocks with a wary eye to right and left, she discovered with some surprise another cavalier awaiting her at the gate. She joined him with alacrity.

"Hullo, Uncle Nick! You are early."

"I was earlier than you, my dear," said Nick, tendering her mackintosh. "Have you had a good swim?"

"Topping, thank you," said Peggy. "Where's Reggie?"

Nick pointed towards some distant half-submerged rocks. "Still playing over there like a disgruntled porpoise."

Peggy looked, screwing up her eyes. "What ever for? He isn't cross, is he?"

Nick laughed. "Good gracious, no! He's thoroughly enjoying himself. Come along! We shall be late for breakfast."

"I think I'll wait for him," said Peggy.

"What for?" said Nick.

She turned to him with a smile in her eyes. "You see, we were supposed to be bathing together, and somehow he got left behind."

"Best place for him," said Nick unfeelingly. "A kid like that! Leave him alone to find himself! Much better for him."

"Oh no!" said Peggy. "That wouldn't be cricket."

She raised her hollowed hands to her mouth suddenly and sent a piercing siren-call in the direction of Reggie's playground. Then she turned and thrust her slender arms into her mackintosh.

"That'll fetch him," she said with confidence. "You go in, won't you, and say we're coming!"

A distant yell came back in answer to her more melodious call. Peggy mounted the railing by the gate and sat down.

"Don't you wait!" she said.

Nick stood surveying her, however. "So that is the present-day maiden in distress!" he remarked. "Her gallant rescuer is sent about his business while the would-be dragon is invited to come on!"

Peggy's merry laugh pealed out. "Oh, I didn't know you were rescuing me, Uncle Nick. How perfectly sweet of you! Does Reggie know? He does?" She rocked with laughter on her perch. "What did he say? Wasn't he frightfully amused? Poor old boy? I think I must go and meet him after that." She jumped to the ground. "Do tell Aunt Muriel! She'll simply die!"

She began to flit away on dancing feet, but paused to fling back a kiss which he found it impossible not to return, though he smiled somewhat wryly as he did so.

"Gone to hold the old fossil up to ridicule!" he commented. "Reggie's quite right. All the girls do as they like nowadays."

He returned alone to the house, and entering, encountered his wife just descending to breakfast.

"Oh, Nick!" she said. "How late you are! You've been playing with the children!"

He came to her and flung his one arm about her. "No, darling, they won't play with me; I'm too old," he said.

"Too young, more likely!" laughed Muriel. "Wait till Violet comes!"

He laughed also, his face to hers. "I'm sick of these up-to-date infants, Muriel. They're so beastly full of commonsense, they have you every time and there's no getting level with them."

"It's no good trying, dear," said Muriel wisely. "Shall I come and help you dress?"

He kissed her. "Will you, sweetheart? And we'll get our breakfast over and done before they come along. I wonder if anyone ever falls in love in the old-fashioned way these days."

"Of course," said Muriel simply. "Everyone does."

"I wish I could think so," said Nick, keeping his arm about her as they went up the stairs. "But I believe it's a lost art."

"You silly old thing!" said Muriel affectionately. "What's happened to you to-day?"

"I don't know," Nick spoke despondently. "But to see Daisy's daughter —bless her little heart!—behaving like—like a twentieth-century maiden who doesn't care a damn for any man, however big a fool he makes of himself—"

"Oh, my dear," said Muriel, "for goodness' sake leave the child alone! She hasn't begun to grow up yet. They don't, you know. While as for Reggie —he is more infantile even than you are, which is saying much."

"Yes, but, Muriel," Nick ignored this insult to register his point, "you weren't much more than Peggy's age in the Wara days. Remember? But you —you know—you—"

"I was a little idiot," said Muriel firmly. "Had I been born twenty years later, I should have been much more adaptable. And I shouldn't have cared a fig for what anybody said, which also is a help. No, Nick, you mustn't grudge these children their heritage. The playtime has been extended since our day. Let them enjoy it!"

"I only wish Peggy weren't so dashed attractive," said Nick. "Daisy herself was never more so, and every man she met was crazy about her. It'll be the same story again when she gets to India. She'll never steer clear."

"Oh, not the same story, darling!" protested Muriel gently. "Another story, with a happier ending, let us pray! She has plenty of sense, as you say, and that will be her safeguard."

"I'm dead certain Will won't anyway," declared Nick. "He has wrapped himself up in his work, and he won't see an inch beyond it. And girls nowadays, they get into trouble so easily, Muriel. She's got to go, I know; but I hate the thought of it."

"I don't think you need be afraid," Muriel said. "Somehow I feel she has more strength than dear Daisy ever had. She will steer clear. And I believe too that when Will sees her he will begin to wake up. It is just that sort of responsibility that he needs."

"If he will only take it seriously—instead of mooning!" said Nick.

He dismissed the matter though not as one greatly reassured. Muriel's quiet confidence was certainly comforting, if not wholly convincing.

Descending to the breakfast-room a quarter-of-an-hour later, the two truants were discovered, still in their bathing-kits, in possession.

"We thought it would make us so late to dress," explained Peggy, with serene blue eyes uplifted. "And we were sure you wouldn't mind, dear Aunt Muriel."

Who could mind anything from Peggy with her irresistible little air of always being quite safe from rebuke? As Nick was wont to remark, no one could ever have slapped her in earnest, however richly she might have deserved it.

Muriel certainly was not proof against her and merely kissed her with a feebly expressed hope that perhaps she would manage to finish her bathe a little earlier to-morrow.

"It was my fault," volunteered Reggie, equally unabashed. "We started fooling, I don't know why. And then I got left behind and Peggy waited for me like a brick."

"That was very kind of her," remarked Muriel, beginning to pour out.

"Don't you believe it, Mother darling!" said Reggie. "She wouldn't have done it if she hadn't wanted to."

"If it depends on anything like that," said Peggy, "I promise to be in very good time for breakfast to-morrow."

"One up!" chanted Reggie. "That's the easiest rise I've had for a long time."

"Children, be quiet!" said Muriel. "And let me read my letters!"

They subsided momentarily, and a brief pause reigned while hunger was being appeased.

Muriel looked up presently. "This is a letter from Mrs. Bobby Fraser, Peggy."

"Oh!" said Peggy. The colour flooded her face in an instant and as swiftly the latent merriment died out of it. "About India?" she questioned in a low voice.

"Yes, dear. You would be safe in their care. He is a perfect dear. In fact, I would rather you travelled with them than with anyone else I know. The only thing is—" Muriel's voice also was troubled—"they are leaving rather earlier than I had thought."

"Oh, when?" said Peggy.

And "Damn!" said Reggie in the same instant with violence.

Nick glanced across at him, but continued his breakfast without comment.

"Early in September," said Muriel. "About a month from now."

"That is rather soon," said Peggy, in the same low voice.

"Yes, dear," agreed Muriel. "We have got to decide between that and letting you go with strangers."

"To which," Nick spoke suddenly for the first time, "I shall certainly not consent."

"We might hear of someone else," murmured Peggy, her face still scarlet. "You know such heaps of people."

"As it chances, I don't know of anybody except the Frasers who are going out this season," said Nick. "At least no one I would trust a precious little piece of goods like you to."

"I can't see why I shouldn't be allowed to take care of myself," said Peggy rather forlornly. "What possible harm could come to me?"

"Ye gods!" said Nick. "Well, darling, I'm sorry, but the very question demonstrates your utter inability to do so. The fact that the Frasers are going is the greatest piece of luck that has come our way for a long time, and we mustn't let it slip. That's settled, Muriel. You will have to set to work and get the child ready."

"Oh, damn!" said Reggie again with more emphasis, as if determined that everybody should hear and take notice. "Then that's the end of everything!"

"Oh, not everything, I hope," said Nick with a cheery grin. "You anyway haven't much to complain about. You'll be gazetted by that time and getting ready for your own career. Lucky beggar! I wish I were in your shoes."

Muriel bent towards Peggy. "Finish your breakfast, darling, and we'll talk about it," she said. "There certainly isn't much time to lose, but we must try and get through before Joan comes. You shall have your little holiday together if I can possibly manage it."

"Thank you," said Peggy.

The colour was fading at last. It went very rapidly, leaving her strangely pale by contrast, leaving also two enormous tears in her eyes which she quietly wiped away. She began to eat and drink again in silence.

Not so Reggie! He almost flung his plate from him at sight of those tears which she had treated so practically, and burst into vehement speech.

"It's a damn' shame, that's what it is!" he declared. "Father! Mother! You've no business to let her go at all! You can see she loathes the very thought of it. Why can't her beastly father come to her if he wants her? He doesn't—you know he doesn't! And it's nothing but damned old-fashioned rot to make her go!"

So he delivered himself of his protest, youth fiercely rebellious of coercion as it has been from the beginning of the ages, ready to tilt with the universe to gain its own, regardless of all consequence, careless of all cost.

Standing there with flashing eyes, he challenged all authority in one superb gesture which would have been ludicrous in anyone less young.

As it was, Nick paused as one reluctant to strike an answering blow, while Muriel only shook her head mutely refusing the issue.

It was Peggy—the up-to-date, twentieth-century maiden—who ruthlessly crushed underfoot the elements of magnificent knighthood thus displayed—Peggy with the tears yet scarcely dry, but a brave dimple in each cheek notwithstanding.

"Don't be such a funny ass, Reggie!" she said. "Nobody's making me go. I'm just going, and that's all there is to it."

Three sentences which completely deprived the situation of either tragedy or heroism!

CHAPTER VI

DESTINY

"WHAT'S the matter with you, young feller?" said Dr. Jim, with a kindly look at the gloomy specimen of boyhood lounging drearily against the window-sill of his consulting-room.

Reggie inhaled his cigarette with a kind of bitter enjoyment. "There's nothing the matter," he said. "I've been shelved, that's all."

"Great Scott!" said Dr. Jim. "Does that mean you're crossed in love?"

"No, it doesn't," said Reggie with contempt. "That sort of thing doesn't happen now. Nobody cares enough."

"Oh, quite!" said Dr. Jim. "I forgot that. It's a great relief to me, you know, as I don't like prescribing for that sort of thing. My potions are all too drastic for that type of heart-trouble."

Reggie threw him a brief grin of appreciation. "Everything is so damn' dull," he complained, relaxing again. "I thought we were going to have the time of our lives this summer."

"Instead of which," said Dr. Jim, "you've been left to your own damn' devices without a damn' thing to do or a damn' person to speak to—except me. I agree with you, my lad. It is—damn' hard."

"Thank you," said Reggie.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" said Dr. Jim.

Reggie shrugged his shoulders. "I was told to come here and play with the kids till further notice," he said.

"Well, they'll be here to-morrow," said Dr. Jim.

Reggie made a noise expressive of deep disgust. "I shall be jolly glad when the time comes to join," he said, making a vicious dab at a fly on the window. "I told Peggy so before she went up to town. Of course I shan't see any more of her."

"She's coming back, isn't she?" said Dr. Jim.

"Oh yes, I suppose so. But then she'll have Joan in tow; in fact, I heard them saying that they would bring Joan back with them. And that of course means—" Reggie's shoulders once more expressed his meaning.

"I see," said Dr. Jim.

He sat for a space in silence, his keen eyes under their iron-grey brows steadily scrutinizing the lounging figure by the window.

"Why did Nick go too?" he suddenly asked. "Surely he isn't required to help buy Peggy's trousseau!"

Reggie started as if he had been sharply pricked.

"It's an outfit, not a trousseau," he growled. "She isn't going to be married."

"Ho, isn't she?" said Dr. Jim. "I don't mind betting you anything you like that there are wedding-bells somewhere for Peggy within the year. But that's beside the point. Why did Nick go too? I want to know!"

"I suppose he pleased himself," said Reggie. "I don't know why he went."

"Yes, you do know. Out with it!" There was a certain sternness in the quiet rejoinder.

Reggie turned a little and looked at him. He and Dr. Jim had been fast friends from the beginning of his life. There was in fact in some respects a closer confidence between them than between himself and his father who was young enough to be more of a comrade to him than a mentor. There was besides a temperamental sympathy between them which frequently rendered explanations unnecessary. Jim Ratcliffe, the elder brother who had been a father to Nick, was almost more than a father to his son.

"Well, I think he was a bit fed up with me," he said, after a moment.

"Impossible!" said Dr. Jim.

Reggie smiled faintly. "I couldn't help it. It's such an infernal shame. I had to tell them so."

Dr. Jim nodded. "We're talking about Peggy, I take it. I quite agree with you—though for other reasons than yours. It is a shame to send that child out without giving her any fun at all in England first. It's a sacrifice which

shouldn't be. Nick knows I think so, and so does Will. But I can't make any impression on either. As for Will—" He broke off.

"Yes, what about him?" said Reggie eagerly.

"Nothing," shortly responded Dr. Jim.

"You might tell me," urged Reggie. "I'm safe as houses, and anything to do with Peggy interests me."

"I gathered that," said Dr. Jim drily. "But I don't see that any good purpose is served by discussing her father with you. Besides, I've nothing to go upon. I haven't seen him for nearly twelve years. Poor devil! His wife was with him then, and she was the very air he breathed. I knew she wouldn't live long, but I couldn't tell him so. I couldn't."

"Then you think—" said Reggie tentatively. "You think—"

"I think he has probably got a broken heart," said Dr. Jim. "Not the kind you sneer at, my boy; but the genuine finished article which I hope you may never come across. It may do him good to have the child out there, but I think it's a risk—a grave risk."

"Oh, can't you stop them sending her?" said Reggie in accents of despair.

"No, boy, I can't." Dr. Jim's reply held finality. "There's always another point of view, remember. And yours and mine may be the wrong one. Nick maintains—and I daresay he is right—that it is the child's duty, and she feels it to be so herself. Daisy would have said the same. Daisy went back to India the last time knowing that she would never return, leaving her baby behind and sticking to Will up to the very end. Peggy must do her share. And it may not be such a great sacrifice after all. She may find her destiny waiting for her,—possibly such a destiny as she wouldn't exchange for anything else on earth. We've got to think of that, Reggie boy, and we won't grudge it to her if it comes, eh?"

Reggie made an abrupt movement and flung his cigarette-end through the window, turning his back upon the room. He took out his case then and extracted and lit another before he resumed his lounging attitude.

"I don't know what you mean by destiny, Uncle Jim," he said then. "To my mind we make our own destinies. Anyway, I'm going to make mine, whatever anybody says or does,—even if I have to chuck the Army to do it!" he ended rather viciously.

"I shouldn't make an ass of myself if I were you," said Dr. Jim mildly. "It isn't worth it, believe me."

Again there was that in his utterance which provoked a quick grin from Reggie. "No, all right," he said. "I won't do it for nothing, anyway. Thanks for being a brick. Look here! Can't I do anything to help you while I am here? Send Mitchel for a holiday, and let me run you round and look after the car!"

Dr. Jim laughed. "You can run me round as often as you like, but I won't ask you to clean the car as well. Come along, boy! We'll go for a walk. I'm glad you've planted yourself on me. I don't see enough of you nowadays."

"My dear old uncle chap!" said Reggie affectionately. "I'd sooner be with you than practically anybody."

They went out together, and the subject of Peggy and her prospects was not renewed. A man of very human understanding was Dr. Jim; he knew when to speak and when to be silent, and the wisdom of close upon seventy years had taught him that the very young must be taken seriously in all their ways, even in their cynicisms.

Though he was expecting his daughter Olga and her family of four on the morrow, he was none the less glad to have this lad of Nick's to share his hospitality. He had always loved Reggie for his own sake, had piloted him through all his childish ailments, and the fact that he bore a strong resemblance to his own dead son was one that drew them all the closer. To get Dr. Jim to reason with him had long been Muriel's chief remedy when her boy was headstrong. Reggie would at least always listen to him, and Dr. Jim's reasoning was always sound.

Olga Wyndham was another member of the family for whom Reggie had a sincere affection, and her expected advent had made him all the more willing to take up his temporary abode at Weir. Olga's children invariably ran wild in her father's house while Olga herself made holiday, and their visits usually ended in a wholesale migration to Redlands and the sea for the last week or two. Such was to be the programme on this occasion, and they were hoping to persuade Dr. Jim to accompany them, for he never left his home at any other time, declaring himself too old for much gadding about.

It was true that, active though he was, the years were beginning to tell upon him. He had taken a partner since the death of his eldest son who was to have joined him in the practice, and it was no longer difficult for him to get away, but he had no desire to do so. His two remaining sons, who were farming in South Africa, had urged him many a time to join them, but old

Dr. Jim was not to be persuaded. He would live and die in his own place, he said,—a decision which Olga hailed with relief. She relied upon Nick to take care of him so long as he remained at Weir, and she knew that he would not fail her, for she and Nick were fast allies.

She loved Reggie also for his devotion to her father, and his presence was always a welcome one. To find him on the watch for her when the big car drew up the next day before the doctor's house was a pleasure to which her shining eyes, no less than the joyful squeals of her children, amply testified.

"Oh, Reggie, you dear old thing, how like you to be here!" was her greeting.

Olga at thirty-three still bore a very fair resemblance to the Olga who at twenty-one had married her pet aversion, Max Wyndham. She had the same spontaneity of manner, the same blind, engaging fondness for those she loved. She was superbly incapable of seeing any faults in her friends, a trait which Reggie warmly appreciated.

With Violet and her next brother, Hugh, clinging to him, he managed to embrace her.

"It always does anyone good to see you," he said. "You're all looking very blooming. Uncle Jim will be in directly. Come along in!"

"How is he?" asked Olga anxiously.

"Oh, fit as a flea—dear old fellow! When is Max coming?"

"Not till the end of the week. He is busy. I hated leaving him," said Olga, "but Baby Nick has been bothered with his teeth and we wanted to get him down here."

"Well, he doesn't look too bad," said Reggie, with a glance at the infant in question solemnly seated on the arm of his nurse. "Hullo, little Jimmy! How are you?"

Little Jimmy, aged four, regarded him with eyes of twinkling mischief which induced Reggie to hoist him on to his shoulder, thereby establishing a firm friendship.

"I've seen Nick," said Olga, as they trooped into the house. "He came round this morning and told me about everything. He has promised faithfully to come back the day after to-morrow."

"Alone?" said Reggie.

“Yes. Muriel and Peggy will follow about the middle of next week, with Joan.”

Reggie groaned. “As I thought,” he remarked rather bitterly.

Olga looked at him in surprise. “Why? Don’t you like Joan?”

Reggie turned upon her a smile too brilliant to be genuine. “I adore her,” he said.

CHAPTER VII

MAX

THE week that intervened between Olga's arrival at Weir and the return of Muriel and Peggy from London was spent in what Reggie called fooling about. It was not an unpleasant period, but it was to him so patently an interval between the acts that he took very little note of its happenings. The hours spent with Dr. Jim were always happy ones and suited his existing frame of mind better than those devoted to hectic games with the children who pursued him with flattering zest whenever he was on the premises.

Nick returned to Redlands according to his promise, but he refused Reggie's offer to join him there.

"No, my lad, you stay where you are for a bit!" he said, with a shrewd glance at his son's healthy countenance. "Jim likes having you, and I'm going to have Olga for the week-end all by herself, for old times' sake, as Max can't get away after all till later."

It was an arrangement that pleased everybody, even Dr. Jim, who declared that three days of freedom from family cares would do his girl more good than six weeks of ordinary holiday. So Nick bore her off in triumph, and Reggie remained with the children.

It was arranged that the general migration to Brethaven should take place earlier this year on account of Peggy's plans, and her last fortnight in England was to be spent in the midst of the family party. It was what Peggy herself desired, for they were all dear to her, and the holidays spent thus at Redlands were amongst her dearest memories. It was so jolly to be all together, as she said, and she wanted as much of it as possible before she left. So when at length she and Muriel, with little Joan Mordaunt who had joined them, left London after ten days of very busy shopping and preparation, Dr. Jim, Olga, the children, and Reggie were all awaiting them with Nick at his house by the sea.

"We're going to have the time of our lives," cried Joan. "Violet and I are going to bathe every morning at five o'clock."

“Right-ho!” said Reggie. “Peggy and I are going to bathe at midnight, but we’ll try not to make it too soapy for you.”

She made a face at him. Somehow Joan was very attractive when she made a face.

“Oh, of course at midnight too!” she said. “Everybody does that. And I bet you I’ll swim further out to sea than you will!”

“If anybody—except of course Reggie—goes bathing between the hours of eight at night and six in the morning, they will bathe no more these holidays,” said Nick blandly.

“Oh, why?” was the general outcry.

He beamed upon them with benignity. “Because, my children, I say it, and I’m boss of this ’ere show. I don’t hold with midnight bathing except under very exceptional circumstances.”

“But everybody does,” protested Violet. “And we’re all swimmers.”

Nick made her a bow. “I know, dear. Those are my chief reasons. What everybody does is a bad rule to go by, and people who swim are always much more likely to get into mischief than those who can’t.”

“Then why let Reggie?” said Violet, taking up the tale.

“Because Reggie is a lad of sense,” said Nick, with his ready grin, “and I don’t think he will do it often.”

“Of course he won’t—by himself!” said Joan.

“You are quite wrong,” said Reggie, showing his teeth in his own peculiarly bright smile. “I much prefer swimming by myself to playing the fool in the water with a lot of schoolchildren.”

“Reggie! Reggie!” said Muriel.

But Joan only laughed, albeit a trifle scornfully. She knew very well that as a swimmer he would find it hard to beat her.

“All right,” she said lightly. “We’ll wait till our very last night, when no penalties can be imposed, and then we’ll have a midnight competition and see who is the biggest fool.”

“Joan, don’t be silly!” said Peggy.

Joan turned impulsively and leaned her arm on her friend’s shoulder. “I shan’t be a bit silly when you’re gone,” she said. “Neither will Reggie. We shall probably tear each other’s eyes out from sheer *ennui* if we are left

alone. I'm beginning to think you will get all the fun after all, Peggy. I'll change places with you if you like. I daresay your father wouldn't know the difference."

"That's an idea!" declared Reggie. "By Jove, why don't you do it? No one would miss you half as much."

Joan looked round upon the assembled company. "Reggie is more brotherly than a brother," she remarked. "What a gift he has for putting things prettily!"

"He doesn't mean it," said Peggy.

Reggie lighted a cigarette with an air of detachment, and Joan mimicked his movements with a skill that drew a laugh.

Only Peggy frowned at her. "Don't, Joan!"

Joan made an impetuous movement to draw her away. "Oh, come along, Peggy! We are wasting time. Every moment counts. Let's get away and enjoy ourselves!"

But Peggy paused. "You coming, Reggie?"

He threw her a smile as different from his previous one as champagne is different from vinegar. "I've promised to take my mother out in the car. But we shall be back to tea. Let's have some tennis afterwards!"

"We will," said Peggy. "Good-bye!" She turned to go.

"Mayn't I come?" said Violet.

Good-nature supervened with Reggie. "No, you come along with us!" he said. "I'll give you a much jollier time."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Violet, overjoyed.

The two girls departed together, Joan still as resentful as a naturally sweet temperament would allow.

"I really don't know what's come to Reggie," she said. "He used to be such a jolly boy, and now he does nothing but grouse and make nasty remarks."

"He doesn't mean any of it," said Peggy. "He is rather at a loose end just now; but he'll be all right as soon as he is gazetted."

"Well, I'm sure I hope so," said Joan. "He's getting very spoilt."

"No, no, he isn't really." Peggy stood up for her absent friend. "I think he's a little bit fed up about my going. That's why I'm trying to be extra nice to him."

"Well, aren't we all fed up?" said Joan. "It's almost a pity you can't take him with you as you're the only person that seems to have any use for him."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" said Peggy, without embarrassment. "He doesn't care really. I didn't mean that. It's only temporary. He'll be quite different as soon as he gets his job. You'll see."

"I don't suppose I shall be here to see," said Joan. "Anyhow, he's jolly lucky not to have to go and stick in a place where every stick and stone will remind him of you, as I have. It's all very fine, Peggy, but—"

"Oh, come along, darling! Do let's enjoy ourselves!" interrupted Peggy. "We've got the whole afternoon and it was very decent of Reggie to take Violet off our hands."

"It was rather," admitted Joan. "But I don't mind her so much. She is a good-tempered kid, anyway."

"He'll be good-tempered enough as soon as he has got something to do," said Peggy wisely.

Joan, however, remained unconvinced. "I suppose he has got to a horrid age," she decided.

But, drawbacks notwithstanding, that summer holiday by the sea was to stand out for ever in her memory, and that not solely on account of the departure of her friend.

The days slipped by very quickly,—far too quickly for all of them. There were tennis-parties, boating-parties, fishing-parties and picnics organized by Nick in a succession so rapid that the wistful shadow seldom had time to gather in Peggy's eyes, and Reggie declared himself worked off his feet.

There came a day of great jubilation when his name at last appeared in the London Gazette, and he received his orders to join his regiment at Woolwich about three weeks later. It was his turn to buy a trousseau, as Dr. Jim called it, and he shot up to town for the purpose but was back again almost before they realized him gone.

Peggy's time was getting very short. "I can stay up there and finish off when you've gone," he told her. "But I shan't before."

And though Peggy said, “Why not?” she neither expected nor received an answer.

Nick’s final effort was a dance to be given on Peggy’s last night at Redlands. The whole party were to break up on the following day, Dr. Jim returning with Olga and the children to Weir, while the rest went up to London whence Peggy was to travel with Nick and Muriel to Southampton the day after, leaving Joan in charge of some cousins of her mother’s who lived within reach.

Max Wyndham was to come down for the dance, and duly arrived in the afternoon to find Olga waiting for him at the end of the drive.

He jumped from the car to join her, and she waved the chauffeur on almost before he had done so.

“Oh, Max!” she said then. “It’s three weeks nearly!”

Max’s reply was to gather his wife bodily into his arms and walk down the glen with her, pausing only when he reached what he deemed a suitable spot in which to make amends for their lengthy separation.

She emerged from his hold, hatless and laughing. “Max, you are too bad. It doesn’t make up in the least. I’ve been starving for you all this time.”

“My dear girl,” said Max, speaking for the first time, “it has been the very devil with me too, but I couldn’t help it. I’ve had case after case that couldn’t be left—a sort of arch conspiracy to keep me in town. I couldn’t leave poor old Kersley to do all the work, though he tried to push me out more than once. Well, how goes the world? All serene?”

“All upside down, I think,” said Olga, still resentful. “Nick is completely untiring, and the children have had the time of their lives. But I won’t do it again, Max. I won’t! I won’t! I refuse to be shelved in this way.”

He stroked her cheek soothingly. “It seems to have agreed with you, notwithstanding. You are looking almost pretty for you. And how are all the infants behaving? Has young Reggie gone off the deep end yet?

“No, but I believe he soon will. No, it’s a shame to laugh. I’m really sorry for him,” protested Olga. “Peggy is a little darling, but she hasn’t the faintest idea how hard hit he is,—what it means even. I believe Joan knows. He is fiercely jealous of Joan, who of course is an easy first.”

Max continued to laugh hard-heartedly. “I envy the younger generation,” he observed. “I can’t help it. So scornful, yet so easily caught! And what

says the little god to his offspring's lack of wisdom? Still looking the other way and whistling?"

Olga shook him impatiently. "Nick is just as wise as ever. He has hedged the child round with a bodyguard that poor Reggie is powerless to penetrate. They could be alone together at any hour of the day, yet somehow they never are. If he takes her motoring, one of the children is sure to be in the back seat. If he murmurs any complaint,—'Oh, but why not?' says little Peggy. 'There's plenty of room.' So he gnashes his teeth and consents. Poor boy! He has room for only one just now, and she is sublimely unconscious of it."

"You bet she knows," said Max, with uncharitable shrewdness. "They probably put her on her guard long ago, and if they didn't Joan must have told her."

"My dear, I'm certain she doesn't know," said Olga. "Or if she does, she refuses to take it seriously. She is supremely natural in all her ways."

"That's her modern way of doing things," said Max. "I know these little innocents with their wholesome downright ways. They are the biggest coquettes that have ever existed. She may be playing him with a light hand, but she's playing him all the same."

"Max," said Olga with distinctness, "there are times even now when I almost hate you."

"Bless your little heart!" said Max fondly. "Didn't you know that was just what I was angling for?"

CHAPTER VIII

SPILT MILK

EVERYONE agreed that Nick surpassed himself that night. The arrangements for what was known somewhat sarcastically as "Peggy's coming-out ball" were superbly carried out. Nothing was lacking down to the last detail, and Redlands, mounted on its cliff above the sea, was transformed into a positive fairyland. There was a huge marquee for dancing on the lawn, and every wooded walk that led from it was a mass of fairy-lights.

"I shall never, never forget it," said Peggy, standing with Nick on the steps to watch the illuminations take effect before the arrival of the guests.

"You will see much more brilliant functions than this in the East," said Nick.

"But nothing that will appeal to me half as much," said Peggy.

He put his arm round her. "You're going to have a good time, little girl," he said. "Make no mistake about it! They will all want to *fête* you and make much of you. I know my India. But don't let them spoil you, darling! And don't be too nice to them all, or they'll get asking for more than you can give."

Peggy pressed close to him. "I'll try not to be spoilt," she said.

"That's right," he said lightly. "And don't be scared either! You've got lots of sense if you only remember to use it."

She laughed. "I'm sure I don't know why you think so."

"From observations made," said Nick. "If you always keep as level a head as you have now, I shall never be afraid of you getting into mischief."

"You all talk as if India is such a dangerous country," said Peggy.

"It is for some people," said Nick.

"But not for me?" questioned Peggy.

"I hope not for you, darling," he said gently.

She looked at him with puzzled eyes, but pursued the matter no further.

Joan's arrival on the scene a few seconds later scattered her thoughts. It was impossible to be pensive for long in Joan's presence. She was looking brilliantly pretty and was obviously in the most festive spirits.

"Come along!" she cried, seizing Peggy round the waist. "I'm going to be the first to dance with you anyway. Reggie isn't dressed yet, thank goodness."

There was no resisting her. She almost carried Peggy from the scene, and Reggie, descending a little later, sought for her in vain.

Joan's laughter in the garden finally betrayed their whereabouts, and he went in pursuit, only to find that the elusive Peggy had just freed herself from her friend's tomboy pranks and run back to the house at the arrival of the first car.

He turned back, fuming, expecting nothing but mockery from Joan, but, contrary to his expectations, she came and walked beside him in complete sobriety.

"I'm only playing the fool so as to hide that I'm hating every minute of it even more than you are," she said.

This was a novel aspect of things that had not occurred to Reggie.

"I don't know what you've got to hate it for," he remarked gruffly.

"Oh, don't you?" said Joan. "Well, then, you're an ass, that's all!"

The remark failed somehow to convey offence. It seemed to cover more than it expressed, and almost against his will Reggie was softened.

"Well, but it can't matter so much to you," he said, making no pretence of mistaking her meaning. "After all, this place isn't your home. She doesn't belong to you in the same way."

"Doesn't she just?" said Joan, flashing round on him. "She belongs to me in a way she doesn't belong to anyone else at all. And—after to-morrow—it'll all come to an end and never, never, never be the same again."

There was a sudden shake in her voice with the words which effectively drove all further resentment from Reggie's mind. Till that moment he had been at variance with Joan, regarding her with some reason as an obstacle to

all enjoyment; but from that moment something different crept into their intercourse. The latent antagonism waned.

The instinct to comfort urged him. "I don't know why you say that," he said. "She isn't a girl to change, and she won't forget you. Besides, she isn't going away for ever. She'll come back."

"She won't," said Joan. She stood still in the path and faced him tragically. "She'll go and marry out there. I know she will. And she'll never be the same Peggy again."

"Oh rot!" said Reggie, flinching a little. "She won't marry yet anyhow. She's much too young."

"She won't stay young," said Joan. "And everybody does marry out there. Besides—besides—" She broke off and stood in quivering silence.

"I say," said Reggie, "don't!"

Joan swallowed hard and began to laugh. "I'm not! I think it's silly to cry over spilt milk, don't you? We might just as well be enjoying ourselves."

This piece of philosophy struck even Reggie as sound. He joined in her laugh, though more with the object of encouraging her than for any other reason.

"All right. Let's enjoy ourselves!" he said. "Or pretend to anyhow! It's a ripping night and we may as well make the best of it."

They began to walk back. The lights shone upon Joan with her vivid colouring and rather uncertain smile, and he looked at her with an admiration born of the new kindliness that she had awakened in him.

"You're looking topping," he said.

It was the first compliment he had ever paid her. She stared at him in amazement.

"Good gracious!" she said. "What on earth makes you say that?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. "Because I think it, I suppose."

"How extraordinary!" said Joan.

She hastened her steps as if embarrassed, and in a moment broke into a run. The band had begun to play, and he ascribed her desertion to a natural desire to miss no part of the evening's entertainment. He himself followed at a more leisurely pace, but their brief encounter had in some fashion made matters more tolerable. There was certainly no reason at least why they

should not make the best of it for this one night and enjoy themselves as far as in them lay. It was sporting of Joan to take that attitude, he reflected, though the idea that her coming loss could in any way approach his in magnitude was of course preposterous.

Still, if Joan could be sporting, so could he, and within a very few minutes he had flung himself heart and soul into the evening's entertainment. Let the morrow take care of itself! They would make the best of to-night.

He found it difficult to get near Peggy, but she had already promised him four dances, and secure in these he occupied himself elsewhere. Nick, who had scarcely hoped for much assistance from him, was pleasurably surprised to find him taking a responsible part in securing the success of the evening.

"The pup is actually justifying his existence for once," he murmured to Muriel.

She shook her head at him. "You never have done him justice," she said.

"That's my humility," said Nick, with a laugh at her dubious face. "Afraid I lack the modern parents' complete faith in their own production. He has sulked so whole-heartedly for the past few weeks that I have barely restrained myself from punching his head times without number."

"Nick! That's too bad," she protested. "He has never been sulky with me."

"My darling wife, I have yet to meet anyone who could be," said Nick. "You spoil everybody within reach."

But Muriel still shook her head. "You don't understand. The boy has been miserable."

"He'll soon get over it," said Nick hard-heartedly.

"Yes, he will get over it." Muriel's eyes followed her son with a certain wistfulness. "But you must not blame him for not grinning when he is hurt. We are not all Spartans like you."

He laughed and patted her arm. "Bantams is a more suitable simile. The boy will learn to grin when he is a little older. Are you going to dance with me to-night? I have ordered *The Blue Danube* especially for your pleasure and for the confusion of all mere fox-trotters."

Her eyes glistened in answer. "Yes, Nick. I will dance that with you. Do you think they are all enjoying themselves now?"

He cast a critical glance over the laughing crowd. "Yes, every one of 'em. Even the fair Marguerita seems to have forgotten her approaching doom. Look at her! It might be Daisy herself."

"She has exactly the same power of attraction," Muriel said, with a sigh. "At present, she is quite unconscious of it and only thinks how kind everyone is to her. Dear little girl! Where will it lead her, I wonder?"

"Not into any trouble," Nick answered, with swift conviction. "She has more strength than Daisy ever had,—some of that bull-dog tenacity of Will's has descended to her. Don't be over-anxious about her! She will hold her own."

"I hope so. I do hope so," Muriel said.

From a knot of dancers close to them there rose a girl's merry laugh, and she looked round with a smile.

"Joan! How she is loving it! I have never seen a child with a greater capacity for enjoyment. She is going to be a beauty one of these days."

"Oh yes, she'll play havoc with the best of them," agreed Nick. "But there's more in her than meets the eye, or I am much mistaken. She's a regular rogue is Joan."

"She is an absolute child," Muriel said. "I love her free honest ways."

"Yet not wholly incapable of subtlety if I have read her aright," said Nick.

"Oh, I am sure you are mistaken there," Muriel declared with warmth. "She is as open as the day."

"With reservations," said Nick.

But though, somewhat indignant, she pressed him to explain, he went no further.

Olga came up a moment later and claimed him for a dance, and he departed with her, laughing gaily and inconsequently, leaving his wife to wonder—as she had wondered a good many times before—if he knew what he was talking about.

The evening wore on, and the zest of the dance increased. Both Peggy and Joan danced tirelessly with the total disregard of fatigue possible only to the very young. It would not have occurred to either of them to have paused while breath and partners remained, and certainly they did not lack the latter.

The night was warm and dominated by a full moon that hung in splendour over the sea. Some of the elders walked or rested in the garden that ran along the edge of the cliff, but the enthusiasm for the dance among the younger element was such that Nick was persuaded to prolong the fun by half-an-hour.

It came to an end at last in the chill of the very early morning, and with a clatter of cars and much merriment the guests at length dispersed.

Muriel's arm was round Peggy as they turned from the open door. "You will be so tired, child," she said. "Run along to bed!"

Peggy looked at her with sparkling eyes. "I've loved it," she declared. "I suppose I must go to bed though I don't want to in the least." She turned suddenly and clung to the motherly arm. "Oh, it's horrid to think how soon it will all be over," she said.

"My dear!" said Muriel.

The same thought had been in her own mind though she had not given voice to it. She turned to the stairs, drawing Peggy with her.

"Are you going?" called Joan from the hall below as they began to mount. "Good night!"

She lifted her face to the banisters, and Peggy dropped on her knees and kissed her through the bars.

"Aren't you coming, dear?"

"I'm going to dance one more fandango with Reggie first," laughed Joan, looking as eager and vivid as when the evening had begun.

Muriel hesitated for a moment, then gently drew Peggy on. "We will leave Nick to look after them," she said.

But it so happened that Nick was busy with the musicians, and he did not see the child run out again into the moonlight and, tapping Reggie on the shoulder, flit on before.

Reggie, on the point of turning inwards, needed no second bidding. The night had been a revelation to him so far as Joan was concerned. He followed her now, as a needle follows a magnet, with a bound that caught her ere she had reached the shadowy path that led down to the glen. And in that moment he forgot that Peggy had not remembered to say good night to him, forgot everything but the magic of the night and the warm, pulsing

presence of the girl who had so strangely lured him after weeks of scarcely veiled antagonism.

It was plainly her will that he should reach her, for at his touch on her arm she stood still. The gurgle of the spring that flowed through the glen rose up with a tinkle as of fairy music as they two stood on the verge.

"Let's go down!" said Reggie.

"All right!" said Joan.

She turned, but more soberly, and began to walk down the dim winding path.

He walked beside her in a curious species of hush, feeling almost as if he trod unfamiliar ground.

They were half-way down and within sound of the low murmur of the sea when suddenly Joan spoke, abruptly, with a touch of defiance. "I wonder why you came."

He replied with masculine simplicity. "Mainly because you wanted me to."

She laughed a little at that. "I shouldn't have thought that was a reason that would weigh with you much."

"Well, it does," said Reggie bluntly, and wondered why he said it.

She walked on for a space in silence, then again she stopped. "I thought I was going to hate to-night," she said. "I should have hated it if it hadn't been for you."

"Really?" said Reggie. He paused a second, then he also laughed, openly and boyishly. "Do you know I've been thinking almost exactly the same thing? It was you who made to-night so jolly."

"Was it?" said Joan.

The place in which they stood was deeply shadowed. He could barely see her face, much less her expression. The murmur of the stream mingled with that of the summer sea with a magic sound that had in it the secrets of all the ages.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," said Joan, and she spoke in a lower tone, almost as though she feared to be overheard. "I rather wanted to see if you could. Anyhow—" she hesitated momentarily—"anyhow—it was more or less up to me as I have spoilt most of your pleasure up to now."

"What do you mean?" said Reggie.

She made a small but vehement gesture. "I'm telling you what I mean, or trying to. I've been getting in your way on purpose all this time, just because I didn't want you to get more miserable than you need. I didn't want Peggy to be miserable either, though I think she has really got too much sense. As I said before, I hate crying over spilt milk, though the milk was spilt really before I came. I didn't know till to-night, when you told me I looked decent, that I had it in my power to give you a jolly time, or I'd have begun sooner. But it's no good really now, because—because—" She suddenly gulped and put out a hand as if to save herself from falling. "Oh, I don't want to make a fool of myself," she ended between anger and distress.

Somehow the outflung hand found itself clasped in Reggie's; it was inevitable. He came close to her in deep concern.

"I say, I say, what's the matter? What is it, Joan? Don't be upset, I say!"

She mastered herself with a strong effort. "I'm not. Only—I'm sorry, and I wish I'd told you sooner. You'll never speak to me again I know. Not that I care! Don't think that! Only—I wish I'd told you sooner, that's all."

"But told me what?" said Reggie, bewildered.

She snatched her hand abruptly from him and began to walk down the glen above the tinkling stream.

He followed, not venturing to walk beside her lest he should witness the tears she was evidently struggling to hide.

After a dozen paces or so, she stopped again and faced about with a certain courage. "You must think me quite mad," she said. "I'm not really. I'll tell you now. I've always meant to tell you ever since I realized— But I kept putting it off. Reggie, you knew I had an uncle in the Indian Army, didn't you?"

"Of course!" said Reggie, more puzzled than ever. "Why?"

"I daresay you may remember him," went on Joan recklessly, "though I can't say I do very clearly. Anyhow, he's awfully handsome and all that, and in the old days—long, long ago—when Peggy was a tiny little toddler in India, he and she were great pals. She hasn't seen him since she was seven, but she cared for him more than anyone else in the world then, and she hasn't forgotten him."

"Oh, my hat!" said Reggie, beginning to see light. "Really, Joan, you can't be so silly as to think—"

"No, I don't—I don't!" She interrupted him sharply. "And I'm not silly. I expect he forgot all about her, for he's never been home since. But this year—this Christmas—he was thinking of coming. I heard it weeks ago, before we left school. And I said to myself that it was a shame for him to come back just when she was going out there and wouldn't know a soul except her father—who doesn't care. So after I got home, I got hold of his address,—I knew he was stationed at Ghawalkhand which is close to where Sir William Musgrave is building a viaduct or something—and I just wrote to him and told him so."

"Oh, I see!" said Reggie.

He spoke in an odd tone from which all feeling was carefully excluded. Joan stared at him through the gloom, trying to decipher his mood.

"Do you suppose it will make any difference?" he asked in a moment or two on the same strictly impersonal note.

"I don't know," she said. "It may. He isn't married. There's no special reason for him to come home. He may stay out there to see her out of sheer curiosity. Of course he's years older than she is."

"How old is the fellow?" said Reggie.

"Oh, I suppose he's something over thirty," said Joan vaguely. "Not really old, as men go. My mother is very fond of him, so I thought he must be a good sort."

"I see," said Reggie again.

It was he who took the initiative this time and walked quietly on towards the sea.

Joan watched him for a few seconds; then she humbly followed.

He did not turn his head until he reached the little gate over which Peggy had so lightly vaulted on that merry morning which seemed so long ago now on which she had eluded him. Then he stopped, and resting his arms upon the top rail, looked out to sea. A very faint primrose light was beginning to steal over the quiet waters, herald of the dawn which was yet an hour away. The place was mysterious and still, the soft lapping of the tiny waves upon the strand the only sound.

Joan came and stood beside him in silence. In her young purity she had the look of a being from another world. The moonlight yet lay upon all things, and the earth itself looked different and in some magic fashion

etherealized. It was the wonder hour between the night that was past and the day that was yet to come.

They had been standing there for many seconds when the boy slowly turned his head and looked at the girl beside him.

Her eyes leaped to his on the instant, but she did not speak.

It was he who at last broke the silence, and then it was in a voice little above a whisper.

"Joan," he said, "I'm glad you did it."

She started. She had been braced to meet reproach, but this—somehow this was much harder to bear.

"I did it for her sake," she murmured back rather piteously.

"Yes. I know." His hand found hers again and squeezed it boyishly, reassuringly. "It was jolly decent of you."

"Oh, don't you mind?" gasped Joan.

"No, I don't mind a bit." He spoke with a firmness that carried conviction. "If he's a good sort, as you say, it may make all the difference to her." He paused a moment, then in a lower tone: "I'll tell you this, Joan, because you're such a sport, you'll understand. I'm awfully fond of Peggy, always have been; and I very nearly made a fool of myself over her, but I didn't quite,—partly thanks to you, and partly because I always knew I hadn't a chance. I know I've been a bad-tempered beast these holidays, and I'm sorry. If you're feeling generous, you might say you forgive me."

"Good gracious!" said Joan, genuinely startled. "Me—forgive you!"

"Yes." He smiled at her suddenly. "I like you, Joan. I'd like to make a pal of you if you'll let me. I haven't got any sisters, and when Peggy's gone —"

"Oh, but of course!" said Joan, delighted. "Do let's be pals! I should love it. It'll help me too."

"How decent of you!" said Reggie. "Then that means you've forgiven me, doesn't it?"

"Oh, don't be a donkey!" said Joan. "And I'll write and tell you all about Peggy whenever I hear from her."

"Will you?" he said. "I shall like that. I mean, I should like you to write to me awfully."

"I will then," she promised. "And now look here! It's our last chance of any fun here, and I simply can't go to bed, can you? Could anybody do anything to us if we sneaked back and got into bathing-kits and had a swim?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Reggie. "We'll do it, shall we?"

"Right-ho! We will!" said Joan.

And, "Exactly what I'm proposing to do myself!" said a cheery, cracked voice behind them. "Run along, children, and don't keep me waiting!"

Nick, bare-footed and lightly draped in a bath-sheet, came airily on to the scene with the words, and Reggie and Joan fell apart.

Nick waved the latter away. "Run along, my dear! Go and get out of that finery! It's beginning to look out of place. That's the way!" as, slightly disconcerted but laughing, she took to flight up the path. "Aren't you going too?" He came up to his son, peered at him with glancing eyes, and then abruptly, unexpectedly, pushed his one arm round his shoulders. "Reggie, my boy, I'll tell you something," he said. "Your old dad is no eavesdropper, but he knows a little more than you give him credit for, and there's just one thing he'd like to say to you, if you'll try and bear with him."

"What is it?" said Reggie.

His tone was not encouraging, but it held no affront. The arm that held him suddenly gripped him hard.

"Only this, old chap," said Nick simply. "You're beginning to be a man, and I'm glad."

"That all?" said Reggie.

"That's all," said Nick.

"Oh!" said Reggie. "Thank you."

He stood for a moment, stiff with self-consciousness; then some inner force spurred him to action. He moved within that wiry hold—he was half a head taller than Nick—and impetuously returned the embrace.

"Dear old Dad!" he said, and kissed him.

The next moment he was free and Nick was already on his way to the shore.

"Buck up, Reggie! Buck up!" he called back as he went.

And, “Coming!” cried Reggie. “Coming!” as he sped up to the house to change.

CHAPTER IX

THE SEA OF LIFE

THE steamship *Pioneer* was ready to start. The buzz on her decks was indescribable, a medley of sound above which her siren shrieked its raucous warning.

"Good-bye!" said Peggy Musgrave.

She had been very brave throughout, nor did she flinch now that the last moment had come. It was in fact almost easier than much that had preceded it. She had made the acquaintance of Major and Mrs. Fraser who had undertaken the charge of her, and now she was near to wishing herself gone.

At her own urgent request, Joan had accompanied them to Southampton, and somehow Reggie was of the party also, as Peggy had somehow always known he would be. But no one was making any fuss. Indeed, Joan and Reggie seemed to be vieing with one another as to who could make the worst jokes. Nick had been talking practically up to the last with his friend Bobby Fraser. And Muriel, after a few words with Mrs. Bobby, had taken her quiet stand by Peggy's side to give her a few final hints with a view to securing the utmost comfort possible during the voyage.

The September sun shone brilliantly over all, and the water gleamed in a million sparkles. As the shriek of the siren died away there arose a mixed babel of rather hysterical laughter.

Nick raced up. "You're off, darling! Good-bye!"

There was more in his lightning embrace than words could have uttered though he almost pushed her into Muriel's arms at the same moment. Afterwards, Peggy remembered the whispered blessing which at the time she scarcely heard.

Then came Joan's clinging kiss, and she had an impression that Reggie bestowed one upon the back of her neck simultaneously. And then it was over. They went in a crowd to the gangway close by, and she watched them cross, her heart beating very fast and a sense of strangulation at her throat though she felt no desire to cry.

Again the siren sounded, and she threw a rather distressed glance at it, vaguely resenting the din that seemed to deprive her of the power to think and to realize what was happening. Then there came the throb of an unseen power under her feet, and she knew that the ship was moving.

Realization pierced her then, swift and keen as the thrust of a dagger, so that she almost cried out. The siren ceased its hubbub and she heard no other sound. Every sense seemed to have left her save that of sight. There across a widening rift she saw those dear to her, those who meant home;—Nick with his wrinkled face and baffling grin, Muriel with her earnest loving eyes and smile that tried so hard to be steady, Joan—darling little Joan—shouting words of good speed which never reached her, and Reggie—dear old Reggie—waving his hat to her and laughing.

"What ever shall I do without them?" she whispered, as the first pang of loneliness pierced her quivering heart.

She was wholly unconscious of the presence of anyone else as the great ship drew away from the shore. She might have been standing in a vast, unpeopled desert, viewing a mirage from afar. But for some reason she had to keep waving and waving for as long as the mirage lasted. There was simply nothing else to be done.

The rift became a gulf of sparkling water. The figures on the shore began to merge into other figures, to decrease in size. But still she waved and waved as they were waving, and laughed, quaveringly and rather desperately, because she knew that they were laughing too.

At the last a strange thing happened. Though she had felt no desire to cry a great mist rose and obscured her vision. Blinded and rather giddy, she drew back from the rail and was conscious of tears upon her cheeks. She wiped them away, but she did not look again. She knew that she could not trust her sight any longer. She turned with a vague intention of going below.

Someone lightly touched her arm, and she saw the round kindly face of Bobby Fraser.

"It's a beastly game saying good-bye," he said cheerily. "Let's go and find my wife!"

She went with him, scarcely conscious of direction. She liked the look of him. He had the look of a boy who had never grown up.

After what seemed to her a lengthy journey they came to Mrs. Bobby. She was sitting on a settee in the large saloon, a woman of about thirty with

good features though with somewhat small brown eyes across which the lids were drawn rather tightly.

"Well," she said. "Have you seen the last of them?"

It was not in Peggy's sunny nature to dislike anyone at sight, but there was no denying the fact that Mrs. Bobby did not at the outset make a very favourable impression upon her. She was in fact conscious of a most earnest desire in that moment to run away and hide. Such escape, however, was out of the question.

She could only murmur rather inarticulately, "Yes, they've gone."

"Have you seen your cabin?" said Mrs. Bobby.

"Yes," said Peggy. "Aunt Muriel took me down. It's a very nice one, and it's very kind of you to share it with me."

Mrs. Bobby laughed a little. "Oh, that's none of my doing. You'd better thank my husband for that. He is doubling up with another man so that I can look after you."

"I thought you would rather be with someone you knew," said Bobby kindly.

Peggy felt herself colouring with embarrassment; she hardly knew why. "Oh, wouldn't you rather be together?" she said. "I'm sure I shouldn't mind."

"It's done now," said Mrs. Bobby. "So don't make a fuss! Of course he doesn't care! Why should he?"

Again she uttered her scornful little laugh, and Peggy was distressed by a feeling altogether outside her experience—a very keen sensation that she was not wanted.

There was nothing more to be said, and she turned away rather disconsolately. But the next moment Bobby touched her shoulder.

"Look here! Nick gave me this for you—to bring you luck," he said. "You weren't to look at it till we had started. Good chap—Nick, what?"

He pushed a small packet into her hand, smiled encouragingly upon her, and went away.

"Oh, thank you!" said Peggy.

But he did not turn his head and she had a suspicion that he was not sorry to escape. Mrs. Bobby had taken up a paper, her attitude plainly

indicating that she had no intention of bestowing more attention upon her charge than was strictly necessary.

Peggy gave her a few seconds' quiet consideration, standing there with Nick's packet clasped tight in her hand. She was certainly a handsome woman, albeit her firm lips had something of a downward curve. That characteristic of the eyelids gave a somewhat callous look to her face which yet, in some indefinable fashion, was not without its charm. She was rather like a lynx, Peggy thought, yet could not tell what it was that suggested the idea to her mind. She could imagine that a certain sparkle of fascination was possible in a countenance which in repose rather repelled her.

There were not many people in the saloon, and her interest did not spread any further. She drew a step nearer to Mrs. Bobby.

"I think I shall go to our cabin," she said, "and undo some of my things."

"Do whatever you like!" responded Mrs. Bobby, without looking up. "Only don't spread them all over the place, please! I shall want a little room myself."

Peggy drew away from her again. "I shan't forget that," she said, and went her way, wondering whether Mrs. Bobby were being intentionally unpleasant or if it could be mere habit.

She found the cabin with some difficulty. It was a deck one with a porthole that looked out across a narrow promenade to the blue water. She climbed on to a seat below it and gazed forth for a space over the sparkling ripples. Never in her life before had she felt so forsaken and alone. The friendly woods along the shore seemed to call to her, seemed to reproach her. Why was she leaving them—she who loved them so? A great fear of the unknown came upon her, a dread she was powerless to combat. What was it that lay before her? What were the dangers lurking in the wilderness through which she had to pass? A tremor she could not repress went through her. If only Uncle Nick and Aunt Muriel had been with her—those dear guardians of her childhood—how different it would have been!

But here she checked herself. This was futile, this was repining; almost cowardice indeed. It had been ordained that she should face the future alone, and she would do so without murmuring or shrinking. She would tread the appointed way faithfully and without faltering, and she would not be suffered to stumble or go astray. She would do that which the beloved dream-mother would have desired her to do. She would do her utmost to fill that mother's place with the father who did not want her, and she would leave the rest to the God Who had given it to her to do.

With a great sigh she withdrew her eyes from the enchanting prospect of tree-draped shore and returned to the consciousness of Nick's packet still in her clasp.

Dear Uncle Nick! How like him! She pressed the packet to her quivering lips ere she opened it. Then, sitting on the edge of the bunk, she untied the string that bound its wrapper.

Two envelopes and a small jeweller's box were within. On one of the first was written: "Give this to Will when you see him"; and on the second: "For your own dear little self." She opened it and drew forth a sheet of paper.

> "My darling Peggy," (so ran Nick's message) "Now you are off on your own on the sea of life, and this is to bring you an old friend's love, and to tell you to buck up and be happy! You will find a little native charm in the box which you are to look at if ever you feel tired or downhearted and simply say to yourself, 'I'm going straight on.' There's nothing in the world like it, darling. Don't forget! It's also a good remedy if ever you chance to lose your way. I've tried it and I know. Good-bye and God bless you!—Your loving old Uncle Nick."

She seemed to hear his voice in the words—an echo of himself; and a warmth came about her heart like a sudden gleam of sunshine on a dark day. The sense of being forsaken began to pass.

She was actually smiling as she opened the little box. It contained a tiny replica of a Hindu god in jade strung on a slender gold chain. It was beautifully cut, and the green of the stone held an intensity of colour which she knew to be unusual. It attracted the eye irresistibly, and she sat for a long time, gazing upon it in a trance-like stillness.

Afterwards it seemed to her that she must have wandered into a species of dream, so rapt and so curiously irresponsible were her thoughts. It was as if while she gazed upon that strangely magnetic charm a gate were opened to her and she passed almost unconsciously, certainly by no will of her own, into a new country—a land of glamour and mystery—a world of romance. The dancing reflection of sunlit water on the ceiling of her cabin turned into a rippling golden stream. She had an impression of cypresses and palm-trees and an immensity of sand. Someone was coming towards her, but the light in her eyes—or was it the magic greenness of the carved thing she held?—prevented her seeing clearly what manner of man he was.

Nearer he came and nearer, and she held her breath, wondering within herself if he would pass her by, though deep in her soul she knew that it was because of her that he came.

And now he was close to her, and she made a sharp effort to rid her eyes of the curious green veil that obscured her vision. She failed. Yet she knew that when he reached her he paused and put out a hand to touch her. . . .

Her heart gave a great jerk and she looked up. . . .

All was gone, save the dancing ripple of reflected water on the ceiling of her cabin, and the little green Hindu idol that lay in the hollow of her hand.

She sat for a few seconds as if dazed. Then, under her breath, she spoke.

"Noel! Was it—Noel? Noel the Wonderful!"

The only answer was the swish and roar of the sea along the vessel's side. Her eyes fell and rested upon Nick's letter lying in her lap. A sharp quiver ran through her as she re-read the words: "Now you are off on your own on the sea of life . . ." That was what had happened to her. Her sail was set; and for good or ill she was launched upon it.

PART II

CHAPTER I

MRS. BOBBY

If it had not been for the complete novelty of life on board, Peggy's spirits would have sunk very low during the first few days of the voyage, and this notwithstanding the fact that the weather was superb. Had she been travelling alone, she would have been surprisingly happy; for she found plenty of kindness awaiting her everywhere save in her cabin. But here, for a reason which she was slow to fathom, gloom reigned supreme. Mrs. Bobby very obviously did not like her and was at no pains to conceal the fact. She never addressed her in private except to make some complaint or give utterance to some caustic criticism on her clothes or her behaviour which Peggy was far too inexperienced to parry. No one had ever been deliberately rude to her before, and for some time she could not understand it. Possessing no means of retaliation, she could only endure in tingling silence, but there were moments, and they were not infrequent, when she seethed inwardly with impotent resentment. It was not that there was anything in Mrs. Bobby's treatment to which she could take open exception, but the whole atmosphere was one of contempt and intolerance, though this was a state of affairs that did not extend beyond the narrow confines of the cabin. In the saloon or on deck Mrs. Bobby was full of dash and racy humour. Her *bon mots*, if somewhat tart, were always clever enough to go the round. She was an excellent dancer and she dressed in a fashion that made other women wonder how she did it. With her own sex she was not notably popular though no one deemed her quarrelsome. With men she held her own when present, though how far she maintained her position when absent was open to question. She was never without an attendant swain, but they did not flock around her.

Peggy in her innocence used to wonder how it was that any full-grown males could ever stoop to take any notice of such as she. That they did so constantly and without stint was to her a sign of the amazing kindness of human nature. She was sure that they were all actuated by sympathy for her in her somewhat forlorn state, and she received the by no means small amount of attention that was bestowed upon her with a winning gratitude that was all the greater for the hours of chill disapproval which were always her lot at the beginning and end of every day.

Not till they had been a week at sea did she even begin to suspect the reason for Mrs. Bobby's very evident aversion—an aversion which by that time she had quite unavoidably come to reciprocate. They had passed Gibraltar and were sailing in the Mediterranean in glorious summer weather. The first fancy-dress ball was about to take place and Peggy had gone down early to dress in order to leave the cabin free for her companion later. She had a pretty butterfly costume of Muriel's own devising in blue and silver gauze, and she had just finished adjusting it when Mrs. Bobby entered.

Peggy, standing before the glass, saw her reflected there, saw her sudden start as of dismay, saw her regular features twitch with anger. She turned instinctively to face her and met a scoffing laugh.

"My good child," said Mrs. Bobby, "you can't mean to appear in that extraordinary garment! It's simply all wrong everywhere. Who on earth designed it for you?"

Peggy felt the well-known tingle of indignant embarrassment creep over face and neck. She did not look at herself again in the glass.

"What's the matter with it?" she said, trying to speak with unconcern.

"Matter!" Mrs. Bobby laughed again with scornful mirth. "Well, nothing, if you like to make a figure of fun of yourself. It's ridiculous, provincial, villagey, if you want to know. I wouldn't be seen dead in such a rig-out. But it's your affair, not mine. It'll do for a foil, I suppose."

"How—dare you?" said Peggy suddenly.

The words simply leaped from her. She did not know she had spoken until they were uttered and she was standing, ashamed, quivering, furious, before her tormentor. It was the first time that she had ever given utterance to the bitterness that had taken root within her. And now that she had done so, she knew that she had taken an irrevocable step, and retreat was impossible. It was open war between them, and there was literally nothing

upon which any reconciliation could be based. The realization shocked her. She had never been at open war with anyone before.

Mrs. Bobby was plainly surprised. She stared at her, her eyes narrowed to slits.

"What did you say?" she asked at last.

Peggy did not repeat her words. She could not. Though there was no retreat, she recognized overwhelmingly the enormity of her conduct. Trembling from head to foot, she turned away from the cruel scrutiny of the half-veiled eyes. Had she been allowed to do so, she would have gathered up her belongings and fled, for there was something dreadful to her in the atmosphere. She felt as a child feels that has embarked upon defiance without reckoning the cost, and she had a desperate longing to escape before the menacing consequences drove her beyond all limits.

Mrs. Bobby, however, made escape impossible by setting her back against the door.

"Are you going to repeat what you said?" she asked.

Peggy stood mute, avoiding her ruthless gaze.

"No!" pursued Mrs. Bobby, in clear-cut, disdainful tones that were somehow like a whip-lash deftly administered to bare, shrinking flesh. "I thought not! And now, my dear, you shall listen to something from me. You are the most ill-bred and unattractive girl it has ever been my portion to meet. Your clothes may not be unstylish in themselves, but you have the unfortunate knack of always making them appear so. Your manners are those of the nursery and your boasted education does not include the ordinary usages of polite society. You are *gauche* and *banale* in all that you do and say. You are also very stupid and incapable of learning anything useful. I now find that you are bad-tempered as well and atrociously rude. People on board have been kind to you because they pity you for the circumstances in which you are placed, but for no other reason, let me assure you! When this very unpleasant voyage is over, you will find that no one else will take the trouble to be so. You will find your own level, and you will never rise above it."

She paused. Peggy's face was on fire, but she still kept it averted while she fought for self-control. The deliberation with which the words were uttered gave them weight. She could not ignore them if she would.

She spoke at last in a very low voice. "I do not know why people should pity me. After all, I have my father to go to."

"Your—father!"

The scathing tone brought her round sharply. There was a species of scoffing pity upon Mrs. Bobby's hard face which sent a sudden coldness to her heart.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Half-laughing, but with deadly aim, Mrs. Bobby applied the lash again. "You miserable girl, do you mean to say they haven't told you? I must say that's rather a shame in a way, but perhaps they thought you wouldn't notice."

"What—what do you mean?" stammered Peggy again.

The blazing colour had gone into patches on her face. Her lips were ashen.

"Please will you tell me what you mean?" she said.

Something in her voice or appearance affected Mrs. Bobby. She left her post by the door and squeezed past Peggy to the corner in which her cabin-trunk was stowed.

"Oh, go away, do!" she said pettishly. "I have had more than enough of this, and I don't want anything further to do with you. I shall never speak to you again if I can help it."

"Yes, you will!" Again the words leaped from Peggy without her own volition; had she tried to speak, her voice would probably have failed. She was shaking all over with a nameless agitation. "You will!" she said again, and now she was standing over Mrs. Bobby who had bent to open her trunk. "You will tell me what you mean. You must—you shall—tell me what you mean!"

There was no violence in her utterance, yet Mrs. Bobby straightened herself swiftly as if in self-defence. She looked at Peggy, and saw that every vestige of colour was gone from her face. All its pretty lines were strained, almost distorted.

"My goodness!" said Mrs. Bobby. "You are a bad-tempered child! What on earth is the matter? Why can't you behave yourself if you want to keep out of trouble?"

"Tell me what you meant—about my father!" said the voice within Peggy, the voice which she did not control. Her hands were equally

involuntarily gripping the delicate fabric of the frock she had so lightly donned a bare quarter-of-an-hour before.

"You'll tear that in a minute," observed Mrs. Bobby with more composure. "Not that it would matter much if you did! You needn't stand there threatening me, for you won't gain anything by that. You'd better take my advice and go before you make a bigger fool of yourself."

But still Peggy remained motionless and rigid. "About my father!" her white lips said again.

Mrs. Bobby lost patience and flung all caution to the winds. "Your father! Your father! Why, he's half-witted of course,—has been for years! Everybody knows it. The only thing he is sane about is his work."

"Oh!" said Peggy.

She withdrew herself from Mrs. Bobby's vicinity, moving stiffly, like an automaton, until she reached the door. There she paused, still looking at Mrs. Bobby though with eyes gone glassy, as if they saw something beyond.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, with a kind of instinctive courtesy that was wholly free from sarcasm. "I certainly ought to know."

And with that she opened the door and slipped through, closing it noiselessly behind her.

Mrs. Bobby uttered a short sigh of relief and returned to her cabin-trunk.

"So much for that!" she said. "Now I wonder—what had I better put on to-night? Something more striking than that ridiculous butterfly costume! How maddening if she got a prize!"

CHAPTER II

TRANSFORMATION

A WARM wind was blowing over the sea, and Peggy, standing at the rail, breathed it deeply, as one who had been near to suffocation. She had no recollection of making her way on deck, but she found herself there with relief unspeakable. There was a feeling within her as of raging thirst, a yearning for home that was physical.

"If I could but go back!" she whispered into the darkness. "O God, if I only could!"

There was no one about. Her piteous cry went out into silence, and for a space sheer panic possessed her heart. What was this thing that she had heard? What was the destiny that awaited her?

Then by degrees she began to collect herself, to review the matter with a more normal perception. The information so cruelly imparted was probably mere rumour. It might have very little truth in it. In any case, it was for her to go on and find out for herself. Panic was absurd; she must cast it out with a firm hand. Whatever lay ahead of her must be met bravely. She must not permit herself to be handicapped by fear. There was nothing so crippling or so harmful.

She took herself severely to task, and succeeded in restoring to a large extent her usual equilibrium. What, after all, did those few ill-natured words amount to? It would be ridiculous to take them literally. Probably Mrs. Bobby herself, if challenged, would refuse to vouch for the truth of her statement. But it was certainly not worth while to challenge her, or to let her imagine that she regarded it as anything but a piece of petty spite.

Even if the thing were true—even if it were—of what avail to sift and question now? Her way was clearly marked before her, and there could be no turning back.

"I will go straight on," said Peggy, and lifted her head bravely with the words. "Why, it hasn't even begun to be difficult yet."

She took a turn along the deck, and then, feeling calmer, descended to the saloon.

She was still on the stairs when a voice greeted her from below.

"Hullo!" it said. "Hullo! What fairyland have you dropped from?"

She paused, looking down, and saw a curious creature in a brown costume over a somewhat corpulent body looking up at her.

She recognized him at once as a man in the Guides universally known as Tiggie Turner.

"I say!" he said. "Are you an angel by any chance?"

"No," said Peggy with the utmost simplicity. "I'm just myself dressed up. Why?"

"Why?" said Tiggie Turner. "Because you're just the loveliest thing I've ever seen. That frock is an inspiration. What made you think of it?"

"Oh, do you like it?" said Peggy. "I—I was half-afraid it looked silly."

"Silly!" said Tiggie Turner. He came to the foot of the stairs and frankly gazed up at her. "I hope you don't mind," he said. "But I couldn't take my eyes off you if I tried."

"You'll have to try," said Peggy, beginning to smile a little. "There will be plenty of other people to look at presently."

"Oh, not like you!" he said. "You're divine."

"I'm not," said Peggy. "I'm quite human. What are you supposed to be?"

"I was going to be a sort of Robin Hood," he said. "But now—well, since you are Titania, I am going to be the great god Pan."

She laughed outright at that. "Oh, no, you couldn't! And I'm not Titania. I'm only a specimen of butterfly."

He stood back for her to descend. "Then I vow I'll go and get a net!" he declared.

"Oh, pray don't!" begged Peggy. "I shouldn't like to be asphyxiated and put under a glass at all."

She looked at him with dancing eyes of a wholly unconscious witchery. Tiggie Turner restrained a sudden movement.

"I'd no idea you were so lovely," he said. "You've surpassed yourself tonight—and every one else too! What does Mrs. Bobby say to it? Is she

pleased?"

The quick colour mounted in Peggy's cheeks. "If you're going to be horrid," she said with severity, "I shall go and change—at once."

"You can't change yourself," said Tiggie Turner, "or me either. The deed is done. My eyes are opened. If you danced in sackcloth to-night, I should still spread a net for your feet. How many will you give me?"

Peggy glanced downwards. "I've only got two, and I want them both myself!"

"Not with those floating wings!" protested Tiggie. "No, dash it! This is no time for quibble. How many may I have? Five—six—seven?"

"Oh, stop!" said Peggy. "Let's wait till the time comes! There'll be heaps of others for you to choose from, and better dancers too."

"What do you know about that, you little scrap of gossamer?" said Tiggie Turner. He flung out an arm as she was about to pass him. "Don't you know 'you are all that is lovely and light'? What could anyone want more?"

She evaded him with a fairy-like adroitness that easily defeated his clumsier methods. "Well, we'll wait till the time comes anyway," she threw back as she fled. "There may be more for me to choose from too!"

Which was the first consciously coquettish speech which she had ever uttered! She was even a little ashamed of it, though the small encounter had done her good. It was impossible even for her gay innocence not to realize that Tiggie Turner's admiration was genuine.

"But I mustn't be spoilt," she said to herself resolutely, when she was cooler. "I won't be spoilt! This is only the very, very beginning, and men are always silly on board ship. They've nothing else to do, and it doesn't mean anything whatever."

This was doubtless a perfectly reasonable conclusion, but it did not in any way alter the fact, which was presently very clearly established, that little Peggy Musgrave was the *belle* of the evening and in a fair way to become the reigning favourite of the ship.

There certainly were more for her to choose from when the time came, so many, in fact, that she found it impossible to satisfy everyone and could only display a full card with laughing regret to late comers. Several old campaigners remarked that it was the most sudden and overwhelming triumph that they had ever witnessed.

"Fine feathers!" said Mrs. Bobby sarcastically when she heard it, and she laughed with still more caustic sarcasm when old Mrs. Flatterby, a colonel's wife, congratulated her upon the amazing transformation which her genius for dress had wrought in the girl.

"You must be a regular fairy-godmother. I had no idea she was such a beauty," said Mrs. Flatterby.

"Cinderella wasn't when she changed back to her old clothes," said Mrs. Bobby.

She herself looked striking in the costume of an Italian gipsy, but the effect she made, rich though it was, was in no way comparable to that achieved by Peggy.

Peggy had taken everyone by storm, and on that particular evening at least everyone seemed anxious to fall at her feet. Notwithstanding the weight at her heart, she found it all thoroughly enjoyable. Compliments were showered upon her from all sides, and it was practically a foregone conclusion that the prize for the best costume would be hers.

"And you would win a first prize for beauty too, dear, if one were offered," said Mrs. Flatterby. "I have never seen anyone so like a rose as you."

It would have turned the head of any girl less sensible than Peggy, but though conscious of elation she maintained her balance.

"I don't know why everyone is so kind to-night," she said. "It's awfully decent of them."

But when a little later Tiggie Turner took her up on the promenade deck and in a sheltered corner slipped an arm about her and tried to kiss her, she was furious. She broke from him with the strength of a tiger-cub.

"Captain Turner!" she gasped. "Are you mad? Let me go!"

Tiggie was both grieved and indignant. "I'm awfully sorry," he said. "How was I to know? You shouldn't make yourself so dashed pretty if you don't want to be noticed. I didn't mean to offend you. I thought you'd like it."

His tone was so much like that of a child rebuked unjustly that Peggy's wrath evaporated. She had been taught in her position of responsibility at school to weigh both sides of a question, and his pained resentment was somehow disarming. She recognized that in spite of his amazing behaviour

he had not transgressed any code of his own, and she began to wonder if she had been unreasonable.

"Oh, well, I don't," she said after a moment. "I suppose men are different, and perhaps some women too." (This was a decided concession on Peggy's part dictated by sheer sweetness of nature.) "But I do think it's rather rotten to try and—and kiss anyone without asking first."

"May I kiss you then?" said Tiggie promptly and with great docility.

"No," said Peggy. "Of course not! I can't think why you should want to. It doesn't appeal to me at all."

"I don't appeal to you, you mean," said Tiggie, with a grin. "All right. I've taken my medicine, so you needn't be cross. Your friend Mrs. Bobby is much more charitable. She'd have turned the other cheek at once."

"I don't believe it," said Peggy.

But though she spoke with decision she was conscious of a stirring of doubt at her heart. Perhaps Mrs. Bobby was also one of those different ones whose code she had yet to master! It was a perplexing sort of world. Nick's advice: "Don't let them spoil you, and don't be too nice to them all!" flashed through her mind. He had probably foreseen something of this kind and had desired to put her on her guard. Had she been too nice to Tiggie Turner, she wondered in some bewilderment?

She was rather grateful to him for putting an end to the situation while she stood pondering the matter by proposing a move. "We're wasting a good dance," he said, "and I expect you like dancing better than anything else, don't you? Shall we go down?"

She felt as if she had suddenly become a child again after her brief emancipation. Tiggie Turner evidently regarded her as quite undeveloped, even raw. With a gesture that was unconsciously pathetic she held out her hand to him.

"It isn't going to spoil things, is it? I mean, we can be friends?"

He stared at her for a moment. Obviously this also was contrary to any known rules. Then he seized her hand and wrung it with a heartiness that made her wince.

"Bless your little heart, of course we can!" he said. "I never proposed to be anything else."

“Oh, I know that,” said Peggy, turning scarlet. “I only wanted—only meant—”

“All right. I know what you meant,” said Tiggie Turner good-naturedly.

CHAPTER III

FAIR PLAY

FROM the evening of her triumph onwards Peggy knew quite definitely that Mrs. Bobby was her enemy. It had taken her some time to find out, but once made, the discovery was never to be forgotten. She knew herself to be the object of a venomous jealousy such as she had never before encountered and realized that only by great circumspection could she hope to steer a peaceful course.

Having received the prize amid universal acclamations she determined to slip back into obscurity and take no further part in any gaieties on board. But to her surprise she found this procedure practically impossible to carry out. But no desire of her own she had become so popular that without being ungracious she could not avoid joining in every revel afoot.

"I can't help it," she said apologetically to Bobby Fraser one night. "I do try to keep out of things, or anyhow not to get pushed forward, but I can't help it."

"My dear child, why try?" said Bobby. "Nobody wants you to."

He was quite proud of her success in his genial way, being far too easy-going to bother himself about his wife's point of view. Let everyone enjoy himself while he could, was his maxim; people always gave less trouble when they were happy.

That Peggy was quite the reverse of happy during the hours spent with her cabin-companion was equally no affair of his, even if he suspected it. She was the acknowledged pet of everybody else on board and she couldn't have everything.

To any caustic remark from Mrs. Bobby he invariably turned a deaf ear. It would all be over in another fortnight, so what did it matter?

Peggy began to feel the same thing when Mrs. Bobby's not infrequent tirades descended upon her. She grew a little reckless at times, though she never measured swords with her again. Her revenge took the form of a delicate defiance, rather inferred than actual. She wrapped herself in silence

when alone with her enemy, but in the presence of others she displayed a dainty and finished charm of coquetry which sometimes almost shocked herself.

"Am I getting spoilt?" she would ask herself in alarm, and then reassure herself with, "But it isn't real. I'm only pretending, like everyone else. If I had been really pretty, I must have found out long ago. It will all be over very soon."

And at this point she always turned her thoughts aside. She had no longer any desire to dwell upon the end of her journey. It could not be wrong to enjoy the good things that came her way while they lasted. And everyone, except Mrs. Bobby, was so kind to her. It would be ungracious not to respond.

The ordeal of the Red Sea, always considerable, did not affect her as severely as some. Her healthy young frame stood the strain without difficulty though she rejoiced with the rest when it was left behind.

Among all her friends, somewhat to her surprise, Tiggie Turner had become the chief. He had somehow succeeded in establishing himself in her confidence, and she had no fear that he would ever again give her cause for offence. He took a good deal of trouble to ensure her comfort, and he seemed to be her recognized partner in all amusements. She liked him thoroughly, and was always glad of his company. He was so kind and so pleasingly devoid of all subtleties. She even came to look upon him as a species of protector from those more ardent ones whose admiration was inclined to develop into incessant demands upon her which even her ready energy found rather wearing. Tiggie Turner could always be relied upon to know when she desired peace and to obtain it for her by a simple method of obstruction which eventually drove away the most importunate. On the other hand, though seldom far away, he never sought to monopolize her and she never found his good-natured presence obtrusive.

All sorts of gaieties were organized for the last week at sea, and she discovered herself without effort in the thick of them all. Nothing was complete without "that adorable little Miss Musgrave," as Mrs. Flatterby called her, and her position was too well assured for any gibes from Mrs. Bobby to take effect. Almost in spite of herself, Peggy was beginning to realize her power.

"I had no idea the voyage could be so jolly," she told Tiggie, as she stood on deck with him one evening and watched the sun plunge—a glowing ball of fire—below the distant sky-line.

"It's your own doing," he answered between ponderous puffs at his pipe.

Peggy disagreed with him and said so.

"That's just why," said Tiggie Turner. "You're so fresh and untired of things. You think everyone else is being nice when it's really only you."

"It can't be," said Peggy.

"You bet it is," said Tiggie.

He was looking at her as he spoke, and something in his eyes revived a faint uneasiness within her. She turned a little aside.

"Well, I've enjoyed it all immensely," she said. "And I wish it was going to last longer."

He pulled again at his pipe. "Ah! So do I," he said. "But nothing decent ever lasts."

"I know," said Peggy rather wistfully. "I expect we shall often wish ourselves back on the old *Pioneer*. I'm sure I shall anyway."

"Shall you?" he said. "I wonder why."

She did not answer him. Her thoughts had begun to stray in the direction from which she always turned them back. The future that she dreaded was drawing very near now.

Tiggie Turner took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it speculatively. "I wonder why," he said again.

"I shall miss it all so," said Peggy ingenuously.

"Think you will miss me?" said Tiggie, still intent upon his pipe.

She regarded his rubicund face by the last of the daylight and made honest and friendly reply. "Yes, I'm sure I shall."

He uttered a semi-comic groan. "I was afraid you'd say that," he remarked.

"Didn't you want me to?" said Peggy.

He looked at her again and his eyes were rueful. "I want you to say just what you feel," he said. "Look here, Peggy! Do you think you'll miss me enough to make it worth my while to come and see you some time?"

"Oh, yes!" said Peggy with enthusiasm. "I should love it!"

"Quite sure of that?" he said.

She nodded with emphasis. "Quite—quite sure. But it'll be miles and miles for you to come, I am afraid. I wonder if I ought to let you."

"It isn't a question of letting," said Tiggie with sudden determination. "I'm coming."

Then she saw what she had done and took alarm. "Oh, please!" she said. "I never meant anything like that. Please, Captain Turner, please!"

He smiled at her and pushed his pipe into his mouth again, an action which in some fashion seemed to add to his general air of resolution.

"It's all right," he said. "I understand. You needn't think I'm going to pester you at this stage. I'm not quite such a fool. But I shall turn up one of these days, just for a spree. You wouldn't like to feel you were never going to see me again, now would you?"

"No," said Peggy, surveying him rather doubtfully. "But—"

"That's all right," said Tiggie Turner, with the air of a gambler pocketing his gains. "Don't look so unhappy! There's no harm done. I'm fond of travelling and I shall enjoy looking you up. So that's that! Shall we take a turn?"

She complied, not knowing quite how to deal with the situation, almost wishing that he had been more explicit so that she might have taken more definite action. For of course the idea of Tiggie Turner in all his unromantic plumpness as a suitor was entirely and completely beyond the range of consideration. She wondered if she ought to tell him so, but lacked both courage and effrontery. He had taken so little—and yet so much—for granted. How was it possible to refuse a man before he proposed or even actually announced his intention of doing so? Besides—oh, besides—at the back of her mind there lurked a thought which she knew to be unworthy; he was a link with the old life, and she had so few, so few. If he would only be content to be kind to her for friendship's sake, how precious might his kindness prove!

She wanted to tell him so as they paced the deck together, but somehow the words would not be uttered. He had already put the matter aside, and she felt it would be almost indecent to attempt to renew it. Poor little Peggy, the twentieth-century maiden! She would have known exactly how to behave under ordinary circumstances, but now she floundered in inexperience. Had her need of a friend been less, she knew to her shame that Tiggie would have been dismissed without hesitation. But the desert awaited her, and she could not do it. Besides—besides—he had not even asked her!

There was that much comfort to be derived from the situation, and she tried to make the most of it.

Her manner to Tiggie became much more guarded during the few days that remained, but he seemed serenely unaware of it, continuing to behave as the privileged friend in his own unobtrusive fashion. He was very kind to her, and it was impossible not to realize it or to feel other than friendly towards him in return. But she avoided all approach to intimacy, and curiously he seemed to do the same. She wondered sometimes if perhaps this were a bad sign.

She spent a good deal of anxious thought upon him during that last week, for her desire for fair play was deeply ingrained, but every day that passed made it more and more difficult to re-open the matter, and she finally abandoned the idea. He would have to take his chance. Moreover, he would probably forget her the moment he set foot in India. He himself had said there was no harm done. Surely it was nothing but conceit that made her doubt his assurance!

"It's a good thing the voyage is coming to an end," she told herself severely, "for I'm very nearly as horrid a little beast as Mrs. Bobby thinks I am."

And, notwithstanding an inner voice that violently disagreed with her, she stuck to her point, and astonished Mrs. Bobby later by displaying a meekness under great provocation which even she recognized as almost heroic.

"Turning into a saint now, I suppose!" was her comment.

To which Peggy's only reply was a sigh of deep depression.

"I should give it up if I were you," said Mrs. Bobby with a laugh of irony.

CHAPTER IV

INDIA

INDIA! IT was like waking up out of a long dream to Peggy. She stood and listened to the yelling myriads in the great station while words and phrases of an unknown tongue came crowding back to memory.

"Of course it was just like this!" she said. "I had forgotten."

She took a deep breath and it seemed to her that the very essence of the East, so long forgotten, rushed into her being again and took possession. Very strangely also came the memory of her mother, more vivid in that moment than ever before, a wistful presence that was like a vision calling to her, and something within her rose up in passionate response that brought the hot tears to her eyes, she knew not wherefore.

"It must be because of Daddy," she whispered to herself. "Perhaps—perhaps—she is not happy about him!"

She awoke to the fact that someone was talking to her, and with a curious sense of incongruity she found Tiggie Turner waiting to say good-bye.

His big hand clasped hers hard and close. His broad face looked oddly crumpled though it was smiling. "You'll not forget me?" he said.

"Never!" said Peggy. "Never!" and then wondered, as his smile brightened, whether she had been too enthusiastic.

"Will you give me your address?" he said.

She complied, reflecting that he would certainly obtain it by some means or other.

"And this is mine," said Tiggie, pressing a scrap of paper upon her. "If you are ever in any trouble,—well, you know you've only got to let me know, don't you?"

"Thank you very much," said Peggy, knowing full well that she would never summon him to her aid.

"And I shall look you up before long," he assured her fervently. "Good-bye, Peggy! Good-bye, darling!"

She heard the last word, low-spoken though it was, but somehow he looked so extremely like a child that is just going to burst out crying that she dared not take exception to it. She merely pressed his hand.

"God bless you!" said Tiggie almost inarticulately, as he tore himself away.

"And you too!" said Peggy gravely, as she saw him go.

There was no one to meet her, but she was not agitated on that account. Somehow she had known that it would be so. The journey held no terrors for her, for she seemed to tread ground that became more and more familiar at every step. The screaming horde of natives that swarmed in at the great station did not fill her with either fear or bewilderment. She knew their speech and their ways as only the Indian-born can know, and the intervening years of her life in England were rolled up like a scroll behind her. Deep down in her heart was an excited sense of gladness to be back. All her memories of India were happy ones. The great task-mistress had never touched her with any but the lightest fingers of love.

"I really don't know why I minded coming alone," she said. "It all seems so natural and easy now I am here."

The Frasers were not going to Ghawalkhand till later, and only the first part of the journey could be travelled together. In a way Peggy was glad of this. She did not want any disturbing influence near her on this strange return to the land of her childhood. She wanted to step straight back into the old joyous atmosphere, and she had a strong conviction that it would be far better for her to meet her father alone. Now that the meeting had drawn so near, she no longer dreaded it. She had begun to tell herself that it would be much easier for them to renew their knowledge of each other here than it would have been in England. She could not visualize him as she had succeeded in visualizing her mother, yet she felt assured that in some fashion all would be well. She would know him when they met. Even though no word of greeting reached her or any sign that he was aware of her coming, she would not be discouraged. She was nearing her goal now and ready to face all things with a brave heart.

The parting with the Frasers took place at a junction in the Plains two days' journey from Bombay. She was genuinely sorry to take leave of Bobby, whose kindliness was of a quality guaranteed to stand practically any strain. But between herself and Mrs. Bobby there was no pretence of any

regret. The latter had been careful to make it clear to her that she repudiated all further responsibility regarding her now that they were in India, and in so doing had somehow managed to convey that it would be no great surprise to her at any future period to hear that Peggy was in difficulties. Her opinion, however, carried no weight with Peggy and she scarcely attempted to conceal the fact.

"I am afraid I hate Mrs. Bobby," she had written in a letter to Joan which she posted at Bombay. "She is so repulsively bitter that I can't see how she can be good for anybody, but she may have a reverse side which she keeps for him. Anyhow, he does not seem to mind her, though he may have got to the pitch of endurance where minding is no good."

Bobby's smiling face at her carriage-window as he bade her a final farewell seemed amply to bear out this theory. He appeared blissfully contented with all the world.

He would not listen to any thanks on her part. "My dear girl, we've loved having you with us," he said, "and I hope we shall see lots more of you when we come down to Ghawalkhand. We'll have heaps more fun then."

Fun! The word recurred to Peggy when the train had borne her away. He had spoken genuinely too. She was sure of that.

"How does he ever get any fun out of life, I wonder?" she said to herself. "He must be a genius if he does."

Her thoughts wandered away very soon. She could not feel that the Frasers were, or ever could be, of any overwhelming importance in her life, and now that the brief tyranny was over, it melted into the past almost as if it had not been. She was really free at last, and she still fancied that the fashioning of her life was in her own hands. Later she remembered that first hour of emancipation as a mother remembers her baby's first effort to walk alone.

She was to reach Ghawalkhand that evening, and the prospect filled her with an eager anticipation that blotted out all other feelings. She was longing now to reach her father, to hold him against her heart and comfort him, to know him for her very own.

The long hours of travel seemed interminable. A great part of the journey lay through desert, and the monotony and the heat weighed upon her though it was growing too late in the year for the latter to be very oppressive. She had the carriage to herself. Bobby had seen to that. He had also given her

papers, but she could not bring her mind to concentrate upon them. To be alone in India was beyond her experience, a thing to dwell upon with a kind of awful enjoyment. It was like living in an Arabian Night. There was no knowing what might be awaiting her round the corner.

No knowing indeed! Peggy of the wide blue eyes and sunny smile, borne on the tide of life and manfully striving to guide her little barque aright through seas uncharted! Little did she dream of the time that was coming when she was to yearn with a heart near to breaking for the peaceful haven that lay behind her—that haven of childhood's innocence to which there could be no return!

Slowly the hot afternoon waned, and glimpses of a line of hills in the distance clothed with jungle growth told her that she was nearing her destination. She had never seen Ghawalkhand, but both Nick and Muriel had described it to her, and she knew it for a native state set amidst hills which in England would have been regarded as of some importance. It was among these that her father's work at present lay. He was constructing a series of viaducts across rocky streams and ravines which should carry the railway to a point on the further side of the state, thus linking it with the world beyond. She had heard the road spoken of as a masterpiece of engineering ingenuity, Colonel Flatterby having once gone so far as to remark that it was a job that could never have been given to any but Sir William Musgrave. He had been at work upon it now for nearly two years, and part of the new railway was already in use.

She knew that it started at a place called Samdana in the western extremity of Ghawalkhand, and that here a change of trains would be necessary since the traffic upon it was strictly limited. Bobby Fraser had assured her that she would meet with no difficulty. It was merely a matter of transferring herself and her belongings from one train to another. There was no possibility of going wrong, and she had no anxiety regarding the matter. But it occurred to her as possible—just possible—that her father might come down to the starting-point of his railway to meet her. She knew that Bobby had sent him a wire from Bombay, informing him of their arrival and of the train by which she would travel, so that a very slight calculation would serve to tell him at what hour she might be expected at Samdana.

Would he come? Would he come? She tried not to build upon the chance, yet as the minutes passed and they drew nearer her heart beat hard with suspense. Oh, if only he would be there! It would be proof that she was not entirely unwelcome—a proof which in spite of all determined self-

assurances she was beginning to need. She was growing a little tired, and the spirit of adventure was beginning to wane.

"I expect I want my tea," she said to herself, trying to smile. "If Daddy is at Samdana, I daresay we shall have some there."

They left the desert behind and ran into more fertile country. The hills were drawing near. Again she was conscious of the quickening of her heart. In half-an-hour now—in less—she would be there. She began to count off the minutes with a breathless eagerness, telling herself, half-laughing, that it was the longest half-hour she had ever spent.

Slowly it crawled away, became a quarter, dwindled at last to five minutes, to four, to three, to two,—to one!

She found herself panting in a kind of desperation. "Oh, Daddy, do be there! Do be there!" she breathed.

The sun was sinking, would soon be gone. The rattle and roar of the train filled her senses. She had a feeling of being crushed, crushed ruthlessly, by a weight so immense, so inevitable, that it seemed she must see disaster whichever way she looked. Perhaps for the first time in her life she was afraid, intensely, overwhelmingly afraid. When the train ran into the station at length she sat motionless in her corner for several seconds, feeling too foiled, too paralyzed to stir. Without a single glance she was quite sure that her father had not come. Without any effort of thought she realized the desolation of utter loneliness.

The usual hubbub of native voices arose deafeningly from the platform. She had a confused impression of hurrying figures and dark faces. With a definite effort she commanded herself and looked forth.

As she did so, she suddenly saw an Englishman in a *solar topee* coming towards her, glancing into each carriage as he passed. By what instinct she knew he was searching for her, she never afterwards could tell. Her first glimpse of him was brief and not wholly satisfactory, for the light was behind him and other figures intervened. But from the first moment she never had the faintest doubt that she was the object of his quest.

"Is it Daddy?" she questioned doubtfully as she opened the carriage-door to meet him. "Can it be Daddy? I didn't think he was quite like that."

And then the advancing Englishman drew near, moving with somewhat impatient strides it seemed to her, and she saw very clearly that he was certainly not her father. He had a splendid physique and bore himself with

an air of command. The light was in her eyes and dazzled her, still obscuring his features.

Yet she went a pace or two to meet him, for the certainty that he was in search of her prevailed.

He started at the sight of her, started and halted.

"Are you looking for me?" said Peggy.

His hand went up to his helmet. "By Jove!" he said. "Yes. I believe I am."

And then she knew him—it was like the sudden raising of a curtain letting in a flood of light. She stretched out both hands to him. She was a child again.

"Noel!" she said.

CHAPTER V

NOEL

He gripped those eager hands instantly. Through all the babel around them she heard the well-remembered laugh.

"Hullo, Peg-top! Is it really you? Or has some grown-up young lady dared to borrow your eyes?"

"It is me—it is me!" she cried between tears and smiles. "Can't you see it's me? I knew you directly I saw you close."

"By Jove!" he said again, "Isn't this topping?"

"It was topping of you to come and meet me," she said. "I thought you were on your way home."

"Not much!" he said. "Now what about your baggage? We've got to get into that other train. Where's your bearer?"

"I haven't got a bearer," said Peggy. "I'm quite by myself."

He stared. "What! Not even an *ayah*? Who's supposed to be looking after you?"

"Nobody now," said Peggy. "I parted with the Frasers this morning. I thought—perhaps—Daddy might meet me here."

"He probably missed the train," said Noel. "He's a regular dreamer. Never mind! I'll see to things. I'll just pack you into the other train first."

It occurred to her that his explanation of her father's absence was more charitable than probable, since he had obviously taken the trouble to come and meet her himself. But it was no moment for going into such matters then; she could only yield herself submissively to his management.

He found her a comfortable carriage in the Ghawalkhand train and disappeared into the confusion while she sat in her corner and waited. Her heart was no longer thumping with suspense though it was beating very fast. So they had not missed each other after all! He was here in the flesh—Noel the Wonderful—to greet her. Just the same too, as she had always known he

would be,—the same merry, jesting playfellow she had loved in her babyhood! Again it seemed to her that all the intervening years were gone and she was an irresponsible laughing child once more—Noel's little Peg-top—his own particular pal. It would not greatly have surprised her if he had snatched her up in his arms in that first glad moment of meeting. She could not remember that they had ever met before without his doing so.

At this juncture she began to awake again and felt her cheeks tingling.

"I wonder if he thought me very gushing," she said. "I couldn't possibly help it. But he—he evidently expected to find me quite grown up."

The thought disquieted her somewhat. It was disconcerting to find herself behaving like a child of six years old when she had really reached the advanced age of eighteen. Perhaps he had found it disconcerting too! She wondered.

It was some time before he came to her. The din outside continued unabated. She watched the hurrying crowd of natives with interest. It was like watching a hive of ants. The darkness was falling, and they were beginning to light lamps. Suddenly the one in her carriage went up, and almost in the same moment she heard Noel's voice again.

"I've brought you some tea. Can you open the door?"

The light fell full upon him as she did so, and she saw that which in the dazzle and turmoil outside she had missed. He was older—very much older—than that playfellow of hers who had gone away from her without saying good-bye. He had matured since then, and though the boyish glint still lingered in his eyes, she saw that he was a man.

A throb of embarrassment went through her. She wished ardently that she had not given him so unconventional a greeting. Noel of the old days had been practically her contemporary. But this man was very different. She felt suddenly small and insignificant before him, for he was the most goodly specimen of manhood that she had ever seen. A deep blush of shame covered her as she recognized his magnificence. She felt as if she had hailed a prince with careless good-fellowship.

He got in and sat facing her, and she saw his white teeth gleam in the smile that she knew. He wore a short dark moustache. The old Noel—her Noel—had been clean-shaven.

"It was jolly of you to know me," he said. "Don't hurry over that tea! I won't let them start till you've finished."

She opened her eyes wide, and he laughed.

"Oh, but—" said Peggy.

He waved an autocratic hand. "There is no but in the case. If Sir William Musgrave's daughter is unattended, she is still entitled to the freedom of her father's railway."

Peggy smiled a little. It was nice of him to try to make her feel of some importance. She said so after a moment. "Though of course I know I'm not," she added hastily, lest he should think that she was still seeking to treat him as an equal.

"There you make a great mistake," said Noel Wyndham. "You are quite the most important person in Ghawalkhand at the present moment, and everyone is dying to meet you."

"Except—my father!" said Peggy.

She had not meant to speak of him so soon, but it seemed inevitable. Her words had a wistful ring, but they held no reproach. Her clear eyes looked straight across to the dark ones opposite with something of appeal.

He replied with instant directness. "Don't worry about your father, Peg-top! He's simply wrapped up in his work. But you'll soon bring him to his senses."

She drew a quick little breath. "Captain Wyndham," she said, "I—don't think you must call me Peg-top any longer."

He broke into his sudden, boyish laugh. There were merry lines about the outer corners of his eyes which she liked—good-tempered lines, she called them.

"Oh, but you always let me call you that—except when you were saying your prayers," he said. "You're not going to be so cruel as to make any more restrictions, surely! And why 'Captain Wyndham'? How can I ever be anything but Noel to you?"

Her colour deepened. She lacked the courage to tell him that her old playfellow had become a princely knight to whom she felt a meed of deference was due.

"Won't—people—think it rather odd?" she said with hesitation.

He swept the notion aside. "Not they! Why should they? It seems the simplest thing in the world to me. Well, all right," seeing her look, "if you think people matter. I won't call you Peg-top and you needn't call me Noel

for the first three weeks—unless we are alone. How's that?" He leaned towards her with the words and she felt his eyes scrutinize her—fiery eyes that had always been soft for her sake. "It really is Peg-top, isn't it?" he said coaxingly. "You haven't turned into a high and mighty princess after all these years, have you? You almost look as if you had. I swear I'm half-afraid of you."

She laughed at that. It had been so exactly her own thought with regard to him. Had he read it? Or was he genuine?

"Oh yes, it's really me," she said. "At least, it feels like me, and I'm not a bit high and mighty. Why did you go away without saying good-bye?"

"What an awful question!" said Noel. "Surely you know the answer!"

"Because you forgot," said Peggy promptly.

"Forgot—you!" said Noel.

She was sure now that he was laughing at her, seeing how far he could lead her on, impose upon her credulity. A pang of disappointment went through her, but she held her head high.

"Of course you forgot! I was such a midget—much too small to count. I don't suppose you can even remember now that you didn't."

"That's all you know about it," said Noel. "Drink up your tea! We shall have to get moving soon."

She resisted his obvious attempt to divert her from the subject. She was beginning to feel more at home with him with every minute that passed. "You had forgotten, hadn't you?" she insisted.

"No, I hadn't," said Noel.

"Well, you did forget to say good-bye," she maintained, steadily regarding him as she drank her tea.

"I did not," said Noel.

She set down her cup with an air of triumph. "Then explain!" she said.

"All right," said Noel, without discomfiture. "I didn't say good-bye to you, Peg-top, because I couldn't bear to see you cry."

"Oh!" said Peggy. "Oh! How like you!"

She knew that he had spoken the truth; the absolute simplicity of his statement made that clear. And she was touched as she had not thought she could be,—touched in a fashion that sent the tears to her eyes.

"I do think that was decent of you," she said.

"Don't mention it," said Noel, taking her cup with a flourish. "I am quite decent, I assure you. And I can remember lots of things that you probably forgot long ago."

"I don't believe you can," said Peggy.

He laughed. "I shall start asking my questions next—questions you won't want to answer."

"Why should I mind?" said Peggy.

She asked the question with all the old childish sweetness of innocence in her serious uplifted face. Noel regarded her with a sudden flash in his dark eyes.

"You'd better be careful," he warned. "If you look at me like that, I may forget your advanced age and snatch you up in my arms and kiss you—as I used to. You wouldn't like that now, would you?"

She shook her head but without embarrassment. Was he not Noel the pal as he had always been—as she had sometimes vaguely hoped he always would be?

"I'm afraid I'm too big," she said.

"On the contrary, you are just the right size," declared Noel.

She began to laugh again; somehow he provoked laughter. "Only in your estimation!" she said. "Not in mine—or anyone else's."

"Meaning you'd be angry?" said Noel.

She considered the point for a few seconds, and decided not to answer.

"How prudent!" he said. "Well, I see your point. Perhaps it is a bit early to begin. Just let me know when you're ready, that's all! Sure you won't have any more tea? Then we'll ring up the curtain."

He deposited the remains of her refreshments upon the platform, shouted something unintelligible above the din, got back into the carriage and banged the door.

"I wonder how long it will be," he said, "before I am allowed to hear you say your prayers again."

Was he laughing? She could not decide. "I say them to myself now," she responded seriously.

He nodded. “And are they any of them the same as they used to be? That evening hymn—jolly little verses they were!—do you still say that?”

“No,” said Peggy. “I left that off when I was confirmed.”

“Oh, what a damn’ shame!” he said. “I mean—sorry—but why?”

“I got too old,” explained Peggy, feeling she ought to be severe but for some reason unable to begin.

“Too old! What rot!” said Noel. “I know exactly how old you are. You were—let me see—you were eighteen last March.”

“Fancy your remembering!” said Peggy weakly.

“I remember everything that ever happened with regard to you,” he said.

“Everything?” said Peggy.

“Yes, everything.” He spoke with absolute assurance. “You won’t floor me, however hard you try. I say, may I ask you one thing more? Do you mind?”

“I don’t think so,” said Peggy.

“It’s only this,” he said impulsively. “Have you dropped anything else out of your prayers? I mean any of those other things you used to ask for? It’s infernal cheek of me to ask, I know. But you don’t mind, do you?”

“What do you mean?” said Peggy with red cheeks.

He leaned towards her again confidentially. “I used to be one of your *protégés*. I remember. I wonder if I am still?”

She looked at him. There was no mockery in his eyes. Something stirred within her—a curious kind of motherliness, banishing reserve.

“Of course,” she said simply.

She saw his black brows go up. He sat for a moment or two staring at her with that in his eyes that strangely thrilled her. Then with an abrupt movement that was nevertheless full of a very knightly courtesy, he bent and took her hand and put it to his lips.

“Now I know why I have never been able to forget you,” he said.

CHAPTER VI

A BROKEN MAN

It was dark when the train steamed out of Samdana station. Noel had begun to talk about her father's railway, to tell her a score of things that she had never known. And while he talked she watched him, this bronze-faced square-shouldered Englishman who had taken the place of the laughing youngster she had known twelve years ago. Again she was struck by his magnificence, his fineness of limb and stature, the soldierly alertness of his carriage. He was much quieter of speech than of yore, more assured and self-restrained. Yet she marked in him the old impulsiveness flowing as it were beneath the surface. She could still picture him doing headlong things.

She remembered that he had always been totally unlike Max, but she succeeded in tracing in him a certain resemblance to Joan's mother and his only sister, Chris. He gave her the same impression of abiding youth, of *joie de vivre*, of zest. She realized even then that he must possess a tremendous attraction for all with whom he came in contact. No man of his personality and bearing could fail to do so.

He broke off suddenly in his talk. "What are you thinking of?" he said.

With some confusion she answered him. "I was thinking of Joan's mother—Aunt Chris. I think you are rather like her."

"You'd better call me Uncle Noel then," he said with a laugh.

"Don't be silly!" said Peggy.

He made a gesture that accepted the rebuke. "Well, tell me about them! How are they all? Old Max still going strong? And Nick—good little Nick! What is he like by this time?"

"Like no one else in the world," said Peggy.

"Oh, he always was," laughed Noel. "Go on! Tell me all about them—Chris and everyone! And Olga too! I was awfully smitten with Olga at one time. I wasn't at all keen on her as a sister-in-law."

"Oh, was that it?" said Peggy. "I always used to wonder—" She stopped herself. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Pray don't be!" said Noel. "I got over it long since, I assure you. But let me hear everything! Fire away! I love home news."

She did her best to satisfy him. It was no effort to her to talk of those she loved, and while she talked the sense of India faded again and the familiar English atmosphere seemed to wrap her round. After all, they were far more real to her than this half-forgotten father of hers whom she had so nearly reached.

Noel Wyndham listened with kindling eyes. "By Jove! How I should love to see them all again!" he said.

Peggy paused. "But why don't you?" she said. "Why don't you go home? They are all expecting you. I quite thought you were going home for Christmas."

"Did you?" said Noel. His eyes met hers with a smile. "Not this Christmas, Peg-top! Perhaps next! Who can tell?"

There was something rather enigmatical about him at the moment. She passed on, slightly puzzled.

"Well, they would all love to see you, specially Joan. She can barely remember you."

"Let me see! Joan!" he said, still with that humorous flicker in his eyes. "She is a niece of mine, isn't she? Yes, I should like to meet her. A very particular pal of yours, I gather?"

"Yes, she is," said Peggy, "though I don't think I told you so. She is very pretty and taking—like Aunt Chris. You'd love Joan. Everybody does—except Reggie," she added as an afterthought.

"Reggie? That's Nick's lad, isn't it? How old is Reggie?" questioned Noel. "Your age, isn't he?"

"Oh, much younger than I am really," protested Peggy, colouring a little. "He has just got his commission in the Gunners. It will be very good for him to have something to do. He needed it."

"And why doesn't he love Joan?" pursued Noel. "She is younger than you. She ought to be just the right age for him."

"Oh yes, but she's rather a tease," said Peggy. "She hasn't learnt to humour people yet. She's still at school, you know."

"Have you learnt to humour people?" asked Noel unexpectedly.

Her colour deepened. "One couldn't be unkind to Reggie," she said. "He's much too nice."

"Oh, you're fond of Reggie, are you?" said Noel.

She stiffened slightly at the question. "I'm not silly about him, if that's what you mean," she said with the first approach to dignity that she had shown him. "But of course—naturally—I am fond of him."

"Of course—naturally!" agreed Noel. "I appreciate the distinction, and I trust he does also. They are a dashed nuisance when they don't you know. But I don't suppose you have come across that kind at present. Take a word of advice from an old stager! Don't be too nice to us all!"

Nick's advice over again, but from a very different quarter! Again she thought of Tiggie Turner with a pang of self-reproach. Had she been too nice to him?

The doubt hurt her; she turned from it. "Now I want to ask you something," she said.

"Is it a riddle?" said Noel.

"Well, it is rather," she admitted, "and I've been wanting to ask you for ever so long. How did you know I was coming? Did—Daddy ask you to meet me?"

She uttered the question with considerable hesitation. For some reason she was afraid of the answer. Also, she fancied she saw again that baffling gleam in his eyes which she had noted a few moments earlier—a gleam which made her feel that somehow he had the advantage of her.

He did not answer her with absolute directness; she had known that he would not.

"When you have been out here a little while," he said, "you will discover that information has a way of spreading in a fashion there is no accounting for. Everyone in Ghawalkhand knows you are coming, from 'the rich man in his castle' to 'the poor man at his gate'! I may add that they are all agog about it, and I don't imagine that you will suffer very seriously from loneliness in the near future. I came to meet you on my own, for old times' sake; but it wouldn't have been very surprising if the whole of Ghawalkhand had turned up in a body for the same purpose. We're all very hospitable."

She was looking at him with puzzled eyes. Why did she feel as if he were deceiving her in some way? It was impossible to say, yet the feeling was undoubtedly there.

"What's the matter?" said Noel.

She could not tell him. With a conscious effort she approached the more intimate subject of her father. "Will you please tell me a little about Daddy? Is he very hard at work?"

"Very," said Noel.

He had been ready enough to talk of the railway and all the engineering achievements it involved, but she saw in a moment that on this more personal matter he was not at his ease. The discovery sent a sick feeling of uncertainty through her, but she would not shrink now. The time had come for her to see things as they were.

"You don't want to tell me," she said, "but I've got to know, haven't I? What is he like? I haven't seen him for so long, not since my mother died."

"Ah!" Noel said, as one catching at a straw. "I'm afraid he never quite got over that."

"What do you mean by that?" said Peggy almost pleadingly. "It would be so very kind of you to tell me, if you only would."

Noel frowned a little. "It's really very difficult," he said. "There is actually so little to tell. Poor old Sir William is such a hermit that no one knows exactly how he lives. People talk of course. There is always talk wherever you go. But—"

"What do they say, please?" said Peggy.

He met her earnest eyes with a great kindness in his own. "I really can't repeat all the rot I've heard," he said. "I am afraid there is no doubt that he is slightly peculiar, melancholy. But he keeps his brain for his work, which is more than can be said for a good many. He is an absolute genius in that line, as practically anyone would admit. You will say so yourself when you see this railway of his. It's a superb piece of work."

"You're getting away from the point," said Peggy in a very small voice. "If you don't care to tell me what you have heard, you might at least tell me what you yourself think. What is the matter with him? Is it softening of the brain? Is he—is he—half-witted?"

She uttered the word quiveringly, almost in a whisper, but her eyes remained bravely uplifted, as though they would fain impart the courage to him to tell her the plain, unvarnished truth.

"It would be very much better for me to know," she said, as he still hesitated. "It really would."

He gave in suddenly, with a depth of compassion that she but vaguely understood. "Oh, you poor little girl!" he said. "They oughtn't to have let you come. It was a damned shame. Someone—Nick—ought to have come with you!"

"He couldn't," said Peggy. "But go on!"

His hand found hers and held it. "He isn't sane, Peg-top. Everybody knows it. He isn't dangerous. I don't mean that. But he's just a broken man. Only the extraordinary part is that he keeps on—and works as no normal man could possibly work. They say he never sleeps. I don't know if it's true or not. No, of course it isn't true. The natives are all afraid of him. They think he's got a devil inside him; all except one faithful old dog—his bearer Sammy who worships him as a god and never leaves him. He has a bungalow beyond the city, but as often as not he spends his nights in a mud hut up the hill where the railway is being built. He is just finishing a wonderful viaduct—like nothing else in India, an absolute masterpiece of genius; but that part of his brain is all that seems to function. The rest of him is gone."

"I see," said Peggy. She swallowed hard once or twice. Her fingers were clinging to Noel's hand as they had clung in childhood. "He may—perhaps he will—come back," she murmured rather piteously.

Noel said nothing.

"Has no doctor ever seen him?" she pursued, after a moment.

He shook his head. "He won't be interfered with, and there is no one with sufficient influence to persuade him."

"Couldn't you?" said Peggy.

"No." He spoke regretfully. "He doesn't encourage fellows like me. I tried to get in with him at one time, but I failed. There is only one man he has any actual personal dealings with besides the natives, and that is his assistant Forbes. I detest Forbes myself, but I have nothing tangible against him. I don't trust him, that's all."

He stopped.

“Thank you,” said Peggy. “It was good of you to tell me.”

“It was infernally difficult,” said Noel.

“But it was better—kinder—than letting me find out,” she said. “I’m glad you didn’t do that.”

“Well, I meant to tell you,” said Noel. “But my courage gave out. You’re so young.”

“I’m growing up,” said Peggy with a wise little shake of the head.

He squeezed her hand and released it. “Oh, you’ll do that fast enough here. Everybody will show you how. But don’t let them if you can help it! You’re nicer as you are.”

She smiled rather wistfully. “I simply can’t believe that it is less than three months since I left school,” she said.

“Can’t you?” said Noel. “I can.”

She passed on with a sigh. “Do you think he realizes that I am coming?”

“I believe he has done so,” Noel said. “But he forgets. I rode up there this morning to remind him, but he was too hard at work to pay any attention. He simply lives for his work.”

“How he must have suffered!” murmured Peggy.

CHAPTER VII

THE WORKER

Sir William Musgrave sat at work in his bungalow. To say that he lived for his work was to express the matter very mildly. Work was to him what drink is to a man with an unquenchable thirst. He worked without cessation, as if nothing else mattered or ever existed. And it was not for reward or results that he worked, but simply because of the driving force within him that would not let him rest. Everyone who had no connection with work was a mere interruption, either to be ignored or got rid of as soon as possible. He held no intercourse with the officers of the station. They were loafers and obstacles to work. He resented any stumbling-block to concentration. The fact that he was dubbed "Mad Musgrave" by them was one to be treated with irony—the sort of nickname to be expected from scatterbrains. He had no vision to inspire him, no end to attain. Work was his fetish, that was all. Once it had been his salvation, but it had turned into an insatiable monster from which there was no escape. The whole world contained nothing else.

Under the lamp that presided over his desk he was making intricate mathematical calculations. At his elbow was a large blue plan of his viaduct now nearing completion. It was a splendid conception, executed by a master brain. To any other man it would have been a thing to glory in; to this man it was only—work. It had got to be done, and he alone could do it. He was not fretted by responsibility, however. He had no doubts as to his power to deal with it. To go on and on and forever on, that was the burden laid upon him, and he shouldered it perpetually.

He had grown old in the doing of it. His back was bent, as though for long years it had carried too heavy a load. His hair was grey, and his brow deeply furrowed. He had the look of an aged man though his eyes were still clear and his hand steady.

It travelled over the paper with unchanging assurance. He never lifted his eyes or consulted the plan beside him. For hours he would sit thus, without changing his position. When he worked, the passage of time was nothing to him. He would eat when his servant brought him food, but had it

not been brought he would have fasted without knowing it. He was quite unaware of what he ate. Everything tasted the same, or perhaps did not taste at all. The only exercise he took was his daily ride to inspect the viaduct and the works beyond. He was never seen in the cantonments or anywhere near the race-course. They called him "The Hermit" and he well deserved the name.

The night was warm, but the oppressive heat was over. Several bat-like moths were flapping about the bare room, and there was a heavy hum of insects in the air. Nothing disturbed or hindered him. No visitor would penetrate his solitude. The far-off notes of a bugle seemed but to emphasize the surrounding quiet.

In an adjoining room his servant moved softly. Presently he would glide in with a tray which he would set down by his master's side, and the worker would eat while he worked, scarcely knowing that he did so.

The bugle ceased to sound and the silence which the singing hum of the insects could not break closed round again. It was the silence of the desert that crept up the hill at night.

Again, after the passage of minutes the distance gave forth a sound, a faint throbbing that gradually increased to a murmur which in its turn swelled to the unmistakable roar of an engine climbing a steep gradient.

It was a sound that penetrated the worker's consciousness. For a moment his hand paused and a certain tightening of the muscles betrayed the fact that his attention had been aroused. But the moment passed, and his hand moved on. He did not raise his head.

The clamour ceased while still some distance away, and again the silence came, stealthily, like a spirit,—taking possession. Under the lamp the grey-haired man toiled on, neither hastening nor slackening, but never ceasing, never pausing for an instant's ease. The darkness beyond the verandah was like a pall.

Nearly half-an-hour passed away. The time for the evening meal was drawing near. A small wind had sprung up and was making a murmur in the trees and shrubs that surrounded the bungalow. It did not seem to enter the room where the worker sat, but wafted to and fro with a lost and eerie moaning as though it fain would enter but could not. Through the deep night-silence there rose the far howl of a jackal.

Suddenly there came a more definite sound close at hand,—the tread of feet upon the dark verandah.

The worker heard and slightly changed his position, but did not cease to work.

"Is that you, Forbes?" he said, without turning his head.

There was no reply. The footsteps ceased on the threshold of the open window. The man within continued his task as if he had forgotten their approach.

Nevertheless, after a few moments, he spoke again with a kind of weary patience. "Will you go away, please? I am designing a tunnel."

There was no reply, no sound of any sort save that of the wandering, unhappy wind in the trees of the compound.

For a space the grey man at the desk worked on, then very gradually, as though some motive power in him were beginning to fail, his hand travelled more slowly till at length it stopped.

He spoke again, very softly, still without turning his head. "Is that you, Daisy? Come in, darling! I am waiting for you."

Again there was no answer, but there was a fluttering movement as though the desert spirit were on the point of entering.

He lifted his head, listening, with eyes half-closed. "Won't you come in, dear?" he said. "I will do all I can—to make you happy."

The movement ceased. The wind moaned on. Again there came that far, lonely cry of the jackal.

The man in the chair uttered a long, long sigh, and turned back to his work. "Ah well!" he said.

It was the Prisoner of the Bastille over again, returning to his cobbling when his vision of a long lost love had failed him.

That was the thought that ran through Peggy's brain as she stood, bareheaded so that he should know her instantly when he turned, and looked in upon him.

She had meant to speak in answer, but her throat felt locked. Far down in the depths of her being there was a weight of tears which she dreaded to set free. It was better to stand there in silence than to break down before this lonely man. He would turn soon—surely he would turn soon!—and see her.

Several seconds throbbed away. She stood in indecision. How should she let him know that she was there? His pen still moved over the paper, but

with less regularity, as though the interruption had disturbed the mechanical process by which it worked. Once or twice it halted, jerking on again spasmodically as though the motive power were at fault. Then gradually, as the silence lengthened, the old steady aptitude seemed to reestablish itself. He worked as before.

Two or three long minutes passed, and a cold feeling that was almost despair began to creep over Peggy. What could she do? The thought of breaking in upon him suddenly was somehow intolerable. She did not know him well enough for that. Hardly did she know him at all—this gaunt man with his bent shoulders and silvered hair. It was not the active father with the kindly smile whom she remembered; and yet there was something about him—something about him—to which she vaguely felt she could claim kinship—a familiar touch in the line of his half-averted face—a look she knew. Though memory failed her, she realized that she had seen him at work before.

The coldness grew upon her. She wished she had suffered Noel to accompany her. He could at least have broken this awful silence. But now it seemed hopeless—as if it must continue indefinitely.

She had almost decided that further waiting was useless and that it would be wiser to withdraw and perhaps get a message conveyed to Noel when there came a sound. The door of the bare room opened, and a bare-footed native servant clad in snowy white entered, bearing a tray. He was an elderly man with a watchful, somewhat apprehensive look. Drawing near to his master, he murmured something, and set the tray upon a small table which he pulled to his side.

The worker said nothing. A faint frown crossed his face as though he resented the interruption but recognized it as inevitable.

The man arranged one or two things on the tray and prepared to withdraw. But, as he straightened himself, his look went to the window, and in a moment a glare of sheer animal terror leaped into his eyes. He uttered a curious sound and went backwards, staring wildly. The worker looked up.

The man had nearly reached the door. He made a gesture, indicating the window.

Again the worker spoke rather monotonously. “I know. I know. She was there before. Don’t—frighten her away, Sammy! She doesn’t often come.”

Sammy came up against the door, incoherently muttering, his dilated gaze still fixed upon the apparition at the window.

"Can you still see her?" said the worker; he passed his hand across his eyes with a gesture of exceeding weariness. "I wish I could, but the vision is not for me."

The Indian raised a trembling hand, pointing. "*Mem-sahib!*" he said. "*Mem-sahib!* See, *Sahib*! She waits!"

The worker turned slowly in his chair with the heavy movements of an old man. His eyes, bloodshot with too constant use and concentration, travelled to the window. He opened his mouth to speak, but a sudden thrill went through him, stiffening all his muscles, and no words came. He sat like one caught by an electric current, motionless, speechless, rigid.

To Peggy, standing bareheaded with the light full upon her, those wide eyes had a look of unspeakable hunger that went straight to her heart. For a moment or two she waited for him to speak; then, as it seemed he could not, she moved forward over the threshold.

"May I come in?" she said.

He tried to answer, but failed. She saw his throat begin to work. Inspiration came to her. She made a sign of dismissal to the native who stood cringing with terror at the door—a sign which he was swift to obey. Then, without any further hesitation, she went to the man in the chair and knelt down by his side.

"Daddy," she said, "it's me! Don't you know me?"

He made a jerky movement. She saw that his lips were trembling. He put his hand to his chin as if to steady himself.

His voice came at last, hollow-sounding, uncertain. "Yes, dear, yes. I know you. It's a very long while—isn't it?—since you came."

She laid her hand upon his knee. "It's me, Daddy," she said, striving to speak with great emphasis despite the hard beating of her heart. "It's Peggy. Don't you remember Peggy?"

A clouded, painful look came into his eyes. "Peggy?" he said. "Peggy? Yes, I remember her. She is our little girl. She is quite safe, dear. I gave her to Nick."

Peggy was again conscious of that weight of tears within her. Her throat ached with the desire to shed them, but she kept them back. "Daddy dear, I am Peggy—your own Peggy. You haven't seen me for twelve years, and I've grown up. And now I've come to you."

He regarded her doubtfully, his hand still at his chin. Then, "Twelve years!" he repeated slowly. "It can't be—twelve years."

"It is!" she assured him tremulously. "It is twelve years. Had you forgotten that I was coming?"

He continued to gaze at her with a pathetic lack of conviction. "It couldn't be Peggy," he said at last. "You—you are Daisy, as—as you used to be when first I knew you, before—before your hair went white. Such beautiful golden hair!" He made a movement as though to touch it, but checked himself. "No, I mustn't do that. She will go if I do,—fade into thin air—and not come back again for another twelve years perhaps. Are you sure it is twelve years, dear? Have you been very far away all that time?"

"Daddy—Daddy!" Desperately she answered him, and as she spoke she gripped his arms with all her strength, though their thinness sent a shock through her. "It isn't Mummy! Can't you see it isn't Mummy? It is Peggy—her Peggy and yours. Won't you believe me? Can't you see—can't you feel—that I am flesh and blood? Nick has sent me to you. Don't you remember? You had his letter. You wrote in answer. You must have had mine too, though you didn't answer that."

"Is Nick here?" he said, and suddenly she was aware of a change in him; his voice had a more rational sound.

"No," she answered. "He couldn't come. I wish he had been able to. He would have made you understand. But I have brought you a letter from him. Will you read it? It may help."

She drew it from the pocket of her coat and gave it to him.

He took it, but he did not remove his eyes from her face. His look also had changed; it held a deep searching as though he fain would solve the problem for himself.

"You tell me you are Peggy," he said at last.

She faced him steadily, with blue eyes that never flinched. "I am your daughter Peggy," she said. "I have come out here from England to be with you."

He uttered a groan. "To be with me, child! You had better have stayed where you were."

"Don't you want me?" said Peggy, with brave eyes still uplifted. "Shall I go away again? I will—if you wish it."

"No, no!" he said. "No, no! Don't go—if you can help it! It's only a dream, I know. But stay with me—whoever you are—stay as long as you can!"

A sense of desperation came upon her. She stood up. "You're not very kind to me, Daddy," she said. "I think—Mummy—would be very disappointed if she knew."

"What?" he said. "Doesn't she know then?"

She stood before him with clasped hands. He looked up at her, and she noted afresh with an aching heart the utter weariness of his face.

"I didn't mean to be unkind," he said pathetically. "I'm afraid I'm rather like that chap in the Bible. I've been driven from among men for so long, that I've almost forgotten what humanity means."

She bent towards him in sudden compassion, her hand upon his shoulder. Her eyes were full of the tears which till now she had restrained. "Oh, poor Daddy!" she said. "What you have suffered!"

His hand came up to hers and held it; it was his first voluntary movement. "We—won't talk of it," he said somewhat haltingly. "One—can't, you know. There's nothing for it but work. It—somehow—deadens things. It's better not to feel at all than to suffer—agony."

She bent lower over him. Her whole heart yearned to him in that moment. "You shall never suffer again if I can help it," she said. Her arms went round him with the words. "Listen! I am going to stay with you—take care of you—love you! You'll try and love me too, won't you? For I am your own Peggy."

Her tears were falling now, wetting his face to which she had pressed her own. The warmth and tenderness of her were such as his withered life had wellnigh ceased to remember.

They awoke him from his lethargy. They thrilled to his inmost soul. And suddenly his pulses began to beat with a new vitality, like the pulses of a half-frozen man drawing near to the glow of a fire.

He reached up abruptly and drew her down to him. "Child, don't cry—don't cry!" he said.

She went into his arms like a nestling bird. Her own were clinging closely round his neck.

"It's so dreadful not to be wanted," she whispered forlornly.

He held her to him. “Never say that again!” he said. “Never think it! I know you now—my little Peggy—I tell you, I know you now. They told me you were coming, but—somehow—I never thought you would. God bless you for coming, my own little girl!”

His voice shook and ceased. He put up a trembling hand and softly stroked her hair.

She turned her face upwards in a moment with child-like confidence, won by that simple action. And as she kissed him she saw that his eyes also were heavy with tears.

She clasped him closer. “Oh, Daddy,” she said. “I’m so glad I came.”

His lips were quivering, but he tried to smile. “God bless you!” he said again. “God bless you!”

CHAPTER VIII

FORBES

PEGGY'S thoughts often dwelt in after days upon the hours that followed that reunion with her father, but she never spoke of them to any. There was something deeply sacred to her in the gradual revitalizing of a broken heart that had almost ceased to feel. Curiously, though her own young life had scarcely known the meaning of pain, she understood with poignant completeness the suffering which had preceded that terrible atrophy of the senses. She did not need to be told that where a weaker mind would have taken refuge in easier and possibly more potent remedies, this man had forced himself into a slavery to work, treating it as an anodyne until it dominated him physically and mentally.

He told her nothing of the life he had led since the light had gone out of his world, nothing of the awful groping of the spirit left behind, nothing of the anguish of bereavement. He could not have told her had he tried; but she knew it all without, saw it in every action, heard it in every tone. This was a man who had laid the whole of his being at the feet of the woman he loved, and her passing had left him shattered.

Through the grief which had utterly overwhelmed him, blasting his whole existence, there came to Peggy glimpses of the mother she so vaguely remembered, touches of the lightness which he had adored, recollections of the dainty personality that had filled him with rapture. Sometimes it even seemed as if the echo of her laughter floated down the years, or was it that the music so dear to him was reproduced within herself, a hidden gift of which she had never dreamed?

Impossible to say! Yet she was aware of a strange influence at work. For he would start and listen when she spoke, or sit and gaze upon her when she was silent, as though it were enough for him to behold again some resemblance to those beloved features which had meant more than all the world to him.

"It isn't really me he loves," she told herself wistfully. "It is only the bit of Mummy in me that counts."

But of his devotion there was no question. He roused himself to provide for her comfort. He procured servants for her; he literally showered money upon her.

"Buy everything you've been used to—everything you want!" he begged her in his pathetic blundering fashion. "Don't bother to ask for anything! Just get it!"

Straight from school as she was, she was slightly bewildered at first; but she had never been lacking in commonsense and she soon gathered up the reins, recognizing thankfully "that the bit of Mummy" in her was of a practical and capable order. Fortune favoured her also in bestowing upon her an *ayah* of somewhat unusual ability who had served English families for many years, and with her own childish memories of the land of her birth Peggy was soon fully able to conduct her own affairs with some credit.

Mirwani, the *ayah*, regarded her with the utmost deference. She seemed to know everything from the inside as few *mems* came to know in the passage of years, and a certain naïve hauteur which had characterized her in babyhood came back to her now and kept all natives adroitly and firmly at a distance. She seldom praised Mirwani, but her blame was delicately pointed and never missed the mark. Therefore Mirwani honoured her and took pleasure in serving her. The Miss-*sahib* was of those who knew.

Sammy, her father's faithful old bearer, who had procured Mirwani honoured her also, but there was a considerable blend of awe in his respect. For he had known her mother—the butterfly creature who had been the ecstasy—and the agony—of his master's life, and he saw in her that which Sir William saw, a being in whom it seemed that the dead and the living were merged. Years before, he had seen the child depart with her mother for England, but in Peggy's person it was the mother and not the child who had returned. The dead woman lived again within her, and like his master he watched the signs.

At Peggy's own request, Noel was not to come and see how she fared until the third day after her arrival.

"I want to shake down by myself," she had told him. "I can let you know if things don't go right."

That he would present himself on that third day she was quite convinced, and the cheery hoot of a motor-horn in front of the bungalow as soon as *tiffin* was over sent an eager look of anticipation to her eyes. She had seen nothing of Ghawalkhand so far, since all her father's interests were centred in the

opposite direction above the city where his viaduct was in process of construction and where lay the scene of his projected tunnel.

These he had taken her with pathetic enthusiasm to see, and she had in fact been warmly interested, but when it transpired that he planned as a matter of course that she should accompany him twice if not thrice every day upon his visits up the valley, her ardour began to wane a little. She realized that much as she admired his work and strongly as the rugged hill country appealed to her sense of the beautiful, she lacked the only thing which in her father's eyes were worth while—the brain of an engineer.

She had begun to wonder rather anxiously how soon he would discover it and be disappointed, for she was too essentially honest to assume an aptitude which she did not possess, and the doubt was present in her mind when the note of the horn introduced a welcome diversion and she turned towards the window that led out on to the verandah to greet the new-comer.

The first sound of his step, however, brought her disappointment. She knew in a moment that the visitor was other than Noel. It had a species of pomposity wholly alien to him.

Her father, who was leaning over a plan that he had spread upon the table, looked up with a hint of animation.

"Ah! Forbes!" he said.

A man came into view with his hands in his pockets and a cigar between his lips. He was of medium height and had a bullet head set somewhat far back between powerful shoulders. His skin was dark, and his eyes were extraordinarily black and vivid. They came straight to Peggy as though drawn by some magnetic attraction. He looked hard at her as he entered, but his features which were slightly coarse showed no variation of expression. He addressed her father almost without looking at him.

"Good afternoon, Sir William! I've just got back. Anything doing?"

His voice had a rasp in it which to Peggy's ear lacked refinement. His eyes continued to study her with an attention which she found distinctly unpleasing. Her father, however, noticed nothing.

"I am very glad you are back," he said. "It is difficult to be in several places at once. Now we can get down to it. I was just going over this tunnel business again. I think the blasting will have to start here."

He indicated a point on the map before him. His assistant came up to the table, moving with a loose sort of swagger, and glanced down. It seemed to

Peggy that in spite of it his attention was still upon her.

"Oh, I see," he said carelessly. "That would be better decided on the spot, wouldn't it? Have you taken another assistant in my absence, may I ask?"

Sir William looked up again. "Another assistant! What do you mean?"

Forbes laughed a little. To Peggy his laugh had a jarring sound. She knew instinctively why Noel did not like this man.

"Some change in your establishment seems to have taken place since I left," he said.

Sir William's look passed to Peggy. "You mean—my daughter," he said, and hesitated as if momentarily bewildered. "Didn't you know that she was coming?"

Forbes held out his hand to Peggy. "I am charmed to make your acquaintance," he said. "Yes, I had heard of your expected advent. My wife is very anxious to meet you."

She gave him her hand with a conscious feeling of reluctance. The freedom of his action displeased her, yet she felt it was unreasonable to be displeased by such a trifle.

"Do you live near here?" she asked.

"Not far away," he said. "I might run you down in my car when the inspection is over. Now, Sir William! At your service! I presume the new assistant is coming too?"

"Of course she is coming too!" said Sir William, ere Peggy could reply. "She is keenly interested in it all. Are you ready, dear? Shall we go?"

Peggy looked and felt desperate for a second, then she made a bold plunge. "If you don't mind, Daddy, I'll stay behind. I have several things to do. Let me come next time if I may!"

He regarded her with instant solicitude. "You are tired," he said. "I ought to have thought of it. You must have a rest. You go on, Forbes! I will come up later."

"Oh, please!" Peggy said in distress. "I wouldn't have you stay on my account for anything. No, really, Daddy! I mean that. You go! I shall be perfectly all right. I've got letters and things to see to. I shall really enjoy an afternoon to myself if you would let me."

He still looked uneasy. “I don’t like leaving you,” he said. “Something—might happen. No, I’d rather stay. I have plenty to do on paper. This tunnel scheme will keep me busy in the mathematical line for some time to come.”

She went to him and twined her arm in his. “Daddy, please, I want you to go. You can’t help me with my jobs any more than I can help you with yours. It’s better for us to be independent. Don’t you think so? You’ll find me still here when you get back for tea.”

She heard Forbes laugh again as though he detected a joke somewhere behind her words; she greatly disliked his laugh, but she paid no heed to it. Her whole energy just then was occupied by the effort to persuade her father into a reasonable course of action. His eyes had a hurt, almost distrustful look, as though he were loth to let her out of his sight.

“You know, dear, you can’t be in several places at once,” she reasoned firmly. “You’ve just said so. And I can’t always come with you when you go round to inspect. Do, please, not worry any more about me, but go and do your work, and we will have a happy evening together when you come back.”

It was almost as if she spoke to a child. Already it had come to that; for he followed her about as though wholly lacking in initiative save when the call of his work absorbed him. Like a child now he answered her with protest.

“I don’t like leaving you. I don’t want to leave you.”

Again she heard a laugh barely suppressed from Forbes. Sir William heard it also, and to her surprise he turned with sudden quiet dignity.

“I asked you to go on without me, Forbes,” he said.

Forbes gave a slight start. The calm sentence was evidently unexpected by him also.

“Oh, well, sir,” he said, blundering slightly, “I didn’t—exactly—like to take you at your word.”

“I should very much prefer you to do so,” said Sir William.

Forbes swung on his heel. There seemed to Peggy to be something offensive in all his movements.

“Most certainly, if you wish it!” he said, and went swinging out on to the verandah.

They stood in silence listening, while he started up his car and rattled away. Then, with the same quietness, Sir William spoke. “Now, my dear, I will do whatever you like.”

She looked up at him with a troubled face. “I’ll come of course if you want me,” she said. “But I’m afraid I don’t understand your engineering problems. And I think Noel will probably come some time this afternoon, and I shouldn’t like to miss him.”

“Noel?” he questioned, as though he had never heard the name before.

“You know, dear,” she explained gently. “I told you about him. He is Uncle Max’s younger brother, and he came to meet me when I arrived. You remember Captain Wyndham, don’t you?”

He frowned a little. “Oh yes,—yes of course. Daisy used to be fond of him as a lad. She liked him better than Max, I remember. He used to be kind to our little Peggy—to you, dear.”

He corrected himself in his pathetic fashion. There were times when he seemed to find it difficult to realize that she actually was the little daughter of long ago.

“Yes,” Peggy said. “He has always been good to me. And he said he might come up to-day. I’ll keep him to tea if he does, shall I?”

“You must do whatever you like, dear,” said Sir William, though the faint frown remained between his eyes. “You are not old enough, are you, to get too fond of him? I shouldn’t like that to happen, for he wouldn’t make you happy.”

“Why do you say that?” said Peggy in surprise. The decision with which he spoke was unmistakable and arrested attention. It was one of those rare moments when a flash of shrewd perception betrayed the existence of a judgment which through long disuse had become practically dormant.

He looked at her with returning uncertainty. “I don’t think I could make you understand, dear,” he said. “He is very popular, though, I believe, a keen soldier and fine officer also. I should not like to say anything against him. Only I should be sorry to see you too intimate with him.”

Peggy felt her colour begin to rise. “Daddy,” she said, “I think you ought to realize that I am grown up and I can’t—possibly—take any notice of anything like that without knowing why.”

“No?” he said, and even as he spoke she saw the vitality die out of his eyes. “Well, dear, you must do as you think best. I know very little of the

people here. There are not many girls in the station, and—well, married women like to be amused, I suppose. I must be going now, or Forbes will be waiting. You said you would like me to go, didn't you?"

She lifted her face to kiss him with a rather piteous sense of helplessness. His work was drawing him again, and he had forgotten all beside; already his brain was immersed in it.

"Don't forget to come back, Daddy darling!" she said. "I shall be waiting for you."

"Yes, I will come back," he said, and went out as if her very existence had faded from his mind.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. FORBES

"MARRIED women like to be amused."

Peggy's brows drew together over the problem. What had he meant by that? What was the warning he had tried to convey? She puzzled over the matter as she sat waiting for Noel to come to her. She wanted to label it "just station gossip," but the way her father had spoken made that somehow impossible. She was instinctively certain that mere gossip, even if it had reached him, would certainly have gone no further. And it was natural of course,—perfectly natural—that a man of Noel Wyndham's type should be popular. She recalled his magnificent appearance and *debonair* ways.

"Joan is like him," she reflected. "Everyone will be crazy about her some day."

It was inevitable. Magnetism was bound to attract. But—married women! Why married women? The thought troubled her.

For herself, though the fascination existed, it was a very small part of her feeling for Noel Wyndham. To her he was Noel the friend, the first pal she had ever known, and no romance of the handsome hero type had any real bearing upon the matter. It was no physical attraction to which her memory had remained loyal all these years, no brilliance of ability or sparkle of wit. He was simply Noel—Noel the Wonderful—who had played child-games with her in her nursery and enjoyed them to the full as much as she had. She had forgotten his supreme popularity if she had ever known it. As to his charm, it had only existed in the fact that they were playfellows.

Some adjustment of ideas had become necessary. She was not in love with him. People who had known each other all their lives were seldom justified in falling in love, in Peggy's opinion. But she realized that to maintain the old footing of easy friendship might be difficult, or at least might cause her attitude to be misconstrued. She did not want to hurt him, but she could not continue to extend quite the same privileges as of yore. It had seemed possible, even inevitable, at first; but she realized now that she must exercise restraint.

"I have been too impetuous again," she reflected sadly. "I must learn to be more careful."

She had barely registered this decision when the tramp of horses' feet beyond the verandah announced the invasion of her solitude. Her instant impulse was to run out to meet him; but she checked it swiftly. The eager child in her must be schooled.

The next moment she was glad that she had refrained, for his voice and his laugh told her that he was not alone. A faint sense of resentment went through her, though she told herself that she was glad.

Her father's *khitmutgar* entered and presented a salver with cards: *Captain Wyndham. Mrs. Forbes.*

A wave of incomprehensible agitation overwhelmed her; she was aware of a sudden hot embarrassment as she gave the order to admit the visitors. But a moment later, as they entered, she felt curiously cold and stiff.

"How do you do?" she said with extended hand.

The woman who preceded Noel into the room was young—possibly five or six years Peggy's senior. She moved with a lissom grace, almost as if she were dancing. Her face, olive-skinned with marvellous dark eyes, was of a beauty such as Peggy had never before looked upon. The shape of it was exquisite, the features practically faultless, unless the lips were a trifle over-full. They had the colouring of ripe cherries, and smiling displayed teeth that shone with a pearly lustre in vivid contrast. The whole effect of her was vivid to intensity. Yet her voice was low and musical, with a languorous sound.

"I wanted so much to see you," she said. "I persuaded Captain Wyndham to introduce me. I hope you don't mind?"

Her hand, slender and lissom like herself, held Peggy's for a moment and slipped away. Her beautiful eyes regarded the young English girl with frank interest.

"I am very pleased," Peggy said. "Do sit down!" She turned to Noel. "How do you do, Captain Wyndham?"

"Oh, I'm a little better now, thanks," he answered lightly. "I've been feeling rather anxious about you out here in the wilds. But since you have survived—"

"I wonder what you thought could happen to me," she said, with a lightness that matched his own. "I am settling down splendidly, and feel as if

I have lived here for years."

"I suppose you have seen my husband," said Mrs. Forbes. "He has been away, but returned last night and came up to report about half-an-hour ago."

"Yes, I did see him," said Peggy. "They have gone up to the viaduct."

"Oh, the viaduct!" said Mrs. Forbes. "Nobody ever talks of anything else at this end. What shall we do about it, Miss Musgrave? I think it ought to be blown up, don't you?"

She spoke without any great animation, and Noel laughed. "She isn't so vindictive as she sounds," he told Peggy.

"No," said Mrs. Forbes. "I suppose my bark is worse than my bite—but I can bite, if I want to."

"About as hard as a month-old puppy," said Noel. "Which reminds me!" He addressed Peggy again. "Do you want a horse to ride? Because I've got one for you. Do you remember the Chimpanzee? Well, this is Chimpanzee the second, and I believe you'll love him."

"Oh!" Peggy said, with shining eyes. "How kind of you to think of that! When may I see him?"

"I'll bring him up this evening," said Noel promptly, and she saw at once that her half-formed plan to keep him at a distance was completely demolished. "We'll go for a gallop and see how you like him."

"And when are you coming to play tennis at the Club?" said Mrs. Forbes.

"I didn't know I could," said Peggy.

"Of course you can!" said Noel. "You were elected almost before you arrived. I'll take you down there this evening after our gallop, and show you round!"

"Too bad!" said Mrs. Forbes. "I wanted to do that."

He laughed with upraised finger. "One up! I knew you did. But I wanted it more."

She sighed as she turned to Peggy. "He's a selfish lad, isn't he? All men are. But you will come down with me to-morrow afternoon, won't you? I'm sure you're a good player. We will get two of the boys to join us. Come and have tea with me first!"

"I should love to if my father doesn't want me," said Peggy.

"Oh, my dear, don't worry yourself about that!" said Mrs. Forbes. "Let him get on with his work! That's all he wants."

Her slow, rich voice had its charm. Peggy's first instinctive stiffness began to pass. She realized that Mrs. Forbes desired to be friendly, and she was grateful. She was feeling the need of a woman's friendship.

"I'll certainly come if I can," she said. "And I should enjoy some tennis. But I haven't had any practice since—"

She paused. She had been going to say "the holidays," but suddenly remembered that there were no more school holidays for her. With the memory came a pang of homesickness, as the vision of the courts at Redlands rose in her mind.

"Since I left home," she ended, forcing a smile. "And that seems a very long while ago though I suppose it isn't."

"Time will go quite fast when once you have got into the swing," said Noel, and she knew that he had read her thoughts. "It isn't a bad place—Ghawalkhand. You'll like it all right."

"I'm sure I shall," said Peggy.

"I hope you will," said Mrs. Forbes. "We must do our best to make you. There are not too many nice people like you here."

Her languid utterance made the banal compliment sound sincere, and Peggy was pleased albeit somewhat in spite of herself.

"I'm looking forward to meeting everybody immensely," she said.

"Oh, you wait!" said Noel. "Wait till you've met the great Triumvirate—Mrs. Griffiths, Mrs. Hobart, and—last but not least—Mrs. Ash!"

"I'm sure they're all perfect darlings," said Mrs. Forbes with that in her eyes and voice which openly belied her words.

"Angels separately," agreed Noel. "But taken in mixture, a rather strong draught to swallow. You needn't be afraid," he added, smiling at Peggy. "They'll like you."

"I'm sure I hope they will," she said, feeling rather bewildered. "Ought I to call on them, not being married? I am sure I shall never get Daddy to come too."

"Keep quite calm!" advised Noel. "You will meet them all at the Club when you go there under my august patronage to-night. (Yes, that's cheeky, I

know. I apologize.) And they will then—as one woman—ask you to tea. The rest will be up to you."

"You're making me very nervous," said Peggy.

"Me too!" protested Mrs. Forbes. "I am on the unwritten black list, and when you have been the round you will never speak to me again."

"Oh, why?" said Peggy.

Noel intervened. "Can't you see why? I'm always telling her to put on a veil if she wants to be popular with her own sex."

"He is always talking nonsense," observed Mrs. Forbes serenely. "No doubt it amuses him." She smiled in his direction. "Amusement is the key-note of our lives."

"Oh!" said Peggy, and wondered why she was shocked at the declaration.

There was something primitive about this woman which had an odd effect upon her. It was not an aversion that she felt, but wonder that was almost awe—such awe as is inspired by desert places where civilization is unknown.

"She isn't a cynic, though you might think so," said Noel, and again she knew that he answered her thought. "She is just a child that has never grown up."

"Or was she never a child?" suggested Mrs. Forbes. "Is the gift of childhood ever given to a woman?"

There was pathos in the words, such pathos as went straight to the warm deeps of Peggy's heart. She suddenly wished that Noel would go and leave them alone together—to make friends. But that was a thought she could not suffer him to read, and she banished it swiftly lest he should do so.

"I have been very lucky in that respect," she said simply. "I have had a lovely childhood, and I haven't wanted to grow up in the least. But I suppose we can't stand still. There isn't time."

"There is no such thing as time for those who are happy," said Mrs. Forbes, in her slow, fatalistic fashion. "For the others—there is nothing else."

Again Noel intervened. "We're getting morbid," he said. "Do you know that track up the hill through the pine-trees?" He addressed Peggy again though not by name. "Haven't you been up there yet? It's rather jolly. Let's

go! You get the whole valley from there with the dust of the desert in the distance."

"If you're going to do that, I shall go home," said Mrs. Forbes.

He turned to her. "Oh, be a sport! Come too!"

"Don't let's go now!" said Peggy quickly. "We'll ride up there this evening."

He conceded the matter at once, but she knew that he had gained his point. They talked nothing but commonplaces—Mrs. Forbes passively following his lead—during the remainder of their visit. It was by Noel's decision that they did not stay to tea.

CHAPTER X

THE RIDE

SIR WILLIAM did not return to tea—an omission for which Peggy was not unprepared. She sat in the verandah when it was over, dressed for riding, and listened to a couple of parroquets holding a wordy argument in a corner of the neglected compound. Somehow she was not very anxious for the coming of Noel. That sudden pang of homesickness seemed to have thrown her out of tune with her surroundings, or was there some other reason? Whatever the cause, she was not in a mood for analyzing her feelings. She knew only that she was tired and disinclined for further effort. Also, she wanted Nick.

When she heard the clatter of horses for the second time, she rose indeed, but without much alacrity. She was not in the mood for fencing with Noel, and that, she felt, was somehow what was required of her.

But when they met, she realized afresh what she had almost forgotten. It was not the Noel of old that greeted her. It was a much older man—a man who understood.

"I want you to forgive me," he said, "for coming here with Mrs. Forbes to-day."

She looked at him with questioning eyes. "I don't see why," she said.

"No," said Noel. "I'll tell you. She wanted me to come with her, and it would have been unfriendly of me to refuse."

"I think it would," said Peggy.

"Yes, I know," he said. "But I may as well tell you what you are bound to find out sooner or later. She is rather looked down upon by the military set—which is really the only set that counts. Forbes is not popular, and she has rather a rotten time. I think myself it's a shame."

"I liked her," said Peggy.

"Yes, I knew you would." She was suddenly aware that he spoke guardedly. "She is quite a good sort. But I couldn't let her sponsor you at the Club. It wouldn't have been fair."

"You mean they would have looked down on me too if she had?" said Peggy.

He nodded. "It wouldn't have been a good beginning, anyway. You'll know all the local politics soon. That was another reason that I came here with her. I didn't want you to be prejudiced before you had met her."

"You are very friendly with her?" said Peggy.

"I am very sorry for her," he said.

Again her candid blue eyes looked up to his. "It's just kindness, is it?" she said.

He hesitated. "I don't put it quite in that way, though you may if you like. You have met Forbes. How do you like him?"

"Not very much," said Peggy.

He smiled. "That's right. You have a very sound judgment. What of your father now? You haven't told me anything."

"There isn't much to tell," she said.

"Oh, don't put me in my place!" begged Noel, "It isn't my fault I didn't come up to see you sooner."

She felt herself colour. "It wasn't—indeed! But it is quite true. There isn't much to tell. It took a little while to make him realize who I was; but when he did, he was very pleased."

"And you haven't been unhappy?" he said. "Not lonely or anything?"

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not a bit!"

The dark Irish eyes shone with a certain half-challenging raillery. "I've found a prettier name for you than Peg-top," he suddenly said irrelevantly. "It is Forget-me-not. It's your eyes that do it, I believe. Anyhow, I've never been able to and never shall."

Peggy drew herself up. Here was something tangible at last! "If you call me anything as silly as that," she said, "I shall just stop being friends altogether."

He broke into a gay laugh. "You couldn't and you wouldn't! Come along and see the Chimpanzee, and if you don't fall in love with him, well, you'll never fall in love with anybody."

"I don't mean to," said Peggy with an instant decision.

"You wait!" laughed Noel. "It's always the cocksure ones that get caught first. I seem to remember someone once saying—but, no, I mustn't remind you of that. It must be cricket—cricket at all costs—and cricket to the end, as I'm sure the great Nick would say!"

"Oh, why do you talk of him?" she said with an involuntary catch of the breath.

"Because you were thinking of him," he made answer. "And well you may! He's the finest chap I've ever come across. But come along! Don't let's waste any time! Give him my respects next time you write, that's all!"

He swept her away with him, and she went, puzzled and slightly disconcerted. How did he know—how could he have known—that she had been thinking of Nick?

"I shall have to be very careful," was her thought, swiftly banished lest he should read that also.

She found the Chimpanzee all that a girl's heart could desire. He was a small graceful creature with Arab points and a freedom of action which greatly appealed to her.

They rode out by the way that Noel had suggested—a long track that wound up the hill under pine-trees where monkeys peeped at them and fled, and jays made raucous complaint of their presence.

"What a lovely place!" said Peggy.

"I thought you'd like it," said Noel. "Does it remind you of old times?"

She nodded. "It does a little. What made you so good to me when I was such a little kid, I wonder?"

"I don't know," he said. "I think it was fore-ordained."

His tone left her doubtful as to whether he spoke in jest or earnest. She did not pursue the subject.

They rode on up the hill which grew steeper as they ascended. The pine-trees became sparse as they proceeded, and finally ceased altogether. They came out upon a rough ridge that ran along the head of the valley, leading to higher hills beyond. The sun was beginning to sink, and a golden glory hung upon all things.

Noel halted the animals with Peggy beside him. "This is the best part of the whole show," he said. "You see the desert over there that you came through to get here. See that line of dust where the road winds? A convoy of

camels probably. That little bunch of buildings right down in the hollow is Samdana where I met you. You can't see all the windings of the railway—only just a glimpse here and there. Look! There's a puff of smoke! That's the train I went down on. By Jove! Is it only three days ago? If we go a little further round the shoulder of this hill, we shall get a sight of the great viaduct and Ghawalkhand. It looks rather romantic at this hour."

"It's wonderful!" said Peggy.

She had never seen anything to equal it. The atmosphere had that curious stillness which precedes the sunset. She sat in rapt admiration.

"It's like an enchanted land," she said.

The thin notes of a bugle arose from some hidden point below them, and she was aware of a sudden alertness in the man beside her which reminded her of her father's words. "A keen soldier!" She was quite sure, without any telling, that Noel Wyndham was that.

They went on to the point whence a glimpse of the viaduct was possible though it was far below them, as also were the flat roofs and occasional domes of the native city of Ghawalkhand.

"Show me the barracks!" said Peggy. "And where you live!"

"Not visible from here, I'm afraid," he said. "But you can just catch sight of a corner of the Club tennis-courts, and the barracks are beyond, just round the corner. The Colonel's bungalow is in that clump of trees to the right, and the Ashes live just beyond. That green space farther on is the race-course and beyond that is the polo-ground. The place with the flat domes is the Rajah's palace, and there's a temple thing down by the river which you can't see from here where he says his prayers. There is good *mugger*-shooting lower down the stream, by the way, and heaps of black buck up in the hills. I'm going to get some sport next leave. I may find bear too if I'm lucky."

"Do you like big-game hunting better than going home?" asked Peggy.

He laughed. "Under existing circumstances, yes, I think I do. One can't have everything, you know. And there's no sport in England to compare with sport out here."

"But your people!" she insisted. "You must want to see them sometimes."

"Oh, sometimes, yes," he admitted. "But there is no vast need for hurry that I can see. They've managed without me very nicely all these years."

"They haven't wanted to," said Peggy. "I know Aunt Chris was counting very much on getting you next Christmas."

"Dear old Chris!" said Noel. "I'm sorry if I've let her down, but it was quite unavoidable. I can't be everywhere at once."

"But you haven't got to stay out here, have you?" said Peggy, with something of her childhood's persistence. "I mean, it isn't as if someone in India badly needed you, is it?"

"I'm not so sure of that," said Noel.

She looked at him suddenly. "You don't think—I hope you don't think—that I need anyone, except my father," she said.

His eyes came to hers on the instant, and somehow she had to lower her own though she scarcely knew why. "I haven't given you any reason for imagining that I am capable of such presumption as that, have I?" he said.

She checked her rising colour with a sheer effort of will. "I shouldn't like to think so anyway," she said. "And just because you were good to me when I was a baby doesn't entail any obligation upon you to—to—"

"Look after your interests now?" he supplemented. "Thank you, Peg-top! That's rather delicious of you. Will you here and now accept my solemn assurance that the fact that I was privileged to slap you in babyhood does not in any way affect my attitude towards you now?"

She laughed. "Oh, it's no good talking! You always get away with it. But, all the same, I would like you to understand that though it was very nice of you to meet me and I did appreciate it, I am quite—quite capable of taking care of myself."

She met his look again with the words and her own was perfectly steady, even though she was aware of a certain mastery in his expression, enigmatical as it was.

"You always were an independent infant," remarked Noel, "able to hold your own anywhere. Well, I'm not preventing you, am I? You've done your best to make me go home like a good boy, and it isn't your fault that I'm not off by the next boat. You can tell 'em that with my love when you write. Now let's go a little farther and have some fun!"

He was wholly irresistible. What was the good of arguing, she asked herself? He had the amazing Irish facility for evading trouble without involving anyone else and without giving offence which completely

defeated all ends but his own. No one would ever bring him to book, so what was the use of trying?

They went on a little farther, as he suggested, and presently came to a flat stretch of land where a gallop was possible, and in the delight of exploiting her new mount, Peggy forgot her perplexities; forgot also all her resolutions to avoid anything of the nature of intimacy with this man of whom her father disapproved.

But how could she help it? Had they not been intimate from the very beginnings of things, and was it possible to draw back now? If her conscience reproached her at all after that baffling conversation it was because she had even tried to do so. Surely the presumption had been on her side and not on his!

As they rode down the hillside at length in the brief twilight that heralded the darkness that already shrouded the desert distances, she felt that the good comrade by her side was more than enough to shield her from any lurking evil about her path.

CHAPTER XI

THE CLUB

"HERE is the Club!" said Noel. "Come along in! We shall just have time to look round, and then I'll see you home. Ah, there is Mrs. Griffiths—and Mrs. Hobart too! By Jove! What luck!"

To Peggy the whole place seemed swarming with people, clad in tennis-kit for the most part and nearly all of them armed with a drink of some description. It was the social half-hour that immediately preceded the general dispersal for dinner. The verandahs buzzed with talk and laughter, and within, native servants hastened to and fro in their attendance upon the members' needs.

"This way!" said Noel, as Peggy stood hesitatingly in shy uncertainty. "Good evening, Mrs. Griffiths! I simply had to bring Miss Musgrave in to see you. Good evening, Mrs. Hobart! Here she is!"

A moment of overwhelming bashfulness was Peggy's, and then a large lady rose from a protesting wicker-chair and greeted her with outstretched hand. "Miss Musgrave, how do you do? I am very pleased to welcome you here. Come and sit down! This is Mrs. Hobart. So you have come back to India at last! It must seem very strange after all these years."

Peggy's shyness passed, for there was no mistaking the kindness of voice and action. The Colonel's wife might be formidable, but she had evidently decided that Sir William Musgrave's daughter should not be left out in the cold. Almost before she realized it, she was sitting between the two ladies and being subjected to a catechism of the most friendly description.

She liked Mrs. Griffiths at sight. There was something downright and spacious about her friendliness very warming to the new-comer's heart.

She was not so sure of Mrs. Hobart who was far less expansive, and—she felt it instinctively—infinitely more critical. She treated Peggy with a politeness that was strictly conventional while her grey eyes studied her with a keenness so penetrating as to make her feel as if she was being observed

under a microscope. But yet the examination had nothing hostile about it. It was simply a necessary and impersonal act.

Noel sat on the rail of the verandah facing them and kept the conversation at an easy level. There was nothing in the least proprietary about his attitude, and yet she felt in a subtle way that she was being taken at his valuation. Her father was barely mentioned.

The news of her coming evidently spread, for after a few minutes, a stout, rather florid man came out to join them, at sight of whom Noel straightened himself from his lounging attitude and stood up.

Mrs. Griffiths turned her head. "This is Miss Musgrave, Herbert. You remember Captain Wyndham told us that she was coming. She arrived three days ago."

"Ah, to be sure! Yes, yes! Sir William's daughter!" He shook hands with her kindly. "Well, Miss Musgrave, I hope you will manage to dig him out of his seclusion, for I'm sure it isn't good for him. And how do you like India?"

"Oh, it's just like it used to be," Peggy said. "I am getting back into the ways. I was born in India, so I am not really a stranger."

"Yes, yes. So Captain Wyndham told us." He looked at her with frank curiosity. "He seems to take a sort of godfatherly interest in you because you were at school with his niece. Isn't that it?"

He cocked a humorous eye at Noel, who laughed and protested.

"Not entirely, sir. We are old friends, almost prehistoric in fact. I knew her in her cradle."

"Better call him grandmotherly at once!" said Mrs. Griffiths. "You can't expect any of us to admit any personal knowledge of such ancient history as that. And she has been in England all these years with Nick Ratcliffe, Herbert! Think of that! I'd give something to see him again. He was the jolliest man I ever met."

"Every woman who ever met Nick wanted to fall in love with him," declared Colonel Griffiths. "But luckily for him, he had a genius for avoiding complications which is not given to many."

"Oh, he was married and done for before I even met him," said Mrs. Griffiths. "Of course he must be an absolute Methuselah to this child. Why that boy of his must be almost of a marriageable age by now."

"Oh no, he isn't!" said Peggy. "He is only my age."

"A mere babe in arms!" laughed Noel.

"I didn't mean that. I am nearly nineteen," she said with dignity. "But boys are different. They don't begin to grow up for years after that."

"Till they get to my age, in fact," suggested Colonel Griffiths quizzically. "I quite agree with you, Miss Musgrave. Don't have anything to do with that fellow Wyndham! He is too juvenile to be worthy of your notice."

During the banter that followed, two or three subalterns came up and were introduced, and then Major Hobart strolled out, bringing with him his late tennis-partner, Mrs. Ash, to inspect the new arrival.

The latter was a small woman with quick dark eyes and a ready tongue for giving advice which had induced irreverent youngsters to dub her "Auntie." She was the doctor's wife and a regular visitor at the hospital, having been a nurse prior to her marriage.

Her greeting of Peggy was brief and business-like. "How do you do, Miss Musgrave? So you have come out to take care of your poor father! A very good thing, I think! It is high time somebody did something. I had hoped for his sake that you would have been a little older, however."

"She is being as old as she can," put in Noel. "Give her time, Mrs. Ash!"

"Oh, don't be any older than you need!" begged Major Hobart humorously. "We are all much too sophisticated and *blasé* here. Have you joined the Club yet, Miss Musgrave? If not, may I have the pleasure of proposing you?"

"My dear man," said Mrs. Griffiths. "All that has been attended to long since. The ceremony of swearing in is all that remains. If you will come to tea with me to-morrow, Miss Musgrave, I will do all the initiating."

"Oh, thank you very much," said Peggy. "But I have already promised to go to tea with Mrs. Forbes."

"With whom?" said Mrs. Hobart.

Peggy looked at her. Somehow the question had a scathing note. "With Mrs. Forbes," she said.

The silence that followed her repetition of the name seemed to her even more scathing than the query that had preceded it. She broke it herself with a certain quiet strength of purpose.

"She very kindly said that she would bring me down to the Club afterwards."

"That was very kind of her," commented Mrs. Ash.

"Yes, it was, wasn't it?" said Peggy. "And I told her I should like it very much."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Griffiths, with the air of one making the best of things, "you must come to me another day."

"I should love to," said Peggy with sincerity. "And now, do you know, I think I ought to be going or Daddy may be missing me."

Mrs. Griffiths smiled upon her with approval. "You are riding? Where did you get your mount? Oh, Noel,—the fairy godfather again! I suppose he is seeing you back? Well, we shall meet again soon, perhaps to-morrow, if you come down to the Club after tea. I presume that is the idea?"

"I think it is," said Peggy.

Mrs. Griffiths held out her hand to her suddenly, with almost a protecting gesture. "I shall be here," she said. "Good-bye, my dear! I am very pleased to have met you. You are very like your mother."

"Good-bye!" said Peggy. "And thank you very much."

Riding back up the hill with Noel, she made a sudden observation. "I'm glad—very glad—that I met Mrs. Forbes first."

"Are you?" said Noel. "I wonder why?"

"Because," said Peggy simply, "kind as they are, I believe I am going to like her the best."

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST VISIT

WHAT had brought Peggy to that decision she could not have said with any certainty, but the feeling within her was that Mrs. Forbes was, with the exception of Noel himself, the most human figure she had encountered in India. There was pathos about her also which appealed to Peggy's warm young heart. All the rest were self-satisfied and critical, but Mrs. Forbes was neither. With all her beauty, she was without any suggestion of arrogance.

Peggy's second impression of her merely deepened the first. She paid her promised visit on the following day and found her alone in a drawing-room warm with Oriental colouring in the midst of which she herself looked like some splendid tropical flower.

She greeted Peggy with sufficient animation to convince her that she was welcome. "I was not at all sure that you would come," she said.

"But why?" said Peggy. "I said I'd come. Besides, I wanted to."

"That is the kindest thing that has been said to me for a long while," said Mrs. Forbes.

She questioned her in an easy, incurious fashion about her ride with Noel. Had she decided to buy the Chimpanzee?

Peggy did not yet know. She had not had the opportunity to consult her father about it. He had come back on the preceding evening so obsessed with his work that she had realized the impossibility of introducing any other subject.

Mrs. Forbes seemed to understand this without being told. She had a facile way of taking things for granted.

"And you met what Noel calls 'the great Triumvirate' at the Club?" she said. "What did they have to say to you?"

"They were very kind," said Peggy.

"They probably took a fancy to you," said Mrs. Forbes. "You will be swamped with invitations, I expect; also with advice, whichever way you turn."

"Advice?" said Peggy.

Mrs. Forbes uttered her lazy laugh. "This is the only place where you won't get any. All I have to offer at any time is, Do what you like best and enjoy yourself!"

"Is that what you do?" asked Peggy.

She made an odd gesture. "With more or less success. I shouldn't recommend you to make an example of me, nor will anyone else."

"I suppose they are all jealous," said Peggy almost involuntarily.

"Jealous—of me!" The beautiful heavy eyes opened wide for an instant. "Oh, I don't think so," said Mrs. Forbes, with her own enigmatical smile. "You may admire the lovely markings on a reptile well enough to wear its skin for your shoe-leather, but you are not—jealous of it, are you?"

"I am sure that isn't a good simile," said Peggy.

"You'll know better presently," said Mrs. Forbes. "But an unprejudiced opinion is very refreshing, all the same. Are you sure you would like to go down to the Club with me? You wouldn't rather go alone?"

"Of course not!" said Peggy with emphasis. "Please don't—ever—think I am like that!"

"How nice of you!" said Mrs. Forbes. "It's Captain Wyndham's doing of course. I said to him before you came how jolly it would be to meet you before you had begun to breathe the Club atmosphere, and he was a good sort enough to wangle it for me."

"I can't understand it," said Peggy. "Why are they all horrid to you?"

Mrs. Forbes uttered a sigh. "You have met my husband, haven't you?" she said.

"Yes," said Peggy, slightly disconcerted. "Why?"

"That's one of the reasons," said Mrs. Forbes.

"Oh!" said Peggy, and felt herself colour hotly. An urgent desire to change the subject came upon her, and she followed it blindly. "I shall be very glad when I have met everybody. I shall feel more settled then. Of course, Daddy is too busy with the railway to have any time to spare for

amusement. I don't want to be carried away either. I came out here to be with him."

"Which is about the last thing you will be allowed to do," observed Mrs. Forbes. "I can read your destiny with my eyes shut. You are going to be the rage."

"Oh no!" said Peggy.

"Oh yes!" said Mrs. Forbes, smiling. "I know the signs. It will be a sort of royal progress, ending at the altar as they all do."

"Indeed it won't!" declared Peggy, with sudden vigour. "I am not going to marry anyone for a very, very long time, if ever."

"Yes, you all say that," said Mrs. Forbes, unmoved. "But—it happens, just the same. Why, I am surprised that you even arrived here intact. They must have been a very dull lot on the boat."

"But you don't imagine that I'm going to marry the first man that asks me!" protested Peggy.

Mrs. Forbes's low laugh was wholly without edge. "So I scored a point, did I? My dear, forgive me! I hope you were not the smitten one."

"I wasn't," said Peggy. "But—but—"

"He is the first of many," Mrs. Forbes assured her tranquilly. "And I think I can tell you who will be the second."

"Please don't," said Peggy with flaming cheeks. "I don't want to know, and I won't be proposed to by everybody in turn!"

"Then you'd better wear a large label with 'Engaged' on it round your neck," said Mrs. Forbes, with indolent humour. "I don't see anything else for it."

It was impossible to be indignant with her; everything she said was in good part. Peggy decided that she must not be taken too seriously.

She changed the subject again, more successfully, by reverting to the voyage out and the Frasers.

"Oh, yes, they will be turning up soon," said Mrs. Forbes. "He has a post as political adviser to the Rajah. There used to be a British Resident, but that lapsed. A jolly man—Bobby Fraser! The best dancing-partner, except Noel, that I know! His only handicap is his wife, as I am sure you will agree."

Peggy hesitated.

"My dear, we all know she is poisonous," said Mrs. Forbes. "You needn't mind saying so. But she is also well born, save the mark, so she has a status at the Club. Another point in her favour is that she knows how to dress. Her style is beyond reproach."

"Yes, I noticed that," said Peggy, relieved to find one quality upon which she could safely dwell.

"How she must have hated you!" said Mrs. Forbes dispassionately. "Did she ever tell you so?"

"Well, not quite!" said truthful Peggy.

"Yes, I see," said Mrs. Forbes. "She is what I should describe as a woman-hater. She hates us all in varying degrees, according to our powers of attraction. I can imagine that she hated you very badly indeed."

"And what about you?" suggested Peggy.

"Oh, I make her very ill," said Mrs. Forbes, with her lovely smile, "especially in the ball-room. She is a good dancer too, but conventional. I am—the other kind."

"I should love to see you dance," said Peggy suddenly.

Mrs. Forbes took out a jewelled cigarette-case. "You will, my dear, if you live a little longer. You smoke, of course?"

"I don't at present," said Peggy.

"Oh, try one of these! They are good to begin on. You'd rather not? Well, why should you, if you don't want to? I smoke too much myself." She lighted a cigarette with the words. "At least, some people say so. But I say, Why not?"

"I suppose it's your own affair," said Peggy.

"Exactly so. And if I am no good at managing my own affairs, at any rate no one else is better. I am much better-tempered too when I smoke."

"Are you ever anything but good-tempered?" said Peggy.

"Oh, sometimes," said Mrs. Forbes, with lazy eyes upon the smoke. "But it's seldom worth it; much easier to let the world go by."

Looking at her, Peggy wondered what she would be like when roused. That there was hidden fire somewhere behind that supremely impassive exterior she was convinced, but it was evidently not wasted upon trifles. It came to Peggy then, and was remembered by her long afterwards, that not

until she had seen this woman borne upon the flood-tide of a tremendous passion would she really see her as she was.

"I'll tell you one thing," said Mrs. Forbes presently, speaking as one who follows a train of thought: "there are very few people in this station who are worth putting oneself out over. It's a continual round of tennis, racing, dancing, and cards, and through it all one vast flirtation match in which it's advisable always to think of oneself first. For it's a fairly hot place for scandal. It doesn't do to ride more than three times running with the same man if you value your reputation."

"How absurd!" said Peggy.

"Isn't it?" said Mrs. Forbes. "That's why I always do it. You see, it doesn't matter for me. My reputation went by the board long ago."

Peggy's clear eyes regarded her with absolute honesty. "But is that quite fair to the man, do you think?" she said.

"Good gracious, child!" Mrs. Forbes uttered her slow laugh. "I don't bother about the men. They can look after themselves—and do."

"Do they?" said Peggy.

"Make no mistake about that!" said Mrs. Forbes. "They consult their own inclinations every time. When they get bored, they go on leave and shoot something."

"I see," said Peggy. Her brows were drawn a little. "And some of them really prefer that to going home?"

"The bachelors do," said Mrs. Forbes. "There's much more fun for them out here than in England, and most of them have the sense to realize it."

"Is that why?" said Peggy, in a tone of enlightenment.

"Probably," said Mrs. Forbes, with her enigmatical smile.

"I—see," said Peggy again.

She sat thereafter silent for some moments, deep in thought, only rousing herself when her hostess proposed a move.

They were on the verge of departure for the Club when there came the sound of a man's feet on the verandah and Forbes walked in.

"Just in time!" he observed. "If you will wait a moment, I will take you down in the car. How are you, Miss Musgrave? Still going strong?"

His hand held hers again with a kind of insolent assurance, making her second impression of him even more unfavourable than her first.

"How do you do?" she responded gravely, escaping from his touch as soon as courtesy permitted.

"I left your good father crawling about on his hands and knees making hieroglyphics on the face of the rock," he said, careless derision in his voice. "I told him that I didn't think my particular form of genius was required at that stage, and as he was rude enough to agree, I left him to it."

"Somewhat rash of you!" commented his wife.

"Think so?" He turned to the tea-tray and poured himself out a cup. "This stuff looks pretty poisonous. How long has it been made?"

"Oh, about a week," said Mrs. Forbes indifferently. "The *khit* will make some more if you care to wait."

"I don't," he responded curtly, and swallowed the mixture he had poured out. "I'm just going to change. I shall be ready in five minutes."

He sauntered out with the words, leaving a distinct impression that he expected his wishes to be obeyed.

Peggy glanced at her hostess, who shrugged her shoulders with the air of one repudiating responsibility.

The atmosphere of ease was completely dispelled, and during the brief interval that ensued the conversation was somewhat disjointed and strained.

Forbes could be heard in the distance, abusing his bearer, and in spite of herself Peggy could not avoid displaying a certain amount of discomfiture. She would have given much to have made her escape before his return.

This, however, was out of the question, and she had to endure his free stare when he came in again dressed for tennis, with as good a grace as she could muster. He inspired her with an antipathy so strong that she did not know how to hide it.

She was in fact almost on the verge of excusing herself from accompanying them and returning to her father's bungalow on the plea of fatigue, but checked herself in time as she realized that he would doubtless insist upon driving her thither, short as was the distance.

And even as she arrived at this decision, Mrs. Forbes to her amazement took her by the arm as her husband strode out on to the verandah, leading

the way with a lordly disdain of convention, and murmured into her ear two words: “Humour him!”

But when Peggy looked at her in swift astonishment, the beautiful face was so impassive as to make her wonder if she had heard aright.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

It did not take long for Peggy to discover that to appear at the Club under the auspices of Mr. and Mrs. Forbes was a very different matter from dropping in under the easy escort of Noel Wyndham. She received kindly acknowledgments indeed, but they were obviously bestowed with reservations, and very little cordiality was extended to either of her companions. It was easy to see that Forbes was not in his element though he swaggered through the place with no diminution of self-importance. Peggy could readily understand the strong desire apparent among the masculine members to tread heavily upon him; but it seemed strange that one so beautiful and so wholly without aggressiveness as his wife should share his unpopularity, though she noted that the lack of cordiality was more apparent on the part of the women than the men.

Matters improved, however, when Noel presently came upon the scene and impetuously arrange a sett in which he matched Peggy and himself against Forbes and his wife. He was a good player, and Peggy was also a very fair performer, but she was completely eclipsed by Mrs. Forbes whose form was excellent though she played with such supreme indifference that it was hard to believe that she exerted herself at all. Her husband was a steady player of medium ability whom Noel could easily have beaten single-handed.

It proved an interesting match, and very soon spectators had drifted down to watch it. Noel had set his heart upon winning, and after her first nervousness Peggy developed into an ardent and understanding partner, forgetting the critics in her zest for the game. In the end the sympathy between them achieved that which mere skill would scarcely have accomplished, and they emerged from a hard-fought contest victorious.

"Well played!" said Noel, beaming upon Peggy with delighted approval. "I knew you could if you tried. Mrs. Forbes is hot stuff, you know,—quite the best woman-player in the Club."

"I don't believe she wanted to win," said Peggy.

"Rot!" said Noel.

There was no doubt as to the popularity of their victory. They were received by the onlookers with a round of applause, and Peggy was speedily "taken into custody" as Noel expressed it, by Mrs. Griffiths and Mrs. Ash, while a small crowd of subalterns clustered round and made merry.

She would not, however, be completely detached from Mrs. Forbes, and she presently extricated herself to join her for a few minutes, but she found her unresponsive and even absent and very soon she was claimed again by Noel who was arranging another sett with Mrs. Ash and Major Hobart.

On this occasion she played against him, but though she could not pretend to herself that she liked it nearly as much, she played well and helped her partner to score a victory which she little expected. Major Hobart professed himself delighted with her play, and Mrs. Ash told her that she was an acquisition to the Club.

Later, Forbes swaggered up and suggested a return sett, but by that time Noel had been claimed for another court, and Mrs. Hobart had taken possession of Peggy. They walked round the courts together, and Peggy found that, though reticent, her companion was certainly friendly, and she enjoyed herself in consequence.

"I am coming to see you one day if I may," said Mrs. Hobart on their return to the Club house.

And Peggy, feeling that this was an honour indeed, flushed and assured her of her welcome.

She left the Club soon after in Mrs. Griffiths' *'rickshaw*, and returned to the bungalow up the hill with a warm sense of gratitude at her heart. It seemed that everyone was ready to receive her and be kind.

She entered her father's bungalow, light-footed, singing a snatch of song, and though the loneliness of the place came about her like a muffling cloak, she was not daunted. The world was full of friends.

She went straight to the room in which he worked, finding him as usual at his desk with the lamplight shining on his bent grey head.

She wound warm young arms about his neck. "Oh, Daddy," she said, "I have had such a lovely day."

He did not lift himself or turn. "Do you mind going away?" he said. "I am very busy."

With his left hand he sought to disengage himself, his right held a pen with which he was making rapid figures upon a sheet of paper.

She released him swiftly, cut to the heart. "Are you too busy to speak to me?" she said.

He answered her in a monotonous voice, not ceasing his calculations, not even glancing in her direction. "Yes—yes! I have no time for dreams."

He was practically unconscious of her before he ceased to speak. She drew back, bitterly disappointed, and slipped from the room.

She dined alone that evening, waited upon by the silent-footed Sammy who came and went like a shadow. When the meal was over, she went out upon the verandah and faced the solitude of the night. There was no moon, but a multitude of stars shone down. The trees in the compound were dark blots of stillness. The atmosphere had an aromatic scent that was subtly Eastern. The silence held an eerie, listening quality, restless even in its intensity. The loneliness was the loneliness of the desert.

She found herself holding her breath in the midst of it, standing as it were expectant, almost counting the seconds till something should happen. She felt as if something sinister, something rather terrible, were at hand. Was there a gliding monster in the compound watching her with eyes she could not see?

Ah! A sound at last! Her nerves quivered and were still. The far, weird call of a jackal—haunting spirit of the night! Stay! Was it a jackal? Or was it —was it something human that had uttered that wailing cry?

Her heart throbbed suddenly fast and hard and she shivered. She wanted to turn back into the room she had left, but something kept her where she was, motionless, listening.

But it was only the silence that she heard,—the awful, desert silence.

It lasted interminably, like a drawn-out elastic continuing to stretch after the snapping-point was long past. She waited for it to break, became desperately afraid while she waited, and when at last it went again into that dreadful animal cry, she shrank as though a knife had pierced her. The night had become inexpressibly evil.

The next moment, with a sensation of tearing herself free from some overmastering spell, she was fleeing along the verandah to her father's room.

She burst in upon him headlong—a scared child seeking shelter. "Daddy, oh, Daddy, do speak to me! Do let me be with you!" was her cry. "There's

something dreadful outside, and I'm frightened—I'm frightened!"

He became aware of her then, turned from his work and from the untouched meal at his elbow, clasped her closely and protectingly in his arms.

"My little girl!" he said. "Why, what has come to you? What has frightened you?"

She clung to him, unnerved and trembling. "Daddy, I heard something cry out. I don't know what it was. And oh, it's so lonely out there. Mayn't I stay with you? Please mayn't I stay?"

He patted her shoulder soothingly. "Of course dear, of course! But there is nothing to frighten you, nothing! India often cries out in her sleep."

Something of the loneliness of the nights through which he had pursued his endless task was in the words. She looked into his lined face and felt anew the stirring of a deep compassion, outbalancing her panic. She saw with relief that she had penetrated his lethargy. His spirit had emerged once more from its prison. He was no longer locked away from her.

She laid her hand upon his work. "Daddy," she said, "I want you. Won't you leave this now for a little while?"

He looked at her, his weary, bloodshot eyes very tender. "I will do whatever you wish, dear," he said. "But you mustn't be afraid of the dark, you know."

"I know," said Peggy. "But the dark is rather dreadful when—when you are quite alone."

His hand caressed her hair. "Yes," he said as if to himself. "Yes. It can be—very dreadful."

"Let me put it away!" she begged him softly. "Don't do any more tonight!"

She saw a look come into his face which she did not understand. It was as if a light had suddenly been kindled and instantly extinguished.

"You needn't put it away," he said. "I shall want it in the morning. But I will leave it now. I must take care of my little girl. Nick says so."

"Ah!" Peggy said quickly. "You are very fond of him, aren't you? Wouldn't you like to see him soon?"

"Yes." He spoke rather dreamily. "Very much! Very much indeed! But —" he heaved a deep sigh—"I never shall again!"

"Oh, Daddy!" Swiftly Peggy broke in. "But you will, dear; of course you will! When your work is finished—we are going home, aren't we? You'll see him then."

He looked at her, and she saw that his eyes were curiously clouded, as if they could not wholly take her in. "My work?" he said. "My work? When my work is finished, I shall be dead."

"Oh no!" she said, in distress. "No! No!"

His eyes began to see her again. He even smiled at her, but his smile was infinitely sad.

"But that is why I work so hard," he said. "I want to get it done."

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAY OF DESTRUCTION

FROM that day Peggy was an accepted member of the Ghawalkhand community and she very soon found herself drawn into the general round of station gaieties. It was tacitly taken for granted that her father would not accompany her to any of these, but since "the great Triumvirate" had become her self-elected sponsors in order of seniority she was never without a matron's sheltering wing. She had her own *'richshaw*, moreover, and having obtained her father's consent to buy the Chimpanzee, she was well-mounted and enjoyed many an early ride, sometimes with Noel and sometimes alone.

Her first dance was at the Club, and it was here that she realized to her surprise that the popularity that had come to her on the voyage out was still hers. The subalterns vied with each other for her favours, and not only they. Major Hobart and even the Colonel himself sought her out, complimented her upon her dancing, and generally made much of her.

She was also compelled to dance with Forbes in spite of her utmost efforts to avoid him. Because of her liking for his wife which was developing into a genuine affection, she could not openly refuse. But she hated the close proximity her dance with him entailed and almost showed her aversion in her downcast countenance.

Mrs. Forbes was beyond all disputing the best dancer in the room. Her beauty and her elegance seemed to cast a spell. She was exquisite in every line and every movement. Her chief partners were Noel and a senior subaltern known as "Hadlow the Highbrow" whose love of dancing was almost an obsession. Peggy noticed that she did not dance with her husband at all. They scarcely seemed to belong to each other, and she did not observe him even to glance in the direction of the beautiful figure in gleaming copper and gold that moved with a kind of passionate rhythm that set it apart from all the other dancers. She was very thankful that she could not give Forbes a second dance, and her truthful eyes almost told him so in answer to his importunity. He went away with a shrug.

A little later Noel came to her. She thought him less merry than usual and inclined to be abstracted, but he laughed when she told him half-apologetically that she only wished she could dance like Mrs. Forbes.

"My dear baby," he said, "unwish that wish at once!"

"But why!" protested Peggy. She had long since realized that to rebuke him for familiarity of speech was useless, and did not now attempt it. "Her dancing is the most exquisite I think I have ever seen."

"The most exquisitely bad style—according to the Triumvirate," said Noel.

She looked at him, round-eyed. "You don't think so anyway," she said.

"Don't I?" said Noel.

"Well, you like dancing with her. You must!" declared Peggy, who had seen him do so at least half-a-dozen times.

"Perhaps I like bad style," said Noel.

He was in a baffling mood, and she abandoned the discussion. Noel was still wonderful, but she was not sure that she always fully approved of him. And there was no one to whom she could turn for enlightenment or advice. She could only withdraw herself from too free an intimacy with him.

"Yes, I love you when you do that," he said suddenly and disconcertingly.

"What do you mean?" said Peggy, flushing.

He told her with a simplicity that had its subtle side. "I was picturing you with your little spade on the shore at Brethaven, building a little sand-bar to keep out the sea. It gave you some trouble and made you rather hot, and the sea always overwhelmed it in the end, didn't it?"

She did not answer him. Her face was sober though she knew that he was smiling.

"I even helped you once," he murmured, half under his breath. "But I'm not going to help you now."

"I shouldn't take that trouble now," she answered unexpectedly with an odd little throb of defiance. "I should build something stronger."

"Would you?" he said. "Would you?"

And that was all. They danced on with the rest, but in the silence that came between them Peggy knew that he read every thought that she

sheltered in her soul. No barrier that she could raise would keep him out. And protest was useless, for to protest was to own him her master, and that she would not do.

She enjoyed that dance more than any that had preceded it, and she knew that she would look forward to her next with him with a zest which would make the intervening ones seem tedious. Strive against the fact as she might, there was no denying that her old playfellow possessed privileges which none other could claim, and she was aware of a little pang, swiftly stifled, when he left her to return to Mrs. Forbes.

Later, pleading fatigue, she sat out with a young subaltern named Worthing and watched the two. Their dancing was superb and in flawless accord. They never seemed to speak, but there evidently existed between them a perfect bond of sympathy. There was plainly no need for words.

A good many people were watching, and presently Peggy became conscious of fugitive whispering here and there. Nothing tangible reached her, yet she knew by an instinct which could not err that those two faultless dancers were the subject of their talk. It made her vaguely uneasy. She felt as if there were something hostile in the air, almost as though Noel were threatened by some evil of which she longed to warn him, but could not.

Her companion was not a conversationalist, and she noted that he too was taking a covert interest in Noel and his partner. A curious sense of desperation came upon her. She spoke abruptly.

"I wonder why everyone is watching those two. Is it because they dance together so beautifully?"

He gave her a quick half-guilty glance, and she noted that he did not ask to which couple she referred.

"They ought to dance well together," he said rather bluntly, "considering they're practically always doing it."

Again she was aware of that small pang at her heart which must be stilled at all costs.

"But why shouldn't they?" she said. "Everybody dances with the person who suits him best nowadays. It's the only thing to do."

He looked somewhat confused. "Well, I didn't say it wasn't," he said. "I only said they did."

It was not very satisfactory, and she would have been wise to have left the matter there, but an inner urging goaded her on.

"Then why does everybody stare so?" she said. "Surely they have a right to dance together if they want to!"

"Yes, of course." Young Worthing spoke with obvious reluctance. "It's a pity to be conspicuous, that's all."

The public-school maxim appealed to her all the more forcibly because her own school-days were so recent. It was certainly one which she would be the last to dispute. Yet, being a woman, she hunted her quarry down.

"Why should they be more conspicuous than anyone else," she said, "except that they dance better?"

He gave her what she felt to be a dark look. "It isn't just dancing that does it," he said.

"Then what—" began Peggy, and paused; a sudden light had flashed upon her soul, and for the moment she felt dazzled, almost blinded. Abruptly she realized what he was trying not to say. She proceeded after a moment with more caution, borrowing a little cynicism for the occasion to cloak some deeper feeling.

"But doesn't everybody do that? Flirt, I mean? I thought it was all part of the game."

Young Worthing looked at her with a kind of sullen surprise. "It doesn't make it good form, does it?" he said stiffly.

She began to feel a little exasperated with him. Was he a prude?

"I don't see much harm in it so long as it's a game," she said.

A dull flush rose in the boy's face. He evidently recognized the implied rebuke. But the next moment he disconcerted her.

"Not if one knows where to draw the line," he said, and shut his mouth as though he had already been drawn into saying too much.

She turned from him, half-vexed and half-perturbed. What right had anyone to criticize? Surely Noel was at liberty to dance with whomsoever he would! And then against her will her father's warning recurred to her. If even he had heard the gossip—! She felt her own colour begin to rise. A curious anger came over her. Young Worthing was right. Noel ought not to make himself conspicuous. Flirtation ought to be kept within bounds. Even to risk being accused of bad form was to be guilty of it. And Noel of all people—Noel whom she had regarded as in some respects a person to be revered!

She clenched her hands tightly. He was of the same stuff as other men after all, and she had been a fool to imagine him otherwise. The same stuff as all those others on board ship who had paid their empty court and drifted on to other happy hunting-grounds, the same stuff as Tiggie Turner who in an idle moment had tried to kiss her! Did Noel ever kiss Mrs. Forbes?

She did not ask herself the cause of her sudden anger, or why the conviction hurt her so. It is said that a deep wound is often so much less painful than a superficial one that the victim cannot realize its severity. Certainly Peggy would have furiously repudiated the existence of any wound at all. Yet there was something in the situation that she found inexplicably hard to bear. She felt as if someone ought to have warned her beforehand. Even Noel himself—her mind paused as at some sudden obstacle—had Noel warned her? That first visit—when he had brought Mrs. Forbes to see her, and later had apologized, actually apologized, for having done so; had that not been a species of warning? She remembered that he had tried to enlist her sympathy on Mrs. Forbes's behalf, but had not allowed her to describe his own attitude towards her as one of mere kindness. She remembered Mrs. Forbes's own ironical reference to flirtation. It all pointed to the same thing. Yet, strangely, it was not against Mrs. Forbes that her anger was kindled. It was only against Noel—Noel who had firmly claimed and maintained the privileges of an old friend, while still pursuing a flirtation of a very advanced order with a married woman.

She felt as if he had somehow shamed her, degraded her. The memory of Forbes's half-insolent demeanour came upon her. Probably he thought that she too was of the type that might be treated lightly! She pictured him behaving as Tiggie Turner had behaved, and was startled by her own sense of nausea. Tiggie Turner was at least a gentleman. He had offended, but he had not revolted her. But Forbes—she had shrunk from Forbes with instinctive loathing from the first moment of their acquaintance.

It was at this point that her thoughts suddenly became unbearable, and she got up.

"Come on! Let's dance!" she said.

He rose with her, clumsily anxious to please. "Rather! Dying to! You're such a ripping dancer, you know."

His flattery did not appeal to her in the least, and she found him an uninspiring partner, but anything seemed preferable to sitting out any longer. She was determined that nothing should induce her to do that again. When the dance was over, she passed on eagerly to the next which was with Major

Ash, the cheery doctor whom everyone liked. When that came to an end, she was surprised by the approach of Hadlow who somewhat ceremoniously asked for a dance. The thought came to her that he had waited to see how she acquitted herself before doing so, but it suited her purpose to grant his request, and she did so without an instant's hesitation. Her card was full, but she gave him Noel's next dance without showing it to him, and he departed, satisfied.

When the time came, he was the first to come to her, as somehow she had known he would be, and they were the first couple to take the floor. Furtively she watched for Noel, and had the satisfaction of seeing him enter and glance round, but he turned on his heel in practically the same moment and she saw him no more.

There was no enjoyment left for the rest of the evening, though Ronald Hadlow paid her what she knew to be a high compliment by booking several dances with her at the next Club dance. She was aware that nothing but style appealed to him, and certainly from a strictly technical standpoint it was a pleasure to dance with him, but she experienced no keen gratification at his evident appreciation of her own achievements. She felt as if something in her heart had begun to cry like a child that will not be pacified, and she found it difficult to attend to anything else.

In the end she left earlier than she had intended, mainly to avoid her last dance with Noel, and went back to her father's bungalow in a state of great depression.

"I do hate being horrid to people," she said to herself ruefully, "though I don't suppose he cared in the least."

There was no disguising from herself that the evening had been a failure, though she knew that from the point of view of popularity she had scored a considerable success.

She found her father at his work, and with infinite tact and patience managed to detach him from it, though she strongly suspected that he would creep back to it as soon as she was safely out of earshot.

Very tired and dispirited, at length she lay down, feeling as if her whole world were awry. In her fatigue, she presently slept, but her brain could not wholly cast out the images of her waking hours. She went back to the Club in her dreams and watched Noel and Mrs. Forbes dancing together in a kind of endless maze of movement.

She did not want to watch them, but something held her watching. She noted again the almost wanton grace of the woman, the free and natural splendour of her gleaming form, the rapt and even trance-like ecstasy of her face. She had never seen the spirit of a dance expressed with such utter abandonment, and there was something about it that shocked her, she knew not wherefore.

Noel also—was this Noel, merry and trusted comrade—who went through that maze of dance with lips set in a kind of grim appreciation and eyes that saw only the dream in those eyes so near his own?

Again that curious sense of nausea came upon her, but this time from a different cause. Not on her own account did she feel her flesh begin to creep with a dread of she knew not what. Something was coming to her, some species of revelation hitherto undreamed of, but it was not for herself that she feared it. It was for Noel—her Noel—with whom she had been so angry only a short time before. It was because of him that she watched and waited.

Till then she had not been aware of the music to which those two figures were dancing. Her attention had been too fixed, too tense, for that. But now it obtruded itself upon her. For the careless jaunty rhythm to which she was accustomed had changed, and in its place she heard something fateful, something that had a note of doom. Was it the banging of a *tom-tom*—the chant of native voices? Her breath began to come quickly, as though it laboured against some overwhelming oppression. What was this? What was this? Before her dilated vision one of the dancers was changing—changing. Into the woman's beautiful rapt face had come a look as of some unknown element awaking. The eyes that had been half-closed were opened now, and in their depths there was a wolfish glare. They never left the man; they seemed to gloat upon him, almost they devoured him, while he danced on as one beneath a spell, unconscious. And through it all, the wild and dreadful music continued, like an incantation, like a dirge.

He did not know his danger, he must be warned. But—the knowledge came upon her like a thunderbolt—she was powerless. An iron force held her faculties. She could move neither hand nor foot, she could utter no word or even silent prayer. She could only watch—only watch—as he went down the way of destruction.

The music quickened; the crisis was at hand. The woman's face was no longer human. It was the face of an animal, incredibly craving, insatiably fierce. The eyes were alight with a fierce hunger. The red mouth was open and the bared teeth shone like the teeth of a snarling beast.

And still Noel did not see—could not realize—the danger. What she saw so clearly was evidently invisible to him. Or was he suddenly stricken blind to everything?

She knew not. All that she knew was that the end was at hand, and she was powerless to help or hinder.

It came very swiftly at last—a sound as of demons laughing that ended in a wailing shriek; and she saw the animal that had been a woman leap forward upon her prey.

In that instant she also saw the sudden dawning of a horror unspeakable in Noel's face . . .

Then the devilish bands that gripped her were loosed and she started up, gasping and inarticulate.

She was half-way across the room before she awoke, and then some sound unknown and dreadful still lingered in the air—the sound that had awakened her from her vision of terror. She stood with bated breath, listening, her hands hard pressed upon her heart. Ah, what was it? What was it, still vibrating like a message of evil in an atmosphere that filled her with despair? She knew not; for already, while she listened, it had died, and it came not again. It was only the dim echoes to which her normal faculties had been alive. It might have been the call of a jackal. Or it might have been India once more—the mysterious and tragic—crying out in her sleep.

PART III

CHAPTER I

RECONCILIATION

"So you've decided to cut me!" said Noel.

It was three days after the dance, and Peggy had not seen him since. She had in fact been at pains to avoid him, and had kept away from the Club also. But to-day, in company with Mrs. Hobart, she had come down to the race-course and he had almost immediately sought her out. She had not expected him to do so. During those three days she had been schooling herself to do without her old playfellow. She had been busying herself about the bungalow. There was so much to be done to make it attractive, and somehow she needed occupation very sorely just then. To devote herself to her father was her ideal, but it was one which she found very difficult to attain. He required so little of her. He still loved to have her ride up with him to inspect the nearly-completed viaduct, but he was wont to forget her presence very speedily when they reached the railway. And to be entertained on his behalf by Forbes was a state of things not to be tolerated.

Of Mrs. Forbes also she had seen nothing since the night of the dance, and she was not visible on the race-course on that sunny afternoon.

But Noel was as usual in the thick of everything, and he had come to her the moment she had descended from the Hobarts' car. She had not intended to allow herself to be detached from Mrs. Hobart, but circumstances had defeated her. Someone had called Mrs. Hobart aside and she had been left temporarily alone. There was no escape for her now, and she knew it.

Noel evidently meant to bring her to book for her treatment of him, and she was in the same hopeless predicament as usual because he could read her thoughts.

"So you've decided to cut me!" he said again, and she felt his dark eyes upon her, searching and finding.

She made a little gesture of unconscious appeal. "It doesn't really matter to you what I do, does it?" she said.

"Yes," said Noel quietly. "I hate being cut by you. It hurts."

Something stirred within her, and she knew it for remorse. Yet she had not wittingly done him an injustice.

"I don't know why it should," she said, and she tried to speak coldly, tried to smile heartlessly with the words.

"Oh, don't you?" said Noel. "How—shortsighted of you!"

He did not smile; in fact there was about him a hint of deadly earnestness that she found oddly comforting. Even if he were angry, she preferred him serious just then.

He went on after a moment. "If I have offended you in any way, don't you think we have known each other long enough for you to tell me so—instead of running away?"

She considered the point, the while her eyes watched the gay scene around her. Almost unconsciously she was searching for Mrs. Forbes, but she did not see her in the throng.

"You don't want to answer me," he said at last, and made a slight movement as if he would leave her.

That brought her attention fully back to him. She looked at him with troubled eyes, and met trouble in his own. Again she felt that stirring of remorse.

"No," she said. "I don't—specially—want to answer you. And—of course—I am not offended. I have no right to be."

"You have every right," he said impulsively.

She shook her head. "None whatever. I am sorry I cut your dance the other night. It was rude of me."

"Peggy," he said, "don't break my heart!"

She turned from his look, partly that she might not see the entreaty that it held. There was something about him in that moment that she found it inexplicably difficult to meet.

"Don't let's be silly about it!" she said, and this time her effort to treat the affair lightly was more successful. "It isn't a matter of life and death, is it? Do take me round to see the horses! I'm longing to go."

She spoke with as much finality as she could muster. There was an almost tragic element in the atmosphere that must be dispelled at all costs. To be taken to task was one thing, but to have Noel—of all people Noel!—humbly deprecating her displeasure was quite another, and it could not be permitted for a single instant.

But he did not at once comply with her request. He paused, as though he desired to say something further, something which he found hard of utterance.

Then, rather jerkily, with a boyishness that went straight to her heart, "I'm forgiven then, am I?" he said. "We are—as we were?"

She made a small impetuous movement towards him, but swiftly checked it. She must not—she would not—act upon impulse any longer.

"Oh, don't let's be silly!" she said again. "Isn't it rather hot standing here? Don't you think we might move?"

He took her at her word, and with that quickness of intuition characteristic of him he read and bowed to her desire. For the next twenty minutes they wandered about together, talking carelessly of impersonal things, and at the end of that time he escorted her punctiliously back to Mrs. Hobart with whom he exchanged some light-hearted *badinage* before he withdrew. Mrs. Hobart was one of those shrewd people who possess wit of a clean-cut and highly-polished variety which is not at the service or indeed within the scope of all comers. There were some who thought her dull, others who knew her to be brilliant. Noel was one of the latter, but, as someone had once said of him, Noel was a man to strike sparks from anyone. He had a genuine admiration for Mrs. Hobart, and, perhaps for this reason, she was more lenient towards his escapades than were some. He had the gift of retaining his general popularity even in the midst of disapproval.

"There is no getting level with him," was Peggy's thought, as she watched him go. Yet, curiously, she was glad that it was so. The thought of Noel worsted was intolerable.

And she was glad that they had not quarrelled, deeply and intensely glad. Though it seemed that her effort to avoid any intimacy with him had not been a signal success, yet she could not regret the obvious fact that he

valued her friendship. It sent a warmth to her heart that she had not known for some days.

She enjoyed that afternoon down on the race-course. She was beginning to feel her feet in the station and to be sure of a welcome wherever she went. At one moment Mrs. Ash waylaid her to ask her to tea, at another young Hadlow sought her out to suggest a ride, and Mrs. Griffiths—kind jolly Mrs. Griffiths—appropriated her for half-an-hour to discuss a projected picnic at which she had decreed that Peggy was to be her chief assistant.

The races interested her also, and she watched with elation when Noel rode one of his horses to victory. Considerable enthusiasm attended this event, and even Mrs. Hobart was moved to applause, though she quickly suppressed it with the remark that it did not do to take too much notice of him as his head was so easily turned. Peggy was aware that the observation was intended for her and accepted it in meek silence, once more registering her determination to be discreet at all costs.

She went back with Mrs. Hobart to tea, not expecting to see Noel again that day; but while they were still lingering over it on the verandah he appeared with Major Hobart and joined them. Again there followed some careless jesting between Mrs. Hobart and himself, and then he was seated beside her, and she knew that the object of his visit had been attained.

"I hope you were backing me this afternoon, Miss Musgrave," he said, with a formality that sounded comic to her ears.

She replied, smiling, that she had not backed anyone.

"What a waste of time!" protested Noel. "I could have given you no end of good tips. For instance, I knew quite well that I was destined to be a winner. I should have started with that."

"Do you always know when you are going to win?" said Peggy, stirring her tea. "That must be very useful."

"It is," said Noel. "Most useful. It saves a great deal of misspent energy. I never work for what I know I can't get."

"That doesn't sound very enterprising," she said.

"On the contrary," he returned, "it is the secret of all successful enterprise. If everybody said the same, we should all be winners."

"Or losers," said Peggy.

He laughed. “According to the point of view. It’s a great help to know one’s own limitations, anyway. To attempt too high a jump is a sure way of taking a toss. I’m quite sure you agree with me there.”

“I wonder what makes you so sure,” she said, drinking her tea to hide a faint sense of embarrassment.

“Oh, you have taught me that,” he said, with the smile that she never fully understood. “You are teaching me quite a lot of things.”

“What things?” said Peggy over her cup.

“I’ll tell you another day,” said Noel lightly. “But I’m avoiding the high jump at the moment, so you needn’t be nervous on that account.”

She knew that her colour rose a little despite her resolution, and was glad when Mrs. Hobart turned from careless chat with her husband and broke in upon them.

“Now what mischief are you perpetrating, Captain Wyndham? You are not to take Miss Musgrave over any high jumps with that skittish little animal of hers. I am sure she isn’t used to them.”

He turned to her in his most winning fashion. “I assure you, Mrs. Hobart, I would never lead anybody into mischief. It is quite the other way round. Miss Musgrave is leading me—by the nose.”

“Indeed she isn’t!” protested Peggy with spirit. “It isn’t my fault if you choose to follow.”

“That’s the way!” said Major Hobart, with quiet enjoyment. “Fling a stone or two at him, Miss Musgrave! You’ll soon shake him off. He never follows anyone for long.”

“But he’d follow his real owner to perdition,” retorted Noel. “That’s the sort of animal he is. You may not have met the breed before, Major, but it exists.”

“I should say the Irish variety is very rare,” said Major Hobart, humorously malicious. “But I am glad to know that it exists. Are you coming on to play tennis, my boy? If so, hurry up!”

“No, I can’t to-night,” said Noel. “I’m going back with Miss Musgrave to see Sir William.”

It was a bold move, and Peggy was not ready for it. “Oh, are you?” she said somewhat weakly.

Mrs. Hobart gave him a quick look, but said nothing.

"I want to ask his advice about the fifth green on the golf-course," said Noel unconcernedly. "I promised Ferrers that I would. The whole thing seems to be slipping down to the river-bank. He may be able to tell us what to do."

"Oh!" said Peggy. "I do hope he will!"

Noel smiled upon her suddenly and exclusively. "If I can't persuade him, you must!" he said.

She smiled back; it was inevitable. "I'll do my best," she said.

CHAPTER II

PLAYFELLOWS AGAIN

WHEN they left the Hobarts' bungalow, Peggy sent her *'richshaw* home and walked with Noel. The sun was sinking, and the air had the soft coolness of a summer evening in England.

"I wonder what they are all doing," she said.

"I don't believe you like India," said Noel.

"Oh, I do," she said. "I do. I am quite happy, but—" She broke off with a sigh.

"It doesn't sound like it," he commented.

"I've no reason to be anything else," she said, as if arguing with herself. "Daddy is perfectly sweet to me, and though I worry about him rather, I know it is unnecessary. He is no worse than he has been for years."

"And no better?" said Noel.

She shook her head. "No, I can't honestly say I think he is any better. I don't think my coming has made a great amount of difference. I don't think anything could. It's rather like trying to write an inscription on a stone that has been overgrown with moss for ages. And one sometimes wonders—" Again she broke off with a sigh half-uttered.

"What does one wonder?" said Noel.

"Whether it is worth while trying," she answered. "It might be—it might be almost cruel to wake him right up."

"Poor little thing!" said Noel.

She turned almost indignantly. "No, I'm not—I'm not! I am very well off indeed. Everyone is kind to me, and I am very lucky. I am beginning to have heaps of friends, and I have nothing whatever to grumble about. I'm not grumbling!"

"It's all right. I know," he said gently. "I quite see how you feel about your father, and it may be, as you say, kinder to leave him in his groove. But still, your coming out here hasn't been wasted effort. You have given him a certain amount of happiness by coming. And for yourself—"

"I don't think we need talk about myself," said Peggy. "I have told you I am quite happy."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that," said Noel. "And you never feel lonely—or cut off—in that bungalow up the hill?"

She shivered unexpectedly. How had he come to guess it? "It is a little lonely sometimes," she admitted. "Daddy doesn't mind it, so I don't see why I should. But it is rather eerie sometimes at night. I shouldn't care to be alone there."

"You never must be," said Noel with decision. "Look here, if you feel jumpy, why don't you make your *ayah* sleep in the room with you?"

"Oh, I should hate that," said Peggy, with equal decision. "I would never let a native think I was nervous, for one thing. And for another, I really am not. It's only sometimes, when one gets bad dreams."

"Do you have bad dreams?" said Noel.

The question surprised her momentarily. It had a peremptory sound, as though he realized that she would not wish to give him an answer, but was determined that she should do so.

"I suppose everyone does sometimes," she said.

"Not people like you," said Noel. "Tell me, Peggy! What are your bad dreams?"

She hesitated.

"Go on!" he said.

"Well," half-unwillingly she made reply—"I have sometimes thought I heard wailing sounds. But it is only the jackals of course. I know it is only the jackals."

She spoke insistently. For some reason she wanted to convince him on this point. She waited for him to make jest of her fears; but no jest came. He strode by her side in silence.

Glancing at him, she saw that his face was grim. "Why don't you tell me not to be silly?" she said.

His look came to her, and for a moment she actually thought that he was angry. Then she saw him smile.

"You can tell yourself that," he said. "I don't know anyone who can do it better. Anyhow, there is no reason whatever for you to be scared. You'll get nothing more formidable than monkeys or wild cats up there. I'll come and lie up with a gun and shoot some of them, shall I?"

"Oh no!" said Peggy. "I love the monkeys. They are company."

"Lucky monkeys!" said Noel. "But I'll tell you what you might as well have, and that's a dog. I've got the very thing for you, a little blighter called Jingo—no special breed—an absolute nailer for cats."

"Oh, but I'm not going to take your dog," said Peggy hastily. "I really couldn't. Besides, I'm not sure yet that I want one."

He laughed at her with easy audacity. "Oh yes, you are; and so am I. Jingo would love to come here. He wants a lady friend rather badly. We are all men down at the barracks, and we get on his nerves sometimes. Yes, you must have Jingo. Oh, not for keeps!" reading dissent in her face. "I'll lend him to you. I've got to find someone to look after him for a bit anyhow, for I'm going into camp up in the hills directly. So you'll take him, won't you? He's quite a jolly rascal."

"I'll have him till you come back if you are sure you would like me to," said Peggy. "But, as you say, not for keeps. What are you going into camp for?"

"Oh, just to shoot something," he said.

"Oh!" said Peggy abruptly.

"What's the matter?" he questioned. "There's nothing wrong in that, is there?"

"Of course not!" She looked embarrassed. "I was just thinking of something someone told me—about the life out here."

"What was it?" said Noel.

She told him, though it cost her a considerable effort. "That when the men get bored—with flirting—they just get leave, and go off into the hills—to shoot something."

"Very sensible too!" he commented.

"Yes, very!" agreed Peggy.

He walked on beside her for a few seconds. They had reached a line of pine-trees which threw long shadows across their path.

"And so you think that is what I am doing," he said at length.

Peggy was silent. She did not know why she had suffered herself to speak thus openly, but it was no unkind impulse that had moved her.

"Do you think so, Peggy?" he asked.

"I don't quite know," she said in a small voice. "I know it is very easy to make mistakes."

"Thank you for that," he said. "No one but you would have said as much."

She felt again that glow at the heart which had come to her in the afternoon. "You've nothing to thank me for," she said. "I don't want to think anything horrid of anyone."

"I know, I know," he said. "But you can't help breathing the atmosphere, can you? But I swear this to you, little comrade." He spoke with sudden feeling. "If you'll only go on believing in me as you used to, I'll never let you down."

His words brought her eyes to his, and again she saw that odd look of entreaty that had stirred her earlier.

"I am sure of that," she said simply.

He smiled at her again, dispelling all seriousness in a flash. "Don't ever forget it!" he said. "And look here! When may I bring Jingo along to make your acquaintance? To-morrow?"

"I am out to-morrow," she said.

"Then the next day?"

"And the next day, I am afraid."

"By Jove!" he said. "They don't give you much peace, do they? Well, I'll bring him along to the Club on spec one evening. I'm sure he'll fall in love with you at sight, like everybody else. Has young Hadlow proposed yet?"

"What do you mean?" said Peggy.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing at all! Much less than nothing!" laughed Noel. "I say, you will dance with me next Club night, won't you? I don't

mind Hadlow proposing as often as he likes, but I'm damned if I can see him take my dances."

Peggy flushed deeply. "I told you I was sorry," she said.

"Well, you're not to be sorry, child. Laugh—laugh!" he commanded. "Yes, that's better. Never be sorry again! I can't bear it. I know I shall pick you up and kiss you one of these days when you're not looking."

"Indeed you won't!" declared Peggy with severity.

"Shan't I? We'll see!" said Noel, with tantalizing merriment. "If I do, it won't be because I want to, you know. Only because I must. I want you to understand that beforehand, because motives are so important, aren't they? Nobody ever ought to be punished for anything else. Isn't that your creed?"

"I—I really don't know," said Peggy, somewhat bewildered. "But—I'll tell you one thing that is quite certain. If anyone—kissed me—without my permission, I would never speak to him again."

"What! Never?" joked Noel.

She tried not to laugh. "I am in earnest," she said. "It's—it's one of the rules of my life."

"I say!" He spoke with awe. "Have you had to tell many people that? You have? Oh, Peggy, Peggy! And what generally happens afterwards?"

Peggy turned from him and quickened her pace. "I think you are rather a pig!" she said, clearly and succinctly.

"*Mais que voulez-vous?*" laughed Noel. "I never was till you came on the scene, my Circe."

It was impossible not to laugh with him, impossible to be indignant. She had avoided him for three whole days, and the delight of seeing him again swamped every other feeling. In his presence, bad dreams and all other evils dwindled to nothing. She almost forgot that they had existed.

They went on up the hill together, talking absurdities; children once more, enjoying the present, careless of the future, while the shadows across their path lengthened and deepened and the sun sank over the desert.

They had passed the entrance to the Forbes's compound and were already nearing Sir William's when Forbes suddenly shot out of the latter in his car and raced down upon them in his usual headlong fashion.

Noel drew Peggy to one side with a muttered remark of a not very complimentary nature, and Forbes whizzed by without a sign of recognition. He turned into his own compound and the clamour of his car ceased with an abruptness that made the succeeding quiet seem abnormal.

"He'll come to grief one of these days," said Noel. "And serve him damn' well right."

"How you all detest him!" said Peggy.

"Well, don't you?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Peggy.

"Every decent-minded person does," said Noel. "I don't know how your father manages to endure him, but I suppose he is clever in his own line. You're shivering! Are you cold?"

"No, not really," said Peggy. "The sun has gone, that's all."

He glanced over his shoulder. "By Jove, yes! It'll be dark in a minute. Come along! You mustn't start ague."

He put his hand under her elbow and jogged her into a run.

In a way she was glad of the diversion, for she felt a strong reluctance to discuss the Forbeses with him, and she was relieved that he did not pursue the matter.

They reached the bungalow immediately after, and she led him straight to her father's room, guessing that he had just returned in Forbes's car and hoping to catch him before he settled down to work. He sometimes took a cup of tea before he began, and she counted upon the brief delay that this might cause.

"Can we come in, Daddy?" she said at the door. "Here is Noel. He wants to speak to you."

Sir William had just seated himself at his desk. The tea-tray had been set in its usual place at his elbow by the assiduous Sammy, and he was in the act of pouring some tea into a cup when the sound of his daughter's voice made him pause.

He set down the tea-pot with a bump that sent its contents splashing over the tray and turned. His bloodshot eyes peered at them with pathetic searching.

“So you want to be married, do you?” he said. “I knew it was coming. I’ve guessed it from the beginning. But I hoped it wouldn’t happen. Well, well! Come in and let me hear what you have to say!”

“Daddy! Daddy!” said Peggy blankly.

And then with quick reassurance Noel’s hand clasped her arm. He spoke into her ear.

“You run along, Peg-top! Leave this to me! I’ll put it right.”

She went as it were in spite of herself, hardly knowing what she did.

CHAPTER III

NOEL THE WONDERFUL

PEGGY went away to her own room in a state of mind that bordered upon distraction. Her father's words had come almost as an accusation. She reviewed them with a kind of horror. What would Noel say? What would he think? Would he imagine that the conclusion to which Sir William had so disconcertingly leapt had been in any way justified by any words or deeds of hers? Would he think—could he possibly think—that she had come to India to find him, the hero of her babyhood, and try to found a romance upon their early friendship? Oh, if he did think that, she could never, never face him again. All their newly-restored good-fellowship was over. They would become utter strangers—utter strangers—for the rest of their lives.

Strangers! Somehow the word stuck in her mind, seeming to revolve before her and display itself in every aspect. How would it go with her if they two became as strangers? If three days without the sight of him had seemed so hard to fill, so lengthy and so futile, how would it be if they never met again, or met only as strangers?

But this was absurd! She cast her mind back rather desperately. He could not be in any way indispensable. It was barely three weeks since her arrival, and previous to that three weeks they had not met or so much as written to each other for twelve years. How on earth had she managed to do without him for twelve years? It came upon her like a thunderbolt. Surely a brief three weeks had not wrought so devastating a havoc as this!

That was the word that best described the situation. It was devastating.

She had not the faintest idea how to deal with it, or even during that half-hour of most overwhelming consternation how to grasp it.

Up and down, up and down, she paced, dismissing her ayah almost angrily when she came to help her dress.

"I feel like an animal behind bars," she said to herself once. "What is the matter with me? Why should I care like this for a stupid, stupid mistake? When I see him again, he will laugh! But I won't see him again to-night."

She began to throw off her clothes in desperation. She must change, and it was getting late. But the thought of Noel's laughter was like a whip. She made herself endure it though each time it rose in her mind she shrank and flinched. He was probably laughing now, and she must laugh too. It was the only thing to do. She must laugh—laugh—laugh with all her might. Yet why was it so hard to laugh? Why did she have again the sensation as of something crying within her—something that would not be pacified? Why did she feel so frantic, so hurt? She was not one of those last-century girls who could never see a joke. She was not prim or demure or anything of that unspeakable nature. She was not afraid of men. She enjoyed masculine society. And she was not—oh, ye gods, she was not!—romantic. Then why this ridiculous feeling of dismay, of complete and irretrievable disaster? Why was she so routed, so hopelessly confounded?

Half-dressed as she was, she fell to pacing her room anew. There was something here that must be understood, something that must be faced before she could go any further. Across the lurid kaleidoscope of her emotions there was something written which she must stop and read. It was in no foreign language. It needed no interpreter. It seemed to challenge her with its clear simplicity. Yet over and over again she balked at it, hiding the eyes of her soul.

At the last, very suddenly she stood still and pressed her two hands very tightly over her face, not breathing, while she forced herself to meet the inevitable.

It leaped to her inner vision in letters of fire, dazzling her, hurting her, but she held herself firmly, no longer seeking escape. The reason for that crying—that piteous crying—within her! Resolutely at last she faced it, endured it, accepted it.

This was love! . . .

A long, long time passed, or so it seemed to her,—a time during which she thought she had not drawn a breath or stirred,—a time during which that mystic writing burned and burned itself into her, searing its indelible mark upon her soul.

At the end of that time there came a small, deprecating sound at her door, and she lifted a face of absolute pallor and saw Mirwani.

"What is it?" she said, and wondered oddly that her cold lips formed the words. "I told you to go."

Mirwani cringed a little and explained. Captain Wyndham *sahib* was waiting to speak with her, greatly desiring to see her.

"Oh!" said Peggy, and drew a long deep breath that seemed to bring her back to normal things. "Give him my compliments and say that I am sorry, but I am dressing and I cannot see him again to-night!"

Mirwani slipped away, and Peggy began to disrobe a little further. He would have to go now.

A few seconds and again Mirwani at the door! She entered apologetically. This time she bore a note.

Peggy took it, opened it as she was, under the light. And suddenly a great wave of burning heat went through her. Her pallor and her numbness went like snow flung into a fire.

"Dressed or undressed, I am going to see you to-night," said the note; bold words scrawled in a bold handwriting. "Are you coming to me, or shall I come to you? It won't be the first time that I have seen you wrapped only in a bath-towel!"

There was no signature to the note, and its jaunty touch was reassuring. But it did not deceive her. Noel was not to be diverted from his purpose, whatever that might be. He would certainly find a way to her, whether she sought to thwart him or not. She came to the rapid decision that she would be wiser to give in at once.

She addressed Mirwani with dignity. "Tell the captain *sahib* that I will join him in ten minutes, and then come back and help me dress!"

Mirwani departed again, and Peggy was left still in that strange and rather terrible glow as though a burning ray had penetrated her from head to foot. She looked down upon the note she held, and she tried to laugh; but her throat would only work spasmodically and she felt more like crying.

The return of Mirwani was a help. So far as keeping up appearances in the presence of natives was concerned, Peggy was something of a martinet. By force of habit she became brisk and practical.

An older woman would have stopped to consider which among her frocks would be the most becoming for the occasion, and would probably have taken some trouble to make herself presentable. But Peggy merely snatched the first that her *ayah* offered and dragged it on, adjusting her hair with scarcely a glance in the glass. Her main idea was to tackle the matter and have done with it as speedily as possible.

Yet when she was ready, she had the fresh sweetness of a windblown flower, and in her utter simplicity she might have been a little child again.

That was the thought that came to Noel when she entered the room in which he awaited her. He almost expected to hear her squeal of baby laughter at the sight of him. But she came in quite soberly, and her blue eyes held neither merriment nor greeting.

"Did you really want to see me again?" she said. "I thought you came to discuss that golf-course problem with Daddy."

He moved to meet her impulsively, undeterred by her impersonal speech. "Yes, little fairy-flower, I really did want to see you again," he said. "Please don't look so severe! It can't possibly be as serious as all that."

She faced him steadily. "Shall we be sensible for once?" she said. "Did you get Daddy to understand what you had really come for?"

He made a comic gesture. "Oh, yes, he understands. In fact, he is in some respects more far-seeing that we are. Peg-top, what have I done to make you cross?"

"I am not cross," she said. "But, please, don't call me Peg-top! You said you wouldn't, you know."

It was futile, even piteous in its way, her effort to establish between them at this stage a barrier of formality which had never existed. But it appealed to the man more strongly than any attempt at lightness. In that moment, though she knew it not, she scored a victory.

He bent and gently took her hand. "I will never call you anything that you don't like, dear," he said, and in his voice was deep sincerity. "All I care for on this earth is to make you happy. Don't you realize that?"

Her hand trembled in his. Her clear eyes remain uplifted, but they held distress. "It is very, very kind of you to say that," she said. "But don't say any more—please, I don't want you to say any more! Let us be just friends again—as we were before."

His eyes looked straight down into hers. They held a reverence and a tenderness which seemed to plead with her. "I want you to understand one thing," he said, "and then I will be whatever you like. It is for you to choose. Peggy, I worship you! I could kiss the ground under your feet. God knows—God alone knows—how I love you!"

"Oh, Noel!" she said, and there stopped, gazing up at him with those eyes of childhood seeking to read his soul.

"You don't believe me?" he said, and in a lower voice, "Perhaps you don't want to believe me!"

She shook her head. "Dear Noel, it isn't that. I—I do want to."

"Peggy!" he said and stooped to her.

She made a swift motion of restraint; the distress was still in her eyes. She set her free hand against his shoulder. "Not yet! Please not yet!" she said, and her voice was husky with deep feeling. "I—you will think me very horrid. I can't help it. You must. It has been much too quick, and—and—dear Noel, I'm not ready yet. I've got to be sure of—of us both. I want you to help me. There's no one else that can."

"Little darling, I'll do anything," he said.

She took him up gravely. "You mustn't call me that. It isn't cricket. And you said—do you remember?—you said it should be cricket all the way through. I must be sure—Noel, we both must be sure—that we are standing on solid ground. It seems to me that India is such a feverish place, and everyone does things in much too great a hurry. We mustn't do that. We must be quite, quite sure of each other first. You do understand, don't you?"

He bent his head with a certain humility. "Yes, dear, I quite understand. You have a perfect right to do as you wish, and you shall. All I want to say is this; whatever I've been and whatever I've done, I've never wanted to marry anyone on this earth—since my salad days—but you."

"Oh, Noel," she said, "is that true?"

"It is absolutely true," he made steady answer. "I'll tell you something more. If you hadn't come out here this cold weather, I should have been in England now."

"Oh, Noel!" she said again. "But why? How? I don't understand."

"I was coming back to look for you," he said.

"For me!" Her eyes grew round with surprise.

"Yes, for you." His hand closed more firmly about her own. "I never wrote to you all those years. That wouldn't have been cricket, little girl, if you like. But I always meant to try my luck with you if some other Fate didn't turn up meantime. And, you see, it didn't. As I say, I've never wanted to marry anyone else. And so this year I made up my mind to come and find you, before I got any older. But you,—Peggy, you came and found me instead."

"Oh, no!" said Peggy. "No!" She was trembling again, but her eyes never flinched from his. "I never knew you were here," she said. "I thought you were on your way home."

"Ah! So I should have been," he said, "if I hadn't heard in time."

"You heard?" Her eyes widened again. "How did you hear?"

He smiled at her suddenly. "Don't look so scared! It wasn't black magic, I assure you."

"Daddy told you?" she hazarded.

"No, it wasn't Daddy either."

"Then who?" She spoke with resolution. "Please tell me who!"

"It was a little bird called Joan," he said. "But it's a secret, and you mustn't let her know I told you."

"Joan!" Peggy went back a step. "You mean to say she wrote to you—told you I was coming?"

He began to laugh a little. "Yes. After all, why shouldn't she? She's my niece, as she was careful to explain."

"Good gracious!" said Peggy, flushing deeply. "I can't think how she dared!"

"You're not to pitch into her," he said. "I only told you so that you might realize that your father was justified in his prognostications and I really am in earnest. Is it so hard for you to believe in me, Peg-top? You used to have more faith in your old friend."

Again she checked him gravely. "This is quite different. It was very wrong of Joan to interfere. But it was entirely without my authority. You know that."

"Why do you say it?" he said. "I trust you, you see."

Her blue eyes held a strange, almost a foreseeing look. "Yes, you trust me," she said, "because you know that I am still an ignorant child in many ways. But not in all! We can't stay ignorant. Life won't let us. We have got to go on and learn things. And we have got to be careful how we learn. Please, you mustn't think me ungrateful. I am very glad to know that you wanted to meet me again. But you have got to be careful too. I may not be exactly what you want. You haven't waited to find out."

"My dear," he said, "I knew that the moment I saw you at Samdana."

She smiled a little, as it were in spite of herself. That moment was stored in her memory also for as long as she lived. But she would not be diverted from her point.

"That is just what I mean," she said. "You haven't waited to find out. You have just jumped to conclusions."

"Well, where else could one jump?" he said, encouraged by her smile.

She regarded him with renewed seriousness. "That is just it. There isn't much choice, and that is another reason for being careful. Oh, please, Noel, don't think me a pig! I am grateful, and I love you for thinking of it. But—don't let it be more than that yet! Let us give each other time to be quite sure! Then—then—when we are—if we are—we'll talk about it again."

Her beseeching air conquered him. Who could resist her—little Peggy of the forget-me-not eyes? He did not know that in yielding, he bound her all the more closely to him.

"How long is it going to take?" he said.

She gave his hand a small grateful squeeze, and released her own. "Oh, not very long, I should think. Didn't you tell me you were going hunting big game? Perhaps, after you come back—" She paused. "I suppose you will be back about Christmas?"

"Oh, before that!" said Noel. He also paused; then: "Christmas is my birthday," he remarked tentatively. "Wouldn't that be a nice day for—"

"Oh no!" said Peggy quickly. "Not if—"

He laughed. "Oh, I quite agree. Any old day would do for that. But"—he became serious—"if you haven't turned me down sooner—may I come to you then, and hear you say—Yes?"

She bent her head for the first time, hiding her face. He saw that she was quivering.

"Peggy!" he urged softly.

She made a small, pathetic movement. "If you still wish it yourself," she said, under her breath.

"My dear," he said, "there is no one in the world for me but you. There never will be. I'm going now. Thank you for your sweetness to me. Good night!"

"Good night!" she said, and gave him her hand.

He took it, bent over it, kissed it, and in a moment turned and went.

She lifted her head again as she heard him go, and in her eyes there shone a radiance which he would have given much to have seen.

"Oh, Noel!" she murmured, and clasped her hands together in a soft ecstasy as she drank that first deep draught of delight. "Noel the Wonderful! My Noel!"

The rapture of that moment thrilled her from head to foot.

CHAPTER IV

THE SAFE SIDE

IT was with some uneasiness that Peggy considered the matter of approaching her father again that night. The situation that he had precipitated, though it no longer actively embarrassed her, made her feel strangely defenceless and in a fashion half-afraid. It was so new a thing, this that had come to her. She wanted to clasp it close, to hide it deep, to look at it herself only in secret. She felt that any reference to it was barely tolerable. It was too wonderful, too sacred to be put into words even of the most reverent description. She remembered her father's previous warning and shrank. What would his attitude be now? She felt that to listen to any disparagement of Noel was more than she could bear,—Noel who had treated her with such chivalrous tenderness that she had almost told him then and there of her love, flinging prudence to the winds. She recalled the fact that he had always been chivalrous with her, and wondered if after all in imposing this time of probation she had not been unreasonable. It reminded her of a game she had played with him in childhood, in which he had had to cover his eyes while she hid herself from him. He had played it with scrupulous honesty, but it had always been a foregone conclusion that he would find her in the end.

"And he will find me now," she said. "It was really hardly worth while to try and hide."

Yet she could not seriously regret that she had done so. It was better to be on the safe side, even when one's heart was clamouring for utter surrender as was hers. The fact that they had been playfellows did not really entitle him to so easy a victory. She almost wished that they had not been, so that they might take a more impartial view of each other now.

"He will not believe that I have grown up," she said. "But for his own sake, he really must."

She did not expect her father to join her at dinner, and was considerably surprised when Sammy brought her a message to the effect that he hoped to do so.

She kept the meal waiting for him, and eventually he came, looking grave and somewhat anxious, but decidedly more alert than usual. They sat down together almost in silence.

The night air was chilly, and she had had the windows closed and curtained. Save for the silent-footed Sammy, coming and going in their service, they might have been in England. Peggy murmured as much after a little while.

Sir William looked at her. "England! Ah yes, England!" he said somewhat vaguely. "It's a better place for little girls than this wilderness."

She did not ask him what he meant. Something told her that this was the preliminary to more confidential talk. When dinner was over, and Sammy had placed the cigarettes at his master's elbow and withdrawn, she prepared herself with a certain resignation to listen.

But Sir William began to smoke with something of his customary air of absorption, and she was actually wondering if possibly he had forgotten the point at issue when very quietly but resolutely he spoke.

"Peggy, my dear, I want to have a little talk with you."

She looked across at him, her heart suddenly beating very hard. "Yes, dear. What is it?"

He patted the arm of his chair. "Come and sit here!" he said.

She went, though for some reason reluctantly. He put his arm round her as she sat down. "My poor little Peggy!" he said softly.

She leaned against him, her hand caressing his grey hair. "Please don't worry about me, Daddy!" she said.

He took the caressing hand, and held it against his cheek. "My little girl," he said, "you are the one person in the world that I do worry about—and ought to worry about. But—" he sighed deeply—"I am such a poor guardian."

"What nonsense!" she murmured tenderly.

"No, dear, no! It's true." He spoke with conviction. "I am not a fit person to have the care of you. I am too forgetful, too occupied with my work. They ought to have known it. Nick ought never to have sent you to me.

"He thought—we all thought—perhaps you might like to have me," whispered Peggy.

"I do, dear. Of course I do!" He pressed her hand more closely. "But I am not thinking of myself. I am thinking of you. And I am so unfit—so inadequate—for the task of watching over you. I might have known it would happen." He looked up at her. "Anyone might have known. Peggy dear, I don't want to hurt your feelings. I know that in coming out to me, you were actuated by a sense of duty. But—it was an unfortunate mistake; and I am going to suggest that you now rectify it by returning to England."

"Daddy!" she ejaculated in surprise. This was wholly unexpected; she did not know how to meet it.

He straightened himself in his chair, still holding her. "It would be far the best thing," he said. "This is no fit place for you. There are lurking dangers of which you have no conception. I am not in a position to guide or protect you, and, left alone, you will fall an easy prey. Peggy, I can't risk that. You are too precious, too much your mother's child for that."

"What do you mean—an easy prey?" questioned Peggy, bewildered. "Daddy, surely,—that is a very extreme view! I haven't met anybody so desperately wicked since I came here."

"No, dear, no! I daresay not." His anxious eyes surveyed her with an earnestness that moved her to the old throbbing pity. "You haven't found them out anyhow. Thank God for that! But there are dangers that you don't realize, to which it is not right that you should be exposed. And—" again he sighed deeply—"I can't guard you from them."

She leaned her cheek against his head. "My own dear Daddy!" she said. "You all seem to think that because I am young I must necessarily be very foolish. Why won't you tell me just what you are afraid of, and then I should be able to guard myself?"

"I did try to warn you," he said. "But it didn't make any difference."

"You mean about Noel?" she said, and her heart was beating in the word.

"Yes. Other men in general, Noel in particular." He spoke wearily. "I have had a long talk with him, and I believe he means well. But he is elusive, unstable. I have not been able to obtain anything satisfactory from him. He is a man of great attraction and great popularity, especially among women. And he is emphatically not one to whom I could possibly entrust my little daughter with an easy mind. I do not know whether I have any influence over you, my dear, but if I have—"

She interrupted him, speaking rather fast. "Daddy, dear, I think I'd better tell you straight away that I too have had a talk with Noel. And I love him

very much,—very much. But I have sent him away for the present, so that we can both make quite sure that there is no mistake."

"Ah!" He made a movement to look at her again, but she gently checked him. "You have really sent him away!" he said.

"For the present." She was still rather breathless from the effort she had made. "He is going off shooting, but is coming for his answer at Christmas, if—if I don't send it sooner."

"And he agreed to that?" questioned Sir William.

"Of course he agreed!" she said simply.

"Ah!" he said again. "That gives us—let me see!—how long?"

"Six weeks, Daddy," she answered, feeling anew that glow as of a flame spreading throughout her whole being.

"Six weeks!" he said slowly, as one in deep thought. "I wonder! I wonder!"

"Daddy, what are you thinking of?" she said, stabbed by a sudden sense of doubt.

"Only—" he spoke as one communing with himself—"only wondering whether if I worked day and night, day and night, I might do it."

"Do what, Daddy?" Her voice had a sharp ring of anxiety. "Please tell me what you are thinking of doing!"

"No, dear, no!" Very gently but definitely he uttered his refusal. "I don't even know if it is possible. I must talk to Forbes. Don't worry about it! I am glad you have put him off for six weeks. He is going away you say?"

"For part of the time," said Peggy. "But Daddy—"

He stopped her with the quiet authority of which she had had a glimpse once before. "That is enough, my dear. I am glad you have told me. I hope you will not see more of him than is absolutely necessary until he goes. You have done very well so far, and I am thankful it has gone no further. Now I must get to work. There is a great deal to be got through, and I mustn't waste time. You are not going out to-night?"

She was already on her feet. She looked at him with puzzled eyes. There was something about him that she could not fathom. Some change seemed to be taking place in him. He looked younger, taller, more active.

"No, I am not going anywhere to-night," she said, as he waited.

“Good!” he said. “I am going down to Forbes’s bungalow. Don’t wait up, dear!”

“I might come with you,” she said, on a sudden impulse. “I haven’t seen Mrs. Forbes for some time.”

“She has not been well,” said Sir William. “A slight attack of malaria, I think he said. You had better wait till the morning.”

It was his evident desire to go without her, and she yielded the point. But, as he turned to go, that fire which had been kindled within her, moved her to an action which surprised herself.

She laid her hand on his arm, detaining him.

“Daddy,” she said, with her pure eyes upraised to his, “I think I ought to tell you—it is only right that you should understand—that I am quite sure—really—of my own heart. And when—when he does come for his answer—it will be—Yes.”

The last words came with great steadfastness. She was determined that they should reach him.

He looked down at her for a second or two, and she wondered what was passing in his mind. Then he bent and with grave tenderness he kissed her.

“That is exactly what I do understand, my little girl,” he said.

CHAPTER V

THE VISION

A SMALL voice that was oddly like the voice of conscience disturbed Peggy's rest that night. It seemed to her that since that vivid and wholly unaccountable dream after the dance, she had not treated Mrs. Forbes quite fairly. She had not certainly avoided her, but she had been secretly relieved that they had not met, and it was equally certain that she had taken no steps to seek her out. All because of a totally unwarrantable mental picture which she was ready now to admit must have been produced by over-fatigue or indigestion!

Moreover, she had pardoned Noel for making himself conspicuous in her company. She had even to a certain extent admitted to herself that she had not regarded the affair with strict impartiality. For did not everyone dance with the partner who pleased him best nowadays? And yet she had not extended the same generosity to Mrs. Forbes, whom she had begun to regard in the light of a friend. She had not wanted to see her again, which of course was both absurd and unkind. And now that she knew that illness was the cause of her non-appearance during the past few days, her heart smote her.

"I've been a pig," she said to herself, waking in the early morning hours to that persistent voice. "I'll go down and see her to-day."

She had not slept well, but she found it quite impossible to sleep again. That strange glow was still upon her, seeming to possess her. Having silenced the voice that troubled her with a definite resolve, she gave herself up to it, basking as it were in the perfect sunshine of a bliss so great as to be almost incredible.

"Yes, it's just like coming into a blaze of sun," she said to herself. "I had no idea that it could be like this."

She revelled in its supreme delight like a flower opening wide to drink its fill of the glory. She began to recall all that he had said to her, dwelling tenderly upon each word, each look, each action. Noel the Wonderful, who would not take her, or even persuade her, against her will! She burned at the thought of how easily she might have been persuaded, wished for a space

that she had not suffered prudence to restrain her, and then unwished it again quickly, with cheeks on fire.

For after all, it had been her father and not Noel who had brought the matter to a head—poor dear Daddy who, with his crippled perception, had succeeded in precipitating the very crisis he had desired to avert!

Not that it had really made any difference! Noel had convinced her of that. It had been coming—coming—coming from the first. And now that it had come, would she desire it otherwise? A thousand times, No! It was the Grand Inevitable of her life.

The dawn broke with a glory that somehow exceeded all she had ever seen before. The parroquets in the compound resumed their quarrel exactly where they had left off the preceding night; but to-day their raucous voices had a musical sound. She wondered why. In the far distance, somewhere in the dim depth of clustering pines, another bird was calling, calling, with a sweet and plaintive insistence. She was sure that it was wooing its hidden mate.

Swiftly the sun climbed up the sky. Other sounds began to mingle with the bird-voices, and she heard a monkey chattering not far from the verandah. She found it impossible to lie still any longer, and got up and went out.

The splendour of the new day came upon her like a burst of rejoicing. She stood still with caught breath to meet it. It seemed to her that the whole world was changed. Her heart swelled with the wonder of it.

There came to her a moment of sheer rapture which she was to remember all her life. She clasped her hands with an instinct of worship which found no vent in words. And in that moment she knew that a vision had been granted to her. She beheld a new heaven and a new earth. . . .

She heard Mirwani moving in her room, and reluctantly she turned.

The *ayah* looked at her with a curiously awed expression as she entered. Did some of the glory still cling to her? Would Miss-*sahib* ride that morning as she had risen so early? No orders had been given, but if Miss-*sahib* desired, Hoosa should be told to saddle and bring her horse at once.

Yes, Peggy would ride. Tell Hoosa to hasten! She would be ready in a quarter-of-an-hour.

She dressed with the magic of the morning still running in her veins. Then, as she heard the Chimpanzee stepping daintily up to the door, she

went out into the full sunshine and mounted. The *saice* also looked at her with a certain awe. There was about her a radiance that could not be hidden.

As she mounted and rode away, it seemed to her that all the world was singing. She took the road up through the pines that led to the wide tract at the head of the valley whither Noel had guided her on their first ride together. Squirrels peeped at her as she passed, and here and there she caught sight of a flying-fox hanging asleep from a branch. The Chimpanzee went lightly as though he trod on enchanted ground. Did he also sense the miracle, she wondered?

On and up they went, quite alone under the pines, until at length they emerged upon the stony open ground from which the city of Ghawalkhand was visible and the cavalry-lines outside. The race-course and polo-ground shone green in the sunshine. She was going down to a polo-match after luncheon with Mrs. Griffiths. He would be playing, and he would come to them and make careless talk that would thrill her soul. Even now, at the very thought of him, she thrilled from head to foot. Noel the Wonderful!

The Chimpanzee was restless and she rode on till she came to a level stretch where it was safe to gallop. Then she gave him the rein, and they went like the wind on the wings of the morning.

She rode further than she had ever been before through the broken hill country in which her father's railway was making its slow and tortuous progress. The hour was still early, and she wanted to prolong it to the utmost, garnering like precious jewels the moments of a day never to be forgotten. She had a reluctance to share them with any, a feeling that in doing so the lustre would fade and she herself be forced to quit the enchanted region to which she had been given entrance. It was childish of course, for until she went back into the haunts of men she would not see him again. But yet she hesitated, so perfect was the vision.

At last on a high platform which even the light-footed Chimpanzee had found some difficulty in attaining she checked his further progress and stood quite still, above her the stony ramparts which she could not conquer, below her the little world of daily things, and beyond—far beyond—a shining, misty emptiness that was desert. And the ground on which they stood was holy.

The Chimpanzee was no longer restless. He stood like a sentry on the rocky platform, silhouetted against the flawless blue of the sky.

She stroked his neck with a loving hand. "We shall always be comrades after this," she said.

The growing warmth of the sun reached her, and after a space she turned her face to it with a blind gesture of homage.

"O God!" she whispered rather brokenly. "O God, thank You!"

Then she lifted the rein, and the Chimpanzee, stepping proudly, bore her down again from the holy place, back to the little world of daily things.

CHAPTER VI

OUT OF THE DEEP

NOT till they reached the edge of the pines did the glory begin to fade. Till then she rode as one in a dream; but as they took the steep track downwards she heard the lumbering of a bullock-cart in front of her and the yell of a native-driver.

She did not wish to overtake it, and turned aside on the pine-needles; but the spell was gone. Ordinary everyday life had claimed her again. She realized as she walked the Chimpanzee through the straight, pole-like trunks that she was getting hungry.

The sounds of the bullock-cart dwindled in the distance and she began to make a slanting line back to the track. The sunlight shone in dazzling shafts between the trees, now blinding her, now revealing every detail of her path.

She did not expect to meet anyone, and was scarcely looking where she was going when suddenly the Chimpanzee gave a violent start and shied to one side. She checked him with voice and bridle, and while so doing saw that which caused his fright—a huddled figure crouched close to her against the bole of a tree, its head upon its knees.

Her first impression was that it was a native curled up asleep, but almost immediately she saw that she was mistaken. The sunlight glinted down upon European clothes, and a large sun-hat lay on the ground at one side. The bent head was black indeed, but with shining glints of which no native woman could boast. Moreover, notwithstanding the unnatural pose, there seemed to Peggy to be something familiar about the bowed form. It had certain goddess-like curves that she knew.

Instinctively she reined in. Later, she wondered if it would have been the truer kindness to have passed on.

"Oh, what is it?" she said. "Are you ill?"

There was a convulsive movement like the shrinking of a trapped animal, then with a gesture of abandonment the dark head was lifted and her suspicion was verified. She looked down into the death-like face of Mrs.

Forbes. She almost recoiled at the sight, for it was ravaged and distorted by grief in a manner which made it scarcely recognizable. But not alone on that account. There was about the defiantly upturned countenance that challenged the pitiless morning light a look—a terrible look—which reminded her vividly of her dreams. The craving was there, the wolfish glitter of a devouring hunger. Peggy's heart turned sick at the sight.

Had the choice been hers then she would have ridden on; but it was too late.

"It is you," said Mrs. Forbes.

Her voice had a dull sound like a muffled instrument. She put up a hand with an uncertain gesture and made a motion as if to clear some obstruction from before her eyes.

Even as she did it, the glitter died out of them, and in a moment Peggy's horror turned to soft compassion. She slipped out of the saddle, and led the Chimpanzee to a tree with a jutting branch to which she could fasten him. Then she returned to the woman who still crouched on the ground.

The dreadful agonized face was covered then by shaking hands, and as she stooped she heard a sobbing that went straight to her heart.

"Oh, let me help you!" she said, and kneeling wrapped her warm young arms about the quivering form.

It yielded to her without resistance. It seemed as if that brief challenge had been the final effort, as if passion had wreaked itself to the point of exhaustion, and bitter weeping were all that was left. Yet to Peggy, kneeling there, it was a measure of relief to know that tears were possible.

"Lean on me!" she whispered while she sought to pillow the bowed head on her breast. "You will soon be better."

But many minutes passed before the anguish spent itself, and by then the head she sought to support had sunk low and rested face downwards upon Peggy's knees.

Peggy sat very still with one hand gently pressing the dark hair while the paroxysm lasted, but as at length it began to pass she stirred and made a stroking movement over and over with infinite patience and a sympathy too fine for any expression in words.

Mrs. Forbes spoke at length in a broken whisper, "You are very good to me."

"I want to help you," Peggy answered gently.

"You can't, my dear." A trembling hand came upwards and held hers. "I'm on the rocks, and it would take more than even your sweetness and humanity to push me off again."

"I can anyhow try," murmured Peggy.

A long shiver went through the huddled form. "You can sow water-lilies in the desert, but they won't grow," said the quenched voice.

There fell another silence between them, Peggy's fingers clasping the hand that had taken them.

Perhaps there was healing in her touch or at least a comforting quality, for at length Mrs. Forbes stirred and slowly lifted herself.

"Thank you," she said. "You have done me good."

"Can't I do something more?" asked Peggy gently.

"What more could anyone do?" said Mrs. Forbes, in a tone of dull wonder. "And who in this hell of social convention would have done as much?"

It was the utterance more than the words that shocked Peggy. She spoke with a hint of authority. "Please don't! There is no need to talk like that. You know I would do anything to help you, don't you? Other people don't come into it."

"They certainly don't!" said Mrs. Forbes drearily.

She turned her beautiful face, all marred and ravaged by misery, to the girl with an unconscious gesture of appeal. And Peggy in sheer loving compassion bent forward and kissed her.

The effect of her action was electric. Mrs. Forbes drew back sharply, gazing at her almost with accusation in her eyes. "What made you do that?" she said.

Peggy held out her arms. Her own eyes held tears. "Dear Mrs. Forbes, please forgive me!" she said. "But I was so sorry for you, and, after all, I have always loved you as if you were a friend."

"Oh, child!" The older woman went into those opened arms almost as one taking refuge. "Do you offer me—friendship?" she said. "A girl like you!"

"Why not?" said Peggy, clasping her. "Of course—of course I do!"

She felt herself gathered into an embrace that was passionate, and again for an unwarrantable instant she visualized an appalling hunger that nothing could satisfy. Then she braced herself and cast the evil vision from her. Her own hold became warmly spontaneous.

"Of course I do!" she said again.

There followed another short silence, then with more restraint Mrs. Forbes released herself.

"You will never know what you have done for me, Peggy," she said. "Don't ever call me Mrs. Forbes again! Call me Marcella!"

"Marcella! What a lovely name!" said Peggy. "It was made for you. May I really call you that?"

"Yes, child, yes." She caught back a heavy sigh. "It reminds me—somehow—of my old school-days to hear it from you."

"Where were you at school?" Peggy said.

"Oh, in Europe,—Geneva, Paris; never anywhere for long." She put up her hands to her disordered hair and began to smooth it back.

"Never in England?" said Peggy.

She smiled wanly. "For one term only, when I was fifteen. But I knew too much, or they were jealous of my dancing; I never knew which for certain. So I was sent away."

Peggy had the wisdom to ask no more. She watched her for a few moments in silence, then turned and, with the impulse to help, picked up the shady hat that lay on the pine-needles.

The next instant she uttered a sharp exclamation of dismay. There was something else lying in the pine-needles, something that had been hidden beneath it—a small object that shone like silver in the sunlight.

Marcella Forbes reached out and took it into her hand. "Don't look so shocked," she said. "I generally carry it with me when I go out alone. I am never without it at night. Haven't you got one?"

"A revolver! Why, no!" said Peggy.

"It's a good thing to have. You never know what devilry natives may be up to when you are unprotected. It's only a toy, and doesn't take up any room."

She dropped it into a pocket with the words, and Peggy acquiesced in silence though with a deep disquietude. If that were all, why had it ever left its usual hiding-place? Marcella did not even take the trouble to suggest that it had fallen out.

Somehow the finding of the weapon seemed to put an end for the moment to further intimacy between them. Even a touch of shyness descended upon Peggy, making her half-afraid of intruding upon her new friend's privacy.

Moreover, with returning composure she saw that Marcella was making a strong effort to behave normally, and to support her in this was apparently the only way in which she could help her just then.

She did her loyal best to do so, and in a few minutes they were talking together as though they had but casually met in the pine-wood.

The moment for confidences, if it had ever existed, was plainly past, and very soon Marcella suggested that she ought to be going back.

"I will stay a little longer," she said; and then, as Peggy looked inclined to demur, "Don't you bother any more about me, dear! I shall be all right now."

"You are sure?" Peggy said, lingering. "I heard you had been ill."

"Yes, dear. It was a touch of fever, and it always makes one feel suicidal. But I am much better. You have saved me from the bottomless pit this time. Perhaps there won't be a next." She laughed, and somehow the sound had in it the harsh dryness of the desert. "Good-bye!" She put her arm round Peggy. "Come and see me soon!"

"Oh, I will!" Peggy promised. "I will!"

She kissed her a second time, and then turned aside to the waiting Chimpanzee.

He was chafing to be gone, and Marcella held him while she mounted. Then, as Peggy prepared to move away, she did a strange thing. She bowed her forehead for an instant upon Peggy's knee.

When she raised her face again it had the statuesque look which it had worn at their first meeting. And the heavy-lidded eyes veiled her soul.

CHAPTER VII

STATION GOSSIP

WHEN PEGGY arrived at the Railway Bungalow, as someone had christened her father's abode, an unexpected sight awaited her. An unknown native servant in the form of a huge Pathan with a black beard was walking up and down, leading a most unwilling terrier on a leash.

She recognized the latter in a moment, having seen him before in Noel's company—a white dog of undistinguished parentage, with a longish tail that curved over his back like a mark of interrogation and a black blot over one eye that gave a rakish touch to an otherwise rather earnest countenance.

"It's Jingo!" said Peggy.

She slid to the ground, giving her horse up to her *saice* who was watching for her, and went to greet him.

At the first sound of her voice he had begun to leap and strain to reach her, completely spoiling his attendant's stately *salaam* by his impetuosity, by which Peggy gathered that a native escort did not appeal to him.

She took the leash from the servant's extended hand and was instantly overwhelmed by Jingo's ecstasies. He made desperate attempts to fling himself into her arms, and would not be satisfied until she gathered and clasped him to her, a kicking, joyous bundle with a tongue of marvellous agility that seemed to lick in all directions at once.

The native servant stood by in dignified immobility till the first wild effusion had spent itself and Peggy had set the wriggling Jingo once more upon the ground. Then, as she turned to him, he *salaamed* again deeply and presented her with a note in a sealed envelope.

"From Captain Wyndham *Sahib*," he said.

Her first letter from him! She felt her heart leap oddly as she held it in her hand. Somehow she could not open it in the presence of this stately individual who stood awaiting her pleasure. Leading the now overwhelmingly willing Jingo, she turned aside and entered the bungalow.

In her own room she gave him a drink which he splashed freely and noisily on all sides in his desire to demonstrate his appreciation, and then she sat down and broke the seal of that precious letter, which had come straight from Noel's hand.

It would not be a love-letter of course! It could not be under the circumstances. But Noel was Noel, and he might—conceivably—allow himself a little license in addressing her.

He had.

"To the Queen of all the Forget-Me-Nots" (so it began).

"My Darling,

"Here is Jingo with my love and charged with a great many kisses which I do not doubt he will deliver faithfully! In this I am not saying anything that I have no right to say, or that I would not have said to you years ago. I loved you then. I worship you now, Peg-top, my own. Turn me down as you yet may, there will still be a bit of you that can never belong to anyone but me, adored little playfellow of the Early Ages! Do you remember that scrimmage we had the day you ran amok in a bath-towel? Beloved, I caught you then. Why didn't I keep you for ever and ever? I wonder whether I seem very old to you. I am sorry I am Joan's uncle. It is a distinct handicap; but I am not quite on the shelf yet. I rather think she suspected the fact when she wrote. Darling, all this is the preliminary to telling you that in my heroic endeavour to observe the rules of cricket as she is played by the English, I am off already into the hills for a shoot, and I shall not see you again for perhaps five weeks. Leave has been due to me for some time, and it came through just at the crucial moment. I wish I could see your face as you read this. Are you smiling or are you sad? One thing, little darling, I know I shall not ask in vain. Keep your prayers just as they are until we meet again! It will comfort me when I am watching the stars in camp at night all those miles away from you to know that my name is still in your mind if not your heart, and sometimes on your beloved lips. Oh, for those lips for one divine moment! Peggy, Peggy, I am dying of thirst, and I am going to a very thirsty land. Remember me, sweetheart, for good, won't you? I am trying to be really good for your sweet sake; and it isn't always easy, Peg-top mine. But it all comes into the great Game which, please God, I am going to win.

"Your's for ever,

"NOEL.

"P.S. You may trust Jingo to the death; he knows a lot."

At the foot of the page was a circle finely drawn and these words:

"I have left a kiss in the very centre for you. If you love me, receive it on your lips! I think I shall know.—N."

She was alone in the room with Jingo who watched her with bright intent eyes, almost as if he knew. But anyway he couldn't tell, that was certain. So how could Noel possibly know if— She hesitated. Was it a risk? He read her so closely when they were together. But they were not together now, would not be for a very long time. Moreover, did she really desire to keep him ignorant? Was he not playing the game for her sake?

Again the glow of her vision caught her, overwhelmed her. She bent and set her lips fondly, closely, passionately, upon the magic circle that his hand had traced—the circle that held his kiss.

In that moment Jingo leapt to his feet with a loud bark that sounded like a whoop of delight, and as she started and looked at him she read hilarious triumph in his shining eyes.

"Yes, I'm sure you understand," she said to him with laughing embarrassment. "But you can't tell anyone, so it doesn't matter."

Jingo's eyes laughed back at her and clearly said, "Ho! Can't I?"

And so their friendship began.

Her father had gone to his work up the valley, and the hour was growing late. Resolutely she called herself back to daily life. Noel was gone. She would not see him at polo that afternoon, and the prospect to which she had been looking forward more than she knew had now become flat and uninteresting. What did it matter to her if Mr. Hadlow should choose to come and sit beside her, selecting her for his especial attention as he undoubtedly would in Noel's absence? Or if Captain Broadbane should profit by the occasion to try and develop a little flirtation? What did any of them matter now? In conjunction with Noel's sparkling presence they amused her. Without it, they were no more than a handful of ashes. Their conversation was pointless, their wit without edge.

The exaltation of the morning had given place to a most unwonted depression. Though she carried that precious letter very close to her heart,

she could not cast out a very definite feeling of sadness. He had gone away again without saying good-bye, and though she knew she was utterly unreasonable, she wanted him back to repair the omission. Why, oh, why had she told him that she was not ready?

But for that, he would have been with her now. But for that, his lips would already have met hers, in very truth sealing her for his own. But she had sent him away, and he had gone—thirsty. Oh, little did he know how great a thirst he had left behind!

When she went down to *tiffin* with Mrs. Griffiths, she had to a certain extent mastered her low spirits, but a veiled sense of having made a mistake still hung upon her, and she was powerless to shake it off. Once again, and very earnestly, she longed for Nick.

She found it difficult to rivet her interest upon the polo later, though she strove with all her might to do so. She had never before realized how empty a crowded place can be.

Mr. Hadlow came to her exactly as she had anticipated, criticizing the play for her benefit, and evidently trying to make himself agreeable—an unusual mark of esteem on his part which she somehow completely failed to appreciate. She responded courteously as was her wont, but she knew that she was uninteresting that afternoon, and her attention wandered in spite of her.

Kind Mrs. Griffiths presently came to her rescue and despatched the young man to procure some tea.

"Don't let him tire you, child!" she said, as he departed. "I know young Hadlow the Highbrow, and I never let him talk to me for more than ten minutes at a stretch. We must get hold of someone else before he comes back."

Peggy did not actively abet this somewhat shabby manœuvre, nor did she oppose it; and Mrs. Griffiths succeeded in installing another subaltern at her side before the return of Mr. Hadlow. The latter, who never condescended to divide the honours with any man, speedily removed himself, and a little later, Peggy's companion being called away, she found herself alone.

Mrs. Griffiths and Mrs. Ash were standing close to her, chatting in an undertone, and something of their talk reached her from time to time, though she was not consciously listening.

"The most extraordinary case of fever I ever heard of," so said Mrs. Ash. "You know the symptoms as well as I do. Doesn't everyone? Of course it wasn't really up to me to do anything, but I thought it was only kind, more especially as . . ." her voice dwindled down to a whisper and gradually recovered, leaving a few words inaudible, . . . "so I went round, and what do you think I found?"

"Opium," said Mrs. Griffiths with decision.

"No, no! I don't say that. I've never been absolutely satisfied on that point, though I admit there are indications. No, that wasn't what I meant. A woman of that sort, you know,—they know how to hide the traces. No, I didn't mean that. I meant . . ." here her voice dwindled again, and again after a few words came back,—the bedside whisper of the trained nurse which is apt upon occasion to defeat its object . . . "so I insisted upon seeing her, practically forced my way in. A thankless task of course! It always is with those people,—dark blood, you know. But I did it for my own peace of mind."

"I think it was very brave of you," said Mrs. Griffiths, while Peggy wondered idly to what native haunt the zealous ex-nurse had managed to penetrate.

Mrs. Ash uttered a low, complacent laugh. "I can tell you it wasn't easy. But anyhow I got there. I generally do when I make up my mind. And of course—as I suspected—it wasn't fever at all. I couldn't see very much, the place was so dark, and she was lying crouched up in a heap. They always crouch, you know. Rather like animals, don't you think? Well, I went up to her, and I began to ask her how she felt—I always try to be cheery—when she turned on me like a tiger-cat, and—" the rest of the sentence was lost in a whisper so low that even Mrs. Griffiths had to hear it twice, but in a few seconds the recital had become audible again. "Just as if I had gone there for my own pleasure! They are all alike. No European would have dreamed of behaving in that disgraceful way. Well, coming out, who should I run into but her husband. He was looking like thunder, but naturally—for appearances' sake—I stopped to speak. But, my dear Mrs. Griffiths, the man was actually insulting in his manner and almost brushed me to one side. It was not till I was back in my *'richshaw* again that the reason of it all dawned on me. I had heard rumours of it before, and this absolutely confirmed it. Her condition was simply the result of his cruelty. They had had a frightful row, and he had been beating her."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" said Mrs. Griffiths, and for some reason unknown to herself Peggy turned round and regarded them with earnest attention.

"They say it is so," averred Mrs. Ash. "I have never paid any heed to it before, but I am sure of it now. They say the man is absolutely merciless. No doubt she drives him to distraction. And I believe he treats her like a dog when he is roused. I have always known he had a wicked temper. Have you never noticed that slow gloating way he has of moving his eyes? It's a sure sign of cruelty. And it accounts for so much—Noel Wyndham for instance—the soul of chivalry as we all know, and rather apt to let his feelings run away with him. She is a dangerous subject for his pity though, for I am sure she is quite unscrupulous. Someone ought to warn him."

At this point Mrs. Griffiths became aware of Peggy close to her, and made a swift signal to Mrs. Ash, who after a quick glance murmured a few words and moved away.

Peggy's eyes met those of Mrs. Griffiths very steadily and resolutely. She spoke with schoolgirl honesty.

"I didn't really mean to listen, but I'm afraid I heard."

Mrs. Griffiths looked somewhat embarrassed and uncertain as to the best way of handling the situation. Eventually she smiled.

"My dear child, what does it matter? Station gossip goes round and round. It is bound to reach you sooner or later."

"I see," said Peggy gravely; and then in a moment: "You were talking of Mrs. Forbes, weren't you?"

Mrs. Griffiths hesitated. Quite plainly she did not want to answer, but Peggy, waiting patiently, was not to be ignored.

"Well, my dear," she said at last, "since you know so much, I may as well tell you that we were. But don't let it go any further!"

"Thank you," said Peggy. "I won't."

CHAPTER VIII

BOBBY

It was with an immense relief that Peggy found herself free at last to go back to her solitude. Mrs. Ash's narrative lay like a coiled serpent at the back of her mind, and there was something about it that frightened her. She had not understood it fully in the telling; it came to her by degrees as she walked about the dusky compound with Jingo. She had often wondered why Marcella Forbes had always occupied so lowly a place in the general estimation, and though she had told herself that it must be the result of military prejudice that explanation had never fully satisfied her. She herself could not claim to belong to the military element, yet her status was unquestioned. People were getting almost too kind in short, and her hours of leisure were dwindling. She was going to a dance at the Club given by the Hobarts only that night. She had promised Mr. Hadlow several dances; young Worthing also, and Captain Broadbane, not one of whom held the faintest interest for her. Marcella would not be there, and now she knew why. It was only to Club dances that she had the *entrée*. To those which came under the jurisdiction of The Great Triumvirate it had been decreed that she should be denied admittance. And this because Marcella with all her beauty and grace was not good style, not a person to know intimately, emphatically not an equal. She behaved as no European would have dreamed of behaving. Those words burned Peggy, almost as though they had been applied to herself, so calm in their utterance, so fateful in their significance. And those other words which at the time had conveyed so little, —they haunted her now . . . "Dark blood, you know," . . . So that was the reason for everything! Poor, beautiful Marcella was of mixed birth. She saw it clearly now, and wondered that she had not done so before. That dark rich loveliness was no Western heritage. The languid grace of her, the perfect curves, the hidden fire, what but an Eastern sun could have gendered these? It seemed that she was too beautiful for the circle in which she moved. Her charm far exceeded that of any other woman she had met, but it was her curse. They would have none of her. Had she been small and insignificant, she might have been granted a certain tolerance, but the ripe splendour of her was such as could not be ignored, or so it seemed to Peggy, and so they

cast her out. She was like an exquisite pomegranate which some cruel hand had labelled poisonous.

As to the probability of the rest of Mrs. Ash's revelations and deductions, she had no doubt whatever. The very thought of Forbes made her shiver, so deeply had he inspired her with loathing. Her aversion was instinctive and physical. As Mrs. Ash had said, he carried his cruelty in his eyes. He was a man who would not only inflict pain, but would revel in the infliction.

"He would make a good torturer," she said to herself with a shudder.

And the thought of Marcella at the mercy of such a man made her very heart shrink. He was the type who would degrade a woman to the level of the beasts of the jungle.

She saw her as the victim of prejudice and cruelty, the hapless sport of Fate. Small wonder that Noel with his ready and chivalrous understanding had taken compassion upon her! She saw it all now. He had not stopped at compassion. He had given his generous and ungrudging friendship, scorning the petty rules of conventionality by which they had sought to fetter him. Others might conform to whatever fetish they were pleased to set up, but he acknowledged only the dictates of his own great heart. Where he gave, he gave freely, heedless of the cost.

"And I will do the same," said Peggy, with sudden resolution. "Yes, I will do the same."

There came again to her the memory of the wild abandonment of grief through which she had supported Marcella that morning, and her swift and passionate acceptance of the friendship she had offered. Had the cause of that terrible outburst been the utter desolation of friendlessness consequent upon Noel's departure? Was he in truth the only friend she had? She recalled how he had tried to enlist her sympathy on Marcella's behalf. It all pointed to the same thing. Poor, friendless Marcella, wrecked by her beauty and the dark strain in her blood!

Yes, she would be a friend to her. Again she registered her resolution. Whatever the other women of the station might do or say, Marcella should have one friend of her own sex who was not afraid or ashamed to stand by her. Added to her own increasing affection for the outcast was a sense of co-operation with Noel which made her task all the more welcome. In this thing she and Noel would be partners, and even in his absence she would feel that they were working together, that possibly she was doing more than he himself could have accomplished by her loyal championship. When he

returned he would be grateful to her for having undertaken it, and she warmed to the thought of his gratitude. She had never done anything for him before.

Time was growing short, and she called to the cheerful Jingo and went indoors. She had no keen desire to go to the Hobarts' dance, but neither had she any valid excuse for remaining away. Her father was later than usual and had not returned, and the bungalow felt deserted. She was glad to have Jingo sitting by her side through the solemn meal of which she had to partake before starting for the evening's entertainment. He had completely adopted her for his own. She could almost believe that he welcomed the change of owners, so complacent was his attitude.

He looked a little wistful when she took him to his corner of her room and fastened him up prior to departure, but he lay down with philosophical acquiescence before she left. She gave him a tender kiss of farewell as a reward. She was getting very fond of Jingo.

Passing the Forbes' bungalow in her *'richshaw* a few minutes later, she peered through the trees and descried a light, but she heard no sound save the padding of her *coolie's* feet on the road. She resolved to go thither in the morning.

The Club as usual presented a scene of considerable animation, and the ball-room under Mrs. Hobart's able superintendence had blossomed into an Oriental magnificence which rendered it like the bower of an Arabian Nights princess.

Peggy was surrounded from the moment of her entrance, and though Noel was absent and though she had not wanted to come, her spirits rose as it were in spite of her. She found herself exchanging gay *badinage* with Captain Broadbane, a kindly officer with a well-bred nose and an inconspicuous chin, whose easy and quite harmless flirtations were proverbial. She saw Ronald Hadlow in the distance looking superciliously in her direction and, also superciliously, failing to see her; and a gay little spirit of provocation entered into her. Hadlow the Highbrow and his aspirations mattered nothing to her. His sole recommendation in her eyes was that he was the best dancer in the room, and that consideration was not of paramount importance in her estimation. She certainly did not care in the faintest degree whether he approved of her conduct or not.

Captain Broadbane thoroughly and most obviously enjoyed her favour. Quite unconsciously he was accustomed to being treated as a foil, and to hold the attention of the most popular girl in the community was a feat of no

mean value in his eyes. He availed himself of his good fortune to try to persuade her to ride with him on the following evening. No, to-morrow was the day of Mrs. Griffiths' picnic up in the hills, so she was afraid that was impossible. The next day then; he knew of a place that he was quite sure she had never seen. Would she come that day? Peggy was elusive. She might have an engagement. She was not sure. Might she let him know?

"That means you are hoping to go with someone you like better," he said.

She smiled upon him serenely. "Well, there is nothing to prevent you doing the same," she said.

He protested with amiable indignation, but she would not listen. He was quite an amusing companion for a little while, but she had no intention of committing herself to his society indefinitely. He was the type that became a bore after very brief acquaintance.

It was while they were dancing together that he imparted a piece of information that she had not previously heard. The Bobby Frasers had arrived in Ghawalkhand.

"In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if they turned up here to-night," he added. "Mrs. Bobby never misses a dance if she can help it. I suppose you haven't met them yet?"

"Oh yes," said Peggy. "I travelled out with them a month ago."

"Did you indeed?" said Captain Broadbane, and laughed his jolly inane laugh. "I wonder how you liked that."

As it was merely an idle wonder, Peggy did not feel called upon to answer it. She had known that the Frasers were expected, but somehow the news of their arrival gave her a feeling of dismay. She did not want to endure the criticism of Mrs. Bobby's cold eyes again, though if only Noel had been there it would not have mattered. He had the happy knack of making every burden seem lighter, and he always protected the oppressed. Very fully had she come to realize that.

Within half-an-hour Captain Broadbane's surmise was justified, and Bobby and Mrs. Bobby entered. Mrs. Hobart made them welcome in her detached dignified way. With her excellent sense of proportion she had permitted Mrs. Bobby to regard herself as the species of friend who is privileged up to a point. Beyond that point, which was very delicately but quite indelibly indicated by Mrs. Hobart, she had never penetrated. No one ever knew whether Mrs. Hobart liked or disliked a person, but everyone

knew the exact status of intimacy to which that person was admitted. That the Frasers should arrive thus uninvited was quite in order. Mrs. Hobart was definitely pleased to greet them. But Mrs. Bobby did not drop in to *tiffin* with Mrs. Hobart. That was a different matter.

At the end of her dance with Ronald Hadlow, who was in one of his most distant moods, Peggy went to pay her respects to her late chaperone.

She was greeted by Mrs. Bobby with a brief, "Oh, here you are! Getting on all right?" and a handshake which involved fingers only.

There was a slight flicker of the tight eyelids as this took place and a faint curl of the thin lips which told Peggy very clearly that in Mrs. Bobby's estimation she was exactly where she had always been and that by no effort of her own would she ever climb any higher.

Bobby greeted her with his usual geniality, however, and she experienced genuine pleasure in meeting him again.

"I say, you will dance with me, won't you? Of course I know your card is full and all that, but you'll cut one or two for me for old times' sake, or I shan't take the floor at all."

She showed him her card, and he at once approached Hadlow who, he declared, had far too many. Peggy was beginning to be of the same opinion, and she was not at all regretful when Hadlow magnanimously withdrew in Bobby's favour, asserting that he was really not in a dancing mood. He then transferred his favour to Mrs. Bobby, who was by no means unwilling to avail herself of it.

"And how are you enjoying yourself?" Bobby wanted to know. "Oh yes, rather, we've had a ripping time at Delhi, but tell me about yourself! You're not married yet, I hope?"

She assured him she was not with an emphasis that made him laugh.

"What are they all thinking about here? Or are you hopelessly hard-hearted? By the way, a friend of yours is coming to us in a week or two. I expect you have forgotten his very existence, but I assure you he hasn't forgotten yours."

"Do you mean Captain Turner?" said Peggy.

He laughed again. "Good guess! So you haven't forgotten him! Lucky Tiggie!"

"But then I don't forget people," Peggy pointed out. "And after all, it's only a month ago, though I admit it does seem much more like a year."

"Well, I hope we are going to see plenty of you now we are all together again," said Bobby heartily. "What's the latest from home? Have you heard from Nick?"

"Either from him or Aunt Muriel by every mail," said Peggy proudly. "Isn't it just like them? Everything is going on all right, and they are all going to Joan's home for Christmas, so that they won't be too miserable without me, Uncle Nick says."

"Let's see! Who's Joan?" said Bobby. "Oh, I remember! That awfully pretty little girl who came on board with you! She and Nick's lad were great pals, weren't they?"

"Oh no!" said Peggy. "Not at all!"

"Perhaps you weren't looking!" laughed Bobby. "Didn't you tell me she was some relation to Noel Wyndham? Or did I dream it?"

"She is his niece," said Peggy. "Don't you remember? I'm sure I told you all about it when we were on the *Pioneer*."

"You did. Yes, I remember, of course. Where is Wyndham, by the way? Isn't he here?" Bobby looked round among the dancers.

"He is away shooting," Peggy told him without the smallest change of countenance. "He went off to-day—somewhere Bakri way, I believe."

"Lucky beggar!" said Bobby enviously. "Wish I'd had a chance to go too. There's heaps of game out that way too. Gone off with the same old *shikari*, I suppose? Chap we call The Sultan. He'll come back with a dozen head, various; see if he doesn't! He always has all the luck, that chap."

"He is a good shot, I expect," said Peggy.

"Oh, rather! I've seen him pull off the most amazing flukes. Good all round chap—Wyndham!" Bobby's frank eyes met hers. "I always say I'd sooner have him by me at a pinch than any other fellow I know, excepting of course Nick. We must always except him, what?" his look twinkled.

"Of course!" said Peggy loyally.

"All the same," remarked Bobby unexpectedly a few seconds later, "I think in some respects Wyndham runs him rather close."

"Oh, do you?" said Peggy, faintly flushing.

“What do you think about it?” said Bobby.

“I don’t quite know,” she said.

“Or aren’t you going to tell?” he said.

She met his look as she made guarded reply. “Perhaps I will tell you when I know.”

“I see,” said Bobby.

He changed the subject immediately with a tact which she somewhat unreasonably felt inclined to resent.

CHAPTER IX

THE NEW FRIEND

ACCORDING to her resolve, Peggy made an early start on the following morning in order to pay a visit to the Forbes' bungalow on her way to that of Mrs. Griffiths. She saw her father for a moment before leaving, but he was in one of his deeply engrossed moods, and though he kissed her she felt that he was scarcely aware of her presence. She watched him get into his little two-seater car and drive away ere she went about her own pursuits with a faint sigh. He seemed to have less need of her than ever nowadays.

It was a very unpleasant shock to her to find on rounding the curved drive that led through the Forbes' compound that Forbes himself had not yet departed to his work. His car stood in front of the bungalow, awaiting him.

Her dislike of the man had grown to actual detestation of late, and her instant impulse was to order her *coolie* to turn about and withdraw; but it was too late. Almost simultaneously with her appearance, Forbes came out upon the verandah, and retreat became impossible.

She burned with embarrassment as she drew near, for he waited for her with the peculiarly offensive air of complacence which always characterized him, against which she had no suitable weapon of offence.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure," he said, as her *'richshaw* reached him, offering his hand with his usual assurance. "What a dainty picture you make! You ought always to wear shell-pink. It is your colour. It isn't every woman who knows what her colour ought to be."

She gave him the briefest possible glance as she freed her fingers from a touch which sought to linger.

"Is Mrs. Forbes at home?" she asked with a bluntness that was not far removed from rudeness. She was physically incapable of concealing her aversion at that moment.

He laughed, his jarring, unpleasant laugh. "My dear young lady, she is so much at home as to be still in bed. Is she expecting you, may I ask?"

"No," said Peggy, snatching at the fact. "I won't disturb her. I'll come in another day."

He waved a restraining hand. "No, no! I will tell her you are here. She would be very disappointed to miss you. The fact is, she has not been very well lately, and it will cheer her up a lot to see you. Come in and make yourself at home!"

"At home!" thought Peggy with an inward shiver, as she reluctantly accompanied him along the verandah.

He ushered her into the drawing-room with another airy wave of the hand. "Pray sit down! I will let her know you are here."

He departed with a leisurely, self-satisfied gait which gave the impression that carpet-slippers were his favourite foot-wear, and she waited uncomfortably for his return.

By the new light that had come to her she surveyed the room in which she stood, and her first impression was deepened. In colouring and arrangement it had an undoubted look of the Oriental about it. It was also rather untidy. There were crumpled cushions in odd corners, and a litter of papers together with a lady's riding-whip and gloves lay on a table. An ash-tray with a pile of ash and spent matches was on a chair beside a sofa. Evidently the room was as it had been left the night before.

Peggy's lips tightened a little. She wished for a few seconds that she could have the management of Marcella's servants. Then she heard Forbes returning and braced herself to meet him with chilly reserve.

He swaggered in, swinging the door shut behind him. "She's getting up and hopes you will wait."

"I really think it would be better if I came in another time," said Peggy.

He glanced round the room. "Oh, don't go! She will be so disappointed. I am sorry we are in such a muddle. Fact is, I had a row with the house-boy yesterday, and he has cleared out. The *khit* hasn't got another yet. Sit down, won't you?"

She longed to go, but for Marcella's sake she yielded the point. He sprawled in a chair opposite, his dark eyes fixing her as usual with their hard, appraising stare.

"I mustn't stay very long," she remarked. "I am really on my way to Mrs. Griffiths who is giving a picnic to-day."

"Really!" said Forbes. "The good ladies of the regiment seem to have taken you up with some enthusiasm. I hope you are enjoying their patronage."

"I have had a very good time since I have been out here, thank you," Peggy replied non-committally.

"You haven't begun to wish yourself home again yet?" he suggested.

"No, I don't think so." She spoke with intentional vagueness. "Is there any reason why I should?"

"I just wondered," said Forbes easily. "Your good father isn't much of a chaperon, is he? But girls don't need chaperons these days."

His tone goaded her in spite of herself. "I didn't come out here to have a good time," she remarked. "It was to take care of him."

His laugh grated upon her unbearably. "Oh, of course!" he said. "We all knew that. But popularity sometimes comes unsought, does it not? And a girl with a face like yours could hardly expect to avoid it. It is causing Sir William considerable anxiety, I can tell you. He has actually discussed the subject with me."

"With you!" said Peggy in amazement.

He nodded complacently. "Yes, with me. I hope you have no objection."

"Indeed I have!" she said, breathing quickly. "Perhaps you will tell me what he said!"

"And perhaps I won't!" said Forbes with a maddening smile.

She felt her face crimson at the taunt. Swiftly she stood up.

But in a moment he also was on his feet. He caught her by the arm, actually held her as she turned to go.

"Now don't you be a little fool!" he said, still smiling at her. "I'm a friend of yours, and I'm doing my best to help you."

"You are *not* a friend of mine!" said Peggy fiercely. "Let me go—instantly!"

But his hand still held her, and she would not stoop to struggle with him. She stood still, her eyes ablaze.

He looked at her, still with that horrible assurance which somehow affected her more than physical force, holding her as it were invisibly in thrall.

"I will certainly let you go if you wish it," he said, "but I think I ought to warn you first that in your good father's interests as well as your own, you would be well-advised not to act in haste."

His words had weight, she knew not why. She felt her resistance wane, and realized that he was gaining the upper hand; and she was powerless to prevent it.

"Are you going to tell me what you mean?" she said after a few hard-breathing seconds, still standing rigidly before him.

He took his hand very slowly from her arm. It was almost like the action of a mesmerist.

"To a certain extent, yes," he said. "At least, I will tell you enough to convince you—even in my absence—that I am a force to be reckoned with, not despised."

He uttered the last words with a certain malicious relish, and a coldness went suddenly down Peggy's spine. She shivered in spite of herself.

"Sit down again!" said Forbes.

She obeyed him, conscious of a weakness that she could not control. He came and stood over her, but without touching her. "I think you realize," he said, "that I am generally regarded as your father's right-hand man."

She made a gesture of assent. The throbbing of her heart felt as if it would choke her.

Forbes continued, his harsh voice slightly lowered. "That was originally my status, and to all outward appearances it is still. But in actual fact, our positions for a long while now have been reversed. I think you know—of course you must know—that your father's brain is failing?"

She looked up at him desperately. Her anger was dead. "Not—as regards his work!" she said.

His ruthless eyes came again to hers, holding them riveted. "Yes, as regards his work," he said. "It could hardly be otherwise, could it? What do you imagine he does in those endless hours of toil? Do you really think the results are worth the paper they are made out on?"

"Oh!" Peggy said. "I had never thought of that."

"No." Grimly he agreed with her. "You never thought, did you, that but for someone to stand by and counteract his blunders, the whole scheme which has been entrusted to him would prove a gigantic failure?"

She shrank from the sheer pitilessness of the words. All heat had gone out of her. She felt cold to the soul, cold with a dread foreboding such as she had never known before.

"Is it true?" she said, but she asked the question more of herself than of him.

He brought his hand down upon the back of her chair with a force that startled her. "Yes, it is true!" he asserted. "You know it is true. Every day he makes some fresh blunder, something which I have to counteract or amend. I tell you frankly, he will never take on another job; but I am guiding him through this one as I know it will be his death-blow if he fails. Surely you can see it for yourself! If he were to realize the actual state of affairs, he would put a bullet through his brain. The only thing that keeps him going is his work."

"Yes, yes, I know," Peggy said, and somehow she felt as if she were trying to propitiate him. "It is the one thing he has lived for all these years."

"Even so," said Forbes grimly. "And it's the one thing he'll die for if once he lets go. Can't you see that it's got to be kept from him at all costs till the work is done?"

"Yes, but how? How?" She heard herself repeating the word with a piteous persistence; she was almost as one pleading for mercy.

A subtle change came into the eyes that watched her, a change that in some inexplicable fashion revolted her. His hand moved from the back of her chair and lightly pressed her shoulder.

"Now you are getting reasonable," he said approvingly. "It can be done, but only by your co-operation with me. We have got to be partners in this deal, or he is a dead man. With the best intentions I couldn't possibly cover up his tracks if he were to leave now. If he does that, the whole thing is bound to come out, and—well, you know what the result will be."

"But—surely—he isn't thinking of leaving," said Peggy.

She hated the hand on her shoulder, but she endured it with stiff fortitude. It was no moment for considering trifles. She was face to face now with a crisis which demanded all her strength and ability. She dared not suffer any personal element to confuse the issue. Loathe this man as she might, she knew that he spoke the truth when he declared that her father's very life was bound up in his work.

"That is exactly what he is thinking of doing," Forbes said, "and on your account. He feels unable to take care of you out here, and he is making an extra effort now in order that he may be able to break off and rush you back to England in a few weeks' time and leave you with your friends there. He means to return immediately, but the cat will be out of the bag long before then, and so far as his work goes he will be a ruined man. That, Miss Peggy, is what you have got to prevent."

"Oh!" said Peggy. "I see."

The few words expressed a good deal. It had been a ruthless unveiling, but she could not snatch at any shred of doubt wherewith to comfort herself. Something within told her that there was no escape for her, no shifting or even sharing of the responsibility. There was no one, save Noel, sufficiently intimate with her to be in a position to help or advise. And Noel was out of reach.

Forbes' hard voice broke in upon her. "Well, what do you propose to do?"

She started nervously. For the moment, so overwhelming was the burden thus suddenly thrust upon her, she felt almost cowed. Then with an effort she collected herself. Was he actually trying to browbeat her on the strength of his position? That at least she would never endure.

"I really don't know," she said. "I must think."

"Are you going to let him take you back to England?" he asked.

She shook her head with decision. "No, not yet. Certainly not yet. But I must have time to think it over. Something must be done, but I don't yet know what."

"I should advise nothing in haste," said Forbes, and patted her shoulder with a familiarity which she felt was intended for kindness. "As things are at present, he is comparatively safe. I can engineer him through the worst if he sticks to it, and I have every incentive for doing so. But if he once takes matters into his own hands, I won't be answerable for the consequences. Anything might happen."

"I know," she said. "I know."

Again he patted her shoulder, his fingers just touching her bare neck. "Well, cheer up! It seems to me your job is pretty plain, and that is to make him stick to it for the present. When once this show is within sight of the

end, we may be able to persuade him that his work is done, and he can go home with a mind at rest."

"Perhaps!" said Peggy. She uttered the word at random, for her very flesh was creeping at the touch of his hand. She wanted to fling it from her as though it had been a serpent. But—it had come to this—she did not dare.

"We are partners then," said Forbes.

His hand moved higher, for a second caressed her cheek. But that was more than she could bear. She got up quickly and moved out of reach.

"You have been very kind," she said, speaking hurriedly and hating the words as she uttered them. "And I am most grateful. I am not sure that we shall be doing right in allowing things to go on as they are. But it seems to be all we can do for the time being. Perhaps—perhaps later—something more satisfactory can be arranged, without—without injury to my father. In any case,—" again she forced herself to utterance,—"you have shown very great consideration, and—and I am very grateful."

He made her a brief bow. "I am only anxious to be your friend," he said. "I realized when you first arrived that you would very soon be in need of one. You are in a very difficult position, but you may count on me at all times. And as no one but myself can be in any way described as a loser by carrying on as we are, I think the arrangement may be safely regarded as a pious fraud." He laughed a little, and held out his hand. "Come, Miss Peggy, you will have to swallow your prejudice and take me for a friend. I assure you I have never had any but friendly feelings for you."

She hesitated; but his black eyes were upon her, and his hand remained extended. She compelled herself to lay hers within it without shuddering, and again it seemed to her as though she touched a reptile.

His fingers closed upon hers and sinuously held. There came to her a horrible sensation of being drawn against her will. It was like a nightmare, only infinitely more nerve-racking.

Then, just as the limit was reached, the ordeal was over. With another laugh which held a note of derision to her hard-wrung senses, he set her free and swung round on his heel.

"Here comes Marcella!" he said.

CHAPTER X

THIRST

WITH utter relief Peggy turned to greet Marcella. She came in with her usual slow gait, and though she had seen her so recently and though her mind was filled with other thoughts, Peggy was shocked by her appearance. Her face was drawn and her eyes looked sunken. The colour on her cheeks was obviously artificial.

"How nice of you to come in," was her greeting, as Peggy moved to meet her. "I am sorry I wasn't up." She kissed her languidly. "Maurice been amusing you, I hope. Have you had any breakfast?"

"Oh yes, thank you," Peggy said. "And I am so sorry you bothered to get up, because I can't stay long. I am really on my way down to Mrs. Griffiths'."

"Being indispensable to all that good lady's entertainments for the present," said Forbes with his sneering laugh. "Well, I suppose I had better be off to see what mischief your esteemed father is up to. Marcella, don't forget what I told you and see that those orders of mine are strictly carried out!"

She did not turn her head at his sudden address or lift her heavy eyes. "I shall not forget," she said.

He squared his shoulders aggressively. "And you, Miss Peggy," he said in a voice that was noticeably softer, even subtly caressing, "don't forget that whatever your need may be, I am now and always at your service!"

"Thank you," said Peggy gravely.

She also did not look at him until something in his attitude and silence compelled her to do so, and then as unwillingly her eyes met his she was aware of a cruel and gloating triumph in them which made her quiver with disgust.

"And so good-bye!" said Forbes, turning on his heel.

He went tramping out with the swing of a conqueror, and neither of the two women he left behind uttered a word or so much as moved until the clattering of his car told of his departure.

Then with a brief sigh of complete weariness Marcella spoke. "Sit down, dear, I am very pleased to see you. I've been rather rotten lately, as you know, and I am not getting up very early."

Peggy roused herself with an effort. To discuss what Forbes just told her with Marcella was impossible to her. Some instinct forbade it. Later, perhaps, it might be a help, but at the moment she felt it must be kept private. Moreover, it was evident that Marcella had her own burden to bear, and to add to it was not Peggy's idea of friendship. Marcella had a crushed, almost a beaten, look that morning. Her weariness was so palpable as to give the air of having risen from a sick-bed. She moved as though she were dragging chains.

"Have you had the doctor?" Peggy asked.

"Good gracious, no! I always treat myself. Besides, there's nothing to be done." Her speech trailed off hopelessly.

Peggy remembered Mrs. Ash and asked no more. "I wish you hadn't got up," she said uneasily. "I ought not to have come."

"Oh yes, indeed you ought!" Marcella dropped upon the sofa and lay back, her eyes half-closed. "I love to see you. It does me good."

She sank into silence, and it came to Peggy suddenly that she was fighting against an overwhelming desire to sleep.

"You have had a bad night," she hazarded.

"The nights are always bad," said Marcella, smothering a yawn. "The jackals—have you never heard them? One can't—possibly—sleep decently —at night."

"Oh, I know," Peggy said. "Yes, I have heard them. They used to frighten me at first. I used to think it was—"

She broke off; Marcella's eyes were suddenly wide open, looking at her with a kind of tortured curiosity.

"What did you think it was?" she asked.

Peggy hesitated, found herself stammering. It was almost as if those wide, watching eyes challenged her. Or were they asking for something, craving for something which might give relief?

"I—I really hardly know," she said. "I think the Railway Bungalow is rather—rather eerie sometimes, and—well, I suppose one is apt to imagine things."

"What things?" said Marcella.

She leaned forward, but though she still seemed to be watching Peggy intently her eyelids were drooping as though weighted.

Peggy began to feel rather desperate. "I can't possibly tell you," she said, "because I don't know."

"You are afraid to tell me," said Marcella, and her voice had a dull tragic note. "What if I tell you that the things you imagine are true? Will it frighten you right away, I wonder? It would be the best thing that could happen if it did."

"Oh, what do you mean?" Peggy said.

She got up quickly, impelled by she knew not what, went to Marcella and knelt beside her.

"My dear!" Marcella said, and leaned her head against her with a single dry sob.

In a moment Peggy's arms clasped her tightly. Her own troubles were thrust into the background. "Hush!" she whispered. "Don't give way! Tell me what is wrong! Perhaps I can do something! You know I love you and want to help, don't you? Won't you trust me and let me try?—Ah!"

She started back sharply, aware of a shadow that for a fraction of time had fallen across the window nearest to them.

Marcella leaned slowly back again as though overcome by weariness. "I am not fit to speak to to-day," she said. "These attacks take all the life out of me. You mustn't take me too seriously, dear. There is nothing the matter really. It will pass. It always does. You must be going, mustn't you?"

Peggy got to her feet and stood looking down at her; she saw that the moment had passed. "I wish I could stay and take care of you," she said.

Marcella faintly smiled. "Be thankful that you can't! But I love you for thinking of it. Don't bother about me! I am not really ill. All I suffer from is thirst—raging thirst. It is like a furnace inside me sometimes. Fever, you know,—just fever!"

She tried to lift her eyes to Peggy's, but, failing, made a gesture with her hand instead.

"Don't let me keep you, dear! It is getting late. Thank you for coming. I shall try to have a little sleep. Good-bye!"

Peggy stooped over her. Already she seemed to be on the verge of slumber. As she bent, she caught some murmured words spoken unconsciously between lips that scarcely moved. "It's such a long way—to Bakri, but—it's awful—to die of thirst."

She stood up again. Marcella's eyes were closed. She lay among the cushions as one utterly exhausted.

A kind of horror came upon Peggy. She felt as if the place were full of watching eyes and the very atmosphere had become hostile. Marcella was asleep; there was no doubt of that. To rouse her seemed cruel. Besides, why should she be roused? She was plainly worn out, and it were better to leave her to rest.

Yet it was not without misgiving that she prepared to go. Ought she to leave her thus? Was she really ill? Now that she saw her face in repose, it looked less drawn, more normal. Probably sleep was the best thing for her, and to linger was of no avail. Slowly she turned, and again, as she did so, she was conscious of a shadow just beyond the window.

She cast out her sense of insecurity, and walked to it. But when she reached the verandah it was empty.

Once more she came back and looked at Marcella. Mrs. Ash's murmured confidences were running in her mind. Was this sleep natural? Or was it induced by some drug? Ought she to go? Ought she to remain?

She bent down over her, almost touching her, closely regarding her. But Marcella did not stir. Her sleep was profound and untroubled, her breathing calm and regular.

Peggy watched her for seconds, then, without moving her body, she turned her head and looked round her shoulder towards the window. For one flashing instant she saw a face!

It was gone as swiftly as it was seen, but it was enough. She stood up with a wildly palpitating heart and without a moment's further hesitation she turned from the motionless figure on the couch and went. It needed all her self-control to restrain herself from running. Even as it was, her retreat was a rapid one, and once out in the open where her *coolie* awaited her with her *'richshaw* she found herself panting as though she had come through some great physical exertion.

Not until they were out of the compound and half-way down the long hill to Ghawalkhand did her composure return, and even then she glanced back now and then along the dusty track as if she feared pursuit.

Not that he would dare to follow her! Of course he would not dare! But why had he hidden there? Why had he spied upon them? Why had he pretended to go and then remained behind? There was no mistake about it. There could be no mistake. With her own eyes she had seen him though it had been so fleeting a glimpse. And Marcella—she was convinced that Marcella had seen also, or at least had known, in spite of that awful lethargy of weariness. She had been on the verge of confidence and had checked it. It had been almost an instinctive act, for her mind had not been in a normal state. Perhaps the impulse to speak had been a mere instinct also, and not one to which she would have yielded had she been in full command of herself.

Impossible to tell! But the fact remained—the glaring, undeniable fact—that the face she had seen looking in upon them in that brief, amazing second had been the face of Maurice Forbes. And she was quite sure that he had of set intention overheard all that had passed between them after he had feigned to depart.

CHAPTER XI

THE OUTCAST

MRS. GRIFFITHS' picnic was marked in Peggy's memory by two happenings which remained vivid in her mind long after all other details had faded.

Mrs. Hobart and Mrs. Ash were both there, also Mrs. Bobby with Captain Broadbane hovering in attendance and laughing heartily at every caustic comment that fell from her cynical lips. Men were in the minority that day or he had not occupied so favoured a position.

But, somewhat to Peggy's surprise, Ronald Hadlow had managed to put in an appearance, and, to her still greater surprise, he attached himself to her with a firmness of purpose which refused to be diverted in any other direction. She had not the vaguest idea as to the reason for this persistence, but she suffered it since it was less trouble to do so than to attempt to shake him off. He was at least a quiet companion, for he openly scorned small-talk, and so she did not need to exert herself for his entertainment. She carried a very preoccupied mind and though she tried to conceal the fact from time to time, she was not very successful.

The site of the picnic was among the hills on the other side of the city, far away from the railway, in a rugged bit of country barren even of pines. It led to the Bakri district whither Noel had betaken himself, and her thoughts turned to him very constantly as they scrambled among the boulders that strewed the scarred hillside.

The sun shone brilliantly; it might have been a day in English June. The party was a merry one. It seemed to Peggy that everyone was in high spirits except herself, and she desired to be, but could not. Her heart was heavy with anxiety, and she longed for solitude in which to face it. Only in solitude could she hope to come to any decision.

Mrs. Griffiths noticed her preoccupation and drew her own conclusions which she presently murmured to Mrs. Hobart. "I thought something of the kind was happening. It's a good thing he's gone away for a little. I hope there is no mischief done."

To which Mrs. Hobart replied, "I should hardly think so. She is a very level-headed girl. But of course she is in a peculiarly defenceless position."

"He would never take advantage of that, if I know him," said Mrs. Griffiths.

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Hobart. "She wouldn't have a chance against him if he did."

Mrs. Griffiths sighed rather anxiously. "Well, anyway she is safe with young Hadlow," she said.

And at that precise moment Ronald Hadlow, very calm and collected to all outward appearance, was asking Peggy to marry him.

"I believe we could make a very fair show of it if we tried," he said, "though of course I am quite aware of the possibility that you may think otherwise. But I hope that you will anyhow take time to think, as it is not a matter to be decided off-hand."

Peggy was astounded and said so. She was also annoyed with him, though that she did not express in words.

"It is quite—quite out of the question," she said. "Thank you all the same, but I couldn't think of it for a single moment, so please put the idea out of your mind! I can't imagine why it ever occurred to you."

"Why shouldn't it?" said Ronald Hadlow, looking a little pained. "I suppose I have as great a right as any other fellow to wish to make you my wife."

"Oh, if you put it like that, yes," said Peggy. "But it's a waste of time, so I hope you won't let it go any further."

"I am sorry," said Hadlow rather stiffly. "I hope I have not offended you."

She relented swiftly. "Oh, please don't be hurt about it! I am very sorry too. And if it has been my fault in any way—"

"It has not," he said, in a tone of strict justice. "You need not let it distress you, and I hope you will not allow it to make any difference in your behaviour towards me. I should be sorry to lose such a promising dancing-partner."

He smiled with the words, and his smile had a hint of courage about it which made Peggy wonder whether his feelings had been deeply touched or not, though she realized at once that he had no intention of letting her know.

She smiled in answer, as it appeared the kindest thing to do. “Oh well, you needn’t do that,” she said, “so long as you fully realize that I can never be more than a dancing-partner to you.”

“That is quite understood for the present,” he said. “I am not one of those sentimentalists who think it necessary to break off all connection with a girl because she may not want to marry them. I think you will agree that that is a very prehistoric idea.”

“Oh, very!” said Peggy, wondering if she did altogether agree.

“Moreover,” pursued Hadlow, and a sudden vision of him thirty years older and retired came upon her with a vividness of detail which she felt to be uncharitable, “I have a theory that with marriage, as with everything else in life, a certain amount of preparation is necessary. One sows the seed, but one does not expect it to mature at once—even if it matures at all. I have mentioned my intentions; you have told me yours. Neither of us is any the worse for knowing how we stand in the matter, nor do we esteem each other any the less. Simply, for the moment we do not agree. However, we are both free to change. And in the course of the next few months I predict that one of us will change. But I will not tell you which.”

“I hope it will be you,” said Peggy with simplicity. “It will be if you are wise.”

“That,” said Hadlow, “is for neither you nor me to say. But let us hope we shall both grow wiser as we grow older!”

Reviewing the matter later, Peggy came to the conclusion that the only excuse he had ever had for imagining that she entertained any preference for him was the fact that she had given him Noel’s dances on the occasion of the Club dance, and the realization moved her to ironical laughter. Could any woman in her sober senses prefer Ronald Hadlow to Noel?

Out of the goodness of her heart she tried to be especially kind to him during the remainder of the time they spent together, convinced that he could not at least misunderstand her motive for that, but she was very glad to rejoin Mrs. Griffiths, even though Mrs. Bobby had done the same and greeted her appearance with a sudden silence which seemed to suggest that she had been the topic of conversation.

“Come along, dear, and have some tea!” said Mrs. Griffiths in her kindly fashion. “How are you getting on? Have you enjoyed yourself?”

“You’re looking tired,” observed Mrs. Ash, who was pouring out the tea.

"You see, I danced a good deal last night," explained Peggy.

"Overdid it, I suppose," said Mrs. Ash. "I should be careful if I were you. You don't want to get old before your time."

Mrs. Bobby uttered a satirical laugh, but said nothing.

"You must learn not to be too energetic," said Mrs. Hobart, with her rather prim smile. "Shall we see you at the Club dance on Saturday?"

"Oh, I expect so," said Peggy, "if Daddy doesn't want me."

The words provoked another faint laugh from Mrs. Bobby. "I always knew you would become a model of filial affection," she remarked.

Peggy's colour rose, but Mrs. Griffiths swept at once to the rescue. "And she certainly is," she said. "Only her father is so occupied with his work that it does not give her much scope. You have never succeeded yet in bringing him down to see us, my dear, but I assure you he would have a very great welcome of you did."

"And it would be very good for him too," put in Mrs. Ash professionally. "No one is the better for living in entire seclusion, however absorbing their work. Does he never leave anything to Mr. Forbes?"

Peggy shook her head. It was the last subject that she desired to discuss, and her gesture said as much. "He is always very busy," she said.

"You don't mean to say he has still got that objectionable Forbes creature working for him!" said Mrs. Bobby. "And the far too beautiful Mrs. Forbes! How has she been behaving herself lately? Is she actually still a member of the Club?"

Mrs. Hobart spoke with her usual air of restraint. "I think you will find that the membership has really altered very little, Mrs. Fraser. We all do our best to keep it as select a community as possible."

Mrs. Bobby sneered into her tea-cup, drank some tea to gain time, and returned to the attack.

"Of course I know that," she said. "But I do think some sort of revision is occasionally necessary. Apart from the fact that she is not of our ilk as regards birth, her record is so astonishingly bad. I am amazed—literally amazed—that a woman of that type should be admitted to a Club with any pretensions at all to ordinary decency. It really is extraordinary to my way of thinking. Such a state of affairs would not be tolerated in England."

It was at this point that Peggy with flaming cheeks broke in upon her. "Please forgive me for interfering!" she said, and she addressed herself to the company in general rather than to Mrs. Bobby. "But Mrs. Forbes is a very good friend of mine and I can't sit by and hear her spoken ill of. I simply can't."

There was an appeal in her voice to which after a momentary pause Mrs. Griffiths made kind reply.

"My dear, your loyalty does you credit, though I could wish it were bestowed upon a worthier object. But I am sure none of us have any desire to continue this discussion now as it is certainly not a fitting time or place. Let me pass your cup, Mrs. Bobby! I see it is empty."

Mrs. Bobby was looking at Peggy through narrowed eyelids. She spoke with unveiled malice. "I bow to your ruling of course, Mrs. Griffiths. But I must say that I consider Miss Musgrave's behaviour quite unwarrantable. It is probably the outcome of utter ignorance; at least it is charitable to suppose so. But if this is the case, I think it would be far kinder to tell her at once that the woman whom she describes as her friend is a complete waster in every sense of the word, and if she cares to associate with her after that she alone is responsible for the consequences."

"I am not afraid of any consequences," said Peggy quickly. "And I would rather be a social outcast myself than give up a friend I loved at your recommendation."

"Oh, I know you never cared for taking advice from me," said Mrs. Bobby.

"I would sooner die than take it!" flashed Peggy.

Mrs. Hobart's cool white hand pressed her arm. "Drink your tea, Peggy!" she said in a tone of quiet authority. "We shall be starting back directly. It gets too cold to linger after sunset."

It was like a very gentle but firm *douche*. Peggy gave a gasp and came to herself.

Mrs. Griffiths plunged headlong into a discussion of Club fixtures with Mrs. Ash who, though laughing a little, nobly followed her lead, while Mrs. Bobby smoked a cigarette with an insolent expression, disdaining everybody.

Mrs. Hobart with crystal-clear intention kept Peggy occupied until the time for a general move arrived when she handed her over to Captain

Broadbane with a quiet request that he would take care of her.

So ended Mrs. Griffiths' picnic, and when it was over two things only remained in Peggy's mind. They were Ronald Hadlow's proposal and Mrs. Bobby's bitter arraignment of Marcella. The latter made the greater impression of the two despite her furious efforts to shake herself free from it. It was as though the whole station were trying to bring home to her a certain deadly truth to which she was perpetually striving to blind herself. Notwithstanding all her resistance, the weight of public opinion was beginning to take effect at last. At least she now faced the fact that Marcella was an outcast.

CHAPTER XII

THE HOUR OF NEED

THE RAILWAY BUNGALOW was empty when Peggy entered it. Her father was getting later in returning from his work. With a heavy heart she dined alone and then sat down to write to Nick.

She was determined to tell him everything, but when she began to do so, she found it more difficult than she had anticipated. Even to Nick she could not explain fully on paper all that had happened regarding Noel. To describe with any degree of accuracy her father's condition was also somehow impossible. She felt she was powerless to convey the atmosphere of tragedy that surrounded the life she led. Then there was Forbes with his sinister revelation all too probable to be discredited. That at least she determined that Nick must know, and she set herself firmly to tell him every detail.

"I do not like Mr. Forbes," she wrote. "I never have; but I know Daddy has a high opinion of his engineering abilities and I am afraid that what he says is true. Daddy is quite immersed in his work, but I think he is probably not as good at it as he used to be and but for Mr. Forbes it would end in failure. It would simply break Daddy's heart if this happened, and I honestly don't know what to do about it. Daddy has proposed a flying visit home, but I am dreadfully afraid that that might precipitate matters. He seems to have got into a groove of hard work—and how he does work; it is as if it were his very life—and I can't imagine what he would be like without it. There would simply be nothing left."

Here she paused with bent brows. Should she tell him about Noel? Or should she wait? Somehow it seemed presumptuous at this stage to speak of what had been between them to anyone. It was too private, too sacred. She could not. When Noel returned—her heart quickened at the thought—everyone would know then. But in the meantime her father must somehow be persuaded to relinquish the idea of an immediate return to England. For his own sake as well as for hers this seemed to be imperative. She must try to delay his plans at least until she received Nick's answer. Nick would certainly have some definite advice to offer, and by the time it reached her

Noel would have returned. That reflection comforted her and renewed her courage. Surely the return of Noel would make all the difference! He would know how to deal with the situation. She could tell him everything and he would help. He was out of reach for the moment, but it would not be long. She began to feel that she had allowed herself to be unnecessarily disturbed. After all, things had not apparently changed very rapidly hitherto, and a few more weeks would probably make but little difference. The only immediate need was to persuade her father to abandon his scheme and so avoid too sudden an awakening.

She read over what she had written and decided that she had said enough. Jingo was pressed against her, mutely entreating to be taken for a run in the compound. She looked down into his beseeching eyes.

"All right, old chap! I'll come," she said.

She fastened up her letter, threw on a wrap, and went outside.

There was a brilliant moon. The air was cold and still. She shivered a little as she stepped forth from the verandah, but Jingo would not have been satisfied if she had remained behind. Her father had never been so late before. She began to feel uneasy about him. Could he have been taken ill alone in that mud hut beyond the viaduct? It might so easily happen. Should she send Sammy to look for him?

But Sammy had departed to his own quarters, and he was an old man. The viaduct was three miles away, and she did not like to send him so far. She paced the path in growing anxiety while Jingo became engrossed in a rat-hunt among the bushes. She remembered that Noel had told her that Sir William sometimes spent the night in the hut, but he had never done so since her return. The natives were afraid of him when he led this hermit existence, but she had always understood that Sammy shared it. It was quite possible that there was no need for anxiety, but she could not shake it off. So much had happened to make her uneasy of late.

Suddenly as she walked she heard a far-off cry. Doubtless it was no more than the howling of a jackal, but it seemed to freeze her blood. With a call to Jingo who was much too deeply absorbed to pay any attention, she turned and sped towards the bungalow. The sound pursued her with a horrible insistence as she went, but she muffled her head in her wrap and blotted it out. It was the one thing she could not bear that night.

Breathlessly she regained the verandah and ran into her sitting-room, shutting the window behind her. With something like panic at her heart, she

dropped into a chair and hid her face. It was as though she had fled from an evil presence.

It was some time later that she commanded herself and sat up. Jingo must be fetched in. He would hunt rats throughout the night if left to himself. With trembling limbs she rose and went to the window.

Opening it, she heard another sound which sent a thrill of relief through her. A car had turned off the road and was approaching the bungalow. Doubtless her father at last!

Eagerly she went out again on to the verandah to meet him. She saw the gleam of the advancing lamps, but not until the car stopped did she clearly discern its occupant. Then, as he descended, she drew back with a sharp breath. It was Forbes.

The moonlight was full upon her and she knew that he saw her also. In any case she realized that she could not avoid a meeting. He had probably come to set her mind at rest about her father. She stood motionless, awaiting him.

He came to her with his customary aggressive gait. "Ha!" he said. "So you are at home to-night! I wasn't sure that you would be, or I should have come along sooner."

"Can you tell me anything about my father?" she said.

The moment she had uttered the question she regretted it; for she saw his face change subtly. He smiled upon her as one well pleased.

"Oh, it's no good sitting up for him," he said. "He is much too busy playing with his house of cards. Can I come in a moment? I won't keep you long."

She could not refuse him admittance though she longed to do so. Very reluctantly she turned back into the room she had just left, he following her.

"So you are all alone!" he said. "That's sad. Do you smoke?"

He offered her his cigarette-case, but she refused it instantly.

"Oh no, thanks! I don't."

"What?" he said. "You have never taken to it? You will of course. No woman in the East can do without it. Let me initiate you. It's a very harmless brand."

"Thank you," she replied steadily. "I would rather not."

There was something about his look that made her intensely uncomfortable. She wondered if he were the worse for drink, though he did not altogether give her that impression. It was more a gorged look, as though he had indulged freely in some hidden vice. She had never before noticed the utter sensuality of his face. To-night it struck her like an evil miasma. Every instinct within her was up in arms. She stood stiffly awaiting his departure.

But it was evident that he had no intention of hastening it on that account. He lighted a cigarette himself and dropped easily into a chair.

"Too soon for bedtime, eh?" he said. "I may as well keep you company for a little."

"I am quite happy by myself, thank you," said Peggy.

He looked up at her with virile insolent eyes that dwelt upon her possessively. "What a haughty maiden!" he said, and laughed.

She felt the indignant blood rise within her and knew that she turned vividly scarlet under his look. But she kept herself in hand. If it were his deliberate intention to bait her, he should not achieve success.

After a moment or two she sat down very quietly facing him.

"That's better," said Forbes. "Now we can talk without interruption. I have often wanted to have a real heart-to-heart talk with you."

"I don't see any special reason for it," said Peggy with determined coldness.

"No?" he said, and smiled at her through the smoke of his cigarette. "Well, we can soon find one. I think we decided this morning to be friends, did we not?"

"Only in so far as my father was concerned," she answered steadily.

"Your father! Ah yes, we mustn't let him down, must we?" His smile became a sneer. "You would do a good deal to avoid that, I take it."

She clasped her hands very tightly together in her lap. "I am doing—a good deal," she said.

He inhaled a deep breath of smoke. "Women are funny creatures," he said. "They all seem to think that it is their privilege to call the tune. I have never yet discovered why."

"I don't understand you," said Peggy.

She was beginning to feel very cold now, so cold that she wanted to shiver, but she would not yield to the impulse. She sat rigid, though his grating laugh seemed to pierce her.

"Do you really imagine that a mere appearance of friendship is going to satisfy anyone?" he said. "You don't know much about men, my dear Peggy, if you do, and it is time someone took you in hand and gave you a lesson or two."

"I don't know what you mean," said Peggy.

He withdrew his cigarette and waved it elaborately in the air. His full lips still curved in a smile, but somehow it was of a type that merely accentuated their cruelty.

"Oh, I think I can explain," he said. "You are very young, but I imagine you are fully aware of the fact that you are attractive. Otherwise, the whole male population of the station would scarcely be at your feet."

"What has that to do with it?" said Peggy.

He leaned slowly towards her, and there was that in his eyes that sent a cold shudder to her heart. She asked herself again, rather wildly, if he could be sober.

"Must I be more explicit?" he said. "Don't you know what it means when a woman attracts a man? If you don't, why do you set out to make yourself attractive?"

She recoiled from his look, scarcely veiled horror in her own. "I really don't know what you mean," she said. "Where is Marcella? I wish you had brought her with you."

"Do you?" said Forbes. His look changed, became almost threatening; then again he smiled. "My dear child, you are indeed a novice! I have no use for Marcella at present. Frankly, she bores me now that there is a brighter star in the sky. You are far lovelier than Marcella has ever been. Don't you realize that?"

"I have no wish to be," said Peggy honestly. "And I don't believe it either."

He laughed. "You can't help yourself. You are exquisite, like a flower just opening, waiting—just waiting to be gathered." He put out a hand towards her. "Peggy, you little white rose, let me be the one to gather you, and hold you against my heart!"

She stared at him for a second, taken by surprise, so alien to the man's whole personality and bearing were the words he uttered. Then, with a swift movement, she pushed her chair to avoid the advancing hand.

"You are mad!" she said.

"Mad!" he echoed. "Mad to love a little piece of perfection like you! No, listen! Don't look so horrified! I am not asking any sacrifice of you. Only for a little kindness in return for the kindness I have shown to you! I don't want to deprive you of your kingdom. No one will ever know. I only ask you if just for once—just for to-night—can't we be lovers instead of friends?"

He stopped. Peggy was on her feet, frozen horror in her eyes. "You brute!" she said, and sprang past him for the window.

He turned with a strangled oath, but she had wrenched it open before he reached her. He caught at her, but she wrested herself from him with a frenzied cry and fled out into the moonlight.

Like a flash she was gone, and ere he could follow her, like a flash something else came upon him. A white streak shot suddenly on to the verandah and hurled itself straight at him.

It was like the bursting of a small tornado. The din was indescribable, while the tornado—a leaping whiteness as swift as lightning—did its furious work. Not in vain had Jingo been brought up a soldier's dog among soldiers. There was not an inch of him that was not game and ready. Blows had no effect upon him. Kicks did not reach him. Yells simply passed him by. Snarling like a wolf, he bit and tore and leaped free, only to rush in again wherever he deemed he saw a vulnerable point. Literally he was beside himself with rage and he wreaked it in a fashion not soon to be forgotten by the object thereof.

He was nearing the prime of life and quite tireless, and the battle might have continued almost interminably if left to take its course. But at the end of a howling minute there came an interruption. A figure ran quickly along the verandah, and stooping caught back the dog in full career. In the height of his wrath Jingo found himself checked by an authority which he could not ignore. Bristling and struggling he was drawn into Peggy's arms and found himself compelled to yield.

On her knees on the verandah she clasped him, and over his head, with eyes that burned like blazing spirit from a face as white as death, she looked up at Forbes and spoke.

"Will you go, please?"

There was something unearthly about her in that moment, something majestic, indomitable, wholly irresistible.

The man stood hesitating, then turned and went.

The dog in her arms snarled with bared fangs and protruding, bloodshot eyes, but he did not attempt to quit her hold. He was ready to spring if Forbes returned; but he also was under the authority of that rigid, kneeling figure.

And so Forbes went, ignominiously, cravenly. There was nothing else to be done. Moreover, he had been bitten, and one does not ignore a dog-bite in India.

He went with a deep curse, but obedient to that unflinching command which could not be ignored. If an angel with a flaming sword had suddenly descended and taken his stand between them, his rout could not have been more effectual. Perhaps in that hour of Peggy's need a protecting power had indeed been provided to deliver her from evil. . . .

It was over an hour later that there came again the sound of a car in the compound beyond the verandah.

It came to a halt and a bent, gaunt man descended and moved along the verandah to the open window whence a light still shone.

He entered to find a girlish figure crouched against a chair with hidden face, while a dog—a bony terrier of doubtful extraction—sat alert, with pricked ears, by her side.

He suffered the man to enter without a sound, but as he began to draw near the huddled figure he uttered a deep, admonishing growl.

The girl stirred and lifted her face in a kind of staring horror that melted into gasping relief.

"Oh, Daddy—Daddy!" she said, and held out her arms.

Jingo's growl turned into a grunt and he moved to one side.

"My little girl!" said Sir William, bending fondly over her. "I was so busy—Forbes gave me rather a big problem to work out—I'm afraid I forgot you. Is there anything the matter? Or were you just asleep?"

She raised herself and clung to him. "Oh, Daddy—my Daddy!" she said, and burst into hysterical crying on his breast.

He gathered her close, soothing her, comforting her. “What is it, darling? You have been lonely. I’m so sorry. I ought to have thought. Will you try and forgive me?”

His hand stroked her hair. He kissed her repeatedly, with great tenderness, while she clasped his neck and sobbed out her anguish there.

“Come, come!” he said presently. “You are better now. I must turn over a new leaf and take more care of you.”

To which she answered, clinging closer, “Oh yes, Daddy, yes! You must never—never leave me again!”

PART IV

CHAPTER I

THE MESSAGE

Of the happenings of that evening Peggy told her father nothing. Though it was on the tip of her tongue to speak, and impulse strongly urged her, she checked the words unuttered, dreading the possible consequences. Forbes was his right-hand man, and even if not wholly indispensable as he represented, it might be a very serious matter if Sir William had to part with him. She was not even certain that he had the authority to do so, and to cause a strained relationship between the two was to run a risk which she could not bring herself to undertake. Then there was Marcella. All through the night, while Jingo lay snoring at the foot of her bed, between troubled sleep and restless waking the thought of Marcella haunted her—Marcella the outcast whom everyone despised—Marcella the defenceless victim of a man who knew no mercy! Never in her life had she been so stirred by compassion. It swamped all personal thought, even dwarfing her anxiety on her father's account. The hopeless tragedy of it, the misery and the sin!

It was impossible now to dream of entering the Forbes' bungalow again. Even if she could bring herself to do so, any confidence with Marcella was out of the question. There was no safe privacy there. It was more than likely that the place was full of spies. Yet to leave her alone, abandon her as it were to her fate, was equally unthinkable. Something must be done—something must be done, to help Marcella.

In the early morning she rose and sat down to write to her. Certainly something must be done!

She had thought that she would find the letter difficult, but to her surprise when she began to write, the words came to her without effort.

Quite suddenly, as she set pen to paper, she knew what she would do. Marcella must come to her.

Her letter was a brief one, making little reference to what had passed between them and none at all to her own experience of the night before. She was so sorry that they had been interrupted in the morning. She wanted very much to see and talk to her. Would she come and spend a few days at the Railway Bungalow? She, Peggy, was in real need of companionship just then and she would be so very, very pleased to have her.

She fastened and sealed the letter when it was finished, relieved to have found an expedient for the situation even though only of a temporary character. Somehow she did not doubt that Marcella would come. It would mean deliverance for her for a time at least, and for herself—she drew a long hard breath of relief. It would mean complete safety for her.

When she met her father in the morning he looked at her with grave concern. "My dear, I am afraid you haven't slept," he said. "That fright I gave you last night has upset your nerves."

She tried to answer him lightly though she knew her face belied her. "I am all right, Daddy," she said. "But, please, you won't be so late again, will you?"

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Peggy," he said, "I am going to be a better father to you. I have been thinking a good deal lately, and I realize that I have not been shouldering my responsibilities as I ought. Probably I never have, but that is another matter. I have been testing Forbes during the last day or two to see if he could be safely entrusted with the work upon which I am at present engaged, but I find that it can be done only to a limited extent. That means that for the present I cannot be spared to take you home."

"I don't want to go home," said Peggy quickly.

Sir William sighed. "That also I have realized. Well, dear, it is not for me to direct your destiny. I have made mistakes before, and I should make them again if I attempted to do so. But it is my job to take care of you, and as long as you need my care, it will always be at your service. I have wrapped myself in my work to the exclusion of everything else. I am awake to that now. Last night up at the hut I had a vision that opened my eyes."

He spoke with great simplicity, but with a solemnity that made her look at him with awe. She saw that his eyes were fixed beyond her, as she had seen them before, but they held a smile which was quite new to her, new and strangely exalted.

"Daddy!" she whispered, to bring him back.

Very slowly he turned his look upon her, and still the smile lingered like a spiritual torch lighted within.

"Last night," he said again, "I had a vision. Peggy, she—your mother—came to me while I was at work in the hut. She did not keep at a distance as she has always done before, but she came right to me, and laid her dear hands on my shoulders. Oh, the radiance of her face!" Surely it was that same radiance that Peggy saw reflected in his own! "Before I could speak to her for joy, I heard her voice half-joking, half-tender, as it used to be. 'My dear old Will,' she said, 'your work will soon be done. But there's one thing you're forgetting, and that is our little Peggy. Go to her, go to her now! She needs you.' And then, before I could speak or move, she put her lips to my forehead, in that old sweet way she had, and was gone. So I came straight away to find you. I knew it was no dream. And when I got to you, I found it was quite true. You were wanting me."

"Yes," Peggy said earnestly, her hands tightly clasping his arm. "I did want you, Daddy."

He stooped and kissed her. "Poor little girl! So lonely and so frightened! I wonder what startled you so. A rat perhaps? Or an owl?"

She shivered. "I thought it was a devil, Daddy."

"Child, child!" he said compassionately. "I will never leave you like that again. So long as you have any need of me, I swear I will never fail you."

She leaned her head against him with a sigh. "I am so thankful to hear you say that," she said.

He stroked her hair with a gentle hand. "Poor little Peggy!" he said. "Well, I must really begin to take care of my little girl."

"Oh, Daddy, thank you!" she whispered. "But what about you? Won't you find it rather difficult?"

"No," he said quietly. "No. My work is nearly done. I may be called upon to lay it down at any time now. I cannot of course give it up until the call comes, but I realize—" he paused, and looking up, she saw again that far-away look in his eyes—"I realize," he said slowly almost as though he were repeating a message, "that my work is not the only thing that matters. It may not even be given to me to finish it. But that is not my business. I can only go on with it for as long as God gives me strength. And you—" he

smiled upon her and she saw the vision fade again—"you, Peggy, must come first."

His words and look moved her almost to tears. She spoke impulsively. "It is only at night, Daddy. I have lots of friends who will take care of me by day. They are all so good to me, Mrs. Griffiths and Mrs. Hobart and all of them. I never feel lonely in the daytime."

"That means I must get into the way of coming back early," he said, "on the nights that you don't go out."

"If you would sometimes go out with me, Daddy!" she whispered a little diffidently. "I suppose you would hate to do that."

He sighed. "I shouldn't hate it, dear, but I'm afraid I shouldn't be much use in society. However, we will see. I suppose there is no one you could ask to stay with you till I can be more at liberty?"

"Oh yes!" Peggy suddenly remembered her letter. "I have written already to ask Mrs. Forbes. I knew you wouldn't mind. You know her, don't you?"

"Who?" said Sir William; then, frowning slightly: "Ah yes, I know her. But—surely you are not very friendly with her?"

She felt herself flush. Did he also entertain the general prejudice? Almost unconsciously she spoke with warmth. "I am very fond of her, Daddy, and very, very sorry for her. I had a special reason for asking her. I felt so sure you could not possibly object."

Sir William turned and sat down at the table, and again she heard him sigh. "I couldn't object to anything you do, dear," he said. "After all, you are quite right to be kind to people whom you pity. It will not do you any harm. My only fear is that it might cause you pain."

Compunction smote Peggy. She bent to kiss him. "Daddy, how dear of you! How like you! But please don't be afraid of that! It would hurt me much more not to be able to help."

"I know, dear, I know," he said. "You must do as you think best. I do not take it upon myself to direct you, either in this matter or in the matter of Noel Wyndham. I only ask you to be very careful."

She kissed him again, deeply stirred by his gentleness. "I will, dear; indeed I will," she promised.

"That is my own little girl!" he said.

CHAPTER II

AN OLD FRIEND

LATER in the day Peggy's letter to Marcella was brought back to her with the news that the *mem-sahib* had gone away. The information surprised her, but in a fashion it brought relief. Marcella then had another refuge to which to turn in adversity, and she was thankful to know that she had gone to it and was for the time at least out of reach of her tyrant.

Her father's attitude had had more effect upon her than any of the Club gossip, and though she was still ready to help Marcella she was not sorry that for the time at least her help was not needed. That she had anything further to fear from Forbes she did not believe. Reviewing what had passed with dispassionate eyes she came to the conclusion that he had not been sober. The fact that he must now be regarded in the light of an open enemy was one that caused her considerable disquietude, but she had never been wanting in courage, and she determined to meet it without dismay. Though the thought of meeting him again filled her with a shrinking horror, she would not suffer herself to be overwhelmed by it. Noel would soon be back, and when he came, all would be well. She had only to school herself to be brave and patient till then. Only a few weeks now and he would be with her again! She would enlist him on her father's behalf, and he would help her. He would soon overcome Sir William's prejudice. Of that she was confident. Who could possibly withstand Noel for long?

So she comforted herself, thrusting away all evil forebodings with a resolution that would not accept defeat. It was just Noel who made all the difference. The thought of the future much more than compensated for the past. Nothing could go radically wrong so long as that beacon-light of happiness shone ahead of her. She would steer her course by that, and all would be well.

Alone in her room, after her father had gone to his work with a definite promise to return at an early hour, she drew forth Nick's talisman and regarded it with loving eyes. Whether it had brought her luck or not it was impossible to say, but the motto which he had given her with it rose to her

lips, and she uttered it without fear: “I will go straight on.” So she planned to face the unknown future! . . .

In the days that followed, the English society at Ghawalkhand beheld a most unexpected thing. Sir William Musgrave, the recluse, suddenly emerged from his hermitage on the hill and took his place as his daughter’s protector. It was done with the utmost simplicity and such complete lack of ostentation that his presence had become an established fact almost as soon as it was observed.

He was received with great cordiality by Mrs. Griffiths and her followers, and warm approval was bestowed upon Peggy for having at last succeeded in luring her father from his seclusion, but, as Colonel Griffiths said, Peggy was Peggy, and could probably get what she wanted out of anybody.

It was very soon evident, however, that he did not desire to be drawn into any of those functions at which Peggy had no need of an escort. He was never to be seen in the station during the day, and only accompanied her at night to such entertainments as seemed to call for a parent’s presence. He went with her to the Club dance at the end of the week and also to a Mess concert, but he courteously refused all invitations to dinners and evening parties of a private nature where his little girl was always sure of being under the wing of one or other of the Great Triumvirate. He merely held himself in readiness when there was no one else.

His intention was quickly recognized and approved. Mrs. Ash said it was his plain duty to keep an eye upon his daughter, but nobody wanted him to make a martyr of himself, and she for one should certainly not persuade him to do so. As it happened, no one persuaded him. He was given a ready welcome by all, but it was universally realized that beyond this it was wiser not to go. There was something of infinite pathos about the bent, prematurely-aged man thus abandoning his cherished solitude for the sake of his child, but no one ever succeeded in approaching him with sufficient intimacy to express the sympathy so widely felt. He remained a hermit even in their midst, wrapped in an aloofness wholly unconscious, a dignity utterly unaware of itself which nevertheless formed an impenetrable barrier between him and all sympathizers. As one in a dream he would stand while the careless crowd surged to and fro about him, never addressing anyone but always replying with grave courtesy to any who spoke to him. A curious kind of popularity was his, and even Mrs. Bobby did not scoff at the silent presence that waited so patiently in the background. He had the still eyes of

one who, looking beyond the sea of life, beholds a growing light on the horizon, and so awaits the Dawn.

Even Peggy, who knew that look, was sometimes awed by it. But she was satisfied that he did not suffer any longer, and she found comfort in the thought. She had feared that any slackening from his work might bring distress, but she realized now that the fear was needless. Something deeply absorbing had begun to take its place. She was aware of a gradual change in him, and though it was of a nature that she could not quite fathom she deemed it was for the better. Surely anything was better than that terrible concentration which had once so completely held him in thrall!

She knew that he still spent a great deal of his time and practically all his energy in work, but even in the midst of that she would sometimes see him pause and lift his face as it were to the dawn-light. He no longer had the hopeless, imprisoned look that had so gone to her heart when she had first come to him. An influence unknown to her was at work, and already his chains were loosening.

"Some day he will be free," she told herself, but something withheld her from seeking to know what that longed-for freedom would mean.

She saw nothing of Forbes for over a week, and no news of Marcella reached her during that time. The usual round of gaieties continued, and she was drawn into playing in a tennis tournament at the Club with young Worthing for a partner. She rather liked him because he reminded her upon occasion of Reggie Ratcliffe. Also, he was too young to propose.

He was a very keen tennis-player, and in his society she became enthusiastic. They carried all before them with flying colours, eventually finding themselves in the semi-finals and opposed to Captain Broadbane and Mrs. Bobby—a very strong combination. Great excitement prevailed though Peggy and her partner both felt that their cause was doomed. In Marcella's absence Mrs. Bobby was easily the best woman-player on the courts, while Captain Broadbane was generally regarded as being more than a match for Leonard Worthing.

The latter, however, came to Peggy with a set jaw just before the match began and drew her aside.

"Look here!" he said. "We're going to pull this off. If we win this, we'll win the whole show, for we shan't meet anyone more formidable than Major Hobart and Mrs. Ash in the finals. I hope you're game, are you?"

"Rather!" said Peggy.

The boy's earnestness appealed to her and put her on her mettle. She had not been so absorbed in anything since Noel's departure. To win through to the finals would indeed be a triumph, especially when it involved the defeat of Mrs. Bobby.

"Don't you stand any rot from her!" cautioned Worthing. "Captain Broadbane will play a *sahib's* game. He always does. But she'd do anything to queer the pitch."

"Oh no!" said Peggy unconvincingly.

He laughed. "Well, look out for her, that's all! She'll probably bash everything at you, and she's got a stroke with a most diabolical spin. You be ready for her!"

"I will," Peggy promised.

She was feeling less anxious than usual that day, for her father had seemed more alert and had even taken a certain interest in her account of the tournament. She knew also that Forbes had received no serious harm from Jingo's onslaught, and this was a matter which had caused her secret uneasiness for some days. She had not seen him, but she knew that he was at work as usual directing the blasting operations for the tunnel under Sir William's supervision. She had begun of late to doubt if his assertion regarding her father's inaptitude for work had been true, but she had no means of ascertaining. All her perplexities were being held in abeyance until the return of Noel, and each day was bringing that nearer. Each day the burden grew less.

She rose therefore the more spontaneously to Leonard Worthing's appeal, and when the play began she knew she was at her best. Though Mrs. Bobby at once began to pursue the tactics which her partner had described she met them without dismay and presently succeeded in turning defence into attack. Her play had never been lacking in spirit or style, and it was soon apparent that the fight would be a close one. General attention became very speedily focussed upon it, and Peggy found herself more than once the object of tumultuous applause. She kept her head, however, not permitting either embarrassment or gratification to divert her from the end in view, which was to give Mrs. Bobby as thorough a beating as it lay in her power to accomplish. She played an absolutely generous game throughout, scorning the petty devices in which her opponent freely indulged, but missing no opportunity of making herself felt.

"Peggy is quite inspired to-day," declared Mrs. Griffiths, and Mrs. Hobart agreed that she seemed incapable of doing wrong.

It was not long before Mrs. Bobby sensed this also, and it made her furiously indignant. She began to exert herself almost beyond her strength to obtain the ascendancy, with the result that after a close finish the first sett was secured by herself and Captain Broadbane.

Unfortunately the latter was so encouraged by this initial victory that he allowed himself a little license in the second sett for which he speedily paid the price. Young Worthing soared to the occasion, with the result that he and Peggy won without difficulty, to the outspoken delight of the spectators among whom the excitement now mounted to fever-pitch.

"Don't let them put you off!" murmured Worthing to Peggy. "Keep it up, whatever you do! They are better players than we are."

She laughed at the naïve admission. "Perhaps they won't be after to-day!" she said gaily.

As the couples faced each other again, it was evident that Mrs. Bobby was beginning to feel the strain. She was too incensed with her partner to address him with civility, and she concentrated all her skill upon Peggy with a malice that was fully apparent to the onlookers. Of these there was now a goodly crowd whose sympathies were practically all on the side of Peggy and her partner. On one corner of the Club verandah a square man of somewhat stout build stood beside Bobby Fraser watching the play. He had a pipe in his mouth, but he forgot to smoke it, his eyes being fixed unblinkingly upon the slim white figure that darted like a skimming swallow about the court undismayed by her adversary's most crashing shots. When Bobby addressed any remark to him he merely grunted, and when everyone else shouted and clapped, he bit on his pipe-stem and grunted again. Being a stranger at the Club, he probably felt that he was hardly entitled to do anything else.

The play waxed fast and furious. Mrs. Bobby, white as the frock she wore, put forth all her waning strength to save the situation and Captain Broadbane, looking rather scared, did his utmost to second her efforts. But it was all in vain. Peggy was indeed as one inspired that day. She played with brilliance and an unerring judgment such as she had never manifested before. There was no enmity about her, but very clearly she knew herself to be on the winning side, and she even now and then spared Mrs. Bobby where she might have been quite merciless. Leonard Worthing smiled with malicious delight when he observed this and remarked later that for sheer finished spite, give him a woman! But it was not really spite on Peggy's part.

It was rather a sense of shame that held her hand. For she had never before so earnestly desired a victory.

They scored it at last at the end of a desperate struggle, and while the Club ground rang with the cheers of the spectators, Mrs. Bobby collapsed on her partner's arm and had to be almost carried off the court.

Peggy went after her in genuine concern, but was checked and peremptorily sent back by Mrs. Ash. "I'll look after her. It's more temper than anything else. You go and get a drink! I'm sure you want it."

So she returned to Leonard Worthing to receive the ovation awaiting her.

"An epic victory!" was Major Ash's description of it, and he declared himself reduced to despair with regard to his wife's chances of winning the tournament on the morrow.

"I should hate to beat her," said Peggy frankly, and was laughed at heartily by all within hearing.

It was at this stage that the stout, red-faced stranger who had arrived under the auspices of Bobby Fraser turned round and confronted Peggy, removing his pipe.

"I expect you have forgotten all about me by this time," he said.

Tentative interrogation mingled with a kind of humorous resignation in his voice. Peggy gave a quick start of surprise and held out an eager friendly hand.

"Forgotten you, Captain Turner!" she exclaimed. "Why, of course not! Who ever could?"

"Oh, thank the gods for that!" said Tiggie Turner, as he grasped the proffered hand. "Then I haven't got to begin all over again."

"Oh no!" said Peggy, laughing. "That would be a frightful waste of time."

He mopped his brow as he released her. "Dash it!" he said. "It doesn't look as if I had a vast amount of time to lose. Tell me, who is the youth with pale face and intellectual brow scowling at us in the distance?"

"That," said Peggy, "is Mr. Hadlow."

Tiggie's good-humoured eyes began to twinkle. "A has-been?" he ventured. "Or a possible going-to-be?"

“Neither,” said Peggy promptly and emphatically. “Just a ripping dance-partner, that’s all.”

“Oh, heaven!” said Tiggie with a groan of tragedy.

CHAPTER III

THE NEWS FROM BAKRI

It was impossible to be other than pleased to see him. The honest, rubicund face with eyes like a child's held an appeal for Peggy which she could not stifle. He was like a bit of home, or at least the connecting link with those dear past days. Utterly unromantic, even commonplace, as he was, he held a larger place in her heart than any of those about her. He had the solidity of a friend, and as such she loved him, even though she had scarcely given him a thought since their parting. Tiggie was one of those large kindly people whom everybody loves.

He stood by her side while she had tea, not talking much, nor wholly appropriating her, yet in some fashion making it apparent that he had a certain right to be there. He congratulated her on her play and hoped she and her partner would win the finals the following day. He was staying with Bobby Fraser and would certainly come and watch.

"I expect we shall go to pieces," Peggy said. "We were both of us playing above our form to-day."

Ronald Hadlow had drawn near and overheard this speech. He remarked, as he took Peggy's cup, that he begged to differ. Her tennis, like her dancing, was undoubtedly improving, and he personally would not be surprised to see her develop into a champion-player.

Tiggie stared at him while he thus expressed himself and then remarked bluntly, "Well, there wasn't much room for improvement in her dancing when I saw her last anyway. What was the matter with it?"

Hadlow raised his brows and looked compassionate. "I suppose that is chiefly a matter of ideals, sir," he said.

"Sorry!" said Tiggie Turner. "But that sounds like tommy-rot to me."

Peggy broke in, laughing. "It is and it isn't! I'll show you what he means the next time we dance together. He really has taught me quite a lot."

"And when are we going to dance together again?" asked Tiggie at once.

Peggy cast a hasty mental eye over her engagements. “I expect I could squeeze out one or two at the next Club dance,” she said.

“Miss Musgrave always keeps an extra up her sleeve,” remarked Bobby Fraser cheerily from behind her, “in case of a chance comer winning her favour.”

He had not expected the vivid flush that rose in Peggy’s face at his words. Neither had Tiggie Turner who immediately and somewhat conspicuously looked the other way.

Peggy spoke rather too hastily. “No, really, Major Fraser! I keep one or two for myself, in case I want a rest. I always have.”

“Oh, quite, quite!” said Bobby. “An excellent idea! I should put a very high premium on them if I were you. Ah, here comes my wife! Not quite dead this time, eh, Myra? Getting over your gruelling?”

Peggy sprang up with outstretched hand. “I’m so sorry you were done in,” she said. “I think it was too hot to play really.”

Mrs. Bobby sent a swift glance up and down her and conceded a pinched handshake. “It suited you all right evidently,” she remarked rather tartly. “I knew I should be in bad form to-day. As for Captain Broadbane,—” she glanced round for him, but he had wisely absented himself, and she ended her sentence with outspoken disdain—“he was simply playing the fool the whole time.”

“I thought it was a rattling good fight,” said Tiggie tactlessly. “Wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

Mrs. Bobby’s eyes expressed in a second’s survey exactly what she thought of his opinion.

“Well, have some tea, dear!” said Bobby pacifically, pressing a cup upon her. “You mustn’t overdo it, you know. You were going to ask Peggy to dine with us to-night, weren’t you?”

“Oh, thanks very much. I can’t, I’m afraid,” said Peggy quickly. “Daddy is expecting me back, and I know he won’t be late.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for that,” said Bobby cheerily. “No use asking him too, I suppose?”

She shook her head. “Thank you very much. I can’t accept for him. He goes out so little, and then only for my sake. I ought to be getting back to him now.”

"May I walk back with you," said Tiggie, "and see where you live?"

She looked at him with an instant's hesitation. "Wouldn't it be rather a waste of time?" she said.

"Not on my part," said Tiggie with a smile. "I want a walk. We'll go as fast as you like."

She laughed. His methods were so transparent as to be quite disarming. "All right," she said. "I'll walk too."

But when they started a few minutes later, her face was sober. For somehow the tactics which had seemed so natural on board the *Pioneer* were not so easy to deal with at Ghawalkhand, and she knew exactly what all the Club were saying as they walked away.

Tiggie was sublimely contented and appeared to take it for granted that she shared his complacence. He did not want to talk much, merely to saunter by her side and enjoy her presence. It even became a little exasperating after a time, and Peggy found herself making commonplace remarks out of sheer impatience at his silence.

They were half-way up the track that led to the Railway Bungalow when Tiggie roused himself from what had been almost a reverie to ask an unexpected question. Did she know a chap called Wyndham? Bobby had said he was stationed at Ghawalkhand, but he had never met him since they were at school together.

"He is hunting big game at Bakri," said Peggy rather briefly.

"Do you know him?" asked Tiggie again.

"Yes, of course." With a touch of defiance she made answer, not relishing his persistence.

"What is he like now?" asked Tiggie.

A very difficult question to answer! Peggy braced herself to do her best. "I think he is about thirty-three, rather good-looking, and plays polo very well."

"A good dancer?" asked Tiggie.

Peggy made a further effort. "I haven't had very many opportunities of judging. Rather above the average, I should say."

Her tone was strictly impartial. Tiggie seemed to be making a mental note, for he paused before he asked his next question.

"And when did you say he was coming back?"

"I didn't say," said Peggy. "I don't know."

"I should like to see him again," said Tiggie musingly. "He was the worst chap for getting into scrapes I ever knew, generally other people's scrapes. An awfully good liar, too! He would swear that black was white until he really almost convinced you that it was."

Something in the words made Peggy's heart contract, casually though they were uttered. She tried to laugh it off. "I expect that was because he was Irish. And black often looks much blacker to some people than it does to others."

"Yes, I forgot he was Irish," said Tiggie.

He dropped into silence again, and Peggy forgot to break it.

They passed the Forbes' bungalow, and Tiggie roused himself again.

"Who lives there?"

"My father's assistant," said Peggy. "They are building a railway. I think I told you."

"Yes, yes, I remember," said Tiggie. "You were rather anxious about your father, weren't you? How did you find him?"

His kindly tone was so completely devoid of anything but sympathetic interest that though she had never confided in him before she found herself doing so now without effort.

"I think he is better than when I first came, but I am still anxious about him. It was my mother's death that affected him so, years ago now, and I doubt if he will ever get over it."

"He must be jolly glad to have you with him," said Tiggie.

"Yes, yes,—sometimes," said Peggy. "More so lately, I think." She broke off. A white figure had suddenly come into sight on the road above them and was tearing down with incredible swiftness. "Here is Jingo!" said Peggy in the tone of one introducing a pal.

"Jingo!" echoed Tiggie. "What, that thing? What is it?"

Jingo had flung himself upon Peggy ere the question was well uttered. She stooped over him, fondling him and uttering endearing words.

Eventually she raised her head and completed the introduction. "This is Jingo. He is Captain Wyndham's dog really. I am taking care of him till he

comes back. He's just the best dog in the world."

"Lucky Jingo!" said Tiggie. "I should like to shake hands with him."

He did so solemnly and received Jingo's warm approbation in the process.

"So he's a lodger, is he?" he said. "Jolly decent of you to give him house-room."

"Oh, he earns his keep. He's a splendid watch-dog," said Peggy.

They went up the hill and came to the Railway Bungalow.

"I suppose I mustn't ask to come in?" said Tiggie, looking wistful.

"Of course, if you want to!" said Peggy. "Why not?"

He turned into the compound beside her. "I suppose you would send me to the right-about if you felt that way," he remarked.

"I hope it won't come to that, Captain Turner," said Peggy with a touch of severity.

He smiled. "So do I, Peggy,—I mean Miss Musgrave. I say, I do think you might call me by my Christian name when we're alone. I'm sure you call Wyndham by his."

Again that vivid flush rose in Peggy's cheek before she could check it. She felt as if she were on fire. Instinctively she ignored his last sentence. It was the only way to deal with it.

"I'm afraid I don't know your Christian name," she said. "And—besides —"

He interrupted her good-naturedly. "Oh, never mind that! Call me Tiggie! It's short for Montague, but nobody ever called me that, thank the gods!"

Peggy's colour began to die down. She uttered a faint laugh. "I'm not sure that I want to call you Tiggie," she said.

"Oh, then don't!" he said, with great earnestness. "Never do anything you don't like to please me! I couldn't possibly bear it."

She looked at him in sharp surprise, almost as if she were seeing him for the first time. Was there a certain subtlety about Tiggie Turner, after all? If so.— She felt oddly like one on the verge of a discovery. Tiggie? It seemed incredible.

"I believe you are laughing at me," she said, after a grave pause.

"Heaven forbid!" said Tiggie.

They were nearing the bungalow. Her father's car stood before the entrance and she quickened her pace.

"We will talk of this another time," she said.

"As often as you like," said Tiggie generously. "In fact, I shan't mind what we talk about—so long as we talk."

She laughed at that more naturally. "Come in and see my father!" she said.

She conducted him by way of the verandah to her father's room. It was impossible not to treat him as an intimate friend. He fitted no other *rôle*. Involuntarily she had come to regard him as a big, kindly elder brother with an undoubted right to be treated as such. To shake him off was out of the question. In some shape or form yet to be decided, he had come into her life to stay.

The sound of voices in her father's room made her pause just as she reached it. She drew back with a sharp gesture, staying the man behind her. Forbes was in there, talking with Sir William.

She had not met him since the night on which Jingo had accomplished his discomfiture, and every impulse within her revolted against meeting him now. She stood in indecision.

As she did so, Forbes's voice, strident with anger, came fiercely forth.

"I have long known that my wife was tainted,—not to be trusted. But Wyndham—I took him for a gentleman! And by all the gods of India, I'll make him pay!"

Peggy stiffened as she stood. Her impulse had been to go. It left her on the instant, and with it all power to move. She forgot the man with her, forgot everything in that overwhelming moment but the need—the absolute need—as insistent as the need to breathe—to know the truth. Like a statue she stood against the wall of the bungalow. It was as though an unseen hand had touched her and turned her to stone. Every pulse in her body had ceased to beat.

Sir William's voice came, quiet and concentrated, through the silence. The matting on the verandah had deadened the sound of approaching

footsteps, and it was obvious that he was unaware of any presence outside his room.

"You are taking a good deal for granted," he said. "You have no actual evidence of the truth of it. It may be an entirely false rumour."

"False!" echoed Forbes in a voice that was like the bellowing of a bull. "False! I tell you the story is all over the city. She has been in camp at Bakri with him for the past week. I know now well enough that it was going on before that—weeks before. I felt it in the air. But he tried to throw dust in my eyes by running after your daughter, the dirty scoundrel, though she may have been in the secret for all I know."

Something stopped him, though apparently it was no more than the quiet pushing back of a chair.

Sir William's voice came with just that note of authority which upon occasion he was so well able to assume. "I should prefer," he said, "that my daughter's name were not mentioned in this connection. If what you have told me is true, I am very sorry. But you may take it from me that my daughter has never been concerned with any shameful secret."

It was at this stage that Tiggie, very red and uncomfortable, addressed himself in a loud whisper to the motionless marble figure which a few seconds before had been a laughing happy girl.

"I say, hadn't we better go?"

She did not answer him or turn her head. There was an awful sightless look in her eyes which he was to remember for many a long day.

But if his whisper failed to reach her, it pierced beyond. There was a further quiet movement, and Sir William stepped out on to the verandah.

"Peggy!" he said.

That stirred her. She gave a gasp and seemed to awake. "Yes, Daddy," she said, and turned towards him.

He came to her. "My dear child!" he said.

She uttered a choking sound, and collected herself. "Daddy dear, this is—this is Tiggie—I mean Captain Turner—a friend I made on the way out. May he come in? And please—" she was frowning a little as if the words cost her some effort—"will you tell Mr. Forbes to go before—before Jingo finds him? Take him—take him out the other way, please, Daddy!"

She made an urgent gesture with the last request, and Sir William turned back at once to the room he had left.

"Certainly, my dear!" he said.

As he disappeared inside, Peggy turned with a ghastly smile to her companion.

"I'm so sorry," she said in a whisper. "Please—forgive me! I'm—afraid—I played—too hard."

Her strength seemed to snap with the words. Her hands went out with a groping movement towards him. He was just in time to catch her as she fell.

CHAPTER IV

AFTERWARDS

OUT of a darkness that was like unto death Peggy came trembling back.

It was the most terrible awakening she had ever known, and it was accompanied by such fits of trembling as shook her from head to foot. When she opened her eyes at last, it was only to be seized by a nauseating giddiness that compelled her to close them again.

"Daddy, I'm falling—I'm falling!" she said.

His voice came to her as from a great distance; yet she knew he was by her side. "No, darling, you are not. I have got you. You are quite safe."

Even then, in her extremity, she reflected that she had never heard him speak with such complete self-reliance before. She tried to cling to him, but her hands were so numb and cold that she could not close her fingers. Another awful tremor went through her; she shook all over.

Then a second voice spoke close to her—a voice she vaguely knew. "Let me give it to her, sir! That's better. Peggy, try and drink this, dear! Just try!"

The rim of a glass came against her quivering lips, and she knew that it was Tiggie's hand that held it. She made an effort to obey him in answer to the gentle persuasion of his voice, and swallowed a drain of brandy and water that burned intolerably yet imparted a certain strength.

"Just a little more!" urged Tiggie tenderly. "It'll do you good, you know. And you're so cold."

It was true; she was cold, overwhelmingly, numbly cold. That ague-like trembling made her feel almost as if body and soul were being sundered. Desperately she sought to comply, and this time with more success. The fiery draught went down, and she opened her eyes.

She was lying in her father's arms, and Tiggie was kneeling beside her, glass in hand. His was the first face she saw as her vision gradually focussed.

"Oh, Tiggie!" she said weakly, and began to cry.

"Don't, darling, don't!" said Sir William.

"Don't stop her!" said Tiggie. "It'll be a help."

He set down the glass and began to rub one of her icy hands between his own.

"Cry as much as you want!" he told her. "It isn't going to do any harm, and you'll feel better afterwards."

But persuasion to cry is usually the most successful antidote to tears, and so it proved with Peggy. She sobbed for a little and grew quiet.

"Better, darling?" said Sir William.

She sat up slowly by the aid of his supporting arm. Again her head reeled, but after a moment or two she began to feel steadier. She looked from one to the other of the two men.

"Oh, dear! I am so sorry," she said.

"That's all right," said Tiggie, in a tone of gentle remonstrance. "You've been playing a bit too hard, you know. Can't keep going all the time at that rate."

She smiled at him faintly, with gratitude. "I know. But I'm all right now. Daddy dear," she turned to him pathetically, "I'm sorry I've been so silly. I'll go to my room now and dress. Won't you ask—Captain Turner—to stay to dinner?"

"Oh, I can't, thanks," said Tiggie. "The Bobby's are expecting me back. I'll come up in the morning and see how you are. Take it easy now! Wouldn't you be better in bed?"

"Yes, dear, yes," said Sir William. "It would be far the best way. I'll get the doctor to come up."

She laid her hand on his arm. "No, Daddy, please. I am perfectly well, and I don't want the doctor. Please forget I have been so stupid! I shan't do it again."

"My poor darling!" he said compassionately.

Tiggie got to his feet. "Well, I must be going," he said, "if there's nothing I can do. I hope you will get a decent night and be all right in the morning."

Peggy held out her hand to him. "You are very kind," she said earnestly.

He gripped her hand and held it for a second. “If there’s anything I can do—anything under the sun—well, I shall be up in the morning.” He released her abruptly and turned to Sir William. “Good-bye, sir!”

Sir William shook hands, regarding him with eyes of grave searching. “Thank you, Captain Turner,” he said. “I shall be very pleased to see you again. Good-bye!”

Tiggie turned and went.

As he did so, Peggy rose somewhat unsteadily to her feet.

“I don’t know how I came to behave like this, Daddy,” she said. “It was very silly of me.”

“My dear, I know,” he said.

She met his eyes. “Yes, I heard what Mr. Forbes was saying,” she said. “I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it!” She glanced around her, shivering. “You sent him away? He has gone?”

“Yes, dear, yes,” Sir William said.

She faced him again. “Daddy, do you believe it?”

He made a gesture as though the question were too painful to answer.

“I see,” she said.

Haltingly he tried to soften his refusal. “You know, my dear, it is a very difficult subject. I have never felt sure—never wholly sure—of Noel Wyndham’s stability. But I cannot definitely say that I—”

She interrupted him gently. “Dear Daddy, don’t say! I quite understand. You mustn’t grieve about it. It will be all right.” She leaned against his shoulder very lovingly. “I’ve got you, my own Daddy,” she whispered. “And—we—we’ll keep together, won’t we? And comfort each other—and help each other—and—and lean on each other—when things are difficult?”

He pressed her to him. “My darling,” he said huskily, “for as long as I live you will always come first with me.”

A quick tremor went through her. She turned and clung to him. “Daddy, will you remember—will you always remember—how badly I want you?”

He stooped and kissed her. “Always, my Peggy, always,” he said.

She hid her face in his neck. “I think I’ve expected too much of life,” she told him tremulously. “It was as if—everything came to me at once, and—and I got dazzled, bewitched almost. It was like—like a lovely dream. And

even now—even now—" she faltered, hiding her face a little deeper, "it may —it may not be over. It may be all a dreadful mistake. I felt somehow—so sure—that we belonged to each other—were always meant for each other. He—he was so good to me. Daddy, and—I know—he thought he loved me." A little sob rose in her throat; she controlled it quickly. "But I'm going to be brave, darling. I do promise I'll be brave. And you won't keep anything from me, will you, when you really know? Promise—promise!"

"I promise, darling," he said tenderly.

She lifted her face and showed it without a trace of tears. "Thank you, Daddy, my own Daddy. There is no one in the world who has ever been better to me than you have. Now I am going to change and we will have dinner together."

"You are sure you are up to it?" he questioned anxiously. "Sure you are not trying to do too much?"

She mustered a little, trembling laugh. "Of course I'm sure! How you spoil me! I am quite, quite well now. Don't I look it?"

He regarded her with grave criticism. "You look," he said, "as one who knows where strength is to be found. Peggy, tell me, this Captain Turner,—a very nice man, my dear, and I like him, but—have I ever heard of him before?"

She laughed again with less effort. "No, dear, you haven't. I'm afraid I forgot to mention him. There have been so many new things to fill one's mind. But he is, as you say, a very nice man. He was very kind to me on the voyage out. He made friends with Major and Mrs. Bobby at the same time, and now he is staying with them."

"Do you know what has brought him?" asked Sir William, still looking at her.

No flush rose in Peggy's pale face as she answered him. Her smile died completely away.

"Yes, Daddy, I do know," she said steadily. "He told me he was coming. I didn't really want him to, but I couldn't tell him not. I think he knows that it isn't any good. I have never let him think anything else."

"Ah!" Sir William said, and sighed deeply. "Well, I like him, Peggy. He is honest and straight."

She echoed the sigh as she turned away. "Yes, I know he is, Daddy. I like him too. But—but—"

She did not finish the sentence, and as the door closed behind her, her father sighed again.

“God help my little Peggy!” he said.

CHAPTER V

TIGGIE

PEGGY was sitting on the verandah on the following morning with Jingo serenely on guard when the lifting of his head and smiling angle of his ears told her of the approach of someone of whom he approved. She heard a step immediately afterwards and saw Tiggie come round the curve that hid the road.

She did not move from her place, but Jingo rose with the decorous air of a *major domo* and trotted to meet him with just as much pleasure in his demeanour as was compatible with the high post he filled. Tiggie paused to greet him as was fitting, and they came on together, Jingo leading the way.

Peggy rose from her wicker-chair with a touch of languor to greet the visitor as he reached the verandah. She was still pale, but her smile was wholly spontaneous.

"How awfully nice of you to come!" she said.

"It isn't at all," said Tiggie with scrupulous honesty. "Besides, I said I should."

There was another chair near her. "Sit down!" she said. "And do smoke your pipe if you want to!"

"Thank you very much," said Tiggie, pulling it out. "Sure you don't mind?"

"I like it," said Peggy.

He produced a tobacco-pouch and began to fill it gravely. "Are you all right to-day?" he said.

"Yes, quite, thank you," said Peggy.

"But you had a bad night," said Tiggie.

She leaned back in her chair. "Not too bad. I didn't dream anyway."

"Or sleep either," said Tiggie.

"Not a tremendous lot," she admitted.

He concentrated his attention upon his pipe for a few seconds, and she thought his rotund face had the rather appealing seriousness of a child contemplating a beloved toy. Eventually he pushed it into the side of his mouth and looked up at her.

"Where is your father?" he said.

The question surprised her momentarily; she had expected something more intimate at the end of his cogitation.

"He has gone to his work," she said.

"Oh!" said Tiggie. "Did he know I was coming?"

"Yes," she said. "He heard you say so yesterday. Did you want to see him? I don't think he realized that."

"Oh no!" said Tiggie. "I don't. I just wanted to make sure that he knew all about me, that's all."

"He does," said Peggy simply.

"Meaning you told him?" questioned Tiggie.

She nodded. "I try to tell him everything," she said. "That is, everything that he ought to know."

A faint gleam crossed Tiggie's face; it was hardly a smile. "Exactly. That's the way to bring up fathers. Treat 'em with confidence until they abuse it; which I don't fancy yours would ever do."

"That he would not!" said Peggy warmly.

Tiggie struck a match and lighted his pipe thoughtfully. "He doesn't disapprove of me, I hope?" he said then.

"Why should he?" said Peggy, smiling at him. "I shouldn't think anybody possibly could, could they?"

"Thank you," said Tiggie politely. "I rather hoped you might say something like that. You may have gathered by this time that I had a particular reason for coming up like this?"

She made a small gesture of appeal with one hand. "Oh, I do hope not a very serious one!" she said.

Tiggie was smoking serenely, just as he had smoked on deck when he had suggested coming to see her. Certainly by the expression of his kindly

face he was not contemplating anything very alarming.

"It's like this, Peggy," he said after a moment, and somehow the utterance of her name at that point had a comforting sound. "I am a sort of fellow that's made more for use than ornament, and I've often rather hoped that I might some day have the chance to make myself a bit useful to you. Not because I want to place you under any obligation—I don't want you to think that for a moment. But between friends, you know, there is a certain license or privilege, whatever you like to call it, which allows services to be rendered without any after-effects, as it were. For instance, if you were to sew on a button for me to-day, as you easily might for you're very kind-hearted, I shouldn't feel I was obliged to run after you until I had performed a service of similar importance for you. That isn't my idea of friendship."

"I see what you mean," said Peggy. "It isn't mine either."

Yet she spoke with a certain reserve, for she was beginning to be afraid that her friendship with Tiggie had already gone too far.

He looked at her rather wistfully. "You must agree," he said, "that there is no paying back between friends. It simply isn't done."

"I think it depends a little bit," she said.

"What on?" said Tiggie.

She made another small gesture, and though it was a very slight one, her hand found its way to his knee. "Captain Turner," she said.

"Tiggie," he said, and laid his hand exactly over hers without grasping it.

"Tiggie," she repeated obediently, "I think I know what you are trying to say,—what you are really too nice to put into words. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but—"

"You don't know in the least," said Tiggie unexpectedly. "I'm not the sort of chap that comes to you when you've been let down by one fellow and says, Look here, have me instead! Besides, we don't know yet that he has. There's a lot of gossip flying about. It may be true and it may be false. What I'm going to do is to find out, and I've come up to tell you so. That's all. I thought perhaps you might like to know I was on the job."

"Oh! I see!" she said rather helplessly.

He proceeded with more firmness of purpose than he had yet displayed. "You've no one else to take it on that I can see, and it isn't fair to go on nothing but rumour. It is quite possible it isn't all true. He may have made a

three-fold ass of himself, but there may be a way out. That is what I propose to discover. If I go with your approval, so much the better, but in any case I'm going." A tinge of colour had risen in Peggy's face at last. She lay in her chair, looking at him, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, Tiggie," she said, "how good you are!"

"I'm not good at all," he said, as if affronted. "It's the only sane thing to do that I can see. It isn't fair to carry on without knowing, and even if there is an entanglement, well, in nine cases out of ten one can generally wangle something. Besides—besides—" he hesitated for a second, then his hand closed strongly over hers— "I don't believe there's a fellow living who could deliberately go off the rails with a married woman when he could get you for the asking."

A little spasm crossed Peggy's face. "You haven't seen the other woman," she whispered.

"What is she like?" said Tiggie.

How did he know that it helped her to talk to one who till then had never been in her confidence? Peggy wondered afterwards; but she knew that he would never have questioned her had he not known.

It was no effort to her to answer him. "She is a friend of mine and I love her. She is very beautiful. They say she has Indian blood. And she is very unhappily married. Noel has been very good to her. It was he who brought her here first. The others—all the people down at the Club—don't like her, and they say rather horrid things about her. I don't think it is all true, but of course I don't know. I think that was why Noel befriended her. She seemed so forlorn."

"And you befriended her on his recommendation?" suggested Tiggie.

She nodded. "And I loved her from the first. I couldn't help it. She is so very lonely and so sad."

"Ah!" said Tiggie. "Then it wasn't for Noel's sake?"

"Oh no, it wasn't for Noel's sake." She wiped away her tears with a simplicity that established him once and for all as a friend in whose presence no deception was necessary. "It was for her own. But I saw—I saw at once—why he was taking her part. He is like that."

"What is he like?" said Tiggie.

She drew a deep breath. “He is difficult to describe. There is no one that I have ever met in the least like him. I knew him as a child, and he was always the same,—kind, chivalrous, wonderful. We were great pals in the old days.” A faint smile crossed her face. “We used to play together—all sorts of games—when I was six and he was twenty-two.”

“You don’t say the mischief began then?” said Tiggie.

Her hand lay in his; she did not seek to remove it. Her eyes met his with complete confidence. “No, no, of course not. But I loved him very dearly, as any child would. I never saw him again after that for twelve whole years. I was in England, and he never came home. Then, when I was eighteen, I finished schooling and came out here to Daddy. He was stationed here. That was chance. But someone told him I was coming, and so he waited on, instead of taking leave. He met me down at Samdana, because Daddy was hard at work and forgot. And ever since then he has taken special charge of me, till at last—at last—” She paused, frowning a little, as if seeking for adequate words.

“At last?” said Tiggie gently.

“Well, at last,”—she dropped her voice a little as one who speaks of sacred things—“we knew that we loved one another. I think he knew first, but it came rather suddenly to me. And so I asked him to wait for a little while until we were quite sure. That was how he came to go off to Bakri like that. I was going to answer him—” her voice was no more than a whisper now—“when he came back.”

“I see,” said Tiggie.

He had listened with great attention, but without any show of feeling. Reviewing the matter later, she decided that he was the easiest person to confide in that she had ever met.

“And your father?” he said, after brief consideration. “Does he know about it all?”

She hesitated. For the first time she would have preferred not to answer, but Tiggie’s patient silence drew her on.

“Yes, he does know,” she said. “But—I’m afraid he doesn’t believe in Noel. He was rather prejudiced against him from the beginning. I never quite knew why. There was some gossip that he never told me. He doesn’t know him as I do. He never has.”

“Ah!” said Tiggie, biting on the stem of his pipe.

He did not ask her anything further, but sat for some time smoking rather moodily and staring straight before him.

Finally he lifted her hand and laid it gently in her lap. “Well, I’m going now,” he said.

“Going?” She looked up at him with half-startled appeal. “Must you go yet? It—has been a real comfort to talk to you.”

“Thank you,” said Tiggie. Nevertheless he got up. “I’m glad you’ve told me everything. I’m going now to find out the rest. Try not to be downhearted while I’m gone, and don’t believe anything till I come back! No, don’t get up! You’re tired.” He stood a moment, looking down at her. “I shan’t be long,” he said. “Think you can carry on as if nothing had happened till I see you again?”

She lifted her eyes bravely to his. “I will,” she said.

“That’s right,” said Tiggie. He bent a little and clumsily, jerkily, he touched her cheek with one finger. “That’s right,” he said again. “Carry on!”

As he went away, still smoking, still outwardly unperturbed, she knew that he was deeply moved.

CHAPTER VI

GRIT

WHEN PEGGY reappeared at the Club that afternoon, there were very few who noticed any difference in her, though there were many who looked for it.

Mrs. Griffiths gave her an even warmer greeting than usual, and Mrs. Hobart, albeit with her customary dignity, made it very clear that she was welcome. Mrs. Ash, to her surprise, met her with an abrupt kiss.

"I hope you are going to win," she said.

"Oh, do you?" said Peggy. "Then I hope you will!"

There was a general laugh at this, and Mrs. Bobby, who was sitting near, made a wry grimace as if the levity jarred upon her.

"That being the case, it doesn't promise to be a very interesting match," she said.

"You wait!" said Major Hobart, as they departed to the court.

Leonard Worthing was waiting for her with anxiety on his boyish face, but the first sight of Peggy seemed to reassure him.

"Just a little grit and we'll win," he said.

Curiously, that was the very word which Mrs. Griffiths was at that moment murmuring into Mrs. Hobart's ear. "She is full of grit, but I am certain she has been awake all night."

"You really think she knows?" said Mrs. Hobart.

"Of course she knows! Everybody knows. My husband is in a terrible state about it. We shall lose him of course." Mrs. Griffiths uttered a tragic sigh.

"I think you are taking rather too much for granted," said Mrs. Hobart. "So far it is nothing but report, and we have had no confirmation of it."

"Oh, it's true! I'm sure it's true!" declared Mrs. Griffiths. "Horrid things always are. And that poor child will be broken-hearted."

"There again," said Mrs. Hobart in her quiet judicial way, "I think you may be mistaken. We have no grounds—no possible grounds—for imagining that—"

Mrs. Griffiths broke in upon her. "Yes, we have. There's Jingo. Why did he leave Jingo with her? He'd have taken Jingo with him (he's simply devoted to that dog) if he hadn't wanted to leave some sort of reminder behind him to keep his memory green. Oh, my dear, I've known things were serious ever since I heard about Jingo."

None but Mrs. Griffiths ever called Mrs. Hobart "my dear," and Mrs. Hobart always smiled slightly at the rare epithet as if she knew that it ill became her peculiarly self-contained personality.

She smiled now as she said, "Well, that does not prove that anything very serious has happened to Peggy. She too may be fond of dogs."

Mrs. Griffiths sighed again. "The child is such a darling. She would love anyone who was decent to her. Her mother over again! Just like her mother!"

"You knew her well?" said Mrs. Hobart.

"I did indeed, and dearly loved her. She was full of charm, but—poor girl, like a flower—born to die. A tragic story! Everyone loved her. Poor Will Musgrave of course worshipped her. She was the glory—and the ruin—of his life."

Mrs. Hobart looked as she generally looked when anything at all extravagant was said by Mrs. Griffiths, not wholly unsympathetic, but faintly ironical. "Well, let us hope that Peggy will have a happier record," she said.

At this point Mrs. Bobby, pale but eager, edged her chair close to that of Mrs. Griffiths. "Are you talking about Peggy Musgrave?" she said.

An abrupt silence fell between the two ladies. Then Mrs. Griffiths made guarded reply.

"Yes. I think her tennis has improved marvellously of late. You really ought to have a return match with her when you are feeling quite fit."

Mrs. Bobby's thin lips curled. "I think we shall see her beaten to-day, unless Mrs. Ash is in an over-generous mood."

"Oh, Mrs. Ash isn't that sort," said Mrs. Griffiths. "She will do her best to win. She always does."

"Then she will not have a very difficult task," returned Mrs. Bobby. "Peggy was playing to the gallery yesterday, but she has no one to watch her to-day."

"Really?" said Mrs. Griffiths in some surprise.

"Didn't you see?" said Mrs. Bobby carelessly. "Captain Turner, the man she trifled with on the way out! He turned up again—to make a fool of himself. But he very soon had enough of it apparently, for he left this morning to go shooting. He is coming back to us later, but not, I imagine, to worship before her shrine again. He probably realized on a closer acquaintance, what I have known for a long time, that she is an incorrigible little flirt."

Mrs. Hobart leaned quietly forward and spoke across Mrs. Griffiths. "Do you know, Mrs. Fraser, little Peggy Musgrave has become such a favourite among us that if your friend, Captain Turner, really is of that opinion I am afraid he will not find us very anxious to entertain him."

It was gently, even gracefully spoken; but a red flush instantly dyed Mrs. Bobby's rather high cheek-bones. She opened her mouth to reply, but only succeeded in drawing a somewhat deep breath.

Mrs. Hobart leaned quietly back again. "Yes, the child is making quite a good beginning," she said to Mrs. Griffiths. "It will be amusing if she and Mr. Worthing really come through. He is a good solid player, so they have quite a fair chance. At any rate, my husband thinks so."

Mrs. Griffiths, who for the moment had seemed to share Mrs. Bobby's discomfiture, rallied herself to smile approval.

"I like young Worthing," she said in her hearty way. "He may not be the sort to set the Thames on fire, but he is always reliable."

Mrs. Bobby also recovered herself with an almost fierce rapidity. "Unlike his captain," she remarked acidly. "I must say I was astonished when I heard of this open scandal with that unspeakable Mrs. Forbes. They say Forbes is simply rampant. What on earth will be the end of it?"

Mrs. Griffiths turned to her rather hastily, almost with an air of protection. "My dear Mrs. Bobby," she said, "we are not talking of it until we know for certain. No good can come of discussing it, and we are hoping and praying that it is not true."

Mrs. Bobby sneered faintly. “I would join my hopes and prayers to yours if I thought they would be of the slightest use,” she said. “But I am sure they would not, and I am equally sure that Mrs. Hobart agrees with me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Griffiths, betraying some confusion. “At least, I think that is taking a good deal for granted.”

Mrs. Hobart spoke, majestically. “Mrs. Fraser is quite right. I do agree with her. And I also agree with you that it is not a matter for discussion. Is that Sir William Musgrave that I see over there?”

It was; to their great astonishment they recognized him walking up to the Club House.

“He has come to see Peggy play in the finals,” said Mrs. Griffiths. “I am pleased! Shall I go and speak to him, or do you think he would rather be left alone?”

“Shall we both go?” suggested Mrs. Hobart, rising.

Mrs. Bobby gave her a single lightning glance of pure hatred as she passed. But neither of the two ladies saw it. In the interest of the new arrival Mrs. Bobby was, very obviously, forgotten.

They met Sir William as he came rather absently up the path.

“How do you do?” said Mrs. Griffiths. “So you have actually come to watch the finals! How splendid!”

He shook the hand proffered with a kind of vague appreciation. “I thought I should find my little girl down here,” he said. “Is she playing?”

“She is playing in the finals,” Mrs. Hobart told him, “against Mrs. Ash and my husband, and there is every hope that she and Mr. Worthing will win.”

His look comprehended her and he smiled courteously, though the gist of what she said passed him by. “It is very kind of you to take such care of her,” he said. “She had a fainting attack last night and I am rather anxious about her. Please do not let her do too much!”

Mrs. Griffiths and Mrs. Hobart exchanged glances. “Oh no!” said the former. “We must take care of her if that is the case. I shall make a point of doing so.”

“You are very kind,” said Sir William. He hesitated a moment, then added, “I am sure your care would be far more adequate than mine.”

Mrs. Hobart smiled graciously, since she was plainly included in this remark. “We are very fond of Peggy,” she said, “and we want her to be happy.”

“Ah!” said Sir William with a heavy sigh. “Nobody wants that more than I do. But it is difficult to know how to find it for her—where to look.”

“Don’t you think,” said Mrs. Hobart very gently, “that happiness sometimes comes unsought?”

He turned to her with a wistful gratitude in his eyes. “Yes,” he said. “That is so, I believe, very often. And she is a child who will never seek it for herself.”

“For that very reason,” said Mrs. Hobart, “it will probably come to her, though not from the direction in which we have looked.”

Mrs. Griffiths broke in warmly. “I cannot conceive of any girl with such a sweet temperament finding anything but happiness sooner or later.”

“Thank you,” said Sir William gravely. “You comfort me very much.”

They passed on to the courts, and he sat between Peggy’s two champions and watched her play without comment and, they were inclined to think, without much attention upon the game. She was playing well, but not brilliantly. Young Worthing, on the other hand, was surpassing himself. But it was evident upon very brief observation, that they were completely outmatched.

Major Hobart and Mrs. Ash had played together many times, and their partnership was one of the flawless variety that admits of no misunderstandings. They were a very powerful combination, and wholly calm in the face of Leonard Worthing’s most meteoric efforts. They won the first sett though not with ease, and at the end of it Peggy ran up for a second to speak to her father.

“Daddy, I didn’t know you were coming. It was dear of you.”

He smiled at her in his kindly, absent way. “I wanted to see how you were getting on,” he said.

“We are getting on splendidly,” she declared. “We are going to make the biggest fight of our lives now.”

She was gone again laughing with the words, and Mrs. Griffiths behind Sir William’s back signalled to Mrs. Hobart the one word which seemed to fit the occasion: “Grit!”

To the crowd of onlookers, it was evident that Peggy put forth the very utmost of her powers over the next encounter. But the brilliance of the previous day was lacking, and it was a losing battle. Young Worthing, with gritted teeth did his part, but there was no evading the ultimate issue. Major Hobart and Mrs. Ash scored their victory, though again after a hard fight, at the end of the second sett. Mrs. Ash roundly declared that it was the most sporting tussle she had ever had, and came from the court with her hand pushed through Peggy's arm.

The applause that greeted them was hearty and sustained, and she pushed the girl in front of her, laughing good-naturedly, to receive it.

Everyone was kind to Peggy, and she was not allowed to efface herself though she sought to do so. And everyone, from Colonel Griffiths downwards, wanted to secure a dance at the Tennis Ball which was to take place a few days after the next Club dance. She yielded herself to the general atmosphere of gaiety about her with that ready adaptability that was her charm, and a good many, hearing her careless laughter, decided that the scandal of the hour had affected her not at all.

But the Great Triumvirate when they met together to discuss various items of current interest were unanimously of the opinion that there was more in little Peggy than met the eye.

"I admire her very much," said Mrs. Hobart.

"The child is a sport," said Mrs. Ash.

Mrs. Griffiths had the last word, and she uttered it with emphasis: "Grit!" she said.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRUTH

For more than a week rumour remained rife in Ghawalkhand, sometimes rumour of the wildest description, but there came no definite confirmation of it, no solidifying into fact. All that was known was that Noel Wyndham remained absent and that servants only were in possession of Forbes's bungalow.

Sir William was working harder than ever while his assistant was away. It was presumed that the latter was engaged upon ascertaining the actual state of affairs, and taking legal advice. Sir William spoke of him to none, not even to Peggy, between whom and himself there now existed a closer bond of sympathy than had ever before been possible. His work did not allow him to be much with her, but his interest in all that she did was unfailing, and he always satisfied himself that one or other of her good friends was watching over her when he could not be there. It had become a self-imposed task with the Great Triumvirate who would not have yielded their charge to any save her own father. Every day, Mrs. Griffiths, Mrs. Hobart, or Mrs. Ash made provision as it were for Peggy's immediate future, and the result was that whichever way she turned she found herself surrounded by the most loving care.

To have withdrawn into herself during that time of suspense would have been very difficult, and she soon decided that it was far better not to attempt to do so. In some subtle way she was aware of a sympathy too delicate to reveal itself, and the certainty of its existence made life bearable. She shunned the blank hours with all her might, feeling instinctively that in them alone despair could find her. But whether with dear loving Mrs. Griffiths, calm and sustaining Mrs. Hobart or bluntly friendly Mrs. Ash, she knew relief and a measure of forgetfulness.

"If your father should ever have to be away for the night, dear, you will come to me," said Mrs. Griffiths.

"If your father is unable at any time to accompany you to an evening entertainment, you will let me know," said Mrs. Hobart.

And, "If you ever want someone to run round with you, ride or anything, don't mope by yourself, just send me a *chit*!" said Mrs. Ash.

And they planned out her days among them in a fashion which for a long time Peggy never suspected.

It was a period of waiting to which later she looked back with an odd wonder. Was it possible that she played and rode and danced with that awful trouble gnawing at her heart? She did not remember shedding any tears though sometimes she woke in the night and found her pillow wet with them. She did not feel any desire to cry during the day. In a fashion it was easier to go forward as she was led or propelled by her kindly guardians than to pause by the wayside to mourn. She bore her dread burden wherever she went, but as if in response to their efforts she was able to suppress all sign of it. It even seemed to her at times that they took turns to help her in the bearing of it though none ever hinted at any knowledge of its existence. She came to know Mrs. Griffiths' cheery, "And what are the plans for to-morrow?" as regularly as her father's good night kiss.

Everything was always planned for her, everything was in due order carried out. She found every day that someone wanted her, and so that time of waiting which, if left to herself she might have found wellnigh unbearable, passed. It was as if she had been placed partially under an anæsthetic, she thought to herself. There were even times when it seemed that it was all a dream and Noel must surely come back to her at the end of it with laughter and tenderness in his eyes and words of love upon his lips.

Wistfully now she counted the days of his absence. He had been gone nearly four weeks.

And then one morning as she walked on the hill with Jingo, she spied a thick-set, unromantic figure coming towards her and knew that Tiggie had returned from his mission.

The sight of him sent all the blood in her bounding to her heart. She wanted to rush to meet him, yet also she wanted to flee away and hide—and hide—from the news he came to bring.

In the end she stood quite still, waiting with suspended breath, watching with wide, unblinking eyes, while he came rather heavily up the slope to join her.

Jingo raced in his usual impulsive fashion to greet him, and was duly received and patted by Tiggie, who then came on up the hill, red-faced and slightly panting, to present himself to Peggy.

She let her pent breath go in a long sigh as she gave him both her hands, and in that sigh her last hope flickered out like the quivering flame of a spent match. She knew that he brought her no good news.

He held her hands in a warm tight grasp. She noted with faint surprise that his pipe was not in his mouth.

"They told me I'd find you up here," he said, speaking awkwardly, almost lumberingly.

"I know," she said simply, and somehow speech came without difficulty just because of his awkwardness. "I always left word, in case you came."

His kind eyes were on her face. "I got back as soon as I could," he said. "I'm afraid it's pretty bad, Peggy."

"Yes," she said.

He gathered her hands close up against his heart; but she did not even know that he was holding them.

"You poor little girl!" he said.

She smiled at him gallantly. "Just tell me everything!" she said. "You needn't mind telling me. I—have always known—somehow—that it was true."

"It isn't all his fault, poor devil!" said Tiggie. "He's nearly heart-broken about it. It began before you set foot in India. He never meant it to go any length, and had actually made plans to go home on leave, so as to break it. But—"

"Ah!" said Peggy with a little gasp. "Yes. I know. Go on!"

"Well, it fell through," said Tiggie. "And after that—well, her husband is the greatest swine that ever breathed. It was he who practically forced her to this by deliberate and persistent cruelty. He wanted to get rid of her."

"Oh!" said Peggy, horrified.

Marcella's face rose before her, pale and piteous, as she had seen it last. Her own trouble suddenly seemed almost insignificant.

"Oh, how awful!" she said.

Tiggie's good-natured visage was drawn into lines of most unaccustomed grimness. He continued with the air of one trying to hasten through a distasteful task.

"Yes, pretty awful," he said. "And she, coming of a passionate and uncontrolled stock—"

"Ah, don't say anything against her!" breathed Peggy.

"All right. I won't. She wasn't so rightfully to blame, I suppose. It was that hell-hound Forbes." He paused a second and swallowed hard. "Some men are born like that,—born devils. Well, as I say, it was in the main his doing. His treatment of her was beyond all bearing. He literally drove her to Wyndham. She got passionately attached to him, and she followed him to Bakri and threw herself on his mercy. That is precisely what happened. And he—he hadn't the heart—or shall we say the brutality?—to send her back. Now you know the whole story."

"I see," said Peggy.

She was standing very still with her face slightly raised. Her eyes seemed to be fixed upon something beyond Tiggie.

"And what will happen now?" she said, as he did not speak.

He hesitated for a second or two, then spoke bluntly. "That is for you to decide. That's what I've come to tell you."

"For me!" Her eyes came to him swiftly with a startled look. "Do you mean—I don't quite know what you mean," she said.

"I'll tell you," said Tiggie, and still he held her hands tightly, tightly in his own. "Forbes is out for blood. He'll get a divorce. But the situation isn't of Noel's making. He isn't bound to tie himself up with her. I've had it out with him. I know exactly how it is with him. He doesn't want to do it. He wants you!"

"Oh!" whispered Peggy, and it was as if her heart turned over within her as she stood.

Tiggie went on with a kind of desperate determination to rid himself of what he had to say. "He's frightfully cut up, says he can't come near you or ever speak to you again, says he's let you down and the sooner you forget him the better. I told him he might be right, but I thought he was a bit headlong, and I thought you ought to have some say in the matter anyhow."

Peggy broke in upon him rather breathlessly; it was as if she too compelled herself to utter the words. "But—but what of her? Have you thought—did he think—of her?"

Tiggie's face changed a little. For the first time he showed agitation, and again, involuntarily, she thought of a child about to cry. "I knew you'd say that," he said. "She would probably get over it. I don't know. Those uncontrolled people usually do. In any case, she'll be free from that accursed brute, her husband. And—and—" he halted a little under her direct look —"probably some provision could be made."

She drew back from him in a kind of horror. "Oh, stop!" she said. "Stop!"

"I'm sorry," said Tiggie humbly; and added half-deprecatingly, "I knew you'd take it like that."

"How else could one?" said Peggy.

But she had begun to tremble as though her strength were failing. He released his hold upon her hands, and gently took her arm.

"Let's walk a little way!" he said.

She submitted mechanically. He led her slowly up the track by which she had once ridden to the very pinnacle of a happiness that had been too great to last.

Tiggie did not speak for a time. He seemed almost afraid to break the silence. But at last, feeling that she had regained her self-command, he quietly resumed the subject.

"It isn't for me to advise, I know, but you've put up with me so far. Peggy, could you possibly bring yourself to see him? Or would it be too much for you?"

She turned as one catching at a straw. "Oh, if I only could!" she said.

The crumpled look on his face began to straighten somewhat, as though he found a measure of relief in propounding a plan to achieve her desire. "I could fix that for you," he said. "Easiest thing in the world! If you will come down to Samdana with me to-morrow on the early train, we can get out over the desert by *tonga* to where he is. Yes, he has left Bakri and has gone to Sunam. He said he would wait there two days in case you came, but he would understand if you didn't."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" said Peggy, standing still.

Her face also had changed. The strained look had gone, and in its place was an expression almost of exaltation. She stood as one awaiting a message, and Tiggie stood watching her, forgetting to answer.

Her look came to him again. “Of course I will go!” she said. “Surely he must have known I would!”

“That’s what I told him,” said Tiggie. “And”—he hesitated a second —“you needn’t be afraid of meeting—her. She isn’t with him now.”

“Where is she?” said Peggy.

“I don’t know. I never saw her at all. He is keeping her somewhere out of the way, until—” Tiggie swallowed the rest of the sentence.

But its import passed her by. She was standing, still with that strange look on her face, no longer looking at him but gazing downwards through the pine-trees to a spot where a bar of sunshine gleamed upon a straight red trunk.

She spoke, but not as if addressing him. “It was the day he left, and she was sitting there, all huddled together, broken-hearted, crying most terribly. Poor, poor Marcella!”

Then he knew that the touch of unearthliness about her which he had not understood was the dawning of a great renunciation.

CHAPTER VIII

SACRIFICE

SUNAM was no more than a village composed of mud huts raised promiscuously near the bank of a sluggish river that wound like a slow-creeping serpent through sandy miles of desert. The only white men who ever went near the place were sportsmen in search of crocodile. It was a four hours' journey by *tonga* from Samdana, and *mugger* enthusiasts had a further two hours of hard tramping through loose sand ere they came within sighting distance of their quarry.

Between that happy hunting-ground, where the great monsters lay like logs in the noon heat, and the mud village of Sunam the river flowed dully with here and there a few palms or tufts of thorny scrub along its banks. Around it as far as the eye could see stretched the desert, rolling hummocks of sand succeeding each other in an almost unbearable monotony. The *tonga*-track ceased at Sunam; after that one travelled by camel or on foot.

There was one spot about two miles above Sunam where a group of cypress-trees broke the eternity of sand. They stood on a slight rise about twenty yards from the river, and in the heart of them was a native well, long-disused, for no natives would go near the place. They said it was the abode of *Shaitan* and that the evil spirits of the river dwelt there also.

It afforded welcome shade from the noonday sun, however, to those less susceptible to evil influences, and Tiggie, viewing it from afar, mopped his brow with a sigh of thankfulness.

"If all the devils in the universe are congregated there, I don't go a step further," he said. "They can have all they can get of me in exchange for a drink and I wish 'em joy of the transaction."

"I'm afraid there won't be anything to drink," said Peggy, with anxious sympathy. "But you'll be able to cool down anyway."

He groaned dramatically, but in a moment smiled and said, "Never mind! It's in a good cause. It's like a bit of the Pilgrim's Progress, isn't it? You're Hopeful, and I'm the other johnny—the one who was always getting

into sloughs and things. By jove! You're a good little pal! You never grumble."

"But I'm doing it because I want to," pointed out Peggy, whose own face was flushed with exertion. "It's horrid going, isn't it? I ought to have come on by myself from Sunam."

"Which you couldn't have done if you'd tried," said Tiggie elegantly. "I'm boss of this expedition, remember. You can't drop me at a moment's notice."

"I wouldn't for the world," said Peggy.

"Well, I'll tell you what," said Tiggie. "When we get to that beastly elusive group of cypresses, I shall collapse and smoke a pipe. You can go on from there by yourself. It'll take you quite a year to get out of sight, and you'll meet him before then."

"Oh, that's an excellent idea," said Peggy. "But you won't really collapse, will you? I mean, you're all right."

"I'm quite all right," said Tiggie. "But I don't want to be reduced to nothing but a wet spot. That doesn't enter into my scheme of things, and I take it I can be of more use to you if I manage to remain more or less solid."

"Indeed you can!" said Peggy. She added hopefully, "I think we really are getting there, don't you?"

They were tramping more than ankle-deep in sand, and as every ploughing footstep seemed to sink back upon the last, there was some reason for her query.

Tiggie laughed a little. "Oh, we're getting there all right. Make no mistake about it! In another half-hour we shall have covered the fifty yards that yet remain. On my soul, I don't wonder they think the devil devised the place. One certainly couldn't get up any speed if one wanted to run away."

"One certainly couldn't," agreed Peggy, plodding on with renewed effort.

She was in fact far more weary than was apparent, having been up since before dawn to accomplish this expedition in Tiggie's company. The journey by *tonga* had seemed the maximum of discomfort until this further stage on foot through the desert had begun. She had to admit to herself that it was the hardest she had ever undertaken. But that fact did not in any way daunt her. Her whole heart was set upon the fulfilment of the purpose that had brought her. Somewhere along that twisting river, somewhere among those stunted

palms, Noel was waiting for her. Noel the Wonderful! Her Noel—who after to-day would never be hers again!

Manfully she set herself to the task before her, refusing to be discouraged, even managing to laugh when Tiggie said that the Jewish race had earned his undying admiration from that day forward. Dear Tiggie! Such an achievement as this would have been utterly impossible without him. She loved him for his cheery quips, knowing that he was suffering far more discomfort than she was herself.

When they arrived at length at the end of that dreadful struggle through the sand, she regarded him with real anxiety, for his face was nearly purple and his breathing unmistakably laboured. But still he laughed at her with unfailing joviality.

"This is where I collapse," he said. "You run on now by yourself. But if you want me, by Jove, I'll come to you on seven-league boots."

She felt reluctant to leave him, so obvious was the distress he sought to hide, but he succeeded in reassuring her when he dropped down on the sand and began to fill his beloved pipe. He seemed to acquire a picnicking air at once, and after a brief rest she consented to resume the journey, leaving him to smoke in solitude.

She left the shadow of the cypresses, and struck out for a ridge of sand running parallel with the river that seemed to afford more foothold. The sun was pouring down upon her, and the whole desert landscape swam and pulsed in the heat. Under her wide-brimmed hat she gazed with eyes that seemed burning in their sockets. Now that she was no longer in Tiggie's actual presence her own exhaustion became somehow more noticeable. For the first time her brave heart began to falter.

Perhaps he had mistaken the trysting place! Perhaps some other, greater need had arisen and he would not come!

The thought made her feel oddly sick, but she pressed on. Whatever happened, she must not fail. In the after years, she must be able to remember that that great crisis of her life had found her ready. That Noel could be allowed to wait in vain for her was unthinkable. So with gallant effort she went on.

It became almost dream-like at last, that progress of hers that yet was so unlike any progress at all. The sand slipped and slid all about her, and the hummocks in the distance seemed to heave and swell before her aching eyes like the waves of the sea. She was conscious of a shimmer of water below

her and knew that she was still following the course of the river, but beyond that all conscious reasoning had ceased. She was like a wandering spirit seeking another spirit in the realms of the Unknown.

And then, as she still stumbled on through the yielding sand, it came to her that this that was happening to her had happened once before. Once before—very long ago, it seemed—she had seen as in a vision the endless sand of the desert, the cypresses and the palms, and the sun shining dazzlingly upon moving water. And she had waited with bated breath for someone who surely was coming to her.

When that memory awoke within her, she stopped, as it were at the bidding of an inner voice. Through the throbbing atmosphere she could see nothing, but she knew with absolute certainty that her great moment was at hand. He was coming!

Quite unconsciously her hand went to her throat, clasping the fine chain on which hung Nick's parting gift. She had worn it constantly of late. Somehow it comforted her to feel it there. And now, while she knew that he was coming, that every instant brought him nearer, a scared feeling of weakness was upon her. And she had so counted upon being strong.

The desert seemed to widen all around her. Its immensity held terror as well as loneliness. The thought came to her, like a wild bird flashing by: How awful to be alone—quite alone in that emptiness!

And then she knew that he was close to her, that he had reached her, had put out a hand to touch her . . .

She felt no touch, and knew that his hand had fallen ere it reached her. Her heart gave a great jerk and she looked up with returning vision. "Oh, Noel!" she said. "Is it—Noel?"

His voice answered her, but not as she had ever heard it. All the youth and merriment had gone out of it. It had a dull, heavy sound.

"Yes, it's me," he said.

She stood a moment, convincing herself that it was all true. Then she put out her hand to him with a shy, yet confiding gesture.

"Dear Noel," she said, "don't—don't be so miserable! I know all about it. I—understand."

His hand met hers, clasped it hungrily. "My precious little love!" he said.

There was a sound of heartbreak in his voice, as though the stony despair with which he had greeted her had been but the outer crust concealing the turmoil of misery that seethed below.

It went straight to Peggy's own heart, obliterating everything else. With a childish, protecting movement she drew his hand through her arm, pressing it close against her side.

"Let's go and sit down in the shade somewhere where we can talk!" she said.

He yielded at once to the proposal. "Yes, it's hell here, isn't it?" he said. "You must be nearly dead."

But he did not suggest that she should go back to the cypress-trees. He guided her in the direction whence he had come.

There was no faltering about Peggy now. A new strength was hers. The burning sand no longer tortured her. She stepped out unflinchingly.

He did not lead her far. They came to a little knot of palm-trees on a mound overlooking the river, and here he spread his coat for her and made her sit down.

It was an immense relief to rest at last, but she still clung to his hand as if she could not bear to let it go. "There's room for us both," she said wistfully.

"Oh, Peggy, my little darling!" he said hoarsely. "What can I say to you? You—you must be an angel from heaven to come to me like this."

"No, no, I'm not," she answered tenderly. "I'm just Peggy. And I had to come. Noel, you're not—not ill?"

"God knows I wish I were dead!" he said violently, and then swiftly recollecting himself: "No, no, darling! I am all right. Don't you be worried or scared or anything! Say what you came to say and don't waste any pity on me! I've behaved like a damn' scoundrel, and I don't deserve it."

Her hand was still locked in his. "But, Noel dear," she said, with loyal eyes still raised to his. "I don't think you have."

"You said you knew all about it," he said.

"I do," said Peggy. "That's why—"

He interrupted her forcibly. "You don't! You don't! Turner said he'd tell you, but if he did, you were too white to take it in. Peggy, listen! I'm going

to tell you everything myself now, and when I've done, just tell me to go to hell, and I'll go!"

"Please don't!" said Peggy. "I think I do understand. Really I think I do."

"You can't!" he said. He paused as one on the brink of a deep plunge, looking down into her pure face with a kind of anguished adoration. Then suddenly something seemed to give way within him. He uttered a hard sob and dropped his head upon her knees. "O God!" he said. "O God!"

Her arms were all about him in a moment. She clasped him close.

"Noel—Noel darling! Don't! I'll help you. It's what I've come for."

He groaned aloud. "You can't. It's no use. There's no undoing what's done."

"I know," Peggy said. "But perhaps, if we can talk things over, we may be able to mend them a little bit."

"What a hound I am!" he said.

She bent her face until her cheek pressed his temple. "No, never!" she said. "Never!"

He made a jerky movement at her touch. His arms went out, but they did not enfold her. After a few seconds he spoke, without lifting his head. "Peggy, you love me!"

"Yes, darling," she answered simply.

His fingers gripped the sand. "And I've broken your heart," he said.

There was a brief silence, then softly Peggy's voice made answer over his bowed head. "Dear Noel, I don't think God will let it break, or yours either, because we are both going to try so very, very hard to do what is right."

His arms came about her then. He held her fast, lifting his drawn face to hers. "Peggy! Peggy!" he said. "I can't let you go! You are more than life to me. Since you came to India I have never thought of any other woman."

Her hands were on his shoulders. "I know," she said. "But—dearest—you have taught another woman to love you. And she—Noel, she has a greater claim on you now."

He groaned again. "Peggy, I swear to you I meant to play the game. I meant to behave decently. How shall I ever explain to you how it all began? It was before you came, I was sorry for her, and she was so beautiful—like a

luscious fruit—and she danced so superbly. Peggy, I loathe telling you; but —I wasn't the first or even the second with her. Peggy, she is like that. She was made so. It's in the blood. Forbes—brute-beast—never made any pretence of sticking to her, treated her like a bit of furniture, to be used when wanted and kicked aside when done with. Peggy, am I offending you, darling? Stop me if I am, and I'll try to put it differently!"

But, "No, dear. Go on telling me!" said Peggy, though she looked white and sick as she listened.

"I never meant to get drawn in," he said. "I meant to be just a good friend to her, no more. But—she—Peggy, you'll hate me for saying it—she got to love me so terribly that she—tempted me. I think she felt that for her it must be all or nothing. I think the others had done the tempting, and she had lost all that mattered. I'm not defending myself. I know I'm a blackguard. Only, for both our sakes, I want you to realize that it was more on her side than mine. It made it all the worse from my point of view. Peggy, I know that. But I hadn't seen you. And when I came to my senses I knew what a foul brute I was and that it had got to stop."

"That was when you made plans to come home," said Peggy.

"Yes—yes." He caught at the words. "You knew that, didn't you? And then I got that letter from Joan, and somehow—I had to stay and see my little pal. I was going to find you when I got home, and I couldn't stand the thought of missing you, leaving you to fend for yourself. It would have been better for you, heaven knows, if I'd gone."

"It wouldn't have been better for me," said Peggy. "But go on! You haven't finished."

He went on, rather haltingly. "Well, I made up my mind from then on that things had got to get back to the old footing of just friendship with Marcella, or stop altogether. It ought to have been the last, but she was so alone, so friendless, I couldn't! I'd have been an arch scoundrel to have done that. Peggy, say you understand!"

"I do, dear," she answered gently; and added, "You know, I loved her too."

"Yes." He spoke desperately. "That was my doing. I thought a decent friendship with a woman might be her salvation. I was very fond of her, but I didn't love her, not—not as I know now that loving can be. You must believe that of me. You do?"

"I do, dear," she said again very quietly, very convincingly.

He went on. “It seemed to work, anyhow at first. You were so good to her. But that devil Forbes—I don’t know whether he had always had his eye on me and suddenly thought that he was missing an opportunity or whether he had any other vile intrigue in his mind—he suddenly began to ill-treat her so foully and horribly that—Peggy, do you remember the sound you thought was a jackal’s cry?”

She flinched for the first time and hid her eyes. “Oh, please, Noel! Please!”

He passed on. “All right, dear. I won’t. There’s no need. She took to drugs, and I don’t wonder. I didn’t know all this then. She has told me since. I couldn’t have cleared out had I known. But I went because of you. Then things got unbearable for her, and she followed me to Bakri. He meant her to follow me. After that—Peggy, I was finished—I couldn’t send her back. The brute was murdering her by inches. He was determined to get rid of her at any cost.”

“I know,” Peggy’s voice came muffled through her hands. “Tiggie told me.”

There fell a silence between them. He had withdrawn slightly from her, and was waiting for her to look up.

When she did so at length, though her face was deadly pale, her eyes were steadfast. “I’m sorry, dear Noel,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be weak. There’s only one thing to do now, is there? She has suffered more than anybody, hasn’t she? And—and I know you’re fond of her. You couldn’t let her down. You’ll learn to love her very soon. I—would like you to marry her, Noel, when—I mean as soon as you can.” Her throat began to work a little. She put up a resolute hand to still it. “We have got to do the right thing,” she said. “Marcella is very dear—and loving. She will be a good woman—with you to help her. Noel—dearest—there is no other way. You and I will be just pals all our lives. And we’ll never let her know that we ever wanted to be anything else to one another. She doesn’t know, does she, Noel?”

He was staring at her rather stonily, with a kind of fixed yearning. “No,” he said. “She doesn’t know. She wouldn’t have followed me if she had. Oh, Peggy,—God help us both!—why didn’t I tell her?”

“You weren’t meant to,” Peggy said. “You never, never must. Noel, promise me you never will!”

“I will never do anything against your wish,” he said.

She put out her hand to him again, trustfully, like a child. “I love you for saying that,” she said.

He bowed his face over it and kissed it hungrily. “How shall I live without you?” he said. “Darling, I don’t know if I can!”

Her own face quivered, but she controlled it sharply. “Don’t kiss my hand, Noel!” she said, a tremor of distress in her voice. “Just this once, won’t you—”

He looked up swiftly, and in an instant she was in his arms. He held her to him, kissing her lips again and again and feeling them cling to his in answer with a species of agonized rapture more poignant than anything he had ever known.

Her arms were wound about his neck, holding him tightly as they had held him in childhood, but with a throbbing difference which there could be no mistaking. In that close embrace she gave him the whole heart of her womanhood in a surrender so complete and selfless that for a time it almost seemed as if her very being were merged into his.

Yet it was she who, softly whispering, broke the spell at last. “Noel—darling—beloved—we mustn’t—let ourselves—forget.”

He held her faster as he came to earth. He kissed her palpitating throat. “Sweetheart! Peggy! I can’t let you go!” he said.

She opened her eyes to his with returning resolution. “We’ve got to do it,” she said. “We’ve got to say good-bye.”

“And meet again—” he said, holding her, seeking as it were to drink in all the dearness of her that he might live upon it in the barren hours to come—“when?”

“I don’t know when,” she said rather faintly.

A new thought came upon him, or perhaps it was a forgotten thought returned. “And who is going to take care of you?” he said.

She gave him a little trembling smile as her arms slackened from about his neck. “I’ve got Jingo,” she said.

“Jingo!” His own hold tightened. “You can’t marry Jingo,” he said. “Besides, he won’t live for ever.”

She put up her hand, gently holding his face away from her. “I don’t want to marry anyone now,” she said.

His features contracted for a moment. He pulled her hand sharply away. "Peggy, listen!" His voice was suddenly stern. "You can't live on up there unprotected. I can't stand the thought of it. Anything might happen. It's impossible in India. Look here—look here, Peggy! If I've got to marry—so must you!"

"Oh no!" she said. "Oh no!"

She tried to withdraw herself from him, but he would not suffer it. "Little sweetheart," he said, in the tender winning tones she knew so well, "listen to me! Just listen a minute! You're out of my reach now, though, God knows I'd have married you, and loved and cherished and got somehow worthy of you, if it had been possible. It isn't. You've made me see it isn't. And I'm not fighting any more. I'll take my medicine and make the best of it. But there's one thing I can't endure, either now or in the horrible future. Peggy, don't make it harder for me! I can't—I simply can't—think of you all alone."

She raised herself slowly, very gently loosening his hold upon her. "But, Noel—" she said.

He interrupted her. "I know. I know all you're going to say. But you've told me what to do, and now it's my turn. Peggy, to please me,—there's a fellow who wants you very badly, and he's one of the best—I mean Tiggie Turner of course. I know he won't let you break your precious little heart for me. And he'll be good to you. He'll take care of you. Peggy—Peggy, say you'll have him!"

She drew away from him, half-bewildered. "Noel, I don't see how I could. I don't love him like that. I never can."

"I don't love Marcella like that," said Noel.

"Ah, but that is different. You must see it's different." She spoke with rising agitation. "Tiggie has been very good to me, but I don't owe him anything like that. Noel—dearest—I couldn't. You mustn't ask me that. It—it's so different for a woman."

He laid his hand suddenly upon her lap, upturned, asking for hers. "Peggy," he said, "do you think it's an easy thing for me to ask?"

She looked at him and saw that in his eyes that seemed to stab her. She caught back her breath. "Oh, darling!" she said, and put hand quickly into his. "Don't—don't look like that! I can't bear it. You know I'll do anything—anything—"

"But you won't do that," he said. "Peggy, if I were a condemned man and it were my last wish, would you do it for me then?"

She hesitated. "I don't know why you want me to do that," she said.

"Because I want to be sure of your safety," he told her forcibly. "That brute Forbes—"

She shrank sharply, as if from a blow.

"Yes, I know," he said. "That's why. So that you may be safe from him—and devils like him." He sprang suddenly to his feet, seeming to find inaction unbearable. "Peggy, I can't leave you at the mercy of the world like this. I just can't."

"I have my father," she said.

"Your father!" He made a hopeless gesture. "What sort of protection is he?"

"He has been better lately," she said.

"And how long will it last?" He spoke with a species of desperation. "For the matter of that, how long will he himself last? Forgive me for saying it, but you must see for yourself that he is an old man."

He turned away from her, tramped a few yards in the sand, and came back. She sat watching him, but as he returned, moved by the anguish of his face, she got up impulsively.

"Noel," she said, with a catch in her voice, "I'll—I'll do my best, but don't press me any more! If—if I find I can do it, I will. But if—but if I can't, you'll know why. You'll understand."

She broke down with the words and began to cry, not passionately, but hopelessly, like a lost child accepting the inevitable.

He took her in his arms and kissed her, seeking to comfort her with fond words. But though she clung to him, and though she gave her lips to his, it was as if her heart had died within her. She could not check those slow, heavy tears.

He held her for a space as if he could never let her go, but at last even he saw that to prolong the parting any further was to torture her almost beyond endurance. Her strength was waning, and he cursed himself for having taxed it so cruelly.

"I'm going to say good-bye now, little sweetheart," he whispered. "I've kept you too long already. Will you give me something of yours to keep—something that will be a tiny link between us when everything else is gone?"

She gazed up into his face long and yearningly. "What shall I have of you?" she said.

He smiled down at her. "You have got Jingo. He will outlast me easily in your memory."

"I shall never forget you," she said.

"Yes—yes, you will," he said. "You forgot me before for twelve years on end."

"I didn't really forget you," she said. "And that was different."

"It wasn't different, Peg-top." He spoke with smiling assurance, and only his eyes belied him. "I tell you nothing lasts. But we shall meet again, you and I, somewhere beyond the stars, and—no, we shan't forget we ever met—we shall only forget that we were ever parted. Now what will you give me—that chain on your neck—may I have that?"

"Oh yes," she said, "yes! Nick's little bit of luck! Indeed you may!"

She drew the little jade charm from its hiding-place and slipped the chain over her head.

"Yes, take it!" she said. "I would love you to have it. And—and if ever you lose your way and don't know where to turn—you are to look at it and say, 'I will go straight on.' Nick said so."

"I don't know if I ought to take it if it's Nick's," he said.

She pressed it into his hand. "It isn't Nick's any more; it's mine. And I wouldn't give it to anyone in the world but you. But I want you to have it,—please, darling! It will bring you luck—from me."

He looked at her and yielded. "All right, little Peg-top," he said. "I will keep it always. And now good-bye—good-bye!"

She wiped the tears away to give him her last kiss. "Good-bye, dear Noel!" she whispered back, her arms about his neck. "You go your way and I'll go mine, and we won't either of us look back at all, or we shan't be able to do it. Good-bye my darling—my darling! I shall go on—asking God to bless you—every night!"

A great choking sob burst from Noel. He crushed her to him for a second, and then he let her go.

She stumbled from him blindly, for the tears were dropping down her face again. He turned his back with clenched hands and tramped away into the desert.

And so they parted.

CHAPTER IX

FRIENDSHIP

SOMEONE came to meet Peggy, and took her hand, and led her back to the little oasis of cypress-trees, helping her to keep a straight course and holding her up when she stumbled.

She could not see who it was, and she did not ask herself. It did not seem to matter in the least. But she would probably have sunk down in the sand in a stupor of misery but for that helping hand. When at length it ceased to urge her, she stopped as if bewildered.

"Sit down, my dear!" said Tiggie.

She obeyed, still conscious of his guiding hold. She felt exhausted and very, very old.

The next thing she knew was Tiggie kneeling beside her and making her drink something out of the cup of a flask. She made a murmur of protest, but he was gently insistent.

"It's very weak. It won't hurt you," she heard him say; and when she had submitted over that also he dried her tears and told her everything was all right and she was not to bother.

She tried to smile at that, feeling somewhat revived. "It's you who are doing all the bothering," she said.

"I know. I like it," said Tiggie.

She looked up at last into his honest red face and thanked him. "Though I always think 'Thank you' is such a silly word," she added rather irrelevantly. "It's what you do, not what you say, that counts."

"Oh, every time!" said Tiggie. "But then you've always been decent to me,—even on that awful occasion when I tried to kiss you. Do you remember? I can't think how I dared."

She laughed weakly. He had wanted her to laugh. "I suppose," she said, subduing the tears that were still striving for the mastery, "I suppose you

always go about kissing people if—if they'll let you."

"Oh, not so bad as that!" protested Tiggie. "I haven't kissed anyone since, not one—haven't even wanted to. I'm getting quite a reformed character."

"I expect it's old age," said Peggy with a sigh.

He had made her feel better; there was no denying it. She sat for a space gazing out through the trees into the glaring heat-haze while the trouble within her sank deeper and deeper below the surface. He gave her sandwiches from a case he had brought with him, and she ate mechanically with a dull wonder that the food did not choke her. It was so strange to go on doing the ordinary things when the very mainspring of her life had been snapped in twain.

When Tiggie presently withdrew himself from her immediate vicinity to smoke his afternoon pipe, she tried to make herself face the tragedy once more and found that she could not. She was too tired, too utterly weary, too spent physically and mentally for any further effort.

It would come back—oh, it would all come back, she knew that. In the weeks and years that stretched before her the pain which now was mercifully dulled would be perpetually with her. The whole of life had lost its savour, and nothing could ever be a joy to her again. Through long days and endless nights she would yearn for him. In dreams her spirit would seek him. But she would never find him—never find him—until they met beyond the stars, as he had said. Already, vaguely, she had begun to think of that far-off meeting as the goal of all desire. Mortal life had become a long imprisonment to be endured with such fortitude as the bitter years might bring. It could never be anything more than that now—a long, sad waiting outside the courts of Love.

So she mused while gradually her weariness overwhelmed her like a rising tide, and at last like a worn-out child she fell asleep.

It did not seem a very long sleep, but when she awoke she knew that it was getting late. The faithful Tiggie was sitting in a large hole he had scooped for himself in the sand about five yards from her. He was not smoking, but his pipe was by his side, lying on the paper with which he had apparently been beguiling the period of his vigil.

She sat up and looked across at him apologetically. "I've been asleep. I'm so sorry."

He smiled back at her. “I should have been much sorrier if you hadn’t,” he said. “I always think it’s such a jolly thing to do when one’s tired. What about making a move now? It isn’t really late, but it’s something of a journey from Sunam to Samdana.”

“It is indeed!” said Peggy, starting up. “You shouldn’t have let me sleep so long.”

“It’s quite all right,” said Tiggie comfortably. “I was timing you. I should have waked you in another quarter-of-an-hour if you hadn’t waked yourself. How are you feeling now? Rested?”

“Oh yes, much better, thank you,” she said.

“Good!” said Tiggie, rising and pocketing his pipe. “Then we’ll be getting back. It’s quite a nice place for a picnic,” he looked around him appreciatively, “but I’m afraid it’ll be a hot trudge going back.”

“We’ll step out,” said Peggy.

Her sleep had restored her to a certain extent though the lassitude that often follows the slumber of complete weariness still hampered her. She ignored it, however, with determination, telling herself severely that she had given him trouble enough already.

The sun was still too high to be pleasant, but it was now behind them and the glare was not so intense. They set out upon the return journey with an energy that did them credit.

Tiggie was in a pleasantly talkative mood that required little or no encouragement. His simplicity was really astounding for a man of his age, Peggy found herself reflecting. He behaved exactly as if he had thoroughly enjoyed the day’s outing.

To her that return tramp through the sand meant a renewal of the heartache which her sleep had temporarily alleviated. Strive as she would, it was impossible not to realize that every step carried her further from all that made life worth while. The dreariness was closing in upon her like a vast and pitiless sea. Once she paused and glanced back, but only once. The desert was quite empty on every side.

They reached Sunam where their *tonga* awaited them, and then began the jolting journey back to Samdana. Tiggie made light of it in his nice childish way. He said he did not know much about the Indian desert, but it seemed a good deal tamer than the African variety. Anyway, there were no lions about, and he was afraid of lions. He said he always ran away from

them on all-fours as he got on faster that way. Peggy was inclined to question this, but he proved it to her with a solid logic that quite confounded her, and he said it confounded the lions also.

He did not seem to expect her to laugh at anything he said, but his prattle was undoubtedly entertaining, and in a wholly detached fashion she responded to it without much effort. It would be unkind to let him think himself a failure. Henceforth, the whole of life would be thus, to meet the need of others the while she strove to hide the aching need within herself. Perhaps in time it might even bring her some sort of comfort. She wondered . . .

They reached Samdana in plenty of time to catch the evening train—that train by which she and Noel had travelled on the day of her arrival at Ghawalkhand. Tiggie cheerily remarked that they would have time for a cup of *char* at the *dâk*, and piloted her thither without delay.

The *dâk*-bungalow had been in existence before the coming of the railway. It still boasted a certain amount of accommodation for travellers, and was used chiefly by the sportsmen who came and went along the river in their pursuit of *mugger*; but in the main it was used for refreshment for the passengers who changed at Samdana at the junction of the railways.

The main line train had not yet arrived and the station was comparatively quiet. The little train that mounted Sir William's hill railway was waiting, but, as Tiggie said, they would let it wait, and after reserving a compartment he led her on.

To please him, Peggy drank the tea he brought her on the verandah of the *dâk*-bungalow, but she could not eat, though he had a few sandwiches left which he tried to press upon her.

"I'm so sorry I can't," she said wistfully.

"It doesn't matter a bit," said Tiggie, and ate them himself.

The swift darkness was falling, and the chill of evening was in the air. They stood and watched the station-lights in silence, and Peggy began to wonder if it could be true or if it was all a dreadful dream from which she would awake in the Railway Bungalow and go out in the early morning to ride with Noel. Something made her clutch at her heart rather suddenly. Oh, what was Noel doing now?

It was the first real stab of pain since their parting, and it nearly unnerved her. Very vividly his face rose before her. She saw again the heavy

misery in his eyes. She shut her own, gripping her courage with all her strength. It had got to be endured somehow.

"Are you all right?" said Tiggie.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Yes, quite, thank you. I'm just —just enjoying the coolness."

"You're very tired," said Tiggie, in a tone that admitted of no contradiction. "We'll get back to the train."

As they went, she felt his kindly hand at her elbow, but she was not aware that she leaned upon it.

They reached the station, and she heard him say, "Hullo!" as if surprised.

She looked up, slightly dazzled, and saw Mrs. Griffiths coming towards her.

"Why, my dear," said the colonel's wife, "I didn't know you were here. I came down on the six train to meet a friend who is always coming but never seems to arrive. And to think I should run into you!" She put her arm round Peggy and gave her a tender squeeze.

"Oh, how nice!" said Peggy a little breathlessly. "Then we can all go back together."

"We've been for a picnic," said Tiggie somewhat unnecessarily, "and we've just been getting a spot of tea. I've engaged a carriage, Mrs. Griffiths. It's along here."

He led the way, and Mrs. Griffiths followed, still with her arm round Peggy.

"You're looking very tired, dear. I hope you haven't been too far. You must go to bed early. Ah, here comes the big train at last! Now I wonder—" She paused, somewhat perfunctorily, watching the arrival of the main line train. "You get in, dear!" she said. "I'll follow you if my friend doesn't come. If she does, I'll take her to another carriage."

"Oh, you mustn't do that," said Peggy, and with some idea of preventing it she also stopped on the platform as the train from the Plains steamed in.

The usual hubbub arose, and a chaos of shouting, gesticulating natives seethed forward to greet the arrival. Peggy flinched a little at the noise, but she remained standing beside Mrs. Griffiths who seemed to take it for granted that it was not worth while to join the *mêlée*.

After a minute or so, she turned to Peggy. “No, she hasn’t come. She never does when she says she will. Jump in, darling! I didn’t know you were waiting all this time.”

Peggy had hardly known it either. She seemed to have lost touch with ordinary things. She turned to obey, but even as she did so, with her foot on the step, she looked back.

And there, in the crude glare of the station-lights, alone in the crowd, she saw Marcella.

For an instant she stood, halting, gazing; then quietly she stepped down again on to the platform.

“Do you mind waiting a minute?” she said to Mrs. Griffiths and Tiggie. “I see a friend of mine has come.”

She left them with the words, moving swiftly as one impelled. She went through the crowd unfaltering, though she would have shrunk from the rough contact with natives at any other time. She reached the lonely figure.

“Marcella!” she said, and clasped her warmly.

Marcella recognized her with a great start. “Peggy! Child! What are you doing here?”

“Nothing,” said Peggy simply. “I am with Mrs. Griffiths and Captain Turner. I caught sight of you and had to come and speak to you. And you—where are you going?”

“I am putting up at the *dâk*,” said Marcella, and added half-defiantly, “Noel is coming to me there.”

“I see,” Peggy said. Her arms were still about the older woman. She held her, unconscious of the roaring confusion all about them. “I want to say one thing to you,” she said into Marcella’s ear. “I know—what he is to you. And I hope—I pray—that when it is all over—you will be very happy together.”

“Oh, Peggy!” Marcella said. “Little darling! No one but you would ever have said that to me.”

She was moved to tears as she kissed the pure sweet face lifted to hers. Her own embrace had in it something passionate.

“I must go,” Peggy said. “Good-bye—dear Marcella! I will never forget you.”

And with that she released herself and was gone.

She returned to Mrs. Griffiths and Tiggie, who had watched her speechlessly, and got into the hill-train at their behest.

Mrs. Griffiths followed her. She dabbed her eyes rather impatiently as she sat down, and spoke as if she could not restrain herself.

"I don't think," she said, "even your mother would have done that, Peggy."

Peggy looked at her in surprise. "Oh, but it isn't difficult, is it," she said, "to be kind to those you love? It's friendship, isn't it? And I have always loved Marcella."

"Ye gods!" said Tiggie, and stuck his empty pipe into his mouth as if to prevent himself saying anything more.

CHAPTER X

THE CHAMPION

WHEN they reached Ghawalkhand, Mrs. Griffiths parted with them. She said that she must hurry back or she would be late for dinner.

She clasped Peggy very closely ere she went and whispered, "Bless the child!" rather incoherently.

Then Peggy and Tiggie set out on the final stage of their journey. It was not very far to the Railway Bungalow, and the cold night air was refreshing.

"I'm not coming any farther," Tiggie said when they reached the compound. "You are very tired and you will have your father."

"Oh yes, he is sure to be back," Peggy said.

She stopped since he had done so, facing him in the gloom with an odd sense of shyness. For to be shy with Tiggie was almost unthinkable.

"Well, good night!" said Tiggie. "Go to bed early!"

"I will," she promised; and then, with a tremendous effort: "Tiggie, I haven't been able to thank you for to-day. Is it any good trying?"

"My dear child," said Tiggie paternally, "I assure you I've spent a thoroughly selfish day, and I don't deserve any thanks."

Her hand found its way into his and it lay there confidingly. She might indeed have been a child standing there before him.

She spoke rather brokenly. "Well—I shall never leave off—feeling grateful to you. You do know that, don't you?"

"That's very nice of you," said Tiggie with an awkward little laugh. "I'm not sure that I want you to feel like that though, unless of course it makes you any happier."

His grasp of her hand was strictly friendly. He was plainly determined to maintain the high standard of good behaviour which he had so successfully established during the day.

She realized it with an incongruous feeling of amazement. Tiggie was being subtle again.

With a sharp sigh she turned from the subject to one nearer her heart. "There's one thing I want to ask you, Tiggie. Somehow—I couldn't—ask him. What—what do you think will happen now? Will he—will he come back—to the Regiment, I mean?"

"I don't know," Tiggie said. "I shouldn't think so. In fact, I'm pretty certain he won't. He may get an exchange, or he may have to clear out altogether."

"Oh, I hope not that," she said and her voice was piteous. "He will need his work to help him."

"He may find something else to do," suggested Tiggie.

"Can you imagine it?" she said hopelessly.

Tiggie's imagination had never been his strong point, so he said nothing.

She sighed again and gently freed her hand. "Good night, Tiggie," she said.

"Good night," he said, and whispered "darling" under his breath, for his own edification, not hers.

She turned wearily away. Somehow she could not be nice even to Tiggie any longer.

With dragging feet she walked through the dark compound to the bungalow. It was quiet as the grave, and there were no lights to be seen. But then her father's room was round the corner of the verandah. Doubtless she would see his lamp burning when she reached it.

She found the steps and stumbled up them. The verandah was very dark. She was half-way along it when suddenly something seemed to stab her—a sense of insecurity—a sense of panic.

She stood still. "Is anyone there?" she said.

She knew she was close to her own room, but she did not seek to enter it. Some unseen influence held her back.

"Jingo!" she called, and whistled softly. "Jingo, where are you?"

She thought she heard a movement, but she was not certain. It came to her that she had given orders that Jingo should be fastened up in her room after dark, on account of his rat-hunting propensities.

In that case he must be there now. In that case she would go to him. But still, as if an invisible hand had been laid upon her, she was held back.

"I will go to Daddy," she said aloud, and moved forward again, forcing herself to pass the open window. These panics were becoming too frequent, and they were only the result of tired nerves.

She took a single step forward—and stopped, aware of a figure that suddenly and noiselessly confronted her.

"Oh, who is it?" she said. "Who is it?" and pressed a hand to her throat.

A voice she knew made answer—a rasping, insolent voice. "It is me, Miss Musgrave. I have been waiting for you to return. May I have a word with you?"

She felt her heart contract in a kind of nameless horror. "What is the matter?" she said. "My father—"

"Oh, he's all right," came the sneering answer, "mooning up at the hut as usual. The servants are all in their quarters, and Jingo is safely shut up at the back. There's no one left to interfere, so now we can have our talk in peace. Understand? It's a pity if you don't, for I've taken some pains to make myself intelligible."

Yes, she did understand. In that, the most terrible moment of her life her senses were more alert than they had ever been. The man was mad, she realized that, whether from drink, drugs, or actual insanity she could not tell. She also realized that she was at his mercy. Flight was impossible. He was too close for her to attempt it, and Tiggie by that time would be too far off to hear a cry for help, even had she been able to utter it. But she kept herself in hand. She would get away—somehow she would get away! Brute force could never gain the day. Her brain was as if lighted up, ablaze with intelligence. She remained passive, as a live wire is passive but filled with an electric force that a touch will release.

Something of that force reached Forbes. He broke into a bullying laugh.

"You needn't think you are going to escape a second time," he said. "I've got you absolutely in my power to-night. But I shan't let you down. I'm going to marry you. I always made up my mind to that from the first moment I saw you. I know exactly what I want, and I'm going to get it. We will be married the moment I can free myself from that accursed she-devil. Quite a neat bit of work that! Wyndham was inclined to get in my way, so I've swept 'em both off the board at one move. I wanted you, you see,—and I'd more than finished with her."

He laughed again in the darkness, and his laugh was horrible, like the gibing of devils.

Peggy spoke no word. She stood quite rigid, waiting, waiting, with that burning radiance still in her brain which was unlike anything she had ever known. She had a feeling that it might explode at any moment and kill her, but if it did not explode it would be her deliverance.

Again, it seemed, that Forbes was aware of it, for very suddenly his laughter turned into a snarl of fury.

"You dare to think that you can stand up to me!" he said. "A little bit of porcelain like you! Why, I could break you into a thousand pieces if I wanted to."

His hands came out to her with the words. She sprang backwards, but he caught her.

Then it was that the flare that sheer horror had lighted in Peggy's brain blazed up. She fought in a positive frenzy for her liberty, with a strength which while it lasted almost equalled his own.

It was over in a very few seconds, but it was an eternity to her, and as she felt herself vanquished she uttered a wild cry for help though she did not believe that help would come. But on the instant there came an answer—a kind of bellow—followed by a smashing blow delivered from behind her which abruptly set her free. She reeled against the balustrade of the verandah and hung there, near to fainting . . .

What followed was like an awful nightmare, and it went on and on, as if it would never end—an appalling battle between two figures, dimly seen, that raged up and down the verandah to the accompaniment of stamping feet and frightful blows. Now and then there came a fierce oath or a gasp, but for the most part they fought in silence with a concentrated deadliness of purpose most terrible to watch.

She did not know how long it lasted, but it became evident to her at length that one of the combatants was giving ground. The struggle became limited to one corner of the verandah, and there was less give and take. One of the two, moreover, was panting spasmodically, as if hard pressed. She realized that the other was giving no quarter. She did not know which was gaining the victory, only that the end was near.

In those moments, she might have fled, but she did not. It did not even occur to her to do so. Her brain was still lit by that blaze of horror, and she could not break away from it. She stood rooted to the spot, and watched.

The end came at length with appalling suddenness. One figure went down with a crash, and the other knelt upon it and drove a heavy fist downwards with smashing force. Then, breathing heavily, the topmost figure arose, while the under one lay still.

"And that's that!" said Tiggie. "Are you there Peggy? Could you light a lamp somewhere?"

She moved towards him like an automaton. Her limbs felt oddly stiff.

"Have you killed him?" she said.

"I don't know," said Tiggie. "I hope so. May I come in for a second—and mop up?"

He spoke gaspingly. A faint spasm of anxiety went through her.

"Are you hurt?" she said.

"Oh no!" said Tiggie. "I've enjoyed it. Once let me get my breath—and I'll do it again."

She reached out in the gloom and grasped his arm. "Come in here! I'll soon light a lamp."

"I've got a match," said Tiggie.

He blundered after her over the threshold of her room, and in a moment struck a match for her. She took it from him and with a start she saw that his mouth was bleeding.

"Nothing but a split lip," said Tiggie, in answer to her look. "I've only just begun to feel it."

Peggy lighted the lamp. As she did so, she began to tremble. The reaction was setting in, and she was utterly powerless to prevent it. It came upon her like an ague.

Tiggie mopped his mouth with his handkerchief with one hand. With the other he reached out and drew her to lean against him.

"Just hang on me!" he said. "It's what I'm here for. You're not hurt, are you?"

She covered her face. "No," she said, "no! But—I feel—as if I have been in—hell!" And she burst into wild tears upon his shoulder.

He held her and soothed her with great gentleness. "It's all right, dear, it's all right! You haven't—and you never will be. I'm sorry I didn't get to you sooner. I didn't realize there was anything wrong at first. I just waited

for your light to show, and as it didn't I came along, and then of course I heard what the brute was saying. There, child, there! It's all right. You're as safe as houses. Don't you worry! I'm here."

"Yes—yes! You're here!" sobbed Peggy. "I don't know what I should do without you. It's—it's as Noel said. I've got no one else."

"Did he say that?" said Tiggie, as if greatly struck. "How decent!"

"Oh, he meant it!" She was clinging to him now, her face still hidden. "It's quite true. I haven't got anyone. Daddy doesn't know—doesn't understand. Oh, Tiggie—Tiggie—don't leave me!"

Her distress was piteous. He held her closer, still seeking to comfort her. "Never!" he said. "Never in life so long as you want me! Don't be afraid, little girl! It's all right. I won't leave you. I swear I won't. There, don't cry darling! It's quite all right."

"It isn't—all right," sobbed Peggy, thoroughly overwrought. "I ought not to ask you—ought not to let you! But I can't help it. I simply can't. But you do know all about Noel. It isn't—as if—I'm pretending to you."

"My dear little love, of course it isn't!" said Tiggie. "You've always been straight with me. You couldn't be anything else. I know well enough I'm only a bad second. But I'm—" he paused and swallowed—"I'm content to be that—anyhow for the present. Come, you're worn out. We needn't talk about this now. Just sit down a minute while I go and have a look at that hell-hound, and see if there's anything to be done."

But she clung to his arm. "Don't go! Don't go! At least—if you must—I'll come too."

"Come along then!" said Tiggie, picking up the lamp.

They went out together. He cast the light along the verandah. It was empty.

"Gone away!" ejaculated Tiggie. "I didn't damage him so much as I hoped. No matter! I've marked him pretty badly. He won't come back for any more."

"Oh, be careful!" whispered Peggy, shivering. "He may—he may—shoot you!"

Tiggie laughed at the idea. "Not he! He's got more important things to think about. The fellow was blind drunk—reeked of it—and I think I can guarantee that he's feeling very sick at the present moment. Now—what

about the servants? May I go round and kick 'em out and tell 'em what I think of 'em?"

"No!" she said. "No! Just stay with me!"

"Right-ho!" said Tiggie. "Well, let's go round the place and light every lamp we can find! We shan't feel so jumpy then."

His practical commonsense reassured her. They went from room to room till presently the whole bungalow was illuminated. When that was done, a wild yelping from a shed near the servants' quarters led them to the release of Jingo, whose delight at seeing them did something towards restoring Peggy to a more normal frame of mind.

Tiggie, penetrating a little further, succeeded in unearthing Sammy, who with many shaky *salaams* explained that Forbes *sahib* had brought a message from his own *sahib* to the effect that he would be late back that night, and that the Miss *sahib* was dining out.

Tiggie suppressed all comment, gave a few brief orders, and went back to the bungalow with Peggy.

"May I stay to dinner?" he asked.

"Oh, please!" she said. "Of course!"

They sat down in the drawing-room to wait for it, and she cried a little into Jingo's neck while Tiggie absorbed himself in a paper, and finally curled up in a long chair with the dog beside her and sank into a half-doze.

She did not know what was going to happen, and she was too exhausted to worry about it any more. All she knew was that Tiggie would not leave her alone. And that was all she needed to know, all that mattered in life now. She was intensely grateful to Tiggie, but it was no good telling him so. And she was too tired—too tired—to try.

The tears were still on her cheeks when at last she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XI

THE BAD SECOND

SOMEONE softly stroked her forehead, and she looked up and saw her father. She roused herself with a quick sense of expediency.

"Daddy, what is it?" she said.

For there was that in his face which she had not seen before, though wherein the difference lay she could scarcely have said save that his eyes looked more deeply sunken than usual.

He laid a tender, restraining hand upon her. "Don't get up, darling! I have brought you some food, that's all. You looked so worn out that I thought I had better wake you to have it."

She took his hand and held it, gazing at him. "You're not ill, are you, dear?" she questioned anxiously.

He smiled faintly, but the look—that indescribable look about the eyes—did not alter. "My dear child, all is well with me," he said. "It is you that I am troubled about. You have had a terrible day. I have heard all about it from your friend Tiggie."

"Is he still here?" she asked, looking round.

"No. We dined together, and he has gone. Let me prop you up, darling, while you have something to eat!"

She submitted to his solicitude, partly to please him, partly because of her own overwhelming weariness. Leaning back among the cushions, she ate and drank while he watched her. The food undoubtedly revived her, but the weariness remained. She felt as if she would always be tired for the rest of her life.

"Did Tiggie tell you everything?" she asked presently.

"Yes, dear. Everything." He spoke with a certain emphasis, was silent for a moment or two, and then said, "I shall take immediate steps to have Forbes removed."

"Oh, Daddy!" Peggy turned to him in dismay. "But you! What will you do without him?"

"I shall do very well," Sir William answered with that hint of authority that always silenced all question. "I have in fact been contemplating parting with him for some time. I suspected him of being a scoundrel, but I did not know to what extent. I shall apply at once for a man better fitted for responsibility."

The decision with which he spoke made her realize that the step he contemplated was the result of quiet and connected thought. She accepted it in silence.

He went on gravely. "You will never see him again. So far as you are concerned, he is gone already. This is not the first time you have been frightened by him, Peggy. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to be troubled," she said.

"That was a mistake, dear. You ought to have told me." There was no rebuke in his voice, only that concentration of purpose which made him in some way unfamiliar. "I should have been better able to protect you, had I known. But it is over now. Tell me, Peggy! Do you want to marry Captain Turner?"

She started at the question, so wholly unexpected was it and uttered with a calmness so complete. "Oh, has he told you that?" she said.

"He has told me that he loves you," Sir William said. "But he seems very doubtful of your feelings towards him. That was why I asked."

She uttered a weary sigh. "He has been very good to me, Daddy. I am very fond of him. But—but—"

"I see," Sir William said rather sadly.

He became silent, engrossed in thought. She hesitated to ask what was in his mind, for somehow she dreaded to know. Her own thoughts went back to Noel, to that last poignant interview, to his earnest urging on Tiggie's behalf. After all, was there any real reason for her to be obdurate on this point? Did she not owe something to Tiggie for all his goodness to her? And did anything else matter now?

She laid her hand on her father's. "Would you like me to marry him, Daddy?" she said.

He looked at her with those eyes that seemed to see so far beyond. "I should be very thankful," he said, "to feel that you were in the safe keeping of a good man. But—I am not going to persuade you. It is for you alone to decide."

She sat up slowly. "I don't think I mind much what happens to me now, Daddy," she said.

"You are too young to say that, child," he said.

She shook her head. "No, I am not young any more. I have eaten of the tree of knowledge, and nothing will ever be the same again. Daddy, if you want me to marry Tiggie—and if he wants it too—I'll do it. There! I promise!"

She held up her face to him, and in a moment he took it between his hands and bending kissed it. As he did so, she saw that the tears were in his eyes.

"Only to have you safe!" he said. "Only to have you safe, my precious little Peggy! I couldn't—meet her—if I weren't sure of that."

She knew what he meant, was conscious of an odd little stab of pain at her heart and wondered that she was still capable of suffering. Then softly she arose.

"Daddy darling, I think I'm going to bed. I'm dreadfully tired. I'll see—Tiggie—in the morning. And you mustn't worry any more about me. It's going to be all right." She stooped and laid her cheek caressingly against his white hair. "I'll never forget how good you've been," she said. "Good night, darling!"

She slipped away, and he was left gazing straight before him with those deep-set eyes, as one who waited for the lifting of a curtain. He sat so without stirring till far into the night.

With the morning Peggy was outwardly herself again save for a certain heaviness of the eyes and a pallor which made her look like a tired child. Mrs. Ash, who came up early to see her on the pretext of arranging some tennis for the following day, was inclined to scold her for not staying in bed, but desisted abruptly when an appealing glance from those weary eyes reached her.

"Let's do something nice!" she said instead. "Come along back with me and we'll have a jolly day together!"

Peggy, well aware that this was a *ruse* to get her under the doctor's eye, declined with affectionate gratitude.

"I'm expecting Captain Turner at any moment," she explained. "He is coming to *tiffin*."

"Oh, is he?" said Mrs. Ash, looking slightly perplexed. "You seem to be seeing a great deal of him."

"Yes," said Peggy.

"Do you like him?" asked Mrs. Ash, with frank curiosity.

"Yes," said Peggy again, but confided nothing further.

"Ah well," said Mrs. Ash consolingly, "you might do worse."

She stayed with Peggy for some time and her brisk companionship was like a tonic. Peggy's fatigue was less apparent when they had talked for awhile upon impersonal things.

The advent of Tiggie was the signal for her to take her departure.

"Won't you stay to *tiffin* too?" Peggy asked a little nervously.

"Not for the world, my dear," said Mrs. Ash, and kissed her warmly ere she went back to report.

Tiggie came in, looking somewhat scared. "I'm afraid of these good ladies," he said, as he held Peggy's hand for a moment. "You have such a strong bodyguard, and I'm not at all sure that I meet with their approval. Do you think she noticed my split lip?"

"It doesn't show very badly," said Peggy reassuringly. "But she certainly wouldn't disapprove of you on that account. Not that it would matter if she did! Are you all right this morning?"

"Quite," said Tiggie. "And you?"

She nodded. "Yes. I am always all right. Sit down, won't you? I'm having *tiffin* on the verandah. Daddy isn't coming back for it. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind!" said Tiggie. "It's almost more than I had dared to hope for."

She uttered a faint laugh that ended in a sigh. "You always put things so nicely—and so honestly. Tiggie, I'm awfully sorry about last night."

"Why should you be sorry?" said Tiggie.

She sat down, facing him. Her eyes regarded him with a troubled look. "I always seem to be calling on you for something," she said. "It's so unfair."

"It isn't unfair," said Tiggie. "I like you to."

"I know. That's the worst of it. And I—I've never even sewn on a button for you yet." In spite of her smile, her voice had a tragic note.

"Cheer up," said Tiggie, "or I shall pull one off at once!"

She made a little hopeless gesture. "I'm not fit to sew on your buttons, Tiggie," she said, "—or to black your boots for the matter of that!"

"Oh, I say!" said Tiggie, embarrassed.

"It's quite true." There was almost a challenge in her voice. "You know it's true in your heart. What have I ever done in return for all your decency and unselfish goodness to me? Just made use of you, that's all."

"What rot!" said Tiggie. "Look here, Peggy! You'll make me angry if you talk like that."

"If I tell you the truth?" she said, her smile still wistful.

"It isn't the truth!" declared Tiggie. "I haven't been unselfish at all! I fell in love with you on the *Pioneer*, and I followed you about like a moonstruck ass when you didn't want me. And I wouldn't let you shake me off, though you tried your hardest in your nice polite little way. And then I came after you here—though you still didn't want me—and just because Providence has been good enough to give me a leg-up and let me be a bit useful to you, you turn on me and call me unselfish,—when I've never been such a thing in my life and don't even know what it means!"

He was red with indignation as he ended, and for the first time that morning Peggy was smiling without effort.

"Tiggie—Tiggie, you're priceless!" she said.

He looked at her suspiciously. "I don't mind swallowing that if it's an insult," he said. "But I won't have any compliments, thanks."

"You shan't," she said. "Not one! I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world. That's why—that's why—Tiggie, I want to ask you something."

"The answer is Yes whatever it is," said Tiggie promptly.

She caught back another sigh. "I know. That's so like you. And in a way, it makes it harder. I wish I could feel that you would say No—if—if you

thought it best."

"Are you asking me to marry you?" asked Tiggie, with great simplicity.

She bent her head so that he could not see her face. "I'm just telling you that—you can if you want to," she said. "It's rather a different thing, isn't it?"

"Not to me!" said Tiggie. He leaned towards her. "Peggy—Peggy, are you in earnest?"

She drew a long hard breath. "Yes," she said.

Tiggie moved again, went solidly down on his knees in front of her. "Do you mind looking at me?" he said.

She raised her head slowly. Her look, as it met his, was still troubled. "I am in earnest, Tiggie," she said, "though I don't know if I am doing right."

"It isn't your father's doing?" questioned Tiggie.

She shook her head. "No, it's my own, though I know he will be very glad. And so will—Noel."

"You poor little girl!" said Tiggie.

The tears sprang to her eyes. She put out her hands to him beseechingly. "Please, Tiggie, you mustn't! I can't bear it. I'm dreadfully afraid I'm wronging you. I've got so little to offer, and you—you ought to have so much. It isn't fair of me, Tiggie, but—but—if you think it's good enough—"

"Good enough!" said Tiggie, and lifted the trembling hands to his lips. "My little darling, don't ever be afraid of that! It's—it's almost absurd, you know. As I told you last night, I only aspire to be a bad second, but when the first is disqualified, the second generally wins, doesn't he, even though he may be a very long way behind?"

She laid her head down on his shoulder. "Oh, Tiggie," she whispered brokenly, "I don't know how to answer you. You're so big—that everything besides you looks paltry and mean. But I'll tell you one thing. And—and I'd say it even if I weren't going to marry you. I love you very dearly—very dearly."

"Bless your little heart!" said Tiggie tenderly. "Well I never want anything better than that."

And with the words he stooped, and very awkwardly, with extreme reverence, kissed her hair.

CHAPTER XII

MARCELLA

It was at Peggy's desire that the engagement between herself and Tiggie Turner was kept secret until Christmas. She gave no definite reason, but Tiggie, being full of consideration for her, was more than willing that it should be so. Sir William, their sole confidant, said gravely that his little girl should do as she liked. Christmas was in any case barely a fortnight away, and when that was over the announcement would be made and they would be married in the early part of the year. Meantime, the Great Triumvirate had their own shrewd idea as to what was passing, though with conspicuous discretion they forebore to ask. Peggy remained as before their especial *protégée*, and no word of criticism regarding her was ever permitted in the presence of any of them. Tiggie had somehow obtained an extension of leave and stayed on with the Frasers, comfortably vague as to the future, serenely contented as to the present. He saw a good deal of Peggy in a quiet and unobtrusive fashion, but not even Mrs. Bobby accused him of making his intentions too conspicuous. Tiggie was so essentially a person who accepted life as it came and did not bother to look ahead.

Of the scandal surrounding Noel's doings, nothing more was for the moment known. It was believed that he would have to send in his papers, but no definite information regarding this had leaked out. Men spoke of him at the Mess in the Club in terms of affectionate regret, and there seemed to be a general feeling that he would never be seen among them again. He had destroyed himself for the sake of a woman who had never been really accepted in the society of Ghawalkhand.

Another figure that had also disappeared from the station was that of Maurice Forbes. He had vanished completely, almost in a night, and it was said that Sir William had parted with him on account of his dissolute habits which had become much more marked of late. Another assistant, a reticent Scotchman called Mackenzie, had arrived and was already at the Railway Bungalow pending negotiations for the one that had belonged to Forbes. Peggy was half-afraid of Mackenzie and had dreaded his coming on her father's account, but so far no circumstance had arisen to justify her fears.

The Scotch engineer seemed to entertain a deep veneration for Sir William's abilities, and she frequently saw them deeply engrossed for hours together over the plans for continuing the railway beyond the tunnel. Towards herself, Mackenzie was always distantly courteous, but sometimes she fancied she read a look of pity in his eyes, and at such times the old fear revived within her. But she never dared to broach the matter to him.

Life for her during those days that intervened before Christmas was a sort of lull, as though her little boat had come through stormy waters into a temporary haven of peace. Tiggie was as ever very good to her. He never talked about the future or strayed to any subject that might distress her. He simply smoked his pipe and followed where she led, unfailingly patient, invariably kind.

The usual round of gaieties claimed her, and she did not try to evade them. Among those kindly friends of hers at the Club she felt her heartache less; and though the old perpetual longing refused to be stilled, it helped her to be with them. She was conscious of a change taking place within her, and she wondered if they saw it. The old careless spontaneity was a thing wholly of the past. She knew no real zest for anything that she undertook. She believed that these would never come back to her, but she did not regret their going. She told herself wistfully that she was leaving her youth behind, and when she was no longer young she would suffer less. Even now she was not suffering so acutely as at first. The early agony of loss was nearly past, and it recurred now only in the dark at night, never by day. Jingo alone knew what those paroxysms were. He always crept on to her bed and watched beside her till they were over, spending the rest of the night pressed close to her side. But they were becoming less violent each time, and the intervals between them were growing longer. During that lull it seemed to Peggy almost as if she were waiting for something, though for what she could not have said.

Christmas promised to be a very gay season indeed, and all her energies were required by Mrs. Griffiths and her two partners to assist in making it a success. They were inaugurating a sort of Carnival Week, every day of which was to be a separate festivity. Balls, gymkanas, races, and every kind of entertainment were to be the vogue, and no one—not even Tiggie—was to be exempted from attendance.

On Christmas Eve there was to be a fancy-dress ball with a great deal of *confetti* and such foolishness, as Mrs. Ash described it. Everyone was to be in fancy dress, and at Tiggie's earnest request Peggy consented to wear the butterfly costume which she had first donned on board the *Pioneer*.

"I have always wanted to see you in that again," he said. "You know, you simply took my breath away that night."

Peggy laughed. "Fine feathers!" she said. "I believe you got the impression that I was a real beauty that night."

"I have always thought you that," said Tiggie with simplicity. "But there was something else about you—something I want to see again."

She put her hand on his. "I hope you won't be disappointed, Tiggie," she said.

"I never am," said Tiggie.

When the great week began they saw less of each other in private, but in public they were constantly together.

"I can't think why they don't get engaged," Mrs. Bobby said petulantly. "It would be so much more decent somehow."

"Oh, give 'em time!" said Bobby comfortably. "I never have thought Tiggie was a marrying man."

"That depends on how much he is thrown with a marrying woman," responded Mrs. Bobby tartly.

When she saw Peggy enter the ball-room on Christmas Eve wearing the despised butterfly-dress of the *Pioneer* days, she was very indignant indeed. It was in fact almost more than she could bear, and she hardly restrained herself from walking straight out again and going to bed.

For if Peggy had never been actually beautiful before, she was beautiful that night. There was something unearthly about her, something which had made her father catch his breath when she had slipped into his room to say good-bye.

Mrs. Griffiths recognized it as she greeted her. "How like your lovely mother!" she said.

For some reason Mrs. Griffiths was a little flustered that night and inclined to fuss over Peggy. But Mrs. Hobart, garbed as Queen Elizabeth and looking the part to the last inch, very soon came up and bore her away. It was not her custom to compliment anyone upon their appearance, but she permitted herself to remark that Peggy was looking very nice and she hoped that she would enjoy herself.

Peggy's card had been filled long since and she soon found herself dancing with Ronald Hadlow whose high-souled silence was always a relief.

In a rather mechanical fashion she did enjoy herself, for everyone seemed to be conspiring to make her happy. She was conscious that in some fashion she was being singled out for general attention, but she put it down to the charm of the butterfly-dress which had won her so signal a victory before.

There was no vanity in this conclusion. Peggy had never been vain. She was too open-minded for that. But it was impossible not to be aware of the under-current of interest which moved around her. She knew that she was being observed closely and that with one exception the observation was kindly. Her partners did not give her much respite, and she did not want to rest. She had always loved dancing, and it was much easier than talking. Moreover, it helped her not to think, and thought meant sorrow in those days. Yes, she was certainly growing older.

When she came to dance with Tiggie she roused herself a little lest he should think her unresponsive, and Tiggie—of all people—must never be allowed to think that. But, curiously enough, she found him somewhat abstracted, and though he told her that she was even lovelier in his eyes than she had been on board the *Pioneer*, she had a strong feeling that for the most part he was thinking of something else.

"I am going to take you back," he said at parting. "Let me know when you want to go!"

She was a little surprised at the announcement, for though it was an understood thing between them that he should accompany her back to her father's bungalow, she had not thought that he regarded it altogether as a right.

"Do you want me to go early?" she asked.

"No," said Tiggie. "I want you to please yourself—in that and everything else—always."

He smiled at her in the old kindly way with the words, but she still felt that she did not fathom the motive that prompted them.

After she had left him she knew that he continued to watch her from afar with a kind of moody solicitude for which she could not account.

The Peggy of earlier days would probably have been more alert, more aware of a certain mystery in the atmosphere than this older Peggy who had deeper thoughts to occupy her and took less account of her surroundings. With the zest of life had also gone the keen interest which once had been hers. There was so little left that mattered.

But as the evening wore on, she did begin to notice a strange element of secrecy about her. As once before, when people had drawn aside and whispered as Noel and Marcella danced together in faultless harmony, so now here and there were whisperers who seemed to warn each other and look guilty at her approach. She realized that her three protectors were taking especial care to keep her in sight, and that all conversation in their vicinity was almost obtrusively commonplace, even banal.

It took some time to dawn upon her, but the conviction was hers at last. Something had happened—something which everyone else knew, but which the Great Triumvirate had decreed, doubtless for her good, that she was not to know.

When that realization came to Peggy she became instantly determined to defeat their well-meant efforts. She was essentially feminine in all her ways, and she resented being kept in the dark, however praiseworthy the motive. What others knew, surely she had a right to know! She cast about her for a means of finding out.

It was hard upon midnight and at the striking of a gong to herald Christmas Day, there was to be a general revel. Her partner for the occasion was Leonard Worthing, and she swiftly decided that he should be made to serve her purpose.

The moment he came to claim her she lightly took his arm. "Come out on the verandah a moment!" she said. "I want to get out of the crowd."

He accompanied her quite willingly. Since the tennis tournament a certain palship had sprung up between them.

They went out into the chill of the night and found it a glory of stars.

"You won't catch cold?" said Worthing.

"Oh no," she said, "of course not! I never catch anything. Leonard, I want to ask you something. You and I have soldiered together, and I don't think you can refuse to answer."

"Oh, holy Moses!" he ejaculated. "Is that what we came out for?"

Her hand fastened tightly upon his arm, for he showed signs of beating a retreat.

"Yes, it is!" she said rather breathlessly. "It is! I want to know what is going on—what Mrs. Griffiths and Mrs. Hobart and Mrs. Ash are all keeping from me. You know. I'm sure you know. I want you to tell me."

"Why don't you ask them?" said Leonard.

She nearly shook him for his idiocy. "Oh, don't be foolish! You know perfectly well it wouldn't be any good. They all treat me like a child. And I'm not a child, you know, Leonard. It isn't fair. I am bound to find out if it's something that concerns me. So you may as well tell me."

"Yes, there is that to it," said Leonard, considering. "But it doesn't concern you. At least, I hope it doesn't."

"Then why not tell me?" she demanded in exasperation.

"Oh, just because it might, I suppose," he said.

A sudden fear pierced Peggy. She stiffened with a gasp; for it was like a knife through her heart.

Then, in a voice that was very distinct and detached from herself, she spoke. "Is it something to do with Noel?"

Leonard was silent. The situation was beyond him, and he longed urgently to escape; but he could not, because of that little hand gripped like a spring upon his arm.

"Tell me! Is it?" said Peggy.

He moved uneasily. "I say, I wish you'd ask somebody else," he said.

She did not seem to hear him. "What is it about him?" she said. "I have got to know now. Is he dead?"

"Oh, good gracious, no!" said Leonard, with a start. "Not he! He's all right. He's back in his quarters. It's Mrs. Forbes. There! I've told you. But, as you say, you've got to know. I hope you weren't very fond of her. I don't suppose you were."

"What has happened to her?" said Peggy.

She was perfectly quiet and collected. Young Worthing began to think that the powers who ruled the English community in Ghawalkhand had made much ado about nothing.

"She's dead," he said. "Best thing that could possibly happen really. For he couldn't have married her. He could—not—have married her."

"How did she die?" said Peggy.

Young Worthing felt a little uneasy again. He had let the cat out of the bag with a vengeance.

“I say, don’t tell anyone I told you!” he said. “Though, after all, it’s absurd not to, because—as you say—you’ve got to know some time. She shot herself. No one knows why. I believe it happened yesterday.”

His words went into silence. Across the starlit compound a wandering wind was sighing like something lost. Peggy turned her face towards it and stood very still.

Suddenly from behind them there came the slow strokes of a gong. It was like the tolling of a bell.

Peggy spoke. “Do you mind going away?” she said. “I want to be alone.”

He went with alacrity. Somehow he was rather afraid of Peggy just then.

As he left her, the revelry began, and music and movement and laughing voices broke forth in a torrent of sound. But they did not reach the girl standing alone on the cold verandah with her face to the night.

She was shivering, though she did not know it, as the night-wind sighed and passed.

“Marcella!” she whispered. “Marcella! Oh, dear Marcella!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE RETURN OF THE VISION

It was Tiggie who found her presently, crouched in a wicker-chair, and very cold.

"My darling!" he said. "I've been looking for you everywhere. What on earth are you doing here?"

She lifted a face that was white and still. "I would like to go back now, please, Tiggie," she said.

He bent to her. "You are chilled to the bone. Peggy, what's the matter?"

She answered him with absolute directness. "I've heard about Marcella," she said.

"Who told you?" he said.

"It doesn't matter who told me," she answered drearily. "It might as well have been you. I had to know some time."

"Yes, I know," said Tiggie. "That's what I said. But they thought it would upset you, and they wanted you to have to-night in peace. The news only came this evening. Noel is back."

"I know," she said. She got up, accepting his help almost unconsciously. "You—I suppose you haven't seen him?"

"No," Tiggie said. "But I'm going to."

He spoke with a certain doggedness. She looked at him questioningly. "Why, Tiggie?" she said.

He hesitated for a second. Then: "I'll tell you to-morrow, dear," he said. "Let's get back now, shall we?"

For the second time that night she found him unfathomable. He seemed suddenly to have acquired a strength of purpose which did not naturally belong to him.

"Don't let's go through the ball-room!" she said. "It's so noisy."

"All right," said Tiggie, and led her along the verandah.

They went in again by the main entrance which was quite deserted.

"Hadn't you better say good night to Mrs. Griffiths?" suggested Tiggie.

She shook her head. "I can't, Tiggie. They're all so gay. None of them cares but me. Tiggie,"—she spoke in a whisper—"I loved her."

"I know you did," Tiggie said, and there was an odd note of reverence in his voice.

She slipped in for her cloak, and he went to find the Frasers' car to take her back.

The uproar in the ball-room was tumultuous; but one of the Great Triumvirate had missed Peggy, and as she came gliding back like a pale moonbeam seeking escape, she met Mrs. Hobart in her Elizabethan robes in the passage.

She drew back momentarily, as if disconcerted, but Mrs. Hobart made an unexpected gesture which could not be ignored. She held out her arms to Peggy, and Peggy ran to her like a child.

"I've just heard," she said, and suddenly she was sobbing. "Oh, it's dreadful—it's terrible—to think of her gone like that."

There was sustaining strength in the arms that held her. Mrs. Hobart spoke very gently, with great kindness.

"Peggy," she said, "be comforted! It may be that she has found her place of repentance."

The words had an arresting effect upon Peggy. She lifted her face and received Mrs. Hobart's kiss.

"Thank you—for saying that," she whispered. "I shall always remember it."

"You are going now?" said Mrs. Hobart. "Well, good-bye, dear!"

She released her with the words and turned away. But the comfort which she had given to Peggy went with her into the night, and she clung to it with a dawning sense of peace in the midst of her distress. Poor beautiful Marcella to whom life had been so cruel a tragedy! Perhaps, after all, it was best!

She hardly spoke to Tiggie during the drive back, but when they entered the bungalow together she turned to him with a touch of wistfulness.

"Dear Tiggie, thank you very much. I hope I haven't spoilt the evening for you. I haven't meant to be selfish."

He took the hand she held out to him, but though his eyes were very kindly she was still aware of that new element of resolution about him which made him somehow different.

"I like you best when you're selfish, Peggy," he said. "Don't ever make any mistake about that!"

"Do you?" she said. "How funny!"

"I mean it," said Tiggie with emphasis. "I sometimes think that you are too keen on self-sacrifice. It doesn't always answer."

She looked at him with wide open eyes. "Tiggie, what do you mean? Do you think—you don't think—Marcella found out, do you?"

"I don't know," said Tiggie soberly. "But somehow I think she ought to have been told."

"Oh Tiggie!" she said.

"That's my own idea," said Tiggie. "Happiness can't be built on a false foundation. I've found that out lately. But it's all right, little girl! I'm not going to let you wreck yours that way anyhow."

"Oh, Tiggie!" she said again. Her hand clasped his very tightly; she had begun to tremble. "Tiggie," she said piteously, "what can I say to you? What can I do?"

He looked at her for a second with that in his eyes that went straight to her heart. Then very quietly he bent and kissed her.

"I'll tell you to-morrow," he said again, and with that he turned and left her.

She stood alone in the lighted room, wondering numbly what he had meant and what was going to happen on the morrow.

Then she heard Jingo whining for her in her bedroom, and she went quickly to him and clasped him around the neck as she always did when returning late at night.

"I shan't have you much longer, dear doggie," she whispered.

Jingo licked her with great vehemence and tried to wriggle on to her lap, assuring her with much emphasis that he was hers till death.

When she had quieted him, she stood up again and found a pile of letters and parcels on her table. The mail had come in after her departure.

She stared for a moment and it dawned upon her. "Of course!" she said. "It's Christmas!"

Yes, there were letters from everyone—Nick, Muriel, Joan, and Reggie. A pang of homesickness went through her.

"Oh, when shall I see them all again?" she said.

She took up Joan's letter and opened it. Somehow she felt as if she had treated Joan rather badly of late. She had been able to tell her so little of the inner happenings of her life.

Joan, however, seemed blissfully unconscious of any shortcomings in that direction. She was full to the brim of her own affairs. She had been invalided home from school that term with measles. ("Fancy me getting measles at my age!") And her mother had been away, so she had gone to Uncle Nick's rather against her will, but there had been no help for it, and then Reggie had got leave, and they had had a ripping time together. "I hope you don't mind, Peggy dear," came airily from Joan's pen at this juncture, "but I think it likely that Reggie and I may make a match of it some day. We think we should suit each other very nicely, and I know you never really wanted him. How is Noel? Give him my love and tell him I commend you to his care! I wish he would marry you quick and bring you home."

"Oh, Joan!" protested Peggy aloud.

But she read the letter through and felt the better for it. Dear little Joan! Dear old Reggie! She had never expected it of them, but how jolly it would be for them both!

She laid the letter down and looked round the bare room. The thought of Marcella's death crowded back upon her, but though the shock was still so fresh she felt already as if she had known of it for a very long while.

She had no heart to open any Christmas parcels. Even Nick's letter would wait till the morning.

"I will just go and see if Daddy is still up," she said.

It was with no thought of seeking a confidant that she went in search of him. No news that did not directly affect her was of any interest to him. But she had formed a habit of slipping in to say good night to him, and she knew that he liked her to do so.

She pulled her cloak about her again and ran along the verandah to his room.

Yes, he was still up. The light was burning, and there came to her very vividly the memory of that first night when she had reached his window and looked in upon the solitary worker seated at his table.

She remembered how she had been afraid to break in upon him, how she — He was there now, but he was not working. He was sitting facing the window.

His deep-set eyes were alight, glowing, ardent. Involuntarily she drew back out of sight. That face was not of earth. It was the face of a visionary. He was gazing straight through the open Gates of Eternity.

As she hung there waiting, she heard him speak, not in the slow tired tones she knew, but quickly, rapturously, like a boy.

"Yes, darling, yes, I am coming! How dear of you to wait! It hasn't been so long for you as it has for me—beloved—but—it's all over now!"

As he ceased to speak, Peggy turned and slipped away. He did not need her. It would be an intrusion to break in upon him while his vision remained. In the morning—when he was himself again—she would tell him all that had happened. And perhaps he would tell her of this that had happened to him also. But not now—not now!

As she went softly back to her room, it seemed to her as if a gracious presence were somewhere very near her, and she stopped at her window and stretched out her arms towards that vision which only her father was permitted to see.

"God bless you, my Mummy!" she whispered, and in her heart she knew that a silent benediction came back.

Later, as she lingered with her face to the stars, she remembered again that it was Christmas Morning—and Noel's birthday.

CHAPTER XIV

GREATER LOVE

UP on the hill with the morning sun pouring down through the pines, and Jingo busily hunting unattainable squirrels close to her, Peggy opened her Christmas letter from Nick.

It seemed strange that they all knew so little of what was happening to her, but in a sense it was a relief. It helped her to get a right perspective and to view things in their proper proportion.

The comfort offered by Mrs. Hobart last night was with her still. She was able to think of Marcella with calmness and without that dreadful feeling of tragedy. She had slept and awaked with a mind at peace.

Nick's letter was exactly like himself. She almost felt as if he were sitting beside her.

> "I really don't know how we are going to survive Christmas without you," he wrote, "but I suppose we shall all find some sort of consolation in our various ways. Joan and Reggie have begun already. I do not know what is the modern equivalent of falling in love, but they seem to be practising it with considerable success. They rag each other like two puppies all day long, and my own particular beloved and I gape at each other in open-mouthed astonishment at their unloverly pranks. I am sure you will do the thing far more prettily when your turn comes, my child. You are far too much your mother's daughter to descend to such depths of modernity.
>
> "How is my old Will? Give him my love and tell him that if he doesn't chuck work and bring my little favourite back to me soon, I shall break all my vows and come out and fetch her! I will not go through another Christmas in this forlorn style. Don't be over-anxious about him, Peggy! But if you can gradually detach him from his work, try to do so! I know what he is. Work has been his salvation, but it mustn't become his fetish. Do your very utmost to

> persuade him to bring you Home. If you can't do this single-handed, I will come straight out and help you. Remember, he himself is far more important than the work, which can easily be left to others. Let me know exactly how things are, and if you really want me I will come."

This was the answer to her letter of all those weeks before when Noel had first gone away. Peggy folded it and sat pondering. So much had happened since then, but her father's need remained. To detach him from his work, to take him back to England, would that really be for his good?

She shook her head slowly over the thought. "I don't believe it would answer," she said. "India has become more Home to him than England now, and he needs his work—just as he needs his Vision."

Looking back over those few weeks that had intervened since the writing of her letter, she realized that a great change had taken place. The absorption in his work was not what it had been. There had been a gradual loosening of his bonds in that direction. But in another sense which was scarcely tangible she knew that his hold upon earthly things was loosening also. That Dawn Light of which now and then she had caught a glimpse had increased immeasurably. He was no longer as one who waited for the lifting of a curtain, but—she had seen it in his eager eyes last night—as one who watched it rise. The Dawn was drawing very near.

For the first time she faced the fact and all that it meant, though she felt it to be no new revelation but something that she had vaguely known all along. She grasped now the meaning of the pity in Mackenzie's eyes. He knew it also.

"I expect they all do," she said to herself, as she thought of the protecting wall which had been raised for her by the Great Triumvirate. "That is why they are all so good to me. They all know that I shall soon be left alone."

A chill went through her at the thought, but she checked it resolutely. Whatever life might hold for her, she would face it bravely and go straight on. It was the only way.

She got up, facing the sunlight, and began to walk down the hill. She covered several yards, and then paused. Someone was coming up the track. She turned aside under the trees, still clinging to her solitude.

The light was shining in her eyes, dazzling her. She threaded her way rather vaguely through the pines, then paused again. Here was the spot

where Marcella had sat, bowed to the earth with misery! Her tears began to gather as she stood, looking downwards. Poor, beautiful Marcella!

Then she became aware that someone else had turned off the track and was coming to her through the pines. Her heart gave one great throb and stood still. She did not attempt to speak or move. She knew she could not.

Steadily the advancing footsteps drew nearer. How well she knew them! There was another who knew them too, for with a shriek and a bound Jingo suddenly forsook his occupation and flung himself upon the intruder. There followed a greeting which to Jingo's mind was all too brief, and then to Peggy, dumbly waiting, Jingo's master turned.

"Please forgive me," he said, "for coming upon you like this!"

Somehow her hands found themselves in his. She looked straight up into his face. Words came to her—such simple childish words as she would have uttered in the long ago.

"Oh, poor Noel!" she said. "Poor Noel!"

His brown face quivered. "That's so like you," he said, "to pity a damn' scoundrel like me."

That restored her more swiftly than any other words could have done. She moved close to him.

"Noel, don't ever say that! It isn't true."

He uttered a groan of dissent. "It is true, Peg-top. I've let down everybody. But that isn't what I've come for—just to excite your pity. I've come to give you something, and then—I'm going again. I wanted Turner to bring it, but he wouldn't."

"Oh, what is it?" she said.

"This," said Noel. He held out to her a little twisted note on the palm of his hand. "It was enclosed in a message to me—a message Marcella left."

"Oh, what?" breathed Peggy.

She took the note with reverence, but she looked at him without opening it.

He answered her with a calmness which she knew to be the outcome of immense effort. "Her message to me was very short—simply, 'Good-bye, my best of friends! Give this to your little love Peggy!'"

"Oh!" gasped Peggy. "Then she knew!"

"Yes." Again with that forced calmness he made answer. "She saw your little jade god, and recognized it as yours. She must have seen you wear it some time. I tried to lie to her, but I suppose I failed. For the next time I saw her—she was dead."

"Noel—oh, Noel!" said Peggy. She looked at the note in her hand as if she could not bear to open it. "Poor, poor Marcella! You know, I saw her at Samdana that night. That was why she didn't believe your lie. She must have guessed that I had been with you."

"Shall I open it for you?" he said.

She gave it to him. "Please Noel! I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

He opened it with perfectly steady fingers. She clung to his arm, and they read it together.

> "Good-bye, dear heart! I have taken a good deal from you, but there is just one thing I can't take, because I love you. You have offered me all you had, but I send it back, dear one, with my love. Take it and be happy, and think kindly sometimes of poor Marcella."

Peggy looked up. "Oh, Noel," she said, "she laid down her life for her friends!"

He did not speak. She saw that he could not.

She leaned her head against his arm. "We will never forget her," she said.

He remained silent. Very quietly he folded the note again and gave it to her.

So for a space they stood as if it were before the high altar of sacrifice.

Peggy lifted her head at last. "Don't cry, dear Noel!" she said softly. "I am sure—I am quite sure—she is safe."

He made an impulsive gesture and found his voice. "Yes, she is safe now. Thank God for that! I'm going now, Peggy. The Colonel has been amazingly decent to me. I've got Home leave for a year, and after that they'll have me back. Everything will be forgotten by then. I'm to start again." He paused, then plunged on. "Turner says I'm to ask you something before I go. He says he won't marry you now—though God knows he is a

million times better fellow than I. And I'm to ask you if you'll have me—when—when I've lived this thing down."

"Oh, Noel!" Peggy was looking up at him with a wonder that was almost a dawning smile in her eyes. "So that was what he meant!" she said. "Dear Tiggie! Dear Tiggie! Noel," she stretched her hands up to his shoulders, "he knows we belong to each other. Of course—of course I will!"

He bent to her. "I don't deserve it," he said huskily. "I'm not worthy of you. Peggy, I'm not worthy!"

"Oh, hush!" she said. "Hush! What is the good of talk like that between you and me? If it weren't for Daddy, I would come with you now."

"Would you?" he said. "Would you? Peg-top, my own, my darling, do you mean it?"

She turned her lips to his. "Of course I mean it—Noel—beloved. How could I possibly mean anything else when every little bit of me is yours?"

As they went down the hill together she remembered again that it was Christmas morning and his birthday. "And I've got nothing for you," she said. "You will have to come and help me open my presents instead. And then—then we must tell Daddy."

"I fancy Turner has gone in to do that," said Noel.

"Oh, did he come up with you? How like him!" she said. "I hope he is still there. Yes, there he is waiting for us! Oh, Noel! Oh, Tiggie!"

She suddenly broke off. Tiggie was there indeed, but his face was paler than usual, and he gave her no greeting as they met.

"Thank goodness, you're here!" he said to Noel. "It'll make it easier for her. Peggy—Peggy child—I've got something to tell you. Will you try and be your brave little self while I say it?"

She put her two hands over her heart. "I know what it is!" she said. "It's—it's Daddy!"

He bent his head. "They found him—this morning—in his chair—"

She spoke again with a strange exaltation. "I know, I know. He had a Vision. My mother came for him last night. I knew she was there. I knew it!"

She broke off. For a few minutes she stood as it were unconscious of them, as though she too saw the Vision and the open Gates of Eternity . . . .

Then with a deep sigh she came back to earth, and found herself standing between the two men and holding a hand of each.

She looked from one to the other. "I'm glad," she said. "Oh, I'm glad. He wanted her so. And now—they are together."

"That's right," said Tiggie, with eager clumsy solace. "And you've got Noel, you know. Don't forget you've got him!"

She lifted her face to him with a sweet tremulous smile. "I shall never forget," she said, "that you sent him to me." Then, as he gently kissed her and set her free, she turned to Noel. "We will go Home together now," she said, "to Nick."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book title and author have been added to the original book cover. Cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Peggy By Request*, by Ethel M. Dell.]