

The Odds eBook

The Odds by Ethel May Dell

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Odds eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	9
Page 1.....	11
Page 2.....	13
Page 3.....	15
Page 4.....	17
Page 5.....	19
Page 6.....	20
Page 7.....	22
Page 8.....	24
Page 9.....	26
Page 10.....	28
Page 11.....	30
Page 12.....	32
Page 13.....	34
Page 14.....	36
Page 15.....	38
Page 16.....	39
Page 17.....	41
Page 18.....	43
Page 19.....	45
Page 20.....	47
Page 21.....	49
Page 22.....	51

Page 23.....	53
Page 24.....	55
Page 25.....	57
Page 26.....	59
Page 27.....	61
Page 28.....	63
Page 29.....	65
Page 30.....	67
Page 31.....	69
Page 32.....	71
Page 33.....	73
Page 34.....	75
Page 35.....	77
Page 36.....	79
Page 37.....	81
Page 38.....	83
Page 39.....	85
Page 40.....	87
Page 41.....	89
Page 42.....	91
Page 43.....	93
Page 44.....	95
Page 45.....	97
Page 46.....	98
Page 47.....	100
Page 48.....	102

Page 49.....	104
Page 50.....	106
Page 51.....	108
Page 52.....	110
Page 53.....	112
Page 54.....	114
Page 55.....	116
Page 56.....	118
Page 57.....	120
Page 58.....	122
Page 59.....	124
Page 60.....	126
Page 61.....	128
Page 62.....	130
Page 63.....	132
Page 64.....	134
Page 65.....	135
Page 66.....	137
Page 67.....	139
Page 68.....	141
Page 69.....	143
Page 70.....	145
Page 71.....	147
Page 72.....	149
Page 73.....	151
Page 74.....	153

Page 75.....	155
Page 76.....	157
Page 77.....	159
Page 78.....	161
Page 79.....	163
Page 80.....	165
Page 81.....	167
Page 82.....	169
Page 83.....	171
Page 84.....	173
Page 85.....	175
Page 86.....	177
Page 87.....	179
Page 88.....	181
Page 89.....	183
Page 90.....	185
Page 91.....	187
Page 92.....	189
Page 93.....	191
Page 94.....	193
Page 95.....	195
Page 96.....	197
Page 97.....	199
Page 98.....	201
Page 99.....	203
Page 100.....	205

Page 101.....	207
Page 102.....	209
Page 103.....	211
Page 104.....	213
Page 105.....	215
Page 106.....	217
Page 107.....	219
Page 108.....	221
Page 109.....	223
Page 110.....	225
Page 111.....	227
Page 112.....	229
Page 113.....	231
Page 114.....	233
Page 115.....	235
Page 116.....	237
Page 117.....	239
Page 118.....	241
Page 119.....	243
Page 120.....	245
Page 121.....	247
Page 122.....	249
Page 123.....	251
Page 124.....	253
Page 125.....	255
Page 126.....	257

Page 127.....	259
Page 128.....	261
Page 129.....	263
Page 130.....	265
Page 131.....	267
Page 132.....	269
Page 133.....	271
Page 134.....	273
Page 135.....	275
Page 136.....	277
Page 137.....	279
Page 138.....	281
Page 139.....	283
Page 140.....	285
Page 141.....	287
Page 142.....	289
Page 143.....	291
Page 144.....	293
Page 145.....	295
Page 146.....	297
Page 147.....	299
Page 148.....	301
Page 149.....	303
Page 150.....	305
Page 151.....	307
Page 152.....	308

Page 153.....	310
Page 154.....	312
Page 155.....	314
Page 156.....	316
Page 157.....	318
Page 158.....	320
Page 159.....	322
Page 160.....	324
Page 161.....	326
Page 162.....	328
Page 163.....	330
Page 164.....	332
Page 165.....	334

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
Without Prejudice	1
CHAPTER I	1
CHAPTER II	4
CHAPTER III	7
CHAPTER IV	10
CHAPTER V	13
CHAPTER VI	17
CHAPTER VII	21
CHAPTER VIII	26
CHAPTER IX	30
CHAPTER X	36
CHAPTER XI	39
CHAPTER XII	42
CHAPTER XIII	47
Her Own Free Will	50
CHAPTER I	50
CHAPTER II	53
CHAPTER III	57
CHAPTER IV	61
CHAPTER V	64
CHAPTER VI	66
CHAPTER VII	68
CHAPTER VIII	73
CHAPTER IX	76
CHAPTER X	80
CHAPTER XI	81
CHAPTER XII	83
CHAPTER XIII	85
CHAPTER XIV	88
The Consolation Prize	91
Her Freedom	103
Death's Property	113
CHAPTER I	113
CHAPTER II	115
CHAPTER III	117
CHAPTER IV	120
CHAPTER V	121
CHAPTER VI	123
CHAPTER VII	125

CHAPTER VIII	127
CHAPTER IX	129
CHAPTER X	131
CHAPTER XI	133
CHAPTER XII	135
CHAPTER XIII	138
CHAPTER XIV	140
CHAPTER XV	142
CHAPTER XVI	143
The Sacrifice	145
CHAPTER I	145
CHAPTER II	151
CHAPTER III	152
CHAPTER IV	155
CHAPTER V	157
CHAPTER VI	158
CHAPTER VII	161
CHAPTER VIII	162
By Ethel M. Dell	165

Page 1

Without Prejudice

CHAPTER I

SILLY SENTIMENT

"It's time I set about making my own living," said Dot Burton.

She spoke resolutely, and her face was resolute also; its young lines were for the moment almost grim. She stood in the doorway of the stable, watching her brother rub down the animal he had just been riding. Behind her the rays of the Australian sun smote almost level, making of her fair hair a dazzling aureole of gold. The lashes of her blue eyes were tipped with gold also, but the brows above them were delicately dark. They were slightly drawn just then, as if she were considering a problem of considerable difficulty.

Jack Burton was frankly frowning over his task. It was quite evident that his sister's announcement was not a welcome one.

She continued after a moment, as he did not respond in words: "I am sure I could make a living, Jack. I'm not the 'new chum' I used to be, thanks to you. You've taught me a whole heap of things."

Jack glanced up for a second. "Aren't you happy here?" he said.

She eluded the question. "You've been awfully good to me, dear old boy. But really, you know, I think you've got burdens enough without me. In any case, it isn't fair that I should add to them."

Jack grunted. "It isn't fair that you should do more than half the work on the place and not be paid for it, you mean. You're quite right, it isn't."

"No, I don't mean that, Jack." Quite decidedly she contradicted him. "I don't mind work. I like to have my time filled. I love being useful. It isn't that at all. But all the same, you and Adela are quite complete without me. Before you were married it was different. I was necessary to you then. But I'm not now. And so—"

"Has Adela been saying that to you?"

Jack Burton straightened himself abruptly. His expression was almost fierce.

Dot laughed at sight of it. "No, Jack, no! Don't be so jumpy! Of course she hasn't. As if she would! She hasn't said a thing. But I know how she feels, and I should feel exactly the same in her place. Now do be sensible! You must see my point. I'm getting

on, you know, Jack. I'm twenty-five. Just fancy! You've sheltered me quite long enough—too long, really. You must—you really must—let me go."

He was looking at her squarely. "I can't prevent your going," he said, gruffly. "But it won't be with my consent—ever—or my approval. You'll go against my will—dead against it."

"Jack—darling!" She went to him impulsively and took him by the shoulders. "Now that isn't reasonable of you. It really isn't. You've got to take that back."

He looked at her moodily. "I shan't take it back. I can't. I am dead against your going. I know this country. It's not a place for lone women. And you're not much more than a child, whatever you may say. It's rough, I tell you. And you"—he looked down upon her slender fairness—"you weren't made for rough things."

Page 2

"Please don't be silly, Jack!" she broke in. "I'm quite as strong as the average woman and, I hope, as capable. I'm grown up, you silly man! I'm old—older than you are in some ways, even though you have been in the world ten years longer. Can't you see I want to stretch my wings?"

"Want to leave me?" he said, and put his arms suddenly about her. She nestled to him on the instant, lifting her face to kiss him.

"No, darling, no! Never in life! But—you must see—you must see"—her eyes filled with tears unexpectedly, and she laid her head upon his shoulder to hide them—"that I can't—live on you—for ever. It isn't fair—to you—or to Adela—or to—to—anyone else who might turn up."

"Ah!" he said. "Or to you either. We've no right to make a slave of you. I know that. Perhaps Adela hasn't altogether realized it."

"I've nothing—whatever—against Adela," Dot told him, rather shakily. "She has never been—other than kind. No, it is what I feel myself. I am not necessary to you or to Adela, and—in a way—I'm glad of it. I like to know you two are happy. I'm not a bit jealous, Jack, not a bit. It's just as it should be. But you'll have to let me go, dear. It's time I went. It's right that I should go. You mustn't try to hold me back."

But Jack's arms had tightened about her. "I hate the thought of it," he said. "Give it up! Give it up, old girl—for my sake!"

She shook her head silently in his embrace.

He went on with less assurance. "If you wanted to get married it would be a different thing. I would never stand in the way of your marrying a decent man. If you must go, why don't you do that?"

She laughed rather tremulously. "You think every good woman ought to marry, don't you, Jack?"

"When there's a good man waiting for her, why not?" said Jack.

She lifted her head and looked at him. "I'm not going to marry Fletcher Hill, Jack," she said, with firmness.

Jack made a slight movement of impatience. "I never could see your objection to the man," he said.

She laughed again, drawing herself back from him. "But, Jack darling, a woman doesn't marry a man just because he's not objectionable, does she? I always said I wouldn't marry him, didn't I?"

“You might do a lot worse,” said Jack.

“Of course I might—heaps worse. But that isn’t the point. I think he’s quite a good sort—in his own sardonic way. And he is a great friend of yours, too, isn’t he? That fact would count vastly in his favour if I thought of marrying at all. But, you see—I don’t.”

“I call that uncommon hard on Fletcher,” observed Jack.

She opened her blue eyes very wide. “My dear man, why?”

“After waiting for you all this time,” he explained, suffering his arms to fall away from her.

She still gazed at him in astonishment. “Jack! But I never asked him to wait!”

Page 3

He turned from her with a shrug of the shoulders. "No, but I did."

"You did? Jack, what can you mean?"

Jack stooped to feel one of his animal's hocks. He spoke without looking at her. "It's been my great wish—all this time. I've been deuced anxious about you often. Australia isn't the place for unprotected girls—at least, not out in the wilds. I've seen—more than enough of that. And you're no wiser than the rest. You lost your head once—over a rotter. You might again. Who knows?"

"Oh, really, Jack!" The girl's face flushed very deeply. She turned it aside instinctively, though he was not looking at her. But the colour died as quickly as it came, leaving her white and quivering.

She stood mutely struggling for self-control while Jack continued. "I know Fletcher. I know he's sound. He's a man who always gets what he wants. He wouldn't be a magistrate now if he didn't. And when I saw he wanted you, I made up my mind he should have you if I could possibly work it. I gave him my word I'd help him, and I begged him to wait a bit, to give you time to get over that other affair. He's been waiting—ever since."

Dot's hands clenched slowly. She spoke with a great effort. "Then he'd better stop waiting—at once, Jack, and marry someone else."

"He won't do that," said Jack. He stood up again abruptly and faced round upon her. "Look here, dear! Why can't you give in and marry him? He's such a good sort if you only get to know him well. You've always kept him at arm's length, haven't you? Well, let him come a bit nearer! You'll soon like him well enough to marry him. He'd make you happy, Dot. Take my word for it!"

She met his look bravely, though the distress still lingered in her eyes. "But, dear old Jack," she said, "no woman can possibly love at will."

"It would come afterwards," Jack said, with conviction. "I know it would. He's such a good chap. You've never done him justice. See, Dot girl! You're not happy. I know that. You want to stretch your wings, you say. Well, there's only one way of doing it, for you can't go out into the world—this world—alone. At least, you'll break my heart if you do. He's the only fellow anywhere near worthy of you. And he's been so awfully patient. Do give him his chance!"

He put his arm round her shoulders again, holding her very tenderly.

She yielded herself to him with a suppressed sob. "I'm sure it would be wrong, Jack," she said.

“Not a bit wrong!” Jack maintained, stoutly. “What have you been waiting for all this time? A myth, an illusion, that can never come true! You’ve no right to spoil your own life and someone else’s as well for such a reason as that. I call that wrong—if you like.”

She hid her face against him with a piteous gesture. “He—said he would come back, Jack.”

Jack frowned over her bowed head even while he softly stroked it. “And if he had—do you think I would ever have let you go to him? A cattle thief, Dot! An outlaw!”

Page 4

She clung to him trembling. "He saved my life—at the risk of his own," she whispered, almost inarticulately.

"Oh, I know—I know. He was that sort—brave enough, but a hopeless rotter." Jack's voice held a curious mixture of tenderness and contempt. "Women always fall in love with that sort of fellow," he said. "Heaven knows why. But you'd no right to lose your heart to him, little 'un. You knew—you always knew—he wasn't the man for you."

She clung to him in silence for a space, then lifted her face. "All right, Jack," she said.

He looked at her closely for a moment. "Come! It's only silly sentiment," he urged. "You can't feel bad about it after all this time. Why, child, it's five years!"

She laughed rather shakily. "I am a big fool, aren't I, Jack? Yet—somehow—do you know—I thought he meant to come back."

"Not he!" declared Jack. "Catch Buckskin Bill putting his head back into the noose when once he had got away! He's not quite so simple as that, my dear. He probably cleared out of Australia for good as soon as he got the chance. And a good thing, too!" he added, with emphasis. "He'd done mischief enough."

She raised her lips to his. "Thank you for not laughing at me, Jack," she said. "Don't—ever—tell Adela, will you? I'm sure she would."

He smiled a little. "Yes, I think she would. She'd say you were old enough to know better."

Dot nodded. "And very sensible, too. I am."

He patted her shoulder. "Good girl! Then that chapter is closed. And—you're going to give poor Fletcher his chance?"

She drew a sharp breath. "Oh, I don't know. I can't promise that. Don't—don't hustle me, Jack!"

He gave her a hard squeeze and let her go. "There, she shan't be teased by her horrid bully of a brother! She's going to play the game off her own bat, and I wish her luck with all my heart."

He turned to the job of feeding his horse, and Dot, after a few inconsequent remarks, sauntered away in the direction of the barn, "to be alone with herself," as she put it.

CHAPTER II

NUMBER THREE

Adela Burton was laying the cloth for supper, and looking somewhat severe over the process. She was usually cheerful at that hour of the day, for it brought her husband back from his work and, thanks to Dot's ministrations, the evening was free from toil. It was seldom, indeed, that Adela bestirred herself to lay the cloth for any meal, for she maintained that it was better for a girl like Dot to have plenty to do at all times, and she herself preferred her needlework, at which she was an adept.

Page 5

No one could have called her an idle woman, but she was eminently a selfish one. She followed her own bent, quite regardless of the desires and inclinations of anyone else. She was the hub of her world from her own point of view, and she was wholly incapable of recognizing any other. Most people realized this and, as is the way of humanity, took her at her own valuation, making allowances for her undoubted egotism. For she was comely and had a taking manner, never troubling herself unless her own personal convenience were threatened. She laughed a good deal, though her sense of humour was none of the finest, and she was far too practical to possess any imagination. In short, as she herself expressed it, she was sensible; and, being so, she had small sympathy with her sister-in-law's foolish sentimentalities, which she considered wholly out of place in the everyday life at the farm.

Not that Dot ever dreamed of confiding in her. She sheltered herself invariably behind a reserve so delicate as to be almost imperceptible to the elder woman's blunter susceptibilities. But she could not always hide the fineness of her inner feelings, and there were times when the two clashed in consequence. The occasions were rare, but Adela had come to know by experience that when they occurred, opposition on her part was of no avail. Dot was bound to have her way when her soul was stirred to battle for it, as on the day when she had refused to let Robin, the dog, be chained up when not on duty with the sheep. Adela had objected to his presence in the house, and Dot had firmly insisted upon it on the score that Robin had always been an inmate as the companion and protector of her lonely hours.

Adela had disputed the point with some energy, but she had been vanquished, and now, when Dot asserted herself, she seldom met with opposition from her sister-in-law. It was practically impossible that they should ever be fond of one another. They had nothing in common. Yet it was very seldom that Jack saw any signs of strain between them. They dwelt together without antagonism and without intimacy.

Nevertheless, Dot's announcement of her desire to go out into the world and hew a way for herself came as no surprise to him. He knew that she was restless and far from happy, knew that his marriage had unsettled her, albeit in a fashion he had not fathomed till their talk together. His young sister was very dear to him. She had been thrown upon his care years before when the death of their parents had left her dependent upon him. It had always been his wish to have her with him. His love for her was of a deep, almost maternal nature, and he hated the thought of parting with her. He had hoped that the companionship of Adela would have been a joy to her, and he was intensely disappointed that it had proved otherwise. His anxiety for her welfare had always been uppermost with him, and it hurt him somewhat when Adela laughed at his hopes and fears regarding the girl. It was the only point upon which his wife and he lacked sympathy.

Page 6

Entering by way of the kitchen premises on that evening of his talk with Dot, he was surprised to find Adela fulfilling what had come to be regarded as Dot's duties. He looked around him questioningly as she emerged from the larder carrying a dish in one hand and a jug of milk in the other.

"Where's the little 'un?" he said.

It was his recognized pet name for Dot, but for some reason Adela had never approved of it. She frowned now at its utterance.

"Do you mean Dot? Oh, mooning about somewhere, I suppose. And leaving other people to do the work."

Jack promptly relieved her of her burden and set himself to help her with her task.

Adela was not ill-tempered as a rule. She smiled at him. "Good man, Jack! No one can say you're an idler, anyway. I've got rather a nice supper for you. I shouldn't wonder if Fletcher Hill turns up to share it. I hear he is on circuit at Trelevan."

"I heard it, too," said Jack. "He's practically sure to come."

"He's very persistent," said Adela. "Do you think he will ever win out?"

Jack nodded slowly. "I've never known him fail yet in anything he set his mind to—at least, only once. And that was a fluke."

"What sort of a fluke?" questioned Adela, who was frankly curious.

"When Buckskin Bill slipped through his fingers." Jack spoke thoughtfully. "That's the only time I ever knew him fail, and I'm not sure that it wasn't intentional then."

"Intentional!" Adela opened her eyes.

Jack smiled a little. "I don't say it was so. I only say it was possible. But never mind that! It's an old story, and the man got away, anyhow—disappeared, dropped out. Possibly he's dead. I hope he is. He did mischief enough in a short time."

"He set the whole district humming, didn't he?" said Adela. "They say all the women fell in love with him at sight. I wish I'd seen him."

Jack broke into a laugh. "You'd certainly have fallen a victim!"

She tossed her head. "I'm sure I shouldn't. I prefer respectable men. Shall we lay an extra plate in case Mr. Hill turns up?"

"No," said Jack. "Let him come unexpectedly!"

She gave him a shrewd look. "You think Dot will like that best?"

He nodded again. "Be careful! She's coming. Here's Robin!"

Robin came in, wagging his tail and smiling, and behind him came Dot. She moved slowly, as if dispirited. Jack's quick eyes instantly detected the fact that she had been shedding tears.

"You're too late, little 'un," he said, with kindly cheeriness. "The work is all done."

She looked from him to Adela. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I'm afraid I forgot about supper."

"Oh, you're in love!" joked Adela. "You'll forget to come in at all one of these days."

The girl gave her a swift look, but said nothing, passing through with a weary step on her way to her own room.

Page 7

Robin followed her closely, as one in her confidence; and Jack laid a quiet hand on his wife's arm.

"Don't laugh at her!" he said.

She stared at him. "Good gracious, Jack! What's the matter? I didn't mean anything."

"I know you didn't. But this thing is serious. If Fletcher Hill comes to-night, I believe she'll have him—that is, if she's let alone. But she won't if you twit her with it. It's touch and go."

Jack spoke with great earnestness. It was evident that the matter was one upon which he felt very strongly, and Adela shrugged a tolerant shoulder and yielded to his persuasion.

"I'll be as solemn as a judge," she promised. "The affair certainly has hung fire considerably. It would be a good thing to get it settled. But Fletcher Hill! Well, he wouldn't be my choice!"

"He's a fine man," asserted Jack.

"Oh, I've no doubt. But he's an animal with a nasty bite, or I am much mistaken. However, let Dot marry him by all means if she feels that way! It's certainly high time she married somebody."

She turned aside to put the teapot on the hob, humming inconsequently, and the subject dropped.

Jack went to his room to wash, and in a few minutes more they gathered round the supper-table with careless talk of the doings of the day.

It had always been Dot's favourite time, the supper-hour. In the old days before Jack's marriage she had looked forward to it throughout the day. The companionship of this beloved brother of hers had been the chief joy of her life.

But things were different now. It was her part to serve the meal, to clear the table, and to wash the dishes Jack and Adela were complete without her. Though they always welcomed her when the work was done, she knew that her society was wholly unessential, and she often prolonged her labours in the scullery that she might not intrude too soon upon them. She was no longer necessary to anyone—except to Robin the faithful, who followed her as her shadow. She had become Number Three, and she was lonely—she was lonely!

CHAPTER III

FLETCHER HILL

There came a sound of hoofs thudding over the pastures. Robin lifted his eyebrows and cocked his ears with a growl.

Dot barely glanced up from the saucepan she was cleaning; her lips tightened a little, that was all.

The hoofs drew rapidly nearer, dropping from a canter to a quick trot that ended in a clattering walk on the stones of the yard. Through the open window Dot heard the heavy thud of a man's feet as he jumped to the ground.

Then came Jack's voice upraised in greeting. "Hallo, Fletcher! Come in, man! Come in! Delighted to see you."

The voice that spoke in answer was short and clipped. Somehow it had an official sound. "Hallo, Jack! Good evening, Mrs. Burton! What! Alone?"

Page 8

Jack laughed. "Dot's in the kitchen. Hi! little 'un! Bring some drinks!"

Robin was on his feet, uttering low, jerky barks. Dot put aside her saucepan and began to wash her hands. She did not hasten to obey Jack's call, but when she turned to collect glasses on a tray she was trembling and her breath came quickly, as if from violent exercise.

Nevertheless she did not hesitate, but went straight through to the little parlour, carrying her tray with the jingling glasses upon it.

Fletcher Hill was facing her as she entered, a tall man, tough and muscular, with black hair that was tinged with grey, and a long stubborn jaw that gave him an indomitable look. His lips were thin and very firm, with a sardonic twist that imparted a faintly supercilious expression. His eyes were dark, deep-set, and shrewd. He was a magistrate of some repute in the district, a position which he had attained by sheer unswerving hard work in the police force, in which for years he had been known as "Bloodhound Hill." A man of rigid ideas and stern justice, he had forced his way to the front, respected by all, but genuinely liked by only a very few.

Jack Burton had regarded him as a friend for years, but even Jack could not claim a very close intimacy with him. He merely understood the man's silences better than most. His words were very rarely of a confidential order.

He was emphatically not a man to attract any girl very readily, and Dot's attitude towards him had always been of a strictly impersonal nature. In fact, Jack himself did not know whether she really liked him or not. Yet had he set his heart upon seeing her safely married to him. There was no other man of his acquaintance to whom he would willingly have entrusted her. For Dot was very precious in his eyes. But to his mind Fletcher Hill was worthy of her, and he believed that she would be as safe in his care as in his own.

That Fletcher Hill had long cherished the silent ambition of winning her was a fact well known to him. Only once had they ever spoken on the subject, and then the words had been few and briefly uttered. But to Jack, who had taken the initiative in the matter, they had been more than sufficient to testify to the man's earnestness of purpose. From that day he had been heart and soul on Fletcher's side.

He wished he could have given him a hint that evening as he looked up to see the girl standing in the doorway; for Dot was so cold, so aloof in her welcome. He did not see what Hill saw at the first glance—that she was quivering from head to foot with nervous agitation.

She set down her tray and gave her hand to the visitor. "Doesn't Rupert want a drink?" she said.

Rupert was his horse, and his most dearly prized possession. Hill's rare smile showed for a moment at the question.

"Let him cool down a bit first," he said. "I am afraid I've ridden him rather hard."

Page 9

She gave him a fleeting glance. "You have come from Trelevan?"

"Yes. I got there this afternoon. We left Wallacetown early this morning."

"Rode all the way?" questioned Jack.

"Yes, every inch. I wanted to see the Fortescue Gold Mine."

"Ah! There's a rough crowd there," said Jack. "They say all the uncaught criminals find their way to the Fortescue Gold Mine."

"Yes," said Hill.

"Is it true?" asked Adela, curiously.

"I am not in a position to say, madam." Hill's voice sounded sardonic.

"That means he doesn't know," explained Jack. "Look here, man! If you've ridden all the way from Wallacetown to-day you can't go back to Trelevan to-night. Your animal must be absolutely used up—if you are not."

"Oh, I think not. We are both tougher than that." Hill turned towards him. "Don't mix it too strong, Jack! I hardly ever touch it except under your roof."

"I am indeed honoured," laughed Jack. "But if you're going to spend the night you'll be able to sleep it off before you face your orderly in the morning."

"Do stay!" said Adela, hastening to follow up her husband's suggestion. "We should all like it. I hope you will."

Hill bowed towards her with stiff ceremony. "You are very kind, madam. But I don't like to give trouble, and I am expected back."

"By whom?" questioned Jack. "No one that counts, I'll swear. Your orderly won't break his heart if you take a night out. He'll probably do the same himself. And no one else will know. We'll let you leave as early as you like in the morning, but not before. Come, that's settled, isn't it? Go and get Rupert a shake-down, little 'un, and give him a decent feed with plenty of corn in it! No, let her, man; let her! She likes doing it, eh, Dot girl?"

"Yes, I like it," Dot said, and hurriedly disappeared before Hill could intervene.

Jack turned to his wife. "Now, missis! Go and make ready upstairs! It's only a little room, Fletcher, but it's snug. That's the way," as his wife followed Dot's example. "Now—quick, man! I want a word with you."

“Obviously,” said the magistrate, dryly. “You needn’t say it, thanks all the same. I’ll leave that drink till—afterwards.”

He straightened his tall figure with an instinctive bracing of the shoulders, and turned to the door.

Jack watched him go with a smile that was not untinged with anxiety, and lifted his glass as the door closed.

“You’ve got the cards, old feller,” he said. “May you play ’em well!”

Fletcher Hill stepped forth into the moonlit night and stood still. It had been a swift manoeuvre on Jack’s part, and it might have disconcerted a younger man and driven him into ill-considered action. But it was not this man’s nature to act upon impulse. His caution was well known. It had been his safeguard in many a difficulty. It stood him in good stead now.

Page 10

So for a space he remained, looking out over the widespread grasslands, his grim face oddly softened and made human. He was no longer an official, but a man, with feelings rendered all the keener for the habitual restraint with which he masked them.

He moved forward at length through the magic moonlight, guided by the sound of trampling hoofs in the building where Jack's horse was stabled. He reached the doorway, treading softly, and looked in.

Dot was in a stall with his mount Rupert—a powerful grey, beside which she looked even lighter and daintier than usual. The animal was nibbling carelessly at her arm while she filled the manger with hay. She was talking to him softly, and did not perceive Hill's presence. Robin, who sat waiting near the entrance, merely pricked his ears at his approach.

Some minutes passed. Fletcher stood like a sentinel against the doorpost. He might have been part of it for his immobility. The girl within continued to talk to the horse while she provided for his comfort, low words unintelligible to the silent watcher, till, as she finished her task, she suddenly threw her arms about the animal's neck and leaned her head against it.

"Oh, Rupert," she said, and there was a throb of passion in her words, "I wish—I wish you and I could go right away into the wilderness together and never—never come back!"

Rupert turned his head and actually licked her hair. He was a horse of understanding.

She uttered a little sobbing laugh and tenderly kissed his nose. "You're a dear, sympathetic boy! Who taught you to be, I wonder? Not your master, I'm sure! He's nothing but a steel machine all through!"

And then she turned to leave the stable and came upon Fletcher Hill, mutely awaiting her.

CHAPTER IV

THE COAT OF MAIL

She gave a great start at sight of him, then quickly drew herself together.

"You have come to see if Rupert is all right for the night?" she said. "Go in and have a look at him."

But Fletcher made no movement to enter. He faced her with a certain rigidity. "No. I came to see you—alone."

She made a sharp movement that was almost a gesture of protest. Then she turned and drew the door softly shut behind her. Robin came and pressed close to her, as if he divined that she stood in need of some support. With her back to the closed door and the moonlight in her eyes, she stood before Fletcher Hill.

“What do you want to say to me?” she said.

He bent slightly towards her. “It is not a specially easy thing, Miss Burton,” he said, “when I am more than half convinced that it is something you would rather not hear.”

She met his look with unflinching steadiness. “I think life is made up of that sort of thing,” she said. “It’s like a great puzzle that never fits. I’ve been saying—unwelcome things—to-day, too.”

Page 11

She smiled, but her lips were quivering. The man's hands slowly clenched.

"That means you're unhappy," he said.

She nodded. "I've been telling Jack that I must get away—go and earn my own living somewhere. He won't hear of it."

"I can understand that," said Fletcher Hill. "I wouldn't—in his place."

She kept her eyes steadfastly raised to his. "Do you know what Jack wants me to do?" she said.

"Yes." Hill spoke briefly, almost sternly. "He wants you to marry me."

She nodded again. "Yes."

He held out his hand to her abruptly. "I want it, too," he said.

She made no movement towards him. "That is what you came to say?" she asked.

"Yes," said Hill.

He waited a moment; then, as she did not take his hand, bent with a certain mastery and took one of hers.

"I've wanted it for years," he said.

"Ah!" A little sound like a sob came with the words. She made as if she would withdraw her hand, but in the end—because he held it closely—she suffered him to keep it. She spoke with an effort. "I—think you ought to understand that—that—it is not my wish to marry at all. If—if Jack had stayed single, I—should have been content to live on here for always."

"Yes, I know," said Hill. "I saw that."

She went on tremulously. "I've always felt—that a woman ought to be able to manage alone. It's very kind of you to want to marry me. But—but I—I think I'm getting too old."

"Is that the only obstacle?" asked Hill.

She tried to laugh, but it ended in a sound of tears. She turned her face quickly aside. "I can't tell you—of any other," she said, with difficulty, "except—except—"

"Except that you don't like me much?" he suggested dryly. "Well, that doesn't surprise me."



"Oh, I didn't say that!" She choked back her tears and turned back to him. "Let's walk a little way together, shall we? I—I'll try and explain—just how I feel about things."

He moved at once to comply. They walked side by side over the close-cropped grass. Dot would have slipped her hand free, but still he kept it.

They had traversed some yards before she spoke again, and then her voice was low and studiously even.

"I can't pretend to you that there has never been anyone else. It wouldn't be right. You probably wouldn't believe me if I did."

"Oh, I gathered that a long time ago," Hill said.

"Yes, of course you did. You always see everything, don't you? It's your specialty."

"I don't go about with my eyes shut, certainly," said Hill.

"I'm glad of that," Dot said. "I would rather you knew about it. Only"—her voice quivered again—"I don't know how to tell you."

"You are sure you would rather I knew?" he said.

"Yes." She spoke with decision. "You've got to know if—if—" She broke off.

Page 12

"If we are going to be married?" he suggested.

"Yes," whispered Dot.

Hill walked a few paces in silence. Then, unexpectedly, he drew the nervous little hand he held through his arm. "Well, you needn't tell me any more," he said. "I know the rest."

She started and stood still. There was quick fear in the look she threw him. "You mean Jack told you—"

"No, I don't," said Hill. "Jack has never yet told me anything I couldn't have told him ages before. I knew from the beginning. It was the fellow they called Buckskin Bill, wasn't it?"

She quivered from head to foot and was silent.

Hill went on ruthlessly. "First, by a stroke of luck, he saved you from death by snake-bite. He always had the luck on his side, that chap. I should have caught him but for that. I'd got him—I'd got him in the hollow of my hand. But you"—for the first time there was a streak of tenderness in his speech—"you were a new chum then—you held me up. Remember how you covered his retreat when we came up? Did you really think I didn't know?"

She uttered a sobbing laugh. "I was very frightened, too. I always was scared at the law."

Hill nodded. He also was grimly smiling.

"But you dared it. You'd have dared anything for him that day. He always got the women on his side."

She winced a little.

"It's true," he asserted. "I know what happened—as well as if I'd seen it. He made love to you in a very gallant, courteous fashion. I never saw Buckskin Bill, but I believe he was always courteous when he had time. And he promised to come back, didn't he—when he'd given up being a thief and a swindler and had turned his hand to an honest trade? All that—for your sake!... Yes, I thought so. But, my dear child, do you really imagine he meant it—after all these years?"

She looked at him with a piteous little smile. "He—he'd be worth having—if he did, wouldn't he?" she said.

"I wonder," said Hill.

He waited for a few moments, then laid his hand upon her shoulder with a touch that seemed to her as heavy as the hand of the law.

"I can't help thinking," he said, "that you'd find a plain man like myself more satisfactory to live with. It's for you to decide. Only—it seems a pity to waste your life waiting for someone who will never come."

She could not contradict him. The argument was too obvious. She longed to put that steady hand away from her, but she felt physically incapable of doing so. An odd powerlessness possessed her. She was as one caught in a trap.

Yet after a second or two she mustered strength to ask a question to which she had long desired an answer. "Did you ever hear any more of him?"

"Not for certain. I believe he left the country, but I don't know. Anyway, he found this district too hot to hold him, for he never broke cover in this direction again. I should have had him if he had."

Page 13

Fletcher Hill spoke with a grim assurance. He was holding her before him, one hand on her shoulder, the other grasping hers. Abruptly he bent towards her.

"Come!" he said. "It's going to be 'Yes,' isn't it?"

She looked up at him with troubled eyes. Suddenly she shivered as if an icy blast had caught her. "Oh, I'm frightened!" she said. "I'm frightened!"

"Nonsense!" said Hill.

He drew her gently to him and held her. She was shaking from head to foot. She began to sob, hopelessly, like a lost child.

"Don't!" he said. "Don't! It's all right. I'll take care of you. I'll make you happy. I swear to God I'll make you happy!"

It was forcibly spoken, and it showed her more of the man's inner nature than she had ever seen before. Almost in spite of herself she was touched. She leaned against him, fighting her weakness.

"It isn't—fair to you," she murmured at last.

"That's my affair," said Hill.

She kept her face hidden from him, and he did not seek to raise it; but there was undoubted possession in the holding of his arms.

After a moment or two she spoke again. "What will you do if—if you find you're not—happy with me?"

"I'll take my chance of that," said Fletcher Hill. He added, under his breath, "I'll be good to you—in any case."

That moved her. She lifted her face impulsively. "You—you are much nicer than I thought you were," she said.

He bent to her. "It isn't very difficult to be that," he said, with a somewhat sardonic touch of humour. "I haven't a very high standard to beat, have I?"

It was not very lover-like. Perhaps, he feared to show her too much of his soul just then, lest he seem to be claiming more than she was prepared to offer. Perhaps that reserve of his which clothed him like a coat of mail was more than even he could break through. But so it was that then—just then, when the desire of his heart was actually within his grasp, he contented himself with taking a very little. He kissed her, indeed,

though it was but a brief caress—over before her quivering lips could make return; nor did he seek to deter her as she withdrew herself from his arms.

She stood a moment, looking small and very forlorn. Then she turned to retrace her steps.

“Shall we go back?” she said.

He went back with her in silence till they reached the gate that led into the yard. Then for a second he grasped her arm, detaining her.

“It is—’Yes?’” he questioned.

She bent her head in acquiescence, not looking at him. “Yes,” she said, in a whisper.

And Fletcher let her go.

CHAPTER V

THE LOST ROMANCE

Jack looked in vain for any sign of elation on his friend’s face when he entered. He read nothing but grim determination. Dot’s demeanour also was scarcely reassuring. She seemed afraid to lift her eyes.

Page 14

"Isn't it nearly bed-time?" she murmured to Adela as she passed.

Adela looked at her with frank curiosity. There were no fine shades of feeling about Adela. She always went straight to the point—unless restrained by Jack.

"Oh, it's quite early yet," she said, wholly missing the appeal in the girl's low-spoken words. "What have you two been doing? Moonshining?"

Fletcher looked as contemptuous as his immobile countenance would allow, and sat down by his untouched drink without a word.

But it took more than a look to repress Adela. She laughed aloud. "Does that mean I am to draw my own conclusions, Mr. Hill? Would you like me to tell you what they are?"

"Not for my amusement," said Hill, dryly. "Where did you get this whisky from, Jack? I hope it's a legal brand."

"I hope it is," agreed Jack. "I don't know its origin. I got it through Harley. You know him? The manager of the Fortescue Gold Mine."

"Yes, I know him," said Hill. "He is retiring, and another fellow is taking his place."

"Retiring, is he? I thought he was the only person who could manage that crowd." Jack spoke with surprise.

Hill took out his pipe and began to fill it. "He's got beyond it. Too much running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. They need a younger man with more decision and resource—someone who can handle them without being afraid."

"Have they got such a man?" questioned Jack.

"They believe they have." Hill spoke thoughtfully. "He's a man from the West, who has done some tough work in the desert, but brought back more in the way of experience than gold. He's been working in the Fortescue Mine now for six months, a foreman for the past three. Harley tells me the men will follow him like sheep. But for myself, I'm not so sure of him."

"Not sure of him? What are you afraid of? Whisky-running?" asked Jack, with a twinkle.

There was no answering gleam of humour on Hill's face. "I never trust any man until I know him," he said. "He may be sound, or he may be a scoundrel. He's got to prove himself."

"You take a fatherly interest in that mine," observed Jack.

"I have a reason," said Fletcher Hill, briefly.

"Ah! Ever met Fortescue himself?"

"Once or twice," said Hill.

"Pretty badly hated, isn't he?" said Jack.

"By the blackguards, yes." Hill spoke with characteristic grimness. "He's none the worse for that."

"All the better, I should say," remarked Adela. "But what is he like? Is he an old man?"

"About my age," said Hill.

"I wish you'd give us an introduction to him," she said, with animation. "I've always wanted to see that mine. You'd like to, too, wouldn't you, Dot?"

Dot started a little. She had been sitting quite silent in the background.

"I expect it would be quite interesting," she said, as Hill looked towards her. "But perhaps it wouldn't be very easy to manage it."

Page 15

"I could arrange it if you cared to go," said Hill.

"Could you? How kind of you! But it would mean spending the night at Trelevan, wouldn't it? I—I think we are too busy for that." Dot glanced at her brother in some uncertainty.

"Oh, it could be managed," said Jack, kindly. "Why not? You don't get much fun in life. If you want to see the mine, and Hill can arrange it, it shall be done."

"Thank you," said Dot.

Adela turned towards her. "My dear, do work up a little enthusiasm! You've sat like a mute ever since you came in. What's the matter?"

Dot was on her feet in a moment. This sort of baiting, good-natured though it was, was more than she could bear. "I've one or two jobs left in the kitchen," she said. "I'll go and attend to them—if no one minds."

She was gone with the words, Adela's ringing laugh pursuing her as she closed the door. She barely paused in the kitchen, but fled to her own room. She could not—no, she could not—face the laughter and congratulations that night.

She flung herself down upon her bed and lay there trembling like a terrified creature caught in a trap. Her brain was a whirl of bewildering emotions. She knew not which way to turn to escape the turmoil, or even if she were glad or sorry for the step she had taken. She wondered if Hill would tell Jack and Adela the moment her back was turned, and dreaded to hear the sound of her sister-in-law's footsteps outside her door.

But no one came, and after a time she grew calmer. After all, though in the end she had made her decision somewhat suddenly, it had not been an unconsidered one. Though she could not pretend to love Fletcher Hill, she had a sincere respect for him. He was solid, and she knew that her future would be safe in his hands. The past was past, and every day took her farther from it. Yet very deep down in her soul there still lurked the memory of that past. In the daytime she could put it from her, stifle it, crowd it out with a multitude of tasks; but at night in her dreams that memory would not always be denied. In her dreams the old vision returned—tender, mocking, elusive—a sunburnt face with eyes of vivid blue that looked into hers, smiling and confident with that confidence that is only possible between spirits that are akin. She would feel again the pressure of a man's lips on the hollow of her arm—that spot which still bore the tiny mark which once had been a snake-bite. He had come to her in her hour of need, and though he was a fugitive from justice, she would never forget his goodness, his readiness to serve her, his chivalry. And while in her waking hours she chid herself for her sentimentality, yet even so, she had not been able to force herself to cast her brief romance away.

Page 16

Ah, well, she had done it now. The way was closed behind her. There could be no return. It was all so long ago. She had been little more than a child then, and now she was growing old. The time had come to face the realities of life, to put away the dreams. She believed that Fletcher Hill was a good man, and he had been very patient. She quivered a little at the thought of that patience of his. There was a cast-iron quality about it, a forcefulness, that made her wonder. Had she ever really met the man who dwelt within that coat of mail? Could there be some terrible revelation in store for her? Would she some day find that she had given herself to a being utterly alien to her in thought and impulse? He had shown her so little—so very little—of his soul.

Did he really love her, she wondered? Or had he merely determined to win her because it had been so hard a task? He was a man who revelled in overcoming difficulties, in asserting his grim mastery in the face of heavy odds. He was never deterred by circumstances, never turned back from any purpose upon the accomplishment of which he had set his mind. His subordinates were afraid to tell him of failure. She had heard it said that Bloodhound Hill could be a savage animal when roused.

There came a low sound at her door, the soft turning of the handle, Jack's voice whispered through the gloom.

"Are you asleep, little 'un?"

She started up on the bed. "Oh, Jack, come in, dear! Come in!"

He came to her, put his arms about her, and held her close. "Fletcher's been telling me," he whispered into her ear. "Adela's gone to bed. It's quite all right, little 'un, is it? You're not—sorry?"

She caught the anxiety in the words as she clung to him. "I—don't think so," she whispered back. "Only I—I'm rather frightened, Jack."

"There's no need, darling," said Jack, and kissed her very tenderly. "He's a good fellow—the best of fellows. He's sworn to me to make you happy."

She was trembling a little in his hold. "He—doesn't want to marry me yet, does he?" she asked, nervously.

He put a very gentle hand upon her head. "Don't funk the last fence, old girl!" he said, softly. "You'll like being married."

"Ah!" She was breathing quickly. "I am not so sure. And there's no getting back, is there, Jack? Oh, please, do ask him to wait a little while! I'm sure he will. He is very kind."

“He has waited five years already,” Jack pointed out. “Don’t you think that’s almost long enough, dear?”

She put a hand to her throat, feeling as if there were some constriction there. “He has been speaking to you about it! He wants you to—to persuade me—to—to make me—”

“No, dear, no!” Jack spoke very gravely. “He wants you to please yourself. It is I who think that a long delay would be a mistake. Can’t you be brave, Dot? Take what the gods send—and be thankful?”

Page 17

She tried to laugh. "I'm an awful idiot, Jack. Yes, I will—I will be brave. After all, it isn't as if—as if I were really sacrificing anything, is it? And you're sure he's a good man, aren't you? You are sure he will never let me down?"

"I am quite sure," Jack said, firmly. "He is a fine man, Dot, and he will always set your happiness before his own."

She breathed a short sigh. "Thank you, Jack, I feel better. You're wonderfully good to me, dear old boy. Tell him—tell him I'll marry him as soon as ever I can get ready! I must get a few things together first, mustn't I?"

Jack laughed a little. "You look very nice in what you've got."

"Oh, don't be silly!" she said. "If I'm going to live at Wallacetown—Wallacetown, mind you, the smartest place this side of Sydney—I must be respectably clothed. I shall have to go to Trelevan, and see what I can find."

"You and Adela had better have a week off," said Jack, "and go while Fletcher is busy there. You'll see something of him in the evenings then."

"What about you?" she said, squeezing his arm.

"Oh, I shall be all right. I'm expecting Lawley in from the ranges. He'll help me. I've got to learn to do without you, eh, little 'un?" He held her to him again.

She clasped his neck. "It's your own doing, Jack; but I know it's for my good. You must let me come and help you sometimes—just for a holiday." Her voice trembled.

He kissed her again with great tenderness. "You'll come just whenever you feel like it, my dear," he said. "And God bless you!"

CHAPTER VI

THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

On account of its comparative proximity to the gold mine, Trelevan, though of no great size, was a busy place. Dot had stayed at the hotel there with her brother on one or two occasions, but it was usually noisy and crowded, and, unlike Adela, she found little to amuse her in the type of men who thronged it. Fletcher Hill always stayed there when he came to Trelevan. The police court was close by, and it suited his purpose; but he mixed very little with his fellow-guests and was generally regarded as unapproachable—a mere judicial machine with whom very few troubled to make acquaintance.

Fletcher Hill in the role of a squire of dames was a situation that vastly tickled Adela's sense of humour. As she told Jack, it was going to be the funniest joke of her life.

Neither Hill nor his grave young fiancée seemed aware of any cause for mirth, but with Adela that was neither here nor there. She and Dot never had anything in common, and as for Fletcher Hill, he was the driest stick of a man she had ever met. But she was not going to be bored on that account. To give Adela her due, boredom was a malady from which she very rarely suffered.

She was in the best of spirits on the evening of their arrival at Trelevan. The rooms that Fletcher Hill had managed to secure for them led out of each other, and the smaller of them, Dot's looked out over the busiest part of the town. As Adela pointed out, this was an advantage of little value at night, and it could be shared in the daytime.

Page 18

Dot said nothing. She was used to her sister-in-law's cheerful egotism, and Adela had never hesitated to invade her privacy if she felt so inclined. Her chief consolation was that Adela was a very sound sleeper, so that there was small chance of having her solitude disturbed at night.

She herself was not sleeping so well as usual just then. A great restlessness was upon her, and often she would pace to and fro like a caged thing for half the night. She was not actively unhappy, but a great weight seemed to oppress her—a sense of foreboding that was sometimes more than she could bear.

Fletcher Hill's calm countenance as he welcomed them upon their arrival reassured her somewhat. He was so perfectly self-controlled and steady in his demeanour. The very grasp of his hand conveyed confidence. She felt as if he did her good.

They dined together in the common dining-room, but at a separate table in a corner. There were many coming and going, and Adela was frankly interested in them all. As she said, it was so seldom that she had the chance of studying the human species in such variety. When the meal was over she good-naturedly settled herself in a secluded corner and commanded them to leave her.

"There's something in the shape of a glass-house at the back," she said. "I don't know if it can be called a conservatory. But anyhow I should think you might find a seat and solitude there, and that, I conclude, is what you most want. Anyhow, don't bother about me! I can amuse myself here for any length of time."

They took her at her word, though neither of them seemed in any hurry to depart. Dot lingered because the prospect of a *tete-a-tete* in a strange place, where she could not easily make her escape if she desired to do so, embarrassed her. And Hill waited, as his custom was, with a grim patience that somehow only served to increase her reluctance to be alone with him.

"Run along! It's getting late," Adela said at last. "Carry her off, Mr. Hill! You'll never get her to make the first move."

There was some significance in words and smile. Dot stiffened and turned sharply away.

Hill followed her, and outside the room she waited for him.

"Do you know the way?" she asked, without looking at him.

He took her by the arm, and again she had a wayward thought of the hand of the law. She knew now what it felt like to be marshalled by a policeman. She almost uttered a remark to that effect, but, glancing up at him, decided that it would be out of place. For

the man's harsh features were so sternly set that she wondered if Adela's careless talk had aroused his anger.

She said nothing, therefore, and he led her to the retreat her sister-in-law had mentioned in unbroken silence. It was certainly not a very artistic corner. A few straggling plants in pots decorated it, but they looked neglected and shabby. Yet the thought went through her, it might have been a bower of delight had they been in the closer accord of lovers who desire naught but each other.

Page 19

The place was deserted, lighted only by a high window that looked into a billiard-room. The window was closed, but the rattle of the balls and careless voices of the players came through the silence. A dusty bench was let into the wall below it.

"Do you like this place?" asked Fletcher Hill.

She glanced around her with a little nervous laugh. "It's as good as any other, isn't it?"

His hand still held her arm. He bent slightly, looking into her face. "I've been wanting to talk to you," he said.

"Have you?" She tried to meet his look, but failed. "What about?" she said, almost in a whisper.

He bent lower. "Dot, are you afraid of me?" he said.

That brought her eyes to his face with a jerk. "I—I—no—of course not!" she stammered, in confusion.

"Quite sure?" he said.

She collected herself with an effort. "Quite," she told him with decision, and met his gaze with something of a challenge in her own.

But he disconcerted her the next moment. She felt again the man's grim mastery behind the iron of his patience. "I want to talk to you," he said, "about our marriage."

"Ah!" It was scarcely more than a sharp intake of the breath, and as it escaped again Dot turned white to the lips. His close scrutiny became suddenly more than she could bear, and she turned sharply from him.

He kept his hand upon her arm, but he made no further effort to restrain her, merely waiting mutely for her to speak.

In the room behind them there came the smart knocking of the balls, and a voice cried, "By Jove, he's fluked again! It's the devil's own luck!"

Dot flinched a little. The careless voice jarred upon her. Her nerves were all on edge. Fletcher Hill's hand was like a steel trap, cold and firm and merciless. She longed to wrench herself free from it, yet felt too paralysed to move.

And still he waited, not urging her, yet by his very silence making her aware of a compulsion she could not hope to resist for long.

She turned to him at last in desperation. "What—have you to suggest?" she asked.

"I?" he said. "I shall be ready at the end of the week—if that will suit you."

She gazed at him blankly. "The end of the week! But of course not—of course not! You are joking!"

"No, I am serious," Fletcher said. "Sit down a minute and let me explain!"

Then, as she hesitated, he very gently put her down upon the seat under the closed window, and stood before her, blocking her in.

"I have been wanting this opportunity of talking to you," he said, "without Jack chipping in. He's a good fellow, and I know he is on my side. But I have a fancy for scoring off my own bat. Listen, Dot! I am not suggesting anything very preposterous. You have promised to marry me. Haven't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, breathlessly. "Yes."

Page 20

"Yes," he repeated. "And the longer you have to think about it, the more scared you will get. My dear child, what is the point of spinning it out in this fashion? You are going through agonies of mind—for nothing. If I gave you back your freedom, you wouldn't be any happier, would you?"

She was silent.

"Would you?" he said again, and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"I—don't think so," she said, faintly.

He took up her words again with magisterial emphasis. "You don't think so. Well, there is every reason to suppose you wouldn't. You weren't happy before, were you?"

She gripped her courage with immense effort. "I haven't been happy—since," she said.

He accepted the statement without an instant's discomfiture. "I know you haven't. I realized that the moment I saw you. You have been suffering the tortures of the damned because you're in a positive hell of indecision. Oh, I know all about it." His hand moved a little upon her shoulder; it almost seemed to caress her. "I haven't studied human nature all these years for nothing. I know you're in a perfect fever of doubt, and it'll go on till you're married. What's the good of it? Why torture yourself like this when the way to happiness lies straight before you? Are you hoping against hope that something may yet turn up to prevent our marriage? Would you be happy if it did? Answer me!"

But she shrank from answering, sitting with her hands clasped tightly before her and her eyes downcast like a prisoner awaiting sentence. "I don't know—what I want," she told him, miserably. "I feel—as if—whatever I do—will be wrong."

"That's just it," said Fletcher Hill, as if that were the very admission he had been waiting for. And then he did what for him was a very curious thing. He went down upon one knee on the dusty floor, bringing his face on a level with hers, clasping her tense hands between his own. "You don't trust yourself, and you won't trust me," he said. "Isn't that it? Or something like it?"

The official air had dropped from him like a garment. She looked at him doubtfully, almost as if she suspected him of trying to trick her. Then, reassured by something in the harsh countenance which his voice and words utterly failed to express, she leaned impulsively forward with a swift movement of surrender and laid her head against his shoulder.

"I'll do—whatever you wish," she said, in muffled tones. "I will trust you! I do trust you!"



He put his arm around her, for she was trembling, and held her so for a space in silence.

The voice in the billiard-room took up the tale. "That fellow's luck is positively prodigious. He can't help scoring—whatever he does. He'd dig gold out of an ash heap."

Someone laughed, and there came again the clash of the billiard-balls, followed in a second by a shout of applause.

Page 21

The noise subsided, and Fletcher spoke. "My job here will be over in a week. Jack can manage to join us at the end of it. Your sister-in-law is already here. Why not finish up by getting married and returning to Wallacetown with me?"

"I should have to go back to the farm and get the rest of my things," said Dot.

"You could do that afterwards," he said, "when I am away on business. I shan't be able to take you with me everywhere. Some of the places I have to go to would be too rough for you. But I shall be at Wallacetown for some weeks after this job. You have never seen my house there. I took it over from the last Superintendent. I think you'll like it. I got it for that reason."

She started a little. "But you didn't know then—How long ago was it?"

"Three years," said Fletcher Hill. "I've been getting it ready for you ever since."

She looked up at him. "You—took a good deal for granted, didn't you?" she said.

Fletcher was smiling, dryly humorous. "I knew my own mind, anyway," he said.

"And you've never had—any doubts?" questioned Dot.

"Not one," said Fletcher Hill.

She laid her hand on his arm with a shy gesture. "I hope you won't be dreadfully disappointed in me," she said.

He bent towards her, and for a moment she felt as if his keen eyes pierced her. "I don't think that is very likely," he said, and kissed her with the words.

She did not shrink from his kiss, but she did not return it; nor did he linger as if expecting any return.

He was on his feet the next moment, and she wondered with a little sense of chill if he were really satisfied.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONQUEROR

They found Adela awaiting them in her corner, but chafing for a change.

"I want you to take us to the billiard-room," she said to Fletcher. "There's a great match on. I've heard a lot of men talking about it. And I adore watching billiards. I'm sure we shan't be in the way. I'll promise not to talk, and Dot is as quiet as a mouse."

Fletcher considered the point. "I believe it's a fairly respectable crowd," he said, looking at Dot. "But you're tired."

"Oh, no," she said at once. "I don't feel a bit sleepy. Let us go in by all means if you think no one will mind! I like watching billiards, too."

"It's a man called Warden," said Adela. "That's the new manager of the Fortescue Gold Mine, isn't it? They say he has the most marvelous luck. He is playing the old manager—Harley, and giving him fifty points. There's some pretty warm betting going on, I can tell you. Do let us go and have a look at them! They've got the girl from the bar to mark for them, so we shan't be the only women there."

She was evidently on fire for this new excitement, and Fletcher Hill, seeing that Dot meant what she said, led the way without further discussion. He paused outside the billiard-room door, which stood ajar; for a tense silence reigned. But it was broken in a moment by the sharp clash of the balls and a perfect howl of enthusiasm from the spectators.

Page 22

“Oh, it’s over!” exclaimed Adela. “What a pity! Never mind! Let’s go in! Perhaps they’ll play again.”

The barmaid came flying out to fetch drinks as they entered. The atmosphere of the room was thick with smoke. A babel of voices filled it. Men who had been sitting round the walls were grouped about the table. In the midst of them stood the victor in his shirt-sleeves, conspicuous in the crowd by reason of his great height—a splendid figure of manhood with a careless freedom of bearing that was in its way superb.

He was turned away from the door at their entrance, and Dot saw only a massive head of straw-coloured hair above a neck that was burnt brick-red. Then, laughing at some joke, he wheeled round again to the table; and she saw his face....

It was the face of a Viking, deeply sunburnt, vividly alive. A fair moustache covered his upper lip, and below it the teeth gleamed, white and regular like the teeth of an animal in the wilderness. He had that indescribable look of morning-time, of youth at its best, which only springs in the wild. His eyes were intensely blue. They gazed straight across at her with startling directness.

And suddenly Dot’s heart gave a great jerk, and stood still. It was not the first time that those eyes had looked into hers.

The moment passed. He bent himself over the table, poised for a stroke, which she saw him execute a second later with a delicacy that thrilled her strangely. Full well did she remember the deftness and the steadiness of those brown hands. Had they not held her up, sustained her, in the greatest crisis of her life?

Her heart throbbed on again with hard, uneven strokes. She was straining her ears for the sound of his voice—that voice that had once spoken to her quivering soul, pleading with her that she would at their next meeting treat him—without prejudice. The memory thrilled through her. This was the man for whose coming she had waited so long!

He had straightened himself again, and was coming round the table to follow up his stroke. Fletcher Hill spoke at her shoulder.

“Sit down!” he said. “There is room here.”

There was a small space on the corner of the raised settee that ran along the side of the room. Dot and Adela sat down together. Hill stood beside them, looking over the faces of the men present, with keen eyes that missed nothing.

Dot sat palpitating, her hands clasped before her, seeing only the great figure that leaned over the table for another stroke. Would he look at her again? Would he remember her? Would he speak?

Fascinated, she watched him. He executed his stroke, again with that steady confidence, that self-detachment, that seemed to set him apart from all other men. He was standing close to her now, and the nearness of his presence thrilled her. She tingled from head to foot, as if under the power of an electric battery.

Page 23

His late opponent stood facing her on the other side of the table, a grey-haired man with crafty eyes that seemed to look in all directions at the same time. She took an instinctive dislike to him. He wore a furtive air.

Warden stood up again, moving with that free swing of his as of one born to conquer. He turned deliberately and faced them.

"Good evening, Mr. Hill!" he said. "I'm standing drinks all round. I hope you will join us."

It was frankly spoken, and Hill's instant refusal sounded unnecessarily curt in Dot's ears.

"No, thanks. I am with ladies," he said. "I suppose the play is over?"

Warden glanced across the table. "Unless Harley wants his revenge," he said.

The grey-haired man uttered a laugh that was like the bark of a vicious dog. "I'll have that another day," he said. "It won't spoil by keeping. You are a player yourself, Mr. Hill. Why don't you take him on?"

"Oh, do!" burst forth Adela. "I should love to see a good game. You ask him to, Dot! He'll do it for you."

But Dot sat silent, her fingers straining against each other, her eyes fixed straight before her, seeing yet unseeing, as one beneath a spell.

There was a momentary pause. The room was full of the harsh babel of men's voices. The drinks were being distributed.

Suddenly a voice spoke out above the rest. "Here's to the new manager! Good luck to him! Bill Warden, here's to you! Success and plenty of it!"

Instantly the hubbub increased a hundredfold. Bill Warden swung round laughing to face the clamour, and the tension went out of Dot. She drooped forward with a weary gesture. As in a dream she heard the laughter and the shouting. It seemed to sweep around her in great billows of sound. But she was too tired to notice, too tired to care. He did not know her. She was sure of that now. He had forgotten. The memory that had affected her so poignantly had slipped like a dim cloud below his horizon. The glory had departed, and life was grey and cold.

"You are tired," said Fletcher's voice beside her. "Would you like to go?"

She looked up at him. His eyes were searching hers, and swiftly she realized that this discovery that she had made must be kept a secret. If Hill began to suspect, he would very quickly ferret out the truth, and the man would be ruined. She knew Hill's stern justice. He would act instantly and without mercy if he knew the truth.



She braced herself with a great effort to baffle him. "No, oh, no!" she said. "I am really not tired. Do play! I should love to see you play."

He looked sardonic. "Love to see me beaten!" he said.

She put out a quick hand. "Of course not! You will beat him easily. You are always on the top. Do try!"

He smiled a little, and turned from her. She saw him approach Warden and tap him on the shoulder.

Page 24

Warden wheeled sharply, so sharply that the drink he held splashed over the edge of the glass. The excitement in the room was dying down. She watched the two men with an odd breathlessness, and in a moment she realized that everyone else present was watching them also.

Then they both turned towards her, and through a great singing that suddenly arose in her ears she heard Adela whisper excitedly, "My dear, he is actually going to introduce that amazing person to us!"

She sat up with a stiff movement, feeling cold, inanimate, strangely impotent, and in a moment he was standing before her with Fletcher, and she heard the latter introduce her as his "affianced wife."

Mutely she gave him her hand. It was Adela who filled in the gap, eager for entertainment, and the next moment Warden had turned to her, and was talking in his careless, leisurely fashion. The ordeal was past, her pulses quieted down again. Yet she realized that he had not addressed a single word to her, and the conviction came upon her that not thus would he have treated one who was a total stranger to him.

Because of Fletcher, who remained beside her, she forced herself to join in the conversation, seconding Adela's urgent request that the two men would play.

Warden laughed and looked at Fletcher. "Do you care to take me on, sir?" he said.

From the other side of the table, Harley uttered his barking laugh. "Now is your chance, Mr. Hill! Down him once and for all, and give us the pleasure of seeing how it's done!"

There was venom in the words. They were a revelation to Dot, the almost silent looker-on. It was as if a flashlight had given her a sudden glimpse of this man's soul, showing her bitter enmity—a black and cruel hatred—an implacable yearning for revenge. She felt as if she had looked down into the seething heart of a volcano.

Then she heard Hill's voice. "I am quite willing to play," he said.

A buzz of interest went through the room. The prospective match plainly excited Warden's many admirers. They drew together, and she heard some low-voiced betting begin.

But this was instantly checked by Fletcher. "I'm not doing it for a gamble," he said, curtly. "Please keep your money in your pockets, or the match is off!"

They looked at him with lowering glances, but they submitted. It was evident to Dot that they all stood in considerable awe of him—all save Warden, who chalked Hill's cue with supreme self-assurance, and then lighted a cigarette without the smallest hint of embarrassment.

The match began, and though the gambling had been checked a breathless interest prevailed. Fletcher Hill's play was not well known at Trelevan, but at the very outset it was evident to the most casual observer that he was a skilled player. He spoke scarcely at all, and his face was masklike in its composure, but Dot, watching, knew with that intuition which of late had begun to grow upon her that he was grimly set upon obtaining the victory. The knowledge thrilled her with a strange excitement. She knew that he was in a fashion desirous of proving himself in her eyes, that he had entered into the contest solely for her.

Page 25

As for Warden, she believed he was playing entirely to please himself. He took an artistic interest in every stroke, but the ultimate issue of the game did not seem to enter into his calculation. He played like a sportsman, sometimes rashly, often brilliantly, but never selfishly. It was impossible to watch him with indifference. Even his failures were sensational. As Adela had said of him, he was amazing.

Hill's play was absolutely steady. It lacked the vitality of the younger man's, but it had about it a clockwork species of regularity that Dot found curiously pleasing to watch. She had not thought that her interest could be so deeply aroused; before the game was half through she was as deeply absorbed as anyone present.

It did not take her long to realize that public sympathy was entirely on Warden's side, and it was that fact more than any other that disposed her in Fletcher's favour. She saw that he had a hard fight before him, for Warden led almost from the beginning, though with all his brilliancy he never drew very far ahead. Fletcher kept a steady pace behind him, and she knew he would not be easily beaten.

Once he came and stood beside her after a very creditable break, and she slipped a shy hand into his for a few seconds. His fingers closed upon it in that slow, inevitable way of his, but he neither spoke nor looked at her, and she had a feeling that his attention never for an instant wandered from the job in hand. She admired him for his concentration, yet would she have been less than woman had she not felt slighted by it. He might have given her one look!

Adela was full of enthusiasm for his opponent, and that also caused her a vague sense of irritation. She was beginning to feel as if the evening would never come to an end.

The scoring was by no means slow, however, and the general interest increased almost to fever pitch as the finish came in sight. Hill's steady progress in the wake of his opponent seemed at length to disconcert the latter. He began to play wildly, to attempt impossible things. His supporters remonstrated without result. He seemed to have flung away his judgment.

Hill's score mounted till it reached and passed his. They were within twenty points of the end when Warden suddenly missed an easy stroke. A noisy groan broke from the onlookers, at which he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. But Hill turned upon him with a stern reproof.

"You're playing the fool, Warden," he said. "Pull up!"

He spoke with curt command, and the man he addressed looked at him for a second with raised brows, as if he would take offence. But in a moment he laughed again.

"You haven't beaten me yet, sir," he said.

“No,” said Hill. “And I don’t value—an easy victory.”

There followed a tense silence while he resumed his play. Steadily his score mounted, and it seemed to Dot that there was hostility in the very atmosphere. She wondered what would happen if he scored the hundred before his opponent had another chance. She hoped he would not do so, and yet she did not want to see him beaten.

Page 26

He did not, but he left off with only three points to make. Then Warden began to score. Stroke after stroke he executed with flawless accuracy and with scarcely a pause, moving to and fro about the table without lifting his eyes from the balls. His play was swift and unswerving, his score mounted rapidly.

Dot watched him spellbound, not breathing. Hill stood near her, also closely watching, with brows slightly drawn. Suddenly something impelled her to look beyond the man at the table, and in the shadow on the farther side of the room she again saw Harley's face, grey, withered-looking, with sunken eyes that glared forth wolfishly. He was glancing ceaselessly from Hill to Warden and from Warden to Hill, and the malice of his glance shocked her inexpressibly. She had never before seen murderous hate so stamped upon any countenance.

Instinctively she shrank from the sight, and in that moment Warden's eyes were lifted for a second from the table. Magnetically hers flashed to meet them. It was instantaneous, inevitable as the sudden flare of lightning across a dark sky.

He stooped again to play, but in that moment something had gone out of him. The stroke he attempted was an easy one; but he missed it hopelessly.

He straightened himself up with a sharp gesture and looked at Hill. "I am sorry," he said.

Hill said nothing whatever. Their scores were exactly even. With machine-like precision he took his turn, utterly ignoring the grumbling criticisms of his adversary's play that were being freely expressed around the room. With the utmost steadiness he made his stroke, scoring two points. Then there fell a tremendous silence. The choice of two strokes now lay before him. One was to pocket his adversary's ball; the other a long shot which required considerable skill. He chose the second without hesitation, hung a moment or two, made his stroke—and failed.

A howl of delight went up from the watchers, their hot partisanship of Warden amounting almost to open animosity against his opponent. In the midst of the noise Hill, perfectly calm, contemptuously indifferent, touched Warden again upon the shoulder, and spoke to him.

Warden said nothing in reply, but he went to his ball with a hint of savagery, bent, and almost without aiming sent it at terrific speed up the table. It struck first the red, then the white, pocketed the former, and whizzed therefrom into the opposite pocket.

A yell of delight went up. It was a brilliant stroke of which any player might have been proud. But Warden flung down his cue with a gesture of disgust.

"Damnation!" he said, and turned to put on his coat.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEETING

The two girls left the billiard-room, shepherded by Fletcher, almost before the tumult had subsided. It seemed to Dot that he was anxious about something and desirous to get them away. But Adela was full of excited comments and refused to be hurried, stopping outside to question Hill upon a dozen points regarding the game while he stood stiffly responding, waiting to say good-night.

Page 27

Dot leaned upon the stair-rail, waiting for her, and eventually Fletcher drew Adela's attention to the fact.

Adela laughed. "Oh, that's just her way, my dear Fletcher. Some women were born to wait. Dot does it better than anyone I know."

It was at that moment that Warden came quietly up the passage from the billiard-room, moving with the lightness of well-knit muscles, and checked himself at sight of Fletcher.

"I should like a word with you—when you have time," he said.

Adela swooped upon him with effusion. "Mr. Warden! Your play is simply astounding. Allow me to congratulate you!"

"Please don't!" said Warden. "I played atrociously."

She laughed at him archly. "That's just your modesty. You're plainly a champion. Now, when are you going to let Mr. Hill show us that wonderful mine? We are dying to see it, aren't we, Dot?"

"The mine!" Warden turned sharply to Hill. "You're not going to take anyone over that—surely! Not in person—anyhow! What, sir?" He looked hard at Hill, who said nothing. "Then you must be mad!"

"He isn't obliged to go in person," smiled Adela. "I am sure you are big enough to take care of us single-handed. Dot and I are not in the least nervous. Will you take us alone if we promise not to tease the animals?"

Warden's eyes flashed a sudden glance upwards to the girl who still stood silently leaning upon the rail. It was almost like an appeal.

As if involuntarily she spoke. "What is the danger?"

Hill turned to her. "There is no danger," he said, curtly. "If you wish to go, I will take you to-morrow."

Warden made a brief gesture as of one who submits to the inevitable, and turned away.

Fletcher held out his hand to Adela with finality. "Good-night," he said.

"Are you really going to take us to-morrow?" she said.

"Yes," said Fletcher.

She beamed upon him. "What time shall we be ready?"

He did not refer to Dot. "At five o'clock," he said. "I shall be busy at the court all day. I will come and fetch you."

He shook hands with Dot, and his face softened. "Good-night," he said. "Go to bed quickly! You're very tired."

She gave him a fleeting smile, and turned to go. She was tired to the soul.

Adela caught her by the arm as they ascended the stairs. "You little quiet mouse, what's the matter? Aren't you enjoying the adventure?"

Dot's face was sombre. "I think I am too tired to enjoy anything to-night," she said.

"Tired! And no work to do! Why, what has come to you?" Adela surveyed her with laughing criticism.

"Let's go to bed!" said Dot. "I'll tell you when we get there."

Something in tone or words stirred Adela. She refrained from further bantering and gave her mind to speedy preparations for bed.

Then, as at last they were about to separate, she put a warm arm about the girl and held her close. "What is it? Aren't you happy?" she said.

Page 28

A great sob went through Dot. Her trouble was more than she could bear. She clung to Adela with unaccustomed closeness.

"I've promised to marry Fletcher at the end of the week—instead of going back with you to the farm."

"I thought that was what he was after," said Adela. "But—don't you want to?"

"No," whispered Dot, trembling.

"Well, why don't you tell him so—tell him he's got to wait? Shall I tell him for you, you poor little thing?" Adela's voice was full of compassion.

But Dot was instant in her refusal. "No, oh, no! Don't tell him! I—I couldn't give him—any particular reason for waiting. I shall feel better—I'm sure I shall feel better—when it's over."

"I expect you will," said Adela. "But I don't like your being miserable. I say, Dot—" she clasped the quivering form closer, with a sudden rare flash of intuition—"there isn't—anyone else you like better, is there?"

But at that Dot started as if she had been stung, and drew herself swiftly away. "Oh, no!" she said, vehemently. "No—no—no!"

"Then I shouldn't worry," said Adela, sensibly. "It's nothing but nerves."

She kissed her and went to her own room, where she speedily slept. But Dot lay wide-eyed, unresting, while the hours crawled by, seeing only the vivid blue eyes that had looked into hers, and thrilled her—and thrilled her with their magic.

In the morning she arose early, urged by a fevered restlessness that drove her with relentless force. Dressing, she discovered the loss of a little heart-shaped brooch, Jack's gift, which she always wore.

Adela, still lying in bed, assured her that she had seen it in her dress the previous evening while at dinner. "It probably came out in that little conservatory place when Fletcher was embracing you," she said.

"Not very likely, I think," said Dot, flushing.

Nevertheless, since she valued it, she finished dressing in haste and departed to search for it.

There was no one about with the exception of a man who was cleaning up the billiard-room and assured her that her property was not there. So she passed on along the

passage to the shabby little glass-house whither she and Fletcher had retreated on the previous evening.

She expected to find the place deserted, and was surprised by a whiff of tobacco-smoke as she entered. The next moment sharply she drew back; for a man's figure rose up from the seat under the billiard-room window on which she had rested the previous evening. His great frame seemed to fill the place. Dot turned to flee.

But on the instant he spoke, checking her. "Don't go for a moment! I know what you're looking for. It's that little heart of yours. I've got it here."

She paused almost in spite of herself. His voice was pitched very low. He spoke to her as if he were speaking to a frightened child. And he smiled at her with the words—a frank and kindly smile.

Page 29

"You—you found it!" she stammered.

"Yes, I found it, Miss Burton." He lingered over the name half unconsciously, and a poignant stab of memory went through her. So had he uttered it on that day so long, so long ago! "I knew it was yours. I was trying to bring myself to give it to Mr. Hill."

"How did you know it was mine?" She almost whispered the words, yet she drew nearer to him, drawn irresistibly—drawn as a needle to the magnet.

He answered her also under his breath. "I—remembered."

She felt as if a wave of fire had swept over her. She swayed a little, throbbing from head to foot.

"I have rather a good memory," he said, as she found no words. "You're not—vexed with me on that account, I hope?"

An odd touch of wistfulness in his voice brought her eyes up to his face. She fought for speech and answered him.

"Of course not! Why should I? It—is a very long time ago, isn't it?"

"Centuries," said Warden, and smiled again upon her reassuringly. "But I never forgot you and your little farm and the old dog. Have you still got him?"

She nodded, her eyes lowered, a choked feeling as of tears in her throat.

"He'd remember me," said Warden, with confidence. "He was a friend. Do you know that was one of the most hairbreadth escapes of my life? If Fletcher Hill had caught me, he wouldn't have shown much mercy—any more than he would now," he added, with a half-laugh. "He's a terrific man for justice."

"Surely you're safe—now!" Dot said, quickly.

"If you don't give me away," said Warden.

"I!" She started, almost winced. "There's no danger of that," she said, in a low voice.

"Thank you," he said. "I've gone fairly straight ever since. It hasn't been a very paying game. I tried my luck in the West, but it was right out. So I thought I'd come back here, and that was the turning-point. They took me on at the Fortescue Mine. It's a fiendish place, but I rather like it. I'm sub-manager there at present—till Harley goes."

"Ah!" She looked up at him again. "He is a dangerous man. He hates you, doesn't he?"

“Quite possibly,” said Warden, with a smile. “That mine is rather an abode of hate all round. But we’ll clean it out one of these days, and make a decent place of it.”

“I hope you will succeed,” she said, very earnestly.

“Thank you,” he said again.

He was looking at her speculatively, as if there were something about her that he found hard to understand. Her agitation had subsided, leaving her with a piteous, forlorn look—the look of the wayfarer who is almost too tired to go any farther.

There fell a brief silence between them, then with a little smile she spoke.

“Are you going to give me back my brooch?”

He put his hand in his pocket. “I was nearly keeping it for good and all,” he said, as he brought it out.

Page 30

She took it from him and pinned it in her dress without words. Then, shyly, she proffered her hand. "Thank you. Good-bye!"

He drew a short hard breath as he took it into his own. For a second or two he stood so, absolutely motionless, his great hand grasping hers. Then, very suddenly, he stooped to her, looking into her eyes.

"Good-bye, little new chum!" he said, softly. "It was—decent of you to treat me—without prejudice."

The words pierced her. A great tremor went through her. For an instant the pain was almost intolerable.

"Oh, spare me that!" she said, quickly and passionately, and drew her hand away.

The next moment she was running blindly through the passage, scarcely knowing which way she went, intent only upon escape.

A man at the foot of the stairs stood aside for her, and she fled past him without a glance. He turned and watched her with keen, alert eyes till she was out of sight. Then, without haste, he took his way in the direction whence she had come.

But he did not go beyond the threshold of the little dusty conservatory, for something he saw within made him draw swiftly back.

When Fletcher Hill went to the court that day, he was grimmer, colder, more unapproachable even than was his wont. He had to deal with one or two minor cases from the gold mine, and the treatment he meted out was of as severe an order as circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER IX

THE MINE

The Fortescue Gold Mine was five miles away from Trelevan, in the heart of wild, barren country, through which the sound of its great crushing machines whirled perpetually like the droning of an immense beehive.

The place was strewn with scattered huts belonging to such of the workers as did not live at Trelevan, and a yellow stream ran foaming through the valley, crossed here and there by primitive wooden bridges.

The desolation of the whole scene, save for that running stream, produced the effect of a world burnt out. The hills of shale might have been vast heaps of ashes. It was a

waste place of terrible unfruitfulness. And yet, not very far below the surface, the precious metal lay buried in the rock—the secret of the centuries which man at last had wrenched from its hiding-place.

The story went that Fortescue, the owner of the mine, had made his discovery by a mere accident in this place known as the Barren Valley, and had kept it to himself for years thereafter because he lacked the means to exploit it. But later he had returned with the necessary capital at his back, had staked his claim, and turned the place of desolation into an abode of roaring activity. The men he employed were for the most part drawn from the dregs—sheep-stealers, cattle-thieves, smugglers, many of them ex-convicts—a fierce, unruly lot, hating all law and order, yet submitting for the sake of that same precious yellow dust that they ground from the foundation stones of the world.

Page 31

Personally, Fortescue was known but to the very few, but his methods were known to all. He paid them generously, but he ruled them with a rigid discipline that knew no relaxation. It was murmured that Fletcher Hill—the hated police-magistrate—was at his back, for he never failed to visit the mine when his duty took him in that direction, and there was something of military precision in its management which was strongly reminiscent of his forbidding personality. It was Fletcher Hill who meted out punishment to the transgressors who were brought before him at the police-court at Trelevan, and his treatment was usually swift and unsparing. No prisoner ever expected mercy from him.

He was hated at the mine with a fierce hatred, in which Fortescue had but a very minor share. It was recognized that Fortescue's methods were of a decent order, though his lack of personal interest was resented, and also his friendship with Fletcher Hill, which some even declared to be a partnership. The only point in his favour was the fact that Bill Warden knew the man and never failed to stand up for him. For some reason Warden possessed an enormous influence over the men. His elevation to the sub-managership had been highly popular, and his projected promotion to the post of manager, now filled by Harley, gave them immense satisfaction. He had the instincts of a sportsman and knew how to handle them, and a personality, that was certainly magnetic, did the rest.

Harley had a certain following, but the general feeling towards him was one of contempt. Most men recognized that he was nothing but a self-seeker, and there were few who trusted him. He did his best to achieve popularity, but his efforts were too obvious. Bill Warden's breezy indifference held an infinitely greater appeal in the eyes of the crowd.

Harley's resignation was of his own choosing. He declared himself in need of a rest, and no one attempted to persuade him otherwise. His day was over, and Warden's succession to the post seemed an inevitable sequence. As Hill sardonically remarked, there was no other competitor for the chieftainship of that band of cutthroats.

For some reason he had postponed his departure till after Hill's official visit to Trelevan. He and Warden shared the largest house in the miners' colony in Barren Valley. It was close to the mine at the end of the valley, and part of it was used as the manager's office. It overlooked the yellow torrent and the black wall of mountain beyond—a savage prospect that might have been hewn from the crater of a dead volcano.

A rough track led to it, winding some twenty feet above the stream, and up this track Fletcher Hill drove the two visitors on the evening of the day succeeding their arrival at Trelevan.

There was a deadness of atmosphere between those rocky walls that struck chill even to Adela's inconsequent soul. "What a ghastly place!" she commented. "I should think Ezekiel's valley of dry bones must have been something like this."

Page 32

Harley met them at the door of his office with a smile in his crafty eyes. "Warden is waiting for you in the mine," he said to Fletcher. "His lambs have been a bit restless this afternoon. He has set his heart on a full-dress parade, but I don't know if it will come off."

Fletcher's black brows drew together. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Harley shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. "You wait and see!"

The entrance to the mine yawned like an immense cavern in the rock. The roaring screech of the machines issuing from it made an inferno of sound from which, involuntarily, Dot shrank.

She looked at Hill appealingly as they drew near. He turned instantly to Harley.

"Go ahead, will you, and tell them to stop work? We can't hear ourselves speak in this."

"I'll come with you, Mr. Harley," said Adela, promptly. "I want to see the machines going."

Harley paused for a moment. "You know your way, Mr. Hill?" he said.

Hill nodded with a hint of impatience. "Yes, yes. I was here only the other day."

"Very good," said Harley. "But don't forget to turn to the right when you get down the steps. The other way is too steep for ladies."

He was gone with the words and Adela with him, openly delighted to have escaped from her solemn escort, and ready for any adventure that might present itself.

Dot looked after her for a moment, and then back at Hill. "She'll be all right, won't she?" she asked.

"Of course she will!" said Hill.

"Then shall we wait a minute till the noise stops?" she suggested.

Hill paused, though not very willingly. "There is nothing to be nervous about," he said.

She glanced at the cavernous opening with a little shudder. "I think it is a dreadful place," she said.

She saw him faintly smile. "I thought it didn't appeal much to you," he said.

She shivered. "Do you like it? But of course you do. You are interested in it. Isn't that grinding noise terrible? It makes me want to run away and hide."

Hill drew her to a large flat rock on the edge of the path. “Sit down,” he said.

She did so, and he took up his stand beside her, one foot lodged upon the stone. In the silence that followed she was aware of his eyes upon her, intently watching her face. She gripped her hands hard around her knees, enduring his scrutiny with a fast-throbbing heart. She expected some curt, soul-searching question at the end of it. But none came. Instead, the noise that reverberated through the valley suddenly ceased, and there fell an intense stillness.

That racked her beyond bearing. She looked up at him at last with a desperate courage and met his eyes. “What is it?” she questioned. “Why do you—why do you look at me—like that?”

He made a brief gesture, as if refusing a challenge, and stood up. “Shall we go?” he said.

Page 33

She got up also, but her knees were trembling, and in a moment his hand came out and closed with that official grip upon her elbow. He led her to the mine entrance guiding her over the rough ground in utter silence.

They left the daylight behind them, passing almost immediately into semi-darkness. Some rough steps hewn in the rock led down into a black void before them.

"Are there no lights anywhere?" said Dot.

"Yes. There'll be a lamp round the corner. Straight on down!" said Fletcher.

But for his presence she would hardly have dared it, so great was the horror that this place had inspired within her. But to wait alone with him in that terrible empty valley was even less endurable. She went down the long, steep stair without further protest.

They reached the foot at length, and a dim light shone ahead of them. The atmosphere was vault-like and penetratingly damp. The passage divided almost immediately, and a narrow track led off between black walls of stone to the right, where in the distance another lamp shone.

Fletcher turned towards this, but very suddenly Dot clasped his arm. "Oh, don't let us go that way!" she begged. "Please don't let us go that way!"

Hill paused in response to her urgent insistence. "What's the matter with you, Dot?" he said.

She clung to him desperately, still holding him back. "I don't know—I don't know! But don't go that way! I have a horrible feeling—Ah!" The deafening report of a revolver-shot rang out suddenly close to them.

Hill turned with a sound in his throat like the growl of an angry animal, and in a moment he had thrust Dot back against the protecting corner of the wall.

"You are not hurt?" she gasped.

"No; I am not." His words fell clipped and stern, though spoken scarcely above a whisper. "Don't speak! Get back up the steps—as quickly as you can!"

The command was so definite, so peremptory, that she had no thought of disobeying. But as she moved there came to her the sound of running feet. Hill stayed her with a gesture. She saw something gleam in his hand as he did so, and realized that he was not defenceless.

Her heart seemed to spring into her throat. She stood tense.

Nearer came the feet and nearer. The suspense of waiting was torture. She thought it would never end. Then suddenly, just as she looked to see a man spring from the opening of that narrow passage, they stopped.

A voice spoke. "All right! Don't shoot!" it said, and a great throb of amazement went through her. That voice—careless, debonair, half-laughing—awoke deep echoes in her heart.

A moment later Warden came calmly round the corner, his great figure looming gigantic in that confined space.

He held out his hand. "I'm sorry you've had a fright. I fired that shot. It was a signal to the men to line up for inspection."

Page 34

He spoke with the utmost frankness, yet it came to Dot with an intuition she could not doubt that Hill did not believe him. He returned the revolver to his pocket, but he kept a hold upon it, and he made no movement to take the hand Warden offered.

"We came to inspect the mine, not the men," he said, shortly. "Go back and tell them to clear out!"

Dot, mutely watching, saw Warden's brows go up. He had barely glanced at her. "Oh, all right, sir," he said, easily. "They've hardly left off work yet. I'll let 'em know in good time. But first I've got something to show you. Come this way!"

He turned towards the main passage, but in a second, sharp and short, Fletcher's voice arrested him.

"Warden!"

He swung on his heel. "Well, sir?"

"You will do as I said—immediately!" The words might have been uttered by a machine, so precise, so cold, so metallic were they.

Warden stood quite motionless, facing him, and it seemed to Dot that his eyes had become two blue flames, giving out light. The pause that followed was so instinct with conflict that she thought it must end in some terrible outburst of violence.

Then, to her amazement, Warden smiled—his candid, pleasant smile. "Certainly, if you make a point of it," he said. "Perhaps you will walk up with me. The strong-room is on our way, and while you are looking at the latest specimens I will carry out your orders."

He turned back with the words, and led the way towards the distant lamp that glimmered in the wall.

Stiffly Hill turned to the girl beside him. "Would you rather go back and wait for me?" he said.

"Oh, no!" she said, instantly. "No; I am coming too."

He said no more, but grimly stalked in the wake of Warden.

The latter moved quickly till he reached the place where the lamp was lodged in a niche in the wall. Here he stopped, stooped, and fitted a key into a narrow door that had been let into the stone. It opened outwards, and he drew aside, waiting for Hill.

"I will go and dismiss the men," he said. "May I leave you in charge till I come back? They will not come this way."

Hill paused on the threshold. The lamp cast a dim light into the place, which was close and gloomy as a prison.

“There are two steps down,” said Warden. “One of them is badly broken, but it’s worth your while to go in and have a look at our latest finds. You had better go first, sir. Be careful!”

He turned to depart with the words, still ignoring Dot. She was close to Hill, and something impelled her to lay a restraining hand on his shoulder as he took the first step down.

What followed happened with such stunning swiftness that her memory of it ever afterwards was a confused jumble of impressions, like the wild course of a nightmare.

Page 35

She heard Warden swing round again in his tracks, but before she could turn he had caught her and flung her backwards over his arm. With his other hand simultaneously he dealt Hill a blow in the back that sent him blundering down into the darkness, and then, with lightning rapidity, he banged the door upon his captive. The lock sprang with the impact, but he was not content with this. Still holding her, he dragged at a rough handle above his head and by main strength forced down an iron shutter over the locked door.

Then, breathing hard and speaking no word, he lifted her till she hung across his shoulder, and started to run. She had not uttered a sound, so stunned with amazement was she, so bereft of even the power to think. Her position was one of utter helplessness. He held her with one arm as easily as if she had been a baby. And she knew that in his free hand he carried his revolver.

In her bewilderment she had not the faintest idea as to the direction he took. She only knew that he ran like a hunted rat down many passages, turning now this way, now that, till at last he plunged down an unseen stairway and the sound of gurgling water reached her ears.

He slackened his pace then, and at last stood still. He did not alter his hold upon her, however, but stood listening intently for many seconds. She hung impotent across his shoulder, feeling still too paralyzed to move.

He turned his head at last and spoke to her. "Have I terrified the senses out of you, little new chum?" he whispered, softly.

That awoke her from her passivity. She made her first effort for freedom.

He drew her down into his arms and held her close.

"Right down," she said, insistently.

But he held her still. "If I let you go, you'll wander maybe, and get lost," he said.

His action surprised her, but yet that instinctive trust with which he had inspired her long ago remained, refusing to be shaken.

"Put me right down!" she said again. "And tell me why you did it!"

He set her on her feet, but he still held her. "Can't you guess?" he said.

"No!" she said. "No!"

She spoke a little wildly. Was it the first doubt that ran shadow—like across her brain, leaving her so strangely cold? She wished it had not been so dark, that she might see his face. “Tell me!” she said again.

But he did not tell her. “Don’t be afraid!” was all he said in answer. “You are—safe enough.”

“But—but—Fletcher?” she questioned, desperately. “What of him?”

“He’s safe too—for the present.” There was something of grimness in his reply. “He doesn’t matter so much. He’s been asking for trouble all along—but he had no right—no right whatever—to bring you into it. It’s you that matters.”

A curious, vibrant quality had crept into his voice, and an answering tremor went through her; but she controlled it swiftly.

Page 36

"And Adela," she said. "She was with Mr. Harley. What has become of her?"

"He will take care of her for his own sake. Leave her to him!" Warden spoke with a hint of disdain. "She'll get nothing worse than a fright," he said, "possibly not even that—if he gets her to the manager's house in time."

"In time!" she echoed. "In time for what? What is going to happen? What do you mean?"

His hold tightened upon her. "Well," he said, "there's going to be a row. But I'm boss of this show, and I reckon I can deal with it. Only—I'll have you safe first, little new chum. I'm not taking any chances where you are concerned."

She gasped a little. The steady assurance of his voice stirred her strangely.

She tried to release herself from his hold. "I don't like this place," she said. "Let me go back to Mr. Hill."

"That's just what I can't do." He bent suddenly down to her. "Won't you trust me?" he said. "I didn't fail you last time, did I?"

She thrilled in answer to those words. It was as if thereby he had flung down all barriers between them. She stood for a moment in indecision, then impulsively she turned and grasped his arms.

"I trust you—absolutely," she told him, tremulously. "But—but—though I know you don't like him—promise me—you won't let—Fletcher be hurt!"

He, too, was silent for a moment before responding. She fancied that he flinched a little at her words. Then: "All right, I promise," he said.

"Then I will go—wherever you like," she said, bravely, and put her hand into his.

He took it into a strong grasp. "That's like you," he said, with simplicity.

CHAPTER X

THE GREATER LOVE

Through a labyrinth of many passages he led her, over ground that was often rough and slimy with that sound of running water in their ears, sometimes near, sometimes distant, but never wholly absent. Now and then a gleam of light would come from some distant crevice, and Dot would catch a glimpse of the rocky corridor through which they moved—catch a glimpse also of her companion walking with his free stride beside her, though

occasionally he had to stoop when the roof was low. He did not look at her, seldom spoke to her, but the grasp of his hand held her up and kept all fear at bay. Somehow fear in this man's presence seemed impossible.

A long time passed, and she was sure that they had traversed a considerable distance before, very far ahead of them at the end of a steep upward slope, she discerned a patch of sky.

"Is that where we are going?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She gazed before her, puzzled. "But where are we? Are we still in the mine?"

"No. This is the smugglers' warren." She caught a hint of humour in his voice. "The stream flows underground all through here—and very useful we have found it."

Page 37

She gave a great start at his words. “You—you are not a smuggler!” she said.

He drew her on. “I am a good many things,” he said, easily, “and the king of this rat-run amongst them. There’s no one knows it as well as I do.”

Her heart sank. “You said—you said yesterday—you had lived straight!” she said, in a low voice.

“Did I? But what does it matter to you how I live?” With a touch of recklessness he put the question. “If Fletcher Hill managed to put the official seal on me, what would it matter to you—now?”

There was almost a note of anger in his voice, yet his hand still held hers in the same close, reassuring grasp. She could not be afraid.

“It would matter,” she said at last.

“I wonder why?” said Bill Warden.

“Because—we are friends,” she said.

He made a sharp sound as of dissent, but he did not openly contradict her. They were nearing the opening, and the ground was rough and broken. She stumbled once or twice, and each time he held her up. Finally they came to a flight of steps that were little more than notches cut steeply in the rock.

“I shall have to carry you here,” he said.

Dot looked upwards with sharp dismay. The rocky wall rose twenty feet above her, the rough-hewn steps slanting along its face. For the first time her heart misgave her.

“What a dreadful place!” she said.

“It’s the only way out,” said Warden, “unless we tramp underground nearly half-way to Wallacetown!”

“Can’t we go back?” she said, nervously.

“What! Afraid?” He gave her hand a sudden squeeze.

She looked at him and caught the blue fire of his eyes as he bent towards her. Something moved her, she knew not what. She surrendered herself to him without a word.

Once more she hung upon his shoulder, clinging desperately, while he made that perilous ascent. He went up with amazing agility, as if he were entirely unencumbered. She felt the strength of his great frame beneath her, and marvelled. Again the magnetic force of the man possessed her, stilling all fear. She shut her eyes dizzily, but she was not afraid.

When she looked up again they were in the open. He had set her on her feet, and she stood on the rugged side of a mountain where no vestige of a path or any habitation showed in any direction. For the first time he had relinquished all hold upon her, and stood apart, almost as if he would turn and leave her.

The brief twilight was upon them. It was as if dark wings were folding them round. A small chill wind was wandering to and fro. She shivered involuntarily. It sounded like the whispering of an evil spirit. The fear she had kept at bay for so long laid clammy hands upon her.

Instinctively she turned to the man for protection. "How shall we get away?" she said.

Page 38

He moved sharply, so sharply that for a single moment she thought that something had angered him. And then—all in one single blinding instant—she realized that which no words could utter. For he caught her swiftly to him, lifting her off her feet, and very suddenly he covered her face and neck and throat with hot, devouring kisses—kisses that electrified her—kisses that seemed to scorch and blister—yet to fill her with a pulsing rapture that was almost too great to endure.

She tried to hide her face from him, but she could not; to protest, but his lips stopped the words upon her own. She was powerless—and very deep down within her there leaped a wild thing that rejoiced—that exulted—in her powerlessness.

The fierce storm spent itself. There came a pause during which she lay palpitating against his breast while his cheek pressed hers in a stillness that was in a fashion more compelling than even those burning kisses had been.

He spoke to her at last, and his voice was deep and tender, throbbing with that which was beyond utterance.

“You love me, little new chum,” he said.

There was no question in his words. She quivered, and made no answer. That headlong outburst of passion had overwhelmed her utterly. She was as drift upon the tide.

He drew a great heaving breath, and clasped her closer. His words fell hot upon her face. “You are mine! Why shouldn’t I keep you? Fate has given you to me. I’d be a fool to let you go again.”

But something—some inner impulse that had been stunned to impotence by his violence—stirred within her at his words and awoke. Yet it was scarcely of her own volition that she answered him. “I am—not—yours.”

Very faintly the words came from her trembling lips, but the utterance of them gave her new strength. She moved at last in his hold. She turned her face away from him.

“What do you mean?” He spoke in a fierce whisper, but—she felt it instinctively—there was less of assurance in his hold. It was that that added to her strength, but she offered no active resistance, realizing wherein lay his weakness—and her own.

“I mean,” she said, and though it still trembled beyond her control, her voice gathered confidence with the words, “that by taking me—by keeping me—you are taking—keeping—what is not your own.”

“Love gives me the right,” he asserted, swiftly—“your love—and mine.”

But the clearer vision had come to her. She shook her head against his shoulder. “No—no! That is wrong. That is not—the greater love.”

“What do you mean by—the greater love?” He was holding her still closely, but no longer with that fierce possession.

She answered him with a steadiness that surprised herself: “I mean the only love that is worth having—the love that lasts.”

He caught up the words passionately. “And hasn’t my love lasted? Have I ever thought of any other woman since the day I met you? Haven’t I been fighting against odds ever since to be able to come to you an honest man—and worthy of your love?”

Page 39

"Oh, I know—I know!" she said, and there was a sound of heartbreak in her voice. "But—the odds have been too heavy. I thought you had forgotten—long ago."

"Forgotten!" he said.

"Yes." With a sob she answered him. "Men do forget—nearly all of them. Fletcher Hill didn't. He kept on waiting, and—and—they said it wasn't fair—to spoil a man's life for a dream—that could never come true. So—I gave in at last. I am—promised to him."

"Against your will?" His arms tightened upon her again. "Tell me, little new chum! Was it against your will?"

"No! Oh, no!" She whispered the words through tears. "I gave in—willingly. I thought it was better than—an empty life."

"Ah!" The word fell like a groan. "And that's what you're going to condemn me to, is it?"

She turned in his arms, summoning her strength. "We've got to play the game," she said. "I've got to keep my word—whatever it costs. And you—you are going to keep yours."

"My word?" he questioned, swiftly.

"Yes." She lifted her head. "If—if you really care about being honest—if your love is worth—anything at all—that is the only way. You promised—you promised—to save him."

"Save him for you?" he said.

"Yes—save him for me." She did not know how she uttered the words, but somehow they were spoken.

They went into a silence that wrung her soul, and it cost her every atom of her strength not to recall them.

Bill Warden stood quite motionless for many pulsing seconds, then—very, very slowly—at length his hold began to slacken.

In the end he set her on her feet—and she was free. "All right, little new chum!" he said, and she heard a new note in his voice—a note that waked in her a wild impulse to spring back into his arms and cling to him—and cling to him. "I'll do it—for you—if it kills me—just to show you—little girl—just to show you—what my love for you is really worth."

He stood a moment, facing her; then his hands clenched and he turned away.

“Let’s go down the hill!” he said. “I’ll see you in safety first.”

CHAPTER XI

WITHOUT CONDITIONS

In the midst of a darkness that could be felt Fletcher Hill stood, grimly motionless, waiting. He knew that strong-room, had likened it to a condemned cell every time he had entered it, and with bitter humour he told himself that he had put his own neck into the noose with a vengeance this time.

Not often—if ever—before had he made the fatal mistake of trusting one who was untrustworthy. He would not have dreamed of trusting Harley, for instance. But for some reason he had chosen to repose his confidence in Warden, and now it seemed that he was to pay the price of his rashness. It was that fact that galled him far more than the danger with which he was confronted. That he,

Page 40

Fletcher Hill—the Bloodhound—ever wary and keen of scent, should have failed to detect a *ruse* so transparent—this inflicted a wound that his pride found it hard to sustain. Through his lack of caution he had forfeited his own freedom, if not his life, and exposed Dot to a risk from the thought of which even his iron nerve shrank. He told himself repeatedly, with almost fierce emphasis, that Dot would be safe, that Warden could not be such a hound as to fail her; but deep within him there lurked a doubt which he would have given all he had to be able to silence. The fact remained that through his negligence she had been left unprotected in an hour of great danger.

Within the narrow walls of his prison there was no sound save the occasional drip of water that oozed through the damp rock. He might have been penned in a vault, and the darkness that pressed upon him seemed to crush the senses, making difficult coherent thought. There was nothing to be done but to wait, and that waiting was the worst ordeal that Fletcher Hill had ever been called upon to face.

A long time passed—how long he had no means of gauging. He stood like a sentinel, weapon in hand, staring into the awful darkness, struggling against its oppression, fighting to keep his brain alert and ready for any emergency. He thought he was prepared for anything, but that time of waiting tried his endurance to the utmost, and when at length a sound other than that irregular drip of water came through the deathly stillness he started with a violence that sent a smile of self-contempt to his lips.

It was a wholly unexpected sound—just the ordinary tones of a man's voice speaking to him through the darkness where he had believed that there was nothing but a blank wall.

"Mr. Hill, where are you?" it said. "I have come to get you out."

Hill's hand tightened upon his revolver. He was not to be taken unawares a second time. He stood in absolute silence, waiting.

There was a brief pause, then again came the voice. "There's not much point in shooting me. You'll probably starve if you do. So watch out! I'm going to show a light."

Hill still stood without stirring a muscle. His back was to the door. He faced the direction of the voice.

Suddenly, like the glare from an explosion, a light flashed in his eyes, blinding him after the utter dark. He flinched from it in spite of himself, but the next moment he was his own master again, erect and stern, contemptuously unafraid.

"Don't shoot!" said Bill Warden, with a gleam of his teeth, "or maybe you'll shoot a friend!"

He was standing empty-handed save for the torch he carried, his great figure upright against the wall, facing Hill with speculation in his eyes.

Hill lowered his revolver. "I doubt it," he said, grimly.

"Ah! You don't know me yet, do you?" said Warden, a faintly jeering note in his voice.

Page 41

"Yes," said Hill, deliberately. "I think I know you—pretty well—now."

"I wonder," said Warden.

He moved slowly forward, throwing the light before him as he did so. The place had been blasted out of the rock, and here and there the stone shone smooth as marble where the charge had gone. Rough shelves had been hewn in the walls, leaving divisions between, and on some of these were stored bags of the precious metal that had been ground out of the ore. There was no sign anywhere of any entrance save the iron-bound door behind Hill.

Straight in front of him Warden stopped. They stood face to face.

"Well?" Warden said. "What do you know of me?"

Hill's eyes were as steel. He stood stiff as a soldier on parade. He answered curtly, without a hint of emotion. "I know enough to get you arrested when this—farce—is over."

"Oh, you call this a farce, do you?" Bill Warden's words came slowly from lips that strangely smiled. "And when does—the fun begin?"

Hill's harsh face was thrown into strong relief by the flare of the torch. It was as flint confronting the other man. "Do you really imagine that I regard this sort of Forty Thieves business seriously?" he said.

"I imagine it is pretty serious so far as you are concerned," said Warden. "You're in about the tightest hole you've ever been in in your life. And it's up to me to get you out—or to leave you. Do you understand that?"

"Oh, quite," said Fletcher Hill, sardonically. "But—let me tell you at the outset—you won't find me specially easy to bargain with on that count—Mr. Buckskin Bill."

Bill Warden threw up his head with a gesture of open defiance. "I'm not doing any—bargaining," he said. "And as to arresting me—afterwards—you can do as you please. But now—just now—you are in my power, and you're going to play my game. Got that?"

"I can see myself doing it," said Fletcher Hill.

"Yes, you will do it." A sudden deep note of savagery sounded in Warden's voice. "Not to save your own skin, Mr. Fletcher Hill, but for the sake of—something more valuable than that—something more precious even than your cussed pride. You'll do it for the sake of the girl you're going to marry. And you'll do it—now."

“Shall I?” said Fletcher Hill.

Bill Warden’s hand suddenly came forth and gripped him by the shoulder. “Damn you!” he said. “Do you think I want to save your life?”

The words were low, spoken with a concentrated passion more terrible than open violence. He looked closely into Hill’s eyes, and his own were flaming like the eyes of a baited animal.

Hill looked straight back at him without the stirring of an eyelid. “Take your hand off me!” he said.

It was the word of the superior officer. Warden’s hand fell as it were mechanically. There followed a tense silence.

Warden made a sharp movement. “I did it to save your life,” he said. “You’d have died like a dog within ten seconds if I hadn’t turned you back.”

Page 42

A curious expression crossed Hill's strong countenance. It was almost a smile of understanding. "I am—indebted to you—boss," he said, and with the words very calmly he took his revolver by the muzzle and held it out. "I surrender to you—without conditions."

Bill Warden gave a sharp start of surprise. For an instant he hesitated, then in silence he took the weapon and dropped it into his pocket. A moment longer he looked Fletcher Hill straight in the eyes, then swung upon his heel.

"We'll get out of this infernal hole straight away," he said, and, stooping, gripped his fingers upon a ridge of stone that ran close to the floor. The stone swung inward under his grasp, leaving a dark aperture gaping at his feet. Bill glanced backwards at his prisoner.

The smile still hovered in the latter's eye. "After you, Mr. Buckskin Bill!" he said, ceremoniously.

And in silence Bill led the way.

CHAPTER XII

THE BOSS OF BARREN VALLEY

"Oh, my dear!" gasped Adela. "I've had the most terrifying adventure. I thought I should never see you again. The men are all on strike, and they've sworn to kill Fletcher Hill, only no one knows where he is. What became of him? Has he got away?"

"I don't know," Dot said.

She sank into the nearest chair in the ill-lighted manager's office, and leaned her white face in her hand.

"Perhaps he has been murdered already," said Adela. "Mr. Harley is very anxious about him. He can't hold them. And—Dot—just think of it!—Warden—the man we saw yesterday, the sub-manager—is at their head. I saw him myself. He had a revolver in his hand. You were with Fletcher Hill. You must know what became of him!"

"No, I don't know," said Dot. "We—parted—a long time ago."

"How odd you are!" said Adela. "Why, what is the matter? Are you going to faint?" She went to the girl and bent over her, frightened by her look. "What is the matter, Dot? What has happened to you? You haven't been hurt?"

"I am—all right," Dot said, with an effort. "Did Mr. Harley bring you here?"

“Yes. And you? How did you get here?”

“He—brought me most of the way—Mr. Warden,” Dot said. “He has gone now to save—Fletcher Hill.”

“To shoot him, more likely,” said Adela. “He has posted sentinels all round the mine to catch him. I wonder if we are safe here! Mr. Harley said it was a safe place. But I wonder. Shall we make a bolt for it, Dot? Shall we? Shall we?”

“I shall stay here,” Dot answered.

Adela was not even listening. “We are only two defenceless women, and there isn’t a man to look after us. What shall we do if—Ah! Heavens! What is that?”

A fearful sound had cut short her speculations—a fiendish yelling as of a pack of wolves leaping upon their prey. Dot sat up swiftly. Adela cowered in a corner.

Page 43

The terrible noise continued, appalling in its violence. It swept like a wave towards the building, drowning the roar of the stream below. The girl at the table rose and went to the closed door. She gripped a revolver in her right hand. With her left she reached for the latch.

"Don't open it!" gasped Adela.

But Dot paid no heed. She lifted the latch and flung wide the door. Her slim figure stood outlined against the lamp-light behind her. Before her in a white glare of moonlight lay the vault-like entrance of the mine at the head of Barren Valley, and surging along the black, scarred side of the hill there came a yelling crowd of miners. They were making straight for the open door, but at the sight of the girl standing there they checked momentarily and the shouting died down.

She faced the foremost of them without a tremor. "What is it?" she demanded, in a clear, ringing voice. "What are you wanting?"

A man with the shaggy face of a baboon answered her. "You've got that blasted policeman in there. You stick up that gun of yours and let us pass! We've got guns of our own, so that won't help."

She confronted him with scorn. "Do you imagine I'm afraid of you and your guns? There's no one here except another woman. Are you out to fight women to-night?"

"That's a lie!" he made prompt response. "You've got Fletcher Hill in there, or I'm a nigger. You let us pass!"

But still she blocked the way, her revolver pointing straight at him. "Fletcher Hill is not here. And you won't come in unless Mr. Warden says so. He is not here either at present. But he is coming. And I will shoot any man who tries to force his way in first."

"Damnation!" growled the shaggy-faced one and wheeled upon his comrades. "What do you say to that, boys? Going to let a woman run this show?"

A chorus of curses answered him, but still no one raised a revolver against the slender figure that opposed them. Only, after a moment, a cur in the background picked up a stone and flung it. It struck the doorpost, narrowly missing her shoulder. Dot did not flinch, but immediately, with tightened lips, she raised the revolver and fired over their heads.

A furious outburst followed the explosion, and in an instant a dozen revolvers were levelled at her. But in that same instant there came a sound like the roar of a lion from behind the building, and with it Warden's great figure leapt out into the moonlight.

"You damned ruffians!" he yelled. "You devils! What are you doing?"

His anger was in a fashion superb. It dwarfed the anger of the crowd. They gave way before him like a herd of beasts. He sprang in front of the girl, raging like a man possessed.

“You gang of murderers! You hounds! You dirty swine! Get back, do you hear? I’m the boss of this show, and what I say goes, or, if it doesn’t, I’ll know the reason why. Benson—you dog! What’s the meaning of this? Do you think I’ll have under me any coward that will badger a woman?”

Page 44

The man he addressed looked at him with a cowed expression on his hairy face. "I never wanted to interfere with her," he growled. "But she's protecting that damned policeman. It's her own fault for getting in our way."

"You're wrong then!" flashed back Warden. "Fletcher Hill is under my protection, not hers. He has surrendered to me as my prisoner."

"You've got him?" shouted a score of voices.

"Yes, I've got him." Rapidly Warden made answer. "But I'm not going to hand him over to you to be murdered out of hand. If I'm boss of Barren Valley, I'll be boss. So if any of you are dissatisfied you'll have to reckon with me first. Fletcher Hill is my prisoner, and I'll see to it that he has a fair trial. Got that?"

A low murmur went round. The magnetism of the man was making itself felt. He had that electric force which sways the multitude against all reason. Single-handed, he gripped them with colossal assurance. They shrank from the flame of his wrath like beaten dogs.

"And before we deal with him," he went on, "there's someone else to be reckoned with. And that's Harley. Does anyone know where Harley is?"

"What do you want with Harley?" asked Benson, glad of this diversion.

"Oh, just to tell him what I think of him, and then—to kick him out!" With curt contempt Warden threw his answer. "He's a traitor and a skunk—smuggles spirits one minute and goes to the police to sell his chums the next; then back to his chums again to sell the police. I know. I've been watching him for some time, the cur. He'd shoot me if he dared."

"He'd better!" yelled a huge miner in the middle of the crowd.

Warden laughed. "That you, Nixon? Come over here! I've got something to tell you—and the other boys. It's the story of this blasted mine." He turned suddenly to the girl who still stood behind him in the lighted doorway. "Miss Burton, I'd like you to hear it too. Shut the door and stand by me!"

Her shining eyes were on his face. She obeyed him mutely, with a submission as unquestioning as that of the rough crowd in front of them.

Very gently he took the revolver from her, drew one out of his own pocket also, and handed both to the big man called Nixon who had come to his side.

"You look after these!" he said.

“One is my property. The other belongs to Fletcher Hill—who is my prisoner. Now, boys, you’re armed. I’m not. You won’t shoot the lady, I know. And for myself I’ll take my chance.”

“Guess you won’t be any the worse for that,” grinned Nixon, at his elbow.

Warden’s smile gleamed for an instant in answer, but he passed swiftly on. “Did you ever hear of a cattle-thief called Buckskin Bill? He flourished in these parts some five years ago. There was no mine in Barren Valley then. It was just—a smugglers’ stronghold.”

Some of the men in front of him stirred uneasily. “What’s this to do with Fletcher Hill?” asked one.

Page 45

"I'll tell you," said Warden. "Buckskin Bill, the cattle-thief, was in a tight corner, and he took refuge in Barren Valley. He found the smugglers' *cache*—and he found something else that the smugglers didn't know of. He found—gold. It's a queer thing, boys, but he'd decided—for private reasons—to give up the cattle-lifting just two days before. The police were hot after him, but they didn't catch him and the smugglers didn't catch him either. He dodged 'em all, and when he left he said to himself, 'I'll be the boss of Barren Valley when I come back.' After that he went West and starved a bit in the Australian desert till the cattle episode had had time to blow over. Then—it's nearly two years ago now—he came back. The first person he ran into was—Fletcher Hill, the policeman."

He paused with that dramatic instinct which was surely part-secret of his fascination. He had caught the full attention of the crowd, and held them spellbound.

In a moment he went on. "That gave him an idea. Hill, of course, was after other game by that time and didn't spot him. Hill was a magistrate and a civil power at Wallacetown. So Bill went to him, knowing he was straight, anyway, and told him about the gold in Barren Valley, explaining, bold as brass, that he couldn't run the show himself for lack of money. Boys, it was a rank speculation, but Hill was a sport. He caught on. He came to Barren Valley, and they tinkered round together, and they found gold. That same night they came upon the smugglers, too—only escaped running into them by a miracle. Hill didn't say much. He's not a talker. But after they got back to Wallacetown he made an offer to Buckskin Bill which struck him as being a very sporting proposition for a policeman. He said, 'If you care to take on Barren Valley and make an honest concern of it, I'll get the grant and do the backing. The labour is there,' he said, 'but it's got to be honest labour or I won't touch it.' It was a sporting offer, boys, and, of course, Bill jumped. And so a contract was drawn up which had to be signed. And 'What's your name?' said Fletcher Hill." Warden suddenly began to laugh. "On my oath, he didn't know what to say, so he just caught at the first honest-sounding name he could think of. 'Fortescue,' he said. Hill didn't ask a single question. 'Then that mine shall be called the Fortescue Gold Mine,' he said. 'And you'll work it and make an honest man's job of it.' It was a pretty big undertaking, but it sort of appealed to Buckskin Bill, and he took it on. The only real bad mistake he made was when he trusted Harley. Except for that, the thing worked—and worked well. The smuggling trade isn't what it was, eh, boys? That's because Fortescue—and Fletcher Hill—are using up the labour for the mine. And you may hate 'em like hell, but you can't get away from the fact that this mine is run fair and decent, and there isn't a man here who doesn't stand a good chance of

Page 46

making his fortune if he plays a straight game. It's been a chance to make good for every one of us, and it's thanks to Fletcher Hill—because he hasn't asked questions—because he's just taken us on trust—and I'm hanged if he doesn't deserve something better than a bullet through his brain, even if he is a magistrate and a policeman and a man of honour. Have you got that, boys? Then chew it over and swallow it! And when you've done that, I'll tell you something more."

"Oh, let's have it all, boss, now you're at it!" broke in Nixon. "We shan't have hysterics now. We're past that stage."

Warden turned with a lightning movement and laid his hand upon the girl beside him. "Gentlemen," he said, "it's Fletcher Hill—and not Buckskin Bill—who's the boss of this valley. And he's a good boss—he's a sportsman—he's a maker of men. And this lady is going to be his wife. You're going to stand by her, boys. You aren't going to make a widow of her before she's married. You aren't going to let a skunk like Harley make skunks of you all. You're sportsmen, too—better sportsmen than that stands for—better sportsmen, maybe, than I am myself. What, boys? It's your turn to speak now."

"Wait a bit!" said Nixon. "You haven't quite finished yet, boss."

"No, that's true." Warden paused an instant, then abruptly went forward a pace and stood alone before the crowd. "I've taken a good many chances in my life," he said. "But now I'm taking the biggest of 'em all. Boys, I'm a damned impostor. I've tricked you all, and it's up to you to stick me against a wall and shoot me as I deserve, if you feel that way. For I'm Buckskin Bill—I'm Fortescue—and I'm several kinds of a fool to think I could ever carry it through. Now you know!"

With defiant recklessness he flung the words. They were more of a challenge than a confession. And having spoken them he moved straight forward with the moonlight on his face till he stood practically among the rough crowd.

They opened out to receive him, almost as if at a word of command. And Buckskin Bill, with his head high and his blue eyes flaming, went straight into them with the gait of a conqueror.

Suddenly, with a passionate gesture, he stopped, flinging up his empty right hand. "Well, boys, well? What's the verdict? I'm in your hands."

And a great hoarse roar of enthusiasm went up as they closed around him that was like the bursting asunder of mighty flood-gates. They surged about him. They lifted him on their shoulders. They yelled like maniacs and fired their revolvers in the air. It was the wildest outbreak that Barren Valley had ever heard, and to the girl who watched it, it

was the most marvellous revelation of a man's magnetism that she had ever beheld. Alone he had faced and conquered a multitude.

It pierced her strangely, that fierce enthusiasm, stirring her as personal danger had failed to stir. She turned with the tears running down her face and found Fletcher Hill standing unnoticed behind her, silently looking on.



Page 47

"Oh, isn't he great? Isn't he great?" she said.

He took her arm and led her within. His touch was kind, but wholly without warmth. "There's not much doubt as to who is the boss of Barren Valley," he said.

And with the words he smiled—a smile that was sadder than her tears.

CHAPTER XIII

THE OFFICIAL SEAL

That life could possibly return to a normal course after that amazing night would have seemed to Dot preposterous but for the extremely practical attitude adopted by Fletcher Hill. But when she saw him again on the day after their safe return to Trelevan there was nothing in his demeanour to remind her of the stress through which they had passed. He was, as ever, perfectly calm and self-contained, and wholly uncommunicative. Adela sought in vain to satisfy her curiosity as to the happenings in Barren Valley which her courage had not permitted her to witness for herself. Fletcher Hill was as a closed book, and on some points Dot was equally reticent. By no persuasion could Adela induce her to speak of Bill Warden. She turned the subject whenever it approached him, professing an ignorance which Adela found excessively provoking.

They saw nothing of him during the remainder of the week, and very little of Fletcher Hill, who went to and fro upon his business with a machine-like precision that seemed to pervade his every action. He made no attempt to be alone with Dot, and she, with a shyness almost overwhelming, thankfully accepted his forbearance. The day they had fixed upon for their marriage was rapidly approaching, but she had almost ceased to contemplate it, for somehow it seemed to her that it could never dawn. Something must happen first! Surely something was about to happen! And from day to day she lived for the sight of Bill Warden's great figure and the sound of his steady voice. Anything, she felt, would be bearable if only she could see him once again. But she looked for him in vain.

When her brother joined them at the end of the week a dullness of despair had come upon her. Again she saw herself trapped and helpless, lacking even the spirit to attempt escape. She greeted Jack almost abstractedly, and he observed her throughout the evening with anxiety in his eyes. When it was over he drew her aside for a moment as she was bidding him good-night.

"What's the matter, little 'un? What's wrong?" he whispered, with his arm about her.

She clung to him for an instant with a closeness that was passionate. But, "It's nothing, Jack," she whispered back. "It's nothing."

Then Fletcher Hill came up to them, and they separated. Adela and Dot went up to bed, and the two men were left alone.

* * * * *

So at length the great day dawned, and nothing had happened. The only news that had reached them was a remark overheard by Adela in the dining-room, to the effect that Harley had thrown up his post and gone.

Page 48

Dot dressed for her wedding with a dazed sense of unreality. Her attire was of the simplest. She wore a hat instead of a veil. It was to be a quiet ceremony in the early morning, for neither she nor Hill desired any unnecessary parade. When she descended the stairs with Adela, Jack was the only person awaiting her in the hall.

He looked at her searchingly as she came down to him, then without a word he took her in his arms and kissed her white face. She saw that he was moved, and wondered within herself at her own utter lack of emotion. Ever since she had lain against Bill Warden's breast, the wild sweet rapture of his hold had seemed to paralyze in her all other feeling. She knew only the longing for his presence, the utter emptiness of a world that held him not.

She drove to the church with her hand in Jack's, Adela talking incessantly the whole way while they two sat in silence. It was a bare building in the heart of the town, but its bareness did not convey any chill to her. She was already too numbly cold for that.

She went up the aisle between Jack and Adela, because the latter good-naturedly remarked that she might as well have as much support as she could get. But before they reached the altar-steps Fletcher Hill came to meet them, and Adela dropped behind.

He also looked for a moment closely into Dot's face, then very quietly he took her cold hand from Jack and drew it through his arm. She glanced at him with a momentary nervousness as Jack also fell behind.

Then some unknown force drew her as the magnet draws the needle, and she looked towards the altar. A man was standing by the steps awaiting her. She saw the free carriage of the great shoulders, the deep fire of the blue eyes. And suddenly her heart gave a wild throb that was anguish, and stood still.

Fletcher Hill's arm went round her. He held her for a second closely to him—more closely than he had ever held her before. But—it came to her later—he did not utter a single word. He only drew her on.

And so she came to Bill Warden waiting before the altar. They met—and all the rest was blotted out.

She went through that service in a breathless wonderment, an amazement that yet was strangely free from distress. For Bill Warden's hand clasped hers throughout, save when Fletcher Hill took it from him for a moment to give her away.

When it was over, and they knelt together in the streaming sunshine of the morning, she felt as if they two were alone in an inner sanctuary that was filled with the Love of God. Later, those sacred moments were the holiest memory of her life....

Then a strong arm lifted and held her. She turned from the holy place with a faint sigh of regret, turned to meet Fletcher Hill's eyes looking at her with that in them which she was never to forget.

His voice was the first to break through the wonder-spell that bound her.

Page 49

"Do you think you will ever manage to forgive me?" he said.

She turned swiftly from the arm that encircled her, and impulsively she put her hands upon his shoulders, offering him her lips. "Oh, I don't—know—what—to say," she said, brokenly.

He bent and gravely kissed her. "My dear, there is nothing to be said so far as I am concerned," he said. "If you are happy, I am satisfied."

It was briefly spoken, but it went straight to her heart. She clung to him for a moment without words, and that was all the thanks she ever offered him. For there was nothing to be said.

* * * * *

Very late on the evening of that wonderful day she sat with Bill Warden on the edge of a rock overlooking a fertile valley of many waters in the Blue Mountains, and heard, with her hand in his the amazing story of the past few days, which had seemed to her so curiously dream-like.

"I fought hard against marrying you," Bill told her, with the smile she had remembered for so long. "But he had me at every turn—simply rolled me out and wiped the ground with me. Said he'd clap me into prison if I didn't, and when I said 'All right' to that, he turned on me like a tiger and asked if I wanted to break your heart. Oh, he made me feel a ten-times swab, I can tell you. And when I said I didn't want you to marry an uncaught criminal, he just looked me over and said, 'You've sown your wild oats. As your partner, I am sponsor for your respectability.' I knew what that meant, knew he'd stand by me through thick and thin, whatever turned up. It was the official seal with a vengeance, for what Fletcher Hill says goes in these parts. But it went against the grain, little new chum. It made me sick with myself. I hated playing his game against himself. It was the vilest thing I ever did. I couldn't have done it—except for you."

The little hand that held his tightened. She leaned her cheek against his shoulder. "Shall I tell you something?" she whispered. "I couldn't have done it either—except for—you."

His arm clasped her. "I'm such a poor sort of creature, darling," he said "I'll work for you—live for you—die for you. But I shall never be worthy of you."

She lifted her face to his in the gathering darkness. "Dear love," she said, "do you remember how—once—you asked me to treat you—without prejudice? But I never have—and I don't believe I ever shall. Fletcher Hill is right to trust you. He is a judge of men. But I—I am only the woman who loves you, and—somehow—whichever way I take you—I'm always prejudiced—in your favour."

The low words ended against his lips. He kissed her closely, passionately. "My little chum," he said, "I will be worthy—I will be worthy—so help me God!"

He was near to tears as he uttered his oath; but presently, when he turned back her sleeve to kiss the place where first his lips had lingered, they laughed together—the tender laughter of lovers in the happy morning-time of life.

Page 50

* * * * *

Her Own Free Will

CHAPTER I

“Well, it’s all over now, for better, for worse, as they say. And I hope very much as it won’t be for worse.”

A loud sniff expressive of grave misgiving succeeded the remark. The speaker—one of a knot of village women—edged herself a little further forward to look up the long strip of red baize that stretched from the church porch to the lych gate near which she stood. The two cracked bells were doing their best to noise abroad the importance of the event that had just taken place, which was nothing less than the marriage of Colonel Everard’s daughter to Piet Cradock, the man of millions. Of the latter’s very existence none of the villagers had heard till a certain day, but a few weeks before, when he had suddenly appeared at the Hall as the accepted suitor of Nan Everard, whom everyone loved.

She was only twenty, prettiest, gayest, wildest, of the whole wild tribe. Three sons and eight daughters had the Colonel—a handsome, unruly family, each one of them as lavish, as extravagant, and as undeniably attractive as he was himself.

His wife had been dead for years. They lived on the verge of bankruptcy, had done so as long as most of them could remember; but it was only of late that matters had begun to look really serious for them. It was rumoured that the Hall was already mortgaged beyond its value, and it was common knowledge that the Colonel’s debts were accumulating with alarming rapidity. This marriage, so it was openly surmised, had been arranged in haste for the sole purpose of easing the strain.

For that Nan Everard cared in the smallest degree for the solemn, thick-set son of a Boer mother, to whom she had given herself, no one ever deemed possible for an instant. But he was rich, fabulously rich, and that fact counterbalanced many drawbacks. Piet Cradock owned a large share in a diamond mine in the South African Republic, and he was a person of considerable importance in his native land in consequence. He had visited England on business, but his time there had been limited to a bare six weeks. This fact had necessitated a brief wooing and a speedy marriage.

He had met the girl of his choice by a mere accident. He had chanced to be seated on her right hand at a formal dinner-party in town. Very little had passed between them then, but later, through the medium of his host, he had sought her out, and called upon her. Within a week he had asked her to be his wife. And Nan Everard, impulsive,

dazzled by the prospect of unbounded wealth, and feverishly eager to ease the family burden, had accepted him.

He was obliged to sail for South Africa within three weeks of his proposal, and preparations for the marriage had therefore to be hurried forward with all speed. They were to leave for Plymouth immediately after the ceremony, and to sail on the following day.

Page 51

So at breathless speed events had raced, and no one knew exactly what was the state of Nan's mind even up to the morning of her wedding-day. Perhaps she scarcely knew herself, so madly had she been whirled along in the vortex to which she had committed herself. But possibly during the ceremony some vague realisation of what she was doing came upon her, for she made her vows with a face as white as death, and in a voice that never once rose above a whisper.

But when she came at last down the church-yard path upon her husband's arm, she was laughing merrily enough. Some enthusiast had flung a shower of rice over his uncovered head, to his obvious discomfiture.

He did not laugh with her. His smooth, heavy-jawed face was absolutely unresponsive. He was fifteen years her senior, and he looked it to the full. The hair grew far back upon his head, and it had a sprinkling of grey. His height was unremarkable, but he had immensely powerful shoulders, and a bull-like breadth of chest, that imparted a certain air of arrogance to his gait. His black brows met shaggily over eyes of sombre brown. Undeniably a formidable personage, this!

Nan, glancing at him as she entered the carriage, harboured for a moment the startled reflection that if he had a beard nothing could have restrained her just then from screaming and running away. But, fortunately for her quaking dignity, his face, with the exception of those menacing eyebrows, and the lashes that shaded his gloomy eyes, was wholly free from hair.

Driving away from the church with its two clanging bells, she made a resolute effort to shake off the scared feeling that had so possessed her when she had stood at the altar with this man. If she had made a mistake, and even now she was not absolutely certain that she had—it was impossible in that turmoil of conflicting emotions to say—but if she had, it was past remedy, and she must face the consequences without shrinking. She had a conviction that he would domineer over her without mercy if she displayed any fear.

So, bravely hiding her sinking heart, she laughed and chatted for the benefit of her taciturn bridegroom with the gayest inconsequence during the brief drive to her home.

He scarcely replied. He seemed to have something on his mind also. And Nan breathed a little sigh of relief when they reached their destination, and he gravely handed her out.

A litter of telegrams on a table in the old-fashioned hall caught the girl's attention directly she entered. She pounced upon them with eager zest.

“Ah, here’s one from Jerry Lister. I knew he would be sure to remember. He’s the dearest boy in the world. He would have been here, but for some horrid examination that kept him at Oxford.”

She opened the message impetuously, and began to read it; but suddenly, finding her husband at her side, she desisted, crumpling it in her hand with decidedly heightened colour.

Page 52

"Oh, he's quite ridiculous. Let us open some of the others."

She thrust a sheaf into his hand, and busied herself with the remainder.

He did not attempt to open any of them, but stood silently watching her glowing face as she opened one after another and tossed them down.

Suddenly she raised her eyes, and met his look fully, with a certain pride.

"Is anything the matter?"

He pointed quite calmly to the scrap of paper she held crumpled in her hand.

"Are you not going to read that?" he asked, in slow, rather careful English.

Her colour deepened; it rose to her forehead in a burning wave.

"Presently," she returned briefly.

His eyes held hers with a curious insistence.

"You need not be afraid," he said very quietly; "I shall not try to look over."

Nan stared at him, too amazed for speech. The hot blood ebbed from her face as swiftly as it had risen, leaving her as white as the orange-blossoms in her hair.

At length suddenly, with a passionate gesture, she thrust out her hand to him with the ball of paper on her palm.

"Pray take it and read it," she said, her voice quivering with anger, "since it interests you so much."

He made no movement to comply.

"I do not wish to read it, Anne," he said gravely.

Her lip curled. It was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name, and there was something exceedingly formal in the way he uttered it now. Moreover, no one ever called her anything but Nan. For some reason she was hotly indignant at this unfamiliar mode of address. It increased her anger against him tenfold.

"Take it and read it!" she reiterated, with stubborn persistence. "I wish you to do so!"

The first carriage-load of guests was approaching the house as she spoke. Cradock paused for a single instant as if irresolute, then, without more ado, he took her at her word. He smoothed the paper out without the smallest change of countenance, and

read it, while she stood quivering with impotent fury by his side. It was a long telegram, and it took some seconds to read; but he did not look up till he had mastered it.

“Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye,” so ran the message—“It is no red-letter day for me, but I wish you joy with all my heart. Spare a thought now and then for the good old times and the boy you left behind you.—Your loving Jerry.”

Amid a buzz of congratulation, Piet Cradock handed the missive back to his bride with a simple “Thank you!” that revealed nothing whatever of what was in his mind.

She took it, without looking at him, with nervous promptitude, and the incident passed.

The guests were many, and Nan’s attention was very fully occupied. No casual observer, seeing her smiling face, would have suspected the turmoil of doubt that underlay her serenity.

Page 53

Only Mona, her favourite sister, had the smallest inkling of it, but even Mona was not in Nan's confidence just then. No intimate word of any sort passed between them up in the old bedroom that they had shared all their lives during the fleeting half-hour that Nan spent preparing for her journey. They could neither of them bear to speak of the coming separation, and that embodied everything.

The only allusion that Nan made to it was as she passed out of the room with her arm round her sister's shoulders, and whispered:

"Don't sleep by yourself to-night, darling. Make Lucy join you."

They descended the stairs, holding closely to each other. Old Colonel Everard, very red and tearful, met them at the foot, and folded Nan tightly in his arms, murmuring inarticulate words of blessing.

Nan emerged from his embrace pale but quite tearless.

"Au revoir, dad!" she said, in her sprightliest tone. "You will be having me back like a bad half-penny before you can turn round."

Still laughing, she went from one to another of her family with words of careless farewell, and finally ran the gauntlet of her well-wishers to the waiting carriage, into which she dived without ceremony to avoid the hail of rice that pursued her.

Her husband followed her closely, and they were off almost before he took his seat beside her.

"Thank goodness, that's over!" said Nan, with fervour. "I'll never marry again if I live to be a hundred! I am sure being buried must be much more fun, and not nearly so ignominious."

She leaned forward with the words, and was on the point of letting down the window, when there was a sudden, deafening report close to them. The carriage jerked and swerved violently, and in an instant it was being whirled down the drive at the top speed of two terrified horses.

Instinctively Nan turned to the man beside her.

"It's the boys!" she exclaimed. "They said they should fire a salute! But—but—"

She broke off, amazed to find his arms gripping her tightly, forcing her back in her seat, holding her pressed to him with a strength that took her breath away.

It all came—a multitude of impressions—crowded into a few brief seconds; yet every racing detail was engraved with awful distinctness upon the girl's mind, never to be forgotten.

She struggled wildly in that suffocating hold, struggled fruitlessly to lift her face from her husband's shoulder into which it was ruthlessly pressed, and only ceased to struggle when the end of that terrible flight came with a jolt and a jar and a final, sickening crash that flung her headlong into a dreadful gulf of emptiness into which no light or echo of sound could even vaguely penetrate.

CHAPTER II

Nan opened her eyes in her own sunny bedroom, and gazed wonderingly about her, dimly conscious of something wrong.

Page 54

The doctor, whom she had known from her earliest infancy, was bending over her, and she smiled her recognition of him, though with a dawning uneasiness. Vague shapes were floating in her brain that troubled and perplexed her.

“What happened?” she murmured uneasily.

He laid his hand upon her forehead.

“Nothing much,” he told her gently. “Lie still like a good girl and go to sleep. There is nothing whatever for you to worry about. You’ll be better in the morning.”

But the shapes were obstinate, and would not be expelled. They were, moreover, beginning to take definite form.

“Wasn’t there an accident?” she said restlessly. “I wish you would tell me.”

“Well, I will,” the doctor answered, “if you will keep quiet and not vex yourself. There was a bit of an accident. The carriage was overturned. But no one was hurt but you, and you will soon be yourself again if you do as you’re told.”

“But how am I hurt?” questioned Nan, moving her head on the pillow with a dizzy feeling of weakness. “Ah!” with a sudden frown of pain. “It—it’s my arm.”

“Yes,” the doctor said. “It’s your arm. It went through the carriage window. I have had to strap it up pretty tightly. You will try to put up with it, and on no account must it be moved.”

She looked at him with startled eyes.

“Is it very badly cut, then?”

“Yes, a fragment of glass pierced the main artery. But I have checked the bleeding—it was a providential thing that I was at hand to do it—and if you keep absolutely still, it won’t burst out again. I am telling you this because it is necessary for you to know what a serious matter it is. Any exertion might bring it on again, and then I can’t say what would happen. You have lost a good deal of blood as it is, and you can’t afford to lose any more. But if you behave like a sensible girl, and lie quiet for a few days, you will soon be none the worse for the adventure.”

“For a few days!” Nan’s eyes widened. “Then—then I shan’t be able to go with—with—” She faltered, and broke off.

He answered her with very kindly sympathy.

“Poor little woman! It’s hard lines, but I am afraid there is no help for it. You will have to postpone your honeymoon for a little while.”

“Have you—have you—told—him?” Nan whispered anxiously.

“Yes, he knows all about it,” the doctor said. “You shall see him presently. But I want you to rest now. You have had a nasty shock, and I should like you to sleep it off. Just drink this, and shut your eyes.”

Nan obeyed him meekly. She was feeling very weak and tired. And, after a little, she fell asleep, blissfully unconscious of the fact that her husband was seated close to her on the other side of the bed, silent and watchful, and immobile as a statue.

She did not wake till late on the following morning, and then it was to find her sister Mona only in attendance.

Page 55

"Have you been up all night?" was Nan's first query.

Mona hesitated.

"Well, not exactly. I lay down part of the time."

"Why in the world didn't you go to bed?" questioned Nan.

"I couldn't, dear. Piet was here."

"Who?" said Nan sharply; then, colouring vividly, "All night, Mona? How could you let him?"

"I couldn't help it!" said Mona. "He wouldn't go."

"What nonsense! He's gone now, I suppose?" Nan spoke irritably. The tightness of the doctor's bandages was causing her considerable pain.

"Oh, yes, he went some time ago," Mona assured her. "But he is sure to come back presently, and say good-bye."

"Say good-bye!" Nan echoed the words slowly, a dawning brightness in her eyes. "Is he—is he really going, then?" she whispered.

"He says he must go—whatever happens. It was a solemn promise, and he can't break it. I don't understand, of course, but he is wanted at Kimberley to avert some crisis connected with the mines."

"Then—he will have to start soon?" said Nan.

"Yes. But he won't leave till the last minute. He has chartered a special to take him to Plymouth."

"He knows I can't go?" said Nan quickly.

"Oh, yes; the doctor told him that last night."

"What did he say? Was he angry?"

"He looked furious. But he didn't say anything, even in Dutch. I think his feelings were beyond words," said Mona, with a little smile.

Nan asked no more, but when the doctor saw her a little later, he was dissatisfied with her appearance, and scolded her for working herself into a fever.

"There's no sense in fretting about it," he said. "The thing is done, and can't be altered. I have no doubt your husband will be back again in a few weeks to fetch you, and we will have you quite well again by then."

But Nan only shivered in response, as though she found this assurance the reverse of comforting. The shock of the accident, succeeding the incessant strain of the past few weeks, had completely broken down her nerve, and no amount of reasoning could calm her.

When a message came from her husband an hour later, asking if she would see him, she answered in the affirmative, but the bare prospect of the interview threw her into a ferment of agitation.

She lay panting on her pillows like a frightened child when at length he entered.

He came in very softly, but every pulse in her body leapt at his approach. She could not utter a word in greeting.

He stood a moment in silence, looking down at her, then, stooping, he took her free hand into his own.

"Are you better?" he asked, his deep voice hushed as if he were in church.

She could not answer him for the fast beating of her heart. He waited a little, then sat down by the bed, his great hand still holding her little trembling one in a steady grasp.

Page 56

"The doctor tells me," he said, "that it would not be safe for you to travel at present, so I cannot of course, think of allowing you to do so."

Nan's eyes opened very wide at this. It was an entirely novel idea that this man should take upon himself to direct her movements. She drew a deep breath, and found her voice.

"I should certainly not dream of attempting such a thing without the doctor's permission."

His grave face did not alter. His eyes looked directly into hers and it seemed to Nan for the first time that they held something of a domineering expression.

She turned her head away with a quick frown. She also made a slight, ineffectual effort to free her hand. But he did not appear to notice either gesture.

"Yes," he said, in his slow way, "it is out of the question, and so I have asked your father to take care of you for me until my return—for, unfortunately, I cannot postpone my own departure."

Nan's lips quivered. She was beginning to feel hysterical. With an effort she controlled herself.

"How long shall you be away?" she asked.

"It is impossible for me to say. Everything depends upon the state of affairs at the mines. But you may be quite sure, Anne"—a deeper note crept into his voice—"that my absence will be as short as I can possibly make it."

She turned her head towards him again.

"You needn't hurry for my sake," she said abruptly. "I shall be perfectly happy here."

"I am glad to hear it," he answered gravely. "I have made full provision for you. The interest upon the settlement I have made upon you will be paid to you monthly. Should you find it insufficient, you will, of course, let me know. I could cable you some more if necessary."

A great blush rose in Nan's face at his words, spreading upwards to her hair.

"Oh," she stammered, "I—I—indeed, I shan't want any money! Please don't—"

"It is your own," he interposed quietly, "and as such I beg that you will regard it, and spend it exactly as you like. Should you require more, as I have said, I shall be pleased to send it to you."

He uttered the last sentence as if it ended the matter, and Nan found herself unable to say more. To have expressed any gratitude would have been an absolute impossibility at that moment.

She lay, therefore, in quivering silence until he spoke again.

“It is time for me to be going. I hope the injury to your arm will progress quite satisfactorily. You will not be able to write to me yourself at present, but your sister Mona has promised to let me hear of you by every mail. Dr. Barnard will also write.”

He paused. But Nan said nothing whatever. She was wondering, with a fiery embarrassment, what form his farewell would take.

After a brief silence he rose.

“Good-bye, then!” he said.

He bent low over her, looking closely into her unwilling face. And then—it was the merest touch—for the fraction of a second his lips were on her forehead.

Page 57

"Good-bye!" he said again, under his breath, and in another moment she heard his soft tread as he went away.

Her heart was throbbing madly; she felt as if it were leaping up and down within her. For a space she lay listening, every nerve upon the stretch. Then at last there came to her the sound of voices raised in farewell, the crunch of wheels below her window, the loud banging of a door. And with a gasp she turned her face into her pillow, and wept for sheer relief.

He had come and gone like an evil dream, and she was left safe in her father's house.

CHAPTER III

Three weeks after her wedding, Nan Cradock awoke to the amazing discovery that she was a rich woman; how rich it took her some time to realise, and when it did dawn upon her she was startled, almost dismayed.

Her recovery from the only illness she had ever known was marvellously rapid, and with her return to health her spirits rose to their accustomed giddy height. There was little in her surroundings to remind her of the fact that she was married, always excepting the unwonted presence of these same riches which she speedily began to scatter with a lavish hand. Her life slipped very easily back into its accustomed groove, save that the pinch of poverty was conspicuously absent. The first day of every month brought her a full purse, and for a long time the charm of this novelty went far towards quieting the undeniable sense of uneasiness that accompanied it.

It was only when the novelty began to wear away that the burdened feeling began to oppress her unduly. No one suspected it, not even Mona, who adhered rigorously to her promise, and wrote her weekly report of her sister's health to her absent brother-in-law long after Nan was fully capable of performing this duty for herself. Mona had always been considered the least feather-brained of the family, and she certainly fulfilled her trust with absolute integrity.

Piet Cradock's epistles were not quite so frequent, and invariably of the briefest. They were exceedingly formal at all times, and Nan's heart never warmed at the sight of his handwriting. It was thick and strong, like himself, and she always regarded it with a little secret sense of aversion.

Nevertheless, as time passed, and he made no mention of return, her dread of the future subsided gradually into the back of her mind. It had never been her habit to look forward very far, and she was still little more than a child. Gradually the fact of her marriage began to grow shadowy and unreal, till at length she almost managed to shut it out of her consideration altogether. She had accepted the man upon impulse, dazzled

by the glitter of his wealth. To find that he had drifted out of her life, and that the wealth remained, was the most blissful state of affairs that she could have desired.

Page 58

Slowly spring merged into summer, and more and more did it seem to Nan that the past was nothing but a dream. She returned to her customary pursuits with all her old zest, rising early in the mornings to follow the otter-hounds, tramping for miles, and returning ravenous to breakfast; or, again, spending hours in the saddle, and only returning at her own sweet will. Colonel Everard's household was one of absolute freedom. No one ever questioned the doings of anyone else. From the earliest they had one and all been accustomed to go their own way. And Nan was the freest and most independent of them all.

It was on a splendid morning in July that as she splashed along the marshy edge of a stream in hot pursuit of one of the biggest otters she had ever seen, a well-known voice accosted her by name.

"Hullo, Nan! I wondered if you would turn up when they told me you were still at home."

Nan whisked round, up to her ankles in mud.

"Hullo, Jerry, it's you, is it?" was her unceremonious reply. "Pleased to see you, my boy. But don't talk to me now. I can't think of anything but business."

She was off with the words, not waiting to shake hands. But Jerry Lister was not in the least discouraged by this treatment. He was accustomed to Nan and all her ways.

He pounded after her along the bank and joined her as a matter of course. A straight, good-looking youth was Jerry, as wild and headstrong as Nan herself. He was the grand-nephew of old Squire Grimshaw, Colonel Everard's special crony, and he and Nan had been chums from their childhood. He was only a year older than she, and in many respects he was her junior. "I say, you are all right again?" was his first question, when the otter allowed them a little breathing-space. "I was awfully sorry to hear about your accident, you know, but awfully glad, too, in a way. By Jove, I don't think I could have spent the Long here, with you in South Africa! What ever possessed you to go and marry a Boer, Nan?"

"Don't be an idiot!" said Nan sharply. "He isn't anything of the sort."

Jerry accepted the correction with a boyish grimace.

"I'm coming to call on you to-morrow, Mrs. Cradock," he announced.

Nan coloured angrily.

"You needn't trouble yourself," she returned. "I don't receive callers."

But Jerry was not to be shaken off. He linked an affectionate arm in hers.

“All right, Nan old girl, don’t be waxy,” he pleaded. “Come on the lake with me this afternoon instead. I’ll bring some prog if you will, and we’ll have one of our old red-letter days. Is it a promise?”

She hesitated, still half inclined to be ungracious.

“Well,” she said at length, moved in spite of herself by his persuasive attitude, “I will come to please you, on one condition.”

“Good!” ejaculated Jerry. “It’s done, whatever it is.”

“Don’t be absurd!” she protested, trying to be stern and failing somewhat ignominiously. “I will come only if you will promise not to talk about anything that you see I don’t like.”

Page 59

"Bless your heart," said Jerry, lifting her fingertips to his lips, "I won't utter a syllable, good or bad, without your express permission. You'll come, then?"

"Yes, I'll come," she said, allowing the smile that would not be suppressed. "But if you don't make it very nice, I shall never come again."

"All right," said Jerry cheerily. "I'll bring my banjo. You always like that. Come early, like a saint. I'll be at the boat-house at eleven."

He was; and Nan was not long after. The lake stretched for about a mile in the squire's park, and many were the happy hours that they had spent upon it.

It was a day of perfect summer, and they drifted through it in sublime enjoyment. Jerry soon discovered that the girl's marriage and anything remotely connected with it were subjects to be avoided, and as he had no great wish himself to investigate in that direction he found small difficulty in confining himself to more familiar ground. Without effort they resumed the old friendly intercourse that the girl's rash step had threatened to cut short, and long before the end of the afternoon they were as intimate as they had ever been.

"You mustn't go in yet," insisted Jerry, when a distant clock struck seven. "Wait another couple of hours. There's plenty of food left. And the moonrise will be grand to-night."

Nan did not need much persuading. She had always loved the lake, and Jerry's society was generally congenial. He had, moreover, been taking special pains to please her, and she was quite willing to be pleased.

She consented, therefore, and Jerry punted her across to her favourite nook for supper. She thoroughly enjoyed the repast, Jerry's ideas of what a picnic-basket should contain being of a decidedly lavish order.

The meal over, he took up his banjo and waxed sentimental. Nan lay among her cushions and listened in sympathetic silence. Undeniably Jerry knew how to make music, and he also knew when to stop—a priceless gift in Nan's estimation.

When the moon rose at last out of the summer haze, he had laid his instrument aside and was lying with his head on his arms and his face to the rising glory. They watched it dumbly in the silence of goodfellowship, till at last it topped the willows and shone in a broad, silver streak across the lake right up to the prow of the boat.

After a long time Jerry turned his dark head.

"I say, Nan!" he said, almost in a whisper.

“Yes?” she murmured back, her eyes still full of the splendour. The boy raised himself a little.

“Do you remember that day ever so long ago when we played at being sweethearts on this very identical spot?” he asked her softly.

She turned her eyes to his with a doubtful, questioning look.

“We weren’t in earnest, Jerry,” she reminded him.

He jerked one shoulder with a sharp, impatient gesture, highly characteristic of him.

Page 60

"I know we weren't. I shan't dream of being in earnest in that way for another ten—perhaps twenty—years. But there's no harm in making believe, is there, just now and then? I liked that game awfully, and so did you. You know you did."

Nan did not attempt to deny it. She sat up instead with her hands clasped round her knees and laughed like an elf.

Her wedding-ring caught the moonlight, and the boy leaned forward with a frown.

"Take that thing off, won't you, just for to-night? I hate to think you're married. You're not, you know. We're in fairyland, and married people never go there. The fairies will turn you out if they see it."

Very gently he inserted one finger between her clasped ones and began to draw the emblem off.

Nan made no resistance whatever. She only sat and laughed. She was in her gayest, most inconsequent mood. Some magic of the moonlight was in her veins that night.

"There!" said Jerry triumphantly. "Now you are safe. Jove! Did you hear that water-sprite gurgling under the boat? It must be ripping to be a water-sprite. Can't you see them, Nan, whisking about down there in couples along the stones? Give me your hand, and we'll dive under and join them."

But Nan's enthusiasm would not stretch to this. She fully understood his mood, but she would only sit in the moonlight and laugh, till presently Jerry, infected by her merriment, began to laugh too, and spun the ring he had filched from her high into the moonlight.

How it happened neither of them could ever afterwards say; but just at that critical moment when the ring was glittering in mid-air, some wayward current, or it might have been the water-sprite Jerry had just detected, lapped the water smartly against the punt and bumped it against the bank. Jerry exclaimed and nearly overbalanced backwards; Nan made a hasty grab at her falling property, but her hand only collided with his, making a similar grab at the same moment, and between them they sent the ring spinning far out into the moonlit ripples.

It disappeared before their dazzled eyes into that magic bar of light, and the girl and the boy turned and gazed at one another in speechless consternation.

Nan was the first to recover. She drew a deep breath, and burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"My dear boy, for pity's sake don't look like that! I never saw anything so absolutely tragic in my life. Why, what does it matter? I can buy another. I can buy fifty if I want them."

Thus reassured, Jerry began to laugh too, but not with Nan's abandonment. The incident had had a sobering effect upon him.

"But I'm awfully sorry," he protested. "All my fault. You must let me make it good."

This suggestion added to Nan's mirth. "Oh, I couldn't really. I should feel as if I was married to you, and I shouldn't like that at all. Now you needn't look cross, for you know you wouldn't either. No, don't be silly, Jerry. It doesn't matter the least little bit in the world."

Page 61

"But, I say, won't the absent one be savage?" suggested Jerry.

Nan tossed her head. "I'm sure I don't know. Anyhow it doesn't matter."

"Do you really mean that?" he persisted. "Don't you really care?"

Nan threw herself back in the boat with her face to the stars.

"Why, of course not," she declared, with regal indifference. "How can you be so absurd?"

And in face of such sublime recklessness, he was obliged to be convinced.

CHAPTER IV

Nan's picnic on the lake was not concluded much before ten o'clock.

She ran home through the moonlight, bareheaded, whistling as carelessly as a boy. Night and day were the same thing to her in the place in which she had lived all her life. There was not one of the village folk whom she did not know, not one for whom the doings of the wild Everards did not provide food for discussion. For Nan undoubtedly was an Everard still, her grand wedding notwithstanding. No one ever dreamed of applying any other title to her than the familiar "Miss Nan" that she had borne from her babyhood. There was, in fact, a general feeling that the unknown husband of Miss Nan was scarcely worthy of the high honour that had been bestowed upon him. His desertion of her on the very day succeeding the wedding had been freely criticised, and in many quarters condemned out of hand. No one knew the exact circumstances of the case, but all were agreed in pronouncing Miss Nan's husband a defaulter.

That Miss Nan herself was very far from fretting over the situation was abundantly evident, but this fact did not in any way tend to justify the offender, of whom it was beginning to be opined round the bars of the village inns that he was "one o' them queer sort of cusses that it was best for women to steer clear of."

Naturally these interesting shreds of gossip never reached Nan's ears. She was, as she had ever been, supremely free from self-consciousness of any description, and it never occurred to her that the situation in which she was placed was sufficiently peculiar to cause comment. The Everards had ever been a law unto themselves, and it was inconceivable that anyone should attempt to apply to them the conventional rules by which other people chose to let their lives be governed. Of course they were different from the rest of the world. It had been an accepted fact as long as she could remember, and it certainly had never troubled her, nor was it ever likely to do so.



She was sublimely unconscious of all criticism as she ran down the village street that night, nodding carelessly to any that she met, and finally turned lightly in at her father's gates, walking with elastic tread under the great arching beech trees that blotted the moonlight from her path.

The front door stood hospitably open, and she entered to find her father stretched in his favourite chair, smoking.

Page 62

He greeted her with his usual gruff indulgence.

“Hallo, you mad-cap! I was just wondering whether I would scour the country for you, or leave the door open and go to bed. I think it was going to be the last, though, to be sure, it would have served you right if I had locked you out. Had any dinner?”

“No, darling, supper—any amount of it.” Nan dropped a kiss upon his bald head in passing. “I’ve been with Jerry,” she said, “on the lake the whole day long. We watched the moon rise. It was so romantic.”

The Colonel grunted.

“More rheumatic than romantic I should have thought. Better have a glass of grog.”

Nan screwed up her bright face with a laugh.

“Heaven forbid, dad! And on a night like this. Oh, bother! Is that a letter for me?”

Colonel Everard was pointing to an envelope on the mantelpiece. She crossed the hall without eagerness, and picked it up.

“I’ve had one, too,” said the Colonel, after a brief pause, speaking with a jerk as if the words insisted upon being uttered in spite of him.

“You!” Nan paused with one finger already inserted in the flap. “What for?”

Her father was staring steadily at the end of his cigar, or he might have seen a hint of panic in her dark eyes.

“You will see for yourself,” he said, still in that uncomfortable, jerky style. “He seems to think—Well, I must say it sounds reasonable enough since he can’t get back at present; but you will see for yourself.”

A little tremor went through Nan as she opened the letter. With frowning brows she perused it.

It did not take long to read. The thick, upright writing was almost arrogantly distinct, recalling the writer with startling vividness.

He had written with his accustomed brevity, but there was much more than usual in his letter. He saw no prospect, so he told her, of being able to leave the country for some time to come. Affairs were unsettled, and likely to remain so. At the same time, there was no reason, now that her health was restored, that she should not join him, and he was writing to ask her father to take her out to him. He would meet them at Cape Town,

and if the Colonel cared to do so he would be very pleased if he would spend a few months with them.

The plan was expressed concisely but with absolute kindness. Nevertheless there was about the letter a certain tone of mastery which gave Nan very clearly to understand that the writer thereof did not expect to be disappointed. It was emphatically the letter of a husband to his wife, not of a lover to his beloved.

She looked up from it with a very blank face.

“My dear dad!” she ejaculated. “What can he be thinking of?”

Colonel Everard smiled somewhat ruefully.

“You, apparently,” he said, with an effort to speak lightly. “What shall we say to him—eh, Nan? You’ll like to go on the spree with your old dad to take care of you.”

Page 63

"Spree!" exclaimed Nan. And again in a lower key, with a still finer disdain: "Spree! Well"—tearing the letter across impulsively, with the action of a passionate child—"you can go on the spree if you like, dad, but I'm going to stay at home. I'm not going to run after him to the ends of the earth if he is my husband. It wasn't in the bargain, and I won't do it!"

She stamped like a little fury, scattering fragments of the torn letter in all directions.

Her father attempted a feeble remonstrance, but she overrode him instantly.

"I won't listen to you, dad!" she declared fiercely. "I tell you I won't do it! The man isn't living who shall order me to do this or that as if I were his slave. You can write and tell him so if you like. When I married him, he gave me to understand that we should only be out there for a few months at most, and then we were to settle in England. You see what a different story he tells now. But I won't be treated in that way. I won't be inveigled out there, and made to wait on his royal pleasure. He chose to go without me. I wasn't important enough to keep him in England, and now it's my turn. He isn't important enough to drag me out there. No, be quiet, daddy! I tell you I won't go! I won't go, I swear it!"

"My dear child," protested the Colonel, making himself heard at length in her pause for breath. "No one wants you to go anywhere or do anything against your will. Piet Cradock isn't so unreasonable as that, if he is a Dutchman. Now don't distress yourself. There isn't the smallest necessity for that. I thought it just possible that you might like the idea as I was to be with you. But as you don't—well, there's an end of it. We will say no more."

Nan's arm was around his neck as he ended, her cheek against his forehead.

"Dear, dear daddy, don't think I'm cross with you. You're just the sweetest old darling in the world, and I'd go to Kamschatka with you gladly—in fact, anywhere—anywhere—except South Africa. Can't we go somewhere together, just you and I? Let's go to Jamaica. I'm sure I can afford it."

"No, no, no!" protested the Colonel. "Get away with you, you baggage! What are you thinking of? Miss the cubbing season? Not I. And not you either, if I know you. There! Run along to bed, and take my blessing with you. I'll send a line to Piet, if you like, and tell him you don't object to waiting for him a bit longer under your old father's roof. Come, be off with you! I'm going to lock up."

He hoisted himself out of his chair with the words, looked at her fondly for a moment, took her pretty face between his hands, and kissed her twice.

"She's the worst pickle of the lot," he declared softly.

He did not add that she was also his darling of them all, but this was a perfectly open secret between them, and had been such as long as Nan could remember. She laughed up at him with tender impudence in recognition of the fact.

Page 64

CHAPTER V

The letter from Piet Cradock was not again referred to by either Nan or her father. The latter answered it in his own way after the lapse of a few weeks. He was of a peaceable, easy-going nature himself, and he did not anticipate any trouble with Nan's husband. After all, the child's reluctance to leave her home was perfectly natural. He, for his part, had never fully understood the attraction which his son-in-law had exercised upon her. He had been glad enough to have his favourite daughter provided for, but the actual parting with her had been a serious trouble to him, the most serious he had known for years, and he had been very far from desiring to quarrel with the Fate that had restored her to him.

He was comfortably convinced that Piet would understand all this. Moreover, the fellow was clearly very busy. All his energies seemed to be fully occupied. He would have but little time to spare for his wife, even if he had her at his side. No, on the whole, the Colonel was of opinion that Nan's decision was a wise one, and it seemed to him that, upon reflection, his son-in-law could scarcely fail to agree with him.

Something of this he expressed in his letter when he eventually roused himself to reply to Piet's invitation, and therewith he dismissed all further thought upon the subject from his mind. His darling had pleased herself all her life, and naturally she would continue to do so.

His letter went into silence, but there was nothing surprising in this fact. Piet was, of course, too busy to have any leisure for private affairs. The whole matter slid into the past with the utmost ease. No doubt he would come home some day, but very possibly not for years, and the Colonel was quite content with this vague prospect.

As for Nan, she flicked the matter from her with the utmost nonchalance. Since her father had undertaken to explain things, she did not even trouble herself to write an answer to her husband's letter. That letter had, in fact, very deeply wounded her pride. It had been a command, and Nan was not accustomed to such treatment. Never, in all her unruly life, had she yielded obedience to any. No discipline had ever tamed her. She had been free, free as air, and she had not the vaguest intention of submitting herself to the authority of anyone. The bare idea was unthinkable repugnant to her, foreign to her whole nature.

So, with a fierce disgust, she cast from her all memory of that brief message that had come to her from the man who called himself her husband, who had actually dared to treat her as one having the right to control her actions. She could be a thousand times more arrogant than he when occasion served, and she had not the faintest intention of allowing herself to be fettered by any man's tyranny.

Page 65

Swiftly the days of that splendid summer flew by. She scarcely knew how she spent them, but she was always in the open air, and almost invariably with Jerry. She missed him considerably when he returned to Oxford, but the hunting season was at hand, and soon engrossed all her thoughts. Old Squire Grimshaw was the master, and Nan and her father followed his hounds three days in every week. People had long since come to acquiesce in the absence of Nan's husband. Many of them had almost forgotten that the girl was married, since Nan herself so persistently ignored the fact. Gossip upon the subject had died down for lack of nourishment. And Nan pursued her reckless way untrammelled as of yore.

The week before Christmas saw Jerry once more at the Hall. He was as ardent a follower of the hounds as was Nan, and many were the breakneck gallops in which they indulged before a spell of frost put an end to this giddy pastime. Christmas came and went, leaving the lake frozen to a thickness of several inches, leaving Nan and the ever-faithful Jerry cutting figures of extraordinary elaboration on the ice.

The Hunt Ball had been fixed to take place on the sixth of January, and, in preparation for this event, Nan and some of her sisters were busily engaged beforehand in decking the Town Hall of the neighbourhood with evergreens and bunting. Jerry's assistance in this matter was, of course, invaluable, and when the important day arrived, he and Nan spent the whole afternoon in sliding about the floor to improve the surface.

So absorbing was this occupation that the passage of time was quite unnoticed by either of them till Nan at length discovered to her dismay that she had missed the train by which she had meant to return.

To walk back meant a trudge of five miles. To drive was out of the question, for all the carriages in the place had been requisitioned.

"What in the world shall I do?" she cried. "If I walk back, I shall never have time to dress. Oh, why haven't I got a motor?"

Jerry slapped his leg with a yell of triumph.

"My dear girl, you have! The very thing! I'll be your motor and chauffeur rolled into one. My bicycle is here. Come along, and I'll take you home on the step."

The idea was worthy of them both. Nan fell in with it with a gay chuckle. It was not the first time that she had indulged in this species of gymnastics with Jerry's co-operation, though, to be sure, some years had elapsed since the last occasion on which she had performed the feat.

She had not, however, forgotten her ancient prowess, and Jerry was delighted with his passenger. Poised on one foot, and holding firmly to his shoulders, Nan sailed down

the High Street in the full glare of the lamps. It was not a dignified mode of progression, but it was very far from being ungraceful.

She wore a little white fur cap on her dark hair, and her pretty face laughed beneath it like the face of a merry child. The danger of her position was a consideration that never occurred to her. She was in her wildest mood, and enjoying herself to the utmost.

Page 66

The warning hoot of a motor behind her dismayed her not at all.

"Hurry up, Jerry! Don't let them pass!" she urged.

And Jerry put his whole heart into his pedalling and bore her at the top of his speed.

It was an exciting race, but ending, as such races are bound to end, in the triumph of the motor. The great machine overtook them steadily, surely. For three seconds they were abreast, and Nan hammered her cavalier on the back with her muff in a fever of impatience. Then the motor glided ahead, leaving only the fumes of its petrol to exasperate the already heated Nan.

"Beasts!" she ejaculated tersely, while Jerry became so limp with laughter, that he nearly ceased pedalling altogether.

No further adventure befell them during the five-mile journey. The roads were in excellent condition, and the moon was high and frostily bright.

"It's been lovely," Nan declared, as they turned in at her father's gates. "And you're a brick, Jerry!"

"How many waltzes shall I get for it?" was Jerry's prompt rejoinder.

The girl's gay laugh rang silvery through the frosty air. Jerry had been asking the question at intervals all the afternoon.

"I'll give you all the extras," she laughed as she sprang lightly to the ground.

Jerry did not even dismount. His time also was limited.

"Yes?" he called over his shoulder, as he wheeled round and began to ride away.
"And?"

"And as many more as I can spare," cried Nan, and with a wave of her hand turned to enter the house.

The laugh was still on her lips as she mounted the steps. The hall-door stood open, and her father's voice hailed her from within.

"Hallo, Nan, you scapegrace! What mad-cap trick will you be up to next, I wonder?"

There was a decided note of uneasiness behind the banter of his tone which her quick ear instantly detected. She looked up sharply and in a second, as if at a touch of magic, the laughter all died out of her face.

A man was standing in the glow of the lamp-light slightly behind her father, a man of medium height and immense breadth, with a clean-shaven, heavy-browed face, and sombre eyes that watched her silently.

CHAPTER VI

Nan was ever quick in all her ways, and it was very seldom that she was disconcerted. Between the moment of her reaching the top step and that in which she entered the hall, she flashed from laughing childhood to haughty womanhood. The dignity with which she offered her hand to her husband was in its way superb.

“An unexpected pleasure!” was her icy comment.

He took the hand, looking closely into her eyes. He made no attempt to draw her nearer, and Nan remained at arm’s-length. Yet something in his scrutiny affected her, for a shiver went through her, proudly though she met it.

Page 67

"It is cold," she said, by way of explanation. "It is freezing hard, and we came all the way by road."

"Yes," he said, in his deep, slow voice. "I saw you."

"You saw me?" Nan's eyebrows went up; she was furiously conscious that she blushed.

"I passed you in a motor," he explained.

"Oh!" She withdrew her hand, and turned to the fire with a little laugh, raging inwardly at the fate that had betrayed her.

Standing by the hearth, she pulled off her gloves, and spread her hands to the blaze. It was a mere pretence, for she was hot all over by that time, hot and quivering and fiercely resentful. There was another feeling also behind her resentment, a feeling which she would not own, that made her heart thump oddly, as it had thumped only once before in her life—when this man had touched her face with his lips.

"Well," she said, standing up after a few minutes, "I must go and dress, and so must you, dad. We are going to the Hunt Ball to-night," she added, with a brief glance in her husband's direction.

He made no reply of any sort. His eyes were fixed upon her left hand. After a moment she became aware of this, and slipped it carelessly into her pocket. Whistling softly, she turned to go.

At the foot of the stairs she heard her father's voice, and paused.

"You had better come, too," he was saying to his son-in-law.

Nan wheeled sharply, almost as if she would protest, but she checked her words unspoken.

Quietly Piet Cradock was making reply:

"Thank you, Colonel. I think I had better."

Across the hall Nan met his gaze still unwaveringly fixed upon her, and she returned it with the utmost defiance of which she was capable. Did he actually fancy that she could be coerced into joining him, she asked herself—she who had always been free as the air? Well, he would soon discover his mistake. She would begin to teach him from that moment.

With her head still held high, she turned and mounted the stairs.

Mona was waiting for her in much disturbance of spirit.

“He arrived early this afternoon,” was her report. “We were all so astonished. He has come for you, Nan, and he says he must start back next week without fail. Isn’t it short notice? I wish he had written to say he was coming. He sat and talked to dad all the afternoon. And then, as you didn’t come, he started off in his motor to find you. He must have gone to the station first, or he would have met you sooner.”

To all this Nan listened with a set face, while she raced through her dressing. She made no comment whatever. The only signs that she heard lay in her tense expression and unsteady fingers.

They did not descend till the last minute, just as the carriage containing the Colonel and three more of his daughters was driving away.

Piet was standing like a massive statue in the hall. As the two girls came down, he moved forward.

Page 68

"I have kept the motor for you," he said.

Mona thanked him. Nan did not utter a word. She would not touch the hand that would have helped her in, and she kept her lips firmly closed throughout the drive.

When she entered the ballroom at length her husband was by her side, but neither by word nor look did she acknowledge his presence there.

Jerry spied her instantly, and came towards her. She went quickly to meet him.

"For goodness' sake," she whispered urgently, "help me to get away from that man!"

"Of course," said Jerry, promptly leading her away in the opposite direction till the crowd swallowed them. "Who the dickens is he?"

She looked at him with a small, piteous smile.

"His name is Piet Cradock," she said.

"Great Scotland!" ejaculated Jerry; and added fiercely: "What the devil has he come back for? What does he want?"

Nan threw back her head with a sudden wild laugh.

"Guess!" she cried.

But Jerry knew without guessing, and swore savagely under his breath.

"But you won't go with him—not yet, anyhow?" he urged. "He can't hurry you off without consulting your convenience. You won't submit to that?"

An imp of mischief had begun to dance in Nan's eyes.

"I am told he has to sail next week," she said. "But I think it possible that by that time he won't be quite so anxious to take me with him. Time alone will prove. How many waltzes did you ask for?"

"As many as I can get, of course," said Jerry, taking instant advantage of this generous invitation.

She laughed recklessly, and gave him her card.

"Take them then, my dear boy. I am ready to dance all night long."

She laughed again still more recklessly when he handed her card back to her.



"You are very daring!" she remarked.

He looked momentarily disconcerted.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"I mind? It's what I meant you to do," she answered lightly. "Shall I say you are very daring on my behalf?"

Jerry flushed a deep red.

"I would do anything under the sun for you, Nan," he said, in a low voice.

Whereat she laughed again—a gay, sweet laugh, and left him.

CHAPTER VII

Piet Cradock spent nearly the whole of that long evening leaning against a doorpost watching his wife dancing with Jerry Lister. They were the best-matched couple in the room, and, as a good many remarked, they seemed to know it.

Through every dance Nan laughed and talked with a feverish gaiety, conscious of that long, long gaze that never varied. She felt almost hysterical under it at last. It made her desperate—so desperate that she finally quitted the ballroom altogether in Jerry's company, and remained invisible till people were beginning to take their departure.

Page 69

That feeling at the back of her mind had grown to a definite sensation that she could not longer ignore or trample into insignificance. She was horribly afraid of that silent man with his gloomy, inscrutable eyes. His look frightened, almost terrified her. She felt like a trapped creature that lies quaking in the grass, listening to the coming footsteps of its captor.

In a vague way Jerry was aware of her inquietude, and when they rose at length to leave their secluded corner, he turned and spoke with a certain blunt chivalry that did him credit.

"I say, Nan, if things get unbearable, you'll promise to let me know? I'll do anything to help you, you know—anything under the sun."

And Nan squeezed his arm tightly in acknowledgment, though she made no verbal answer.

Amid a crowd of departing dancers they came face to face with Piet. He was standing in an attitude of immense patience near the door. Very quietly he addressed her.

"Colonel Everard and your sisters have gone. The motor is waiting to take you when you are ready."

She started back sharply. Her nerves were on edge, and the news was a shock. Her hand was still on Jerry's arm. Impulsively she turned to him.

"I haven't had nearly enough yet," she declared. "Come along, Jerry! Let's dance to the bitter end!"

Jerry took her at her word on the instant, and began to thread the way back to the ballroom. But before they reached it a quiet hand fastened upon his shoulder, detaining him.

"Pardon me," said Piet Cradock, "but my wife has had more than enough already, and I am going to take her home!"

Jerry stopped, struck silent for the moment by sheer astonishment.

Without further words Piet proceeded to transfer Nan's hand from the boy's arm to his own. He did it with absolute gentleness, but with a resolution that admitted of no resistance—at least Nan attempted none.

But the action infuriated Jerry, and in the flurry of the moment he completely lost his head.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded loudly.

An abrupt silence fell upon the buzzing throng about them. Through it, with unfaltering composure, fell Piet Cradock's reply.

"I mean exactly what I have said. If you have any objection to raise, I am ready to deal with it, either now or later—as you shall choose."

The words were hardly uttered when Nan did an extraordinary thing. She lifted a perfectly colourless face with a ghastly smile upon it, and held out her free hand to Jerry.

"All right, Jerry," she said. "I think I'll go after all. I am rather tired. Good-night, dear boy! Pleasant dreams! Now, Piet"—she turned that quivering smile upon her husband, and it was the bravest thing she had ever done—"don't keep me waiting. Go and get your coat, and be quick about it; or I shall certainly be ready first."

Page 70

He turned away at once, and the incident was over, since by this unexpected move Nan had managed to convey to her too ardent champion that she desired it to be so.

He departed sullenly to the refreshment-room, mystified but obedient and she dived hurriedly into the cloakroom in search of her property.

She found Piet waiting for her when she came out, and she passed forth with him to the waiting motor with a laugh and a jest for the benefit of the onlookers.

But the moment the door closed upon them she fell into silence, drawn back from him as far as possible, her cold hands clenched tight under her cloak.

He did not attempt to speak to her during the quarter of an hour's drive, sitting mutely beside her in statuesque stillness; and it was she who, when he handed her out, broke the silence.

"I have something to say to you."

He bent before her stiffly.

"I am at your service."

There was something in his words that sounded ironical to her, something that sent the blood to her face in a burning wave. She turned in silence and ascended the steps in front of him.

She found the door unlocked, but the hall was empty, and lighted only by the great flames that spouted up from the log-fire on the open hearth.

Clearly the rest of the family had retired, and a sudden, sharp suspicion flashed through Nan that her husband had deliberately laid his plans for this private interview with her.

It set her heart pounding again within her, but she braced herself to treat him with a high hand. He must not, he should not, assume the mastery over her.

Silently she waited as he shut and bolted the great door, and then quietly crossed the shadowy hall to join her.

She had dropped her cloak from her shoulders, and the firelight played ruddily over her dress of shimmering white, revealing her slim young beauty in every delicate detail. Very pale, but erect and at least outwardly calm, she faced him.

"What I have to say to you," she said, "will make you very angry; but I hope you will have the patience to listen to me, because it must be said."

He did not answer. He merely stooped and stirred the fire to a higher blaze, then turned and looked at her with those ever-watching eyes of his.

Nan's hands were clenched unconsciously. She was making the greatest effort of her life.

"It has come to this," she said, forcing herself with all her quivering strength to speak quietly. "I do not wish to be your wife. I have realized for some time that my marriage was a mistake, and I thought it possible, I hoped with all my heart, that you would see it, too. I suppose, by your coming back in this way, that you have not yet done so?"

He was standing very quietly before her with his hands behind him. Notwithstanding her wild misgiving, she could not see that he was in any way angered by her words. He seemed to observe her with a grave interest. That was all.

Page 71

A tremor of passion went through her. His passivity was not to be borne. In some curious fashion it hurt her. She felt as though she were beating and bruising herself against bars of iron.

"Surely," she said, and her voice shook in spite of her utmost effort to control it—"surely you must see that you are asking of me more than I can possibly give. I own that I am—nominally—your wife, but I realize now that I can never be anything more to you than that. I cannot go away with you. I can never make my home with you. I married you upon impulse. I did you a great wrong, but you will admit that you hurried me into it. And now that—that my eyes are open, I find that I cannot go on. Would it—would it—" She was faltering under that unchanging gaze, but she compelled herself to utter the question—"be quite impossible to—to get a separation?"

"Quite," said Piet.

He did not raise his voice, but she shrank at the brief word, shrank uncontrollably as if he had struck her.

He went on quite steadily, but his eyes gave her no rest. They seemed to her to gleam red in the glancing firelight.

"I do not admit that our marriage was a mistake. I was always aware that you married me for my money. But on the other hand I was willing to pay your price. I wanted you. And—I want you still. Nothing will alter that fact. I am sorry if you think you have made a bad bargain, for you will have to abide by it. Perhaps some day you will change your mind again. But it is not my habit to change mine. That is, I think, all that need be said upon the subject."

There was not the faintest hint of vehemence in his tone, but there was unmistakable authority. Having spoken, he stood grimly waiting for her next move.

As for Nan, a sudden fury entered into her that possessed her more completely than any fear. To be thus mastered in a few curt sentences was more than her wild spirit would endure. Without an instant's hesitation she flung down the gauntlet.

"It is true," she said, speaking quickly, "that I married you for your money, but since you knew that, you were as much to blame as I. Had I known then what sort of man you were, I would sooner have gone into the workhouse. I am quite aware that it is thanks to you that my father is not a ruined man, but I—I protest against being made the price for your benefits. I will never touch another penny of your money myself, and neither shall any of my family if I can prevent it. As to abiding by my bargain, I refuse absolutely and unconditionally. I do not acknowledge your authority over me. I will be no man's slave, and—and, sooner than live with you as your wife, I—I will die in a ditch!"

Furiously she flung the words at him, too much carried away by her own madness to note their effect upon him, too angry to see the sudden, leaping flame in his eyes; too utterly reckless to realize that fire kindles fire.

Page 72

Her fierce wrath was in its way sublime. She was like a beautiful, wild creature raging at its captor, too infuriated to be afraid.

“I defy you,” she declared proudly, “to make me do anything against my will!”

There was scorn as well as defiance in her voice—scorn because he stood before her so silently; scorn because the fierce torrent of her anger had flowed unchecked. She had only to stand up to him, it seemed, and like the giant of the fable he dwindled to a pigmy. She was no longer hurt by his passivity. She despised him for it.

But it was for the last time in her life. As she turned contemptuously to pick up her cloak, he moved.

With a single stride he had reached her, and in an instant his hand was on her arm, his face was close to hers. And then she saw, what she had been too self-engrossed to see before, that fire had kindled fire indeed, and that those rash words of hers had waked the savage in him.

She made a sharp, instinctive effort to free herself, but he held her fast. She had outrun his patience at last.

“So,” he said, “you defy me, do you? You defy me to take what is my own? That is not very wise of you.”

He spoke under his breath, and as he spoke he drew her to him suddenly, violently, with a strength that was brutal. For a moment his eyes compelled hers, terrible eyes alight with a passion that scorched her with its fiery intensity. And then abruptly his arms tightened. She was at his mercy, and he did not spare her. Savagely, fiercely, he rained burning kisses upon her shrinking face, upon her neck, her shoulders, her hands, till, after many seconds of vain resistance, spent, quivering, terrified, she broke into agonized tears against his breast.

His hold relaxed then, but tightened again as her trembling limbs refused to support her. He held her for a while till her agitation had in some degree subsided; then at last he took her two shaking hands into one of his, and turned her face upwards.

Once more his eyes held hers, but the fire in them had died down to a smoulder. His mouth was grim.

“Come!” he said quietly, “you won’t defy me after this?”

Her white lips only quivered in reply. She made no further effort to resist him.

Very slowly he took his arm from her, still holding her hands.

“You have married a savage,” he said, “but you would never have known it if you had not taunted me with your defiance. Let me tell you now—for it is as well that you should know it—that there is nothing—do you hear?—nothing in this world that I cannot make you do if I so choose! But if you are wise, you will not challenge me to prove this. It is enough for you to know that as I have mastered myself, so I can—and so I will—master you!”

His words fell with a ring of iron. The old inflexibly sombre demeanour by which alone till that night she had always known him clothed him like a coat of mail. Only the grasp of his hand was vital and close. It seemed to burn her flesh.

Page 73

"I have done!" he said, after a pause. "Have you anything further to say to me?"

She found it within her power to free herself, and did so. She was shaking from head to foot. The untamed violence of the man had appalled her, but his abrupt resumption of self-control was almost more terrible. She felt as if his will compassed and constrained her like bands of iron.

She stood before him in panting silence, a shrinking woman, striving vainly to raise from the dust the shield of pride that he had so rudely shattered and flung aside. She could not speak to him. She had no words. From the depths of her soul she hated him. But—it had come to this—she did not dare to tell him so.

He waited quietly for a few seconds; then unexpectedly, but without vehemence, he held out his hand to her.

"Anne," he said, a subtle change in his deep voice, "fight against me, and you will be miserable, for I am bound to conquer you. But come to me—come to me of your own free will—and I swear before Heaven that I will make you happy."

But Nan held back with horror, almost with loathing, in her eyes. She did not utter a word. There was no need.

His hand fell. For a second the fire that smouldered in his eyes shot upwards to a flame, but it died down again instantly. He turned from her in silence and picked up her cloak.

He did not look at her as he handed it to her, and Nan did not dare to look at him. Dumbly she forced her trembling body into subjection to her will. She crossed the hall without faltering, and went without sound or backward glance up the stairs. And the man was left alone in the flickering firelight.

CHAPTER VIII

To Mona fell the task of making preparation for Nan's departure, for Nan herself did not raise a finger to that end. Three days only remained to her of the old free life—three days in which to bid farewell to everybody and everything she knew and loved.

Her husband did not attempt to obtrude his presence upon her during those three days. The man's patience was immense, cloaking him as with a garment of passive strength. He was merely a guest in Colonel Everard's house, and a silent guest at that.

No one knew what had passed between him and his young wife on the night of the Hunt Ball, but it was generally understood that he had asserted his authority over her after a fashion that admitted of no resistance. Only Mona could have told of the white-faced,

terrified girl who had lain trembling in her arms all through the dark hours that had followed their interview, but Mona knew when to hold her peace, though it was no love for her brother-in-law that sealed her lips.

So, with a set face, she packed her sister's belongings, never faltering, scarcely pausing for thought, till on the very last day she finished her task, and then sat musing alone in the darkness of the winter evening.

Page 74

Nan had been out all the afternoon, no one knew exactly where, though it was supposed that she was paying farewell visits. The Colonel, whose courteous instincts would not suffer him to neglect a guest, had been out shooting with his son-in-law all day long. Mona heard them come tramping up the drive and enter the house, as she sat above in the dark. She listened without moving, and knew that one of her sisters was giving them tea in the hall.

Two hours passed, but Nan did not return. Mona rose at last to dress for dinner. Her face shone pale as she lighted her lamp, but her eyes were steadfast; they held no anxiety.

Descending the stairs at length she found Piet waiting below before the fire. He looked round as she came down, looked up the stairs beyond her, and gravely rose to give her his chair.

Mona was generally regarded as hostess in her father's house, though she was not his eldest daughter. She possessed a calmness of demeanour that was conspicuously lacking in all the rest.

She sat down quietly, her hands folded about her knees. "Have you had good sport?" she asked, her serene eyes raised to his.

There was a slight frown between Piet's brows. Hitherto he had always regarded this girl as his friend. To-night, for the first time, she puzzled him. There was something hostile about her something he felt rather than saw, yet of which from the very moment of her coming, he was keenly conscious.

He scarcely answered her query. Already his wits were at work.

Suddenly he asked her a blunt question. "Has Anne come in yet?"

She answered him quite as bluntly, almost as if she had wished for his curt interrogation. "No."

He raised his brows for an instant, then in part reassured by her absolute composure, he merely commented: "She is late."

Mona said nothing. She turned her quiet eyes to the blaze before her. There was not the faintest sign of agitation in her bearing.

"Do you know what she is doing?" He asked the question slowly, half reluctantly it seemed.

Again she looked at him. Clear and contemptuous, her eyes met his.

“Yes, I know.”

The words, the look, stabbed him with a swift suspicion. He bent towards her, his hand gripped her wrist.

“What do you mean? Where is she?”

She made no movement to avoid him. A faint, grim smile hovered about her calm mouth.

“I can tell you what I mean,” she said quietly. “I cannot tell you where she is.”

“Then tell me what you mean,” he said between his teeth.

His face was close to hers, and in that moment it was terrible. But Mona did not flinch. The small, bitter smile passed, that was all.

“I mean,” she said, speaking very steadily and distinctly, “that you will go back to South Africa without her after all. I mean that by your hateful and contemptible brutality you have driven her from you for ever. I mean that you have forced her into taking a step that will compel you to set her free from your tyranny. I mean that simply and solely to escape from you she has run away with—another man.”

Page 75

A quiver of pain went over her face as she ended. With a swift, passionate movement she rose, flinging her mask of composure aside. The hand that gripped her wrist was bruising her flesh, but she never felt it.

“Yes,” she said, with abrupt vehemence. “That is what you have done—you—you! You would not stoop to win her. You chose to take her by force, and force is the one thing in the world that she will never tolerate. You bullied her, frightened her, humiliated her. You drove her to do this desperate thing. And you face me now, you dare to face me, because I am a weak woman. If I were a man, I would kick you out of the house. I—I believe I would kill you! Even Nan cannot hate you or despise you one-tenth as much as I do!”

She ceased, but her eyes blazed their hatred at him as her heart cursed him. She was furious as a tigress that defends her young.

As for the man, his hand was still clenched upon her wrist, but no violent outburst escaped him. He was white to the lips, but he was absolutely sane. If he heard her wild reproaches, he passed them over.

“Who is the man?” he said, and his voice fell like a word of command, arresting, controlling, compelling.

It was not what she had expected. She had been prepared for tempestuous, for overwhelming, wrath. The absence of this oddly disconcerted her. Her own tornado of indignation was checked. She answered him almost involuntarily.

“Jerry Lister.”

He frowned as if trying to recall the owner of the name, and again without her conscious will she explained.

“You saw him that night at the ball. They were together all the evening.”

The frown passed from his face.

“That—cub!” he said slowly. “And”—his eyes were searching hers closely; he spoke with unswerving determination—“where have they gone?”

She withstood his look though she felt its compulsion.

“I refuse to tell you that.”

“You know?” he questioned.

“Yes, I know.”

"Then you will tell me." He spoke with conviction. She felt as if his eyes were burning her.

"Then you will tell me," he repeated, as if she had not heard him.

"I refuse," she said again; but she said it with a wavering resolution. Undoubtedly there was something colossal about this man. She began to feel the grip of his fingers upon her wrist. The pain of it became intense, yet she knew that he was not intentionally torturing her.

"You are hurting me," she said, and instantly his hold relaxed. But he did not let her go.

"Answer me!" he said.

"Why should I answer you?" It was the last resort of her weakening will.

He betrayed no impatience.

"You will answer me for your sister's sake," he told her grimly.

"What do you mean? You will follow her?"

"I shall follow her."

"And bring her back?"

Page 76

"Back here? No, certainly not."

"You will hurt her, bully her, terrify her!" The words were quick with agitation.

He ignored them. "Tell me where she is."

She made a last effort.

"If I tell you—will you take me with you?"

"No," he said, "I will not."

"Then—then—" She was looking straight into those pitiless eyes. It seemed she could not help herself. "I will tell you," she said at last. "But you will be kind to her? You will remember how young she is, and that—that you drove her to it?"

Her voice was piteous, her resistance was dead.

"I shall remember," he said very quietly, "one thing only."

"Yes?" she murmured. "Yes?"

"That she is my wife," he said, in the same level tone. "Now—answer me."

And because there was no longer any alternative course, she yielded.

Had he shown himself a raging demon she could have resisted him, and rejoiced in it. But this man, with his rigid self-control, his unswerving resolution, his deadly directness, dominated her irresistibly.

Without argument he had changed her point of view. Without argument or protestation of any sort, he had convinced her that it was no passing fancy of his that had prompted him to choose Nan for his wife. She had vaguely suspected it before. Now she knew.

CHAPTER IX

It was very dark over the moors. The solitary lights of a cab crawling almost at a foot pace along the lonely road shone like a will-o'-the-wisp through the snow. It had been snowing for hours, steadily, thickly, and the cold was intense. The dead heather by the roadside had long been completely hidden under that ever-increasing load. It lay in great billows of white wherever the carriage lamps revealed it, stretching away into the darkness, an immense, untrodden desert, wrapped in a deathly silence, more terrible than any sound.

It seemed to Nan, shivering inside that cheerless cab, as if the world had stopped like a run-down watch, and that she alone, with her melancholy equipage, retained in all that vast stillness the power to move.

She wished heartily that she had permitted Jerry to come to the station to meet her, but for some reason not wholly intelligible to herself she had prohibited this. And he, ever obedient to her behests, had sent the conveyance to fetch her, remaining behind himself to complete the preparations for her reception upon which he had been engaged for the past two days at the tiny, incommensurable shooting-box which his father had bequeathed to him, and of which not very valuable piece of landed property he was somewhat inordinately proud.

It had been a tedious cross-country journey, and the five miles from the station seemed to Nan interminable. Already deep down in her heart were stirring ghastly doubts regarding the advisability of this mad expedition of hers. Jerry, as she well knew, was fully prepared to enjoy the situation to the utmost. He was a trusty friend in need to her, no more, and she had not the smallest misgiving so far as he was concerned.

Page 77

He would be to her what he had ever been, breezy comrade, merry friend—romantic cavalier, perhaps, but in such a fashion as to convince her that he was only playing at romance. It had always been his attitude towards her, and she anticipated no change. The boy's natural chivalry had moved her to accept his help, though she well knew that the step she had taken was a desperate one, even for one of the wild Everards. That it would fulfil its purpose she did not doubt. Her husband, she was fully convinced, would take no further steps to deprive her of her liberty. Her notions of legal procedure in such a case were of the haziest, but she had not the faintest doubt that this last, wildest escapade of hers would sooner or later procure her her freedom from the chain that so galled her.

And yet she started and shivered at every creak of the crazy vehicle that was bearing her to the haven of her emancipation. She was horribly, unreasonably afraid, now that she had taken this rash step. Would it upset her father very greatly, she wondered? But surely he would not think badly of her for making a way of escape for herself. He had been powerless to deliver her. Surely, surely he would understand!

The cab jolted to a standstill, and out of the darkness came an eager, boyish voice, bidding her welcome. An impetuous hand wrenched open the door, and she and Jerry were face to face.

She never recalled afterwards crossing the threshold of his little abode. She was numbed and weary in mind and body. But she found herself at length seated before a bright fire, with a cup of steaming tea in her hand, and Jerry hovering about her in high delight; and the comfort of his welcome revived her at length to an active realization of her surroundings.

Clearly the adventure, mad, lawless as it undoubtedly was, was nothing but a picnic to him. He was enjoying himself immensely without a thought of any possible consequences, and it was plain that this was the attitude in which he expected her to regard the matter.

With an effort she responded to his mood, but she could not shake off the burden of doubt and foreboding that oppressed her. She felt as if the long, bitter journey had in some fashion aged her. Jerry's gaiety was as the prattle of a child to her now. They had been children together till that day, but she felt that they could never be so again. Never before had she stopped in her headlong course to look ahead, to count the cost! Now, for the first time, misgivings arose within her upon Jerry's score. What if this boy who had lent himself so lightly, so absolutely freely, to her scheme for deliverance, were made in any way to suffer for his reckless generosity? For this it had been with him—and this only—as she well knew.

With sheer, boyish gallantry, he had offered his protection; with sheer, girlish recklessness, she had accepted it. And now—now she had in a few hours crossed the

boundary between childhood and womanhood and she stood aghast, asking herself what she had done!

Page 78

By what means understanding had come to her she did not stay to question. The tragic force of it overwhelmed all reasoning. She knew beyond all doubting that she had made the most ghastly mistake of her life. She had done it in blindness, but the veil had been rent away; and, horror-struck, she now beheld the accursed quicksand into which they had blundered.

"I say," said Jerry, "you're awfully tired, aren't you? You're positively haggard. I've got quite a decent little dinner for you, and I've done every blessed thing myself. There isn't a soul in the house except us two. I thought you'd like it best."

She smiled at him wanly, and thanked him. He was watching her with friendly, anxious eyes.

"Yes; well, drink that up and have some more. I'm afraid you'll think the accommodation rather poor. It's only a pillbox, you know. I'll show you round when you're ready. I've got my kennel in the kitchen. Best place for a watch-dog, eh? But you've only got to thump on the floor if you want anything. There, that's better. You don't look quite so frozen as you did. Come, it's rather a lark, isn't it?"

His boyish eyes pleaded with her, and again she made a valiant effort to respond. She knew what stupendous efforts he had been making to secure her comfort.

"Everything is perfect," she declared, "and you're the nicest boy in the world. I'm quite warm now. What a dear little hall, to be sure!"

"Hall!" said Jerry. "It's the living-room! But there's another one upstairs that you can sit in. I thought you would like the upper regions all to yourself. We can call on each other, you know, now and then. I say, it's rather a lark, isn't it? Come and see my preparations for dinner."

She went with him into the little bare kitchen, and bestowed lavish praise upon everything she saw.

Jerry's cooking was an accomplishment of which he had some reason to be proud. He was roasting a pheasant for his visitor's delectation.

"I always do the cooking when we camp out," he explained. "Just sit down while I finish peeling the potatoes."

He pointed to a truckle bedstead in the corner; and Nan seated herself and made a determined effort to banish her depression.

Jerry's preparations for his own comfort were anything but elaborate.

“Oh, I could sleep on bare boards,” he lightly said, when she commented upon the hardness of his couch. “I know the furniture isn’t up to much, but it isn’t a bad little shanty when you’re used to it. My pater and mater spent their honeymoon here years ago, and I stayed here with two other fellows for three weeks’ grouse-shooting a couple of years back. Rare sport we had, too. Do you mind passing over that saucepan? Thanks! I say, Nan, I hope you don’t mind it being a bit rough.”

“My dear boy,” Nan said impulsively, “if it were a palace I shouldn’t like it half so well.”

Page 79

Jerry grinned serenely.

"Yes, it's snug, anyhow, and I think you'll like that pheasant. There's another one in the larder, so we shall have something to eat if we're snowed up. That cupboard leads upstairs. Perhaps you would like to go and explore. Dinner in half an hour."

Nan availed herself of this suggestion. She was frankly curious to know what Jerry's ideas of feminine comfort might be. She ascended the steep cottage stairs that wound up to the first floor, looking about her with considerable interest. The narrow staircase was lighted from above, and she finally emerged into a little room in which a fire burned brightly. A sofa had been drawn in front of it, and was piled with cushions. There were one or two basket-chairs, and a small square table bearing a paper-shaded lamp, and a newspaper, a "Punch," Jerry's banjo, and a cigarette case.

The window was covered with a red curtain, and the cosy warmth of the place sent a glow of comfort through Nan. Jerry's efforts had not been in vain.

From this apartment she passed into another beyond, the door of which stood half open, and found herself in a bedroom. A small stove burned in a corner of this, and upon it a kettle steamed merrily. There was room for but little furniture besides the bed, but the general effect was exceedingly comforting to the girl's oppressed soul. She sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned her aching head against the back.

What was happening at home she wondered? Her departure must be known by this time. Mona would have told Piet. She tried to picture the man's untrammelled wrath when he heard. How furious he would be! She shivered a little. She was quite sure he would never want to see her again.

And yet, curiously, there still ran in her brain those words he had uttered on that night that she had defied him—that dreadful night when he had held her in his arms and forced her to endure his hateful kisses!

She could almost hear his deep voice speaking: "Anne, fight against me and you will be miserable, for I am bound to conquer you. But come to me—come to me of your own free will—and I swear before Heaven that I will make you happy!" Make her happy! He! She could not imagine it. And yet it was true that, fighting against him, she was miserable.

With a great sigh, she rose at last and began to remove her outdoor things. It was done—it was done. What was the use of stopping on the wrong side of the hedge to think? She had taken the leap. There could never be any return for her. The actual mistake had been committed long, long ago, when she had married this man for his money. That had been monstrous, contemptible! She realized it now. But that, too, was beyond remedy. Her only hope left was that in his fury he would set her free, and that without

injury to Jerry. She had not the faintest notion how he would set about it; but doubtless he would not keep her long in ignorance. He would be more eager now than she had ever been to snap asunder the chain that bound them to each other. Yes, she was quite, quite sure that he would never want to see her again.

Page 80

CHAPTER X

Jerry's dinner was not, for some reason, quite the success he had anticipated.

Nan made no complaint of the cooking, but she ate next to nothing, to the grief of his hospitable soul. She was tired, of course, but there was something in her manner that he could not fathom. She was silent and unresponsive. There was almost an air of tragedy about her that made her so unfamiliar that he felt as if he were entertaining a stranger. He did not like the change. His old domineering, impetuous playfellow was infinitely easier to understand. He did not feel at ease with this quiet, white-faced woman, who treated him with such wholly unaccustomed courtesy.

"I say," he said, when the meal was ended, "let's go upstairs and have a smoke. I can clear away after you have gone to bed. Or do you want to go to bed now? It's nearly nine, so you may if you like."

She thanked him, and declined.

"I shouldn't sleep if I did," she said with a shiver. "No; I will help you wash up, and then we will go upstairs and have some music."

Jerry fell in eagerly with this idea. He loved his banjo. He demurred a little at accepting her assistance in the kitchen, but finally yielded, for she would not be refused. She seemed to dread the thought of solitude.

When they went upstairs at length, she made a great effort to shake off her depression. She even sang a little to one or two of Jerry's melodies, but her customary high spirits remained conspicuously absent, and after a while Jerry became impatient, and laid the instrument down.

"What's the matter?" he asked bluntly.

Nan was sitting with her feet on the fender, her eyes upon the flames. His question did not seem to surprise her.

"You wouldn't understand," she said, "if I were to tell you."

"Well, you might as well give me the chance," he responded. "My intelligence is up to the average, I dare say."

She looked round at him with a faint smile.

"Oh, don't be huffy, dear boy! Why should you? You want to know what is the matter? Well, I'll tell you. I'm afraid—I'm horribly afraid—that I've made a great mistake."

"You have?" said Jerry. "How? What do you mean?"

"I knew you would ask that," she said, with a little, helpless gesture of the shoulders. "And it is just that that I can't explain to you. You see, Jerry, I've only just begun to realize it myself."

Jerry was staring at her blankly.

"Do you mean, that you wish you hadn't come?" he said.

She nodded, rising suddenly from her chair.

"Oh, Jerry, don't be vexed, though you've a perfect right. I've made a ghastly, a perfectly hideous mistake. I—I can't think how I ever came to do it. But—but I wouldn't mind so frightfully if it weren't for you. That's what troubles me most—to have made a horrible mess of my life, and to have dragged you into it." Her voice shook, and she broke off for a moment, biting her lips. Then: "Oh, Jerry," she wailed, "I've done a dreadful thing—a dreadful thing! Don't you see it—what he will think of me—how he will despise me?"

Page 81

The last words came muffled through her hands. Her head was bowed against the chimney-piece.

Jerry was nonplussed. He rose somewhat awkwardly, and drew near the bowed figure.

"But, my dear girl," he said, laying a slightly hesitating hand upon her shoulder, "what the devil does it matter what he thinks? Surely you don't—you can't care—care the toss of a half-penny?"

But here she amazed him still further.

"I do, Jerry, I do!" she whispered vehemently. "He's horrid—oh, he's horrid. But I can't help caring. I wanted him to think the very worst possible of me before I came. But now—but now—Then too, there's you," she ended irrelevantly. "What could they do to you, Jerry? Could they put you in prison?"

"Great Scott, no!" said Jerry. "You needn't cry over me. I always manage to fall on my feet. And, anyhow, it isn't a hanging matter. I say, cheer up, Nan, old girl! Don't you think you'd better go to bed? No? Well, let me play you something cheerful, then. I've never seen you in the dumps before. And I don't like it. I quite thought this would be one of our red-letter days. Look up, I say! I believe you're crying."

Nan was not crying, but such was the concern in his voice that she raised her head and smiled to reassure him.

"You're very, very good to me, Jerry," she said earnestly. "And oh, I do hope I haven't got you into trouble!"

"Don't you worry your head about me," said Jerry cheerfully. "You're tired out, you know. You really ought to go to bed. Let's have something rousing, with a chorus, and then we'll say good-night."

He took up his banjo again, and dashed without preliminary into the gay strains of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

He sang with a gaiety that even Nan did not imagine to be feigned, and, lest lack of response should again damp his spirits, she forced herself to join in the refrain. Faster and faster went Jerry's fingers, faster and faster ran the song, his voice and Nan's mingling, till at last he broke off with a shout of laughter, and sprang to his feet.

"There! That's the end of our soiree, and I'm not going to keep you up a minute longer. I wonder if we're snowed up yet. We'll have some fun to-morrow, if we are. I say, look at the time! Good-night! Good-night!"

He advanced towards her. She was standing facing him, with her back to the fire. But something—something in her eyes—arrested him, sending his own glancing backwards over his shoulder. She was looking, not at him, but beyond him.

The next instant, with a sharp oath, Jerry had wheeled in his tracks. He, too, stood facing the door, staring wide-eyed, dumbfounded.

There, at the head of the stairs, quite motionless, quite silent, facing them both, stood Piet Cradock.

CHAPTER XI

Page 82

Nan was the first to free herself from the nightmare paralysis that bound her. Swiftly, as though in answer to a sudden inner urging, she moved forward. She almost pushed past Jerry in her haste. She was white, white to the lips with fear, but she never faltered till she stood between her husband and the boy she had chosen to protect her. The first glimpse of Piet had revealed to her in what mood he had come. In his right hand he was gripping her father's heaviest hunting-crop.

He came slowly forward, ignoring her. His eyes were upon Jerry, who glared back at him like a young panther. He did not appear to be aware of Nan.

Suddenly he spoke, briefly, grimly every word clean as a pistol-shot.

"I suppose you are old enough to know what you are doing?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Jerry, in fierce response. "What are you doing here? And how the devil did you get in? This place belongs to me!"

"I know." Piet's face was contemptuous. He seemed to speak through closed lips. "That is why I came. I wanted you."

"What do you want me for?" flashed back Jerry, with clenched hands. "If you have anything to say, you'd better say it downstairs."

"I have nothing whatever to say." There was a deep sound in Piet's voice that was something more than a menace. Abruptly he squared his great shoulders, and brought the weapon he carried into full view.

Jerry's eyes blazed at the action.

"You be damned!" he exclaimed loudly. "I'll fight you with pleasure, but not before—"

"You will do nothing of the sort!" thundered Piet, striding forward. "You will take a horse-whipping from me here and now, and in my wife's presence. You have behaved like a cur, and she shall see you treated as such."

The words were like the bellow of a goaded bull. Another instant, and he would have been at hand grips with the boy, but in that instant Nan sprang. With the strength of desperation, she threw herself against him, caught wildly at his arms, his shoulders, clinging at last with frenzied fingers to his breast.

"You shan't do it!" she gasped, struggling with him. "You shan't do it! If—if you must punish anyone, punish me! Piet, listen to me! Oh listen! I am to blame for this! You can't—you shan't—hurt him just because he has stood by me when—when I most wanted a friend. Do you hear me, Piet? You shan't do it! Beat me, if you like! I deserve it. He doesn't!"

“I will deal with you afterwards,” he said, sweeping her hands from his coat at a single gesture.

But she caught at the hand that sought to brush her aside, caught and held it, clinging so fast to his arm that without actual violence he could not free himself.

He stood still, then, his eyes glowering ruddily over her head at Jerry, who stamped and swore behind her.

“Anne,” he said, and the sternness of his voice was like a blow, “go into the next room!”

Page 83

"I will not!" she gasped back. "I will not!"

Her face was raised to his. With her left hand she sought and grasped his right wrist. Her whole body quivered against him, but she stood her ground.

"I shall hurt you!" he said between his teeth.

"I don't care!" she cried back hysterically. "You—you can kill me, if you like!"

He turned his eyes suddenly upon her, flaming them straight into hers mercilessly, scorchingly. She felt as though an electric current had run through her, so straight, so piercing was his look. But she met it fully, with wide, unflinching eyes, while her fingers still clutched desperately at his iron wrists.

"Nan! Nan! For Heaven's sake go, and leave us to fight it out!" implored Jerry. "This can't be settled with you here. You are only making things worse for yourself. You don't suppose I'm afraid of him, do you?"

She did not so much as hear him. All her physical strength was leaving her; but still, panting and quivering, she met those fiery, searching eyes.

Suddenly she knew that her hold upon him was weaker than a child's. She made a convulsive effort to renew it, failed, and fell forward against him with a gasping cry.

"Piet!" she whispered, in nerveless entreaty. "Piet!"

He put his arm around her, supporting her; then as he felt her weight upon him he bent and gathered her bodily into his arms. She sank into them, more nearly fainting than she had ever been in her life; and, straightening himself, he turned rigidly, and bore her into the inner room.

He laid her upon the bed there, but still with shaking, powerless fingers she tried to cling to him.

"Don't leave me! Don't go!" she besought him.

He took her hands and put them from him. He turned to leave her, but even then she caught his sleeve.

"Piet, I—I want to—to tell you something," she managed to say.

He wheeled round and bent over her. There was something of violence in his action.

"Tell me nothing!" he ordered harshly. "Be silent! Anne, do you hear me? Do you hear me?"

Under the compulsion of his look and voice she submitted at last. Trembling she hid her face.

And in another moment she heard his step as he went out, heard him close the door and the sharp click of the key as he turned it in the lock.

CHAPTER XII

For many, many seconds after his departure she lay without breathing, exactly as he had left her, listening, listening with all the strength that remained to her for the sounds of conflict.

But all she heard was Piet's voice pitched so low that she could not catch a word. Then came Jerry's in sharp, staccato tones. He seemed to be surprised at something, surprised and indignant. Twice she heard him fling out an emphatic denial. And, while she still listened with a panting heart, there came the tread of their feet upon the stairs, and she knew that they had descended to the lower regions.

Page 84

For a long, long while she still crouched there listening, but there came to her straining ears no hubbub of blows—only the sound of men's voices talking together in the room below her, with occasional silences between. Once indeed she fancied that Jerry spoke with passionate vehemence, but the outburst—if such it were—evoked no response.

Slowly the minutes dragged away. It was growing very late. What could be happening? What were they saying to each other? When—when would this terrible strain of waiting be over?

Hark! What was that? The tread of feet once more and the sound of an opening door. Ah, what were they doing? What? What?

Trembling afresh she raised herself on the bed to listen. There came to her the sudden throbbing of a motor-engine. He had come in his car, then, and now he was going, going without another word to her, leaving her alone with Jerry. The conviction came upon her like a stunning blow, depriving her for the moment of all reason. She leapt from the bed and threw herself against the door, battering against it wildly with her fists.

She must see him again! She must! She must! She would not be deserted thus! The bare thought was intolerable to her. Did he hold her so lightly as this, then—that, having followed her a hundred miles through blinding snow, he could turn his back upon her and leave her thus?

That could only mean but one thing, and her blood turned to fire as she realized it. It meant that he would have no more of her, that he deemed her unworthy, that—that he intended to set her free!

But she could not bear it! She would not! She would not! She would escape. She would force Jerry to let her go. She would follow him through that dreadful wilderness of snow. She would run in the tracks of his wheels until she found him.

And then she would force him—she would force him—to listen to her while she poured out to him the foolish, the pitiably foolish truth!

But what if he would not believe her? What then? What then? She had sunk to her knees before the door, still beating madly upon it, and crying wildly at the keyhole for Jerry to come and set her free.

In every pause she heard the buzzing of the engine. It seemed to her to hold a jeering note. The outer door was open, and an icy draught blew over her face as she knelt there waiting for Jerry. She broke off again to listen, and heard the muffled sounds of wheels in the snow. Then came the note of the hooter, mockingly distinct; and then the hum of the engine receding from the house. The outer door banged, and the icy draught suddenly ceased.

With a loud cry she flung herself once more at the unyielding panels, bruising hands and shoulders against the senseless wood.

“Jerry! Jerry!” she cried, and again in anguished accents, “Jerry! Come to me, quick, oh, quick! Let me out! Let me out!”

Page 85

She heard a step upon the stairs. He was coming.

In a frenzy she beat and shook the door to make him hasten. She was ready to fly forth like a whirlwind in the wake of the speeding motor. For she must follow him, she must overtake him; she must—Heaven help her! She must somehow make him understand!

Oh, why was Jerry so slow? Every instant was increasing the distance between her and that buzzing motor. She screamed to him in an agony of impatience to hurry, to hurry, only to hurry.

He did not call in answer, but at last, at last, his hand was on the door.

She stumbled to her feet as the key grated in the lock, and dragged fiercely at the handle. It resisted her, for there was another hand upon it, and with an exclamation of fierce impatience she snatched her own away.

“Oh, be quick!” she cried hysterically. “Be quick! He is miles away by this time. I shall never catch him, and I must, I must!”

The door opened. She dashed forward. But a man’s arm barred her progress, and with a cry she drew back. The next moment she reeled as she stood, reeled gasping till she slipped and slid to the floor at his feet. The man upon the threshold was her husband!

CHAPTER XIII

In silence he lifted her and laid her again upon the bed. His touch was perfectly gentle, but there was no kindness in it, no warmth of any sort. And Nan turned her face into the pillow and sobbed convulsively. How could she tell him now?

He began to walk up and down the tiny room, still maintaining that ominous silence. But she sobbed on, utterly unstrung, utterly hopeless, utterly spent.

He paused at last, and poured some water into a glass.

“Drink this,” he said, stopping beside her. “And then lie quiet until I speak to you.”

But she could neither raise herself nor take the glass. He stooped and lifted her, holding the water to her trembling lips. She leaned against him with closed eyes while she drank. She was painfully anxious to avoid his look. And yet when he laid her down, the sobbing began again, though she struggled feebly to repress it.

He fetched a chair at last and sat down beside her, gravely waiting till her breathing became less distressed. Then, finding her calmer, he finally spoke:



"You need not be afraid of me, Anne. I shall not hurt you."

"I am not afraid," she whispered back.

He sat silent for a space, not looking at her. At last:

"Can you attend to me now?" he asked her formally.

She raised herself slowly.

"May I say something first?" she said.

He turned his brooding eyes upon her.

"If you can say it quietly," he said.

She pressed her hand to her throat.

"You—will listen to me, and—and believe me?"

"I shall know if you lie to me," he said.

Page 86

She made a sharp gesture of protest.

"I don't deserve that," she said. "You know it."

His grim lips relaxed a very little.

"I shouldn't talk about deserts if I were you," he said.

His tone scared her again, but she made a valiant effort to compose herself.

"You say that," she said, "because you are very angry with me. I don't dispute your right to be angry. I know I've made a fool of you. But—but after all"—her voice began to shake uncontrollably; she forced out the words with difficulty—"I've made a much bigger fool of myself. I think you might consider that."

He did consider it with drawn brows.

"Does that improve your case?" he asked at length.

She did not answer him. She was trying hard to read his face, but it told her nothing. With a swift movement she slipped to her feet and stood before him.

"I don't know," she said, speaking fast and passionately, "what you have in your mind. I don't know what you think of me. But I suppose you mean to punish me in some way, to—to give me a lesson that will hurt me all my life. You have me at your mercy, and—and I shall have to bear it, whatever it is. But before—before you make me hate you, let me say this: I am your wife. Hadn't you better remember that before you punish me? I—I shan't hate you so badly so long as I know that you remember that."

She stopped. She was wringing her hands fast together to subdue her agitation.

Piet had risen with her, but she could no longer search his face. She had said that she did not fear him, but in that moment she was more horribly afraid than she had ever been in her life.

She thought that he would never break his silence. Had she angered him even further by those words of hers, she wondered desperately? And if so—oh! if so—Suddenly he spoke, and every pulse in her body leaped and quivered.

"Since when," he said, "have you begun to remember that?"

"I have never forgotten it," she said, in a voiceless whisper.

He took her hands, separated them, held up the left before her eyes.



“Never?” he said. “Be careful what you say to me.”

She looked up with a flash of the old quick pride.

“I have spoken the truth,” she said. “Why should I be careful?”

He dropped her hand.

“What have you done with your wedding-ring?”

“I—lost it.” Nan’s voice and eyes sank together. “It was an accident,” she said. “We dropped it in the lake.”

“We?” said Piet.

She made a little hopeless gesture.

“Yes, Jerry and I. It’s no good telling you how it happened. You won’t believe me if I do.”

He made no comment. Only after a moment he put his hand on her shoulder.

“Have you anything else to say?” he asked.

She shook her head without speaking. She was shivering all over.

Page 87

"Very well, then," he said. "Come into the other room—you seem cold."

She went with him submissively. The fire had sunk low, and he replenished it. The hunting crop that he had brought from her father's house lay on the table with Jerry's banjo. He picked it up and put it away in a corner.

"Sit down," he said.

She sank upon the sofa, hiding her face. He took up his stand on the rug, facing her.

"Now," he said quietly, "do you remember my telling you that you had married a savage? I see you do. And you are afraid of me in consequence. I am a savage. I admit it. I hurt you that night. I meant to hurt you. I meant you to see that I was in earnest. I meant you to realize that you were my wife. I meant—I still mean—to master you. But I did not mean to terrify you as you were terrified, as you are terrified now. I made a mistake, and for that mistake I desire to apologize."

He stooped and drew one of her hands away from her face.

"You defied me," he said. "Do you remember? And I am not accustomed to defiance. Nor will I bear it from anyone—my wife least of all. I am not threatening you; I am simply showing you what you must learn to expect from me, from the savage you have married. It is not my intention to frighten you. I am no longer angry with either you or the young fool whom you call your friend. By the way, I have not done him any violence. He has merely gone to find a lodging for himself and for the motor in the village. Yes, I turned him out of his own house, but I might have done worse. I meant to do much worse."

"Yes?" murmured Nan. "Why—why didn't you?"

"Because," he answered grimly, "I found that I had only fools to deal with."

He paused a moment.

"Well, now for your punishment," he said. "As you remarked just now, I have you absolutely at my mercy. How much mercy do you expect—or deserve? Answer me—as my wife."

But she could not answer him. She only bowed her head speechlessly against the strong hand that still held hers.

She could feel his fingers tightening to a grip. And she knew herself beaten, powerless.

"Listen to me, Anne!" he said suddenly; and in his voice was something that she had only heard once before, and that but vaguely. "I am going to give you a fair chance, in

spite of your behaviour to me. I am willing to believe—I do believe—that, to a certain extent, I drove you to this course. I also believe that you and your friend Jerry are nothing but a pair of irresponsible children. I should like to have caned him, but I had nothing but a loaded horse-whip to do it with, so I was obliged to let him off. Now listen! I am going downstairs and I shall stay there for exactly half an hour. If between now and the end of that half-hour you come to me with any good and sufficient reason for letting you go back and live apart from me in your father's house, I will let you go. You have asked me to remember that you are my wife. Precisely what you meant by that you have left me to guess. You will make that request of yours quite plain to me within the next half-hour."

Page 88

He relinquished his hold with the words, and would have withdrawn his hand, but she made a sharp movement to stay him.

“Do you—really—mean that?” she asked him, a catch in her voice, her head still bent.

“I have said it,” he said.

But still with nervous fingers she sought to detain him.

“What—what would you consider a good and sufficient reason?”

The hand she held clenched slowly upon itself.

“If you can convince me,” he said, his voice very deep and steady, “that to desert me would be for your happiness, I will let you go for that.”

“But how can I convince you?” she said, her face still hidden from him, her hands closed tightly upon his wrist.

“You will be able to do so,” he said, “if you know your own mind.”

“And if—if I fail to satisfy you?” she faltered.

He was silent. After a moment he deliberately freed himself, and turned away.

“Those are my terms,” he said. “If you do not come to me in half an hour I shall conclude that you leave the decision in my hands—in short, that you wish to remain my wife. Think well, Anne, before you take action in this matter. I do not seek to persuade you to either course. Only let me warn you that, whatever your choice, I shall treat it as final. You must realize that fully before you choose.”

He was at the head of the stairs as he ended. Without a pause he began to descend, and she counted his footsteps with a wildly beating heart till they ceased in the room below.

CHAPTER XIV

She was alone. In a silence intense she lifted her head at last, and knew that for half an hour she was safe from interruption.

Far away over the snow she heard a distant church clock tolling midnight. It ceased, and in the silence she thought she heard her stretched nerves cracking one by one. Soon—very soon—she would have to go down to him and fight the final battle for her freedom. But she would wait till the very last minute. She would spend the whole of the

brief time accorded to her in mustering all her strength. He had swept her pride utterly out of her reach. But surely that was not her only weapon.

What of her hatred—that hatred that had driven her to this mad flight with Jerry? Surely out of that she could fashion a shield that all his savagery could not pierce. Moreover, he had given her his word to abide by her decision whatever it might be, so long as she could convince him of that same hatred that had once blazed so fiercely within her.

But what had happened to it, she wondered? It had wholly ceased to nerve her for resistance. How was it? Was she too physically exhausted to fan it into flame, or had he torn this also from her to wither underfoot with her dead pride? Surely not! With all his boasts of mastery, he had not mastered her yet. She would never submit to him—never, never! Crush her, trample her as he would, she would never yield herself voluntarily to him. It was only when he began to spare her that she found herself wavering. Why had he spared her? she asked herself. Why had he given her that single chance of escape?

Page 89

Or, stay! Had he, after all, been generous? Had he but affected generosity that he might the more completely subjugate her? He had said that she must convince him that freedom from her chain would mean happiness to her. And how could she ever convince him of this? How? How? Would he ever see himself as she saw him—a monster of violence whose very presence appalled her? The problem was hopeless, hopeless! She knew that she could never make him understand.

Swiftly the time passed, and with every minute her resolution grew weaker, her agitation more uncontrollable. She could not do it. She could not face him with another challenge. It would kill her to resist him again as she had resisted him on Jerry's behalf. And yet she must do something. For, if she did not go to him, he would come to her. The half-hour he had given her was nearly spent. If she did not make up her mind soon it would be too late. It might be that already he was repenting his brief generosity, if generosity it had been. It might be that at any moment she would hear his tread upon the stairs.

She started up in a panic, fancying that she heard it already. But no sound followed her wild alarm, and she knew that her quivering nerves had tricked her. Shuddering from head to foot, she stood listening, debating with herself.

Her time was very short now; only three minutes to the half-hour—only two—only one!

With a gasp, she gathered together all the little strength she had left. But she could not descend those gloomy stairs. She dared not go to him. She stood halting at the top.

Ah, now he was moving! She heard his step in the room below, and she was conscious of an instant's wild relief that the suspense was past.

Then panic rushed back upon her, blotting out all else. She saw his shadow on the stairs, and she cried to him to stop.

"I am coming down to you! Wait for me! Wait!"

He stepped back, and she stumbled downwards, nearly falling in her haste. At the last stair she tripped, recovering herself only by the arm he flung out to catch her.

"I was coming!" she gasped incoherently. "I would have come before, but the stairs were dark—so dark, and I was frightened!"

"There is nothing to frighten you," he said gravely.

"I can't help it!" she wailed like a child. "Oh, Piet—Piet, be kind to me—just this once—if you can! I—I'm terrified!"

He put his arm round her.

“Why?” he said.

She could not tell him. But in a vague fashion his arm comforted her; and that also was beyond explanation.

“You are not angry?” she whispered.

“No,” he said.

“You will be,” she said, shivering, “when I have told you my decision.”

“What is your decision?” he asked.

She did not answer him; she could not.

He moved, and very gently set her free. There was a chair by the table from which he had evidently just risen. He turned to it and sat down, watching her under his hand.

Page 90

"What is your decision?" he asked again.

She shook her head. Her agony of fear was passing, but still she could not tell him yet.

He waited silently, his face so shaded by his hand that she could not read its expression.

"Why don't you answer me?" he said at last.

"I—can't!" she said, with a sob.

"You leave the decision to me?" he questioned.

She did not answer.

He straightened himself slowly, without rising.

"My decision is made," he said. "Give me your hand; not that one—the left."

She obeyed him trembling. He had taken something from his pocket. With a start she saw what it was.

"Oh, no, Piet—no!" she cried.

But he had his way, for he would not suffer her resistance to thwart him. Very gravely and resolutely he slipped a gold ring on to her finger.

"And you will give me your word to keep it there," he said, looking up at her.

Her lips were quivering; she could not speak.

"Never mind," he said; "I can trust you."

He released her hand with the words, and there followed a brief silence while Nan stood struggling vainly for self-control.

Failing at length, she sank suddenly down upon her knees at the table hiding her face and crying as if her heart would break.

"My dear Anne!" he said. And then in a different tone, his hand upon her bowed head: "What is it child? Don't cry, don't cry! Is it so hard for you to be my wife?"

She could not answer him. His kindness was so strange to her. She could only sob under that gentle, comforting hand.



"Hush!" he said. "Hush! Don't be so distressed. Anne, listen! I will never be a savage to you again. I swear it on my honour, on my faith in you, and on the love I have for you. What more can I do?"

Still she could not answer him, but her tears were ceasing. Yielding to the pressure of his hand, she had drawn nearer to him. But she did not raise her head.

After a long, quivering silence she spoke.

"Piet, I—I want you to—forgive me; not just for this, but for—a thousand things. Piet, I—I didn't know you really loved me."

"I have always loved you, Anne," he said, in his deep, slow voice.

"And you—forgive me," she said faintly.

"I have forgiven you," he answered gravely.

She made a slight, shy movement, and he took his hand from her head. But in an instant impulsively she caught at it, drawing it down against her burning face.

"And you are not angry with me any more?" she murmured.

"No," he said again.

She was silent for a space, not moving, still tightly holding his hand.

He could not see her face, nor did he seek to do so. Perhaps he feared to scare away her new-found courage.

At length, in a very small voice, she broke the silence.

Page 91

“Piet!”

He leaned forward.

“What is it, Anne?”

He could feel her breath quick and short upon his hand. She seemed to be making a supreme effort.

“Piet!” she said again.

“I am listening,” he responded, with absolute patience.

She turned one cheek slightly towards him.

“If I loved anybody,” she said, rather incoherently, “I—I’d find some way of letting them know it.”

He leaned his head once more upon his hand.

“I am a rough beast, Anne,” he said sadly. “My love-making only hurts you.”

Nan was silent again for a little, but she still held fast to his hand.

“Were you,” she asked hesitatingly at length, “were you—making love to me—that night?”

“After my own savage fashion,” he said.

“Well,” she said, a slight quiver in her voice, “it didn’t hurt me, Piet.”

Piet was silent.

“I mean,” she said, gathering courage, “if—if I had known that it meant just that, I—well, I shouldn’t have minded so much.”

Still Piet was silent. His hand shaded his eyes, but she knew that he was watching her.

“Do you understand?” she asked him doubtfully.

“No,” he said.

“Don’t you—don’t you know what I want you to do?” she said, rather Breathlessly.

“No,” he said again.

“Must I—tell you?” she asked, with a gasp.

“I think you must,” he said, in his grave way.

She lifted her head abruptly. Her eyes were very big and shining. She stretched her hands out to him with a little, quivering laugh.

“I hate you for making me say it!” she declared, with a vehemence half passionate, half whimsical. “Piet, I—I want you—to—to—to—take me in your arms again, and—and—kiss me—as you did—that night.”

The last words were uttered from his breast, though she never knew how she came to be there. It was as though a whirlwind had caught her away from the earth into a sunlit paradise that was all her own—a paradise in which fear had no place. And the chain against which she had chafed so long and bitterly had turned to links of purest gold.

* * * * *

The Consolation Prize

“So you don’t want to marry me?” said Earl Wyverton.

He said it by no means bitterly. There was even the suggestion of a smile on his clean-shaven face. He looked down at the girl who stood before him, with eyes that were faintly quizzical. She was bending at the moment to cut a tall Madonna lily from a sheaf that grew close to the path. At his quiet words she started and the flower fell.

He stooped and picked it up, considered it for a moment, then slipped it into the basket that was slung on her arm.

“Don’t be agitated,” he said, gently. “You needn’t take me seriously—unless you wish.”

Page 92

She turned a face of piteous entreaty towards him. She was trembling uncontrollably. "Oh, please, Lord Wyverton," she said, earnestly, "please, don't ask me! Don't ask me! I—I felt so sure you wouldn't."

"Did you?" he said. "Why?"

He looked at her with grave interest. He was a straight, well-made man; but his kindest friends could not have called him anything but ugly, and there were a good many who thought him formidable also. Nevertheless, there was that about him—an honesty and a strength—which made up to a very large extent for his lack of other attractions.

"Tell me why," he said.

"Oh, because you are so far above me," the girl said, with an effort. "You must remember that. You can't help it. I have always known that you were not in earnest."

"Have you?" said Lord Wyverton, smiling a little. "Have you? You seem to have rather a high opinion of me, Miss Neville."

She turned back to her flowers. "There are certain things," she said, in a low voice, "that one can't help knowing."

"And one of them is that Lord Wyverton is too fond of larking to be considered seriously at any time?" he questioned.

She did not answer. He stood and watched her speculatively.

"And so you won't have anything to say to me?" he said at last. "In fact, you don't like me?"

She glanced at him with grey eyes that seemed to plead for mercy. "Yes, I like you," she said, slowly. "But—"

"Never mind the 'but,'" said Wyverton, quietly. "Will you marry me?"

She turned fully round again and faced him. He saw that she was very pale.

"Do you mean it?" she said. "Do you?"

He frowned at her, though his eyes remained quizzical and kindly. "Don't be frightened," he said. "Yes; I am actually in earnest. I want you."

She stiffened at the words and grew paler still; but she said nothing.

It was Wyverton who broke the silence. There was something about her that made him uneasy.

"You can send me away at once," he said, "if you don't want me. You needn't mind my feelings, you know."

"Send you away!" she said. "I!"

He gave her a sudden, keen look, and held out his hand to her. "Never mind the rest of the world, Phyllis," he said, very gravely. "Let them say what they like, dear. If we want each other, there is no power on earth that can divide us."

She drew in her breath sharply as she laid her hand in his.

"And now," he said, "give me your answer. Will you marry me?"

He felt her hand move convulsively in his own. She was trembling still.

He bent towards her, gently drawing her. "It is 'Yes,' Phyllis," he whispered. "It must be 'Yes.'"

And after a moment, falteringly, through white lips, she answered him.

"It is—'Yes.'"

* * * * *

Page 93

"And you accepted him! Oh, Phyllis!"

The younger sister looked at her with eyes of wide astonishment, almost of reproach. They were two of a family of ten; a country clergyman's family that had for its support something under three hundred pounds a year. Phyllis, the eldest girl, worked for her living as a private secretary and had only lately returned home for a brief holiday.

Lord Wyverton, who had seen her once or twice in town, had actually followed her thither to pursue his courtship. She had not believed herself to be the attraction. She had persistently refused to believe him to be in earnest until that afternoon, when the unbelievable thing had actually happened and he had definitely asked her to be his wife. Even then, sitting alone with her sister in the bedroom they shared, she could scarcely bring herself to realize what had happened to her.

"Yes," she said; "I accepted him of course—of course. My dear Molly, how could I refuse?"

Molly made no reply, but her silence was somehow tragic.

"Think of mother," the elder girl went on, "and the children. How could I possibly refuse—even if I wanted?"

"Yes," said Molly; "I see. But I quite thought you were in love with Jim Freeman."

In the silence that followed this blunt speech she turned to look searchingly at her sister. Molly was just twenty, and she did the entire work of the household with sturdy goodwill. She possessed beauty that was unusual. They were a good-looking family, and she was the fairest of them all. Her eyes were dark and very shrewd, under their straight black brows; her face was delicate in colouring and outline; her hair was red-gold and abundant. Moreover, she was clever in a strictly practical sense. She enjoyed life in spite of straitened circumstances. And she possessed a serenity of temperament that no amount of adversity ever seemed to ruffle.

Having obtained the desired glimpse of her sister's face, she returned without comment to the very worn stocking that she was repairing.

"I had a talk with Jim Freeman the other day," she said. "He was driving the old doctor's dog-cart and going to see a patient. He offered me a lift."

"Oh!" Phyllis's tone was carefully devoid of interest. She also took up a stocking from the pile at her sister's elbow and began to work.

"I asked him how he was getting on," Molly continued. "He said that Dr. Finsbury was awfully good to him, and treated him almost like a son. He asked very particularly after you; and when I told him you were coming home he said that he should try and manage

to come over and see you. But he is evidently beginning to be rather important, and he can't get away very easily. He asked a good many questions about you, and wanted to know if I thought you were happy and well."

"I see." Again the absence of interest in Phyllis's tone was so marked as to be almost unnatural.

Page 94

Molly dismissed the subject with a far better executed air of indifference.

"And you are really going to marry Earl Wyverton," she said. "How nice, Phyl! Did he make love to you?"

There was a distinct pause before Phyllis replied. "No. There was no need."

"He didn't!" ejaculated Molly.

"I didn't encourage him to," Phyllis confessed. "He went away directly after. He said he should come to-morrow and see dad."

"I suppose he's frightfully rich?" said Molly, reflectively.

"Enormously, I believe." A deep red flush rose in Phyllis's face. She had begun to tremble again in spite of herself. Molly suddenly dropped her work and leaned forward.

"Phyl, Phyl," she said, softly; "shall I tell you what Jim Freeman said to me that day? He said that very soon he should be able to support a wife—and I knew quite well what he meant. I told him I was glad—so glad. Oh, Phyl, darling, when he comes and asks you to go to him, what will you say?"

Phyllis looked up with quick protest on her lips. She wrung her hands together with a despairing gesture.

"Molly, Molly," she gasped, "don't torture me! How can I help it? How can I help it? I shall have to send him away."

"Oh, poor darling!" Molly said. "Poor, poor darling!"

And she gathered her sister into her arms, pressing her close to her heart with a passionate fondness of which only a few knew her to be capable. There was only a year between them, and Molly had always been the leading spirit, protector and comforter by turns.

Even as she soothed and hushed Phyllis into calmness her quick brain was at work upon the situation. There must be a way of escape somewhere. Of that she was convinced. There always was a way of escape. But for the time at least it baffled her. Her own acquaintance with Wyverton was very slight. She wished ardently that she knew what manner of man he was at heart.

Upon one point at least she was firmly determined. This monstrous sacrifice must not take place, even were it to ensure the whole family welfare. The life they lived was desperately difficult, but Phyllis must not be allowed to ruin her own life's happiness and another's also to ease the burden.

But what a pity it seemed! What a pity! Why in wonder was Fate so perverse? Molly thought. Such a brilliant chance offered to herself would have turned the whole world into a gilded dreamland. For she was wholly heart-free.

The idea was a fascinating one. It held her fancy strongly. She began to wonder if he cared very deeply for her sister, or if mere looks had attracted him.

She had good looks too, she reflected. And she was quick to learn, adaptable. The thought rushed through her mind like a meteor through space. He might be willing. He might be kind. He had a look about his eyes—a quizzical look—that certainly suggested possibilities. But dare she put it to the test? Dare she actually interfere in the matter?

Page 95

For the first time in all her vigorous young life Molly found her courage at so low an ebb that she was by no means sure that she could rely upon it to carry her through.

She spent the rest of that day in trying to screw herself up to what she privately termed "the necessary pitch of impudence."

* * * * *

At nine o'clock on the following morning Lord Wyverton, sitting at breakfast alone in the little coffee-room of the Red Lion, heard a voice he recognized speak his name in the passage outside.

"Lord Wyverton," it said, "is he down?"

Lord Wyverton rose and went to the door. He met the landlady just entering with a basket of eggs in her hand. She dropped him a curtsy.

"It's Miss Molly from the Vicarage, my lord," she said.

Molly herself stood in the background. Behind the landlady's broad back she also executed a village bob.

"I had to come with the eggs. We supply Mrs. Richards with eggs. And it seemed unneighbourly to go away without seeing your lordship," she said.

She looked at him with wonderful dark eyes that met his own with unreserved directness. He told himself as he shook hands that this girl was a great beauty and would be a magnificent woman some day.

"I am pleased to see you," he said, with quiet courtesy. "It was kind of you to look me up. Will you come into the garden?"

"I haven't much time to spare," said Molly. "It's my cake morning. You are coming round to the Vicarage, aren't you? Can't we walk together?"

"Certainly," he replied at once, "if you think I shall not be too early a visitor."

Molly's lips parted in a little smile. "We begin our day at six," she said.

"What energy!" he commented. "I am only energetic when I am on a holiday."

"You're on business now, then?" queried Molly.

He looked at her keenly as they passed out upon the sunlit road. "I think you know what my business is," he said.

She did not respond. "I'll take you through the fields," she said. "It's a short cut. Don't you want to smoke?"

There was something in her manner that struck him as not altogether natural. He pondered over it as he lighted a cigarette.

"They are cutting the grass in the church fields," said Molly. "Don't you hear?"

Through the slumberous summer air came the whirl of the machine. It was June.

"It's the laziest sound on earth," said Wyverton.

Molly turned off the road to a stile. "You ought to take a holiday," she said, as she mounted it.

He vaulted the railing beside it and gave her his hand. "I'm not altogether a drone, Miss Neville," he said.

Molly seated herself on the top bar and surveyed him. "Of course not," she said. "You are here on business, aren't you?"

Wyverton's extended hand fell to his side. "Now what is it you want to say to me?" he asked her, quietly.

Page 96

Molly's hands were clasped in her lap. They did not tremble, but they gripped one another rather tightly.

"I want to say a good many things," she said, after a moment.

Lord Wyverton smiled suddenly. He had meeting brows, but his smile was reassuring.

"Yes?" he said. "About your sister?"

"Partly," said Molly. She put up an impatient hand and removed her hat. Her hair shone gloriously in the sunlight that fell chequered through the overarching trees.

"I want to talk to you seriously, Lord Wyverton," she said.

"I am quite serious," he assured her.

There followed a brief silence. Molly's eyes travelled beyond him and rested upon the plodding horses in the hay-field.

"I have heard," she said at length, "that men and women in your position don't always marry for love."

Wyverton's brows drew together into a single, hard, uncompromising line. "I suppose there are such people to be found in every class," he said.

Molly's eyes returned from the hay-field and met his look steadily. "I like you best when you don't frown," she said. "I am not trying to insult you."

His brows relaxed, but he did not smile. "I am sure of that," he said, courteously. "Please continue."

Molly leaned slightly forward. "I think one should be honest at all times," she said, "at whatever cost. Lord Wyverton, Phyllis isn't in love with you at all. She cares for Jim Freeman, the doctor's assistant—an awfully nice boy; and he cares for her. But, you see, you are rich, and we are so frightfully poor; and mother is often ill, chiefly because there isn't enough to provide her with what she needs. And so Phyllis felt it would be almost wicked to refuse your offer. Perhaps you won't understand, but I hope you will try. If it weren't for Jim, I would never have told you. As it is—I have been wondering—"

She broke off abruptly and suddenly covered her face with her two hands in a stillness so tense that the man beside her marvelled.

He moved close to her. He was rather pale, but by no means discomposed.

"Yes?" he said. "Go on, please. I want you to finish."

There was authority in his voice, but Molly sat in unbroken silence.

He waited for several moments, then laid a perfectly steady hand on her knee.

“You have been wondering—” he said.

She did not raise her head. As if under compulsion, she answered him with her face still hidden.

“I have dared to wonder if—perhaps—you would take me—instead. I—am not in love with anybody else, and I never would be. If you are in love with Phyllis, I won’t go on. But if it is just beauty you care for, I am no worse-looking than she is. And I should do my best to please you.”

The low voice sank. Molly’s habitual self-possession had wholly deserted her at this critical moment. She was painfully conscious of the quiet hand on her knee. It seemed to press upon her with a weight that was almost intolerable.

Page 97

The silence that followed was terrible to her. She wondered afterwards how she sat through it.

Then at last he moved and took her by the wrists. "Will you look at me?" he said.

His voice sent a quiver through her. She had never felt so desperately scared and ashamed in all her healthy young life. Yet she yielded to the insistence of his touch and tone, and met the searching scrutiny of his eyes with all her courage. He was not angry, she saw; nor was he contemptuous. More than that she could not read. She lowered her eyes and waited. Her pulses throbbed wildly, but still she kept herself from trembling.

"Is this a definite offer?" he asked at last.

"Yes," she answered. Her voice was very low, but it was steady.

He waited a second, and she felt the mastery of the eyes she could not meet.

"Forgive me," he said, then; "but are you actually in earnest?"

"Yes," she said again, and marvelled at her own daring.

His hold tightened upon her wrists. "You are a very brave girl," he said.

There was a baffling note in his tone, and she glanced up involuntarily. To her intense relief she saw the quizzical, kindly look in his eyes again.

"Will you allow me to say," he said, "that I don't think you were created for a consolation prize?"

He spoke somewhat grimly, but his tone was not without humour. Molly sat quite still in his hold. She had a feeling that she had grossly insulted him, that she had made it his right to treat her exactly as he chose.

After a moment he set her quietly free.

"I see you are serious," he said. "If you weren't—it would be intolerable. But do you actually expect me to take you at your word?"

She did not hesitate. "I wish you to," she said.

"You think you would be happy with me?" he pursued. "You know, I am called eccentric by a good many."

“You are eccentric,” said Molly, “or you wouldn’t dream of marrying one of us. As to being happy, it isn’t my nature to be miserable. I don’t want to be a countess, but I do want to help my people. That in itself would make me happy.”

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” Wyverton said, gravely. “I believe I have suspected some of it from the first. And now listen. I asked your sister to marry me—because I wanted her. But I will spoil no woman’s life. I will take nothing that does not belong to me. I shall set her free.”

He paused. Molly was looking at him expectantly. His face softened a little under her eyes.

“As for you,” he said, “I don’t think you quite realize what you have offered me—how much of yourself. It is no little thing, Molly. It is all you have. A woman should not part with that lightly. Still, since you have offered it to me, I cannot and do not throw it aside. If you are of the same mind in six months from now, I shall take you at your word. But you ought to marry for love, child—you ought to marry for love.”

Page 98

He held out his hand to her abruptly, and Molly, with a burning face, gave him both her own.

"I can't think how I did it," she said, in a low voice. "But I—I am not sorry."

"Thank you," said Lord Wyverton, and he stooped with an odd little smile, and kissed first one and then the other of the hands he held.

* * * * *

No one, save Phyllis, knew of the contract made on that golden morning in June on the edge of the flowering meadows; and even to Phyllis only the bare outlines of the interview were vouchsafed.

That she was free, and that Lord Wyverton felt no bitterness over his disappointment, he himself assured her. He uttered no word of reproach. He did not so much as hint that she had given him cause for complaint. He was absolutely composed, even friendly.

He barely mentioned her sister's interference in the matter, and he said nothing whatsoever as to her singular method of dealing with the situation. It was Molly who briefly imparted this action of hers, and her manner of so doing did not invite criticism.

Thereafter she went back to her multitudinous duties without an apparent second thought, shouldering her burden with her usual serenity; and no one imagined for a moment what tumultuous hopes and doubts underlay her calm exterior.

Lord Wyverton left the place, and the general aspect of things returned to their usual placidity.

The announcement of the engagement of the vicar's eldest daughter to Jim Freeman, the doctor's assistant in the neighbouring town, created a small stir among the gossips. It was generally felt that, good fellow as young Freeman undoubtedly was, pretty Phyllis Neville might have done far better for herself. A rumour even found credence in some quarters that she had actually refused the wealthy aristocrat for Jim Freeman's sake, but there were not many who held this belief. It implied a foolishness too sublime.

Discussion died down after Phyllis's return to her work. It was understood that her marriage was to take place in the winter. Molly's hands were, in consequence, very full, and she had obviously no time to talk of her sister's choice. There was only one visitor who ever called at the Vicarage in anything approaching to state. Her visits usually occurred about twice a year, and possessed something of the nature of a Royal favour. This was Lady Caryl, the Lady of the Manor, in whose gift the living lay.

This lady had always shown a marked preference for the vicar's second daughter.

“Mary Neville,” she would remark to her friends, “is severely handicapped by circumstance, but she will make her mark in spite of it. Her beauty is extraordinary, and I cannot believe that Providence has destined her for a farmer’s wife.”

It was on a foggy afternoon at the end of November that Lady Caryl’s carriage turned in at the Vicarage gates for the second state call of the year.

Page 99

Molly received the visitor alone. Her mother was upstairs with a bronchial attack.

Lady Caryl, handsome, elderly, and aristocratic, entered the shabby drawing-room with her most gracious air. She sat and talked for a while upon various casual subjects. Molly poured out the tea and responded with her usual cheery directness. Lady Caryl did not awe her. Her father was wont to remark that Molly was impudent as a robin and brave as a lion.

After a slight pause in the conversation Lady Caryl turned from parish affairs with an abruptness somewhat characteristic of her, but by no means impetuous.

“Did you ever chance to meet Earl Wyverton, my dear Mary?” she inquired. “He spent a few days here in the summer.”

“Yes,” said Molly. “He came to see us several times.”

The beautiful colour rose slightly as she replied, but she looked straight at her questioner with a directness almost boyish.

“Ah!” said Lady Caryl. “I was away from the Manor at the time, or I should have asked him to stay there. I have always liked him.”

“We like him too,” said Molly, simply.

“He is a gentleman,” rejoined Lady Caryl, with emphasis. “And that makes his misfortune the more regrettable.”

“Misfortune!” echoed Molly.

She started a little as she uttered the word—so little that none but a very keen observer would have noticed it.

“Ah!” said Lady Caryl. “You have not heard, I see. I suppose you would not hear. But it has been the talk of the town. They say he has lost practically every penny he possessed over some gigantic American speculation, and that to keep his head above water he will have to sell or let every inch of land he owns. It is particularly to be regretted, as he has always taken his responsibilities seriously. Indeed, there are many who regard his principles as eccentrically fastidious. I am not of the number, my dear Mary. Like you, I have a high esteem for him, and he has my most heartfelt sympathy.”

She ceased to speak, and there was a little pause.

“How dreadful!” Molly said then. “It must be far worse to lose a lot of money than to be poor from the beginning.”

The flush had quite passed from her face. She even looked slightly pale.

Lady Caryl laid down her cup and rose. "That would be so, no doubt," she said. "I think I shall try to persuade him to come to us at the end of the year. And your sister is to be married in January? It will be quite an event for you all. I am sure you are very busy—even more so than usual, my dear Mary."

She made her stately adieu and swept away.

After her departure Molly bore the teacups to the kitchen and washed them with less than her usual cheery rapidity. And when the day's work was done she sat for a long while in her icy bedroom, with the moonlight flooding all about her, thinking, thinking deeply.

Page 100

* * * * *

It was the eve of Phyllis's wedding-day, and Molly was hard at work in the kitchen. The children were all at home, but she had resolutely turned every one out of this, her own particular domain, that she might complete her gigantic task of preparation undisturbed. The whole household were in a state of seething excitement. There were guests in the house as well, and every room but the kitchen seemed crowded to its utmost capacity. Molly was busier than she had ever been in her life, and the whirl of work had nearly swept away even her serenity. She was very tired, too, though she was scarcely conscious of it. Her hands went from one task to another with almost mechanical skill.

She was bending over the stove, stirring a delicacy that required her minute attention when there came a knock on the kitchen door.

She did not even turn her head as she responded to it. "Go away!" she called. "I can't talk to anyone."

There was a pause—a speculative pause—during which Molly bent lower over her saucepan and concluded that the intruder had departed.

Then she became suddenly aware that the door had opened quietly and someone had entered. She could not turn her head at the moment.

"Oh, do go away!" she said. "I haven't a second to spare; and if this goes wrong I shall be hours longer."

The kitchen door closed promptly and obligingly, and Molly, with a little sigh of relief, concentrated her full attention once more upon the matter in hand.

The last critical phase of the operation arrived, and she lifted the saucepan from the fire and turned round with it to the table.

In that instant she saw that which so disturbed her equanimity that she nearly dropped saucepan and contents upon the kitchen floor.

Earl Wyverton was standing with his back against the door, watching her with eyes that shone quizzically under the meeting brows.

He came forward instantly, and actually took the saucepan out of her hands.

"Let me," he said.

Molly let him, being for the moment powerless to do otherwise.

“Now,” he said, “what does one do—pour it into this glass thing? I see. Don’t watch me, please; I’m nervous.”

Molly uttered a curious little laugh that was not wholly steady.

“How did you come here?” she said.

He did not answer her till he had safely accomplished what he had undertaken. Then he set down the saucepan and looked at her.

“I am staying with Lady Caryl,” he told her gravely. “I arrived this afternoon. And I have come here to present a humble offering to your sister, and to make a suggestion equally humble to you. I arrived here in this room by means of a process called bribery and corruption. But if you are too busy to listen to me, I will wait.”

“I can listen,” Molly said.

He had not even shaken hands with her, and she felt strangely uncertain of herself. She was even conscious of a childish desire to run away.

Page 101

He took her at her word at once. "Thank you," he said. "Now, do you remember a certain conversation that took place between us six months ago?"

"I remember," she said.

An odd sense of powerlessness had taken possession of her, and she knew it had become visible to him, for she saw his face alter.

"I know I'm ugly," he said, abruptly; "but I'm not frowning, believe me."

She understood the allusion and laughed rather faintly. "I'm not afraid of you, Lord Wyverton," she said.

He smiled at her. "Thank you," he said. "That's kind. I'm coming to the point. There are just two questions I have to ask you, and I've done. First, have they told you that I'm a ruined man?"

Molly's face became troubled. "Yes," she said. "Lady Caryl told me. I was very sorry—for you."

She uttered the last two words with a conscious effort. He was mastering her in some subtle fashion, drawing her by some means irresistible. She felt almost as if some occult force were at work upon her. He did not thank her for her sympathy. Without comment he passed on to his second question.

"And are you still disposed to be generous?" he asked her, with a directness that surpassed her own. "Is your offer—that splendid offer of yours—still open? Or have you changed your mind? You mustn't pity me overmuch. I have enough to live on—enough for two"—he smiled again that pleasant, sudden smile of his—"if you will do the cooking and polish the front-door knob."

"What will you do?" demanded Molly, with a new-found independence of tone that his light manner made possible.

"I shall clean the boots," he answered, promptly, "or swab the floors, or, it may be"—he bent slightly towards her, and she saw a new light in his eyes as he ended—"it may be, stand by my wife to lift the saucepan off the fire, or do all her other little jobs when she is tired."

Again, and more strongly, she felt that he was drawing her, and she knew that she was going—going into deep waters in which his hand alone could hold her up. She stood before him silently. Her heart was beating very fast. The surging of the deep sea was in her ears. It almost frightened her, though she knew she had no cause to fear.

And then, suddenly, his hands were upon her shoulders and his eyes were closely searching her face.

“I offer you myself, Molly,” he said, and there was ringing passion in his voice, though he controlled it. “I loved you from the moment you offered to marry me. Is not that enough?”

Yes; it was enough. The mastery of it rolled in upon her in a full flood-tide that no power of reasoning could withstand. She drew one long, gasping breath—and yielded. The splendour of that moment was greater than anything she had ever known. Its intensity was almost too vivid to be borne.

Page 102

She stretched up her arms to him with a little sob of pure and glad surrender. There was no hiding what was in her heart. She revealed it to him without words, but fully, gloriously, convincingly, as she yielded her lips to his. And she forgot that she had desired to marry him for his money. She forgot that the family clothes were threadbare and the family cares almost impossible to cope with. She knew only that better thing which is greater than poverty or pain or death itself. And, knowing it, she possessed more than the whole world, and found it enough.

Late that night, when at last Molly lay down to rest with the morrow's bride by her side, there came the final revelation of that amazing day. Neither she nor Wyverton had spoken a word to any of that which was between them. It was not their hour; or, rather, the time had not arrived for others to share in it.

But as the two girls clasped one another on that last night of companionship Phyllis presently spoke his name.

"I actually haven't told you what Lord Wyverton did, Moll," she said. "You would never guess. It was so unexpected, so overwhelming. You know he came to tea. You were busy and didn't see him. Jim was there, too. He came straight up to me and said the kindest things to us both. We were standing away from the rest. And he put an envelope into my hand and asked me, with his funny smile, to accept it for an old friend's sake. He disappeared mysteriously directly after. And—and—Molly, it was a cheque for a thousand pounds."

"Good gracious!" said Molly, sharply.

"Wasn't it simply amazing?" Phyllis continued. "It nearly took my breath away. And then Lady Caryl arrived, and I showed it to her. And she said that the story of his ruin was false, that she thought he himself had invented it for a special reason that had ceased to exist. And she said that she thought he was richer now than he had ever been before. Why, Molly, Molly—what has happened? What is it?"

Molly had suddenly sprung upright in bed. The moonlight was shining on her beautiful face, and she was smiling tremulously, while her eyes were wet with tears.

She reached out both her arms with a gesture that was full of an infinite tenderness.

"Yes," she said, "yes, I see." And her glad voice rang and quivered on that note which Love alone can strike. "It's true, darling. It's true. He is richer now than he ever was before, and I—I have found endless riches too. For I love him—I love him—I love him! And—he knows it!"

"Molly!" exclaimed her sister in amazement.

Molly did not turn. She was staring into the moonlight with eyes that saw.

“And nothing else counts in all the world,” she said. “He knows that too, as we all know it—we all know it—at the bottom of our hearts.”

And with that she laughed—the soft, sweet laugh of Love triumphant—and lay back again by her sister’s side.

Page 103

* * * * *

Her Freedom

"We have been requested to announce that the marriage arranged between Viscount Merrivale and Miss Hilary St. Orme will not take place."

Viscount Merrivale was eating his breakfast when he chanced upon this announcement. He was late that morning, and, contrary to custom, was skimming through the paper at the same time. But the paragraph brought both occupations to an abrupt standstill. He stared at the sheet for a few moments as if he thought it was bewitched. His brown face reddened, and he looked as if he were about to say something. Then he pushed the paper aside with a contemptuous movement and drank his coffee.

His servant, appearing in answer to the bell a few minutes later, looked at him with furtive curiosity. He had already seen the announcement, being in the habit of studying society items before placing the paper on the breakfast-table. But Merrivale's clean-shaven face was free from perturbation, and the man was puzzled.

"Reynolds," Merrivale said, "I shall go out of town this afternoon. Have the motor ready at four!"

"Very good, my lord." Reynolds glanced at the table and noted with some satisfaction that his master had only eaten one egg.

"Yes, I have finished," Merrivale said, taking up the paper. "If Mr. Culver calls, ask him to be good enough to wait for me. And—that's all," he ended abruptly as he reached the door.

"As cool as a cucumber!" murmured Reynolds, as he began to clear the table. "I shouldn't wonder but what he stuck the notice in himself."

Merrivale, still with the morning paper in his hand, strolled easily down to his club and collected a few letters. He then sauntered into the smoking-room, where a knot of men, busily conversing in undertones, gave him awkward greeting.

Merrivale lighted a cigar and sat down deliberately to study his paper.

Nearly an hour later he rose, nodded to several members, who glanced up at him expectantly, and serenely took his departure.

A general buzz of discussion followed.

“He doesn’t look exactly heart-broken,” one man observed.

“Hearts grow tough in the West,” remarked another. “He has probably done the breaking-off himself. Jack Merrivale, late of California, isn’t the sort of chap to stand much trifling.”

A young man with quizzical eyes broke in with a laugh.

“Ask Mr. Cosmo Fletcher! He is really well up on that subject.”

“Also Mr. Richard Culver, apparently,” returned the first speaker.

Culver grinned and bowed.

“Certainly, sir,” he said. “But—luckily for himself—he has never qualified for a leathering from Jack Merrivale, late of California. I don’t believe myself that he did do the breaking-off. As they haven’t met more than a dozen times, it can’t have gone very deep with him. And, anyhow, I am certain the girl never cared twopence for anything except his title, the imp. She’s my cousin, you know, so I can call her what I like—always have.”

Page 104

"I shouldn't abuse the privilege in Merrivale's presence if I were you," remarked the man who had expressed the opinion that Merrivale was not one to stand much trifling.

* * * * *

"Well, but wasn't it unreasonable?" said Hilary St. Orme, with hands clasped daintily behind her dark head. "Who could stand such tyranny as that? And surely it's much better to find out before than after. I hate masterful men, Sybil. I am quite sure I could never have been happy with him."

The girl's young step-mother looked across at the pretty, mutinous face and sighed.

"It wasn't a nice way of telling him so, I'm afraid, dear," she said. "Your father is very vexed."

"But it was beautifully conclusive, wasn't it?" laughed Hilary. "As to the poor old pater, he won't keep it up for ever, bless his simple heart, that did want its daughter to be a viscountess. So while the fit lasts I propose to judiciously absent my erring self. It's a nuisance to have to miss all the fun this season; but with the pater in the sulks it wouldn't be worth it. So I'm off to-morrow to join Bertie and the house-boat at Riverton. As Dick has taken a bungalow close by, we shall be quite a happy family party. They will be happy; I shall be happy; and you—positively, darling, you won't have a care left in the world. If it weren't for your matrimonial bonds, I should quite envy you."

"I don't think you ought to go down to Riverton without someone responsible to look after you," objected Mrs. St. Orme dubiously.

"My dear little mother, what a notion!" cried her step-daughter with a merry laugh. "Who ever dreamt of the proprieties on the river? Why, I spent a whole fortnight on the house-boat with only Bertie and the Badger that time the poor old pater and I fell out over—what was it? Well, it doesn't matter. Anyhow, I did. And no one a bit the worse. Bertie is equal to a dozen *duennas*, as everyone knows."

"Don't you really care, I wonder?" said Mrs. St. Orme, with wondering eyes on the animated face.

"Why should I, dear?" laughed the girl, dropping upon a hassock at her side. "I am my own mistress. I have a little money, and—considering I am only twenty-four—quite a lot of wisdom. As to being Viscountess Merrivale, I will say it fascinated me a little—just at first, you know. And the poor old pater was so respectful I couldn't help enjoying myself. But the gilt soon wore off the gingerbread, and I really couldn't enjoy what was left. I said to myself, 'My dear, that man has the makings of a hectoring bully. You must cut yourself loose at once if you don't want to develop into that most miserable of all creatures, a down-trodden wife.' So after our little tiff of the day before yesterday I sent

the notice off forthwith. And—you observe—it has taken effect. The tyrant hasn't been near."

"You really mean to say the engagement wasn't actually broken off before you sent it?" said Mrs. St. Orme, looking shocked.

Page 105

"It didn't occur to either of us," said Hilary, looking down with a smile at the corners of her mouth. "He chose to take exception to my being seen riding in the park with Mr. Fletcher. And I took exception to his interference. Not that I like Mr. Fletcher, for I don't. But I had to assert my right to choose my own friends. He disputed it. And then we parted. No one is going to interfere with my freedom."

"You were never truly in love with him, then?" said Mrs. St. Orme, regret and relief struggling in her voice.

Hilary looked up with clear eyes.

"Oh, never, darling!" she said tranquilly. "Nor he with me. I don't know what it means; do you? You can't—surely—be in love with the poor old pater?"

She laughed at the idea and idly took up a paper lying at hand. Half a minute later she uttered a sharp cry and looked up with flaming cheeks.

"How—how—dare he?" she cried, almost incoherent with angry astonishment. "Sybil! For Heaven's sake! See!"

She thrust the paper upon her step-mother's knee and pointed with a finger that shook uncontrollably at a brief announcement in the society column.

"We are requested to state that the announcement in yesterday's issue that the marriage arranged between Viscount Merrivale and Miss Hilary St. Orme would not take place was erroneous. The marriage will take place, as previously announced, towards the end of the season."

* * * * *

"What sublime assurance!" exclaimed Bertie St. Orme, lying on his back in the luxurious punt which his sister was leisurely impelling up stream, and laughing up at her flushed face. "This viscount of yours seems to have plenty of decision of character, whatever else he may be lacking in."

Bertie St. Orme was a cripple, and spent every summer regularly upon the river with his old manservant, nicknamed "the Badger."

"Oh, he is quite impossible!" Hilary declared. "Let's talk of something else!"

"But he means to keep you to your word, eh?" her brother persisted. "How will you get out of it?"

Hilary's face flushed more deeply, and she bit her lip.

“There won’t be any getting out of it. Don’t be silly! I am free.”

“The end of the season!” teased Bertie. “That allows you—let’s see—four, five, six more weeks of freedom.”

“Be quiet, if you don’t want a drenching!” warned Hilary. “Besides,” she added, with inconsequent optimism, “anything may happen before then. Why, I may even be married to a man I really like.”

“Great Scotland, so you may!” chuckled her brother. “There’s the wild man that Dick has brought down here to tame before launching at society. He’s a great beast like a brown bear. He wouldn’t be my taste, but that’s a detail.”

“I hate fashionable men!” declared Hilary, with scarlet face. “I’d rather marry a red Indian than one of these inane men about town.”

Page 106

“Ho! ho!” laughed Bertie. “Then Dick’s wild man will be quite to your taste. As soon as he leaves off worrying mutton-bones with his fingers and teeth, we’ll ask Dick to bring him to dine.”

“You’re perfectly disgusting!” said Hilary, digging her punt-pole into the bed of the river with a vicious plunge. “If you don’t mean to behave yourself, I won’t stay with you.”

“Oh, yes, you will,” returned Bertie with brotherly assurance. “You wouldn’t miss Dick’s aborigine for anything—and I don’t blame you, for he’s worth seeing. Dick assures me that he is quite harmless, or I don’t know that I should care to venture my scalp at such close quarters.”

“You’re positively ridiculous to-day,” Hilary declared.

* * * * *

A perfect summer morning, a rippling blue river that shone like glass where the willows dipped and trailed, and a girl who sang a murmurous little song to herself as she slid down the bank into the laughing stream.

Ah, it was heavenly! The sun-flecks on the water danced and swam all about her. The trees whispered to one another above her floating form. The roses on the garden balustrade of Dick Culver’s bungalow nodded as though welcoming a friend. She turned over and struck out vigorously, swimming up-stream. It was June, and the whole world was awake and singing.

“It’s better than the entire London season put together,” she murmured to herself, as she presently came drifting back.

A whiff of tobacco-smoke interrupted her soliloquy. She shook back her wet hair and stood up waist-deep in the clear, green water.

“What ho, Dick!” she called gaily. “I can’t see you, but I know you’re there. Come down and have a swim, you lazy boy!”

There followed a pause. Then a diffident voice with an unmistakably foreign accent made reply.

“Were you speaking to me?”

Glancing up in the direction of the voice, Hilary discovered a stranger seated against the trunk of a willow on the high bank above her. She started and coloured. She had forgotten Dick’s wild man. She described him later as the brownest man she had ever seen. His face was brown, the lower part of it covered with a thick growth of brown beard. His eyes were brown, surmounted by very bushy eyebrows. His hair was

brown. His hands were brown. His clothes were brown, and he was smoking what looked like a brown clay pipe.

Hilary regained her self-possession almost at once. The diffidence of the voice gave her assurance.

"I thought my cousin was there," she explained. "You are Dick's friend, I think?"

The man on the bank smiled an affirmative, and Hilary remarked to herself that he had splendid teeth.

"I am Dick's friend," he said, speaking slowly, as if learning the lesson from her. There was a slight subdued twang in his utterance which attracted Hilary immensely.

Page 107

She nodded encouragingly to him.

"I am Dick's cousin," she said. "He will tell you all about me if you ask him."

"I will certainly ask," the stranger said in his soft, foreign drawl.

"Don't forget!" called Hilary, as she splashed back into deep water. "And tell him to bring you to dine on our house-boat at eight to-night! Bertie and I will be delighted to see you. We were meaning to send a formal invitation. But no one stands on ceremony on the river—or in it either," she laughed to herself as she swam away with swift, even strokes.

"I shouldn't have asked him in that way," she explained to her brother afterwards, "if he hadn't been rather shy. One must be nice to foreigners, and dear Dickie's society undiluted would bore me to extinction."

"I don't think we had better give him a knife at dinner," remarked Bertie. "I shouldn't like you to be scalped, darling. It would ruin your prospects. I suppose my only course would be to insist upon his marrying you forthwith."

"Bertie, you're a beast!" said his sister tersely.

* * * * *

"We have taken you at your word, you see," sang out Dick Culver from his punt. "I hope you haven't thought better of it by any chance, for my friend has been able to think of nothing else all day."

A slim white figure danced eagerly out of the tiny dining-saloon of the house-boat.

"Come on board!" she cried hospitably. "The Badger will see to your punt. I am glad you're not late."

She held out her hand to the new-comer with a pretty lack of ceremony. He looked more than ever like a backwoodsman, but it was quite evident that he was pleased with his surroundings. He shook hands with her almost reverently, and smiled in a quiet, well-satisfied way. But, having nothing to say, he did not vex himself to put it into words—a trait which strongly appealed to Hilary.

"His name," said Dick Culver, laughing at his cousin over the big man's shoulder, "is Jacques. He has another, but, as nobody ever uses it, it isn't to the point, and I never was good at pronunciation. He is a French Canadian, with a dash of Yankee thrown in. He is of a peaceable disposition except when roused, when all his friends find it advisable to give him a wide berth. He—"

"That'll do, my dear fellow," softly interposed the stranger, with a gentle lift of the elbow in Culver's direction. "Leave Miss St. Orme to find out the rest for herself! I hope she is not easily alarmed."

"Not at all, I assure you," said Hilary. "Never mind Dick! No one does. Come inside!"

She led the way with light feet. Her exile from London during the season promised to be less deadly than she had anticipated. Unmistakably she liked Dick's wild man.

They found Bertie in the little roselit saloon, and as he welcomed the stranger Culver drew Hilary aside. There was much mystery on his comical face.

Page 108

"I'll tell you a secret," he murmured; "this fellow is a great chief in his own country, but he doesn't want anyone to know it. He's coming here to learn a little of our ways, and he's particularly interested in English women, so be nice to him."

"I thought you said he was a French Canadian," said Hilary.

"That's what he wants to appear," said Culver. "And, anyhow, he had a Yankee mother. I know that for a fact. He's quite civilised, you know. You needn't be afraid of him."

"Afraid!" exclaimed Hilary.

Turning, she found the new-comer looking at her with brown eyes that were soft under the bushy brows.

"He can't be a red man," she said to herself. "He hasn't got the cheek-bones."

Leaving Dick to amuse himself, she smiled upon her other guest with winning graciousness and forthwith began the dainty task of initiating him into the ways of English women.

She was relieved to find that, notwithstanding his hairy appearance, he was, as Dick had assured her, quite civilised. As the meal proceeded she suddenly conceived an interest in Canada and the States, which had never before possessed her. She questioned him with growing eagerness, and he replied with a smile and always that half-reverent, half-shy courtliness that had first attracted her. Undoubtedly he was a pleasant companion. He clothed the information for which she asked in careful and picturesque language. He was ready at any moment to render any service, however slight, but his attentions were so unobtrusive that Hilary could not but accept them with pleasure. She maintained her pretty graciousness throughout dinner, anxious to set him at his ease.

"Englishmen are not half so nice," she said to herself, as she rose from the table. And she thought of the stubborn Viscount Merrivale as she said it.

There was a friendly regret at her departure written in the man's eyes as he opened the door for her, and with a sudden girlish impulse she paused.

"Why don't you come and smoke your cigar in the punt?" she said.

He glanced irresolutely over his shoulder at the other two men who were discussing some political problem with much absorption.

With a curious desire to have her way with him, the girl waited with a little laugh.

"Come!" she said softly. "You can't be interested in British politics."

He looked at her with his friendly, silent smile, and followed her out.

* * * * *

“Isn’t it heavenly?” breathed Hilary, as she lay back on the velvet cushions and watched the man’s strong figure bend to the punt-pole.

“I think it is Heaven, Miss St. Orme,” he answered in a hushed voice.

The sun had scarcely set in a cloudless shimmer of rose, and, sailing up from the east, a full moon cast a rippling, silvery pathway upon the mysterious water.

The girl drew a long sigh of satisfaction, then laughed a little.

Page 109

"What a shame to make you work after dinner!" she said.

She saw his smile in the moonlight.

"Do you call this work?" She seemed to hear a faint ring of amusement in the slowly-uttered question.

"You are very strong," she said almost involuntarily.

"Yes," he agreed quietly, and there suddenly ran a curious thrill through her—a feeling that she and he had once been kindred spirits together in another world.

She felt as if their intimacy had advanced by strides when she spoke again, and the sensation was one of a strange, quivering delight which the perfection of the June night seemed to wholly justify. Anyhow, it was not a moment for probing her inner self with searching questions. She turned a little and suffered her fingers to trail through the moonlit water.

"I wonder if you would tell me something?" she said almost diffidently.

"If it lies in my power," he answered courteously.

"You may think it rude," she suggested, with a most unusual attack of timidity. It had been her habit all her life to command rather than to request. But somehow the very courtesy with which this man treated her made her uncertain of herself.

"I shall not think anything so—impossible," he assured her gently, and again she saw his smile.

"Well," she said, looking up at him intently, "will you—please—let me into your secret? I promise I won't tell. But do tell me who you are!"

There followed a silence, during which the man leaned a little on his pole, gazing downwards while he kept the punt motionless. The water babbled round them with a tinkling murmur that was like the laughter of fairy voices. They had passed beyond the region of house-boats and bungalows, and the night was very still.

At last the man spoke, and the girl gave a queer little motion of relief.

"I should like to tell you everything there is to know about me," he said in his careful, foreign English. "But—will you forgive me?—I do not feel myself able to do so—yet. Some day I will answer your question gladly—I hope some day soon—if you are kind enough to continue to extend to me your interest and your friendship."

He looked down into Hilary's uplifted face with a queer wistfulness that struck unexpectedly straight to her heart. She felt suddenly that this man's past contained something of loss and disappointment of which he could not lightly speak to a mere casual acquaintance.

With the quickness of impulse characteristic of her, she smiled sympathetic comprehension.

"And you won't even tell me your name?" she said.

He bent again to the pole, and she saw his teeth shine in the moonlight. "I think my friend told you one of my names," he said.

"Oh, it's much too commonplace," she protested. "Quite half the men I know are called Jack."

And then for the first time she heard him laugh—a low, exultant laugh that sent the blood in a sudden rush to her cheeks.



Page 110

"Shall we go back now?" she suggested, turning her face away.

He obeyed her instantly, and the punt began to glide back through the ripples.

No further word passed between them till, as they neared the house-boat, the high, keen notes of a flute floated out upon the tender silence.

Hilary glanced up sharply, the moonlight on her face, and saw a group of men in a punt moored under the shadowy bank. One of them raised his hand and sent a ringing salutation across the water.

Hilary nodded and turned aside. There was annoyance on her face—the annoyance of one suddenly awakened from a dream of complete enjoyment.

Her companion asked no question. He was bending vigorously to his work. But she seemed to consider some explanation to be due to him.

"That," she said, "is a man I know slightly. His name is Cosmo Fletcher."

"A friend?" asked the big man.

Hilary coloured a little.

"Well," she said half-reluctantly, "I suppose one would call him that."

* * * * *

"I believe you're in love with Culver's half-breed American," said Cosmo Fletcher brutally, nearly three weeks later. He had just been rejected finally and emphatically by the girl who faced him in the stern of his skiff.

She was very pale, but her eyes were full of resolution as they met his.

"That," she said, "is no business of yours. Please take me back!"

He looked as if he would have liked to refuse, but her steadfast eyes compelled him. Sullenly he turned the boat.

Dead silence reigned between them till, as they rounded a bend in the river and came within sight of the house-boat, Fletcher, glancing over his shoulder, caught sight of a big figure seated on the deck.

Then he turned to the girl with a sneer:

"It might interest Jack Merrivale to hear of this pretty little romance of yours," he said.

The colour flamed in her cheeks.

"Tell him then!" she said defiantly.

"I think I must," said Fletcher. "He and I are such old friends."

He waited for her to tell him that it was on his account that they had quarrelled, but she would not so far gratify him, maintaining a stubborn silence till they drew alongside. Jacques rose to hand her on board.

"I hope you have enjoyed your row," he said courteously.

"Thanks!" she returned briefly, avoiding his eyes. "I think it is too hot to enjoy anything to-day."

The tea-kettle was singing merrily on the dainty brass spirit-lamp, and she sat down at the table forthwith.

Jacques stood beside her, silent and friendly as a tame mastiff. Perhaps his presence after what had just passed between herself and Fletcher made her nervous, or perhaps her thoughts were elsewhere and she forgot to be cautious. Whatever the cause, she took up the kettle carelessly and knocked it against the spirit-lamp with some force.

Page 111

Jacques swooped forward and steadied it before it could overturn; but the dodging flame caught the girl's muslin sleeve and set it ablaze in an instant. She uttered a cry and started up with a wild idea of flinging herself into the river, but Jacques was too quick for her. He turned and seized the burning fabric in his great hands, ripping it away from her arm and crushing out the flames with unflinching strength.

"Don't be frightened!" he said. "It's all right. I've got it out."

"And what of you?" she gasped, eyes of horror on his blackened hands.

He smiled at her reassuringly.

"Well done, man!" cried Dick Culver. "It was like you to save her life while we were thinking about it. Are you hurt, Hilary?"

"No," she said, with trembling lips. "But—but—"

She broke off on the verge of tears, and Dick considerably transferred his attention to his friend.

"Let's see the damage, old fellow!"

"It is nothing," said Jacques, still faintly smiling. "Yes, you may see it if you like, if only to prove that I speak the truth."

He thrust out one hand and displayed a scorched and blistered palm.

"Call that nothing!" began Dick.

Fletcher suddenly pushed forward with an oath that startled them all.

"I should know that hand anywhere!" he exclaimed. "You infernal, lying impostor!"

There was an elaborate tattoo of the American flag on the extended wrist, to which he pointed with a furious laugh.

"Deny it if you can!" he said.

Jacques looked at him gravely, without the smallest sign of agitation.

"You certainly have good reason to know that hand rather well," he said after a moment, speaking with extreme deliberation, "considering that it has had the privilege of giving you the finest thrashing of your life."

Fletcher turned purple. He looked as if he were going to strike the speaker on the mouth. But before he could raise his hand Hilary suddenly forced herself between them.

"Mr. Fletcher," she said, her voice quivering with anger, "go instantly! There is your boat. And never come near us again!"

Fletcher fell back a step, but he was too furious to obey such a command.

"Do you think I am going to leave that confounded humbug to have it all his own way?" he snarled. "I tell you—"

But here Culver intervened.

"You shut up!" he ordered sternly. "We've had too much of you already. You had better go."

He took Fletcher imperatively by the arm, but Jacques intervened.

"Pray let the gentleman speak, Dick!" he said. "It will ease his feelings perhaps."

"No!" broke in Hilary breathlessly. "No, no! I won't listen! I tell you I won't!" facing the big man almost fiercely. "Tell me yourself if you like!"

He looked at her closely, still with that odd half-smile upon his face.

Page 112

Then, before them all, he took her hand, and, bending, held it to his lips.

“Thank you, Hilary!” he said very softly.

In the privacy of her own cabin Hilary removed her tatters and cooled her tingling cheeks. She and her brother were engaged to dine at Dick’s bungalow that night, but an overwhelming shyness possessed her, and at the last moment she persuaded Bertie to go alone. It was plain that for some reason Bertie was hugely amused, and she thought it rather heartless of him.

She dined alone on the house-boat with her face to the river. Her fright had made her somewhat nervous, and she was inclined to start at every sound. When the meal was over she went up to her favourite retreat on the upper deck. A golden twilight still lingered in the air, and the river was mysteriously calm. But the girl’s heart was full of a heavy restlessness. Each time she heard a punt-pole striking on the bed of the river she raised her head to look.

He came at last—the man for whom her heart waited. He was punting rapidly downstream, and she could not see his face. Yet she knew him, by the swing of his arms, the goodly strength of his muscles,—and by the suffocating beating of her heart. She saw that one hand was bandaged, and a passionate feeling that was almost rapture thrilled through and through her at the sight. Then he shot beyond her vision, and she heard the punt bump against the house-boat.

“It’s a gentleman to see you, miss,” said the Badger, thrusting a grey and grinning visage up the stairs.

“Ask him to come up!” said Hilary, steadying her voice with an effort.

A moment later she rose to receive the man she loved. And her heart suddenly ceased to beat.

“You!” she gasped, in a choked whisper.

He came straight forward. The last light of the day shone on his smooth brown face, with its steady eyes and strong mouth.

“Yes,” he said, and still through his quiet tones she seemed to hear a faint echo of the subdued twang which dwellers in the Far West sometimes acquire. “I, John Merrivale, late of California, beg to render to you, Hilary St. Orme, in addition to my respectful homage, that freedom for which you have not deigned to ask.”

She stared at him dumbly, one hand pressed against her breast. The ripple of the river ran softly through the silence. Slowly at last Merrivale turned to go.

And then sharply, uncertainly, she spoke.

“Wait, please!” she said.

She moved close to him and laid her hand on the flower-bedecked balustrade, trembling very much.

“Why have you done this?” Her quivering voice sounded like a prayer.

He hesitated, then answered her quietly through the gloom.

“I did it because I loved you.”

“And what did you hope to gain by it?” breathed Hilary.

He did not answer, and she drew a little nearer as though his silence reassured her.



Page 113

"Wouldn't it have saved a lot of trouble," she said, her voice very low but no longer uncertain, "if you had given me my freedom in the first place? Don't you think you ought to have done that?"

"I don't know," Merrivale said. "That fellow spoilt my game. So I offer it to you now—with apologies."

"I should have appreciated it—in the first place," said Hilary, and suddenly there was a ripple of laughter in her voice like an echo of the water below them. "But now I—I—have no use for it. It's too late. Do you know, Jack, I'm not sure he did spoil your game after all!"

He turned towards her swiftly, and she thrust out her hands to him with a quick sob that became a laugh as she felt his arms about her.

"You hairless monster!" she said. "What woman ever wanted freedom when she could have—Love?"

* * * * *

Two days later Viscount Merrivale's friends at the club read with interest and some amusement the announcement that his marriage to Miss Hilary St. Orme had been fixed to take place on the last day of the month.

* * * * *

Death's Property

CHAPTER I

A high laugh rang with a note of childlike merriment from the far end of the coffee-room as Bernard Merefleet, who was generally considered a bear on account of his retiring disposition, entered and took his seat near the door. It was a decidedly infectious laugh and perhaps for this reason it was the first detail to catch his attention and to excite his disapproval.

He frowned as he glanced at the menu in front of him.

He had arrived in England after an absence of twenty years in America, where he had made a huge fortune. He was hungering for the quiet unhurried speech of his fellow-countrymen, for the sights and sounds and general atmosphere of English life which for so long had been denied to him. And the first thing he heard on entering the coffee-room of this English hotel was the laugh of an American woman.

He had thought that in this remote corner of England—this little, old-world fishing town, with its total lack of entertainment, its unfashionable beach, and its wild North Sea breakers—no unit of the great Western race would have set foot. He had believed its entire absence of attraction to be a sure safeguard, and he was unfeignedly disgusted to discover that this was not the case.

As he ate his dinner the high laugh broke in on his meditations again and again, and his annoyance grew to a sense of savage irritation. He had come over to England for a rest after a severe illness, and with an intense craving, after his twenty years of stress and toil, to stand aside and watch the world—the English, conservative world he loved—dawdle by.

He wanted to bury himself in an unknown fishing-town and associate with the simple, unflurried fisher-folk alone. It was a dream of his—a dream which he had imagined near its fulfilment when he had arrived in the peaceful little world of Old Silverstrand.

Page 114

There was a large and fashionable watering-place five miles away. This was New Silverstrand, a town of red brick, self-centred and prosperous. But he had not thought that its visitors would have overflowed into the old fishing-town. He himself saw no attraction there save the peace of the shore and the turmoil of the sea. He had known and loved the old town in his youth, long before the new one had been built or even thought of. For New Silverstrand was a growth of barely ten years.

In all his wanderings his heart had always turned with a warm thrill of memory to the little old fishing-town where much of his restless boyhood had been spent. He had returned to it as to a familiar friend and found it but slightly changed. A new hotel had been erected where the old Crayfish Inn had once stood. And this, so far as he had been able to judge in his first walk through the place on the evening of his arrival, was the sole alteration.

He had heard that the shore had crumbled beyond the town, but he had left that to be investigated on the morrow. The fishing-harbour was the same; the brown-sailed fishing-boats rocked with the well-remembered swing inside; the water poured roaring in with the same baffled fury; and children played as of old on the extreme and dangerous edge of the stone quay.

The memory of that selfsame quay roused deeper recollections in Merefleet's mind as he sat and dined alone at the little table near the door.

There came to him the thought, with a sudden, stabbing regret, of a little dark-eyed sister who had hung with him over that perilous edge and laughed at the impotent breakers below. He could hear the silvery echoes of her laughter across half a lifetime, could feel the warm hand that clasped his own. A magic touch swept aside the years and revealed the old, glad days of his boyhood.

Merefleet pushed away his plate and sat with fixed eyes, fascinated by the rosy vision. They were side by side in a fishing-smack, he and the playmate of his childhood. There was an old fisherman in charge with grizzled hair, whose name, he recollected without effort, was Quiller. He was showing the little maid how to tie a knot that was warranted never to come undone.

Merefleet watched the ardent, flushed face with a deep reverence. He had not seen it so vividly since the day he had kissed it for the last time and gone forth into the seething sea of life to fight the whirlpools. Well, he had emerged triumphant so far as earthly success went. He had breasted the tide and risen above the billows. He was wealthy, and he was celebrated. No mortal power rose up in his path to baulk him of his desire. Only desire itself had failed him, and ambition had become mockery.

For twenty years he had not had time to stop and think. For twenty years he had wrestled ceaselessly with the panting crowd. He had bartered away the best years of his life to the gold god, and he was satiated with the success of this transaction.

Page 115

In all that time he had not mourned, as he mourned to-night, the loss of the twin-sister who had been as his second and better self. He had not realised till he sat alone in the place, where as a boy he had never known solitude, how utterly flat and undesirable was the future that stretched out like a trackless desert at his feet.

And in that moment he would have cast away the whole bulk of his great possessions for one precious day of youth out of the many that had fled away for ever.

A woman's laugh, high, inconsequent, rang through the great coffee-room, and all but one looked towards the corner whence it proceeded. An American voice began at once to explain the joke with considerable volubility.

Bernard Merefleet rose from his chair with a frowning countenance and made his way down to the old stone quay below the hotel.

CHAPTER II

The air was keen and salt. He paused on the well-worn stone wall and turned his face to the spray. A hundred memories were at work in his brain, and the relief of solitude was unspeakable. It was horribly lonely, but he hugged his loneliness. That laughing voice in the hotel coffee-room had driven him forth to seek it. No mental or physical discomfort would have induced him to return.

He propped himself against a piece of stonework and gazed moodily out to sea. He did not want to leave this haven of his childhood. Yet the thought of remaining in close proximity to a party of tourists was detestable to him. Why in the world couldn't they stop away, he wondered savagely? And then his own inconsistency occurred to him, and he smiled grimly. For the place undoubtedly had its charm.

A fisherman in a blue jersey lounged on to the quay at this point of his meditations, and, old habit asserting itself, Merefleet greeted him with a remark on the weather. The man halted in front of him in a conversational attitude. Merefleet knew the position well. It came back to him on a flood of memory. He could not believe that it was twenty years since he had talked with such an one.

"Wind in the nor'-east, sir," said the man.

"Yes. It's cold for the time of year," said Merefleet.

The man assented.

"Fish plentiful?" asked Merefleet.

"Nothing to boast of," was the guarded reply.

Merefleet had expected it. Right well he knew these fisher-folk.

“You get a few visitors now, I see,” Merefleet observed.

The fisherman nodded. “Don’t know what they come for,” he observed. “Bathing ain’t good, and them pleasure-boats—well”—he lifted his shoulders expressively—“half-a-capful of wind would upset ’em. There’s a lady staying at this here hotel—an American lady she be—what goes out every day regular, she and a young gentleman with her. They won’t have me nor yet any of my mates to go along, and yet—bless you—they could no more manage that boat if a squall was to come up nor they could fly. I told her once as it wasn’t safe. And she laughed in my face, sir. She did, really.”



Page 116

Merefleet smiled a little.

"Well, if she likes to run the risk it's not your fault," he said.

"No, sir. It ain't. But that don't make me any easier. She's a pretty young lady, too," the man added. "Maybe you've seen her, sir."

Merefleet shook his head. He had heard her, and he had no desire to improve his acquaintance with her.

"As pretty a young lady as you would wish to see," continued the fisherman reflectively. "Wonderful, she is. 'Tain't often we get such a picture in this here part of the country. Ever been to America, sir?"

"Just come home," said Merefleet.

"Are all the ladies over there as pretty as this one, I wonder?" said his new acquaintance in an awed tone.

"She seems to have made a considerable impression," said Merefleet, with a laugh. "What is the lady like?"

But the man's descriptive powers were not equal to his admiration. "I couldn't tell you what she's like, sir," he said. "But she's that sort of young lady as makes you feel you oughtn't to talk to her with your hat on. Ever met that sort of lady, sir?"

Merefleet uttered a short laugh. The man's simplicity amused him.

"I can't say I have," he said carelessly. "Good-looking women are not always the best sort, in my opinion."

"That's very true, sir," assented his companion thoughtfully. "There's my wife, for instance. She's as good a woman as you'd find anywhere, but her best friend couldn't call her handsome, nor even plain."

And Merefleet laughed again. The man's talk had diverted his thoughts. The intolerable sense of desolation had been lifted from his spirit. He began to feel he had been somewhat unnecessarily irritated by a very small matter.

He lighted a cigar and presented one to his new friend. "I shall get you to row me out for a couple of hours to-morrow," he said. "By the way, did you ever know a man called Quiller who had some fishing craft in these parts twenty years ago?"

The man beamed at the question. "That's my father, sir. He lives along with my wife and the kids. Will you come and see him, sir? Oh, yes, he's well and hearty. But he's



getting on in years, is dad. He don't go out with the luggers now. You'll come and see him, eh, sir?"

"To-morrow," said Merefleet, turning. "He will remember me, perhaps. No, I won't give you my name. The old chap shall find out for himself. Good-night."

And he began to saunter back towards his hotel.

The searchlight of a man-of-war anchored outside the harbour was flashing over the shore as he went. He watched the long shaft of light with half-involuntary attention. He noted in an idle way various details along the cliffs that were revealed by the white glow. It touched the hotel at last and rested there for the fraction of a minute.

And then a strange thing happened.

Looking upwards as he was, with fascinated eyes, following the slanting line of light, Merefleet saw a sight which was destined to live in his memory for all the rest of his life, strive as he might to rid himself of it.

Page 117

As in a dream-picture he saw the figure of a girl standing on the steps of the terrace in front of the hotel. The searchlight discovered her and lingered upon her. She stood in the brilliant line of light, a splendid vision of almost unearthly beauty. Her neck and arms were bare, curved with the exquisite grace of a Grecian statue. Her face was turned towards the light—a marvellous face, touched with a faint, triumphant smile. She was dressed in a robe of pure white that fell around her in long, soft folds.

Merefleet gazed upon the wonder before him and asked himself one breathless question: "Is that—a woman?"

And the answer seemed to spring from the very depth of his being: "No! A goddess!"

It was the most gloriously perfect picture of beauty he had ever looked upon.

The searchlight flashed on and the hotel garden was left in darkness.

A chill sense of loss swept down upon Merefleet, but the impression did not last. He threw away his cigar with an impetuosity oddly out of keeping with his somewhat rugged and unimpressionable nature. A hot desire to see that face again at close quarters possessed him—the face of the loveliest woman he had ever beheld.

He reached the hotel and sat down in the vestibule. Evidently this marvellous woman was staying in the place. He watched the doorway with a strange feeling of excitement. He had not been so moved for years.

At length there came a quick, light tread. The next moment he was gazing again upon the vision that had charmed him out of all commonsense. She stood, framed in the night, white and pure and gloriously, most surpassingly, beautiful. Merefleet felt his heart throb heavily. He sat in dead silence, looking at her with fascinated eyes. Had he called her a Greek goddess? He had better have said angel. For this was no earth-born loveliness.

She stood for several seconds looking towards him with shining, radiant eyes. Then she moved forward. Merefleet's eyes were fixed upon her. He could not have looked away just then. He was absurdly uncertain of himself.

She paused near him with the light pouring full upon her. Her eyes met his with a momentary questioning. Then ruthlessly she broke the spell.

"Say, now!" she said in brisk, high tones. "Isn't that searchlight thing a real cute invention?"

CHAPTER III

Merefleet shivered at the words. He did not answer her. The shock had been too great. He sat stiff and silent, waiting for more.

The American girl looked at him with a pitying little smile. She was wholly unabashed.

"I reckon the man who invented searchlights was no fool," she remarked. "I just wish that quaint old battleship would come right along here. It's not exciting, this place."

"New Silverstrand would be more to your taste, I fancy," said Merefleet, reluctantly forced to speak.

Page 118

The smile on the beautiful face developed into a wicked little gleam of amusement. "That's so, I daresay," said the high voice. "But you see, I wasn't consulted. I've just got to go where I'm taken."

She sank into a chair opposite Merefleet and leant forward.

Merefleet sat perfectly rigid. There was a marvellous witchery about the clasped hands and bent head before him. But he did not mean to let his idiotic sentimentality carry him away again. So long as the enchantress was speaking, the spell was wholly impotent. Therefore he should not suffer her to relapse into silence. Yet—how he hated that high, piercing voice! It was like the desecration of something sacred. It made him shrink in involuntary protest.

"Say!" suddenly exclaimed his companion, looking at him sharply. "Aren't you Bernard Merefleet of New York City?"

Merefleet frowned unconsciously at the notoriety that was his.

"I was in New York until recently," he said with some curtness.

"Exactly what I said," she returned triumphantly. "A friend of mine snap-shotted you walking up Fifth Avenue. He said to me: 'Here's Merefleet the gold-king, one of the cutest men in U.S.A. His first name is Bernard. So we call him the Big Bear for short.' Ever heard your pet name before?"

"Never," said Merefleet stiffly, with a suggestive hand on the evening paper. He wished she would leave him alone. With his eyes averted at length, the charm of her presence ceased to attract him. He even fancied he resented her freedom. But the girl only laughed carelessly. She had not the smallest intention of moving.

"Well," she said, and he imagined momentarily that her abominable accent was deliberately assumed. "I guess you've heard it now, Mr. Bernard Merefleet. Smart, I call it. What's your opinion?"

Merefleet started a little at the audacity of this speech. And again he was looking at her. There was a funny little smile twitching the corners of her mouth. Her beauty was irresistible. Even the iron barrier of his churlish avoidance was severely shaken. She was hard to withstand, this witch with her friendly eyes and frank speech, despite her jarring voice.

She nodded to him sociably as she met his grave look. "You aren't on a pleasure-trip, I reckon," she observed.

"Pleasure!" said Merefleet, giving way with abrupt bitterness. "No. There's not much pleasure in unearthing skeletons. That's what I'm doing."

The beautiful eyes opposite opened wide. She was silent for a moment. Then, “Think you’re wise?” she enquired casually.

“No,” said Merefleet roughly. “I’m a fool.”

She nodded acquiescence. “That’s so, I daresay,” she said. “I was afraid you were sick.”

“So I am,” he said. “Sick of life—sick of everything.”

“I guess you want some medicine,” she said seriously.

Merefleet laughed suddenly. “Something strong and deadly, eh?” he said.

Page 119

She shook her head. "Tell me what you like best in the world!" she said.

Merefleet reflected.

"You must know," she insisted briskly. "Is it a woman?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Merefleet, with an emphasis not particularly flattering to the sex.

"Well, then," she said, "p'r'aps it's the sea?"

"You may say so for the sake of argument," said Merefleet.

"I don't argue," she responded, with what he took for a touch of heat. "If people disagree with me I just shunt."

"Excellent policy," said Merefleet, interested in spite of himself. He fancied a faint shadow crossed her face. But she continued to speak with barely a pause. "If you like the sea you'd better join Bert and me. We go out every day. It's real fun."

"Exciting as well as dangerous," suggested Merefleet.

She nodded again. It was a habit of hers when roused to eagerness. "You've hit it. It's just that," she said. "Will you come?"

Merefleet hesitated. He was still inclined to be surly. But the new influence was not so easy to resist as he had imagined. The woman before him attracted him strongly, despite the fact that he now knew her loveliness to be but mortal; despite the constant jar of her shrill voice.

"Who is Bert?" he enquired at length, reluctantly aware that in temporising he signed away his freedom of action.

"Bert's my cousin," she answered. "He's English right through. You'd like Bert. He's in the smoke-room. Bert and I are great chums."

"Are you staying here alone together?" Merefleet enquired.

She nodded. "Bert is taking care of me," she explained. "He's like a son to me. I call him my English bull-dog. I just love bull-dogs, Mr. Merefleet."

Merefleet was silent.

She stretched out her arms with a swift, unconscious movement of weariness.

"Well," she said, "I'm real lazy to-night, and that's fact. I guess you want to smoke, so I'll go and leave you in peace."

She rose and stood for a few moments in the doorway, looking out into the pulsing darkness beyond. Merefleet watched her, fascinated. And as he watched, a deep shadow rose and lingered on the beautiful face. Moved by an instinct he did not stop to question, he rose abruptly and stood beside her. There was a pause. Then suddenly she looked up at him and the shadow was gone.

"Isn't he cross?" she said.

"Who?" asked Merefleet.

"Why, that funny old sea," she laughed. "He's just wild to dash over and swamp us all. Supposing he did, should you care any?"

"I don't know," said Merefleet.

Her eyes were full of a soft laughter as she looked at him. Suddenly she laid a childish hand on his arm. "Oh, you poor old Bear!" she said, dropping her voice a little. "I'm real sorry for you!"

And then she turned swiftly and was gone from his side like a flash of sunlight.

Page 120

CHAPTER IV

It was some time later that Merefleet entered the smoking-room to satisfy a certain curiosity which had taken possession of him. He looked round the room as he sat down, and almost at once his attention lighted upon a broad-shouldered man of about thirty with a plain, square-jawed face of great determination, who sat, puffing at a short pipe, by the open window.

Merefleet silently observed this man for some time, till, his scrutiny making itself felt, the object of it wheeled abruptly in his chair and returned it.

Merefleet leant forward. It was so little his custom to open conversation with a stranger that his manner was abrupt and somewhat forced on this unusual occasion.

"I believe I ought to know you," he said. "But I can't recall your name."

The reply was delivered in a manner as curt as his own. "My name is Seton," said the stranger. "As you have only met me once before, you probably won't recall it now."

Merefleet nodded comprehension. He loved the straight, quiet speech of Englishmen. There was no flurry or palaver about this specimen. He spoke as a man quite sure of himself and wholly independent of his fellow men.

"Ah, I remember you now," Merefleet said. "You came as Ralph Warrender's guest to a club dinner in New York. Am I right?"

"Perfectly," said Seton. "You were the guest of the evening. You made a good speech, I remember. You were looking horribly ill. I suppose that is how I came to notice you particularly."

"I was ill," said Merefleet, "or I should have been out of New York before that dinner came off. I always detested the place. And Warrender would have done far better in my place."

"I am not an admirer of Warrender," said Seton bluntly.

Merefleet made no comment. He was never very free in the statement of his opinion.

"The railway accident in which his wife was killed took place immediately after that dinner, I believe?" he observed presently. "I remember hearing of it when I was recovering."

"It was a shocking thing—that accident," said Seton thoughtfully. "It's odd that Americans always manage to do that sort of thing on such a gigantic scale."

“They do everything on a gigantic scale,” said Merefleet. “What became of Warrender afterwards? It was an awful business for him.”

“I don’t know anything about him,” Seton answered, with a brevity that seemed to betray lack of interest. “He was no friend of mine, though I chanced to be his guest on that occasion. I was distantly connected with his wife, and I inherited some of her money at her death. She was a rich woman, as you probably know.”

“So I heard. But I have never found New York gossip particularly attractive.”

Seton leant his elbow on the window-sill and gazed meditatively into the night. “If it comes to that,” he said slowly, “no gossip is exactly edifying. And to be the victim of it is to be in the most undesirable position under the sun.”

Page 121

It struck Merefleet that he uttered the words with some force, almost with the deliberate intention of conveying a warning; and, being the last man in the world to attempt to fathom the wholly irrelevant affairs of his neighbour, he dropped into silence and began to smoke.

Seton sat motionless for some time. The murmur of a conversation that was being sleepily sustained by two men in the room behind them created no disturbing influence. Presently Seton spoke casually, but with that in his tone which made Merefleet vaguely conscious of an element of suspicion.

"You didn't expect to see me just now, did you?" he asked.

"No," said Merefleet. "I should have taken the trouble to call your name to mind before I spoke if I had."

Seton nodded. "I saw you at *table d'hôte*" he remarked. "I was with my cousin at the other end of the room. You were gone when we got up."

"Your cousin?" said Merefleet deliberately. "Is that the American lady who is staying here?"

"Yes. Miss Ward. She is from New York, too. You may have seen her there."

"No," said Merefleet. "I know very little of New York society, or any society for the matter of that."

Seton turned and looked at him with a smile. "Odd," he said. "For there can be scarcely a man, woman, or child, here or in America, who does not know you by name."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Merefleet. And Seton laughed.

"You have the reputation for shunning celebrity," he remarked.

"So I understand," said Merefleet. "I hope the reputation will be my protection."

Young Seton became genial from that point onward. Without being communicative, he managed to convey the impression that he was quite prepared to be friendly. And for some reason unexplained Merefleet was pleased. He went to bed that night with somewhat revised ideas on the subject of society in general and the society of American girls in particular.

CHAPTER V

"Is this the gentleman as was to come and see me? Come in, sir. Come in! My old eyes ain't so sharp as they used to be, but I can see a many things yet."

And old Quiller, the fisherman, removed his sou'wester from his snowy head and peered at the visitor from under his hand.

"You don't know me, eh, Quiller?" Merefleet said.

He was surprised to hear a high voice from the interior of the cottage break in on the old man's hesitating reply.

"He's a sort of walking monkey-puzzle, I guess," said the voice, and a roguish laugh followed the words.

Merefleet looked over old Quiller's shoulder into the little kitchen. She was standing by the table with her sleeves up to her elbows, making some invalid dish. A shaft of sunlight slanting through the tiny window fell full upon her as she stood. It made him think of the searchlight glory of the previous night. She shone like a princess in her lowly surroundings.

Page 122

She nodded to him gaily as she met his eyes.

"Come right in!" she said hospitably. "And I shall tell Grandpa Quiller who you are."

"Aye, but I know," broke in the old man eagerly. "Master Bernard, ain't it? That's right, sonny. That's right. Yes, come in! There! I never thought to see you again. That I never did. This here's little missie what comes regular to see my daughter-in-law as has been laid by this week or more. I calls her our good angel," he ended tenderly. "She's been the Lord's own blessing to us ever since she come."

Merefleet, thus invited, entered and sat down on a wooden chair by the table. Old Quiller turned in also and fussed about him with the solicitude that comes with age.

"No," he said meditatively, "I never thought to see you again, Master Bernard. Why, it's twenty year come Michaelmas since you said 'Good-bye.' And little miss was with you. Ah, dear! It do make me think of them days to see you in the old place again. I always said as I'd never see the match of little miss but this young lady, sir—she's just such another, bless her."

Merefleet, with his eyes on the busy white hands at the table, smiled at the eulogy.

The American girl glanced at him and laughed more softly than usual. "Isn't he fine?" she said. "I just love that old man."

Somehow that peculiar voice of hers did not jar upon him quite so painfully as he sat and watched her at her dexterous work. There was something about her employment that revealed to him a side of her that her frivolous manner would never have led him to suspect. While he talked to the old fisherman, more than half his attention was centred on her beautiful, innocent face.

"My!" she suddenly exclaimed, turning upon him with a dazzling smile. "I reckon you'll almost be equal to beating up an egg yourself if you watch long enough."

"Perhaps," said Merefleet.

She laughed gaily. "Are you coming along with Bert and me this afternoon in Quiller's boat?" she inquired.

"I believed I have engaged Quiller to come and do the hard work for me," Merefleet said.

"You!" She was bending over the fire, stirring the beaten egg into a saucepan. "Oh, you lazy old Bear!" she said reprovngly. "What good will that do you?"

"I don't know that I want anything to do me good," Merefleet returned. He had become almost genial under these unusual circumstances. It was certainly no easy matter to keep this exceedingly sociable young lady at a distance.

He was watching the warm colour rising in her face as she stooped over the fire. He had never imagined that the art of cookery could be conducted with so much of grace and charm. Her odd, high voice instantly broke in on this reflection.

"I'm going to see Mrs. Quiller and the baby now," she said, with her sprightly little nod. "So long, Big Bear!"

The little kitchen suddenly looked dull and empty. The sun had gone in. Old Quiller was sucking tobacco ruminatively, his fit of loquacity over.

Page 123

Merefleet rose. "Well, I am glad to have seen you, Quiller," he said, patting the old man's shoulder with a kindly hand. "I must come in again. You and I are old friends, you know, and old comrades, too. Good-bye!"

Quiller looked at him rather vacantly. The fire of life was sinking low in his veins. He had grown sluggish with the years, and the spark of understanding was seldom bright.

"Aye, but she's a bonny lass, Master Bernard," he said with slow appreciation. "A bonny lass she be. You ain't thinking of getting settled now? I'm thinking she'd keep your home tidy and bright."

"Good-bye!" said Merefleet with steady persistence.

"Aye, she would," said the old man, shifting the tobacco in his cheek. "She's been a rare comfort to me and mine. She'd be a blessing to your home, Master Bernard. Take an old chap's word for it, an old chap as knows what's what. That young lady'll be the joy of some man's heart some day. You've got your chance, Master Bernard. You be that man!"

CHAPTER VI

"Say, Bert! We can take Big Bear along in our boat. Isn't that so?"

Merefleet looked up from his paper as he heard the words. They were seated at the next table at lunch, his American friend and her excessively English cousin. Merefleet noticed that she was dressed for boating. She wore a costume of white linen, and a Panama hat was crammed jauntily on the soft, dark hair. She was anything but dignified. Yet there was something splendid in the very recklessness of her beauty. She was a queen who did not need to assert her rights. There were other women present, and Merefleet was not even conscious of the fact.

"Who?" asked Seton, in response to her careless inquiry.

She nodded in Merefleet's direction and caught his eye as she did so.

"He's the cutest man in U.S.," she said, staring him straight in the face without sign of recognition. "But he's real lazy. He saw me making custard at Grandpa Quiller's this morning, and he wasn't even smart enough to lift the saucepan off the fire. I thought he might have had spunk enough for that, anyway."

Twenty-four hours earlier Merefleet would have deliberately hunched his shoulders, turned his back, and read his paper. But his education was in sure hands. He had made rapid progress since the day before.

He leant a little towards his critic and said gravely:

“Pray accept my apologies for the omission! To tell you the truth, I was not watching the progress of the cookery.”

The girl nodded as if appeased.

“You can come and sit at this table,” she said, indicating a chair opposite to her. “I guess you know my cousin Bert Seton.”

“What makes you guess that?” Merefleet inquired, changing his seat as directed.

She looked at him with a little smile of superior knowledge. “I guess lots,” she said, but proffered no explanation of her shrewd conclusion.

Page 124

Young Seton greeted Merefleet with less cordiality than he had displayed on the previous evening. There was a suggestion of caution in his manner that created a somewhat unfavourable impression in Merefleet's mind.

Already he was beginning to wonder how these two came to be thus isolated in the forgotten little town of Old Silverstrand. It was not a natural state of affairs. Neither the girl with her marvellous beauty, nor the man with his peculiar concentration of purpose, was a fitting figure for such a background. They were out of place—most noticeably so.

Merefleet was the very last man to make observations of such a description. But this was a matter so obvious and so undeniably strange that it forced itself upon him half against his will. He became strongly aware that Seton did not desire his presence in the boat with him and his cousin. He did not fathom the objection. But its existence was not to be ignored. And Merefleet wondered a little, as he cast about in his mind for a suitable excuse wherewith to decline the girl's invitation.

"It's very good of you to ask me to accompany you, Miss Ward," he said presently. "But I know that Quiller the younger is under the impression that I have engaged him to row me out of the harbour and bring me back again. And I don't see very well how I can cancel the engagement."

Miss Ward nudged her cousin at this speech.

"Oh, if he isn't just quaint!" she said. "Look here, Bert! You're running this show. Tell Mr. Merefleet it's all fixed up, and if he won't come along with us he won't go at all, as we've got Quiller's boat!"

Seton glanced up, slightly frowning.

"My dear Mab," he said, "allow Mr. Merefleet to please himself! The fact that you are willing to put your life in my hands day after day is no guarantee of my skill as a rower, remember."

"Oh, skittles!" said Mab irrelevantly.

And Seton, meeting Merefleet's eyes, shrugged his shoulders as if disclaiming all further responsibility.

Mab leant forward.

"You'd better come, Mr. Merefleet," she said in a motherly tone. "It'll be a degree more lively than mooning around by yourself."

And Merefleet yielded, touched by something indescribable in the beautiful, glowing eyes that were lifted to his. Apparently she wanted him to go, and it seemed to him too small a thing to refuse. Perhaps, also, he consulted his own inclination.

Seton dropped his distant manner after a time. Nevertheless the impression of being under the young man's close observation lingered with Merefleet, and Mab herself seemed to feel a strain. She grew almost silent till lunch was over, and then, recovering, she entered into a sprightly conversation with Merefleet.

They went down to the shore shortly after, and embarked in Quiller's boat. Mab sat in the stern under a scarlet sunshade and talked gaily to her two companions. She was greatly amused when Merefleet insisted upon doing his share of the work.

Page 125

"I love to see you doing the galley-slave," she said. "I know you hate it, you poor old Bear."

But Merefleet did not hate his work. He sat facing her throughout the afternoon, gazing to his heart's content on the perfect picture before him. He wore his hands to blisters, and the sun beat mercilessly down upon him. But he felt neither weariness nor impatience, neither regret nor surliness.

A magic touch had started the life in his veins; the revelation of a wandering searchlight had transformed his sordid world into a palace of delight. He accepted the fact without question. He had no wish to go either forward or backward.

The blue sea and the blue sky, and the distant, shining shore. These were what he had often longed for in the rush and tumult of a great, unresting city. But in the foreground of his picture, beyond desire and more marvellous than imagination, was the face of the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

CHAPTER VII

There was no wandering alone on the quay for Merefleet that night. It was very warm and he sat on the terrace with his American friend. Far away over at New Silverstrand, a band was playing, and the music came floating across the harbour with the silvery sweetness which water imparts. The lights of the new town were very bright. It looked like a dream-city seen from afar.

"I guess we are just a couple of Peris shut outside," said Mab in her brisk, unsentimental voice. "I like it best outside, don't you, Big Bear?"

"Yes," said Merefleet, with a simplicity that provoked her mirth.

"Oh, aren't you just perfect!" she said. "You've done me no end of good. I'd pay you back if I could."

Merefleet was silent. He could not see her beautiful face, but her words touched him inexplicably.

There was a long pause. Then, to his great surprise, a warm little hand slipped on to his knee in the darkness and a voice, so small that he hardly recognised it, said humbly:

"Mr. Merefleet, I'm real sorry."

Merefleet started a little.



“Good heavens! Why?” he said.

“Sorry you disapprove of me,” she said, with a little break in her voice. “Bert used to be the same. But he’s different now. He knows I wasn’t made prim and proper.”

She paused. Merefleet’s hand was on her own. He sat in silence, but somehow his silence was kind.

She went on. “I wasn’t going to speak last night. Only you looked so melancholy at dinner. And then I thought p’r’aps you were lonely, like I am. I didn’t find out till afterwards that you didn’t like the way I talked.”

“Do you know you make me feel a most objectionable cad?” said Merefleet.

“Oh, no, you aren’t that,” she hastened to assure him. “I’m positive you aren’t that. It was my fault. I spoke first. I thought you looked real sad. And I always want to hearten up sad folks. You see I’ve been there, and I know what it is.”

Page 126

"You!" said Merefleet.

Did he hear a sob in the darkness beside him? He fancied so. The hand that lay beneath his own twitched as if agitated.

"What do you know about trouble?" said Merefleet.

She did not answer him. Only he heard a long, hard sigh. Then she laughed rather mirthlessly.

"Well," she said, "there aren't many things in this world worth crying for. You've had enough of me, I guess. It's time I shunted."

She tried to withdraw her hand, but Merefleet's hold tightened.

"No, no. Not yet," he said, almost as if he were pleading with her. "I've behaved abominably. But don't punish me like this!"

She laughed again and yielded.

"You ought to know your own mind by now," she said, with something of her former briskness. "It's a rum world, Mr. Merefleet."

"It isn't the world," said Merefleet. "It's the people in it. Now, Miss Ward, I have a favour to ask. Promise me that you will never again imagine for a moment that I am not pleased—more, honoured—when you are good enough to stop by the way and speak to me. Of your charity you have stooped to pity my loneliness. And, believe me, I do most sincerely appreciate it."

"My!" she said. "That's the nicest thing you've said yet. Yes, I promise that. You're real kind, do you know? You make me feel miles better."

She drew her hand gently away. Merefleet was trying to discern her features in the darkness.

"Are you really lonely, I wonder?" he said. "Or is that a figure of speech?"

"It's solid fact," she said. "But, never mind me! Let's talk of something nicer."

"No, thanks!" Merefleet could be obstinate when he liked. "Unless you object, I prefer to talk about you."

She laughed a little, but said nothing.

"I want to know what makes you lonely," he said. "Don't tell me, of course, if there is any difficulty about it!"

"No," she responded coolly. "I won't. But I guess I'm lonely for much the same reason that you are."

"I have never been anything else since I became a man," said Merefleet.

"Ah!" she said. "I might say the same. Fact is"—she spoke with sudden startling emphasis—"I ought to be dead. And I'm not. That's my trouble in a nutshell."

"Great heavens, child!" Merefleet exclaimed, with an involuntary start. "Don't talk like that!"

"Why not?" she asked innocently. "Is it wrong?"

"It isn't literal truth, you know," he answered gravely. "You will not persuade me that it is."

"I'm no judge then," she said, with a note of recklessness in her voice.

"You have your cousin," Merefleet pointed out, feeling that he was on uncertain ground, yet unaccountably anxious to prove it. "You are not utterly alone while he is with you."

She uttered a shrill little laugh. "Why," she said, "I believe you think I'm in love with Bert."

Page 127

Merefleet was silent.

"I'm not, you know," she said, after a momentary pause. "I'm years older than Bert, anyhow."

"Oh, come!" said Merefleet.

"Figuratively, of course," she explained.

"I understand," said Merefleet. And there was a silence.

Suddenly she laughed again merrily.

"May I share the joke?" asked Merefleet.

"You won't see it," she returned. "I'm laughing at you, Big Bear. You are just too quaint for anything."

Merefleet did not see the joke, but he did not ask for an explanation.

Seton himself strolled on to the terrace and joined them directly after; and Mab began to shiver and went indoors.

The two men sat together for some time, talking little. Seton seemed preoccupied and Merefleet became sleepy. It was he who at length proposed a move.

Seton rose instantly. "Mr. Merefleet," he said rather awkwardly, "I want to say a word to you."

Merefleet waited in silence.

"Concerning my cousin," Seton proceeded. "You will probably misread my motive for saying this. But nevertheless it must be said. It is not advisable that you should become very intimate with her."

He brought out the words with a jerk. It had been a difficult thing to say, but he was not a man to shrink from difficulties. Having said it, he waited quietly for the result.

Merefleet paused a moment before he spoke. Seton had surprised him, but he did not show it.

"I shall not misread your motive," he said, "as I seldom speculate on matters that do not concern me. But allow me to say that I consider your warning wholly uncalled for."

“Exactly,” said Seton, “I expected you to say that. Well, I am sorry. It is quite impossible for me to explain myself. I hope for your sake you will never be placed in the position in which I am now. I assure you it is anything but an enviable one.”

His manner, blunt and direct, appealed very strongly to Merefleet. He said nothing, however, and they went in together in unbroken silence. Mab did not reappear that night.

CHAPTER VIII

A fortnight passed away and Merefleet was still at the hotel at Old Silverstrand. Mab was there also, the idol of the fisher-folk, and an unfailing source of interest and admiration to casual visitors at the hotel.

Merefleet, though he had become a privileged acquaintance, was still wholly unenlightened with regard to the circumstances which had brought her to the place under Seton’s escort.

As time went on, it struck Merefleet that these two were a somewhat incongruous couple. They dined together and they usually boated together in the afternoon—this last item on account of Mab’s passion for the sea; but beyond this they lived considerably apart. Neither seemed to seek the other’s society, and if they met at lunch, it was never by preconceived arrangement.

Page 128

Merefleet saw more of Mab when she was ashore than Seton did. They would meet on the quay, in old Quiller's cottage, or in the hotel-garden, several times a day. Occasionally he would accompany them on the water, but not often. He had a notion that Seton preferred his absence, and he would not go where he felt himself to be an intruder.

Nevertheless, the primary fascination had not ceased to act upon him; the glamour of the girl's beauty was still in his eyes something more than earthly. And there came a time when Bernard Merefleet listened with unconscious craving for the high, unmodulated voice, and smiled with a tender indulgence over the curiously naive audacity which once had made him shrink.

As for Mab, she was too eagerly interested in various matters to give more than a passing thought to the fact that the man she called Big Bear had laid aside his surliness. If she thought about it at all, it was only to conclude that their daily intercourse had worn away the outer crust of his shyness.

She was always busy—in and out of the fishermen's cottages, where she was welcomed as an angel—to and fro on a hundred schemes, all equally interesting and equally absorbing. And Merefleet was called upon to assist. She singled him out for her friendship because he was as one apart and without interests. She drew him into her own bubbling life. She laughed at him, consulted him, enslaved him.

All innocently she wove her spell about this man. He was lonely, she knew; and she, in her ardent, great-souled pity for all such, was willing to make cheerful sacrifice of her own time and strength if thus she might ease but a little the burden that galled a fellow-traveller's shoulders.

Merefleet came upon her once standing in the sunshine with Mrs. Quiller's baby in her arms. She beckoned him to speak to her. "Come here if you aren't afraid of babies!" she said, displaying her charge. "Look at him, Big Bear! He's three weeks old to-day. Isn't he fine?"

"What do you know about babies?" said Merefleet, with his eyes on her lovely flushed face.

She nodded in her sprightly fashion, but her eyes were far away on the distant horizon, and her soul with them. "I know a lot, Big Bear," she said.

Merefleet watched her, well pleased with the sight. She stood rocking to and fro. Her gaze was fixed and tender.

"I wonder what you see," Merefleet said, after a pause.

Her eyes came back at once to her immediate surroundings.



“Shall I tell you, Big Bear?” she said.

“Yes,” said Merefleet, marvelling at the radiance of her face.

And, her voice hushed to a whisper, she moved a pace nearer to him and told him.

“Just a little baby friend of mine who lives over there,” she said. “I’m going to see him some day. I guess he’ll be glad, don’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t?” said Merefleet. “But that’s not the West, you know.”

Page 129

"No," she said simply. "He's in the Land beyond the sea, Big Bear." And with a strange little smile into his face, she drew the shawl closer about the child in her arms and disappeared into Quiller's cottage.

There was something in this interview that troubled Merefleet unaccountably. But when he saw her again, her mirth was brimming over, and he thought she had forgotten.

CHAPTER IX

It was about a week after this conversation that Merefleet, invited by Seton, joined his two friends at *table d'hôte* at their table. The suggestion came from Mab, he strongly suspected, for she seconded Seton's proposal so vigorously that to decline would have been almost an impossibility.

"You look so lonely there," she said. "It's miles nicer over here. What's your opinion?"

"I agree with you, of course," said Merefleet, with a glance at Seton which discovered little.

"Isn't he getting polite?" said the American girl approvingly. "Say, Bert! I guess you'll have to take lessons in manners or he'll get ahead of you."

Seton smiled indulgently. He was this girl's watch-dog and protector. He aspired to be no more.

"My dear girl, you will never make a social ornament of me as long as you live," he said.

And Mab patted his arm affectionately.

"You're nicer as you are, dear boy," she said. "You aren't smart, it's true, but I give you the highest mark for real niceness."

Seton's eyes met Merefleet's for a second. There was a touch of uneasiness about him, as if he feared Merefleet might misconstrue something. And Merefleet considerably struck a topic which he believed to be wholly impersonal.

"By the way," he said, "I had an American paper sent me to-day. It may interest you to hear that Ralph Warrender has resigned his seat in Congress and married again."

"What?" said Seton.

"My!" cried Mab, with a shrill laugh. "That is news, Mr. Merefleet!"

Merefleet glanced at her sharply, his attention arrested by something he did not understand. Seton pushed a glass of sherry towards her, but he was looking at Merefleet.

"News indeed!" he said deliberately. "Is it actually an accomplished fact?"

"According to the *New York Herald*," said Merefleet.

Mab's face was growing whiter and whiter. Seton still leant over the table, striving with all his resolution to force Merefleet's attention away from her. But Merefleet would not allow it. He saw what Seton did not stop to see; and it was he, not Seton, who lifted her to her feet a moment later and half-led, half-carried her out of the stifling room.

With a practical commonsense eminently characteristic of him, Seton remained to pour out a glass of brandy; and thus armed he followed them into the vestibule. Mab was lying back in an arm-chair when he arrived. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing quickly. Merefleet was propping open the door on to the terrace. The lights flickered in the draught and gave a strange look to the colourless face on the cushion. It was like a beautifully carved marble. But for Merefleet the place was deserted.

Page 130

Seton knelt down and held the glass to his cousin's lips.

Merefleet returned softly and paused behind her chair.

"It's this confounded heat," said Seton in a savage undertone. "She will be all right directly."

Merefleet said nothing. Again he was keenly conscious of the fact that Seton wanted to get rid of him. But a stronger influence than Seton possessed kept him standing there.

Mab opened her eyes as the neat spirit burnt her lips. She tried to push the glass away, but Seton would not allow it.

"Just a drain, my dear girl," he said. "It will do you all the good in the world. And then—Merefleet," glancing up at him, "will you fetch some water?"

Merefleet went as desired.

When he returned, Mab was lying forward in Seton's arms, crying as he had never seen any woman cry before. And Seton was stroking her hair in silence.

Merefleet set down the water noiselessly, and went softly out into the summer dusk. But the great waves beating on the shore could not drown the memory of a woman's bitter sobbing. And the man's heart was dumb and heavy with the trouble he could not fathom.

Some hours later, returning from a weary tramp along the shore, he encountered Seton pacing to and fro on the terrace.

"She is better," he said, in answer to Merefleet's conventional enquiry. "It was the heat, you know, that upset her."

"Yes," said Merefleet quietly. "I know."

Seton walked away restlessly, more as if he wished to keep on the move than to avoid Merefleet. He came back, however, after a few seconds.

"Look here, Merefleet," he said abruptly, "you may take offence, but you can't quarrel without my consent. For Heaven's sake, leave this place! You are doing more mischief than you have the smallest notion of."

There was that in his manner which roused the instinct of opposition in Merefleet.

“You will either tell me what you mean,” he said, “or you need not expect to gain your point. Veiled hints, like anonymous letters, do not deserve any man’s serious consideration.”

Seton muttered something inaudible and became silent.

Merefleet waited for some moments and then began to move off. But the younger man instantly turned and detained him with an imperative hand.

“What I mean is this,” he said, and the starlight on his face showed it to be very determined. “My cousin is not in a position to receive any man’s attentions. She is not free. I have tried to persuade myself into thinking you want nothing but ordinary friendship. I should infinitely prefer to think that if you can assure me that I am justified in so doing.”

“What is it to you?” said Merefleet.

“To me personally it is more a matter of family honour than anything else. Moreover I am her sole protector, and as such I am bound to assert a certain amount of authority.”



Page 131

"So you may," said Merefleet quietly. "But I do not see that that involves my departure."

Seton struck the balustrade of the terrace with an impatient hand. "Can't you understand?" he said rather thickly. "How else can I put it?"

"I have no desire to pry into your affairs, Heaven knows," Merefleet said, "but this I will say. If I can be of use to either of you in helping to dispose of what appears to be a somewhat awkward predicament you may rely upon me with absolute safety."

"Thanks!" Seton turned slowly and held out his hand. "There is only one thing you can do," he said, with an awkward laugh. "And that is precisely what you are not prepared to do. All right. I suppose it's human nature. I am obliged to you all the same. Good-night!"

CHAPTER X

"Say, Big Bear! Will you take me on the water?"

Merefleet, lounging on the shingle with a pipe and newspaper, looked up with a start and hastened to knock out the half-burnt tobacco on the heel of his boot.

His American friend stood above him, clad in the white linen costume she always wore for boating. She looked very enchanting and very childlike. Merefleet who had seen her last sobbing bitterly in her cousin's arms, stared up at her with wonder and relief on his face.

She nodded to him. Her eyes were marvellously bright, but he did not ascribe their brilliance to recent tears.

"You don't look exactly smart," she said critically. "Hope I don't intrude?"

"Not a bit." Merefleet stumbled to his feet and raised his hat. "Pardon my sluggishness! How are you this morning?"

"Fresh as paint," she returned. "But I'm just dying to get on the water. And Bert has gone off somewhere by himself. I guess you'll help me, Big Bear. Won't you?"

Merefleet glanced from the sea to the sun.

"There's a change coming," he said. "I will go with you with pleasure. But I think it would be advisable to wait till the afternoon as usual. We shall probably know by then what sort of weather to expect."

Mab pouted a little.

"We shan't go at all if we wait," she declared. "Why can't we go while the fine weather lasts? I believe you want to back out of it. It's real lazy of you, Big Bear. You shan't read, anyhow."

She took his paper from his unresisting hands, dug a hole in the shingle with vicious energy, and covered it over.

"Now what?" she said, looking up at him with an impudent smile.

"Now," said Merefleet gravely, "I will take you for a row."

"Will you? Big Bear, you're a brick. I'll put you into my will. No, I won't, because I haven't got anything to leave. And you wouldn't want it if I had. Say, Big Bear! Haven't you got any friends?"

Merefleet looked surprised at the abrupt question.

"I have one friend in England besides yourself, Miss Ward," he replied. "His name is Clinton. But he is married and done for."

Page 132

"My! What a pity!" she exclaimed. "Isn't he happy?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Still, you know, most fellows have to sacrifice something when they marry. He was a war-correspondent. But he has spoilt himself for that."

"I see." Mab was prodding the shingle with the end of her sunshade, her face very thoughtful. Suddenly she looked up. "Never get married, Big Bear!" she said vehemently. "It's the most miserable state in Christendom."

"Anyone would think you spoke from experience," said Merefleet, smiling a little.

But Mab did not smile.

"I know a lot, Big Bear," she said, with a sharp sigh.

Merefleet was silent. His thoughts had gone back to the previous night. He was surprised when she suddenly alluded to the episode.

"There's that man Ralph Warrender," she said. "I guess the woman that's married him thinks he's A1 and gilt-edged now, poor soul. But he's just a miserable patchwork mummy really, and there isn't any white in him—no, not a speck."

She spoke with such intense, even violent bitterness that Merefleet was utterly astonished. He stood gravely contemplating her flushed, upturned face.

"What has he done to make you say that, I wonder?" he said.

"Nothing to me," she answered quickly. "Nothing at all to me. But I used to know his first wife. She was a sort of friend of mine. They used to call her the loveliest woman in U.S., Mr. Merefleet. And she belonged to that fiend."

They began to walk towards the boats through the shifting shingle. Merefleet had nothing to say. There was something in her passionate speech that disturbed him vaguely. She spoke as one whose most sacred personal interests had once been at stake.

"Lucky for her she's dead, Big Bear," she said presently, with a side-glance at him. "I've never regretted any of my friends less than Mrs. Ralph Warrender. Oh, she was real miserable. I've seen her with diamonds piled high in her hair and her face all shining with smiles. And I've known all the time that her heart was broken. And when I heard that she was dead, do you know, I was glad—yes, thankful. And I guess Warrender wasn't sorry. For she hated him."

"I never cared for Warrender," said Merefleet. "But I always took him for a gentleman."

She laughed at his words with a gaiety that jarred upon him. "Do you know, Big Bear," she said, "I think they must have forgotten to teach you your ABC when you went to school? You're such an innocent."

Merefleet tramped by her side in silence. There was something in him that shrank when she spoke in this vein.

But quite suddenly her tone changed. She spoke very gently. "Still, it's better to know too little than too much," she said. "And oh, Big Bear, I know such a lot."

Merefleet looked at her sharply and surprised an expression on her face which he did not easily forget.

Page 133

He knew in that moment that this woman had suffered, and his heart gave a wild, tumultuous throb. From that moment he also knew that she had taken his heart by storm.

CHAPTER XI

Half-an-hour later they were out on the open sea beyond the harbour in a cockleshell even frailer than Quiller's little craft which they had not been able to secure.

The sea was very quiet, only broken by an occasional long swell that drove them southward like driftwood. Merefleet, who had been persuaded to quit the harbour against his better judgment, was not greatly disturbed by this fact. He did not anticipate any difficulty in returning. A little extra labour was the worst he expected, for he knew that a southward course would bring him into no awkward currents. Away to the eastward he was aware of treacherous streams and shoals. But he had no intention of going in that direction, and Mab, who steered, knew the water well.

There was no sun, a circumstance which Mab deplored, but for which Merefleet was profoundly grateful.

"You're not nearly so lazy as you used to be," she said to him approvingly, as he rested his oars after a long pull.

"No," said Merefleet. "I am beginning to see the error of my ways."

"I'm real glad to hear you say so," she said heartily. "And I want to tell you, Big Bear—that as I'm never going to New York again, I've decided to be an Englishwoman. And you've got to help me."

Merefleet looked at her with undisguised appreciation, but he shook his head at her words. She was marvellous; she was inimitable; she was unique. She would never, never be English. His gesture said as much. But she was not discouraged.

"I guess I'll try, anyhow," she said with brisk determination. "You don't like American women, Mr. Merefleet."

"Depends," said Merefleet.

And she laughed gaily.

They were drifting in long sweeps towards the south. Imperceptibly also the distance was widening between the boat and the shore. The wind was veering to the west.

"My! Look at that oar!" Mab suddenly exclaimed.

Merefleet started at the note of dismay in her tone. He had shipped his oars. They were the only ones that had been provided. He glanced hastily at the oar Mab indicated. It had been broken and roughly spliced together. The wood that had been used for the splicing was rotten, and the friction in the rowlocks had almost worn it through. Merefleet examined it in silence.

The girl's voice, high, with a quiver in it that might have stood for either laughter or consternation, broke in on him.

"Well," she said, "I guess we're in the suds this time, Big Bear; and no mistake about it."

Merefleet glanced at her helplessly. He did not think she realised the gravity of the situation, but something in the little smile that twitched her lips undeceived him.

Page 134

"The sea was full of boats a little while ago," he said. "They have probably gone in for the lunch hour. But they will be out again presently. We shall have to drift about for a while and then run up a distress signal. It will be all right."

She nodded to him and laughed.

"Splendid, Big Bear! You talk like an oracle. I guess we'll run up my red parasol on the end of an oar for a danger sign. Bert could see that from the terrace." She glanced shorewards as she spoke, and he saw her face change momentarily. "Why," she said quickly, "I thought we were close in. What's happened?"

Merefleet looked round with sullen perception of a difficult situation.

"The wind is blowing off shore," he explained. "It was north when we started. But it has gone round to the west. It will be all right, you know. We can't drift very far in an hour."

But he did not speak with conviction. The sea tumbled all around them, a mighty grey waste. And the shore seemed very far away. A dismal outlook in truth. Moreover it was beginning to rain.

Mab sheltered herself under her sunshade and began to laugh. "It's just skittles to what it might be," she said consolingly.

But Merefleet did not respond. He knew that the wind was rising with every second, and already the little boat tipped and tossed with perilous buoyancy.

Mab still held the rudder-lines. She sat in the stern, a serene and smiling vision, while Merefleet toiled with one oar to counteract the growing strength of the off-shore wind. But she very soon put down her sunshade, and he saw that she must speedily be drenched to the skin. For the rain was heavy, drifting over the water in thick, grey gusts. They were being driven steadily eastwards out to sea.

"I don't think my steering makes much difference, Big Bear," she said, after a long silence.

"No," said Merefleet. "It would take all the strength of two rowers to make headway against this wind."

He shipped his oar with the words and began to take off his coat. Mab watched him with some wonder. He was seated on the thwart nearest to her. He stooped forward at length very cautiously and, taking the rudder-lines from her, made them fast.

"Now get into this!" he said. "Mind you don't upset the boat!"

She stared at him for one speechless second. Then:

“No, I won’t, Big Bear,” she declared emphatically. “Put it on again at once! Do you suppose I’ll sit here in your coat while you shiver in nothing but flannels?”

“Do as I say!” said Merefleet, with a grim hardening of the jaw.

And quite meekly she obeyed. There was something about him that inspired her with awe at that moment. She felt as if she had run against some obstacle in the dark.

The rain began to beat down in great, shifting clouds. The sea grew higher at every moment. Flecks of white gleamed here and there on all sides. The boat was dancing like a cork.



Page 135

Mab sat in growing terror with her eyes on the roaring turmoil. The minutes crawled by like hours. At length she turned to look shorewards for the boats. A driving, blinding mist of rain beat into her face. She saw naught besides. And suddenly her courage failed her. "Big Bear!" she cried wildly. "What shall we do? I'm so frightened."

He heard her through the storm. He was still sitting on the middle thwart facing her. He moved, bending towards her.

"Come to me here!" he said. "It will be safer."

She crept to his outstretched arm with a sense of going into refuge. Merefleet helped her over the thwart. There was a torn piece of sailcloth in the bottom of the boat. He drew her down on to it and turned round himself so that his back was towards the storm. He was thus able to shelter her in some measure from the full fury of the blast.

Mab shrank against him, terrified and quivering.

"It looks so angry," she said.

"Don't be afraid!" said Merefleet.

And he put his arms about her and held her close to him as if she had been a little child afraid of the dark.

CHAPTER XII

No pleasure-boats or craft of any sort put out from Silverstrand that afternoon. The wind eventually blew away the clouds and revealed a foaming, sunlit sea. But the waves were immense at high tide, and the fishermen muttered among themselves and stared darkly out over the mighty breakers.

It was known among them that a boat had put out to sea in the morning and had not returned before the rising of the gale. There were heavy hearts in Old Silverstrand that day. But to launch another boat to search for the missing one was out of the question. The great seas that came hurling into the little fishing-harbour were sufficient proof of that, even to the most inexperienced landsman.

Seton, learning the news when lunch was half over, rushed off to New Silverstrand in the hope that the boat might have been driven in that direction by the strong current. But nothing had been seen from there of the missing craft, and though he traversed the entire distance by way of the cliffs, he saw nothing throughout his walk but flecks of foam here and there over the tumbling expanse of water.

He returned an hour or so later, reaching Old Silverstrand by five. But nothing had been heard there. The fishermen shook their heads when he questioned them. It was plain that they had given up hope.

Seton raged up and down the quay in impotent agony of mind. The off-shore wind continued for some hours. There was not the smallest doubt that the boat had been driven out to sea, unless—a still more awful possibility—she had been swamped and sunk long ago. As darkness fell, the gale at length abated, and Quiller the younger approached Seton.

“Tell you what, sir,” he said. “There’s a cruiser been up and down a matter of ten miles out. Me and my mates will put out at daybreak and see if we can get within hail of her. There’s the light-ship, too, off Morden’s Shoal. ’Tain’t likely as a boat could have slipped between ’em without being seen. For if she was just drifting, you know, sir, she wouldn’t go very fast.”

Page 136

"All right," said Seton. "And thanks! I'll go with you in the morning."

Quiller lingered, though there was dismissal in the tone.

"Go in and get a rest, sir!" he said persuasively. "There ain't no good in your wearing yourself out here. You can't do nothing, sir, except pray for a calm sea. Given that, we'll start with the light."

"Very well," said Seton, and turned away. He knew that the man spoke sense and he put pressure on himself to behave rationally. Nevertheless, he spent the greater part of the night in a fever of restlessness which no strength of will could subdue; and he was down on the quay long before the first faint gleam of light shot glimmering over the quiet water.

* * * * *

It was during those first wonderful moments of a new day that Mab woke up with a start shivering, and stretched out her arms with a cry of wonder.

Hours before, Merefleet had persuaded her to try to rest, and she had fallen asleep with her head against his knee, soothed by the calm that at length succeeded the storm. He had watched over her with grim endurance throughout the night, and not once had he seen a light or any other object to raise his hopes.

They were out of sight of land; alone on the dumb waste. He had not the smallest notion as to how far out to sea the boat had drifted. Only he fancied that they had been driven out of the immediate track of steamers, and in the great emptiness around him he saw no means of escape from the fate that seemed to dog them.

The boat had lived miraculously, it seemed to him, through the awful storm of the day. Tossed ruthlessly and aimlessly to and fro, drenched to the skin, hungry and forlorn, he and the woman who was to him the very desire of life, had gone through the peril of deep waters. Merefleet was beginning to wonder why they had thus escaped. It seemed to him but a needless prolonging of an agony already long drawn out.

Nevertheless there was nothing of despair in his face as he stooped over the girl who was crouching at his feet.

"Glad you have been able to sleep," he said gently. "Don't get up! There is no necessity if you are fairly comfortable."

She smiled up at him with the ready confidence of a child and raised herself a little.

"Still watching, Big Bear?" she said.

“Yes,” said Merefleet.

His tone told her that he had seen nothing. She lay still for a few moments, then slowly turned her face towards the east. A deep pink glow was rising in the sky. There was a rosy dusk on the sea about them.

“My!” said Mab in a soft whisper. “Isn’t that lovely?”

Merefleet said nothing. He was watching her beautiful face with a great hunger in his heart.

Mab was also silent for a while. Presently she turned her face up to his.

“The Gate of Heaven,” she said in a whisper. “Isn’t it fine?”

Page 137

He did not speak.

She lifted a hand that felt like an icicle and slipped it into his.

"I guess we shall do this journey together, Big Bear," she said. "I'm real sorry I made you come if you didn't want to."

"You needn't be sorry," said Merefleet, with a huskiness he could not have accounted for.

"No?" she said, with a curious little thrill in her voice. "It's real handsome of you, Big Bear. Because—you know—I ought to have died more than a year ago. But you are different. You have your life to live."

Merefleet's hand closed tightly upon hers.

"Don't talk like that, child!" he said. "Heaven knows your life is worth more than mine."

Mab leant her elbow on his knee and gazed thoughtfully over the far expanse of water. Merefleet knew that she was faint and exhausted, though she uttered no complaint.

"Shall I tell you a secret, Big Bear?" she said, in the hushed tone of one on the threshold of a sacred place. "I ended my life long ago. I was very miserable and Death came and offered me refuge. And it was such a safe hiding-place. I knew no one would look for me there. Only lately I have come to see that what I did was wicked. I think you helped to make me see, Big Bear. You're so honest. And then a dreadful thing happened. Have you ever spoilt anyone's life besides your own, I wonder? I have. That is why I have got to die. There is no place left for me. I gave it up. And there is someone else there now."

She stopped. Merefleet was bending over her with that in his face that might have been the reflected glory of the growing day. Mab saw it, and stretched up her other hand with a startled sob.

"Big Bear, forgive me!" she whispered. "I—didn't—know."

A moment later she was lying on his breast, and the first golden shimmer of the morning had risen above the sea.

"I shan't mind dying now," Mab whispered, a little later. "I was real frightened yesterday. But now—do you know?—I'm glad—glad. It's just like sailing into Paradise, isn't it? Are any of your people there, Big Bear?"

"Perhaps," said Merefleet.

"Won't you be pleased to see them?" she said, with a touch of wonder at the indifference in his tone.

"I want nothing but you, my darling," he said, and his lips were on her hair.

He felt her fingers close upon his own.

"I guess it won't matter in Heaven," she said, as though trying to convince herself of something. "My dear, shall I tell you something? I love you with all my heart. I never knew it till to-day. And if we weren't so near Heaven I reckon I couldn't ever have told you."

Some time later she began to talk in a dreamy way of the Great Haven whither they were drifting. The sun was high by then and beat in a wonderful, dazzling glory on the pathless waters.

Page 138

"There's no sun There," said Mab. "But I guess it will be very bright. And there will be crowds and crowds along the Shore to see us come into Port. And I'll see my little baby among them. I told you about him, Big Bear. Finest little chap in New York City. He'll be holding out his arms to me, just like he used. Ah! I can almost see him now. Look at his curls. Aren't they fine? And his little angel face. There isn't anyone like him, I guess. Everybody said he was the cutest baby in U.S. Coming, darling! Coming!"

Mab's hands slackened from Merefleet's clasp, and suddenly she stretched out her arms to the sky. The holiest of all earthly raptures was on her face.

Then with a sharp sigh she came to herself and turned back to Merefleet. A piteous little smile hovered about her quivering lips.

"I guess I've been dreaming, Big Bear," she said. "Such a dream! Oh, such a gorgeous, heavenly dream!"

And she hid her face on his breast and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIII

Before the sun set they were sighted by the cruiser returning to her anchorage outside the little fishing-harbour. Mab, worn out by hunger and exposure, had slipped back to her former position in the bottom of the boat. She was half asleep and seemed dazed when Merefleet told her of their approaching deliverance. But she clung fast to him when a boat from the cruiser came alongside; and he lifted her into it himself.

"By Jove, sir, you've had a bad time!" said a young officer in the boat.

"Thirty hours," said Merefleet briefly.

He kept his arm about the girl, though his brain swam dizzily. And Mab, consciously or unconsciously, held his hand in a tight clasp.

Merefleet felt as if she were definitely removed out of his reach when she was lifted from his hold at length, and the impression remained with him after he gained the cruiser's deck. He met with most courteous solicitude on all sides and was soon on the high-road to recovery.

Later in the evening, when Mab also was sufficiently restored to appear on deck, the cruiser steamed into Silverstrand Harbour, and the two voyagers were landed by one of her boats, in the midst of great rejoicing on the quay.

Seton, who had long since returned from a fruitless search for tidings, was among the crowd of spectators. He said little by way of greeting, and there was considerable strain

apparent in his manner towards Merefleet. He hurried his cousin back to the hotel with a haste not wholly bred of the moment's expediency. Merefleet followed at a more leisurely pace. He made no attempt to join them, however. He had done his part. There remained no more to do. With a heavy sense of irrevocable loss he went to bed and slept the dreamless sleep of exhaustion for many hours.

The adventure was over. It had ended with a tameness that gave it an almost commonplace aspect. But Merefleet's resolution was of stout manufacture.

Page 139

The consequences of that night and day of peril involved his whole future. Merefleet recognised this and resolved to act forthwith, in defiance of Seton or any other obstacle. He did not realise till later that there was opposed to him a strength which even his will was powerless to overcome. He did not even take the possibility of this into consideration.

He was very sure of himself and confident of success when he descended late on the following morning to a solitary breakfast—sure of himself, sure of the smile of that fickle goddess Fortune—sure, thrice sure, of the woman he loved.

And he watched for her coming with a rapture that deprived him of his appetite.

But Mab did not come.

Instead, Herbert Seton presently strolled into the room, greeted him, and paused by his table.

“Be good enough to join me on the terrace presently, will you?” he said abruptly.

And Merefleet nodded with a chill sense of foreboding. But his resolution was unalterable. This young man should not, he was determined, by any means cheat him now of his heart’s desire. Matters had gone too far for that. He followed Seton almost at once and found him in a quiet corner, smoking. Merefleet sat down beside him and also began to smoke. There was a touch of hostility about Seton that he was determined to ignore.

“Well,” said Seton at length, with characteristic bluntness, “so you have done it in spite of my warning the other night.”

Merefleet looked at him. Was he expected to render an account of his doings to this man who was at least ten years his junior, he wondered, with faint amusement?

Seton went on with strong indignation.

“I told you in the first place not to be too intimate with her. I told you again two nights ago that she was not free to accept any man’s attentions. But you went on. And you have made her miserable simply for the gratification of your own unreasonable fancy. Do you call that manly behaviour, I wonder?”

Merefleet sat in absolute silence for several seconds. Finally he wheeled round in his chair and faced Seton.

“If I were you,” he said quietly, “I should postpone this interview for half-an-hour. I think you may possibly regret it if you don’t.”

Seton tossed away a half-smoked cigarette and rose.

"In half-an-hour," he said, "I shall have left this place, and my cousin with me. I asked to speak to you because I detest all underhand dealings. You apparently have not the same scruples."

Merefleet also rose.

"You will apologise for that," he said, in a tone of conviction. "I don't question your motives, but to fetch me out here and then insult me was not a wise proceeding on your part."

Seton's hand clenched involuntarily. But he had put himself in the wrong, and he knew it.

"Very well," he said at length, with a shrug. "I apologise for the expression. But my opinion of you remains unaltered."



Page 140

Merefleet ignored the qualification. He was bent on something more important than the satisfaction of his own personal honour. "And now," he said, with deliberate purpose, "I am going to have a private interview with your cousin."

Seton started.

"You are going to do nothing of the sort," he said instantly.

Merefleet looked him over gravely.

"Look here, Seton!" he said. "You're making a fool of yourself. Take a friend's advice—don't!"

Seton choked back his anger with a great effort. In spite of this there was a passionate ring in his voice when he spoke that betrayed the exceeding precariousness of his self-control.

"I can't let you see her," he said. "She is upset enough already. I have promised her that she shall not be worried."

"Have you promised her to keep me from speaking to her?" Merefleet grimly enquired.

"No." Seton spoke reluctantly.

"Then do this," said Merefleet. "Go to her and ask her if she will see me alone. If she says 'No,' I give you my word that I will leave this place and trouble neither of you any further."

Seton seemed to hesitate, but Merefleet was sure of his acquiescence. After a pause of several seconds he fulfilled his expectations and went.

Merefleet sat down again and waited. Seton returned heavy-footed.

"She will see you," he said curtly. "You will find her in the billiard-room."

"Alone?" said Merefleet, rising.

"Alone."

And Merefleet walked away.

CHAPTER XIV

He found her sitting in a great arm-chair at one end of the empty billiard-room. She did not rise to meet him. He thought she looked tired out and frightened.



He went to her and stooped over her, taking her hands. She did not resist him, but neither did she welcome. Her lips were quivering painfully.

"What have I done that you should run away from me?" Merefleet asked her very gently.

She shook her head with a helpless gesture.

"Mr. Merefleet," she whispered, "try—try not to be cross any! I'm afraid I've made a big mistake."

"My dear, we all make them," Merefleet said with grave kindness.

"I know," she faltered. "I know. But mine was a real bad one."

"Never mind, child!" he said tenderly. "Why should you tell me?"

She threw a swift look into his face. She was trembling violently.

"Big Bear," she cried with sudden vehemence, "you don't understand."

He knelt down beside her and put his arm about her.

"Listen to me, my darling," he said, and she shrank at the deep thrill in his voice. "To me you are all that is beautiful and good and holy. I do not want to know what lies behind you. I know you have had trouble. But it is over. You may have made mistakes. But they are over, too. Tell me nothing! Leave the past alone! Only give me your present and your future. I shall be quite content."

Page 141

He paused. She was shivering within his encircling arm. He could hear her breath coming and going very quickly.

"You love me, darling," he said. "And is it necessary for me to tell you that I worship you as no one ever has worshipped you before?"

He paused again. But Mab did not speak. The beautiful face was working painfully. Her hands were tightly clasped in his.

"Child, what is it?" Merefleet said, conscious of a hidden barrier between them. "Can't you trust yourself to me? Is that it? Are you afraid of me? You didn't shrink from me yesterday."

She bowed her head. Yesterday she had wept in his arms. But to-day no tears came. Only a halting whisper, a woman's cry of sheer weakness.

"Don't tempt me, Big Bear!" she murmured. "Oh, don't tempt me! I am not—free!"

Merefleet's face grew stern.

"You did not say that yesterday," he said.

She heard the change in his tone, and looked up. She was better able to meet this from him.

"I know," she said. "And I guess that was where I went wrong. I ought to have waited till we were dead. But, you see, I didn't know."

"Then do you tell me you are not free?" Merefleet said. "Do you mean literally that? Are you the actual property of another man?"

She shook her head with baffling promptitude.

"I guess I'm just Death's property, Big Bear," she said, with a wistful little smile. "But he doesn't seem over-keen on having me."

"Stop!" said Merefleet harshly. "I won't have you talk like that. It's madness. Tell me what you mean!"

"I can't," Mab said. "I can't tell you. It wouldn't be fair. Don't be angry, Big Bear! It's just the price I've got to pay. And it's no use squirming. I've worried it round and round. But it always comes back to that. I'm not free. And no one but Bert must ever know why."

Merefleet sprang to his feet with an impatience by no means characteristic of him.

"This is intolerable!" he exclaimed. "You are wrecking your life for an insane scruple. Child, listen! Tell me nothing whatever! Give yourself to me! No one shall ever take you away again. That I swear. And I will make you so happy, dear. Only trust me!"

But Mab covered her face as if to shut out a forbidden sight.

"Big Bear, I mustn't," she said, with a sharp catch in her voice. "I've done very wrong already. But I mustn't do this. Indeed I mustn't. It's real good of you. And I shall remember it all my life. I think you are the most charitable man I ever met, considering what you must think of me."

"Think!" said Merefleet, and there was a note of deep passion in his voice. "I don't think. I want you just as you are,—just as you are. Don't you know yet that I love you enough for that?"

Mab rose slowly at the words. She was very pale, and he could see her trembling as she stood.

Page 142

"Big Bear," she said, "I've got something to say to you. What I told you yesterday was quite true. And I'm in great trouble about it. I thought we were going to Heaven together. That was how I came to say it. But it was very wicked of me to be so impulsive. I've done other things that were wicked in just the same way. It's just my nature. And p'r'aps you'll try to forgive me when you think how I truly meant it. I'm telling you this because I want you to do something for me. It'll be real difficult, Big Bear. Only you're so strong."

She faltered a little and paused to recover herself. Merefleet was standing close to her. He could have taken her into his arms. But something held him back. Moreover he knew the nature of her request before she uttered it.

"Will you do what I ask you?" she said suddenly, facing him directly. "Will you, Big Bear?"

Merefleet did not answer her.

She went on quickly.

"My dear, it's hard for me, too, though I'm bad and I deserve to suffer."

Her voice broke and Merefleet made a convulsive movement towards her. But he checked himself. And Mab ended in a choked whisper with an appealing hand against his breast.

"Just go right away!" she said. "Take up your life where it was before you met me! Will you, dear? It—will make it easier for me if you will."

A dead silence followed the low words. Then, moved by a marvellous influence which worked upon him irresistibly, Merefleet stooped and put the slight hand to his lips. He did not understand. He was as far from reading the riddle as he had been when he entered. But his love for this woman conquered his desire. He had thought to win an empire. He left the room a beaten slave.

CHAPTER XV

Men said that Bernard Merefleet, the gold-king, was curiously changed when once more he went among them. Something of the old grimness which had earned for him his *sobriquet* yet clung to his manner. But he was undeniably softer than of yore. There was an odd gentleness about him. Women said that he was marvellously improved. Among such as had known him in New York he became a favourite, little as he attempted to court favour.

Towards the end of the year he went down to the Midlands to stay with his friend Perry Clinton. They had not met for several years, and Clinton, who had married in the interval, also thought him changed.

"Is it prosperity or adversity that has made you so tame, dear fellow?" he asked him, as they sat together over dessert one night.

"Adversity," said Merefleet, smiling faintly. "I'm getting old, Perry; and there's no one to take care of me. And I find that money is vanity."

Clinton understood.

"Better go round the world," he said. "That's the best cure for that."

But Merefleet shook his head.

Page 143

"It's my own fault," he said presently. "I've chucked away my life to the gold-demon. And now there is nothing left to me. You were wise in your generation. You may thank your stars, Perry, that when I wanted you to join me, you had the sense to refuse. When I heard you were married I called you a fool. But—I know better now."

He paused. He had been speaking with a force that was almost passionate. When he continued his tone had changed.

"That is why you find me a trifle less surly than I used to be," he said. "I used to hate my fellow-creatures. And now I would give all my money in exchange for a few disinterested friends. I'm sick of my lonely life. But for all that, I shall live and die alone."

"You make too much of it," said Clinton.

"Perhaps. But you can't expect a man who has been into Paradise to be exactly happy when he is thrust outside."

Clinton took up the evening paper without comment. Merefleet had never before spoken so openly to him. He realised that the man's loneliness must oppress him heavily indeed thus to master his reserve.

"What news?" said Merefleet, after a pause.

"Nothing," said Clinton. "Plague on the Continent. Railway mishap on the Great Northern. Another American Disaster."

"What's that?" said Merefleet with a touch of interest.

"Electric car accident. Ralph Warrender among the victims."

"Warrender! What! Is he dead?"

"Yes. Killed instantaneously. Did you know him?"

"I have met him in business. I wasn't intimate with him."

"Isn't he the man whose first wife was killed in a railway accident?" said Clinton reflectively, glad to have diverted Merefleet's thoughts. "I thought so. I met her once and was so smitten with her that I purchased her portrait forthwith. The most marvellous woman's face I ever saw. The man I got it from spoke of her with the most appalling enthusiasm. 'Mab Warrender!' he said. 'If she is not the loveliest woman in U.S., I guess the next one would strike us blind.' Here! I'll show it you. Netta wants me to frame it."

Clinton got up and took a book from a cupboard. Merefleet was watching him with strained eyes. His heart was thumping as if it would choke him. He rose as Clinton laid the picture before him, and steadied himself unconsciously by his friend's shoulder.

Clinton glanced at him in some surprise.

"Hullo!" he said. "A friend of yours, was she? My dear fellow, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

But Merefleet hung over the picture with fascinated eyes. And his answer came with a curiously strained laugh, that somehow rang exultant.

"Yes, a friend of mine, old chap," he said. "It's a wonderful face, isn't it? But it doesn't do her justice. I shouldn't frame it if I were you."

CHAPTER XVI

Page 144

"Isn't he a monster?" said Mab, as she sat before the kitchen fire in Quiller's humble dwelling with Mrs. Quiller's three months' old baby in her arms. "I guess he'd fetch a prize at a baby show, Mrs. Quiller. Isn't he just too knowing for anything?"

"He's the best of the bunch, miss," said Mrs. Quiller proudly. "The other eight, they weren't nothing special. But this one, he be a beauty, though it ain't me as should say it. I'm sure it's very good of you, miss, to spend the time you do over him. He'd be an ungrateful little rogue if he didn't get on."

"It's real kind of you to make me welcome," Mab said, with her cheek against the baby's head, "I don't know what I'd do if you didn't."

"Ah! Poor dear! You must be lonesome now the gentleman's gone," said Mrs. Quiller commiseratingly.

"Oh, no," said Mab lightly. "Not so very. I couldn't ask my cousin to give up all his time to me you know. Besides, he would come to see me at any time if I really wanted him."

"Ah!" Mrs. Quiller shook her head. "But it ain't the same. You wants a home of your own, my dear. That's what it is. What's become of t'other gentleman what used to be down here?"

Mab almost laughed at the artlessness of this query.

"Mr. Merefleet, you mean? I don't know. I guess he's making some more money."

At this point old Quiller, who had been toddling about in the November sunshine outside, pushed open the door in a state of breathless excitement.

"Here's Master Bernard coming, missie," he announced.

Mab started to her feet, her face in a sudden, marvellous glow.

"There now!" said Mrs. Quiller, relieving her of her precious burden. "Who'd have thought it? You'd better go and talk to him."

And Mab stepped out into the soft sunshine. It fell around her in a flood and dazzled her. She stood quite still and waited, till out of the brilliance someone came to her and took her hand. The waves were dashing loudly on the shore. The south wind raced by with a warm rushing. The whole world seemed to laugh. She closed her eyes and laughed with it.

"Is it you, Big Bear?" she said.

And Merefleet's voice answered her.

“Yes,” it said. “I have come for you in earnest this time. You won’t send me away again?”

Mab lifted her face with a glad smile.

“I guess there’s no need,” she said. “My dear, I’ll come now.”

And they went away together in the sunlight.

* * * * *

“And now I guess I’ll tell you the story of the first Mrs. Ralph Warrender,” said Mab, some time later. “I won’t say anything about him, because he’s dead, and if you can’t speak well of the dead,—well it’s better not to speak at all. But she was miserable with him. And after her baby died—it just wasn’t endurable. Then came that railway accident, and she was in it. There were a lot of folks killed, burnt to death most of them. But she escaped, and then the thought came to her just to lie low for a bit and let him think she was dead.

Page 145

“Oh, it was a real wicked thing to do. But she was nearly demented with trouble. And she did it. She managed to get away, too, in spite of her lovely face. An old negro woman helped her. And she came to England and went to a cousin of hers who had been good to her, whom she knew she could trust—just a plain, square-jawed Englishman, Big Bear, like you in some respects—not smart, oh no—only strong as iron. And he kept her secret, though he didn’t like it a bit. And he gave her some money of hers that he had inherited, to live on. Which was funny, wasn’t it?”

Mab paused to laugh.

“And then another man came along, a great, surly, fogheaded Englishman, who made love to her till she was nearly driven crazy. For though Warrender had married again before she could stop him, she wasn’t free. But she couldn’t tell him so for the other woman’s sake. It doesn’t matter now. It was a dreadful tangle once. And she felt real bad about it. But it’s come out quite simply. And no one will ever know.

“Now, I’ll tell you a secret, Big Bear, about the woman you know of. You must put your head down for I’ll have to whisper. That’s the way. Now! She’s just madly in love with you, Big Bear. And she is quite, quite free to tell you so. There! And I reckon she’s not Death’s property any more. She’s just—yours.”

The narrative ended in Merefleet’s arms.

* * * * *

A few weeks later Quiller the younger looked up from a newspaper with a grin.

“Mr. Merefleet’s married our little missie, dad,” he announced. “I saw it coming t’other day.”

And old Quiller looked up with a gleam of intelligence on his wrinkled face.

“Why!” he said, with slow triumph. “If that ain’t what I persuaded him for to do, long, long ago! He’s a sensible lad, is Master Bernard.”

A measure of approval which Merefleet would doubtless have appreciated.

* * * * *

The Sacrifice

CHAPTER I

It had been a hot day at the Law Courts, but a faint breeze had sprung up with the later hours, blowing softly over the river. It caught the tassel of the blind by which Field sat and tapped it against the window-frame, at first gently like a child at play, then with gathering force and insistence till at last he looked up with a frown and rose to fasten it back.

It was growing late. The rose of the afterglow lay upon the water, tipping the silvery ripples with soft colour. It was a magic night. But the wonder of it did not apparently reach him. A table littered with papers stood in front of him bearing a portable electric lamp. He was obviously too engrossed to think of exterior things.

For a space he sat again in silence by the open window, only the faint rustling of the lace curtain being audible. His somewhat hard, clean-shaven face was bent over his work with rigid concentration. His eyelids scarcely stirred.

Page 146

Then again there came a tapping, this time at the door. The frown returned to his face. He looked up.

“Well?”

The door opened. A small, sharp-faced boy poked in his head. “A lady to see you, sir.”

“What?” said Field. His frown deepened. “I can’t see any one. I told you so.”

“Says she won’t go away till she’s seen you, sir,” returned the boy glibly. “Can’t get her to budge, sir.”

“Oh, tell her—” said Field, and stopped as if arrested by a sudden thought. “Who is it?” he asked.

A grin so brief that it might have been a mere twitch of the features passed over the boy’s face.

“Wouldn’t give no name, sir. But she’s a nob of some sort,” he said. “Got a shiny satin dress on under her cloak.”

Field’s eyes went for a moment to his littered papers. Then he picked up a newspaper from a chair and threw it over them.

“Show her in!” he said briefly.

He got up with the words, and stood with his back to the window, watching the half-open door.

There came a slight rustle in the passage outside. The small boy reappeared and threw the door wide with a flourish. A woman in a dark cloak and hat with a thick veil over her face entered.

The door closed behind her. Field stood motionless. She advanced with slight hesitation.

“I hope you will forgive me,” she said, “for intruding upon you.”

Her voice was rich and deep. It held a throb of nervousness. Field came deliberately forward.

“I presume I can be of use to you,” he said.

His tone was dry. There was scant encouragement about him as he drew forward a chair.

She hesitated momentarily before accepting it, but finally sat down with a gesture that seemed to indicate physical weakness of some sort.

“Yes, I want your help,” she said.

Field said nothing. His face was the face of the trained man of law. It expressed naught beyond a steady, impersonal attention.

He drew up another chair and seated himself facing her.

She looked at him through her veil for several seconds in silence. Finally, with manifest effort, she spoke.

“It was so good of you to admit me—especially not knowing who I was. You recognise me now, of course? I am Lady Violet Calcott.”

“I should recognise you more easily,” he said in his emotionless voice, “if you would be good enough to put up your veil.”

His tone was perfectly quiet and courteous, yet she made a rapid movement to comply, as if he had definitely required it of her. She threw back the obscuring veil and showed him the face of one of the most beautiful women in London.

There was an instant’s pause before he said.

“Yes, I recognise you, of course. And—you wanted to consult me?”

“No!” She leaned forward in her chair with white hands clasped. “I wanted to beg you to tell me—why you have refused to undertake Burleigh Wentworth’s defence!”

Page 147

She spoke with a breathless intensity. Her wonderful eyes were lifted to his—eyes that had dazzled half London, but Field only looked down into them as he might have regarded one of his legal documents. A slight, peculiar smile just touched his lips as he made reply.

“I have no objection to telling you, Lady Violet. He is guilty. That is why.”

“Ah!” It was a sound like the snapped string of an instrument. Her fingers gripped each other. “So you think that too! Indeed—indeed, you are wrong! But—is that your only reason?”

“Isn’t it a sufficient one?” he said.

Her fingers writhed and strained against each other. “Do you mean that it is—against your principles?” she said.

“To defend a guilty man?” questioned the barrister slowly.

She nodded two or three times as if for the moment utterance were beyond her.

Field’s eyes had not stirred from her face, yet still they had that legal look as if he searched for some hidden information.

“No,” he said finally. “It is not entirely a matter of principle. As you are aware, I have achieved a certain reputation. And I value it.”

She made a quick movement that was almost convulsive.

“But you would not injure your reputation. You would only enhance it,” she said, speaking very rapidly as if some obstruction to speech had very suddenly been removed. “You are practically on the top of the wave. You would succeed where another man would fail. And indeed—oh, indeed he is innocent! He must be innocent! Things look black against him. But he can be saved somehow. And you could save him—if you would. Think what the awful disgrace would mean to him—if he were convicted! And he doesn’t deserve it. I assure you he doesn’t deserve it. Ah, how shall I persuade you of that?” Her voice quivered upon a note of despair. “Surely you are human! There must be some means of moving you. You can’t want to see an innocent man go under!”

The beautiful eyes were blurred with tears as she looked at him. She caught back a piteous sob. The cloak had fallen from about her shoulders. They gleamed with an exquisite whiteness.

The man’s look still rested upon her with unflickering directness. Again that peculiar smile hovered about his grim mouth.



“Yes, I am human,” he said, after a pause. “I do not esteem myself as above temptation. As you probably know, I am a self-made man, of very ordinary extraction. But—I do not feel tempted to take up Burleigh Wentworth’s defence. I am sorry if that fact should cause you any disappointment. I do not see why it should. There are plenty of other men—abler than I am—who would, I am sure, be charmed to oblige Lady Violet Calcott or any of her friends.”

“That is not so,” she broke in rapidly. “You know that is not so. You know that your genius has placed you in what is really a unique position. Your name in itself is almost a mascot. You know quite well that you carry all before you with your eloquence. If—if you couldn’t get him acquitted, you could get him lenient treatment. You could save his life from utter ruin.”

Page 148

She clasped and unclasped her hands in nervous excitement. Her face was piteous in its strain and pathos.

And still Field looked unmoved upon her distress.

"I am afraid I can't help you," he said. "My eloquence would need a very strong incentive in such a case as this to balance my lack of sympathy."

"What do you mean by—incentive?" she said, her voice very low. "I will do anything—anything in my power—to induce you to change your mind. I never lost hope until—I heard you had refused to defend him. Surely—surely—there is some means of persuading you left!"

For the first time his smile was openly cynical.

"Don't offer me money, please!" he said.

She flushed vividly, hotly.

"Mr. Field! I shouldn't dream of it!"

"No?" he said. "But it was more than a dream with you when you first entered this room."

She dropped her eyes from his.

"I—didn't—realise—" she said in confusion.

He bent forward slightly. It was an attitude well known at the Law Courts. "Didn't realise—" he repeated in his quiet, insistent fashion.

She met his look again—against her will.

"I didn't realise what sort of man I had to deal with," she said.

"Ah!" said Field. "And now?"

She shrank a little. There was something intolerably keen in his calm utterance.

"I didn't do it," she said rather breathlessly. "Please remember that!"

"I do," he said.

But yet his look racked her. She threw out her hands with a sudden, desperate gesture and rose.



“Oh, are you quite without feeling? What can I appeal to? Does position mean a great deal to you? If so, my brother is very influential, and I have influential friends. I will do anything—anything in my power. Tell me what—incentive you want!”

Field rose also. They stood face to face—the self-made man and the girl who could trace her descent from a Norman baron. He was broad-built, grim, determined. She was slender, pale, and proud.

For a moment he did not speak. Then, as her eyes questioned him, he turned suddenly to a mirror over the mantelpiece behind him and showed her herself in her unveiled beauty.

“Lady Violet,” he said, and his speech had a steely, cutting quality, “you came into this room to bribe me to defend a man whom I believe to be a criminal from the consequences of his crime. And when you found I was not to be so easily bought as you imagined, you asked me if I were human. I replied to you that I was human, and not above temptation. Since then you have been trying—very hard—to find a means to tempt me. But—so far—you have overlooked the most obvious means of all. You have told me twice over that you will do anything in your power. Do you mean—literally—that?”

He was addressing the face in the glass, and still his look was almost brutally emotionless. It seemed to measure, to appraise. She met it for a few seconds, and then in spite of herself she flinched.



Page 149

"Will you tell me what you mean?" she said in a low voice.

He turned round to her again.

"Why did you come here yourself?" he said. "And at night?"

She was trembling.

"I had to come myself—as soon as I knew. I hoped to persuade you."

"You thought," he said mercilessly, "that, however I might treat others, I could never resist you."

"I hoped—to persuade you," she said again.

"By—tempting—me?" he said slowly.

She gave a great start. "Mr. Field—"

He put out a quiet hand, and laid it upon her bare arm.

"Wait a moment, please! As I said before, I am not above temptation—being human. You take a very personal interest in Burleigh Wentworth, I think?"

She met his look with quivering eyelids.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you engaged to him?" he pursued.

She winced in spite of herself.

"No."

He raised his brows.

"You have refused him, then?"

Her face was burning.

"He hasn't proposed to me—yet," she said. "Perhaps he never will."

"I see." His manner was relentless, his hold compelling. "I will defend Burleigh Wentworth," he said, "upon one condition."

"What is that?" she whispered.



"That you marry me," said Percival Field with his steady eyes upon her face.

She was trembling from head to foot.

"You—you—have never seen me before to-day," she said.

"Yes, I have seen you," he said, "several times. I have known your face and figure by heart for a very long while. I haven't had the time to seek you out. It seems to have been decreed that you should do that part."

Was there cynicism in his voice? It seemed so. Yet his eyes never left her. They held her by some electric attraction which she was powerless to break.

She looked at him, white to the lips.

"Are you—in—earnest?" she asked at last.

Again for an instant she saw his faint smile.

"Don't you know the signs yet?" he said. "Surely you have had ample opportunity to learn them!"

A tinge of colour crept beneath her pallor.

"No one ever proposed to me—like this before," she said.

His hand was still upon her arm. It closed with a slow, remorseless pressure as he made quiet reply to her previous question.

"Yes. I am in earnest."

She flinched at last from the gaze of those merciless eyes.

"You ask the impossible," she said.

"Then it is all the simpler for you to refuse," he rejoined.

Her eyes were upon the hand that held her. Did he know that its grasp had almost become a grip? It was by that, and that alone, that she was made aware of something human—or was it something bestial—behind that legal mask?

Suddenly she straightened herself and faced him. It cost her all the strength she had.

Page 150

"Mr. Field," she said, and though her voice shook she spoke with resolution, "if I were to consent to this—extraordinary suggestion; if I married you—you would not ask—or expect—more than that?"

"If you consent to marry me," he said, "it will be without conditions."

"Then I cannot consent," she said. "Please let me go!"

He released her instantly, and, turning, picked up her cloak.

But she moved away to the window and stood there with her back to him, gazing down upon the quiet river. Its pearly stillness was like a dream. The rush and roar of London's many wheels had died to a monotone.

The man waited behind her in silence. She had released the blind-cord, and was plucking at it mechanically, with fingers that trembled.

Suddenly the blast of a siren from a vessel in mid-stream shattered the stillness. The girl at the window quivered from head to foot as if it had pierced her. And then with a sharp movement she turned.

"Mr. Field!" she said, and stopped.

He waited with absolute composure.

She made a small but desperate gesture—the gesture of a creature trapped and helpless.

"I—will do it!" she said in a voice that was barely audible. "But if—if you ever come—to repent—don't blame me!"

"I shall not repent," he said.

She passed on rapidly.

"And—you will do your best—to save—Burleigh Wentworth?"

"I will save him," said Field.

She paused a moment; then moved towards him, as if compelled against her will.

He put the cloak around her shoulders, and then, as she fumbled with it uncertainly, he fastened it himself.

"Your veil?" he said.



She made a blind movement. Her self-control was nearly gone. With absolute steadiness he drew it down over her face.

"Have you a conveyance waiting?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

He turned to the door. He was in the act of opening it when she stayed him.

"One moment!" she said.

He stopped at once, standing before her with his level eyes looking straight at her.

She spoke hurriedly behind her veil.

"Promise me, you will never—never let him know—of this!"

He made a grave bow, his eyes unchangeably upon her.

"Certainly," he said.

She made an involuntary movement; her hands clenched. She stood as if she were about to make some further appeal. But he opened the door and held it for her, and such was the finality of his action that she was obliged to pass out.

He followed her into the lift and took her down in unbroken silence.

A taxi awaited her. He escorted her to it.

"Good night!" he said then.

She hesitated an instant. Then, without speaking, she gave him her hand. For a moment his fingers grasped hers.

"You may depend upon me," he said.

Page 151

She slipped free from his hold. "Thank you," she said, her voice very low.

A few seconds later Field sat again at his table by the window. The wind was blowing in from the river in rising gusts. The blind-tassel tapped and tapped, now here, now there, like a trapped creature seeking frantically for escape. For a space he sat quite motionless, gazing before him as though unaware of his surroundings. Then very suddenly but very quietly he reached out and caught the swaying thing. A moment he held it, then pulled it to him and, taking a penknife from the table, grimly, deliberately, he severed the cord.

The tassel lay in his hand, a silken thing, slightly frayed, as if convulsive fingers had torn it. He sat for a while and looked at it. Then, with that strange smile of his, he laid it away in a drawer.

CHAPTER II

The trial of Burleigh Wentworth for forgery was one of the sensations of the season. A fashionable crowd went day after day to the stifling Court to watch its progress. The man himself, nonchalant, debonair, bore himself with the instinctive courage of his race, though whether his bearing would have been as confident had Percival Field not been at his back was a question asked by a good many. He was one of the best-known figures in society, a general favourite in sporting circles, and universally looked upon with approval if not admiration wherever he went. He had the knack of popularity. He came of an old family, and his rumoured engagement to Lady Violet Calcott had surprised no one. Lord Culverleigh, her brother, was known to be his intimate friend, and the rumour had come already to be regarded as an accomplished fact when, like a thunder-bolt, had come Wentworth's arraignment for forgery.

It had set all London talking. The evidence against him was far-reaching and overwhelming. After the first shock no one believed him innocent. The result of the trial was looked upon before its commencement as a foregone conclusion until it became known that Percival Field, the rising man of the day, had undertaken his defence, and then like the swing of a weather cock public opinion veered. If Field defended him, there must be some very strong point in his favour, men argued. Field was not the sort to touch anything of a doubtful nature.

The trial lasted for nearly a week. During that time Lady Violet went day after day to the Court and sat with her veil down all through the burning hours. People looked at her curiously, questioning if there really had been any definite understanding between the two. Did she really care for the man, or was it mere curiosity that drew her? No one knew with any certainty. She wrapped herself in her reserve like an all-enveloping garment, and even those who regarded themselves as her nearest friends knew naught of what she carried in her soul.

Page 152

All through the trial she sat in utter immobility, sphinx-like, unapproachable, yet listening with tense attention to all that passed. Field's handling of the case was a marvel of legal ingenuity. There were many who were attracted to the trial by that alone. He had made his mark, and whatever he said carried weight. When he came at last to make his speech for the defence, men and women listened with bated breath. It was one of the greatest speeches that the Criminal Court had ever heard.

He flung into it the whole weight of his personality. He grappled like a giant with the rooted obstacles that strewed his path, flinging them hither and thither by sheer force of will. His scorching eloquence blasted every opposing power, consumed every tangle of adverse evidence. It was as if he fought a pitched battle for himself alone. He wrestled for the mastery rather than appealed for sympathy.

And he won his cause. His scathing attacks, his magnetism, his ruthless insistence left an indelible mark upon the minds of the jury—such a mark as no subsequent comments from the judge could efface or even moderate. The verdict returned was unanimous in spite of a by no means favourable summing-up. The prisoner was Not Guilty.

At the pronouncement of the verdict there went up a shout of applause such as that Court had seldom heard. The prisoner, rather white but still affecting sublime self-assurance, accepted it with a smile as a tribute to himself. But it was not really directed towards him. It was for the man who had defended him, the man who sat at the table below the dock and turned over a sheaf of papers with a faint, cynical smile at the corners of his thin lips. This man, they said, had done the impossible. He had dragged the prisoner out of his morass by sheer titanic effort. Obviously Percival Field had believed firmly in the innocence of the man he had defended, or he had not thus triumphantly vindicated him.

The crowd, staring at him, wondered how the victory affected him. It had certainly enhanced his reputation. It had drawn from him such a display of genius as had amazed even his colleagues. Did he feel elated at all over his success? Was he spent by that stupendous effort? No one knew?

Now that it was over, he looked utterly indifferent. He had fought and conquered, but it seemed already as if his attention were turning elsewhere.

The crowd began to stream out. The day was hot and the crush had been very great. On one of the benches occupied by the public a woman had fainted. They carried her out into the corridor and there gradually she revived. A little later she went home alone in a taxi with her veil closely drawn down over her face.

CHAPTER III

The season was drawing to a close when the announcement of Lady Violet Calcott's engagement to Percival Field took the world by storm.

Page 153

It very greatly astonished Burleigh Wentworth, who after his acquittal had drifted down to Cowes for rest and refreshment before the advent of the crowd. He had not seen Lady Violet before his departure, she having gone out of town for a few days immediately after the trial. But he took the very next train back to London as soon as he had seen the announcement, to find her.

It was late in the evening when he arrived, but this fact did not daunt him. He had always been accustomed to having his own way, and he had a rooted belief, which the result of his trial had not tended to lessen, in his own lucky star. He had dined on the train and he merely waited to change before he went straight to Lord Culverleigh's house.

He found there was a dinner-party in progress. Lady Culverleigh, Violet's sister-in-law, was an indefatigable hostess. She had the reputation for being one of the hardest-working women in the West End.

The notes of a song reached Wentworth as he went towards the drawing-room. Lady Violet was singing. Her voice was rich and low. He stood outside the half-open door to listen.

He did not know that he was visible to any one inside the room, but a man sitting near the door became suddenly aware of his presence and got up before the song was ended. Wentworth in the act of stepping back to let him pass stopped short abruptly. It was Percival Field.

They faced each other for a second or two in silence. Then Field's hand came quietly forth and grasped the other man's shoulder, turning him about.

"I should like a word with you," he said.

They descended the stairs together, Burleigh Wentworth leading the way.

Down in the vestibule they faced each other again. There was antagonism in the atmosphere though it was not visible upon either man's countenance, and each ignored it as it were instinctively.

"Hullo!" said Wentworth, and offered his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you here."

Field took the hand after a scarcely perceptible pause. His smile was openly cynical.

"Very kind of you," he said. "I am somewhat out of my element, I admit. We are celebrating our engagement."

He looked full at Wentworth as he said it with that direct, unflickering gaze of his.

Wentworth did not meet the look quite so fully, but he faced the situation without a sign of discomfiture.

“You are engaged to Lady Violet?” he said. “I saw the announcement. I congratulate you.”

“Thanks,” said Field.

“Rather sudden, isn’t it?” said Wentworth, with a curious glance.

Field’s smile still lingered.

“Oh, not really. We have kept it to ourselves, that’s all. The wedding is fixed for the week after next—for the convenience of Lady Culverleigh, who wants to get out of town.”

“By Jove! It is quick work!” said Wentworth.

There were beads of perspiration on his forehead, but the night was warm. He held himself erect as one defying Fate. So had he held himself throughout his trial; Field recognised the attitude.

Page 154

The song upstairs had ended. They heard the buzz of appreciation that succeeded it. Field turned with the air of a man who had said his say.

"I don't believe in long engagements myself," he said. "They must be a weariness to the flesh."

He began to mount the stairs again, and Wentworth followed him in silence.

At the drawing-room door Field paused and they entered together. It was almost Wentworth's first appearance since his trial. There was a moment or two of dead silence as he sauntered forward with Field. Then, with a little laugh to cover an instant's embarrassment, Lady Culverleigh came forward. She shook hands with Wentworth and asked where he had been in retreat.

Violet came forward from the piano very pale but quite composed, and shook hands also. Several people present followed suit, and soon there was a little crowd gathered round him, and Burleigh Wentworth was again the popular centre of attraction.

Percival Field kept in the background; it was not his way to assert himself in society. But he remained until Wentworth and the last guest had departed. And then very quietly but with indisputable insistence he drew Lady Violet away into the conservatory.

She was looking white and tired, but she held herself with a proud aloofness in his presence. While admitting his claim upon her, she yet did not voluntarily yield him an inch.

"Did you wish to speak to me?" she asked.

He stood a moment or two in silence before replying; then:

"Only to give you this," he said, and held out to her a small packet wrapped in tissue paper on the palm of his hand.

She took it unwillingly.

"The badge of servitude?" she said.

"I should like to know if it fits," said Field quietly, as if she had not spoken.

She opened the packet and disclosed not the orthodox diamond ring she had expected, but a ring containing a single sapphire very deep in hue, exquisitely cut. She looked at him over it, her look a question.

"Will you put it on?" he said.

She hesitated an instant, then with a tightening of the lips she slipped it on to her left hand.

“Is it too easy?” he said.

She looked at him again.

“No; it is not easy at all.”

He took her hand and looked at it. His touch was cool and strong. He slipped the ring up and down upon her finger, testing it. It was as if he waited for something.

She endured his action for a few seconds, then with a deliberate movement she took her hand away.

“Thank you very much,” she said conventionally. “I wonder what made you think of a sapphire.”

“You like sapphires?” he questioned.

“Of course,” she returned. Her tone was resolutely indifferent, yet something in his look made her avert her eyes abruptly. She turned them upon the ring. “Why did you choose a sapphire?” she said.

Page 155

If she expected some compliment in reply she was disappointed. He stood in silence.

Half-startled she glanced at him. In the same moment he held out his hand to her with a formal gesture of leave-taking.

"I will tell you another time," he said. "Good night!"

She gave him her hand, but he scarcely held it. The next instant, with a brief bow, he had turned and left her.

CHAPTER IV

Burleigh Wentworth looked around him with a frown of discontent.

He ought to have been in good spirits. Life on the moors suited him. The shooting was excellent, the hospitality beyond reproach. But yet he was not satisfied. People had wholly ceased to eye him askance. He had come himself to look back upon his trial as a mere escapade. It had been an unpleasant experience. He had been a fool to run such a risk. But it was over, and he had come out with flying colours, thanks to Percival Field's genius. A baffling, unapproachable sort of man—Field! The affair of his marriage was still a marvel to Wentworth. He had a strong suspicion that there was more in the conquest than met the eye, but he knew he would never find out from Field.

Violet was getting enigmatical too, but he couldn't stand that. He would put a stop to it. She might be a married woman, but she needn't imagine she was going to keep him at a distance.

She and her husband had joined the house-party of which he was a member the day before. It was the end of their honeymoon, and they were returning to town after their sojourn on the moors. He grimaced to himself at the thought. How would Violet like town in September? He had asked her that question the previous night, but she had not deigned to hear. Decidedly, Violet was becoming interesting. He would have to penetrate that reserve of hers.

He wondered why she was not carrying a gun. She had always been such an ardent sportswoman. He would ask her that also presently. In fact, he felt inclined to go back and ask her now. He was not greatly enjoying himself. It was growing late, and it had begun to drizzle.

His inclination became the more insistent, the more he thought of it. Yes, he would go. He was intimate enough with his host to do as he liked without explanation. And he and Violet had always been such pals. Besides, the thought of sitting with her in the firelight while her husband squelched about in the rain was one that appealed to him. He had no liking for Field, however deeply he might be in his debt. That latent antagonism

between them was perpetually making itself felt. He hated the man for the very ability by which he himself had been saved. He hated his calm superiority. Above all, he hated him for marrying Violet. It seemed that he had only to stretch out his hand for whatever he wanted. Still, he hadn't got everything now, Wentworth said to himself, as he strode impatiently back over the moor. Possibly, as time went on, he might even come to realise that what he had was not worth very much.

Page 156

He reached and entered the old grey house well ahead of any of the other sportsmen. He was determined to find Violet somehow, and he made instant enquiry for her of one of the servants.

The reply served in some measure to soothe his chafing mood. Her ladyship had gone up into the turret some little time back, and was believed to be on the roof.

Without delay he followed her. The air blew chill down the stone staircase as he mounted it. He would have preferred sitting downstairs with her over the fire. But at least interruptions were less probable in this quarter.

There was a battlemented walk at the top of the tower, and here he found her, with a wrap thrown over her head, gazing out through one of the deep embrasures over the misty country to a line of hills in the far distance. The view was magnificent, lighted here and there by sunshine striking through scudding cloud-drifts. And a splendid rainbow spanned it like a multi-coloured frame.

She did not hear him approaching. He wondered why, till he was so close that he could see her face, and then very swiftly she turned upon him and he saw that she was crying.

"My dear girl!" he exclaimed.

She drew back sharply. It was impossible to conceal her distress all in a moment. She moved aside, battling with herself.

He came close to her. "Violet!" he said.

"Don't!" she said, in a choked whisper.

He slipped an arm about her, gently overcoming her resistance. "I say—what's the matter? What's troubling you?"

He had never held her so before. Always till that moment she had maintained a delicate reserve in his presence, a barrier which he had never managed to overcome. He had even wondered sometimes if she were afraid of him. But now in her hour of weakness she suffered him, albeit under protest.

"Oh, go away!" she whispered. "Please—you must!"

But Wentworth had no thought of yielding his advantage. He pressed her to him.

"Violet, I say! You're miserable! I knew you were the first moment I saw you. And I can't stand it. You must let me help. Don't anyhow try to keep me outside!"

“You can’t help,” she murmured, with her face averted. “At least—only by going away.”

But he held her still. “That’s rot, you know. I’m not going. What is it? Tell me! Is he a brute to you?”

She made a more determined effort to disengage herself. “Whatever he is, I’ve got to put up with him. So it’s no good talking about it.”

“Oh, but look here!” protested Wentworth. “You and I are such old friends. I used to think you cared for me a little. Violet, I say, what induced you to marry that outsider?”

She was silent, not looking at him.

“You were always so proud,” he went on. “I never thought in the old days that you would capitulate to a bounder like that. Why, you might have had that Bohemian prince if you’d wanted him.”

Page 157

"I didn't want him!" She spoke with sudden vehemence, as if stung into speech. "I'm not the sort of snob-woman who barter herself for a title!"

"No?" said Wentworth, looking at her curiously. "But what did you barter yourself for, I wonder?"

She flinched, and dropped back into silence.

"Won't you tell me?" he said.

"No." She spoke almost under her breath. He relinquished the matter with the air of a man who has gained his point. "Do you know," he said, in a different tone, "if it hadn't been for that fiendish trial, I'd have been in the same race with Field, and I believe I'd have made better running, too?"

"Ah!" she said.

It was almost a gasp of pain. He stopped deliberately and looked into her face.

"Violet!" he said.

She trembled at his tone and thrust out a protesting hand. "Ah, what is the use?" she cried. "Do you—do you want to break my heart?"

Her voice failed. For the first time her eyes met his fully.

There followed an interval of overwhelming stillness in which neither of them drew a breath. Then, with an odd sound that might have been a laugh strangled at birth. Burleigh Wentworth gathered her to his heart and held her there.

"No!" he said. "No! I want to make you—the happiest woman in the world!"

"Too late! Too late!" she whispered.

But he stopped the words upon her lips, passionately, irresistibly, with his own.

"You are mine!" he swore, with his eyes on hers. "You are mine! No man on earth shall ever take you from me again!"

CHAPTER V

Violet was in her room ready dressed for dinner that evening, when there came a knock upon her door. She was seated at a writing-table in a corner scribbling a note, but she covered it up quickly at the sound.

"Come in!" she said.

She rose as her husband entered. He also was ready dressed. He came up to her in his quiet, direct fashion, looking at her with those steady eyes that saw so much and revealed so little.

"I just came in to say," he said, "that I am sorry to cut your pleasure short, but I find we must return to town to-morrow."

She started at the information. "To-morrow!" she echoed. "Why?"

"I find it necessary," he said.

She looked at him. Her heart was beating very fast. "Percival, why?" she said again.

He raised his eyebrows slightly. "It would be rather difficult for me to explain."

"Do you mean you have to go on business?" she said.

He smiled a little. "Yes, on business."

She turned to the fire with a shiver. There was something in the atmosphere, although the room was warm, that made her cold from head to foot. With her back to him she spoke again:

"Is there any reason why I should go too?"

Page 158

He came and joined her before the fire. "Yes; one," he said.

She threw him a nervous glance. "And that?"

"You are my wife," said Field quietly.

Again that shiver caught her. She put out a hand to steady herself against the mantelpiece. When she spoke again, it was with a great effort.

"Wives are sometimes allowed a holiday away from their husbands."

Field said nothing whatever. He only looked at her with unvarying attention.

She turned at last in desperation and faced him. "Percival! Why do you look at me like that?"

He turned from her instantly, without replying. "May I write a note here?" he said, and went towards the writing-table. "My pen has run dry."

She made a movement that almost expressed panic. She was at the table before he reached it. "Ah, wait a minute! Let me clear my things out of your way first!"

She began to gather up the open blotter that lay there with feverish haste. A sheet of paper flew out from her nervous hands and fluttered to the floor at Field's feet. He stooped and picked it up.

She uttered a gasp and turned as white as the dress she wore. "That is mine!" she panted.

He gave it to her with grave courtesy. "I am afraid I am disturbing you," he said. "I can wait while you finish."

But she crumpled the paper in her hand. She was trembling so much that she could hardly stand.

"It—doesn't matter," she said almost inaudibly.

He stood for a second or two in silence, then seated himself at the writing-table and took up a pen.

In the stillness that followed she moved away to the fire and stood before it. Field wrote steadily without turning his head. She stooped after a moment and dropped the crumpled paper into the blaze. Then she sat down, her hands tightly clasped about her knees, and waited.



Field's quiet voice broke the stillness at length. "If you are writing letters of your own, perhaps I may leave this one in your charge."

She looked round with a start. He had turned in his chair. Their eyes met across the room.

"May I?" he said.

She nodded, finding her voice with an effort. "Yes—of course."

He got up, and as he did so the great dinner-gong sounded through the house. He came to her side. She rose quickly at his approach, moving almost apprehensively.

"Shall we go down?" she said.

He put out a hand and linked it in her arm. She shrank at his touch, but she endured it. She even, after a moment, seemed to be in a measure steadied by it. She stood motionless for a few seconds, and during those seconds his fingers closed upon her, very gentle, very firmly; then opened and set her free.

"Will you lead the way?" he said.

CHAPTER VI

A very hilarious party gathered at the table that night. Burleigh Wentworth was in uproarious spirits which seemed to infect nearly everyone else.

Page 159

In the midst of the running tide of joke and banter Violet sat as one apart. Now and then she joined spasmodically in the general merriment, but often she did not know what she laughed at. There was a great fear at her heart, and it tormented her perpetually. That note that she had crumpled and burnt! His eyes had rested upon it during the moment he had held it in his hand. How much had they seen? And what was it that had induced him in the first place to declare his intention of curtailing their visit? Why had he reminded her that she was his wife? Surely he must have heard something—suspected something! But what?

Covertly she watched him during that interminable dinner, watched his clear-cut face with its clever forehead and intent eyes, his slightly scornful, wholly unyielding lips. She cast her thoughts backwards over their honeymoon, trying somehow to trace an adequate reason for the fear that gripped her. He had been very forbearing with her throughout that difficult time. He had been gentle; he had been considerate. Though he had asserted and maintained his mastery over her, though his will had subdued hers, he had never been unreasonable, never so much as impatient, in his treatment of her. He had given her no cause for the dread that now consumed her, unless it were that by his very self-restraint he had inspired in her a fear of the unknown.

No, she had to look farther back than her honeymoon, back to the days of Burleigh Wentworth's trial, and the almost superhuman force by which he had dragged him free. It was that force with which she would have very soon to reckon, that overwhelming, all-consuming power that had wrestled so victoriously in Wentworth's defence. How would it be when she found herself confronted by that? She shivered and dared not think.

The stream of gaiety flowed on around her. Someone—Wentworth she knew later—proposed a game of hide-and-seek by moonlight in and about the old ruins on the shores of the loch. She would have preferred to remain behind, but he made a great point of her going also. She did not know if Percival went or not, but she did not see him among the rest. The fun was fast and furious, the excitement great. Almost in spite of herself she was drawn in.

And then, how it happened she scarcely knew, she found herself hiding alone with Wentworth in a little dark boat-house on the edge of the water. He had a key with him, and she heard him turn it on the inside.

"I think we are safe here," he said, and then in the darkness his arms were round her. He called her by every endearing name that he could think of.

Why was it his ardour failed to reach her? She had yielded to him only that afternoon. She had suffered him to kiss away her tears. But now something in her held her back. She drew herself away.

“Come and sit in the boat!” he said. “We will go on the water as soon as the hue and cry is over. Hush! Don’t speak! They are coming now.”

Page 160

They sat with bated breath while the hunt spread round their hiding-place. The water lapped mysteriously in front of them with an occasional gurgling chuckle. The ripples danced far out in the moonlight. It was a glorious night, with a keenness in the air that was like the touch of steel.

Violet drew her cloak more closely about her. She felt very cold.

Someone came and battered at the door. "I'm sure they're here," cried a voice.

"They can't be," said another. "The place is locked, and there's no key."

"Bet you it's on the inside!" persisted the first, and a match was lighted and held to the lock.

The man inside laughed under his breath. The key was dangling between his hands.

"Oh, come on!" called a girl's voice from the distance. "They wouldn't hide in there. It's such a dirty hole. Lady Violet is much too fastidious."

And Violet, sitting within, drew herself together with a little shrinking movement. Yes, that had always been their word for her. She was fastidious. She had rather prided herself upon having that reputation. She had always regarded women who made themselves cheap with scorn.

The chase passed on, and Wentworth's arm slipped round her again. "Now we are safe," he said. "By Jove, dear, how I have schemed for this! It was really considerate of your worthy husband to absent himself."

Again, gently but quite decidedly, she drew herself away. "I think Freda is right," she said. "This is rather a dirty place."

He laughed. "A regular black hole! But wait till I can get you out on to the loch! It's romantic enough out there. But look here, Violet! I've got to come to an understanding with you. Now that we've found each other, darling, we are not going to lose each other again, are we?"

She was silent in the darkness.

He leaned to her and took her hand. "Oh, why did you go and complicate matters by getting married?" he said. "It was such an obvious—such a fatal—mistake. You knew I cared for you, didn't you?"

"You—had never told me so," she said, her voice very low.

“Never told you! I tried to tell you every time we met. But you were always so aloof, so frigid. On my soul, I was afraid to speak. Tell me now!” His hand was fast about hers. “When did you begin to care?”

She sat unyielding in his hold. “I—imagined I cared—a very long time ago,” she said, with an effort.

“What! Before that trial business?” he said. “I wish to Heaven I’d known!”

“Why?” she said.

“Because if I’d known I wouldn’t have been such a fool,” he said with abrupt vehemence. “I would never have run that infernal risk.”

“What risk?” she said.

He laughed, a half-shamed laugh. “Oh, I didn’t quite mean to let that out. Consider it unsaid! Only a man without ties is apt to risk more than a man who has more to lose. I’ve had the most fantastic ill-luck this year that ever fell any man’s lot before.”



Page 161

"At least you were vindicated," Violet said.

"Oh, that!" said Wentworth. "Well, it was beginning to be time my luck turned, wasn't it? It was rank enough to be caught, but if I'd been convicted, I'd have hanged myself. Now tell me! Was it Field's brilliant defence that dazzled you into marrying him?"

She did not answer him. She turned instead and faced him in the darkness. "Burleigh! What do you mean by risk? What do you mean by being—caught? You don't mean—you can't mean—that you—that you were—guilty!"

Her voice shook. The words tumbled over each other. Her hand wrenched itself free.

"My dear girl!" said Wentworth. "Don't be so melodramatic! No man is guilty until he is proved so. And—thanks to the kindly offices of your good husband—I did not suffer the final catastrophe."

"But—but—but—" Her utterance seemed suddenly choked. She rose, feeling blindly for the door.

"It's locked," said Wentworth, and there was a ring of malice in his voice. "I say, don't be unreasonable! You shouldn't ask unnecessary questions, you know. Other people don't. For Heaven's sake, let's enjoy what we've got and leave the past alone!"

"Open the door!" gasped Violet in a whisper.

He rose without haste. Her white dress made her conspicuous in the dimness. Her cloak had fallen from her, and she seemed unaware of it.

He reached out as if to open the door, and then very suddenly his intention changed. He caught her to him.

"By Heaven," he said, and laughed savagely, "I'll have my turn first!"

She turned in his hold, turned like a trapped creature in the first wild moment of capture, struggling so fiercely that she broke through his grip before he had made it secure.

He stumbled against the boat, but she sprang from him, sprang for the open moonlight and the lapping water, and the next instant she was gone from his sight.

CHAPTER VII

The water was barely up to her knees, but she stumbled among slippery stones as she fled round the corner of the boat-house, and twice she nearly fell. There were reeds growing by the bank; she struggled through them, frantically fighting her way.

She was drenched nearly to the waist when at last she climbed up the grassy slope. She heard the seekers laughing down among the ruins some distance away as she did so, and for a few seconds she thought she might escape to the house unobserved. She turned in that direction, her wet skirts clinging round her. And then, simultaneously, two things happened.

The key ground in the lock of the boat-house, and, ere Wentworth could emerge, a man walked out from the shadow of some trees and met her on the path. She stopped short in the moonlight, standing as one transfixed. It was her husband.

He came to her, moving more quickly than was his wont. "My dear child!" he ejaculated.



Page 162

Feverishly she sought to make explanation. "I—I was hiding—down on the bank. I slipped into the lake. It was very foolish of me. But—but—really I couldn't help it."

Her teeth were chattering. He took her by the arm.

"Come up to the house at once!" he said.

She looked towards the boat-house. The door was ajar, but Wentworth had not shown himself. With a gasp of relief she yielded to Field's insistent hand.

Her knees were shaking under her, but she made a valiant effort to control them. He did not speak further, and something in his silence dismayed her. She trembled more and more as she walked. Her wet clothes impeded her. She remembered with consternation that she had left her cloak in the boat-house. In her horror at this discovery she stopped.

As she did so a sudden tumult behind them told her that Wentworth had been sighted by his pursuers.

In the same moment Field very quietly turned and lifted her in his arms. She gave a gasp of astonishment.

"I think we shall get on quicker this way," he said. "Put your arm over my shoulder, won't you?"

He spoke as gently as if she had been a child, and instinctively she obeyed. He bore her very steadily straight to the house.

CHAPTER VIII

In the safe haven of her own room Violet recovered somewhat. Field left her in the charge of her maid, but the latter she very quickly dismissed. She sat before the fire clad in a wrapper, still shivering spasmodically, but growing gradually calmer.

"I believe there is a letter on the writing-table," she said to the maid as she was about to go out. "Take it with you and put it in the box downstairs!"

The girl returned and took up the letter that Field had written that evening. "It isn't stamped my lady," she began; and then in a tone of surprise: "Why, it is addressed to your ladyship!"

Violet started. "Give it to me!" she commanded "That will do. I shall not be wanting you again to-night."

The girl withdrew, and she crouched lower over the fire, the letter in her hand.

Yes, it was addressed to her in her husband's clear, strong writing—addressed to her and written in her presence!

Her hands were trembling very much as she tore open the envelope. A baffling mist danced before her eyes. For a few seconds she could see nothing. Then with a great effort she commanded herself, and read:

“My own Beloved Wife,

“If I have made your life a misery, may I be forgiven! I meant otherwise. I saw you on the ramparts this evening. That is why I want you to leave this place to-morrow. But if you do not wish to share my life any longer, I will let you go. Only in Heaven's name choose some worthier means than this!

“I am yours to take or leave. P.F.”

Hers—to take—or leave! She felt again the steady hold upon her arm, the equally steady release. That was what he had meant. That!

Page 163

She sat bowed like an old woman. He had seen! And instead of being angry on his own account, he was concerned only on hers. She was his own beloved wife. He was—hers to take or leave!

Suddenly a great sob broke from her. She laid her face down upon the note she held....

There came a low knock at the door that divided her room from the one adjoining. She started swiftly up as one caught in a guilty act.

"Can I come in?" Field said.

She made some murmured response, and he opened the dividing door. A moment he stood on the threshold; then he came quietly forward. He carried her cloak upon his arm.

He deposited it upon the back of a chair, and came to her. "I hoped you would be in bed," he said.

"I am trying—to get warm," she muttered almost inarticulately.

"Have you had a hot drink since your accident?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I told West—I couldn't."

He turned and rang the bell. He must have seen his note tightly grasped in her hand, but he made no comment upon it.

"Sit down again!" he said gently, and, stooping, poked the sinking fire into a blaze.

She obeyed him almost automatically. After a moment he laid down the poker, and drew the chair with her in it close to the fender. Then he picked up the cloak and put it about her shoulders, and finally moved away to the door.

She heard him give an order to a servant, and sat nervously awaiting his return. But he did not come back to her. He went outside and waited in the passage.

There ensued an interval of several minutes, and during that time she sat crouched over the fire, holding her cloak about her, and shivering, shivering all over. Then the door which he had left ajar closed quietly, and she knew that he had come back into the room.

She drew herself together, striving desperately to subdue her agitation.

He came to her side and stooped over her. "I want you to drink this," he said.

She glanced up at him swiftly, and as swiftly looked away. “Don’t bother about me!” she said. “I—am not worth it.”

He passed the low words by. “It’s only milk with a dash of brandy,” he said. “Won’t you try it?”

Very reluctantly she took the steaming beverage from him and began to drink.

He remained beside her, and took the cup from her when she had finished.

“Now,” he said, “wouldn’t it be wise of you to go to bed?”

She made a movement that was almost convulsive. She had his note still clasped in her hand.

After a moment, without lifting her eyes, she spoke. “Percival, why did you—what made you—write this?”

“I owed it to you,” he said.

“You—meant it?” she said, with an effort.

“Yes. I meant it.” He spoke with complete steadiness.

“But—but—” She struggled with herself for an instant; then, “Oh, I’ve got to tell you!” she burst forth passionately. “I’m—very wicked.”

Page 164

"No," he said quietly, and laid a constraining hand upon her as she sat. "That is not so."

She contracted at his touch. "You don't know me. I wrote you a note this evening, trying to explain. I told you I meant to leave you. But—I didn't mean you to read it till I was gone. Did you read it?"

"No," he said. "I guessed what you had done."

Desperately she went on. "You've got to know the worst. I was ready to go away with him. We—were such old friends, and I thought—I thought—I knew him." She bowed herself lower under his hand. Her face was hidden. "I thought he was at least a gentleman. I thought I could trust him. I—believed in him."

"Ah!" said Field. "And now?"

"Now"—her head was sunk almost to her knees—"I know him—for what—he is." Her voice broke in bitter weeping. "And I had given so much—so much—to save him!" she sobbed.

"I know," Field said. "He wasn't worth the sacrifice." He stood for a moment or two as though in doubt; then knelt suddenly down beside her and drew her to him.

She made as if she would resist him, but finally, as he held her, impulsively she yielded. She sobbed out her agony against his breast. And he soothed her as he might have soothed a child.

But though presently he dried her tears, he did not kiss her. He spoke, but his voice was devoid of all emotion.

"You are blaming the wrong person for all this. It wasn't Wentworth's fault. He has probably been a crook all his life. It wasn't yours. You couldn't be expected to detect it. But"—he paused—"don't you realise now why I am offering you the only reparation in my power?" he said.

She was trembling, but she did not raise her head or attempt to move, though his arms were ready to release her.

"No. I don't," she said.

Very steadily he went on: "You have not wronged me. It was I who did the wrong. I could have made you see his guilt. It would have been infinitely easier than establishing his innocence before the world. But—I have always wanted the unattainable. I knew that you were out of reach, and so I wanted you. Afterwards, very soon afterwards, I found I wanted even more than what I had bargained for. I wanted your friendship.

That was what the sapphire stood for. You didn't understand. I had handicapped myself too heavily. So I took what I could get, and missed the rest."

He stopped. She still lay against his breast.

"Why did you want—my friendship?" she whispered.

He made a curious gesture, as if he faced at last the inevitable. When he answered her his voice was very low. He seemed to speak against his will. "I—loved you."

"Ah!" It was scarcely more than a breath uttering the words. "And you never told me!"

He was silent.

She raised herself at last and faced him. Her hands were on his shoulders. "Percival," she said, and there was a strange light shining in the eyes that he had dried. "Is your love so small, then—as to be not—worth—mentioning?"

Page 165

For the first time in her memory he avoided her look. "No," he said.

"What then?" Her voice was suddenly very soft and infinitely appealing.

He opened his arms with a gesture of renunciation "It is—beyond words," he said.

She leaned nearer. Her hands slipped upwards, clasping his neck.

"It is the greatest thing that has ever come to me," she said, and in her voice there throbbed a new note which he had never heard in it before. "Do you think—oh, do you think—I would cast—that—away?"

He did not speak in answer. It seemed as if he could not. That which lay between them was indeed beyond words. Only in the silence he took her again into his arms and kissed her on the lips.

* * * * *

By Ethel M. Dell

The Way of an Eagle
The Knave of Diamonds
The Rocks of Valpre
The Swindler
The Keeper of the Door
Bars of Iron
The Hundredth Chance
The Safety Curtain
Greatheart
The Lamp in the Desert
The Tidal Wave
The Top of the World
Rosa Mundi and Other Stories
The Obstacle Race
The Odds and Other Stories
Charles Rex
Tetherstones