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THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS

By ETHEL M. DELL

Author of "The Way Of An Eagle"

1912

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY FRIEND AND SISTER IN LOVING REMEMBRANCE OF HER SYMPATHY AND HELP

O Charity, all patiently
Abiding wrack and scaith!
O Faith that meets ten thousand cheats
Yet drops no jot of faith!
Devil and brute Thou dost transmute
To higher, lordlier show,
Who art in sooth that lovely Truth
The careless angels know!

To the True Romance.

RUDYARD KIPLING

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE MISSING HEART

There came a sudden blare of music from the great ballroom below, and the woman who stood alone at an open window on the first floor shrugged her shoulders and shivered a little. The night air blew in brisk and cold upon her uncovered neck, but except for that slight, involuntary shiver she scarcely seemed aware of it. The room behind her was brilliantly lighted but empty. Some tables had been set for cards, but the cards were untouched. Either the attractions of the ballroom had remained omnipotent, or no one had penetrated to this refuge of the bored—no one save this tall and stately woman robed in shimmering, iridescent green, who stood with her face to the night, breathing the chill air as one who had been on the verge of suffocation. It was evidently she who had flung up the window. Her gloved hands leaned upon the woodwork on each side of it. There was a certain constraint in her whole attitude, a tension that was subtly evident in every graceful line. Her head was slightly bent as though she intently watched or listened for something.

Yet nothing could have been audible where she stood above the hubbub of music, laughter, and stamping feet that rose from below. It filled the night with uproar. Nor was there anything but emptiness in the narrow side-street into which she looked.

The door of the room was ajar and gradually swinging wider in the draught. Very soon it would be wide enough for anyone passing in the passage outside to spy the slim figure that stood so motionless before the open window. It was almost wide enough now. Surely it was wide enough, for suddenly it ceased to move. The draught continued to eddy round the room, stirring the soft brown hair about the woman's temples, but the door stood still as at the behest of an unseen hand.

For fully half a minute nothing happened; then as suddenly and silently as a picture flashed from a magic lantern slide, a man's head came into view. A man's eyes, dusky, fierce, with something of a stare in them, looked the motionless figure keenly up and down.

There followed another interval as though the intruder were debating with himself upon some plan of action, then, boldly but quite quietly, he pushed the door back and entered.

He was a slight, trim man, clean-shaven, with high cheek-bones that made a long jaw seem the leaner by contrast. His sleek black hair was parted in the middle above his swarthy face, giving an unmistakably foreign touch to his appearance. His tread was light and wary as a cat's.

His eyes swept the room comprehensively as he advanced, coming back to the woman at the window as though magnetically drawn to her. But she remained quite unaware of him, and he, no whit disconcerted, calmly seated himself at one of the tables behind her and took up a pack of cards.

The dance-music in the room below was uproariously gay. Some of the dancers were singing. Now and then a man's voice bellowed through the clamour like the blare of a bull.

Whenever this happened, the man at the table smiled to himself a faint, thin-lipped smile, and the woman at the window shivered again.

Suddenly, during a lull, he spoke. He was counting out the cards into heaps with lightning rapidity, turning up one here and there, and he did not raise his eyes from his occupation.

"I say, you know," he said in a drawl that was slightly nasal, "you will have to tell me how old you are. Is that an obstacle?"

She wheeled round at the first deliberate syllable. The electric light flared upon her pale, proud face. She stood in dead silence, looking at him.

"You mustn't mind," he said persuasively, still without lifting his eyes. "I swear I'll never tell. Come now!"

Very quietly she turned and closed the window; then with a certain stateliness she advanced to the table at which he sat, and stopped before it.

"I think you are making a mistake," she said, in a voice that had a hint of girlish sweetness about it despite its formality.

He looked up then with a jerk, and the next instant was on his feet.

"Gad! I'm tremendously sorry! What must you take me for? I took you for

Mrs. Damer. I beg you will forgive me."

She smiled a little, and some of the severity went out of her face. For a moment that too seemed girlish.

"It is of no consequence. I saw it was a mistake."

"An idiotic mistake!" he declared with emphasis. "And you are not a bit like Mrs. Damer either. Are you waiting for someone? Would you like me to clear out?"

"Certainly not. I am going myself."

"Oh, but don't!" he begged her very seriously. "I shall take it horribly to heart if you do. And really, I don't deserve such a snub as that."

Again she faintly smiled. "I am not feeling malicious, but you are expecting your partner. And I—"

"No, I am not," he asserted. "My partner has basely deserted me for another fellow. I came in here merely because I was wandering about seeking distraction. Please don't go—unless I bore you—in which case you have only to dismiss me."

She turned her eyes questioningly upon the cards before him. "What are you doing with them? Is it a game?"

"Won't you sit down?" he said, "and I will tell you."

She seated herself facing him. "Well?"

He considered the cards for a little, his brows bent. Then, "It is a magician's game," he said. "Let me read your fortune."

She hesitated.

Instantly he looked up. "You are not afraid?"

She met his look, a certain wistfulness in her grey eyes. "Oh, no, not afraid—only sceptical."

"Only sceptical!" he echoed. "That is a worldwide complaint. But anyone with imagination can always pretend. You are not good at pretending?"

"Not particularly."

His eyes challenged hers. "Perhaps you have never needed an anaesthetic?" he said coolly.

She looked slightly startled. "What do you mean?"

He leaned deliberately forward across the table. "You know what an anaesthetic does, don't you? It cheats the senses of pain. And a little humbug does the same for the mind. Of course you don't believe anything. I don't myself. But you can't stand for ever and contemplate an abyss of utter ignorance. You must weave a little romance about it for the sake of your self-respect."

She looked straight into the challenging eyes. The wistfulness was still in her own. "Then you are offering to weave a little romance for me?" she said, with a faint involuntary sigh.

He made her a brief bow. "If you will permit me to do so."

"To relieve your boredom?" she suggested with a smile.

"And yours," he smiled back, taking up the cards.

She did not contradict him. She only lowered her eyes to the deft hands that were disposing the cards in mystic array upon the table.

There followed a few moments of silence; then in his careless, unmusical drawl the man spoke.

"Do you mind telling me your first name? It is essential to the game, of course, or I shouldn't presume to ask."

"My name is Anne," she said.

The noise below had lessened considerably, and this fact seemed to cause her some relief. The tension had gone out of her bearing. She sat with her chin upon her hand.

Not a beautiful woman by any means, she yet possessed that indescribable charm which attracts almost in spite of itself. There was about her every movement a queenly grace that made her remarkable, and yet she was plainly not one to court attention. Her face in repose had a look of unutterable weariness.

"How old are you please?" said the magician.

"Twenty-five."

He glanced up at her.

"Yes, twenty-five," she repeated. "I am twenty-five to-day."

He looked at her fixedly for a few seconds, then in silence returned to his cards.

She continued to watch him without much interest. The dance-music was quickening to the *finale*. The hubbub of voices had died away. Evidently a good many people had ceased to dance.

Suddenly her companion spoke. "Do you like diamonds?"

She smiled at the question. "Yes, I like them. I haven't a passion for them."

"No," he said, without raising his eyes. "You haven't a passion for anything at present. You will have soon."

"I think it very unlikely," she said.

"Of course you do." He was manoeuvring the cards rapidly with one hand. "Your eyes have not been opened yet. I see an exciting time before you. You are going to have an illness first. That comes in the near future."

"I have never been ill in my life," she said.

"No? It will be an experience for you, then—not a very painful one, I hope. Are you getting nervous?"

"Not in the least."

"Ah! That's as well, because here comes the King of Diamonds. He has taken a decided fancy to you, and if you have any heart at all, which I can't discover, you ought to end by being the Queen. No, here comes the Knave—confound his impudence!—and, by Jove, yes, followed by the missing heart. I am glad you have got one anyway, even if the King is not in it. It looks as if you will have some trouble with that Knave, so beware of him." He glanced up at her for a moment. "Beware of him!" he repeated deliberately. "He is a dangerous scamp. The King is the man for you."

She received his caution with that faint smile of hers that softened her face but never seemed to reach her eyes.

He continued his contemplation of the cards in silence for some seconds. "Yes," he said finally, "I see an exciting future before you. I hope you will look out for me when you come into your own. I should value your majesty's favour immensely."

"I will give you a place at court as the Queen's jester," she said.

He glanced up again sharply, met her smile, and bowed with much ceremony. "Your majesty's most humble servant!" he declared, "I enter upon my functions from this day forward. You will see my cap and bells in the forefront of the throng when you ride to your coronation."

"You are sure there will be a coronation?" she asked.

"It is quite evident," he replied with conviction.

"Even though I chance to be married already?"

He raised his brows. "That so?" he drawled. "Well, it rather complicates matters, doesn't it? Still—" He looked again at the cards. "It seems pretty certain. If it weren't for that hobgoblin of a Knave I should say it was quite so. He comes between the King and the heart, you see. I shouldn't be too intimate with him if I were you."

She rose, still smiling. "I shall certainly keep him at a respectful distance," she said. "Good-bye."

"Oh, are you going? Let me escort you! Really, I've nothing else to do." He swept the cards together

and sprang to his feet. "Where may I take you? Would you like some refreshment?"

She accepted his proffered arm though she instantly negated his proposal. "Shall we go down to the vestibule? No doubt you have a partner for the next dance."

"Have you?" he questioned keenly.

"That is beside the point," she remarked.

"Not at all. It is the centre and crux of the situation. Do say you are disengaged for the next!" His manner became almost boyishly eager. He had shed his drawl like a garment. "Say it!" he insisted.

She stood in the doorway as one halting between two opinions. "But if I am not disengaged?" she said.

He laughed. "There is a remedy for that, I fancy. And the Queen can do no wrong. Don't be a slave to the great god Convention! He's such a hideous bore."

His bold dark eyes smiled freely into hers. It was evident that he wasted little time before the shrine of the deity he condemned. But for all their mastery, they held a certain persuasive charm as well. She hesitated a moment longer—and was lost.

"Well, where shall we go?"

"I know of an excellent sitting-out place if your majesty will deign to accompany me," he said, "a corner where one can see without being seen—always an advantage, you will allow."

"You seem to know this place rather well," she observed, as she suffered him to lead her away in triumph.

He smiled shrewdly. "A wise general always studies his ground," he said.

CHAPTER II

THE QUEEN'S JESTER

The chosen corner certainly had the advantage of privacy. It was an alcove at the end of one of the long narrow passages in which the ancient hostelry abounded, and the only light it boasted filtered through a square aperture in the wall which once had held a window. Through this aperture the curious could spy into the hall below, which just then was thronged with dancers who were crowding out of the ballroom and drifting towards the refreshment-room, the entrance to which was also visible.

An ancient settee had been placed in this coign of vantage, and upon this they established themselves by mutual consent.

The man was laughing a little below his breath. "I feel like a refugee," he said.

His companion leaned her arms upon the narrow row sill and gazed downwards. "A refugee from boredom?" she suggested. "We are all that, more or less."

"I dispute that," he said at once. "It is only the bores who are ever bored."

"And I dispute that," she replied, without turning, "of necessity, in self-defence."

He leaned forward to catch the light upon her profile. "You are bored?"

She smiled faintly in the gloom. "That is why I have engaged the services of a jester."

"By Jove," he said, "I'm glad you pitched on me."

She made a slight movement of impatience. "Isn't it rather futile to say that sort of thing?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you know quite well it was not a matter of choice."

"Rather a matter of *manque de mieux*?" he suggested coolly.

She turned from her contemplation of the crowd below. "I am not going to contradict you," she said, "I never foster *amour propre* in a man. It is always a plant of hardy growth."

"'Hardy' is not the word," he declared. "Say 'rank,' and you will be nearer the mark. I fully endorse your opinion. We are a race of conceited, egotistical jackanapeses, and we all think we are going to lick creation till a pretty woman comes along and makes us dance to her piping like a row of painted marionettes. But is the pretty woman any the happier, do you think, for tumbling us thus ruthlessly off our pedestals? I sometimes wonder if the sight of the sawdust doesn't make her wish she hadn't."

The drawl in his voice was very apparent as he uttered the last sentence. His chin was propped upon his hands. He was obviously studying her with a deliberate criticism that observed and considered every detail.

But his scrutiny held without embarrassing her. She met it with no conscious effort.

"I can't bear cynicism," she told him frankly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Cynics—real cynics—never can."

"But I am not a cynic."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"And yet you tell me that you never take the trouble to flatter the inferior male. That's conflicting evidence, you know. Are you a man-hater, by the way?"

She shivered as if at a sudden draught. "I'm not prepared to answer that question off-hand," she said.

"Very prudent of you!" he commented. "Do you know I owe you an apology?"

"I shouldn't have said so."

"No? Well, let me confess. I'm rather good at confessing. I didn't believe you just now when you said you were twenty-five. Now I do. That single streak of prudence was proof absolute and convincing."

"I usually tell the truth," she said somewhat stiffly.

"Yes, it takes a genius to lie properly. I am not so good at it myself as I should like to be. But a woman of twenty-five ought not to look like a princess of eighteen—a tired princess moreover, who ought to have been sent to bed long ago."

Her laugh had in it a note of bitterness. "You certainly are not the sort of genius you aspire to be," she said, "any more than I am a princess of eighteen."

"But you will be a queen at thirty," he said. "Hullo! Here is someone coming! Don't speak, and p'r'aps they won't discover us. They can't stay long."

He rose swiftly with the words and blocked the little spy-hole with his body. Certainly footsteps were approaching, but they ceased before they reached the alcove at the end of the passage. There was another settee midway.

"Oh, this is quite comfortable," said a woman's voice. "Here I am, Major Shirley! It's dark, isn't it, but rather a relief after the glare downstairs. What a crush it is! I am beginning to think the Hunt Ball rather a farce, for it is next to impossible to dance."

"People don't know how to dance nowadays," grumbled Major Shirley in response. "I can't stand these American antics. That young Nap Errol fairly sickens me."

"Oh, but he is a splendid dancer," protested his partner tolerantly.

"Oh course you say so," growled the Major. "All women like that horrid little whipper-snapper. I can't see what in thunder they find to attract them. I call him a downright cad myself, and I'm inclined to think him a blackguard as well. He wouldn't be tolerated if it weren't for his dollars, and they all belong to his brother, I'm told."

"Ah! He is a charming man. Such a pity he is a cripple!"

"He would probably be as insufferable as Nap if he weren't," rejoined the Major gloomily. "I can't think what the County are coming to. They will accept anybody nowadays, it seems to me. I even met that little bouncer at the Rifle Club the other day. Heaven knows how he got in. Dollars again, I suppose, confound his audacity!"

His partner made a slight movement of uneasiness. "I wonder where he is. I haven't seen him for some time. I hope he isn't anywhere within earshot."

"Not he! He is stowed away in some corner well out of the way with his latest conquest. He won't turn up again this evening. He never does when once he goes to earth—the wily young fox."

"Who is his latest conquest, I wonder?" mused the woman. "I thought it was Mrs. Damer. But I have just seen her dancing with young Waring."

"Mrs. Damer! Why, that was the day before yesterday!" The Major laughed unpleasantly. "'Anyone for a change, but no one for long,' is his motto. The fellow is an infernal bouncer through and through. He will get a sound hiding one of these days, and serve him jolly well right, say I!"

"My dear Major, how you hate him! Anyone would think he had tried to flirt with Violet."

"He'd better," growled the Major.

There came a slight sound from the darkness of the alcove, as though someone faintly chuckled.

"What's that?" asked the woman's voice nervously.

"Nothing—nothing!" said the Major testily. "Somebody laughing in the hall. I wonder where my wife is. I shall clear out soon. I'm tired of this show. Haven't had a decent dance all the evening. Shouldn't think you have either. They ought to build a Town Hall in this place, and do the thing properly."

"There is some talk of it, you know. Now that there is a millionaire in the neighbourhood it really might be done. The Carfaxes would help too, I am sure. Sir Giles is very open-handed."

"Drunken beast!" commented the Major. "A pretty spectacle he has been making of himself to-night. He is sitting in a corner of the refreshment-room now absolutely incapable. He reached the noisy stage very early in the evening. I am not sure that he even came sober."

"No! Isn't it too pitiful for words? That young wife of his! I can't think how she endures it. It must be positive martyrdom."

"Lady Carfax is a fool!" said the Major crossly. "I can't stand these martyrs. If she leads a dog's life it's her own fault. She's a fool to put up with it."

"Perhaps she can't help herself," pleaded the woman.

"Stuff and nonsense! No woman need be the slave of a drunken sot like that. It's a downright offence to me to be in the same room with the fellow. He always reeks of drink. And she has, or professes to have, a certain amount of refinement. Not much, I dare say. She was nothing but his bailiff's daughter, you know, and people of that class don't generally suffer from an exaggerated sense of duty. She probably sticks to the man because she wants to keep in with the County. I don't like the woman, never did. Her airs and graces always rub me up wrong way. Why couldn't Sir Giles have married in his own set? He probably wouldn't be so fond of the whiskey bottle now if he had."

"I must say I like Lady Carfax," broke in the woman with decision. "Whatever her origin, that queenliness of hers is not assumed. I believe her to be intensely reserved, and, perhaps for that very reason, I have a genuine admiration for her."

"My dear Mrs. Randal, you'd find points to admire in a wax candle," grunted the Major. "She always makes me think of one; pale and pure and saintly—I can't stand the type. Let's go downstairs and find Violet."

"Oh, not saintly, I think," protested Mrs. Randal charitably. "Saintly people are so uninteresting."

The Major laughed. He was already on his feet.

"Probably not—probably not. But a show of saintliness is more than enough to frighten me away. A woman who can't understand a wink I invariably strike forthwith off my visiting-list."

"How cruel of you!" laughed Mrs. Randal. They were already moving away down the corridor. Her voice receded as they went. "But I can't understand any man daring to wink at Lady Carfax; I can't,

indeed."

"That's just what I complain about," grumbled Major Shirley. "Those wax-candle sort of women never see a joke. What fools they are to leave the place in darkness like this! Can you see where you are going?"

"Yes, we are just at the head of the stairs. It is rather foolish as you say. People might hurt themselves."

"Of course they might. Infernally dangerous. I shall complain."

The voices fell away into distance; the band in the ballroom struck up again, and the woman on the settee in the alcove sat up and prepared to rise.

"Suppose we go down now," she said.

Her companion moved away from the little window as one coming out of a reverie. "Our gallant Major Shirley seems somewhat disgruntled tonight," he said. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him." Her words fell with icy precision.

"So do I." The man's tone was one of sheer amusement. "I had the pleasure of meeting him at the Rifle Club the other day. Someone introduced us. It was great fun. If there were a little more light, I would show you what he looked like. For some reason he wasn't pleased. Do you really want to go downstairs though? It is much nicer here."

She had risen. They were facing one another in the twilight. "Yes," she said, and though still quiet her voice was not altogether even. "I want to go, please."

"Mayn't I tell you something first?" he said.

She stood silent, evidently waiting for his communication.

"It's not of paramount importance," he said. "But I think you may as well know it for your present edification and future guidance. Madam, I am that wicked, wanton, wily fox, that whipper-snapper, that unmitigated bounder—Nap Errol!"

He made the announcement with supreme complacency. It was evident that he felt not the faintest anxiety as to how she would receive it. There was even a certain careless hauteur about him as though the qualities he thus frankly enumerated were to him a source of pride.

She heard him with no sign of astonishment. "I knew it," she said quietly. "I have known you by sight for some time."

"And you were not afraid to speak to such a dangerous scoundrel?" he said.

"You don't strike me as being very formidable," she answered. "Moreover, if you remember, it was you who spoke first."

"To be sure," he said. "It was all of a piece with my habitual confounded audacity. Shall I tell you something more? I wonder whether I dare."

"Wait!" she said imperatively. "It is my turn to tell you something, though it is more than possible that you know it already. Mr. Errol, I am—Lady Carfax!"

He bowed low. "I did know," he said, in a tone from which all hint of banter had departed. "But I thank you none the less for telling me. I much doubted if you would. And that brings me to my second—or is it my third?—confession. I did not take you for Mrs. Damer in the card-room a little while ago. I took you for no one but yourself. No man of ordinary intelligence could do otherwise. But I had been wanting to make your acquaintance all the evening, and no one would be kind enough to present me. So I took the first opportunity that occurred, trusting to the end to justify the means."

"But why have you told me?" she said.

"Because I think you are a woman who appreciates the truth."

"I am," she said. "But I do not often hear it as I have heard it to-night"

He put out his hand to her impulsively. "Say, Lady Carfax, let me go and kick that old scandal-monger into the middle of next week!"

Involuntarily almost she gave her hand in return. "No, you mustn't," she said, laughing faintly. "The fault was ours. You know the ancient adage about listeners. We deserved it all."

"Don't talk about deserts!" he exclaimed, with unexpected vehemence. "He doesn't deserve to have a whole bone left in his body for speaking of you so. Neither do I for suffering it in my presence!"

She freed her hand gently. "You could not have done otherwise. Believe me, I am not altogether sorry that you were with me when it happened. It is just as well that you should know the truth, and I could not have told it you myself. Come, shall we go down?"

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Let me know how I stand with you first. Have you decided to pass over that lie of mine, or are you going to cut me next time we meet?"

"I shall not cut you," she said.

"You are going to acknowledge me then with the coldest of nods, which is even more damnable," he returned, with gloomy conviction.

She hesitated for an instant. Then, "Mr. Errol," she said gently, "will you believe me when I say that, however I treat you in the future, that lie of yours will in no way influence me? You have helped me much more than you realise by your trifling to-night. I am not sure that you meant to do so. But I am grateful to you all the same."

"Then we are friends?" said Nap, quickly.

"Yes, we are friends; but it is very unlikely that we shall meet again. I cannot invite you to call."

"And you won't call either on my mother?" he asked.

"I am afraid not."

He was silent a moment. Then, "So let it be!" he said. "But I fancy we shall meet again notwithstanding. So *au revoir*, Lady Carfax! Can you find your own way down?"

She understood in an instant the motive that prompted the question, and the impulse to express her appreciation of it would not be denied. She extended her hand with an assumption of royal graciousness that did not cloak her gratitude. "Good-bye, Sir Jester!" she said.

He took her fingers gallantly upon his sleeve and touched them with his lips. "Farewell to your most gracious majesty!" he responded.

CHAPTER III

THE CHARIOT OF THE GODS

The Hunt Ball was over, and Mrs. Damer, wife of the M.F.H., was standing on the steps of the Carfax Arms, bidding the last members of the Hunt farewell.

Nap Errol was assisting her. He often did assist Mrs. Damer with that careless, half-insolent gallantry of his that no woman ever dreamed of resenting. Like his namesake of an earlier date he held his own wherever he went by sheer, stupendous egotism.

The crowd had thinned considerably, the band had begun to pack up. In the refreshment-room waiters were hurrying to and fro.

"Isn't it horrid?" laughed Mrs. Damer, shrugging her shoulders and shivering. "One feels so demoralised at this end of the night. Nap, I wish you would find my husband. I've said good-night to everybody, and I want to go home to bed."

"Lady Carfax hasn't gone yet," observed Nap. "I saw her standing in the doorway of the ladies' cloak-room just now."

"Lady Carfax! Are you sure? I thought they went long ago. Is their carriage waiting then?"

"Yes. It is still there."

Mrs. Damer hastened into the ladies' cloak-room, still half-incredulous.

At her entrance Anne Carfax, clad in a white wrap that made her face look ghastly, turned from the dying fire.

"My dear Lady Carfax!" exclaimed Mrs. Damer. "I quite thought you left ages ago. What is it? Is anything the matter?"

The pale lips smiled. "No, nothing, thank you. I am only waiting for my husband."

"Ah! Then we are in the same plight. I am waiting for mine." Mrs. Damer hastened to veil her solicitude, which was evidently unwelcome. She caught up her cloak and began to fumble with it. The attendant had gone.

"Let me!" said Anne, in her quiet voice, and took it from her.

Her fingers touched Mrs. Damer's neck, and Mrs. Damer shivered audibly. "Thank you, thank you! You are as cold as ice. Are you well wrapped up?"

"Yes, quite. I am never very warm, you know. It is not my nature. Is Mr. Damer ready? I hope you will not delay your departure on my account. Sir Giles will not be long, I think."

"We will send Nap Errol to find him," said Mrs. Damer.

"Oh, no, thank you. That is quite unnecessary. Please do not trouble about me. A few minutes more or less make little difference."

The words came with the patience of deadly weariness. She was still faintly smiling as she wound a scarf about Mrs. Damer's head.

"I am quite ready, you see," she said. "I shall leave the moment he appears."

"My dear Lady Carfax, you have the patience of a saint. I am afraid Phil does not find me so long-suffering." Mrs. Damer bustled back into the hall. "Are you there, Nap? Do see if you can find Sir Giles. Poor Lady Carfax is half-dead with cold and fit to drop with fatigue. Go and tell him so."

"Please do nothing of the sort," said Lady Carfax behind her. "No doubt he will come when he is ready."

Nap Errol looked from one to the other with swift comprehension in his glance. "Let me put you into your carriage first, Mrs. Damer," he said, offering his arm. "Your husband is busy for the moment—some trifling matter. He begs you will not wait for him. I will drive him back in my motor. I have to pass your way, you know."

Mrs. Damer shook hands hurriedly with Lady Carfax and went with him. There was something imperative about Nap just then. They passed out together on to the baize-covered pavement, and Anne Carfax breathed a faint sigh of relief.

A few seconds later the Damer carriage was clattering down the street, and Nap Errol was once more by her side.

"Look here," he said. "Let me take you home in my motor first. No one will know."

She looked at him, her lips quivering a little as though they still tried to smile. "Thank you very much," she said. "But—I think not."

"No one will ever know," he reiterated. "I will just set you down at your own door and go away. Come, Lady Carfax!" His dark eyes gazed straight into her own, determined, dominating. The high cheekbones and long, lean jaw looked as though fashioned in iron.

"Come!" he said again.

She made a slight forward movement as if to yield, and then drew back again. "Really, I had better wait and go with my husband," she said.

"You had better not!" he said with emphasis. "I have just seen him. He is in the smoke-room. I won't tell you what he is like. You probably know. But if you are a wise woman you will leave him for Damer to look after, and come with me."

That decided her. She threw the hood of her cloak over her head and turned in silence to the door.

Errol paused to pull on an overcoat and then followed her on to the steps. A large covered motor had just glided up. He handed her into it. "By Jove, you are cold!" he said.

She made no rejoinder.

He stepped in beside her, after a word with the chauffeur, and shut the door.

Almost instantly they were in motion, and in another moment were shooting forward swiftly down the long, ill-lighted street.

Anne Carfax sank back in her corner and lay motionless. The glare of the little electric lamp upon her face showed it white and tired. Her eyes were closed.

The man beside her sat bolt upright, his eyes fixed unblinkingly upon the window in front, his jaw set grimly. He held the gloves he had worn all the evening between his hands, and his fingers worked at them unceasingly. He was rending the soft kid to ribbons.

They left the desolate street behind and came into total darkness.

Suddenly, but very quietly, Anne spoke. "This is very kind of you, Mr. Errol."

He turned towards her. She had opened her eyes to address him, but the lids drooped heavily.

"The kindness is on your side, Lady Carfax," he said deliberately. "If you manage to inspire it in others, the virtue is still your own."

She smiled and closed her eyes again. It was evident that she did not desire to talk.

He looked away from her, glanced at his torn gloves, and tossed them impatiently from him.

For ten minutes neither spoke. The car ran smoothly on through the night like an inspired chariot of the gods. There was no sound of wheels. They seemed to be borne on wings.

For ten minutes the man sat staring stonily before him, rigid as a statue, while the woman lay passive by his side.

But at the end of that ten minutes the speed began to slacken. They came softly to earth and stopped.

Errol opened the door and alighted. "Have you a key?" he said, as he gave her his hand.

She stood above him, looking downwards half-dreamily as one emerging from a deep slumber.

"Do you know," she said, beginning to smile, "I thought that you were the Knave of Diamonds?"

"You've been asleep," he said rather curtly.

She gave a slight shudder as the night air brought her back, and in a moment, like the soft dropping of a veil, her reserve descended upon her.

"I am afraid I have," she said, "Please excuse me. Are we already at the Manor? Yes, I have the key."

She took his hand and stepped down beside him.

"Good night, Mr. Errol," she said. "And thank you."

He did not offer to accompany her to the door. A light was burning within, and he merely stood till he heard the key turn in the lock, then stepped back into the motor and slammed it shut without response of any sort to her last words.

Anne Carfax was left wondering if her dream had been a cause of offense.

CHAPTER IV

"Oh, bother! It's cake morning." Dot Waring turned from the Rectory breakfast-table with a flourish of impatience. "And I do so want to hear all about it," she said. "You might have come down earlier, Ralph."

"My good sister," said the rector's son, helping himself largely to bread and honey, "consider yourself lucky that I have come down at all after dancing half the night with Mrs. Damer, who is no light weight."

"You didn't, Ralph! I am quite sure you didn't! I'm not going to believe anything so absurd." Nevertheless she paused on her way to the door for further details.

"All right. I didn't," said Ralph complacently. "And Sir Giles didn't get drunk as a lord and tumble about the ballroom, and yell comic—awfully comic—songs, till someone hauled him off to the refreshment-room and filled him up with whiskey till he could sing no more!"

"Oh, Ralph! Not really! How utterly beastly! Was Lady Carfax there?"

"She was at first, but she cleared out. I don't know where she went to."

"Oh, poor Lady Carfax! How horrid for her! Ralph, I—I could kick that man!"

"So could I," said Ralph heartily, "if someone would kindly hold him for me. He is a drunken blackguard, and if he doesn't end in an asylum, I shall never express a medical opinion again."

"P'r'aps he'll die of apoplexy first," said Dot vindictively.

"Whatever he dies of," said Ralph, "I shall attend his funeral with the greatest pleasure. Hadn't you better go and make that cake? I shall want it by tea-time."

"You are a pig!" the girl declared, pushing the sunny hair back from her gay young face. "Isn't Bertie late this morning? Perhaps he isn't coming. Dad won't be able to take him anyhow, for old Squinny is bad again and sent for him in a hurry."

"That wretched old humbug! That means more beef-tea, not approaching dissolution. Old Squinny will never dissolve in the ordinary way."

"Well, I must go." Dot reached the door and began to swing it to and fro, gathering impetus for departure. "By the way, was Bertie there?" she asked.

"Bertie who?"

"Bertie Errol, of course. Who else?"

"There are plenty of Berties in the world," remarked Ralph, helping himself again to bread and honey. "No, Bertram Errol was not present. But Napoleon Errol was. It was he who so kindly shunted Mrs. Damer on to me. *Nota bene!* Give Napoleon Errol a wide berth in future. He has the craft of a conjurer and the subtlety of a serpent. I believe he is a Red Indian, myself."

"Oh, Ralph, he isn't! He is as white as you are."

"He isn't white at all," Ralph declared, "outside or in. Outside he is the colour of a mangold-wurzel, and inside he is as black as ink. You will never get that cake made if you don't go."

"Oh, bother!" Dot swung open the door for the last time, turned to depart, and then exclaimed in a very different tone, "Why, Bertie, so here you are! We were just talking of you."

A straight, well-made youth, with a brown face that laughed good-temperedly, was advancing through the hall.

"Hullo!" he said, halting at the doorway. "Awfully nice of you! What were you saying, I wonder? Hullo, Ralph! Only just down, you lazy beggar? Ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He stood, slapping his riding-boots with a switch, looking at Dot with the direct eyes of good-fellowship. His eyes were clear and honest as a child's.

"Dad's away," said Dot. "He was sent for early this morning."

"Is he though? That means a holiday. What shall we do?"

"I don't know what you will do," said Dot. "I am going to bake cakes."

"I'll come and bake cakes too," said Bertie promptly. "I'm rather a swell at that. I can make fudge too, real American fudge, the most aristocratic thing on the market. It's a secret, of course, but I'll let you into it, if you'll promise not to tell."

"How do you know I can keep a secret?" laughed Dot, leading the way to the kitchen.

"You would keep a promise," he said with conviction.

"If I made one," she threw back.

"I would trust you without," he declared.

"Very rash of you! I wonder if you are as trustworthy as that."

"My word is my bond—always," said Bertie.

She turned and looked at him critically. "Yes, I think it is," she admitted. "You are quite the honestest boy I ever met. They ought to have called you George Washington."

"You may if you like," said Bertie.

She laughed—her own inexpressibly gay laugh. "All right, George! It suits you perfectly. I always did think Bertie was a silly name. Why didn't you go to the Hunt Ball last night?"

Bertie's merry face sobered. "My brother wasn't so well yesterday. I was reading to him half the night. He couldn't sleep, and Tawny Hudson is no good for that sort of thing."

The merriment went out of Dot's face too. It grew softer, older, more womanly. "You are very good to your brother," she said.

He frowned abruptly. "Good to him! Great Scot! Why, he's miles too good for any of us. Don't ever class him with Nap or me! We're just ordinary sinners. But he—he's a king."

A queer little gleam that was not all mirth made Dot's eyes grow brighter. "I like you for saying that," she said.

"Why, of course I say it!" he protested. "It's true! He's the finest chap in the world, all true gold and not a grain of dross. That's how it is we all knock under to him. Even Nap does that, though he doesn't care a tinker's curse for anyone else on this muddy little planet."

"You are awfully fond of him, aren't you?" said Dot sympathetically.

"Fond of Lucas! I'd die for him!" the boy declared with feeling. "He's father and brother and friend to me. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for him. Did you ever hear how he came to be a cripple?"

"Never," said Dot.

"He was knocked down by an electric car," Bertie said, rushing through the story with headlong ardour, "trying to save his best girl's dog from being run over. He did save it, but he was frightfully hurt—paralysed for months. It's years ago now. I was only a little shaver at the time. But I shall never forget it. He always was good to me, and I thought he was done for."

"And the girl?" asked Dot rather breathlessly.

"Married an English nobleman," he rejoined, with a brevity that spoke volumes. "I say, what about those cakes? Hadn't we better begin?"

Dot turned her attention to the fire. "I should like to meet your brother," she remarked. "I've never spoken to a real flesh-and-blood hero in my life."

"Nothing easier," said Bertie promptly. "Come over and have tea. Come this afternoon, you and Ralph."

But Dot hesitated in evident doubt. "I don't know what Dad would say," she said.

"Oh, rats! He wouldn't mind. And my mother would be delighted. Come early and I'll show you the hunters. Nap has just bought a beauty. She's a blood mare, black as ink."

"Like Nap," said Dot absently; then in haste, "No, I didn't mean that. I wasn't thinking."

Bertie was looking at her shrewdly. "What do you know about Nap?" he said.

She coloured deeply. "Nothing, nothing whatever. I only know him by sight."

"And you don't like him?"

"I—I think he looks rather wicked," she stammered.

Bertie grunted. "Do you think I look wicked too?"

"Of course I don't. No one could."

He laughed. "That's all right. You can think what you like of Nap. Everybody does. But even he is not all bad, you know."

"I'm sure he isn't. But—but—" Desperately Dot turned from the fire and faced him. "I've got to say it, Bertie," she said rather piteously. "Please don't be offended. You know I—I'm young. I don't know many people. And—and—though I would like to know your eldest brother immensely, I think I won't come to Baronmead if Nap is there. My father doesn't want me to meet him—unless I am obliged."

She uttered the last words in evident distress. Bertie's face had grown quite serious, even stern. He was looking at her with a directness which for the first time in their acquaintance she found disconcerting.

He did not speak for several seconds. At length, "How old are you?" he said abruptly.

"Eighteen," she murmured.

He continued to look at her speculatively. "Well," he said at length, speaking with something of a twang, "I guess your father knows what he's about, but it beats me to understand why he has me here to study. I guess I'd better shunt."

"Oh, please don't!" she said quickly. "It isn't you at all. It's only Nap."

"Damn Nap!" said Bertie, with some fervour. "Oh, does that shock you? I forgot you were a parson's daughter. Well, it may be your father is right after all. Anyway, I shan't quarrel with him so long as he doesn't taboo me too."

"He won't do that," said Dot, with confidence. "He likes you."

Bertie's good-looking face began to smile again. "Well, I'm not a blackguard anyway," he said. "And I never shall be if you keep on being kind to me. That's understood, is it? Then shake!"

They shook, and Dot realised with relief that the difficult subject was dismissed.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

It was a week after the Hunt Ball that Anne Carfax, sitting alone at tea in her drawing-room before a blazing fire, was surprised by the sudden opening of the door, and the announcement of old Dimsdale the butler, "Mr. Nap Errol to see your ladyship!"

She rose to meet him, her surprise in her face, and he, entering with that light, half-stealthy tread of his, responded to it before his hand touched hers.

"I know my presence is unexpected, and my welcome precarious, but as none of my friends have been able to give me any news of you, I determined to chance my reception and come myself to inquire for your welfare."

"You are very good," said Anne, but she spoke with a certain stateliness notwithstanding. There was no pleasure in her eyes.

Nap, however, was sublimely self-assured. "I am beginning to think I must be," he said, "since you say so. For I know you to be strictly truthful."

Anne made no response. She did not even smile.

"I am in luck to find you alone," proceeded Nap, surveying her with bold dark eyes that were nothing daunted by her lack of cordiality.

"My husband will be in soon," she answered quietly.

"I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance," said Nap imperturbably.
"Has he been hunting?"

"Yes." Anne's tone was distant. She seemed to be unaware of the fact that her visitor was still on his feet.

But Nap knew no embarrassment. He stood on the hearth with his back to the fire. "You ought to hunt," he said. "Why don't you?"

"I do—occasionally," Anne said.

"What's the good of that? You ought to regularly. There's nothing like it. Say, Lady Carfax, why don't you?" He smiled upon her disarmingly. "Are you wondering if I take one lump or two? I take neither, and no milk, please."

Against her will she faintly smiled.

"I thought that was it," said Nap. "Why didn't you ask me? Are these scones in the fender? May I offer you one?"

He dropped upon his knees to pick up the dish, and in that attitude humbly proffered it to her.

She found it impossible to remain ungracious. She could only seat herself at the tea-table and abandon the attempt.

"Sit down and help yourself," she said.

He pulled a large hassock to him and sat facing her. "Now we can be sociable," he said. "Really, you know, you ought to hunt more often. I have never seen you in the field once. What on earth do you do with yourself?"

"Many things," said Anne.

"What things?" he persisted.

"I help my husband to the best of my ability with the estate and try to keep an eye on the poorest tenants. And then I practise the piano a good deal. I haven't time for much besides."

"I say, do you play?" said Nap, keenly interested. "I do myself, a little, not the piano—the violin. Lucas likes it, or I suppose I should have given it up long ago. But I generally have to manage without an accompaniment. There is no one can accompany at our place. It's a bit thin, you know, playing by yourself."

Anne's face reflected his interest. "Tell me more about it," she said.
"What sort of music do you care for?"

"Oh, anything, from Christmas carols to sonatas. I never play to please myself, and Lucas has very varied tastes."

"He is your elder brother?" questioned Anne.

"Yes, and one of the best." Nap spoke with unwonted feeling. "He is hopelessly crippled, poor chap, and suffers infernally. I often wonder why he puts up with it. I should have shot myself long ago, had I been in his place."

"Perhaps he is a good man," Anne said.

He shot her a keen glance. "What do you mean by a good man?"

"I mean a man who does his duty without shirking."

"Is that your ideal?" he said, "There are plenty of men that do that, and yet their lives are anything but blameless."

"Quite possibly," she agreed. "But if a man does his duty, he has not lived in vain. It can be no man's duty to destroy himself."

"And how would you define 'duty'?" said Nap.

She let her eyes meet his for a moment. "I can only define it for myself," she said.

"Will you do so for my benefit?" he asked.

A faint colour rose to her face. She looked past him into the fire. There was a deep sadness about her lips as she made reply.

"I have not been given much to do. I have to content myself with 'the work that's nearest.'"

Nap was watching her closely. "And if I did the same," he questioned in a drawl that was unmistakably supercilious, "should I be a good man?"

"I don't know what your capabilities are," she said.

"I have vast capabilities for evil," he told her, with a cynical twist of his thin-lipped mouth.

She met his look again. "I am sorry," she said.

"Are you really? But why? Doesn't the devil attract you? Honestly now!" He leaned forward, staring straight at her, challenging her. "I tell you frankly," he said, "I am not what you would call a good man. But—the truth, mind!—would you like me any better if I were?"

She smiled a little. There was undoubted fascination in the upturned face with its fiery eyes and savage jaw. Perhaps the lips were cruel, but they were not coarse. They were keenly sensitive.

She did not answer him immediately, and during the pause his eyes never flinched from hers. They were alive, glowing with insistence.

"Yes," she said at length. "Quite honestly, I do prefer good men."

"That wasn't exactly what I asked," said Nap, thrusting out his chin.

"I think you are capable of drawing your own conclusions," she answered gently.

His look fell away from her. He began to munch scone with a contemplative air.

Anne gave him some tea, and he set it on the hearthrug between his feet. The silence became lengthy. She was conscious of something in the atmosphere that made her vaguely uneasy. Was it a cat he resembled, crouching there in front of her? No, there was nothing domestic about him though she had a feeling that he could purr when he was pleased. Yes, there was undoubtedly something feline about him, a supple grace, a noiselessness, a guile, that made her aware of the necessity for caution in her dealings with him. This was a man of many subtleties—she knew it instinctively—a man of tigerish temperament, harmless as a kitten in sunshine, merciless as a fiend in storm. Yes, he was certainly like a tiger, forcible even in repose. She had never before encountered so dominant a personality. It affected her strangely, half-attracting, half-repelling, arousing in her a sense of antagonism that yet was not aversion.

"I wish you would say all that out loud," said Nap. "You have such interesting thoughts, it is really selfish of you not to express them."

"Surely not," she said, "if you know what they are."

He gave her an odd look as he lifted his tea-cup.

"The Queen's jester is a privileged person," he said. "When the door of her pleasure is closed to him he climbs up and looks over the wall."

"Not always a discreet proceeding, I fear," Anne remarked.

"Discretion, Lady Carfax, is but another term for decrepitude. I have detected no symptoms of the disease at present." He drained his tea with an arrogant gesture and handed the cup for more. "Which is the exact reason why I have no intention of remaining on the top of the wall," he said. "I will have a stronger dose this time, please."

An unsteady hand began to fumble at the door, and Anne glanced up with a start. The blood rose to her face. "I think it is my husband," she said, in a low voice.

Nap did not turn his head or answer. He sat motionless, still staring at her, till the door began to open. Then, with a sudden, lithe movement, he rose and kicked the hassock to one side.

A big man in riding-dress tramped heavily into the room, and stopped in the centre, peering before him under scowling brows. Not the kindest of critics could have called Sir Giles Carfax handsome, though every feature in his face was well formed. The blotchy complexion of the man and his eyes of glaring malice marred him all too completely. He looked about fifty, to judge by his iron-grey hair and moustache, but he might have been less. He had immensely powerful shoulders that stooped a little.

He continued to stand in the middle of the room and glare at the visitor till Anne quietly bridged the gulf.

"This is Mr. Nap Errol, Giles. Mr. Errol—my husband."

She made the introduction without a tremor, but she kept her eyes downcast as if she did not wish to see them meet. Perhaps she divined that a gleam of supercilious humour flickered in Nap's eyes as he made easy response.

"I have been waiting for the pleasure of meeting you," he drawled. "I dropped in on the chance, and Lady Carfax assured me you wouldn't be long."

Sir Giles scowled more heavily than before. He shot a malignant glance at his wife.

"Who in thunder made her so clever?" he growled. "And what did you want to see me for? Have I ever met you before?"

His voice was thick, the words somewhat difficult to distinguish.

Nap's smile was unmistakably sardonic. "Many times," he said. "You nearly rode over me on the last occasion. Doubtless the episode has escaped your memory, but it made a more lasting impression upon mine."

Sir Giles glared offensively, as if he deemed himself insulted. "I remember," he said. "Your animal came down with you. You pushed in front of me. But it was your own fault. You Americans never observe the rules of sport. I'm always glad to see you come a cropper."

"I am sure of it," said Nap politely. "It must gratify you immensely."

Sir Giles uttered a brief, snarling laugh, and advanced abruptly to the hearth. He towered above the slim American, but the latter did not appear to shirk comparison with him. With his hands in his pockets he nonchalantly opposed his insolence to the other man's half-tipsy tyranny.

And Anne Carfax sat silent behind the tea-table and endured the encounter with a mask-like patience that betrayed no faintest hint of what she carried in her heart.

"Well, what do you want to see me for?" Sir Giles demanded, with a ferocious kick at the coals.

Nap was quite ready with his answer. "I am really here on my brother's behalf. There is a scheme afoot, as no doubt you know, for the building of a Town Hall. My brother considers that the lord of the Manor"—he bowed with thinly-veiled irony—"should have first say in the matter. But I am at liberty to assure you that should you be in favour of the scheme he is ready to offer you his hearty support."

Sir Giles heard him out with lowering brows. It did not improve his temper to see Anne's eyes flash sudden interrogation at Nap's serenely smiling countenance, though he did not suspect the meaning of her glance.

"I am not in favour of the scheme," he said shortly, as Nap ended.

Nap slightly raised his brows. "No? I understood otherwise."

The blood mounted to Sir Giles's forehead. "Either you were misinformed or your intelligence is at fault," he said, with that in his voice that was so nearly an open insult that, for a second, even Nap looked dangerous.

Then quite quietly, without raising her eyes, Anne intervened. "I think you ought to explain to Mr. Errol, Giles, that you have only recently changed your mind."

Sir Giles rounded on her malignantly. "What the devil has that to do with it, or with you, for that matter? Do you think I don't know my own mind? Do you think—"

"I know exactly what Lady Carfax thinks," cut in Nap, moving deliberately so that he stood directly between Sir Giles and the tea-table. His back was turned to Anne, and he kept it so. "And in the main, I agree with her, though my sentiments are a little stronger than hers. I'll tell you exactly what they are some day. I think you would be interested, or at least not bored. But with regard to this Town Hall suggestion, what's wrong with it, anyway? Couldn't you come over and talk it out with my brother? He isn't well enough just now to come to you."

The coolness of this speech took effect. Sir Giles glared for a few moments till the speaker's steady regard became too much for him. Then, with a lurching movement, he turned away.

"No, I won't visit your brother! Why the deuce should I? Do you think I belong to the rag, tag, and bobtail, that'll mix with the very scum of society so long as there's money about? Do you think I'd lower myself to associate with fellows like you?"

"I guess you'd find it difficult," drawled Nap.

He still stood with his back to the tea-table. He seemed to have forgotten the woman who sat so rigid behind him. His fingers drummed a careless tattoo upon the table-edge. He was unquestionably master of the situation, and that without much apparent effort.

And Sir Giles knew it, knew himself to be worsted, and that in his wife's presence. He glanced at her through eyes narrowed to evil slits. Her very impassivity goaded him. It seemed in some fashion to express contempt. With violence he strode to the bell and pealed it vigorously.

On the instant Nap turned. "So long, Lady Carfax!"

She looked up at him. Her lips said nothing, but for that instant her eyes entreated, and his eyes made swift response.

He was smiling with baffling good humour as he turned round to Sir Giles.

"Good-bye, sir! Delighted to have met you. I'll give your message to my brother. It'll amuse him."

He departed without a backward glance as the servant opened the door, elaborately deaf to Sir Giles's half-strangled reply that he might go to the devil and take his brother with him.

He left dead silence in the room behind him, but the moment that the clang of the front door told of his final exit the storm burst.

Sir Giles, livid, stammering with rage, strode up and down and cursed the departed visitor in lurid language, cursed the errand that had brought him, and rated his wife for admitting him.

"I will not know these impertinent, opulent Americans!" was the burden of his maledictions. "As for that damned, insolent bounder, I will never have him in the house again. Understand that! I know him. I've heard Shirley talk of him. The man's a blackguard. And if I ever catch him alone in your company after this, I'll thrash him—do you hear?—I'll thrash him! So now you know what to expect!"

It was at this point that Anne rose, passed quietly, with the bearing of a queen, down the long room, and without a single word or glance went out and closed the door very softly behind her.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE MEET

On one occasion, and one only, in the whole year were the gates of the Manor thrown open to all comers, opulent Americans and impecunious Britons alike. And this was when, in accordance with a custom that had been observed from time immemorial, the foxhounds met upon the Manor lawn.

It was then that Sir Giles, who cursed this obligatory hospitality for weeks beforehand, emerged with a smile as fixed as his scowl, shook hands with the select few whom he deigned to number among his acquaintances and pointedly ignored the many who did not enjoy this privilege.

With old Dimsdale the butler rather than with his master rested the honours of the house, and old Dimsdale did his part nobly; so nobly that Major Shirley was heard to remark more than once that it

was a pity he and Sir Giles couldn't change places. It was the great day of Dimsdale's year, and his was the proud task to see that none of the guests were neglected.

Anne usually rode to hounds on this occasion. Tall and stately, clad in the conventional black riding-habit that only added grace to her severity of outline, she moved among her husband's guests. And even those of them who, like Major Shirley, resented that queenliness which was an inborn part of her very nature, were fain to admit that she filled her position as lady of the Manor with striking success. Though she had withdrawn herself more and more of late from the society of the neighbourhood, she acted the part of hostess with unfailing graciousness. On foot she moved among the throng, greeting everyone she knew.

Little Dot Waring, standing in the background with her brother on a certain misty morning in January marked her progress with looks of loving admiration. Lady Carfax's mount, a powerful grey with nervous ears and gleaming eyes, was being held in unwilling subjection close to them.

"Be ready to mount her when she comes this way, Ralph," Dot whispered, as the tall figure drew nearer.

But the honour of mounting Lady Carfax was not for Ralph. A man on a black mare—a slight man with high cheek-bones and an insolent bearing—was threading his way towards them through the crowd. The mare, like the grey, was restive, and her rider swore at her whimsies as he came.

Meeting Dot's frank regard, he checked himself and raised his hat with a courtesy half-instinctive.

Dot stared, coloured, and very slightly bowed.

Ralph sniggered. "Let yourself in for it that time, my child! Here comes Bertie to effect a formal introduction."

"Bertie won't introduce him," she said quickly.

Bertie, looking very handsome and stalwart, was already close to them. He leaned down from the saddle to shake hands.

"Are you following on foot? I wish I was. Never thought of it till this moment."

"I would much rather follow on horseback," Dot declared, looking as if she did not believe him.

He laughed. "I'll take you in front of me if you'll come."

"No. I shouldn't like that," said Dot very decidedly.

"How can you possibly know till you try?"

Dot looked up at him with the sunshine in her clear eyes. "How do you know that you would prefer to follow the hounds on foot? I don't suppose you ever have."

"How do I know?" laughed Bertie. "Because I should be in your company, of course. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Idiot!" said Dot tersely.

"Minx!" said Bertie.

She flushed, looked angry for a moment, and then in spite of herself dimpled into a smile. "Bertie, you're a beast! Say that again if you dare!"

"I daren't," said Bertie.

"No, I thought not. Now apologise!"

"Oh, not now! Not in public!" he pleaded. "I'll drop in this evening and you can shrive me before I go to bed."

"I shan't be at home," said Dot, with her head in the air.

"Oh, yes, you will. Anyway, I'm bound to catch you if I wait long enough." Bertie spoke with cheery assurance. "Hullo! What do you want?"

His expression altered as his glance fell upon his brother, who had just come to his side. He looked inclined to scowl.

But Nap was not apparently desiring an introduction to the rector's daughter. "Hold the mare a minute, will you?" he said.

Bertie complied and he swung himself to the ground.

Lady Carfax was coming towards them and he went to meet her.

Her grey eyes smiled a friendly welcome. "I was just wondering if you were here."

He bowed low. "I am honoured indeed to be in your thoughts for a single instant."

"I hope I do not forget my friends so easily," she said. "Oh, here are some more of them! Excuse me for a moment."

She went straight to Dot, shook hands with her and her brother, and stood chatting for a few seconds.

Nap remained close behind her, and after a little she turned to include him in the group. "Have you ever met this Mr. Errol. Dot? Mr. Errol—Miss Waring!"

Dot bowed again with a scarlet countenance, but the next instant a friendly inspiration delivered her from the moment's awkwardness.

"And you don't know Bertie Errol, do you, Lady Carfax?" she said eagerly. "Let me introduce him. He studies with Dad, you know."

"When he isn't hunting, or paper-chasing, or—baking cakes," said Bertie. "He's such a nice boy, Lady Carfax. He can do almost anything. I'm sure you'll like him!"

Dot laughed and protested. "He isn't a bit nice, and he isn't clever either, though he thinks he is. I don't believe he learns anything with Dad. They study natural history most of the time."

"Harmless, anyway!" commented Nap, with a sneer.

"Yes, quite harmless," assented Bertie, looking straight at him.

"And very interesting, no doubt," said Lady Carfax, turning towards her mount.

Ralph moved to assist her, but Nap pushed before him. "My job, I think," he drawled, with that in his face which made the English youth draw sullenly back.

"Cad!" whispered Dot fiercely.

And Bertie from his perch above her laughed through clenched teeth.

In a few minutes more the hunt was off. The whole crowd streamed briskly away, hounds leading, horses, motors, carriages, and the usual swarm of pedestrians, following in promiscuous array.

The sun shone through a mist. The weather was perfect for hunting, but looked as if it might end in rain.

Sir Giles rode with the master. He seemed in better spirits than usual. His customary scowl had lifted.

His wife rode nearer the end of the procession with Nap Errol next to her. His brother was immediately behind them, a very decided frown on his boyish face, a frown of which in some occult fashion Nap must have been aware, for as they reached a stretch of turf and the crowd widened out, he turned in the saddle.

"Get on ahead, Bertie! I can't stand you riding at my heels."

Bertie looked at him as if he had a retort ready, but he did not utter it. With tightened lips he rode past and shot ahead.

Nap smiled a little. "That young puppy is the best of the Errol bunch," he said. "But he hasn't been licked enough. It's not my fault. It's my brother's."

"He looks a nice boy," Anne said.

Nap's smile became supercilious. "He is a nice boy, Lady Carfax. But nice boys don't always make

nice men, you know. They turn into prigs sometimes."

Anne diverted the subject with an instinctive feeling that it was one upon which they might not agree.

"There is a considerable difference between you?" she asked.

"Eight years," said Nap. "I am thirty, Lucas five years older. Most people take me for the eldest of the lot."

"I wonder why?" said Anne.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is not really surprising, is it? Lucas has been on the shelf for the past ten years and I"—he glanced at her shrewdly—"have not!"

"Oh!" said Anne, and asked no more.

For the first time the definite question arose in her mind as to whether in admitting this man to her friendship she had made a mistake. He had a disquieting effect upon her, she was forced to acknowledge.

Yet as they drifted apart in the throng she knew with unalterable conviction that the matter did not rest with her. From the outset the choice had not been hers.

He had entered the gates of her lonely citadel on the night of the Hunt Ball, and though she was by no means sure that she liked him there, she fully realised that it was too late now to try to bar him out.

CHAPTER VII

THE FALL

They found a fox after some delay in a copse on the side of a hill, and the run that followed scattered even Anne's sedateness to the winds. Something of youth, something of girlishness, yet dwelt within her and bounded to the surface in response to the wild excitement of the chase.

The grey went like the wind. He and the black mare that Nap Errol rode led the field, a distinction that Anne had never sought before, and which she did not greatly appreciate on this occasion. For when they killed in a chalky hollow, after half-an-hour's furious galloping across country with scarcely a check, she dragged her animal round with a white, set face and forced him from the scene.

Nap followed her after a little and found her fumbling at a gate into a wood.

"I've secured the brush for you," he began. Then, seeing her face, "What is it? You look sick."

"I feel sick," Anne said shakily.

He opened the gate for her, and followed her through. They found themselves alone, separated from the rest of the hunt by a thick belt of trees.

"Do you mean to say you have never seen a kill before?" he said.

"Never at close quarters," murmured Anne, with a shudder.

He rode for a little in silence. At length, "I'm sorry you didn't like being in at the death," he said. "I thought you would be pleased."

"Pleased!" she said, and shuddered again.

"Personally," said Nap, "I enjoy a kill."

Anne's face expressed horror.

"Yes," he said recklessly, "I am like that. I hunt to kill. It is my nature." A red gleam shone suddenly in his fiery eyes. He looked at her aggressively. "What do you hunt for anyway?" he demanded.

"I don't think I shall hunt any more," she said.

"Oh, nonsense, Lady Carfax! That's being ultrasqueamish," he protested. "You mustn't, you know. It's bad for you."

"I can't help it," she said. "I never realised before how cruel it is."

"Of course it's cruel," said Nap. "But then so is everything, so is life. Yet you've got to live. We were created to prey on each other."

"No, no!" she said quickly, for his words hurt her inexplicably. "I take the higher view."

"I beg your pardon," said Nap, in the tone of one refusing a discussion.

She turned to him impulsively. "Surely you do too!" she said, and there was even a note of pleading in her voice.

Nap's brows met suddenly. He turned his eyes away. "I am nothing but an animal," he told her rather brutally. "There is nothing spiritual about me. I live for what I can get. When I get the chance I gorge. If I have a soul at all, it is so rudimentary as to be unworthy of mention."

In the silence that followed he looked at her again with grim comprehension. "P'r'aps you don't care for animals," he suggested cynically. "To change the subject, do you know we are leaving the hunt behind?"

She reined in somewhat reluctantly. "I suppose we had better go back."

"If your majesty decrees," said Nap.

He pulled the mare round and stood motionless, waiting for her to pass. He sat arrogantly at his ease. She could not fail to note that his horsemanship was magnificent. The mare stood royally as though she bore a king. The man's very insignificance of bulk seemed to make him the more superb.

"Will you deign to lead the way?" he said.

And Anne passed him with a vague sense of uneasiness that almost amounted to foreboding. For it seemed to her as if for those few moments he had imposed his will upon hers, had without effort overthrown all barriers of conventional reserve, and had made her acknowledge in him the mastery of man.

Rejoining the hunt, she made her first deliberate attempt to avoid him, an attempt that was so far successful that for the next hour she saw nothing of him beyond casual glimpses. She did not join her husband, for he resented her proximity in the hunting-field.

They drew blank in a wood above the first kill, but finally found after considerable delay along a stubby stretch of ground bordering Baronmead, a large estate that the eldest Errol had just bought. The fox headed straight for the Baronmead woods and after him streamed the hunt pell-mell along a stony valley.

It was not Anne's intention to be in at a second death that day, and she deliberately checked the grey's enthusiasm when he would have borne her headlong through the scampering crowd. To his indignation, instead of pursuing the chase in the valley, she headed him up the hill. He protested with vehemence, threatening to rebel outright, but Anne was determined, and eventually she had her way. Up the hill they went.

It was a scramble to reach the top, for the ground was steep and sloppy, but on the summit of the ridge progress was easier. She gave the grey the rein and he carried her forward at a canter. From here she saw the last of the horsemen below her sweep round the curve towards Baronmead, and the hubbub growing fainter in the distance told her that the hounds were already plunging through the woods. Ahead of her the ridge culminated in a bare knoll whence it was evident that she could overlook a considerable stretch of country. She urged her animal towards it.

The mist was thickening in the valley, and it had begun to drizzle. The watch on her wrist said two o'clock, and she determined to turn her face homewards as soon as she had taken this final glimpse.

The grey, snorting and sweating, stumbled up the slippery ascent. He was plainly disgusted with his rider's tactics. They arrived upon the summit, and Anne brought him to a standstill. But though she still heard vague shoutings below her the mist had increased so much in the few minutes they had taken over the ascent that she could discern nothing. Her horse was winded after the climb, however, and she remained motionless to give him time to recover. The hubbub was dying away, and she surmised that the fox had led his pursuers out on the farther side of the woods. She shivered as the chill damp crept

about her. A feeling of loneliness that was almost physical possessed her. She half wished that she had not forsaken the hunt after all.

Stay! Was she quite alone? Out of the clinging, ever-thickening curtain there came sounds—the sounds of hoofs that struggled upwards, of an animal's laboured breathing, of a man's voice that encouraged and swore alternately.

Her heart gave a sudden sharp throb. She knew that voice. Though she had only met the owner thereof three times she had come to know it rather well. Why had he elected to come that way, she asked herself? He almost seemed to be dogging her steps that day.

Impulse urged her to strike in another direction before he reached her. She did not feel inclined for another *tête-à-tête* with Nap Errol just then.

She tapped the grey smartly with her switch, more smartly than she intended, for he started and plunged. At the same instant there broke out immediately below them a hubbub of yelling and baying that was like the shrieking of a hundred demons. It rose up through the fog as from the mouth of an invisible pit, and drove the grey horse clean out of his senses. He reared bolt upright in furious resistance to his rider's will, pawed the air wildly, and being brought down again by a sharp cut over the ears, flung out his heels in sheer malice and bolted down the hill, straight for that pandemonium of men and hounds. If the pleasures of the hunt failed to attract his mistress, it was otherwise with him, and he meant to have his fling in spite of her.

For the first few seconds of that mad flight Anne scarcely attempted to check his progress. She was taken by surprise and was forced to give all her attention to keeping in the saddle.

The pace was terrific. The scampering hoofs scarcely seemed to touch the ground at all. Like shadows they fled through the rising mist. It struck chill upon her face as they swooped downwards. She seemed to be plunging into an icy, bottomless abyss.

And then like a dagger, stabbing through every nerve, came fear, a horror unspeakable of the depth she could not see, into which she was being so furiously hurled. She was clinging to the saddle, but she made a desperate effort to drag the animal round. It was quite fruitless. No woman's strength could have availed to check that headlong gallop. He swerved a little, a very little, in answer, that was all, and galloped madly on.

And then—all in a moment it came, a moment of culminating horror more awful than anything she had ever before experienced—the ground fell suddenly away from the racing feet. A confusion of many lights danced before her eyes—a buzzing uproar filled her brain—she shot forward into space....

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIDE HOME

Sir Giles was in a decidedly evil temper as he rode home from the hunt in the soaking rain that afternoon. The second fox had led them miles out of the way, and they had not been rewarded by a kill. The brute had eluded them, profiting by the downpour that had washed away the scent. So Sir Giles, having solaced himself several times with neat brandy from the large silver flask without which he never rode abroad, was in anything but a contented mood with the world in general and his own luck in particular. Dusk had long descended when at length he turned in at his own gates. He had given up urging his jaded animal, being too jaded himself for the effort. But, hearing a clatter of hoofs on the drive before him, he did rouse himself to holler into the darkness, supposing that his wife was ahead of him. If it were she, she was later in returning than was her wont, but no answer came back to him, and he did not repeat his call. After all, why should he hail her? He did not want her company, Heaven knew. That stately demeanour of hers which once had attracted him generally inspired in him a savage sense of resentment nowadays. There were times when he even suspected her of despising him—him, the lord of the Manor, who had given her all she possessed in the world!

He swore a furious oath under his breath as he rode. The darkness ahead of him was all pricked by tiny red sparks, that glanced and flashed like fireflies whichever way he looked. He rubbed his eyes and they departed, only to swarm again a little farther on. The rain had soaked him to the skin. He shivered and swore again as he fumbled for his flask.

The fiery gleams faded wholly away as the raw spirit warmed his blood and revived his brain. He drew a breath of relief. Again he heard the sound of a horse's feet some distance in front. They seemed to fall unevenly, as though the animal were lame. Could it be the grey, he asked himself? If so, why had Anne not answered his call? She must have heard him. He ground his teeth. It was like her habitual impudence to ignore him thus. He gathered himself together and sent a furious bellow into the darkness.

But there came back no reply. The hoofs ahead seemed to quicken into a shambling trot, that was all. And after a little he heard them no more.

She had reached the house then, and gone within into light and comfort, and again feverishly he execrated her for not waiting for him, the cold and the rain and the dark notwithstanding. Again fitfully he began to see those leaping points of light; but it was only here and there. Whenever he focussed his attention upon them they eluded him. For these also he held his wife in some fashion responsible. What did she mean by leaving him thus? How dared she enter the house that was his while he was still groping without? He believed that she would shut his own door against him if she dared. He was sure she hated him, as he hated her—as he hated her!

And then—suddenly a strange thing happened. Suddenly, clear-cut as a cameo before his fevered vision, there arose against the dripping darkness his wife's face. Pale and pure as the face of a saint, it shone before him like a star. There was no reproach in the level eyes; there was no contempt. But they looked through him, they looked beyond him, and saw him not.

A violent tremor went through him, a nameless, unspeakable dread. The curses died upon his lips. He stared and stared again.

And while he stared, the vision faded before his eyes into nothingness. He was alone once more in the darkness and the drenching rain; alone with a little gibing voice that seemed to come from within and yet was surely the voice of a devil jeering a devil's tattoo in time to his horse's hoof-beats, telling him he was mad, mad, mad!

Three minutes later he rode heavily into his own stable-yard.

A group of servants scattered dumbly before him as he appeared. The glare of lights dazzled him, but he fancied they looked at him strangely. He flung an oath at the groom who stepped forward to take his horse.

"What are you staring at? What's the matter?"

The man murmured something unintelligible.

Sir Giles dismounted and scowled around. His limbs were stiff and not over steady.

"What's the matter with you all?" he growled. "You look like a crowd of death's heads. Hullo! What's this?"

He had caught sight of something he had not seen before, something that sent him striding furiously forward. For there in the centre of the yard, standing huddled on three legs, was the grey horse his wife had ridden. Limp and draggled, plastered with mud and foam, with a great streaming gash on the shoulder, and head hanging down in utter exhaustion, stood the grey.

"What's this?" demanded Sir Giles again. "Where's her ladyship?"

A shudder seemed to run through the assembled men. There was a moment's silence. Then old Dimsdale, the butler, who was standing in the doorway that led to the servants' quarters, stumped forward and made reply.

"The animal's come home alone, Sir Giles."

"What?" thundered his master.

The old man faced him with respectful firmness. No one had ever seen Dimsdale agitated.

"As I said, Sir Giles," he answered, with a certain deferential obstinacy. "The animal's come back alone."

"Only just come in, sir," chimed in a groom. "We was just beginning to wonder when he came limping in in this state. Looks as if her ladyship had met with an accident."

Sir Giles rounded upon him with a violence that brought his surmisings to an abrupt end. Then, having worked off the first heat of his fury, he turned again to Dimsdale.

"What the devil is to be done? I never saw her after the first kill."

"And where might that be, Sir Giles?" questioned Dimsdale.

"Up Baronmead way. It was hours ago."

Dimsdale considered. "Shall we send and make inquiries at Baronmead, Sir Giles?"

"No, I'm damned if I do!" said Sir Giles.

Dimsdale considered again. "Was her ladyship riding with anyone in particular?" he asked next.

"No, I don't think so. Stay! I believe I saw that Errol bounder talking to her—the one who was here the other day. But I forget when. Anyhow"—his voice rising again—"I won't have any traffic with them. I've said I won't, and I won't!"

Dimsdale grunted. "Seems to me the only thing to do, Sir Giles. You can't leave her lady ship to die under a hedge maybe, and not do anything to find her."

He spoke very deliberately, looking straight into his master's bloodshot eyes as he did so.

"It wouldn't be hardly right, Sir Giles," he pointed out gravely. "It's likely that young Mr. Errol will be able to give us a clue, and we can't leave any stone unturned, being such a serious matter. I'll send on my own responsibility if you like, Sir Giles. But send we must."

The bystanders glanced uneasily at one another in the silence that followed this bold speech. The old butler's temerity was unheard of. Not one among them would have dared thus to withstand the master to his face. They waited, nervously expectant, for the vials of wrath to descend.

Old Dimsdale waited too, still firmly watching Sir Giles. If he felt any anxiety on his own account, however, it was not apparent. Nor did he display any relief when the unpleasant tension passed and Sir Giles with a shrug turned away from him.

"Oh, go your own way, and be damned to you! I don't care what you do. Don't stand gaping there, you fools! Get to your work! Better send for the vet. Can't afford to have a valuable animal spoilt. Dimsdale, take some brandy and hot water up to my room at once, before you do anything else. Do you hear?"

And with that he tramped within, leaving an atmosphere of mingled relief and indignation behind him.

But if his words were callous, the soul of the man was far from easy as he mounted to his room. He flung himself into the nearest chair when he arrived there and sat with eyes fixed sullenly before him. He ought to go in search of her, of course, but he was powerless. His brain was a smouldering furnace in which anxiety and anger strove luridly for the mastery. But through it all he sat there torpidly staring. His body felt as though it were weighted with leaden fetters.

He heard a step in the passage, but did not turn his head. Someone knocked discreetly. He heard, but he took no notice. The door opened softly, and old Dimsdale entered.

"We have news, Sir Giles."

Sir Giles neither looked at him nor spoke. He continued to glare heavily into space.

Dimsdale paused beside him. "A messenger has just come from Baronmead in their motor, Sir Giles," he said, speaking very distinctly. "Her ladyship has had a fall, and has been taken there. Mr. Errol begs that you will go back in the motor, as her ladyship's condition is considered serious."

He stopped. Sir Giles said nothing whatever.

"The messenger is waiting, Sir Giles."

Still no response of any sort.

Dimsdale waited a moment, then very respectfully he bent and touched his master's shoulder.

"Sir Giles!"

Sir Giles turned slowly at last, with immense effort it seemed. He glowered at Dimsdale for a space. Then, "Bring some brandy and water," he said, "hot!"

"But the messenger, Sir Giles!"

"What?" Sir Giles glared a moment longer, then as anger came uppermost, the smouldering furnace leapt into sudden seething flame. "Tell him to go to the devil!" he thundered. "And when you've done that, bring me some brandy and water—hot!"

As Dimsdale departed upon his double errand he dropped back into his former position, staring dully before him, under scowling brows.

When Dimsdale returned he was sunk in the chair asleep.

CHAPTER IX

THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE

"Hullo, Lucas! Can I come in?"

Nap Errol stood outside his brother's door, an impatient frown on his face, his hand already fidgeting at the handle.

"Come in, old chap," drawled back a kindly voice.

He entered with an abruptness that seemed to denote agitation.

The room was large and brilliantly lighted. In an easy chair by the fire the eldest Errol was reclining, while his valet, a huge man with the features of an American Indian half-breed and fiery red hair, put the finishing touches to his evening dress.

Nap approached the fire with his usual noiseless tread despite the fact that he was still in riding boots.

"Be quick, Hudson!" he said. "We don't want you."

Hudson rolled a nervous eye at him and became clumsily hasty.

"Take your time," his master said quietly. "Nap, my friend, hadn't you better dress?"

Nap stopped before the fire and pushed it with his foot. "I am not going to dine," he said.

Lucas Errol said no more. He lay still in his chair with his head back and eyes half-closed, a passive, pathetic figure with the shoulders of a strong man and the weak, shrunken limbs of a cripple. His face was quite smooth. It might have belonged to a boy of seventeen save for the eyes, which were deeply sunken and possessed the shrewd, quizzical intelligence of age.

He lay quite motionless as though he were accustomed to remain for hours in one position. Hudson the valet tended him with the reverence of a slave. Nap fell to pacing soundlessly to and fro, awaiting the man's exit with what patience he could muster.

"You can go now, Tawny," the elder Errol drawled at last. "I will ring when I want you. Now, Boney, what is it? I wish you would sit down."

There was no impatience in the words, but his brows were slightly drawn as he uttered them,

Nap, turning swiftly, noted the fact. "You are not so well to-night?"

"Sit down," his brother repeated gently. "How is Lady Carfax?"

Nap sat down with some reluctance. He looked as if he would have preferred to prowl.

"She is still unconscious, and likely to remain so. The doctor thinks very seriously of her."

"Her husband has been informed?"

"Her husband," said Nap from between his teeth, "has been informed, and he declines to come to her. That's the sort of brute he is."

Lucas Errol made no comment, and after a moment Nap continued:

"It is just as well perhaps. I hear he is never sober after a day's sport. And I believe she hates the sight of him if the truth were told—and small wonder!"

There was unrestrained savagery in the last words. Lucas turned his head and looked at him thoughtfully.

"You know her rather well?" he said.

"Yes." Nap's eyes, glowing redly, met his with a gleam of defiance.

"You have known her for long?" The question was perfectly quiet, uttered in the tired voice habitual to this man who had been an invalid for almost the whole of his manhood.

Yet Nap frowned as he heard it. "I don't know," he said curtly. "I don't estimate friendships by time."

Lucas said no more, but he continued to look at his brother with unvarying steadiness till at length, as if goaded thereto, Nap spoke again.

"We are friends," he said, "no more, no less. You all think me a blackguard, I know. It's my speciality, isn't it?" He spoke with exceeding bitterness. "But in this case you are wrong. I repeat—we are friends."

He said it aggressively; his tone was almost a challenge, but the elder Errol did not appear to notice.

"I have never thought you a blackguard, Boney," he said quietly.

Nap's thin lips smiled cynically. "You have never said it."

"I have never thought it." There was no contradicting the calm assertion. It was not the way of the world to contradict Lucas Errol. "And I know you better than a good many," he said.

Nap stirred restlessly and was silent.

Lucas turned his eyes from him and seemed to fall into a reverie. Suddenly, however, he roused himself.

"What does the doctor say about her?"

Nap frowned. "He says very little. After the manner of his tribe, he is afraid to commit himself; thinks there may be this injury or there may be that, but says definitely nothing. I shall get someone down from town to-morrow. I'd go tonight, only—" he broke off, hammering impotently with his clenched fist on the arm of his chair. "I must be at hand to-night," he said, after a moment, controlling himself. "The mater has promised to call me if there is any change. You see," he spoke half-apologetically, "she might feel kind of lonely waking up in a crowd of strangers, and mine is the only face she knows."

Silence followed the words. Lucas had closed his eyes, and there was nothing in his face to indicate the trend of his thoughts.

Nap sat with his face to the fire, and stared unblinkingly into the red depths. There was no repose in his attitude, only the tension of suppressed activity.

Softly at length his brother's voice came through the silence. "Why not dine, dear fellow, while you are waiting? You will do no good to anyone by starving yourself."

Nap looked round. "In Heaven's name, don't talk to me of eating!" he said savagely. "You don't know what I've been through." Again he paused to control himself, then added in a lower tone, "I thought she was dead, you know."

"It was you who picked her up?" Lucas asked.

"Yes. There was no one else near." He spoke with feverish rapidity, as though he found speaking a relief. "It was the old chalk-pit. You know the place—or p'r'aps you don't. It's a ten-foot drop. The brute went clean over, and he must have rolled on her or kicked her getting up." He drew a sharp breath between his teeth. "When I found her she was lying all crumpled up. I thought her back was broken at first."

A sudden shudder assailed him. He repressed it fiercely.

"And then, you know, it was foggy. I couldn't leave her. I was afraid of losing my bearings. And so I just had to wait—Heaven knows how long—till one of the keepers heard me shouting, and went for help. And all that time—all that time—I didn't know whether she was alive or dead."

His voice sank to a hard whisper. He got up and vigorously poked the fire.

Lucas Errol endured the clatter for several seconds in silence: then, "Boney," he said, "since you are feeling energetic, you might lend me a hand."

Nap laid down the poker instantly. "I am sorry, old fellow. I forgot. Let me ring for Hudson."

"Can't you help me yourself?" Lucas asked.

Nap hesitated for a second; then stooped in silence to give the required assistance. Lucas Errol, with a set face, accepted it, but once on his feet he quitted Nap's support and leaned upon the mantelpiece to wipe his forehead.

"I knew I should hurt you," Nap said uneasily.

The millionaire forced a smile that was twisted in spite of him. "Never mind me!" he said. "It is your affairs that trouble me just now, not my own. And, Boney, if you don't have a meal soon, you'll be making a big fool of yourself and everyone will know it."

The very gentleness of his speech seemed to make the words the more emphatic. Nap raised no further protest.

"Go and have it right now," his brother said.

"And—in case I don't see you again—goodnight!"

He held out his hand, still leaning against the mantelpiece. His eyes, blue and very steady, looked straight into Nap's. So for a second or two he held him while Nap, tight-lipped, uncompromising, looked straight back.

Then, "Good-night," Lucas said again gravely, and let him go.

Yet for an instant longer Nap lingered as one on the verge of speech. But nothing came of it. He apparently thought better—or worse—of the impulse, and departed light-footed in silence.

CHAPTER X

THE HAND OF A FRIEND

What had happened to her? Slowly, with a sensation of doubt that seemed to weigh her down, Anne rose to the surface of things, and looked once more upon the world that had rushed so giddily away from her and left her spinning through space.

She was horribly afraid during those first few minutes, afraid with a physical, overwhelming dread. She seemed to be yet falling, falling through emptiness to annihilation. And as she fell she caught the sounds of other worlds, vague whisperings in the dark. She was sinking, sinking fast into a depth unfathomable, where no worlds were.

And then—how it came to her she knew not, for she was powerless to help herself—out of the chaos and the awful darkness a hand reached out and grasped her own; a hand strong and vital that gripped and held, that lifted her up, that guided her, that sustained her, through all the terror that girt her round.

The light dawned gradually in her eyes. She found herself gazing up into a face she knew, a lean, brown face, alert and keen, that watched her steadfastly.

With an effort she clasped her nerveless fingers upon the sustaining hand.

"Hold me!" she whispered weakly. "I'm falling!"

"Don't be afraid!" he made answer with infinite gentleness. "I have you safe."

Someone whom she saw but vaguely came behind him and whispered in a vigorous undertone. A large white hand, on which flashed many rings, rested upon his shoulder.

He moved slightly, took something into his free hand and held it to her lips. Submissively, in answer to an influence that seemed to fold her about and gently to compel, she drank.

Slowly the mist of dread cleared from her brain. Slowly she awoke to full consciousness, and found Nap Errol bending over her, her hand fast clasped in his.

"What happened?" she asked him faintly. "Where am I?"

"You are at Baronmead," he said. "You were thrown and we brought you here."

"Ah!" Her brows contracted a little. "Am I much hurt?" she asked.

"Nothing to worry about," Nap said with quiet confidence. "You will soon be all right again. I will leave you to get a good sleep, shall I? If you are wanting anything my mother will be here."

She looked at him doubtfully. Her hand still clung to his, half-mechanically it seemed.

"Mr. Errol," she faltered, "my husband—does he know?"

"Yes, he knows." Very softly Nap made answer, as though he were soothing a child. "Don't trouble about that. Don't trouble about anything. Just lie still and rest."

But the anxiety in her eyes was growing. "He isn't here?" she questioned.

"No."

"Then—then I think I ought to go to him. He will think it so strange. He will—he will—"

"Lady Carfax, listen!" Quietly but insistently he broke in upon her rising agitation. "Your husband knows all about you. He couldn't come to-night, but he is coming in the morning. Now won't you be content and try to sleep?"

"I can't sleep," she said, with a shudder. "I am afraid of falling."

"No, you're not. See! I am holding your hands. You can't fall. Look at me! Keep looking at me and you will see how safe you are!"

His voice had sunk almost to a whisper. His eyes dusky, compelling, yet strangely impersonal, held hers by some magic that was too utterly intangible to frighten her. With a sigh she yielded to the mastery she scarcely felt.

And as she floated away into a peace indescribable, unlike anything she had ever known before, she heard a woman's voice, hushed to a sibilant whisper, remark, "My, Nap! You're too smart to be human. I always said so."

When she opened her eyes again it was many hours later, and she was lying in the broad sunshine with the doctor, whom she knew, stooping over her.

"Ah, you are awake at last!" he said. "And I find a marvellous improvement. No, I shouldn't try to move at present. But I don't suppose you can for a moment. You have had a wonderful escape, my dear lady, a most wonderful escape. But for all that I shall keep you where you are for the next fortnight or so. A badly jarred spine is not a thing to play with."

"Is that all?" Anne asked.

He became cautious on the instant. "I don't say that is all. In any case we will run no risks. Let me congratulate you upon having fallen into such good hands."

He glanced over Anne's head at someone on the other side of the bed, and Anne turned slightly to see the person thus indicated. And so she had her first sight of the woman who ruled Lucas Errol's house.

She had heard of her more than once. People smiled, not unkindly, when they mentioned Mrs. Errol, a good sort, they said; but, like many another woman of inelegant exterior, how good a sort only her Maker knew. She was large in every way. It was the only word that described her; large-boned, large-

featured, and so stout that she wheezed—a fact which in no way limited her activity. Her voice was as deep as a man's, and it went even deeper when she laughed.

But she was not laughing now. Her face was full of the most kindly concern. "Lord bless the child!" she said. "She don't know me yet. I'm Mrs. Errol, dear, Mrs. Lucas Blenheim Errol. And if there's anything you want—well, you've only got to mention it to me and it's as good as done."

She spoke with a strong American accent. A Yankee of the Yankees was Mrs. Errol, and she saw no reason to disguise the fact. She knew that people smiled at her, but it made no difference to her. She was content to let them smile. She even smiled at herself.

"You are very good," Anne murmured.

"Not a bit," said Mrs. Errol cheerfully. "I'm real pleased to have you, dear. And don't you think you're giving any trouble to anybody, for there isn't anything that pleases me so much as to have a girl to look after. It's the biggest treat the Lord could send."

Anne smiled a little, conscious of a glow at the heart that she had not known for many a day. She tried weakly to give her hand to her new friend, but the pain of moving was so intense that she uttered a quick gasp and abandoned the attempt.

But in an instant Mrs. Errol's fingers were wound closely about her own, the large face, wonderfully smooth, save for a few kindly wrinkles about the eyes, was bent to hers.

"There, dearie, there!" said the motherly voice, tender for all its gruffness. "You're stiff in every limb, and no wonder. It's just natural. Just you lie still and leave everything to me."

She was, in fact, determined to take the whole burden of nursing upon herself, and when the doctor had gone she began to show Anne how capable she was of fulfilling the responsibility she had thus undertaken. No trained nurse could have given her more dexterous attention.

"I've spent a great part of my life in sickrooms," she told Anne. "First my husband, and then poor Lucas, that's my eldest boy. But Lucas won't have me to wait on him now. He doesn't like his mother to see him in his bad hours, and they are mighty bad now and then. So my nursing talents would run to seed if it weren't for a casual patient like yourself."

It was so evident that she enjoyed her self-appointed task that Anne could only smile and thank her. She was helpless as an infant and could not have refused her hostess's ministrations even had she desired to do so. She suffered a good deal of pain also, and this kept her from taking much note of her surroundings during that first day at Baronmead.

She refrained from asking further about her husband for some time, avoiding all mention of him, but she was possessed by a nervous dread that increased steadily as the hours wore on. At last, as Mrs. Errol seemed equally determined to volunteer no information, she summoned her resolution and compelled herself to speak.

"My husband has not come yet?" she asked.

"No, dear." Mrs. Errol smiled upon her with much kindness, but her tone did not encourage further inquiries.

Anne lay silent for a little. It was a difficult matter to handle. "Did he send no message?" she asked at last, with knitted brows. "I thought—or did I dream it?—that your son said he was coming."

"To be sure he did," said Mrs. Errol. "You would like to speak to Nap about it, wouldn't you?"

Anne hesitated. Mrs. Errol was already on her way to the door. It was plain that here was a responsibility she was unprepared to shoulder. But Anne called her back.

"No, please!" she said, a slight flush on her face. "Don't call him in again! Really, it is of no consequence."

But in spite of this assertion her uneasiness regarding her husband grew rapidly from that moment—an uneasiness that she was powerless to control or hide. Could it be—was it possible?—that he meant to leave her thus abandoned to the pitying kindness of strangers? She could hardly believe it. And yet—and yet—he had done un-heard-of things before. There were times, times that had become more and more frequent of late, when she doubted his sanity. Those devilish moods of his, whither were they tending? Was he in the grip of one of them now? And if so—if so—what would happen to her? What could she do?

As the hours passed, the torture of suspense so worked upon her that she began to grow feverish. The afternoon was waning and still no word had come.

She tried to reassure herself again and again, but each failure added to her distress.

"You mustn't fret, child," said Mrs. Errol gently, when she brought her tea. "It's the worst thing possible. Come, come! What is it?"

Anne tried to tell her, but could not. The very utterance of her fears was more than she could accomplish in her present state. Words failed her.

Mrs. Errol said no more, but presently she went quietly away, leaving her alone in the firelight, chafing but impotent.

She was soon back again, however, and a muffled word on the threshold told Anne that she was not alone. She turned her head sharply on the pillow regardless of wrenched muscles, hoping against hope. But she looked in vain for her husband's tall figure, and a sigh that was almost a groan escaped her. It was Nap, slim, upright, and noiseless, who stepped from behind Mrs. Errol and came to her bedside.

He stooped a little and took her quivering hand, holding it in both his own so that his fingers pressed upon her pulse.

"The matter thought you would like to speak to me," he said.

She looked up at him with eyes of piteous entreaty. She was long past any thought of expediency so far as he was concerned. It seemed only natural in her trouble to turn to him for help. Had he not helped her before? Besides, she knew that he understood things that she could not utter.

"Oh, Nap," she said admitting him unconsciously in her extremity to an intimacy she would never have dreamed of according him in any less urgent circumstances, "I am greatly troubled about my husband. You said he would come to me, but—he hasn't come!"

"I know he hasn't," Nap said. He spoke quietly, but she was aware of a certain grimness in his speech. "I shouldn't worry if I were you. It won't help you any. Is there anyone else you would like sent for?"

"I have—no one else," she said, her voice quivering beyond her control. "How can I lie here and not worry?"

"Lord bless the child!" said Mrs. Errol vigorously. "What is there to worry about, anyway?"

But Nap was silent. His fingers were still closed firmly upon her wrist.

"Mrs. Errol is very good," Anne said earnestly. "You mustn't think me ungrateful or unappreciative. But I cannot go on like this. I cannot!"

"I am afraid you have no choice," Nap said.

She scarcely heard him. At least she paid no heed. "Will you tell me exactly what has passed? Has he definitely refused to come to me? Because, if so—"

"If so—" said Nap gently.

She summoned her wavering self-control. "If so—I must go back to him at once. I must indeed. You will manage it for me, will you not? Perhaps you will take me yourself in the motor."

"No," said Nap. He spoke briefly, even sternly. He was bending down over her, and she caught the gleam of the firelight in his eyes and thought that they shone red. "I would do a good deal for you, Lady Carfax," he said, "but I can't do that. You ask the impossible." He paused a moment and she felt his grasp slowly tighten upon her hand. "You want to know what passed, and perhaps it is better that you should know even if it distresses you. I sent a messenger in the motor to Sir Giles last night to tell him of your accident and to beg him to return here with him. He came back alone with no definite reply. He did not, in fact, see Sir Giles, though the message was delivered. I waited till noon today to see if he would come, and then as there was no sign of him I went myself in the motor to fetch him."

"Ah!" Anne's lips parted to utter the word. They were quivering uncontrollably.

"I saw him," Nap went on very quietly. "I practically forced an entrance. He was in his study alone. I fancy he was feeling sick, but I didn't stop to inquire. I told him you were wanting him. I was quite kind to him—for your sake." She fancied the grim lips smiled. "But I regret to say he didn't appreciate my

kindness, and I soon saw that he was in no state to come to you even if he would. So—I left him and came away."

"Ah!" Again that faint exclamation that was like the half-uttered cry of a woman's heart. "He wasn't—wasn't rude to you, I hope?"

Nap's teeth showed for an instant. He made no reply.

"Mr. Errol," she said beseechingly, "please tell me everything! He did not—did not—"

"Kick me?" questioned Nap drily. "My dear lady, no man may kick Nap Errol and live. So I did not give him the opportunity."

She uttered a quick sob and turned her head upon the pillow. The tears were running down her face.

The hand that pressed her wrist began to rub it very gently. "That's the worst of telling the truth," Nap said softly. "It is sure to hurt someone."

"I am glad you told me," she whispered back, "though I don't know what to say to you—how to atone —"

"I will tell you then," he answered swiftly. "Stay quietly here and be as happy as you can till the doctor gives you leave to go back. You will have to do it in any case, but—if you feel you owe me anything, which of course you don't"—he smiled again, and his smile when free from cynicism held a wonderful charm—"do it willingly—please do it willingly!"

She could not answer him in words, but her fingers closed upon his. Instantly she felt his answering pressure. A moment later he laid her hand down very gently and left her.

CHAPTER XI

THE STING OF A SCORPION

"Oh, dear, I wish it wasn't so muddy." Dot, emerging from old Squinny's cottage, stood a moment on the edge of the large puddle that was old Squinny's garden and gazed over the ploughed fields beyond towards the sinking sun. It was the last day in January, and the winter dusk was already creeping up in a curtain of damp mist that veiled everything it touched. She knew it would be dark long before she got home, and the prospect of sliding about in the muddy lanes did not attract her.

"You were an idiot not to bring a lantern," she told herself severely, as she skirted the edge of the puddle. "You might have known—but you never think!"

Here she reached the garden-gate and lifted it scientifically off its hinges and then back again when she had passed through. Old Squinny's gate had not opened in the ordinary way within the memory of man. It was stoutly bound to the gate-post by several twists of rusty chain.

A stretch of waste land lay beyond the cottage garden; then came the road and then the fields, brown and undulating in the ruddy western glow. For a second or two Dot considered the homeward path that lay across the fields. She had come by that earlier in the afternoon, and she knew exactly what it had to offer besides the advantage of cutting half a mile from a three-mile trudge. But her knowledge eventually decided her in favour of the road.

"Besides," as she optimistically remarked to herself, "someone might pass and give me a lift."

For Dot was not above being seen in a waggon or a tradesman's cart. She accepted as she was prone to give, promiscuously and with absolute freedom.

But it was no tradesman's cart that the gods had in store for her that day. Rather was it a chariot of their own that presently swooped as if upon wings swiftly and smoothly down upon the Sturdy wayfarer. Dot herself was scarcely aware of its approach before it had passed and come to a standstill barely half a dozen yards from her.

"Hullo!" cried a boyish voice. "This is luck! Jump in! I'll soon trundle you home."

It was Bertie leaning out from the wheel on which his hands rested. In the open seat behind him, propped by cushions, sat a man whom she knew instantly though she had never met him before. He looked at her as she came up to the car with blue eyes as frank and kind as Bertie's, though not so merry. It was not difficult to see that they were brothers.

"My brother Lucas," said Bertie, "the one you wanted to know."

He smiled as he said it for the sheer malicious pleasure of seeing her blush. And Dot's green-brown eyes shot him a glance of quick indignation.

But Lucas Errol stepped calmly into the breach. "This young brother of mine has a way of turning things topsy-turvy," he said in his easy drawl. "We just make allowances for him when we can, and kick him when we can't. It is I who have wanted to know you, Miss Waring—it is Miss Waring, I think—for some time past. Won't you get in beside me and give me the pleasure of making your acquaintance?"

He pulled off his glove and offered her his hand.

Dot instantly took it, but when he would have helped her in she drew back. "I had better not, really. Look at my boots!"

"Jump in!" urged Bertie. "Who cares?"

He sprang suddenly down and seized her impulsively by the waist. In another second he would have bundled her in without ceremony, but quietly, with no change of countenance, his brother intervened.

"Bertie, behave yourself! Miss Waring, I beg you will do exactly as you like, but please believe that the state of your boots doesn't matter a cent. I should say the same with absolute honesty if I had to clean the car myself."

"I am quite sure I shouldn't in your place," said Dot as she climbed into the car.

Lucas smiled and fished out a spare rug. "Put it round your shoulders and fold it well over. You will find it cold when we begin to move. Are your feet quite warm? There is a foot-warmer here. Tuck her in well, Bertie. That's the way."

"You will never get out again," laughed Bertie, as he shut the door upon her. "Now, where are we going? To Baronmead?"

His merry eyes besought her for an instant; then, as she began to shake her head, "Can't you persuade her, Luke?" he said.

"I think so," Lucas answered. "Drive on slowly while I try. You know there is a friend of yours there, Miss Waring?"

"Lady Carfax?" said Dot quickly.

He bent his head. "I think she would like you to visit her. She has so few friends."

"I would love to, of course," Dot said impetuously. "But—you know, I've never visited her before, though I have often longed to. People don't call at the Manor. Not even Dad goes there. And in any case, I am hardly grown up enough to pay calls. Wouldn't she—are you sure she wouldn't think it very presumptuous of me to go and see her?"

"That is the last thing I should expect from her," Lucas answered, with quiet conviction.

"She is very proud," Dot began.

"She is very miserable," he said.

Dot's eyes softened. "Oh, poor Lady Carfax!" she said. "So you know that, too!"

"I have seen her only twice," he said. "Yes, I know it."

Dot's eyes widened. "Only twice! Why, surely it must be three weeks nearly since her accident."

"I believe it is. But it was serious, you know, and she has made a very slow recovery. The doctor has only just allowed her to be removed to another room."

"Poor Lady Carfax!" Dot said again. "Yes, I'll come. I know Dad wouldn't mind!"

So Bertie had his desire and turned the motor with a light heart towards Baronmead. He sang as he

drove, sang at the top of his voice; for he was in a happy mood that evening.

And Dot was happy too, though a little nervous. She had often longed to go to Baronmead, and she was already thoroughly at her ease with the master thereof, who sat and conversed beside her in that rather monotonous, tired drawl of his. It was only the thought of Anne that made her nervous. Warmly as she admired her, she was ever so slightly afraid of the stately lady of the Manor, who made friends with so few and for all her queenly graciousness kept those she had at so discreet a distance. Of course everyone knew why. The reason was plain to all who had eyes to see. But that fact did not help any to overstep the barrier, nor did it keep the majority from being affronted. Dot was not of the latter, but she was ever shy in Anne's presence, though it was more the fear of hurting than of being hurt that made her so.

She enjoyed the brisk run to Baronmead with all her healthy soul. As they sped up the long drive they were joined by a galloping horseman, who shouted to Bertie to put on speed and flogged his animal furiously when the car drew ahead. He looked like a demon to Dot in the half-light—a black imp mounted on a black mare riding to perdition. She was glad to leave him behind.

But as they drew up before the great house that loomed gaunt and eerie in the gathering darkness the galloping hoofs drew near again, and before they were out of the car Nap was beside them.

He flung himself out of the saddle, with a curt, "Here, Bertie! Take the brute for me. Mind her teeth! She's in a vile temper."

"What a beast you are!" was Bertie's comment, as he went to the panting animal.

The valet, Hudson, was waiting to help his master out of the car, but Nap pushed him imperiously aside. His quick, lithe movements fascinated Dot. She stood and watched him as he dexterously assisted the heavy, misshapen figure of his brother to alight. He was wonderfully strong for so slight a man. He seemed compacted of muscle and energy, welded together with a certain fiery grace that made him in some fashion remarkable. He was utterly different from any other man she had ever seen.

"Will you go first, Miss Waring?" It was Lucas Errol's voice. He leaned on his brother's shoulder, waiting for her.

Nap glanced round at her. She saw his ironical smile for an instant. "Miss Waring prefers to wait for Bertie, perhaps," he remarked.

The words stung her, she scarcely knew why, and what had been a half-reluctant prejudice before turned to sudden hot antagonism in Dot's heart. She hated Nap Errol from that moment.

But Lucas laid a quiet hand on her arm, and her resentment died.

"I think Miss Waring was waiting for me," he said. "Will you let me lean on you, Miss Waring? Steps are always a difficulty to me."

"Of course," she said eagerly. "Do lean hard!"

It occurred to her afterwards that the valet's assistance would have been more effectual than hers, and at the top of the steps she glanced back at him. He was immediately behind them, laden with some things he had taken from the car. His eyes, as he ascended, were fixed upon Nap, and a curious little thrill of sympathy ran through Dot as she realised that she was not the only person who hated him.

As they passed into the great entrance-hall Bertie came springing up behind them. "I say, can't we have tea here before you go up to see Lady Carfax? It's the cosiest place in the whole house."

A huge fire burned on an open hearth, about which a deep lounge and several easy-chairs were arrayed.

"That will be O.K.," said Lucas. "Fix me up on the settee, Nap."

"You had better go and rest in your room," said Nap. "Bertie and Miss Waring are accustomed to entertaining each other."

Again Dot felt the sting—this time a tangible one—in his words. He was evidently in a stinging mood.

She drew back quickly. "I would rather go straight up to Lady Carfax if I may."

"Oh, I say, don't!" thrust in Bertie with a quick frown. "Lucas, you'll stay, won't you, and have tea with us here?"

"That is my intention," said Lucas, "if Miss Waring will give us the pleasure of her company."

And Dot, though she longed to escape, went forward with him into the glow of the firelight.

She hoped earnestly that Nap would depart, but for some reason Nap was minded to remain. He settled his brother on the cushions and then flung himself into a chair on the other side of the fire. Dot was aware without looking at him that he had her under observation; she felt the scrutiny she could not see, and knew it was malevolent.

Bertie evidently knew it too, for he was scowling savagely in a fashion quite unfamiliar to her. He placed a chair for her close to Lucas.

"I guess we must ask you to do the honours, Miss Waring," the latter said. "My mother must be with Lady Carfax."

"Here's an opportunity for Miss Waring to display her charms!" gibed Nap. "But doubtless Bertie has been initiated in the arts and wiles of tea-making long before this. It's a bewitching performance, eh, Bertie?"

Bertie growled something unintelligible and turned his back.

"Give him plenty of sugar, Miss Waring," recommended Nap. "He's remarkably guileless. With a little patience and subtlety on your part he'll soon come and feed out of your hand. After that, a little feminine persuasion is all that is required to entice the pretty bird into the cage. He's quite a fine specimen; such a lot of gold about him, too! It would be a pity to let him escape. There are not many of his sort, I assure you."

The drawling insolence of the words made Dot quiver all over. She knew by Bertie's rigidity of pose that he was furious too, but she did not dare to look at him. She tried to attend to some remark that Lucas made to her, but she only answered at random. She could not take in what he said.

Perhaps he saw her perturbation, for after a moment he turned from her to Nap and very deliberately engaged him in conversation, while Bertie, very pale but quite collected, sat down by her and began to talk also.

She did her best to second his efforts, but with Nap's eyes openly mocking her from the other side of the hearth, she found it impossible to divert her thoughts.

So they thought that of her, did they? They thought—that! She felt as if she had been publicly weighed in the balances and found wanting. She told herself passionately that she would never, as long as she lived, speak to Nap Errol again. Everyone said he was a bounder, and everyone was right.

CHAPTER XII

BROTHERS

"Come right in!" said Mrs. Errol. "Anne, my dear, here is little Miss Waring come to see you. I'm real pleased to meet you, child. I've watched you in church many a time when I ought to have been saying my prayers, and so has someone else I know."

Dot's cheeks were scarlet as she came forward to Anne's couch. She was still telling herself with fierce emphasis that never, never again would she voluntarily venture herself within the walls of Baronmead.

But when Anne stretched out a hand to her and smiled, all her perturbation vanished at a breath. She went impulsively forward and knelt down by her side. For some reason she did not feel her customary awe of the lady of the Manor. This sad-faced woman with the deeply shadowed eyes aroused within her something that was stronger, something that carried her completely out of herself.

"Oh, are you better?" she said. "I have been so sorry about you."

"It was good of you to come up to see me," Anne said gently. "Yes, Dot, I am better. I am allowed to walk again, and I am going home to-morrow."

"Not if I know it," said Mrs. Errol stoutly. "Or if you do, I go too, to take care of you."

Anne smiled at her without replying. "Sit down, Dot," she said, "and tell me all the news. I know you hear everything."

"But nothing has happened," said Dot. "Everybody is squabbling as usual about the Town Hall, why we want one, why there isn't one, and when we are going to have one. Really, there's nothing else."

"My dear," said Mrs. Errol, "everybody wants a sound spanking, and I should like to administer it. Every township ought to have a public building, and there's my son Lucas wanting nothing so much as to build one and they won't let him."

"I am afraid my husband is the main obstacle," said Anne.

"Then I guess we won't discuss it," said Mrs. Errol firmly. "Who's that scratching at the door?"

It was Bertie, as Anne knew on the instant by Dot's face. "Do ask him to come in," she said kindly.

Bertie came in as one not wholly sure of his welcome, and took up a position in the background. And there during the remainder of Dot's visit he stayed, scarcely speaking, and so sternly preoccupied that Dot's embarrassment returned upon her overwhelmingly, and she very soon rose to go.

He stepped forward then and followed her out. "I am going to motor you home," he said, as he escorted her down the stairs.

Dot nearly stopped short in consternation. "Oh, no, really! I'm going home alone. It's no distance, and I know my way perfectly."

"I'm coming with you," he said doggedly.

But the memory of those eyes that had mocked her across the hall still burned in the girl's heart. She faced him resolutely;

"You are not to, Bertie. I don't wish it."

"I can't help it," said Bertie. "I am coming."

At this point they arrived in the hall, and here she found Lucas Errol waiting to say good-bye to her.

She turned to him with desperate appeal. "Mr. Errol, please don't let Bertie see me home. I—I would so much rather go alone."

She was almost crying as she said it, and Lucas looked at Bertie with most unaccustomed sharpness.

"It's all right," the boy made answer. "We haven't quarrelled yet."

The last word sounded ominous, and with her hand in Lucas's quiet grasp, Dot shivered.

"But I'm sure we are going to," she said. "And I do so hate quarrelling. Do, please, let me run home alone. I'm not a bit afraid."

Lucas began to smile. "I think it's rather hard on Bertie," he said. "However—"

"I must go, Lucas," Bertie said quickly. "You don't understand. There is something I want to explain."

But Lucas leaned a hand upon his shoulder. "Let it keep, dear fellow. There is always tomorrow!"

"No, never, never, never!" whispered Dot to her turbulent heart.

Yet when a moment later Bertie came forward, and silently, without looking at her, held open the door, a wild regret surged fiercely through her, and for that second she almost wished that she had let him go with her.

And then again there came to her that hateful whisper—that taunting, intolerable sneer; and she fled without a backward glance.

Bertie closed the great door very quietly, and turned back into the hall.

"Where is Nap?"

"Come here, Bertie," Lucas said.

He went unwillingly. "Where is Nap?" he said again.

Lucas, supporting himself on one side with a crutch, stood by the fire and waited for him.

As Bertie drew near he took him gently by the shoulder. "May I know what you were going to say to Miss Waring just now?" he asked.

Bertie threw back his head. "I was going to ask her to overlook that cad's vile insinuations—and marry me."

"And that was the very thing she didn't want you to do," Lucas said.

"I can't help it." There was a stubborn note in Bertie's voice. "She shan't think I'm a blackguard like Nap."

"We will leave Nap out of it," Lucas said quietly.

"Why?" demanded Bertie hotly. "He was responsible. He insulted a guest under your roof. Are you going to put up with that? Because I'm not!"

"My dear fellow, it is I, not you, who must deal with that."

Bertie stamped furiously. "That's all very well, but—dash it, Lucas, you're always holding me back. And I can't knock under to you in this. I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm going to have it out with Nap. Whatever you may say, it is more my business than yours."

He would have flung round with the words, but his brother's hand was still upon him, restraining him.

He paused, chafing. "You must let me go. I shall hurt you if you don't."

"You will hurt me if I do, boy," Lucas made grave reply.

"I know, and I'm sorry. But I can't help it. There are times when a man—if he is a man—must act for himself. And I—" he broke off, still chafing, his hand seeking without violence to free him from that hold which could not have been so very powerful, though it resisted his efforts. "Luke," he said suddenly, and the anger was gone from his voice, "let me go, old chap. You must let me go. It isn't right—it isn't just to—to take advantage of being—what you are."

The quick falter in the words deprived them of any sting, yet on the instant Lucas's hand fell, setting him free.

"All right, Bertie! Go!" he said.

And Bertie went—three steps, and halted. Lucas remained motionless before the fire. He was not so much as looking at him.

Several seconds passed in silence. Then impulsively Bertie turned. His lips were quivering. He went straight back to the quiet figure on the hearth, lifted the free arm, and drew it boyishly round his neck.

"Old chap, forgive me!" he said.

"For what you haven't done?" Lucas asked, with a very kindly smile.

"For being an unconscionable brute!" Bertie said, with feeling. "I didn't mean, it, old man. I didn't mean it!"

"Oh, shucks, dear fellow! Don't be such a silly ass! It's demoralising for all concerned." Lucas Errol's hand pressed his shoulder admonishingly. "She's a nice little girl, Bertie. I've taken a kind of fancy to her myself."

Bertie looked up quickly. "Luke, you're a brick!"

Lucas shook his head. "But you mustn't ask her yet, lad. She's not ready for it. I'm not sure that you are ready for it yourself."

Bertie's face fell. "Why not? I'm in dead earnest. I want to marry her, just as soon as she will have me."

"Quite so," drawled Nap, from the depths of the lounge behind him. "And she, I doubt not, wants to

marry you—even sooner, if possible."

He had come up in his noiseless fashion unobserved. Attired in evening dress, slim, sleek, well-groomed, he lay at full length and gazed up at the two brothers, a malicious glitter in his eyes. He held an unlighted cigarette between his fingers.

"Pray don't let me interrupt, Lucas," he said airily, ignoring Bertie's sharp exclamation, which was not of a pacific nature. "I always enjoy seeing you trying to teach the pride of the Errols not to make a fool of himself. It's a gigantic undertaking, isn't it? Let me know if you require any assistance."

He placed the cigarette between his lips and felt for some matches.

"I am going to turn my attention to you now," Lucas rejoined in his tired voice. "Bertie, old chap, go and dress, will you? You can come to my room afterwards."

"Bring me one of those spills first," said Nap.

Bertie stood rigid. He was white to the lips with the effort to control himself. Nap, outstretched, supple as a tiger, lay and watched him unwaveringly.

"Go, Bertie!" Lucas said very quietly.

He took a spill himself from the mantelpiece, and tried to hold it to the blaze. But he stooped with difficulty, and sharply Bertie reached forward and took it from him.

"I will," he said briefly, and lighting the spill, carried it to Nap, at ease on the sofa.

With a faint smile Nap awaited him. He did not offer to take the burning spill, and Bertie held it in sullen silence to the end of his cigarette. His hand was not very steady, and after a moment Nap took his wrist.

The cigarette glowed, and Nap looked up. "It's a pity you're too big to thrash, Bertie," he said coolly, and with a sudden movement doubled the flaming paper back upon the fingers that held it.

Bertie's yell was more of rage than pain. He struck furiously at his tormentor with his free hand, but Nap, by some trick of marvellous agility, evaded the blow. He leapt over the back of the settee with a laugh of devilish derision.

And, "Bertie, go!" said Lucas peremptorily.

Without a word Bertie checked himself as it were in mid career, stood a second as one gathering his strength, then turned in utter silence and marched away.

CHAPTER XIII

THE JESTER'S INFERNO

Between the two men who were left not a word passed for many minutes. Nap prowled to and fro with his head back and his own peculiarly insolent smile curving the corners of his mouth. There was a ruddy glare in his eyes, but they held no anger.

Lucas, still leaning on his crutch, stood with his back turned, his face to the fire. There was no anger about him either. He looked spent.

Abruptly Nap ceased his pacing and came up to him. "Come!" he said. "You have had enough of this. I will help you to your room."

Slowly Lucas lifted his heavy eyes. "Send Hudson to me," he said.

Nap looked at him sharply. Then, "Lean on me," he said. "I'll help you."

"No. Send Hudson." The words ended upon a stifled groan.

Nap turned swiftly and dragged forward the settee. "Lie down here for a minute, while I fetch him. Don't faint, man! You will be easier directly. You have been on your feet too long. There! Is that

better?"

Lucas drew a long, shuddering breath and slowly suffered his limbs to relax. His face was ghastly though he forced himself to smile.

"Yes, I am better. Don't call Hudson for a minute. Nap!"

Nap bent.

"Put your hand under my shoulders. Ah! That's a help. I always like your touch. Say, Boney," the words came gaspingly, the sunken eyes were heavy with pain, "you'll think me a mean brute. I am, dear fellow, I am; a coward, too, from the same point of view. But—ill or well, I've got to say it. You've been running amok to-day, and it's been altogether too lively to be just pleasant. You've got to pull up. I say it."

Nap's smile had utterly departed. It was some other impulse that twitched his lips as he made reply.

"Whatever you say is law."

"Thanks! I'm duly grateful. Do you mind wiping my forehead? I'm too lazy to move. Boney, old chap, he's a well-behaved youngster on the whole. What do you want to bait him for?"

"Because I'm a jealous devil," Nap said through his teeth.

"Oh, rats, dear fellow! We are not talking in parables. You're a bit of a savage, I know, but—"

"More than that," threw in Nap.

"No—no! You can hold yourself in if you try. And why jealous, anyway? We're all brothers. Say, Boney, I'm going to hurt you infernally. You hit the youngster below the belt. It was foul play."

"What can you expect?" muttered Nap.

"I expect—better things. If you must be a beast, be a clean beast. If you must hit out now and then, give him a chance to hit back. It's kind of shabby—the game you played today."

"Are you going to make me apologise?" asked Nap grimly.

"Shucks, no; He would think you were laughing at him. Clap him on the back and tell him not to be a fool. He'll understand that."

"And wish him luck with the parson's daughter?" said Nap, with a sneer.

"Why not, old chap?"

"You really mean to let him marry the first girl who runs after his dollars?"

"It isn't the dollars," said the millionaire gently. "And she isn't running after him either. She's running away."

"Same thing sometimes," said Nap.

"Oh, don't be cynical, Boney! It's so damned cheap! There! I've done swearing at you for the present. It's wonderful how you fellows bear with me. Find Hudson, will you? And then go and tell Lady Carfax that I am afraid I can't visit her this evening as I had hoped."

"Do you know she talks of leaving tomorrow?" said Nap.

"Yes, I know. Guess she is quite right to go."

"She's not fit for it," said Nap, in a fierce undertone. "It's madness. I told her so. But she wouldn't listen."

"She is the best judge," his brother said. "Anyway, she is in an intolerable position. We can't press her to prolong it. Besides—whatever he is—her husband has first right."

"Think so?" said Nap.

"It is so," Lucas asserted quietly, "whether you admit it or not."

Nap did not dispute the point, but his jaw looked exceedingly uncompromising as he departed to find the valet.

When a little later he asked for admission to Anne's presence, however, his bitter mood seemed to have modified. He entered with the air of one well assured of his welcome.

"Are you in a mood for chess tonight?" he asked.

"Now, you're not to plague her, Nap," put in Mrs. Errol. "She isn't going to spend her last evening amusing you."

"Oh, please," protested Anne. "It is your son who has had all the amusing to do."

Nap smiled. "There's for you, alma mater!" he remarked as he sat down.

"Lady Carfax is much too forbearing to say anything else," retorted Mrs. Errol.

"Lady Carfax always tells the truth," said Nap, beginning to set the chess-board, "which is the exact reason why all her swains adore her."

"Well," said Mrs. Errol very deliberately, though without venom, "I guess that's about the last quality I should expect you to appreciate."

"Strange to say, it is actually the first just now," said Nap. "Are you going, alma mater? Don't let me drive you away!"

He rose, nevertheless, to open the door for her; and Mrs. Errol went, somewhat with the air of one complying with an unspoken desire.

Nap came softly back and resumed his task. "P'r'aps you will be good enough to refrain from referring to me again as the august lady's son," he said. "She doesn't like it."

"Why not?" said Anne in astonishment.

He glanced up at her as if contemplating something. Then, "You see, the benign mother is not over and above proud of me," he drawled. "If it were Bertie now—well, I guess even you will admit that Bertie is the flower of the flock."

His manner mystified her, but it was not her way to seek to probe mysteries. She smiled as she said, "I have yet to discover that you are so very despicable."

"You have yet to discover—many things," said Nap enigmatically. "Will you be pleased to make the first move?"

She did so silently. They had played together several times before. He had formed a habit of visiting her every evening, and though her skill at the game was far from great, it had been a welcome diversion from the constant anxiety that pressed so heavily upon her. Nap was an expert player, yet he seemed to enjoy the poor game which was all she had to offer. Perhaps he liked to feel her at his mercy. She strongly suspected that he often deliberately prolonged the contest though he seldom allowed her to beat him.

To-night, however, he seemed to be in a restless mood, and she soon saw that he was bent upon a swift victory. He made his moves with a quick dexterity that baffled her completely, and but a very few minutes elapsed before he uttered his customary warning.

"You would do well to beware."

"Which means that I am beaten, I suppose," she said, with a smile of resignation.

"You can save yourself if you like," he said, with his eyes on the board, "if you consider it worth while."

"I don't think I do," she answered. "The end will be the same."

His eyes flashed up at her. "You surrender unconditionally?"

She continued to smile despite the sadness of her face. "Absolutely. I am so accustomed to defeat that I am getting callous."

"You seem to have great confidence in my chivalry," he said, looking full at her.

"I have—every confidence, Mr. Errol," she answered gravely. "I think that you and your brother are the most chivalrous men I know."

His laugh had a ring of harshness. "Believe me, I am not accustomed to being ranked with the saints," he said. "How shall I get away from your halo? I warn you, it's a most awful misfit. You'll find it out presently, and make me suffer for your mistake."

"You haven't a very high opinion of my sense of justice," Anne said, with just a tinge of reproach in her gentle voice.

"No," he said recklessly. "None whatever. You are sure to forget who fashioned the halo. Women always do."

Anne was silent.

He leaned suddenly towards her, careless of the chessmen that rolled in all directions. "I haven't been living up to the halo to-day," he said, and there was that in his voice that touched her to quick pity. "I've been snapping and biting like a wild beast all day long. I've been in hell myself, and I've made it hell wherever I went."

"Oh, but why?" Half involuntarily she held out her hand to him as one who would assist a friend in deep waters.

He took it, held it closely, bowed his forehead upon it, and so sat tensely silent.

"Something is wrong. I wish I could help you," she said at last.

He lifted his head, met her eyes of grave compassion, and abruptly set her free.

"You have done what you could for me," he said. "You've made me hate my inferno. But you can't pull me out. You have"—she saw his teeth for a second though scarcely in a smile—"other fish to fry."

"Whatever I am doing, I shall not forget my friends, Nap," she said, with great earnestness.

"No," he returned, "you won't forget them. I shouldn't wonder if you prayed for them even. I am sure you are one of the faithful." There was more of suppressed misery than irony in his voice. "But is that likely to help when you don't so much as know what to pray for?"

He got up and moved away from her with that noiseless footfall that was so like the stealthy padding of a beast.

Anne lay and silently watched him. Her uncertainty regarding him had long since passed away. Though she was far from understanding him, he had become an intimate friend, and she treated him as such. True, he was unlike any other man she had ever met, but that fact had ceased to embarrass her. She accepted him as he was.

He came back at length and sat down, smiling at her, though somewhat grimly.

"You will pardon your poor jester," he said, "if he fails to make a joke on your last night. He could make jokes—plenty of them, but not of the sort that would please you."

Anne said nothing. She would not, if she could help it, betray to any how much she was dreading the morrow. But she felt that he knew it in spite of her.

His next words revealed the fact. "You are going to purgatory," he said, "and I am going to perdition. Do you know, I sometimes wonder if we shouldn't do better to turn and fly in the face of the gods when they drive us too hard? Why do we give in when we've nothing to gain and all to lose?"

She met his look with her steadfast eyes. "Does duty count as nothing?" she said.

He made an impatient movement, and would have spoken, but she stopped him.

"Please don't rail at duty. I know your creed is pleasure, but the pursuit of pleasure does not, after all, bring happiness."

"Who wants pleasure?" demanded Nap fiercely. "That's only the anesthetic when things get unbearable. You use duty in the same way. But what we both want, what we both hanker for, starve for, is just life! Who cares if there is pain with it? I don't, nor do you. And yet we keep on stunting and stultifying ourselves with these old-fashioned remedies for a disease we only half understand, when we might have all the world and then some. Oh, we're fools—we're fools!" His voice rang wildly passionate. He flung out his arms as if he wrestled with something. "We've been cheated for centuries of our birthright, and we still put up with it, still bring our human sacrifices to an empty shrine!"

And there he broke off short, checked suddenly at the height of his outburst though she had made no second effort to stop him.

Her quiet eyes had not flinched from his. She had made no sign of shrinking. With the utmost patience she had listened to him. Yet by some means intangible the fiery stream of his rebellion was stayed.

There fell a brief silence. Then he rose. "I am afraid I am not fit for civilised society to-night," he said. "I will say good-bye." He held her hand for a moment. "You will let me see you sometimes?"

"I hope to come now and then to Baronmead," she answered quietly. "But you will not—please—come to the Manor again."

He looked down at her with eyes that had become inscrutable. "I shall not come against your will," he said.

"Thank you," she answered simply.

And so he left her.

CHAPTER XIV

A BIG THING

As the widowed rector's only daughter, Dot's occupations were many and various, and it was in consequence no difficult matter to be too deeply engrossed in these occupations to have any time to spare for intercourse with the rector's pupil.

Her brother had gone back to college, and there was therefore no excuse for the said pupil to linger when his studies were over, though he invented many that would not have borne a very close investigation.

But his ingenuity was all to no purpose. Dot could be ingenious too, and she evaded him so adroitly that at the end of a week he had abandoned his efforts.

He went about with a certain sternness in those days, but it was not the sternness of the vanquished, rather the dogged patience of the man who is quite sure of ultimate success. Dot, peeping from the kitchen window to see him ride away, marked this on more than one occasion and strengthened her defences in consequence. She had not the remotest intention of seeing Bertie alone again for many a month, if ever. His persistence had scared her badly on that night at Baronmead. She was horribly afraid of what he might feel impelled to say to her, almost terrified at the bare notion of an explanation, and the prospect of a possible apology was unthinkable. It was easier for her to sacrifice his good comradeship, though that of itself was no easy matter, and she could only thrust her sense of loss into the background of her thoughts by the most strenuous efforts.

She was sturdily determined to make him relinquish their former pleasant intimacy before they should meet again. She was growing up, she told herself severely, growing up fast; and intimacies of that sort were likely to be misconstrued.

She took the counsel of none upon this difficult matter. Her father was too vague a dreamer to guide her, or so much as to realise that she stood in need of guidance. And Dot had gone her own independent way all her life. Her healthy young mind was not accustomed to grapple with problems, but she did not despair on that account. She only resolutely set herself to cope with this one as best she might, erecting out of her multifarious duties a barrier calculated to dishearten the most hopeful knight.

But in thus constructing her defences there was one force with which she omitted to reckon and against which she in consequence made no preparation, a force which, nevertheless, was capable of shattering all her carefully-laid schemes at a touch.

As she emerged among the last of the congregation from the church on the Sunday morning following her visit to Baronmead, she found Lucas Errol leaning upon the open lych-gate.

He greeted her with that shrewd, kindly smile of his before which it was almost impossible to feel embarrassed or constrained. Yet she blushed vividly at meeting him, and would gladly have turned the other way had the opportunity offered. For there in the road below, doing something to the motor, was Bertie.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you again, Miss Waring," said Lucas, in his pleasant drawl. "I was just hoping you would come along. I met your father before the service, and he promised to show me his orchids."

"Oh!" said Dot, nervously avoiding a second glance in Bertie's direction. "Won't you come across to the Rectory then and wait for him there?"

"May I?" said Lucas.

He straightened himself with an effort and transferred his weight to his crutch. Dot shyly proffered her arm.

"Let me!" said Bertie.

He was already on the steps, but Lucas waved him down, and accepted the girl's help instead.

"We will go in the garden way," said Dot. "It's only just across the road."

He halted terribly in the descent, and glancing at him in some anxiety she saw that his lips were tightly closed. Overwhelming pity for the man overcame her awkwardness, and she spoke sharply over her shoulder.

"Bertie, come and take my place! You know what to do better than I do."

In an instant Bertie was beside her, had slipped his arm under his brother's shoulder, and taken his weight almost entirely off the crutch. His active young strength bore the great burden unfalteringly and with immense tenderness, and there ran through Dot, watching from above, a queer little indefinable thrill that made her heart beat suddenly faster. He certainly was a nice boy, as he himself had declared.

"That didn't hurt so badly, eh, old chap?" asked the cheery voice. "Come along, Dot. You can give him a hand now while I fetch the car round. There are no steps to the Rectory, so he will be all right."

His airy friendliness banished the last of Dot's confusion. With a keen sense of relief she obeyed him. Those few seconds of a common solicitude had bridged the gulf at least temporarily.

"This is real good of you," Lucas Errol said, as he took her arm again. "And it's a luxury I ought not to indulge in, for I can walk alone on the flat."

"Oh, it is horrid for you!" she said with vehemence. "How ever do you bear it?"

"We can all of us bear what we must," he said, smiling whimsically.

"But we don't all of us do it well," said Dot, as she opened the Rectory gate.

"I guess that's a good deal a matter of temperament," said the American. "A fellow like Nap, for instance, all hustle and quicksilver, might be expected to kick now and then. One makes allowances for a fellow like that."

"I believe you make allowances for everyone," said Dot, impetuously.

"Don't you?" he asked.

"No, I am afraid I don't."

There was a pause. The garden door was closed behind them. They stood alone.

Lucas Errol's eyes travelled over the stretch of lawn that lay between them and the house, dwelt for a few thoughtful seconds upon nothing in particular, and finally sought those of the girl at his side.

"One must be fair, Miss Waring," he said gently. "I can't imagine you being deliberately unfair to anyone."

She flushed again. There was something in his manner that she could not quite fathom, but it was something that she could not possibly resent.

"Not deliberately—of course," she said after a moment, as he waited for an answer.

"Of course not," he agreed, in his courteous, rather tired voice. "If, for instance, you were out with a friend and met a scorpion in a rage who stung you both, you'd want to take it out of the scorpion, wouldn't you, not the friend?"

She hesitated, seeing in a flash the trend of the conversation, and unwilling to commit herself too deeply.

He read her reluctance at a glance. "Please don't be afraid of me," he said, with that most winning smile of his. "I promise you on my honour that whatever you say shall not be used against you."

She smiled involuntarily. "I am not afraid of you, only—"

"Only—" he said.

"I think there are a good many scorpions about," she told him rather piteously. "I could name several, all venomous."

"I understand," said Lucas Errol. He passed his hand within her arm again and pressed it gently. "And so you are flinging away all your valuables to escape them?" he questioned. "Forgive me—is that wise?"

She did not answer.

He began to make his difficult progress towards the house.

Suddenly, without looking at her he spoke again. "I believe you're a woman of sense, Miss Waring, and you know as well as I do that there is a price to pay for everything. And the biggest things command the highest prices. If we haven't the means to pay for a big thing when it is offered us, we must just let it go. But if we have—well, I guess we'd be wise to sell out all the little things and secure it. Those same little things are so almighty small in comparison."

He ceased, but still Dot was silent. It was not the silence of embarrassment, however. He had spoken too kindly for that.

He did not look at her till they were close to the house, then for a few moments she was aware of his steady eyes searching for the answer she had withheld.

"Say, Miss Waring," he said, "you are not vexed any?"

She turned towards him instantly, her round face full of the most earnest friendliness. "I—I think you're a brick, Mr. Errol," she said.

He shook his head. "Nothing so useful, I am afraid, but I'm grateful to you all the same for thinking so. Ah! Here comes your father."

The rector was hastening after them across the grass. He joined them on the path before the house and urged his visitor to come in and rest. The orchids were in the conservatory. He believed he had one very rare specimen. If Mr. Errol would sit down in the drawing-room he would bring it for his inspection.

And so it came to pass that when Bertie entered he found his brother deep in a botanical discussion with the enthusiastic rector while Dot had disappeared. Bertie only paused to ascertain this fact before he turned round and went in quest of her.

He knew his way about the lower regions of the Rectory, and he began a systematic search forthwith. She was not, however, to be very readily found. He glanced into all the downstairs rooms without success. He was, in fact, on the point of regretfully abandoning his efforts on the supposition that she had retreated to her own room when her voice rang suddenly down the back stairs. She was calling agitatedly for help.

It was enough for Bertie. He tore up the stairs with lightning speed, boldly announcing his advent as he went.

He found her at the top of the house in an old cupboard used for storing fruit. She was mounted upon a crazy pair of steps that gave signs of imminent collapse, and to save herself from the catastrophe that this would involve she was clinging to the highest shelf with both hands.

"Be quick!" she cried to him. "Be quick! I'm slipping every second!"

The words were hardly uttered before the steps gave a sudden loud crack and fell from beneath her with a crash. But in the same instant Bertie sprang in and caught her firmly round the knees. He proceeded with much presence of mind to seat her on his shoulder.

"That's all right. I've got you," he said cheerily. "None the worse, eh? What are you trying to do? May as well finish before you come down."

Dot seemed for a moment inclined to resent the support thus jauntily given, but against her will her sense of humour prevailed.

She uttered a muffled laugh. "I'm getting apples for dessert."

"All in your Sunday clothes!" commented Bertie. "That comes of procrastination—the fatal British defect."

"I hate people who hustle," remarked Dot, hoping that her hot cheeks were not visible at that altitude.

"Meaning me?" said Bertie, settling himself for an argument.

"Oh, I suppose you can't help it," said Dot, filling her basket with feverish speed. "You Americans are all much too greedy to wait for anything. Am I very heavy?"

"Not in the least," said Bertie. "I like being sat on now and then. I admit the charge of greed but not of impatience. You misjudge me there."

At this point a large apple dropped suddenly upon his upturned face and, having struck him smartly between the eyes, fell with a thud to the ground.

Bertie said "Damn!" but luckily for Dot he did not budge an inch.

"I beg your pardon," he added a moment later.

"What for?" said Dot.

"For swearing," he replied. "I forgot you didn't like it."

"Oh!" said Dot; and after a pause, "Then I beg yours."

"Did you do it on purpose?" he asked curiously.

"I want to get down, please," said Dot.

He lowered her from his shoulder to his arms with perfect ease, set her on the ground, and held her fast.

"Dot," he said, his voice sunk almost to a whisper, "if you're going to be violent, I guess I shall be violent too."

"Let me go!" said Dot.

But still he held her. "Dot," he said again. "I won't hustle you any. I swear I won't hustle you. But—my dear, you'll marry me some day. Isn't that so?"

Dot was silent. She was straining against his arms, and yet he held her, not fiercely, not passionately, but with a mastery the greater for its very coolness.

"I'll wait for you," he said. "I'll wait three years. I shall be twenty-five then, and you'll be twenty-one. But you'll marry me then, Dot. You'll have to marry me then."

"Have to!" flashed Dot.

"Yes, have to," he repeated coolly. "You are mine."

"I'm not, Bertie!" she declared indignantly. "How—how dare you hold me against my will? And you're upsetting the apples too. Bertie, you—you're a horrid cad!"

"Yes, I know," said Bertie, an odd note of soothing in his voice. "That's what you English people always do when you're beaten. You hurl insults, and go on fighting. But it's nothing but a waste of energy, and only makes the whipping the more thorough."

"You hateful American!" gasped Dot. "As if—as if—we could be beaten!"

She had struggled vainly for some seconds and was breathless. She turned suddenly in his arms and placed her hands against his shoulders, forcing him from her. Bertie instantly changed his position, seized her wrists, drew them outward, drew them upward, drew them behind his neck.

"And yet you love me," he said. "You love yourself better, but—you love me."

His face was bent to hers, he looked closely into her eyes. And—perhaps it was something in his look that moved her—perhaps it was only the realisation of her own utter impotence—Dot suddenly hid her face upon his shoulder and began to cry.

His arms were about her in an instant. He held her against his heart.

"My dear, my dear, have I been a brute to you? I only wanted to make you understand. Say, Dot, don't cry, dear, don't cry!"

"I—I'm not!" sobbed Dot.

"Of course not," he agreed. "Anyone can see that. But still—darling—don't!"

Dot recovered herself with surprising rapidity. "Bertie, you—you're a great big donkey!" She confronted him with wet, accusing eyes. "What you said just now wasn't true, and if—if you're a gentleman you'll apologise."

"I'll let you kick me all the way downstairs if you like," said Bertie contritely. "I didn't mean to hurt you, honest. I didn't mean to make you—"

"You didn't!" broke in Dot. "But you didn't tell the truth. That's why I'm angry with you. You—told—a lie."

"I?" said Bertie.

He had taken his arms quite away from her now. He seemed in fact a little afraid of touching her. But Dot showed no disposition to beat a retreat. They faced each other in the old apple cupboard, as if it were the most appropriate place in the world for a conflict.

"Yes, you!" said Dot.

"What did I say?" asked Bertie, hastily casting back his thoughts.

She looked at him with eyes that seemed to grow more contemptuously bright every instant. "You said," she spoke with immense deliberation, "that I loved myself best."

"Well?" said Bertie.

"Well," she said, and took up her basket as one on the point of departure, "it wasn't true. There!"

"Dot!" His hand was on the basket too. He stopped her without touching her. "Dot!" he said again.

Dot's eyes began to soften, a dimple showed suddenly near the corner of her mouth. "You shouldn't tell lies, Bertie," she said.

And that was the last remark she made for several seconds, unless the smothered protests that rose against Bertie's lips could be described as such. They were certainly not emphatic enough to make any impression, and Bertie treated them with the indifference they deserved.

Driving home, he managed to steer with one hand while he thrust the other upon his brother's knee.

"Luke, old chap, I've gone dead against your wishes," he jerked out. "And—for the first time in my life—I'm not sorry. She'll have me."

"I thought she would," said Lucas. He grasped the boy's hand closely. "There are times when a man—if he is a man—must act for himself, eh, Bertie?"

Bertie laughed a little. "I don't believe it was against your wishes after all."

"Well, p'r'aps not." There was a very kindly smile in the sunken eyes. "I guess you're a little older than I thought you were, and anyway, she won't marry you for the dollars."

"She certainly won't," said Bertie warmly. "But she's horribly afraid of people saying so, since Nap—"

"Ah! Never mind Nap!"

"Well, it's made a difference," Bertie protested. "We are not going to marry for three years. And no one is to know we are engaged except you and her father."

"She doesn't mind me then?"

There was just a tinge of humour in the words, and Bertie looked at him sharply.

"What are you grinning at? No, of course she doesn't mind you. But what's the joke?"

"Look where you're going, dear fellow. It would be a real pity to break your neck at this stage."

Bertie turned his attention to his driving and was silent for a little.

Suddenly, "I have it!" he exclaimed. "You artful old fox! I believe you had first word after all. I wondered that she gave in so easily. What did you say to her?"

"That," said Lucas gently, "is a matter entirely between myself and one other."

Bertie broke into his gay boyish laugh and sounded the hooter for sheer lightness of heart.

"Oh, king, live for ever—and then some! You're just the finest fellow in the world!"

"Open to question, I am afraid," said the millionaire with his quiet smile. "And as to living for ever—well, I guess it's a cute idea in the main, but under present conditions it's a notion that makes me tired."

"Who said anything about present conditions?" demanded Bertie, almost angrily; and then in an altered voice: "Old man, I didn't mean that, and you know it. I only meant that you will always be wanted wherever you are. God doesn't turn out a good thing like you every day."

"Oh, shucks!" said Lucas Errol softly.

CHAPTER XV

THE CHAMPION

When Mrs. Errol remarked in her deep voice, that yet compassed the incomparable Yankee twang, that she guessed she wasn't afraid of any man that breathed, none of those who heard the bold assertion ventured to contradict her.

Lucas Errol was entertaining a large house-party, and the great hall was full of guests, most of whom had just returned from the day's sport. The hubbub of voices was considerable, but Mrs. Errol's remark was too weighty to be missed, and nearly everyone left off talking to hear its sequel.

Mrs. Errol, who was the soul of hospitality, but who, nevertheless, believed firmly in leaving people to amuse themselves in their own way, had only returned a few minutes before from paying a round of calls. She was wrapped in furs from head to foot, and her large, kindly face shone out of them like a November sun emerging from a mass of cloud.

There was a general scramble to wait upon her, and three cups of tea were offered her simultaneously, all of which she accepted with a nod of thanks and a gurgle of laughter.

"Put it down! I'll drink it presently. Where do you think I've just come from? And what do you think I've been doing? I'll wager my last dollar no one can guess."

"Done!" said Nap coolly, as he pulled forward a chair to the blaze. "You've been bearding the lion in his den, and not unsuccessfully, to judge by appearances. In other words, you've been to the Manor and have drunk tea with the lord thereof."

Mrs. Errol subsided into the chair and looked round upon her interested audience. "Well," she said, "you're right there, Nap Errol, but I shan't part with my last dollar to you, so don't you worry any about that. Yes, I've been to the Manor. I've had tea with Anne Carfax. And I've talked to the squire as straight as a mother. He was pretty mad at first, I can assure you, but I kept on hammering it into him till even he began to get tired. And after that I made my points. Oh, I was mighty kind on the whole. But

I guess he isn't under any misapprehension as to what I think of him. And I'm going over to-morrow to fetch dear Anne over here to lunch."

With which cheerful announcement Mrs. Errol took up one of her cups of tea and drank it with a triumphant air.

"I told him," she resumed, "he'd better watch his reputation, for he was beginning to be regarded as the local Bluebeard. Oh, I was as frank as George Washington. And I told him also that there isn't a man inside the U.S.A. that would treat a black as he treats his wife. I think that surprised him some, for he began to stutter, and then of course I had the advantage. And I used it."

"It must have been real edifying for Lady Carfax," drawled Nap.

Mrs. Errol turned upon him. "I'm no bigger a fool than I look, Nap Errol. Lady Carfax didn't hear a word. We had it out in the park. I left the motor half way on purpose, and made his high mightiness walk down with me. He was pretty near speechless by the time I'd done with him, but he did just manage at parting to call me an impertinent old woman. And I called him—a gentleman!"

Mrs. Errol paused to swallow her second cup of tea.

"I was wheezing myself by that time," she concluded. "But I'd had my say, and I don't doubt that he is now giving the matter his full and careful attention, which after all is the utmost I can expect. It may not do dear Anne much good, but I guess it can't do her much harm anyway, and it was beer and skittles to me. Why, it's five weeks now since she left, and she's only been over once in all that time, and then I gather there was such a row that she didn't feel like facing another till she was quite strong again."

"An infernal shame!" declared Bertie hotly. "I'll drive you over myself to-morrow to fetch her. We'll get up some sports in her honour. I wonder if she likes tobogganing."

"I wonder if she will come," murmured Nap.

Mrs. Errol turned to her third cup. "She'll come," she said with finality; and no one raised any further question on that point. Mrs. Errol in certain moods was known to be invincible.

Though it was nearly the middle of March, the land was fast held in the grip of winter. There had been a heavy fall of snow, and a continuous frost succeeding it had turned Baronmead into an Alpine paradise. Tobogganing and skating filled the hours of each day; dancing made fly the hours of each night. Bertie had already conducted one ice gymkhana with marked success, and he was now contemplating a masquerade on the ornamental sheet of water that stretched before the house. Strings of fairy lights were being arranged under his directions, and Chinese lanterns bobbed in every bush.

He was deeply engrossed in these preparations, but he tore himself away to drive his mother to the Manor on the following morning. His alacrity to do this was explained when he told her that he wanted to drop into the Rectory and persuade the rector to bring Dot that night to see the fun, to which plan Mrs. Errol accorded her ready approval, and even undertook to help with the persuading, to Bertie's immense gratification. He and his mother never talked confidences, but they understood each other so thoroughly that words were superfluous.

So they departed both in excellent spirits, while Lucas leaning upon Nap's shoulder, went down to the lake to watch the skaters and to superintend Bertie's preparations for the evening's entertainment.

The voices of the tobogganists reached them from a steep bit of ground half-a-mile away, ringing clearly on the frosty air.

"The other side of that mound is tip-top for skiing," remarked Nap, "better than you would expect in this country. But no one here seems particularly keen on it. I was out early this morning and tried several places that were quite passable, but that mound was the best!"

"After dancing till three," commented Lucas. "What a restless fellow you are!"

Nap laughed a somewhat hard laugh. "One must do something. I never sleep after dawn. It's not my nature."

"You'll wear yourself to a shadow," smiled Lucas. "There's little enough of you as it is—nothing but fire and sinew!"

"Oh, rats, my dear fellow! I'm as tough as leather. There would need to be something very serious the matter for me to lie in bed after daylight. Just look at that woman doing eights! It's a sight to make you

shudder."

"Whom do you mean? Mrs. Van Rhyl? I thought you were an admirer of hers."

Nap made a grimace. "Where is your native shrewdness? And I never admired her skating anyway. It's about on a par with Mrs. Damer's dancing. In the name of charity, don't ask that woman to come and help us dance again. I'm not equal to her. It's yoking an elephant to a zebra."

"I thought you liked Mrs. Damer," said Lucas.

Nap grimaced again. "She's all right in the hunting-field. Leave her in her own sphere and I can appreciate her."

"Do you think you are capable of appreciating any woman?" asked Lucas unexpectedly.

Nap threw him a single fiery glance that was like a sword-thrust. His slight figure stiffened to arrogance. But his answer, when it came, was peculiarly soft and deliberate—it was also absolutely and imperiously final.

"I guess so."

Lucas said no more, but he did not look wholly satisfied. There were times in his dealings with Nap when even his tolerance would carry him no further.

They spent a considerable time on the terrace in front of the house. It was a sheltered spot, and the sunshine that day was generous.

"This place is doing you good," Nap remarked presently. "You are considerably stronger than you were."

"I believe I am," Lucas answered. "I sleep better."

He had just seated himself on a stone bench that overlooked the lake. His eyes followed the darting figures of the skaters with a certain intentness.

Nap leaned upon the balustrade and watched him. "Why don't you see Capper again?" he asked suddenly.

The millionaire's gaze gradually lost its intentness and grew remote. "I am afraid he is on the wrong side of the Atlantic," he said.

"You can cable to him."

"Yes, I know." Slowly Lucas raised his eyes to his brother's face. "I can have him over to tell me what he told me before—that I haven't the recuperative strength essential to make his double operation a success."

"He may tell you something different this time." Nap spoke insistently, with the energy of one not accustomed to accept defeat.

Lucas was silent.

"Say, Lucas"—there was more than insistence in his tone this time; it held compulsion—"you aren't faint-hearted?"

The blue eyes began to smile. "I think not, Boney. But I've got to hang on for the present—till you and the boy are married. P'r'aps then—I'll take the risk."

Nap looked supercilious. "And if it is not my intention to marry?"

"You must marry, my dear fellow. You'll never be satisfied otherwise."

"You think marriage the hall-mark of respectability?" Nap sneered openly.

"I think," Lucas answered quietly, "that for you marriage is the only end. The love of a good woman would be your salvation. Yes, you may scoff. But—whether you admit it or not—it is the truth. And you know it."

But Nap had ceased already to scoff; the sneer had gone from his face. He had turned his head keenly as one who listens.

It was nearly a minute later that he spoke, and by that time the humming of an approaching motor was clearly audible.

Then, "It may be the truth," he said, in a tone as deliberate as his brother's, "and it may not. But—no good woman will ever marry me, Luke. And I shall never marry—anything else."

He stooped, offering his shoulder for support. "Another guest, I fancy. Shall we go?"

He added, as they stood a moment before turning, "And if you won't send for Capper—I shall."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MASQUERADE

The brothers were standing together on the steps when Anne alighted from the car, and her first thought as she moved towards them was of their utter dissimilarity. They might have been men of different nationalities, so essentially unlike each other were they in every detail. And yet she felt for both that ready friendship that springs from warmest gratitude.

Nap kept her hand a moment in his grasp while he looked at her with that bold stare of his that she had never yet desired to avoid. On the occasion of her last visit to Baronmead they had not met. She wondered if he were about to upbraid her for neglecting her friends, but he said nothing whatever, leaving it to Lucas to inquire after her health while he stood by and watched her with those dusky, intent eyes of his that seemed to miss nothing.

"I am quite strong again, thank you," she said in answer to her host's kindly questioning. "And you, Mr. Errol?"

"I am getting strong too," he smiled. "I am almost equal to running alone; but doubtless you are past that stage. Slow and sure has been my motto for some years now."

"It is a very good one," said Anne, in that gentle voice of hers that was like the voice of a girl.

He heard the sympathy in it, and his eyes softened; but he passed the matter by.

"I hope you have come to stay. Has my mother managed to persuade you?"

"She will spend to-night anyway," said Mrs. Errol.

"And only to-night," said Anne, with quiet firmness. "You are all very kind, but—"

"We want you," interposed Lucas Errol.

She smiled, a quick smile that seemed reminiscent of happier days. "Yes, and thank you for it. But I must return in good time to-morrow. I told my husband that I would do so. He is spending the night in town, but he will be back to-morrow."

Nap's teeth were visible, hard clenched upon his lower lip as he listened, but still he said nothing. There was something peculiarly forcible, even sinister, in his silence. Not until Anne presently turned and directly addressed him did his attitude change.

"Will you take me to see the lake?" she said. "It looked so charming as we drove up."

He moved instantly to accompany her. They went out together into the hard brightness of the winter morning.

"It is so good to be here," Anne said a little wistfully. "It is like a day in paradise."

He laughed at that, not very pleasantly.

"It is indeed," she persisted, "except for one thing. Now tell me; in what have I offended?"

"You, Lady Carfax!" His brows met for an instant in a single, savage line.

"Is it only my fancy?" she said. "I have a feeling that all is not peace."

He stopped abruptly by the balustrade that bounded the terrace. "The queen can do no wrong," he said. "She can hurt, but she cannot offend."

"Then how have I hurt you, Nap?" she said.

The quiet dignity of the question demanded an answer, but it was slow in coming. He leaned his arms upon the balustrade, pulling restlessly at the ivy that clung there. Anne waited quite motionless beside him. She was not looking at the skaters; her eyes had gone beyond them.

Abruptly at length Nap straightened himself. "I am a fool to take you to task for snubbing me," he said. "But I am not accustomed to being snubbed. Let that be my excuse."

"Please tell me what you mean," said Anne.

He looked at her. "Do you tell me you do not know?"

"Yes," she said. Her clear eyes met his. "Why should I snub you? I thought you were a friend."

"A friend," he said, with emphasis. "I thought so too. But—"

"Yes?" she said gently.

"Isn't it customary with you to answer your friends when they write to you?" he asked.

Her expression changed. A look of sharp pain showed for an instant in her eyes. "My invariable custom, Nap," she said very steadily.

"Then—that letter of mine—" he paused.

"When did you write it?"

"On the evening of the day you came here last—the day I missed you."

"It did not reach me," she said, her voice very low.

He was watching her very intently. "I sent it by messenger," he said. "I was hunting that day. I sat down and wrote the moment I heard you had been. Tawny Hudson took it."

"It did not reach me," she repeated. She was very pale; her eyes had dropped from his.

"I was going to allow you a month to answer that letter," he went on, as though she had not spoken. "After that, our—friendship would have been at an end. The month will be up to-morrow."

Anne was silent.

"Lady Carfax," he said, "will you swear to me that you never received that letter?"

"No," she said.

"You will not?"

"I will not."

He made a sudden movement—such a movement as a man makes involuntarily at an unexpected dart of pain.

Anne raised her eyes very quietly. "Let us be quite honest," she said. "No oath is ever necessary between friends."

"You expect me to believe you?" he said, and his voice was shaken by some emotion he scarcely tried to hide.

She smiled very faintly. "You do believe me," she said.

He turned sharply from her. "Let us go down," he said.

They went down to the garden below the terrace, walking side by side, in silence. They stood at the edge of the lake together, and presently they talked—talked of a hundred things in which neither were greatly interested. A few people drifted up and were introduced. Then Bertie came running down, and their *tête-à-tête* was finally at an end.

They were far away from one another during luncheon, and when the meal was over Nap disappeared. He never concerned himself greatly about his brother's guests.

At Bertie's persuasion Anne had brought skates, and she went down with him to the lake in the afternoon, where they skated together till sunset. She had a curious feeling that Nap was watching her the whole time, though he was nowhere to be seen; nor did he appear at tea in the great hall.

Later Mrs. Errol took possession of her, and they sat together in the former's sitting-room till it was time to dress for dinner. Anne had brought no fancy dress, but her hostess was eager to provide for her. She clothed her in a white domino and black velvet mask, and insisted upon her wearing a splendid diamond tiara in the shape of a heart in her soft hair.

When she finally descended the stairs in Mrs. Errol's company, a slim man dressed as a harlequin in black and silver, who was apparently waiting for her halfway down, bowed low and presented a glorious spray of crimson roses with the words: "For the queen who can do no wrong!"

"My, Nap! How you startled me!" ejaculated Mrs. Errol.

But Anne said nothing whatever. She only looked him straight in the eyes for an instant, and passed on with the roses in her hand.

During dinner she saw nothing of him. The great room was crowded with little tables, each laid for two, and she sat at the last of all with her host. Later she never remembered whether they talked or were silent. She only knew that somewhere the eyes that had watched her all the afternoon were watching her still, intent and tireless, biding their time. But silence in Lucas Errol's company was as easy as speech. Moreover, a string band played continuously throughout the meal, and the hubbub around them made speech unnecessary.

When they went out at last on to the terrace the whole garden was transformed into a paradise of glowing colours. The lake shone like a prism of glass, and over all the stars hung as if suspended very near the earth.

Lucas went down to the edge of the ice, leaning on his valet. Bertie, clad as a Roman soldier, was already vanishing in the distance with someone attired as a Swiss peasant girl. Mrs. Errol, sensibly wrapped in a large motoring coat, was maintaining a cheery conversation with the rector, who looked cold and hungry and smiled bluely at everything she said.

Anne stood by her host and watched the gay scene silently. "You ought to be skating," he said presently.

She shook her head. "Not yet. I like watching. It makes me think of when I was a girl."

"Not so very long ago, surely!" he said, with a smile.

"Seven years," she answered.

"My dear Lady Carfax!"

"Yes, seven years," she repeated, and though she also smiled there was a note of unspeakable dreariness in her voice. "I was married on my eighteenth birthday."

"My dear Lady Carfax," he said again. And with that silence fell once more between them, but in some magic fashion his sympathy imparted itself to her. She could feel it as one feels sudden sunshine on a cold day. It warmed her to the heart.

She moved at length, turning towards him, and at once he spoke, as if she had thereby set him at liberty to do so.

"Shall I tell you what I do when I find myself very badly up against anything?" he said.

"Yes, tell me." Instinctively she drew nearer to him. There was that about this man that attracted her irresistibly.

"It's a very simple remedy," he said, "simpler than praying. One can't always pray. I just open the windows wide, Lady Carfax. It's a help—even that."

"Ah!" she said quickly. "I think your windows must be always open."

"It seems a pity to shut them," he answered gently. "There is always a sparrow to feed, anyway."

She laughed rather sadly. "Yes, there are always sparrows."

"And sometimes bigger things," he said, "things one wouldn't miss for half creation."

"Or lose again for the other half," said the cool voice of a skater who had just glided up.

Anne started a little, but Lucas scarcely moved.

"Lady Carfax is waiting to go on the ice," he said.

"And I am waiting to take her," the new-comer said.

His slim, graceful figure in its black, tight-fitting garb sparkled at every turn. His eyes shone through his velvet mask like the eyes of an animal in the dark.

He glided nearer, but for some reason inexplicable to herself, Anne stepped back.

"I don't think I will," she said. "I am quite happy where I am."

"You will be happier with me," said the harlequin, with imperial confidence.

He waved his hand to Hudson standing a few paces away with her skates, took them from him, motioned her to the bank.

She stepped forward, not very willingly. Hudson, at another sign, spread a rug for her. She sat down, and the glittering harlequin kneeled upon the ice before her and fastened the blades to her feet.

It only took a couple of minutes; he was deft in all his ways. And then he was on his feet again, and with a royal gesture had helped her to hers.

Anne looked at him half dazzled. The shimmering figure seemed to be decked in diamonds.

"Are you ready?" he said.

She looked into the glowing eyes and felt as if some magic attraction were drawing her against her will.

"So long!" called Lucas from the bank. "Take care of her, Boney."

In another moment they were gliding into that prism of many lights and colours, and the harlequin, holding Anne's hands, laughed enigmatically as he sped her away.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SLAVE OF GOODNESS

It seemed to Anne presently that she had left the earth altogether, and was gliding upwards through starland without effort or conscious movement of any sort, simply as though lifted by the hands that held her own. Their vitality thrilled through her like a strong current of electricity. She felt that whichever way they turned, wherever they led her, she must be safe. And there was a quivering ecstasy in that dazzling, rapid rush that filled her veins like liquid fire.

"Do you know where you are?" he asked her once.

And she answered, in a species of breathless rapture, "I feel as if I were caught in a rainbow."

He laughed again at that, a soft, exultant laugh, and drew her more swiftly on.

They left the other masqueraders behind; they left the shimmering lake and its many lights; and at last in the starlight only they slackened speed.

Anne came out of her trance of delight to find that they were between the banks of the stream that fed the lake. The ground on each side of them shone white and hard in the frost-bound silence. The full moon was just rising over a long silver ridge of down. She stood with her face to its cold splendour, her hands still locked in that vital grip.

Slowly at last, compelled she knew not how, she turned to the man beside her. His eyes were blazing at her with a lurid fire, and suddenly that sensation that had troubled her once before in his presence—a sensation of sharp uneasiness—pricked through her confidence.

She stood quite still, conscious of a sudden quickening of her heart. But she did not shrink from that burning gaze. She met it with level eyes.

For seconds they stood so, facing one another. He seemed to be trying in some fashion to subjugate her, to beat her down; but she would not yield an inch. And it was he who finally broke the spell.

"Am I forgiven?"

"For what?" she said.

"For pretending to disbelieve you this morning."

"Was it pretence?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't!" he told her fiercely. "It was deadly earnest. I would have given all I had to be able to disbelieve you. Do you know that?"

"But why, Nap?"

"Why?" he said. "Because your goodness, your purity, are making a slave of me. If I could catch you—if I could catch you only once—cheating, as all other women cheat, I should be free. But you are irreproachable and incorruptible. I believe you are above temptation."

"Oh, you don't know me," she interposed quietly. "But even if I were all these things, why should it vex you?"

"Why?" he said. "Because you hold me back, you check me at every turn. You harness me to your chariot wheels, and I have to run in the path of virtue whether I will or not!"

He broke off with a laugh that had in it a note of savagery.

"Don't you even care to know what was in that letter that you never had?" he asked abruptly.

"Tell me!" she said.

"I told you that I was mad to have missed you that day. I begged you to let me have a line before you came again. I besought you to let me call upon you and to fix a day. I signed myself your humble and devoted slave, Napoleon Errol."

He ceased, still laughing queerly, with his lower lip between his teeth.

Anne stood silent for many seconds.

At last, "You must never come to see me," she said very decidedly.

"Not if I bring the mother as a chaperon?" he jested.

"Neither you nor your mother must ever come to see me again," she said firmly. "And—Nap—though I know that the writing of that letter meant nothing whatever to you, I am more sorry than I can say that you sent it."

He threw back his head arrogantly. "What?" he said. "Has the queen no further use for her jester? Am I not even to write to you then?"

"I think not," she said.

"And why?" he demanded imperiously.

"I think you know why," she said.

"Do I know why? Is it because you are afraid of your husband?"

"No."

"Afraid of me then?" There was almost a taunt in the words.

"No," she said again.

"Why, then?" He was looking full into her eyes. There was something peculiarly sinister about his masked face. She almost felt as if he were menacing her.

Nevertheless she made unfaltering reply. "For a reason that means much to me, though it may not appeal to you. Because my husband is not always sane, and I am afraid of what he might do to you if he were provoked any further."

"Great Lucifer!" said Nap. "Does he think I make love to you then?"

She did not answer him. "He is not always sane," she repeated.

"You are right," he said. "That reason does not appeal to me. Your husband's hallucinations are not worth considering. But I don't propose on that account to write any more letters for his edification. For the future—" He paused.

"For the future," Anne said, "there must be no correspondence between us at all. I know it seems unreasonable to you, but that cannot be helped. Mr. Errol, surely you are generous enough—chivalrous enough—to understand."

"No, I don't understand," Nap said. "I don't understand how you can, by the widest stretch of the imagination, believe it your duty to conform to the caprices of a maniac."

"How can I help it?" she said very sadly.

He was silent a moment. His hands were still gripping hers; she could feel her wedding-ring being forced into her flesh. "Like our mutual friend, Major Shirley," he said slowly, "I wonder why you stick to the man."

She turned her face away with a sound that was almost a moan.

"You never loved him," he said with conviction.

She was silent. Yet after a little, as he waited, she spoke as one compelled.

"I live with him because he gave me that for which I married him. He fulfilled his part of the bargain. I must fulfil mine. I was nothing but his bailiff's daughter, remember; a bailiff who had robbed him—for whose escape from penal servitude I paid the price."

"Great Heavens!" said Nap.

She turned to him quickly, with an impulsiveness that was almost girlish. "I have never told anyone else," she said. "I tell you because I know you are my friend and because I want you to understand. We will never—please—speak of it again."

"Wait!" Nap's voice rang stern. "Was it part of the bargain that he should insult you, trample on you, make you lead a dog's life without a single friend to make it bearable?"

She did not attempt to answer him. "Let us go back," she said.

He wheeled at once, still holding her hands.

They skated a few yards in silence. Then suddenly, almost under his breath, he spoke. "I am not going to give up my friendship with you. Let that be clearly understood."

"You are very good to me," she said simply.

"No. I am not. I am human, that's all. I don't think this state of affairs can last much longer."

She shuddered. Her husband's condition had been very much worse of late, but she did not tell him so.

They were skating rapidly back towards the head of the lake. In front of them sounded the swirling rush of skates and the laughter of many voices.

"I'm sorry I've been a beast to you," Nap said abruptly. "You mustn't mind me. It's just my way."

"Oh, I don't mind you, Nap," she answered gently.

"Thanks!" he said.

And with that he stooped suddenly and shot forward like a meteor, bearing her with him.

They flashed back into the gay throng of masqueraders, and mingled with the crowd as though they had never left it.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DESCENT FROM OLYMPUS

"Come and say good-bye to Lucas," said Bertie. "He is up and asking for you."

So, with an impetuous hand upon Anne's arm, he whisked her away on the following morning to his brother's room. She was dressed for departure, and waiting for the motor that was to take her home. Of Nap she had seen nothing. He had a way of absenting himself from meals whenever it suited him to do so. She wondered if he meant to let her go without farewell.

She found the master of the house lying on a couch sorting his correspondence. He pushed everything aside at her entrance.

"Come in, Lady Carfax! I am glad not to have missed you. A pity you have to leave so soon."

"I only wish I could stop longer," Anne said. He looked up at her, holding her hand, his shrewd blue eyes full of the most candid friendliness.

"You will come again, I hope, when you can," he said.

"Thank you," she answered gently.

He still held her hand. "And if at any time you need the help—or comfort—of friends," he said, "you won't forget where to look?"

"Thank you," she said again.

"Is Nap driving you?" he asked.

"No," said Bertie. "Nap's skiing."

"Then you, Bertie—"

"My dear fellow," said Bertie, "I'm fearfully sorry, but I can't. You understand, don't you, Lady Carfax? I would if I could, but—" his excuses trailed off unsatisfactorily.

He turned very red and furiously jabbed at the fire with his boot.

"Please don't think of it," said Anne. "I am so used to being alone. In fact, your mother wanted to come with me, but I dissuaded her."

"Then I conclude it is useless for me to offer myself as an escort?" said Lucas.

"Yes, quite useless," she smiled, "though I am grateful to you all the same. Good-bye, Mr. Errol!"

"Good-bye!" he said.

As Bertie closed the door behind her he took up a letter from the heap at his elbow; but his eyes remained fixed for several seconds.

At length: "Bertie," he said, without looking up, "are you due at the Rectory this morning?"

"This afternoon," said Bertie.

He also bent over the pile of correspondence and began to sort. He often did secretarial work for Lucas.

Lucas suffered him for some seconds longer. Then, "You don't generally behave like a boor, Bertie," he said.

"Oh, confound it!" exclaimed Bertie, with vehemence. "You don't suppose I enjoyed letting her think

me a cad, do you?"

"I don't suppose she did," Lucas said thoughtfully.

"Well, you do anyway, which is worse."

Bertie slapped down the letters and walked to the fire.

Lucas returned without comment to the paper in his hand.

After a long pause Bertie wheeled. He came back to his brother's side and pulled up a chair. His brown face was set in stern lines.

"I don't see why I should put up with this," he said, "and I don't mean to. It was Nap's doing. I was going to drive her. He interfered—as usual."

"I thought you said Nap was skiing." Lucas spoke without raising his eyes. He also looked graver than usual.

"I did. He is. But he has got some game on, and he didn't want me looking on. Oh, I'm sick to death of Nap and all his ways! He's rotten to the core!"

"Gently, boy, gently! You go too far." Lucas looked up into the hot blue eyes, the severity all gone from his own. "It isn't what things look like that you have to consider. It is what they are. Nap, poor chap, is badly handicapped; but he has been putting up a big fight for himself lately, and he hasn't done so badly. Give the devil his due."

"What's he doing now?" demanded Bertie. "It's bad enough to have the whole community gossiping about his flirtations with women that don't count. But when it comes to a good woman—like Lady Carfax—oh, I tell you it makes me sick! He might leave her alone, at least. She's miserable enough without him to make matters worse."

"My dear boy, you needn't be afraid for Lady Carfax." Lucas Errol's voice held absolute conviction. "She wouldn't tolerate him for an instant if he attempted to flirt with her. Their intimacy is founded on something more solid than that. It's a genuine friendship or I have never seen one."

"Do you mean to say you don't know he is in love with her?" ejaculated Bertie.

"But he won't make love to her," Lucas answered quietly. "He is drawn by a good woman for the first time in his life, and no harm will come of it. She is one of those women who must run a straight course. There are a few such, born saints, 'of whom the world is not worthy.'" He checked himself with a sudden sigh. "Suppose we get to business, Bertie."

"It's all very fine," said Bertie, preparing to comply. "But if Nap ever falls foul of Sir Giles Carfax, he may find that he has bitten off more than he can chew. They say he is on the high road to the D.T.'s. Small wonder that Lady Carfax looks careworn!"

Small wonder indeed! Yet as Anne sped along through the sunshine on that winter day she found leisure from her cares to enjoy the swift journey in the great luxurious car. The burden she carried perpetually weighed less heavily upon her than usual. The genial atmosphere of Baronmead had warmed her heart. The few words that Lucas had spoken with her hand in his still echoed through her memory. Yes, she knew where to look for friends; no carping critics, but genuine, kindly friends who knew and sympathised.

She thought of Nap with regret and a tinge of anxiety. She was sure he had not intended to let her go without farewell, but she hoped earnestly that he would not pursue her to the Manor to tell her so.

And then she remembered his letter; that letter that her husband must have intercepted, recalling his storm of unreasonable fury on the occasion of her last return from Baronmead. He had doubtless read that letter and been inflamed by it. Hating her himself, he yet was fiercely jealous of her friends—these new friends of hers who had lavished upon her every kindness in her time of need, to whom she must always feel warmly grateful, however churlishly he might ignore the obligation.

He had raised no definite objection to this present visit of hers. Mrs. Errol had, in her own inimitable fashion, silenced him, but she had known that she had gone against his wish. And it was in consequence of this knowledge that she was returning so early, though she did not expect him back till night. He should have no rational cause for complaint against her. For such causes as his fevered brain created she could not hold herself responsible.

It was hard to lead such a life without becoming morbid, but Anne was fashioned upon generous

lines. She strove ever to maintain the calm level of reason wherewith to temper the baleful influence of her husband's caprice. She never argued with him; argument was worse than futile. But steadfastly and incessantly she sought by her moderation to balance the difficulties with which she was continually confronted. And to a certain extent she succeeded. Open struggles were very rare. Sir Giles knew that there was a limit to her submission, and he seldom, if ever now, attempted to force her beyond that limit.

But she knew that a visit from Nap would place her in an intolerable position, and with all her heart she hoped that her caution of the previous day had taken effect. Though utterly reckless on his own account, she fancied that she had made an impression upon him, and that he would not act wholly without consideration for her. In bestowing her friendship upon him she had therewith reposed a confidence which his invariable compliance with her wishes had seemed to warrant. She did not think that her trust would ever prove to have been misplaced. But she was sorry, unquestionably she was sorry, to have left without bidding him farewell. It might be long ere they would meet again.

And with the thought yet in her mind she looked out of the window in front of her, and saw his slim, supple figure, clad in a white sweater, shoot swiftly down a snow-draped slope ahead of her, like a meteor flashing earthwards out of the blue.

His arms were extended; his movements had a lithe grace that was irresistibly fascinating to the eye. Slight though he was, he might have been a young god descending on a shaft of sunshine from Olympus. But the thought that darted all unbidden through Anne's mind was of something far different. She banished it on the instant with startled precipitancy; but it left a scar behind that burned like the sudden searing of a hot iron. "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven."

The car was stopping. The figure on skis was waiting motionless by the roadside. It ran smoothly up to him and stopped.

"Dramatic, wasn't it?" smiled Nap. "Did you think you were going to escape without another word?"

"I had almost begun to think so," she admitted, smiling also.

He stooped to take off the skis, then stepped to the door. He leaned towards her. There was no faintest sign of cynicism in his face that day. He was in the mood of good comradeship in which she liked him best.

"Walk across to the park with me," he said. "It is scarcely a mile by the downs. The man can go on to the Manor with your things and wait here for me on his way back."

Anne considered for a moment, but only for a moment. It might make her late for the luncheon hour, but she was convinced that her husband would not return before the evening. And the world was very enchanting that winter day. The very ground was scattered with diamonds!

"Yes, I will come," she said.

He handed her out, and picked up his discarded skis. His dark face smiled with a certain triumph. The grim lines about his mouth were less apparent than usual. He moved with the elastic swing of well-knit limbs.

And Anne, walking beside him, found it not difficult to thrust her cares a little farther into the sombre background of her mind. The sun shone and the sky was blue, and the ground was strewn with glittering diamonds. She went over the hill with him, feeling that she had snatched one more hour in paradise.

CHAPTER XIX

VENGEANCE

By what magic he cajoled her into trying her skill upon skis Anne never afterwards remembered. It seemed to her later that the exhilarating atmosphere of that cloudless winter day must in some magic fashion have revived in her the youth which had been crushed out of existence so long ago. A strange, irresponsible happiness possessed her, so new, so subtly sweet, that the heavy burden she had borne for so long seemed almost to have shrunk into insignificance. It permeated her whole being like an

overpowering essence, so that she forgot the seven dreary years that separated her from her girlhood, forgot the bondage to which she was returning, the constant, ever-increasing anxiety that wrought so mercilessly upon her; and remembered only the splendour of the sunshine that sparkled on the snow, and the ecstasy of the keen clear air she breathed. It was like an enchanting dream to her, a dream through which she lived with all the greater zest because it so soon must pass.

All the pent energies of her vanished youth were in the dream. She could not—for that once she could not—deny them vent.

And Nap, strung to a species of fierce gaiety that she had never seen in him before, urged her perpetually on. He would not let her pause to think, but yet he considered her at every turn. He scoffed like a boy at her efforts to ski, but he held her up strongly while he scoffed, taking care of her with that adroitness that marked everything he did. And while they thus dallied the time passed swiftly, more swiftly than either realised. The sun began to draw to the south-west. The diamonds ceased to sparkle save here and there obliquely. The haze of a winter afternoon settled upon the downs.

Suddenly Anne noticed these things, suddenly the weight of care which had so wonderfully been lifted from her returned, suddenly the shining garment of her youth slipped from her, and left her like Cinderella when the spell of her enchantment was broken.

"Nap!" she exclaimed. "I must go! I must have been dreaming to forget the time!"

"Time!" laughed Nap. "What is time?"

"It is something that I have to remember," she said. "Why, it must be nearly two o'clock!"

Nap glanced at the sun and made no comment. Anne felt for and consulted her watch. It was already three.

She looked up in amazement and dismay. "I must go at once!"

"Don't!" said Nap. "I am sure your watch is wrong."

"I must go at once," she repeated firmly. "It is long past the luncheon hour. I had no idea we had been here so long. You must go too. Your chauffeur will think you are never coming."

The skis were still on her feet. Nap looked at her speculatively.

"This is rather an abrupt end," he said. "Won't you have one more go? A few minutes more or less can't make any difference now."

"They may make all the difference," Anne said. "Really, I ought not."

They stood on a gentle slope that led downwards to the path she must take.

"Just ski down into the valley from here then," urged Nap. "It's quicker than walking. I won't hold you this time. You won't fall."

The suggestion was reasonable, and the fascination of the sport had taken firm hold of her. Anne smiled and yielded. She set her feet together and let herself go.

Almost at the same instant a sound that was like the bellow of an infuriated bull reached her from above.

She tried to turn, but the skis were already slipping over the snow. To preserve her balance she was forced to go, and for seconds that seemed like hours she slid down the hillside, her heart thumping in her throat; her nerves straining and twitching to check that maddening progress. For she knew that sound. She had heard it before, had shrunk secretly many a time before its coarse brutality. It was the yell of a man in headlong, furious wrath, an animal yell, unreasoning, hideously bestial; and she feared, feared horribly, what that yell might portend.

She reached the valley, and managed to swerve round without falling. But for an instant she could not, she dared not, raise her eyes. Clear on the frosty air came sounds that made her blood turn cold. She felt as if her heart would suffocate her. A brief blindness blotted out all things.

Then with an agonised effort she forced back her weakness, she forced herself to look. Yes, the thing she had feared so horribly was being enacted like a ghastly nightmare above her.

There on the slope was her husband, a gigantic figure outlined against the snow. He had not stopped to parley. Those mad fits of passion always deprived him, at the outset, of the few reasoning powers

that yet remained to him. Without question or explanation of any kind he had flung himself upon the man he deemed his enemy, and Anne now beheld him, gripping him by the neck as a terrier grips a rat, and flogging him with the loaded crop he always carried to the hunt.

Nap was writhing to and fro like an eel, striving, she saw, to overthrow his adversary. But the gigantic strength of madness was too great for his lithe activity. By sheer weight he was borne down.

With an anguished cry Anne started to intervene. But two steps with the skis flung her headlong upon the snow, and while she grovelled there, struggling vainly to rise, she heard the awful blows above her like pistol-shots through the stillness. Once she heard a curse, and once a demonical laugh, and once, thrilling her through and through, spurring her to wilder efforts, a dreadful sound that was like the cry of a stricken animal.

She gained her feet at last, and again started on her upward way. Nap had been forced to his knees, but he was still fighting fiercely, as a rat will fight to the last. She cried to him wildly that she was coming, was coming, made three paces, only to trip and fall again.

Then she knew that, so handicapped, she could never reach them, and with shaking, fumbling fingers she set herself to unfasten the straps that bound the skis. It took her a long, long time—all the longer for her fevered haste. And still that awful, flail-like sound went on and on, though all sound of voices had wholly ceased.

Free at last, she stumbled to her feet, and tore madly up the hill. She saw as she went that Nap was not struggling any longer. He was hanging like a wet rag from the merciless grip that upheld him, and though his limp body seemed to shudder at every crashing blow, he made no voluntary movement of any sort.

As she drew near, her husband suddenly swung round as though aware of her, and dropped him. He fell in a huddled heap upon the snow, and lay, twisted, motionless as a dead thing.

Sir Giles, his eyes suffused and terrible, turned upon his wife.

"There lies your gallant lover!" he snarled at her. "I think I've cured him of his fancy for you."

Her eyes met his. For a single instant, hatred, unveiled, passionate, shone out at him like sudden, darting lightning. For a single instant she dared him with the courage born of hatred. It was a challenge so distinct and personal, so fierce, that he, satiated for the moment with revenge, drew back instinctively before it, as an animal shrinks from the flame.

She uttered not a word. She did not after that one scorching glance deign to do battle with him. Without a gesture she dismissed him, kneeling beside his vanquished foe as though he were already gone.

And—perhaps it was the utter intrepidity of her bearing that deprived him of the power to carry his brutality any further just then—perhaps the ferocity that he had never before encountered in those grey eyes cowed him somewhat in spite of the madness that still sang in his veins—whatever the motive power it was too potent to resist—Sir Giles turned and tramped heavily away.

Anne did not watch him go. It was nothing to her at the moment whether he went or stayed. She knelt beside the huddled, unconscious figure and tried to straighten the crumpled limbs. The sweater had been literally torn from his back, and the shirt beneath it was in blood-stained tatters. His face was covered with blood. Sir Giles had not been particular as to where the whip had fallen. Great purple welts crossed and re-crossed each other on the livid features. The bleeding lips were drawn back in a devilish grimace. He looked as though he had been terribly mauled by some animal.

Anne gripped a handful of snow, hardly knowing what she did, and tried to stanch the blood that ran from an open cut on his temple. She was not trembling any longer. The emergency had steadied her. But the agony of those moments was worse than any she had ever known.

Minutes passed. She was beginning to despair. An icy dread was at her heart. He lay so lifeless, so terribly inert. She had attempted to lift him, but the dead weight was too much for her. She could only rest his head against her, and wipe away the blood that trickled persistently from that dreadful, sneering mouth. Would he ever speak again, she asked herself? Were the fiery eyes fast shut for ever? Was he dead—he whose vitality had always held her like a charm? Had her friendship done this for him, that friendship he had valued so highly?

She stooped lower over him. The anguish of the thought was more than she could bear.

"O God," she prayed suddenly and passionately, "don't let him die! Don't let him die!"

And in that moment Nap's eyes opened wide and fixed themselves upon her.

He did not attempt to move or speak, but the snarling look went wholly out of his face. The thin lips met and closed over the battered mouth. He lay regarding her intently, as if he were examining some curious thing he had never seen before.

And before that gaze Anne's eyes wavered and sank. She felt she could never meet his look again.

"Are you better?" she whispered. "Can I—will you let me—help you?"

"No," he said. "Just—leave me!" He spoke quite quietly, but the very sound of his voice sent a perfect storm of emotion through her.

"I can't!" she said almost fiercely. "I won't! Let me help you! Let me do what I can!"

He stirred a little, and his brow contracted, but he never took his eyes from her face.

"Don't be—upset," he said with an effort. "I'm not going—to die!"

"Tell me what to do," she urged piteously. "Can I lift you a little higher?"

"For Heaven's sake—no!" he said, and swallowed a shudder. "My collar-bone's broken."

He was silent for a space, but still his dusky eyes watched her perpetually.

At last, "Let me hold your hand," he said.

She put it into his, and he held it tightly. The blood was running down his face again, and she wiped it softly away.

"Thank you," he said.

Those two words, spoken almost under his breath, had a curious effect upon her. She felt as if something had suddenly entered and pierced her heart. Before she knew it, a sharp sob escaped her, and then all in a moment she broke down.

"Oh, Nap, Nap," she sobbed, "I wish I had died before this could happen!"

She felt his hand tighten as she crouched there beside him in her anguish, and presently she knew that he had somehow managed to raise himself to a sitting posture.

Through her agony his voice came to her. It was pitched very low, yet she heard it.

"Don't cry—for pity's sake! I shall get over it. I shall live—to get back—my own."

Torn by emotion as she was, something in the last words, spoken in that curious undertone, struck her with a subtle force. With a desperate effort she controlled herself. She knew that he was still watching her with that strange intensity that she could not bring herself to meet. His right hand still held hers with quivering tenacity; the other trailed uselessly on the snow.

"Let me help you," she urged again.

He was silent; she feared he was going to refuse. And then she saw that his head had begun to droop forward, and realised that he was on the verge of another collapse. Instinctively she slipped her arm about his shoulders, supporting him. He was shuddering all over. She drew his head to rest against her.

A long time passed thus, she kneeling motionless, holding him, while he panted against her breast, struggling with dogged persistence to master the weakness that threatened to overpower him. It was terrible to see him so, he the arrogant, the fierce, the overbearing, thus humbled to the earth before her. She felt the agony of his crushed pride, and yearned with an intensity that was passionate to alleviate it. But there seemed nothing for her to do. She could only kneel and look on in bitter impotence while he fought his battle.

In the end he lifted his face. "It's the collarbone that hurts so infernally. Could you push something under my left arm to hold it up? Your muff would do. Mind my wrist—that's broken too. Ah!" She heard the breath whistle sharply between his lips as with the utmost care she complied with these instructions, but almost instantly he went on: "Don't be afraid of touching me—unless I'm too monstrous to touch. But I don't believe I can walk."

"I will help you," she said. "I am very strong."

"You are—wonderful," he said.

And the words comforted her subtly though she did not know exactly what he meant by them.

Thereafter they scarcely spoke at all. By slow degrees he recovered his self-command, though she knew with only too keen a perception how intolerable was the pain that racked his whole body. With her assistance and with strenuous effort he managed at last to get upon his feet, but he was immediately assailed afresh by deadly faintness, and for minutes he could stand only by means of her arms upholding him.

Later, with his one available arm across her shoulders, he essayed to walk, but it was so ghastly an ordeal that he could accomplish only a few steps at a time.

Anne did not falter now. She was past that stage. All her nerves were strung to meet his pressing need. Again and again as he hung upon her, half-fainting, she stopped to support him more adequately till he had fought down his exhaustion and was ready to struggle on again. She remained steadfast and resolute throughout the long-drawn-out agony of that walk over the snow.

"Great Heaven!" he muttered once. "That you should do this—for me!"

And she answered him quickly and passionately, as though indeed there were something within that spoke for her, "I would do anything for you, Nap."

It was drawing near to sunset when at last the end of the journey came in sight. Anne perceived the car waiting in the distance close to the spot where Nap had descended upon her that morning.

She breathed a sigh of thankfulness. "I scarcely thought he would have waited for you so long," she said.

"He daren't do otherwise," said Nap, and she caught a faint echo of arrogance in the words.

And then of his own free will he paused and faced her. "You are coming with me," he said.

She shook her head. "No, Nap."

His eyes blazed redly. His disfigured face was suddenly devilish. "You are mad if you go back," he said.

But she shook her head again. "No, I know what I am doing. And I am going back now. But I will come to Baronmead in the morning."

He looked at her. "Are you—tired of life?" he asked abruptly.

She smiled—a piteous smile. "Very, very tired!" she said. "But you needn't be afraid of that. He will not touch me. He will not even see me to-night." Then, as he still looked combative, "Oh, please, leave this matter to my judgment! I know exactly what I am doing. Believe me, I am in no danger."

He gave in, seeing that she was not to be moved from her purpose.

They went a few yards farther; then, "In Heaven's name—come early to Baronmead," he said jerkily. "I shall have no peace till you come."

"I will," she promised.

The chauffeur came to meet them with clumsy solicitude as they neared the car, but Nap kept him at a distance.

"Don't touch me! I've had a bad fall skiing. It's torn me to ribbons. Just open the door. Lady Carfax will do the rest!" And as the man turned to obey, "Not a very likely story, but it will serve our turn."

"Thank you," she said very earnestly.

He did not look at her again. She had a feeling that he kept his eyes from her by a deliberate effort of the will.

Silently she helped him into the car, saw him sink back with her muff still supporting his injured arm, whispered a low "Good-bye!" and turned to the waiting chauffeur.

"Drive him quickly home," she said. "And then go for a doctor."

Not till the car was out of sight did she realise that her knees were shaking and refusing to support

her. She tottered to a gate by the roadside, and there, clinging weakly with her head bowed upon her arms, she remained for a very long time.

CHAPTER XX

THE VISION

It was growing dusk when Anne at length came to the Manor. She was utterly weary and faint from lack of food. The servant who admitted her looked at her strangely, as if half afraid.

"Please have tea taken to my sitting-room," she said quietly, as she passed him.

And with that she went straight to her room. Standing before a mirror to remove her hat, she caught sight of something that seemed to stab her heart. The cream cloth coat she wore was all spattered with blood.

She stood rigid, not breathing, staring into the white face above it—the white face of a woman she hardly knew, with compressed lips and wild, tragic eyes. What was it those eyes held? Was it hatred? Was it madness? Was it—?

She broke away horror-stricken, and stripped the coat from her with hands like ice. Again through her mind, with feverish insistence, ran those words that had startled her earlier in the day. She found herself repeating them deliriously, under her breath: "I beheld Satan—as lightning—fall from heaven!"

Why did they haunt her so? What was it in the utterance that frightened her? What meaning did they hold for her? What hidden terror lay behind it? What had happened to her? What nightmare horror was this clawing at her heart, lacerating, devouring, destroying? It was something she had never felt before, something too terrible to face, too overwhelming to ignore.

Was she going mad, she asked herself? And like a dreadful answer to a riddle inscrutable her white lips whispered those haunting unforgettable words: "I beheld Satan—as lightning—fall from heaven."

Mechanically she bathed her face and hands and passed into her sitting-room, where her tea awaited her. A bright fire crackled there, and her favourite chair was drawn up to it. The kettle hissed merrily on a spirit-lamp.

Entering, she found, somewhat to her surprise, old Dimsdale waiting to serve her.

"Thank you," she said. "I can help myself."

"If your ladyship will allow me," he said deferentially.

She sat down, conscious of a physical weakness she could not control. And the old butler, quiet and courteous and very grave, proceeded to make the tea and wait upon her in silence.

Anne lay back in her chair with her eyes upon the fire, and accepted his ministrations without further speech. There was a very thorough understanding between herself and Dimsdale, an understanding established and maintained without words.

The tea revived her, and after a little she turned her head and looked up at him.

"Well, Dimsdale?"

Dimsdale coughed. "It was about Sir Giles that I wanted to speak to your ladyship."

"Well?" she said again.

"Sir Giles, my lady, is not himself—not at all himself," Dimsdale told her cautiously. "I was wondering just before you came in if I didn't ought to send for the doctor."

"Why, Dimsdale?" Anne looked straight up into the old man's troubled face, but her eyes had a strangely aloof expression, as though the matter scarcely touched her.

Dimsdale shook his head. "It's not the same as usual, my lady. I've never seen him like this before."

There's something—I don't rightly know what—about him that fair scares me. If your ladyship will only let me send for the doctor—"

He paused. Anne's eyes had gone back to the fire. She seemed to be considering.

"I don't think the doctor would be at home," she said at last. "Wait till the morning, Dimsdale—unless he is really ill."

"My lady, it's not that," said Dimsdale. "There's nothing ails his body. But—but—" he faltered a little, and finally, "It's his mind," he said, "if I may make so bold as to say it. I don't believe as he's safe. I'm afraid he'll be doing a mischief to—someone."

His pause was not lost upon Anne. Again she raised her eyes and steadily regarded him.

"To whom, Dimsdale?" she asked.

"My lady—" the old man murmured unwillingly.

"To me?" she questioned in a quiet, unmoved voice. "Why are you afraid of that?"

Dimsdale hesitated.

"Tell me," she said. But again her eyes had sunk to the fire. She seemed as one not vitally interested, as one whose thoughts were elsewhere.

Reluctantly Dimsdale made answer: "He's been cutting your ladyship's portrait into strips and burning 'em in the study fire. It was dreadful to see him, so intent like and quiet. I saw him put his hand right into the flame once, and he didn't seem to know. And he came in in one of his black moods with his hunting-crop broken right in two. Carrying the pieces he was, and glaring like as if all the world was against him. I was afraid there would be trouble when he came home to lunch and found your ladyship not there."

He stopped, arrested by a sudden movement from Anne. She had leaned forward and covered her face with her hands. The tension of her attitude was such that Dimsdale became strongly aware that his presence was an intrusion. Yet, the matter being urgent, he stood his ground.

He waited silently, and presently Anne lifted her head. "I think you must leave the matter till the morning, Dimsdale," she said. "It could do no good to have the doctor at this hour. Besides, I doubt if he could come. And Sir Giles will be himself again after a night's rest."

"I'm very much afraid not, my lady," said Dimsdale lugubriously. "He's drinking brandy—neat brandy—all the while. I've never seen him drink like that before. It fair scares me, and that's the truth."

"You are not afraid on your own account?" Anne asked.

"Oh, no, my lady. He wouldn't interfere with me. It's your ladyship—"

"Ah, well," she said, quietly interrupting, "you need not be afraid for me either. I shall not go downstairs again to-night. He will not be expecting me."

"Very good, my lady."

Dimsdale looked somewhat relieved but not wholly satisfied. He lingered as if he longed yet did not dare to say more.

As for Anne, she sat quite motionless gazing into the fire, her hands clasped very tightly before her. She seemed to have dismissed the subject under discussion and the faithful Dimsdale simultaneously from her mind.

After a few seconds the old butler realised this, and without further ado he removed the tea-things and went quietly away.

Anne did not notice his departure. She was too deep in thought. Her brain was steadier now, and she found it possible to think. For the first time she was asking herself if she would be justified in bringing her long martyrdom to an end. She had fulfilled her part of the bargain, patiently, conscientiously, unflaggingly, throughout those seven bitter years. She had married her husband without loving him, and he had never sought to win her love. He had married her for the sake of conquering her, attracted by the very coldness with which she had tried in her girlhood to repel him. She had caught his fancy in those far-off days. Her queenliness, her grace, had captivated him. And later, with the sheer hunter's instinct, he had pursued her, and had eventually discovered a means of entrapping her. He had named

his conditions and she had named hers. In the end he had dispatched the father to Canada and made the daughter his wife.

But his fancy for her had scarcely outlasted his capture. He had taken pleasure for a while in humiliating her, counting it sport if he succeeded in arousing her rare indignation. But soon even this had ceased to amuse him. He had developed into that most odious of all bullies, the domestic tyrant, and had therewith sunk back into those habits of intemperance which his marriage had scarcely interrupted. He was many years her senior. He treated her as a slave, and if now and then an uncomfortable sensation of inferiority assailed him, he took his revenge upon her in evil, glowering tempers that rendered him more of a beast than a man.

But yet she had borne with him. By neither word nor action had she ever voluntarily widened the breach between them: His growing dislike had not had any visible effect upon her. She had done her duty faithfully through all, had borne his harshness and his insults in silence, with a patience too majestic, too colossal, for his understanding.

And now for the first time she asked herself, Did he want to be rid of her? Had he invented this monstrous grievance to drive her from him? Were the days of her bondage indeed drawing at last to an end? Had she borne with him long enough? Was she free—was she free to go?

Her heart quickened at the bare thought. How gladly would she set herself to make a living when once this burden had been lifted from her!

But she would not relinquish it without his sanction. She would be faithful to the last, true to that bargain she had struck with him so long ago. Yet surely he could not refuse it. She was convinced that he hated her.

Again she felt that strange new life thrilling in her veins. Again she felt herself almost young. To be free! To be free! To choose her own friends without fear; to live her own life in peace; to know no further tumults or petty tyrannies—to be free!

The prospect dazzled her. She lifted her face and gasped for breath.

Then, hearing a sound at her door, she turned.

A white-faced servant stood on the threshold. "If you please, my lady, your coat is in a dreadful state. I was afraid there must have been an accident."

Anne stared at the woman for a few seconds with the dazed eyes of one suddenly awakened.

"Yes," she said slowly at length. "There was—an accident. Mr. Nap Errol was—hurt while skiing."

The woman looked at her with frank curiosity, but there was that about her mistress at the moment that did not encourage inquiry or comment.

She stood for a little silent; then, "What had I better do with the coat, my lady?" she asked diffidently.

Anne made an abrupt gesture. The dazed look in her eyes had given place to horror. "Take it away!" she said sharply. "Do what you like with it! I never want to see it again."

"Very good, my lady."

The woman withdrew, and Anne covered her face with her hands once more, and shuddered from head to foot.

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE MERCY OF A DEMON

Some time later Anne seated herself at her writing-table.

The idea of writing to her husband had come to her as an inspiration; not because she shirked an interview—she knew that to be inevitable—but because she realised that the first step taken thus would make the final decision easier for them both.

She did not find it hard to put her thoughts into words. Her mind was very clear upon the matter in hand. She knew exactly what she desired to say. Only upon the subject of her friendship with Nap she could not bring herself to touch. A day earlier she could have spoken of it, even in the face of his hateful suspicion, without restraint. But to-night she could not. It was as if a spell of silence had been laid upon her, a spell which she dared not attempt to break. She dared not even think of Nap just then.

It was not a very long letter that she wrote, sitting there in the silence of her room, and it did not take her long to write. But when it was finished, closed and directed, she sat on with her chin upon her hand, thinking. It seemed scarcely conceivable that he would refuse to let her go.

She could not imagine herself to be in any sense necessary to him. She had helped him with the estate in many ways, but she had done nothing that a trustworthy agent could not do, save, perhaps, in the matter of caring for the poorer tenants. They would miss her, she told herself, but no one else. It was very long since she had entertained any guests at the Manor. Sir Giles had offended almost everyone who could ever have claimed the privilege of intimacy with him. And people wondered openly that his wife still lived with him. Well, they would not wonder much longer.

And when her life was at her own disposal what would she do with it?

There were many things she might do; as secretary, as companion, as music-teacher, as cook. She knew she need not be at a loss. And again the prospect of freedom from a yoke that galled her intolerably made her heart leap.

A slight sound in the passage brought her out of her reverie. She glanced up. It was probably Dimsdale. She would give him the note to deliver to his master in the morning. She crossed to the door and opened it.

The next instant, in amazement, she drew back. On the threshold, face to face with her, stood her husband!

He did not give her time to speak, but pushed straight forward into the room as if in haste. His face was white and purple in patches. His eyes were narrowed and furtive. There was something unspeakably evil in the way they avoided hers. He carried his right hand behind him.

He began to speak at once in quick, staccato tones, with which she was utterly unfamiliar.

"So you think you are going to escape me, do you? But you won't! No, not for all the Errols in the world!"

She did not answer him. There was something so utterly unusual in this abrupt visitation that she knew not how to cope with it. But he scarcely waited for an answer. He swung the door behind him with a bang.

"Do you remember," he said, his staccato tone merging into one of rising violence, "a promise I made to you the first time I caught that scoundrel making love to you? I swore that if it happened again I'd thrash him. Well, I'm a man who keeps his promises. I've kept that one. And now it's your turn. I thought at first I'd kill you. But I fancy this will hurt you more."

His hand shot suddenly out from behind him, and there followed the whistle of a thong—the thick, leathern thong with which he kept his dogs in order.

It struck her as she stood before him, struck and curled about her shoulders with a searching, scalding agony that turned her sick, wringing from her a cry that would never have been uttered had she been prepared.

But before he could strike again she was ready to cope with his madness. On the instant she sprang, not from him, but to him, clasping his arms with both of hers.

"Giles!" she said, and her voice rang clear and commanding. "You are not yourself. You don't know what you are doing. Look at me! Do you hear? Look at me!"

That was his vulnerable point, and instinctively she knew it. He was afraid—as a wild animal is afraid—of the compulsion of her eyes. But he fought with her savagely, furiously, refusing to face her, struggling with inarticulate oaths to break away from her clinging arms.

And Anne was powerless against him, powerless as Nap had been earlier in the day, to make any impression against his frenzied strength. She was impotent as a child in that awful grip, and in a very few seconds she knew it.

He had already wrung his arm free and raised it to strike a second blow, while she shut her eyes in anguished expectation, still clinging blindly to his coat, when the door burst open with a crash and Dimsdale tore into the room.

Anne heard his coming, but she could not turn. She was waiting with every nerve stretched and quivering for the thong to fall. And when it did not, when Dimsdale, with a strength abnormal for his years, flung himself at the upraised arm and bore it downwards, she was conscious not of relief, but only of a sudden snapping of that awful tension that was like a rending asunder of her very being. She relaxed her hold and tottered back against the wall.

"He will kill you!" she heard herself saying to Dimsdale. "He will kill you!"

But Dimsdale clung like a limpet. Through the surging uproar of her reeling senses Anne heard his voice.

"Sir Giles! Sir Giles! This won't do, sir. You've got a bit beyond yourself. Come along with me, Sir Giles. You are not well. You ought to be in bed. Now, now, Sir Giles! Give it up! Come! Here's West to help you undress."

But Sir Giles fought to be free, cursing hideously, writhing this way and that with Dimsdale hanging to him; and at sight of the footman hastening to the old man's assistance he put forth a strength so terrific that he swung him completely off the ground.

"He's too much for me!" shouted Dimsdale. "My lady, go—go, for the love of heaven! Quick, West! Quick! Trip him! It's the only way! Ah!"

They went down in a fearful, struggling heap. Sir Giles underneath, but making so violent a fight that the whole room seemed to shake.

And Anne stood and looked upon the whole ghastly spectacle as one turned to stone.

So standing, propped against the wall, she saw the young under-footman come swiftly in, and had a glimpse of his horrified face as he leapt forward to join the swaying, heaving mass of figures upon the floor. His coming seemed to make a difference. Sir Giles's struggles became less gigantic, became spasmodic, convulsive, futile, finally ceased altogether. He lay like a dead man, save that his features twitched horribly as if evil spirits were at work upon him.

The whole conflict had occupied but a few minutes, but to the rigid watcher it had been an eternity of fearful tumult. Yet the hard-breathing silence that followed was almost more terrible still.

Out of it arose old Dimsdale, wiping his forehead with a shaking hand.

"He didn't hurt your ladyship?" he questioned anxiously.

But she could not take her eyes from the motionless figure upon the floor or answer him.

He drew nearer. "My lady," he said, "come away from here!"

But Anne never stirred.

He laid a very humble hand upon her arm. "Let me take you downstairs," he urged gently. "There's a friend there waiting for your ladyship—a friend as will understand."

"A—friend?" She turned her head stiffly, her eyes still striving to remain fixed upon that mighty, inert form.

"Yes, my lady. He only came a few minutes back. He is waiting in the drawing-room. It was Sir Giles he asked to see, said it was very particular. It was West here took the message to Sir Giles, and I think it was that as made him come up here so mad like. I came after him as soon as I heard. But the gentleman is still waiting, my lady. Will you see him and—explain?"

"Who is the gentleman?" Anne heard the question, but not as if she herself had uttered it. The voice that spoke seemed to come from an immense distance.

And from equally far seemed to come Dimsdale's answer, though it reached and pierced her understanding in an instant.

"It's Mr. Errol, my lady,—the crippled one. Mr. Lucas, I think his name is."

Anne turned then as sharply as though a voice had called her.

"Lucas Errol! Is he here? Ah, take me to him! Take me to him!"

And the old butler led her thankfully from the scene.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CITY OF REFUGE

The moment Lucas Errol's hand closed upon hers it was to Anne as if an immense and suffocating weight had been lifted from her, and with it all her remaining strength crumbled away as if her burden alone had sustained her.

She looked at him, meeting the kind, searching eyes without effort, trying piteously to speak, but her white lips only moved soundlessly, her throat seemed paralysed.

"Her ladyship has had a shock, sir," explained Dimsdale.

"Won't you sit down?" said Lucas gently. In a moment she found herself sitting on a sofa with this stanch friend of hers beside her, holding her hand. A few words passed between him and Dimsdale, which she scarcely heard and was too weak to comprehend, and then they were alone together, she and Lucas in a silence she felt powerless to break.

"You mustn't mind me, Lady Carfax," he said. "I know what you have come through. I understand."

Dimly she heard the words, but she could not respond to them. She was shivering, shivering with a violence that she was utterly unable to repress.

He did not speak again till Dimsdale came back with a tray, then again he exchanged a few murmured sentences with the old butler, who presently said, "Very good, sir," and went softly away.

Then Lucas turned again to Anne. "Drink this," he said. "It will revive you."

She groped for the glass he held towards her, but trembled so much that she could not take it.

"Let me," he said, and put it himself to her lips.

She drank slowly, shuddering, her teeth chattering against the glass.

"Lay your head down upon the cushion," he said then, "and shut your eyes. You will be better soon."

"You—you won't go?" she managed to whisper.

"Why, no," he said. "It's for your sake I've come. I guess I'm a fixture for so long as you want me."

She breathed a sigh of relief and lay back.

A long time passed. Anne lay motionless with closed eyes, too crushed for thought. And Lucas Errol watched beside her, grave and patient and still.

Suddenly there came a sound, piercing the silence, a sound that made Anne start upright in wild terror.

"What is it? What is it?"

Instantly and reassuringly Lucas's hand clasped hers. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "They are moving him to another room, that's all."

She sank back, shuddering, her face hidden. The sound continued, seeming to come nearer—the sound of a man's voice shrieking horribly for help, in piercing accents of terror that might have come from a torture-chamber. Suddenly the yells became articulate, resolved into words: "Anne! Anne! Anne!" in terrible crescendo.

She sprang up with a sharp cry.

But on the instant the man beside her spoke. "Anne, you are not to go."

She paused irresolute. "I must! I must! He is calling me!"

"You are not to go," he reiterated, and for the first time she heard the dominant note in his voice. "Come here, child! Come close to me! It will soon be over."

Her irresolution passed like a cloud. She looked down, saw his blue eyes shining straight up at her, kind still, but compelling. And she dropped upon her knees beside him and hid her face upon his shoulder, with the cry of, "Help me! Help me! I can't bear it!"

He folded his arms about her as though he had been a woman, and held her fast.

Long after the awful sounds had died away Anne knelt there, sobbing, utterly unstrung, all her pride laid low, herself no more than a broken, agonised woman. But gradually, from sheer exhaustion, her sobs became less anguished, till at length they ceased. A strange peace, wholly unaccountable, fell gently upon her torn spirit. But even then it was long before she moved. She felt an overwhelming reluctance to withdraw herself from the shelter of those quiet arms.

"What must you think of me?" she whispered at last, her face still hidden.

"My dear," he said, "I understand."

He did not offer to release her, but as she moved she found herself free, she found herself able to look into his face.

"I shall never forget your goodness to me," she said very earnestly.

He smiled a little, after a fashion she did not wholly comprehend. "My dear Lady Carfax! You underrate friendship when you say a thing like that. Sit down, won't you? And let me tell you what brought me here."

"Nap told you—" she hazarded.

"Yes, Nap told me. And I decided I had better come at once. I wasn't in when he got back, or I should have been here sooner. I saw there had been a gross misunderstanding, and I hoped I should be able to get your husband to take a reasonable view."

"Ah!" she said, with a shiver. "I—I'm thankful you didn't meet."

"I am sorry," Lucas said quietly. And though he said no more, she knew that he was thinking of her.

"How is Nap?" she ventured hesitatingly.

"Nap," he said with deliberation, "will be himself again in a very few weeks. You need have no anxiety for him."

Again she did not wholly understand his tone. She glanced at him nervously, half afraid that he was keeping something from her.

"You really mean that?"

His eyes met hers, very level and direct. "He is badly battered, of course. But—he is not quite like other men. He has no nerves to speak of in a physical sense. He will make a quick recovery. Broken bones mean very little to a man of his calibre."

She heard him with relief mingled with a faint wonder at his confidence on this point.

"The doctor has seen him?" she asked.

"Yes; and I have sent my man in the motor to ask him to come on here."

She shivered again irrepressibly. "Giles hates Dr. Randal."

"I do not think that will make any difference," Lucas said gently.

Thereafter they sat together almost in silence, till the buzzing of the motor told of the doctor's arrival. Then with the aid of a stick Lucas began to drag himself laboriously to his feet. Anne rose to help him.

He took her arm, looking at her shrewdly.

"Lady Carfax, will you let me speak to him alone?"

"If you wish it," she said.

"I do wish it." His eyes passed hers suddenly and rested upon the lace at her neck. In one place it was torn, and the soft flesh was revealed; revealed also was a long red stripe, swollen and turning. In an instant his glance fell, but she saw his brows contract as if at a sharp twinge of pain. "I do wish it," he said again very gently. "P'r'aps you will wait for me here."

And with that he relinquished her arm, and made his halting, difficult way across the room to the door.

Anne sat down before the fire to wait. She had, to a large extent, recovered her self-control, but a deadly weariness was upon her which she found it impossible to shake off. She kept it at bay for a time while she listened for any sound. But no sound came, and at length exhausted nature prevailed.

When Lucas came back she was sunk in her chair asleep.

He took up his stand near her while he waited for the doctor, and again that deep furrow showed between his brows. But the eyes that watched her were soft and tender as a woman's. There was something almost maternal in their regard, a compassion so deep as to be utterly unconscious of itself. When the doctor's step sounded at length outside he shuffled away without disturbing her.

It was hours later when Anne awoke and sat up with a confused sense of something wrong. She was still in her easy-chair before the fire, which burned brightly as ever, while on the other side of the hearth, propped upright upon cushions and watching her with those steady blue eyes, whose kindness never varied, was Lucas Errol.

He spoke to her at once, very softly and gently, as if she had been a child.

"I'm real pleased you've had a sleep. You needed it. Don't look so startled. It's all right—a little late, but that's nothing. Dimsdale and I agreed that it would be a pity to disturb you. So we let you sleep on. And he brought in a tray of refreshments to fortify you when you awoke. He's a thoughtful old chap, Lady Carfax. You're lucky to have such a servant."

But Anne scarcely heard him. She was staring at the clock in amazement. It was half-past three! Just twelve hours since—She repressed a violent shudder.

"Don't be shocked any!" besought Lucas in his easy drawl. "I'm often awake at this hour. I guessed you wouldn't sleep if we woke you to go to your room, and I didn't quite like the thought of being down here out of reach. You are not vexed with me, I hope?"

"No," she said. "I am not vexed."

But she looked at him very strangely, as if that were not all she desired to say.

"Dimsdale has been in and out," he said, "keeping the fire going. He and one of the others are watching upstairs. But all is quiet there. Sir Giles has been asleep ever since the doctor left."

Anne got up slowly. "You look very uncomfortable," she said.

He smiled up at her. "My dear Lady Carfax, I am all right. The advantage of this position is that one can rise at a moment's notice."

As if to demonstrate the truth of this he rose, but not without considerable effort.

"Ah, please don't!" she said, putting out a quick, restraining hand. "It hurts me to see you suffer on my account. It was too kind of you—much too kind—to stay with me like this. You will never know how much you have helped me, and I thank you for it with all my heart. Now please sit down again, and let me wait upon you for a change. Have you had anything to eat or drink?"

He sat down again, looking quizzical. "I have been waiting for my hostess to join me," he said.

"Do you ever think of yourself at all?" she asked, turning aside to the tray that Dimsdale's consideration had provided.

"A great deal more often than you imagine," smiled Lucas. "Must you really do the waiting? It's very bad for me, you know."

He joked with her gently through the light repast that followed. And though she scarcely responded, she let him see her gratitude.

Finally, he laid aside all pretence of humour and spoke to her very quietly and gravely of her husband. The doctor thought it advisable to remove him from the Manor with as little delay as possible. He would consult her about it in the morning. His brain was without doubt very seriously affected, and it might take some months to recover. It was essential that he should be taken away from familiar surroundings and people whom he knew.

Anne listened with a whitening face. She asked no questions. Lucas supplied every detail with the precision that characterised most of his utterances. Finally he spoke of her position, advised her strongly to employ an agent for the estate, and promised his help in this or any other matter in which she might care to avail herself of it.

He seemed to take it for granted that she would remain at the head of affairs, and it gradually dawned upon Anne that she could not well do otherwise. Her presence for a time at least seemed indispensable. The responsibility had become hers and she could not at that stage shake it off. Her dream of freedom was over. Of what the future might hold for her she could not even begin to think. But the present was very clearly defined. It remained only for her to "do the work that was nearest" as bravely as she might.

When Lucas ended she leaned forward and gave him her hand. "I wonder what I should have done without you," she said. "I believe I should have gone mad too."

"No, no, Lady Carfax!"

She smiled faintly; the tears were standing in her eyes. "Yes, I know. You don't like to be thanked. But you have been like a mother to me in my trouble, and—I shall always remember it."

The blue eyes began to twinkle humorously. The hand that held hers closed with a very friendly pressure.

"Well," drawled the kindly American voice, "I'll be shot if that isn't the kindest thing that anyone ever said to me. And I believe you meant it too."

"Yes, I meant it," Anne said.

And though she smiled also there was genuine feeling in her words.

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE JESTER'S RETURN

The gradual coming of spring that year was like a benediction after the prolonged rigour of the frost. The lengthening evenings were wrapped in pearly mystery, through which the soft rain fell in showers of blessing upon the waiting earth. To Anne, it was as though a great peace had descended upon all things, quelling all tumult. She had resolutely taken up her new burden, which was so infinitely easier than the old, and she found a strange happiness in the bearing of it. The management of her husband's estate kept her very fully occupied, so that she had no time for perplexing problems. She took each day as it came, and each day left her stronger.

Once only had she been to Baronmead since the masquerade on the ice. It was in fulfilment of her promise to Nap, but she had not seen him; and as the weeks slipped by she began to wonder at his prolonged silence. For no word of any sort reached her from him. He seemed to have forgotten her very existence. That he was well again she knew from Lucas, who often came over in the motor with his mother.

As his brother had predicted he had made a rapid recovery; but no sooner was he well than he was gone with a suddenness that surprised no one but Anne. She concluded that his family knew where he was to be found, but no news of his whereabouts reached her. Nap was the one subject upon which neither Mrs. Errol nor her elder son ever expanded, and for some nameless reason Anne shrank from asking any questions regarding him. She was convinced that he would return sooner or later. She was convinced that, whatever appearances might be, he had not relinquished the bond of friendship that

linked them. She did not understand him. She believed him to be headlong and fiercely passionate, but beneath all there seemed to her to be a certain stability, a tenacity of purpose, that no circumstance, however tragic, could thwart. She knew, deep in the heart of her she knew, that he would come back.

She would not spend much thought upon him in those days. Something stood ever in the path of thought. Invariably she encountered it, and as invariably she turned aside, counting her new peace as too precious to hazard.

Meanwhile she went her quiet way, sometimes aided by Lucas, but more often settling her affairs alone, neither attempting nor desiring to look into the future.

The news of Sir Giles's illness spread rapidly through the neighbourhood, and people began to be very kind to her. She knew no one intimately. Her husband's churlishness had deprived her of almost all social intercourse, but never before had she realised how completely he was held responsible for her aloofness.

Privately, she would have preferred to maintain her seclusion, but it was not in her to be ungracious. She felt bound to accept the ready sympathy extended to her. It touched her, even though, had the choice been hers, she would have done without it. Lucas also urged her in his kindly fashion not to lead a hermit's existence. Mrs. Errol was insistent upon the point.

"Don't you do it, dear," was her exhortation. "There may not be much good to be got out of society, I'll admit. But it's one better than solitude. Don't you shut yourself up and fret. I reckon the Lord didn't herd us together for nothing, and it's His scheme of creation anyway."

And so Anne tried to be cordial; with the result that on a certain morning in early May there reached her a short friendly note from Mrs. Damer, wife of the M.F.H., begging her to dine with them quite informally on the following night.

"There will only be a few of us, all intimate friends," the note said. "Do come. I have been longing to ask you for such an age."

Anne's brows drew together a little over the note. She had always liked Mrs. Damer, but her taste for dinner-parties was a minus quantity. Yet she knew that the invitation had been sent in sheer kindness. Mrs. Damer was always kind to everyone, and it was not the fashion among her circle of friends to disappoint her.

Anne considered the matter, contemplated an excuse, finally rejected it, and wrote an acceptance.

She wore the dress of shimmering green in which she had appeared at the Hunt Ball. Vividly the memory of that night swept across her. She had not worn it since, and scarcely knew what impulse moved her to don it now. It well became her stately figure. Dimsdale, awaiting her departure at the hall-door, looked at her with the admiring reverence he might have bestowed upon a queen.

Again, during her drive through the dark, the memory of that winter night flashed back upon her. She recalled that smooth, noiseless journey in which she had seemed to be borne upon wings. She recalled her misery and her weariness, her dream and her awakening. Nap had been very good to her that night. He had won her confidence, her gratitude, her friendship. His reputation notwithstanding, she had trusted him fully, and she had not found him wanting. A faint sigh rose to her lips. She was beginning to miss this friend of hers.

But the next moment she had drawn back sharply and swiftly, as if she had encountered an angel with a flaming sword. This was the path down which she would not wander. Why should she wish to do so? There were so many other paths open to her now.

When she stepped at length from the carriage her face was serene and quiet as the soft spring night behind her.

Upstairs she encountered the doctor's wife patting her hair before a mirror. She turned at Anne's entrance.

"Why, Lady Carfax! This is indeed a pleasure. I am so glad to see you here."

There was genuine pleasure in her voice, and Anne remembered with a smile that Mrs. Randal liked her.

They chatted as she removed her wraps, and finally descended together, Mrs. Randal turning at the head of the stairs to whisper: "There's that horrid old gossip, Major Shirley. I know he will fall to my lot. He always does. How shall I direct the conversation into safe channels?"

Anne could only shake her head. She knew that Mrs. Randal was not celebrated for discretion.

Entering the drawing-room, they found Major Shirley with his wife and daughter, Ralph and Dot Waring, and the doctor, assembled with their host and hostess.

Mrs. Damer glanced at the clock after greeting them. "The Errols are late."

Anne chanced to be speaking to Dot at the moment, and the girl's magic change of countenance called her attention to the words. She wondered if her own face changed, and became uneasily aware of a sudden quickening of the heart. Quietly she passed on to speak to the Shirleys. The major looked her up and down briefly and offensively as his manner was, and she escaped from his vicinity as speedily as possible. His wife, a powdered, elderly lady, sought to detain her, but after a few moments Anne very gently detached herself, accepting the seat which young Ralph Waring eagerly offered her.

There followed a somewhat lengthy and by no means easy pause. Conversation was spasmodic. Everyone was listening for the arrival of the last guests, and when after some minutes there came the rush of wheels under the window and the loud hoot of a motor everyone jumped. Mrs. Damer, who had talked hard through the silences, made no comment but looked unutterably relieved.

Dot openly and eagerly watched the door, and Anne with a conscious effort suppressed an inclination to do likewise.

When it opened she looked up quite naturally, and surely no one suspected the wild leaping of her heart.

Nap entered—sleek, trim, complacent; followed by Bertie, whose brown face looked unmistakably sullen.

"Sorry we are late," drawled Nap, "Bertie will make our excuses."

But Bertie said nothing, and it was left to Mrs. Damer to step into the breach.

She did so quite gallantly, if somewhat clumsily. "I am very pleased to see you, Nap; but, you know, it was your brother whom we expected. I didn't so much as know that you were at home."

"Oh, quite so," smiled Nap. "Don't apologise—please!" He bent slightly over her hand. "So good of you not to mind the exchange. I know I am a poor substitute. But my brother is entertaining an old friend who has arrived unexpectedly, so I persuaded him to send me in his place. He charged me with all manner of excuses and apologies, which I have not delivered since I know them to be unnecessary."

Mrs. Damer found it impossible not to smile at his calm effrontery, even though she knew Major Shirley to be frowning behind her back.

"When did you return?" she asked. "Someone said you were in the States."

"I was," said Nap. "I returned half an hour ago; hence our late arrival, for which I humbly beg to apologise, and to entreat you not to blame Bertie, who, as you perceive, is still speechless with suspense."

"Oh, you Americans!" laughed Mrs. Damer. "You are never at a loss. Do let us go in to dinner. No, Nap! The doctor will take me. Will you take Miss Waring? But you won't be able to sit together. You have disarranged all my plans, so I shall treat you as of no importance."

"Miss Waring won't quarrel with either you or me on that account," commented Nap, as he offered his arm to the rector's daughter with ironical courtesy. "Come along, Miss Waring! Shut your eyes and bolt me. It will soon be over."

Dot was young enough to make a face at him, but the hard stare with which he countered it reduced her almost instantly to confusion. Whereupon he transferred his attention and looked at her no more.

But compensation was in store for her, for at the dinner-table she found herself placed between Bertie and the doctor, a pleasing situation in which she speedily recovered her spirits, since the doctor talked to his hostess, and Bertie's partner, Mrs. Shirley, strenuously occupied the attention of her host, who was seated on her other side.

Major Shirley fell as usual to Mrs. Randal, over which circumstance Anne, catching a tragic glance from the latter, failed somewhat conspicuously to repress a smile.

"Yes, it's mighty funny, isn't it?" said Nap, and with a sharp start she discovered that he was seated upon her right.

"I—didn't see you," she faltered.

"No?" he said coolly. "Well, it's all right. I was told to sit here—obviously decreed by the gods. You'll think me uncanny if I tell you that it was just this that I came for."

"You are uncanny," she said.

He made her a brief bow. It seemed to her that a mocking spirit gleamed in his eyes. She had never felt less confident of him, less at her ease with him, than at that moment. She felt as if in some subtle fashion, wholly beyond her comprehension, he were playing some deep-laid game, as if he were weaving some intricate web too secret and too intangible to be understood or grappled with. Upon one point only was she quite clear. He would suffer no reference to their last meeting. Whatever the effect of that terrible punishment upon him, he did not choose that she should see it. She had seen him in the utmost extremity of his humiliation, but she should never see the scars that were left.

This much of his attitude she could understand, and understanding could pardon that part which baffled her. But she could not feel at her ease.

"And so you are afraid," said Nap. "That's a new thing for you."

She glanced round the table. In the general hubbub of talk they were as isolated as though they were actually alone together.

"No," she said. "Why should I be afraid? But—I feel as if I am talking to—a stranger."

"Perhaps you are," said Nap.

He uttered a laugh she could not fathom, and then with a certain recklessness: "Permit me to present to your majesty," he said, "the Knave of Diamonds!"

There was that in his tone that hurt her vaguely, little as she understood it. She smiled with a hint of wistfulness.

"Surely I have met him before!" she said.

"Without knowing him," said Nap.

"No," she maintained. "I have known him for a long while now. I believe him to be my very good friend."

"What?" he said.

She glanced at him, half startled by the brief query; but instantly she looked away again with a curious, tingling sense of shock. For it was to her as though she had looked into the heart of a consuming fire.

"Aren't you rather behind the times?" he drawled. "That was—as you say—a long while ago."

The shock passed, leaving her strangely giddy, as one on the edge of inconceivable depth. She could say no word in answer. She was utterly and hopelessly at a loss.

With scarcely a pause Nap turned to Violet Shirley, who was seated on his right, and plunged without preliminary into a gay flirtation to which all the world was at liberty to listen if it could not approve. Ralph Waring, thus deprived of his rightful partner, solaced himself with Mrs. Randal, who was always easy to please; and the major on her other side relapsed into bearish gloom.

It was with unspeakable relief that Anne rose at length from that dinner-table. She had a deep longing to escape altogether, to go back to the quiet Manor, where at least all was peace. He had hurt her more subtly than she could have deemed possible. Had his friendship really meant so much to her? Or was it only her pride that suffered to think he valued hers so lightly? It seemed that he was fickle then, fickle as everyone declared him to be. And yet in her heart she did not for a moment believe it. That single glimpse she had had, past the gibing devil in his eyes, deep into the man himself, had told her something different.

He hated her then, he hated her as the cause of his downfall. This seemed the more likely. And yet—and yet—did she really believe this either?

"Dear Lady Carfax, do play to us!" urged her hostess. "It will be such a treat to hear you."

She rose half-mechanically and went to the piano, struck a few chords and began to play, still so deep

in her maze of conjecture that she hardly knew what she had chosen.

Mrs. Randal came to sit near her. Mrs. Shirley edged close to Mrs. Damer and began to whisper. The two girls went softly into the conservatory.

Anne's fingers played on. Now and then Mrs. Randal spoke to her, thanked her or begged her to continue. But presently she moved away and Anne did not miss her. She was far too deeply engrossed in her own thoughts.

"Lady Carfax!"

She started, every nerve suddenly on the alert.

"Don't stop playing!" he said, and as it were involuntarily she continued to play.

"I am coming to see you to-morrow," he went on. "What time would you like me to call?"

She was silent. But the blood had risen in a great wave to her face and neck. She could feel it racing in every vein.

"Won't you answer me?" he said. "Won't you fix a time?"

There was that in his voice that made her long earnestly to see his face, but she could not. With a great effort she answered:

"I am generally at home in the afternoon."

"Then will you be out to the rest of the world?" he said.

She stilled the wild tumult of her heart with desperate resolution. "I think you must take your chance of that."

"I am not taking any chances," he said. "I will come at the fashionable hour if you prefer it. But—"

He left the sentence unfinished with a significance that was more imperious than a definite command.

Anne's fingers were trembling over the keys. Sudden uncertainty seized her. She forgot what she was playing, forgot all in the overwhelming desire to see his face. She muffled her confusion in a few soft chords and turned round.

He was gone.

CHAPTER II

THE KERNEL OF THE DIFFICULTY

"I want to know!" said Capper, with extreme deliberation.

He was the best-known surgeon in the United States, and he looked like nothing so much as a seedy Evangelical parson. Hair, face, beard, all bore the same distinguishing qualities, were long and thin and yellow. He sat coiled like a much-knotted piece of string, and he seemed to possess the power of moving any joint in his body independently of the rest. He cracked his fingers persistently when he talked after a fashion that would have been intolerable in anyone but Capper. His hands were always in some ungainly attitude, and yet they were wonderful hands, strong and sensitive, the colour of ivory. His eyes were small and green, sharp as the eyes of a lizard. They seemed to take in everything and divulge nothing.

"What do you want to know?" said Lucas.

He was lying in bed with the spring sunshine full upon him. His eyes were drawn a little. He had just undergone a lengthy examination at the hands of the great doctor.

"Many things," said Capper, somewhat snappishly. "Chief among them, why your tomfool brother—you call him your brother, I suppose?—brought me over here on a fool's errand."

"He is my brother," said Lucas quietly. "And why a fool's errand? Is there something about my case you don't like?"

"There is nothing whatever," said Capper, with an exasperated tug at his pointed beard. "I could make a sound man of you. It wouldn't be easy. But I could do it—given one thing, which I shan't get. Is the sun bothering you?"

He suddenly left his chair, bent over and with infinite gentleness raised his patient to an easier posture and drew forward the curtain.

"I guess I won't talk to you now," he said. "I've given you as much as you can stand and then some already. How's that? Is it comfort?"

"Absolute," Lucas said with a smile. "Don't go, doctor. I am quite able to talk. I suppose matters haven't altered very materially since you saw me last?"

"I don't see why you should suppose that," said Capper. "As a matter of fact things have altered—altered considerably. Say, you don't have those fainting attacks any more?"

"No. I've learnt not to faint." There was a boyishly pathetic note about the words though the lips that uttered them still smiled.

Capper nodded comprehendingly. "But the pain is just as infernal, eh? Only you've the grit to stand against it. Remember the last time I overhauled you? You fainted twice. That's how I knew you would never face it. But I've hurt you worse to-day, and I'm damned if I know how you managed to come up smiling."

"Then why do you surmise that you have been brought here on a fool's errand?" Lucas asked.

"I don't surmise," said Capper. "I never surmise. I know." He began to crack his fingers impatiently, and presently fell to whistling below his breath. "No," he said suddenly, "you've got the physical strength and you've got the spunk to lick creation, but what you haven't got is zeal. You're gallant enough, Heaven knows, but you are not keen. You are passive, you are lethargic. And you ought to be in a fever!"

His fingers dropped abruptly upon Lucas's wrist, and tightened upon it. "That brother of yours that you're so fond of, now if it were he, I could pull him out of the very jaws of hell. He'd catch and hold. But you—you are too near the other place to care. Say, you don't care, do you, not a single red cent? It's all one to you—under Providence—whether you live or die. And if I operated on you to-morrow you'd die—not at once, but sooner or later—from sheer lack of enthusiasm. That's my difficulty. It's too long a business. You would never keep it up."

Lucas did not immediately reply. He lay in the stillness habitual to him, gazing with heavy eyes at the motes that danced in the sunshine.

"I guess I'm too old, doctor," he said at last. "But you are wrong in one sense. I do care. I don't want to die at present."

"Private reasons?" demanded Capper keenly.

"Not particularly. You see, I am the head of the family. I hold myself responsible. My brothers want looking after, more or less."

"Brothers!" sniffed Capper, with supreme contempt. "That consideration wouldn't keep you out of heaven. It's only another reason for holding back."

"Exactly," Lucas said quietly. "I don't know what Nap will say to me. He will call me a shirker. But on the whole, doctor, I think I must hold back a little longer."

"He'd better let me hear him!" growled Capper. "I wish to heaven you were married. That's the kernel of the difficulty. You want a wife. You'd be keen enough then. I shouldn't be afraid of your letting go when I wasn't looking."

"Ah!" Lucas said, faintly smiling. "But what of the wife?"

"She'd be in her element," maintained Capper stoutly. "She'd be to you what the mainspring is to a watch, and glory in it. Haven't you seen such women? I have, scores of 'em, ready made for the purpose. No, you will only go through my treatment with a woman to hold you up. It's a process that needs the utmost vitality, the utmost courage, and—something great to live for—a motive power behind

to push you on. There's only one motive power that I can think of strong enough to keep you moving. And that is most unfortunately absent. Find the woman, I tell you, find the woman! And—under Providence—I'll do the rest!"

He dropped back in his chair, cracking his fingers fiercely, his keen eyes narrowly observant of every shade of expression on his patient's face.

Lucas was still smiling, but his eyes had grown absent. He looked unutterably tired.

"Yes," he said slowly at length. "I am afraid you have asked the impossible of me now. But, notwithstanding that, if I could see my way to it, I would place myself in your hands without reservation—and take my chance. There are times now and then—now and then—" his words quickened a little, "when a man would almost give the very soul out of his body to be at peace—to be at peace; times when it's downright agony to watch a fly buzzing up and down the pane and know he hasn't even the strength for that—when every muscle is in torture, and every movement means hell—" He broke off; his lips usually so steady had begun to twitch. "I'm a fool, Capper," he murmured apologetically. "Make allowances for a sick man!"

"Look here!" said Capper. "This is a big decision for you to make off-hand. You can take three months anyway to think it over. You are getting stronger, you know. By then you'll be stronger still. You won't be well. Nothing but surgical measures can ever make you well. And you'll go on suffering that infernal pain. But three months one way or another won't make much difference. I am due in London in September for the Schultz Medical Conference. I'll run over then and see if you've made up your mind."

"Will you, doctor? That's real kind of you." Lucas's eyes brightened. He stretched out a hand which Capper grasped and laid gently down. "And if you undertake the job—"

"If you are fit to go through it," Capper broke in, "I'll do it right away before I leave. You'll spend the winter on your back. And in the spring I'll come again and finish the business. That second operation is a more delicate affair than the first, but I don't consider it more dangerous. By this time next year, or soon after, you'll be walking like an ordinary human being. I'll have you as lissom as an Indian."

He cracked his fingers one after the other in quick succession and rose. A moment he stood looking down at the smooth face that had flushed unwontedly at his words; then bending, he lightly tapped his patient's chest. "Meanwhile, my friend," he said, "you keep a stiff upper lip, and *cherchez la femme—cherchez la femme toujours!* You'll be a sound man some day and she won't mind waiting if she's the right sort."

"Ah!" Lucas said. "You will have to forego that condition, doctor. I am no ladies' man. Shall I tell you what a woman said to me the other day?"

"Well?"

"That I was like a mother to her." Again without much mirth he smiled. His lips were steady enough now.

"I should like to meet that woman," said Capper.

"Why?"

The doctor's hand sought his beard. "P'r'aps she'd tell me I was like a father. Who knows?"

Lucas looked at him curiously. "Are you fond of women?"

"I adore them," said Capper without enthusiasm. He never satisfied curiosity.

Lucas's eyes fell away baffled. "I'll take you to see her this afternoon if you can spare the time," he said.

"Oh, I can spend the afternoon philandering so long as I catch the night train to Liverpool," Capper answered promptly. "Meanwhile you must get a rest while I go and take a dose of air and sunshine in the yard."

His straight, gaunt figure passed to the door, opened it, and disappeared with a directness wholly at variance with his lack of repose when seated.

As for Lucas, he lay quite still for a long while, steadily watching the motes that danced and swam giddily in the sunshine.

Nearly half an hour went by before he stirred at all. And then a heavy sigh burst suddenly from him,

shaking his whole body, sending a flicker of pain across his drooping eyelids.

"*Cherchez la femme!*" he said to himself. And again with a quivering smile, "*Cherchez la femme!* God knows she isn't far to seek. But—my dear—my dear!"

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST ORDEAL

All the birds in the Manor garden were singing on that afternoon in May. The fruit trees were in bloom. The air was full of the indescribable fragrance of bursting flowers. There was no single note of sadness in all the splendid day. But the woman who paced slowly to and fro under the opening lilacs because she could not rest knew nothing of its sweetness.

The precious peace of the past few weeks had been snatched from her. She was face to face once more with the problem that had confronted her for a few horror-stricken minutes on that awful evening in March. Then she had thrust it from her. Since she had resolutely turned her back upon it. But to-day it was with her, and there was no escaping it. It glared at her whichever way she turned, a monster of destruction waiting to devour. And she was afraid, horribly, unspeakably afraid, with a fear that was neither physical nor cowardly, yet which set her very soul a-trembling.

Restlessly she wandered up and down, up and down. It was a day for dreams, but she was terribly and tragically awake.

When Nap Errol came to her at length with his quick, light tread that was wary and noiseless as a cat's, she knew of his coming long before he reached her, was vividly, painfully aware of him before she turned to look. Yesterday she had longed to look him in the face, but to-day she felt she dared not.

Slim and active he moved across the grass, and there came to her ears a slight jingle of spurs. He had ridden then. A sudden memory of the man's free insolence in the saddle swept over her, his domination, his imperial arrogance. Turning to meet him, she knew that she was quivering from head to foot.

He came straight up to her, halted before her. "Have you no welcome for me?" he said.

By sheer physical effort she compelled herself to face him, to meet the fierce, challenging scrutiny which she knew awaited her. She held out her hand to him. "I am always glad to see you, Nap," she said.

He took her hand in a sinewy, compelling grip. "Although you prefer good men," he said.

The ground on which she stood seemed to be shaking, yet she forced herself to smile, ignoring his words.

"Let us go and sit down," she said.

Close by was a seat under a great lilac tree in full purple bloom. She moved to it and sat down, but Nap remained upon his feet, watching her still.

The air was laden with perfume—the wonderful indescribable essences of spring. Away in the distance, faintly heard, arose the bleating of lambs. Near at hand, throned among the purple flowers above their heads, a thrush was pouring out the rapture that thrilled his tiny life. The whole world pulsed to the one great melody—the universal, wordless song. Only the man and the woman were silent as intruders in a sacred place.

Anne moved at last. She looked up very steadily, and spoke. "It seems like holy ground," she said.

Her voice was hushed, yet it had in it a note of pleading. Her eyes besought him.

And in answer Nap leaned down with a sudden, tigerish movement and laid his hand on hers. "What have I to do with holiness?" he said. "Anne, come down from that high pedestal of yours! I'm tired of worshipping a goddess. I want a woman—a woman! I shall worship you none the less because I hold you in my arms."

It was done. The spell was broken. Those quick, passionate words had swept away her last hope of

escape. She was forced to meet him face to face, to meet him and to do battle.

For a long second she sat quite still, almost as if stunned. Then sharply she turned her face aside, as one turns from the unbearable heat and radiance when the door of a blast-furnace is suddenly opened.

"Oh, Nap," she said, and there was a sound of heart-break in her words, "What a pity! What a pity!"

"Why?" he demanded fiercely. "I have the right to speak—to claim my own. Are you going to deny it—you who always speak the truth?"

"You have no right," she answered, still with her face averted. "No man has ever the faintest right to say to another man's wife what you have just said to me."

"And you think I will give you up," he said, "for that?"

She did not at once reply. Only after a moment she freed her hands from his hold, and the action seemed to give her strength. She spoke, her voice very clear and resolute. "I am not going to say anything unkind to you. You have already borne too much for my sake. But—you must know that this is the end of everything. It is the dividing of the ways—where we must say good-bye."

"Is it?" he said. He looked down at her with his brief, thin-lipped smile. "Then—if that's so—look at me—look at me, Anne, and tell me that you don't love me!"

She made an almost convulsive gesture of protest and sat silent.

For a little he waited. Then, "That being so," he said very deliberately, "there is no power on earth—I swear—I swear—that shall ultimately come between us!"

"Oh, hush!" she said. "Hush!" She turned towards him, her face white and agitated. "I will not listen to you, Nap. I cannot listen to you! You must go."

She stretched a hand towards him appealingly, and he caught it, crushing it against his breast. For a moment he seemed about to kneel, and then he altered his purpose and drew her to her feet. Again she was aware of that subtle, mysterious force within him, battling with her, seeking to dominate, to conquer, to overwhelm her. Again there came to her that sense of depth, depth unutterable, appalling. She seemed to totter on the very edge of the pit of destruction.

Very quietly at length his voice came to her. It held just a touch of ridicule. "What! Still doing sacrifice to the great god Convention? My dear girl, but you are preposterous! Do you seriously believe that I will suffer that drunken maniac to come between us—now?"

He flung his head back with the words. His fiery eyes seemed to scorch her. And overhead the rapturous bird-voice pealed forth a perfect paean of victory.

But Anne stood rigid, unresponsive as an image of stone. "He is my husband," she said.

She felt his hand tighten upon hers, till the pressure was almost more than she could endure. "You never felt a spark of love for him!" he said. "You married him—curse him!—against your will!"

"Nevertheless, I married him," she said.

He showed his teeth for a moment, and was silent. Then imperiously he swept up his forces for the charge. "These things are provided for in the States," he said. "If you won't come to me without the sanction of the law, I will wait while you get it. I will wait till you are free—till I can make you my lawful wife. That's a fair offer anyway." He began to smile. "See what a slave you have made of me!" he said. "I've never offered any woman marriage before."

But Anne broke in upon him almost fiercely. "Oh, don't you know me better than that?" she said. "Nap, I am not the sort of woman to throw off the yoke like that. It is true that I never loved him, and I do not think that I shall ever live with him again. But still—I married him, and while he lives I shall never be free—never, never!"

"Yet you are mine," he said.

"No—no!"

She sought to free her hand, but he kept it. "Look at me!" he said. "Do you remember that day in March—the day you saw me whipped like a dog?"

Involuntarily she raised her eyes to his. "Oh, don't!" she whispered, shuddering. "Don't!"

But he persisted. "You felt that thrashing far more than I did, though it made a murderer of me. You were furious for my sake. Did you never ask yourself why?" Then in a lower voice, bending towards her, "Do you think I didn't know the moment I saw your face above mine? Do you think I didn't feel the love in your arms, holding me up? Do you think it isn't in your eyes—even now?"

"Oh, hush!" she said again piteously. "Nap, you are hurting me. I cannot bear it. Even if it were so, love—true love—is a sacred thing—not to be turned into sin."

"Sin!" he said. "What is sin? Is it sin to fulfil the very purpose for which you were created?"

But at that she winced so sharply that he knew he had gone too far. It was characteristic of the man that he made no attempt to recover lost ground.

"I'm a wicked pagan no doubt," he said, with a touch of recklessness. "Everyone will tell you so. I fancy I've told you so myself more than once. Yet you needn't shrink as if I were unclean. I have done nothing that you would hate me for since I have known you."

He paused and seemed to listen, then very quietly released her hand. A curious expression flickered across his face as he did so, and a little chill went through her. It was like the closing of the furnace door.

"I am going," he said. "But I shall come back—I shall come back." His smile, sudden and magnetic, gleamed for an instant and was gone.

"Do you remember the missing heart?" he said "There are some things that I never forget."

And so, without farewell, he turned and left her, moving swiftly and easily over the grass. She heard the jingle of his spurs, but no sound of any footfall as he went.

CHAPTER IV

THE FATAL STREAK

"My lady!"

Anne looked up with a start. She had been sitting with closed eyes under the lilac tree.

Dimsdale, discreet and deferential as ever, stood before her.

"Mr. Lucas Errol is here," he told her, "with another gentleman. I knew your ladyship would wish to be at home to him."

"Oh, certainly," she answered, rising. "I am always at home to Mr. Lucas Errol. Please tell him I am coming immediately."

But she did not instantly follow Dimsdale. She stood instead quite motionless, with her face to the sky, breathing deeply.

When she turned at length she had recovered all her customary serenity. With the quiet dignity peculiar to her, she passed up the garden path, leaving the thrush still singing, singing, singing, behind her.

She found her visitors in the drawing-room, which she entered by the open window. Lucas greeted her with his quiet smile and introduced Capper—"a very great friend of mine, and incidentally the finest doctor in the U.S.A."

She shook hands with the great man, feeling the small green eyes running over her, and conscious that she blushed under their scrutiny. She wondered why, with a vague feeling of resentment. She also wondered what had moved Lucas to bring him.

As she sat at the tea-table and dispensed hospitality to her guests it was Lucas who kept the

conversation going. She thought he seemed in wonderful spirits despite the heavy droop of his eyelids.

Capper sat in almost unbroken silence, studying his hostess so perpetually that Anne's nerves began to creak at last under the strain.

Quite suddenly at length he set down his cup. "Lady Carfax," he said abruptly, "I'm told you have a herb garden, and I'm just mad on herbs. Will you take me to see it while Lucas enjoys a much-needed and well-earned rest?"

Anne glanced up in surprise. They were almost the first words he had spoken. Capper was already upon his feet. He stood impatiently cracking his fingers one by one.

She rose. "Of course I will do so with pleasure if Mr. Errol doesn't mind."

"Certainly not, Lady Carfax," smiled Lucas. "I am extremely comfortable. Pray give him what he wants. It is the only way to pacify him."

Anne smiled and turned to the window. They went out together into the golden spring evening.

The herb garden was some distance from the house. Capper strode along in silence, with bent brows. More than ever Anne wondered what had brought him. She did not try to make conversation for him, realising by instinct that such effort would be vain as well as unwelcome. She merely walked quietly beside him, directing their steps whither he had desired to go.

They were out of sight of the house before he spoke. "Say, madam, I'm told you know the Errol family off by heart without needing to look 'em up."

She glanced at him in surprise. "Of course I know them. Yes, I know them all."

"Well?" he demanded.

"Oh, quite well." Almost involuntarily she began to explain the intimacy. "I was taken to their house after a hunting accident, and I was an invalid there for several weeks."

"That so?" Again piercingly the American's eyes scanned her. "You're real friendly then? With which in particular?"

She hesitated momentarily. Then, "I am very fond of Mrs. Errol," she said, speaking very quietly. "But Nap was my first friend, and afterwards Lucas—"

"Oh, Nap!"

There was such withering contempt in the exclamation that she had perforce to remark it.

"Nap is evidently no favourite with you," she said.

He raised his brows till they nearly met his hair. "Nap, my dear lady," he drily observed, "is doubtless all right in his own sphere. It isn't mine, and it isn't yours. I came over to this country at his request and in his company, and a queerer devil it has never been my lot to encounter. But what can you expect? I've never yet seen him in a blanket and moccasins, but I imagine that he'd be considerably preferable that way. I guess he's just a fish out of water on this side of civilisation."

"What can you mean?" Anne said.

For the second time that afternoon she felt as if the ground beneath her had begun to tremble. She looked up at him with troubled eyes. Surely the whole world was rocking!

"I mean what I say, madam," he told her curtly. "It's a habit of mine. There is a powerful streak of red in Nap Errol's blood, or I am much mistaken."

"Ah!" Anne said, and that was all. In a flash she understood him. She felt as if he had performed some ruthless operation upon her, and she was too exhausted to say more. Unconsciously her hand pressed her heart. It was beating strangely, spasmodically; sometimes it did not beat at all. For she knew beyond all doubting that what he said was true.

"I don't say the fellow is an out-and-out savage," Capper was saying. "P'r'aps he'd be more tolerable if he were. But the fatal streak is there. Never noticed it? I thought you women noticed everything. Oh, I can tell you he's made things hum on our side more times than I've troubled to count. Talk of the devil in New York and you very soon find the conversation drifting round to Nap Errol. Now and then he has a lapse into sheer savagery, and then there is no controlling him. It's just as the fit takes him. He's

never to be trusted. It's an ineradicable taint."

She shivered at the words, but still she did not speak.

Capper went unconcernedly on. "I fancy Lucas once thought he was going to make a gentleman of him. A gentleman, ye gods! Teach a tiger to sit up and beg! He has a most amazing patience, but I guess even he realises by now that the beast is untamable. Mrs. Errol saw it long ago. There's a fine woman for you—A.1., gilt-edged, quality of the best. You know Mrs. Errol, you say?"

"Yes, I know her." Anne heard the words, but was not conscious of uttering them.

Capper gave her a single straight look. "You wouldn't think, would you," said he, "that that woman carries a broken heart about with her? But I assure you that's so. Nap Errol was the tragedy of her life."

That quickened her to interest. She was conscious of a gradual sinking downwards of her dismay till it came to rest somewhere deep in her inmost soul, leaving the surface free for other impressions.

"He came out of nowhere," Capper went on. "She never tried to account for him. He was her husband's son. She made him hers. But he's been a tiger's cub all his life, a hurricane, a firebrand. He and Bertie are usually at daggers drawn and Lucas spends his time keeping the peace; which is about as wearing an occupation for a sick man as I can imagine. I want to put a stop to it, Lady Carfax. I speak as one family friend to another. Lucas seems to like you. I believe you could make him see reason if you took the trouble. Women are proverbially ingenious."

Anne's faint smile showed for a moment. They had entered the herb garden and were passing slowly down the central path. It was a small enclosure surrounded by clipped yew hedges and intersected by green walks. The evening sunlight slanting down upon her, had turned her brown hair to ruddiest gold. There was no agitation about her now. The grey eyes were gravely thoughtful.

She bent presently to pluck a sprig of rosemary. "Will you tell me," she said, "what it is that you want to do?"

Capper shot her a keen side-glance. "I want to cure him," he said. "I want to make a whole man of him."

"Could you?" she asked.

"I could." Abruptly Capper stopped. His yellow face was curiously aglow. "I say I could," he asserted almost fiercely, "if I could choose my conditions. If I could banish that pestilent brother of his, if I could rouse him to something like energy, if I could turn his will in one direction only, I could do it. Given his whole-hearted co-operation, I could do it. Without it, I am powerless. He would simply die of inanition."

"It would mean an operation then? A very serious one?" Anne had paused upon the green path. Her eyes sought Capper's.

He answered her with curt directness. "My dear lady, it would mean not one, but two. I won't trouble you with technical details which you wouldn't understand. Put briefly, it would mean in the first place a pulling down and in the second a building up. Both operations would be a serious tax upon his strength, but I am satisfied that he has the strength for both. Six months would elapse between the two, and during that time he would be flat on his back. If he could hold on for those six months he would come through all right. Of that I am convinced. But those six months are my stumbling-block. Freedom from all anxiety is essential. He wants a stanch friend continually beside him to keep him cheery and at peace. That fellow Nap is the principle obstacle. He stirs up hell and tommy wherever he goes, and he's never absent for long. Lucas himself admits that his brothers are a care to him. Oh, it's all an infernal tangle. I sometimes think family ties are the very deuce."

Capper tugged at his beard with restless fingers and ground his heel into the turf.

"If you consider Nap an obstacle—why don't you speak to him?" Anne asked in her quiet voice.

Capper shrugged his shoulders. "He hates me—and small wonder! I've told him the brutal truth too often."

Anne passed the matter by. "And Lucas does not wish to undergo the operation?"

"That's just the infernal part of it!" burst forth Capper. "He would undergo it to-morrow if he didn't consider himself indispensable to these young whelps. But that isn't all. Lady Carfax, he wants help. He wants someone strong to stand by. I believe you could do it—if you would. You are the sort of woman that men turn to in trouble. I've been watching you. I know."

Again very faintly Anne smiled, with more of patience than amusement.

"Dr. Capper, has Lucas been telling you about me?"

Capper thrust out a hand. "Yes."

"You know how I am situated?" she questioned.

"I do." There was no sympathy in Capper's voice or face; only in the grasp of his hand.

"And you think I could be of use to him?"

"I don't think," said Capper. "I know." He released her hand as abruptly as he had taken it. His long fingers began to curve and crack mechanically. "I'll tell you something," he said. "Don't know why I should, but I will. I love Lucas Errol as if he were my son."

"Ah!" Anne said gently. "I think we all love him in our different ways."

"That so?" said the American keenly. "Then I shall leave the matter in your charge, Lady Carfax. I can see you're a capable woman. I'm coming back in September to perform that operation. You will have a willing patient ready for me—by willing I mean something gayer than resigned—and my bugbear, Nap—that most lurid specimen of civilised devilry—hunting scalps on the other side of the Atlantic."

"Oh, I don't know!" Anne said quickly. "I don't know!"

She spoke breathlessly, as one suddenly plunged into a strong current. Her face was bent over the sprig of rosemary which she was threading in her dress. Her fingers were trembling.

Capper watched her silently.

"Let me!" he said at last.

He took the sprig from her with a hand that was perfectly steady, held it a moment, seemed to hesitate, finally withdrew it and planted it in his own buttonhole.

"I guess I'll keep it myself," he said, "with your permission, in memory of a good woman."

Anne commanded herself and looked up. "Keep it, by all means," she said. "But do not expect too much from me. No woman is always good. The best of us fail sometimes."

"But you will do your best when the time comes?" he said, in a tone that was a curious blend of demand and entreaty.

She met his eyes quite fully. "Yes," she said, "I will do my best."

"Then I'm not afraid," said Capper. "We shall pull him through between us. It will be a miracle, of course, but"—a sudden smile flashed across his face, transforming him completely—"miracles happen, Lady Carfax."

CHAPTER V

THE TOKEN

Slowly Anne drew aside the curtain and looked forth into the night, a magic night, soft and wonderful, infinitely peaceful. A full moon shone high in the sky with an immense arc of light around it, many-rayed, faintly prismatic. There was the scent of coming rain in the air, but no clouds were visible. The stars were dim and remote, almost quenched in that flood of moonlight.

Across the quiet garden came the song of a nightingale in one of the shrubberies, now soft and far like the notes of a fairy flute, now close at hand and filling the whole world with music. Anne stood, a silent listener, on the edge of the magic circle.

She had just risen from the piano, where for the past hour or more she had been striving to forget the fever that burned within. Now at last she had relinquished the piteous, vain attempt, and utterly wearied she stood drinking in the spring sweetness.

It was drawing towards midnight, and all but herself had retired. She knew she ought to bolt the window and go to rest also; only she knew, too, that no rest awaited her. The silver peace into which she gazed was like balm to her tired spirit, but yet she could only stand, as it were, upon the edge.

A great longing was upon her, a voiceless, indescribable desire, that made within her so deep a restlessness that no outside influence seemed able to touch it. She leaned her head against the window-frame, conscious of suffering but scarcely aware of thought.

With no effort of hers the events of that afternoon passed before her. She heard again the ardent voice of the friend who had become the lover. He had loved her from the first, it seemed, and she had not known it. Could it be that she had loved him also, all unknowing?

There came again to her the memory of those fierce, compelling eyes, the dogged mastery with which he had fought her resolution, the sudden magic softening of the harsh face when he smiled. There came again the passionate thrilling of his voice; again her hands tingled in that close grip; again she thought she felt the beating of the savage heart.

She raised her arms above her head with the gesture of one who wards off something immense, but they fell almost immediately. She was so tired—so tired. She had fought so hard and so long. Oh, why was there no peace for her? What had she done to be thus tortured? Why had love come to her at all? In all her barren life she had never asked for love.

And now that it had come it was only to be ruthlessly dashed against the stones. What had she to do with love—love, moreover, for a man who could offer her but the fiery passion of a savage, a man from whom her every instinct shrank, who mocked at holy things and overthrew all barriers of convention with a cynicism that silenced all protest. What—ah, what indeed!—had she to do with love?

She had lived a pure life. She had put out the fires of youth long ago, with no hesitating hand. She had dwelt in the desert, and made of it her home. Was it her fault that those fires had been kindled afresh? Was she to blame because the desert had suddenly blossomed? Could she be held responsible for these things, she who had walked in blindness till the transforming miracle had touched her also and opened her eyes?

She shivered a little. Oh, for a helping hand! Oh, for a deliverer from this maze of misery!

She saw again the quiet garden lying sleeping before her in the moonlight, and felt as if God must be very far away. She was very terribly alone that night.

The impulse came to her to pass out into the dewy stillness, and she obeyed it, scarcely knowing what she did. Over the silver grass, ghost-like, she moved. It was as if a voice had called her. On to the lilac trees with their burden of fragrant blossoms, where the thrush had raised his song of rapture, where she had faced that first fiery ordeal of love.

She reached the bench where she had sat that afternoon. There was not a leaf that stirred. The nightingale's song sounded away in the distance. The midnight peace lay like a shroud upon all things. But suddenly fear stabbed her, piercing every nerve to quivering activity. She knew—how, she could not have said—that she was no longer alone.

She stood quite still, but the beating of her heart rose quick and insistent in her ears, like the beat of a drum. Swift came the conviction that it was no inner impulse that had brought her hither. She had obeyed a voice that called.

For many seconds she stood motionless, not breathing, not daring to turn her head. Then, as her strength partially returned, she took two steps forward to the seat under the lilac tree, and, her hand upon the back of it, she spoke.

"Nap!"

He came, gliding like a shadow behind her. Slowly she turned and faced him.

He was still in riding-dress. She heard again the faint jingle of his spurs. Yet the moonlight shone strangely down upon him, revealing in him something foreign, something incongruous, that she marvelled that she had never before noticed. The fierce, dusky face with its glittering eyes and savage mouth was oddly unfamiliar to her, though she knew it all by heart. In imagination she clothed him with the blanket and moccasins of Capper's uncouth speech; and she was afraid.

She did not know how to break the silence. The heart within her was leaping like a wild thing in captivity.

"Why are you here?" she said at last, and she knew that her voice shook.

He answered her instantly, with a certain doggedness. "I want to know what Capper has been saying to you."

She started almost guiltily. Her nerves were on edge that night.

"You may as well tell me," he said coolly. "Sooner or later I am bound to know."

With an effort she quieted her agitation. "Then it must be later," she said. "I cannot stay to talk with you now."

"Why not?" he said.

Desperately she faced him, for her heart still quaked within her. The shock of Capper's revelation was still upon her. He had come to her too soon. "Nap," she said, "I ask you to leave me, and I mean it. Please go!"

But he only drew nearer to her, and she saw that his face was stern. He thrust it forward, and regarded her closely.

"So," he said slowly, "he has told you all about me, has he?"

She bent her head. It was useless to attempt to evade the matter now.

"I am mightily obliged to him," said Nap. "I wanted you to know."

Anne was silent.

After a moment he went on. "I meant to have told you myself. I even began to tell you once, but somehow you put me off. It was that night at Baronmead—you remember?—the night you wanted to help me."

Well she remembered that night—the man's scarcely veiled despair, his bitter railing against the ironies of life. So this had been the meaning of it all. A thrill of pity went through her.

"Yes," he said. "I knew you'd be sorry for me. I guess pity is about the cheapest commodity on the market. But—you'll hardly believe it—I don't want your pity. After all, a man is himself, and it can't be of much importance where he springs from—anyway, to the woman who loves him."

He spoke recklessly, and yet she seemed to detect a vein of entreaty in his words. She steeled her heart against it, but it affected her none the less.

"Nap," she said firmly, "there must be no more talk of love between us. I told you this afternoon that I would not listen, and I will not. Do you understand me? It must end here and now. I am in earnest."

"You don't say!" said Nap.

He was standing close to her, and again fear stabbed her—fear that was almost abhorrence. There was something about him that was horribly suggestive of a menacing animal.

"I am in earnest," she said again. But she could not meet his eyes any longer. She dared not let him read her soul just then.

"I am in earnest too," said Nap. "But you needn't be afraid of me on that account. I may be a savage, but I'm not despicable. If I take more than you are prepared to offer it's only because I know it to be my own." He bent towards her, trying to see her face. "My own, Anne!" he said again very softly. "My own!"

But at his movement she drew back sharply, with a gesture of such instinctive, such involuntary recoil, that in an instant she knew that she had betrayed that which she had sought to hide.

He stiffened as if at a blow, and she saw his hands clench. In the silence that followed she stood waiting for the storm to burst, waiting for his savagery to tear asunder all restraining bonds and leap forth in devilish fury. But—by what means she knew not—he held it back.

"So," he said at last, his voice very low, "the Queen has no further use for her jester!"

Her heart smote her. What had she done? She felt as if she had cruelly wounded a friend. But because he demanded of her more than friendship, she dared not attempt to allay the hurt. She stood silent.

"Can't you find another *rôle* for me?" he said. "You will find it difficult to exclude me altogether from the cast."

Something in his tone pierced her, compelled her. She glanced up swiftly, met his eyes, and was suddenly caught, as it were, in fiery chains, so that she could not look away. And there before her the gates of hell opened, and she saw a man's soul in torment. She saw the flames mount higher and higher, scorching and shrivelling and destroying, till at last she could bear the sight no longer. She covered her face with her hands and blotted it out.

"Oh, Nap," she moaned, "if you love me—if you love me—"

"If I love you—" he said.

He put his hand on her shoulder and she trembled from head to foot.

"Prove your love!" she whispered, her face still hidden.

He stood awhile motionless, still with his hand upon her. But at last it fell away.

"You doubt my love then?" he said, and his voice sounded strange to her, almost cold. "You think my love is unworthy of you? You have—lost faith in me?"

She was silent.

"Is it so?" he persisted. "Tell me the truth. I may as well know it. You think—because I am not what Capper would, term a thoroughbred—that I am incapable of love. Isn't that so?"

But still she did not answer him. Only, being free, she turned to the garden-seat and sank down upon it, her arms stretched along the back, her head bowed low.

He began to pace up and down like a caged animal, pausing each time he passed her, and each time moving on again as if invisibly urged. At last very suddenly he stopped with his back to her, and stood like a statue in the moonlight.

She did not look at him. She was too near the end of her strength. Her heart was beating very slowly, like a run-down watch. She felt like an old, old woman, utterly tired of life. And she was cold—cold from head to foot.

Minutes passed. Somewhere away in the night an owl hooted, and Nap turned his head sharply, as one accustomed to take note of every sound. A while longer he stood, seeming to listen, every limb alert and tense, then swiftly he wheeled and gazed full at the drooping woman's figure on the bench.

Slowly his attitude changed. Something that was bestial went out of it; something that was human took its place. Quietly at length he crossed the moonlit space that intervened between them, reached her, knelt beside her.

"Anne," he said, and all her life she remembered the deep melancholy of his voice, "I am a savage—a brute—a devil. But I swear that I have it in me to love you—as you deserve to be loved. Won't you have patience with me? Won't you give me a chance—the only chance I've ever had—of getting above myself, of learning what love can be? Won't you trust me with your friendship once more? Believe me, I'm not all brute."

She thrilled like a dead thing waked to life. Her dread of the man passed away like an evil dream, such was the magic he had for her. She slipped one of her cold hands down to him.

He caught it, bowed his head upon it, pressed it against his eyes, then lifted his face and looked up at her.

"It is not the end then? You haven't given me up in disgust?"

And she answered him in the only way possible to her. "I will be your friend still, only—only let there never again be any talk of love between us. That alone will end our friendship. Can I trust you? Nap, can I?"

He jerked back his head at the question, and showed her his face in the full moonlight. And she saw that his eyes were still and passionless, unfathomable as a mountain pool.

"If you can bring yourself—if you will stoop—to kiss me," he said, "I think you will know."

She started at the words, but she knew instantly that she had nought to fear. His voice was as steady

as his eyes. He asked this thing of her as a sign of her forgiveness, of her friendship, of her trust; and every generous impulse urged her to grant it. She knew that if she refused he would get up and go away, cut to the heart. She seemed to feel him pleading with her, earnestly beseeching her, reasoning against prejudice, against the shackles of conventionality, against reason itself. And through it all her love for the man throbbed at the very heart of her, overriding all doubt.

She leaned towards him; she laid her hands upon his shoulders.

"In token of my trust!" she said, and bent to kiss his forehead.

But he gave her his lips instead—the thin, cynical lips that were wont to smile so bitterly. There was no bitterness about them now. They were only grave to sternness. And so, after a moment, she kissed him as he wished, and he kissed her in return.

Afterwards, he rose in unbroken silence, and went away.

CHAPTER VI

THE BURIAL OF A HATCHET

During the weeks that followed, something of her former tranquillity came back to Anne. It was evident that Nap was determined to show himself worthy of her trust, for never by word or look did he make the slightest reference to what had passed between them. He came and went after his customary sudden fashion. He never informed any one of his movements, nor did even Lucas know when he might be expected at Baronmead. But his absences were never of long duration, and Anne met him fairly frequently.

She herself was more at leisure now than she had been for years, for Lucas had found an agent for her and the sole care of her husband's estate no longer lay upon her. She spent much of her time with Mrs. Errol. Her happiest hours were those she spent with Lucas and his mother in the great music-room at Baronmead. It was here also that she learned to know of that hidden, vital quantity, elusive as flame, that was Nap Errol's soul. For here he would often join them, and the music he drew from his violin, weirdly passionate, with a pathos no words could ever utter, was to Anne the very expression of the man's complex being. There were times when she could hardly hear that wild music of his without tears. It was like the crying of something that was lost.

Often, after having accompanied him for a long time, she would take her hands from the piano and sit silent with a strange and bitter sense of impotence, as if he were leading whither she could not follow. And Nap would play on and on in the quiet room, as though he played for her alone, with the sure hand of a master upon the quivering strings of her woman's heart.

But he never spoke to her of love. His eyes conveyed no message at any time. His straight gaze was impenetrable. He never even touched her hand unless she offered it to him. And gradually her confidence in him grew stronger. The instinct that bade her beware of him ceased to disquiet her. She found herself able to meet him without misgiving, believing that he had conquered himself for her sake, believing that he bowed to the inevitable and was willing to content himself with her friendship.

Undoubtedly a change had passed over him. Lucas was aware of it also, felt it in his very touch, marked it a hundred times in the gentleness of his speech and action. He attributed it to the influence of a good woman. It seemed that Nap had found his soul at last.

Bertie alone marked it with uneasiness, but Bertie was no impartial critic. He had distrusted Nap, not without reason, from his boyhood. But matters of a more personal nature were occupying his attention at that time, and he did not bestow much of it upon home affairs. For some reason he had begun to study in earnest, and was reading diligently for the English Bar.

Perhaps Mrs. Errol could have pierced the veil of civilisation in which Nap had wrapped himself had she desired to do so, but she was the last person in the world to attempt such an invasion. There never had been the faintest streak of sympathy between them. Neither was there any tangible antagonism, for each by mutual consent avoided all debatable ground. But there existed very curiously a certain understanding each of the other which induced respect if it did not inspire confidence. Without deliberately avoiding each other they yet never deliberately came in contact, and, though perfectly

friendly in their relations, neither ever offered to cross the subtle dividing line that stretched between them. They were content to be acquaintances merely.

Anne often marvelled in private at Mrs. Errol's attitude towards her adopted son, but the subject was never mentioned between them. Often she would recall Capper's words and wonder if they had expressed the literal truth. She wondered, too, what Capper would say to his ally when he returned at the end of the summer and found the charge he had laid upon her unfulfilled. But, after all, Capper was scarcely more than a stranger, and it seemed to her, upon mature reflection, that he had been inclined to exaggerate the whole matter. She did not believe that Lucas's welfare depended upon Nap's absence. Indeed, there were times when it actually seemed to her that he relied upon Nap for support that none other could give. Moreover, he was growing daily stronger, and this of itself seemed proof sufficient that Nap was at least no hindrance to his progress. She knew also that Nap was using his utmost influence to persuade him to undergo the operation when Capper should return in September; but she had no opportunity for furthering his efforts, for Lucas never referred to the matter in her hearing. If he had yet made his decision he imparted it to none. He seemed to her to be like a soldier awaiting orders to move, with that steadfast patience which had become his second nature. She knew that he would never act upon impulse, and she admired him for it.

Dot, who heard all from Bertie, wondered how he could ever hesitate. But Dot was young and possessed of an abundant energy which knew no flagging. Her vigorous young life was full of schemes, and she knew not what it was to stand and wait. She was keenly engaged just then in company with Mrs. Damer, Mrs. Randal, and a few more, in organising an entertainment in support of the Town Hall and Reading Club, to which Lucas Errol had promised his liberal support. It was no secret that he had offered to supply the whole of the necessary funds, but, as Dot remarked, it was not to be a charity and Baronford was not so poor-spirited as to be entirely dependent upon American generosity. So Lucas was invited to give his substantial help after Baronford had helped itself, which Dot was fully determined it should do to the utmost of its capacity.

Many schemes were in consequence discussed and rejected before the Town Hall Committee finally decided in favour of amateur theatricals.

Here again Lucas Errol's assistance was cordially invited, since no place suitable for such an entertainment existed in Baronford. It was naively intimated to him by Dot that he might provide the theatre and the scenery, so that the profits might be quite unencumbered.

Lucas forthwith purchased an enormous marquee (the cost of which far exceeded any possible profits from the projected entertainment), which he had erected upon his own ground under Dot's superintendence, and thenceforth preparations went gaily forward; not, however, without many a hitch, which Lucas generally managed directly or indirectly to smooth away.

It was Lucas who pressed Nap into the service as stage-manager, a post which had been unanimously urged upon himself, but for which he declared himself to be morally and physically unfit. It was Lucas who persuaded Anne to accept a minor *rôle* though fully aware that she would have infinitely preferred that of onlooker. He had taken her under his protection on that night in March, and he had never relinquished the responsibility then assumed. With a smile, as was his wont with all, he asserted his authority, and with a smile, in common with all who knew him, she yielded even against her own strong inclination.

Nap laughed when he heard of it, despite the fact that he had himself yielded to the same power.

"You seem to find Luke irresistible," he said.

"I do," she admitted simply. "He is somehow too magnificent to refuse. Surely you have felt the same?"

"I?" said Nap. "Oh, I always do what I am told. He rules me with a rod of iron."

Glancing at him, she had a momentary glimpse of a curious, wistful expression on his face that made her vaguely sorry.

Instinctively she went on speaking as if she had not seen it. "I think with Bertie that he is a born king among men. He is better than good. He is great. One feels it even in trifles. He has such an immense patience."

"Colossal," said Nap, and smiled a twisted smile. "That is why he is everybody's own and particular pal. He takes the trouble to find out what's inside. One wonders what on earth he finds to interest him. There's so mighty little in human nature that's worthy of study."

"I don't agree with you," Anne said in her quiet, direct way.

He laughed again and turned the subject. He was always quick to divine her wishes, and to defer to them. Their intercourse never led them through difficult places, a fact which Anne was conscious that she owed to his consideration rather than to her own skill.

She was glad for more than one reason that Lucas had not pressed a very onerous part upon her. She had a suspicion, very soon confirmed, that Nap as stage-manager would prove no indulgent task-master. He certainly would not spare himself, nor would he spare anyone else.

Disputes were rife when he first assumed command, and she wondered much if he would succeed in establishing order, for he possessed none of his brother's winning charm of manner and but a very limited popularity. But Nap showed himself from the outset fully equal to his undertaking. He grappled with one difficulty after another with a lightning alertness, a prompt decision, which soon earned for him the respect of his unruly subordinates. He never quarrelled, neither did he consider the feelings of any. A cynical comment was the utmost he ever permitted himself in the way of retaliation, but he held his own unerringly, evolving order from confusion with a masterly disregard of opposition that carried all before it.

Dot, who was not without a very decided prejudice in favour of her own way, literally gasped in astonishment at his methods. She would have liked to defy him openly a dozen times in a day, but Nap simply would not be defied. He looked over her head with disconcerting arrogance, and Dot found herself defeated and impotent. Dot had been selected for an important part, and it was not very long before she came bitterly to regret the fact. He did not bully her, but he gave her no peace. Over and over again he sent her back to the same place; and over and over again he found some fresh fault, till there came at length a day when Dot, weary and exasperated, subsided suddenly in the midst of rehearsal into indignant tears.

Nap merely raised his eyebrows and turned his attention elsewhere, while Anne drew the sobbing girl away, and tried to soothe her back to composure in privacy.

But it was some time before Dot would be comforted. Her grievance against Nap was very deeply rooted, and it needed but this additional provocation to break its bounds. It was not long before, clinging very tightly to Anne, the whole story came out; how she and Bertie loved each other "better than best," how no one was to know of it and they scarcely dared to exchange a glance in public in consequence, how there could never, never be any engagement, all because that horrid, horrid Nap had dared to hint that she was pursuing Bertie for his money.

"I hate him!" sobbed Dot. "I do hate him! He's cruel and malicious and vindictive. I know he means to prevent our ever being happy together. And—and I know Bertie's afraid of him—and so am I!"

To all of which Anne listened with grave sympathy and such words of comfort as seemed most likely to induce in Dot a calmer and more reasonable state of mind.

But Dot was not to be reassured quickly. It was very seldom that her equanimity was disturbed, only in fact when her deepest feelings were concerned, and this made her breakdown the more complete. She apologised tearfully for her foolishness at rehearsal, which she set down to bodily fatigue. She had been to see poor Squinny that morning, and she thought he really was dying at last. He had cried so, and she hadn't known how to comfort him, and then when she had got home there had been no time for luncheon, so she had just changed and come away without it. And oh,—this with her arms tightly about Anne's neck—she did wish she had a mother to help her. Poor Dad was very sweet, but he didn't understand a bit.

Anne sat with her for the greater part of an hour, comforting her with a grave tenderness that Dot found infinitely soothing. It might have been half a lifetime instead of a brief seven years that stretched between them. For Anne had been a woman long before her time, and Dot for all her self-reliance was still but a child.

She grew calm at last, and presently reverted to the theatricals. Did Lady Carfax think she might withdraw? Nap made her so nervous. She was sure she could never be successful under his management.

Anne strongly advised her not to think of such a thing. In consideration of the fact that Dot had been the moving spirit of the whole scheme such a proceeding would be little short of disastrous. No doubt a substitute could be found, but it would mean an open breach with Nap. Bertie would quarrel with him in consequence, and Lucas would be grievously disappointed.

"We mustn't hurt Lucas," Anne urged. "He has so much to bear already."

And—and he has been so much happier about Nap lately."

"Does Nap worry him too, then?" asked Dot, quickly. "Isn't he hateful? He upsets everybody."

"No—no!" Anne said. "Nap would do anything for Lucas. It is his one solid virtue."

It was at this point that the door opened with a noiseless swing, and Nap himself entered. He advanced with the assured air of one whose welcome is secure.

"Give the devil his due, Lady Carfax!" he drawled. "He has one other anyway."

Even Anne was for the moment disconcerted by the abruptness of his entrance. Dot sprang to her feet with burning cheeks. It was her evident intention to escape, but he intercepted her.

"My business is with you," he said, "not with Lady Carfax. Do you mind waiting a minute?"

Dot waited, striving for dignity. Nap was looking at her narrowly.

In the pause that ensued, Anne rose and passed her arm reassuringly through Dot's.

Nap glanced at her. "That's rather shabby of you," he declared. "I was just going to ask for your support myself."

She smiled at him faintly. "I think you can manage without it. Dot will not refuse her forgiveness if you ask for it properly."

"Won't she?" said Nap, still keenly watching the girl's half-averted face. "I should if I were Dot. You see our feud is of very long standing. We always cut each other when we meet in the street—very pointedly so that no one could possibly imagine for a moment that we were strangers. We don't like doing it in the least, but we are both so infernally proud that there is no alternative. And so we have got to keep it up all our days, long after the primary reason for it all has sunk into oblivion. By the way, I have forgotten already what the primary reason was."

"I—haven't," said Dot, in a very low voice. Her lower lip was quivering. She bit it desperately.

"No?" said Nap.

"No!" Dot turned her flushed face suddenly upon him. "You never meant me to forget," she said, in a voice that shook beyond control.

"It must have been something very venomous," he said.

"It was!" she answered, fighting with herself. "You—you know it was!"

"It's not worth crying about anyway," said Nap. "My sting may be poisonous, but it has never yet proved fatal. Tell me where the mischief is, and p'r'aps I can remove it."

He was smiling as he made the suggestion, smiling without malice, and, though Dot could not bring herself to smile in return, she was none the less mollified.

"What was it?" he persisted, pressing his advantage. "Something beastly I said or looked or did? I often do, you know. It's just my way. Do you know what it was, Lady Carfax?"

She nodded. "And I think you do too," she said.

"I don't," he asserted, "on my honour."

Dot looked incredulous. "Don't you remember that day in February," she said, "the first day I ever came here—the day you accused me of—of running after Bertie for—his money?"

"Great Christopher!" said Nap. "You don't say you took me seriously?"

"Of course I did," she said, on the verge of tears. "You—you were serious too."

"Ye gods!" said Nap. "And I've been wondering why on earth you and Bertie couldn't make up your minds! So I've been the obstacle, have I? And that's why you have been hating me so badly all this time—as if I were the arch-fiend himself! By Jove!" He swung round on his heel. "We'll put this right at once. Where's Bertie?"

"Oh, no!" Dot said nervously. "No! Don't call him! He'll see I've been crying. Nap—please!"

She disengaged herself from Anne, and sprang after him, seizing him impetuously by the arm.

"I mean—Mr. Errol!" she substituted in confusion.

He clapped his hand upon hers and wheeled. "You can call me anything under the sun that occurs to you as suitable," he said. "You may kick me also if you like—which is a privilege I don't accord to everybody. You won't believe me, I daresay. Few people do. But I'm sorry I was a beast to you that day. I don't deal in excuses, but when I tell you that I was rather badly up against something, p'raps you'll be magnanimous enough to forgive me. Will you?"

He looked her straight in the face with the words. There was little of humility about him notwithstanding them, but there was something of melancholy that touched her warm heart.

"Of course I will!" she said impulsively. "Let's be friends, shall we?"

He gripped her hand till she felt the bones crack. "Suppose we go and get some tea," he said. "Are you coming, Lady Carfax?"

"I'm not fit to be seen," objected Dot, hanging back.

He drew her on, her hand still fast in his. "Don't be shy, my dear girl! You look all right. Will you lead the way, Lady Carfax? In the hall, you know."

Very reluctantly Dot submitted. She had not the faintest inkling of his intentions or her docility would have vanished on the instant. As it was, fortified by Anne's presence, she yielded to his insistence.

The hall was full of people to whom Mrs. Errol was dispensing tea, assisted by Bertie, who had emerged from his den for the purpose. Bertie's studies did not permit him to take any part in the theatricals. Possibly Nap's position at the head of affairs had assisted his resolution in this respect.

He was sitting on the arm of Lucas's chair, hastily gulping some tea in an interval snatched from his ministrations, when Anne entered, closely followed by Dot and his brother. Some instinct moved him to turn and look, for in the general buzz of talk and laughter around him he could have heard nothing of their approach. He looked, then stared, finally stood up and set down his cup abruptly.

As Nap came towards him, still holding Dot by the hand, he turned white to the lips and moved forward.

A sudden silence fell as they met. They were the centre of the crowd, the centre of observation, the centre of an unseen whirlpool of emotions that threatened to be overwhelming.

And then with a smile Nap put an end to a tension of expectancy that had become painful.

"Hullo, Bertie!" he said, and smote him on the shoulder with a vigorous hand. "I've just been hearing about your engagement, my dear fellow. Congratulations! May you and Dot have the best of everything all your lives!"

Poor Dot would have fled had that been possible, but she was hedged in too closely for that. Moreover, Nap had transferred her hand to Bertie's, and the boy's warm grasp renewed her fainting courage. She knew he was as amazed as she was herself at Nap's sudden move, and she determined that she would stand by him at whatever cost.

And after all, the difficult moment passed very quickly. People crowded round them with kindly words, shook hands with them, chaffed them both, and seemed to be genuinely pleased with the turn of events. Mrs. Errol came forward in her hearty way and kissed them; and in the end Dot found herself in Bertie's vacated place on the arm of Lucas's chair, with his steady hand holding hers, and his quiet, sincere voice telling her that he was "real glad that the thing was fixed up at last."

Later Bertie took her home in the motor, and explained the situation to the rector, who was mildly bewildered but raised no definite objection to the announcement of the engagement. He was something of a philosopher, and Bertie had always been a favourite of his. Nap in fact was the only member of the Errol family for whom he did not entertain the most sincere esteem; but, as Dot remarked that night, Nap was a puzzle to everybody. It seemed highly probable after all that he carried a kind heart behind his cynical exterior. She was sure that Lady Carfax thought so, since she invariably treated him as an intimate friend.

The rector admitted that she might be right, but after Dot had gone to bed he leaned his elbow on his writing-table and sat long in thought.

"I wonder," he murmured to himself presently, "I wonder if Lady Carfax knows what she is doing. She really is too young, poor girl, to be so much alone."

CHAPTER VII

A QUESTION OF TRUST

The theatricals were arranged to take place on an evening in the beginning of July, and for that one night Mrs. Errol persuaded Anne to sleep at Baronmead. She would not consent to leave the Manor for longer, for she still superintended much of the management of the estate and overlooked the agent's work. She had begun to wonder if all her days would be spent thus, for the reports which reached her regularly of her husband's state of health were seldom of a hopeful nature. In fact they varied very little, and a brain specialist had given it as his opinion that, though it was impossible to speak with certainty, Sir Giles might remain in his present condition of insanity for years, even possibly for as long as he lived. He was the last of his family, and the title would die with him. And Anne wondered—often she wondered—if it were to be her lot to live out the rest of her life alone.

She did not mind solitude, nor was she altogether unhappy, but she was too young not to feel now and then the deep stirrings of her youth. And she had lived so little in all her twenty-five years of life. Yet with that habit of self-control which had grown up with her, and which made many think her cold, she would not suffer her thoughts to dwell upon past or future. Her world was very small, and, as she had once told Nap, she contented herself with "the work that was nearest". If it did not greatly warm her heart, it kept her from brooding over trouble.

On the morning of the day fixed for the theatricals he came over in the motor to fetch her. It was a glorious day of summer, and Anne was in the garden. He joined her there, and they walked for awhile in the green solitudes, talking of the coming entertainment.

They came in their wanderings to the seat under the lilac trees. She wondered afterwards if he had purposely directed their steps thither. They had not been together there since that night when the lilac had been in bloom, that night of perfect spring, the night when their compact had been made and sealed. Did he think of it, she wondered as they passed. If so, he made no sign, but talked on in casual strain as if she were no more than the most casual of friends. Very faithfully he had kept his part of the compact, so faithfully that when they were past she was conscious of a sense of chill mingling with her relief. He had stifled his passion for her, it seemed, and perhaps it was only by comparison that his friendship felt so cold and measured.

She was glad when they reached Baronmead at length. It was like going into sudden sunshine to enter Lucas's presence and feel the warmth of his welcome about her heart. She stayed long talking with him. Here was a friend indeed, a friend to trust, a friend to confide in, a friend to love. He might be "everybody's own and particular pal," as Nap had said, but she knew intuitively that this friend of hers kept a corner for her that was exclusively her own, a safe refuge in which she had found shelter for the first time on that night that seemed so long ago when he had held her in his arms and comforted her as though he had been a woman, and which she knew had been open to her ever since.

There was a final rehearsal in the afternoon which went remarkably smoothly. Anne's part was not a lengthy one, and as soon as it was over she went back to the house in search of Mrs. Errol. She had left directions for her letters to be sent after her, and she found two or three awaiting her in the hall. She picked them up, and passed into the music-room.

Here she found Lucas reading some correspondence of his own.

He looked up with a smile. "Oh, Lady Carfax! I was just thinking of you. I have a letter here from my friend Capper. You remember Dr. Capper?"

"Very well indeed," she said, stifling a sudden pang at the name.

He lay motionless in his chair, studying her with those shrewd blue eyes that she never desired to avoid. "I believe Capper took you more or less into his confidence," he said. "It's a risky thing for a doctor to do, but he is a student of human nature as well as human anatomy. He generally knows what he is about. Won't you sit down?"

She took the seat near him that he indicated. Somehow the mention of Capper had made her cold. She was conscious of a shrinking that was almost physical from the thought of ever seeing him again.

"Capper wants to have the shaping of my destiny," Lucas went on meditatively. "In other words, he wants to pull me to pieces and make a new man of me. Sometimes I am strongly tempted to let him try. At other times," he was looking at her fully, "I hesitate."

She put her shrinking from her and faced him. "Will you tell me why?"

"Because," he said slowly, "I have a fear that I might be absent when wanted."

"But you are always wanted," she said quickly.

He smiled. "Thank you, Lady Carfax. But that was not my meaning. I think you understand me. I think Capper must have told you. I am speaking with regard to—my brother Nap."

He spoke the last words very deliberately. He was still looking at her kindly but very intently. She felt the blood rush to her heart. For the first time her eyes fell before his.

He went on speaking at once, as if to reassure her, to give her time. "You've been a stanch friend to him, I know, and you've done a big thing for him. You've tamed him, shaped him, made a man of him. I felt your influence upon him before I ever met you. I sensed your courage, your steadfastness, your goodness. But you are only a woman, eh, Lady Carfax? And Rome wasn't built in a day. There may come a time when the savage gets the upper hand of him again. And then, if I were not by to hold him in, he might gallop to his own or someone else's destruction. That is what I have to think of before I decide."

"But—can you always hold him?" Anne said.

"Always, Lady Carfax." Very quietly, with absolute confidence, came the reply. "You may put your last dollar on that, and you won't lose it. We settled that many years ago, once and for all. But I've been asking myself lately if I need be so anxious, if possibly Rome may be nearer completion than I imagine. Is it so? Is it so? I sometimes think you know him better than I do myself."

"I!" Anne said.

"You, Lady Carfax."

With an effort she looked up. His eyes were no longer closely studying her. He seemed to be looking beyond.

"If you can trust him," he said quietly, "I know that I can. The question is—Can you?"

He waited very quietly for her answer, still not looking at her. But it was long in coming.

At last. "I do not feel that I know him as I once did," she said, her voice very low, "nor is my influence over him what it was. But I think, if you trust him, he will not disappoint you."

The kindly eyes rested upon her again for a moment, but he made no comment upon the form in which she had couched her reply.

He merely, after the briefest pause, smiled and thanked her.

CHAPTER VIII

A SUDDEN BLOW

Anne found herself the first to enter the drawing room that night before dinner. It was still early, barely half-past seven. The theatricals were to begin at nine.

She had her unopened letters with her, and she sat down to peruse them by an open window. The evening sun poured full upon her in fiery splendour. She leaned her head against the woodwork, a little wearied.

She opened the first letter mechanically. Her thoughts were wandering. Without much interest she

withdrew it from the envelope, saw it to be unimportant, and returned it after the briefest inspection. The next was of the same order, and received a similar treatment. The third and last she held for several seconds in her hand, and finally opened with obvious reluctance. It was from a doctor in the asylum in which her husband had been placed. Slowly her eyes travelled along the page.

When she turned it at length her hands were shaking, shaking so much that the paper rattled and quivered like a living thing. The writing ended on the further page, but before her eyes reached the signature the letter had fallen from her grasp. Anne, the calm, the self-contained, the stately, sat huddled in her chair—a trembling, stricken woman, with her hands pressed tightly over her eyes, as if to shut out some dread vision.

In the silence that followed someone entered the room with a light, cat-like tread, and approached the window against which she sat. But so overwhelmed was she for the moment that she was unaware of any presence till Nap's voice spoke to her, and she started to find him close to her, within reach of her hand.

She lifted her white face then, while mechanically she groped for the letter. It had fallen to the ground. He picked it up.

"What is it?" he said, and she thought his voice sounded harsh. "You have had bad news?"

She held out her hand for the letter. "No, it is good. I—am a little tired, that's all."

"That is not all," he said, and she heard the dogged note in his voice that she had come to know as the signal of indomitable resolution. He sat down on the window seat close to her, still keeping the letter in his hand.

She made a little hopeless gesture and sat silent, striving for composure. She knew that during the seconds that followed, his eyes never stirred from her face. It was his old trick of making her feel the compulsion of his will. Often before she had resisted it. To-night she was taken at a disadvantage. He had caught her unarmed. She was powerless.

She turned her head at last and spoke. "You may read that letter," she said.

The thin lips smiled contemptuously for an instant. "I have read it already," he said.

She started slightly, meeting his eyes. "You have read it?"

"In your face," he told her coolly. "It contains news of the man you call your husband. It is to say he is better—and—coming—home."

He spoke the last words as though he were actually reading them one by one in her tragic eyes.

"It is an experiment," she whispered. "He wishes it himself, it seems, and they think the change might prove beneficial. He is decidedly better—marvellously so. And he has expressed the desire to see me. Of course"—she faltered a little—"I should not be—alone with him. There would be an attendant. But—but you mustn't think I am afraid. It wasn't that. Only—only—I did not expect it. It has come rather suddenly. I am not so easily upset as a rule."

She spoke hurriedly, almost as though she were pleading with him to understand and to pardon her weakness.

But her words quivered into silence. Nap said nothing whatever. He sat motionless, the letter still in his hand, his eyes unswervingly fixed upon her,

That sphinx-like stare became unbearable at last. She gathered her strength and rose.

"You came upon me at an unlucky moment," she said. "Please forget it."

He still stared at her stonily without moving or speaking. Something that was almost fear gripped her. The very stillness of the man was in a fashion intimidating.

She stood before him, erect, and at least outwardly calm. "May I have my letter?" she said.

The words were a distinct command, and after a very decided pause he responded to it. He rose with a quick, lithe movement, and handed her the letter with a brief bow.

An instant later, while she still waited for him to speak, he turned on his heel and left her.

Very soon after, Mrs. Errol came in, and then one after another those who were staying in the house

for the entertainment. But Anne had commanded herself by that time. No one noticed anything unusual in her demeanour.

Nap was absent from the dinner—table. Someone said that he was superintending some slight alteration on the stage. It was so ordinary an occurrence for him to fail to appear at a meal that no one was surprised. Only Anne covered a deep uneasiness beneath her resolute serenity of manner. She could not forget that basilisk stare. It haunted her almost to the exclusion of everything else. She had no thought to spare for the letter regarding her husband. She could only think of Nap. What had that stare concealed? She felt that if she could have got past those baffling, challenging eyes she would have seen something terrible.

Yet when she met him again she wondered if after all she had disquieted herself for nought. He was standing at the stage-entrance to the marquee, discussing some matter with one of the curtain-pullers when she arrived. He stood aside for her to pass, and she went by quickly, avoiding his eyes.

She kept out of his way studiously till her turn came, then perforce she had to meet him again, for he was stationed close to the opening on to the stage through which she had to pass. For the moment there was no one else at hand, and she felt her heart beat thick and fast as she waited beside him for her cue.

He did not speak to her, did not, she fancied, even look at her; but after a few dumb seconds his hand came out to hers and held it in a close, sinewy grip. Her own was nerveless, cold as ice. She could not have withdrawn it had she wished. But she did not wish. That action of his had a strange effect upon her, subtly calming her reawakened doubts. She felt that he meant to reassure her, and she suffered herself to be reassured.

Later, she marvelled at the ingenuity that had so successfully blinded her, marvelled at herself for having been so blinded, marvelled most of all at the self-restraint that could so shackle and smother the fierce passion that ran like liquid fire in every vein as to make her fancy that it had ceased to be.

When her turn came at length she collected herself and left him with a smile.

She went through her part very creditably, but she was unspeakably thankful when it was over.

"You are tired, Lady Carfax," Lucas murmured, when at length she found her way to the seat beside him that he had been reserving for her.

"A little," she admitted.

And then suddenly the impulse to tell him the primary cause of her trouble came upon her irresistibly. She leaned towards him and spoke under cover of the orchestra.

"Mr. Errol, I have had news of—my husband. He wants to come home. No, he is not well yet, but decidedly better, well enough to be at liberty in the charge of an attendant. And so—and so—"

The whispered words failed. She became silent, waiting for the steady sympathy for which she knew she would never wait in vain.

But he did not speak at once. It almost seemed as if he were at a loss. It almost seemed as if he realised too fully for speech that leaden weight of despair which had for a space so terribly overwhelmed her.

And then at last his voice came to her, slow and gentle, yet with a vital note in it that was like a bugle-call to her tired spirit. "Stick to it, Lady Carfax! You'll win out. You're through the worst already."

Desperately, as one half-ashamed, she answered him. "I wish with all my heart I could think so. But—I am still asking myself if—if there is no way of escape."

He turned his head in the dim light and looked at her, and shame stabbed her deeper still. Yet she would not recall the words. It was better that he should know, better that he should not deem her any greater or worthier than she was.

Then, "Thank you for telling me," he said very simply. "But you'll win out all the same. I have always known that you were on the winning side."

The words touched her in a fashion not wholly accountable. Her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"What makes you have such faith in me?" she said.

The light was too dim for her to see his face, but she knew that he was smiling as he made reply.

"That's just one of the things I can't explain," he said. "But I think God made you for a spar for drowning men to cling to."

She smiled with him in spite of the tears. "May the spar never fail you!" she said.

"I am not afraid," he answered very steadily.

CHAPTER IX

THE BOON

It was long before Anne slept that night, but yet though restless she was not wholly miserable. Neither was she perplexed. Her duty lay before her clearly defined, and she meant to fulfil it. Those few words with Lucas Errol had decided her beyond all hesitancy, so completely was she in sympathy with this strong friend of hers. Perhaps her wavering had only been the result of a moment's weakness, following upon sudden strain. But the strain had slackened, and the weakness was over. She knew that even Nap had not the power to move her now. With the memory of his firm hand-grip came the conviction that he would not seek to do so. Like herself he had been momentarily dismayed it might be, but he had taken his place among her friends, not even asking to be foremost, and remembering this, she resolutely expelled any lingering doubt of him. Had she not already proved that she had but to trust him to find him trustworthy? What tangible reason had he given her for withdrawing her trust even for a moment? She reproached herself for it, and determined that she would never doubt him again.

But yet sleep was long in coming to her. Once when it seemed near, the hooting of an owl near the open window drove it away; and once in the vague twilight before the dawn she started awake to hear the sharp thudding of a horse's hoofs galloping upon the turf not very far away. That last set her heart a-beating, she could not have said wherefore, save that it reminded her vaguely of a day in the hunting-field that had ended for her in disaster.

She slept at last and dreamed—a wild and fearful dream. She dreamed that she was on horseback, galloping, galloping, galloping, in headlong flight from someone, she knew not whom, but it was someone of whom she was unspeakably afraid. And ever behind her at break-neck speed, gaining upon her, merciless as fate, galloped her pursuer. It was terrible, it was agonising, yet, though in her heart she knew it to be a dream, she could not wake. And then, all suddenly, the race was over. Someone drew abreast of her. A sinewy hand gripped her bridle-rein. With a gasping cry she turned to face her captor, and saw—a Red Indian! His tigerish eyes gazed into hers. He was laughing with a fiendish exultation. The eagle feathers tossed above his swarthy face. It came nearer to her; it glared into her own. And suddenly recognition stabbed her like a sword. It was the face of Nap Errol....

He was on the stairs talking to Hudson, the valet, when she descended to breakfast, but he turned at once to greet her.

"I am sorry to say Lucas has had a bad night. He will keep his room to-day. How have you slept, Lady Carfax?"

She answered him conventionally. They went downstairs together.

Bertie was in the hall studying a newspaper. He came forward, scowling heavily, shook hands with Anne, and immediately addressed his brother.

"I've just come in from the stable. Have you been out all night? You've nearly ridden the mare to death."

Anne glanced at Nap instinctively. He was smiling. "Don't vex yourself, my good Bertie," he said. "The mare will be all right after a feed."

"Will she?" growled Bertie. "She is half dead from exhaustion anyway."

"Oh, skittles!" said Nap, turning to go.

The boy's indignation leaped to a blaze. "Skittles to you! I know what I'm saying. And if you're not ashamed of yourself, you damned well ought to be!"

Nap stopped. "What?" he drawled.

Bertie glared at him and subsided. The explosion had been somewhat more violent than he had intended.

Very quietly Nap stepped up to him. "Will you repeat that last remark of yours?"

Bertie was silent.

"Or do you prefer to withdraw it?"

Bertie maintained a dogged silence. He was fidgeting with the paper in a fashion that seemed to indicate embarrassment.

"Do you withdraw it?" Nap repeated, still quiet, still slightly drawling.

Bertie hunched his shoulders like a schoolboy. "Oh, get away, Nap!" he growled. "Yes—sorry I spoke. Now clear out and leave me alone!"

Anne was already at the further end of the hall, but Nap overtook her before she entered the breakfast room. He opened the door for her, and as she passed him she saw that he was still faintly smiling.

"Pardon the *contretemps!*" he said. "You may have noticed before that I am not particularly good at swallowing insults."

"I wonder if there was a cause for it," she said, looking at him steadily. "Remember, I know what your riding is like."

He raised his eyebrows for a moment, then laughed. The room they entered was empty.

"No one down yet!" he observed. "Take a seat by the window. What will you have?"

He attended to her wants and his own, and finally sat down facing her. He seemed to be in excellent spirits.

"Please don't look so severe!" he urged. "Just as I am going to ask a favour of you, too!"

She smiled a little but not very willingly. "I don't like cruel people," she said. "Cruelty is a thing I can never forget because I abhor it so."

"And are you never cruel?" said Nap.

"I hope not."

"I hope not, too," he rejoined, giving her a hard look. "But I sometimes have my doubts."

Anne looked out of the window in silence.

The sharp rapping of his knuckles on the table recalled her. She turned, slightly startled, and met his imperious eyes. He smiled at her.

"Queen Anne, I crave a boon."

Almost involuntarily she returned his smile. "So you said before."

"And you don't even ask what it is."

"I am not quite sure that I want to know, Nap," she said.

"You are not liking me this morning," he observed.

She made no answer.

"What is it?" he said. "Is it the mare?"

She hesitated. "Perhaps, in part."

"And the other part?" He leaned forward, looking at her keenly. "Are you afraid of me, Anne?" he said.

His voice was free from reproach, yet her heart smote her. She reminded herself of how he had once pleaded with her for her trust.

"I'm sorry I pressed the mare," he said, "but it was quite as much her fault as mine. Moreover, the cub exaggerated. I will fetch him in and make him own it if you like."

She stayed him with a gesture. "No, don't, please! I think Bertie was probably in the right."

"Do you, though?" Nap leaned back again, regarding her with supercilious attention. "It's rather—daring of you to say so."

"Do you really think I stand in awe of you?" she said.

"You are such a truly remarkable woman," he made answer, "that I scarcely know what to think. But since you are not afraid of me—apparently, perhaps I may venture to come to the point. Do you know I have been laying plans for a surprise picnic for you and—one other? It's such a gorgeous day. Don't refuse!"

The boyish note she liked to hear sounded suddenly in his voice. He discarded his cynicism and leaned towards her again, eager, persuasive.

"Don't refuse," he reiterated. "Look at the sunshine, listen to the birds, think of a whole day in the open! I'll take you to the loveliest place I know in this quaint little island, and I'll be your slave all day long. Oh, I promise you won't find me in the way. Now don't look prudish. Be a girl for once. Never mind the rest of creation. No one else will know anything about it. We leave Baronmead this morning in the motor, and who cares what time we reach the Manor? It can't matter to you or anyone. Say you'll come! Say it!"

"My dear Nap!" Anne looked at him dubiously, uncertain whether to take him seriously.

"Say it!" he repeated. "There is no earthly reason why you shouldn't. And I'll take such care of you. Why shouldn't you have a real good time for once? You never have had in all your life."

True, only too true! But it was not that fact that made her waver.

"Will you tell me what plans you have made for this picnic?" she asked at length.

He began to smile. "My plans, Lady Carfax, are entirely subject to your approval. About forty miles from here there is a place called Bramhurst—a place after your own heart—a paradise. With judicious driving we could be there by one or soon after—in time for luncheon."

"Yes?" she said, as he stopped.

"That's all," said Nap.

"But—afterwards?" she hazarded.

"My dear Lady Carfax, if it is to be a surprise picnic, where's the use of settling all the details beforehand?" Nap's tone was one of indulgent protest; he was eating and drinking rapidly, as if he had an appointment to keep. "My suggestion is that we then follow our inclinations—your inclinations." He smiled at her again. "I am your slave till sunset."

"Could we be back at the Manor by then?" she asked.

"Of course we could."

"Will you promise that we shall be?" She looked up at him seriously.

He was still smiling. "If you ordain it," he said.

"I must be back by dinner-time," she asserted.

"And you dine?"

"At eight."

He pushed back his chair and rose. "Very discreet of you! The sun sets at eight-ten. At what hour will you deign to be ready?"

"At eleven," said Anne.

He glanced at his watch. "I am afraid you can't see Lucas to say good-bye. Hudson has just given him morphia."

"Is he so bad then?" she asked quickly.

"No worse than he has been before. Bad pain all night. He always fights against taking the stuff. I persuaded him." He spoke shortly, as if the subject were distasteful to him. "No doubt he is easier by this time," he added. "Eleven o'clock then! I will go and get ready." But even then he paused, his hand on the back of her chair. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked lightly.

She glanced up at him. "A secret?"

"An it please you," he said, "let this be a secret between yourself and your humble slave!"

And with the words he turned with an air of finality and went away.

CHAPTER X

A DAY IN PARADISE

It was a day in the very heart of the summer, a day of cloudless skies and wonderful, magic breezes, a day for the dreaming—and perchance for the fulfilment—of dreams. Swift and noiseless as the swoop of a monster bird the motor glided on its way; now rushing, now slackening, but never halting. Sometimes it seemed to Anne that she sat motionless while the world raced by her. She had often seen herself thus. And then with a thrill of the pulses came the exultation of rapid movement, banishing the illusion, while the very heart of her rejoiced in the knowledge thereof. For this one day—for this one day—she had left the desert behind her. She had yielded half against her judgment, but she knew no regret. On the morrow she would be back in the waste places where, during all her womanhood, she had wandered. But for this one day the roses bloomed for her and she drank deep of their fragrance. It had come to her so unexpectedly, so dazzlingly, this brief and splendid hour. She marvelled at herself that she had hesitated even for a moment to accept it.

Perhaps memories of another day came now and again to her as she leaned back on the cushions and opened her soul to the sunshine, memories of a day of sparkling winter which had begun in much the same genial atmosphere and had ended in most hideous disaster. But if they came she put them resolutely from her. There was no time to waste upon past or future. For this one day she would drink the wine of the gods; she would live.

Nap drove in almost unbroken silence. He was wearing a mask, and she had no clue to his thoughts; but she scarcely speculated about him. She did not want to talk. She only desired to give herself up to the pure pleasure of rapid movement. She had complete faith in his driving. If daring, he was never reckless, with her beside him.

The meadows were full of hay, and the scent of it lay like a spell upon the senses. The whirr of the mowing machine filled the air with a lazy droning. It was like a lullaby. And ever they sped on, through towns and villages and hamlets, through woods and lanes and open country, sure and swift and noiseless save for the cheery humming of the motor, which sang softly to itself like a spinning top.

They went through country of which Anne had no knowledge, but Nap seemed fully acquainted with it; for he never paused to ask the way, never raised his eyes to the finger-posts that marked the cross-roads. She marvelled at his confidence, but asked no questions. It was not a day for questions.

Only when they emerged at last upon a wide moor, where the early heather grew in tufts of deepest rose, she cried to him suddenly to stop.

"I must get some of it. It is the first I have seen. Look! How exquisite!"

He drew up at the side of the long white road that zigzagged over the moor, and they went together into the springy heath, wading in it after the waxen flowers.

And here Anne sat down in the blazing sunshine and lifted her clear eyes to his. "I won't thank you, because we are friends," she said. "But this is the best day I have ever had."

He pushed up his goggles and sat down beside her. "So you are not sorry you came?" he said.

"I could not be sorry to-day," she answered. "How long have you known this perfect place?"

He lay back in the heather with his arms flung wide. "I came here first one day in the spring, a day in May. The place was a blaze of gorse and broom—as if it were on fire. It suited me—for I was on fire too."

In the silence that succeeded his words he turned and leisurely scrutinised her. She was snapping a stalk of heather with minute care. A deep flush rose and spread over her face under his eyes.

"Why don't you look at me?" he said.

Very slowly her eyes came down to him. He was smiling in a secret fashion, not as if he expected her to smile in return. The sunlight beat down upon his upturned face. He blinked at her lazily and stretched every limb in succession, like a cat.

"Let me know when you begin to feel bored," he said. "I am quite ready to amuse you."

"I thought it was only the bores who were ever bored," she said.

He opened his eyes a little. "Did I say that or did you?"

She returned to her heather-pulling. "I believe you said it originally."

"I remember," he returned composedly. "It was on the night you bestowed upon me the office of court-jester, the night you dreamed I was the Knave of Diamonds, the night that—"

She interrupted very gently but very resolutely; "The night that we became friends, Nap."

"A good many things happened that night," he remarked, pulling off his cap and pitching it from him.

"Is that wise?" she said. "The sun is rather strong."

He sat up, ignoring the warning. "Anne," he said, "have you ever dreamed about me since that night?"

She was silent, all her attention concentrated upon her bunch of heather. His eyes left her face and began to study her hands.

After a moment he pulled a bit of string out of his pocket and without a word proceeded to wind it round the stalks she held. As he knotted it he spoke.

"So that is why you were afraid of me to-day. I knew there was something. I wined it the moment we met. Whenever I hold your hand in mine I can see into your soul. What was it, Anne? The Knave of Diamonds on a black mare—riding to perdition?"

He laughed at her softly as though she had been a child. He was still watching her hands. Suddenly he laid his own upon them and looked into her face.

"Or was it just a savage?" he asked her quietly.

Against her will, in spite of the blaze of sunshine, she shivered.

"Yes," he said. "But isn't it better to face him than to run away? Haven't you always found it so? You kissed him once, Anne. Do you remember? It was the greatest thing that ever happened to him."

He spoke with a gentleness that amazed her. His eyes held hers, but without compulsion. He was lulling her fear of him to rest, as he alone knew how.

She answered him with quivering lips. "I have wondered since if I did wrong."

"Then don't wonder," he said. "For I was nearer to the God you worship at that moment than I had ever been before. I never believed in Him till then, but that night I wrestled with Him—and got beaten." He dropped suddenly into his most cynical drawl, so that she wondered if, after all, he were mocking her. "It kind of made an impression on me. I thought it might interest you to know. Have you had enough of this yet? Shall we move on?"

She rose in silence. She was very far from certain, and yet she fancied there had been a ring of sincerity in his words.

As they reached the car she laid her hand for an instant on his arm. "If it did that for you, Nap," she said, "I do not regret it."

He smiled in his faint, cynical fashion. "I believe you'll turn me out a good man some day," he said. "And I wonder if you will like me any when it's done."

"I only want you to be your better self," she answered gently.

"Which is a myth," he returned, as he handed her in, "which exists only in your most gracious imagination."

And with that he pulled the mask over his face once more and turned to the wheel.

CHAPTER XI

THE RETURN TO EARTH

It was nearly two before they reached Bramhurst and drew up before the one ancient inn the place possessed. Upstairs, in a lattice-windowed room with sloping floor and bulging ceiling, a room that was full of the scent of honeysuckle, Anne washed away the dust of the road. Turning to the mirror on the dressing-table when this was over, she stood a moment wide-eyed, startled. Through her mind there swept again the memory of a day that seemed very far away—a day begun in sunshine and ended in storm, a day when she had looked into the eyes of a white-faced woman in the glass and had shrunk away in fear. It was a very different vision that now met her gaze, and yet she had a feeling that there was something in it that remained unaltered. Was it in the eyes that shone from a face so radiant that it might have been the face of a girl?

She could not have said. Only after that one brief glimpse she looked no more.

Descending, she found Nap waiting for her in the oak-beamed coffee-room. He made her sit facing the open window, looking forth upon hill and forest and shallow winding river.

The stout old English waiter who attended to their wants very speedily withdrew.

"He thinks we are on our wedding-trip," said Nap.

She glanced at him sharply.

"Yes, I let him have it so," he returned. "I never destroy a pretty illusion if I can help it."

"What time do we start back?" said Anne, aware of burning cheeks, which he was studying with undisguised amusement.

"Would you like some ice?" he suggested.

She laughed, with something of an effort. "Don't be ridiculous, Nap!"

"I am sure you have never done anything so improper in all your life before," he went on. "What must it feel like? P'r'aps you would have preferred me to explain the situation to him in detail? I will have him in and do it now—if you really think it worth while. I shouldn't myself, but then I seldom suffer from truthfulness in its most acute form. It's a tiresome disease, isn't it? One might almost call it dashed inconvenient on an occasion such as this. There is only one remedy that I can suggest, and that is to pretend it's true."

"I am not good at pretending," Anne answered gravely.

He laughed. "Very true, O Queen! Horribly true! But I am, you know, a positive genius in that respect. So I'm going to pretend I'm an Englishman—of the worthy, thick-headed, bulldog breed. (I am sure you admire it; you wouldn't be an Englishwoman if you didn't). And you are my devoted and adorable wife. You needn't look shocked. It's all for the sake of that chap's morals. Do you think I can do it?"

"I don't want you to do it, Nap," she said earnestly.

He dropped the subject instantly. "Your wish is law. There is only one other person in this world who can command my implicit obedience in this fashion. So I hope you appreciate your power."

"And that other is Lucas?" said Anne.

He nodded. "Luke the irresistible! Did you ever try to resist him?"

She shook her head with a smile.

"Take my advice then," he said. "Never do! He could whip creation with his hands tied behind him. Oh, I know you all think him mild-tempered and easy-going, more like a woman than a man. But you wait till you're hard up against him. Then you'll know what I mean when I tell you he's colossal." There was a queer ring of passion in his voice as he ended. It sounded to Anne like the half-stifled cry of a wounded animal.

Because of it she repressed the impulse to ask him what he meant. Nevertheless, after a moment, as if impelled by some hidden force, he continued.

"There was a time when I thought of him much as you do. And then one day there came a reckoning—an almighty big reckoning." He leaned back in his chair and stared upwards, while the grim lines of his mouth tightened. "It was down in Arizona. We fought a duel that lasted a day and a night. He was a worse cripple in those days than he is now, but he won out—he won out." Again came the cynical drawl, covering his actual feelings as with an impenetrable veil. "I've had a kind of respect for him ever since," he said. "One does, you know."

"One would," said Anne, and again refrained from asking questions.

She was thinking of the complete confidence with which Lucas had spoken of his ascendancy over this man.

Finishing luncheon they went out over the common that stretched from the very door, down the hillside of short, sun-baked grass, passing between masses of scorched broom, whose bursting pods crackled perpetually in the sunshine, till they came to the green shade of forest trees and the gleam of a running stream.

The whirr of grasshoppers filled the air and the humming of insects innumerable. Away in the distance sounded the metal clang of a cow-bell. It was the only definite sound that broke the stillness. The heat was intense. A dull, copper haze had risen and partially obscured the sun.

Anne stopped on the edge of the stream. Wonderful dragon-flies such as she had never seen before, peacock, orange and palest green, darted to and fro above the brown water. Nap leaned against a tree close to her and smoked a cigarette.

She spoke at last without turning. "Am I in fairyland, I wonder?"

"Or the Garden of Eden," suggested Nap.

She laughed a little, and stooping tried to reach a forget-me-not that grew on the edge of the water.

"Beware of the serpent!" he warned. "Anyway, don't tumble in!"

She stretched back a hand to him. "Don't let me go!"

His hand closed instantly and firmly upon her wrist. In a moment she drew back with the flower in her hand, to find his cigarette smouldering on a tuft of moss. He set his foot upon it without explanation and lighted another.

"Ought we not to be starting back?" she asked.

"It won't be so hot in half-an-hour," he said.

"But how long will it take?"

"It can be done in under three hours. If we start at half-past-four you should be home well before sunset."

He smiled with the words, and Anne suffered herself to be persuaded. Certainly the shade of the beech trees was infinitely preferable to the glare of the dusty roads, and the slumberous atmosphere made her feel undeniably languorous.

She sat down therefore on the roots of a tree, still watching the dragon-flies flitting above the water.

Nap stripped off his coat and made it into a cushion. "Lean back on this. Yes, really. I'm thankful for the excuse to go without it. How is that? Comfortable?"

She thanked him with a smile. "I mustn't go to sleep."

"Why not?" said Nap. "There is nothing to disturb you. I'm going back to the inn to order tea before we start."

He was off with the words with that free, agile gait of his that always made her think of some wild creature of the woods.

She leaned back with a sense of complete well-being and closed her eyes....

When she opened them again it was with a guilty feeling of having been asleep at a critical juncture. With a start she sat up and looked around her. The sun-rays were still slanting through the wood, but dully, as though they shone through a sheet of smoked glass. The stillness was intense.

A sharp sense of nervousness pricked her. There seemed to be something ominous in the atmosphere; or was it only in her own heart that it existed? And where was Nap? Surely he had been gone for a very long time!

She rose stiffly and picked up his coat. At the same instant a shrill whistle sounded through the wood, and in a moment she saw him coming swiftly towards her.

Quietly she moved to meet him.

He began to speak before he reached her. "I was afraid you would be tired of waiting and wander about till you got frightened and lost yourself. Do you ever have hysterics?"

"Never," said Anne firmly.

He took his coat and began to wriggle into it, surveying her meantime with a smile half-speculative, half-rueful.

"Well, that's a weight off my mind, anyway," he remarked at length. "For I have a staggering piece of news for you which I hardly dare to impart. Oh, it's no good looking at your watch. It's hopelessly late, nearly six o'clock, and in any case I can't get you home to-night. There's no petrol."

"Nap!" Anne's voice was a curious compound of consternation and relief. Somehow—doubtless it was the effect of thunder in the atmosphere—she had expected something in the nature of tragedy.

Nap put on his most contrite air. "Do be a brick and take it nicely!" he pleaded. "I know I was an all-fired fool not to see to it for myself. But I was called away, and so I had to leave it to those dunderheads at the garage. I only made the discovery when I left you a couple of hours ago. There was just enough left to take me to Rodding, so I pelted off at once to some motorworks I knew of there, only to find the place was empty. It's a hole of a town. There was some game on, and I couldn't get a conveyance anywhere. So I just put up the motor and came back across country on foot. I don't see what else I could have done, do you?"

Anne did not for the moment, but she was considering the situation too rapidly to answer him.

"My only consolation," he went on, "is that you have got a change of raiment, which is more than I have. Oh, yes, I had the sense to think of that contingency. Your bag is at the inn here, waiting for you."

"You had better have taken me back with you to Rodding," Anne said.

"Yes, I know. But I expected to be back in half an hour if all went well. It's easy to be wise after the event, isn't it? I've thought of that myself since." Nap picked up a twig and bit it viciously. "Anyway, there is some tea waiting for us. Shall we go back?"

Anne turned beside him. "Then what do you propose to do?"

He glanced at her. "Nothing before morning, I'm afraid. There is no vehicle to be had here. I will send someone down to Rodding in the morning for a conveyance. We can take the train from there to Staps, where I can get some petrol. We ought by that means to reach home sometime in the afternoon. It is the only feasible plan, I am afraid; unless you can suggest a better."

He looked at her keenly, still biting at the twig between his teeth.

Anne walked for several seconds in silence. At last, "Would it be quite impossible to walk to Rodding now?" she asked.

"Not at all," said Nap. "It is about eight miles through the woods. We should be benighted, of course. Also I fancy there is a storm coming up. But if you wish to make the attempt—"

"I was only wondering," she said quietly, "if we could get an evening train to Staps. That, I know, is on the main line. You could put up there, and I could take the night train to town."

"Oh, quite so," said Nap. "Shall we have tea before we start?"

They had emerged from the wood and were beginning to climb the hill. The veiled sunlight gave an unreal effect to the landscape. The broom bushes looked ghostly.

Anne gave an uneasy glance around. "I believe you are right about the storm," she said.

"I generally am right," observed Nap.

They walked on. "I shouldn't like to be benighted in the woods," she said presently.

His scoffing smile showed for an instant. "Alone with me too! Most improper!"

"I was thinking we might miss the way," Anne returned with dignity. "I wonder—shall we risk it?"

She turned to him as if consulting him, but Nap's face was to the sky. "That is for you to decide," he said. "We might do it. The storm won't break at present."

"It will be violent when it does," she said.

He nodded. "It will."

She quickened her steps instinctively, and he lengthened his stride. The smile had ceased to twitch his lips.

"Have you decided?" he asked her suddenly, and his voice sounded almost stern.

They were nearing the top of the hill. She paused, panting a little. "Yes. I will spend the night here."

He gave her a glance of approval. "You are a wise woman."

"I hope so," said Anne. "I must telegraph at once to Dimsdale and tell him not to expect me."

Nap's glance fell away from her. He said nothing whatever.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE FACE OF THE GODS

"Thank the gods, we are the only guests!" said Nap that evening, as they sat down to dine at the table at which they had lunched.

The glare of a lurid sunset streamed across the sky and earth. There was a waiting stillness upon all things. It was the hush before the storm.

An unwonted restlessness had taken possession of Anne. She did not echo his thanksgiving, an omission which he did not fail to note, but upon which he made no comment.

It was in fact scarcely a place for any but day visitors, being some considerable distance from the beaten track. The dinner placed before them was not of a very tempting description, and Anne's appetite dwindled very rapidly.

"You must eat something," urged Nap. "Satisfy your hunger with strawberries and cream."

But Anne had no hunger to satisfy, and she presently rose from the table with something like a sigh of relief.

They went into the drawing-room, a room smelling strongly of musk, and littered largely with furniture of every description. Nap opened wide a door-window that led into a miniature rosegarden. Beyond stretched the common, every detail standing out with marvellous vividness in the weird storm-light.

"St. Christopher!" he murmured softly. "We are going to catch it."

Anne sat down in a low chair near him, gazing forth in silence, her chin on her hand.

He turned a little and looked down at her, and thus some minutes slipped away, the man as tensely still as the awe-stricken world without, the woman deep in thought.

He moved at last with a curious gesture as if he freed and restrained himself by the same action.

"Why don't you think out loud?" he said.

She raised her eyes for a moment. "I was thinking of my husband," she said.

He made a sharp movement—a movement that was almost fierce—and again seemed to take a fresh grip upon himself. His black brows met above his brooding eyes. "Can't you leave him out of the reckoning for this one night?" he asked.

"I think not," she answered quietly.

He turned his face to the sinking sun. It shone like a smouldering furnace behind bars of inky cloud.

"You told me once," he said, speaking with obvious constraint, "that you did not think you would ever live with him again."

She stifled a sigh in her throat. "I thought so then."

"And what has happened to make you change your mind?"

Anne was silent. She could not have seen the fire that leapt and darted in the dusky eyes had she been looking at him, but she was not looking. Her chin was back upon her hand. She was gazing out into the darkening world with the eyes of a woman who sees once more departed visions.

"I think," she said slowly at length, as he waited immovably for her answer, "that I see my duty more clearly now than then."

"Duty! Duty!" he said impatiently. "Duty is your fetish. You sacrifice your whole life to it. And what do you get in return? A sense of virtue perhaps, nothing more. There isn't much warming power in virtue. I've tried it and I know!" He broke off to utter a very bitter laugh. "And so I've given it up," he said. "It's a trail that leads to nowhere."

Anne's brows drew together for an instant. "I hoped you might come to think otherwise," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "How can I? I've lived the life of a saint for the past six months, and I am no nearer heaven than when I began. It's too slow a process for me. I wasn't made to plough an endless furrow."

"We all of us say that," said Anne, with her faint smile. "But do we any of us really know what we were made for? Are we not all in the making still?"

He thrust out his chin. "I can't be abstruse tonight. I know what I was made for, and I know what you were made for. That—anyway for tonight—is all that matters."

He spoke almost brutally, yet still he held himself as it were aloof. He was staring unblinking into the sunset. Already the furnace was dying down. The thunder-clouds were closing up. The black bars had drawn together into one immense mass, advancing, ominous. Only through a single narrow slit the red light still shone.

Mutely they watched it pass, Anne with her sad eyes fixed and thoughtful, Nap still with that suggestion of restrained activity as if he watched for a signal.

Gradually the rift closed, and a breathless darkness came.

Anne uttered a little sigh. "I wish the storm would break," she said. "I am tired of waiting."

As if in answer, out of the west there rose a long low rumble.

"Ah!" she said, and no more.

For as if the signal had come, Nap turned with a movement incredibly swift, a movement that was almost a spring, and caught her up into his arms.

"Are you tired of waiting, my Queen—my Queen?" he said, and there was a note of fierce laughter in his words. "Then—by heaven—you shall wait no longer!"

His quick breath scorched her face, and in a moment, almost before she knew what was happening, his lips were on her own. He kissed her as she had never been kissed before—a single fiery kiss that sent all the blood in tumult to her heart. She shrank and quivered under it, but she was powerless to escape. There was sheer unshackled savagery in the holding of his arms, and dismay thrilled her through and through.

Yet, as his lips left hers, she managed to speak, though her voice was no more than a gasping whisper. "Nap, are you mad? Let me go!"

But he only held her faster, faster still.

"Yes, I am mad," he said, and the words came quick and passionate, the lips that uttered them still close to her own. "I am mad for you, Anne. I worship you. And I swear that while I live no other man shall ever hold you in his arms again. Anne—goddess—queen—woman—you are mine—you are mine—you are mine!"

Again his lips pressed hers, and again from head to foot she felt as if a flame had scorched her. Desperately she began to resist him though terribly conscious that he had her at his mercy. But he quelled her resistance instantly, with a mastery that made her know more thoroughly her utter impotence.

"Do you think that you can hold me in check for ever?" he said. "I tell you it only makes me worse. I am a savage, and chains of that sort won't hold me. What is the good of fighting against fate? You have done it as long as I have known you; but you are beaten at last. Oh, you may turn your face from me. It makes no difference now. I've played for this, and I've won! You have been goddess to me ever since the day I met you. To-night—you shall be woman!"

He broke into a low, exultant laugh. She could feel the fierce beating of his heart, and her own died within her. The blaze of his passion ringed her round like a forest fire in which all things perish.

But even then she knew that somewhere, somewhere, there was a way of escape, and with the instinct of the hunted creature she sought it.

"To-night," she said, "I shall know whether you have ever really loved me."

"What?" he said. "You dare to question that now? Do you want to put me to the proof then? Shall I show you how much I love you?"

"No," she said. "Take your arms away!"

She did not expect his obedience, but on the instant he spread them wide and released her.

"And now?" he said.

She almost tottered, so amazing had been his compliance. And then as swiftly—came the knowledge that he had not really set her free. It had pleased him to humour her, that was all. He stood before her with all the arrogance of a conqueror. And through the gathering darkness his eyes shone like the eyes of a tiger—two flames piercing the gloom.

She mustered all her strength to face him, confronting him with that unconscious majesty that first had drawn him to her.

"And now," she said, "let us once and for all understand one another."

"What?" he said. "Don't you understand me yet? Don't you realise—yet—that when a man of my stamp wants a woman he—takes her?"

Again there throbbed in his voice that deep note of savagery, such savagery as made her quail. But it was no moment for shrinking. She knew instinctively that at the first sign of weakness he would take her back into his arms.

She straightened herself therefore, summoning all her pride. "Do you really think I am the sort of woman to be taken so?" she asked. "Do you really think I am yours for the taking? If so, then you have never known me. Nor—till this moment—have I known you."

He heard her without the faintest hint of astonishment or shame, standing before her with that careless animal grace of his that made him in some fashion superb.

"Yes," he said, "I really do think you are mine for the taking this time, but you will admit I've been patient. And I've taken the trouble to make things easy for you. I've spirited you away without putting you through any ordeals of hesitation or suspense. I've done it all quite unobtrusively. To-morrow we go to London, after that to Paris, and after that—whithersoever you will—anywhere under the sun where we can be alone. As to knowing each other"—his voice changed subtly, became soft, with something of a purring quality—"we have all our lives before us, and we shall be learning every day."

His absolute assurance struck her dumb. There was something implacable about it, something unassailable—a stronghold which she felt powerless to attack.

"Doesn't that programme attract you?" he said, drawing nearer to her. "Can you suggest a better? The whole world is before us. Shall we go exploring, you and I, alone in the wilds, and find some Eden that no man has ever trodden before? Shall we, Anne? Shall we? Right away from everywhere, somewhere in the sun, where I can teach you to be happy and you can teach me to be—good."

But at his movement she moved also, drawing back. "No!" she said. Her voice was low, but not lacking in strength. Having spoken, she went on almost without effort. "You are building upon a false foundation. If it were not so, I don't think I could possibly forgive you. As it is, I think when you realise your mistake you will find it hard to forgive yourself. I have treated you as a friend because I thought I could do so with safety. I thought for the sake of my friendship you had given up all thought of anything else. I thought you were to be trusted and I trusted you. Oh, I admit I ought to have known you better. But I shall never make that mistake again."

"No," Nap said. "I don't think you will."

He spoke deliberately; he almost drawled. Yet a sense of danger stabbed her. His sudden coldness was more terrible than his heat.

"But why say this to me now?" he said. "Do you think it will make any difference?"

He had not moved as he uttered the words, and yet she felt as if he menaced her. He made her think of a crouching tiger—a tiger whose devotion had turned to sudden animosity.

She did not shrink from him, but her heart quickened. "It must make a difference," she said. "You have utterly misunderstood me, or you would never have brought me here."

"Don't be too sure of that," he returned. "It may be that you can deceive yourself more easily than you can deceive me. Or again, it may be that I have come to the end of my patience and have decided to take by storm what cannot be won by waiting."

She drew herself up proudly. "And you call that—love!" she said, with a scorn that she had never before turned against him. "You dare to call that—love!"

"Call it what you will!" he flashed back. "It is something that can crush your cold virtue into atoms, something that can turn you from a marble saint into a living woman of flesh and blood. For your sake I've tried—I've agonised—to reach your level. And I've failed because I can't breathe there. To-night you shall come down from your heights to mine. You who have never lived yet shall know life—as I know it—to-night!"

Fiercely he flung the words, and the breath of his passion was like a fiery blast blown from the heart of a raging furnace. But still she did not shrink before him. Proud and calm she waited, bearing herself with a queenly courage that never faltered.

And it was as if she stood in a magic circle, for he raised no hand to touch her. Without word or movement she kept him at bay. Erect, unflinching, regal, she held her own.

He caught his breath as he faced her. The beast in him slunk back afraid, but the devil urged him forward. He came close to her, peering into her face, searching for that weak place in every woman's armour which the devil generally knows how to find. But still he did not offer to touch her. He had let her go out of his arms when he had believed her his own, and now he could not take her again.

"Anne," he said suddenly, "where is your love for me? I will swear you loved me once."

"I never loved you," she answered, her words clear-cut, cold as steel. "I never loved you. Once, it is true, I fancied that you were such a man as I could have loved. But that passed. I did not know you in those days. I know you now."

"And hate me for what you know?" he said.

"No," she answered. "I do not even hate you."

"What then?" he gibed. "You are—sorry for me perhaps?"

"No!" Very distinct and steady came her reply. "I only despise you now."

"What?" he said.

"I despise you," she repeated slowly, "knowing what you might be, and knowing—what you are."

The words passed out in silence—a silence so tense that it seemed as if the world itself had stopped. Through it after many seconds came Nap's voice, so softly that it scarcely seemed to break it.

"It is not always wise to despise an enemy, Lady Carfax—especially if you chance to be in that enemy's power."

She did not deign to answer; but her gaze did not flinch from his, nor did her pride waver.

He drew something abruptly from his pocket and held it up before her. "Do you see this?"

She stirred then, ever so slightly, a movement wholly involuntary, instantly checked. "Are you going to shoot me?" she asked.

"I thought that would make you speak," he remarked. "And you still despise me?"

Her breathing had quickened, but her answer was instant; for the first time it held a throb of anger. "I despise you for a coward. You are even viler than I thought."

He returned the weapon to his pocket. "It is not for you," he said. "I am more primitive than that. It is for the man who stands between us, for the man who thought he could whip Nap Errol—and live. I have never gone unarmed since."

He paused a moment, grimly regarding her. Then, "There is only one thing I will take in exchange for that man's life," he said. "Only—one—thing!"

But she stood like a statue, uttering no word.

A sudden gust of passion swept over him, lashing him to headlong fury. "And that one thing I mean to have!" he told her violently. "No power in heaven or hell shall keep you from me. I tell you"—his voice rose, and in the darkness those two flames glowed more redly, such flames as had surely never burned before in the face of a man—"whatever you may say, you are mine, and in your heart you know it. Sooner or later—sooner or later—I will make you own it." His voice sank suddenly to a whisper, no longer passionate, only inexpressibly evil. "Will you despise me then, Queen Anne? I wonder!—I wonder!"

She moved at last, raised her hand, stiffly pointed. "Go!" she said. "Go!"

Yet for a space he still stood in the doorway, menacing her, a vital figure, lithe, erect, dominant. The tension was terrible. It seemed to be strained to snapping point, and yet it held.

It was the fiercest battle she had ever known—a battle in which his will grappled with hers in a mighty, all-mastering grip, increasing every instant till she felt crushed, impotent, lost, as if all the powers of evil were let loose and seething around her, dragging her down.

Her resolution began to falter at last. She became conscious of a numbing sense of physical weakness, an oppression so overwhelming that she thought her heart would never beat again. Once more she seemed to totter on the edge of a depth too immense to contemplate, to hover above the very pit of destruction...

And then suddenly the ordeal was over. A blinding flash of lightning lit the room, glimmered weirdly, splitting the gloom as a sword rending a curtain, and was gone. There came a sound like the snarl of a startled animal, and the next instant a frightful crash of thunder.

Anne reeled back, dazed, stunned, utterly unnerved, and sank into a chair.

When she came to herself she was alone.

CHAPTER XIII

AN APPEAL AND ITS ANSWER

A puff of rain-washed air wandered in through the wide-flung window, and Lucas Errol turned his head languidly upon the pillow to feel it on his face. He sighed as he moved, as if even that slight exertion cost him some resolution. His eyes had a heavy, drugged look. They seemed more deeply sunken than usual, but there was no sleep in them, only the utter weariness that follows the sleep of morphia.

At the soft opening of the door a faint frown drew his forehead, but it turned to a smile as Bertie came forward with cautious tread.

"That you, dear fellow? I am awake."

Bertie came to his side, his brown face full of concern. "Are you better, old chap?"

"Yes, better, thanks. Only so dog-tired. Sit down. Have you brought the budget?"

"There's nothing much to-day. Only that chap Cradock writing again for instructions about the Arizona ranch, and a few Wall Street tips from Marsh by cable. Say, Luke, I don't think Cradock is overweighted with spunk, never have thought so. Guess that ranch wants a bigger man."

"I'll see his letter," said Lucas. "Presently will do. What about Marsh?"

"Oh, he's behind the scenes as usual. You'd better read him now. The rest will keep. When you've done that I want to talk to you."

"So I gathered. Stuff in another pillow behind me, will you? I can think better sitting up."

"I shouldn't, old chap, really. You're always easier lying down."

"Oh, shucks, Bertie! Do as you're told. And don't look at me like that, you old duffer. It's a mean advantage to take of a sick man. Steady now, steady! Go slow! You mustn't slam a creaking gate. It's bad for the hinges."

But notwithstanding Bertie's utmost care there were heavy drops on his brother's forehead as he sank again upon his pillows. Bertie wiped them away with a hand that trembled a little, and Lucas smiled up at him with twitching lips.

"Thanks, boy! It was only a twinge. Sit down again, and give me Marsh's cipher and the morning papers. The letters you shall read to me presently."

He straightway immersed himself in business matters with the shrewdness and concentration that ever aroused his young brother's deepest admiration.

"What a marvellous grip you've got on things, Luke!" he exclaimed at the end of it. "No wonder you are always on the top! You're great, man, you're great!"

"I guess it's just my speciality," the millionaire said, with his weary smile. "I must be getting another secretary soon, boy. It's a shame to eat up your time like this. What is it you want to talk to me about? Going to get married?"

Bertie shook his head. "The padre won't hear of it yet, and Dot herself—well, you know, I said I'd wait."

"Don't wait too long," said Lucas quietly. "You shall have the old Dower House to live in. Tell the padre that. It's only a stone's throw from the Rectory. We'll build a garage too, eh, Bertie? The wife must have her motor. And presently, when you are called to the Bar, you will want a flat in town."

"You're a brick, Luke!" the boy declared, with shining eyes. "Between ourselves, I don't expect to do much at the Bar, but I'm sticking to it just to show 'em I can work like the rest of creation. I'd sooner be your secretary for all time, and you know it."

"That so?" Lucas stretched a hand towards him. "But I guess you're right. I don't want you to depend on me for employment. If I were to go out one of these days you'd feel rather left. It's better you should have other resources."

"Luke, I say! Luke!"

But the quick distress of the words was checked by the gentle restraint of Lucas's hand. "I know! I know! But we've all got to die sooner or later, and one doesn't want to tear a larger hole than one need. That's all right, Bertie boy. We'll shunt the subject. Only, if you want to please me, get that nice little girl to marry you soon. Now what was it you wanted to say? Something about Nap?"

"Yes. How did you know? It's an infernal shame to worry you when you're not fit for it. But the mother and I both think you ought to know."

"Go ahead, dear fellow! I'm tougher than you think. What has become of Nap?"

"That's just the question. You know he went off in the car with Lady Carfax yesterday morning?"

"I didn't know," murmured Lucas. "That's a detail. Go on."

"Late last night the car had not returned, and the mother began to wonder. Of course if Lady Carfax hadn't been there it wouldn't have mattered much, but as it was we got anxious, and in the end I posted off to the Manor to know if she had arrived. She had not. But while I was there a wire came for the butler from a place called Bramhurst, which is about fifty miles away, to say that the car had broken down and they couldn't return before to-day. Well, that looked to me deuced queer. I'm convinced that Nap is up to some devilry. What on earth induced her to go there with him anyway? The mother was real bothered about it, and so was I. We couldn't rest, either of us. And in the end she ordered the big Daimler and went off to Bramhurst herself. I wanted to go with her, but she wouldn't have me at any price. You know the mother. So I stopped to look after things here. Everyone cleared off this morning, thank the gods. I don't think anyone smelt a rat. I told them the mother had gone to nurse a sick friend, and it seemed to go down all right."

Lucas had listened to the recital with closed eyes and a perfectly expressionless face. He did not speak for a few moments when Bertie ended. At length, "And the mother is not back yet?" he asked.

"No. But I'm not afraid for her. She knows how to hold her own."

"That's so," Lucas conceded; and fell silent again.

He was frowning a little as if in contemplation of some difficulty, but his composure was absolute.

"There may be nothing in it," he said at last.

Bertie grunted. "I knew he was in a wild beast mood before they started. He nearly rode the black mare to death in the early morning."

"Why wasn't I told of that?" Lucas opened his eyes with the question and looked directly at his brother's worried countenance.

"My dear fellow, you were too sick to be bothered. Besides, you were taking morphia. He saw to that."

Lucas closed his eyes again without comment, A long pause ensued before he spoke again.

Then: "Bertie," he said, "go down to the garage and leave word that as soon as Nap returns I want to speak to him."

"He won't return," said Bertie, with conviction.

"I think he will. It is even possible that he has returned already. In any case, go and tell them. Ah, Tawny, what is it?"

The valet came to his master's side. His hideous features wore an expression that made them almost benign. The dumb devotion of an animal looked out of his eyes.

"A note, sir, from the Manor."

"Who brought it?" asked Lucas.

"A groom, sir."

"Waiting for an answer?"

"Yes, sir."

Lucas opened the note. It was from Anne.

He read a few lines, then glanced at Bertie. "It's all right, Bertie. Go and give that message, will you? Say it's important—an urgent matter of business."

Bertie departed, and Lucas's eyes returned to the sheet he held.

Tawny Hudson stood motionless beside him, and several silent seconds ticked away. His master spoke at length.

"Pen and paper, Tawny. Yes, that's right. Now put your arm behind the pillows and give me a hoist. Slowly now, slowly!"

And then, as the man supported him, very slowly and unsteadily he traced a few words.

"Don't worry. All's well.—Lucas."

Abruptly the pen fell from his fingers; his head dropped back. His face was drawn and ghastly as he uttered a few gasping whispers. "Tawny, give me something—quick! This pain is—killing me!"

The man lowered him again, and took a bottle from a side-table. As he measured some drops into a glass the only sound in the room was his master's agonised breathing.

Yet he knew without turning that someone had entered, and he betrayed no surprise when Nap's hand suddenly whisked the glass from his hold and held it to the panting lips.

CHAPTER XIV

THE IRRESISTIBLE

The first words Lucas uttered when utterance became possible to him were, "No morphia!"

Nap was deftly drawing away the pillows to ease his position. "All right, old fellow," he made answer. "But you know you can't sit up when you are like this. What possessed you to try?"

"Business," murmured Lucas. "Don't go again, Boney. I want you."

"So I've been told. I am quite at your service. Don't speak till you feel better."

"Ah! I am better now. There's magic about you, I believe. Or is it electricity?" Lucas's eyes rested on the grim face above him with a certain wistfulness.

Nap only smiled cynically. "Is Hudson to take this note? Can I address it for you?"

If he expected to cause any discomfiture by the suggestion he was disappointed. Lucas answered him with absolute composure.

"Yes; to Lady Carfax at the Manor. It is to go at once."

Nap thrust it into an envelope with a perfectly inscrutable countenance, scrawled the address, and handed it to the valet. "You needn't come back till you are rung for," he said.

And with that he calmly seated himself by his brother's side with the air of a man with ample leisure at his disposal.

As the door closed he spoke. "Hadn't you better have a smoke?"

"No. I must talk first. I wish you would sit where I can see you."

Nap pulled his chair round at once and sat in the full glare of the noonday sun. "Is that enough lime-light for you? Now, what ails the great chief? Does he think his brother will run away while he sleeps?"

There was a hint of tenderness underlying the banter in his voice. He stooped with the words and picked up a letter that lay on the floor. "This yours?"

Lucas's half-extended hand fell. "And you may read it," he said.

"Many thanks! I don't read women's letters unless they chance to be addressed to me—no, not even if they concern me very nearly." Nap's teeth gleamed for a moment. "I'm afraid you must play off your own bat, my worthy brother, though if you take my advice you'll postpone it. You're about used up, and I'm deuced thirsty. It's not a peaceful combination."

Again, despite the nonchalance of his speech, it was not without a certain gentleness. He laid the letter on the bed within reach of his brother's hand.

"I won't leave the premises till you have had your turn," he said. "I guess that's a fair offer anyway. Now curl up and rest."

But Lucas negatived the suggestion instantly though very quietly. "I'll take my turn now if you've no objection. That ranch in Arizona, Boney, is beginning to worry me some. I want you to take it in hand. It's a little job peculiarly suited to your abilities."

Nap jerked up his head with an odd gesture, not solely indicative of surprise. "What do you know of my abilities?"

"More than most." Very steadily Lucas made answer. "I depend on you in a fashion you little dream of, and I guess you won't fail me."

Nap's jaw slowly hardened. "I'm not very likely to disappoint you," he observed, "more especially as I have no intention of removing to Arizona at present."

"No?"

"No."

"Not if I make a point of it?" Lucas spoke heavily, as if the effort of speech were great. His hand had clenched upon Anne's letter.

Nap leaned forward without replying, the sunlight still shining upon his face, and looked at him attentively.

"Yes," Lucas said very wearily. "It has come to that. I can't have you here disturbing the public peace. I won't have my own brother arraigned as a murderer. Nor will I have Anne Carfax pilloried by you for all England to throw mud at. I've stood a good deal from you, Boney, but I'm damned if I'm going to stand this."

"The only question is, Can you prevent it?" said Nap, without the faintest change of countenance.

"I am going to prevent it."

"If you can."

"I am going to prevent it," Lucas repeated. "Before we go any further, give me that shooter of yours."

Nap hesitated for a single instant, then, with a gesture openly contemptuous, he took the revolver from his pocket and tossed it on to the bed.

Lucas laid his hand upon it. He was looking full into Nap's face. "Now, I want you to tell me something," he said. "I seem to remember your saying to me once in this very room that you and Lady Carfax were friends, no more, no less. You were mighty anxious that I shouldn't misunderstand. Remember that episode?"

"Perfectly," said Nap.

"I surmised that you told me that because you honestly cared for her as a friend. Was that so?"

Nap made a slight movement, such a movement as a man makes when he catches sight of a stone to his path too late to avoid it.

"You may say so if you wish," he said.

"Meaning that things have changed since then?" questioned Lucas, in his tired drawl.

Nap threw up his head with the action of a jibbing horse. "You can put it how you like. You can say—you like—that I am a bigger blackguard now than I was then. It makes no difference how you put it."

"But I want to know," said Lucas quietly. "Are you a blackguard, Boney?"

His eyes were fixed steadily upon the dusky face with its prominent cheek-bones and mocking mouth. Perhaps he knew, what Anne had discovered long before, that those sensitive lips might easily reveal what the fierce eyes hid.

"A matter of opinion," threw back Nap. "If I am, Anne Carfax has made me so."

"Anne Carfax," said Lucas very deliberately, "has done her best to make a man of you. It is not her fault if she has failed. It is not her fault that you have chosen to drag her friendship through the mire."

"Friendship!" broke in Nap. "She gave me more than that."

Lucas's brows contracted as if at a sudden dart of pain, but his voice was perfectly level as he made reply: "Whatever she gave you was the gift of a good woman of which you have proved yourself utterly unworthy."

Nap sprang to his feet. "Be it so!" he exclaimed harshly. "I am unworthy. What of it? She always knew I was."

"Yet she trusted you."

"She trusted me, yes. Having cast out the devil she found in possession, she thought there was nothing more to me. She thought that I should be content to wander empty all my days through dry places, seeking rest. She forgot the sequel, forgot what was bound to happen when I found none. You seem to have forgotten that too. Or do you think that I am indeed that interesting vacuum that you are pleased to call a gentleman?" He flung his arms wide with a sudden, passionate laugh. "Why, my good fellow, I'd sooner rank myself with the beasts that perish. And I'd sooner perish too; yes, die with a rope round my throat in the good old English fashion. There's nothing in that. I'd as soon die that way as any other. It may not be so artistic as our method, but it's quite a clean process, and the ultimate result is the same."

"Do you mind sitting down?" said Lucas.

Nap looked at him sharply. "In pain again?"

"Sit down," Lucas reiterated. "You can't do anything more than that. Now will you take the trouble to make me understand what exactly are your present intentions, and why?"

"Doesn't that letter tell you?" said Nap.

"This letter," Lucas answered, "is the desperate appeal of a very unhappy woman who is in mortal dread of your murdering her husband."

"That all?" said Nap. The red glare of savagery flickered for an instant in his eyes. "She has no fears on her own account then?"

"Will you explain?"

"Oh, certainly, if you need explanation. I mean that the death of Sir Giles Carfax is no more than a stepping-stone, a means to an end. So long as he lives, he will stand in my way. Therefore Sir Giles will go. And mark me, any other man who attempts to come between us I will kill also. Heaven knows what there is in her that attracts me, but there is something—something I have never seen in any other woman—something that goes to my head. Oh, I'm not in love with her. I'm long past that stage. One can't be in love for ever, and she is as cold as the North Star anyway. But she has driven me mad, and I warn you—I warn you—you had better not interfere with me!"

He flung the words like a challenge. His lower jaw was thrust forward. He looked like a savage animal menacing his keeper.

But Lucas lay without moving a muscle, lay still and quiet, without tension and without emotion of any description, simply watching, as a disinterested spectator might watch, the fiery rebellion that had kindled against him.

At length very deliberately he held out the revolver.

"Well," he drawled, "my life isn't worth much, it's true. And you are quite welcome to take your gun and end it here and now if you feel so disposed. For I warn you, Nap Errol, that you'll find me considerably more in your way than Sir Giles Carfax or any other man. I stand between you already, and while I live you won't shunt me."

Nap's lips showed their scoffing smile. "Unfortunately—or otherwise—you are out of the reckoning," he said.

"Am I? And how long have I been that?"

Nap was silent. He looked suddenly stubborn.

Lucas waited. There was even a hint of humour in his steady eyes.

"And that's where you begin to make a mistake," he said presently. "You're a poor sort of blackguard at best, Boney, and that's why you can't break away. Take this thing! I've no use for it. But maybe in Arizona you'll find it advisable to carry arms. Come over here and read Cradock's letter."

But Nap swung away with a gesture of fierce unrest. He fell to prowling to and fro, stopping short of the bed at each turn, refusing doggedly to face the quiet eyes of the man who lay there.

Minutes passed. Lucas was still watching, but he was no longer at his ease. His brows were drawn heavily. He looked like a man undergoing torture. His hand was still fast closed upon Anne's letter.

He spoke at last, seeming to grind out the words through clenched teeth. "I guess there's no help for it, Boney. We've figured it out before, you and I. I'm no great swell at fighting, but—I can hold my own against you. And if it comes to a tug-of-war—you'll lose."

Nap came to his side at last and stood there, still not looking at him. "You seem almighty sure of that," he said.

"That's so," said Lucas simply. "And if you care to know why, I'll tell you. It's just because your heart isn't in it. One half of you is on my side. You're just not blackguard enough."

"And so you want to send me to Arizona to mature?" suggested Nap grimly.

"Or to find yourself," Lucas substituted. "Say, Boney, if you don't give in pretty soon I'll make you take me along."

"You!" Nap's eyes came down at last to the drawn face. He gave a slight start, and the next moment stooped to lift the tortured frame to another position. "If Capper were here he'd say I was killing you," he said. "For Heaven's sake, man, rest!"

"No," gasped Lucas. "No! I haven't finished—yet. Boney, you—you've got to listen. There's no quarrel between us. Only if you will be so damned headstrong, I must be headstrong too. I mean what I say. If you won't go to Arizona alone, you will go with me. And we'll start to-night."

Nap's thin lips twitched, but with no impulse to ridicule. He rearranged the pillows with his usual dexterous rapidity, then deliberately laid his hand upon the lined forehead and stood so in utter silence, staring unblinking straight before him.

For many seconds Lucas also lay passive. His eyelids drooped heavily, but he would not suffer them to close. He was yet watching, watching narrowly, the flame that still smouldered and might blaze afresh at any moment.

"Give it up, Boney!" he said at last. "I'll go with you to the ends of the earth sooner than let you do this thing, and you'll find me a very considerable encumbrance. Do you honestly believe yourself capable of shunting me at will?"

"I honestly believe you'll kill yourself if you don't rest," Nap said.

He looked down suddenly into the tired eyes. The fierce glare had gone utterly out of his own. His very pose had altered.

"Then I shall die in a good cause," Lucas murmured, with the ghost of a smile. "You needn't say any more, Boney. I guess I shall rest now."

"Because you think you've beaten me," Nap said curtly.

"Guess it's your victory, dear fellow, not mine," Lucas answered very gently.

A gleam that was not a smile crossed the harsh face, softening but not gladdening. "It's a mighty hollow one anyway. And I'm not going for nothing—not even to please you."

"Anything—to the half of my kingdom," Lucas said.

Nap sat down on the edge of the bed. The madness had passed, or he had thrust it back out of sight in the darkest recesses of his soul. He laid a hand upon his brother's arm and felt it speculatively.

"No sinew, no flesh, and scarcely any blood!" he said. "And yet"—his mouth twisted a little—"my master! Luke, you're a genius!"

"Oh, shucks, Boney! What's brute strength anyway?"

"Not much," Nap admitted. "But you—you haven't the force of a day-old puppy. Maybe, when I'm out of the way fighting my devils in the desert, you'll give Capper a free hand, and let him make of you what you were always intended to be—a human masterpiece. There won't be any obstacles when I'm out of the way."

Lucas's hand felt for and closed upon his. "If that's your condition, it's a bargain," he said simply.

"And you'll put up a fight for it, eh, Luke? You're rather apt to slack when I'm not by." Was there a hint of wistfulness in the words? It almost seemed so.

A very tender look came into the elder man's eyes. "With God's help, Boney," he said, "I'll pull through."

Nap rose as if that ended the interview. Yet, rising, he still gripped the weak hand of the man who was his master.

A moment he stood, then suddenly bent very low and touched it with his forehead.

"I leave to-night," he said, and turning went very quickly and noiselessly from the room.

CHAPTER XV

ON THE EDGE OF THE PIT

It was a very cheery Dot Waring who ran across the wet fields that afternoon to the Manor to acquaint Lady Carfax with the gratifying intelligence that the proceeds of the great entertainment at which she had so kindly assisted actually amounted to close upon thirty pounds. Baronford had done its humble best towards providing itself with a Town Hall, had in fact transcended all expectations, and Dot was in high spirits in consequence.

It was something of a disappointment to be met by old Dimsdale with the intelligence that her ladyship was very tired and resting. He added, seeing Dot's face fall, that Mrs. Errol was spending a few days at the Manor and would no doubt be very pleased to see her.

So Dot entered, and was presently embraced by Mrs. Errol and invited to take tea with her in the conservatory.

"Yes, dear Anne's in bed," she said. "She and Nap went for a motor ride yesterday, and broke down and were benighted. Nap always was sort of reckless. We had a message late last night telling us what had happened, and I went off at once in the big car and brought Anne back. Nap had to wait for his own car, but I guess he's back by this time. And poor Anne was so worn out when we got back that I persuaded her to go to bed right away. And I stopped to take care of her."

In view of the fact that Mrs. Errol was never happier than when she had someone to take care of, this seemed but natural, and Dot's straightforward mind found nothing unusual in the story.

She remained for nearly an hour, chattering gaily upon a thousand topics. She was always at her ease with Mrs. Errol.

At parting, the latter held her for a moment very closely. "Happy, dearie?" she asked.

"Oh, ever so happy," said Dot, with warm arms round her friend's neck.

Mrs. Errol sighed a little, smiled and kissed her. "God keep you so, child!" she said.

And Dot went forth again into the hazy summer sunshine with a vague wonder if dear Mrs. Errol were quite happy too. Somehow she had not liked to ask.

Her way lay over the shoulder of a hill, that same hill on which Sir Giles Carfax had once wreaked his mad vengeance upon his enemy.

A mist lay along the valley, and Dot kept on the ridge as long as she could. She was essentially a creature of sunshine.

She was obliged, however, at last to strike downwards, and with regret she left the sunshine behind.

The moment it was out of her eyes she caught sight of something she had not expected to see in the valley below her. It was not a hundred yards away, but the mist rising from the marshy ground partially obscured it. A dark object, curiously shapeless, that yet had the look of an animal, was lying in a hollow, and over it bent the figure of a man.

Dot's heart quickened a little. Had there been an accident, she asked herself? She hastened her steps and drew near.

As she did so, the man straightened himself suddenly, and turned round, and instantly a thrill of recognition and of horror went through the girl. It was Nap Errol, and the thing on the ground was his black mare.

She knew in a flash what had happened. Bertie had predicted disaster too often for her not to know. A great wave of repulsion surged through her. She was for the moment too horrified for speech.

Nap stood, erect, motionless, waiting for her. There was a terrible set smile on his face like the smile on a death-mask. He did not utter a word as she came up.

The mare was quite dead. The starting, bloodshot eyes were already glazing. She lay in a huddled heap, mud-stained, froth-splashed, with blood upon her flanks. White-faced and speechless, Dot stood and looked. It was the first time that tragedy had ever touched her gay young life.

She stooped at last, and with trembling, pitiful fingers touched the velvet muzzle. Then suddenly indignation, fierce, overwhelming, headlong, swept over her, crowding out even her horror. She stood up and faced Nap in such a tornado of fury as had never before shaken her.

"You brute!" she said. "You fiend! You—you—"

"Devil," said Nap. "Why not say it? I shan't contradict you."

He spoke quite quietly, so quietly that, even in the wild tempest of her anger she was awed. There was something unfathomable about him, something that nevertheless arrested her at the very height of her fury. His manner was so still, so deadly still, and so utterly free from cynicism.

She stood and stared at him, a queer sensation of dread making her very heart feel cold.

"I should go if I were you," he said.

But Dot stood still, as if struck powerless.

"You can't do any good," he went on, his tone quite gentle, even remotely kind. "I had to kill something, but it was a pity you chanced to see it. You had better go home and forget it."

Dot's white lips began to move, but it was several seconds before any sound came from them. "What are you going to do?"

"That's my affair," said Nap.

He was still faintly smiling, but his smile appalled her. It was so cold, so impersonal, so void of all vitality.

"Really, you had better go," he said.

But Dot's dread had begun to take tangible form. Perhaps the very shock she had undergone had served to awaken in her some of the dormant instincts of her womanhood.

She stood her ground, obedient to an inner prompting that she dared not ignore. "Will you—walk a little way with me?" she said at last.

For the first time Nap's eyes looked at her intently, searched her closely, unsparingly. She faced the

scrutiny bravely, but she trembled under it.

At the end of a lengthy pause he spoke. "Are you going to faint?"

"No," she answered quickly. "I never faint. Only—only—I do feel—rather sick."

He put his hand under her arm with a suddenness that allowed of no protest and began to march her up the hill.

Long before they reached the top Dot's face was scarlet with exertion and she was gasping painfully for breath; but he would not let her rest till they were over the summit and out of sight of the valley and what lay there.

Then, to her relief, he stopped. "Better now?"

"Yes," she panted.

His hand fell away from her. He turned to go. But swiftly she turned also and caught his arm "Nap, please—" she begged, "please—"

He stood still, and again his eyes scanned her. "Yes?"

The brief word sounded stern, but Dot was too anxious to take any note of that.

"Come a little farther," she urged. "It—it's lonely through the wood."

"What are you afraid of?" said Nap.

She could not tell him the truth, and she hesitated to lie. But his eyes read her through and through without effort. When he turned and walked beside her she was quite sure that he had fathomed the unspeakable dread which had been steadily growing within her since the moment of their meeting.

He did not say another word, merely paced along with his silent tread till they reached the small wood through which her path lay. Dot's anger had wholly left her, but her fear remained. A terrible sense of responsibility was upon her, and she was utterly at a loss as to how to cope with it. Her influence over this man she believed to be absolutely nil. She had not the faintest notion how to deal with him. Lady Carfax would have known, she reflected, and she wished with all her heart that Lady Carfax had been there.

He vaulted the stile into the wood, and held up his hand to her. As she placed hers within it she summoned her resolution and spoke.

"Nap, I'm sorry I said what I did just now."

He raised his brows for the fraction of a second. "I forget what you said."

She flushed a little. "Because you don't choose to remember. But I am sorry I spoke all the same. I lost my temper, and I—I suppose I had no right to."

"Pray don't apologise," he said. "It made no difference, I assure you."

But this was not what Dot wanted. She descended to the ground and tried again. It was something at least to have broken the silence.

"Nap," she said, standing still with her hands nervously clasped behind her, "please don't think me—impertinent, or anything of that sort. But I can't help knowing that you are feeling pretty bad about it. And—and" she began to falter—"I know you are not a brute really. You didn't mean to do it."

A curious little smile came into Nap's face. "It's good of you to make excuses for me," he observed. "You happen to know me rather well, don't you?"

"I know you are in trouble," she answered rather piteously. "And—I'm sorry."

"Thanks!" he said. "Do we part here?"

She thrust out her hand impulsively. "I thought we decided to be—friends," she said, a sharp quiver in her voice.

"Well?" said Nap. He did not touch her hand. His fingers were wound in the thong of his riding-crop and strained at it incessantly as if seeking to snap it asunder.

Dot was on the verge of tears. She choked them back desperately. "You might behave as if we were," she said.

He continued to tug grimly at the whip-lash. "I'm not friends with anyone at the present moment," he said. "But it isn't worth crying over anyway. Why don't you run home and play draughts with Bertie?"

"Because I'm not what you take me for!" Dot suddenly laid trembling hands on the creaking leather and faced him with all her courage. "I can't help what you think of me," she said rather breathlessly. "But I'm not going to leave you here by yourself. You may be as furious as you like. I simply won't!"

He pulled the whip sharply from her grasp. She thought for the moment that he actually was furious and braced herself to meet the tempest of his wrath. And then to her amazement he spoke in a tone that held neither sarcasm nor resentment, only a detached sort of curiosity.

"Are you quite sure I'm worth all this trouble?"

"Quite sure," she answered emphatically.

"And I wonder how you arrived at that conclusion," he said with a twist of the mouth that was scarcely humorous.

She did not answer, for she felt utterly unequal to the discussion.

They began to walk on down the mossy pathway. Suddenly an idea came to Dot. "I only wish Lady Carfax were here," she exclaimed impetuously. "She would know how to convince you of that."

"Would she?" said Nap. He shot a swift look at the girl beside him, then: "You see, Lady Carfax has thrown me over," he told her very deliberately.

Dot gave a great start. "Oh, surely not! She would never throw over anyone. And you have always been such friends."

"Till I offended her," said Nap.

"Oh, but couldn't you go and apologise?" urged Dot eagerly. "She is so sweet. I know she would forgive anybody."

He jerked up his head. "I don't happen to want her forgiveness. And even if I did, I shouldn't ask for it. I'm not particularly great at humbling myself."

"Isn't that rather a mistake?" said Dot.

"No," he rejoined briefly. "Not when I'm despised already for a savage and the descendant of savages."

"I am afraid I don't understand," she said.

He uttered a sudden harsh laugh. "I see you don't. Or you would be despising me too."

"I shall never do that," she said quickly.

He looked at her again, still with a mocking smile upon his lips. He bore himself with a certain royal pride that made her feel decidedly small.

"You will never say that again," he remarked.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because," he answered, with a drawling sneer, "you are like the rest of creation. You put breed before everything. Unless a man has what you are pleased to term pure blood in his veins he is beyond the pale."

"Whatever are you talking about?" said Dot, frankly mystified.

He stopped dead and faced her. "I am talking of myself, if you want to know," he told her very bitterly. "I am beyond the pale, an illegitimate son, with a strain of Red Indian in my veins to complete my damnation."

"Good gracious!" said Dot.

She stared at him for a few seconds mutely, as if the sudden announcement had taken her breath away.

At last: "Then—then—Mrs. Errol—" she stammered.

"Is not my mother," he informed her grimly. "Did you ever seriously think she was?" He flung back his shoulders arrogantly. "You're almighty blind, you English."

Dot continued to contemplate him with her frank eyes, as if viewing for the first time a specimen of some rarity.

"Well, I don't see that it makes any difference," she said at length. "You are you just the same. I—I really don't see quite why you told me."

"No?" said Nap, staring back at her with eyes that told her nothing. "P'r'aps I just wanted to show you that you are wasting your solicitude on an object of no value."

"How—funny of you!" said Dot.

She paused a moment, still looking at him; then with a quick, childish movement she slipped her hand through his arm. Quite suddenly she knew how to deal with him.

"You seem to forget," she said with a little smile, "that I'm going to be your sister one day."

He stiffened at her action, and for a single moment she wondered if she could have made a mistake. And then as suddenly he relaxed. He took the hand that rested on his arm and squeezed it hard.

And Dot knew that in some fashion, by a means which she scarcely understood, she had gained a victory.

They went on together along the mossy, winding path. A fleeting shower was falling, and the patter of it sounded on the leaves.

Nap walked with his face turned up to the raindrops, sure-footed, with the gait of a panther. He did not speak a word to the girl beside him, but his silence, did not disconcert her. There was even something in it that reassured her.

They were approaching the farther end of the wood when he abruptly spoke.

"So you think it makes no difference?"

Was there a touch of pathos in the question? She could not have said. But she answered it swiftly, with all the confidence—and ignorance—of youth.

"Of course I do! How could it make a difference? Do you suppose—if it had been Bertie—I should have cared?"

"Bertie!" he said. "Bertie is a law-abiding citizen. And you—pardon me for saying so—are young."

"Oh, yes, I know," she admitted. "But I've got some sense all the same. And—and—Nap, may I say something rather straight?"

The flicker of a smile shone and died in his eyes. "Don't mind me!" he said. "The role of an evangelist becomes you better than some."

"Don't!" said Dot, turning very red.

"I didn't," said Nap. "I'm only being brotherly. Hit as straight as you like."

"I was going to say," she said, taking him at his word, "that if a man is a good sort and does his duty, I don't believe one person in a million cares a rap about what his parents were. I don't indeed."

She spoke with great earnestness; it was quite obvious that she meant every word. It was Dot's straightforward way to speak from her heart.

"And I'm sure Lady Carfax doesn't either," she added.

But at that Nap set his teeth. "My child, you don't chance to know Lady Carfax as I do. Moreover, suppose the man doesn't chance to be a good sort and loathes the very word 'duty'? It brings down the house of cards rather fast, eh?"

An older woman might have been discouraged; experience would probably have sadly acquiesced. But Dot possessed neither age nor experience, and so she only lost her patience.

"Oh, but you are absurd!" she exclaimed, shaking his arm with characteristic vigour. "How can you be so disgustingly flabby? You're worse than old Squinny, who sends for Dad or me every other day to see him die. He's fearfully keen on going to heaven, but that's all he ever does to get there."

Nap broke into a brief laugh. They had reached the stile and he faced round with extended hand. "After that—good-bye!" he said. "With your permission we'll keep this encounter to ourselves. But you certainly are a rousing evangelist. When you mount the padre's pulpit I'll come and sit under it."

Dot's fingers held fast for a moment. "It'll be all right, will it?" she asked bluntly. "I mean—you'll be sensible?"

He smiled at her in a way she did not wholly understand, yet which went straight to her quick heart.

"So long, little sister!" he said. "Yes, it will be quite all right. I'll continue to cumber the ground a little longer, if you call that being sensible. And if you think my chances of heaven are likely to be improved by your kind intervention, p'r'aps you'll put up a prayer now and then on my behalf to the Power that casts out devils—for we are many."

"I will, Nap, I will!" she said very earnestly.

When he was gone she mounted the stile and paused with her face to the sky. "Take care of him, please, God!" she said.

CHAPTER XVI

DELIVERANCE

Notwithstanding her largeness of heart, Mrs. Errol was something of a despot, and when once she had assumed command she was slow to relinquish it.

"I guess you must let me have my own way, dear Anne," she said, "for I've never had a daughter."

And Anne, to whom the burden of life just then was more than ordinarily heavy, was fain to submit to the kindly tyranny. Mrs. Errol had found her alone at the inn at Bramhurst on the night of the storm, and in response to her earnest request had taken her without delay straight back to her home. Very little had passed between them on the circumstances that had resulted in this development. Scarcely had Nap's name been mentioned by either. Mrs. Errol seemed to know him too well to need an explanation. And Anne had noted this fact with a sick heart.

It meant to her the confirmation of what had already become a practical conviction, that the man she had once dreamed that she loved was no more than a myth of her own imagination. Again and yet again she had been deceived, but her eyes were open at last finally and for all time. No devil's craft, however wily, however convincing, could ever close them again.

Lying in her darkened room, with her stretched nerves yet quivering at every sound, she told herself over and over that she knew Nap Errol now as others knew him, as he knew himself, a man cruel, merciless, unscrupulous, in whose dark soul no germ of love had ever stirred.

Why he had ever desired her she could not determine. Possibly her very faith in him—that faith that he had so rudely shattered—had been the attraction; possibly only her aloofness, her pride, had kindled in him the determination to conquer. But that he had ever loved her, as she interpreted love, she now told herself was an utter impossibility. She even questioned in the bitterness of her disillusionment if Love, that True Romance to which she had offered sacrifice, were not also a myth, the piteous creation of a woman's fond imagination, a thing non-existent save in the realms of fancy, a dream-goal to which no man might attain and very few aspire.

All through the long day she lay alone with her problem, perpetually turning it in her mind, perpetually asking by what tragic influence she had ever been brought to fancy that this man with his violent, unrestrained nature, his fierce egoism, his murderous impulses, had ever been worthy of the halo her love had fashioned for him. No man was worthy! No man was worthy! This man least of all!

Had not he himself warned her over and over again, and she had not listened? Perhaps he had not meant her to listen. Perhaps it had only been another of his devilish artifices for ensnaring her, that attitude of humility, half-scoffing, half-persuasive, with which he had masked his inner vileness.

Oh, she was sick at heart that day, sick with disappointment, sick with humiliation, sick with a terrible foreboding that gave her no rest. Slowly the hours dragged away. She had despatched her urgent message to Lucas immediately upon her arrival at the Manor, and his prompt reply had in a measure reassured her. But she knew that he was ill, and she could not drive from her mind the dread that he might fail her. How could he in his utter physical weakness hope to master the demons that tore Nap Errol's turbulent soul? And if Lucas failed her, what then? What then? She had no city of refuge to flee unto. She and her husband were at the mercy of a murderer. For that he would keep his word she did not for a moment doubt. Nap Errol was not as other men. No second thoughts would deter him from his purpose. Unless Lucas by some miracle withheld him, no other influence would serve. He would wreak his vengeance with no hesitating hand. The fire of his savagery was an all-consuming flame, and it was too strongly kindled to be lightly quenched.

Her thoughts went back to her husband. The date of his return had not been definitely fixed. The letter had suggested that it should take place some time in the following week. She had not yet replied to the suggestion. She put her hand to her head. Actually she had forgotten! Ought she not to send a message of warning? But in what terms could she couch it? Lucas might even yet succeed. It might be that even now he was fighting the desperate battle.

Inaction became intolerable. She had promised Mrs. Errol that she would take a long rest, but there was no rest for her. She knew that she would hear from Lucas the moment he had anything definite to report; but a new and ghastly fear now assailed her. What if Nap had not returned to Baronmead? What if he had gone direct to the asylum, there to snatch his opportunity while his fury was at its height?

The thought turned her sick. She rose, scarcely knowing what she did, and moved across the room to her escritoire. The vague idea of penning some sort of warning was in her mind, but before she reached it the conviction stabbed her that it would be too late. No warning would be of any avail. If that had been Nap Errol's intention, by this time the deed was done. And if that were so, she was in part guilty of her husband's murder.

Powerless, she sank upon her knees by the open window, striving painfully, piteously, vainly, to pray. But no words came to her, no prayer rose from her wrung heart. It was as though she knelt in outer darkness before a locked door.

In that hour Anne Carfax went down into that Place of Desolation which some call hell and some the bitter school of sorrow—that place in which each soul is alone with its agony and its sin, that place where no light shines and no voice is heard, where, groping along the edge of destruction, the wanderer seeks its Maker and finds Him not, where even the Son of God Himself once lost His faith.

And in that hour she knew why her love lay wounded unto death, though not then did she recognise the revelation as a crowning mercy. She saw herself bruised and abased, humbled beyond belief. She saw her proud purity brought low, brought down to the very mire which all her life she had resolutely ignored, from the very thought of which she had always withdrawn herself as from an evil miasma that bred corruption. She saw herself a sinner, sunk incredibly low, a woman who had worshipped Love indeed, but at a forbidden shrine, a woman moreover bereft of all things, who had seen her sacrifice crumble to ashes and had no more to offer.

Through her mind flashed a single sentence that had often and often set her wondering: "From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have." She knew its meaning now. It scorched her inmost soul. Such an one was she. No effort had she ever made to possess her husband's love. No love had she ever offered to him; duty and submission indeed, but love—never. Her heart had been unwarmed, nor had she ever sought to kindle within it the faintest spark. She had hated him always. She knew it now. Or perhaps her feeling for him had been something too cold for even hatred. If he had made her drink the waters of bitterness, she had given him in return the icy draught of contempt.

There had been a time when his passion for her might have turned to love, but she had let it slide. She had not wanted love. Or else—like so many fevered souls—she had yearned for the full blossom thereof, neglecting to nourish the parched seed under her feet.

She had committed sacrilege. That was why Love had come to her at last with a flaming sword, devastating her whole life, depriving her of even that which she had seemed to have. That was why she now knelt impotent before a locked door. That was why God was angry.

A long, long time passed. She did not hear the rain pattering upon the green earth, nor feel the soft breeze on her neck. She had lost touch with things physical. She was yet groping in outer darkness.

A hand very softly turned the handle of her door, and a motherly face looked in.

"Why, Anne, dear child, I thought you were asleep!" the deep voice said reproachfully. "I've been listening outside for ages, and you were so quiet!"

She raised her head quickly, and in a moment rose. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, but they bore no trace of tears.

"I could not sleep," she said. "But you mustn't trouble about me. I am quite well. I will dress and come down."

Mrs. Errol came forward, shaking her head disapprovingly. "I have a note from Lucas," she said. "It arrived a quarter of an hour ago, but there was no answer, so I thought it would be real wicked to wake you up to read it."

Anne stretched out a hand that shook. "Please!" she said almost inarticulately.

With the note open in her hand she turned and sat down suddenly as if incapable of standing. The clumsy, uneven writing danced before her eyes. One sentence only, but it took her many seconds to read!

"My brother Nap leaves to-night for Arizona.—Lucas."

She raised her face with a deep, deep breath. She felt as if she had not breathed for hours. Silently, after a moment, she held out the brief message to Mrs. Errol.

"My!" said the latter. "Well, thank the Lord for that!"

And then very tenderly she laid her hand upon Anne's shoulder. "My dearie, would it help you any to speak of him?"

Anne leaned her weary head against her. "I don't know," she said.

"I often wanted to warn you," Mrs. Errol said. "But I thought—I hoped—it was unnecessary. You were always so kind of frank with him that I thought maybe it would be an impertinence to say anything. It wasn't as if you were an inexperienced girl. If you had been—but to give him his due, Nap never tried to trap inexperience. He's got some morals, knave as he is. Say, Anne dear, you know he is no son of mine?"

"Yes," whispered Anne, gently drawing her friend's hand round her neck.

"And I sometimes wonder," Mrs. Errol went on, in her deep sing-song voice that yet somehow held a note of pathos, "if I did wrong to take him as I did. He was the quaintest baby, Anne—the cutest morsel you ever saw. His dying mother brought him to me. She was only a girl herself—a broken-hearted girl, dying before her time. I couldn't refuse. I felt he had a sort of claim upon us. Maybe I was wrong. My husband didn't view it that way, but at that time I hadn't much faith in his judgment. So I took the boy—his boy—and he was brought up as one of my own. But he was always unaccountable. He had queer lapses. I tried to be kind to him. I guess I always was kind. But I surmise that he always suspected me of resenting his existence. Lucas was the only one who ever had any influence over him. Latterly I've thought you had some too, but I guess that was where I went wrong. He and Bertie never got on. P'r'aps it was my fault. P'r'aps he inherited some of my antagonism. The Lord knows I tried to suppress it, but somehow it was always there."

"Dear Mrs. Errol!" Anne murmured softly. "Not one woman in a thousand would have done as much."

"Oh, you mustn't say that, dearie. I'm a very poor specimen. I gave him what advantages I could, but I never loved him. P'r'aps if I had, he'd have been a better boy. It's only love that counts for anything in God's sight, and I never gave him any. Lucas did. That's how it is he knows how to manage him. It isn't personal magnetism or anything of that sort. It's just love. He can't help answering to that, because it's Divine."

"Ah!" breathed Anne. "You think him capable of love then?"

"I guess so, dear. He's raw and undeveloped, but like the rest of creation he has his possibilities. You've seen him in his better moods yourself. I always thought he kept his best side for you."

"I know," Anne said. She leaned slowly back, looking up into the kindly eyes above her. "But it was

only a mask. I see it now. I think there are many men like that, perhaps all are to a certain extent. They are only themselves to one another. No woman would ever love a man if she saw him as he is."

"My dear! My dear!" Mrs. Errol said. "That's a bitter thing to say. And it isn't true either. You'll see better by-and-by. Men are contemptible, I own—the very best of them; but they've all got possibilities, and it's just our part to draw them out. It's the divine foolishness of women's love that serves their need, that makes them feel after better things. No woman ever won a man by despising him. He may be inferior—he is—but he wants real love to bolster him up. I guess the dear Lord thought of that when He fashioned women."

But Anne only smiled, very sadly, and shook her head. It might be true, but she was in no state to judge. She was blinded by present pain. She felt she had given her love to the wrong man, and though it had flourished like a tropical flower in the fiery atmosphere of his passion, it had been burnt away at last by the very sun that had called it into being. And she would love in that way no more for ever. There was only duty left down all the long grey vista of her life.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE POWER DIVINE

"Well, if this isn't a pleasure!"

Thus Lucas Errol, sitting on the terrace on a certain hot afternoon early in August, greeted Dot, whose multifarious duties did not permit her to be a very frequent visitor. He smiled at her with that cordiality which even on his worst days was never absent, but she thought him looking very ill.

"Are you sure I shan't tire you too much?" she asked him, as he invited her to sit down.

"Quite sure, my dear Dot!" he answered. "It does me good to see people. Lady Carfax is coming presently. The mother has gone to fetch her. It will be her last appearance, I am afraid, for the present. She is expecting her husband home to-morrow. But I'm glad you are here first. I was just wishing I could see you."

"Were you really?" said Dot.

"Yes, really. No, you needn't look at me like that. I'm telling the truth. I always do, to the best of my ability. Is that chair quite comfortable? Do you mind if I smoke?"

"I don't mind anything," Dot said. "And I'm so comfortable that I want to take off my hat and go to sleep."

"You may do the first," said Lucas. "But not the second, because I want to talk, and it's sort of uninteresting not to have an audience, especially when there is something important to be said."

"Something important!" echoed Dot. "I hope it's something nice."

"Oh, quite nice," he assured her. "It's to do with Bertie." He was smiling in his own peculiarly kindly fashion. "By the way, he's stewing indoors, studying for that exam, which he isn't going to pass."

"Not going to pass?" Dot looked up in swift anxiety. "Oh, don't you think he will?"

Lucas shook his head. "What's success anyway? I guess the Creator finds the failures just as useful to Him in the long run."

"But I don't want him to fail!" she protested.

"In my opinion," Lucas said slowly, "it doesn't matter a single red cent, so long as a man does his best. Believe me, it isn't success that counts. We're apt to think it's everything when we're young. I did myself once—before I began to realise that I hadn't come to stay." The shrewd blue eyes smiled at her under their heavy lids. "Now I don't want to distress you any," he said, "but I'm going to say something that p'r'aps you'll take to heart though you mustn't let it grieve you. Capper is coming here next month

to perform an operation on me. It may be successful, and on the other hand—it may not. The uncertainty worries me some. I'm trying to leave my affairs in good order, but—there are some things beyond my scope that I'd like unspeakably to see settled before I take my chances. You can understand that?"

Dot's hand, warm, throbbing with life, slipped impulsively into his.
"Dear Lucas, of course—of course I understand."

"Thanks! That's real nice of you. I always knew you were a woman of sense. I wonder if you can guess what it is I've set my heart on, eh, Dot?"

"Tell me," murmured Dot.

His eyes still rested upon her, but they seemed to be looking at something beyond. "P'r'aps I'm over fond of regulating other folks' affairs," he said. "It's a habit that easily grows on the head of a family. But I've a sort of fancy for seeing you and Bertie married before I go out. If you tell me it's quite impossible I won't say any more. But if you could see your way to it—well, it would be a real kindness, and I needn't say any more than that."

The weary, rather droning voice ceased to speak. The eyelids drooped more heavily. It seemed to Dot that a grey shadow lay upon the worn face. He looked so unutterably tired, so ready for the long, long sleep.

She sat quite still beside him, turning the matter in her mind.

After a little he went on speaking, with eyes half-closed. "It would hit him hard if I went under, but he wouldn't feel so badly if you were there. The mother too—she wants someone to lean on. There's Lady Carfax, but she has her own burden. And there'd be a lot for Bertie to see to, Nap being away. Besides —"

"Oh, Luke," Dot broke in, her eyes full of tears, "I—I can't imagine this place without you."

"No? Well, you mustn't let it distress you any. We've all got to go, sooner or later. There isn't anything in that. The main thing is to get it over, when it comes, with as little fuss as possible. Life isn't long enough for grieving. It's just a mortal waste of time. And what is Death anyway?" He raised his eyes with what seemed an effort. "You won't blame me," he said, "for wanting to close up the ranks a bit before I go. Of course I may live as long as any of you. God knows I shall do my best. I want to pull through—for several reasons. But if I've got to go, I'd like to feel I've left things as ship-shape as possible. Bertie will tell you what provision I desire to make for you. P'r'aps you and he will talk it over, and if you're willing I'll see the padre about it. But I kind of felt the first word ought to be with you. Bertie didn't like to speak because he'd promised to wait. You'll find he's a man of his word. That's why I've butted in. Say, child, I didn't mean to make you cry. That was clumsy of me."

He patted her hand gently, while Dot blinked away her tears.

"Don't let us talk about it any more now," she besought him. "Oh, Lucas—I do want you to live, more—more than anything."

"That's real kind of you," he said. "I'll do my best, you may be sure. I can hear Lady Carfax talking in the drawing-room. Won't you go and bring her out?"

He made no effort to rise when Anne came on to the terrace, but he gave her so vivid a smile of welcome that she scarcely noted the omission. It was their first meeting since Nap's departure, for Lucas had been confined to his bed for days. But that smile of his banished any sense of embarrassment from her mind. He was so candidly, so unaffectedly, pleased to see her.

She sat down in the riotous sunshine and gave herself up unreservedly to the pleasure of being with her friends. They were all congenial to her. Mrs. Errol, Dot, Lucas, but most especially Lucas, who occupied a unique position in her heart and in her thoughts. He had always been so perfectly her friend in need.

As the long, sunny afternoon wore away, she found herself watching him and in silence marvelling. How was it that this man in his utter, piteous weakness accomplished so much, ruled thus supreme? Wherein lay that potent charm of his which neither devil nor brute could effectively resist? Whence came it, this power of the soul, this deliberate and conscious mastery?

She watched Bertie waiting on him, hovering about him, ready to spring up at his lightest word to execute his scarcely-uttered wish. Other men—even great men—did not command this personal homage, this complete, incessant devotion. Undoubtedly there was something kingly about him; but

wherein did it lie? Not in the impotent, unwieldy figure, not in the pleasant, emotionless drawl, not even in the friendly quiet of his eyes, the kindly sympathy of his smile. In none of these lay his power, and yet in all of them it was in some fashion apparent. No great force of personality characterised him, and yet his monarchy was absolute. No splendour of intellect, no keenness of wit, no smartness of repartee were his. Only a shrewdness of understanding that was never cruel, a humour that had no edge.

And presently Anne remembered that his own mother had given her the key to the problem, and she doubted not that it solved the whole. "It isn't personal magnetism," Mrs. Errol had said, "nor anything of that sort. It's just love."

That was the magic to which even Nap, the fierce, the passionate, the treacherous, had been forced to bow. In the midst of his weakness this man wielded an all-potent power—a power before which they all instinctively did homage—before which even devils humbled themselves—because it was Divine.

That was the secret of his strength. That was the weapon by which he conquered. She wondered if it had always been so, or if his physical weakness had tended to develop in him a greatness of heart of which more active men were quite incapable. It might be true, as Mrs. Errol had contended, that all men had their possibilities, but, this was the only man she had ever met who had turned them to account. All unconsciously, perhaps in response to a reaction which had been necessarily violent, Anne yielded herself that day for the first time in her life to a species of hero-worship that could not but beautify her own sad life.

When later she found herself alone with him, they talked for a space upon indifferent things, and then they did not talk at all. The intimacy between them made conversation unnecessary, and Lucas Errol's silence was as easy as his speech.

"You'll take care of yourself," he said once, "or I shan't be easy about you."

And, when she had promised that: "And you'll look us up as often as you find you can. P'r'aps if you can't come very often you'll manage to write."

But he made no direct reference to her husband's return. His sympathy neither sought nor needed expression in words.

Neither did he speak of himself. He only at parting held her hand very closely for several silent seconds. And Anne went away with a hushed feeling at her heart as if he had invoked a benediction.

Back to her home she went, strangely quiet and at peace. She had thought that visit to Baronmead would have been painful to her. She had expected to suffer afresh. But it was instead as if a healing hand had been laid upon her, and as she went she thought no more of Nap, the savage, the sudden, the terrible; but of Lucas, the gentle, the patient, the chivalrous, who had won and would for ever keep her perfect trust.

The light of a golden evening lay upon the Manor as she entered. It was wonderfully quiet. She went in by the French windows that led into the drawing-room, and here, tempted by an impulse that had not moved her for long, she sat down at the piano and began very softly to play.

She had not touched the keys since her last visit to Baronmead. She wondered, as idly she suffered her fingers to wander, how long it would be before she played again.

Yet it was hard to believe, sitting there in the quiet evening light, that the next day would witness her return to bondage, that bondage that had so cruelly galled her, the very thought of which had at one time filled her with repulsion. But her feelings had undergone a change of late. She could not feel that the old burden would ever return upon her. She had been emancipated too long. Her womanhood had developed too much during those months of liberty. No, it could never be the same. Patient and faithful wife she would still be. She was ready to devote herself ungrudgingly, without reservation, to her invalid husband. But his slave she would never be again. She had overcome her repugnance; she was willing to serve. But never again would he compel. The days of his tyranny were for ever gone.

It was no easy path that lay before her, but she had not forgotten how narrowly she had escaped the precipice. Even yet she still trembled when she remembered the all-engulfing pit of destruction that had opened before her, and the anguish of fear that had possessed her until deliverance had come. Lucas Errol had been her deliverer. She remembered that also, and a faint, sad smile touched her lips—Lucas Errol, king and cripple, ruler and weakling.

Softly the sunset faded. Anne's fingers ceased to roam over the keys. She clasped them in her lap and sat still.

All at once a quiet voice spoke. "My lady!"

With a start she turned. "Dimsdale! How you startled me!"

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," the old man said.

He was standing close behind her. There was an air of subdued importance about him. He was grave to severity.

But Anne did not look at him very critically. "I shall not want any tea," she said. "I will dine at eight in my sitting-room as usual. Is everything in readiness, Dimsdale? Is Sir Giles's room just as it should be?"

"Yes, my lady."

Anne rose and quietly closed the piano. She wondered why Dimsdale lingered, and after a moment it struck her that he had something to say. She took up her gloves and turned round to him.

"No one has been, I suppose?"

"No one, my lady."

"Are there any letters?"

"No letters, my lady."

"Then—" Anne paused, and for the first time looked at the old servant attentively. "Is anything the matter, Dimsdale?" she asked.

He hesitated, the fingers of one hand working a little, an unusual sign of agitation with him.

With an effort at last he spoke. "Your ladyship instructed me to open any telegram that might arrive."

Her heart gave a great throb of foreboding. "Certainly," she said. "Has there been a telegram then?"

Dimsdale's hand clenched. He looked at her anxiously, rather piteously.

"My lady—" he said, and stopped.

Anne stood like a statue. She felt as if her vitality were suddenly arrested, as if every pulse had ceased to beat.

"Please go on," she said in a whisper. "There has been a telegram. Either give it to me, or—tell me what was in it."

Dimsdale made a jerky movement, as if pulling himself together. He put an unsteady hand into his breast-pocket. "It came this afternoon, my lady, about an hour ago. I am afraid it's bad news—very bad news. Yes, my lady, I'm telling you, I'm telling you. I regret to say Sir Giles has been took worse, took very sudden like, and—and—"

"He is dead," Anne said very clearly, very steadily, in a tone that was neither of question nor of exclamation.

Dimsdale bent his head. "He died at half-past three, my lady."

He had the telegram in his hand. Anne took it from him and moved very quietly to the window.

Mutely the old man stood and watched her in the silence, thankful for her composure. He was himself severely shaken, and the ordeal of telling her had been no light one.

But as the silence still continued he began to grow uneasy again. He wondered if he ought to go, if she had forgotten to dismiss him. Her stately head was bent over the paper, which never crackled or stirred in her hand. There began to be something terrible, something fateful, in her passivity. Old Dimsdale shivered, and took the liberty of breaking the silence.

"Would your ladyship wish a message to be sent to Baronmead?"

She stirred at that, moved sharply as one suddenly awakened. Her face was quite white, but her eyes were alight, curiously vital, with a glitter that was almost of horror.

"To Baronmead!" she said, a queer note of sharpness in her voice. "No, certainly not, most certainly not!"

And there she stopped, stopped dead as though struck dumb. In the garden behind her, down among the lilac trees, a bird had begun to sing, eagerly, voluptuously, thrillingly, with a rapture as of the full spring-tide of life.

Anne stood for a space of many seconds and listened, her white face upraised, her eyes wide and shining.

And then suddenly her attitude changed. She put her hands over her face and tottered blindly from the open window.

Dimsdale started to support her, but she needed no support. In a moment she was looking at him again, but with eyes from which all light had faded.

"I must write some messages at once," she said. "One of the grooms must take them. No, I shall not send to Mrs. Errol to-night. I wish to be alone—quite alone. Please admit no one. And—yes—tell them to pull down the blinds, and—shut all the windows!"

Her voice quivered and sank. She stood a moment, collecting herself, then walked quietly to the door.

"Come to me in ten minutes for those telegrams," she said. "And after that, remember, Dimsdale, I am not to be disturbed by anyone."

And with that she passed out, erect and calm, and went up to her room.

CHAPTER II

THE WORKER OF MIRACLES

"I want to know!" said Capper.

He had said it several times during a muddy two-mile tramp from Baronford Station, and he said it again as he turned up the hill that was crowned by the old grey church, whose two cracked bells had just burst into as cheerful a marriage peal as they could compass.

"Sounds frisky!" he commented to himself, as he trudged up the steep lane. "My! What an all-fired fuss! Guess these muddy boots aren't exactly wedding-guesty. But that's their lookout for monopolising every vehicle in the place. I wonder if I'll have the audacity to show after all. Or shall I carry this almighty thirst of mine back to the Carfax Arms and quench it in British ale?"

But this latter idea did not apparently greatly lure him, for he continued to plod upwards, even while considering it, to the tune of the clamouring bells.

Arriving finally at the top of the hill and finding there a crowd of vehicles of all descriptions, he paused to breathe and to search for the Baronmead motors.

He found them eventually, but there was no one in attendance. The servants were all herded in the churchyard for a view of the bridal procession, for which a passage across the road to the Rectory grounds was being kept.

Capper stationed himself, with another rueful glance as his boots, as near as he could get to the open lych-gate, and there stood grimly conspicuous, watching the scene with his alert green eyes, that held the glint of a tolerant smile, and cracking his thin, yellow fingers one by one. No one gave him a second glance, or dreamed for an instant that one of the greatest men in the Western Hemisphere was standing on the edge of the crowd.

They came at last—bride and bridegroom—flushed and hastening through a shower of rose petals.

Bertie was laughing all over his brown face. He was holding Dot's hand very fast, and as they descended the red-carpeted steps into the road he leaned to her, whispering. She laughed back at him with shining eyes, her round face radiant beneath the orange blossom. Neither of them glanced to right or left. Swiftly through the fallen rose leaves they crossed to the Rectory gateway and were lost to view.

A bevy of bridesmaids ran laughing after them, and then came a pause.

Capper edged a little nearer to the churchyard steps and waited. The clamour of bells was incessant, wholly drowning the clamour of voices. Everyone was craning forward to see the crowd of guests. The long procession had already begun to issue from the church porch. It moved very slowly, for at the head of it, his hand on his mother's arm, came Lucas Errol.

He walked with extreme difficulty, leaning on a crutch. His head was uncovered, and the glare of the September sunlight smote full upon it. The hair was turning very grey.

He was smiling as he came, but his brows were slightly drawn, his eyes sunk in deep hollows.

Swiftly and comprehensively the man at the foot of the steps scanned every detail, marked the halting, painful progress, the lined forehead. And the next moment, as Lucas paused, preparatory to descending, he pushed forward with characteristic decision of movement and moved upwards to his side.

"I guess you'll find me useful at this juncture," he said.

Lucas's start of surprise was instantly followed by a smile of welcome. He gripped Capper's hand warmly.

"The very man I want! But how in wonder did you get here? You never walked all the way from the station?"

"I did," said Capper.

"You don't say! Why didn't you let me know? I guess we must move on. We are blocking the gangway."

"Easy does it," said Capper. "It won't hurt 'em any to wait. Get your arm over my shoulder. That's the way. These steps are the very devil for you."

He bent his wiry frame to Lucas Errol's need, and helped him to descend. At the foot he paused a moment and looked at him keenly.

"All serene," smiled Lucas. "I'll take your arm now, if it's all the same to the mother. You didn't expect to find us plunged in wedding gaities, I guess."

"Wish it had been your own," said Capper.

At which Lucas turned up his face to the sky and laughed.

They crossed the flag-decked garden and entered by the conservatory door. People were beginning to crowd about them.

"We must find you a seat somehow," said Capper.

"I must have a word with the bride and bridegroom first," Lucas declared.

But the bride and bridegroom were for the moment inaccessible, being completely surrounded by well-wishers.

Capper seized upon the first chair he came upon and put Lucas into it.

"I seem to have come in the nick of time," he observed drily. "Why is no one detailed to look after you? Where is that tiger's whelp Nap?"

"Nap's in America, been gone two months or more."

"That so?" There was keen satisfaction in Capper's tone. "That clears the ground for action. And Lady Carfax? Is she here?"

"No." There was a hint of reserve in the quiet reply. "Lady Carfax is in deep mourning for her husband."

"That so?" said Capper again. He seemed to take but casual note of the information. He was pulling absently at his pointed yellow beard.

Lucas lay back in his chair and suffered himself to relax with a sigh. Capper's eyes darted lizard-like over him, taking in every line of him, keenly alive to each detail.

"If I were you I should shunt as soon as possible," he said. "Since it isn't your own show

unfortunately, I should imagine you are not indispensable."

But at this point the throng parted, and Dot, looking very young in her bridal white, and supremely happy, burst eagerly through,

"Oh, here you are!" she cried. "Your mother said you were close by, but I couldn't see you anywhere. It's been too much for you. You're tired."

She bent over him in quick solicitude, then, as he smiled and drew her down to him, stooped and kissed him, whispering a few words for his ear alone.

Bertie was close behind her, but he had caught sight of Capper and had stopped short with a queer expression on his boyish face, a look that was a curious blend of consternation and relief.

A moment and he stepped up to the great doctor and took him by the elbow. "You here already!" he said. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"I have only run down to have a look at things," said Capper. "I seem to have pitched on a busy day. I hope you are enjoying yourself."

"Thanks!" said Bertie, with a brief laugh. "Say, Doctor, you'll let me know your plans?"

"Certainly—when they are ripe." The green eyes gleamed humorously. "Aren't you thinking of introducing me to Mrs. Bertie?" he suggested.

"Yes, yes, of course. But you won't do anything without me?" urged Bertie. "I should greatly like a talk with you, but I'm afraid it can't be managed."

"I mightily doubt if you could tell me anything that I don't know already," said Capper, "on any subject."

"It's about Luke," said Bertie anxiously.

"Just so. Well, I guess I know more about Luke than any other person on this merry little planet."

"Do you think he looks worse?" whispered Bertie.

Capper's long, yellow hand fastened very unobtrusively and very forcibly upon his shoulder. "One thing at a time, good Bertie!" he said. "Weren't you going to present me to—your wife?"

CHAPTER III

THE WOMAN'S PART

It was on a day of wild autumnal weather, when the wind moaned like a living thing in torture about the house, and the leaves eddied and drifted before the scudding rain, that they turned Tawny Hudson out of his master's room, and left him crouched and whimpering like a dog against the locked door. Save for his master's express command, no power on earth would have driven him away, not even Capper of the curt speech and magnetic will. But the master had spoken very definitely and distinctly, and it was Tawny Hudson's to obey. Therefore he huddled on the mat, rocking to and fro, shivering like some monstrous animal in pain, while within the room Capper wrought his miracles.

Downstairs Mrs. Errol sat holding Anne's hand very tightly, and talking incessantly lest her ears should be constrained to listen. And Anne, pale and still, answered her as a woman talking in her sleep.

Bertie and his young bride were still absent on their honeymoon; this also by Lucas's express desire.

"It won't help me any to have you here, boy," he had said at parting. "A certain fuss is inevitable, but I want you out of it. I am looking to Anne Carfax to help the dear mother."

He had known even then that he would not look in vain, and he had not been disappointed. So, sorely against his will, Bertie had submitted, with the proviso that if things went wrong he should be sent for immediately.

And thus Anne Carfax, who had lived in almost unbroken seclusion since her husband's death, now sat with Mrs. Errol's hand clasped in hers, and listened, as one listens in a nightmare, to the wailing of the wind about the garden and house, and the beat, beat, beat of her heart when the wind was still.

"Could you say a prayer, dear?" Mrs. Errol asked her once.

And she knelt and prayed, scarcely knowing what she said, but with a passion of earnestness that left her weak, quivering in every limb.

The wind was rising. It roared in the trees and howled against the panes. Sometimes a wild gust of rain lashed the windows. It made her think of an unquiet spirit clamouring for admittance.

"Anne dear, play to me, play to me!" besought Mrs. Errol. "If I listen I shall go mad! No one will hear you. We are right away from his part of the house."

And though every nerve shrank at the bare suggestion, Anne rose without a single protest and went to the piano. She sat down before it, and blindly, her eyes wide, fixed, unseeing, she began to play.

What she played she knew not. Her fingers found notes, chords, melodies mechanically.

Once she paused, but, "Ah, go on, dear child! Go on!" urged Mrs. Errol. And she went on, feeling vaguely through the maze of suspense that surrounded them, longing inarticulately to cease all effort, but spurred onward because she knew she must not fail.

And gradually as she played there came to her a curious sense of duality, of something happening that had happened before, of a record repeating itself. She turned her head, almost expecting to hear a voice speak softly behind her, almost expecting to hear a mocking echo of the words unspoken. "Has the Queen no further use for her jester?" No further use! No further use! Oh, why was she tortured thus? Why, when her whole soul yearned to forget, was she thus compelled to remember the man whose brutal passion and insatiable thirst for vengeance had caught and crushed her heart?

And still she played on as one beneath a spell, while the memory of him forced the gates of her consciousness and took arrogant possession. She saw again the swarthy face with its fierce eyes, the haughty smile, which for her was ever tinged with tenderness. Surely—oh, surely he had loved her once! She recalled his fiery love-making, and thrilled again to the eager insistence of his voice, the mastery of his touch. And then she remembered what they said of him, that women were his slaves, his playthings, the toys he broke in wantonness and carelessly tossed aside. She remembered how once in his actual presence she had overheard words that had made her shrink, a wonder as to who was his latest conquest, the cynical remark: "Anyone for a change and no one for long is his motto." What was he doing now, she asked herself, and trembled. He had gone without word or message of any sort. Her last glimpse of him had been in that violet glare of lightning, inexpressibly terrible, with tigerish eyes that threatened her and snarling lips drawn back. Thus—thus had she seen him many a time since in the long night-watches when she had lain sleepless and restless, waiting for the dawn.

Some such vision came to her now, forcing itself upon her shrinking imagination. Vividly there rose before her his harsh face alert, cruel, cynical, and the sinewy hands that gripped and crushed. And suddenly a shuddering sense of nausea overcame her. She left the piano as one seeking refuge from a horror unutterable. Surely this man had never loved her—was incapable of love! And she had almost wished him back!

"There is someone in the entry, dear child," whispered Mrs. Errol. "Go and see—go and see!"

She went, moving as one stricken blind. But before she reached the door it opened and someone entered. She saw Capper as through a mist in which bodily weakness and anguished fear combined to overwhelm her. And then very steadily his arm encircled her, drew her tottering to a chair.

"It's all right," he said in his expressionless drawl. "The patient has regained consciousness, and is doing O.K. Are you ladies thinking of lunch? Because if so, I guess I'll join you. No, Mrs. Errol, you can't see him before to-night at the earliest. Lady Carfax, I have a message for you—the first words he spoke when he came to. He was hardly conscious when he uttered them, but I guess you'll be kind of interested to hear what they were. 'Tell Anne,' he said, 'I'm going to get well.'"

The intense deliberation with which he spoke gave her time to collect herself, but the words affected her oddly. After a moment she rose, went to Mrs. Errol, who had covered her face with both hands while he was speaking, and knelt beside her. Neither of them uttered a sound.

Capper strolled to the window, his hands deep in his pockets, and looked out upon the wind-swept gardens. He whistled very softly to himself, as a man well satisfied.

He did not turn his head till at the end of five minutes Anne came to his side. She was very pale but quite self-possessed.

"Mrs. Errol has gone to her room," she said. "She wished to be alone."

"Gone to have a good cry, eh?" said Capper. "Healthiest thing she could do. And what about you?"

She smiled with lips that faintly quivered. "I am quite all right, Doctor. And—I have ordered luncheon."

He turned fully round and looked her up and down with lightning swiftness. "You're a very remarkable woman, Lady Carfax," he said after a moment.

"I hope you may never be disappointed in me," she answered gravely.

"I hope so too," he said, "for there is a good deal dependent upon you."

"What do you mean?" She raised her clear eyes interrogatively.

But he baffled her, as he baffled everyone, with the very keenness of his own scrutiny. He began to crack all his fingers in turn.

"I mean," he said, "that even I can't work miracles by myself. I can do the elementary part. I can cut and saw and sew, but I can't heal. I can't give life. That's the woman's part. That's where I count on you. And I don't think you are going to fail me, Lady Carfax."

"I promise you I will do my utmost," she said very earnestly.

He nodded. "I believe you will. But even so, you can't do too much. It's a serious case, even more serious than I expected. I don't say this to alarm you, but I guess you had better know it. It'll be a tough, uphill fight, and he'll need a deal of pushing behind. It may entail more than you dream of—a big sacrifice perhaps; who knows? But you women don't shy at sacrifices. And, believe me, he's worth a sacrifice."

"He deserves the best," she said warmly.

"Yes, but you don't take me," said Capper.

He paused a moment, then suddenly laid a quiet hand on her shoulder. "I may be a wise man," he said, "and again I may be a meddling fool. You and the gods must decide between you. But I'm old enough to be your father anyway. So p'r'aps you'll bear with me. Lady Carfax, hasn't it struck you that a time will come—probably pretty soon—when he will begin to reach out for something that you—and you alone—can give?"

Anne's quick gesture of protest was his answer. She stood motionless, her eyes still raised, waiting for him to continue. But he felt her tremble under his hand. He knew that inwardly she was not so calm as she would have had him think.

He went on in his precise, emotionless fashion, as though he perceived nothing. "He won't ask for it—anyway till he feels he can make a fair return. He will never ask a sacrifice of you. He will break his heart sooner. The point is, Are you capable of offering the sacrifice unasked? For that is what it amounts to, now that the gods have cleared the way."

"Ah!" Anne said. "And—if—not?"

She spoke rather as if to gain time than because she desired an answer.

But he answered her nevertheless very quietly, without a shade of emotion, as if he were discussing some technical matter of no personal interest to him. Only as he answered he took his hand from her shoulder and thrust it back into his pocket.

"In that case he will die, having nothing left to live for. He probably won't suffer much, simply go out like a candle. He hasn't much vitality. He may die either way. There is no responsibility attached—only possibilities."

He turned with the words, and walked across the room with the air of a man who has said his say.

She uttered no word to stop him, nor did she move to follow. She stood alone with her face to the grey storm-clouds that drifted perpetually overhead. Somehow she did not for a moment doubt the truth of what Capper had just told her. She even felt sub-consciously that she had known it for some

time. Neither did she ask herself what she was going to do. For deep in the heart of her she knew already. Deep in the heart of her she knew that when Lucas Errol began to reach out for something which she alone could give, it would not be in vain. He had given of his best to her, and she was ready to give of her best in return. If she could not give him passion, she could give him that which was infinitely greater—a deep, abiding love, a devotion born of complete sympathy. She could give him happiness, and in the giving she might find it for herself.

Over in the west the clouds were breaking, and a shaft of pale sunshine streamed upon the distant hills, turning the woods to living gold. Her eyes brightened a little as they caught the radiance. It seemed as if the door before which she had knelt so long in impotence were opening to her at last, as if one more opportunity were to be given her even yet after long and bitter failure of turning her corner of the desert into a garden of flowers and singing birds.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSAGE

It was nearly a month after Lucas Errol's operation that Bertie and his bride came home from their honeymoon and began the congenial task of setting their house in order.

Dot was thoroughly in her element. The minutest details were to her matters of vital importance.

"We must make it comfy," she said to Bertie, and Bertie fully agreed.

He had relinquished his study of the law, and had resumed his secretarial duties, well aware that Lucas could ill spare him. He was in fact Lucas's right hand just then, and the burden that devolved upon him was no light one. But he bore it with a cheerful spirit, for Lucas was making progress. Despite his utter helplessness, despite the inevitable confinement to one room, despite the weariness and the irksomeness which day by day were his portion, Lucas was very gradually gaining ground. Already he suffered less severely and slept more naturally.

His last words to Capper at parting had been, "Come again in the spring and complete the cure. I shall be ready for you."

And Capper had smiled upon him with something approaching geniality and had answered, "You'll do it, and so shall I. So long then!"

But the months that intervened were the chief stumbling-block, and Capper knew it. He knew that his patient would have to face difficulties and drawbacks that might well dismay the bravest. He knew of the reaction that must surely come when the vitality was low, and progress became imperceptible, and the long imprisonment almost unendurable. He knew of the fever that would lurk in the quickening blood, of the torturing cramp that would draw the unused muscles, of the depression that was its mental counterpart, of the black despair that would hang like a paralysing weight upon soul and body, of the *ennui*, of the weariness of life, of the piteous weakness that nothing could alleviate.

He had to a certain extent warned Lucas what to expect; but the time for these things had not yet arrived. He was hardly yet past the first stage, and his courage was buoyed up by high hopes as yet undashed. He had faced worse things without blenching, and he had not begun to feel the monotony that Capper had dreaded as his worst enemy.

He took a keen interest in the doings of the young couple at the Dower House, and Dot's breezy presence was ever welcome.

As for Anne, she went to and fro between Baronmead and the Manor, of which her husband's will had left her sole mistress, no longer leading a hermit's life, no longer clinging to her solitude, grave and quiet, but not wholly unhappy. Those few words Capper had spoken on the day of Lucas's operation had made a marvellous difference to her outlook. They had made it possible for her to break down the prison-walls that surrounded her. They had given her strength to leave the past behind her, all vain regrets and cruel disillusionments, to put away despair and rise above depression. They had given her courage to go on.

Of Nap no word was ever spoken in her presence. He might have been dead, so completely had he

dropped out of her life. In fact, he was scarcely ever mentioned by anyone, a fact which aroused in Dot a curiously keen indignation, but upon which a certain shyness kept her from commenting. She kept him faithfully in mind, praying for him as regularly as she prayed for old Squinny, who still lingered on with exasperating tenacity, and continued to enjoy such help, spiritual or otherwise, as he could extract from the parson's daughter.

That Bertie strongly disapproved of his brother she was aware, but she held no very high opinion of Bertie's judgment, though even he could scarcely have forbidden her to pray for the black sheep of the family. She had not been brought up to rely upon anyone's judgment but her own, and, deeply as she loved him, she could not help regarding her husband as headlong and inclined to prejudice. He was young, she reflected, and doubtless these small defects would disappear as he grew older. True, he was nearly four years her senior; but Dot did not regard years as in any degree a measure of age. It was all a question of development, she would say, and some people—women especially—developed much more quickly than others. She herself, for instance—At which stage of the argument Bertie invariably said or did something rude, and the rest of her logic became somewhat confused. He was a dear boy and she couldn't possibly be cross with him, but somehow he never seemed to realise when she was in earnest. Another of the deficiencies of youth!

Meanwhile she occupied herself in her new home with all the zest of the young housewife, returned calls with commendable punctuality, and settled down once more to the many parochial duties which had been her ever-increasing responsibility for almost as long as she could remember.

"You are not going to slave like this always," Bertie said to her one evening, when she came in late through a November drizzle to find him waiting for her.

"I must do what I've got to do," said Dot practically, suffering him to remove her wet coat.

"All very well," said Bertie, whose chin looked somewhat more square than usual. "But I'm not going to have my wife wearing herself out over what after all is not her business."

"My dear boy!" Dot laughed aloud, twining her arm in his. "I think you forget, don't you, that I was the rector's daughter before I was your wife? I must do these things. There is no one else to do them."

"Skittles!" said Bertie rudely.

"Yes, dear, but that's no argument. Let's go and have tea, and for goodness' sake don't frown at me like that. It's positively appalling. Put your chin in and be good."

She passed her hand over her husband's face and laughed up at him merrily. But Bertie remained grave.

"You're wet through and as cold as ice. Come to the fire and let's get off your boots."

She went with him into the drawing-room, where tea awaited them.

"I'm not wet through," she declared, "and I'm not going to let you take off my boots. You may, if you are very anxious, give me some tea."

Bertie pulled up a chair to the fire and put her into it; then turned aside and began to make the tea.

Dot lay back with her feet in the fender and watched him. She was looking very tired, and now that the smile had faded from her face this was the more apparent.

When he brought her her tea she reached up, caught his hand, and held it for a moment against her cheek.

"One's own fireside is so much nicer than anyone else's," she said.

"We'll have a nice cosy talk presently. How is Luke to-day?"

"Not quite so flourishing. A brute of a dog howled in the night and woke him up. He didn't get his proper sleep afterwards."

"Poor old Luke! What a shame!"

"Yes, it made a difference. He has been having neuralgia down his spine nearly all day. I believe he's worrying too. I'm going back after dinner to see if I can do anything. I manage to read him to sleep sometimes, you know."

"Shall I come too?" said Dot.

"No." Bertie spoke with decision. "You had better go to bed yourself."

She made a face at him. "I shall do nothing of the sort. I shall sit up and do the Clothing Club accounts."

Bertie frowned abruptly. "Not to-night, Dot."

"Yes, to-night. They have got to be done, and I can think better at night."

"You are not to do them to-night," Bertie said, with determination. "I will do them myself if they must be done."

"My dear boy, you! You would never understand my book-keeping. Just imagine the muddle you would make! No, I must get through them myself, and since I must spend the time somehow till you come home, why shouldn't I do them to-night?"

"Because I forbid it," said Bertie unexpectedly.

He was standing on the rug, cup in hand. He looked straight down at her with the words, meeting her surprised eyes with most unwonted sternness.

Dot raised her eyebrows as high as they would go, kept them so for several seconds, then very deliberately lowered them and began to stir her tea.

"You understand me, don't you?" he said.

She shook her head. "Not in the least. I don't think I have ever met you before, have I?"

He set his cup upon the mantelpiece and went suddenly down on his knees by her side. "I haven't been taking proper care of you," he said. "But I'm going to begin right now. Do you know when you came in just now you gave me an absolute shock?"

She laughed faintly, her eyes fixed upon her cup "I didn't know I was looking such a fright."

"You can never look anything but sweet to me," he said. "But it's a fact you're not looking well. I'm sure you are doing too much."

"I'm not doing any more than usual," said Dot, still intent upon the drain of tea in her cup.

"Well, it's too much for you anyway, and I'm going to put a stop to it."

"Do you know how to read your fortune in tea leaves?" said Dot.

"No," said Bertie. With a very gentle hand he deprived her of this engrossing pastime. "I want you to attend to me for a minute," he said.

Dot snuggled against him with a very winning gesture. "I don't want to, Bertie, unless you can find something more interesting to talk about. Really, there is nothing wrong with me. Tell me about Luke. Why is he worrying?"

Bertie frowned. "He doesn't say so, but I believe he's bothered about Nap. Heaven knows why he should be. He was supposed to go to Arizona, but he didn't turn up there. As a matter of fact, if he never turned up again anywhere it would be about the best thing that could possibly happen."

"Oh, don't, Bertie!" Dot spoke sharply, almost involuntarily. There was a quick note of pain in her voice. "I don't like you to talk like that. It isn't nice of you to be glad he's gone, and—it's downright horrid to want him to stay away for ever."

"Good heavens!" said Bertie.

He was plainly amazed, and she resented his amazement, feeling that in some fashion it placed her in a false position from which she was powerless to extricate herself. The last thing she desired was to take up the cudgels on Nap's behalf, nevertheless she prepared herself to do so as in duty bound. For Nap was a friend, and Dot's loyalty to her friends was very stanch.

"I mean it," she said, sitting up and facing him. "I don't think it's right of you, and it certainly isn't kind. He doesn't deserve to be treated as an outcast. He isn't such a bad sort after all. There is a whole lot of good in him, whatever people may say. You at least ought to know him better. Anyhow, he is a friend of mine, and I won't hear him abused."

Bertie's face changed while she was speaking, grew stern, grew almost implacable.

"Look here," he said plainly, "if you want to know what Nap is, he's a damned blackguard, not fit for you to speak to. So, if you've no objection, we'll shunt him for good and all!"

It was Dot's turn to look amazed. She opened her eyes to their widest extent. "What has he done?"

"Never mind!" said Bertie.

"But I do mind!" Swiftly indignation swamped her surprise. "Why should I shunt him, as you call it, for no reason at all? I tell you frankly, Bertie, I simply won't!"

Her eyes were very bright as she ended. She sat bolt upright obviously girded for battle.

Bertie also looked on the verge of an explosion, but with a grim effort he restrained himself. "I have told you he is unworthy of your friendship," he said. "Let that be enough."

"That's not enough," said Dot. "I think otherwise."

He bit his lip. "Well, if you must have it—so did Lady Carfax till she found out her mistake."

"Lady Carfax!" Dot's face changed. "What about Lady Carfax?"

"She gave him her friendship," Bertie told her grimly, "and he rewarded her with about as foul a trick as any man could conceive. You heard the story of the motor breaking down that day in the summer when he took her for a ride? It was nothing but an infernal trick. He wanted to get her for himself, and it wasn't his fault that he failed. It was in consequence of that that Lucas sent him away."

"Oh!" said Dot. "He was in love with her then!"

"If you call it love," said Bertie. "He is always in love with someone."

Dot's eyes expressed enlightenment. She seemed to have forgotten their difference of opinion. "So that was why he was so cut up," she said. "Of course—of course! I was a donkey not to think of it. What a mercy Sir Giles is dead! Has anyone written to tell him?"

"No," said Bertie shortly.

"But why not? Surely he has a right to know? Lady Carfax herself might wish it."

"Lady Carfax would be thankful to forget his very existence," said Bertie, with conviction.

"My dear boy, how can you possibly tell? Are you one of those misguided male creatures who profess to understand women?"

"I know that Lady Carfax loathes the very thought of him," Bertie maintained. "She is not a woman to forgive and forget very easily. Moreover, as I told you before, no one knows where he is."

"I see," said Dot thoughtfully. "But surely he has a club somewhere?"

"Yes, he belongs to the Phoenix Club, New York, if they haven't kicked him out. But what of that? I'm not going to write to him. I don't want him back, Heaven knows." There was a fighting note in Bertie's voice. He spoke as if prepared to resist to the uttermost any sudden attack upon his resolution.

But Dot attempted none; she abandoned the argument quite suddenly, and nestled against his breast. "Darling, don't let's talk about it any more! It's a subject upon which we can't agree. And I'm sorry I've been so horrid to you. I know it isn't my fault that we haven't quarrelled. Forgive me, dear, and keep on loving me. You do love me, don't you, Bertie?"

"Sweetheart!" he whispered, holding her closely.

She uttered a little muffled laugh. "That's my own boy! And I'm going to be so good, you'll hardly know me. I won't go out in the rain, and I won't do the Clothing Club accounts, and I won't overwork. And—and—I won't be cross, even if I do look and feel hideous. I'm going to be a perfect saint, Bertie."

"Sweetheart!" he said again.

She turned her face up against his neck. "Shall I tell you why?" she said, clinging to him with hands that trembled. "It's because if I let myself get cross-grained and ugly now, p'r'aps someone else—some day—will be cross-grained and ugly too. And I should never forgive myself for that. I should always feel

it was my fault. Fancy if it turned out a shrew like me, Bertie! Wouldn't—wouldn't it be dreadful?"

She was half-laughing, half-crying, as she whispered the words. Bertie's arms held her so closely that she almost gasped for breath.

"My precious girl!" he said. "My own precious wife! Is it so? You know, I wondered."

She turned her lips quickly to his. There were tears on her cheeks though she was laughing.

"How bright of you, Bertie! You—you always get there sooner or later, don't you? And you're not cross with me any more? You don't think me very unreasonable about Nap?"

"Oh, damn Nap!" said Bertie, for the second time, with fervour.

"Poor Nap!" said Dot gently.

That evening, when Bertie was at Baronmead, she scribbled a single sentence on a sheet of paper, thrust it into an envelope and directed it to the Phoenix Club, New York.

This done, she despatched a servant to the postoffice with it and sat down before the fire.

"I expect it was wrong of me," she said. "But somehow I can't help feeling he ought to know. Anyway"—Dot's English was becoming lightly powdered with Americanisms, which possessed a very decided charm on her lips—"anyway, it's done, and I won't think any more about it. It's the very last wrong thing I'll do for—ever so long." Her eyes grew soft as she uttered this praiseworthy resolution. She gazed down into the fire with a little smile, and gave herself up to dreams.

CHAPTER V

THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND

"O God, give me rest!"

Painfully the words came through quivering lips, the first they had uttered for hours. Lucas Errol lay, as he had lain for nearly three months, with his face to the ceiling, his body stretched straight and rigid, ever in the same position, utterly helpless and weary unto death.

Day after day he lay there, never stirring save when they made him bend his knees, an exercise upon which the doctor daily insisted, but which was agony to him. Night after night, sleepless, he waited the coming of the day. His general health varied but little, but his weakness was telling upon him. His endurance still held, but it was wearing thin. His old cheeriness was gone, though he summoned it back now and again with piteous, spasmodic effort. Hope and despair were fighting together in his soul, and at that time despair was uppermost. He had set out with a brave heart, but the goal was still far off, and he was beginning to falter. He had ceased to make any progress, and the sheer monotony of existence was wearing him out. The keen, shrewd eyes were dull and listless. At the opening of the door he did not even turn his head.

And yet it was Anne who entered, Anne with the flush of exercise on her sweet face, her hands full of Russian violets.

"See how busy I have been!" she said. "I am not disturbing you? You weren't asleep?"

"I never sleep," he answered, and he did not look at her or the violets; he kept his eyes upon the ceiling.

She came and sat beside him. "I gathered them all myself," she said. "Don't you want to smell them?"

He moved his lips without replying, and she leaned down, her eyes full of the utmost compassionate tenderness and held the violets to him. He raised a hand with evident effort and fumblingly took her wrist. He pressed the wet flowers against his face.

"It's a shame to bring them here, Lady Carfax," he said, letting her go. "Take them—wear them! I guess they'll be happier with you."

She smiled a little. "Should I have gathered all this quantity for myself? It has taken me nearly an hour."

"You should have told the gardener," he said. "You mustn't go tiring yourself out over me. I'm not worth it." He added, with that kindly courtesy of which adversity had never deprived him, "But I'm real grateful all the same. You mustn't think me unappreciative."

"I don't," she answered gently. "Wouldn't you like them in water?"

"Ah, yes," he said. "Put them near me. I shall smell them if I can't see them. Do you mind closing the window? I can't get warm to-day."

She moved to comply, passing across his line of vision. A moment she stood with the keen sweet air blowing in upon her, a tall, gracious figure in the full flower of comely womanhood, not beautiful, but possessing in every line of her that queenly, indescribable charm which is greater than beauty.

The man caught his breath as he watched her. His brows contracted.

Softly she closed the window and turned. She came back to her chair by his side, drew forward a little table, and began deftly to arrange her flowers.

Several seconds passed before Lucas broke the silence. "It does me good to watch you," he said. "You're always so serene."

She smiled at him across the violets. "You place serenity among the higher virtues?"

"I do," he said simply. "It's such a restful contrast to the strenuousness of life. You make me feel just by looking at you that everything's all right. You bring a peaceful atmosphere in with you, and"—his voice sank a little—"you take it away again when you go."

The smile went out of her grey eyes at his last words, but the steadfastness remained. "Then," she said gently, "I must come more often and stay longer."

But he instantly negated that. "No—it wouldn't be good for you. It wouldn't be good for me either to get to lean on you too much. I should grow exacting."

She saw a gleam of his old smile as he spoke, but it was gone at once, lost among the countless lines that pain and weariness had drawn of late upon his face.

"I don't think that is very likely," Anne said. "I can't imagine it."

"Not yet perhaps. I haven't quite reached that stage. Maybe I shall be down and out before it comes. God grant it!"

The words were too deliberate to cause her any shock. They were, moreover, not wholly unexpected. There followed a short silence while she finished arranging her violets. Then very quietly she spoke:

"You say that because you are tired."

"I am more than tired," he answered. "I'm done. I'm beaten. I'm whipped off the field."

"You think you are not gaining ground?" she questioned.

"My dear Lady Carfax," he said quietly, "it's no use closing one's eyes to the obvious. I'm losing ground every day—every night."

"But you are not fighting," she said.

"No." He looked at her half-wistfully from under his heavy eyelids. "Do you think me quite despicable? I've done my best."

She was silent. Perhaps she was not fully prepared to cope with this open admission of failure.

"I've done my best," he said again. "But it's outlasted my strength. I'm like a man hanging on to the edge of a precipice. I know every instant that my grip is slackening, and I can't help it. I've got to drop."

"You haven't done your best yet," Anne said, her voice very low. "You've got to hold on to the very end. It may be help is nearer than you think."

"But if I don't want help?" he said. "If it would be more merciful to let me go?"

Again she was silent.

"You know," he said, "life hasn't many inducements. I've put up a fight for it because I gave my promise to Nap before he went. But it isn't good enough to keep on. I can't win through. The odds are too great."

"Do you think Nap would let you stop fighting?" she said.

He smiled again faintly. "I suppose—if he were here—I should subsist on his vitality for a little while. But the end would be the same. Even he can't work miracles."

"Don't you believe in miracles?" Anne said.

He looked at her interrogatively.

"Mr. Errol," she said, "I am going to remind you of something that I think you have forgotten. It was Dr. Capper who told me. It was when you were recovering consciousness after the operation. You sent me a message. 'Tell Anne,' you said, 'I am going to get well.'" She paused a moment, looking at him very steadily. "I don't know why exactly you sent that special message to me, but I have carried it in my heart ever since."

She had moved him at last. She saw a faint glow spread slowly over the tired face. The heavy eyes opened wide to meet her look.

"Did I say that?" he said. "Yes, I had forgotten."

He was silent for a little, gazing full at her with the eyes of one suddenly awakened.

She lowered her own, and bent her face to the violets. Though she had spoken so quietly it had not been without effort. She had not found it easy. Nor did she find his silence easy, implicitly though she trusted him.

Perhaps he understood, for when he spoke at length there was in his voice so reassuring a gentleness that on the instant her embarrassment passed.

"Anne," he said, "do you really want me to get well? Would such a miracle make much difference to you?"

"It would make all the difference in the world," she answered earnestly. "I want it more than anything else in life."

With the words she raised her eyes, found his fixed upon her with an expression so new, so tender, that her heart stirred within her as a flower that expands in sudden sunshine, and the next moment his hand lay between her own, and all doubt, all hesitation had fled.

"But, my dear," he said, "I always thought it was Nap. Surely it was Nap!"

She felt as if something had stabbed her. "No, never!" she said passionately. "Never! It might have been—once—before I knew him. But never since, never since!"

"That so?" said Lucas Errol, and was silent for a little. Then, "Anne"—and the soft drawl had in it a tremor that was almost a break—"I guess I do believe in miracles after all, dear. Anyway," he began to smile, "there are some things in life too mighty for explanation."

His face was turned towards her. There was something in the look it wore that seemed to her in some fashion superb. He was different from other men. That quiet kingliness of his was so natural to him, so sublimely free from arrogance. He was immeasurably greater than his fellows by reason of the very smallness of his self-esteem.

"Guess I must take up my burden again and step out," he said. "You won't catch me slacking any after this. And—if I don't win out, dear, you'll know that it just wasn't possible because God didn't will it so."

"Oh, but you will!" she said, clasping his hand more closely. "You will! God knows how badly I want you."

"His Will be done!" said Lucas Errol. "But I want you too, dearest. I want you too."

His fingers stirred in her hold. It was the merest movement, but she knew his meaning. She slipped to her knees by his side, leaned down and kissed him.

CHAPTER VI

A VOICE THAT CALLED

Christmas came and went—the most peaceful Christmas that Anne had ever known. A wonderful peace had indeed begun to possess her. It was as if after long tossing she had come at last into quiet waters, and a contentment such as she had never known before was hers. Her health had improved in this calm, untroubled atmosphere. She slept without dreaming. She had put all regrets and fears out of her life.

Lucas filled all her thoughts. Had he allowed it, she would have devoted herself exclusively to him, but this he would not have. Very slowly, very painfully, he had struggled out of his Slough of Despond, and what that struggle had meant to him none but himself would ever know. And now that he had made it, and in a measure succeeded, he suffered scarcely less than before. His strength was undoubtedly greater, his spirits were more even; but these were the only visible signs of improvement. The long, sleepless nights with spells of racking pain continued. Perhaps they became less frequent as time went on, but they did not cease.

Anne always knew, though the same brave smile greeted her every day, when he had been through one of these ordeals. He was always so ready to tell her when the news was good, but when it was otherwise his lips were sealed upon the subject. He never uttered a desponding word in her presence.

But still, gradual, often halting though it was, he did make progress. He went forward more than he slipped back. And ever he carried in his eyes the light of a great hope. She knew that he did not despair, even in his own hidden soul.

And day by day her love and admiration for the man grew and spread, filling her life, renewing her youth, transforming her very existence. Day by day she sounded greater depths of a nature that made her feel infinitely small in comparison. Day by day she marvelled afresh at the greatness and the simplicity that went to the making of this man's soul.

No one, save Mrs. Errol, knew of what had passed between them. They scarcely referred to it even in private. There was no need, for the understanding between them was complete. By mutual consent they awaited the coming of Capper and the final miracle.

Slowly the dark, bitter days of January dragged away. The Hunt Ball had been postponed till the following month when the Town Hall, which had been building all the winter, should be complete. Anne, to her dismay, had been unanimously elected to perform the opening ceremony. Her position as Lady of the Manor made her prominent, and, no substitute being forthcoming, she had been obliged reluctantly to consent. Her deep mourning enabled her to avoid any succeeding social function, but, since she had broken her seclusion, she found it impossible to escape the ceremony itself.

She had never enjoyed social prominence, and she was thankful that at the Hunt Ball at least her presence could not be expected. She never thought of the last that she had attended without a shiver. It had been her birthday, and this fact brought it to mind the more persistently. This year she spent the day in the peaceful atmosphere of Baronmead, driving home at length, through the frosty starlight, in the Errols' car.

She strove as she went to put away from her the memory of that other ride of a year ago, when she had been borne swiftly through the darkness as though upon wings, when she had lain back exhausted in her corner and dreamed a strange, vivid dream, while Nap had sat upright beside her, alert, silent, inscrutable, plucking the gloves to tatters between his restless hands.

The vision would not be excluded, strive though she might. She leaned amongst the cushions and closed her eyes, trying to trick herself to drowsiness, but on the instant he was there beside her again, a ruthless, indomitable presence, which would not be ignored. She was glad when she came to her journey's end.

Entering the hall, she gathered up a few letters that lay there, and went straight to her room. With a feeling of unwonted fatigue she dropped into an easy-chair and sat for awhile inert. On her right hand she wore a ring that Lucas had given her only that day.

He had half-apologised for his offering. "If you think it premature, don't wear it!" he had said.

And she had slipped it on to her right hand and worn it ever since.

She recalled the kindling of his tired eyes at her action, and smiled sadly to herself. How little she had to give him after all! And yet he was content!

Sitting there, she raised her hand and looked closely at the gift. It was a complete circle of diamonds. She had never seen such a ring before. It must have cost a fortune. She wondered if she ought to wear it. Again memory began to crowd upon her, strive though she would.

"Do you like diamonds?" asked a casual voice.

Her hand fell into her lap. She sat as one watching a scene upon a stage, rapt and listening. She wanted to rise and move away, to break the magic spell that bound her, to flee—to flee—but she was powerless.

"No," said the voice. "You haven't a passion for anything at present. You will have soon."

There fell a silence in her soul, a brief darkness, then again words, no longer casual, but quick, burning, passionate.

"I am mad—I am mad for you, Anne! Goddess—queen—woman—you are mine—you are mine—you are mine!" And then, less fiery, less vehement, but infinitely more compelling: "Where is your love for me? I will swear that you loved me once!"

The voice ceased, was lost in the wild throbbing of her heart, and Anne's hands clenched unconsciously. In that moment there came to her the conviction, inexplicable but extraordinarily vivid, that across the world Nap Errol had called to her—and had called in vain.

Minutes passed. She sat as one in a trance. Her eyes were wide and fixed. Her face was grey.

She rose at last and stood looking down into the red depths of the fire. The coals sank together under her eyes, and a sudden flame flared fiercely for a moment and died. It was like the opening and the shutting of a furnace door. A long, long shiver went through her. She turned away....

Anne Carfax did not look in her glass again that day. For the third time in her life she was afraid to meet her own eyes.

And all night long her brain thrummed like a vibrating wire to a voice that sometimes pleaded but more often gibed. "Has the Queen no further use for her jester?"

CHAPTER VII

THE UNINVITED GUEST

Spring came early that year, and the day fixed for the opening of the Baronford Town Hall was brilliantly fine and warm. Anne was staying at Baronmead for the event. The end of February was approaching. Lucas was decidedly better. His sleep was becoming less broken. He suffered considerably less; and he took a keen interest in all that passed.

On the morning before the ceremony he greeted Anne with an eagerness that almost amounted to impatience. "Come in! Come in! I've something to show you."

He was alone. She went to his side and kissed him.

His hands caught hers, and she marvelled at the strength of his grip. "Sweetheart," he said, "I've had a letter from Capper."

She felt the blood ebb suddenly from her face. She stood a moment in silence, then sat down and pressed his hand close against her heart.

"What does he say?" she asked.

He looked at her oddly for a few seconds. Then: "It's good news, dear," he said. "You mustn't let it scare you."

She began to smile, though her lips were trembling. "No, of course not. Tell me what he says."

He gave her the letter and she read. Capper wrote that he had received an excellent report from Dr. Randal of his patient's progress, that he expected to be in England in about a fortnight and would come down himself to ascertain if the time for the second operation had arrived. He wrote in a cheery strain, and at the end of the letter was a postscript: "Have you taken my advice yet with regard to *la femme*?"

"An ancient joke," explained Lucas with a smile. "He told me long ago that I should need a woman's help to pull me through. And"—his voice dropped—"I guess he was right."

The colour came back to her face. She pressed his hand without speaking.

"I shouldn't be here now but for you, Anne," he said, his blue eyes watching her. "I sometimes think it must have been a mortal strain upon you. Have you felt it so very badly, I wonder?"

She met his look with eyes grown misty. "Luke—my dearest—you have done far greater things for me. You have kept me from starvation. You have no idea what you are to me."

The words came brokenly. She checked a sudden sob and, rising, moved to the window.

Lucas lay silent, but his eyes watched her with a great tenderness.

When she came back to him she was smiling. "Have you ever begun to think of what you will do when you are well?" she said.

"I am thinking of it always," he answered. "I make wonderful pictures for myself sometimes. You are the central figure of them all."

She clasped his hand again in hers. "Lucas," she said, "will you take me away?"

"Yes, dear," he said.

"Far away from anywhere I have ever been before?" Her voice shook a little. "I want to begin life over again where everything is new."

A certain shrewdness gleamed in the steady eyes that watched her, but it was mingled with the utmost kindness.

"I guess I'd better show you my best picture right now," he said. "It's got a steam yacht in it, and a state cabin fit for a queen. And it goes rocking around the world, looking for the Happy Islands. I guess we shall find them some day, sweetheart—maybe sooner than we think."

"Ah, yes," she said. "We won't stop looking till we do. How soon shall we start, Luke?"

He answered her with a smile, but there was a thrill of deep feeling in his words. "Just as soon as I can stand on my feet like any other man, Anne, and hold the woman I love in my arms."

She bent her face suddenly, pressing her cheek to the hand she held. "I am ready for you when ever you will," she murmured.

"I know it," he said. "And God bless you for telling me so!"

He was full of kindness to her that day, and she thought him cheerier than he had been all the winter. When she bade him good-bye that afternoon he seemed in excellent spirits. Yet after she was gone he lay for a long while staring at the specks of dust that danced in a shaft of sunlight, with the air of a man seeking the solution of a problem that baffled him. And once very suddenly he sighed.

Anne went through the ordeal of publicity with less embarrassment than she had anticipated. Mrs. Errol was with her, and she was surrounded by friends. Even Major Shirley deigned to look upon her with a favourable eye. Bertie was hunting, but Dot was present to view the final achievement of her favourite scheme.

She seized the first opportunity to slip her arm through Anne's. "Do—do come home with me to tea," she whispered very urgently. "I want to show you some things I have been making. And make the dear mater come too, if someone else doesn't snap her up first."

But the dear mater was already snapped up, and Anne had some difficulty in avoiding a like fate.

Eventually, however, she succeeded in making her escape, and she and Dot drove back to the Dower House, congratulating themselves.

"I am lucky to get you all to myself," Dot said. "And do you know, dear Lady Carfax, you are looking simply lovely to-day?"

Anne smiled a little. She had discarded her widow's veil for the first time, and she felt like a woman emerging from a long imprisonment. People would call it premature, she knew. Doubtless they were already discussing her not too charitably. But after all, why should she consider them? The winter was past and over, and the gold of the coming spring was already dawning. Why should she mourn? Were not all regrets put away for ever?

"I wish you would call me Anne, Dot," she said.

"To be sure I will," said Dot, with shining eyes. "I never liked the name before I knew you. And now I love it."

There was something wonderfully genuine and childlike about Dot, a youthfulness that would probably cling to her all her life. Anne drew her on to speak of herself and her coming happiness, which she did with that cheery simplicity of hers that had first drawn Bertie to her.

"He makes a tremendous fuss," she said, displaying Bertie's favourite dimple at the thought. "I don't, you know. I somehow feel it's going to be all right. But it's rather nice being petted for months together. I haven't had a tantrum for ages. I'm afraid I'm getting spoiled."

At which piece of logic Anne could not repress a smile.

"He won't be home to tea," said Dot, when they finally turned in at the Dower House. "He stables his hunters at Baronmead, and he is sure to go in and see Luke. So we shall have it all to ourselves. I'm so glad, for I have been wanting your advice for days. I wonder if anyone has been. Hullo! Bertie's back after all!"

A glow of firelight met them from the little square hall as they entered, and a smell of cigarette smoke mingled with the scent from the burning logs.

Dot stood back for her guest to precede her, but Anne stood suddenly still.

"Hullo!" said Dot again.

A slim, straight figure was standing outlined against the firelight. Dot stared as she stepped forward.

"Why—Nap!" she said incredulously.

He made a swift, elastic movement to meet her, caught her hands, laughed, and kissed her.

"Why—Dot!" he said.

Dot continued to stare. "Good gracious!" she said.

And in the doorway Anne stood like a statue, the soft spring dusk behind her.

"My sister seems surprised," said Nap. "I hope I haven't come at an unlucky moment."

He did not even glance towards the silent figure in the doorway. It was as if he had not observed it.

"I am surprised," said Dot. "Hugely surprised. But I'm very glad to see you," she added. "When did you come?"

"I have been here about half an hour," he told her coolly. "I went to the Rectory first, where I learned for the first time of your marriage. You forgot to mention that detail when you wrote. Hence my brotherly salute, which you must have missed on your wedding-day!"

At this point Dot remembered her other guest, and turned with flushed cheeks. "Lady Carfax—Anne—you—you know my brother-in-law Nap?"

The pleading in her voice was unmistakable. She was evidently agitated, wholly at a loss how to manage a most difficult situation.

But Nap hastened to relieve her of the responsibility. He had dealt with difficult situations before. He went straight to Anne and stood before her.

"Are you going to know me, Lady Carfax?" he asked.

There was no arrogance in voice or bearing as he uttered the question. He looked as if he expected to

be dismissed, as if he were ready at a word to turn and go. His eyes were lowered. His foot was already on the threshold.

But Anne stood speechless and rigid. For those few seconds she was as one stricken with paralysis. She knew that if she moved or tried to speak she would faint.

She wondered desperately how long it would be before he looked up, if perhaps he would go without looking at her, or if—ah, he was speaking again! His words reached her as from an immense distance. At the same instant his hands came to her out of a surging darkness that hid all things, grasping, sustaining, compelling. She yielded to them, scarcely knowing what she did.

"Lady Carfax has been overtiring herself," she heard him say. "Have you any brandy at hand?"

"Oh, dear Lady Carfax!" cried Dot in distress. "Make her sit down, Nap. Here is a cushion. Yes, I'll go and get some."

Guided by those steady hands, Anne sank into a chair, and there the constriction that bound her began to pass. She shivered from head to foot.

Nap stooped over her and chafed her icy hands. He did not look at her or speak. When Dot came back, he took the glass from her and held it very quietly to the quivering lips.

She drank, responsive to his unspoken insistence, and as she did so, for a single instant she met his eyes. They were darkly inscrutable and gave her no message of any sort. She might have been accepting help from a total stranger.

"No more, please!" she whispered, and he took the glass away.

The front door was still open. He drew it wider, and the evening air blew in across her face. Somewhere away in the darkness a thrush was warbling softly. Nap stood against the door and waited. Dot knelt beside her, holding her hand very tightly.

"I am better," Anne said at last. "Forgive me, dear child. I suppose it has been—too much for me."

"My dear, dear Anne!" said Dot impulsively. "Would you like to come into the drawing-room? There is tea there. But of course we will have it here if you prefer it."

"No," Anne said. "No. We will go to the drawing-room."

She prepared to rise, and instantly Nap stepped forward. But he did not offer to touch her. He only stood ready.

When he saw that she had so far recovered herself as to be able to move with Dot's assistance, he dropped back.

"I am going, Dot," he said. "You will do better without me. I will look in again later."

And before Dot could agree or protest he had stepped out into the deepening twilight and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEART OF A SAVAGE

It had certainly been a successful afternoon. Mrs. Errol smiled to herself as she drove back to Baronmead. Everything had gone well. Dear Anne had looked lovely, and she for one was thankful that she had discarded her widow's weeds. Had not her husband been virtually dead to her for nearly a year? Besides—here Mrs. Errol's thoughts merged into a smile again—dear Anne was young, not much more than a girl in years. Doubtless she would marry again ere long.

At this point Mrs. Errol floated happily away upon a voyage of day-dreams that lasted till the car stopped. So engrossed was she that she did not move for a moment even then. Not until the door was opened from outside did she bestir herself. Then, still smiling, she prepared to descend.

But the next instant she checked herself with a violent start that nearly threw her backwards. The

man at the step who stood waiting to assist her was no servant.

"My!" she gasped. "Is it you, Nap, or your ghost?"

"It's me," said Nap.

Very coolly he reached out a hand and helped her to descend. "We have arrived at the same moment," he said. "I've just walked across the park. How are you, alma mater?"

She did not answer him or make response of any sort to his greeting. She walked up the steps and into the house with leaden feet. The smile had died utterly from her face. She looked suddenly old.

He followed her with the utmost composure, and when she stopped proceeded to divest her of her furs with the deftness of movement habitual to him.

Abruptly she spoke, in her voice a ring of something that was almost ferocity. "What have you come back for anyway?"

He raised his eyebrows slightly without replying.

But Mrs. Errol was not to be so silenced. Her hands fastened with determination upon the front of his coat. "You face me, Napoleon Errol," she said. "And answer me honestly. What have you come back for? Weren't there enough women on the other side to keep you amused?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Women in plenty—amusement none. Moreover, I didn't go to be amused. Where is Lucas?"

"Don't you go to Lucas till I've done with you," said Mrs. Errol. "You come right along to my room first."

"What for?" He stood motionless, suffering her restraining hands, the beginning of a smile about his lips.

"There's something I've got to tell you," she said.

"Lead the way then, alma mater!" he said. "I am very much at your service."

Mrs. Errol turned without further words, and he, with her sables flung across his shoulder, prepared to follow. She moved up the stairs as if she were very weary. The man behind her walked with the elasticity of a cat.

But there was no lack of resolution about her when in her own room she turned and faced him. There was rather something suggestive of a mother animal at bay.

"Nap," she said, and her deep voice quivered, "if there's any right feeling in you, if you are capable of a single spark of affection, of gratitude, you'll turn around right now and go back to the place you came from."

Nap deposited his burden on the back of a chair. His dark face was devoid of the faintest shadow of expression. "That so?" he drawled. "I thought you seemed mighty pleased to see me."

"Lock that door!" said Mrs. Errol. "Now come and sit here where you can see my face and know whether I am telling the truth."

He smiled at that. "I don't require ocular evidence, alma mater. I have always been able to read you with my eyes shut."

"I believe you have, Nap," she said, with a touch of wistfulness.

"It isn't your fault," he said, "that you weren't made subtle enough. You've done your best."

He came and sat down facing her as she desired. The strong electric light beat upon his face also, but it revealed nothing to her anxious eyes—nothing save that faint, cynical smile that masked so much.

She shook her head. She was clasping and unclasping her hands restlessly. "A very poor best, Nap," she said. "I know only too well how badly I've failed. It never seemed to matter till lately, and now I would give the eyes out of my head to have a little influence with you."

"That so?" he said again.

She made a desperate gesture. "Yes, you sit there and smile. It doesn't matter to you who suffers so long as you can grab what you want."

"How do you know what I want?" he said.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Errol. "I only surmise."

"And you think that wise? You are not afraid of tripping up in the dark?"

She stretched out her hands to him in sudden earnest entreaty. "Nap, tell me that it isn't Anne Carfax, and I'll bless you with my dying breath!"

But he looked at her without emotion. He took her hands after a moment, but it was the merest act of courtesy. He did not hold them.

"And if it were?" he said slowly, his hard eyes fixed on hers.

She choked back her agitation with the tears running down her face. "Then God help Lucas—and me too—for it will be his death-blow!"

"Lucas?" said Nap.

He did not speak as if vitally interested, yet she answered as if compelled.

"He loves her. He can't do without her. She has been his mainstay all through the winter. He would have died without her."

Nap passed over the information as though it were of no importance. "He is no better then?" he asked.

"Yes, he is better. But he has been real sick. No one knows what he has come through, and there is that other operation still to be faced. I'm scared to think of it. He hasn't the strength of a mouse. It's only the thought of Anne that makes him able to hold on. I can see it in his eyes day after day—the thought of winning out and making her his wife."

Again he passed the matter over. "When does Capper come again?"

"Very soon now. In two or three weeks. There was a letter from him to-day, Lucas was quite excited about it, but I fancy it upset dear Anne some. You see—she loves him too."

There fell a silence. Mrs. Errol wiped her eyes and strove to compose herself. Somehow he had made her aware of the futility of tears. She wondered what was passing in his mind as he sat there sphinx-like, staring straight before him. Had she managed to reach his heart, she wondered? Or was there perchance no heart behind that inscrutable mask to reach? Yet she had always believed that after his own savage fashion he had loved Lucas.

Suddenly he rose. "If you have quite done with me, alma mater, I'll go."

She looked up at him apprehensively. "What are you going to do?"

He smiled abruptly. "I am going to get a drink."

"And what then?" she asked feverishly. "Nap, oh, Nap, she is staying in the house. Won't you go without seeing her?"

"I have seen her already," drawled Nap.

"You have seen her?"

His smile became contemptuous. "What of it? Do you seriously suppose she is the only woman in the world I care to look at?"

"I don't know what to think," cried Mrs. Errol. "I only know that you hold Luke's fate between your hands."

He was already at the door. He turned and briefly bowed. "You flatter me, alma mater!" he said.

And with the smile still upon his lips he left her.

CHAPTER IX

THE DIVINE SPARK

"Boney, old chap, you're the very man I want!" Such was Lucas Errol's greeting to the man who had shot like a thunderbolt into the peaceful atmosphere that surrounded him, to the general disturbance of all others who dwelt therein.

"I guess you must have known it," he said, the sinewy hand fast gripped in his. "You've come like an answer to prayer. Where have you been all this time? And why didn't you write? It's worried me some not hearing."

"Great Lucifer!" said Nap.

He sat down, leaving his hand in his brother's grasp. The cynicism had gone utterly from his face, but he did not answer either question.

"So you are winning out?" he said. "It's been a long trail, I'll wager."

"Oh, damnably long, Boney." Lucas uttered a weary sigh. "I was nearly down and out in the winter. But I'm better, you know. I'm better." He met the open criticism of Nap's eyes with a smile. "What's the verdict?" he asked.

"I'll tell you presently. You're not looking overfed anyway." Nap's fingers began to feel along his wrist. "Did Capper say he wanted a skeleton to work on?"

"Shucks, dear fellow! There's more than enough of me. Tell me about yourself. What have you been doing? I want to know."

"I?" Nap jerked back his head. "I've nothing to tell," he declared. "You know what I went to do. Well, I've done it, and that's all there is to it."

"I'm not quite clear as to what you went to do," Lucas answered. "You didn't turn up in Arizona. I was puzzled what to think."

"You never expected me to go to Arizona," said Nap with conviction. "You were shrewd enough for that."

"Thanks, Boney! P'r'aps I was. But I've been hoping all this while, nevertheless, that you might have the grit to keep the devil at arm's length."

Nap laughed, stretched his arms above his head, and made a vehement gesture as if flinging something from him—something that writhed and clung.

"Will it interest you to know that the devil has ceased to provide me with distractions?" he asked suddenly.

A certain eagerness came into the blue eyes. "That so, Boney?"

Nap leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "It's no virtue of mine," he said. "I found I wanted solitude, so I went to the Rockies and stayed there till I was tired. That's all."

Again the skeleton hand of the man on the bed sought and pressed his. "Old chap, I'm real glad," the tired voice drawled. "You've found yourself at last. I always felt you would—sooner or later."

Nap's lips twitched a little. "Don't be too sure of that. Anyway it doesn't follow that I shall sit at home and practise the domestic virtues. I've got to wander a bit first and find my own level."

"Not yet, dear fellow. I'm wanting you myself."

"You!" The thin lips began to smile. "That's real magnanimous of you. But—thanks all the same—I'm not taking any. You have the mater and Bertie and Anne Carfax to bolster you up. I guess I'm not essential."

"And I guess you can do more for me than any one of them," Lucas made quiet reply. "P'r'aps you'll think me a selfish brute to say so, but I need you badly. You're like a stimulating drug to me. You pick me up when I'm down. There is no one can help me in the same way."

"You wouldn't get Capper to say 'Amen' to that," remarked Nap.

"Capper is no oracle out of his own sphere. Besides," there was almost a note of pleading in Lucas's voice, "I know what I want better than he can tell me."

"True, very true!" Nap was smiling somewhat grimly. "And doubtless your wish is law. But it doesn't follow that you always desire what is best for yourself. Hadn't you better consult the queen before you admit the wasp to the hive?"

"You're too fond of talking in parables, my son," protested Lucas, frowning slightly. "My intelligence won't stretch to it."

"We'll try another," said Nap imperturbably. "Do you think Anne Carfax would thank you for asking me to pull in the same boat? Do you think she would second that request? Because, if so, I beg to differ."

He looked his brother full in the face as he said it, without the flicker of an eyelid. Lucas's frown deepened. He lay in silence.

After a moment Nap went on. "She may be ready to put up with it for your sake. There's nothing some women won't do for a man they care for, and I take it she has your welfare next her heart. But it's rather much to ask of her. You wouldn't want to run the risk of frightening her away."

Lucas was watching him gravely, his brows still drawn. "Boney," he said slowly at length, "I'd give a good deal to see into your soul."

Nap smiled with a faint return of cynicism. "Who's talking in parables now? Afraid I can't show you what I haven't got."

Lucas passed the rejoinder by. "What makes you conclude that I am more to her than—any other man?"

"Circumstances," said Nap.

"What circumstances?"

"Finding her installed here as one of the family for one. Finding you pulling off the biggest deal of your life for another. And other signs—crowds of them—that I can't explain but that I can't fail to notice when I've got my nose to the trail. You needn't be shy about it. I'm just as pleased as you are."

But Lucas's face did not clear. There followed a very decided pause. Then, with an effort, very earnestly, he spoke.

"Nap, I don't believe you'll lie to me when I tell you that I'd rather die than be deceived. I know you cared for her once."

"I care for most women," said Nap indifferently. "What of that? It's the way I'm made, and I must say they don't most of 'em seem to mind."

"But, Boney—Anne Carfax?"

Nap threw up his head with a brief laugh. "Oh, I'm cured of that—quite cured. The paths of perpetual virtue are not for me. I prefer more rapid travelling and a surer goal."

He stood up, his arms stretched up above his head. "I make you a present of Anne Carfax," he said lightly. "Not that she is mine to give. But I wouldn't keep her if she were. We belong to different spheres."

"And yet—" Lucas said.

"My dear fellow, that's an old story." Impulsively Nap cut in, almost fiercely. "Do you think the woman is living who could hold me after all this time? I tell you that fire is burnt out. Why rake over the dead ashes?"

"I am looking for the Divine Spark," Lucas answered quietly.

"And if you found it?" Nap's words came through smiling lips, and yet they sounded savage.

"If I found it," very steadily came the answer, "I would blow it to a flame, Boney, for your sake—and hers."

"For hers?" Something fierce showed in Nap's eyes. It was as if a goaded animal suddenly looked out of them.

Lucas must have seen it, for on the instant his manner changed.

"We won't go any further," he said. "Only, dear fellow, I can't part with you yet. Let that be understood. I want you."

"So be it!" said Nap. "I will stay and see you married."

And with the words he stooped and grasped his brother's hand for a moment.

"Go on and prosper, Luke," he said. "It's high time that you came into your own."

CHAPTER X

THE QUEEN'S PARDON

As soon as Anne entered Baronmead that evening she was aware of a difference. Bertie, with a thunderous countenance, came forward to meet her. She had not seen him wear that look in all the months of Nap's absence.

"The prodigal has returned," he told her briefly. "P'r'aps you know."

She did not pretend to misunderstand him. She had schooled herself to face the situation without shrinking.

"Yes, I know," she said. "I met him at your house an hour ago."

"At my house!" For a single instant Bertie looked downright murderous, and then the sight of Anne's pale face made him restrain himself.

"He didn't stay," she said rather wearily. "What of Luke? Has he seen him?"

"Can't understand Luke," muttered Bertie. "He's actually pleased. Say, Lady Carfax, would it help any if I were to stop and dine?"

"No," Anne said, smiling a little. "Go back to Dot, won't you? She is expecting you."

She saw that he was glad to follow her suggestion, and she was undoubtedly glad to see him go. He was plainly in an explosive mood.

Mrs. Errol came to her room while she was dressing. But Mrs. Errol had had ample time to compose herself. She showed no agitation, and spoke of Nap's unexpected arrival as if she were quite indifferent to his comings and goings; but she hovered about Anne with a protecting motherliness that did not need to express itself in words. When they went downstairs she held Anne's arm very closely.

But the ordeal that both were mutely dreading did not take place that night. Nap did not present himself at the dinner-table, and they dined alone in unspoken relief.

Anne went to Lucas as usual when the meal was over, but she thought he seemed tired and she did not remain with him long.

He kept her hand for a moment when she stooped to bid him good-night.

"Anne," he said gently, "I just want you to know, dear, that Nap will be all right. Don't be anxious any. There is no need."

He desired to reassure her, she saw; and she bent and kissed him. And then for a moment a queer gust of passion possessed her, shook her from head to foot.

"Oh, Luke," she whispered, "can't you send him away again?"

He looked up at her oddly, with eyes that seemed to see beyond her. And then, "Good-night, dear," he said, as if he had not heard.

She turned from him in silence. It was the first time she had ever appealed to Lucas Errol in vain.

She went to her room early that night. She told herself she must leave on the morrow. She was urged by a deep unrest. She could not remain under the same roof with this man who had once so cruelly tortured her. She could not. Lucas must understand this. He must never ask it of her, never—never!

She did not in the least understand the latter's attitude. The more she thought of it, the more it troubled her. She felt as if he had suddenly ceased to be on her side, had, as it were, shut off his sympathy and left her groping and alone. It was not like him to treat her thus. It hurt her subtly, wounding her as she had never expected to be wounded, shaking her faith in what she had ever believed to be immutable. And then she remembered the physical weakness with which he had wrestled so long, and a great pity flooded her heart. She would not let herself be hurt any longer. Was he not reserving his strength for her sake? And could she not, for his, face bravely this sudden obstacle that had arisen in her path? Moreover, had he not told her that all would be well? And he had said it as one who knew. Why, then, was she harbouring this wild dismay?

Why? Why? She asked the question, but she did not seek the answer. She dared not.

And yet in the morning she went down with a calm aspect, resolute and unafraid. Once more she was compelling herself to do simply that which lay nearest to her hand.

Nap came out of a room near the foot of the stairs as she descended. He scarcely looked at her, but quite obviously he had been awaiting her coming.

"May I have two words with you before you join the mater?" he asked.

With her whole soul she wanted to refuse. Yet without visible hesitation she yielded. She turned aside into the room he had just quitted.

He followed, and, closing the door, came forward to the table. It was littered with guns and cleaning apparatus. He had evidently been employing himself while he waited, and he at once took up an oily rag and resumed operations, his swarthy face bent over his task, his lips very firmly compressed.

Anne waited for a moment or two. His attitude puzzled her. She had become so accustomed to the fierce directness of his stare that its absence disconcerted her.

"What is it you wish to say to me?" she asked at length.

At the first sound of her voice he ceased to work, but still he did not raise his eyes.

"On my own account—nothing," he said, speaking very deliberately. "But as my sojourn here may be an offence to you, I think it advisable to explain at the outset that I am not a free agent. My brother has decreed it, and as you know"—a hint of irony crept into his voice—"his will is my law."

"I understand," said Anne gravely, but even as she spoke she was asking herself what possible motive had prompted this explanation.

He jerked up his head and she caught the glint of his fiery eyes for an instant. "You—care for Lucas, Lady Carfax?" he said.

Her heart gave a sudden throb that hurt her intolerably. For a moment she could not speak.

Then, "Yes," she said. "I love him."

Nap was pulling mechanically at the rag he held. It began to tear between his hands. She watched him ripping it to shreds.

Suddenly he seemed to realise what he was doing, and tossed it from him. He looked her straight in the eyes.

"Have you fixed the date for your coronation?" he asked.

Her eyes fell instantly. "Will you tell me what you mean?" she said.

"Is my meaning obscure?"

She compelled herself to answer him steadily. "If you mean our marriage, it will not take place for some time, possibly not this year."

"Why not?" said Nap. "Are you a slave to etiquette?"

The thing sounded preposterous on his lips. She faintly smiled. "The decision does not lie with me."

"Ah!" he said shrewdly. "The privilege of kings! You will still be a queen before you are thirty. And your first act will be to expel the court jester—if he waits to be expelled."

She saw his grim smile for an instant, and knew that he was playing his old fencing game with her, but at the same time she knew that there was no antagonism behind his point. How the knowledge came to her she could not have said, but she realised afterwards that it was at that moment that she began to perceive that the devil had gone out of Nap Errol. The conviction was slow in growing, but it was then that it first took root; it was then that her fear of the man began to die away.

She raised her eyes. "Why should I do that, Nap?"

He made her a deep bow. "Because I have been unfortunate enough to incur your displeasure."

There was a moment of silence, then, in obedience to that instinct to which in rare moments she yielded herself and which never played her false, Anne held out her hand to him. "I forgive you," she said.

He started. He evidently had not expected that from her. Perhaps he had not wanted it. Later she wondered. But he showed no awkwardness of indecision. Only once had she ever seen him at a loss, and of that once she would never voluntarily think again.

He took her hand upon his sleeve and bent over it. She thought he was going to kiss it, and a sharp dread went through her. But he only touched it for a single instant with his forehead.

"For Luke's sake?" he said, not looking at her.

"For your own," she made answer, almost as if she could not help herself.

"Because?" he questioned.

"Because I know you love him," she said. "Because I know that you will be loyal to him."

"Though I may be false to you?" he said.

She bent her head. "I am only a woman. I am afraid your experience of women has not taught you to respect them."

He picked up the gun again and fell to work upon it. "My experience of one woman at least," he said, "has taught me—something different, something I am not likely to forget."

It was the end of the interview. In silence Anne turned to go. He wheeled round and opened the door for her, but he did not look at her again, nor she at him. When the door closed between them she felt as if a great silence had fallen in her life.

CHAPTER XI

SOMETHING GREAT

On the day succeeding Nap's return Dot went to tea at Baronmead. She was a very constant visitor there. Lucas always enjoyed her bright presence and welcomed her with warmth. But Dot was not feeling very bright that day. She looked preoccupied, almost worried.

She found that Mrs. Errol and Anne had gone out, and, as her custom was when she found the house deserted, she went straight to her brother-in-law's room.

Tawny Hudson answered her knock at the outer door, and she was struck by the lowering look the great half-breed wore. His expression was positively villainous, and sharp as a pin-prick there darted through her the memory of her first visit to Baronmead, and the hatred of Nap Errol she had that day seen revealed in the man's eyes. She had never given the matter a thought since. To-day it awoke to life, stirring within her a vague apprehension.

"How is your master, Tawny?" she asked.

"He is not so well, madam," said Tawny Hudson, but he opened the door wide notwithstanding, inviting her to enter.

She went in. The room adjoined that in which Lucas lay, and Hudson was always there when not actually in attendance upon his master, except in his off hours, which were as few as Lucas would permit.

"May I see him?" said Dot. "Or would he rather not be disturbed?"

Hudson stepped to the closed door and listened, his great red head bent almost to the keyhole.

After a few moments he stood up and softly turned the handle. He made a brief sign to her and passed noiselessly into the room.

Dot remained where she was. She heard Lucas accost him at once, and caught the murmur of the man's low-spoken reply. And then in a moment Hudson came back to her.

"Will you go in, madam?" he said, in his careful English that always made her think of an animal that had been taught to speak.

She went in, treading lightly, relieved to leave the man's heavy scowling visage behind her.

"Come right in," said Lucas hospitably. "It's real good of you to come and see me like this."

She took his outstretched hand, looking at him anxiously. She saw that he had not slept for many hours. Though he smiled at her, there was a grey look about his lips that made her wonder if he were in pain.

"Sit down," he said gently. "It's nothing. Only another bad night. I can't expect to sleep soundly always."

"How disappointing!" Dot murmured.

"Not surprising though. I had an exciting day yesterday. You heard of Nap's return?"

"Yes." There was a very decided cloud upon Dot's face. "I saw him."

"Well?" said Lucas.

She turned to him impulsively. "Isn't it horrid when the thing you've been planning for and wanting ever so long happens and everyone else is cross?"

The blue eyes looked quizzical. "Very, I should say," said Lucas. "Would it be presumptuous to ask what has been happening and who is cross?"

Dot's answering smile held more of pathos than mirth. Her lips took a quivering, downward droop. "It's Nap," she said.

He raised his brows a little. "Nap seems the general pivot on which all grievances turn," he remarked.

Dot leaned her chin on her hand. "I do so hate making mistakes," she said.

"We all do it," said Lucas.

"Oh, you don't!" She turned and gravely regarded him. "You are always wise," she said, "never headlong."

"Which only demonstrates your ignorance and the kindness of your heart," said Lucas. "But go on, won't you? What has Nap been doing?"

"Oh, nothing. Nap is all right. It isn't Nap I mind." Again that doleful droop of the lips became apparent, together with a little quiver of the voice undeniably piteous. "It—it's Bertie," whispered Dot. "I—I—it's very ridiculous, isn't it? I'm a wee bit afraid of Bertie, do you know?"

"St. Christopher!" said Lucas, in astonishment.

"Yes. But you won't ever tell him, will you?" she pleaded anxiously. "If—if he knew or guessed—all my prestige would be gone. I shouldn't be able to manage him at all. He—he is rather difficult to manage sometimes, don't you think?"

Lucas was frowning slightly. "I guess I can manage him," he said.

"No doubt you could. I expect you always have. He respects you," said Dot, with unwitting wistfulness.

Lucas turned his head and looked at her very steadily. "Will you tell me something, Dot?" he said.

She nodded.

"Why are you afraid of Bertie?"

She hesitated.

"Come!" he said. "Surely you're not afraid of me too!"

The banter in his voice was touched with a tenderness that went straight to Dot's young heart. She leaned down impetuously and held his hand.

"No," she said tremulously. "I'm not such a little idiot as that, Luke. I'm afraid of Bertie because I've done something he wouldn't like. It's a very little thing, Luke. It is, really. But—but it's bothered me off and on all the winter. And now that Nap is home, I feel much worse—as if—as if it had been really wrong. And—and"—she broke down suddenly—"I know I ought to tell him. But—I can't."

"Tell me," said Lucas gently.

"And you will tell him for me?"

"If you wish me to do so."

"I don't like it," sobbed Dot. "It's so despicable of me. I've wanted to tell him for ever so long. But he has been so good to me all this time, and—and somehow I couldn't face it. We haven't even squabbled for months now. It—it seemed such a pity to spoil everything when it really didn't make any difference to anyone if he knew or not."

"Don't cry," interposed Lucas. "It would hurt Bertie if he knew."

"Dear Bertie!" whispered Dot. "Isn't it horrid of me to be such a coward? I haven't done anything really wrong either. In fact at the time it seemed almost right."

"Almost!" said Lucas, faintly smiling.

She smiled also through her tears. "Why don't you call me a humbug? Well, listen! It was like this. One night in the beginning of the winter Bertie and I had a disagreement about Nap. It wasn't at all important. But I had to stick up for him, because I had chanced to see him just before he left in the summer—you remember—when he was very, very miserable?"

"I remember," said Lucas.

He spoke rather wearily, but his eyes never left her face. He was listening intently.

"And I was frightfully sorry for him," proceeded Dot, "though at the time I didn't know what was the matter. And I couldn't let Bertie say horrid things about him. So I fired up. And then Bertie told me"—she faltered a little—"about Nap caring for Lady Carfax. And that was where the trouble began. He didn't give him credit for really loving her, whereas I knew he did."

Strong conviction sounded in Dot's voice. The blue eyes that watched her opened a little.

"That so?" said Lucas.

"Oh, I was sure," she said. "I was sure. There are some things a woman can't help knowing. It was the key to what I knew before. I understood—at once."

"And then?" said Lucas.

"Then, of course, I remembered that Lady Carfax was free. And I asked Bertie if he knew. You see, I thought it possible that in her heart she might be caring for him too. I knew they had always been friends. And Sir Giles was such a brute to her. No woman could ever have loved him. I think most people couldn't help knowing that. And it seemed only fair that Nap should know that Sir Giles was dead. I told Bertie so. He didn't agree with me." Dot paused and vigorously dried her eyes. "I still don't think he was right," she said.

"P'r'aps not." Lucas spoke meditatively. "There's a good deal to be said for woman's intuition," he said.

"It seemed to me a matter of fair play," maintained Dot. "He didn't know where Nap was, only his club address. And he wouldn't write himself, so I just wrote a single line telling Nap that Sir Giles was dead, and sent it off that night. I didn't tell Bertie. It didn't seem to matter much then, and I knew it might be ages before Nap got it. But now that that line has brought him back, I feel as if he ought to know—particularly as Bertie is so angry with him for returning. And Anne too—Anne nearly fainted when she saw him. I felt as if I had landed everybody in a hopeless muddle." Again Dot wiped her eyes. "And I had so wanted him to come," she ended.

"Don't fret," said Lucas very kindly. "I wanted him too."

She looked at him eagerly. "You think as I do? You think he cares for Anne?"

"I guess so," he answered, "since your letter brought him back."

"And—and Anne? Do you think—do you really think—?"

"I guess so," he said again.

He lay silent for a while, his eyes drooping heavily, till she even began to wonder if he were falling asleep.

At length, "Dot," he said, "have I your permission to make what use I like of this?"

She gave a slight start. "You are going to tell Bertie?"

He looked at her. "My dear," he said, "I think Bertie had better know."

She nodded. "I know he ought. But he will be furious with me."

"Not if I talk to him," said Lucas, with his quiet smile.

"But it's so mean of me," she protested. "And I'm sure it's bad for you."

He reached out his hand to her. "No, it isn't bad for me, Dot. It's just the best thing possible. You've put me in the way of something great."

She squeezed his hand. "Do you really think you can make things go right?"

"Under God," said Lucas gravely.

CHAPTER XII

A FRIENDLY UNDERSTANDING

Notwithstanding Lucas's assurance, Dot awaited her husband's coming in undisguised trepidation that night.

She had not seen Nap since that brief glimpse of him in the hall when Anne had so nearly swooned. She did not so much as know if Bertie had seen him at all. They had not met on the previous evening, but Bertie's aspect had been so thunderous ever since he had heard of his return that she had been on thorns lest he should present himself again at the Dower House. That he would come sooner or later she knew, but she hoped with all her heart that it might not be when Bertie was at home.

She was convinced, moreover, that Bertie was going to be very angry with her, and her heart sank the more she thought of it. Bertie's anger had become a hard thing to face since he had made her know the depths of his tenderness.

The night was chilly, and her suspense made her cold. She sat very close to the fire in the cosy curtained hall, shivering, and straining her ears to catch the sound of his feet on the gravel. She had worked herself into a state of anxiety that made her start at the faintest noise.

It was nearing the dinner-hour, and she was beginning to wonder if perhaps he were staying at

Baronmead to dine, though he had never done so before without sending her word, when there came the sudden hoot of a motor and the rush of wheels upon the drive.

She sat up, every pulse beating. It must be one of the Baronmead motors. But Bertie always walked.

She heard the car stop at the door, and she rose to her feet, scarcely knowing what to expect. The next moment the door opened and she heard Bertie's voice.

"The car will be all right," he said. "It's a fine night. Go in, won't you? I expect Dot is waiting."

And with amazement Dot saw Nap enter the hall in front of her husband.

He came straight to her just as he had come on the previous day, and she had a moment of sheer panic lest he should have the effrontery to kiss her; but he spared her this, though the smile with which he greeted her told her that he was quite aware of her embarrassment and its cause.

"Bertie has taken upon himself to ask me to dine," he said, as he held her hand. "I hope that is quite agreeable to Mrs. Bertie?"

"Of course I am delighted," she said, but her eyes sought Bertie's somewhat anxiously notwithstanding.

She saw with relief that the cloud had gone from his face. He came forward, bent, and kissed her. His hand lay upon her shoulder for an instant with a quick, reassuring touch, and she knew that all was well.

"Heavens, child! How cold you are!" he said. "I'll bring you down a shawl, shall I? Come along, Nap. We are late."

They went upstairs together, and Dot waited below, listening to their voices in careless converse and wondering by what means Lucas had wrought so amazing a change.

She wondered still more during dinner, for Nap was plainly upon his best behaviour. He seemed determined that Bertie should be on easy terms with him, and he was in a great measure successful. Though reticent, Bertie was undoubtedly cordial.

At the appearance of dessert Nap rose. "I must be getting back to Lucas," he said.

"Oh, skittles! He won't be wanting you," Bertie protested. "Sit down again, man. You haven't been here an hour."

But Nap was not to be persuaded. "Many thanks, but I'm going all the same. I want to secure him a good night if possible. Good-bye, Mrs. Bertie!" He bent and kissed her hand. "I am going to be pretty busy for the next week or two, but I shall call on you when I have time."

He took a cigarette from Bertie's case, and went out without stopping to light it.

Bertie followed him into the hall. "Shall I come?" he asked.

"No," said Nap.

He found a paper spill on the mantelpiece and lighted it. As he held it to his cigarette he looked at Bertie with a smile.

"Remember that day I baited you? It must be about a year ago."

Bertie looked uncomfortable. "I remember," he said shortly.

Abruptly Nap thrust out his hand. "I've eaten your salt now," he said. "I'll never bait you again."

Bertie gave his hand. "Is that what you wanted to dine for?"

"Partly." Nap's fingers gripped and held. "Also I wanted to persuade you that we are fighting for the same thing, only maybe with different weapons. You'll bear it in mind, eh, friend Bertie?"

Bertie looked at him hard for an instant. "I will," he said impulsively.

"Good!" said Nap laconically. "It isn't going to be a walk over, but I guess we'll pull it off between us."

"Amen!" said Bertie fervently.

And Nap wrung his hand and departed. For the first time in their lives there was a friendly understanding between them. For the first time Bertie was aware of a human heart throbbing behind that impenetrable mask.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FINAL DEFEAT

It was growing late that night when Lucas opened his eyes after a prolonged and fruitless attempt to sleep, and found Nap standing at the foot of the bed watching him. A lamp was burning in the room, but it was turned very low. For a few seconds he lay wondering if the motionless figure he saw had been conjured there by some trick of the shadows. Then as he stirred he saw it move and at once he spoke.

"Hullo, dear fellow! You! I never heard you come in."

Nap stepped noiselessly to his side. "Don't talk!" he said. "Sleep!"

"I can't sleep. It's no use. I was only pretending." Lucas stifled a sigh of weariness. "Sit down," he said.

But Nap stood over him and laid steady hands upon his wrists. His hold was close and vital; it pressed upon the pulses as if to give them new life. "You can sleep if you try," he said.

Lucas shook his head with a smile. "I'm not a good subject, Boney. Thanks all the same!"

"Try!" Nap said insistently.

But the blue eyes remained wide. "No, old chap. It's too high a price to pay—even for sleep."

"What do you mean?" There was a fierce note in the query, low as it was; it was almost a challenge.

Lucas answered it very quietly. "I mean that I'm afraid of you, Boney."

"Skittles!" said Nap.

"Yes, it may seem so to you; but, you see, I know what you are trying to do."

"What am I trying to do?" demanded Nap.

Lucas paused for a moment; he was looking straight up into the harsh face above his own. Then, "I know you," he said. "I know that you'll get the whip hand of me if you can, and you'll clap blinkers on me and drive me according to your own judgment. I never had much faith in your judgment, Boney. And it is not my intention to be driven by you."

There was no resentment in the tired voice, only unflagging determination.

Nap's hold slowly relaxed. "You don't trust me then?"

"It's your methods I don't trust, dear fellow, not your motives. I'd trust them to perdition."

"But not my—honour?" Nap's lips twisted over the word.

Lucas hesitated. "I believe you would be faithful to your own code," he said at length.

"But you don't consider that to trick a man who trusted me would be against that code?"

Again Lucas hesitated, and in the silence Nap straightened himself and stood waiting, stern, implacable, hard as granite.

"Don't do violence to yourself," he said cynically.

On the instant Lucas spoke, in his voice a tremor that was almost passionate. "Boney—Boney, old chap, have I wronged you? God knows I've tried to be just. But are you straight? Are you honest? I'd

give my soul to be able to trust you. Only—dear fellow, forgive me—I can't!"

Nap's hands clenched. "Why not?" he said.

"Because," very slowly and painfully Lucas made reply, "I know that you are trying to blind me. I know that you are sacrificing yourself—and another—in order to deceive me. You are doing it to save me pain, but—before God, Boney—you are torturing me in the doing far more than you realise. I'd sooner die ten times over than endure it. I can bear most things, but not this—not this!"

Silence followed the words, a silence that was vital with many emotions. Nap stood upright against the lamplight. He scarcely seemed to breathe, and yet in his very stillness there was almost a hint of violence. He did not attempt to utter a word.

Lucas also lay awhile without speaking, as if exhausted. Then at length he braced himself for further effort. "It seems to me there's only one way out, Boney," he said gently. "It's no manner of use your trying to deceive me any longer. I happen to know what brought you back, and I'm thankful to know it. After all, her happiness comes first with both of us, I guess. That's why I was so almighty pleased to see you in the first place. That's why it won't hurt me any to let her go to you."

Nap made a sharp movement and came out of his silence. "Luke, you're mad!"

"No, Boney, no! I'm saner than you are. When a fellow spends his life as I do, he has time to look all round things. He can't help knowing. And I'm not a skunk. It never was my intention to stand between her and happiness."

"Happiness!" Harshly Nap echoed the word; he almost laughed over it. "Don't you know that she only tolerates me for your sake? She wouldn't stay within a hundred miles of me if it weren't for you."

"Oh, shucks, Boney!" A faint smile touched the worn face on the pillow. "I know you hurt her infernally. But she will forgive you that—women do, you know—though I guess she would have forgiven you easier if she hadn't loved you."

"Man, you're wrong!" Fiercely Nap flung the words. "I tell you there is no love between us. I killed her love long ago. And as for myself—"

"Love doesn't die," broke in Lucas Errol quietly. "I know all about it, Boney. Guess I've always known. And if you tell me that your love for Anne Carfax is dead, I tell you that you lie!" Again he faintly smiled. "But I don't like insulting you, old chap. It's poor sport anyway. Besides, I'm wanting you. That's why—"

He stopped abruptly. A curious change had come over Nap, a change so unexpected, so foreign to the man's grim nature, that even he, who knew him as did none other, was momentarily taken by surprise. For suddenly, inexplicably, Nap's hardness had gone from him. It was like the crumbling of a rock that had withstood the clash of many tempests and yielded at last to the ripple of a summer tide.

With a sudden fierce movement he dropped down upon his knees beside the bed, flinging his arms wide over his brother's body in such an agony of despair as Lucas had never before witnessed.

"I wish I were dead!" he cried out passionately. "I wish to Heaven I had never lived!"

It was a cry wrung from the very depths of the soul, a revelation of suffering of which Lucas had scarcely believed him capable. It opened his eyes to much that he had before but vaguely suspected.

He laid a hand instantly and very tenderly upon the bowed head. "Shucks, Boney!" he remonstrated gently. "Just when you are wanted most!"

A great sob shook Nap. "Who wants me? I'm nothing but a blot on the face of creation, an outrage, an abomination—a curse!"

"You're just the biggest thing in that woman's life, dear fellow," answered the tired voice. "You hang on to that. It'll hold you up, as God always meant it should."

Nap made an inarticulate sound of dissent, but the quiet restraint of his brother's touch seemed to help him. He became still under it, as if some spell were upon him.

After a time Lucas went on in the weary drawl that yet held such an infinite amount of human kindness. "Did you think I'd cut you out, Boney? Mighty lot you seem to know of me! It's true that for a time I thought myself necessary to her. Maybe, for a time I was. She hadn't much to live for anyway. It's

true that when you didn't turn up in Arizona I left off expecting you to be faithful to yourself or to her. And so it seemed best to take what she gave and to try to make her as happy as circumstances would allow. But I never imagined that I ruled supreme. I know too well that what a woman has given once she can never give again. I didn't expect it of her. I never asked it. She gave me what she could, and I—I did the same for her. But that bargain wouldn't satisfy either of us now. No—no! We'll play the game like men—like brothers. And you must do your part. Believe me, Boney, I desire nothing so earnestly as her happiness, and if when I come to die I have helped to make this one woman happy, then I shall not have lived in vain."

Nap turned his head sharply. "Don't talk of dying! You couldn't die! And do you seriously imagine for a single instant that I could ever give her happiness?"

"I imagine so, dear fellow, since she loves you."

"I tell you she wouldn't have me if I asked her."

"You don't know. Anyway, she must have the chance. If she doesn't take it, well, she isn't the woman I imagine her to be."

"She's a saint," Nap said, with vehemence. "And you, Luke,—you're another. You were made for each other. She would be ten million times happier with you. Why do you want her to marry a blackguard?"

A shadow touched Lucas Errol's face, but it was only for an instant; the next he smiled. "You are not a blackguard, Boney. I always said so. And the love of a good woman will be your salvation. No, you're wrong. I couldn't give her real happiness. There is only one man in the world can give her that. And I—am not that man." He paused; his eyelids had begun to droop, heavily. "Say, Nap, I believe I could sleep now," he said.

"Yes, yes, old chap, you shall." Nap raised himself abruptly, banishing his weakness in a breath; only a certain unwonted gentleness remained. "You shall," he said again. "Guess you won't be afraid now you have got your own way. But just one thing more. You'll be wanting all your strength for yourself for the next few weeks. Will you—for my sake if you like—put all this by till you are winning out on the other side? She would say the same, if she knew."

Lucas opened his eyes again, opened them wide, and fixed them steadily, searchingly, upon his brother's face.

"You'll play the straight game with me, Boney?" he questioned. "You won't try to back out?" Then, in a different tone, "No, don't, answer! Forgive me for asking! I know you."

"I guess you do," Nap said, with the ghost of a smile, "better even than I know myself. You know just how little I am to be trusted."

"I trust you, Boney, absolutely, implicitly, from the bottom of my soul."

The words left Lucas Errol's lips with something of the solemnity of an oath. He held out a quiet hand.

"Now let me sleep," he said.

Nap rose. He stood for a moment in silence, holding the friendly hand, as if he wished to speak, but could not. Then suddenly he bent.

"Good-night, dear chap!" he said in a whisper, and with the words he stooped and kissed the lined forehead of the man who trusted him....

Half an hour later the door of the adjoining room opened noiselessly and Tawny Hudson peered in.

One brother was sleeping, the quiet, refreshing sleep of a mind at rest. The other sat watching by his side with fixed inscrutable eyes.

The latter did not stir, though in some indefinable way he made Tawny Hudson know that he was aware of his presence, and did not desire his closer proximity. Obedient to the unspoken command, the man did not come beyond the threshold; but he stood there for many seconds, glowering with the eyes of a monstrous, malignant baboon.

When at length he retired he left the door ajar, and a very curious smile flickered across Nap's face.

But still he did not turn his head.

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE GATE OF DEATH

The second time that Tawny Hudson was driven from his master's side was on a day of splendid spring—English April at its best.

Till the very last moment he lingered, and it was Lucas himself with his final "Go, Tawny!" who sent him from the room. They would not even let him wait, as Nap was waiting, till the anaesthetic had done its work. Black hatred gripped the man's heart as he crept away. What was Nap anyway that he should be thus honoured? The cloud that had attended his coming had made a deep impression upon Hudson. He had watched the lines upon his master's face till he knew them by heart. He knew when anxiety kept the weary eyes from closing. He knew when the effort of the mind was more than the body could endure. Of Lucas's pleasure at his brother's return he raised no question, but that it would have been infinitely better for him had Nap remained away he was firmly convinced. And he knew with the sure intuition that unceasing vigilance had developed in him that Capper thought the same.

Capper resented as he did the intrusion of the black sheep of the family. But Capper was obviously powerless—even Capper, who so ruthlessly expelled him from his master's presence, had proved impotent when it came to removing Nap.

There was a mysterious force about Nap that no one seemed able to resist. He, Hudson, had felt it a hundred times, had bowed to it in spite of himself. He called it black magic in his own dark heart, and because of it his hatred almost amounted to a mania. He regarded him with superstition, as a devilish being endowed with hellish powers that might at any moment be directed against his enemies. And he feared his influence over Lucas, even though with all his monstrous imaginings he recognised the fact of Lucas's ascendancy. He had a morbid dread lest some day his master should be taken unawares, for in Nap's devotion he placed not a particle of faith. And mingled with his fears was a burning jealousy that kept hatred perpetually alive. There was not one of the duties that he performed for his master that Nap had not at one time or another performed, more swiftly, more satisfactorily, with that devilish deftness of his that even Capper had to admire and Hudson could never hope to achieve. And in his inner soul the man knew that the master he idolised preferred Nap's ministrations, Nap's sure and dexterous touch, to his.

And so on that day of riotous spring he waited with murder in his heart to see his enemy emerge from the closed room.

But he waited in vain. No hand touched the door against which he stood. Within the room he heard only vague movements, and now and then Capper's voice, sharp and distinct, giving a curt order. Two doctors and two nurses were there to do his bidding, to aid him in the working of his miracle; two doctors, two nurses, and Nap.

Gradually as the minutes passed the truth dawned upon the great half-breed waiting outside. Against Capper's wish, probably in defiance of it, Nap was remaining for the operation itself. Suspicion deepened swiftly to conviction, and a spasm of indignation akin to frenzy took possession of the man. Doubtless Capper had remonstrated without result, but he—he, Tawny Hudson—could compel. Fiercely he turned and pulled the handle of the door.

It resisted him. He had not heard the key turned upon him, yet undeniably the door was locked. Fury entered into him. Doubtless this also was the work of his enemy. He seized the handle, twisted, dragged, wrenched, till it broke in his hand and he was powerless.

No one within the room paid any attention to him. No one came to open; and this fact served to inflame him further. For a few lurid moments Tawny Hudson saw red. He gathered his huge bull-frame together and flung the whole weight of it against the resisting wood. He was powerless to force the lock, as the door opened towards him, but this fact did not discourage him. It scarcely entered into his reckoning. He was nothing at the moment but a savage beast beyond all reasoning and beyond control.

The panels resisted his violent onslaught, but he was undaunted. With scarcely a pause he drew off and prepared for another. But at the very instant that he was about to hurl himself the second time, a voice spoke on the other side of the door.

"Tawny!"

Tawny stood as if transfixed, his eyes starting, bestial foam upon his lips.

"Tawny!" said the voice again—the voice of his enemy, curt and imperious. "Go and find Mr. Bertie, and tell him he is wanted."

Through the closed door the magic reached the frenzied man. He remained motionless for a few seconds, but the order was not repeated. At the end of the interval the magic had done its work. He turned and slunk away.

A minute later Bertie, very pale and stern, presented himself at the closed door.

"What is it, Nap?"

Contemptuously clear came the answer. "Nothing here. Stay where you are, that's all, and keep that all-fired fool Hudson from spoiling his master's chances."

Bertie turned to look at the man who had come up behind him, and in turning saw the door-handle at his feet.

He pointed to it. "Your doing?"

Hudson shrank under the accusing blue eyes so like his master's. He began to whimper like a beaten dog.

Bertie picked up the knob. "Poor devil!" he muttered; and then aloud: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Do you call this a man's game?"

Tawny cringed in abject misery. He was completely subdued. With the smallest encouragement he would have grovelled at Bertie's feet.

Bertie came away from the door and sat down. His own anxiety was almost insupportable, but he cloaked it with determined resolution. "Sit down there!" he said, pointing to a distant chair. "And don't move until I give you leave."

Meekly the man obeyed him, sitting crouched, his head between his hands.

Bertie regarded him with a severity more assumed than actual. He had not the heart to send him away. He knew it would have been sheer cruelty.

A long time passed. Neither of the two watchers stirred. Tawny Hudson did not even seem to breathe. He sat like a human image of despair.

Noon came and passed. Somewhere in the distance church bells began to peal. Bertie started a little. He had forgotten it was Sunday. Dot would be just driving home from church. She would not come to Baronmead, he knew. It had been her original intention, but he had dissuaded her. He knew that she was very anxious, but he would not have her run the risk of a shock. If the operation failed, if Luke were to die, he would tell her himself. He knew that he could soften the blow as none other could.

It was nearly one when at last the closed door opened. Bertie was on his feet in an instant. Dr. Randal came quietly out, glanced round, stopped.

"It is over. We have taken him into the inner room, and he is recovering consciousness. No, don't go to him. His man mustn't go either. We want all these doors open, wide open, the windows too. But no one is to go near. He must have absolute quiet."

He propped open the door as he spoke. His face was very grave.

"Remember," he said, "that the banging of this door or any sudden sound may mean the end."

"Is he so bad then?" said Bertie, speaking with effort.

"He is very bad indeed," the doctor answered. "The operation has been a protracted one. If he lives, it will be a success. But there is great weakness of the heart's action. Any moment may be the last. Dr. Capper will not leave him at present. Your brother is there too." He paused a moment. "Your brother is a wonderful man," he said, with the air of a man bestowing praise against his will. "If you will be good enough to order some refreshment I will take it in. On no account is Mr. Errol's servant to go near."

Slowly the hours of a day that seemed endless dragged away. Bertie went home to his wife in the afternoon, taking Tawny Hudson, subdued and wretched, with him.

In the evening he returned, the man still following him like a pariah dog, to find the situation unaltered. Capper and Nap were still with Lucas, whose life hung by a thread.

Bertie decided to remain for the night, and at a late hour he saw Capper for a moment. The great man's face was drawn and haggard.

"He won't last through the night," he said. "Tell the ladies to be in readiness. I will send for them if there is time."

"No hope whatever?" said Bertie.

Capper shook his head. "I fear—none. He is just running down—sinking. I think you had better not come in, but stay within call."

He was gone again, and Bertie was left to give his message, and then to wait in anguish of spirit for the final call.

The night was still. Only the draught from the wide-flung doors and windows stirred through the quiet rooms. Mrs. Errol and Anne shared Bertie's vigil in the room that opened out of that in which Lucas Errol was making his last stand. Humbly, in a corner, huddled Tawny Hudson, rocking himself, but making no sound.

Within the room Capper sat at the foot of the bed, motionless, alert as a sentry. A nurse stood like a statue, holding back the bellying window-curtain. And on his knees beside the bed, the inert wrists gripped close in his sinewy fingers, was Nap.

The light of a shaded lamp shone upon his dusky face, showing the gleam of his watchful eyes, the crude lines of jaw and cheek-bone. He looked like a figure carved in bronze.

For hours he had knelt so in unceasing vigilance, gazing unblinking and tireless at the exhausted face upon the pillow. It might have been the face of a dead man upon which he gazed, but the pulses that fluttered in his hold told him otherwise. Lucas still held feebly, feebly, to his chain.

It was nearly an hour after midnight that a voice spoke in the utter silence.

"Boney!"

"I'm here, old chap."

"Good-bye, dear fellow!" It was scarcely more than a whisper. It seemed to come from closed lips.

"Open your eyes," said Nap.

Slowly the heavy lids opened. The blue eyes met the deep, mysterious gaze focussed upon them.

Silent as a ghost Capper glided forward. The nurse left the window, and the curtain floated out into the room, fluttering like an imprisoned thing seeking to escape.

"Ah, but, Boney—" the tired voice said, as though in protest.

And Nap's voice, thrilled through and through with a tenderness that was more than human, made answer. "Just a little longer, dear old man! Only a little longer! See! I'm holding you up. Turn up the lamp, doctor. Take off the shade. He can't see me. There, old chap! Look at me now. Grip hold of me. You can't go yet. I'm with you. I'm holding you back."

Capper trickled something out of a spoon between the pale lips, and for a little there was silence.

But the blue eyes remained wide, fixed upon those other fiery eyes that held them by some mysterious magic from falling into sightlessness.

Three figures had come in through the open door, moving wraith-like, silently. The room seemed full of shadows.

After a while Lucas spoke again, and this time his lips moved perceptibly. "It's such a long way back, Boney,—no end of a trail—and all up hill."

The flare of the lamp was full upon Nap's face; it threw the harsh lines into strong relief, and it seemed to Anne, watching, that she looked upon the face of a man in extremity. His voice too—was that Nap's voice pleading so desperately?

"Don't be faint-hearted, old chap! I'll haul you up. It won't be so tough presently. You're through the worst already. Hold on, Luke, hold on!"

Again Capper poured something between the parted lips, and a quiver ran through the powerless

body.

"Hold on!" Nap repeated. "You promised you would. You mustn't go yet, old boy. You can't be spared. I shall go to the devil without you."

"Not you, Boney!" Lucas's lips quivered into a smile. "That's all over," he said. "You're playing—the straight game—now."

"You must stay and see it through," said Nap. "I can't win out without you."

"Ah!" A long sigh came pantingly with the word. "That so, Boney? Guess I'm—a selfish brute—always was—always was."

A choked sob came through the stillness. Bertie suddenly covered his face. Mrs. Errol put her arm round him as one who comforted a child.

"Is that—someone—crying?" gasped Lucas.

"It's that ass Bertie," answered Nap, without stirring so much as an eyelid.

"Bertie? Poor old chap! Tell him he mustn't. Tell him—I'll hang on—a little longer—God willing; but only a little longer, Boney, only—a little—longer."

There was pleading in the voice, the pleading of a man unutterably tired and longing to be at rest.

Anne, standing apart, was cut to the heart with the pathos of it. But Nap did not seem to feel it. He knelt on, inflexible, determined, all his iron will, all his fiery vitality, concentrated upon holding a man in life. It was not all magnetism, it was not all strength of purpose, it was his whole being grappling, striving, compelling, till inch by inch he gained a desperate victory.

In the morning the fight was over. In the morning Lucas Errol had turned, reluctantly as it seemed to Anne, from the Gate of Death.

And while he lay sleeping quietly, the spring air, pure and life-giving, blowing across his face, the man who had brought him back rose up from his bedside, crept with a noiseless, swaying motion from the room, and sank senseless on the further side of the door.

CHAPTER XV

THE KING'S DECREE

For three weeks after the operation Capper said nothing good or bad of his patient's condition, and during those weeks he scarcely went beyond the terrace. He moved about like a man absorbed, and it seemed to Anne whenever they met that he looked at her without seeing her.

Nap was even closer in his attendance, and Tawny Hudson found himself more than ever supplanted and ignored. For night and day he was at hand, sleeping when and how he could, always alert at the briefest notice, always ready with unfailing nerve and steady hand.

And Capper suffered him without the smallest remonstrance. He seemed to take it for granted that Nap's powers were illimitable.

"That young man will kill himself," Dr. Randal said once. "He is living at perpetual high pressure."

"Leave him alone," growled Capper. "He is the force that drives the engine. The wheels won't go round without him."

And this seemed true; for the wheels went round very, very slowly in those days. Lucas Errol came back to life, urged by a vitality not his own, and the Shadow of Death still lingered in his eyes.

He did not suffer very greatly, and he slept as he had not slept for years, but his progress was slow, sometimes imperceptible. The languor of intense weakness hung like a leaden weight upon him. The old brave cheeriness had given place to a certain curious wistfulness. He seemed too weary for effort, content at all times to sleep the hours away.

Yet when Capper demanded effort he yielded without protest. He did his best, and he smiled at each evidence of returning powers.

"I guess it's just an almighty success, doctor," he would say. "And you've given me sleep into the bargain. It's blessed to be able to sleep. I've a good many years of arrears to make up."

On the day that Capper and Nap set him on his feet for the first time, his weakness was such that he fainted; but he recovered and apologised, and would even have faced the ordeal again had Capper permitted it. On the following day he went through it without a tremor, and slept thereafter for hours, scarcely rousing himself for nourishment.

It was during that sleep that Nap left him, went out into the spring woods, and remained absent for some time. Lucas was still sleeping when he returned, and after a brief look at him he moved away into the adjoining room and prowled to and fro there waiting.

At the first sound of his brother's voice he was back by the bedside.

Lucas smiled a welcome. "I'm better," he said, and held up a weak hand.

It was the first time he had made the assertion. Nap took the hand and laid it gently down.

"You'll get well now," he said.

The heavy drowsiness was less apparent than usual on Lucas's face. "I don't know where I'd be without you, Boney," he said. "Do you know you're looking awfully ill?"

"Shucks!" said Nap.

But Lucas continued his criticism undeterred.

"You've spent too much of yourself on me, and I've been too damned selfish to notice. I'm going to wake up now, Boney. I'm going to play the game. You've been playing my hand as well as your own till now. I'm going to relieve you of that."

"Hear, hear!" said Nap.

"You'll go to bed in your own room to-night," said Lucas, "go to bed and to sleep. In the morning we'll have a talk."

But when the morning came, his energy had flagged a little. He had not slept as well as usual, and though he had no pain he seemed disinclined for physical effort.

"I want a holiday to-day," he said to Capper. "Just let in the sunshine and leave me to bask."

There had been a spell of cold and sunless weather, but that day the sun shone gloriously. The genial warmth of it came in through the open window and flooded the room with the very essence of spring.

"I'm going to take a day off and enjoy it," smiled Lucas. "You take a day off too, doctor. Make the mater go out in the car. I shall do wonders to-morrow after a good laze to-day."

Capper looked him over keenly, pulled his beard, cracked his fingers, and yielded. "Guess a rest won't do you any harm. There's no reason to hustle you any that I can see."

And Lucas spent the whole morning basking in the sunshine in almost unbroken silence. He did not sleep at all. His eyes, remote and thoughtful, were for the most part watching the specks that danced and floated in the rays of light that streamed across his bed.

Nap forebore to disturb him, but he remained within call. He knew with sure intuition that sooner or later Lucas would summon him. Almost he knew what he would say.

The call came at last, very quiet and deliberate. "Boney!"

Instantly Nap presented himself.

"Come here a minute, old chap. No, I'm not wanting anything—only a word in private. Say, Boney, is Anne still stopping here?"

He had seen her nearly every day since the operation, but he had been too drowsy to ask any questions. He had only smiled upon her, and sometimes for a little had held her hand.

"She is backwards and forwards," said Nap. "I believe she is spending to-night."

"Ah! Then, Boney, I want you to speak to her—to-night." He looked up at his brother with his old, kindly smile. "It's for my own sake, old chap," he said. "You know, I didn't sleep last night. I was thinking about her—about you both. And I want her to know everything to-night. I shall sleep the easier when she knows."

Nap stood silent. His face was set in hard lines.

"Will you tell her, Boney?"

"What am I to tell her?" said Nap,

"Tell her the truth, dear fellow, so that she understands it. Make her realise that the dearest wish of my life is her happiness—and yours." He reached up a hand to the motionless figure beside him. "Just this one thing, Boney," he pleaded gently. "Remember—I came back because of it. It will be my happiness too. I want to feel that all is well between you. God knows I want it more than anything else on earth."

Nap gripped the proffered hand and held it fast.

"But she won't have me, you know," he said, after a moment. "She only forgave me because of you."

"Shucks, dear fellow! I guess that wasn't the reason."

"I wish to heaven you'd let me off," Nap said, with sudden vehemence. "Let me shunt first instead of last. It's more than I can face—even for you."

"But I guess you'll face it all the same," said Lucas gently. "And when it's over, come—both of you—and tell me."

He closed his eyes and turned his face to the sunshine. "So long, old chap!" he said. "Don't stay indoors. I'm not wanting you. Think I'll get to sleep presently. Don't let them wake me if I do."

But Nap lingered, still holding his hand. "Luke!" he said.

There was a note of entreaty in his voice, but, for the second time in his life, Lucas turned a deaf ear. The smile was still on his lips, but his eyes remained closed.

"Go, dear fellow!" he said softly. "And God bless you!"

And Nap turned with a set face and went straight from the room.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STRAIGHT GAME

It was drawing towards evening on that same day when Anne, who had been spending the afternoon at the Dower House, walked back across the park. She went by way of the stream along which she and Nap had once skated hand in hand in the moonlight, and as she went she stooped now and then to gather the flowers that grew in the grass beside her path. But her face as she did it was grave and thoughtful. She did not seem to notice their fragrance.

As she neared the lake she moved more slowly, and reaching a rustic seat beneath a cedar that shadowed the entrance to the gardens she sat down, her grey eyes fixed upon the water that gurgled at her feet.

A brilliant green dragon-fly, darting meteor-like across her vision, came presently to disturb her reverie. With a slight start she awoke, and leaned forward with an odd eagerness to mark its progress. As it flashed away through the shadows a quick sigh came to her lips. It was so fair a thing, so swiftly gone.

She gathered up her flowers and rose. And in that moment she knew that she was not alone.

How she knew it she could not have said. No sound or shadow told her. No hand touched her. Yet she knew.

For a few seconds she stood motionless on the edge of the stream. Then without turning she spoke.

"Were you looking for me?"

"Yes," he said.

He came to her side. They were close—close to that spot where once he had so arrogantly claimed her friendship. To-day it seemed he had no word to utter.

For a space she waited, then, finding in his silence something that disquieted her, she spoke again.

"Is all well? Why are you not with Lucas?"

"All's well," he said, but he left her second question unanswered. He was gazing down intently into the clear water.

Seconds passed. She glanced at him once or twice, but he seemed unaware of her scrutiny. He made no movement to meet it. His dark face brooded over the stream, almost as if she were not there.

Her heart began to throb with thick, uneven strokes. What had he come to say to her? And why did he stand thus silent? There was something tragic about him, something almost terrible.

She waited beside him in wordless foreboding. Whatever was coming she felt powerless to avert. She could only brace herself to meet the inevitable.

In some fashion, though he never glanced her way, he must have been aware of her agitation, for when he spoke again there was some measure of reassurance in his voice, emotionless though it was.

"I shan't alarm you," he said. "I shan't even ask you to answer me, much less to treat me kindly. But you've got to hear me, that's all. I'm not telling you for my own sake, only because Luke has ordained that you must know. I daresay you thought it strange that I should have come back so soon. It probably made you wonder."

"It did," said Anne, in a low voice.

"I knew it would." A note of grim satisfaction sounded in the rejoinder. He jerked his head a little with a touch of the old arrogance. "Well, I am here to explain. I knew the odds were dead against me when I started—as they are to-day. All the same you are to understand that I came back when I did because I had just heard that you were free and I was mad enough to dream that in spite of everything I should one day persuade you to marry me."

He paused an instant, but he kept his eyes upon the water as if he were reading something in the crystal depths.

Anne still waited beside him, her hands clasped tightly upon her drooping flowers.

He continued very rapidly, as though he wished to have done. "That was my true reason for coming back. I don't know if I deceived you any on that point. I tried to. But anyway I didn't manage to deceive Lucas. He sees most things. He knows for instance that I—care for you"—almost angrily he flung the words—"and he thinks you ought to know it, in case"—his lips twisted into a queer smile—"you care for me. It's a preposterous idea anyway. I've told him so. But he won't be easy till I've given you the chance to trample on me. Guess he thinks I owe you that. Maybe I do. Well—you have your opportunity."

"Do you think I want—that?" Anne said, her voice very low.

His hands clenched. "I can't say," he said. "Most women would. But—if you want to know—I'd sooner be trampled. I've promised I'll play the straight game, and I'm playing it. I'm telling you the raw truth. I love you. I have it in me to make you know it. But—"

"But you love Lucas better" she said.

He nodded. "Just that. Also, Lucas is a good man. He will set your happiness first all his life. While I—while I"—he stooped a little, still staring downwards as if he watched something—"while I, Lady Carfax," he said, speaking very quietly, "might possibly succeed in making you happy, but it wouldn't be the same thing. You would have to live my life—not I yours. I am not like Lucas. I shouldn't be satisfied with—a little."

"And you think that is all I can offer him?" she said.

He made a sharp gesture of repudiation. "I have no theories on that subject. I believe you would

satisfy him. I believe—ultimately—you would both find the happiness we are all hunting for."

"And you?" Anne said, her voice very low.

He straightened himself with a backward fling of the shoulders, but still he did not look at her. "I, Lady Carfax!" he said grimly. "I don't fit into the scheme of things anyway. I was just pitchforked into your life by an accident. It's for you to toss me out again."

Anne was silent. She stood with her face to the sinking sun. She seemed to be gathering her strength.

At last, "What will you do?" she asked in the same hushed voice. "Where will you go?"

He turned slowly towards her. "I really don't know. I haven't begun to think."

His eyes looked deeply into hers, but they held no passion, no emotion of any sort. They made her think with a sudden intolerable stab of pain of that night when he had put out the fire of his passion to receive her kiss. He had told her once that that kiss was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. Did he remember it now, she wondered, as she met those brooding eyes, still and dark and lonely as they had been then, unfathomable as a mountain pool. She did not fear to meet them. Only a vast, surging pity filled her soul. She understood him so well—so well.

"Nap," she said tremulously, "what can I say to you? What can I do?"

He put out a quiet, unfaltering hand and took hers. "Don't be too good to me," he said. "Don't worry any on my account. If you do, maybe Luke will notice and misunderstand. He's so damnably shrewd." A brief smile crossed his face. "I'll tell you what to do, Lady Carfax, and when it's done you'll feel better. Come with me now to Lucas—it's his own idea—and tell him you've no use for me. Put it how you like. Women can always do these things. Make him know that he comes first with you still and always will. Tell him you know all the truth and it hasn't made you change your mind. Tell him you'd rather belong to a man you can trust. He'll believe you, Anne. We all do."

He spoke insistently. He had begun to draw her towards the path. But as they reached it, his hand fell from hers. He walked beside her, close beside her, but not by word or touch did he seek further to persuade her.

And Anne walked steadily forward as one in a dream. It was the only thing to do, since he had told her plainly that he desired it, since with both of them Luke must for ever come first. He had drawn them together, he had linked their hands, but he stood between them to do it, and neither of them would suffer him to go.

She supposed they would be friends again, she and Nap. She did not fear that he would ever again cross the boundary line. His love for his brother ran like a purifying current through his veins. It was the one streak of greatness in him. Its very selflessness made it stronger than his love for her. She knew with a certainty that nought could ever shake that he would be true to Lucas, that never again by word or sign would he betray that for which he had not scrupled to play her false.

And because she was a woman and understood him she forgave him this. For she knew that the greater loyalty had done for him that which she had failed to do. She knew that in uttermost self-sacrifice Nap Errol, the savage, the merciless, the treacherous, had found his soul.

So side by side in silence they went back to the house.

The evening was very still; passing in from the terrace they seemed to enter an enchanted palace wherein nothing stirred.

"He may be asleep," Nap said. "Shall I go first?"

She assented without speaking. Somehow the spell of silence seemed to hold her also.

Tawny Hudson was on guard as usual in the outer room. He looked up with resentful eyes as they entered, but he said nothing. The door into his master's room stood half open. Nap paused at it a moment to listen. He turned to Anne, and she fancied just for a second that there was a shade of anxiety on his face. But it was gone instantly, if indeed it had been there.

"Follow me in a minute," he said, "if I don't come back."

And with that he glided through the narrow space and passed from sight.

A minute later, absolute silence reigning, Anne softly pushed back the door and entered.

She found Nap crouched motionless with outflung arms across the foot of the bed.

And drawing nearer, she saw that Lucas Errol was lying asleep with his face to the sky, all the lines of pain smoothed utterly away, and on his lips that smile which some call the Stamp of Death, and others the shining reflection of the Resurrection Glory which the passing soul has left behind.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRANSFORMING MAGIC

No clamour of mourning broke the spell of silence that lay upon Baronmead. Those who wept hid their grief behind closed doors. But those to whom Lucas was dearest shed the fewest tears. His mother went about with a calmness of aspect that never faltered. She and Anne were very close to each other in those days though but few words passed between them. A hush that was like a benediction brooded upon the silent house. They could not weep.

Once, standing in the hallowed stillness beside her dead, Mrs. Errol turned to Anne, saying softly: "The dear Lord knows best, dear. We wouldn't call him back. He wouldn't want to come."

And later she told her gently that she had known ever since the operation that the end was near.

"It was in his eyes," she said. "I know that look so well. Dr. Capper knew it too. And so, I'm sure, did the dear boy himself. That waiting, far-off look as if the soul were listening, didn't you see it, dear? I only wondered that he stayed so long."

Yes, Anne had seen it. She knew it now. Though he had smiled upon her, though he had held her hand, she knew that all human longing had died in Lucas Errol's soul on the night that he had gone down to the Gate of Death and Nap had drawn him back. He had slackened his hold upon things earthly that night, and though he had come back a little way, it had been as a spectator only that he lingered, no more as one who took an active part in the drama of mortal life. His *rôle* was played; she realised now that he must have known it, and that he had not wished it otherwise. He had not died with that kingly smile upon his lips if he had not been content to die. That was why grief seemed to her impossible. That was why the peace in which he lay, wrapped tenderly around her tired heart also and gave her rest.

Of Nap during those days of silence she saw nothing whatever. He had risen from his brother's death-bed with a face of stony aloofness, and had gone swiftly out, she knew not whither. Since that moment she had scarcely seen him. He spent his time out of the house, somewhere away in the woods she believed, out of reach of any human observation, not even returning at night. Once only in the early morning she saw him cross the stretch of lawn in front of the lake and enter by a side door. But her glimpse of him was of the briefest. She did not see his face.

Upon Bertie devolved all the duties of the head of the household, but his mother was ready at every turn to help him. She was more to him during those few days than she had ever been before. Capper also, remaining for the funeral, placed himself at his disposal and did much to lighten the burden.

Capper indeed helped everyone, and Anne always remembered with gratitude a few moments that she had alone with him on the evening before the funeral, when he laid a fatherly hand upon her shoulder to say: "My dear, I don't know if you're fretting any, but you've no cause to fret. I know now that it couldn't have been otherwise. If you'd been his wife you couldn't have kept him."

She thanked him with a look. She believed that Capper understood, and she was glad that it should be so. She fancied also that his opinion regarding Nap had undergone a change, but she hesitated to touch upon the subject, and the moment passed.

Up to the last minute she was doubtful as to whether Nap would attend his brother's funeral. She herself went because Mrs. Errol desired to go. She walked with Capper immediately behind Bertie and his mother. Neither of them seemed to expect Nap, or even to think of him. His movements were always sudden and generally unaccountable. But she knew that his absence would cause comment in the neighbourhood, and though she also knew that Nap would care nothing for that, she earnestly hoped that he would not give occasion for it.

Nevertheless the procession started without him, and she had almost ceased to hope when he suddenly appeared from nowhere as it seemed to her, and walked on her other side.

She heard Capper give a grunt, whether of approval or otherwise she did not know, but not a word was said. She glanced once at Nap, but his face was sphinx-like, utterly unresponsive. He stared straight ahead, with eyes that never varied, at the coffin that was being borne upon men's shoulders to its quiet resting-place in the village churchyard, and throughout the journey thither his expression remained unaltered.

At the gate Bertie suddenly turned and motioned him forward, and they entered the church together. Later, by the open grave, Anne saw that Bertie was leaning on Nap's shoulder, while his mother stood apart with her face to the sky; and she knew that the feud between them had been laid at last and for ever by the man who had ruled supreme in the hearts of all who knew him.

When all was over, Nap disappeared, and she saw no more of him till the evening when for the first time he came to the dinner-table. Capper was leaving early on the following day, and it was to this fact that Anne attributed his appearance.

Bertie dined at home, but he walked over later to take leave of Capper. They sat together in the hall, with the door wide open, for the night was as warm as summer.

Mrs. Errol had gone to her room immediately after dinner, but Anne remained at Capper's request.

"I shan't see much more of you," he said.

They talked but little however. Nap sat smoking in a corner and hardly opened his lips. Bertie came in late, looking worn and miserable.

"I wish you would tell me what to do with Tawny Hudson," he said. "I believe the fellow's crazy; and he's pining too. I don't believe he has eaten anything for days."

Since Lucas's death Tawny Hudson had attached himself to Bertie, following him to and fro like a lost dog, somewhat to Dot's dismay; for, deeply though she pitied the great half-breed, there was something about him that frightened her.

"I don't know what to do with him," Bertie said. "He's as gaunt as a wolf. He's hanging about somewhere outside now. Wish you'd take him along to America with you, Doctor."

"Call him in," said Capper, "and let me have a look at him."

Bertie went to the door and whistled.

There was no reply.

"Hudson!" he called. "Tawny! where are you?"

But there came no answer out of the shadows. The only voice which Tawny would obey was still.

Bertie came back baffled. "Confound the fellow! I know he's within hail."

"Leave the brute alone!" said Nap. "He isn't worth much anyway."

"But I can't let him die," said Bertie.

Nap looked contemptuous, and relapsed into silence.

"I'll take him back with me if you're wanting to be rid of him," said Capper. "Tell him so if you get the chance."

"Thanks!" said Bertie. "But I don't believe he'll budge. Nap will be crossing next week. P'r'aps I shall persuade him to go then." He looked across at Nap. "I know you don't like the fellow, but it wouldn't be for long."

"Probably not," said Nap, staring fixedly at the end of his cigar.

Something in his tone made Anne glance at him, but as usual his face told her nothing. She saw only that his eyes were drawn as if with long watching, and that the cynical lines about his mouth were more grimly pronounced than she had ever seen them before.

Not long after, Bertie got up to go. His farewell to Capper was spoken almost in a whisper, and Anne saw that his self-control was precarious.

When he shook hands with her he was beyond speech. She was glad to see Nap rise and accompany him, with a friendly hand pushed through his arm.

For nearly half an hour longer she sat on with Capper; then at length she rose to go.

"I shall see you in the morning," she said, pausing.

"I am making an early start," said Capper.

She smiled. "I shall see you all the same. Good-night."

Capper kept her hand in his, his green eyes running over her with elusive intentness. "Wonder what you'll do," he said abruptly.

She met his look quite simply. "For the present," she said, "I must be with Mrs. Errol. Later on—next month—she will no doubt go to the Dower House, and I shall go back to the Manor."

"Don't mope!" he said.

She smiled again with a short sigh. "I shall be too busy for that."

"That so?" Capper drew his brows together. "Lady Carfax, at risk of offending you, I've something to say."

"You will not offend me," she answered. "And I think I know what it is."

"Very possibly you do, but I guess I'd better say it all the same. You may remember a talk we had at the commencement of our acquaintance, regarding Nap. I told you he was just a wild animal, untamable, untrustworthy. Well, you have proved me wrong. You have worked a miracle, and you have tamed him. Lucas himself told me about it the day before he died."

"Oh, no!" Anne said quickly and earnestly. "It was Lucas who worked the miracle, Doctor. The magic was his."

"Guess he wouldn't have done it single-handed," said Capper. "He'd been trying as long as I had known him, and he hadn't succeeded." He paused, looking at her with great kindness. Then: "My dear," he said, "you needn't be afraid to trust yourself to him. He will never let you down again."

Anne stood silent, but under his look a deep flush rose and overspread her face. She turned her eyes away.

Very gently Capper patted her shoulder. "You've made a man of him between you," he said. "Lucas has left the developing process to you."

"Ah!" she said wistfully, and that was all, for her eyes were suddenly full of tears.

She went to the door and stood there for several seconds. The voice of a nightingale thrilled through the silence. Was it only a year—only a year—since the veil had been rent from her eyes? Only a year since first her heart had throbbed to "the everlasting Wonder Song"? She felt as if eons had passed over her, as if the solitude of ages wrapped her round; and yet afar off, like dream music in her soul, she still heard its echoes pulsing across the desert. It held her like a charm.

Slowly her tears passed. There came again to her that curious sense of something drawing her, almost as of a voice that called. The garden lay still and mysterious in the moonlight. She caught its gleam upon a corner of the lake where it shone like a wedge of silver.

A few seconds she stood irresolute; then without word or backward glance she stepped down into the magic silence.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LAST ORDEAL

What impulse she obeyed she knew not; only she wanted to hear the nightingale, to drink in the

fragrance, to feel the healing balm upon her heart. Her feet carried her noiselessly over the grass to that shining splendour of water, and turned along the path that led past the seat under the cedar where Nap had joined her on that evening that seemed already far away, and had told her that he loved her still. By this path he and Bertie would have gone to the Dower House; by this path he would probably return alone.

Her heart quickened a little as she passed into the deep shadow. She was not nervous as a rule, but there was something mysterious about the place, something vaguely disquieting. The gurgle of the stream that fed the lake sounded curiously remote.

She turned towards the rustic seat on which she had rested that day, and on the instant her pulses leapt to sudden alarm. There was a stealthy movement in front of her; a crouching object that looked monstrous in the gloom detached itself from the shadow and began to move away. For a moment she thought it was some animal; then there came to her the unmistakable though muffled tread of human feet, and swift as an arrow comprehension pierced her. The thing in front of her was Tawny Hudson.

But why was he skulking there? Why did he seek thus to avoid her? What was the man doing? The agitated questions raced through her brain at lightning speed, and after them came a horrible, a sickening suspicion.

Whence it arose she could not have said, but the memory of Nap's face only half an hour before, when Tawny Hudson had been under discussion, arose in her mind and confirmed it almost before she knew that it was there. She had often suspected the half-breed of harbouring a dislike for Nap. More often still she had noted Nap's complete and perfectly obvious contempt for him. He had tolerated him, no more, for Lucas's sake. Was it not highly probable that now that the restraining influence was gone the man's animosity had flamed to hatred? And if he were really crazy, as Bertie believed, to what lengths might he not carry it?

Fear stabbed her, fear that was anguish. At any moment now Nap might be returning, and if Tawny were indeed lying in wait for him—

She traversed the deep shadow cast by the cedar and looked forth into the park beyond. The man had disappeared. He must have doubled back among the trees of the shrubbery; and she knew he must be crouching somewhere in concealment not far away, for all sound of footsteps had ceased. Did he fancy she had not seen him, she wondered? Was he hoping that she would turn and go back by the way she had come, leaving him free to accomplish his purpose, whatever it might be?

And then her heart suddenly stood still, for away in the distance, walking with his light, swinging gait over the moonlit sward, she saw Nap.

In that moment her fear took definite and tangible form, and a horror of the thing that lurked in the shadows behind her seized her, goading her to action. She passed out into the quiet moonlight and moved to meet him.

Her impulse was to run, but she restrained it, dreading lest she might precipitate the disaster she feared. Hudson must not suspect her intention, must not know of the panic at her heart.

Nap did not see her at once. The background of trees obscured her. But as she drew away from them he caught sight of her, and instantly quickened his pace.

They met scarcely fifty yards from the cedar, and breathlessly Anne spoke. "Turn back with me a little way. I have something to say to you."

He wheeled at once, with no show of surprise. Though he must have seen her agitation he did not ask its cause.

They walked several paces before Anne spoke again. "You will think me very strange, but I have had a fright. I—I want you, Nap, to—to understand and not think me foolish or laugh at me."

"I couldn't do either if I tried," said Nap. "Who has been frightening you? Tawny Hudson?"

"Yes, Tawny Hudson." Anne was still breathless; she glanced nervously over her shoulder. "Shall we walk a little faster? He—he is lurking in those trees, and do you know I don't think he is safe? I think—I can't help thinking—that he is lying in wait for you to—to do you a mischief."

Nap stopped dead. "That so? Then I reckon I will go and deal with him at once."

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "No! Nap, are you mad?"

He gave her a queer look. "By no means, Lady Carfax, though I believe I should be if I went any farther with you. You stay here while I go and investigate."

He would have left her with the words, but on the instant desperation seized Anne. Her strained nerves would not bear this. She caught his arm, holding him fast.

"You must not! You shall not! Or if you do I am coming with you. You—you are not going alone."

"I am going alone," Nap said; but he stood still, facing her, watching her as he had watched her on that day long ago when he had lain helpless in her arms in the snow, the day that revelation had first come to her shrinking heart. "I am going alone," he repeated very deliberately. "And you will wait here till I come back."

She felt that he was putting forth his strength to compel her, and something within her warned her that he was stronger in that moment than she. She did not understand his ascendancy over her, but she could not help being aware of it. Her agitated hold upon his arm began to slacken.

"Oh, don't go!" she entreated weakly. "Please don't go! I can't bear it. It—it's too much. Nap, if—if any harm comes to you, I—I think it will kill me."

There came a sudden gleam in his sombre eyes that seemed to stab her, but it was gone instantly, before he spoke in answer.

"Lady Carfax, you are not foolish—you are sublime! But—be wise as well." Very quietly he extricated his arm from her clinging hands and turned to go. "Don't watch me," he said. "Go on to the bridge and wait for me there."

He was gone. Blindly she obeyed him; blindly she moved towards the bridge that spanned the stream. She was trembling so much that she could hardly walk, but almost mechanically she urged herself on. No other course was open to her.

She reached the bridge, and leaned upon the handrail. She thought the beating of her heart would suffocate her. She strained her ears to listen, but she could hear nought else; and for a time she actually lacked the physical strength to turn and look.

At last, after the passage of many minutes, she summoned her sinking courage. Faint and dizzy still, she managed to raise her head. The moonlight danced in her eyes, but with immense effort she compelled herself to look back.

The next instant utter amazement seized and possessed her, dominating her fear. Nap was standing just beyond the outspreading boughs of the cedar, a straight relentless figure, with the arrogance of complete mastery in every line, while at his feet grovelled and whimpered the great half-breed, Tawny Hudson.

Nap was speaking. She could not hear what he said, but spell-bound she watched, while a curious sensation of awe tingled through her. The man was so superbly self-confident.

Suddenly she saw him stoop and take something from his prostrate enemy. A sharp doubt assailed her. She saw the wretched Tawny cringe lower and cover his face. She saw the moonlight glint upon the thing in Nap's hand.

He seemed to be considering it, for he turned it this way and that, making it flash and flash again. And then abruptly, with a swift turn of the wrist, he spun it high into the air. It made a shining curve, and fell with a splash into the stream. She saw the widening ripples from where she stood.

But she did not stay to watch them. Her attention was focussed upon the scene that was being enacted before her.

It was very nearly over. Tawny Hudson had lifted his head, and she saw submission the most abject on his upraised face. He seemed to be pleading for something, and after a moment, with the faintest shrug of the shoulders, Nap lifted one hand and made a curious gesture above him. The next instant he turned upon his heel and came towards her, while Tawny Hudson got up and slunk away into the shadows.

Anne awaited him, standing quite motionless. She knew now what had happened. He had grappled with the man's will just as once he had grappled with hers. And he had conquered. She expected him to approach her with the royal swagger of victory, and involuntarily she shrank, dreading to encounter him in that mood, painfully aware of her own weakness.

He came to her; he stood before her. "Anne," he said, "forgive me!"

She gazed at him in astonishment. "Forgive you!" she repeated. "But why?"

"I have no right to practise the black arts in your presence," he said, "though as a matter of fact there was no other way. I've frightened the poor devil out of his senses. Aren't you frightened too?"

"I don't understand," she answered rather piteously. "I am only thankful that you are not hurt."

"That's good of you," he said, and she heard no irony in his voice. He leaned his arms upon the rail beside her, and stared down in silence for several moments into the dark water. "If this had happened a week—less than a week—ago," he said at length, speaking very quietly, "I would have let the fellow knife me with the utmost pleasure. I should even have been grateful to him. And"—he turned very slightly towards her—"you would have had cause for gratitude too, for Luke would have been with you to-day."

She shrank a little at his words. "I don't understand," she said again.

He stood up and faced her with abrupt resolution. "I am going to make you understand," he said, "once and for all. It's a rather hideous recital, but you had better hear it. I will condense it as much as possible. I've been an evil brute all my life, but I guess you know that already. The first time I saw you I wanted to ruin you. I never meant to fall in love with you. I kicked against it—kicked hard. Good women always exasperated me. But I wanted a new sensation, and, by heaven, I got it!" He paused a moment, and she saw his grim features relax very slightly. "I was caught in my own net," he said. "I believe there is magic in you. You captured me anyway. I did homage to you—in spite of myself. After that night the relish went out of everything for me. I wanted only you."

Again he paused, but she said nothing. She was listening with her steadfast eyes upon him.

"But you kept me at a distance," he said, "and I couldn't help myself. That was the maddening part of it. Lucas knew even then—or suspected. But he didn't interfere. He saw you were taming me. And so you were—so you were. But that thrashing upset everything. It drove me mad. I was crazy for revenge. Lucas made me go away, but I couldn't stay. I was like a man possessed. My hatred for your husband had swamped my love for you. You have got to know it, Anne; I am like that. I wanted to wreak my vengeance on him through you, because I knew—by then—that I had somehow reached your heart. And so I came to you—I saw you—and then I couldn't do it. Your love—I suppose I may call it that?—barred the way. It was your safeguard. You trusted me, and for that I wanted to fall down and worship you. But you sent me away—I had to go. You made a man of me. I lived a clean life because of you. I was your slave. I believe I should have remained so if your husband had died then. But the knowledge that he was coming back to you was too much for me. I couldn't stand that. I broke free."

He stopped suddenly and brought his clenched fist down upon the rail as if physical pain were a relief to his soul.

"I needn't go into what happened then," he said. "You saw me at my worst, and—you conquered me. You drove me out of your stronghold, and you locked the door. I don't know even now how you did it. None but a good woman would have dared. Do you know, when I came to my senses and knew what I had done, knew that I'd insulted you, killed your trust—your love, made you despise me, I nearly shot myself? It was Dot who kept me from that. She guessed, I suppose. And I went away—I went right away into the Rockies—and fought my devils there. I came back saner than you have ever known me, to hear that you were free. Can you believe that I actually told myself that you were mine—mine for the winning? I stretched out my hands to you across half the world, and I felt as if wherever you were I had somehow managed to reach and touch you. It was exactly a year from the day I had first met you."

"Ah, I remember!" Anne said, her voice quick with pain; but she did not tell him what she remembered.

He went on rapidly, as if she had not spoken. "And then I came to you. And—I found—I found Luke—in possession. Well, that was the end of everything for me. I couldn't help knowing that it was the best thing that could possibly happen to either of you. And I—well, I was just out of it. I would have gone again that night, but Luke wouldn't have it. He suspected from the first, though I lied to him—I lied royally. But I couldn't keep it up. He was too many for me. He wouldn't let me drop out, but neither would I let him. I fought every inch. I wouldn't let him die. I held him night and day—night and day. I knew what it meant to you too, and I knew you would help me afterwards to drop out. My whole soul was in it, but even so, I couldn't hold on for ever. I had to slacken at last, and he—he slackened too. I knew it directly, felt him losing hold. That was two days before he died. And I pulled myself together and grabbed him again. I think he knew. He tried to wake up, said he'd get well, made me let go of him, made me explain things to you. And then—well, I guess he thought his part was done—so he just—let

go."

Abruptly he turned from her and leaned again upon the rail, lodging his head on his hands. "That's all," he said. "But if Tawny had taken it into his fool brain to make an end of me a little sooner—as I meant him to—I know very well Luke would have hung on—somehow—for your sake. Oh, I wish to heaven he had!" he burst out fiercely. "I'm not fit to speak to you, not fit to touch your hand. You—you—I believe you'd be kind to me if I would let you. But I won't—I won't! I'm going away. It rests with me now to protect you somehow, and there is no other way."

He ceased to speak, and in the silence she watched his bent head, greatly wondering, deeply pitying. When he stood up again she knew that the tumult that tore his soul had been forced down out of sight.

"You see how it is with me, Anne," he said very sadly. "Tawny Hudson thinks I'm a devil, and I'm not sure—even now—that he isn't right. That's why I'm going away. I won't have you trust me, for I can't trust myself. And you have no one to protect you from me. So you won't blame me for going? You'll understand?"

His words went straight to her heart. She felt the quick tears rising, but she kept them back. She knew that he needed strength from her just then.

And so, after a moment, she commanded herself, and answered him.

"I think you are quite right to go, Nap. And—yes, I understand. Only—some day—some day—come back again!"

He leaned towards her. His face had flashed into sudden vitality at her words. He made a movement as if he would take her into his arms. And then abruptly, almost with violence, he withdrew himself, and gripped his hands together behind him.

Standing so, with the moonlight shining on his face, he showed her that which her heart ached to see. For though the dusky eyes were fixed and still, unveiled but unrevealing, though the high cheek-bones and lantern jaw were grim as beaten brass, she had a glimpse beyond of the seething, volcanic fires she dreaded, and she knew that he had spoken the truth. It was better for them both that he should go.

"I will come back to you, Anne," he said, speaking very steadily. "I will come back to you—if I find I can."

It was final, and she knew it. She held out her hand to him in silence, and he, stooping, pressed it dumbly against his lips.

Thereafter they walked back to the house together, and parted without a word.

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE FURNACE

Capper looked round with a certain keenness that was not untouched with curiosity when Nap unexpectedly followed him to his room that night.

"Are you wanting anything?" he demanded, with his customary directness.

"Nothing much," Nap said. "You might give me a sleeping-draught if you're disposed to be charitable. I seem to have lost the knack of going to sleep. What I really came to say was that Hudson will go with you to-morrow if you will be good enough to put up with him. He won't give you any trouble. I would let him go with me next week if his wits would stand the strain of travelling in my company, but I don't think they will. I don't want to turn him into a gibbering maniac if I can help it."

"What have you been doing to him?" said Capper.

Nap smiled, faintly contemptuous. "My dear doctor, I never do anything to anybody. If people choose to credit me with possessing unholy powers, you will allow that I am scarcely to be blamed if the temptation to trade now and then upon their fertile imaginations proves too much for me."

"I allow nothing," Capper said, "that is not strictly normal and wholesome."

"Then that places me on the black list at once," remarked Nap.
"Good-night!"

"Stay a moment!" ordered Capper. "Let me look at you. If you will promise to behave like an ordinary human being for once, I'll give you that draught."

"I'll promise anything you like," said Nap, a shade of weariness in his voice. "I'm going up to town tomorrow, and I never sleep there so I reckon this is my last chance for some time to come."

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" asked Capper abruptly.

But Nap only threw up his head and laughed. "If that were my object I'd take a shorter cut than this. No, I guess I shan't die this way, Doctor. You seem to forget the fact that I'm as tough as leather, with the vitality of a serpent."

"The toughest of us won't go for ever," observed Capper. "You get to bed. I'll come to you directly."

When he joined him again, a few minutes later, Nap was lying on his back with arms flung wide, staring inscrutably at the ceiling. His mind seemed to be far away, but Capper's hand upon his pulse brought it back. He turned his head with the flicker of a smile.

"What's that for?"

"I happen to take an interest in you, my son," said Capper.

"Very good of you. But why?"

Capper was watching him keenly. "Because I have a notion that you are wanted."

Nap stirred restlessly, and was silent.

"How long are you going to be away?" Capper asked.

"I don't know."

"For long?"

Nap's hand jerked impatiently from the doctor's hold. "Possibly for ever."

Capper's long fingers began to crack. He looked speculative. "Say, Nap," he said suddenly, "we may not be exactly sympathetic, you and I, but I guess we've pulled together long enough to be fairly intimate. Anyway, I've conceived a sort of respect for you that I never expected to have. And if you'll take a word of advice from a friend who wishes you well, you won't regret it."

The thin lips began to smile. "Delighted to listen to your advice, Doctor. I suspect I'm not obliged to follow it."

"You will please yourself, no doubt," Capper rejoined drily. "But my advice is, don't stay away too long. Your place is here."

"You think so?" said Nap.

"I am quite sure," Capper said, with emphasis.

"And you think I shall please myself by going?"

"Who else?" said Capper almost sternly.

Nap did not instantly reply. He was lying back with his face in shadow. When he spoke at length it was with extreme deliberation. Capper divined that it was an effort to him to speak at all.

"You're a family friend," he said. "I guess you've a right to know. It isn't for my own sake I'm going at all. It's for—hers, and because of a promise I made to Luke. If I were to stop, I'd be a cur—and worse. She'd take me without counting the cost. She is a woman who never thinks of herself. I've got to think for her. I've sworn to play the straight game, and I'll play it. That's why I won't so much as look into her face again till I know that I can be to her what Luke would have been—what Bertie is to Dot—what every man who is a man ought to be to the woman he has made his wife."

He flung his arms up above his head and remained tense for several seconds. Then abruptly he relaxed.

"I'll be a friend to her," he said, "a friend that she can trust—or nothing!"

There came a very kindly look into Capper's green eyes, but he made no comment of any sort. He only turned aside to take up the glass he had set down on entering. And as he did so, he smiled as a man well pleased.

Once during the night he looked in upon Nap and found him sleeping, wrapt in a deep and silent slumber, motionless as death. He stood awhile watching the harsh face with its grim mouth and iron jaw, and slowly a certain pity dawned in his own. The man had suffered infernally before he had found his manhood. He had passed through raging fires that had left their mark upon him for the rest of his life.

"It's been an almighty big struggle, poor devil," said Capper, "but it's made a man of you."

He left early on the following day, accompanied by Tawny Hudson, whose docility was only out-matched by his very obvious desire to be gone.

True to her promise, Anne was down in time to take leave of Capper. They stood together for a moment on the steps before parting. Her hand in his, he looked straight into her quiet eyes.

"You're not grieving any, Lady Carfax?"

"No," she said.

"I guess you're right," said Maurice Capper gravely. "We make our little bids for happiness, but it helps one to remember that the issue lies with God."

She gave him a smile of understanding. "He knows about it all—He knows—He knows," she quoted softly. And Capper went his way, taking with him the memory of a woman who still ploughed her endless furrow, but with a heart at peace.

CHAPTER XX

THE PROMOTION OF THE QUEEN'S JESTER

"My!" said Mrs. Errol. "Isn't he just dear?"

There was a cooing note in her deep voice. She sat in the Dower House garden with her grandson bolt upright upon her knees, and all the birds of June singing around her.

"Isn't he dear, Anne?" she said.

Anne, who was dangling a bunch of charms for the baby's amusement, stooped and kissed the sunny curls.

"He's a lord of creation," she said. "And he knows it already. I never saw such an upright morsel in my life."

"Lucas was like that," said Mrs. Errol softly. "He was just the loveliest baby in the U.S.A. Everyone said so. Dot dearie, I'm sort of glad you called him Luke."

"So am I, mater dearest. And he's got Luke's eyes, hasn't he now? Bertie said so from the very beginning." Eagerly Dot leaned from her chair to turn her small son's head to meet his grandmother's scrutiny. "I'd rather he were like Luke than anyone else in the world," she said. "It isn't treason to Bertie to say so, for he wants it too. Where is Bertie, I wonder? He had to go to town, but he promised to be back early for his boy's first birthday-party. It's such an immense occasion, isn't it?"

Her round face dimpled in the way Bertie most loved. She rose and slipped a hand through Anne's arm.

"Let's go and look for him. I know he can't be long now. The son of the house likes having his granny to himself. He never cries with her."

They moved away together through the sunlit garden, Dot chattering gaily as her fashion was about

nothing in particular while Anne walked beside her in sympathetic silence. Anne was never inattentive though there were some who deemed her unresponsive.

But as they neared the gate Dot's volubility quite suddenly died down. She plucked a white rose, to fill in the pause and fastened it in her friend's dress. Her fingers trembled unmistakably as she did it, and Anne looked at her inquiringly. "Is anything the matter?"

"No. Why?" said Dot, turning very red.

Anne smiled a little. "I feel as if a bird had left off singing," she said.

Dot laughed, still with hot cheeks. "What a pretty way of putting it! Bertie isn't nearly so complimentary. He calls me the magpie, which is really very unfair, for he talks much more than I do. Dear old Bertie!"

The dimples lingered, and Anne bent suddenly and kissed them. "Dear little Dot!" she said.

Instantly Dot's arms were very tightly round her. "Anne darling, I've got something to tell you—something you very possibly won't quite like. You won't be vexed any, will you?"

"Not any," smiled Anne.

"No, but it isn't a small thing. It—it's rather immense. But Bertie said I was to tell you, because you are not to be taken by surprise again. He doesn't think it fair, and of course he's right."

"What is it, dear?" said Anne. The smile had gone from her face, but her eyes were steadfast and very still—the eyes of a woman who had waited all her life.

"My dear," said Dot, holding her closely, "it's only that Bertie didn't go up to town on business. It was to meet someone, and—and that someone will be with him when he comes back. I promised Bertie to tell you, but you were so late getting here I was afraid I shouldn't have time. Oh, Anne dear, I do hope you don't mind."

Dot's face, a guilty scarlet, was hidden in Anne's shoulder. Anne's hand, very quiet and steady, came up and began to stroke the fluffy hair that blew against her neck. But she said nothing.

It was Dot who remorsefully broke the silence. "I feel such a beast, Anne, but really I had no hand in it this time. He wrote to Bertie yesterday from town. He hasn't been in England for over a year, and he wanted to know if he could come to us. Bertie went up this morning to see him and bring him back. I thought of coming round to you, but Bertie seemed to think I had better wait and tell you when you came. I hoped you would have come earlier, so that I would have had more time to tell you about it. Dear, do tell me it's all right."

"It is all right," Anne said, and with the words she smiled again though her face was pale. "It is quite all right, Dot dear. Don't be anxious."

Dot looked up with a start. "That's the motor coming now. Oh, Anne, I've only told you just in time!"

She was quivering with excitement. It seemed as if she were far the more agitated of the two. For Anne was calm to all outward appearance, quiet and stately and unafraid. Only the hand that grasped Dot's was cold—cold as ice. The motor was rapidly approaching. They stood by the gate and heard the buzzing of the engine, the rush of the wheels, and then the quick, gay blasts of the horn by which Bertie always announced his coming to his wife. A moment more and the car whizzed into the drive. There came a yell of welcome from Bertie at the wheel and the instant checking of the motor.

And the man beside Bertie leaned swiftly forward, bareheaded, and looked straight into Anne's white face.

She did not know how she met his look. It seemed to pierce her. But she was nerved for the ordeal, and she moved towards him with outstretched hand.

His fingers closed upon it as he stepped from the car, gripped and closely held it. But he spoke not a word to her; only to Dot, whom he kissed immediately afterwards, to her confusion and Bertie's amusement.

"I seem to have stumbled into a family gathering," he said later, when they gave him the place of honour between Mrs. Errol and his hostess.

"Being one of the family, I guess it's a happy accident," said Mrs. Errol.

He bowed to her elaborately. "Many thanks, alma mater! Considering the short time you have had for preparing a pretty speech of welcome it does you undoubted credit."

"Oh, my, Nap!" she said. "I'm past making pretty speeches at my age. I just say what I mean."

A gleam of surprise crossed his dark face. "That so, alma mater?" he said. "Then—considering all things—again thanks!" He turned from her to the baby sprawling on the rug at his feet, and lifted the youngster to his knee. "So this is the pride of the Errols now," he said.

The baby stared up at him with serious eyes, and very deliberately and intently Nap stared back.

"What is his name, Dot?" he asked at length.

"Lucas Napoleon," she said.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "What an unholy combination! What in thunder possessed you to call him that?"

"Oh, it wasn't my doing," Dot hastened to explain, with her usual honesty, "though of course I was delighted with the idea. Bertie and I called him Lucas almost before he was born."

"Then who in wonder chose my name for him?" demanded Nap.

"See the Church Catechism!" suggested Bertie.

"Ah! Quite so." Nap turned upon him keenly. "Who were his god-parents?"

"My dear Nap, what does it matter?" broke in Dot. "Be quiet, Bertie! For goodness' sake make him put the child down and have some tea."

"Let me take him," Anne said.

She stooped to lift the boy, who held out his arms to her with a crow of pleasure. Nap looked up at her, and for an instant only their eyes met; but in that instant understanding dawned upon Nap's face, and with it a strangely tender smile that made it almost gentle.

Dot declared afterwards that the birthday-party had been all she could have desired. Everyone had been nice to everyone, and the baby hadn't been rude to his uncle, a calamity she had greatly feared. Also Nap was improved, hugely improved. Didn't Bertie think so? He seemed to have got so much more human. She couldn't realise there had ever been a time when she had actually disliked him.

"P'r'aps we're more human ourselves," suggested Bertie; a notion which hadn't occurred to Dot but which she admitted might have something in it.

Anyway, she was sure Nap had improved, and she longed to know if Anne thought so too.

Anne's thoughts upon that subject, however, were known to none, perhaps not even to herself. All she knew was an overwhelming desire for solitude, but when this was hers at last it was not in the consideration of this question that she spent it.

It was in kneeling by her open window with her face to the sky, and in her heart a rapture of gladness that all the birds of June could not utter.

She scarcely slept at all that night, yet when she rose some of the bloom of youth had come back to her, some of its summer splendour was shining in her eyes. Anne Carfax was more nearly a beautiful woman that day than she had ever been before.

Dimsdale looked at her benignly. Would her ladyship breakfast out-of-doors? She smiled and gave her assent, and while he was preparing she plucked a spray of rose acacia and pinned it at her throat.

"Dimsdale," she said, and her cheeks flushed to the soft tint of the blossom as she spoke, "Mr. Errol is coming over this morning. I expect him to luncheon."

"Mr. Errol, my lady?"

"Mr. Nap Errol," said Anne, still intent upon the acacia. "Show him into the garden when he comes. He is sure to find me somewhere."

Dimsdale's eyes opened very wide, but he managed his customary "Very good, my lady," as he continued his preparations. And so Anne breakfasted amid the tumult of rejoicing June, all the world laughing around her, all the world offering abundant thanksgiving because of the sunshine that flooded

it.

When breakfast was over she sat with closed eyes, seeming to hear the very heart of creation throbbing in every sound, yet listening, listening intently for something more. For a long time she sat thus, absorbed in the great orchestra, waiting as it were to take her part in the mighty symphony that swept its perfect harmonies around her.

It was a very little thing at last that told her her turn had come, so small a thing, and yet it sent the blood tingling through every vein, racing and pulsing with headlong impetus like a locked stream suddenly set free. It was no more than the flight of a startled bird from the tree above her.

She opened her eyes, quivering from head to foot. Yesterday she had commanded herself. She had gone to him with outstretched hand and welcoming smile. To-day she sat quite still. She could not move.

He came to her, stooped over her, then knelt beside her; but he did not offer to touch her. The sunlight streamed down upon his upturned face. His eyes were deep and still and passionless.

"You expected me," he said.

She looked down at him. "I have been expecting you for a very long time," she said.

A flicker that was scarcely a smile crossed his face. "And yet I've come too soon," he said.

"Why do you say that?" She asked the question almost in spite of herself. But she had begun to grow calmer. His quietness reassured her.

"Because, my Queen," he said, "the *rôle* of jester at court is obsolete, at least so far as I am concerned, and I haven't managed to qualify for another."

"Do you want another?" she said.

He turned his eyes away from her. "I want—many things," he said.

She motioned him to the seat beside her. "Tell me what you have been doing all this time."

"I can't," he said.

But he rose and sat beside her as she desired.

"What under heaven have I been doing?" he said. "I don't know, I guess I've been something like Nebuchadnezzar when they turned him out to grass. I've been just—ruminating,"

"Is that all?" There was a curious note of relief in Anne's voice.

His old magnetic smile flashed across his face as he caught it. "That's all, Queen Anne. It's been monstrous dull. Do you know, I don't think Heaven intended me for a hermit."

Involuntarily almost she smiled in answer. Her heart was beating quite steadily again. She was no longer afraid.

"Nebuchadnezzar came to his own again," she observed.

"He did," said Nap.

"And you?"

He leaned back with his face to the sky. "Not yet," he said.

Anne was silent. He turned after a moment and looked at her. "And what have you been doing, O Queen?" he said.

Her hands were clasped in her lap. They suddenly gripped each other very fast.

"Won't you tell me?" said Nap.

He spoke very softly, but he made no movement towards her. He sat aloof and still. Yet he plainly desired an answer.

It came at last, spoken almost in a whisper. "I have been—waiting."

"Waiting—" he said.

She parted her hands suddenly, with a gesture that was passionate, and rose. "Yes, waiting," she said, "waiting, Nap, waiting! And oh, I'm so tired of it. I'm not like you. I have never wanted—many things; only one—only one!" Her voice broke. She turned sharply from him.

Nap had sprung to his feet. He stood close to her. But he held himself in check. He kept all emotion out of his face and voice.

"Do you think I don't know?" he said. "My dear Anne, I have always known. That's the damnable part of it. You've wanted truth instead of treachery, honour instead of shame, love instead of—"

She put out a quick hand. "Don't say it, Nap!"

He took her hand, drew it to his heart, and held it there. "And you say you don't want many things," he went on, in a tone half sad, half whimsical. "My dear, if I could give you one tenth of what you want—and ought to have—you'd be a lucky woman and I a thrice lucky man. But—we've got to face it—I can't. I thought I could train myself, fashion myself, into something worthy of your acceptance. I can't. I thought I could win back your trust, your friendship, last of all your love. But I can't even begin. You can send me away from you if you will, and I'll go for good and all. On the other hand, you can keep me, you can marry me—" He paused; and she fancied she felt his heart quicken. "You can marry me," he said again, "but you can't tame me. You'll find me an infernal trial to live with. I'm not a devil any longer. No, and I'm not a brute. But I am still a savage at heart, and there are some parts of me that won't tame. My love for you is a seething furnace, an intolerable craving. I can't contemplate you sanely. I want you unspeakably."

His hold had tightened. She could feel his heart throbbing now like a fierce thing caged. His eyes had begun to glow. The furnace door was opening. She could feel the heat rushing out, enveloping her. Soon it would begin to scorch her. And yet she knew no shrinking. Rather she drew nearer, as a shivering creature starved and frozen draws near to the hunter's fire.

He went on speaking rapidly, with rising passion. "My love for you is the one part of me that I haven't got under control, and it's such a mighty big part that the rest is hardly worthy of mention. It's great enough to make everything else contemptible. I've no use for lesser things. I want just you—only you—only you—for the rest of my life!"

He stopped suddenly, seemed on the verge of something further, then pulled himself together with a sharp gesture. The next moment, quite quietly, he relinquished her hand.

"I'm afraid that's all there is to me," he said. "Lucas would have given you understanding, friendship, chivalry, all that a good woman wants. I can only offer you—bondage."

He half turned with the words, standing as if it needed but a sign to dismiss him. But Anne made no sign. Over their heads a thrush had suddenly begun to pour out his soul to the June sunshine, and she stood spell-bound, listening.

At the end of several breathless moments she spoke and in her voice was a deep note that thrilled like music.

"There is a bondage," she said, "that is sweeter than any freedom. And, Nap, it is the one thing in this world that I want—that I need—that I pray for night and day."

"Anne!" he said. He turned back to her. He took the hands she gave him. "Anne," he said again, speaking rapidly, in a voice that shook, "I have tried to play a straight game with you. I have warned you. I am not the right sort. You know what I am. You know."

"Yes," Anne said, "I know." She raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes. "You are all the world to me, Nap," she said. "You are the man I love."

His arms caught her, crushed her fiercely to him, held her fast.

"Say it again!" he said, his fiery eyes flaming. "Say it! Say it!"

But Anne said nought. Only for a long, long second she gazed into his face; then in utter silence she turned her lips to his.

They spent the whole of the long June day together in the garden. Neither knew how the time went till evening came upon them all unawares—a golden evening of many fragrances.

They came at last along the green path under the lilac trees, and here by the rustic seat Nap stopped.

"I'll leave you here," he said.

She looked at him in surprise. "Won't you dine with me?"

"No," he said restlessly. "I won't come in. I should stifle under a roof to-night."

"But we will dine outside," she said.

He shook his head. "No, I'm going. Anne," he caught her hand to his lips, "I hate leaving you. How long must I be condemned to it?"

She touched his shoulder with her cheek. "Don't you know that I hate it too?" she said.

"Then—" He put his arm round her.

"Next week, Nap," she said.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. I mean it."

"You will marry me next week. What day?"

"Any day," she said, with her face against his shoulder.

"Any day, Anne? You mean that? You mean me to choose?"

She laughed softly. "I shall leave everything to you."

"Then I choose Sunday," Nap said, without an instant's consideration, "as early in the morning as possible. I shall go straight to the padre and arrange it right now."

"Very well," she said. "I'll try to be ready."

He threw up his head with the old arrogant gesture. "You must be ready," he said imperiously. "I shall come and fetch you myself."

She laughed again at that. "Indeed you will not. I shall go with Mrs. Errol."

He conceded this point, albeit grudgingly. "And afterwards?" he said.

"The afterwards shall be yours, dear," she answered.

"You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it."

"Then, Anne"—he bent his face suddenly, his lips moved against her forehead—"will you come with me to Bramhurst?"

"Bramhurst!" She started a little. The name to her was no more than a bitter memory among the many other bitter memories of her life.

"Will you?" he said.

"If you wish it," she answered gently.

"I do wish it."

"Then—so be it," she said.

He bent his head a little lower, kissed her twice passionately upon the lips, held her awhile as if he could not bear to let her go, then tore himself almost violently from her, and went away, swift and noiseless as a shadow over the grass.

CHAPTER XXI

It was late on the evening of her wedding-day that Anne entered once more the drawing-room of the little inn at Bramhurst and stopped by the open window.

There was a scent of musk in the room behind her, and an odour infinitely more alluring of roses and honeysuckle in the garden in front. Beyond the garden the common lay in the rosy dusk of the afterglow under a deep blue sky. The clang of a distant cow-bell came dreamily through the silence.

She stood leaning against the door-post with her face to the night. It was a night of wonder, of marvellous, soul-stilling peace. Yet her brows were slightly drawn as she waited there. She seemed to be puzzling over something.

"Say it out loud," said Nap.

She did not start at the words though he had come up behind her without sound. She stretched out her hand without turning and drew his arm through hers.

"Why did we choose this place?" she said.

"You didn't choose it," said Nap.

"Then you?"

"I chose it chiefly because I knew you hated it," he said, a queer vibration of recklessness in his voice.

"My dear Nap, am I to believe that?"

He looked at her through the falling dusk, and his hand closed tense and vital upon her arm. "It's the truth anyway," he said. "I knew you hated the place, that you only came to it for my sake. And I—I made you come because I wanted you to love it."

"For your sake, Nap?" she said softly.

"Yes, and for another reason." He paused a moment; speech seemed suddenly an effort to him. Then: "Anne," he said, "you forgave me, I know, long ago; but I want you here—on this spot—to tell me that what happened here is to you as if it had never been. I want it blotted out of your mind for ever. I want your trust—your trust!"

It was like a hunger-cry rising from the man's very soul. At sound of it she turned impulsively.

"Nap, never speak of this again! My dearest, we need not have come here for that. Yet I am glad now that we came. It will be holy ground to me as long as I live. As long as I live," she repeated very earnestly, "I shall remember that it was here that the door of paradise was opened to us at last, and that God meant us to enter in."

She lifted her eyes to his with a look half-shy, half-confident. "You believe in God," she said.

He did not answer at once. He was looking out beyond her for the first time, and the restless fire had gone out of his eyes. They were still and deep as a mountain pool.

"Nap," she said in a whisper.

Instantly his look came back to her. He took her face between his hands with a tenderness so new that it moved her inexplicably to tears.

"I believe in the Power that casts out devils," he said very gravely. "Luke taught me that much. I guess my wife will teach me the rest."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS ***

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